


Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers:
The Pleasures of Japanese
Pornographic Comics for Women

DEBORAH SHAMOON

* Hard-core pornography tends to be read as synonymous with film, video, and photography. Although Walter Kendrick in The Secret Museum (1996) demonstrates how in the nineteenth century the pornographic could be located anywhere, from ancient statuary to novels, accounts of porn in the twentieth century have tended to concentrate on the technological capabilities of film as the most appropriate medium for the pornographic imagination. In Hard Core, Linda Williams argues that hard-core pornography seeks to "induce and photograph a bodily confession of involuntary spasm" (1999, 48). Thus film pornography aspires to what Williams calls an aesthetic of "maximum visibility" (49), in which real bodies are seen performing real sex acts. However, in this formulation, the progression to ever more technologically advanced, mimetic art forms seems inevitable—from paintings to still photography to moving image, all in search of even more faithful reproductions of "reality." Williams ends the book by wondering about the possibility of interactive porn in the form of video games or virtual reality, yet another step up the technological ladder. But must one limit the idea of maximum visibility to only the most mimetic of arts? Drawn pornography in the form of comic books, decidedly low-tech material, has continued to flourish in spite of the widespread availability of film and video porn. More specifically, pornographic comics have proliferated in Japan, while readership in the United States remains fairly small. Unlike film, comics cannot aspire to an extremely high degree of realism; however, the lack of popu-
larity of comic book pornography in the United States has less to do with
the limitations of drawing versus film than with the lack of an adult readers-
ship of comics in this country. In Japan, on the other hand, where comics, or
manga, have a huge adult audience, pornographic comics constitute a large
and significant genre. In the 1980s, a new genre emerged that has come to
be called “ladies’ comics” (fureizu komikku), hard-core pornographic comics
aimed at women in their twenties and thirties. I will argue that the success
of ladies’ comics as a genre lies in its ability to appeal to female readers through
familiar generic conventions associated with girls’ comics, but also in ladies’
comics’ use of maximum visibility. As Williams points out, one of the prob-
lems of film pornography is the invisibility of the female orgasm, as well as
of penetration. Drawn pornography, however, has no such limitations. Thus
drawn pornography in Japanese comics not so much lacks in realism as it depicts
the different truth of the female body impossible to capture on film.

Japanese comic books, animation, and video games have become increas-
ingly popular in the United States in the last ten years. Japanese comics
in particular have gained an ever larger fan base not only for their high
production values and variety of stories but also for their sexual content,
which ranges from the mildly suggestive to the explicitly pornographic. The
adult sections of American comic book stores now carry a large number of
translations of Japanese hard-core comics, as well as an increasing num-
ber of homegrown imitations. Ladies’ comics, however, have not yet been
imported. Given that many American women still do not consume visual
hard-core pornography of any kind, it may come as a surprise that ladies’
comics enjoy huge popularity in Japan, primarily among women in their
twenties and thirties. As a genre, the ladies’ comic is less than twenty years
old, first appearing only around 1980, but already it has claimed a large por-
tion of the massive, highly competitive comics market in Japan. Frederik
Schodt estimates that ladies’ comics magazines have a circulation of 103
million monthly, which amounts to about 10 percent of the total circulation
of comics for adults, including nonpornographic ones (1996, 82). Clearly,
Japanese women have embraced this new genre, and there simply exists no
parallel in U.S. popular culture.

So how is it that a genre of hard-core pornography for women has come
to exist in Japan? In part, the answer lies in the specific cultural climate of
contemporary Japan. Comic books, or manga, in Japan make for a popular
form of entertainment not only for children but for adults as well, includ-
ing women. As Sharon Kinsella points out in Adult Manga, while attend-
dance at movie theaters has declined and rates of television viewing have
remained level, sales of comics continued to rise throughout the 1970s and
1980s, and in 1993, the largest comic book publishers boasted profit margins
that exceeded any company on the Tokyo stock exchange that year (2000, 40–42). Furthermore, there is a greater cultural acceptance of sexually
explicit images in all kinds of comics. Kinsella writes, “In general porn-
ography has not been as strongly compartmentalized in post-war Japan as
it has in post-war America or Britain. Pornographic images have tended to
appear throughout the media as well as in specifically pornographic produc-
tions” (46). While the comics industry does distinguish between adult
and children’s comics, with hard-core or explicit images appearing only in
the former, some nudity and sexual innuendo appear everywhere, even in
comics for children and teens. In addition, a de facto relaxation of censor-
ship laws has occurred throughout the 1990s, allowing for the sale of in-
creasingly explicit material. Compared to their counterparts in the United
States, comic book readers in Japan constitute a larger, more diverse audi-
ence, and also one more tolerant of pornographic images. In this respect,
it seems only natural that the industry would seek to market pornographic
comics to women as well as to men.

Ladies’ comics have succeeded, however, not simply as a marketing ploy,
but also because they are able to speak to female desire in a way appeal-
ing to Japanese women. How do ladies’ comics speak to a female audience
and formulate female desire? The answer to this question lies first, in an
understanding of the ways in which ladies’ comics relate to other genres of
comics for women and girls and second, in looking at how the magazines
themselves encourage a specific type of readership. A full understanding
of the ladies’ comics genre can explain some of the most salient features
of the genre, including the display of the female body rather than the male
and the prevalence of violence and rape. As a genre, ladies’ comics are often
overlooked as too lowbrow or trashy, even by Japanese comics critics such as
Yomota Inuhiko and Natsume Fusansuke, who barely acknowledge their
existence. Critics who do examine ladies’ comics, such as Anne Allison, tend
to search out and condemn all aspects of them that are not pro-feminist.
From an American standpoint, the label “comics by and for women” can
prove a bit misleading: although most of the writers are women, and the
comics are marketed specifically to women, ladies’ comics do not present
a vision of a sexually free, feminist utopia, nor are they radically subver-
sive. Ladies’ comics do, however, represent real (or at least realistic) women
actively pursuing their own sexual pleasure, taking the initiative in sexual
experimentation and otherwise negotiating heterosexual relationships in a
world of gender inequalities. In a small way, the characters’ sexual adventur-ness in the ladies’ comics is subversive in a culture that still values sexual inexperience in females. More important, however, ladies’ comics present an interesting example of female spectatorship and visual pleasure. The popularity of ladies’ comics gives lie to the old myth that women are not visually stimulated and provides a much-needed example of how hard-core visual pornography for heterosexual women can come to exist.

There is little writing in English on the topic of ladies’ comics, and what little there is tends to be very negative. One of the few critics to look at ladies’ comics is Anne Allison, who devotes one chapter to ero manga (pornographic comics) in her book Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan (1996). Allison begins the chapter by stating her intention not to take the reductive approach of antiporn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. However, because she uses a Freudian model of phallocentric power and desire to analyze the sex in pornographic comics, her conclusion does not veer far from the rhetoric of Dworkin and MacKinnon. Allison writes, “That ero manga are misogynistic is undeniable. That they embed and thereby foster an ideology of gender chauvinism and crude misogyny is also irrefutable” (78). As evidence for these assertive claims, Allison cites examples from both ero manga for men and from ladies’ comics, as if they belonged to the same genre. In a footnote she adds, “ladies’ comics has emerged with narratives and images not significantly different from those in ero manga” (185 n. 11). If ero manga are so offensive and even harmful to women, and if ladies’ comics are no different, why do women read them? Taking Allison’s argument to its logical conclusion, one discovers the implication that Japanese women are blind to their own patriarchal oppression. Allison seems optimistic that once women gain more power in society, misogyny and masochism in comics will naturally disappear: “It is likely that this aspect of erotic comics (as well as of comics and mass culture in general) will change as more women enter the ranks of wage laborers and refuse to enter those of mother and wife” (78). In fact, ladies’ comics have changed significantly through the 1990s, in spite of the fact that Japanese women continue to marry and have children. Allison’s failure to understand the nature of ladies’ comics not only results from her attempt to explain ladies’ comics in terms of a phallocentric gaze but also from her assumption that all pornographic comics are essentially the same.

In fact, there is evidence that pornography for women works hard to differentiate itself from pornography for men in order for women readers to

find it appealing. In At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life (1998), Jane Juffer, writing about American women’s access to pornography, argues that the most important preconditions for women’s enjoyment of pornography are aesthetics and access. Access, Juffer writes,

is shaped by a number of conditions, including governmental regulation; education about technology, such as the Internet; financial resources to buy the technology, from subscribing to cable television to buying a computer; and the time and space in which to consume pornography amidst everyday routines such as work and child care. Furthermore, access is in part a question of content: to the degree that much pornography is still largely produced within the conventions of an industry that has for years catered mainly to male pleasures, access for women on their—at least diverse—terms is still somewhat limited. (56)

In other words, access is not only a question of making pornographic videos available in woman-friendly stores; the content of the video itself must in some way address female desires—it must be something a woman wants to watch. Juffer claims that although the majority of pornographic videos and magazines remain aesthetically unpleasing to women, this does not mean that women do not consume sexually explicit entertainment. In the United States, pornography for women takes other forms, such as sex manuals and instructional videos for couples, lingerie catalogs, and especially romance novels and erotica. In fact, Juffer points out, the publication of erotic books, many of them aimed at a female audience, has risen by 324 percent in the 1990s (5). Literature, even sexually explicit literature, is far more accessible to women both as producers and as consumers, and it is aesthetically marked as feminine. Juffer writes, “Print erotica’s claims to aesthetic value and the discourses that help produce this value outside the text facilitate the process of domestication through which women gain control over sexually explicit materials as readers within the spaces of their homes” (105).

Although Juffer uses the term print erotica to encompass publications as diverse as Best American Erotica and the Victoria’s Secret catalog, she never once mentions comic books. This hardly comes as a surprise, given that women and girls make up only a tiny fraction of the already tiny audience for comics in the United States. A few erotic comics written by and for women do exist, but as long as the comics industry as a whole caters only to a male audience and comics are only available in comic book stores, with their boys’ club atmosphere, erotic comics will never reach a wide female readership in this country. Comics in the United States, pornographic or other-
wise, lack ease of accessibility and aesthetic value for women. In Japan, on the other hand, comics readership is divided nearly equally between males and females of all ages, and comic book artist is considered a legitimate, even glamorous, career for a woman. Comic books in Japan are extremely cheap—the average cost lies between $3 to $4 for a magazine ranging from two hundred to seven hundred pages and containing over a dozen serialized stories. The more popular stories are later reprinted in paperback book form on higher quality paper, but the average price remains low, at only about $5 to $15. Japanese comics fall into clearly marked genres that tend to divide readers along the lines of gender and age, although all types of comic books and magazines are sold in the same stores. This includes ladies’ comics, which are widely available in bookstores and newstands. While women may hesitate to read pornographic comics in public (as men do), they do not have to think twice about buying them. Thus the success of women’s erotic comics in Japan, as opposed to their almost total absence in the United States, derives from Japanese women’s access to comics both as consumers and as creators.

As Juffer points out, however, material access is only part of the equation. Japanese women are more receptive to visual pornography because ladies’ comics also prove aesthetically available to a female readership. More specifically, ladies’ comics are not a female-oriented subgenre of porn for men. As a genre, ladies’ comics arise from the genre of nöjo manga, or romance comics for teenage girls. Shöjo manga have been a major part of mainstream Japanese culture since the 1970s, when women artists began to write stories exploring the subjectivity of the girl protagonists. Since their inception, shöjo manga have been occupied with female desire. Depictions of sexual activity (albeit very discreetly rendered) have appeared since the early 1970s. As the teenage readers reached their twenties and thirties, ladies’ comics appeared as an adult offshoot of the shöjo manga genre. Although some differences exist in terms of plot, the artwork of ladies’ comics maintains the recognizable traits of shöjo manga. This link with shöjo manga makes ladies’ comics aesthetically pleasing and easily available to women. In fact, rather than grouping ladies’ comics in the category of ero manga, as Allison does, I find it more useful to think of ladies’ comics as a sexually explicit subgenre of shöjo manga. For this reason, a comparison of ladies’ comics with shöjo manga proves more informative than one between ladies’ comics and ero manga.

Looking at ladies’ comics only in terms of porn for men can in fact lead to confusion. For instance, one of the most salient aspects of ladies’ comics is the consistent display of the female body, almost to the exclusion of the male body. Superficially, this does not much differ from porn for men; the display of the female body is a standard generic trait of ero manga (and of heterosexual porn in general). The fact that display of the female body appears in ladies’ comics as well is one of the reasons Allison assumes the two genres to be the same. However, what may appear visually similar can, in the context of different audiences and different generic expectations, have radically different meanings. In ero manga, the female body is displayed for the enjoyment of the male reader, while in ladies’ comics, the display of the female body arouses the sexual desire of the female reader through the endless play of difference and similarity between her and the characters.

To understand how this works, let us take a closer look at the genre of shöjo manga. Although the genre today encompasses an ever widening array of stories, making generalization difficult, most shöjo manga still bear at least some resemblance to the classics that defined the genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, a group of young women cartoonists took over the genre of girls’ comics, previously run largely by men, and began producing comics that spoke intimately to the desires and concerns of teenage girls. The change was nothing short of revolutionary. While many of the comics they produced were for the most part frothy romances of young girls and boys finding their “true love,” the stories examined in detail the inner psychology of the girl protagonists. In order to visually portray the interiority of the characters, shöjo manga artists developed a radically new style of visual expression, which has now become standard throughout the shöjo manga genre. Some of the methods they developed include the large eyes with many highlights, as well as the use of flowers, clouds, and abstract designs as background motifs to reflect the characters’ emotions. Another widely used technique is the montagelike arrangement of panels, including liberal use of empty space and the superimposition of characters or text outside the borders of the panels. In Why Manga Are Interesting, an analysis of the narrative structure of Japanese comics, Natsume Fusanosuke points out that the purpose of the art in shöjo manga is not to depict an action taking place over time, but to illustrate the emotions of the characters; for this reason, montage is preferable to an orderly progression of panels (1996, 166). Close-up renderings of the main characters’ faces appear frequently, often partially superimposed over the action, accompanied by text recording the character’s thoughts. In long scenes in which the “action” is nothing more than two people talking, variations in frame size, angle, and point of focus are used to give the scene more dramatic weight. All of these
design innovations draw the reader's attention to the image of the female protagonist for the purpose of sympathizing and identifying with her.

One of the most recognizable visual characteristics of shōjo manga is the superimposition of a full-length view of a character along the side of the page. This type of composition also appears in ladies' comics. The figure usually is not a direct part of the action and dialog in the accompanying panels, but appears as a visual echo of the action on that page. Often this visual arrangement introduces the main character, or shows her off in a new outfit, with flowers in the background to emphasize her beauty. But in “Study of Shōjo Manga,” Mizuki Takahashi argues that this constitutes more than simply a display of fashion. As Takahashi points out, “In shōjo manga that do not feature ‘adventure,’ the depiction of the upper part of the body or face overwhelmingly occupies most of the panels, as the expression of feelings is more important than the action of the body” (1999, 34). In other words, shōjo manga are always in danger of becoming visually monotonous because the stories generally do not contain much physical action. Showing the full figure not only adds visual interest to the page but also encourages the reader to see the main character as literally full and complete. Takahashi writes, “By the full-length body image, the reader confirms the body of the character and can identify with her personality and atmosphere” (35). Shōjo manga feature a consistent and marked display of the female body in order to encourage readers to identify with the female characters.

The art in ladies’ comics is aesthetically marked as feminine by its relation to shōjo manga, which includes as a generic feature the consistent display of the female body. The design conventions of shōjo manga encourage the reader to see the characters as the self, not as other. This is not unique to shōjo manga, but is a part of the nature of the comic book medium itself. In other forms of visual narrative that rely on photographed images, such as film or video, the viewer tends to approach the character on-screen as the other. But as Scott McCloud points out in Understanding Comics (1993), the more generalized or iconic quality of the drawn face has the effect of drawing the reader in. McCloud writes, “When you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself... the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it” (36). McCloud also points out that Japanese comics, which often juxtapose a simply drawn figure against a more detailed background, emphasize this effect. No less than any other manga genre, shōjo manga also often show iconic or “cartoon” characters in a detailed, realistic physical environment. According to McCloud, this contrast encourages the reader to identify with the characters. In this case, the tendency of the reader to experience the drawn character as the self complements shōjo manga’s exploration of the subjectivity of teenage girls.

There is yet another possible reason for the absence of male bodies in ladies’ comics. Again, the answer may lie in the relation between ladies’ comics and shōjo manga. While many shōjo manga stories feature girl protagonists seeking heterosexual romance, some shōjo manga artists, concurrent with the aesthetic innovations of the early 1970s, began to write stories about homosexual love among teenage boys. These bishōnen, or “boy-love,” comics constitute a distinct subgenre of shōjo manga, but share all the same visual elements (not surprisingly, since the same artists created them). Miori Matsui, in her 1993 essay “Little Girls Were Little Boys,” argues that although the characters of bishōnen comics are boys, the girl readers experience the characters in the same way as they do the protagonists of heterosexual romances, that is, as the self, not as other. Not only are the boy-boy comics visually similar to girl-boy comics, they share thematic similarities as well. The story usually focuses on adolescent romance and an exploration of the characters’ interiority. Furthermore, the boy characters often look extremely feminine, with large eyes, long flowing hair, and ectomorphic bodies. Matsui writes, “It was apparent that the boys were the girls’ displaced selves; despite the effeminate looks that belied their identity, however, the fictitious boys were endowed with reason, eloquence and aggressive desire for the other, compensating for the absence of logos and sexuality in the conventional portraits of girls” (178). In addition to homosexual boy-love, many shōjo manga feature stories about boys and girls who cross-dress or who magically change sex. All these types of characters give teenage girls the freedom to imagine themselves as acting beyond the strictures imposed on them in Japanese society. Not surprisingly, shōjo manga featuring homosexual boys or girls dressed as boys were the first to show the characters in bed together (Fujimoto 1998, 47).

Boy-love comics have grown increasingly popular in the last twenty years, and (like ladies’ comics) have become more sexually explicit as their fans have grown up. Hard-core boy-love comics, known as shota-con or yaoi comics, are now widely available in bookstores, comic book stores, and on the Internet. While the circulation of the most popular yaoi comics magazine, June, is only 100,000 per month, significantly less than that of ladies’ comics magazine Amour at 450,000 (Schodt 1996, 123, 127), most yaoi comics
are written by amateurs and sold or traded outside the professional manga industry or posted on the Internet. In fact, the term yaoi is almost synonymous with amateur comics.\(^9\) It is difficult to know exactly how the readership of boy-love comics compares to that of ladies’ comics; boy-love may in fact be the more popular genre. On the other hand, boy-love stories are not segregated from other shōjo manga comics, and the borders between yaoi, shōjo manga, and ladies’ comics are quite permeable, so in all likelihood, most readers enjoy both homosexual and heterosexual stories. While ladies’ comics favor images of female characters, Japanese women who want to look at hard-core pornographic images of idealized male bodies have no shortage of material.

Boy-love comics also feature a strong fantasy element, which can prove empowering, as well as potentially unsatisfying. Many boy-love stories have a fantastic, historic, or futuristic setting. The fans themselves make no secret of the fact that boy-love comics constitute a form of escapist fantasy. Mark McLelland quotes from the home page of a yaoi fan: “[Boy-love] comics are an imaginary playground in which I can flee the realities of everyday life” (2001). As Matsui suggests, while transference of the girl reader’s identity onto the boy character can provide a powerful means for girls to access their sexual desires, the leap of imagination required for such a reading can also prove detrimental. Matsui writes, “The Japanese boy-love comic, in its most imaginatively ambitious mode, is a remarkable amalgam of the feminine and the adolescent imagination. . . . Yet this transgressive play can easily slide into self-indulgence, an intellectual equivalent of drug-taking” (1993, 194). Self-indulgence does seem to have taken over the genre: the current trend in yaoi comics favors endlessly repeating sex scenes over plot and character development, and parody or appropriation of existing texts over originality. On the other hand, ladies’ comics provide a realistic alternative to the endless play and fantasy of boy-love comics.

While even the earliest shōjo manga, particularly of the boy-love variety, included depictions of sexual activity, the transition from chaste to pornographic images has been gradual. While there is no ratings system (such as there is with film in the United States), the distinction between the merely suggestive and the truly hard-core, not surprisingly, seems to lie in the explicit rendering of genitalia. In the 1990s, new shōjo manga magazines aimed at girls in their late teens and early twenties, such as Dessert and You, advertised the stories’ sexual content on the cover. The main difference between these new shōjo manga stories and those of the 1970s seems to be the emphasis on casual sex in lieu of romance; however, the sex act itself is still not explicitly rendered. Pornographic stories never appear alongside less explicit ones in the same magazine. Ladies’ comics, which not only show but highlight the characters’ genitalia, remain a distinct genre. In this regard, at least, ladies’ comics show some similarity with the conventions of ero manga. Both genres make use of the selective veiling of genitalia in order to evade censorship, although enforcement of the law has become increasingly lax. The little white or black squares that once covered drawings of genitalia have now shrunk, become transparent, and, where necessary, changed shape to triangles, thin strips, or tiny dots, to the point where they now emphasize rather than conceal the anatomy, and pubic hair, which was once forbidden, now sprouts lushly. While shōjo manga may hint at sexual activity, ladies’ comics, like other hard-core comics and films, purport to reveal that action in every detail.

The fact that ladies’ comics are drawn and not filmed, however, has a significant impact on the viewer’s experience of the text. In Hard Core, Linda Williams argues that one of the pleasures of watching film or video pornography derives from the opportunity of seeing the truth of the body, what she terms the “frenzy of the visible.” She writes, “Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of female pleasure, but its involuntary confession” (1999, 50). Whatever the premise of a porn movie, the actors are really having sex, and much of the emphasis in porn films lies on demonstrating the reality of the filmed sex act. In comic book pornography, obviously, this effect is not possible. Instead, these comics have opted for other types of visual pleasures. One advantage of comics is that only the imagination of the artist can limit the action. Many Japanese pornographic comics and animated films have taken advantage of that fact, showing acts that would be either illegal, such as pederasty, or events that would be impossible in real life.\(^{10}\) Much of ero manga for men has tended toward the fantastic, showing bodies that are increasingly superhuman in ever more bizarre settings. The image of an impressively buxom heroine being penetrated by a tentacled alien has become clichéd in porn comics for men. In the case of ero manga, part of the visual pleasure seems to involve pushing the human body to extremes, exploring the point at which it can no longer be recognized as human.

In ladies’ comics, on the other hand, with their emphasis on reality and the real sex lives of their readers, part of the visual pleasure seems to derive from an aesthetic of maximum visibility. This represents a significantly different kind of visual pleasure from that found in the hard-core films and videos Linda Williams analyzes. As Williams points out, the “frenzy of the
visible" has historically been tied to gender issues: "The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually the frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured" (1999, 50). While male pleasure in hard-core cinema involves showing the erect penis and ejaculation, the physiology of the vagina makes female pleasure and orgasm much more difficult to represent on film. For this reason, comics are perhaps better able to depict female pleasure. While drawings may not be able to reveal the "truth" of the real body in the way film can, drawings can show things that would not be visible on film, in particular vaginal penetration. In ladies’ comics, bodies are frequently made transparent, such that penises, fingers, and sex toys become visible even inside the body (figure 1). In fact, the convention of leaving the genital area blank or very quickly sketched can add to this effect. One common convention is to show a penis extended in blank space, but dripping with juices and inserted through an oval opening. The reader familiar with the aesthetic conventions of ladies’ comics instantly understands that this is not a penis in thin air but inside a body. In this way, perhaps this aesthetic of maximum visibility in drawn pornography is uniquely accessible to women, because it can depict female genital stimulation in ways not possible in film.

Ladies’ comics magazines encourage strong identification between the readers and the characters of the stories and demonstrate ways in which women can express and act on their desires. Ladies’ comics not only address a female audience by using the shōjo manga art style but also encourage a continuity of sexual experience between the fictional stories and the readers’ real lives. For the most part, the stories are "realistic" (that is, not science fiction or fantasy) and are set in recognizable, contemporary Japan. The characters appearing in the stories are very similar to the women whose letters appear in the back of every issue: unskilled office workers and housewives in their twenties and thirties, single or recently married, and without children. At the back of every issue, a questionnaire asks readers to report which stories they liked and disliked, and what sorts of stories they want to see. These kinds of questionnaires are commonly included in comics and books of all kinds in Japan. But ladies’ comics magazines go one step further, encouraging readers to write down their real-life sexual experiences and opinions, which are then published in later issues. The February 1999 issue of Labien features a long article on techniques for cheating on one’s husband, with advice from several readers. An issue of Fizz from the same month has articles discussing the results of a questionnaire about the pros and cons of one-night stands, instructions for arranging threesomes, and a "reader’s vibrator report." On the whole, the magazines encourage a continuity of sexual experience beyond simply reading the stories.

The same issue of Fizz mentioned above also contains two manga stories supposedly based on the true experiences of readers. The first is "My Most Perverted Evening" [Watashi no ichiban H na yoru] by Kado Motomi, based on the experiences of Kishiwada Mayumi (age twenty-four). The story revolves around a girl (named Mayumi) who gets caught having sex with her boyfriend on a crowded train. Although Mayumi swears off exhibitionism at the end of the story, the last frame indicates that she and her boyfriend will continue their sexual experimentation. The second story is entitled “Neighborly Love” [Rinjin’ai] by Nagaya Yoko and based on the experiences of Yamashita Ryoko (age twenty-three). The plot centers around a newly wed couple who move into a new apartment complex. The wife is seduced by a neighbor, who eventually initiates the couple into the joys of swinging. Like the previous story, this one also ends with the promise of future pleasures. While it is possible that these "true stories" are, in fact, fiction, the events of the
narrative are plausible and take place in locales commonly associated with casual or illicit sex in modern Japan, such as the crowded train. The use of the readers' (supposedly) real names and ages encourages identification and possibly even imitation. Even more explicitly than in shōjo manga, the ladies' comics reader is encouraged to think of the characters as the self, not as other. In addition to the stories, the magazines carry ads for pornographic videos, sex toys, and phone sex services all explicitly marketed to women. The stories claim to reflect the lives of real readers, while the surrounding articles and advertisements encourage the reader both to enter into dialog with the text by writing letters and to seek out sexual gratification in real life.

Ladies' comics magazines indicate what type of reader they address, but they also point to a theory of desire. Of course, while any reader may approach the text in unpredictable ways, I am less interested in how an individual might read than in how the text presents itself and how it theorizes female sexual desire. One typical ladies' comics story is "Second Party for Two" [Futari no nijikai] by Madono Yuki, the lead story in the February 1999 issue of Labien. The story begins with a young woman, Mikami, at a party with a group of coworkers, when one of the men in the group, named Kubo, persuades her to slip off to a hotel with him instead. At the hotel, Mikami, a married woman, suddenly has second thoughts, but Kubo jokingly says he will not allow her to go home until she masturbates in front of him. She complies, telling herself that she has no choice, and while Kubo watches, she brings herself to orgasm. There follow several pages of the couple enjoying oral and anal sex, but in spite of her demands, Kubo refuses to bring her to orgasm again, claiming that since she is married it would not be right. Instead, he urges her to call her husband and tell him that she will be home soon. She makes the call, but tells her husband that she is going to a second party and will come home late. When Kubo asks why she no longer wants to leave, she points to her wet vagina and demands that he satisfy her. Now having permission to play, Kubo penetrates her with a vibrating cell phone wrapped in a condom. After many more pages of such teasing, she again demands that he penetrate her, again displaying her wet vagina as proof of her desire for him. He at last complies, and they enjoy a simultaneous orgasm. The story ends with them kissing and promising to meet again for another "second party."

Scant as the characterization is, the story still reveals some information about Mikami and Kubo, as well as their desires. Mikami clearly emerges as the main character—she is the character whose thoughts we read and who has the most visual salience in close-ups. Obviously for both characters, much of the erotic excitement comes from transgressing a taboo, in this case, cheating on the husband, but it seems clear that for Mikami, desire also arises from her own body. When they first arrive in the hotel room, Kubo attempts to get her in the mood by kissing and holding her, but she resists. After she masturbates, however, she is suddenly demanding: she wants him to penetrate her. He keeps her in suspense for most of the story, and the methods that he uses (anal sex, fingering, the cell phone) at first cause her shock and embarrassment. However, it is clearly her pleasure that is of primary narrative and visual importance; that Kubo also reaches orgasm seems almost secondary, and readers rarely see his penis. Also, in spite of the casual nature of this encounter, the story highlights the emotional bond between them. Mikami insists that Kubo ejaculate inside her, as proof of this bond (a common trope in ladies' comics), and afterward checks to make sure that she indeed finds his semen inside her vagina. It may seem like stating the obvious to emphasize that this text revolves entirely around bodies, although it is not just the interaction but the individual body itself that generates sexual desire. The implication is that desire is something that Mikami already possesses; she merely has to access it by exciting herself.

Mikami's desire arises from her interaction with her own body, but how is that desire indicated visually? One of the central problems of all pornography is how to depict female sexual excitement. As in other forms of visual pornography, depicting female arousal and orgasm proves problematic because there is less physical evidence; specifically, there exists no direct female equivalent to erection and ejaculation. To circumvent this, ladies' comics emphasize vaginal wetness as a sign of female arousal, and frequently female characters use it as a demand for satisfaction. The wet vagina takes on a significance comparable to that of the erect penis. While it may be going too far to state that phallic power accrues to it in a larger cultural sense, within the framework of the story, the wet vagina serves as proof of the woman's arousal and a demand for satisfaction. As befits its symbolic significance, the wetness is typically overdetermined. Fluids gush forth in a tide of unbridled sexual excitement in the many repeated close-ups. Characters, both female and male, gesture toward it, touch it, and talk about it in every story. Wetness is further determined in the beads of sweat and saliva that soak the characters in nearly every story. The wet vagina also represents a demand that must be satisfied. In "Second Party," when Kubo asks Mikami why she does not go home to her husband when she has the chance, she displays her dripping genitals and demands that he drive her
wild (figure 2). Thus concurrent with the proof of the woman's arousal is the perceived necessity of satisfying such arousal in that site, that is, through penetration, which forms the climax of every story.

In "Second Party," as in many of these stories, penetration to the point of orgasm often constitutes the climax of the narrative, but far from being a display of phallic power (as the climax of porn for men often is), in these scenes the male is nearly absent. As is typical of shōjo manga, the female character, Mikami, has greater visual salience than the male. In part, this serves to fix her as the main character in the story—the repeated close-up views of her face, along with the disclosure of her thoughts, indicate that hers is the primary viewpoint in the story, and her emotions inform the text. The story offers extensive close-ups of her body, specifically her sexual organs, almost to the exclusion of the male. However, it is not just his penis that is left out of the picture but often Kubo's entire body. We only see his body parts as they relate to her pleasure. Kubo's eventual penetration of Mikami is depicted in a single panel that takes up the entire page. The large size of the image highlights this moment in the narrative, but here Kubo is completely absent (figure 3). The only sign of his presence comes in the form of speed lines at her vagina, indicating the rapid in-and-out motion of his penis. Realistically, at least part of his body would be visible in this position, but except for the speed lines, he remains absent. Furthermore, considering the way in which ladies' comics often emphasize maximum visibility of penetrating organs, it seems somewhat surprising that Kubo's penis suffers reduction to a few brief lines. Three pages later, when Mikami reaches orgasm, we again see a large close-up of her alone, with Kubo's presence only abstractly indicated in a spray of ejaculate. As the story progresses and Mikami approaches satisfaction, Kubo becomes more and more marginal, until he disappears entirely in the moment of orgasm. In fact, this curtailment of the male body appears with surprising consistency. In many ladies' comics, the climax of the story has the full-page panel showing the act of penetration with the man's body partially or wholly obscured. However, what is most consistently absent is not his penis but his face, whereas the woman's face is always shown, and often repeated in close-up (figure 4). This arrangement of the bodies and faces seems to indicate that the female orgasm, and the woman's fulfillment of her desire, holds greater importance than the man's. While proof of desire begins with the vagina, it ends with the face.

"Second Party for Two" does not seem to support Anne Allison's assertion that the pleasure of pornographic comics is about the possession of the female form by the gaze of the reader, and that the female characters derive pleasure only from pleasing men. Mikami's desire for Kubo is preexisting, which is why she has gone to the hotel with him in the first place. The action...
in "Second Party for Two" begins with a scene of female masturbation to the point of orgasm. This act, even though it is brought to culmination, does not satisfy or end Mikami's desire, but rather begins it. Her sexual emotions are only given free play after she has aroused herself. In this way, she seems very similar to the reader of ladies' comics, who arrives at the text with desire in need of stimulation. Identification between the reader and Mikami is not merely a matter of becoming her, but of the interplay between the similar positions of the real and fictitious woman. Readers are certainly encouraged, through the letters, questionnaires, articles, and ads, to be sexual like the characters in the stories. However, even if a reader imagines the female protagonist to be real, rather than possession, it seems more likely that her goal would be identification. A woman reading "Second Party" probably does not want to have Mikami, but to be her.

Another example of the importance of the female body for informing female pleasure and the persistent absence of the male is the February 1999 lead story in Fizz, "Rebel Flower" [Ran no hana] by Azuma Katsumi. It begins with a wealthy, proper young wife named Kaoru who feels sexually in-

hibited with her husband. She accidentally observes her husband engaging in sadomasochistic sex play with a maid and realizes that she wishes to play the role of the masochist like that woman. Immediately after her discovery she masturbates, which, as in "Second Party," serves to activate her desire. Her first act in exercising her newfound sexuality is to have sex with another man, a gardener named Yamazaki. Again, we see the familiar full-page panel of the female protagonist being penetrated by a man whose face remains out of view (figure 3). Her thoughts read, "Even as we were rubbing together, I forgot that Yamazaki even existed. The sensation of my flesh became my whole existence." After this, she is ready to take on with her husband the sexually uninhibited role she had previously only imagined. Not only the theme but the narrative of this story features the display of female pleasure in order to arouse female pleasure. It is an exploration, not of the other, as in pornography for heterosexual men, but of the self, or what may potentially become the self. Much as the woman in the story says that all she feels is herself, the reader, engaging her own desires with the text, is occupied with pleasing herself.13

The story "Rebel Flower" also introduces the theme of female masochism, which appears in several (but not all) of the stories in Fizz and Labien. The idea of women finding pleasure in submission and coercion, even in fantasy, appears politically problematic to some feminist critics. The presentation of female masochism is the primary reason Anne Allison found ladies' comics so disturbing, and why she saw no difference between ero manga and ladies' comics. Allison relies on a psychoanalytic theory of spectatorship, one in which men look and women are looked at, and one which leaves no possibility of female spectatorship. For this reason, Allison finds that not only the female character but also the female reader is forced to become a masochist, taking pleasure only in her own submission to phallic power. In such a reading, the presence of female masochism in ladies' comics can be no more than a symptom of society's misogyny. But is it really impossible for women to take pleasure in looking at other women? This kind of pleasure does seem to be operating in shōjo manga, in which the repeated depiction of girly characters serves to encourage identification between the readers and the characters. An understanding of the structure of the ladies' comics genre can account for the prevalence of masochistic fantasies while still accounting for the agency of the readers.

Fujimoto Yukari offers one explanation of the role of female masochism in ladies' comics in a 1992 essay titled, "The Shape of Women's Desire: Women's Sexual Fantasies as Seen in Ladies' Comics" [Onna no yokubō no
5. Kaoru has her first satisfying sexual experience with Yamazaki, the gardener. The text represents Kaoru’s thoughts: “Even though my whole body refused Yamazaki, I could not deny the sensations that arose in me. Even as we were rubbing together, I forgot that Yamazaki even existed. The sensation of my flesh became my whole existence.” From “Rebel Flower” [Ran no hana], by Azuma Katsumi.

katachi: Redezu komikku ni miru onna no sei gensō). Fujimoto identifies herself in the essay as both a feminist critic and an avid reader of ladies’ comics since they first appeared in the 1980s. Refusing to accept that masochism is nothing more than a disguise for the oppression of women, she contends that taking a masochistic stance provides a powerful means for the female character to access her own sexual desire. Fujimoto writes that most ladies’ comics stories follow a specific pattern: the female protagonist meets with a “man of destiny,” who introduces her to the world of deviant sex. While the woman is at first afraid and resists, the man overpowers her, usually through rape, bondage, and humiliation (73). According to Fujimoto, that the woman be completely overpowered is necessary to her sexual awakening. Only when she is overcome, and feels there is no way she could resist, can she surrender herself to pleasure without feeling that she has become “dirty” (74). Linda Williams notices the same dynamic in American sadomasochistic film and video porn: “For only by playing the role of the ‘good girl’ that is, by pretending to be good and only coerced into sex—does the woman who is coerced and punished get the ‘bad’ girl’s pleasure. She gets this pleasure as if against her will and thus as if she were still a good girl” (1999, 209).

Looking at ladies’ comics in comparison to the broader genre of shōjo manga may also help explain the prevalence of rape stories. Within the realm of romance comics for girls and women, sexual encounters between characters had been depicted since the mid-1970s, for the most part only in boy-love comics, however. As Fujimoto points out, scenes of sex and even rape in boy-love comics are more palatable to readers because boys, unlike girls, do not need to worry about possible pregnancy or the necessity of remaining virgins until they marry (1998, 144). Thus, she suggests, sex scenes, sometimes involving violence, became common in boy-love comics. Not only is it more plausible to read about boys, rather than girls, exploring their desires, but because of the fantasy element of the boy-love genre, it also appears less threatening. The female readers indulging in the fantasy of boy-love comics are free to imagine love and sex in a sentimental, idealistic way. McLellan quotes from a yaoi magazine suggesting reasons for the great popularity of boy-love comics: “Some reasons suggested include, ‘you are attracted to a pure kind of love,’ and, ‘you wish to wrap yourself in the joy of love’ (2001). Most boy-love comics foster an aesthetic of purity, even when depicting hard-core sex acts. Heterosexual romance, by comparison, is distinctly more threatening. Compared to the pure (that is, imaginary) love of boy-love comics, heterosexual sex seems frightening and dirty. Masochism
and rape fantasies provide one method of allowing the female characters to engage in dirty acts without themselves becoming dirty, and without owning the desires depicted.

While a masochistic stance serves as a method for attaining sexual pleasure, it is not the only route to pleasure. In the stories from the 1980s and early 1990s that Fujimoto examined, masochism seemed to be the preferred theme, but a decade later, interest in the topic seems on the wane. While consensual s/m play appeared in some of the stories in the February 1999 issues of Fizz and Labien, hardly any instances of the rape, violence, and humiliation Fujimoto describes occurred. A more common theme was that depicted in "Rebel Flower," where a woman actively seeks the masochist role, rather than having it thrust on her. Furthermore, many stories did not feature masochism at all, and many also presented sexually aggressive women. True, many of the female protagonists, like Mikami, put up a vestigial display of resistance and shame. For instance, there is the conceit that Kubo will not allow her to leave until she masturbates, but within the story, this type of coercion is portrayed as more of a game. When Kubo gives Mikami the opportunity to leave, she of course chooses to stay, and it is her own arousal that causes her to overcome her shame and fully embrace her "bad-girl" identity.

This shift away from the need for masochism results from the evolution of ladies' comics as a genre to include a more overtly acknowledged female-centered sexual desire. Romance fiction in the United States underwent a similar shift away from the use of rape as a device for accessing female sexual desire. In The Romance Revolution, Carol Thurston relates the decline of rape fantasies in romance to women's increased access to means of satisfying their own desires: "Though without conscious intent or plan, in rejecting rape as sexual fantasy the great majority of romance readers have freed themselves to recognize and embrace the role of erotica in developing their own identity, and ultimately a sense of self" (1987, 26). Interestingly, she adds in a footnote that Japanese romance is still replete with violence and rape, and she wonders, "It will be interesting to see if the evolution of the Japanese romance consumer follows the pattern of the American consumer, particularly whether most Japanese readers also will in time reject the rape fantasy and violence" (1987, 2). Thurston wrote this in 1987; just over ten years later, it seems that this is exactly what has happened. This is not to suggest that Japanese women lag ten years behind American women in terms of sexual liberation. In fact, the shift away from rape fantasy in comics happened without a drastic change in the status of Japanese women. Rather, what this suggests is that the genre of ladies' comics has matured to the point where realistic, hard-core depictions of female sexuality are accessible and pleasing to female readers, and this maturation of genre has taken place in a relatively short time.

Within the world of ladies' comics, even tropes that seem familiar from genres of porn for men can take on different meaning. Dismissing ladies' comics as yet another example of patriarchal oppression, as Anne Allison does, is a disservice to both the comics and their readers. An understanding of the genre of ladies' comics and its links to other related genres proves crucial to comprehending the content of individual stories and the appeal of the genre as a whole. In this case, the display of the female body does not serve to make the woman into an object to be viewed and possessed, but to encourage the female reader's sexual experimentation. The magazines hearten the female reader to think of the female characters as the self and to imagine ways in which the reader and the character could be one and the same. This is not to suggest that ladies' comics are truly subversive or revolutionary; most stories might be read as heteronormative or as reinforcing the patriarchal system. I do not believe, however, that the value of any example of popular culture necessarily lies in its ability to incite revolution. In the case of ladies' comics, their very existence denies many common myths about pornography, such as that women are not visually stimulated and that hard-core pornography necessarily proves harmful to women. Ladies' comics provide a unique example of what heterosexual women might find pleasure in looking at.

While it is heartening from a feminist perspective to see texts that speak to female desire, it is perhaps impossible to separate ladies' comics from their culture of origin and to make the same texts available to American women. Ladies' comics could only have arisen within a culture that already had a large female readership of comics and a genre aimed at them. If the aesthetics and access to comics were more female-friendly, American women might in fact find a new medium for expressing their own sexual subjectivity. The fact that such texts exist at all, however, does have significant implications for the analysis of other types of visual media and implies that film and video are not the only media appropriate to the pornographic imagination.

Notes

1 As Jane Juffer astutely notes, American women's preference for print erotica, particularly romance novels, over film or video pornography does not derive
from the fact that women are less visually stimulated than men, but from the cultural conditions in which all these genres have developed. Romance novels have been historically more available to women than hard-core videos, although this is slowly changing (1998, 3).

2 By way of comparison, note that Laura Kipnis cites the peak circulation of Hustler at around a million (1999, 125).

3 Some critics, such as Sandra Buckley, attribute this to the sexually open climate of the Edo period (1600–1864) and make associations between modern pornographic comics and Edo-period erotic woodblock prints called shunga (1991, 164). This essentializing view ignores the fact that Japanese artistic traditions, as well as sexual mores, underwent a profound shift after the country opened to the West in 1864. In fact, from the time of the Meiji Restoration through to the ultranationalist fervor of World War II, pornographic images and texts were severely censored. Claiming that the proliferation of pornographic comics from the 1960s to the present is somehow related to the tradition of shunga seems as absurd as attempting to analyze contemporary American video porn in light of eighteenth-century pornographic novels such as Fanny Hill or My Secret Life.

4 As in other genres of comics for women and girls, the writers/artists tend to be women who are close in age to their readers, and who have similar values and experiences (Fujimoto 1991, 54). On the other hand, most editors are men, and they exert some control over the types of stories their female staff write. For a description of the sometimes antagonistic relationship between comic book editors and writers, see Kinsella 2000, 162–201.

5 For example, see The Desert Peach by Donna Barr, Meat Cake by Dame Darcy, Naughty Bits by Roberta Gregory, A Distant Soil by Colleen Doran, and Mystery Date by Carla Speed McNeil, all of them remarkably talented artists doomed to obscurity by the inaccessibility of their chosen medium.

6 Fujimoto Yukari cites the first heterosexual “bed scene” in shōjo manga as appearing in Love Game by Ichijō Yukari in 1973 (1998, 46). In the page Fujimoto reproduces, a naked boy and girl embrace, with the boy lying on top of the girl such that their genitalia are shielded from view. The image is static, as is typical of most renderings of bed scenes from that era. According to Fujimoto, merely the suggestion of sexual activity was enough to create a great emotional impact on teenage readers at the time (46). Another common technique is to leave the lower half of the body out of the frame when showing characters naked in bed together.

7 The most famous of these are Hagiō Motô, Ōshima Yumiko, Ikeda Ryoiko, Take-miya Keiko, Ichijō Yukari, and Yamagishi Ryōko, known collectively as the Year Twenty-Four Group (Nijūnen Nen Gumi) because they were all born in the year 1949, or Shōwa 24 in the Japanese calendar. Unfortunately, very little of their work has been translated into English.

8 The term yaoi is an acronym for the phrase “Yamanashi, Ochinchani, Iminashi,” meaning “no climax, no conclusion, no meaning,” so called because many of these comics forsake plot in favor of desultory love scenes between male characters. It has been suggested as a joke, however, that yaoi really stands for “Yamete, Osiri ga lui,” “Stop, my butt hurts!” (McLelland 2001, 3). The term shota-con is a variant of the term loli-con for “Lolita complex” comics, a genre of porn comics for men featuring young girls. Shota is a common Japanese boy’s name, thus shota-con indicates porn comics featuring young boys.

9 In terms of their amateur status and their depiction of homosexual male sex for female pleasure, yaoi are quite similar to American slash fiction. Like slash fiction, yaoi stories also tend to be plotless, derivative, and parodic.

10 The fact that pornographic comics are drawn obviates one of the antiporn feminists’ objections, namely, that pornographic films are necessarily exploitative of the women who appear in them. Still, they would probably find small comfort in this suggestion at best.

11 Nijikai literally means “second party.” The most common pattern of socializing in Japanese cities is to go out in a large group to a restaurant, then after dinner to break off in smaller groups to other locations—usually a bar or karaoke box—for a second party, then a third, and so on until morning.

12 While it may seem overly obvious to locate female desire in the vagina, this is not necessarily what one sees in other pornographies. It took the American porn industry years to realize the importance of the clitoris. For example, see Deep Throat (dir. Gerard Damiano) which locates female desire in the mouth.

13 As Williams points out in Hard Core, the image of the masturbating female is relatively new in Western pornographic films and represents a shift to the depiction of female pleasure, as well as of a new kind of woman, one not in desperate need of a man (1999, 109). It is important to remember, however, that these films arose from a culture that has historically harbored an intense fear and loathing of masturbation, especially female masturbation (see Bennett and Rosario 1995). In Japanese culture, on the other hand, while female masturbation is undoubtedly naughty, a sign of an active libido, it has never been pathologized. Images of women masturbating show up regularly in ero manga as well, with relatively little comment or anxiety. This cultural difference has perhaps made it easier for a masturbatory literature to be marketed to women.

Works Cited


