

NO TIME AND NO PLACE IN JAPAN'S QUEER POPULAR CULTURE

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

With interest in genres like BL (Boys' Love) and the presence of LGBT characters in popular series continuing to soar to new heights in Japan and abroad, the question of the presence, or lack thereof, of queer narratives in these texts and their responses has remained potent in studies on contemporary Japanese visual culture. In hopes of addressing this issue, my thesis queries these queer narratives in popular Japanese culture through examining works which, although lying distinctly outside of the genre of BL, nonetheless exhibit queer themes. Through examining a pair of popular series which have received numerous adaptations, *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, I examine the works both in terms of their content, place and response in order to provide a larger portrait or mapping of their queer potentiality. I argue that the out of time and out of place-ness present in these texts, both of which have post-apocalyptic settings, acts as a vehicle for queer narratives in Japanese popular culture. Additionally, I argue that queerness present in fanworks similarly benefits from this out of place and time-ness, both within the work as post-apocalyptic and outside of it as having multiple adaptations or canons. I conclude by offering a cautious tethering towards the future potentiality for queer works in Japanese popular culture by examining recent trends among queer anime and manga towards moving towards an international stage.

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INTRODUCTION: NO TIME AND NO PLACE

I am writing this introduction while thousands of feet up in the air and on the first of my flights that will take me from the United States to Japan. This airplane is, for now and to me, a relatively self-contained bubble, quite untethered- physically, at least- from the world below. I am currently between time zones, and truth be told, I'm not entirely sure what day it is. I say this in part because this reflects some odd, queer coincidence, and in part because for all intents and purposes, I have found myself (ironically and paradoxically) performing some aspect of the no time, and no place, which this thesis is theoretically supposed to explore in the realm of contemporary mainstream anime and manga. Granted, my life is not a comic (or manga). Nor is it an animation (or anime), or a *dōjinshi* (fan-made magazine). But, up here and untethered from the world but nevertheless remaining as some part of it, I cannot help but think of this as being appropriate somehow, and of articulating some idea I will spend the next seventy-odd pages trying to express. Perhaps this is the creation of a moment which, although outside of time and place, undeniably occurred. Although this moment has been adapted and warped through writing it here, it does have some tentative tether to the places I am going and the places I have left behind (at least, for now).

Nevertheless, my queer, trans, ace, dog-hair-covered self is up here somewhere, sometime, writing an introduction to a thesis about a queer Japanese popular culture which, although it exists, is also out of time and out of place. The works I will be exploring are also post-apocalyptic, and although it does seem at times we are slipping towards a kind of global apocalypse, for the time being that is not a time or place I can comment upon from experience. For this, I am grateful.

I argue that queerness in Japanese popular culture is tethered along uncertainty, and that the post-apocalyptic settings- that is, settings outside of time and place but nevertheless tentatively roped to reality in some manner- present a ripe opportunity for many manga and anime series to explore and expand upon queer themes. Apart from examining the works in and of themselves, whether as webcomics, novels, manga or anime, I will also be examining fanworks and fan-driven responses to these series. Within the limits of this project, I am less interested in mapping out a history of queer relations and dynamics in Japanese popular cultural works than I am interested in compounding together works with their setting- both internal and external- in an attempt to provide a portrait of this aspect of Japanese culture. In doing so, this thesis has become disjointed, and is composed of many parts which, although quite disparate, have been scrapped and spliced together in a way which- I hope- functions. It is cyborg-esque, which, given that one of the figures I will be discussing (Genos in *One Punch Man*) is a cyborg, seems appropriate.

Alongside cyborgs, I will also be discussing superheroes, dogs, rats, and giant bee creatures. When I first began this project, I did not approach these works with the distinct intention to wind up discussing such a variety of figures, however, beyond being outside of time and place, these works show that in negotiating queerness in Japanese popular culture, one often has to move outside of the realm of the human. Queerness, and specifically in these works transness, hovers on the precipice of humanity, and as such, a healthy dollop of fantasy is necessary in these works. Nevertheless, as post-apocalyptic works, although these works are undoubtedly fantastical, they do continually move around, away from or towards a more contemporary time and place. The connection is tentative, wavering and fleeting, but it is there.

Very soon, my plane will be landing. We will touch down to earth, and this metal bubble will pop as we become tethered to the ground once more. I will regain a time and place that is concrete rather than vague and tangential, and perhaps my phone will finally be able to figure out what time it is. In *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, this foray into the timeless and placeless is also temporary. In no time and no place, one teeters, meanders and hovers uncertainly, but by the series' end, one always comes crashing back down towards the present. In this, there is always a healthy dose of failure- an inability to remain suspended and untethered permanently, alongside other kinds of failure- present in navigating queerness in these series. Although I cannot say with certainty that this introduction has *succeeded in providing a succinct outline and explanation of the topics to be discussed and explored*, as introductions are professed to do, I hope that it has provided a cautious tether, or an uncertain grounding, for the compound, disjointed and ambiguous body of text which is to follow.

CHAPTER 1: *ONE PUNCH MAN*: NOT HERE, NOT NOW, AND NOT WITH THEM

Opening to a world mottled by wastelands and contemporary cities where superheroes provide the only protection against monsters of all forms and origins, *One Punch Man* (2009-) ostensibly depicts a post-apocalyptic world that would be any young action comic or animation-goer's dream. However, if one pries slightly deeper, one becomes confronted with a web of parodic and comic intent that both critiques and replicates the very genre it sets itself within: an action-driven and heteronormative set of narratives that remain oh-so popular in mainstream anime and manga today. *One Punch Man* depicts a collection of trends exemplifying depictions of queer and homosocial relationships in anime and manga today; the anime/manga/webcomic itself, in its post-apocalyptic setting, dances between a *nanshoku* (男色)-laden homosocial past and a queering of a heteronormative, domesticated present.

Although going into a full exploration of the various kinds of male-male love present in Japanese literary and artistic works is well beyond the scopes of this project, part of my aim is to assert that traces of these trends are nevertheless present in manga and anime series today, although the ways they are employed differ significantly from their historical contexts.

Nanshoku, or *shudō* (衆道), often translated as the way of boys or the way of young men, refers to male-male sexuality in Japan, specifically within the frameworks of the Edo, Meiji and first half of the twentieth centuries¹. I contrast the presence of this more historical framework with ways in which queering or queerness, something which I view as a movement or action related to new methods of understanding and always moving beyond the present. Although queering and

¹ Gregory M. Pflugfelder's *Cartographies of Desire* provides a substantial and useful mapping of the historical prevalence and uses of terms concerning male-male sexuality in Japan.

queerness has had ties to interrogations of sexuality and gender, I do not view queerness as something explicitly and solely tied to either of those spectrums, something which I will expand upon later. Rather, I view queerness as a state which is reflexive, responsive and provides new ways of approaching and understanding issues from the perspective of the non-normative. Much queering has focused along lines of gender and sexuality, but recent scholarship has expanded across fields into new mediums and methods.

Before diving into a summary of the series and subsequent analysis, I would first like to provide a bit of orientation, as these works are relatively unknown outside of circles of *otaku*, or hardcore anime and manga fans. *One Punch Man* first emerged as a webcomic created by a manga artist known only by the pseudonym ONE. Apart from having lived in Saitama prefecture- a suburb of Tokyo- for part of his life, relatively little is known about him. *One Punch Man* is still running as a webcomic, and the manga adaptation by Murata Yusuke continues to be serialized and released by Jump Comics². It was also adapted into an animation in fall of 2015. ONE's webcomic page is astoundingly barebones and, by way of its no-frills layout and the bug-fashioned visitor counter at its bottom, harkens back to webpage designs in the early 2000s. While the anime series first season ended in late 2015, it has been renewed for a second season which will likely debut in late 2017 or early 2018. As the animated adaptation has resulted in developing the largest fanbase since the series' outset, and the ways it was adapted for a larger market appeal exemplify many trends of *shōnen* anime today, my summary and

² The most recent chapter of the webcomic was released on January 19, 2017, and included chapter 109. The Jump serialization's thirteenth *tankōbon* (単行本) volume was released in Japan on May 2, 2017.

approach will focus mainly on the events of the animation³. However, in the interest of providing a more complete picture of this work and a more complete analysis, I will be drawing examples and comparisons from the manga and webcomic as well.

1.1 PLOT SUMMARY

One Punch Man begins as many action-driven manga series do: with a giant monster stomping through city streets and wreaking havoc and destruction while proclaiming their drive towards pure, unmitigated evil. Just as *One Punch Man*'s first villain- in this case a towering violet menace with an appearance not dissimilar from Piccolo from the hit series *Dragon Ball*- is about to crush a young girl (whose shirt helpfully reads 'school child' in one of the series' first parodic gestures) to death, a bald, caped figure swoops out of nowhere and saves her. The caped savior introduces himself as Saitama, someone who does heroics as a hobby. Furious that his serious intent to destroy humanity is being ignored by someone who proclaims to be a hobbyist, the villain attacks Saitama, and Saitama fells him in a single punch. The first chapter of the manga and webcomic end with Saitama lamenting that, once again, the most powerful villain he could find was felled in only a single punch- whence the title of the series.

This sense of ennui and lack of fulfillment coupled with extreme disaster is a pervasive theme throughout the series. Although in many instances it is served with a healthy dollop of parody, many of these parodic gestures hint at larger issues concerning contemporary Japan. For example, we are given frequent vignettes of Saitama muddling through his daily life in his utterly

³ *Shōnen* (少年) refers to series written primarily for a young male audience. *Shōjo* refers to series written primarily for a young female audience.

unremarkable apartment. His apartment consists of little more than a few cacti, some manga and a television for company. He passes his days scouring magazines for supermarket coupons rather than looking for work, a blatant commentary on the straitened economy and stringent lifestyle of a post-bubble Japan. Through all this, he daydreams of excitement and purpose again.

Many of the monsters and villains- terms which are often used interchangeably in the series- emerge from figures bearing resemblance to everyday nuisances spliced with visual designs and powers more typical of mainstream superhero comics or *shōnen* anime and manga. For example, an interruption to Saitama's mundane life arrives with a familiar nuisance- a mosquito, which, despite having all the strength and speed in the world, Saitama cannot quite squash. This mosquito is one of a swarm being controlled by the supervillain Mosquito Girl. In defeating her- while trying to squash the mosquito that was bothering him, rather than engage in a fight with her, parodically- Saitama saves a cyborg by the name of Genos. Genos is the deuteragonist of the series. As a cyborg, Genos is gender ambivalent, but is referred to by the third person masculine in the series. For the sake of convenience, I will continue this trend, although expanding upon interpretations of his gender, and the significance of those interpretations, will be one of the aims of this paper.

Genos then begs Saitama to take him on as his disciple. Saitama is reluctant to take on a disciple as he feels he has nothing to teach, and in his effort to convince him, Genos conveys his reasons for wanting to be stronger to Saitama. Four years ago and when Genos was fifteen years of age, Genos' family was wiped out in a sudden and inexplicable attack by a cyborg- one that he is still hunting in a quest for revenge. This vendetta-style backstory is a common theme and plot device in Japanese *Jidaigeki*(時代劇), vendetta or period-piece theater. This combination of comedic mundanity- such as a mosquito- weaving together with supervillains and nostalgic

plotlines is a trademark quality of this series, and one which has contributed significantly to the series' popularity and appeal both in Japan and abroad.

Coupled with this parodic combination of the mundane qualities of daily life and the overpowered nature of many superhero comics is a distinct air of critique with regard to formalized ways of evaluating success and failure. Early on in the series, Genos convinces Saitama that working as a formalized superhero would allow him to cover his daily bills. Saitama and Genos both take the formal examination to become heroes, which consists of physical and mental examinations. During the physical test and the mental examination, Genos is placed in the top tier of hero (S-class) with a perfect score, while Saitama barely ekes out a passing grade (despite breaking all the hero association's records in the physical exam, his mental skills proved lacking on the written test) and is placed into the lowest tier of professional hero, that of C-class.

These elements are parodic, and serve to highlight disparity between what society recognizes as effective versus what actually proves to be effective. Time and time again, formally recognized heroes, most of whom stand in as emblematic of *shōnen* genre archetypes, fail to address the apocalyptic problems that sweep over their world, while Saitama- who lazes around most days and would rather read *manga* and play video games than do most anything else- manages to solve the conflict without a climactic fight as is typical of the *shōnen* genre.

As the series is well over a hundred chapters in both manga and webcomic format, it would be impossible to summarize the series' entire plot within the scope of this paper. However, I hope that by highlighting the series' beginning and a few key scenes and events within the series, I might be able to shed some light on a collection of trends which crystalize as the series continues; namely, the intertwining of homophobia typical for the genre along with queer and homosocial relationship dynamics being expanded upon along temporal lines.

1.2 SEXUALITY

In *Two Timing Modernity*, Keith Vincent provides an in-depth analysis of a number of texts depicting various interpretations of homosocial relationships in Japanese literature. Among these is his analysis of Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*, wherein Vincent asserts that *Kokoro* relegates its protagonist to a suspended state between a homosocial past and a heterosexual future⁴. His analysis of this work, as well as many others in the book, provides a distinct way of examining how Japanese literature has navigated homosexual and homosocial narratives across the cusp of modernity. His argument locates homosociality and queerness as tied invariably with the temporal in Japanese literature, with homosociality being tied to the past (pre-modernity) while heteronormativity is tied more to the present (modernity).

Beyond literature, temporality, homosociality and homosexuality remain intimately linked. In contemporary Japan, many *seinen* and *shōnen* manga and anime works, particularly those with mass-market appeal, will make no short work of introducing a love interest (typically female) for the main character (typically male) to pursue. This “romance plot” will often take up a substantial amount of narrative space in the work, and will typically devote significant time to fostering a heteronormative dynamic between the two main love interests. *One Punch Man*, however, shows no concern with this kind of narrative in the slightest. Rather, the relationship between Saitama and Genos, which dances between a homosocial and homosexual nature, is given the most prevalence in the text. I argue that this is emblematic of the confused temporality present in the narrative.

⁴ Keith Vincent, *Two Timing Modernity: Homosocial Narrative in Modern Japanese Fiction* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2012) 105.

These characteristics are most immediately apparent through the relationship dynamic between Saitama and Genos. Through his referencing of Saitama not by his name but by the word *sensei* (先生), or teacher, Genos immediately hearkens back to a tradition of premodern male-male sexuality depicted through the realms of *nanshoku* (male love) and *shudō* (the way of boys), wherein a homosocial, or even homoromantic or homosexual relationship occurs between two men often in a master-disciple relationship⁵. These themes are well documented in premodern Japanese literature, a fact which *One Punch Man* seems to consciously employ⁶.

Out of supreme awe for Saitama's strength and skill, we as viewers are often privy to Genos' internal monologues regarding his fondness and respect for Saitama. Even within the domestic, laid-back scenes in the apartment, there are frequent images of Genos taking notes of even the most seemingly inconsequential of Saitama's actions, such as slouching while reading a manga. Over the course of the series we see Genos adapt and learn from Saitama- even going so far as to change his running style to match his teacher's- in a way that exemplifies the master-student relationship they share and the respect and affection that underlays it. Additionally, through this particular manner of imitation and aggressive note-taking, we are given an illustration of how a cyborg learns and grows.

⁵ Keith Vincent, , *Two Timing Modernity: Homosocial Narrative in Modern Japanese Fiction* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2012) 25.

⁶ One of the most significant collections of male-male love in Japanese literature is undoubtedly Ihara Saikaku's *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (難色大鏡)

One of the most potent of these instances comes when a earth-shattering asteroid is hurtling towards the earth, and Genos sets out to try and stop it. His initial attempts prove futile, and another hero, Bang, offers him advice:

“You are far too young to be worried about failure. When your back is against the wall, just muddle through.”⁷

Taking this advice to heart, Genos reflects on failure and the concept of muddling. A vision of Saitama appears behind him, and Genos takes his teacher’s nonchalance and laziness as a bout of encouragement. Genos then rips off his shirt and utilizes his cyborg core to attempt to destroy the meteor. This proves ultimately unsuccessful. Although this scene has ties in with notions of failure, a concept relating to queerness which I will expand on later, I would like to emphasize the link between Genos’ learning from Saitama as having both homosocial (by way of education and learning) and homosexual (by way of the relationship patterns) between them which are emblematic of *nanshoku and shudō*. The link between Genos’ internal monologues given image and vocalization in the series and the tie of his monologues to Saitama and a certain degree of eroticism (such as tearing off his shirt while an image of Saitama is superimposed on the background) illustrate this historical model in a contemporary light with remarkable efficiency.

While Saitama is not as vocal in his own views of Genos- we as viewers are rarely privy to his internal thoughts when it does not involve gags such as grocery shopping or running errands- the depth of their relationship grows over the course of the series, and is depicted through actions as opposed to words. In drawing out this reference to homosociality and same-

⁷ *One Punch Man*, episode 7

sex affection, *One Punch Man* situates one aspect of its temporality-driven queerness as referential of premodern Japan.



Figure 1 Genos cleaning the toilet in his and Saitama's apartment (One Punch Man, Episode 5)



Figure 2 Genos drying dishes using his cybernetic hands (One Punch Man, episode 8)

All of this is set against another aspect of Saitama and Genos' relationship, that of a contemporary, heteronormative-esque domesticity. Whether it's Genos cleaning toilets while dressed in an apron and slippers (Figure 1), Genos drying dishes using his cyborg enhancements (Figure 2), or simply returning from grocery shopping with the characteristic *tamanegi* in hand, this premodern image is set against a present which relishes in images associated with the domestic, and depicts a surreal level of concern for contemporary, mundane realities and questions. These questions, such as missing grocery store sales and cooking dinner, are more at home in a contemporary rom-com than an action-driven *shōnen* anime.

It is of note here, as well, that by in large the chores and tasks associated traditionally with femininity, such as cleaning and doing the dishes, are done by in large by Genos, who is both Saitama's disciple and a cyborg. Within the word *shudō* itself, the way of boys, there is immediately a hierarchy and a gendering assigned with the older figure being more knowledgeable, practiced and learned, while the younger figure is thus implied as a boy or young man who is less learned, and thus relegated to a receptive position both by ways of knowledge and sex⁸. The cyborg or transhuman elements, too, are often relegated to a realm distinctly associated with the feminine and/or homosexual⁹. In these ways, the domestic, contemporary sphere present in *One Punch Man* takes on a markedly gendered twist, with Saitama largely fulfilling the masculine and Genos largely being associated with feminized images or tasks. In splicing together a domestic present, one which carries along with it heteronormatively-gendered

⁸ Gregory M Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse 1600-1950*, (University California Press, 1999) 32.

⁹ Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 110.

actions with a premodern structured homosocial bond, *One Punch Man* actively situates the queer in a place neither here nor there, and just like its post-apocalyptic setting, post-temporal.

Of course, a third aspect to this temporality, that of a mythological, timeless aspect, cannot be ignored. This is depicted in several aspects: once in terms of general, overall aesthetic of the series, once in terms of the emphasis on a timeless, aestheticized moment, and once in terms of its post-apocalyptic setting. As stated earlier, the series revolves around figures of superheroes and mythology-inspired monsters. With superheroes commonly acknowledged as a modern-day mythos, linking this with the timeless mythology of the past further obfuscates the exact temporal position of the series and characters within, and further emphasizes the series' concern for timelessness or multiple, coexistent temporalities.

This distinct emphasis on timelessness is emphasized through the series' aesthetic, and that of the most commonly recurring theme: Saitama's punch. Battles against age-old villainous creatures and commandeering space pirates alike are decided at once by this punch, the aftermath of which is not only devastatingly powerful, but instantly disrupts or destroys the structure of whatever occurs around it. This over-powered strength, while no doubt intended and mainly employed as that of a parody, plot device or gag, also references an instantaneousness or timelessness which slides in alongside the other themes present in the series. As the most significant plot device of the series, this emphasis on instantaneous and timelessness solidifies the series' position as a work that focuses much of itself on the breaching of time or existence in a post-temporal world.

What does this then tell us about the series' role as a queer text? The emphasis on the temporal, when taken into consideration with previous analyses of homosociality and homosexuality in Japan as linked with temporality, reveals a new temporality wherein queerness

can visually exist while hearkening back to multiple coexistent modes. If a *nanshoku*-laden past is linked distinctly with premodernity and the modern era is linked with a heteronormative present, then a post-apocalyptic setting such as *One Punch Man*, one which is mottled in equal parts by an eerily contemporary Japan alongside wide expanses and swaths of desolated landscapes, allows for the breaching of these multiple temporalities in order to imagine a place where queer modes and relationships, such as those present in *nanshoku* relations, might be excavated and given new vitality in literature today. *One Punch Man* suggests that a trans-temporality or post-temporality is absolutely necessary for a reiteration and re-exposition of queer relationships in Japanese literature and artworks today.



Figure 3. Puri-Puri Prisoner (left) in his first appearance talking to Speed-o'-Sound Sonic (*One Punch Man*, Episode 8)

This trans-temporal or post-temporal necessity is emphasized by the presence of an outspokenly gay character in the series: Puri-Puri Prisoner. Puri-Puri Prisoner is the lowest ranked member of the S-class (highest ranking class) of heroes. His introduction in the series is

delayed thanks to his being imprisoned- where he was placed thanks for his penchant for molesting young men. Visually, Puri-Puri Prisoner possesses a tall, hulking physique. In his first introduction, a knitted sweater with a pink heart stretches over his prisoner's uniform, leaving little to the imagination in terms of his body. His entire body exists as a caricature; in blending hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine ascribed characteristics, his figure becomes monstrous. This is something that Sonic observes, as well, referring to Puri-Puri Prisoner as being "inhuman"¹⁰.

This dehumanization and caricature-esque depiction of the outspokenly gay Puri-Puri Prisoner is emblematic of not only *shōnen* manga's uneasy relationship with gay characters and diverse representation, but of a by-in-large conservative nation which still responds uneasily to LGBTQ identities and issues. As opposed to Genos, who by way of his cyborg body exists in a post-now, and Saitama, by way of his mythic superhero status exists in a pre-time state, Puri-Puri Prisoner is very much a character of the here and now. Genos and Saitama's relationship wavers on the cusp of a *nanshoku*-esque premodernity, while Puri-Puri Prisoner's referring to his boyfriend casually, and his presence in the state structure of a prison, root him in a very tangible present without temporal ambiguity.

In *shōnen* manga, this is a problem. While queer dynamics may exist in the series, the instant these dynamics shift and slip outside to the realm of the queer existing in LGBTQ as opposed to a state of queering or queerness, they slide into the contemporary issues surrounding LGBTQ representation in Japan today. In other words, once "queer" is given a concrete, contemporary grounding, it slips towards issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in Japan today. This demarcates a clear division between existing in states of queering, that is,

¹⁰ *One Punch Man*, episode 8.

reevaluating methods of doing and existing that challenge, reinterpret and reutilize means traditionally interpreted as heteronormative, and being queer in terms of concretely non-heteronormative pertaining to gender and sexuality. So long as queerness cannot be concretely and distinctly tied to LGBTQ social and legal issues in contemporary Japan, it can carve out a place to exist in *One Punch Man*, and by extension, *shōnen* manga by in large. *Shōnen* manga, and to a certain extent, manga by in large, has long been hailed as containing little diverse representation, and the presence and depiction of a character such as Puri-Puri Prisoner only reaffirms that the place for such representation, according to the manga industry, is not *now*.

1.3 GENDER

Thus far I have spoken rather liberally and casually about the issue of sexuality in the series, particularly as it navigates through a nostalgic past and domestic idealized present while always hovering on the verge of a queer future and veering swiftly and unwaveringly around issues of contemporary LGBTQ representation in Japan. This trend continues in the realm of gender in the series- in particular when it comes to issues concerning trans characters.

The dialogue surrounding trans characters crystalizes in the figure of Genos. A cyborg, Genos cast aside most of his physical body following the murder of his parents by a rogue cyborg. Following their death, he sought out a man named Dr. Kuseno (Dr Stench), who removed his original body save for his brain. In seeking out better combat skills and weaponry to enact his revenge, his body is frequently modified and parts are swapped around. This occurs frequently, as following every major battle Genos emerges severely damaged from the fighting. While Genos' continued bodily destruction following every major battle or arc acts as a running gag throughout the series, it has farther-fielding effects which pan out in just the way Genos' body is rebuilt time and time again. These concepts of death, destruction and rebuilding, slip all-

too easily into the realm of trans theories and echo many themes concerning the post-apocalyptic setting.

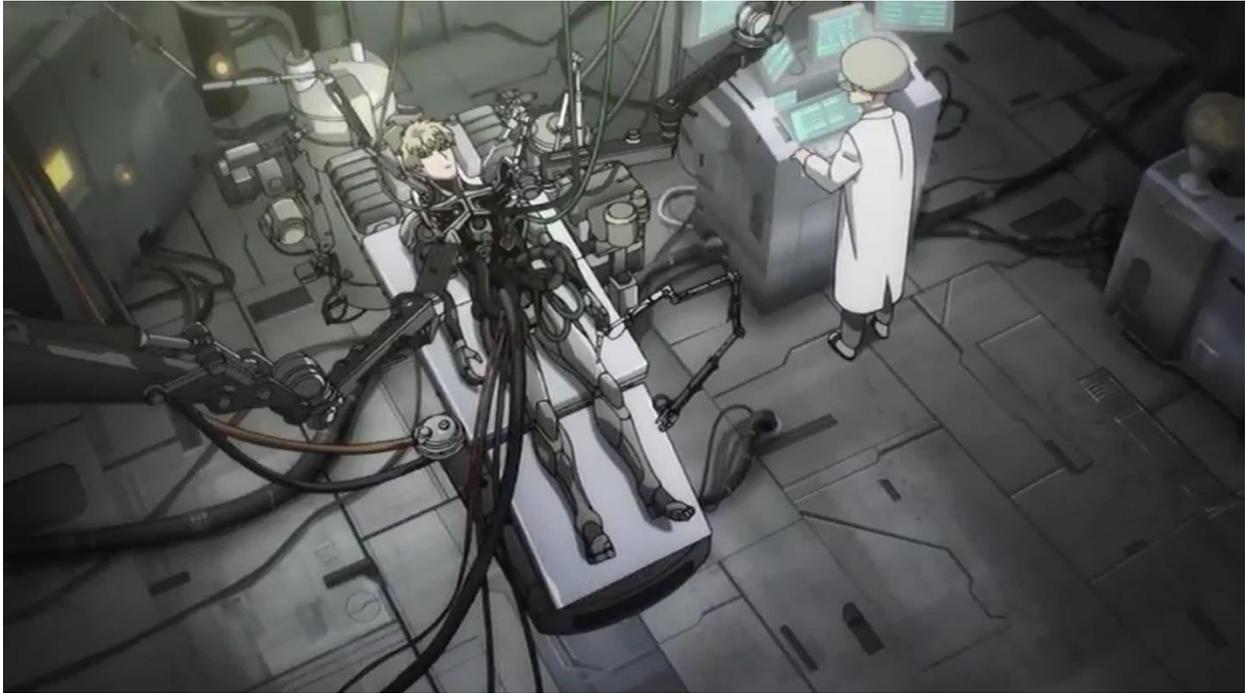


Figure 4 Genos (left) receives modifications and has his body repaired by Dr. Kuseno (One Punch Man, Episode 4)

Following each destruction, Genos returns to Dr. Kuseno and seeks repairs, more often than not bringing scraps and remains of his opponents with them if they too were a cyborg. While he proclaims his motivations as being that of growing stronger to defeat the rogue cyborg and enact his revenge, a number of attachments- such as a bottle opener and dish drier- appear on his person without distinct, concrete links to his goal. Although the attachments themselves are not gendered, they are often used in gendered ways. Genos' bodily reconstruction presents a constant navigation of gender in that his body and his body's purpose is always being unsettled, and the utilizations- in terms of goals, applications and actual modifications made to his person- are never quite static. However, in any case, Genos' own identification with any sense of gender

seems to take a back seat to the functions that his body is made to perform in its perpetual death and reconstruction.

This is hardly a unique phenomenon. Sweeping aside notions of concrete boundaries with regard to identity politics, cyborgs have long been associated with the shifting and ambiguous, drawing lines through affinity and function as opposed to more concrete notions.¹¹ The cyborg, a being which blurs the boundaries between human, machine and animal- echoed in *One Punch Man* not only through Genos but through the other cyborg-animal hybrids in the house of evolution- may settle easily in the ambiguity that exists between these borders, and, as a utopic or post-temporal being- that is, a figure of an imagined other time rather than a current now or concrete future- the cyborg may slip between temporal boundaries, too.

It is precisely because of Genos' nature as a cyborg that he can slip so easily between temporal lines, and precisely why this kind of relationship dynamic between him and Saitama can exist in a mainstream *shōnen* series like this. The post-apocalyptic setting, as a time and space post time, is necessary for the construction of this dynamic, and navigations of gender and sexualities along the lines of the inhuman and steeped in ambiguity allows it to persist so long as the temporal sphere is maintained.

1.4 WEBCOMICS, PARODIES AND GAGS – OH MY!

I will expand more upon issues of the post-apocalyptic in *One Punch Man* in tandem with my analysis of *No. 6*, which I view as necessary for articulating why the post-apocalyptic is of such importance in visual works such as these. However, before discussing *No. 6*, I would first

¹¹ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s"

(*Feminism/Postmodernism*: 1990) 190-233.

like to turn to the original format of *One Punch Man* in and of itself: that as a parody and gag-driven webcomic.

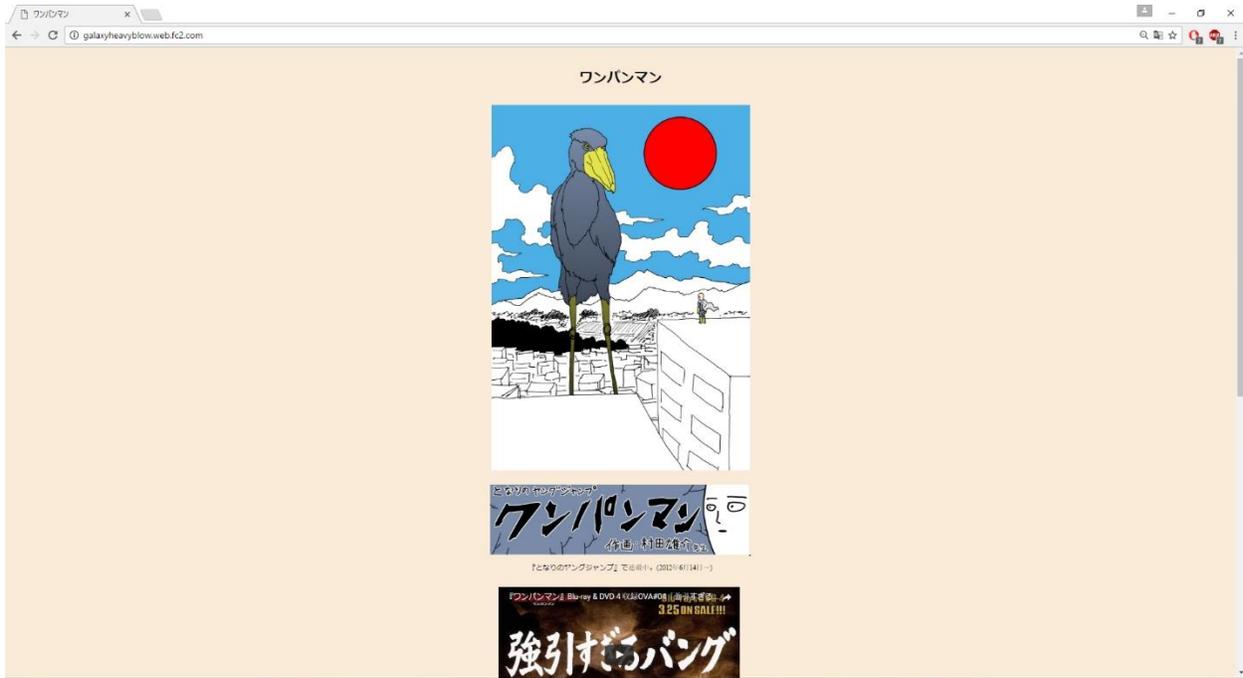


Figure 5 The *One Punch Man* webcomic's home page (4/19/2017)



Figure 6 The bottom of the *One Punch Man* webcomic's home page, including navigation for all of the webcomic chapters, and a user counter featuring bug shapes.

While the study of webcomics in English is very much still in development¹², I am unaware of any substantial research that has been carried out on Japanese webcomics. As mentioned briefly in the introduction to this series, the layout of the webcomic's site in and of itself depicts a certain kind of time travel. I must confess, when I first stumbled across the site for ONE's *One Punch Man*, I at first did not recognize it as the site I was looking for because it seemed so casually outdated in terms of web design; the URL, too, bears little resemblance to the webpage's contents- something that in the web-design world would be viewed as unprofessional or amateur in almost every case. When accessing the site, it seems as if one is stepping back in time in terms of website design and development, all the way down to the bug-shaped visitor counter present at the bottom of the page. Although it is difficult to say if this is distinctly intentional in terms of referring to time-travel or not – particularly as ONE has made no such allusions in his interviews, instead referring to the site design as simple and accessible (ironic, considering I was nearly turned away)- this nonchalance and amateur-ness is not necessarily detached from the series' message overall.

This is echoed in the visual qualities of the webcomic. While ONE's skills as a draftsman have improved over the years during which *One Punch Man* has continued, his drawing capabilities clearly rely on no sense of any formalized training or experience. Lines wobble and wander this way and that, while there is no body, form or concrete sense of presence beyond the use of line- as the series is black and white, and makes little use of gradients and pools of light and shadow. Although ONE shows some concern for composition and narrative structure in the

¹² For an introduction into the study of webcomics, see Scott McCloud's *Reinventing Webcomics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*.

comic overall, even Saitama's first appearance in the webcomic is far from visually striking in terms of draftsmanship.



Figure 7 Saitama's (top) first appearance in ONE's One Punch Man webcomic. The text reads:

SAITAMA: "I'm just a guy who's a hero for fun."

MONSTER: "What kind of half-assed backstory is that?"

1.5 FAILURE

One Punch Man is, at its heart, a parody. Given that the series in itself is a parodic work, it would be

relatively easy to approach the series from the perspective of its genre, that of action and comedy or parody, and say that the qualities of its characters and relationships in terms of dynamics and reference towards larger issues within the realms of queer theory are merely intended as humor or as parodies. However, in many ways the series' role as parody, and the presence of the act of

parody, is what makes these qualities all that much more potent. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam outlines a conception of failure and parody which, by challenging preexisting narratives which tend towards heteronormativity in their content and messages, exemplify queerness by both presenting alternatives to success by finding other non-heteronormative solutions and providing alternative narratives to challenge and surround preexisting narratives. Halberstam writes: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well...”.¹³ By situating itself as parody, and one that emerged from a series begun by a hobbyist and not a professional, no less, *One Punch Man* actively fits into this queer mold.

One Punch Man's inclinations towards failure are echoed both in the series' construction and in the series' contents. *One Punch Man*'s protagonist, Saitama, is not a hero out of a distinct desire for success or gain, but is a hobbyist. What is more, in painting him as a failed salaryman, he actively pushes back against one of the most common, and heteronormatively perceived and idealized, methods of employment in Japan today.¹⁴ In keeping with a critique of a distinct, concrete narrative and written temporality, *One Punch Man* critiques and provides alternatives to these narratives and expectations with a levity that only parody can mediate.

In any case, this conscious or unconscious decision about layout, and its associated nonchalance and amateur approach, nevertheless echo many of the thematic issues within *One Punch Man*. By slipping casually between temporalities and contributing to a sense of meanwhile-ness through raw absurdity, parody and a careen towards failure, we are given a

¹³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁴ Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 105.

vision of a virtual queer past futurity- one which necessitates a not-here and not-now temporal sphere in order to be fully realized (at least, temporarily).

CHAPTER 2: NO.6

Where *One Punch Man* in all its iterations is an irreverent, wild ride through expectation after expectation which its genres set up before it, *No. 6* instead offers an overly earnest meditation on life in a Utopian- or, dystopian- society. Nevertheless, despite the widely disparate approaches present in these two series, a number of themes remain consistent between the two texts. The post-apocalyptic is used as a vehicle for expanding upon a queer narrative, and a quasi-mythological past is utilized as a vehicle for weaving through the post-apocalyptic and the elements that it provides. Before diving into a summary of the storyline in the text(s), I would like to contextualize the works I will be dealing with in this section of the paper.

No. 6 was first released as a series of nine light novels¹⁵ by Asano Asuko, beginning in 2005 and running until 2009. In 2011 a sequel, *No 6: Beyond* was released. In addition to these nine light novels, the series was given a manga adaptation that ran from 2011 to 2013, published by Kodansha and illustrated by Kino Hinoki. From the manga, an anime adaptation produced by Studio Bones and directed by Nagasaki Kenji and written by Minakami Seishi ran in 2011. While the storylines between these three formats are largely the same, there are occasional differences and slippages in the texts, which I will highlight. For similar reasons as using primarily the anime in *One Punch Man*, my summary and visual approaches rely on the anime adaptation unless otherwise stated.

¹⁵ Light Novels (ライトノベル) are short, novel-length works published in Japan, and are so-called because they are typically viewed as “light reading”, or easy and quick to read. Although *No. 6*’s light novels do not feature illustrations beyond maps of Number 6, many light novels feature illustrations. Although the genre has been around since at least the 1970s, in recent years it has increased in popularity to the point where it is not unusual to see a successful light novel adapted into a manga, anime or live-action film.

2.1 PLOT SUMMARY

Opening to the dark recesses of a tunnel entrenched under the utopian city of Number six, one of only six city-states still in existence in the world, *No. 6* begins following Nezumi's (ネズミ, rat or mouse) escape from a collection of pursuers chasing him for yet-unstated reasons. He is wounded, and although he manages to escape through the tunnels and into the city above—specifically, a section of Number 6 which caters to citizens deemed “gifted elites” known as Chronos (クロノス)—his fate is left ambiguous.

The story then jumps perspectives, shifting to Shion (紫苑), celebrating his twelfth birthday and his acceptance into a gifted school course. This acceptance into the special curriculum secures his and his mother's ability to continue to live in Chronos, among other special privileges granted to them by the city¹⁶. Despite living in a luxurious home, however, Shion feels a sense of discontent that he struggles to articulate. A hurricane arrives at his house, and Shion goes outside to scream into the storm and express his discontent.

Nezumi sneaks into the room while Shion is distracted, prompting the introduction of the two. Shion patches Nezumi's wounds and agrees to keep him hidden. While fetching dinner for

¹⁶ This marks the first of many small departures between the light novels and the manga and anime. The manga and anime instead begin in a classroom where Shion and his friend Safu (沙布) are receiving instruction. The two then return home to Chronos together, where Safu's grandmother gives Shion a hand-knitted sweater (uncommon in Number 6, as textiles are typically not homemade) for his birthday. This is one of the first incidents we are given privy to an instance where a character pursues a handicraft (in this case, knitting) as a hobby rather than relying completely on the city for production of such goods.

him from the kitchen, Karan hears the news that a violent fugitive has escaped the correctional facility in the West Block¹⁷. The fugitive, called VC (Violence Chip) 103221, is Nezumi. The next morning, Nezumi leaves, and Shion and his mother are evicted from Chronos and lose all of their special privileges within Number 6.

Four years later, while Shion is working at his job supervising robots clean up a park in Number 6, a mysterious death occurs. An old man's body appears seemingly out of nowhere, skin withered like a husk. Later that day, Shion meets with Safu, his elementary school friend who remained in the special curriculum and Chronos. Safu informs Shion she is studying abroad, and they part ways. The next day, Shion's coworker experiences the same fate, and Shion is arrested and taken to the correctional facility Nezumi escaped from years prior.

A small robot mouse witnesses Shion's capture, and Nezumi appears and rescues Shion. The two escape through the sewers of the city and out into the sewer's dumping grounds: the West Block. Nezumi then leads Shion to his home, an underground safe house piled from floor to ceiling with all manner of books banned within Number 6's walls, and inhabited by a collection of rats- both living and robotic- that Nezumi keeps.

Just after arriving, rot similar to the rot that killed Shion's coworker appears along Shion's arms and neck. At Shion's behest, Nezumi cuts out a bee larvae from his neck, but the experience leaves Shion with white hair, red eyes¹⁸, and a serpent like pattern over his body. Shion is horrified at his own appearance, and does not recognize himself at first.

¹⁷ West Block is a "Special Security Zone" built outside of No. 6's walls, and according to Shion, is considered to be a hotbed of crime.

¹⁸ They are violet in the novels, a reference to the color of the shion flower.

Shion and Nezumi then examine the bee pulled from Shion. They conclude that the bee is a kind of parasite and has the capabilities to wipe out Number 6, but that the citizens of West Block may have developed an immunity, as Nezumi was not infected.

Seeking more answers, they head to one of Nezumi's informants, a figure named Inukashi (イヌカシ, Dogkeeper), who owns a hotel in the West Block.¹⁹ There, they keep a large pack of dogs, whom they use to gather information and run errands throughout the city. At night, they lease out the dogs to guests who visit the hotel to stay warm. Inukashi tells Nezumi that they may have luck talking to a figure named Rikiga. Shion and Nezumi leave to find him. Rikiga agrees to help, and reveals he knows Nezumi. However, rather than knowing him as Nezumi, Rikiga instead knows him by his stage name of Eve, and is an avid fan of his stage performances.

The next scene opens in the city of Number 6 itself, and specifically the Twilight House, a facility for the elderly in the city. Safu's grandmother, having been moved there, is chatting with the other elderly women when a nurse arrives to administer their medicine: an injection which they all receive. The nurse, when returning home, is shown lamenting having to care for the elderly when a dark splotch appears on her neck. She screams and falls to the ground dead, another victim of the parasitic wasps. Rikiga gets news of this and tells Shion.

Throughout all of this, we are given occasional cuts to Safu's life. Safu, studying abroad in one of the other mega cities in existence- one which appears to be based in Europe or North America by way of the architecture of the city and the anglicized names of the residents, Number

¹⁹ Inukashi's gender remains ambiguous throughout the series, and I will be referring to Inukashi using the pronoun "they".

5. Her friends tease her for her consistent obsession with the rational and apparent lack of interest in anything relating to the empathetic and what lies outside the touch of words.

The next scenes slide comfortably back and forth between the events at Number 5 and the going-ons in the West Block of Number 6. Rikiga leads Shion to the theater where Nezumi is performing as Eve, and very specifically, in the role of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Across the world in Number 5, Safu visits a museum with her class. While Shion and Rikiga watch Nezumi perform a soliloquy, Safu becomes separated from her group, entranced by a stained-glass window depicting a trinity of bees. Before Nezumi can finish the soliloquy, however, a gust of wind then sweeps over plains- echoing the open grassy fields of Chronos in Number 6- and blusters over both Safu and Nezumi. A song, ushered on by the breeze, echoes in their minds, causing them both to suddenly collapse.

Nezumi experiences a nightmare, and Safu wakes to one. Safu's grandmother has passed away and she must return to Number 6. On her way back, her Picasso artbook is confiscated and her identification wristband is returned to her. Safu then goes to the Twilight House to visit her grandmother's remains, which have been placed in a flower-filled coffin with only her smiling face evident. Safu notices that her grandmother's clothes have no smell of her remaining.

I have thus far spent this much space detailing the plot and setting of *No. 6* for several reasons: primarily, to convey the plot of this series which remains relatively unknown outside of anime circles in the United States and Japan today. Secondly, while much of the plot and resolution of the story carries through in the second half of the series, the first half shows a greater concern for establishing the world and the key issues of the series. In short, this series is more about its context than its content, and as such, requires greater explication of its setting and

background than the plot overall, which at best winds up quite hurried and condensed in the animated version.

Before delving into my analysis, I would like to give a very abbreviated summary of the later half of the text, and highlight a few key scenes which I find particularly provocative in issues relating to the roles gender and sexuality play in the text.

Safu grows suspicious and is labeled as a malcontent. She is brought to the correctional facility, where her mind is linked up with a force called Elyurias. E After discovering that Safu has been incarcerated, Nezumi reluctantly agrees to help Shion find her- but only after Shion kisses him, and Nezumi reciprocates. Nezumi leads Shion to a group of people who raised him following the destruction of his home and family. He refers to his family as the forest people, and is another survivor of a bee attack. The leader of the forest people reveals that the bees are tied to an entity the forest people worshipped called Elyurias. This leader also tells Shion and Nezumi that he helped to found Number 6 as a utopia, but that the city deviated from his hopes. He asks Shion to confront Number 6.

Inukashi and Rikiga help Shion and Nezumi rescue Safu. Along the way, Inukashi is tasked with getting close to one of Number 6's officials to get plans to the correctional facility by crossdressing and posing as one of the women that Rikiga pimps out to the city officials. The experience of posing as a woman proves traumatic for Inukashi, to the point where Inukashi winds up weeping against Shion when he goes to comfort them. Nevertheless, they successfully obtain a map of the facility- and are left with only finding a way inside.

They find their opportunity during the yearly purging that Number 6 does of the West Block on its celebration of the city's holy day (the yearly celebration of the day it was founded). Tanks are sent from the city which blast and mow down swaths of the West Block, rounding up

anyone they can find who doesn't flee or wind up dead from the assault. Shion and Nezumi find a baby among some of the wreckage, which Shion sends back to Inukashi by one of their dogs. Nezumi and Shion are then captured by the tanks and dumped into the correctional facility's underbelly onto a literal pile of corpses. They climb up the corpses and into the ventilation shafts leading out from the hellish room in to the correctional facility.

Nezumi and Shion make their way to where Safu is being held. Safu's mind has been melded with Elyurias', and they are unable to save her. Instead, Nezumi destroys the computer keeping Safu alive at her request, and escapes with Shion. This causes the facility, and a portion of the wall surrounding Number 6, to collapse. They, along with Rikiga and Inukashi, flee from the building in time to watch the wall collapse.

Looking out over the destroyed correctional facility and tattered walls of Number 6 which were brought down along with it, Nezumi kisses Shion one last time and then departs without an explanation. Inukashi is left with the child that Shion found during the purging of the West Block, and the series ends with a tentative step towards an unknown future. The final scene winds to a close with a long shot of Shion looking out over the West Block, with the crumbling walls and the city of Number 6 in the distance.

1.2 QUEERING GENRES AND QUEERING STATES

It is well established in *No. 6* that Nezumi and Shion possess romantic feelings for each other, however, their relationship does not appear to persist past the end of the series. Given that *No. 6* devotes substantial time and narrative effort to making explicit and clear the burgeoning romantic relationship between its two male protagonists, it is unexpected and strange that the series ends with that relationship ending for the foreseeable future. However, at a closer glance,

this is not necessarily as surprising as one might at first think, and does not seem to have any specific ties to the nature of the genre in which *No. 6* finds itself- that specifically of *shōjo* manga as opposed to distinctly Boys' Love.

Although I have touched on *shōnen* manga earlier in addressing *One Punch Man*, it may be important to expand upon the genres of *shōjo* (少女) and Boys' Love (BL) manga and anime.

While *shōnen* manga is geared towards a young male audience, despite a large portion of its readership being women, *shōjo* manga is intended to be read by young girls, and while its readership has grown more varied, it has been somewhat more resistant than *shōnen* manga in garnering a more diverse readership. While *shōjo* manga may incorporate any number of genres, plots and visual qualities, it is labeled by its target demographic. Nevertheless, compared to *shōnen*, *shōjo* tends to emphasize interpersonal dynamics and relationships with greater frequency than *shōnen*.

Boys' Love (BL, ボイズラブ), tangentially known as *yaoi* and encompassing genres such as *shōnen-ai* (少年愛) is a genre of manga, anime and light novels that focuses on depicting gay relationships between cisgendered men²⁰. Its targeted readership is women, and most BL works are created by women. As such, it has been referred to as a sub-genre of *shōjo*. Typically, relationships between men in BL anime and manga tend to follow very heteronormative

²⁰ Cisgender is a term often used to refer to people whose gender identity resides cohesively with the gender that was assigned to them at birth. In this context, I am using the term to contrast with the word transgender (occasionally shortened to trans), which suggests a gender identity which is not entirely cohesive with the gender that was assigned at birth.

relationship patterns, with one character being viewed as the *seme* (攻め), who acts as a top or dominant figure, and the *uke* (受け), who acts passive and is the bottom in the relationship.

Typically, women have very little presence in BL, and if present, are often conveyed in a negative light. Women are often portrayed either as obstacles for the two men to overcome or reject in entering into a gay relationship, or are depicted as abusive figures when they have kinship ties to either of the two protagonists.

Despite drawing on trends and archetypes present in Boy's Love and *shōjo* manga, such as a remarkable emphasis on relationship dynamics even in the context of a larger world-driven plot which could, theoretically, function with less emphasis (as is common in *shōjo* works), and the presence of Nezumi and Shion who, in a typical BL would be defined as the *seme* and *uke* respectively, for each of these trends that *No. 6* spares a nod to, it destabilizes its own genre in turn. Kinship and friendship relations with women, most notably those between Shion and his mother Karan, and those between Shion and his friend Safu, play a pivotal role in the plot and character development. The main plot of the story is not “getting-together” as is present in many BL works, but instead, resolves its story contents without any intent to resolve the relationship between Nezumi and Shion with any sense of finality.

Although the work features love between boys, it is not a Boys' Love work, and it seems quite intent to make that explicitly clear. Additionally, although the series has been marketed as a *shōjo* work, it withholds from making relationships the end-all of the plot. Gayness, an issue that is located at the center of BL works and often slips into *shōjo* works that incorporate gay themes and characters, is not at issue in *No. 6*. Rather, *No. 6* invests itself in tearing down the heteronormative trends that have slipped to the forefront in *shōjo* and BL genres. Rather than pursuing a gay narrative, *No. 6* is invested in crafting and locating a queer one.

Queerness, or queering, is first and foremost a state of being that the text presents. *No. 6* locates queerness, whether by way of non-heteronormative relationship dynamics and patterns, gender non-conforming characters or the queering capabilities of the state, as something hovering on the cusp of a post-apocalyptic temporal sphere. In this way, the queerness present in *No. 6* resembles the queerness present in *One Punch Man*, but rather than revolve around parody, failure and skirting around social issues, *No. 6* reevaluates and repositions queerness. By virtue of *No. 6*'s landscape being more visually distinct from contemporary times than *One Punch Man*, it allows more slippage between queering and queerness as it is experienced in contemporary times. Queerness is always crafted by a series of relationships. In the case of creating non-heteronormative relationship dynamics and patterns, the series is invested in highlighting interpersonal relationship dynamics that, in opposition to many of those present in *shōjo* and BL, destabilize heteronormative expectations and patterns. With the series' prominent involvement of animals, robots and the non-human, *No. 6* also queers by relishing in the ambiguity and uncanniness that results from the intersections of these different spheres of existing. Finally, with its state of queering present throughout the text, *No. 6* also calls into question the queering capabilities of the state (Number 6 itself). Each of these methods of queering culminate on the spearhead of the post-apocalyptic, and as that post-apocalyptic state ends, so too do the queering capabilities it outlined shatter.

In order to illustrate this, and the broader implications that this approach has for queer dynamics in anime and manga outside of the genres of BL and *yaoi*, I would first like to expand upon representations of sexuality- in particular, gay and bi sexualities- and then shift onto the ways in which gender is navigated in this series. I will conclude this section by tying in together

these issues with one of the most salient aspects of the *No. 6* universe: that of the setting and landscape itself.

2.3 NON-HETERONORMATIVE RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS AND PATTERNS

Unlike *One Punch Man*, *No. 6* is remarkable in that it incorporates a range of sexual identities in the series and does not shy away from making these sexualities abundantly clear. Shion's lack of interest in Safu as anything beyond that of a friend, despite Safu asking Shion for sex (specifically, for his sperm) before she leaves to study abroad. When a prostitute approaches him on the way to him and Nezumi finding Rikiga, he is utterly bewildered by her advances. His consistent bewilderment at women who approach him seeking sex, concretely and distinctly suggests a lack of sexual and romantic interest in women at all. Nezumi, on the other hand, shows interest in both men and women, as made evident by his interactions with Shion and women in the series- particularly the same prostitute that approached Shion. After Shion refuses her advances- namely, a kiss- Nezumi pays her for her services with a kiss of his own. This could also have ties and be a reference to the link between prostitution and theater, which I will expand upon later. Rikiga is shown to be heterosexual, as is Karan. Although Inukashi's sexuality is not expanded upon in the series, this lack of expansion relative to the other time devoted to the characters in the series could suggest asexuality- a lack of sexual attraction. This is reaffirmed by Inukashi's disgust at having to pose as a prostitute later in the series- another moment I will expand on later.

Needless to say, it is unusual in anime and manga, either within the genres of BL or without, to witness a cast that not only includes explicitly non-heteronormative characters, but one that relies on characterization through archetype as opposed to stereotype. Where an

archetype can provide a point of reference for locating a character within a larger dialogue or conversation with regards to expectation, a stereotype only reaffirms expectations- typically in a negative way- without ever expanding upon them. Within the genres of BL and *yaoi* manga and anime, women are often portrayed in a negative light, as they typically represent obstacles to the two male objects of desire coming together. Meanwhile, as was made evident in *One Punch Man*, non-heteronormative characters are typically depicted by outlandish stereotypes- as is the case of Puri-Puri Prisoner- or their non-heteronormative qualities are made implicit rather than explicit- as is the case in the dynamic existing between Saitama and Genos. *No. 6*, however, seems intent to depict a collection of sexualities and relationship dynamics that step outside of these genre-ordinated tendencies. These dynamics, however, crumble and give way just as easily as the walls that surround Number 6 at the series' finale.

This is seen explicitly, and perhaps most appropriately and ironically, through the involvement of Safu. I say “appropriately” because of the nature of the feminine as being a vehicle for expanding upon homosocial and homosexual relationships, as proposed by Eve Sedgwick, Keith Vincent and others.²¹ Sedgwick proposes that erotic triangles are registers “...for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment”.²² Safu is not so much as a strain on the relationship between Nezumi and Shion as she is a vehicle for it- a trend not uncommon when depicting and expanding upon homosocial

²¹ For their readings on this subject, please see Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, and Keith Vincent's *Two Timing Modernity*.

²² Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 27.

and homosexual trends. From the series' outset, she and Shion are shown to be close friends, although her continued interest in Shion is shown to be more than mere friendship. Curiously, however, Safu does not approach Shion in seeking out romantic involvement, but rather, approaches Shion and expresses her interest in him through asking for his sperm. She is driven more out of biological compatibility than by harboring romantic affections. Her desire for Shion's sperm, and subsequent desire for biological reproduction and sexual interest along rational lines, is shown to fail time and time again, particularly as the subject of her interest is not only suggested to be gay, but one that increasingly moves outside of the drive towards biological reproduction. It is this Eros drive that ultimately spells her madness and subsequent demise.²³

Before expanding upon Safu's engagement with these concepts, I would like to provide a brief introduction to the concepts of Eros and Thanatos, and justify my use of them here. The definition of Eros that I use here is the one developed by Sigmund Freud, and specifically refers to the drive to create life, and to participate in creative and productive endeavors. Thanatos, termed by Freud as the "Death Drive", is the drive towards death and destruction that exists in opposition to Eros. Although these theoretical models are dated, that is in part why I have chosen to utilize and reinvigorate them in my argument here. Topics of madness- and hysteria in particular- can be traced back to antiquity, and in order to better approach and analyze how madness is used in these narratives, I find the use of these antiquated terms to be productive. Ultimately, the analysis I offer of *No. 6* requires moving along temporal lines and necessitates a certain degree of jumbling the temporal- just as the work offers in and of itself.

²³ This was proposed by Sigmund Freud in his *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory* (1910), and expanded upon in its links to civilization by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955)

While residing in Number 6, Safu seems wedded to these concepts of biological reproduction and rationality. While I will expand upon the former later in the paper as I discuss the issue of the family within *No. 6*, I would like to take a moment to expand upon the latter now. Whether by her presentation to the class in the beginning of the series, or by her pursuit of Shion's sperm, or her response to stumbling across her friend abroad making out with a man, Safu is shown to rely explicitly on rationality as a way of picking apart and expanding the world. She all too often leaves emotional subjectivity by the wayside, especially when in context with sexuality. She only recognizes a non-rationality driven aspect of sexuality once outside of the confines of Number 6, and that realization upon her return to the dystopian city causes her to surrender herself to madness. In short, her obsession with a near machine-like rationality and intent- that is, viewing human beings and human relationships as products of what actions human bodies perform or are made to perform, a point I will expand upon later- is a direct product of being raised and fostered within Number 6 as one of the first generations to exist there from birth, and in her high status within the city, is emblematic of the city-state's ideal human citizen.



Figure 8 Safu looks at the stained glass depicting a trio of bees

Naturally, then, upon her interaction with the outside world- Number 5- and her inability to be completely purged (although she must surrender her book on Picasso's art, the impact that her interaction afforded her there remains), she becomes incompatible with the ideals that Number 6 holds for its citizens. This incompatibility leads to discontent, and as a result, she is herded away to the correctional facility. There, while undergoing correctional analysis, the analyzers- faceless figures- comment on how her physical and mental capabilities are ideal for the purpose they have been cultivating so many subjects. It is there that she is hooked up to the entity known as Elyurias, and in return for giving her body over to this entity, Elyurias agrees to help her see Shion again. Just as quickly as Safu has realized the non-rational qualities of her body- namely, a personality and subjectivity that lies outside the realm of citizen and city subject, out of her wish to see Shion again and enact a heterosexual union, she must relinquish this aspect of herself for completion of this desire. Her love sickness, translated as madness when

Nezumi and Shion find her at the end of the series, results in first a death of her identity, and then a physical, biological death.

The theme of madness is not relegated to Safu alone, however. Just as the song of Elyurias eventually results in overtaking Safu by way of Elyurias herself being introduced into her person, so too does Nezumi- a figure who emerged out of the society that worshipped Elyurias- become affected by her song. However, where Safu is affected by the song, and that in turn serves to bolster and enable her erotic drive towards reuniting with Shion (and, implicitly, gaining access to his sperm and heterosexual reproduction), for Nezumi the song instead posits a struggle between his past- one interwoven closely with nature (the organic) and defined through (suggested as heteronormative) kinship ties- and a present and future which is instead dominated by a present drive to destroy Number 6- that is, constructed and inorganic kinship ties- and by a potential gay future with Shion. This struggle by Nezumi shows the first set of negotiations between a past (kinship and familial love) and a present/future (queer romantic love) that the work must navigate.



Figure 9 Nezumi, while performing *Ophelia*, notices Shion is watching him for the first time (No. 6, Episode 5)

Nezumi's moment of madness is illustrated most poignantly through his performance-in-drag of the role Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this role, he adopts the persona of the beautiful actress, Eve. This multilayered performance hearkens back to multitudinous echelons of theater traditions where men act out female roles on stage, and, particularly in a Japanese context, the homosexual and homosocial bonds that emerged out of those traditions.

Most notable among these traditions is *Kabuki* (歌舞伎). Although Kabuki first developed during the Tokugawa period of Japanese history (1603-1868) as a theatrical art to be performed by women, travelling troupes became associated with prostitution. As a result, women were banned from the art form, and it came to be performed only by men. The actors also came to be associated with prostitution for both male and female customers. Men who specialized in performing idealized female characters were known as *Onnagata* (女形 lit: woman's shape),

while young men who specialized in performing young male roles were known as *wakashū* (若衆 lit: young clique). As a result of these kinds of actors being particularly popular among customers, both roles experienced periodic bans throughout Kabuki's history.²⁴

Although this style of tradition is hardly unique to Japan, as many forms of Elizabethan theater also featured similar traditions of men playing women, the homosexual and homosocial bonds which emerged from these traditions in Japan bring a specificity to *No. 6*'s context as a Japanese work. In hearkening back to these traditions, Nezumi's episode of madness, brought about by Elyurias, hinges along temporal lines. Non-heteronormativity, and to a certain degree resistance to the nation-state evoked by these theatrical traditions, is located in a nostalgic past where West Block is located.

But this point of madness is not bound to the geographical local of West Block alone. Slipping easily along geographical and social borders, Elyurias' song carries from Safu in Number 5 to Nezumi in Number 6's West Block, resulting in their mutual collapse from the non-rational driven song- a kind of sexual or emotional awakening in their recognition of their feelings for Shion. For both characters, this represents an epiphany. For the first time, Safu realizes an aspect of herself which cannot be articulated and defined by rationality. For Nezumi, this is the first time where Shion witnesses his role as a singer and performer. Both witness a mutual state of looking; for Safu, she looks into the stained glass as a mirror and witnesses a first realization of an in-articulatable, visceral present. For Nezumi, it is the first glimpse of a queer future with Shion, where hearkening to the past is a method of achieving said future. Both in Safu's enrapturement with the present and Nezumi's absorption into a multi-temporality in-

²⁴ Matazo Nakamura, trans. Mark Oshima, *Kabuki: Backstage, Onstage*, (Kodansha International: 1990), 21-24.

leadensphere, exist at the crossroads of temporal spheres which had not yet coexisted in the work.

This sexual awakening is interwoven tightly with issues pertaining to gender. It is this moment of performance- performing a woman performing a woman, a point of estrangement from his own physically, socially and temporarily inscribed body- that Nezumi can realize a queer futurity. While the heterosexual drive Safu experiences as a result of this madness spells her demise, for Nezumi it instead hearkens to an entanglement with Nezumi's death drive which, at this point in the story, showed substantial presence over his concern for anything pertaining to eros. This song, which carries across geographies and between the two, represents this temporal moment that cannot be articulated, and a possible escape.

Coming from outside the city of Number 6 both in terms of birth and the manner he was raised in, Nezumi lacks the Eros- that is, the heterosexual drive to reproduce in this instance- that has been inscribed onto its idealizing citizens- most notably Safu. This song is a hearkening to this non-reproductive driven Eros, and echoes the scream bellowed by Shion at the series' onset.



Figure 10 Shion throws open the windows to his home in Chronos and screams (No. 6, Episode 1)

At the beginning of the story, Shion throws open the windows to his room and steps out into the storm to let out a vocal scream. Although he is unable to identify precisely why he felt the need to do such a thing, he acknowledges the need to release *something*. In this way, his need to shout is reminiscent of Safu's viewing of art and Nezumi's singing- expressing something along lines that do not rely concretely and purely on the spoken in order to be conveyed. During this shout, Nezumi manages to sneak into Shion's house. By way of Nezumi spying on Shion at this moment, too, it provides a companion to Shion looking at him in the West Block theatre while singing later in the series. Both of these acts of viewing and observing the other participating in a vocalization that is irrational, and either steeped in the past as is Nezumi's theater performance or steeped in the future as is Shion's home, invigorate queer narratives and relationships.

This moment of temporal drag²⁵, set in the shadowy corner of a theater which stands at visual odds with Number 6's glass and metal sheen, provides the first step towards the realization of a future that lies outside of the state-ordained heteronormative future created by Number 6. In conveying this revitalization of the past through an art form, specifically through song, the mechanized rhythms into which Number 6 has fallen are denied, and the potentiality for alternate futures begin to open.

2.4 FAMILY, GENDER NON-CONFORMITY, AND THE INHUMA

It is important to expand upon the aspects of heteronormativity I am focusing on, and the alternatives to such heteronormativity that the text presents. I would like to return briefly to an issue which I raised earlier in this paper in the context of Safu, but have not yet expanded sufficiently upon, namely the issue of biological reproduction and the structure of the family within the text. The nature of family structure and reproduction, as well, is at stake in *No. 6*. Each of the families we, as viewers, are given privy to inside the city do not fit within idealized patrilineal structures. Shion and his mother, for example, are shown living alone, while Safu resides with her grandmother before going abroad. Yomin, a man who visits Shion's mother and harbors discontent towards the city of Number 6, has been isolated from his wife and daughter. In each of these respects, although the families seem to continue and the members of the family seem to reproduce according to vaguely heteronormative structures (Safu's obsession with Shion's sperm, and the framing of his sperm as optimal is quite clear evidence of this), these family structures instead seem to break down within the city's bounds. As a result, institutions that the city has erected- whether by way of robots performing maintenance or by employees administering "care" to the elderly in the Twilight House- fill this gap instead. The dystopic

²⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2000).

future in Number 6, while brought about and given the possibility of continuity through heterosexual reproduction, is maintained and cultivated not by human hands, but by those of a machine.

Inukashi is the foil to the technological and normalized future that this dystopia envisions. While Safu is driven throughout the series in pursuit of eros and her kinship ties to her grandmother, Inukashi's greatest fear- and greatest drive- is Thanatos itself²⁶. When one of Inukashi's dogs dies, Inukashi becomes extremely anxious, and Nezumi often goes to sing for Inukashi and their dogs when one of the dogs passes away as a way of soothing both the dog's and Inukashi's spirit. Avoiding death and eking out means of survival is shown to be Inukashi's drive in the series, particularly as they show little to no interest in developing or fostering human bonds. Additionally, as their name suggests, Inukashi exists at the borderlands between the human and the animal; their family is not human, but instead consists of a motley crew of dogs.

In an epilogue to the light novels and not included in the manga or anime adaptations, *No. 6: Beyond* provides a bit of insight as to Inukashi's history. *No. 6 Beyond* includes a collection of short stories providing snippets of life experienced by the main characters before, during and after the events of *No. 6*. In the segment "Inukashi's days" (イヌカシの日々), the story opens with Inukashi laying in bed sick, and lamenting how, due to Inukashi's illness and inability to move to seek treatment, Inukashi is likely to die. A fear of death and a drive to live, as mentioned above, is a key focal point of Inukashi's character. Nevertheless, Inukashi manages to convey to one of their dogs to fetch Shion and Rat, and while in a feverish stupor waiting for them, begins

²⁶ Thanatos, or the death drive, was a concept developed by Sigmund Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1910).

to reminisce about the past- or, specifically, the last time they were this near to death as a baby. Inukashi was found as a baby by the roadside and taken in by a nameless man. Although the man says he has no clue why he picked them up, as finding dying and unwanted children by the roadside was not an uncommon scene in the West Block, he was taken aback by how quickly his dog took to the young Inukashi, to the point where she began to nurse them from her teats. Inukashi is then raised by the dogs, and at some point takes over ownership of the inn they now operate. Their primary source of income is to lease out their dogs as blankets for their guests to keep warm with at night, however, they also use their dogs as information gatherers and errand-runners throughout the West Block, as a way of always keeping their finger on the city's pulse.



Figure 11 Inukashi with their dogs (No. 6, Episode 4)

Throughout the whole series, Inukashi toes a fine line between mocking Shion for his obsession with treating the dogs as humans- namely by cleaning and pampering them as he was

pampered in Number 6- and referring to the dogs as their own kin. When one of the dogs dies, Inukashi refers to him as their uncle- specifically their mother's brother- and becomes enraged when Nezumi and Rikiga show disrespect towards the dog's body. Rather than seeking to elevate the dogs to the realm of the human, Inukashi instead seems to express a stronger affinity to the realm of the canine.

This non-identification with the human plays out in several ways in *No. 6*, but is most notably evident with regards to Inukashi's gender. Inukashi's gender remains ambiguous throughout the series, and although Inukashi is referred to by other characters in the manga and anime as "he", they make no particular comment one way or the other in relations to their gender identity.²⁷ Among their dog kin, they act as somewhat of a matriarch, and in the story's epilogue, the manner by which they raise the young baby seems in many ways positively maternal. However, when they had to dress up as a female prostitute in order to gain information from one of the top official of Number 6, they were traumatized by the experience. When Shion comforts them following this experience, he notes that Inukashi has remarkably slender shoulders for someone he perceived as being male- something he had not noticed before.

²⁷ In the anime and manga, they refer to themselves using the masculine pronoun *ore* (俺), but this marks a distinct departure from the novels



Figure 12 Inukashi cries against Shion after posing as a prostitute (No. 6, Episode 9)

Each of these moves progressively blurs distinctions between the masculine and the feminine and their own kinship ties- maternal or otherwise. In addition to caring for their own brood of dogs, Inukashi also becomes saddled with a baby which Shion finds following the purging of West Block on Number 6's holy day. While they name the baby Shion and thus establish a fictitious relationship by way of naming, the baby's presumably deceased parents are never identified. Instead, Inukashi raises the child as their own and among the pack of dogs that they tend to- allegedly in a similar way to how they were found and raised by the human that raised them.

In disidentifying the maternal with the realm of the feminine, and by providing a maternal which hinges neither on heteronormative patrilineal familial structures nor entirely on the realm of the human, Inukashi's and the future in which Inukashi continues to exist provides an alternative to the one constructed by the looming monolith of Number 6. In this way, the

presence of dogs is not just a way to navigate gender nonconforming characters- as was the case with cybernetics and Genos in *One Punch Man*- but an alternative vision of a future which hinges not on the shiny, metallic futuristic world of the city of Number 6, but instead on a return to a domesticated nature existing at the fringes of the human.

And yet, this disidentification with the human is not limited to Inukashi alone. Nezumi, by the very nature of his name- Rat- exists distinctly within this venue, as well. However, while Inukashi's ambiguity relating to dog-human relations is crafted over the course of the series by nature of their kinship and interaction with the four-legged creatures, Nezumi's first appearance in the light-novel version of *No. 6* leaves substantial ambiguity as to the nature of the human qualities of the subject itself:

“Rat was in a hole.

A quiet breath was drawn in the darkness. The smell of moist dirt faintly tinged the air. He cautiously inched his way ahead. The hole was cramped; there was only just enough space for him to squeeze through. It was also dark, without any light to be seen. He felt himself relax. He liked dark and cramped places.”²⁸

ネズミは穴の中にいた。

暗闇の中で、静かに息を吸う。わずかに温気をおびた土の匂いがした。ゆっくりと慎重に前に進む。穴は狭い。ネズミがやっと通れるほどの広さしかなかった。そして、暗い。光はどこにも見えなかった。心が落ち着く。暗く狭い場所は好きだ。

²⁸ Atsuko Asano. *No. 6. Volume 1*. Original text is in Japanese. The translation is my own, as there is currently no English-language translation.

Taking advantage of the lack of a need to distinguish between Rat and the rat that the Japanese language provides, the opening to the novels leaves it up to the reader to determine whether or not this figure is human- a theme which persists throughout the series, by way of who (ie. The city-state of Number 6) decides who (ie. The inhabitants of the west block such as Nezumi) are human beings and worthy of recognition. While this degree of ambiguity is avoided in the opening of the anime and manga by nature of Nezumi remaining unnamed in the beginning- and thus being stripped of another aspect of his human identity- the cramped, dark aspect of the opening remains, and is a theme that persists beyond the novel's opening.

Nezumi lives underground in a series of tunnels with adjacent rooms which very much resembles a rat burrow- as well as a nuclear fallout shelter- and uses a collection of robotic mice to collect information from Number 6. In a similar manner to how Nezumi is shown crawling and scraping his way through the tunnels at the beginning of the novel to escape his pursuers- officials of Number 6 who seek him for his ties to Elyurias- the rats too must shuffle their way through the tunnels and pipes that make up Number 6's underbelly. The mechanisms that support the city and drain its waste, in turn, become vehicles for those that would usurp it to garner information, tools and roadways that bolster their attempts.

Intermingling with these robot mice are a number of flesh-and-blood mice that live in the burrows and between the shelves of the library Nezumi keeps in his shelter. In this manner, the story blurs not only the border between human and animal, but also calls into question the border between animals and robots. The books, symbols of a culture emerging out of a past which is forgotten within Number 6's borders, not only provide livelihood and pastime for Nezumi through their connection to the theater he performs, but also constitute the homes of these little mice.

2.5 QUEERING STATES

Mediating gender identity with something lying outside of the realm of the distinctly human is an approach used in both *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*. While the genres of *yaoi* and *shōnen-ai* have always been riddled with effeminate men and professed to have a certain comfort with that femininity, when it comes to involving transgender characters, the genres have been incredibly resistant to any push for conscious involvement or representation. However, increasingly outside of the realms of *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi*, there have been moves to incorporate more gender-non-conforming characters into these storylines- with a few catches. *One Punch Man* and *No. 6* exemplify these hitches with remarkable explicitness. In both *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, whether by Genos' cyborg nature, Rat's affiliation with rats or Inukashi's affiliation with dogs, the genders of trans characters are always mediated by something inhuman and uncanny. What is more, this set of disidentifications, that of refusing human-inscribed boundaries as a way of mediating gender, provides a new set of ways of navigating the queer among these non-BL genres. This is brought into particular focus in the context of the dystopic setting in which *No. 6* situates itself.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the city Number 6 is a city whose very existence is dependent upon a high degree of control of its subjects. This control is maintained by a collection of bodily modifications, invasive and performative elements that the city necessitates from its subjects. From the narrative's very opening, we are given a glimpse of a group of school children, designated by testing done to them at the age of two, participating in a classroom made of glass and interacting less with the people around them than with the screens. In Shion's first home, as well, the entire home is mediated through a cascading series of security systems.

Announcements are doled out through the wristbands on citizens' wrists, which also contain a personal identification number and can be tracked. Nezumi, in his first entrance into the narrative, is being tracked by virtue of the VC (Violence Chip) embedded in his body. Later in the tale, when Shion is working in his cleaning job in his park- where his job is not actually to clean, but to perform surveillance on the robots who tidy the park instead of humans- before entering work each day, he must utter an oath:

SECURITY SYSTEM : “Good Morning, recite your oath to an unchanging city.”

SHION: “I swear my loyalty to an unchanging city”

SECURITY SYSTEM: “We appreciate your loyalty. Take faith and pride in your citizenship while you pursue your daily labors.”²⁹

These performative actions by the citizens and the acknowledgement by the automated institutions that run the city manage exactly where the bodies of its citizens may access and where they are forbidden from entering. While the city is composed overwhelmingly by buildings and structures composed of glass, the barriers that the city provides to its citizens are scarcely relegated to the tangible. Rather, these controls inhabit the bodies and performances of the very citizens themselves.

Yet, beings that lie outside of the realm of the urban and manufactured are not exempt from modifying and manipulating the citizens of the city. Even the bees- creatures whose existence is tied with the destruction of Number 6 and its inhabitants- destroy its hosts by burrowing into their bodies and squeezing the vitality out of them from the inside out. As noted by Shion as well, the bees only seem to attack citizens of Number 6- there are no reported deaths by the bees from outside the walls of the city- suggesting a personal vendetta by the bees not

²⁹ *No. 6*, episode 2.

upon humanity by means of a blight, but rather a wrathful attack on the aspects of Number 6 itself that have become imbued in its hosts. Whatever Number 6 has imparted to its citizens, in doing so the city has removed their immunity. As much as the bees are framed as a parasite by Shion, they are not a parasite upon humanity, but a parasite specifically driven with the intent to eradicate the larger, ever looming and surveilling parasite of Number 6 itself. While Number 6 surveys its citizens and surface keenly and precisely, it cannot protect its citizens from the nature-born plague, which those outside of Number 6's borders have developed immunity to. The utterly controlled environment acts as a poison to its citizens. Nevertheless, from the city to the organic bees of Elyurias, bodily surveillance, insertion and modification are key issues in the narrative, and some of the very issues that the narrative pushes back against.

But unlike the bees, the city does not fade under the burden of time, nor does it seem to possess any notion of time or temporal decay within its close-held ideals. The framing of the city as “unchanging” (変わらない) is at key issue here, as well. As noted earlier, upon returning from her study abroad in Number 5, Safu is prevented from bringing a book of art- in particular, a book of Picasso's art- back into the city of Number 6. The first instance the narrative so much as includes a book, as well, is once Nezumi and Shion leave the walls of Number 6 behind and head underground into the shuttered and sheltered bomb-shelter-like structure that Nezumi calls home. The books there, including those by authors such as William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde, hearken back to a specific kind of past- one distinctly imbued with the literary, with paper and works on paper as its behest, rather than one that relies on screened surface- namely, the reflective and transparent- at its core. Additionally, the sources of these slips of paper and lines of word are authors with non-normative sexualities.

It is only when one drops in rank- as Shion and his mother did following Shion helping Nezumi escape his pursuers- that we are given a glimpse of a more time-imbued space. This stepping down of rank is closely tied in to a stepping back in time- the bakery Karen runs and the street it is situated on bear more resemblance to an old city block than the hyperfuturistic rest of the city that Number 6 projects. From the sterile, manufactured and perfectly manicured gardens and the high-class Chronos, Karen's bakery in lost town instead seems as if it could be perfectly at home in contemporary Japan today, rather than set as it is in the utopic-dystopic city of Number 6. The farther one slips from the ideals that the city has set out for its citizens, and the lower the rank one inhabits, the farther back one falls along temporal lines, as well. It is along these lines of mediation, specifically mediation of the temporal, that *No. 6* positions its escape from this dystopic future.

Very specifically, the city-state of Number 6 manipulates the bodies and the positions of the bodies of its inhabitants, positing their positions in very specific temporally-imbued physical locations. In "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", Cathy Cohen provides a convincing construction of the power of the state in queering bodies. The state, as she constructs it, normalizes sexuality, exploits labor, and constrains visibility³⁰. In short, the city-state *queers*, but does not only queer along location, but queers along temporal lines as well.

In a time and place where mediation of the body is performed by the state in such penetrating and invasive ways, and in a place where one's body is made further estranged from oneself, it is no small wonder that a character like Inukashi's gender and kinship ties- things

³⁰ Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (*GLQ* 3, 1997) 440.

which are closely mediated by the looming monolith of Number 6- must be mediated by beings isolated from the realm of the human and accessible as non-human persons only through the way of allegory. Nezumi, too, in his performance of Ophelia and descent into a madness-wrought swoon at the end of his performance must mediate his identity and performances by ties to a nostalgic past that lies outside of the realm of accessibility, and outside of the realm of the present. This madness is brought on by the blistering sound and sensation of the wind, utterly unbound to Number 6 and in the opening of the series, something that only makes the city's hallmark building- the moondrop- weep. Shion's transformation following infection by the bee, too, causes him to be so startled and appalled by his reflection that he at first fails to recognize, or even acknowledge, the reflection as his own. This has potential tie-ins to a Lacanian framework, by way of visual means and visual cues being utilized to recognize, construct and differentiate the self. Visually and thematically born again by this change in appearance, Shion at first does not recognize himself, which can be read as an inability to contextualize himself in his new reality when working along these lines³¹. Unable to recognize or contextualize himself anew, Shion must once again craft a new sense of self, isolated from the visual and theoretical reaches of the state and beyond its borders in the West Block.

Because the body one is born with in this society is controlled, framed and even owned by the state, it is only a departure from the range of expectation that this body may have affiliated with it that one can find liberation. As much as *No. 6* is framed by love songs, highlighting the familiar, the near and the known, as its opening and concluding acts at the end

³¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as the Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", *Ecrits: a selection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002) 3-10.

of each episode, the narrative itself is instead more focused about a departure from the familiar and an estrangement from something one once thought was one's own.

CHAPTER 3: THE MEANING OF POST-APOCALYPTIC

While this dystopic setting provides a distinctive way of examining queerness in the context of *No. 6*, what then does this mean in the context of post-apocalyptic narratives in a larger scale? In *One Punch Man*, as I have mentioned earlier, we are brought into a world that leaps easily between an uncannily mundane present, a dystopian future and an overarching mythological edge that leaves the narrative settled uncomfortably within the realm of the post-apocalyptic. Meanwhile, in *No. 6*, we are given a view of a seemingly utopic civilization which, in actuality, has been sculpted and crafted over a rotting, dystopic underbelly brought about by eradication and carnage. While *One Punch Man* juxtaposes temporalities, *No. 6* layers them, suggesting a kind of excavation and building necessary for navigation. Both of these texts make distinct use of their setting- that of a post-temporally driven, post-apocalyptic location- and although they employ these settings in different ways, this setting provides a vision of locating a queer futurity in a place that can never quite be reached.

This not-quite-there-ness is hardly a novel topic in queer theory. In *Cruising Utopia*, Munoz locates queerness as something always on the verge of expectation and lying just outside the horizon of anticipation. It is something that can never quite be reached, and as such, is always out of grasp and not fully realized. Munoz writes in the book's introduction: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."³² As I have touched on earlier in the paper, queerness must always be unsettled, always shifting, and can never quite exist within the horizons of the here and now.

³² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

The post-apocalyptic too, is just that. It is a place and a time outside of time, and can only be reached and obtained once another timeline has ended. In *One Punch Man*, this abrupt halt is brought about by horrendous monsters that decimated much of the land, while in *No. 6*, it was a consciously made decision, an attempt to construct a series of utopias free of violence and warfare when the human species seemed close to destroying itself. In *No. 6*, as the walls between Number 6 and the West Block are crumbling down and in *One Punch Man*, as cities are rebuilt and reorganized and Saitama gains success, the narrative becomes less queer, and instead creeps back towards heteronormative trends emblematic of many *shōnen* works. As a realization of the kind of world they live in approaches, and as the layers in *No. 6*'s landscape are scraped away and the juxtaposed temporalities conflate in *One Punch Man*, queerness evaporates along the margins.

No. 6's ending, with Nezumi and Shion parting ways, exemplifies this tension and the impossibility of a tangible, queer present. Once the utopian city of Number 6 has become conscious of its underbelly and the walls have been torn down, there no longer exists any place for the queer relationship between Shion and Nezumi to progress. Throughout the entire series, Nezumi is constantly referred to as living in reality, while Shion is portrayed, up until the final acts, as inhabiting a set of ideals. In the destruction of the physical wall between the West Block and Number 6, as well as the final acts leading to Shion's progressive engagement in non-idealized thought processes and actions, the wall between the ideal and the real have been broken down, and no longer navigating between these two states, Nezumi and Shion go their separate ways. While Nezumi leaves with a promise that they will meet again, the time at which this will occur is left in the ambiguous future, and whether or not this reunion occurs is not answered in any epilogues or additional materials that the authoress has supplied.

As *One Punch Man* remains ongoing, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where ONE will push the narrative. The most recent arc in the webcomic (released January 19th) has focused on building up the characters and relationship between Fubuki and Tatsumaki, the two psychokinesis super powered sisters. In doing so, ONE emphasized the potential in the developing relationship between these women and Saitama, while Genos slips farther and farther into the background with the adopted, alien dog Rover and the cautious, queer domesticity that had been built up between Genos and Saitama.

In each of these instances, as a realization and recognition of the temporal landscape the characters inhabit comes closer, and as that landscape begins to shift away from the post-apocalyptic, or post-destruction and post-time into a new beginning (in the case of *No. 6*), or in the case of a more coherent, established institution (as is the case in the construction of the new hero headquarters in *One Punch Man*), so too do the dynamics of the narrative and characters shift away from one distinctly tied in with the queer. A gay relationship between Shion and Nezumi is refused, and instead, emphasis is placed upon the continuation of the next generation—the baby that Inukashi will raise, also named Shion. While *One Punch Man* continues to hover of the verge of expectation and uncertainty, and while that in and of itself presents a certain kind of queerness in its anticipation, it is suggested that as the narrative builds and the landscape comes to resemble less of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, that the topics will realign themselves with a future that does not hover on the precipice of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 4: FANWORKS ON THESE SERIES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This hovering on the cusp of uncertainty and ambiguity allows fanworks to flourish. Many of the themes present in both *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, curiously enough, persevere among fanworks that emerge out in response to these works. Before diving into greater detail regarding specific fanworks, I would like to provide a bit of exposition with regard to the nature of fanworks that I will be analyzing.

Fanworks for these series tend to fall into the categories of fanfiction- that is, written works- and *dōjinshi*. *Dōjinshi* (同人誌) are short *manga* (漫画) or comics which typically focus on the relationship and dynamics between a set of characters. Historically, these kinds of fanworks have placed particular emphasis on sex occurring between the characters, and on sexual climax being the literal climax of the work. By in large, both fanfiction and *dōjinshi* are produced by and for heterosexual women, however in recent years there has been an increase in the presence of both queer women and queer men in both genres.³³ *Dōjinshi* are typically published independently and on small scales with very limited runs, and are either produced by a single author/artist or by a collection of authors and artists acting as part of a fan group. Fanfiction is typically only published online, and while most works are written by a single author, themes, prompts and ideas for works are often conceived of in online spaces such as

³³ Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin, “Male Homoerotic Fiction and Women’s Sexual Subjective: Yaoi and BL Fans in Indonesia and the Philippines”, *Women and Erotic Fiction: Critical Essays on Genres, Markets and Readers* (McFarland & Company: 2015) 187.

Tumblr, *Archive of Our Own*,³⁴ *Livejournal*, and others. While *dōjinshi* tend to be more popular in Japan, written and digitally accessible fanfiction tend to be much more popular and utilized by fanbases in the United States.

It has been commonly acknowledged that one of the greatest differences in themes and plots between *dōjinshi* and US-based fanworks is the emphasis in *dōjinshi* (as is true for BL) on relationship dynamics taking precedence over plot, while US-based fanworks tend to emphasize plot at a greater level compared to Japanese fanworks, in keeping with trends in American comics.³⁵ Of particular note, as well, is the prevalence of words relating to gender and sexual identities, such as gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, and demisexual- between sexual and asexual- to name a few, in the tagging-system of US-based fanfiction works. These tags are used to search through fanfiction databases, allowing users to search for tags such as “Demisexual Saitama” or “Transgender Genos”. While this is one way of sorting fanfiction works and catering certain works to viewers, it also roots the works in contemporary, tangible social issues.

The emphasis on larger world-based plots versus a pinpoint focus on relationship dynamics is shown as well by the length of these series. Most *dōjinshi* tend to fall in the range of 15-30 pages and are stand-alone works. Fanfiction, on the other hand, can range from a

³⁴ Archive of Our Own (AO3) is notable because it emerged in response to a growing involvement of business ventures in marketing and manipulating ways of accessing fanfiction. Despite being the largest fanfiction database currently available, the site is mostly kept running by donations, and, as the name suggests, emerged with the intent to archive fanfiction and similar works rather than market them.

³⁵ Brenner, Robin E and Wildsmith, Snow, Love through a Different Lens: Japanese Homoerotic Manga through the Eyes of American Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Other Sexualities Readers”, *Mangatopia: Essays on Manga and Anime in the Modern World*, edited by Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog, (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2011) 96.

standalone work of 2000-4000 words, or may encompass a multi-hundred-thousand wordcount work, in some cases longer than the source material it is drawn from.

In the realm of fanfiction in particular, a number of communities have sprung up from these works. While all of these works are non-canonical by nature, these spin off of comments, observations and interpretations of the source material. In that way, they construct fan canons, or fanons, which encompass generally accepted or enjoyed characterizations or interpretations of characters and themes present in the works. As such, many of these works, particularly high-wordcount and multi-chaptered fanfictions often take on a life of their own. This multiplicity and shifting nature present in fan communities is something that I would like to highlight with my approach, and something I will devote time to in my subsequent analysis.

4.2 *ONE PUNCH MAN* FANWORKS

English-language fanfictions about *One Punch Man* primarily feature expanding upon Genos and Saitama's relationship in the canon, and there is a remarkable trend towards both exploring cyborg sexuality, as well as expanding upon asexual articulations of the characters within the works. Although they do focus on Genos and Saitama's relationship, they do so by contextualizing that relationship in a larger social sphere, and as mentioned earlier, employ tags in sorting the work such as asexual, demisexual, gay or transgender- words which are more at home in a contemporary LGBTQ social context than one that focuses only on queering and relationship dynamics. English-language fanworks seek to ground the works in the here and now, whereas Japanese-language fanworks tend to avoid a contemporary, concrete grounding. While sexual fulfillment and climax still frequently appear as themes in many of these works as is typical of the genre, the ways in which these themes are expanded upon suggest that these

themes are not so much a motivation or tool as they are a vehicle for exploring issues with regard to gender and sexuality as topics.

One fanwork which exemplifies these qualities is a shorter fanfiction titled “Sensory”, available through *Archive of Our Own* and written by the user using the web handle Duskglass on the site. The work’s tags flag the piece as including asexual characters, and although the work does feature sexual interaction (a fact I will expand on later), a large amount of the fic’s emphasis is placed on expanding upon asexual dynamics and identities between Saitama and Genos. Moreover, much of the dialogue and writing surrounding Genos’ identifying as asexual is focused on his pre-cyborg existence. In this way, the articulation, emphasis and exploration of asexual identities is- in keeping with analyses that state US-made fan works tend to emphasize social issues and identity projections more than distinct relationship dynamics- is linked more with a human present than a cyborg or trans-human future (or post-temporal) sphere.

Although Japanese *dōjinshi* of *One Punch Man* stress the temporal aspect in relationship dynamics, US-based fanfiction highlight the social aspects of the characters’ identities through demisexuality or asexuality. However, they have one thing in common: reinterpreting and renegotiating gender identity through transhuman experience, or, more succinctly, Genos’ cyborg aspects. As mentioned before, the fanfic “Sensory” does feature sexual interaction. What makes this unique, however, is that the sexual interaction that occurs is conducted through fiddling with Genos’ wiring, and thus is not connected to traditional heteronormative patterns of sexual intercourse. What this further emphasizes, through depicting a sexual intercourse that is not distinctly dependent on a biological body to be experienced, is the transgender and transhuman aspect to this dynamic and interaction. The transgender aspect is clear through a disassociation with binary genitalia for sexual interaction to occur, and the trans-human aspect is

made clear by articulating aspects of human identity and experience with objects and constructions not distinctly linked to a human biology.

Although English-language fanworks tend to place a greater emphasis on identity politics, and reinterpreting along lines of identity as a means of crafting multiple narratives and fanons, the same does not quite hold true in Japanese language works. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of narratives is scarcely limited to fanfiction and its communities alone. Multiplicity by way of multiple timelines is a topic which comes up in *dōjinshi* about *One Punch Man*, however, rather than relying on identification and disidentification as a means of gaining recognition, the trend instead relies on remembering and forgetting as a means of understanding. In Nezumi Norōka's *Null Object*, this temporal emphasis is clear.

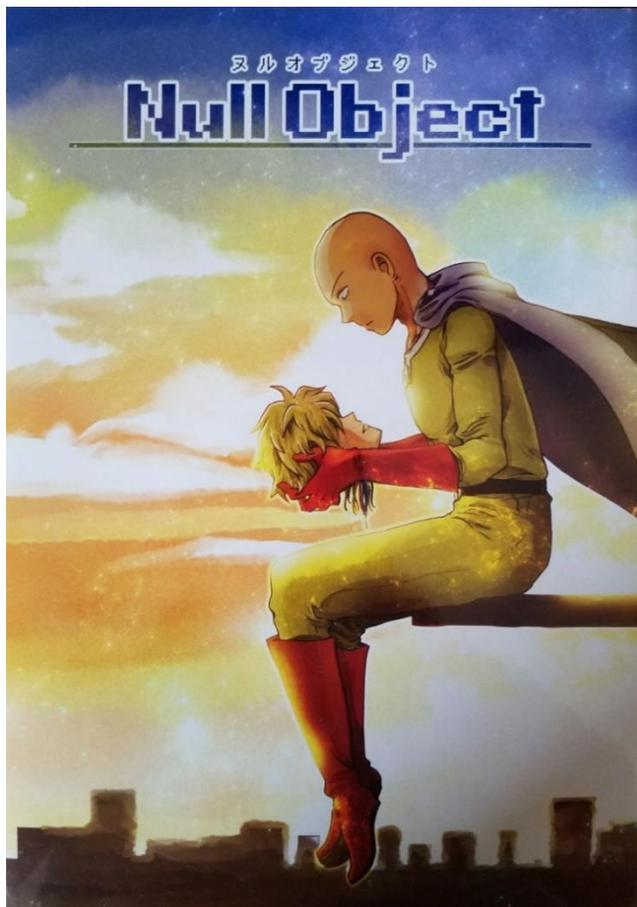


Figure 13 cover of *Null Object*

Null Object revolves around the aftermath of a fight where Genos' body must undergo substantial repairs; the question of whether he will live or die hangs in the balance. While his damaged core is repaired, his human brain must be transferred to another body, and as a result, he retains no recollection of Saitama nor of his actions. While it is possible to view this as just another cliché, what is highlighted in this approach is that, through this loss of memory, Genos and Saitama wind up developing a similar set of temporal canons as are present in the original anime. Genos' relationship as he remembers Saitama remains one linked with the homosocial through master and disciple only, and it is only when he returns to his cyborg body near the end of the *dōjinshi* that the two of them achieve an explicitly romantic relationship. This reveals not only a consciousness of a homosocial, human past, but the necessity of actively remembering, or re-enacting aspects of that past in order to better understand the queer relationship that the two of them enter into at the end of the text. Forgetting and remembering, then, is key to understanding the queer time we find ourselves in now.

4.3 NO. 6 FANFICTION

Fanworks of *No. 6* echo many of the larger themes within *No. 6* itself. In particular, the physical, human body remains a site of uncertainty in many fanworks. There is a distinct lack of interest in penetration in these works, in marked contrast to the importance of this motif has in BL and *yaoi* on a larger scale. In *No. 6*, the physical, human body is no longer a site exempt from state influence, control or insertion. The body is no longer quite one's own, nor a path towards any sense of liberation. This sentiment is echoed among fanworks. While this may also have ties to these works being largely written by and for women (and featuring a large lesbian fanbase), this detachment from the body relative to other fanworks from other series seems to hint at

something more. Rather than pursue interest in sex as a means to an end, many of the fanfictions tend to take advantage of the work's ambiguous ending concerning its two protagonists- Nezumi and Shion- and offer interpretations of what might come after for them both by way of resolution of their relationship and the world they inhabit.

However, this emphasis on resolution does not necessarily mean a domestication or heteronomalizing of the text. In particular, *The Sun in Jericho*, written by the user furiosity, exemplifies these trends. The fanfic slips into the narrative ten years post canon, and opens with Nezumi living in the artist colony-esque city called the "City of Dreams" (or, city Number 1). After a long string of unfulfilling one night stands and affairs with other men in the colony, he decides to return to Number 6 to see Shion again. At Number 6, the city is in the process of being rebuilt. Trained dogs (bred and trained by Inukashi) have replaced the city's police force, The area of West Block has been burned to the ground following a cholera outbreak that came about when the area was excavated for building materials. As a result, much of West Block's population has died and the population has moved within the destroyed walls of Number 6. While several parts of the city have been preserved- such as the area of Lost Town surrounding Karan's bakery- the city itself exists in a mix of futuristic technology and antiquated living situations.

While Karan continues to live and work in her bakery, Shion has instead shifted his focus to developing sustainable farming techniques, and uses the bunker that he and Nezumi inhabited just outside Number 6 as a base. The bulk of this fanfiction takes place in this bunker, where Nezumi and Shion are accidentally locked in together for two weeks while Shion conducts a controlled experiment on agriculture in the isolated space. Outside the bunker, Shion has created

a system which will conduct a small-scale artificial weather simulation, which he will observe from the bunker's interior.

Repurposing the post-apocalyptic bunker- which was once filled with antiquated books and reminiscent of a premodern scene- into a capsule used to observe artificial, synthetic weather patterns being carried out to study sustainable farming techniques, echoes many of the temporal sympathies evoked by the original text. The fanfiction's author, rather than relying on a resolution that hinges purely on a "getting-together" of the two characters, also involves a renavigation of temporality in the work. By way of the dogs working as police officers and the mottled temporalities present in the city- from Karan's persistent bakery to the repurposed bunker- the fiction imagines a possible future through evoking qualities of the past. In short, while the queer relationship present between Nezumi and Shion ceases to exist in the *No. 6* canon when the series ends and the discrepancies in temporalities are brought to a halt, one way fanfictions have navigated this is by further unsettling the temporalities present in the work. For queer dynamics to exist in the series and in fan-driven responses, a certain degree of ambiguity with regard to the temporal setting is necessary.

4.4 FANWORKS: HERE / NOW / THEN / THERE

Perhaps appropriately, confusing timelines is a part of what fanworks do best. Scarcely limited to the content of the works themselves, the range of canons present among fanworks and fan communities have stretched as far as to have confused the original canon at times (as was particularly notorious among fanbases such as *Star Wars*). While avoiding confusion to that degree has decreased in recent years with the relegation of many fan communities to digital spaces and networks outside the spheres of the canon itself, this multiplicity and ambiguity of narrative is in

part what has allowed this medium to thrive in recent years. By nature of being fanworks, they are not part of the canon, and theoretically- in particular with digitally accessible works- there is no hierarchy insofar as the validity or canonicity of the works themselves. That being said, it is not uncommon to see a particular author or range of interpretation of a certain character to gain popularity in the fandom. For example, fan interpretations and writings depicting Genos and Saitama as being on the asexual spectrum are commonly accepted fanons.

However, it is this constant flux, and the possibility of new interpretation and additions to these burgeoning fanons that allows the works to queer the canons and themselves. Multiple timelines and fanons may develop, and as they grow organically between creators and regardless of borders belonging to the State, the state they create is nebulous and never quite certain. Spatially and temporally, both within and without, the fanworks have the capacity to queer beyond the reaches of the canon itself.

CHAPTER 5: CANONS, TEMPORALITIES AND QUEERNESS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Throughout this paper, I have been nonchalantly using writings by theorists located here and there throughout various times and places. These theorists are often scattered, their approaches varied and their intents dissonant with one another. However, this is precisely the reason I have used them. These works are scattered temporally, reflexive of the nature of the works and approaches to queerness that lay within them. Without responding to the work's scattered temporal nature in kind by the structure of this paper and the sources I draw from, I do not believe a complete analysis of the works is possible. Just as adaptations of the works change from medium to medium, and their mantles are taken up by fans and re-accommodated, I have avoided drawing from a single, cohesive body of works, theoretical or otherwise, to inform my approach. Perhaps what I am advocating for here is a cyborg-like approach in and of itself: disjointed, multifaceted, ambiguous, and always moving beyond the presence of the now.

“Queerness is not yet here.”³⁶ Queerness may never be here, at least in so far as contemporary anime and manga are concerned. *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, as well as their associative fanworks, exhibit a portrait of queerness that hovers along this instability. Whether it is looking back towards a nostalgic past, hearkening towards a timeless future, or insisting on a plethora of timelines to tell parallel stories, these contemporary works consistently push away from the here and now of contemporary Japan. Characters- such as Puri-Puri Prisoner in *One Punch Man*- who are located in the here and now are relegated to overly stereotyped roles, and as soon as a cohesive temporality slides into place in the work, so too does queer potentiality seem

³⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Queering Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

to vanish. A return to the past or advance towards the future is necessary to queer- but the precise lines along which these works suggest this can be done lies outside of the narrative's temporal arc.

Although the return to *No. 6*'s nostalgic queer past with its Shakespeare and Wilde isn't possible, we are given a glimpse of a postmodern- not just post-apocalyptic- world that suggests an escape through the state's dominion of control. The physical body is no longer quite safe as it lies within reach of the state and is subject to its penetration, but what that body can do, perform and create provides a way to resist the state's influence. While *No. 6* most clearly pushes this potentiality- whether by way of Safu's grandmother's knitting, Nezumi's performance or Shion's entrancement with reading- the works which offer a solution lay outside of it. Rather, by looking at the forms- and the multiple forms- that these works take, we are given a potential view of a queer future that is not quite so far out of hand as one might think.

It is no secret that print goods tend to have greater interest and popularity than digital goods in contemporary Japan.³⁷ While there has been a recent surge of interest in digital goods- particularly in the US- whether by way of digital music files, e-books, movies, TV shows or otherwise, consumers in Japan have largely remained resistant to this trend. From CDs and novels to *dōjinshi*, print and hard-copy goods remain in high demand and high production, and uncertainty around digital goods and production models remain skeptical at best. Yet, at the same time, webcomics like *One Punch Man* are gaining interest and popularity- but why?

While *One Punch Man*'s content seems to be slipping away from queerness within its narrative, what the work does offer is a revitalization and potentiality of art-making, or mark-

³⁷ Andrew T. Kamei-Dyche, "The History of Books and Print Culture in Japan: The State of the Discipline", *Book History*, Volume 14 (Johns Hopkins University Press: 2011), 270-304.

making in a digital sphere. With a barebones, temporally confused website and a craftsmanship which thoroughly undermines any expectations regarding superior draftsmanship, we are given a site where the hand is ultimately evident. The bugs at the base of the website's screen count visits to the page- literal clicks that brought viewers into engaging with the material. Through the wobbly linework of the comics themselves, the uncertainty and physical drag of a human hand is evident. While a digital work, the hand is ultimately present- a fact that no doubt aided in bolstering the work's salience with a Japanese audience.

The same could be said of many fanworks. Rather than attempt a smooth and shiny surface as is present in much anime and manga produced today, the author-artist's hand is nearly always present in the work. This comes through in part due to the works' nature as amateur works, and in particular as works without access to the professional-grade printing and editing processes employed by *manga* and *anime* producing companies today. While reading fanworks, whether they be *dōjinshi* or fanfiction, it is usual to slip entirely into the work, as the wavering of a hand or awkward choice of wording immediately pulls the reader out from under the suspension of disbelief. Rather, through their amateur nature and multiplicity of narrative, an uneasy tie to the present, lived experience of reading and interacting with the object is achieved.

This is the exact uneasy, uncertain tie to the present that I believe these works are advocating from the perspective of queerness. Although *No. 6*'s adaptations hardly have the presence of the hand in the linework and formal qualities present in the work, time and time again through the work's setting, we are given a vision of a possible future achieved through the presence of the hand, and in particular a hand that creates. While the hand may gesture back in time through its aesthetic approach and decisions, as is evident with ONE's *One Punch Man* webcomic, it also acts as a tether to a moment when it was active. The hand is a temporal tether

that may link and bind in unexpected ways, and through this, offer some kind of an alternate future. The looming visage of Number 6's façade is sterile and unwelcoming, while the parts of the city where the hand is most present show the most potentiality for escaping from a dystopic future and inching towards a utopic one.

While mainstream manga and anime hardly seem likely to move towards including openly queer characters (in particular those in contemporary-set works), anytime soon, a pair of vehicles for exploring queer potentiality in Japan have been laid out: one, by moving beyond the present and two, by relying on the irrational capacity of creation rather by rationally-driven language to create works and ascribe characters. *One Punch Man* in its absurdity and *No. 6* with its steady meditation on a dystopian future all hearken to a necessary to re-navigate the present either by way of the past, future, or by a refusal along rational lines. Fanworks, by their presence of the hand and disjointed set of canons, simultaneously provide multiple visions of future canons and a reliance on craftsmanship hand-driven drafting- whether digital or physical- that lays outside of large-scale forms of production. The human hand is altogether necessary in what they produce, and as is evident from visual and narrative trends in both *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, this may be a way of shuffling beyond the heteronormative present to something more. What I am advocating is not a sheer reliance on the amateur, but rather, in a time and place- namely, contemporary Japan- where heteronormative and isolating trends remain salient across broad swaths of Japanese culture, a growing consciousness of the human hand and lived human experience may provide a point of resistance. Although we may never be queer, the presence of the human hand, body and memory- as well as its capacity to craft imperfections both in digital and analogous spheres- provides a way of shuffling towards this queerness.

CHAPTER 6: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

It is undoubtedly ironic that I am advocating an aesthetic and theoretical approach which incorporates a certain degree of imperfection and amateurism in a work (this MA thesis) which is, in many ways, still an amateur attempt. My approach is jumbled and scattered, and although I believe this manner of approach is helpful and will become more useful in years to come, particularly as our digital world slips and spreads and provides greater access to materials which may have been difficult to find otherwise. There is a certain degree of stratification present in the works that I have examined, one which I find my work resembles formally if not thematically.

Since undertaking this project, a number of things have begun to change in the sphere of mainstream contemporary *anime* and *manga* today. Of particular interest has been the huge popularity of an anime series titled *Yūri!!! On Ice* (ユ－リ ! ! ! on ICE). Set in contemporary times, the series follows a figure skater, Yūri, and his relationship with his Russian coach Viktor while Yūri trains for the Grand Prix. Much of the series takes place on an international stage. Nevertheless, ironically, when the two purchased engagement rings for one another on the night before the protagonist's final performance at the world stage, the rings were still referred to as "good-luck charms", and any formal gay marriage engagement was not verbally stated. While there might be a possibility of a queer present in *Yūri!!! on Ice*, it has both shifted geographically away from Japan and many of the moments in the work that serve as clear demarcations of a gay relationship between the two remain partially obscured.

This may also reflect the nature of *Yūri!!! on Ice* as bearing more in common with reality than *No. 6* or *One Punch Man*. *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, while specifically post-apocalyptic, are both works that reside comfortably in the genre of fantasy. As mentioned with my discussion of *Puri-Puri Prisoner*, when characters begin to tug at contexts that hearken closer to reality,

homophobia often slips into the discussion around these works and characters. While using fantasy to comment on reality is hardly a novel concept, what these works do is create an alternate place- or time- through the post-apocalyptic to comment on reality when reality is not quite ready to field these themes in and of itself.

Although *Yūri!!! on Ice* is set in contemporary times and is ultimately quite realistic, it nevertheless does create an alternate place which is necessary for queer dynamics to develop and occur in a Japanese context. The international stage the work is set in may very well be a quasi-fantastic setting for many Japanese nationals living in Japan. The cast of *Yūri!!! on Ice* as well, with its no-holds-barred multinationalism, depicts a setting far estranged from Japan, which, despite the presence of *Zainichi* (在日 Koreans living in Japan), *Burakumin* (部落民, a traditional marginalized group), and other ethnic minorities, remains one of the most homogeneous nations in the world. No matter where or when queer dynamics come about in anime and manga, the vehicle of fantasy- the locations of other places and the temporalities of other times- remain the most salient way of exploring and expanding upon queer themes.

This stems in part from the place(s) sexuality occupies in Japan, particularly in relation to the place(s) sexuality occupies in Western nations, such as the United States. There is no shortage of stories from foreigners visiting Japan who are shocked to see pornographic magazines being read in broad daylight, on public transportation, by businessmen commuting to and from work. Certain manga and anime, and perhaps most notably *dōjinshi*, may not be considered pornographic while in Japan, but when brought to the United States or Australia, for instance, can be interpreted as explicitly pornographic in nature. This especially becomes an issue regarding *Shōnen-Ai* (Boys' Love or BL), which occasionally features underage protagonists and can be explicit in nature. In Japan, these works are considered as fantasy, and

fantasy as being viewed as untethered to reality. This is not necessarily true in the United States and Australia, where fantasy in comics is often viewed as a direct commentary on reality, rather than a location for expanding upon or exploring it. For instance, Marvel's *X-men* has frequently drawn parallels between the plights faced by X-men, mutants exhibiting various superpowers or supernatural qualities who must often hide their natures or experience societal discrimination and isolation, and LGBT people in the United States.

The genre of *Bara*, which focuses on male-male relationships between often muscular and un-androgynous men and is often written by and for gay men (in contrast with *Shōnen-Ai*, which as mentioned previously, features many androgynous characters and is typically written by and for women even though it focuses on male-male relationships), also exemplifies this.

Bara is also usually considered to be of explicitly sexual nature. Despite the often-overemphasized musculatures of its protagonists, *Bara* also tends to be drawn more realistically than *Shōnen-Ai*. This is also true of *X-men* and many mainstream American comics. Although I am not saying that more realistically crafted visual works are more directly associated with or reflect reality as opposed to fantasy, what this may lead to is a difference in the perception of sexual deviancy associated with these works.

Nevertheless, fantasy and queerness, whether non-heteronormative queerness, or the state of queering I have discussed in this thesis, remain quite tethered in Japan. If not through another time as another place, such as the post-apocalyptic in *One Punch Man* and *No. 6*, then moving outside of Japan and crafting a location-driven fantasy seems to be necessary for expanding upon queer themes and ideas. Unfortunately, I do not see any change to this pattern occurring anytime soon. Queerness and queer characters remain tied outside of the present, and outside of Japan. With series like *Yuri!!! On Ice* gaining traction both in Japan and abroad, there exists the

possibility that this will change in the future. However, we are not quite there yet, and may never be.

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