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POCKET MONSTERS AND PIRATE TREASURE: FANTASY AND SOCIAL
PLATFORMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Jacob Waalk

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Masters of Arts
in the Department of Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

By

JACOB WAALK

May 2016

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ABSTRACT

POCKET MONSTERS AND PIRATE TREASURE: FANTASY AND SOCIAL PLATFORMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY is an anthropology project examining media, fantasy, ideology, and social groups in order to build a better foundation for the ways in which economic and social changes influence social networking, popular media, and values by using the anime-manga subculture as an example. The thesis draws from three major theorists: Thomas LaMarre, Anne Allison, and Ian Condry as well as major anthropological theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu. As an ethnography, the project was split into two sections: one consisting of interviews with eight anime-manga subculture participants drawn primarily from the University of Mississippi Anime Club, and the second constructed from participant observation in a variety of activities important for constructing the community, such as conventions and group watching of animated series. I conclude that through the synthesis of different strains of contemporary ideas—along with my own contribution of theory in the form of a redefinition of Levi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage—a better way of understanding both resistance in the consumption of popular media and the formation of group cultures in social networks. Larger conclusions on this regard are posed as ongoing studies and challenges to the field of media studies and anthropology, and as targets of further research.

DEDICATIONS

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the many friends I formed through the Ole Miss Anime club. Though I hardly knew it starting out, their friendship would help me grow a lot as a person. Here's to Sean, Josh, and Lydia especially.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my appreciation to my entire committee for their time and patience in this project. I would like to thank Dr. Kate Centellas for her initial support for crafting a thesis on a local subculture, and for serving as my chair even on a topic outside her specialty. I am grateful to Dr. Marcos Mendoza for his ability to get on my wavelength in a way that he always knew how to phrase a criticism or help me to work out a thought while guiding me to useful sources. Finally, I thank Dr. Noell Wilson, who took time from her sabbatical to work on this project with me and to whom I turned to for advice on Japanese culture and history.

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CHAPTER I: POSTMODERNISM, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF FANDOM

1. Introduction

The key ambitions of this project, given its limited scope both temporally and spatially, are 1) to synthesize a working model for interpreting anime-manga subcultures, unifying several contemporary theorists and contextualizing this approach in contemporary anthropology and 2) to test the idea that social, technological, and economic changes reorient popular media and alter perceptions of identity, space, and interpersonal relationships by using ethnographic data collected through the University of Mississippi anime club, primarily from August of 2013 until April of 2015. Therefore the ethnography seeks to get at ways fan subcultures enable social solidarity and serve as raw material for expressing or forming specific ideological concerns around identity, space, and play. I have crafted a more unified and comprehensive theoretical approach to analyzing the anime-manga subculture so as to open up ways of asking whether this type of community and consumption is capable of articulating a positive politics of resistance to more destructive or alienating tendencies of the contemporary techno-capitalistic world. The anime-manga subculture is an interesting example, and suggests ways that people create moral capitalisms around play, and seek out horizontal social networks based on common interests and a common meta-textual language of discussion.

The three key theorists this thesis draws from are Thomas LaMarre, Anne Allison, and Ian Condry (*The Anime Machine* 2009; *Millennial Monsters* 2006; *The Soul of Anime* 2013). The three cover different ground in a mutually inclusive manner, roughly divisible to three sets of

interrelated theoretical concerns: consumption, production, and material object as espoused by Anne Allison, Ian Condry, and Thomas LaMarre respectively. Media studies and the study of transnational, globalized pop culture are still nascent, and I position Japanese pop culture as a focal point for this field of research and for understanding the role of digital media. However, the newness of these fields of research means that there has been a rush to build theoretical approaches and interpretative frameworks—this project draws three of the most prominent, who are separated by only seven years' time. All three theories contain important contributions, and each highlights an important aspect, yet on their own each theory seems somewhat lacking, or rather, the field lacked a broadly integrative approach to looking at media. In a new field, it is important to establish ways to generate broader links between different theoretical concerns, because this creates more comprehensive background for research within pop culture studies, the field of study in question. In order to even begin judging fan spectatorship, involvement, the social solidarity of fantasy, the intersection of capitalism and technology, and the use of media as a tool to express politics, it is necessary to possess a theoretical approach that can shift between the numerous different aspects of each issue.

Henry Jenkins is an important figure as the first theorist to produce major research dealing with fan communities in his work on Star Trek fans in the mid 1980s. Jenkins is an oft-cited figure in studies of fandom and participatory media, and a recent work on participatory culture proved useful in defining some underlying precepts of this project. As the real world becomes riddled with issues of access and impersonalization, fantasy and playthings offer the promise of access and depth, with participation a way of exploring potential sites of creative production, or to borrow phrasing from Thomas LaMarre, fantasy and playthings offer fields of potential exploration within the techno-capitalistic system they are embedded in. Jenkins notes

that digital media culture is leading to a transition in types of attention—one that directs away from a centralized object of singular attention and to a field of objects (2009). Multitasking is another way of scanning fields for relevant information, something Thomas LaMarre makes critical to discussing visual perspectives in anime since most anime lacks three-dimensional geometric perspectives as in a photorealistic portrayal. The lack of a single vanishing point could well substitute for the lack of a single object of focus, wherein the viewing experience is more about searching for different salient objects, a visual media that prioritizes what I call informationalization.

I read LaMarre as ultimately describing one-point geometric perspective as a visual form suited to historically specific strains of Modernism and Enlightenment idealism¹ as contrasted to the potentials found in animation for a more positive visual culture. The most interesting possibility, LaMarre posits, is what he terms orthogonal perspective or exploded perspective; perspective at an angle, where the layers of an image are blown up to the surface as in a schematic.

¹ What David Harvey (1990) describes as a preoccupation with knowledge as universal and the ephemeral as eternal.

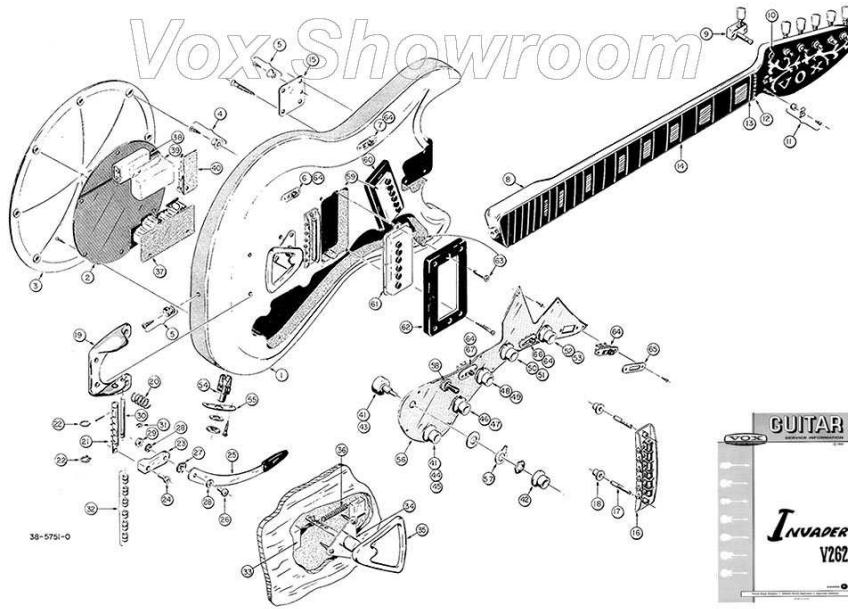


Figure 1: An example of orthogonal perspective

Figure 1 is what is called an exploded view or exploded projection, which splits an image across orthogonal lines (those lines that run outward from the vanishing point) and most crucially, *does not insist on scalar relations* as geometric perspective does. As LaMarre notes, this is also rational and instrumentalizing; an individual using the above schematic would not need to think that the screws in the back of guitar are smaller than those in the front and the essence of such projections is informationalization of the objects within space, often along multiple viewing angles. LaMarre, then, discusses how anime (and by implication manga) informationalize spatial perspectives in visual media; what Allison and Condry discuss is how people interpret and draw from entertainment through aesthetics of deconstruction, reconstruction, and collaboration. Such activities represent the scanning and interpretation of information, and LaMarre provides a critical framework for considering informationalization in media. Such extreme variation of flattened movement carries with it the idea of potential depth, where:

Movement functions to generate emergent depths, potential depth. The result is very close to a logistics of information retrieval, and not only because viewers are asked to skim and scan fields, and to

discern degrees of separation or connection in the manner of a network. It is also like information retrieval in that elements of the image do not function as inert, discrete data but as fields, that is, as potential depths that, if pursued, promise to generate links and connections (2009:136)

Movement and positioning of the viewer determine the insights taken from an image, and hence aesthetics of informationalization take priority over scalar realism. Units of information are not end points, but rather form *orientations* and establish a particular line of sight from which to explore the image. While such exploded projections also run the risk of reifying perceptions of rational, goal-oriented action towards an aim within an organized and standardized world, the flattened perspective of what is called limited animation also creates fields of perspective and opens up the possibility of a heterogeneous world. Movement becomes a context, one that offers the potential for divergent visual experiences rather than a singular or closed experience within a universalized image, which carries the assumption that the experience of motion is homogenous. LaMarre provides the tools to interpret and explain the manner in which anime and manga are structured materially in such a way that deconstructions of fantasy, open-ended worlds that fans can approach from diverse angles are facilitated by the stylistic conventions of the genre in a way that is quite distinct from, for example, Disney. LaMarre's ideas enable the project to consider the way in which fan activities are influenced by media, in this case studying the composition of image and the methods through which motion or the implication of motion are created. Anime and manga are materials, and as such I needed and wanted to have a description of their boundaries, to describe them as an interactive field of diverse materials.

Such multiprocessing as LaMarre implies that such visual media requires viewers to scan the surface rather than be pulled into photorealistic depth. Multiprocessing is not distraction (Jenkins et al 2009:63) but a different form of attention. Human history has seen a shift from

hunters' scanning a large, shifting horizon for information, to farmers' attention spans that required intensive localized focus, which suggests that high-tech societies of information industries and lifestyles actually harken back to hunter-gatherer perspectives with a high-tech field of dynamic technological components requiring shifting, scanning attentions.



Figure 2: A screenshot from the hit anime Kill la Kill. Note the rather disorienting effects of perspective and the combination of realistic and unrealistic elements.

The presence of multiple different salient objects, and potential ways of engaging with the world and an image explains why fans drawn by deconstructing fantasy and reassembling it across a variety of forms are attracted to the anime-manga visual culture. Fans scrub an anime or manga down to a single theme or image and explore the potentials of that theme or image.

Without understanding the intricacies of motion, the use of perspective and orientations towards action in the anime-manga culture industry, it is difficult to isolate just what factors are associated with the deterritorialization of imagination and art and make the anime-manga culture industry such a transnational media phenomena, much less to operationalize that in research.

Both how individual fans use materials and the internal constraints and trajectories implied by their materiality matter for social research. By using LaMarre to talk about the anime-manga industry, I am highlighting the importance of that fantasy platform as something intrinsically

different from other platforms, and its difference is what allows it to adapt so readily to the types of consumption and production that Allison and Condry project in their ethnographies.

The use of the word “platform” is more appealing to me than any variant of the suffix -scape, as taken from Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) use of the suffix. At this level of discussion a word such as “playscape” or “fantasyscape” or “mediascape” suffers from a vague lack of purpose. The words evoke a general concept of the noun being modified to extend across a large space, but a space that is not inherently defined—even if the point of such terms is to emphasize the way in which causal relationships are not easy or even possible to establish in complex systems. I make use of a more grounded word like platform because it does suggest a functionality and materiality lacking in such -scape abstractions—a play platform or platform of play suggests a concrete set of functions and a more delimited space of interaction. In this I owe much to Condry’s idea of the “portable creative platform” (2013:2), and to his ideas about collaborative creativity, in which more open fan involvement with production is essential to the success of Japanese pop culture at home and abroad.

The central finding of Allison’s observations and research was that even in the technological mass produced worlds of Pokémon, participants were drawn into the world itself. Essential to Allison’s work is the way in which engrossment into a complex and variant world of endless permutations—an endless quest to attain mastery that entails a complex array of elements continuously combining and being deconstructed across a range of formats—offers therapeutic respite from performative pressures. As a game Pokémon provided its users with personalized worlds, the sense of ownership, and the ability to master rules and strategies that empower users with success. In the lack of consequences for failure, such interactive media are

therapeutic in that they allow free exploration and a low stress platform within which to learn from past failures (Henry Jenkins & etc 2009).

All three researchers have insights that can be united in discussing the anime-manga subculture in the United States as a play culture built around pursuing new frames of reference and playing with a platform that can be disassembled and reassembled in personal and group contexts. These activities are key to building group solidarity and establishing access to rich social networks that are not limited simply to conventions and anime fan clubs, but also include forums, websites, and social media. The words bricolage and remix are very similar in this context, but bricolage leaves open the possibility that new materials may not be recognizable from their source materials—such as an ambitious AMV editor who puts together an especially intricate video made from clips from thirty or forty anime series, or a fan who makes their own original story within a framework taken from another show.

Bricolage as a term is taken from Levi-Strauss and *The Savage Mind* (1966:21) and generally means any object created from diverse resources. As I utilize it, bricolage refers to the use of materials or practices that are a reconstruction of that original in a different context. Bricolage is in essence a way of talking about the variability of the figurative and literal materials of human life. In looking at Japanese pop culture, I am looking at a transnational flow of practices adapted to a variety of very different settings—in the case of this research, anime fandom in U.S. universities.² Contorting this obscure academic term to a very novel usage serves as the nexus of my contribution to theory-building within the fledgling study of the globalization of Japanese pop culture in anthropology and media studies. Bricolage, of course, implies a

² As Eron Rauch and Christopher Bolton's contribution to *Mechademia 5* notes, it is widely acknowledged that "cosplay" short, for "costume playing" originated in American comic conventions, and it was not until several decades later, starting in the early 1980s that it was widely adopted into Japanese anime subcultures, who were clearly influenced by America. This is in contrast, however, to the impression in fan communities that cosplay is a Japanese-originating practice.

certain materiality to Japanese pop culture products in that it treats the media as materials that fans will amass and reconstruct; materials that are both consumed *and* produced by fans. I view media through this theory as a pool of materials from which, to borrow a phrase from Thomas LaMarre, fields are constructed, and even certain localized projectories emerge under careful observation (2009:173). I position bricolage as a key synthesizing semantic concept, one that asserts intentionality and hybridity simultaneously, and with it can transition between three similar but distinct theories for understanding the spread of Japanese pop culture. Talking about a concept like bricolage moves through all three sets of concerns—from the production of the creative practices and community, consumption obsessed with objects that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, and the interest in particular ways of constructing visual media—bricolage relates to multiple theorists at once. This is a big step forward to analyzing potentials of subcultures in general, and serves as a way for not just academics and social researchers, but also for people involved in those subcultures to better understand, critique, and shape these potentials.

The ubiquity of art and play in the daily life of the Global North is a key backdrop to these questions—one mediated by techno-capitalistic systems with a global reach. I am interested in the way that escape, therapy, and reenchantment of de-personalized/dehumanized commodities are present in emerging forms of fantasy and fan culture. The intrusion of such fantasy into the fabric of everyday life coincides with the increasing reorientation of capitalist production towards information and semantic values—selling the image of a product rather than its functionality (Otsuka Eiji 2010; Paige West 2012). Interpreting fandom and subculture as a community of practice, the end goal is to identify these practices in useful interpretive frameworks that can create broader connections to capitalism and socio-technological systems and locate positive potentials in popular media.

Aesthetics forms a communal field of understanding and communication, one defined by specific social contexts. I want to understand how the product and the consumer interact with one another in the case of American consumption of Japanese pop culture, to understand why and how Japanese pop culture appeals to its American fan community. The subculture of people who are socially engaged with Japanese pop culture attracts people alienated in some of the central spheres of American culture and who seek to combat pressures towards normativity in pastimes and interests. Moreover, these fans gravitate towards forms of fantasy that subvert structures of modernity and contemporary society—everything from gender and sexual orientation to economics to technology to religion—in such a way that the fantasy offers new perspectives on the post-millennial condition. Anime and manga are popular because they provide constructive outlets for perceiving and considering difference, useful for deconstructing social norms and individual identities while offering a common platform for creative activities and interpersonal bonding. These fans face a doubly negative stigma: first, America does not, aside from with sports, view it as positive or healthy to devote a large amount of energy or enthusiasm or to build social networks around on a pastime,³ and second, animation and comics are negatively marked as childish or unbecoming hobbies for adults.⁴ My work with a southern fan community in a largely rural and socially conservative state shed light on fandom as stigmatized pastime where certain forms of fantasy and consumption create social networks and provide relief from certain forms of contemporary alienation.

³ See Marilyn Ivy, 2010 for discussion on the semantic conceptualization of the fan as someone with misplaced dedication, in a world where certain boundaries define appropriate “objects” of personal fixation.

⁴ John Ranyard, writing in *Psychological Perspectives*, describes his worries about his interest as follows: “Instead of curbing my sudden, wild enthusiasm for anime, I have indulged it shamelessly. Well, not entirely without shame. I did feel an awkwardness around my possession by the anime spirit. What would “people” thinking if they knew that a 50-year-old man was watching “cartoons”?” (2006:267).

In this opening chapter, I seek to outline my research project in several ways: positioning myself within the research and my research within the important questions and considerations of anthropology. The following subtopics each receive attention over the course of Chapter 1: a short explanation of what anime and manga are and the role of media studies in my project, the issue of auto-ethnography, questions of Post-Fordism and Postmodernism, the historical developments of anthropology that situate the research, and separately, the specific issues of methodology that I had to tackle. It ends with an overview of the entire project, broken down into four chapters on different aspects of the questions and difficulties in making such an ambitious interpretation of international pop culture.

2. What Are Anime and Manga? The Role of Media Studies

Despite their growing population, anime and manga are still foreign terms to most Americans, unknown to the large majority of those age forty and above and far from universally recognized among the Millennial generation. Anime is a Japanese shortening of the word animation, a foreign loan word borrowed into Japanese, and pronounced ah-knee-may. The word is written in katakana, the language's script for foreign words and names, and thus in its very writing, anime is marked as "western" and foreign in Japanese. Manga has a more complicated origin, seen in the fact that the term has kanji (Chinese characters) for it and is written in both hiragana, the Japanese's phonetic script, and commonly in katakana as well. Anime and manga are closely intertwined with one another, moreso with the rise of multimedia in Japan, where popular stories have games, light novels, manga, animes, and even concept albums by pop groups or voice actors released to supplement the franchise. Manga, while often translated into English as Japanese comics, should not be judged using the very distinctive American image of comics, which misconstrue manga by making it derivative of a loaded American term. At the

level of language “comics” offers a poor translation, given the implication of distinctly American visual styles and certain lines of thematic concerns with space operas and superheroes, implying that the social conditions of manga in Japan are the same or even similar to comics in the United States.

The most important factor about anime and manga—and one that is most often non-intuitive to Americans—is that both anime and manga are extremely popular and not age-segregated in Japan. Interest in manga or anime may be subculture in the United States, while in Japan manga sales alone are a multi-billion dollar industry that constitutes 40% of all publishing and anime is a staple of major primetime television and cinema releases.⁵ Manga and anime are thoroughly mainstream cultural products in Japan, even with the attendant subcultures and ostracized elements of intense fandom. The major difference between the United States and Japan lies in this mainstream quality, as both manga and anime are not limited to a handful of common genres as are cartoons and comics in the United States, nor are they exclusively targeted towards children—even if children and teenagers are the largest market. This context is important to keep in mind when discussing the way in which American fan communities construe Japan, as if it were the case that obscure subcultures within Japanese anime and manga were a metonym for Japan.

I pay close attention to the material products of media, as objects that facilitate communication and orient bodies of fan practices, drawing from media studies and the interpretation and definition of complex arrays of products that sell fantasy. The *Mechademia* journal, published by the University of Minnesota and edited by Frenchy Lunning, a professor of design history and liberal arts at that institution, attempts to challenge the failure of Western

⁵ The highest grossing film of all time in Japan’s domestic market is, for instance, Hayao Miyazaki’s 2001 film *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*).

aesthetics to view animation as a serious art form (Kerin Ogg 2010:157). It is the first and only media studies journal to deal exclusively with Japanese pop culture, and was instrumental in tracing the development of the scholarly research in the field as it has exploded in interest over the past eight years—mostly from a media studies perspective.

The popularity of manga and anime have boomed in America, with sales increasing from sixty million in 2002 to two-hundred and ten million in 2007 (Tsutsui 2010). This still pales in comparison to Japan—where, again, manga accounts for 40% of all publishing and the Comic Market, an annual convention held in Tokyo⁶ has an attendance of nearly half a million people (Condry 2013:108). Manga is itself inextricable from anime—such that a scholar looking at one cannot ignore the other, not when sixty percent of currently airing animated series in Japan are based on manga (Condry 2013:106). The connection is so deep that television animation was typically called *terebi manga*⁷ and the early Toei animated films were advertised as *manga eiga* or manga films, a term and tradition that is carried on to the current day with internationally renowned director Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli who, as they assert, make manga films *not* anime. Therefore while key theorists such as Ian Condry and Thomas LaMarre may focus on the power of animation and the animation industry, I maintain that manga also captures movement without physically projecting it, and manga's history and stylistic development is equally essential to the discussion, as manga and anime are synergetic partners in a single larger culture industry that I, like Tze-Yue G. Hu (2010), call the *manga-anime* industry. In this regard, I differ from the common tendency I found in the field of Japanese pop culture studies, where most researchers ignore manga or treat it as a footnote—even Condry devotes very little space to

⁶ Comiket as it is also known, is additionally where new series debut and tens of thousands of amateur circles release their own manga and fan fiction. This makes Comiket an appealing place for manga publishers to scout new talent. The extremely successful group of manga artists known as CLAMP got their start selling fan mangas at Comiket.

⁷ This is written in katakana, and *terebi* is the shortened, Japanese borrowing of the word television, and so literally, “TV manga.”

discussions of manga. This tendency is a little odd given that Japanese anime is often coterminous with manga—most iconic anime series and films⁸ began as manga, such that Hu uses the term manga-anime industry to highlight these close connections. The connection between manga and their animated counterpart is, however, much deeper and much closer than that of books and films. Mangas establish not just the appearance of all characters and backdrops, but even provide a framework for an anime’s visual style. Anime adaptations often use large sections of the written text of the manga, that relate to thoughts and speech, word for word. In this sense, manga can be seen as anime-ready storyboards and a vast reserve for potential series.

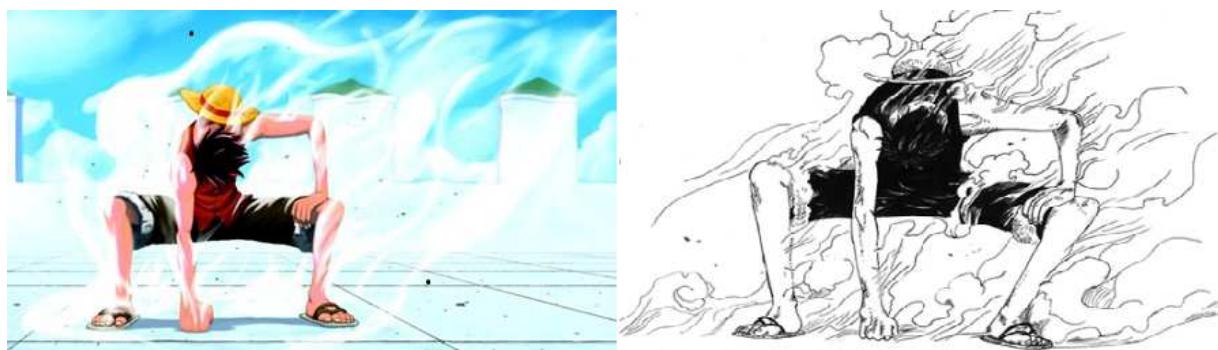


Figure 3: A comparison of an action scene from the One Piece Manga with the One Piece Anime.

Reading manga too required a degree of effort to attain a naturalistic fluency—reading panels from right to left and sometimes top to bottom as well, judging from height and other visual cues of the “gutter space” (the space between panels) the chronology of panels. Even being able to follow the implications of movement and action meant reading lines and being sensitive to shifts in angle, viewing position, and other visual techniques—such as cascades of lines forming large swooshes to indicate motion and direction. Words do a poor job at invoking the ways in which manga shows movement and yet also require a certain scanning ability to produce sequences—both important elements of why I discuss manga in addition to anime.

⁸ *Urusei Yatsura*, *Dragonball*, *Akira*, *The Rose of Versailles*, *One Piece*, *Astro Boy*, *Death Note* and *Sazae-san* to name a few classic examples.

Figures 4 and 5 are great examples from what was my first manga series, *Claymore*. The images are indeed hard to read at first; it takes experience to scan them, order them, and then focus in on panels in a proper progression and with proper sensitivity to the angles and use of lines. But even so, the way in which stationary images in manga also project sensations of motion in similar ways to animation are on clear display here for reference.

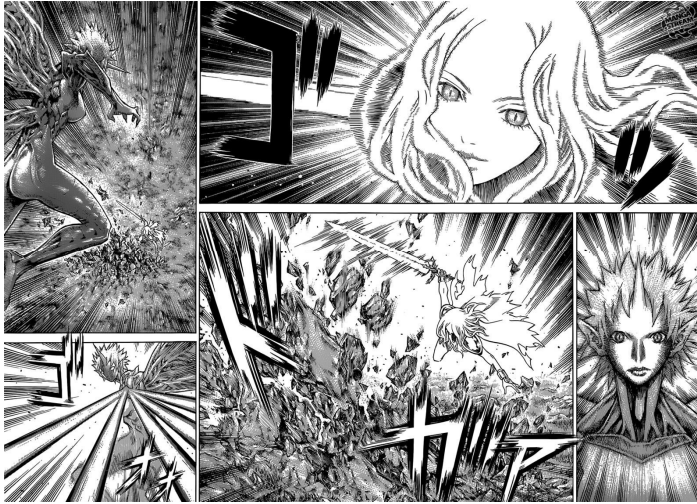


Figure 4: Action sequence from *Claymore*, Copyright 2014 Norihiro Yagi



Figure 5: Action sequence from *Claymore*, Copyright 2014 Norihiro Yagi

While I am not researching manga, and manga did not become a major topic in either my interviews or ethnographic observations, I include it and acknowledge it, and am attempting to

provide a background for both manga and anime, as part of my argument that they are intertwined halves of the same culture industry. The two halves influence one another in more ways than one, and both tend to create an experience that is tailored towards scanning fields and engaging with the experience of motion in different ways—an important distinction for how I consider LaMarre’s ideas.

William Tsutsui, in his overview of Japan Studies, observes that contemporary Japanese pop culture has emerged from a “complex pattern of transnational exchange that brought western ways to Japan and Japan’s pop innovations to the world” (2010:5), while Susan Napier, the most widely cited scholar on Japanese popular culture, highlights previous historical waves of Japanese culture export⁹ in her work *From Impressionism to Anime*. The question taken from the history of Japanese culture as export is whether there is anything unique about the current spread and embrace of Japanese pop culture across the globe—whether it represents a continuation of the pre-existing Orientalist dynamics described by Edward Said¹⁰ or whether there is something both unique and modern to the contemporary currency of Japanese pop culture.

A key concern in media studies is the interpretation of story, technique and affect in anime and manga. My focus however, is not in such textual cultural studies, but rather on improving and considering better ways in which bridges can be formed between the strengths of media/cultural studies and anthropology—bridges that would be beneficial to both.

Anthropology is first and foremost a discipline that inserts itself into the grinding task of dealing with the contradictory and confusing human practices incipient in daily life. Anthropology gleans—or least excavates—importance from behind the minutia of the mundane, the

⁹ Indeed, French Impressionism owes much of its inspiration and history to the Japanese *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints from the Edo period) that influenced important artists such as Claude Monet, and during the Meiji period (1868-1912) Japan exported millions of fans, kimonos and other exotic consumer goods to Europe each year.

¹⁰ Said’s magnum opus *Orientalism* argues that there is a condescending exoticism in western scholarship and constructions of the “Orient” through terms of romanticism and traditionalism.

extraordinary from the ordinary. I have found in studies of popular media a wealth of information and perspectives, and sought to apply these analytic insights for fan communities and contemporary society.

Cultural studies may rightly receive censure for “its proclivity for textual analysis, theoretical acrobatics, and what has sometimes been characterized as drive-by ethnography” (Allison 2006:32), however I do not hold with such a critique in its entirety. Cultural studies and anthropology reflect differing traditions: literature and fine arts for in the former; interactive fieldwork taken from botany and biology in the latter. Within anthropology itself there are two extremes between theoretical and pragmatic descriptive programs, and I have greater affinity for heavy theoretical conceptions and consequent outlines for broader and more integrative interpretations. The main challenge is to incorporate anthropological methods and maintain a grounded theoretical approach that allows individual actions, practices and dialogues to speak for themselves, while also addressing the messiness and inconsistency of such actions within complex systems.

3. Outline of the Ethnography

In this project I worked with American fans of Japanese pop culture products, a diverse field of products that—for purposes of length and simplicity—were limited to anime and manga at the exclusion of discussion of popular music, games, fashion and toys. The ethnography was primarily conducted within the University of Mississippi’s anime club, a group of college students—the bulk of whom are from the larger American South—who gather together to watch and bond over anime. Japanese pop culture has increasingly served as a staging ground for some segments of contemporary youth culture to come together and share in certain fantasies of

translocation that blur identities and rethink relations present in contemporary Post-Fordist capitalism.

Mississippi may not be the perfect stand in for anime subculture in America at large; this thesis cannot argue that point with the ethnographic data collected, as it has no comparative data. Mississippi does however, offer a unique setting for this type of sociological investigation. Foreign-born residents comprise just 2.2% of the state's population—placing Mississippi dead last among all fifty states in international diversity.¹¹ Mississippi tends to receive low scores across a range of important socio-economic statistics, including poverty, child poverty, income inequality, education, obesity, and child mortality rates just to name a few statistical categories. Mississippi is in addition, a very rural state, and the University of Mississippi campus is situated in Oxford, a small urban bubble over an hour away from other regional hubs such as Jackson, Mississippi or Memphis, Tennessee.

The stronger traditionalism and conservatism in Mississippi—even in Lafayette County where the University is located—make it somewhat surprising that such subcultures thrive at all there. Many of the features that I see in the University of Mississippi group may reflect the local tendencies and culture that make these groups quite different from their counterparts on the West Coast, or in say, Florida or New York. I suspect that one key point of difference in the group cultures between an ethnography in Mississippi versus other locations, is that fans in the University of Mississippi anime club felt that just being a fan of anime marked them as different, cosmopolitan, and open-minded—and often described or enacted their fandom in ways that implied this. Importantly, this *is* the case, where just being into anime and manga; into Japanese pop culture; being plugged into a larger field of nerd culture carries a starker social stigma than in other regions of the country, hence imaginative dialogues within the clubroom (which was

¹¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28000.html> Accessed: 5/1/2015

located in a residential dorm) where members would say things like “The people outside are probably wondering what those anime faggots are doing this time.”

Particularly when it comes to gender performance the University of Mississippi is dominated culturally and in campus politics by its huge Greek Life contingent and by very strict limitations on what is masculine and feminine. This is present every home game during football season, when the park at the center of campus, known as “The Grove” fills up with anywhere between fifty and a hundred thousand people. During these Saturdays, no matter how muddy the Grove may be, women wearing high heels or nice boots alongside summer dresses and men wearing loafers, slacks and long-sleeve button-ups fill up the space. Men who are more invested in fantasy or scientific pastimes than sports, clubbing, drinking, and outdoors activities are by default a minority and one with very little social capital on campus. Further, aspirations towards cosmopolitanism and internationalism run counter to the very potent, parochial culture of Mississippi, where good old country boy or self-described “redneck” chic and the idea of the “Southern Lady” are stalwarts of socialization and youth culture, even at the state’s largest university. I would venture to say, on the basis of this ethnography, that participants of the subculture in Mississippi invested more meaning into the fandom, more markedness, than I anticipate would exist in a more urban, diverse, and liberal environs where such cosmopolitan interests and association with “nerdom” is not only far more common but possessing of real social capital among younger generations. This was a boon to the research in that it highlights aspects of identity formation and complex internationalisms that I hoped to shed light on through the project.

Subcultures are often very diverse and dispersed, yet manage to assert a sort of cultural solidarity over shared values, sometimes embodied in a material form such as music or in the

case of this subculture, anime and manga. In questioning subjects, I worked hard to shape the questions in ways that emphasized more concrete aspects, pushing towards questions on the internet and the role in technology, in asking them to describe what *exactly* appealed to them about anime and manga, and even inquiring into narratives about Japan and the United States. Doing so allowed the research to focus on finding important commonalities within the subculture.

I organized the ethnography along two lines, one built from participant observation of Anime Conventions and various fan practices at large, before focusing in on the University of Mississippi anime club and what its linguistic and community-building practices were. The last section of the ethnography deals with the series of nine interviews—more limited than I had hoped for—and seeks to relate commentaries from within the subculture with practices and interpret these through a coherent analytical framework.

4. The Problems of Anthropology and *Who Does Anthropology*

The issue of motivation and background, of *who* does anthropology is an important one for this project. As I will bring up when discussing Anne Allison's work, I was a huge fan of Pokémon as a child, however there was a weird gap between that enthusiasm and awareness of Japan. Friends and I would huddle together in secret staring at holographic Pokémon cards from Japan, with their indecipherable writing and immeasurable value. As children we all knew that Pokémon originated in Japan—such that Japanese versions of the cards were the most prestigious and envy-worthy among elementary schoolers—yet Pokémon left no distinct sense of connection to Japan. We may have watched *Dragonball Z* religiously on television, mimicked its fights with each other on trampolines, and learned at some point that it was a Japanese show, and certainly recognized how different these two fads were, without ever constructing its relation to Japan as a distinction of importance.

I have been a member of the University of Mississippi Anime Club—the fan group I interview—since its inception, and yet my path to fandom was indirect. *Adult Swim* comes up quite a lot among anime fans, since *Cartoon Network's* late night 16-24 oriented programming block has been the main source of exposure to Japanese anime on major American broadcast television for almost a decade. However, I never followed any of these series closely in high school, and indeed ended up spending more time reading Japanese literature by major post-war authors such as Oe Kenzaburo and Mishima Yukio, or at least nearly as much as I plugged in to watch *Bleach* or *Eureka Seven* on Saturday nights. My access point to the anime club came through the University of Mississippi's Residential College, which I lived in all four years of my undergraduate study, including the dorm's first year in operation. The Residential College, or RC, was an experiment towards gearing nicer dorms towards high-performing students, and I sometimes played multiplayer video games like Nintendo's *Super Smash Brothers* in the common areas. One of the students who organized these impromptu gaming sessions went on, later in my freshman year, to restart the University's then defunct Anime Club. I ended up getting the small club a room on the second floor of the Croft building on campus, and the first two weeks of the Club were hosted there, with four to six students. The first two shows the club watched were Gainax studio's mecha parody *Gurren Lagann* and the samurai hip-hop remix *Samurai Champloo*, before the club resettled in the Residential College classroom, and eventually grew to have between twenty and forty active members at any given period. My first experiences with animes we watched ranged from moderate amusement to blasé reactions—I did not appreciate the novelty and uniqueness of *Samurai Champloo* for instance, until I returned to it some years later. But I liked some shows enough, and got into various gateway series that helped situate me within the style and eventually became a major fan.

I am working through this project as a fan of manga and anime, and someone who has a deep network of personal connections that were at least partially facilitated by the Ole Miss anime club. Some of the core questions and interests have formed from years of personal involvement that reflects a distinctly auto-ethnographic position. Many of the subjects that emerge are personal for me, and in many ways I am not just testing the propositions of other researchers against my interviews and my observations taken from different settings, but I also compare and consider these ideas partially through my own extensive experiences.

There are both benefits and potential drawbacks to my background. The questions of the project are personal questions that represent longstanding considerations of my own tastes and desires. That would, I hope, give the discussion of such questions a more personal edge and thereby offer a somewhat more engaging narrative framework for the explanations and ideas behind new and changing social forms in popular media. The problem arises in whether this turns the research itself towards hyper-focused or subjective lines of sight, and prevents me as researcher from seeing beyond certain expectations or biases that I have formed. The ideal of objectivity in anthropology runs deep in the discipline and has typically discouraged researchers from studying anything they were perceived as too close to, whether a homosexual individual and the gay community (Kath Weston 1997) or an African-American and Africa (Deborah Amory 1997). The home-field conception derived its boundaries from an implied subject-object, self-other framing, the effect of which placed limitations on those who seek to use anthropology's tools and ideals not to explore otherness, but to explore the self from varied perspectives. Anthropology was hesitant if not openly hostile to the idea that home and field may be one entity—that the familiar could be foreign. What Kath Weston calls hybridity, mainstream anthropology treated with skepticism (Weston 1997). Weston explained this skepticism through

the scientific analogy of the mixture where two separate entities are combined but retain their original chemical natures, and a compound, where the entities bind together to form a new substance with different properties than either of its progenitors (1997:168). Anthropology conceived of the hybrid as a mixture rather than a compound, always suspicious of what part was ethnographer and what part was “native” identity, a native identity that threatened what Weston condemned as the discipline’s “participation in the power relations that fuel the process of nativization” (1997:179). Through the work of anthropologists such as Weston, the field of anthropology has become much more open to work that deals with personal experience and home communities, and objectivity is much less marked by categories of exclusivity and privilege.

To counteract any preexisting focuses—a legitimate concern in any auto-ethnography—from distracting my research from other interesting questions and possibilities, I cast a wide net in researching the field, both to challenge my own field of vision and to expand the project’s scope as much as possible within the constraints of practicality. The positive outweighs the potential pitfalls, given that I can draw on several years of personal experience, that, were I just now embarking on a project dealing with a group I had no contacts with and no experience, there would be no time to form a meaningful or accurate intuitive perspective on this fan community, nor the level of intimacy in my access to informants.

5. A Pair of Posts, Post-Fordism and Postmodernism

Some theorists, such as Arjun Appadurai (1996), use the term postmodern to talk about a new social landscape in postmodern society—defined according to co-occurring phenomena of both capitalist and political systems. Kiyomitsu Yui summarizes the postmodern aesthetic in art as the “fragmentation of time and space, aestheticiation of daily life, de-centralization of the self

or deconstruction of the subject, and de-differentiation of borders” (Yui 2010:46).¹² The geographer David Harvey is a major theorist on the postmodern and its relation to modern urbanity and history who defines postmodernism in similar terms as “Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universals or “totalizing” discourses” (1990:9). Harvey examines how postmodernism reacts against the operationalizations of knowledge and reason for instrumental aims, what he terms aesthetics as a “problematic” bridge between moral judgment and scientific knowledge within the complex history of Enlightenment (1990:19).

Aesthetics—the question of *what* is beautiful and pleasing, and *how* it is so, constitutes an entire branch of philosophy. Isolating such a term can be problematic even as it is necessary to undergird a specific type of use. Both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno pioneered important Marxist approaches to art and the inherent technological questions of its production—one which informs the underlying assumption of this thesis, which is that technological and capitalistic changes reorient popular culture in particular ways. In the case of studying fan culture and imagination, I focus on practices and sociality that operate through and around “taste.” For that I view popular media as a “cultural products” and piece together its place in what Pierre Bourdieu termed habitus: the natural lifeworlds that form around cultural practice.

The seminal French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work on aesthetics as a socially specific entity has influenced generations of social researchers in how to approach the social construction of aesthetics, or “taste.” In *Distinctions: A Social Critique of Taste* Bourdieu first approached the concept of aesthetics through a revised Marxist format that brought together Max Weber’s ideas on status and the ideological structures of class. This work expanded upon Bourdieu’s powerful theories on social capital and used extensive survey data to discuss how in

¹² Yui, Kiyomitsu
2010 Japanese Animation and Glocalization of Sociology. *Sociologisk Forskning* 47(4):44-50.

France, aesthetics reflected specific social contexts, often constructed by public institutions such as the state, education, religion, and occupation. Conceptualizing art as a code (1984:2), Bourdieu posited that “taste” in art served to distinguish social position and reproduce class relations through the consumption of cultural products. The conclusion of the study on French society is that the beautiful and the sublime are not external existences, but products of socially contingent meanings and identities. The focus on taste as communicative and cultivated by social processes reoriented the way social science analyzes aesthetics in art by positioning it as a cultural artifact embedded in specific social phenomena.

Viewing aesthetics as not independent and external to social conditions, formed one of the core presumptions of the approach this thesis undertakes. Bourdieu first brought me to consider how the consumption of anime and manga might reflect broader social, cultural, and economic issues in terms of forming a specific type of group solidarity. The study of popular media as a whole builds off a Bourdieuean foundation in terms of finding ways to discuss very large, complex, and pressing phenomena in human societies through particular forms of consumption that produce what I call an *imaginative habitus*. Imaginative habitus is the way in which a group/class of people imaginatively reproduce ideas and images about the world and other groups of people. In this sense, subcultures exist by distinguishing themselves from larger norms or restrictions, and in the case of this subject group, construed itself against strong normative pressures in Mississippi that restricted self-expression.

Bourdieu makes numerous references to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and David Harvey also traces back the origins of postmodernism to Nietzsche’s ideas on power and the subjectivity of truth (1990:42). Various points of Nietzsche’s work also influence my framing of postmodernism and assumptions that undergird this research. In particular, *Thus*

Spoke Zarathustra, where Nietzsche proposes an intellectual-spiritual progression of humanity from the Camel to the Lion to the Child, has a key—if somewhat literary—place in my thoughts about society. To summarize a key segment of Nietzsche’s treatise, the Lion, as a beast that consumes truth in cynical solitude, is a transitional state; it cannot maintain itself, because existence requires meaningful relationships to the world—relationships founded on some basic assumption of truth. Instead, it is the Child that inherits the world after the Lion—the Child who can maintain a *playful* relationship to the world.

I position individuals—as a result of media flows and technology flows—as more self-conscious of their habits and practices, and argue then that a researcher must position these concepts with more intentionality and transformationality, hence an interest in referring back to Nietzsche even if only obliquely and briefly. Such a formulation reconceptualizes habitus into a life aesthetic—that is, as performative and intentional. I am in a sense, expanding the consideration of aesthetics from a single element of human cultural worlds, and into a common denominator that informs or dictates more and more domains that previously asserted greater autonomy.¹³ One key aspect of the ethnography interprets potentials inherent in the aesthetics of capitalism—the aspirations towards empowered, egalitarian moral economies of play and play as a site of social solidarity—that the behavior of subculture displayed.

Even as I work with a systems-oriented approach deeply concerned with the interaction of diffused structures with the individual on a global context, I draw from many veins of postmodernist thought in order to understand three underlying subjects: 1) conditional or context-dependent truth, 2) particular forms of individual alienation in the world, 3) potential solutions to this alienation. I seek here to clarify a certain description, a certain conception of

¹³ Harvey discusses the problematic aestheticization of politics in the thought and influence of Martin Heidegger (1990:37).

what postmodern society looks like, and open the door to interpreting how these motivations relate to the social landscape—essential background for how I interpret the purpose of fan practice and imaginary communities. As such, I return to David Harvey to outline the economic transitions associated with new social forms, and describe Fordism and the shift to Post-Fordism and which play a key role in the conclusions of the anthropologist Anne Allison.

Fordism is so named because it crystallized under the ideology and successful business model of the American Industrialist Henry Ford when he began mass-producing cheap automobiles in Dearborn, Michigan in 1914. Ford realized that mass production required mass consumption, and mass consumption needed consumers who could afford the products and possessed the leisure time to enjoy them, leading to the adaptation of eight hour work days and decent wages. Harvey differs from economists in taking a broad view of economics that takes into account institutional and cultural factors and positions economic activity as embedded in psychological and social needs. In that sense, the Fordist marketplace emphasized stability, an aesthetic of modernism and techno-scientific rationalism, mass production and mass consumption. The labor system required a “habituation to different instruments of production” (1990:123) that further removed control over product design and production pace away from workers, and attempted to maximize efficiency. Politically, this took the form of stable mass trade unions that were able to trade worker control for higher wages and stable employment, and Keynesian economic policy at the state level.

Harvey traces back the first major breakdown in this system to 1973, when the Arab Oil Embargo stripped bare the weaknesses that rising inflation and stagnant production had underlined in American and European economies. What is now commonly called Post-Fordism, Harvey terms flexible accumulation, and this new form of organization arises out of necessity to

the central flaw of Fordism and Keynesianism, summed up by Harvey in one word: “Rigidity” (1990:142). Post-Fordism brings about even greater labor control, market niches, greater automation, higher structural unemployment, flexible working hours and high turnover, and widespread increases in subcontracting. One of advantage of such reorganization is that “Petty class production undermines working class organization” (1990:153), and highlights the methods in which certain forms of cultural unity are undermined as older forms of capitalist production are picked up again. Blue collar working class identities molded with large groups of people relating to one another in an open factory work environment are subsumed in economies that prioritize more atomized forms of white collar and service industry labor. Whereas the Fordist model pursued economies of scale, Post-Fordism has outpaced that with economies of scope—in practical terms, cheaper, small batch production to rapidly fill orders has outpaced mass production, having the advantage of faster response time and greater flexibility.

A small observation from Harvey that has great relevance to my project is an off-handed comment that perhaps companies produce events now, rather than things. This comment comes in the context of discussing how product half-lives have shrunk (1990:157), but Harvey explains that because events are ephemeral (hence the emphasis on ephemerality and severing it from the eternal in postmodern aesthetics) they can maintain the rapid turnover necessary to fuel growth in the new system that emerged to resolve the problems of Fordism. Producing events is in one way similar to producing semantic value in a product: both are not built on standardization and indeed standardization is anathema. Information economies of the contemporary world, more than Harvey could have anticipated in 1990, open meaning itself into the realm of commodity, but my project looks at the way this comes at the expense of centralized control and the way in which popular media at least offer a potential staging ground for solidarity, community-building,

and therapeutic relief from and revolt against the very marginalization and alienation engendered by capitalist systems involved in their production.

6. Methods

My interest in modern, urban, technology-concerned anthropology interrogates these three issues as they relate to the location of anthropological study. Historically, anthropologists studied the small local entity, working from a whole host of assumptions thereon, in particular that villages were the best place to find traditional culture. Such a curriculum had the effect of defining societies by their apparent simplicity in the eyes and constructions of outside gazes. Codified as non-western, “the field” and core programs of anthropology valued the isolated, the marginal, and exoticized, dealing in the currency of a symbolic Otherness with its origins in colonialism and structures of privilege.

A brief history of fieldwork in anthropology is required here to extrapolate the how and why of fieldwork’s importance—though the concept originated in zoology and reified the discipline’s consideration of itself as a natural science of humanity as opposed to other fields like religion and history (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:2-6). Among my central anthropological sources, Anne Allison and Ian Condry are members of a new generation of anthropologists, who have challenged and even rebelled against traditional anthropology, with its exoticism, isolation, and romantic veins of self-discovery in the pre-modern. Anthropology as a discipline emerged as a byproduct of colonialism and exploration in the latter half of the 19th Century, and its subject was what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) disparaged as the “Savage Slot,” that is to say that anthropology reified and enshrined certain conceptions of distance and legitimized the Western gaze and popular conceptions of the civilized-uncivilized imaginative framework. Fieldwork and field location crystallized into a particular form in the discipline. Bronislaw Malinowski’s model

of fieldwork outlined in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* served as a model for anthropology for over half a century, and only in recent decades have newer forms of fieldwork come into being. Those like Anne Allison, who do multi-location fieldwork in radically different settings and in the Global North, looking at both domestic and foreign consumption of media, are the product of a revolt against traditional ideas of fieldwork.

I invoke both past and present because anthropology is a discipline that is still often misunderstood and conflated—frustratingly for anthropologists—with its more populist and archaic form. Malinowski pioneered and institutionalized a specific form of participant observation (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:7) that meant finding an isolated location, the more rural or the less overtly westernized the better, and settling down for several years to live side by side with the people, leading to the almost clichéd masculine image of explorer anthropologist in “pith helmet, shorts, and boots” (1954:5) in the opening scenes of Laura Bohannan’s *Return to Laughter*.

Thus the classical anthropologist studied the “Other”, Truillot’s “Savage Slot”, which was in practice non-western and the field valued for study was the isolated, the marginal, and carried perceptions of the exotic, dealing in the currency of symbolic Otherness. Even granting that this did “much to counter Eurocentric and parochial understandings of culture” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:14), the field as archetype operated with an implied home. Home and field can be interpreted as a proxy dichotomy for Subject and Object and what anthropology did was really a Hegelian dialectic: the culture of home posited as thesis, the culture of field posited as antithesis, and the individual anthropologist both making and becoming a living synthesis, which explains the powerful appeal and impact such narratives had. “Natives” became a negative contrast to the abstract values and material conditions of home just as the field was conceptualized as a negative

contrast to home—where home was filled with technology, the field had only primitive tools, where the home was literate, the field was illiterate, where the home was urban, the field was rural, where the home was in constant flux, the ossified field lay in a slow-moving or completely static state.

I deal with the history of fieldwork in order to highlight the contribution of this project in continuing to tear down these methodological distractions. I have referred to *Anthropological Locations* (Edited by Ferguson and Gupta 1997) several times to emphasize this one point: that the very definition of an anthropological project and of anthropology was, until quite recently, the idea that anthropology was done somewhere far removed from the researcher, in some exotic setting. By working within a narrow locality,¹⁴ and with a subculture whose mores I am familiar with, I am departing from traditional anthropology and am closer to a field and type of research typically covered by media studies, sociology, and the fine arts (such as Art History, Literature, Cinema Studies, etc). I invoke the relationship of “home” and the “field”, I focus my gaze on the techno-modern, on the proliferation of forms in different local contexts, and my fascination has as its epicenter the dense urban overstimulation of the modern world. I seek to contribute to an anthropology that frees itself from restrictive thinking about appropriate “sites” of fieldwork and Other to approach subcultures that rapidly emerge and develop particular practices and create community through transnational media flows.

The mere idea of studying Americans, or looking at technology and frames of reference that are highly mobile and grounded in contemporary technological and capitalistic systems, would have been seen as unsuitable for anthropology as recent as twenty years ago. Anne Allison highlights the quandary of contemporary anthropology in its attempts to keep the admirable

¹⁴ The research done through the University of Mississippi is more an initial stage of longer-term research, bounded by the constraints inherent in a Master’s thesis. It is my goal to expand upon this in the future with more data and more locations within the U.S.

focus on contextualization and analysis grounded in everyday life and lived experiences.

Allison's question of "How does one do ethnography without the false comfort of imagined local boundaries" (2006:32) is a pertinent one to anthropology and to my research. Allison worked in a number of different field settings, an "open" and flexible arrangement that sought to record intimate and accurate observations in often brief and diverse circumstances, such as an advertising firm internship. Fundamental to Allison's techniques and goals and my own is the desire to bring anthropology into the realm of technology and an era where relationships and understanding across different cultures and frameworks is more important than ever, yet the useful toolkits of anthropology are all too often absent from public consciousness. A tertiary goal then, is to present more involved anthropology in such a way that would "sell" its capacity to engage public participants and address issues that are both relatable and contemporary.

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In this chapter, I have outlined my thesis, presented my view of Post-Fordist society, discussed the anthropological theorists that buttress this project, and lastly, discussed methodology and how I have mobilized it to the service of this project. Chapter two shifts to show fan dialogues and how fans construct and portray their community and activities, invoking specific materials and imaginative images from visual media to get at how fans perceive their social networks and how they use media in making specific types of political judgments. These insights provide a background to consider in Chapter three, which outlines historical and contemporary backdrops to Japanese pop culture and further explains important theoretical considerations and their relationship to subculture, consumption, and the requirements of interpreting the anime-manga fan subculture. The discussion moves to an initial historical outline consisting of general facts and arguments about the origins of Japanese pop culture genres. From

there I discuss the two main field-related anthropologists, Anne Allison and Ian Condry, in detail and synthesize their approaches. The third section of the chapter rests in unpacking the very complex ideas of media theorist Thomas LaMarre—a central figure in Japanese media studies and in my thesis for his conception of the relationship of technologies and representation to human ideological systems and the ontology of the human. The chapter concludes with a survey academic commentary on popular media forms and fantasy consumption, and the role of the girl in Japanese pop culture in order to give an example of how forms of resistance can be expressed in such subcultures.

Chapter four presents my ethnography of the anime-manga subculture as studied through the University of Mississippi anime club from 2014-2015. The ethnography invokes the blurred relationship between consumer and producer in light of active engagement from fans, which often blurs legal lines as well. I overview a wide range of fan activities and sites and discuss strains of commonality between them; deconstruction, reconstruction, humor, subversive or offensive language, and horizontally organized social environments with very little social space to claim superiority or authority within the subculture.

Chapter Four is where I return to the question of how to frame the anime-manga subculture in America and tackle the kinds of practices, self-representations, and ideologies found in the ethnography. I return to my interest in the growing influence of Japanese pop culture in media in the United States, as a result of my interest in Anne Allison's thesis that certain forms of media are better suited to Post-Fordist economic culture. Furthermore, I leave open the possibility that certain forms of consumption offer liberation from alienating capitalist conditions through an aesthetics of control, personalization, and non-normativity.

CHAPTER II: FANS SPEAK

Ethnography offers so much to social research because the voices and subjects of discussion have the opportunity to “speak back” as it were. By giving ample space for the perspectives of people embedded within the fictive community, and given intimate access in acquiring these perspectives, the interview component of an ethnography tempers the presence of the researcher. In this section I present responses taken from different interviews and unpack and interpret these responses, contextualizing them as individuals.

The first person I interviewed was a Freshman student at the University of Mississippi whom I will call “Fred.” Fred is nineteen years old, male, from a small town in Mississippi, and has aspirations of becoming a voice actor for an American distributor of anime. When pressed to describe what is was about manga and anime that appealed to him, Fred said:

[2/15/2015 5:09:21 PM] **Fred:** For *Gurren Lagann*, its a show that makes one is simply another coming of age story and add an insane style and action and fun character to make a good show, *Cowboy Bebop* was a show that took the American episodic style and turned it on its head by having a full story behind the scene and not only that but having it make tribute to many other shows American and Japanese

[2/15/2015 5:11:53 PM] **Jacob Waalk:** So you liked how both shows were more experimental? *Cowboy Bebop* is especially referential and creative.

[2/15/2015 5:12:33 PM] **Fred:** Yeah they were more creative than most American shows are, anime shows a lot more times will take risks that American shows would never take

Fred described his interest in terms of individual shows, which was my expectation in starting out, however most people I interviewed actually did not describe their interest in terms of shows. Fred was very specific, and yet even after I pressed him to expand, remained

somewhat vague in his discourse. The portrayal of anime here is a positive contrast to America—a running theme in my interview with Fred was how overt this positive contrast was. Anime is more creative, more willing to take risk and do strange things with style (I'm guessing he meant visual style) and action. Underlying these different concepts is the idea of dynamicism versus stagnation, that Japanese culture if nothing else is more dynamic than America. Here is how an exchange about America went between Fred and I:

[2/15/2015 5:24:46 PM] **Fred:** America I think while a country I love has problems like political infighting, rampant commercialization and terrible ideas on what should be good role models.

[2/15/2015 5:25:28 PM] **Jacob Waalk:** Those last two points, rampant commercialization and terrible ideas on role models, can you go into a little more detail?

[2/15/2015 5:27:52 PM] **Fred:** I think everything is about making money sometimes you get a good show that wasn't about making money like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* but usually you get designed by committee with no artistic ideas in it at all. and we put people like Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton on a pedestal instead of smart people like Stephen Hawking or artistic people like Guillermo del Toro.

[2/15/2015 5:29:33 PM] **Jacob Waalk:** And on these points you feel that Japan offers a good counterpoint?

[2/15/2015 5:30:33 PM] **Fred:** I think that Japan can sometimes have these problems but they most of the time offer have more shows that are evolved from artistic freedom.

[2/15/2015 5:31:12 PM] **Jacob Waalk:** So there's a lot more freedom and diversity in Japanese media?

[2/15/2015 5:31:24 PM] **Fred:** At least in my mind yes, you get more shows with interesting concepts and characters in Japan than in America.

Fred criticizes the sites of American cultural production, with a focus on perceived negative influences and negative role models. America is constructed on negative traits, and positive features are left unstated, and while Fred hesitates to raise Japan up on a pedestal, as a contrast to America Japan does not have to be perfect. Indeed, Japan lacks prominence in this discussion—presented in terms of a vague sense of priorities that reflects the vague images Fred has of Japan: cherry blossoms and temples. While describing himself, he said “I am an atheist

and an egalitarian. I went to a right-wing private Christian school for most of my life, and that is probably [what] made me an atheist.” When I asked whether discovering anime was like discovering something new, Fred described it as “[...] like discovering this thing that was completely different from everything I had ever seen.”

Unique about Fred was the fact that of all the interviews I’ve conducted, he was the only subject who expressed a desire to work in the anime production industry. What’s more, while from a small conservative town in Mississippi, he talked about how his mother had become a huge fan of anime and watched a lot of series with him in high school, contrary to the sort of generational gap I would expect. Fred is a big fan of English language dubs, and his interest comes from a belief that English dubbing is critical in disseminating anime across a larger public where few people would watch subtitled programming. Fred likes the fact that anime fans are passionate and enjoys the presence of shows that can be admired both for entertainment and moral purposes.

Some of the major themes recur in other interviews. Specifically one focus I had was what fans had to say about America versus what they had to say about Japan. One of the most interesting interviews I carried out was with a twenty-three year Taiwanese-American graduate student called “Johnny” who managed MAI-CON through its first two conventions. Johnny is half American, half Taiwanese, and grew up in the rural interior of Taiwan until coming to America in middle school. Johnny is a writer, physicist, sci-fi aficionado, polyglot, martial arts enthusiast who adheres to the progressivist unitarianistic Baha’i religion, which tends to filter into his evolutionist outlook that sees in history and the present a steady progress towards the realization of moral and technological aims.

Anything crazy coming out of Japan almost doesn't seem surprising to outsiders, but it's paralleled with something on the extreme opposite

spectrum, it's cultural strictness. Schools and businesses follow a militarily strict, extremely formal honor code and code of conduct. Even the language has built in respectfulness while allowing for intimacy and familiarity. I think the biggest cultural reason is because they are wound so tight, the release is so huge in degree and scale. How is it different than the Chinese? Well, as one, I can without hesitation tell you the Chinese are overall complacent and lethargic, surviving on bursts of passion. Japanese as a whole are filled to the brink with energy, fueling the various emotions and feelings: creativity, ambition, hatred, love.

What interests me most about this passage is that rather than the United States, the negative contrasts are about Chinese culture. Johnny's family were not nationalist refugees who fled mainland China, but rather went back somewhere between twenty and twenty three generations on the island, and according to him, his grandfather was a forced conscript to the Japanese army, was educated in Japan as a child like many Taiwanese children, and later during the war was among the highest ranked Taiwanese officers in the Japanese army. Even in the midst of a complicated local relationship to Japan—in one gruesome comment, Johnny notes how his school in Taiwan was built by the Japanese and how they beheaded the rebelling men of the local non-Chinese indigenous tribe behind that very school—all the kids in the community where he grew up read the shounen manga *Naruto*, watched anime, and these interests in Japan were uncontroversial. Even with the dark history of colonialism and war crimes in World War II, Johnny still goes on to say that “the area probably had much to thank economically to the Japanese.” So as he first broaches the subject of what images and ideas define Japan for him, Johnny seeks to critique a different “home” culture. It is not just America, but rather Japan seems to offer a neat foil for similar types of domestic criticisms in other contexts.

Johnny's insight lines up with common fan and media studies commentaries—even Anne Allison to a degree—that he connects the vibrancy of anime-manga and Japanese pop culture more generally to the enormous pressures towards continual performance. Japan exists as a place

of precarious extremes—formality and casualness, work and play, strictness and openness. Johnny, like many other fans, connects the perceived intensity of Japanese culture with the intensity these fans find in anime, and Johnny tries to explain this energy in positive terms of contrasts—how ‘tightly wound’ the Japanese social system is compared to Johnny’s personal experience with a more lax social system in Taiwan. When pressed to describe the salient images and ideas of America for him, a similar critical contrast happened. Of all my interviews Johnny presented the most colorful and unique comment on America.

America is the old revolutionary turned mobster who retired after working hard to get where is was, sitting on his couch spending the money his kids were supposed to inherit.

Where as Japan has a diverse number of minds, America is nearly homogeneous, yet so desperate to define themselves. This homogenous nature of the mind has led to us becoming very susceptible by a single idea. We focus on it, take sides on it, desperate to make ourselves distinguishable, and end up adding too many spices into the melting pot.

Japan, the country that had so little international presence in its communities that it started the JET program to import diversity and bring foreign teachers to rural and provincial communities, becomes the more diverse country. Johnny is aware of Japan’s demographic homogeneity and cultural strictness—both aspects that differ markedly from the United States—however he argues that Japan is more diverse *mentally*. In contrast, the United States is complacent, and its diversity superficial. The very obsession with identity that Johnny sees in other Americans is a sign of just how homogenous and untethered the traditions and social system are—the overabundance of “spices in melting pot” render individuality, uniqueness, and fresh ideas difficult to express or establish, though he does later express hope that America is changing.

Johnny was the only person to really break into the idea of characters when talking about Japanese anime and manga. While it was not the first factor he listed in discussing the appeal of what to him was not a genre of entertainment, but a broad umbrella of styles, discussion of characters took up the bulk of the initial exchange. The focus of the commentary, however, is an excellent point of consideration:

As a story teller/writer myself, the interactions of characters and your expectations of these characters have a very profound impact on the story. Whether it is familiarity of the characters so you know what to expect, or a theatrical trap that feeds on your expectations, only for them to be flipped on you, variety borne from cultural inspired creative thinking can always find novelty in my mind.

As a self-identified writer, Johnny also makes a claim that would have jarred my American perceptions of writing a few years back, which have tended to exist in narratives about “art” that present writing in individuated terms of self-transcendence and improvement.¹⁵ Implicit in that is a fierce independence and individuality praised in American literature—such as the oft repeated maxim of creative writing workshops “Write what you know” i.e. that the best writing comes from the deepest, and most unique expressions of the writer’s self and experiences. Johnny, however, phrases the discussion of writing in such a way that precludes bromides on art and grounds the process of writing in society. Japanese manga and anime—and indeed much Japanese literature—makes use of very formalized types, which inform the personality of the character or at least the expectations of the viewer. Sometimes the entire plot may hinge around the use of clichéd stock visual keys and the ways an anime or manga can make a creative manipulation of these formally recognized archetypes—the tall, quiet, glasses-wearing character who is supposed to be studious and intelligent, for example.

¹⁵ Here I could make reference to one of any number of guides or commentaries on creative writing, but specifically had in mind sections of *Quack This Way*, Bryan Garner and David Foster Wallace’s commentary on writing.

Johnny appreciates these archetypes, presenting them in a manner reminiscent of Superflat art; meaning and identity lie at the surface of the image, in the appearance. A grammar of visual signs emerges with codified personality traits—glasses, bleached hair, a piercing, social awkwardness, etc—that inform viewers of what to expect. Johnny praises this use of types for the comfort and access point that it lends viewers with the experience to recognize it, however he also recognizes the subversive potential for theatrical traps, for frequently challenging the clichés themselves, and even the creativity necessary to manipulate such stock traits into new stories. Johnny calls it “cultural-inspired thinking” but what he describes is the use of culturally salient symbols—in character traits and designs—to self-consciously make art from stereotypes and exaggerations. This fits into what Azuma (2001) noted with Japanese fans deconstructing and reconstructing characters from a database of traits, and provides a way of connecting this aspect of disassembly to the American fanbase. Anime and manga force fans to consider them beyond the closed context of a show or story, and more in terms of the broad cross-genre references, in terms of a medium consisting of different, movable components. For Johnny, manga and anime provide a sense of nostalgia; bring him back to “something I've known but have sort of left.”

Johnny agrees that without the internet as a medium of distribution the anime-manga subculture would not exist in America, and that this also required legal and ethical violations, going so far as to say “that the anime and manga culture was created entirely out of the copyright infringement issue.” Manga and anime represent a fast-growing market that Johnny sees as still undetermined and thus somewhat frontier-like in the loose cavalier rules and attitudes of the fans. Johnny predicts that the anime-manga medium will continue growing and even challenge mainstream domestic American media, in terms of economic and imaginary capital. Johnny again returned to the melting pot metaphor in his final comments, where he more fully outlines a

pragmatist view of art, and the assertion that it is, more than anything, a lack of social cohesion that prevents contemporary Americans from fully expressing identity or self-realization.

Entertainment is meant to be an escape of reality most of the time. The structured storylines ensure that the characters we care about always have a purpose and have a beginning, middle, and end. Often, dealing with issues isn't the most difficult thing in daily life, it's finding purpose. That and transferring symbolic knowledge and wisdom of others and of the past. Isn't it awful that so many people hate to see the joy in others just because they don't agree with their medium? [...] However, it's the mark of the wise to hold and consider a thought without accepting it. Personally, I think that Americans could do well to accept many of the ideas and thoughts from the Japanese culture.

America has always been a melting pot of people in that they exist in the same space, a large bowl filled with vegetables, meats, and spices but no water, each a separate entity. It's time someone added water and turned on the heat, allowing the flavors to melt into one another to truly create a hearty stew.

Another eloquent interview subject who also shared a dual heritage, like Johnny did, “Sherry” is half-African-American half Korean. In a sense her position is more difficult than Johnny, who takes closely after his Taiwanese father and grandfather, and Sherry notes that “My parents taught me that I would always be different, that I would be treated and seen differently - and it would either be for good or bad as a result.” Sherry is a gregarious twenty-eight year old, a former member of the Ole Miss Anime Club, speaks Korean and English fluently, and got her degree in graphic design and film editing. Sherry has won numerous AMV contests, blogs, and works as a radio DJ. At the beginning, in response to my question of when she first encountered anime or manga, Sherry quips “The joke is that my answer is I've been watching anime since before I was born” before explaining that her mother watched *Kimba the White Lion* and other Japanese movies while pregnant with her, and that anime was a constant part of her early life.

Sherry highlights the creative platform of the anime-manga Japanese pop culture platform as key to her passion: “I would have to say that the appeal to anime to me has always

been the very creation of it. Being both a graphic artist and video editor, it's absolutely mind boggling to think about just how far anime has come as a genre and as its own culture.” Sherry is confident and opinionated, and with a deft grasp of anime as subject matter (she has watched thousands of shows, and has an enormous library of anime DVDs) she is in her element and shoots off quick responses on a variety of questions.

There is no doubt that Sherry also loves the fan community, though she does not shy away from calling out newer fans for thinking that “slapstick, absurdism in anime is "awesome" or "epic"” at the expense of classic animes and series that focus more on serious story and character development—*Neon Genesis Evangelion* being one example she spends much time talking about. Sherry does not spend much time discussing Japan when questioned about Japan’s presence in her ideas and imagery, other than in the generalist terms “My views are positive on Japan as a whole, but some of the things they have there are a bit strange and while I can't say I haven't attempted to wrap my head around it, I will say that it's not easy to fully grasp.” Sherry does not show much interest in commenting on America either, other than to talk about the role of prejudice and to say “As for in today's society, I can't say that I'm overly impressed with America's development as a society.”

Sherry’s self-description is of interest—how she connects things about herself to her background:

I've always had a very open-minded aspect on life as a whole. Having to grow up as different, I learned early on that the world is different too. In that sense, I was the same as the very world - that I could connect with just about anyone, but I am still me. I am still different. I'm still unique.

Japanese pop culture has been described in similar fashion by LaMarre, Allison and Condry in their work on media and fan communities. As a medium it opens up possibilities of difference, temporary re-identification, and allows free open space to connect and play with

aspects of change and accepting unfamiliar culture. Sherry's comments on overall direction, growth and movement of the "Otaku" subculture in America is both ordinary and subversive to traditional ideas of American exceptionalism (or parochialism). Sherry criticizes the use of the word "Otaku"—the main reason I included the term; to see which Americans saw it in terms of its playful American usage or in terms of its complex and negative history in Japanese. Sherry then outlines a vision of how Japanese pop culture is becoming ubiquitous, and a defense of what she sees as falling more broadly under the umbrella of "geek culture."

Name it as something different because as a geek for both games and anime, I think being a geek in general is never something to be frowned upon. Geeks make up a good portion of our inventors, creators, and storytellers. [...] Anyone who is into animation, or who has seen something simple as *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, or any other Studio Ghibli films released from Disney, have already exposed themselves to the culture. Watching the one minute and thirty second trailers for the movies and having their siblings or children wanting to see it has them exposed to the culture. There is no escaping from it. It's simply a different style presented from a different point of view from a different group of people (thought that bridge has already been made thanks to shows like *Avatar the Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*). As for negative impressions, that could be said of all media. We all have our likes and dislikes and as for the culture itself, I can't say that it's something to be frowned upon anymore as it has started to readily cross over into the realm of video games - a sub-culture that is growing rapidly with each passing year.

In order to get a little context from outside the University of Mississippi, I interviewed a Bobby, a 4th year student at Tulane, soon to be starting an MFA program in Florida emphasizing sci-fi and fantasy genre writing and literary criticism. Bobby and I played Quiz Bowl together in High School, though as an underclassman he did not start on the same team as I did, and in High School we didn't associate much other than having the same circles of friends. In college it was social media and a common interest in anime and manga that brought us back into contact and led to many discussions about a whole range of topics, creating a lasting friendship. As an open

bisexual, Bobby, who comes from a conservative upper class WASP family from North Louisiana, has a different position than others I had interviewed.

Though different, Bobby's enculturation to Japanese pop culture products follows a common storyline. First, he grew up watching *Dragonball Z* on Cartoon Network's risky, controversial Toonami block, which filled up with English dubs of Japanese anime, some of which, like *Dragonball Z* and *Gundam Wing*, were attacked as too violent for children. Then some friends told him to go watch this new show called *Naruto*, and from there he began watching animes that aired on Cartoon Network's teen-oriented, weekend late-night programming Adult Swim—*Inuyasha*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *Bleach* were animes he listed as examples. Tired of getting just one episode a week of the story, Bobby took to the *Naruto* manga, and from there began exploring that field. The last step in the process was “when I started playing the online video game *Naruto-arena*. I joined a guild in the game, talked with my various guild members on the chat site Xat, and became exposed to Japanese pop culture in the form of music and the regular exports from the country.”

The advantage of the Japanese pop culture industry here was that it had a seamless interface between numerous media platforms, all of them interactive to a degree, even watching anime or reading manga—the two focuses of my project—furnish certain forms of social activities and interaction to a degree. When asked what about manga and anime appealed to him, Bobby said:

The characters were drawn to be cool and it made you want to be like them. It created a sort of superhero for us unfamiliar with comic books while also diverging from comic books in the way it appeals to a younger audience. As a child, it was funny, cool, and absurd. It resonated with my own personality. It also meshed well with my preference for a fantasy type setting with its futuristic or fantastical setting. It appealed to me then because of its lightheartedness and fun. The drawing style felt more realistic--despite the enlarged eyes, etc--and so I saw a world and story

that I wanted to be in, whereas in Western cartoons (such as Yogi, Dexter's Lab, Cow and Chicken, etc) I never wanted to be in those worlds. They were entertainment. Anime and manga created worlds that were, to me, life.

The statement bears a startling resemblance to Anne Allison's thesis—even the wording is similar. Allison makes a very specific observation about Pokémon, which is that children didn't identify with the characters (this is what made market testing companies tell Nintendo that Pokémon would do poorly in America) but rather were drawn to it because it was a world with systematic rules and implied depth. Bobby repeats these sentiments almost exactly—describing a sense of wanting to *be in* a fantasy world, of the power of manga and anime for creating fantasy playscapes that felt more realistic and more desirable than children's media in America, distinguishing between *entertainment* and *play*.

When asked how he saw Japan, Bobby responded “There's the anime world that I recognize as an unrealistic view of Japan and then there's my more realistic view of Japan.” Bobby was interesting in that he actually compartmentalized his perceptions of Japan, and was consciously separating media images from other impressions he had gleaned of the culture. After talking about Akihabara, Tokyo's electronics district internationally renown for its “Otaku” culture and specialized shops such as Maid Cafes, Bobby explains that he thinks Japan is a little xenophobic and that while anime and manga are popular and respected, dedicated fans are still socially stigmatized. However, most interestingly, Bobby invokes the use of animals and other “cute” character designs in company marketing and as company emblems as what unifies the two different sides of Japan for him—eliding with Ian Condry's comments on how the character merchandizing business is incredibly profitable, and with Allison's ideas of Japanese culture finding ways to “reenchant” modern late-capitalism and thus alleviate sentiments of alienation from denatured, industrialized commodities. Overall, there is a deeply contradictory image of

Japan in Bobby's mind, between the cyberpunk image utilized by sci-fi writer Chris Gibson, and the traditional images of quaint hot spring resorts called *Onsen*, the beautiful Shinto gates known as *tori*, temples, rural scenic countryside and strict maintenance of tradition. In a real sense, the common construction of Japan throughout my interviews is of a precarious but appealing mix of secure traditionalism and scenic pastoralism set side by side and intertwined with cutting-edge modernity—cherry blossoms beside mazes of flashing neon signs and high rise skyscrapers and dense super-urban cities.

When asked about America, Bobby is particularly critical among all of my subjects, saying that while he likes some things about how the United States works, that it is “one mess of a country” and as a whole the “U.S. is generally so slow and conservative that I find it hard to actually love the country.” None of the actual images he pulls up to visualize the United States are positive: “I conjure up images of fast food, monopoly men, sensationalized media, and far right conservative extremists with their U.S. flags. I think everyone imagines the golden arches of McDonald's, the corporate logo of Wal-Mart, and the rednecks with their flags and beer on a lawn chair.” However, Bobby tempers these images by saying that these are the international image of America, and that while he agrees with them as generalizations he still gets frustrated because they tend to hide the diversity in the country, exclaiming that “Others do exist within our country!” As for American media, Bobby hashed out a lengthy response in less than five minutes, slamming it on numerous fronts:

There doesn't seem to be anything new to them at all and most of them generally try to piggyback off the success of some previous show. When one show does happen to become really popular and stand out, the show becomes pervasive with their item sales that I quickly tire of the show even existing without having watched much of it. American genres separate themselves too far from each other resulting in cartoons that generally feel childish without anything substantial or enlightening about them. The shows sense of humor amounts to nothing substantial. It is

stupidity. Stupidity becomes the joke. That's the thing though isn't it? These shows are about comedy. Comedy seems to be the big thing. There isn't much of anything that is serious or makes the viewer actually think about the world around them. This relates to the notion that, yes, U.S. shows feel mass-produced, which fits in with the capitalistic depictions of the U.S. I can sit down and watch multiple television shows and hear the same joke in each one. It's not hard at all. It's boring and unfunny. There also seems to be an obsession with the grotesque, or pseudogrotesque, being construed as comedy. In an attempt to appeal to a massive audience and appease CEOs and business men who only see ratings and profit, the U.S. creates shows that ultimately fall flat in every regard. It has reached the point where for the past 4 years I have refused to pay for cable or satellite and instead subscribe to Hulu and Crunchyroll for anime.

The question of American media leads to a near rant on the subject, but one that on many points is hard to argue—at least on the level of its basic assertions. It invoked a lot of Ian Condry's discussions in my mind—the uniqueness of Japanese media production itself and Condry's portrayal of the anime-manga industry as run largely by dedicated fans of the medium, a thought that I will return to in the conclusion. The pessimism about America is largely in line with Bobby's description of himself as a pessimistic person, and a “southern outlier” in that he has a very strong sense of southern manners and etiquette, is soft-spoken and status-conscious, but is progressive and as a result of his bisexuality always felt out of place within his community and culture. Bobby has “zero tolerance for stupidity,” is fascinated by sci-fi and fantasy genre work, and has interests in neuroscience and psychology, as well as English and the fine arts.

The discussion of bisexuality led to the manga genre of yaoi (or Boy's Love) being brought up. When I broached the question of about what the appeal of yaoi was, Bobby's first comment was about his own tastes. “The interesting thing is that I've always heard yaoi is for women, bara is for gay males. Oddly enough, I don't like bara, and I like yaoi.” Of interest to him was that a genre sometimes lampooned by gay activists in Japan as geared towards and produced by women actually appealed to him and other people he knew more than manga genres

produced more exclusively for and by male homosexual men. Bobby praises yaoi for its wide range of characters and everyday settings: “I feel that this normalizes homosexuality for younger viewers who at times can feel absolutely isolated and like they are alone at being queer in the world.” Bobby also praises the genre for breaking down gender roles, which is something he is very supportive of, and later says that it might be the case that people become more open to “playing” with gender roles in cosplay. The willingness of the fan community to accept these practices and diversities is something that Bobby also notes, and he also describes the community as open-minded, positing that “Conservative mindsets also tend to push away from anything unrealistic.”

As someone who came across his roommate of four years through anime and manga—Bobby speaks about numerous friendships formed through the common language, relating to how he and his roommate first met another one of their inner circle of friends when the two of them were talking about anime on a parking shuttle at Tulane and he chimed in as a complete stranger and the three of them hit it off discussing anime. This entire fan community though, could not exist without technology, as according to Bobby, the fandom depends on easy access to images and other material products, as well as scattered networks of people that technology facilitates. Indeed, Bobby like many anime fans, declares that he prefers the (often illegal) online subs of Japanese animes even to official English dub releases, because dubs in the U.S. are typically done “pitifully.” Bobby outlines a typical laundry list of complaints that fans have about official paths of distribution in the United States: the small number of voice actors leading to the same group of people appearing in most shows, the lack of formal training, poor translations, and the inability of English dubs to capture Japanese wordplay that make up most of the humor.

Bobby's final thoughts on the direction of anime and manga subculture in America are tempered by some pessimism, as compared to most of the interviews I did. Bobby worries that the increasing popularity of anime and its exposure on American television, and the growth of the fanbase, will lead to anime in America becoming an increasingly commercialized industry. Bobby sees the potential for the "wrong types" of animes to become popularized at the expense of broad spectrums of the medium. However, Bobby notes that his experiences through the fan community have been both positive and important in his life, and he remains hopeful that the fandom will continue to have a positive impact even as it grows larger and approaches the mainstream.

Another very interesting interview that I carried out was with Thomas, a former President and Vice President of the anime club who had also served as President of the Residential College, and completed a Masters degree in Accounting. Thomas, now working in Houston, Texas, is well-liked and respected by members, and spent five years being involved in the club and other related social groups such as Magic the Gathering player circles. It took several weeks to find an open time for Thomas—who works full time for a Houston area company—to do an interview, but the eventual interview was very productive and we both enjoyed it. Thomas described himself as a typical upper middle class suburban kid from Houston, with a standard nuclear family of two parents who had two kids; parents who both had graduate degrees and emphasized having a strong career path. Thomas's father retired when Thomas was just a kid so as to spend more time with him, and even coached his soccer team. Thomas concluded that he was "basically an optimistic person. I like to believe in people and hate to see anyone, especially those I care about, having troubles or being down." Thomas then added that he is easy going and willing to go with the flow and or try new things as long as they didn't break the law or rules.

Thomas traces his exposure to anime back to his childhood watching Toonami, and following hit series like Digimon and Yu-gi-oh on television, though he does not have a clear idea of when he began considering such things separately as “anime.” Thomas comments on the art, saying that it was “more... detailed and stylized? than what I saw in other shows - and when the time called for it - more... epic” and yet struggles to really discuss artistic effects, later pulling up images from various animes and cartoons to look at them and consider the art. While he lacks the vocabulary or the acquaintance with more formal discussions of art, Thomas still spends almost twelve minutes trying to describe facets of artistic appeal, including noting how he liked the facial expressions more in the anime art style. Thomas is more at ease discussing the role of thematic appeal for him, the appeal of the story constructions and characters, specifically harping on what William Tsutsui noted about the dark, intricate storylines of many popular anime and manga. Thomas cites *Death Note* and *Fullmetal Alchemist* as “the two shows that got me to look into anime more than just some show I'm watching on TV that I like.” The opening credits of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, which introduces the plight of the two brothers, is what Thomas says truly stuck with him—the back-story of how the Elric brothers as small children attempted to use alchemy in a way that transgressed the limitations of nature in order to bring their dead mother back to life left a deep impression on his mind. Thomas says of this experience: “It was dark, it was something that I hadn't really seen in animation before. And it was fairly compelling as an idea and... an emotion, a tone, really.” *Death Note* was the first thing he watched in subtitles, and Thomas notes that he was surprised at how easy it was to follow, “The only thing is you really have to focus the whole time. You can't just "have it on" and do something else at the same time.” At that time, he appreciated the focus and intensity that watching something in

subtitles required of him, and the breadth of subtitled shows online helped to get him more involved in the anime and manga as a subculture.

When asked about the images and ideas he had about Japan, the very first thing Thomas writes follows closely to the narrative pace already set by the other interviews: “When I think of Japan, have this sense there are very different... pieces of it, I suppose. Kind of a dichotomy.” Indeed the consistency is remarkable in that Japan appears in terms of a dichotomy, of radical contrasts and for most fans, it is that complex and multifaceted image that attracts them, as opposed to simplifying or exoticizing Orientalist narratives such as those critiqued by Edward Said. Thomas, with his business background, unsurprisingly selects economic aspects, “On the one hand, I think of its business world. The country that spawned global companies like Toyota and Nintendo.” Thomas goes on: “I also know that the Japanese have this idea of continuous improvement. I'm pretty sure it's Japanese or they have something similar. I've actually learned about this in my management accounting class. They are always pushing to do things better, make something more efficient.” He also speaks positively about the willingness of Japanese companies to cooperate with one another and even share information for the greater social good, and also mentions the way Japanese businesses are structured so as to produce specialized, exact orders on tight deadlines. In a small space, Thomas invokes a number of economic issues beyond the purview of my project, but still interesting, such as *kaizen*, which is the idea of continuous improvement; a concept introduced and developed by the American statistician W. Edwards Deming and a centerpiece of Japanese economic culture to the current day. I found it interesting that Thomas, although vague, was very grounded in viewing Japan in terms of specific localized practices, rather than generic or potentially exoticized images of tradition or technology. Thomas even tempers his assessment of Japanese business culture by saying that forced overtime and

after-work social obligations such as drinking are neglectful to healthy family life, and that the society is a lot more patriarchal than the United States. The contrast in Japan, for Thomas, comes from the vibrant niche cultural communities that exist within this strict business world. However Thomas says “I don't know how... accepted these niche cultures are in the general sense. And some seem overwhelmingly out there that part of me wonders if it is reactionary to the strictness of the other side of things.” The last section of that assessment is in line with Brian Bergstrom’s discussion of Lolita, and with Anne Allison’s thesis that Pokémon offered positive, healing experiences from strict educational regimens.

Thomas has a laid-back, temperate and generally positive perception of the United States that offers a stark contrast to Bobby’s; Thomas’s view is that it “seems like there's more of a spectrum here” and that “You're allowed to be yourself, for the most part.” Thomas is actually the only interview subject to invoke the American Dream, as he adds “We have this "American dream," and even if it's debatable whether everyone can really reach it, it feels like the country has that hope of it.” But the other side to all of these statements is that none of them make a firm assertion; there all these little modifiers throughout that temper them; ‘seems’ – ‘for the most part’ – ‘even if its debatable’ – ‘it feels like’ that express that such sentiments are not assumed to be universals or totalizing. Thomas expresses an even-keeled and positive outlook while still acknowledging that this outlook is not a universal.

The importance of fan communities came from “Being involved in a smaller group like that where you always know you have at least something in common to talk about and bond over is great. And being that it's a college group with everyone the same age, doubly so.” As someone who was an officer throughout, Thomas got to know most of the members, which he appreciated, as someone not very good at just going out and randomly approaching new people. What’s more,

Thomas notes that members of the anime club tended to have similar tastes in games and hobbying. Conventions, more than just a fun or artificially liminal space, were bonding experiences for the entire group in Thomas's experiences. While any common interest is a potential ground for social relationships "coming together again and again with that same interest as at least a starting point I think that's what makes it work. And you do things together." Meeting together and turning interests into different activities was the key to how fan communities make social networks of consequence in Thomas's opinion, and something that I will consider again in the conclusion.

When asked if the fan community would exist without the internet, Thomas said "Simply stated? No." The anime-manga subculture is perhaps the first, mass international subculture to arise totally as a result of the internet, and the kinds of freewheeling access provided by scanlations of manga (scanning + translation) and English language subtitles made by fan groups, a topic of contention between the industry and its fan base that Ian Condry approaches in Chapter Six of his book, titled "Dark Energy: What Overseas Fans Reveal about the Copyright Wars." Thomas says, with an implied criticism of the history of U.S. distributors' judgment and business decisions¹⁶, without the internet "We'd [fans] have the English productions of whatever companies decided would do well here (without near as much motivation because there wouldn't be this huge following)." Fans support internet sharing over capitalist ethics—even business oriented, corporate employees like Thomas—because they are skeptical of U.S. distributors, and supportive of the unregulated democratic process by which shows spread and gain notice through

¹⁶ This goes back to the difficulty that shows such as *Power Rangers* and *Pokémon* had just in reaching the American market and finding distributors willing to take what was considered a huge, almost absurd risk. In the same manner that *Sailor Moon* was canceled quickly for not having a huge audience despite having a dedicated and passionate fanbase and cult following that only grew until it was brought back to TV on the Toonami block. (Allison 2006).

fan distribution and activities, often with the implied belief that production companies do see some net profit from this type of activity.

The growing acceptance of anime and manga and fan groups is what Thomas sees as a sign of its larger popularity, which has made anime especially less exotic and less unusual among college students and high school students. Although he does not “see much changing” he does “think it will continue to grow. You see more and more shows being picked up and distributed in America.” Thomas mentions the breakout success of *Attack on Titan* and its ability to suck in casual anime fans and even people who have never watched anime and were far outside the typical demographics (read older) for anime shows. “As for the negative views there are probably a couple different ones that I see: The it's for kids / cartoon idea – the cute little girls (and hentai), um, thing [...] Anime is such a huge category but people that don't know much will latch onto some piece of it they know and assume that's basically it.” Thomas, like many other fans, cites anime's perceived perversion as a site of negative perceptions in the general public, and expresses some irritation that out of context sub-genres are taken as representative of the media writ large. Thomas even cites some of his favorite shows—*Higurashi*, *Black Lagoon*, *Monster*, as examples of shows that have nothing to do with kiddy subject matter that Americans associate with animation (an association that seems to bother fans the most). *Monster* for example is a complex psychological serial-killer thriller, while *Black Lagoon* is an incredibly violent exploration of criminality that is by turns nihilistic and romantic, emphasizing criminality as a form of destructive liberation and in a similar vein to Jean Genet's literature that paint crime and moral subversion as forms of aesthetic beauty.

Thomas wraps up our interview by acknowledging the difference encoded in anime and manga, and asserting acceptance of this difference as a natural byproduct of the creators and

intended audience having a different background than Americans. He asserts that the stories, however, “can be universal, just as humanity is”, and adds at the end that he is still involved with anime fan groups in Houston. I was not aware that such groups, with meetings and activities and other communal activities existed outside the peculiar conducive settings within universities and high schools, but Thomas says the Houston group has also been a good way to meet new people and organize groups for conventions and other events.

I also interviewed the Anime club’s current President Kaylie, a first year linguistic grad student with a research focus on dying languages. Kaylie is a gregarious blond-haired girl, short in stature but with a strong presence and self-deprecating sense of humor. A former mascot for MAI-CON, whose mother taught her sewing and knitting, Kaylie has an interest in costume-making, and emphasizes her position as the token sorority girl in the anime club—and someone who held a leadership position in their sorority. At one point Kaylie describes herself as “a fairly reasonable person- not a pushover, but not a total bitch either. I’m a bit of a mother hen, and have a tendency to have a problem saying ‘no’ if someone asks me for help.” Kaylie is a self-described second generation nerd and bookworm, who points to her father as a source for a common interest in sci-fi and fantasy novels. Growing up in rural Southwest Missouri, Kaylie sees herself as an increasingly less common student whose parents did not divorce. Kaylie is a cosmopolitan young woman who speaks fluent French and reads some of her favorite manga online in French translations, and has studied abroad in both France and Slovakia.

Kaylie claims that her interest in manga and anime “boiled down to the fact that it was the culture of my friend group” and that starting with the popular shoujo series *Fruits Basket* she began reading manga, also watching the anime version with friends. Unlike my other interviews, Kaylie not only reads a lot of manga, but in the interview itself she actually spends more time

talking about manga than anime, going so far as to say “Give me manga over anime any day! The writer and reader in me will rejoice!” Kaylie traces down some major reasons that manga appealed to her, raising up the writing itself as a factor—despite her expectations even, she found the writing to be good and the character development impressed her. Further, Kaylie says that she has never cared for copious description in fiction, and manga, with its visual aspects foregoes description (and indeed allows fans individualized reactions with scenery, images, character design, movement) and instead keeps a taut narrative and stream of dialogue that drives the story. When asked about what she liked about the art, Kaylie writes:

I think it was, at least initially, partially because I’d gotten bored with the way Western animation looked. I’d never done the comic book thing, but what I’d seen of that art hadn’t appealed either. Manga was a really different style that was both realistic, but not. I mean, sure, most girls, myself included, would like large eyes, but the fact of the matter is, we don’t have them to anime face proportions. Beyond that, it looked really two dimensional. It wasn’t trying to be 3D, which I thought was great.

The critique of three-dimensional art work is a running strain through the conversation, as Kaylie expresses considerable disgust with CGI and displeasure that CGI elements have even become commonplace in Japanese animation. Kaylie is not ambiguous about relating her tastes to flatness versus the type of geometric depth that LaMarre spends ample time discussing, the depth created by imposing a vanishing point and a rational projectory to all points in the picture. She also says outright that manga art appealed to her and American comics did not. While talking about the gutter space between panels in manga and cut scenes in anime during fights and action sequences, I brought up how both will frequently cut to the collision of a sword or fist, or how the angle will just be swung around to imply a sense of motion that isn’t drawn, with perhaps some flurries of lines to suggest a direction or split up the cut. Kaylie instantly knows what I’m talking about and agrees that its both common, and more interestingly, argues that “no

one would do that in the west – the cultural preference is for the action to be right in front of the camera in as high a resolution as we can get it.” The contradiction here is that such styles of action come off to the viewer as intense and immediate, yet ambiguous and context-driven within the progression of images itself.

When asked about her image of Japan, Kaylie asks “Ummm... are we talking about its traditional culture, or its modern one?” The very first comments she makes split up Japan into a dichotomy of cultural forms. Kaylie offers up a few loose comments on Japan that don’t necessarily connect with each other; feminism hasn’t progressed as far there, there is a real emphasis on tradition, but the country is modern because after World War II it rebuilt itself with a focus on tech industries. As for images, Kaylie said her brain does “weird things” and flips between images of anime, kimono, and outlandish J-Pop music sets and costumes. In line with her interest in clothing—Kaylie relates how much her mother impressed upon her that clothing sends out an image and expression of identity that others will pick up on—Kaylie talks about how Japanese school uniforms interested her, as well as the overrepresentation in manga and anime of fringe styles like *ganguro* and Lolita.

Kaylie’s response to my clarification that her opinions and ideas about the United States are also welcome, was “Ohhhhh, that’s messy.” Aside from her previously stated view of the United States as highly internalized, Kaylie goes on to criticize the United States for its stubborn monolingual system, at one point saying “We don’t even really try to teach kids SPANISH, for god’s sake.” The United States is isolationist, and what’s more Kaylie adds “And sadly, this is the reason why I have to knock the melting pot off of my imagery of the US- we’re not anymore. Maybe we used to be, but now the goal is to assimilate and make everyone else like us.” As might be expected from a linguist, language plays a major role in Kaylie’s appraisal, but what

struck me was that in the context of the interview, she asserts a sense of traditional southern values from her family, however this sense of identity is secure and not threatened by diversity. Kaylie attacks the U.S. for assimilationist policies (and is the second person to critically refer to the melting pot metonym) and for refusing to take what she considers to be basic steps to engaging with other national groups and with the broader world, asserting underneath all of this that the U.S. is not actually diverse. Kaylie concludes though, by saying “But at the same time... America is home.” Her tone is one of exasperation—that she feels more at ease in the United States than in Europe. Kaylie does not offer up any hopes for improvement or ideas about how correct these problems; just that sense of exasperation.

The question of social networking brings out a bubbly response from Kaylie, who writes “Going to anime is almost a guarantee that you’ll find SOMEONE who’s interested in the same things you are.” For her, it is an exciting experience to connect with new people over a show that both parties are big fans of—her example is *Sword Art Online*. Kaylie latches on to the fact that the anime-manga subculture is less mainstream as a key reason why it is a lot more open-minded.

I do think that the anime community is really incredibly open. I mean, there’s something for everyone. Don’t like your shounen tournaments? That’s ok, we have shoujo and slice of life. You want lots of pretty boys? How do you feel about yaoi? There’s literally so many genres that it’s almost impossible not to find something you like. And we embrace them all.

Kaylie talks about Conventions as places where because everyone is involved in the subculture, “You’re safe at a con in a way that you can’t be safe anywhere else.” The Convention is a safe place to get totally emerged in the fandom and provide a socially acceptable place to engage in a host of activities like cosplay that cannot be done elsewhere. For her, “Cosplay’s fun. And if you suck at it, you’re usually allowed to suck at it.”

The question of the internet and new technologies of distribution elicits a rather frank admission of (il)legality in fan activities that is none the less crucial to the dissemination of these products and the growth of the overall fanbase in general:

Having websites like crunchy roll streaming video for free (or subscription if you have the cash) makes it infinitely easier for poor grad students like me to get a hold of my anime. The same goes for the, errr, scans of probably questionable legality of manga. I can't afford to buy all of the volumes, no matter how much I want to, but I can go online and get to them.

Kaylie suggests Toonami and Adult Swim as other major instigators behind the growth of anime in the United States, though offers the disclaimer that she isn't really sure, because she, like many fans, doesn't watch anime on TV—recalling Bobby, he said with pride that he did not pay for cable and only kept Hulu and Crunchyroll subscriptions. Unlike other subjects, Kaylie does not think the anime-manga subculture will fully go mainstream. Rather, she believes “that Otaku subculture will probably stay about the size it currently is. It's a fairly well known genre, and it has a decent amount of support, but it's never going to go mainstream in the US.” The negative perceptions of the subculture that exist both within it and outside it have, Kaylie suggests, to do with the fact that it is a “nerd subculture” and many of the participants “are the awkward kids who never quite got the memo on how to interact with other, non-socially handicapped people.” However, Kaylie dismisses this criticism as not representing everyone, and also arguing that to a lesser or greater extent the same thing is true of all subcultures and isn't necessarily a bad thing. Kaylie does not see many of the current fanbase aging out, however she also thinks that a primary focus will continue to be teens and college students, perhaps suggesting that as the subculture ages generational gaps such as those in Japan (which were a focus of Azuma) may emerge in the United States. Kaylie concludes with a lengthy

uninterrupted set of comments that stuck up for the subculture, and also reframed several of the topics we had discussed throughout the course of the interview:

Then you move onto the fact that, as a foreign product in the moderately isolationist and very definitely Western America, anime is a representative of the ‘other’. It’s not something that is easily recognizable, and is therefore harder to understand. So, that causes a lot of negativity with people who don’t want to try to get at the culture underneath.

The best response is... well, there isn’t a really good response, to any of them. We can encourage our lovely socially awkward people to talk with non-socially awkward people in hopes of figuring out the social norms. We can explain that ‘no, they’re really not cartoons. They’re not just for kids. Especially if the word ‘tentacle’ is in the title. Trust me on this one.’ But those won’t always be effective. The best thing I can think of is to encourage American culture to be more open. We’re supposed to be a melting pot, so let’s act like one!

Please note, I’m not even going to TOUCH on the occasional issue I’ve seen of people having heard that there’s perverted manga before having learned anything about manga as a whole. That’s a topic I’m not going to try to deal with.

The array of topics brought up in the final statements fall under five points: anime-manga as an internationalized subculture that by its very definition is not centered in an American-produced space, that the subculture helps to socialize those whom society has failed, that animation is not by default childish, that greater acceptance of different styles of media will open American culture up to more intrinsic possibilities, and lastly, that perceptions of perversion are somewhat offensive in painting or distorting small sub-sets with the larger whole. Kaylie effectively espouses a protective sentiment towards the community and her defenses outline the common criticisms she refutes.

The common theme of the interviews was the diversity of sentiments and comments that shared some central points. The interviews—Thomas’s open-ended positive comments aside—all had somewhat critical views of the United States, and while Japan was naturally the site of generally positive perceptions, these perceptions don’t breakdown into traditional Orientalist

narratives. Japan was not a totally positive presence either, as throughout the interviews negative comments were interwoven as well, touching on issues of social strictness, sexism, or poor work conditions. Many of the interview subjects described Japan in conflicting terms, sensitive to the traditional images of Japan and the way in which anime and manga often disseminate old-fashioned or traditional values, and yet also enamored with images of a high-tech modernity that occupies the same geographic and imaginative space. The modern-primitive self-styling of Japanese culture (Allison 2006) is eagerly consumed by fans fascinated at the idea that modern techno-social systems can at the same time be intertwined with a historicism that emphasizes tradition and nature even in the most urban of settings. Indeed, to my surprise fans descriptions and views of Japan were more contradictory and more nuanced than their view of the United States, and the socially conservative, largely ethnically homogeneous country possesses an aura of greater diversity of imagination and more vibrant social countercultures than the United States. In this regard the interviews represent a stark shift from a long history of condescending narrative models, that as Susan Napier (2007) explored, had a tendency to totalize Japan in Primitivist and romantic perceptions. Perceptions of Japan are no longer homogenized, nor do individual ideas of Japan fail to see diversity within the country itself, two points that mark a considerable step forward in more equalized and humanized understandings of the larger world, at least within the dynamics of the local subculture I have worked with.

Fans paint a favorable picture of the community in defense of what they perceive are broader social stigmas of their interests as childish or perverted. Of importance for fans are the way that commodities designed for fantasy and entertainment can also facilitate a range of communication and temper the unfamiliarity of strangers, allowing fans to form new connections. Equally, my interview subjects were unanimous in relating to practices of questionable

ethicalness and legality, while acknowledging that this is a subculture that would not exist without the internet and new forms of mass communication. The interviews each showed a keen awareness of how the internet took power away from distributors and market-testing firms, creating distribution networks that are fan-controlled and fan-run, such as translation groups that scan and translate manga. For some more popular mangas with large groups, American fans receive high quality translations online within 6-7 days of the manga being released in print form in Japan. These activities are central realms of fan projects, and none of the subjects I interviewed criticized these, other than Fred, the aspiring voice actor, and even he agreed that such activities are important to bringing new animes to America.

Even the topic of the future direction of the anime-manga subculture in America was relatively uniform, as aside from Kaylie, most were of the opinion that it would continue to grow and verge on mainstream in a way that they perceive Marvel movies and video gaming as acceptable according to the perceptions of mass culture. Some such as Bobby, worried about growing commercialization, while others were closer to Alex, the twenty-two year old Vietnamese-American member I interviewed, who said “But having that common interest with so many people would be awesome, you know.” The interviews showed an engaged network of people who had given some consideration already to what drew them to their hobbies, as well as whether they see their subculture as a centerpiece to bringing a cosmopolitan cultural change to the United States. The next chapter will address common theoretical discourses on Japanese pop culture with an eye towards unifying a larger media theory of subcultures—it’s production, distribution, and consumption—and its fan communities in America and Japan.

CHAPTER III: JAPANESE POP CULTURE AND SOCIAL THEORY

The following chapter is split into two parts. Part One lays out a general overview of historical matters related to Japanese pop culture and common theories, as well as establishes some basic information. This section is important on a number of fronts, from establishing my problems with historical-particularist-esque arguments for the unique “Japaneseness” of anime and manga, to a general acknowledgement of certain important historical elements, and an attempt to explain the conflagration of factors that lead to the emergence of this cultural industry after World War II. After the introduction of general information related to the field I am studying, I turn to two sets of theoretical concerns, followed by a brief overview of gender related concerns that serves as a vehicle to discuss a politics of resistance in the anime-manga subculture. The first consists of Anne Allison and Ian Condry, who produced the two major works of anthropology dealing with Japanese pop culture in recent years. Allison was among the first anthropologists to look at international pop culture phenomena, beginning with her studies of Pokémon in the late 1990s, and her work deals with play as a global commodity and tries to unpack *how* these products are consumed and why that is relevant. Ian Condry is more interested in the production of anime, specifically the cultural capital and growth of an industry that is actually not that profitable or lucrative. Condry provides an ethnography of production methods, and shows that intimate fan engagement explains the appeal and growth of the medium as a platform. The second, deals with Thomas LaMarre, a media theorist and art historian with a focus on historical forms of representation. LaMarre works to unravel the role of visual perception and differing techniques of mimicking motion in animation to talk about technology

and human society, and to argue for very specific ways of understanding and dealing with the techno-social condition of human life. I utilize LaMarre not only for describing how animation echoes fan culture at the level of image and technique, but also for his insights and language in describing conditional, localized expansions of thinking that certain modern media forms have the potential to enable. LaMarre is useful for thinking about how human perceptions are grounded in artistic representations and in media, as well as for talking about social implications of certain visual regimes. The last set of theory that I approach is centered not around an author or specific idea, but rather a subject that is useful because it spans the entire width of my theoretical background and manages to tie in and exemplify a range of ideas and discourse in a concrete fashion. The last section deals with the issue of “the girl” in manga and anime and in fan culture, both as a symbol, and the actual women who are engaged in the fan community. As a conclusion to the chapter, the discourse on gender and sexuality ties together different strains of theory nicely and offers a chance to discuss consumption as resistance and real life reenactment of fantasy to assert new personalized relations to the world and society. The overarching theme of the chapter is that changing forms of storytelling and entertainment are embedded in changing societies, and that fan practices also mirror new emphasis’s in entertainment aesthetics of postmodern capitalism.

1. A Background of the Politics and History of Japanese Pop Culture

Japan at Home and Abroad

The anime-manga culture industry is both parochial and cosmopolitan, borrowing from art styles, histories, myths and stories taken from a diverse range of sources, while also tending to be almost exclusively geared towards the domestic market. The cosmopolitan nature of Japanese pop culture ability to appeal to impulses for translocation are large factors in the appeal

of “Cool Japan.” The term originates from a 2002 article in *Foreign Policy* by Douglas McGray. McGray discussed Japan’s rising “Gross National Cool,” to ponder whether the rising appeal of Japan’s cultural products, and its ability to sell a positive image abroad, could represent a new and as yet unquantified form of political and economic power.

Transformation is a recurrent theme in the anime-manga medium, of self and surroundings, both rapid and creeping. The preoccupation with themes of transformation, from *Tokyo Ghoul’s* protagonist, a human-turned-monster, to the post-apocalyptic Tokyo of the cyberpunk classic *Akira*, reflects a modern history of rapid and often uncertain transformations. Change can be found not only in domestic commentaries, but also in international perceptions, and importantly in America’s view of Japan. In the postwar period between 1950-1990, Japan went from a maker of cheap, quaint toys constructed from the trash of American GI’s (Allison 2006) to the ruthless, insular technocrats of Michael Crichton’s *Rising Sun* (Napier 2007). The most salient shift in contemporary culture industry successes from historical, state-sponsored¹⁷ cultural waves is that Japan has traditionally influenced the West through what could be termed its “high art,” from the influence of Noh on W.B. Yeats’ theatrical efforts, haikus on Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, *ukiyo-e* paintings on Monet and Van Gogh (who was utterly enamored with a romanticized ideal of Japan), and the popularity of the films of Japanese directors such as Ozu Yasujirō and Kurosawa Akira in urban arthouse theaters and among professional filmmakers (Tsutsui 2010), (Napier 2007). Contemporary Japan however, now holds far greater influence on pop culture and in the sphere of what traditionally would have been devalued as “low art.” .

¹⁷ Napier elaborates on how the 19th Century Japanese Government spent ample resources to send elaborate and carefully choreographed exhibits to World Fairs, and promoted a traditionalist image abroad while exporting numerous cheap cultural products at high prices.

The ubiquitous nature of Japanese visual designs and styles produces statements such as William Benton's comment that "manga and anime will do for visual culture in this century what African-American music did for music in the last century: provide the peoples of the world with a common expressive medium" (*Mechademia* 2006:283). Benton was also close to the mark in describing this popular entertainment culture as the result of an extinction event in the wake of the World War II. This is a surprisingly apt metaphor because the Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), saw American military authorities hand a great deal more power to young filmmakers who were less implicated in the militaristic establishment of wartime Japan. American authorities supported and even encouraged experimentation, while, just like in an extinction event, stamping out some storytelling tropes and allowing others to flourish in this new space (Hu 2010). Anne Allison also suggests that rise of manga and animation as postwar entertainment forms could be due in part to the fact that American biases saw both manga and animation as non-threatening and childish, and encouraged their production (2006).

I position Japanese pop culture then as intrinsically cosmopolitan. Borrowing from a wide variety of Western sources, as well as the influences of the U.S. Occupation and American media, Japanese pop culture is embedded in a global network of exchanges. A shift has occurred that resituates Japan's artistic influence away from exoticized high art and into networks of engaged popular culture, and coincides with changing perceptions of Japan at home and abroad. The contemporary shift marks a new phase where styles and entertainment mediums that have developed in Japan primarily after World War II are now spreading across the world, and beginning to influence even parochial elements of American media. My framing is at odds with the ontology of some theories, such as that behind the Japanese pop art movement Superflat¹⁸, which sees the current Japan as having lost a central piece of its history, and still in the process

¹⁸ See Appendix I

of dealing with unresolved traumas through consumerism and fetishism that constructs a false Japan from a bricolage of Western materials and their own lost history.

Tezuka and Matters of Production and Style

While the term manga goes back to the aforementioned 18th Century *ukiyo-e* artist Hokusai, who coined the term to refer to playful, casual images of street life and other scenes that he drew but did not feel counted as high art, modern manga owes much to Osamu Tezuka. In the aftermath of World War II, Japan's publishing industry was broke, many of the major companies dismantled by the Occupation officials. In this environment publishers were willing to experiment more and to give broad leeway to the artistic development of a new genre. Tezuka played a seminal role in this, one that Roland Kelts described as providing "the blueprint for Japanese manga and artists" (2006:43). Kelts echoed a commonly acknowledged comment about the man variously referred to as the Japanese Walt Disney and the God of Manga—Hu's section of Tezuka is in fact titled "God of Comics: Tezuka Osamu" (2010:95).

Tezuka was an enormous fan of the work of Disney studios, and watched numerous Western films, which also influenced the influential early animated films of Toei (Tsutsui 2010:12). The trademark visual style of faces in manga and animation, with the oversized eyes and small noses and mouths was in large part popularized by Tezuka, who was approximating the design of characters animated by Western studios, such as Bambi, Mickey Mouse, and Betty Boop (Condry 2013:99). From Western cinema, Tezuka made a radical departure from pre-war comic strips, which presented a theatrical stage of action with a set unchanging frame that a character entered on, moved across, and finally exited. The format, with its formulaic structure and set viewing angle, lacked dynamicism. Tezuka was a central figure in a post-war style called

gekiga (Hu 2010:97), which literally translates as theatrical pictures, and which sought to open up the medium to cinematic visual effects.^{19 2021}



Figure 6: A screenshot from the 2001 animated film *Metropolis*, based on Tezuka's 1949 manga and not to be confused with the classic Fritz Lang film. Of note are the stylistic elements, with the large bright eyes, small, subtle nose, and small mouth that creates a representation of a human that is simultaneously hyper-realistic and startlingly unnatural.

Tezuka later directed the adaptation of many of his stories into animation. In order to make the production of *Astro Boy* affordable for TV studios with limited budgets and tight schedules, Tezuka contracted to make *Astro Boy* into a TV show at a loss, founding his Mushi Pro production studio and agreeing to 500,000-600,000 yen per episode (1,500 dollars in 1963), with the intention of using merchandizing to cover the losses, establishing the roots for the modern three-tiered business model of merchandise, video sales, and manga. In order to keep a production pace that was viewed as impractical and unworkable, and to limit production costs,

¹⁹ See also: Schodt, L. Frederick.

1983 *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha Press.

²⁰ “In sum, in its sources and in its formation, manga entails a series of direct and indirect intersections with the moving image. Indeed, if Tezuka Osamu’s manga are frequently hailed as the moment or site of the coalescence and consolidation of manga itself (making him the god or father of the postwar story manga), it is in no small part because his manga used conventions associated with cinema to a greater degree than his predecessors” (Thomas LaMarre: 2009:287).

²¹ See Appendix I

Tezuka and his studio attempted to make thirty minute programming with only two thousand frames. The studio saved various common cut shots such as Astro Boy flying, and reused them, while mouth movements were limited to three distinct states: closed, open, and middle (Condry 2013:104). In all this Tezuka helped to pioneer and, more centrally, popularize²² the limited animation that enabled mass production and proliferation of animation in the television medium. Limited animation is so definitive of anime aesthetics that what began as a cost-cutting measure is now commonly cited by Condry, LaMarre, Tsutsui and others as the defining frame of reference for talking about anime and harkens more intimately to the experience of reading manga than does the full animation pioneered by Disney Studios.

Astro Boy provides an ideal example of another descriptor an uninformed reader to the vicissitudes of anime/manga as a visual and thematic entity.²³ *Astro Boy* is a children's story—an iconic one in fact—with a plot reminiscent of Brian Aldiss and Stanley Kubrick.²⁴ Much of the series appeals to its young male demographic with fights between robots or aliens, but Tezuka embeds this sci-fi action in a commentary on the relationship between humans and technology in a futuristic world and on the meaning of being “human.” Many stories in this series have mature implications, and are engaging, and human cruelty and insularity (as opposed to the fundamental danger of technology) were mainstays of its plot. Selling more than 100,000,000 copies, *Astro Boy* was a trailblazing series in terms of influence for subsequent animes and mangas. Both Tsutsui and Napier cite the powerful, and nuanced themes common in manga and anime that have gained international popularity, something that appears throughout the fan commentaries I

²² *Astro Boy* had almost 30% of the market share at its peak popularity.

²³ This frame of reference is central to Napier's discussions of anime and is also an important aspect of my later discussions to relate *frames* of appeal to forms of social networking and patterns of ideology and positioning within anime/manga fan groups.

²⁴ Referring of course to Aldiss's 1969 short story “Supertoys Last All Summer Long” and the Kubrick/Spielberg film, *A.I.* inspired from the story.

documented as well. The dark emotional complexity with which these themes are developed, for “jaded entertainment consumers in a global entertainment market weaned on the sunny monotony of Hollywood summer movies, Saturday morning television, and Hannah Montana, the bleakness, lack of sentimentality, and unpredictability of much of Japanese pop can come as a welcome breath of fresh air” (Tsutsui 2010:38).

The orientation of a narrative to a visual surface, of storytelling itself to visual mediums that incorporate human action of drawing and creation as opposed to the mechanical production of representation in film or the textual representations of literature, is one of the central traits of the anime-manga culture industry and, I think, part of its ability to connect with fans and fan practices in the way that it does. Counterintuitive as it may be, a story pushed into a tightly controlled visual surface creates an additional dimension and additional depth with the inclusion of non-verbal or better stated, unverbal, elements in the service of narrative. Critically speaking, this is a different type of story, and its growing popularity may serve as a commentary on changing societies and new ways of looking at the world at the dawn of the 21st Century, which is examined with great insight by Condry and Allison in their anthropological work.

2. Anne Allison and Ian Condry: Consumer versus Producer Models

Ironically the series considered the “Rosetta stone for anime” (Kelts 2006:90), Pokémon, was not expected to perform well in the American market. Indeed Kelts relates how Nintendo’s market research, done by a major American firm, concluded that Pokémon would not appeal to American children. The irony is obvious, of course, as Pokémon became one of the defining fads of the 1990s, generating fifteen billion dollars in profit by 2003 (Allison 2006:193), and Kelts’ invocation of the Pokémon fad offers a journalistic segue into the work of Anne Allison and different perspectives for interpreting the place of capitalism in media markets. Anne Allison and

Ian Condry, the central theorists in this section, have a similar interest in observing logics of capitalism in fan practice and within fantasy itself, but approach the question from very different perspectives. Allison situates her interpretations in consumption, while Condry looks at questions of production, and so uniting both these theories requires some bridge-building and the use of the idea of bricolage.

Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, which examined Japanese toys and television fads in the 1990s. Allison interrogates the issue from every angle, from playing with children to working with the adults responsible for marketing Pokémon in the United States. Indeed, as a child of the time period Allison did the bulk of her research on Pokémon, my friends and I were devout fans. Allison's descriptions intimately mirrored my own experiences with a surprising accuracy; even as an adult it struck me how she managed to get inside the appeal of the product, and also the disconnect between generations. Allison describes this "profound" gap between the adults she interviewed and their children and grandchildren, passionate about the extended Pokémon media empire (2006:250). While as Allison notes, adults are often mystified by the fads of younger generations, her observations showed something unique and pervasive about the disconnect between adults and children with Pokémon, and her descriptions on this account ties into my personal experience. What is of interest was that Allison found that adults were for the most part not disinterested or even judgmental about the fad; they simply didn't understand it. In this research "almost all the adults I [Allison] spoke to were utterly mystified about the rules of the game or the parameter of the playscape" (2006:250).

The issue of understanding and a generational gap was also something I felt keenly as a child and so I cannot help but draw on personal experiences in making an auto-ethnographic

assessment of Allison's portrayal. I recall images of my grandfather snoring through *Pokémon: The Movie 2000* in the theater or my mother being baffled by my attempts to explain the types of Pokémon and their weaknesses and strengths versus other types. Subsequent generations have only added more "types" of Pokémon, to the current number of 18, which there are 324 different possible combinations. Nintendo continues to release new games that introduce new regions of play and new Pokémon, increasing the total count from 151 in the first generation of games, to 718 as of 2015. Even small children who got into the game quickly grasped a complex grammar, memorizing hundreds of different Pokémon and the relations between types—water is weak to electricity, rock is weak to water, grass is weak to fire, to name a few common examples. The explanation for this disconnect is a central theme of the threefold foci of Allison's work: fantasy, capitalism, and globalization. Anne Allison's ethnographic work seeks to "analyze how their [play and media industries] power to enchant, stimulate, and soothe the imaginations of players but to also dissect how such fantasies come embedded in—and reproduce or alter—relations of capitalism, cultural geopolitics, and techno-communication," (2006:29). The novel insight that Allison comes to is that for the millennial children, the Pokémon fantasyscape—an extended world of video games, playing cards and animation—offered something fundamentally redemptive: a sense of control and mastery in the face of a world "in which postindustrial kids [...] are navigating the dispersal, fluctuations, and deterritorializations of everything from bodies and identities, to relationships and basic sustenance" (2006:15).

Allison takes great care to set up the particular environment in which this type of popular media has flourished. Many children in Japan face enormous pressures to study and dedicate themselves single-mindedly to academic success, in accordance with a life-model of Japan set to

its so-termed “Economic miracle,”²⁵ when good grades led to good schools, which in turn led to high-paying stable employment, often under systems of lifetime employment. The 1990s saw this secure system fall apart in the face of continued recessions and sluggish growth, and in Japan this decade challenged the entire postwar consensus national image in the face of the Kobe earthquakes, Aum Shinrikyo²⁶ and rising youth delinquency and social pathologies such as the hikikomori.²⁷

Pokémon represented a corrective to these pressures, offering not only an outlet for stress that was mobile and could be done in short segments, but its very gameplay, inspired by bug collecting and exploring nature, sought to provide something to urban children, many of whom lived in apartments or condos that did not even allow pets. Without pets, with long commutes to schools, after-school “cram schools”, constant concerns over testing results, Pokémon places these kids in a gameplay world where the solitary young protagonist explores the wilds, competes with other computerized opponents, and acquires the knowledge to succeed. Taijiri Satoshi the young developer who spearheaded the game’s development was also concerned with providing children a platform for social community in the same manner that bug-collecting had provided him a community growing up. Therefore in order to attain all Pokémon, the gameplay required trades between Gameboys, and players could also combat each other through the use of cables, while the card game was interactive.

²⁵ A period from the mid-1950s to the late-1980s when the Japanese economy grew rapidly, becoming the world’s second largest economy and threatening to overtake the United States for a time.

²⁶ The radical terrorist group, founded by Asahara Shoko, who were responsible for the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks that killed twelve people and injured more than a thousand others, rattling the national sense of safety in what was both its economic heart and the very image of Japanese modernity.

²⁷ The term in Japanese literally means pulling inward, and refers to acute social withdrawal symptom. It affects many students who drop out of school after middle school, usually in the face of bullying or test pressures they can no longer handle. In it’s most extreme cases previously social children become shut-ins who refuse to leave their room and do not even interact with family. Sometimes this continues on for years or becomes a long-term psychological pathology.

What Allison excels most at is describing the platforms of play and incisively breaking down the aspects of their appeal and the complex interrelations between this appeal and greater social conditions such as the breakdown of the Fordist global model. Gameboys, Walkmans, and now Smartphones, are all portable devices offering a broad array of customizable experiences and identities, at turns allowing people to retreat into solitary, individual bubbles even in crowded places, while in other contexts forming the links that bring people together..

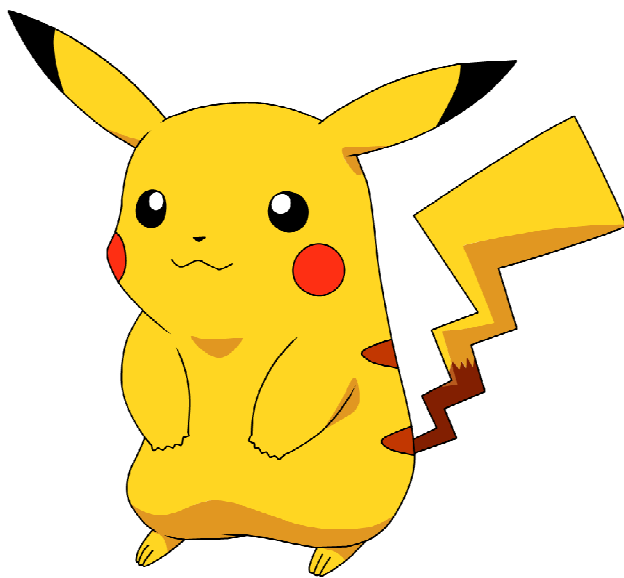


Figure 7: The titular mascot of Pokémon, Pikachu, a "lightning type" whose name includes Japanese onomatopoeic expressions for sparks and kissing.

The power of the titular creatures in the Pokémon franchise is their ability to exist as both personified character and capitalist commodity, possessing personal attributes and fictional life they can still be “stored” in the Pokéballs and abstracted into a form of currency or on hand potential resource. Players “capture” new creatures, and once captured they are stored in Pokéballs, which dematerialize the living creature and turn it into both a companion and something the player owns and can trade to other players at any time—in other words, currency. Allison sees in the Pokémon system an imaginative version of informational capitalism and

further stimulates the ability to adapt to such a system. Allison locates the production of imagination and power in the commodification of play.

Pokémon is both a symptom and ideal of a capitalist system embodied by instability now marked by information commodities and digital creation with an increasingly transnational reach. It is a product of a post-Cold War era where global geopolitics are no longer produced along ideological lines. Children are relating to a very different cultural environment according to Allison. In the vein of David Harvey, this view argues that in the 1990s, after nearly 60 years of relatively stable Fordist popular culture, real transitions begin to occur in popular culture, and therefore this disconnect between parents is the disconnect of a Fordist and Post-Fordist socialization. Generational differences here are then the reason that adults treated the intricate Pokémon—this system of types postmodern assortment of combinable parts and game elements—“as if it were Greek” (2006:253). *Pokémon the First Movie* was a tremendous success in American theaters when it came out, much more so than the critically acclaimed Miyazaki film *Princess Mononoke*, which saw limited release in American theaters the same year. Yet while the movie was extremely popular with children, and arguably the most Americanized release of the franchise, media polls still found that over 80% of American adults did not like the film (2006:253). Even American studios were hesitant about Pokémon—most thought it could not work because of the idea that anything even slightly unfamiliar would drive away children. As if being drawn into a fantasy depending on “seeing oneself” in it, which Allison lampoons as nothing less than the “chauvinism of the empowered” (2006:151). Allison sees in these changes a shift, and a conflict between different perspectives produced by different capitalist systems, defining a postmodern aesthetics “that, contrasted with the relative stability of Fordist modernity, celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of culture forms

(2006:123-124). The popularity of Pokémon is then a product of global capitalism and information economies valuing new aesthetics.

At its core Pokémon represents a system of collection, of amassing not just playable creatures but also knowledge—an entire grammar of types, evolutions, attacks, strategies, and backgrounds that define the extent and nature of the platform. The principle praise from American adults came, in fact, in recognition of the game’s capitalistic aspects. Allison weighs the potentially negative consequences of this hyper-capitalistic mindset of endless consumption and never-ending quest and weighs it against the positive release provided by a world where empowerment is diffused across an entire world-horizon, accessible to everyone who engages with it. Such games give the sense of mobility, control, and reward to people who lack access to these things in the real world, where hard work and knowledge do not always equate to leveling up or gaining success.

Pokémon is, as opposed to a traditional Disney story, an open fantasy space, one not delimited by the boundaries of a single story or setting, but rather a broad open space into which children can easily insert themselves. The series’ characters are mere models, so that while American marketing research groups initially found that American kids did not identify strongly with the characters, the point is just that; the children didn’t want to be Ash Ketchum (the American name of protagonist of the Pokémon TV series) they wanted to take themselves into the world-setting of Pokémon and pursue similar adventures. This is what Allison terms “a logic of assemblage and disassemblage [...] given impetus by the national disruptions and reconstruction following the war” where “bodies and powers that are endlessly remapped, recharged, and replaced have been a commonplace” (2006:264).

Within the contemporary information economy design, utility, and innovation overtake the importance of raw materials. As manufacturing is automated and a broad array of similar products are available, classical standardization is indeed the “kiss of death for a product line today” (2006:265) in an economy where differentiation is key and marketing has begun to sell values and sentiment by reorienting these things back into the “aura” of objects. The model of consumption of play commodities changes to embrace feelings of dislocation, and companionship itself becomes a commodified entity. The path of Pokémon is one of mastery “that is always somewhere but nowhere, and full of conquests but also contests that never end” (2006:278). A world that can mediate the real life pressures, and sensations of alienation and fulfilling the need for displacement in an era defined by nomadicism, or better stated, pluralism, of existing in the space between familiarity and the strange, between sameness and difference.

Ian Condry and a Model of Production

Allison’s model zooms in on the consumer and production of desire and the ways in which particular commodities are consumed and the role this plays in guiding individuals through the transnational capitalist system. Ian Condry shifts the focus to the centers of production, wanting to understand the spread of cultural forms as “something other than follow the money” (2013:2). The result then is an anthropological assessment of the social side of media production, and a useful thesis of “collaborative creativity”, which connects different industries to fans and fan productions. Collaborative creativity, Condry posits, is at the heart of the anime-manga industry’s success and it is a particular form of creative platform that works through the intimate interconnectedness of different units, where anime forms a “circle of interaction across categories of products” (2013:3). The central question of Condry’s work is why almost 60% of global animation comes from Japan and anime is an international brand “despite relatively

modest returns” (2013:16). The animation industry is not very profitable even with its growing success domestically and abroad, and the average starting salary for animators at some Japanese companies is just eleven thousand dollars a year for work that includes long, arduous hours and stressful deadlines. Capitalist models concerned with profits and well-remunerated labor do not match the realities of the anime-manga culture industry, and the issue at hand is how to engage with these motivations without relying on vague macro-level social values that are holistic and static in how they portray Japanese culture. Condry suggests that these aspects can be engaged with by “thinking in terms of the people who do the spreading, the economic and social motivations that drive those actions” (2013:29).

I have already invoked Condry to discuss the conditions of Tezuka’s efforts to bring *Astro Boy* to television, but there are other issues beyond frame count and movement. Among the most arduous parts of the production process described by Condry are the initial efforts to develop a sense of the story and how it will flow, and most importantly how to design the characters. Character design is central to contemporary Japanese anime and the character industry plays prominently in the Japanese economy where not only companies but even Prefectural governments have personalized characters akin to a post-industrial clan emblem. Condry presents story as almost secondary in the actual production of anime as he observed it in Japan, and noting how characters are the lynchpin of Japanese advertising and character related merchandising represents a market ten times that of anime itself (Condry 2013:72).



Figure 8: “Kobaton” the official mascot of Saitama Prefecture.

Condry’s most dynamic and refreshing observation is the so-called “democratic capitalism” where “the most popular series are the best” (2013:107). This discussion is taken from a *Kino* magazine discussion where the editors argued that unlike with film, heavy star-studded advertising campaigns are not tools available to manga. In addition, practices such as passing around magazines between friends or reading them while standing around in stores make a highly egalitarian market dependent on reader reactions and securing an intense fanbase built on the merits of the work itself. Manga that are not popular get cut while popular series continue on as long as they maintain their audience. Condry sees “manga’s success as a media form relies on the feedback loop between producers and audience” (2013:107). While this feature is accurate, it does not necessarily encourage quality, as the same dependence on feedback can turn into a tool to more aptly capitalize on market tastes while reproducing the same tastes. The repetitive copying of major authors, homogenous themes and slow moving-trends, these are all to some degree still factors in the manga industry, but what is important here is the manner, importance, and intimacy of producer-audience feedback in the industry.

A feedback loop is clearly present in an event like the annual Comic Market in Tokyo, which attracts more than half a million visitors every year and thirty thousand or more amateur mangaka (manga writers) circles and other small-time vendors that blur the line between fan and

producer (2013:108). Explaining “how value arises in instances of social circulation itself” (2013:110) is the central question of Condry’s work. Generative creative platforms function through such social circulation, and Condry’s major contribution to the field lies in his work on social circulation and his thesis that grassroots engagement and disseminated creativity among both fans and actual producers helps to explain the popularity of the form and its invasive success as a subculture. Users generate feedback loops, popularity, direct narratives and exert enormous influence over and participation in the production of series and in dictating which series continue and which series fail. For market purposes this meant that, with the advent of VHS sales and specialty merchandizing even small niche shows could reliably churn out profits, even if small profits, which expanded the horizons and diversity of anime in Japan.

An ideal example of this is the anime studio Gainax, which has produced some of the most important series of the last thirty years, and includes perhaps the most famous television anime director, Anno Hideki and his *Evangelion* series. That the huge, breakout anime series—the extremely dense, deconstructed and psychological challenge to the “mecha”²⁸ genre—*Evangelion* emerged from a studio made from small-time fans is noteworthy. Condry terms this type of engagement from fans, that has positioned fan activities and fan communities at the cutting edge of the industry and as essential to its dynamicism and expansion, “globalization from below” (2013:215), to underline the role of the organic and intertwined movements of people, ideas, and fan use of anime-manga industry creative platforms in the emergence of a globalized culture industry. Condry’s insight into how dispersed creativity and multi-user network-oriented models of media production allow a particular platform to emerge, is an

²⁸ Human operated mechanical suits, a staple genre of television anime since the underground success of Gundam in the early 1980s.

excellent affirmation of the deconstruction and instability Allison found critical to the uniqueness and success of the Japanese play industry.

I construct a central part of my approach from these two theorists, who both on the surface seem to be talking about the same process—that of explaining the popularity of anime and manga according to grounded material networks and economic developments. The two are not incompatible despite the different explanations for the same phenomena. Allison describes the elements of consumption—emersion, deconstruction, reconstruction, imaginary communities—inherent in the design of such products and how consumers think about and use them. Condry expands on how consumption, in this case, spills over into production and the lines are blurred in a moral economy of play where greater levels of access and fan involvement are themselves sources of appeal. By using Allison to describe *what* makes anime and manga’s popularity, I position Condry to describe *how* they are popular, that is the mechanisms of dispersal. The next section shifts from anthropologically centered discussions to deal with Thomas LaMarre and the ways of considering technology and material, where I seek to grab LaMarre’s very complex and nuanced ways of interpreting human reaction to these ontological elements in order to expand how I deal with the topic of media. Neither Allison nor Condry offer a deep engagement with how media engages with people on a technical level, nor how such technology driven mediums reflect historical processes and relate to ideology, both important aspects of considering change and defining just how the expanding popularity of a new medium might reflect such social change.

3. Thomas LaMarre and the Material Theory of Animation

“My emphasis is not on cultural uses of a technology or technologies, or on the history of a technology. Rather it is on how technologies affect thought” (LaMarre 2009:XXXIV).

Thomas LaMarre is central to my project because he is the first scholar to offer a comprehensive theory for interpreting animation itself, both as a process/artistic material that results from the creation of motion in drawings, and as a system of representation. LaMarre has a theoretical interest “in historically specific sets of material orientations, or perception grounded in media and media technologies” (*Mechademia* 5 2010:364). I approached my project with an eye at documenting perception and social orientations grounded in the media of LaMarre’s focus—the manga-anime industry—and determining to what degree such orientations or changes to orientations are actually visible in language, self-perceptions, and practices of the fan community itself.

LaMarre makes a compelling argument for the need to include and work with anime as a material object itself, and not just as a meta-textual starting point for philosophical questions. LaMarre approaches anime functionally, crafting the idea of underdetermination, or “indeterminacy to determination” (LaMarre 2009: XXVI). Underdetermination is a way of thinking about social issues that avoids a simplified application of the basic physical sciences—creating models where a reaction either occurs or does not and from that making a rule of function. That is to say, underdetermination points the researcher towards potentiality and defining what structures human perception of time, space, and self and how—hence LaMarre’s extensive use of Heidegger and focus in describing the technologization of human life.

The central image of LaMarre’s discussion is that of the train, that definitive symbol of modernity, whose closed window progression of motion was a common metaphor for film. The train is important for explaining different experiences of motion that LaMarre finds important: movement *across* space, and motion *into* space. In the discussion of the train LaMarre lends much credit to Wolfgang Schivelbusch and his Marxist oriented discussions of the

technologization of space and time through the train. According to Schivelbusch (1986) the train altered an experience of distance and movement over land that had throughout all of human history been “living” through the use of animals or one’s own ambulation. Trains broke an unsteady and inconsistent experience of travel and created a smooth and—as Schivelbusch highlights with ample historical commentary—for many first time passengers, eerily consistent mechanized experience of motion. Trains—set above the landscape on level, raised tracks and ridges—created a perspective of humanity as outside and beyond the physical environment. This was the first step towards inculcating ideologies and cultures of hyper-utilization with ever increasing tendencies towards speed and domination according pessimistic hyper-modernists, such as the French philosopher Paul Virilio.²⁹ What’s more, the trains began a process whereby perceptions of local identity were unsettled by mobility and with the lack of isolation commodities became malleable products untethered from the previous logistical constraints of transportation imposed by location and distance (Schivelbusch 1986:41).

Without purchasing the larger and more pessimistic consequences of this thought (ever-increasing speed and the race towards destruction), LaMarre still takes from Virilio “a massive modernity thesis, which [...] might be defined as accelerated or hyper-Cartesianism” (2009:5). The discussion of Cartesianism is central to LaMarre’s theory, yet not easy to unpack. In a literal sense, Cartesianism begins with the spatial theories of French Philosopher Rene Descartes, who constructed divisions between mind and body, interior and exterior, while LaMarre also seems to use it at times to refer to the long-standing traditions of geometric perspective in Western European art. What geometric, or one-point perspective implies is the idea of a completely rational external observer and a uniform manner of viewing the world, and LaMarre expends considerable space to outline how explicitly this was tied to science and the rise of modernity.

²⁹ I would cite Virilio’s *The Vision Machine* (1994) here specifically.

What LaMarre objects to is the idea of the essential, unchanging, and rational position of the human—the human as transcendental subject located above and beyond the material network utilized. It is in the face of such an ideological position that LaMarre seeks to reinterpret Heidegger’s comments on technology, in order to posit that the intellectual issue of dealing with technology must move away from such hyper-humanistic first principles. LaMarre challenges these deeply embedded ontologies associated with Cartesian ideology; in the conceptualization of the issue of technology itself, not with presenting these issues as problems and solutions relating to the goal-oriented rational actor. For LaMarre technology is a *condition*, which invokes a relationship between it, the human, and the world together—“the problem of technology is not only its destruction of nature and culture but also (and more importantly) its restriction of our thinking” (LaMarre 2009:53).

However, LaMarre should not be understood as proposing that human thought and behavior lies within a definable and rigid system, but makes it very clear that:

Determination, however, is not the same thing as *determinism*. Materiality is not teleology. Theories of determination acknowledge that a “machine” (in Guattari’s sense) may produce an orientation in the world, a set of directional constraints (a field), and even a trajectory (2008:119).

LaMarre establishes his project in the title of his book, *The Anime Machine*— to outline how animation exists as a machine that has particular material limits and the role of history and human actors in generating cultural ways of considering technology and the world. LaMarre’s sense of determination appeals as an interpretive framework to deal with change in complex systems with unclear causation and very diverse outcomes.

There are two core distinctions that LaMarre uses distinguish animation as a machine and to describe its positive potentials: one is animeticism and the other is cinematicism. Animeticism,

a concept developed by LaMarre himself, describes the nature of animation as existing in the movement of different layers of image in relation to one another, while cinematicism borrows more from apparatus theory and hyper-modernism in how it relates to film and suggests a technologically homogenized display of motion into depth. For LaMarre, cinematicism has a tendency to portray motion in a ballistic fashion, that is, as if the viewer were at the end of a speeding bullet. A concrete description of the distinction between the two is simple: cinematicism is where the viewer stands atop a train looking forward. Objects rush towards and away from the viewer and speed restricts perspective to a singular line of vision determined by the direction and intensity of acceleration. Animeticism though, occurs in considerations of planes of movement, of movement in the foreground. A viewer who sits beside a train window in a station cannot tell, in the absence of other visual contexts, whether the train on the track beside them is moving, their train is moving, or both trains are moving. When looking out a train window, trees or telephone posts close to the track will appear small and flick by, even forming a single blurring line at high enough speeds, while hills further in the background will pass by at a different speed. There are multiple perceptions of motion and location in what LaMarre terms the “animetic interval” and these are slightly more independent of acceleration and direction than cinematicism and allow for the possibility of an independent external world.

The difference between animeticism and cinematicism is a foundation of LaMarre’s theory and as such is more than superficial and does not merely offer a convoluted way of distinguishing three-dimensional and two dimensional representations:

Rather than move into the landscape, you seem to move across it. This is one of the crucial differences between animetism and cinematism. [...] While it too is a modern art of the engine grounded in a speed-riddled instrumentalized perception of the world, animetism is not about movement *into depth* but movement

on and between surfaces. This movement between planes of the image is what I will call the animetic interval. (2009:7).

Cinematicism and its corresponding ballistic motions rely on the generation of speed into a landscape kept consistent as the force of movement is shunted into the technological apparatus of the camera. This type of perspective leaves no time to look side to side, but rather is hyper-instrumentalized, implying both domination and an affirmation of the Cartesian ontology that prevents a more flexible way of thinking about what it is to be human. The distinction is central to the assertion that “as potentials of the moving image cinematism and animetism imply different tendencies and orientations, and by extension, different ways of imagining a technologically accelerated world, and different ways of inhabiting that world” (2009:10). LaMarre turns to the nature of the limited animation style previously discussed and full animation as pioneered by Disney as examples of these distinctions, allowing that animation can also mimic or approximate its own form of cinematicism, and that the terms do not simply distinguish between cinema and animation.

Walt Disney, obsessed with attaining a level of cinematic realism, created the animation stand which allowed animators to control the distance between different layers of an image. The need for such equipment emerges from practical restraints of animation. If an animator wanted to show a figure walking towards a barn at night, every single image in the foreground would have to move, and each frame would require an entire redraw. The moon would change less than the trees for instance, and other parts of the background would also have different changes depending on distance. Such a method would be prohibitively difficult, but the animation stand made it easy and addressed these technical issues by allowing animators to take cel drawings and manipulate the space between them, and thus create the illusion of depth in animation. Rather than one image being redrawn over and over again, different cel sheets would have different

drawings on them, and depth was generated by manipulating the space between them in the animation stand and photographing these set shots one by one.

As opposed to this, Japanese animators in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those who moved into the new media of television anime (called *terebi manga* or “television manga” until the 1980s), had to cut corners. I have already summarized Condry’s comments on these technical matters, but LaMarre sees the innovation here as lying in the use of horizontal, sliding motion, the distinct animetic motion of his theory. The illusion of motion is created not through replicating or approximating geometric Cartesian experiences of the internal moving into the external, but in gliding the camera itself across the image, shaking the image, making abrupt cuts through to different images and different positions within the same image.

I spend so much time with LaMarre because his question of how thought and technology are intertwined is also central to my interests, particularly in dealing with something like media, which is so deeply embedded into—and sensitive to changes in—technology.. Material systems and networks are as much a part of habitus as engrained human mental structures, and LaMarre’s ideas shed light on perspective and motion as ideology and culture. LaMarre offers a way to understand the visual styles that seem to create “the sense of a “personalizable” world: each line of sight can develop into a personal way of connecting the dots” (2009:147).

The removal of such singular lines of sight and consistent motion into depth emphasizes the importance of composition, that is the importance of the objects within the image and moreover their position *within* the image. Rather than being a slave to photorealistic depth, movement is diffused across surfaces, offering the chance to explore an external world whose depths are not fully revealed. Such animation produces “mobile, contingent, multiple frames of reference” (2009:162), and the proliferation of such a form relates into the same larger post-

millennial shift evoked by Allison's thesis, with social segmentation and new questions and problems of interaction emerging with social media and mass communication.

Fans also talked about art and style; Kaylie rails against the obsession with 3D she saw in American animation, while other fans such as Johnny and Bobby talked about the relatability of the world and the more realistic feeling character designs. Nearly every person I interviewed had some observation about how the art "was different" though none of them had a specialized vocabulary or much intimate knowledge of animation as a technical process, and therefore the responses on that account are not eloquent. LaMarre's real anthropological point was this: technology and capitalism impact artistic expression through specific historical configurations and condition people to certain ways of thinking about themselves and the world. It is in this sense that LaMarre finds the widening and contextualized perspectives of motion and visual fields in the anime-manga culture industry potentially redemptive in the face of alienating and hyper-utilizationist visual perspectives in popular culture. In this sense, the open-minded perspectives of fans, and their frequent description of the fan community as very open-minded, is equally a response to a media format that encourages varied reactions and contains immense diversity of styles and subject matter. Watching an anime—and I would add, reading a manga—is easily customizable and interactive as an experience, and LaMarre has hope that these new processes of attention, of scanning fields and holding onto different components of data will lead to more tolerant worldviews that are more concerned with contexts than with a priori interiorized points of origin that are absolute, universal, and demand a singular trajectory.

The uniqueness of animation and the incipient possibilities that arise in its materiality are real and of immense interest for LaMarre, and, I think, coincide with similar ideological even spiritual—if I may use the word more closely to the German sense of *Geist*—concerns of fans.

LaMarre posits that much of this uniqueness lies the medium itself, and even suggests that the issues of character design and drawing movement, implying weight and exertion across numerous still drawings plays a major role in the common thematic concern between body and soul in anime, often in ways that challenge Cartesian dualism (2009:200).

What allows the greatest use for LaMarrean analysis and perspectives is the restraint coded into such analysis from the start, as LaMarre does not observe or describe things in terms of clear-cut concepts like grand ruptures, nor does he attempt a massively ambitious generalized platform for generating specific outcomes of analysis. Rather the theory outlined by LaMarre seeks not grand common denominators, but ways of looking at media and creating a greater understanding “toward “little” questions and personalized relations to technological processes. Faced with a flow of images on the train window-screen, we are compelled to choose what suits us amid the flow” (2009:108). In other words, LaMarre sees in motion across visual planes rather than *into* them a system that allows more perspectives as opposed to being locked down in the projectory of a bullet. Distributive fields describe different potential networks, implying that the center of analysis must be grounded on small questions and localized concerns. LaMarre seeks not “to dispense with questions about social, cultural, or economic determination, but, on the contrary, to lay the ground for approaching such questions in the world of animation” (2009:302).

4. Gender and the Girl: Politics in Cute Aesthetics

The expression or subversion of feminine identity comes up quite frequently in discussions about anime and manga and offer an excellent opportunity to operationalize some of these ideas about pop culture, production, consumption, and visual culture. Gender differences in Japan are much more strictly codified and this formalized system plays a great deal into excessive forms of expression and the mundane realities of market sorting. In a sharp contrast the

United States where genre followed by age group is the principle basis of market organization, Japanese manga and anime are categorized along age and gender categories that function as umbrellas for a wide variety of different genres and styles, thereby organizing the Market by audience, not content. The largest types of manga anime are those directed at young girls, *shoujo*, and *shounen*, directed at younger boys, with their less prominent counterparts, *josei* and *seinen* targeting adult women and adult men respectively.

LaMarre spends the last third of his book discussing shoujo anime, focusing on the artist team CLAMP and their hit anime/manga *Chobits*. LaMarre sees in shoujo manga “one of the most significant cultural industries in terms of the number of women producing image-based narratives largely about women and largely for women” (2009:318). Numerous authors working in media studies talk on the history of shoujo manga, which offers some insights into the development of female expression in the anime-manga culture industry. In the 1950s shoujo manga, though sold to young girls, were drawn primarily by men, mostly as a way for young male artists to establish themselves (Toku 2007:22), until the late 1960s when female artists broke through institutional barriers, as the “Magnificent 24,” a group of female artists born in the twenty fourth year of the Showa era (1949), came of age. These female artists initiated a renaissance of shōjo manga that expanded it into numerous new genres of sci-fi, fantasy, even [male] homosexual love, and constructed new, frequently transgendered or fluid femininities, what Mari Kotani relates as the “Hyper-Girl” (*Mechademia* 2006).

The Rose of Versailles by Ikeda Ryoko, based on Stefan Zweig’s biography of Marie Antoinette. However, the most popular of the figure proved to be not Antoinette, but a side character whose role expanded as a result of strong reader feedback, highlighting the powerful role of the reader in the democratic capitalism—the collaborative creativity—of the manga

industry. The side character in question is Oscar, the Captain of Marie Antoinette's guard and a woman born into a military family who publically occupies a masculine role and name in the story (Shamoon 2010). Oscar's romantic partner, Andre, is effeminized in the story by both class status and an injury that gradually leaves him blind and dependent on Oscar. In this sense, the manga built off the tradition of girls' magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, which promoted a platonic ideal of love between girls, *douseiai*, which took place in closed worlds of boarding schools and which conservative society conceived of as a healthy way for young girls to maintain their purity before marriage.

Frenchy Lunning (2006) addresses the complex origins and appropriations of femininity in shoujo by discussing the Lolita fashion, which uses archaic Victorian styles of lace and bows to craft clothing that is radically out of synch with contemporary reality. The "loli" aesthetic seems at first contradictory, but is a way to occupy a childlike state of imaginative appearance while evoking subversive sexual desirability (Lunning 2006). The prominent Japanese scholar Mari Kotani argues that this infantile position for women in movies such as *Kamikaze Girls* (*Shimotsuma Monogatari*) is essential for girls wanting to transform femininity in ways that open up more independent spaces for their strategic concerns. The overriding interest in rococo aesthetics serve as a way of coopting the image of the doll, and Lunning proposes that this is a confluence of nearly contradictory influences and historical symbols; a bricolage of gender that embraces the hyperbole of the male gaze to challenge it.



Figure 9: Example of Lolita fashion taken from <<http://www.justcauseband.com/2014/lolita-fashion/>>

Lolita fashion-based counterculture features prominently in Japanese pop culture, but it is by no means limited to the female sex. Brian Bergstrom focuses on the work of Takemoto Novala, a male fashion designer and spokesperson for Lolita fashion brands who is also the author of popular novels, *Kamikaze Girls* among them. Takemoto is a cross-dressing biological male who identifies as a heterosexual man, and expounds a concept of the “maiden” that is not only subversive but open to both males and females. Takemoto writes characters who express desires through a language of extremism, whether this is incest, murder, or some other moment of liminal criminality. Takemoto’s fiction ends at a moment of “ecstatic escape that doubles as a kind of self-immolating revenge against society as norm, history as progress” (Bergstrom 2011:31). Bergstrom sees the use of fashion as an internalization of rejection from the social world. I would argue the Lolita subculture, as a bricolage of historical traditions and contemporary explorations of femininity, works because it manipulates and deconstructs social norms and allows a movement in and out of normality, and mimics broader trends under discussion in this thesis in the way in which it offers “self-realization through consumption (2011:31). It offers a port for users to plug into in their search for personalized and empowering

interactions with a world seen as repressing and demanding. Consumption of cuteness and cute aesthetics “constitutes a coherent politics of resistance only where there is a refusal of the future”; when the cute consumer savvy rebellion functions the same as punk subculture (Raine 2011:202). Rather than explicit rejection, these “cute aesthetics” (as I term them) can take on a form of resistance that attempts to destroy or undermine the status quo system through its own tools and symptoms.

Purity itself is placed in moments that are unsustainable and destructive—in climaxes or crescendos that sever the paths back to normality and society. The very impossibility of these moments places them within the realm of fantasy and under the autonomy of the fantasy consumer. Such a fantasy represents the shoujo subject, taking the “cute” and asserting autonomy and resistance. Defining “cuteness” is itself a complicated task, but cute as a category of experience seems to invoke contradictory feelings in the subject towards the object, whereby the subject possesses the desire both to protect and also sometimes to dominate the object (Ivy 2011:193-209). Cute objects are defined by their vulnerability, their malleability and submissiveness to the user (Monnet 2011:153-169). It is not random chance that there are a plethora of children and neotenous figures in not only Japanese pop culture but also Superflat art. The child or childlike figure represents vulnerability and malleability along with the hint of resistance that holds the attention of the subject. Marilyn Ivy discusses the role of these dynamics and the child in the superflat art of Nara Yoshitomo, who has worked with children in his art and also childlike subjects such as the doll, with one exhibit that through dolls expresses “the loneliness, one might say, of the subject who has given up the transitional object but finds adulthood lacking” (2010:23). Nara is famous for the “resistance of the cute” represented in simple, oil pastel paintings of surreal figures that rarely have backdrops and challenge the

conception of cuteness. See Figure 10 for example, as the young girl stares down the viewer from with horizontally elongated eyes that imply a heightened awareness and wariness towards the observer—as if the viewer is threatening them—and a world-weariness only compounded by the cigarette hanging haphazard from the figure’s mouth. The fierce independence of his subjects is belied by their very vulnerability. Nara’s flattened perspectives, lack of context, and ambiguous expressions draw viewers into an art with multiple readings, and invoke everything from subtle dread to discomfort.³⁰



Figure 10: "Too Young to Die", 2001, Nara Yoshitomo. All Rights Reserved.

While a member of the general superflat group, Nara is less embedded in superflat ideology and less publically involved with the group, though he possesses a cult fanbase perhaps larger than any other associated artist including Murakami Takashi. One of Nara’s most famous exhibits, using dolls and titled “Nothing Ever Happens” seems to imply to Ivy a need for the Child to mold and subvert the alienating and aggressive everyday world and all its mundanities

³⁰ It should be noted that Nara views his art as articulating a form of helplessness and vulnerability, even those wield knives and other weapons with aggressive expressions on their face. “*Look at them, they are so small, like toys. Do you think they could fight with those?*” he asks. *“I don’t think so. Rather, I kind of see the children among other, bigger, bad people all around them, who are holding bigger knives....”*
<<https://teachartwiki.wikispaces.com/Too+Young+to+Die--Yoshitomo+Nara>> Accessed 4/21/2015

into a true space for the objectified individual to exist in, away from pressures that seek to mold and control the “cute.” The “Nothing Ever Happens” exhibit drew huge numbers of fans in its construction, as fans donated dolls, time, and other artistic contributions, the intimacy of which touched Nara (Ivy 2011).

The cute in Japanese pop culture extends beyond the Lolita and beyond the challenging pop art of figures like Nara; it exists as a ubiquitous aspect of advertising and mainstream manga and anime. The idea of the shoujo inhabits a complex symbolic space at the heart of Japanese society, as the “girl” is a figure with the least pressure towards productivity and self-sacrifice in Japanese culture, shoujo has become for both men and women an aesthetic of opposition to the hyper-competitive, utilitarian driven socio-economic condition of Japan (Allison 2006:139). Allison finds a key point of interest in “compensated dating” (*enjoyo kousai*) a trend whereby older men pay teenage girls to hang out with them. This is a service that, however, only rarely entails actual sexual acts. The reason why small but significant numbers of older men pay simply to hang out with teenage girls, to shop or eat with them, is that they want to vicariously become them (Kinsella 2002 & Allison 2006). Not in the sense of a transgendered bodily disconnect, but the desire to embody the social space of the shoujo ideal, one which is the consummate—and thus ideal—consumer that keeps Japan’s economy running, and is, at the same time, a figure economically unproductive in their role as pure consumer, by turns both symptom of late capitalism and its dangerous antithesis: rebellion and collaborator all in one.

There is one final topic I wish to invoke before concluding this section, the controversial topic of *yaoi*—a sub-subculture that instigates some conflict even within the fandom.³¹ *Yaoi* is an acronym for a Japanese phrase meaning “no climax, no ending, and no meaning” and originated

³¹ Whitmer, Jennifer
2011 Traps, Lolitas, and Yaoi Fangirls: Gender Hegemony in the US Anime Fan Community. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*.

as a reference to fan-produced parodies or fanfics of popular works that rewrote the male characters into homosexual relations. Now the term is used to refer broadly to male-male relationship mangas and animes, alongside other terms such as *shounen-ai* (literally boy's love) and the *wasei eigo* (Japanized English) phrase 'boys love' or BL. The reason I venture briefly into this topic is that such male homosexual relations, and the fantasies and tropes of representation therein are a major sub-section of girl-oriented shoujo manga and anime, and are further one of the central arenas for female fan activities. Sales of fan *doujinshi* (fan fictions of popular manga), of which yaoi themed works constitute the bulk, generate more than ten billion yen (around 100,000,000 U.S. dollars) in sales at the annual Comiket convention in Tokyo, and the groups producing these are estimated to be 70% female (Saito 2011:171). Azuma Hiroki, in the endnotes to his book *Database Animals*, invokes yaoi fandoms in discussing the female Otaku that he had not discussed at all in his book, writing "within my limited experience with them, the creative motive and the consumption behavior of the female otaku who love the yaoi genre is far more human than the consumers of girl games" (2008:137).

Yaoi, even at its most problematic, represents a powerful postmodern aesthetic in its very form, in how it denatures gender and sexual activity in its portrayal of fluid social forms of love. Kumiko Saito illustrates first how BL as a genre emerged to "fix" the self-created limits of shoujo manga and anime in the early 1970s. The romances geared towards girls and young women of the time operated according to a melodramatic storytelling style, where sex represented a frightening and painful barrier the heroine had to surpass. Saito sees in the rise of boys love stories like *The Heart of Thomas* (1974) "changes in the conceptualization of love, from the surrender of the female body for the sake of love to the mutual exploration of love, sexuality, and erotic desire" (2011:173). The depiction of homosexual love for a primarily

female audience offered a chance for the heterosexual female audience to both admire and identify with the “beautiful” bodies of androgynous boys, simultaneously subject and object and to which readers feel fluid perceptions of closeness and distance. BL manga and anime changed the depiction of sex, and Saito highlights the shift to a close-up, reverse shot style that is meant to emphasize mutual pleasure of the two figures—though it should be noted that far from all BL stories depict sex.

Homosexual relationships offered a liminal space freed from social expectations and from reproductive risks to offer a chance to enjoy sex as purely recreational and on equal terms. Moreover, the persistence of homophobia within BL mangas and a degree of misogyny—a separate subject of hyperbolizing Japanese femininity as criticism embedded with these stories—and the unrealistic bodies and relations serve to push the genre to one of pure fantasy. The attraction of such fantasy is the same as that of Lolita subculture; the fantasy is more clearly removed from the vulgar everyday reality and creating a “purer” experience more controlled by the user, all the while allowing the user to challenge social norms.

The common thread in these topics is the deconstruction of bodies and the diverse proliferation of forms, many of them building bricolages of criticism and non-normativity out of the preexisting materials of society. Indeed, a common theoretical approach to yaoi in doujinshi is to interpret it as an assertion of feminine presence and identity in a hyper-masculine dominated media that doesn't give equal representation to other themes and perspectives. Lolita, yaoi, cuteness, gender-bending, cross-dressing all represent a rejection of stable frames of reference and the destruction of social forms and their reconstitution in more empowered, personalized and de-alienated bricolages. Female fandom is an essential part of the anime-manga platform, to return again to the semantic notion taken from Condry, and thematically, the girl, the shoujo

plays an important role as well in the generative aspects of this platform. The underlying theme is in line with what LaMarre sees as localized and personal critiques made within the techno-social system against that system itself, finding new frames of reference through deconstruction and recombination across an array of interchangeable and related forms that Allison proposes as essential to appeal and spread of Japanese pop culture and playthings across the globe. In the next chapter I examine how fans construct their subculture, and interact with one another and the diverse forms of material in Japanese pop culture. This ethnography takes a look at how some of these bricolages are formed and to what purpose, bringing many ideas of theory to concrete, localized fan practices observed through the University of Mississippi anime club.

CHAPTER IV: ANIME-MANGA FANDOM AS SUBCULTURE AND PRACTICE

Last October, after a twelve hour day volunteering at the Mississippi Anime Invasion Convention, or MAI-Con, I found myself in a corner of a dark room filled with people buzzing with conversation and whispered comments. I opened up a free bottle of water and drank a copious amount of it, having only had melon-flavored ramune (a Japanese soda) and pizza that day. Then a switch went off and the room was bathed in swirling neon green lights as the bass dropped and the crowd began dancing, many of them badly. Through the crowd people shook, shivered, stomped and occasionally formed circles to watch a really talented dancer do a challenging routine of jumping, falling, and bouncing back up. I checked my phone. Thirty minutes. I only had to endure it for thirty minutes, though tired as I was on my four hours of sleep that thirty minutes felt like an hour.

I was working security, though what that entailed I never knew—it did however come with a nice yellow armband that gleamed with authority. In the case of watching the rave, I only had to stay for the beginning and watch over part of the room. I could only guess what for—to confiscate all the acid being tossed around (a disclaimer: that was facetious) or to just stop anyone from trying to do something so wild that they hurt themselves and others. When I left, discreetly fleeing from a back door, the head of security lay sprawled out on the linoleum floor repeating “it’s over, we made it through the day” several times. The entire day spent working the convention was a new experience that showed me that, while I found attending an anime convention as a guest was fun, working one was actually a fairly blasé experience. The moment flashed so pertinent in my mind when I began to write my ethnography because it epitomized th

sense of being inside something in one context and outside of it in another. The experience served as a metonym for being a researcher, whose gaze settles not just on others but themselves, not just the far away, but on their home and community as well—though with the internet and mass communication the difference is not as salient anymore. So I have undertaken this ethnography on a subculture that for me, can be by turns comfortable and intimate, and alienating and bizarre. With such a statement, I have to add that no one fan is involved in all the different parts of the anime-manga subculture; it is too big and too niche-filled and even I have brought up certain parts that are both inside of and outside of my own personal interests in the subculture, yet still failed to cover all of them.

In the loosest terms, this chapter is divided into two sections, one that derives from auto-ethnographic observations spanning several years of involvement with a fan community at the University of Mississippi, and a second section that is built off the colorful interviews carried out with fans. My observations focus on a few key events, spaces, activities, and practices that help to establish a sense of imaginary and shared community even across a diverse set of interests. I look at conventions, anime music videos (AMVs), the anime clubroom, reading manga online, and the role of humor in describing broad tendencies within the fan community that line up both with Allison's ideas about deconstruction and reassembly and Condry's concept of shared creativity. I see these as establishing a way to generate social ties that are both meaningful and therapeutic for fans in the space and relief it provides. In the second section I quote amply from interviews conducted mostly among current and former members of the club (with one exception), and focus on commonalities taken from the body of interviews. I focus on the questions that were most successful, which were: discussions on what drew fans to anime and manga, the questions that tried to glean the influence of media in perceptions and world-images,

and lastly the role of community and social interaction in the community. Together, these observations form a detail portrayal of fan communities and fantasy consumption as a framework for social interaction and creativity.

1. Observations of the Fan Community, Local and Writ Large

Conventions

I begin with the convention because I have been on both sides: seen the inner workings of conventions and enjoyed other conventions as a guest. For its sociality, its imaginary space, and the realness of its presence, the convention offers me a better place to open my ethnography than the smaller and somewhat more intimate observations of the Ole Miss anime club and its internal activities. The anime convention is a rite of passage, a line between casual and serious fan willing to go into a semi-public space and dedicate travel and money to participating in a major event. I have met people who bragged about the number of conventions they had attended—twenty-two conventions for one person, fourteen for another, and even one person who winked and claimed they had ‘gotten laid’ at every convention they had ever gone to.

Anime conventions have a straightforward format that is relatively uniform across conventions, with the only real variation occurring between small conventions and large conventions. Certain staples of conventions are: multiple viewing rooms each with a full day’s schedule of anime—usually in blocks of an hour per show, dealer rooms selling merchandise, cosplay contests, gaming rooms, guest speakers, panels, AMV awards contests, live performances from comedians or bands, and late night raves. Larger conventions have a greater volume of these staples, as well as manga libraries for guests to sit and read in, but the typical range of activities in a convention fall within the above list. The entrance fee typically runs between thirty and seventy dollars, with options to buy more inexpensive passes for just one day,

and very few people go to conventions alone. Most attendees go with a group, carpooling and sharing hotel rooms with as many as five people can keep the price for an entire two night three day excursion to under two hundred dollars a person, including meals and gas.

There is an adage about conventions “if you’re not half asleep you’re not doing it right.” In the span of two or three days an enormous amount of activities are crammed in. Scheduled to coincide with the weekends, most conventions, or “cons” host events primarily on Saturday and half of Sunday, creating a whirlwind of stimuli. In my first convention, the 2011 Kami-Con, which was then still on the University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa, everyone woke up at 7 AM and spent all of Saturday at the con, and after dinner returned for the rave until midnight. Both nights people watched anime together in groups in the hotel rooms past 3 AM. I watched the bulk of the first season of *Black Lagoon* in two nighttime cram sessions with several other people, running around in the daylight hours somewhat befuddled and on limited sleep. Lacking sleep is an essential part of the Con experience—low on sleep it is easier to be overwhelmed by overstimulation and caught up in the mystique that keeps bringing fans back to pay for entrance to convention after convention.

The Con format, consisting of thirty minute or hour blocks throws attendees into a flash of different experiences—a voice actor’s humorous Q&A session fades together with a gaming skit, which itself fades into martial arts lectures, panels on a hit show, panels on traditional Japanese food, and even belly-dancing exhibitions. In such an environment each attendee can only do a fraction of the available events and panels, and has to prioritize certain events over others. Cons are customizable experiences, with hundreds of thousands of permutations of various combinations of constituent component events. The convention offers a very unlikely place to stop and relate all three major theorists ideas. Though it may appear difficult to position

Thomas LaMarre's theories of motion and visual perspectives, informationalization is a key component of describing the convention, and LaMarre's theory hits at key components of this fan activity. As previously stated, fans have to weigh different stimulations simultaneously—the experience is relational, yet non-hierarchical; what fan's value is having many different avenues and options, different venues to explore to a deeper depth. In this sense fan activities align with non-scalar visual cultures, and the aesthetic of informationalization is strongly emphasized in the fan practices of the convention. Into this mix, both Allison and Condry's ideas about personalization, deconstruction, and creative reassembly play out in what activities generate the most attention: cosplay and AMV's.

The con environment is not only very personalizable, but it is also an interactive plug-in. The most fun aspects of the convention are those that are not just customizable, but interactive at a group and individual level. For the 2013 Anime Weekend Atlanta convention, I joined a group of five other friends from the Ole Miss Anime club in putting together a group cosplay of the seven deadly sins (we lacked a Sloth), from the critically acclaimed anime *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* (based on the hit manga by Arakawa Hiromu). I took the role of Pride, a child character because I was the most baby-faced, and was able to muster the courage to do it within a group framework, whereas in any other situation I would likely have felt too ridiculous or self-conscious to cosplay. Within minutes of walking into the Con we were grabbed by other attendees. Cosplaying turned the entire convention experience on its head, as various strangers continually asked to take pictures with us, sometimes forming lines as new people came over to join in. The convention became for our group an extended piece of performance art, as we posed and responded to references and comments from the anime-manga our characters were drawn from.

The act of cosplaying was a form of real life bricolage—deconstructing a visual image into its different components and trying to replicate those components given real life materials and real life constraints such as time, money, and ability. Cosplaying is a real life enactment of what LaMarre talks about in the *potential* of the anime visual culture—that is the invitation to explore the open depths of an image and use this exploration to open up new frames of relating to one’s own identity or world. Cosplaying is remarkable in that it so neatly consolidates the major theorists this thesis seeks to test, and this is viewable in how cosplay represents a creative fan activity, a fan production, a basis for generating social ties through group activity, and at the same time an act of deconstructing a consumable product and reconstructing it in empowered and personalized contexts.

The popularity of cosplay contests and Anime Music Video or AMV contests fit neatly into the framework of the subculture as Allison and Condry describe it. Conventions include not just cosplay contests, but panels on how to cosplay. Professional cosplayers work for companies selling different costuming products, and wear costumes worthy of a blockbuster Hollywood set. In the last few conventions I attended, it would have been easier to count the number of people *not* cosplaying than those who were. Cosplay is then, a little bit of an obsession within the fan community, one of the few that transcends all the different niche hobbies and genres. It is in this space that the materiality and intentionality of bricolage does justice to categorizing a specific type of fan practice, one that is both widespread and generates the sense of common community; that helps affirm the remarkable trust and supportiveness that fans find within the imagined community. Even the ranks of serious cosplayers come from across all corners of society; some work in theater; others have jobs as accountants, or nurses, and I have even met a person who claimed to teach high school physics cosplaying at a Con.

One of the most important functions of a convention is that it provides a bounded imaginary space for cosplayers to perform. The actual practice of wearing the costume is the final stage of its development, and at Cons the hobbyists have a shared social space and the opportunity to meet numerous people who recognize the reference and perhaps even share interests in the same series. As my experience showed, for a very popular series, the attention could be overwhelming, with dizzying numbers of photos taken; executing poses until I was sick of it, etc. Even for less known figures however, there is almost always the factor of recognition—the true appeal comes at the intersection whether the efforts at reconstructing a fantasy in real life gains recognition from other individuals who can read the signs. After cosplaying once, I understood immediately the appeal of the activity: it is empowering, akin to wearing a mask to present a new persona and acting out in a very altered context a fantasy with an audience that both watches, participates, and affirms the fantasy. I found myself being addressed familiarly by my character name; sometimes with impromptu reactions taken by other cosplayers whose characters were from the same series.

The Con becomes a liminal space in that regard, outside ordinary expectations and with a separate, contextual set of rules that above all respect individual autonomy. A guy with a beard wearing a frilly pink dress walks around the con without drawing a second glance, while other men “crossplaying” may be so good at approximating feminine appearances that other Con-goers will jokingly warn their friends about “traps,” a rather unserious and playful defense of heterosexual norms that is played out in “making sure” the girl a Con attendee is hitting on is actually a girl. Cons break down for a temporary period of time the set of expectations that come with day to day reality—I have even run into a guy prowling the halls as a xenomorph from Ridley Scott’s classic sci-fi horror film *Alien*, with a frighteningly realistic costume made even

more realistic by the functioning prosthetic mouth and the cosplayer's unspeaking, predatory performance.



Figure 11: An unknown cosplayer in a custom-made Xenomorph outfit.

The respite granted from a more homogenizing or alienating daily life, from work, social expectations and the like, is what keeps fans coming back to Con after Con year after year. These are therapeutic breaks, and the world therapeutic is important in this case because Anne Allison's work does not overlook the healing aspects of even the most hyper-capitalistic facets of globally popularized Japanese fantasy culture. The convention is a small space temporally and physically, yet one that is carefully crafted by individuals and within which a very different set of relations operate—it is a small and localized reinterpretation of boundaries that exist in the contemporary techno-social system. Conventions are capitalist enterprises; they make money and charge fees for the experience, they advertise with distributors, charge rental space for vendors, and even lease convention centers from city governments. The entire event is deeply embedded in the very

system that engenders alienation and normative pressures, yet within that system people form spaces within which to explore other sets of relations, other identities, and other ways of imagining the world.

An “Anime Music Video” or AMV’s is a video composed of short clips of animation, with a musical track dubbed over the clips, and AMV’s are made and watched by people from all corners of the subculture. One anime series may be used, or dozens may be used, and in some instances even the music component may consist of several songs spliced together. Constructing an AMV is an incredibly time-consuming process, which involves watching through animes, amassing clips of varying lengths from these animes, and then using video editing software and a range of effects—fade-in, fade-out, flips, zoom in, up to more complex effects for higher technique AMV’s—to make a 2-5 minute video. Ideally the music or the dubbed over track (a movie trailer, comedy skit clip, etc), will synchronize with the clips (and fans can manipulate mouth movements to synch a character’s speech with new lyrics or dialogue) to produce some kind of effect, from parody or humor to drama and romance. Hundreds of different component clips may be utilized by the AMV maker, using software that costs several hundred dollars and requires considerable expertise to work with, self-taught or otherwise.

While Condry is the only theorist who broaches the topic of AMV’s, it is also easy to see how the AMV works as an object of bricolage; as an object that requires an explanation of visual media and therapeutic consumption practices to really unpack. As a potential subject for LaMarrean analysis, AMV’s offer a uniquely rich vein in that they combine fan practice with a very literal example of what LaMarre talks about as the exploration of potential depth. An AMV is after all a highly material production, one that literally breaks apart animation along an individualized reaction, one that seeks certain images and certain perspectives, that openly

manipulates the potentials of informationalized media by pursuing very different aims that utilize visual media as an actual material object. The importance of this object and the appeal however, are that it can be deconstructed, broken into short clips, the array of which can be reconstructed with the proper mastery of techniques and refined tastes—that is the aesthetics of the intended audience. The phrasing of all this language is important, as such phrasing alone is a powerful descriptive and interpretive tool taken from the pool of theory this thesis seeks to make integrative. In this case it is especially important how such theory complements itself, as AMV's are often collaborative, and the watching and competitions are very much so, yet looking at the activity solely from the Condry's idea of collaborative creativity would overlook the mechanisms that drive that creativity: deconstruction and reconstruction. Allison both explains how consumption incorporates these desires, but also traces these desires through economic and social changes. Bricolage is an important one again here because it offers a concrete and specific definition of not just object but bodies of practice around the object in question, hints at broader trends towards specific types of interactive media.

AMV's are a popular staple of fan activities and AMV contests are a Con staple, filling up auditorium rooms full of attendees in every Con I've attended. Skirting the line between appropriation and copyright infringement (Condry 2013), AMV's thrive as convention event and private fan activity, despite the hostility of anime studios and music distributors. There are so many AMV's that the contests now involve anywhere from five to ten categories, each with four or five finalists that the Con-goers watch and vote on to make the final awards. I had the opportunity to sit in and get involved with the selection process that occurs behind the scenes to present these finalists. An acquaintance of mine who makes AMV's and has had some success, received an invitation to help judge and come up with finalists for the 2014 Momo-Con in

Atlanta. That year's Con attendance exceeded 14,000 people and had a record number of admissions to the AMV contest. The entries had already gone through one round of technical eliminations, however 150 remained to be judged. We arrived to the Convention manager's suburban Atlanta home around 8:30 on a Saturday morning, and with a group of thirty or so odd people proceeded to watch AMV's for nearly 16 hours before my acquaintance and I took our leave (before they were finished, I might add). To start the group watched all entries in a category before voting on the top five for that category. It was a democratic process to a surprising extent—some AMV's that the Convention manager and AMV contest manager disliked (both self-apologizing "AMV snobs") made it into the finalists by democratic vote. Even though both these individuals held actual authority over the convention and the contest they were loathe to veto the opinions of the group. Contrary to my own expectations, my vote weighed just as much as anyone's, and even though I had never made an AMV, my input or opinion was asked and everyone was willing to listen to my impressions. The experience aligned with many others in a fan community where fan relationships produced what could even be termed non-scalar social system, a phrase that might better reflect the reality of such communities better than a term like egalitarian.

The experience of watching nearly 16 hours of AMV's was a bombarding one, a cascade of different stimulation; different potential fields for exploration. The hundreds of different anime series and movies used in those clips would have taken me years to watch, even if I watched anime as a fulltime job. Hour after hour of fast moving cascade of images, hours passed as the entire group became keyed into the videos, even me, hyper-focused on how a song chorus tied in to clips chosen for that section of the AMV, keeping an eye out for editing techniques, number of clips used. However, the judgment process was far less technical than I and indeed

many testers may have imagined—music choice played a big role in some instances. At one point the Con manager said “Seriously? Is this some kind of coordinated thing where everyone got together and decided to send *Fallout Boy* [the band whose hit song appeared seven or eight times] AMVs in?” The contest directors talked about how, if someone was going to use an obvious or popular song, they would face much higher hurdles and have to have a truly outstanding presentation to breakaway from the pack and make it into the finals. Judging criteria were derived from a range of factors: the aforementioned use of music but also what anime were used. Extremely popular anime were looked down on as AMV material, particularly those animes that had already been heavily mined for other AMVs. In addition to music and anime choice, submissions were graded according to how impressive the video editing techniques and other technical elements used were, and lastly, the big x-factor of how well the AMV worked towards its intended reaction, and whether it made the viewer want to watch the animes it was made from.³²

Overall, an AMV is a thematic presentation, an editor’s interpretation of music and image and effects intended to *affect* the viewer, and that was the number judgment criteria. Juxtaposing the audio for the trailer of *The Hangover* with a radically inappropriate set of images from different well-known animes had me doubled over with laughter, while several of the tragedy entries brought me to tears. Prior to actually sitting in and watching hundreds of consecutive AMVs I had never really appreciated or understood their appeal—indeed it was easy for me to shrug and dismiss them or overlook them as fan activity. AMVs are deconstructions of anime,³³ that much is obvious, but they are also recombinations. The AMV is an independent, fan-made

³² <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSTIia2a84w>> This AMV won multiple awards at the 2014 Momo Con, including the Special Award from the Con Director, and was the overall fan favorite that year as well.

³³ And more rarely, manga, though I did watch a stunning AMV at the MomoCon judging that used only manga and a wide array of special video effects.

bricolage, a not-quite stand in for a show or a theme that instead exists as an independent art-piece—if art is defined by the selective and intentional human arrangement of interpretable signs and components towards creating an affect. AMV contests fill some of the largest auditoriums in any Con, because fans appreciate the unique personalized reactions to anime—AMV’s are perfect examples of individualized fields of perspective, assemblages of image, reanimation of already animated series along a personalized projectory. Fans come together to admire both the techniques of AMVs and the emotional vision of the maker.

One other aspect of conventions that is salient here is the manner in which anime, manga and gaming (though gaming is outside the purview of my project) are a communicative system. Much like Pokémon creator Tajiri Satoshi intended, fans come together and bond over common interests. An anime or manga can become the nexus of a conversation—and especially for people who might otherwise be unconfident or unskilled in interpersonal communication, they become more than an icebreaker. The subject transforms into passionate discussions, revealing personal matters of taste and outlook through a social exchange that takes place on even footing. Anime and manga, plots, themes, art, music and other facets of the entertainment themselves can serve as a communicative grammar, and provide a smaller, personalized, already delimited structure understood by both parties—a fluency that allows successful interactions that are both satisfying and therapeutic. The convention remains a popular site of activities and vacations because it offers a safe space within which to explore these highly particularized explorations and identity-play free from social criticism and outside gazes—it in other words feels like a private space, a space for fans, made by other fans.

I end the section on conventions with an anecdote from my time working as a volunteer for MAI-Con (Mississippi Anime Invasion) the anime convention largely organized by the

University of Mississippi anime club. The Con takes place at the Oxford convention center, and I volunteered to work the second year convention in order to gather some participant notes that would aid in my thesis. Unfortunately, that Friday night several friends and I had stayed up too late—a good friend and myself were mostly just watching his girlfriend and another mutual friend finish their cosplays for the contest. I went to bed at 3 AM, though the costume makers went ahead and pulled an all-nighter. The next day we all had to be at the Convention at 8 AM, and I found myself thankful I had signed up for two hours of anime viewing room duty. I sat in the dark slouched in my chair asleep the first half of the morning, waking up to exit out of videos and hit play on the next episode. There is something surreal about watching an image of a man's head unfurl like a flower of teeth and bite off another character's head while half asleep and largely disengaged. Later that day, my friend and I sat in chairs at the entrance to the dealer room, our assignment to check to see if people had their entry passes—a job we followed out with exemplary gusto and strictness—when we heard from the table in the hall beside us “IT’S OVER *NINE THOUSAND!*” bellowed by the genial mid-forties man wearing a tan-colored beret and sporting a small, trimmed beard. Some fans had just gotten his autograph and stood with their phones out recording their own personal copy of a famous online internet meme. It was a bizarre moment where childhood nostalgia flooded in, hearing a parodied line from one of the iconic early episodes of *Dragonball Z* (in the series a serious statement about an opponent’s “power level”) straight from the English voice actor himself. Indeed, the voice actor, Chris Pratt, showed almost unlimited patience as nearly every person coming up to the table for autographs also sheepishly handed him their Smartphone. Whether it was to call unsuspecting friends, who then answered their phones only to be yelled at by the iconic, angry, hoarse, haughty voice of the *DBZ* character Vegeta, or to make them personalized voicemails, Pratt laughed with fans, and seemed

in on all the jokes and parodies, and the jokes and parodies became meta-jokes and meta-parodies. Conventions are a space where fantasy can intermingle with reality, between the familiar and exotic where numerous different fields of hobbies and tastes intersect, each offering the potential for depth and fulfillment if explored.

The Anime Clubroom

Anime clubs watch anime. It's a pretty simple assessment and accurately encompasses what clubs do in four words, but using only four words to describe club activities would be reductionist and remove the explanatory depth and context. However, watching anime is the principle activity, other than occasional rare discussions about group trips to conventions and other announcements about activities outside the club. For my purposes it is important to look at *how* anime is watched in club settings; at how activities of fans at the Ole Miss Anime Club could be constructed as a form of bricolage and lined up against the thesis's theoretical concerns. In this section I break down the club's ironic language community, bring up the idea of interactive viewing, and position the way certain settings enable fans to break down boundaries.

Set up like a standard classroom, members sat in rows, with different groups of friends often clumping together, and watched anime on a large projector screen in the middle of the room, with the lights off and the volume often loud enough to "weird out" other residents of the dorm. The type of experience and interaction varies depending on the anime series watched, the number of people watching it together, and the group dynamics such as comfort level and familiarity with one another. The Residential College's classroom is a room big enough for forty to fifty people, though the Anime club never filled it to capacity. The current anime club in the 2014-2015 school year was, for example, filled with more freshman and newer members and smaller overall, and therefore the interactions are more subdued and the meetings are significantly

quieter than in years past. Talking while watching anime is, however, still a part of the club activity, to the extent that watching anime isn't a proper description, but rather it is social watching, or an interactive viewing. Watching anime in a clubroom is not like watching a movie in a theater, it is interactive and a site for commentary, one that builds the sense of group identity and orients towards localized social goals.

There are different levels of interaction. In the current club, commentary is restricted to a few scattered jokes based on clichés and internet parodies—such as someone shouting “Notice me senpai”³⁴ when a female character displays interest in an oblivious male character and sometimes even more ironically to imply non-existent male-male sexual tensions. For the most part however, the current level of interaction consists mainly of affirmative comments, and discussions between members about whether an action sequence was cool, or how “messed up” a scene was. There still exists a degree of referentiality—where comments frequently refer to another anime series in comparison, or refer to certain jokes and internet-distributed skits, such as the “abridged” series where online comedy groups have edited and created abbreviated versions of popular anime series redubbed with humorous dialogue and replete with caricatured voices. My observations from this past year however have largely noted the change in dynamic, especially from the previous two years where the clubroom was so noisy that it was impossible to actually hear the dialogue of a show—which was one reason that in the past, the club watched all animes in the original Japanese with subtitles. Numerous current and former members of the club have commented with dismay about the change in dynamics, but I viewed the change as inevitable with high group turnover, and as showing the incredible internal variability of such in-group dynamics.

³⁴ *Senpai* being a Japanese word for one's senior classmate or colleague.

In previous years the clubroom turned into a circus while watching animes, and the jokes and comments were initially offensive to me before I adjusted and even on occasion found myself making similar jokes. The comments and jokes operated almost on parodying offensiveness—perhaps only possible in an environment of great interpersonal familiarity and the expectation of trust and openness between members that allowed at times a very raw offensiveness that ridiculed itself and everything it came into contact with. The parody of homophobia and sexism in particular expressed itself in hyperbolic statements that none of the speakers would have said in other contexts. Some that I wrote down because they occurred more than once include Mystery Science Theater 3000-esque commentary voiceovers. One club member excelled in shouting things like “You have ovaries, therefore your opinion is invalid” and even coined a catchphrase of sorts “Wow dude, anime is for fags” during the club meetings.

What struck me, and eventually tempered my irritation and dislike of such comments was that it dawned on me after repeated interactions that the very impossibility of the comments being serious was what made people laugh. My conclusions were different than those of C.J. Pascoe in *Dude You're a Fag* (2007) and the sociological investigation of the so-called faggot discourse as an enforcement tool for heteronormativity and policing masculine boundaries in California high schools. As a matter of fact, a the same member who was a ringleader in these jokes, came across me reading the book during a convention, which lead to a running in-joke where members would respond to a comment or joke I made by saying, with exaggerated emphasis, “Dude, you're a fag.” As time went on, the joke even attained a certain meta quality, as a member might sigh at some particular comment of mine and say “Do I even have to say it?” That members would watch *Evangelion 1.1 You are not alone* and yell “Quit being a little faggot, Shinji” at Shinji Ikari—Hideaki Anno’s anti-protagonist whose entire character is a reaction

against masculine action/sci-fi hero protagonist tropes—seemed to me to be doing something a little different from what Pascoe described. Members with only mild southern accents would darken their voices and shout such a statement in overblown accents. As opposed to manifesting anxieties and enforcing narrow boundaries, what I saw in the group dynamic was a playful, ridiculing parody that only existed because the entire group was “in” on the parody. Southerners parodied the South in the club, giving it a particular edge that I imagine is regionally specific, as they approximated stereotypes about conservatism and traditionalism in hyperbolic fashions.

Watching anime became a social event, one that specifically served as a commentary critiquing the strict gender roles of Mississippi, specifically the brand of old-fashioned Southern culture cultivated on the University of Mississippi campus. The specter of the University’s sprawling Greek life institutions—the large number of sororities and fraternities, each with their own manicured lawns and antebellum houses—was in the anime fan club’s culture the group’s natural antithesis, one frequently disparaged for its homogeneity. Whether of fashion styles, alcohol choice, stereotypical ways of talking, the anime club often used campus sororities and fraternities as foils to critique conformity, which often crystallized in specific performances of gender.

Multiple people told me that they came for the club for such commentary, for the fun of joking around, for the open environment and the sense of being around outgoing, like-minded people (and stopped coming at times when this environment declined). The anime club was like a book club—if a book club came together to read and simultaneously engage in a stream-of-consciousness, by-turns ironic and metatextual commentary on the book as they read it. I don’t view this practice of interactive viewing as bricolage in the sense that there is no material component involved, nor a reconstruction of outside products into something new. Such

interactive viewing however is a site for social solidarity, and provides ample views of the underlying postmodern aesthetic that values referentiality and open-mindedness.

Simply reading quotes about “faggots” and sexism leaves a lot of the edge on them, because they fail to approximate the contexts and performances that make them comic inversions. Written English often captures certain regions of vocal expressions poorly, and it is in this regard that it fails here and I must circumvent it to a degree. The way offensive statements were casually tossed around needs the context. Not only were the statements either made in a serious tone but contained an utterly implausible amount of offensiveness in them, or they were made in ridiculous tones or using sarcastic cues of intonation that were readily recognizable to the club. It must also be recognized that none of the members who made such statements ever did so or would have ever done so outside the private and intimate environment of the club. There was a clear distinction between contexts of private and public speech and at times members would shock themselves and self-correct after their own addition “Man that was so awful.” To which other members might nod and say “Yep, you’re going to hell.”

I’m grabbing at some vignettes here and trying to contextualize them within a year’s worth of experiences. I interpret such offensive commentaries using loaded language in a cautiously positive manner, because such language was, by its very nature, mocking not the traditional subject of the word (a homosexual individual in the case of “faggot”) but was mocking the word itself, and moreover, the people who used the word seriously. I observed a generation of people—rather unlike myself in this regard—who tended to be *laissez faire* with language, and, unfettered, would substitute small localized meanings of words and phrases in place of commonly understood ones and then use them only in the context of other people who were in that localized network. Members who would say “Get that bitch a cannon. Bitches love

cannons.” However, they only used this phrase in context of fictional female characters (often those with guns) and further such statements were only made in an environment where they could be funny, i.e. the anime club where the direct reference to the *Hellsing Abridged*—one of the aforementioned online comedy skits where fans have redubbed the dialogue of a show to make a parody out of the actual anime itself—and its humorous misappropriation of misogyny were recognized. I recognize that written ethnography, as riveting as it may be, often fails to translate the very particularized form of humor-through-hyperbole that the in-group jokes here recount. The jokes even grew funnier over time as they became familiar presences within a body of in-group humor.

What I noticed in the Anime club from 2012-2014 was that the interactive commentary that went along with group watching anime together took on a life of its own. This meant that it gained its own set of references from past utterances, and a growing body of humor. Everyone in the club was to varying degrees versed in this body of humor and involved in it. I return to LaMarre’s phrasing and ideas about potentiality in visual culture yet again, and say that at the group level, a context-based, trust-based set of alternative meanings to loaded language emerged facilitated by this visual culture. Slurs and curses like “faggot” and “bitch” were used in ways that precluded them from being taken serious—I saw it as a way of defusing controversial language and destroying the meaning of these terms in a small, bounded context. Indeed, latching onto them was a way in which people *built up* trust within the group. Offensive jokes came to be inserted into the flow of watching anime only gradually, as people built up comfort, building up to the point where for the brief duration and space of the club or in other environments with club members, they could feel free to say anything. Knowing the jokes and being in on the jokes only seemed to increase the cohesiveness of the group, building off a

certain aggressive refusal to be too serious or sententious about meaning—it fed into a dynamic and a tendency where people broke out of semantic categories or at least explored new avenues. In this sense the use of profane humor served to form the boundaries of group membership; it also made watching anime a rather intensive three-tiered process between trying to follow what was happening and laughing at the jokes simultaneously all the while searching intently for a place to jump into the fray with one’s own joke.

I also never observed the use of jokes or intentionally bad-natured and poor-taste humor lead to offense or friction with the club. I have considered myself bisexual since High School, if not “out” about that fact to the general public, and had dealt with the stress, anxiety-ridden policing of “faggot taunts” in middle school and junior high much in the same manner that Pascoe described them in her book. Yet, in the club environment, it was my closest group of friends that used the “Dude, you’re a fag” joke, which I came to find rather funny. The very sarcastic appropriation of former taunts helped form a sense of belonging and security because of the closeness the joke implied. The general opinion of the club with regard to this kind of activity was mostly positive, as the bulk of members participated in it, and club attendance rates were the highest and most consistent they have been since the club was founded.

Some researchers, such as Jennifer Whitmer (2011), tend to frame similar discourses, in more negative terms, such as constructing harsh gender hegemonies. Indeed, the most bellicose performer of these ironic jokes—who coined the “dude, you’re a fag” comment did have what I felt to be an anti-intellectual attitude, and even as a friend, I would probably assess his (this person was male) provocations as ways of asserting power. However, while there are real issues to critique, I oppose how reliant many such critiques are on negative stereotypes of the “male

nerd” who brags about their physical ineptness and revels in hostility towards women, things which simply don’t match up with the overall experiences I have had with the anime subculture.

Anime club meetings are similar to conventions in the sense that they are bounded spaces. Although the range of activities is much smaller, much simpler, and even more intimate, club meetings carried with them the same sense of a private sphere and some unpredictability about what members would encounter each time. Some people may have found their values challenged in the shows the group watched, but often people discovered new genres and connected with certain members based on similar interests. In a space where almost nothing was profane, people had the pleasure of temporarily transgressing typical social boundaries and the interplay between members, the animation on the projector, and the floating commentary was a powerful immersive experience that members frequently praised for its ability to relieve them of stress and other negative emotions. My overall assessment, not just of myself, but of others’ statements, reactions, and the like, was that members watched anime—not just in club meetings—to escape from themselves and explore new boundaries, new frames of reference and relationship, to vicariously experience both mundane and rule-driven irreality and the action-filled heroism of supernatural shounen hits like *Bleach* and *Naruto*.

Internet and Social Media

I find it interesting that several of the big online manga browsing sites (that are technically in copyright violation) have functions that work similarly to this aspect of the anime club. Called a *tsukkomu*, from a Japanese verb meaning to make a stupid comment, people reading manga on their online browsers can turn them on or off. When on, the various comments of different readers, often humorous and referential, are displayed on the page and individual readers can add their own humorous or idle commentary up to 140 characters. It is noteworthy

that even outside the club environment, in a solitary activity—reading manga on a computer—that the actual experience of interacting with the entertainment becomes a social activity between other users, and more than a social activity, a meta-textual one. In this sense, such impositions of comments differ markedly from meta-readings, or reading a work while following through a train of interrelated footnotes since 1) these notes are open-access to anyone 2) the person reading can also engage or respond to these comments or add their own and 3) many comments may be of only tertiary relevance to the page being shown.

I see a pattern in the activities themselves across a range of different media and formats. The tsukkomus are usually humorous—even if the manga is not. While reading *Tokyo Ghoul* last year, I had to come up with an entirely different way of reading the manga to deal with the tsukkomus—starting with reading through a page and with the tsukkomus “hidden” before clicking to show the comments. This meant reading the tragedy-horror-action manga, then compartmentalizing the thread of the story and the emotions of it, to enjoy a laugh and satisfy curiosity as to just what sort of commentary was going on about the manga, before turning the tsukkomus off again and moving back to the narrative. Interactions with texts and narratives become fragmented and yet readers learn to keep them whole and deal with gaps in different ways. The draw of such a schizophrenic—of two distinctly different strains of appreciating a story simultaneously, one of which is highly social and interactive—reading experience was surprising, and after a while my negative reaction and irritation with trying to deal with it disappeared and the system became normalized and automatic. I found myself separating story from enjoying and understanding the grammar of different meta-references in the jokes and commentary—*Tokyo Ghoul* references for instance now pop up everywhere in unrelated mangas to comic effect. The system of comments-imposed-over-text is an example of where, an

independent but similar system of social deconstructing occurs simultaneously to enjoying actual story itself.

Below is an example from the most recent chapter of the *Tokyo Ghoul* sequel manga, where the tsukkomus show a broad range of functions.

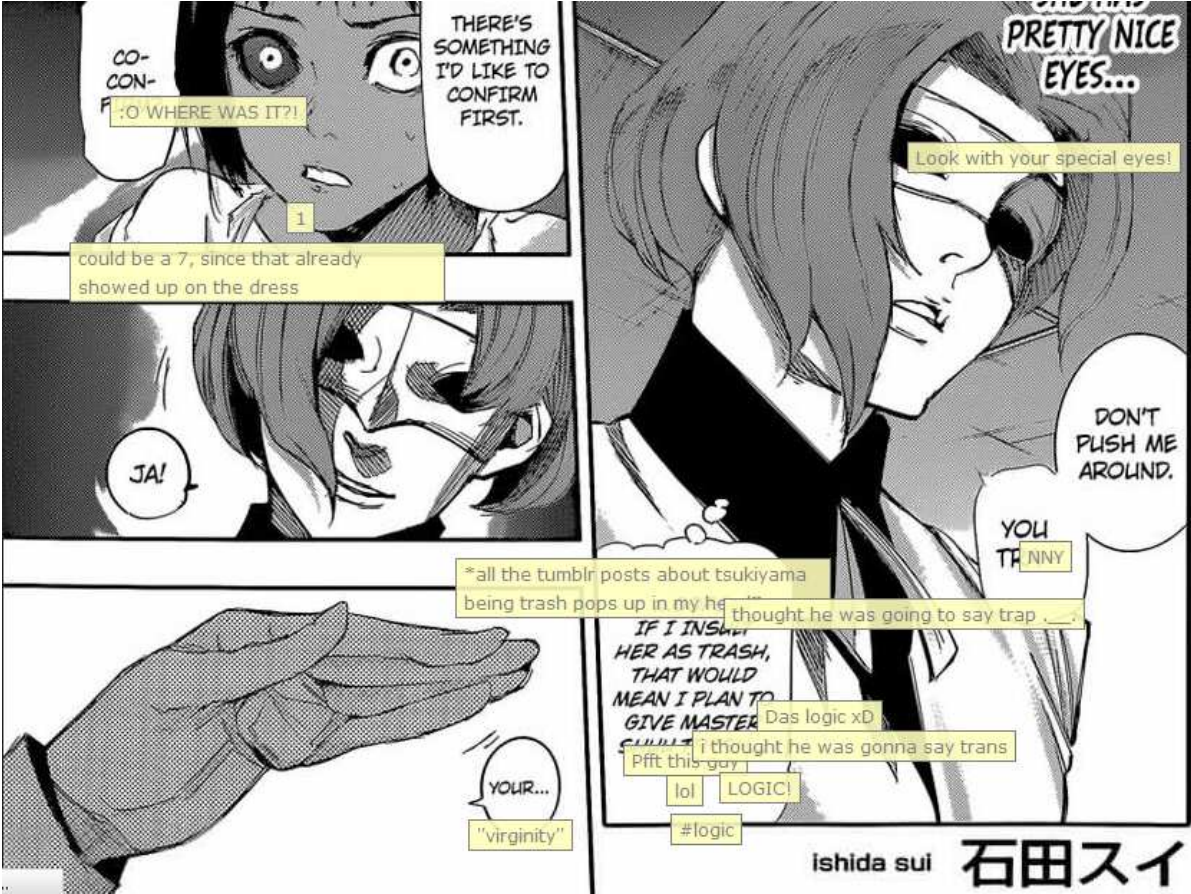


Figure 12: Tokyo Ghoul:re tsukkomus, taken from Mangahere.com

In the top left hand corner there is a brief discussion of whether the lines on the character’s dress collar form a 1 or a 7 shape. The author, Ishida Sui, does insert numbers into his art at random places, and the numbers refer to specific Tarot cards, such as the recurring 12’s hidden into the main protagonist’s clothing or hair, 12 referring to The Hanged Man of Tarot and often associated with Odin, an association that relates back to the protagonist, with his one human eye and one monstrous eye. The Tarot symbolism in the series frequently serves as a

foregrounding of what is to happen and follows closely to a character's leitmotifs, hence fans now keep a close eye out for hidden clues and messages inserted into the text by the author. Alongside this serious close reading are varied jokes and insertions that run parallel to the text. Examples are abundant, but only one is needed establish the visual appearance and provide context for the use of these comments.

What is important is that the way the manga becomes a point of origin for interaction and commentary. The comments allow different readers to plug in not only to jokes and references (the bulk of most comments) but also to share and relate different and often interlaced, multi-individual interjections to the story and activity of reading itself. This elides with the types of activities that occurred in the Ole Miss Anime Club while the group watched anime. Across very different settings a similar type of socially deconstructive activity occurred, one that builds up its own system of references, the comprehension of which becomes a facet of communal solidarity and membership. For instance, in both anime club and in tsukkomus people can say or write "I ship them," a term that means to root for a certain pair in a *relationship*, the phrase's origin. The idea of language communities is a central field of sociolinguistics, whether using particular marked forms of language for stance-taking that I think occurs in the ironic use of southern accents (Burkette 2013:239-258) or Jennifer Coates *Men Talk* (2003) where she examines gender construction in narrative strategies employed by men and women, and which I think could be applied to subcultures as well. It is beyond the purview of my project to engage in such an extensive interpretation of a corpus of linguistic data and focus on language praxis, however there are obviously some elements of fluency that come into play in establishing membership in communities.

I keep returning to humor, with characteristic dryness, to reiterate the role humor plays in the group dynamics of the anime club and how frequently it plays out across mediums in different aspects of the fan community—from tsukkumus to voice actor panels at cons to abridged fan made spoofs of series online. The humor is interesting both because it requires a high level of knowledge—otherwise the codes embedded in it go completely unrecognized—and because it exists as a highly active site of deconstruction and recombination. Contrary to what one might expect, the main activity on the Facebook page of the Ole Miss Anime Club is meme-posting. Since the beginning of March 2015, there have been seventeen postings on the Facebook page: four to websites, three to YouTube, and 10 memes or about sixty percent of all postings. I've included the most recent meme up to March, 13th for an example:



Figure 13: One of the anime-related memes shared through the Ole Miss Anime Club Facebook Page.

The comedy in this image comes from the ridiculousness of depicting Queen Elizabeth II as a dedicated anime fan, and in doing this it references certain forms of snobbery or Bourdieuean distinction that are asserted in fan communities, even down to the use of the odd Japanese *baka gaijin* or “stupid foreigners” in the last panel. Bourdieu’s use of distinction (1984) makes an apt assessment of how social differentiation is a key part of artistic tastes and expression. The meme above plays off the pretension of certain fans who treat watching anime in Japanese without English subtitles as a position of prestige—“linguistic capital.” The meme mocks pretension within the subculture, and it is in the relatability that fans have to this pretension that it is amusing—ten members including myself “liked” the above posting. The interesting aspect of the fan community is that no one possesses any structures to reify or assert power, so that any claims to pretension quickly fall apart into parody.³⁵ Bragging about Japanese fluency, or owning a thousand dollars worth of anime fails to assert social distinction and social relations will be re-equalized by humor or apathy. The same person who coined the “Dude, you’re a fag” joke at my expense, would also make deadpan claims where “X anime is for plebs.” Pleb being short for “plebian” and put down any popular anime with sarcasm, while claiming faux, self-deprecating distinction in arguing that only the obscure anime he was watching counted—“Patricians of taste like myself watch X” in pseudo-hipster condescension. Such behavior was common in the fan group, and in larger fan activities I noted a similar trend towards powerful equalizing forces that regulate and limit claims to superiority, helping to maintain the open and egalitarian nature that fans speak positively about in describing the community.

³⁵ Recall that the MomoCon Convention Manager AMV Contest Director both apologized beforehand for being AMV snobs and said they hoped they wouldn’t offend anyone.

CHAPTER V: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This ethnography emphasizes the ways in which fan communities exist as a network of activities are essential to the construction of solidarity and group identity. I argue this observation with evidence from both observed practice and the commentary interview subjects provided. The ethnography broke down how two examples were best described as bricolage and how these examples—cosplaying and AMVs—required the use of multiple theoretical approaches to explain in their totality. Likewise, the performance of localized language communities/bodies of references, and in similar fashion, the interactive ways of reading manga and enjoying story and meta-commentary separately at the same time—the different activities require multiprocessing to explore different combinations of material in very particular and interactive ways. These practices—that involved collaborative involvement with materials of media and active deconstruction, reconstruction and personalization of fantasy spaces, oftentimes transposing fantasy spaces into social spaces as in the Convention and Cosplay—integrate individual fans into a broader community. Through the subculture fans can undertake creative projects and through these projects be plugged into broader communities; they can deconstruct themselves, assemble vicarious identities and explore new possible experiences.

In the conclusion, I return to the two principle goals of the project: 1) to synthesize a more holistic theoretical approach in a field that has seen a rush of independent theory-building, and 2) to interrogate ethnographic data of American fans in a well-established, localized context in order to comment on not just the potential of subcultures towards ideological and social reforms but also whether subcultures and entertainment offer a useful angle for investigating the

effects of technology and capitalism in human life. To do that, I briefly restate how these theorists come together, then highlight the growing social capital of Japanese pop culture in the U.S. before presenting future directions for research in this vein.

1. Theory-Building and the Paradox of Japanese Pop Culture

I have stated before that even in cultural anthropology there are two extremes between people fascinated with philosophy and the descriptive programs of theory, and those that use as little theory as possible and seek pragmatic or unparadigmatic, open-ended descriptions of real world practices and peoples. I've always been interested in theories—theory like that of Geertz drew me to the potentials of anthropology, and my first love was reading and literature; the arts. The soul of this ethnography and its roots indeed lay in my love of fiction, of creativity, and longstanding cosmopolitan interests in the world's art and literature starting with my high school reading binge of foreign Nobel laureates like Kenzaburo Oe, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Maurice Maeterlinck and others. My background was such that in addition to anthropology I also considered pursuing further education in literature or in creative writing. Anthropology won because of its potential for important-cross cultural connections and ability to focus more on the role that art and culture have on actual human lives.

A major goal of this thesis lies in theoretical concerns, which are lengthy, yet essential in that the major contribution this thesis seeks to make lies more in interpreting and assembling diverse theoretical material in a way that allows for more integrative descriptions of fan subcultures. Three unique and talented theorists are introduced and described in depth to interpret how they position specific ideas about consumption, production, and visual media as a material. The issue I found was that many facets of real world ethnography do not fall under one category or the other—they straddle the line in ways such that describing cosplay in terms of

creative fan engagement vis-à-vis the collaborative anime-manga media platform or AMVs as the result of consumption privileging deconstruction and reconstruction—applying the work of Condry and Allison in rudimentary ways—would miss important factors.

Moreover, the interview subjects of the ethnography were all quite unified in talking about the anime-manga media as different—even if they lacked the vocabulary to articulate this difference. Recurring throughout the interviews, this difference was not epiphenomenal to the media's appeal, but it rather intrinsic to what drew fans to it. A strong grasp of materiality is lacking in both anthropological and more literary approaches to anime-manga media, and therefore LaMarre's work—because it rang so true and offered such powerful ways of discussing media as material—became the important underlying circuit of this theoretical project, and one that crystallized in my own conceptualization of bricolage. This meant that much of the theoretical borrowing was not only holistic, but also implicit rather than explicit; quite frequently what was most important in discussing aspects within the ethnography was the language that I borrowed from each theorist.

Bricolage loses usefulness if applied everywhere—hence I refuse to call some fan practices, such as language communities, and interactive, meta-textual reading/viewing of media as bricolage, because these fall outside specific limitations. They are fan practices, but operate outside and around materials of media in ways that make bricolage unsuited to describe them. The worldview behind ironic humor, interactivity, multitasking-based, social engagement with entertainment is similar to the impulses that drive fans to construct actual bricolages, and hence both echo and confirm each other. The ethnography clearly showed the manner in which these impulses derived from the need to deconstruct and reconstruct everything from identity to the experience of fantasy—to create therapy from media and do so with others, forming social

networks of fulfilling, horizontally organized and non-scalar engagement that draws fans into collaboration rather than idle observation.

Japanese pop culture is parochial—it is for this reason that so many Japanese people are, as Roland Kelts described them, shocked at the large number of anime and manga fans abroad and sometimes unsettled by how much they know about Japan, both very different experiences than historically when Japan was exotic and vastly misunderstood abroad. Takahashi Rumiko, who is one of the world’s best-selling mangaka with a long stream of hits spanning four decades (with over 170,000,000 copies of her work in print in Japan), wondered why her works were popular among English speakers.³⁶ The number of idiosyncratic jokes, references to Japanese myths and folklore, puns and the like that Takahashi used in her works made them seem unlikely candidates for even limited success in foreign markets, yet she has sold millions of books outside of Japan, and her manga have spawned global anime hits such as *Urusei Yatsura*, *Ranma ½*, and *InuYasha*. Manga and anime are unsurprisingly preoccupied with contemporary Japanese social issues, and seek to fill in specific needs at home, yet growing numbers of people in outwardly different contexts also flock to these fantasies, to the point where it is diversifying American media. I see it as significant that in the 17 years ago, the United States distributors changed character’s names and scrubbed all traces of Japanese scripts and text in Pokémon— and even tried to digitally alter Japanese foods into American food, turning rice balls called *onigiri* into an out-of-place sandwich. Fast forward to 2015 and Disney-Pixar’s studios recently won an Oscar for *Big Hero 6*, a movie whose main character, Hiro Hamada is Japanese and who opens the film fighting a man named Yama who has the kanji for *yama* (mountain) emblazoned across his shirt. Fans I interviewed invoked *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and its sequel, *The Legend of Korra* in

³⁶ Rumiko Takahashi interview. Viz Media. Accessed: 3/25/2015.
<http://web.archive.org/web/20000302153014/www.viz.com/products/series/takahashi/interview_02.html>

arguing that Japanese visual and thematic styles had now become influential in American-made productions.



Figure 14: A screenshot from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which fans were quick to cite as being more like anime than American cartoons.

It is this intrusion of Japanese anime-manga aesthetics into American productions that fans see as a sign that such media have truly begun to have an impact on the domestic market. While many fans were skeptical about whether such live-action versions should be made, many treated the news that two classic anime movies, *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, were receiving star-studded live-action Hollywood versions as a sign that the subculture has grown enough to reach mainstream consciousness. I see the expansion of such styles into American media not just as confirming Allison's larger ideas about shifts in capitalism and the growing need for more open fantasy worlds, which with the plethora of creative plug-ins and social activities, the anime-manga subculture provides in abundance—but also Condry's emphasis on the importance of active, engaged fan groups in spreading the anime-manga media; often in ways that the industry itself disputes and fights. The platform of Japanese pop media is interesting precisely because it combines the promises of escape through consumption with the empowerment of a mediating, learning experience in breaking down and remaking or personalizing the fantasy product. The

anime-manga culture industry is so successful and has such a dedicated and intensive fan base precisely because it is so readily and easily adapted to participatory needs of fans who also want engagement from fantasies. The redemptive promise underlying the theories I have used in my ethnography and conceptualization of deconstruction-reconstitution in bricolage is that such formats of fantasy offer the potential for relief in both social engagement and creative mental stimulation.

2. Future Directions

Preliminary as it may be, my project has accomplished my major goals and is a solid foundation for future expansions on the field of Japanese pop culture. In this regard, the pool of research is temporally and spatially restricted, however very clear, and often specific, patterns emerged in responses that fits the theories tested in this thesis to a tee. The underlying intention was to some extent prove the impact of media in shaping perspectives, and in doing so assert the importance of LaMarre's ideas specifically in approaching complex, diverse structures of media that often lack any clear hierarchies of power. I wanted to open up the possibility for new media forms to expand and change consciousness of the self and other nations, other peoples, other cultures. The ethnography looks at the promise of the anime-manga industry in creating cosmopolitan alternatives by providing nuanced materials for domestic critiques and a way of plugging into a larger world of differences and sentiments of translocation.

Further research in this vein would try and tackle the question of whether such fan commentaries constitute a moral economy of play, and the grounds for the type of solidarity that enables a coherent politics of resistance to form. To really dive into these questions, I would require a broader period of study, as well as more sites of research and more data. On a preliminary level, I do observe some very distinct aspects that do suggest in various forms that

the anime-manga subculture offers excellent materials for claiming quasi-independence through deconstruction and recombination of media materials in ways that build both identity and community. I would like to, in future questions, delve into the resistance of the cute, and the adoption of cute aesthetics by marginalized figures in order to detail ethnographically the way in which such aesthetics create a sense of independence and offer the potential for liberation. Such an avenue offers room for expanded questions of gender, community-building, and potential forms of liberation or rejuvenation in popular media.

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APPENDIX

Superflat art is a pop art movement in Japan that appropriates images and styles from anime and manga to offer diverse commentaries on Japanese society and consumerism. While closely associated with the world-renowned pop artist Murakami Takashi, Superflat includes a broad umbrella of artists such as Nara Yoshitomo and has attracted a number of commentaries within Japan and broad. Superflat is a diverse group of artists with different styles and different focuses, central among these is the presentation of a consumerist, fetishist Japanese culture that is the result of unsolved traumas from World War II and an infantilized position in global affairs and to the United States.³⁷



Figure 25: a.k.a. (2002) Photo: ©2002 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

³⁷ Looser, Thomas
2006 "Superflat and the Layers of Image and History in 1990s Japan." *Mechademia 1: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*:92-109.



Figure 16: Starting Over (c)2007 Mr. /Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

As an artistic movement, superflat explores a postmodern style where “Real complexity, and identity, lies at the level of the surface, not some prior interiorized point of origin. Identity, in other words, is emergent. Reality itself, authenticity, and real complexity thus lie at the surface” (Looser 2006:98). At the level of image superflat art attempts to breakdown the space between layers, to break down hierarchies of perception within an image and distort the relationship and space between objects and layers in the image. “To make something look superflat, you have to begin with layers that introduce the possibility of depth and then crush it.” (LaMarre 2006:136). The intended effect is disorientation, and a multitude of individualized potential reactions to art that is able to embrace commercialism and pop culture while espousing a sophisticated ontology and social theory.

ii. The first page Tezuka's *Astro Boy* is an excellent example. The images are read from right to left and top to bottom in accordance with principles of Japanese writing. What should immediately stick out—even to an untrained eye—is the cinematic nature of this progression. It begins with a distant, panoramic shot of the building from outside, and then cuts straight to the interior where it alternates between shots of Professor Ochanomizu and the titular Astro Boy depending on which character is speaking. Tezuka pioneered new styles and opened up the visual text through such Western-influenced cinematism. Punches go off-screen, chunks of movement are skipped in cut scenes, and the reader's viewing position is in constant flux through a creative use of angles of perspective. In this example, the reader is first introduced to Professor Ochanomizu from a position that makes it feel as if the character is addressing the reader, and the subsequent two angles show the changing perspectives of the two characters—the professor looking down on Astro Boy and Astro Boy looking up at the Professor before the final close up of Astro Boy. The transition and shift has a striking, naturalistic feel to it—one which goes almost unnoticed during a casual reading; the final close up shot reinforces a visual sensation of earnestness and action from Astro Boy, while the previous two angles help imply the hierarchical relationship between the characters with visual cues. Even the space between the frames, the “gutter space” serve as important cues and even “Emptiness exerts a kind of gravitational pull on the mind” (Condry 2013:160).

But as important as these visual possibilities was Tezuka's prolificacy (he published more than 170,000 pages of hand-drawn visual texts in a forty year career), and unconstrained exploration of subject matter. Tezuka drew adult-oriented manga like *Black Jack*, famous for its dark subject material, cursing, nudity, and graphic violence, and drew children's manga such as *Astro Boy*. Tezuka's work spanned numerous genres, from horror, to science fiction, to fantasy,

to historical fiction—it was this diversity that encouraged other artists to follow in his footsteps and his success helped establish a precedent that allowed a broad range of thematic expression in manga—perhaps the biggest historical difference between the development of manga in Japan and comics in America. Unlike in America, there was no self-censoring Comic Code (Condry 2013), and within highly generalized categories of age and gender manga artists had freedom to approach nearly any story, genre, genre-blend, and subject matter that appealed to them (Tsutsui 2010:18).



Figure 17: Page 1 of the first chapter of Tezuka’s famous manga, Atom Boy (*Tetsuwan Atomu*)

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