

# Consumable Bodies, Consumable Self: The queer potential of otaku subjectivity in Kio Shimoku's Genshiken

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## Abstract

*'Nerd' is everywhere a lonely status, but queer identities and nonconforming gender expressions are especially socially isolating. This article examines the intersection of these two lonely identities, 'nerd' and 'queer', in Kio Shimoku's manga Genshiken. Genshiken is a sort of roman-fleuve about a university otaku circle. One of the members, Hato, is a heterosexual male connoisseur of BL—homosexual 'boy's love' amateur parody manga—who dresses as a woman. Rather than being doubly isolated for being both queer and a nerd, however, Hato finds that otaku culture is capable of accommodating his queerness. This paper argues that Genshiken proposes otaku subculture as a social space already equipped to accept nonconforming genders and sexualities due to its unique relationship with society and media. Hato represents the queer possibilities of otaku subjectivity, entangled as it is with late capitalist commodification. The aesthetic distance that—per Saitō Tamaki—otaku must maintain from the objects of their desire translates into an otaku acceptance of the aestheticisation of gender, which allows other otaku to accept Hato, alleviating rather than doubling his loneliness. Furthermore, for Hato this aesthetic distance becomes distance from his own gender and sexuality, allowing him to enjoy his own masculine body rendered into a consumable commodity in BL featuring himself.*

**Keywords:** otaku; manga; Genshiken; gender; queer; loneliness

## Introduction

*Genshiken*, a manga by Kio Shimoku, was serialised from 2002 to 2016 (with a break from 2006 to 2010) in the *seinen* (targeted to young and adult men) magazine *Afutanūn* (*Afternoon*) and made into a successful anime. *Genshiken* is a sort of *roman fleuve* about an eponymous ‘otaku’ circle at the fictional Shīō University, which is understood to be a stand-in for the real Chūō University in the Tokyo suburb of Tama. *Genshiken* is an abbreviation of *Gendai shikaku bunka kenkyūkai*, or ‘Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture.’ Despite the impressive and scholarly name, however, it is understood that such ‘research societies’ are really just clubs for fans to gather and chat about their various interests. *Genshiken* is no exception. The protagonist of the text is the circle itself, and the manga follows six years of circle life as various characters come and go.<sup>1</sup>

*Genshiken* sometimes playfully highlights the follies of *otaku* excess but is in general a sympathetic portrayal of *otaku* (a type of fan, discussed below). It depicts a university circle (club) where *otaku* can socialise with other fans that share their interests, an insular space where *otaku* can overcome the loneliness of their alienation from mainstream society. The first part of *Genshiken* focuses mostly on stereotypical Japanese heterosexual male *otaku* subjects, but eventually the text opens up to other sorts of *otaku* subjectivities, including *fujoshi* (literally ‘rotten women,’ an ironically reclaimed self-deprecating term for female *otaku* who may be interested in manga, anime, and games like their male counterparts, but are in particular connoisseurs of amateur male homoerotic parody manga). It also introduces an American, and, most crucially for the current study, a heterosexual male fan of male homoeroticism who dresses in feminine clothing named Hato.

We might expect Hato to be doubly lonely; first experiencing the usual loneliness of a nerd, then also experiencing isolation from the recuperating fan community of the *Genshiken* circle due to a nonconforming gender presentation. Instead—despite some initial awkwardness—the opposite is true, and in *Genshiken* fan space becomes a place that is uniquely capable of accommodating nonnormative genders and sexualities. Kio Shimoku, the author of *Genshiken*, does not (to my knowledge) himself identify as genderqueer, and consequently Hato should not be read as representative of the social reality of queer experiences in Japanese fan culture. Indeed, the text’s representation of Hato is somewhat fraught; although Hato is depicted sympathetically and is far from the archetypal transvestite clown often found in Japanese media, moments of outing or sexual harassment by other circle members are often portrayed lightly and humorously. However, I argue that nonetheless, Hato is a medium through which *Genshiken* explores the

queer potential of *otaku* culture as a social space preconfigured to accept reconfigurations of gender and sexuality.

If we understand queerness broadly, following Michael Warner, as a 'thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,' an 'objection to the normalisation of behavior... and thus to the cultural phenomenon of societalisation,' (Warner, 2011: xxvi-ii) *Genshiken* argues for the queerness of *otaku* culture in two principal respects: resistance to the normative essential connection between sexuality and social presentation (e.g., gender presentation), and a Butlerian understanding of gender as inessential performance. However, the text accomplishes this in the ultra-commodified hyperreal media environment of modern *otaku* culture where images are exchanged and plastically transformed at a rapid pace. Ultimately, *Genshiken* shows that *otaku* culture 'queers' normative structures of gender and sexuality precisely by commodifying bodies and gender presentations, thus entering them into the 'database' (to use Azuma Hiroki's term) of cultural tropes that can be reconfigured for pleasurable *otaku* consumption, thereby revealing them as neither original nor essential. This can, of course, be exploitative. But unlike *fujoshi*, who commodify and consume the body of the (gay, male) other, Hato ideates his own body and masculinity as reconfigurable *otaku* tropes and is even able to consume his own body by enjoying homoerotic manga featuring himself. *Genshiken* therefore uses Hato to suggest that *otaku* culture and *otaku* subjectivity contain an inherent potential for productive queerness.

### **The Otaku**

One important distinction that must be made is that *Genshiken* is not merely a 'fan' circle, but an 'otaku' circle. *Otaku* are a subculture of extremely devoted fans, usually of anime, manga, and video games. In his study of the amorphous and ill-defined *otaku* phenomenon, psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki notes that *otaku* share with other fans and 'maniacs' a compulsion to possess the objects of their desires. However, the object of the *otaku's* desire is fiction, something with no material reality. Therefore, *otaku* can never possess the object of their desire in the way that a stamp collector can eventually own all the stamps he or she desires. Even if one were to own all the cels (individual pictures drawn on transparent material, originally celluloid, which are composited to create the moving animation) of an anime, after all, one would not really own the anime itself, which is a socially circulating fiction. Therefore, *otaku* generally attempt to possess fiction through the creation of new fiction, fiction which promotes a general fiction to a personal fiction, thereby allowing possession of it (Saitō, 2011: 20). Saitō argues that *otaku* are characterised by the production of new fictions such as cosplay and

amateur parody manga, or *dōjinshi*, in order to possess the fictions of which they are fans. He also argues that sexuality is key to *otaku* subjectivity, specifically the ability to be attracted to fictional images with no underlying material reality. He writes, 'to put it very crudely, what distinguishes an *otaku* from a non-*otaku* is whether he is able to 'get release' with an anime character' (Saitō, 2011: 30).

*Otaku* culture, like many fan cultures worldwide, is a despised subculture (Kinsella, 2000: 128-9). Normative society views *otaku* as dangerously undersocialised loners who have failed to make the transition into adulthood and become obsessed with childhood objects (manga and anime). Japanese society's view of *otaku* is congruent with Joli Jenson's description of society's views of celebrity fandom (although she is writing in a Western context), that 'the pathological fan is... the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure' (Jenson, 1992: 11). This relationship with the fandom object is 'a chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition' (Ibid: 17). The fan is therefore viewed not only as a pitiable loser unable to function in society, but also as an object of fear:

*The obsessed loner is the image of the isolated, alienated 'mass man.' He or she is cut off from family, friends and community. His or her life becomes increasingly dominated by an irrational fixation on a celebrity figure, a perverse attachment that dominates his or her otherwise unrewarding existence. The vulnerable, lonely modern man or woman, seduced by the mass media into fantasy communion with celebrities, eventually crosses the line into pathology, and threatens, maims or kills the object of his or her desire. (Jenson, 1992: 15)*

The disdain for fans as loners and losers, therefore, is always pregnant with an undertone of fear that the failure to properly socialise (and conform to normative society's expectations for 'healthy' interests and relationships) will lead to disruption and even violence, the fatal end result of unregulated new media technologies corrupting society. Although in the case of *otaku* the object of obsession is fictional media images rather than celebrities, with *otaku* there is an additional element of candid sexual (masturbatory) use of media images. The fear, then, is displaced from fear that fans will inflict violence to the object of their obsession itself, to the fear that deep perversion lurks at the heart of fandom and such sexual perversion will eventually be acted out in the real world. *Otaku*, therefore, share with other fans the position of being lonely nerds on the margins of society, viewed with something between pity and suspicion. Recently, of course, Japan has started to capitalise on

anime and manga as part of its 'Cool Japan' soft power initiative. But while the government and businesses are happy to exploit *otaku* images for profit, they have generally kept *otaku* themselves at arm's length (Galbraith, 2009: 9).

### Hato Kenjirō

Hato Kenjirō joins the circle Genshiken midway through the overall story arc of the *Genshiken* manga. He is a fan of BL, or 'Boy's Love' male homoerotic pornographic *dōjinshi*. He insists, however, that he is himself heterosexual. Because of bad experiences in high school when his classmates discovered his affection for homoerotica, he first appears in *Genshiken* in so-called *josō*—crossdress, or specifically the practice of men dressing as women—in order to fit in with the circle *fujoshi* who also love BL and assume an identity that will lead to acceptance of his hobby as normal.

A word about Hato's pronouns: of course, no pronouns are used for Hato in the original Japanese text, since Japanese uses few pronouns at all, much less gendered ones. Here I will call Hato 'he' because it seems clear he is not a transgender woman. He only presents as female in certain *otaku* contexts. He does not present as female to the rest of society and seems to be perfectly comfortable presenting as and being identified as male in non-*otaku* social situations. He presents himself as female in *otaku* contexts (club meetings and conventions) in order to fit in more easily with those who share his interests—that is to say, *fujoshi* who are also interested in BL—and works hard to make his presentation as seamless as possible for that reason, but he has no apparent desire to be considered a woman (or anything other than a straight cissexual man) by the rest of society. Admittedly, this is complicated by the presence of a spin-off manga, *Spotted Flower* (titled in English). *Spotted Flower* is written by Kio Shimoku for the web magazine *Rakuen Le Paradis*. This text is written for a different publisher and therefore cannot use the names of *Genshiken* characters, but follows characters who very clearly evoke the *Genshiken* characters as they live their lives several years after graduation. In this text the Hato-analogue character has indeed become a transgender woman: *she* presents as completely female to society (her manga editor does not even know she is transgender, despite the closeness of that relationship), and has undergone some amount of gender reassignment surgery. However, *Spotted Flower* is, again, a spin-off rather than a direct sequel. It began serialisation in 2010, while *Genshiken* was still being serialised, and the 'past' that makes up its settings differs significantly from the conclusion that is eventually reached in *Genshiken* in 2016. Therefore, I will treat *Spotted Flower* as a separate text due its own consideration, rather than the inevitable future

of the events and characters in *Genshiken*. In the text of *Genshiken*, Hato expresses no transgender desires outside of narrow, specific *otaku* contexts, so I will use 'he' for Hato in this article.

### **Queer *Shumi***

However, as Kath Browne (2006: 885-86) has written, 'queer is more than short hand for LGBT.' Instead, she argues we should 'locate "queer"' in the radical requirement to question normativities and orthodoxies, in part now by rendering categories of sexualities, genders and spaces fluid. Currently, this project includes the transgressions of dichotomous sexes, genders and sexualities as well as emphasising the artificiality of boundaries around, and connections between these.' Although Hato is not gay or transgender, he certainly renders categories of genders fluid and transgresses dichotomous sexes and genders. Through him, *Genshiken* explores *otaku* culture as a queer space. One way it does this is by configuring otakudom as a social space that accepts that sexuality and gender presentation do not necessarily signify monolithically. At one point Hato finds himself alone with Madarame, an older club member, making awkward conversation about his crossdressing. As if to address the elephant he feels is in the room, Hato says bluntly 'It's not like I'm gay (*homo*) you know' (Kio, 2011a: 175).<sup>2</sup> Madarame only responds 'hmmm?' Hato is taken aback: 'You're not interested? I thought it was a pretty shocking statement...' As Mark McLelland has noted, Japanese entertainment media has long represented male homosexuals almost exclusively as feminine men, associating homosexual attraction with transvestitism or transgenderism (often so clownishly exaggerated that the word for this media trope has become pejorative), and entrenched the idea that, conversely, transvestitism and transgender presentation must be associated with homosexuality (McLelland, 2000: 8-10). It is no wonder, then, that Hato expects Madarame to assume he is homosexual based on his crossdressing. However, Madarame, a representative of the stereotypical heterosexual undersocialised male *otaku*, says 'Oh, well, I just thought BL and crossdressing were part of your *shumi*. I didn't really consider whether you were gay' (Kio, 2011a: 176). The use of *shumi* here is significant. The term literally means something like a hobby or a preference. This may seem too casual an understanding for something as serious as a nonconforming gender presentation. However, in the context of *otaku* culture *shumi* also refers to one's media consumption preferences, especially one's pornographic preferences.

As many commentators have noted, there is often a slippage between an *otaku's shumi*, their sexuality, and their gender presentation. Many people have noted the gap between the *otaku's* supposedly perverse media habits, or *shumi*, and their 'healthy' sexuality in real life (Saitō,

2011: 30). Madarame himself has *shumi* in BDSM pornography but shows no interest in pursuing BDSM sexuality in real life. He later develops an interest in so-called *otoko no ko* games, or pornographic games featuring young boys dressed as girls, without any apparent inclination towards pederasty in real life. An *otaku's shumi*, therefore, might arguably be seen as a part of their sexuality or even sexual identity, to the extent that they receive masturbatory sexual pleasure from viewing these images and form community bonds with others who have similar *shumi*. Yet the important point is that *shumi* rarely translate into real-life sexual practices with real sexual partners. This is not necessarily surprising: as Eve Sedgwick (1990: 25) has noted, 'many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't want to do.'

*Shumi*, then, are a kind of sexuality play one performs in the hyperreal world of rapidly circulating media images which, crucially, have no essential connection to and reveal no information about one's 'real' sexuality. Famously, this is one aspect of *otaku* subjectivity that hegemonic society has difficulty accepting. Normative society believes that *shumi* and sexuality must signify monolithically, and therefore antisocial *shumi* must reveal some dark hidden perversity in the real sexuality of *otaku*, always threatening to break out into real sexual acts. *Otaku* themselves, however, might find this a bit mystifying; since fiction is not real life, after all, why shouldn't one have totally separate desires in the fictional and real realms?

This is not to say, of course, that real-world non-heterosexual desire or nonconforming gender expression is equivalent to *otaku* media preferences. It does suggest, however, a certain solidarity or allyship between *otaku* and queer; both are plagued by normative society's insistence that sex, gender, and sexuality must signify monolithically, and that any divergence from this monolithic signification is pathological. Therefore, by having Madarame—the stereotypical heterosexual male *otaku*—frame Hato's gender presentation as *shumi*, *Genshiken* proposes *otaku* culture as a space already capable of accommodating queerness. Again, queer here is not a pronoun for LGBT, but rather the radical challenging of monolithic genders and normative contiguity between sexuality and gender, whether heterosexual or homosexual. *Genshiken* suggests that the *otaku* acceptance of *shumi* as a form of hyperreal sexuality with no essential connection to real sexuality has the capacity to accept gender as a performance that has no essential or biological connection to sexuality. Therefore, when Madarame encounters Hato's feminine gender presentation he makes no assumptions that Hato is homosexual—indeed, it does not seem to have occurred to him—because he does not assume that gender and sexuality

must signify monolithically. The customs of *otaku* culture that separate *shumi* from sexuality allow him to easily separate sexuality from gender. *Genshiken*, then, suggests that *otaku* culture is uniquely already primed to accept the queering of genders and sexualities: the rendering fluid of fixed categories. Therefore, rather than experiencing isolation from the fan community that recuperates the loneliness of the nerd, that fan community is primed to accept Hato's queer gender presentation and accepts him. He is able to form important social and affective bonds with his upperclassman, ameliorating his *otaku* loneliness and isolation.

### **The Commodified Self**

Beyond this acceptance of performativity, *Genshiken* also posits the hyper-commodified consumerism in *otaku* culture as creating a consumer subjectivity inherently accommodating to queer subjectivity. Some critics, like Jack Halberstam, have tried to posit queer as opposed to capitalism. Halberstam (2005: 10) writes that queer subjects 'will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production. By doing so, they often live outside the logic of capital accumulation.' It might seem odd, then, to find compatibility between consumerism and queer. However, here I agree with Amy Stone, Margot Weiss, and others that queerness is a late-capitalist sexuality, where flexible subjects made possible by late-capitalist commodities and social spaces allow new bodies and desires to be explored. Stone (2013: 1649) writes that 'flexibility and fluidity are not just a part of queerness, but part of late capitalism's impact on cultural productions in which individuals have a 'dynamic, ever-changing flexible role' within systems... Queerness as a late-capitalist sexuality creates queer spaces that help generate these new flexible and fluid roles.' Weiss (2011: 14-15), similarly, explores queer spaces 'made possible by commodities, and thus limited in... accessibility, but also... space where new bodies, desires, and relationships can be created and explored.' Therefore, such communities:

*Are not oppositional to, but rather complicit with, transformations in capitalism, particularly the consolidation of what is variously called late, flexible, informational, or advanced capitalism. Although different scholars emphasise different aspects of this shift, late capitalism is characterised by flexibility, new relations between production and consumption, a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production, and the rise of new technologies and informatics... In the field of sexuality, this has enabled new sexual identities, as new sexual practices, desires, and technologies have proliferated in the marketplace. From reproductive technologies and sex therapy to sex toys, phone sex, and pornography, the last few decades have seen a*

*proliferation of ever-more-specialised niche markets, a shift that also heralds new possibilities for the generation and commoditisation of social difference. Late-capitalist relations of production and consumption have also restructured bodies, subjects, and sociality. Linked to new forms of capitalism are more 'adaptable' bodies, which absorb new techniques, technologies, commodities, and proliferating sexual pleasures as ideal consumers. (Weiss, 2011: 14-15)*

*Otaku* culture is shot through with just such late-capitalist modes of production and consumption that enables more adaptable and flexible subjectivities, including queer genders and sexualities. These include new technologies and virtualities, such as pornographic games that allow the *otaku* subject to inhabit different bodies and virtually perform nonnormative genders and sexualities. The internet has also enabled the rapid authoring, remixing, distribution, and circulation of images, including pornographies targeted at ever-more-rarefied niche sexualities. But even offline, *otaku* culture is characterised by a late-capitalist production and circulation of images and narratives.

By far the most important late-capitalist *otaku* commodity is amateur parody manga—so-called *dōjinshi*—which circulates via unofficial channels. A perfect example of a late-capitalist shift to non-Fordist production, Sharon Kinsella (2000: 105) notes that such amateur manga is created through the services of small printing companies using technologies like offset printing that allow for cheaper printing of small print runs compared to older mass printers. The result is that 'individuals from all walks of life could now print and reproduce their own work without approaching publishing companies.' This creates a 'sphere of cultural production spreading beneath the superstructure of mass communications... known as the mini communications.' Now some amateur production has moved online, but the unregulated exchange of amateur manga is still one of the largest forms of mini communications in Japan.

Unsurprisingly, much of this amateur manga is pornographic, including the BL *dōjinshi* that Hato is an avid fan of. BL has its own entrenched practices of production and consumption, usually taking as its referent pop cultural tropes rather than the lived experiences of male homosexuals. This can, of course, be harmful, as was famously highlighted in the 1990s *Yaoi ronsō*, or Yaoi debates, in which homosexual men in Japan accused authors and readers of BL (then called Yaoi) of perpetuating vicious stereotypes about gay men (Lunsing, 2006). Be that as it may, *Genshiken* defends BL, and perhaps *otaku* production and consumption generally, by showing that Hato's practice as a reader of BL and experience with its reading practices allows him to 'read' his

own lived experience and his own sexuality from a position of *otaku* aesthetic distance. Hato ideates this 'reader' as a female version of himself, a *fujoshi*, who floats above him omnisciently reading Hato's life as a BL in real time. For example, as Hato enters the apartment of his male *senpai* (upperclassman), he imagines his 'reader' saying 'Yes, yes, hesitating just a little bit is perfect... as if you can't quite get used to it no matter how many times you come here' (Kio, 2011a: 162). In other words, he objectifies his life according to the grammar of BL, imagining a reader pleasurably watching his lived present and anticipating the development of homoerotic situations. Then, as he considers taking a shower there to refresh from the hot day, his reader squeals 'kyaaa!' and says 'what kind of flag is that? What if senpai comes home while he's in the shower...' (Ibid: 165).<sup>3</sup> Hato, then, is reading his life as it happens according to BL tropes. Although there is nothing salacious about this particular visit, according to BL tropes which the practiced BL reader expects, entering an upperclassman's apartment alone and taking a shower will almost certainly lead to the younger man's seduction and possibly to ravishment. Jeffrey Angles has argued that BL invites its readers to identify with multiple characters, and therefore 'there is a fluid circulation of desire between reader and characters, as the reader is invited into the world of the text to identify with multiple subject positions' (Angles, 2011: 235-36). Here the late-capitalist commodity known as BL has allowed Hato just such identification with multiple subject positions, including the position of *fujoshi* readers consuming male homoerotica. BL makes him objectify his own masculinity and his own masculine body, creating the possibility of new sexualities and gender expressions; in a word, queering himself.

While Hato's consumption of BL and his internalisation of BL tropes leads to this productive self-queering, it is worth noting that this happens through inscribing existing BL tropes onto his body and gender, not through self-discovery or a struggle to find a more genuine self. This means that any move towards gender or sexual fluidity is questionable, as gender and sexuality have just been locked into new media tropes rather than becoming truly fluid. For example, BL is famously obsessed with *seme* and *uke* (respectively the 'top' and the 'bottom,' or the penetrator and penetrated) in homosexual male pairings, and figuring out which partner would be which based on the perceived aggressiveness or submissiveness of their personalities. Hato queers his own masculinity by reading his life as if it were a BL, that is, through these BL tropes. He first reads himself as a *seme* vis-à-vis his passive *senpai*, but later when his *senpai* begins to behave in a self-assured fashion suitable to a more confident, mature man, Hato suddenly begins to read himself as the *uke* in that situation (Kio, 2011a: 193). While BL

reading practices have allowed him, although heterosexual, to ideate himself as both giving and receiving penetration in homosexual intercourse, at no point does he interrogate himself about what kind of sexual posture he feels more suited to, thus opening up the possibility of queering his own desire and subjectivity.

However, this is more generally how the *otaku* characters of *Genshiken* frame their relationships with others: through media tropes. They constantly describe themselves and others in terms of *kyara*, or characters: not specific characters in manga and anime, but rather codified character types. One club member, for example, tells another she is noticeably 'creating' a *buaisō kyara* (unsociable character), a standard *kyara* type (Kio, 2005: 112). Another circle member is said to fit the *oiroke kyara* (mature sexy character) mould (Kio, 2006b: 178). *Genshiken* depicts its *otaku* subjects as very self-consciously understanding themselves and their relationship to others and to society based on the reading practices of subculture and its entrenched character tropes. It is therefore, perhaps, inevitable that any *otaku* exploration of gender and sexual fluidity must also be understood through subcultural tropes. So, while Hato's reliance on BL tropes to queer his own gender and body may not lead him to what some may regard as authentic self-discovery, this process certainly creates more possibilities for queer than a monolithically signified body, gender, and sexuality. *Genshiken*, therefore, shows that *otaku* aesthetic objectification and database consumption create unique possibilities for queering heteronormative gender.

### **A Database of Gender**

As mentioned earlier, Azuma Hiroki has proposed that *otaku* culture, and perhaps postmodern culture generally, enters cultural tropes into a cultural database, which individual texts then extract and combine freely in new combinations, with the pleasure of postmodern consumption lying precisely in the ingeniousness of the combination of unlikely elements. He proposes that modern metanarratives (grand narratives) ordered cultural production in the modern period and made up a hidden 'inner layer' in the myriad small narratives (works of fiction) produced in the society organised by that metanarrative. Readers were able to get access to that inner layer by reading these small narratives. Since the noted collapse of modern metanarratives, however, this inner layer no longer functions or is even desired. But unlike the Baudrillardian unregulated proliferation of simulacra proposed by other theorists, Azuma argues that there is still a structure governing cultural production in postmodernity: a 'grand nonnarrative' database (Azuma, 2009: 29-52). This database is filled with affective elements, what Azuma calls *moe*

*yōso*, narrative elements that evoke an emotional response in viewers and readers. This is most apparent in *otaku* culture, which very self-consciously extracts disparate character and plot elements and throws them together in cleverly innovative combinations. Since the database is a nonnarrative, it cannot function to regulate the combination of elements, leading to the random postmodern pastiche that *otaku* delight in. Put another way, the database structure of culture implies that all possible narrative elements are demoted to mere affective database elements, stripped of the gravity of meaning-making and made available for appropriation of their affect in combination with any other element. BL researchers have also made use of this theory. Sandra Annett, for example, points out the database elements in the male characters of the hit comic and anime *Hetalia Axis Powers* that lent themselves to *fujoshi* consumption and pairings (Annett, 2014: 173-75). Azuma Sonoko, on the other hand, has both adopted and critiqued Azuma (Hiroki)'s theory, arguing that unlike male *otaku*, *fujoshi* do not just consume individual character *moe yōso* removed from narrative context. Instead, *fujoshi* consume the narrative relationality between the characters as a kind of element, what she calls *sōkankei shōhi* 相関係消費, or 'interrelational consumption' (Azuma, 2015, quoted in Asano, 2021: 143). More recently, however, she has acknowledged that *fujoshi* can also enjoy character database consumption without relational context (Azuma, 2020: 165-66).

This cultural theory serves as an important framework for reading *Genshiken*, which is, after all, an exploration of *otaku*: those who, according to Azuma Hiroki, are most well-adapted to database cultural production and consumption. In particular, *Genshiken* makes it apparent that Hato has entered himself—or rather his masculine body and gender—into the database, where they have become just another mutable element that can be recombined for pleasurable *otaku* consumption. In other words, by reading his own life as a BL, Hato has demoted his own body and gender from an inviolable source of self-identity into an affective element that can be freely appropriated, recombined with other elements, and pleurably consumed. This database recombination is a kind of intertextuality, and Tomoko Aoyama has noted that BL reading communities are noted for their penchant for detecting the 'scent' of homoerotic BL potential in other texts or situations and reading them intertextually with BL tropes (Aoyama, 2012: 66-67). Accordingly, at one point one of Hato's hometown acquaintances suggests that his crossdressing might fit the BL trope of a homosexual relationship between a macho older brother and an effeminate younger brother (an example of interrelational database consumption), effectively imagining him in an incestuous gay relationship with his

brother. Rather than being disgusted, Hato finds this pairing completely plausible. He says, 'of course there's no basis in reality, but I have to admit that objectively the idea fits.' He then plays along when his friends consider the pairing more deeply, proposing changing the genre to a historical story set in an old-fashioned household: 'Oooh, I see, since the older brother is the only one who will inherit[the household], the younger brother was raised as a girl... that kind of setting?' (**Kio, 2012: 101-2**). Clearly here Hato is treating his own gender and sexuality as database elements—*mere* database elements—that can be combined with other trope elements (like 'old house bound by tradition' and 'gay romance between brothers') and rendered into commodities for pleasurable *otaku* consumption. *Genshiken* attempts to show that the hyper-commodification inherent in *otaku* culture and database consumption allows gender to be denatured, deconstructed, and rendered inessential to identity, becoming just another object of consumption play. As Jay Prosser has written, 'whereas the constructedness of straight gender is obscured by the veil of naturalisation, queer transgender reveals, indeed, explicitly performs, its own constructedness,' (**Prosser, 1998: 31**) thus 'illustrating both the inessentiality of sex and the nonoriginality of heterosexuality' (**Prosser, 1998: 26**). *Genshiken* shows that *otaku* modes of engaging with gender and sexuality encourage such a queering of gender, revealing it as just another commodity that is subject to reconfiguration and therefore constructed, denaturalised, inessential, and nonoriginal.

It should be noted that this commodification of bodies and genders for consumption might, in other contexts, have sinister implications. The commodification of the gay, transgender, or transsexual body for mass consumption robs gay, transgender, or transsexual individuals of the body as a site that can be reinscribed and reclaimed as an expression of the authentic self, and does so in order to satisfy the prurient curiosity of the very normative society that violently excludes such bodies in other contexts. Indeed, this charge might be fairly levelled against *fujoshi*, who are overwhelmingly heterosexual women who take erotic or masturbatory pleasure in the consumption of commodified nonheteronormative bodies and sexualities. The difference here, however, is that while *fujoshi* commodify the body of the gay, male other, Hato is commodifying his own body and his own masculinity. This *self*-commodification allows him to queer his own gender, in other words, to interrogate his own masculinity and heterosexuality as denatured and inessential to his body. This commodification of his own gender reveals that it is, as Judith Butler (**1988: 519-20**) writes, 'in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity

instituted through a stylised repetition of acts.’ These acts, denatured from a ‘locus of agency’ and commodified as disparate database elements subject to recombination, become revealed as ‘acts which are internally discontinuous,’ which then imply that ‘the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.’ Because, after all, if gender is ‘not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.’ It is precisely the reading practices of *otaku* in general and *fujoshi* in particular that make this queering possible, through the relentless reduction of all affect to database elements that can be freely consumed in any combination. In this way, *Genshiken* not only positions Japanese fan culture as a kind of queer space ready to accept radical deconstruction of genders and sexualities, but also, perhaps, defends *fujoshi* practices as the source of this subcultural compatibility with queer, even if they themselves commodify and consume the bodies of others.

In fact, this ability to denature one’s body and sexuality and accept its entrance into the circulation of database elements extends to other *otaku* in *Genshiken*, even those who do not engage in queer performativity like Hato. Sasahara, another circle member and very much a straight, heteronormative male, is at one point shown BL manga drawn by another circle member that features Sasahara himself having homosexual relations with one of his *senpai*. Although flustered, he is able to view his BL avatar as a completely independent character, rather than a representation of himself, and therefore is able to appreciate the artistic merits of the work on an objective level (Kio, 2006a: 103). In fact, the only *otaku* character who seems unable to accept that his gender and sexuality can be denatured and circulated as a commodity inessential to himself is Kuchiki, significantly a member of *Genshiken* who is a clownish figure, given to outbursts of anger and violence, unable to fit in with the other *otaku*, and who exists on the periphery of circle life. Upon being told that the *fujoshi* in the circle view him as the *seme* in a potential pairing with Madarame, he is unable to accept that this is a merely a *fujoshi* commodification of his sexuality and gender presentation, and thinks it must reveal something about his real sexuality. He therefore actually tries to aggressively kiss Madarame in typical *seme* fashion, for which he is quickly punched and restrained by the other circle members (Kio, 2011b: 170). It is only the clown *otaku* who cannot maintain cool aesthetic distance from his own sexuality, and therefore cannot

appreciate it as both inessential and commodified. Significantly, Kuchiki also attempts to sexually harass Hato at various points, presumably because he cannot accept his feminine gender presentation as inessential to his body and sexuality, behaviour which the other circle members quickly condemn as unacceptable. While Kuchiki is largely ostracised from the group for his failure to accept the database commodification of gender and sexuality, the other *otaku* are comfortable seeing their own bodies, genders, and sexualities commodified and recombined because *otaku* cultural practices have primed them to understand gender and sexuality as constructed and inessential: just another database element to be mined for affect.

This is shown to be decidedly untrue, however, of society outside of *otaku* subculture. Ogiue, a character who enters the *Genshiken* circle boldly proclaiming that she hates *otaku* and especially the *fujoshi* love of male homosexuality, is eventually revealed to have suffered a trauma that drove her to such extreme positions; while in middle school she drew BL illustrations featuring her classmates. For this, she was summoned to the principal's office in front of teachers and parents and called to account, she was shunned by other students, and the subject of her illustrations stopped attending school and eventually transferred (Kio, 2006a: 15-25). She therefore hates herself for her own obsession with BL and overreacts by distancing herself from it and other *fujoshi*. The text shows that members of mainstream society are not able to objectify their own bodies, genders, and sexualities, insist on a gender and sexuality that signifies monolithically with the biological body even in fiction, and will bring in all the powers of society and the state (i.e., the authority of teachers, principals, parents, etc.) to enforce that signification. Members of *otaku* subculture, however, are able to apply *otaku* database commodification to their own genders and sexualities, rendering them objects of play which are mutable and inessential. This is how *Genshiken* proposes *otaku* culture itself as a kind of queer space.

## Conclusion

Eve Sedgwick (1993: 8) writes that "'queer" can refer to... the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.' Rather than document the lived experiences of queer *otaku*, *Genshiken* uses Hato, a heterosexual male consumer of BL and a crossdresser, to explore how *otaku* culture meshes with those gaps. The manga concludes that *otaku* aesthetic distance from objects of desire, plus *otaku* database consumption that denatures and commodifies nearly everything, make *otaku* subculture uniquely amenable to queer

gender and sexualities, quite the opposite of normative Japanese overculture. Therefore, rather than being doubly lonely, marginalised by both his nerd interests and his nonconforming gender presentation and sexuality, Hato is able to find warm acceptance within *otaku* culture that alleviates his loneliness, because *otaku* culture is already preconfigured to queer gender and sexuality. This is, certainly, a somewhat idealised representation that does not necessarily reflect the experiences of real queer Japanese *otaku*, some of whom doubtless find fan spaces oppressive. Nevertheless, the text attempts to frame *otaku* culture and *otaku* subjectivity as containing an inherent potential for productive queerness.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This description of the text and the below discussion of *otaku* also appears in (Smith, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> All translations from *Genshiken* are the author's own.

<sup>3</sup> A 'flag' in this context is a kind of story 'tag' which indicates a defined type of erotic relationship or encounter.