Introduction: *Media Scholarship in the Contact Zone*

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Introduction

Media Scholarship in the Contact Zone

Bringing two fields into conversation with one another is no easy task. This issue of *Mechademia: Second Arc,* "Transnational Fandom," seeks to bridge the young, interdisciplinary field of fan studies with the established, institutionalized field of Asian studies. In the current era, in which the humanities are under siege across the globe even as the interconnectivity of the internet is threatened by political and regulatory constraints in the so-called advanced industrial countries, these conversations are more urgent than ever: if we do not hang together, assuredly we shall all hang separately. Moreover, using the strengths and weaknesses of one field to highlight the potentials and biases in the other should enable scholars working in the zones where they intersect, such as the authors in this volume, to wield both as necessary in forging a path forward in both disciplines. Where we go from here will be decided by all of us.

"Transnational fandom" is on one level redundant and on another a term that needs some explication. For those who, like me, have been embedded in online fan cultures from the 1990s onward, the idea that fandom has always been transnational is self-evident, a conclusion that research into fandom history has consistently supported. My own fan history over the past two decades spans sites such as LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, Twitter, and Tumblr, as well as volunteering with the fan advocacy nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works. Across all of these platforms, I made connections with fellow fans who spanned languages and continents from South America to Europe to Asia and Australia. These relationships were and are primarily digitally mediated, and many of them were anchored in the practices of "convergence culture," as Henry Jenkins dubbed it in his groundbreaking 2006 study of the same name.[1] What Jenkins called "transmedia" was already known to practitioners and media theorists working in Japan as the anime media mix, the powerhouse of the Japanese contents industry in which fan practices and cultures play a vital part. The young field of fan studies, which was in large part founded by scholars from the previous generation of fans—those who made the transition from offline to online fandom as adults—has in many ways taken the transnational nature of fandom as axiomatic, even if individual studies have broken fans into discrete (and more easily researchable)

tranches based on specific characteristics ranging from fandom objects to gender to nationality or language.

As scholars have turned their focus on the pre-internet era, however, national boundaries have appeared to reassert themselves as particularly salient in determining fandom and its limits, especially in terms of language and political geography. For nearly two decades, the guiding star for discussions of fandom in Japanese studies has been sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi's *Recentering Globalization* (2002), in which he argued that Japanese contents industry companies were seeking to promote their media exports abroad by constructing their products (Iwabuchi's prime examples were "animations" and video games) as "culturally odorless" (*mukokuseki*).[2] Although Iwabuchi's findings, based on his fieldwork interviews with contents industry professionals, were primarily couched in terms of Japanese exports to the rest of Asia, they have been taken to apply globally in Japan studies ever since.

The only problem with applying Iwabuchi's argument in such a broad fashion is that, for those of us who remember fandom in the 1990s in Anglophone countries, it does not pass the smell test. Specifically, the idea that people who became anime fans in this decade, after anime fandom had made a definitive break from science fiction fandom in the Anglophone sphere, did not know that we were consuming Japanese media or that we were not interested in the aspects of Japanese culture displayed in the media we loved, is simply not accurate. In the United States and related Anglophone anime fandom, the 1990s were the era of "flipped manga" controversies and the "subs versus dubs" wars as a fandom legitimacy test, to say nothing of endless arguments about whether and how to translate honorifics and sound effects. On the video game side, the continuing discourse about "JRPGs" re-inscribed even fantastical "MMORPGs" like the *Final Fantasy* series within a paradigm of cultural provenance despite, as Iwabuchi recounts, their deliberate lack of cultural specificity. For all these media, moreover, the best, most coveted merchandise was always made in Japan (or in many cases, made in China and imported from Japan). We knew that we were consuming Japanese media, and we were fascinated by the image of Japan that those media presented. I was by no means unique in my generation when I studied Japanese in college based on my love for anime, a path that ultimately led to my sitting here writing this introduction.

The fan studies perspective, which attempts to take a bottom-up rather than top-down approach by focusing on audiences rather than professional creators, might have helped Iwabuchi understand that whatever industry

employees in Tokyo thought they were doing, fan reactions and interpretations around the world escaped their attempts to assert control, with a lot of assistance from the internet and the networks it enabled. Fan studies recognizes that audiences are not simply passive consumers or cultural "dupes" but rather that interpretation and engagement are active acts of meaning-making. In the Japanese contents industry in particular, and increasingly in other globally prominent contents industries as well, fan and audience engagement and production—the very transnational fandoms that are the subject of this issue—influence and drive official media production both directly and indirectly.

At the same time, however, Iwabuchi's arguments about the inculcation of "cultural odorlessness" in media for export hold up well when applied to previous generations of Japanese media fandom abroad. Accordingly, this volume begins with my own essay, where I explore the origins of anime fandom in the United States from 1975–95 through the archives of anime, science fiction, and furry fandom figure Fred Patten, who played a key role in popularizing anime in the fandom scene in this time period. Patten's generation of fans was introduced to anime through localized adaptations of anime such as *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* and, for them, the knowledge that anime was in fact Japanese in origin usually came as something of an epiphany, or a shock. The strategies that anime fans in this time period developed to deal with anime's Japaneseness, once discovered, utilized analog fan networks that arose before the internet and recalled earlier instances of media transmission across national and language boundaries, such as film in Japan during the empire. The empire's aftermath also laid down some of the transmission circuits that early anime fans availed themselves of in order to obtain fresh anime direct from the source.

One criticism of fan studies that has been leveled at online media fandom as well is its neglect of race, racism, and nonwhite fans, all of which have been consistently ignored despite their presence in fandom from the beginning. This issue of *Second Arc* cannot replace Rukmini Pande's timely *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race,* but it does go beyond the traditional focus on fans in either Anglophone countries (which usually means the United States) or Japan.[3] Moving across the Atlantic, Salomón Doncel-Moriano Urbano's essay examines the pivotal decade of the 1990s in an entirely different fan culture, namely Spain. While many of the phenomena that Doncel-Moriano discusses—fanzines, fan groups, and conventions—will be familiar in broad outlines to people who participate in fandom around the world, the local par-

ticularities of the Spanish Japanese media fan scene emerge as salient and distinct, starting with the embrace of the word "otaku," a term that has a tortuous history in Japan. Doncel-Moriano ultimately concludes that Spanish anime fans were anything but passive consumers: reading through the voluminous archive of fan literature from the 1990s, he finds that fans in that era were active participants in both constructing the Spanish anime and manga industry and instructing society at large about the value of anime and manga as more than "just" children's entertainment. Moreover, the close relationship between fandom and the professional anime and manga industry helped expand the scope for the reception of Japanese media in Spain overall.

Fansubbing and its cousin scanlation were fundamental to fandom before the rise of streaming video services such as Crunchyroll, and initiatives such as Viz Media's digital *Shonen Jump* platform, cut most of the groups practicing them in the English-language fan sphere off at the knees. But these unauthorized practices remain central to fans worldwide who cannot access authorized alternatives, whether for reasons of intellectual property and licensing rights regimes or because they are not proficient in the language(s) in which they are offered. Krystal Urbano's essay explores the phenomenon of fansubbing in Brazil, where anime fans active in the dominant language of Portuguese have not been well-served by linear TV or streaming services. The politics of fansub groups were notorious, if somewhat opaque, before their general demise in Anglophone fandom, and some of those same pluralistic and conflict-driven dynamics are evident in Urbano's analysis, particularly when she explores the ethical reevaluation spurred among fansubbers by the appearance of speed fansub groups. At the same time, Urbano argues that fansubbing has not only become the core distribution method for anime fandom in Brazil but also has created circuits of media distribution that are driving the introduction and spread of East Asian media beyond anime through this space, such as K-dramas. In her fidelity to the common fansubbing experience of conflict and dissent, Urbano calls for a new recognition in fan studies of disagreement and negative emotions generally as drivers of fandom activity itself, and an endemic part of fan interaction rather than a deviation from some idealized community harmony.

Many academics in Japan studies are still prone to talking about "Cool Japan," the belated bureaucratic counterpart to the mukokuseki strategy, as a current rather than past promotional initiative. In reality, both have faded in the past decade, especially after the return of the Abe government saw a new bureaucratic embrace of nationalism in the wake of the 3/11 disasters.

But the mukokuseki argument that Iwabuchi advances can still be a useful analytical tool, as Tomás Grau demonstrates in his essay comparing the global reception of notable video games from *Katamari Damacy* to the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise. The flip side of the fan recognition of Japanese origin is Orientalism, whether techno- or otherwise, and the binary paradigm of Japan/the West still haunts the discourse of Japanese exceptionalism in the video game industry, which Grau highlights, by which Japan is always either "Cool" or "Weird." If fan studies is to adequately recognize media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace, as Pande argues it is, it must do so by ingesting the theories about Orientalism, techno-orientalism, cultural flows, mediascapes, and domination among which Iwabuchi positioned himself. Video game studies, an even younger field than fan studies, has the opportunity to get ahead of the game by taking aboard these and other theories and discourses from the beginning. In doing so himself, Grau highlights the ways in which ludic categories seeking to sort gameplay aspects into various recognized paradigms interact with assumptions about what is "conventional" versus "unconventional," normalizing a certain kind of game as "typical" in the discourse about video games and potentially constructing vast swathes of games and players as "atypical" or "Other."

Had we so desired, we could have filled this entire issue with essays discussing various aspects of the global smash hit anime *Yuri!!! on Ice* (*YOI*) and its blockbuster fandom. Kristine Santos kicks off the *YOI*-related discussions with her article about fan activities in the Philippines, analyzing the ways in which fans in that country have used recent anime and other fandoms, including *YOI,* to reorient their position in fandom globally through the material production of fanworks. Specifically, Santos argues that Filipino fans are disrupting existing patterns of transcultural flows by producing fan merchandise that has proven popular worldwide, including with traditional Japanese dôjin (fanworks) vendors and through less established digital means of distribution including Tumblr and a new generation of small-producer storefront sites. Santos finds that Filipino fans' fanwork production is also pushing back against the homogenizing tendency of social media platforms and algorithm-driven engagement by highlighting and taking pride in their local and particular national origins, especially through the production of fan goods celebrating the Philippines itself as a site of fandom. Moreover, Santos notes that the rise of Boys' Love (BL) and other fan conventions in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia generally, despite the general lack of stable, licensed methods of media circulation, affords fans another way to

disrupt established transcultural flows and centers of transcultural fandom distribution. By making their own zines, stickers, keychains, and more, fans in this region are creating actually existing alternatives to spotty, expensive merchandise import regimes.

Boys' Love fandom has traveled far and wide beyond Japan, particularly throughout other parts of Asia, in the decades since its invention in the 1970s. Through online platforms, it is now possible for fans to participate in both BL and slash or m/m (as it is now being called among younger Angophone fans) fan cultures according to taste and language capability. It would be quite interesting to apply Iwabuchi's ideas about cultural odorlessness and transmission to the genre, which has often been criticized for inattention to the lived realities of actual gay men and gay relationships, particularly in earlier decades. Nice Huang looks at the production and distribution of BL *dôjinshi* (fanzines or fan comics) in Indonesia, where predominant, conservative social mores and harsh laws regarding pornography and queer sexuality might have led to the assumption that such dôjinshi would not find much of a readership. Interviewing four female Indonesian BL dôjinshi creators, Huang instead finds that all four have been able to successfully navigate through the legal gray areas surrounding homoerotic content and the ability to print and distribute it both in Indonesia and in Japan through dôjin vendors such as Toranoana. Online networks and illicit distribution of fanzines have enabled all of these creators both to distribute their own work beyond Indonesia and to remain connected to the larger BL sphere, despite Indonesia's blocking websites such as Tumblr on the grounds that they contain pornographic materials. (In light of Tumblr's December 2018 decision to ban all "adult content," Indonesia officially reversed its previous ban on the site.[4]) The tradeoff, however, is that all of these creators have become somewhat wary of their activities being exposed (at least one of them does not mention her nationality online at all). Based on Huang's interviews, it is evident that Indonesian BL creators have generally adopted a policy of self-censorship in the depiction of explicit sexual scenes (or rather the lack thereof) to mitigate potential consequences should their work be subjected to official scrutiny. Even as Indonesian BL fans and creators continue to successfully fly under the radar, Huang argues that this expanding sphere's subversive potential remains unchecked.

The issue ends, in a sense, where it began, with Lori Morimoto's analysis of *Yuri!!! on Ice* fandom as a contested "contact zone," where previously parallel fans and fan cultures brush up against each other in a welter of languages, norms, and assumptions drawn together by a shared love for an atypical sports

anime about elite men's figure skaters. Like most fandoms today, *YOI* fandom is a primarily mediated space that takes place across platforms, languages, and national boundaries, uniting people around the world through social media and in-person events ranging from anime conventions to dôjin events to cafés and pilgrimages. As with most anime fandoms, particularly those that are "simulcast" on Crunchyroll to many countries outside Japan, it was transnational from the beginning, but *YOI*'s unusual, if not unique, appeal for many fans outside the core anime demographics meant that many fans less familiar with the norms of anime and anime fan cultures were drawn into the discussions surrounding the anime and the love story it portrays in multiple languages. Morimoto analyzes these discussions across Twitter, Tumblr, and other platforms, arguing that these platforms and the participation of the show's creators and fans on them proved a remarkable study of "the transcultural implications of real-time global anime distribution and reception," showcasing the multiple and varied subjectivities that different groups of fans with different fandom literacies and different language competencies brought to the show's reception as it aired, actively shaping the discourse about the show as it went on in conversation with the show's creative staff. Many of these fans, Morimoto argues, do not fit easily into the binary, "either/or" categorizations of fans along whatever axes fandom scholars have promoted; instead, the show's reception among different fans showcases the ways in which seemingly monolithic groups are in fact composed of individuals with different, "both/and" plural identities. For Morimoto, transcultural fandom is much more effectively conceptualized as a contact zone rather than as a community. She concludes with a pointed call to Japan studies and its practitioners to do better at recognizing that the matter of "Japan studies" has long since expanded beyond the cul-de-sac of the nation-state, and that to remain relevant and survive in this era, Japan studies must engage with new fields and their knowledge from a genuine standpoint of mutual respect and willingness to learn.

By way of closing, I would like to pay tribute once again to Fred Patten, who passed away at the age of seventy-seven in November 2018, as this issue was in the final stages of preparation. Although Patten will be missed, his legacy lives on, as in 2008 he donated the entire archive of his fandom history to the Eaton Collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy at the University of California, Riverside. The Patten materials are open to researchers, and they represent a vast and invaluable trove recording fandom history in the United States from the bottom up rather than the top down. As I wrote these words

in December 2018, Tumblr was on the eve of banning so-called adult content, and had already blocked archival access for researchers and archivists seeking to preserve snapshots of this material, erasing vast swathes of queer and fan history online in the craven pursuit of vanishing, if not fictitious, ad dollars. (Tumblr lost an estimated 30 percent of its traffic in the wake of the porn ban, and in August 2019 Verizon reportedly sold the site for less than $3 million USD, after Yahoo paid $1.1 billion to acquire it in 2013.[5] One user calculated that as of that month each unique user had personally cost the company $2.89.[6]) In this age of the internet, archiving fan materials in both physical and digital form is increasingly important to the preservation and promulgation of fandom history. The fact that archiving is increasingly contested by platform companies makes it even clearer that Patten's example is one fans should consider following in order to keep fandom history alive, just as researchers have a duty to engage with these materials and the fans who created them in order to accurately portray fandom's history and present across boundaries of nation, language, and gender. This issue is one attempt to do exactly that.

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Guest Editor

Notes

1. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
2. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
3. Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).
4. Jon Russell, "Indonesia Unblocks Tumblr Following Its Ban on Adult Content," *TechCrunch,* December 27, 2018, https://techcrunch.com/2018/12/27/indonesia-unblocks-tumblr/.
5. Shannon Liao, "After the Porn ban, Tumblr Users Have Ditched the Platform as Promised," *The Verge,* March 14, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/14/18266013/tumblr-porn-ban-lost-users-down-traffic; Julia Alexander, "Verizon Is Selling Tumblr to WordPress' Owner," *The Verge,* August 12, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/8/12/20802639/tumblr-verizon-sold-wordpress-blogging-yahoo-adult-content.
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