Record of Dying Days: The Alternate History of *Ōoku*

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The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

—L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

The question "How did things end up like this?" is a form of historical inquiry at its most elemental. One possible answer to this question may be afforded by the work of professional historians, who, in the course of investigating the events of the past and how things changed in a given period of time, adumbrate potential alternatives that were then, through the ratcheting process of the passage of time's arrow, reduced from viable futures to might-have-beens. Another possible answer to this question, however, comes from the popular narratives of science fiction, and in particular the subgenre of science fiction called alternate history.[1]

Although often dismissed as "genre writing," inherently of less artistic merit than so-called "literary fiction," science fiction is a global mode of storytelling whose cultural significance and appeal are indisputable. Science fiction is arguably even more popular in Japan than in the United States: beyond science fiction including novels, short stories, and light novels, the narratives of the anime, manga, and video games that are part of the core of Japanese

popular culture are imbued with countless science fictional or fantastical tropes, plots, and storytelling devices, symbolized by the mobilesuit and the magical girl. Within science fiction globally and in Japan specifically, feminist science fiction has produced some of the genre's most lauded narratives, and Yoshinaga Fumi's feminist alternate history manga *Ōoku* (2005–present) has likewise proven an award-winning hit both in Japan and in English translation.[2] Taking place in an alternate Edo period in which a disease known as the "red-faced pox" devastates three-quarters of the male population, leaving women to take up the reins of power in society, the manga follows the women of the ruling Tokugawa family and the men who serve them in the eponymous inner chambers of the shogunal palace in Edo, beginning with the accession of Yoshimune in 1720 CE before backtracking to the start of the epidemic in the 1630s under Iemitsu and moving forward.

Ōoku is an example of the alternate history subgenre of science fiction, which has a history dating back at least to science fiction's Golden Age in the postwar years and which has recently become well known enough to garner critical attention from academic historians, whose responses have been mixed. In an influential article in 2002, Gavriel Rosenfeld surveys several alternate history texts, all written by men and centering around inflection points in U.S. history. Rosenfeld declares flatly that alternate history's importance lies in the way it "sheds light upon the evolution of historical memory."[3] Rosenfeld further claims that alternate history's utility for its writers and readers lies only in its commentary on the present, which inevitably expresses the author's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the same. To those familiar with science fiction as a genre, however, Rosenfeld's claims about alternate history are reductive. In *The Alternate History,* literary scholar Karen Hellekson discusses some of the same historian-edited anthologies of alternate history that Rosenfeld cites, noting that they were attempts to discipline the wild invention of alternate history by excluding texts deemed too implausible or "frivolous."[4] That frivolity, however—making the past a playground for a writer's imagination, as well as the future—is an essential part of what makes science fiction and alternate history narratives popular.

In contrast to Rosenfeld's declaration that "alternate history is inherently presentist," Hellekson presents a much more nuanced evaluation of alternate history's affordances, meanings, and potentialities when she argues that "these texts change the present by transforming the past."[5] Hellekson's interpretation of alternate history considers the subgenre as a mode not just for expressing dissatisfaction but for articulating productive critique of and dissent from prevailing views: a way of imagining alternatives in the past,

the present, and in the future. Indeed, examining alternate history narratives beyond Rosenfeld's U.S.-centric, and entirely male-authored, examples reveal that the subgenre contains much more complex, conflicted, and generative texts than he or most historians realize. Alternate history demonstrates the ways in which non-scholars understand history and can transform familiar, "standard" narratives of Dead White Males Doing Things into tools of imagination, resistance, and critique.

ALTERNATE HISTORY DEMONSTRATES THE WAYS IN WHICH NON-SCHOLARS UNDERSTAND HISTORY AND CAN TRANSFORM FAMILIAR, "STANDARD" NARRATIVES OF DEAD WHITE MALES DOING THINGS INTO TOOLS OF IMAGINATION, RESISTANCE, AND CRITIQUE.

Science fiction scholar Alexis Lothian writes that "the speculative logics of possibility and impossibility are sites of contestation about the meanings of the future, the present, and the past," and science fiction in general and alternate history in particular are attempts to work these logics out in narrative and to contest these meanings—and standard narratives—thereby.[6] *Ōoku* turns the history of early modern Japan into just such a site of contestation, as Yoshinaga brings her longstanding concerns as a feminist and as a female writer of women's manga to bear on what scholars once argued was the period of Japanese history in which women's social position was lowest.[7] Rewriting the official history of the Tokugawa shogunate to feature women in positions of explicit social and political authority changes the meaning of the past in the manga, and has ramifications for the future as well as for the present.

PUTTING THE ALTERNATIVE IN ALTERNATE

One question that examining alternate history raises is how non-scholars conceptualize history. Educational psychologist Sam Wineburg argues in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001) that even in the history classroom tacit cultural assumptions "shape our ideas about what is central in history and what is peripheral, what to look for and what to overlook."[8] In his book, Wineburg describes an experiment that he and his fellow researchers conducted with U.S. grade school students, asking them to draw pictorial representations of such broad categories of U.S. historical figures as "Pilgrim," "pioneer," and "hippie." The results were profoundly gendered in that the majority of students depicted the past as populated by solitary (white) men, and in that girls were vastly more likely than boys to depict family units. Wineburg

concludes that how we conceptualize the past is a function of "culturally coded prompts that tap into gender stereotypes" (and other stereotypes about race, sexuality, disability, and social class as well).[9] Far from the past being an independent progenitor of the way we think about present historical circumstances, present historical circumstances shape our retrospective views of the past by default. Learning to discard this presentism when considering the past takes time, and it often challenges even the most gifted students in history classrooms: the notion of change over time in everything, even such socially sacrosanct categories as race, sexuality, and gender, is mind-bending when first encountered.

History does not operate in a sociopolitical vacuum, and Gavriel Rosenfeld's dismissal of alternate history narratives is unwarranted: science fiction in general and alternate history in particular has a great capacity to upend current cultural assumptions in exactly the same way that discarding presentism does. As Lothian argues, part of the appeal of science fiction lies in the fact that it can and does "articulate temporalities other than those that reproduce the predictable dystopias of the present," and in articulating those temporalities, science fiction offers both the temporary pleasure of imaginative escape from the present's predictable dystopias, and the opportunity to use those temporalities to create more long-lasting change by using their critiques as fulcrums on which to seek to move the world into a different track.[10] This is essentially the premise, whether implicit or explicit, of feminist science fiction, and of other works and subgenres that do not reflect either the dystopian present or familiar futures.

Science fictional narratives rely on what Darko Suvin famously called a "moment of estrangement": science fiction locates that moment in the future, while alternate history places it in the past.[11] This moment of estrangement is purposefully destabilizing (because readers must suspend their disbelief to accept the science fictional premise of the text), and although some premises have become hackneyed, it can be a powerful, even transformative, experience. Feminist science fiction narratives routinely capitalize on and amplify that moment's destabilizing effect for the purpose of critique, and in the case of *Ōoku*, this effect is further intensified by the visual nature of manga: the full-page spreads of a female shogun presiding over an assembly of female daimyo in Edo Castle are profoundly disorienting when one first sees them; indeed, the normalization of the sight of women openly exercising authority in every sphere of early modern Japanese society is one of the manga's more subversive achievements. Given that *Ōoku* is marketed in Japan as a *josei* (women's) manga, the least popular of the four major manga marketing

categories in terms of sales, the manga's challenge to the patriarchal norms of Japanese society past and present via its articulation of an alternate temporality in which women rule must form part of its appeal: as of this writing it has been adapted for film twice, in addition to a ten-episode *jidaigeki* (historical) TV drama.[12]

The construction of historical narratives is an important part of the narrative of *Ōoku* itself; shogun Yoshimune's curiosity about the origins of the female-dominated world in which she rules provides the framing device for volumes two through seven of the manga, as Yoshimune peruses the secret history of the Ōoku and of the shogunate. This *Record of Dying Days* details the agonizing process by which female rule was legitimated within the confines of Edo Castle; crucially, Yoshimune's new knowledge of the red-faced pox and its history compels her to relax the restrictions on the circulation of *rangaku,* the "Dutch learning" imported from Europe via Nagasaki, so that it can be used for research into the disease, providing the overarching narrative of the manga's more recent volumes.

Learning history has consequences, as does forgetting it: in many ways these aspects of *Ōoku* literally bear out Karen Hellekson's argument that alternate histories "foreground the 'constructedness' of history and the role narrative plays in this construction."[13] Alongside the positive construction of historical narratives in the secret *Record of Dying Days, Ōoku* also depicts the negative process of historical forgetting. Female officials in the manga take on masculine names when they assume office; this practice is the trigger for Yoshimune's curiosity about the past, and it is also one of the reasons that Edo townswomen only a few generations after the beginning of the epidemic blithely assume that historical figures with masculine names—such as Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu—were in fact female. Equating a society with natural sex ratios to the mythological "age of the gods," or at the latest to the time of the *Tale of Genji* centuries earlier, these townswomen unwittingly demonstrate just how quickly and how thoroughly popular memory, and conventional wisdom, can change.

Such scenes also indicate that change, once made, can very easily go from being radical to being unquestionably familiar—and this, of course, is one of the reasons that change is often strenuously resisted. The flexibility of historical memory in this alternate Edo recalls Jack Halberstam's discussion of ways in which forgetting "becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription."[14] Indeed, there is an additional irony, and applicability, in the

fact that this particular interlude occurs after the women have left a *kabuki* performance: the beautiful men on the Edo *kabuki* stages are played entirely by women, and the townswomen's meditation on the nature of past Japanese society is inspired entirely by a spectral—i.e., nonexistent—referent: the beautiful man who is in reality a woman, and whose slippage between these categories calls them both into question. Similarly, the woman who brought the Tokugawa shogunate through the ravages of the red-faced pox, the female Iemitsu, chooses to preserve the fiction that she never succeeded her father, ensuring that her own history is utterly erased. For the female Iemitsu, forgetting is her final gesture of loyalty to a vanished way of life in which she had no consequence, just as for her, women taking up the reins of power is explicitly only a temporary, stopgap measure. Hellekson argues that alternate histories "make readers rethink their world and how it has become what it is"; sure enough, reading such scenes is extremely disorienting, as the reader's knowledge that historical reality *wasn't* that way comes forcibly up against the question of *why* it *couldn't* have been that way.[15]

PUTTING MALE CHARACTERS IN THE DEPENDENT AND SUBSERVIENT POSITIONS SO OFTEN OCCUPIED BY WOMEN, PARTICULARLY IN HISTORICAL DRAMAS, HIGHLIGHTS THE INEQUALITY AND ESSENTIALLY ARBITRARY NATURE OF PUTTING ANYONE IN SUCH POSITIONS BASED ON CONSTRUCTED CATEGORIES SUCH AS GENDER.

The answer that *Ōoku* gives to that question is the social construction of gender and of gendered social roles; the process by which female authority becomes first a possibility, then a grudgingly accepted necessity, and finally the unquestioned social hegemony is dramatized through the traumatic childhood and unhappy adulthood of the female Iemitsu. But even as she and other women openly take on more authority, gender roles do not simply flip; the narration notes that while the social roles assigned to each gender shift, men still come out ahead in that women take on almost all the work of production, while men are obligated only to survive and to father children. Male characters in later volumes of the manga are constrained by society's resulting sexist assumptions, and the men surrounding the shogun are utterly and often unhappily dependent on her will and whims. Putting male characters in the dependent and subservient positions so often occupied by women, particularly in historical dramas, highlights the inequality and essentially arbitrary nature of putting anyone in such positions based on constructed categories such as gender.

In its depiction of the impact of historical learning, of the construction of historical memory, and of the construction of gender roles over time, *Ōoku* resembles nothing so much as a scholarly historical narrative. Its use of biography is somewhat outmoded compared to the mainstream of current professional historical practice, but biography, which dates back to the writings of Xenophon in Greece in the fourth century BCE and to those of Sima Qian in China in the second century BCE, is one of the oldest narrative modes in historiography, and it remains a popular genre of historical writing even now: that *Ōoku* is organized around the lives of the shogun and their attendants is not a sign that it is simple or underserving of attention, but rather is a mark of the divergence between the popular and the professional understanding of history, and of historiography.[16]

Far more than a simple archive of historical memory, *Ōoku* is a form of popular (in both senses of the word) historical writing: it is one of the "way stations of historical practice," in which Wineburg is interested, turned into sequential art, a perfect example of Hellekson's dictum that alternate history occupies a middle ground between historiography and historical fiction.[17] Whereas a professional historian writing on, for example, gender in the Edo period would discard "what if?" scenarios and biographies of powerful officials as steps toward writing a work of professional historiography, the manga takes them as its focus in a way that is no less serious for being nonacademic; its concerns end where a professional historian's would begin. For these reasons, *Ōoku* and alternate histories in general ought to be understood not as records of historical memory but as archives of popular historical understanding.

THE INNER CHAMBERS

Although the red-faced pox assuredly causes social dislocation, Yoshinaga's Japan continues under the Pax Tokugawa that the Edo period experienced in the actual historical record, and the world of *Ōoku* is not a dystopia. Both patriarchy and matriarchy in *Ōoku* are about equally effective at providing good government: historical events in the manga unfold very much in parallel with the actual historical record, meaning that the record of famines, of boom years, and of the fluctuations in the rice-to-silver ratio is essentially unchanged despite the gender of the people in power.

Creating a manga is exhausting work, as Yoshinaga has previously dramatized in her manga, and although her decision to transpose the actual historical record into the manga is surely a labor-saving device, it has the effect

of heightening the focus on characters' emotions and personal interactions, since it is in these that the meaningful differences between historical events in *Ōoku* and the actual historical record can be found.[18] Some of these interactions are indeed sites where Yoshinaga contests the meaning and the standard narrative of the historical past and unequal present, but others are in a kind of metafictional complicity with the current state of things. In this respect the manga and its readers form what Katie King calls a "pastpresent," in which "pasts and presents very literally mutually construct each other" and that today "are actually necessary for important forms of knowledge making, not limited to teaching knowledges in entertaining ways."[19]

To take an obvious example of contestation in a pastpresent, consider the scene at the beginning of volume 4 in which the female Iemitsu makes her debut as the openly female shogun and demands that, should any of her assembled feudal lords (*daimyo*) have any opposition to her taking power, they speak now or forever hold their peace. None do, which is a clear vindication of the idea that women are perfectly fit to exercise political and social power.[20] Accordingly, after this moment in the manga Iemitsu's rule is never again challenged directly, and the idea of female rulership is more or less taken for granted. King writes of pastpresents that the "making and sharing of knowledge" they engender "are not properly separated; in use they are brought together."[21] In *Ōoku's* pastpresent, the manga and its readers mutually first contest and then naturalize a matriarchal alternative to the status quo, and the manga's entertainment value is not incidental, but rather crucial, to this process.

By contrast, what may be the most infamous scene in the entire manga is more ambiguous in its orientation toward the contemporary social politics of manga consumption and creation, and by extension to the position of women in society in general. This scene, which takes place in volume 5, depicts the louche shogun Tsunayoshi attempting to order two of her male retainers, whom she knows to be in love with each other, to have sex for her entertainment. Distraught, one of them attempts to commit suicide but is stopped by the appearance of the grand chamberlain, whose job includes supervising the shogun's assignations. He orders the two retainers to depart before *almost* kissing Tsunayoshi, then unceremoniously telling her to go to sleep.[22]

Yoshinaga Fumi initially made her name as a writer of boys' love (BL or *yaoi*) manga, which (much like fan fiction) depict male characters in same-sex relationships but are overwhelmingly created and consumed by women. Yoshinaga has depicted her sense of guilt, as a writer of BL, over possibly exploiting gay men and stereotypes about them in her manga before; the semi-autobiographical *Not Love but Delicious Foods Makes Me So Happy!* includes a

chapter in which she goes out to dinner with a gay male friend and drunkenly tries to apologize to him for her career. Somewhat bemusedly, he tells her that she has nothing to apologize for because her manga have nothing to do with his life.[23]

Given this background, reading Tsunayoshi in this scene in *Ōoku* as a female creator or reader of BL manga is not difficult, particularly since Yoshinaga systematically changes many other aspects of the historical Tsunayoshi's life to make Tsunayoshi much more congruent with romance tropes. Whereas the historical Tsunayoshi had no children because he was apparently exclusively interested in having sex with men, in the manga Tsunayoshi's immense heterosexual appetites—her predations drive at least one of her lords to suicide when the shogun seduces first her husband and then her son—is ironically contrasted with her infertility. The historical Tsunayoshi was murdered by his imperial wife when the shogun's latest infatuation with a much younger man threatened, in her view, the stability of the government; in the manga, Tsunayoshi is smothered during an illness by her closest retainer, who has evidently harbored a lifelong unrequited passion for her. Further playing to romantic tropes, it is eventually revealed that the shogun and the aforementioned chamberlain have each nursed an enduring secret love for the other—but the morning after they consummate their passion, just when it looks as though the shogun may have finally found a happy romantic relationship, the chamberlain dies peacefully of old age in his sleep.

The straight-washing of *Ōoku* in general (later volumes contain scenes in which characters refer to the prevalence of lesbian relationships in post-pox society, and gay relationships within the Ōoku are occasionally discussed, but no queer relationship has been depicted at length in the actual manga thus far) and of Tsunayoshi in particular serves several purposes.[24] On one level, it keeps the manga firmly in the mainstream of *josei* comics, which do not usually feature lesbian (*yuri*) relationships, by continuing the manga's theme of unhappy heterosexual romance. On another, its relentless focus on heterosexual relationships, even in a society that is at times nearly 75 percent women, further reinforces the marginalization of queer people and queer relationships not only in contemporary Japanese society and pop culture but also in the telling of Japanese history. This is particularly ironic for a manga set in the Edo period, which, as Gregory M. Pflugfelder argues in *Cartographies of Desire,* openly celebrated the way of male–male sexuality (*nanshokudō*) as no other period in Japanese history has done.[25] Both of these strategies work to increase the manga's marketability; it is no accident that the second *Ōoku* movie, *Eien* (2012, Eternity) focuses exclusively on the Tsunayoshi romantic arc.

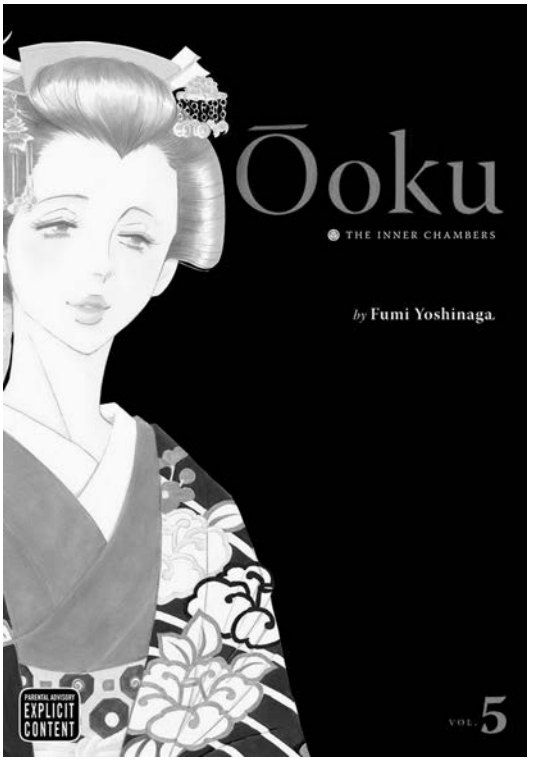

FIGURE 1. The beautiful shogun Tsunayoshi personifies many of the manga's strategies of popular historical writing. From Fumi Yoshinaga, *Ōoku: The Inner Chambers*, vol. 5. VIZ Media LLC, 2010.

In a capitalist society, even a feminist manga has to turn a profit or face cancellation. But in contesting one set of received meanings or assumptions about the past and the present, a narrative such as *Ōoku* may well find itself reinforcing others, a dilemma not confined to feminist manga but shared by every media property attempting to move beyond stereotypical discourse by offering critiques and presenting alternatives.

A REVOLUTION WITHOUT DANCING

Ōoku, as alternate history, might be deemed "frivolous" by most professional historians, but dismissing the allegedly frivolous on account of frivolity is one of the mainstays of preserving what scholar and feminist science fiction giant Joanna Russ called "socially arranged bias" in her classic work *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1982).[26] The book is Russ's careful documentation and explosion of the rhetorical maneuvers used to deny the existence, importance, and relevance of women's writing, both historically and in the present, and by extension of women's experience. As Russ writes, "The trick in the double standard of content is to label one set of experiences as more valuable and important than the other."[27] When the double standard is levied against women's experience, which is defined as "inferior to, less important than, or 'narrower' than men's experience, women's writing is automatically denigrated."[28]

Much of what Russ writes applies, *mutatis mutandis,* to the writing and experience of other nondominant social groups. "False categorizing" in particular is wielded as a tool of suppression against many excellent writers: they and their works are systematically moved from "serious" to "not serious," from "artist" to "non-artist," and from "art" to "non-art."[29] Marginalized authors writing genre fiction are doubly impacted by these rhetorical strategies, since

genre fiction, including science fiction, is widely considered less serious, and of less literary or artistic merit, than "literary fiction."

In light of these tools of suppression, Rosenfeld's decision to focus on three specific moments in alternate history—the Nazis winning World War II, the South winning the Civil War, the American Revolution not occurring—and on narratives exploring these moments exclusively written by men is highly questionable. Rosenfeld justifies his focus on these narratives with the claim that they are three of the most popular, but his bestowing academic attention on them implicitly demarcates the category of "events of world historical importance" and includes them inside it.[30] It also validates a certain kind of historical narrative in which men are much more likely to play a prominent role than women, and by extension a certain kind of social and historical experience. As Wineburg notes, in this narrative "history remains the story of political and economic progress acted out on a public stage," and it "rests on the notion that there is a single history instead of multiple 'histories,' many of which go untold because their content is viewed as insignificant or unimportant."[31] Taking the frivolous seriously—both in scholarship and in society—is in this respect a vital equalizing maneuver, and it is no coincidence that narratives trafficking in histories that do not fit this mainstream historical mode are more likely to be deemed frivolous or "mere entertainment" in the first place. Rosenfeld's disregarding alternate histories that do not fit within his narrowly defined tranche of "serious and important," and thus using alternate history to reinforce existing categories of value which transcend the academy, does a disservice not only to readers and writers of alternate history but also to professional history itself, which continues to struggle with making room for women, queer people, and people of color both as subjects of history and as professional historians.

Ōoku, with its focus on the women of the shogunal family and their servants and retainers, may seem to hew closely to this standard narrative, but the manga's very title (its English subtitle is *The Inner Chambers,* a literal translation of the Japanese) betrays its focus on the complicated emotional and interpersonal dynamics and relationships of people in the enclosed hothouse setting of the shogunal palace. Concubines and their servants are stereotypically schemers and backstabbers, and the men of the Ōoku are no exception, but besides assigning this emotionality and plotting to male characters, another subversive aspect of Yoshinaga's manga is the impact that characters' emotional lives and relationships are shown to have on matters of state; indeed, characters' personal motivations take on outsized importance. The notorious incident of the forty-seven ronin in 1703 is a good example of

an event that takes on a different valence in alternate history: in the manga the incident is used as a pretext to reinstate the law prohibiting men from inheriting households, which had been relaxed by a prior shogun. In light of everything about early modern Japanese history that does not change in the manga, readers are forced to ask: how does gender impact history? *Would* the world be better off if women were in charge, as so many second-wave feminists and classic feminist science fiction novels argued? Like other third wave feminist texts, *Ōoku* questions gender essentialism: if, as Emma Goldman is said to have suggested, a revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having, it may be that the revolutionary act lies not in the revolution itself but in insisting on the equal importance of both politics and frivolity.

FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

What is to be gained from taking such a view of revolutions, and of dancing? What do professional historians or scholars of Japan gain by taking alternate history texts and pop culture narratives such as *Ōoku* seriously, not as documents of historical memory but as challenges to mainstream historical discourses in which scholarly writing plays a part? What is the value of taking the alternatives that a text like *Ōoku* articulates seriously, not only as a critique of the present but as a critique of ways of talking about the present and of imagining the future?

Through texts like *Ōoku,* alternate history as a subgenre and manga as a medium have fostered a space in which the limitations of conventional (historical) narrative need not apply, in which readers and writers can enjoy an escape from the "predictable dystopias," not only of the present but also of common ways of telling a story or of relating history. Regardless of however seriously they take the business of frivolity—and many creators including Yoshinaga take it very seriously indeed—it is precisely because these narratives are deemed frivolous and unserious that they have flourished even while levying serious charges against mainstream narratives and their unthinking defaults. Although time's arrow points only one way, the human imagination may range freely in all directions.

Thus the value of alternate history lies precisely in its frivolity: a subgenre of a subgenre of fiction that has long struggled for academic and critical respect, alternate history has been freed by its very lack of being taken seriously to take almost anything and everything in recorded history as its subject, and to transform received narratives about those histories in whatever way

its writers and readers like. Not all alternate histories articulate such powerful critiques as *Ōoku* does, but on some level, whether a given work can be read as critiquing the present or the past is beside the point: the fact that alternate histories play with the "what happened" of the actual historical record by asking "what if?" is already its own critique; an insistence that nothing is inevitable, that history is not merely one damn thing after another but rather that it is contingent, that things can always change—or be changed. By the same token, so can historical narratives.

One powerful effect of alternate history is understanding the present historical reality, whatever it may be, as the product of specific historical forces, factors, and decisions that might well have turned out any number of different ways. While professional historians will (rightly) protest that at any given time, some events are far more likely to happen than others, the point remains that alternate history destabilizes the prevailing understanding of the present as natural and inevitable by pointing out that it is anything but. This destabilization in turn is not just enjoyable but also productive, even liberatory: in its imagining different possible pasts, alternate history makes it possible to imagine different possible futures—which of course must be made real in the present, thereby changing it, too. Rather than an archive of historical memory, therefore, alternate history is a standing reserve of different possible pasts, which may at any time be used to alter the future.

CONCLUSION

It is a truism that Japanese narratives tend to favor the loser rather than the victor, as the loser's story inevitably has more pathos and interest than the successes of the victor, particularly when the loser is worthy, or at least ennobled by failure.[32] This theme has cropped up in Japanese literature at least since the medieval epic the *Tale of the Heike,* the eponymous clan of the title being perhaps the ultimate tragic losers of Japanese history. Given the romantic allure of losers, then, it does not seem accidental that later volumes of *Ōoku* have set the shogunate up for a very hard fall indeed: after the long reign of the male shogun Ienari, during much of which his murderous mother dominated the shogunate and neglected the country and research into immunizing children from the red-faced pox, a woman has now become shogun again, just in time for Japan to enter the uncertainty of the so-called *bakumatsu* era (1853–68).

Although the shogunate in the historical record fell with a relative minimum of bloodshed, the uncertainties of the *bakumatsu* period that preceded the so-called Meiji Restoration were nonetheless intensely socially dislocating, and the modernization of all of Japanese society that followed in the Meiji era (1868–1912) was even more so. Particularly in the twentieth century, historians tended to portray Japan's modernization, if not the colonial empire building that was part of it, as a necessary price to pay for Japan to avoid being colonized by the West in turn, and consequently the shogunate in the nineteenth century was seen as a hindrance to needed political and social reforms. But the Tokugawa shogunate itself oversaw, over the course of its existence (1600–1868), an economic transformation of Japan that brought the country to the loftiest possible heights of preindustrial economic prosperity, and in *Ōoku* this commercial and economic transformation is accompanied by an equally profound and much swifter gender transformation. It seems possible that as the manga progresses the shogunate's growing critics will make the familiar sexist case that women are unsuited to rule, and that all of Japan's problems can be laid at the feet of the fact that the female officials of the shogunate are as incompetent and feeble as the shogunate itself. But just as the political ideology of the Meiji government should not be used as the standard by which historians evaluate the Edo period, so should in-manga criticism of the female-dominated government not be allowed to overshadow the critiques that the manga itself presents to its own society.

Moreover, failure is not in and of itself a critical or historical judgment. Jack Halberstam's argument that failure can be a generative mode is surely applicable to *Ōoku*; in *The Queer Art of Failure,* Halberstam concludes that celebrations of failure in popular culture "remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner."[33] Just as the "failed" Tokugawa shogunate, revived in popular culture, functions as a critique of contemporary Japanese politics, so the celebration of the female shogunate—an institution that is doomed to fail—in and via *Ōoku* provides a model of a very alternative government and society that may yet inspire future change.

Ōoku itself presents trenchant critiques both of the standard portrayal of Japanese history and also of the Japanese present. Some of these critiques are explicitly feminist, such as the ease with which women assume power in society and the panoply of female officials in the manga, which can easily be read as a rebuke to the overwhelming male domination of Japanese society in general and of politics and business in particular. Others are less explicitly

feminist and more concerned with socioeconomic issues: Yoshimune's concerns with the shogunal palace's extravagance at the beginning of the manga made a notable contrast to the Japanese government's fiscal policy in 2005. Similarly, the consistent concern that good shogunal officials show for the lives and livelihoods of even the poorest commoners throughout the period's ups and downs is notably different from the indifference Japan's leaders have at times shown to the impact of today's enduring recession on Japan's most vulnerable populations. To be sure, Yoshinaga's making these critiques quite literally *visible* through the medium of manga is not the same as changing Japanese society, but it is an essential first step to any attempts to do so because to change society these critiques must be articulated, and before they can be articulated they must be understood as problems in the first place. Popular narratives like *Ōoku* are thus an essential imaginative space in which possible social changes, as well as their possible antecedents and ramifications, can be encountered and mapped before they are realized: the first time is entertaining; the second time is revolutionary.

The manga also points to the ways in which alternate history can be read not as "mere" escapism or "just" a record of historical memory but rather as a piece of popular culture asking worthy questions seriously, and seeking to question or to overturn common assumptions by doing so. If the past is another country, then the past in alternate history is another world entirely: not only do they do things differently there, but it takes some effort to get there in the first place. But although the effort required to reach the past of alternate histories is real, it is certainly not less than that required to bring those pasts and the possible futures they may inspire into alignment. Via the critiques they raise and by the very terms of their existence, alternate histories such as *Ōoku* demonstrate not that we live in the best or the worst of all possible worlds, but that another world is always possible.

Notes

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1. I use the term "alternate history" in this paper in conformity with science fiction parlance, as well as a mark of difference from the "counterfactual history" of professional

historians, which is commonly understood as a branch of economic history involving the computation of "what if not?" scenarios.

2. Yoshinaga Fumi, *Ōoku*, 12 vols. (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2005–present); translated as *Ōoku: The Inner Chambers* (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009–present). Unusually for a mangaka, Yoshinaga openly identifies as a feminist. For more on the details of her career and on the Japanese pop culture antecedents of *Ōoku,* see Hikari Hori, "Views from Elsewhere: Female Shoguns in Yoshinaga Fumi's *Ōoku* and Their Precursors in Japanese Popular Culture," *Japanese Studies* 32, no. 1 (2012): 77–95.

3. Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?' Reflections on the Function of Alternate History," *History and Theory* 41, no. 4 (2002): 93.

4. Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001).

5. Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?'" 93; Hellekson, *The Alternate History,* 4.

6. Alexis Lothian, "Deviant Futures: Queer Temporality and the Cultural Politics of Science Fiction" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2012), 9.

7. This interpretation of the status of women in Tokugawa society, and the general view of the Edo period as a dystopia, is now more or less outdated in historiography of the period. For a good overview of women's status and potential social roles in the period, see Laura Nenzi's *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), or *The Female as Subject: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan,* ed. P. F. Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G. G. Rowley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010).

8. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

9. Ibid., 129.

10. Lothian, "Deviant Futures," 9.

11. Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 372–82.

12. Hikari Hori reads *Ōoku* as a shojo manga; while the genre divisions are to some extent arbitrary marketing categories and Yoshinaga has been strongly influenced by the shojo classics of the 1970s and 80s, Hakusensha is a *josei* publisher and *Ōoku* is published and marketed as a *josei* title.

13. Hellekson, *The Alternate History,* 5.

14. Jack Halberstam (published as Judith Halberstam), *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

15. Hellekson, *The Alternate History,* 5.

16. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern,* 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 25–26.

17. Hellekson, *The Alternate History,* 29.

18. Yoshinaga's semi-autobiographical *Not Love but Delicious Foods Make Me So Happy!,* trans. William Flanagan (New York: Yen Press, 2010) offers many glimpses into the life of a *mangaka,* as well as restaurant reviews.

19. Katie King, *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 12.

20. Yoshinaga, *Ōoku* 4 (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2008), 1–11.

21. King, *Networked Reenactments,* 12.

22. Yoshinaga, *Ōoku* 5 (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2009), 121–37.

23. Yoshinaga, *Not Love but Delicious Foods Make Me So Happy!,* 44.

24. Hori sees the manga's exclusive focus on heterosexual relationships as part of a dystopian regime of "compulsive heterosexuality" connected to the bare need for society and the shogunate to reproduce itself, but this seems a stretch unless the historical Edo period—and the present—is also understood as a dystopia. Moreover, she participates in the same straight-washing as Yoshinaga when she reads the word *koi,* commonly translated as "(romantic) love," as "loyalty" in the Tsunayoshi episodes, ostensibly in homage to Ikeda Riyoko's *The Rose of Versailles.* Hori, "Views from Elsewhere," 81, 87.

25. Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male–Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Understanding such relationships as "queer" is a historical anachronism; to do so is to put oneself in a past-present with a society that conceptualized sex and sexuality differently than our own.

26. Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing,* 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 48.

27. Ibid., 40.

28. Ibid., 47.

29. Ibid., 50–53.

30. Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?,'" 94.

31. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking,* 130.

32. For more on this theme in Japanese history and literature, see Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975).

33. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 120.