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OTAKU FOR QUEER THEORY AND MEDIA THEORY
Michael Moon

Beautiful Fighting Girl by Saitō Tamaki, translated by J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pp. 213 + xxv. $60.00 cloth, $19.95 paper.

In 2004, in the initial phases of trying to write a book about Henry Darger and his little-girl combatants, I was intrigued to come across an online review of a book on *otaku*—hardcore fans of "fighting girl" manga and anime—by a Japanese Lacanian in which Darger was a central figure.[1] For the next several years, this one review was all I could learn about Tamaki Saitō's take on Darger and otaku and the figure of the "beautiful fighting girl." (The review I'd seen was entitled "Attack of the Phallic Girls.") Then I heard a couple of years ago that J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson had completed a translation of the full text of Saitō's book and that it was in press. In his book *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (first published in Japanese in 2000), Saitō analyzes the culture and sexuality of otaku, the mostly young male participants in one of the principal thriving consumer-collector-connoisseur subcultures that has formed around manga and anime.

With the publication of the present volume, non-Japanese-speaking scholars and fans of anime and manga, as well as students of sexuality and media, can now form our own responses to Saitō's account of the meaning and significance of the sexuality of otaku and of the erotic charge of the highly mediated "warrior girl" figures who fascinate them. As cotranslator J. Keith Vincent attests in his invaluable, extensive introduction,

it is "quite a baggy monster of a book" (xii), comprising chapters that range in kind from psychoanalytic theory to interviews with individual otaku and analyses of the workings of temporality in anime and manga. But Vincent goes on to make a compelling case that, taken together, the parts of Saitō's book still have much to offer readers across a broad range of disciplines and interests, especially readers and practitioners of queer theory.

Indeed, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* has generated as much heated debate as it has largely because of its author's insistence on putting otaku sexual desire and behavior—their strong emotional and/or erotic attachment to comics-and-cartoon depictions of cute girls in and out of battle—at the center of his analysis of otaku. Other commentators have tended to de-emphasize sexuality in their accounts. A book, published in Tokyo in 2001, in response to Saitō's, by Hiroki Azuma, another prominent culture critic in Japan, has already been published in translation by the University of Minnesota Press (*Otaku: Japan's Database Animals,* 2009). Azuma's book foregrounds political and social trauma and recurrent US cultural invasions as primary factors in explaining otaku. He also deprecates Saitō's focus on otaku sexuality and his pioneering attention to the kinds of highly networked, mediated, Internet-pervaded sexualities that have only become more

widespread, and more controversial, in the decade since his book was first published.

And yet, as Vincent points out in his introduction (xiv), sexuality, and specifically an extreme form of allegedly perverse sexuality, had been placed at the center of public debate on otaku over a decade before Saitō's and Azuma's respective books first appeared. That occurred in 1989, with the arrest of twenty-six-year-old Tsutomu Miyazaki, a Tokyo serial killer, for the murder and sexual molestation of four girls, aged 4–7. Before his arrest, the media had referred to Miyazaki as "The Little Girl Murderer," but, soon afterwards, the discovery (or planting—the debate about that appears to be unresolved) of anime as well as slasher films in his reportedly vast video collection (over five thousand titles) led to the media's rechristening him "The *Otaku* Murderer." The notion that watching too much video—too many slasher and anime films—had directly caused Miyazaki to commit his crimes gave rise to a full-blown moral panic in which the otaku subculture was "exposed" and demonized repeatedly as a breeding ground for deranged and violent pedophiles.

A full decade had already passed since the public outcry against otaku when Saitō published his account of otaku sexuality, and the highly sensationalized discourse of otaku as potential killers of little girls

had at least partly given way to the more measured, if still disapproving, image of them, widespread in the media, as obsessive, unproductive, unsocialized nerds—a public image closer to the one that had prevailed before the publicity surrounding the arrest and trial of the so-called Otaku Murderer. Inevitably, there had emerged during the same decade (the 1990s) several versions of a utopian account of otaku that celebrated the subculture for its ability to foster community among otherwise marginalized and alienated young people, to subvert capitalist consumer culture by radically reconfiguring it into networks of fan-producers, and to resist successfully the hegemony of US entertainment media with local media products. In its extreme version, otaku were proclaimed unrecognized heroes of contemporary Japan's assumption of international cultural primacy through the ever-increasing popularity of manga and anime in many parts of the world. Rather than a class of young men who needed to grow up, otaku became in this telling the advance guard of a new world order in which manga and anime were rapidly establishing themselves as one of the first fully globalized entertainment-media products— products around which new otaku or otaku-like subcultures were forming in many places far from Japan. Superconsumers to their critics, otaku paradoxically become

emblematic to some of their champions of a potentially revolutionary form of appropriative, communal fan culture.

Saitō's book labors to create some kind of middle ground in which otaku can be seen as being neither budding serial killers nor exemplary and successful subverters of (US or global) capitalist consumer culture. What otaku represent for Saitō, what makes their shared practices deserving of a book-length analysis, is their ongoing existence as a subculture of which the members have, collectively and individually, become proficient fictionalizers of perverse desires, taking one another as their primary audience for their performances of their strong attraction to the girl-warrior heroines of their favorite comics and animated films. These performances, as Saitō evokes them, sound highly rhetorical, as well as highly stylized. While there is no entry in the index to *Beautiful Fighting Girls* for "dandies" or "dandyism," nevertheless, the public or semipublic performances of perversity among otaku may have illuminating precedents in other dandiacal subcultures, East and West. Saitō's pronouncement that "the passion of the *otaku* is more performative" than that of the merely obsessive collector of anime (19) now seems ripe for the kinds of theoretical development enabled by the work on theories of performativity inaugurated by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

At the heart of the debate about otaku culture and otaku erotic culture is a strong disagreement between Saitō and Azuma about whether, in engaging in masturbation in conjunction with reading a manga, watching an anime, or playing a video game about a "girl warrior," an otaku is performing a sexual act. Indeed, as Vincent discusses in his introduction, Azuma has gone so far as to deny in public debate (with Saitō and feminist critic Kotani Mari) that "masturbating to a picture" is an "actual sexual act," insisting that it is more "like thumb sucking," more like the behavior of an infant or small child enacting a compulsion rather than that of a postpubescent erotic subject enacting a desire. Given Azuma's refusal to consider masturbation as possibly constituting "real sex" of any kind, otaku are for him somehow beyond sex or even (Francis Fukuyama take note) at the end of sex. For Saitō, to the contrary, the practice of masturbating to orgasm as one fantasizes about a fictional warrior girl, "get[ting] release with an anime character," is an act of definitive significance; it is for him the one thing that distinguishes an otaku from other kinds of anime enthusiasts (30).

Saitō, who sometimes exhibits a pundit's tendency to construct sociologies (albeit if only very much in passing) on the basis of what appears to be only a little anecdotal evidence, assures the reader (and seems to assume that the reader wants or needs such assurance— perhaps, as Vincent suggests, in relation to the preceding moral panic) that, while abundantly kinky in their "imaginary" sex lives, otaku are almost entirely straight "in reality" and tend to have "perfectly respectable members of the opposite sex as their partners." Otaku, he argues, are adept at shifting between desires and their "orientations" thereto (30); for him, both kinds of desire partake of real and imaginary elements, and the ability of the otaku to navigate the psychic and social shoals between these different but related kinds of desires makes them a type of notably successful early adopter of a view and an experience of erotic relations in which one engages sexually with a high level of awareness of the largely fictive qualities of one's relations with one's objects, whether they are one's real-life partner (or partners) or whatever kind of mass-mediated narrative figures tickle one's fancy. Vincent points out the consonance between Saitō's way of thinking about this and Sedgwick's, quoting (xix–xx) the latter's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991): "Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't *want* to do."[2] While it may seem entirely likely that there have long been people who were notably (if perhaps only to themselves) adept at commuting

between real and imaginary erotic desires and behaviors, what seems different about otaku for Saitō is that this formerly relatively private or even secret (if also widespread) practice has in the past few decades become an increasingly mass-mediated social role with an unprecedented amount of public visibility.

Saitō denies that the female partners of his (perverse) straight-male otaku are in any sense "substitutes" for the heroines of anime that the otaku may (also?) adore and desire, and opines, "My personal impression is that marriage to another otaku of the opposite sex tends to be seen as the perfect ending to life as an otaku" (30). Vincent defends Saitō from the charge of heteronormativity by arguing that while "Saitō may *describe* the real-life sexuality of the otaku he knows as tending toward the heterosexual and the vanilla, . . . he never *prescribes* that it be so" (xx). For Vincent, what gives Saitō's work its considerable interest to queer theorists is its theoretical tendency neither to privilege nor pathologize the otaku's enjoyment of "the reality-producing charge [that] . . . the beautiful fighting girl sparks across the gap between" his outward performance of sexual "normality" (xx) and his sustained commitment to both his perverse imaginary pleasures and the media-saturated collective context that enables and sustains these pleasures.

And what about those relatively understudied (at least in this book) *female* otaku? Saitō offers no substantive consideration of them and their practices; in his introduction, Vincent informs us that the author has written about female otaku elsewhere, and that what Saitō seems to mean by "female otaku" are female fans of *yaoi,* another huge subset of manga that, in contrast with girl-warrior narratives, features beautiful schoolboys falling in love and (in many cases) having sex with each other—narratives that are mostly written and drawn by women authors for a largely female audience. (Gay men my age might have found yaoi disturbing but fascinating when we were adolescents, but made do with *Archie* comics instead.)[3] In one of his few direct references to female otaku, Saitō mentions not only yaoi but also *shotakon,* a manga and anime genre that features prepubescent or pubescent boys in romantic and sometimes erotic contexts (29).

Is the interested reader to assume that Saitō understands female otaku desire as simply a mirror image of the male desire he analyzes so elaborately in this book? That reader will for the most part have to look elsewhere for answers to such questions. And indeed, besides making clear the reasons for the importance of this book to students of queer theory (and media theory) of several stripes, Vincent's introduction does an excellent job

of providing useful information for readers about some places where they may continue to pursue questions about fictiveness, desire, gender, and sexuality beyond *Beautiful Fighting Girl.*

Besides questions of performativity, another potentially fruitful area for queer theory–related research into the erotics of mass-mediated narrative and "real" fictive desire would be that of affect theory as theorized by Silvan Tomkins and revisited for queer theory by Sedgwick and Adam Frank in their 1995 collection *Shame and Its Sisters.* Especially pertinent to research on affect is *Beautiful Fighting Girl*'s recurrent and intriguing, if somewhat inconclusive, discussions of the particular configuration of otaku affect known in Japanese as *moé,* which is the feeling that otaku are said to have in response to what they experience as the powerful and pleasurable attractiveness of their favorite character or type of character. Again, proponents of moé run the gamut from those who embrace and avow what they experience as the sexual turn-on element of the extreme cuteness of their fantasy media object to those who deny that plays any part in their devotion to the character(s) they love. Tomkins's script theory of affect, a late-career resumption of his fascination with the practice of playwriting as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, may provide some useful conceptual tools for students interested

in analyzing the dynamics of moé. Saitō's somewhat sketchy account of the etiology of moé, based on a somewhat ungrounded version of trauma theory, sits awkwardly alongside his otherwise generally upbeat, win-win account of otaku sexuality and its anime-heroine objects. Script theory's central concern with the construction of scenes, and their linkage and amplification by intense emotions, pleasurable and otherwise, make it a potentially productive place for analysts of perverse, fetishistic desires and behaviors to explore.[4]

Of all Saitō's objects of study in *Beautiful Fighting Girls,* it is perhaps Darger and his work for whom the academic and theoretical contexts have undergone the most change in the decade since the book's first appearance in Japanese. Saitō's contention that the Chicago janitor-artist was merely neurotic (76), not the potential or actual psychopath that pioneering outsider-art scholar John M. MacGregor for some time considered him to be, was certainly a position worth staking out in the first years of Darger's coming to public hypervisibility in the late 1990s, but the polarization around the question of whether he was neurotic or psychotic has ceased to define the limits of debate about him and his art for some time now. Readers expecting Saitō to analyze the sexuality of Darger and his work with the kind of elaborate attention to detail and nuance that he pays to

the erotics of otaku in the rest of the book may be disappointed.

Yet even though Saito's book appears to have little to add to the debate about the impact of Darger's sexuality on his work, it does in its consideration of his work suggest the first of many kinds of connections that students, scholars, and fans may be interested in making between otaku and other kinds of graphic narrative. The point deserves emphasis that this book is of interest to students not only of sexualities but also of fictive narrative media of a number of kinds. Indeed, the imbrication of these two ranges of phenomena with each other has, arguably, intensified to a remarkable degree in the decade since Saitō's book first appeared. Who foresaw the proliferation of mobile porn downloads specially designed for viewing on smartphones (rhetorical question)? The degree to which sexualities of many kinds are now resolutely attached to and in some part products of the Internet and Internet-enabled social collectivities (antisocial as watching porn on your smartphone in a crowded restaurant may seem to be) is a circumstance for which Saitō probably deserves credit as an early anticipator. Readers excited by Vincent's reintroduction of Saitō's work on otaku sexuality into a more recent theoretical moment may be interested in other current takes on networked sexualities. A short list of some of the most stimulating of these might include, besides Vincent's introduction to *Beautiful Fighting Girl,* Kevin Ohi's recent article on Robinson Devor's film *Zoo* (2007) and the entry on "Titillation" in Ian Bogost's *How to Do Things with Videogames* (2011).[5] Although not all parts of Saito's book are likely to please every reader who takes an interest in it, from anime fan to queer theorist to the student of media and media-enabled sexualities, readers have reason to be grateful to Vincent and Lawson for their painstaking translation and annotation of this text and to the University of Minnesota Press for adding this volume to the rich mix of works (such as this and other volumes on manga and anime, as well as the excellent anime-and-manga "fan arts" journal *Mechademia*) that they continue to make available to anglophone readers.

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NOTES

1. William O. Gardner, "Attack of the Phallic Girls," *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 485–89, accessed 12 March

2011, http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review_essays/gardner88.htm.

2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 25.

3. Keith Vincent has written about yaoi and gay-male readers of the 1990s in "A Japanese Electra and Her Queer Progeny," *Mechademia* 2 (2007): 64–82.

4. Silvan Tomkins's own account of his script theory is to be found in chapters 32–41 of his *Affect Imagery Consciousness,* vol. 3: *The Negative Affects: Anger and Fear* (New York: Springer, 1991). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank provide excerpts from Tomkins's writings on script theory (in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], 179–95), as does Virginia Demos in her selection of Tomkins's writings (*Exploring Affect* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 303–410).

5. Kevin Ohi, "The Consummation of the Swallow's Wings: A Zoo Story," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 3 (2011): 715–43; and Ian Bogost, "Titillation," *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 103–9.