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The passion of Gengoroh Tagame: the master of gay erotic manga

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Throughout the book, this assumption results in jarring contrasts between issues that are associated in terms of shared goals and activist sensibilities: playful internet jokes are juxtaposed with the work of sex activists, the usage of dating websites compared with the participation in 'sexual uprisings', and the belonging to fan cultures associated with the exploits of online celebrities or contemporary artists.

In its fragmentarity and theoretical diversity, *People's Pornography* provides a challenging and kaleidoscopic collection of snapshots of sexuality in the Greater China region, and explores multiple connections between them along the vectors of private consumption, media industries, surveillance culture, fandom and sexual identity. Although some of these connections still need to be fully interrogated, Jacobs' writing conveys the effort in representing 'subjectivities that may never substantially hold together or fully materialize' (Jacobs 2012, 180).

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The passion of Gengoroh Tagame: the master of gay erotic manga, by Gengoroh Tagame, produced by Anne Ishii, edited by Graham Kolbeins, art direction by Chip Kidd, introduction by Edmund White, Brooklyn, NY, PictureBox, 2013, 256 pp., $29.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-984-58924-1

Although there is a long history of comics aimed at various demographics and interests in Japan, even today and by contrast, many comics in English-speaking countries tend to assume a heterosexual male readership. The publication of *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame* is something of a landmark for manga (Japanese comics) as it is the one of the first examples of the *bara* genre to be released in English. The term bara refers to comics that feature male homosexual relations often created by and for gay men. In addition, bara manga often features masculine characters depicted as physically large; ranging from chubby to muscular.

Although Tagame's book is one of the first English-language bara manga to be officially published, homosexual-themed manga has been experiencing quite a boom

in recent years. These comics are a subgenre of *shoujo* manga, or Japanese comics that are written with a young female audience in mind. Manga scholar Matt Thorn (2008) notes that Japanese comics for young females have existed since the early twentieth century. However, it was not until the 1970s that shoujo manga began to feature the subject of male homosexual relationships. These stories were often termed *shounen-ai* (boys' love). Japanese film and literature scholar Deborah Shamoon identifies the 1970s as a turning point for boys' love manga, recounting stories that were about allowing young women to begin to come to terms with 'sexuality and eroticism in a safe, nonthreatening way' (2012, 104). As the genre developed, boys' love manga sometimes featured explicit homosexual encounters, but Shamoon argues that 'these are not stories about real homosexual relationships' (2012, 111). Rather, she suggests that the stories employed a tactical use of male homosexuality in the service of heterosexual female empowerment. Love and romance could be safely and freely explored in boys' love manga without the worries of pregnancy or the potentially restrictive gender roles inherent in heterosexual couplings. However, James Welker has questioned this assessment, arguing that manga 'functioned for some readers not as merely a fantastic escape or a straightforward critique of patriarchal romance paradigms in Japan' (2011, 223) and 'helped them to understand and validate their own same-sex desire or non-normative gender identification' (2011, 212).

The protagonists in boys' love manga are generally (but not always) slight and rather effeminate. This makes sense if the imagined audience for such manga is supposed to find such homosexual relationships physically non-threatening. By contrast, the characters in Gengoroh Tagame's work are almost always large men with muscles and facial hair. Like boys' love manga, the foundations for this can be traced back to the early 1970s. *Barazoku* (literally 'rose tribe') was the first Japanese magazine for gay men to be distributed nationally and as such it 'played a substantial role in forming the contours of Japanese gay culture' (Suganuma 2012, 76). According to Katsuhiko Suganuma, prior to *Barazoku* male homosexuality in Japan was often portrayed as necessarily feminized. By contrast, '[t]he emphasis on masculine identity in early issues of *Barazoku* was a strategy to denounce pre-existing stereotypes of gay men, and a way of recuperating their otherwise damaged self-esteem and pride' (2012, 79). In this way, the magazine set out to reclaim masculinity for male homosexuality, but at the same time it reinforced commonly accepted gender norms. The tropes of bara manga, including the comics produced by Gengoroh Tagame, spring from this earthy, masculine soil.

Although Tagame's stories probably reflect male desires more than female ones, one would be hard pressed to say that they depict 'real homosexual relationships' (to use Shamoon's words) any more than boys' love stories do. In other words, as with most erotic material, one must be careful about assuming an authenticity that maps onto reality due to the experiences of its author. Additionally, according to Graham Kolbeins's essay that concludes *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame*, the artist estimates that one-half of his readership is female, indicating a market for homosexual manga beyond the boys' love genre. Part of this popularity could be due to the fact that, despite Tagame depicting men having sex with men, these encounters are not often marked as culturally gay. As William S. Armour mentions in his analysis of Tagame's manga:

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> Tagame shows hyper-masculine men, not necessarily men who identify as homosexual or men who even desire to have sex with other men, engaging in a range of activities that deterritorialise their hegemonic masculinity. He then celebrates the macho through the privilege of highly aestheticised sexual violence. (2010, 461)

Through the seven stories presented in *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame*, we see a gamut of explicit homosexual experiences ranging from consensual sex between couples to forced bondage, piercing, and public degradation. The wide range of sexual themes in Tagame's manga is illustrated in the first two stories in the collection, 'Hairy Oracle' and 'Arena.' In the first story, a mustachioed police officer visits a boy(friend?) for assistance with a case. The conceit is that the officer is able to have psychic visions that help solve crimes, but these are only triggered when he has orgasms from anal intercourse. Although he willingly obliges, the policeman's friend feels used, particularly when he is left unfulfilled after the officer leaves once he has had his revelation. However, the story ends on a romantic note when the policeman later takes the day off to spend with him. The story 'Arena,' on the other hand, is both the longest and one of the most intense chapters in the book. In it, a famed Japanese martial artist travels to the United States for a series of underground no-holds-barred fights, only to be drugged, raped, and humiliated again and again. Some of the other chapters explore SM within a master/servant relationship in feudal Japan, culturally sanctioned group sex in the Japanese countryside, and a tale of murder and revenge with a surprisingly sentimental ending. Designer Chip Kidd (one of the editors of this book) commissioned a special story called 'Class Act' for this collection about the relation between a teacher and his pupil that evolves into a sexual relationship desired by both sides. The common theme running throughout these stories, however, is that social and physical power (the two are often intertwined) heighten the sexual experience. Whether it is a young country doctor willingly servicing the men of the village or a boxer who has been sold into slavery and is repeatedly violated for an audience, it is the imbalance of power that provides the fuel for Tagame's passion. Tagame makes it clear that the majority of the sexual violence he depicts only takes place in the realm of the imagination, even going so far as to put a warning on his website homepage in English and Japanese that reads 'Recognize a distinction between Actuality and Fantasy!' By including such a caveat, Tagame is consciously disclaiming that his manga is designed to depict 'real homosexual relationships' in any way.

The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame provides a significant amount of context for an audience that probably has little experience with bara manga. It contains an introduction by novelist and essayist Edmund White, a forward by Kidd, an afterward by editor Graham Kolbeins, and a short commentary by Tagame himself after every chapter. Notably, many of these contextual passages link Tagame's work with other, better known, examples of both literature and art. White likens the protagonist of 'Arena' to a William S. Burroughs character and draws attention to the allusions to Japanese woodblock prints. Kidd begins his introduction with the following, perhaps hyperbolic, statement: 'The Marquis de Sade. Pasolini. *The Story of O*. *Lolita*. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Yukio Mishima. And now, finally in English, Gengoroh Tagame.' Kolbeins' afterward is formed in part from an interview with Tagame that explores his life-story and influences, and is probably the most informative of the three pieces of writing due to its interrogation of the artist and its willingness to go beyond being a cheerleader for the book's content.

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Ultimately, *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame* is a beautifully-printed work that does justice to the power and artistry of Tagame's comic art. One of the few downsides to the book's publication, however, is that since it is one of the few examples of bara manga available in English, Tagame's work may be taken as representative of all such manga. Publisher PictureBox Books had planned to release an English-language volume called *Massive: Gay Erotic Manga and the Men Who Make It* that would have featured 11 different artists (including Tagame), but the company announced they would halt releasing new titles in December 2013. Hopefully a similar title in the near future will showcase the diversity of approaches that can be found in bara manga.

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Carnal resonance: affect and online pornography, by Susanna Paasonen, Cambridge, MA, MIT, 2011, 336 pp., $35.00 / £24.95 (hbk), SIBN 978-0-262-01631-5

Susanna Paasonen's *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* provides a useful framework for theorizing online pornography in all of its quirky, kinky, and sometimes shocking or grotesque particularities. While the book's subtitle implies that the text resides in the developing 'affective turn,' *Carnal Resonance* actively resists such a classification. Rather than placing her analytical orientation firmly within an affective or representation-focused 'school,' two broad areas of scholarship that the author contends have been unhelpfully and binaristically opposed to each other in recent years (pp. 8–12), Paasonen adopts the term 'carnal resonance' to make 'sense of the movement between porn and its users' in order to 'tackle the interactive nature of such attachments' (p. 16). She deploys the term in a two-fold fashion that attends firstly to how users are 'grabbed' by porn's 'visceral appeal and power to disturb' and secondly to the process by which users develop lasting affinities with specific websites, genre tropes, performers, or even individual texts