

Karl Andersson

IMPOSSIBLY CUTE BOYS

The Healing Power of
Shota Comics in Japan

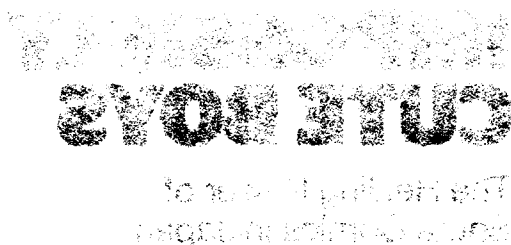
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SHOTAKO



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INTRODUCTION

THIS SHOTA IS AMAZING!

The human ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, or between the virtual realm of ideals and the actual world of people, is nowhere as clearly manifested as in the Japanese comic genre called *shotacon*, or just *shota*. After all, *shota* comics feature young boy characters engaged in sexual acts, from playful to hardcore. Acts that would often be illegal or immoral in the actual world, if not downright impossible. But *shota* is not the actual world. It's a dream world invented by young women in Japan in the 1980s, which since then has been embraced and loved by ever more people. *Shota* is part of the thriving culture of self-published comics called *dōjinshi*, which are sold, bought, and exchanged at huge events across Japan. The fact that *shota* expressions are illegal to possess in several countries outside of Japan points to how the genre seems to blur the border between fantasy and reality for both people and nations: *shota* brings matters to a head.

An unexplored nook

There are few areas of contemporary life and culture that haven't yet been explored in research. To find a manga genre that is alive and well, albeit small in comparison to other genres, and which hasn't yet been explored in academia, neither inside nor outside of Japan, is nothing short of exceptional. One wonders what has held researchers

back, when so much is written about the adjoining genres of boys love and *yaoi*, especially in the English-speaking world. And one suspects what the reason might be. The Japanese manga critic Nagayama Kaoru talks about “the erotic barrier,”¹ which holds researchers off sexual topics in general. American and British manga scholars have lamented that studying certain erotic manga genres risks prompting accusations of having a “prurient” interest,² and may equal “career suicide,”³ something that I personally experienced when my PhD research on shota went viral,⁴ and I was expelled from my university, as I will recount in a separate chapter.

It seems that erotic themes may pass as long as it is women who read the comics, maybe because society doesn’t recognize women’s sexual agency, and so, their activity is not as dangerous as when men read porn. Or maybe because women reading erotic manga might even be titillating to some, or because women reading *male homoerotic* stories seems weird and thereby fascinating to the outside world. Whatever the reason might be that so many anthologies in English focus on female readers of boys love and *yaoi*, while not even a fraction of that interest is directed toward male readers of erotic comics, this has resulted in an uneven research landscape, where the spotlights only light up certain areas, while others remain hidden in the shadows. And that’s where we find shota, at the bottom of the research interest ladder, so hidden from the spotlights that few outside of Japan, or even in Japan, are aware that the genre exists.

This opens up for speculations about the readers of shota: who are they, and why do they like comics that feature childlike characters that are having sex? While shota has flown under the radar so far, the similar genre lolicon, or loli, which features girl-like characters in a sexually explicit way, has been the target of hefty attacks from both media and politicians, not least outside of Japan. TV reporters from the UK and the USA have questioned why comics that seem to be made “for a certain kind of person”⁵ and that might “fuel the darkest desires of criminals”⁶ are legal in Japan, and a Dutch Special Rapporteur to the United Nations even suggested, at a press conference in Tokyo, that Japan ban manga with what she called “extreme child pornographic content.”⁷

This is indeed what several countries outside of Japan have done, where drawings have been included in child pornography legislations in for example Australia,⁸ Canada,⁹ the UK,¹⁰ and Sweden.¹¹ We’ll get

back to the legal situation and its historical background, but it should be noted that lack of research creates a situation where laws are based on prejudice rather than science, and that this may harm people rather than protect them.

About me

My interest in shota is part of my interest in the boy as an ideal, a theme that I have explored as an independent magazine publisher, and, later, in anthropology. When I say that I'm interested in the boy as an ideal, the "ideal" part is as important as the "boy." And compared to my previous ventures, nowhere is this ideal so clearly carved out as in shota, which in its symbolic representation of the boy – depicted as he is through simple lines and as a collection of attributes – manages more than any other expression to capture the essence of the Boy, this magical creature that society keeps obsessing about, keeps worshipping.

Yes, I argue that not only I, but the whole world sees the boy as some kind of deity. Many societies worshipped the boy openly, most notably ancient Greece. Japan has its own tradition of idealizing the beautiful boy, the *bishōnen*, for example in the *wakashudō* culture in both the fifteenth and the seventeenth century. But as I see it, our contemporary society is just as obsessed with the boy. What are the upset reactions that my own shota research caused if not an expression, let be a twisted one, of boy worship? The boy is holy and must not be desecrated, is the message that some people want to express through their agitation.¹² In other words, they love the boy. We all love the boy. That's why this rather small research topic commands shock-horror headlines in tabloid newspapers worldwide, why the House of Commons of the UK summoned my university for a questioning about my research, and why my university ultimately expelled me. It's all proof of the power of the boy as an ideal in our society.

This is all to say that I come to shota not from manga studies, or even Japanese studies. I come to shota from my own private *boy* studies. This has led some to think that I'm not appropriately positioned to do research among shota fans. Apparently, a manga researcher, or someone who is interested first and foremost in Japan, would be better suited. Except that I think it's generally wrong to restrict who can study what through such disciplinary gatekeeping, it is also wrong in another sense. As this book will show, many of my research

participants turned out to be more interested in the idea of the boy than in the actual shota comics, which can be seen as just one expression of their obsession. In other words, the boy was more important to them than the comics, and so, “boy studies” is indeed a good entry point to understand the allure of shota. Like my research participants, *I love the boy!*

My declaration is not a confession in the Foucauldian sense, that is, in the tradition of “coming out,” which assumes that each person carries an “individual secret” (call it “sexuality” if you want), which can be hidden or revealed.¹³ Instead, it is a way to acknowledge contemporary understandings of knowledge as never being objective, but always shaped by the researcher. It thereby becomes relevant to know where the researcher comes from, or how the research is “situated” in the world.¹⁴

As Elin Bengtsson points out in her study of ageplay in the BDSM community, another reason to be transparent about one’s own background is that stigmatized groups often have been studied from a pathological perspective, by outsiders who treat their study participants as clinical test subjects.¹⁵ Declaring that one has a personal interest in one’s research, that one is an insider in some sense, thereby becomes a way to show one’s research participants that one is (or at least thinks of oneself as being) *one of them*, and that what one wants to find out is related not only to them, but to oneself. I always tried to make it clear to my research participants that we were in this together. Indeed, the way some of my research participants described the ideal boy was almost to the letter how I had expressed it myself in my magazines more than 15 years ago. In that sense, embarking on fieldwork in a culture that idealized the boy was like coming home.

About this book

This book shouldn’t exist. After my shota research went viral in August 2022, I was expelled from my university, investigated by the police, hunted by reporters, and bullied into silence by self-righteous vigilantes. Yet here I am. I continued my research on my own, used my savings to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Japan for half a year, and wrote this book about it. The whole project aligns closely to the three-year PhD program at a British university that I was expelled from, and this book equals my PhD thesis, although I’ve shortened it and use less academic language. The research meets expected

standards of academic rigor, and the book includes a brief section on methodology, which can be skipped if you're not interested in that. For the sake of clarity: I am not affiliated with any university, and this research is not funded by anyone. I do not have a supervisor, or any other advisor. No one but myself is implicated.

I considered publishing this book with a university press. But my experiences from academia have made me question both the value of peer reviews and the merit of being published by a prestigious publisher, which seems to be mostly about building one's career in a sector that I am not part of anymore. In addition, the publishing process is long (about two years), and some presses charge the author a fee, which can be quite hefty.¹⁶ Such fees are probably often paid by the author's affiliated institution, but I am unaffiliated.

I also considered submitting the book to a regular publisher, but in the end decided not to. Since I come from independent publishing, it felt right to return to independent publishing, where everything from writing to typesetting, branding, and marketing is done by me. It's what I love doing, and it also aligns well with the do-it-yourself ethos of the *dōjinshi* culture; several of my main sources in this book, including Yoshimoto Taimatsu, Budōuri Kusuko, and Manda Ringo, self-published their research as *dōjinshi*. This also means that I appreciate immensely if you paid for this book – thank you!

I will start the book with a brief history of manga, to make sure that everyone is on board, followed by a more detailed history of shota and the genres that it emerged from in the 1980s, and a review of how the reading of comics similar to shota has been understood in previous research. Part one ends with a brief account of how I designed my study, and what it was that I wanted to find out.

In part two I present my findings, divided into four themes that emerged from my interactions with research participants: In "Ideal Boys," we zone in on the ideal boy, what he looks like, how old he is, and what he is made of in terms of symbols and attributes. The chapter "Ideal Pasts" explores how shota can be used as a tool for reliving an alternative version of one's past. This theme was particularly salient among shota fans who self-identified as gay men, and often had been bullied in school. The social aspect of shota is the theme of "Shared Desires," where I show how engagement with shota in Japan is surrounded by a whole culture and support structure. The chapter "Real Boys" explores sexual attraction to actual,

living boys among my research participants, and the “ethics of shota” that guided such attraction.

In part three, I will try to make sense of these findings, and try to understand the bigger picture of shota activity. In an additional chapter I will outline the scandal I was subject to when my research went viral, with the purpose to show shota’s power to elicit the mindset of what I call the “born this way” discourse – the belief that there are people with distinct sexualities that can be hidden and revealed – in its purest form.

Housekeeping notes

As will be explained in more detail later, shotacon is a contraction of “Shōtarō complex.” I will use the word shotacon to refer to people who like shota, along with “shota fan” or similar synonyms, and the shorter word shota to refer to the genre as such. The shorter word shota can also mean “boy,” both a boy character in manga and an actual, living boy. When my research participants use the word shota in that sense, I will either translate it to “boy,” or keep it if it makes sense, or use both for clarity. Avoiding terminological confusion is not easy, maybe not even for my participants, but more about this when we enter the ethnographic chapters.

In general, romanized Japanese terms such as *dōjinshi*, *aniparo*, *yaoi*, and *shōjo* will be italicized.¹⁷ (A macron, or thin line, over a vowel means that it is long.) Terms that use English words in original will not be italicized, and will be written in English: boys love and BL, not *bōizu rabu* and *bīeru*. I will also not italicize lolicon and loli, since they are in some sense established as English words (the correct romanization would be *rorikon* and *rori*, which is not how these words are used in English anymore). The word otaku falls somewhere in between, but I’ve chosen to treat it as an English word and not italicize it. Lastly, the words shotacon and shota will occur so frequently in this book that italics would drive you crazy. Let’s embrace them as the beautiful additions to the English language that they are!

In order to make this book more readable to a general audience, I’ve chosen to reference my source material in endnotes. The notes contain an author’s last name and a year, often followed by the page that I refer to in their work. The full title can then be found in the bibliography at the end of the book, listed under that author’s last name and year. Sometimes the endnotes contain some anecdotal

information too, so they can be worth checking out every once in a while even if you don't care about the sources.

Normally, an ethnography like this one would be illustrated with some examples from the field. Because of the legal situation in many countries, where laws regulating drawings of childlike characters in erotic situations vary from ambiguous to clearly prohibitive, this is unfortunately impossible in this case. I considered whether it would make sense to include some non-explicit shota illustrations, but decided to abstain (with the exception of the smashing cover illustration by CoCoLo), since that would be a gross misrepresentation of the genre. Since this research is not about the expressions themselves, but about the people who like them, illustrations are not indispensable to the book. It is my hope, however, to be able to self-publish a lavishly illustrated and tastily laid out Japanese edition of my findings in the form of a *dōjinshi* in the future.

This shota is amazing!

In 1988, a Tokyo publisher started a line of annual “mooks” (magazine-style books) called *These Mysteries are Amazing!* (*Kono misuteri ga sugoi!*), which listed the best mystery fiction books of the previous year. The series was later followed by *These Manga are Amazing!* and *These Light Novels are Amazing!* The titling is a common way to introduce new or trending works in a given genre, but what I like about it is its uninhibited passion – it's *amazing!*

Shota got its own *This Shota is Amazing!* (*Kono shota ga sugoi!*) in 1997.¹⁸ It was published by the elusive and long since extinct independent publisher called Boy Therapy Writings (*Shōnen ryōhō shiron*), and contained essays and comics collected by the similarly elusive editor Shindōji Gun.

The book's introduction has a title in English: “What are little boys made of?” That phrase captures what my whole research project is about: to understand the magic of the boy. Where does it reside? How does it happen? *What are boys made of?* We will never know. But it is the will to find out that drives both me and my fellow independent shota researchers in Japan.

I can at times be sad that I was expelled from academia, but the boy as a source of inspiration is too strong to care about such worldly matters. It is on that positive note that I want to begin this book. Because, you see, *this shota is amazing!*

PART ONE

BACKGROUND

ONE

BOY BOOM

THE HISTORY OF SHOTA

Imagine manga as a vast continent, its varied terrain ranging from the highest mountains to the deepest valleys, over easily traversed plains and dense jungles. In this chapter, we will fly in over this popular land, so that even those of you who are unfamiliar with its landscape will get an overview of it, before setting up our basecamp in its less reachable area. From there, we will tread on foot into the unexplored jungle that shota is.

A brief history of manga

At its core, manga is drawn images with speech bubbles, arranged in panels on a page to tell a story.¹ Although comical drawings have been found in Japan as far back as the seventh century,² and the artist Katsushika Hokusai famously used the word “manga” for his sketches in the beginning of the nineteenth century,³ contemporary manga has truly cross-cultural roots. Speech balloons and sequential panels – two defining aspects of manga – were borrowed from British and French comics at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ American satirical cartoons influenced manga in the interwar period, when many Japanese manga artists visited the USA.⁵

After the Second World War, or the Pacific War as it is called in Japan, manga was again influenced by American and European aesthetics, not least through the work of Tezuka Osamu, who mixed the

cute aesthetics of Disney with the camera angles of French and German cinema to create the unique style that came to be associated with manga.⁶

The postwar manga industry took off for real when Kodansha launched its weekly *Shōnen Magazine* in 1959, which was followed by similar ventures by other publishers, most notably Shueisha's *Weekly Shōnen Jump* in 1968.⁷ These thick and cheap magazines came to define manga for the decades to come.

At its height in the 1990s, printed manga made up 40 percent of all published books and magazines in Japan,⁸ and *Weekly Shōnen Jump* sold over six million copies per week, now down to less than two million.⁹ However, digital manga, to be enjoyed mainly on one's phone, has been on the rise since the early 2000s.¹⁰ In addition, there are paperback volumes, *tankōbon*, that collect manga episodes that have been serialized either in print magazines or digitally.¹¹

From the start, manga magazines in Japan were targeted to clearly defined groups based on age and gender. *Shōnen* in the above magazines' titles means "boys," and the other three major target groups that came to equal genre names were *shōjo* (girls), *seinen* (men; literally "youth"), and *josei* (women).¹² However, it was the male genres that were most profitable,¹³ and thereby came to be the "standard of manga."¹⁴ Actual readership has been more mixed than the genre names imply; the majority of *Shōnen Jump*'s readers in 2018 were adults.¹⁵ In addition, more than half of the readers of boys' manga in the 2010s were female, partly because the original boy readers were lost to video games; the *shōnen* genre has therefore been described as no longer meaning "manga for boys," but rather "manga with boy characters."¹⁶

Shōjo manga

Shōjo, or girls' manga, had a strong focus on emotions, and this was reflected in its soft style, with close-ups, poetic montages, and huge, cute eyes.¹⁷ It was Tezuka Osamu who set the standard for long-form storytelling in *shōjo* manga with his work *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no kishi*, 1953–56).¹⁸ More importantly, the main character in *Princess Knight* is a girl who dresses as a boy and switches between the genders depending on purpose, which has led some to argue that an awareness of gender as a construction was there in *shōjo* manga from the start.¹⁹

Female artists didn't enter the manga industry until the late 1950s,²⁰ and this is when the gender-bending potential of the *shōjo* genre became more consciously utilized.²¹ Ikeda Riyoko's *The Rose of Versailles* (*Berusai no bara*, 1972–73) and Hagio Moto's *Snow Child* (*Yuki no ko*, 1971) both feature female protagonists who, like Tezuka's, dress as boys,²² and there were also beautiful boy characters, *bishōnen*, who sometimes dressed as or were mistaken for girls.²³

Girls dressing as boys in *shōjo* manga has been interpreted as “a desire to avoid growing up,” since men's clothing can be seen as a girl's refusal to become a sexual being in the form of an adult woman.²⁴ Beautiful boys dressing as or looking like girls, on the other hand, may be a reflection of the “continuum of male beauty” in Japan, where feminine and delicate men are not only accepted as a beauty ideal, but often preferred by women, whose taste – or “female gaze” – has influenced media depictions of men.²⁵

Shōnen-ai in *shōjo* manga

The theme of homosexual love between male characters, *shōnen-ai* (literally “boy-love”), first appeared in *shōjo* manga with Take-miya Keiko's *The Song of the Wind and the Tree* (*Kaze to ki no uta*, 1976–84) and Yamagishi Ryōko's *The Prince of the Land of the Sunrise* (*Hiizuru tokoro no tenshi*, 1980–84).²⁶

Since male characters could do things that would have been socially and sexually impossible for a woman in Japan at the time, male homoeroticism in *shōjo* manga has been understood as a way to let the female readers experience love and sex vicariously, at a safe distance from their everyday reality.²⁷ Concretely, these female readers could separate the sex from their own bodies by “borrowing” the bodies of male characters, which have been described as “male bodies with the hearts of young women.”²⁸ The distance and thereby safety was often increased by letting the story take place in an exotic Europe instead of in the reader's contemporary Japan.²⁹

While the emergence of *shōnen-ai* themes in *shōjo* manga in the 1970s is associated with “negative” reasons, such as a society that limits women's sexual freedom so that they must find creative outlets for it,³⁰ the continuous popularity of these themes over the following decades, even as society changed, has been understood differently. Manga researcher Fujimoto Yukari argues that the keyword here is “play”; male homoerotic stories let the female readers “play with

gender” – or even “with men.”³¹ This play consisted of coupling male characters with each other, an activity that found its full expression in so called *dōjinshi*.

Yaoi dōjinshi

Dōjinshi are amateur-produced comics, most often thin booklets in B5 format (176 × 250 mm or 6.9 × 9.8 in). These are sold and bought at physical spot sale events that attract hundreds of thousands of participants, most notably Comic Market, which is held over several days twice a year at Japan’s biggest trade fair venue Tokyo Big Sight. *Dōjinshi* activity is in other words an important part of Japanese popular culture.

Japan has a long history of self-published fanzines, but it wasn’t until after the Pacific War that circles of comic enthusiasts started drawing and publishing their own comics.³² This activity gained momentum in the 1970s, as amateur printing became more available with the spread of photocopiers. Comic Market was founded in 1975 in Tokyo, similar events followed all over Japan,³³ and soon a whole infrastructure of alternative printers sprouted, which would print *dōjinshi* with professional offset technology and deliver the comics directly to the events.³⁴

This complex of businesses catering to amateur comic artists came to be called *minikomi*, short for *mini communication*, as a contrast to the mass media that was called *mass communication*, or *masukomi*. Except for comics, the *minikomi* sector of Japanese publishing also included fanzines and political pamphlets. An early piece of participatory culture, *minikomi* has been seen as a physical predecessor to the internet.³⁵

The *dōjinshi* culture that formed in the 1970s was dominated by young women who, inspired by the male homoerotic expressions in *shōjo* manga, drew “parodies” of popular manga and anime.³⁶ In these *aniparo*, the young female creators coupled famous male characters with each other in romantic or erotic stories.³⁷ Some referred to this practice as *yaoi*, a contraction of *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi*, or “no highs, no lows, no meaning,” a self-derogatory way of saying that they didn’t care about a traditional dramaturgy that would make sense, but cut right to the action. By the second half of the 1980s, *yaoi* had become the name for the whole amateur genre of male homoerotic expressions made by and for women.³⁸ What’s

more, *yaoi* was now the mainstream of *dōjinshi* production.³⁹ Journalist Watanabe Yumiko remembers how being a female member of her high school's manga study group and *not* liking *yaoi* in the 1980s was akin to heresy.⁴⁰

The reason why it was young women who pioneered the *dōjinshi* culture might have been that commercial manga was targeted mainly toward boys and men, as noted above. Since the industry didn't care to satisfy the demand of young women, amateur culture stepped in to fill that void.

Just as the *dōjinshi* world had been inspired by *shōjo* comics, *yaoi* expressions trickled back into commercial manga, where they became known as boys love, or BL, in the 1990s.⁴¹

Shota's birth in *yaoi*

It was in this amateur culture of *yaoi dōjinshi* that shota emerged in the 1980s. The *shōnen* anime *Mobile Suit Gundam* (*Kidō senshi Gandamu*, 1979) and *God Mars* (*Roku shin gattai Goddo Māzu*, 1980) had been popular to parody in these amateur comics, but when the football (soccer) manga *Captain Tsubasa* premiered in *Shōnen Jump* in 1981, and was made into an anime in 1983, this would lead to the big "break" not only for *yaoi*, but also for what was to become known as shota.⁴² Until then, the characters that were given alternative homoerotic storylines in these *dōjinshi* had been older than, or at least the same age as their creators, who most often were teenage girls. But the characters in *Captain Tsubasa* were still in elementary school, approximately grade four to six, and so, for the first time, the characters engaging in various homoerotic escapades were now *younger* than their creators.⁴³

Captain Tsubasa led to the biggest boom in *dōjinshi* publishing to date. Participation at Comic Market doubled to 60,000 in 1987, at the height of the boom.⁴⁴ Most participants were women, and almost all of them were creating *Captain Tsubasa dōjinshi*. This made *aniparo* the dominating *dōjinshi* expression, whereas previously the balance between parody and original works had been more equal.⁴⁵ Since event organizers had struggled with skyrocketing rents for exhibition spaces in Japan's bubble economy, some argue that *Captain Tsubasa* saved the *dōjinshi* scene from "near extinction."⁴⁶ In the wake of *Captain Tsubasa*, specialized "only" events, which focused on a particular genre or series, started to emerge.⁴⁷

It has been speculated why shota expressions became such a hit in *yaoi dōjinshi*. One reason might have been that the roles of *seme* and *uke*, that is, “attacker” and “receiver,” or top and bottom, were quite strict in *yaoi*, or at least they were always *there*, and the female reader was supposed to identify with the *seme*; *yaoi* had partly emerged as a way for women to “escape their own *uke*” and become the attacker of a male character, but this reading could also be restricting. The young age of the characters in shota made it natural for them to be more playful about these roles, and so, the reader too could be freer in her reading of these stories. In that sense, shota opened up what Watanabe calls a whole “playground of possibilities.”⁴⁸

Another reason might have been that *yaoi* had become too mainstream. When the genre first emerged, these explicit male homoerotic expressions were a bit forbidden, but after ten years, they were starting to lose their dangerous edge. That’s when shota introduced a new taboo – younger characters depicted erotically – that was exciting and revived the *dōjinshi* scene, Watanabe suggests. She adds that the taboo aspect also might explain why incest was a common theme in shota, with for example relations between two brothers.⁴⁹

The *yaoi* boom clearly affected mainstream magazines such as *Shōnen Jump*, whose editors realized that there was a demand for stories with young male protagonists who could be coupled with each other in derivative works.⁵⁰ Interestingly, despite the young characters in *Captain Tsubasa*, *dōjinshi* versions of the series were still seen as part of *yaoi*, and not as a genre of its own. In the second half of the 1980s, several series with young boy characters were launched, such as the football series *Ganbare, Kickers!* (manga 1985–89, anime 1986–87) and the cooking series *Mister Ajikko* (manga 1986–89, anime 1987–89), and derivative works of these series were also not seen as separate from *yaoi*, despite the characters were in elementary or middle school.⁵¹ In other words, before becoming a genre of its own, with its own magazines, anthologies, and “only” events, shota can be described as having been “latent” in *yaoi*.⁵²

Lolicon and *bishōjo* comics

Before we move on, a few words should be mentioned about the lolicon boom, which preceded the *yaoi* boom. In short, lolicon (or loli) is comics that feature young girl characters in a cute or erotic way. However, when this expression first emerged in the early 1980s, the

focus was not on explicit sex, but on cuteness. This has been understood as the postwar generation's protest against the previous generation's macho ideals, as they were reflected in the realistic *gekiga* style of comics in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵³ In the 1980s, erotic "third-rate *gekiga*" were replaced by the *bishōjo*, the cute girl, as an ideal,⁵⁴ and the focus shifted from the *stories* of *gekiga* to the *character* and its attributes. This in turn paved the way for the concept of *moe*, or affection for fictional characters.⁵⁵ Since its start, Comic Market had been dominated by female participants, but in 1981, men were in majority for the first time, as a result of what came to be known as the lolicon boom.⁵⁶

An important facet of lolicon was that the readers' interest was directed toward fictional characters and not the "real thing," that is, "flesh-and-blood girls and women."⁵⁷ As the magazine *Manga Burikko* transformed into a lolicon magazine under its editor Ōtsuka Eiji in 1983, it did away with nude and other photography and became exclusively devoted to two-dimensional expressions, that is, the pure fiction of drawings.⁵⁸ This was in line with the wishes of readers, who in letters to the editor said they had a "two-dimensional complex," meaning their desire was directed toward the two-dimensional world of fiction rather than to the three-dimensional world of real people.⁵⁹

Origin and meaning

The term shotacon is a contraction of "Shōtarō complex," in the same way that lolicon means "Lolita complex," that is, an obsession with a certain type of character. Whereas lolicon is based on Vladimir Nabokov's fictional character Lolita, a twelve-year-old girl, shotacon takes Kaneda Shōtarō, the ten-year-old protagonist of Yokoyama Mitsuteru's manga *Tetsujin 28-gō* (1956–66), as its model.

It was in issue 5, 1981, of the magazine *Fanroad* that the term shotacon was coined by the editors in a response to a reader letter. A female reader wrote that she was aware that lolicon meant a man who liked young girls, and asked what it should be called when a woman liked young boys. In their brief answer, the editors asked whether it would be inappropriate to call it shotacon based on "Shōtarō-kun." It has later been specified that it was the editor of *Fanroad*, Hamamatsu Katsuki, who concocted the term together with the editor of the sister magazine *Animec*, Komaki Masanobu.⁶⁰

As noted, the *shota* or *shotacon* expressions that emerged in *yaoi dōjinshi* in the 1980s were not called that in the beginning, and before the term settled, there were other contestants around too, one of them being *ribocon* for “little boy complex” (*ritoru bōi konpurekkusu*).⁶¹ And in a “boy character special feature” in issue 1, 1982, of *Fanroad*, a reader suggests the term *toricon*, based on the boy Triton in Tezuka Osamu’s manga *Triton of the Sea* (*Umi no Toriton*, 1969–71). The reason why the *dōjinshi* world settled for *shotacon* might have been that it sounded more boyish and not too far away from *shōnen*, one of the words for “boy.”⁶² In fact, a 1984 *dōjinshi* called *Shotacon magajin* printed the English-Japanese words “shonen character complex magazin” in latin letters on its cover, and highlighted “sho,” “ter,” and “com,” as if *shotacon* was derived from *shōnen character complex*.⁶³

So far the technical history of the term. As for its meaning, this has changed slightly over time. A terminology dictionary defined *shotacon* as “a ‘boy interest’ among girls” in 1991, but expanded the definition in 1997 to “a woman interested in boys only, as well as such a hobby.”⁶⁴ That is, *shotacon* can refer both to a person, or an identity, as in the second volume of the popular BL manga *Shota x Oni*, when the teenage protagonist is asked by his classmates: “Are you a *shotacon*?”⁶⁵ And it can also refer to a “hobby.” This is where we’ll place the comic genre of *shotacon*, which can be shortened to just *shota*. As mentioned, this shorter word has also come to mean “boy,” either a fictional character or a real, living boy. This usage probably comes from *shota-kko*, or a “*shota* child/boy.”⁶⁶

Shortly after the term’s inception in the early 1980s, *shotacon* referred to an interest for all kinds of boys, from fictional anime characters to real child actors.⁶⁷ Magazines from this time, such as the *shōnen-ai* magazine *June*, which premiered in 1978, sometimes included photos of boys in addition to the comics. But just like the *lolicon* magazines decided to focus on purely two-dimensional expressions, so *shotacon* came to mean an interest for boy *characters* rather than real boys early on. However, this is not cut in stone; the meaning of the word is fluid, especially since *shotacon* is a smaller genre or identity than *lolicon*, and since the word has been adopted by different groups, who possibly use it in different ways. As we will see later, discussions on attraction to two-dimensional (fictional) and three-dimensional (actual) boys are at the core of the *shota* discourse, to an extent that is not the case for *lolicon* or other genres.

Shota triggers in anime

Integral to shota's consolidation into its own genre was the original anime *Mashin Hero Wataru* (*Mashin eiyūden Wataru*, 1988). *Wataru* was a robot anime aimed at children, but its protagonist, nine-year-old Ikusabe Wataru, was drawn in a cute way that diverged from earlier character design, and became popular among older viewers. As if this wasn't enough, halfway through the series, Wataru's rival Toraoh is introduced. This awakened the "shota mind" in the series' secondary audience of adult women, and *Wataru* has therefore been called a "shota trigger."⁶⁸ This again stresses the important *coupling* aspect in male homoerotic expressions made for women, or as Watanabe puts it, "no partner, no *moe*."⁶⁹

Wataru was followed by many similar anime made from the same recipe.⁷⁰ It might be telling that in *Madō King Granzōrt* (*Madō Kingu Guranzōto*, 1989), the eleven-year-old protagonist Haruka Daichi's best friend Rabbi is introduced already in episode four, as if the production studio, Sunrise, had now learned from *Wataru* what the viewers wanted, and therefore intended to unlock their "shota mind" right from the start.

Note that none of these anime were "shota" in the sense erotic depictions of young boy characters. Such depictions were left for the fans to create in derivative works. To what extent the studios were aware of adult fans who were attracted to the elementary schoolers in their anime, or whether they even pandered to such desires, is an open question. There is a general interplay between the industry and the fans in Japan. Not only are derivative works allowed in practice, despite they technically constitute copyright infringement, but a certain series' or character's popularity in *dōjinshi* is seen by the industry as a measurement of how popular a certain manga, anime, or game is,⁷¹ like an unofficial top list. So there is an awareness. As for the pandering, it has been noted that while the primary target group of *Wataru*, *Granzōrt*, and similar anime are children, the boy characters often wear loose clothes that will expose some skin when tugged by the air in the midst of action.⁷² This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *chiralism* in Japanese, which the dictionary translates as "the art of giving a brief glimpse (of skin, underwear, etc.)"⁷³ Although *Wataru* and *Granzōrt* were separate works, they were so similar in style and origin that they were combined into one single category at *dōjinshi* events.⁷⁴ And beyond the characters themselves and

their exposed bodies, these mainstream anime of course also included the indispensable relations between boys, which became “irresistible to women and girls.”⁷⁵

But what about the men? According to Watanabe, it was three “shota masterpieces” of anime from 1994 that opened the shota mind of male viewers: *Akazukin Chacha*, *Brave Police J-Decker* (*Yūsha keisatsu Jeidekkā*), and *Yamato Takeru*. These anime too were mainstream titles aimed at children, but they included boy characters – Shiine-chan, Yūta-kun, and Roka, respectively – who were timid and had feminine looks that appealed to male viewers.⁷⁶ In *Yamato Takeru*, the longhaired and shy boy Roka even confesses to the more boyish protagonist Takeru, and this started a history of confession scenes between boys in anime.⁷⁷ The emergence of cute boy characters in manga and anime in the 1980s and 1990s is a good example of how the commercial and the amateur world influenced each other. *Captain Tsubasa* had caused a boom in *dōjinshi* publishing, and the industry paid attention and responded with even more series that featured cute boys.

The first shota events

Now the boy character as an object of affection started trending for real in Japan. In 1995, the shota genre got its first “only” spot sale event, Shotaket, which was held in Kawasaki on the symbolical date of May 5, the public holiday called Children’s Day (known as Boys’ Day until 1948), although the symbolism might have been unintended.⁷⁸ The first event attracted 80 circle participants (creators) and 700 general participants (visitors/buyers), and was both organized and visited mainly by men.⁷⁹ A report from the fourth edition of the event in 1998 states that there were slightly more female than male circle participants.⁸⁰ For its first five years, Shotaket was the only shota “only” event, but it was joined in 2000 by Shōnen-kei in Tokyo, held on the same date (only in years when Shotaket was not held), and in 2001 by Shota-yanen in Osaka and Shota Collection, also in Tokyo, but in October.⁸¹

Let us here briefly note that shota has a surprisingly diverse fan base compared to other comic genres in Japan, which are often heavily targeted to either men or women, at least on the surface.⁸² Despite shota first emerged in the female-dominated genre of *yaoi*, ten years later, men had taken these expressions to heart. This change is

reflected in the terminology dictionary, which in 1991 defined shotacon as “a ‘boy interest’ among girls,” and in 1997 as “a woman interested in boys only, as well as such a hobby,” but in 2000 used a gender-neutral definition: “a *person* interested in boys only, as well as such a hobby” (my emphasis).⁸³

The first commercial shota wave

1995 was also when the first wave of commercial shota publications started to form. Already in 1987, the first *dōjinshi* anthology featuring derivative works of *Captain Tsubasa* had been published, and in 1994, the word “shotacon” first appeared on the cover of an anthology to designate the content of a special issue of the series *b-Boy*. But it was in April 1995 that the first anthology series focused entirely on shota was launched. *TIP TAP* (Eikō Publishing, 1995–96), as it was called, marketed itself as a “shotacon only anthology.” Although it was discontinued the next year, shota historian Budōuri Kusuko argues that the ensuing boom of commercial shota publications would have been unimaginable without it.⁸⁴

During the second half of the 1990s, a whole 27 commercial shota anthology series were launched.⁸⁵ These anthologies were not published as magazines, which disappear from the shelves when the next issue is out, but as books, in A5 format and with ISBN numbers, which meant that bookstores could stock both the current volume and all back issues. At the same time, they included magazine-typical elements, such as a “readers’ corner,” where the editors and artists could have a dialogue with the readers. In other words, they felt like magazines but enjoyed some of the benefits of books.⁸⁶

Sociologist and shota researcher Yoshimoto Taimatsu has detailed the shota anthologies of the first wave by reading a whole 112 of them, published between 1994 and 1999, and analyzing the 1,139 works they include.⁸⁷ He sees three factors behind the sudden trend of commercial shota publications. First, the *Captain Tsubasa dōjinshi* boom, followed by *Wataru* and other anime with cute boys. Second, the continued appearance of cute boy characters in 1990s anime, such as Shinji in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki Evangerion*, 1995), or Romeo in *Romeo and the Black Brothers* (*Romio no aoi sora*, 1995), from which the shota anthology series *Romeo* took its name.⁸⁸

The third reason is connected to erotic comics for men, or *eromanga*. In the early 1990s, the *eromanga* industry had introduced the

"adult comics label" as a way to evade calls for censorship.⁸⁹ While the label limited where and to whom erotic comics could be sold, it at the same time gave publishers carte blanche to create as explicit expressions as they wanted, since these would now only be read by adults. Suspecting that the next crackdown was around the corner, readers consumed while they still could, and publishers pushed out as many new titles as they could, which created an *eromanga* bubble; while around 20 *eromanga* paperbacks had been published per month before the introduction of the adult comics label, this number quickly became 50, and even crossed 100 at the peak.⁹⁰ Throughout the second half of the 1990s, about a thousand *eromanga* paperbacks were published per year.

It was in this seemingly insatiable *eromanga* bubble of joyful experimentation that the new shota anthologies suddenly sprouted, but with a twist: since shota came from the female genre of *yaoi*, and the adult comics label was introduced to regulate comics for men, these shota anthologies were published without the label, despite they included explicit sex.⁹¹ This is remarkable, considering that these publications also merged two traditions: the homoerotic *content* of *yaoi* was mixed with the hardcore *style* of *eromanga*; whereas sexual expressions in boys love up till then had been limited and softcore, shota was all about "watching boys having intense sex," Yoshimoto comments.⁹² The reasoning for not applying the label to such works was twofold, and can be pinned down to both heterosexism and gender oppression: first, only sex between men and women counted as sex, and second, female artists drawing sexual expressions was not considered erotic enough to need the label.⁹³ As a result, shota expressions benefitted from the *eromanga* rush that the adult comics label had created, but without the limitations of the same label, meaning the magazines could be bought in any bookstore, and not only by adults.

Some shota anthologies

The first wave of shota anthologies was a motley bunch of titles that publishers from different traditions pushed out in an atmosphere of trial and error.⁹⁴ We can get a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the wave through Yoshimoto's summaries of some of the titles:

Volume 17 of *b-Boy* (published by Byblos, 1994) was the first anthology to specialize in "shotacon." The publisher was otherwise focused on boys love for women, so turning *b-Boy* into a shota anthol-

ogy, and using several male artists, might have been a way to try to catch on to the shota trend and attract male readers. The same publisher launched *b-Boy Petit* in 1998, at the height of the boom. Aimed at women, this series featured female artists only, but also included explicit sexual depictions to a higher degree – 20.7 percent according to Yoshimoto's detailed analysis – than what had been common in comics for women. In other words, shota's unique combination of what Yoshimoto calls "women drawing for women and including erotic content" had been put in place. The publisher discontinued its shota anthologies in 1999, maybe because of poor sales, and went back to boys love.⁹⁵

Tip Tap (Eikō Shuppan, 1995–96) was the first anthology series that was focused on shota only. The publisher belonged to a *dōjinshi* printer; several of those ventured into commercial publishing at the time. This heritage is reflected in the content, both in the form of the hardcore sexual depictions – typical for the *dōjinshi* world – and in the fact that many of the contributors were women active in the *dōjinshi* scene. The series disappeared after three issues when its parent company went bankrupt, but Yoshimoto underscores its importance. *Tip Tap* was a pioneer that helped turning shota into a genre of its own, and set the standard for the hardcore sexual depictions that came to be typical for shota.⁹⁶

For its first two issues, *Johnny* (Issuisha/Kōsai shobō, 1995–98) was a gay comic (*gei komikku*) magazine, but since it didn't sell well, it was turned into a shota anthology from its third issue. It now became aimed at women, and included short stories and comics by several female artists. But it also used male artists from the *bishōjo* genre, and the first color pages of *Johnny* depicted erotic scenes, like in *bishōjo* publications for men, so that the anthology in effect became a mix of female and male traditions. Halfway through 1998, *Johnny* and a couple of other shota anthologies launched by the same publisher were discontinued, since they didn't sell. Yoshimoto comments that it might have been the forced mix of female and male elements that simply didn't work.⁹⁷

On the male side, shota expressions had found their way into *bishōjo* magazines, where they were a small part of otherwise heterosexual erotic comics. *U.C.BOYS* (Akane Shinsha, 1995–97) was launched as a shota *only* anthology series for men, featuring only male artists, as hinted on the cover: "A boys book, by boys, for

boys." *U.C.BOYS* only came out with two issues, and was the only shota anthology that had the adult comics label. Yoshimoto comments that its achievement was to show that men too could feel sexual desire for boy characters.⁹⁸

With 21 volumes, *Romeo* (*Romio*, Issuisha/Kōsai shobō, 1996–99) was the most successful of the shota anthologies, and for many synonymous with the shota boom. It took its name from the 1995 anime. *Romeo* created the standard for shota books aimed at women. It featured female artists and avoided the explicit sexual depictions seen in *bishōjo* manga and *U.C.Boys*. At the same time, all its comics did include some sexual depictions. When *Romeo* was discontinued in September 1999, it signaled the end of the first shota wave.⁹⁹

Boy Meets Boy (Issuisha/Kōsai shobō, 1997–98) was an attempt by the publisher of *Romeo* and *Johnny* to create a shota anthology aimed at men, with mainly male artists. However, the proportion of female artists increased until the gender ratio was reversed.¹⁰⁰

Zushiō (Shobunkan, 1997–99) was aimed at women, and was an offspring from another anthology for women that only contained a few shota elements. The sexual depictions were racier than in regular boys love magazines, but not as explicit as in *Romeo* or shota anthologies for men.¹⁰¹

Pet-Boy's (Tsukasa Shobō, 1997–99) was a highly explicit shota anthology for men, with detailed close-ups of insertions, and very subtle censoring. Despite this, it did not have the adult comics label, and could therefore be read by minors. In other words, *Pet-Boy's* took full advantage of the loophole situation of shota anthologies, where sexual depictions for men could evade the label because they emerged in a female field. However, *Pet-Boy's* might have pushed it too far, as it drew attention during the discussions about new legal restrictions that started in 1998, and which would lead to its demise.¹⁰²

X-kids, pronounced *Bai-kizzu* (Kamakura Shuppansha, 1998–99), was aimed at women, and despite it contained sexual depictions almost as explicit as those in *Pet-Boy's*, it wasn't affected by the mounting legal discussion. Yoshimoto observes that there were no major changes in sexual depictions in *X-kids* before and after the child pornography law that was discussed in 1998 and implemented in 1999. He suggests that the reason might have been that the publishers and artists perceived themselves as targeting women only, and thereby not subject to regulation.¹⁰³

As can be seen in this summary, shota was a mixture of many genres. Publishers of boys love, *yaoi dōjinshi*, *bishōjo*, loli, and *gei* comics all ventured into shota, which became a unique genre by borrowing expressions from these disparate traditions.

While this ethnographic study doesn't focus on expressions, I think it can be interesting to note two aspects of these shota comics that Yoshimoto brings up in his analysis of them. First of all, shota sex almost always means anal sex: "Middle schoolers, upper and lower elementary schoolers, and preschoolers all take the attacker's penis in their anus." Secondly, the boy characters are almost always positive about sex; they enjoy sex without any sense of taboo. Yoshimoto comments that this is a contrast to female characters, who are depicted as feeling guilty when they have sex with a man. Yoshimoto further notes that the anal sex often happens suddenly and without preparation, a contrast to the reality of anal sex.¹⁰⁴ Some would also argue that the "hedonistic" attitude of the boy characters is a contrast to reality. In other words, these aspects highlight the fictional aspect of shota comics.

Reasons for the first shota wave

Except for the reasons related to the shota trends in *dōjinshi* and anime, and the peculiar usage of the adult comics label, Yoshimoto sees factors related to sexual liberation – both for women and for men – behind the first boom of commercial shota anthologies. For women, sexual behavior was changing, but erotic expressions in genres aimed at women were still toned down compared to those for men. Shota here allowed women to enjoy hardcore sexual expressions.

For men, the pressure to live up to the masculine role was strong, especially during and after Japan's financial bubble in the 1980s, and "heterosexual supremacy" not only forced them to take the lead in sex and romance, but also meant that it was impossible to acknowledge any romantic or sexual feelings for men or boys. Here shota offered an outlet where it was okay for men to like boys, to feel loved, and – most of all – to become an *uke*, that is, to imagine themselves as the passive part of a relationship instead of being the leader. In that sense, shota was akin to "emancipation" for men. Note that Yoshimoto here writes about men who self-identify as heterosexual (if at all). He also mentions that especially the shota anthologies aimed at men (such as *U.C.BOYS*) seemed to appeal to "gay" (*gei*) people.¹⁰⁵

And let's not forget that part of the reason for shota's sudden popularity probably lay in the cuteness of shota itself, Yoshimoto adds.¹⁰⁶ This is certainly an important factor, especially in combination with the fearlessness with which *eromanga* is read, where the only rule is that "anything goes as long as it is erotic."¹⁰⁷ Even though many male readers had a resistance to homoerotic themes, as Yoshimoto mentioned, the fact that shota features characters that are *children* was not seen as a problem. This is a stark contrast to the mindset in for example Europe, where people who are interested in such comics often are seen as pedophiles and potential criminals. Critic and editor Nagayama Kaoru, who is an expert on erotic comics, even suggests that the young and cute characters might have made it easier for male readers to embrace shota, while adult characters engaged in gay sex – as in the manga of Tagame Gengoroh (think sweaty action between muscular men) – becomes too stark and therefore causes a homophobic reaction.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, the shota frenzy at the end of the 1990s can probably also be seen as an example of what Frederik Schodt has called "the 'me-too' syndrome" of Japanese media; if one publisher is successful with a certain theme, all other publishers rush to cash in on the same trend.¹⁰⁹ That's what happened with manga about pachinko (a kind of slot machine and game) in the early 1990s.¹¹⁰ And just like with pachinko manga, the shota bubble burst a few years later.

The end of the first shota wave

The first wave of shota anthologies started to die out in 1998, when publishers realized that their shota ventures weren't as profitable as they had expected. Explaining why the shota anthology series *Johnny* was being discontinued, its editor wrote in the fifteenth and final issue in July 1998 that "the reason is simple: it doesn't sell."¹¹¹

The direct reason for the sudden disappearance of shota publications, however, was probably fear of a new law on child pornography that would come into effect in 1999. The law targeted compensated dating between female high school students and men, which had been a recent scandal in the media, but it also included regulations around child pornography, which in the law's first draft included comics. Although the law eventually excluded comics, publishers had already started to self-regulate to the extent that their shota anthologies hardly contained any sexual depictions at all – despite this had been the very point with them and their reason for existing.¹¹²

Especially *Pet-Boy's*, with its hardcore sexual depictions, became the target of these discussions in 1998. Yoshimoto has measured the percentage of sexual depiction in all ten volumes of *Pet-Boy's*, from October 1997 to April 1999, and concludes that while it lingered between 45 and 63 percent for the anthology's first six volumes, in late 1998 it dropped to 8.2 and 4.7 percent, or zero (!) if not counting a reader contribution. Several publishers had urged their readers to submit their own comics for "newcomer awards" as a way to attract fresh talent to a genre that was going stale, but in the seventh volume of *Pet-Boy's* in October 1998, when its sexual depictions plummeted, the editors warn the readers that their works may not be publishable if they don't adhere to the stricter regulation of sexual depictions. They also asked their readers to abstain from criminal themes such as prostitution and rape, and to avoid signifiers of young age, such as school bags. Although sexual depictions came back slightly for the last two volumes of *Pet-Boy's* in 1999, as it became clear that comics were not targeted by the new law, the harm had been done and the series was discontinued with its tenth volume in April 1999. The case of *Pet-Boy's* influenced the whole industry, and almost all other shota anthologies disappeared within the next few months.¹¹³

The second commercial shota wave

For the next couple of years, shota expressions eked out a meager existence in the margins of other genres. But in November 2002, another shota wave was set in motion with the launch of *Shota-comi* (Shobunkan), whose editors wanted to "revive the shota comic magazine."¹¹⁴ It was followed by *Recommending Lusty Boys* (*Kōshoku shōnen no susume*, Akane Shinsha, 2002) and *Boy Lover* (*Shōnen shikō*, Ōtō Shobō, 2003).¹¹⁵ These shota anthologies were more directed toward men than had been the case in the first shota wave, and thereby a more integral part of *eromanga*.¹¹⁶ Thus, most of them had the adult comics label, although some, including *Shota-comi*, were published without it.¹¹⁷ However, the publishers now seemed more aware that the content could be seen as controversial, since some anthologies stated, not very convincingly, that "all characters appearing in this publication are at least 18 years old."¹¹⁸

In May 2003, *Shotacom*i split into *Delusion Boy* (*Mōsō shōnen*, Shobunkan, 2003), aimed at women, and *The Aesthetics of Boy-Love* (*Shōnen-ai no bigaku*, Shobunkan, 2003), aimed at men.

The division might have been a way to avoid the gender mix that had caused confusion and possibly bad sales during the first wave. Now that it was aimed at men, *The Aesthetics of Boy-Love* got an adult comics label and started contracting male artists. Sexual depictions were abundant and explicit, and the censoring minimal.¹¹⁹ Each volume had a certain theme, such as “naughty boys” (*yancha shōnen*), and the emergent genres of “cross-dressing boys” (*josō shōnen*) and “one-shota,” or stories with a boy and a woman (literally “big sister”)¹²⁰ – sometimes called “straight shota.”¹²¹

Many of the boy characters in this second wave of commercial shota magazines looked quite feminine. Manga can be said to have different “drawing codes” for female and male characters, such as vertical eyes and long eye-lashes for girls. These style conventions had been utilized previously for narrative effects, for example by Tezuka Osamu in his pioneering gender-bending *shōjo* manga *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no kishi*, 1953–56), where a girl is drawn as a boy, and in Eguchi Hisashi’s manga *Stop!! Hibari-kun!* (1981–83), where a boy is drawn as a girl.¹²² When these codes were used in shota magazines, it resulted in “a flat-chested, Lolita-type ‘shemale.’”¹²³ At the same time, the theme of cross-dressing boys was trending in mainstream media, as in for example Shimura Takako’s manga *Wandering Son* (*Hōrō musuko*, 2002–13, anime 2011).¹²⁴ This all shows how fluid the erotic depictions of young boy characters were, and how styles and constellations kept changing as new groups of readers took shota to heart.

The second commercial shota wave can be said to have ended in 2006, when both *Recommending Lusty Boys* and *The Aesthetics of Boy-Love* ceased publishing. *Boy Lover* became more focused on crossdressing boys as it was taken over by a publisher of another such magazine.¹²⁵

Although the second shota wave was over, its aesthetics of “beautiful, androgynous and cute boys, little brothers, cross-dressers, passive boys” had spread into regular *eromanga* for men,¹²⁶ and paved the way for a third shota wave entirely based on this character type.

The *otoko-no-ko* boom

The androgynous boy type that inhabited the shota magazines of the second wave came to be known as *otoko-no-ko*, pronounced as the word for “boy,” which is normally written with the Chinese charac-

ters for “male child” (男の子), but with the character for “child” switched to “daughter,” so that the meaning becomes “male daughter” (男の娘), despite the reading (pronunciation) hasn’t changed.

The *otoko-no-ko* boom, which can be seen as the third shota wave, occurred approximately between 2010 and 2013, with a peak in 2012 when 38 paperbacks were published.¹²⁷ The specialized *otoko-no-ko* magazines *Waa!* (Ichijinsha, 2010–14) and *Oto Nyan* (Mirion, 2010–13) were published without the adult comics mark; the erotic depictions were limited to undressing scenes. Except for manga, these magazines also contained tips to male readers on how to cross-dress as a woman, as well as advertisements from companies selling women’s clothes in male sizes.¹²⁸ This reflects that the *otoko-no-ko* trend had also mounted in the three-dimensional world of actual people, with some cross-dressing men becoming famous for their feminine but flat-chested beauty.¹²⁹

My own copy of *Oto Nyan*, issue 6 from March 2012, starts with some full-page pin-up drawings in full-color of what seems to be young girls, but where the contours of male genitals can be seen through their exposed underwear. The bulk of the magazine consists of some rather innocent comics in black and white. Three pages feature reader contributions in the form of drawings and letters: under the vignette “if I could become an *otoko-no-ko*,” one reader writes that he wants to wear a wedding dress; in the advice section, one reader writes “my friend would look really good in female clothes, but he refuses, what should I do?” Then follow some book and *dōjinshi* reviews, and two full-page ads for shops with female high school uniforms and swimwear in big sizes. “You can become an *otoko-no-ko*! We have many sizes!!” is the message from one of the shops, which also offers hair removal and a space with lockers where male customers can store their normal clothes while going out on the streets as a woman. In other words, there is a clear focus on three-dimensional *otoko-no-ko* in *Oto Nyan*, a focus that became particularly concrete in this issue, since it came with a free sports bra and striped panties.

Oto Nyan and *Waa!* ceased publication in 2013 and 2014 respectively. At the same time there was a decline in other non-adult *otoko-no-ko* titles. But even if the wave had subsided, by 2015, *otoko-no-ko* had become an established theme, both in erotic comics with the adult comics label, and at *dōjinshi* conventions, along with similar genres like *josō* (cross-dressing) and *futanari* (hermaphroditism).¹³⁰

Shota everywhere

Although all three shota waves eventually subsided, as waves must, one can argue that each of them influenced the mainstream society in Japan. Shota characters, not least the cross-dressing type, have become popular in media. Series like *Kemono Jihen* (manga 2016–, anime 2021) and *Made in Abyss* (manga 2012–, anime 2017) feature not only cute boy characters that have become favorites in the *dōjinshi* world, but also characters who at first seem to be girls but turn out to be cross-dressing boys.

Regular “boyish” boy characters are also popular. One of the best-selling boys love comics during my fieldwork in Tokyo was Nakayama Miyuki’s *Shota x Oni* (2021–), which is about the romance between a seventeen-year-old and a ten-year-old boy. When the third volume was released in spring 2023, the Ikebukuro branch of manga retailer Animate devoted two full shelves to the series, complete with posters, enlarged comic pages, special editions, and various special deals. Other manga on prominent display flirted with the word shota on the cover, as in Masaya Ziki’s *My Husband Turns into a Shota when he is Stressed Out* (*Watashi no otto wa sutoresu ga tamaru to shota-ka suru*, 2023), and there were also several manga about a woman in her teens or twenties who gets an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy on her hands, and has to deal with the feelings she – make no mistake – is sure to develop for him. These titles include Ichikawa Natsuwo’s *Serenade of the Minus Temperature* (*Mainasu ondo no serenāde*, 2015–) and *Naughty Little Prince* (*Namaiki ritoru purinsu*, 2019–), as well as Hoshimi Yumi’s *Yankee Boy and Otaku Girl* (*Yankī shota to otaku onēsan*, 2016–), where the *dōjinshi* world and the female protagonist’s thoughts about attraction to fictional and actual boys take center stage. These three series were all first serialized in online manga magazines before being released as paperbacks by large publishing houses, so it can be argued that the shota theme once again has influenced the industry from underneath, just like in the 1980s.

In other words, what started as the playful (but maybe taboo-fueled) experimentation among young women in the *dōjinshi* world, and was later discovered and enjoyed by a male audience, has after several bouts in commercial publishing finally become part and parcel of Japanese popular culture – shota is everywhere! Looking back, Yoshimoto describes shota’s conquest of Japanese media as “guerrilla

warfare”: find a weak spot, attack, withdraw quickly if it doesn’t work. This creative approach is especially evident in the way that shota “outsmarted the system” by depicting hardcore sexual acts between boys without using the adult comics label – a fitting strategy for a genre that reeks of boyish mischief, Yoshimoto comments.¹³¹ But he is also a little sad when he looks back. The boy, the shota, used to be rare, so finding and buying a shota publication filled one with excitement. That is not the case when there are shotas in everything from mainstream comics and anime to boys love and *eromanga*.

Beyond mainstream comics (which don’t feature any sexual depictions) and commercial *eromanga*, there are several “shota only” *dōjinshi* events, particularly Shotafes, which is held in Yokohama or Tokyo several times a year, and J-ket, which premiered in Tokyo in 2023.

Since the new child pornography law in 1999, the fear of which killed off the first wave of shota anthologies, there has been a steady stream of law proposals on both the local and the national level. As a small genre, shota has been neither the trigger nor the intended focus of these discussions (just like it wasn’t in 1999), but it is of course not unaffected by them. Regulations used to target only concrete *expressions*, namely the genitalia, while not caring about the *themes*, which could be abuse, rape, incest, and so on, as long as the expressions themselves were properly censored. This has started to change with debates around “unhealthy publications,” and even publications in the female genres of boys love and teens love have been deemed “unhealthy” or “harmful” by panels appointed by local ordinances.¹³²

Beyond comics, I have noticed a general recognition of beautiful boys in Japan during my stays there over the past thirteen years. The most obvious example is the idol agency Johnny & Associates, which specializes in music groups with beautiful boys, and especially its division Johnny’s Jr (*Janīzu junia*), whose members are often teenagers or younger.¹³³ There are several other similar idol agencies, and there are also beauty pageants for boys and young men. During my fieldwork in 2023, I even saw advertisements for such beauty contests on the trains in Tokyo. One was called “Mr Seventh-grader” (*Misutā chū ichi*). On the website, the thirteen-year-old boys are presented with photo and basic data. Likewise, the fashion magazine *Junon*, which targets girls and women, has organized the annual “Super Boy

Contest” since 1988, where the participants are between twelve and twenty-five years old. The contestants are paraded in the magazine throughout the year, not seldom shirtless. Participants in these beauty contests are of course active on social media, where they post cute photos of themselves almost daily. If they are minors, their profile bio often states that the account is run by the boy’s mother. In my eyes, the whole industry around beautiful boys in Japan points to an open and uninhibited celebration of the boy as an ideal.

A look at shota

Before we move on, I think it would be worthwhile to take a brief look at some of these magazines. No matter which wave they belonged to, these shota anthologies followed the established technical standard for erotic paperbacks: A5 size (148 x 210 mm or 5.8 x 8.3 inches), about 160 to 180 pages in black and white, often with a color inset of one to four glossy papers in the beginning. These color pages can be the start of a comic (as in *Johnny* and *U. C. Boys*), which continues in black and white, or a pin-up style illustration – some magazines even feature foldouts. There might also be a detachable postcard with a poster style illustration attached between the cover and the color inset. Like all paperback manga, they come with a soft cover that is printed in one color (such as blue or purple), around which a glossy jacket in full color has been wrapped. The inner flaps of the jacket can contain illustrations, a summary of the content, and/or advertisements of similar titles by the same publisher, or previous volumes in the same series. (Both in mainstream and erotic manga, the author is usually presented on the flap, but that was not the case for these anthologies, which featured several authors.) The bulk of the book, which is printed in black and white on high quality matte paper, contains from about seven to about twelve shota comics. Some contain one or two short stories too.

At the end of the premier issue of *X-Boys* (Kasakura Shuppansha, 2001), there is a page with the English headline “Comment,” where each contributing artist has drawn a little image and written a few words. Since this is the first issue, they mostly congratulate the publisher on the new title. One writes about having newly moved to Tokyo and having stomach ache. The second volume of *XX* (read as *Daburu ekkusu*, Kasakura Shuppansha, 1999) also has a page called “comment,” with the English subtitle “for you with love.” (All these

publications are of course in Japanese, but English is sometimes used in vignettes and headlines.) Since the summer edition of Comic Market was coming up, several of the artists write which “space” they will have at this huge spot sale event, and welcome the readers to come and say hi.

Many of the anthologies contain some page at the end with information about the publisher’s other titles, and about the next issue – when it will come out and which artists it will feature. The last page is the contents page where the included comics’ titles and artists are listed with page numbers. The last page also features the colophon, with bibliographic information about publisher, printer, and date of publication.

What’s really interesting though, from an ethnographic perspective, is when the reader is included in the magazine. Except for the “comments” from the artists, which address the reader, this happens in three ways in many of the anthologies: through “readers’ corner,” manga contests, and questionnaires.

Readers’ corner

The “readers’ corner” (*dokusha kōnā*) is a page or spread that features reader letters and the readers’ own shota illustrations, which they are asked to send in on postcards. Let’s take a look at some of these contributions to get a little bit acquainted with the readers.

In *Boy Meets Boy* volume 7 (Kōsai Shobō, 1998), the reader page is called “Everybody’s ‘syota para’” (written in English and latin letters), short for “shota paradise.” Reader letters and illustrations are answered and commented on by the editors. A reader in the Ishikawa prefecture writes that there are so many shota magazines around, but that *Boy Meets Boy* is a must-buy. The editors express their thanks. The same reader has contributed an illustration of a naked boy and written next to it: “The other day I was urinating at a public toilet when a boy in approximately first grade of elementary school came up next to me. He pulled down his pants over his butt and peed. It was so cute! But I actually like fifth and six graders the most.” The editors comment: “Whoa, a boy in first grade ... The real thing could be a crime ... Well, to appreciate it is a good thing.” This exchange points to the question of whether an interest in shota comics is connected to an interest in real boys, a topic that we will return to in my findings. A reader in Tokyo, who has signed his letter with a male

name, has contributed a drawing of a boy who embraces another boy from behind while grabbing his erect penis. Next to the illustration, the reader has written: "I enjoy drawing boys these days. Looking forward to the next issue." The editor replies that it's a lovely couple and wonders what will happen next: "I expect his hand to get sweaty." Another reader in Tokyo, also with a male name, has made two portraits of a cute boy. He thanks the editor in advance for publishing his drawings and says that he will soon turn fifteen. The editor replies that the publication of his illustrations should be seen as a birthday celebration.

As can be gathered from "everybody's shota paradise," at least some of the readers of the magazines of the first shota wave were male, and at least one was fourteen years old. And who knows how old the reader who described his experience at the public toilet was – maybe of similar age? *Boy Meets Boy* did not have the adult comics label, and so it was accessible to readers of all ages. This reminds of the lolicon boom, where the majority of the readers of the magazine *Comic Lolipop* were teenagers, according to the publisher's statistics.¹³⁴ Media critic and *eromanga* researcher Kimi Rito suggests that even the contributors to these magazines to a large extent might have been minors.¹³⁵

In XX, these pages are called "*Daburu Ekkusu Square*," written both in Japanese *kana* and in English ("XX Square"). In issue 2 (Kasakura Shuppansha, 1999), many of the readers comment on the first issue. A "mother from Kokura, Fukuoka prefecture" writes that the cover and especially one of the comics were erotic and that she will continue buying the magazine. A reader from Iwate prefecture with a female first name writes that it happens about once a year that she wants to read a "homo book" (*homo hon*) – she apologizes for the crude expression – but that she doesn't like going to the bookstore and therefore has let a friend buy the books for her. But this time she went to the bookstore herself for the first time in years and found XX. Now she can't wait for the next issue.

A reader from Fukushima prefecture with a gender-neutral first name writes: "My feeling was 'it's my first time.' Shota can really get you hooked. I didn't really like shota, but after I was hooked I found it really good. I like that it's sort of naughty ♡." A reader in Kanagawa prefecture with a female first name writes that the covers should stay normal or else her parents won't let her buy the magazine. She

adds that her male friends want to see it too. A reader in Shimane prefecture, also with a female first name, simply asks the editors to “publish more of this brutal stuff.” The editor thanks them for all their postcards and promises to do her or his best to entertain the readers henceforth.

It might be that all of these contributions – and we’re only one third in – are by women, because the second page ends with two letters under the headline “boys’ corner” (*otoko no ko no kōnā*). A reader from Hyōgo prefecture writes that he saw the cover in the bookstore and decided to pick up the magazine. “I’m a guy but it’s totally OK!” The other male reader, from Kanagawa prefecture, writes: “I read it because it was recommended to me by the girls in my class. The hard content and beautiful illustrations made it a worthwhile read. The girls in my class are really into this stuff.”

The reader pages in *X Kids* (*Bai-kizzu*) are called “kids forum” (written in English and Japanese). In *X Kids* issue 5 (Kasakura Shuppansha, 1998), most readers comment on the stories in the last issue and praise the artists. The editor reminds them that they can reach the artists directly by sending postcards to the publisher. Under the headline “massive response in the boys’ corner,” a reader in Fukuoka prefecture writes: “I’m a man but I’ve become completely addicted to boy stuff. While I think it might be dangerous, I just can’t get out of this world ... So I’ll just go all in!! Looking forward to the next issue.” Two other male readers praise the magazine. The editor thanks them and writes that more men are welcome with their views. A female reader in Osaka comments: “I read in some magazine that shota is becoming popular among men, and that seems to be true. I guess male readers also exist.”

XX changed name to *Baby-X* in 2003.¹³⁶ On the spread called “Baby’s Club” in issue 2 of *Baby-X* (Kasakura Shuppansha, 2003), enthusiastic readers praise the artists and comment on the comics in the first issue. In a letter signed by Donald (*Donarudo*) in Miyagi prefecture, a reader writes that the boy in one of the stories looked just like a real boy (*riaru shōnen*) in the neighborhood: “I fantasized that something like that could really happen.” A reader from Kanagawa prefecture with a female name writes that it was the first time she bought this kind of magazine, and that she really liked it since “I like cute boys.” She adds that she has noticed a man in his fifties or sixties who browses the books in the boys love section at her local book-

store. "But, it is BL...!! No matter if anyone is standing next to him, he just continues reading. I would like to talk to him once (laugh). To get a first-hand account of boy on boy?!" The editor replies: "But he's hardly a boy (laugh)." And gives her own account of a "slightly fat old man" she saw at Comic Market when she was buying shota books. She wonders if he might be reading this book too. A reader in Fukui prefecture writes that she saw a tennis teacher instructing a high school boy in front of a tennis club. Their bodies touched when the teacher showed the boy how to swing the racket, and the reader couldn't help fantasizing about them. Since one letter is published under the headline "and now a word from a man!!" (he simply praises the artists), it seems that the rest of the letters were from women, although one of them was signed Donald.

These scattered reader comments let us glimpse two defining characteristics of the first and second shota waves. First, the mix of female and male readers, as well as a certain confusion around it, where male readers seemed surprised at finding excitement in this genre, and where editors seemed to be eager to learn more about this reader group. And second, the young age of the readers (as inferred from references to classmates and parents), who could buy these anthologies legally since they didn't have the adult comics label, a factor that Yoshimoto argues was crucial to their success.¹³⁷ (Although *Baby-X* was published in 2003, its focus on female readers made it possible for it to avoid the adult comics label.)

Manga awards

A second way in which these anthologies included the readers was through manga awards. This way to attract new talent was also common in mainstream magazines. Yoshimoto suggests that the shota genre was going stale as it stabilized, and that publishers were desperate for new blood, which they hoped to attract through these contests, especially during the first shota wave.¹³⁸

Volume 5 of *Shota Hunting* (*Shota kari*, Shobunkan, 2004), a special issue focused on boys and women in "inverse attack" (the woman "attacking" the boy), announces over a full spread that readers are "very welcome to bring in your manuscripts!" which can be "a shortcut to professional debut and publication!" After booking a meeting, prospective artists are welcome to come by the editorial offices in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, on weekdays between 11 and 18 (except holidays),

where a staff member will review the manuscript directly. On the opposite page are technical instructions: the pages should be in B4 format – commercial manga manuscript paper is available in that size. Use black ink or India ink in a single color. Write the title and the speech bubbles in pencil. Both professionals and amateurs can apply – the only condition is that the work is an original adult manga that hasn't been published before.

X-kids volume 5 (Kasakura Shuppansha, 1998) includes manuscript submission guidelines on a general information page in the middle of the book. Like *Shota Hunting*, they are looking for original and unpublished works, drawn in black ink or India ink on B4 paper. They specify that the comic should be 16 to 24 pages. Both publications offered to send back the original manuscript if the readers enclosed an envelope with their address and postage stamps.

The only proper contest I have found is the “Big Award for Replacement Manga” (*Daigen manga taishō*), which was announced in *Shōnen shikō R* (Moeru Publishing, 2006). *Daigen* is a contraction of *dairi genkō*, or “proxy manuscript,” which is a kind of reserve comic that the editor can use if a serialized artist fails to deliver on time. These can be a chance for new artists to break.¹³⁹ *Shōnen shikō R* gives us all the technical details for submission, but in addition to the usual guidelines about black ink and India ink, and writing the speech bubbles in pencil, there is also a possibility to submit the comic digitally. There is no prize money, but published works will be paid according to the standard for manga. Submissions can be 8, 12, 16, 20 or 24 pages.

Questionnaires

Nearly all mainstream manga magazines use reader questionnaires to gauge the popularity of its comics, and which direction to take them in.¹⁴⁰ The most basic of these *ankēto* simply asks which works of the current issue that the reader found most exciting, and most boring, along with some demographical information such as gender and age. The questionnaire is attached as a postcard in the back of the publication, and is sent in by the reader by mail. Usually there is some prize to be won by participating in these surveys.

Let's take a look at one of these questionnaires in order to see what the publishers wanted to know about their readers. The survey postcard at the end of *X-kids* volume 7 (Kasakura Shuppansha, 1999)

asks about the reader's name, address, pen name, age, gender, work/school situation, marital status, at which store and when they bought the book, and how they got to know about this book. The reader can also enter which one of thirteen autographed publications, presented on a separate page, they want if they would win the lottery of questionnaire submissions.

The other side of the postcard asks in some detail about the content of the book. Which three works did you enjoy the most and why? Which one didn't you enjoy and why? What was your motivation for buying *X-kids*? The reader can choose from four alternatives ("I liked previous volumes," "I like boy stuff," "the cover was good," "it included my favorite artist" – and if so, who?) or enter another reason. Then the reader is asked to suggest one or more artists for future issues of *X-kids*. The publisher also wants to know which "stories and couplings" the reader wants to see. They list some examples of what one can write: "SM, school stories, father x son, older brother x younger brother." Next, the publisher wants to know what the reader is looking for in *X-kids*. Hard stories? Lovey-dovey stories? Serious stories? Everyday stories? Fantasy? More series? The last question asks the reader to write down his or her impressions and opinions. They add that this may be published in the next issue.

It seems that many or maybe all of the reader letters came from these survey postcards. For example, a reader letter from Fukuoka prefecture in *X-kids* volume 5 begins: "It's my first time taking the questionnaire!!" This exchange with the readers illustrates how magazine-like these publications were, despite technically being books.

The survey postcards in other shota anthologies had almost identical questions, but with some interesting variations. *Shota King* volume 1 (Core Magazine, 1997) didn't come with a postcard, but listed the questions on a page. Here the reader is asked to enter any number of works in this issue that they liked, didn't like, and thought was erotic (*ecchi*). After asking the readers about their favorite artists and their general impressions of the book, *Shota King's ankēto* ends with a simple question: "Do you like 'shota'?"

Volume 7 of *Boy Meets Boy* (Issuisha/Kōsai shobō, 1998) also didn't have a postcard, but published their questions on two full pages, or one leaf, which the reader is asked to either rip out or take a copy of and send to the publisher. The anthology, which was aimed at men, asked the readers to enter their "number one" among the

comics in this issue. After that, the readers are asked to enter which works were “good” and which were “boring.” Going into more detail than the other anthologies, *Boy Meets Boy* also wants to know which scenes the readers found erotic (*ecchi*), where they got excited (*dokidoki*), and which characters they found cute. On the next page, the questions about what the readers want continue: What kind of stories do you want to read? What kind of characters do you like? What kind of coupling of characters do you like? Lastly, the readers are asked what kind of age difference between the characters they like. An example is provided: “Middle schooler x elementary schooler.” The Chinese characters for these words are “middle, school, student” and “small, school, student,” but interestingly, the character in the middle, “school,” has been replaced by a circle, as if it would be sensitive to spell out the whole word.

Lastly, volume 2 of *Boy Lover* (*Shōnen shikō*, Ōtō Shobō, 2004) asks of the reader to rate from 1 to 5 each of the 17 comics and the illustrations on the cover, the back, the inside flap, and the front and back of a “color pin up” that can be folded out. In addition, they ask the readers for an “erotic situation” that they would like to read about. They ask which work the readers would like to see as a paper-back release, and they want to know which other magazines or anthologies the readers read. As a thanks for their hard work, the readers can win signed *dōjinshi* by the artists from this issue, and the hand-drawn original to one of the pin-up illustrations.

Questionnaires are common at *dōjinshi* events too. At Shotafes 12 in Yokohama in February 2023, I picked up the participant survey – a single paper in A5 format with five simple questions printed on one side. The organizers wanted to know how the event was (very good, good, okay, or bad) and why. Then they asked for my favorite participating circles – one could write several names. And they wanted to know if I thought cosplay and paper rallies (a kind of contest) were necessary at *dōjinshi* events. Lastly, they wanted to know which kind of goods I wanted the most: “acrylic key holder (cheap),” “acrylic stand (a bit expensive),” or “acrylic block (expensive).” (These acrylic products typically feature a drawn character and are sometimes sold by artists in addition to their *dōjinshi*.)

Even some *dōjinshi* creators use questionnaires as a way to gauge the taste of their readers. The circle *Take no ko gohan VF* published a questionnaire in the form of a folded A3 paper in 2012. Five of the

artist's boy characters are printed in full color on the inside spread, and on the back side, the reader is asked to choose his or her favorite. The artist also asks what type of *seme kyara*, or top character, the reader likes. One can choose from "elementary schooler," "middle schooler," "high school student," "university student" and "old man." These words are written in the same kind of semi-censored style as in *Boy Meets Boy*, with the center character "school" replaced by a circle for some discretion. Readers are further asked if they prefer to read the artist's works on paper (as a printed *dōjinshi*), on CD, DVD-ROM or similar, or as a digital download. The artist also wants to know where the reader bought his work: at Comic Market, at an "only" event such as Shotaket or Shotascratch, at the *dōjinshi* retailer Toranoana, at the digital download provider Digiket, or at some other place. Just like the shota anthologies, this artist offered something in return for the work of filling out the survey. The participants can win an original work by him, and so, he also asks to whom it should be made out when he signs it.

The shota artist Osōzaiya took the questionnaire to the next level when he asked his male fans to share memories of love and sex from their time in elementary and middle school. He compiled the stories in the *dōjinshi* *Sharing our experiences* (*Minna no taikendan*), published in 2024.¹⁴¹ Osōzaiya's ethnographic project accentuates the connection between fiction and reality that flows like an undercurrent in the shota interest of *some* shota fans.

TWO

MANGA STUDIES

HOW PEOPLE READ EROTIC COMICS

Before designing my own study, I wanted to go through previous research, to see what had already been written about how shota is enjoyed. However, there is virtually no previous research on shota, in Japan or elsewhere – at least no *ethnographic* research that focuses on the *people* who like shota. Shota's history has been mapped in relative detail by Yoshimoto Taimatsu and Budōuri Kusuko, the former of whom has also interviewed male fans of boys love and shota, but it is telling that their books were not published at university presses, or even by regular publishing houses, but as self-published *dōjinshi*, and this was also the case for Manda Ringo's book *The Syotaroh*. Beyond these valuable initiatives, the reading of shota has been analyzed on a rather theoretical level that lacks a connection to empirical research. But maybe we can approach shota reading through other genres? In this chapter, I will summarize some literature that will function as a background to my own research. My interest here is: *How is it read?* How do people read erotic comics of various kinds?

How men read lolicon manga

Although shota sprang from the male homoerotic genre of *yaoi*, which was dominated by women, it can also be compared to lolicon, or loli, that is, erotic comics that feature cute girl characters, and which are aimed at men.

The reason why men and boys started reading lolicon manga is connected to the *cuteness* “virus” that infected all parts of Japanese society in the economically prosperous and optimistic 1980s,¹ and which has been understood as a protest against the machismo of earlier generations.² Research indicates that male readers of lolicon typically project themselves not onto the man in the story, but onto the cute girl. This may sound counterintuitive, but makes sense if we see lolicon as offering men relief from “masculine competitive society” by letting them identify with the girl character.³ However, as readers we are able to identify with different characters, and read the story from different perspectives. Nagayama describes the two perspectives in lolicon like this:

If one side is the more readily graspable desire of objectification and possession – I want to love a cute girl character / to hold her / to violate her / to abuse her – then the other side is the hidden desire of identification – I want to become a cute girl / to be loved / to be held / to be violated / to be abused.⁴

In that sense, the young girl characters in lolicon manga are invented to represent cuteness in its ultimate form. Nagayama stresses that these characters are not substitutes for real girls, but rather exist in their own right as “small and loveable” characters, or in one phrase: “the cute matters more than the girl.”⁵ In other words, the desire that lolicon reading men feel is not directed toward “the real thing,” as psychologist Saitō Tamaki puts it, but toward “virtual” girls, that is, the fictional characters that appear in manga, anime, and games.⁶ As supporting evidence for this claim, Saitō mentions the ongoing “abstractification” of lolicon, where the characters (*kyara*) remind less and less of actual girls, and instead become abstract symbols.⁷

Likewise, the anthropologist Patrick Galbraith refers research that indicates that lolicon fans can differ between fiction and reality, and that they desire girl characters “precisely because they are unreal.”⁸ This preference for fictional characters has been called a “two-dimensional complex,” as in the two dimensions of lines on paper, whereas real people are referred to as three-dimensional, or 3D. While some would see it as good news that lolicon fans are only interested in drawings, in Japan such a desire for fictional characters has been described as a “sickness,” and a “cuteness fetish” by critics, who argued

that it is “unnatural” to lack the desire for real girls or women that every healthy young man should feel.⁹ This is part of a larger discussion around otaku, or pop culture nerds, which I will not go into here. But it is interesting to note that Japan has had its own panics, which are quite different from those in, say, the UK.

The strict division between desire for 2D and 3D – fictional and real people – may seem a little bit too good to be true. Are lolicon fans really not interested in real girls at all? Not a single one of them? And so, this simplistic division has been complicated lately. In a recent book, Galbraith illustrates how an “ethics of affect” steps in and catches those who feel confused about their desires. Such an ethics is created and continuously negotiated by the group itself, as a way for its members to take responsibility for their desires.¹⁰

How women read romance

It can here be interesting to mention Janice Radway’s seminal study among romance reading women in Midwestern United States in the 1970s.¹¹ Radway’s main findings were that these women read romance literature for two reasons: to feel pleasure and to escape the everyday. As mothers and housewives, they cared for both children and husbands, but when they read a romance, they were for once allowed to care for *themselves*.¹² This is not unlike how men read shota and loli in Japan in the 1990s, as these genres gave them a chance to briefly escape from their societal responsibility and the stress attached to that. Radway even sees romance reading as a form of “protest” against the conditions of society.¹³

I also want to mention Elin Bengtsson’s study of ageplay and littleness in BDSM culture, that is, adults who find pleasure in playing the role of a child, sexually or socially, but within an agreed upon setting, such as play, or at home. For Bengtsson’s participants, littleness – playing the child – was connected to feelings of relaxation and to being able to receive care and give up normative restraints on how one should behave as an adult.¹⁴ This too is almost to the letter a description of how men read shota and loli in Japan in the 1990s.

It’s interesting to note that the discussion of whether the readers want this “in real life” is completely absent from Radway’s study. Although romance literature has been criticized for not being real literature, and for segmenting gender roles,¹⁵ no one thinks that romance reading women are not able to differ between fiction and

reality. But somehow, this question is always the first to come up in discussions about shota and loli, especially outside of Japan. This is probably partly because we are more familiar with our own culture, and so, people in for example the US find it easier to understand the local culture of romance reading than the foreign culture of loli reading, despite both practices share the purpose of feeling pleasure and escaping reality. Such double standards are a prime example of ethnocentrism, or the inability to understand another culture from that culture's own perspective. But more about that later.

The fact that ageplay is connected to the idea of the child, and that this practice is rather unknown, makes it the target of suspicions similar to those that shota and loli readers face in some cultures, namely, in plain language, that their practitioners are pedophiles.¹⁶ Bengtsson also refers research on ageplay in virtual worlds, where a person who has sex as a child avatar is assumed to harbor "pedophile desires."¹⁷ In this light, it's interesting that the stigma for shota reading men in Japan in the 1990s and early 2000s was *homosexuality*,¹⁸ and not pedophilia. To put it slightly differently, the fear was not of a certain "sexuality," but of diverting from the group by not investing in the all-permeating heterosexual norm in society.

How men read shota manga

When shota entered *eromanga* for men in the beginning of the 2000s, the boys love theme of two boys having sex was extended to the *one*-shota theme of a boy and a woman. (The *one* part is pronounced like the German word *ohne*, approximately *ohnay*.) Interestingly, the boy was typically the receiver, or the passive partner, when coupled with a woman,¹⁹ as in the "inverse attack" themed special issue of *Shota Hunting* (*Shota kari*, Shobunkan, 2004). This was also the case when the boy was coupled with a young man, whereas the *seme* (top) and *uke* (bottom) roles could shift in works featuring two boys of the same age.²⁰ Nagayama argues that the point with shota in *eromanga* for men is that the boy is an *uke*, no matter the gender of his partner.²¹

In shota works with a boy and a young man, it may be natural for a male reader to project himself onto the young man, with the object of his affection simply happening to be a boy instead of a girl or a woman. But when shota works are narrated from the boy's point of view, and depict him with depth and not just as an object, the reader can identify with him, Nagayama writes. This is similar to how men

project themselves onto the girl in lolicon manga, with the difference that it might be even easier for a man to identify with a boy, since he has been one himself. In other words, the gender switch of the *uke* facilitates a smoother acceptance of the passive role for male readers of *eromanga*. But he doesn't have to stick with that role; in manga with two boys, the reader can identify with either the top or the bottom depending on his mood, or with both at the same time. In Nagayama's words, the fantasy goes: "I have transformed into a cute boy and can do naughty things with other cute boys."²² In shota, the male reader can become *both* the cute character who is loved, *and* the partner who loves (or violates) him. In other words, he can be top and bottom at the same time, so that the act of reading shota becomes "me having sex with myself."²³ In stories where a boy character is violated by several attackers, the more attackers there are, the more their individuality disappears. This puts all the focus on the boy, whom the reader feels and identifies with, while the role of the attackers is to simply be there "to violate the cute I."²⁴ In other words, when reading shota, men project onto the cute character in a similar way to when they read lolicon. Nagayama suggests that this auto-erotic aspect of shota is a key to deconstruct not only *eromanga* as a whole, but pornography in general.²⁵

The importance of Nagayama's analysis is that it turns the spotlight to how comics *are read*. Nagayama stresses that self-projection is not fixed or static, that the reader can take several perspectives, and not necessarily that of the protagonist. He or she may even take the perspective of an all-seeing god outside the comic. The multitude of ways in which a reader can enjoy erotic comics is a contrast to the rather flat criticism of for example lolicon, which typically focuses on "what is drawn on the page" instead of "how it is read."²⁶ I think this is what Nagayama means with shota being the key to deconstruct pornography in general. Not only do the male "attackers" lose their individuality and disappear into the background in much mainstream pornography, in the same way that they do in such shota scenarios, with the boy/woman and his/her reactions taking center stage, but the male reader/viewer might also project himself not only onto the boy in shota, but also onto the woman in mainstream pornography. In other words, "what is drawn on the page," or shown in the video, is uninteresting compared to "how it is read," or viewed. Note that this is my own interpolation of Nagayama's words.

In her narratological analysis of BL shota works, Nagaike Kazumi carves out four common themes in the relatively simple stories: 1) A boy's deviation from an idealized family situation, and the filling in of the lack and loneliness that comes from that situation; 2) characters that are allowed to express repressed or socially unacceptable emotions; 3) the realization of "non-phallic education" without competition or hierarchy; 4) the giving and receiving of forgiveness.²⁷ Like Nagayama, Nagaike suggests that male readers of shota project themselves onto the boy, the shota, because they "seek to become like shota."²⁸ This may be a desire to "return to boyhood" as a way to avoid the hardships of being a man. Shota lets male readers be "weak, passive, and beloved,"²⁹ and the "forgiveness" in the stories is the forgiveness of these readers, who fail to live up to the masculine norm in society.³⁰

These "failed men" are also the theme for Yoshimoto Taimatsu's interview study among *fudanshi*, or men who like boys love comics.³¹ The word *fudanshi* literally means "rotten boy," and is a variation on *fujoshi*, or "rotten girl," which some women started calling themselves around 2006 as a way to "own" a word that sums up society's negative view of them for being more interested in boys love comics than in marrying and reproducing.³² Yoshimoto comments that the prevailing view used to be that only homosexual men like homosexual expressions, but that *fudanshi* break with this tradition by enjoying the homoerotic love stories of BL and shota without necessarily self-identifying as homosexual.³³

The *fudanshi* in Yoshimoto's study came to boys love through various routes: some replied that they were recommended the genre by a female friend (20 percent) or a family member (4 percent), and some said that they had bought a work at a bookstore (19 percent) or at a *dōjinshi* event (4 percent). Interestingly, one third of them replied that they were either interested in men from the beginning (19 percent), or that they liked shota (14 percent).³⁴ This is interesting, since Nagaike specifies the male readers of BL and shota in her analysis as "self-identified heterosexual males."³⁵ While Nagayama mentions that "conscious or unconscious homosexuality" may of course be behind a liking for shota among male readers,³⁶ he skips this rather obvious interpretation in favor of the autoerotic analysis that I summarized above, which seems to assume a real-life preference for women among male shota fans. Likewise, Yoshimoto is a heterosexually mar-

ried father who described himself as a “straight shotacon” when we first met in Tokyo in 2020. But the respondents in Yoshimoto’s study complicate the idea that male shota fans necessarily self-identify as heterosexual. In fact, when asked directly about their sexuality, 30 percent of them chose “gay (homosexual),” 27 percent chose “bisexual (prefer men)” and 21 percent “bisexual (prefer women).” Only 15 percent chose “straight (heterosexual).”³⁷

It can also be noted that half of Yoshimoto’s respondents started liking BL at the age of 15 to 19, with another 34 percent between 10 and 14, which effectively makes BL a “youth culture” among these men, Yoshimoto comments.³⁸

How gay men read gay manga

Thomas Baudinette has interviewed “gay men” in contemporary Japan about how they read both BL and *geikomi* (literally “gay comics”). *Geikomi* emerged as a genre aimed at same-sex-desiring men in Japan in the 1970s.³⁹ Unlike BL, which typically features *bishōnen* characters, or beautiful boys, *geikomi* contained hard displays of hypermasculinity, possibly as a way to counter understandings of gay/*gei* as transgender that were common in Japan at the time.⁴⁰ In other words, despite both being genres that depict male homoeroticism, BL and *geikomi* differ greatly in their expressions. Whereas the masculinity in BL has been seen as “softer” and thereby “safer” for women to consume, Baudinette’s study participants described *geikomi* as “gay men having wild, rough and uncontrollable urges.”⁴¹

Maybe not surprisingly, a “*yaoi* dispute” broke out in the early 1990s, where self-professed gay men argued that the male homosexuality seen in BL was not a realistic depiction, and that the “effeminate” style of the characters furthered prejudices about gay men as transgender. To this, BL fans and scholars replied that BL depicted fantasies that let young women explore their sexuality, and that the characters should not be understood as gay/*gei*.⁴²

Baudinette’s six participants recognized the difference between BL and *geikomi*, but they read and enjoyed both genres. All of them said that they used both BL and *geikomi* as masturbation material, but two of them said that *geikomi* was more exciting in that regard. However, this was not because these comics were more realistic, but because the characters in them were more similar to the masculine men they liked “in real life.”⁴³

What's interesting in Baudinette's study is the complete absence of even the word "shota." It might of course be included in BL, and Baudinette does suggest that a next step could be to look at what kinds of BL (and *geikomi*) gay men in Japan consume.⁴⁴ But another theory is that shota is rather unknown and alien to many men who self-identify as gay in contemporary Japan. That has at least been my impression when I have interacted socially with several such men during my stays in Japan, and told them about my research project. Some have not even known what shota is, although they might have heard the longer word *shotacon*. And it goes both ways: among the male shota fans I have interviewed, some didn't understand when I asked them if they also liked *geikomi* – they had not even heard the word. So while there certainly are many readers of shota who self-identify as gay men, shota does not seem to be a particularly big or popular genre among "gay men" in general, if it makes sense to talk about such a group or culture.

How women read *yaoi*

We have already seen how male homoerotic *shōnen-ai* stories in *shōjo* manga facilitated a "play with gender" for its female readers from the 1970s on.⁴⁵ In Patrick Galbraith's ethnographic study among women who call themselves *fujoshi*, the female original to the male *fudanshi*, the key to understand how these "rotten girls" read *yaoi* comics and engage with their surroundings lies in the word "play," or *asobi*.⁴⁶ This "fantasy play" consists of taking existing characters from mainstream *shōnen* manga and devotedly reinterpret these boy characters' "touches, words, and glances" to infer an intimacy that isn't there technically, but which can be glimpsed or imagined between the lines.⁴⁷ To deliberately "misread" a mainstream work in this way has been called "*yaoi* reading" (*yaoi-yomi*).⁴⁸ The point of this practice, what comes out on the other side, so to speak, is a *coupling* (*kappuringu*). Depending on the character traits, behavior, and physical features of a character, he is designated either the *seme* (top) or the *uke* (bottom) role in the coupling. This is done according to rules that are so well-known among *fujoshi* that it can be compared to a kind of "basic literacy."⁴⁹ Galbraith's participants use the word *moe* to describe the feelings of affection they get from this practice, and talking about what makes one feel *moe* is logically called "moe talk," or *moebanashi*.⁵⁰

An interesting extension of *moebanashi* is that it can be applied to the whole world, beyond the boy characters of mainstream manga for whom it was originally used. On their way home from Comic Market, Galbraith's participants laugh at how the newly paved road they walk on is a virgin bottom doing his best to please the cars on top, and maybe being in love with one particular car who is an insensitive pleasure-seeking top. What one of them calls the "power of lascivious fantasy" (*mōsōryoku yutaka*) adds a layer of potential to the everyday, thereby charging it with *moe*.⁵¹ (Note that the word *mōsō* for "fantasy" can also be translated as "delusion," which can have a slightly negative or excessive connotation. This word was often used by my own participants, and is in the title of the second wave shota anthology *Delusion Boy/Mōsō shōnen*.) This brings to mind the *Baby-X* reader who had observed a tennis teacher instructing a boy, started fantasizing about them, and then shared her fantasy in a reader letter to the shota anthology, where the editor commented on it – a beautiful example of *moebanashi*. Galbraith stresses that the affection one feels, the *moe*, comes both from the fantasy itself – the coupling of boys or other "characters" – and from the act of sharing these fantasies with others, whereby "emotional energy" travels between these worlds of fantasy and reality.⁵²

In a later book, Galbraith explores the "shared worlds of imagination" that are connected to *moe*, or feelings of affection for fictional characters.⁵³ The mix of fantasy (2D) and reality (3D) inherent in *moebanashi* might have found its fullest expression in the Tokyo neighborhood Akihabara in the 2000s, when maid cafés mixed the two worlds (real people acting like a kind of fictional character) in what can be called a "2.5-dimensional" space.⁵⁴ But even without these particular institutions, the whole plethora of stores and other establishments catering to the fantasy – or the delusion – of their customers or participants created an atmosphere of shared imaginations; it's not just about my own private delusions anymore, but about *sharing* these delusions with others.⁵⁵

One more word about *fujoshi*. Despite wallowing in male homoerotic fantasies, these women "typically lead heteronormative lives," and described their fantasies as "nothing more than play."⁵⁶ Here we see a clear division between fantasy and reality, or between fictional and actual realities, a division that seems more blurry for some shota fans, as we will see.

Female and male shota fans

In 1998, Watanabe Yumiko wrote an essay called "Shota research" (*Shota no kenkyū*) for an anthology edited by pop culture critic and self-professed otaku Okada Toshio.⁵⁷ After tracing the emergence of shota expressions in *yaoi dōjinshi* in the 1980s, and describing the ensuing shota boom in mainstream anime and manga in the 1990s, Watanabe interviews some people in order to understand how women and men enjoy shota. She talks to a female shota artist and contributor to the commercial anthology *X-kids*, and they conclude that the partner aspect is key to how women read shota. This is what we saw in the anime series *Wataru*, which didn't take off until Wataru's rival Toraoh was introduced halfway through the series. According to Watanabe, women don't fall in love with characters because of their individual personalities, but because of how they would function *in relation* to another character. The shota artist takes as an example Shinji, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki Evangerion*, 1995). Seen on his own, Shinji was just a weak boy with dark and introverted tendencies, but when "coupled" with Kaworu, he was seen in a different light by many women, namely as an *uke* to his *seme* Kaworu. In that light, "weak" became "delicate," and "dark and introverted" became "pure and innocent."⁵⁸

Let's here also reiterate the allure of shota to many women. Watanabe writes that *yaoi* began as a way for women to "escape their own *uke*" and be able to "attack" the male characters. But whereas women were restricted to identify with the *seme*, the attacker, in *yaoi*, shota offered a different set of possibilities, and thereby less restricting ways of reading.⁵⁹

Next, Watanabe turns to male shota fans. After detailing how men discovered shota through lolicon and cute boys in mainstream anime, she interviews two male shota artists who have a *dōjinshi* circle together. Whereas the men who came to shota from lolicon maybe saw the boy as an acceptable alternative to a female character, these two men say that they "did not come from loli" and that they were shotacon already in elementary school. They call themselves "genuine" shota fans, and they have their own psychological explanations to why they became shotacon. One says that he was often alone as a child and therefore had a strong longing for friendship. The other says that it from elementary through middle school was common for the boys to have close relations, akin to "pseudo love," but that when

his classmates moved on to girls, he got stuck, and he thinks that is the case for many shota fans: "Maybe we have not managed to leave the boy stage."⁶⁰ We will revisit these "genuine" shota fans in the chapter about attraction to real boys.

Masturbation and embodiment

As we saw in Baudinette's interviews with gay men who read BL and *geikomi*, all of his participants said they used these "gay media" when they masturbated.⁶¹ In his history of *eromanga* expressions, Kimi Rito even defines *eromanga* as comics to be used for masturbation, or "orgasm manga,"⁶² although he argues that *eromanga* is also much more than just "masturbation media."⁶³ And Galbraith shows how *bishōjo* games – erotic video games – are meant to trigger a bodily response and eventually masturbation.⁶⁴ However, I have not been able to find any literature about masturbation in relation to shota, despite the fact that this activity seems to be at the center of *how it is read*.

As we have seen, some male readers of shotacon identify with the boy in the stories; shota lets them become an *uke*, the passive partner, in a way that the masculine norm in their society does not permit. Interestingly, some BL and shota scholars reveal that they have brought this reading into their actual lives. Yoshimoto Taimatsu has said that he enjoys "being passive in sex."⁶⁵ Likewise, cultural critic Kasuga Taichi, who calls himself a "heterosexual *fudanshi*," has said that his desire doesn't fit the stereotype of the male penetrator, and that he learned new ways to feel pleasure when he had a threesome with two lesbian women.⁶⁶ These are interesting examples of how the shota experience can be embodied in the actual world, in a way that reminds of ageplay.⁶⁷

The openness with which these scholars talk about their personal experiences and desires also points to the joyful experimentation that informs this discourse in Japan. This is a refreshing contrast to the rather clinical approach of many researchers in Europe and North America, which seems to take its lineage from the early anthropologists from those areas, who ventured out to "exotic" tribes without ever involving themselves in their quest for knowledge. As can be seen in the posthumously published diaries of Bronisław Malinowski, one of these anthropologists, ethnographic fieldwork is not a clinical venture disconnected from one's own self and one's desires.⁶⁸

Ethnographic research

I have now summarized some of the writings about shota and similar genres that might be relevant. What is striking is the lack of ethnographic studies among shota fans. Yoshimoto Taimatsu and Manda Ringo seem to be the only ones who have actually talked to people who like shota.

When looking at the texts I have summarized, it seems that shota, more than other genres, is enjoyed by a diverse set of fans, who possibly use shota in different ways. As we have seen, shota was pioneered by women, and then men found their way to the genre. Some of these men “came from loli,” and others called themselves “genuine” shotacon. Saitō Tamaki has described shota fans as “a complicated mix of male and female producers and consumers,” which, according to his observations, is divided fifty-fifty between men and women.⁶⁹ If we look at the “frequently asked questions” section on the website of the shota event Shotafes, one of the questions is “Can men also attend Shotafes?” This indicates that shota is perceived as a female genre. The organizers reply that it is “absolutely not forbidden” for men to attend, and that, interestingly, a whole 70 percent of the general participants (visitors) in 2022 were male, whereas the division between men and women among circle participants (sellers) was roughly fifty-fifty.⁷⁰

The diversity of shota expression, which ranges from cute to hardcore, can probably be pinned down to the diversity among the genre’s artists. Saitō comments that “*shota* texts by female *yaoi* authors are structurally identical to *yaoi* texts, while *shota* by male otaku clearly position these little boys as young girls with penises.”⁷¹ But this excludes male readers of shota who don’t want girl-like boy characters.

The “complicated mix” of shota fans deserves to be understood in sensitive ways, not least when it comes to how they think about attraction to fictional and actual boys, a question where my research participants differed heavily in their opinions and feelings. Saitō again comments that “the authors and readers of these texts are not pedophiles in their actual lives,”⁷² but it is not clear what he bases this claim on (or what he means by a pedophile for that matter).

With that, we now turn to my own research.

THREE

RESEARCHING SHOTA

METHOD AND ETHICS

This is an ethnographic study, which means that it is about *people*: the word “ethnography” comes from the Greek words for “people” (*éthnos*) and “I write” (*gráphō*). In other words, this study doesn’t concern itself with analyzing shota texts, but focuses on how people read them.

In this chapter I will describe very briefly how I collected the data that my findings are based on. Let’s start by repeating what it was that I wanted to find out:

How do people engage with shota?

How do shota fans think about fantasy and reality?

Now, which methods would best answer these research questions? As we have seen, shota fans are a diverse bunch of people, and what’s more, there is no physical field site where they “dwell,” so I couldn’t just set up camp in the middle of the village, like an old-school anthropologist. However, many shota fans congregated at recurring shota events, which can be seen as a kind of pop-up field sites. The shota shelves at specialty bookstores, particularly in the subculture hub Akihabara in Tokyo, also provided a physical space that was related to shota consumption. In addition, many shota fans were active

on social media, particularly Twitter and the illustration sharing website Pixiv, and that took some of my fieldwork online.

I think the lack of a concrete community worked to my advantage in some ways. Several research participants told me, often after we had finished the interview, that they had wanted to participate in my study because they felt alone in their interest for shota and wanted to know how others related to this interest. They also wanted to share with their fellow shota fans how they themselves engaged with and thought about shota, with me as the mediator. I think my research gave some people a sense of community that they felt they were lacking.

In order to achieve a “thick description”¹ of the *multi-sited*² activity of my research participants, I decided to rely on three main methods: *questionnaires*, *interviews*, and *participant observation*.

As can be seen in my research questions, I was not mainly interested in *why* people liked shota. As Bengtsson points out in her research among practitioners of ageplay, asking why people harbor a certain desire risks tilting the research into a psychopathological discourse, where it is assumed that desires that divert from the norm have identifiable reasons that should be mapped, in a way that is not the case for normative desires.³ Instead of asking why, I wanted to focus on *how* people engaged with shota, and what it meant to them.

I wanted to study how shota fans *in Japan* engaged with shota, but the participants didn’t necessarily have to be Japanese. However, it was important that they had been living in Japan for a long enough time to be considered a part of the larger culture in which shota emerged. Since I designed the study while still enrolled at a university, it was important that the participants were at least 18 years old. The last criterion was that study participants had a personal interest in shota – that they liked it, simply.

The physical fieldwork took place in Japan, mainly the Tokyo area, from January to June 2023. Ideally, a longer period would have been preferable, but since I had no institutional affiliation, I went there on a regular “temporary visitor” visa, which is three months, but which I could extend to six months.

Questionnaire

My first point of contact with research participants was a questionnaire in Japanese that also included information about the study and what participation in it would entail (for example, how long time it

would take to fill out the questionnaire or participate in an interview). Since I was suspended from my university at the time when I departed on my fieldwork, I stressed in the questionnaire that this was an independently conducted study and that I was not affiliated with any university. However, since I at this time still had hopes of returning to the university, I had designed the questionnaire in accordance with the feedback from the university's ethics committee, and this unfortunately limited what I could ask.

The questionnaire was available in print and online, and contained questions about four broad topics:

What kind of shota do you like?

How do you use shota?

How do you engage with the shota community, online and/or offline?

How do you think about fictional characters and real boys?

Lastly, I asked some basic facts about the participant's life situation, such as age, gender, and marital status. I also asked about "sexuality," but let the survey takers formulate the answer themselves instead of choosing from predefined categories.

I distributed the printed questionnaire at three shota events between February and May 2023. As we have seen, questionnaires are common in Japanese books. Except for the shota anthologies, at least one *dōjinshi*, and mainstream manga magazines such as *Shōnen Jump*, even my Japanese study books contain them. In addition, the organizers of Shotafes questioned their participants in a simple survey, an *ankēto* that was available on the flyer table, next to a box with free pens. So the format of a questionnaire was probably not alien to my potential research participants, when they saw my *ankēto* on the flyer table, or when I handed it to them if they bought my own *dōjinshi*. In other words, it was a method that fitted the local culture. In an attempt to further motivate people to take my survey, I had ordered 200 pens, with the text *Shota kenkyūkai* printed on the clip, which I gave to potential participants as a *purezento*, a present. Anthropologists will surely connect this initiative to Marcel Mauss's 1925 essay *The Gift*, which argues that a gift must always be reciprocated,⁴ in this case maybe by taking the survey. I will not deny that I indeed wanted people to take my survey, and that I thought the free pen could maybe influence them in that direction. In fact, one person

refused to accept the pen, maybe aware of potential obligations that would come with receiving the gift. At the same time, providing a free pen was not only logical in a smartphone culture where few people carry a pen, but also in line with the practice of the Shotafes organizers, who also provided a pen. Although, admittedly, mine was kind of flashy.

I collected 45 questionnaires from shota fans in Japan between February and June 2023. 26 of these were on paper, often handed to me directly at an event, and 19 were submitted online. Of the 45 respondents, 33 were men, 11 women and one “other,” specified as MTF (male-to-female) transsexual. The gender ratio looked different in Manda Ringo’s shota survey in 1996, which was taken by 63 women, 18 men, and one *okama* (which might be understood as a crossdressing gay man or an MTF transsexual).⁵ This might reflect that shota was seen more as a female genre during the first wave of commercial shota magazines in the second half of the 1990s, when Manda published her book, whereas most visitors at the shota events where I distributed the questionnaire in 2023 were men. The fact that I am a man and Manda a woman might also have influenced the gender ratio, since some participants might find it easier to approach or communicate with a person of the same gender.

Interviews

Some of the survey takers had indicated, by ticking a checkbox and providing contact details, that they were interested in participating in a research interview, which can be a way to have a deeper conversation about themes that have come up in the questionnaire. I made eleven such interviews. Seven of them were conducted face to face in the physical world, either at a café or similar, or, in two cases, in the participant’s home. One of the interviews was done on the video conference platform Jitsi, because the participant was living far away, and the last three were done through direct messages on Twitter over a longer period of time, since that’s how these participants preferred to be interviewed. The physical interviews usually lasted between one and two hours. I made an audio recording of all interviews except one, where the participant didn’t want to be recorded. In that case, I took detailed notes instead. I transcribed the interviews myself when I had returned home from fieldwork, and translated them to Swedish, which is my mother tongue and the language I prefer working in.

In addition to the research participants, I interviewed six Japanese researchers and one industry professional. These interviews were also recorded by me. The purpose of these interviews was to provide context to shota's emergence and existence in Japan.

Participant observation

Pioneered by Bronisław Malinowski during his stay on the Trobriand islands in the 1920s, participant observation is anthropology's primary research method. It is what it says: by participating and at the same time observing, you can learn things about the culture you want to understand more about.

But how do you participate in shota activity, that hardly has any physical space that you can travel to? As mentioned, there are recurring shota events, and they became my natural point of entry. There I could participate and observe, both as a circle and as a general participant. Except the shota events, I also went to the larger *dōjinshi* events Super Comic City 30, which targets women, and Comitia 144, which only accepts original works (no parodies). Both were held in May 2023 at Japan's biggest trade fair venue Tokyo Big Sight, and both featured shota works, although only as a small part of the whole.

But it also turned out that shota often is a rather solitary phenomenon, both in between events and for those who don't go to events. And so, I could participate on my own, however weird that might sound. One way in which I engaged in such solitary participation was by drawing my own *dōjinshi* comic, printing it at a *dōjinshi* printer, and selling it as a *dōjinshi* circle at a shota event. Not only did this let me experience first-hand the unique infrastructure of *minikomi* in Japan, but it also gave me a glimpse of what one can feel when both creating and sharing one's own shota *dōjinshi*, something that some of my participants had talked about in the interviews.

Another part of my participant observation was to use shota comics as masturbation material, as my research participants had said they did, and to try to observe how I felt when reading the comics in this way. This experimental practice, which was done on my own initiative without any university affiliation or guidance, gave me ideas for questions to ask my research participants that I wouldn't have got without engaging with the texts in this way. I described this experiment in a peer-reviewed article⁶ that was subsequently retracted after public outcry (see separate chapter).

Sometimes I will refer to my master's thesis in Visual and Media Anthropology, for which I conducted fieldwork in Japan in 2019 and 2020. This research resulted in the documentary *Unreal Boys* (2020).

Legal issues

The most obvious ethical issue, from the perspective of Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, was that shota (and loli) comics might be illegal to possess, handle, or even see in several jurisdictions in those parts of the world, because they were counted as "child pornography," "child sexual abuse material," or whatever the legal term happened to be.

In Germany, where I resided during my master's studies between 2018 and 2020, paragraph 184b of the Criminal Law stated that "whoever ... produces, obtains, supplies, stocks, offers, advertises⁷ or undertakes to import or export ... child pornographic content ... incurs a penalty of imprisonment for a term of between one year and 10 years." However, a "child" was defined as someone under the age of 14 (which is logical if you consider that the age of consent is 14 in Germany), and "pornographic" was defined as content that "reproduces an actual or realistic act."⁸ It seems that shota falls outside of at least one of those definitions, since the comics are neither realistic nor depict actual acts, and maybe the second too, since the age of shota characters is hard to determine and in many cases can be deemed to be 14 if not stated explicitly to be lower. Germany also had a concept of "youth pornography" (paragraph 184c) for content that features persons between the ages of 14 and 18, and where the penalty was "a fine" or prison for up to three years. But this paragraph also required that the pornographic content "reproduces an actual or a realistic act,"⁹ which is not the case with shota.

However, laws can be interpreted in different ways, and are ultimately determined in court. There had been a case in Germany where police confiscated a novel (!) that a prosecutor argued contained a paragraph that she considered "child pornographic." The local court didn't agree, and acquitted the defendant, a gay publishing house. But this was only because the judge considered the novel "lacking in pornographic quality," that is, it was not first and foremost pornography, since pornography "caters primarily to the beholder's sexual excitement, without regard to the human, interpersonal aspect of sexuality," as she put it.¹⁰ What is shota first and foremost? Does shota

cater to the reader's sexual excitement without considering "human" and "interpersonal" aspects? And who decides that?

To be on the safe side, my MA supervisor and I agreed that I should seek legal advice before proceeding. The university's student committee put me in contact with a lawyer, who explained to me that *shota* expressions might be illegal to possess in Germany, although such a case had not yet been tested in the courts. It might also be the case that being comics, *shota* expressions were not *realistic* enough to count as child pornography. However, the lawyer continued, even if *shota* would be illegal, Germany has an exception for "acts which exclusively serve the performance of ... official or professional duties," and this includes academic research. In other words, I was in the clear, and the lawyer told me not to worry. In addition, Germany's Basic Law from 1949 states that "[a]rts and sciences, research and teaching shall be free." This phrasing was a direct response to the crimes of the preceding Nazi regime, which had banned certain artistic expressions, crimes that the new constitution was designed to protect against. Before we leave Germany, it should be mentioned that a reform commission appointed by the government has recommended to remove fictional content which "without doubt can be recognized as artificial depictions, for example comics or cartoons" from the child and youth pornography laws,¹¹ although it remains to be seen if or when this will be implemented in the law.

In my home country Sweden, drawings are included in the definition of "child pornography" if they are "realistic," and thereby illegal to see, possess, distribute, and so on. However, whether an image is "realistic" or not can be debated. This is exactly what happened during the so called "manga trial," that ran in Sweden between 2010 and 2012. A manga translator and expert, who taught manga studies at a university, was prosecuted for and found guilty of "child pornography crime" for possessing 54 digital cartoon images (some of them duplicates) that the local court deemed realistic enough to count as child pornography. The regional court agreed, but released some images which they did not think were realistic enough. The arts editors of major newspapers decided to publish some of the released images, and a debate about whether the child pornography law should really apply to comics ensued. The supreme court, finally, released all images but one, which they still deemed realistic enough to count as child pornography. However, they acquitted the defendant on the

grounds that possession of this single illustration was permissible in his particular case, him being Sweden's maybe foremost expert on manga. But for anyone else, it would be illegal to possess this illustration. In other words, the supreme court chose not to make the law effectively void, which is within their power. A lively debate followed: a conservative member of parliament motioned that the child pornography law should only apply to depictions of "children of flesh and blood," as she called them, and a member of the Centre Party motioned at his party's convention that the law should "exclude pure fiction." Both motions were voted down, but not without debate.

During this trial, I managed to contact the artist behind one of the illustrations that the regional court had excluded from the case, and which had been published in a newspaper as part of the debate. I went to Japan to interview him, and my article was published in one of Sweden's major newspapers on the day of the verdict of the supreme court. In the midst of the debate, I also published an original shota work in English translation, and sent review copies to Swedish newspapers. One newspaper published the cover of the comic, and the arts editor defended the right to publish and review shota comics. This is all to say that while possession of shota illustrations remains illegal in Sweden, if they are considered "realistic," there was at least a debate about it, and the general consensus seemed to be that the inclusion of comics in the child pornography law not only was ridiculous, but also could hamper its ability to protect real children.¹²

In Australia, the ban on "child-abuse material" includes cartoons and animation. Mark McLelland shows how this legislation targets "girls and young women" who engage in fan communities online: "it is *young people themselves* who create, disseminate and consume the majority of *fictional* representations that could be classed as 'child-abuse material' under the Australian definition."¹³

Similarly, Aleardo Zanghellini shows that the wide definition of "child pornography" in Canada likely captures most *yaoi*/BL works, which makes it a criminal offense to "possess" or even "access" such works for the genre's predominantly female audience.¹⁴

In the UK, so called "prohibited images of children" can include "cartoons, manga, and drawings," according to the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. However, the images must meet certain criteria, such as being "pornographic," "grossly offensive, disgusting, or otherwise of an obscene character," and focused on "the child's genital

or anal region” or depicting a number of acts that are listed.¹⁵ This almost reads like a description of *shota* (or at least some *shota*), but scholars are at a loss to understand which comics actually meet the criteria for prohibitive status in the UK. This results in a situation where, in psychologist and BL researcher Anna Madill’s words, the BL community in the UK is “hostage to fortune,” and where it is impossible for her as an academic to research the “feminist readings” of *shota*.¹⁶ Madill calls the UK legislation “deeply problematic,” and concludes that it “has the potential to criminalise a demographic – young people – that it was designed to protect.”¹⁷

These legal circumstances affected both me as a researcher and my research participants. As per the advice from the lawyer provided to me by my university’s student committee during my master’s research, it would be legal for me to handle *shota* comics in Germany, as long as this was a part of my research. Exactly what constitutes research can be debatable, especially outside of a formal university setting, such as the year in between my graduation from the master’s program and the commence of my PhD studies. But since *shota* not necessarily was illegal in Germany to begin with, and since I am some kind of *shota* expert no matter the institutional affiliations, I didn’t worry about legal issues in Germany.

University ethics

As we have seen, the UK is another matter entirely, something that I was very well aware of before I even applied to do my PhD at a British university. It was clear to me that I would never, under any circumstances, bring any material that even reminded of *shota* into the UK. As mentioned, my research was ethnographic, so I concerned myself with the *people* who liked *shota*, and not the texts themselves (as opposed to for example literary criticism, where you look at the texts). To the extent that I would come into contact with *shota* comics, this would happen solely during fieldwork in Japan, where such comics are legal.

As for my research participants, they too were affected by certain parts of the British law. In the UK, courts can order a researcher to disclose data about research participants, a situation that led the president of the British Sociological Association to publicly state that “[s]ocial researchers working on sensitive topics know that the confidentiality of interviewees cannot be guaranteed.”¹⁸ Since my

research participants would live in Japan, and not the UK, the possibility of a British court order was maybe mostly theoretical. But who knows? With its purportedly “sensitive topic,” my research might very well have been the kind that was considered serious enough to mandate such an action, especially if my findings would be controversial and make headlines. I saw this as a severe hindrance in my research. One way to get around it would be for me, as the researcher, to not know the identities of my research participants. But I would still need their contact details, and law enforcement may be able to uncover an identity from an email address or a social media handle. In the end, I wrote this sentence in the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), at the end of the section about confidentiality:

In the case of a British court order, Karl Andersson will be obliged to hand over your personal information.

It felt ridiculous, and I wondered who would want to participate in a study with such a possibility stated in its PIS. This certainly went above and beyond what either my supervisors or other social researchers at the university did, or even were aware of. At the same time, I had discovered an issue that I needed to deal with. My phrasing in the PIS is not incidental. There is a difference between being “obliged to hand over” and actually handing over something, and it was clear to me from the start that I would rather go to jail than disclose my research participants’ personal data.

The reason why I read up on this was that my research was given an “unfavorable opinion” by the ethics committee of my university, which apparently is rare and seen as very serious. The committee reacted especially to a question that I wanted to ask my participants in the survey: “Do you like actual, living boys (3D boys)?” And if the participants replied that they did like real boys too, how did this attraction differ from that of fictional characters? I asked this because it’s what I wanted to find out – it was one of my research questions. The committee thought that such a question could result in a participant disclosing a committed crime, or plans to commit one. I argued that there is no evidence that there would be a connection between liking shota comics – or other erotic comics, with or without childlike characters – and committing crimes, and so, such an assumption is based on prejudice. But even if that was the case, all interviews, no

matter the subject, have the potential of the interviewed revealing a crime, I was told. You need a protocol for that. I will not go into the details of my investigations of UK law, Japanese law, university regulations, praxis among anthropologist colleagues in the UK and Japan, and the ethics guidelines of the British Sociological Association, the British Society of Criminology, and the Social Research Association in the UK. In the end, I downloaded the university's template for a "disclosure protocol," but added the phrase "without breaking the confidentiality of the research participant" to each step. Whether it would have passed the ethics committee, we will never know, since my modified application was automatically withdrawn when I was suspended from my university.

When discussing how to respond to the committee, an advisor told me that I could argue that since the age of consent is lower in Japan, to be sexually attracted to a fifteen-year-old "child" is not a crime. While appreciating the will to help, I found this argument completely wrong. Attraction in itself is not a crime, not even in the UK. I don't even think that the ethics committee argued that.

In the end, I rephrased the questions about attraction to real boys to:

How do you think that the characters of shota comics differ from or are similar to real boys?

Please explain freely how you think about the relationship between fictional boys and actual boys.

Not a word about attraction there. I wanted to be sure that my second application would pass the ethics committee, since each round took about three months, and my fieldwork was approaching. Unfortunately, this watered down version of my research question became nearly unintelligible. Several survey respondents replied that they didn't see any difference between the two questions, and I understand them.

I still regret that I adhered so strictly to the committee's opinion, which according to another participant in the meeting seemed to be grounded in "Victorian morals." This participant had the impression that the committee members had "fired up" themselves and each other in being upset over my research, and the naively straightforward way I went about it. If that was the case, they let their will to

be perceived as righteous persons take precedence over what they were there to do: facilitate good research. The rephrasing to the point of unintelligibility of the question about attraction to real boys effectively marred my research, which became blurry in its most central area, almost like an *eromanga* panel that has its most exciting parts censored. It can be argued that by not being able to separate personal feelings from the task they were assigned, the committee let down not only me and my research, but also the university that had appointed them to, well, *do their job*.

The above is just a snapshot of one issue in the meeting with the ethics committee; they had over a hundred comments, which apparently also is rare. What also caused them concern was that I would ask my research participants whether they masturbated to shota comics. I remember the words of the committee chair verbatim, when he said that “frankly, anyone would be shocked by that question.” I don’t agree. During my earlier fieldwork, the subject was often broached by the research participants themselves. The committee didn’t prohibit me to ask the question. They seemed more alarmed by me being so casual about it and not understanding the serious context it apparently demanded. Namely, another protocol. And so, I downloaded and modified a “distress protocol” from the university’s intranet, which contained clear instructions of what to do if a research participant showed signs of distress during an interview. These steps included to “take a break in the interview,” “offer the participant to drink water,” “offer them a napkin if they are crying,” and “ask the participant how they are feeling, listen with empathy and offer support.” The protocol also included contact details to a community center I had found in Tokyo, and instructions to call an ambulance if the participant suffered a panic attack. Needless to say, I felt frustrated at having to be told how to behave as a fellow human being. Especially the step where I should “listen with empathy” felt so false and unjust toward the research participant.

Even though I rant a bit about the university’s take on ethics, that doesn’t mean I don’t care about ethics, quite the opposite. Ethics is at the heart of what we do as anthropologists, and, coming from journalism, it is something that I have given a lot of thought. There is namely an important difference between the two vocations: whereas the first ethical principle of anthropology is to “do no harm,”¹⁹ that of journalism is to “seek truth and report it,” with “minimize harm”

on second place.²⁰ In other words, in journalism, the story is number one – in anthropology, the person. The reason why anthropology stresses this is that the discipline has a rather unflattering history, where humans were not always treated ethically. But even the principle of “do no harm” feels unnecessary if you truly see your research participants as equals, because if you do, then you of course don’t harm them. Another way to express this is “take people seriously,” which is the overriding principle of the anthropologist Tim Ingold.²¹ That phrase trumps the whole ethics application with its many protocols and policies (did I mention the “lone worker policy,” in which I promise the university to be aware of the risk of “tripping on cables” when interviewing research participants in their homes).

In addition to these ethical principles, or as a result of them, ethics permeates how we are trained as anthropologists. During my master’s studies, I read texts on for example “interviewing on sensitive topics,” where one risk is that “the articulation of hitherto private feelings may encourage a growing sense of a particular identity.”²² In my case, if a person who likes *shota* says it out loud for the first time in an interview with me, the identity of liking *shota* could grow stronger. I have pondered such possibilities, but I see the interview as a catalyst of such thoughts rather than an instigator of them. The larger answer, however, is that anthropologists always affect the field and its dwellers, or in simpler words, that humans affect other humans. And that this is not a problem. The “interviewing on sensitive topics” issue is just one example that serves to say that as an anthropologist, being aware of ethical issues such as this one *is my job*. It’s what I have been trained for. Maybe some people need a protocol to know when they should abort an interview or offer a napkin, but it is my hope that most anthropologists don’t.

So far the university ethics. I was told by several scholars and other PhD students at my university that there is the ethics application, which is mostly an administrative and legal matter – let’s call it “corporate ethics” – and then there is what they called “real ethics,” which we will turn to now.

Real ethics

Considering that the material that my research participants were engaging with in Japan was possibly illegal in several countries outside of Japan, including the UK, where I conducted my research, I needed

to protect my research participants from possible legal action or other problems in or by those countries. The most fundamental level of protection was the technical design of the study. Concretely, I needed to make sure that if law enforcement would seize my laptop and hard drives, for example after reading this book, they would find nothing that could harm my research participants.

Already during my master's research, it became evident that I could not use any of the popular cloud services for questionnaires or data storage, since they are not secure. Apple's privacy policy even mentioned that the company used "pre-screening or scanning" of uploaded content,²³ and although the details are somewhat elusive, my conclusion was that it would be unsafe to store my research participants' data in the cloud.

For the online questionnaire, I used a Linux-based Apache web server based in Sweden, which ran a Wordpress installation with a survey plugin. Since these platforms are open source, they offer a degree of security compared to proprietary systems. I obtained an SSL certificate for encrypted communication between the survey taker and the web server, and configured the survey plugin to not collect the respondent's IP address. After downloading the survey submissions, I stored them on several encrypted devices.

Since I also used filmmaking for fieldwork as a method, I needed to store large amounts of video and audio recordings. Following best practice in visual anthropology, I stored these files on several encrypted hard drives.²⁴

When working with the collected data, I accessed it locally on an encrypted laptop. I set up redundant and encrypted backup solutions. I also made sure to exclude possibly identifiable information, such as contact details, from the material. As an extra layer of protection, I gave my research participants my own nicknames, which were not connected to anything they called themselves. (Even if they didn't use their real names with me, some participants used social media handles that could possibly be connected to their real identities.) I also urged them not to use an email address that revealed their real name.

To the extent that there are differences in mindsets between people belonging to different cultures (to put it conservatively), this has important ethical implications for research. In my case, it could be hard for research participants in Japan to understand how people in other parts of the world would see their *shota* interest, and what it might

mean to talk openly about one's shota interest in a film. It was therefore important that I decided to anonymize my participants, even if they didn't demand it themselves. I have seen examples of TV teams from the US and the UK taking advantage of the unawareness of how controversial certain themes are outside of Japan, and getting an understandably clueless Japanese person talk about their interest without knowing that they are basically part of a freak show. It is understandable that journalism (if it can be called that) puts the story first, but anthropologists must be aware of this ethical aspect.

The problem of ethics committees in the humanities

When setting up my own ethical framework, I felt a certain relief at not being bound by university policies anymore. These required that all data be uploaded to university servers at the end of each day of fieldwork. Beyond the practical aspect of transferring hundreds of gigabytes of raw footage each day, I felt that I couldn't protect my research participants if raw footage of them was stored at a university in the UK. I argued that this probably isn't how the anthropologists at the university's famous center for visual anthropology worked, but I was at another department, and the university's information governance office didn't seem to be aware of work procedures in visual anthropology. Likewise, the university demanded that I use the survey software of the company Qualtrics, located in the USA. Although I communicated with this company about privacy issues, in the end I didn't feel that my research participants would be safe when handing over their contact details to this American company.

Another ethical issue that I was relieved of was the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). The university's template for this was long, in my opinion badly written, and included legal sections about the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that were hard to understand. The document felt like one of those long "terms and conditions" that you have to accept before using a software or service, and which people typically never read. I found it unethical that the PIS was so long and complicated that my research participants might not read it. It felt like it was there more to protect the university than the person in the study. I wanted my research participants to understand what participating in my study entailed, since that in my view is ethical, and so I put work into rewriting and shortening the PIS, without compromising with its content – all the important information was

still there. Having a BA in language consultancy, this is what I have done professionally. But in the end, my version of the PIS was not accepted. Having spent a lot of time and energy to make my research ethical, I deleted it all and went back to the strict template of the university for my second ethics application. It didn't feel good. Or right.

In summary, my research strives to be ethical, but in the sense of "real ethics," and not the watered down version that mostly seems to serve to protect the university from litigation. Real ethics don't come with a protocol for every conceivable situation. Real ethics simply ask that you take people seriously.

This is not only my view. Ethics committees have been harshly criticized in Sweden for making certain research in the humanities and the social sciences "impossible."²⁵ The Swedish debate culminated in 2,489 researchers signing an op-ed in a major newspaper in 2023, protesting that the current system of ethics committees "threaten research,"²⁶ and the Minister for Education announcing a review of the legislation.²⁷ Ethics committees came into being after the Second World War to make sure that no humans would be harmed in medical research. That was a very important original purpose, but the committees and the way they work are a bad fit for the social sciences today, especially when the word "harm" is extended to include being shocked by questions about masturbation – in a study about what many see as masturbation material.

I don't think that my study could be done at a university, at least not in the UK or a similar country, if I was to adhere to protocol and at the same time protect my research participants. I think that similar studies are conducted only because the researcher compromises in either of these areas – either letting down the university or the research participants – or because the university turns a blind eye to the actual doings of its researchers.

Having been expelled from my university, at least I didn't have to consider this compromise, which had caused me so much frustration. Finally I was free to do real research.

PART TWO

FINDINGS

FOUR

IDEAL BOYS

THE SYMBOL OF SHOTA

“Do you like cute boys (shota)?” The question is asked in the book *How to Draw Shota (Shota no egakikata)*.¹ Shota can technically be described as comics and illustrations that feature boy characters in a cute or sexually explicit way. But what does that mean? The book’s introduction offers a more poetic description:

Simple and innocent childish cuteness. An undeveloped body with muscles and bones signaling manliness. The special charm of boys that is called “shota” is about not being an adult, but being in the process of growth. ... No matter if they cry, laugh, are angry or quiet, these lovely boys are like angels who have descended on earth.

The key here is neither the child with its cuteness, nor the man with his muscles, but *the gap in between them*. That gap between two states of being human is where the boy resides, the book seems to argue. Humans who enter this gap are not humans anymore. For a brief period of time, they are angels. As such, they can’t be understood by the rest of us, and so, we are attracted to them, as if by magic:

A boy who is spellbinding us through his total overflow of energy, his being on the brim of adulthood, and his face so delicate that it seems it would break if touched. Shota.

Shota is an idea, a concept that we can't grasp, and which we are therefore infinitely fascinated by. We can never understand the magical beauty of the boy – that's why he is "spellbinding us." But we can try. For example by following the instructions that the book provides on how to draw boy characters, and how to do it in a way that makes them "even more cute." One character is shown holding a mace and wearing a primitive tank top. An arrow points to his right armpit, and we read: "When his right arm is extended to the left to raise the mace, you can glimpse (*chira*) the side of his body."² Another boy has an arrow pointing to his chest and this text: "Draw the tank top so that it folds according to his chest muscles." And so it continues with 82 more boy characters "who will tickle your heart," as it says on the cover. The book reminds me of one of those books that explain the tricks of magicians, only here it is the magic of the boy that is deconstructed. As readers we watch in awe, but ultimately, the trick is never explained, because who can explain an angel? And so, the fascination remains, as never-ending as the source that fuels it: the Boy.

The culture of shota is a direct and passionate expression of this fascination. Readers who draw their own lines and create their own boy characters engage in a kind of worship. Maybe that's why it feels so good? The headline to the how-to-draw book's introduction about spellbinding angels is written in English: "SHOTA IS JUSTICE." What does that even mean? Maybe it points to the act of worshipping boys being *right*, in some larger moral sense: drawing and reading shota as a way to *do justice* to an *ideal* that can't be appreciated in any better way?

Ideal age, appearance, personality

The gap between child and adult was central to my research participants too, when they described their ideal shota in my questionnaire. Personality and looks may vary depending on individual taste, but no matter if the participants liked slim or chubby boys, quiet or cocky, many of them said that the period of "growth," "puberty," or "development" was key to their attraction. It is in this period that "secondary sexual characteristics have not yet started to develop," "the voice hasn't changed, pubic hair hasn't started growing," and the boy "has just started to become an adult, physically and mentally." One participant centered this precious period to "around the first ejaculation," and added that the boy then had "both male and androgynous

traits." Others too used the word "androgynous" to describe this state, or "androgynous *bishōnen*" (beautiful boy). One described it as "the period when you become a man," and added that the boy is then in "the ambiguous phase when his gender identity is undifferentiated." One participant used the word "pseudo-masculinity": "A boy who tries to be masculine (according to the norm in society) but fails at it is the cutest." It is this contrast between wanting to be a man but still having a child's body that creates "*moe*," he wrote, or affection. This contrast is reflected in the boy's body, where "some hair has started to grow but the penis is still small," or where "his penis hasn't finished growing and he still can't ejaculate." If we see the ability to ejaculate as the biological border between child and man, the first ejaculation becomes the summit of the special period of growth and development that *shota* is all about; it is in the first ejaculation that the gap between child and man momentarily closes, as the boy transcends from one state to the other through an event that many surely have experienced as a kind of magic.

In other words, *shota* is not just any "boy." The word doesn't refer to a child, but also not to an adult. It refers to the state in between, the "not yet," the "has just," and the "in the middle of"; *shota* happens in the gap between child and man, a state that is beautiful because "time is finite," as one participant put it. Another participant explained more about this special time, when we met for an interview. He called it "the awakening" (*mezame*):

They don't see themselves as an object for sexual attraction. But when they become aware of their own body as something sexual, the phase that I call the awakening starts. Boys who are just entering puberty are sexy. I like how they look at that age.

He explained that the sexual awareness that the boy gets in this period is an irreversible change, "it can't be undone," and that his attraction lies in the fact that he as a reader becomes *moved* by this. "It is dramatic and there is an energy that captures me."

So what does a boy look like in this special period of his life? Let's begin with the most measurable of descriptions: his age. When asked in the questionnaire about their favorite age span for *shota* characters, my research participants entered ages from elementary school (*shō*) to high school (*kō*), sometimes using expressions like "low

teen” (*rōtīn*) and “first half of the tens” (where the “tens” cover that whole decade, just like one’s twenties). When I calculated the average favorite age from the 42 answers that had included a concrete age span, the result came to 12.2 years. Figure 1 shows how all but two favorite age spans include the age twelve.

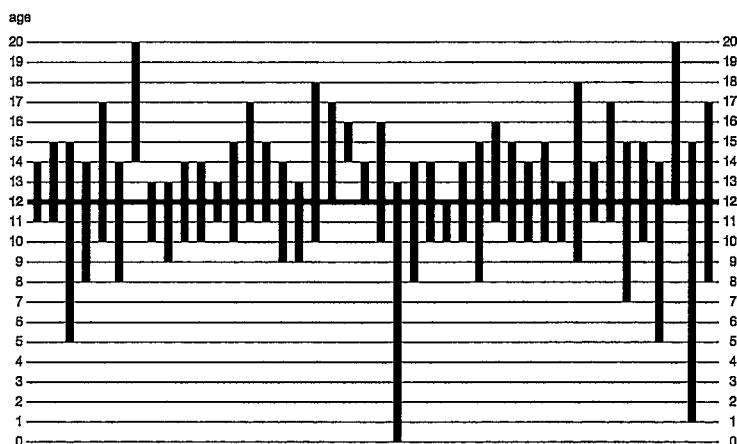


Figure 1. The favorite age spans for shota characters among 42 respondents.

This is very close to the 12.1 years that was the average preferred age of shota characters among the ten participants in my master’s study. Twelve was also the favorite age among the 82 shota fans that Manda Ringo surveyed in 1996.³

These findings correspond well to Yoshimoto Taimatsu’s analysis of 1,139 shota works published between 1994 and 1999: of all the boy characters who appear in the stories and have an age, 80 percent were between ten and fourteen, with twelve at the center.⁴

So the ideal shota is twelve years old. And what does he look like at this age? My participants said in the questionnaire that he should be short, and some gave concrete descriptions of his height, such as 130–140 cm, under 155 cm, 160–170 cm, and under 170 cm. The ideal body type ranged from slim to chubby, with many participants mentioning muscles, and some saying they liked tan lines. One said that “as long as he’s slim, I don’t care if he’s masculine or feminine, has muscles or not, or about his personality.” The ideal face was described as “childish,” “boyish,” “beautiful” (*kao ga ikeshota*).

Many participants mentioned short hair, or "shaved head" or "cropped hair." One said that "spiky hair is a plus but short hair is a must." The focus on short hair is a contrast to the long hair that the male characters in especially early *shōnen-ai* manga used to have. Short hair might here be a symbol that signifies both a younger age, and the masculinity that many participants wanted the boy to strive for (while not succeeding in achieving it). Short hair may also be a "realistic" attribute that connects the fictional characters to the actual reality of young boys, just like a school bag, or age-typical clothes. This would make shota characters more realistic than the fantastical creatures of *shōnen-ai*.

As for how the ideal boy is dressed, many participants mentioned shorts, and some swimming pants and briefs. One said the clothes should have "a high degree of exposure," and gave loincloths and swimwear as examples. But the boy could also wear a hoodie, or attributes from football, baseball, and other sports. These clothes of course reflect certain lifestyles or activities: swimwear is used for swimming, other sports attributes for those sports. Likewise, tan lines is something you get if you "play outdoors every day," which was how one participant described her ideal boy. This all points to an *active* lifestyle that goes well with the "lively" and "sporty boys" who are "full of energy" and "masculine vigor," which is how some participants described their ideal boy.

But there are several shota types. Some respondents said that they liked "quiet" (*otonashi*), "serious" (*majime*), or "timid" (*ki ga yowai*) boys, who might be "weak," or "look pale, but have a fine (*rippa*) heart." In contrast to this quiet ideal, others described their ideal boys as "cocky" (*namaiki*) or "naughty" (*yancha*, *wanpaku*) "irritating brats" (*kusogaki*) who prank or tease (*itazura*) their surrounding; who are "disobedient" (*shitagawana kanji*) or "stubborn" (*iji*). Such a boy was also described as being "confident" and having "absolute trust in himself." There were also a couple of participants who said they liked crossdressing (*josō*).

But no matter if the ideal boy was naughty or quiet, or hot or cool, as these personalities are sometimes called,⁵ he was described as "pure" (*junsui*), "innocent" (*mujaki*), "cheerful" (*genki*), "honest" (*sunao*), "curious" (*kōkishin*), and "kind" (*yasashi*). These positive terms were often paired with the "negative" ones above, as in "naughty, honest" (*yancha*, *sunao*), "naughty and cheerful" (*yancha-*

genki), “adorable, naughty” (*airashī, yancha*), or even “cheerful, naughty, cocky, pure, loving mum” (*genki, yancha, namaiki, junsui, mama daisuki*). This shows that the “negative” traits, which are personified in the “irritating brat,” are not really bad, or rather, that being “bad” is good, since it’s an expression of the untainted innocence and purity that the boy epitomizes.

Descriptions of the ideal boy as “precious” (*tōtoi*), “sexy” (*eroi*), or “sexually appealing” (*seiteki ni moeru*) don’t point to any looks or personality traits, but rather say something about how the boy is viewed from the outside, or how he is treated. After all, we don’t know what it is in the boy, be he quiet or lively, that makes him “sexy” or “precious” to the viewer. This also goes for descriptions of shota as “absolutely essential” (*hitsuyō fukaketsu*), “divinity” (*shinpi*), and simply “Gods!!” (*kami*). Such words remind of the how-to-draw book’s description of shota as “angels on earth,” and say something about the indispensable role of shota, or boys, in the participant’s life.

The *moe* database

Let’s revisit Manda Ringo’s book *The Syotaro* here, which she self-published during the first shota boom in 1996. When she asked her survey takers to freely list their favorite items for a boy, “socks” came in first with nine votes. The rest of the list includes both physical items like “school uniform,” “tank top,” “long eyelashes,” and character traits like “having unfulfilled dreams,” “a dark past,” and “ephemeral burning spirit.” In addition, “yesterday’s lunch bread” and “dead tree branch” shall be understood as creative euphemisms for the genitals.⁶

Asked where the magic of the boy resides, 13 respondents replied “purity” (*junsuisa*), 12 of them wrote “his smooth limbs” and another 12 “his eyes.” The rest of the answers are, just like the favorite items, a mix of physical features (“beautiful face,” “appearance,” “penis,” “butt,” and so on) and personality traits (“foolishness,” “eager to grow up,” “single-mindedness,” “fighting spirit,” and so on).⁷

In the last question, Manda asks her respondents to describe their ideal boy. These contributions almost read like poetry. An example, written by a twenty-year-old woman:

Childish facial features, looking tender, *bishōnen* expressions like long eyelashes ... definitely don’t fit him. Even without wind, his

hair is always fluttering. If he has a dream or ideal he'll stop at nothing to realize it, putting himself in difficult situations and fights. Even so, the boy will keep running at full speed. Instead of superpowers, as if he was a cyborg, his boyish incompleteness is emphasised. Such a boy figure is my ideal.⁸

The next example, written by a sixteen-year-old man, includes a connection to the respondent's actual reality. It is also a reminder that many of the *shota* readers during the first wave of commercial anthologies in the 1990s were quite young:

A white t-shirt over black shorts. About 150 cm tall, a bit plump, likes bicycles, doesn't wear socks (but if he does, it's OK). Big eyes and mouth. Hair in a bowl cut, a bit grown out. Personality is cheerfully determined or quiet. (If he's quiet, he wears glasses.) I like boys who are a bit rebellious. There are boys who fit this description in my math cram school, so I'm horny every day. Although the clothes are completely different.⁹

What the answers of Manda's and my own respondents do is that they try to capture an *ideal*, and they do so by assembling it from a collection of attributes: body parts, personality traits, clothes, hair-style, and so on. This can be seen as a prime example of what the Japanese philosopher Azuma Hiroki calls "database consumption," where characters are assembled from *elements* that create *moe*. Azuma contrasts this fragmented way of consuming culture to the "grand narrative" of modernity, where a coherent *story* was the default. In postmodernity, the story has been dethroned by the *character*, where *moe* elements are put together in endless combinations.¹⁰ This is the practice of the *fujoshi* in Galbraith's study, who said they had a "*moe* dictionary" in their heads that contained the meanings of all these elements and their combinations, what Galbraith compared to a "basic literacy."¹¹ In our case, elements like a tanned skin and a plaster on the knee represent an active boy who "plays outdoors every day." The boy character is "read" through the items he is made up of, by people who have the literacy for it. *Dōjinshi* culture as a whole can be seen as an example of this mindset, with its focus on the character and several alternative storylines instead of one official narrative.¹²

Azuma's point is that since the consumption of otaku was always database driven, otaku culture is the "essence" of postmodernity.¹³ And since we are now all living in the postmodern world, as represented by the internet, with its decentralized database structure and absence of any "grand narrative," the otaku can be seen as a forerunner; we are now all living and consuming in the fragmented way that otaku culture paved the way for in the late 20th century. I think pornography consumption works well as an example: porn flicks used to be rented from an adult bookstore, watched from beginning to end, and feature at least some kind of story, but in the age of the internet, porn sites feature *hashtags* that denote every thinkable act or desire, and which let their users connect directly to the *moe* database without any distractions in the form of a story. Likewise, dating used to follow a "narrative" of being introduced, go on a date, eventually get to "third base," and so on, but now apps let us filter prospective dates according to fine-tuned categories and measurements – what is this if not dating the *moe* database? In a sense, we are all otaku now, and that's why otaku culture may hold the keys to understand ourselves better in this new world of ours. Is a human being even necessary for dating? One of my research participants considered the pros and cons of dating a real human, before deciding to order a love doll instead, which he could design according to his wishes (we will meet them in a later chapter). With its focus on ideal characters and the items they are made up of, shota can be seen as a case study of desire in the postmodern world.

Ideal boys in mainstream culture

Ideal boys are not only or even primarily found in shota works, but in mainstream manga, anime, and games. Shota can rather be seen as the explicit extension of mainstream works, as it takes the raw material of cute boy characters to the next level by showing a dimension of them that can otherwise only be glimpsed. It turned out that almost all of my research participants had favorite boy characters in mainstream works. These characters can be seen as concrete manifestations of the ideal that my participants had described, assembled as they are from an ideal age, an ideal appearance, and an ideal personality.

The most popular boy character among my participants was Reg, the half-robot boy in Tsukushi Akihito's series *Made in Abyss* (manga 2012–, anime 2017). With his large eyes and short stature, Reg is the

epitome of cute. Since his origins in the series are unknown, he has no age, but visually he seems to be around ten years old. Except for being cute, he is kind and honest, other key words mentioned by my participants, and he is usually depicted shirtless. Reg was also a favorite in my master's study, and during my fieldwork in 2023, he was a popular character in derivative works at *dōjinshi* events. Considering the popularity of the series among not only shota but particularly lolicon fans, and its flirting with lolicon aesthetics, something that can upset people outside of Japan, it is worth noting that the anime got worldwide distribution through Netflix and Crunchyroll, where it won an award for "Best Anime."¹⁴ All participants who liked Reg in my survey were male. Alongside Reg, one man mentioned Ruka, Kukurū, and Kurt from *Doraemon*, and Shaohei from *The Legend of Hei*, and wrote that "all of them are cute, it would probably feel good if they had sex ♥."

Several of my participants liked Satoshi (Ash Ketchum), the ten-year-old main character in *Pokémon*, "because he is cute," as two of them specified. When I met one of these participants and asked him to explain what he liked in Satoshi, he replied: "Everything. He's cool and cute. If you say 'boy' (*shōnen*), he's the first thing you come to think of." In other words, the symbol of the Boy was encoded in Satoshi, and the same can be said about the other iconic boy characters in manga, anime, and games.

Scaramouche in the game *Genshin Impact* was also mentioned by several participants. One of them said that he liked this character's "erotic" (*eroi*) appearance. Another person wrote that he liked "both his looks and his personality," and specified: "Because he is kind. A boy of eternity (*eien no shōnen*). He may be the personification of Japanese culture (laugh)."

The favorite characters varied among the rest of the participants, but the words "cute" and "kind" were often used as explanation, along with other words that the participants had used when describing their favorite shota. One person wrote about Rabbi in *Granzört*: "Despite the rabbit ears make him super cute (*kawaisugiru*), he is naughty and boyish (*yancha de shōnenrashī*)."

The combination of looks and personality was also mentioned by a person who liked Tōya Akira in *Hikaru no Go* "because of his beautiful (*utsukushī*) looks, and his childish fighting spirit (*kodomo-rashī makenki*)," a word that Manda Ringo's respondents also used

when describing where the magic of the boy resided.¹⁵ When I interviewed this participant in his home, he showed me a calendar with shota illustrations in his bookshelf. He described the character on display as “maybe a fourth-grader,” and continued: “I feel a strong attraction to his littleness in combination with his manliness.” As we have seen, many participants pointed out the period of puberty as central to the idea of the boy, as well as what we can call “failed manliness”; the cuteness of the boy resided in the will to be a man while still being a child, or as this man put it, in the “unbalance” (*anbaransu*) between childishness and masculinity.

Another participant liked “Shine-chan” in the 1994 anime *Akazukin Chacha*, which Watanabe Yumiko called a “shota masterpiece,”¹⁶ and described him as “cocky” (*namaiki*).

Rabbi, Tōya Akira and Shīne are all side characters. Other participants too mentioned side characters as their favorites. A woman wrote about Oda Shinya in the game *Persona 5*: “At first he seems to be an ill-mouthed cocky (*namaiki*) boy, but he turns out to have a good personality and a complicated family situation that feels real.” She stressed the contrast between innocence and danger that made the character interesting: “A child in colorful clothes is mixed with the worst of all tarot cards, the ‘tower.’” This is another way to say that the character exists in the gap between child and man, or that that’s where his allure resided.

Lastly, characters who maybe weren’t technically shota were mentioned. A man who liked Byakko no Kogenta in *Onmyō Taisenki* wrote that “although he’s a human beast, his tone and gestures are exactly like those of a rebellious middle school boy.” Another man said about Ferga in the game *Merc Storia* that “he’s not shota, but I like his muscles.” A third man said that he liked Ryūta in *Monster Hunter Stories* “because the characteristics of a boy are emphasized.”

The rest of the favorite characters mentioned in my survey was a diverse bunch (English titles and names preferred when available):

Jimmy Kudo (Edogawa Conan) in *Detective Conan (Case Closed)*
(two mentions)

Kaito Kuroba in *Detective Conan (Case Closed)*

Tōshirō Hitsugaya in *Bleach* (two mentions)

Lan Hikari (Hikari Netto) in *Mega Man Battle Network* (two mentions)

Shigeno Gorō in *Major* (two mentions; one respondent clarified
 “only elementary school”)
 Kusaka Kabane in *Kemono Jihen* (two mentions)
 Tadamaru Shiki in *Kemono Jihen*
 Killua in *Hunter x Hunter*
 Hikaru Shindo in *Hikaru no Go*
 Matsuda Takato in *Digimon Tamers*
 Takeru, “Izzu” Izumi, and Daichi in *Digimon Adventure*
 Ayasaki Hayate in *Hayate the Combat Butler*
 Albedo in *Genshin Impact*
 Hikaru Hoshihara in *Danball Senki Wars*
 Leon D.S. Gehste in *Star Ocean 2*
 Ren Kaidō in *Super Lovers*
 Ciel Phantomhive in *Black Butler*
 Sasaki and Miyano in *Sasaki and Miyano*
 Yugi Amane in *Toilet-Bound Hanako-kun*
 Wataru Ikusabe in *Mashin Hero Wataru*
 Mataro Tamada and Masuo Netami in *Y School Heroes*
 Natsu Dragneel in *Fairy Tail*
 Shinra Kusakabe in *Fire Force*
 Shikimori-san in *Kawaii dake janai Shikimori-san*
 Yū Nishinoya in *Haikyū!!*
 Rex in *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*
 Shirō Emiya in *Fate*
 Link in *The Legend of Zelda*
 Gorō Hoshiwatari in *YAT Anshin! Uchū Ryokō*
 Syaoran (Xiaolang) Li in *Cardcaptor Sakura*
 Nobu-kun in *Super Radical Gag Family*
 Namida Umeboshi in *Super Radical Gag Family*
 Son Goku in *Dragon Ball*
 Dai and Popp in *Dragon Quest*
 Gold in *Pokemon Special*
 Ayato Naoi in *Angel Beats!*
 Takumi Shinada (including Black Pepper) in *Pretty Cure*
 Rudeus Greyrat (as a boy) in *Mushoku Tensei*
 Wataru Mitsuya in *Brave story*
 Oz Vessalius in *Pandora Hearts*
 Mizuki in *Arknights*

The diversity in taste among my research participants is a contrast to the focus on one single series, such as *Captain Tsubasa*, that used to be typical of *dōjinshi* events. This may be because my research participants are diverse, both in terms of gender and age, where each generation maybe has its own favorite series. But beyond the specific characters, who all are manifestations of the *idea* of the Boy, or various aspects of him (such as muscles or gestures), what is most telling about the participants' preferences is maybe that almost all of them had at least one favorite character. As one respondent (who liked Reg) put it, "no matter the manga, there is at least one." Only four of the 45 survey respondents didn't enter any favorite character. Two of these wrote that they "can't think of any" and that there is "no one in particular right now," one of them said that "I have favorite characters" but didn't specify any, and one didn't answer. This points to how integrated the culture of manga, anime, and games was in the participants' lives, and how cute boy characters flourish, and are cherished, not only in the shota community, but also, and not least, in the non-explicit setting of mainstream culture.

Ideal stories

We have now zoned in on my research participants' ideal shota: a twelve-year-old boy who is *still, not yet, and in the middle of*: still a child, not yet a man, and in the middle of puberty – that short and magical gap during which the body and the mind change irreversibly, and which therefore provides such allure.

The respondents' favorite themes and scenarios related to this ideal period. Several wrote that they liked themes of "first love," sometimes specified as "pure love," often with an "older brother" or "childhood friend," or between older and younger school friends (*senpai* and *kōhai*). Except for "pure love" and "friendship," there was a focus on the "first time sex," or on discovering sex together, most commonly with "a classmate," "a close friend," or "the older boy in the neighborhood," but also with an adult woman or (less frequently) man. Several mentioned "the first ejaculation," or to be taught to masturbate by an older boy, and to be surprised at the onset of hair growth. This could happen during a "summer vacation," "after school," or during the "club activities" that are a part of every person's life in school. Except for the physical growth, mental developments were also mentioned, such as being "still unsure about one's

sexual orientation,” or “having an interest in sex.” The person who mentioned the summer vacation wrote that during this “unusual” summer, “something is gained and something is lost.”

The above are all what one respondent called “everyday scenarios.” It seems that many of these scenarios tap into a collective past, where most people in Japan probably share the common experience of having been on a summer vacation, having had an older friend in the neighborhood when they grew up, having engaged in club activities, and (like the rest of us) having gone through puberty. The favorite shota scenarios that the respondents mentioned seemed to be either memories, or maybe *tweaked* memories. Just like the ideal boy has a certain look, personality, and age, shota stories can be seen as *ideal versions* of the memories of the past, close to reality in terms of the familiar setting, but with the added feature of the sexual aspect, which might have and might not have been there (or at least not in that way) in the actual version of the past. In the next chapter, we will explore these “ideal pasts” in more detail.

The relatively innocent scenarios of first love, exploring sex with a friend, or being surprised at one’s physical development in puberty, were contrasted to (or combined with) extreme themes of rape and sexual abuse in a few responses. A woman who had written that she liked “cocky boys who are put into place” and “pure boys who are deceived” also wrote that “I can watch almost anything, but I mainly like sexual abuse (*muriyari-kei*).” A man and a woman simply named “gang rape” (*mobure*, literally “mob rape”) as their favorite theme. Another man wrote that he liked everything “from heartwarming to gang rape.” Another man, who preferred “quiet, cute-faced, boyish” boys, wrote that he liked “brutal” themes such as “kidnapping” or “boys in despair.” Another man wrote that he liked stories about sickness and death. It was only these five respondents – three men and two women – who brought up these “brutal” scenarios in their responses. Brutal themes of disgrace and rape are more common in regular, non-shota *eromanga*¹⁷, where they have been understood as reflecting (and soothing) the reader’s own drive toward “self-destruction, self-injury, self-mutilation and suicide.”¹⁸

Ideal boys in context

I could personally relate to the passion with which my research participants described their ideal boy. In the 2000s, I published a magazine

about the boy as an ideal, and when trying to understand where the boy's beauty resided, I searched "in his glimmering skin, in his long eyelashes; in the lines of his collarbone, his pectoral muscles and his puberty."¹⁹ These few examples align perfectly with the "indispensable shota items" that Manda Ringo's survey participants listed in 1996, which also include "long eyelashes," "collarbone," and various references to the boy's skin and body.²⁰ My examples also include the important *period* of "puberty" that my own respondents stressed.

My research participants and I were not the only ones obsessing about ideal boys and the attributes they are made of. From ancient Greece, where the boy was hailed as an ideal, we have surprisingly detailed descriptions of what a beautiful boy should look like: "broad shoulders, a deep chest, big pectoral muscles, big muscles above the hips, a slim waist, jutting buttocks and stout thighs and calves."²¹ If this sounds too manly, Michel Foucault points out that the boy's virility should not yet be developed, but be there "as a precocious form and as a promise of future behavior: already to conduct oneself as the man one has not yet become,"²² a description that is very similar to the respondent who described cute boys as wanting to be masculine but failing at it. "Strength, endurance, and spirit" were parts of the boy's beauty in ancient Greece, and these characteristics should be reflected in "a sun-tanned skin" from outdoor activity,²³ a direct overlap with the "tan lines" mentioned by some of my research participants, and the "tan" mentioned by a seventeen-year-old girl in Manda's survey.²⁴ Even the survey responses about boys being "gods" are as taken from ancient Greece, where the poet Anacreon said that he wrote hymns to boys instead of gods "because boys are our gods."²⁵

In their descriptions of the ideal boy, my respondents' mentions of "the penis is still small" and "the penis hasn't finished growing" also echo ancient Greek ideals, where the penis of a beautiful boy was depicted in vase-painting as "thin (sometimes notably thinner than a finger) and short (as measured from the base to the end of the glans), terminating in a long pointed foreskin, the axis of the penis and foreskin being almost always straight."²⁶ The focus on the undeveloped penis also reminds of what Yoshimoto calls "shota's taboo," namely pubic hair. Among the 1,139 works that appeared in shota anthologies between 1994 and 1999, only six feature depictions of pubic hair, according to Yoshimoto's survey. He concludes that the strong consensus seemed to be: "If it has hair, it is not shota."²⁷ In the answers

that mentioned pubic hair in my survey, there was both “hair hasn’t started growing” and “some hair has started to grow.”

Japan of course has its own rich history of beautiful boys. At least in the fifteenth and seventeenth century, so called *wakashu*, adolescent boys between approximately eleven and nineteen years of age, were objects of affection. The defining feature of these boys was their forelocks (*maegami*), since these were shaved off in the coming-of-age ceremony around age eighteen or nineteen, when the *wakashu* “graduated” to a man.²⁸ Several participants referred to this history of appreciating young male beauty. When I interviewed the person who thought that the character Scaramouche personified Japanese culture, he explained that “there is a culture of beautiful boys (*bishōnen*) in Japan.” However, this culture had been replaced by “heterosexual culture” in contemporary Japanese society, and he lamented that homosexuals now had monopolized male appreciation of young male beauty, since “heterosexual men too like boys.” For this participant, *shota*, as personified by the character Scaramouche, became a connection to the old Japan where all men could appreciate the beautiful boys, the *bishōnen*.

An important aspect of *wakashudō*, or the “way” or culture of the *wakashu*, was that the boy was the sexual partner of a man, called *nenja*. A *shota* artist whom I met at an event contacted me afterward and wrote passionately about these relationships. She thought that this tradition might be the reason why contemporary Japan is more tolerant of “same-sex love or boy love” (*dōsei-ai ya shōnen-ai*). The prolific *shota* artist Tsukumo Gō mentioned the same reason to *shota*’s unproblematic status in Japan in a public interview I made with him in 2012,²⁹ and I was told casually by friends in Japan (without any interest in *shota*) that they had learned about these relations between boys and men in school. This all suggests that both *shota* artists and fans in Japan can “back up” their interest with a historical legacy that seemed connected to a feeling of pride.

Interestingly, already the townsmen in seventeenth century Edo, who had money but low social status, used the older samurai tradition to lend historical legitimacy to the popular boy prostitution that was part of the kabuki theater. In his famous work *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (*Nanshoku ōkagami*) from 1687, Ihara Saikaku juxtaposes the ancient *wakashudō* to the more commercial Edo version, in order to let some “samurai glory” be reflected on the latter.³⁰

After promising to help me in my research by spreading the link to my questionnaire, the shota artist I met at the event ended her message with an almost activist greeting: "Let's together do our best! For the sake of shota!" What "sake" was this? It seemed to me that her attitude went beyond the concrete expressions that are called shota, and was rather about idealizing the boy as such; shota just happened to be one expression that this idealization could take. Just like I said that I came from "boy studies" rather than from "manga studies," this participant too seemed first and foremost to be interested in the Boy as a kind of deity. The "divine boy" has been a theme in Japanese art throughout the ages,³¹ and maybe shota offered this manga artist a contemporary tool for the worship of this young god. In the same passionate style reminding of activism, the *How to Draw Shota* book ends with a simple imperative, written in English across the last page: "Did you enjoy this book? Love SHOTA!"

FIVE

IDEAL PASTS

THE HEALING OF SHOTA

I used to be physically weak and was often bullied by my classmates, and as a result, my family was overprotective. I haven't experienced the fun schooldays of manga, so maybe I'm feeling a bit disappointed about that and have a strong longing for it.

This was written in the optional "Do you want to add anything?" field in my questionnaire. I contacted the respondent and he invited me to interview him in his home. I will name him Kabane after his favorite character, thirteen-year-old Kusaka Kabane in the manga *Ke-mono Jihen* (2016–). Sitting on the carpeted floor of his modern studio apartment in Tokyo, Kabane told me that he had been "severely bullied" throughout his school years due to his small stature. In middle school he had been the shortest boy in his class, "and I was also very slim." Now, at age twenty-eight, Kabane was still slim but also quite tall, clearly above the average height in Japan.

Kabane grew up in China, and although the bullying subsided in high school, the focus on studies was so strong that it didn't leave room for social activities: "There was a lot of focus on preparing for university, so everyone was completely focused on studying, we hardly did any sports at all. In Japan they have their club activities (*bukatsu*), but we didn't have that at my high school. It was really just study, study, every day. For me and the others. From six in the

morning to nine in the evening. So you could play after that, but there was not much time for it.”

Describing his feelings when reading and drawing shota, Kabane said: “I feel strongly that I want to return to that time, and be surrounded by energetic boys.” When he projected himself onto the characters in a shota comic, it was with the feeling of “I wish this was me.”

Kabane sometimes drew his own school-themed shota illustrations. When I asked if he wanted to be with the boy he drew, he corrected me: “Rather than wanting to be with him, I want to *become* him.” He said that he liked sporty boys, and described his favorite character Kusaka Kabane as “incredibly strong.” In other words, the character he wanted to “become” was the kind of sporty and strong boy that he hadn’t been himself when growing up. He also liked Hanako-kun in *Toilet-Bound Hanako-kun (Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun*, manga 2018–, anime 2020–), a character that he described as “cool rather than strong, I think he’s cool because he does everything to protect the ones he likes.” When I asked if he wanted to “become” Hanako-kun too, he said: “I want Hanako by my side, but with Kabane I have the feeling that I want to become such a strong boy.”

Unlike many others, Kabane was uninterested in sexually explicit shota, and skipped those parts when he read a *dōjinshi*. “I’m more interested in the everyday life,” he said. “Walking home from school with someone, doing homework together. I guess I feel some kind of longing for that kind of things.” In other words, the purpose of reading shota seemed to be to provide an alternative version of Kabane’s actual schooldays: “I think I want the experiences that high school students have in anime and manga.” He also said that if he got children of his own, he would do all he could to give them a high school experience “as it is depicted in manga,” the kind of experience that he felt that he had missed out on.

The ideal schooldays of manga and anime were also what Satoshi returned to through his engagement with shota. We met briefly at a shota event in Tokyo when he gave me the questionnaire that he had filled out, and later we got together for an interview at a café outside Nagoya. Satoshi didn’t reveal his age to me, but seemed to be in his twenties. I have named him after Satoshi (Ash Ketchum) in *Pokémon* (1997–), who was his favorite character.

Like Kabane, Satoshi was bullied in elementary school. He thought it was because he was “interested in romance between boys” already

then: "At that time, because I was *homo* I became a target for bullying. ... And that's why, in this fantasy, I can create something else (*betsumono*)." So when reading a *dōjinshi* that takes place in elementary school, you can experience ideal schooldays, without any risk of bullying? I asked, and he replied: "Yes exactly, that's what I'm doing. That's what I want. Like a fantasy. Ideal schooldays." Since the boys in shota are so attractive, he imagined himself with the shota body he had in elementary school, experiencing romance with someone "like-minded." That is, he longed for the experiences that he didn't have back then, when he instead was bullied for his same-sex desires. That's where shota came in as a comforter that could give him not only those experiences, but a whole new and "ideal time in school." Satoshi liked stories set in an English public school, a setting that took him even further away from the gruesome reality of his actual schooldays in Japan.

A twenty-one-year-old university student whom I will call Killua had written in the questionnaire that he "particularly feel affection for characters who have a rival or best friend," and that he liked Killua in *Hunter x Hunter* (1998-) and Hikaru in *Hikaru no Go* (1998-2003) because of the love they receive from their best friend or rival Gon and Akira, respectively. When we met for an interview in a karaoke room in a suburb to Tokyo (like Satoshi, Killua was still living with his parents), he told me that he had had a best friend in school "whom I sort of liked." He said that he had been in love with his friend, "but it was only from my side, I think it was unrequited from his side." He saw a connection between his experiences in school, or the experiences he would have *wanted* to have with his best friend, and his favorite theme in shota, where the love was reciprocated.

In the questionnaire, Killua had written that he felt "cute" when he read a *dōjinshi*: "If only I was this cute." When we met, he elaborated: "Everyone says that manga characters are so cute, but that's not how I felt. I felt envy toward the characters." He said that he thought this was because he wanted to "become the character."

The way Killua projected onto a shota character may seem like a textbook example of Nagayama's "cute me" theory, where the reader feels pleasure and relief by "becoming" the cute boy (or girl) character. But whereas previous research has focused on the relief that men get from escaping from the traditional male role in society, Killua's

reading seemed to target his past experiences in school. Killua told me that he had Gon on a poster on the wall of his room at home, and he also showed me that he had Gon as the background on his phone. At the same time, he had said that his favorite character was Killua, who is Gon's friend. This makes sense if we accept that he wanted to *become* the character Killua, *who is loved by Gon*, in the way that he maybe wished to have been loved by his best friend in school.

Takato was a graduate student in the humanities who seemed to be in his twenties when we met for an interview at a café in Tokyo. He too told me that he had been attracted to other boys as a kid. He said that he hadn't had any sexual experiences with others then, but that he would have wanted to have that. "Shota is a way for me to relive my time in puberty," he told me.¹

Len was twenty-seven years old when I video interviewed him in 2023. In our earlier email correspondence he had written: "Already in middle school I had homosexual feelings for my classmates. I fell in love with one of them when I was in first grade of middle school." Now he told me that he hadn't had any sexual experiences in middle school, but "a few" in high school, although he probably would have wanted to have more: "My lack of experience during my high school days may have led to my admiration for shota. By engaging with shota, I feel like I've returned to myself from that period." It was in high school that Len realized more and more that he liked shota, and "a homosexual identity" started to take form. I asked him if shota helped him understand his homosexual identity. "Yes, I think it helped. I had seen the word on the internet. Many of the creators of these works were homosexual. So I understood that there were a lot of people like that."

Len liked the theme of football (soccer) in shota. He thought that this was because football in itself has a certain "shotaness" (*shotasei*) or "boyishness" (*shōnensei*) to it, with the uniforms and shorts. He said he liked shorts because "the degree of exposure increases, or to express it more directly, the skin shows." And since there are few occasions when an adult wears shorts, it becomes a symbol for the boy. Football is also "lively" (*kappatsuteki*) in a boyish sort of way, unlike for example baseball, which was the club he belonged to himself in school, where you mostly stand still. So although shota let Len feel that he had "returned to myself from that period," it was not his actual past that he returned to, but an ideal past, symbolized by the

“shotaness” of football, just like the English school signaled that Satoshi didn’t return to his actual past, but to an ideal version of it.

Unlike some of the participants, Len didn’t immerse himself in shota to “become” the boy, or even to “be with” the boy. Instead, he saw himself as an “onlooker” (*bōkansha*). To the extent that he projected onto a character, he imagined himself being the adult in a situation with a boy and an adult character. In other words, instead of *becoming* the boy, Len wanted to *have* the boy.

What these five participants had in common was that their reading of shota was connected to their own schooldays. Reading shota let Kabane experience ideal schooldays, “like in the manga,” free from bullying due to his weak stature, and without his actual experience of constant study and no play. Likewise, shota created a fantasy for Satoshi in which he too could experience “ideal schooldays,” without being bullied for being “homo.” Although Killua wasn’t bullied in school, he had the experience of falling in love with his best friend, and in the shota version of his past, this love was reciprocated. Takato was attracted to the other boys in his class and wanted to have sex with them, which didn’t happen. But when he “relives his puberty” through shota, it included the sexual experiences that were lacking from his actual past. Len too had “homosexual feelings” for his classmates in middle school, and fell in love with one of them when he was thirteen. He connected his interest for shota to his “lack of experience” in his actual past, and said that shota let him return to himself from that period. For these research participants, engaging with shota seemed to be a kind of self-help that healed the wounds of the past. As mentioned earlier, brutal themes in regular, non-shota *eromanga* have been understood as a way for the reader to handle self-destructive impulses and even suicide thoughts.² While reclaiming one’s past through shota is different, both readings show how erotic comics can be used in therapeutic ways, and, following that logic, maybe even prevent suicides.

Reclaiming one’s past

When I told *eromanga* scholars in Japan about how some of my research participants read shota comics to “reclaim their past,” they told me that nostalgia is a common theme in manga and anime. This is because many people in Japan look back upon their high school days as the last period of freedom, love, and maybe happiness, a con-

trast to the harsh reality of their everyday lives as adults. This kind of nostalgia explains why so many manga are set in high school, despite they are not necessarily targeted at high school students.³ However, I argue that the “nostalgia” of my research participants is different from the general theme of nostalgia in Japanese pop culture, and even contradictory to it. These research participants didn’t have any fond memories of school, and Satoshi even shuddered when I asked if he wanted to return to school. Since he had been bullied, he absolutely didn’t want to return, he exclaimed. At the same time, he and the others read shota comics that were set in school, but this was not *their* school. It was an alternative version of their school, one that could replace their actual experiences of bullying, unrequited love, and lack of sexual experience, and provide them with an *ideal past*, if only for the duration of reading a *dōjinshi*, or as a continuously simmering undercurrent to their lives in the form of a Twitter feed that supports you “twenty-four hours” of the day, as Satoshi specified the amount of time he spent on the app. Nostalgia implies good memories, immersing oneself in one’s actual past, going back in time with a smile. Rather than engaging in nostalgia, my research participants “reclaimed” their past by rewriting crucial parts of it. Just like the ageplay practitioners in Elin Bengtsson’s study, these participants had found a way to “explore a childhood one could have had,” as Bengtsson puts it, if circumstances had been different.⁴ If nostalgia lets you escape the here and now, what I call “reclamation” lets you escape your past, or exchange it for a better version, like sending back a faulty product in exchange for a new and shiny one without any scratches or bruises or severe malfunctions.

While my research participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, and self-described sexuality, the five participants referred here, who used shota to go back in time and “reclaim” their past, all self-identified as what somewhat simplified can be called “gay men.” I put scare quotes around “gay men” since one should be careful not to let such categorizations drive the research, and especially not to apply labels that may come from other cultures, as with the word “gay.” This is not only because words can take on a different meaning or nuance when they are transferred to another culture,⁵ but also because the idea of static and inborn sexualities is a thought tradition rooted in Christian Europe,⁶ and not necessarily a relevant way to understand the world in other cultures. Even so, feeling different from the other

boys in school due to one's desire for them seems to be a universal experience for some, no matter what we call it, and that experience was shared by these participants.⁷ The theme of reclaiming the past through shota was prominent among these "gay" participants, but not among other participants, who read shota in other ways. Since previous understandings of shota reading among men have assumed that the readers are "heterosexual males,"⁸ it is not surprising that the "gay" angle of reclamation has been missing.

In the interviews that I conducted for my master's research in 2019 and 2020, the theme of reclaiming one's past also stood out among the participants who self-identified as "gay men." One of them, twenty-two years old, said that he liked shota that was focused on friendship and being openly gay in school, something that he had not been himself. "It's not that I want these experiences," he said about the shota that he liked to read and draw, "more that I *wanted* these experiences when growing up." A similar wish was expressed by a twenty-four-year-old participant, who called himself "bi" and had a male lover, when he described how he felt when playing a shota video game set in middle school: "What if my own time in school had been like that!" A twenty-year-old participant who self-identified as "gay" said that his ideal shota was a thirteen-year-old boy in school uniform who played video games with his friend in his room, and added that he probably liked this scenario because he never experienced it himself at that age. Since he didn't have any friends, he invented one:

When I was lonely as a middle schooler I created this second person in my mind. That boy is my ideal shota. He was a lover, a little brother, and a friend. Even now I talk to him in my spare time and before going to bed. Is he my own shota?

This suggests that except for letting "gay men" reclaim their past, which can be seen as a kind of therapy or self-help, shota also empowered them in another way. In my recent fieldwork, all the above participants except Kabane discovered shota at a young age, when they, in a sense, were shota themselves: Satoshi was introduced to shota in middle school, when he self-identified as a *fudanshi*, by which he meant "you know, gay, homo" (*gei toka homo toka*). Killua found shota on the internet when he was thirteen, and since the characters were of his own age, these expressions gave him an awareness

of himself as a sexual being. Takato and Len found *shota* online when they were eleven and fourteen years old respectively. What they have in common is that their discovery of *shota* was a result of their sexual curiosity. All except Kabane mentioned that they had been sexually or romantically interested in their male classmates. We are all curious about sex at that age, and sooner or later we will be confronted with our first sexual expressions. If you grew up in Sweden in the 1980s, those expressions would almost without exception be a pornographic magazine that featured adult models engaged in heterosexual action. Today it would probably be pornographic videos on the internet, and although gender constellations and acts may be more fluid, and depend on search terms, the actors would still be adults. But these pubescent boys in Japan were presented with pornographic comics featuring boy characters of their own age. I won't argue that this is necessarily a superior first exposure to sexual expressions,⁹ but I think few would argue the opposite, that it would be better if these kids kept to "real" porn with adults. It seems that finding *shota* comics at a time when they were struggling with feelings of same-sex attraction gave these participants some kind of support, or as Len put it, an understanding that "there were a lot of people like that." Again, *shota* here seems to function as a self-help tool for youths whose desires diverge from the norm. It is accepted that BL and *yaoi* allowed young women to explore their gender identity, so the leap shouldn't be too far to the idea that *shota* can help LGBT youth come to terms with their sexuality or identity.

The theme of going back to one's past and tweaking it in certain areas also came up with some participants who didn't self-identify as "gay." When I interviewed twenty-four-year-old Akira in his home in Tokyo, he told me that he projected himself onto the boy in *one-shota*, or stories with a boy and a woman:

In *one-shota* it is common with young boys, in elementary or middle school, who are unaware about sexual things. Then I remember my own feelings from that time. So when I project, I imagine what I would have felt if a situation like that would have happened when I was that age. Me and my friends didn't have any awareness of sex, but we were curious about the female body, so it would have been a special feeling (*tokubetsukan*) if something like that had happened.

So can the *dōjinshi* be seen as a kind of continuation of your actual experiences from that time? Does it let you do what you couldn't do then? I asked.

Yes exactly, if the things in the *dōjinshi* had happened to me as a boy, it would have felt good, I had wished that such things happened. To project onto a character is the best tool (*tsūru*) to remember my feelings as a boy. I want to transport the young me into the world of the *dōjinshi*. When I have a *dōjinshi* in front of me, my imagination becomes a tool.

The man who said that Scaramouche in the video game *Genshin Impact* (2020) personified the Japanese culture of beautiful boys, and that “heterosexual men too like boys,” was twenty years old when we met for an interview at a café in Tokyo. Like Killua, he said that he felt “envy” (*senbō*) for the shota characters:

They are so attractive, and I want to become that attractive too. So there is an envy or longing for the boy. I didn't have any sexual appeal myself at that age, but these boys are both young and have a strong sexual appeal. The boy is so cute, and I feel I want to become the boy.

The wish to become the boy was not only connected to the boy's cuteness, but also to his social world. Scaramouche, as I call this participant, didn't have any friends to play with when he grew up, he told me. “When I started high school, I wanted to have similar experiences as in BL manga, but I didn't succeed in that. It was frustrating and I feel regret about that. I envy those who have such a relation in high school.” But when Scaramouche read a *dōjinshi*, he was able to change his past: “Instead of my own reality, I can experience another past (*betsu no kako*). I can get a best friend, a boy in middle school or in high school, one of my own age.”

For Scaramouche, shota also became a way to connect to a vanished world of ideal male friendship and intimacy. He described the idea or the concept of the boy as his “hometown” (*kokyō*): “It's like an own nation, an own group. 2D or 3D doesn't matter. All men have been boys and come from that nation, that state. Our earlier period as boys, and today's boys, it's our world (*bokutachi no sekai*).” This

way of thinking goes well with Nagayama's analysis of how some men read shota, where the absence of women facilitates a nostalgic escape from modern society: "This is a return to the boys-only clubhouse, and sex as a ceremony within a homosocial secret society."¹⁰

Self-projection

Let's now turn to how shota is enjoyed more widely. Among the 45 people who took my survey, almost all read shota in *dōjinshi*, which is hardly surprising since I distributed the questionnaire at *dōjinshi* events. Except for reading or looking at shota material, half of the survey takers – 18 of 45 – said that they also drew shota.

When I wrote above that my participants "projected themselves" onto a shota character in order to "become the boy," this refers to psychological projection, and more specifically the "self-expansion through fictional characters" that occurs when one is immersed in a story where a character represents one's "ideal self," which contrasts to one's "actual" self.¹¹

Despite my research participants weren't necessarily familiar with this psychological concept, 22 of them (17 men, 4 women, and one MTF transsexual) checked in the questionnaire that they projected when reading shota. Three of the four projecting women specified that they projected onto the *seme*, or top, none on the *uke*, or bottom. As we have seen, this is in line with previous research, according to which women project onto the *seme* in *yaoi* in order to "escape their own *uke*,"¹² that is, the role that they are traditionally assigned by society.

As for men, they too typically project onto the role opposite of the one they have in society, according to previous research. In other words, they project onto the *uke*, in order to become the cute boy (or girl) who is the center of attention, and this provides them with temporary relief from the demands of society.¹³ Among the 17 men who said they projected in my survey, eight said they projected onto both the *seme* and the *uke*, five on the *seme* only, and two on the *uke* only. The MTF transsexual also projected onto the *uke*. While my male participants certainly projected in a more varied way than is typical for fans of other genres, such as lolicon, I don't want to draw any further conclusions from these results, particularly as one of shota's defining features is its ability to dispose of the strict *seme* and *uke* roles¹⁴ – maybe the varied projection preferences simply reflect the playfulness inherent in shota.

Instead, let's look at how my participants felt when they projected. First of all, self-projection was described as a kind of immersion that lets you experience the story more intensely. By projecting, my participants could "feel as if I have become the shota," "feel like the character feels (love, fear, etc)," or get "a strong feeling of 'I can really understand it.'" Some also said that they felt sexually excited (*kōfun*), or "liberated" (*kaihō*) when projecting.

But projection could also be a way to connect the story to one's own experiences, or lack thereof, similar to how the participants I interviewed above reclaimed their pasts: "I remember my own childhood," "How wonderful it would have been if I had experienced this when I was little," "I wish this would happen to me too." One man wrote: "By projecting myself, I can return to an existence of pure feelings. If I had to explain this in one word, I would say 'boy' (*otoko no ko*)." Rather than just a character, the "boy" here becomes symbolic for an ideal existence. A man who had checked that he projected onto the *seme* wrote that "I want to hug a crying boy," and described his feelings when reading shota as being "healed" (*iyashi sareru*).

Among the women, one described her feelings like this when she projected on the *seme*: "My mischievous heart aches." She had described her favorite shota as "plays outdoors every day and gets dirty, he has fun and doesn't care about the judging mentality of his surrounding, 'aren't you ashamed to behave this way?'" and "Doesn't want to give up childhood." The allure of shota for this woman in her fifties might have been the contrast between the careless existence as a boy who doesn't care about getting dirty or what his surrounding thinks of that, and the very *careful* life that she possibly led as an adult woman in Japan, with its strong focus on politeness and what people think. Another woman wrote: "Maybe I want to become a strong boy who is more beautiful than a girl. Since that won't come true, I'm drawing it in a manga." This shows that for women, too, shota offered an alternative reality, which nevertheless was connected to their actual selves.

In a personal essay, Manda Ringo recounts how she "wanted to become a boy" when she was growing up. Up till middle school, she only wore shorts, never a skirt: "Until fourteen, I was basically a boy," she writes, which she thinks might explain why she now, as an adult woman, yearns for boys in middle school.¹⁵

Sexual healing

Even outside of the question of projection, several participants connected their selves to the story when describing how they felt when they read shota: "I imagine myself being part of the couple," one wrote. Another respondent said "I want to be a shota as much as I can," another one that "I feel both desire and envy for the boy, I feel both identification and friendship with him at the same time." Yet another one said that shota to some extent let him "see the glittering world through the eyes of a boy." All of these respondents were male, which might make identification with a male character, or connecting the story to one's own boyhood, easier. One man even wrote that his feelings were dependent on "whether I can relate it to my own experiences."

As we saw earlier, "cute" was a keyword when describing the allure of shota characters. But even when describing how they felt when reading shota, a whole nine participants spontaneously wrote "cute." Sometimes that word was the only answer: "Cute!!" Longer answers like "I feel that they are so cute" (*kawaii na to kanjiru*) indicated that the cuteness referred to the boys they were viewing, not necessarily to themselves. Yet another answer pointed to exactly this connection to the self: "Cute, if only I was this cute." These answers can be seen as examples of Nagayama's theory of shota giving the reader the opportunity both to be *with* a cute boy, and to *be* the cute boy.¹⁶ Other positive feelings that the participants mentioned were "happiness" (*shiawase*) and "fun" (*tanoshī*), or that reading shota made them feel "grateful" (*arigatai*).

15 participants mentioned various forms of sexual feelings in the questionnaire, from being "sexually aroused" (*seitekina kōfun*) to feeling "horny" (*muramura*), "excited" (*wakuwaku*), or finding it "sexy" (*ecchi*). Some mentioned words like "desire" (*yokubō*), one said that he felt "filled up with the things I like," and added the word "pleasure" (*kaikan*) in parenthesis. One said that it was both "libido" (*ribidō*) and "moe," or an affection for fictional characters. A word that was mentioned often, particularly by women, was "*iyashi*," which literally translates to "healing," but can be understood as a kind of comforting or soothing that in some contexts is synonymous with "sexual relief," but which doesn't necessarily have a sexual meaning. In any case, the positive feelings described by my participants made it clear that shota made them feel good, but maybe in different ways.

Since many shota readers reported sexual feelings, and since shota comics typically are sexually explicit, it should come as no surprise that 28 of the 45 survey takers said they masturbated to shota. However, there was a clear gender divide here. Whereas 27 of the 33 male participants masturbated to shota, with 5 checking “no” and one choosing “prefer not to answer,” only one of the 11 women said she masturbated to shota, with 8 women choosing “no” and two preferring not to answer. The MTF transsexual also checked “no.” This is not a quantitative study, and there may be all kinds of reasons to why 82 percent of the male participants said they masturbated to shota, whereas only 8.3 percent of the women (including the MTF transsexual) said they did so. As with all questions, it can be discussed whether the participants can be trusted to have written a truthful answer. But it is at least clear that a significant part of the participants used shota as masturbation material. This confirms the results of my master’s study, where some participants went so far as to say that shota’s “main purpose” was to be masturbation material, or *okazu*.

Shota routines

In order to understand more concretely how my research participants engaged with shota, I asked them to describe a typical day in their life, and shota’s role in it.

The first thing Killua saw when he woke up in the morning was the poster of Gon, the twelve-year-old protagonist of *Hunter x Hunter*, on his wall. The poster could be turned around to show a more explicit scene, but the innocent Gon side was the one he presented to others. Killua left for his university at 7:30 and attended classes throughout the day. When he came home around eight in the evening, he spent about an hour with his studies, and another hour drawing shota. Then he took a bath and went to bed to read a *dōjinshi* while masturbating, before falling asleep.

Akira worked from home when we met. He used to wake up at seven or eight, and started his day by masturbating to a shota *dōjinshi* for twenty or thirty minutes while still in bed. Then he got up, had breakfast, and started working at his computer around nine. He checked Twitter throughout the day, during breaks from work. “My feed is full of shota, so if something appropriate turns up, I masturbate again.” After work, he had dinner in front of his computer while checking Twitter and other websites. Then he worked on his hobbies,

and around ten or eleven he went to bed. He usually didn't leave his apartment during weekdays. Both Killua and Akira told me that they sometimes masturbated to regular porn videos on the internet, "for variation," as Killua put it. When it came to erotic comics, Killua only read shota, whereas Akira sometimes used other genres, for example featuring a man and a woman: "It depends on how I feel that day."

Satoshi read a *dōjinshi* only once a week or more seldom, but shota was part of his everyday routine in the form of his Twitter feed, which he said he checked "all day long, twenty-four hours." He got up at 4:30 in the morning, watched anime or Youtube while eating breakfast, and started working at a home for elderly people at 5:30. He browsed Twitter on the train to and from work, and during breaks. The job usually ended at 2:30 in the afternoon. Then he went home, and since his mother was deceased, it was his task to cook for the family. After that he played some video game, took a bath, and went to bed. He said that he used to masturbate to shota, but usually didn't do it anymore: "Of course I get sexually excited. I get an erection, but I don't masturbate. It's just a reaction, a bodily reaction." However, in the questionnaire he had checked "yes" in the question about whether he masturbates when reading shota, so maybe the border was not so clearcut.

Hōsuke, a married woman in her "mid thirties," engaged with shota one or two days a week, but said she thought about shota for about an hour every day. She described shota's role in her life as giving her "peace" or "tranquility" (*yasuragi*): "I feel relaxed when I see the relationship between a boy and his world. It's almost as if I'm the older brother who watches over his little brother. That's the feeling. When I have finished drawing a manga and read through my own work, that's how I feel." This reminds of the feelings of the female protagonist in the popular teens love web comic turned paperback *Subaru-kun is horny* (*Subaru-kun wa muramura shitemasu*, 2022), who through family circumstances finds herself with a younger boy and exclaims: "I'm so happy that I've managed to get a little brother ... I want to take care of him ..." ¹⁷ The young woman of course ends up in bed with her "little brother," but as the back of the *obi*, which reproduces the panels with the first kiss, blurts out from the perspective of the boy: "I'm not a child, I'm not your little brother. I want you to see me as a man." Hōsuke said in our interview over direct messages that she didn't masturbate to shota.

Kabane worked as a researcher in a lab when we met, and he had decorated the wall next to his desk with shota postcards. He also used shota illustrations as wallpapers on his laptop and iPad. This made him “feel good, or maybe I should say that I feel comforted (*iyashi sareru kanji*).” Kabane enjoyed shota through *dōjinshi* and Twitter. Another way that he made shota part of his life was by wearing gym clothes or a school uniform in public, clothes that are associated with boys. “I think it might have to do with a strong desire to become a high school student again.” Like Hōsuke, Kabane didn’t use shota for masturbation. This was because the feeling he got from shota was not “erotic” (*eroi*), but rather “cute” (*kawaii*) and “comfort” (*iyashi*). He compared the feeling to having a cat, which you of course want to touch and stroke because it’s cute, but: “If you have a cat, you wouldn’t want to have sex with it (laugh). That’s how I feel.” He told me casually that his boyfriend masturbated to shota, so the topic was not sensitive.

As we saw earlier, by seeing himself as an “onlooker” rather than one of the characters in the story, Len had a more voyeuristic way of reading shota. This was reflected in his everyday life, where he would see and admire real boys on the train to and from work. When he came home and masturbated in front of his computer, the memories of real boys on the train would mix with the sexually explicit shota illustrations that he was watching. Len here introduces a connection between shota and real boys that we will explore in a later chapter.

During my master’s research too, I learned how shota was an integrated part of the lives of my participants. For example, a twenty-nine-year-old man masturbated to shota in front of his computer for half an hour every evening after his pregnant wife had fallen asleep. Without going into detail, he indicated that his wife was “very understanding.”¹⁸ The way several of my participants used shota for masturbation is also in line with Thomas Baudinette’s study of how “gay men” in Japan read BL and *geikomi*, where all of them said that they used books from these genres as masturbation material.¹⁹

Shota as self-help

Two things stand out in these findings. First, that shota reading is not really about boys or the readers’ potential attraction to boys, but about *the readers themselves*. While the content of shota comics may come off as “extreme” to some (such as the Dutch Special Rapporteur

to the UN), for these participants it was really just a “tool,” as Akira called it, to connect to oneself and one’s past. In that sense, “what is drawn on the page,” as Nagayama put it,²⁰ is both irrelevant and uninteresting compared to the *meaning* that the act of reading had for these readers.

Second, many of these participants can somewhat simplified be described as belonging to vulnerable groups. Several of them self-identified as “gay,” “bi,” or “homosexual,” and had been bullied in school, in Satoshi’s case as a direct result of being “homo,” as he said. Shota helped Len understand his homosexual identity when he was in high school. Even without a non-normative identity, Scaramouche said that he had not had any friends to play with when growing up. Shota let these participants “reclaim” their pasts by providing an alternative and ideal version of it. It was not even primarily, or only, sexual experiences that these readers wanted, but the everyday experiences of friendship and play. Considering that shota readers are often painted as predators in online discussions and media reports, particularly outside of Japan, it is important to realize that many of them are the opposite to that: they are the bullied rather than the bully, the outcast who didn’t have any friends. They are the vulnerable, for whom shota reading can both heal the wounds of the past, and help them understand and come to terms with their sexual identity, particularly in an LGBT discourse.

SIX

SHARED DESIRES

THE CULTURE OF SHOTA

It's a chilly February morning in Yokohama, and about a hundred people are waiting in the lobby outside a conference hall. Some are wearing backpacks, some have brought trolley bags. Although most seem to have come alone, the atmosphere is friendly and some people chatter with each other. It's a Sunday and they are casually dressed. Everyone is wearing a face mask. A loose line has formed, and when new people arrive, they look around a bit first, and then go to the back of the line, which stretches all the way to a little café at the opposite wall. These are the circle participants, or creators, at the shota event Shotafes 12, and their luggage is either filled with their newly printed *dōjinshi* that they will sell today, or with older publications, since many circles let their newest *dōjinshi* be shipped directly from the printer to the event. Many also bring an empty bag that will be filled up with the works that they will buy from or exchange with other circles during the day. The excitement is evident. This is the day we have all been waiting for. For the next four hours, circle participants will meet with general participants and staff participants at this shota *only* spot sale event, or *sokubaikai*.

At 11 o'clock, a staff participant with a badge around his neck opens the door to the hall and asks the participants to form two proper lines. Before we are let into the hall, we must pass a tripod with a sensor that measures our temperature – it is 2023 and we're at

the end of a pandemic. Relieved to have passed the test, I continue into the event venue, where friendly staff participants guide me along a set of desks where I first show the circle ticket on my phone, then show my passport for the age check, pay 1,000 yen for the mandatory event catalogue (as instructed beforehand, I have brought exact change), and finally receive a pink wristband. It's all smiles, and the whole process takes less than half a minute.

I have been to ten or so shota events over the past decade, and they have been surprisingly similar in size and style. My first shota event was Shotascratch 18 in 2012. I remember the stress when I realized I had forgotten to bring my passport for the age verification at the entrance. The volunteer who checked everyone's ID called a manager, who after some desperate explanations from my side deemed me to be at least 18, and let me in. I also remember the unreal feeling of being in a room with hundreds of other general participants, and about two hundred circle participants, who all were there because they liked shota.

At a *dōjinshi* event, the creators who sell their *dōjinshi* or goods are called "circle participants," and the visitors "general participants." In addition, the organizers and volunteers are called "staff participants." This terminology stems from Comic Market, whose founders wanted to stress that all "participants" (*sankasha*) contributed to the event,¹ and that a "general participant" wasn't merely a "customer."²

I spent some 30,000 yen on *dōjinshi* at my first event (as a comparison, the monthly rent for the house I rented at this time was 55,000 yen). Unlike many of my study participants, I hadn't done any research beforehand, and didn't have any favorite artists. I just went from table to table, browsed the sample copy, and more often than not bought one or more of the artist's *dōjinshi*. I was like a kid let loose in a candy shop. But I was also an adult with an income, and it felt good to support this unique culture financially.

In October 2013, I went to Shotascratch 21, and in December to Comic Market 83. This mother of all *dōjinshi* events, held at Japan's biggest trade fair venue Tokyo Big Sight for a few consecutive days twice a year, and with hundreds of thousands of participants, also featured a shota section. After a break from Japan for some years, I came back in October 2017 to participate at Shotascratch 33. This event was held on the seventh floor of a conference building that housed other events too on this Saturday. This is an excerpt from my diary:

The lobby was full of people when I entered the conference center. A representative for the event called out to those of us who seemed to be on our way to Shotascratch: "Shotascratch seventh floor!" I noticed on a monitor that a kimono workshop was taking place on the sixth floor. Elevator to the seventh floor, where I showed my passport (I remembered it this time!) and was let into the waiting room. I came 25 minutes before opening time, but there were already several lines of men sitting on the floor, and I was shown to my place too and sat down. I counted to 20 persons per line, about 12 lines, so about 240 guests – at the opening. While I was waiting, I browsed the catalogue that I think you had to buy for 600 yen as an entrance fee (and I wanted it anyway).

The waiting room was separated from the event venue only by folding screens. When the clock turned 11:30, the representative who stood in front of us said "I hereby declare Shotascratch 33 opened," and everyone applauded. Then we walked in, line after line. We kept to our lines, even after the volunteers had moved away the screens, it looked a bit funny. People raised the hand holding the catalogue when they went in, just like the representative did, maybe to show that you had it (but we also had wristbands).

A bit of confusion while I tried to get an idea of the layout of the tables and who I would go to first. People immediately started forming the longest line – from one wall to the other in double rows – to Service Boy, whom the organizers had given a good placement that was appropriate for such a long line, they knew he was popular. ... When I took my place in the line, a bit later, when it was shorter, I was given the cardboard sign that says "last person in line." Just like last time, the guy from Studio Rakkyou arrived after it had begun. ... And just like last time, a line quickly formed. I placed myself in it and then bought all the three things he was selling.

At Boys Parade 2 in October 2019, I was for the first time trying to recruit participants for my master's research, although without much success; the organizers wouldn't let me distribute my flyers, since they thought it would be unfair to the circle participants, who had all paid for their space, if I was allowed to promote my project for free. Fair enough, this made me decide to try to participate as a circle at the

upcoming Shotafes 5, which would be held in Yokohama in February 2020.

These shota events were truly Japan-internal affairs. Unlike Comic Market, which has some information in English, the websites of Boys Parade and Shotafes were entirely in Japanese. What was more problematic, both a Japanese address and a Japanese bank account were required to apply for a space as a circle participant at Shotafes 5. I had neither. As if this was not enough, it turned out that the online application form could not be submitted from a computer with an IP address outside of Japan. A research participant I had met on my last trip offered to help me by using his address and bank account, and submitting the form for me. At his suggestion, I named my circle *Shota kenkyūkai* – the “shota research group” – and made a “circle cut,” or thumbnail, for it, which he submitted with the application. The price for one space was 3,500 yen.

When Shotafes released the names of the 219 circle participants on their website, one month before the event, and presented them with their circle cuts and links to homepages and Twitter and Pixiv profiles, I was excited to see myself in the list. Since my research participant had moved from the Tokyo area when I arrived to Japan, he sent the physical tickets that he had got from Shotafes by mail to a friend of mine in Tokyo, whom I met up with to finally receive the two tickets that each participating circle got. This is all to explain that there was quite some administration required for a foreigner wanting to participate as a circle at a shota event in Japan in 2020.

The envelope from Shotafes also contained a “circle participant guide” in the form of a slim booklet with a detailed schedule and information about everything from the mandatory age check to the price for renting an extra chair (500 yen) for one’s space, since each circle was allowed to have two participants. It also included an example shipment label from a delivery company, for those who wanted to have their *dōjinshi* shipped directly from the printer to the event.

As can be seen on the website *ketto.com*, which lists *dōjinshi* events across Japan, most events are held on weekends. On the day that I’m writing this paragraph, Sunday February 11, 2024, thirteen *dōjinshi* events of various specializations are held in Japan according to *ketto.com*: seven of them in the Kantō (Tokyo) area, including one at Tokyo Big Sight, the rest in Sapporo, Nagoya, Kobe, Hiroshima, and Tsuyama. Most events start around 11 and close around 15.

Shotafes 5 was held on a rainy Sunday in February 2020 between 12 and 16, and the circle participants were admitted between 10 and 11:30. After having shown my passport, paid 500 yen for the catalogue, and got my wristband, I found my assigned desk and set up the poster advertising my circle name. Such promotional items were called “POP” by some of my study participants, for “point of purchase” promotion. My *dōjinshi*, which I had printed in Germany and brought to Japan, contained my interviews with shota fans, as well as some illustrations that I had made. A member of staff came by my space and browsed the little booklet to make sure it adhered to the rules. He quickly approved it. My neighbor was not as lucky. The staff member complained that one of his illustrations wasn’t properly censored, so for the next ten minutes or so, this participant had to go over all the copies he had brought with a marker to add an extra black line on a character’s genitals. From 11:30, the circle participants were allowed to buy each other’s works, before the event opened. And then at 12 o’clock sharp, a woman announced on the PA that “Shotafes 5 is hereby opened.” Applause followed, and general participants started to fill the hall. Just like at the previous events I had been to, long lines started forming in front of the desks of popular circles. People were interested in my research. I ended up selling 42 copies of my *dōjinshi*, and connecting with people who wanted to participate in my study.

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the *dōjinshi* world severely. *Dōjinshi* printers struggled as events closed down.³ Shotafes postponed their physical events,⁴ and experimented with moving online, where participants were asked to use a hashtag on Twitter to create a one-day Twitter-based event.⁵ When they opened up again, it was with a strict regimen of measures to prevent the spreading of the virus.⁶ An acquaintance of mine reported that these restrictions, where general participants were assigned a time slot during which they could enter the hall, took the fun out of the event, and that the number of participants was much lower than before the pandemic.

When Shotafes 12 was held in Yokohama in February 2023, things were back to normal again. I had registered as a circle, happy to finally be able to enter Japan after two and a half years of entry restrictions. This time, one could pay through Paypal, and both the tickets and the guide were digital, so there was no need for a Japanese address or bank account. However, the application form could still only

be submitted from within Japan, so I used the personal VPN of a Japanese friend⁷ to get a Japanese IP address when I applied. Again, I participated as the circle *Shota kenkyūkai*. Except for spare copies of my old *dōjinshi*, I had brought the questionnaire used for this study, and the free pen. The same staff member who had inspected my *dōjinshi* in 2020 came by and said that he didn't need to browse it again, since he remembered approving it three years earlier – such was the familial atmosphere.

Being a bit more experienced as a circle participant now, I could relax more. So when the same woman who had opened Shotafes 5 in 2020 announced at 12 o'clock that "Shotafes 12 is hereby opened," and people applauded and general participants started to fill the hall, I felt a rush of joy at being part of this exhilarating culture. There may be different views on what shota is or what it means to be a shotacon, but here we were, assembled in the same physical space, in silence, each one of us alone but at the same time together, connected through an unspoken feeling of oneness. Months of hard work for the circle participants and anticipation for the general participants exploded into this particular event, on this day, this hour. Like many other events I've been to, including the big ones at Tokyo Big Sight, Shotafes 12 was most energizing during the first hour. After that, people started dropping off, and during the last hour, many circle participants had already packed up and left. When things started to calm down, my circle neighbor approached me, and we talked a bit and exchanged *dōjinshi*.

Since I was living in Japan now, I went to the new event J-ket 1 (Junior Market), which my circle neighbor had recommended me, in Tokyo in March 2023. I went as a general participant but was allowed to distribute my questionnaire and the pen.

Then I signed up to participate as a circle again at Shotafes 13 in May 2023, only this time I wanted to do it not as a researcher, but "for real," as a shota manga artist. So for an intensive month, I created my first comic and had it printed at one of the specialized *dōjinshi* printers in Japan. Whereas I had used the software InDesign from the American company Adobe when creating my *dōjinshi* in 2020, and Affinity Publisher from the British company Serif when creating my questionnaire (which had quite an elaborate design), I now chose to do everything, from drawing to page management, on my iPad in the app Clip Studio Paint EX from the Japanese company Celsys.

It felt more local, and some of the *dōjinshi* printers had templates for this app. Shotafes 13 was to be held in the first week of May, the major holiday period called Golden Week, which is also when several other events, big and small, are held. This meant that the *dōjinshi* printers were quite busy, and it was already too late to place an order at several of them. But just as I was starting to panic, I found a company that was both cheap and which accepted credit card payment, and so, one hundred copies of my very first comic were delivered to my home on the first of May, 2023, a week ahead of the event. My comic was in A5 format and consisted of twenty pages plus the cover. The cost for it, including shipping it to me, was 11,450 yen. “Oh my god, the *dōjinshi* is fantastic! Everything is perfect!” I wrote in my field notes when I had opened the cardboard box and browsed the first copy. I had worried about some technical issues related to grayscale and monochrome, but in the end everything had worked out fine. I also created a die cut sticker for the first time, as part of my “POP.”

At the event, I only sold eight copies of my comic. But considering that a participant in my master’s study had said that he only sold one copy at his first event, it wasn’t that bad. What’s more, I could improve until next time. Not least, I think people like and expect the traditional B5 format, which is more common than the smaller A5 format (which I happen to like). A fellow circle participant told me that he thought people were mostly interested in a few popular circles, and that the rest of us were there “to fill up the hall,” like some kind of collateral creators. But as long as it’s fun, we were fine with that.

We also noted an increase in non-Japanese looking people among the general participants, a clear contrast to my experience back in 2012 and 2013, when I didn’t see any other foreign-looking participants. One even recognized me from the news and asked for a selfie, a request that felt out of place in a setting where the respect for the participants’ privacy is unspoken but expected. (But there is nothing wrong in asking, of course.) Photography is actually forbidden in the rules of Shotafes, but circle participants are allowed to take photos of their own space.⁸ Both at Shotafes 12 and Shotafes 13 in 2023, I got friendly nods of recognition from staff whom I had met at Shotafes 5 in 2020, and I also started to see the same faces among the circle participants, and sometimes we said hi or chatted a bit. I thereby got a

glimpse of the social aspect of these events, and indeed, after Shotafes 13 I went out to have sushi and beer with a fellow circle participant. Never has an *otsukaresama desu*, “cheers for good work,” felt so good.

Circle participants

Since I recruited the participants for this study mainly at Shotafes, most of them had some experience of shota events, but there was quite some variation. While some wrote in the questionnaire that “this is my first time,” most said that they had been to shota events one, two, or three times before. On the other end of the scale, there were “up to 10 times,” “about 20 times,” “60 times” (written by a man in his 50s), and “too many to count.” 13 of the 45 survey takers had attended a shota event as a circle, and 9 of these were women; only 4 of the 33 men in the survey had any circle experience. This reflects what the organizers of Shotafes wrote about the majority (70 percent) of their general participants in 2022 being male, while circle participants were evenly spread between men and women.⁹ However, my own impression at Shotafes 5 in 2020 and Shotafes 12 and 13 in 2023 was that at least 90 percent of the general participants were male. By comparison, I estimated, by a simple headcount, that around 70 percent of the circle participants at the shota event J-ket in March 2023 were female.

One of these circle participants was Shinya, who was single, lived with her family, and described her sexuality as “omnivorous in fiction, straight (*sutorēto*) in reality.” She didn’t enter any age in the questionnaire, but when I met her, she seemed to be in her twenties. I have named her after her favorite character, the elementary schooler (probably around twelve years old) Oda Shinya in the video game *Persona 5*. “Shinya” described the character Shinya as being “a foul-mouthed brat on the surface, but who has a kind personality underneath, and a complicated family situation which feels real.” In the questionnaire, Shinya had described her ideal shota as “a self-confident and grown up-ish boy with sex appeal,” and her favorite age as “I like anything from ten and up.” She chose “prefer not to answer” on the question about masturbation.

In our interview over direct messages, Shinya told me that she had been to about ten events, both as a circle and a general participant. She was only in middle school when she debuted as a circle at an

“only” event for the video game *Pop’n Music*. She had printed what she could afford for her money: laminated cards and stickers. Over the years she learned the trade of *dōjinshi* publishing by looking at the specifications and price of other people’s work. She usually sold her *dōjinshi* for 500 yen, but said the price depended on page count and other factors. The “rule” (*rūru*) was that the price should neither be below or too much above what it cost to print the *dōjinshi* and have it delivered, she wrote.

The events made it possible for Shinya to meet and chat with other people who liked the video game series that her *dōjinshi* were based on, *Persona*. She had got to know other artists who also were drawing that series. Since she felt that shota events were aimed at men, she didn’t know anyone there, whereas she always had plenty of acquaintances at events aimed at women. But she liked the small size of shota events, and said she felt it was easier to participate there than at big all-genre (*ōru-janru*) events like Comic Market: “I used to participate at Comic Market, but it has grown so big that I don’t bother anymore, I haven’t applied in recent years.” At the events, she talked to other creators about various aspects of the production, and she got feedback on the technical quality of her own *dōjinshi*, which she found useful.

When we briefly met at a large event aimed at women at Tokyo Big Sight, Shinya was an *uriko*, literally “sales girl,” for another artist. In other words, she didn’t sell her own works, but was a kind of assistant for someone else. “I could only imagine being *uriko* for someone I know well,” she said. “I’ve known the circle owner for some years, and we have participated in the same anthologies and offline meetings. So when this author was looking for an *uriko* some months ago, I decided to help out.” At other events, I have encountered both *uriko* who always work for the same artist, who they told me was never present, and the opposite: an artist who for once decided to participate herself instead of sending her male *uriko*. She asked me not to reveal to anyone that she was the actual artist. This brings to mind how authors of both boys love manga for women and *eromanga* for men in the 1990s sometimes used a pen name of the other gender.¹⁰

One of the reasons why Shinya decided to be an *uriko* at this event instead of selling her own works was that she was now working temporarily in the commercial manga business, in the *otoko-no-ko* genre, and didn’t have time to create her own *dōjinshi*. She lamented that

she hadn't been able to participate much in events recently, and ended our correspondence with these words: "I want to make an effort to devote myself to this for as long as I can." This might have been a reference to *dōjinshi* culture being part of one's youth, a hobby that might have to step to the side when one's adult life takes over in the form of employment and child-rearing. Those were at least the factors that contributed to the *dōjinshi* world's crisis in the 1980s, when its pioneers were leaving the scene as they grew older.¹¹

Hōsuke was another circle participant whom I met briefly at a shota event, and corresponded with through direct messages after she had taken my survey. She described herself as being in her "mid thirties," married, bisexual (*baisekushuaru*), and having had both homosexual and heterosexual experiences. Since she wrote that her favorite character was "no one in particular right now," I have named her after the protagonist Sharaku Hōsuke in Tezuka Osamu's manga *The Three-Eyed One* (*Mitsume ga Tōru*, 1974–78), which she said she liked reading.

Hōsuke discovered shota in her second year of high school, when she was introduced to the genre by her friend's younger sister. She wrote that her impression was that shota was a genre aimed at women back then, but that she now thought it might have become "the other way around." The shota event where we met was therefore "a new world" for her. She had participated as a circle at two events for women before, and she described the dominance of male participants at the shota event as "fresh rather than shocking." She had spent one and a half month finishing two *dōjinshi* for the event, but "didn't sell anything at all." She was still happy though, since she thought it had been an interesting experience: "I felt things that were new to me (this includes a sexual meaning)."

Unlike many participants, Hōsuke felt quite uninterested in regular BL. What she liked about shota was that the comics feature "boys swaying in the gap between childhood and youth," a reference to the important period of growth that many participants mentioned. She added: "The strong appeal of shota is that even if there are no strong sexual depictions in the work, I can still feel a freshness in my heart." This feeling came from the "purity (*junsuisa*) or honesty (*sunao*)" that she considered the key ingredients of a shota character.

Hōsuke thought it was "more fun" to draw shota than to read it. "When I draw, I can express my world in any way I want to a certain

extent, so it can be a good opportunity to let other people know my feelings and thoughts about shota.” This points to shota as a way to communicate feelings in a culture that has few accepted outlets for that. In his ethnographic study among *fujoshi*, or female fans of male homoerotic comics, Galbraith stresses the social aspect of desire. As described earlier, his participants did not only feel affection for fictional characters, or *moe*, but they also wanted to talk about it with each other in so called *moebanashi*, or “*moe* talk.” Sharing one’s desire with likeminded, as Shinya did with other fans of the *Persona* series, creates a “feeling of oneness” (*ittaikan*). It is this feeling that participants want to experience when they draw and publish *dōjinshi*, and exchange them face to face at events, Galbraith writes.¹²

Another circle participant at a shota event was Link. She lived with her husband, described her sexuality as “normal,” had only heterosexual experiences, and liked shota characters from nine to fourteen years of age. I have named her after her favorite boy character Link in the video game series *The Legend of Zelda* (1986–).

Like Hōsuke, Link had only been to events aimed at women before, and described her first shota event as “fresh,” since it in her view was “aimed at men”:

Events aimed at women are visited almost only by women. My otaku friends are almost a hundred percent women, so since I have had almost no contact with men, and there were many men at the shota event, I was a bit afraid at first (laugh). But everyone treated me very respectfully, so I stopped being afraid. I learned a lot. ☺

She also appreciated that the shota event was clearly aimed at adults and had a strict age check. This made it possible for her to “indulge” in sexual expressions without worries. “At regular events you must make sure that the poster for your *dōjinshi* isn’t too sexual, out of consideration for others. But since the shota event was purely adult, sexual illustrations were on display without shame, and that felt fresh.”

At the shota event, Link didn’t sell a singly copy of the novel she had written. She thought this was because the cover art was not aimed at men and she hadn’t done much promotion for it beforehand.

Link liked both boys love and shota, and while she thought that many considered them similar genres, she saw them as distinct, and thought that shota had another “taste” than regular BL. She liked that shota was much more sexually explicit than other genres, something she thought was due to shota, in her view, being a male genre. “Of course there are many female readers too, but I think they are female readers who like genres aimed at men.”

General participants

To buy a newly published *dōjinshi* directly from the artist was mentioned as meaningful by many of my survey respondents who had visited a shota event as a general participant. They said they wanted to “tell them my impressions of their work,” “convey my feelings of support,” or simply “compliment” the artists. Many of them already did this by liking and commenting on their works on social media, but this could not be compared to meeting the artists at a physical event: “The main purpose is to see the artists live, whom I otherwise only know from the internet, and to tell them my impressions,” one wrote.

Many participants stressed the social aspect of going to an event. A respondent who had attended two shota events said that these events’ meaning for him was “the realization that there are other shotacon like me.” Likewise, both a man and a woman said that they attended shota events “because I’m a shotacon.” The man continued: “Beyond the desire, realizing that there are many people in the world with my sexual orientation (*sei shikō*) made my loneliness disappear.” Another man expressed himself in a similar way: “Since I’m aware that my preference (*shikō*) is in the minority, thinking about that everyone around me are the same as me gives me relief and a feeling of having found my place.” Yet another man wrote: “When I went there, I realized that there are various people who like shota. Regardless of age, gender or nationality, we are a group of people who like shota.” Related to that, one man discussed whether the increased “visibility (*kashika*) of ‘shotacon’” that these events might contribute to was a good or a bad thing. These comments refer to liking shota as a “sexual orientation.” Another participant said that it was “both a lifestyle and a hobby.” But no matter if they saw liking shota as a sexuality, lifestyle, or hobby, many expressed joy at meeting others who shared this interest. One man called it “a shared awareness of friendship.” A woman wrote “It’s fun (I can meet people with the same interest).”

Another woman commented that “I think it’s interesting that there are so many shotacon.” Yet another woman said she attended shota events “to find likeminded people.” One man wrote that visiting a shota event made him feel both “sympathy” (*kyōkan*) and a sense of “relief” (*anshin*), and another man wrote that “being close to those who like the same thing as me” was meaningful to him.

Considering the importance of meeting “likeminded,” it is notable that several respondents said there was almost no communication between general participants at events. The typical and only communication was instead between general and circle participants, when the former buys a *dōjinshi* from the latter. This “accounting” offered a chance for some “trivial conversation,” one respondent wrote. Else than that, “there is nothing between buyers,” another respondent wrote. As answers to what kind of communication there was at a shota event, a whole twelve respondents wrote “nothing” or “nothing in particular,” with almost identical phrasing despite this was a freeform question.

“It doesn’t matter how many events I go to. I know no one there, and therefore I can’t talk to anyone,” Killua told me during our interview in the karaoke room. He had been to three shota events, all of them Shotafes in Yokohama, which he had found out about on Twitter, through artists that he followed. “There are no shotacon among my current friends, so I have no one to go to an event with,” he continued. He thought it would be good if the events could have some activities that facilitated conversation between the participants: “For example a concept café, a café where you can talk.”

The organizers of J-ket might have had communication between participants in mind when they arranged a “treasure hunt.” We got a map that guided us to various “stations” in the building, where there were posters with quiz questions. But when I was there, no one was cooperating: about forty men and one woman were standing alone and in silence along the walls, each busy with their phone or the form for the treasure hunt. After a while, a staff participant told us not to occupy that area, and instead guided us to a “resting room” (*kyūkeishitsu*), which looked a bit like a classroom. Two friends were chatting, and the rest of us, about twenty people, of whom all but one were male, were sitting in silence at our desks.

In our interview, Takato described shota events as giving him a “sense of belonging” (*kizokukan*). He used to go alone, but after

having visited several shota events, he had got some acquaintances, and that made the events more fun. He said that both the shota events and the communication he had with his new acquaintances confirmed his identity (*aidentiti wo kakunin suru*) as *shotacon*. He saw this as important, and lamented that there was no “shota culture,” similar to “gay culture”: “Compare with gays and lesbians. It’s important to be with likeminded. Because you can talk!” He told me that was the reason why he had wanted to participate in my study: to start a conversation about shota and what it means to like it.

Despite the lack of conversation for Killua, he thought it had been “interesting” and “fun” to participate at shota events: “Since everyone was in the same room, and all the others had the same interest as me, it was a very special situation, and that was fun.” And even if he would have managed to talk to someone, he wouldn’t have known what about, since his experiences from Twitter was that conversations about one’s shota preferences tended to become “embarrassing”: “I get satisfaction from looking at these characters on my own, but I have felt that I don’t have so much to talk to other shotacon about. Our favorite genres differ, and we have all watched different anime. We all entertain ourselves in our own way.” The feeling of having something in common with other shota fans was rather unspoken: “We have a similar way of thinking.”

The special atmosphere at shota events was mentioned by several survey respondents. “I can feel the brewing atmosphere of people who like shota who have assembled in one space, I like the energy that can be felt from that,” one wrote. “To be in the same place as other people who like shota is meaningful,” another one wrote. He compared visiting a shota event to “the extraordinary feeling similar to going on a trip.”

Satoshi had been to general *dōjinshi* events in Nagoya, but Shotafes 12 in Yokohama, where we met and exchanged contact details to arrange an interview, was the first shota *only* event he visited. Usually he bought his *dōjinshi* in specialty stores in Nagoya, read them at a café afterward, and then went back to the store’s second-hand counter to trade in the ones he didn’t like. That way, the hundred or so shota *dōjinshi* and commercial volumes that he had at home consisted solely of works he really liked. But now he had saved money to go to Yokohama, after having seen information about the event on Twitter. He stayed the night at a hotel after the event. He liked the

feeling that everything was shota at Shotafes. He felt that he had things in common with the other participants, so going there felt like a unique opportunity, a “one chance” (*wanchan*). He queued in front of popular shota artists and bought ten or fifteen *dōjinshi*, which he read at his hotel room afterward. He came alone and didn’t talk to anyone at the event, although he would have wanted that. But there was communication afterward on Twitter, when participants shared photos of the *dōjinshi* they had bought. He called such photos, where the purchased *dōjinshi* and goods are placed neatly on a bed or a table, “war trophies” (*senrihen*), which says something about these artefacts’ status as treasures to their new owners. Since Satoshi had already browsed the *dōjinshi* before buying them (which is often not possible at specialty stores), he was not disappointed by the content.

Scaramouche had written in the questionnaire that going to a shota event was like a “pilgrimage” (*junrei*) for him, so when we met for an interview, I asked him what he meant by that. “Everyone is there, the artists who have worked so hard, and everything is centered around boys. It feels good to meet others who are fans of the same favorite character (*oshi*) as me. It’s a pilgrimage because they are gods, and we show them respect.” Who are the gods? I asked. The boys? Or the artists? “Okay, gods is maybe an exaggeration, but I think we should show them respect. The boys.” Scaramouche had been to five shota events as a general participant, and usually didn’t stay too long at them. He had prepared his visits by researching the participating circles online. “On the day of the event, I check the catalogue for good circles by looking at their circle cuts, and then I go to check them out.” Based on the circle cuts, which he compared to thumbnails on Youtube, and his online research, Scaramouche made his rounds in the event hall. He stressed how important the communication with the artists was to him: “To pay 500 yen directly to the author of a work and to receive the *dōjinshi* in your hand is a ritual.”

Akira had been to two shota events, and he said that the keyword to understand his experiences of them was “energy” (*enerugi*). “A spot sale event gives you a raw atmosphere (*nama no funiki*) that you can’t get on the internet. It comes from the stuff that is sold there. The energy and hotness are expressed through the *dōjinshi*. By buying various *dōjinshi*, I can feel that atmosphere as a concrete thing. I don’t buy to read, but more as a memory, a good feeling.” Part of the attraction of *dōjinshi* events for Akira was that he saw himself as a

working member of society (*shakaijin*), and that the events functioned as a kind of gateway into the world of otaku: "In my work and when I have meetings with other companies, I of course don't mention my shota interest since no one shares my hobby. But otaku use their hobby and their fetish in their communication with others, you can hardly call them working members of society (*shakaijin*). Sometimes I feel that I want to join the otaku world to be able to communicate more openly about what I'm attracted to." He also said that he didn't have friends who shared his shota interest, but that he would want that. Like Killua and Satoshi, Akira usually didn't talk to anyone at the events, but at the last Shotafes, he had seen another person who was filling out the questionnaire for this study, so he approached him and they started talking. "We added each other on Line and might meet at the next event. I had hardly thought that I would make a new friend at the event!"

What Akira was attracted to in the *dōjinshi*, beyond the "energy" that they embodied, was not so much the content itself as the fact that *someone else* was attracted to this content, namely the artist who had drawn it. He described manga characters as a "deformation" (*difōmu*) of reality:

Deformation means that you take aspects of reality but enhance them. For example, if there is something sexual in a boy, you enhance that in the fictional version. Another thing that is enhanced is youth, so they can look very young. Manliness can be enhanced by adding muscles. That way, an ideal shota that you can desire is created.

And since every line in a manga is drawn by the artist, it is the artist who has chosen what aspects of reality to deform and enhance. This gave Akira a direct connection to the artist's desire: "You can understand the artist's feelings from what they have chosen to deform, and a certain energy is born from that, and that is the attraction for me with deformation." He continued: "I want to know how the artist felt when they created the work. No matter the libido or feelings the artist has, I find it extremely fascinating to take part of them through a *dōjinshi*." Even things he didn't like, such as grotesque themes, could become attractive when seen through the eyes of the artist: "Since the artist felt attraction to it, I want to in some way understand

it. It's like with food. If there is a vegetable I don't like but others like it, I want to understand it." He felt the same way toward general participants:

To participate at an event is for me to deepen the communication with other shota fans. How can a certain *dōjinshi* be interpreted, how can you read it, how can you feel with it? To hear how others think about that strengthens my ability to feel attraction, so that's the purpose behind my communication with others.

Akira here expressed very clearly the idea that the expressions themselves are less important than the *sharing with others* of the desires and imaginations that are packaged in those expressions, a sharing that finds its ultimate expression in a *dōjinshi* event. Although Akira hadn't created any *dōjinshi*, he sometimes drew his own characters, both boys and women. He showed me some "body parts" that he had drawn on the whiteboard in his room: an arm, the line of the back down to the waist, the behind, and the armpit. "To transfer my ideal, even if it's just a small part of it, to the actual world gives me a feeling of satisfaction," he said. Maybe because taking one's desire out from one's head and into the physical world makes it shareable with others, even if it never reaches the form of a *dōjinshi*.

Unlike many of the other participants that I interviewed, Kabane was not interested in the social aspect of events at all. Since attending his first shota event in 2019, he had been to Shotafes, Boys Parade, J-ket, and Yarōfes, a male-oriented event that also included shota. But he said he didn't like places with a lot of people, and he was not interested in any communication with other shota fans; if someone started talking to him, he withdrew. He simply went to the event to "stock up" on shota, since he always wanted to "have cute boys at hand" in his home. Like Scaramouche, he prepared a list in advance of artists he wanted to visit at these events, and went home immediately after having completed his purchases. As mentioned, Kabane sometimes dressed in a school uniform, despite being twenty-eight years old and not a high school student anymore. At events it therefore happened that other participants approached him to compliment him on his clothes, but he told me he didn't care about these positive reactions.

Dōjinshi culture in manga

There are several mainstream manga that take *dōjinshi* culture or even shota as their themes. Mugiimo's manga *My Ex-Boyfriend Loves Boys' Love* (*Motokare ga Fudanshi ni Natte Orimashite*, 2018–22; English translation: Penguin Random House, 2023–) is about exactly that: twenty-four-year-old Akado Momo stumbles upon her ex-boyfriend Katakura, also twenty-four, at the BL section of a bookstore, and he admits that he has become a *fudanshi*, or a man interested in boys love. (The original title translates to “My ex-boyfriend has become a *fudanshi*.”) They realize that they like the same coupling, and start seeing each other again as friends, since they now have this interest in common. Momo is drawing *dōjinshi* under a pseudonym and will participate as a circle at the next Comic Market. The twist is that Katakura's favorite *dōjinshi* circle is in fact the one of Momo, something she doesn't want him to find out, and so the plot in the first volume revolves around Momo and her friend Yukine trying to talk Katakura out of going to his first Comic Market.

While I thought it was cruel to deprive a fresh *fudanshi* of the special energy of an event, and the feeling of belonging that many of my research participants had talked so positively about, *Motokare* functions as an excellent introduction to *dōjinshi* culture. We learn all the necessary terminology: “event” (*ibento*) is pedagogically explained as a simpler word for “spot sale event” (*sokubaikai*). It's common to give the people who buy your *dōjinshi* a little gift, for example a thin booklet or a folded paper with some illustrations, and this simple gift is called *muhai-hon*, which the manga explains is short for *muryō haifu hon*, literally a “book distributed free of charge.”¹³

The manga also makes fun use of furigana, the help text that explains how the Chinese characters, or kanji, of the main text should be read. The reason why Momo doesn't want her ex-boyfriend to find out that she is the person behind his favorite circle is that she doesn't want him to find out her “fetish” (*seiheki*), a word that can also mean “sexuality” in the sense “taste” or “preference.” However, the kanji for “fetish” here gets the furigana for *dōjinshi*, in a parenthesis. This concretizes that she is really afraid that Katakura will discover her *dōjinshi*, but it also equals one's sexual preference with the *dōjinshi* one creates. In other words, one's *dōjinshi* is a very personal expression of one's “fetish,” or sexual desire. A bit later, Katakura says that what he likes with living alone is that he doesn't have to hide his

“great books” anymore, and here, again, “great books” is furiganaized as *dōjinshi* in parenthesis, a word that Katakura as a fresh *fudanshi* maybe hasn’t grown accustomed to using yet.

Just like my research participants, the characters in *Motokare* use Pixiv and Twitter. And just like the website of Shotafes included a question about if men too could attend, so Katakura says he’s afraid to go to an event “as a man.” Katakura’s joy at having got two otaku friends (Momo and Yukine) reminded me of the research participants who told me they wanted to have likeminded friends, and of course of Akira, who in fact had exchanged contact details with someone at the last shota event and would maybe meet him again.

The point where *Motokare* most aligns with my research is in its description of the energy of an event. Momo participates as a circle at Super Comic City at Tokyo Big Sight. Like at Shotascratch and Shotafes, the organizers announce the opening of the event on the PA, and the participants applaud. Momo is thinking to herself, using words that are very similar to those of my research participants: “People with the same hobby have assembled in the same space... No matter how many times I come, it makes me excited...!” Except for selling her own *dōjinshi*, Momo takes a round in the hall to buy the *dōjinshi* of others and connect with people she only knows from Twitter. When she has completed her shopping, she holds the bag with *dōjinshi* to her chest and says “lots of treasures,” but the word for “treasure” (*takara*) has got the help text “*dōjinshi*” in parenthesis. So now the word *dōjinshi* has been used as the reading for three words: “fetish,” “great book,” and “treasure.” In that way, *Motokare* gives the word *dōjinshi* a meaning beyond its literal definition, and we understand that this item, which is at the center of this youth culture, is charged with positive feelings. “Events are the best...” Momo says in the same panel, and adds: “All these lusting people were so nice...” (And yet she deprived her ex-boyfriend of this positive experience! Shame on you, Momo!)

When it’s time for the summer edition of Comic Market, we get a glimpse of what it feels like to produce a *dōjinshi*: what it’s like to work against a deadline, and to decide to print one’s *dōjinshi* despite it’s not cheap. And how all the work one puts into it results in a “feeling of accomplishment” (*tasseikan*) when the *dōjinshi* is delivered, something I experienced too. The protagonist also feels “self satisfaction” (*jiko manzoku*), which was also a word mentioned by the

dōjinshi creators among my research participants. The next chapter introduces us to terms like the *nēmu*, the sketch, and *pen'ire*, which is to ink the manuscript, or *genkō*, that is, to use a pen to draw the actual lines in black ink on top of the sketch, which has been drawn with pencil. Momo and her friend are working hard on their manuscripts, and this includes struggling with motivation. When Momo finally uploads her manuscript to the printer, a process called *nyūkō*, Yukine congratulates her. They have chosen to have their *dōjinshi* delivered directly to the event – maybe they used a shipment label template similar to the one provided in the circle participant guide to Shotafes? Before the event, the two girls have a “strategy meeting” (*sakusen-kaigi*), where they show each other the list of which circles they want to visit at “*Natsu-komi*,” Summer Comic Market. Just like the manga *Bakuman* (2008–12) by Ōba Tsugumi showed us the mainstream manga industry from the inside, *Motokare* introduces the feelings and practicalities of *dōjinshi* culture to a wider audience. That these themes become more well-known can be seen as an example of how otaku culture has become trendy and “cool” in the past couple of decades.

In *Yankee Boy and Otaku Girl* (*Yankī shota to otaku onēsan*, 2016–), Hoshimi Yumi also takes her protagonist Kazuko, a twenty-something woman who draws shota *dōjinshi*, to a spot sale event, which is explained as “a festival by otaku, for otaku.”¹⁴ It’s even the same event as Momo and Yukino went to, Super Comic City, but disguised as “Ultra Comic City” in Hoshimi’s version. As Kazuko is waiting in the line for circle participants, we are told in another explanatory caption: “Through the trade of self-produced *dōjinshi* and fan goods, *moe* is shared and deepened among the participants ... on this big day of embarrassed bliss.” This too points to a *dōjinshi* event being less (or not at all) about business, and more about sharing the affection one feels for the fictional characters in these works with others, and to feel happy as a result, and maybe a bit embarrassed as well, since, after all, one’s *dōjinshi* equals one’s desires.

Do it yourself

People who create *dōjinshi* in Japan are surrounded by a whole culture that guides them to both technical and dramaturgical aspects of the craft. In the 1990s, how-to books about *dōjinshi* production started to be published. The *Dōjinshi Handbook* (*Dōjinshi hando-*

bukku) from 1997 explains how offset printing works, how a spot color can create extra beautiful skin, and how other effects, graded from beginner to advanced, can be used to achieve a beautiful *dōjinshi*. I was shown this book by the writer and subculture expert Barubora, who explained that there had formed manga study groups, *manga kenkyūkai*, at Waseda and other universities across Japan, where the members published their own *dōjinshi*. At that time, they learned the *dōjinshi* trade from their older peers, or *senpai*, but these books spread the knowledge outside of these study groups.¹⁵ This handbook has been published in many sequels since 1997, the biggest technical change in them being the switch from analogue to digital production.

A recent example of these handbooks is *Step up! Dōjinshi Design: Ideas for Your Perfect Publication*, published in 2023.¹⁶ Like the predecessors in the genre, the book has an accessible and tasty layout, with clear step-by-step instructions and big illustrations in full color. The reader is guided through everything from a digital workflow and the proper use of colors and rasters, over formats and binding, to the spot colors, varnish, and other “special effects” that will make your *dōjinshi* stand out.

I bought the *Step Up!* book at the 144th edition of Comitia, a spot sale event that is held at Tokyo Big Sight four times a year. At this event and others that I have visited, the specialized *dōjinshi* printers that are part of the *minikomi* industry have been present, either with booths of their own, or through flyers or catalogues that can be picked up. These catalogues often contain detailed price tables, so that you immediately can see how much a *dōjinshi* of a certain format (typically B5 and A5) with a certain number of pages would cost to print in a certain number of copies. As an example, the cheapest “course” on the menu offered by Pico, according to a catalogue I picked up at Comitia 106 in 2013, was 15,100 yen for 30 copies of an 8 page booklet in B5 format. But that’s in full color. A simple flyer from Tei’s Print that I probably picked up at the same event charged only 10,900 for 30 copies of a 16-page B5 booklet with a cover in full color and an insert in black and white. With today’s (April 2024) exchange rate, that is about 66 euro or 70 US dollar, maybe an affordable sum for a young amateur who wants to participate at their first event?

When it’s time to print the *dōjinshi*, these specialized printers guide the customer pedagogically with illustrated guides, sometimes in the

form of little cartoon images, on their websites. As a result, details about type area and bleed, cover and insert, grayscale and monochrome, terms that were only used by professionals when I worked as an art director at magazines in Sweden in the beginning of the 2000s, become the domain of every teenage girl who wants to print her own *dōjinshi*. Some printers stress that an actual human will watch over the printing process and get in touch in case there are any major technical problems; the first-time *dōjinshi* creator can feel safe.

The porous border between amateur and professional manga artists is demonstrated by the presence of publishing houses at the larger spot sale events. Editors from these publishers offer free advice to amateur creators, who queue up to have their manga assessed. Even without such a meeting, participants are free to submit a *dōjinshi* or a manuscript in one of the cardboard boxes put out by the publishers for that purpose. At Super Comic City 30 and Comitia 144 – both taking place at Tokyo Big Sight during Golden Week in May 2023 – the publishers had been assigned spaces at one end of the big hall, so as to reserve the main floor for amateur circle participants. I picked up some of the “entry sheets” (*entorī shīto*) that one should attach to one’s manga. Except for one’s real name, pen name, circle name, and contact details, most publishers wanted to know the age of the applicant, and some had fields for a website or a Pixiv ID.

Except for the technical advice of *dōjinshi* guidebooks and the editorial advice of publishers, there is also a whole genre of how-to-draw (*egakikata*) books in Japan. These include everything that can be drawn, from buildings and backgrounds to people and animals, with some focus on manga characters and the human anatomy: I have bought books on how to draw hands and feet, muscles and bones, *bishōjo* girls,¹⁷ and, of course, boys. But my favorite, and the only one I’ve read cover to cover, is *The 12 Essential Rules for Drawing a Manga*,¹⁸ which presents the craft of manga in the form of a manga. It is probably aimed at younger readers, who are guided through the twelve rules over three chapters: tools for making manga, story and characters, and panel distribution. The story part introduces the parts of the *kishōtenketsu* narrative structure that Japanese, Korean, and Chinese stories traditionally follow.

All these books seem to function as a sort of onboarding of young people in Japan to a manga culture that they can contribute to themselves. Rather than being passive consumers, the readers of the shota

anthologies in the 1990s and 2000s were invited to contribute with their illustrations to the “readers corner,” and these anthologies also arranged manga contests as a way to find new talent, something that regular magazines also did. Already the pioneering *shōnen-ai* magazine *June* had lessons on how to draw the “beautiful boy.”¹⁹ We have also seen how the publishers recruit amateurs at large *dōjinshi* events. This way, a culture has been created and cultivated, where it is natural to express oneself, and one’s desire or identity, by way of drawing manga and illustrations.

Sharing desire online

Shota culture is of course also flourishing online. Twitter and Pixiv dominated the shota related online activities among my 45 survey takers, with 35 and 30 mentions each. Twitter was an American social media platform that changed name to X in July 2023, after the end of my fieldwork, and Pixiv is a Japanese illustration sharing platform, founded in 2007.²⁰ The runner-ups were the donation platform Fanbox and the Mastodon instance Pawoo (similar to Twitter) – both run by Pixiv – with only four and three mentions respectively.

It goes without saying that my participants used these platforms to find and view shota, but six of them also specified that they masturbated or got sexual relief from this activity. Several mentioned that they used the platforms to keep on top of shota related information, for example about upcoming events. Some circle participants explained that they used particularly Twitter to promote their work.

Among the general participants, the online activity mirrored that of physical events. There was a strong focus on supporting artists by liking, commenting, and sometimes sending direct messages. Several respondents said they wanted to convey their impressions and their respect to the artists, and one explained that “I try to encourage the artists since I don’t want them to stop drawing.” As we saw, several participants lamented that there was no communication between shota fans at physical events, but many found it easier to connect online. “It’s an interest that I can’t talk about with my real friends, so friends are important,” a man wrote. Similarly, a woman wrote that “since liking shota is not widely recognized, I want to feel sympathy with likeminded.” One man wrote that “I want to make friends,” another that “I’m not in this community at all, so therefore I want to enter it. I want friends.” Several mentioned that they felt a sense of

community online, although not in as passionate words as when they described physical events, with their “raw atmosphere” and special “energy.” When asked what their online engagement meant to them, a woman said that “it’s a mutual feeling of feeling good,” and two women said it was for their own well-being (*jibun no tame*). A man said that the meaning for him was “fulfilling of hobbies and stimulation of creative desire,” and another man that “it motivates me, if even just a little.” One man said that his online activity “lights up my day.” Several pointed out that while they communicated with artists to show appreciation for their works, “there is hardly any communication between the readers,” something that online shota activity shared with the offline activity at shota events.

It is a bit of an irony that Twitter had become the platform of choice for shota fans in Japan. In their rules, Twitter stated that they had a “zero-tolerance child sexual exploitation policy,” and that “illustrated ... depictions of a human child in a sexually explicit context” as well as “sexualized commentaries” about “minors,” defined as “any person under the age of 18,” violated this policy.²¹ It seems to me that shota expressions would be in violation of these rules, and it was therefore hardly surprising that the accounts of shota artists were frequently suspended by the platform. It was well known in the online shota community that this could happen, and so, one could sometimes see a shota account listing a *hinan-aka*, a “refuge account,” in their profile, which followers could go to if the main account was suspended. Pixiv, on the other hand, has mainly been concerned with copyright infringement, since many of the illustrations on the platform are derivative works. In the end, the company chose the approach already adopted in the larger *dōjinshi* world, which is to turn a blind eye to potential copyright infringements, as these are seen as an integral part of this amateur culture.²² As for sexual content, everything was permitted, including illustrations of children in sexual situations, as long as the genitals were properly censored, just as in erotic comics in general in Japan.

With internet, “the age of sharing” is said to have begun;²³ it has become natural for us to share joy and sorrow and pretty much everything on social media. With its inherent focus on sharing desires, *dōjinshi* culture can be seen as a precursor to the internet.²⁴ Websites like Pixiv are in a sense a digital continuation of an amateur culture that had already sprouted for decades in Japan.²⁵

Social support

What the physical and the online cultures that surrounded shota offered was a kind of support system for its members, who felt good when being with “likeminded,” who “confirmed their identity.” When I bought some random paperbacks during my fieldwork, it became evident to me how this kind of confirmation happens also through mainstream manga, for example by depicting masturbation or an interest in sex or taboos as normal.

Ikeda Takashi’s manga *Clockworks & Meister* (*Tokei jikake no ane*, 2016–18) begins with a boy having sex with a man, while the act is being filmed with a hidden camera. In another room of the building, the boy’s older sister sits by a desk and watches the live footage. As she watches, she reaches down with her hand between her legs and starts masturbating.²⁶

In Hidaka Ryō’s *Subaru-kun Is Horny* (*Subaru-kun wa muramura shitemasu*, 2022), the twenty-two-year-old older sister barges in on her four years younger brother as he was ... well, technically he is shown as lifting weights, sitting on his bed, but his embarrassment – sweat drops flying – and irritated words – “you can’t just come in like that!” – imply that we should read these panels symbolically, possibly as masturbation. Another giveaway is that Subaru after a while gets so horny (as promised in the title) that he throws himself over his older sister and starts kissing her and fondling her breasts. As they consummate their relationship further into the manga (and no, they are not real siblings), the “sister” asks Subaru about his masturbation habits, and at the end of the manga, Subaru reciprocates the question. While it is a little embarrassing, she tells him openly how she masturbates and what she thinks about when doing it.²⁷

Lastly, Ikeda Yūki’s boys’ adventure manga *Thunder 3* (*Sandā suri*, 2022–) starts by showing the elementary schooler Pyontarō sitting on the toilet with his phone, and being interrupted by his little sister, then being bored in class and drawing a pair of breasts in his textbook, then getting ready for bed in the bathroom, where he is shown nude from behind, and finally lying on the bed of his room, where he is image searching “breasts” (*oppai*) on his phone. Here there is no doubt what he is doing, although it is not shown explicitly. And just like poor Subaru, he is interrupted when his mother and little sister suddenly enter the room – the sweat drops fly off little Pyontarō too as he sits up in bed.²⁸

These three examples stem from men's, women's, and boys' comics respectively, although actual readership is more mixed, but all of them show masturbation as a natural part of the everyday life of not only boys and men, but also women. They also make an affection for little brothers seem normal; the second volume of *Clockwork & Meister* even boasts about themes of "taboo and eros" on the *obi* wrapped around its cover. And despite *Thunder 3* is an adventure manga where three boys get lost in a "multiverse" of different realities, sexual themes are not cut out from it.²⁹

In my reading, the inclusive character of these mainstream manga, targeted to men, women, and children, lets the reader know that they are not alone, that we all go to the toilet, that we all masturbate, and that we're all curious about breasts at that age (well, not *all* of us, but you get it). It creates a feeling of normalcy, and maybe support. In other words, the explicit shota culture, as it manifests offline and online, is embedded in a larger manga culture which, while not explicit, contains similar themes and, not least, practices, that people who are interested in shota and other subcultural works can relate to, such as masturbating, or feeling a tinge of excitement from the fantasy of incest. Just like sitcoms provide a feeling of safety while being fun at the same time (or the opposite way around) by reflecting human relations in a certain culture, thereby showing us typical ways to live, and in that way confirming our identities and lifestyles, so the larger culture of slice-of-life manga can confirm their readers' lives in a way that makes them feel good. This is all to say that shota in Japan is surrounded by a culture in which a shota fan is *normal*.

This sense of feeling normal and cared for is also provided by the larger infrastructure that shota is a part of. When I had just arrived in Japan in 2023, I went to Animate in Akihabara and asked for the latest volume of Hoshimi Yumi's *Yankee Boy and Otaku Girl*. After checking in the computer, a female staff member asked me to follow her down to the fourth floor, since the manga was apparently sorted as *shōnen*, a boys' manga. And there it was, the newly released seventh volume, shrink-wrapped and shiny. I thanked her and went down to the ground floor to pay. While this is a shota themed mainstream series, over the years I have often asked about real shota, and never been made to feel bad about it. As the protagonist in my film *Unreal Boys* says when we follow him to the specialty store Mandarake, where he asks the staff about a certain comic: "It is important

to have a home, where I can just go into a store and buy shota porn and not have the staff or people look me up and down.”

When I paid for my manga, the young cashier took up a binder, and browsed to a page on which eight different stickers were on display. Apparently, since I bought Hoshimi's manga, I was eligible to choose one of the stickers as a gift. I felt a bit stressed since there was a line behind me, so I didn't inspect the stickers in detail. But on one of them, the word “shota” was written. “That one,” I said, and pointed to the shota sticker. When I inspected it afterward, it turned out that it featured the characters from Nakayama Miyuki's manga *Shota x Oni* – that's how I found out about that manga, which became the next one I bought at Animate. Later I also became a member of Club Animate, installed their app on my phone, charged the app-internal wallet Animate Pay with 2,000 yen, and started using plenty of the discount coupons that the app offered for various products or periods. Both in the app and in the physical stores, there were always various offers, which were sometimes hard to understand for me. “Now you have bought two products with Hanako-kun, but you need to spend 493 yen more to get this sticker.” I could keep the receipts and come back to purchase more Hanako-kun merch later, they said.

It reminded of a game. A sticker might not seem much, but since it was not for sale and could only be earned through buying other products, and since it potentially featured my favorite character, I wanted it. At one point when I was handed a random sticker from a series because I was eligible for it, I asked if I could get another character, but no, the rule was that you get a random sticker. Like in a capsule machine. And so you keep purchasing.

Of course I was aware that the many discount coupons, special deals, club cards, store-internal payment systems, and so on only served to make the customers spend more, but that didn't matter. Because in the midst of this capitalist circus, I felt happy. And cared for. And I think that many people feel the same, particularly if they are alone. To come up to the cashier at Animate and feel that they take their time with you despite the line; they let you choose a sticker, and they explain the deals – it's quality time. And it makes you feel part of something bigger. It makes you feel normal. I want to end this chapter with an even better example of what such normalcy can look like.

Doll love

When packing up my audio equipment after having finished the interview with Akira in his little studio apartment, I was taken aback as I noticed someone lying on his bed, only an arm's length away from us. Black hair was spread out over the pillow, the rest of the rather small body covered by a comforter. For a moment I thought that we were not alone. But it turned out that the person on the bed was Akira's love doll Keito.

Keito was a 120 cm tall boy made out of silicone. His "skeleton" was made of iron, and his limbs could be twisted in different directions. Akira breathed heavily as he lifted Keito up on the table and bent him into a sitting position. Keito was quite heavy, weighed around twenty kilos, which Akira said was similar to a real boy of that size.

When Akira moved to Tokyo for work after having graduated at his university in another part of Japan, he struggled with feelings of loneliness. It was winter and cold outside, and he felt a need to be close to someone. He considered starting dating, but then he saw how a person on Twitter had bought a boy doll. Akira knew about love dolls, but he didn't know there were boy models too. So he followed the advice of other love doll owners on the internet and ordered one himself on Amazon. He could customize everything from hair style and eye color to the skin, some basic makeup, and whether the doll would be able to stand on its own or not. Akira made himself "a typical Japanese boy," but who couldn't stand on his own. A couple of weeks later, Keito, as Akira decided to call him when friends online started asking about his name, was delivered. "I was so happy," Akira remembered. "He looked just as I had expected. He made me really excited, and still does. It was my first doll, so I had to learn how to treat it, but it was a good experience." Since Keito smelled of rubber and other manufacturing materials, Akira sprinkled some perfume on him. They regularly took a bath together, and after cleaning Keito's body with soap, Akira treated his skin with baby powder, so that it would not start deteriorating.

The doll was quite expensive at 140,000 yen (including the basic makeup), but Akira thought it was "a really good purchase." He compared with the elaborate process of dating a real human: "First you have to talk to them and slowly get to know them. You have to go out and eat with them several times to develop a close relation. But

with a doll I don't have to care about that, since it already embodies my ideal. That was an important point for me. Once I had decided to get a lover, I simply placed an order and got a delivery two weeks later. That's quite short compared to the time it would take to get a real lover."

You can have sex with a love doll – Keito had a hole in his behind for that. Akira told me that they had had sex once a week in the beginning, but that there were so many preparations involved – using a lubricant, cleaning and dressing Keito afterward – that they hardly did it anymore. Instead, what he liked with Keito was to sleep with him and to do things with him, such as just sitting and chatting. Of course, Keito couldn't speak, so Akira imagined what he said. "And that's not a bad thing," Akira explained. "A real person can suddenly get angry or say unexpected or irritating things. But when I imagine it, my boyfriend says exactly what I want. That's really wonderful. That's not the case for a real person." He didn't want to tell me what they talked about, since it was "love talk, the kind of talk that couples have in private."

A love doll is obviously not real; it belongs to the two-dimensional world of fictional characters. At the same time, it has a physical form: "He is three-dimensional," as Akira said. And that was what set Keito apart from other expressions of *shota*, according to Akira: "It's great that I can touch him and move him around. We can do things together, one-on-one. When I play with the doll, *he is really here*, and that's where the attraction lies. That's hardly the case for images and animation." Continuing the comparison with comics, where the characters are created by a comic artist, Akira said that "I'm the artist who created the character Keito. His character represents my ideal. Since he is the physical representation of my ideal, he becomes both a lover and a friend."

I spent a full Saturday with Akira as he was interacting with Keito: undressing him, cleaning him in the shower, treating his skin with baby powder, dressing him in clothes he had bought for him – he said clothes for ten-year-old boys were a perfect fit – and finally just sitting down with him, holding him in his lap and stroking his hair. But it wasn't all romance. Once Keito's head fell off, and couldn't be screwed on properly because the screw thread had become rusty. We went to a 100 yen shop to buy a pair of pliers and some sandpaper, and for the next hour or so, Akira meticulously sandpapered the

screw thread of the head. After he had oiled the internal threads in Keito's neck too, the head could finally be screwed on again.

As I watched Akira perform this "maintenance" (*mentenansu*), my thoughts went to some old artisan who goes about his craft, such as tatami making, with love and care. Only here it was not a tatami mat but a love doll that was being cared for. The sandpaper, oil, and other equipment also brought to mind the image of a hobby, and that was indeed how Akira described it too: "If you look around in my apartment, you see that it's full of my hobbies. In that sense, Keito is one of my hobbies. But my hobbies are a very big part of my life, and he is one of them."

Akira stressed that he didn't have anything against real humans. Getting a love doll instead of a human partner had simply been "more practical," at least at this point in his life, when he was twenty-four years old and quite busy with work in a new city. He imagined that his lifestyle would change in the future, "but right now, he is my companion. The feelings I get when I hold him in my arms are similar to when you sleep with a real lover. We go to bed and sleep together every night, and sometimes we touch each other, so maybe it's like having a partner. I can't even imagine separating from him. I'm very attached to him, and I still feel a strong attraction." Is it love? I asked. "Love is such a hard word to define, but I guess this is love."

I filmed Akira's interactions with Keito during this day. When I half a year later sent Akira the rough cut of the short movie I had made about them, he had some sad news. Keito's skin had deteriorated to the point where Akira had seen himself compelled to dispose of him. It had not been an easy decision, and it also posed a practical problem: how do you dispose of a love doll? Japan has very strict rules for how to sort one's household garbage. During my fieldwork, I got many flyers in the mail from companies who offered to take care of oversized garbage for a fee. The flyers included examples of what it would cost to dispose of an old computer monitor, a clothes drying rack, and various pieces of furniture, but I didn't see "love doll" on the list, and I imagine it could be embarrassing to ask them about it, or in any case not a good feeling to hand over one's lover to a garbage collector. Akira told me that he had used a company that specialized in the collection and respectful dismantling of love dolls, and which also gave them a simple funeral. It's not a funeral that you can attend, Akira explained, but they hold a little memorial service on a certain

day, before burning the doll. "I was sad that day," Akira wrote me. "But since he had deteriorated considerably and I was able to choose the day to say goodbye, it made it easier. The bad thing about dolls is that unlike living things, there is no clear border to 'death.'" He wrote that he wanted to buy a new doll, but it would cost 200,000 yen, so he was putting it on hold for now.

On their website, the company that took care of Keito writes about how they treat the dolls they receive: "With all our heart, we will clean it here, hold a memorial service, and then dismantle it." For this service, they charge 13,000 yen per doll. The customer packs the doll himself and a courier picks up the package. For an extra fee, they even offer to come by and pick up the doll personally, if the customer lives in the Kantō (Tokyo) area. There is no need for cleaning the doll, and one is free to include its clothes too, or other "personal belongings" that should be disposed of together with the doll. "Also, let us know the name of your doll," they write. "We will use it when we read the sutras." They emphasize that they don't repair, remodel, or resell the dolls, which might be a worry for a person who has taken the hard decision to part with his beloved. The website includes grateful comments from customers: "Thank you so much for taking care of Risako the other day. It really helped me a lot."

I can't help but find both the engagement with dolls and the helpful community around it extremely beautiful. I see in front of me men scattered across Japan who for various reasons live with a doll. I imagine them talking to their dolls like Akira did, taking baths with them, caring for them, and polishing their screw threads. Loving them. And when it's time to say goodbye, there is a support structure in the form of both "garbage disposal" companies that cater to doll owners, and the community of likeminded online. Rather than feeling alienated because of their desire, as they would certainly do in many other parts of the world, these men feel *normal*, since that is what they are in a culture that respects each person's right to love.

SEVEN

REAL BOYS

THE ETHICS OF SHOTA

In 1998, Watanabe Yumiko interviewed two male manga artists who called themselves “genuine” shota fans. Unlike the women who pioneered the shota genre, and the men who discovered it through lolicon and preferred more feminine boy characters, these two artists say that they were shotacon already in elementary school. With this they mean not only that they as kids were attracted to the boy heroes in popular manga and anime, such as *Triton of the Sea* (*Umi no Toriton*, manga 1969–71, anime 1972), but, as one of them says: “In middle school I was attracted to my cute classmates. Seeing gym clothes made me excited.” This means that they, unlike the men who “came from loli,” have been shota fans for a long time: “For us the boy’s attraction is a much more special thing,” one of them says. That’s why they call themselves and their interest “genuine shota” (*shinsei shota*), where the word *shinsei* can also be translated as “inborn nature.”

Whereas one of the artists says that he likes “only two-dimensional,” that is fictional characters, the other calls himself “2D plus” (*nijigen purasu*), meaning that he enjoys watching actual boys, but that’s where he “draws the line.” Both of them have given the issue some thought, and come up with a “clear division,” a *warikiri*, that separates real boys from fictional characters.¹ In other words, they have come up with an ethics that handles potential attraction to real boys, what Galbraith calls an “ethics of affect.”² Such an ethics may

be more important when fiction and reality seem to come closer, as in the case of these “genuine” shotacon who have been attracted to real boys since they were in elementary school.

As we have seen, previous research suggests that readers of erotic manga make a strict distinction between fictional characters and actual people. A sexual desire for fictional characters has even been described as a “two-dimensional complex”³ that stands in opposition to attraction to actual humans; the attraction is for the drawn expression itself.⁴ In other words, the consensus seems to be that fans of erotic comics with childlike characters are not interested in “the real thing,” or, in Saitō Tamaki’s words, “are not pedophiles in their actual lives.”⁵

In this chapter, I will complicate this neat division between the fictional and the actual world. While most of my participants saw fictional and actual boys as very different, many of them did not see their sexual attraction as limited to fictional boys. However, this recognition of a sexual desire for real boys among several of the participants was accompanied by a policy of “no touch,” which emerged as what I will call an ethics of shota. I will start by referring the responses to my questionnaire in some detail, before getting into more depth in the interviews, where some of the participants would probably call themselves “genuine” shota fans. Again, the terms two-dimensional, or 2D, for fictional expressions such as comics, and three-dimensional, or 3D, for actual human beings of flesh and blood (including photos of such humans) will be frequently used here.

Questionnaire

What I wanted to ask my participants was simple: “Are you sexually attracted to real boys too, and, if so, how do you think about this attraction? How is it different from your attraction to fictional boys?” But since I still had the hopes of continuing my PhD when designing the questionnaire, I had to follow the advice of the university’s ethics committee. The questions thereby became watered down to these formulations:

How do you think that 2D and 3D boys differ, and how are they similar?

How do you think about the relation between manga characters and real boys?

Some participants understandably expressed that they didn't understand how these two questions differed (even I don't see any significant difference between them in retrospect), but even so, many of the participants seemed to read between the lines and brought up the question of sexual attraction to real boys and how they thought about that.

Completely different

Commenting on the connection between fictional characters (2D) and actual boys (3D), one respondent wrote what many would consider to be quite obvious: "I think it's enough with a quick glance to see that they are completely different." Her words were echoed by many of the respondents:

2D is 2D, reality is reality.
 Anime is anime, reality is reality.
 2D and 3D are completely different things.
 They are not similar.
 They are different things.
 It feels like a completely different existence.
 I think they differ completely.

One person answered "completely different," and elaborated: "2D: Has no personality, so to some extent I can project myself onto him. 3D: Since there is an independent personality, I'm not very interested." Another man too pointed out that "a 3D boy has a personality."

Another respondent replied "they are completely different things" and explained further: "3D are not pure, they have a growing sexual desire, they are not sexy, they stink of sweat. Shota: A kind of ideal depiction. Real boys: Irritating brats." He provided some examples to illustrate the difference between fictional characters and real boys: "Ideal (2D): Playing the piano, fair-skinned, nice smell, feminine, drinking black tea. Reality (3D): Only irritating brats, stinking of sweat, dark-skinned, drinking things like barley tea."

His view was echoed by another man: "I think about them as completely separate. I don't think that reality is that cute." Except for not being cute enough, real boys' inability to "come as much and as far" as fictional characters was pointed out by another man. Or to come

at all, one could add; as Yoshimoto points out, in the fictional world of shota, even preschoolers can ejaculate.⁶

Several respondents pointed to the obvious fact that real boys will only be boys for a short time:

In reality, the voice starts breaking in grade two or three of middle school.

In 3D, the face will change and unwanted hair starts growing.

All real boys become old men.

In reality, they grow up.

In short, as one respondent described real boys: "They have a life." Whereas she described fictional boys thus: "They are deformed, they don't grow, they don't exist."

Some similarities

There were also several respondents who did not separate fictional and actual boys as distinctly as those above. "It's the difference between fiction and reality," one man wrote, but added: "Since 2D characters are an imitation of 3D people, there are also similarities."

Similarities pointed out by respondents included "the age," "the period of growth," "their cute smiling faces (*egao*)," and "the unique charm of boys." One respondent asked herself if the similarities "might be in their cockiness and their purity, mainly in how they speak and act?" and another one wrote: "Same body. Same mentality. Same lifestyle and life situation."

The cuteness in particular was mentioned by several respondents:

Just like 2D boys, 3D boys are also cute.

Both are innocent and cute.

Both are cute and lovable ...

3D boys are not as simple as 2D ones, but both are cute!

Both 2D and 3D are cute ... Both are the best. You can't live without them!

After mentioning that fictional and actual boys look different, and that "it's not like any boy would do in the real world," one respondent continued: "But if they are cute, they are cute. In 2D and 3D."

Another respondent first brought up the negative aspects of real boys, such as “individual differences in appearance,” “homophobia,” and “lacking the virtue of 2D,” and then problematized a too strict division between fictional and actual boys:

One shouldn't differ between 2D and 3D shota. The feelings and friendships we experienced in our boyhoods are the same as those appearing in *dōjinshi*. I can't agree with the idea that fiction is compartmentalized as fiction (but of course you must not touch).

Ideal depictions

The concept of “deformation” was mentioned by several respondents to describe how manga characters differ from reality. One respondent, who had mentioned that “the unique attraction of boys” existed in both fictional and actual boys, elaborated: “Manga characters are deformed to enhance the cherishing aspect of the above-mentioned attraction. But the basis of the attraction is the same.” He explained further:

The attraction of real boys is the basis (*bēsu*), but in a “shota” character, this gets repeated in an echo chamber, to the extent that some shota characters couldn't exist in reality, they are rather a derivative of reality. However, the basis remains the same. Whether the created shota is realistic or unrealistic, there is attraction, and the same can be said for real boys.

The idea that manga characters present an ideal “derivative of reality” was mentioned by another respondent too:

I wonder if manga characters are made by squeezing out the cuteness of real boys. ☹ It's like an image that keeps the cute and attractive parts and throws away the horrible parts.

He also described his personal experience of this idea:

There are certainly boys that I feel attracted to sometimes, but I think I better watch them from afar. As you get closer, the image of an irritating brat becomes stronger.

This respondent also wrote that “I don’t see 2D shota as boys, it’s more like a pet-like feeling.” The words about boys becoming “irritating brats” when you come closer remind of the thoughts of the protagonist of my film *Unreal Boys*, who compared real boys to “eye-candy” at first glance:

That’s cute, I like that – for a second of looking at them when they’re in that ideal, perfect beauty. And then, once they start to stray from that, it’s just like, you know, real-life children are disgusting (laugh). ... Teenagers are angsty and they scow and scoff. They are human beings, right. In shota, in the manga, they stay in that ideal.⁷

The comparison of boys to pets was also made by a participant in my master’s study, not about shota but about real boys, whom he thought were cute, “but in the same way that cats and dogs are cute.”⁸ In a personal essay in her book, Manda Ringo expressed something similar:

When I see a boy in reality, I feel no sexual desire. Well, sometimes I want to hug them close from behind. But that only happens inside my head. Real boys aren’t that sweet.⁹

While some described the ideal of the fictional world as better than the real thing, since “you can have perfect eyelashes, and the freedom of buttocks and legs so beautiful that you want to stroke them,” as one woman put it, one respondent wrote:

Most boys in anime are unrealistic. In a strange way, they are like adults.

It’s not clear if this is meant as criticism, but it is in line with the difference between the “purity,” “innocence,” etc. of fictional boys and the “irritating brats” among real boys that several respondents pointed out, that is, the understanding that the fictional boys are unrealistic in many respects, even though there are “some similarities” that can fool us into thinking that they are realistic. One could probably even say that the purpose of these superficial similarities – age, smiling face, body, mentality, lifestyle, and so on – is to make us buy the *illu-*

sion that the shota character is a real boy, but who we can let do "unreal" things, where having sex is just one such thing, and having an adult personality is another, which is just as unrealistic, only not as controversial and in-your-face.

"No touch"

The potential crime involved in doing something sexual with a real underage boy was pointed out by several respondents in relation to the differences between fictional and actual boys. The word most often used was *te wo dasu*, which literally means "to reach out one's hand." I will translate this to "touch," since the synonymous English word "touch" (*tacchi*) also appeared in some answers.

The above descriptions of fictional characters as a "deformation" or "derivative" of reality point to an ideal depiction. The word "symbol" expresses a similar ideal representation that this respondent contrasted to the morality and legality of the actual world:

2D is like a symbol that doesn't exist. 3D are people that you must not touch. It's the difference between fiction and reality. If you feel sexual excitement for a 2D character, to apply it to a real boy is inexcusable.

A similar view was held by another respondent:

Only 2D shota must be the object of desire. As for 3D, that you must absolutely not touch them is an ethical principle for me. We should make sure that real boys are not touched. ... However, if it is 2D, you can project onto it since it's "100% ideal shota."

The moral-legal aspect was mentioned shortly and matter-of-factly in many answers about the difference between fictional and actual boys:

2D: Possibilities are endless. 3D: Possibilities are limited.

It's about whether touching them is ok or not.

Grinning at a 2D boy and grinning at a real boy have completely different meanings. One should draw a line.

In reality you can't touch.

I think it differs in whether you can do what you want with them or not.

Touching would make you a criminal.
The difference is crime and no crime.
Since it would be a crime in reality, it's no good.
You must never commit a sexual offense against a 3D boy.
If you love a 3D boy, it's a crime.

Some illustrated this division with the various things you can do to a fictional character, but not to a real boy. One man wrote that manga characters "can be seen and interacted with as sadistic or sexual objects." A woman wrote:

I can bully them as much as I want in the manga, but I want all real children to live happily.

Another woman expressed herself in a similar way, referring to a case of alleged sexual abuse in the idol agency Johnny & Associates:

I think shota manga characters and real boys are different things. For example, I don't mind if a shota manga character is abused by an old man. But in reality (as in the news about Johnny's), if I hear about a boy who has been sexually abused, I feel sorry for the boy.

She also wrote that she didn't use real boys as a reference when drawing her own shota characters. Another man wrote that "2D boys can basically be viewed in a sexual way," whereas he described real boys as "our national treasure." In the same vein, a woman wrote that "real boys are much more precious, stupid, and inviolable," whereas "drawn characters are completely the fantasies of the artists and readers." One man criticized the attitude in other countries:

Shota manga characters do not live in the real world, so I wish that all the people in Europe, the US, and other foreign countries who can't make the distinction and want to ban everything would stop this behavior. I'm tired of it. I think it's great that in Japan people can make the distinction and are free to create anything.

This man described himself (in Japanese) as "a foreign engineer living in Tokyo," which might explain the awareness of or focus on the perspective from outside, something that was absent in the other answers.

Real attraction

The answers so far imply a clear boundary between fictional and actual boys that the respondents maybe found so obvious that it didn't need any further elaboration. However, despite the answers explicitly forbade "touching" real boys, they of course also contain the possibility of "touch," at least on a theoretical level; the answers hint that one might "want" to touch a real boy, although one would never do it due to the legal and moral ramifications mentioned. This personal negotiation became clearer in some answers. One respondent, who described himself as a "homosexual pedophile," wrote:

Real boys are supreme beings. They are like gods. Just to be able to watch them directly should be appreciated, but one must not touch them, not even talk to them. If you start feeling confused about this, I think you should stay away from shota for the rest of your life.

He continued:

The characters of manga works are creations and should not be assigned human rights. Creations can be beautiful, but they can also be dark. I think that for me, shota is one of my breakwaters. ... There are people who use creative works to protect themselves. Since fiction and reality are different, I prefer that the rules of reality are not brought into the world of fiction.

His answer seems to suggest that shota can be used as a substitute for real boys, a thought that was taken up by another respondent too. After stressing that "3D boys have personalities and to commit a sexual offense against them is an absolute NO," he continued:

I think an important aspect of 2D characters (not limited to shota) is that their existence protects real people. ... 2D characters are ideal *ikemen*/*bishōjo* who function as guards against real people, you get a projection of a real *ikemen*, and this protects that person's actual life.

In other words, instead of taking a real *ikemen* (good-looking young man) as the object of one's desire, which might hurt that person, one

can take a fictional depiction of a real person as the object of one's desire, which doesn't hurt anyone, and which thereby protects the real person. Another respondent seemed to reason in a similar way:

I make sure to only enjoy the attraction of real boys by seeing them from afar. I don't talk to them or look at them in a sexual way (cause I don't want to be seen as a suspicious person). And since it would certainly be a crime to directly touch a real boy, I keep to viewing and enjoying 2D illustrations as much as possible.

This take on viewing real boys from afar differs from that of the respondent who kept a distance to real boys since "as you get closer, the image of an irritating brat becomes stronger." By contrast, this person seemed to think that, as you get closer, the attraction becomes stronger, which might lead to problems. Again, manga characters here seem to be a safe substitute for real boys. The respondent seemed to see his interest for shota – and real boys – almost as a sexuality, and not an unproblematic one, since it needed a strategy. Another respondent seemed to think in a similar way:

I'm curious about the reason to why I became a shotacon, I want to know how all of you shotacon live in society. It's hard, isn't it?

Another respondent wrote that "I follow YES shota No touch" (with "YES" and "No" written in English). Such an ethical stance was stated to me more or less like that by many participants that I met, both in 2023 and during my master's research in 2019 and 2020.

To summarize, the survey participants expressed views on attraction to fictional and actual boys that covered the whole spectrum, from being purely interested in fictional characters (at least when it came to boys) and describing real boys as "disgusting" and "irritating brats," to being attracted to real boys but using shota as a substitute and having strategies and ethical rules against any contact with real boys. As mentioned, this finding is a contrast to much of the literature on people who like comics with expressions that would be problematic in real life, particularly lolicon, where fans are assumed to draw a strict line between fictional characters and actual humans. Let us now go deeper into this discussion by hearing what some of the participants told me in the interviews.

Between sexuality and hobby

In an essay, Saitō Tamaki makes a distinction between pedophilia, which he describes as a “sexual orientation” (*seiteki shikō*), and people who call themselves lolicon, who are part of the otaku culture and don’t have such a sexuality.¹⁰ One of my respondents described how he had reacted negatively when he read Saitō’s text:

To me, to cut out only the framework from otaku culture and say that “I only like 2D shota” would be to cut away and dispose of people who like 3D, and I thought that was unfair. ... I think that to say that having sexual feelings for a 2D boy has nothing to do with 3D is not correct.

This was written by Takato, a young man who now self-identified as “gay” (*gei*), but who in his teens, when trying to come to terms with the feelings of attraction he felt for his male classmates in Taiwan, thought of himself as either “shotacon” or “boy-lover” (*shōnen-aisha*). He had discovered shota comics on the internet when he was eleven years old, and he still preferred boy characters aged eleven to fourteen approximately.

“It’s a big interest, not just a hobby,” Takato said. For him, being a shotacon was somewhere between sexuality and hobby, but leaning toward the former. This made him worry about his future. He said he was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to have a family. This was because his interest for shota was not only directed toward fictional boys, but toward real boys too. In the questionnaire, he had written that it gave him feelings of guilt to think sexual thoughts about real boys, but not about fictional characters. He stressed that “the sexual desires you can have for 2D boys should not be applied to 3D boys. But it’s too simple to say that there is no attraction at all. It’s complicated.” He said that the principle of “no touch” (*te wo dasanai*) was important to him.

Like Takato, Len had “homosexual feelings” for his classmates in school, and had fallen in love with one of them. Already then he liked boys who were a bit younger, around twelve years of age when he himself was fourteen. It was in high school that he realized more and more that he liked shota; he described it as “a homosexual identity” starting to take form. As he grew older, his preferred age also went up a bit, so that now, at the age of twenty-seven, he liked boys from

said that he self-identified more as “gay” now, maybe because of the “pressure from society” he felt because of the “prejudices” around shotacon in Japan: “That they are criminals. On the news and in comments on the internet, the heckling language on Twitter. I think it has influenced me.”

I asked Len if he thought his interest for shota, or his identity as a shotacon or gay man, would influence his life choices when it came to having a partner or a family. He replied that he thought it was relevant that he was a shotacon when it came to having a family. “If I for example would have a child and it’s a boy and he is like a shota, then I would worry that I would confuse the love for my child with my interest for shota.” But after thinking for a while he added: “On the other hand, among heterosexuals it’s common that a father loves his daughter and hugs her and so on, and I don’t find that strange.” One could also argue that Len’s favorite shota were a bit older and not really children.

Len also saw himself as gay man who likes twink, or young men up to approximately twenty-five, with slender bodies and a boyish appeal. We talked about the gay scene in Japan, and Len told me that there were both gays who liked masculine men and those who liked “*maegami-kei*,” which is another Japanese word for twink. It refers to the haircut of having forelocks, which is associated with boys and youth. He said he thought there were many shotacon among those who liked twink. However, he had found it hard to talk about his shota interest with his gay friends. “If I show them something, the conversation stops.”

Len described his attraction to shota as twofold: “The first part is directed toward men, and that feeling is probably connected to my sexuality. The other part is directed toward youth, to young boys. That part can maybe partly be explained biologically, because even my gay friends are attracted to younger guys. But it’s still not that easy. Because when others say that they like young people, I don’t think those guys are that young. Whereas I like young guys who ... I can’t really explain it.” Here he was silent for a while. He told me he had thought a lot about these things, but that there were things he couldn’t explain. “As I grow older, the age of those I’m attracted to also gets higher. It becomes harder and harder for me to say that I have a strong identity as a shotacon. It’s more that I like shota. But even if I have started to like older guys, I like young ones too.”

Both Takato and Len were struggling with their sexual attraction to real boys, both in terms of how it would affect their lives practically, especially when forming a family in the future, and in regards to what it meant for their identity. Like Watanabe's "genuine" shota fans, they shared the experience of having been attracted to their male classmates in school, and both had some kind of "gay" identity. The "genuine" shota fans say in Watanabe's interview that the word "shota" has a positive meaning for them and has made it easier for them to accept themselves and "come out" (*soto ni dereru*),¹¹ whereas before learning that there were other men like them, they thought of themselves as "sick" (*byōki*). This is the language of sexuality, where an interest for shota goes so deep that it is (mis)understood as a disease, and where you can finally "come out" after having come to terms with this interest. Could it be that fiction and reality come closer for men who self-identify as gay, since they have both been boys, and been attracted to boys? Are "gay" or "genuine" shota fans attracted to real boys too? Not necessarily.

Kabane was also sexually attracted to men in his actual life, and he had a boyfriend. However, he preferred men around his own age, which was twenty-eight when I interviewed him in his home. He was not only uninterested in actual boys, but thought that they were irritating. He illustrated this with an example from his surroundings: "I live near the station, and sometimes I almost crash with some boy on a bike who is in a hurry to catch the train. I want to tell him to take it easy, I even get angry." By contrast, "boys in anime behave like adults; even when they are brats, they are not as irritating as in reality."

As we saw earlier, Kabane used shota as a way to return to his own boyhood, and experience the friendship and play that hadn't been part of his actual schooldays. We can say that his interest for shota was less related to boys, and more related to himself; Kabane wanted to *be* the boy, which is a contrast to for example Len, who expressed that he wanted to *have* the boy.

Killua fell somewhere in between the two. When he first discovered shota at the age of thirteen, there was a concrete connection to his own life: "Shota-BL works feature boys around the age of thirteen. And when I saw them, I thought I could do the stuff they are doing." But you didn't, right? I asked. "No of course not. But I became aware of it." He protested when I suggested that fantasy and reality must have

been closer when he was the same age as the shota characters: "No, it wasn't like that at all. No matter how you look at it, the characters in shota are so cute that they can't be matched by anything in reality."

Killua was only twenty-one when we met, lived at home and had not given much thought to what his future life would look like in terms of family. "Maybe I will get a wife, but if that doesn't work out, maybe I will get a boyfriend. I don't think about these things now." I asked him if he thought his shota interest would be a problem or not in a future relation. "Oh, I think it would be a problem," he exclaimed. "A lover probably wouldn't understand. Because society's view on shotacon is that they are sort of criminals or homosexual." But if he would understand you, it wouldn't be a problem? I asked. "No, of course not." In other words, the "problem" had nothing to do with Killua's own sexual desire: "No, there is no problem there."

When I asked Killua if he was sexually attracted to real boys too, he said that he wasn't "particularly interested": "I don't see them as shota, I see them as men." And the "men" he was attracted to were of his own age. So maybe Killua's interest in shota was more about *himself* rather than about other boys, fictional or real? "Yes exactly, that's how I think it is," he replied when I asked him this.

Asked if he saw his shota interest as a sexuality or a hobby, Killua replied: "I think it's quite connected, but not completely the same thing. I wouldn't call it a sexuality (*seiteki shikō*). But even if it's a hobby, I would say that it has a certain influence over one's sexuality." He said he thought it was a mere coincidence that he had come to like shota: "I think I like it because I've looked so much at it. It's like the effect of advertising, we are affected by it psychologically. If you see an ad several times, it will have an effect on you. If the first porn I came across was loli, I might have still been into loli. But since the first I saw was shota, that's what I like now too."

Although Satoshi had been bullied in elementary and middle school, he had had several sexual experiences with male classmates when he was in high school, he told me when I interviewed him over waffles and coffee. However, he separated these experiences completely from the fantasy of shota: "I don't compare it with my own experiences. That is that and me is me. ... They don't overlap." In other words, the stories in shota were separate both from the bad experiences from elementary school, when he was bullied, and from his positive experiences in high school.

Like many others, Satoshi had written in the questionnaire that it's illegal to touch real boys. But was he attracted to them? "I think they are cute, but only to look at," he replied. So it's not a sexual cuteness? I asked. "Of course it's a sexual cuteness (*seitekina kawaïsa*)." This shows that the word "cute," which so many respondents had used to describe shota and their feelings when engaging with it, is not necessarily opposed to "sexual."

When asked if shota for him was a sexuality or a hobby, he replied "both": "It is a hobby. But when it comes to partners I like younger guys." But not as young as in shota I guess, I asked. "No, of course not. I just look at them." He also said: "Let's say as an example that there is a boy who is interested in doing something. In that case I would say no." Because you have such a principle? I asked, and he confirmed. But would you *want* to do something? "If it wasn't a crime? Maybe." Satoshi giggled a bit as he said it. Maybe because he hadn't been confronted with the question of what he would "want" before, and because it seemed irrelevant considering the ethics that guided him.

For Akira and Scaramouche, the two young men who didn't have a "gay" identity, the border between attraction to fictional and actual boys was also not so clearcut. The "basis" of the attraction is the same, Akira said, and this basis consists of the "symbols" of "young" and "boy" that are inherent in shota:

Those symbols can exist in a real elementary school boy, but they can also exist in *dōjinshi* or illustrations. The basis of an immature boy can be expressed in various images. When I see these images within me, it doesn't matter if the original is 3D or 2D. If I'm attracted to something, it goes for both. In that sense, you can't make a clear distinction between real and fictional.

According to Akira, the principal distinction between fictional and actual boys lay not in the basis, but in the "deformation" (*difōmu*) that happens when this basis is enhanced in a drawn character. He illustrated his point with his attraction to *jōsō*, or crossdressers: "Crossdressers exist in reality too, but without the enhancement. But in the fictional world the deformation can be drawn in various ways." When I asked him if he preferred deformed characters, Akira thought for a while and then replied that he liked both: "What I feel most

attraction to varies. It depends on my mood. Real boys have their own attraction of course, but deformation can enhance certain parts of reality." Like the others in the study, he added his ethical stance: "Even if I'm attracted to both, it is illegal to do anything sexual with a real boy. But there are no such limitations in fiction."

When I asked Akira if he saw his shota interest as a sexuality or a hobby, Akira told me that he had several hobbies. One of them was to build custom keyboards, another to develop game strategies powered by artificial intelligence. And he saw shota as nothing more, or less, than these hobbies: "Shota is just a hobby for me, like keyboards and programming. I don't see any connection to if I would be gay (*gei*). Even so, there seems to be prejudices about people who like shota, in a way that is not the case for other hobbies. Sexuality seems to imply that your life is in a certain way, and that's not the case for me."

Although Akira mentioned the word "gay" here, he didn't see himself as gay. Like the majority of twenty-four-year-old men in Japan, he was still a virgin,¹² but he saw himself marrying a woman in the future, and getting children. Unlike some of the participants who self-identified as homosexual men, he didn't see his interest for shota as a problem in this regard: "My attraction to shota is separate from the real me who wants to marry, create a home, and have a life plan (*raifu puran*). Shota is just one of my hobbies, and I like working on my computer as much as I like reading a *dōjinshi*, they are on the same level."

At the end of the interview, Akira wanted to go back and correct what he had said about sex with underage boys being illegal and thereby implicitly wrong. "If we look back in history, there has been a tradition with beautiful boys, and I can't say that the moral then was wrong. So I can think that today's law is a bit too strict. Today in Japan, men and women have no power over their own lives until they are eighteen years old. To not give people under eighteen the power to decide for themselves is something of an abuse in my view. In that sense, I don't think that people who love shota have a bad influence on society. For example, if a boy and a grown man would have a relation in the real world, I think it would be a crime according to today's legislation, but I can't say that it's something bad." Akira thereby brought up the legacy of *wakashudō* that several research participants had mentioned.

Scaramouche said that he felt the same attraction to real boys as to fictional characters: "Of course there's no difference. Both are boys." He added that the appearance varies for real boys, whereas "2D shota can be super hot (*moerisugi*).” He also mentioned the familiar principle of “you must not touch (*tedashi ikemasen*) real boys.” But you can look, Scaramouche told me. “At a public bath for example, I feel lucky if I get a glimpse of something. I can think ‘how beautiful.’ But you can’t stare of course.” He noted that his view seemed to be more common among shota readers than for readers of other genres: “In loli, reality and fantasy are separated. In GL (girls love)¹³ they are also separated. In BL too. But in shota for men, this separation is not made.”

In the future, Scaramouche wanted to have a family and become a parent, “have real children, boys and girls.” He saw himself marrying a woman. When I asked him if his interest for shota could be a problem for such plans, he said no: “Family is family and individual is individual, you can separate them.” Here he used the same word for separation, *warikiri*, that Watanabe’s “genuine” shota fans had used. Although they used it to separate real boys from their own lives, and Scaramouche used it to separate his future family life from his personal interests, the line drawn functioned as a way to make things work. The view that one’s personal desires are irrelevant as long as one fulfills one’s societal duties might be reflected in the general acceptance of *eromanga* in Japan, with its sometimes extreme themes, where people’s personal desires are separated from their “public” persona, maybe through a *warikiri*.

The female shota artist Hōsuke had written in the questionnaire about the relation between two-dimensional, fictional boys and three-dimensional, actual boys: “I don’t think there are any differences.” When I asked her to elaborate, she wrote:

I would be lying if I said that I don’t feel sexual attraction toward 3D boys. Since 3D boys exist in the real world, they have both a future and a past. But since 2D boys don’t exist in the real world, my personal opinion is that they neither have future nor past.

She wrote that shota was somewhere between a sexuality and a hobby for her. “I think my husband accepts my shota interest, but as for my family, I don’t think they know what shota is, and I don’t

think they care since I haven't told them that I like shota." She said the fact that she liked shota didn't have much impact on her life.

Link was open with her husband about her interest for *dōjinshi* and BL manga generally, but wrote that "I keep quiet about shota because the adult elements are a bit too strong." She wrote that it was similar to not discussing porn (*poruno*) openly: "For example, you can tell your partner that you watch adult videos (AV), but not which genre of adult videos you like."

Despite liking the distinct "taste" of shota compared to regular BL, Link had decided to stop drawing shota, and to go back to creating BL works. The reason for this was that she thought shota fans were discriminated against, both by BL fans and by the outside world:

Even among people creating homoerotic works, there are those who keep a distance to shota and look down upon it. In the BL world, there are many housewives who have children. And Amazon Kindle prohibits works that feature sex between characters under the age of eighteen, even if they are made up ... There are fewer and fewer places where you can express yourself, and I think that development will accelerate in the future.

She brought up the Miyazaki incident, where a murderer of little girls in the late 1980s was framed as having an excessive interest in anime, and how that made the public suspicious against adults who liked anime. "Even now, shotacon and lolicon are seen as potential criminals when there is some news about some crime that has been committed against a boy or a girl. It's a common view."

She said that she so far was happy with her decision to abandon shota for BL. "If I feel lonely I buy shota as ebooks (laugh)." There was something sad about Link's liking for shota and her decision to abandon the genre due to a feeling of discrimination. The negative feelings surrounding shota can thereby be said to revolve both around one's personal identity, where Takato and Len expressed worries about not being able to form a family due to this interest, which both of them at times had thought of as a sexuality, and around the "pressure from society," as Len expressed it, and the view that shota fans are, in Killua's words, "criminals or homosexuals." Link ended our correspondence with these words: "I feel that there is almost no one who understands my liking for shota. To be honest, I was afraid

to be discriminated against just by saying I liked it.” Maybe the feeling of discrimination from the outside society, and even from other BL fans, who one would think should know better, contributes to the “feeling of oneness” that many shota fans experienced at shota events.

The ethics of shota

Like the survey responses, the interviews too covered the whole spectrum of thoughts about attraction to fictional and real boys, from Kabane, who was not only uninterested in, but even irritated by real boys, and Killua, who was also uninterested in them, to Satoshi, Takato, and Len, who all expressed that they were sexually attracted to actual boys. This finding challenges previous beliefs that people who like erotic comics with childlike characters are not interested in “the real thing.”¹⁴ But of course, those studies mostly concerned lolicon, and to the extent that they included shota, they assumed that the readers self-identified as heterosexual males.¹⁵ The only reference I have found that complicates the division between attraction to fictional and actual boys is Watanabe’s interview with the two “genuine” shota fans in 1998. Their words about having been attracted to their own gender already as children echo almost to the letter how some of my research participants described their feelings. And just like my participants, those two interviewees differed internally in their view on actual boys, where one of them was uninterested in them and the other was attracted to them but had a principle of looking only. Which again reflects the ethical principle of my research participants. We also saw a teenage boy writing in Manda’s survey that there were boys in his class who fit his idea of “ideal shota,” so he was “horny every day.”¹⁶ And we saw references to real life situations in reader letters to commercial shota magazines in the 1990s, which seemed to have been written by men (or boys). It seems both from the literature and from my interviews that the border between attraction to fictional and actual boys is more fluid for some shota fans, both more fluid than for fans of other genres, such as lolicon, and more fluid than for other shota fans. One can probably say that the shota fans for whom fictional and actual realities come closer are the “genuine” shota fans, who with today’s terminology might call themselves “gay” or “homo,” as my research participants did when describing similar experiences and feelings as Watanabe’s interviewees. If your

real-life desire is directed toward other males, it is logical that the border between fictional and actual boys becomes more blurred than for male shota fans whose real-life desire is directed toward women, since shota expressions feature male characters. However, this doesn't explain why female readers, whose real-life desire typically also is directed toward men, don't seem to be as sexually attracted to real boys as some of the "genuine" shota fans.

It might also be that the view on fictional and actual boys is connected to the way shota is read. Killua was not interested in real boys, because he wanted to *be the boy* when he was reading shota. This contrasts to the reading of Len, who wanted to *have the boy*, a less immersive and more objectifying or voyeuristic way of reading that might be closer to observing real boys on the train. In Nagayama's analysis, male readers of shota typically project themselves onto the boy character, just like they identify with the girl in loli. If the point of the reading is that you *become the boy* or *become the girl*, then real children are of course completely uninteresting; they are irrelevant, non-existent, since the story is about no one else than *you*, or the "cute I" as Nagayama calls him.¹⁷ But this is only the reading of certain male shota fans, and as my interviews with shota fans who self-identify as "gay," "homo," "shotacon and gay," and so on suggest, there are other ways to read shota, other ways to project and immerse, and thereby other ways to think about one's attraction to fictional and actual boys.

Saitō Tamaki wrote that shota fans "are not pedophiles,"¹⁸ but as we have seen, some of my research participants said that they felt sexual attraction to real boys, an attraction that some of them found problematic. Even so, I would not describe them as "pedophiles" in the strict technical meaning of sexual attraction to prepubescent children, but, if I have to use the psychopathological discourse of sexuality, as "gay men" (primarily) who were honest and curious about their desire in a way that would be unthinkable in a culture marked by centuries of violent persecution of "deviants" – I'm looking at you, Europe.¹⁹ Such a playful acceptance of one's desires does not necessarily say anything about one's "sexuality," but rather about a culture where desires in themselves are not shameful, and where there is an important difference between what one feels and what one does. That's why both in my master's research and in this study, the mention of an attraction to actual boys was always accompanied with the

ethical policy of “no touch,” just like the “genuine” shota fans who were interviewed by Watanabe in 1998 knew where to draw the line, the *warikiri*.²⁰

Among these research participants we also see a tendency to connect one’s interest for shota with one’s sexuality or identity. Some of them had given a lot of thought to this issue, and had changed the way they looked upon their shota interest over time: Len had called himself “shotacon and gay,” but now said he was more “gay” than “shotacon.” Takato had seen himself as a “shotacon/boy-lover” in his teens, but said he had stopped thinking so much about his identity now. Even so, both Len and Takato expressed worries that their interest for shota could be a problem when forming a family in the future. Whether it would be a problem or not is maybe less interesting than the fact that they worried about it. This is a clear contrast to those participants who saw their interest for shota as a mere hobby that had no bearing on their current or future relationships, be they with men (as with Kabane and Satoshi above) or with women. It was my impression that this stance was the default both among my female research participants, and among the men who were primarily interested in women in their actual lives. For those participants, shota was “a hobby among others,” as Akira put it, that brought them joy and pleasure without any existential worries. And it was against those shota fans that Watanabe’s “genuine” shota fans protested when they said that “for us the boy’s attraction is a much more special thing.”²¹ In other words, just like whether one was attracted to real boys or not spanned the whole spectrum among my research participants, so did the view on whether one’s shota interest was a hobby or part of one’s sexuality. There were participants who recognized the beauty of real boys while still considering their shota interest an unproblematic hobby, but there was no one who saw their shota interest as a sexuality if they were not attracted by real boys.

In the essay “‘Shota’ as sexuality: Between ‘shota’ and ‘boy-lovers,’” published in 1997 in the midst of the first wave of commercial shota magazines, Akiyama Michiya divides men who like shota in four “breeds”: “shotacon,” “hetero male” (*hetero dansei*), “gay” (*gei*), and “boy-lover” (*shōnenaiisha*).²² He writes that some people who like shota also seem to identify as “boy-lovers,” and that he saw photos of real boys being sold at Shotaket, the pioneering shota event that was founded in 1995. He recounts the history of the gay move-

ment abroad: how gays disliked being lumped together with boy-lovers, and how gay organizations finally issued public statements saying that they didn't want anything to do with the boy-lovers. Akiyama writes about shotacon: "The time may have come for us to decide, like the gay organizations overseas, how to respond to boy-lovers." Akiyama's essay shows that the discussion about whether a desire for shota also encompasses real boys has been present ever since the genre was formed.

While lolicon is nowadays understood as "an orientation toward fictional bishōjo (the two-dimensional) and thus distinct from sexual desire for flesh-and-blood women (the three-dimensional),"²³ early lolicon expressions actually included nude photography featuring young girls,²⁴ and this was the case on the boy side too in the 1970s. In his book *The Outrageous World of Beautiful Boys*,²⁵ also published in 1997, anime critic Karasawa Shun'ichi describes several artistic and hardcore boy photo publications from the 1970s. Some of them were published as *dōjinshi* that were bought mainly through mail order, and some as exclusive photo books that sold for as much as 3,300 yen.²⁶ As the amateur culture of *minikomi* started trending, boy photo *dōjinshi* made it to the shelves of major bookstores. Others were available in adult bookstores.²⁷ After surveying the reader letters to *Shōnen*, a quarterly magazine that was published in 22 issues in the 1970s, Karasawa notes an "extreme confusion" in the attitude toward boys:

There are many kinds of boy-love (*shōnen-ai*). There are people who actually want to have sexual relations with boys, there are those who never tire of just looking at boys in shorts, and there are people who enjoy watching child stars on TV as if they were idols.²⁸

The boy idols that Karasawa mentions are a good example of the prominent status of the beautiful boy, the *bishōnen*, in contemporary Japan. In her essay from 1998, also written in the midst of Japan's boy craze, Watanabe Yumiko writes that "there are beautiful boys everywhere nowadays," and mentions the boy idols in Johnny's Jr. Although she clarifies that her research will exclude three-dimensional boys, her description of the shota boom as consisting of "Johnny's, *dōjinshi*, *yaoi*" is telling, as it includes beautiful boys in

both the third and the second dimension, both actual and fictional.²⁹ (The shota anthology *Johnny*, which started as a gay comics magazine, is probably a flirt with this emporium of boy idols, and the term “johnny”/janī is synonymous with “twink” in Japanese gay parlance.) The pioneering *shōnen-ai* magazine *June*, which was aimed at women, also featured photos of boys.³⁰

Of course, one can argue that a *photo* of a boy is something different than an *actual* boy of flesh and blood, and that photos therefore belong to the two-dimensional realm of fiction, not least since the photographed idols are groomed and retouched to perfection, stylized into an ideal. I will not go into that discussion here, but we can note that the border between drawings and photos of beautiful boys is not necessarily conceptual, but rather seems to have come about by chance in both commercial and amateur publishing in Japan between the 1970s and the 1990s. There is namely a striking similarity in the reader letters to *Shōnen*, which featured photos of actual boys, and those in the shota publications in the 1990s that only featured comics. “My ideal model is someone aged from thirteen, fourteen to sixteen, seventeen, with a beautiful face, but also someone who is not cute, but manly,” one *Shōnen* reader writes. “The one I find most attractive is a slim, beautiful boy with thick hair who is between ten and twelve years old,” another writes, and adds in parenthesis that “I don’t accept twelve-year-old boys whose voice has changed.” A third reader writes that he thinks that “the beauty of the boy lies in his androgynous nature.” These quotes, as chosen by Karasawa,³¹ could have been taken not only from the readers’ corner of purely two-dimensional shota comic publications, but also from Manda Ringo’s survey of shota fans in 1996,³² and my own survey in 2023: the age specifications, the androgyny, the period of puberty when the voice changes. It seems that the idea of the boy, or the *ideal* of the boy, is more important than the concrete expressions of this ideal. The boy is like a spirit that manifests in all dimensions, from photo magazines and idols to comics. As well as in real boys on the street, as when a *Baby-X* reader described how she had seen a boy practicing tennis with a trainer, and started to fantasize about them. (It could probably even be argued that actual boys of flesh and blood are also fiction, at least to their worshippers who obsess about them from a distance.) Or when a *Boy Meets Boy* reader recounted how cute it was when an elementary schooler urinated next to him at a public toilet. In that

sense, the culture of shota *dōjinshi* is maybe not best understood as a comic culture, but as a *boy* culture, or rather, as one part of a boy culture that can take many expressions.

As we have seen, the theme of attraction to actual boys, and how to handle that attraction, was very real and personal for several of the male shota fans that I interviewed, particularly those whose real-life desire was directed at other males. However, no matter if the participants felt sexual attraction to real boys or not, all agreed that one must not “touch” them. Since this rule was expressed with almost the same wording by my research participants, it seemed to have been widely adopted. Patrick Galbraith calls such a shared understanding of where to draw the line an “ethics of affect.”³³ He shows that even among lolicon, the division between 2D and 3D is not always that clear, but that people who stray into the blurry area are caught by this ethics, which is upheld by the group. Takato even suggested that the principle of “no touch” (*te wo dasanai*) could be called an “ethics of shotacon.” It seems to me that the group aspect of the ethics of affect – fellow shotacon (or lolicon) who support each other and pull each other back if someone shows tendencies to stray into murky waters – is the killer app of these *dōjinshi* cultures, and something that other societies could learn from. Because the alternative, or the opposite, to the unabashed celebration of the beautiful boy that shota culture is an expression of is silence and individuals whose stigmatized and condemned desires wander on their own, unrestrained and unguided by the group. And who knows where they might wander then?

On this theme, the French essayist Georges Bataille points out that “what we want” is a rather uninteresting question. He illustrates with a crime novel and says that of course the reader wants to be the murderer. Or the detective who solves the crime. The whole premise of fiction is that we as consumers “want” to be part of it. But to “want” and to “do” are completely different things. While crime novels and tv series let us commit murder through fiction, we don’t do it in reality for a number of reasons: it’s immoral, we will become outcasts, and if nothing else works, it’s also illegal, so we will end up in prison.³⁴ In other words, the enjoyment of these fictions is surrounded by an ethics, which is upheld by society.

In the same way, one can argue that whether some shota fans “want” to have sex with a real boy is irrelevant. In fact, one of the participants in my master’s study said that although he wasn’t partic-

ularly interested in it, "it would be cool to some day have sex with a real boy, just to see how it was." Such a candid admission would be unthinkable in countries where social and legal sanctions in this area are strong; it is not unthinkable that my university would have seen such a statement as a "disclosure" of plans to commit a crime, and that I would have been obliged to act upon it in accordance with my "disclosure protocol." This would in my view not only be highly unethical, as it would risk doing harm to this research participant, but also ridiculous, since it was obvious that the statement was not to be taken seriously.

Likewise, another participant in my master's study described himself as a "pedophile" (*pedofairu*). He stated that he was sexually attracted to real boys as young as "zero." However, both these participants told me that they had either a partner or a sex friend who was roughly the same age as them (around twenty-five and forty respectively), so to the extent that one of them "wanted" to have sex with a real boy at some point, and the other self-identified as a "pedophile," these aspects didn't seem to be crucial to their lives, or impair their happiness, as would have been the case if they could only feel desires that could not be acted upon. Rather, what they said seemed to me as *honest* and *fearless* explorations of feelings that are so stigmatized in other parts of the world that people won't even admit them to themselves, let alone mention them to others. Maybe the strict "no touch" rule of what we can call the "ethics of shota" let some people be freer in their thoughts and fantasies, including those about what they "want," or think they "want," since the realization of these desires is so safely guarded by the ethics that one never has to even consider whether it would be possible or not. This ethical thinking is so obvious in other parts of society that we don't even reflect about it. After all, it is both immoral and illegal to "touch" *anyone* who doesn't want it. We can go around claiming that we "want" to have sex with everyone from celebrities to the cashier at the local 7-Eleven or random people we see on the street, but both we and everyone else know that such desires are irrelevant, since they are disconnected from the actual reality. This is common sense, and there is no rational reason why desires directed toward real boys should be treated any differently.

PART THREE

REFLECTIONS

EIGHT

LET'S PLAY!

UNDERSTANDING SHOTA

Now that we have gone through various aspects of how my research participants engaged with and thought about shota, how do we make sense of these findings? In this chapter, I will try to connect them to existing theories, and explain why I don't think that the framework of sexuality and queer theory is the best way to understand shota activities. Instead, I will suggest that the local concept of *play* better captures what's going on here. But let's start with trying to understand the godlike role of the boy in my research participants' lives.

Idology

Idology is a subfield of symbolic anthropology that looks at how people relate to idols. The Japanese anthropologist Aoyagi Hiroshi, who pioneered the field in the early 2000s, argues that an idol doesn't exist on its own, but always in relation to others, and that this relationship can be intimate and intense, personal or shared.¹ Since many of my research participants described the boy as an ideal, it is not a far leap to call him an *idol*, who is *shared* by his worshippers through *dōjinshi*.

In Aoyagi's study among fans of pop idols, his participants told him that the idols gave them energy. The way that the fans collected this energy was by purchasing idol goods.² This brings to mind Akira, who said that he bought *dōjinshi* not primarily to read them, but because they contained the "hotness and energy" of the event: "By

buying various *dōjinshi* I can feel that atmosphere as a concrete thing." When I visited Akira in his home, I saw how not only *dōjinshi*, but also other shota related commodities, such as a calendar with shota illustrations, filled his little room. It was the same case with Kabane, who rose to his feet during our interview to show me some kind of shota card game that was on display in his bookshelf. We also saw how he had decorated the wall at his lab where he worked with cute boy characters, and that he had a shota illustration as wallpaper on his laptop. The one with most shota goods was Zac from my master's study, whose room was populated by action figures of boy characters from his favorite manga and anime. He said that these characters made him feel good because of the "energy" he felt from them.

Aoyagi and Kovacic argue that the need for "symbolic mysticism" is as big in urban societies as in traditional ones, because it offers stress relief.³ Since we have seen that shota offers a refuge from societal pressure, the boy characters can be seen as fulfilling the same role as the "protective spirits" that watch over their worshippers in rituals described by anthropologists.⁴ This reminds of the Japanese traditional belief in *yōkai*, or spirits, which Aoyagi and Kovacic call the "frontal sides" of a spirituality that we otherwise can't see. *Yōkai* were in other words mediators between the human and the spiritual realm, a role that idols also seem to occupy.⁵

Whereas *yōkai* were "mysteriously deformed," today's pop idols in Japan are "extraordinary" in everything from their "shiny stage costumes" to the limited access that their fans have to them.⁶ Indeed, idols in Japan are groomed into such perfection that they almost become unreal, like the characters in manga, anime, and games. And even when reality knocks on the door in the form of aging, female fans of male idols in Japan *fictionalize* them to the extent that even a thirty-year-old idol can be described as a "cute boy."⁷

This shows that everything in a way is fiction, and that the purely fictional expressions that we usually reserve for the term, such as comics, are simply a bit better at "being fiction" than humans, who need to fight reality in order to become a symbol, become *unreal*. It might not be a coincidence that the field of idology emerged in Japan, with its strong focus on abstract expressions of cultural consumption; beyond the obvious examples of manga, anime, and games, the theater traditions of *noh* and *kabuki* were also highly symbolic in their expressions. Shota can in some ways be seen as the epitome of fiction,

with its characters being impossibly cute boys who engage in practices that in reality would be not only morally and/or legally questionable, but often downright impossible (real prepubescent boys can't ejaculate) or unrealistic (real boys don't have anal sex days on end). But shota is not about real boys. Shota is all about the viewer, for whom shota facilitates something: feeling good, escaping stress, healing.

Using Victor Turner's diagram of the ritual process, Aoyagi and Kovacic place the idols in the "liminal space-time" of symbols, where they act as "tricksters" who through their magic powers facilitate an exchange between the spiritual and the human realm.⁸ It is easy to see shota as such a trickster (see figure 2). The magic power of the boy lets the reader or drawer of shota communicate with a higher layer that is otherwise inaccessible, and that is what makes it feel so good to engage with shota. When my research participants referred to shota, or boys, as "Gods," and when the how-to-draw book calls them "angels," this points to the role of the boy as a spiritual entity, who can be used as a tool for our own wellbeing.

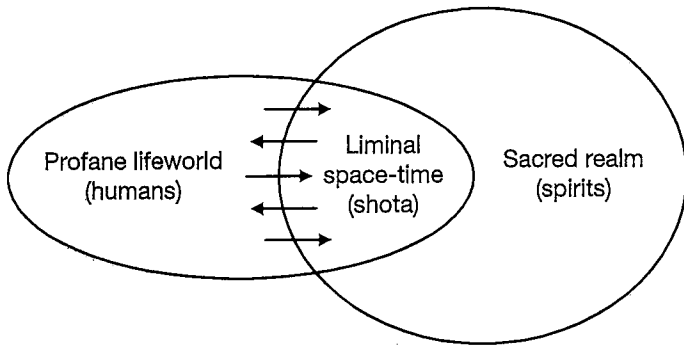


Figure 2. The ritual process, adapted from Victor Turner, with the role of idols and shota in the "liminal space-time."

The innocent child

In chapter four, I recounted how my research participants combined a number of items and personality traits, and attached these to a male character in a certain age span in order to create an *ideal boy*. Except for being cute, cool, and sexy, the keywords that many participants mentioned was *innocence*, *purity*, *honesty*, *curiosity*, and *kindness*. In

addition, the *period* of puberty was important, because that's when an *irreversible* change happens, and these ideal personality traits get tainted by adult life. In other words, shota *idealizes* the child as the spotless and virtuous *opposite* to the adult.

The way these shota fans idealized innocent boys aligns very well with the idealization of the child in Victorian England. James Kincaid describes how adults invented the persona of "the innocent child" in the late nineteenth century for their own purposes, namely to project their own (lost) innocence onto this empty vessel.⁹ In line with the categorization frenzy of the time, the Victorians made the child into "the other," a being completely separated from adults with all their depravity.¹⁰ Kincaid quotes a Christian official who perfectly captures this mindset in his speech at the aptly titled National Purity Congress: "It should be understood at the outset that the child's mind is perfectly pure at the beginning."¹¹ The professed concern about the innocent child, and the high moral ground on which it was expressed, were in stark contrast to the harsh reality of children in Victorian England: in 1856, half of all children died before the age of five; between 1868 and 1925, 80,000 children were shipped to Canada to work as laborers or servants (most of them were under fourteen, one third of them were orphans).¹² And let's not forget the boys who were sent down mines and up chimneys, where they not seldom were "roasted alive"; small "climbing boys" were used to sweep otherwise inaccessible crevices, and if they didn't die on the spot, they inhaled so much soot that they soon got cancer in several parts of their body.¹³ In addition, it was not uncommon with prostitutes being as young as eight or nine. Kincaid concludes that Victorian England was very far away from Lewis Carroll's "child of the pure unclouded brow."¹⁴ But then again, the concern was not about actual children, but about an image that adults used for their own purposes.

I refer this history since we're still living the legacy of the innocent child, as it was concocted by the Victorians, in Europe and other parts of the world. Kincaid shows how our contemporary take on the innocent child finds its ultimate expression in the persona of the pedophile; he argues that we have invented this "monster" as a useful opposite to the pure child. In Kincaid's analysis, innocence is in itself erotic, since it is surrounded by a taboo: if it is absolutely forbidden to feel desire for something, that in itself creates desire. And the pedophile is useful because we can outsource this desire to him.¹⁵ This

explains the “hypnotic interest” that we show the pedophile as we watch him on the news, follow him in endless trials, and shudder at him in feature films.¹⁶ In Kincaid’s words, we have put the pedophile “on the throne.”¹⁷ While both pedophilia (whatever that is) and child sexual abuse are actually quite rare phenomena, at least compared to other forms of child abuse, we have made them the center of our thinking, to the extent that we can’t see family pictures of children on the beach without worrying that a pedophile might view them with the wrong intent. This, in a way, makes *us* the pedophile; in our *desire* to see pedophiles everywhere, and condemn them as publicly and ritualistically as possible, we have internalized a pedophilic gaze.¹⁸ And so, we can continuously denounce him, and experience vicarious pleasure in the process. As in nineteenth century England, the ones losing out on this societal self-therapy are the real children. In a follow-up book, Kincaid lists the actual atrocities that children suffer in contemporary USA. No one cares even about murdered children, unless there is a sexual component to it that can arouse our interest.¹⁹

To get back to my research, my study participants seemed in a way to be part of this narrative, since they described their ideal boy in words that could have been taken from the National Purity Congress: he should be “pure,” “innocent,” “cheerful,” “honest,” and so on. However, on one crucial point did these shota fans differ heavily from the Victorians and their contemporary heirs, namely in that they knew that this ideal boy that they obsessed about was *fiction*. Real boys were often described as “irritating brats,” or even as “lacking the virtue of 2D,” which is a direct opposite to the virtuous ideal. Of course, the innocent child of the Victorians and of contemporary cultures is also fiction, but there is no awareness of that: we still think that both the innocent child and the evil pedophile are real. *We believe in the child!* In that sense, the shota fans in my research demonstrated a comparatively high degree of psychological maturity in being aware that their idealization of the boy had nothing to do with reality; it was simply *play*, engaged in every now and then for the pleasure of it. One could argue that reading juicy news stories about evil pedophiles is play too, just like watching a murder mystery is, but it is not recognized as such – at least not yet. As I see it, these shota fans had access to a way of thinking about desire in relation to fictional and actual realities that we can all learn from, at least if we want to protect actual children. In case anyone would be interested

in that for real. By comparison, to actually believe in innocent children that must be protected from evil pedophiles comes off as superstitious at best, but considering the disastrous effects of this self-glorifying superstition, both for real children and for those who are assigned the role of the pedophile, it's important to understand that it is, at its core, a fantasy. Shota can here be seen as a kind of acid test for rationality: if you can see these "extreme" expressions without spitting three times and chanting condemnations, you might finally be free to save both the children and yourself.

"A certain kind of person"

The belief in the innocent child as a distinct persona, and the pedophile as its antithesis, is connected to the idea of sexualities, which gained traction in nineteenth century Europe. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, French historian Michel Foucault traces the origins of the idea of sexualities back to the medical discourse in Protestant Europe; he famously suggests 1870 as the "date of birth" for "the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality."²⁰ If same-sex sexual acts had been seen as *behavior* before, "the homosexual was now a *species*" (my emphasis). Foucault also shows that the belief that every person has an "individual secret" that can be revealed goes back at least to the Catholic confession of the early thirteenth century,²¹ and that the secular society that was introduced with the Enlightenment continued to carry out this confession, only not in a religious way, but through a combination of medical, "scientific," and juridical rules.²² He concludes that "the West" has since become "a singularly confessing society."²³ In other words, we see each other as people with distinct sexualities that can be hidden and revealed as one chooses, but which are always *there*.

This mindset thrived in the late modern period, as reflected in literature from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th century,²⁴ and unlike other hallmarks of modernity, such as the nuclear family and steady employment, the idea of innate and static sexualities doesn't seem to wane, but rather, grow stronger. The fluid desires of the characters in BL manga are a contrast to the mindset of static sexualities. Literature and film scholar Otomo Rio argues that by not being concerned with the idea of a "true self," "both BL texts and readers are outside the paradigm of modernity."²⁵ In other words, modern concepts of sexual categories don't apply. Manga

scholar Sharalyn Orbaugh recalls how the ambiguous way that Japanese comics deal with gender and sexuality often clashed with the mindset of her students in North America, where the “‘born this way’ discourse” was prevalent, that is, the idea that “being gay ... is inherent and utterly fundamental to a person’s identity.”²⁶

The pedophile is a child of the same sexual essentialism that created the homosexual, the heterosexual, and other clearly designated “species,” some of which, like “the ‘frigid’ woman,”²⁷ have gone out of style and are long since forgotten. The idea that people come with inborn sexualities is not an objective way of understanding the world. It is simply *one* way to understand it, one that has its roots in Christianity, as per Foucault, and possibly also in the atomistic worldview of ancient Greece.²⁸ But other cultures make sense of the world in other ways, guided by their own history, and that’s why we get confusion at best and denunciation at worst when someone applies their own culture’s rules to someone else’s culture. An example of this can be seen in the BBC documentary *Young Sex for Sale in Japan* (how’s that for a title), in which the reporter holds up a *dōjinshi* and says disapprovingly that she thinks it is made for “a certain kind of person.”²⁹ Of course, in the “born this way” culture of the UK, that *dōjinshi* is made for a pedophile, simple as that. Reasoning in a similar way, a CNN reporter told his American audience that “cartoons featuring sexual violence against kids” are “for sale on the streets of Japan, even if some fear those cartoons may be fueling the darkest desires of criminals.”³⁰ Not being able or willing to understand another culture from that culture’s own perspective, and instead applying the “common sense” of one’s own, supposedly superior culture on the culture one visits is sometimes called ethnocentrism. While it is common that ethnocentrism “fuels” (to borrow a word from CNN) tabloid journalism, for the simple reason that it sells, it is another matter entirely when it informs global politics, as when the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children, seventy-year-old Maud de Boer-Buquicchio from the Netherlands, suggested to Japan that “manga should be banned” when containing what she called “extreme child pornographic content.”³¹ Or when an Australian senator suggested that every manga and anime available in Australia should be checked for “child exploitation,”³² although this man’s regulating zest at least didn’t have extraterritorial ambitions. None of these actors seems to

be aware that the *dōjinshi* scene was pioneered by young women, that the authors of the first shota comics were themselves teenage girls, and that the men who read lolicon manga typically want to become the little girl. Pedophiles? Criminals? The West has spoken!

Desire on trial

With the above understanding of sexuality as something essential and inborn, child pornography legislations that include fictional content, as we have seen examples of in Europe, North America, and Australia, in a way become logical. Rather than protecting actual children from appearing in such content, their aim is to capture “a certain kind of person,” and that person can be exposed by the material he possesses and thereby supposedly feels sexual desire for. If that is the purpose, it of course becomes irrelevant if the material consists of photos of real children or drawings of unrealistic characters; either way, the viewer is exposed as a pedophile. The child pornography legislations don’t spell out this purpose, but the absence of any rational reasoning behind their inclusion of fictional content (bar the thorough German investigation, that came to the conclusion that such content should be removed from the law), and the vague references to child pornography being “offensive to children in general,” as in Sweden, seem to indicate that the real purpose behind these laws, the purpose that everyone reads into them despite it’s not explicitly stated, is, to quote an American TV show, “to catch a predator.”

The protests in Sweden in 2010 against a child pornography law that banned the possession of comics seem to have been an anomaly. My experiences from the UK in 2022 convinced me that “the people” in the UK, at least a vocal part of them, very much want such laws. As usual when these things are discussed, there will unfailingly be calls for the death penalty – it’s part of the show, as Kincaid would have said. But seriously, kill people for reading comics? Of course, the comics are not what’s at issue here, but *what they reveal* about the “sexuality” of their readers, whose “individual secret,” as Foucault called it, has been exposed. That’s why a Swedish court acquitted a man who possessed a 1976 studio album by Scorpions, which featured a naked girl on the cover, on the grounds that he possessed it because of the music, not because of the girl. And we have already seen how the Supreme court in Sweden acquitted a manga expert for possessing a drawing that would have been illegal for other people to

possess. Intent matters in the “born this way” world, since your intent reveals your desire, and it was your desire that was on trial from the start.

The “born this way” mindset contrasts sharply to the fearless reading of *eromanga* in Japan, where “anything goes as long as it is erotic.”³³ No matter if the comics contain the childlike characters that my research is about, or if they feature themes of incest, abuse, or even mutilation, not to mention the famous tentacles, readers typically don’t seem to connect the content of the stories to their own identity. That’s what I mean when I say that readers of *eromanga* are fearless: they don’t fear that their “individual secret” will be revealed by the manga they are reading, because their culture doesn’t believe in any such secret. That’s why the regulation of *eromanga* in Japan has traditionally been focused on censoring concrete expressions, such as certain parts of the genitals, or the area where the genitals meet, and not on whole themes, such as incest, abuse, or childlike characters. As long as the genitals are censored, all themes are treated the same way. Several people in Japan expressed surprise when I told them that I could not bring any *dōjinshi* into the UK. To them, properly censored genitals would make the *dōjinshi* safe. But as I’m arguing here, the “born this way” countries don’t care about the *dōjinshi* itself. They care about you and your desire.

Recent debates in Japan have focused on “unhealthy publications,” and local ordinances have designated books in the female genres of BL and TL as “harmful,”³⁴ so it might be that Japan too starts shifting its focus from concrete expressions to overarching themes. In the second edition of his book, from 2014, Nagayama has written a new chapter where he discusses a law amendment that would criminalize “possession out of sexual curiosity,” where it would have to be proven that the possession was “for sexual purposes.” He likens this with giving the legislator the right to “judge human desire as such,”³⁵ which, as described above, is exactly what is going on in Sweden and other countries. As Nagayama points out, such practice is an infringement of basic human rights, which include “freedom of expression, freedom of thought and belief, internal freedom,”³⁶ which are protected by the Constitution of Japan. He adds that our “internal freedom” is so “fundamentally inalienable” to us as humans that it is ours even without the support of the constitution: “The law does not give us the right to what was already ours, and we must not allow it

to take it away.”³⁷ It remains to be seen if Japan will follow the countries in Europe and other parts of the world to take away the internal freedom of its citizens.

With its “extreme” but ultimately harmless expressions, shota can be seen as an acid test not only for people, but whole nations: the way a country treats shota reveals how it treats its citizens. In Europe and other places, we have already been stripped of our internal freedom. We are not allowed to possess or even look at certain *comics*. Read that again and think about it. We live in a world where I felt compelled to publish a book about shota *without a single shota illustration*, in order to protect the safety of my readers. Not readers in some distant and purportedly “backward” country, but in Europe, which prides itself of being the pinnacle of rational enlightenment, and which often criticizes other countries for banning certain texts and illustrations. I don’t know about you, but I think it is high time that we take back our inviolable internal freedom.

Global shota fans

As a complement to my research among shota fans in Japan, I published an English translation of the questionnaire, which was taken by 79 respondents between February and May 2023. This material is so rich and interesting that it deserves its own book. Here I just want to bring up a couple of aspects from these responses, which I think well illustrate the “born this way” mindset, and the stigma that comes with the view on some people as essentially different. The two themes that were most salient in these survey submissions were *sexuality*, or more to the point, pedophilia, and *fear*, both of being and of being seen as a pedophile. Here are a couple of illustrative quotes:

I am sad because people want me to die for having this interest, not because I’m ashamed of it. I’m fine with people not liking me because of it, but I feel there are real material risks to my freedom and livelihood if I don’t keep it a secret, and because of that I will never have a deep platonic or romantic relationship with someone who understands the things that are important to me in both my private and public life. (Female, 30)

I feel like there is constant paranoia and assumptions [that] people who like *lolisho* are pedophiles and are just trying to secretly meet

other pedophiles. Maybe some are, and it's very disturbing. I wish i felt safe to meet people and express myself, because now i feel very afraid all the time because of several bad things happening to me because of bad people in shota communities, and being punished by others. It's still something that feels part of me though, even though I've been harmed so badly. I just want to draw, read, make friends, express myself, get boyfriend. That's it (FTM, 30, UK)

It's interesting that while the second commenter lamented that shota and loli fans were lumped together with pedophiles, he at the same time considered the idea that some of them indeed were pedophiles "very disturbing." This is the same estranging rhetoric that he sees himself a victim of, and which has historically been used against many unwanted groups. This raises the stakes of the self image; feeling attraction to fictional boys and actual boys is divided by a conceptual wall, where you are a shotacon on one side, and a pedophile on the other, which would not only make you a pariah, but would also be "very disturbing" for yourself. This view is a contrast to the continuum of attraction that was expressed by the participants in Japan, where many said that they felt some kind of attraction to real boys too, an attraction that most of them considered unproblematic because it was guarded by the ethics of shota, the "no touch" policy. But another reason to why attraction to real boys didn't cause them concern might have been that they didn't connect it to the monster of the pedophile, since the "born this way" discourse of inborn sexualities was not as dominating in their society.

Another example of the fear among shota fans outside of Japan comes from the question about shota events. It was natural that most respondents outside of Japan had not been to a shota event, since those are unique to Japan. My checkbox options for why they hadn't attended included "lack of money," "too far away," and so on, since it was a translation of the Japanese survey, but in the English version, several survey takers checked "other," and added their own reasons for not going to shota events:

Fear judgment, feeling awkward (Male, 21, Canada)

The fear of being called a pedophile or something like that. (Male, 21, South America)

fear of stigma against shotacons, and embarrassment from buying such works (Female, 18, USA)

Shota content is forbidden and taboo in my country (Male, 21, country: "I think that if I say Europe it is already quite good...")

Embarrassment (Male, 26, Spain)

Don't want to be seen in public at a shota event (Male, 28, USA)

Ashamed to publicly attend (Male, 27)

Unsafe. In my country, shota is considered CSAM [child sexual abuse material] and has a minimum prison sentence of 6 months if you're convicted of accessing it or possessing it, more if you're doing more than that with it. (Male, 33, Canada)

Many English-speaking respondents were articulate about their shota interest, and showed an awareness of the context that surrounded both them and their interest. These excerpts are from the question about attraction to fictional and actual boys:

Shotacons are attracted to the idealized, artistic representations of youth (boys) and not real boys, where as Pedophiles are attracted to the real youth. Pedophiles can possibly be Shotacons, but being a Shotacon doesn't automatically make you a Pedophile. (Male, 25, foreigner in Japan)

My observation on English-speaking twitter is that any implication that you would be sexually interested in real-life kids/teens or even characters in a live-action show that are portrayed as or played by actors under 18 is more or less considered pedophilia/minor attraction and not considered shota. People who suggest they could possibly like anything live-action or any real child, or support people who do, are expelled from the community. (Female, 30)

Rather than an ethics of shota that focuses on *behavior*, we see here an attitude that focuses on *identity* or *sexuality*, where people are "expelled" from the "shota" identity if there is any "suggestion" that they are sexually attracted to real boys too. This attitude very well illustrates the either/or mindset of the "born this way" society, where each person has an "individual secret" that can be hidden or exposed.

The assumption that shota fans are pedophiles was also common among shota fans themselves outside of Japan, although the issue was hotly debated. The admin of an online shota forum wrote as part of an introduction to a section of the forum that discussed pedophilia:

We recognize that not all shota enthusiasts are pedophiles, but it wouldn't be accurate to say that there isn't a strong correlation between liking drawn representations of children having sex and having a sexual attraction to real children.³⁸

It is telling that the section with pedophilia discussions became so controversial that the admin made it hidden by default. In a forum poll about "attraction to minors," 70 percent of the 288 respondents said they felt some kind of attraction to minors.³⁹ My own study doesn't quantify "attraction to minors," but my impression is that such attraction was more common among the pollees at the English language shota forum. One theory is that shota emerged and developed in one way in Japan, pioneered as it was by young women in the 1980s, but was then picked up by people outside of Japan, many of whom were maybe interested in real boys to begin with, and therefore liked fictional depictions of them when they were served them in the form of a readymade genre. Or to put it differently, these people outside of Japan *had an identity* of being interested in real boys. The attraction to boys may be the same, but a person in Japan in the 1980s interpreted this attraction as a *hobby* that gave them pleasure, whereas a person in Europe or North America understood it as a *sexuality*. In the "born this way" framework of sexualities, attraction to boys was channeled not through pop and subculture, as in Japan, but through sexual politics. That's why when Japan got *Triton of the Sea* and other anime with cute boys, the US got Nambla (North American Man/Boy Love Association).

A user on an English-speaking forum for people who self-identify as boy-lovers wrote:

I want to be a boy making love to a boy
and that is eternally denied to me.
There, I said it.

I am not drunk, or high. I missed out on a lot of fun times due to overprotective parents who insisted on knowing everything

about everybody I hung out with. Fuck it.

I once had a chance with intimate relationships with one boy, but then my mother one day proclaimed I was not going to hang with him anymore, and when I asked her why, she proclaimed I would not understand. I understood fully. Fucking cunt.⁴⁰

Those words are very similar to how some of my research participants described their boyhoods; Kabane even mentioned his “over-protective parents.” But whereas the shota fans I met in Japan immersed themselves in comics to “reclaim” what they “missed out on” as boys, this user has channeled his unresolved desire into an identity as a boy-lover – a sexuality – since that is the only option available to him in his culture.

A last example of the pathological sexuality context that surrounds shota in some areas outside of Japan is a study on how “minor attracted persons,” including “those with a pedophilic age of attraction,” “relate to online pornographic or erotic material featuring ‘lolicon’ and/or ‘shotacon.’”⁴¹ The study is sponsored by B4U-ACT, a British non-profit organization that “promotes competent and effective professional services and resources for individuals (adults and adolescents) who are sexually attracted to children and adolescents through education, outreach, communication, creativity, and initiative.”⁴² The findings had not been published at the time of writing (February 2024).

Japan as inherently queer

The theoretical framework called queer temporalities argues that time looks different for some people, and that this diversion from the normal can be seen as threatening to other people. If the normal timeline of life consists of certain events that should happen at certain points in one’s life – typically the first crush, marriage, getting children – those who deviate from that “straight line” can be said to have a “queer orientation.”⁴³ In an influential work, Halberstam suggests that the “non-normative behaviors” of “gay and lesbian” people can be understood in a new way through the concept of “queer time.”⁴⁴ Halberstam uses the example of gay men in the US, who during the Aids crisis discarded mainstream ideals of “longevity and futurity,” and instead embraced “risk, disease, infection, and death,” but it can also be as simple as rejecting the traditions of “family, inheritance, and child rearing.”⁴⁵ This early dichotomy between family life and

"queer urban subcultures"⁴⁶ is complicated by Bengtsson in her study of ageplay and littleness.⁴⁷ After all, ageplay is in some ways all about "child rearing," except that the "child" is actually an adult playing a child. One can divert from the "straight line" in many ways, and queer temporalities can encompass many practices.

Do shota fans divert from the straight line? Can their reading be understood in a similar way as that of Bengtsson's ageplay practitioners, who said that they take "vacation" from the responsibilities of adult life by becoming fictional children?⁴⁸ Some of my research participants too escaped the present reality by "becoming the boy" in shota, and the literature points to male readers of both loli and shota projecting themselves onto the cute character in order to relieve themselves of the responsibility of being an adult man in Japan. So there are definitely similarities.

A related theory is the emerging idea of transage, which denotes "people who identify as an age that is different than their chronological age."⁴⁹ In other words, some people may have an adult biological age, but identify with a lower age. The idea of transage has been seen as ridiculing transgenderism by taking its rhetoric to its extreme: if gender is a "social construct" that has nothing to do with biology, why not age too?⁵⁰ But it can also be seen as the logical next step in a culture obsessed with categorizing sexual and other identities, and giving each of them a pride flag (yes, the transage movement has one too). One of my research participants from North America, who is not part of the material for this study, seemed to intuitively grasp and embrace the idea of transage when I told him about it. But the theories of queer temporalities and transage are both grounded in the paradigm of sexualities, and might therefore not be a perfect fit for shota fans in Japan. Let me elaborate a bit on this.

Queer theory, which is the parent theory of queer temporalities, emerged in North America in the 1990s. In short, queer theory argues that identities are *constructed*, and thereby can be deconstructed. In other words, the theory can be used to better understand how sexual and gender identities have come into being; queer theory reveals them as "not natural," but "discursively constructed."⁵¹ This way of seeing the world is grounded in poststructuralist thought, which questions the idea of objective truths,⁵² and queer theory was initially highly influenced by Michel Foucault, a poststructuralist. We have already seen how Foucault shows how the idea of sexualities emerged in the

medical discourse of nineteenth century Europe, and how it can be further traced back to the Catholic confession. In other words, Foucault (and later, queer theory) questioned the essentialist view on sexuality and identity by deconstructing them and showing how they had come into being. The point I want to make with this very brief historical background is that queer theory emerged as a response to, or even a *protest* against the sexual essentialism of nineteenth century Europe. In other words, it was a *reaction* to the society in which it emerged. And this makes perfect sense, *in the local setting* of Christian Europe and other societies that take their cultural heritage from it. But queer theory is not necessarily a fit for societies that look back on another historical trajectory, such as Japan.

Neither queer theory nor its predecessor lesbian and gay studies has had any success in Japan, despite attempts to introduce the disciplines at universities in the early 2000s and the 1990s, respectively.⁵³ Japanese queer studies (*kuia sutadīzu*) were heavily based on American queer theory, and the field has been described as “extremely marginal” and “widely unknown” in Japan, even within the neighboring field of gender studies.⁵⁴ To put it bluntly, queer theory was a failure in Japan, and the reason might be that it was imported wholesale from another culture, without considering the “purpose” of the discipline in that culture. Concretely, queer theory emerged to deconstruct sexual (and other) identities that were seen as natural and unchangeable in societies with a heritage from Christian Europe, as I summarized it above. But Japan doesn’t have that heritage. When Europe in the Middle Ages burned, beheaded, drowned, hanged, and castrated “sodomites,”⁵⁵ *wakashudō* flourished in Japan,⁵⁶ that is, the romantic and sexual relationships between an adult *nenja* and a younger *wakashu* that some of my research participants saw as *shota*’s legacy.

An important aspect of *wakashudō* culture was that *nenja* and *wakashu* were not seen as biological categories (such as the “species” of the homosexual in Europe), but as *roles* that were *performed*.⁵⁷ In fact, the age of the “actors” could vary considerably, with boys playing the role of men, and vice versa, as long as the participants adhered to their roles.⁵⁸ This is even more evident in the formalized setting of the kabuki theater of the seventeenth century, where actors could play roles that didn’t correspond to their actual age or even gender.⁵⁹ The coming-of-age of a male person in Japan was accompanied by a strict regimen of clothing and haircuts,⁶⁰ but if a person didn’t shave

his forelocks, the symbol of still being a boy, he could continue taking the role of the *wakashu*, even as he grew older.⁶¹ Likewise, when boys were banned from the kabuki theater in 1652, they were allowed to continue performing if they shaved their forelocks and thereby, through a simple cut with a razor knife, “became” men.⁶²

As some of you surely notice, this is the language of queer theory; this is what Judith Butler means when they say that gender is “performed.”⁶³ The conclusion may be that queer theory failed in Japan because it wasn’t needed from the start. While queer theory solved a certain problem in Europe – to deconstruct identities – that problem didn’t exist in Japan, because identities were already seen as roles that were performed, or to put it differently: *Japan was already queer!* That’s at least one way of seeing it, and it is my reason for not wanting to force a queertheoretical framework onto findings that might be better understood in other ways. Instead I want to ask: What would a *local* theory of shota consumption look like?

Let’s play!

One way to understand my findings is through the keyword “play,” or *asobi*. As described earlier, *shōnen-ai* has been understood as a “play with gender” for female readers of the genre in the 1970s,⁶⁴ and the initial success of shota among female readers has been explained by the new “playground” that these expressions offered.⁶⁵ Likewise, *fujoshi* called their engagement with both *yaoi* and the world “fantasy play,” while notably leading “heteronormative lives.”⁶⁶ The fearless “anything goes” attitude among readers of *eromanga*⁶⁷ can also be seen as a form of play. Nagayama even describes incestuous themes in *eromanga* as a form of “role-play,” since the male reader doesn’t feel affection for the little sister as a person, but as “a ‘character’ playing the role of ‘little sister.’”⁶⁸ These are but a few examples that indicate that manga is not only read, but *played*.

Just like queer theory failed in Japan, *asobi* would probably fail in the “born this way” world. If you believe in every person’s “individual secret,” the inborn and unchangeable sexuality, then too much is at stake to play around with that. Whatever you do, it will be pinned down to your “secret,” because the belief in it is so strong. My own example is instructive: reading shota comics the way they were read by my research participants – while masturbating – was a *playful* way to add a layer of understanding to my research. But when my article

about my experiments with this local custom was read with “born this way” glasses, it was understood as a *confession of the secret*, and resulted not only in upset reactions in all kinds of media, but also in an extensive investigation by my university, a police investigation, a parliamentary questioning, retraction of the article by the journal, and ultimately expulsion from my university. For the relatively futile act of reading erotic comics the way they were intended, like maybe millions of people in Japan? The culture clash couldn’t be bigger. And while queer theory perfectly captures these reactions, it falls flat outside the “born this way” world that it was invented to analyze. Likewise, a theory of “play” would be incomprehensible outside the world in which it has already thrived for centuries.

Richard Nisbett argues that the idea of the individual in Europe goes back to the atomistic worldview of the Greeks, where everything could be taken apart as discrete objects, and where there was a strong belief in personal agency.⁶⁹ He contrasts this to the holistic worldview of ancient China, which in turn influenced Japan and Korea. The holism of China was based on Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, orientations which stressed harmony and hierarchy, and according to which everything was connected to everything else.⁷⁰ In other words, the system was more important than the individual. Nisbett’s argument is that the disparate histories of these two cultures, which simplified can be called “Western” and “Eastern,” still influence how we think. If that is so, it is logical that readers of *eromanga* in Japan are not afraid that the content of the manga, or the desire they feel for it, will reveal their “individual secret,” simply because that secret doesn’t exist. There is no big fat truth that can be hidden or revealed, no closet to come out of. If you see yourself as part of the whole, as per the Confucian heritage of China, you don’t exist as an individual. You are unimportant. And that makes you free, free to *play*. From the perspective of the “born this way” hemisphere, there is a certain liberation in throwing off the yoke of individualism and the fears that come with it.

Okada Toshio similarly points out that Europe divided the world in cosmos, or God, and chaos, or demons, and that science was a “religious war” aiming to turn chaos into cosmos.⁷¹ This binary worldview also saw adults and children as polar opposites, where children were seen as “chaos” that needed to be reared into “cosmos.”⁷² It is easy to apply Okada’s analysis on the European view on normal and

deviant sexualities, where the latter represented chaos, or demons, that society needed to deal with, be it through persecution or celebration. Okada further argues that Japan doesn't divide the world in cosmos and chaos, but sees it as a continuum, and his point is that otaku culture, which embraces the "culture of children," manifests this playful mindset.⁷³

But the otaku, that is, the persona of the pop culture nerd, has sometimes been framed in terms that remind of a sexual identity, as in the title of Saitō Tamaki's essay "Otaku Sexuality."⁷⁴ The word otaku first appeared in a series of columns in the magazine *Manga Burikko* in 1983 as a demeaning moniker for male fans of cute girl characters.⁷⁵ Galbraith describes the tone of the columns as "pathologizing," as it positioned otaku against "normal people."⁷⁶ He notes a "hierarchy of sexual objects," where feeling desire for real women was considered "normal and healthy," and feeling desire for fictional characters was considered "abnormal and sick."⁷⁷ Indeed, otaku was discussed as a "sexual orientation," and Galbraith concludes that otaku basically were seen as "queer."⁷⁸ These terms remind of the medical discourse of nineteenth century Europe, where some people were deemed deviants. However, although the otaku debate borrowed European terminology, it seems to me that the threat of the otaku was still not in his constitution, but in his refusal to adhere to normative ideas about sexual desire. As Galbraith points out, it was the *choice* of otaku to prefer fictional characters instead of real women that was "unacceptable" and made them "failed men."⁷⁹ This points to a failure to live up to the societal responsibility that comes with the traditional male role in Japan. In other words, the otaku doesn't know his place in the Confucian hierarchy. His failure is not in his "species," but in his *behavior* when choosing to stray from the group.

Playing with the gap

While it is common, for example in my own study, to casually differ between "fantasy and reality," or "fiction and reality," this creates a false dichotomy that implies that fantasies and fictional comics are not "real." And of course, they are not "real" in the same way that an actual human being that you can touch is real, but at the same time, we can *experience* our fantasies, comics, dreams, memories, and so on as quite real, what psychoanalysts call "psychic reality."⁸⁰ Since at least the 1980s, manga and anime fans in Japan have there-

fore talked about “fictional” and “flesh-and-blood” *realities*, since, as Galbraith puts it, “manga/anime characters are fictional, but also real in their own way.”⁸¹ In other words, the distinction is not between fictional and real, but between two-dimensional characters and three-dimensional human beings made of flesh and blood. The awareness of these dimensions of reality in Japan is demonstrated in the “2.5-dimensional” space that for example a maid café occupies;⁸² while three-dimensional *actual* human beings work there, they act as *fictional* characters, thereby challenging our notions of reality.

Nagaike Kazumi suggests that popular culture doesn’t represent *one* reality, but is a concoction of social *possibilities*. She connects this to the French philosopher Étienne Souriau’s theory about various ways to exist beyond the purely physical reality.⁸³ In a similar way, Judith Butler sees fantasy as “a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable,” the point being that fantasy “is not the opposite of reality.”⁸⁴ Butler criticizes the “anti-pornography feminists” in 1980s USA for assuming “a mimetic relation between the real, fantasy, and representation that presumes the priority of the real,”⁸⁵ an assumption that can also be seen in the discourse around *shota* and similar expressions when viewed from outside of Japan.

In his ethnography on the virtual world Second Life, Tom Boellstorff likewise challenges common notions of reality, and quotes the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze saying that “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual.”⁸⁶ And so, Boellstorff contrasts the virtual world not to reality, but to what he calls the “actual world.” In other words, two-dimensional characters would in Boellstorff’s terminology be called *virtual*, whereas three-dimensional human beings are *actual*. And both remain real in their own ways. A “virtuality” in the form of a comic or a virtual world *reminds* of the actual reality, or carries a “potentiality” of it. As Boellstorff puts it, the virtual *approaches* the actual “*without arriving there*.” This means that there is always a “gap” between the virtual and the actual world, or between our *experience* (which can be very real) and the actual world.

Boellstorff argues that this gap is critical, since “were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either.”⁸⁷ Think about this for a while. A drawing of a human being can be abstract or lifelike, but no matter how realistic it is (“approaches the actual”), it will still be a drawing, a virtuality. If the drawing was to, in some way, become an actual human being (the gap

“filled in”), then the drawing would not exist anymore. And it would be meaningless to call the human “actual,” since nothing else exists to compare it to anymore. If this feels like a strange thought experiment, it is because we as humans can’t really comprehend it, for the simple reason that the gap is so central to our existence that we rarely think about it.

Virtualities don’t only come in the form of Second Life and drawings; our whole *culture* can be seen as a virtuality, since it is an artificial layer that we have put over the actual, physical reality of flesh and blood, and without which we would just be blobs of meat without meaning. Boellstorff puts this more eloquently when he argues that humans were “virtual” all along: “It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human ‘nature’ to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being. Culture is our ‘killer app’: we are virtually human.”⁸⁸

The virtual and the actual is basically what Georges Bataille means when he writes that the “expression of desire” and the realization of it in the actual world, or its “action,” are mutually exclusive:

For if a man begins to follow a violent impulse, his expression of it signifies that he is no longer following it, for at least the duration of its expression. Expression requires the substitution of an external figurative sign for passion itself. He who expresses himself must therefore pass from the burning sphere of passion to the relatively cold and torpid sphere of signs.⁸⁹

In Boellstorff’s terminology, there is a “gap” between Bataille’s action and expression, and the two can never merge. Following Bataille, drawing boy characters in a *dōjinshi* is an intellectual activity belonging to the “cold and torpid sphere of signs,” and as such, it stands *in opposition* to the realization of this desire in the actual world. So why is it that there lurks a suspicion that people who draw shota stories might be interested in realizing such a desire in the actual world, when their expression of it can be seen as the opposite of that?

The reason might be that we seem to think, or want to think, that the gap between the virtual and the actual world can be bridged. Boellstorff recounts how both researchers and residents in virtual worlds seem fascinated by the “blurring” of the two worlds, something that in Second Life is called “bleed-through,” for example when

a group of virtual residents decide to meet in the actual world. Maybe it tickles us to imagine that the gap can be bridged? Deleuze uses the word “division” instead of gap, and argues that each side of the division has a “halo” of the other side;⁹⁰ the virtual and actual sides never cross the division, but the “halo” may make us think that they do, since it makes the two sides remind of each other. The “halo” may explain the confusion about fictional and actual realities that informs suspicions about readers of certain manga being “criminals” or “a certain kind of person,” a confusion that was also expressed by some of my research participants.

Fan studies offer another perspective on the virtual and the actual. When Nancy Baym interviewed musicians about their online interaction with fans, many expressed that it was important not to reveal too much about their everyday lives, since that risked destroying the “mystique” which was an important part of the fans’ experience.⁹¹ Just like virtual and actual worlds would cease to exist if the gap between them closed, so artist and fans would cease to exist if the gap between them was closed; if the artist became an actual “friend” of their fans, the whole point with worshipping an artist, which is what being a “fan” is all about, would disappear. And while the internet and social media seemingly have brought artist and fans closer, the gap between them can by definition not be bridged. As one artist put it: “And I do think that that inequality in the relationship is what keeps it alive.”⁹² Another artist pointed out that fans “say they want to know everything that’s going on,” but argued that if the artists really told their fans everything, “it would probably destroy the magic a little bit, you know?”⁹³ The magic resides in the gap.

An important point that Boellstorff makes is that attempts to bridge the gap don’t weaken it, but rather make it stronger, since it puts all the focus on the gap and its workings.⁹⁴ In the above example, fans may think that they want to get closer to the artist, but if they would actually manage to bridge the gap by making the artist their friend, then the idea of both artist and fan would evaporate, which the fans of course don’t want. I would therefore describe the urge to bridge the gap as a *play*: we *pretend* to want to capture the artist, but we don’t expect it to happen and we don’t *want* it to happen. This mostly happens unconsciously – we fool even ourselves – although some seem more aware of the dangers of bridging the gap. In her book about boy idols in Japan, Swedish journalist Marita Lindqvist recounts how she

ends up in the line to a “hand-shaking,” where the fans will be able to shake hands with their idols after a concert, and how this makes her panic and look for an emergency exit.⁹⁵ When I first read the book, I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t want to meet her idols, but now I see her reaction as fear of coming too close to a virtuality, fear that the meeting of their physical bodies in the handshake would amount to a bridging of the gap, whereby both the virtuality of the idol and she herself would cease to exist.

The play of feigning interest in bridging the gap is at the heart of our existence as human and social beings. Just think of a bunch of sloppy men yearning after, and maybe catcalling, a woman who is obviously out of their league: no one thinks that they will “get” her, that they will be able to bridge the gap, and that is also not the purpose of the play. In fact, would anyone of them actually “get” her, she would cease to exist as the virtuality that they catcalled, and become a human being like themselves. This is the difference between the sexy women on the cover of men’s magazines, who are adored as virtualities, and the actual girlfriends of the readers of these magazines, who are seen as equal human beings.⁹⁶ And it works of course in the same way in the opposite direction, with for example Radway’s romance reading women in the American Midwest fantasizing about the ideal men in the novels – virtualities – but sticking with the human being they are married to in their actual lives.⁹⁷ This is all common sense, we are all aware of the difference between the virtual world of ideals, dreams, and fantasies, and the actual world of our everyday lives. But whenever the two worlds seem to close in on each other, as they do in shota, we get fascinated, or we panic. We may think that we panic for moral reasons, because we care about actual boys being at risk, but the real reason may be that we are afraid that bridging the gap will kill the *virtual* boy, and thereby ourselves, since the gap is central to our existence as human beings.

The female protagonist in Hoshimi Yumi’s manga *Yankee Boy and Otaku Girl* (*Yankī shota to otaku onēsan*, 2016–) likes shota and participates at *dōjinshi* events. In the very first scene of the manga, the eleven-year-old neighbor boy whom she has got to know a month earlier insists on following her to one of these events. He is quite annoying – my research participants would maybe call him an “irritating brat” – and they end up leaving early. The woman laments that she hasn’t been able to buy a single *dōjinshi*. But on the train back home,

the boy falls asleep, and the woman notes how cute he is. Next, it dawns on her: "Is this my chance to touch a real shota!!?" Devil horns shoot out from her head in a little caricature next to the speech bubble, and a little text describes the devil version of her as a "pervert" (*hentai*). Having previously been annoyed by the boy, now she thinks: "Now while he's sleeping, he's just like shota...!!" In other words, since the boy is sleeping, the irritating aspects of the actual world that otherwise taint the image of an ideal boy are toned down, and the actual boy approaches the virtual ideal. The woman reaches out her hand toward the boy's chin, while thinking "Itadakimaa...," the "itadakimasu" that you say before a meal, as if she would *taste* the boy, like Sebastian Venable in Tennessee Williams's play *Suddenly, Last Summer*. The moment is broken when their stop is announced in the loudspeakers and the boy wakes up.⁹⁸ They get up, and the woman thinks to herself: "That was close... what the hell was I doing!!!" And: "If this came out, I would be dead..."⁹⁹

What is this, if not a close encounter with the gap? The popularity of this ongoing series, which started as a web comic on Pixiv and has been published in seven paperback volumes so far by Square Enix, one of the world's largest video game companies, might be due to the fact that it taps into the minds of many people in the BL and shota themed *dōjinshi* world. How do we relate to actual eleven-year-olds? The manga is a safe place to explore the gap between actual boys and the virtual idea of a boy by fantasizing about "touching" a "real shota," something that everyone knows is unacceptable in the actual world. Ultimately, the seemingly blurred gap is reinforced through the nervous attempts to bridge it. But imagining that we can bridge the gap is an exciting form of *play*.

In that sense, "extreme" genres like shota and loli might show the way to a more relaxed way to understand and relate to ideals. I grew up in a country where it was a Christmas tradition for activists to spray-paint the underwear ads of the clothes company H&M because the models didn't represent "real women," who would supposedly feel bad because they would never be able to look like these unattainable ideals. But that is what an ideal is: unattainable. The difference between ideal and actual people is taken up a notch in the beauty contest "Miss AI," in which computer generated models compete. As expected, the contest has been accused of promoting "unrealistic beauty standards."¹⁰⁰ But again, that's what an ideal is: unreal. An alternative

to compulsively comparing oneself to these ideals could be to get a better understanding of what an ideal is, and to relate to it in a different way. If we accept from the outset that ideals are unreal and unattainable, we can enjoy them for what they are: symbols, deformations, ideas taken to their extremes. That is what both shota and loli are: concepts pushed as far as possible without losing their seed of origin, their "basis." Ironically, a European classic like *The Beauty and the Beast* does the same thing; the story is basically a deformed version of a heterosexual relationship. But in my eyes, that's exactly what loli is too: a woman who by nature is more delicate than a man is made to be even smaller, even weaker – she is *deformed* into the extreme version that she was all the time in the mind of her partner, and vice versa. Both *The Beauty and the Beast* and lolicon manga are expressions of the heterosexual mating dance of idealization and othering, and celebrating one of these expressions as high culture while wanting to ban the other can only be pinned down to ethnocentrism.

Loving the gap

But let's get back to the boy. "The idol is worshipped because it is neither a person, nor a miraculous machine, but a god," the anthropologist Alfred Gell wrote.¹⁰¹ To me, this is another way of saying that the idol resides neither in the actual world of persons, nor in the virtual world of machines, but in the gap in between them; it is the gap that bestows him with magic: *God lives in the gap*. Or shall we say: *the Boy lives in the gap* – the boy is a gap, or maybe even: *boy means gap*. Not only for shota fans but for all of us: the boy as a concept has been invented to capture that gap in the life of male humans that happens between childhood and adulthood. It is a gap that we can't understand, and which therefore is filled with magic, like Victor Turner's "liminal space-time." As such, the gap between child and man demands rituals and ceremonies. The individuals who enter this gap must be guided through it, or else we worry that they will get lost in it. In that sense, the unabashed celebration of beautiful boys that we see in both ancient Greece and among shota fans in contemporary Japan, and the compulsive "child protection" zest that we see in contemporary Europe, emanate from the same source: the awareness that the Boy equals the gap, and the logical conclusion that *the Boy is magic*, or even: *The Boy is God!* The Boy is a god not only for shota fans, but for all of us. We just worship him in different ways.

In that sense, shota can be seen as a formalized and articulated worship of the Boy, whereas the way we do it in contemporary Europe and elsewhere more reminds of an uncultured concoction of panic and fear: in our twisted version of worshipping the boy as a god, we have invented a Satan who we can throw in prison and hate as publicly and loudly as possible, in order to convince ourselves and others that we are *not* him. We have a whole industry of “child protection” professionals akin to a church. To me, the moral high ground on which people condemn those who openly celebrate the boy comes off as protesting too much. The passion with which these people protest – the shock-horror headlines, the ritualistic language, the social media tantrums – reveal that they too *love the boy*. We all love the boy. Shota fans do it in a cultured and internal way that doesn’t harm others, but uncultured people externalize their boy worship to the press, to courts and prisons and disciplinary panels. Their worship thereby uses other people, arbitrarily chosen, but some more suitable than others for the purpose, to achieve the same personal goal that shota fans achieve through drawing and reading shota: *to express love for boys*. Am I being clear? I argue that when people in for example the UK loudly proclaim how “disturbing” and “disgusting” it is to find boys beautiful, this is a way for them to express the very same love for boys, only that their expression takes the detour via tabloid newspapers and the legal system. While sad, this is logical and understandable, considering Christian Europe’s long history of thinking in categories of sexualities and races. But it still needs to be called out, since this twisted, or let’s call it *creative* way of loving the boy affects others, who are used as props in this ritual.

As we saw, Boellstorff described culture as the “killer app” of humans; we are “virtually human” in our ability to think about virtual concepts such as ideas and dreams, and to understand that they are separated from our actual, everyday life by a gap. In that sense, shota can be seen as the ultimate expression of culture. The ability to find meaning in drawn lines, to romanticize, idealize, and *love* those lines, and to understand that they reside on the other side of the gap, is a distinctly human trait. As humans, we should cherish this ability to enjoy the full virtual spectrum of life – it is the ultimate proof of how fantastic we are. I will therefore end this book with the same simple imperative that the how-to-draw book offered: *Love SHOTA!*