The Significance of *Manga* in the Identity-Construction of Young American Adults: A
Lacanian Approach

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the identity construction of five *manga* fans by exploring their creation of comics and their cosplay. Certain identity themes emerged through a Lacanian interpretation using a qualitative/interpretivist paradigm. Data collection relied primarily on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants, and included their cosplay photos as well as their *manga* drawings and stories. Specifically, Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real were used to interpret these participants' identities. The study showed not only that identity is not always determined by the Symbolic (conscious act), but also that it is governed by unconscious desire and fantasy (of the Real). While unconscious desire (Real) continues to break the fixability of identity, the Symbolic remains an oppressed ruling Other that determines which identity is positive and which negative. The Imaginary is a most important outlet in terms of identity building for the subject, the freedom to make changes, and the power to heal one's fixity against change (provide hope) in light of the Other's gaze. Some of Lacan's concepts—gaze, fantasy, desire/lack, camouflage—are also discussed by way of explaining identity-related themes.

Dedication

Dedicated to my parents—

Chao-hong Chen and Fu-rong Chenlin

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research explores the identity formation of young American adults through their engagement with *manga* from a Lacanian perspective. The study seeks to understand the meaning of the identities that young people form based on their fantasies of the *manga* world as well as how they use *manga* to articulate their social and cultural worlds. This introductory chapter presents the background and theoretical framework for this study; identifies the problem statement; defines the research questions, methodology, rationale, and significance of the study; and outlines the chapters that follow.

Background of the Study

During the past decade, Japanese *manga*¹ (comic books) and *anime*² (animation) have become widely accepted as popular visual forms accessible throughout the world through mass media (Natsume, 2000, 2001). Young adults worldwide have formed fan clubs and websites, through which they display and share their own comic creations with the public. *Manga*'s widespread popularity in the United States is evident in local bookstores, entire aisles of which have been dedicated to hundreds of different *manga*

¹ *Manga* (mahn-gah, 漫画) literally means "humorous picture" in the sense of caricatures or comic books in English (Toku, 2001) and describes a sequence of pictures that tell a story. The term was first popularized by well-known woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai, who published *Hokusai Manga* in 1814 (Hosogaya, 2002). The word *manga* combines the Chinese character *man* (meaning "involuntary" and implying "morally corrupt") and the Japanese word *ga* (meaning "picture"). The result is a word with the double meaning of "whimsical (and slightly risqué) sketches" (Schodt, 1986, p. 18).

² *Animé* (ah-nee-may) is a Japanese term for animation, a motion picture that uses cinematic productions (Schodt, 1996). *Manga* series are often transformed into *animé* productions and often appear on television and cable networks as well as on merchandise.

styles. Artists, readers, and fans have engaged in the global production and consumption³ of these Japanese-inspired comics. On university campuses, *manga* fans have formed clubs devoted to enjoying and promoting both *manga* and *anime* (Duarte, 2003). Furthermore, young people in the United States have appropriated *manga* for the purpose of expressing their own identities. The art form's tremendous social and cultural impact stems from its influence on young people's artistic development through popular culture (Toku, 2001a, 2001b; Wilson, 2000, 2003).

However, more recently *manga* has come to mean simply "comics made in Japan." As such, it is important to understand *manga* better: What are its characteristics? How does it differ from comics produced in the Western hemisphere? How are its cultural influences expressed? *Manga* covers a range of publications, including picture books, *anime*, and cartoons (Schodt, 1986, 1996). Story *manga*⁴ are usually printed in dichromatic (e.g., black and white) tones and focus on pictorial images rather than text, depicting in particular feelings and emotions through sequential movement (Schodt, 1996). In addition to the iconic technique of figure drawing, *manga* incorporates a distinct and elaborated facial style (e.g., big eyes, long eyelashes, and small delicate mouths) (Natsume, 2007). These aesthetic qualities and *manga*'s unique styles make the art form attractive to its western fans.

In general, *manga* and *anime* stories typically include specific features: a high-tech look, fantasy worlds, human drama, complex characters with emotional inner

³ The export value of Japanese *manga-anime* sold to the American market was estimated at \$75 million in 1996, surpassing that of the American comic book market, even as American artists had begun incorporating the Japanese *manga* style into their own comic book production (Iwabuchi, 2002). *Manga* has achieved further commercial success through character merchandising in films, animation, and video games.

⁴ For the purpose of this study, the focus will be print or story *manga*.

development and growth, *mecha* characters (robots ridden by humans), and sexy, supernatural, and powerful female characters (Levi, 1996).⁵ Unlike children's cartoons created by American artists, *manga* and *anime* can be written for readers of any age. Adult *manga* are frequently held to be as complex in form as novels in their depictions of complex human dramas (Toku, 2001a). Moreover, the extensive range of *manga* genres emphasize themes that provoke reader identification by questioning reality and human identity (Napier, 2002). *Manga* characters often pose questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? Why do I do what I do? What is reality? Such questions signify one's quest and need to understand the meaning of life and one's inherent inner lives.

Manga stories tend to focus on a subconscious conflict-solving level in which the scenarios depict glorified images of everyday people doing great things (Craig, 2000). They often trigger a desirable image of self—one that has the power or magic to become something larger than oneself. Accordingly, participants perceive themselves in these *manga* images. They aspire to be the story characters and see their lives reflected in, experienced by, and problem-solved by the characters. Thus, through a series of images, *manga* provides a form of fantasy and imagination that mediate between how participants see themselves and how they desire to be seen by others in a new, unconventional light. As a result, *manga* promotes emotional expression, often leading to radically different views of lifestyles, personal and cultural values, and even beliefs that are disparate from those of western society.

In *manga*, the depiction of characters constructing an “idealized identity” from a fragmented or shattered persona, fans’ construction of their own idealized identity from

⁵ This is merely an overview, since the range of stories is quite varied, and many have none of these features.

their fragmented organic selves, the influence of the group and its forms on individuals as transmitted through fan groups and websites, and the interplay of all aspects serve as both metaphors for and examples of the Lacanian vision of the construction of a fictional identity in psycho-social development. Moreover, the appropriation of the pictorial and textual “language” of *manga* is illustrative of Lacan’s suggestion that the fiction of identity exists exclusively in language, being both explicitly expressed and encoded within it. According to this logic, *manga* supplies fans with the tools to construct a fictional identity that they merely believe they’ve created, although it would be nearer the truth to say that it supplies them with that identity through the act of providing a means of expression. (Although fans tend to believe *manga* is subversive, it actually enforces many values widely embraced in society, including some very traditional ones.) The result of this distance between perception and reality clearly suggests a Lacanian *méconnaissance*. However, given that the *manga* idealized “identity” is so clearly a fantasy—together with the almost universal acknowledgment to *manga* characters of a divided self—it paradoxically suggests a high degree of what Lacan might consider an acceptance of one’s condition as a fragmented human, a product of desire and culture, as well as perhaps serving as a tacit acknowledgment of the fictionality of self.

Statement of the Problem

This study’s investigation began with an empirical interest that subsequently developed into a theoretical understanding of how young people construct their identity through the popularized art form of *manga*. A flyer on campus—“Come and Learn How to Draw *Manga*”—sparked curiosity about why American college students like *manga* and what it means to dress like *manga* characters. Observing the Ohio State University

(OSU) *Manga* Club members led to the discovery that its members believe that *manga* is better than western comics in connecting to readers' inner emotions through the visual characteristics of its art style. Members learn to copy, and later alter, the *manga* style, giving their characters a unique style that can be used to explore alternatives. The mimicry⁶ of *manga* characters is an attempt to express, construct, and use different forms of identity.

As members become more involved with *manga* over time, their views seem to change in response to different values and attitudes.⁷ Embracing Japanese *manga* seems to promote cognitive processes that may generate alternatives to reality and promote identity changes. As a result, *manga* participants appear to be thoughtful. They learn and perceive the Japanese culture not as exoticism, but as a mirror reflecting their personal and cultural identities through the eyes of the other—namely, *manga* stories and characters. According to one club member, “*manga* makes you question and think about yourself as experienced by the character” (Kent, personal communication, May, 25, 2005). *Manga* appears to help motivate its participants to think about the consequences of actions in situations of identity crisis, creating a space in which to make decisions and think about identity in a liberating way.

The driving question of the study emerged in an ongoing dialectical process: How does *manga* provide resources for its participants to change and develop their own

⁶ When members draw *manga* characters, their styles appear to be almost the same, but not quite like those of *manga*. They go beyond the original *manga* style by appropriating its style, producing excesses and differences to form an identity by becoming *mangaka* (a *manga* artist) or *manga*-lized. Lacan calls this the act of camouflage.

⁷ During conversations with *manga* club fans, many members expressed a desire to visit or live in Japan. Some had enrolled in Japanese language and culture courses while others even assumed Japanese names or dyed their hair black, suggesting that they were (whether consciously or not) imitating the characters found in *manga* stories.

identities, needs, and desires? Other questions emerged such as is participation in the OSU *manga* club an expression of a fantasy to become something or someone and how do young fans use *manga* to express distinction and non-conformity with respect to mainstream American culture. In other words, is involvement with *manga* a form of “refusal” (Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000) or “resistance” (McRobbie, 1991; Storey, 1996)? In facilitating this cultural rebellion, does *manga* make its fans more aware of their own culture? What influence does the consumption and reproduction of the artifacts of another culture have on the construction of fans’ own identity?

Ongoing dialogues with club members led to further more specific questions. First, what is the meaning of participants’ involvement with *manga*? Specifically, in what ways do they perceive themselves as subjects? Second, what does it mean to create and *cosplay manga* stories and characters? Finally, what purpose does their involvement with *manga* serve, particularly as they deal with identity issues and problems? As part of the research, this study connects the popular *manga* culture to identity-invested meanings in producing identity in young people who participate in it. The study examines the way in which participants use *manga* to perceive, interpret, and ultimately construct their identity in order to articulate their social and cultural worlds.

Theoretical Framework

This research relies primarily on a Lacanian psychoanalytic view to interpret the meaning of identity for *manga* participants. Generally speaking, the Lacanian model of the subject is de-centered, there is no unified self, but the subject is divided between self and other, one’s identity is projected in relation to others according to one’s identity

needs and desires. Unlike other theories of identity, which emphasize how one differs⁸ from others (i.e., “us vs. them”), Lacanian identity is focused on one’s perception of unity with others. This is in sharp contrast to the idea of *manga* as exoticism (othering), where the focus is on what is different. Lacanian identity is formed not by contrasting the self with others, but by constructing multiple collages of identity based on the image of the Other with which one particularly identifies as something desirable.

The Lacanian concept of identity projects the subject’s identity in relation to others in the process of *becoming* in both a Symbolic and Real sense in a search for unity and a whole self. According to Lacan, identity is composed primarily of multiple bits of images often drawn from the outside. For example, identity is named, given to us in ways that we may not be conscious of and we may not be able to change within the Symbolic world that names us. We either accept it or reject it by constructing alternatives through the Imaginary as an escape. In addition to influences from the outside, identity construction is influenced by the unconscious (e.g., desire, fantasy), which shapes both discursive and non-discursive forms⁹ of identity.

According to Lacan (1978), identity is not always a conscious thought; thus, the subject can never be fully represented by language due to frequent contradictions between what is said and unsaid. The unconscious refers to repressed signifiers evidenced in the return of a slip of the tongue, a joke or humor, all symptoms in the form of the

⁸ Identity as difference, see Stuart Hall (1990, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 2000; 1992). Identity is a practice, a form of struggle for meaning in which individuals constantly reproduce and reconstitute how they understand themselves in relation to others—not through opposition, but through difference(s).

⁹ Lacan (1977g) defines identity as something inherently linked to the external; however, Lacan’s notion of identity is not just a set of subject positions imposed upon the subject. Instead, identity arises from a psyche motivated by a lack/desire. Lacan’s dynamic concept of desire drives individuals’ journey toward self-identification and the desire for recognition (Evans, 1996; Fink, 1995; Kojève & Queneau, 1969).

misuse of language working at the conscious level. Thus, one's identity can never be whole, but rather entails fracturing and splitting.

Another component of Lacanian theory with relevance for to the study relates to Lacan's concept of lack and the endless production of desire. Lacan's concepts of lack and desire thus shape other aspects of his identity theory, including the three registers of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic identity (Lacan, 1977c, 1978), particularly his ideas of the Imaginary and the Mirror stage.

While a complete discussion of Lacan's identity theory is beyond the scope of this study, Lacan's theory of identity is crucial to this study involving external socio-cultural factors but also internal forces of desire as well. We fall in love with our own image (in the Mirror stage) and are then attracted by what we see and want to be but cannot be: an integrated, autonomous self for whom lack creates never-ending desire.

Among the *manga* fans observed, a strong identification with the *manga* image (e.g., characters, stories) was evident, suggesting that fans' involvement cannot be viewed as simply a fascination with the exotic. Moreover, their involvement does not seem to be based on a desire to reaffirm their own American identities or on a perception that Japan is a superpower to be imitated. Rather, by identifying with imaginary others (i.e., *manga* characters in fantasy), fans have the opportunity to experience the self in the eyes of the other, whether it be a beautiful Japanese death god, a powerful warrior, or an artificial cyborg—all of which points to the idea that identity is tied to dissatisfaction with one's own identity in reality. The images of the *manga* world provide fans with a temporary but complete and satisfying self; this subjective identity is based on one's divided image of self or one's want-to-be self, including gender/sex roles. As Lacan

(1977f) puts it, all identities are ultimately a false and problematic self caught and captured by the images (object of desire), providing the subject a temporary place in the culture that continues to divide and alienate the subject as a being lack. In other words, in seeking a complete and satisfying identity, one struggles and is ultimately doomed to failure. However, the desire for dissatisfaction is not a negative based on a lack, but might be able to help us develop our own identity and motivate changes in the unsatisfied images of ourselves.

Methodology

Given the subjectiveness of the interview responses involved in an in-depth understanding of *manga* fans' identity construction and the meanings that govern their production, this research relies on a qualitative/interpretivist paradigm followed by in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1998). In addition to the interviews, photocopies of participants' *manga* drawings and favorite *manga* stories were collected, analyzed, and subsequently interpreted. The interpretation of ways in which *manga* fans' identities are linked to participants' favorite *manga* stories and characters incorporates the theory of Lacan's three registers.

Participants in the study were recruited from the OSU *Manga* Club. Initially, twelve participants were recruited based on observations of club meetings. Only six of these were motivated enough to continue with follow-up interviews. The final, in-depth analysis was confined to these six participants, each of whom proved to be highly thoughtful and engaged in writing, drawing, and/or reading *manga*.

Part of the purpose of this research was to provide an emic perspective by listening to participants to ensure that their voices are heard. Asking questions did not

aim to inform the participants, but rather to understand participants' identity components. A conversational questioning technique was used to enable participants to detail their identity elements in relation to their favorite *manga* characters. The focus on participants' own stories and self-inventing subjects encouraged them to reveal their desire to develop and recognize their own identities.

Content analysis was used to identify identity themes in participants' responses. The data analysis consisted of two steps: (1) identification of themes related to the question of how *manga* informs young people's identities and (2) interpretation of the data using relevant themes derived from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory including the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders; fantasy; and desire and lack (where lack is the cause of desire). Such "preset" themes are broadly referred to as "theoretical." Additional themes emerged in the present study during interviews conducted during the pilot study, while other relevant themes (e.g., gender identity, and sexuality) were drawn from the *manga* literature. Themes were also based on the recurring ideas or thoughts communicated by participants.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Much of what is known about young people's art-making derives from the classroom context, in which authoritative teachers significantly influence students' practices. Wilson (2000, 2003) states that popular visual cultural images of Japanese *manga* are expanding in a rhizomic fashion, affecting young children's cognitive and artistic development and influencing their rapport with authority figures and resolution of issues (Toku, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). Often previous art education research has been based on analyses of children's drawings within the classroom context while the present study

looks at the relationship between participants' artistic creations and their identity construction in a student-initiated, non-classroom setting connecting identity construction with young people's interest in popular culture.

This study is significant in that it supports an understanding of identity construction from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective. A forthcoming special issue of *Visual Arts Research Journal* recognizes the general absence of Lacanian theory from art education and supports its potential to address factors in subjectivity that fall outside of consciousness (Parsons & Walker, 2010). Thus, the study seeks to understand participants' subjectivity through the internal components of affective dispositions, unconscious fantasies, and desires in relation to external factors such as norms, conventions, and parental expectations, especially regarding gender and sex roles. Through the interplay between these factors, identity acquires a personal meaning and reflexive ability to connect with desires.

Given the strong current focus of art education and that of the recent past, the study's attention to visual culture is also significant. Much of what is known about young people's artmaking derives from the classroom context, in which authoritative teachers significantly influence students' practices. This study recognizes the site of visual culture experiences for young people outside and beyond the classroom, examining the relationship between participants' artistic creations and their construction of identity in a self-initiated, non-classroom setting, connecting identity construction with young people's interest in popular culture.

Outline of the Chapters

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature on theories of identity, focusing in particular on the Lacanian perspective. It also provides information related to *manga*'s characteristics and origins. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study. Chapter Four presents a case-by-case analysis of research participants' interviews using a Lacanian approach. Chapter Five discusses the Lacanian themes that emerged in the narratives presented in Chapter Four and briefly concludes the research findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The relevant literature is presented in this chapter in two parts. Part one describes *manga's* characteristics and origins, serving not only as contextual information showing the differences between Japanese *manga* and American comics, but also as an illustration of *manga's* cultural tradition. Part two reviews several theories of identity from the Lacanian perspective, including Lacan's central ideas of identity and the work of jagodzinski and Zîzêk—two theorists who applied Lacanian theory to interpret cultural media (films, visuals, video games, etc.), focusing mainly on the concepts of fantasy, desire, and gaze. In the current study, Lacanian theory is used to provide a theoretical understanding of the concept of identity. Finally, a summary of this chapter is provided.

Part I

Manga's Origins and Characteristics

Japan has a long tradition of using sequential art (i.e., art that presents stories through a series of pictures), dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries AD. The earliest sequential art was found on wooden planks in the ceiling of Horyuji Temple in Nara (Ito, 2005). These illustrated narrative picture scrolls, known as *emaki* (Tanaka, 2004), dealt with serious religious subjects as well as witty tales, court events, daily life, humorous legends, and poetry (Ito, 1994a, 1994b, 2005; Toku, 2001b). Some contained drawings of animals or flowers at different stages, depending on the season. The Choju-giga (Animal

Scrolls), drawn by the Buddhist monk Toba and other artists in the 12th century (Tanaka, 2004), emphasized facial expressions and actions drawn in a caricatured style. They were satirical and parodic and often portrayed humanity in the form of various anthropomorphic animals as they sought to mock or critique mainstream Japanese society (Tanaka, 2004). The ancient scrolls found in temples and the images contained in *ukiyo-e*¹⁰ subsequently became sources for the development of modern *manga* (Tanaka, 2004), providing the storytelling principles as well the style and focus on entertainment.

Origins of Sex and Gender Themes in Manga

Sexuality has always been a prevalent subject area for Japanese art,¹¹ and is often regarded as a source of emotional and physical connection for men and women (Hibbett, 2001). Such pictorial art is believed to serve a positive moral and medical function, facilitating a harmonious sex life for women and men as a divine step toward freedom for humankind (Perper & Cornog, 2002). *Manga*, as a living tradition, has retained the traditional approach to sexuality found in the older Japanese aesthetic traditions of kabuki

¹⁰ *Manga*'s form also derives from a certain style of woodblock painting known as *ukiyo-e*, which is a Japanese term meaning "pictures of a floating world" (Hibbett, 2001). *Ukiyo-e* became popular during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) and depicted the city life of prosperous townsmen (i.e., merchants, who were the lowest ranked in Japanese society, but who regarded themselves as superior in terms of style and taste), often including scenes of the streets and shops of Edo (Tokyo). *Ukiyo-e* was considered an inexpensive way to make prints and images. During the Tokugawa period, artists were often intrigued by the world of pleasure and entertainment districts. Artists were stimulated by the life, manner, and costumes of popular actors, and *ukiyo-e* often depicted the private lives and affairs of actors, courtesans, and sumo wrestlers (Hibbett, 2001; Screech, 1999).

¹¹ For example, the classical *ukiyo-e* prints were often erotic, graphic displays depicting the sexual activity of courtesans and popular actors (Screech, 1999). These classical Japanese woodblock prints also typically depicted women as beautiful, elegant, and erotic objects not restricted by their emotions, documenting an acceptance of sexuality in which sex is sometimes seen as transcendent or divine (Perper & Cornog, 2002).

theatre¹² (Ito, 1994a, 2005; Ogi, 2003). Men often perform female roles in the male kabuki theatre, while women perform male roles in the female kabuki theatre. Sex and gender roles are not defined as rigidly as they are in American culture. In light of these cultural influences, adult *manga* depicts the ancient themes of sexual activity, themes of gender transvestitism, and cross-dressing in a new light, within the comparatively recent genre of Japanese *manga*. Same-sex relationships are of particular interest within the larger context of the *manga* genre and are openly addressed, especially in adult *manga*.

Some adult *manga* can be perceived as pornography in western countries. Although *manga* draws upon the old aesthetic and cultural traditions of Japan, an openness about sex exists throughout the genre. This context underpinning modern *manga* distinguishes it from other comics. Without an understanding of Japanese culture, the meanings of sex and gender roles in *manga* can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted by American readers.

The Influence of Religion

In addition to its cultural influences, *manga* stories of the supernatural also take on Japanese religious influences. *Manga* often depicts superhuman beings or powers. Such themes are partially based on *Shintō*, which is often translated as “the way of the gods” (Tiedemann, 1974).¹³ The images of feminine power that repeatedly appear in

¹² *Kabuki* (translated as the art of singing and dancing) is a form of traditional Japanese theatre known for the stylization of its drama and the intricate design of costumes and makeup. Sometimes female and male actors are available for prostitution for their patrons (Hibbett, 2001).

¹³ *Shinto* beliefs and practices are rooted in the animist tradition, in which a living supernatural or sacred force is thought to be found in persons, animals, places, or things in addition to being manifested in spiritual, awe-inspiring forms such as of birds, beasts, dragons, trees, plants, seas, and mountains (Holtom, 1993). *Shinto* entails the worship of *kami* (i.e., spirits, ancestors, gods, and nature). Many (approximately 800) *kami* are said to reign (Holtom, 1993), but *kami* are not ghosts in the Western sense (Reader, 1993).

manga are often associated with powerful female *kami*—beautiful, erotic, and powerful protective spirits (Perper & Cornog, 2002).

Shinto is reflected in *manga* characters who value the importance of sentiment and connections with nature. In addition, themes involving characters with a strong belief in doing the right thing are based on the influence of Confucianism and Taoism (Tiedemann, 1974). Finally, many *manga* stories also reflect the influence of karma from the Buddhist religion—namely, the idea that one’s actions have consequences and that what a person does always follows him. Characters in *manga* are often involved in internal and external struggles to understand the meaning of their own actions in relation to others.

The Influence of Western Art Styles

Manga shows evidence of Western as well as Eastern influences. Western styles and techniques such as shading, perspective, narrative pattern, and word balloons were introduced in Japan in approximately 1860 by British cartoon artist Charles Wirgman (1835-1891) and Frenchman George Bigot (1860-1927) (Schodt, 1986). These techniques were adopted and transformed by Japanese *manga* artists.

The Japanese subsequently became fascinated by western fashion, technology, and modernization after their defeat in World War II (Lent, 2004; Schodt, 1986). Thus, *manga* began to be inspired by western notions of beauty. Osamu Tezuka, “father of modern *manga*,” sparked a revolution in the incorporation of western animation and cinematic techniques within *manga* (Schodt, 1986). His interest in these cinematic effects and perspectives revolutionized the art form in the 1960s by inventing *manga*’s distinctive “large eyes” style, which he based on popular western characters such as Walt

Disney's Mickey Mouse (Schodt, 1986, 1996). Today, many characters found in popular *manga* series still inherit these highly recognizable iconic features of *manga* characters.

Manga's Characteristics

In Japan, the term *manga* refers to a widely varied range of publications that include printed comic books, magazines, *anime*, cartoons, and comic strips (Schodt, 1986, 1996). Both *manga* and *anime* stories typically include a high-tech look, fantasy worlds, human drama, complex characters with emotional and inner development and growth, *mecha* characters (robots ridden by humans), and sexy, supernatural, and powerful female characters (Levi, 1996). Some *manga* combine these features whereas others have none. This broad range of features is something not often seen in mass-market western comics.

Manga as Comics

Another way *manga* differs from American and European comic books is that they are drawn with little or no color. They are usually printed in dichromatic tones (i.e., black and white) in magazines (Schodt, 1986) and subsequently collected and reprinted onto high-quality paper in both black and white and color (Tanaka, 2004). *Manga* characters are often drawn in a style characteristic of cartoons, utilizing the iconic technique of figure drawing; for example, characters often have big eyes and an innocent and cute appearance (McCloud, 1994). *Manga* scenes can be drawn with minimal background details or highly realistic environments and seeded with immensely powerful sentiments (McCloud, 1994).

Words and pictures in *manga* are designed for instant reading, with a focus on the pictorial images. *Manga* artists tend to devote many panels to their stories because they

emphasize images and intense, affect-charged experiences over words. They may use many frames and dedicate several pages to depict single actions and motions in sequential movement with expressive close-ups, different viewpoints, and perspectives (McCloud, 1994; Schodt, 1986). The use of the panel is one of the most important characteristics in the flow of *manga* storylines. *Manga* artists use overlapping irregular or off-centered panels to embody a sense of flow in time and spatial movement. The frames between panels are designed for better pacing, transition, and storytelling—a theatrical effect similar to what is seen as slow motion in movies. Sometimes panel transitions can be taken out of sequence, like random images flashing out from each other with no logical relation to each other at all. This is primarily explained as the collapsing of time and space (McCloud, 1994). The use of an endless space with non-framed panel transitions allows the artist to control what readers see. It also evokes the mood of a character, thereby helping the reader to participate in or identify with the character's feelings and emotions as the story progresses (McCloud, 1994).

Visual Appearance

Manga's distinctive style can also be attributed to the highly stylized human figures that characterize the medium (Natsume, 2000). One of the most distinctive features of *manga* illustrations is the extreme stylization of visual appearance, including big eyes, a small mouth and nose, strange hairstyles, and a relatively undefined bodyline and muscles. This is particularly true of girls' and women's *manga*, in which female and male characters in foreign settings are depicted as having long legs, slim figures, flowing blonde hair, and big, sparkling, orb-like eyes (Lent, 2004; Natsume, 2000). *Manga* characters are emotionally expressive and convey their inner struggles as opposed to the

external actions. This theme is evident in all *manga* genres. *Manga* uses iconic symbols (e.g., anger mark, embarrassment line, teardrops) (McCloud, 1994) to show a wide range of human emotions. For example, characters' eyes are often drawn in a large oval shape to express innocence and cuteness. Eyes can be small to show ranges of fear, annoyance, anger, sadness, disbelief, evil, happiness, relief, surprise, or tiredness.

Another characteristic of *manga* characters is that they tend to wear normal, everyday clothing as opposed to their western comic book counterparts (personal conversations with *manga* fans, 2004), who often wear costumes and capes to hide their superpower and secret identity and live double lives (Oliker, 2001). Scenes in many *manga* comics are often drawn against flowery backgrounds to depict the sentiment or heroic moments. Although these characteristics are typical of *manga*, regardless of the specific genre, much more style variation occurs in *manga* than comics from the United States.¹⁴

The Main Manga Genres

Generally speaking, *manga* genres are categorized in terms of the market to which the genre is targeted (Kinsella, 2000; Schodt, 1986). In terms of target audience, the Ohio State Library System (Donovan, 2001, 2004) categorized comics as adult *manga* (including women's and men's *manga*); girls' *manga* (*shōjo*); boys' *manga* (*shōnen*); juvenile *manga*; and ladies' *manga* (*redikomi*).¹⁵ The following sections describe the

¹⁴ The comics generally referred to as American comics in this study are actually American mainstream comics (i.e., superhero comics).

¹⁵ *Manga* topics are loosely divided into art, biography, science fiction, business, comedy, cooking, culture, detective and mystery stories, drama, education, entertainment and show business, erotica/pornography, fantasy, finance and economics, political satire (*fushiga*), absurdity (*fujori*), gambling, history, homosexuality, horror journalism, literature, medicine, music, nonsense, picaresque (centering on the adventures of rogues and knaves), religious, romance, science fiction, social issues, sports, and spy stories (Donovan, 2001).

main *manga* genres as defined by *manga*'s producers and readers. In particular, members of the OSU *Manga* Club prefer *shōnen* (boys') and *shōjo* (girls') *manga*.

Shōnen (boys') manga. *Shōnen manga* targets young teenage boys and is sometimes written by men, reflecting the creator's subconscious adolescent fantasies and unfulfilled desires (Cooper-Chen, 2001). The main topics (i.e., themes) included within this genre include fantasy, science fiction, comedy, sports, and (non-graphic) sex. Action and school life stories are also common within this genre.

Shōjo (girls') manga. A literal translation of *shōjo* is "young, teenaged, unmarried girl" (Ito, 1994b). *Shōjo manga* targets younger girls and unmarried women. The *shōjo* image is significant in popular culture because it is chiefly produced and written by female artists and centers on the identity and various roles of women in Japanese society. *Shōjo manga* is read by a wide variety of women from different social groups. They are most popular among women in their teens, late twenties, and middle years¹⁶ (Ito, 2005) for reasons outlined below.

The *shōjo* genre, like other *manga* genres, does not depict an objective, external reality, but instead shows social values and gender roles as viewed by *shōjo* readers and writers (Fujimoto, 1991; Ito, 2005). *Shōjo manga* describes individual women's views regarding sexuality, gender, traditions, and politics. It also describes ideal models of what *shōjo* is and what *shōjo* can—or cannot—be or do (Ito, 1994b; Ogi, 2003). These stories may occur within a drama, action, or science fiction theme. Common topics within the *shōjo* genre include interpersonal relationships, comedy, romantic love, school life, personal dreams and fantasies, and life before and during marriage. This last emphasis is

¹⁶*Shōjo manga* is also read by boys and men.

also a reason why this category appeals to older and married women. The *shōjo manga* targeted toward older girls and women often challenges existing gender roles and norms as agents of socialization (Ito, 1994b; Tsurumi, 2000).

The theme of sexuality—especially male homosexuality—is also incorporated within *shōjo manga* (Ito, 2005; Ogi, 2001, 2003). Two important sub-genres occur within the broader *shōjo* genre—*shōnen-ai*¹⁷ and *ya-o-i*¹⁸—and are concerned primarily with love relationships between two somewhat feminine male characters (boy-boy love). They also deal with subversive themes of sexuality, including the reversal of male and female power relationships, in which female sexual subjects are replaced by male bodies, cross-dressing (girls dress as boys and beautiful boys dress as girls), and trans-gender experimentation (Ito, 1994b, 2005; Ogi, 2001, 2003).

Although both *shōnen-ai* and *ya-o-i* sub-genres occupy a small niche in Japan, they are popular among many young American female readers. In *shōjo manga*, gay men's relationships (but not female/female relationships) are perceived as an ideal and superior form of love (Cooper-Chen, 2001). This unconditional love stemming from the merging of two equal sexes can never be experienced in reality (McLelland, 2000). Many Japanese women seek an alternative to the inequality between women and men (McLelland, 2000, 2004). The ideal and authentic expression of love and equality in relationships depicted in the *shōnen-ai* and *ya-o-i* sub-genres is considered a free love that can't be achieved by two women (Suzuki cited in Cooper-Chen, 2001).

¹⁷ *Shōnen-ai manga* depicts boy-boy relationships involving kissing and hugging without explicit sex scenes. In contrast, the *ya-o-i* sub-genre contains explicit or even violent sexual scenes at times and would sometimes be characterized as pornography in the American sense.

¹⁸ *Ya-o-i manga* is a Japanese acronym for words meaning “no build-up,” “no foreclosure,” and “no meaning” and is composed of the first syllable of those three phases: “**y**ama nashi,” “**o**chi nashi,” and “**i**minashi” (Kinsella, 2000).

Dōjinshi (amateur) manga. The previously described genres are representative of the majority of professional *manga*. Young amateur artists also develop and print their own *manga* books (called *dōjinshi*) for distribution among fans at *manga* clubs and conventions. In the early 1980s, many amateur *manga* artists began to produce parodic *manga* (Kinsella, 1998, 2000), in which popular commercial *manga* stories and characters are portrayed in homosexual relationships and explicit erotic contexts (Kinsella, 1998, 2000). These stories sometimes contain adult material and depict unconventional tastes, styles, and forms adapted from original *manga* series; however, other types of *dōjinshi* do not include sexual activity. In short, any *manga* characters and stories created by *manga* club participants fall into the *dōjinshi* tradition. Fans of a particular genre generally produce these types of *manga* to explore what-if storylines by applying everyday situations and emotions to fantasy, imaginary characters, and comedic stories to recreate pleasure, desire, and alternative lifestyles.

Common Manga Themes

Manga stories emphasize a character's growth and development in everyday life. Many stories display characters' flaws and weaknesses along with their strengths and endearing qualities (Craig, 2000). They glorify images of normal people doing normal things—scenarios with which many readers can identify. These themes entail personal connections, including interpersonal relationships, and emphasize the importance of team collaboration, the value of friendship, the value of failure (e.g., tragic heroes), consequences of action and decision making, the importance of questioning one's existence and inner lives, the complexity of human relations (who am I, why am I here,

and why do I do what I do? What is real?); and the understanding of the poignant impermanence of things in a materialistic age (Craig, 2000; Schodt, 1986).

Manga themes are not limited to themes such as supernatural mysteries, but are instead quite diverse, ranging from magical girls' romance to life changes, fear of technological innovations, giant robots (known as *mecha*, usually ridden by human pilots) fighting with unknown aliens, martial arts (Ninja as martial artist/warrior), vampire battles, the role of the domestic housewife, cooking, the school sports epic, romantic triangles, and the gender reincarnated transvestite (Levi, 1996). The most popular genres in the U.S. are the fantasy element of *shōjo* (being magical and powerful) (Napier, 1998), ethical and moral themes, adventure and fighting elements of *shōnen* as martial warriors, the subversive theme of homosexuality as pure and equal love (McLelland, 2000, 2004), and alternative gender roles (Martinez, 1988).

Ethics/morals. Not only do the heroes and heroines depicted in *manga* have great powers, but they are also concerned primarily with doing the right thing and pursuing self-knowledge (*manga* participants, personal communication, 2004). A similar concept found within *manga* stories is the importance of sentiment. For example, the heroes in *manga* stories are often tragic heroes because a failed hero who accepts the consequences of his actions and the vanity of existence is even more heroic than one who only experiences success (*manga* participants, personal communication, 2004). *Manga* heroes, in this sense, are more “real” and less “ideal” than those of mass-marketed western comics (superhero genre). Another way in which *manga* diverges from the western ideal is in its treatment of gender issues.

Female superheroes/alternative gender roles. Gender is less rigid and more fluid in *manga* stories (*manga* participants, personal communication, 2004). Gender, as depicted in *manga*, is not defined by the person's biology; instead, *manga* characters are free to cross sex/gender categories. They can be androgynous, ambiguous, or undefined. Indeed, it is common to see girls dressed as boys and beautiful boys who can be mistaken as girls (see *Revolutionary Girl Utena Manga*). Sometimes *manga* depicts the reversal of a male and female power relationship, with the female sexual subject being replaced by male bodies (see *Raman ½ Manga*). Trans-gender experimentation is often a common theme (sexual differences are reconstructed or characters have both female and male qualities) (see *Ghost in the Shell Manga*). Images of women's roles and females' gender identity have been addressed widely in *shōjo manga*. Female protagonists in *shōjo manga* are often equipped with fantastic "super" powers in order to create a pleasing (i.e., "cool") persona possessing both female and male qualities (Napier, 1998). Such protagonists can be read as depicting "wish-fulfilling fantasies of empowerment" and can also be seen as "intimately related to a young girl's normal femininity" (Naiper, 1998, p. 93). At times, *manga* stories depict female superheroes as feeling ambivalent about the roles they play (Allison, 1996, 2000). This ambiguity also crosses over into *manga* characters' expression of sexual preference.

*Boy-boy love: A love story between two guys.*¹⁹ In Japan, *manga* stories centering on same-sex relationships are not essentially about homosexuality as they are in the West, nor are they interpreted in terms of "homosexuality versus heterosexuality." Differences in the perception of same-sex genres might engender different responses in western

¹⁹ *Manga's* depictions of same-sex relationships are not considered bad or evil, as they are in the western moral sense of Christian purity and sexual restraint (Perper & Cornog, 2002).

cultures than they do in Japan, where same-sex relationships express the unity or balance within human life. For example, in the United States, male-male relationships are defined as “homosexuality” and are often seen as unacceptable or abnormal because they defy the accepted social and religious sexual norms. In Japan, same-sex relationships are not openly discussed in public, but it is acceptable to explore them in *manga*’s fantasy world (Allison, 1996, 2000). The imaginary seems to distance itself from reality to facilitate the public’s creativity and imagination. However, when *manga* is localized and appropriated by American youth, resulting in the reshaping of gender and sex identity, a hybrid creation of cultural values and new meanings results (Grigsby, 1998). Identities that embody characteristics of the original culture are blended with aspects of a new culture. Although much can be learned from exploring *manga* themes and genres, a complete understanding of the art form cannot be achieved without a thorough examination of its historical, cultural, and artistic influences, which the next section (i.e., Part II) explores in more detail.

Summary

The variety of *manga* read in the United States is relatively limited compared to the variety found in Japan due, in part, to differences between Japanese and American cultures. Some topics are popular in Japan but not in the United States and vice versa. Limitations in the range of *manga* in the United States are also due to censorship as American laws restrict children’s access to violent and sexual content. *Manga* stories are sometimes altered—or omitted altogether—to maintain compliance with the American law (Kinsella, 2000). In addition, much of classical Japanese *manga* cannot reach American audiences directly due to copyright accessibility and publishers’ decisions

regarding the promotion of the media. However, publishers are increasingly responding to demands from fans with new translations. When published translations are not available, fans provide their own “scanlation.”²⁰

Manga topics popular among American readers appear to be chosen not only because of individuals’ tastes or interests, but also because they are prohibited or unavailable (e.g., homosexuality, alternative versions of femininity) in mainstream American society. *Manga*’s attraction likely also stems from certain unique features of the medium itself. Readers can identify with the depth and realism of character development conveyed in sophisticated stories through a sequence of emotionally charged images utilizing film effect techniques that explore philosophical and moral issues of human subjectivity and identity through themes of desire, fantasy, sexuality, and gender identification. *Manga* invites identity participation. As one participant said, *manga* makes you question and think about yourself through the eyes of the character. Its wide range of genres offers something for individuals of all ages, genders, sexual orientations, and even cultural backgrounds and provides a platform for their desires and fantasies. As opposed to its American mass-marketed comic book counterparts, *manga* stories are about everyday life situations, focusing on ordinary people with whom the reader can identify and relate. Most importantly, *manga*’s fantasy element appears to attract club members because it represents possibilities for what one might do or become that is otherwise prohibited in mainstream, everyday reality.

²⁰ “Scanlation” refers to “scanning and translation,” the process by which *manga* comics are scanned and translated by fans (of Japan or of *manga* who know the Japanese language) into another language and then generally distributed via free Internet downloads (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scanlation>).

Part II

Theoretical Perspectives of Identity

The discussion is divided into three sections: a comparison of different views of identity, a review of the central concepts of Lacanian identity—the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, and a discussion of fantasy, desire, and gaze (the act of seeing), as interpreted by jagodzinski and Zîzêk.

A Comparison of Different Views of Identity Theories

A wide range of views on identity formation exist; thus, this section briefly contrasts the Lacanian theory of identity with other prominent identity theories and provides a Lacanian framework of identity to explain its relevance to this study.

Lacanian Identity vs. Modernism

The Lacanian concept of identity formation based on identification sharply contrasts the modernist view of identity construction. For example, the modernist view understands the individual subject (i.e., the “I” or the “self”) as a free and autonomous being that experiences the world as an indivisible “singular, distinctive, and unique” entity (Williams, 1976, pp.133-135). In other words, the modernist view posits an authentic and essentially true individuality that preexists cultural and social influences. As such, the Lacanian identity is not unified, but incomplete (or absent). In the Lacanian view, although the subject initially experiences the world as an indivisible whole, his or her identity is profoundly influenced not only by language and culture, but also by the unconscious aspects (Layton, 1998).

Lacanian Identity vs. Poststructuralism

Similar to Lacan's theory, the poststructuralist concept of identity focuses on identity as a set of subject positions in the culture (structure of language).

Poststructuralists insist that the human subject is not determined by inner ego or will, but rather by culture and language. Language constitutes identity for us, and we are continually reconstituted within the cultural framework as we speak and think (Weedon, 1999). Regardless of how much we try to escape, a subject cannot exist outside the cultural system by which other subjects are interconnected (Mansfield, 2000). As will be shown in more detail below, Lacan would agree that aspects of one's identity are a function of language, yet he also believes that identity construction may not be a conscious act and may not be articulated through language.

Lacanian Identity vs. Postmodernism

The postmodernist concept of identity reflects some aspects of Lacan's view in that it speaks of identity as a situational, social, and discursive process based on our perceptions of differences (Layton, 1998). For example, Hall (1996b) illustrates identity's dependence on 'difference' when he maintains that constituting "oneself as 'black' is another recognition of self through difference" (p. 116). In other words, "black identity" is learned through the process of recognizing what is not "white." Although Lacan would agree that identity formation is based on a social context, an important aspect of identity process is not based on contrasting oneself with others, but is motivated by similarity to one's ideal image of self, which is formed in part by observing others who will actually become a part of the ideal self.

Lacanian Identity vs. Postcolonialism

The postcolonialist concept of identity differs from Lacan's view in its focus on issues of power and domination. Postcolonialists view identity as either a distorted image imposed on a weaker group by a stronger group or, alternatively, a false image of superiority maintained by the stronger group. For example, Said's (1978) *Orientalism demonstrates* not only how the West creates inaccurate representations of other cultures, but also how other identities may not exist as fundamental or inherent phenomena. Rather, they can be seen as a by-product of domination. Said provides the concept of the Orient as an example, which was created by the western imagination and is based on the Occidental (Western) domination of the Orient. According to Said, the Oriental subject never existed prior to its creation by the western mind; *rather*, the "Oriental" identity *was* bestowed by the western mind on account of its power and superiority. Such identity is historically, politically, culturally, and economically produced and imposed by the West and its representation of "us" *versus* "them" (western *versus* non-western) (Hall, 1996). Lacan would agree that identity is formed, in part, based on one's perception of the other. However, in his view, an individual's perception of the other is not primarily based on an "us *versus* them" desire to maintain dominance. Instead, at least in part (in the Mirror stage), there is no "Other" for Lacan. The individual tends to see "the Other" as him-/herself.

Bhabha (1994), another postcolonialist theorist, also linked identification with "the Other" as the result of "the Other's" policies of domination. For example, colonized countries may tend to "mimic" their oppressors because they view their oppressors' power as somehow imitable due to the need to conform to laws, rules,

culture, and conventions of the dominating society. As such, the weaker party's identification with the stronger party is ultimately a reflection (or a mocking) of the stronger party's values and desires. Yet do the American youth direct a significant amount of time and energy toward *manga* and toward the imitation of Japanese culture based on perceptions of Japanese superiority or *manga*'s overwhelming popularity? According to the *manga* club examined in this study, neither is the case. (This question is discussed in the summary of the section on the Lacanian Identity: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.)

Lacanian Theory

Lacanian theory explains participants' involvement with *manga* in ways other theories of identity do not. Although the Lacanian concept of identity formation will be described more completely in subsequent sections, it is important to emphasize that—unlike all the other notions of identity previously described—the Lacanian view bases identity formation on “lack” or “desire.” The theory rests on the unconscious perception between the ways an individual perceives him-/herself and the ways the individual wants to be seen by others in the social and cultural world. In other words, Lacanian identity is not based primarily on the perception of the other as different, but the other as part of the ideal self (assimilated process), which is also motivated by other components (e.g., desire/lack, power, camouflage, need for security, and desire for recognition). Lacanian identity construction is not always a conscious process. In Hall's (1999) words, identity “operate[s], not just discursively, but at the symbolic and psychic level of the unconscious” (p. 311). In the Lacanian view, identity is not merely a set of subject

positions constructed outside the subject, but is essentially connected to (Freud's) unconscious desire.

The Lacanian theory of identity formation is similar to Freud's theory in that it recognizes the psyche as being split between the conscious and unconscious elements. In addition, both theories emphasize subjective experiences. However, Lacanian theory differs from Freudian theory in terms of the psyche's dynamics and its impact on identity formation. Lacan seeks to explain that the lack occurs in the misrecognition of an objective being (Rumboll, 1996) as a whole. It is not primarily driven by the bodily needs and instincts. For example, the objective woman and man do not exist but are, in fact, "lacking" (nonexistent or absent) beings (because of the loss of the Real). According to Lacan, no subject exists in its totality, only the endless desire motivated by this lacking (Fink, 1995). Desire exists, but the 'unity of wo/man' does not (Rumboll, 1996). In other words, Lacanian identity is a product of desire. Although Lacan seeks to revive some of Freud's theory, his interpretation of desire is based on transference of a lacking being with symbolic identification (e.g., desire is always transference of something onto something else), which differs from Freud's idea of biological and sexual needs governing one's entire adult identity and civilization.

Freudian Influence

According to Freud, the human psyche has both conscious and subconscious elements (Ragland-Sullivan, 1987). It is composed of the id, the ego, and the superego. The id (*i.e.*, the subconscious) is characterized by primitive instincts (e.g., a desire to possess one's family member sexually) and the desire for satisfaction of bodily needs (e.g., sex, food). In contrast, the ego preserves a stable sense of self-image for purposes

of environmental adaptation and assimilation and functions as the mediator between the id and the superego. The superego is the domain of values, ideals, morals, and social relationships with others that ultimately influence the ego's self-identification. The superego, the voice that tells us what we "should" or "should not" do, is fundamentally formed by the society in which we live and behave in order to get along in a social world.

An individual's knowledge of how he/she fits into the social world is very much defined by his/her role in the family. According to Freud, the developmental process of every individual's identity centers on the mother (Barker, 2003). Freud noted that infants are born completely dependent on their mother; the mother's body satisfies their biological needs, thereby giving them pleasure. For boys, this relationship results in (1) an attraction to the mother and a desire to possess her sexually, (2) a fear that the father might punish them with castration for their desires, and (3) the consequent repression of their desires through identification with their father (Mansfield, 2000). For girls, the relationship with the mother is what allows them to identify with her. Girls are presumed to desire their father's attention and to realize that they must compete with their mother in order to get it. They develop feelings of ambivalence toward their mothers (e.g., they want them around, yet do not want them around) and consequently identify with their mothers as a way to overcome this ambivalence while gaining their father's attention (i.e., "If dad likes mom, and I am like mom, dad will like me too") (Fink, 1995).

According to Freud, the Oedipus complex is a necessary part of the process of gendered identity formation (Lacan, 1977h). By resolving the "castration anxiety," the boy learns about and identifies himself with his father figure by displacing his basic sexual instincts for his mother. The girl identifies with her mother and desires a father as

a substitute. Freud's understanding of the self was clearly very much linked to instinct, the pursuit of pleasure, sexuality, and the repression thereof (Smith, 2001). In contrast, Lacan's identity formation is not based on biological needs for sexual gratification, but instead centers on the transference of self into symbolic identification through the Other (e.g., "What does the Other want from me?" "What am I worth for the Other?") (Lacan, 1977h; Žižek, 2006). This ultimately creates an endless desire—a need to meet the expectations of parents, significant others, partners, and cultural norms.

An individual's identity formation, or identification, can be interpreted through the three Lacanian registers: the Real, the Imaginary/Mirror, and the Symbolic. It is too simplistic to say that these aspects of identity rise and fall in a chronological developmental process. Rather, the context for one's identity formation depends on every individual's "developmental stage" at any given time. For Lacan, even after one developmental stage is complete, the Real, the Imaginary/Mirror, and the Symbolic aspects continue to coexist within an individual, with each aspect playing a dominant role at various times. The following sections on identity formation explain the Lacanian notion of identity through the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic.

The Real: The Core of Desire

As previously described, Lacanian theory views identity formation as a function of "lack" or "desire." In the early stages of development in particular (i.e., the Imaginary/Mirror stage), identity is formed based on the unconscious perception of the chasm between how one perceives oneself to be and how one wishes to be seen by others. The "self that reflects how one wants to be" is in turn based on the Real—in other words, one's whole self. Although one may unconsciously perceive that he or she is lacking

something specific, such as power or beauty, Lacan would state that ultimately what is really lacking is the unified sense of wholeness with which one is born—the state of oneness (self and (m)other) (Ragland-Sullivan, 1996).

When a human being is born, he or she experiences the world as an undifferentiated whole (Fink, 1995). The infant perceives no difference between the self and others and makes no distinction between the newborn and the external world. Reality is coherent and unified. Thus, in this stage, there is no separateness and no loss or lack as the infant does not recognize that the external world is different from itself and because the infant has no concept of other (Ragland-Sullivan, 1996). The realm of the Real represents the individual's state of oneness, in which the psyche has not yet split.

Lacan's earlier work (1950-1960) describes the Real as the realm of emotions as well as bodily and sensory experiences (Fink, 1995). Thus, the Real refers to a time or state in which one's sense of the world is based entirely on one's affective and bodily experiences. According to Jagodzinski (2004), the Real refers to the unconscious realm that is viewed, beyond the Imaginary, as resistance to the symbolization:

The affective body states that happen below the level of consciousness, as well as the impossibility of knowing the unconscious fully The Real is characterized by nonsense, trauma, and a realm beyond both the Imaginary and Symbolic psychic registers (p. 9).

As Lacan tells us in his seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, "the letter kills the Real." The Real cannot be put in thoughts through language. As Fink (1995) describes it:

The Real is...an infant's body "before" it comes under the sway of the symbolic order, before it is subjected to toilet training and instructed in the ways of the world.... The Real is sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, woven in such a way as to be full everywhere, there being no space between the threads that are its "stuff" (p. 24).

Since the Real exists prior to the Symbolic, it is inscribed in the unconscious and must continually be repressed. The Real is, to a large extent, impossible to trace through language. Lacan states that one way to trace the Real is through transference of the subject's speech (e.g., slips of the tongue, a refusal to countenance, unwitting jokes, ambiguous speech and nonsense wherein things do not seem to fit) (Homer, 2005). These oblique references are the leftovers of transference from the Real onto the Symbolic. Lacan further connects the Real with trauma—whether psychical or physical—registered in the subject's unconscious (Fink, 1995). The trauma occurs when the subject fails to reach the Real (the unity) as there is always something missing or left to symbolization.

As we enter the Symbolic order, we unconsciously seek this wholeness. In our desire to reach for the oneness experienced in the Real, we misrecognize that the oneness (i.e., the Real) can be fulfilled through the gaze as *objet a* (certain objects that fulfill the subject's lack or replace the subject's ego ideals), whether it is an imaginary transference or symbolic identification. Lacan (1978) stated that, since we lack being, we can never recover the (w)hole from the Real; therefore, the Real is impossible to achieve. One way to cope with the loss of the Real is through the means of fantasy (Homer, 2005). By creating a false sense of imaginary wholeness, one is whole again, and thus without lack. Therefore, fantasy becomes a defense mechanism through which the subject attempts to

satisfy the desire of a state of oneness. As such, fantasy provides a temporary sense of unity between the self and the Other as a means to balm the loss of the Real.

Since the Real is always with us and must be continually repressed, the Real is—to a large extent—lost forever once we enter the world of culture and language (Elliott, 1992). This loss makes the Real the core of desire and fantasy, and the loss of the Real brings us to the Imaginary stage.

The Imaginary/Mirror: Total Identity as Misrecognition

According to Lacan, the Imaginary/Mirror stage occurs between the ages of 6 *and* 18 months. In his essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of I*, Lacan (Lacan, 1977f) described the Mirror stage as that in which the child encounters its mirrored reflection, which in turn provides the child's whole and complete image. In the Mirror stage, an "imaginary" ego arises as an ideal self-image that is actually the image of the other. The other is seen as oneself, functioning as a mirror that assures the subject as a whole (Elliott, 1992, 1994).

What is the Mirror stage's function? According to Lacan (1977f), children become very anxious when they recognize that they are separate from the world around them because this recognition of separateness means the loss of the unified whole. Initially, the individual perceives him-/herself as undifferentiated from a larger whole, but in the Mirror stage the child learns that he/she has limitations. The limitless Real cannot constitute his/her identity. He/she is *not* all that is seen and experienced. The child's "imaginary" identification with the other provides the means to compensate for the lack that becomes apparent during this stage. By identifying with the other, the child experiences wholeness. The image of the other casts an imaginary unity on the child and

is thus internalized. Consequently, the lacking subject is now able to see itself as a stable, coherent whole.

In a statement that reveals the Mirror's relationship to Freud's ego referring to *On Narcissism*, Lacan (1981) explained, "the theory of ego is intended...to show that what we call our ego is a certain image that we have of ourselves, an image that produces a mirage, of totality, [of] no doubt" (Lacan cited in Macey, 1995, p. 75). Like the ego, the Mirror stage constructs a space of imaginary fullness based on narcissistic misrecognition, marking no distinction between the self and other (Lacan, 1977b, 1977f). The mirror generates a sense of unified selfhood formed by the cognitive integration of experiences external to the infant's secure, self-centered self-image. Thus, in the Mirror stage, the ego's imaginary identification with its environment is always harmonious. The other serves to give the subject what he/she lacks as the imaginary aspect constructs a fantasy relationship between the self and other as a step toward the wholeness that characterizes the Real (Elliott, 1992, 1994). The key word here is "fantasy." The mirror does not give us a true picture of reality; we see what we want to see (we gaze at the world through our fantasies and desires).

In the Lacanian framework, the Imaginary contains inaccurate mental constructs characterized by narcissistic self-fixation. The inevitable failure of these constructs leads to the never-ending misrecognitions that characterize our relations with others and ourselves (Elliott, 1992, 1994). As Ragland-Sullivan (1987) points out, the construction of identity in the Mirror stage is a partial effect of visual objects as imaginary misrecognitions of the other as itself. In an attempt to compensate for the loss of the Real, the child misinterprets and misconstrues reality so that it can take the "unified" shape he

or she desires. Further misrepresentation occurs in that the ego, as reflected in the mirror, fundamentally represents an object outside the other. The ego comes into being as an object outside itself that is alone and alienated (Elliott, 1992, 1994).

At this point, it is important to point out what may already be obvious: Individuals operating in terms of the Mirror stage do not identify with all other individuals, and they do not perceive others as being identical to themselves. In fact, some people are perceived as an (Imaginary) “other” with whom there can be no identification. Related to this differentiation, in actual practice, what seems to be observed in the Mirror stage individuals is that they identify with only the socially or libidinally *desirable* aspects of others (Fink, 1995). For example, the *manga* participants who stated that a character is “just like me” consistently referred to beautiful characters, characters with super powers, and so on. The essential characteristic of the Mirror stage is such that those external images that an individual calls up actually reflect, at an unconscious level, a *lack* of something that the individual sees. The person does not identify with someone because he or she is really like him, but because he or she wants to be like him.

The Mirror stage corresponds to Freud’s concept of ego in that both the ego and the Mirror serve adaptive purposes (Elliott, 1992, 1994). As will be seen more clearly in the following discussion, while the ego mediates between the id and the superego, the Mirror mediates between the Real (loss of) and the Symbolic (castration of). Meanwhile, whereas the ego is also explicitly concerned with adaptation to the physical environment, the Mirror is primarily concerned with compensation for the loss of wholeness. The Mirror is also more concerned with creating whole identity *per se*.

Finally, as previously suggested, the Mirror/Imaginary stage is more than a developmental process that occurs in early childhood. According to Lacan, “the human subject will continue throughout life to look for an imaginary wholeness and unity” (Lacan cited in Edkin, 1999, p. 91). Moreover, the various aspects of identity play a predominant and interchangeable role, depending on the context. For example, as will become clearer in the next section, one important function of the Imaginary aspect is that it allows us to escape the Symbolic (Other), where the law, convention, and language rule.

The Symbolic

According to Lacan, during the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic stage, the individual shifts his/her focus from the unconscious search for wholeness to the use of language to find his/her place in the social order (Smith, 2001). Essentially, the Symbolic order (or “big Other”) refers to the reality created by language.²¹ The subject learns “social meanings, logic, and differentiation” (Elliott, 1994) in the world of language and other cultural norms. Through language, we learn the differences and meanings between ourselves and the rest of the world in terms of sex, gender, class, age, race, and ethnicity. Thus, the Symbolic stage represents that aspect of identity formation in which one is defined primarily in terms of the master signifiers (Bracher, 1999)—“man,” “woman,” “feminine,” “masculine,” “smart,” “cool,” “good,” “evil,” etc.

The Symbolic dimension structures our perception of social reality, and is responsible for the human tendency to be concerned with what others think about us. In

²¹ The “big Other” refers to the Symbolic order or reality governed by the law, convention, and other cultural norms (Evans, 1996). Thus, the Symbolic dimension structures our perception of social reality. We are concerned with what others think about us, and the focus is on adherence to societal rules and meeting others’ expectations.

Lacan's view (and in part to remain faithful to Freud), the Symbolic order is thus best referred to as the Name-of-the-Father. Here, the term *father* is not meant to be a phallic object. Instead, Lacan uses *father* as a linguistic analogy to explain the order of the law that governs Symbolic identity:

It is in the Names-of-the-Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function, which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law (Lacan, *Ecrits* cited in Feldstein, Fink & Jaanus, 1995, p. 66).

Within the Symbolic order, the father functions as a signifier that governs our relationship with the other. Thus, the focus is not on the way the individual perceives him-/herself ("what do I want?"), but on how others perceive the individual ("what am I in the eyes of those others?") (Žižek, 2006). The focus is on behaving and being in ways that conform to others' expectations, allowing the individual to be desirable in others' eyes. The focus is on adhering to societal rules and meeting others' expectations.

However, societal rules are not primarily concerned with the individual's self-discovery or attempt to return to wholeness. Instead, just as we are known by what the father (symbolic law) names us, the self is known through the names it receives from others (Fink, 1995). Again, the Symbolic stage is the domain in which one is defined primarily in terms of the master signifiers. However, as Lacan (1977a) points out, the signified can never truly match the signifier. There is always a gap between the signifier and the signified (Lacan, 1977a). The word can never truly represent what we mean or what it says it means; thus, language also castrates us. We can't be fully represented by language due to the limitation of linguistic deferral.

In other words, as Saussure (1974) suggests, language reflects the difference generated by signs in order to create meaning. According to this view, the connection between words and external objects is arbitrary as meaning is actually only constructed through the perception of its difference from other meanings. Words are not equated to their objects *per se* but are established through conventional use, rather than the intrinsic property of the thing. For example, “cat” means cat in English because it is not a dog, a bat, or a bowl of soup. The meaning of the English word *cat* is determined by convention. It is not *dog*, thus the meaning of the word *cat* is based, in part, on its difference from the meaning assigned to *dog*. The signifier “cat” ultimately refers to the linguistic differences the signifier recalls.

Because language can never fully represent a subject, there is always something missing—a lack. Symbolic representation always distorts the subject. As Žižek (1989) stated:

The subject of signifier is precisely this lack—this impossibility of finding a signifier—which would be “its own”: *the failure of its representation is its positive condition*. The subject tries to articulate itself in a signifying representation; the representation fails. Instead of a richness, we have a lack, and this void opened by the failure is the subject of the signifier. To put it paradoxically: the subject of the signifier is a retroactive effect of the failure of its own representation; that is why the failure of representation is the only way to represent it adequately (p. 175).

An example, provided by Feldstein, R., Fink, B., & Jaanus, M. (1995), of the impossibility of finding an adequate signifier is provided in a father’s representation of

his son as a “good boy.” First, the meaning of the label “good boy” is defined solely in relation to the father’s (or someone else’s) ideals and preferences. Second, although the subject may be a good boy, he is also other things that the label cannot describe. Thus, a part of the subject is left out when the label is applied. Fink (1999) links this lacking arising from symbolic representation to what may be the most important signifier of an individual: one’s name.

The empty set as the subject’s place-holder within the symbolic order is not unrelated to the subject’s proper name. This name is often selected long before the child’s birth, and it inscribes the child in the symbolic. A priori, this name has absolutely nothing to do with the subject; it is as foreign to him or her as any other signifier. But in time this signifier—more, perhaps, than any other—will go to the root of his or her being and become inextricably tied to his or her subjectivity. It will become the signifier of his or her very absence as subject, standing in for him or her (p. 53).

Indeed, the Symbolic realm of language is closely related to the superego and also parallels Freud’s Oedipal complex. In Lacan’s view, language castrates the subject. Castration is a symbolic function of language. In the Symbolic order, it is not we who take command of our being; rather, language commands us. The father (who forbids the union with the mother), or “big Other” (Symbolic law), dictates who we are and how we should be. The individual who operates in accordance with the Symbolic order represses his/her perception of lacking and is relatively unconcerned with the overcoming of loss and absence. Consequently, the Imaginary/Mirror aspect continually serves an essential function in that it provides an escape from the Symbolic and the motivation to pursue it,

thereby allowing an individual to focus less on what others want and instead seek another sort of imaginary wholeness through the viewing of beautiful, desirable others as oneself.

Summary

Lacanian identity has three aspects: the Real, the Mirror/Imaginary, and the Symbolic. To Lacan, an individual's identity is ultimately misrecognition of the other as reflected in him-/herself. Individuals view others as themselves based on an unconscious desire to return to their original state, in which they experienced themselves as unified with the world and others around them. More specifically, individuals seek identities characterized by traits they find desirable (based on the Imaginary others). Their Imaginary identity with others who have these desirable traits is actually a cognitive integration of external phenomena into their own self-centered self-image. We do not identify with someone because we are like him; instead, we identify with this person because we want to be like him. We identify with others based on our unconscious perception of our own *lack*. Although an identity that is formed on the basis of lack is based on misrecognition (or illusion), this dynamic allows us to compensate for both the original (unavoidable) loss of wholeness and any additional losses that occur in the Symbolic realm. In other words, any construction of identity is the result of a *lack* connected with the desire expressed by others who model that desire throughout our adult life (e.g., the desire to be accepted as the norm, the desire to be beautiful or intelligent according to societal standards). Such Symbolic identity given by others can become oppressive, but Lacan holds that the desire for dissatisfaction can become a positive force and may be able to help develop a self-image, thereby motivating changes.

Fantasy, Desire, and the Act of Seeing

jagodzinski and Žižek are both proponents of theories that mirror the Lacanian theory of identity development. They use Lacanian theory to interpret the visual, or the act of “seeing,” as that which operates fundamentally on the basis of fantasy and desire. jagodzinski is an art educator and Lacanian expert who uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to interpret how the media operates through our unconscious desire. Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher and social critic, uses Lacan’s work in his own analysis of popular culture. Žižek as an interpreter of Lacanian psychoanalysis—uses the visual (especially Alfred Hitchcock’s films) as a way to illustrate such constructs as the Imaginary/Symbolic/Real triad, the *objet a*, or the split subject.

Traversing the Fantasy

As previously discussed, fantasy characterizes the Imaginary stage. Essentially, fantasy is a means to cope with the loss of the Real. Although infants are born into a realm in which they experience a sense of unified wholeness (i.e., no separation between self and other), between the ages of 6 and 18 months, they begin to confront language and other systems of representation (Lacan, 1977f), thus coming to recognize that they are independent entities separate from the world around them. With this recognition of separateness comes the loss of fullness or completeness. Lacan’s Imaginary realm allows us to compensate for this loss by creating fantasies that tell us we are whole. Essentially, fantasy allows the subject to escape the Symbolic, confronting the Symbolic law that reinforces our *lack* by telling us who we should be and how we should behave (Žižek, 1999).

As Lacanian theorists, jagodzinski and Žižek would agree that a primary way in which we create fantasies is how we identify with others, whether these others are people in our lives we admire or (more often) figures in the media. When we identify with a media figure, we see that character the way we *want* to see ourselves. Through fantasy, the spectator finds satisfaction in identifying with the likable or desirable elements within the scene. The spectator views him-/herself as an *ideal* other (for example, a powerful and beautiful *manga* character). As Laplanche and Pontalis (1968) described it:

In fantasy, the subject does not pursue the object or its sign; he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene (p. 16).

Thus, fantasy is an externalized and idealized seeing signifying that one participates in a scene or event that does not represent “the way things really are,” but “things as one sees them.” As Žižek (1999) puts it, what the spectator identifies within fantasy is his ideal ego in staging:

Even when the subject appears in person in his own narrative...He, by no means, necessarily “identifies with himself.” Far more usual is the identification with the ego-ideal, with the gaze for which point of view from which—I, in my activity depicted in the fantasmatic narrative, appear in a likable way (p. 92).²²

²² As will be suggested in the next section, others with whom one might identify are shaped not only by the Imaginary/fantasy realm, but also by the Symbolic order. The terms *ideal ego* and *ego-ideal* are used to refer to this distinction between Imaginary and Symbolic identification. As Žižek (1989) describes it, the ideal ego is what we would like to be based on our own ideal image of self (e.g., a young woman may want to be like a superhero). This ideal self is the imaginary mirror image in which we appear likeable to ourselves. The ego-ideal, in contrast, involves Symbolic identification and is the place through which we judge ourselves. The ego-ideal is the image with which one wishes to conform, based on social expectations, in order to appear likeable, desirable, or acceptable (e.g., the same young woman may want to be seen as a good student who is also attractive). According to Žižek, a gap always exists between

jagodzinski and Žižek would argue that the media, in which our imagination, fantasies, and dreams become a part of the scripts inspired by movie stars and celebrities, is a driving force soliciting fantasy. In his book *Youth Fantasies*,²³ jagodzinski (2004) examined the media's portrayal of youth as an example of fantasy at work, demonstrating how the obsession to be young (so common in western societies) has resulted in the creation of a symbol in which youth are a "fantasmatic object of desire" (jagodzinski, 2004, p. 34). Youth represents a better, ideal self in western culture. According to jagodzinski (2004), the fantasy we enact when we visualize youth reflects the scenarios in which we find what was lost in childhood and deferred growing up:

The term "youth" has effectively overshadowed, if not entirely replaced, the previous master signifier, "childhood," as the dominant zone of contention and concern that shapes postmodernity's social imagination ... The symptom of today's postmodern "youth" exposes the "truth" of the modernist fantasy of the "innocent" or "divine" chills (p. 32).

One important way in which we use fantasy to confront the Symbolic concerns our identification with *multiple* subject positions (Žižek, 1999). For example, Žižek notes that film affords the audience the ability to identify with several characters at once. One can relate to the powerful king or queen, the outlaw who dares to rebel, and the servant who—although poor—retains great dignity. The media presents a multiplicity of

Imaginary and Symbolic identification: Our Imaginary image of what we would like to be cannot align completely with the Symbolic image, which represents the way we want others to see us.

²³ In addition to examining cultural images of youth as evidence of the broader culture's fantasy, Jagodzinski's book also applies Lacanian theory in an examination of youth themselves. In other words, rather than frame his discussion in terms of the effects of the cultural activities of youth (e.g., playing video games), Jagodzinski refers to such activities in order to examine the unconscious desires youth are trying to fulfill through their extensive involvement with various forms of media.

identities from which we can choose, including a variety of gender roles, body images, “cool” personas, etc. In this context, the subject is not fixed, but is symbolically free of the restraints and fixed positions imposed by language. Žižek (1992, 1999, 2001) would also argue that the cinema’s representation of multiple subject positions is relevant to Lacan’s observation that lack is fundamentally the lack of wholeness, but the desires based on such lack are manifested in various forms, depending on the individual and his/her social context.

Desire

When human beings recognize that they are separate from the world around them, they experience (largely unconsciously) the loss of the fullness and completeness that characterize one’s original state of being (Fink, 1995, 1999). The Lacanian notion of desire has nothing to do with bodily needs; instead, the desire is for wholeness. The subject tries to close a “hole in the self” through an endless search for the right material possessions, the right mate, the right job, etc. According to Lacan, desire occurs because of the “presence” of absence (Lacan, 1977h). The subject’s unconscious memory of wholeness is forever linked with traumatic, irrevocable loss (i.e., we cannot return to the pre-linguistic, unified state). The impossibility of recovering this lost wholeness leads to desire. The fundamental absence (i.e., lack) resulting from the loss of wholeness serves as the screen onto which we project our desires to become whole. In turn, such fundamental desires occur in the form of desired objects or scenarios, resulting in our fantasies mediating between the Symbolic order and the objects we encounter in everyday reality. This provides “a schema according to which certain positive objects in reality can

function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure” (Žižek, 1997, p. 7).

Objet a: Object Caused of Desire

Lacan used the term *objet a* or *objet petit a* to refer to these objects that promise to fill one’s empty spaces (Marks, 2001). Objects become objects of desire whenever something about them connects to the subject’s unconscious sense of lack. As jagodzinski (2004) noted, a shiny new sports car can connect to a middle-aged man’s lack of youth, a certain style of clothing may connect to a young woman’s lack of popularity, and a collection of guns and knives may connect to a young man’s lack of power and recognition by others. As Žižek (1991) might describe it, the viewer looks at an image that elicits more than itself. In a similar vein, jagodzinski (2004) points out that the *objet a* provides a temporary sense of fullness to the subject, creating a “surplus” value—“something that is more than itself, fulfilling fantasies of imaginary fullness, promising the subject that he doesn’t lack, and being fully in control of his ego” (p. 46).

The Other’s Desire

Because entrance into the Symbolic order occurs as a result of language, desire is not only rooted in the loss of the Real, but also entwined in the social structures and constraints that dominate our lives once we learn language. Thus, Lacan (1977h) states that “man’s desire is the *désir del’ Autre* (the desire of the Other)” (p. 312). In essence, we desire what we desire because of what we have learned from others. According to Žižek (1997, 1999, 2005), even our unconscious desires are organized in terms of the Symbolic order—the “big Other.” Consequently, in a sense, our desire is not even our own, but created based on cultural ideologies.

The desire staged in fantasy—in my fantasy—is precisely not my own—not mine—but the desire of the Other. Fantasy is a way for the subject to answer the question of what object they are for the Other, in the field of the Other, for the Other’s desire (Zîžêk, 2005, p. 61).

As such, because desires are both produced and made available to us through language, one’s desires are in large part based on what the Other (parents, other family members, teachers, employers, etc.) wants us to be. Indeed, as jagodzinski (2004) pointed out, for young women to feel desirable, they must see themselves as being wanted in the eyes of the Other (parents, men, social ideals). By today’s standards, this means being thin, sexy, and somewhat accommodating, which is why most young women pursue these characteristics.

Zîžêk (1989) suggested that it is the repulsiveness of the desire of the Other that leads to fantasy. In a sense, fantasy allows us to imagine the fullness we lost when we encountered the Symbolic and escape the demands and limitations imposed by society. However, at the same time, “it is...fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the co-ordinates of our desire.... In the fantasy-scene the desire is not fulfilled, ‘satisfied’, but constituted (given its objects, and so on) [...and] through fantasy, we learn ‘how to desire’” (Zîžêk, 1989, p. 118; emphasis in original).

Desire Can Never be Satisfied

Although individuals try to recapture primordial wholeness and unity throughout their lives, desire is endless and can never be satisfied, in part because desire is based on language. Language can never fully represent a subject, and symbolic representation

always distorts the subject; thus, something will always be missing (Zîzêk, 1989).

According to Lacan,

Desire is situated in dependence on demand—which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both absolute and inapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued, an element that is called desire (Lacan, 1978, p. 154).

Thus, as soon as a desired object is obtained, desire moves onto something else, meaning desire is a hole that can never truly be fulfilled.

Another reason that desire can never be satisfied has to do with its relationship to lack. As our fantasies do not correspond to what is real, our desires rely on lack. At the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness, which in fact is nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. The lacking at the core of desire ensures that we will continue to desire. In addition, coming too close to the object of desire threatens to uncover the lack necessary for desire to persist. Ultimately, desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire, but in keeping our distance, which in turn ensures that desire will continue. Because desire is expressed through fantasy, it is driven, to some extent, by its own impossibility.

Interplay of Desire and Fantasy

An example of the interplay of desire and fantasy (the Symbolic and the Imaginary) is provided in jagodzinski's (1999) analysis of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974, directed by Rainer Werner Faßbinder). In the film, an older German Putzfrau widow (Emmi) marries a 20-year-younger Gastarbeiter Moroccan mechanic (Ali). This

interracial marriage is frowned upon by Emmi's family and friends—and indeed by the entire German social order. Emmi wants to go to a very special restaurant to celebrate their wedding. The restaurant is so special because, in addition to serving the best food and wine, it is an establishment at which Hitler once dined (though now he despises the place).

As Emmi and Ali are preparing to place their order, Emmi explains to Ali that the best food one can order is golden caviar, since this is served to the emperor. Eventually, the two decide to order the expensive caviar, drinks, and Chateaubriand. When the waiter arrives (with a look of disapproval) and asks whether the food should be prepared “English or Medium,” Emmi chooses English, as this term has a better sound to it. As it turns out, Emmi's lack of knowledge about the term results in a meal of raw meat.

In Jagodzinski's analysis (2004), Emmi's fantasies and desires (and lacking) are made apparent in her choice of restaurant and meal. First, the choice to go to a place where Hitler once dined is based on a kind of identification with Hitler—a fantasy that places her in the position of a “good German citizen” despite her marriage to Ali. Second, Emmi's choices reveal her fantasy to attain the status of the upper class (although in reality she is a cleaning woman).

Emmi's *objet a*—the expensive restaurant, the caviar that is served to royalty, the use of a more sophisticated term (“English”)—all have a surplus value with which Emmi can live out her Imaginary fantasies, thereby overcoming her limited social status (becoming “just like” Hitler and other members of the upper class) and the lack of acceptance that arises from her interracial marriage. Yet her desires are clearly the desires of the Other. She wants to be accepted by those who disapprove of her. She wants the

things that others (i.e., the upper class) say one must have. She wants to fit in with the German Symbolic order. Ultimately, consistent with the notion of the gaze, Emmi's *objet a* reveals her fundamental lack. Hitler no longer values the restaurant, the waiter disapproves of the marriage, and the food they ordered turns out to be inedible.

The Gaze

The gaze is about how we look at the world based on our loss of wholeness and desire for fulfillment (Zîzêk, 1992a, 1997). In today's urban societies, popular culture's perception of the world has been extensively influenced by industrial mass production, sound and image broadcasting and recording, and mass media industries including film, radio, television, book publishing, and the print and electronic news media. As Denzin (1994) describes it, we now live in a postmodern society "that has been radically transformed by the invention of film and television into a visual, video culture" (p. 184). So how do we look at the images with which we are now continually bombarded? As was suggested in the previous sections, a fundamental aspect of Lacan's, jagodzinski's, and Zîzêk's views is that we do not really see anything (e.g., a person with whom we identify) as it is. Instead of *looking* at the world, which has more to do with the physical process of visual perception, in which one would be able to see all things, we *gaze* at it based on our fantasies and desires.

One popular notion perceives gaze in relation to the viewer's power and autonomy. In other words, "to gaze implies more than to look at—it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (Schroeder, 1998, p. 208). For example, film is often viewed as the "instrument of

the male gaze, producing representations of women, the good life, and sexual fantasy from a male point of view” (Schroeder 1998, p. 208).

The Gaze: The Object Looks Back

Lacan, jagodzinski, and Žižek understood the gaze in more complex terms. In Lacan’s later work in particular, the gaze refers to the dialectic notion that the object is not only viewed by the subject, but it also looks back at the subject as well. How is it that the object can look back at the subject?

In one sense, the object’s power to view the subject relates to the external nature of desire. The object’s ability to look back can be seen as a metaphor for the fact that our desires are, to a large extent, “the desires of the Other,” being shaped by those around us. Moreover, the object’s power arises due to an unconscious reminder. The realm of the Real, being fundamentally more influential and more powerful than the Symbolic order, always threatens to undo the meaning structures associated with the Symbolic. We are unconsciously—yet continually—reminded of the lack at the core of our existence. This dynamic of being continually reminded of our lack is reflected in the object’s ability to view the viewer. The subject may be able to “see” what he wants to see, but regardless of the power that viewing affords him, the object always reminds him that he cannot have or be what he sees.

Lacan (1978) provides an excellent example of gaze through his interpretation of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* (also see jagodzinski, 2004; G. Rose, 2001; Žižek, 1992b). In the immediate sense, the painting recalls notions of power and control. The viewer seems to be in control of his looking. The objects in the painting are balanced, centered, and clearly seen. Most importantly, the two men in the picture are

wearing jewelry and rich clothing and are positioned in a place of strength and control relative to the material objects in the picture. Even the material objects themselves represent luxury, wealth, and knowledge. However, eventually the viewer notices a strange object (the blot) at the bottom of the canvas. Only by looking at this object from the side can the viewer recognize it as a skull that is staring back at him. The skull represents (Symbolic) death, mortality, and the vanity inherent in the accumulation of worldly goods, reminding the viewer not only of the lack that is the essential nature of our experience, but also of the power of the Real to undercut the order of the Symbolic.

The Imaginary Gaze

As this discussion suggests, the gaze occurs out of the dynamic interplay between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders and illustrates the orders' dependence on one another. The gaze can involve both the narcissistic process of identification with an ideal ego and the voyeuristic process of objectification of the object of desire (Mulvey cited in Rose, 2001).²⁴ This identification tends to be associated with the realm of fantasy and the Imaginary, whereas objectification tends to be associated with the realm of desire and the Symbolic, as previously described.

Lacan's gaze provides another example of the interplay between the Imaginary and Symbolic in the sense that the gaze is both *seeing* what we want to see in our

²⁴ The Lacanian notion of gaze does not equate to the *male gaze* referred to in the film critique. Whereas the male gaze views women as objects that fulfill male fantasies (women are the screen for the projection of the viewer's fantasies) and the leading man in terms of a heroic, strong, ideal ego, the female objects in the viewer's picture can also be said to present him with a certain (unconscious) castration anxiety in that the very object he desires is that which lacks the phallus (Mulvey, 1989). In other words, although the viewer creates for himself an ideal ego (the male object) that is not without the phallus, the fact that the objects of his desire *do* lack the phallus serves as a kind of "looking back" that reminds him of the fundamental lack inherent in his being. Because one's *objet a* is really nothing but a screen for one's own fantastic projections, this object ultimately gazes at us, providing us with the unconscious realization that behind our desire is nothing but our lack.

fantasies and *being seen* (our fantasies tell us what we are for the others). jagodzinski (2004) explores the Imaginary gaze in his analysis of cyberspace communities and video games, where reality is reduced to a mirror onto which one projects his fantasies. The Other (authority) has disappeared, and desires are instantly gratified. The shifting identities existing within the fantasy of cyberspace arise solely from the realm of fantasy. No trace of reality exists here, nor does any confrontation of the law (jagodzinski, 2004). For example, the close connection between a gamer's physical movements and those of his video game characters suggests that virtually no distance exists between the gamer and his character, resulting in instant gratification and fantastic identification. In addition, no real death or pain is involved in the video games in which characters can be hurt, eaten, squashed, or killed. The gamer cannot be harmed, and his ability to stop the current game and start a new one whenever he desires—along with his ability to play over and over again—suggests immortality. He is given complete control in which “a gamers’ look captures a character’s (game’s) gaze” (jagodzinski, 2004, p. 194).

Another example of the Imaginary gaze in a more general sense can be found in the mass media. The Imaginary screen provided by much of the media enables us to experience immediate narcissistic obsession and relief, as “the other can laugh and cry for me.... The spectator loses herself in the screen of fantasy” (jagodzinski, 2004b, pp. 53-55). Whether we are playing video games, watching TV sitcoms/a movie/a sporting event, or reading a *manga* story, we identify with the characters in these media such that we experience real emotions and real physical excitement as we watch them—as if we are the actor who is “laughing,” “crying,” “enjoying,” “fighting,” and “doing it” for us

(jagodzinski, 2004, p. 57). Žižek (2002) pointed out that the excesses of media have, in a sense, created a fake, staged world in which we can live:

Virtual Reality...provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee. Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience “real reality” itself as a virtual entity (p. 11).

In contrast to the Imaginary gaze that is marked by pure fantasy, illusions of control, or pure identification with an ideal other, the Symbolic gaze has to do with that aspect of the gaze in which the subject is viewed by the object. The spectator’s desire is caught and captured by the magic of the sublime imagining of the object’s gaze. In Žižek’s (1991) words, “the gaze marks the point in the object (in the picture) from which the subject viewing is already gazed at; it is the object that is gazing at me” (p. 114). This dynamic serves to remind us that we do *not* have what we desire; instead, we fantasize about it. In contrast to that which occurs in the realm of fantasy, here we are reminded of the lack. As jagodzinski (2004) described it, the magic elicited by visual images creates the reflection that frames us and turns us into a picture of symbolic representation, which is how we are symbolically “put in the picture by the outside Order” (jagodzinski, 2004, p. 194).

Through the gaze we are asked what kind of objects we are for these others—“Are you a good student?” “Are you a good parent?” “Are you feminine/masculine?” In other words, “Does your Ego Ideal of being a good student match the expectation of the particular culture or society’s Ideal Ego of being a good student [or parent, or woman/man]?”

(jagodzinski, 2004, p. 194). The fantasy provides an answer to our desire, which is how we attempt to form an identity to satisfy our others and make us the object of their desire.

Summary

Zîzêk's and jagodzinski's use of Lacanian interpretation for cultural media seems to be negative in that it regards spectators as passive victims of mass media, floating in the terrain of a materialistic world. It is almost as if they are surrounded by a fake virtual reality without knowing the differences between self and other, or fantasy and reality. The media can be acting on our behalf, doing the "laughing," "crying," "enjoying," "fighting," "doing," and the creating of pleasure for us.

However, *manga* fans are different from these media users situated in a false virtual reality (e.g., game-simulated reality, virtual café) because they do not simply accept what the world presents to them. Through *manga*, they become the positive force that motivates change. This medium gives the individual the ability to alter the image of self and construct alternatives to his/her own fixed identity. For example, fans alter the *manga* style, creating imaginary characters based on their want-to-be stories in what-if scenarios (Am I this or that? What do I want myself, and my character, to be? Would I be loved, feared, or rejected? What would I do if I got killed or hurt?). They give their characters a unique style that can be used to build their own identities. *Manga* opens up a great space for making decisions about, thinking about, and playing with personal and cultural identity.

Based on the researcher's observations, participants respond to *manga* in a critical and thoughtful manner. *Manga* has the potential for being different from other real-world examples of media, providing the means for the articulation of the unconscious desire

that shapes how young people project and externalize an identity of their own creation. The fantasy of becoming something—or someone—else can be experienced through identification of the self with ideal images of characters found in *manga* characters and stories. *Manga* enables the participant to create and retain something other than him-/herself through fantasy. The fantasy found in *manga* and the pleasure of making it enable young people to open up new meanings for themselves and search for new possibilities of new forms of identity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter gives a three-part summary of the methodology and methods used in this research. The chapter's first section provides an overview of the methodological framework and describes the role of the researcher. The subsequent sections outline the research and related questions. The final section discusses the research design and limitations.

Overview of the Methodological Framework

This is a qualitative/interpretive study involving a Lacanian theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which *manga* fans' identities are linked and constructed through their favorite *manga* stories, characters, and *manga* productions. One reason for conducting this study is to listen to participants' explanations from their point of view through an emic perspective. By attempting to ask questions that are not misleading or directed and paying close attention to participants' responses, the aim is not to inform participants, but to use the interview process to uncover how participants identify themselves and give meanings to self and others. By using a conversational questioning technique, participants will have the opportunity to articulate the process by which they identify with *manga* characters and stories and how their identities are constructed and fulfilled by reading and making *manga*.

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study is to interpret as an outsider and as a non-*manga*-fan. The researcher's own academic desire and theoretical curiosity lies in examining the ways in which the participants construct their identities rather than in the medium itself.

The role of the researcher co-exists with that of the participants in an ongoing dialogue, where the self and subject are entangled. It is not possible to speak for others completely; however, by writing the voices of others, one can possibly gain a better understanding of what they are experiencing and facilitate an awareness of one's own experiences that shape one's perceptions and interpretations. In this way, one can attempt to de-center the fixed self. As Richardson (1992) puts it, "In writing the Other, we can (re)write the Self" (p. 136). Thus, in this study, the researcher chose to relate to participants as co-researchers and to explore interactions with them analytically.

Although the social interactions²⁵ between interviewer and interviewee are of interest to this study, the main source of data remains the stories of the participants' own experiences with *manga*. All cultural stories revealed in this study are partial tales constructed by participants, wherein their interpretations are governed by their current state of knowledge and understanding of *manga*. For this reason, knowledge construction is viewed as inherently subjective and temporary. Meaning is derived from an interpretive understanding of what the "things themselves" say (Schwandt, 2000). The construction of knowledge does not depend on finding one "correct" interpretation, but

²⁵ Social interactions with interviewees play an important role in understanding participants' experiences with *manga* events outside the interviews, including attending *manga* club meetings, panel discussions, fundraising events, and *manga/anime/comic* conferences.

rather occurs through multiple views of different realities. Thus, knowledge can be viewed as an interpretation of other interpretations.

Research Questions

This research explored the meaning of participants' involvement with *manga*, including their own comics, drawings, and *cosplay* photos.²⁶ The primary research questions are: What is the meaning of participants' involvement with *manga*, specifically their perceptions of themselves as subjects? What does it mean to create and *cosplay manga* stories and characters in terms of identity construction? What purposes does an involvement with *manga* serve for the participants? Additionally, the following related questions informed the primary research questions.

A. Questions related to identity construction:

1. Ideal Self—the idealized image that one aspires to be in relation to *manga* stories and characters:
 - a. How do participants interpret the *manga* characters?
 - b. What do the participants' interpretations of *manga* characters suggest about their perceptions of their own identities?
 - c. Which *manga* genres/characters do participants identify?
 - d. What do participants reveal about their socio-cultural experiences when they create a *manga* genre or character?

²⁶ *Cosplay* is short for “costume play” and refers to fans' role-playing their favorite *manga* or *anime* character.

2. Symbolic Self —the social and cultural world of Japanese and American differences, values, norms, and aesthetics:

- a. What do participants understand about cultural/social norms of Japanese and American culture?
- b. What do they value about these cultures? What do they reject?
- c. What are the differences between American comics and Japanese *manga*?
- d. What aesthetic styles are valued in *manga* as compared to American comics?

Gender/sex roles:

- a. What are the ideal gender types favored by the participants?
- b. How does Japanese *manga* inform thinking about social and cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity?
- c. What moral ideals or ideological assumptions are suggested by the sexual themes in Japanese *manga*/American comics?
- d. What personal beliefs and ideals do participants have regarding stories of *manga* superheroes (e.g., super-girl power vs. Superman)?

Personal values and religious beliefs:

- a. What do participants like about *manga*? What aspects of *manga* are most important —the styles, narratives, characters, and/or drawings?
- b. How do the participants describe aspects of *manga* —as fantasy, realism, or exoticism?

- c. Do the participants have religious beliefs? Does a supernatural theme occur in the stories they write or read?
- d. What personal beliefs do the participants hold regarding the supernatural themes depicted in *manga*? How do they perceive these themes—representing a threatening, or evil force or do the themes represent both good and evil? Do participants perceive the themes as a metaphor for things beyond their control?

B. Questions related to participants' social involvement with manga:

- a. How are participants involved with *manga*? Do they create *manga* or *animé*? Do they engage in *cosplay*?
- b. Is participant involvement a group phenomenon or a solitary activity?
- c. How much and what kind of *manga* do they consume and reproduce?

Design of the Research

Participants and location of the research. The study participants were recruited from among the members of the OSU *Manga Club*. Twelve participants were initially recruited based on the researcher's observations of the club's weekly meetings. Specific procedures for recruiting participants were as follows: (1) obtain permission from the club's coordinator (see Appendix D); (2) attend and observe weekly club meetings; (3) recruit participants by asking members to participate in the study voluntarily (see Appendix B); and (4) collect consent forms (see Appendix G). Of the twelve members who consented to be interviewed for this study, only six cases were selected for in-depth

analysis because these individuals were motivated enough to continue with follow-up interviews. Each one proved to be highly engaged in writing, drawing, or reading *manga*. It is important to note that an in-depth analysis cannot be undertaken without first placing the participants within the larger context of the *manga* club.

The Context of the Manga Club at OSU

The *Manga* Club at OSU attracts approximately 20 college students, 18 to 24 years old. Club members are both female and male and represent several cultural groups (European, Asian, and African-American), although the majority of the participants are white Americans. There are no Japanese members. Similar to the diversity of their ethnic backgrounds, the social and cultural backgrounds of these young adults also vary widely. Although members represent a variety of socioeconomic and religious groups, the majority are from middle-class Catholic or Protestant families. Members' majors also vary and include Japanese culture, history, computer science, medieval and renaissance studies, anthropology, biology, molecular genetics, chemical engineering, and animal science. Only one member said he or she was majoring in the arts. Some members are primarily interested in drawing comics, while others prefer reading them; still others are more interested in writing them. Some members are so involved with *manga* that they intend to work with the art form as a career.

The members of the OSU *Manga* Club usually meet at 7 p.m. every Friday during the quarter. Members get together on campus because they share a common interest in reading *manga* and making *manga*-style drawings. The club allows members to share and learn various drawing, coloring, shading, and scripting techniques. The club's activities feature lessons on inking, coloring, and shading; drawing of facial expressions; posting

comics on the web; story writing; and computer scripting. These lessons are taught by the club members. Other activities include artwork critiques, panel discussions, fundraising, costume contests (Halloween costumes), and *cosplay* (costume play) at get-togethers. In addition to regular meetings, club members also participate together in fundraising to attend *manga* or *animé* conventions. They also watch *animé* movies or play video games after school.

Data Collection

The research data included: a pilot study, semi-structured interviews, participants' *manga* drawings, participants' favorite *manga* stories and characters, the researcher's journal, and a literature review.

Pilot Study. A pilot study was conducted during the 2003-2004 academic year to ensure that the research was established appropriately, used a viable interviewing method, and posed questions that allowed for the successful identification of the relevant identity themes. The pilot study contributed to the present study's credibility by revealing potential strengths and weaknesses associated with the use of Lacanian theory to discover the underlying themes in the data. This enabled the researcher to identify appropriate questions and subsequently interpret the meaning of identity themes identified by the participants.

Interview Procedures. Interviews were one-on-one, open-ended, and in-depth. Each interview typically started with questions about participants' favorite *manga* stories or characters and focused on their identification with such stories or characters. Conversations then turned to more general questions, such as participants' beliefs and

values or their identification with Japanese and American cultures. The order of the questions sometimes varied depending on the conversations.

The length of the interviews also varied. Most interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, while others took as little as 20 minutes or as long as two and half hours. Participants were interviewed more than once. Second interviews served to clarify the meaning and validity of provided data. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews took place primarily in public places, such as library study rooms on campus or coffee shops near campus. General interview questions were developed based on conversations with *manga* members. General topic questions and follow-up questions are listed below (see Appendix E for the complete interview schedule).

General Topic Questions:

- What are one or two series/stories you like the most? Why?
- Who are two of your favorite *manga* characters?
- Tell me more about why you like these characters. Why is he/she an attractive character?
- Can you tell me about any other *manga* characters that you like a lot?
- Why do you like these characters?
- Can you describe a specific example of a time you related to another character's feelings?
- Are there any *manga* characters you feel you can relate to? In other words, although you may like certain characters, are there characters that you not only like, but can also relate to? Are there characters that are like you in important

ways? Is there a particular male character you relate to? A female character? A non-human character?

- Why do you relate to these characters?
- Tell me about your own *manga* characters and stories.
- Can you explain a little bit about your experience with, and thoughts about, religion?
- Tell me more about the kinds of religious experiences you had growing up.
- Tell me more about what you think about organized religion now.

Follow-Up Questions:

- Can you explain _____? What do you mean by that?
- Can you show me an example?
- Can you say more?

Data Analysis

Participants' statements were interpreted using Lacanian psychoanalytical theories of identity. Data analysis consisted of two steps: (1) identification of themes related to the question of how *manga* informs young people's identities and (2) interpretation of the data using relevant themes derived from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Some of the concepts addressed in Lacanian theory include: Lacan's three registers—the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic; *objet a*, desire/lack (i.e., the cause of desire), fantasy, *jouissance*, camouflage, and misrecognition.

Procedure of Identifying Themes

Content analysis involves a process of data reduction that utilizes the coding of sequential words of data into analytical categories (Charmaz, 2000). Data analysis based

on content involves continually examining what is being learned in relation to the questions asked. This research utilized thematic content analysis to illuminate issues and themes that would explain how participants' identities are linked to the stories and meanings found in *manga*. Using coding, data were defined and categorized based on the themes and meanings of interest to the study. Themes can be found in phrases, sentences, or words. Sequential steps in the analysis process are described below:

1. Identifying themes based on the data.
2. Breaking up each theme into two or three categories.
3. Identifying specific comments or phrases that relate to the categories.
4. Summarizing the themes (e.g., how often a particular theme is repeated, or what it means).
5. Connecting the findings to the research question: What do the findings say about the influence of *manga* on participants' identity construction?

Lacanian Concepts and Terms

The Real. The Real is undifferentiated (between self/other), which resists symbolization and imagination (Homer, 2005). Lacan (1978) explains the Real as a primordial relationship between child and (m)other. The child comes into the world as a unified being who cannot perceive the difference between self and (m)other; thus, no sense of lacking exists; however, such a bond requires an emotional tie. Since the Real is the realm of the unconscious or repressed content, it can be assessed in a participant's speech via slips of the tongue, jokes, suppressed topics and statements that are logically unconnected. These oblique references can be perceived as the transference from the Real, where the Real surfs without logic, or the known as the object of anxiety. The Real

also registers in the subject's memory and is often linked to traumatic events and the fear of death.²⁷

The Imaginary. The Imaginary refers to ego arising through the mirror process based on the self-image of the other who is misrecognized as oneself (Lacan, 1977f). This self-image appears the "ideal image of self" (the other is my own other, not the big Other) (Homer, 2005). The Imaginary is both narcissistic and an illusion; what one loves in one's image is always something more than the image ("in you more than you") (Lacan, 1977f). Lacan (1977f) explains, the child's "imaginary" full identity with the other, during this stage, develops a sense of unity (libidinal relationship) through the body-image. By identifying with the other, the child creates fantasy images without lack.

Mirror stage. Lacan (1977f) describes the Mirror stage as that in which the child (ego) encounters its mirrored reflection and falls in love with its mirror self. Consequently, the ego finds equal love from others, particularly ones with similar qualities. The image of the other casts an imaginary unity onto the child and is thus internalized. The lacking subject is now able to see itself as a stable, coherent whole.

What seems to be observed in Mirror-stage individuals is that they identify with only the

²⁷ Since the Real can be neither symbolized through images nor expressed via language, it can only be present through the primacy of bodily and materialistic experience. Lacan characterizes the Real as the core of the desire: The "self one wants to be" is based on the Real (i.e., on one's whole self). As we accept the Symbolic order, we unconsciously seek this wholeness, wanting to reach the oneness we once experienced in the Real. However, we misrecognize that the oneness (the Real) can be fulfilled via *objet a*, whether it is an imaginary object or symbolic recognition. Lacan says that we lack being and can never recover the (w)hole from the Real. Consequently, the Real becomes traumatic as we come to accept the Symbolic that furthers our separation from the Real. The process of emerging with the Other gives us a sense of dread or anxiety. Lacan uses the term *jouissance* to describe the feeling of dissatisfaction when we fail to reach our desire to attain the Real or the state of oneness. The Real continues to surf throughout one's entire course of life as the Real remains both desirable and ultimately unobtainable. Such a breakdown of boundary between the self and other ultimately damages one's psychological life. Lacan asserts that one way to cope with the loss of the Real is through the means of fantasy. By creating a false sense of imaginary wholeness, one is whole again and, thus, without lack. Therefore, fantasy is a defense mechanism system through which the subject tries to satisfy the desire by unifying the self and the other as a means to cover the loss of the Real.

desirable aspects of the other. The essential characteristic of the Mirror stage can be described as ‘those external images I call myself are actually based on my unconscious perception that I *lack* what I see. I do not identify with someone because I *am* like him. Instead, I identify with this person because I *want to be* like him.’ The problem, however, is that the mirror is an illusion and distorts what is seen.

The Symbolic. In the Symbolic order or “big Other”, the social world of linguistic communication, cultural norms and knowledge of ideological conventions govern (Homer, 2005). The Symbolic controls both the subject’s desire and rules of communication. Having entered the Symbolic world, the subject is supposed, accepts the law, and becomes part of something he/she is not as a result of the subject named by the law (structured by language) (Lacan, 1977e). Within the Symbolic, language functions as a signifier governing our relationship with the Other in terms of different subject positions (e.g., sex, gender, social, and cultural roles). Thus, the focus is not on the way in which an individual perceives him-/herself (“what do I want”), but on how others perceive him/her (“what am I in the eyes of others”). The subject focuses on behaving and being in ways that conform to others’ expectations, allowing him/her to be desirable in others’ eyes. Thus, the Symbolic represents the Other outside the individual, not the other in the mirror projection. For example, the Symbolic represents what the subject is by what Lacan (1977a) calls ‘master signifiers’ —man/woman or masculine/feminine— through which the subject becomes concerned with what others think about him-/herself,

wishing to appear likeable, desirable, or acceptable by society (Bracher, 2002) (how one is seen by some Other's gaze).²⁸

The *objet a* (*objet petit a*): *The object causing our desire*. Lacan's (1978) term; the small *a* stands for '*autre*' referring to the concept of the 'otherness.' The *objet a* is not about what is desired (i.e., the object), but represents a desire based on a lack that causes a desire for unity that can never be achieved or satisfied (of the wholeness we once experienced in the Real before we entered the Symbolic realm) (Evans, 1996). Because the *objet a* also provides a temporary sense of fullness to the subject, the object has "surplus" value—"something that is more than itself" that promises the subject that no lack exists, thus leaving the subject in full control of his/her ego (jagodzinski, 2004). As jagodzinski (2004) points out, the *objet a* can be assessed within the visual signifiers that act as a mediator between the subject and the Other as well as a reminder of the subject's lack via images, people we admire, or figures in the media who solicit our desire to desire more. For example, a shiny new sports car can connect to a middle-aged man's lack of youth, or a certain style of clothing may connect to a young woman's lack of popularity.

The Gaze: The object looks back (the Real staring back at us). The object gaze refers to the Lacanian notion of a "blind spot" in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, i.e., that the object is not only viewed by the subject, but also looks back (a floating skull looking back at the Ambassadors), reminding the subject of his/her lacking and incompleteness in being what he/she sees (jagodzinski, 2004; Lacan, 1978; G. Rose, 2001; Zîzêk, 1992b). Gaze reveals what we desire through the eyes of the Other based on the Symbolic realm (of being seen by the Other). In other words, gaze is the way that the

²⁸ Yet, the subject is unable to distinguish between the two. For Lacan, even in the Mirror image, there is no "what I want," only the illusion of it. After the Mirror stage, we are socially constructed beings.

Real stares back at us. Through gaze, we are asked what kind of objects we are to others: “Are you a good student?” “Are you a good parent?” “Are you feminine/masculine?” Gaze creates a subject split between who sees (ideal-ego) and who is seen (ego-ideal) in the Other (“you never look at me from the place from which I see you”) (Lacan, 1978, p. 103).

Desire/Lack: Want-to-be vs. lack-being. Under this concept, the subject is characterized as a lack-being and thus is governed by her/his lack (castration). What we desire is the wholeness lost in the Real. In a Lacanian context, desire has nothing to do with bodily needs, but is characterized by a relation to lack that can never be satisfied (Fink, 2003 ; Lacan, 1977h). We always feel we are missing something or want to have or be something. In other words, desire is the result of an internal lacking produced in the Symbolic realm (e.g., the desire to be accepted as the norm, the desire to be beautiful or intelligent according to societal standards). What makes such a fundamental lack be expressed in the form of desired objects or desired scenarios? For example, desire can be assessed in subjects in two ways: from the Other, wanting to be the object of the Others’ desire (e.g., of teachers, parents, school); or from the Real, wanting to feel “whole” again, as when a subject seeks a secure identity.

Fantasy. Fantasy is an answer to our desire to compensate for the experienced lost object (trauma of the Real) and an attempt to satisfy the desire of the (m)Other (Žižek, 1992b, 1997, 2006). In fantasy, the spectator identifies a fantasy ego—a likable other—with his ideal ego. Through fantasy, the individual idealizes and participates in a scene that represents the way he/she wants him-/herself to be, not “the way things really are.” Lacan’s fantasy exists in the Imaginary realm, which allows the subject to escape from

the Symbolic by creating fantasies that ensure the subject unification with the other (Lacan, 1978). Lacan (1977h) explains that fantasy provides a temporary sense of unity between self and other—a unity without lack. In a sense, fantasy is an answer to the desire for visual representation because it applies the subject's narcissistic relationship to the objects seen through the eyes of the Other. Through fantasy, one becomes an object of desire for the Other's desire. Fantasy can be assessed through the visual representation that the subject uses to camouflage his/her lack. Such visual representation provides the subject pleasure as a means to cope with the dissatisfaction or the failure to reach the desire of the Other (Zîzêk, 1992b, 1997, 2006).

Jouissance. Lacan (1997) uses *jouissance*²⁹ to describe a condition that results from the subject merging with the Other, where the access to the barrier is forgotten. *Jouissance* is the blockage of all fantasy of human desire, which can be used to describe a breakdown of the boundary between the self and Other, the dissatisfaction one feels (e.g., desire is not achieved) between a sense of loss and desire that cannot be incorporated into the Symbolic, and an anticipated pleasure of hope one creates from the fantasy in disguising the lack (of Symbolic) (Zîzêk, 1999, 2005). For example, cosplayers want to be recognized as *manga* characters, not as themselves. A cosplayer can be understood as having *jouissance* when he/she connects his/her pleasure with punishment, shame of getting caught in public (someone recognizes him/her behind the cosplay), and pleasure of not getting caught (to be recognized as *manga* characters). It is not about the object

²⁹ *Jouissance* refers to the experience of both pain and enjoyment at the same time. In French, it indicates, in particular, the pleasure derived from sexual orgasm (Evans, 1996; Lacan, 1978). Such a condition can be overwhelming, and can rise to the point of pain, not purely pleasure, which means that it can become enjoyment and thus pleasurable only if controlled within its limits. In other words, *jouissance* becomes unbearable when beyond its limit.

one cosplays, but about the pleasure one gets from merging with the Other (e.g., recognition by others as a cosplayer).

Camouflage. The term *camouflage* refers to a defense mechanism; the subject tries to protect its own identity by merging with others (Kelly, 1996; Lacan, 1978). The subject uses this strategy to blend into a specific environment to remain invisible, while simultaneously also being seen by becoming part of its surroundings. Lacan (1978) stated that the purpose of camouflage is not about adaptation, but about disguising and escaping from the gaze (of the Other), such as when one feels ashamed or unappreciated (Miller, 2006). By becoming something other than itself, the subject must trick its enemy (gaze) about its visual representation (Kelly, 2010). Consequently, the subject becomes something larger than the self, between what he thinks he is and what he shows the Other. The subject deceives its enemy by concentrating on the images of others into which one can blend. For example, cosplayers want to be recognized as *manga* characters, but not as themselves; by cosplaying *manga* characters, they seem to be able to hide their real identity, becoming part of the group (fans) in order to hide their real identity (e.g., unpopular, not fitting in at school).

Misrecognition (méconnaissance). In the Mirror stage, the Imaginary identification contains false mental constructs characterized by narcissism (Lacan, 1977f). For Lacan, such misrecognition comes in the form of the child's (whole, complete) image, which leads to the never-ending misrecognitions that characterize our relations with others and ourselves. As Lacan (1977f) describes it, the Imaginary identification is an illusion, a partial effect of visual objects as imaginary misrecognitions of the other as itself. In an attempt to compensate for the loss of the Real, the child

misinterprets and misconstrues reality so that it can take the “unified” in the shape the child desires. Lacan (1977e) holds that, as adults, we continue to search for this wholeness and misrecognize the unified image of self.

Additional themes that appear in the present study were derived from interviews conducted during the pilot study. Further relevant themes (e.g., gender identity, sexuality) were developed from the *manga* literature. In addition, the researcher searched for and analyzed themes based on the recurring ideas or thoughts communicated by participants. These themes needed to be understood within the context of the conversations, or *manga* productions, in which they occurred. The examination of themes derived from the data analysis also led to the development of new categories, themes, and ideas (Seidman, 1998).

Trustworthiness

A concern with any research design is whether or not it is valid. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) naturalistic inquiry techniques were used to ensure the validity of this study. These techniques included (1) prolonged engagement; (2) triangulation of sources and methods; (3) utilization of member checking; (4) awareness of the researcher’s bias; and (5) incorporation of the reflexive journal (p. 328). Each of these is described in more detail below:

Prolonged engagement. Several interviews were conducted with each study participant over a period of one year. As part of the process of preparing and designing this research, the researcher joined the *Manga Club* and attended its meetings regularly. By attending review and drawing sessions as well as panel discussions on *manga* scripting and coloring techniques, the researcher had opportunities to ask questions.

Access to club meetings enabled provided an insider's perspective on people who attend these meetings. Club participation also enabled the researcher to discover new questions while socially interacting with the members, thereby quickly gaining a better understanding of the importance of social context in relation to self-initiated art making.

Triangulation. Multiple data sources were used to help ensure the credibility of the research. Data sources used in this study included a pilot study, semi-structured interviews, participants' *manga* drawings, participants' favorite *manga* stories and characters, the researcher's journal, and a literature review. In addition, a peer review was conducted to reduce bias and misinterpretation of the data.

Member check. The member check allowed participants to ensure the accuracy of their interview transcripts. As the researcher is not a native English speaker, she ensured that transcripts were accurate by allowing each interviewee to review them prior to data analysis.

Awareness of subjectivity and bias. To avoid the unconscious reproduction and imposition of one's values on the data analysis, Peshkin (1988) encouraged researchers to systematically examine their positions and explicitly acknowledge their subjectivity as such subjectivity kills the "emic voice" (p. 21). According to Lather (1986), this examination process requires researchers to "becom[e] vigorously self-aware" (p. 66). Lincoln and Guba (2000) used the term reflexivity to refer to the process of self-awareness. In conducting this study, the researcher endeavored to remain aware that writing is not a transparent medium of reality, but rather a process of "discovery of the subject (and sometimes of the problem itself) and discovery of the self" (Richardson, year, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 184).

Researcher's reflexive journal. In recognizing the researcher's personal and cultural biases, judgments, values, and assumptions, journaling was used to help her become more aware of her own thinking practices. It also served to identify cultural differences and similarities between the researcher and participants. As listening to others' stories made the researcher (Taiwanese) more aware of the differences with participants, this process also provides documentation of the researcher's struggles to define her personal and social identity as an outsider.

Ethics. All researchers have an obligation to relate to participants in an ethical manner. Part of the researcher's ethical responsibilities involved providing participants with information about the study and ensuring their anonymity. Thus, prior to their participation in this study, each interviewee was informed of the nature of the study. Each one then signed a consent form (see Appendix G). After receiving participants' consent, the researcher informed them as to what they would be required to do as part of the study and also explained the researcher's role and responsibility in relation to the study. In addition, the information obtained from participants remained confidential; participants were assigned code names and entered in a codebook. Their *manga* drawings and interview transcripts were labeled with these code names. This coding was done in order to protect each participant's identity. The Institutional Review Board (IRB), which ensures that participants' privacy and well-being are protected in the course of research, approved this study (see Appendix C).

Limitations of the Study

Like any research study, the generalizability of the present study is limited. This study is limited to the views of a small group of members recruited from a single *manga* club in a large public university in a Midwestern United States. As such, the findings are relevant to the *manga* fan club at OSU, but may not reflect the views of members of other fan clubs at other universities across the United States. The findings of this study may produce some general statements about how identity is constructed through *manga* practices. In revealing participants' experiences related to their involvement with Japanese *manga*, the findings presented here provide some insight concerning the problems and meanings of subject identity (agency) as it crosses cultural boundaries (i.e., cultural differences between American and Japanese).

This research reports (1) an account of the researcher's understandings of both a description of what *manga* participants said about *manga* (expressiveness of emotionality, ease of identification, pleasure of cosplay, ambiguity of gender roles, etc.) and (2) an initial analysis, identifying the themes related to Lacanian theory on identity based on the data. Lacanian theory is not limited to identity analysis, but this study uses only the theory's relevant concepts in understanding young people's identity formation through the use of *manga*. Some common identity-related themes included issues of pleasure, liking, role-playing, conflict, gender, etc. These themes were defined and subjected to Lacanian interpretation. The researcher is also aware of the feminist theorists' criticism³⁰ of Lacan's theory based on heterosexual normality; however, this study did not address its generalization across class, gender, sex, or age. Consequently,

³⁰ See Whitford (1991) for Luce Irigaray and see Becker-Leckrone (2005) for Julia Kristeva.

this research concentrates on Lacan's theory of subjectivity and identity focusing on three registers: the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic.

The research is framed within a Lacanian framework of identity that *manga* participants see themselves as simulating, rather than differing and contrasting, or perceiving Japanese as the exotic other. *Manga* participants identify with aspects of *manga* stories and characters that are useful in constructing their identities, particularly the idea of the Imaginary/Mirror stage.

In telling the stories of *manga* participants, the researcher has not simply transcribed their experiences, but has also included her own voice and position (including her position as an outsider and an "oriental girl").³¹ One significant assumption made in this study is that the *manga* phenomenon is not only a form of expression, but also serves the motivation for identity changes. Furthermore, it is a significant outlet for creating identities—a way of making sense of identity within different contexts of other cultures, fulfilling desire/lack by directing participants' attention toward the alternative against their Symbolic (e.g., the oppressive American culture).

Finally, this study also has limitations related to the transience of the *manga* phenomenon. It is impossible to predict how long the current *manga* fever will last. The results of this study reflect the experiences and views of participants as they occur only at this particular time (early 2000s) in history.

³¹ The story about an oriental girl (see Appendix F) subtly impacts the way the researcher sees herself and how she is perceived by others. Such remarks have impacted her identity and determined the way in which she should behave according to the Symbolic world (American culture), in ways she may not be aware of. Regardless of how much she tries to change her personal-cultural gender, she may not be able to change her gendered identity (skinny-tiny-weak-oriental). Lacan says that the Imaginary serves as a resource for people who feel oppressed by their Symbolic existence and who seek an alternative. The desire for dissatisfaction might be able to help the researcher develop and change the fixed identity.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

This chapter presents five individual cases, giving a first-person account of what *manga* means to five different people and relating *manga* identification to identity themes. The data analysis is a combination of describing what was said and analyzing identity themes within a Lacanian framework. Chapter 5 will discuss the commonalities among a number of the subjects, including emerging identity themes.

Case-by-Case

The selected five cases are given coded names—Amy Grant, Jess Doe, Kent Soup, Clark Wise, and John Mars (see Table 1)—and each case is analyzed and situated within the context of each participant’s *manga* productions and narratives of how these stories and characters have meaning and significance to him/her. The *manga* stories and drawings they create constitute moves to construct their own identities. They do not merely read *manga*’s words and pictorial images, but they also interact with particular *manga* characters in acts of pleasure in which they value and create stories and pictures of their own. Their feelings are reflected in certain *manga* characters and stories as they continually situate themselves in the narratives and subjectively identify with the characters. The structure of each case is organized into 5 sections: (1) personal biographical account, (2) what the participant values about *manga*; (3) his or her identification with specific *manga* stories and characters; (4) his or her created *manga*

drawings or/and cosplay photos; and (5) a summary. This chapter begins with Case 1:
Amy Grant.

Case/Code Names	1. Amy Grant	2. Jess Doe	3. Kent Soup	4. Clark Wise	5. John Mars
Age	19	19	20	21	20
Major	Anthropology	Computer Science	Biology	Linguistics	History
Sex	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male
Religious belief	Catholic	None	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic
Ethnicity	Italian- American	American	English- German- American	German- American	German- American

Table 1. Profile of the Research Participants

Case 1: Amy Grant

Introduction

This case focuses on three main themes that appeared repeatedly as Amy described and explained her involvement with *manga*: (1) her appreciation of *manga* as a genre with more depth and complexity, centering on human relationship and emotion; (2) her identification with a male persona; and (3) her desire for power and recognition and her fantasy of feminine males. The section begins with a brief biographical sketch.

Brief Biographical Account

Amy is a nineteen-year-old anthropology major who wants to become an anthropologist to explore different cultures around the world. She is attracted to *manga* and its originating culture, Japan, which has led her to study Japanese culture and enroll in language courses. She describes herself as a *manga* artist, a *yaoi* (boys' love *manga*) fan (Amy is attracted to both *shōjo* [girls'] and *shōnen* [boys'] *manga*), an enthusiastic *anime* cosplayer, and a cult Catholic.³² Coming from an Italian-American family in America, she was raised by Catholic parents. Her father is a medical doctor, and her mother is a housewife. Amy grew up in a small, conservative town in the Midwest. As a girl, she was expected to marry a boy and raise a family, but she is resistant to this norm and had a relationship with a woman.

The Value of Manga: Story Centered on Emotion and Human Relationships

Given Amy's attraction to Japanese culture—a culture that is “other” and exotic to westerners—it can be argued that her attraction to *manga* is attraction to the Other (i.e.,

³² By which she means a Catholic who is unorthodox and lives an unconventional life.

something different, not American). However, to hear Amy describe it, *manga* is better than American superhero comics because it involves emotional problems:

I prefer a *manga* story instead of seeing 40 armies killed by one guy [as in American comics]. At least *manga* has some emotional problems compared to American [comics in which the hero] destroys everything and then goes out to have some beers (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

For Amy, *manga* depicts real-life, human (as opposed to superhero genre) situations. According to Amy, “There are more relationships in *manga* that support bigger audiences. American comics mostly are superheroes, mostly male-oriented, even ones with female heroes” (personal communication, May 20, 2005). Lacan (1977f) stated that any image or object could serve a Mirror function for one’s identification process (Bracher, 1999, 2002). All identity begins with the interacting images one embraces; by embracing the image, the image itself is experienced as lacking (Fink, 1995). In a Lacanian sense, Amy’s identification with *manga*’s emotionality may connect to her lack of maturity and recognition by others (e.g., her family expectations about wo/man relationship). Seeing herself through the eye of the other (i.e., *manga* character) reminds her of what she cannot have and that she cannot be what she sees. *Manga* characters provide her the screen for the projection of her fantasy as if she experiences the real emotions as she watches the characters go through the emotional problems.

By giving them [characters] real personality, character development, they just seem so real. They have a lot of emotions to them. You can see the emotions.

Like the eyes are, a lot of time, a big sweat drop or the angel mark. You can have subtleties—you can make big soft eyes, sad and lonely, or their eyes can get really

small when people get either really angry or scared. You can tell what they are thinking in the way their emotions are shown. American ones—you don't see the faces much—not much facial detail (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy appreciates *manga*'s human characters, with their human emotions and human limitations—categories clearly not served for her in American ones. In a Lacanian sense, the *manga* phenomenon is also purely Symbolic. It expressly teaches morals, holds up ideals, serves as a model, and has a stylized symbols set for expressing emotions. In contrasting *manga* characters with the American Superman, she comments on Superman's lack of personality on an emotional level: "I don't like superman as much. Mostly, he is like very, very good. He can't be bad at all. He's certainly super, but he's not very human" (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Not only is Amy attracted to *manga*'s complex human emotions, but she also finds *manga* to be deeper and more mature than its American counterparts. In her comparison of the performance activities engaged in by Star Trek and *manga* fans, she stated:

Star Trek and cosplay are kind of similar, but...My parents are into the Star Trek thing. I was raised on Star Trek and sci-fi movies before I even experienced *anime* [cosplay] at all. But it's kind of a beginner thing. It's mostly, like, science fiction, spaceship stuff. And *anime* is, like, everything (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy clearly perceives the *manga* subculture to have a depth and dimensionality not reminiscent of the American Star Trek culture (e.g., by stereotyping images of sci-fi fans as geeks or nerds, she is distancing herself from the sci-fi generation). In a related

comment, Amy suggested that the motivation Star Trek fans experience as they act out their favorite characters' roles is less complex than that of *manga* fans:

They [Star Trek fans] do that [act the characters' parts] because they want to feel like they are that character, like, the hero. Instead of being the science club nerd that never got engaged and never married and still lives with their parents...[unlike Star Trek fans,] *anime* cosplayers are pretty much any kind of person, from little kids to the entire family. [*Anime* participation shows] your ability. Some people show their ability just by making the costumes...(personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy clearly does not embrace the images or subculture of Star Trek. In a Lacanian sense, she is rejecting the American science fiction (e.g., boys, technology, spaceship), which is perhaps what American means to her from her childhood memory and media's stereotypes of sci-fi culture. In her mind, she is the opposite of those people whom she describes as nerds who indulge in science, have no social life, and live the life of a failure who "never got engaged or married, still lives with their parents." In other words, she desires something different. As Lacan (1977f) noted, identity requires an emotional tie; as ego falls in love with its mirror self, the ego finds equal love from others. Such others with which one identifies are identified with the ideal self one aspires to be. According to Lacan (1977g), when one embraces an image, the image itself is symbolically experienced as a lack (Fink, 1995, 2003).

Perhaps *manga* is satisfying because it creates a fantasy image to cope with the object of one's desire (e.g., the need to feel magical and accepted by others). As jagodzinski (2004) noted, such an object has a surplus value—"magic, emotion, and

feelings.” *Manga* provides Amy with a temporary sense of fulfillment and enjoyment of the symbols she identifies (e.g., magic, emotion, and feelings). As a young woman, perhaps she values these qualities: feelings, emotions, and magical (perceived as a mature adult).

Another surplus that makes *manga* desirable is the way *manga* depicts its female characters and the way it addresses girls’ needs.

American comics mostly are superheroes, mostly male-oriented, even ones with female heroes. They [female characters] are very much formed man-style, with thin waists, big hips, big butts, and big breasts. And they all are very pretty looking, and always wearing skimpy, tight outfits. In *manga*, they are less [explicit] like that. And there’s *manga* for girls. But [in America], there’s no comic book for girls. There was, but it’s like *Barbies*. There are no American comic books aimed toward girls (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy appreciates *manga* as a genre that recognizes and depicts girls, being “for girls,” as much as for its relative depth and complexity. In a Lacanian sense, Amy rejects a certain set of signifiers, an imagined or symbolized other from the Symbolic that does not fit her ideal image of self in the same narcissistic way (Lacan, 1977b), particularly the American stereotyping images of gender roles and the stereotypical, male-oriented female images found in American comics. In part, she rejects the passivity (woman-as-sex object) associated with these images. However, it is not clear that Amy wants to be feminine.

What does it mean to be feminine and perceived as beautiful as opposed to being perhaps less sexy than the Americanized sexy doll? Amy clearly does not like the passivity of female roles (e.g., she does not like big butts), but she wants to be strong and powerful;

despite her identification with what would traditionally be called a “male” persona, she is female-oriented, not male-oriented, as evidenced in both her criticism of male-oriented female images and her complaint that America has no “comic books aimed toward girls.” What does this statement say about what it means to be a girl or woman in America? According to Lacan (1977a), it all comes from the Symbolic world in which one lives. In a Lacanian sense, Amy’s critique of mainstream American comics’ depiction of superheroes involves Symbolic identification and is the place through which she judges herself. She feels rejected by that Symbolic order (i.e., not fitting in), particularly by the media portrayal of woman as sex objects (e.g., toys such as G.I. Joes, Barbies, football players). Consequently, she resists becoming a woman such as those portrayed. In other words, *manga* represents an alternative—an ideal other that she chooses with the aspect of the symbolic, which fits her desired self in a narcissistic fashion (Lacan, 1977a). Lacan would say that Amy’s Imaginary image of what she would like to be cannot align completely with the Symbolic image that represents the way she resists conforming with what society wants—namely, “thin waists, big hips, big butts, and big breasts.”

Given this Symbolic resistance (despite the fact that *manga* is expressly Symbolic, and she adores it), Amy has chosen another Symbolic order (i.e., *manga* fantasy world) as a means to cope with her dissatisfaction of being a young girl in America. Perhaps, in her mind, being a girl is not satisfying and is not being recognized as the same as boys as “there are no American comic books aimed toward girls.” According to Lacan (1977d), everything is language and structured by the law, once the Symbolic becomes oppressive (e.g., being a girl in America is perhaps repressive

according the Father), one turns into the Imaginary as an escape to cope with the failure to meet the Symbolic demands.

Consequently, Amy identifies with two imaginary *manga* characters (as discussed in the following section)—the Imaginary Mirror image in which she appears likeable to herself. Lacan (1977e) argued that such identity is a continuation of deferral that creates a divided and fractured identity. Furthermore, such imaginary identification continues to influence and shape one's adult's life. Through the image (in the Mirror process), one takes in and exchanges for meaning as a fictive and temporary being. According to Lacan (1977f), all identity—including gender/sex and race—is temporary and fictive as a result of misrecognition between the self and the other (e.g., images/objects/people we encounter in life). Amy's identification with specific *manga* characters serves as a starting point for understanding how one enters in the Imaginary and creates a fantasy world to cope with the object of desire in the effect of the Symbolic and the lack coming from the Real.

Amy's Identification with Specific Manga Characters: Pretty Females with Magic Power to Fight and Kill

The *manga* characters with whom Amy identifies often appear to be the central female figures in the genre, who possess the magical power to fight and kill and whose personalities are predominantly manly (e.g., tough), despite having been born a girl. Two *manga* characters with whom Amy especially identifies are Sailor Moon³³ and the

³³ Sailor Moon is an action/adventure comic series targeted at young girls. The stories often include romantic themes and center on a 14-year-old high school girl named Tsukino Usagi, who has ordinary desires and super powers that transform her from a girl into a tough, pretty, monster-fighting super-heroine called "Sailor Moon." As a female character, Sailor Moon embraces both feminine and masculine qualities. She has a feminine form—she has long blond hair and big eyes—but she also carries weapons and can be

Japanese Death God, *Shinigami*.³⁴ Both are pretty females with expressive large eyes, but they are also tough warriors who possess special powers that help them fight monsters/ghosts. *Shinigami*³⁵ shares much in common with Sailor Moon, but she has merged into a hybrid, a combination of male/female, young/old, beautiful/deadly, human/superpower (ghost), and cool/powerful. These two characters represent a contradiction regarding Amy's desire of who she wants to be based on her ideal self-image in a narcissistic fashion.³⁶

The Imaginary identity. That Amy identifies with Sailor Moon and *Shinigami* is clear from her statement about what it is like to act these characters' part during cosplay. In describing her performance as Sailor Moon, she says, "it's like being Sailor Moon. You feel like 'I am gonna take out another world. I can fight monsters. I am Sailor Moon'" (personal communication, May 20, 2005). Amy's words further suggest a strong Imaginary identification—namely, her inability to differentiate herself from the other. In her statement, she does not simply act the character's part; rather, during cosplay, she *is* the character. As her statement indicates, Sailor Moon is tough, physically young, and beautiful as well as in possession of magic powers. Thus, when Amy identifies with this character, she essentially identifies with the character's image—i.e., the male persona:

aggressive, controlling monsters with her magic and supernatural power. Sailor Moon is both an ordinary girl and a heroic warrior (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Moon).

³⁴ *Shinigami* is a term used to refer to any god associated with death (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinigami>).

³⁵ Reia is a *Shinigami* from *shōnen manga*, *Bleach*. She is a very old female spirit, but looks as young as a girl, dressing in black, traditional men's clothing, carrying a long sword to perform soul reaper powers. Her task is to purify the souls of bad ghosts and send the souls of both ordinary and bad ghosts to Soul Society, punishing or destroying them when appropriate ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleach_\(manga\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleach_(manga))).

³⁶ Sailor Moon and the *Shinigami* characters Amy identifies are both "hot"—not only in an American comic book sense, but almost in a Barbie sense. Lacan would say that the image of the *manga* characters that Amy embraces also comes from the Symbolic, as the Symbolic representation she identifies fit with her ideal image of self. However, Americans' depiction of women with "big butts, thin waist" didn't fit her ideal *self*.

strong, cool, tough, aggressive, carrying weapons, and skilled at fighting/killing. In a Lacanian sense, Sailor Moon represents the imaginary ideal self-image she wants to be, thereby providing her with a satisfying image of a complete and whole being without lack. Not only is she Sailor Moon, but she possesses the power to fight.

According to Lacan (1977f), one's Imaginary identity is made up of ego and its identification with objects/others (signifiers) like itself; that process is fundamentally narcissistic. What one loves about one's image is always something more than the image. Sailor Moon ultimately casts an ideal self-image of being "tough, strong, powerful, and yet feminine"—a theme also mirrored in Amy's identification with the Japanese death God, *Shinigami* (see Figure 4.3).

She [the character] is a female, but she doesn't act girlish. Not like "Ooooh, I am scared"...she is just like, "kill it." She is just like me. She is a female, but she doesn't act like "Hmmm, don't kill." She is like "I am gonna rip you apart with my bare hands" (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Raised in Western society in which girls are perceived as weak and fearful, Amy identifies herself with the tough images of Sailor Moon and *Shinigami*. In so doing, she endows herself with male/female qualities as depicted in *manga*'s imaginary world. In the Imaginary, Sailor Moon and *Shinigami* are the imagined self-identification image she aspires to be by assimilating others who are just like her. Amy participates in the fantasy scene she enacts as if she is Sailor Moon or *Shinigami* is just like her. Such Imaginary identity (in which an other is perceived as an identical ego) is ultimately a 'méconnaissance' (misrecognition) of self and other as oneness (Lacan & Miller, 1988, p. 167). This other is actually a misrecognized other as oneself—her inability to

differentiate herself from the other (“she is just like me”). As Amy indicates, what she identifies is the image of her want-to-be based on the *manga* characters. In a Lacanian sense, *manga* serves as a mirror function that provides an imaginary wholeness to cope with the incomplete self, ultimately creating a mirage (e.g., Amy thinks she is Sailor Moon) as a means to wholeness that has been lost from the Real. Lacan (1977g) warned us that the Imaginary identity continues to exercise its power throughout the life of the adult and casts an imaginary relation for both ourselves and our sexual partners.

Resisting the symbolic image of traditional gender roles: What it means to be a girl (feminine vs. masculine). As suggested in Amy’s description of *Shinigami*, she recognizes that the female characters with whom she identifies are different from the traditional female images found in western society. In Western society, as in most societies, girls are not socialized in the same way as boys. The concept of gender, or what it means to be a girl/woman or boy/man, is constructed and subsequently determined by the social system in which “masculinity” or “femininity” is performed by a set of normative acts (Butler, 1990). In America, gender is often treated as of fixed: Males are always tough, and females are always pretty and soft. As a young American woman, Amy has learned these gender differences at a very young age. She knows that females are supposed to be “girlish”—that is, sensitive and relatively weak—whereas males are supposed to be aggressive and tough. In resisting the traditional gender roles, Amy reveals her resistance to her mother’s concept of a girl.

Don’t be so picky about what a guy should or what a girl should be. It’s kind of being stuck with the norm.... In a way, I feel like I am a lot more masculine than feminine. I do like buying makeup and playing hair. But I like building stuff, like

models. My mom hates me building my Gundam model because [she says] “you are too much of girl to be doing that.” I am like, if I am too much of girl doing that, why do I like doing that? I like building things because it’s part of my masculine side to be. At the same time, I want to be very masculine and very strong too, I mean physically. Girls can be like that too. It’s more acceptable for a girl to be like a tomboy than it is for guys to be too girly (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Here Amy reveals a strong desire for a more flexible gender role relating to masculinity and femininity (e.g., society finds it acceptable for a girl to be a tomboy). Bracher (2006) asserted that Lacanian desires are supposed by the Symbolic recognition since the Symbolic structures our social reality and defines who we are and how we should behave. Amy’s desire is caught between the Symbolic image (what the (m)other wants of her) and the Imaginary image (based on an ideal self-image) she wants to be. Amy’s identity, according to Lacan (1977a), flows between Imaginary and Symbolic identification, particularly in gender roles.

Rejecting traditional images of gender roles. Amy appreciates *manga’s* increasing flexibility of gender roles in part because she rejects a passive image of femininity. Such rejection of traditional female roles is apparent in Amy’s cosplay reenactment of the Shinigami character (see Figure 4.3).

She is a girl, but she has this cool personality. She is a girl, but she still dresses like a man, and still carries the sword. And she’s got this very tough personality. I like that. She says what she thinks, and I say what I think (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy resists female passivity and traditional sex-role stereotyping as she identifies with Sailor Moon and *Shinigami*; in so doing, she seeks alternative gender roles for girls without conforming to what society might have wanted of her. “Girls do not have to be girlish in order to be a girl. Girls can be strong, tough, and powerful” (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy's Own Manga Characters and Stories: Boys' Love Story

Just as Amy's identification with strong female characters reveals a rejection of traditional female images, her *manga* creations reflect a rejection of traditional male images. The male characters in her *manga* stories are pretty and sometimes mistaken for girls; they are soft looking and often decorated with jewelry—a style with a lot of details (see Figure 4.1).

[My styles have] usually very heavy lines. The guy's got very thick chest and broad shoulders. I usually do long hair and a lot of jewelry. It's simple but there's a lot of details at the same time. Like they will not have any patterns, but will have details in wearing necklace, earrings, I do pretty detailing (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Figure 4.1. Amy's favorite *manga* drawing, Prince [Left]. In the picture on the right (boys' love story), Prince (right) looking passive, holding hands with his guard (left), depicted on a flowery and magical background. In the picture on the right, a pretty guy with a tattoo, wearing jewelry, long hair, who has very defined muscles, a well-built chest, and broad shoulders in watercolors. [Used by permission of the artist]

Unlike American mainstream comics, in which men and women are usually clearly defined (e.g., men are manly and women have to be womanly and wear tights and capes), *manga* often has no clear definition of male and female. As Amy constructs her own *manga* story, a boys' love story (see Figure 4.1) about a prince falling in love with a guard, she intentionally creates the male characters with feminine features—in her words, a “delicate jaw,” “small eyebrows,” “small lips,” and “blown hair” (personal communication, May 20, 2005). Because traditional men do not appeal to Amy (see the next section), she constructs alternative male images—feminine characters who look like girls—in her *manga* stories. Lacan (1977f) stated that the Imaginary is an alternative outlet for creating fantasy images to cope with the dissatisfaction experienced from the Symbolic—an answer to the desire that cannot be satisfied. In a comment that reflects her appreciation of *yaoi manga* (see Figures 4.2), Amy stated,

Two guys who are normally like “football and beers,” and instead they are being all nice and kind and they touch chins and kiss and all, being nice to each other...It’s like, that’s so sweet. I don’t know, it’s kind of nice to watch the changes. I don’t know how to describe it (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Figure 4.2. Amy’s own *manga* drawings (boys’ love story) show guys being nice and kind as they touch chins and kiss each other. [Top from left to right] *Liam and Lex*, *Yaoi love*, *Demon and Angel*; [bottom from left to right] *Arabian prince*, *Kissing*, *Hugging*. [Used by permission of the artist]

For Amy, the traditional male (Symbolic stereotype of macho men) does not satisfy her. Despite her stereotyping images of the Symbolic male, she creates her own ideal version in which desirable men appear like gay men (another stereotypical image from the Symbolic), whom she embodies with feminine features. In a Lacanian sense, the Imaginary is an attempt to escape from the Symbolic constraints imposed upon the subject. Regarding Amy's attraction in her fantasy of seeing two guys being all "nice and kind" to each other (or perhaps involved in a relationship), Lacan (1977g) argued that such Imaginary identification ultimately casts an ideal self-image of both herself and her sexual partner. Perhaps Amy desires an equal power relationship (an equal recognition from her male partner); perhaps she sees these feminine qualities in her female partner as she is in a relationship with a woman. Through fantasy (of her *yaoi* drawings), somehow Amy derives a temporary sense of unity between her self and her ideal partner (other)—a unity without lack. In other words, Amy's *yaoi* fantasy (e.g., seeing two guys being nice and kind to one another) provides her with pleasure as a means for coping with the failure to reach the desire of wholeness with the opposite sex.

Desire/lack. Amy's identification with the Sailor Moon and *Shinigami* characters can be interpreted as a desire for the qualities these characters embody: cool, tough, possessing physical efficacy/strength (the characters carry weapons), physically dominating (the characters punish and kill at times), heroic, yet feminine. In other words, her identification with these characters is not only evidence that she sees their qualities in herself, but it may also point to a lacking or a desire to obtain something that cannot be attained (she wants to have both feminine and masculine qualities).

Another element of Amy's involvement with *manga* that supports this “want-to-be” interpretation is her cosplay performance. Figure 4.3 shows a photo of Amy cosplaying the *Shinigami* character, during which she is disguised so as to be one with the character. She poses, wearing traditional clothing and carrying the weapon. She is even wearing a tough expression on her face. Clearly, she is trying to *be* the character—what Lacan (1977f) described as a mirage (i.e., a misrecognition of the other seen as an identical self based on one's ideal image of self or desired self). Amy clarified this point when she described her performance as Sailor Moon: “You are trying to be the character...It's like being Sailor Moon. When you dress up [as the character], it feels like ‘I am gonna take out another world. I can fight monsters. I am Sailor Moon’” (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Figure 4.3. Photo of Amy cosplaying at a *manga/anime* convention, posing as *Shinigami*, wearing traditional samurai clothing, carrying a wooden sword, and appearing to be Imaginary constructions of a

desirable self—an envisioning of the *manga* character as model of the self she wants to be (tough, strong, and cool). [Used by permission of the artist]

Thus, as Amy presents herself in cosplay as either Sailor Moon or *Shinigami*, in a sense she also attempts to become someone else. According to Lacan (1977g), such identification itself is experienced as a lack revealed from the Symbolic realm. In “trying to be” the characters—in both cases, tough, powerful, physically aggressive warriors—Amy rejects the stereotype of a girl being petite, “girlie,” and powerless. She perceives cosplay as an attempt to transform herself into a formidable, dangerous force bound with a lacking: a powerless girl. Through fantasy, her desire is motivated by desiring more power.

Contradictory desires with hybrid elements. If one adheres to the notions associated with traditional sex roles, Amy’s desire to be a powerful female is logically inconsistent. Traditionally, masculine and feminine qualities could not coexist in the same person. A strong woman is unfeminine (e.g., defined by the law that constitutes a wo/man). Women do not kill. Women are not physically dominating. Women are not cool or tough. It is certainly impossible to have a male personality and also be feminine, just as you cannot be young and old at the same time. However, Amy wants to possess a strong male persona while remaining feminine. She described *Shinigami* as follows:

She is like a really old woman, but she looks like she is 14 or 15. She is really good at killing and magical stuff. [...] She is a girl, but she has this cool personality. Even though she is raised in the feudalistic era, she still...carries the sword. And she’s got this very tough personality. I like that. She says what she

thinks, and I say what I think. She doesn't act girlish. Not like "Ooooh, I am scared"...She is just like me. She is a female, but she doesn't act like "Hmmm, don't kill"... (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy's identification with Sailor Moon reveals similar themes of contradictory desires: Like *Shinigami*, Sailor Moon is not only a tough warrior, but also cute, young, and female.

For Amy, Sailor Moon and *Shinigami* represent the ideal self. First, they are female; second, they have male characteristics. These hybrid characters embody both the superhero aspect of male culture (fighting, action, adventure) and the romantic, sensitive aspect of feminine culture (love, care, relationship). Amy strongly identifies with a strong male persona in feminine form. In a Lacanian sense, identity is never whole, but is contradictory at times and temporary, caught by bits of images (or objects [*objet a*] that have surplus value) one takes in for him-/herself as he/she finds pleasing, inscribing meaning in return for meaning (Jagodzinski, 2004). When the subject is caught by the *objet a* (images/objects/people), as Fink (1995) noted, *objet a* represents a constant reminder of the loss of the Real (e.g., want to be whole, want to be recognized, want to have a secure identity).

Seeking recognition. The *manga* characters with whom Amy identifies, along with her cosplay performance, point to her desire not only for power, but also for attention. The characters with whom she identifies are central figures in their genre. They are larger-than-life, spectacular heroes living extraordinary lives. Amy described her performance of these characters' roles as follows:

You don't feel like you. You are not yourself, and you feel like you are somebody else...A lot of the time, you just walk around the hallway and people stop you and take your picture and have their pictures taken with you. It is so amazing to have complete strangers come out and ask, "Can I have my picture taken with you, please?" [...] It feels like I am a superstar (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Thus, cosplay not only allows Amy to become the spectacular characters with whom she identifies, but also affords her the experience of being recognized and valued in the public domain. Amy does not merely want to *be* the character; she also wants to be *recognized* as the character. She acts the part of well-known, recognizable protagonists in part because she enjoys the attention; she enjoys it when people ask to have their picture taken with her and enjoys feeling like a superstar. For Amy, identifying with heroes who lead adventure-filled lives and acting these heroes' parts in cosplay allow her to move beyond her ordinary life as a student to play the role of celebrity, for instance. Ultimately, the fantasy we create is to cope with the loss of the Real; in a Lacanian sense, by being one with the *manga* character, Amy tries to deny the loss of the Real and cover the lack of wholeness using fantasy as a defense.

Preferring the image of pretty, feminine, safe males. The *manga* drawings and narratives Amy creates herself often involve love stories centering on same-sex relationships between two beautiful males. Amy's male images, like many male images in *manga*, depict these characters as effeminate, with long hair, a small well-defined muscle body, and delicate facial features—small noses, big eyes, delicate mouths.

So with whom does Amy identify in these stories, or what desires are reflected here? It is clear from Amy's discussion of the male characters in her own stories that these characters are not necessarily individuals with whom she identifies, but instead reflect the type of man she finds desirable (see Figures 4.2). As Amy says:

I find them really attractive. I could relate to them better...the idea goes beyond just what you read on the page. You start thinking of them off the page to what it might be like at home (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

That Amy imagines interacting with her characters at home psychologically clearly points to a "wanting" or lacking element in her stories. She also makes it very clear that her appreciation for feminine males has to do with the fact that she does not feel that traditional males are "safe":

A lot of boys in *manga* have long hair. Because they are pretty boys ...girls are attracted to guys who are more feminine because they can relate to them. That way they feel safe. It has to do with the way people see gender. Because girls are usually raised around girls, they can relate to girls better than guys. If they see a feminine guy, they can relate to him better than a really bulky, manly man. A delicate jaw, small eyebrow area, maybe the small lips. Girls find that kind of thing attractive, even though [the males] are mistaken as girls a lot...(personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy reveals her concern for safe intimate relationships even more clearly in another statement:

[That I find these males attractive is] also the “safe” thing. They probably won’t hurt you. They will be nice, like, they will put the toilet seat down and clean up after themselves (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Amy sees bulky men as relatively unsafe—or at least inconsiderate (e.g., they just want to have sex with you, watch football, and go out to have beers in the unconscious level). The feminine guys (see Figure 4.2) are caring and safe as “they probably won’t hurt you.”

Not many kinds of people are like that, except maybe for the gay guys. That’s why there’s a ton of females after them, even though they don’t want to have sex with him. It’s the idea of psychological thinking that gay guys or girlie guys seem to be safer (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Again—although Amy is attracted to the type of males depicted in her stories and is psychologically involved with her male characters such that she imagines living with them—she does not really *identify* with them; instead, to Amy, these characters represent the opposite of the aggressive, physically dominating the persona she wants for herself. This being the case, Amy’s appreciation of traditional masculine qualities in herself, while previously discussed as a desire for power, can also be viewed as a desire for safety. For Amy, safety is maximized when her partner is “nice” and “sweet” whereas she is tough and aggressive. That the power/safety theme appears both in terms of who she wants to be as well as what she finds attractive in the other suggests that Amy is also seeking a secure identity. As Fink (1995) noted, it comes from the Real (a unity between the self and (m)other) that is constantly erupting and a reminder as an *objet a*, existing below the thread (thought or language) or an impulse that is hard to trace; however, such

desire of seeking a secure identity continues to shape our relationship with ourselves and our partner, including sex and gender roles.

Summary: Identity as Misrecognition

Amy's involvement with *manga* is complex and filled with what seems to be in Lacan's (1978) strongest form of Imaginary *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) of identity construction between who she is and what she thinks she is (*Sailormoon*), and her identity often appears to be contradictions. For example, Amy rejects strong male characters and embraces feminine male characters while simultaneously wanting to be strong, tough, and aggressive herself. As she rejects traditional female roles for herself, instead preferring roles typically reserved for males, she prefers males who are more like females. Amy reports feeling unsafe around men who are not effeminate, as such men are likely to "hurt you" or act selfishly. Yet even as she associates the "male" qualities of aggression and physical strength with control and domination, she reports wanting these qualities for herself. She embraces a male persona as this makes her feel powerful, yet she rejects this same characteristic in others (men). As previously discussed, Amy's desires are certainly contradictory if one adheres to traditional sex role stereotyping: She wants to possess a strong male persona, yet still remain feminine in form and appearance.

For Amy, *manga* provides an Imaginary fantasy world that allows her to express and explore different—at times "contradictory"—forms of identity (without confronting the law of the Symbolic). *Manga*, which Amy perceives to be greater in depth and complexity relative to American comics, provides her with various alternative identities she can "try on" as she engages psychologically with the genre's characters. In a Lacanian sense, *manga* provides a mirrored stage on which Amy constructs a new, hybrid

female/male, girl/boy, feminine/masculine, superhero/human (emotional) persona in an attempt to resist or change the traditional images of gender relations; in a way, she creates a fantasy as a means to cope with the dissatisfaction (e.g., to be complete as whole). To Amy, *manga* is a significant source of identity practices (the Imaginary) that can be used to embody gender and sexuality without conforming to what the society might want her to be (e.g., weak, feminine, sexual). The Imaginary identification is dominant in her forms of ego and the objects she embraces. Her identity tends to be made up of others like her or others she aspires to be. *Manga* takes her to the Mirror stage, often triggering a desirable image of self—an image in which she has the power or magic to become something larger than herself. In a way, Amy's identity is composed of bits of fantasy images she embraces by inscribing herself into an image that is pleasing; she makes meaning in return for the satisfying image of a complete and whole being. Lacan (1981) calls such Imaginary identification a mirage—a misrecognition of the self/other as a means to cope with the trauma of the Real and as a defense system to deal with the prohibitions of the Symbolic (Macey, 1995).

Case 2: Jess Doe

Introduction

This case focuses on three main themes that were apparent when looking at Jess's involvement with *manga*: (1) her appreciation of *manga* as a complex genre, whose characters have flaws and weaknesses (as opposed to superhero powers); (2) her identification with the fighting genre (boys' *manga*) and preference for pretty and soft male physicality; and (3) her desire for social recognition³⁷ and gender ambiguity. The section begins with a brief biographical sketch of Jess's life.

Brief Biographical Account

Jess is a 19-year-old computer science major who grew up as an only child in a rural area outside of Ohio. Her mother, a non-practicing Christian, works at the social security office as a claims representative. Her father, a moderately religious man, used to work as a lumber cutter at a sawmill. Jess has never been to church and rejects organized religion (e.g., the American, Puritan, Christian notion of a clear-cut distinction between good and evil and right and wrong). Jess is a regular attendee at *anime/manga* conventions, a panelist in *yaoi*³⁸ presentations, and an active cosplayer who makes her own costumes. Jess particularly enjoys *shōnen* (boys') *manga*, especially the combat stories. She also likes stories that focus on boy/boy romantic relationships. Outside school, she collects dolls and enjoys playing video games.

³⁷ Using cosplay (costumed role-play) as an act of socialization with others.

³⁸ *Yaoi*, or boys' love *manga*, emphasizes the male/male homosexual relationship and is explicit in its sexual content.

The Value of *Manga*: *Manga* as a Complex Genre with Flawed Characters

Jess's attraction to Japanese *manga* (*anime*) began when she was 12 years old (7th grade). Jess stated,

I was getting ready for school, and I turned on the TV, and there was Pokemon. It's this weird cartoon on the Cartoon Network, and I just watched it, and it was just so odd...Before then, I enjoyed watching American cartoons...[But Pokemon was] just very odd, and I just remembered watching it and thinking, "What is this cartoon that's on?" I ended up going to the library, using the Internet, and looking it up, and finding out that it was from Japan. And I thought it was kind of neat, and I looked up [some] *anime* stuff, and I thought it was interesting, so that's how I had my first *manga* experience (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Initially, Jess was attracted to *manga* simply because it was so different from the western cartoons to which she was accustomed. As she gained more experience with the art form, *manga* became preferable to its American counterparts because she enjoyed the artwork and found the story easier to follow.

I don't read American comics as much as Japanese ones because, with Japanese comics, there's more than [just the hero's story]. [Also,] there's a start and, eventually, there's a finish. American comics tend to branch out into all these different stories. I tried to read X-Men—that's the one American comic I like—but it's so confusing because they have five different series. If you want to have a complete picture, you have to read all these series. [In other words, often] American comics are not worried about telling the story. They worry about continuing to publish it, continuing to have you read it, and there's no end to

anything they do. In Japan, the Japanese comic is usually one story, and it is a lot fuller than American comics. You just lose track of what's going on with American ones. I found *manga* to be easier to follow than a lot of western comics (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Jess finds *manga* easier to follow than American comics and “fuller” than those depicted in American comics. Although Jess does not emphasize *manga*'s complexity and depth as much as some *manga* fans do, she did express that she “enjoys [*manga*'s] intricate storylines and character development.” When asked whether she likes the American Superman, Jess answered:

I don't read Superman that much. He is not human. He doesn't have personality. He is an alien. It's just a personal preference...[S]ome girls like lots of muscle on guys. I don't really find them that attractive, and I don't find them attractive when I draw them. Guys in *manga* are so feminine, and I think it affects you...You get used to seeing these pretty gay men [and then], when you read American comics, you see things like this busy muscle man, going around to save the world. It's just not my style at all. You see it, and you just don't like the feel of it. Even Wonder Woman is designed for men (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Like other *manga* fans, Jess prefers *manga* characters to American comics because *manga* characters are more human and, thus, easier to relate to. Her description of Superman as an “alien” without “personality” strongly suggests that one reason she does not appreciate this character is that she cannot identify with him. More importantly, she emphasizes Superman as “overly masculine.” Jess prefers male characters that have some feminine qualities. Her less-than-favorable description of Superman as a “busy muscle

man, going around to save the world” suggests that she prefers characters who can relate to other characters on more equal terms, rather than one being superior to the other, as a savior. Interestingly, her last statement suggests that Jess believes that “feminine characters are designed for women, while masculine characters are designed for men.” To Jess, superhuman, muscle-bound saviors (whether male or female) are characters that would appeal mainly to male readers. She believes women cannot relate to them.

In a Lacanian sense, the Imaginary (e.g., *manga*) is a building block for the basic concept of self identification, particularly for the ideal ego (idealization) to emerge (Bowie, 1993). The image of feminine characters found in *manga* is an *objet a* that elicits her Jess’s desire for less masculine men (Superman represents an ideal model of what a man is to be). As a girl, she is attracted to more feminine male characters (i.e., since feminine characters are designed for women). Jess’s identification with *manga* reveals her desire for pretty and soft male physicality (as opposed to the muscle-bound Superman). Her desire is intimately tied up with *manga*’s visual attraction, and its symbolic representation of men somehow meets her idealization of an image of gay men (e.g., intricate, pretty gay men). Jess appears to unconsciously seek this desire for an equal partnership between the woman and man (she does not want to be rescued or overpowered by a [super]man, and at least she can relate to gay men [closer to her reality] on equal terms).

Jess’ Identification with Specific Manga Characters: Desire for Emblematic Male Power to Kill and Fight

Three *manga* characters whom Jess especially likes are classified as boys’ *manga* (*shōnen manga*), the stories of which generally center on the protagonist’s development, particularly as it pertains to the engagement of training in combat and growing up as

orphans (either having been abandoned or brought up by others). For Jess, the exemplars of this form are Naruto (a nijnan from the *Naruto manga*³⁹ series), Son Goku (a martial master from the *Dragon Ball manga* series), and *Shinji* (a self-indulgent robot rider who fights aliens, from the *Neon Genesis Evangelion anime* series). When asked to describe the *manga* series she prefers, Jess stated:

I like all kinds of *manga*. I have always been interested in girls' [*shōjo*] comics. I also like a lot of *shōnen* [boys'] *manga*, and especially enjoy "high school fighting" *manga*. I also read some *shōnen-ai* [boys' love *manga*] because I enjoy the relationships and artwork. [But] I [especially] like fighting. I think it is very entertaining (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Jess's identification with the fighting genre can be viewed as the desire for emblematic male power. Despite being a girl, Jess finds "fighting" stories enjoyable and entertaining—a theme consistent with her identification with her favorite three *manga* characters, who all engage in battles. Naruto is one of Jess's favorite *manga* series, one classified as *shōnen* (boys') *manga* and which places a strong emphasis on characters' development and growth through combat (see Figure 4.4). As Jess described it:

In *Naruto manga*, all the different characters in the series have different fighting techniques...[The] premise of the series is that the character Naruto wants—his goal and dream is [sic] to become the next *Hokage*, the leader of the village. What happens is that, twelve years before the series, there was this big nine-tailed fox demon that was attacking the Hidden Leaf Village. The current *Hokage*, or the leader, ended up defeating it by sealing it into a child. The child's name was

³⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naruto>

Uzumaki Naruto. He actually holds the demon inside his head. So, because of it, he was alienated and mistreated by his village, all throughout his childhood. They think he is the demon fox itself and are scared of him. People in the village end up becoming very scared of him, thinking someday he will destroy the village, but he hasn't done anything to harm, or wrong, the village (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.4. Photograph of Jess cosplaying Naruto, acting out a hand-seal mimicking Naruto's fighting technique. She is clearly operating in Lacan's Imaginary landscape at the expense of the Symbolic, despite the symbolic disapproval (of the public smirking at her) [Used by permission of the artist].

Continuing, Jess explained why she likes Naruto as a character:

Naruto grew up as an orphan —without friends or family support—and he couldn't force people to befriend him. He learns through a lot of misfortunes, and he survives as a naughty boy, but he holds very strong values. He ends up very positive about life. He is always happy and cheerful, energetic and confident. He is always determined toward self-improvement. To prove himself, and in order to prove that they [others] are wrong, he attends the Ninja Academy. There's

nothing wrong with him, and his goal is to be the greatest Ninja ever in history, but his score is always the lowest. But he ends up learning how to harness his power through different courses [and different] missions and tasks ... With [the friends he makes at the Academy and his] *sensei*'s [teacher's] help, he becomes confident and eventually passes the exam and graduates from the Ninja Academy... I like him a lot. He is the kind of character who is not expected to win, and he is constantly in search of others' approval and recognition (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

The Naruto series centers on the main character, Naruto, and his friends' personal growth and development as they interact with one another in the course of training to become ninjas. Naruto and his friends share very similar backgrounds; all were either abandoned or orphaned and thus grew up without parents or family. Naruto and his friends are not popular, but they get to know each other and learn new abilities in order to get through the hardships in their lives. They start out as very weak characters, but as the story progresses and they gain new techniques, they become much stronger and more focused on their dream of becoming the *Hokage* of the village. Thus, the Naruto story centers on a classic theme wherein troubled or disadvantaged youth struggle to overcome hardships and grow to gain new abilities and strength.

Although one might expect Jess to enjoy the series because it is a member of the "high school fighting" genre, her description of the series emphasizes themes related to personal growth and overcoming life's challenges. Jess appreciates the character development theme within the Naruto series; thus, she cosplays the Naruto character (see Figure 4.4). In her performance as Naruto, she is Naruto, wearing Naruto's costume,

casting a hand-seal as if she is ready to engage a fight. Despite the disapproval of others (e.g., the girl staring at her), Jess is clearly creating an imago (ideal ego) of her want-to-be (in which she perceives an ideal self-image) based on an Imaginary other (the Naruto character).

Lacan (1978) would say such Imaginary identification is based on “narcissism” (p. 74) (in which Jess falls in love with her own image of the strong warrior/fighter) and that such a reaction results in no differentiation between the self and other: The other is seen as self, and the self is seen as the other. In a Lacanian sense, this Imaginary (narcissistic) identification with a spectacular image of self as a fighter gives Jess a sense of empowerment: the power to prove herself to the others. Such an Imaginary identification (the other is perceived as the self) is seen as a building block for the fantasy. If not fraud in a Lacanian sense, it is a ‘*méconnaissance*’ (misrecognition) (Lacan & Miller, 1988, p. 167) of a unified self, a temporary sense of fulfillment without lacking. Like the Naruto character, “the imaginary is always already structured by the symbolic order” (Evans, 1996, pp. 82-83).

Jess herself acknowledges that she is “constantly in search of others’ approval and recognition” (personal communication, May 9, 2006). In her (Symbolic) reality, Jess feels that she has to constantly prove herself to others (due to the lack of recognition and security). In her fantasy, Jess gains the power to exercise her projection of want-to-be; she is both automaton and strong (as if she has no lacking), and through the use of the magic hand seal it seems that she has gained a sense of confidence (self-recognition) despite the symbolic disapproval (of the public smirking at her) (see Figure 4.4). In other words, Jess’s perception of herself constitutes a contradictory representation of her

Imaginary and the Symbolic. This inconsistency is derived from the Imaginary misrecognition (of herself as *manga* characters), rather than from the social reality of the Symbolic knowledge through which she sees herself.

Another series Jess likes is *Dragon Ball*, which follows the life of Son Goku,⁴⁰ a monkey-tailed boy who grew up without parents but was guided by a master. Son Goku, like Naruto, is a martial artist who later becomes the strongest martial artist in the world. Jess described the Son Goku character:

He is a very good fighter, and I really like him...He is so positive, and nothing is bad about him. He is just one of the characters who doesn't have many flaws. He is just so good, and such a pure character, that you want to like him a lot because there are so many good things about him. You just want to identify with him and like him (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

The Naruto character shares Son Goku's upbeat, positive qualities. Like Naruto, who—although “naughty”—is “always happy and cheerful, energetic and confident” and “always determined toward self-improvement,” the Son Goku character is “positive,” “good,” and “pure.” While Jess appreciates Son Goku, identifying the character as an ideal character, she also desires these qualities (“positive,” “good,” and “pure”) for herself.

⁴⁰ Son Goku is a 12-year-old monkey tailed boy who is naughty, pure, and positive in the original *Dragon Ball* series (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_Goku_%28Dragon_Ball%29).

Shinji,⁴¹ a robot rider from the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series is another character with whom Jess especially identifies explicitly and whom she discusses in great detail. She stated,

Shinji is also [a] favorite character. He is very messed up. He has emotional issues because his mother died, and his father abandoned him. He didn't want to go back to his father after [being away from him for] ten years since the man totally dumped him. He grew up abnormally, and he is the one who is depended upon by people. It's very interesting. I identify with him a lot—the character himself. I can understand why he is acting the way he is. A lot of people don't like Shinji because he whines the entire time. I don't know why I like him, but I can identify with why he acts the way he does. I can't say anything bad about him because I understand why he acts this way. Some of the things he says make sense to me. Like [some *manga* fans would ask], "Why couldn't he do anything? Why was he so indecisive?" But it's just the way he was...He wasn't born to be so messed up. His father abandoned him and his mother died. I feel sympathy for him, and I can understand why he is so scared to get closer to people. He is just so insecure about himself, and he just can't help it. I can identify with him, and sometimes I feel so insecure, and I don't really get closer to people. What if they reject me, and I'm left hurt? And that's the same way Shinji feels. He is uncontrolled all the time, and I can identify with him (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

⁴¹ Jess's favorite character, Shinji (from the *Neon Genesis Evangelion anime* series), a robot pilot in training, exhibits physical and psychological vulnerability, often feeling insecure and uncontrolled (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Eva020.jpg>).

Among Jess's three favorite characters, Shinji is the only one that she discusses in detail and with whom she identifies. Jess likes flawed (Naruto, Shinji) and unflawed (Son Goku) characters, but it is the whining, indecisive, "messed up" Shinji with whom she identifies "a lot". In fact, Jess does identify with Naruto even if she denies it: "I don't really relate to him. I am not an optimistic person. I just like him as a character" (personal communication, May 9, 2006). In a Lacanian sense, Jess may think this is how she feels or sees herself, but she is deceiving herself, and this is where the unconscious speaks on the conscious level where she contradicts herself; that is, the unconscious is revealed in her conscious talk through contradiction and self-denial (via misuse of language).

Thus, in Jess's description of three of her favorite characters, she appears quite conscious of her own limitations. She has a clear sense of the difference between herself ("not optimistic," "insecure," "uncontrolled") and ideal characters who are typically positive, good, or "pure". Unlike the positive Son Goku, Jess both experiences and acts on her insecurities and fears. It is the very presence of these insecurities and fears that allows her to understand and feel sympathy for characters who are so "uncontrolled" that "a lot of people [both other characters and *manga* fans] don't like" them. Jess can identify with flawed, less-than-appealing characters when their personalities are clearly the result of past traumas and hardships. Since none of the three characters with whom she identifies were brought up by parents, having been abandoned in one way or another, Jess apparently feels insecure and perhaps distant from her parents (she is an only child). Jess feels she understands the trauma and hardship experienced by these three *manga* characters as if she were there with them or as if she were experiencing these traumas and hardships in her own life. The memory of her having often been left at home alone while

both of her parents worked to support the family exerts itself in both her Imaginary and Symbolic (reality) realms. *Manga* is this Imaginary *objet a*, and the other is like the individual, who loves and identifies with him/her, feeling his/her joy and pain as his/her own. The other is capable of having similar feelings and insecurities; as the individual loves his/her self, another self is equally worthy of his/her love (sympathy). This dynamic is evident in Jess's identification with these *manga* characters, whose feelings are somewhat similar to her own (resulting in no difference between the self and other). Jess is clearly projecting herself onto these Imaginary characters as if she were one of them.

The Real (appearing at the Imaginary and threatening to break through the law of the Symbolic). Jess's identification with the *manga* imaginary world is based on her Imaginary transference, which can also be interpreted as an example of the Real incarnating in the Imaginary and slipping perpetually away within her Symbolic realm (reality), moving beyond its representation. Since the Real cannot be directly experienced (e.g., having been lost forever upon the entrance into the Symbolic), nor can be expressed via language (as soon as we attempt to visualize or symbolize it, it ceases to exist and we feel a sense of failure), the Real presents itself continually in our existence without being known and exerts itself by the failures of every attempt we make to articulate it (Chiesa, 2007). In other words, the Real is a sort of unknown migraine caused by its own force, making itself felt through our every movement in existence. Despite its impossibility of being cured, we are nonetheless being driven by it (through our very failure to cure it). As Homer (2005) explained, the Real can be grasped by its negativity, through the sense of failure when we cannot achieve our desire (e.g., seeking the unified self and a secure identity).

We can understand the negative presence of the Real through Jess's identification with Shinji, in the uncontrolled identification with the Symbolic she feels. Jess tries to fill this void while simultaneously avoiding it.

I feel so insecure, and I don't really get closer to people. What if they reject me, and I'm left hurt? And that's the same way Shinji feels. He is uncontrolled all the time, and I can identify with him (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Lacan says the Real is a constant missing (w)hole that shatters our sense of reality (Homer, 2005). Consequently, one constantly feels dissatisfied and has the desire to fill and recover this (w)hole from the Real. In a Lacanian sense, one way to cope with the sense of lost wholeness is through participation in a fantasy world that one creates in an attempt to retain the previously experienced wholeness. In the Imaginary, through the Mirror stage, the domain is emphasized by the harmonious quality between the self and other to maintain the imaginary fullness without lack. This ongoing process of Imaginary identification is the result of the inability to perceive the differences between the self and other. Such a limitation, as Homer (2005) noted, initiates the lifelong quest to return to the state of wholeness (Real). In pursuit of this impossible goal, the individual develops fantasized identifications that reassure him or her by imaginatively producing identical self with an other based on an ideal image of self—a vision of him-/herself without lack. The following discussion begins to explain how Jess develops fantasized identifications ensuring that she has no lack; she wants to be loved for who she is not, by camouflaging herself into a range of different *manga* characters.

Involvement with Cosplay: Camouflage as a means of social formation and creative self-engagement. Jess is an active cosplayer who makes her own costumes,

regularly attending *manga/anime* conventions, and especially enjoying cosplay with others as a collaborative group. Unlike many cosplayers, Jess does not cosplay primarily for fame and glory. Rather, she participates because she derives pleasure from making the costume (to be good in order to gain public attention) and from interacting with friends for social recognition. In Jess's words, the purpose of cosplaying is to be recognized as characters, not as herself:

I know a lot of people do it because they want to be seen—for attention—or to have their picture taken or to be famous on the Internet. If you are a very good cosplayer, you probably can become very well known. Actually, there are people that make a living from making costumes. Cosplay can be a career...[But] I don't really like the attention that much. I just want a few people to come to say, "Hey. I am glad you did that character because nobody does." [But you do] want to do a good job on the costume because you [do] want people to take a picture of you. I just want people to recognize the character, not me (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Interestingly, Jess expresses the desire for attention—an assertion that seems to contradict another repeated assertion: that she only wants to be looked at and not be recognized as herself, but only as the characters. This is an instance of the unconscious marking itself through contradictions (especially in regard to her self-deception). In a Lacanian context, the unconscious is the means by which the truth is revealed in the subject's speech in terms of what is said and not said, particularly through the misuse of language (jokes, humor, etc.) (Homer, 2005). In effect, subjects continue to be castrated (omitted) by the language as they speak and fumble for words. Unconsciously, Jess attempts to fill the

gaps via *objet a* with which she identifies (e.g., *manga* characters)—provided in the chain of the Symbolic *manga* world—to fill the gaps as seen through the Other’s desire (e.g., worthiness, fame), to replace her (Symbolic) lacking (recognition, and popularity), and to cover her Symbolic identity through the shield of images. Unfortunately, the Symbolic *manga* characters register her in the domain of the Imaginary rather than in the Symbolic. Her identity remains trapped in the Imaginary and slides through these signifiers that never guarantee her full satisfaction. As a result, Jess denies what she really feels (contradictions manifest by way of covering up the Symbolic lacking she sees in herself behind the images). Jess’s denial of this symbolization (Real), allows her a temporary freedom (via Imaginary *manga* landscape) to avoid the impact of the Real trauma (Foster, 1996; McGowan, 2007) by playing characters who live larger than her own life.

In a Lacanian sense, perhaps Jess feels shame with regard to her Symbolic identity (Miller, 2006). She realizes that she is the object-gaze that the Other sees and judges (e.g., her personal social reality and others’ reactions to her), so she uses cosplaying as a means to shield the gaze of the Other. Her (Symbolic) identity is disguised behind the costume of the cosplay, through which she (consciously or unconsciously) reveals what she wants the Other to see in her while intentionally concealing the parts of the undesirable self she does not want to have seen. In other words, Jess wants to be loved for who she is not (using cosplaying to cover who she is not). She sees herself through the imagery of the *manga* characters and gains a sense of self-worth by submitting to the Symbolic (authority, or figures with power) by subscribing to signifiers that promise to fill the lack. According to Lacan, having entered the Symbolic world, the subject emerges, accepts the law, and becomes part of something

he or she is not as a result of becoming de-centered (Fink, 1995). The Lacanian subject is thus divided and forever incomplete, leaving the Real to slip between the gaps of the shield as “that which always comes back to the same place,” marking the subjects as incomplete and missing (Lacan, 1978, p.49) through the repetition of the failure of our attempt to define our Symbolic identity.

On the other hand, the fantasy is a defense system that the subject uses to overcome the loss of the Real (wholeness), in which case camouflage is a way to overcome feelings of alienation and lack occurring in the Symbolic (Kelly, 1996, 2010). Lacan (1972) sees camouflage⁴² as a way of thinking about how one sees oneself—a way that does not depend on the way of seeing outlined by others (Kelly, 1996, 2010) (i.e., not focusing on what it means to be feminine or masculine, but on what I want others to see in me, my femininity or masculinity or both). In a Lacanian sense, Jess is seeing herself behind the mask; by mimicking her favorite *manga* characters through cosplaying in the costume of one of her ideal images, she is constructing herself as glamorous (inviting others to see her, through her skill, appearing to be like the characters). Jess uses costumes and props to construct her (Symbolic) identity in terms of what glamorous is meant to be in Symbolic terms. In other words, Jess’s construction of her cosplay identity is also structured in her symbolic reality (although *manga* characters can be used to construct the Imaginary).

Lacan maintained that camouflage is an expression of the desire to establish some connection with the Other (e.g., religion, culture) through “mimicry” as a whole, like a

⁴² Camouflage “is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (Lacan, 1972, p.101).

screen interposing itself between the subject and the gaze of the Other (Kelly, 1996, 2010; Lacan, 1978). It mediates our identification with our surroundings, stressing the need for social connection. For Jess, cosplaying is not merely about imitating the characters (assimilation with the chosen image as a pursuit of an idealized version of herself), but also allows her to become part of the social world “against the mottled background, ... [by] becoming mottled” (Lacan, 1978, p. 99)—as with the technique of camouflage used in warfare. She uses cosplay as a means to overcome the intimidation caused by the entrance into the Symbolic. She gets to play it out in the Imaginary (of the *manga*), an activity that takes place in the Symbolic world. Jess’s identification with *manga* characters can be explained as the identity’s perpetual movement back and forth between the Symbolic and the Imaginary (perhaps simultaneously overlapping and co-creating): (S)he is not what (s)he is seeing. The traumatic aspect of the castration occurs when the subject enters into the Symbolic, furthering feelings of alienation from the Other. Jess uses cosplaying as a way to reduce the alienation.

Lacan (1978) explained that such a technique is like camouflage as practiced in human warfare; it also applies to Jess’s desire to mimic, to be loved for what she is not (to be loved as *manga* characters and to be seen as glamorous in crowds). She conceals herself from being visible to the Other. Her identity is partially revealed but hidden at the same time with the costumes she designs. To Jess, cosplaying is a way to protect herself from the Other’s gaze, as no one is looking at her except as she is blended in to the character’s identity. In a Lacanian sense, camouflage is a great defense for meeting the Other, using one’s artistic skill as a non-confrontational strategy (to meet the Other and to reduce the traumatic effect of the Real).

This theme is also consistent with Jess's focus on cosplay's craft-making aspect as a way to meet other people (to overcome feelings of alienation or shame). The narrative below (obtained in response to a question regarding whether Jess identifies with a character she cosplays) provides another example of this focus. The question was, "Do you identify with Kankuro (see Figure 4.5)] in any way?"

I am not trying to be like him [Kankuro]. I like to cosplay him. And the outfit is very comfortable. I made the puppet, and I had a lot of fun making it. It has four arms, and it didn't take me too long to put it together. It was very big. This is a box. I cut it out and just painted it over. When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But this is me, and that's my puppet. It's interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different. I end up wearing masks or face paint or a giant collar or glasses. I don't know...I don't know why, but I have a lot of fun doing it, though...It's the making of the clothes, painting, making the props that I enjoy. I like making things. It's a lot of fun in the making of it...(personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.5. Photograph of Jess cosplaying Kankuro at a *manga/anime* convention, carrying her handmade puppet around her neck, and gesturing as if ready to strike the enemy in mimicking the manner of Kankuro.
[Used by permission of the artist]

Here, Jess states explicitly that, for her, cosplay is not about being the character. Instead, it is about dressing (and acting) as the character to be part of the social crowd. For Jess, “it’s the making of the clothes, painting, making the props” that she enjoys. Her cosplay is very much about “making things.” In a Lacanian sense, cosplay is another way to reduce alienation by shielding from others, as if no one is looking at her (but at the characters). Jess’s performative responses to the Other’s gaze comprise the different looks she asserts. In other words, cosplay is a technique by which Jess camouflages and masks herself, which functions as a lure, inviting others to see her, when actually there’s nothing there to see (Kelly, 1996).

Jess’s identity is mediated through the characters she mimics through the construction of the costume of one of her ideal images, thereby constructing herself as

someone famous, as a wish fulfillment, fighting behind the costume of these characters whom she is not. She is experienced as to what being a specific character means: She can be quite different (e.g., fighter, smart, quiet, observing, intelligent, successful). In other words, Jess wants to fit into the social norm or have social recognition (i.e., she desires a connection with the Other). This is how *manga* fantasies (cosplay) operate in the Symbolic. In a Lacanian sense, Jess' cosplaying identity is also structured in her social reality based on others' reactions (desire to be recognized by others).

This desire is evident in Jess's statements as to the benefits she derives from cosplay, which are not that she can "become" a specific character, but rather that she can make social connections and meet like-minded people through craft-making. Shino, a smart, mysterious, quiet, and observing character, succeeds based on his intelligence (see Figure 4.6).

Shino is a very cool guy, who is quiet and always wears sunglasses. His demeanor is a little mysterious. He is thoughtful and very smart, and he always wins the battles with his strategic thinking. Unlike Naruto, he is very quiet and observing. At first, he doesn't get along with Naruto, but later they become good friends (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.6. Photograph of Jess cosplaying Shino. Jess mimicking the body language of the character Shino, wearing dark sunglasses, along with a robe, covering her forehead with a headband, trying to be cool and mysterious, and then striking a pose as if harnessing power with her two arms outstretched as Shino in one of the *anime* scenes. Photos taken by a friend at a *manga/anime* convention. [Used by permission of the artist]

In addition to the social connection afforded by cosplay, Jess also appreciates the opportunity for artistic expression. In response to a question about what she likes most about cosplay, Jess related her making the costumes through her identification with the character:

It's challenging to make things. I notice that I got better at figuring things out. Before, I never touched the sewing machine, and I didn't know how to read patterns, and I had no clue as to what I was doing...I always [wanted] to make costumes, but I never thought I could...Now I can pick up patterns, cut them out, and sew things together...It's kind of fun making costumes. There are so many characters and different types of costumes that you could make for your character in one show (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Thus, for Jess, cosplay's costume-making component is more important than playing the role of (i.e., identifying with) a particular character in a fictional world. In other words, rather than maintaining a focus on embodying/acting out the personalities of one or two favorite characters, Jess—because she enjoys the activity so much—appears to imagine what it would be like to make costumes for many different characters (“there are so many characters and different types of costumes that you could make...”). Although Jess does, in fact, cosplay her “favorite” characters, she is primarily concerned with the element of artistic practice:

Usually, when I pick up something I want to do, I usually find something I like. I find a favorite character of mine, then I cosplay it. I like this character a lot. This is the character Mousse (see Figure 4.7) from *Raman ½*. I've liked it for a long time, and I always wanted to make a costume of him, but I didn't know how. I kept saying that, and finally I realized I could, and I decided that I wanted to. For this costume, I went through a lot of the books I have and looked from different angles...Sometimes they change clothes, and I just pick up the [costume] that shows up the most, and then I look at the color scheme because there are three different choices for the colors I want...(personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.7. [Right] Photograph of Jess cosplaying Mousse [Left], wearing the opaque glasses she made and a white robe with green diamond patterns, carrying her favorite doll in her sleeve, which in the Imaginary world of the series is understood to serve as a weapon. Jess gestures, looking serious and standing still in the manner of Mousse (mimicking a gesture from the reference photo). [Top] Reference of Mousse Jess used for creating her own costume, photo provided by Jess. [Used by permission of the artist].

Thus, one can say that Jess uses her artistic skill to ensure that she is sufficiently crafted to capture public attention, as a relatable appeal for others in order to make social connections through both the art-making and the act of cosplay.

Desire for Social Connectivity with Others (Group photographs and the socializing aspect of cosplay). As Jess recalls her own cosplay experience over time [See Figure 4.8], she maintains that cosplay is about meeting people who are just like her, who like to be part of the same social network (e.g., identified as a good cosplayer who is of an artistic mind and shows good craftsmanship). In her words:

Before I got into cosplay a lot, I usually did it by myself...Since I have a lot of friends cosplaying now, too, we like to do groups, and I think it is fun to do cosplaying in a group. And, also, if we are in a group, then you know there are other people depending on you to get your things [costumes, props] done. [So]

you are motivated to get things done. It's more fun to cosplay with other people than it is to cosplay by yourself...If you come alone to the convention dressed up like some character, you don't get to meet other people, and it's less fun. [But] if you go to the photo shoot [a forum wherein groups of fans dressed as the same character have a group photo taken], you will find other people who are just like you in a group...You find other people who, just like you, like to be part of the same character...It's fun to do things in-group because you have people to talk to and be around, and take pictures and work on the costumes together (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.8. Photographs of Jess cosplaying with friends. The group photo shoot shows the pleasure of cosplaying different characters with others. Jess enjoys cosplaying and role-playing with friends, particularly posing for photos taken as part of her interaction with other people, and meeting those like-

minded people, whom she perceives as “just like her.” Photos taken at different *manga/anime* conventions, 2001-2003. [Used by permission of the artist]

For Jess, social interaction with other cosplayers is very important. “A lot” of her friends (see Figure 4.8.) share an interest in *manga*, and it is clear from her narrative that she derives much pleasure from interacting with them in the context of cosplay. Her narrative further suggests she has met new friends as a result of her engagement in this activity. Indeed, her participation in photo shoots allows her to meet new people who are “just like her” and who share similar interests. In a Lacanian sense, cosplaying is desirable; simply put, it is a desire expressed by others. Lacan (1978) stated that desire is never our own, but the desire of the Other. We learn how to desire through other people. Jess’s cosplay performance is tied up in the expressed desires of others, made up of people who correspond and answer to her desire.

Desire for male power. Jess tends to cosplay specific characters, including Naruto (previously described), Shino, Kankuro, and the Major—all four of whom are male-oriented fighters. Jess’s description of the Kankuro character provides further evidence of her appreciation of “fighting *manga*” (see Figure 4.9):

Kankuro from [the] *Naruto* series [...] uses the puppet technique to fight. He keeps this strange mummy wrapped on his back...He carries it around with him. He grabs his enemy with this puppet—the technique is called change-of-body, which he disguises as himself, but the enemy doesn’t know, and he gets closer. This is when he unveils himself and takes his enemy out. The puppet’s mouth can open and shoots poison gas from his mouth to kill people. The puppet is his

weapon, equipped with traps and hidden devices that allure [sic] the opponents to a deadly fight (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure. 4.9. Photograph of Jess cosplaying Kankuro [Left]. [Right] A closer shot of Jess, showing off her handmade puppet and enjoying her costume, her expression showing great confidence as a cosplayer in posing for a photo. [Used by permission of the artist]

As this narrative shows, Jess not only appreciates characters that fight, but she is also focused on the details of the fighting (i.e., the fight strategy) itself. Presumably, Jess both appreciates the personal power and self-efficacy associated with fighting skills and the technical aspects of a successful fight.

Jess's enjoyment of fighting may explain why she appreciates the Major,⁴³ a "Nazi character" who engages in war for its own sake. Although she does not necessarily like this character's personality, she is drawn to cosplay him.

⁴³ The Major is a Nazi character from the *Hellsing manga* series.

I don't know if I really like him, but he is just such an intriguing character...He [fights] because he wants a war. He doesn't care who is fighting, who is winning, who is dying, or who is living. He just wants to have a war. [...] He once says, "I love war," and he is just an interesting character...He doesn't have a bad story at all, and he is just there. You don't know anything about him. The series doesn't tell you that much about him. He is just there...Even though he is a Nazi character, he is just an interesting character. He is very insane (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Given that Jess enjoys playing the roles of characters who spend a great deal of time in battle, what does this tell us about her identity? Although it is clear that Jess values at least some aspects of fighting and conflict, her broader descriptions of the roles she chooses provide further evidence that, for Jess, cosplay is not primarily an identification process of want-to-be (the formation of ideal ego through assimilation). As previously discussed, when Jess was asked whether she identifies with the Naruto character, she answered, "I don't really relate to him...I just like him as a character." In elaborating further, Jess stated that, "[with] a lot of [the characters], I ended up...cosplaying [them] because I cosplay with a group" and "People don't usually do [perform] the same [roles over and over again]...I like to cosplay different varieties of characters." Clearly Jess likes to cosplay a range of characters, not just characters that are like her. Moreover, there may even be an element of randomness to her choice of characters ("[with] a lot of [the characters], I ended up...cosplaying [them] because I cosplay with a group")—Jess has cosplayed many characters based not on her decision alone, but also on those of her friends. In a Lacanian sense, her identity is a product of desire based on transference of a

lacking being with symbolic identification; her desire is always of something else and can never be satisfied (Lacan, 1978).

As previously described, Jess tends to cosplay the characters she likes. She also prefers “secondary” characters who are odd or inept.

I usually cosplay the characters I like...I like the characters that are fun, and I like the characters that are usually odd, so nobody [else] would do them...I often like the characters that are inept at what they do. I mean—they are not very good at what they do. They tend to be clumsy or bumping around. I like a lot of the secondary characters. The characters I cosplay are not exactly the main characters in the story... Sometimes, I think the secondary characters are more interesting than the main one (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

An additional aspect of Jess’s choice of characters is her strong preference for male subjects (see Figure 4.10):

I like to cosplay male characters a lot...A lot of girls in *anime* wear dresses and skirts. I don’t like to wear skirts. I don’t know if there is a deep meaning behind it. A lot of times, I find myself disliking a lot of the female characters. I don’t really dress up like them. Mostly, I don’t like to wear skirts that much. But, at one time, I wore a kimono for this character named Tenten, from the *Naruto* series. She is a ninja, and is very good at aiming for the targets when throwing her weapon. Her ability can hit “ten targets out of ten” (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.10. Photograph of Jess cosplaying Tenten from *Naruto manga* series and wearing a Japanese Kimono robe, holding a paper-fan, gesturing as if she is ready to take action. Photo taken by her friend at a *manga/anime* convention. [Used by permission of the artist]

Here, Jess's description of the one female character she has cosplayed again reveals her appreciation for fighting. Although she doesn't like to cosplay female characters—and even “dislikes” many of these characters—she can appreciate the females who are strong fighters.

Ultimately, whether Jess identifies with the *manga* characters she cosplays or not remains unclear. She provides contradictory information regarding this issue. Although she does want to be looked at and she does “find pieces of [herself] in the characters” as well as “[her] own traits [in] the *manga* character” and can “identify with characters because they are part of [her],” she also states repeatedly that she cosplays ones that she perceives as her opposites; she is somehow able to connect herself in the story she plays.

Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself.

They are the characters I do, but I am not trying to prove, or become them by

dressing up like them...I usually pick the ones that are opposite to me...I identify with the story more than a specific character (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

The male characters she cosplays or likes reveal her desire for what she cannot attain. She may be vulnerable or weak, but through cosplaying she is able to gain the power to fight, being seen as tough—a quality opposite her own (being a female). She wants to be emblematic of male power. Lacan (1978) would say that, through the fantasy of cosplaying these *manga* characters, Jess learns how to desire (“Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself”), but through cosplaying “It’s interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses.”

Jess’s Own Characters: Feminine Males

Desire for feminine looking men. Like many fans, Jess not only reads *manga*, watches *anime*, and participates in cosplay, but she also draws her own *manga* characters. According to Jess, because “the things [she] read[s] mostly involve pretty guys,” her characters are typically feminine-looking males.

I end up drawing things like pretty boys. It’s—a lot has to do with what I read...When you find a man in *manga*, a lot of times, they are pretty guys (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Jess explained her artistic style further when she responded to a question asking why one male character wears jewelry (see Figure 4.11):

I like to draw the character that can be both ways. [Both ways?] I mean androgynous—no gender. A lot of times, it happens in *anime*. I prefer to draw

males. They tend to work either way. For example, Louis is a guy, but he can be mistaken for a girl. The gender doesn't matter in my drawing. You can't really tell (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.11. Jess's own *manga* character, Sexy Pirate, decorated with body jewelry, wearing a feminine hat, and girl-like boots, appearing androgynous despite the fact that the character is identified as a male pirate. [Used by permission of the artist]

In describing her own artwork, Jess characterizes her drawings as androgynous, making it clear that she values androgyny. Jess's expression of androgyny appears in her *manga* drawing Sexy Pirate (see Figure 4.11), whose appearance and build make identifying his gender difficult. However, she also suggests that her style is in large part an artifact of mere exposure (i.e., her style "has to do with what [she] read[s]"). Unconsciously, she finds androgynous characters attractive; thus, she experiments with these qualities in her own *manga* drawings (e.g., making the male characters visually look much more feminine or girls who can be mistaken for boys). In a Lacanian sense,

Jess certainly desires soft male physicality, yet it is not clear what Jess means by androgyny (is she seeking assimilation of male and female or expressing a need for gender recognition?). *Manga* gives her the latitude of fantasy in which to play with gender without confronting the law (the Symbolic rules how we should behave). Jess perhaps feels oppressed in her gender identity by the dominant norm; thus, she rejects being defined through the traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. She is seeking an alternative offering more gender flexibility, in which identity can be neither masculine nor feminine. Androgyny can be said to be an Imaginary ideal gender role having less to do with sex identification than a need for gender recognition associated with the opposite sex.

Desire for gender ambiguity. How significant is the element of androgyny in Jess's work? Does this element arise simply because it is an essential aspect of *manga* and she is a *manga* artist or, alternatively, does it reflect deeper feelings about sex roles and male-female relationships? Jess's response to a question concerning *yaoi manga* (which, like *shōnen-ai*, emphasizes the male/male relationship) suggests the latter is the case:

[The characters in *yaoi*] are not a definite gender, even though they are in the male form. I think it is more interesting to get out of the old gender thing. I don't really like it very much, and it's kind of a limited thing. Like, "Oh, this is the girl, and this stronger man needs to rescue her." And there's a set of rules to follow—man rescues the woman, or woman has to stay at home. She is the wife, and she needs to fulfill her role. There are a lot of gender roles in society that are defined by society's idea of "this is female, and this is male." There is this traditional

division between what is female and what is male. This is how I grew up. I don't think this is that bad, but there are still things that make this idea so limiting. Like, "You are a girl. Why do you do *that*?" Like, I am also into computer science. I notice that not many girls are in computer science. I just don't understand. Why aren't there more girls here? Are they not interested? Which doesn't make any sense, since it's...a good career (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

In a related statement, Jess commented:

Actually, *yaoi* is not made for homosexual men. It's for women, actually [...]. Japanese women feel trapped in this gender role of being [the devoted] wife...She has no sexual freedom, and [when] she reads *yaoi manga*, she can project herself with this relationship that is totally different from what she has in her real life...It gives a kind of empowerment by reading it (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

These narratives strongly suggest that the *manga* characters Jess creates reflect a desire for more egalitarian intimate relationships and more flexibility in the woman's role. She is aware that traditional notions of femininity are "limited." Women, for example, are not supposed to be out and about having adventures (such as completing a ninja mission). They are not supposed to be strong and self-sufficient (like a traditional male), and they certainly are not supposed to fight (like the martial artist characters Jess prefers).

Interestingly, Jess refuses to refer to traditional gender roles as "bad," yet it is clear that she finds such roles limiting. She wants to be able to do more—to have more freedom—without being labeled "unfeminine." She neither rejects the feminine role nor desires for femininity to be associated with strength, while masculinity is associated with

weakness. Rather, she creates characters who “can be both ways,” possessing both male and female qualities, as a means to immerse herself in an alternate reality wherein such androgyny is normalized (without sexual differences).

The Real stares back, reminding us of the lack. On the other hand, the Real is always present when there’s something missing or when one feels the void. The dissatisfaction of feeling left unconnected, is evident in Jess’s involvement with cosplaying, her desire to be with a larger crowd and hide herself behind the costumes of the characters she creates. Lacan maintained that, since the Real is impossible to articulate, one way to trace the Real is through the mode of doubt that suggests possible but not certain meanings (Homer, 2005). Even Jess’s description of her favorite (self-made) character reveals this focus (see Figure 4.12):

This is my favorite drawing. I did it for the club’s art book. I used Photoshop for the line and color. I am trying to learn how to do fading. [What does he do?] I just make him up. His name is Louis. This is the concept. I call it “And he shall be king”...He seizes the crown...I don’t know how I did it, but I thought he should be holding something. And I thought he should be holding the crown. This is the *manga* style – the long hair, the proportions, and I found that long hair usually looks good on guys when they are drawn. I like it visually...[And why is he holding a knife?] I thought it was just visually nice (personal communication, May 9, 2006).

Figure 4.12. Jess's favorite *manga* drawing, *He shall be King*, in which Louis—identified as a *manga*-style male, decorated with body jewelry, having delicate long hair and a slim body shape—stands elegantly, holding a crown and knife while simultaneously appearing to reign in his own power. [Used by permission of the artist]

Here, Jess's emphasis on her artistic process needs no explanation; even her reference to that which could be viewed as highly symbolic (the crown, the knife, the character's feminine aspects) is framed in terms of style/technique ("I thought he should be holding something"; "[The long hair] is the *manga* style"; "I thought it was just visually nice"). Jess's inability to articulate her own *manga* in meaning indicates her feeling that something is always missing. In a Lacanian sense, it is the unknown and the reminder of the Real. For Jess, reading *manga*, engaging in cosplay, and creating her own manga characters are ultimately efforts to seek a secure identity and the process of involved repetition of failure in trying to reach it (the state of the unity one once experienced with the Real, (m)other). In Lacanian terms, Jess's identity is shaped by the *objet a*: Her identification with *manga* is where the Real appears in the Symbolic and where the

unknown emerges (e.g., crown, knife, boys' *manga*, the power to fight to avoid the symbolization). According to Lacan, these objects of desire (*objet a*) are the names we give to our lack (Fink, 1995, 2003), and what is lacking in Jess's identity is the Imaginary projection of fullness and her desire for a secure identity. In other words, Jess's Imaginary projection is nothing but her own lacking—the insecurity and uncontrolled feeling accompanying the Symbolic order and the dissatisfaction of her own being (*jouissance*, the repetition of failure in trying to reach the Real), such that she feels the needs to hide herself (e.g., dissociate from her shame). This is the point at which the Real constantly repeats itself, resisting imaging and symbolization, thereby dominating her experience of pleasure and pain, excitement and disappointment in her Symbolic identity.

Summary: Identity as Contradiction

Contradictions of identity construction. It seems clear after analyzing Jess's identification with *manga* characters and cosplay that her identity construction emerges from Lacanian themes, where identity and desire converge as fundamentally contradictory categories. Her repeated assertions of self-denial are exhibited in her contradictory statements about identification with *manga* and in her self-awareness concerning herself and likable others (e.g., "I just want to be recognized as the character, not myself"; "When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But this is me, and that's my puppet."). Jess repeatedly says that she is well aware of the differences between herself and the characters she enjoys so much ("Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself"; "I usually pick the ones that are opposite to me"). Similarly, she comments several times on her lack of identification with characters

(e.g., “I don’t really relate to him...I just like him as a character”). In this sense, all (Symbolic) representations of herself also work at the unconscious level—the Real emerges from the unconscious through inconsistency and contradiction (whether she acknowledges it or not). Consequently, she denies what she really feels (contradiction). This is an instance in which the unconscious is at work filling the gap of the Symbolic lack, residing in the desire of the subject that turns into the desire of the Other.

Her discussion of her involvement with *manga* makes it clear that she does not identify with *manga* characters as whole, but only the parts she likes (as a desirable person). Her identification with male characters with various fighting skills suggests a strong fascination with male power. Her enjoyment of cosplay series—having to do with meeting like-minded people, participating in group photo shoots, having social interaction with others, and being able to show off her artistic skill (as an authentic cosplayer who makes her own costumes and props)—all speak to her desire for social recognition and acceptance (to be part of the social crowd, as someone glamorous and popular). Her identity is complex, stemming not just from a desire to be someone, but also deriving from the expressed desire by the other that makes up her own Symbolic identity.

Her own *manga* characters are androgynous males who have strong feminine qualities, revealing her affinity for ambiguous gender roles—a preference which may also reflect her indecisive feelings about her own identity. When she turns to fantasies of *manga* and cosplay, she is free to live in her cover-ups, in which she feels comfortable and likeable. Fantasies supply her lacking (created by the Other), thereby further forestalling her questioning of her identity (“It’s interesting to see these pictures. I can be

so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses. I don't know...I don't know why..."). The fantasies she constructs are the answers to her questions: What is she in the eyes of the Other? Which of them are worthy? Glamour or popularity does not negate her Symbolic existence, but becomes a symptom of her lack, which emerges in uncontrolled feelings concerning her Symbolic world; as a result, she is exiled from the Symbolic via the technique of camouflage as a solution to cover up a lack of power (lack of control over the Symbolic) and the void caused by the Real (in an attempt to be complete and whole again).

Lacan's Real also haunts Jess's Symbolic and Imaginary, as she resists symbolization through her constant denial of her Symbolic identity (she is not what she is seeing—after all, she deceives others and disguises herself in order not to be recognized for who she really is; the truth is, she is just an ordinary girl). Jess's identification with other cosplayers shuttles back and forth between a sense of herself as her ideal self and her identification with an ego ideal that she claims has nothing to do with her, aside from her artistic skill within the cosplay community (e.g., using her costume-making skill as a means of social interaction with other cosplayers). This latter sense of identity is entirely symbolic and has exposed her sense of social identity through her intense sense of being an authentic artistic cosplayer (garnering social praise and recognition based on others' reactions to her).

Lacan would say that, through the fantasy of cosplaying these *manga* characters, Jess learns how to desire: "Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself," but through cosplaying "it's interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses." According

to Lacan (1978), “men’s desire is the desire of the Other” (p. 235); desire is never our own, but stems from the desire of the Other. When Jess cosplays and poses for group photos, she (the subject) becomes the object (caused) of the Other’s desire.

We learn the extent to which Jess’s identity is not simply dominated by her Symbolic, but constantly moves back and forth between the Symbolic and Imaginary versions of herself. Her Imaginary identity is dominated by her experience of and identification with the *manga* fantasy world, in which she sees herself reflected in the images of *manga* characters (embodied male power). The Imaginary identity is also based on the Symbolic value of *manga* (a sense of social recognition and worthiness) based on others’ reactions to her (as an authentic and skillful cosplayer). Given such trespassing, Lacan might say that the Imaginary ideals (e.g., embodied male power) would not be negated by the Symbolic identity (e.g., to be seen as glamorous, popular, and artistic), but that identity is in a constant flux between two worlds at their convergence. In Jess’s Imaginary identity, the other is accepted both as an aspect of her identity and through her differences from her Symbolic construct. She has found a sense of the satisfaction of her desire in finding herself in the object of the other’s desire.

On the other hand, given the sense of Symbolic shame Jess feels when she encounters the gaze of the big Other (e.g., as being unworthy or unpopular), Lacan might say that the weapon the subject uses to shield itself from the look is the same sort of camouflage one utilizes in warfare. In order to preserve a sense of self and survival reality, Jess has dissolved herself into the Imaginary construct of the Symbolic sense, as if nothing has happened, as she experiences herself through an illusion of fusing with the other, thereby achieving an impossible sense of pleasure and existence without dealing

with the Other. Her identification with *manga* has been caught in the web of the Imaginary (except that she is the watcher, not the watched) as a survival trick.

The complication engendered by the social aspect of manga. To inhabit the desire-driven world, Jess learns to desire through *manga*'s fantasy. Her desire is driven by becoming the object of the Other's desire (e.g., glamorous, powerful in a masculine sense, artistic, and popular). She wants to be loved for who she is not (after all, she is just an ordinary girl who is indecisive about her life). She uses cosplaying as a defense mechanism to compensate for the anxiety that emerges during the acceptance of the Symbolic, which castrates the subject and leads to a never-ending lack (she is just an ordinary girl and yet an unpopular college student). This situation leaves her caught between two identities (the Imaginary and the Symbolic), neither of which can truly be chosen for its authenticity as both are based on misrecognition (she is not what she is seeing nor what is seen by the Other). The Imaginary identity is an alienated one, but the Symbolic identity is even more alienated since the identification is not just with whom we would like to be, but also with the gaze of the Other, our social world, that determines whether our Imaginary identity is indeed acceptable. Identity for Lacan is ultimately a split (or contradiction) between the Imaginary—the ideal self we want to be—and the Symbolic—the ego ideal stemming from how the Other activates our desire when we imagine ourselves to be objects of the Other's desire.

Case 3: Kent Soup

Introduction

This case focuses on three main themes articulated in Kent's narratives of his involvement with *manga*: (1) his appreciation of *manga* as a genre that is more realistic and intellectually challenging; (2) his response to *manga*'s characters ("It is much easier to relate to someone who is similar to you") on an emotional level ("The characters react to situations as if they were you"); and (3) his own *manga* characters in search of manhood, associated with *manga* characters who are super-strong males with troubled pasts. The section begins with a brief biographical sketch of Kent.

Brief Biographical Account

Kent is a 19-year-old biology major. He was raised in a Catholic family and described himself as a patriotic, English or German-Texan-American. Although both his parents are casually religious, he is not a fan of organized religion. As a would-be biologist, Kent rejects homosexuality as a viable lifestyle, believing that only male-female relationships are natural and right. Kent likes science fiction, fantasy, and futuristic themes (i.e., new technologies). Kent is a huge *manga* fan; he enjoys *anime* and commercial *manga*, creates his own *manga* drawings, and is up-to date with the online community of *manga* fans of the *Naruto*⁴⁴ community. As a *manga*-inspired American artist, he values *manga* as works of art whose meaning transcends the stories themselves.

⁴⁴ The *Naruto manga* series is popular among young people. In the United States, there is also an *anime* series based on the *manga* series. For more information, see the *Naruto Fan* web site (<http://www.Narutofan.com/index.php>).

Kent also appreciates (and takes coursework in) Japanese culture, viewing that culture as one that is “crazier,” happier, and more upbeat than that of America.

The Value of Manga: Manga is Realistic in its Depiction of Human Characters in Terms of Emotional and Internal Growth as Opposed to External Action

One theme that arose repeatedly in the interview with Kent was his belief that *manga* is more realistic and thus more complex than American comics. Although Kent loves fantasy and science fiction in general, and although the *manga* stories he reads include fantastic tales and tales of superheroes, it is *manga*’s realistic, true-to-life elements that Kent repeatedly mentioned while explaining why he prefers *manga* to American comics.

In [American] comics the story line...it’s almost like it’s overacting. It’s almost like a shocking realism. Like they are throwing so much reality at you, and it becomes unrealistic. It’s almost...they go past it. [For example,] the characters often keep fighting and fighting over and over again. They keep doing it. When in *manga* and *anime*, if a character is destined to fight the same guy over and over again, he is getting tired of it, and he tells you, “I can’t do this anymore. I am getting tired of it. I don’t want to do this” (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent strongly appreciates fantasy or science fiction stories, so it is not the fantastic or science-fiction worlds found within these genres that he finds objectionable. Instead, he feels that American comics are less attractive than *manga* because they include so much action or drama that they become unbelievable. American comics “throw so much reality at you that they go past it.” Thus, for Kent it is not so much *manga*’s depiction of external

scenarios but rather its depiction of characters that accounts for its realistic qualities (experiencing the situations as if you were the character). Kent elaborated:

Anime and *manga* are much more true to life because it [the stories] could actually happen: *The characters react to situations as if they were you* [emphasis added].

You know, they react as you would if you are upset or mad or disappointed.

Sometimes in American comics, if the character is offended by somebody, he gets enraged and fights the person. In *anime* and *manga*, often when the characters are offended, all they do is go sit somewhere by themselves and just think about it.

And that's something that somebody would actually do. You know. They go over and sit by themselves and try to figure out what's going on (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent also noted *manga*'s inclusion of vulnerable, childlike characters:

In *manga*, there's much more humanity in the story line. Like, if you watch Spiderman and X-men, these are about adults. You know, X-men are adults with superpowers and they are fighting bad guys. Kids can't really relate to them. But if you look at *Pokemon* [a *manga* series], it's about little kids, kids who are about the age of the people who watch it. These kids in *Pokemon* are realistic because they get tired of fighting. They get scared, and you never see a scared X-man or a scared superhero in American comics (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent appreciates real, human characters—namely, characters who can be vulnerable, tired, disappointed, scared, or confused. In turn, a significant aspect of Kent's appreciation of *manga*'s realistic characters has to do with the affective response these characters produce in Kent. In other words, *manga*'s characters are not simply realistic;

they are characters to whom Kent can relate on a personal, emotional level. In a Lacanian sense, Kent's identification with *manga* character comes not only from imaginary assimilation as a result of the Mirror image of the Other seen as self (I am like that, "It is much easier to relate to someone who is similar to you"), but also from accepting the mirrored emotions as if he is the character going through the same experience, reassured and consolatory with regard to his feelings as if he is not alone ("The characters react to situations as if they were you"). As Bracher (1999) noted, any image or object one embraces could serve as a mirror, including not only the elements that are visually appealing but also the elements that are intangible (e.g., affects of sound, touch, emotion). These affective responses can also promise to fill one's lacking. Kent's embrace of real and human characters (as his *objet a*) promises him a temporary sense of fullness without lack. It is this sense of recognition (e.g., a sense of humanity and realism, meaning he is not alone) in which he finds himself experiencing the same vulnerable, human emotions, leaving him in full control of his own ego (without lacking)—in fact, a fantasized self, investing his feelings and emotions through the medium of the Other (e.g., *manga* characters). *Manga*'s attraction lies in its support of emotions (*objet a*) that connect Kent's psychological connection to his lacking (e.g., desire for emotions, feelings for human existence).

Because of the emotional fullness Kent invests in the *manga* characters, he finds himself befriending *manga* characters (psychologically experiencing the other's emotions as if he has no lack).

In a lot of ways, [American comics are] much more unbelievable as far as the story goes. The art is really realistic, but the story line has a tendency to be more

unbelievable because the characters don't seem to be as human. In *anime/manga*, you can always *relate to the characters*. You say, “*That's somebody I can have as a friend in any setting*” [emphasis added]. In American comics, you can't really *connect to the characters* very well [emphasis added] (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Here, Kent relates to *manga* characters as friends with whom he can connect as he contrasts the art form with its American counterpart. Several of the narratives provided here reveal Kent's appreciation not simply for realistic characters as such, but rather for realistic characters to which he can relate on an emotional level. Furthermore, as previously suggested, Kent's appreciation for realism seems to occur in large part because it is this realism that allows him to relate to the characters—that is, in a sense, the ability to relate to the characters (e.g., psychological connection) appears to be more important to Kent than realism *per se* (e.g., physical appearance). In a Lacanian sense, Kent's identification with a *manga* character as someone with whom he can be friends affirms the presence of the Imaginary (e.g., his seeking a secure identity through emotional resonance with others). In his materialistic experience, such echoes mirror and validate his existence, affirming for Kent that the images of *manga* character are “him,” resulting in his feeling that they are the same (there's no Other, thus there's no lack), in an instance of envisioning these *manga* characters as models of himself (jagodzinski, 2004). As jagodzinski (2004) explained, even the most intimate emotions (e.g., “vulnerable, tired, disappointed, scared, or confused”) can be transferred and assigned to the Imaginary others (seen as the identical self) who go through everyday problems for us. As Kent explained:

It is much easier to relate to someone who is similar to you [emphasis added] or who goes through similar circumstances....As a result, it is hard to personally relate to Superman, as I have never been in any of the circumstances that he was in. However, many *manga* characters are often the same age I am, and have experiences that are similar to mine (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

For Kent, relating to *manga* characters is more than an exercise in self-validation (“these people are just like me, so I must be okay—I’m not different, I fit in”); instead, it is an affective experience of connection (Kent is feeling the required emotion through the medium of the Other [*manga* character]). Such an other is capable of performing and averting feelings on one’s behalf (Jagodzinski, 2004). In a situation in which feeling bad for doing something wrong when one can feel the Other’s fear or compassion, the Other has the capacity to think and act on one’s behalf. Such connection, in turn, allows for a more intense experience, a deeper “involvement” with the stories. In fantasy, Kent learns to desire from the Other; he sees a surplus value he wants to see in himself (e.g., being capable of having emotions and feelings). Lacan (1978) argued that the *objet a* constantly reminds us of our lack (Evans, 1996; Lacan, 1978). Lacan (Lacan, 1978) explained that we unconsciously seek this wholeness; wanting to reach for the Real, we misrecognize that the oneness (the Real) can be fulfilled through the *objet a* whether it is an imaginary object or symbolic resonance (e.g., people seek emotional support) (Bracher, 1999).

According to Kent:

In *manga*, story lines can get personal...you can get so involved with the characters, that for example, if a character dies or the story line didn’t end the way

you wanted it to, you have an emotional reaction. Like, you might get mad at a character for doing something wrong...(personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Manga's realistic story lines and human characters that can be related to on an emotional level likely contribute to the more general complexity and depth that characterizes *manga*. According to Kent, *manga*'s complexity and depth are another valuable element that distinguish *manga* from American comics.

Manga is much more intellectual. You have to think about it a little bit more; whereas in American comics, the drama is kind of fed to you....In *anime* and *manga*, you might have to look a bit closer to truly get what's going on. Although American comics do stretch the imagination, still they feed the story line to you. So you expect or know about everything that happens. In *anime/manga* you have to think about it....You have to almost invest some mental time and energy into *anime* and *manga* to really understand it. You can read it like you read American comics, and you can be entertained, but you would miss a lot because it is so much deeper than that (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent further personalized this idea:

....the quality of the entertainment in *manga* is better because you have to invest a bit of yourself into it. They [American comics] are entertaining. They look great on the pages in front of you, but you don't really come away with anything (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

As such, Kent does acknowledge that American comics both "stretch the imagination" and "are entertaining." Still, he finds the entertainment provided by American comics to

be lacking in comparison to that provided by *manga* because American comics lack *manga*'s depth.

What is it about *manga* that makes it so complex? From Kent's perspective, *manga*'s complexity is based in part on the fact that its story lines engage readers' intellect and thus are not formulaic or predictable. Perhaps the main reason for *manga*'s complexity lies in *manga*'s focus on characters' "internal experiences" as opposed to the external context.

Anime and *manga* concentrate more on the internal experiences of the characters.

The emotional aspects of their interactions with other people are what direct the story line. Whereas in western comics, the actual physical occurrences that happen in the story—like this guy destroys that guy—these are the major story points. In *anime* and *manga*, this guy destroying that guy might be secondary, and the real story might be the internal thought process about having defeated this person or what other people are going to think of him now if he is a fighter or something like that. It's going to be an internal struggle as opposed to the external, western struggle. Western comics cast more on the outside as opposed to the inside. *Anime* and *manga* cast more on the inside instead of the outside (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent explained what he means by "internal struggle" in a related statement:

[Although *manga* stories] do, obviously, have conflicts between characters,...Japanese comics are more about conflicts concerning morals and moral choices. *Shojo manga*, especially—it has a lot of this, like, it often deals with brother/sister relationships, homosexual relationships, and blurred lines

between good and evil...[And] one big question a lot of *anime* characters ask is: What is the point? Why am I here, and why am I doing what I'm doing? And what is reality? And American comics don't deal with that at all. *Anime* and *manga* deal with that a lot...and so they make you think, kind of make you apply these questions to yourself...it's more in-depth...(personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Manga characters' emotional interactions with other characters, deep questions about the nature of human existence, and internal struggles and conflicts leading to personal growth all illustrate Kent's desire to seek the acceptance of the Symbolic—namely, what the Other wants of me (e.g., “Why am I here?” “Why am I doing this?” “What am I doing?” and “What is reality?”). On the other hand, his desire is caught in the *manga*'s Symbolic (signifying network). One can say that Kent's interaction with *manga* is structured by the symbolic in search of his existence and meaning in life. On the other hand, Kent's desire is revealed and expressed through the desires of the *manga* characters that serve to remind him how to desire; through the medium of the *manga* (Other), he learns what can be desired (e.g., Why am I here?). Kent's desire, in Lacanian terms, suggests his lacking in that desire is never our own, but is caught up in the social structure, particularly with regard to our entry into the Symbolic (Zîzêk, 2005). Through the gaze (in the extent to which *manga* makes us think about and question reality), we are reminded of what we do not have. Kent, through the medium of *manga*, questions himself and is reminded of what he does not have (e.g., seeking the purpose in order to fill the (w)hole being). He engages in subject relations with the Other and desires such knowledge (e.g., What is reality? What is fantasy?). In a Lacanian context, knowledge (language) is impossible to fully

attain; it governs our desire, in which desire is also bound by the Symbolic (i.e., the subject can never fully control it), leading to a never-ending lack (Zîzêk, 2005).

As Kent recognizes, even *manga*'s heroes become heroes through an internal struggle due to their mastery of their inner selves, as opposed to an external enemy:

In *manga*, the hero is often someone who is sucked into their position as a hero.

They are not heroes to begin with. They are often people who find themselves in strange, difficult circumstances, and they become heroes by rising to the occasion and doing what they have to do to be themselves (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent's characterization of *manga*'s heroism comes from the conceptual territory of the hero's role as an entity that is simultaneously both self and Other; Kent admires the wholeness of the imago (Imaginary self) and desires identification (Symbolic consciousness) with that imago (the hero being driven by a purpose rather than an innate ability). In a Lacanian sense, Kent imaginarily takes this image (what it would be like to himself arise as a hero by projecting himself onto the characters) to be the essence of his identity. Finally, Kent exemplifies his appreciation of *manga*'s focus on the internal, commenting on its super-girl stories:

Super-girl *manga*, as a genre, is not necessarily one of my favorites, though there are series from this genre that I enjoy, like *Magic Knight Rayearth*. I guess I like the series not because of the super-girl parts of it, but because of the character interactions that occur within the super-girl theme. As far as how they compare with Superman, the stories are completely different. Superman's stories are all about saving the women in trouble or saving the world. However, stories like

Rayearth are more about the personal growth and internal experiences of the characters (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent makes it clear that he does not prefer stories about female superheroes; rather, he enjoys some of these stories because of their focus on the deeper, internal aspects of human experience. Throughout Kent's discussion of his involvement with *manga*, he makes it abundantly clear that these comics' depiction of characters he can "relate to" and their focus on complex, emotional topics are the main reasons he prefers them to American comics. However, in a statement that can perhaps be applied to more superficial media (e.g., a TV sitcom or standard mystery novel), Kent revealed that another reason he appreciates *manga* is simply because it allows him to "escape" his everyday reality.

In *manga*, it's not [always] that you learn stuff from it. Instead, it's almost like you experience things without actually doing it. You can escape into somebody else's life for 20 minutes. The things that are happening in the stories are very different from what's actually going on around me, although I totally enjoy what I'm doing right now. [...] I'm having a lot of fun. I enjoy the people I'm around. It's not that I want to get away. It's almost like...you are experiencing other things through somebody else, through these other characters. It's almost like having extra experiences in addition to what else you want to do. It's the same reason people read books. It's entertaining because it stretches your imagination. It makes you think along different lines. It expands what you already know. It stretches you, and I think that's good. People do the same thing over and over

again too much and just get bored. Now I hate being bored more than anything (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent emphasized that he “totally enjoys” his everyday reality while also indicating that he finds it interesting and entertaining to “escape into somebody else’s life” from time to time. Although Kent does not want to escape his own life in an unhealthy sense (“It’s not that I want to get away”), he still finds it enjoyable to access the “extra experiences” provided by *manga*’s characters.

The main reasons Kent provided for his appreciation of *manga* center on the art form’s complexity and inclusion of realistic characters to which he can feel an emotional attachment, yet he also values *manga* simply because it provides him with a wider range of experiences than is possible in real life. As Žižek (2005) noted, fantasy existing in the Imaginary realm allows the subject to escape the Symbolic by creating fantasies that assure the subject that he or she is whole. In a sense, fantasy is the answer to the object of what we are for the other; the fantasy is a visual scenario of possession and loss staged in the subject’s desire (Žižek, 1997, 2005). Fantasy promises endless possibilities for what one can be in the eyes of others. Thus, these narrative scenarios provide a sense of temporary fullness and restrain a satisfying relationship with the Other. Indeed, Kent’s identification with two *manga* characters (representing *objet a*) illustrate Lacan’s concept of fantasy and how it represents the subject’s ideal ego through the reflection of a visual likeness based on body image (in the mirror) one wants to see in fantasies (young boy but exhibiting “man” qualities—toughness and independence).

Kent's Identification with Specific Manga Characters: Tough Young Boys with Troubled Pasts

Two *manga* characters with whom Kent especially identifies are Shinji and Naruto. Shinji, a 14-year-old robot rider abandoned by his father, is characterized as shy with little or no self-esteem; he is training to fight alien battles. Naruto, a 12-year-old orphan, is training to be a ninja (martial artist) and learning about combat tactics of war at the ninja academy. Despite their young ages and personality flaws, they are both young and tough, engaged in combat, fighting for good will, and equipped with a man's endurance despite their troubled pasts and present hardships. One thing is clear: They represent Kent's ideal self—who he wants to be (e.g., young and tough). When asked whether he identifies with specific *manga* characters, Kent responded:

I guess a real good example is Shinji from *Evangelion*. There are times when he is very shy and laid back, but when it comes down to it, he is going to take charge. He is pissed off and he is angry and he is going to just take out everybody. When he gets into a certain mode in his mind, he is the boss. He can do it when he wants to. I am kind of like that...and he is bad with girls. He is terrible with girls...terrible, but at the same time there are times when he is just a regular guy with other guys. A lot of *manga* characters are like that: They have weaknesses that are right out there, and everybody can see them, but when the time comes they can put that aside and become strong and get the job done. I kind of see myself that way (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Shinji, a character from the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series, is a gloomy boy whose mission is to pilot a robot in the fight against mysterious alien beings who threaten

Earth's inhabitants. Shinji has lived without his father for many years due to the demands of his father's extensive pilot training. As a result, Shinji is an isolated, troubled character who often runs away from difficult situations. His missions often fail as a result of his severe lack of self-confidence, and he finds it hard to express his feelings toward others (especially girls). His relationship with his father is complicated, and a major theme of the series concerns his attempts to gain his father's recognition and respect.

The main reason Kent identifies with Shinji is that Shinji can be very strong despite his weaknesses. Perhaps the primary way in which Shinji manifests his strength is by "taking charge," "being the boss," and "getting it done when he wants to"—perhaps in an angry, "pissed off" kind of way. Thus, although Shinji is isolated and troubled and may not always be sure of where he fits within the social order, if he chooses to, he can be dominant, "taking out everybody." Kent appreciates this "has-weaknesses-yet-can-be-dominant" aspect of Shinji's personality and views himself as sharing it. Thus, on the one hand, Kent's identification with Shinji reflects his alignment with traditional ideals wherein males are expected to be able to take control of any situation. On the other hand, at some level Kent likely experiences Shinji's vulnerability as symbolic of a slightly modified, alternative ideal wherein dominant males also get to retain their more limited, human aspects—that is, they can "be the boss" when they want to, but they don't have to be a "man's man" in order to earn this position. Shinji can be said to be Kent's ideal vision of himself, in which he sees himself in part due to the extent to which he is actually able to dominate situations, accomplishing whatever it is he intends whenever he decides to take charge.

Kent's identification with Shinji is actually what Lacan called a dynamic interplay of identity crisis between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders (Chiesa, 2007). The Imaginary involves a narcissistic process of identification with an ideal ego (e.g., young and tough) that he wants to be while the Symbolic identification involves the way he desires to be perceived (e.g., in search of manhood) by meeting the Other's expectations (what a man should be? e.g., tough and independent). Shinji reveals Kent's recognition through a Mirror process, and he also recognizes his perception of the spectacular image as his own. Kent further described the Shinji character:

Shinji realizes the value of people around him, but at the same time, he realizes the value of being alone. Like, throughout the movie, people try to be part of his life and want to be close to him, but he doesn't want any part of them. The only person who really connects with him is his dad. And in the end he is, like, "I got to stop proving myself to him. I got to be me. Primarily, it has to be me." I think most guys feel the same thing. Their entire young adult life is all about trying to impress their dads. You know, trying to be like, "Yeah, Dad. Look at this."...And then there comes a time when they realize, "I got to be my own man, I got to be me, and I got to stop proving myself." To be a young man, I realize that I don't have to prove myself to anybody. I'd like to, but I no longer think that I have to. I think that's something a lot of people go through...I think a lot of guys would probably feel a...connection [to Shinji], like, you're trying to prove yourself and always feeling that you're a little short, until you realize that you don't have to prove yourself (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent's description suggests that another reason he identifies with Shinji is that, like Shinji, he has come to decide that he no longer needs his father's approval. As Kent understands it, most people eventually make such a decision in the course of transitioning from childhood to adulthood; therefore, most ("a lot of guys") would be able to relate to Shinji in this area. Although Kent may be correct in assuming that young men and women do not need their parents' approval quite so much as they mature, the language he uses in raising this theme suggests that perhaps the type of independence he values can only be found in fantasy. Statements such as "Primarily, it has to be me"; "I got to be my own man, I got to be me, and I got to stop proving myself"; and "To be a young man, I realize that I don't have to prove myself to anybody" are not possible in a social world.

Essentially, Kent's identity as a man is shaped by the imaginary ideal self (young and tough) that he wants to be, which subsequently leads to his search for manhood in his evaluation of what it means to live up to his father's ideal. Thus, while Shinji may be an independent loner who eventually learns that he can also let go of the one person who has mattered to him (his father), Kent's identification with this aspect of Shinji's character is based as much on his desire as on his seeking his father's recognition (e.g., he wants to be a man like his father) and his wish to appear likable and acceptable by that standard (e.g., he wants to be perceived as a man and at the same time recognized by the father or people around him).

In a Lacanian sense, Kent's sense of identity is shaped by the *objet a* (e.g., the ideal image of self) of his desires. Kent's connection to Shinji reflects a lacking he wants to fulfill but cannot have (e.g., image of man as having emotional maturity, toughness, confidence). Kent is seeking recognition from the father (Symbolic law) and trying to

meet the expectations of the father (e.g., a parent's expectations, ideals, societal norms). He feels a sense of failure (dissatisfaction) as he constantly feels the need to prove himself to others (including his own father); he is a man, not a boy anymore, as he passes into manhood. Lacan says that the Symbolic defines what we are and how we should behave as a wo/man, and through identification with and assimilation of an endless array of "signifiers" (e.g., man, woman, independence, maturity, responsibility, toughness, control, conquer), we learn what it means to be a wo/man (Chiesa, 2007). For Kent, being a man means living one's life according to one's own standards, by one's own ideals and not by what others and society says to do. On the other hand, Kent's identity of being a man is constrained by societal expectations concerning how he should be and behave according to the Symbolic law (e.g., a man should not be weak, but tough and strong).

Clearly, Kent is struggling to establish his identity as a man, between what he thinks he is (a boy who is shy may be weak) and the way he wants others to see him (a man who is in control is tough, thus strong). Lacan argued that identity is always a struggle and ultimately all attempts we make fail, just as Kent feels he comes up short on his attempt: "you're trying to prove yourself and always feeling that you're a little short."

Another character with whom Kent identifies is Naruto, a character from one of *manga's* action-comedy series. Naruto is a 12-year-old orphan studying to become a ninja who, because of the loss of his parents, tends to be a troublemaker, annoying his teachers and his peers. But Naruto is highly motivated to become the greatest ninja ever to live in his village and eventually graduates from the Ninja Academy with the help of his classmates. In a comment that is consistent with his appreciation of "human" characters, Kent stated:

As far as character strengths and weaknesses, I prefer strengths and weaknesses that are realistic. I like characters that are strong, but not necessarily in physical strength. Naruto is a good example; he is not always the strongest character when it comes to bodily strength, but he is always the one who helps people when they are depressed or sad. Naruto can be said to be idealistic, and I think I am too. I like to look for the best in people and situations and hope for the best, even if that is not necessarily realistic (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Again, Kent prefers characters that are believable, and thus have human limitations. On the other hand, as the narratives describing both Naruto and Shinji demonstrate, Kent also enjoys strong characters. In the case of Naruto, Kent identifies this character's strength as based in his idealism as well as his ability to help others. Naruto is strong because he can retain a positive outlook despite life's hardships, encouraging others who have let such hardships get them down. Kent also identifies with Naruto's positivity. In the following statement, we see that Kent also identifies with Naruto for the same reason he identifies with Shinji:

I can relate to...Naruto...[because he] is like me, because when times get tough and you need to get a job done, he gets serious and concentrates on the job at hand. Also, he, like me, is not the best with women...(personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Like Shinji, Naruto is weak yet strong. Although he has suffered the loss of his parents and thus acts out in ways that annoy others, resulting in their disapproval, he can also occupy a dominant position, "getting the job done" when times are tough enough to warrant such action. As previously described earlier, Kent identifies with characters who

can rise to a dominant position (“taking charge,” “being the boss,” “taking out everybody”) despite their vulnerability (and lack of standing among their peers). His fantasy indicates what he is for the others: Shinji and Naruto display qualities he sees in himself and wishes to be seen by the Other. He may be young and physically weak (like the characters), but he can be psychologically dominant and take control of a situation. Not surprisingly, many of the qualities Kent finds so attractive in Shinji and Naruto are those he has provided to Roland, a *manga* character he has created himself (a young boy who exhibits “man” qualities—toughness and emotional maturity) (see Figure 4.13).

Figure 4.13. Kent’s favorite *manga* character (Naruto) in Photoshop: Naruto appears to be Imaginary constructions of a desirable self, an envisioning of these *manga* characters as models of the self he wants to be (tough, strong and self-controlled) [Used by permission of the artist].

Kent's Own Manga Character

Symbolic identity in search of manhood. Kent's manga character Roland is a 14-year-old gunfighter whose pursuits center on finding the man he believes killed his parents. As such, he is in continual pursuit of this individual and does not have a permanent home. Kent described Roland (see Figure 4.14) as follows:

Roland is a combination of several of my favorite characters from several different media. The first [character] is where he get his name from. Stephen King wrote some books called the Gunslinger trilogy. The main character was a man named Roland, who was a rough-edged cowboy gunfighter. He reminded me of Clint Eastwood, one of my favorite movie stars. I always have wondered what such a person would be like as a child, and as this period of [this character's life was] never explored, I wanted to do it myself in [my] character. He had a troubled childhood (he killed his parents, for reasons he, during his story, does not understand), and even as a teen...he has mental and emotional issues he was dealing with. He was becoming an adult way earlier than others his age, and his seriousness and cold-heartedness was [sic] odd for his age (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Figure 4.14. Kent's own *manga* Character (Roland). [Left] Roland exhibits boyish features with innocent, large eyes, accompanied by his weapon—police-type guns; [middle] Roland with wings and a big coat, carrying a rifle; [right] Kent's original *manga* drawing colored by Noah in Photoshop: Roland with a smoking pistol looking down after firing a shot. These drawings represent the presence in the Imaginary of Kent's ideal self by way of mirroring the other/self. [Used by permission of the artist]

Kent further explained:

[Roland] is very human, with a lot of problems...[He] doesn't show a lot of emotions. He is very quiet. [...] You can't see too much emotion in his eyes because he has kind of pulled back from everyone else...[And] he is not necessarily so buff. He is kind of skinny, but I want to emphasize his muscle because I want to emphasize that he is kind of like...he can freak out at any time. It's more like a quiet strength that he has instead of an in-your-face physical strength. He is about 14. It's more—as opposed to giving him lots of muscle, this is much more realistic because the Average Joe 14-year-old kid is not walking around with huge muscles. My character has smooth skin. He...also...doesn't have a place to stay. He moves from town to town...My character is young and a

little slender because I want to show that, while he is young, he has been doing a lot, having lots of experiences. It's a kind of combination of the two – he is young and he is also experienced and older...The gun he carries is his father's gun. His father was kind of like a policeman. [So] this is actually the gun of a policeman (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

These narratives support the idea that Kent's self-invented *manga* character is based in part on Stephen King's hard, "rough-edged" gunfighter character along with the related Clint Eastwood prototype. Kent's Roland is himself a gunfighter, and it would seem that he has landed in this role as a result of his troubled past (one of Kent's intentions in creating his character was to explore the childhood of Stephen King's gunslinger character). Fourteen-year-old Roland is a serious, unemotional (even "cold-hearted") youth who is much older than his years as a result of both his past and present experiences. Although he has "mental and emotional issues" as a result of his childhood, he remains an exceptionally strong character, living an independent, nomadic lifestyle and continually fighting others as he attempts to "avenge" his parents' death. Kent explained Roland's mission and the physical toll this mission takes on him:

As for his scars, they [are] part of his messed-up mind and history. He had a major mental break-down after he killed his parents and his mind blanked out these memories, and they were replaced with a dark, masked man killing his parents instead. So Roland made it his mission to hunt down this mystery man (who didn't actually exist) and kill him. Roland, though, maintained that he was the good guy, so for every person he had to kill in his mission to get to this man, he gave himself a scar on his arms. It was his way of punishing himself for taking

a life, even in self-defense. It was his way of kind of justifying what he was doing, and in a way these scars, the damage he was doing to his body, mirrored the damage to his mind and soul, based on his history (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Kent elaborated further:

He doesn't kill every time somebody attacks him. He won't kill somebody just randomly. He is a good guy, and he is a good person. If he is killing somebody in self-defense, even though it's in self-defense, he gives himself a scar to remind himself that maybe with each kill he becomes more like the people who killed his parents. He doesn't want that. It's almost like a reminder to be different from them, to be good (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

As these descriptions indicate, Roland encounters numerous opponents he must fight and kill as he searches for the imaginary man he believes murdered his parents. Yet, although Roland is a "cold-hearted" fighter, he still has very strong morals; thus, he scars himself each time he kills in order to both punish himself and remind himself not to get too hard. As Kent describes it, Roland's scars emphasize his damaged psyche ("his scars...[are] part of his messed-up mind and history") while reflecting his intention to be a good person.

Roland's scars also emphasize his strength. First, Roland's scars are self-inflicted rather than the result of an inability to fight. Roland has not sustained the damage to his body as a result of his having been at a disadvantage in a fight. Second, Roland's scars symbolize his discipline, self-control, and courage. It takes a lot of courage and self-control for one to deliberately cut oneself as part of a broader effort to remain good.

Finally, both Roland's inner and outer scars function more as a badge of honor than a sign of physical impairment. The damage Roland has suffered does not evoke impressions of flaw or handicap; instead, it is a sign of endurance and toughness. In fact, it is the damage Roland has suffered that has caused him to become the "rough-edged" killer he is.

Roland can be said to be Kent's projection of the ideal ego (albeit with a visual likeness) of what he wants to be and the manner in which he wishes to be perceived by others (e.g., young and tough, emotionally mature, morally good). His imaginary other represented by his *objet a* (e.g., a man's qualities of endurance, toughness, mature emotionality, and independence) is also structured by the Symbolic order—namely, his fantasy that mediates the relationship he has with the Other and that also represents a constant struggle in which he tries to meet the desire of the other (inscribed in the Symbolic order), in which he is the witness as the objects of desire for the other's desire (e.g., seeking a man's recognition).

Summary: Identity as Struggle

Kent's identity is an effect of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, framed by what Lacan described as an ultimate identity struggle between an ideal ego (e.g., he wants to be young and tough) and an ego-ideal (e.g., he seeks a man's recognition). Kent strives to seek this impossible goal by creating a fantasized identification that reassures him that his ideal ego meets the ego ideal. The fantasy provides an answer to his lack; *manga* is the source of his fantasy and stages how he attempts to form an identity to satisfy his others (e.g., parents, friends) and make himself the object of their desire.

To cope with the dissatisfaction (brought by the Symbolic, constantly feeling the need to prove himself to others), Kent creates fantasies mirroring the *manga* characters as models. As a man, he desires to fit into the traditional (western) masculine ideals, as revealed through the gaze of the father (the desire driven by the Symbolic ideals). The Imaginary provides an alternate subject position in which Kent can simultaneously be boy and man, experimenting without confronting the law. His identity is trapped in the Imaginary, yet his Imaginary is strongly bounded by the moral values he receives from the Symbolic order (e.g., he is quite conscious of the difference between good and bad, evidenced by Roland being a “good” killer with a conscience).

Furthermore, in a Lacanian sense, Kent’s Imaginary identity is structured by the Symbolic western cultural ideals of man. Lacan (1977e) asserted that the body types of acquired ideals and models, often accompanied by the open choices provided in the social and cultural worlds (Symbolic), govern the ideal image one inscribes later in life and that identity is always a split between what we want to see in fantasy (Imaginary) and what we desire to be seen as in the eyes of the Other (Symbolic). Indeed, this is a constant struggle—a moving between two versions of ourselves.

Case 4: Clark Wise

Introduction

This case focuses on three main themes that emerged from Clark's discussion of his involvement with *manga*: (1) his preference for *manga* as a fantasy genre, which emerges in an everyday context with authentic human emotional qualities; (2) his identification with a dominant male persona; and (3) his struggle for fitting in, approval, and recognition as a gay man. The section begins with a brief biographical sketch of Clark's life.

Brief Biographical Account

Clark is a 20-year-old linguistics major. He grew up in a very small town in the Midwest and was raised Catholic in a household that closely followed that religion's beliefs. Clark has three brothers and one sister. His mother does not work outside the home because of her perceived moral obligation to stay home to care for her family in fulfillment of the traditional mother's role. Clark's father, a Methodist, is a registered nurse who sometimes works two shifts in order to support his family. As a gay man, Clark views himself as having been rejected by the Catholic community; thus, he no longer considers himself a practicing Catholic. He prefers Japanese philosophies of living.⁴⁵ His favorite *manga* series is the *Gravitation* series, whose stories center on romantic relationships between two beautiful young men. Clark's own *manga* stories often center on power struggles.

⁴⁵ Because of his exposure to *manga*, Clark professes a belief in animism—that all living and non-living forms in nature (e.g., persons, animals, plants, places, mountains, stones, rocks, sea, furniture) are thought to be manifested in spirits with a supernatural or sacred force. This belief is also rooted in Shintoism.

The Value of Manga: Manga's Fantasy Structure Emerges in an Everyday Context with Authentic Human Emotional Qualities

One of Clark's first instances of exposure to comics occurred as a result of his father's influence. When Clark first started to read comics, he read those that his father had read as a boy (e.g., the superhero genre). Now, like many *manga* fans, Clark prefers *manga* to American comics.

I used to read old American comics...the stuff my dad used to read...[For example,] Superman...I used to read the comics my father had when he was younger and still living in my grandmother's house. I mean, those work, but they're really outdated. Now I am reading more *manga*, and I have friends who are involved in *manga*. I prefer *manga* to American comics (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

As Clark puts it, American comics "work," but they're not as enjoyable as *manga*. When asked why he prefers *manga* to American comics, he stated:

Manga stories center on everyday life, but they [also] include situations you never think would happen. [So] there's something [the element of everyday life] you can identify with. In American comics, it's always a superhero. There are no people like a high school student or some guy or woman who ends up in a small town (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

According to Clark, a major reason why he prefers *manga* to American comics is that *manga* is both unpredictable and ordinary. More to the point, *manga* stories sustain the reader's interest while also allowing the reader to "identify with" the story and its characters in a fantasy realm. In contrast to the American superhero genre, *manga*

includes normal characters to which one can easily relate (e.g., a high school student or a woman living in a small town).

Elaborating on *manga*'s mixture of the (Symbolic) everyday with (Imaginary) fantasy, Clark explained:

Manga is like—everyday life is fantasy! Like, in *Angel Sanctuary*, the setting is in this completely normal world, but the storyline is a little odd. It's about this brother who is in love with his sister, and it turns out he is the reincarnation of this beautiful angel with supernatural powers. At the end, he turns angels and demons against God (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

For Clark, *manga* provides fantasy—the brother character in *Angel Sanctuary* has extraordinary powers—but he is also engaged because the stories are set in a context to which he can relate. It is relatively easy for Clark to imagine an interaction with the brother or even to imagine himself as the brother. *Manga* is enjoyable because the fantasy provides a screen that mediates the subject's mental interaction with the outside world. Clark is fascinated by the *manga* stories not only because they provide pleasure, but also because they are prohibited by the Symbolic (e.g., the brother is in love with his sister, turns angels and demons against God). When asked to elaborate on the difference between *manga* and American comics, Clark responded:

[Well...] for example, you know Superman has a clear-cut evil in the storylines? There's this one guy—he is just evil, and that's all there is—not very interesting. It's just—he is a cliché. I mean, you know? OK. This guy is going to release some biochemical agent into the world. It's just plain bad. But *manga* is different (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Like many fans, Clark views *manga* as more valuable than American comics because of its more complex treatment of morality in regard to right and wrong, good and evil. Clark provided an example of such treatment when he described the *Final Fantasy VII* story:

For example, [in] *Final Fantasy VII*, Sephiroth is the secondary character in the story, and he is the antagonist—the enemy...It turns out...[that at one point in the story] he [goes] to this small town, and he finds out his mother is in this cage...[So] Sephiroth is trying to help his mother. He burns out the entire town...and takes her with him when he leaves the town...He is kind of crazy. You have to admit that. He thinks he is God but, at the same time, you can see some of his reasons...It's for his mother. It's for family ties, which, in any culture, is a huge thing to have. A lot of cultures encourage respect for the mother. You can see what he is doing and why he is doing it. You may not support the way he is going about it, but at least you can see he has a reason for it (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

According to Clark, Sephiroth⁴⁶ (the “crazy” antagonist in the *Final Fantasy VII* story) behaves the way he does with good reason: “You can see what he is doing and why he is doing it. You may not support the way he is going about it, but at least you can see he has a reason for it.” Sephiroth’s “bad behavior” is based on something we can all relate to—namely, anguish over the fate of a loved one and the desire to help that loved one. The reader can feel something for this antagonist. In contrast to the evil antagonists of the American superhero genre, this *manga* character is not a cliché. Instead, he has more complex human characteristics, making it easy for the reader to understand and relate to

⁴⁶ See Sephiroth character at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sephiroth_%28Final_Fantasy_VII%29.

him. For Clark, given *manga*'s ability to engage the reader in a world consisting of both fantasy and symbolic representations, fantasy resides with the image derived from the place that occupies the larger (Symbolic) structure. In other words, the fantasy must be staged in the subject's desire so that it can be enjoyed. Elaborating on his attitude toward Superman, Clark stated:

Superman seems to be ultra-masculine—giant shoulders...[and] his emotions are one-dimensional emotions. He doesn't experience complex emotions like me.

Superman is, like, there is one truth, and it's *the* truth. In *manga*, *manga* characters have grey areas. They are not entirely good or entirely bad. There is no real winner in the situation. I mean, you have to draw your own conclusion[s]...In the American comics, it's, like, "he is bad," and there's nothing [else] to it.

Another thing is that I don't think Superman is attractive because he is drawn in a superhuman character. He is, like, beyond the realm of possibility. Superman is outside of it. He has all the muscles—super strength—and can't be killed by bullets and all sorts of things like that. [But] that could never, ever happen. And, compared to Yuki—Yuki is a pretty normal guy. I mean, sometimes he gets a little superhero strength. [But] you can see some people [actually] doing [this]. You've heard of people who get super strength, where it's not outside the realm of human possibility...it's close enough that you could see that it's possible, instead of Superman, where it's just not possible (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Like many *manga* fans, Clark embraces the treatment of the realism of the stories and the characters' complexity with regard to emotional development. He feels the Superman

stories are simplistic in their treatment of moral themes (good versus evil) and finds “black and white” characters uninspiring. He prefers *manga*’s gray characters, who are neither entirely good nor entirely bad and thus have more complex personalities and motivations for being bad and “experience complex emotions” like him.

Manga is attractive because it offers Clark a surplus value—the way it accords with his desire to meet a pretty guy in reality. As Clark frames it, a significant limitation of the Superman stories lies in the fact that Superman is “beyond the realm of possibility.” No one has Superman’s physique, strength, or skills; thus, Superman’s story is unbelievable. Interestingly, the implication here is that, when fantasy is overdone, it ceases to facilitate imagination. For Clark, fiction needs to be structured in everyday reality if he is to become involved in the story. Clark elaborated on this theme, contrasting Superman with Yuki:

Superman has a lot of testosterone. Superman is a saver, but he doesn’t exist. You are more likely to meet Yuki. [...] If you go down to [a local park], none of those guys look like Superman. I just think Yuki is more realistic, and it’s possible to meet someone more like Yuki than it would someone who looks like Superman...[Yuki] is not [exactly] like other guys [and a guy like him would still be] hard to find, but still in the realm of possibility. He is different, but not too different (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark described Superman as an “ultra-masculine” character who is “well-built, with a lot of muscle on him” (personal communication, April, 26, 2006) whereas Yuki is a human

character who is more similar to the people Clark might actually meet in real life.⁴⁷

Superman is a savior, but he does not actually exist, while Yuki-type characters are “in the realm of possibility.”

A primary reason Clark appreciates stories with realistic characters is that such stories can facilitate relationship fantasies. He values human characters not only because these are characters he “can really relate to” or understand, but also because only on these characters can Clark project fantasies of friendship or intimacy. Clark is thus transformed from something read into someone seen, perhaps someone seen in the mirror. A main element in Clark’s comparison of the Yuki and Superman characters is that “it’s possible to meet someone” like Yuki. Clark seems to prefer characters on whom he can project intimacy and relationship-oriented fantasies. His imaginary identification resides in what he enjoys and is also structured in the Symbolic (possible) realm. Simply put, the American superhero does not fit his ideal body image of the self, but *manga* characters return Clark’s gaze (to meet a cool guy like Yuki).

On the other hand, Clark could not relate to Superman even if he were human:

Superman is the big, muscular guy who defends the weak and is in love with the woman. That’s very stereotypical. You know, the man is supposed to be brave and a winner, and be this kind of super-awesome, powerful guy. I am not powerful at all, in my opinion (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

⁴⁷ Superman represents an idol of men for his embellished masculinity, power, and strength; wearing a cape, boots, and underwear-like pants; with the super power ability of flying in the air; and cast as America’s most powerful figure although he doesn’t exist in real life. On the other hand, Eiri Yuki also exists in the Imaginary for Clark, but is closer to his Symbolic reality. Yuki has blond hair, wears normal clothes and sunglasses, and appears to be more like an ordinary guy from the neighborhood. He might be met in reality: a cool, sarcastic person who does not show a lot of emotion.

Clark's focus is not on Superman's lack of complexity or realism, but rather he acknowledges that Superman has qualities human males are supposed to have. According to American mainstream norms, men are supposed to be brave, powerful winners—not just in (Imaginary) fantasy, but in (Symbolic) reality as well. Yet Clark does not see himself this way.

I can't relate to him—once again, the big muscular guy. I am not big with my muscles...[and] I am pretty short for a guy, and actually kind of thin...and he likes girls. I don't have that sort of attraction for girls. You know, I would protect them, but I don't have an attraction to them like that (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Although Superman conforms to societal norms for males, Clark does not, being relatively short and thin, not muscular, and—more importantly—gay. Clark has almost nothing in common with the macho, heterosexual Superman character, which is another reason he finds the character lacking. Superman exists in the Symbolic ideals for heterosexuality (Superman stands for the American way—man's power, masculinity, and savior status), but such body ideals do not seem to fit Clark's image of the self (he is short, feminine, sensitive, and in love with a man).

When asked what kinds of *manga* he prefers, Clark answered:

Any type of *manga* or *anime* stories or video games that I get into has to have a character that I can really relate to. I can see what they need—what they want. It's like, "Whoa! I like him a lot." I want to see what's gonna happen to him, so I keep following the storyline because [it includes] characters I find interesting...In *Gravitation*, for example, Eiri Yuki is basically a jerk the whole time, and you

wonder why. I mean, people are not usually jerks for no apparent reason. Usually, there is a reason for it. It's just the matter of me wanting to know why he is such a jerk the whole time. You find out later, if you follow the story (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark seems to be more interested in following the lives of characters he “can really relate to.” If Clark likes a character or if a character is interesting to him, he enjoys following that character's life to see what happens to him or tries to understand him better.

For Clark, one of *manga*'s appeals is that it allows him to become immersed in the world of its characters—so much so that he becomes emotionally involved in their stories.

When I first saw the scene where Yuki and Shuichi are alone together for the first time, I was, like...screaming. [This is] probably very sad...But with *Gravitation*, you actually, in my opinion, feel something for the character (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark's emotional response to Yuki and Shuichi's relationship amounts to an acknowledgement that perhaps his emotional involvement with the characters is based on a mirror reflection, that Clark likes the story characters so much that he attaches himself to the character's emotional intimacy. When asked to explain how *manga* solicits an emotional response from the reader, Clark answered:

It's just, maybe, how the characters act, like, their personality, and how they handle the situation, [so that] you're sitting there, maybe, empathizing with them. “I have been in situations like that”...or...“I think that person is very cool

because of that.” It just depends on how you want to see—if you are willing to see their point of view...It’s like—almost like—there are certain people that you hate. [Although] in *manga*, not everyone hates or likes the same [characters]... You develop emotional attachments because they are just interesting. You want to follow the story, and you can talk about them to your friends (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

According to Clark, the reason *manga* facilitates readers’ emotional involvement with its characters is because *manga* characters are so “human.” They are easy to identify with. Clark develops an emotional attachment with these characters and begins to fill a key emotional need (the need to talk about the stories with his friends) by following the story. *Manga* characters act in ways Clark can appreciate, such that he can see the characters reflecting himself concerning how he might act in a relationship (since he is in a relationship with another guy). *Manga* characters can be said to be closer to his (Symbolic) reality, such that Clark can empathize with them and imagine interactions with the characters in similar situations.

The two *manga* characters Clark identifies exist in relation to the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders; together they constitute a desire to try to resolve the gap between what he sees himself as and how he is seen by others, with his desire to be accepted by others. Thus, his desire expressed in the *manga* fantasy may also point the way to conflict.

Clark’s Identification with Specific Manga Characters

The *manga* characters with whom Clark identifies often are good-looking guys, characters who make sense of his world, with personification or traits he likes. In

*particular, he identifies with Yuki,*⁴⁸ a good-looking young man whose personality displays qualities of a dominant and cool persona, and Kanoe,⁴⁹ a female dreamseer described as a pragmatist⁵⁰ and a free spirit, prominent in her vision of herself, with the ability to get into others' dreams and the personal experience of the seer. Both characters represent the ideal-self Clark wants to be. Clark described Yuki as follows:

Yuki has a dominant personality. He's the tall, beautiful, mysterious and romantic novelist in the story...[and] Shuichi is a popular Japanese band signer and is in pursuit of Yuki for a romantic relationship...Throughout the story, [Yuki] keeps pushing Shuichi away and is reluctant to show his feelings to Shuichi, due to his difficulties in the past. In a way, I am very much like Shuichi (very much a cry baby), but I want to be like Yuki (he acts more grown up). Yuki is always kind of like this ideal guy—the guy I actually prefer. Yuki is kind of cold, and he can hide his emotions. Shuichi is more emotional, and he is more forward about things...I want to be like Yuki. I can't control my emotions. He is able to just shut off—no emotions, no feelings about people. There's something that I can't do. If I feel emotional about someone, it's going to be obvious (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark's portrayal of the Yuki character shows Yuki as one who is attractive, mysterious, and strong. Although Yuki is "cold," refusing to show his feelings, to Clark this is not a bad thing. Clark makes it clear that Yuki is one of his favorite characters because Yuki is

⁴⁸Yuki is involved in a love relationship with a singer in a rock band, Shuichi, in the *Gravitation* series (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravitation_%28manga%29).

⁴⁹ Kanoe is a character from *X/1999 manga* series (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/X_%28manga%29).

⁵⁰ Clark describes Kanoe as someone with traits he likes (emotional maturity, flexibility, open-mindedness, deliberation), found in the practical consequences of accepting things.

in firm control of his emotions. Although Clark wants to be like Yuki, he is, in fact, more like Shuichi.⁵¹ In other words, whereas Clark views Yuki as an ideal (Imaginary) other, the character with whom he explicitly identifies is Shuichi (“I am very much like Shuichi”). Thus, Yuki is the ideal self he wants to be, and Shuichi is rather a self-image in which he sees himself. What Clark identifies is his ideal ego (staged within the fantasy).

When Clark identifies with Yuki, he does not really see this character as he is; instead, he sees that character in the way he wants to see himself. Through fantasy, he finds satisfaction in identifying with the likable or desirable elements in the scene. This ideal other (the *objet a*) has a “surplus value” (a cool persona with a cold and dominant personality—without fear or feelings of rejection) (Jagodzinski, 2004). Clark elaborated on Yuki’s unemotional personality when he provided an example of the way Yuki tends to “push Shuichi away.”

[For example, when] someone is trying to get closer to him...He just does not do anything. There is one scene in *anime* where Shuichi goes to kiss him, and Yuki [just] stand[s there.] So, Shuichi is thinking about all the stuff that’s going on with Yuki. Yuki is just cool and stands there. He is so cool about things. He doesn’t really react, and he doesn’t go either way (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Again, to Clark, Yuki’s reluctance to respond or show affection is a strength—an example of his ability to go through life without “reacting” to it. Rather than taking a

⁵¹ Yuki is one of Clark’s favorite characters from *Gravitation*, the ideal self Clark wants to be (a cool persona with a cold and dominant personality) because Yuki is in firm control of his emotions; meanwhile, Shuichi is a self-image in which Clark sees himself (an emotionally sensitive person). Shuichi can be seen at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Shuichi.jpg>.

vulnerable stance when Shuichi attempts to kiss him, for instance, Yuki is cool and unresponsive. Clark appreciates and wishes for a demeanor like Yuki's: cool, unemotional, "grown up." To Clark, Yuki is "this ideal guy" with traits he desires.

I like Yuki's personality. It's probably because he almost has no emotions—maybe because he thinks the opposite way I do. If there's something wrong, typically, people would know about it with me. With him, it seems like you...have to [work to] find out, and you have to know him well before he will tell you anything. It might be just because he is the opposite of me, and that's why he is so attractive—just the fact that he is so different from me (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Here, Clark suggests that he appreciates Yuki not only because Yuki possesses specific qualities he wants for himself, but because Yuki represents an Imaginary object stemming from his Symbolic lack (his opposite, representing his desire for the qualities of being cool, mature, grown-up, etc.). Clark thus desires identification with that image. Another Imaginary other as the *objet a* of his Symbolic lack (cause of desire) is echoed in Kanoe's personality. Free to live the life she chooses, Kanoe is another signifier that structures Clark's desire. Kanoe is a female dreamseer who works as a secretary for the Japanese government. She has the ability to enter and leave the dreams of others, but she cannot see into the future or past through these dreams. She can also manipulate other people's dreams to get what she wants. Clark began his description of Kanoe by contrasting her with Hinoto,⁵² her sister:

⁵² Princess Hinoto is a character from *shojo manga X/1999*. As a dreamseer, she has the ability to foresee the future and visions, but she cannot hear, see, or walk. She has very long white hair and bright red eyes. Others can never see that she works for the Japanese government to foresee the battles between the

Basically, there are seven dragons of heaven and seven dragons of earth. Hinoto, a dreamseer, represents a dragon of heaven, who lives in the basement of the Japanese State House, and she is blind and can't be seen by people. No one can know she exists, but she advises the people who are higher-level, powerful businessmen in Japan. Her power is to look into dreams and create dreams, and her dreams have never failed to come true (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark also described Kanoe:

On the other hand, her younger sister, Kanoe, who works as a secretary in the government building for the governor of Tokyo, lives her life any way she chooses it. She doesn't need to worry about people seeing her. She has a completely free life. She looks pretty evil...[And while Hinoto's] plan is to save humankind, and "humans are good," Kanoe is, like, more concrete. "This is how the world is, and humans are bad."...[And a] young person, Kamui, discovers that he must choose whether to become a Dragon of Earth or a Dragon of Heaven (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Thus, Kanoe is unlike Hinoto in that Kanoe is pragmatic or cynical; more importantly, she is free to live as she chooses.

Kanoe is also influential and persuasive. She refuses to passively accept situations she wishes to see changed and refuses to engage in flattery or undue generosity in

Dragons of Heaven and Earth, despite the fact that she lives in the basement of the Japanese Senate House. In contrast, her younger sister Kanoe is an equal to her, but cannot foresee the future. She is hot and sexy, a free spirit and manipulative, and lives a life without being afraid of expressing herself ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Characters_of_X_\(manga\)#Princess_Hinoto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Characters_of_X_(manga)#Princess_Hinoto)), image of Hinoto character: <http://www.manga.sk/Informacie/Recenzie/X1999/hinoto.jpg>, and image of Kanoe character: http://www.nonsolomanga.it/manga3/camp_x/Kanoe.jpg.

her dealings with others. I absolutely like Kanoe. She is very manipulating. She gets what she wants, and she knows how to get it. She influences people to see things her way, unlike Hinoto. Hinoto (Kanoe's sister) just sits there and pleases you. She is, like, "Please, please do. You know the right thing to do." And Kanoe is, like, "I can only present you both sides. You can either go her way, helping people, or you can go my way..." She is, like, "The choice is up to you" (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

As Clark continued to describe Kanoe, he noted that—paradoxically—her sister actually has more power. Nevertheless, Kanoe is more appealing to Clark as she seems to have more strength of character. She has a stronger will (representing his lack):

The weird thing is that Hinoto can go into people's dreams. She can create dreams and carry on conversations with people. [In contrast,] Kanoe can only enter her sister's dreams. She can't create dreams herself, and she can only get into dreams by entering other dreamseers. [But] technically, regarding their powers, [while] Hinoto might be more powerful,...Kanoe is nine or ten times more influential. I like Kanoe, who is completely real. She goes out, and she does things. She lives her life any way she chooses it. She doesn't need to worry about people not seeing her. She gets a completely free life. [But] Hinoto...accepts the way things are. Kanoe is, like, "Why can't I do that?" And she challenges things, which is a lot different from accepting the way things are. I want to be more like Kanoe, but sometimes I think I am more like Hinoto, just accepting things the way they are...Kanoe can do what she wants, and she doesn't have to worry about things that much. That doesn't mean that she doesn't have remorse. She understands the

consequences of her actions. She doesn't do things without thinking (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

As a dreamseer, Hinoto is more powerful than her sister and can manipulate dreams to a greater extent than Kanoe. Yet Kanoe is an influential go-getter who does what she wants and “has a completely free life” as a result. Just as Clark wants to be like the Yuki character, he also wants to be like Kanoe, as she possesses certain qualities he feels he lacks himself (to become something he is not, someone who is assertive and has willpower). Clark wishes to be like Kanoe (although he actually thinks he is more like Hinoto); he desires her personality, since she “goes out and does things,” “challeng[es] things” and “negotiat[es]” with her environment to shape it to her will. As will be discussed in more detail in the following section, in large part due to his religious upbringing and sexual orientation, Clark has experienced significant pressure to do and be someone he is not. Clark wants to be like Kanoe because, unlike Clark, she can be her own person without having to “worry about things that much.”

In a Lacanian sense, Clark's identification with Kanoe and Yuki (his *objet a*—“strong will,” “cool,” “unemotional,” and “grown up”) is based on his lacking. Clark first recognizes himself as someone seen as an *other*, possibly even as certain others see him. His Imaginary identification with *manga* is clearly centered on the Symbolic lacking, and he creates an ideal ego around certain fantasies. For Lacan, the Imaginary (mirror stage) is important since it prepares the subject for Symbolic identification by establishing a separate identity. In other words, the Mirror offers the subject a warrant visuality, an ideal vision of the self in process. This vision provides a safe zone for the self-discovery necessary to create meaning without conforming to the Symbolic law.

Clark's Own Manga Characters and Stories: Narcissists who like Power Struggles

As is perhaps the case with most good fiction, the *manga* Clark creates centers on the story's characters, not the events surrounding them. Clark is explicit in his avowal that his characters are reflections of him. When asked to describe the *manga* he creates himself, he stated:

The characters have to come first. My characters are sort of like me, in different ways. I like power struggles, and I typically start with a character I like, and then the character, from there, creates a story (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark reduces *manga* to his mirror image, the one he likes (e.g., "I typically start with a character I like") and with whom he can empathize and relate (e.g., "my characters are sort of like me"). As such, his *manga* work ultimately becomes a narcissistic relationship between the self and the fantasy image of the self (the other is an identification of the mirror stage). In other words, Clark takes his own ego as a love object, where the other is the product of an Imaginary misrecognition that he perceives as a mirror for himself in Symbolic terms. He begins to create characters based on what he likes to be (see his self-portrait, Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15. Clark's own self-portrait entitled, *Ahem, how was that?* Clark's want-to-be, referenced from the *manga* character, Sephiroth, from *Final Fantasy VII*.⁵³ This self-portrait drawing works in an Imaginary sense as a mirrored ideal self-image (both feminine and masculine qualities, carrying a sword, with blue hair and skirt-like pants), and a gaze that turns away from the viewer. [Used by permission of the artist]

The Imaginary sense of a mirrored ideal fantasy image is displayed in Clark's own drawing of himself as a *manga* character (see Figure 4.15), in which he tries to be aggressive and passive at the same time, wearing long blue hair, with detailed abdominal and chest muscles (the desirable elements). Physically, he is striking a pose of victory or self-satisfaction, based on the picture's caption ("Ahem, how was that?"). He is wearing a suit and is naked from the waist up, carrying his weapon elegantly, contemplating after having used it in a fight. Clark modeled the self-portrait on a specific *manga* character, Sephiroth, but incorporated important differences. His gaze turns downward, away from the viewer, while he poses in an elegant gesture. The portrait reflects the desirable elements of Clark's want-to-be (both masculine and feminine—physical strength and

⁵³ See Sephiroth at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Sephiroth.png>.

muscular body, with certain feminine qualities and complex emotionality). In a Lacanian sense, Clark's desire/lack is further assured by the image in which he recognizes himself.

Visually, Clark desires both feminine and masculine aspects (e.g., a muscular body, with a feminine look and long blue hair), yet there is a narcissistic sense in which he displaces the desire of the Other onto his own ego, eventually falling in love with his own image, identifying self and other through the mirror stage. According to Lacan (1977f), such Imaginary identification (narcissistic identity), serves as a screen protect from the Symbolic chaos (Kristeva, 1987).

On the other hand, the *manga* Clark develops also functions as an alternative world in which he can experiment with various roles, act out personal fantasies, or relive stressful events. As it turns out, Clark's *manga* seems to serve the primary purpose of allowing him to re-experience (rehearse in the Imaginary sense) the conflict in his life. As he put it, he "likes power struggles" as a theme. An example of Clark's *manga* is described below (see Figure 4.16).

This story [Clark refers to a particular story] is kind of an Apocalypse kind of story. While I was reading *X/1999*, I was inspired by it because I like the idea of having a kind of story about the Apocalypse. It's a biblical term...My favorite book of the Bible is Revelation. It's telling the end of the world. It's telling a series of the events taking place at the end of the world (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Figure 4.16. Clark's favorite *manga* drawing (The King on Ocean Cliff, 2004). Clark portrays the king in his fantasy, standing on the cliff while looking down at the ocean, contemplating whether to save the world or end it. The black dots emerging from the dark green wings symbolize the presence of doubts and problems, and the wings represent freedom. [Used by permission of the artist]

Clark continued, explaining:

The original plan I was going to do is that this guy is supposed to be the king of his group of people. But what happens is that...he is the one who decides when to end the world. He needs to decide in his head, and everything is going to end the world. He has the ability. A bunch of people are trying to influence him, telling him he should end the world now, or he should save the world and the people in it. Everyone tries to get this guy to decide what's gonna happen, and this is the last scene. He is standing there on the cliff, and there's a person standing behind him, asking him, "Are you sure you want to do this? You understand, if you're doing this, you're ending the entire world?" He is trying to think about it, being alone by himself. He has to figure out and decide if he wants the world to be over...he can stop the world or continue it. He is the one who needs to make a

decision. Everyone is trying to influence him. [But] he is not trying to influence anyone...He is...the one person who is [not] trying to influence everyone. It's everyone else trying to influence one person—kind of feeling the pressure from society to bend to other people's will...I really like the power struggles in the story (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Although Clark's initial plan apparently did not center on the apocalyptic theme, the story took a turn in which the main character faced the ultimate decision: whether to end the world. Clark's story represents for him the ultimate power struggle as its inspiration is the biblical Apocalypse—the final struggle between good and evil. Of course, the obvious power struggle in Clark's story is the struggle between the King (the “self” character) and the rest of society. The King experiences significant conflict and turmoil in this story, yet Clark's description suggests such conflict does not primarily derive from the decision he faces, but rather from the fact that everyone is trying to get him to do what they think is best. Clark did not explicitly state that the King faces conflict over the thought of ending the world, anticipating the anguish some might feel if in fact he decides to go through with it. Instead, Clark repeatedly referred to the fact that “a bunch of people are trying to influence” the King (he is a King in his Imaginary), even going so far as to point out that the King is the one character who is not trying to influence anyone.

The King does not exert pressure on anyone; all he wants to do is live his life. However, he is feeling immense pressure from everyone else (Symbolic). Clark elaborated on this theme in response to a question about a black wing the main character has attached to his back (see Figure 4.16).

I just like the wing. I thought it looked cool. I didn't know what I wanted to do with it...It's a black wing, and I like the idea of black...The black wing is, kind of, to show [that he] either [has] regrets or problems. Maybe stresses. It starts with a light color, and when [he] start[s] to get stressed or worry about stuff, the wing has black spots coming out that show [he] ha[s] doubts and problems [he's] trying to work out. The idea of wings is not connected to angels, *per se*, but to me. The wings look cool. It's very pathetic, I know, but it's also a thought of flying. I think flying is a very cool ability. He is caught in the middle of power struggles. All these different people try to tell him what to do ... Everyone is questioning him and asking him, "What do you think? What do you want to do?" and "You should listen to us." It becomes a situation where he is pulled from so many directions, he just gets so sick of it all (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Here, Clark's initial explanation of the purpose of the King's wing seems hesitant or unclear. Initially he stated that he "didn't know what he wanted to do with" the wing, while his statement that the wing signifies stress or conflict is equivocal. However, as he continued, he became more straightforward in his description. The wing definitely symbolizes the presence of doubts and problems, and it also represents freedom. What kinds of stressors does the King face? As described earlier, the self character's main source of stress results from other people pulling him in so many directions. Yet in this struggle, everyone is aware that the King is the only one who has any meaningful power. As such, Clark gets to imagine himself in the Imaginary drama of the power struggle while knowing the whole time that he is bound to win it.

Unlike Kanoe, who can do what she wants without having to worry about it, the King cannot do what he wants without internal conflict. Other people are constantly trying to get him to act in accordance with their will, and their attempts cause so much stress and self-doubt that the King yearns for an escape. Clark desires to be freed from the dictates of society; he resists accepting heterosexuality as normality. The Imaginary is seen as a place to resist the ideological conventions and the restrictions of law that regulates both his desire and his existence. Thus, Clark gets to fantasize a world in which the Symbolic is conducted on his terms (Imaginary fantasy).

In regard to the Imaginary, Clark gets to play the role of the King, yet the Apocalypse story⁵⁴ he creates also stems from his (Symbolic) religious acknowledgment (being a gay man, he has been rejected by the Church), indicating an enormous influence (pressure) on shaping who he is as he passes through childhood into adulthood, ultimately resulting in him leaving the Church. In Lacanian terms, the Symbolic (including religion—the master signifier bound by the name-of-the-father) regulates who we are and how we should behave; no matter how much we try to escape, we can never be freed or exempted from the gaze of the Other once we have entered the Symbolic order (Žižek, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 2001). Thus, we are forever regulated and controlled by the desire of the Other. Clark's efforts to deny or recreate the Symbolic in his own image and according to his desires are actually a testament to the influence over him of the larger Symbolic—the one beyond his control. His power fantasies imply his powerlessness in a Lacanian as well as a Real sense: The unconscious desires mark themselves in a Fantasy sense when language fails and meaning falls short (Homer, 2005).

⁵⁴ According to Clark, apocalypse is historically defined by the Bible. In the book of Revelations, it corresponds to the importance of the secrets about to be disclosed at end of the world.

The visual depiction of the King in a self-portrait (see Figure 4.16) format acts as a rehearsal in an Imaginary sense. The King (i.e., Clark) is shown in contemplation the moment before the world ends, the pressure he is facing signified through the visual hints (object of anxiety, the meaningless black-and-white dots). This portrait is solidly framed in the fundamental Imaginary relation between the irreducible Symbolic treatment and the Real slipping into the midst of familiar reality. Clark is the King in his fantasy, standing on the cliff while looking down at the ocean, contemplating whether to save the world or to end it. The airbrushed mysterious white dots scattered in the air signify an “uncanny sense” of the Real (which lies in uncertainty as the object of an anxiety) (Zîzêk, 1992b), and they exceed and undercut the meaning structure of Symbolic reality (Zîzêk, 2005). Although Clark did not explain the white dots and the meaning associated with them, what is left unsaid tends to confirm the presence of an unconscious Real working in a Symbolic sense (signifying something is about to happen or change). On the other hand, both wings are painted dark green with black dots, and Clark acknowledges that the black dots are meant to show problems the King (he) has or regrets.

The portrait King is an object of his desire (*object a*—power to control the world) returning the Other’s gaze—addressing the subject’s question as to what he/she wants (just as there’s a person standing behind the King, asking him, “Are you sure you want to do this? You understand, if you’re doing this, you’re ending the entire world?”); what’s bothering him/her (“He [King] is the one who needs to make a decision”); and what the subject is for the Other (“he is feeling the pressure from society to bend to other people’s will”). In this case Clark defensively uses fantasy to avoid the impact of the Real (anxiety, uncertainty, regrets, and traumas). Through the fantasy landscape, Clark finds

temporary satisfaction and fulfillment by fantasizing an answer to the question: What am I for the Other? This is the instance where Clark uses the conscious talk explaining his anxiety (lack of symbolic power) through Symbolic language and Imaginary fantasy landscape to avoid the impact of the Real in a conflict-free fantasy atmosphere.

Thus, Clark sees the King in his reality as a returning gaze, seeing himself seeing himself in the eyes of the Other. He bears witness to this as he represents himself as a King, struggling to please everyone yet be his own man, while failing to live the life he wants. In fact, Clark is the King; in the Imaginary he has apprehended one of the roots of his identity: He was and is that King who, in reality, is a King for nobody, captivated by nothing. In the fantasy, he is the witness of the gaze as *objet a* (wing, King, black-and-white dots), and the King comes to symbolize his central lack expressed in the Imaginary, marking his presence for the first time with the web of desire (e.g., What do I do? Do I want to end the world or continue it? Is this the right decision or do I have other options?). In addition, the wings are supposed to signify the freedom of desire (wings are interpreted to be the symbol of mobility or freedom), reflecting both Clark's Imaginary and Symbolic self-representations (his wish to be freed, his quest to be recognized in his gay identity, and his desire to be accepted into the Symbolic law).

What is important about the story is that it presents a larger conflict that engages Clark's desire; it proceeds to reveal partial resolutions that hint toward the satisfaction of desire. These partial resolutions, in turn, suggest that the final decision will tie up all the loose ends and answer all the questions posed to Clark. The King explores how he reacts to the Other's gaze (via *objet a*), thereby freeing him from the pressure occurring in the Symbolic world such that the story is less concerned with following the path of desire

than with dwelling in a particular experience and the unsatisfied state of being that is connected to the experience of the Symbolic rejection. Clark is seeking acceptance of his gay identity but is simultaneously disrupted and rejected by his surrounding social reality (e.g., church, (m)other, social norms). Although Clark does not specifically connect his *manga* drawings to being gay and feeling unaccepted, he desires such (gay) identity but cannot attain it in Symbolic terms. Although it is left unsaid, Clarke is seeking recognition, a place where he can exist (without being gay-targeted); he turns himself toward the Imaginary fantasy, which constitutes a rehearsal/escape, in order to find solutions to the Symbolic conflict (not fitting in).

While Clark does not explicitly discuss the King's story in the context of his fears associated with being gay or connect those fears with that story, the fact that this connection remains unarticulated may represent an instance of the unconscious emerging through conscious speech. In other words, Clark uses the King as a signifier and referent in an attempt to refute the real conflict, imagining that he is a King, plunging his power into a conflict situation (whether to end the world) that represents his secret fears (the anxiety of not being accepted) while working against the impending impact of the Real. The Real trauma (gay bashing and rejection by the church) is momentarily set aside while being symbolically seized upon in the dream landscape.

Clark's Involvement in Manga Reflects His Own Inner Conflict

Clark's preferences for specific commercial *manga* characters and the conflict, stress, and anxiety themes reflected in his own *manga* story both strongly correspond to his accounts of his religious upbringing and his homosexuality. Clark still feels residual ties to the church that has rejected him. Clark, who is gay, was raised Catholic in a

traditional household that adhered closely to the religion's beliefs. Indeed, Clark was no exception. He was not a rebellious child. On the contrary, he explained:

When I was little, I believed what my mother told me. We went to church every Sunday. We'd sing and do prayers...Religion was a big part of the way I thought of things (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

However, a significant problem for Clark arose in that the Catholic Church does not accept homosexuality.

According to Lacan, upon acceptance of the Symbolic, the subject has to become something other than itself (in this case, to fit into the heterosexual norm) (Fink, 1995, 2003). As Clark's stated:

You know, I am gay, and the church does not accept it. The basic tenet of the Catholic religion is that homosexuality is wrong and gay people are going to hell. It's very cut and dry... In your mind, you can think whatever you want, but if you ever act on the impulse and do anything with another man, you are going to hell, right there...There is a part in the Bible—Leviticus—it specifically says that if a man lies with a man, as a man would lie with a woman, then he shall be stoned—killed. It's the same with the woman...[So] the problem is that, if you are gay, I am sorry, you have to be killed (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

For Clark, the church's position on homosexuality couldn't be clearer. This particular "offense" is so horrible that one should be killed if one engages in it. Although Clark is "done with Catholicism," he makes several statements that suggest he may still be tied to the church in some sense. In a Lacanian sense, the Symbolic castrates the subject and can be very oppressing to one's identity; for Clark, his gay identity (gay is not an acceptable

alternative to the heterosexual norm) violates the law (religion, cultural norms) and is thus not accepted (must be killed)—a situation that creates abjection and anxiety.

Another element of Clark's (gay) identity arises in the difference of a Symbolic father (church) conflict. At one point Clark explained how Protestant ideals are inconsistent with the Catholic faith's "focus on the Virgin Mary," commenting that, "It's comforting to be [in the church] once you are in the system. It's a community of worship. It's a whole group of people who believe the same thing" (personal communication, April, 26, 2006). He later stated that, "There's no escaping the way I was raised. There's no way I could completely get rid of my beliefs, no matter what I do... You know, Protestantism is not too bad" (personal communication, April, 26, 2006). Such statements reflect a kind of internal conflict for Clark, concerning the religious upbringing (family expectations and church influences) wielding its influence on him long before he was born. Clark's comment about "being part of the system" was spoken in the present tense. He did not say that "it once was comforting," but rather it "is" comforting to be a part of a religious community. His statement that "there's no escaping the way he was raised" is an explicit acknowledgement that the Christian ideals he was taught as a child still influence him to some extent—to such an extent, in fact, that he almost appears to consider Protestantism as a viable alternative to Catholicism. In some sense, Clark is still tied to Christianity; because Christianity is Bible-based and the Bible rejects homosexuality, the church is still a source of internal conflict for Clark, despite the fact that he has left it.

Symbolically castrated by the Other (rejection of society, heterosexual norm, and church). An additional source of the conflict Clark experiences comes not from the

church *per se*, but from the larger society. Having been raised in a small Midwestern town, Clark has an acute sense of mainstream society's rejection of the gay lifestyle.

I came from a very conservative and small town. It's not wise to come out [in towns] like that...I never said anything because it was just easier not to. In smaller towns, I remember that there were insults as bad as, like, "That's so gay." So, being gay is the same as being the object of insult—ridicule. It's an attack on somebody's masculinity. It's, like, you'd rather be considered a woman...When you step outside of what people understand, questions start to rise. That's why I left (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

In Clark's hometown, to be labeled "gay" was to experience ridicule and an attack on what is perhaps the core of one's identity: one's gender. Being gay was not an acceptable alternative to the heterosexual norm, but rather something to hide. In a related statement, Clark commented:

When I was younger, my entire life, growing up, I wanted to say something, but you just can't say anything because if you say that, people would look at you weird. I was what is thought of as being outside the norm.... I am not part of the normal defining way of life...I am gay, and I like guys—not girls—and people don't really understand that a lot. People ask me, "How could you like a guy?" (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

One's sexual orientation is a highly significant aspect of personal identity, at least in most societies. Although Clark had a strong and persistent desire to reveal his sexual orientation to others and share that part of himself, he knew that he would suffer negative consequences if he did so. People would not understand him and would respond with

disbelief as well as ridicule and strong attempts to make him feel deeply ashamed and humiliated (“How could you like a guy?”).

As Clark grew older, he learned that, consistent with the biblical mandate (at least to some extent), people also responded to homosexuality with violence. He described contemptuous attitudes many people continue to hold toward gays:

Actually, last night, one of my friends got gay-bashed...They [the perpetrators] came in the car, and they just beat them [Clark’s friend and his date] up. They jumped in their car, and they [Clark’s friend and his date] ran through a red light because they were trying to get rid of these guys. And policemen gave them a ticket. They wouldn’t hear the story they were trying to tell them. It’s just the fact that society works very devoutly against those who are outside the norm, and they...don’t have the ability to reach those...in power. They can’t. There’s no way around it (personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Clark’s account of his sexuality is replete with themes of rejection. A significant element of his sexuality includes the fear of violence. Clark has not only experienced rejection and condemnation throughout his life as a result of his sexual orientation, but he also knows that, even today, he could be seriously harmed—even killed—if the wrong people knew his sexual orientation. Furthermore, he believes that the offenders would not be held accountable since he believes that “those in power” are against him too. In a Lacanian sense, it is this horror in the Real (the memory of the traumatic event of being gay-bashed) where the trauma haunts him (fear, death, powerless)—the fear of not being accepted by the law because the Real is a force of abjection that is cast out of the Symbolic from which the subject’s unconscious fantasy and desire derive from the excess

of traumatic experiences, loss and fear (Zîzêk, 1999, 2006) (e.g., gay-bashing; the notion from Leviticus that, “if you are gay, you must be killed”).

Manga not only reflects Clark’s conflicts but also provides alternatives to avoid the issues of castration. Essentially, then, it can be argued that Clark’s own involvement with *manga* reflects the conflicts he has experienced as an American gay man raised in the Catholic Church. In many ways, Clark is like the King on the cliff, “pulled” as he is by the church and by the larger society to act in ways that conform to their ideals. Clark has experienced—and still experiences—“power struggles” related to his sexual orientation. Although it is not his intention to change the church or others around him, neither the church nor those around him accept him as he is; his articulation (the King on the cliff as a metaphor for conflict) appeared to be cloaked in metaphor incorporating multiple meanings of struggle by drawing on his past.

Clark is an emotional and sensitive man who tends to “worry about anything and everything.” His desire to live openly as a gay man in America continues to be a source of internal conflict and stress. He thus finds relief as he creates alternatives in his own *manga* stories and vicariously lives the alternatives presented in other *manga* stories. The King on the cliff, while troubled, has the power to make the ultimate life-or-death decisions, along with the ability to fly to freedom. Kanoe and Yuki are strong, self-determined individuals representing ideal Others whom Clark can aspire to be like. Ultimately, *manga* represents an alternative community wherein Clark can find some acceptance as he lives a lifestyle that he defines as “outside the norm...not part of the normal defining way of life,” turning to *manga*’s fantasy because at least “they [Japanese people] are willing to talk about it... They are willing to look at things in ways that

common people don't" (personal communication, April, 26, 2006). Clark suggests that *manga's* Imaginary is relieving at least in that it allows the subject to speak about the prohibition of the desire—something only possible if that desire is articulated. The importance of *manga* is that it occupies a space that allows the subject to recognize and name his desire in the presence of the Other, bringing the subject into existence, eventually leading to enjoyment (the Imaginary provides a temporary wholeness without lacking, while the fantasy reassures the subject through pleasure that there is no lacking).

Summary: Identity as Abjection

In his fantasy mixture of Symbolic contexts, Clark has engaged in identity (de)construction through the Real-Symbolic-Imaginary triad, such that each of these terms should be regarded as integrated or overlapping onto one another. Clark's identity, particularly his Imaginary narcissistic relationship and the Symbolic castration (gay identity), can be interpreted as a constitutive example of Lacan's lack, while Clark's shocking story of gay violence and religious values brings the presence of the true Real (as an object of anxiety) toward the fear of the Other and the desire for the (m)other.

In the case of his Imaginary identification, we have the narcissistic ideal self through which he takes the Other as his object for self-love. On the other hand, the Imaginary coexists with the Symbolic, in which Clark desires the ideal image of self (models, people, objects, etc.) as caught in the Imaginary others (*objet a*) and in which he wishes to join in the Symbolic to be accepted there (embracing the qualities of both his feminine and masculine ideal self): He desires recognition by the Symbolic order of the Imaginary (m)other. The failure of the Symbolic to recognize his gay identity drives Clark to create a substitute Symbolic and permanently exclude the rejection from the

society he wishes to join. Therefore, as a whole, he challenges a very basic but powerful negation of his gay identity (e.g., the black dots signifying stress or anxiety; the impending regrets figured through the mystery of the white dots). It seems that neither the Imaginary, which relies entirely on a physical and /or visual relation of fantasy (as a misrecognition), nor the Symbolic (castration), which subordinates him to the father's law (church), can lead to him being accepted as a gay man on his own terms. Neither provides a space in which he can speak in his own right.

The Real, by contrast, refers to Clark's Imaginary ideals while being a version of the Symbolic father's rejection. The Real is represented as a sort of anti-Symbolic reality (using black dots and white dots as metaphors) that is meaningless in itself but which simply functions as the uncertainty or anxiety onto which (or out of which) reality is constituted. Lacan argues that the Real itself establishes the failure of our attempt to define our identity, which always ceases to block the subject's Imaginary and Symbolic reality, so that we remain unsatisfied through the unknown anxiety symptoms (Lacan, 1978; Žižek, 1992a).

The Imaginary remains important for Lacan as it provides a comfort zone for the subject after the entrance into the Symbolic (1977g) (castration—to be something you are not). The (Imaginary) fantasy landscape finds a clear expression in *The King on Ocean Cliff*. Fantasy often includes a sense of infinite possibility (covered in metaphor); by fantasizing (in the fantasy landscape), Clark attempts to fill in the gaps (between the Imaginary ideal and the Symbolic rejection). As Foster (1996) noted, Imaginary (fantasy) is the screen protecting us from an encounter with the Real (in Clark's case, the memory of the traumatic event of being gay-bashed) and the escape from the Symbolic pressure

(to be accepted as a gay man). However, where Clark encounters a particular image of horror-excess (black dots and white dots serving as uncanny markers of the Real)—where the dream turns into a nightmare (the regrets impending)—he finds an immediate pressure to escape back into reality, to wake up to avoid the negativity of the Real, such that the Real establishes a kind of anxiety without symbolization (Zîzêk, 1992b, 1999, 2005, 2006). Lacan (1977f) explains that the Mirror stage prepares the subject for Symbolic identification; the separation of the two realms tends to reinforce their differences and blinds us to the fact that they are implicated everywhere in each other. However, the Imaginary identification incarnates in the Real's negativity (a symptom of the anxiety and fear concerning anti-gay violence for Clark) and Symbolic castration (the gay identity does not exist or should be punished or killed). Clark's identity is thus reconfigured as a hidden subject in the Symbolic order.

Clark's sexual (Symbolic) identity is filled with rejection and fear, thereby progressing into the Imaginary. His Symbolic identity as a gay man stands in relation to his fragmented experience of the Real's negation (the traumatic gay-bashing, humility; the King's Imaginary gaze returning his Symbolic lack of power); it thus exiles him from the Symbolic into the Imaginary—although he resists it—and works against such desires in others and in himself by creating an ideal identity as an illusory whole to cover the trauma of the Real. In such an Imaginary space, the King (i.e., Clark) does not have to face the dilemma or pressure of feeling pulled in many directions, even when Clark enters the Symbolic, but remains in the Imaginary—a language that cannot exist in physical terms (because of fears, anxieties, disruptions, slippages) within the Symbolic itself. If that were a space in which he could remain, Clark would never have to create the

King, a substitute Imaginary self, because he would always remain rejected within the social. In order to cope with the Symbolic repression and the trauma of the Real, Clark stays in his fantasies. Yet even in his fantasies the Real still pursues him. In the dimension of the Symbolic, there is first revelation itself, followed by the dimension of the Real, in which his fantasy landscape regarding the moment of the end of the world seems to erupt through to reality, and the Imaginary (white dots and black dots), which are rendered meaningless in the attempt to escape to reality. In this way the trauma (anti-gay violence, the rejections of society) proceeding from the end of the world is intensified precisely as a result of this breach created by the fantasies pursuing him back to reality. The traumatic excess (of the Real) is inherent in the Imaginary as a feeling of horror at his own pleasure, of which he himself is unaware (as the King standing over the cliff). As a result, Clark's identity floats through Lacan's triad order—the Symbolic, Imaginary, and finally the Real—all constantly haunting him and threatening to destroy the meaning of his identity. As Žižek stated, all (sexual) identity construction “is always tainted by failure” (2005, p. 349).

Case 5: John Mar

Introduction

This case focuses on three main themes that emerged in John's descriptions and explanations of his involvement with *manga*: (1) his appreciation of *manga* as a genre that is more intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing than similar forms in that it places an emphasis on human emotionality; (2) his search for truth and self-knowledge by considering the story's protagonist as an alternative; and (3) his self-conscious synthesis of influences from Chinese culture (non-dualistic themes), as opposed to binary oppositions (e.g., black and white; good and evil). The section begins with a brief biographical sketch of John's life.

Brief Biographical Account

John is a 20-year-old history major. He was born in a small town in the Midwest, was raised by Roman Catholic parents, and has three younger brothers. Before attending undergraduate school, John was educated exclusively in Catholic schools. As a history major, John studies Chinese culture, specializing in Eastern Asian pre-modern history, including that of Japan and Korea. He quickly adopted aspects of Eastern culture—particularly of Chinese philosophy—as alternative beliefs, although he still holds onto some of the Roman Catholic views under which he was raised.

He especially enjoys comics and literature that present an alternative to the conventional Western ideals with which he grew up. He reads mainly boys' (*shōnen*) *manga*, along with some girls' (*shōjo*) *manga*, and is most interested in themes that deal with cyberpunks, futuristic elements, humanity, and paradox. John's own *manga* stories are based, in part, on his interest in Eastern Asian literature and history. His greatest

influences as a *manga* artist himself are *manga* artists Masamune Shirow and Haruki Murakami. In addition to reading *manga* and creating his own *manga* artworks, John also enjoys learning about the artillery of the early 19th century.

The Value of Manga: More Intellectually Stimulating and Aesthetically Pleasing

Like many *manga* fans, John reads both Japanese and American comics. When asked why he reads *manga*, he contrasted it with its American counterparts, focusing on *manga*'s intellectual depth and its aesthetic qualities.

I used to read American mainstream superhero comics. I like the Japanese *manga* because they are a lot more...intellectually stimulating...[For example,] there's no good or evil—although a lot of Japanese, like, especially *shonen* comics (boys' comics), tend to be very similar to superhero American comic books because they tend to have a good and a bad. But a lot of *manga* I read are more the stories that are much less clear than a simple struggle between good and evil. Other than the intellectual pleasure, one of the reasons that I like *manga* versus American [comics] is the aesthetic pleasure of seeing the artwork. In my opinion, the artwork is a lot more—has a better aesthetic quality—than the artwork in the American mainstream comics. That's because of the omission of detail and the simplicity...Aesthetically speaking, the iconic eyes—larger eyes—and big, different hair makes the artwork more interesting to look at (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

In contrast with mainstream American comics, John finds *manga* to be more intellectually stimulating (given that the stories are about more than good versus bad). One of the reasons John likes *manga* is the aesthetic pleasure of seeing the artwork (the

omission of detail). *Manga*'s iconic visual style draws John's interest to the artwork.

When asked to explain further why less detail (e.g., the iconic style) would facilitate the expression of emotion, John stated:

I think it is intuitive on the part of the artist and reader. That it is to say that they automatically do these things without thinking about it. The character is more complex because of certain effects; [for example,] the Japanese style of drawing. [So] the reader might identify with the characters more. Neither the reader nor, in many cases, I think, the artist, really realizes the mechanics of it. This is just kind of second nature to most—how the fact that the faces of characters in Japanese comics and the faces or styles—the faces of characters in American comics—are different in the way they are detailed. Japanese characters are more iconic—big eyes. The human brain finds it is easier to recognize the face like that. Maybe it is more attractive. Maybe it is just easier for the reader to identify with the character when they don't have to, like ... they remove the obstacle—the obstacle of having more details in the face. The more details, the [less] symbolic the face is...I think *manga* does a better job in expressing the emotions of the characters [because with its] simplified kind of drawing style, the mind of the reader kind of adds its own emotions to the page (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

According to John, the main factor in his identification with *manga* is its iconic style (as opposed to the detail of the relatively more realistic style of American comics), which stimulates human emotions. Not surprisingly, this psychological process is probably an unconscious (or intuitive) one, aimed at the expression of human emotions as a whole rather than in parts. Perhaps paradoxically, “the artwork in the characters” is simple, yet

the characters themselves are complex. According to John, this phenomenon likely occurs because *manga*'s simplified iconic visual style facilitates the reader's imagining his or her own emotions in the characters and identifying the representation without obstacles. This identification, in turn, allows the reader to unconsciously identify with the characters; thus, the style's omission of the emotionally charged details allows them to be imagined subjectively.

In a related statement, John noted that the characters portrayed in *manga* also tend to be complex, in large part because the story emerges from internal conflicts:

The strange thing about *manga* is that the artwork in the characters is much simpler than the artwork of the American comic book characters. However, the Japanese characters' interiors—or their...personalities—are far more complex than the American characters' personalities...*Manga* characters [not only] face external threats, [but] also suffer internal conflicts over their own natures...It's easy to get the sense of emotions from *manga*....[*Manga*] reflect[s] the interior emotions of characters very well (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

From John's perspective, the characters found in *manga* are more psychologically complex (and therefore more enjoyable) than those in American comics, because they reflect human personalities (interior emotions) and face the chore of resolving internal and external conflicts. Apparently, a *manga* character's challenges are not only derived from an external enemy, but also found within oneself.

John subsequently psychologically projects his feelings onto the characters, allowing him to re-experience emotions and react to the depicted situation as if he were the characters (via a process of self-other mirroring). By identifying with the *manga*

characters, he is able to fill his emotions (Symbolic lack) through the Imaginary register of *manga* characters. This sense of vulnerable human emotions makes *manga* enjoyable and believable to such a degree that one can easily relate to them.

Japanese *manga* tend to have a lot more different themes than the American comics do. There is more drama and relationship to it. In general, mainstream American comics are produced by larger publishing companies...[And] most of these mainstream comics are superhero comics—pretty simple storyline, and people fighting to maintain the status quo. And they are usually in costume. Sometimes they live double lives—you know, the Superman and Batman sort of things. And they usually are fighting against people who are trying to go against the system. Like, there's a super-villain trying to, basically, take down the existing system of government or the system of society that exists. Usually, the role of the superhero is to put things back right—keep things running as they were. I think the Japanese *manga* tend to be a lot—this is also a generalization—[Japanese] themes tend to be anti-authoritarian (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Another element that makes *manga* so attractive to John is its investigation of anti-authoritarian themes. When asked to give an example of an anti-authoritarian theme, John stated:

For example, in Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series, ...the authority...is represented by giant artificial intelligences, which control everything in society. Everything is perfectly ordered. The protagonists, the main characters, instead of being superheroes who are trying to support a computer

system and maintain the status quo of society, they end up going directly against the society. And, actually, through their course of action, they end up destroying the entire human race, even though they are the heroes of the book. In American—traditional, mainstream, western comics—this character would be seen as a tremendous super-villain, as opposed to the hero of the comic (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John's example of *manga's* intellectual complexity centers on the theme of anti-authoritarianism. For him, stories that do not support the status quo have more (Symbolic) value, perhaps because they serve as an alternative to mainstream notions. His example of Anno's work is an especially appropriate illustration of the protagonist playing against the status quo of a society and its laws. In a Lacanian sense, the subject is made possible (following the law) via the acceptance of the Symbolic. To John, the American mainstream superhero genre is dissatisfying as it reflects a domination of mainstream values and prohibitions (inclined toward keeping things the way they are), so that this condition of the Symbolic (black-and-white binary thinking, hero versus villain) is simultaneously limiting and oppressing. Thus, through his desire, John identifies with *manga's* fantasy (supported by the anti-authoritarian themes), wherein the protagonist (he) is able to (re)construct the status quo by means of *manga's* registers of narrativization and visual images.

John's attitude toward the Symbolic law is actually a result of his denial of the Other (rejecting American authoritarian power), using *manga's* fantasy landscape to rewrite Symbolic reality. In a Lacanian sense, *manga's* fantasy world serves as an alternative escape from the Symbolic and constitutes an attempt to create a less-divided

boundary between self/other, good/evil, superhero/super villain, and right/wrong (the state of the Real [wholeness] with no divisions). By creating an Imaginary wholeness, John manifests his desire for the completed and unified image with the (m)other, resisting such differences of the Symbolic (a clear boundary of the law), which create prohibitions for the subject. In fact, this less-divided boundary (grayness) is what John values most about *manga*.

A lot of American comics see things in black-and-white terms, morally speaking, whereas what appeals to me most about Japanese comics is that they are more intelligent—many of them—than American comics that address the same things [right and wrong, good and evil]. They [*manga*] have mature views on morality beyond right and wrong. [For example,] in works like Masamune Shirow, there's a villain, but villains are much more complicated than in American comics (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

As John sees it, while *manga* does address moral issues, it does so in a non-dualistic, intelligent, and mature manner. For John, such maturity stands in contrast to his everyday experience of American culture.

According to John, he finds this contrast so refreshing that he now actively studies the broader philosophy on which *manga* is based:

I used to believe in Roman Catholicism. When I became interested in *manga*, I also became interested in Buddhism and other Eastern Asian philosophies. It goes away from the western ideals of right and wrong—the dualism of good and evil, God and Satan. That stuff doesn't work for me anymore. I believe...that there's

no absolute right and wrong or good and evil...The world is far more complicated than simply the two absolute ideas (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Thus, *manga* has become a springboard of sorts, leading him to a broader study of Eastern Asian philosophy. John's primary interest in such philosophy seems to be based on its potential to serve as an alternative to the notion of "absolute right and wrong or good and evil." He simply cannot abide western dualism (and subjectivity), which he views as simplistic and unrealistic. He now "believes" in eastern philosophy to a greater extent than the western ideals with which he was raised.

Even his analysis of Superman is framed as a critique of the west's simplistic moral ideals.

For superheroes, there's a right and wrong. There is a truth, and it makes it far more one-dimensional and less realistic. It has less to do with how the real world functions as a place where there are no real morals, except for the ones we humans artificially attach ourselves to (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John's criticism of the American superhero genre stems from his resistance to the subordination of the Symbolic (superheroes who defend the truth). To John, things are not that clear-cut, and the (Symbolic) reality is far more complex than one-dimensional thinking concerning right and wrong will allow (according to John, such thinking is naive and dissatisfying). John pointed out that such a theme unconsciously operates in a social structure and system with rules and regulations that bind individuals to abide not in their own right, but in their resistance against social structures (e.g., government, church), which we ourselves create. According to Lacan, the Symbolic can produce *jouissance* (the pleasure associated with the dissatisfaction one feels from not merging with the

Other) when there is a breakdown of the boundary between the self and Other

(McGowan, 2004, 2007). Elaborating on his analysis of Superman, John explained:

Superman, along with other superheroes, embodies a spirit of the time in American culture right now...For example, the American government, or certain priorities within the American government, adopts this kind of ideal Superman. [It's as if] they identify [with the] superheroes in American comics...[so the] military interventions, embargos...basically, they base their policies [in accordance with] their ideals. This, internally, leads to contradictions because they do not realize the world is a far more complicated place than a simplistic American pop culture ideal or a Western Christian ideal allows for...I would rather be Darth Vader [the Star Wars antagonist] than Superman because Darth Vader realizes that he is evil. Superman doesn't recognize evil in himself; therefore, he doesn't realize when he inflicts evil (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Interestingly, John did not focus on the visual style of American comics when explaining the difference between Superman and *manga* characters, but rather on the form's portrayal of the Symbolic truth as defended by Superman (an icon of American popular culture who embodies the American way of truth and justice as a savior for the world) and of its moral theme as played out in politics. In locating the superhero theme within American culture, John noted that American policy is often framed in terms of moral imperatives and super powers. The United States tends to act like a superhero whose job it is to intervene into others' affairs based on the notion that "this is the right thing to do." For John, Superman as supported by the American ideal operates through fantasy and

desire in a Symbolic sense. Superman upholds the same sorts of ideals as Americans do (from John's perspective) when acting the hero, ascribing to themselves only power and goodness. However, the reality appears to be far more complex and contradictory. John believes that it is better to be someone who is explicit about his villainous intentions than someone who tries to act like a superhero because superheroes are unaware of their own flawed (evil) natures. They, too, "inflict evil," yet fail to acknowledge doing so. John's conscious synthesis of the ideological origin of good (heroes powered by super goodness) is discernible through the unrealized dark force (the notion of good is inherently at times evil). In a Lacanian context, John consequently feels a sense of loss and desire that cannot be incorporated into the Symbolic. As such, it connects his pleasure with suffering, a condition of *jouissance* (good and evil merging into one condition, pleasure and fear). When asked to elaborate on a hero who appears in *manga* stories, John explained:

It has to do with the belief that failure can be honorable—that one can be a hero, even if they lose. It has to do with the Bushito belief—the cult of the samurai (which was actually formulated long after the samurai had ceased to be a force in Japanese history). It's the nobility of failure in the Japanese ideal, which is to say that it's better to die honorably, or to lose with honor, than to win with dishonor...[Also,] if you are always winning, and things always go your way, you will never have self-knowledge (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Desire: Want-to-know (the cause of the desire). According to John, *manga* heroes do not always win. Perhaps more importantly, they are "sometimes right and sometimes

wrong,” but they try to live in accordance with honorable ideals. John is not so concerned with losing, but is searching for self-knowledge and recognition of his own failure (failure can be honorable). It is clear that *manga* is satisfying since it feeds his desire (to know) to search for the missing *objet a* (the Real). The process ends in dissatisfaction as there is always more to desire; desire is hopeful since it creates in the subject a state of fantasy and fulfillment, under which he or she continues to move forward and circulate within the Symbolic chain. *Jouissance*, on the other hand, stems from a state of suffering since the Real has been lost forever and cannot be achieved; consequently, one is constantly driven by the unknown drive, but forever rejected by the Other’s recognition (Zîzêk, 2005). John’s want-to-know points to a lack beyond the knowledge he desires. The Other (*manga* fantasy world) is complete and consistent with his Symbolic ideals and makes John desire to create a knowledge (language) in which he can find the truth. John defined “self-knowledge” as:

[For example, if] you are a scientist and you are always doing an experiment, and it always turns out right, and your hypotheses are never proved wrong, then you have no means of...realizing that you can be wrong. [But] the idea is that you pursue the question of *whether* you are right or wrong. Sometimes you are right; sometimes you are wrong. By realizing that you are wrong, sometimes you end up with a better, truthful view of the universe. Winning is more pleasant, but I like to win truth and self-knowledge. If you pursue self-knowledge, and you get something from your defeats, as well as from your victories, then you’ve won a great victory (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

What is implicit in John's seeking the experience of defeat (nature of failure)? John has articulated a contradiction inherent in the concept of winning (recognition of failure) while discussing the scientific approach to knowledge. This endeavor of searching for self-knowledge is a Symbolic recognition, opening a path leading to desire (aimed at an absence of failure that yields truth and knowledge, not necessarily focused on pleasure-winning, but on the enjoyment of identifying failures). The point is that we are becoming more aware of our failure; we can fleetingly reach a state of truth (knowledge is gained through the repetitive process of failures and defeats). Winning is more pleasant, but to John, the task of obtaining knowledge by understanding his failures can be highly enjoyable (honorable). What is implied here is not the satisfaction of need (*qua* knowledge as *objet a*), but the satisfaction of the drive (driven by being unsatisfied, wanting to know).

Lacan (1997) explained that the satisfaction of the drive does not belong to the self/other, but is rather articulated by the subject's signifying his or her lack in the Other (in a Symbolic sense) (Lacan, 1978). In other words, John's satisfaction exists through the enjoyment of identifying his lack in the Other. Knowledge represents a center, and the demands, of the Other. John's desire to know is driven by trying to find an Other (*manga* as an alternative Other) that is complete and consistent, without lacking, but the truth is that no one can be the center of the Other. By pursuing this impossible task (searching for the missing object), John seeks to recognize the Other's lack, producing in the process a fantasy in his unconscious. In his fantasy, the *objet a*, represented by truth and knowledge, is what he imagines the Other is missing; by pursuing self-knowledge and truth, John fantasizes that he can gain access to the center of the Other and thus be one

with the Other. The movement of the fantasy begins as soon as John imagines himself merged with the law (knowledge) of the Other, as becoming one with the Other, who then returns the movement with the result of there being no lack (a misrecognition). However, in a Symbolic sense, the Other remains prohibited and barred (McGowan, 2004, 2007). The subject designated by way of *jouissance* continues to remain unsatisfied, so that this desire introduces the subject to dissatisfaction by its inability to fulfill the law (knowledge), while this big Other will be lacking as there is no guarantee of the subject satisfaction, since the Other is also lacking (Fink, 1995, 2003).

The following discussion provides an example of how John adopts *manga*'s ideals (as the Imaginary operates in his Symbolic being) through an ideal Other, as John himself knows well. This adoption introduces *jouissance* stemming from the dissatisfaction he feels from not connecting with the American Symbolic (the pleasure of hope he tries to create from participation in *manga*'s fantasy world in order to discover his lack), the subject of his want-to-know, and his desire to be at the center with the Other, whose presence commands his dissatisfied being to embrace failures as a way to gain access to the Other (self-knowledge). The Imaginary *manga* opens a path to what appears to be the Lacanian subject of the transgression (e.g., enjoyment)—a misrecognition, residing in the Symbolic law, diverging into the Imaginary escape, and taking the *objet a* (symbols, ideas of yearning for change) as dissatisfaction in the Real sense while finding an Other that is complete (knowledge) and consistent without a lack (e.g., as if in control of his own superego) in order to maximize the residual enjoyment brought by the contingency of the failures, and thus by the impossible (Real).

John's Identification with Specific Manga Stories and Characters

Seeking the objet a—knowledge, desire, and jouissance. Masamune Shirow's

Ghost in the Shell, one of John's favorite manga series (from the Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex anime series), revolves around a female protagonist, Motoko Kusanagi,⁵⁵ a manga character from the Ghost in the Shell movie who is highly Symbolically constructed (a beautiful cybercrime fighter bound by the Symbolic law) but also appears to be highly Imaginarily constructed (with hybrid qualities of male and female, half-human and half robot). She ultimately manifests herself in the Real sense by becoming one with a computer (knowledge) cell, living out of the Imaginary existence of human soul and memory and orienting its cell to copy, such that potentially its consciousness lives fully in the Symbolic network of computers. Interestingly, this merging is perfectly understood using Lacan's account of the Symbolic-Imaginary reconfigured (joined together, with body-image and mind-soul cohering), in which bodily unity is fundamentally suggested in the mirror stage as it is in the fantasy illusion.

Ultimately, Kusanagi manifests the completed and unified self-image with the Other (computer knowledge cell), resulting in the Other and self becoming one. The instance of the Real marks itself by filling the gap of the Symbolic-Imaginary, an illusion state of no separation or lack where the subject, in return, not having lack. John's identification with the *manga* centers on its emphasis on the story theme (not the

⁵⁵ Motoko Kusanagi appears to embody Lacan's transgression of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Kusanagi is highly Symbolically constructed but appears also to be highly Imaginary, a beautiful female cybercrime fighter born as a human but reconstructed as a cyborg (half-human and half-robot) after an incident. She has both masculine and feminine qualities, a mixture of human qualities (female-male) and non-human (robot body). In the end, she merges with the Puppeteer, known as Project 2501 (a computer host greatly increasing certain mental capacities, such as human memory). This merging can be seen as the Real manifesting itself by working through the unconscious as she becomes one with the Other (computer host).

imagery), leaving his identity with a strong Symbolic identification that revolves around the symbols and signifiers that lead to other signifiers, prompting him to doubt what humanity is (human being versus non-being) and how humanity (soul/body/mind) changes if the body becomes a cyborg (e.g., a robot with a human soul). John explained:

I like *Ghost in the Shell*, which really began my interests in Masamune Shirow's work...In *Ghost in the Shell*, the theme is about humanity and what does humanity mean when people are becoming cyborgs (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John further elaborated on *Ghost in the Shell*'s "in-depth" content:

It becomes quite complicated. Kusanagi is chasing after Puppeteer because he commits crimes—breaking into, and taking control of, human minds...Basically, he steals human minds. At the end, he merges with Kusanagi's mind and body. It raises questions about the nature of human identity, where human consciousness is replaced by artificial intelligence. I mean, without a soul, [is a] human still a human or just a robot with intelligence? ... The whole theme of it is that the only thing remaining between that which is artificial intelligence—the computer network—and what we think of as a human entity is that the human possesses a soul. The main character, the protagonist, Motoko Kusanagi, is confounded when the artificial intelligence program appears to have a soul...[But] if you think about the Puppeteer's consciousness, it's just a bunch of computers talking to each other. In the same way, a human's consciousness has a lot of little brain cells talking to each other. The individual brain cell doesn't have any consciousness. Is the whole more than a sum of the parts? Or is the human not a soul, and just

simply a mechanical creation reproducing itself? (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John's interest in *manga* has enabled him to become articulate as he tries to search out his identity and his desire to know (his yearning for self-knowledge). What does it mean to be human? Is the human essence defined by the brain and spinal cord? What happens when a human merges with artificial intelligence? Do humans (whose consciousness is "a lot of little brain cells talking to each other") have more in common with artificial intelligence than seems apparent? *Ghost* (soul) *in the Shell* (body) calls into question the philosophical tradition in terms of the origin of the being-desiring subject:

What [is it that] defines "human"...That's the question posed in Masamune Shirow's *manga*, *Ghost in the Shell*. These kinds of questions are the questions that are interesting to me. That's why I became interested in *manga*. There's a deeper theme that you can't find in the American comics or American pop culture—these questions about humanity, the nature of right and wrong, and nature of male and female. That's why I am much more interested now in *manga*, [because it] pos[es] these kinds of questions (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

In a Lacanian sense, John's desire is imbued by the *objet a* (i.e., lack-in-being, want-to-know); he adopts the *objet a*, the cause of his desire, and his being not whole as the subjects he desires to know. John immediately understands that his lack stems from his relation to the Symbolic, becoming a subject forever castrated and unknown. Through *manga* (otherness as opposed to the American), John learns to answer his desire by desiring more.

The desire is not aimed at the satisfaction itself, but at the dissatisfaction that circulates in what can be known and defined (what is humanity) and what defines a man or woman (if not biology). John focused on the androgyny themes present in Shirow's work:

Interestingly enough, in Masamune Shirow's work—at least in *Ghost in the Shell*—the line between female and male is blurred...What happens is that...Motoko Kusanagi gets basically destroyed. Her friend, Batou, a guy, saves her brain and spinal cord and goes on the run. To save her, he steals someone's body. At first, he thinks it's a female, but then, once Motoko Kusanagi wakes up, and she is in this new body...it's male. The body [was actually] male, and they took out his brain. The organ is male...Kusanagi becomes more artificial and more cyborg when she loses some of her female organs, and she begins to act less like a female. Throughout the story, she swings back and forth. She sometimes accentuates her feminine qualities, but then sometimes she acts just like a male...*Manga* does [this] a lot. In other words, the difference between females and males is much lighter (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Androgyny: ambiguity of gender construction. Clearly, John is interested in the androgyny theme present in *Ghost in the Shell*, in part because the theme adds complexity to the story and also because it is consistent with his vision of the borderlessness of gender construction in regard to male/female relationships:

As an American, and working in the more cosmopolitan area of America, I believe, of course, in equality...between the sexes. To some extent, it's a more

avant-garde idea that hasn't been accepted by the mainstream culture—[in] either America or Japan. An ideal of androgyny is the only true equality between the sexes (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

However, as John elaborates on the idea of androgyny as a sign of equality between the sexes/genders, it must be acknowledged that to some extent the concept of androgyny is a pretense that can exist only in the utopian (Imaginary), not the Symbolic sense. For him, androgyny's appeal is based mainly on the fact that it represents an alternative (e.g., Kusanagi has both masculine and feminine qualities; she is the savior and the saved) to American dualistic thought (if you are a man, you are the savior, since a man cannot be weak or be rescued, only a woman):

The ambiguity of gender construction is part of the appeal of *manga* to me because it presents the story which is less confined...They [*manga*] often explore more themes to me that seem to be more meaningful, like the concept of androgyny...In American comics, like Superman and Spiderman, the male is always the one who saves...[Although] sometimes you see more androgynous characters, usually the black is black and white is white in American comics...[In contrast, in Japan] there's less of a dualism—a wrong-and-right morality—and the roles of male and female in Japanese *manga* are less dualistic than American comics (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Rejection of ideals of dualism. As the previous narrative indicates, John appreciates androgyny for its own sake. *Manga*'s treatment of this theme also appeals to him because it represents an alternative to “black-and-white thinking.” As will be

examined in more detail in the following discussion, the fact that “you tend to see things that are much grayer” in *manga* is perhaps the main reason why *manga* is so attractive to John. He actively resists the confining, restrictive nature of “wrong-and-right morality,” purposely seeking alternatives to western subjectivity as part of this resistance (western ideals of dualism). The enjoyment of the access to the Other’s desire feeds John’s fantasy, the (w)hole (what can be knowable) the desire tries to fill up. By participating in the identification of the story’s protagonist, John attempts to gain the Other’s knowledge (via *manga*’s fantasy), beyond Symbolic dualism (American way of thinking between right and wrong), by identifying with the desire of the Other, thus becoming a subject by subscribing signifiers (human, dog, beast) provided in the Symbolic chain. When asked which character in *Ghost in the Shell* John relates to the most, he answered:

In this case, I became more identified with Motoko Kusanagi—especially [given that] the Puppeteer is an alien character, and not human, so it is difficult to relate to. It is important to get people relating to the main character. That’s one of the fundamentals in good writing, regardless of whether the main character is a he or a she, or some sort of dog or other beast (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John’s identification with a female protagonist lies in the story (symbols, words, ideas), but not in the image or the look (appearance or self mirroring reflection in Imaginary) provided in *manga*’s signifying chains. As John pointed out, in order to become involved in any story, one must recognize something of oneself in the protagonist, regardless of that protagonist’s sex or species:

Whenever someone reads a comic—or any work of fiction—ideally, the purpose is to identify oneself with the protagonist, the main character... You have to identify with the protagonist in order for the literature to work. That's how literature works. It's not simply reading a report or non-fiction work... It's kind of—there's a philosophical theory saying that the fiction is—whenever someone uses a work of fiction, they kind of play a game of make-believe, and temporarily suspend what they understand to be the real world to engage in kind of a game, almost (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

In John's words, in order to “play” the “game of make-believe” in which one engages when reading literature, one must identify with the main character (the ideas rather than the look). The reader simply cannot become involved in the story otherwise. From John's perspective, his identification with female protagonist Kusanagi is in his relation to the Symbolic (to be one with the Other), not based on a narcissistic identification with the image itself (mirror reflection of ideal image of self with the other). Rather, his identification process is based on the merging with the (Symbolic) story. In other words, his identification with the main character is typically not a matter of “becoming” the character, but his focus is on following the character (whether animal or human) around whom the story takes place. This character will always be the protagonist, regardless of his or her (or its) qualities.

There's a difference between identifying with a protagonist in a fictional world and identifying oneself with a protagonist in a fictional world. I would say that I identify with Kusanagi because... in order to follow the story, you need to identify

with what the protagonist is experiencing (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John's references to "identifying with a protagonist" and "identifying oneself with a protagonist" seem to provide evidence of an acknowledgement that his identification with the story symbols does not reflect a fantastic effect of the Imaginary, but lies in his identification with the Symbolic value that the character (the Puppeteer) represents:

I see myself more like Puppeteer...I identify with some of the ideas he represents. For example, yearning to change and evolve. [Isn't he just a computer program? Can the program change by itself?] Once he becomes self-aware, he gains the ability to change himself (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

As this statement shows, John's vision of himself as similar to the Puppeteer is not simply a matter of self-mirrored reflection with this character, but rather aligns with the Symbolic symbols he desires to possess (e.g., signifiers of change, self-awareness). John explicitly suggests that he identifies with the Puppeteer because he shares certain distinct qualities and ideas with him—in this case, a "yearning to change and evolve." He strives for self-awareness and views himself as one who seeks growth and change in conditions of his conscious existence. With this thinking, change of all kinds is inevitable in life, which allows evolution to take place just as Puppeteer (the computer host) continues to duplicate and evolve over the course of a lifetime.

John's Own Manga: A Conscious Synthesis of Influences

When asked to describe the *manga* he creates himself, John focused on his intention is to integrate a variety of influences into his own artwork:

I have been trying to be kind of original...In my own work, I try to draw both from the underground tradition, American comics, and western comics, and the *manga* tradition of Japan...My work doesn't conform to a particular style...It has many influences from *manga*, but also from certain Western comics and literature...My work has more pronounced underground influences, [as opposed to] Eastern or western influences...The sense of the Japanese disappears, and I try to develop my own style, which I call "underground." [This term] describes a style that is simply any sort of comics that don't conform to either western superhero comics or Japanese comics...It's a style that you cannot categorize. It does not adhere to anything but a general comic book style (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

In addition to maintaining a sense of originality for its own sake, John also seems to have many influences upon which to draw, including Japanese comics, western comics, and a variety of literature. Thus, John resists categorizing his *manga* as either western or eastern.

When asked to clarify whether his *manga* style derives from a desire to conform to Japanese culture—even to a limited extent—John stated:

It's important not to be imitative. But, on the other hand, in my opinion, the kind of exchanging of styles going on between American culture and Japanese culture is very beneficial because, if the American comics were to stay the same way that the...traditional ones are, then they will become a static and inartistic medium. Then the artistic world would just be a manufacturer—an unoriginal factory. There's now, kind of, we're starting to see more Japanese influences, even in the

superhero comics...In general, I think the influence of Japanese *manga* on

American comics is a good thing (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

John's initial response is consistent with his statement that he tries not to "conform to a particular style" (his identification with the symbol, not the image itself). Yet he also acknowledges a difference between imitation and influence. While it is "important not to imitate," it is also important to receive outside influences that enable one's work to evolve and change. As such, John seems to suggest—paradoxically—that if an artist seeks to remain so original that he or she is closed to new influences, ultimately this artist will become "unoriginal," "static," and "inartistic."

One of John's *manga* stories, *Generic Samurai Girl* (see Figure 4.17), provides an example of the Japanese influence in that the story is about a particular Japanese character that is common in contemporary *manga*. John describes the story as follows:

The main character doesn't have a name since she is just a generic samurai girl.

It's a humorous story meant to be making fun of conventions in certain genres of *manga*. It's a kind of parody, but it's not drawn in a particular style of *manga*. It's very violent, and there's a point where there are random enemies dressed up as medieval knights. They come after her, and try to attack her. She chops them all up with her samurai sword....The samurai girl is a very common secondary character in lots of contemporary *manga* these days (personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

have a name—she is “generic.” When asked why his main character is female, John answered simply: “The samurai girl is a very common [character].” Thus, apparently, John attaches no real significance to the character’s gender. Although he may identify with samurai or females, his account strongly suggests that his work may be more of a parody of “certain genres of *manga*” than a means of expressing his own personal desires and fantasies. Such a parody can be seen as an instance of the Real working in the conscious; parody can be seen (in the Imaginary terms) as a socially acceptable form of expressing the arbitrary nonsense and violence that one desires (in the Imaginary, there’s no consequence or punishment, as illustrated by the ability to chop off someone’s head without any consequence or punishment occurring in the Symbolic).

Another one of John’s *manga* drawings, *Delayed Satori* (see Figure 4.18), echoes the same theme: a nonsensical parody featuring a main character who finds her access to enlightenment delayed (the infinite space of absence/presence). The main character appears naked with a cat and her own spirit imagined as a crumb. Nothing implies at the end that the character has achieved a moment of self-realization (being). Instead she reaches a state of frustration brought on by disruptive nonsense (as opposed to achieving nothingness), including a devil that interrupts the main character’s sudden emotional cry (NOOOOOOO!) and a cat’s parodic presence, mimicking the nonsense/failures of the character in not achieving the moment of self-enlightenment (or emptiness of the Symbolic). This appears to be an instance of the Real working at the unconscious level (through image) to avoid the Real impact (covering through the nonsense of humor and laughter). As Foster (1996) noted, Imaginary (fantasy) is the screen protecting us from an

encounter with the Real.

Figure 4.18. John's own manga drawing (*Delayed Satori*), a nonsensical parody (of the Real) featuring a main character who finds her access to enlightenment delayed (the infinite space of absence/presence).

[Used by permission of the artist].

Ultimately, for John, “writing and reading *manga* or fiction is an overall process of being critical and questioning things about oneself.” John is interested in alternative views of epistemology, the way things are, and using *manga* to know himself well (to fill his lacking). By using the mediation of *manga* rooted in Chinese philosophy as a knowledge domain, he is able to transcend philosophy in his reality, using *manga* as an alternative Symbolic method to speak as a subject. *Manga* is an Imaginary alternative as it supports his reality and representation of the world. His belief in Chinese philosophy is

formalized in such a way that it can support his truths—that reality is multiple—which stands in contrast to the Symbolic law from which he feels disconnected and dissatisfied (American reality). *Manga*, perhaps an exotic father contaminated by western values, represents a knowledge domain that enables him to gain access to the knowledge of the Other (temporarily deriving satisfaction through the fantasy he participates in). *Manga* is rather hopeful in that it creates desire that ends the dissatisfaction (*jouissance*) of constantly pursuing the impossible lost *objet a*: the Real. In facing struggles and conflicts in life, John is able to learn from one's failures, weaknesses, and flaws via Imaginary other (e.g., tragic hero). In this case, John defensively uses *manga's* fantasy to learn the trauma of the Real (i.e., loss, losing, and failure) to take risks and to live with loss and losing.

Summary: Identity as Jouissance

Distinct from the other cases reviewed, John's analysis demonstrates his strong motivation to pursue self-knowledge as he recognizes his own desire in identifying his own lack. For Lacan, it is the Symbolic Other who introduces the subject to the world of desire. The desire of the Other entails recognition of the subject as lacking being, and John's Symbolic identity often emerges in the form of a *jouissance* (enjoyment of self-failures), created by the Other (*manga*, Chinese philosophy). John names the Other's desire (he presupposes knowledge is the lack in the Other, trying to attain it by desiring it), but more importantly he names his own desire (understanding his own failures). His *manga* experience is closely linked to the intersubjective relationship between the subject and the Other and ultimately represents the formation of his identity as a struggle in which John attempts to access his own desire through the attainment of the Other (e.g.,

knowledge). This attainment would fulfill his own lack as well as reduce the alienation caused by the Symbolic castration. Yet this desire is also impossible to attain as the Other cannot be attained or accessed. What is prohibited by the Symbolic father (American system) remains unfulfilled.

Manga introduces John to the world of fantasy, a network of signifiers (e.g., self-knowledge, awareness, enlightenment, freedom) and creates a misrecognition of wholeness. What he wants from this fantasy illusion is wholeness (lost object) that he cannot have. John replaces the Symbolic father of western culture with an exotic father: *manga* (Eastern philosophy). For John, no Other can guarantee the enlightenment (as in the *Delayed Satori*). This enlightenment (the state of oneness) is an attempt to confront *jouissance* by rejecting the Symbolic, which makes it reappear in the Imaginary, as it is always deferred by something prohibiting one from reaching it (the Real).

Meanwhile, John's desire to know leads to an examination of the structure of the (self-) failure. The notion of knowledge in this case is a form of *jouissance*, consisting of identifying the process of defeats (failures) in a process that implies enjoyment. In other words, self-knowledge does not come with victories or winnings, but instead lies in the process of understanding and exploring one's own failures. In so doing, one is able to gain wisdom and understanding. Through the process of realizing failure (self-recognition), John gains the necessary foundation for self-knowledge to name and position himself within the Symbolic order. In a Lacanian sense, John's search for truth and knowledge lies at the locus of the Other's desire; his insistence on defining himself through this sort of knowledge and his search for it are integral steps in creating his own identity (caused by the hole in the Symbolic chain), which no one can fully know (except

the Other who possesses knowledge and language). To complicate matters, the Other is also lacking. In rejecting western authority and Symbolic knowledge, John believes he will find what he seeks in another Symbolic (*manga* and Eastern philosophy), without admitting that these Symbolic forms of knowledge can also be lacking.

For John, his desire is to be at the center of the Symbolic. This desire for knowledge can never be satisfied, but creates an endless desire—the subject’s want-to-know (a desiring subject *qua* object of knowledge). To avoid the permanent existence of a void (of the Real), John adopts *manga* to supply his absence of a Symbolic father in his search for self-knowledge (pointing to his lack), not only in his rejection of the difference between self and other, but also in his escape from the law of the Symbolic (prohibitions) and return to the realm of the (m)other (Imaginary freedom) as he believes that he can regain the name of the father by keeping himself in the domain of the Imaginary rather than in the realm of the Symbolic. In his attempts to learn from his (Symbolic) defeats and failures, John is able to accept the lacking (Other), using the Imaginary (tragic hero in *manga*) as a shield to deal with the dissatisfaction or trauma (caused by the Real) to accept his failures (residue of the Real in a form of parody) in the hopes of gaining ultimate freedom—a state in which the subject derives wholeness without lack or separation between the self and Other.

In his attempt to encounter the absence of his being, as conducted in the Real (which both inhibits and enhances the [w]hole while simultaneously existing in both the absence and presence), John seems to understand the negativity of the Real and embraces the failures as well as welcomes the trauma (often through the process of repetition of the failure in the signifier of [absence and presence] the Symbolic chain). John’s rejection of

the Symbolic father (here, the American system) is conscious, as he accepts the gaze of the Other (via the *objet a* of *manga* characters and Japanese philosophy), mapping the experience of failures through the Imaginary *manga* landscape without the confrontation of the law. In order to survive as a subject, John embraces loss and losing (the negativity of the Real), thereby recognizing the tragedy and failure (evoked by the Real) as a way of living, achieving ultimate victory through an embodiment both of desire (lack) and *jouissance* (enjoyment aimed at obtaining failure). Ultimately, John embraces both his desire/lack and enjoyment while suffering from his failures that result from being a subject conscious of what is not—whether doubted or unrealized—which appears to be the Lacanian subject of a misrecognition.

Chapter 5: Emergent Themes as Related to Lacan

This final chapter presents an overview of the themes that emerged in interviews with participating *manga* fans. The first section reviews the study's purpose and methodology. The following section presents a summary of the most significant recurring ideas related to Lacanian identity themes. Finally, the last section provides a brief conclusion of the study.

This research sought to explore the meaning of five participants' involvement with *manga*, including their own comics, drawings, and *cosplay* photos, specifically in terms of the Lacanian subject. Furthermore, it sought to understand what it means to create and cosplay *manga* stories and characters as well as what purposes involvement with *manga* serves. As discussed in Chapter 4, participants critically interact with *manga*, using it as a way to explore and question their own identities and as a guide to construct meaning, examine identity issues, and adopt views while interpreting their social and cultural worlds. Participants are clearly not looking for a representation of their present lives, but rather are seeking change, discovering their *want-to-be* and what they *might* become. In dealing with identity issues, Lacanian theory was used as an interpretive tool to analyze identity as a product of lack/desire—namely, how one's identity can be decentered and, thus, projected in relation to others (i.e., *objet a* relation).

Lacan's three registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—can be understood as the principal dimensions of identification linked to the identity processes.

For Lacan, the Imaginary (narcissistic ideal-ego) constitutes the subject as lack, or incompleteness, a Lacanian *méconnaissance* (misrecognition via fantasy, the subject takes the other as the object for self-love). The Symbolic, the lack, (governed by the big Other or ego-ideals) limits who one can be, determining which identity is desirable or positive (within the confines of language and social norms). The Real, the lost *objet a*, driven by unconscious desire (of wholeness), marks the identity that resists symbolization (i.e., via symptoms of anxiety, contradiction, self-denial, jokes).

The following sections synthesize the themes from the previous analysis focusing on interpretations of identity within the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real, demonstrating how participants see themselves passing through a mirror reflection (self-recognition caught up in the lure of Imaginary identification), and how they fantasize the way the Other (via *manga*) sees them as a fantasy Real via the images they attempt to project. In submission to the Symbolic law, their identity is contested via their resistance to social norms (particularly traditional American values). The Imaginary fantasy is a precarious balance of the pleasure participants employ against the traumatic encounters of the Real, and a way to elevate the prohibition of the Symbolic to reach a full satisfaction of desire, by which participants learn to cope with the loss, defeat and failure that are a part of being and living (between *jouissance* and pleasure).

Through *manga*, the participants actively seek: (1) to explore alternative identities; (2) to resist mainstream values (particularly those of American culture); (3) to question gender roles and sexuality; (4) to satisfy a desire for recognition; and (5) to receive the pleasure of binding the traumatic life together (the Real is that which resists reality).

(1) Exploration of Alternative Identities (*Identification of Others Based on an Ideal Image of Self*)

Participants in this study appreciated certain characters more than others for various reasons. For some, favorite characters were powerful individuals with whom participants identified. For others, favorite characters were not the strong, well-liked characters, but those with obvious weaknesses. Others appreciated certain characters because they seemed to model alternative gender construction (e.g. androgyny as an alternative gender) and equal gender roles (e.g. equality between the sexes). Participants' involvement with specific *manga* characters is an area that is especially susceptible to Lacanian Imaginary identification and mirror dynamics. They identify with certain *manga* characters of the like-others sort, the ones whom they like. They recognize themselves as in a mirror image (i.e., "s/he is like me"):

...it's like being Sailor Moon. You feel like I am gonna take out another world. I can fight monsters. I am Sailor Moon (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

She [Shinigami] is a female, but she doesn't act girlish. Not like "Ooooh, I am scared"...she is just like, "kill it." She is just like me. She is a female, but she doesn't act like "Hmmm, don't kill." She is like "I am gonna rip you apart with my bare hands." (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

...I can relate to...Naruto...[because he] is like me, because when times get tough and you need to get a job done, he gets serious and concentrates on the job at

hand. Also, he, like me, is not the best with women...(Kent, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

He [Son Goku] is a very good fighter, and I really like him...He is so positive, and nothing is bad about him. He is just one of the characters who doesn't have many flaws. He is just so good, and such a pure character, that you want to like him a lot because there are so many good things about him. You just want to identify with him and like him. (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

I see myself more like Puppeteer [computer host]...I identify with some of the ideas he represents. For example, yearning to change and evolve... (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Yuki has a dominant personality. He's the tall, beautiful, mysterious and romantic novelist in the story ... In a way, I am very much like Shuichi (very much a cry baby), but I want to be like Yuki (he acts more grown up). Yuki is always kind of like this ideal guy—the guy I actually prefer (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

The images participants see in the *manga* world initially appear to be their projection of a unified sense of self. This fully constitutive sense of other as self is derived from the Imaginary fullness of the mirror (based on narcissism, wherein the narcissist falls in love with his own image through the mirror) in which they are made more likeable or at least more identifiable, having a coherent, integrated identity through identification with their

own image (Lacan, 1978). On the other hand, participants also identify with *manga* characters in light of the surplus value of seeing themselves in images as they want to be seen (e.g., women often want to be seen as male personas, fighting, killing, having magical powers, while male participants tend to identify with a dominant personality).

Lacan articulates how the subject “perceives the unity of this specific image from the outside, and in an anticipated manner” (Lacan & Miller, 1988, p. 166), as distorted through a mirror: “I, in my activity depicted in the fantasmatic narrative, appear in a likable way” (Žižek, 1999, p. 92), and how the subject identifies with his own illusion in the reflected gaze, fulfilling “fantasies of imaginary fullness, promising the subject that he doesn’t lack, and being fully in control of his ego” (Jagodzinski, 2004, p. 46). What is actually identified in the mirror is the subject’s own image in his illusion of self as integrated self in (fantasy), which is actually a misrecognition, being seen from a distance, always from the place of the (m)other. In her reading of Lacan, Grosz (1990) explains, “Relations between self and other thus govern the imaginary order. This is the domain in which the self is dominated by images of the other and seeks its identity in a reflected relation with alterity. Imaginary relations are thus two-person relations, where the self sees itself reflected in the other” (Grosz, 1990, p. 46). But the question is, for whom are these images depicted? Where is the self, and who is the other?

What is known as the self is the subject assuming its own reflection of body image as a unified image (mirrored from an other), fantasized as real (without a fractured self), a vision which implies a lack (Lacan, 1977f). The mirrored other reminds the subject of what s/he doesn’t have. “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation-and which manufactures for the subject,

caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (Lacan, 1977f, p. 4). The Imaginary identification (via *objet a*) becomes prominent in the development of the unified selfhood since the image (e.g., from the *manga* symbolic structure) provides for the subject’s greater sense of unity and security.

In other words, the image (other) reassures the subject through the perception of the specular image (also recognized as himself) as his own, having a completed and unified image of the self (thus without lack). The projection of the ideal self onto the (likeable) other fulfills the self-love for the (m)other that one unconsciously seeks (based on narcissism), participating in fantasy as real (i.e., “I am Sailormoon, I can fight monsters”). This dynamic is evident in Amy and Jess’s cosplaying their favorite *manga* characters, which are characterized by a masculine structure (see Figure 5.1). The mirror (a distorted reflection) assures the subject as to how s/he looks at her/himself, and the outside image (other) confirms how s/he will be looked at, focusing on “what I want” or “how I see myself in images” less than on what the Other wants of me.

Figure 5.1. Photos of Amy’s [right] and Jess’s [left] cosplaying of their favorite *manga* characters,

demonstrating the moment of illusionary self as controlling and autonomous, and the self and other merging into one. Cosplaying enacts both a Lacanian notion of misrecognition, and an illusion of self based on an image of the other. In their fantasy, they are unified with the other (*manga* characters), as if without lack.

The Imaginary Coexisting with the Symbolic

One important implication for identity brought out by the analyses is the manner in which participants flow in and out of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary is always structured within the Symbolic (Lacan & Miller, 1988). The look (image) is not only derived from the gaze of the (m)other (implying unification between self and (m)other), but is also framed by the Symbolic Father (the big Other governed by language and laws), who determines which identity (s/he looks at) is desirable and positive (the image confirms s/he will be looked at). This interplay is evident in the participants' struggle to bridge the gap between ideal self and ego ideal (i.e., boy/man, girl/woman, femininity/masculinity). It abides in the mixture of fantasy wherein the ideal self of want-to-be (i.e., being a boy, girl, man, woman) is chased by the ego-ideal (i.e., being a man's man) that returns the gaze of the Other (what would the father say?) (Zîzêk, 1989). This perception introduces the desire of the Other, so evident in Clark's own self-portrait, modeled as an ego-ideal version of self with a masculine body and a feminine look, and Kent's struggle to live up to the father's idea of a man (See Figure 5.2). In Kent's words,

The only person who really connects with [Shinji] is his dad. And in the end he is, like, I got to stop proving myself to him. I got to be me. I think most guys feel the same thing. Their entire young adult life is all about trying to impress their dads.

You know, trying to be like, “Yeah, Dad. Look at this” [...] and like, you’re trying to prove yourself and always feeling that you’re a little short, until you realize that you don’t have to prove yourself (Kent, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

Figure 5.2. Clark’s self-portrait [left] and Kent’s *want-to-be*, Roland [right], function as a symbol, exhibited various subject positions in an imagined situation, representing the presence in the Imaginary sense (of a mirrored ideal fantasy image). In a Symbolic sense, the signifiers - young/tough, boy/man, innocent/experienced, independent/dominant, feminine/masculine - dominate their identification of who they want to be. [Used by permission of the artists.]

One of the inevitable extensions of the Imaginary mediation is the effect of being outlined by the gaze of the Other. If identity is mediated through an Other, then one’s identity is offered to no one but the Father. In facing desire, one must endure the emergence of lack in meeting the Other’s desire (i.e., “you’re trying to prove yourself and always feeling that you’re a little short”). In a way, it can be said that the man’s desire is not his, but that of the Other (Lacan, 1977h). As Žižek (1989) notes, “imaginary

identification is always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other [...] which gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?” (p. 103). It is the Father (Other) who puts limits on who one can be, and determines which image is desirable (Fink, 1995, 2003 ; jagodzinski, 2004; Zîzêk, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 1999, 2006).

As a result, “The very image of man brings in here a mediation which is always imaginary, always problematic, and that is therefore never completely fulfilled” (Lacan & Miller, 1988, p. 166), but only perpetually and indefinitely adds to its many different specular forms, as the subject’s identity subscribes to an image that comes and goes. In Jess’s comments on her cosplay of different *manga* characters, she states:

When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But, this is me, and that’s my puppet. ...It’s interesting to see these pictures (see Figure 5.3). I can be so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses. I don’t know...I don’t know why, but I have a lot of fun doing it

(Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

Thus, one’s self-recognition in a mirror with others makes possible subsequent identity construction prior to any social interaction (Lacan, 1977f). Here (see Figure 5.3), the subject (“I”) is not certain given that her identity is in process, captured by its own (body) image (via *object à*, “I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses”), and is disguised by its own image (addressing every play of the other), (“When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But this is *me*, and that’s *my* puppet”). By manipulating the self that is seen via the external image, the subject reveals her uncertainty about her symbolic disposition—she explores her identity by playing around

with the body images (the look) behind the cover of the characters (“by cosplaying different characters, I can be so different”). Thus, hers is clearly a case of the subject using the images (the look) as a defense, to manipulate what people see about her and to allow her to be seen through objects (*my puppet*), so as to keep her from ever being seen fully (“nobody recognizes me. But this is *me*”). (Jess’s disguise and tendency toward self-denial actions will be further discussed below in terms of the Real).

Figure 5.3. Photos of Jess cosplaying various *manga* characters. Her identity is made up of the bits of images; the subject is in process, captured and photographed in the act of becoming an other (glamorous, popular, cool). Cosplaying (camouflage) is a means to shield the *gaze* of the Other without being fully seen. [Used by permission of the artist.]

Lacan explains the power of image to elicit an illusion: “The subject presents itself as other than what it is, and what it is given to see is not what it wants to see” (J. Rose, 1996, p. 192). As such, the Imaginary mediation not only provides the subject

playful images of “what I want” or “how I see myself in images,” but also provides a sense of security, and the pleasure of seeing oneself from the distance of the Other, in the gaze without being caught in the Symbolic terms (i.e., shame, indecisive, unpopularity). One is engaged imaginatively in various subject positions as one creates a kind of identity in process, by becoming someone other than oneself.

On the other hand, the Imaginary remains important since it provides the subject a screen against directly encountering the gaze of the Other. By becoming physically camouflaged as the other, one can see through and be seen behind the mask without being fully revealed to the Other (Kelly, 1996, 2010; Lacan, 1978). The image functions to veil the Other and provides the pleasure of not being caught by the Other (See Figure 5.3).

The Imaginary (images) thus provides a protection from the impact of the Real (Foster, 1996). In the *manga* fantasy world, “you don’t feel like you. You are not yourself, and you feel like you are somebody else.” They can be “so different” and “end up wearing masks, or face paint, or a giant collar, or glasses.” This is the Real working at the conscious level, disguised as the Imaginary (images) before one can make sense of it (“I don’t know why”). This dynamic also shows how indecisive the subject is about her own identity, which emerges as bits of imagery as she comes and goes between the (fractured self-) images. Thus an identity is made up, sliding between images (signifiers).

This self-denial concerning the subject’s identity exhibits the Real operating in the unconscious through inconsistency and contradiction (whether she acknowledges it or not). The subject denies what she really is (“When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But, this is me,” and “I just want people to recognize the character – not *me*”), and her identity converges as a fundamental Lacanian lack, and the fantasy of *manga*

supplying her lack (created by the images) increases her resistance to symbolization of her identity (indecision); further, she relies on the image for her perception of who she really is (“It is interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glass. I don’t know... I don’t know why...”).

By negation, through the fantasies she constructs in *manga*, she is temporarily fulfilling what the Other wants of her, by deceptively fracturing her identity into bits of images, to fill the void caused by the Real (to be whole, and complete again). The gaze of the Other is shielded and her Symbolic identity is successfully covered in her camouflage of *manga* images. She is not what she sees; after all, she deceives others (including herself) and disguises herself as the character, and in so doing is able to experience her social reality through the Imaginary fantasies, not to be recognized as herself, but as the *manga* characters. Thus, her (social) identity remains trapped in the Imaginary (beset by indecision and lacking power to control the Symbolic, trapped in the Imaginary, she is glamorous and popular again, known as an artistic and “authentic” cosplayer). The manner in which her social identity resists symbolization and the inconsistency of her desires (“Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself”; “It’s interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different, I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses”) are derived from the Real. Based on the social trauma of not being accepted she has to become someone other than herself. She finds herself acceptable, garnering the social praise and recognition of *manga* fans, by whom she is accepted (as a character, not as herself). In order to fit in, she has to repeatedly cover herself up to meet the ideality of the Symbolic (and thus her identity is fractured) so that she can be seen as desirable.

Manga's fantasy (the Imaginary mirror fullness of narcissism) aims to return the *manga* participants to the experience of the primal Real, a state of wholeness without lack. Such reunion involves a form of visual representation, seeing oneself as seen through the perception of the other, under the illusion of the 'I' as whole and integrated with an other—from the place of an (m)other. In her reading of Lacan, Kristeva (1987) explains that the narcissistic identity based on Imaginary relation is a way of re-experiencing the primary identification with the (m)other—a primary state of wholeness between the self and other without lack (that characterizes the Real), without facing the concerns of the Symbolic Other. The self-love bonded with the (m)other preserves a sense of primal comfort for coping with the lost object (Real):

Narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of the emptiness, insures an elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos would sweep away any possibility of distinction, trace, and symbolization, which would in turn confuse the limits of the body, words, the real, and the symbolic. The child, with all due respect to Lacan, not only needs the real and the symbolic—it signifies itself as child, in other words, as the subject it is, and neither as a psychotic nor as an adult, precisely in that zone where emptiness and narcissism, the one upholding the other, constitute the zero degree of imagination (Kristeva, 1987, p. 24).

This Imaginary identification with the (m)other (unification between self and other based on a sense of the Real) remains important for self-preservation, since it enables the individual to identify with the other to form a totality (self recognition) as a step toward the wholeness that characterizes the Real (Elliott, 1992, 1994). This fantasy of wholeness

is characterized by the Real, in which the signifier offers the subject a spectacle experience of being staged in a scene, representing a “self” in the process of trying to fix the stable meaning of “I”—by allowing the subject to appear as its possibility in images and photographs. Although Lacan (1977f) would say this form of narcissistic identity is only an illusion, an image created by a misrecognition of the relation between self and its own image, it nonetheless provides a temporarily satisfaction of the desire.

After all, Lacan’s Imaginary is hopeful in that it provides the subject creativity (via images) to recover and to heal (from the pain and trauma caused by the Real) upon the entrance into the Symbolic. It provides self-esteem and a sense of wholeness (a fantasy wherein the symbolic is concealed by identification with an other) to cope with the dissatisfaction brought on by the Symbolic emptiness. Not only is the Imaginary the resource (images) that makes identity possible, but it also provides strategies by which the subject may deal with Symbolic prohibition, *jouissance*—the pleasure (i.e., seeking of winning, ideality) in pain (i.e., reminders of trauma, death) as part of living. Ultimately, the Imaginary (the source of creativity) creates a desire to heal that temporarily ends the Symbolic dissatisfaction, brought by the subject of desire.

(2) Resistance to Mainstream Values, Particularly those of Traditional American Culture

In general, participants find *manga* to be more intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing than other comic book forms, as offering stories emphasizing human emotionality, a world that is more complex (inasmuch as *manga* stories are different from those of American superheroes). *Manga* serves here as a relay, because participants feel disconnected and dissatisfied (the American Other is lacking). Their desire is reflected in *manga*, as they ask the questions *manga* asks:

[...] one big question a lot of *anime/manga* characters ask is: What is the point? Why am I here, and why am I doing what I'm doing? And what is reality? And American comics don't deal with that at all (personal communication, Kent, May 25, 2005).

What defines "human"?...That's the question posed in Masamune Shirow's *manga, Ghost in the Shell*. These [...] questions [...] are interesting to me. That's why I became interested in *manga*. There's a deeper theme that you can't find in the American comics or American pop culture—these questions about humanity, the nature of right and wrong, and nature of male and female (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Since they perceive the American Symbolic (Other) as lacking, *manga* participants grasp at their own desire in pursuing the desire of the Other (via *manga*'s fantasy) to gain self-knowledge. *Manga* represents an alternative Symbolic world which *manga* participants hope to use to replace the (American) culture they know. Their desire for another Symbolic form (via *manga*) also implies their resistance to the perceived American Other (the American reality). What they resist is the limitations of an American one-dimensional truth supported by superhero fictions, regarding right and wrong, good and evil.

For [American] superheroes, there's a right and wrong. There is a truth, and it makes it far more one-dimensional and less realistic. It has less to do with how the real world functions as a place where there are no real morals, except for the ones we humans artificially attach ourselves to (John, personal communication, May,

25, 2005).

[Well...] for example, you know Superman has a clear-cut evil in the storylines? There's this one guy—he is just evil, and that's all there is—not very interesting. It's just, he is a cliché. [...] But *manga* is different (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Apparently, participants' critique of traditional American culture (i.e., Superman's clear-cut evil, right-and-wrong morality) reveals a Symbolic dissatisfaction; they desire flexibility in terms of Symbolic structure (less divided boundaries and laws), and thus they reject the American Father (mainstream values). The “either-or” theme (i.e. right and wrong, good and evil, black and white, man and woman) is centered firmly on issues of morality and is reminiscent of the “rejection-of-the-Symbolic” in that participants refuse to submit themselves (reject being castrated) to the Symbolic Law (i.e., American values represented in the Superman ideal as a symbol of savior, truth, and justice). Not only does the American Father fail to take up their Symbolic function, but their desire implies what is in the end inexpressible lack in the Other (the American culture they know “is just cliché”).

According to Lacan (1988), the Symbolic is made possible because of the recognition of the-name-of-the-father, who controls laws and restrictions that govern our desire and our communication with others. Through language, the subject is able to create forms of meaning and define the boundaries of reality. The Symbolic, defined by language, is “the pact which links the subjects together in one action. The human action

par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts” (Lacan & Miller, 1988, p. 230).

In the participants’ view, the American Other, governed by its Symbolic laws and functions, fails to take up its contracts or even to accommodate one’s sense of lack (or support) on an emotional level. In contrast, *manga* is derived from the emotional aspects of its users’ interactions in terms of seeing themselves as more human (they value feelings and emotions as aspects of humanity), and comes to be a mirror device which participants use against their Symbolic reality in a constant battle springing from the internal (i.e., the need for emotional support) and in which they resist seeing themselves forming an image composed of such stereotypes.

I don’t like Superman as much. Mostly, he is like very very good. He can’t be bad at all. He’s certainly super, but he’s not very human (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

I don’t read Superman that much. He is not human. He doesn’t have personality. He is an alien (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

...Superman seems to be ultra-masculine – giant shoulders...[And] his emotions are one-dimensional emotions. He doesn’t experience complex emotions like me (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Art forms like *manga* seem to be based more on complexity and the ability to present complex issues so as to alleviate the pressure from Symbolic demands.

I prefer a *manga* story instead of seeing 40 armies killed by one guy [as you would in American comics]. At least *manga* has some emotional problems

compared to American [comics where the hero] destroys everything and then goes out to have some beers (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

In [American] comics [for example,] the characters often keep fighting and fighting over and over again. They keep doing it. When in *manga* and *anime*, if a character is destined to fight the same guy over and over again, he is getting tired of it, and he tells you, “I can’t do this anymore. I am getting tired of it. I don’t want to do this” (Kent, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

Participants’ identification with *manga* characters is a result of their desire to see themselves as “human” and “acceptable.” Their perception is that *manga* (alternative Other) is unlike the traditional American Other, whose images function as an idealizing image of self (want-to-be and want-to-know), and which dominates the subject’s desires and judges whether a Symbolic identity desirable. In other words, the American Other limits who they can be. Participants desire less distinct boundaries (between self/other, good/evil, right/wrong, as “there are no real morals”) in which deviation from the “right” (i.e., societal demands, mainstream ideals) is acceptable and even normal. They find that *manga* tends to provide themes that are “anti-authoritarian.” such “themes” help provide a “counterpoint view” to “free oneself” from the dominating ideology. In this sense, participants’ Symbolic identification (i.e. Superman) comes with a dimension of fantasy (or even involves stereotypes of a Symbolic), and they fantasize their social reality through *manga*, a “counterpoint view,” which serves as a cultural critique of the American mainstream view. They are looking for a moral flexibility in life that “goes beyond the dualism of good and evil, God and Satan.” Rather than “view[ing] that

everything conforms to an archetype of good and evil,” participants value a worldview that is much more complex than black-and-white thinking—grayer. As John notes, “I think *manga* helps...by mainly providing a counterpoint in the form of cultural exchange to the pop culture monopoly in the United States” (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005). *Manga* is thus a Symbolic structure which constitutes a perversion of these American values.

[...] For example, the American government, or certain priorities within the American government, adopts this kind of ideal Superman. [It’s as if] they identify [with the] superheroes in American comics... This, internally, leads to contradictions because they do not realize the world is a far more complicated a place than a simplistic American pop culture ideal or a Western Christian ideal allows for...I would rather be Darth Vader [the Star Wars antagonist] than Superman because Darth Vader realizes that he is evil. Superman doesn’t recognize evil in himself; therefore, he doesn’t realize when he inflicts evil (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Participants use *manga* against their Symbolic, to sanction their own cultures, and to deny the authority of the ruling Other.

I used to believe in Roman Catholicism. When I became interested in *manga*, I also became interested in Buddhism and other Eastern Asian philosophies. It goes away from the western ideals of right and wrong—the dualism of good and evil—God and Satan. That stuff doesn’t work for me anymore. I believe...that there’s no absolute right and wrong or good and evil...The world is far more complicated

than simply the two absolute ideas (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

It appears that the American (Symbolic) culture fails to retain its (phallic) power, as participants reject the father they know, as they hope to gain power by identifying with another Other (*manga*). Unfortunately, as a falsified father, *manga* registers its participants in the domain of the Imaginary. It seems that participants shift the version of the two worlds happening to a new misrecognition of experiencing their social reality (Symbolic) through the Imaginary (of the *manga* world) between their own alternative ideas, or distinguishing them by associating them with another culture. In a Lacanian context, the *manga* ideas wouldn't be the participants' "own" ideas, but ideas that actually become embedded into their own Symbolic context.

In other words, *manga* participants' epistemological thought isn't any more Eastern than it is Western (or any more Buddhist than Roman Catholic). The belief that *manga* can be used to allow participants to see themselves as Eastern in terms of their philosophy and approach by rejecting Western authority and Symbolic knowledge, allows participants to believe they will find what they seek in another culture (a *manga* Other and Eastern philosophy), not admitting that these Symbolic forms of knowledge *manga* represents can also be lacking. This appears to be a new misrecognition—participants using *manga* to think of themselves as representative of Japanese culture and engaging in a Symbolic return to the realm of Imaginary freedom (a state of wholeness without lack), not realizing that their perception of *manga* also reflects mainstream values in their own context, based on a contamination by Western values.

[For example,...] By realizing that you are wrong, sometimes you end up with a better, truthful view of the universe. Winning is more pleasant, but I like to win truth and self-knowledge. If you pursue self-knowledge, and you get something from your defeats as well as from your victories, then you've won a great victory... (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Anime and *manga* are much more true to life because it [the stories] could actually happen: *The characters react to situations as if they were you (emphasis mine)*.

You know, they react as you would if you are upset or mad or disappointed.

Sometimes in American comics, if the character is offended by somebody, he gets enraged and fights the person. In *anime* and *manga*, often when the characters are offended, all they do is go sit somewhere by themselves and just think about it.

And that's something that somebody would actually do. You know. They go over and sit by themselves and try to figure out what's going on (Kent, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

On the other hand, the void of the Symbolic authority (knowledge, validation) remains enmeshed in the Imaginary as hope (for change). The desire to pursue the ideal Other is the desire for the ideal (m)other (it is themselves whom they pursue). This alternative Other can be approached through *manga* (eastern philosophy) in that it creates desire that ends in the dissatisfaction and pleasure prohibited by the American Symbolic. What they desire are less-distinct boundaries, and the knowledge (eastern philosophy) to allow seeing things outside the "Western ideals of right and wrong—the dualism of good and evil—God and Satan" the discourse of the Other, in which the subject is constituted by

another Other (the *manga* Other's surplus value) in an attempt to appropriate *manga* culture as a source for (alternative) identity, and the source of desire.

That being the case, participants adopt *manga* as an alternative (Other) father to deal with the dissatisfaction (*jouissance*) brought on by the Symbolic dissatisfaction. Participants use *manga* as a fantasy device to name the desire, a want-to-know (self-knowledge) by which they recognize the importance of loss, defeat, failure, and weakness caused by the Symbolic.

It's the nobility of failure in the Japanese ideal, which is to say that it's better to die honorably, or to lose with honor, than to win with dishonor...[Also,] if you are always winning, and things always go your way, you will never have self-knowledge (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

Manga brings a different value to its participants' sense of identity-making: "the belief that failure can be honorable—that one can be a hero, even if they lose." In *manga*, even the heroes are allowed their weaknesses and limitations. Thus, *manga* represents an alternative Symbolic (closer to its participants' perceived reality though derived from fantasy) for the participants to think about their social reality (if "you are always winning, and things always go your way, you will never have self-knowledge"). In contrast, the American superhero may win all the (external) battles, but because he never loses, he never learns from his mistakes. *Manga* heroes are perceived as reflective, because they prompt participants to think and apply their mistakes through a mirroring experience as if experienced by the characters. Clearly, participants use *manga* as a guide for gaining self-knowledge and exploring their worldviews and possibilities. The Imaginary fantasy (via a tragic hero) functions as a rehearsal place for dealing with Symbolic castration (the

Other's demand which fixes the subject), wherein the subject can learn how to lose, and wherein via the Imaginary other one can learn how to take risks, how to live as a subject who accepts failures, and how to speak as a (castrated) subject in lack (Fink, 1995).

(3) A Questioning of Gender Roles and Sexuality

One's identity, in particular as regards gender roles and sexual differences, arises out of the Symbolic as defined by language (upon the acceptance of the Symbolic, one has to become something other than self—castration). The Symbolic is always the source of oppression of one's identity regardless of whether one acknowledges this is so. One learns to become a man/woman (girl/boy) by forcefully playing out the differences (through language). Language defines the subject, and thus continues to further the desire of the subject (lack). Often female participants question how sexual differences define the social meaning of gender, specifically in terms of meeting the Other's desire (parental expectation, societal norms).

There are a lot of gender roles in society that are defined by society's idea of, "This is female, and this is male." [...] This is how I grew up. I don't think this is that bad, but there are still things that make this idea so limiting. Like, "You are a girl. Why do you do *that*?" Like, I am also into computer science. I notice that not many girls are in computer science. I just don't understand. Why aren't there more girls here? Are they not interested? Which doesn't make any sense, since it's...a good career (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

My mom hates me building my Gundam model because "you are too much of girl to be doing that." I am like, "if I am too much of girl doing that why do I like

doing that?” I like building things because it’s part of my masculine side to be. At the same time, I want to be very masculine and very strong too, I mean physically.

Girls can be like that too. (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

For female participants who live according to societal norms, the Symbolic remains a source of oppression, in particular regarding how one’s gender identity should be viewed in Symbolic terms (i.e., girly, masculine, feminine, male, female). The Symbolic regulates who we are and how we should behave (what it means to be a girl/boy). According to Lacan, the Symbolic is governed by the Other (language, law, societal norms, parental desires), which can also repress the subject’s desire (e.g., Females do not want to be saved by men, and men resist the stereotype of men being a savior).

American comics mostly are superheroes, mostly male-oriented, even ones with female heroes. They [female characters] are very much formed man-style, with thin waists, big hips, big butts, and big breasts. And they all are very pretty-looking, and always wearing skimpy, tight outfits. In *manga*, they are less [explicit] like that. And there’s *manga* for girls. But [in America], there’s no comic book for girls. There was, but it’s, like, *Barbies*. There are no American comic books aimed toward girls (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

While the Symbolic remains a source of repression, the Imaginary remains the locus of the imagination and the freedom to avoid the prohibition of the Other. In the fantasy, men don’t have to be macho; they can be “nice and kind” to each other. The female participants, in particular, create feminine guys (i.e., boy-boy love -- see Figure 5.4) to explore their own fantasy gender relations wherein the structure of the genders is

eminently ambiguous (homosexuality as a norm), against the traditional image of men (heterosexual norm):

Two guys who are normally like “football and beers,” and instead they are being all nice and kind and they touch chins and kiss and all, being nice to each other...It’s like, that’s so sweet. I don’t know, it’s kind of nice to watch the changes. I don’t know how to describe it (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Figure 5.4. Amy’s *manga* drawings show men being nice and kind as they touch chins and kiss each other: to explore her own fantasy gender relations wherein the structure of the genders is eminently ambiguous (homosexuality as a norm), against the traditional image of men (heterosexual norm). [Used by permission of the artist].

The female participants create pretty male characters (“pretty guys can be mistaken as girls”) that can be taken both ways because “the things [they] read mostly involve pretty guys.” These images of gay (pretty) men constitute an Imaginary other that actually comes from the Symbolic structure (the stereotypical images of a gay man). In a Lacanian sense, when participants see themselves only in terms of the Symbolic, they

become an Other (in relation to a man) for themselves, but define themselves in terms of a woman, seeing themselves as an Other (man), such that the desire of man is structured in a fantasy like theirs (feminine characters). Their imaginary gaze remains in the Symbolic structure (homosexual), where the fantasy of the mirror governs the relationship between the self and the other (i.e., man/woman), triggering the image the participants wish to embody (see Figure 5.5); they wish to remain in the form of a male body and at the same time be seen as a girl—pretty. It is their own image in their dream which they pursue, and the imaginary subject they create is a complete abdication of the desire of the other — in terms of their position as defined in a new Other (fe/male) for themselves, thus without lack (“You can’t really tell”):

I like to draw the character that can be both ways. [Both ways?] I mean androgynous – no gender. A lot of times, it happens in *anime*. I prefer to draw males. They tend to work either way. For example, Louis is a guy, but he can be mistaken for a girl. The gender doesn’t matter in my drawing. You can’t really tell. (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

Figure 5.5. Amy’s [left two] and Jess’s [right two] *manga* drawings: their *manga* characters are typical pretty guys, appearing androgynous as an Imaginary ideal-ego within the Symbolic sense (can be mistaken

as girls, commonly decorated with such characteristics as a magical, florid background, wearing accessories and jewelry, feathers, and hats, having small chins, elegant long hair, defined muscles, and a well-built chest. [Used by permission of the artists].

Androgyny as the Ultimate Gender Utopia (Without Sexual Differences)

The term *androgyny* implies a gender without sexual differences (in relation to castration). Participants feel oppressed (castrated by laws, and language), and thus seek other means of acceptance by participating in *manga*'s fantasy. Their desire furthers their Symbolic reality, and they desire to see themselves as defined by an imaginary other (a new gendered identity embodying both male and female qualities). They seek to reject the differences of the Symbolic dichotomy (between man and woman, masculinity and femininity); thus, they reject being defined through the traditional notions of either-or themes as drawn between man and woman (femininity or masculinity) via the landscape of the Imaginary as defensive mechanism to cope with the Symbolic castration (via the acceptance of the Law either man or woman). Thus, via *manga*'s Imaginary world (they no longer need to follow the law), an alternative construction (imaginary) of gender relation is attempted without sexual difference, in which one's gender identity can no longer be defined as male and female.

Perhaps the concept of androgyny (See Figure 5.5. in which the characters are pretty girls disguised in male bodies) aims toward being an Imaginary gender (ideal image of the self), having less to do with sex identification than the need for gender recognition associated with the opposite sex (sexual differences create subjugation), in which there is less "difference between females and males," an alternative (via fantasy of

the Imaginary world) in which “an ideal of androgyny is the only true equality between the sexes” (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005). However, androgyny can never be truly fulfilled in a Symbolic sense, since it is derived from the Imaginary (the fantasy of *manga*). Participants experience their social reality through the imaginary of *manga*, in which there’s no structure (the infinite via the imagination).

Such fantasy construction is a kind of empowerment for motivation changes, and even represents a liberating desire to resolve the question of sexual difference. An androgynous other which looks like a woman is also a form of the Imaginary intersubjective relation, an attempt to avoid Symbolic castration (as man or woman):

Actually, *yaoi* is not made for homosexual men. It’s for women, actually [...].

Japanese women feel trapped in this gender role of being [the devoted] wife...She has no sexual freedom, and [when] she reads *yaoi manga*, she can project herself with this relationship that is totally different from what she has in her real life...It gives a kind of empowerment by reading it. (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

A lot of boys in *manga* have long hair. Because they are pretty boys ...girls are attracted to guys who are more feminine because they can relate to them. That way they feel safe. It has to do with the way people see gender. Because girls are usually raised around girls, they can relate to girls better than guys. If they see a feminine guy, they can relate to him better than a really bulky, manly man. A delicate jaw, small eyebrow area, maybe the small lips. Girls find that kind of

thing attractive, even though [the males] are mistaken as girls a lot... (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

...not many kinds of people are like that, except maybe for the gay guys. That's why there's a ton of females after them, even though they don't want to have sex with him. It's the idea of psychological thinking that gay guys or girlie guys seem to be safer. (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Afterward, in a Lacanian sense, *manga* (*yaoi*—boy-boy love) remains in the realm of the Imaginary, embodying a primary bonding relationship with the (m)other, a state of being free of difference, separation, or sex identification. The Imaginary (*manga*) construct (via creation of self image and narcissistic love) allows for compensation for this condition of dissatisfaction (being trapped in the socially designated sexual position - man/woman). The participants create “pretty boys” to fulfill this lack by constructing an image of the other (boys with feminine qualities) based on their own self-image. This imaginary return, in Lacanian terms, constitutes an act of self-defense in seeking wholeness without lack, in returning to the (m)other, in which one makes a momentary complete return in the search for a secure identity.

Desire for a Secure Identity

In a Lacanian sense, female participants relate their desire to an attempt to resist or change traditional images of gender relations, and in a way they create a fantasy character as a means of coping with the Symbolic threat (e.g., bulky men), and this fantasy can be used to embody gender and sexuality without conforming to what the society might want them to be (e.g., weak, feminine, sexual). The Imaginary

identification is dominant in their forms of *ego* and the forms of objects they embrace. Their (gender) identity tends to be made up of others like them or qualities they desire. Ultimately, their identity, in particular their gender, is composed of bits of images assembled by them so as to inscribe themselves into an image that is pleasing (in fantasy), and these constitute meaning in the return to the satisfying image of a complete and whole being (to liberate them from Symbolic constraints).

Lacan (1977d) sees such Imaginary particular gender identification as an effect of the Symbolic—a defense system for dealing with the Symbolic threat the Other (men) represent, as female participants see them (bulky men)—relatively unsafe, or at least inconsiderate on the unconscious level. The feminine guys (also see Figure 5.5) are caring and safe. Ultimately, what the participants seek is a secure (integrated) identity, derived from a temporary fantasy in which they are free, without being castrated by the Symbolic father (man). They resist seeing themselves as being defined through a man, even though a man can't see himself being defined by the masculine structure:

Superman is the big, muscular guy who defends the weak and is in love with the woman. That's very stereotypical. You know, the man is supposed to be brave and a winner, and be this kind of super-awesome, powerful guy. I am not powerful at all, in my opinion (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

Superman embodies the qualities (macho, heterosexual) men are *supposed* to have. He represents the masculine structure of what a man should be according to traditional American mainstream norms: men are *supposed* to be brave, powerful winners, and tough – not just in fantasy (Imaginary), but in reality (Symbolic), as well. Being gay, however, Clark doesn't see himself this way. Superman abides in the Symbolic ideals of

heterosexuality, but these types of body ideals do not seem to fit Clark's image of the self. The (homo)sexual subject can exist only in the Imaginary but is doubtful in the American Symbolic (norm), which remains an undesirable place for people who are outside the (heterosexual) norm. One's Symbolic identity (including one's sexuality), as Lacan warns us, is doomed to failure. Symbolic (sexual) differences always involve a Symbolic castration, given that to become a subject one must take the positions offered by the Symbolic that makes up one aspect of the identity, such that attempts to resist it are always negated by something, and even one's sexuality can be threatened if not accepted by the Symbolic father, furthering the subject's lack and creating more desire of the Other.

*(4) A Desire for Recognition—The Desire is to be the Object of the Other's Desire
(Social Aspect of Manga)*

One new theme emerging from the analysis is the complication produced by the social aspect of *manga*. This aspect complicates and broadens the relationship from simply that of the subject and the *manga* characters to incorporate a complex of social relationships (e.g. other cosplayers). This complexity introduces the desire of the other to be the object of the Other's desire (to become other than self). Interestingly enough, female participants explicitly express that they cosplay [costume-play] to be recognized and valued in the public domain (fame, attention, social networking).

Before I got into cosplay a lot, I usually did it by myself...Since I have a lot of friends cosplaying now, too, we like to do groups, and I think it is fun to do cosplaying in a group. And, also, if we are in a group, then you know there are other people depending on you to get your things [costumes, props] done. [So]

you are motivated to get things done. It's more fun to cosplay with other people than it is to cosplay by yourself...If you come alone to the convention dressed up like some character, you don't get to meet other people, and it's less fun. [But] if you go to the photo shoot [a forum wherein groups of fans dressed as the same character have a group photo taken], you will find other people who are just like you in a group...You find other people who, just like you, like to be part of the same character...It's fun to do things in-group because you have people to talk to and be around, and take pictures and work on the costumes together...I think it is much more fun when you cosplay with friends (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

You don't feel like you. You are not yourself, and you feel like you are somebody else...A lot of the time, you just walk around the hallway and people stop you and take your picture and have their pictures taken with you. It is so amazing to have complete strangers come out and ask "*Can I have my picture taken with you, please?*" It's just so amazing to have people ask to take your picture. It feels like I am a superstar (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005).

I know a lot of people do it because they want to be seen – for attention – or to have their picture taken or to be famous on the Internet. If you are a very good cosplayer, you probably can become very well known. Actually, there are people that make a living from making costumes. Cosplay can be a career...[But] I don't really like the attention that much. I just want a few people to come to say, "Hey.

I am glad you did that character because nobody does.” [But you do] want to do a good job on the costume because you [do] want people to take a picture of you. [But] I just want people to recognize the character – not me (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

Figure 5.5: Jess’s photoshoots at *manga/anime* conventions. By cosplaying with her friends, Jess is socially motivated to create art. Her (Symbolic) identity is disguised behind the costume of the cosplay. She becomes the object of the Other’s desire (i.e., glamour, popular, famous) that the Other sees and judges and who determines which body image is positive (e.g., her personal social reality and others’ reactions to her). She wants to be accepted, to be loved for who she is not. [Used by permission of the artist.]

Cosplayers enjoy the social benefits that they derive from cosplay, and they find pleasure in meeting other people with similar interests, meeting new people who are “just like you” and who “like to be part of the same character” because “it’s fun to do things in-group because you have people to talk to and be around and take pictures and work on the costumes together.” Cosplay performance points out not only the desire for acceptance, but also the desire to be socially likeable, to be something larger than life. Most importantly, it affords the experience of being recognized and a greater subsequent feeling of self-worth (i.e., “I just want people to recognize the character – not me” “It feels like I am a superstar”).

A fundamental human desire is to be accepted and recognized by the Other (i.e., norm, parents, peers, teachers) (Lacan, 1978, Bracher, 1999, 2002). By identifying with *manga* characters, participants are engaged in fantasy, and they are provided the opportunity to experience imaginary wholeness, including beauty, power, and uniqueness, by becoming the spectacular characters with whom they identify, but cosplay also affords participants the experience of being recognized and valued in the public domain (“Can I have my picture taken with you, please?”). The Symbolic identification with *manga* comes with a dimension of fantasy. Participants experience their social world through the Imaginary of *manga*. What is composed of the Imaginary is precisely what they lack in their social reality. Furthermore, the fundamental human desire is to have a secure identity which has no lack and which is in control of its own ego.

Females’ identification with cosplaying characters is strongly reminiscent of an Imaginary identification process, with an identity who is not split, who doesn’t lack, and

who seems to be in full control. In a Lacanian sense, one can argue that cosplay is a means to be attractive in the eyes of others —or to fit into a popular norm. The desire for wholeness contributes to participants' fantasy of fitting in or appearing to be likable ("I just want people to recognize the character – not me"). Through costumes and acting, they transform themselves into a superstar or a Ninja warrior who can ostensibly fight and be accepted by strangers. *Manga* allows participants to create a sense of friendship and a safe community in which they feel recognized and accepted. By cosplaying, they seem to fulfill the lack of their reality, which is acceptance of who they are. The empty space in their social life is filled by cosplaying, meeting people, and becoming part of a popular social crowd, in which they find a sense of security. Cosplaying empowers them to map their desires and seek recognition and to be seen as desirable by the Other.

(5) The Pleasure of Binding the Traumatic Life Together (The Real is That Which Resists Reality)

One issue emerging in the analysis is the importance of the unconscious operating in the identity process. The unconscious (Real) is never literally revealed but appears in the contingency of the Symbolic, and makes itself known through relation to the Imaginary, including all forms of signifier (images, desire, etc.). One way the Real makes contact with us is not only through the Imaginary reincarnation—seeking a sense of wholeness that tells us we are whole without lack, but also through the Symbolic paradox, often found in the misuse of language (i.e., contradiction, paradox, strong denials, nonsense, parody, or humor) to fill the gap left by the Real. Since the Real is forever a lost object, when we meet it again it is always as a void (lack) felt through a

traumatic version of the self (Foster, 1996; Walker, 2009), one of the reactions to the Real is represented by the strong emotional reactions associated with traumatic events (i.e., as evidenced by Clark's anxiety associated with being gay and his terror of gay-bashing).

The following discussion focuses on the Real as framed within unconscious elements (anxiety, fear of death, etc.) in an attempt to conceptualize them in Symbolic (Imaginary) form. By bringing the contents (the Real) of the unconscious into consciousness, it is possible to name desire and to strengthen the ego or I, as a form of an identity, as the subject speaks.

Imaginary Real - Metaphor (Parody) as a Visual Signifier to Avoid the Emotional Trauma Caused by the Real

Clark's story (of the King on the Ocean Cliff) can be interpreted as a constitutive example of Lacan's Imaginary Real, wherein the Real is incarnated in visual form as a Symbolic escape, arising from the Symbolic prohibition, particularly with regard to Clark's Symbolic castration (gay identity) and his shocking story of gay violence and oppressive religious values. This internal conflict arising from being a gay man is revealed in Clark's self-portrait being clouded by visual metaphors (object of anxiety embodied in the meaningless black and white dots).

Since Clark has experienced, and still experiences, "power struggles" related to his sexual orientation, his articulation (King on the cliff as a metaphor for conflict) appears to embody multiple meanings that are condensed within a metaphor of struggle, which draws on his past. While it is not his intention to change the church or others around him, neither the church nor those around him accept him the way he is. He

remains in the Imaginary. To avoid the impact of the trauma of the Real, Clark slips into an Imaginary landscape in which he conceals his fear with that of the oppressor (the Other), the intruder who works against him, the Real, working at the unconscious level.

The Real, alluded to in the mysterious airbrushed white dots scattered in the air and the black dots which undercut the meaning structure of Symbolic reality, is frozen in the Imaginary without necessitating speaking the horror caused by the Symbolic rejection (In the imaginary he is King after all - he has ultimate power and has no need to face the threat of reality). In fact, Clark's identity is clouded by his own visual metaphor of participating in the fantasy; he *is* the King captivated by nothing but power. Certain visual forms of the self portrait are potentially emancipating—wings, being King (power), black dots (fears) and white dots (uncertainty)—and the King comes to resist symbolizing his central lack, marking his fear for the first time in visual form as a social symbolic traumatic lack, continuing to shape his subjectivity with the web of desire, resisting being put into words (e.g., to be accepted as a gay? Is this right, or what are other options?). In addition, the wings are meant to signify the freedom of desire (wings are interpreted as being a symbol of mobility or freedom), reflecting both Clark's Imaginary and Symbolic self-identity, representing his wish to be freed, his quest to be recognized in his gay identity, and his desire to be accepted into the Symbolic Law. All these wishes are safe to discuss in the Imaginary via fantasy. His secret will be preserved without his having to make a decision in reality (the failure to be accepted as a gay man becomes a central repression of his identity).

Fantasy as a Way to Learn to Live with Real Trauma (Loss, Defeat and Failure as Part of Life)

Although the Real is inevitable and traumatic (fear of death), it masks failures in every play of our social symbolic experience through the Imaginary disguise. Before we can reach an identity, there's always a resistance, strings attached to the Real. One way to avoid making contact with the Real is via the fantasy others who feel pain and joy for us without the supposition of Symbolic failure, brought by *jouissance* (a sense of loss, failure, fear and death) (Jagodzinski, 2004). The Imaginary (the image) wards off the Real (Foster, 1996). With the aid of *manga* (via fantasy others), participants create their own *manga* images through the use of parody (nonsense, humor and laughter) to avoid the impact of the Real, filling the emptiness (hole) of the Symbolic with nonsense (failures) to achieve temporary enlightenment regarding the Real (see John's "Delayed Satori"). Winning is good and can afford a great deal of pleasure, but failure can be desirable and honorable (embracing both pain and pleasure) if one learns to live with it. In his rejection of the American superhero ideal (winning as opposed to losing), John gains self-knowledge (traumatic attachment) via the tragic hero:

It has to do with the belief that failure can be honorable – that one can be a hero, even if they lose. It has to do with the Bushido belief – the cult of the samurai (which was actually formulated long after the samurai had ceased to be a force in Japanese history). It's the nobility of failure in the Japanese ideal, which is to say that it's better to die honorably, or to lose with honor, than to win with dishonor...[Also,] if you are always winning, and things always go your way, you will never have self-knowledge (John, personal communication, May, 25, 2005).

The fantasy allows the subject to speak and imagine in different subject positions (failure can be honorable) through an Other. In the Imaginary one can rehearse a state of failure brought on by the Other. As opposed to achieving wholeness (winning all the time), the subject learns self-knowledge to assist in dealing with trauma, in a space wherein failure makes desire possible (and in which failure can thus be liberating). The self-realization which comes with learning how to lose is a form of self-knowledge which comes from recognition of one's lack, and in which one learns to move on and learn to live with failure as part of the imperfection of being (as with the nobility of failure in the Japanese ideal).

The Symbolic Real and the Misuse of Language to Fill the Symbolic Emptiness (via Contradictions, Self-denial)

Another way the Real makes contact with us is in the form of self-denial and contradiction; this contact is evident in Jess's repeated assertion of self-denial in her cosplay performance in light of what she says she really feels about her own identity.

I just want a few people to come to say, "Hey. I am glad you did that character because nobody does." [But you do] want to do a good job on the costume because you [do] want people to take a picture of you. [But] I just want people to recognize the character – not *me* (Jess, personal communication, May, 9, 2006).

"When I wear this outfit, nobody recognizes me. But, this is me," and "I just want people to recognize the character – not *me*." Jess's self-denial concerns how she and *manga* others exhibit the Real operating in the unconscious through inconsistency and contradiction (whether she acknowledges it or not). She denies what she really is, and her identity converges as a fundamental Lacanian lack, while the fantasy of *manga* supplies

her lack (created by the images), furthering her resistance to symbolization of her identity (indecision); instead, she relies on images to communicate who she really is: “It is interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different. I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glass. I don’t know... I know why.”

To put it another way, through the fantasies she constructs via *manga*, she is temporarily fulfilling what the Other wants of her, by fragmenting her identity into deceptive bits of images, to fill the void caused by the Real (to be whole and complete again). The gaze of the Other is shielded and her Symbolic identity is successfully covered in her disguise of *manga* images. She is not what she is seeing; after all, she deceives others (including herself) and disguises herself as the character. She is able to experience her social reality through the Imaginary fantasies, not to be recognized as herself, but as the other *manga* characters. Thus, her (social) identity remains trapped in the Imaginary (marked by her indecision and lack of power to control the Symbolic). By being trapped in the Imaginary, she is glamorous and popular, known as an artistic and authentic cosplayer. The manner in which her social identity resists being put into symbolization and the inconsistency of her desires (“Sometimes their traits I like a lot, but they are not the aspects I see in myself”; “it’s interesting to see these pictures. I can be so different, I end up wearing masks, or face paint or a giant collar, or glasses”) is derived from the Real, the social trauma of not being accepted. She thus has to become someone other than herself, at which point she finds herself acceptable, garnering social praise and the recognition of *manga* fans (as a character not herself). In order to fit in, she has to repeatedly cover herself to meet the ideality of the Symbolic (with her identity fractured as a result) so that she can be seen as desirable. Lacan posits that while the

trauma of the Real resists being put into symbolization, it continually asserts itself through endless repetition of inconsistencies and contradictions that undercut the meaning of reality (Homer, 2005). As Žižek puts it, the Lacanian Real is that traumatic “bone in the throat that contaminates every ideality of the symbolic rendering it contingent and inconsistent” (Žižek, 2005, p. 350).

The Trauma of the Real Real, Its Unspeakable Horror, and the Fear of Death

Clark’s traumatic experiences (e.g., of gay-bashing) and his sexual identity are accompanied by the fear and rejection caused by the Other’s recognition of what it means to be gay (via Church and society), and his desire to fit in as a gay man can thus be interpreted as a constitutive example of Lacan’s real Real (trauma relation). While Clark doesn’t explicitly discuss his story of the King on the Ocean Cliff in the context of his fears associated with being gay, or connect those fears with that story, the fact that this connection remains unarticulated may represent an instance of the unconscious emerging through conscious speech. That is, Clark uses the King as a signifier and referent in an attempt to refute the real conflict, imagining that he is a King, plunging his power into a conflict situation (concerning whether to end the world) that represents his secret fears (the anxiety of not being accepted) while working against the impending impact of the Real. The Real trauma (gay-bashing and the rejection of the Church) is momentarily set aside while being symbolically seized upon in the dream landscape. This fear (of being killed) continues to emerge; even before he is born, the primal traumatic reemergence of a central event against homosexuality repeats itself in history.

You know, I am gay, and the church does not accept it. The basic tenet of the

Catholic religion is that homosexuality is wrong and gay people are going to hell.

It's very cut and dry... In your mind, you can think whatever you want, but if you ever act on the impulse and do anything with another man, you are going to hell, right there... There is a part in the Bible – Leviticus – it specifically says that if a man lies with a man, as a man would lie with a woman, then he shall be stoned – killed. It's the same with the woman... [So] the problem is that, if you are gay, I am sorry, you have to be killed... (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

For Clark, his gay identity is contested (being gay is not an acceptable alternative to the heterosexual norm), violates the Law (of religion and cultural norms) and is not accepted (he must be killed), a situation which creates traumatic fears (even a death threat), all of which characterizes a Lacanian real Real, a horror of the oppressor that haunts his being.

Actually, last night, one of my friends got gay-bashed... They [the perpetrators] came in the car, and they just beat them [Clark's friend and his date] up. They jumped in their car, and they [Clark's friend and his date] ran through a red light because they were trying to get rid of these guys. And policemen gave them a ticket. They wouldn't hear the story they were trying to tell them. It's just the fact that society works very devoutly against those who are outside the norm, and they... don't have the ability to reach those... in power. They can't. There's no way around it (Clark, personal communication, April, 26, 2006).

As is shown above, Clark's account of his sexuality is replete with themes of fears and rejection, including the horror of violence. One's atypical sexual orientation (Clark's psychic trauma associated with being gay) not only occasions rejection and condemnation throughout one's life but also functions for many (gay) people as a

Lacanian Real (traumatic lack) that shapes the identity of the social symbolic relation (Chiesa, 2007). Further, sexual orientation serves as the Lacanian *objet a*, or fantasy object, that continually circles and simultaneously masks the real trauma of gay identity. In a Lacanian sense, Clark's gay-bashing experience is a Lacanian real Real, dragging his being into a traumatic path that he cannot escape. It repeatedly emerges through history against the attempt to construct his (gay) identity. It is this sense of horror associated with the Real (the memory of the traumatic event of being gay-bashed), and the anxiety of not being accepted by the Law, that make the Real an irreducible hole and unnamable in the Symbolic form, a situation derived from an excess of trauma, loss, and fear (Žižek, 1999).

Since there's no way of escaping the trauma of the Real, one way we ward off the Real is through the use of visual forms (Foster, 1996). Clark's use of metaphor (his self portrait of the King on the Ocean Cliff) can be thought of as a strategy for avoiding confronting the real trauma (of being put into symbolization). Instead, he creates a visual metaphor of repression, such that the Real no longer produces the trauma except as marked by the visual of illusion or mirage, through the vehicle of taking the images outside, and naming oneself a name so as to experience wholeness and unity (Žižek, 1999) as a real *objet a* that can support fantasies (Chiesa, 2007) (i.e., in the Imaginary landscape he is the King, dwelling in a Symbolic form of power without fear).

Summary

A wide range of views exist concerning how a person's identity is formed and what the identification process signifies. A brief summary of the most prominent theories

of identity was provided in Chapter 2. As described in that chapter, the Lacanian approach differs from many other prominent theories in that it bases identity construction on “lack” or “desire.” On the unconscious level, one’s identity is partially shaped by one’s own lack; thus, an endless desire is created, which ultimately governs one’s identity in the conflict between what one sees, and what one wishes others would see. The central issues of identity are examined between self and other, as structured in the desire of the Other. According to Lacan (1978), identity is not fundamentally constructed outside the subject or a set of subject positions that are imposed upon the subject, and identity is not based primarily on the perception of the other as different. Instead, identity is based on ideal images one sees from the outside, and it is also driven by the interior life, which characterizes our identity. One’s identity is never whole, and its construction is not always a conscious process, as the data analysis has shown.

Manga appears to shape and contribute to its young fans’ identities. Their identification with *manga* is more complex than a simple domination of the Symbolic. Although participants have a positive image of Japanese culture, their involvement with *manga* is not simply an expression of a desire to become an “exotic other,” or simply a use of the *manga* style to express distinction from and non-conformity with mainstream American culture. Neither are they using *manga* as a means to help them define their American identity. On the contrary, participants’ identification with *manga* appears to be based on the desire of the Other (as lack), as represented in their resistance to social norms; they use the Imaginary construction to explore their alternative selves (desirable qualities or represented ideal selves or partners) as supported by fantasies.

Most participants' attachment to characters involved a mix of Lacanian themes concerning the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Based on what they see as similarities, *manga* participants are not looking for representations of their lives, but are participating in a fantasy of relation in constructing their identity through creativity in bits of images so as to create, to have the ability to become, and to change the unsatisfactory identity (or to recover the fractured self). These *manga* characters function as the *objet a* that supports fantasies. They gaze back at the participants and remind them of what they don't have (lack). The participants learn more about themselves (via desire) through a mirror other-self relationship by identifying with the *manga* characters.

Such desire as associated with *manga* seems positive (hopeful) because it promotes change. For example, female participants often want to construct themselves with masculine aspects and see themselves in androgynous characters in order to seek alternatives, or to form a new identity from their limited Symbolic. This occurs not because the girls don't like to be rescued, or because boys don't like fighting, but because participants are looking for more flexibility in living their lives like the ones they can imagine. There is much freedom in *manga* stories and characters. Art forms such as *manga* operating in one's Imaginary certainly open up a significant space for making decisions about, thinking about, and playing with a multiplicity of possible identities through a fantasy space. *Manga* not only supplies a positive sense of fulfillment of its participants' identity-making through image-constructing and cosplaying, but through it they are also able to see a range of facets of self- and identity-changing. With *manga*, participants have the power to make changes to the self and to construct meaning. To them, *manga* is not just an escape from the Symbolic; rather, it is an outlet for fulfilling

desire/lack by directing their attention toward alternatives, against their Symbolic (e.g., the oppressive mainstream American culture). In a Lacanian sense, because of the Imaginary, we are motivated to change ourselves; thus, those constraints of the Symbolic somehow create more possibilities through the imaginary world so as to heal and to recover from dissatisfaction.

Several participants stated explicitly that they preferred androgynous characters, in general, or effeminate male characters, in particular. The females often identified with men who possessed feminine qualities and imagined interacting with them psychologically. One can argue that the image of a feminine man looking back at them reminds them of what they lack in the reality frame. In other words, they desire men somewhat similar to themselves, which would be an equal relationship they desire. They imagine that such men “probably won’t hurt you. They will be nice, like, they will put the toilet seat down and clean up after themselves” (Amy, personal communication, May 20, 2005). In a larger sense, Lacan would say their connection with these characters arises as an unconscious reminder—of the realm of the Real. We are unconsciously, but continually, reminded of the lack at the core of our existence. We may be able to “see” what we want to see, but the *objet a* (object gaze) always reminds us that we cannot have, or be, what we see. Lacan warns us that identity remains an illusion (misconstruction) between the Imaginary self and Symbolic identity that we identify as we continue to search for this wholeness and misrecognize the unified image of self.

Implications for Art Education: Why Lacan?

Walker and Parsons (2010) suggest that art educators should examine current practice from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, particularly as regards the concept of subjectivity (the subject of the unconscious, the concept of desire and fantasy), to enable them to go beyond existing practice and discussion in art education. Much of identity theory is framed within a poststructuralist framework, focusing on the way in which identities are constructed through the delivery of language (a conscious act). Lacan's theory of the unconscious (i.e., that the Other is always lacking) offers new readings about identity construction beyond the specific framing of identity practice (i.e., language, discourse, ideology, institution), and moving toward a more active subject, when interpreting individual desire in relation to the process of identification (Atkinson, 2002). Such a view gives more weight to how individuals interpret themselves as subjects who determine the choices of their identity-making, rather than as objects passively waiting to be determined by the culture (the Symbolic) within which they live.

The role of the Lacanian Other in the construction of the subject identity has crucial implications for art education with regard to a student's construction of identity. Lacan highlights the power of desire (i.e., the signifier) to radically shift the formation of identity in others, and the self. This power comes into play especially when the desire is organized beneath the subject's desire, and motivates the subject to confront the gaze of the Other (i.e., What am I worth? What does the Other want of me?). When this desire is connected to the subject (students) as the perceived desire of the Other, it can be a powerful tool for art educators to help bring about change in the subject (students). Art

educators should recognize this process (the subject of desire) in response to the student's desire as motivation—when this form of desire is intentionally engaged in their learning, students are compelled to continue speaking from multiple subject positions and to make associations with their learning in imaginative multiple contexts.

Often, learning in an art classroom is driven by the teacher's desires, interests and values rather than the students', even though, as Brent Wilson (Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Toku, 2003) observes, understanding students' interests outside the classroom motivates students' artmaking and exposes them to means of self-presentation and identification, and such meaning-making will go ahead of the students' identity understanding. Walker et al. (Walker, 2009; Walker, Daiello, Hathaway, & Rhoades, 2006; Walker & Parsons, 2010) also argue that recognizing one's affective dispositions, unconscious fantasies, and subjectivity can also facilitate positive self-transformative shifts away from oppressive authoritarian principles. Further, desire as a pedagogical approach can liberate and empower; in particular, gender/sex identity conflicts can be mitigated by empowering imaginary gender performance through personal meaning and artmaking, so as to change fixed and unsatisfying identities.

So, how can the learning of art help students to ensure that art is not repressive and traumatic in the most authoritarian and alienating fashion, and to facilitate the building of a new subject identity that shifts the desire (signifiers) sent from the big Other (e.g., teachers, peers, parents, societal norms) to the students? How can students learn art in such a way that it does not subvert their identity and leave a void in them? Students should not be forced to fill this void by subscribing to Imaginary signifiers. This study concerns the way in which a student's self-initiated artmaking, such as *manga* drawings,

can be seen as a means to map identity-making that promotes expression of thoughts, feelings and desires through visual images. *Manga* represents an optimistic view of young people as active agents who construct meanings for themselves by thoroughly analyzing their own identity choices. In addition, *manga* research enables its fans to identify components of their own identity, and it is hoped that their desire thus framed might help them to develop their own identities. In the present case studies, participants had clearly been out of step with their desire. The signifiers of the desire of the Other brought together by *manga* fantasy allowed participants to undermine the previous identity assigned to them, and to perform and construct a new identity based on a new set of signifiers.

Appendix A: Images of *Manga* Drawing by Club Members

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Principle Investigator: Michael J. Parsons

Professor.

614.688-4483

parsons.4@osu.edu

Department of Art Education

Dear Members of *Manga* Club,

My name is Hsiao-ping Chen. I am a Ph D student in the Department of Art Education. I would like to ask you to participate in my study, titled “The Influence of Japanese *manga* (Comics) on Young adults’ Identity Formation.” I am interested in studying *manga* culture and its influence on shaping young people’s identity, attitudes, beliefs, and values.

My research will involve one-on-one interviews. The interviews will be in-depth and open-ended. I am interested in studying the popular *manga* culture and elements of identity formation in connection with how you understand Japanese *manga* (comics) and how you produce and interpret *manga* the way you read and create *manga* style drawings. The questions will be about issues related to personal, social, cultural, and aesthetic identity in connected with about *manga* characters and drawings.

Your name will not be disclosed in anyway to reveal your identity. Code names will be assigned when presenting results and discussing quotes extracted from your interview transcription. That means your identity and personal information will be confidential and anonymous. If you are willing to contribute your understanding and knowledge to the research, please sign the consent letter provided (see Appendix G).

Thank you,

Hsiao-ping Chen
Department of Art Education
The Ohio State University
chen.457@osu.edu
614.784.8926

Appendix C: The Human Subjects Review Committee Approved

Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board

Office of Responsible Research Practices
VVO Research Foundation
1960 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1063

Phone (614) 688-8457
Fax (614) 688-0566
www.orrp.osu.edu

April 27, 2006

Protocol Number: **2004-00165**
Protocol Title: **THE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE MANGA (COMICS) ON YOUNG ADULTS' IDENTITY FORMATION: 12 CASE STUDIES OF INDIVIDUAL COLLEGE STUDENTS, Michael J. Parsons, Patricia L. Sinker, Hsiiao-ping Chen, Art Education.**
Type of Review: **Continuing Review – expedited**
IRB Staff Contact: **Cheri Petley**
(614) 292-0526
Petley.6@osu.edu

Dear Dr. Parsons,

The Behavioral and Social Sciences IRB **APPROVED** the above referenced protocol **BY EXPEDITED REVIEW**. The Board was able to provide expedited approval under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) because the research presents minimal risk to subjects and qualifies under the expedited review category(s) listed below.

Date of IRB Approval: **April 26, 2006**
Date of IRB Expiration: **April 26, 2007**
Expedited Review Category: **Category #1**

If applicable, informed consent (and HIPAA research authorization) must be obtained from subjects or their legally authorized representatives and documented prior to research involvement. The IRB-approved consent form and process must be used. Changes in the research (e.g., recruitment procedures, advertisements, enrollment numbers, etc.) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented (except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects).

This approval is valid for **one year** from the date of IRB review when approval is granted or modifications are required. The approval will no longer be in effect on the date listed above as the IRB expiration date. A Continuing Review application must be approved within this interval to avoid expiration of IRB approval and cessation of all research activities. A final report must be provided to the IRB and all records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least 3 years after the research has ended.

It is the responsibility of the investigator to promptly report to the IRB any serious, unexpected and related adverse events or potential unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This approval is issued under The Ohio State University's OIRP Federalwide Assurance #00006378.

All forms and procedures can be found on the ORRP website – www.orrp.osu.edu. Please feel free to contact the IRB staff contact listed above with any questions or concerns.

Thomas Nygren, PhD, Chair
Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board

Expedited Approval
Version 0-12/05

Appendix D: Support Letter

Support Letter for Hsiao-ping Chen's Research at the *Manga* Club

To Whom It May Concern,

This is a support letter for Hsiao-ping Chen. I support her research study at the OSU *Manga* Club, titled "The Influence of Japanese *Manga* (Comics) on Young Adults' Identity Formation: 12 Case Studies of Individual College Students." She is interested in studying *manga* culture and its influence on shaping today's young people's identity, attitudes, beliefs, and values.

I believe Ms. Chen's study will contribute to *manga* activity and encourage *manga* making in understanding one's own identity. She also agrees to share with her research result in return.

I highly support Hsiao-ping Chen for your program review. If you have any further questions, please contact me by e-mail.

Sincerely,

Lisa Steward
Student President of OSU *Manga* Club
steward.42@osu.edu

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

- What do you like about *manga* compared with American comics? Is *manga* better than American comics? What purpose does *manga* serve for you?
- What is the difference between *manga* and American comics?
- What is the *manga* style like? What do characters typically look like (e.g., big eyes, small mouth)? Why are they like that, compared with the American comic style? Is it true that the big eyes are characteristic only of *shoujo* (girls') *manga*?
- Are you a *manga* artist? What is your style? What does it mean to have a *Manga* style? Can you show me some examples of your drawing? Why do you define yourself as a *manga* artist as opposed to an artist who draws American-style comics? Tell me about your own *manga* characters and stories.
- What are one or two series/stories you like the most? Why? Who are two of your favorite *manga* characters? Tell me more about why you like these characters. Why is he/she an attractive character? Can you tell me about any other *manga* characters that you like a lot? Why do you like these characters?
- Are there any *manga* characters you feel you can relate to? In other words, although you may like certain characters, are there characters that you not only like, but also can relate to? Characters who are *like* you in important ways? Is there a particular male character you relate to? A female character? A non-human character? Can you describe a specific example of a time you related to another character's feelings? Why do you relate to these characters?
- How is the girl's/boy's role depicted in *manga*? How are girls and boys portrayed? Can you show me an example?
- Why are boys in *manga* so feminine-looking, compared with the American macho Superman? What do you think of the beautiful guys portrayed in *manga*? Are they realistic or ideal? Are guys like that here? What do you think of traditional gender/sex roles?
- Do you like/read *yaoi* (depicting boy-boy love relationships)? Why do you like it? It is said that straight women like to read about boy-boy relationships; do you think this is true? What does it mean to see two beautiful guys falling in love with each other instead of choosing the heterosexual girl-boy relationship?
- Do you have religious beliefs? Can you explain a little bit about your experience with and thoughts about religion? Tell me more about the kinds of religious experiences you had growing up. Tell me more about what you think about organized religion now.
- What are your beliefs about the supernatural? Do supernatural themes occur in the stories you write? Can you give me an example?
- What do you think of the super-girl power (e.g., Sailormoon) portrayed in *manga*, as compared with America's Superman? Do you like Superman? What is a hero like in *manga*?
- What types of *manga* do you write/draw/read? What are they about? Are the stories based on your experiences, or are they strictly fiction?
- What is *cosplay*? How does *cosplay* compare with America's Star Trek phenomenon? Why do people do that? Do you *cosplay*? Why do you *cosplay*? What character(s) do you *cosplay*? What does s/he do? Do you identify yourself in the character(s)? What is the character like? What are you trying to be? Is your identity as a *manga* fan a secret identity? Do your parents know about your involvement with *manga*? What do they think of *manga*?

Appendix F: A Story About an Oriental Girl

On the first day of classes I usually introduce myself saying, “My name is Hsiao-ping Chen. I am Taiwanese.” I am used to the comments I receive from my American fellow young adults, such as:

--“Are you Chinese? What’s the difference between China and Taiwan?” Or “Where is Taiwan?”

My head is often bewildered, “Am I Chinese or what? A couple years ago I was dumbfounded when one of my fellow students, an older American woman, yelled to me after class:

--“Hey, Oriental girl! Why are you Oriental girls so skinny, tiny, and always dressed up so cute?”

I could not even reply, because I never think of myself as “Oriental.” Images that others assign to me generate self-conversations about who I am and what I am not, and help me to understand myself through a multiplicity of voices. When I become the “object” of other people’s gaze, my identity changes and shifts depending on the context. I came up with a few interpretations of what my classmate might have meant with the term, “Oriental girl,” and why she thought it applied to me. She could have referred to me as an “Oriental” to designate the geographical location of Taiwan in the Far East. Or she might have implied that I was “Oriental,” as in childlike, exotic, full of innocence, naiveté, and pleasure (Said, 1978). I wonder whether the members of *manga* fan clubs have a sense of Japanese culture as “the other” and whether their attraction has to do with their opinion of Japanese culture as “exotic.”

Until my classmate addressed me as “Hey Oriental girl,” I had never encountered this dilemma of trying to define myself through others, since Taiwanese society is so homogeneous. In Taiwan, I am not as aware of my own biases as I am when I am submerged in a diverse culture like the United States. My sense of self-identity is delineated around the social intervention of other people I meet in America. When we are submerged in a much more diverse culture, we come to know ourselves in deeper ways. We know what we are like and we know what we are not like. Does the imported Japanese *manga* culture, then, make *manga* fans more aware of their own culture and does it help them define their identity by contrast?

Appendix G: Consent Form

Please read the following document carefully, and if you agree with what it asks of you, please sign it next to the X.

Principle Investigator: Michael J. Parsons /Professor of Art Education Department.

I have read the document. I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study titled “The Influence of Japanese Manga (Comics) on Young adults’ Identity Formation: 12 Case Studies of Individual College Students “, conducted by Hsiao-ping Chen at the Department of Art Education of The Ohio State University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I authorize the use and disclosure of my interview information to the researcher for the purposes described above.

I agree to answer the questions in the interview as complete as I possibly can. I also have the right to decide not to answer certain questions that I think are not appropriate to my personal beliefs, values, religions, etc.

I understand that the researcher may have questions to clarify with me regarding my own background, knowledge, and beliefs connected with Japanese manga and I agree to answer his/her questions through the second and/ or third interviews.

I consent to the use of audiotapes and/or copies of photographs and/or prints of artwork in the context of the purpose of research. I understand how the tapes and/or photographs will be used for this study.

By signing this consent form I have not waived any of the legal rights, which I otherwise would have as a subject in a research study.

I have read this form or I have had it read to me. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Participant’s Name (please print)

Participant’s regular preferred e-mail address for the researcher to contact regarding research matters.

CONSENT SIGNATURE:

X

Participant’s Signature

Date

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