

## **BRINGING SMEXY BACK: FANGIRL PRODUCTION, AMVs, AND TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITY**

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*I'm bringing sexy back  
Them other boys don't know how to act  
I think you're special, what's behind your back?  
So turn around and I'll pick up the slack. (Timberlake, 2006)*

“i'm a girl & luv yaoi - very hot,” writes Rena54, in response to the YouTube video, “Yaoi Anime – SexyBack”, an anime music video (AMV) that has received 54,089 views in just over two years. The video mashes up scenes from a variety of popular Japanese anime, scans of manga cells, and fan art related to male-male pairings of favorite characters, with Justin Timberlake’s 2006 hit, “Sexy Back.” AMV mash-ups are fan-made music videos that reframe the narrative of a popular anime or manga series by re-editing scenes from many episodes to tell an unauthorized story, a story that highlights peripheral characters or creates relationships that are not part of the original narrative. But girls whose AMVs depict the boy/boy relationships that they call yaoi are making a contemporary, electronic version of slash; fan-created scenes and narratives pairing male characters from their favorite anime/manga series.

The term yaoi is a Japanese acronym, defined variously as *Y-A-ma nashi O-chi nashi I-mi nashi*, which translates to “no climax, no point, no meaning” or stories that are plotlessly episodic, driven by incidents of sexual relations. The alternate definition is employed (perhaps jokingly) by the girls and women who consume sexually explicit depictions of boy-boy romance, *Yamete! Atashi no Oshiri Itai!:* Stop! My ass hurts! (Bollmann, 2010, p. 42; Lunsing, 2006, p. 4; McClelland, 2008, p. 3). When Timberlake growls, “them other boys don’t know how to act,” he was not likely aware of the way these teen girls creating internet content might want their animated boys to act.

Timberlake's "Sexy Back," like much pop music, initially constructs the female "you" as an object of the male singer's desire, but later in the song, she simply becomes an object of contestation with "them other boys," to whom the "you" of the song eventually shifts, when those boys become "you motherfuckers." The song is nearly an anthem in the creation of anime music videos—a YouTube search of Sexy Back + AMV yielded over 1000 different uses of this song in producing AMVs. In almost every case, the character tasked with "bringing sexy back" is a pretty, longhaired, wholly androgynous, cartoon teenage boy. Is this contrast only ironic to adult women, or do the girls producing these videos appreciate the chasm between the aggressive (and potentially misogynist) masculinity depicted by Timberlake's swaggering musical protagonist and their mash-up depictions of slender boys offering each other slow, longing looks punctuated by a driving beat and interspersed with fan art depicting long, deep kisses—and occasionally more? Perhaps these girls' music videos resist not only dominant media constructions of gender to develop sites of their own sexual pleasure, but also help the girls resist constructions of themselves as passive recipients of media images, of popular music's misogyny, and of various media industries' ability to regulate and sanction the uses (and pleasures) of their products.

Cultural theorist Constance Penley (1997) suggests that recreating popular characters in male-male sexual relationships is an act "not only sexually but politically scary, with its overt homoeroticism throwing into sharp relief the usually invisible homosocial underpinnings of . . . U.S. culture" (p. 141). Like Penley, I suggest that it is not only the sexual content of these girls' videos that is transgressive, but their media use (and some might suggest abuse), their method of distribution, the way their interests make us question culturally held notions about female desire. Mark McClelland (2007) identifies a peculiar discomfort many westerners seem to have with the female desire that yaoi suggests: "When I causally mention that the most frequent

representations of male homosexuality in Japan . . . appear in manga comics written by and for women and girls, I am usually met with an incredulous ‘Why?’ This always strikes me as odd, because few people react with surprise to the fact that male pornography is full of ‘lesbian’ sex” (p. 1). Are we simply surprised that teen girls are so dissatisfied with the male characters and male homosocial situations available in popular media that they depict the shift from those homosocial situations into fully formed, homoerotic images of boys “boinking” as McClelland calls it? Or are we surprised that girls have desires and pleasures, and mash up the available, intensely homosocial, popular media to create images representing those desires and share them with a similarly interested internet community?

The very possibility that artifacts of popular culture can work in ways that are subversive, resistant, or transgressive is itself a claim that scholars hotly contest; I certainly do not wish to claim that teen girls, through creating video mash-ups, have somehow freed themselves from the constraints of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality that shape the mass media to which they have access. Nor do I wish to claim these girls are questioning corporate copyright out of a high-minded desire to jam corporate media control with their hybrid products. But that said, these girls are creating (and watching) a huge amount of internet content that represents a reflection of their own desires and offers an implicit critique of the mainstream media produced for them. In the process, they are developing communities and networks through which they share the content they create, as well as systems of friendship and support.

Anime music videos illustrate the notion of convergence culture that Henry Jenkins (2006) describes as “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (p. 2-3). As many as twenty years ago, Kaplan and Farrell (1994) called upon scholars to better understand the outside-of-school activities in which young women might engage on the web. Takayoshi, Huot, and Huot (1999)

note that the internet offers the potential to “alter relationships between girls and technology” in positive ways, through developing community with other girls and through developing technical skills (p. 104). However, despite the ways in which AMVs illustrate the global flow of media in a non-commercial media economy, there has been little study of AMVs, as examples of convergent culture, of girl’s media use, or of fan activity. Burgess and Green (2009) offer a brief definition of AMVs in their book on YouTube, noting especially the instability of YouTube as a platform for this kind of fan activity or its study (p. 6; pp. 38-52). Condry (2013) examines the tension between the ethics and the aesthetics of fan produced AMVs (p. 23-25). More common are recent studies of fan fiction, and fan fiction communities, like Hellekson and Busse’s (2006) book that describes the production and circulation of fan fiction, as well as the role of fan communities in authoring various forms of fan fiction (including slash). However, most research on online youth is most interested in their activities as building literacies (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2007), and not necessarily in gendered online behaviors and media creation.

There’s no question that girls are producing more Internet content than ever. The Pew Internet & American Life report (2005), “Teen Content Creators and Consumers,” documents the amount and kinds of internet content teens are creating. Teen girls are producing what the report names “remixed” content at a significantly higher rate than teen boys. By the 2009, the authors of the Pew Study suggest that girls are more likely to remix than boys, with 21% of teen girls producing remixed content, while only 15% of online boys produce this kind of work. Roughly 12 million youth are what Pew calls “content creators”: “online teens who have created or worked on a blog or web page, shared original creative content, or remixed content they found online into a new creation” (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2009, p. 22).

This paper, then, attempts to occupy that research space that exists at the intersection of work on the gendered nature of online fan behaviors and content creation, the history of yaoi in

Japan and the fan production of slash fiction in the west, and scholarly explorations the ways a contemporary convergence culture has enabled teen girls, who are already among primary non-commercial creators of internet content in the U.S. (Lenhart, et al., 2010) to create a new, electronic version of slash, one these girl creators often refer to as “yaoi AMVs.” Like the earlier slash fiction, the production and reception of these artifacts is gendered, and they are understudied as a means of gaining insight into the ways girls may push back at popular culture and its construction of both their desire and their desirability.

### **Reading Yaoi and Slash: The Previous Research Context**

*I'm bringing sexy back  
Them other fuckers don't know how to act  
Come let me make up for the things you lack  
'Cause you're burning up I gotta get it fast.* (Timberlake, 2006)

What teen and ‘tween girls mean when they define an anime music video distributed in a forum such as YouTube as yaoi is rarely the same thing that adult women purchasing a yaoi manga expect. Most AMVs would more appropriately be described as *shonen-ai*, the Japanese word meaning boys’ love, which typically depicts romance between boys: longing looks, handholding, embracing, kissing, and what adults might deem teen-appropriate activity, were many adults not confused by the gender of the anime characters in question (most don’t realize the characters are both male). Although AMVs are rarely pornographic (with the exception of those that incorporate fan art or *doujinshi* images of bondage and/or penetration), because the girls who create these videos often title them yaoi (often as a warning to viewers not interested in same-sex male relationships), it’s important to understand the similar content and fan relationship to Japanese yaoi.

Yaoi’s earliest forms were illustrated, manga fan fiction that seemed to develop independently and spontaneously in Japan at about the same time (1970s and 1980s) as slash

fiction in the U.S. and the United Kingdom (Kinsella, 2000, p. 125). Yaoi, mostly written by women, for women, has been a fast-growing proportion of the manga market in Japan since the late 1970s early 1980s, when *doujinshi* and fan-produced yaoi was first distributed at the Tokyo Comic Market (Kinsella, 2000, p. 113). Like AMVs, these manga reworked existing characters and commercial stories into new, same-sex love relationships. Yaoi is typically sexually explicit, often including multiple, illustrated scenes of rape, bondage, and penetration. Although some scholars have documented a subset of lesbian readers, in both Japan and in the west (Lunsing, 2006; Welker, 2006), Wim Lunsing (2006) is clear to point out that yaoi is not, in this Japanese context, gay pornography, which is produced by and for a different audience. He documents the criticisms of yaoi by the Japanese gay community as homophobic, while Mark McClelland (2006) suggests a similar response in the western gay press.

Lunsing (2006) responds to the claim of homophobia by suggesting that there is little difference in the sexual explicitness of the content or the development of characters in yaoi and gay comics. He argues, however, that gay men have been made uncomfortable because yaoi represents an example of the female gaze on the objectified male body, a situation that men, because of their privileged right to gaze, rather than be viewed, encounter rarely (p. 11). McClelland (2006), conversely, notes that authors of yaoi would respond that their characters are not politically gay, because they are not gay at all, “they are two young men who happen to love each other” (p. 4). This response is not unproblematic. In “Uttering the Absurd,” Neil Akatsuka (2009) complicates the gender dynamics of yaoi readership (heterosexual women) as not-queer-enough readers, because yaoi has a “queer identity without the anti-homophobic political agenda that queerness usually entails” (p. 172).

Why Japanese girls and women (and more and more western women) are interested in these images, and the pleasures they get from these narratives is certainly complex. A number of

scholars have made claims about both the readers of yaoi and Japanese culture, suggesting that patriarchy, Confucianism, and a lack of equality and reciprocity in relationships have all contributed to a culture in which women have so little power that they cannot fantasize about mutual love relationships with men. Welker (2006) agrees, suggesting that “the genre is widely considered to offer a libratory sphere within which presumably hetero-normative readers can experiment with romance and sexuality through identification with the beautiful boy characters” (p. 842). Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, Dru Pagliassotti’s co-edited collection (2008) also explores this question, with similar answers: the genre offers emancipatory potential for women’s erotic experiences, ones not available through heterosexual romance. Because the collection makes the same claims about slash fiction, it does the important work of shifting the readership to a western context and avoiding the suggestion that stifling patriarchy a purely Japanese phenomenon.

Among the first scholars to examine the western phenomenon of slash fiction was science fiction novelist Joanna Russ (1985), whose book *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts*, introduced a scholarly audience to fan slash, specifically K/S, or Kirk/Spock fan fiction. Based on the male lead characters of the original *Star Trek* series, K/S fan ‘zines published and distributed stories about Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock’s love relationship. While these stories varied from G-rated to X-rated, all assumed a sexual, love relationship between these two characters, and attempted to set those stories within the universe of the original show, a universe in which it was clear that “the TV series made the Kirk-Spock friendship a matter of real respect and real love, in contrast to Kirk’s *pro forma* affairs with various women” (p. 84). Russ, unlike many scholars of yaoi, does not suggest these narratives are entirely emancipatory; she argues that most of the K/S narratives, while perhaps enjoyable for some women, do not question the social construction or performance of those traits gendered feminine: monogamy,

empathy, and a disinclination to initiate sexually (p. 87). Russ is able to articulate three things she thinks slash stories do offer: “a sexual relationship that does not require abandoning freedom, adventure, and first-class humanity . . . they [readers] want sexual enjoyment that is intense, whole, and satisfying . . . they also want to create images of male bodies as objects of desire” (p. 90). AMVs share these three elements with slash fiction and yaoi, as evidenced by what their creators and consumers write about them.

### **Girls and AMVs: Sample and Framework**

*Dirty babe*

*You see the shackles*

*Baby I'm your slave*

*I'll let you whip me if I misbehave*

*It's just that no one makes me feel this way.* (Timberlake, 2006)

My objectives with this study are to demonstrate the ways in which these anime music videos foregrounding male-male relationships, are related to earlier slash fiction, but how the medium of these fan productions also shapes their message, making these videos not just a comment on the content of contemporary media, but a critique of its modes of production and distribution. In order to meet these objectives, I undertook a search to find a small number of related AMVs. I limited my search to AMVs on a single distribution site, YouTube. To demonstrate the ubiquity of these boy-boy video remixes, I completed several searches. The search phrase “AMV + Yaoi,” yielded 9,280 hits, many of them having over 125,000 individual views from different IP addresses. To narrow the information for this paper, I searched for an even smaller subset—a single popular song: “Sexyback + yaoi,” a search that yielded 385 results. In this set, I filtered by view count, and examined the top five AMVs that claimed to have been authored by middle or high school aged girls, AMVs that had view counts ranging from 25,233 – 76,644.

Burgess and Green (2009) and many others studying online fan culture have documented

the challenges of knowing with certainty the “real” identity of online contributors. I cannot be sure the girls whose AMVs I discuss are under 18, or whether they are in fact, girls. However, I have chosen only those of the top five AMVs that self disclosed gender, not only in their profile, but in replies to their commenters, and those who, despite the age they put on their profile, discuss issues like boys at school or other school events in their comment activities. For example, one profile suggests that the poster is 31-years-old, but she regularly replies to queries about school and even high school algebra homework in her conversations with commenters, suggesting she is unlikely to be 31. But because I had no contact with any of the girls who own these YouTube channels, I cannot know. In addition, these accounts are unstable, and one has been suspended since I started this project two years ago. I am working from the printed comments, and considering them not an online source, but a data set. The five girls whose AMVs comprise the core of this study are who I refer to as “creators” and to whom I have given the following online names (aliases to protect their identities and channels, as I have not sought informed consent—or any contact—with these underage girls): Barbarella, tildamoon, sayal3, 4kentros, and Jabba. Although best practice in fan communities would assume informed consent (Stedman 2012; Hellekson & Busse, 2009). Although “creators” are sometimes called “vidders” in other online conversations and activities, I’m following the Pew Study (2010) for my terms.

For each of these five creators’ AMVs, I printed all of the comments (968 total), which came from hundreds of individual YouTube viewers (who I will call commenters), and began to categorize the comments in order to better understand if the girls producing and consuming these AMVs offered insight into the reasons they took part in this fan activity. I consider these comments within the framework Joanna Russ (1985) articulates. Russ offered three characteristics of slash that she suggested made it of special interest to women: the depiction of a sexual relationship that doesn’t require one passive partner; sexual pleasures defined by those

creating and creating and consuming the artifacts; and images of male bodies as objects of desire. All of these themes are apparent in the content of the videos themselves, and are reinforced through viewer comments, but two additional categories are salient in the number of comments and replies they generated: first, the desire of creators and viewers to claim a “fangirl” identity—an identity both negatively gendered, and one claiming a fan position, and second, the creators’ responses to flags, flames and threats, and the nearly mandatory disclaimer that the AMV is not in copyright violation.

### **Examining the Products and Responses: AMVs of Five Girl Creators**

*I’m bringing sexy back*  
*You motherfuckers watch how I attack*  
*If that’s your girl you better watch your back*  
*Cause she’ll burn it up for me and that’s a fact.* (Timberlake, 2006)

The actual products these girls create vary greatly in complexity. For example, the 45 second video, “Fullmetal Alchemist – Sexyback,” by Jabba (2006), uses 27 different edits, shifting among various episodes of the series *Fullmetal Alchemist* to tell a story not part of the original show, using the beat of Timberlake’s “Sexy Back” to both pace the edits and give the appearance that the central character was singing Timberlake’s song. This is a complex activity, as it requires a detailed knowledge of the clips available to tell the story the author has chosen, while also choosing those clips that synchronize the character’s speech with the words of the song. Other AMVs contain between 25-125 fan images, scanned manga and dōjinshi cels (fan produced manga), and anime clips in the 4:03 play time of the original song. Although the quality of sound and editing vary greatly, as Lessig (2008) writes of this sort of creative activity, “This is not simply copying” (p. 70). Lessig makes the point that this kind of remixing creates a new message precisely because its components had previous cultural weight, and carried certain meanings on their own; they become more meaningful in juxtaposition (68-76). The fact that in

Jabba's AMV, "Sexy Back," with the overt sexual aggression of its protagonist's words "You motherfuckers watch how I attack," is juxtaposed with video clips of a blonde, long-haired, big-eyed, slender, 15-year-old cartoon boy (who is also a double amputee) seems to offer comment on the song, on the character from the manga and anime, and on the girls who will watch this video. Despite the differences in production values and relative skill of the creators, these five AMVs and the comments of their viewers offer a rich pool of data from which five categories emerge. The next section of this paper is devoted to their analysis.

### **Claiming a Life of Adventure/Rejecting Domesticity**

When Russ (1985) described "a sexual relationship that does not require abandoning freedom, adventure, and first-class humanity" (p. 90) she described a situation that rarely exists even in anime and manga, even in the manga written for girls (*shōjo*). Although examples to the contrary exist, in these *shōjo* romances, the female characters are often reluctant in adventure, quick to abandon freedom for domestic roles, and rarely as strong or able as their male counterparts. In fact, a scholars writing on *shōjo* anime and manga describe the *shōjo* heroine as an "every-girl"—a girl who is not the most beautiful, the best student, the most clever, and is often clumsy and silly (Napier 2005; Orbaugh 2003; Toku, 2007). Her appeal lies in her cuteness, *kawaii* in Japanese, which often carries with it a quick acceptance of traditional domestic roles like learning to cook, and demonstrating "heart" and "cheerfulness" in the face of adversity (Lent 1999; Leheny 2009). In contrast to the often-unsure and incompetent female characters in *shōjo*, the anime sources of these yaoi "Sexy Back" AMVs, are with few exceptions, mash-ups of a variety mainstream, *shonen* (boy) anime and manga (*Full Metal Alchemist*, *Naruto*, *DeathNote*, *Bleach*, *Yu-Gi-Oh*, etc.). In each of these anime (which are all adapted from *shonen* manga), the homosocial relationships represent the strongest bonds, the boys represent the most fully formed characters, and the lives of boys are rich and interesting,

with the plots driven by their adventures. Moreover, the hero boys are not just competent, they are often “chosen” ones, whose actions might decide the fate of their worlds.

Although not in every case, but consistently, in shonen stories, boys cause action, and girls, if they even exist in the action, find themselves repeatedly acted upon. Although neither creators of AMVs nor their commenters directly address the relative lack of interesting female characters in their source materials, they do comment on their interest in the boy-boy pairing (the “rightness” of the male characters for each other: “I love Ed and Roy together. Their [sic] perfect”, “I love this couple” or “these 2 r gr8 2gthr”.) These kinds of comments correspond to creators’ purposes in their AMVs, videos that typically include fights and dazzling escapes, in addition to longing looks. Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers* (1992), describes the fan desire to depict beautiful male bodies together (p. 194), suggesting that slash provides readers with androgynous romance, and a space in which women can turn the tired masculinity of “ready made” television characters into new characters with more fluid identities, at least in part because television offers so few female characters of interest. In the end, however, Jenkins suggests slash is a “renegotiation, rather than a radical break, with the ideological construction of mass culture” (p. 220). It isn’t, then, entirely surprising that some girl fans might wish to revise and reframe these anime to reflect relationships in which partners have adventurous and active lives, punctuated by lots of making out, even if it is occasionally surprised, coerced or confused making out. These AMVs recreate the typical shōjo romance from shonen source material, depicting relationships between equal peers, rather than the protection of an object by an active subject. They actively revise the shonen source material to depict romance, rather than adventure alone.

### **Defining Own Sexual Pleasures**

And yet, we arrive at the conclusion that it is not just about adventure, it is also about

sexual pleasure. Both creators and commenters are most clear on this: girls and women find pleasure in producing and consuming images and erotic stories of boys kissing, being tender, and having even very aggressive sex with each other. While most of the AMVs girls create are relatively tame in relation to some of the pornographic slash and *yaoi* commercially available, perhaps that has more to do with the availability of source material to tell their stories. It is certainly not uncommon to find insertions of very sexually graphic fan art and cels from in an AMV—and, in fact, these AMVs with high view counts that comprised my sample also had far more explicit content than the usual AMV (with lower view counts).

Girls commenting on the videos describe physical pleasure and physical reactions, whether literal or metaphoric, in more than one in three of their comments. In response to “ItachiXSasuke—Sexyback,” one girl writes, “GOD HELP ME!!!!!! . . . He loved. He. He. They. They. . . finishes massive nosebleed goose bumbs [sic] and cold sweat starts the [sic] appear body turns cold eyes pops [sic] open...I’m on the edge of an orgasm.” Although this viewer lists a wider variety of bodily responses than typical in a single comment, she uses a common strategy, and describes her response as a manga or anime character would respond. One convention of manga art is a variety of bodily responses used to depict sexual arousal: blushing, fainting, a gushing nosebleed, drooling, profuse sweat appearing in huge drops, and eyes popping out at sexual stimuli. With the exception of blushing, which is not a gendered response, these are more often the conventions of arousal in male characters. But the response among commenters is nearly as conventionalized as the response in anime/manga, as one after another girls write, “faint at last pic,” “blush. It’s right and wrong at the same time,” “\*drool\*”, and “ZOMG. That last picture: nosebleed.” More pointedly, “IM [sic] FREAKIN HORNY!” “That got me wet, i’m serious,” “Fapping [masturbating] is a prerequisite when watching this. . . . Or you just might implode” and “omg. I feel an orgasm coming on.” This range of descriptions of

arousal is representative of the sample, with hundreds such examples in this set of comments on only five AMVs, describing specific, though conventionalized bodily responses.

As McClelland suggests, many people react with surprise when they learn that girls and women are both producers and consumers of this kind of visual imagery, even though the same people accept readily that boys/men might seek out images of females having sex with each other. Such images of women are so commonplace that they are no longer simply relegated to pornographic media, but are mentioned, laughed about, and alluded to on family television, in spreads in women's fashion magazines, and other visual mass media. Why are we surprised that girls express similar interest in the objects of their desire, boys? And why are similar images depicting men so underground in popular culture?

Some obvious answers include our cultural discomfort with same-sex male relationships; in fact, the chaste kisses depicted in many AMVs result in flaming and flagging. Perhaps even more important, though, and most harmful to girls, is that we are equally uncomfortable with tweenage and teenage girls expressing any kind of sexual desire. We pathologize girls' desires as always already inappropriate and dangerous; in fact, our most persevering pop cultural mythologies about teen promiscuity are related to anxieties about girls' precocious sexuality (largely fictitious accounts of rainbow parties, girls who crave multiple partners, outbreaks of STDs tied to a single group of girls, and the epidemic of teen mothers—never teen parents!—etc.). Girls are cast as usually partner-less in these pathological sexual behaviors.

We, as a culture, worry about girls' sexuality, and we particularly worry when our accounts of it suggest pleasures that we don't understand. It's unclear whether the girls producing and consuming these images entirely understand either. Russ (1985), who was a grown woman at the time, writes about her embarrassment and titillation upon discovering K/S slash. Most yaoi journals devote editorial space to helping women negotiate their interest in these

images (Bollman, 2010; McClelland, 2006). Many girls producing AMVs distance themselves from their creations, suggestions that “this is the first time” she made this kind of video, or she “made it for my little sister” or her “friend thought that this would be a great pairing.” In my small sample, several commenters even ask why they might be responding in the way they are, with one viewer writing, “Every time I watch this, my stomach gets butterflies. Is that good or bad. Could one of you people who have watched yaoi for a long time answer this?” Another doesn’t ask if her response is good or bad, she labels her own interest as deviant, writing, “I’m only 11 and I love yaoi and shonen-ai. God, I’m such a perv.” A third writes, “I can’t wait until I’m 18. Where can I buy this not in secret?” Clearly the last commenter doesn’t mean the AMV, which is available on YouTube, but yaoi videos or manga, which she associates with an adult desire that might someday be not secret.

There is a discomfort and embarrassment at the interest, yet they act on it, in semi-public sphere, creating and consuming images that respond to their pleasures, not the pleasures they would feel more comfortable enacting. In addition, in building a community, these girls also support and reassure each other that their interests are not bad. In response to the 11-year-old, several other commenters, including one who said she was 14, disclosed that they had been interested in similar images at a similar age. Another girl wrote of her desire, “I’m alone here . . .” and the response she received was the comforting, “not alone, cause I’m alone but we can be here together.” “Here” becomes the shared space of a peer’s YouTube channel.

### **Situating Male Bodies as Objects of the Desiring Gaze**

AMVs, like fan fiction and fan art, can actively represent some girls’ sexual desires, and as part of enacting that desire, the videos situate male bodies as objects of the viewers’ gaze. The source anime offers an effective vehicle for this gaze through creating characters of a conventional manga type, beautiful boys referred to as bishōnen. These boys are highly

feminized—they are typically slender, long-haired, big-eyed, and pretty. They are so pretty, in fact, that viewers not familiar with anime often misidentify them as girls, as in one comment where an uninitiated commenter asks, “How come her name is Ed? Isn’t she a girl?” In addition to the bishōnen characters, the creators’ use of fan art, dōjinshi cels, and cross-cutting point-of-view shots in AMVs are designed to make a boy the clear object of another boy’s (and by extension, the viewers’) desiring gaze. Fully one in four of the comments in this data set relates to male bodies as the object of female desire. The most representative comments suggest viewers find the images to be hot or sexy although the adjectives are those more often used to describe media images of women. Girls write, “so sexy n cute,” “sexy and hot,” “f\*cking hot,” “super smexy,” “pretty fucking hot” and “so cute and smexy.” They also comment about images of favorite characters: “Ed’s short, but he’s still sexy,” “Love the picture of Roy with his hand down his pants,” “Yuki and Shuichi are sooo hot,” and “Sasuke = sizzle.”

In addition to expressing simple desire at the images, several also attempt to explain that desire, in somewhat complex terms that reflect Russ’s (1985) and Penley’s (1997) observations on slash. One girl explains, “if you’re a girl like me, the theory goes something like this. Yaoi vids are so popular with straight girls because the girls in question get treated to double the naked boy flesh and double the naked boy.” Some girls put themselves in the position of one of the male characters, “It shows how lucky Sasuke is to have Itachi, who has a yummy body,” while other girls envision themselves not as identifying with one of the boys in the video, but engaged in an encounter with both of them: “Itachi and Sasuke invite boobear [user name] 2 bed. AW YEAH BEBE!”

Because teen boys in anime are often feminine-looking, these characters create a space for both attraction and identification. Girls don’t give up feminine beauty in fantasies of identification with these boys; in fact, through these fantasies, they are able to recapture and

control the objectifying gaze that is usually a male prerogative and pleasure, and turn it back on to the male body. Some scholars address the claim that women interested in same-sex male erotica are unable to integrate positive feelings about their own female bodies into their fantasy lives (Jenkins, 1997; Lunsing, 2006; McClelland, 2006; Welker, 2006). On the contrary, the production of *yaoi* videos seems to suggest that these girls are rejecting the images of girls and women that our culture produces for male pleasure and the male gaze. For many girls, the pretty, but unmade-up boys of manga and anime are, in fact, far more like themselves than the huge busted, bombshell women that are both likely to inhabit anime manga designed for men and boys, and that are a regular part of our western media viewing experience.

Blogger kerry (2009), writes about the mere possibility of the female gaze in her Hub entry, “The Female Gaze.” She argues that of course a female gaze exists, but is only beginning to appear in explicit ways (in the work of women filmmakers, such as Sophia Coppola). “However,” she suggests, “it is much more common for women and girls to *subvert* the intended gaze of media than to create their own Gaze. For many, this is an unconscious process; for others, it is knowingly revolutionary” (2009). She cites the work of fangirls as evidence of this move, offering that they are “Recutting the world to match their eyes.”

Penley (1997) theorizes this rejection of conventional images and relationships, by suggesting that slash is both described by and extends Michel de Certeau’s “Brownian motion” the ways by which a mainly powerless group, in resisting the products of the more powerful group, attempts in a random way to convert those products to their own ends (p. 104). The product of these tactics is *bricolage*, a revamping of already existing products (p. 104-5). Penley suggests that slash writers take de Certeau one step further, for their acts of resistance are not fleeting pleasures at resistant readings, but are actual products: “These products mimic and mock those of the industry they are ‘borrowing’ from while offering pleasures found lacking in the

original” (p. 105).

### **Claiming a Fangirl Identity**

Controlling the gaze and turning it back upon the male body mandates the willingness to accept a position of power over images and their manipulation. Within the relative safety of their community, both creators and commenters are willing to claim an identity by calling themselves fangirls, a word that is also used derisively against them by (mainly) online boys. As LupinDrake (2007), a presumably boy, defines the term on Urban Dictionary.com, “A fangirl is a (female) fan of a character from a movie, anime, video game, etc. . . . Usually, members of this label are seen as 1) insane; 2) idiotic; or 3) scary.” The denigrating term is used to describe the girls who immerse themselves in anime and manga worlds, who inhabit on-line fan sites, and who create and share Internet content about their fandoms. The products of their fan activity are treated as derisively as the girls themselves. Blogger kerryg asks what it is about fangirls that makes others—particularly boys—so uncomfortable, and suggests that it is precisely their willingness and ability to control the gaze and unapologetically cast it upon men. In our culture, it is not a girl’s place to look, and to take obvious and public pleasure in her looking.

While fangirl is a term regularly used to denigrate girl fans, many girls producing AMVs seem to embrace it. For example, a search of playlists on YouTube with fangirl in the title produces more than 52,000 hits. In addition, in my sample of nearly 1000 comments, approximately one in fifteen makes reference to herself as a fangirl. In nearly every case, the choice is an effort to build community and demonstrate empathy with other community members, as demonstrated by regular use of first person plural pronouns: “we” or “us” or third person plural “fangirls.” One girl writes, ‘us [sic] yaoi fangirls are crazy;’ a second offers, “Yaoi fangirls know awesome,” and a third is the most specific about her place in a community, “This is a great channel! Im [sic] such a fangirl!” Several address or support the creators with a

fond use of the term, “Thanks! We gotta spread the yaoi love, fangirl! <3” and “I LOVE this! Us fangirls do it best!”

In addition to the 72 direct references to fangirl identity, a little more than half of the commenters indirectly establish fangirl identity by credentialing themselves or their fan activities, things like direct knowledge of anime, characters, plotlines, etc. For example one writes, “I always wanted to use that clip from FMA (at :23), but this song makes it perfect. A second way they credential themselves is through “fanatic” activity, descriptions of their fan activities, their fan fics, work on Deviant Art, or their own AMVs to which they sometimes share links. One commenter writes, “Jabba, you’ll like this one!” followed by a link to her own AMV.

That girls themselves reappropriate the term fangirl that is used derisively about them suggests several things. That these girls find their online space generally safe, and are using this word to build community among themselves seems an easy explanation. Scholars such as Graybil and Pigg would suggest that the use of the term “fangirl” as an identity marker might be related to “identity building” as part of developing agency within online conversations (p. 104). But perhaps more complex are the entangled notions of reclaiming a derogatory word by embracing it, and the implicit understanding that the word and activities associated with it have been derided because it represents a power position—the position of consumer and manipulator of images. By the very nature of the fan role, the fangirl is the desiring subject, and she places another (men) in an object position. What fangirls do is look, and claiming the name is part of claiming the right to look, and to re-edit the world for their gaze.

### **Protecting against Flaming and Flagging**

Fangirls producing work they title yaoi face even more online derision than the average fangirl, usually from boys—boys interested in the fandoms that these yaoi videos derive from. Certainly, scholars of slash and yaoi have noted similar reactions to those female authors from

straight fans (McClelland, 2006, p. 3; Penley, 1997, p. 210). In this sample, the majority instances of flaming and flagging were in the two videos that were tagged with the name of a mainstream series (*Naruto* and *Full Metal Alchemist*) rather than a simple yaoi tag. Clearly some fans, both boys and girls, looking for straight AMVs, came upon these, perhaps by accident, and left comments flaming the video or its creator and/or flagging it for content. Nearly one in eight of the comments (125) is some kind of flame, thumbs down, or flag.

While all these creators tag the titles of their video with a content disclaimer; seductivemango (2008) combines disclaimers of both content and ownership: “btw, if you find mild yaoi (boyXboy action for the clueless) offensive, don't watch this. (This is a fan-made video and I take no credit/claims for the anime or song).” Despite the disclaimers and attempts by the creators to title and tag their AMVs so that they find the right audience, their work is regularly flamed by surprised or angry viewers. Most of the flaming comments are about the content of the videos, and represent a homophobic reaction to the content: “This is so stupid.” “very disgusting,” “my eyes are burning,” “this is disturbing,” and “this vids [sic] kinda gay.” A few flames are name-calling or labeling, such as “It makes me sad that being a pervert is so acceptable in this world.”

However, there are also a handful of comments that are themselves disturbing in their violent and misogynist stance, comments that seek to discipline what the commenters see as subversive sexuality: “Go be a perverted bitch somewhere else, please,” “You need to get fucked so hard you stop this shit,” “I'm GOING TO KILL YOU ALL . . .fucking disgusting and must be destroyed!,” “All fangirls fear me . . .why? Because I have a [sic] sorts of weapons and shit at my house . . .,” “you little bitch I will fuck you up,” and “GO AND FUCK A TREE OR I'LL STICK IT IN YOU INSTEAD.” There's no question that some of these comments are odd (“go fuck a tree”), but there is a raw vehemence here that is frankly frightening. These commenters

threaten sexualized violence, seemingly because they had identified these fangirls as gender non-conformists. Although there is ample evidence that girls experience more online harassment than boys (Chisholm, 2006; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2006), the vehemence with which these girls are threatened is stunning. Threats of sexual violence and death might give some girls pause, but in most cases, these creators responded politely, “Please don’t threaten my commenters;” let their community respond, “Hey [username of violent flamer], ??????, r u sure ur okay?” or “Go be narrow minded and ignorant somewhere else;” or responded with a sophisticated generosity: “I just don’t enjoy being called a disgusting freak. I have no problems with polite opinions.” In addition, the creators often point to their warnings, “Pay heed to the warning. If you don’t like this, don’t click on it.” There certainly are occasional flame wars between commenters, but the community typically attempts to surround and silence outsiders quickly, occasionally with comments like, “Why did you watch it? Maybe someone is in the closet . . .”

In addition, the creators, who control who can post comments on their channels, often simply silence some commenters. They respond to flammers with comments such as, “I’ll delete your comments if you act like a asshole here,” or “Don’t mess with my fangirls, or your idiot [sic] comments WILL BE REMOVED.” Finally some face so much flaming and harassment that they simply turned off the comment feature at some point, though there is a clear desire to remain in contact with her community: “I had to turn off the comments because of jerks. Yaoi fangirls message me.” These responses demonstrate a desire to control the conversation, and perhaps, protect their community of fangirls.

In addition to this level of flaming, girls creating these AMVs also face flagging (for content) and, like all remixers, a risk of having their work taken down because of copyright infringement. Russ’s discussion of slash fan fiction (1985), adds a another important element closely related to the production of AMVs, when she suggests that the K/S material is the only

“sexual fantasy I know of written without the interposition of interests that are political or commercial” (p. 89-90). It is this element that may be most salient when discussing the girls who create and distribute AMVs online. Because the video production is a time-consuming and complex activity, and the videos themselves not only have no commercial value, but are nonetheless ephemeral in the rapidity with which they can be flagged (for content) or taken down by the hosting sites for copyright violations. In fact, because of their content, they may be even more likely to be threatened with copyright action. For example, as Lawrence Lessig (2008) points out, commercial interests such as Warner Brothers (owners of Harry Potter), have come to terms with leaving fans and fan products alone, except in two instances: when they are deemed commercial, or when they are deemed pornographic (p. 209). And to many media owners, depictions of same-sex male relationships using their characters, no matter how tame, are more likely to be deemed pornographic, perhaps because they are also more likely to be flagged by other fans, and brought to the attention of those with the authority to pull them out of circulation.

All five of the creators in this sample offered explicit disclaimers concerning their videos. Barbarella (2007) writes, “WARNING: This vid contains YAOI! It means boy with boy pairing. If you don’t like it, don’t watch it.” Saya13 (2006) writes, “If you don’t like yaoi that’s fine, but you don’t have to bitch to the whole fucking world about it . . . .” A third creator, tildamoon (2007), is more subtle, but assumes an in-group, a community to whom her work is directed and one that doesn’t need explanation or definition of terms: “YAOI AND INCEST WARNING. If you don’t know what yaoi is, please back away slowly.” A fourth creator, 4kentros (2008) entreats her viewers not to flag her work with a simple warning, “Warning yaoi—Please no flagging.” In addition, all of these creators attempt to use their source material fairly by citing the recording artist and linking to places where the song can be legally purchased (usually Amazon or i-tunes).

As if the threats of viewers would not be enough for these creators to contend with, the ways in which re-mixed products are viewed by the original materials' corporate owners is strongly gendered as well. If the girls producing these videos don't express an immediate awareness that corporate response (Viacom pressure on YouTube, for example) to their work is gendered at some level, they are certainly aware that other fans, through flagging their work, increase the chance of corporate intervention or account suspension. A fan AMV creator suoubi (2009) writes, "For all yaoi fans... HAVE FUN!^^ And even if you don't like yaoi.... PLEASE don't flag!!! (it was soooo much work T\_T)." The re-mix, or mash-up work of boys tends to be more comic—that is, parody—in much broader terms (which is more obviously protected by digital copyright law). For example, LittleKuriboh's "Yu-Gi-Oh: the Abridged Series." The author's disclaimer goes: "Yu-Gi-Oh is the property of Konami and Kazuki Takahashi. We are only a parody, we are not breaking any laws nor intend to." By suing the word parody, the creator directly responds to the law by making the claim that his work falls into a specifically protected category.

In contrast, the work of girl creators, particularly when their AMVs depict erotic, same-sex relationships, is not as likely to be interpreted as either parody or critical commentary, (another protected activity); nor are the girls themselves making these claims. Jenkins (2006), however, argues that while, "It would be hard to argue that a video that depicts Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon as lovers does not 'transform the original in a way that expands its potential meanings'" such work would still be considered fan fiction, and not "an acceptable appropriation of their [Lucasfilms] intellectual property" (p.161). So although some copyright owners (like Warner Brothers, as owners of *Harry Potter*, and Lucasfilms, as owner of *Star Wars*) have been somewhat open to some fan communities' production, the production of boys, which is more likely to be humorous, or very "straight" fan reinterpretations, are continually favored; in fact,

Jenkins reports that the *Star Wars* digital filmmakers expressed surprise when told that there were women and girls making *Star Wars* video products (p. 161).

Many girls producing AMVs express frustration at YouTube and other distribution sites for their narrow interpretation of this aspect of copyright law. As one girl, biyo49, writes on her YouTube account, (2007) “UPDATE! So two of my videos have been removed [for] copyright, which is real outrages [sic] . . . . I purchased the songs and the DVDs used in my videos. I haven't used anything that has been acquired by illegal downloading and this is my reward? Yeah if you can't tell...I'm a bit irate over this.” Moreover, many fan video creators, like biyo49, express dismay to find their work removed from distribution sites like YouTube, when they believe that they have been following all the rules.

### **Why They're Bringing Sexy Back: Girls Resisting**

Given that the negative reaction of some other fans, of boys in general to girls' online fan behavior, and of corporate interests, all seems gendered—in that the negativity is related to the gender of the producers as well as the content of the production—how can we not read the girls producing this work as resistant in a rich variety of unsettling ways? The four things I take from this overview of girls creating AMVs are related to this resistance. These girl-producers are resisting the images of women with which they are presented in popular media, and in many ways foregrounding an almost complete lack of interesting, active, female characters with whom girls can identify. The lack of women in these universes is not unlike the lack of women in important roles in business, industry, government, sports, and the military. Our culture is largely homosocial, and our media reflect this through depictions of a world where women are largely absent, are props, or interior decoration. We are perhaps made most uncomfortable by these videos of homoerotic behavior, because they highlight the near absence of women in the source materials *and* in our larger culture. We are forced to ponder whether *men* can have mutual

relationships with women, when many, in large measure, have no women peers. Given this context, the idea that girls might desire to escape a patriarchy that leaves little space for them to be feminine, adventurous, and romantic, with no space for mutuality and reciprocity, is unsurprising.

Although perhaps these fangirls are at some level rejecting the images and activities of women available to them in these media, I still don't believe that these fan AMVs are really questioning heteronormativity, given the fact that the characters are neither gay nor straight, even in the original shows. Most of these adolescent boys in shonen anime are pre-sexual, or stoically a-sexual, and live in universes where heroes look like girls, the villains usually look like men, and women are absent or menacing. In finding pleasure in these stories, which usually depict adventures and fights, or preparations for fights, or recovering from fights, girls are searching to find stories of themselves, and their interests, and pleasures. But the stories they create are, for the most part, relentlessly heterosexual, and relentlessly formulaic in depicting teen notions of love and romance. As the gay critics of yaoi suggested, these stories never take up issues of gayness, but settle for unsettling us with the homoerotic turn in a universe (that like our own) is thoroughly homosocial.

The answers to the "why" question are multi-layered and complex, even if they are not wholly about emancipation from patriarchy and heteronormativity; even if they aren't about jamming a mass cultural apparatus that tells girls at every turn that their only desire should be in being a desirable object of the male gaze. That doesn't mean that these women and girls aren't producing a new vision of romance, one that is not available to them in either the media to which they have access, or in the culture that produces those media. This vision is one that is not queer, but simply not gendered. Perhaps the most radical possibility is that when men or women consume images of same-sex romance, mutuality, and sex, both groups long for the same thing:

an equitable culture that could offer us true peers as partners, partners who are so like ourselves that we perfectly comprehend both our partners' sexual desires and their desires to be fully human with partners who are actively chosen.

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