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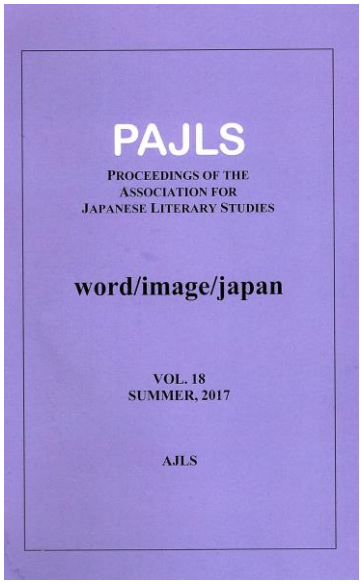

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MANGA VISUALS IN LATIN AMERICA: GENDER DIVERSITY BEYOND THE PANEL

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In 2016, consumers of Japanese comics, or *manga* do not necessarily speak Japanese, live in Japan, or have a particular interest in Japanese literature. Nevertheless, these consumers continue to find ways to access their favorite *manga* stories from anywhere in the world. Outside of Japan, the widespread circulation of *anime* between the 1980s and the early 2000s created a global network of consumers of *manga* who, although not always familiar with Japanese culture in general, are familiar with aspects specific to *manga* culture. Their knowledge of *manga* makes them able to discriminate between major *manga* genres such as s*honen* and *shojo*, and their subgenres (be they *seinen*, *josei*, and *shonen ai*). However, while the global interest in *manga* is significant, national markets across the globe have not always been keen on satisfying consumers' demands. In the case of Latin America, consumerism of unofficial translations of *manga* is fairly common in adult and teen age segments, yet the availability of physical copies of almost any *manga* is extremely limited. The reasons for Latin American market's unresponsiveness to the demand for *manga* are not always clear. In most countries, a mix of political and religious conservatism, the U.S-imported view of comics as juvenile literature, and the prejudice against Japanese popular culture as primarily pornographic, are the most prominent reasons that conflate to obstruct the official circulation of printed *manga*.

The regional production of Latin American comics (also known as *historietas*) has taken the blow of conservatism almost equally if not more harshly than *manga*. The once thriving *historietas* of Mexico, Argentina, and Chile have been under-produced, underfunded and over-taxed for decades, to the point of near disappearance. As readers' demand continues, the scarcity of locally made *historietas* has been compensated by unofficial web translations of *manga* for the last 15 years. Consequently, the latest generation of Latin American artists has found inspiration in

the ornamented, decompressed, and surreal layouts of the *manga* page, which shows in multiple works that may or may not identify as "Latin American *manga*". Some artists, in fact, continue to identify more with French and U.S. American schools of comics, while only partially acknowledging the influence that *manga* has on their work. Nevertheless, a growing number of Latin American comics artists have moved towards a full appropriation of *manga* aesthetics and have begun to produce stories that emulate *manga* conventions to perfection, while carefully adapting them to the representational needs of their immediate local contexts.

Among these locally made works, *shonen ai*, or "homosexual romantic or pornographic *manga* consumed by heterosexual adult women", has gained special notoriety across and along the Latin American continent. The phenomenon of Latin American *shonen ai* is not, however, a mere replication of the tropes of Japanese *shonen ai*. The use of *manga* aesthetics has helped to circulate images and stories that challenge conservative national representations of homosexuality. In Latin American *shonen ai*, the use of *manga* visuals can be seen as a contestation of heteronormative narrative that is especially facilitated by *manga*'s condition as "foreign". In its foreignness, *shonen ai manga* imports methods of representation that allow artists to deal with issues rendered invisible by local heteronormative visuality [1].

[1] In Chilean media, for example, it is an editorial pattern to give primacy to the continuity of heterosexist/patriarchal narratives over all issues of alterity, displacing and/or erasing the latter. When in 2003 a telenovela included a gay character for the first time (*Machos*), it was done in such a way that he was never shown interacting with other gay men or communicating with his partner, who supposedly lived abroad. *Gay Gigante*, the first ever "gay comic" published nationally (2015) consists of a compilation of anecdotes about gay life in the city of Santiago. However, the comic lacks the presence of characters interacting within a homosexual relationship. News coverage over the murder of Hans Pozo (2006) went as far as to create an alternative narrative that hetero-washed the image of his murderer. The victim was known to be an area prostitute since a young age, and it became known that his killer had been his client. Nevertheless, media insisted on portraying the killer as a parent and husband, erasing his homosexuality and participation in child abuse while reinforcing a hetero-paternal narrative (media insisted on the rumor that Pozo had threatened to reveal that his killer was in fact his *father*). In *Raptados* (2012), sexual abuse, an issue central to the history of kidnapped Patagonia indigenous peoples, is treated via a panel that shows a naked woman tied down to a table and about to be raped. The

Featuring greater gender fluidity, emotional depth and nonlinear narrative, the Japanese queer imaginary interrupts the dominance of *machismo* culture, and opens a local space for a more inclusive queer visuality. These foreign aspects of *shonen ai* are especially attractive to a readership that is educated in more complex forms of visuality than the ones offered by traditional *historietas*. Latin American *shonen ai* thus ventures beyond *historieta* conventions, and opens a channel for a local visuality that departs from the contingent images and understandings of Latin American gender and sexuality.

Understanding that classification of *manga* genres can be complex, I would like to clarify that in the context of this study, my use of *shonen ai* is as an encompassing term to include a variety of subgenres that put homosexual male relationships in the center. Therefore, when I refer to *shonen ai*, I am referring to all of those genres from the most naïve to the most pornographic and mature, i.e., from *boys love,* to *yaoi*, to *bara*. The Latin American scene of *shonen ai manga* has only very recently begun to expand towards the more mature end of the spectrum, so a general term to brand them all should still suffice.

In fact, and contrary to the common belief that *shonen ai* is mostly pornographic, only very few of Latin American *shonen ai* stories show explicit sex or deal with more mature themes. The weight of the stories is put on the side of affective exploration and social commentary regarding homosexuality in Latin America. The degree to which the artists of these comics are willing to localize *shonen ai*, however, varies tremendously. Compare, for example, the works of Chilean and Mexican artists such as Furan and Heldrad (Florentina Zamudio). These artists have no difficulty in imitating the look of a *manga* page, in that they work in monochrome, they employ bleeding panels for moments of intimacy that suspend the progression of time, and they even take

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narrative then quickly shifts to a fictional plotline about an indigenous man who escapes his captors and becomes romantically involved with a female prostitute. Whether entirely erasing issues of alterity (homosexuality, child abuse, women's abuse, or indigenous abuse), or displacing them from the focal point, Opus Dei controlled media is insistent in giving space only to narratives that work along editorial directions that are strictly patriarchal and heteronormative.

advantage of *manga*'s inventory of expressionistic backgrounds to convey what Paul Gravett calls the "psychic auras" of characters (79). In these two works and in other *shonen ai* also being created in the region, gradients, sparkles, textures, glows, cross-hatched patterns, and other tropes of *jojou-ga* (叙情画) or "lyric visual art", fills the pages in emotionally charged moments, complementing the emotional charge of the prose (Mazur and Danner 69).

The adoption of *manga* aesthetics can go to such extent as to utilize *katakana* in the writing of onomatopoeia and other simple utterances such as moans and cries. Furan's *Iwanu ga Hana* has multiple occasions when Japanese and Spanish onomatopoeia coexist on the page, such as in the case of "*doki*" for a heartbeat sound (which the author herself translates on the margin of the page), and "*zaaas*" for the sound of a body landing on a bush. This particular author goes as far as to use Japanese lettering for signs within the fictional world as well. These visual-verbal references to Japan are more than just an imitation of the original product, however. The stories, although highly referential to Japan, are not necessarily located in Japan. Puns, slang, and references to Mexican and Chilean culture also happen in most of these comics. The way in which these works imitate Japanese visuality, while also referencing Latin American conversational language and culture, is an example of how Latin American *shonen ai* foregrounds its materiality, its foreignness, while grounding itself in a local context. This way of handling *manga* aesthetics in *shonen ai* narratives creates a reading of these products whereby fans can tackle hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality in new ways.

In a comparative work about the positioning of *yaoi* on the Asian and global scale, Alan Williams explains the possibilities of these new understanding of homosexuality through *yaoi* as "modern" and "postmodern" at the same time, especially in the context of Taiwanese and Chinese circulation of *yaoi* narratives. To Williams, *yaoi* is "modern" in the sense that it employs a visual-verbal method of representation to stylize homosexuality in particular, separated from the stylization dictated by heteropatriarchy. *Shonen ai* is also "postmodern" in the sense that it crosses identitarian borders in being consumed by gay and heterosexual audiences alike, and presents gender-bending

characters who often claim that they are "not gay, just in love with a man" (13). The characters' aversion to self-identifying as male homosexuals, according to Williams, matches readers' view of gender labels as "dated compared to the circulation of desire in *yaoi* fandoms" (13). In another transnational examination of *yaoi* and *fujoshi* culture, Alexandra Chocontá comments on the presence of these comics in Bogotá, Colombia. Chocontá argues that *yaoi* is a movement that adapts hetero-normative patterns to the preferences and interests of Latin American women who can project themselves onto sexually ambiguous characters, and imagine themselves with stronger personalities and enjoying intense sexual encounters (215). However, the view of *shonen ai* as a genre that simply "adapts" hetero-normativity to captivate female audiences would not explain the way in which Latin American-made *shonen ai* most commonly functions.

In reality, Latin American *shonen ai* does follow the trend of using stylized, beautiful, sexually ambiguous young males (also known as *bishonen*), except they are included among a variety of types that compose the diverse Latin American social and racial landscape. Borrowing Michelle Raheja's term, visually sovereign Latin American *shonen ai* could be understood as an effort to "revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure (…) conventions, at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions" (Raheja ctd. in Howowhitu and Devadas xxxix). The use of the *bishonen* type allows these artists to stretch local representations of male beauty towards the feminized end of the spectrum, while at the same time stretching conventions characteristic of Japanese visuality. We can see the coexistence of the Japanese *bishonen* and the Latin American male on the pages of the Mexican *Parellet*. On these pages, and via the coexistence of local and foreign races and body types, the visual proposal of Latin American *shonen ai* disrupts the continuity of ideas of masculinity grounded in *machismo*[2] by introducing feminized male characters, but does so without completely erasing the Latin American, brown male body from the page. Hence, racial conventions of Japanese *shonen ai* (where

[2] Whereby only hyper masculinity and virility are acceptable forms of experiencing male sexuality.

bishonen equals beauty leaning towards indeterminate whiteness) are stretched to include racially mixed Latino characters among the possibilities of feminized male beauty.

As to the characters' sexual identities, it is true that most Latin American made *shonen ai* avoids explicit verbal labelling, which is to say that what characters are *shown doing* is not always accompanied with a verbal self-identification as gay, or what the narrator will tell. However, this omission is not quite the postmodern attempt to skip identitarian borders that Williams describes. For example, in a one-shot story called *Déjame que te Llame*, the author uses visual information to provide a cultural context that identifies these characters as gay in a Catholic society that is commonly unwelcoming of LGBT members. The story is about a male couple of disparate socioeconomic backgrounds who must navigate the waters of introducing a gay partner to their Catholic families for the first time. The tone of the story somewhat naturalizes their relationship in the sense that they are a public couple of college aged adults who go about their lives quite normally. The paneling and timing of the story add a lighthearted comedy aspect to it too, making the reading experience appealing in an alternation between slowed down and accelerated comedic moments. The inventory of "psychic auras", motion lines, and gradient backgrounds contributes to the emotional charge of scenes, especially as their romance develops. Via the combination of all of these visual elements of *shonen ai*, *Déjame que te Llame* quickly builds a romantic plot without having to literally comment on it. Through visual information it is, too, that the story makes a social commentary on LGBT discrimination in Chile's conservative Catholic society.

Verbal omission here does not equal censorship, but opens opportunities for the comic to employ visuality to comment on the status of homosexuality in the public sphere. Here I borrow Hokowhitu' and Devadas' understanding of public sphere as mediated public space where a civil society finds an "opportunity to reconfigure the national imaginary" (xlii). Sebastián introduces Francisco to his parents over at *once* meal time at his lower-income home. The table on the upper right panel, set with *marraqueta* bread, avocado, and tea, is an immediately relatable cue for a Chilean audience, and is especially relevant to the

context of the story. First, Chileans eat *once* between lunch and dinner. Second, inviting someone to eat *once* at one's house is a common social practice that denotes familiarity and humility. Later on, Sebastián wonders why Francisco has been so reluctant to introducing him to *his* family. Realizing that Francisco's upper-class origin might have incidence in how openly he lives his sexuality, Sebastián imagines Francisco's family as shown on page 10, chapter 2. The image portrays a far-right ultraconservative Catholic family of Opus Dei designation, who in contemporary Chile represent an elite of political and economic power, and who are known to be "pro-life" and to oppose universal rights for LGBT people. On the wall behind them a portrait of Dictator Augusto Pinochet is visible, while an unhappy indoors-maid frowns at them. Through these two pages, the author comments on Chilean society's view of upper-class families as preponderantly conservative, and lower class families as more liberal. These pages work with references to a Chilean public sphere and invite the reader to weight in everything that this context signifies. In doing that, the narrative creates possibilities to reconstruct the national imaginary by imagining an alternative public sphere where social practices are welcoming and inclusive towards LGBT love.

The presentation of the story imagines an alternative scenario where homosexuality is fluid and naturalized. I use the term "scenario" here as a portion of the narrative that is construed via performatic aspects such as corporeal behaviors, gestures, attitudes and tones not reducible to language (Taylor 28). I.e., *bishonen* and *jojou-ga* aesthetics narrate by themselves in building a LGBT-friendly space for the story. At the same time, some visual cues invite audiences to adopt a subversive stance towards the monolithic and newly denaturalized understandings of sexuality that exist outside the text. The tension created by these visual scenarios turns *Déjame que te Llame* and other Latin-American *shonen ai* into expansive platforms for countervisuality; empowering critical subjects to 1) "resituate the terms on which reality is to be understood", 2) dispute "which visible elements [have the potential to] belong to what is *common*", and to 3) "designate this *common* and argue for it" (Mirzoeff 28, my emphasis).

Finally, working around and past stereotypical characters who live in secrecy and denial, this and other stories of the region break with the heteronormative paradigm that traditionally underlies some tropes of *shonen ai* from Japan. *Yaoi* especially has a tendency to fix roles between male characters as "active" or "passive" for the masculine *seme* and the feminized *uke*, respectively. Often, *uke* characters are identifiable as the most feminized, delicate, and racially ambiguous of the pair. They will commonly have unrealistic "natural" hair colors and hairstyles, they will be insecure or effeminate, and they will be sexually inexperienced in comparison to the "dominant" *seme*. In an attempt to discontinue such tropes of the genre, *Noisome* by Tatouji features characters whose roles within the relationship are shifting and fluid throughout. *Seme* and *uke* stereotypes are ontologically questioned too, in showing that Noi, the pink-haired male initially portrayed as a stereotypical *uke*, in fact wears a wig, has thick-dark hair, is openly gay, has a social circle before meeting his partner, and is the one to take initiative in their relationship[3]. Thus, his sexual identity and orientation are not presented as deviant and/or possible only within the genre scenario of *shonen ai*. On the contrary, Noi's sexuality is visually encoded in possible and fluid forms that could function beyond the fictional scenario (i.e., he is not "*uke*", but a gay man on his own terms). The adoption of some genre conventions of *shonen ai* facilitate the introduction of LGBT issues to Latin American popular culture, while at the same time localization furthers *shonen ai* conventions to address issues of real contingency. This way, the imagined and the immediate are collapsed into a scenario that reassesses both Latin American and Japanese sexual and identitarian norms.

[3] Hair coloring is again made into a plot point in *Parellet*, when one of the protagonists is taken away from his partner. The narrative suggests that he has been sent to some kind of conversion therapy in that he is sent abroad –where his every move is controlled by a patriarchal figure– and has his hair dyed back to his natural brown color. As a genre trope, artificial hair coloring is indicative of a particular character's sexuality and role (most commonly *uke*), but in the case of these narratives, it is also telling of the performative quality of these roles. Characters are ultimately shown as naturally dark haired, *mestizo*, or Latino, as a reminder that their artificially dyed hair is part of a gendered performance that adds to their racial heritage, but does not eliminate it.

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