2021

Cross-Cultural Reception in the Western Yuri Fandom; Assimilationist and Transcultural Readings

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Cross-Cultural Reception in the Western Yuri Fandom: Assimilationist and Transcultural Readings.

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This thesis is presented as part of the requirement for the conferral of the degree:
Master of Research

University of Wollongong

School of the Arts, English and Media

Faculty the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

November 2021

Abstract

This thesis analyses the response to the yuri genre within Anglophone online fan communities. The Yuri genre, dealing with same-sex intimacy between women across a range of media such as manga, anime and games, has been experiencing major growth throughout the past decades, and as with other Japanese media has acquired a fan community in Anglophone spaces, who both produce interpretations of yuri in fan spaces such as forums and new works identified as 'yuri' by the creators and community. In this thesis I will analyse how these communities and creators have received the genre and their cross-cultural response to it.

I analyse this reception from two angles: firstly focusing on the readings of Japanese yuri in the online fan community itself, represented primarily by the site Dynasty Scans, and secondly on the aforementioned yuri Western texts, in particular several major releases in the visual novel medium, *Heart of the Woods, A Summer's End,* and *Love Ribbon*.

My thesis argues that the response to yuri has been characterized by two main kinds of cross-cultural reading strategies taken to it: an 'assimilationist' strategy that focuses on applying existing Western standards of judgment, and a 'transcultural' reading that, by suspending these and engaging more deeply with the specific cultural background of the genre, can open up a new 'neocultural' space that opens potential for new developments such as the development of yuri visual novels outside Japan. I end with suggestions for further research into yuri, which has been comparatively neglected in academia so far, as well as some considerations of how their reception of yuri might be affecting the fan audiences.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are in order to my family, in particular my father Edward and mother Anne, for supporting me in my University endeavours. In particular, I owe much to my supervisors Helen Kilpatrick and Ika Willis, with especial thanks to Ika for assistance with the phrasing and structure of the Methodology section.

Certification

I, Dale Lucas Altmann declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Master of Research from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

<u>Dale Lucas Altmann</u>

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20 November 2021

Notes

In this thesis, Japanese terms will all be Romanised and in lower case, and will be italicised with the exception of yuri itself. This is partially for readability given the high volume of usage; it also is representative of how the term has been appropriated by the Western fan communities discussed as a common loan word. Additionally, as a major part of the thesis is comprised by an analysis of fan community readings, large usage is made of direct quotations from forum posts; as this is a casual forum where errors are common, I will not be correcting errors but leaving them as is. Such quotes, regardless of size, are identically indicated by indentation for clear reading and consistency. I will be using the singular they to refer to individual posters, due to the anonymous nature of the forum meaning gender often is not clear. Finally, primary sources – the forum pages used in Chapter I as well as the scanlations and original texts referred to therein, and the yuri visual novels examined in Chapter II – are listed separately from other references.

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Section I: Introduction:

This thesis deals with the reception of Yuri in an Anglophone context. Yuri is a Japanese term for texts, primarily but not exclusively manga, light novels and anime, which deal with intense relationships and intimacy between girls and women. These relationships are often romantic, but the range of the relationships to which the term is applied belies a simple characterisation among the lines of 'lesbian relationships'. This genre has been taken up by Anglophone audiences as part of the general growth of interest in anime, manga, and other kinds of Japanese popular media from the 90s onwards, and this audience interacts with such media most particularly on the Internet. In this thesis, I argue that the growth of yuri, and the particular format in which it was translated and delivered across cultural borders, has resulted in the advent of two discrete reading strategies amongst yuri fans, which I call firstly the 'assimilationist' strategy, which focuses on applying existing 'Western' standards of judgment, and a 'transcultural' reading that, by suspending these and engaging more deeply with the specific cultural background of the genre, can open up new ways of thinking for the audience. To this end, I will firstly introduce three important elements necessary to understand the reception of yuri and the form fan communities of it took, dividing this introduction into three main segments: firstly, a history and examination of the nature of yuri itself as a genre in Japan; secondly, an analysis of the character of the Western yuri community; thirdly a primer in the Western visual novel industry in which context the abovementioned Western yuri games are produced. After this, the definition of the reading strategies will be explored in the methodology section, and analysed in the cases of a specific fan community and then in regard to several Anglophone visual novels in the two main chapters.

History and Character of the Yuri Genre

History

Yuri as a distinct genre emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, but can be traced to several influences around the beginning of the century, developing on the one hand from the real practices of female students at Japan's all-girls academies that were being first instituted during this period as part of the Meiji Era reforms, and on the other from *Shōjo* literature of the period that reflected these. I will explore the practices of these female students first.

The institution of women's education was one of the reforms of the Meiji Era in Japan. These schools were, alongside being educational facilities, also to serve a specific ideological purpose, which was the inoculation of the concept of *ryōsai kenbo,* or Good Wife, Wife Mother, training girls in their domestic roles under Japan's patriarchy (Dollase, 2010, p. 249). Of particular importance for the development of yuri was the growth of a set of practices which were quickly denounced by the authorities, in particular due to having been connected to a number of double suicides between female students (Zou, 2018, p. 80). Students engaged in the construction of 'sister' relationships of great emotional intensity, often including some kind of ceremony or vow. Accompanying these practices were a set of *ingo,* or secret words which proliferated among the student body and in magazines aimed at girls (Osaka, 2015, p. 5). The most important was the use of *esu* or 'S', also known as Class S. This derived from the English word sister, and was used to describe the general practice described above. Other such words included L, which stood for letter and in particular love letters, and *hana* or flower, which referred to students who were 'taken' by a teacher as a favourite (*S No Kyoukai,* 2021). This culture was always present within the literary world as well as the schools themselves thanks to the presence of *shōjo* magazines, which collected letters from school girls. Aside from being another link to future yuri, these magazines also featured the first proto-yuri fiction as we will see. Finally, of particular importance to the character of yuri is that the term, *ome*, was gradually replaced by S in general; this coincided with the establishment of female-oriented magazines such as *Shōjo Sekai* from the late Meiji period onward; girls wrote to these magazines regarding their relationships and this usage increased the prominence of *esu* relative to *ome* (Zou, 2018, p. 82). Ome referred to masculine women or to the practice of male and female 'roles' within a relationship, but eventually the focus on the more feminine 'sisters' metaphor became dominant. This is important as yuri tends to not have a strict boundaries between masculine and feminine roles within relationships, demonstrating a continuity with S as opposed to *ome*. The cultural memory of these all-girls school practices remain relevant and often drawn upon in yuri fiction, demonstrating that they are not just a historical curiosity. For instance, the recent visual novel *Yoru, Tomosu*, developed by Nipponichi and advertised as a yuri game, explores the consequences generations later of a double suicide by two girls in such a school, who were in an S relationship, directly relating its own yuri story to the experiences of past generations. Hence yuri can be seen to look backwards towards these all-girls schools and the culture developed in them, a culture whose subversive character relative to the ideology supposed to be

inculcated by education given can be seen in such events as the proliferation of double suicides among girls.

Outside of these all-girls schools and the *shōjo* magazine content that directly related to them, there was the tradition of *shōjo* literature which fictionalised the experiences of girls and which included relationships. In particular, the author Yoshiya Nobuko is often cited as the first major figure in this literary strain which influenced various writers up to the formation of modern yuri. Her work has been identified as a fictional literary representation of *esu* relationships that complemented those in girls' magazines (Fanasca, 2020, p. 58). Nobuko commanded a large audience and was one of the most well-read authors of her time, in particular among women. She was also a queer woman in a long term relationship with another woman, eventually adopting her as a substitute for marriage (Robertson 2005, p. 203). What is most notable here, in keeping with the way in which the actual practices of Class S students tended towards resistance against the ideological framework of 'good wife and wise mother', the kind of *shōjo* constructed in Nobuko's works was a figure threatening to the establishment on account of their exposure to factors such as Western influence and the burgeoning Japanese feminist movement; a *shōjo* was not just an idealised image of a young girl, but a figure that was, on account of their youth, being moulded in ways not necessarily to the liking of the establishment (ibid 199). One of her more famous works, *Hanamonogatari*, helped to create a literary language that depicted the kinds of 'romantic friendships' between girl students that were, on account of the inability to distinguish between 'healthy' same-sex attraction that would subside and be replaced by 'normal' heterosexuality and that which was an unhealthy 'inversion', the target of distrust within the Japanese establishment (Suzuki 2006, p. 581). Partially due to the impact of such literary expressions, Class S is still known as a genre of yuri today, as in the 2019 anthology 'Canelé Soeur Yuri Anthology', using the French term for sisters and dealing with stories along these lines.

Following the early years, however, there is a long mid-century gap before the genre was resuscitated in its modern form. This process began in the 70s, when the first *shōjo* manga dealing with same-sex female relations began to be released, but only irregularly and with the trope of the tragic end being much more prominent than in recent yuri; however after the passing of the Equal Opportunity Employment Act in 1986, not only did yuri works both officially and independently published appear in greater and greater numbers, but there was

also the establishment of what Fujimoto calls the 'bright lesbian' type of story, with the tragic ends becoming rarer (Fujimoto, 2014, p. 98-100). The growth of yuri after this point is tied to several popular specific properties, such as *Maria-sama ga miteiru* and *Sailor Moon*, as well as the establishment of dedicated yuri magazines such as *Yurihime*. Yuri in the modern sense can thus be held to begin around the 90s, with the number of works and general popularity of the genre increasing since then. Examples of this growth include the viability of *Galette*, a crowd-funded yuri magazine since 2017, and the decision by SF Magazine to produce an issue dedicated to science fiction yuri in 2018. Hence yuri is currently a growing genre in Japan, with roots over a century old despite its comparatively recent full emergence.

Demographics

Unfortunately the sparseness of research on the topic of yuri reader demographics means that such information can only be provisional, and aside from the work of academic Maser who researched Japanese yuri demographics, limited in itself, we must rely on surveys performed by yuri fans. Maser performed a survey of Japanese yuri readers based on the site Yuri Komyu with 994 responses, Zeria is a blogger who created a survey which received 695 responses from the English-speaking yuri audience, while the *doujin* yuri essay collection *Yuri Ronkou* also included the results of a survey soliciting Japanese yuri fans on Twitter. With regard to Maser and the *Yuri Ronkou* results, whereas Maser performed their study in 2013, the latter was done in 2020. Hence it may represent a more up-to-date result. The results of the three demographic surveys are dealt with according to topic below.

Firstly, all three demographic surveys included a gender breakdown. Maser describes a result of 52.4% female, 46.1% male, and 1.6% other. As they note, while there is a slight female majority, yuri does not seem to be dominated by a given gender by these results. The results by *Yuri Ronkou* have an intriguing difference: they found 48.3% female, 45.0% male, and 6.7% other. Hence, the male and female audiences seem to have remained fairly constant with growth coming in the 'other' category which has expanded six percent over the 7 years since Maser's study. It is possible that the growth in 'other' could reflect an actual increase in such readership, or alternatively it is possible that it reflects a greater openness to identify as 'other'. Intriguingly, this corresponds with Zeria's responses in the Anglophone fanbase from 2017: 47.19% female, 44.31% male, and 8.49% as other. The gender identity results hence indicate a fairly small but consistent female majority across both Japanese and Anglophone

yuri fanbases, as well as a sizeable contingent of other gender identifications, in particular as a growing trend in Japan.

The next topic that all three included was age. In this case as well, the three surveys have consistent results, with all finding that the yuri audience is mostly centred around the 20-25 age range, with an in general very youthful audience. Maser found 29.4% in the 16-20 category and 39.6% in the 21-25 group. In the *Yuri Ronkou* survey, 204 of the total 478, for 43% percent of the audience, fell into the 20-25 group alone, with the younger-than-19 group following at second largest. Zeria's responses indicate a similar breakdown among the Anglophone audience, with all groups having their largest contingent fall into the 20-25 range. These results strongly indicate that yuri has an audience of similar overall youthfulness in the West and Japan. This is perhaps to be expected considering the relative newness of the yuri genre in its modern form, as well as its most popular medium of manga. On the other hand, the lack of older respondents in *Yuri Ronkou*'s more recent Japanese survey may indicate that some of the respondents to Maser's survey have ceased reading yuri with age.

In terms of sexuality, perhaps the most interesting results can be found: Maser finds her respondents to be 30% non-heterosexual women, 15.2% heterosexual women, 4.7% non-heterosexual men, and 39.5% heterosexual males, and 1.2% other, don't know 8.1%, n/a 1.3%. Hence there is a gap between the female audience, which contains double the number of 'non-heterosexual responses', compared to a fairly overwhelmingly heterosexual male audience. *Yuri Ronkou*'s question in this area included some more granularity in the possible responses; one could identify as uninterested in 'homosexual and bisexuality as social issues', interested but not as a *toujisha*, and interested as a *toujisha*. *Toujisha* means 'person involved' or participant, and here refers to people who are themselves homosexual or bisexual, or who may possibly be. 77.6% of the women identified as *toujisha*, 16% as interested in the social issues but not as one, and only 6.3% as not interested. In comparison, 69.1% percent of males identified as interested in the social issues but not as a *toujisha*, 12.9% as interested and as one, and 18% as uninterested. It seems that the male non-heterosexual category has increased since 2013, while the number of males who are interested in LGBT issues is very high among yuri fans. While the number of non-heterosexuals is high in Japan, Zeria's results find it to be even higher in the West. 96.04% of female readers who responded to her identified as non-heterosexual, and 23.38% percent of the men. Hence we can say that that the number of female non-heterosexual readers is high in

both the West and Japan, and overwhelmingly so in the West, with male readers much less likely to be non-heterosexual; however, the majority of yuri fans in Japan seem to have an interest in LGBT issues whether male or female, indicating they don't necessarily view yuri as a genre to be separate from those issues in the real world.

Things become more complicated in the topic of which works the readers prefer based on their identity. While Maser and Zeria have a list of works selected as favourite divided by group, *Yuri Ronkou* has preferred genre of yuri according to gender. Maser notes that the favourite works selected by male and female fans are mostly the same list, with sexual identify playing a fairly small role. In particular, Maser states that stereotypes such as males preferring pornographic yuri and women preferring stories about 'lesbian' women do not seem to be correct. However, whereas the male selections had clear favourites, the female selections had more variation and smaller majorities for any given text. Zeria finds similar results for the Anglophone fanbase, with the top three popular works being the same for non-straight women and straight men though in a different order. She does note however that *Utena* is present in the list of the former but not the latter, which she attributes to a focus on gender in its story.

One final notable aspect of this is that Zeria attempted to find a gender breakdown for yuri *mangaka* (creators of manga), finding that of the 150 *mangaka* she looked at, at least 60% were female, with 26% being unknown as it is a common practice to use a pseudonym and not reveal one's identity.

It is worth reiterating that the above surveys are all limited and that a really authoritative account of yuri demographics does not exist; nonetheless, given that they concur on the overall trends that they show, they can be taken as useful at least in a limited sense. Some limitations to keep in mind, however, are the probably limited reach of the surveys – as online surveys, they probably reach a primarily younger and highly online audience, and hence it would not be unexpected if they were biased towards younger people and perhaps, also, biased towards LGBT minorities. Other issues, for instance, might be the *Yuri Ronkou* analysis being biased, as a Twitter survey, by the demographics of Twitter itself. These problems prevent, as noted, any uncritical reliance on this information, which should be taken only as a general 'first guess' at true yuri demographics. A major failing is that they do not deal with ethnicity – the possible role of Japanese diaspora, or different reactions among ethnic groups. Regarding this, it should be remembered that there is no unified, homogenous

Western group faced with an equally homogenous 'Foreign' Japan, but two heterogeneous communities whose reactions to one another are mutually constitutive. Going in to an analysis of modern yuri, it should only be kept in mind that many creators are women, that there is a large contingent of queer people in both Anglophone and Japanese fandoms, and that the gaps between preferences for men and women readers of yuri are not necessarily as large as might be imagined.

Characteristics

The specific nature of the yuri genre gives it a unique character compared to Anglophone LGBT fiction; as the argument of this thesis hinges on these differences, my discussion of yuri will finish with an explanation of some of these characteristics.

All genres are created in discourse by readers; this is a fundamental insight of reception theory. Firstly, as argued by Maser, yuri as a genre is 'discursively' created, that is, it is defined by the perception and actions of fans as much as by the commercial products produced under the name (Maser, 2013, p. 8). Examples of these include the production of *doujin* derivative works. *Doujin* are amateur productions, for instance a fan-made manga distributed online or physically at events, often fan-created stories set in the world of existing properties. Importantly, yuri *doujin* do not necessarily need to be derivative of works that are already categorized as yuri. Rather, they can read the yuri relationship into it, thus placing the emphasis on the particular 'yuri' interpretation of a work (Maser, 2013, p. 26). Furthermore, the result of this focus on interpretation is that views on what does and does not count as yuri vary, resulting both in creative differences as well as strong debates. For instance, in an article by Tamaki, they noted that a fan of the hit yuri franchise *Yuru Yuri*, posting on Japanese message board 2channel, expressed disappointment that other yuri stories they read were what they called *gachi rezu* stories (Tamaki, 2014, p. 154). *Gachi rezu* combines *gachi*, meaning serious or authentic, with the abbreviated version of lesbian, *rezu* (associated with lesbian pornography and also often considered a homophobic slur); they are complaining about yuri that is too 'lesbian' compared to *Yuru* Yuri, a very 'soft' yuri work. In addition, yuri has expanded from its roots in schoolgirl culture and there is now a wide diversity in the kinds of relationships explored in the genre. While schoolgirl-centred stories are still very common, they no longer occupy the dominant position, as can be seen from the demographics section above where according to *Yuri Ronkou* working adults yuri had become more popular in general among the female audience. Yuri has established a presence in Science Fiction, for

instance, with an edition of *SF Magazine* devoted to SF yuri. Popular manga *Oshi ga Budokan Ittekureta Shinu*, which received an anime adaption, is an example of yuri focused on idols, while among the yuri anthologies recently released are the *rezu fuuzoku* series focused on the lesbian sex industry.

Rather than a specific context such as school, yuri is focused on female/female intimacy, and a key part of this is the treatment of lesbian sexuality. The particular conception of sexuality that is found in yuri is a key factor that gives it a unique identity. For instance a finding of Wellington was a focus on the female body in its physicality itself, expressed for instance through the depiction of bodily fluids in yuri manga (Wellington, 2013, p. 45-47). In addition to this physical meaning of sexuality, there is also the way in which sexual preference itself is de-emphasised in favour of a view of sexuality as a series of discrete 'events' that can do not necessarily follow the rigid logic implied by the notion of a set 'sexual orientation': rather, sexual identity can be seen as constructed throughout a whole lifetime by an accumulation of events, which cannot be predicted (Kimura, 2014, p. 55). Because of this, the fact that yuri often avoids using the language expected of LGBT fiction, such as self-identification as lesbian, should not be seen merely as the avoidance of social reality, but as the result of a different view on it.

In their detailed work on this topic, Wellington has shown how yuri does not straightforwardly reproduce a passive/dominant sexual and relationship dynamic: while the concepts of *neko* and *tachi* correspond to each respectively, they are not absolute but relative and subject to change according to the particular needs of the character in each moment, for instance, a normally 'passive' character demonstrating her desire to make her partner feel equally good during sex by taking the initiative (Wellington, 2013, p. 42). Furthermore, while the concepts *tachi* and *neko* exist as terms for personality traits, the dichotomy of butch/femme, in particular as a difference in appearance and presentation, is rarely utilized in yuri works such as those in *Yuri Hime* (Nagaike 2010).

Introduction to the Visual Novel Genre and Western Yuri VNs

The works produced by Anglophone fans of yuri in the genre that are examined in this thesis are those that take the form of visual novels. As this is a niche genre, not well-established and often misunderstood in the West, it is worth discussing it in general before Anglophone yuri VNs specifically.

A visual novel is a videogame that comprised primarily of text which is read through to progress, alongside art and music components. Visual novels are known to have originated from the PC adventure games of the 80s and 90s in Japan (Bashova & Pachovski 2013). Whereas those games featured inventory systems and menus to interact with the world, eventually these elements were removed in favour of the more mechanically simple visual novels that pre-dominate today. The regular visual novel is comprised of four elements: art, voice, music, and text. The regular visual novel scene will have character sprites, artwork of the character standing, in front of 'background' art that depicts some setting, such as a room or environment. In addition, there are also full-screen 'CGs' (CG stands for computer graphics) which depict especially important events in full as a still image. The storytelling itself takes place through text, which is either in the ADV ('adventure') or NVL ('novel') format. ADV format means a text box dedicated to text is shown at the bottom of the screen and the rest of the screen is devoted to the art, whereas in NVL the words simply scroll down across the whole screen. Depending on budget, there may be voices for each character or for the major ones. Finally, most VNs have a soundtrack that plays during most scenes, as well as opening and ending movies to introduce and conclude the game. Some visual novels have no interaction outside of clicking to progress the text and using the save/load functions, while others contain choice systems of various complexity that can lead to alternative endings.

The visual novel genre has a reputation in the West for erotic content, and for being 'dating simulators' solely focused on romance. While this is often viewed in a negative way, these aspects have also been seen as positives which combine with the relative accessibility of development to make the genre a way for indie developers to produce challenging content that includes eroticism and queer narratives. An article on The Verge is demonstrative of their position in recent gaming culture. While acknowledging that they bear the weight of stereotypes (pornographic, not enough gameplay), the author asserts that many opponents of the medium are repelled by the 'feminine' nature of them and their 'queer and erotic' stories (Cross 2018). The use of visual novels as a means of expression by marginalised creators attracted to the relatively low cost of production (Hart, 2019) has also led to the development of what I call the Western Yuri visual novel. While they all have their own takes on the genre, they are all influenced in some way by the yuri genre and the history of the medium, and use them productively in the creation of their own stories.

Methodology

The objects of this thesis are firstly yuri fan community discussions drawn mainly from Dynasty-scans, and secondly original English-language visual novels produced by Anglophone fans. The analysis of the community draws out a dichotomy in how yuri texts are read: on the one hand, an 'assimilationist' strategy of reading, which interprets the yuri text text according to existing beliefs and standards and in doing so perpetuates them, and a 'transcultural' strategy in which the reader allows their ways of seeing to be meaningfully challenged and changed by the cultural difference of the text; and I argue for this latter strategy on account of this productiveness. The analysis of visual novels extends this, demonstrating how a transcultural interpretation of texts naturally flows into what I term 'neocultural' texts: how these visual novels represent a merging of the new things that have been taken away from transcultural readings with a meeting of the needs of fans and creators in a different society from those that produced the original yuri texts. In this thesis, I have drawn from reception, fan and translation theory to form my idea of transcultural readings, and have applied this to the textual analysis of fan communities and visual novels that comprise the body of the thesis. Hence, the methodology focuses on tracing the theory I drew from, to elucidate the concepts that led to this idea, and how it can be applied especially to fan production and translation.

Following reception theory, I begin with the insight that texts are interpreted according to culturally and historically specific strategies, and that in this way all readings are also translations into these contingent interpretative strategies of the reader (Radway, 1987, pp. 8). Hence there is no set meaning of texts, but only a set of interpretations depending on the reader (Hawkes, 1992, p. 6). I elaborate on this by utilising the work of two key translation theorists as well as that of Rita Felski, to examine how readings of yuri have been conditioned by and examples of translation. In particular, the visual novels are also examples of interpretative strategies: as Carrington writes, 'every act of authorship is an act of interpretation' (Carrington, 2016, p. 9). In other words, all texts are produced in intertextual dialogue with other texts — which means, in dialogue also with the author's specific interpretation of and way of reading those texts.

The first translation theory I draw upon is Even-Zohar's Polysystems theory of translation. This views literature as a polysystem, containing a multitude of different systems within it (for instance, the arrangement of genres and what they signify culturally, the way in which

various writing styles are judged), and explains the style of translation in a given context as a product of the state of the language and culture's condition at that time. Even-Zohar's theory includes a place for 'sub-cultures' which, being on the margins of the 'official', mainstream culture, are the main places where evolutions are developed and eventually incorporated into the latter (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 16). In Even-Zohar's theory it is recognised that texts do not stand alone, but are only a part of a literary system that is constructed by groups of readers who socially construct the system through discourse (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 35). The most important insight offered by Even-Zohar is that rather than simply being integrated as a series of individual texts, translations amount to a new 'repertoire', a set of models and styles, which plays a role in innovating the system as a whole (Even-Zohar, 1990 p. 46-47). Examples include the role that was played by Western translations in Japanese itself; for instance, the growth in usage of gendered pronouns such as *Kanojo* was such a case (Bai 2018, p. 55-60). This is similar to the concept of Felski, 'cultural grammar', as she applies it to literature: the 'largely unconscious' patterns through which life is lived, as shown through the language in a text that is rooted in a particular historical moment (Felski, 2008, p. 98). We can say that the introduction of new 'repertoires' in Even-Zohar's terms also amounts to the importation of new cultural grammar.

Unlike the kind of 'thickness' Felski discusses, the rootedness of language in a particular culture's ways of living, however, the deployment of these foreign repertoires raises new issues for the reader, as is the case for the importation of Japanese genres such as yuri to an American context. While an American readers engaging with an American text will be familiar with all or most of the cultural grammar and thus easily adjust to whatever repertoire is used, in a cross-cultural context such as that involved in reading translated literature, the reader cannot be assumed to have this knowledge. Both linguistic elements, such as puns and other wordplay, and cultural elements such as the role of certain festivals or outfits will have to be dealt with in translation to account for the fact that the new audience does not possess the background knowledge that the original one did.

Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* describes how the tradition of translation in the Anglosphere has produced a culture that resists the kind of expansion of repertoire through translation that Even-Zohar's theory explains. In particular, he draws upon the dictum of Schleiermacher that either the reader is taken to the writer, inclusive of everything culturally specific in the writer, or the writer is taken to the reader by neutralising those elements

foreign to the reader. The contemporary Anglosphere tradition of translation emphasizes the latter path to the exclusion of the former: resulting in the 'readable', fluent translation, which works to exclude foreign literatures and which reflects a culture which is 'aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to foreign literatures' (Venuti, 1995, p. 12). Fluent translation does not simply mean the production of objectively 'good' English writing, but is reflective of the specific paradigms of what makes for quality writing. For instance, Venuti notes that the demand for easily read translations is reflective of the English-language paradigm that demands transparency of meaning (Venuti, 1995, p. 16).

In opposition to this paradigm of translation, which he dubs 'domesticating' as it seeks to produce an easy-reading translation that is fit to be easily consumed in domestic markets, Venuti presents a 'foreignising' tradition of translation, drawing on German Romantics. Foreignising does not simply mean a literal translation, but drawing attention to the foreign elements of the text on the one hand and reminding the reader that the text is in fact a translation on the other, by breaking the illusion of transparency offered by fluency. The perception of what is foreign depends on the receiving culture (Venuti, 1995, p. 24), so the translation must still keep in mind the audience, rather than focusing completely on producing an unvarnished version of the source text.

If readings are translations into the interpretative strategy of the reader as I argue, then a cross-cultural reader, such as those encountering yuri, faces a similar choice as a translator: they can domesticate the text by applying their existing strategies, what I call 'assimilationist' reading, or adjust their strategy to recover the text, what I call transcultural. This is similar to the dilemma of any reader finding a text that challenges their interpretative strategy: as noted by Rabinowitz, they must decide on rejection of the text or rejection and revising of their own strategy (Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 211). When the transcultural option is taken, the strategy of reading is revised; since the strategy of reading is directly related to the cultural grammar and standards of their society, the reader can then apply this revision more broadly to their surrounding culture, resulting in what Felski described as 'new ways of seeing' (Felski, 2008, p. 103).

The kind of difficult, yet productive reading that produces new ways of seeing from cultural differences I refer to as 'transcultural'. This term is taken from Fernando Ortiz's study of Cuba's interactions with colonial/imperialist powers. The concept describes a process whereby the interaction between cultures allows those who are in contact with both to

produce a neoculture, a distinctly new cultural formation that is influenced by both of the cultures involved in its creation (Trigo, 1993, p. 718). A full transcultural process involves a discrete group of people in regular contact producing a new neoculture. What I describe as transcultural reading within the yuri fan community, however, while resembling this process in terms of the creation of new perspectives and cultural change, is limited in several ways. For instance, fandoms tend towards a fragmentary nomadic approach towards texts, poaching and scavenging what accords with their own needs; in *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins argues that fans produce from this their 'own culture built from the semiotic raw materials' of the media they consume (Jenkins, 1992, p. 50). Moreover, readers of yuri are engaging in reading of a fictional genre and moreover one that is not usually known for political statements. However, it should be kept in mind that the yuri fandom is primarily an online one, and hence any new culture is limited to these online spaces. Rather than a full neoculture, I argue that that transcultural reading in the yuri fandom context provides examples of 'neocultural phenomena': changes in perspective or production of new ways of seeing which change their relationship to their surroundings even if not resulting in a fully new culture. English-language visual novels, which I examine as resulting from transcultural readings of yuri which are then applied to the work of creation, are an example of such a neocultural phenomenon, reflective of how the encounter with foreign texts can affect readers, as they turn from reading to creation.

An example of how these theories can be applied to real cases of translation to demonstrate the introduction of new elements can be found in recent studies such as that of Fabbretti which have found that openness towards Japanese interference and a lack of complete acclimation to English standards is a feature of scanlation of Japanese media that is driven in part by a reaction against the predominance of English-speaking culture, and a desire to immerse oneself in a different cultural context (Fabbretti, 2017, p. 469). Schules, for instance, draws from Sarah Thornton's concept of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), discussing how the reward for partaking in the effort of learning the other cultural context is respect within the fandom (Schules 2012, p. 109-110).

In examining fan communities for translated written works, we are dealing with an audience that is engaging with the foreign in a way that is mediated by whatever techniques are or are not used to deal with this foreign encounter. In the translation of Japanese media today, the growing interest of the corporations owning the franchises tends to lead towards a

domesticating approach, the aim of which is to reduce friction when the new text is brought to the receiving culture and thus target the largest possible demographic in the new market. This approach is 'localization'. For instance, a localization manager for 8-4 Ltd describes how they make female characters less 'whiny' or more 'independent' because the depiction of female characters in Japanese texts 'don't really fit in English' (Mandiberg 2015, p. 295). Aside from cultural changes such as these, texts are also subjected to alterations that make them fit into standard stylistic norms of texts. An example from an interview with members of Sega's localization team makes this philosophy clear; referring to writers on the team who edit the text after the translation:

> So they come in and and they make all this dry, translated text, some of it is already funny because the original intention was set up to be funny, but they come in and they make it hot. They find and insert all the funniness, they find the stuff to go in there and go "Oh we can make this more serious or I'm gonna make you cry, so I'm going to write this really cry-worthy stuff right here." So they play that up. That's the way our company does this. (Khan 2019)

In other words, the text can be made more serious, funny or sad depending on the aesthetic sensibilities of the localization team, which will, of course, tend to coincide with the general trends of their literary system. In general, the trend is towards writing that will be instantly understandable and consumable with minimal challenge or discomfort; another example is changing a character's udon preferences to pizza preferences: only 'five people in the West would get it', and it is unacceptable from a commercial standpoint to have any elements that the audience does not 'get' immediately (Docherty 2021). Finally, localization defines itself in opposition to an impoverished notion of 'translation' that ignores most translation theory and practice; for localization professionals such those interviewed by Docherty, translation, unlike the dynamic changes of localization, is reduced to 'direct' word-for-word translations (Docherty 2021). However, as the existence of debates such as foreignization vs domestication demonstrates itself, there has never been such a literalist consensus in translation; another example being the division of translation into metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation first expounded by John Dryden, in which direct literalism is only one direction translation can be taken (Currell, 2006, pp 160).

Having demonstrated the characteristics of localization, it will be clear that from the perspective of polysystems theory, it tends towards entrenching the existent repertoire and

cultural grammar of the receiving culture while erasing the foreign in both stylistic and cultural senses; my method, in order to demonstrate that yuri fandom has been exposed to an alternative form of translation that does carry over Japanese influence across cultural borders, will thus to be demonstrate examples of foreignising strategies and ways in which texts, being received as foreign, have made the readers reflect on their own cultural context. Examples of such strategies are not uncommon in the yuri fandom because much of the available texts are fan translations, which as products explicitly of a sub culture and without a profit motive, are more capable of producing less 'accessible' translations. An example can be found in Nornes influential essay on 'abusive subtitling' where he praises the 90s anime fan subtitling community for introducing the foreign to the audience through the use of creative methods (such as differently coloured subtitles), and the use of explanatory footnotes (Nornes 1999). Such an approach is abhorred by the localization industry, which as explored above prefers the instantly understandable to explanatory notes. While Nornes thusly held fan production as a possible site of 'abusive', innovative translation strategies, the number of academics who explicitly focus on the intersection between fan cultures and translation is minimal; rather, translation is taken, perhaps, as a given. The article by Lee referenced below, for instance, focuses on fan translation on insofar as it is a 'deviant' practice that seems tied to piracy and other illegal practices. This legal question is one possible reason for the relative lack of such research, another is perhaps that both fan studies and translation studies are young fields. In general, I have taken my cue from Nornes in trying to view fan translations not just as dissident in a legal sense but in terms of their relationship to regimes of translation, and in doing so, have attempted to form this bridge between translation and fans studies myself. For instance, by providing examples of how the cultural intermixtures resulting from fan translations are a way in which the transnational, transference of discrete things from one unified culture to another, becomes the transcultural in fan spaces, an idea recently advocated by Morimoto (Morimoto, 2018, p. 286). I also emphasise the 'communal' nature of both the fan experience (when mediated through fan forums and other sites) in general and in particular how this affects fan-translations, as opposed to the more isolated act of 'official translators'; this communal emphasis can also be seen in fan studies work such as that of Noppe (Noppe, 2010, p 135).

Other research on scanlations demonstrates that conflicts between fans and official translation are not an uncommon occurrence in the field of Japanese media. For instance, Dybała's work on Polish reception of Dragon Ball Z manga translations demonstrates how fans have reacted

negatively to domesticating strategies such as the changing of proper nouns (Dybała, 2020, pps 59-60). Research about scanlation reveals that the goals of scanlators can include deliberate attempts to broaden the English-language medium's repertoire through introducing foreign elements (Fabbretti, 2019, pp. 50). Furthermore, the same case study also showed a scanlator making copious use of notes and other paratexts to explain Japanese social and cultural background that affected their translation strategies (ibid, pp. 53-58). More specifically, Fabbretti has also addressed how culturally specific elements present opportunities for scanlators, who can show off their cultural knowledge and research while also directly reminding the readers of their own work and presence; in addition, they also note that readers tended to favour the usage of translation notes (Fabbretti, 2016, pps 99-101). Another study of the scanlation scene noted the integration of globally spread scanlators with the broader community and their generally 'missionary' motive to spread manga, while also being in ambivalent conflict with 'official' translations (Lee, 2009, pp 1014-1019). A final article by Fabbretti suggests that this global dimension provides an additional incentive for scanlations to be foreignising: Japanese cultural influence was acceptable to readers as a clear element of the original, whereas excessive 'Americanization' was alienating to the many members of the community not in America (Fabbretti, 2017, pp 467-478).

Hence, assimilationist readings are those that seek to apply the existing culturally contingent strategies to foreign text, and to draw from them the same kind of meaning that would be drawn from a Western text; they judge the text according to how easily this can be accomplished, with those texts that prove most resistant to the literary system being rejected. In contrast, transcultural readings are those to commit to a laborious reading, which does not attempt to assimilate the foreign text but to understand it in its own context and to draw from it in a way informed by this understanding; only the latter, in my account, will produce the neocultural phenomenon and new ways of seeing that are the result of resistant texts being read by a reader willing to allow their pre-conceptions to be resisted and challenged.

Instances of assimilationist reading can be identified by references to frames of understanding that refuse to engage with the cultural background of the text or any other feature that challenges the existing standards of the literary system. In particular, one aspect that features heavily in assimilationist readings is, to borrow from Sedgwick, a 'paranoid' reading style. In particular, they often rely heavily on what Sedgwick calls a 'faith in exposure', a belief that exposing some problem or hidden violence in the text is in itself the solving of this problem

(Sedgick, 2003, 138-140). In particular, the 'exposure' of aspects considered homophobic or otherwise problematic in terms of representation to one reader is often presented as reason enough for rejection of a text. Identification of such cases are identification of how culturally contingent understandings of what 'healthy' depictions of minorities are and the necessity of such depictions are universalized so that all texts that fail to hew to these standards are rejected. Other examples of assimilationist tendencies include rejection of texts that are considered too 'strange' or 'weird' (according to dominant modes of understanding), or complaints that a text is too difficult to understand because of the required cultural background.

Instances of transcultural readings can be identified according to several criteria. For instance, the usage of foreign terms, when paired with a considered understanding of their meaning, can be a sign of the labour required for a transcultural reading; the identification of the cultural meaning of certain aspects of texts to explain otherwise strange elements is similar. The explicit usage or preference for aspects considered foreign is another key element; for instance, some posters in Dynasty will announce that the way yuri deals with sexual scenes or gender presentation appeals to them because of its difference to what they are used to. Such instances show the 'poaching' of foreign aspects and their adaption towards the reader's general viewpoint, which can be a neocultural phenomenon. Also, transcultural readers, when creating new works inspired by their reading, will use 'foreignising' adaption that maintains, in creative imitation, foreign elements which mix with 'native' ones to produce neocultural texts.

In order to demonstrate this, I will focus on elements of both the texts and the fan response that demonstrates that such an approach has been taken, leading to readings of yuri texts that are transcultural. Examples of such elements will include: the usage of loan words taken from the texts, such as '*tsundere'* in both text and fan discussion thereof; the usage of translation notes that draw attention to aspects of the foreign within the translation; and comparisons of these texts to similar Western fiction using rhetorical strategies that draw on the aspects of the foreign that are made explicit through such strategies. In addition, how all of these are reflected in original yuri works made by them, such as the visual novels. All of these will help to demonstrate how the yuri fan community, as one system within the broader polysystem of Western literature, has had Japanese cultural grammar and repertoire brought

to it by the use of foreignising strategy: how they have been taken yuri and in turn be taken by it.

The following segments will elaborate my argument in the following way: the literature review will firstly examine writing on yuri with a particular focus on how arguments have been advanced for its political value or lack thereof, but that, in particular with regard to Anglophone audiences, little attention has been paid to their reception of the text; rather these arguments have focused on the critics own interpretations. The chapter on the fan community will explore the conflict between assimilationist and transcultural readings within the frame of consuming yuri, while the final chapter on visual novels focuses on how they are the product of the neocultural phenomenon I identified: works that can only have been created in a mediate space, bearing elements 'taken home' by transcultural readers but also shaped by their existing cultural grammar and needs.

Literature Review

In general, there has been a dearth of Western research and attention for the yuri genre, hence the number of academic sources that can be reviewed here is limited. Research on the reception and production of yuri in the West is particularly sparse. Hence after those sources I have used on reading and fan culture in general, I will focus primarily on reviewing firstly those sources that analyse yuri itself in its original Japanese context before turning to those sources that look at it from a specifically Western viewpoint. In particular, the work of certain people such as Erica Friedman presents an example of what Jenkins calls an 'aca-fan', a fan also engaged academically with the object of their fandom (Jenkins 2011), in Friedman's case through her *Okazu* blog, one of the oldest online English-language sources on the genre. Thus this review will conclude by analysing not just the arguments of such individuals but also the way in which they participant in and attempt to shape general and fan discourse.

In terms of fan readings and culture, the work of Henry Jenkins is undeniably highly important. In particular, a concept of Jenkins that I see my work here as expanding upon is that of 'pop cosmopolitanism'. This is the tendency towards developing cultural knowledge based on pop culture that is spread through new media, a good example of which would be online scanlations, and which 'opens consumers to alternative cultural perspectives' in Jenkins' words (Jenkins, 2006, p. 156). My argument expands on this observation in several

ways: firstly, Jenkins observes differing strategies regarding how 'deodorized' or stripped of specifically Japanese content media is in the West, neglecting fan-created content such as scanlations which I focus on. Secondly, Jenkins notes that while some audiences violently reject foreign cultural artefacts, others grow fond of them precisely on account of their foreign flavour; Jenkins suggests that young people are more likely to veer the latter way. The goal of this thesis is precisely to identify what specific strategies to deal with texts leads to these different responses within the same community, rather than generalising based on age or other factors. Another aspect of his work that I draw upon is his characterisation of fans as 'textual poachers' who take from a text whatever things they find useful in their own context; with this formulation, it becomes possible to begin to establish why certain fans take entirely different things from texs. Jenkins' work remains a valuable starting point for any research into fan communities.

Dealing more specifically with translation strategies and their responses within fan communities is the very relevant and thoughtful work of Douglas Schules. In his thesis on anime fansubs as ludic practice and his article *How To Do Things With Fan Subs*, he draws as do I a comparison between some fan translator strategies and the foreignization theorized by Venuti. Futhermore, he establishes how within fan communities, there is a desire to gain cultural knowledge from engagement with foreign popular media, and how the degree to which one gains such knowledge allows them a greater degree of what he terms subcultural capital, with those who attain mastery of Japanese language and culture more highly esteemed than others, in particular those who translate for others. Schules also provides a notable cautionary note, namely that 'Japanese culture' should not be examined naively, given the deliberate construction of a unified culture in the Meiji Era and the pursuit of a cultural soft power strategy by the Japanese government as embodied by 'Cool Japan'.

The most useful general overview of the genre as it stands in Japan is undoubtedly Maser's 2013 dissertation *Beautiful and Innocent*: *Female Same-Sex Intimacy in the Japanese Yuri Genre*. The overall argument of this thesis is that the yuri genre is created, even more than most genres, through fan discourse and discussion. For Maser, the political import of yuri as a representation of homosexuality is blunted by this: the readers of Japanese yuri are for her interested in 'pleasure not politics' (Maser, 2013, p. 159). Being focused on Japanese readers, Maser's thesis does not answer how Anglophone readers, living in a different environment as regards 'lesbian' texts, might respond to yuri. The way in which this transcultural movement

heightened the submerged conflict between pleasure and politics is a key aspect of the Anglophone reception of yuri that can be highlighted by Maser's work on the Japanese response.

Another useful, more specialized work on the genre is Wellington's 'Finding the Power of the Erotic in Japanese yuri Manga'. This thesis, from 2015, focuses on arguing that the specialized yuri aimed at providing a more explicit sexual experience compared to regular yuri manga provides access to a 'powerfully female-centric imaginative world' for its female readers (Wellington 2013, p. 3). While appreciating Erica Friedman's contribution to discussion of yuri in the West, Wellington also names her as a chief example of the kind of negative assessment of explicit yuri that she aims to disprove; such critics, she says, fail to see beyond the lack of (at least surface-level) 'political engagement' and 'concern for the social reality of female-female love' to the imaginative possibilities embodied by sexually explicit yuri. Reading yuri in the tradition of the 'dream space' opened up in particular since the 1970s by experimental *shōjo* manga, Wellington criticises the failure of critics to recognize that yuri can also show forms of female sexuality 'beyond the realistic depiction of lesbian life' (Wellington 2013, p. 29). A key element where the debate Wellington opens between herself and Friedman can be enhanced is the focus both place on the original Japanese text. Both examine texts in terms of their 'problematicness' in the case of Friedman or subversive potential in Wellington's. By focusing instead on reception of the texts, a greater understanding can be gleaned of how they actually function for readers.

Another overview with valuable insights, though less comprehensive than Maser's longer text, is Nagaike's 'The Sexual and Textual Politics of Japanese Lesbian Comics'. In particular, Nagaike's analysis is notable for drawing attention to how yuri can be viewed through the prism of Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality', connecting this to reader responses by noting how Japanese readers of yuri found their sexuality affirmed (if lesbian) or challenged (if not) by their engagement with yuri. In focusing on how yuri provides a space for female homosociality Nagaike displays how the political import of yuri can be derived from not just from elements of the text itself but interpretations thereof, in particular those which draw upon specifically Japanese cultural elements such as *shōjo* identity; hence a transcultural reading that uncovers these elements would allow for foreign readers of yuri to engage with its subversive potential more effectively than by utilising pre-existing conceptions of homosexuality.

Another more specific aspect of yuri was identified in 'Yuri Japanese Animation: Queer Identity and Ecofeminist Thinking' by Thompson in 2010. Developing her thoughts based on anime rather than manga, Thompson notably draws attention to her own identity as a woman who loves women, and develops an argument that yuri often shows queer gender performances that can be seen in the light of Western queer theory such as Butler. Writing as an Anglophone aca-fan, she focuses on how outside of 'slice of life' settings, yuri subverts patriarchal understandings of women and their ties to nature (Thompson, 2010, p. 71). Given her focus on Japanese culture's view of women, Thompson's call to 'explore other possibilities outside the sphere of Western patriarchal forces' (Thompson, 2010, p. 74) through readings of yuri suggests the possibility of the kind of transcultural reading this thesis proposes.

While these texts are provide valuable insights on the Japanese genre as a collection of texts, Yeung's 'Alternative sexualities/intimacies? Yuri fan communities in the Chinese context' was a direct inspiration for the current thesis in the way it centres a fan community and thus provides a way of seeing Maser's theories of the importance of fan discourse for the genre demonstrated via a case study of the Chinese community. Yeung's findings show that the readers of yuri in her case (on the large online community Yamibo) identified as non-heterosexual women in the main, but had an aversion aspects of Chinese LGBT culture such as butch/femme dynamics, that was inspired by their interaction with yuri. Yeung categorizes the Chinese fan community as 'rebellious' both in this sense and also because the Chinese state places importance on maintaining heterosexuality and normative relationships. Other factors identified by Yeung, such an appreciation for yuri relationships especially when they are ambiguous (Yeung, 2017, p. 77) are notable for being the sites of debate in the Western fan community. Hence, Yeung's analysis of the Chinese fan community provides a useful and rich source of comparison to the Western fan community, in showing how the state of the receiving culture affects how cross-cultural transmission and reception of texts and genres takes place, as well as demonstrating ways of reading and analysing online fan communities as a source. In particular, the usage of yuri as a source of alternative viewpoints and new ways of seeing suggests the possibilities that transcultural readings can have in providing a neocultural space: the readers on Yamibo sought to redefine relationships in a way inspired by readings yuri, and encouraged each other through the forum by supporting a common reading.

Moving onto a figure who has been important for the Western fan community of yuri, the work of Erica Friedman represents a viewpoint that is particularly Western. In particular, a key aspect of Friedman's view of yuri, both in her articles such as 'On Defining "Yuri"' and on her blog, is that the genre must be split between yuri itself and what she calls LGBTQ manga. On this view yuri is 'lesbian content without lesbian identity' and thus manga with the latter is necessarily in a different category. The lack of lesbian identity means, as noted by Wellington, the lack of realistic depictions of social pressure and self-identification by the characters as lesbians directly. Friedman's reviews of specific yuri texts such as *Yagate Kimi ni Naru* view them in terms of these lens, seeking to assimilate them to her own standards, culturally contingent, of lesbian identity. This thesis contributes to the writing on yuri by focusing on fan reception as reflected through cultural differences; whereas Friedman is an example of a reader who seeks to read yuri pressing her own standards onto it, and others such as Wellington and Nagaike have examined the subversive potential of yuri as seen in its own context, the main point here is to see how this potential has been harnessed by fans willing to enter that other context.

Section II: How Yuri Is Read: The Western Fan Community

Firstly I will explain my choice of texts. The main resource I use as representative of fan discourse in this thesis, alongside blogs and articles, are the forum pages on the website *Dynasty-Scans*, also known as *Dynasty Reader,* henceforth referred to as Dynasty here. Dynasty hosts 'scanlations', or translations of manga based on scanned images, as well as forum discussions around those scanlations and general topics; while Dynasty is not exclusively a yuri site, most scanlations are generally of yuri texts. Dynasty is a good choice for several reasons: firstly, the presence of demographic information provided by the site staff allows me confirm that it is close in these terms to the general readership of the genre, as far as the latter can be estimated based on more general yuri demographics. Secondly, the format of the forum itself is helpful as in addition to general forum topics, there are also specific forum discussions for each individual work. This allows for information on how audiences respond to specific aspects of certain yuri series, such as taboo subject matter, unusual art style, and so on. This means that specific topics can be highlighted based on the responses for a work that deals with it. Thirdly, the size of the forum is quite high, with the number of pages of discussion for very popular works such as *Bloom Into You* reaching into the hundreds. This means that the amount of posts available for analysis is very high, and the

high activity additionally means that there is a diversity of viewpoints to be found in response to any particular matter. Fourthly, the structure of how posting works is suitable to an online academic analysis in that old discussion posts are left up and not deleted or archived. As long as the site itself persists, it should be possible to confirm my selections by searching the forums. Finally, the anonymous nature of the site, while posing challenges in that it can be difficult to determine what kind of person a particular comment was left by, also helps in circumventing possible ethics concerns. Thus, it was an easy choice to focus on Dynasty. In addition to it, I have also used sources from other sites that are a part of fandom, whether they are explicitly fan-run yuri blogs, or fandom-adjacent such as *Anime Feminist*, for instance, whose contributors are participants in online discourse, which is inseparable from fan discourse, about anime in general. These sources are useful for providing more long-form and organised articles about the genre, as opposed to forum comments which tend towards being short and often reliant on the context of the entire discussion to make full sense. Since scanlations are provided as they are translated and by necessity lag behind Japanese releases, two phenomena occur within the discussions; firstly, one can see speculation and theory-crafting occur in real-time, sometimes with large gaps in release filled with such discussion. Secondly, it isn't unknown for a reader of the Japanese text to also post in these forums; occasionally they will provide plot details (using the spoiler tag function) as requested by others impatient to know the development of the plot. In addition it should be noted that, in addition to fan discourse on existing Japanese texts, a form of reception would be the creation of fanfiction. While this is not dealt with in this thesis due to a relative paucity of responses to them and due to visual novels having more aspects open to analysis, there is a large corpus of Western-produced fanfiction based on Japanese yuri, which may form the basis for future research.

Secondly before moving on to the main analysis, I will explain my usage of the term 'Western' to refer to the fan community and visual novels I examine. The concept of a coherent 'Western' tradition has been criticized, for example by David Graeber, as reflective more of wishful thinking from conservatives like Samuel Huntington than a real tradition (Graeber 2007, p. 334-335). I do not commit myself a view of a concrete Western culture that is somehow separated or unique from separate cultures; indeed, the core of my argument contradicts such a stance. In this thesis the term 'Western' is reflective of the following: firstly, it is shorthand for anyone who uses English, whether as first or second language, to participate in online fan communities as reader or creator; one does therefore not have to be

from any specific country. The term is secondly reflective of a complex of concerns that relate to specific relevant topics in Anglophone nations today: the issue of 'representation' in media, of the idea of queer/LGBT fiction. These concerns are not rooted in an abstract idea of a 'Western tradition', but rather in the material realities of life in these countries in particular for minorities, and are the concerns that are taken to the texts and contribute to the interpretations thereof. Hence 'Western' here refers more to a snapshot of contemporary concerns among the Anglosphere people who form the majority of readers I have studied than to any such 'clash of civilizations' type concept. Finally, as will be seen in some of the quotations from readers, the distinction between the texts and 'western standards' is a dichotomy present in their own readings; for better or worse, the idea of 'Western' culture is present in this discourse as a part of how foreign texts are approached, and to avoid the term would be an avoidance of this fact. Furthermore, I primarily use the term Western in the following segments to emphasise that the focus is on cultural context and culturally driven responses, hence my terms trans-cultural and neo-cultural; the term Anglophone is used by me as a way to emphasize the usage of English as a lingua franca for online communities – including by some who, while engaging online with native English speakers, are themselves not, and this category would include English as second language speakers from places such as India or Indonesia who are questionably 'Western'.

With these discussions over with, the first aspect of Dynasty to understand is how the norms of scanlation have contributed to the potential for transcultural readings on Dynasty by providing translations that import Japanese terms and cultural features, tending towards the foreignising. An indication that foreignising techniques have been adopted in how yuri is presented to Dynasty readers is that many of the terms used for common archetypes and tropes familiar to yuri readers, such as *tsundere* or *yandere*, are borrowed as loanwords, a practise that the yuri fanbase shares in common with many anime and manga fandoms. The terms *Tachi* and *Neko*, which refer to the 'assertive' and 'passive' partners in a couple respectively, are also used 'as-is'. On the other hand, an example of a common term that has been borrowed from the Western context might be 'useless lesbian', which can often be seen online discourse outside of yuri; within yuri, the useless lesbian will fail to pick up on signs that another girl is attracted to her, overthink plans, and otherwise fail, comically or dramatically, to act out her role as lesbian. It is notable that despite the presence of the term *donkan* in several manga titles, which has a similar meaning (though not referring to lesbians in particular), it has not been adopted for use; this demonstrates that the audiences picks

which terms to adopt. Other examples include jokes and discussion based on the knowledge of the relative presence of certain settings or character archetypes within the genre as a whole: whether it be Class S, modelled after the original *Shōjo* texts that inspired Yuri in the early 1900s, *one-loli* about the relationship between a girl and an older girl or woman, or even *rezu fuuzoku* yuri about the lesbian sex industry, there are a number of Yuri 'sub-genres' with their own common traits. For instance, it isn't surprising that all-girls schools, which have been present since the origins of the genre, are common. A commenter on the page for *If You Could See Love* noted the common trope of a girl deciding to go to such a school specifically to avoid romance, only to be surprised by the girl-girl relationships that prosper there. Thus it is a characteristic of the yuri fandom in general that a certain level of knowledge regarding the cultural background of yuri can be taken for granted. Commenters use this knowledge to construct theories of the texts that are specifically oriented around this knowledge: for instance, the following comment in responding to a translated fan art image:

> It looks to me like the artist isn't trying to portray tribbing; Yukiho seems to be grinding against Alisa's pubic bone, and Alisa is just into that, rather than specifically getting off. (My current working theory is that the whole Japanese cultural construct of sexuality, including the whole seme/uke, tachi/neko thing, means that Japanese creators are a lot more comfortable with only one partner getting actively pleasured than Western ones do.) (SSincere, 2020).

The usage of tachi and neko can be exemplified by the following comment with regard to the manga Comprehensive Tovarisch:

> For those of you unfamiliar with it, it's like Shiramine [A character from another yuri manga] had all her worst qualities but Yurine [Shiramine's romantic interest] was more of a neko than a tachi. (Marion Diabolito, 2019).

In which the reader can be seen using their knowledge of these categories to compare yuri texts to each other through using such terms. Hence readers of yuri can be seen not only gaining knowledge of tropes and terms with the aid of such scanlations, but also productively utilising them in their readings of the texts themselves; this is one way such scanlations help to produce the possibility of transcultural readings.

These loan words would mean little if they were assimilated to be identical in meaning to existing Western terms; however, it is clear that yuri readers do understand them as describing different things. For instance, the forum thread 'Why do people like to have a top and a bottom in yuri?' received several responses that drew on the 'neko/tachi' dichotomy. Respondents drew upon yuri media such as the above manga to demonstrate that yuri was more 'vague' on the subject of strictly defined roles in a relationship, with Nevri having the strongest opinion that "I don't. One of reasons I like yuri to begin with is that there are no set roles in bed", giving this vagueness as a reason to enjoy yuri itself. Here the basic ingredients for a transcultural reading can be identified in discussions such as this: the measured understanding of culturally specific terms and their meaning, as well as an appreciation for what these can mean for the reader despite their foreignness. Thus the usage of these terms in translation helps yuri readers to appreciate cultural difference in a way that sets the stage for transcultural reading.

Examples of the impact of the heavy role of fan translation in the yuri fandom can still be found often in discussion threads. I suggest that the presence of an active fan attitude, and desire to compare translations to the original, demonstrates that while most fan translations were not theoretically grounded in an idea of foreignising translation, they nevertheless achieved the goal of producing an audience that, instead of passively consuming translations and assuming a perfect transmission of meaning, remains aware of the artifice of translation. For instance, fans on DynastyScans can be seen discussing various translation choices. Consider the following comment by Kirakazumi, commenting on one such fan-produced scanlation:

> The phrase is "kimashitawa!" directly meaning "it's here!" often said by people when their favorite ships interacts in a more-than-friends way. Notice the end of that phrase contains the word "tawa" hence "tower". I'm guessing the original line had a "tower" pun after the "kimashita" part (as that's the whole word, "wa" is the added part) that made much more sense in Japanese. (kirakazumi 2021)

The possibility that translations are flawed, or that something might have made more 'sense in Japanese', is kept in mind and commenters actively consider possibilities about the language. This is contrary to the attitudes prevailing in 'official' translations. An article from 2015 on Anime News Network, typical of changing views that are trending towards a single 'official' translation, bemoaned the tendency of anime fans to criticise translations, and

suggested that even the mere existence of fan translations is 'frustrating' to professionals, whose 'legitimate… painstakingly proof-read' translations, the suggestion seems to be, ought to be above the criticism of fans (Sevakis 2015). This fan attitude naturally results in searching for Japanese language, figures of speech, and cultural references on the part of the audience. In addition, fan translations of Japanese popular media have a long tradition of translation notes that also call attention to the translation's status as a mediation and which, as noted before, in anime fan translation were praised by subtitle scholar Nornes as an alternative to conventional film subtitles (Nornes 31-32). Indeed, scanlations such as those on Dynasty often choose to retain the original title, thus inscribing the text even before it is read as a particularly Japanese text, and often paratext (such as the 'thank you for reading' page at the end of a manga) is often left untranslated as well. The fact that fan translations do not claim a 'definitive' status as an English rendition, and that they therefore encourage a greater participation in the foreign culture than standard localisation practice, means that the Western yuri community was steeped in a subculture that increased awareness of those aspects of yuri that were foreign, whereas a localisation practice may have attempted to manipulate these texts to fit them to Western expectations; thus the nature of the yuri community as one highly reliant especially in the past on fan translation, again demonstrates how this aspect of the fandom primed the audience for transcultural readings by giving them the tools and viewpoint necessary to see the cultural differences the acceptance and knowledge of which are at the heart of such a reading.

An example of how the two reading strategies can result in strong disagreements among readers is the highly charged issue of yuri's debt to Class S. For assimilationist readers, Class S influence and presence is an archaic limitation that ought to be rejected as it cannot easily fit with reading yuri through a Western lens; transcultural readers, while accepting the limitations of Class S as a product of a more highly patriarchal era in Japan's history, nonetheless see more value in engaging with it. The assimilationist viewpoint can be seen in numerous comments on Dynasty Scans; in such comments, Class S is reduced to the cliché of 'just a phase' as in the following comment:

> ^ Tbh I don't think we'll ever get a true clarification going forward since most yuri anime are made that way, mostly because Japan is terrible when it comes to accepting the idea that

A) Girls that like other girls actually exist, and

B) Their truly, and I can't stress this enough, archaic "class S" or "it's just a phase" mindset should be abolished. (Rina 2016)

Class S is thus regarded as fundamentally compromised by its historical position as product of a homophobic society, as seen in this comment by Nezchan:

But Class S is *blatantly* saying that teen girls don't have real feelings or emotions for each other, and any romantic inclinations they have are false and temporary. It's an idealized insult writ large, based on a homophobic society finding a way to explain away girls finding each other attractive. (Nezchan 2015)

And:

Well I don't really care if Class S is part of Yuri or not … the fact is that the concept of Class S itself is complete bullshit, it's basically a glorified homophobic story to teach girls they're not gay and marrying a man is their only happiness, so fuck shit like Class S, they might have historic and literally value but besides that they're worthless piece of shit that shouldn't have place in our modern society, same for arranged marriage that a lot of countries still do, I *really hate* those two things, sigh... (Thiaguinho-sama 2015)

As can be seen, the assimilationist way of reading Class S stories sees the lack of 'lesbian' content in the context of the reader's own system, and rejects the genre wholesale. However, these comments are not unopposed; other readers, adopting an attitude based on understanding Class S more fully in its own context, were able to extract from it values and potential that the above assimilationist approach misses, leading them towards a transcultural reading.

For instance, the user Kirin posted a long comment in which they established their firm understanding of the cultural context of Class S, including its usage by lesbian authors not to reproduce the homophobia of society at the time, but to fill it with subversive content, a more historically informed judgment than the above reductions to 'a homophobic society', as if society itself had written the stories. In a sophisticated transcultural reading, while accepting the presence of 'gay until graduation' tropes, they expressed enthusiasm for modern Class S

influence that continued its themes in a new context, giving a specific example of modern Class S that surpasses such clichés:

> As angsty as they might be, Class S stories are some of my favourites, particularly more modern ones that aren't bound to comply with 'Gay Till Graduation' tropes and can go all in on exploring their themes (a story that does this to great effect is the *Flowers* VN series, which actually has a supportive lesbian nun who has taken a vow of chastity, and constantly wonders if she's made the right choice while also pining for another one of the nuns at their school). (Kirin 2020)

A specific example of how these two approaches result in incompatible readings of texts can be found in the discussion between two users, lady_freyja and Nezchan, regarding the manga *Hanjuku Joshi*. For lady_freyja, who hyperlinked to a 2010 article (*The Sexual and Textual Politics of Japanese Lesbian Comics)* by Kazumi Nagaike on Class S and yuri and identified yuri in particular as not simply 'lesbian' in a Western understanding, *Hanjuku Joshi* continued the trend identified by Nagaike of yuri exploring *Shōjo* identity:

> This idea of "staying shōjo" is what we found in *Hanjuku Joshi*, the story of the "immature women", it's the normal evolution of the class S tropes, now that women can more easily escape heterosexual marriage. (lady_freyja 2015)

Like Kirin, lady_freyja celebrated modern Class S influence as a way of continuing this legacy of *Shōjo* identity in a more tolerant society:

> The modern Japenese homosexuality isn't only influenced by our western standards, but is also influenced by the past homosexuality in Japan, from the pre-Meiji period, and –for the lesbian– from the class S too. (lady_freyja 2015)

.To which Nezchan responded:

> Yes, lesbians in a culture can be affected by homophobic tropes from the culture they live in, same as anybody else in that culture. I don't think anyone would deny that. (Nezchan 2015)

For Nezchan, Class S is inherently homophobic and must therefore be lacking in value; influence from it can be dismissed as the unfortunate mistake of lesbians in a culture unable

to escape from its homophobic tropes. Hence, in their assimilationist reading of *Hanjuku Joshi*, they cannot accept this influence, which would complicate assimilation of the text to modern Western understanding of lesbian sexuality and representations thereof. As such, assimilationist Nezchan accuses lady_freyja of poor reading and comprehension:

> Wait, have you *read* Hanjuku Joshi? That's not what it says at all.

> This is not supported by the actual story.

In Nezchan's view, *Hanjuku Joshi* cannot be representative of Class S influence:

> Hanjuku Joshi, if anything, is a denial of Class S. Not an evolution or continuation of it. It's blatantly stating that these two couples actually are lesbian.

This is a limitation of assimilationist reading; the intertextual connections between texts are understood in terms of what is easily assimilated to the reader's context. Class S, for a reader focused on explicit lesbian identification and representation, cannot be easily assimilated into their own context; therefore it is rejected, and this rejection is so wholesale that it is projected onto Japanese yuri authors as well. Transcultural reading's focus on understanding cultural context allowed Kirin and lady_freyja to see webs of influence that Nezchan's reading obliged them to deny. To understand Class S's positive modern potential, such as the possibility to maintain subversive *Shōjo* identity through adulthood, requires an engagement with the cultural context, as can be seen through lady_freyja's application of Nagaike's theory to specific yuri manga. This example of Class S demonstrates how a transcultural reading gives readers tools to appreciate intertextual relations and features of texts based on the deeper engagement with cultural background, and how this is denied to assimilationist readers, resulting in two incompatible readings.

Another aspect of yuri that demonstrates differences between these ways of reading is the concept of representation, and in particular the socially positive or negative consequences of 'good' or 'bad' representation. Yuri readers exhibit a great sensitivity towards this issue; the degree to which it has become a flashpoint for conflict, in a similar way to the issue of Class S, demonstrates that it is another issue in which different reading strategies can develop in incompatible ways. On the one hand, positive representation of lesbians or other marginalized groups is often praised by yuri readers. For instance, in a discussion of the autobiographical

manga *The Private Report on My Lesbian Experience With Loneliness*, commenters focused on the depiction of mental health issues and the positive value of such representation for others dealing with such issues:

> While I can't say I have been through something like this, I can definitely feel the amount of effort the author put into visualizing her emotions and showcasing them to others in this story. This manga is quite a heartfelt tale, and when you know the backstory behind it, it makes it all the more painful. In Japan, talking about mental health issues is not a common thing, and to see an author come out with a tale of this sort is a wonderful thing and I hope it helps other people going through similar issues find something. (Nosebleed 2016).

However, more often, in particular as most yuri manga is not autobiographical in this way, the assumption that representation must be 'helpful' in this way leads to rejection of texts that are read as having either not enough or the wrong type of representation. This can be simple annoyance, such as the following comment regarding the manga *Kaijuu-iro no Shima* in which a commenter was dismayed that the dark-skinned protagonist was simply tanned:

> This is pretty interesting, only thing, i was kinda happy to see that there was a brown protagonist, but then got disappointed when I saw the tan lines, why do japanese artists do that, let brown characters exist without having them end up just being tan, god damnit ahhhggg. (liito, 2021)

In this case, multiple other commenters noted that tanned characters are a trope within Japanese fiction, using their knowledge of these conventions to explain and justify an element of Japanese fiction that could otherwise be judged as above for a lack of ethnic diversity, as in this direct response to the above comment:

> They're in a southern island of Japan. Asian people, including Japanese people, can vary skin tone extremely heavily based on sun exposure. There's also genetics at play as the southern islanders have a lot of Ryukyu blood in them which results in naturally darker skin tone even when not tanned. It's used to indicate whether someone is "country girl" or "city girl" as well in Japanese fiction. (ergzay, 2021).

However, often the feelings evoked by the topic representation in yuri are much more intense. For instance, characters who seemed to readers to embody the trope of the 'predatory lesbian'

were often rejected on this basis. For instance, multiple comments on the manga adaption of a light novel entitled *A* Yuri *Story About a Girl Who Insists It's Impossible For Two Girls to Get Together Completely Falling Within 100 Days* felt that the premise of the story was uncomfortable or problematic because of the resemblance to this trope and to conversion therapy:

> However, in reality I really don't support the idea of it being more okay to "convert" someone straight to gay than the other way around, because it pushes the harmful view of lesbians being predatory. Don't want to prove those straight girls who freak out and think lesbians are out to get them right. (hjyfun, 2021).

On the other hand, other posters again drew on cultural difference to explain why they lacked this negative response:

> That's a cultural issue, though. It is, sadly, a fact that high school-aged compensated dating is a very real thing in Japan . . . The next arc, showing Fuwa working at a lesbian bar as a 17-year-old, might be a bit more sketchy, but she's already stated that she's legally allowed to work there, but only until 10 pm and only if she doesn't handle alcohol. I presume she's working as a hostess, greeting guests and chatting with them if they request her company. This is another legal form of employment in Japan that, I'm sure, many people will find squicky and think is wrong, but it is a valid form of employment and looking down on the legal sex trade, especially the low end of it where there isn't any actual prostitution involved, is something that the Puritan founders of the USA would be ooooh so proud of! Right along with condemning gays and lesbians! There's not really any valid reason to do it. This isn't the TV hookers from 70s and 80s TV shows. It's entirely different. (zensunni, 2021)

As can be seen, not only does the poster point to cultural difference as a justification for the text's usage of sex work, but they also draw a comparison between the openness of this depiction and the assumption that such things are 'wrong', which for them is derived from American moral standards that are not valid. For this reader therefore, knowledge of cultural background allowed them to make a critique of the Western point of view wherein depiction of topics such as this evokes a viscerally negative response of 'squickyness'. Thus the response to this text demonstrates how a transcultural reading can allow readers to use foreign texts to develop or further their critique of their own cultural environment.

The example above shows that there are readings that examine texts for harmful views or depictions. An example of how this can lead to strong rejections of another reading can be seen in how commenters reacted to Erica Friedman's reading of *Bloom Into You*. Much like the negative responses to *A Yuri Story…,* her initial review of volume one of this story, a yuri schoolgirl romance, focused on her interpretation of the character of Touko as 'coercive', which she associates with tropes of predatory homosexuals; she also associated this with the manga's serialization in a magazine for adult men, reading the manga as enacting a standard 'male romantic lead plot' with a gender simply switched (Friedman 2017). In the Dynasty discussion on this review, several posters expressed scepticism about this review, with one describing it as the 'infamous Tou-kun [Touko] coerced Yuu review' (Gudetamago 2019). The most detailed response came from user Blastaar, who credited Friedman's 'blatant misreading' of the series with leading them to their own tendency towards more careful reading. Not only did they view Friedman as incorrectly reading the text itself, they also associated this with her ideological positions:

> At the risk of beating a dead horse, beyond the "coercion" canard (on reading the chapters carefully I discovered that *Yuu* was actually pretty aggressive with the (non-romantic) skinship), another major problem was Friedman's assertion that "She won't take no for answer" (about Yuu taking the campaign manager's job) showed that Touko was an abuser, because "no means no" . . . So calling Touko "coercive" is a very shoddy reading, but to invoke the "no means no" rule in regard to what happened in the story (the kind of thing that happens all the time in everyday life) is at best highly disingenuous—equating someone saying, "Aw, c'mon, it'll be fun" or "Please? This would really help me out!" with the bullying tactics of date rapists goes beyond just having a narrow critical perspective. (Blastaar 2019)

As can be seen, their close reading of the text, inspired by Friedman's 'mis-reading', involved identifying the character Yuu as aggressive with the 'skinship', which is a borrowed term from Japanese media referring to physical contact, showing some degree of cultural understanding is involved with their own reading. More importantly, however, they disagreed with Friedman's perceived forcing of the slogan 'no means no' into the text, and clarified later that Friedman's tendency towards explicitly lesbian characters was part of what caused her to later revise her review of the series to be more positive:

And I don't intend to be mean about this, but I suspect that the considerable attention to Sayaka (an out—to herself—lesbian) recently in the series and the LN helps align YagaKimi with her ideological preferences. (Those preferences are fine—everybody has them, and as general ideas I agree with them more than not. But I've gone to that site several times to get a take on series that she panned on grounds that were clearly contradicted by the text itself. So I don't go there anymore.) (Blastaar 2019).

While they do not express it in these terms, Blastaar's critique of Friedman's reading of the series identifies it as assimilationist: as negatively biased by her prioritising her culturally contingent ideological stances such as insisting on explicit lesbian representation, and results in a compromised reading strategy, like the one she used in reading *Bloom into You*, that produces mis-readings. Other user Gudetamago quoted above agreed with this general assessment:

For a long time since that infamous Tou-kun coerced Yuu review, she said that the only thing she liked about YagaKimi was Sayaka (& the adult couples), that's probably why she picked up the LN. I don't know if this new revelation will help improve her reading comprehension of the series going forward, seeing how long she's gone misreading the entire series. But I guess I should give her the benefit of the doubt too. (Gudetamago 2019).

In broad strokes, Friedman's overall strategy can be described as one that, in addition to being assimilationist, is also paranoid in the sense described by Sedgewick in her classic essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading'. This paranoid style was identified as a historical development in particular in queer critiques by Sedgewick. The emphasis on exposure of problematic elements, such as coercion in the example of *Bloom into You,* is an example of such a style, as is the emphasis on exposing yuri as written by or for males, which is assumed to be disqualifying. An example of another aspect of paranoid reading in Friedman's approach to yuri can be seen in her review of the visual novel *Flowers –Le Volume Sur Primtemps*. Because of main character Suoh's oversensitivity to other women, Friedman regard it as obvious that she was written by a man. In spite of not having read the novel fully, she sarcastically states 'Clearly, her painful past included a confession, although I never got that far.' (Friedman 2016). This corresponds to Sedgewick's observation that paranoid reading is anticipatory (Sedgewick 1995, 130); expecting a clichéd backstory allowed Friedman to pre-emptively assume the worst of the text. In another article expressing

her disagreements with James Welkerm who gave a talk on queer media in Japan, she drew the main dichotomy that characterizes her writing on yuri: a separation between 'lesbian narrative and fantasy girls love' (Friedman 2018). While she holds that yuri is an umbrella term which contains both, she is clear that she prefers the former, as it fulfils 'real-world representation needs'. Following the observation of Blastaar that her reading is rooted in ideological principles, ones that she openly admits such as a desire for more representation, it can be concluded that as a reader of yuri, Friedman pursues a strategy that assimilates yuri towards a particular, historically contingent paranoid style of criticism; the way in which texts such as *Bloom Into You* were easily dismissed by her (only initially in this case) demonstrates how, despite her stated desire to maintain both fantasy and realistic texts within yuri, that texts that fail to meet what she terms the representation needs of readers may be condemned on the basis of judgements that other yuri readers fail to see – that indeed seem to them to simply be misreadings altogether. Given that *Bloom Into You* was a major yuri text that received an anime adaption, light novel spinoffs, and was the subject of over 300 pages of discussion on Dynasty, far more than most titles, it is also clear that this may happen to yuri texts that are quite siginificant.

To a large degree, readings of yuri that oppose this kind of paranoid assimilationist strategy utilize the language of escapism. Part of the pleasure for these readers is thinking about the characters and their motivations from a purely 'in-universe' perspective, which tries to re-focus on Yuri as fiction. For instance, the following comment indicates some users sought to exclude such paranoid readings by mockery and establish a clear distinction of fiction and reality:

> welcome to the dynasty forums, the laughing stock of the internet,
> on the left we have the masochists that read controversial mangas to feel bad to then whine on the forums without adding anything to the conversation
> on the right we have the shamers that will accuse you of literal crimes for enjoying a drawing
> and on the corner there´s a few people that actually discuss the mangas and know the difference between fiction and reality (benja 2021)

In a discussion on *The Nice Neighbourhood Lady,* a yuri romance between a young girl and an older woman that fits into the category of *Onee-loli* yuri, a user noted that part of what

makes 'problematic' elements more acceptable for yuri readers is the usage of fantastic premise and behaviour:

> I think what struck a chord was how disturbingly realistic it is(it ticks oh so many boxes seen in real child abuse cases far too cleanly). This would probably be less controversial if it were more fantastic(eg, a firm indication that the kid started it unprompted). (Polycell, 2018)

The nature of fantasy in yuri readings, and how it relates to transcultural reading, is a key matter on account of how often such appeals are made to the fantastic, both as the source of enjoyment in yuri texts and as the reason why they do not have to be held to the paranoid or ideological standards of readers such as Friedman. An example from Japan itself can be found of how a fan's relationship to yuri can be reconciled with a queer position in real society. In her article in the magazine Eureka, Asako Makimura noted that she was against drawing a strict division between yuri and real lesbians, but not for reasons of representation. Rather, she argued that the kind of fantasy depicted in yuri is itself part of the desire of lesbian women like herself (Makimura 2014). Viewed in this way, consumption of yuri, especially by queer women themselves, can be seen as an opportunity for undertaking reparative readings as advanced by Sedgewick; while remaining aware of the kinds of social issues and representation needs that Friedman focuses on, yuri readers find nourishment in the fantasy of yuri precisely on account of its fantastic elements, and the mix of realistic characters with them.

With this view of yuri readings in mind, a connection can be drawn in the case of the Western yuri fanbase between this kind of reparative reading of yuri and transcultural reading. According to Felski, one of the uses of the literature that allows for new ways of seeing is the 'shock' that accompanies new literatures and genres (Felski 2008, 114-115). This is even more strongly the case with the introduction of foreign genres that are more seemingly alien due to cultural differences. A transcultural reading, as we have seen, focuses on understanding those differences without rushing to judgement on the basis of existing ways of seeing; it therefore involves a suspension of criticism, a willingness to accept texts on their own terms. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that this characteristic of transcultural readers sets them apart from paranoid reading strategies in particular and sets them in a mode of reading that favours reparative readings:

I love it. To one used to the mainstream of Western culture, this completely different cultural take on things really is refreshing.

Come to think of it, this is the reason I got into manga & anime in the first place. (White Rose, 2021).

To find refreshment, or new perspectives, in a cultural take on things that is seen as 'completely different', is the core of transcultural reading. Finding value in the lack of explicit representation, which as seen by the example of Friedman would be a requirement of an assimilationist viewpoint in which foreign media must also fulfil what are seen as the representation 'needs' of consumers, is a common thing for Western fans of Japanese media in general. While distancing her analysis from yuri itself, for instance, the writer of an Animefeminist article noted that magical girl and idol anime often contain coded queer narratives that to her felt more relatable than explicitly LGBT Western media. Rather than engage in an assimilationist and paranoid analysis of these anime, judging them by the standards of that Western media and assuming their difference as evidence of a problem, she engaged in a reparative reading that recuperated meaning for a queer reader directly from the coded structure of the narratives (Khan, 2020). In other words, for transcultural readers a value comes from the text precisely due to its cultural difference; the work that is done in achieving this knowledge is not a chore for such readers, but in a sense part of the enjoyment of engaging with the genre, both due to the refreshing difference to mainstream culture and due to the achievement of social capital within fandom.

In the same way, transcultural readers can allow for a lack of immediate recognition, allowing the text to prove itself in more subtle ways. Recognition can occur even when there is no direct correspondence between the reader and the character; for instance, a male reader may relate to a feminist text's examination of a woman feeling constrained by society's expectations even though they do not have the exact same experience as such (for instance they may feel compelled to go into a certain business because it runs in the family). What's important here is not whether the reader's situation is really 'as bad' as the character's, but the fact that this recognition occurs in the first place. Whether this leads to simply soaking in the feeling of recognition or to a deeper empathy for women's issues and how they relate to his own role is something else. In Yuri, one of the key components of LGBT fiction, namely the drive to examine lesbians 'as lesbians', through the prism of their sexuality first and foremost, is often (but not always) missing. Western Yuri readers have noticed this, but do

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not always criticise this as a failing as such. Rather, they ask themselves why they feel such a kinship to Yuri relationships and characters *in spite of* this lacuna. A commenter on the forum page for *Adachi and Shimamura* posted that (this particular profile is now deleted so that the following comment appears in responses only, so the username is not known):

> There's a lot of yuri that can feel relatable without explicitly dealing with queer identity. (I suspect if this weren't true, there wouldn't be such a huge LGBTQ+ contingent in the readership here.)

Yuri readers can thus problematize the idea that LGBT fiction must 'explicitly deal with queer identity'. On the other hand, this is an ongoing debate in the Yuri fandom in the West – this is in fact rather fitting, considering that yuri is defined by the discourse of readers rather than outside authorities. Whereas some in the community try to assert themselves as authorities and focus on this lack of explicit LGBT content – Erica Friedman is a key example, as for her Yuri is 'lesbian content without lesbian identity' – others focus on an individual experience of recognition that does not focus on what is (from a point of view such as Erica's) 'lacking'. Finding value in this different approach to queer identity is clearly possible for the large LGBT audience in the readership. To this extent, the transcultural readings of such LGBT readers may be a result of their reading yuri and discovering this quality, or it may instead be fulfilling a need that was being met by explicit accounts of queer identity. An example of this tension between explicit and implicit queer identity is the light novel series *Adachi and Shimamura*. For instance, one reader found this particular text to have a resemblance precisely to Western LGBT fiction:

> This series is interesting, it feels a lot more like a western LGBT ya romance novel, it's got the whole arc of like girl meets girl -> oh shit am I gay -> eventual self acceptance -> they get their gay on. Most yuri series tend to avoid that stuff and just focus on the romance without having it mean anything beyond that singular romance. (SadDoctor 2019).

> I'm kinda curious how this will be adapted [From the original novel into a manga]. Like a lot of the charm of this series is that on the surface it's just another ambiguous friendship series. (SadDoctor 2019).

This resemblance helped them to interpret the novel, but as the second post shows, this was only a comparison and the overall analysis of the text was still based on how it was based on and departed from the norms of Japanese yuri such as the 'ambiguous friendship' that is a part of coded queer narrative. This demonstrates how transcultural readers do not just inherit entirely a foreign perspective, but necessarily negotiate and mediate between what might be called their native and adopted strategies.

If explicit queer narrative is not a common feature of yuri, there arises the question of the 'realism' of yuri, in which readers find ways in which, despite a common lack of engagement with the specific social pressures that LGBT people face, Yuri can press a sense of realism through other means. For instance, on the Yuri blog YuriReviews, an article was posted about 'how realistically does the Yuri genre portray lesbians'. This blog is maintained by a lesbian woman which is reflected in this article as well. While there is a lack of realism in the sense of social issues, and in other ways such as contrived situations (no men in the story for instance) that make Yuri simpler to fashion from a plot perspective, there are certain fixtures of the yuri genre that are noted for being realistic; what is interesting in particular here is a focus on the physicality of lesbian intimacy itself. The article notes that the main word used for physical contact and kisses in particular is 'soft', focusing on a (most of the time implied rather than explicit) contrast with male bodies, which would be in comparison harder. It is notable that this is noted as a yuri feature despite this being a feature broadly associated with femininity:

> As the final big topic, I'd like to talk about how first experiences between girls are almost always described by one or even both of the girls with one word – *soft*. If it's about the lips, their skin, or their in body in general, this word is dropped a lot. While I've never had a boyfriend to actually see or rather feel the difference here, we've heard and read a lot that girls just feel soft. To that, I can at least agree. (Lena K 2017).

Aside from this focus on concrete physicality, there is also the psychological realism of the characters themselves. In a response to a reader comment, the writer noted that in yuri this would be compatible with a non-realistic setting:

> Also, for me I guess I mostly wish for fantasy works that have lesbian characters that have a realistic feel to them. I know I left this genre out completely since it's hard to

find the said realism in these works, though what they can have is a realistic lesbian character or couple, simply in an unrealistic setting. (Lena K, 2017).

This desire will be returned to in discussion of the Western yuri visual novels. It shows, however, that a transcultural reading of yuri extracts the positive elements of yuri for a reader, such as psychological realism unburdened by a need to depict social realism, and focuses on these, where an assimilationist reading could find fault in this lack of realism.

It should be noted that yuri, as a broad category that can contain both realistic and fantastical depictions, is not to be type-cast as always containing such coded queer narratives. Examples of fans praising yuri for its depiction of real pressure and in particular psychological turmoil are especially prevalent in newer subgenres such as *shakaijin* or working adults yuri. An example is the following comment on *Crescent Moon and Doughnuts*:

> It's a common yuri trope to have the "I like guys [heart beats near female friend]" which is imposter syndrome. But many of these stories just treat it as a narrative trope rather than an exploration of a serious psychological issue. What I really like about this story is that it does that exploration. It's showing the MC's anxiety, her feeling of brokenness and being unable to fulfill what society expects of her. She directly references media she consumes and how her friends constantly tell her to get a boyfriend. (HellAQA 2020)

Texts like this manga focus more on realistic depictions of lesbian identity, but continue to do so in a way that can frustrate very assimilationist readers.

> I think this is very well-written, with nice focus. But this is another example of... hm, I have a hard time putting this into words. But like, it has absolutely every piece of a coming-out story: Hinako knew she was unusual somehow, so she threw herself into traditional femininity to be normal, and wanted a man to come along and snatch her up so she wouldn't have to think about it, even though she's never really enjoyed men's attention. But now she can't deny her feelings for this woman she knows, and it's pushing her to accept herself. That's a coming-out story!

But like, no one ever talks about that she's gay. Like, it's clear she likes SATOU, and that liking Satou is important for all this somehow. But the very key element of Hinako's sexuality remains totally tacit. What's going on, here? (karp, 2020).

This reader attempted but failed to find a strategy that would allowed to account for the lack of explicit lesbian identity.

To return to the specific example of *tachi/neko* as a cultural element celebrated by yuri fans, one key example of how fans responded to the genre found in Yeung's survey of the Chinese fandom was the debate on femme/butch dynamics; the rejection of these, and the identification of Yuri fans with the more elusive *tachi* and *neko,* or sometimes purely on a character by character basic, demonstrates one way in which one of Yuri's key characteristics has been adopted by Western fans. Where a discourse exists on a site such as Dynasty Reader that depends upon the relationship dynamics of the two female protagonists, the aforementioned legitimacy of Japanese knowledge results in the usage of the terms *tachi* and *neko,* and these are the primary ones that refer to 'top' and 'bottom'. More importantly, the usage of these terms, including when the English terms 'top' and 'bottom' are still used, betrays the influence of the depiction of these in Yuri itself. For instance, discussing fan art of the *Kannazuki no Miko* manga, a poster expressed surprise that the character Himeko was 'taking the lead', prompting another poster to say that 'Himeko is a Tachi in this photo'. What this helps to demonstrate is the way in which the boundaries of *tachi* and *neko* are always porous, both in original works in and in the sense that secondary works such as fanart or fanfiction can portray such 'reverses' of the usual dynamics without seeming 'out of character'; instead, the possibility of a character usually a *neko* taking the lead is an open possibility, which may seem surprising, but is not outside the bounds of the kinds of interpretation permitted by the discourse. Wellington's study of sexual depictions in Yuri has shown how the moment where a *Neko* becomes assertive is a common moment in Yuri (Wellington, 2013, p. 37); furthermore, this does not become a disruptive element or cause of drama in the relationship, but rather draws the two lovers closer together, as both are capable both of expressing their love directly, as well as accepting the same from the other. These terms are introduced to the community in ways that accentuate the provisional nature of the terms. For instance, a short untitled manga by Mikawa Miso features two women deciding who will be the *tachi* and who will be the *neko* using a phone app, for 'our first time'. When it came to their own identities, Yuri fans on this site often apply the knowledge and view of

relationships to their own situations; this can result in influence from transcultural texts precisely because readers expect to be able to recognize themselves in the texts: if the text has messages akin to but slightly different to existing concepts, they may explore whether this applies to them, resulting in the opening of pathways for thinking that Felski, for instance, desires to see from reading. Hence, the Japanese influence complicates recognition. An example is the above manga about tops and bottoms. A commentator noted 'so I'm a "Tachi"', adopting the Japanese term. Of course, it is difficult to say that readers necessarily adopt the concept as a whole, with all differences from the Japanese context included; they may simply begin to use such terms simply as interchangeable with the English equivalents. Yet, some open influence can also be seen in other comments. A key area this can be seen is the question of the relative absence of 'butch' analogues in Yuri. While tomboys are not uncommon, the adoption of a masculine performance of lesbian sexuality in the manner of a 'butch' in lesbian culture is very rare; lesbian culture in Yuri manga is usually presented in the form of older couples who take on, as mentioned prior, a mentor role with regard to the (usually) younger protagonists, and these mentor figures are usually presented as 'regular' women, not as having a specifically lesbian appearance or mannerisms. While some are unhappy with this, and view it as Yuri manga not being willing to put in the more 'transgressive' butch aesthetic, there is also an opposing viewpoint that holds the opposite:

> I'm not particularly sad about it. While I don't mind tomboys etc. when they are characters, not stereotypes, I do prefer my girls girly, so japanese preferred "default women" works perfectly for me. Actually I like it much more because one of reasons I like yuri so much more over het and yaoi is that it does't force set roles and expectations on each partner and is much more fluid in this aspect, making it much more realistic to me. (Nevri 2016)

What this comment displays is an area where Yeung's observation, about the rejection of the butch/femme dynamic in favour of a more 'fluid' Yuri view of relationships, is replayed in the Western context. Certainly, the fluidness of Yuri relationships, for instance through the reversal of top and bottom role as noted above, has always been a characteristic of the genre which has been seen by yuri fans as distinguishing it from familiar narratives. For instance, another comment notes a way in which an exclusionary view is used to discount Yuri as a whole:

> I've heard a similar argument about yuri as a whole, that "real lesbians" always
> present themselves as butch and femme, and that yuri manga featuring two especially
> girly women in a relationship are playing exclusively to straight male fetishes.
> (themusicman 2016)

In these examples, the idea of yuri's cultural difference allowing it to evade paranoid readings that would assign it immediately to the negative area of 'straight male fetish' is associated with positive qualities in how the same thing – a lack of butch/femme dynamics as understood in the reader's context – can both be the source of rejection but also the source of a reparative reading in which the Japanese 'default' allows for the reader to associate fluidity with realism. This can then be extended by the understanding that some readers then associate themselves with these new categories, thus opening up their own identities and allowing them to be shaped by their engagement with the foreign text, as in the case of reader who self-identified as a *tachi*.

Thus transcultural strategies of reading, based on cultural knowledge and a reparative approach that doesn't approach texts with a paranoid approach, produce readings that are sophisticated in their engagement with the cultural background of a text while examining what can be compared with the reader's existing context and taking what seems to them to have value with the text and its own cultural context. Unlike assimilationist readings, they are open to redefinition of what one's own identity might mean or how it should or can be depicted in fiction. An example is the quality of coded queer narrative: while readers such as Friedman or those who violently rejected Class S narratives utilize a frame of reading in which representational needs are seen as inviolable and static, resulting in reading strategies that viewed their lack of fulfilment as an inherent negative, transcultural readers were open to representation in new ways such as through coded narratives. In the next section, I will demonstrate how the transcultural approach is also demonstrated by Western yuri visual novels.

Section III: From Reading to Writing: Western Yuri Visual Novels

In addition to these fan communities, I also analyse as a form of reception of the yuri genre the production of media by Western creators which identifies itself (in promotional material etc) as 'yuri'. Visual novels are a niche medium, Western visual novels comparatively niche within it, and yuri itself is also a niche genre; hence, I will justify why I choose Western Yuri

VNs specifically as the kind of Western yuri media to analyse. Firstly, the commercial nature of them as sold products means that they are original products rather than fanfiction produced about Japanese works. While I do not view fanfiction negatively, I utilise these visual novels specifically in my own research for several reasons. It demonstrates the influence of yuri extending beyond reactions to and responses towards Japanese texts, and becoming an integral part of new texts that are wholly original. It also means that the visual novels themselves have more of a 'footprint' and, in addition to a range of responses and reviews, cannot be easily removed or lost as fanfiction can be if the author deletes it, if the hosting site disappears, and so on. A second reason to choose visual novels is that they are a multimedia medium, and demonstrate both aesthetic, audio, and written dimensions. Hence, they can be analysed from all these angles to see the effect of yuri on how they are produced in various ways – which art style is adopted, how dialogue is written, what sort of sound effects and music is used. This makes them a rich object of analysis.

The visual novel genre is Japanese one, and thus the adoption of it by the producers of original Western yuri shows how fandom of yuri is connected with fandom of Japanese media in general; and in turn, this shows how the creation of such Western yuri texts represents a transcultural moment; such a moment has been defined as one where fans are acting in an increasingly global context where media and genres are transmitted and understood across borders (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 103). In such an environment, both the structure of visual novels and the yuri genre combine with the unique needs and sensibilities of Western authors to produce yuri visual novels that are both affectionately imitative of the Japanese 'originals', while also being examples of neocultural products, uniquely shaped by this mix of influences.

In particular, the strong connection between many yuri visual novels produced in the West and the yuri fandom in general should be understood as meaning that these visual novels are, in a sense, transformative fandom works. This is not to downplay their status as fully original (playing to ideals of authorial originality), but rather to emphasize the intertextual play that is a key feature of a transcultural reader who, in producing original works from another culture's genre, is always mediating between two contexts and two lineages of texts. These visual novels can be viewed as double adaptations: on the one hand, the yuri genre is adapted to the needs and desires of Western authors and readers, and on the other, those authors are also adapting their literary traditions for usage in creating yuri. Adaptation, a function of text-

to-text reception, is not just an engagement with the original text (here, genre), but also an 'interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging' (Hutcheon 2006, 9). In this sense, a link can be drawn between the status of these works as adaptations, and the fact that, as products also of fans, they represent, to return to the fandom theory of Henry Jenkins, a kind of 'poaching'. A strong association between this mediation, and the 'poaching' of fans discussed by Jenkins, with reparative reading has been argued for by Robles: by imbuing texts with more meaning through transformative works, poaching is transformed from an act, in a sense, of theft, to a reparative act in which the love for the text that inspires the taking also lends it a healing quality (Robles 2019, 12). Hence, in reading these visual novels as acts of transformative fandom of yuri in addition to being original works, it can be demonstrated how they aim to fulfill the kinds of desires of yuri readers that were discussed in the above analysis; for instance, for combining unrealistic or fantasy settings with realistic psychological depictions of lesbian women, allowing them to exist in a space set apart from real-life social pressures.

In this thesis I focus on three particular yuri texts: *Heart of the Woods* by Studio Elan, *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986* by Oracle and Bone, and *Love Ribbon* by Razzart Visual. While I reference a variety of other Western yuri visual novels, these occupy the majority of space. Hence, I will show why these particular ones are representative and deserving of this attention. Firstly, they are three texts that demonstrate different approaches to adapting the genre. *Love Ribbon* is very 'faithful' in its approach to replicating the feel of Japanese yuri, while *Heart of the Woods* and in particular *A Summer's End* adapt it further towards their own ends. These allows for a demonstration through the analysis of different ways yuri has been received and adopted. They are also texts that are, within the space of Western visual novels, quite successful. While direct sales numbers are not made public for Steam titles, the online platform most such games are published on, there are indirect ways to demonstrate for each of them that they have achieved success, demonstrating that they are within this space major titles. *Heart of the Woods* has received major updates such as the addition of full voice acting, translations, and a port to the Nintendo Switch platform that demonstrate its staying power and viability. *A Summer's End* has also received translations, been discussed in major gaming outlets such as *Eurogamer*, and featured unusually large numbers of artwork assets for the Western visual novel industry. *Love Ribbon* was similarly successful, as can be seen by its 'very positive' ranking and high number of reviews, 1,482. In addition and more importantly than their success generally, they have all been discussed in yuri fan spaces, which signifies that they have been recognized as adopters of the genre in various ways.

One aspect that examination of several Yuri titles will demonstrate is that they almost always opt for a well-established main character, and this is demonstrated both by their writing and by their visual design. One technique used often in these visual novels to weaken the tie between the reader and the viewpoint character is changes in perspective; *Heart of the Woods*, *Highway Blossoms*, *A Summer's End*, for instance, all include such a tactic, which forces the reader to consider another character's point of view rather than remaining 'inside' of the main character. *Perfect Gold*, meanwhile, uses frequent shifts in time as well, so that the whiplash between the protagonist's views in one time conflicts with that in another time, making it impossible to fully adopt both viewpoints. This is furthermore in distinction to other visual novels that focus on a weakly developed self-insert character romancing several possible options. In such visual novels, the main character is often de-emphasized to the point that key art will deliberately obscure their face with forelocks or camera angles, resulting in a faceless character – the reader is meant, of course, to insert their own face and imagine it is them. Yuri visual novels – and importantly, this includes the Japanese ones, as well as these Western ones that follow in this tradition – buck this tend entirely; the main promotional art for all of the above visual novels, for instance, features the protagonist's face and appearance prominently (often alongside their love interest), and the art throughout takes no such pains to avoid showing them. This is in keeping with the traditions of the most popular Japanese Yuri visual novels. For instance, the very popular *Kindred Spirits on the Roof* has a main character with her own issues and complex personality, but it also jumps between the perspectives of many different characters all forming their own relationships, thus suggesting a sort of lesbian community even when they are not directly communicating. This is followed by yuri visual novels, including *Heart of the Woods* which will be examined in this section. I suggest that this, in combination with the fact that Western visual novels often have all-female casts, accentuates the fantasy element in a way that ties back to what Nagaike calls the *shōjo kyōdōtai,* or community of girls: these novels provide a set of realistic lesbian characters who interact with other women, creating this sense of community in a way separated from male presence.

One example of how creators of Western visual novels are adapting the rules and structure of visual novels as they exist in Japan and in particular in the case of yuri visual novels is the role of the player, in many ways key to these visual novels in a way that is more complex than the simple self-insertion into a blank slate character that characterizes many video games and other genres of visual novel; the key to this relationship to the game lies in the nature of

the visual novel itself, as interactive media. As established, the main characters themselves are meant to be seen as fully fledged characters, and while they are meant to be sympathized with, they are not directly tied to the player. The role of the reader in these games is often both sympathetic, in the sense of being tied most obviously to the viewpoint of one character, and also reflective in the sense that the player must participate in a system of choices that lead to either good ends or bad ends, or in some cases to an ending with one love interest or another. In the case of the later, wanting the protagonist to end up with a particular love interest requires the reader to consider the perspective of that particular character: what they appreciate and want, and also what aspects of the protagonists' own personality best suit them. There is also a mechanical incentive to experiment with choices to be able to see all variations on scenes and endings; hence the player can take multiple approaches to the choice-making: they could simply decide to make the choices they think the protagonist 'in reality' would, they could decide to deliberately make the worst choices to see what happens, and so on. It should be kept in mind, however, that the prominence of these choices varies by each game, and in some visual novels (called kinetic novels), there are no choices. In other cases, there are other gameplay systems that encourage the player to take a step back from complete association with the protagonist. For instance, *A Little Lily Princess* has a simulation system where you must train the protagonist in certain skills such as Grace to appeal to the love interest of your choice; if you do not have the sufficient points you cannot spend time with them and progress their story. All of this amounts to the fact that by choosing visual novels as their medium, developers are committing to more than a simple addition of visual and audio elements to a narrative, but are circumscribed to the kind of storytelling offered by the medium: in the field of Yuri Western visual novels, it is thus clear that they are committing to a kind of narrative that bears much in common with Japanese Yuri visual novels such as *Kindred Spirits on the Rooftop* and *Flowers*, also notable for strong protagonist presence and forcing reflection on the player.

One aspect of many Western yuri visual novels that may stem from their derivation from the 'OELVN' scene (OELVN is 'original English language visual novel') which reflects the influence on Japanese visual novels on Western ones in general is the incorporation of sex scenes. Japanese visual novels with sexual content, known as 'eroge' for erotic game, are a very large part of the VN industry in Japan, and thus the Western fanbase for visual novels is acclimated to sexual content; indeed, they are often outraged by domesticating attempts to remove such content or ban games entirely. A relevant example is the yuri visual novel *The*

Expression Amrilato, an all-ages game that seeks to teach the basis of Esperanto through the prism of a romance between two women. The game was initially rejected from Steam for 'sexualising minors', while the English publisher Mangagamer rejected such claims and claimed that Steam was discriminating against same-sex content by considering it inherently sexual (Lopez 2019). While the game was eventually released on Steam, this shows how sexual content or even the mere presence of character designs that can be considered 'underage' looking can be dangerous for developers looking to sell their game on Steam, by far the largest online games platform. Given this poor environment, it is perhaps a sign of how strong the legacy of sexual content in Japanese VNs is that OELVNs still include patches for sexual content quite frequently; Western yuri VNs such as *A Summer's End, Highway Blossoms, Heart of the Woods, Starlight Vega* and others all include such patches. On the other hand, in the framework of a yuri text sexual content acquires a new significance; whereas an eroge generally unapologetically intends for the sex scenes to be used as pornography, developers for yuri games such as *A Summer's End* have noted that they intend the sexual content to be a part of depicting lesbian desire in an uncompromising way (Asummersend.com blog). In this sense, one can see the above-mentioned merging of traditions: the sex scene is already a factor in many visual novels, but in this particular case, it can be merged with the desire of creators to represent lesbian sexuality in a respectful way that is reflective of a politico-ideological stance.

In speaking of the Western Yuri visual novel as a specifically transcultural product of a combination of Japanese and Western sensibility, one aspect that is highly important is the role of visual design, in particular of characters; the anime style of character design that is adopted by most of these Western visual novels is particularly well-suited to this transmission across borders thanks to its abstract quality, while the role of the *kawaii* aesthetic itself is key to the characterization of their protagonists. The anime style of character design is well-known for simplifying facial features and having in this way a stylized image that relies on *kawaii* imagery; examples are the very large eyes of characters, the relative smallness of noses, and the profusion of unusual hair colours that anime characters will often have without explanation (they are not noted as dying their hair for instance). As has been explored by Sugawa-Shimada, *kawaii* should not just be viewed as a performance of cuteness for a male audience; rather in Japanese culture it has been intricately tied with representations of female power and solidarity, especially in mediums such as magical girl anime (Sugawa-Shimada, 185-195). Therefore it can be viewed as an extension of the *shōjo* aesthetic that contained

both heteronormative expectations of women as well as their subversion in one complex package. The appropriation of an anime or anime-inspired *kawaii* artstyle is key to Western Yuri VNs for multiple reasons. Firstly it displays, on a commercial level, a key demonstration of what to expect to a buying audience; carrying with it the expectation that there will a connection to the Japanese world of Yuri. Furthermore, it does so without requiring them to commit to a Japanese setting; since anime character designs are sufficiently stylized and abstracted from real people, they can be utilized as Asian, White, or Black with fairly small changes required, enabling developers to add characters of varying ethnicities in the same style. Some developers nonetheless explicitly choose to set their games in Japan with Japanese characters regardless of the product having a clear Western style, while others do not; the point, however, is that this artistic choice gives them that freedom. Furthermore, by using the style they are giving their characters the characteristic of *kawaii*, since anime characters are drawn to be cute in most cases and certainly in these visual novels. As will be demonstrated, the writing for their characters takes account of this and the expectations held of characters on the basis of their visual design – the creating of visually *kawaii* characters is not independent from their writing. For instance, to return to *Heart of the Woods*, one explicit aim of the developers was to produce a 'cute' game (Hernandez 2019).

To help illustrate a continuum of assimilation and transcultural approaches, both to the original Japanese Yuri tropes and to the tropes of visual novels, Japanese character writing in general, and otherwise in general to their Japanese inspirations, a comparison between two games both on relatively far points on this spectrum will be useful. In this case, the representative for foreignization is *Love Ribbon*, while the representative of a freer adaption is *A Summer's End*. The aspects of *Love Ribbon* that move it closer to the foreignising end of this spectrum are many: stylistically, it maintains a closer resemblance to anime art than other games in terms of the art style itself, in addition it also utilizes a common Yuri design decision by paring a more naïve or innocent pink-haired girl with a more worldly black-haired one, it utilizes the common high school setting, it borrows the concept of sisters Yuri based on incest which is fairly common in Yuri, and it features a relationship dynamic that will be familiar to any Yuri reader of manga or watcher of anime, namely the slow opening up of a *tsundere* thanks to the affections of their love interest. The heavy usage of such tropes, imitative of yuri texts that will be familiar to readers, signals overtly this debt and places the text as a creative rearrangement of existing yuri. On the other hand, in *A Summer's End* various influences outside of anime are notable, such as various 80s media or

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vaporwave, and the focus on an authentic recreation of a specific time and place, 80s Hong Kong, means that reliance on generic Yuri tropes or situation are minimized. With the focus on political issues (Hong Kong independence) and social pressures, this text moves closer to focusing on representation of lesbians in a 'realistic' way. However, the central tensions in the text are firstly the main character Michelle's dissatisfaction with work and desire for something else, and secondly the conflict between familial and societal pressure to be heterosexual and her burgeoning homosexual desire. These are familiar topics, broadly, to those broached in Yuri typically; and the workplace aspect of the text, while desiring to be realistic to workplace culture in Hong Kong at the time, ends up bearing a resemblance to *Shakai-jin* Yuri, focused on the experience of OL (office lady) workers in Japan; for instance, in the way an outward competence at work is contrasted with an inner distaste or boredom for it. In this context, love interest Sam represents freedom for Michelle both personally and professionally, offering a path outside of white-collar work and heterosexuality. Some other ways in which these difference between the two can be established include the audio: while *Love Ribbon* utilizes a set of background music that could be swapped out with that of many Japanese visual novels, focused on pianos and with clear 'moods' to be established with each scene by the music, *A Summer's End* focuses on the music to create its 'vaporwave' ambience, with particular focus on synth soundscapes and the like, creating a more unique mood. This emphasis can also be seen in track names such as 'Neon Rain' and 'Dot Matrix Shuffle'. On the other hand, this music itself has an international character: one of the bands featured is Crystal Cola, a Japanese band, whereas another is from Sweden, Stevia Sphere (Steam 2021). This increased focused on music can also be seen in how the soundtrack is offered as a separate DLC product, as opposed to Love Ribbon. In general, a set of areas can be established, in all of which a gradient between imitation and change can be seen. On the other hand, it can also be fairly said that modern studies of adaptions seek to break down the very idea of 'faithfulness'; for instance, the recent *Queer/Adaption* collection of essays performs a maneuver in this vein: much as gender itself is an imitation of an idea of gender (as in Butler), so adaptions are imitations based on an accumulation of ideas about the originals, and may, precisely through what is different in their presentation, explore things latent but present in the originals (Damory, 3-4). Therefore, the discussion of assimilation and adaptation here should be taken as a sort of provisional categorization method; there are after all various issues that could be raised: is the 'original' here yuri manga, anime, or other visual novels? *Love Ribbon* would seem to be inspired by manga such as *Citrus*, for instance. Yuri itself is not primarily a genre known for visual novels; so the scene itself is a combination of

the visual novel medium and the yuri genre, a sort of double-adaption. Furthermore, the very fact that the creators used yuri and the visual novel format signifies an engagement with foreign media that marks them as necessarily transcultural and in Jenkins' sense 'pop cosmopolitan'; the difference lays in which elements are taken and modified.

With this in mind, what should be avoided in any discussion of Western visual novels is a sort of orientalist narrative where the Japanese work, lacking in 'subversive' potential or else absent of sufficient 'LGBTQ' elements, is salvaged and 'redeemed' by a White creator. This would not be a transcultural event but an assimilationist one which frames foreign texts as needing to be assimilated to Western values. Such narratives existed in the community for the popular (non-yuri) Doki Doki Literature Club, which for some was seen as a feminist satire of anime writing, in particular, as a critique of the male gaze (O'Hara 2018). This was one example of the 'ironic' visual novels that 'parody' Japanese dating sims which have been criticized by fans of the latter for lacking an essential understanding and being based on dimly remembered jokes, an 'imitation without an original' if ever there was one. See this critique of Doki Doki Literature Club for instance:

> Yet, my contention is that works like *DDLC* are not actually parodying, let alone, critiquing dating sims. This is where "pseudo" comes in. None of these "ironic" visual novels are parodying any specific work. Instead, they are "parodying" an imagined dating sim that has never existed. Most of their "jokes" and the "critiques" they are employing come from Japanese media that parody dating sims in the first place.

 (Kastel, 2019).

While the visual novels I discuss are not so explicitly 'satirical' or parodic, it would be very easy to substitute 'queer' for 'feminist' and explain how these Western visual novels, in particular less 'faithful' ones such as A Summer's End, insert subversive content where there was supposedly none (according to the simplistic formula more Western = more subversive/political = better, quite as Felski warns against, a fetishisation of 'subversive readings'): but this would ignore why, when seeking to explore lesbian characters and experiences, these creators chose this medium and this genre to begin with; for them, the representation, or the subversion, was already there.

With all this in mind, it is time to begin a series of examinations of these Western Yuri visual novels in depth. It is recommended to go to the public Steam pages for each game, which

contain example images and trailers that help show their art style and general aesthetic. To begin with, Love Ribbon will be explored further.

Love Ribbon begins with protagonist Iris arriving at her new school, Lillium High; the name itself is a combination of a reference to 'lily', and the particularly Western or American practice of abbreviating high school names to 'High'. Iris is immediately marked, in a conversation with her father over the phone, as holding a tension between a desire for freedom or independence, and a certain sense of insecurity and immaturity; for instance, when describing her uniform in the introduction, she is 'not sure' about her short skirt, and with the possible objectification wearing it may involve. The two main characters glance at each other right away after this scene, but do not recognize each other yet as sisters. This particular key image (or CG) art piece is also shown in the game's official trailer, and provides the first and far from the last example of *Shōjo* aesthetics that we will see in this examination of Western visual novels. The use in particular of 'fluttering', falling flowers is a key example of this; despite the different setting, it is almost certainly inspired by scenes in Japanese fiction involving falling cherry blossom leaves. In this case, there is a peculiar merging of the Western and Japanese sides in terms of the school itself; the high-class, rigorous nature of the school suggests shades of the original girls schools that Class S literature took place in (without the focus on producing wives and mothers, of course), while the need for Iris to maintain her scholarship by keeping good marks reflects modern Western experiences of education. Given the youthfulness of the audience for yuri in the West, it is not surprising that yuri visual novels produced in the West reflect this by focusing on young characters and concerns that they may have, for instance regarding education.

In the first proper meeting, Iris refers to Zoey as a 'cool beauty', establishing the kind of archetype that is both partially fulfilled and subverted by Zoey. The term itself has a long pedigree as a loan word in Japan; it can be widely seen being used as a term for characters in fiction as well as in beauty or dating websites, and in this sense has 'crossed over' and is sometimes used in anime fandom; for instance, in a yuri context on the site Okazu (Friedman, 2010). Hence, the character type that Zoey is seen as by Iris is immediately embedded with this Japanese identifier, yet in a subtle way that uses a term that is already rendered in English in Japan, hence eliminating the need to use a native Japanese phrase. Zoey herself has some significance in terms of the presentation of her less feminine presentation. On the one hand, her description as a cool beauty is a distinctively feminine one, but her choice of clothing includes a leather jacket, plaid tied around the waist, and other tomboyish or masculine

selections. She is therefore a contrast to Iris in having a tension between masculine and feminine elements; it is notable that Iris refers to her, nonetheless, in female-gendered terms such as cool beauty. The visual contrast between the two is also, in general, a reference or inspired by Japanese design in yuri, in particular the contrast between a shorter girl with shorter pink hair, yet also more feminine in personality, and a less emotional taller girl with longer black hair. Examples of this include Homura and Madoka from *Madoka Magica* and Yuyu and Riri from *Assault Lily*. Iris refers to this contrast in both personality and appearance, reflecting that 'she's so tall and looks so mature for her age'. Hence character design reflects the standards of Japanese yuri while changing some aspects, such as the use of more Western fashion like leather jackets.

Following on this, Love Ribbon also engages with the concept of 'independence', more broadly for women in general, and how this general experience of independence, both in social and economic terms, is impacted by having a household of two women. As stated, part of Iris' goal from the start in moving to a new town and school is to seek independence; yet her desire in this direction seems to be forestalled by the presence of Zoey: 'this is definitely not how I pictured my first day of independence' she says, frustrated by how Zoey's maturity accentuates her own insecurity. This is accentuated by their first major fight soon after; frustrated by Iris attempting to prevent her breaking curfew, she traps Iris against the wall with her arm and says she won't be bossed around by the 'pampered' Iris. Aside from furthering the idea of independence, with Iris becoming the one trying to limit Zoey's due to her commitment to social institutions such as school, the aforementioned 'trapping against a wall' motion (with its own CG image) is another Japanese trope. The term for such a gesture is *Kabedon*, kabe being wall and don being a sound effect for the hand hitting the wall. While it may mean simply hitting the wall out of annoyance, it became a fixture of romance manga and anime, usually with a male being the one hitting the wall; the combination of overbearingness and physical proximity makes it a gesture packed with meaning. In this case, it signifies the romantic potential of the relationship despite its poor condition, and acts as a sort of signal to the audience, a 'taste of what is to come'. Iris responds by noting that she views Zoey as a 'cool independent woman' and as 'beautiful beyond compare'. The play of yuri tropes with ideas of independence is a common feature of the yuri visual novels analyzed here. It is one more example of how these texts seek to maintain the atmosphere and style of (Japanese) yuri while introducing concerns that are topical to the (Western) yuri fandom.

At this point it is pertinent to note the usage of choices in this game. As noted, they are not always present in visual novels. In games such as *Love Ribbon*, they allow the audience to control the narrative according to a narrow range of options. In this case, for instance, while each choice changes the immediate scene after, they lead back to the main story until the end, where the game diverges for good into the 'bad' and 'good' endings. After this kabedon scene, the player chooses whether Iris reflects on what Zoey said to her, or about what she said to Zoey. The latter is the 'good' option, as it makes her consider her own attraction which came out in words despite her being unconscious of it. In this way, the player doesn't select a 'personality' for the main character, but can only nudge them in directions that would be possible considering their pre-existing character. The following choice also allows for marking Zoey as present to class to prevent her getting into trouble for truancy; in this way, the choices also allow the player to decide whether the conflict inside of Iris, whether to stick to the rules or to place Zoey first, plays out from an early stage.

After searching her room and finding out that she goes to bars after curfew, Iris asks herself whether Zoey is a 'bad girl'. The childish framing of the question accentuates the degree of naivety in Iris herself; while she aimed for independence, she did not have any ideas for how to use it, having intended to follow the honor student path and to act according to the norms. Accepting her sister will naturally lead to further questioning of independence.

The key moment changing their relationship dynamic in a positive way is where Iris follows Zoey to a bar and realizes that the latter is a musician, who sings and plays guitar on stage. Not only does the emphasis placed on her sweet voice refer back to *shōjo* aesthetics, Iris also notes the contrast between Zoey's 'harsh' clothes and the entrancing, soft style of her music. In this way, that Iris is attracted in particular to the feminine aspect of Zoey is again emphasized. On the other, Zoey also protects Iris from a drunken man, with her righteous anger being a quick reminder of her overall tougher personality. It is also worth noting that Zoey does this in bars because the school has only a classical music department; the school is again being noted as a conservative force, akin to those in Class S stories, as noted. Another Japanese trope employed later is that of the 'indirect kiss', eating from the same source, when they have smoothies later. The idea of a woman's 'softness' also takes a part in the erotic scenes, such as the one shown below:

Finally, the game places more emphasis on the incest portion of the plot than the lesbian element. For instance, a DNA test is a major plot point that shows up as they begin to realize

their feelings more consciously, while Iris is concerned about 'how could the world ever accept two sisters?' The conflict therefore lies in the sisters part of their relationship rather than the lesbian part, at least on the surface of the plot. While this may seem to make the story less relevant to most lesbians, there is also a sense in which this is a transference of the social pressures involved in being lesbian to the much more uncommon situation of sibling incest, thus allowing for lesbianism itself to become less 'taboo' in comparison. Meanwhile the theme of independence ends in a somewhat unsatisfying way: Iris is praised by her father for having 'proved' her independence, and despite losing her scholarship, will still get her tuition payed by him, in this sense being quite privileged. There is hence a reconciliation at the end, yet the final words of the story still imply that the sisters will be through a lot more as they vow, in a manner reminiscent of a wedding, to be together through the 'good and the bad'.

Love Ribbon is clearly highly indebted to Japanese yuri and wears this influence quite proudly, from the name of the school to the usage of Japanese manga/anime tropes such as kabedon and indirect kissing. It also centers the economic and social situations of women in relationships, even though it does so through the medium of incest primarily. In the way that it focuses on women who are, to some degree or another, feminine and fitting to the *shōjo* aesthetic, it also engages in a view of women themselves that shows this influence on a deeper level. But the Western elements, such as the focus on clubs and bars, on constructing through the development of the leads a story also shaped much like a conventional bildungsroman. In this way, the text is reflective of a transcultural reading that produces, from the material of yuri, a narrative that reflects contemporary concerns for Western readers as well.

A Summer's End makes clear it's attachment to a specific place and time – and in addition, to the aesthetic associated with that time and place culturally – from the main menu onward. In this menu, which is made to look like a vintage television, the outdated screen, neon colour, and other technological details that recall the 1980s are clear indications of how focused the game will be in achieving the feeling of immersion into that period. On the other hand, the main focus remains clear: the two women in the screen (therefore, of course, within both the player's own screen as well as the game's), who retain a clear stylistic debt to Japanese art. On the other hand the Chinese writing below the game's name remind the player that it takes place in Hong Kong.

The game begins with a rumination from the protagonist on the nature of her childhood; she regards herself as having been spoiled and a 'princess', and is determined to be self-reliant as a response to realising that this could not last forever after the death of her father. Hence, the very first line of the story establish a connection between this game and *Love Ribbon*: while the latter focuses on school rather than work, they are both concerned with the economic situation and potential of the women involved to be self-reliant, or independent. It will be recalled at this point that one of the main contributions to the boom in Yuri in Japan itself from the late 80s onward was a change in the law for female employment. This connection, though more explicit in these Western texts than many Japanese Yuri, is brought especially into mind when one considers the recent popularity of 'working adults yuri', or *shakaijin* yuri. A comparison to the manga *Crescent Moon and Doughnut,* referenced in the analysis section, makes clear that just as that manga was praised for the internal psychological depth of the characters struggling with heteronormativity, *A Summer's End* also focuses on this internal struggle rather than external pressure. Michelle and Sam's parents both play the role of enforcer of heteronormativity, but both are secondary characters who do not take significant action to this end; rather their disapproval is most significant simply for being present in the minds of the protagonists. It must therefore be remembered that Yuri by no means represents a fully segregated world empty of economic pressure and thus political significance. The main character in this game, in particular, feels great pressure to maintain her heavy workload in a male dominated environment, and attributes her work ethic, which is naturally to be challenged as the story progresses, to her father: 'the work ethic that my father had instilled in me'. The full commitment to capitalist advancement is thus tied to the father, and to the 'right' relationship to family, as the father in question worked so hard in the first place for his daughter and wife: 'He had always put his family first'. Therefore the daughter inherits the father's gendered position as breadwinner. If the father, departed but whose presence is still strong, represents the need for economic conformity, the mother, still alive but weak and a sort of bitter wisp who remains at home, represents social conformity, as she wants her daughter to stay on the straight and narrow and, in addition, be straight herself.

Yet the tension between femininity, which despite her male-gendered work ethic she maintains through her 'stylishly formal' shoes, and her work is brought to the fore by the inciting incident, namely the breaking of those shoes. After enduring some harassment from her nominal subordinates on the basis of her replacement sandals, she takes the shoes to the cobbler whose daughter is the primary love interest. At this point the protagonist Michelle

meets her love interest Sam. Much like Zoey, Sam is interesting to examine from the point of view of her gender presentation. Her jean overalls might imply a certain masculine slant, but in general her appearance is described by Michelle as that of an 'artist' and an American 'valley girl'; much like Zoey, any masculinity is balanced out by her long hair, which somehow co-exists with her 'garish plastic earrings'.

The concept of an aggressive lesbian is not uncommon. In this game, Sam is perceived as aggressive (though not sexually or romantically by a still oblivious Michelle) early on: 'it was forward and uncouth of her to push me around like that', when she insists on eating together while waiting on the shoe repairs. Sam also refers to Michelle as an OL here, a term for office lady that originates in Japan and was assimilated in China and Hong Kong; hence the Japanese influence of the text itself combines with that in Hong Kong at the time. After this, the first feelings for Sam begin to emerge in Michelle. She states that Sam makes her 'heart pound', a fairly standard phrase which may nonetheless be partly imitative of the classic Japanese yuri phrase *dokidoki* (a sound effect for a pounding heart).

Unlike Love Ribbon, A Summer's End feature what may be considered a 'love rival' male character. The bad end for this game consists in Michelle, unable to come to terms with her lesbian interests, entering a relationship with him more out of inertia than interest; the final moments make it clear she will never quite forget her time with Sam, who she sees again at an airport much later. Normally such 'het' ends are rare in yuri; bad ends are common in any game with choices, but not necessarily in this form. It may be a concession to the setting again; the key part of this portrayal however is that, again, it is clearly depicted as a lack of initiative from Michelle and a failure to act on her true feelings that leads her to it. In terms of a 'love interest', she only really has one; this is emphasized from the beginning of her scenes with the male character (Joey), as she cannot remember his name at first. On the other hand, he is also not portrayed negatively himself; Michelle is not 'driven away' from men by bad experiences with him, but is only acting on her 'real nature' which draws her to Sam. This aspect of the text, the incorporation of a 'love triangle' of sorts, brings it close to the kind of yuri that explores identity, such as *Girl Friends.*

An early scene emphasizes Sam's role, in distinction, as a lesbian with a firm identity as such from the beginning. While the text describes Michelle's uncomfortable placement under her gaze, the CG image itself focuses on Sam. It is in this scene, however, in Sam's video shop,

where Sam introduces Michelle to a movie which reappears several times and comes to bear great metaphorical significance. *New Women*, as the name implies, is about an early women's rights advocate, and in this sense Sam introduces Michelle to feminism in a re-contextualized way; it comes to mean something to Michelle as she moves away from her heavy focus on workplace advancement, on the sense of 'equality' that means equal exploitation of female and male workers. Instead a sense of queer liberation is given to the early era of Chinese feminism. Sam occupies an uncertain role here; she is in one sense advancing quite boldly, but internally is quite hesitant as we will see, and her slight forcefulness is also needed to pull Michelle into the queer world, as represented by the lesbian club Ruby that a friend of Sam's pulls them into. At first, Michelle has no clear idea of what's going on in there. The correct choice to make here is to ask more about it, showing Michelle's interest despite herself in this strange world quite disconnected from her working life.

Soon after, Sam initiates their first kiss. Michelle is confused and passive, though not resistant as such; this scene provoked some conversation in the game's forums over the issue of consent. Sam operates on the border here, her desire constantly threatening to spill over and make her push Michelle too far. Michelle's 'sensibilities were shocked', and she dissociates, focusing on sounds from the neighbors and other distractions. In spite of all this though, the final line of this scene is, quite in expectations for yuri: 'Sam's lips were soft'. Despite this hesitation, she still seeks out Sam afterwards, and encounters Sam's friend from the club mentioned prior, Cecilia, who gives Michelle advice as one lesbian to another, acting as a sort of advisor role. The role of consent here is important for seeing how the visual novel acts within the yuri framework; in a Steam forum discussion, a reader deployed a reading of the text quite similar to Friedman's reading of *Bloom Into You,* pointing out that the text did not include the 'positive affirmations' that are characteristic of what are held to healthy depictions of consent in the West (auroraboros 2021). This reading is again assimilationist in the sense of holding the yuri text to contemporary standards, but given it is a Western visual novel, the more important point is that it is paranoid as well, viewing the text as damaging on account of breaching these standards. That the commitment to realism extends to showing how desire can sometimes be 'forced', in a way that leads nonetheless to a mutually respectful and equal relationship, shows how the yuri format even when deployed by Western authors allows for these standards to be breached.

Despite Sam's generally good relationship with her father, he is still 'holding out hope' that she gets married. Both the father, and eventually Michelle's mother after a bout of sickness,

eventually come to terms with their daughter's sexualities, but only in this sort of way. In this way the parental figures are not wholly condemned as bigots despite their heteronormativity, but presented as also trapped by the same norms that they are trying to press on, and pressured on the other side by a very real love for their daughters.

Following a section in which we follow Sam's perspective in a reprise of the game so far, focusing on Sam's own subjective feeling of her lack of strength, the game climaxes as Michelle runs out of dinner with Joey to be with Michelle again, kissing her of her own will this time. Following a period of slice of life happiness as the two go on a date, Michelle's mother collapses after discovering the relationship. Despite Michelle's fears, Sam seems to win her over, and the game's opening rumination replays with alteration to fit the new situation. Michelle is happy that Sam added 'colour' to her life; the implicit comparison is to a life that is not just heterosexual, but spent in complete dedication to work alone.

A Summer's End deals with the issues homosexual relationships bring directly, though the prominence of fathers remains. The game also focuses on the subjective experience of a lesbian seeking to court a woman whose own orientation she can not be sure of, as well as the difficulty of bringing out lesbian desire in Michelle. But the focus on independence in wider society remains, as well as conflict with it.

The third and final text to be analysed in full depth will be *Heart of the Woods*. In terms of the gradient of 'faithfulness', or domestication of the yuri genre to fit the Western audience, it can be viewed as a midpoint between *Love Ribbon* and *A Summer's End* in some ways. For instance, it lacks the specificity and focus on a single space and time that heavily defines *A Summer's End*, but it also does not have the degree of imitation of Japanese yuri tropes that can be seen in *Love Ribbon*. Like the other two texts, it features a sexual content add-on patch which will be discussed due to what it indicates about a major difference, namely the presence of a trans woman among the main cast and in a relationship herself. Finally, I will here note that all three of these texts make the same choice when it comes to choosing the visual novel format they choose. In general, as can be seen from the screenshots of the prior games, the most popular visual novel format is 'ADV', for adventure. In this format the text is displayed on a textbox at the bottom of the screen, freeing the rest of the screen to be the art and visual component. None of the major Western yuri releases adopt the second format, 'NVL' for novel. In this format the screen as a whole darkens and text fills the whole screen. This choice can be viewed as conforming to the more standard, popular format, but carries

implications of its own. ADV games, due to the smaller amount of space for text, tend to have shorter sentences, a less 'literary' writing style, and a heavier focus on dialogue. Thus the use of this format tends to push the game towards these choices due to the limited amount of text that can be shown at once. This is perhaps partially responsible for another similarity between the games analysed, which is the use of a strong first person voice, including when switching characters as *A Summer's End* did. With these major similarities in mind, the analysis of *Heart of the Woods* now proceeds:

One of the major differences notable from the first is that the two major viewpoint characters (Maddy and Tara) start off as independent adults with their own venture (a Youtube channel) and a clear identity as lesbians (they have in fact dated each other before concluding it wouldn't work). This conflicts with the two prior games, which emphasized a 'first time in love' experience. This is in fact a trend with this developer's games, as can be seen if compared with their previous game *Highway Blossoms*. Rather the focus is distributed evenly between the romance and the fantasy genre elements. Throughout the game, both Maddy and Tara are involved in their own romantic entanglements. Indeed, Tara is depicted as a 'playgirl' type who was been involved with many of the fans of their Youtube channel, whereas the character Morgan has, since coming out as lesbian, been with a number of the women in her small rural community. Hence the text places emphasis on the characters having a stable identity and experience, taking the focus away from the 'discovery' of lesbian sexuality in oneself and towards the development of the romances themselves. On the other hand, the number of lesbian characters (four) among a small cast by coincidence can also be viewed as a concession towards the needs of the genre. The separation of the setting, in a remote rural area, allows for the construction of a space within the text where lesbian women are centred and the only main forces within the story; the incorporation of magical elements establishes the text firmly as fantasy, while the focus on romance and character means that as a whole, *Heart of the Woods* answers the desire of some yuri readers, such as the author of the blog post explored in the fan analysis section, for 'fantasy with realistic lesbian characters.' This setting choice also means the text can be seen as creating, amongst the main characters, Nagaike's *shōjo kyōdōtai,* a set of emotional bonds between them that connects them all beyond their individual romantic ties.

The director of the game noted in an interview that the 'style' of yuri games they want to make is 'tasteful and cute'. The emphasis on cuteness, as opposed to the more harrowing

style preferred by LGBT fiction focused on social struggle, can be seen in various aspects of the game; for instance, Tara functions as a sort of comic relief character, being a natural jokester, while Maddy herself functions as a 'straight man' in comparison, in particular drawing attention to the feebleness of Tara's attempts at flirting. Another way in which this emphasis can be seen is in the absence of parental figures who fulfil the role of pushing compulsory heterosexuality. Both *A Summer's End* and *Love Ribbon* featured such characters, a father in the latter case and a mother in the former. In *Heart of the Woods*, the character Morgan has an antagonistic mother figure, but this is due to her place in the fantasy plot rather than her disapproval of Morgan's romantic interests as such. In a sense, the use of the rural, isolated setting can thus be viewed as a way of establishing a 'closed off' world where the relative lack of social pressures seems more natural. In this way, it can even be viewed as paralleling the use of girls schools in classic Japanese yuri. Finally, Tara in particular but also Abigail, the fourth major character, and be viewed as having somewhat archetypal personalities which are exaggerated to help achieve the general 'cute' effect. Tara's womanising and joking attitude, for instance, are played for laughs and despite the arguable ethical problems involved with dating fans, it is not depicted as a character failing. Abigail's demure demeanour can also be viewed as this kind of exaggeration, justified by her long time as a ghost; the way in which her usual attitude conflicts with her abundant sexual desire can also be viewed as a kind of *gap moe*, a Japanese term for the cuteness induced by a character who has seemingly opposing character traits.

The setting itself is notable in general; the use of fantasy in Western yuri is not unusual, and it can be seen in various games including *Perfect Gold, Starlight Vega,* and *Escape from the Princess*. The kind of fantasy is most often clearly Western-inspired in terms of the language and visual presentation; whereas the kind of fantasy most often seen in Japanese yuri is *isekai* medieval fantasy of the kind seen in popular texts like *I'm in Love with the Villainess*, Western yuri takes various forms that demonstrate Western influence. As far as *Heart of the Woods* is concerned, the fantasy elements clearly take from Western mythology, with the heavy presence of fairies being a major part of the plot. The incorporation of fantasy directly into a modern-day story is not unheard of in Japanese yuri, but it often tends to be contrasted with the patterns of every-day life. *Heart of the Woods* decides, as noted, to rather limit the fantasy to an obscure corner of a little-visited forest. The usage of the idea of a Youtuber, as well as the general theme of the channel which is ghost-chasing, might also be viewed as relatively culturally specific. For instance, Japanese video hosting is not more or less

exclusive to Youtube as in the West, but divided between it and popular site Niconico Douga. Hence, there is a contrast between the desire for a 'cute' experience that draws from the lighter tradition in yuri, and a conventional fantasy genre plot with high stakes narratively.

The more Yuri elements of the text, therefore, can be seen in the characters rather than the plot, and this is most evident by starting with the visual design, which as seen above maintains an anime-influenced aesthetic akin to that of *Love Ribbon* (indeed, the forthcoming next game by this studio features art from Kobuta, a Japanese artist). Following on, the above image also features one of the NVL segments. While the majority of the game takes place in ADV as noted, there are occasionally segments in NVL during moments where heavier description is required; this is the introduction of the fourth major character seen above, who is a ghost. However, her appearance also fits into the conventions of *shōjo* aesthetics, such as her long hair and gown. This places the yuri tradition, which draws on such aesthetics, initially at odds with the design of the main characters, who are wearing heavier clothing to deal with the cold environs. However, the plot later involves Maddy becoming a ghost herself and being drawn into the world of fantasy. In this way, even though the fantasy itself is drawing from Western fantasy and fairy tale traditions, it is coded as related to yuri by its being represented primarily in terms of character by this new character, soon identified as Abigail. On the other hand, she is also the only of the main characters who is having a new experience in terms of lesbian relationships; indeed, she initially mistakes Maddy as being pregnant, which might be viewed as implying a heteronormative interpretation of things. Finally, a writer for the game has expressed interest in the magical girl genre, in which her next game will take place. With this in mind, the empowerment of Maddy by the fairies in the story, by which she is made 'queen' of the forest and gains powers, can be seen as a way of empowering her in the same way in which it is done in such Japanese media, namely in a way that increases her femininity rather than making her masculine to the extent she gains power. This is represented for instance, by her outfit when queen, which increases the *shōjo* aesthetic aspects of Abigail's own appearance.

It is soon after this that the confident nature of lesbian sexuality is made even clearer for Tara and Morgan, who begin their relationship with a fling before becoming more serious. Morgan openly talks about learning to knit from her 'ex' for instance, while the two have an open discussion about the purely sexual terms of their relationship for now. However, this scene is notable for two main reasons. Firstly, it is where Tara first expresses that she is a trans

woman, and talks about how Maddy alone stuck by her when she came out as such. *Heart of the Woods* received some praise from sites like *Okazu* and from various Steam reviewers on account of how this is handled, with the game mentioning it in this scene and it never playing a significant role thereafter. Therefore it was viewed as showing trans people as 'just people' whose identity need not dictate their life. On the other hand, some hesitation can also be seen in how it is handled. For instance, this scene takes place after Tara has had sex with Morgan, meaning that it is not presumably the first time she has mentioned it. The fact that the first time is omitted means that Morgan never expresses her reaction to finding out, and can instead be depicted as simply supporting without further comment. The other major factor to be considered is that only Maddy and Abigail receive sexual scenes in the patch. There was therefore a decision to avoid showing Tara's own sexual experiences despite the fact that the game makes clear that they did in fact happen. The inclusion of a trans main character, as well as the way in which it has been interpreted by reviewers and commentators, represents a desire to produce a socially responsible text based on an assimilationist model wherein texts must uphold standards of representation; but the way in which it is so minor a part of the story can also be viewed as a concession to the desire for a 'cute' story in which social pressures play a minor role. In this way, the issue is solved by placing it directly within the fantasy of yuri, utilising the idea, again, of a *shōjo kyōdōtai* in which different ways of being a woman are explored and accepted. *Heart of the Woods* does continue the conventional terms of description for the female body, focusing on what is 'soft', as in the scene where Abigail and Maddy first kiss. In this sense, therefore, the debt of the game to yuri can be seen, again through the prism of the game's characters in particular.

Therefore *Heart of the Woods*, while it can be viewed as noted as somewhere 'in between' the two former games in terms of how domesticated a yuri game it is, also demonstrates how the incorporation of influence is far from straightforward. The way in which the fantasy aspects draw from Western traditions while also being associated with shõjo aesthetic and with perhaps the most conventionally 'yuri' character in appearance and in fitting in to the less experienced model of character in terms of sexuality. This in turn demonstrates the affinity of sexuality and yuri: while Abigail is usually quite demure and otherworldly due to her many years as a ghost, she is also the one to desire sex with Maddy and it is noted she frequently masturbated as a ghost. Hence, the more feminine aspects of her character are not at all incompatible with a high libido and clear sense of sexuality; she is rather quite sure of her desire for Maddy from the start. While the game has a sense of social responsibility and

has aspects of Western LGBT sensibility in the inclusion of a trans character whose identity is 'not a big deal', it also demonstrates yuri influence through the general 'cute' tone, the use of anime visual design, and complex back and forth between the shõjo aesthetic and Western-fantasy.

Western yuri visual novels demonstrate a complex interplay of influence from Japanese yuri and integration of typically Western concerns, whether those explicitly LGBT in nature or not. However, the general influence both of yuri itself and of the foreignising discourse around the fandom, encouraging the knowledge of Japanese culture and language outside of Japanese texts directly, makes itself known pervasively throughout them. The most obvious example of influence is in visual style, of course, but the narratives themselves display a debt to Japanese yuri, in terms of choice of situation such as the usage of the 'indirect kiss' and the like in *Love Ribbon*, the conception and description of the female body itself as an object of desire from a female perspective, as can be seen in the many descriptions of 'softness', in terms of character itself, which tends to draw from archetypes familiar to yuri fans and to feature a general 'exaggerated' sense of character distinct from that which an assimilationist theory, focusing on social realism, might permit. In *Heart of the Woods,* the possibility of reparative transformative works based on yuri, that for example utilize the idea of all-women spaces and fantasy settings to show acceptance of other minorities like trans women who appear rarely in Japanese yuri, is demonstrated, while *A Summer's End* demonstrates how a focus on social pressures can still be combined with this influence of yuri to produce a text that focuses strongly on affirming lesbian desire and sexuality. Hence Western visual novels are a neocultural development that flow from the desires of transcultural readers, allowing the understanding of yuri's cultural distinctions and special possibilities to be directly combined, not just through readings, but through new transformative original works.

Conclusion:

The yuri genre continues to be a significant force within Japanese media and the Western fan community also appears to be capable of providing a stable base for the production not just of official translations of Japanese media, but also of original Western yuri media such as visual novels. However, as we have seen, whereas the Japanese community appears to largely be interested in 'pleasure not politics' as Maser puts it, there is a clear tension in the Western fan community between these poles.

As a transcultural fandom, interested in a foreign genre, the Western yuri fandom displays how assimilationist readings that try to control the genre and place it within existing norms are necessarily going to be alongside transcultural readings that allow the new genre to meaningfully effect the receiving culture and reader; on the one hand, assimilationist readings can be valuable for readers who require or desire a directly political and topical text; for instance, the response to *Crescent Moon and Doughnuts* was highly positively received by readers who appreciated its depiction of heteronormativity. On the other hand whereas some such as Friedman hold that a lack of explicit lesbian content in other yuri is a weakness of yuri and contrasted it negatively with Western LGBT fiction, some readers have viewed this lack of explicitness as a kind of positive in its own sense and place. For instance, in a comment on a discussion about manga editors talking about yuri growth in Japan, a commentator asserted that the kind of subtle or implicit homosocial relationships found in lighter yuri such as Precure was good representation for young homosexual women in Japan:

> 'Even more than that, I think they can be a good representation for homosexual girls who are saturated by just straight couples elsewhere. I mean, there's a reason why Precure is so popular between female yuri fans in Japan, after all.' (Wtv, 2017).

In instances such as this, a deformation of the concept of representation can be seen where fans find a way to fit yuri into it in a positive way.

This conflict will, as far as can be seen based on Dynasty, continue to be a fixture of reactions to yuri. The desire for lesbian characters and clearly identified lesbian struggles, is for instance, a key part of the creative impetus of titles like *A Summer's End*, showing how the visual novels produced in the West continue to apply this desire for representation to the genre while taking from it as well.

There are several things to watch for in the future. Firstly, how does the debate around representation, a part of the conflict between assimilationist and transcultural readings, as a proper way of judging yuri texts continue going forward in yuri communities? If they gain force, they could influence other fandoms that the participants are a part of, thus changing the overall nature of fandom responses. Another issue is the nature of how audiences are introduced to and read yuri in the future. While I have focused on Dynasty and the scanlations (fan translations) it depends on, the growth of yuri means that more and more yuri texts receive official translations: however, this can also mean a return to censorship, as was

the case for the official English translations of texts like *I Favor the Villainess*. It may also result in translations being more 'localized' and losing the particularly Japanese flavour that gave the fan communities some of their characteristics such as viewing translations as only one possibility, and using loan words and other cultural borrowings. In addition, there are many things about yuri in the West and in general that remain to be analysed as they fell outside the scope of this thesis. For instance, a full textual comparison of Western LGBT fiction with Western yuri texts and Japanese yuri, to explore the differences outside of fan perceptions, as we were limited to in this thesis. Other aspects include the particular responses of particular groups (such as gay men or non-binary people), which was made difficult by the usage of anonymous forums here. In general, yuri as a subject remains as rich as the debates in fan communities provoked by the debates inherent in a transcultural fandom.

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