“What’s So Queer About Boys Bonking?” A Queer Analysis of Gender Normativity and Homophobia in Japanese Boys’ Love Manga

Submitted by: John Francis – 535522

Program: MA Gender Studies

Word Count: 8688

This Dissertation Is Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MA Gender Studies of the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London)

September 17th, 2012
‘I have read and understood regulation 17.9 of the Regulations for students of the School of Oriental and African Studies concerning plagiarism. I undertake that all material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination. I give permission for a copy of my dissertation to be held for reference, at the School’s discretion.’

Name: ______________  Signature:______________  Date:______________
Table of Contents:

Abstract: Page 3

Glossary of Japanese Terms: Page 4

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Queer Theory and the Study of Boys’ Love Manga – Page: 5

Chapter 2: Queer Rather Than Normative: Problematizing Gender Normativity in BL – Page: 14

Chapter 3: Queer Rather Than Phobic?: Problematizing Anti-Homophobic Criticism – Page: 22

Chapter 4: Concluding for a Queer Appreciation of BL Manga Page: 29

Bibliography: Page 33
Abstract:

This dissertation focuses on providing a queer analysis of Boys’ Love manga, a genre of graphic novels from Japan created by women for a female audience, featuring depictions of homoerotism. While the genre has been significantly analyzed from a queer perspective, this work attempts to provide a queer analysis of gender normativity and homophobia, two criticisms that have persisted within discourses on Boys’ Love. Rather than engaging in narrative analysis, I focus on an abstracted discussion of Boys’ Love to avoid potential issues inherent in dealing with commercial products that undergo translation and localization that can change the original meaning behind the texts. This dissertation seeks to problematize the analyses of gender normativity and homophobia presented by other scholarly works on the subject. I find that, while the gender binary constructed in Boys’ Love manga suggest heteronormative gender roles, the plurality of subject positions queers the gender binary created. With regards to homophobia, I argue that the remaining criticisms centering on disavowal of gay identity and “realism” do not problematize the instability of identity and experience.
Glossary of Japanese Terms:

*Manga:* Japanese graphic novels

*Mangaka:* Artist/writer of manga

*Bishônen:* Beautiful boy, generally the subject of most *yaoi manga*, specifically the subject of

*Shônen-ai* and early homoerotic depictions in *shôjo manga*

*Yaoi:* A genre of short, pornography homoerotic comics with little plot and graphic sexual depictions. Also used as an inclusive term for all homoerotic comics and novels create by women, for women.

*Shônen/Shôjo:* Boy/Girl

*Shônen-ai:* Boy love, literally. Generally refers to homosexual romance comics/novels, primarily used in reference to the comics produced in the 1970s.

*Semê:* The aggressive top partner in homoerotic comics

*Ukê:* The submissive bottom partner in homoerotic comics

*Dôjinshi:* Fan/amateur comics featuring parodies of pop culture icons

Boys’ Love: A commercialized genre focusing on homoerotic relationships created by and for women.
Chapter 1: An Introduction to Queer Theory and the Study of Boys’ Love *Manga*

Japanese graphic novels, popularly referred to as *manga*, and their animated counterpart, *anime*, are among Japan’s most globally popular products. *Anime* films regularly wind up in film festivals and award ceremonies and western graphic novel publishers regularly attempt to create comics in “*manga* style.” The majority of the audience for *manga* (and *anime*) is between 13 and 30 years of age, which can be expected as similar to the original Japanese market. (Pagliassotti, 2008; Mizoguchi, 2008) Pagliassotti reports that in 2007, *manga* sales in the United States reached 210 million dollars. At an average price of $9.99, that is around 21 million volumes of *manga*, but that excludes unofficial means of attainment through second hand sales, hand-me-downs, and illegal downloading. Needless to say, even with the recent implosion of US distributors, such as ADV Films and TokyoPop, *manga* remains a huge cultural commodity in the US and all over the world.

*Manga* in the global market are treated differently from Japan where most narratives receive a first run in regularly (weekly, monthly, bi-monthly, etc) released magazines containing a single chapter of various *manga*. So far this practice has only been true for US distributed *Shônen Jump Monthly* and *Shôjo Beat Monthly*. *Shônen* (*manga*) refers to an intended teenage and younger male audience and *shôjo* is the female equivalent. These *manga* anthologies are published in fairly typical magazine sizes, are usually quite thick, and fairly cheap. In the fall of 2008, a copy of *Zero-sum Monthly* cost around 580 yen (around $6). Long running and popular series are then later assembled into printed collections, *tankôbon*, that are generally close to 200 pages in length and roughly the size of a regular paperback.¹ *Tankôbon* is what we typically

---

¹ Different US distributors have different publishing specifications for their books, as a result some are larger than others by small or big differences.
mean when we say we want to buy “a manga.” Japanese bookstores, such as Tsutaya and Book-Off, separate their manga section based on shôjo and shônen (additionally the older audience titles for older readers, jôsei and seinen, respectively), by publisher, and then by either author or title.2 However, in the popular, and among the last remaining, US bookstore Barnes & Noble, manga are ordered alphabetically by title, only; shôjo, jôsei, shônen, seinen all mixed together in a largely gender unspecific presentation. All of this suggests that the actual browsing and shopping is culturally specific. Furthermore, between the translation, localization, and (sometimes) “English reimagining,” certain meanings, emotions, and expressions are altered in sometimes subtle ways and sometimes obtusely.3 So, when I, or anyone else, read a manga in English, there is no reason to assume it is 100% the same as the original Japanese version. As a result, this paper will focus on abstracted conventions of a sub-genre of shôjo/jôsei manga, Boys Love (BL).

BL is the current term for a genre of Japanese manga for women, created by female manga artists (mangaka), featuring typically beautiful young adult male characters in homoerotic relationships. As a marketing genre, BL began toward the end of the twentieth century around 1990. However, BL was the successor to bishônen (pretty/beautiful boy) or shônen-ai (boy love) manga with roots in 1960’s and 70’s and dôjinshi (amateur published manga), in the 1980’s. The bishônen comics features primarily abstract European-esque locations of almost male exclusive spaces, such as all boy boarding schools. The characters are usually young adolescent males with androgynous physiques and looks, presenting them as the objects of desire for the other male characters (although the “ideal”/”intended” pairing is between two bishônen). To date, most if

2 I never figured out for sure the full extent of their ordering system.
3 The anime release of Sailor Moon feature significant alterations from name changes to adding familial relations to remove controversial lesbian overtones.
not all of the 1960/70s bishônen manga have not been released in English translation; perhaps due to legal issues with sexualized depictions and content of immature characters. On the other hand, dôjinshi are amateur productions, largely featuring fan-parodies of popular culture icons including professional manga and anime productions. The sub-genre of homoerotic dôjinshi created by women are known as yaoi, an acronym of a longer Japanese phrase summarized as “no climax, no point, no meaning,” which refers to the generally extreme depictions of sexual activity in a story generally no more than thirty pages long. Yaoi has also been used to refer to the entire continuum of female produced stories of male homoeroticism from the bishônen to the popular BL genre.

Yaoi has been the subject of many academic analyses over the last fifteen or more years. I use the collective yaoi as the studies have varied between BL and bishônen manga and from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, and library science. Much of the analyses focus on issues of gender and sexuality, and the implications of the homoerotic depictions in global, local, and community settings that intersect with politics and identity formation. Recently, the research tends to push for a queer analysis of yaoi for a multitude of reasons that I will discuss later. As a queer middle class American male fan of yaoi, I have always read and favored queer interpretations of yaoi manga. Rather than re-argue for a queer reading/interpretation that I believe has been successfully discussed, I intend to engage with two problems that continue to haunt even the most supportive arguments of yaoi/BL as queer, elements of homophobia and gender normativity. My analysis will focus on genre conventions rather than specific manga titles to take in to account the variety of different

4 Heart of Thomas (トーマの心臓 Tôma no shinzô), a shônen-ai manga from 1974, by Haigo Moto, will be released in the US in January 2013.
5 From this point on, yaoi will be used in reference to the continuum of girls’ comics contain in male homoerotic imagery.
subgenres (romance, action, drama, horror, etc), authors, and localization differences. The goal of my analysis is to problematize the academic readings of homophobia and “traditional” gender representations within BL manga by engaging the wealth of discourses on yaoi manga from a gender and queer theory perspective. In limiting my scope to problematizing, I plan to avoid an essentialist analysis that removes the benefits of criticisms that continue to push and evolve yaoi manga. Without problematizing the discourses identifying homophobic and “traditional” gender tropes in BL manga the force of the queer analysis is limited and imposing a definition of “correct” and “proper” representations of identities that queer theory seeks to destabilize.

Yaoi represents a significant occupation by women of heteronormative, male dominated popular culture not confined to a specifically Japanese cultural experience. Heteronormativity refers to an ordering of society that defines normal, generally, as heterosexuality, or, specifically, as an active cis-male married to a passive cis-woman. In general terms, heterosexuality is the normal and homosexuality is the “other.” The binary dichotomy of hetero/homo recently challenged by Rosemary Hennessy (1999) and Jasbir Puar (2006) suggest the growing acceptance for homosexual individuals in both politics and commodity culture represents the establishment of homonormativity. Hetero/homonormativity largely depends on fixed identities, you are either gay or straight, man or women, these identities are paramount and unchanging. This fixed structure of the hetero/homo binary that permeates western thought and knowledge (Sedgwick, 2008) echoes Richard Dyer’s theorization of stereotypes as the product of ordering the chaos of human experience accompanied by similar expectations of absolute, certainty, and disavowal of ambiguity. (2003, 12) Thus, the cementing of identities within a hetero/homonormative binary disallows the ambiguous fact of the diverse factors that form and craft the ways we experience and think about sexuality and gender. These ambiguities that are
disavowed and ignored in hetero/homonormative culture are the subject of queer theory and queer identities. BL manga is filled with an abundance of ambiguities within the narratives and consumption.

Queer theory “began” as an organizing academic discipline in the early 1990’s with academics such as Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick examining the assumptions of identities in feminism and LGBT based studies. However, because one of the central pillars of queer theory is the intersection of multiple identities and societal processes, academic works before 1990 can still be seen as “queer.” As a term, “queer” previously functioned as a homophobic slang for non-heterosexuals, but was “taken back” through radical LGBT political movements of the late 1980’s. Queer came to mark the recognition and acceptance of difference as people came to embrace counter-normative positions. Thus, “queer” can be seen to be both including LGBT identities as well as all the “abnormal” expressions of gender and sexuality, including “hetero”sexualities. (Turner, 2000: 134)

Butler theorized a framework for rethinking the relationship between sex and gender where gender is a phantasm of society built on biological sex. She argues that gender is a construction so deeply embedded and implicated in the heteronormative hegemony of society that gender can even precede a sexed body. (1993) Even from initial conception, or even fantasies surrounding procreation, we formulate the gender of a child by saying “if it is a boy…” or “if it is a girl…” We celebrate the birth of a child with balloons usually pink “baby girl” or blue “baby boy” ones. From the onset of conception, we are largely all already initiated into acts, gestures, and speech that society deems appropriate behavior based on our sex. Another way of thinking is to imagine an adult male walking down the street wearing a dress and carrying a purse. The purse and the dress are signifiers of femaleness in western culture. Likely, outside of
certain areas where counter-culture is dominant, the man will face ridicule. As Butler suggests, the failure to perform the proper signs of gender that reflect your biological sex outside of seclusion results in fear and condemnation. The man is not in trouble for his sex, as in patriarchal societies men are the masters, but for his portrayal of gender, thus separating gender from sex and revealing the possibility to transgress societies’ boundaries of gender. These signs and gesture change from culture to culture and year to year, and are held up to mythological constructions of gender that R. W. Connell describes as hegemonic masculinity/femininity. (2001: 38-39) Hegemonic gender is an unrealizable concept that we are expected to idolize properly and aspire to. We are all somewhere in that scale each with our own masculine and/or feminine actions, which further constructs gender, even in the binary form of male/female, as multiple. Hegemonic masculinity/femininity only works to obscure the reality of multiple masculinities and femininities. As a result, gender is not only denaturalized from sex, but also fractured into pieces of multiple possibilities of gender expressions.

Whereas Butler’s focus is on gender and sex, which do directly affect sexuality, Sedgwick focused her work on sexuality and identity. Sedgwick saw a preoccupation in western culture of hetero/homosexual definition that marginalized individuals (especially anyone not white, male, and middle-class). (Sedgwick, 2008: 1; Turner, 2000: 133) Since sexuality, both heterosexuality and homosexuality, is of “primary importance for all modern Western identity and social organization,” sexual identity as it is/was supplants other forms of identity or is supplanted by. For example, a gay man, married to a woman with children, who sees his identity as father and husband more important than an identity marking his [homo]sexuality, might have to live “closeted” because the definition of homosexuality is at odds with his heterosexually
organized family identities. “Queer” provides the space for people to exist without the restriction of an identity defined specifically as an oppositional binary.

Queer, queerness, to have a queer identity are ways of embracing the ambiguities left out or disregarded by the binary oppositions of gender and sexuality. The term “queer” was formerly used as a derogatory reference to non-heterosexuality, or the appearance of something “queer” and not normal. To be queer, now, is to embrace the wealth of counter-normative expressions. Queer is a celebration of instability, fluidity, and difference; the recognition that there are far too many influences on sexual and gender identities for essentialist identities. Hennessy claims queer as an “effort to unpack the monolithic identities ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’” which are deeply intersected by “heterosexual norms, race, gender, and ethnic differences.” (1999: 52) She further suggests the embracing of queerness is a “rejection of proper sexual identities that is both anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist.” (1999: 52) Anti-assimilationist because the very nature of embracing queerness is to mark oneself as different, and anti-separatist as queer identities are deeply aligned with certain feminist and gay movements. Even as queer suggests the rejection of “gay,” “lesbian,” and “straight,” “queer” does not exclude those identities because, as I believe, one of the “goals” of “queerness” is to counteract the binary systems of hetero/homosexual, male/female, masculine/feminine, and not reinscribe a binary of “queer/not-queer.”

In recent years, “queer” and queer theory has been identified as perhaps a “more appropriate framework for discussing the worlds of BL and slash. (Meyer, 2010: 233) Yaoi represents a genre occupied women known to be “non-threatening” to readers while simultaneously “threatening” to heterosexual men (suggesting patriarchy). (Valenti, 2005: 4) While yaoi is marketed at heterosexual female readers, readership is actually far more widespread among different sexes, genders, and sexualities. Brennan and Wildsmith highlight
the observation that “both women and men enjoy yaoi… a connection that has rarely been forged in erotic media.” (2011: 109) McHarry goes on to observe that some male fans embrace the “indistinctness, believing sexual identities and masculinities to be multiple, contingent, and/or rejecting them in part or in whole.” (2011: 125) Additionally, Vincent analyzes yaoi, for women, “functions as a means, even if only in fantasy, of overcoming and critiquing heterosexist gender norms. (2007: 73) Mizoguchi Akiko echoes Vincent by suggesting that yaoi functions or can function as a female community that fosters greater freedom for gender and sexual expression. (2010: 160-161)

Other academics have focused on the narratives rather than the community surrounding yaoi. Akatsuka argues that despite the presence heteronormative subtext to BL stories, the subtext is “revealed as failing to control and fix identity through the pretext of homosexuality.” (2010: 163) Ambiguities are deeply grounded in the narratives, preventing any construction of who is what outside of possibility. (Wood, 2006: 397) Not only is sexual identity kept ambiguous, but gender, too, is repeatedly questioned. Welker highlights the ambiguity of gender, particularly in the earlier bishônen stories, through the ambiguous sex, constructed despite/because of “apparition of the penis, the reader maintains the freedom to renarrate and en-gender – or de-gender – the narrative to her own liking.” (2007: 849) The queer reading of yaoi, of BL manga, is built on these stilts of both ambiguity and the imagination of readership. However, some issues complicate the readings.

As an assembly of genres, yaoi has faced complications from issues of representation, specifically that of gay identified men. Mizoguchi and Lunsing, as well as others, discuss at length regarding a debate from the 1990’s initiated by Satou Masaki, a gay drag queen and rights activist, to fulfill a request by a feminist zine Choisir. Satou stated his concern about the
representation of gay characters in *yaoi*, namely the characters failing to be realistic portrayals of gay men. (Mizoguchi, 2008: 134-135) McLelland highlights feelings of alienation by gay men, one in particular, because the boys appearing in *yaoi* narratives were all young, beautiful, intelligent, rich, and the life they live are a distance away from real-life “gay experience.” (McLelland quoted in Isola, 2010: 87) However, McLelland ultimately argues that BL stories are not telling the stories of “real-life” gay men, which Mizoguchi suggests is a “mythological universe where the lovers cannot see anyone but each other.” (McLelland, 2006: 7; Mizoguchi, 2008: 135) McLelland further compares *yaoi* with Japanese gay pornography. While both gay pornography and *yaoi* feature “straight” men in homosexual activity, McLelland observes that gay pornography is essentially the same as heterosexual pornography except the female is replaced by a younger male. (2000: 159) McLelland proceeds to question to what extent gay pornography and media in Japan, produced by/for gay men, depict “real-life” gay men and life. He observes that the majority of gay produced media contained nothing but porn and advice on how to get sex, excluding most political and health related articles that feature in western gay magazines. (2000: 139) As a whole, the issue of gay representation in *yaoi* is largely flawed and has featured less and less in later scholarship. The only two criticisms that remain prominent, both from early work by Mizoguchi and McLelland, and contemporary works, are issues linked to homophobia and “traditional” gender roles.
Chapter 2: Queer Rather Than Normative: Problematizing Gender Normativity in BL

Gender in Boys’ Love manga is problematic because of the absence of the female “other” as narratives use only male characters as protagonists. Without the female element, the romance between two men can be configured in a binary form. At the heart of these romance stories is the central relationship between two male protagonists who, for the most part, replicate a visibly gendered separation in a dominant masculine partner (Semê) and a passive feminine partner (ukê). On the surface, this binary is simply a recreation of heteronormative expectations of heterosexual relationships. This heteronormative reading of male-male sexuality in BL is further supported through the relationship between the “straight” “female” audience, which BL is marketed to, and the stories themselves. By assuming a near exclusive heterosexual female readership, reading the feminine passive partner as the agent of the reader is fairly easy, especially as stories usually feature the passive partner as the narrator or the main vehicle storytelling. This particular perspective leads to a possible conclusion of the passive feminine partner as female, rather than male, thus reducing BL manga to a reproduction of heteronormative/heterosexual romance. However, gender is far more complicated because not all readers fall into the typified audience position.

In Dru Pagliassotti’s survey of western BL manga readers she found a significant minority male readership of 11% and 13% for English and Italian. Additionally, less than half (47%) of English respondents claimed a heterosexual identity while Italian respondents were at 62%. (Pagliassotti, 2008) These pieces of survey data suggest a more complicated global readership, further supported by the acknowledgement of a lesbian Japanese readership via Mizoguchi Akiko, which destabilizes the assumption of a heteronormative female audience. As a result, the passive feminine partner in BL can no longer be easily reduced to the female agent,
because the readership is not one exclusive position but multiple identities with their own
preference of identification. I believe a queer interpretation and understanding is possible with
the gender dynamics between the male characters because of the implications of masculinity
inherent in the characters and the diversification of readers and positions of identification.

Gender in BL *manga* is constructed and mediated through a binary relationship between
the *semê* and the *ukê*. The *semê* is the active, dominate, penetrator in BL relationships and the
*ukê* is the binary opposite. In most cases the *semê* is more physically distinctively masculine,
taller and broader than the *ukê*. *Ukê*, on the other hand, are more petite and “feminine,” with
greater domestic aptitude and, most of the time, younger. Presenting the young, petite, domestic
male partner as the passive “bottom” in BL relationships, represents a gender binary following
similar fixed rules based on heteronormative standards. (Mizoguchi, 2008: 372) Essentially, the
*semê/ukê* relationship acts as a “mimicry” of heterosexist gender roles. (Vincent, 2007: 73) If
couples in BL *manga* are meant to be built on equal terms, then the persistence of such fixed
roles is paradoxical. (Saito, 2011: 185) While many formulae of BL *manga* changed over the
years, the *semê/ukê* dichotomy continues. (Mizoguchi, 2010: 162) Even though the *semê* and *ukê*
are both male, the roles suggest that heterosexism and heteronormativity, can be supported
through the denaturalization of gender, as it replicates the established norms without satire or
parody. (Butler, 1993: 176) As Welker suggests, *manga* is deeply implicated in the production
and reproduction of cultural ideology. (2006: 844) In this case, the *semê/ukê* trope in BL is
mainly seen as a reproduction of heteronormativity.

In the face of this possible normative reading of BL it is hard to imagine this portrayal of
gendered same-sex relationships as queer, because they exist to support the status quo. With the
added weight of Butler’s observation that even in the face of denaturalization of gender,
heteronormativity and heterosexism can solidify its hegemony. (1993: 176) However, alternative readings exist that problematize the reading of “traditional” gender roles in BL. To start with, while the ukê certainly demonstrates several traditional feminine traits, he is not confined to a realm of domesticity. One common theme in BL is to have lovers working in the same line of work or same business, or at least something that pushes the “feminine” partner into traditionally male spaces. The ukê is provided with a transformative identity, allowing him to act as both masculine and feminine. As a result, the ukê is not a character who is wholly feminine, but a character that constantly slips over the boundaries of masculine and feminine, consistently problematize hetero- and homonormativity. (McHarry, 2010: 182) This suggests that even reading the ukê as “female,” “she” has the power to pass through the traditional gender boundaries without punishment. Thus, the gender performance of the ukê, while suggesting femininity, largely embraces both, demonstrating a “masculinity” or “femininity” that is a hybrid collection of expressions.

In men’s comics, both gay and heterosexual pornography, only a particular strand of masculinity is accepted and worshipped. These comics for men construct masculinity centering on the power of a man’s body and the power of a man’s phallus (both figuratively and literally), a masculinity built on power, domination, and the penis. (Wood, 2006: 397) A man with a well-sized and well-shaped penis becomes the epitome of masculinity (McLelland, 2001: 110), and appears clearly deserving of praise, worship, and pleasure. As McLelland develops this observation through a gay Japanese comic featuring a chubby, traditionally “unattractive” submissive character, who seeks to pleasure the athletic and “attractive” baseball team, the phallic masculinity displayed works to subordinate and feminize men who fail to achieve the proper display of masculine “beauty.” McLelland describes the younger chubby character as
enjoying his role, but in context, his subordination, his feminization, results in the loss of male patriarchal power as he spiritually inhabits, albeit willingly, the female position. Despite the character’s willingness to cross from the masculine to the feminine, the trouble is, rather than a cross on equal grounds, this crossing is impossible to see other than a loss, something less than male. Thus, this men’s comic reifies the female position as a loss, as something less than male. The destiny for men who fail to achieve the proper masculinity they become not-men, which is further established though the persisting stereotype of the gay man as feminine. (McLelland, 2000: 114) Additionally, this is a fear Wood suggests with the fear couples in BL express with being labeled “gay.” (2006: 406)

Masculinity works differently in BL manga precisely because the reification that happens in men’s comics, both to the women and the submissive male in men’s comics, does not happen. Even the most feminized uké is not endowed narratively or pictorially with a negative or disempowered position. (Wood, 2006: 403) The uké receives just as much, if not more, sexual enjoyment in his relationship. Mangaka imbue scenes of anal sex with more pleasure than pain, pleasure for both the penetrator and the penetrated. (Wood, 2006: 401) Thus, the source of masculine power and dominance, the penis is a phantom, as stories focus on mutual pleasure and nurturing, rather than power and dominance. In BL, the penis is largely absent, represented in vague outlines and shadows, or occasionally missing altogether. As a result, masculinity in BL is constructed in opposition to mainstream culture, which is seen in men’s comics. Both the semê and uké ultimately construct pluralized masculine identities, revealing Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities, and constantly cross gender boundaries. (Connell, 2001; McHarry, 2010: 182) Moreover, biology ceases to be the primary production of meaning as the couple ignores the biological and social definitions that decide how people love. (McLelland, 2000: 78) Rather than
simply being a reproduction of gender norms, the semê/ukê binary provides significant ways of constructing and thinking of masculinity(ies), and provides an alternative source of masculine identity for men who dislike the macho and ultra-masculine phallic men present in gay male comics.

In addition to masculinities, the semê/ukê dynamic provides significant impact on female identity and femininity. Even as a simple reproduction of heterosexist values, the relationship, and the ukê especially, reconstruct female agency and respectable ways of romance. (Mizoguchi, 2008: 369; Saito, 2011: 183) The female writers create stories with characters of equal social standings (both men) that fall in love and mimic heterosexual gender roles as a means of crafting a heterosexual fantasy of romance on equal grounds for both partners. Additionally the female readers are given the opportunity to identify with the either the semê or the ukê and vicariously participate in the romance.

Even though the ukê is generally perceived and regarded as the female agent of BL narratives (with the absence of a significant female figure), research suggests as many as one-third of female readers identify with the semê character. (Meyer, 2010: 236) The identification with the more masculine partner queers the expected relationship between the reader and text. In the heteronormative frame, a heterosexual female (the expected consumer of BL manga) should exclusively identify with the passive partner, the character most representing their expected position in a relationship. However, Meyer suggests that among female fans, a significant minority prefers to identify with the aggressive, active, top character. This is queer in two particular ways. First of all, even in a heterosexual context, the female who identifies with the semê transgresses the traditional expectations of the female and desires the passive submissive partner. Whether through fantasy or action, by identifying with the masculine semê, she creates a
strong active sexuality for herself, which contradicts the expected passive positioning in heteronormativity. Additionally, the identification can be seen as possibly as a transgression of gender. One possibility behind the female readers’ identification with the semê character is an actual identification with the gender performance of the male character. Rather than reappropriating certain male traits, the reader could be identifying with the semê’s gender. In this reading, the female reader becomes the male semê with the feminine male ukê who may retain a male identity or move to a female one (or something completely different).

On the other hand, for the two-thirds of female readers who identify with the ukê, is that necessarily a reproduction of heterosexist gender norms favoring a passive femininity to an active masculinity? This particular view complicates a queer reading because everything fits into the neatly packed heteronormative expectation of female and femininity. However, an important factor of ukê in BL manga is the resistance to typical tropes that display femininity as disempowering and negative. The ukê reevaluates femininity because he receives both the benefits of patriarchy, but is also parodying the benefit by occupying the typically female position of object. (Akatsuka, 2010: 168) The semê desires the ukê, who is placed in a feminized position of object without the typical negative connotations of femininity. For example, in McLelland’s discussion on men’s comics in Japan, the penetrated is female and the penetrator is male, which infuses the bottom role in homosexual sex as feminine. (2001: 114) Woods argues, though, that the ukê does not receive those same negative traits. Rather, the ukê is shown as a recipient of pleasure, placing the ukê and the semê on equal footing as participants in equally pleasurable sex. (Woods, 2006: 401) Even by identifying the “feminine” and “passive” ukê characters, the female reader is presented with a portrayal of femininity that is not defacto disempowering.
The broad spectrum of possibilities suggest that even for the most normatively identified reader is given an opportunity, “even if only in fantasy, of overcoming and critiquing heterosexist gender norms.” (Vincent, 2007: 73) BL *manga* allow for escapist fantasies, because heterosexism is far reaching and infects everything. (Isola, 2010: 91) While BL *manga* is heavily implicated by heterosexist gender norms, the characters remain same-sex, regardless of any gender crossing. Heteronormativity and heterosexism, both depend to some extent on the fact that anatomical bodies desire different anatomical bodies. (Turner, 2000: 109) In BL, however, the *semê* and the *ukê* desire each other, possessing the same anatomical bodies, problematizing the supporting force of heteronormativity. Even if the subversion is limited because of fixed gender roles, *semê* and *ukê* are not infused with the same negative associations seen in society. What emerges is an image of same sex/same gender, same sex/different gender, different sex/same gender, different sex/different gender, and more possible interpretations of the relationship.

There are many different ways of reading and interpreting the *semê/ukê* presence in BL *manga*. The persistence of such an archetype of the genre can suggest a reproduction of heterosexist gender norms because they exist everywhere. Part of the success of normativity is because of how (in)stable they are. Isola argues that one of the reasons why we can engage in cross/trans-cultural criticism centering on heteronormativity is because of the prevalence of patriarchy. (2010: 91) So, even while the experience of heteronormativity and patriarchy is culturally contingent, they remain visible across many different cultures. The simple fact behind patriarchy is heterosexual male privilege, which BL *manga* is at odds with. While a heterosexist reading of the *semê/ukê* binary is possible, it is possible because of the extent patriarchy and heteronormativity touches and infects everything. Furthermore, with the largely fixed gender
binary in BL, then even homosexuality can be seen as heterosexuality, and worse, heteronormativity. However, this interpretation is largely at odds with what BL manga produces in connection to gender.

While the semê and ukê may resemble a normative gender binary, such as Mizoguchi suggests, the multiple positions of both readers and characters expand the binary to many different constructs of two people in a mutually affirmative relationship. The relationship between the semê and ukê can provide different, counter-hegemonic masculinities rather than cementing the penetrated partner as female, which is a major trope in gay comics, the ukê can invoke either subordinate masculinities in relation to the semê, or femininities, or neither, or both. (Connell, 2001: 39-40) Furthermore, despite the fixed positioning of top and bottom, neither position is disempowered as with heterosexual and homosexual representations in men’s comics and mainstream media. As a result, even the most normative reader, whether a heterosexual male or the intended heterosexual female, will be ultimately placed in a queer position because the power relations that penetrate every relationship are absent. With the female identifying with the ukê and the male identifying with the semê, the disempowering aspect of biology does not exist. Thus, BL manga is capable of even queering typically normative heterosexual relationships by presenting a model of equality between sex and gender.
Chapter 3: Queer Rather Than Phobic?: Problematizing Anti-Homophobic Criticism

Homophobia is a major problematic criticism of BL manga and a major hurdle for arguing a queer reading and understanding. Of the critiques of homophobia, Mizoguchi remains the critic of what she, and others, see as either explicit or implicit homophobia within BL narratives. While Mizoguchi’s critique of homophobia is heavily limited to BL manga release in the late 20th century and the early years of the 21st, she suggests that certain tropes have continued. (2010: 147) The chief trope Mizoguchi criticizes is “homophobic homos,” characters who verbally attach negativity to homosexuality. While these representations have declined, BL characters still disavow a gay identity. Central to the critique of homophobia is the disavowal of “gay identity” and “realism.”

As many academics and critics point out, the male protagonists of BL manga are rarely gay and often claim to not be gay despite being in a homosexual relationship. From a traditional standpoint, the rejection of a gay identity means straight, as the binary constructs an “either/or” view on sexuality. Thus, when a character claims, “I am not gay, I just love [male partner’s name],” he is actually claiming his straightness, and “each declaration of straightness is a reminder that the yaoi universe is a heteronormative and homophobic one.” (Mizoguchi, 2008: 133) This concept, exclusive to BL narratives, of homophobia is joined by the border crossing between reality and fantasy, where the question regarding representation comes into play. While about all academic and a significant portion of audiences view the male characters as representations of female fantasies, there is still the reading and possibility of reading these characters as (falsely) representing real-life “gay” men. Even Neal Akatsuka, who argues for a particularly queer vision of BL, acknowledges the problematic nature of the removal of homosexuality from a real world context, which largely neutralizes homosexuality. (2010: 171)
So even in its absence homophobia is identified because homosexuality is deeply intertwined with homophobia.

Criticisms of homophobia in BL are wide spread and persist within even the queer aligned discourses. Rather than completely disassemble critiques of homophobia, which I, and others, believe are important to pushing the boundaries of any gay or queer genre, I want to problematize much of these claims from a queer perspective, by arguing that the type of disavowal supports queer possibilities and arguing against critiques linking “realism” to “identity” and to “homophobia.”

The trope of disavowal in BL manga centers on a statement that rejects gay identity, or even the complete silence on sexuality. Disavowal and silence work to the same end in our societies where heterosexuality is the unspoken norm; one does not need to “come out” as heterosexual. Aside from certain acts and performances, “gay” is an invisible trait that can only be truly invoked through speech. (Dyer, 1993: 19) Hence, “coming out” refers mainly to an act of speech where upon one claims a non-straight identity. “Coming out” is developed in reference to the “closet,” (what one comes out of) an act of “silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.” (Sedgwick, 2008: 3) The “closet” is really a set of evasive maneuvers to resist the label of homosexuality. Such tactics go from both vague, ambiguous details that do not reveal gender, or exclamations of “straightness” and conspicuously hidden, socially approved, pornography. In essence, disavowal is a strategy of “closetedness” for people who do not want or are not ready to “come out of the closet.” In this light, Mizoguchi’s argument that homophobia in BL is resistant to the “identity” rather than the “act” is a prudent observation, after all, someone in the “closet” does not necessarily disavow sex, just the identity associated with the act. (2008: 133) Thus, disavowal,
for Mizoguchi, in particular, represents a phobia of gay identity, but, in a queer perspective, a
disavowal of gay identity does not necessarily suggest anything, but remains open, undefined,
and unstable. (Akatsuka, 2010: 167)

I believe that the act of BL characters disavowing gay identity is both potentially a
phobia of sexual identity and is not necessarily an expression of homophobia. Resisting a gay
identity is not the same as declaring oneself heterosexual, especially when the disavower is
engaging romantically with a person of the same sex. While, as previously shown, Mizoguchi
views the disavowal as a declaration of “straightness,” Valenti chooses to explain protagonists in
BL as “almost always bisexual,” and others have chosen to word disavowal as simply, “I am not
gay; I just love [fill in the blank].” (Valenti, 2005: 4; Saito, 2011: 182) Thus we can conceive of
disavowal in multiple ways, as straight, as bisexual, and as queer. While it is possible the original
Japanese expresses explicit or implicit suggestions of the characters as “straight,” my experience
with English translated BL manga falls more in line with Saito’s explanation, in that I have not
seen characters embracing a straight identity over a gay identity. Instead what I see is no more
suggestive of straightness than gayness, possibly a phobia of any identity. By resisting a single
expression of sexual identity, it is possible to see “gay identity phobia,” but as characters are
rarely quick to assert another identity and continue to pursue their same-sex relationship, it is
perhaps better to view the disavowal as fear of identity, dislike of identity, or ambivalence of
identity.

The development of identities based on sexuality largely represents a “privileged position
in the explanation of human affairs,” which is one of the reasons both feminism and gay rights
hit potential snags with post-structural critics such as Judith Butler, where the deconstruction of
gender, sex, and sexuality problematized the subjects of feminist and gay rights activism.
Perhaps, the absence of stable sexual identities within BL suggests not only a queerness open to interpretation by the variety of subject positions of the audience, but also an attempt at avoiding falsely representing a largely unrepresentable fragment of human identity. If the protagonists are neither gay, nor straight, nor anything, then claims over accuracy and other critiques of representation can be avoided. Rather than limiting the characters to one identity, one subjectivity, mangaka provided the reader a largely blank slate to engage with free from judgment of “reality.” If anything, not “gay” does not mean “straight.”

There remain two largely unanswered problems with my analysis. Saito highlights that BL “characters overcome the taboo of homosexuality, thereby proving that their love is truer and purer than that of heterosexual couples and “real” gay men.” (Saito, 2011: 183) She sees the relationships depicted in BL as having severe implications for “real” heterosexual characters and “real” gay men because of the idyllic romance depicted that typically conquer time, space, heterosexuality, homophobia, and wide range of possible trials. Similarly, Mizoguchi argues that “when yaoi protagonists say ‘I’m not gay, I just love you,’ they are also saying that those gay men who love other men for their male bodies are creeps.” (2008: 134) Both Mizoguchi and Saito argue that the disavowal reifies “real-life” gay men/identity by, in effect, suggesting the yaoi pair’s relationship is pure because it lacks the taint of homosexual desire. However, I question to what extent readers will differentiate between “real-life” gay men and BL manga characters as “different.” This is not to say that readers will expect “real-life” gay men to be like BL characters, but that the expression of homosexual romance is the same. McLelland reports similar findings with over half of female respondents under 35 declaring support for homosexuality as another form of love. (2000: 70) While Mizoguchi and Saito’s observation are
not necessarily off-base, but the subtleties of their reading is not necessarily one that fans would notice.

On the rare occasion that homophobia is included in BL stories, it is largely something for the characters to overcome. Furthermore, the “forbidden” feeling of same-sex romances acknowledges, “implicitly… that Japanese society at large is not welcoming to GLBTQ people or relationships. (Brenner and Wildsmith, 2011: 98) Both Saito, and Brenner and Wildsmith, suggest BL is intertwined with marginal, “real-life,” experiences of sexuality and romance. Many academics (Akatsuka, 2010; Mizoguchi, 2008; McHarry, 2011; etc) argue that BL manga construct affirmative femininity, alternative masculinities, and serve to provide “shelter” for identities marginalized by the hegemonic (male) culture and discourse. Furthermore, while I have some reservations regarding thinking of “forbidden love” as a central pillar of BL romances, Brenner and Wildsmith’s suggestion that it reveals the implicit (Suganuma’s *otanashii*) homophobia in Japanese society (and outside of Japan), is hardly a bad thing. After all, Suganuma suggests that some methods of gay rights work in Japan is centered on revealing the quiet, non-explicit, homophobia, which is what Brenner and Wildsmith assert BL manga does, to some extent.

These discussions of “gay identity,” “coming out,” and the “closet” are largely features of western concepts of “gay experience.” While the spread of concepts and beliefs regarding sexuality have spread around the world, it is important to consider the fact that culture and history still effect “experience.” That is, we cannot simply assume that the “closet” is behind each and every disavowal, as the practice of “coming out” and the “closet” in Japan is distinctly different. Suganuma suggests that “coming out” is part of a political strategy in Japan. Referring to OCCUR, a Japanese gay rights organization that has long been viewed as practicing western
identity politics, he argues that “their coming-out strategy would function as an initial move to express the complex nature of Japanese homophobia in which the state- and government-sanctioned discrimination against homosexuals had been implicitly, rather than explicitly, embedded in the social fabric.” (Suganuma, 2012: 140) Interestingly enough, rather than argue for a stable identity, Suganuma quotes one of the members of OCCUR who describes “coming out” is the only way to “become” “gay” and “gay” is not a stable identity. (2012: 142) This statement suggests gay as an identity one becomes (interestingly echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born a woman, but becomes one) rather than a biological fact such as sex. This then crafts gay identity as a social category, just like gender, which is established through a realization and acceptance of homosexual desire. Moreover, gay identity is not moored to one particular portrayal or representation. With the male characters in BL manga, is it right for them to claim a “gay identity” if they do not otherwise express homosexual desires apart from their partner? Furthermore, if “gay identity” is not stable or specific to one specific portrayal, how can mangaka truly depict “gay” protagonists without relying on stereotypes produced by either gay men or heteronormativity. If mangaka picked a identity constructed by male dominated media, then the subversive potential of BL will largely vanished, replaced by an image of patriarchal reproduction.

Despite BL existing as a production of fantasy, “reality” and “realism” is a severe point of contention for many fans and readers. Reality is largely linked to the portrayal of homosexuality and the real-life experiences of homophobia. For the most part, homophobia is absent. Vincent argues that even if a BL manga has “gay” protagonists, “the complete lack of concern for or even awareness of the reality of homophobia” will impact the ability of the work to critique heterosexism. (2007: 74) For Vincent, homophobia, implicit or explicit, is such a fact
of life that to have “gay” protagonists without facing representations of homophobia is not “realistic.” Hall highlights similar responses that favor homophobia as central to their view of BL manga as “unrealistic.” (2010: 217) These critiques craft homophobia and victimization as a significant portion of “real” homosexual experience. In order to successfully craft a realistic BL manga, then, victimization through experiences of homophobia is key. This view constructs a “real-life” gay identity as victimized by homophobia, not same-sex love. If homophobia and not same-sex romance is central to craft “realistic” BL manga, then the genre will cease to be a romance genre. Furthermore, highlighting homophobic victimization for “realism” suggests that for a majority of non-straight identified individuals, explicit or violent homophobia is central to their experience. This criticism cauterizes a queer reading by crafting an understanding of a certain truth behind identity. While homophobic critiques should be encouraged, should we encourage perpetuating depictions of homosexuality that is crafted in terms of victimization.

The intense linking of homophobia to gay identity and, ultimately, to BL manga’s failure to achieve a “realistic” representation of homosexuality, presents the possibility of queer interpretation. As a fantasy, BL exists at a distance from reality, which McLelland and Mizoguchi both credit the genre for keeping. (McLelland, 2006/2007: 7; Mizoguchi, 2010) I believe that by remaining “unreal” and a “fantasy” BL achieves a queer presence by molding same-sex romances outside of the intersection of normativity and homophobia.
Chapter 4: Concluding for a Queer Appreciation of BL Manga

Boys’ Love *manga* grew in popularity in the United States at the start of the 21st century. While I cannot recall the exact year I first came in contact with the genre, likely sometime around 2005 or 2006, my first BL *manga* was *Shinobu Kokoro – Hidden Heart* – by Matsumoto Temari. I remember purchasing the book, unaware of the content, but attracted to the art style. I always favor the BL *manga* featuring androgynous *ukē* characters. My involvement as a passive fan of the genre over the years formulated my interest in queer theory and gender studies, because I always identified and found interesting the absence of sexual identity. I am sure that my continual enjoyment of the genre is seeing a romance that defies the expectations of both heterosexuality and homosexuality, an expression I view as queer and similar to my own position and identity. For me, Boys’ Love *manga* provide(d) a significant impact on how I have crafted my queer identity. In this regard, I am heavily invested in queering BL *manga*, which is why I want to problematize the issues that interrupt and problematize the enjoyment of BL and its queerness.

Boys’ Love is a queer genre through and through. From the very production of BL *manga*, they represent an occupation of patriarchal culture as both a popular icon and commodity by women. Moreover, the genre successfully constructs women as occupying the space as sexually desiring subjects, who depict their desires on the bodies of androgynous male characters in homoerotic relationships. (Mizoguchi, 2010: 157) While this shift represents a significant empowerment of female subjectivity, some have objected to the objectification of “gay” men. However, Lunsing questions the negativity associated with objectification in connection to negative connotations with femininity. (2006: 31) Much of these arguments, though, are in the past as the links between BL characters and gay identity have been mostly severed. The
criticisms of BL that remain, that obscure the queer reading most, are homophobia and gender normativity, which persist even in queer analyses.

Gender normativity is supported through the semê/ukê gender binary established through the fixed positioning of the characters into top/dominant and bottom/submissive roles. Since women are absent from prominent positions in BL, as readers we can quickly construct the relationship between two men into a reproduction of what we are so familiar with, that of heterosexuality. As Butler suggests, the denaturalization of the ukê can ultimately lead to a privileging of heteronormativity, rather than a queer occupation of gender hierarchies.

However, the ukê proves to be slippery and unable to be reduced to an either/or gender identity. He maintains the biological empowerment of male privilege while simultaneously constructed as an object. While the positioning of the ukê as object suggests femininity, the character is not particularly imbued with negative connotations. As the intended agent for heterosexual female fans, and without the disempowerment that typically marks the position of sexual object, even normative identified fans experience queer possibilities by receiving the image of an active and empowered feminine presence. This appears to be the very least reader identification can subvert gender norms, because the many positions of fans identify with the semê as well as the ukê, with the added complication of non-heterosexual and non-female fans. Furthermore, the ukê represents a departure from depictions of hegemonic masculinity in men’s manga.

While men’s manga construct masculinity along guidelines of power, directly linked to physical attributes, in particular, the penis, Boys’ Love constructs masculinity along lines of nurturing and mutual care. The semê does not simply take pleasure from the ukê, a trope
common in gay men’s comics, but engages in mutually pleasurable activities. As a result, even as a gender binary, the semê/ukê relationship is depicted without the implications of hierarchy that tinged other depictions of relationships. The positioning of the ukê as the penetrated also does not receive a removal of masculinity, as generally in gay men’s manga, the submissive male is simply a female stand in, losing his masculinity. Thus, BL manga creates different possible masculinities that are not moored to any particular reified position.

In addition to gender normativity, I argued that, while important, anti-homophobic criticism of BL limited the queer interpretation. The disavowal, highlighted as a major perpetuating expression of homophobia, is not a statement of definition, but one of possibility. While the characters generally say “I am not gay,” they do not say they are something, if anything. This can be seen as homophobic to a gay identity, because they are resisting/denying the identity rather than the act. Additionally, the disavowal could be an expression of “closetedness” as it potentially obscures a hidden truth. However, by not identifying, by refusing the category of a specific sexual identity, the male characters allow readers to interpret and read their own views on sexuality.

This lack of defining identity leads directly into the other facet of anti-homophobic criticism of BL. The lack of identity, the lack of “realism,” remains a problem for some fans and academics. Since Boys’ Love largely ignores explicit representations of homophobia except as a plot device, it is somehow less “real.” By linking the experience of homophobia to “realism,” readers are suggesting that men in same-sex relationships who are not victims of homophobia are less “real.” They construct homosexuality on the experience of hatred rather than of love. This kind of interpretation does not make sense with the romantic proclivities of BL as a genre. No one has the same exact life experiences, so how can everyone in same-sex relationships
experience the same violence? Furthermore, I believe a more affirming portrayal of homosexuality should be the focus, rather than an identity deeply engrained with fear and victimization.

On the whole, however, I do not want to say that anti-homophobic criticism is wrong. While, as I have shown, some cases of criticism are at odds with a queer interpretation, anti-homophobic criticism is part of the queer “perspective.” Mizoguchi points to the changes in BL over the past ten years and identifies overall improvements. (2010) Hennessy describes critique as a political process. (1999: 141) This whole paper is a critique, engaging in an ultimately politicized argument for a genre of comics from Japan that represent a significant challenge to patriarchal hegemony that normalizes and asserts order of sexuality and gender, race and ethnicity, age and religion, poor and wealthy. My goal in problematizing the major nodes of criticism that creates a negative reception, I want to solidify a queer genre. An interpretation of BL *manga* as empowering and affirmative of queerness, ultimately suggests a genre that proliferates counter-hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality.
Bibliography


