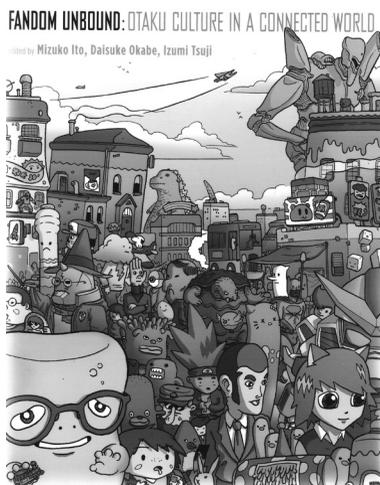


Kohki Watabe

## Book Review: Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji, Eds. *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*



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*Fandom Unbound*, edited by Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Tsuji Izumi, is a collection of anthropological, sociological, and historical studies on *otaku* culture. All chapters except Ito's (chapters 8 and 12) and Eng's (chapters 4 and 7) are originally written by Japanese scholars in Japanese and translated into English. The editors' intention is clearly to introduce academic research on *otaku* culture in Japan into fandom study in English. The editors regard *otaku* culture not simply as a new form of Japanese culture but as a transnational arena in which international fan activity and networked communication are practiced. From this mediological point of view, studies of *otaku* were organized into three parts: part 1, "Culture and Discourse," provides a basic and theoretical introduction; part 2, "Infrastructure and Place," discusses real and virtual time-space, in which fan activity and communication are enabled; and part 3, "Community and Identity," explains how *otaku* establish their identity through communication in the spaces discussed in part 2. These three categories are mutually inseparable. For example,

Azuma's discussion of the *moe* element (chapter 2) and Kitada's analysis of the 2-chan community (chapter 3) in part 1 can be read as explanations of infrastructure, and Tamagawa's study of the Comic Market as a place of self-expression (chapter 5) and Eng's description of anime and manga fandom as a networked culture (chapter 7) in part 2 can be placed in part 3. This fact doesn't mean the categorization is ineffective; rather this collection is well organized so that English-speaking readers can obtain a total image of contemporary *otaku* culture. If I could add something to the editors' effort to organize complex *otaku* phenomena into a logical order for readers, it would be to contrast the differences between the study of fandom in English-speaking countries, especially the United States, and the discussions of *otaku* in Japan.

Japanese society has forums consisting of both academic scholars and non-academic critiques apart from discussions within academic organizations. These forums are called *rondan* and are held in commercially profitable *rondan* magazines. Although contributions to *rondan* are

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not usually counted as scholarly works in Japanese academia, some scholars who have academic positions at universities are very active in the *rondan* for the general public. The New Academism, mentioned in the introduction of *Fandom Unbound*, had great significance in *rondan* after the 1980s, regardless of its highly intellectual reference to French theories. Hiroki Azuma, whose doctoral dissertation focused on Derrida, appeared with his *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal*<sup>1</sup> (excerpted as chapter 2) and opened a new *otaku rondan*. He is not the first person to discuss *otaku* culture, but his book broadened public recognition of the *otaku rondan* in Japanese *rondan* culture. Like Azuma, Kitada (chapter 3) and Morikawa (chapter 6) are scholars who have their own readers in *rondan*.

The *otaku rondan* hasn't paid much attention to the study of participatory culture, networked fandom, and alternative forms of labor and economy in fandom initiated by Henry Jenkins in the United States, as a method to analyze *otaku* culture.<sup>2</sup> Scholars in *otaku rondan* apply methodologies such as contemporary French philosophy (Azuma), Lacanian psychoanalytic approach (Tamaki Saito),<sup>3</sup> structuralist textual analysis and historical description (Eiji Otsuka),<sup>4</sup> field work and sociological analysis (Kitada and Shinji Miyadai),<sup>5</sup> and analysis of history and representation of Akihabara (Morikawa).

However, minor acknowledgement of studies of fandom in *otaku rondan* doesn't mean that fandom studies is unimportant in analyzing *otaku* culture. As this collection successfully shows, *otaku* culture has various practices in the networked community, depending on objects of interest such as trains, *dōjin-shi*, cosplay, fighting video games, and anime subbing. Chapters by Eng (chapters 4 and 7) and Ito (chapters 8 and 12), both of whom are educated in the United States, follow the format of participatory culture articles. Except for the contributions of Azuma, Kitada, and Morikawa, other chapters by Japanese authors also display an awareness of fandom studies. Considering the academic background of participatory culture in this collection, the editors' choice of articles by Azuma, Kitada, and Morikawa among other *otaku rondan* contributors is understandable. Discussions by these three scholars more appropriately fit the concept of the networked community or fandom,

which can be transnational, than do those focusing on the cultural, textual, and historical specificity in Japan. In this sense, *Fandom Unbound* can be described as one cross-section of various aspects of *otaku rondan* cut from the perspective of fandom studies.

The editing policy adopted in *Fandom Unbound* sheds a light on topics which aren't focused on in Japanese *otaku rondan* and suggests the academic possibilities of connecting fandom studies in the English-speaking world and Japanese *otaku rondan*. I would like to mention briefly new angles and tasks for the future suggested by this collection.

### 1. Who are *Otaku*?

For Lawrence Eng (chapter 7) and most *otaku* critics, *otaku* initially meant manga and anime fans. However, Sci-fi fans spoke to each other by using the word "*otaku*" in a polite manner in the 1960s before anime and manga *otaku* began to use the word.<sup>6</sup> If *otaku* scholars think that anime and manga *otaku* are distinguishable from other *otaku* cultures, such as Sci-fi fandom, for what reason and criteria can it make that claim?

Tsuji's historical depiction of train *otaku* (chapter 1) has deep implications related to this topic. Tsuji historicizes train *otaku* from the 1910s, when train fans didn't have the expression found in anime and manga later. According to Tsuji, the imagination of train *otaku* was coincidental with the Japanese Empire's expansion before WWII and with the dreams of a successful future in Japan during the era of high economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. In these eras, the train functioned as a symbol of spatial and temporal "somewhere else" for train *otaku*. However, when the Japanese economy collapsed and a successful future could not be imagined in the post-Cold War era, train *otaku* began to direct their imagination towards the fantastic fictional world of manga and anime. This account resonates with Azuma's postmodern understanding of *otaku* phenomena (chapter 2) and suggests a way of defining *otaku* in terms of its relationship with reality and fantasy. Tsuji says, "*Otaku* culture's recent rapid rise in popularity may be due to the growing strength of the fantasy domain and the lack of appeal of more reality-based identities." If *otaku*-ness can be defined as escapist

immersion into fantasy, other *otaku* phenomena not related with anime and manga (fans of junior idols, Korean talents, and Takarazuka) and, more generally, fan activities not regarded as *otaku* (fans of Hollywood movie stars) can be analyzed in comparison with *otaku* phenomena.

## 2. How Sexuality and Textuality Influence the Creation of Fan Networks

Okabe and Ishida's discussion of *fujoshi*, female slashers, (chapter 9) and Okabe's examination of cosplay, performance in costumes of anime and manga characters, (chapter 10) show various strategies of female *otaku* to establish their identity in fan communities. However, the forms of sexual desires found in *otaku* are not well studied even in these chapters. Although the importance of studying community as a place of identity construction can't be denied, the internal structures of any particular text is important as well since *otaku* become *otaku* because of those structures' attractiveness.

It is a fact that pornographic expression is common in *otaku* fan fiction. While hardcore pornographic *dōjin-shi* for heterosexual male readers occupies considerable importance in Japanese *otaku* culture, there are also unignorable amounts of homosexual slash works for *fujoshi* girls. How expressions of sexuality in these texts influence *otaku* identities and community formation must be studied carefully. In this sense, the networked fandoms revealed in *Fandom Unbound* should incorporate textual studies such as Susan Napier's work, which problematized the textual complexity of sexuality in Japanese anime.<sup>7</sup> Both the textual structure of the expression of sexuality and *otaku's* way of consuming them are very complicated. For instance, androgynous *futanari* characters with both penis and vagina who experience identity crises are common in *dōjin* pornography. Since *futanari* expression seems to be enjoyed as an established genre regardless of a reader's sexuality in *otaku* culture, it is difficult to place it in a single context: queer meanings for political resistance can be read in *futanari* and, at the same time, it can be said that this genre is tamed and commercialized by the existing order.

As this case shows, how sexuality is expressed in *otaku* texts and how *otaku* decode it is so varied that further study is required to understand the characteristics of fandom networks.

## 3. How the Singularity and Historicity of Japan is Decoded by Transnational *Otaku* Fandom

When Japanese culture after WWII is discussed, Japan's defeat in WWII can't be ignored. Being put under the strong influence of American culture and politics after the war, Japan internalized the United States' views as if the United States were the psychoanalytic father of Japan. Japanese people have been trapped in a postcolonial ambiguity; they are strongly attracted to American culture, the same culture that ruled them. This twist is not always clearly mentioned in Japanese popular culture, but, as Norihiro Kato's *Shadow of America* reveals, Japanese literature after WWII has, apparently sometimes metaphorically, mentioned its ambiguous attitude to the United States.

Japanese anime and manga also have direct and indirect commentary on the colonial relationship in various forms: for example, excessive expression of anti-U.S. sentiment in *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion*, and repeated statements about atomic explosion in *Gundam* and *Godzilla*. These are some examples of *otaku* culture, into which the singularity and historicity of Japan must have been woven. Of course, the practice of *otaku* culture is not limited to Japan-ness. However, if *otaku* culture has a transnational expansion, how is the specific status of Japan, which is written in the texts, decoded by international *otaku* fandom? In particular, if complex colonial relationships among the United States, China, North and South Korea, and Japan are taken into consideration, *otaku* fandom's transnationality reveals its multipolar characteristics.

## 4. Is *Otaku* Culture Modern or Postmodern?

Philosophical arguments concerning modernity and postmodernity are not always productive and meaningful, but in this case, necessary. Japanese scholars seem to discuss *otaku* culture as a postmodern cultural phenomenon, in which people enjoy the interplay of differences, such as the *moe* element, and are not motivated to participate in the

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greater society. In contrast, American discussions of participatory culture regard cultural participation as a momentum of pedagogy and democracy. In other words, American discussions are based on a very modernist perspective.<sup>8</sup> Articles in part 3 of this collection show the process of identity construction

within fandom, which can't be practiced in the public realm of contemporary Japanese society. Thus, the necessary discussion is about how practices of fandom can be a new form of democracy or social function if *otaku* culture is basically practiced on postmodern systems of signs and images.

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### End Notes

1 Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); *Dōbutsuka Suru Posuto Modan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2001).

2 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).

3 Tamaki Saitou, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); *Sentō Bishōjo no Seishin Bunseki* (Tokyo: Ota Shuppan, 2000).

4 Eiji Otsuka, *Monogatari Shōbi Ron* (Study of Story Consumption) (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2001).

5 Shinji Miyadai, Akiko Otsuka, and Hideki Ishihara, *Sabukarucha Shinwa Kaitai: Shōjo, Ongaku, Manga, Sei no 30 Nen to Komyunikeshon no Genzai* (Deconstruction of the Myth of Subculture: 30 Years of Girls, Music, Manga and Sex and Today's Communication) (Tokyo: Parco Shuppan, 1993).

6 Japanese literature scholar Takayuki Tatsumi mentioned this at a conference, accessed 12 June 2012, <http://www.flet.keio.ac.jp/~pcres/features/rpns0/2.html>.

7 Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

8 Henry Jenkins, et al, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2009).