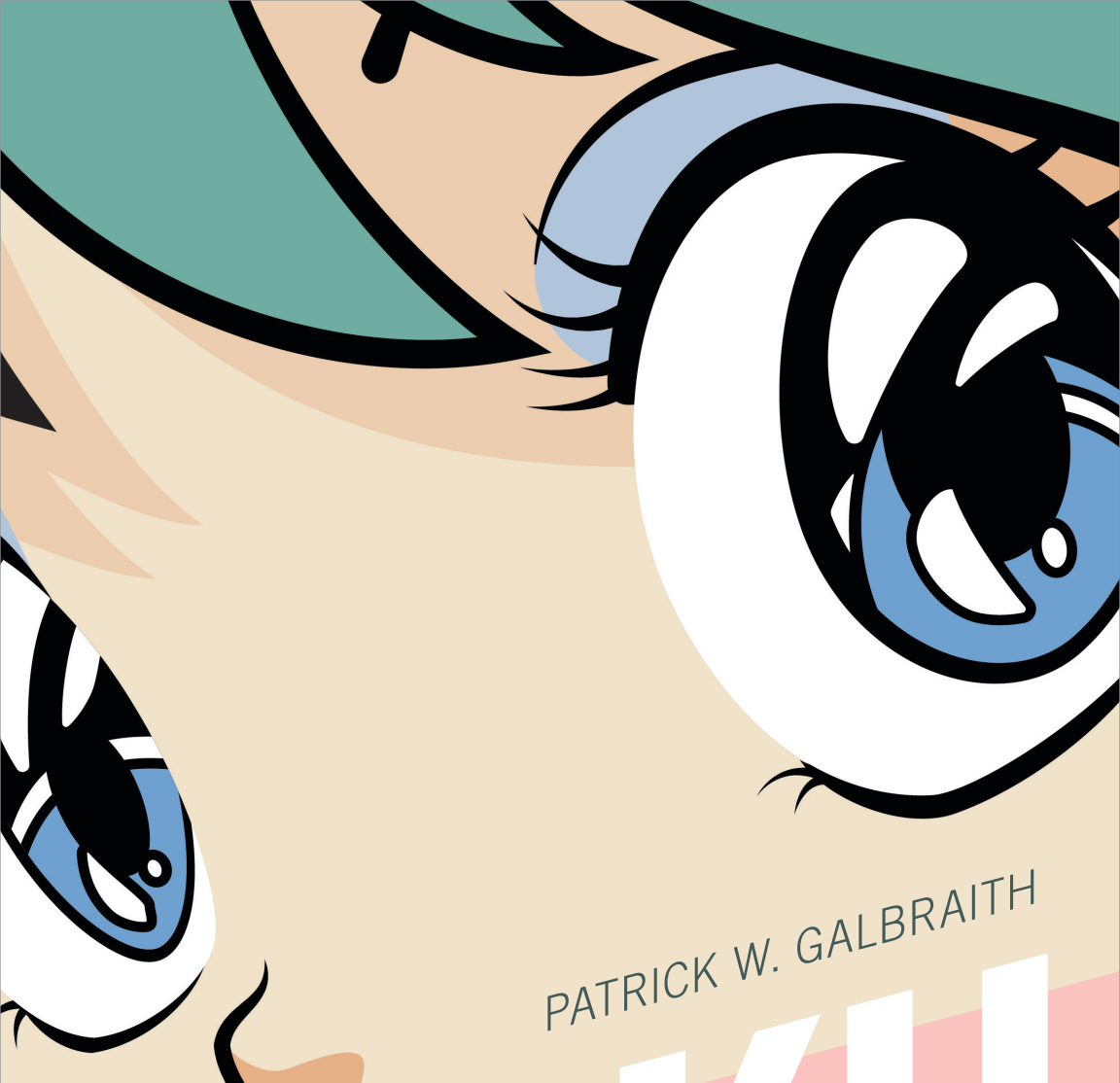

PATRICK W. GALBRAITH

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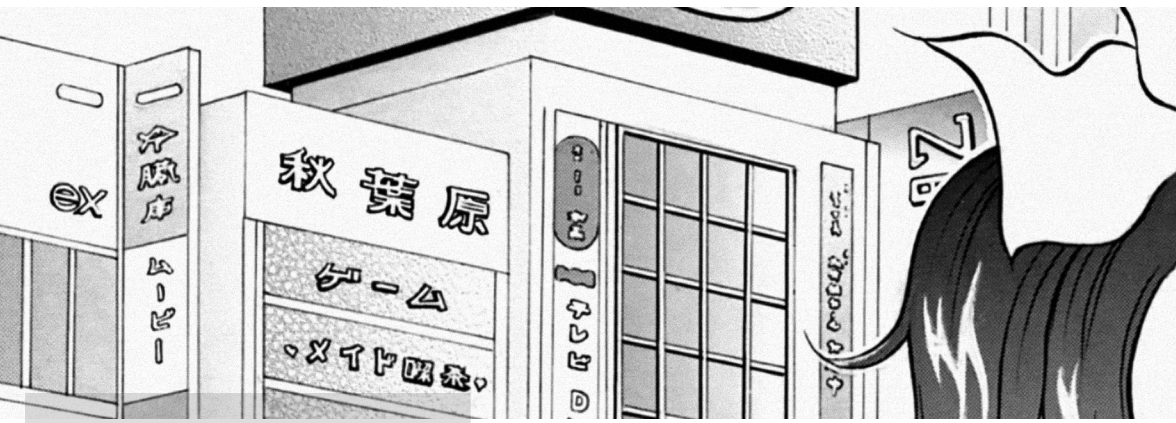

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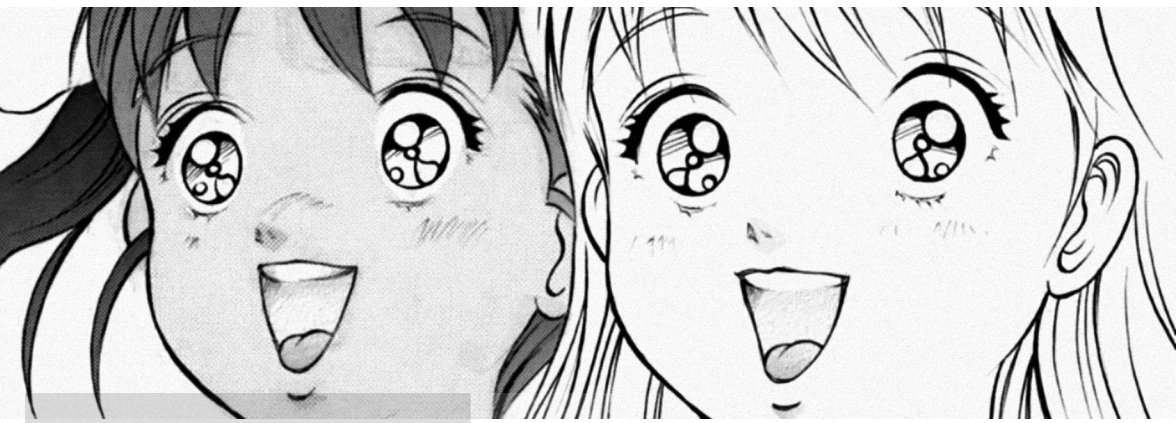

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IMAGINATION is the key to empathy, and if we're not able to imagine peoples' lives, then our empathy diminishes. Translation is a bridge that serves to enlarge imagination, to connect to the world. We're impoverished without it. **PHILIP BOEHM, 2017**

CONTENTS

DEDICATION / ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my big brothers, Russ and Joe, who taught me that, no matter our circumstances, we can always seek ways to alter our consciousness and see and be in the world differently. They were rough times, but for opening my eyes to anime and Japan, I owe you my life. And my mother, Denise, for the unending support and imparting a love of reading and the written word. To my friend Chris, who approached an awkward, angry young man, fresh off the boat and itching for a fight, and just kept on smiling. For that, and teaching me to smile again, I owe you more than you know. To my mentors inside and outside the academy, David H. Slater, Anne Allison, and Yoshimi Shun'ya, who took me under their wing and encouraged me to think in new ways—as consciousness altering as anything that happened up north, but decidedly less dark and more disciplined. To Keiko, the only person I watch anime with regularly. You saw me at my worst and stayed. I am better for having met you, and knowing that we will watch anime again keeps me going. While this project occupied me for many, many years, and often pulled us apart, know that I love you. And to those I came to know in Akihabara, for sharing your lives and stories, for showing me other worlds. Thank you. All of you, each and every one, I love.

INTRODUCTION

"OTAKU" AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IMAGINATION IN JAPAN

The sun is rising to illuminate the hazy sky over suburbia in Japan. A Japanese man in his twenties begins to stir in bed, prompted by a voice. "It's morning! Wake up!" The words are spoken in Japanese, gently, melodically. The man rustles under the sheets, alone in a spacious but minimally decorated apartment. "Hey, wake up!" The voice is insistent. Without opening his eyes, the man sits up and turns to a device next to the bed. A designer alarm clock, perhaps, that produced the voice that woke him and he now means to shut off. As the man pries his eyelids apart, however, he sees the face of a girl, not a clock. The tiny face of a girl standing approximately twenty centimeters tall and seeming to bounce with energy. With a breathy giggle, she tilts her head to the side and says, "Good morning." The man leans toward the device, which looks to be a container for the girl, who is visible as a full-body hologram inside a central, clear cylinder. He taps a button on the base of the device—not to turn it off but instead to respond to the girl. A microphone icon appears on the clear surface, letting the man know that she can hear him. "Good morning," he says, sleepily. As he gazes out the window, the girl tells him that it might rain later and he should take an umbrella. After putting on a suit for work, the man slips a folding umbrella into his satchel and heads for the door. "Hurry, or you'll be late." She is right, but he nevertheless turns around, bends down to the

device, and says, "I'm going now." The girl smiles, waves, and replies, "See you later."

This is an advertisement for Gatebox, which its developer, Vinclu, describes as a "virtual home robot."[1] Vinclu appeals to those who might buy the device not by demonstrating its functions as an alarm clock, weather report, and scheduling tool but by foregrounding a relationship. Steps to activate and use the device are shown but fall away as the focus shifts to interactions between the man and girl. These are routine interactions not in the sense of mechanical repetition but rather the rhythm of living together. The routine exchange of set phrases—"I'm going now," or *ittekimasu*, said by someone going out and coming back, and the reply, "See you later," *itterasshai*—is part of a relationship. At a time when more and more people are living alone in Japan, a country facing declining dating, marriage, and birth rates to the extent that the entire population is shrinking (for an overview, see Allison 2013), these routines can mean a great deal. Vinclu's Gatebox advertisement seems to suggest that this is true even when interactions and relations are with a "virtual home robot," or rather the virtual girl inside of it.

As the advertisement continues, the man, now on a bus commuting into the city, receives a text message telling him to have fun at work. It is from her, the girl in the Gatebox at home. During lunch, the man sits by himself but receives another text: "Come home early." "It's only noon," he replies, and she responds, and he smiles. Stuck working late, again alone, the man looks at his phone and the previous exchange. Pausing momentarily, he punches in, "I'm heading home now." Her response is immediate—"Yaaay!"—and elicits a smile. As the man runs out into the rain, armed with folding umbrella, the Gatebox girl turns on the lights at home. They continue texting as he approaches. Coming through the door, he rushes over to the Gatebox—no, to her—and leans in close. "Welcome home," she says. The Japanese here, *okaerinasai*, is another set phrase, this one so charged with the affect of the relationship that one set of English subtitles translates it, "Missed you, darling!" They sit together and watch television, sipping beverages. Finally back in bed, this time lying awake, the man says, "You know, someone waiting at home . . . is great. I thought so on the way back." From the street outside, he had seen his brightened window. "Good night," he says. "Good night," she responds. As the advertisement concludes its narrative day, the dark room is bathed in a soft glow from the Gatebox, and the girl seems to be watching over the man.

FIGURE I.1
Gatebox: "Missed you, darling!"

When it was released online in December 2016, Vinclu's Gatebox advertisement found a ready, if not always receptive, audience. In anglophone news, it was slotted into a genre of stories about "Weird Japan," or the Japanese as socially dysfunctional and sexually deviant others. Collectively, the reports told a story: "The Creepy Virtual Assistant that Embodies Japan's Biggest Problems," specifically how alienated young men are turning to a company selling a "holographic 'girlfriend'" (Liberatore 2016), "pseudo-girlfriend" (Morris 2016), or "anime girlfriend" (Szondy 2016). Even as putting "girlfriend" into scare quotes implies a question about how the Gatebox girl could be anything of the sort, so does modifying it as "anime girlfriend," which draws attention to her as a Japanese cartoon character, or one with a distinct look shared with the characters of manga (comics) and anime (animation). Few seemed interested in seriously entertaining such a question, however. After all, it was patently obvious to critics that what the Gatebox offers is not a real relationship by any stretch of the imagination.

On the contrary, almost diametrically opposed to its critics, Vinclu presents interactions and relations with a manga/anime character as a significant other, both fictional and real. According to her official bio page, the Gatebox girl is twenty-year-old Azuma Hikari.[2] She likes donuts and watching anime. From her distinctive appearance to the prominence of anime on her list of hobbies, it is apparent that Azuma is meant to appeal to manga/anime fans. If such fans interact with characters from manga/anime franchises in various media and material forms in Japan today (Allison 2006;

Steinberg 2012; Condry 2013), then Vinclu has developed a device that allows for new forms of interaction and relation with a character as part of everyday life. They imagine that the Gatebox makes possible "Living with Your Favorite Character," as the official English-language slogan puts it.[3] The English-language website confirms this vision: "Gatebox is a project that grants the dream of closing the distance between you and characters. The reason why we develop[ed] Gatebox is not because we are just pursuing entertainment or convenience. We want the characters [to] be naturally [present] in our daily lives and [to] spend relaxing time with us. 'I want to live with my favorite character.' We dreamed of such [a] world and we started this project." Vinclu's description of the technology behind Gatebox begins, "Everything is in here for living together." With Gatebox, the character, who recognizes movements, faces, and voices and responds to them, "comes to life." Although Gatebox is designed to be "an interface between two people," the website explains that the "interface [is] centered around communication with the character." The point thus seems to be interacting with a character as a person, or someone alive and real in a relationship. While currently in the spotlight, Azuma Hikari is only the first step toward "living together with the character of your choice"; one day fans may draw from their favorite manga/anime franchises.

Note that the emphasis is on bringing manga/anime characters into our world and spending time with them, which is about adding new dimensions to life, not necessarily shutting off others. The climax of Vinclu's Gatebox advertisement comes when the man refers to Azuma Hikari—waiting at home, there in the room with him—as "someone" (*dareka*). Soon after the man says this aloud, the camera shifts to show the room from above and the Gatebox at an angle, which sets up a contrast. From above, Azuma appears as not only a cartoon character but also a flat image, her full-body hologram an illusion next to the human body in bed. And this comes precisely as the distance between the man and Gatebox girl has closed in his recognition of her as someone and their relationship as real. The revealing view from above is not meant to undermine the moment but rather to underscore it as something other than misrecognition of a character as human. Visually, the view from above reminds us that Azuma is a character, a flat image, *and at the same time someone*. Put another way, Vinclu shows Azuma as a significant other, even as she is also a character, a form of existence that is separate and distinct from human. The point here is emerging forms of interaction and relation with characters as such.

This book is an anthropological study of people living with and loving characters in contemporary Japan. Such people are often called "otaku," which requires some unpacking. As defined in the Japanese dictionary, "otaku" are "people who are interested in a particular genre or object, are extraordinarily knowledgeable about it, but are lacking in social common sense" (Kam 2013b, 152). This seems straightforward enough, but one wonders why certain people and their interactions and relations with certain objects are consistently deemed to be lacking in "social common sense," and indeed what that common sense entails. Conducting fieldwork in the 2000s in the Akihabara area of Tokyo, which had come to be associated with "otaku," I encountered men who, like the protagonist of the Gatebox advertisement, were engaged in intimate interactions and relations with manga/anime characters, specifically *bishōjo*, or cute girl characters. Rather than lacking common sense, however, they seemed to be going against it in public performances of their affection for these characters. During archival research, I found that this same issue was the primary impetus for originally constructing "otaku" as a label in Japan in 1983. Over time, I came to understand "otaku" as connected to the imagined excesses and perversions of manga/anime fans. From another perspective, however, "otaku" point to imagining and creating alternative social worlds with characters.[4] This all speaks to the contestation of "common sense," not consensus. In this way, the book positions "otaku" in an ongoing struggle for imagination in contemporary Japan.

"Otaku," Margins, Imagination

In the literature on manga and anime in North America, examples abound of referring to manga/anime fans in general, if not also viewers/readers, as "otaku." There are a variety of reasons to avoid doing this (Galbraith and Lamarre 2010; Kam 2013a, 2013b; Galbraith, Kam, and Kamm 2015), but suffice it to say here that "otaku" means very little out of context. While discussions of "otaku" often assume understanding, we must scrutinize the term to get at its significance in time and place. This book thinks with "otaku" as it was articulated in Japan in the early 1980s, which speaks back to the 1970s and forward to the 1990s and 2000s. This approach allows us to consider what it was about *specific* manga/anime characters and fans in Japan at *specific* times that required a label for *specific* imagined excesses and perversions. For all that has changed, analysis reveals remarkable resonances

and resilient strands of discourse. Even as manga and anime have spread around the world, and "otaku" have in some ways been normalized as manga/anime fans, the imagined excesses and perversions remain and are revived in specific ways (Kelts 2006, 69, 162–64). While the manga/anime fan might be treated as normal, the "otaku" might not be, and while the "otaku" might be normal, the "weird otaku" in Akihabara or Japan might not. Some interactions and relations with some manga/anime characters might be treated as normal, but others might not. It is important to recognize normalization as a process that is also a struggle with the "abnormal."

In this book, I have decided to keep "otaku" in scare quotes and draw attention to it as a label, which is to be interrogated in context rather than taken for granted at large. More concretely, I present "otaku" as a label that is applied in response to the imagined excesses and perversions of "male" fans of manga and anime, namely an attraction to and affection for cute girl characters. The point is not to exclude other objects or subjects but to think "otaku" in terms of the label that emerged in Japan in the early 1980s. Rather than participate in what theorist Thomas Lamarre describes as discourse about "otaku" meant to "define a historical moment, promote a set of objects, or establish an identity" (Lamarre 2006, 365), the book explores how and why the label has been constructed and applied in contemporary Japan. If, as Lamarre suggests, much of the academic discourse about "otaku" leaves the lines and hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and nation undisturbed (368, 387), then we should not overlook the fact that the imagined excesses and perversions to which the label responds tend to trouble a "straight," "male," "Japanese" position. It is only by being specific that one begins to see politics in sociohistorical context, which opens into questions about the struggle for imagination.

Crucial to these questions are interactions and relations with manga/anime characters as fictional and real others, which can challenge common sense. Why, for example, was the reaction to the Gatebox advertisement and its imagined life with a character so negative? When sharing this advertisement with friends and colleagues in North America, I was surprised that many shook their heads and muttered, "How sad." When pressed, they expanded on how lonely the man must be. This is sad, and turning to a pseudo relationship for solace sadder still. Life with a human partner, a real relationship, would be better, more rewarding and fulfilling. This commonsense position speaks to hegemony, which produces norms and persuades people of their rightness (Hall 1987). To these friends and colleagues, the life portrayed in the Gatebox advertisement registered as

abnormal, somehow wrong. What fascinates me about this interpretation is that it completely ignores the narrative of the Gatebox advertisement, which is explicitly about how the man is not alone, but rather living with a character; there is no indication that he is anything but happy with that character, and the score builds to a crescendo in his recognition of her as someone; the Gatebox advertisement is a celebration of the possibilities of living life otherwise. This did not make sense to friends and colleagues in North America, but it did make sense to manga/anime fans in Japan. Undergirding this are different understandings of interactions and relations with characters, different ways of evaluating them, different ways of seeing and being in the world.

When discussing the Gatebox advertisement, friends and colleagues in North America found equally nonsensical the terms "two-dimensional" (*nijigen*) and "three-dimensional" (*sanjigen*), which have circulated widely among manga/anime fans in Japan for decades. In practice, they mean the manga/anime world or "dimension" and the human world or "dimension," rather than literally two-dimensional and three-dimensional. For example, a manga/anime character in the form of a figurine is still said to be two-dimensional. This is not a distinction between fictional and real, because a two-dimensional character is both fictional and real, but real in a different way than a three-dimensional human. Using the terms "two-dimensional" and "three-dimensional," manga/anime fans talk about their interactions and relations with characters as separate and distinct from humans. One might critique this as "binary thinking," but I am fundamentally skeptical of the assumption that we already know more and better than those we engage with.[5] If, as anthropologist Gabriella Coleman argues, researchers can expect that interactions with media and technology will lead some to "indigenously conceive of the relationship between the screen and the physical space where bodies meet" (Coleman 2013, 49), then researchers can also expect that interactions with manga and anime contribute to a similar phenomenon. In the spirit of anthropology, researchers might try to learn to see the world and be in it differently.

Things make a good deal more sense if one keeps track of "dimensions." For example, in the Gatebox advertisement, the Japanese catch copy reads, "Crossing Dimensions, Coming to You" (*Jigen wo koete, ai ni kuru*). In her official English-language bio, Azuma Hikari is introduced as a "dimension traveler," who will "fly over dimensions to see you." Included is a short comic showing her as a flat character image before entering another dimension, the one where humans live. This explains the revealing view from above in

the advertisement and that shot's very intentional juxtaposition of Azuma inside the Gatebox and the man beside it, with the device allowing for intimate interactions and relations between them and their dimensions. We thus realize that, for Vinclu, the innovation is enabling interactions and relations between the two- and three-dimensional: "Enjoy this unprecedented jump between dimensions that will result in a new, shared lifestyle." The imaginary is one of characters and humans, the two- and three-dimensional, coexisting in the same world, living together. In contrast, not keeping track of dimensions can lead to misunderstanding, as, for example, when critics look at "maid cafés" in Akihabara and see no more than women serving men, while regulars instead draw attention to their interactions and relations with characters. Salient terms such as "2.5-dimensional" (*nitengo jigen*) slip past observers unless they follow that two-dimensional is the manga/anime world and three-dimensional is the human world, and the maid café is somewhere in between. Such "in-between spaces," theorist Jack Halberstam reminds, can "save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony" (Halberstam 2011, 2), but we first need to learn to recognize them.

On the subject of hegemony, let us return to the Gatebox advertisement and situate its protagonist in the imaginary of Japan. Commentators in the anglophone news describe the Gatebox man as not only an "otaku" but also a "salaryman" (Gallagher 2016). Setting aside for now that these are labels, the Gatebox man appears to be a white-collar worker at a large corporation—that is, a "salaryman"—as well as someone involved in intimate interactions and relations with a manga/anime character—an "otaku." For much of the second half of the twentieth century, however, the salaryman was a figure of success in stark contrast to the "otaku." Defined by his institutional belonging, the salaryman was a middle-class, masculine hero whose efforts were imagined to support his company, family, and nation (Roberson and Suzuki 2003, 1). This is an example of "hegemonic masculinity," which need not be the most common or comfortable form but is still the common sense of what a man ought to be and is judged against (Connell 2000, 10–11). As opposed to the salaryman, the "otaku" was seen as an institutional outsider, individualistic and self-absorbed, unstable and undisciplined, engaged in consumptive rather than productive activity, and so on. Simply put, if success in many capitalist societies is tied to achieving "reproductive maturity" (Halberstam 2011, 2), then the "otaku" was seen as a failure, unproductively immature. Nevertheless, with the recession that rocked Japan in the 1990s and subsequent destabilization of institutions

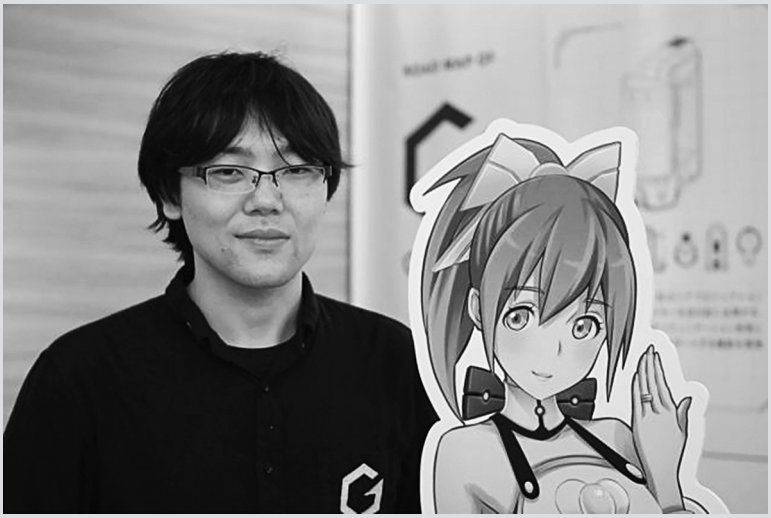

FIGURE I.2
Vinclu CEO Takechi Minori and Azuma posing together. The two-dimensional character shows what appears to be a wedding ring, which suggests an intimate relationship.

(Allison 2006, 74–75), some dramatically proclaim that the salaryman has lost to alternatives such as "otaku," which "have won" (Frühstück and Walthall 2011, 12). Perhaps, then, the Gatebox man is that winner, the successful man, the "otaku" that replaced the salaryman.

This, however, overlooks critical aspects of hegemony in contemporary Japan. To be blunt, the "otaku" does not stand for a new hegemonic masculinity. Few in Japan see "otaku" in ways corresponding to the salaryman ideal. Far from it, in fact: Even a cursory glance at the sociological literature shows "otaku" to be historically suspect (Kinsella 1998), which has led to lingering suspicions of dysfunction and deviance that come out in both longitudinal survey data (Kikuchi 2015) and relatively recent qualitative interviews with even younger Japanese (Kam 2013a, 2013b). That the majority of respondents do not have positive impressions, even in the 2000s, should not go unnoticed. From the commonsense position, the Gatebox man is still a failure, employed and earning enough to afford a device that retails for around US$2,500, but not achieving reproductive maturity. The Gatebox advertisement effectively sabotages its protagonist's salaryman status by portraying him alone during lunch, without his work cohort, texting Azuma Hikari. The impact of the scene is amplified by seating a man and woman chatting directly behind the Gatebox man, who has his back to them. He is alone again in the office working late, thinking of Azuma,

without any sign of his coworkers. Not only is the Gatebox man's heart not in the corporate institution, but his significant other waiting at home is a manga/anime character, and interactions and relations with her cannot produce human children. Rather than framing this as "sad," however, Vinclu triumphantly declares the arrival of a new, shared lifestyle "between dimensions." This imaginary is not of the salaryman but of the "otaku" living life otherwise. If, as anthropologist Ian Condry suggests, affection for manga/anime characters contributes to "the emergence of alternative social worlds" (Condry 2013, 203), then researchers need to account for what makes these social worlds alternative and why that distinction matters.

Hints to such an approach can be found in work on "otaku" outside of Japan. Writing on anime fandom in North America from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, science and technology scholar Lawrence Eng describes "otaku" as "reluctant insiders" (Eng 2006, 24, 34). Reluctant insiders, Eng explains, feel somehow alienated by their inclusion and seek alternatives through unanticipated consumption and appropriation. This is often consumption and appropriation of media and material that are not intended for the reluctant insider, who crosses boundaries to get them (158–59). In the case of Eng's anime fans, the consumption and appropriation was of Japanese cartoons, which meant crossing national boundaries and escaping an alienating inclusion in "the United States." Others add that these reluctant insiders, alienated by their inclusion in "American masculinity," crossed gender/genre boundaries in seeking alternative imaginings of relationships and romance in Japanese cartoons (Newitz 1995, 4–7).[6] For Eng, "otaku" are those that "consciously make choices to self-marginalize" (Eng 2012, 102), or become marginal as a way out of the main body.[7] To rephrase, they choose to move toward the margin and become other than what inclusion in the main body allows and demands. Much of this also strikes a chord in Japan, where "otaku" began crossing gender/genre lines in consumption and appropriation of *shōjo* (for girls) manga and shōjo (girl) characters in manga and anime in the 1970s, and in imagining interactions and relations with bishōjo (cute girl) characters in the 1980s. One way to understand this is by viewing "otaku" as reluctant insiders of the hegemony of masculinity seeking alternatives.

In Japan, not only did "otaku" consume and appropriate across gender/genre lines, but they also produced new spaces to gather and share shōjo manga and fan works such as the Comic Market, new character forms such as the bishōjo, new niche and specialty magazines to share these characters as objects of desire and affection, a new language to discuss this af-

fection, new online and offline sites to share affection, and new ways of interacting with and relating to characters. This is not just about emerging alternative social worlds but also about the movement of actively imagining and creating them. Again, thinking outside Japan can provide clarity. In North America, theorist bell hooks shines a light on movement that takes one "out of one's place," which requires "pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination" (hooks 2000, 203). This can be understood as movement toward the margin, or, in the language of reluctant insiders, choosing to self-marginalize. Distinct from marginality that is structurally imposed, hooks advocates cultivating marginality as openness. Choosing such marginality offers "the possibility of [a] radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (207). For hooks, these alternatives, these imagined and created worlds, are a form of "counter-hegemonic discourse," which goes beyond just words to ways of seeing and being. In its radical openness, the margin is also an invitation to, as hooks puts it, "Enter that space" (208). One not only imagines and creates alternative worlds, not only lives them, but also draws others in.

We can take this further by considering manga and anime, or comics and animation, as media of imagination. In *Understanding Comics*, theorist Scott McCloud argues that comics are radically open in ways that encourage artists and viewers/readers to get involved in shared worlds of imagination—to enter that space, as it were. Three points are germane: iconic characters, gutters, and shared imagination. On the first point, McCloud makes a distinction between "lines to *see*" and "lines to *be*" (McCloud 1994, 43), with the former being more realistic or natural looking, and the latter more iconic or cartoony. If lines to see are objects in a world, then lines to be draw subjects into a world. This informs McCloud's discussion of the effect of iconic characters: "When you look at a photo or 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 to another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon—we *become* it" (36). By McCloud's reckoning, iconic characters are open to diverse identifications, or identification across boundaries as one is pulled out of place and into other spaces and forms. In manga, characters tend to be more iconic than realistic (44).

On the second point, gutters, McCloud states that comics make the viewer/reader "a willing and conscious collaborator" (65) in moving images. Comics are a series of still drawings arranged in panels on the page,

FIGURE I.3
McCloud explains the gutter.

and there is space between deliberately juxtaposed images, which is called the gutter. The viewer/reader looks at the images and fills in the blank between them, and in the process moves the still drawings. To demonstrate this, McCloud presents a pair of panels (figure I.3): the first with two men, one raising an axe and shouting "Now you die!" to a terrified response, and the second a city skyline in which the night air is pierced by "Eeyaaa!" Moving between the images, the viewer/reader fills in the blank—the axe man swings and the other man screams before his demise. In this way, McCloud elucidates, comics excel at compelling viewers/readers to "use their imaginations" (69).

This transitions to the third and concluding point, which McCloud makes through a theory of media: "Media convert thoughts into forms that can traverse the physical world and be re-converted by one or more senses

back into thoughts" (195). In the case of comics, this means converting thoughts into drawings, or a series of deliberately juxtaposed images, for the viewer/reader to access visually. Put somewhat differently, the artist and viewer/reader share thoughts through images, or share imagination. The images are open, yes, but also concrete and immediate. Furthermore, for McCloud, comics stand out in that basically all one needs is a pencil and paper, and the artist is intimately involved in forming the thoughts into images from mind to hand to page (197, 204–5). The images are flexible, there are few limitations on what can be drawn, and the viewer/reader is brought close to what the artist imagines by filling in blanks in and between images.

Given that they often do not feature the "realism" of much of mainstream media, McCloud counts comics among "minority forms," which offer other ways of seeing the world (McCloud 2000, 19). One could also call comics a marginal form, or a medium of imagination, which highlights how artists imagine and create alternative worlds, opening spaces for the viewer/reader to move out of place. In the literature on Japanese comics, a well-documented example of this is a subgenre of shōjo manga focusing on romance and sex between male characters, which in Japan is produced and consumed primarily by heterosexual girls and women but also appeals to a wide range of others (for an overview, see Galbraith 2015a). Thus while manga critic and editor Sagawa Toshihiko provocatively suggests that the "male" characters might better be described as "young women wearing cartoon-character costumes" (quoted in Schodt 1996, 123), it is not only women who are wearing these costumes to move out of place. Indeed, researchers of this subgenre of shōjo manga and its fans have applied McCloud's understanding of iconic characters to propose that the open image invites broad, fluid, and shifting identifications (Isola 2010, 86). In short, in such comics, one can become other by being drawn into character images across lines.[8] Not coincidentally, Sagawa Toshihiko himself was among the early generation of male fans of shōjo manga featuring "male" character romance and sex in the 1970s (Schodt 1996, 120). Like other reluctant insiders seeking alternatives and crossing gender/genre lines, Sagawa opened a shared space of imagination and creation in the form of *June* magazine, which became a flagship of "boys love manga."

Not only do comics offer other ways of seeing the world, they also offer other worlds and ways of being in the world. Again turning to an example from shōjo manga, artist Hagio Moto is renowned for producing stories about male-male romance in the 1970s, but more generally pushed the

boundaries of gender and sexuality in works of speculative fiction that imagined ways out of the hegemonic family and related roles and responsibilities (Suzuki 2011, 59–60).[9] To Hagio's mind, this family was an illusion that many took to be "reality," which she wanted to challenge. Imagining and creating other worlds, Hagio estranges "our naturalized view of the world" and encourages us to question "dominant social norms" (60, 70). Significantly, this sort of shōjo manga spoke to men such as Sagawa Toshihiko as well as critic Yonezawa Yoshihiro, who was involved in founding the Comic Market and providing a shared space of imagination and creation for early "otaku" in the 1970s. For his part, Yonezawa recognizes that comics can be especially effective for unsettling norms because "manga constitutes a realm of imagination, a power to give illusions concrete form" (Yonezawa 2004, 44–45). The imagined and created worlds of comics can be inhabited and shared as alternatives to the illusions of commonsense, hegemonic "reality." If, as scholar of religion Joseph P. Laycock argues, "hegemony can be resisted only if we can imagine new possibilities" (Laycock 2015, 215), then it is perhaps not so surprising that regulators in Japan have had their sights set on manga since the institutional instability of the 1990s.

With a history of substantial connection and crossover between manga and anime in Japan (Steinberg 2012), there are practical reasons to consider the two together, but there are also theoretical reasons. Like comics, much of animation departs from "reality." If film captures movement in the world and turns it into a series of still images, then animation takes a series of still images and turns them into an illusion of movement in imagined and created worlds (Bukatman 2012, 47).[10] This movement is not always or necessarily continuous or "natural." Moreover, while animation on the whole tends to focus on fiction as opposed to preformed entities in front of cameras, the vast majority of characters in Japanese animation are intentionally crafted in a manga/anime style that is "unrealistic." So distinctive is it that critic and editor Ōtsuka Eiji postulates the existence of "manga/anime realism," which points to the reality of manga/anime worlds rather than an approximation of the natural world (Ōtsuka 2003, 24).

Despite linkage and overlap, manga and anime are best grasped as separate but complementary media of imagination. Drawing from manga, anime present images that move and transform onscreen in ways that still ones on the page cannot. The most eloquent assessment of this characteristic of animation comes from Sergei Eisenstein, a Russian filmmaker and theorist intrigued by Walt Disney's early work: "What's strange is that it attracts! And you can't help but arrive at the conclusion that a single,

common prerequisite of attractiveness shows through in all these examples: a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form. An ability that I'd call 'plasmaticness,' for here we have a being represented in drawing, a being of a definite form, a being which has attained a definite appearance, and which behaves like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a 'stable' form, but capable of assuming any form" (Eisenstein 1986, 21). In that it leaves room for the imagination and stimulates it, imagines and creates worlds of fluid and shifting form, and draws viewers in, animation joins comics as a medium that is marginal.[11] Small wonder, then, that theorists such as Halberstam look to animation for alternatives to commonsense, hegemonic "reality" and the world as it is known and inhabited "naturally" (Halberstam 2011, 17, 89).[12]

Although Halberstam at times seems dismissive of "two-dimensional cartoons," there is certainly potential in interactions and relations between the two- and three-dimensional, not least of which is "otaku" movement in response to characters. In his work on the topic, Lamarre refers to such movement as a "collective force of desire" (Lamarre 2006, 359). This desire is quite visible in Japan, where manga and anime are robust media drawing large and diverse audiences with attractive characters (Schodt 1996, 19; Steinberg 2012, 41–45; Condry 2013, 86), but Lamarre would no doubt agree that there is nothing about it that is uniquely "Japanese." Indeed, in North America, theorist W. J. T. Mitchell develops the concept of "drawing desire," which gets at the dual meaning of drawing as inscribing lines and attracting (Mitchell 2005, 59). I find Mitchell helpful for addressing desire among those living with and loving characters in not only contemporary Japan, but beyond. Of particular interest is "desire generating images and images generating desire" (58), which resonates with the discussion of "otaku" (Lamarre 2006, 382–83). In Akihabara, I found that such desire could transform a neighborhood, interactions and relations between dimensions, and even worlds.

Acknowledging those actively imagining and creating alternative social worlds, discourse that hastily normalizes and nationalizes "otaku" strikes me as every bit as problematic as discourse about socially dysfunctional and sexually deviant others. The risk is collapsing together the margin and main body, which smooths over, on the one hand, the contestations of those choosing the margin, and, on the other, efforts to close in-between spaces and discipline and domesticate what is reincorporated into the main body—simply put, missing the process of normalization and attendant

conflict and compromise. Queer theory, carefully conceived, can provide analytic guidance. In her work on male-male romance and sex in manga, psychological researcher Anna Madill writes, "Queer theory . . . draws attention [to], and celebrates, slippage between dichotomously conceived categorization and in so doing challenges a hegemonic worldview that disavows that which is betwixt and between. Where categories are placed in opposition, one is usually associated with greater hegemonic value and the second Othered. Hence, queer theory is also a critique of dominant status and power hierarchies" (Madill 2015, 280). Dwelling on and with what is in-between and out-of-place can challenge hegemonic worldviews. In this way, it is possible to disrupt dominant status and power hierarchies, whereas uncritically accepting the normalization and nationalization of "otaku" can serve to reinforce them. As I learned in Akihabara, where I became enmeshed in struggles over imagination and in shared spaces of imagination, "otaku" movement continues to be unsettled and unsettling, even when seemingly aligned with the powers that be.

Toward an Anthropology of Imagination

This book is based on long-term engagement with Akihabara and the people, characters, and ideas that I encountered and became entangled with there. I initially arrived in Akihabara in 2004, and soon was visiting several times a week, then daily, to hang out for hours at a stretch. Intensive fieldwork took place between 2006 and 2008, and regular commuting to the area continued until 2011. (Afterward, I phased into a project on adult computer games, also situated in Akihabara.) During that time, I was most immediately involved in Akihabara and the happenings in that corner of Tokyo, which led to many of my most enduring relationships with people that I learned with over the course of months and years. From the streets of Akihabara, I followed people into maid cafés, back out, and elsewhere. While conducting this fieldwork in the 2000s, I was made aware of histories that I needed to know to keep up. First it was *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters, which I was told had much to do with the transformation of Akihabara into an "otaku" haven and the emergence of maid cafés there in the 1990s. Some said that moe dated back further to artists such as Takahashi Rumiko, Miyazaki Hayao, and Tezuka Osamu, whose manga/anime works I was instructed to read and view for reference and discussion, drawing me deeper into shared worlds of imagination.

From the moment that I set foot in Akihabara, "otaku" was a word that I could not ignore, but it profoundly puzzled me, because that word seemed as though pulled between competing definitions in the 2000s. "Otaku" were at once creepy and cool, and I was adrift in some chaotic flux. I eventually turned to historical research, which took me back to the 1990s, then the 1980s, where I discovered that the imagined excesses and perversions of interactions and relations with characters was key to labeling some manga/anime fans "otaku." Much of this seemed familiar from the street in Akihabara, and I began to notice that those negatively labeled "otaku" were almost always "male" manga/anime fans attracted to "female" manga/anime characters, specifically bishōjo, or cute girl characters. The longer I spent digging around the archives, the more I saw these characters as vital to the imagination of "otaku." Exploring their origins in the 1970s led to new insights about "otaku," margins, and seeking alternatives in manga and anime.

The order of my learning in the field is reversed in the order of chapters in this book, which starts with manga and anime in the 1970s and works its way up to Akihabara in the 2000s and beyond. Chapter 1 traces the origins of bishōjo. Although now seen as characteristic of manga and anime overall, bishōjo emerged from the movement of men and women imagining and creating alternatives as they crossed gender/genre lines in the 1970s. Again dealing with origins, chapter 2 turns to discourse about "otaku" and draws attention to the formation of it as a label in response to the imagined excesses and perversions of "male" fans of cute girl characters in Japan in the 1980s, as well as mutations of the label amid mounting concern about the impact of manga and anime on psychosexual development and society in the 1990s. Identifying a number of "reality problems," the chapter sketches the terrain of "otaku" and the struggle for imagination in contemporary Japan. Chapter 3 explores discourse about moe. Born from fans discussing cute girl characters online, this neologism allowed "otaku" to share movement. With a rising tide of bishōjo in games such as *Tokimeki Memorial* (Tokimeki memoriaru, 1994–) and anime such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shinseiki Evangerion, 1995–), and a tsunami of fans moved by them, moe came to be understood as a social, economic, and political phenomenon in Japan from the 1990s into the 2000s.

Pivoting from the archive of published accounts and personal interviews to the field, chapter 4 zooms in on the Akihabara area of Tokyo, which was a central hub for bishōjo games that blew up as an "otaku" hotspot with the manga/anime explosion from the late 1990s into the 2000s. Even as the number of men sharing moe responses to cute girl characters in the area

attracted national and international attention, Akihabara was also becoming a symbolic site of "Cool Japan" culture and a tourist destination, which thrust "otaku" there into the spotlight. Core to the chapter is a simultaneous promotion and policing of "otaku" performances, which throws into relief the tension between normalized and nationalized "otaku" and "weird otaku." The focus then shifts in chapter 5 to interactions and relations between two-dimensional characters and three-dimensional humans in maid cafés in Akihabara in the 2000s. From the streets to these establishments, in spaces between dimensions and bodies, fictional and real, we can observe alternative ways of interacting with and relating to others in worlds of shared imagination. The conclusion examines a series of exhibitions of cute girl character art held in Akihabara in the 2010s, which brought bishōjo game makers and government ministries into an uneasy alliance. The exhibitions allow us to consider not only the contested imaginary of "otaku" domestically and internationally, but also the role that academic writing on "Japanese" media and popular culture plays in the ongoing struggle for imagination.

Although the result of reordering my learning in the field is a roughly chronological sequence in the chapters, this book is not intended to be an authoritative or general history of "otaku." My movement backward in time was specifically driven by engagement with Akihabara and the people, characters, and ideas that I encountered and became entangled with there. From participant observation on the streets and in maid cafés, I arranged personal interviews with manga/anime creators, fans, and critics that had lived through earlier decades, and I scoured the wealth of published interviews, dialogues, and firsthand accounts. This is, of course, only a partial view, which reflects where I was positioned and who I was talking with, pointed toward, and learning from. Taking a cue from the word *sōzō*, a homonym in Japanese that can mean "imagination" or "creation," I realize that in imagining "otaku" and bishōjo in relation to one another I am also creating them.[13] For me, the process is a collaborative one. In the field, I checked my "constructive attempts" (Malinowski 2014, 13) with others, who affected my thinking and writing. This book is another constructive attempt, but produced at a distance from my initial collaborators. In presenting it to readers, I anticipate different checks in different fields, which will contribute to open-ended discussion.

In this book, I try to draw readers in by imitating the media of imagination that I shared with "otaku" in the field. Drawing from participant observation, personal interviews, and archival research, I construct and frame

images in text, which I imagine like panels in a comic.[14] The images are drawn in a particular way from a particular point of view and position. They are put into a sequence with space between them, which I hope will encourage readers to use their imagination. If this is at times unsettling, then that is also one of the aims of this book, which pushes back on common sense about "otaku" and predictable readings of psychological, sexual, and social dysfunction and deviance. Like theorist Eve Sedgwick, I fear that readings of this sort often only serve to confirm what critics already "know," which closes down the possibility for encounters with the unknown and where the outcome is not known in advance. To borrow Sedgwick's words, I worry that the prevalence of these readings "may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations" (Sedgwick 2003, 124). So I stick with those relations, which speaks to an ethics of learning with others, or a methodological commitment to be open to encounters and entanglements that can surprise, unsettle, and affect ways of thinking and seeing, if not also being, in the world.[15]

Against the backdrop of countries across the globe regulating some manga and anime under the assumption that they are pornography appealing to perverts, pedophiles, and predators (McLelland 2013), it is more urgent than ever to unpack local, contingent relations that may challenge what critics already "know." To return to the Gatebox advertisement and responses to it, many seem certain that Azuma Hikari is "a little girl" (Siciliano 2016) and that "Japan has a sex problem" (Gilbert 2017). Is this really all that we can imagine? Inspired by fieldworkers finding that interactions and relations with characters are increasingly part of everyday life around the world (Allison 2006; Ito 2008; Condry 2013), we must do better. In her monograph on mushrooms, anthropologist Anna Tsing offers what I take to be an invitation: "We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours" (Tsing 2015, 3). In the process, we might also imagine other possibilities in the world, other possible worlds. We might even try to live in shared worlds of imagination—to create them, together. This, too, is part of the struggle.

NOTES

Introduction

1 On July 7, 2017, Vinclu changed its company name to Gatebox. For issues of clarity, and reflecting my writing about the company before its change, I have decided to retain Vinclu. The advertisement can be viewed online. Gatebox Lab, "Gatebox Promotion Movie: 'Okaeri' (English)," YouTube, December 13, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMbiL8D6qXo.

2 "Profile," Azuma Hikari Official Site. https://web.archive.org/web/20180224114320/https://gatebox.ai/hikari/en/ (last accessed on April 20, 2018).

3 Gatebox Official Site. http://gatebox.ai/ (last accessed on February 12, 2019).

4 If it facilitates better understanding, we can translate this into anthropologist Shaka McGlotten's terms: on the one hand, responses to forms of intimacy perceived to be "less real than others," "dangerous," and "failed," and, on the other hand, "the labors, perverse and otherwise, that animatedly rework categories of intimacy" (McGlotten 2013, 12). For a complementary discussion of "otaku" and the labor of perversion, see Lamarre 2006, 375–85.

5 I am inspired by comics scholar Christopher Pizzino, who writes, "I am skeptical of the tendency in literary and cultural studies to assume that binary thinking is perforce a transgression that must be corrected before it is well understood" (Pizzino 2016, 67–68).

6 Also in the United States, but separate from anime fans, one might further consider "bronies," or adult men attracted to *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (2010–), who have been presented in similar ways as seeking alternatives to hegemonic masculinity by

consuming and appropriating a cartoon originally intended for young girls (Malaquais 2012).

7 Reflecting on his observations of manga/anime fandom outside of Japan, critic and editor Ōtsuka Eiji conjectures that "otaku" movement might be related to "mending social, cultural and mental identity for those who are somehow minorities in a given society" (Ōtsuka 2015, xxv).

8 Here I am thinking of the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychotherapist Félix Guattari, who argue that "we are composed of lines" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 202). Some lines are imposed from the outside, while others sprout up by chance. "Others can be invented, drawn, without a model and without chance: we must invent our lines of flight, if we are able, and the only way we can invent them is by effectively drawing them, in our lives" (202). To my mind, the lines of manga/anime characters can often be understood as lines of flight invented and drawn in the lives of artists and fans.

9 Women's studies scholar Sherrie A. Inness describes comics as a potentially "revolutionary" medium, because they create "alternative worlds in which gender operates very differently than it does in our own real world" (Inness 1999, 141). Feminist psychoanalyst Setsu Shigematsu points in a similar direction when arguing that comics open up "alternative sites and different dimensions of what is typically conceived of as sex and sexuality" (Shigematsu 1999, 128).

10 In fact, theorist Scott Bukatman positions animation as the antithesis of film: "Rather than recording a moving world as a series of still images, a series of still images is projected in sequence to produce movement where none existed. As if in recognition of this signal difference, cartoon logic reverses, in fact *rejects*, the logic and physics of 'the real world'" (Bukatman 2012, 47). Building on this insight, Bukatman proposes that animation offers resistance to the instrumental rationality of the world or "reality" as we know it. Carrying this over to viewers/readers in ways familiar from McCloud, Bukatman suggests that, in animation, "identification crosses gender boundaries to permit all to partake of these performances of disobedience and resistance" (25). It is worth noting that Bukatman draws attention to how artists and viewers/readers get caught up in the movements of characters, as well as the eroticism of movement (198–200). Bukatman shares with many critics in Japan the perspective that the "exuberant energy" of animation is related to "its only partially submilated sexuality" (19).

11 In fact, Bukatman uses this very word to describe animation (Bukatman 2012, 3). As I see it, comics and animation are marginal media of imagination in contrast to more mainstream entertainment and its "realism," which theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue "denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in the imagination" and leads to a "withering of imagination" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 100). Marginal media unsettle reality, leave room for imagination, and contribute to its flourishing. Horkheimer and Adorno seem to recognize this potential of cartoons (106, 110).

12 Like comics, but in its own way, "animation allows the viewer to enter into other worlds and other formulations of this world" (Halberstam 2011, 181). So Halberstam perhaps overstates things somewhat when asserting, "It is *only* in the realm of animation that we actually find the alternative" (23). One might also question his preference for computer-generated animation and critique of "two-dimensional cartoons" (176).

13 The Japanese word for imagination is *sōzō*, which is also a homonym for "creation." The two are distinguished by the modified Chinese characters used to write them, and told apart in spoken conversation through context, but to say "I imagine a world" can also mean "I create a world."

14 Even as I write this in 2018, the University of Toronto Press has started an innovative new series called ethnoGRAPHIC, which, according to the official website, "realizes ethnographic research in graphic novel form." This gets at the issues that I am raising here, but also quite literally makes the deliberately juxtaposed images into sequential art, rather than images in text. We shall have to see if this experiment in ethnographic representation will catch on, but I have high hopes. "ethnoGRAPHIC," University of Toronto Press Official Site. https://utorontopress.com/us/books/by-series/ethnographic?dir=desc&order=publish_date (last accessed on February 12, 2019).

15 "Really imaginative ethnographies," writes Halberstam, "depend upon an unknowing relation to the other. To begin an ethnographic project with a goal, with an object of research and a set of presumptions, is already to stymie the process of discovery; it blocks one's ability to learn something that exceeds the frameworks with which one enters" (Halberstam 2011, 12). Well said. One can see here connections to Halberstam's conception of "low theory," or "theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production" (18).

Chapter 1. Seeking an Alternative

1 If "shōjo culture is notable for its rejection of anything excessively masculine" (Mackie 2010, 194), and if the shōjo is "a vision of alternative forms of sociality and alternative kinds of affective relationships that are not bound by the structures of the heteronormative nuclear family" (198), then there is no reason to assume that this appeals exclusively to girls and women. Feminist thinker Ueno Chizuko, for example, links shōjo deferring or avoiding sexual maturity with "male" shōjo fans doing the same (Ueno 1989, 131–32; for more, see chapter 2). It is not entirely helpful to propose a dualism between the "male, stuck in an immature sexuality that sees its object as the defloration of the innocent Lolita figure, and the Lolita who desperately tries to hang on to this innocence" (Mackie 2010, 200). For a discussion of men identifying with fictional girl characters in complex and contradictory ways, see Kinsella 2000, 121–24, 137–38.

2 This interaction took place at a meeting of the British Association for Japanese Studies (Japan Chapter) hosted at Chiba University on May 27, 2017.

3 Researcher Perry R. Hinton suggests that "the term 'Lolita' has a culturally specific meaning and that it has a different meaning in Western culture to that in Japan" (Hinton 2014, 54). Drawing attention to shōjo as crucial to the phenomenon in Japan, Hinton argues that "lolicon" might better be translated as "shoujo [*sic*] complex" (59). Insofar as it entails a refusal of or resistance to "growing up," lolicon is associated with "a Peter Pan complex rather than a Lolita complex" (62). On the whole, Hinton concludes that "the term 'Lolita complex' is an inappropriate rendering of rorikon [lolicon] given the Western popular representation of Lolita" (65) and its different meanings in Japan.

4 For an English-language discussion, see Shigematsu 1999, 129–32.