FANDOM UNBOUND

FANDOM UNBOUND

Otaku Culture in a Connected World

Edited by

MIZUKO ITO

DAISUKE OKABE

IZUMI TSUJI

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven & London

Published with assistance from

Copyright © 2012 by Yale University.
All rights reserved.

Subject to the exception immediately following, this book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

The author has made an online version of this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 License. It can be accessed through the author's Web site at http:www.itofisher.com/mito.

Yale University Press books may be purchased in quantity for educational, business, or promotional use. For information, please e-mail sales.press@yale.edu (U.S. office) or sales@yaleup.co.uk (U.K. office).

Designed by James J. Johnson
Set in Janson Roman and Helvetica type by Westchester Book Group, Danbury, CT
Printed in the United States of America

[[CIP info to come]]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 2, "Database Animals," is excerpted from *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* by Hiroki Azuma, translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 25–62. Originally published in Japanese as *Dobutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (Tokyo: Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 2001). Copyright 2001 by Hiroki Azuma. English translation copyright 2009 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota.

Chapter 3, "Japan's Cynical Nationalism," is excerpted from *Wararu Nihon no "Nationalism"* by Akihiro Kitada (Tokyo: Nihon Housou Shuppan Kyokai, 2005), introduction, pp. 9–23; and chapter 4, pp. 197–216.

Chapter 6, "Otaku and the City: The Rebirth of Akihabara," is excerpted from *Shuto no Tanjo—Moeru Toshi Akihabara* by Kaichiro Morikawa (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2003), introduction, pp. 26–36; and chapter 1, pp. 40–78.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Editors' Note on Translation ix

Introduction xi
MIZUKO ITO

PART I. CULTURE AND DISCOURSE

1 Why Study Train Otaku? A Social History of Imagination 3
IZUMI TSUJI

2 Database Animals 30
HIROKI AZUMA

3 Japan's Cynical Nationalism 68
AKIHIRO KITADA

4 Strategies of Engagement: Discovering, Defining, and Describing Otaku Culture in the United States 85
LAWRENCE ENG

PART II. INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLACE

5 Comic Market as Space for Self-Expression in Otaku Culture 107
HIROAKI TAMAGAWA

6 Otaku and the City: The Rebirth of Akihabara 133
KAICHIRO MORIKAWA

7 Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture 158
LAWRENCE ENG

8 Contributors v. Leechers: Fansubbing Ethics and a Hybrid Public Culture 179
MIZUKO ITO

PART III. COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

9 Making *Fujoshi* Identity Visible and Invisible 207
DAISUKE OKABE AND KIMI ISHIDA

10 Cosplay, Learning, and Cultural Practice 225
DAISUKE OKABE

11 The Fighting Gamer Otaku Community: What Are They "Fighting" About? 249
YOSHIMASA KIJIMA

12 "As Long as It's Not *Linkin Park Z*": Popularity, Distinction, and Status in the AMV Subculture 275
MIZUKO ITO

List of Contributors 299

Index 000

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank those who provided invaluable guidance and support in creating this book. We are grateful to Shinji Miyadai for inspiring and helping us conceptualize this volume. Elissa Sato provided not only expert translations but valuable insights on otaku culture. Henry Jenkins and Ellen Seiter gave feedback that critically sharpened the core themes of the book, and Jason Schultz offered expert counsel on matters of intellectual property both practical and theoretical. Mariko Oda helped keep this project on track in so many ways. At Yale University Press, this book was in the capable hands of Alison MacKeen, Christina Tucker, and Niamh Cunningham. Very special thanks go to Karen Bleske, who provided editorial support for this project throughout.

Editors' Note on Translation

With the exception of the chapters by Eng and Ito, all of the chapters in this book were written originally in Japanese. The chapter by Azuma was translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono. The remaining chapters were translated by Elissa Sato and Mizuko Ito. Although the authors have worked closely with Ito in editing the English versions of the chapters, Ito bears responsibility for any faults in the translation. Karen Bleske also contributed to the editing and readability of all chapters.

Japanese names are written in the Western format, given name first, to avoid confusion in the frequent juxtaposition of Japanese and Western names.

Certain key terms with no direct counterpart in English have been written in romanized Japanese. Japanese nouns have no plural form, thus terms such as "otaku," "anime," and "manga" are treated as both singular and plural.

When figures in Japanese yen are mentioned, we have included a corresponding value in U.S. dollars, at an exchange rate of approximately ¥100 per US$.

Chapter 2, "Database Animals," by Hiroki Azuma, is a reproduction of a previously published work, and as such, some of its style conventions differ from those in the other chapters in this book. Citations and dates appear in the notes, rather than in the text, Japanese names are written last name first, non-English words remain italicized after their first appearance, and some syllables retain their diacritical marks. However, for the sake of clarity, figures have been renumbered and obsolete cross-references removed. To conserve space, the notes have also been renumbered to remove the translator's notes; interested readers should consult the original publication for those.

Introduction

MIZUKO ITO

Otaku culture defies simple definition. Emerging first in Japan in the 1980s as a marginalized and stigmatized geek subculture, it has gradually expanded its sphere of influence to become a major international force, propelled by arguably the most wired fandom on the planet. Along the way, the term "otaku" has been hotly contested by those inside and outside the subculture. For some, it evokes images of sociopathic shut-ins out of touch with reality. For others, and increasingly, it suggests a distinctive style of geek chic: a postmodern sensibility expressed through arcane knowledge of pop and cyber culture and striking technological fluency. This book seeks to plumb the varied meanings and practices associated with otaku culture, not by pinning it to a single origin story or fixed definition, but by exploring its protean and multifaceted nature in varied social and historical contexts. For the authors in this book, otaku culture references a constellation of "fannish" cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world.

This introduction situates otaku culture within these varied historical and social conditions, tracing its diverse manifestations as well as the common set of characteristics that make it recognizable as a unique cultural movement. I begin by describing how otaku culture is situated within the transnational media culture of the Internet age. While otaku culture grows out of familiar processes of cultural exchange between Japan and the rest of the world, its growing visibility is keyed to the unique conditions of our current historical moment, a moment in which networked and digital culture has energized peer-to-peer and participatory forms of media creation and sharing. I then turn to a discussion of the key conceptual frameworks that structure the three sections of this book: the particular cultural logics of otaku culture, the underlying peer-to-peer infrastructures that enable it, and the varied niche subcultures that these logics and infrastructures have encouraged.

OTAKU CULTURE IN A TRANSNATIONAL ARENA

Today's otaku culture is situated at a transnational confluence of social, cultural, and technological trends that are increasingly global in reach. While the origins of otaku culture can be found in the specificities of postwar Japanese experiences and imaginations (see Chapters 1 and 6), the international circulation of these cultural forms grew from a trickle to a torrent in the decades from the 1980s to the present (see Chapter 7). Accelerated by the international expansion of fan activity and emerging forms of digital and networked communications, otaku media and practices have become a media "meganiche" (Shirky 2006) that is decidedly multicultural in fantasy content and human membership. In other words, while otaku culture retains a Japanese cultural identity, it is a notably large tent which is as welcoming to knights as it is to ninja and includes not only the fans who flock to Tokyo's Comic Market but also those who frequent Southern California's Anime Expo and the countless other gatherings that take place regularly around the world.

Historical Antecedents

In many ways, the transnationalization of otaku culture follows a long-standing tradition of cultural cross-pollination between Japan and other parts of the world. In her book *From Impressionism to Anime*, Susan Napier (2007) notes that the European and American impressionists of the nineteenth century and today's anime aficionados are united by common themes: aesthetic pleasure, intercultural fascination, and Japanophilia. Napier suggests that the pleasure that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Euro-American elites derived from "Oriental" gardens and architecture was punctured by Japan's role as imperialist aggressor in World War II. It was only after the war that the U.S. occupation of Japan in tandem with Japan's postwar recovery created a context to revive the Western cult of Japan. At that point, the countercultural attraction to Japanese spirituality and fascination with Japan's business success became closely intertwined. “Japan Inc.” was a source of both fear and fascination, a curious mix of exotic tradition and advanced technocapitalist modernity (Ivy 1995; Miyoshi and Harootunian 1993; Morley and Robbins 1995). Napier sees this long-standing ambivalence as the basis of today’s fascination with Japanese popular culture, such as anime, games, and manga.

These cultural fascinations are multidirectional. As Euro-Americans absorbed the tenets of Zen Buddhism, Bushido, and Sony’s globalization, the Japanese emulated Euro-American political and economic forms, fashion, and popular culture. Rather than focus on repairing relations with Asian neighbors and building a fully Asian national identity in the period since its economic rise, Japan has developed an identity that is neither completely Western nor Eastern (Iwabuchi 2002, 8–11). Japanese “remaking” of the West (Tobin 1992) has generated both business success and cultural ridicule. The ridicule has focused on stereotypical examples of Japanese cultural mimicry, such as nonsensical “Japlish” or salarymen donning cowboy hats and singing country and western (see, for example, the 1991 documentary *The Japanese Version*). But these stereotypes hardly capture the depth and breadth of Western cultural influences. Osamu Tezuka, generally considered the father of contemporary manga and anime, was a devoted fan of Disney animation (Kelts 2006; Schodt 1983), and many films of today’s most celebrated animator, Hayao Miyazaki, are set in the European countryside and cityscapes. While retaining a culturally distinctive style, the content of much of today’s anime represents ongoing Western influence as well as a kind of “deodorization” (Iwabuchi 2002) or unmooring from cultural origins.

“Cool Japan”

In 2002, the journalist Douglas McGray published an influential article in *Foreign Policy*, declaring a shift in Japan’s international identity from a purveyor of hardware, such as cars and electronics, to one of “software.” Describing the influence of Hello Kitty, j-pop, anime, and manga, McGray identified Japan’s emerging “soft power” as a form of “gross national cool.” McGray’s article crystallized what street and fan culture had known for decades—that Japanese popular culture was a wellspring of generative fantasy content that invited the passionate engagement of media hobbyists around the world. Well before McGray's article, influential fans in the United States had been writing reviews, encyclopedias, and guides to anime and manga culture (Clements and McCarthy 2001; Levi 1996; Patten 2004; Schodt 1983, 1996), and kids around the world were growing up with Japanese media mixes such as *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as facts of life (Ito 2007; Tobin 2004). American teenage girl fan-fiction writers were discovering that *doujinshi* (fan-created manga) shared their obsession with homoerotic subtexts in popular media (McLelland 2001), while American and European kids in military and expat banker families based in Japan had been circulating videotapes of anime to peers in their homelands since the 1980s.

But McGray's article marked the tipping point in a cultural balance of power: high culture and the business sector had lost to youth and pop culture in their efforts to craft Japan's identity in the international arena. In the 1980s, Japan studies were dominated by college students with career ambitions in business, and courses were designed with them in mind. But as Japan's economic fortunes declined, universities saw a shift in the profile of students studying Japanese. In her survey of students in Japanese classes at the University of California, Irvine, University of Southern California, and Occidental, Annie Manion (2005) found that the majority cited interest in anime and manga as one of the primary reasons they were studying the language. As one *Wall Street Journal* article put it, "Interest in Japanese is about cool, not careers" (Parker 2004). Faculty interests also shifted in the 1990s, with a growing number of course offerings and publications in Japanese popular culture (Condry 2006; Craig 2000; Gottlieb and McLelland 2003; Kelly 2004; Martinez 1998; Skov and Moeran 1995).

This shift in cultural geopolitics happened in tandem with the mainstreaming of otaku culture domestically and of fan culture more generally in the United States and elsewhere. Henry Jenkins (2007) argues that in the age of digital and networked culture, fannish engagement with media including the creation of fan fiction, videos, and art have become much more mainstream and less stigmatized. In Japan, the publication of the otaku love story *Densha-Otoko* (Train Man) in 2004 and the subsequent TV version in 2005 marked a crucial turning point: by representing otaku as harmless and endearing, both dramas helped to remove the subculture's historically more negative and sociopathic connotations and to recast it in a much more sympathetic light (see Chapter 3). The site where the *Densha-Otoko* story unfolded, 2ch (channel 2), was by then an established feature of Japanese online culture and had achieved the status of the largest online forum in the world. The otaku district of Akihabara became a tourist destination for both local and international visitors (see Chapter 6), and otaku art and "superflat" 2-D aesthetics became enshrined in U.S. modern art museums through the cultural brokering of pop artist Takashi Murakami (2005).

In tandem with the growing domestic and international interest in Japanese popular culture, such as manga, games, and anime, academic attention to otaku culture also grew. In their introduction to the English version of Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, translators Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono (2009, xix–xxi) explain how in the 1980s, before the rise of otaku studies, cultural critics in Japan associated with the "New Academism" popularized highly theoretical and philosophical works by writing about them in books that were accessible to the general public; in the process, these critics became popular icons themselves. Scholars such as Shinji Miyadai (1994), Masachi Osawa (1995), and Tamaki Saito (2000, 2007) came of age within this context and represented the first wave of Japanese scholarship to look specifically at otaku culture. Hiroki Azuma, Kaichiro Morikawa, and Akihiro Kitada, represented in this volume, expanded on this pioneering work, further establishing otaku and popular cultural studies as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry.

Published in Japan in 2001, Azuma's best-selling book was an important turning point. While the success of the New Academism in promoting accessible genres of writing "paved the way for Azuma's success" (Abel and Kono 2009, xxi), Azuma's book heralded a new era of scholarship devoted to popular and youth culture. In the preface to the English translation, Azuma (2009) describes how the new scholarship on otaku departed from "those critics and theorists of an older sort who ignore such [popular culture] trends and continue to talk about 'the end of literature' and 'the end of criticism.'" He also lamented the fact that the work of popular culture theorists such as Morikawa, Kitada, and Miyadai are largely untranslated and unavailable to English-language readers (Azuma 2009, ix–x).

In English-language scholarship, including Japan studies, the pioneering work of scholars such as Anne Allison (2000, 2006), Sharon

Kinsella (1995, 1998, 2000), Susan Napier (2000, 2007), and Joseph Tobin (2004) has helped establish the study of manga and anime as a legitimate specialty. Today, we see a growing body of scholarly output centered on the study of anime and manga (Bolton, Csicery-Ronay Jr., and Tatsumi 2007; Brown 2006; Lamarre 2009; Lunning 2006). The annual Mechademia series of edited books (Lunning 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) is testament to the robust scholarly interest in manga and anime as well as to growing international scholarly cross-pollination, as is the fact that these edited books now often feature translated essays from Japan. Also, while most English-language scholarship on anime and manga has focused on professional creators or media content, we are now beginning to see work that looks at fan activity. The fifth Mechademia volume, *Fanthropologies*, is dedicated to fandom.

In Japan itself, a new generation of fan studies is extending the work of the first pioneers of otaku studies, energized by the growing visibility of otaku culture both domestically and overseas. By focusing on empirically grounded and detailed case studies, this new generation of scholarship highlights the diversity of fan and otaku engagement. This book showcases key texts from both the first wave of otaku scholars (Azuma, Kitada, and Morikawa,) and the next generation (Ishida, Kijima, Okabe, Tamagawa, and Tsuji). By translating the work of prominent scholars of otaku culture in Japan, this book contributes to the multidirectionality of cultural flow between Japan and the West and complements earlier work on popular cultural flows within Asia (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004). Our aim is to consolidate some of the key work on the contemporary state of otaku culture and practice by focusing specifically on the U.S.-Japan cultural corridor.

"Cool Japan" of the 2000s belongs to an established tradition of East-West cultural flow, and as an example of Japan's continuous rebranding in the international arena, it also belongs to what Iwabuchi (2010, 90) has described as the broader international trend toward "brand nationalism." It echoes the familiar patterns of exoticism and Japanophilia that have defined the privileged U.S.-Japan cultural and political corridor, and it is in keeping with Japan's ongoing nationalist project insofar as it looks more to the West than to Asian neighbors in order to define Japan's identity in the transnational arena (Iwabuchi 2010, 90–91). In contrast to earlier periods of Japanese culture's overseas influence, however, today's otaku landscape has been built by a mostly lowbrow, youth-driven, and highly distributed networked media ecology. International elites, governmental bureaucrats, and transnational corporations are latecomers to a party already dominated by a scrappier and youth-centered crowd. Roland Kelts describes how this groundswell of overseas interest in anime and manga caught local industries off guard: “The global anime boom of the twenty-first century has taken Japan, whose corporate culture prides itself on knowing the next new thing, almost completely by surprise” (Kelts 2006, 7). Kelts goes on to describe how the Japanese government eventually latched on to McGray’s notion of soft power as a way to revitalize Japan’s international influence in an era of economic recession (Kelts 2006, 112–113).

Otaku culture is emblematic of the growing force of technological privilege and online networks in dictating the terms of transnational cultural flow. Policy makers are responding to and capitalizing on trends set by the technocultural sector and online networks rather than being in the driver’s seat. We can see the power of technological and online leadership in the growing influence of South Korea in transnational cultural flows as well. As Iwabuchi notes (2010, 93–94), Korean media culture, particularly drama, has become hugely popular in Japan. This growing cultural influence cannot be decoupled from South Korea’s status as one of the most wired countries on the planet, defining a new techno-pop cultural sensibility within the context of its leadership in online and mobile networks and distribution. In short, today’s interests in otaku culture and the branding of cool Japan bring a new twist to the ongoing projects of national identity production and transnational flows precisely insofar as it registers the growing influence of popular culture and online peer-to-peer networks.

Similarity and Difference

Even as otaku culture is recuperated by elites and the mainstream, and as the terms “anime” and “manga” have become part of a common international lexicon, otaku culture and practice have retained their subcultural credibility. In Japan, much of manga and anime is associated with mainstream consumption; otaku must therefore differentiate themselves from *ippanjin* (regular people) through a proliferating set of niche genres, alternative readings, and derivative works. In the United States, the subcultural cred of anime and manga is buttressed by their status as foreign "cult media." This stance of U.S. fans is not grounded, however, in a simplistic exoticism. Susan Napier suggests that "rather than the traditional Orientalist construction of the West empowering itself by oppressing or patronizing the Eastern Other, these fans gain agency through discovering and then identifying with a society that they clearly recognize as having both universal and culturally specific aspects" (Napier 2007, 189). She describes how U.S. fans most often explain their interests in terms of the works' "thematic complexity and three-dimensional characterization" rather than as an interest in Japan per se (Napier 2007, 177).

Put differently, the international appeal of otaku culture is grounded precisely in its ability to resist totalizing global narratives such as nationalism. The long-running and intricate narrative forms of popular Japanese media represent a platform or, in Hiroki Azuma's terms, a database of referents that are highly amenable to recombination and customization by fans and gamers (see Chapter 2). We can see this in the stunning diversity of *doujinshi* derived from the same manga series (see Chapters 5 and 9) and in the activities of young *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card game players who design their own decks out of the nearly infinite set of possibilities on offer through a growing pantheon of monsters (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004; Ito 2007; Sefton-Green 2004; Willett 2004). While certain female fans might look to *Gundam* for source material to tell stories of erotic trysts between the male characters, other fans geek out over building and customizing models of the giant robots.

What unifies otaku culture as a whole is less its certain content and genres and more its malleable narrative platform and mode of participatory niche media engagement (Jenkins 1992, 2006). The media mixes of Japanese popular culture invite fannish engagement through links across multiple media types (games, toys, TV, cinema, manga, novels), intricate and open-ended story lines, and massive databases of characters, monsters, and machines (Ito 2006). Otaku also gravitate toward media forms and communication platforms that enable them to engage in peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and appropriative DIY creation (see Chapters 10 and 12). While earlier generations of fans relied on conventions and amateur media markets to circulate their work and connect with other fans (see Chapters 5 and 7), the Internet has made these forms of fan communication and sharing widely accessible. Armed with personal digital media and plugged into the end-to-end architecture of the Internet, otaku have truly found their medium.

The Internet has also radically expanded the opportunities for transnational communication and connection. Practices of fan subtitling and translation (Chapter 8) and peer-to-peer Internet distribution have made anime and manga accessible to fans around the world, even in the absence of localization and overseas distribution by the industry. The niches within the meganiche of anime are increasingly uniting fans across national boundaries. For example, the *yaoi* otaku fandom of Japan shares much in common with slash fandoms in the United States; both are female-centered fandoms that center on "couplings" between male characters in popular series, and cyberpunk science fiction has strong crossovers between Japan and the United States as well. Although we are seeing more instances of U.S. media producers' taking up anime-like styles and themes, or creating their own manga, Japan is likely to retain its role as the central site of production for otaku cultural products. Drawing from an interview with Shinichiro Ishikawa, president of anime studio Gonzo Digimation Holdings, Kelts describes how Japan's media markets are a generative site of experimentation and innovation in manga and anime. Ishikawa emphasizes that in one week, Japan sees the equivalent of a full year's worth of U.S. comic sales (Kelts 2006, 196). The fact that Japan is home to the most diverse and robust market for comics in the world obviously goes a long way toward explaining why it is also the source of the tremendous creative output of both manga and anime. Japan's manga ecology is like a primordial soup supporting narrative mutation; and even in the Internet age, only a fraction of the characters and content circulate outside the domestic market.

Variations in otaku culture between Japan and the United States stem not from irreducible differences in national culture but from specific historical, social, and infrastructural conditions. For example, train otaku culture found fertile ground in Japan because it resonated with the history of Japan's postwar modernization and the train-centered transport systems of the small country (see Chapter 1). But we have seen much less transnational uptake of this variation of otaku culture in the car-centered U.S. context. American fans, most of whom encountered anime and manga in a postdigital era, are also much more likely than their Japanese counterparts to engage with digital variants of fan media and production, such as anime music videos (see Chapter 12) or web comics. In contrast, Japan's otaku culture was well established in the predigital era, and it continues to center on the circulation of physical media such as print doujinshi and physical models and figures. This focus is supported by the compact density of Japan and specialized fan events such as the doujinshi market, Comic Market (see Chapter 5), or Wonderfest, where model makers showcase their work. Fans in the United States need to travel greater distances and therefore attend events with less frequency, and conventions tend to be general-purpose umbrellas for all dimensions of the anime and manga fandom.

While the specificities of particular histories, practices, and places are central to the essays collected in this volume, we do not assume that national culture on its own defines the myriad cultural forms that otaku culture takes. We take a transnational rather than a comparative approach. Our interest is not to identify sources of national difference but rather to trace some of the contours of a transnational subculture. Following the lead of a growing body of work in transnational studies that looks at the flow of culture across national boundaries, we see otaku culture as a lens through which to disrupt the commonsensical isomorphism between culture, people, and places (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997; Iwabuchi 1999, 2002). Even as Japan continues to be the primary source of anime and manga content, it is increasingly non-Japanese fans and makers who are defining what it means to be an otaku and a fan of Japanese popular culture.

UNDERSTANDING OTAKU CULTURE

The essays that follow draw from both Japan- and U.S.-centered scholarship to explore three shared dimensions of otaku culture: its discursive and cultural logics, the infrastructures of communication and media distribution, and the structures of community and community membership. The organization of the volume embodies an argument about commonality and difference, in which otaku culture shares a set of common cultural logics and platforms (sections 1 and 2), which are taken up in diverse ways by niche communities (section 3). These underlying dynamics of connection and distinction making are what unify otaku subcultures regardless of national origin and location. Here I provide an overview of these three themes by way of introduction to the chapters of this book.

The Semiotics of Otaku Culture

The chapters in the first section of the book explore the ways in which otaku culture has evolved as a complex set of resistances and accommodations to modernity, mainstream culture, and other subcultures. According to otaku scholar and spokesperson Toshio Okada (1996), the term originated in the early 1980s as a polite term of address between upper-crust college students who were fans of emergent anime cultures. It was transformed into a social category by columnist Akio Nakamori, who published a column on "Otaku Research" in a manga magazine in 1983. In 1989, a full-blown "moral panic" (Cohen 1972) about otaku arose after the arrest of Tsutomu Miyazaki. Miyazaki had abducted, murdered, and mutilated four girls. Photos and footage of his bedroom, crammed with manga and videotapes, many of the Lolita-complex and pornographic variety, flooded the popular press, and Miyazaki became the poster boy of the otaku subculture. After this, "otaku" came to be used and recognized by the mainstream as a stigmatizing label for somebody who is obsessed with anime, manga, and games and out of touch with everyday social reality. Okada (1996) and others have argued against the stigmatizing use of the term, and a more positive vision of otaku as innovative popular culture enthusiasts has increasingly taken hold.

In the United States, in tandem with the rise of cyberpunk and geek chic in the 1990s, the term "otaku" started to be used in a largely positive manner to refer to enthusiasts of Japanese media mixes, particularly anime. In Chapter 4, Lawrence Eng describes in detail the trajectory through which this term became established in the U.S. context. Although the term has tended to have relatively positive connotations in the United States, it can still function as a term of stigmatization. Like Okada, however, Eng believes in the positive potential of otaku culture and identifies the key dimensions of "the otaku ethic" as follows: information literacy, subcultural resistance, and affinities with networked sociability and culture.

The other chapters in this section analyze the particular cultural logics behind the rise of otaku culture in Japan. In Chapter 1, Izumi Tsuji looks in depth at early train otaku culture, when the establishment of a high-tech national railway system embodied Japan's dreams of modernization. As Japan entered the postindustrial era, this train hobbyist culture was transformed into a train otaku culture as young men began to turn to fantasy representations of trains and as anime series such as *Galaxy Express 999* began to treat steam locomotives as objects of nostalgia. Tsuji argues that by tracing the historical emergence of train otaku culture, we can understand the changing structure of the imagination as it evolved through different historical periods.

In an excerpt from his longer book on otaku as "database animals," in Chapter 2 Hiroki Azuma argues that today's otaku culture is grounded in the broader postmodern turn that challenged the stability of modern master narratives. The decline of these master narratives has led to what Azuma has named "database consumption." Database consumption marks a shift from the late 1990s, when otaku culture was oriented to narrative structures and unique characters, to the early twenty-first century, when it became focused on *moe* elements such as cat ears, glasses, business suits, or particular personality quirks. Moe elements are traits that invite particular forms of otaku affection and which are recognizable across a wide range of anime and manga characters and narratives. Today's moe otaku culture represents a fundamental overturning of the premises of modernist narratives. By positioning the act of appropriation and play of signifiers as the generative foundation of cultural production, it downplays the traditional modernist emphasis on "original" and proprietary narrative constructs.

This implicit challenge to master narratives is also evident in otaku's ironic and reflexive critique of mainstream media and institutions. This attitude is manifest in the snarky commentary on the massive anonymous online forum 2ch (channel 2), which is the subject of Chapter 3. Yet even amidst the abrasive social exchanges that characterize the discourse of 2ch, otaku's embrace of social connection is also apparent. In line with Eng's description of the networked culture of U.S. otaku, Kitada argues in Chapter 3 that 2ch represents a "kingdom of social connection" that centers on the traffic in insider knowledge. Characterized by an ironic and snarky one-upmanship, this kind of online communication is also oddly sincere. 2channelers' embrace of the melodramatic *Densha-Otoko* love story, in which an otaku is united with the girl of his dreams, is emblematic of the codependent and highly complex relation between irony and sincerity that Kitada identifies. Although all of the essays in this section describe the ways in which otaku culture emerged through resistance to mainstream narratives and sensibilities, they also trace the ways in which these modes of engagement are becoming much more prevalent and visible in today's networked and digital age.

Peer-to-Peer Platforms and Infrastructures

Undergirding the growing visibility of otaku culture is an increasingly robust social, technical, and place-based infrastructure. Shifting from the previous section's focus on cultural content and process, the chapters in the second section of this book examine these enabling locations and infrastructures. As described earlier, otaku culture has strong affinities with user-configurable digital media and online networks that connect people many-to-many and peer-to-peer, rather than relying on the one-to-many broadcast model of communication. Many of the core characteristics of today's networked and digital age were evident even in the early origins of otaku culture. These characteristics include immersion in specialized and fluid niche knowledge networks (Anderson 2006; Hagel, Brown, and Davison 2010), decentralized forms of social organization and production (Benkler 2000, 2006; Shirky 2008), the primacy of participatory amateur and DIY media (Jenkins 1992; Leadbeater 2004; Varnelis 2008), distributed and collective innovation and intelligence (Hippel 2005; Howe 2009; Jenkins 2006; Lakhani and Panetta 2007; Shirky 2010), and an open and nonproprietary approach to intellectual property (Lessig 2004, 2008; Weber 2004).

In Chapter 6, Kaichiro Morikawa describes a physical set of infrastructures for otaku activity that is unique to the dense urban ecologies of Tokyo but that still embodies the properties of peer-based and amateur otaku culture. As otaku culture has flourished in the 1980s and beyond, particular districts of the city have been able to support a high density of otaku-related establishments. Morikawa describes how in the 1990s, in tandem with the *Evangelion* boom, stores dedicated to otaku commercial products and doujinshi began to centralize in the districts of Akihabara and Ikebukuro, dedicated to male and female otaku, respectively. Far from being the result of centralized urban planning, the specialization of these districts represented a kind of coalescing of distributed intelligence as hobbyists and businesspeople with shared interests converged through mutual attraction. Today's Akihabara is a veritable otaku theme park; plastered with posters of cute anime characters and dotted with maid cafés, where young women dress up as fantasy maid characters, it embodies what Morikawa describes as "the architecture of otaku taste."

Although decidedly low-tech in its execution, Comic Market, the biannual event dedicated to the buying and selling of doujinshi, also exemplifies all of the dimensions of a networked, participatory, and peer-to-peer infrastructure. In Chapter 5, Hiroaki Tamagawa describes the early origins of Comic Market in the late 1970s, when a subset of fans broke from the industry-centric convention style dominant at the time. Comic Market was founded as a distribution venue for the amateur arts of doujinshi, and its ethic of nondiscriminatory participation continues to this day. Much like the Internet, the market is a neutral platform that invites fans of all denominations to participate. With the growth of otaku culture, this open-door policy has meant that the event has ballooned in size; while the first markets attracted several hundred participants, today's events mobilize more than 400,000 fans.

This peer-based fan culture is evident in the growth of the U.S. otaku social networks that Eng describes in Chapter 7. The U.S. fandom began in the 1970s and 1980s by a dedicated core of anime lovers who trafficked in insider information and tapes of anime that were extremely difficult to come by at the time. Eventually, fans at universities established clubs that facilitated the sharing and viewing of anime, and other dedicated fans organized conventions that brought together members of the growing fandom. Since very few anime were localized for the U.S. market in these early years, fans took on the task of translating and subtitling the works, as well as distributing them through snail mail, clubs, and conventions. With the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, U.S. fans found an ideal medium to share knowledge and media with other fans around the country. Informational fan sites and fan forums proliferated, and with the advent of peer-to-peer video distribution and digital fansubbing, the online circulation of anime exploded.

In Chapter 8, on fansubbing, I describe how today's digisubbers organize highly disciplined volunteer work teams that translate, subtitle, and distribute anime episodes to millions of fans around the world. Practices such as fansubbing and scanlation (fan translation of manga) are fan localization practices that have been central to the establishment of the overseas fandom for Japanese popular culture. Fansubbing embodies the complicated dynamics of managing intellectual property and the relation between commercial and noncommercial distribution in the digital age. The symbiotic yet fraught relation between fans and commercial anime and manga industries is a persistent feature of otaku practice, and it is nowhere more evident than in the fansub case.

Participatory and DIY Communities

The spirit of volunteerism, contribution, and participation that we see in the organizers of Comic Market and fansubbers is a foundational aspect of how otaku communities are organized. The final section of the book looks at specific cases of niche otaku communities and how they organize membership, status, and identity. Although otaku share common forms of cultural referencing and infrastructures, particular genres and forms of expression are highly diverse. Otaku subcultures employ strategies to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture, to distinguish different subsets of otaku culture, and to distinguish internally among members of these different subset niches. Drawing from detailed ethnographic work, the chapters that complete this volume offer a window into the fine-tuned distinctions that characterize the internal workings of specific niche communities within the broader anime and manga fandom.

In Chapter 9, Daisuke Okabe and Kimi Ishida examine the subculture of *fujoshi*, female otaku who specialize in "boys' love" and yaoi narratives that center on homoerotic relationships between characters in mainstream manga for boys and young men. Rewriting mainstream heteronormative manga to center on these boys' love narratives, fujoshi disrupt dominant expectations about their own sexuality and feminine identity. Fujoshi also manage a complex identity formation in which they hide their fujoshi identity from family, boyfriends, and friends at school. Bonding rituals of fujoshi identity display are reserved for moments with other fujoshi friends, when they will self-deprecatingly and ironically describe their irrepressible attraction to the fantasy objects of their affections. While yaoi culture resembles many of the products of female fandoms of U.S. television fans, such as fan art and fan fiction (Bacon-Smith 1991; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1997), the identity management practices of fujoshi are inflected by the particular contexts of Japanese girls' culture.

This complicated set of identity negotiations is also evident in Okabe's study, in Chapter 10, of cosplayers, who dress up as characters from manga, games, and anime. Largely overlapping with the fujoshi fandom, cosplay is a female-dominated niche grounded in a DIY and anticommercial ethic of costume making and performance. Although not characterized by formal forms of evaluation and hierarchy, cosplayers are highly conscious of quality standards for costumes. Only handmade costumes that conform to fujoshi interests and moe pass muster; those cosplayers who dress up outside of otaku-dedicated venues or who display mainstream forms of sexuality to attract the male gaze are ostracized from the community.

With Yoshimasa Kijima's study of hand-to-hand fighting games, in Chapter 11, we are offered a glimpse into a highly masculine and competitive subculture of game otaku. Kijima describes how fighting game culture evolved through various gaming genres and a network of game arcades. Today these gamers have a highly developed set of competitive practices in which they constantly test their skills in combat with other players, moving from local to regional to national competitions. Like the other otaku communities surveyed in this section, the subculture of fighting game otaku is built on a high degree of camaraderie, but it also has a unique brutally competitive character.

In the final chapter of the book, I describe the U.S.-centered subculture of anime music video (AMV) makers. AMVs involve remixing anime to a soundtrack of the editor's choosing, usually Euro-American popular music. As digital video editing became more accessible, what was once a tiny niche community has expanded into a massive and highly visible online scene. In the process, AMV makers developed various social and technical mechanisms for defining the center and periphery of their community, recognizing high quality work, and defining an elite crowd of dedicated makers. This dynamic tension between democratic inclusiveness and highly specialized distinction making is central to all of the otaku communities described in this book.

CONCLUSION

The picture of otaku culture that emerges from this volume is one that honors its irreducible diversity and contested nature while also recognizing it as a growing transnational movement with a shared set of infrastructures and cultural practices. As the networked and digital age enters a period of maturity, we might expect that otaku culture will become both a more taken-for-granted feature of the global cultural landscape and one that continues to proliferate unexpected niches, genres, and activities fueled by a growing horde of amateur fan makers. Already, we are beginning to see distinctions and niches becoming ever more fine-tuned within the overall otaku scene as the palette of opportunity and participation expands. Although otaku culture will doubtless always be identified with its Japanese origins, its transnational nature has also become one of its defining characteristics. More than simply a sequel to the well-established narrative of cultural contact between Japan and the West, otaku culture represents a genuinely new symbolic database of transnational flows that has already provided a cast of characters, setting, and back story that invites endless appropriative innovation.

References

Abel, Jonathan, and Shion Kono. 2009. Translators' introduction. In *Otaku: Japan's database animals*, xv–xxix. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Allison, Anne. 2000. A challenge to Hollywood? Japanese character goods hit the US. *Japanese Studies* 20 (1): 67–88.

———. 2006. *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anderson, Chris. 2006. *The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more*. New York: Hyperion.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Azuma, Hiroki. 2009. *Otaku: Japan's database animals.* Trans. Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bacon-Smith, Camille. 1991. *Enterprising women: Television fandom and the creation of popular myth.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Benkler, Yochai. 2000. From consumers to users: Shifting the deeper structures of regulation toward sustainable commons and user access. *Federal Communications Law Journal* 52: 561–579.

———. 2006. *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bolton, Christopher, Istvan Csicery-Ronay Jr., and Takayuki Tatsumi, eds. 2007. *Robot ghosts and wired dreams: Japanese science fiction from origins to anime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Brown, Steven T., ed. 2006. *Cinema anime*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Buckingham, David, and Julian Sefton-Green. 2004. Structure, agency, and pedagogy in children's media culture. In *Pikachu's global adventure: The rise and fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin, 12–33. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Clements, Jonathan, and Helen McCarthy. 2001. *The anime encylopedia: A guide to Japanese animation since 1917*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press.

Cohen, Stanley. 1972. *Folk devils and moral panics*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.

Condry, Ian. 2006. *Hip-hop Japan: Rap and the paths of cultural globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Craig, Timothy J., ed. 2000. *Japan pop! Inside the world of Japanese popular culture*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp.

Gottlieb, Nanette, and Mark McLelland, eds. 2003. *Japanese cybercultures*. New York: Routledge.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1992. Space, identity, and the politics of difference. *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1): 6–23.

———, eds. 1997. *Culture, power, place: Explorations in critical anthropology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hagel, John, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison. 2010. *The power of pull: How small moves, smartly made, can set big things in motion*. New York: Basic Books.

Hippel, Eric Von. 2005. *Democratizing innovation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Howe, Jeff. 2009. *Crowdsourcing: Why the power of the crowd is driving the future of business*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Ito, Mizuko. 2006. Japanese media mixes and amateur cultural exchange. In *Digital generations: Children, young people, and the new media*, ed. David Buckingham and Rebekah Willet, 49–66. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

———. 2007. Technologies of the childhood imagination: *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, media mixes, and everyday cultural production. In *Structures of participation in digital culture*, ed. Joe Karaganis, 88–110. New York: Social Science Research Council.

Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. *Discourses of the vanishing: Modernity, phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 1999. Return to Asia? Japan in Asian audiovisual markets. In *Consuming ethnicity and nationalism: Asian experiences*, ed. Kosaku Yoshino, 177–199. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

———. 2002. *Recentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———, ed. 2004. *Feeling Asian modernities: Transnational consumption of Japanese TV dramas.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

———. 2010. Undoing inter-national fandom in the age of brand nationalism. In *Mechademia 4: Fanthropologies*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi, 87–98. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.