GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN SAKURABA KAZUKI'S *RED X PINK*: HEARING FEMALE AND TRANSGENDER VOICES IN BOYS-ORIENTED LIGHT NOVELS

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Sakuraba Kazuki is a former light novel writer whose literature shows awareness of issues of gender, with narratives about violence, power, and identity. This chapter provides an analysis of her light novel, *Red x Pink*, a story narrated by three protagonists who participate in a girls' clandestine wrestling show, each of them performing a different type of character: the youthful Mayu, the dominatrix Miko, and the boyish Satsuki, whose narrative arc unveils a process of self-discovery and coming out as a transgendered man. The analysis of this work, informed by Azuma Hiroki's concepts of database consumption and manga/anime-like realism, will clarify how Sakuraba expresses the gendered experiences of violence and exposes the consequences of oppression, appropriating the popular form of male-oriented media to narrate stories of oppressed young women and sexual minorities.

Keywords: gender studies, light novel, Japanese contemporary literature, database consumption theory, *otaku* subculture

1. Introduction

Japanese popular media, such as anime, manga, and video games, have been popularized all over the world since the 1980s, and are currently an important part of the entertainment industry. Japanese manga is famous for its wide variety of stories for audiences of all ages and genders.[1] In Japan, manga publishing is deeply shaped by age and gender demographics that not only affect how these works

[1] It should not be dismissed that the market (and the culture it is part of) is still predominantly conservative in terms of gender binarism.

are marketed but are also embedded in their aesthetics and narrative. *Shōnen* (少年, for boys), *shōjo* (少女, for girls), *seinen* (青年, for young adult male readers), and *ladies/josei* (レディースコミックス・女性, for young adult female readers) are some of the main categories that define the format of publication, as well as the possibilities and intentions of expression and representation of the works. The same can be said about light novels, a genre of Japanese young adult literature prominent from the 1990s that has its roots in the pop culture of anime, manga, and games. In a broad sense, light novels are books published under specific imprints that follow the same demographic categories of manga (like *shōnen, shōjo*, etc.), and that have covers and inner illustrations in a manga style. A more in-depth description can also identify several formal and narrative characteristics, such as a larger amount of dialogues, manga-like character building, and manga/anime-like and game-like realism.[2]

Sakuraba Kazuki (桜庭一樹) might not be the first name that comes to mind when talking about light novels, yet her name is constantly mentioned in many studies about this medium, especially as an author that crossed the borders of genre and established a career as a *mainstream*[3] novelist. Like several other female authors, Sakuraba started writing using a pseudonym that masked her gender to publish for young male audiences. Many female authors of Japanese pop media for male audiences (especially in *shōnen* manga and light novels) use male or gender-neutral pseudonyms to preserve their identities, and possibly to prevent gender discrimination from potential new readers. In the early 2000s, Arakawa Hiromu (荒川拡) used the same strategy when she published her worldwide acclaimed *shōnen* manga series *Fullmetal Alchemist* (鋼の錬金術師 *Hagane no* renkinjutsushi, 2001–2010).[4] More recently, Gotouge Koyoharu (吾峠呼世晴), author of the bestselling manga series *Demon Slayer* (鬼滅の刃 *Kimetsu no yaiba*, 2016–2020), has been having their gender identity speculated. Despite their attempts to keep their identity secret and their preference for the use of gender-neutral language, rumors that the author is a woman sparked online.

This issue is not unique to Japanese society. An emblematic example in recent western literature is J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, who has also opted for an acronym that hides her gender for similar reasons. However, when analyzing this issue in Sakuraba's works we must take into consideration the

[2] This definition of light novel summarizes the discussions in Shinjō (2006) and Azuma (2007). The concepts of manga/anime-like and game-like realism will be explained below.

[3] In this chapter *mainstream* (in italics) refers to *ippanshōsetsu* (一般小説), a term used to label the literary works marketed for general audiences, as opposed to children and light literature.

[4] The titles of the works are cited in this chapter in English when an official translation is provided. In the cases of works with no official English title, a romanization of the original title is used.

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specificities of Japanese media and its gender demographics. Meanwhile, in her earlier works, Sakuraba was introduced as "gender: unknown," but by the time of publication of *Red × Pink* (赤 × ピンク *Aka × Pinku*), her female identity had already been disclosed in her bio on the interior flap of the book. Notice that her gender was only disclosed inside the book, which can be checked in most bookstores in Japan, but still is not as obvious as having a female name clearly stated on the cover of a novel targeted at a young male audience.

In this chapter, I will analyze the *shōnen* light novel *Red × Pink*, one of Sakuraba's most peculiar early works, to observe how she appropriates the tools of male-oriented media to narrate gender-informed stories of characters dealing with oppression, domestic violence, objectification, repression, and gender dysphoria. Informed by Azuma Hiroki's (東浩紀) concepts of "database consumption" and manga/anime-like "realism" that explain the forms of creation and consumption of the *otaku* subculture, this close reading will unveil how Sakuraba lures the reader with familiar narrative forms and structures on one layer, but ultimately questions those structures, and expresses the voices of oppressed females and sexual minorities.

2. "Beautiful Fighting Girls" and LGBT in Japanese popular media

Sakuraba's narratives of females and gender non-conforming characters are remarkable for the way she appropriates the discourse of male-oriented media to highlight issues of these minorities, however, rather than being incidental, Sakuraba's work builds on previous forms of representations of these identities in Japanese popular media. Regarding the representation of strong female characters, in *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, Saitō (2011, 83–132) recollects the genealogy of female warriors in Japanese popular media since the rise of television animation in the 1960s, in the works of Ishinomori Shōtarō (石ノ森章太郎), Tezuka Osamu (手塚治), and their contemporaries. His analysis continues through the 1980s and 1990s, highlighting the heroines in Miyazaki Hayao's (宮崎駿) movies and the success of *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* (美少女戦士セーラームーン *Bishōjo senshi sērā mūn*, 1991–1997) and the female pilots in the Neon Genesis *Evangelion* series (新世紀エヴァンゲリオン, *Shinseiki evangerion*, 1995–1996). In his introduction, Saitō (2011, 7) identifies a crisis of representation in those female characters:

> Japan's beautiful fighting girls were originally icons with which their intended audience of young teenage girls could identify. Now, however, a group of consumers has emerged that far exceeds that one in scale – the otaku. The majority of male otaku, at least, see these girls as objects of sexuality.

Saitō's psychoanalytical approach focuses on the *otaku* (オタク), a niche of avid consumers of Japanese popular culture, who do not stand for the majority, but around whom the media and the industry have been molded. Ultimately, those heroines can be at the same time ideological role models for female audiences and the object of desire for male consumers. Nevertheless, it is necessary to question the representativity of these ideological role models for the life experiences of real women. By using the form of *shōnen* light novels, Sakuraba's work builds on the formulaic models of female characters from the *otaku* subculture to narrate the social struggles of girls and women.

In terms of representation of queer identities, the introduction to *Queer Voices from Japan* (McLelland, Suganuma, and Welker 2007, 1–29) provides an overview of the accounts of homosexuality and other forms of non-conformity in modern Japan. First, it alludes to traditional forms of same-sex intimacy mainly between males and indicates that they were reevaluated in the Meiji period (1868–1912) with the introduction of the sexual discourse from the West that established norms of sexual conduct and perversion. Next, it comments on the repressed-yet-blooming male and female homosexuality during the sex segregation of the war period, and the growth of the discourse of experimentation of sex as a form of pleasure in the popular culture of the post-war. Then, it gives an account of the rise of gay bars during the 1950s, while female homosexuals were poorly represented and rather objectified in the "perverse press" (magazines that dealt with matters of sexual desire and exploration). Last, it discloses the gradual reduction of male homosexual content in those magazines until the emergence of the so-called "homo magazines"[5] in the 1970s, and the political engagements of LGBT activism in the same decade. The summary highlights the importance of popular media, such as magazines, in the development of queer identities and the recognition of non-conforming sexual practices and gender identities.

Moreover, same-sex intimacy both male and female has a long history in the Japanese popular culture of manga, anime, and young adult literature. According to Kotani (quoted in Saitō 2007, 222–224), stories about male homosexual intimacy flourished among the female manga artists of the early 1970s, known as the Year 24 Group (24年組 *Nijūyonen Gumi*), with works such as Hagio Moto's (萩尾望都) *Tōma no shinzō* (トーマの心臓, 1974–1975), Takemiya Keiko's (竹宮恵子) *Kaze to ki no uta* (風と木の詩, 1976–1984), and Kurimoto Kaoru's (栗本薫) *Mayonaka no tenshi* (真夜中の天使, 1979). Over the next few years, with the publication of magazines dedicated to this kind of story and its popularity in fanfiction, it developed into

[5] The term "homo magazines" is a direct citation of McLelland, Suganuma, and Walker's (2007) text.

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a genre, currently known as "Boys' Love," or "BL"[6] (Saitō 2007, 222). Besides male homosexuality, intimacy between girls has also been portrayed in works of young popular culture in modern Japan. According to Kume (2013, 178–179), to avoid depicting romantic relationships between a boy/man and a girl/woman directly, novels published in shōjo magazines from the end of the Meiji period presented stories of friendship between girls, known as *yuai monogatari* (友愛物語) or "stories of sorority." These kinds of stories have also permeated the popular culture of manga and anime, and with the emergence of the light novel in the 1990s, *shōjo* novels were incorporated by the light novel market. While such stories of sorority might include or suggest a romantic relationship between girls, lesbian relationships have also appeared in *shōjo* novels from the Meiji and Taisho (1912–1926) periods. In some of them, the same-sex relationship was only a substitute for heterosexual love, while others asserted homosexual affection, though it was mainly portrayed either as something temporary or as unrealistic (Kume 2013, 230–255). In Japanese young adult popular media of the later decades, lesbian relationships have been depicted for both female and male audiences, either as romantic or as erotic.

Besides the development of subgenres focused on homosexual intimacy, queer and gender non-conforming identities have also been portrayed in Japanese media, including popular works, such as the manga and anime series *Yu Yu Hakusho* (幽遊白書, 1990–1994), *One Piece* (ワンピース, 1997–present), and *Naruto* (ナルト, 1999–2014) for boys, and *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon, Card Captor Sakura* (カードキャプターさくら, 1996–2000), and *Paradise Kiss* (パラダイス・キス, 1999–2003) for girls. Still, the potentiality and appropriateness of some of these characters as representations of queer identities may be questionable. The merit of Sakuraba's works is that they not only include an LGBT character or a strong female arbitrarily, but their narratives are deeply shaped by their gendered life experiences. To better understand how Sakuraba expresses gender in her works, this analysis will employ Azuma Hiroki's theory on light novels and mainly his database consumption theory, which is an attempt to define the characteristics of Japanese postmodernism in the *otaku* subculture.

3. Azuma Hiroki's theory on light novels

In *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal* (2009, originally published in Japanese in 2001), Azuma builds upon Otsuka Eiji's concepts of narrative consumption (物語消費論 *monogatari shōhiron*) and manga/anime-like realism to theorize about

[6] Through the years, the genre was also referred to as *Shōnen-ai, Tanbi, June*, and *Yaoi*. Kotani's text refers to it mainly as *Yaoi*, however, in this article the term "BL" was preferred because it is the most commonly used in Japan currently.

the mode of production and consumption of the *otaku* subculture of the 1990s through a system of intertextual elements, which he calls "Database Consumption." In his later work *Gēmuteki riarizumu no tanjō* (ゲーム的リアリズムの誕生, *The Birth of Game-like Realism*, 2007), Azuma complements the theory with the concept of game-like realism, to explain the writing style of light novels. Azuma's theory is based on the dichotomy between light novels and *pure literature* (純文学 *junbungaku*), in which the latter is created and interpreted through the lens of *naturalistic*[7] realism, and the former through manga/anime-like and game-like realism. Azuma does not deny the possibility of a "*naturalistic* interpretation of light novels," as being a literary form with the potential to express a "New Reality" as it is perceived by young people who are already deeply influenced by manga and anime (Azuma 2007, 81). However, he proposes a different mode of interpretation of light novels for their roots in the *otaku* subculture, which exposes the crisis of mimesis in it. For Azuma (2007, 95–96), light novels are a part of a highly intertextual media subculture that is not intended to represent the real world from a *naturalistic* perspective (which he calls "transparent"), neither is entirely submerged in a romantic form of fantasy (which he calls "opaque"). They are somewhere in-between, intertwining expressions of reality and non-reality through a metanarrative system of shared signs (which he calls "translucid"). Put simply, Azuma's theory highlights that the *otaku* subculture is informed by an intertextual system of signs from other manga, anime, games, and novels, rather than by the observation of reality. It also points out that those signs not only provide necessary context when interpreting those works, but they are often the main point for which they are consumed.

Azuma (2007, 82) mentions Sakuraba as a writer whose early works were more related to manga/anime-like realism, but whose later works started becoming closer to *pure literature* as they express a reflection about contemporary society, thus his theory would not be applicable for the interpretation of these works. In his commentary, Azuma does not specify which of Sakuraba's works fall on each side. Nevertheless, as this chapter will demonstrate, *Red × Pink* has a double-layered structure that can be interpreted almost like a commentary on these two kinds of literary potentials of the light novels. On one layer, we have characters that reflect contemporary social issues of gender oppression. On the other, we have the *personas* performed by those characters, which are created following the database model. The possibility of engaging with each of these layers independently is what makes Sakuraba's work transcend the borders of its genre. But

[7] The term *naturalistic* will be written in italics when referring to the concept described in Azuma Hiroki's theory.

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it is in the observation of the interrelation between both layers that Sakuraba's greatest literary potential resides.

A *naturalistic* interpretation not informed by manga/anime-like realism would focus only on the issues of abuse, domestic violence, gender dysphoria, sex work, or the objectification of the female bodies in the text. On the other hand, reading it purely through manga/anime-like realism theory would unveil the signs embodied by each character, and enable a semiotic analysis contrasting the characters and their personas. However, a reading informed by both interpretations can discuss how the perspective of manga/anime-like realism itself is related to the social issues that the story represents.

4. An overview of Sakuraba's oeuvre

Sakuraba started her career writing novel adaptations and scripts for videogames under the pen name of Yamada Sakuramaru (山田桜丸), in the late 1990s. She debuted under the new pen name of Sakuraba Kazuki in 1999, when she received an honorable mention in the First Famitsu Entertainment Literature Prize for her manuscript *Yozora ni, manten no hoshi* (夜空に、満点の星), later published by Famitsū Bunko (ファミ通文庫) under the title of *AD2015 Kakuri Toshi – Loneliness Guardian* (AD2015隔離都市 ロンリネス・ガーディアン). Sakuraba had her works published by different *shōnen* light novel imprints, such as Ex Novels (EXノベルズ), Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko (角川スニーカー文庫), Famitsū Bunko, and Fujimi Mystery Bunko (富士見ミステリー文庫). She reached a high popularity status with her light novel *Gosick*, published in December 2003, which became a long series of 17 volumes and various adaptations to different media. From 2005 to 2006, she went through a period of transition from light novels to *mainstream* novels, when she published under so-called *borders* (ボーダーズ) imprints.[8] After that, Sakuraba's works were mainly published under *mainstream* imprints, with few exceptions.[9] *Red × Pink*, the work analyzed in this chapter, was originally published by Famitsū Bunko as a light novel.

[8] Genre literature imprints that are on the boundaries of the light novel and the *mainstream* novel markets. This includes Tokyo Sogensha's *Mystery Frontier* imprint and Hayakawa's *Bunko JA*, where some of her works were published. With the consolidation of the light novel industry, in the late 1990s and 2000s, in the 2010s there was an establishment of a "light literature" (ライト文芸 *raito bungei*), as a category in-between light novels and *mainstream* novels. The light literature is similar to light novel in its form and transmedia strategies, but it aims at an older and wider demographic.

[9] The volumes of the *Gosick* series that had already been published as *shōnen light novels* were re-published by a *shōjo* imprint in 2011, with the broadcast of the anime adaptation on TV. *Gosick* was also republished by a *mainstream* imprint from 2009, and had new volumes published exclusively by the same imprint in 2011.

Since her early works, Sakuraba's writing has paid attention to gendered experiences of violence. A recurring theme in her literature is domestic violence, with stories of girls who are forcefully confined (*Gosick* series, 2003–2016); are victims of physical and psychological abuse (推定少女 *Suitei Shōjo*, 2004; 砂糖菓子の弾丸は撃ち抜けない: *A Lollipop or a Bullet, Satōgashi no dangan wa uchinukenai: A Lollypop or a Bullet*, 2004; 少女には向かない職業, *An Unsuitable Job for a Girl*, 2005); or experience sexual abuse from their fathers or other male relatives (私の男, *My Man*, 2007). Her stories often present characters negotiating their identities and conflicts within the gender politics of the portrayed era, such as Kujo's conflict with his father's military masculinity (*Gosick*, 2003); the constricted life of Namida as a homosexual boy (赤朽葉家の伝説, *The Legend of the Akakuchibas*, 2006); Satsuki's narrative of coming out as a transgendered man (*Red* × *Pink*, 2003); and Nibiiro's tragedy as a closeted transgender woman having to take the role of the male head of the clan (伏 贋作・里見八犬伝 *Fuse: Gansaku Satomi Hakkenden*, 2010).

This consciousness about gendered experiences in Sakuraba's literature enabled her *shōnen* light novels to transcend the boundaries of demography and attract a wide variety of readers. This may have also been pivotal for her transition to the *mainstream* novel industry. Not only were her new works serialized and published aiming at an older audience, but also her light novels were republished under Kadokawa's *mainstream* imprint. However, this does not mean that Sakuraba's works were incorrectly marketed. Her light novels present characteristics of *shōnen* novels. But their peculiarity is that instead of reaffirming values of androcentric heteronormativity, they bring light to disruptions of gender norms using the discourse of light novels.

5. *Red x Pink*: *Kyara x character*

Red × *Pink* was originally published as a *shōnen* light novel by Famitsū Bunko in 2003 with illustrations by Takahashi Shin (高橋伸),[10] and later republished as a *mainstream* novel with no illustrations by Kadokawa Bunko (角川文庫) in 2008. The story was also adapted into a live-action film directed by Sakamoto Kōichi (坂本浩一)[11] in 2014, also known by its English title *Girl's Blood*. The novel is divided into three parts, each of them focused on one of the protagonists. Mayu, Miko, and Satsuki respectively succeed each other in narrating their stories that take place at the Girl's Blood, a girls' underground wrestling show situated in an abandoned

[10] Takahashi Shin's manga *Saikano* is often cited in studies about Japanese pop culture from the early 2000s.

[11] Sakamoto Kōichi is famous for his work in *tokusatsu* and *super sentai* franchises, such as the American production *Mighty Morphin Power Ranger*, and Japanese TV shows and movies of *Kamen Rider* (仮面ライダー) and *Ultraman* (ウルトラマン).

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school in Roppongi. Each one of the protagonists performs as a different character at the wrestling show which contrasts with their real identities. The novel alternates between showing the fight performances that happen in the octagon and narrating the personal dramas of the protagonists backstage.

We are first introduced to the world of the Girl's Blood by Mayu, a 21-years-old woman who performs as a 14-years-old girl at the octagon. Mayu starts the story with a young adult perspective, with some erotic and sensual descriptions of female bodies, but slowly moves the focus of her narration to the fighters' personal lives. In her narrative, she reveals her trauma caused by domestic abuse in her childhood which resulted in her childish desire for attention. The second part narrated by Miko focuses on the duality between her role as a dominatrix at Girl's Blood and in the sadomasochist club where she works, and her lack of desire in her personal life. Finally, the last chapter focuses on the development of a relationship between Satsuki and Chinatsu, and the resolution of Satsuki's identity conflict, with their[12] coming out as a transgendered man. The three stories are consecutive and interrelated, though each chapter is centered on the narrative arc of one of the characters.

If read out of context in the 2020s, *Red × Pink* might not seem particularly disruptive, it may even be regarded as objectifying and conservative in the way it handles gender identity and sexuality issues. However, considering that it is a story originally published in February 2003, targeted to a young male audience, it is possible to find here the seeds of what became Sakuraba's disruptive writing in the upcoming years. Superficially it seems like an orthodox *shōnen* light novel in conformity with Azuma's (2007) development of the concept of manga/anime-like realism, with female characters who are created following the database model, described on a sensual level to stimulate the imagination of the male readers, as suggested by Saitō (2011). Nevertheless, this chapter proposes to interpret the novel on a metanarrative level, comparing the performances of the protagonists as *personas* on the octagon for the voyeuristic audience of the Girl's Blood, with their performances as characters of the light novel for the voyeuristic reader. In other words, the male gaze, which is a common feature of this genre, can be recognized here within a subtle ironic subtext. Furthermore, this chapter emphasizes that in all the three narrative arcs there is a common theme of self-discovery, in which

12 In the novel, Satsuki is mainly referred to as feminine, though due to characteristics of Japanese language, such as the omission of pronouns, gender-neutral language is also frequently applied. In this paper, the gender-neutral pronoun "they" is used when referring to Satsuki in order not to overlook the gender dysphoria issue which is essential for the present analysis. However, feminine pronouns were used in direct citations to respect the original text in which the narrators refer to Satsuki as a woman.

the protagonists change from the position of serving and satisfying the others' desires into taking agency over their own.

In the first chapter, "File. 1 The Corpse of Mayu 14-years-old," the protagonist is introduced on the chapter's cover page as

> まゆ十四歳。
> 泣き虫。孤独好き。好物はチョコバナナパフェ。
> 指名料3000円。
>
> Mayu 14-years-old.
> Cry baby. Loner. Likes Chocolate Banana Parfait.
> Nomination Fee 3000 yen.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 3)[13]

This, however, is not the description of the novel's character Mayu, but her wrestler persona. These two identities are marked in Japanese, using different writing systems. The wrestler persona is referred to throughout the whole chapter using *hiragana* (i.e., まゆ), instead of her real name written in Chinese characters (i.e., 真由). The name written in Chinese characters appears in determining moments of the story, such as when she receives a call from her father, and in the climax scene when she recovers her identity and introduces herself to her love interest. In other words, it is used to express her real identity, which she suppressed under the performance of the wrestler persona.

In contrast with this first description of Mayu's persona, on the next page, there is an epigraph with Mayu's self-image, which says,

> わたしは生命力が弱い。
> 生きることそのものに偏差値をつけたら
> 42ぐらいなんじゃないかと思うんだ。
>
> My vitality is weak.
> If we set a deviation score for living
> I think that mine would be around 42.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 4)

Followed by these words, the chapter begins in the middle of a fight in which Mayu is being beaten up and becoming desperate. Covered in mud, she holds her scream in while she is defeated by "another her" and hears the cheering audience screaming her name. This first scene looks like a typical hero/heroine introduction, in which the heroine is shown as weak to get the sympathy of the readers who will want to watch her growth and cheer for her with the audience. The novel, on the

[13] All the quotes from the book are direct translations of the original text made by the author of this chapter.

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other hand, defies the expectations that it sets, as Mayu's narrative is not one of becoming a victorious fighter, but of finding her identity and escaping this place of violence. In addition, it is remarkable that in Mayu's view, her opponent looks like "another her." This expression of identification not only reflects the feeling of sorority between the fighters, but also foreshadows that the heroine's conflict is not with "the other," but with herself.

As the fight ends, we are introduced to the system of nomination of the Girl's Blood, in which the fighters are chosen by clients who pay a determined nomination fee to have them handcuffed near their seats for some time. This service has implications on the violence of the gendered power dynamics portrayed, but this analysis will focus on the metafictional nature of the Girl's Blood, rather than on its sociological aspect.

When she is introducing the world of Girl's Blood, Mayu already exposes the fictionality of the wrestling show, as follows:

> これは物語。
> ここで行われているのは一つのイベント。
> 『ガールズブラッド』と銘打って毎晩開催される、地下キャットファイトクラブ
> の悪趣味な物語だ。
>
> This is a story.
> What is happening here is an event.
> It is a distasteful story of a clandestine catfight club called 'Girl's Blood'
> that takes place every night.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 11)

This passage can refer to the novel itself, but it also implicates the fictional nature of the show. Later, Mayu makes it even more clear:

> 今夜もまた、ショーが始まる。
> わたしたち女の子の日常を切り裂く、フィクションの時間が始まろうとしてる。
>
> Tonight again, it's showtime.
> We will cut off from our daily lives as girls and start the fiction time.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 61)

The same kind of expression appears in Miko's narration in chapter two: "Tonight too, it's showtime" (今夜も、ショーが始まる) (Sakuraba 2003, 99). The novel is developed as a double-layered fiction in which characters perform as other characters in an embedded narrative, and the narration makes a clear distinction between the two levels of performance. For example, though Mayu has "14-years-old" as part of her persona's title, it is revealed in the first few pages of the chapter that she is 21. Similarly, all the characters who take part in the Girl's Blood are also assigned a persona. Miko is "The Queen," Satsuki is "The Karate Girl." The

contradiction of Miko's persona is ironically exposed in the title of her chapter "Miko, Everyone's Toy." Her narrative reveals that despite her performances as an erotic sadistic queen, in her personal life Miko has no agency over her desires and is dominated by the patriarchal social system. Satsuki's contradiction is only disclosed in the climax of the last chapter when Satsuki's gender dysphoria is pointed out by Chinatsu, a new member of Girl's Blood with whom they develop a romantic relationship. In other words, Mayu is not 14 years old, Miko is not a dominant woman, and Satsuki is not a girl. They are all playing such roles within a fictional framework.

The way that those personas are created and established in the narrative can be interpreted as a comment on the database consumption model theorized by Azuma (2001). There is a short scene in Chapter 2, where the process of creation of these personas is shown. In that scene, after Mayu left the Girl's Blood (and disappeared from the narrative itself) and Chinatsu was introduced as a new member, the executive head of the Girl's Blood creates the persona that she will have to perform at the show:

> 「衣装はチャイナがいいな。君、黒髪がきれいだし」
>
> 「……へっ?」
>
> 「あと、キャラはね、しゃべるとき『なんとかアルよ』って言ってね。上海娘だから。名前どうしよ、リリーちゃんとかどうかな。適当すぎる?ま、いっか。適当に生きてないと早死にするもんな—。よし決定。」
>
> "Your outfit should be a Chinese dress [cheongam]. After all, you have beautiful black hair."
>
> "Uh...?"
>
> "About your kyara [persona], you should say, 'Something aruyo'[14] when you speak. Because she is a Shanghai girl. Her name would be... Lilly-chan. Is it too careless? Nah, it's enough. If we don't live carelessly, we might die early. Well, that's it."
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 157–158)

Chinatsu is assigned a stereotype that defines how she should act, dress, and talk, which is not related to her real identity, ethnicity, or personality, but rather is attached to her based on bodily signs such as her hair. In this scene, the persona is referred to as *kyara*, a shortened version of the loanword *kyarakutā* (キャラクター, "character"). Kuresawa (2010, 21) defines *kyara* as a step before *kyarakutā*. While

[14] Kinsui and Yamakido (2015, 32) mention *aruyo* as a type of restricted role language used in fiction, which is associated with Chinese characters though it does not (necessarily) correspond with the way real Chinese people speak Japanese.

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the latter is a fully realized character with a sense of personality, the other is a set of characteristics that projects certain feelings or expectations. Similarly, Shinjō (2006, 136) explains *kyara* as a combination of visual characteristics that indicate a determined mode of action. These concepts of *kyara* resonate with Azuma's (2001) database consumption theory, which asserts that characters within the *otaku* subculture are simulacra created from an intertextual database of characteristics and are consumed for the data, rather than the narratives.

This scene in the novel exemplifies the mode of creation of a *kyara* and potentializes the metanarrative interpretation of the novel. By bringing to light the superficiality of the process of creation of those fictional female characters, Sakuraba highlights the problems of representation in them. In other words, just as the personas in the story are female characters created according to the spectators' desires, the female *kyara* in the otaku subculture represents ideal girls and women from the perspective of male consumers, not real girls and women. Therefore, Sakuraba's text appropriates the form of *kyara*, to emphasize the crisis of representation in it.

In *Red* × *Pink*, it is possible to interpret the performance of a persona both as a form of escapism from the protagonists' troubled experiences and as a tool of repression that domesticates their identity issues. As the story discloses, all the main characters who take part in the Girl's Blood have some personal issues related to their gendered experiences, that they repress by performing their personas on stage. For Mayu, the issue she is repressing is her childhood trauma caused by the abusive treatment she received from her mother. Near the climax of her chapter, Mayu comments on some TV news about mothers who committed violent crimes to their children:

> だけどわたしはべつにビックリしない。そういう人を一人、知っているから。
>
> わたしは、物心ついてからも、ずいぶん長い間、赤ちゃん用の木のフェンスみたいなの、あれに入れられていた。よくわからないけど、一種の虐待だと思う。幼稚園に行くようになっても、小学校に上がっても、ずっと、家に帰った途端、それに放り込まれた。体は大きくなってくるから、それはとても狭くて、怖かった。
>
> 知恵もつくし、力もつくから、自分で出ようと思えば出られたはずだと思う。だけど、わたしは出られなかった。その中にいると、手にも足にも力が入らなくて、ただぼんやりとうずくまっていた。
>
> 中学校に入学する頃、弟が生まれた。その途端に、そのよくわからない虐待は終わった。フェンスはかわいらしい弟のために正しい使用目的で使われるようになり、二度とわたしを閉じこめはしなかった。
>
> I am not surprised at all, because I know a person like that.
>
> From as far back as I can remember, for a very long time I have been kept in one of those wooden fences for babies. I don't really understand

> it, but I think it is a kind of abuse. Even when I started going to kindergarten and after I went to elementary school, as soon as I got back home, I would be shut inside that. As my body was growing, it started becoming tighter and scarier.
>
> Since I was smart and strong enough, I think I probably would have been able to leave it if I tried to. But I couldn't. When I was inside it my hands and legs were powerless, and I could only crouch on the floor indifferently.
>
> When I was in middle school my younger brother was born. And suddenly, this incomprehensible abuse ended. The fence started being used properly for my cute little brother, and I've never been confined since.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 66–67)

From this point on, Mayu's narrative becomes very self-aware of these traumas. During a fight, she draws a parallel between the fences of the octagon, a *cage* in which she is being submitted to violence in front of a crowd of men that will not come to help her, and the *cage* in which she was put in her childhood, from which she just wished to be saved by her father. As soon as she realizes that she has been always waiting for this paternal figure to free her from her *cage*, Mayu looks at the audience for help. At this moment, she is rescued by Yasuda, a man she had met earlier, who had playfully proposed to her backstage. She decided to run away with him, freeing herself from the *cage* and the audience's male gaze.

By the end of her chapter, Mayu abandons the Girl's Blood and disappears from the narrative. She appears again in the second chapter, where some of the events are retold from Miko's perspective, but overall her life after leaving the Girl's Blood remains unknown. This reinforces the metanarrative reading of the text, which associates the spectators of the Girl's Blood with the readers of the novel. When Mayu decides to abandon her persona and escapes from the male gaze of the audience of the wrestling show, the character also evades from the sight of the readers.

While a stricter feminist analysis of this text could criticize the male intervention in the process of emancipation of the female protagonist, it is also undeniable that this moment represents Mayu's retrieval of her agency, as her deepest desire is fulfilled by Yasuda. In this scene, Mayu is not the object of Yasuda's narrative and desire, but the subject of her own. This understating can be confirmed by Miko's narration of the scene, in which she laments: "My Mayu has left this cage by her own will" (わたしのまゆが、この檻から、自分の意志で出ていった) (Sakuraba 2003, 114).

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6. Agency, identity, and a scream of freedom

In "File. 2 Miko, Everyone's Toy," the narrative shifts to Miko. In the first chapter, Miko was described by Mayu as a powerful woman who is always in control and uses it to provide the best entertainment to the audience. In Miko's narrative, this is disclosed as her identity conflict. Despite performing the persona of a dominant woman, Miko does not act on her own desires. In fact, she does not even know what she desires. She is always performing to satisfy the male clients and fans. Therefore, it can be said that during Chapter 2, Miko's identity and her performative persona occupy contradictory positions in power dynamics. While her persona is the queen and therefore in possession of absolute power, the real Miko is "everyone's toy," in other words, submissive to others' desires.

Miko is introduced as follows:

> ミーコ女王様。
> 19歳。天性のサド娘。趣味、彫金。
> 指名料2000円。
>
> Queen Miko.
> 19-years-old. A natural-born sadistic girl. Hobby: toreutics.
> Nomination Fee 2000 yen.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 79)

Different from Mayu's epigraph, Miko's epigraph is not a clear self-description. At first glance, it looks like a poem:

> わたしは山茶花の赤ピンクの花に埋もれた
> 月明かりが白かった。雪が降ってた
>
> I was buried under the reddish-pink Sasanqua Camellia
> The moonlight was white. Snow was falling
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 80)

There is a clear contrast between the image of power and sexuality of Miko's persona defined on the chapter's cover page, and her self-image, which is poetic and static. It does not go unnoticed that though the poem is a contemplative description of this beautiful scenery, the lyrical subject is "buried," which indicates Miko's condition of oppression that is covered by a (performative) delightful appearance. Later in the chapter, it is revealed that the epigraph refers to the episode in which Miko was caught having intercourse with her stepfather and was thrown from the second floor's window by her mother. After the fall she remained there on the floor, covered by Sasanqua Camellia flowers on a snowy day, watching her mother's furious face on the window. This episode resulted in her expulsion from home and in her involvement with sex work, which will be explained later in this analysis.

Through the chapter, the conflict between Miko's persona and her identity is further developed by the contrast between the treatment that she receives from her clients, and her self-image. The following dialogue between Miko and one of her clients is one of the several examples of the superior status of Miko's persona:

> 「客なんだ、って言ったって、わたしの裸なんて見たことなかったでしょ」
>
> 「当たり前だ。奴隷が女王様の裸見たがってどうする。それじゃ普通だ」
>
> "Although you said you are my client, you'd never seen me naked, had you?"
>
> "Obviously not. What would happen if a slave wanted to see the queen naked? It's just normal [that I haven't]"
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 122)

This dialogue is symbolic of Miko's identity paradox. Although she is serving the man's fantasy, in their roleplay he is the slave, and she is the queen. This contradiction is even further reinforced by her self-description:

> わたしは、真性のM男くんにはそれなりにハードな夢を、興味本位で覗きにくる人には、望んだ通りの適度に色っぽくて適度に刺激的な解説を、与えるようになった。
>
> わたしはなんにでもなれる。
>
> でも……。
>
> きっと……。
>
> こんなふうに生きていると、わたしの人生はわたしのてからすり抜けていく。
>
> いつか自分の名前も、歳も、なにを欲しているのかまるでわからなくなって、廃人みたいになって、ドブにでも捨てられてしまいそうな気がする。
>
> 消費されて、捨てられる。
>
> おもちゃの宿命。
>
> I became able to realize the intense dreams of a genuine masochist man and to provide an interpretation that is erotic and stimulating enough for those who come to take a look just out of curiosity.
>
> I can become anything.
>
> But...
>
> Surely...
>
> If I continue to live like this, my life will slip through my hands.
>
> I feel that one day I will not know my name, my age, or what I want. I'll become like a cripple and I'll be thrown away in the gutter.

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> I'll be consumed and thrown away.
>
> That's the fate of a toy.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 109)

This passage is the conclusion of Miko's narrative about how she ended up working in a sadomasochist club and it reveals her fear of losing her identity. Her story started when she was rejected by her first love in elementary school, who said that she did not *need* him because she could live well on her own. From this rejection, Miko became self-conscious about society's expectations of her. To be loved she became a model student in junior high, but she was restrained by a teacher from occupying the top position just because she was a girl. A few years later, she moved to a new school after her parents got divorced and completely changed her behavior. She stopped worrying about society's expectations and started pursuing her desires. During this period, she started being seen as a problematic student and ran away with her young female teacher. Soon, they were found, but at this point, Miko understood that she had already fulfilled the needs of her teacher, who could now go back to her life with her fiancé. When she returned home, Miko also got involved with her stepfather's fantasies, which resulted in her being cast away from home and engaging in sex work.

Miko's background story takes about four pages in the middle of her ninety-page-long chapter, but it voices the main conflicts that Miko has been through during her early life because of her gender. She was rejected because she was perceived as a self-sufficient girl, ostracised by her teacher, pressured to conform to society's expectations, and finally decided to seek approval by fulfilling others' fantasies, regardless of her own desires. However, even though this passage denounces gender inequality and Miko's imposed lack of agency, Sakuraba doesn't relegate Miko to the position of the helpless victim of the situation. She voices her struggles which reflect the experiences of many young girls, but she also empowers her to overcome them through her narrative of self-realization.

Another layer of the conscious performativity of Miko's character is noticeable in her description of her job at the sadomasochist club:

> ミーコを見るだけでも価値がある、と、得意先の接待でこの店を使う常連さんも最近は多い。もちろんそういうお客さんは雰囲気を楽しむだけで、本当に痛いこと、熱いこと、きつい言葉なんてものは求めていないから、わたしはうまく、それっぽい雰囲気だけ楽しんでもらって、満足して帰ってもらう。
>
> 鞭を片手にブンブン振り回すけれど、かたわらの椅子や壁を叩いて派手な音を出すだけで、お客さんは叩かない。ポーズを変えて目を楽しませるけれど、怖がっているようなら触らない。インテリのお客さんが、後で飲み屋でウンチクを垂れやすいように、わかりやすいSM講義をしてあげて、最後には覚えが早いですねって誉めてあげる。

> Recently many regular customers come to this place only to be entertained. Customers who think that there is value just in watching Miko.[15] Of course, those clients only enjoy that atmosphere, and they don't really seek pain, warmth, or harsh words. That's why I just give them the kind of atmosphere that they want to enjoy and get them to go home satisfied.
>
> I flick the whip with one hand, but I just hit a chair or the wall nearby making a loud noise, I don't hit the customers. I change my pose so that they can enjoy watching me, but if they look scared, I don't touch them. For the intellectual customers to be able to spill their knowledge later in the bar, I give an easy lecture about SM, and in the end, I praise their quick learning.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 83–84)

As shown in the explanation above, not only does Miko enact the role of dominatrix, but this very performance is not the conventional sexual practice of dominance and infliction of pain. It is just an image of it. Miko's narration reiterates that what her clients look for is not the real experience, but the feeling of it. This too can be interpreted as a metanarrative commentary about the *otaku* subculture and the manga/anime-like realism, whose characters (*kyara*) are produced and consumed as signs, projections of the audiences' expectations and desires, rather than a product of *naturalistic* observation of the real world.

This description is followed by Miko's reflection about her part in Girl's Blood. She says that recently she has become more interested in the practice of martial arts and that it made her more aware of her own body. This reflection foreshadows the climax of Miko's narrative arc, in which she finds her real passion for fighting. At the end of her chapter, Miko's attitude changes from playing a role for entertaining her clients, to enjoying the bodily experience of wrestling. This process of acquisition of her agency is only possible because she observes the paradox between her persona and her identity.

One of the turning points in Miko's narrative is the scene in which she is inquired by Satsuki about her desires. Satsuki, the last of the three protagonists/narrators of the novel, is struggling with issues of sexuality and gender identity, and when confronted by Satsuki's questioning Miko realizes her own issues. The following dialogue is a part of Satsuki's inquiry:

> 「ミーコは、誰が好きなの」
>
> 「好きって?」

[15] Notice that Miko refers to herself in the third person here. Although this use of the third person is not uncommon in Japanese language, it can indicate that Miko is distinguishing her performative persona from her identity.

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「誰を自分のものにしたいんだよ。そのへんな客か?まゆか?お前の大音量の一代記、聞いたあとも、思ったんだよ。耳鳴りに苦しみながら。その女の先生か?義理の父親か?お前の話聞いても、誰がミーコを求めたか、しかわかんねーよ。ミーコは誰が好きで、そいつとどうなりたかったのか。いまは……その客とどうなりたいんだ?まゆとは?おまえ、まゆを取り戻したいのか?」

「……わかんない」

皐月がガバッと起きあがった。わたしの顔に手を伸ばしてきてその細い指には似合わないほど強い力で、わたしの両頬を押さえ込み、顔と髪を前後にガタガタと揺らした。

「だいたいさ、ミーコは、異性愛者なのか?同性愛者なのか?両刀か?SMなのか?ノーマルなのか?」

"Miko, who do you like?"

"Who do I like...?"

"Who do you want to make your own? Is it that weird customer? Is it Mayu? Even after hearing your excruciating blabbering about your life I have been wondering. Is it that female teacher of yours? Or your stepfather? Hearing your story, I could only know who was longing for you. But who do you like? What do you want with that person? At this moment, what do you want with that customer of yours? What about Mayu? Do you want to take Mayu back?"

"I don't know."

Satsuki got up suddenly. She extended her hand towards my face, with a strength that didn't suit those long fingers she pressed my cheeks, shaking my face and hair strongly.

"Generally speaking, Miko, are you heterosexual? Homosexual? Bisexual? Are you sadomasochist? Or are you normal?"[16]

(Sakuraba 2003, 135)

This dialogue takes place when Miko visits Satsuki looking for emotional support after Mayu abandoned the Girl's Blood. Satsuki reflects that *they*[17] fight as a form of escapism from their troubles, and by projecting their own issues they start questioning Miko about her desires. When Miko says that she does not know the answer, Satsuki points out that she does not know her desires because she has only been satisfying other people's desires. Next, Satsuki inquires about Miko's

16 In Japanese, the loanword "normal" (*nōmaru*) is used to indicate someone with orthodox sexual practices. In this context it is contrasting with the fetishist practices, such as sadomasochism.

17 "They" here refers only to Satsuki.

wrestling style. When Miko responds to it with a lot of interest, Satsuki identifies Miko's passion for wrestling. From that conversation, Miko realizes what she longs for. She decides to abandon the performative job in the sadomasochist club and assume her own identity as a wrestler.

Like in Mayu's narrative, Miko's retrieval of her identity is marked linguistically using her full name in Chinese characters (山ノ辺美子 Yamanobe Miko) in contrast to her persona's name written in *katakana* (ミーコ Mīko), to which she is referred to through the whole book. On the other hand, unlike Mayu, when Miko takes over her agency, she does not leave the Girl's Blood. Instead, she changes her performance, from satisfying the audience's desires, into looking for self-satisfaction. For Miko, Girl's Blood is not a space of oppression anymore, but rather one of self-expression and self-realization.

At last, Miko faces Chinatsu in battle, in which she is encouraged by Satsuki to be herself. At that moment, Miko, who had already given up on her job at the sadomasochist club, goes through another moment of reflection in which she reconsiders her past behaviors and decisions. Finally, she frees herself from the audience's expectations and fights spontaneously. This intense fight ends with Chinatsu being rescued from the octagon and Miko screaming in delight.

> やがてその胸の奥からなにかがせりあがってきて、ふいにはじけた。爆発した。わたしは大声で吠えた。うおぉぉぉぉ――!獣のようなその咆哮は夜空に、するどく、そしてなぜか哀しげに響いた。
>
> Finally, something gradually rose from inside of my chest, and suddenly burst open. It exploded. I howled out loud. WOoooo! This beast-like roar echoed sharply and somehow sadly in the night sky.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 167)

Miko's scream is described as a "howl" and a "beast-like roar." These expressions are often used in Sakuraba's literature as a form of animalization and dehumanization of the characters. In *Gosick* (2003–2016), for example, the same expressions are used to describe the protagonist Victorique's cry, who is shown with a supernatural and even inhuman aura. In her later work, *Fuse* (2010), Sakuraba plays more concretely with the dichotomy between human and animal, with a story focused on creatures called *fuse*, which is a species of wolves in human disguise. In all her works, the bestial howling is used as an expression of the innermost voice that reveals an innate queerness, which can be read as a metaphor for gender non-conforming identities (not necessarily sexual minorities, but also including them). In Miko's case, it represents her freedom after a long time of repression. It is the voice of a young woman who breaks with social conventions and expectations, to be herself and pursue her desires.

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7. Coming out queer

The last chapter, "File. 3 Welcome home, Satsuki," is focused on Satsuki's issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In the chapter's cover page, the character is presented as

> 空手少女、皐月
> 19歳。インターハイベスト4のスポーツ少女。
> 趣味、バイクと古着屋巡り。
> 指名料2500円
>
> Satsuki, the karate girl.
> 19-years-old. Top 4 among the girls in the Inter-High School Sports Competition.
> Hobbies: motorcycles and browsing thrift stores.
> Nomination Fee 2500 yen.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 169)

The epigraph consists of two spoken lines directed to the main character which says: "Sa-*chan*,[18] are you doing ok? What kind of face are you showing right now?" (さっちゃん、元気にしていますか / いまあなたは、どんな顔をしていますか) (Sakuraba 2003, 170). The meaning of this epigraph is immediately clarified as the chapter starts with a letter from Satsuki's mother addressing them in the same way. From this letter, it is clear that Satsuki has been keeping their distance from their parents who miss them and are trying to make contact.

Satsuki has been present since the beginning of the novel, but their role increases in Chapter 2 until they take the lead role in Chapter 3. In the first chapter, Mayu introduces Satsuki as below:

> 皐月は十九歳のフリーター。さっき言った、空手でインターハイでモハメド・アリっていうのは、この子のことだ。背はミーコと張るぐらい高いけれど、線が細くて、きゅっと無駄なく筋肉の引き締まった体をしている。腰骨に引っかけるようにはいたユーズドのジーンズに年季の入ったレザージャケット姿とかで、冬でも750CCの馬鹿でかいバイクを操ってやってくる髪は短くて、アッシュ・ブロンドに染めてリーゼント風に固めている。透き通るように肌が白く、青い血管が透けて見えそうなほどだ。ファイトのときはあまり肌を見せず、サラシを巻いた上から、長い白ランをはおり、両腕を背中に回して、背筋を伸ばしてすっくと立つ。
>
> ボーイッシュでかっこいいってわたしは思うのだけれど、なぜか男性のお客さんにはあまり気がない。女の子にキャーキャー言われるタイプらしくて、皐月見たさに恐々とやってくる女の子のお客さんが少しずつ増えている。でも、本人は女嫌いだ。指

[18] "Sa-chan" is an affectionate way of referring to Satsuki, using the abbreviation "Sa" followed by the honorific suffix "chan," which is used mainly to refer to girls and children.

> 名されて、手錠を引っ張られてベンチに繋がれても、苦虫を噛み潰したような顔で黙って煙草をふかしている。
>
> Satsuki is a 19-years-old part-time worker. This girl is the one I mentioned before as the Mohamed Ali of the inter-high school sports competitions. She is as tall as Miko, but her body is slenderer and more compact with firm muscles. She wears used jeans that hang from her hips and a good old leather jacket and rides her ridiculously large 750cc motorbike even in winter. Her short hair is dyed ash blonde and kept fixed in regent style. Her white skin is almost transparent enough for her blue veins to be visible. During fights, she does not show much skin. She puts on a long white school uniform on the top of her breast binding and stands there stretching her back with her hands.
>
> I think that her boyish style is cool, but for some reason, she is not very popular among male customers. She seems like the kind of person that girls would be screaming for, and indeed the number of female customers who come timidly out of curiosity for Satsuki has been increasing. But she hates women. Even if she gets nominated and handcuffed to their bench, she will just smoke her cigarette quietly with a sour face.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 24)

This introduction depicts Satsuki's persona according to the database model. The body type, hairstyle and clothes, background in martial arts, and the popularity among girls, signal a masculine woman character to audiences informed by the database of the *otaku* subculture. This is the persona that Satsuki presents on stage, and also in life. However, similarly to the narrative arcs of the previous two protagonists, Satsuki's arc also brings light to the conflict between persona and identity. In the description above it is mentioned that Satsuki hates women, and in the subsequent paragraphs, Mayu explains that they never share the shower or locker room with the girls, refusing to see the girls' bodies or be seen by others. While this initially can be perceived as part of this tomboy *kyara* who rejects any element of femininity, it is reinterpreted in the last chapter, when Satsuki gets romantically involved with Chinatsu, and finally, have their gender dysphoria revealed.

At first, Satsuki and Chinatsu's relationship is presented as homosexual. When Chinatsu gets closer to Satsuki, she reveals that she has run away from home and that her abusive husband is stalking her. Satsuki escorts her to the nearest station and becomes affectionate towards her. Before parting ways, Chinatsu explains that her husband has threatened her life because he cannot accept her career as a wrestling show fighter. She also confesses that her life goals differ from the expectations of her husband and her father. She says that they envision for her a beautiful place like Korakuen Hall or Ariake Coliseum, two of the biggest sports

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venues in Japan used for pro-wrestling matches. However, what she wants is a "place full of corruption. A dark and frightening place that looks like the end of the world" (汚濁にまみれた場所で。この世の果てみたいな、暗くて恐ろしい場所で) (Sakuraba 2003, 231). Satsuki recognizes that the place she longs for is the Girl's Blood and relates to that desire. This dialogue ends with Chinatsu asking Satsuki to die with her, to which Satsuki responds with a joke. Chinatsu is not one of the narrators, but her story also represents issues of gender bias, such as the pressure of her father's and husband's expectations for her (which resonates with Miko's narrative) and the domestic violence that she suffers from her husband (which resonates with Mayu's). Chinatsu also expresses a form of disruption of the gender norms, by desiring an ugly and corrupted place instead of a beautiful and clean one, as it is socially expected of her.

The next day, Satsuki and Chinatsu face each other in a battle at Girl's Blood. Satsuki's narration oscillates between descriptions of the violence that they are performing and reflections about their feelings for each other. During that fight, Chinatsu again asks Satsuki to die with her, to which Satsuki responds positively this time. This scene too emphasizes the performativity of the Girl's Blood, by bringing simultaneously two contradicting ideas: the physical violence (the performance of a fight) and the emotional bond between the two characters. After the fight, Chinatsu tries to use the shower with Satsuki who refuses to do so. In that scene, Chinatsu indicates for the first time that she knows about Satsuki's gender dysphoria:

> いっしょに死ぬって言ったでしょ。だったら、いっしょに生きてもいけるでしょ。それともそれはまったく別のことなの?わたし、男の人ってわからないから。
>
> You said you would die with me, right? But you could also live with me, couldn't you? Or is that a completely different thing? I don't understand men.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 256)

Angry, Satsuki demands Chinatsu to leave immediately, but later escorts her to the station holding hands. On their way to the station, Satsuki inquires Chinatsu if she will not go back home, to which she responds that neither her husband's nor her family's house are her home and that she wants to create a home with a loved person to whom she will want to return. From that conversation, Satsuki contemplates returning to their own family house but immediately remembers that it is impossible. Later it is revealed that Satsuki avoids their family because of the fear of rejection of their gender identity.

Satsuki and Chinatsu are a peculiar couple in Sakuraba's oeuvre. A short review of Sakuraba's novels published in the magazine *Bessatsu Otona Anime Otona Ranobe* (別冊 オトナアニメ オトナラノベ, *Anime for Adults – Extra Issue: Light Novel*

for Adults) (Inoue 2011) calls attention to the fact that many of Sakuraba's books are centered on a pair of main characters, some of whom are of the same sex (mainly two girls), such as *A Lollipop or a Bullet* and *Suitei Shōjo*, while others, like *Gosick*, have a heterosexual main couple. Inoue (2011, 48) suggests that having a male character in the role of the *knight* is what made it possible for *Gosick* to show a shed of hope, as opposed to the other mentioned works, that have tragic ends. While this observation is convincing, it is also necessary to point out that even the heterosexual pairings in Sakuraba's literature show some level of questioning or disturbance of the gender norms. Satsuki and Chinatsu, for example, form a heterosexual couple (once Satsuki comes out as a transgender man), still, there is an element of queering as Satsuki is mostly perceived and described as a woman throughout the novel. In this sense, Satsuki is part of the list of male protagonists with queer gender identity in Sakuraba's literature.

The revelation of Satsuki's gender identity is the climax of the last chapter, and thus the climax of the novel. It is Chinatsu who first verbalizes that Satsuki suffers from gender dysphoria:

> 「最初にあったとき、わかったわ。目があったとき。ねぇ……いったいどうして誰も気づかないの?」
>
> 「……知らない」
>
> 「皐月は男の子。だから、気づいてない子の裸とか見ないように、気を遣って、更衣室に入らないようにとかしてたんでしょ。本当は、女子更衣室入り放題、シャワー入り放題なんて、楽しいのに」
>
> 「……べつに気を遣ってるとかじゃないよ。そんなんじゃない」
>
> "I knew it from the first time we met. The first time our eyes met. Hey... why hasn't anyone noticed it?"
>
> "I don't know..."
>
> "Satsuki, you are a man. That's why you do things like not looking at the naked bodies of the girls who didn't notice it and you are careful when you enter the locker room. Even though it would be a lot of fun for you to enter freely in the girls' locker room and showers."
>
> "It is not like I am being particularly careful. It is not like that."
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 268)

Faced by Chinatsu's statement, Satsuki finally reveals that they have identified themselves as a man since a young age:

> 「物心ついたときから、男だと思ってた。段々、おかしいなって思いだした。学校の制服とか、苦痛だった。スカートをはくのも、女子の列に並ぶもの。男の目で世

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> 界を見てたし、男の目で女を見てた。女として扱われるのが辛かった。思春期とかとくに。なにかが絶対にまちがってると思ってて、だけどどうしていいかわからなくて、ずっと……」
>
> "I have thought of myself as a man since I can remember. I gradually started thinking that it was weird. The school uniform was painful to wear. Putting a skirt on, cueing up with the girls. I saw the world with men's eyes, and I saw the girls with men's eyes. Being treated like a girl was hard. Especially during puberty. I knew that something was definitely wrong, but I had no idea what to do, for all this time..."
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 269)

Satsuki's coming out is followed by a dive into their childhood traumas:

> 体がどんどん女性らしく変化していくことに、静かなパニックを感じていた。欲望の対象は女の人だけど、女が女を好きっていうのとは、どこかしらちがった。わたしはずっと、自分を、男のはずだと思っていた。この体はおかしいって。
>
> As my body was getting more and more feminine, I started panicking in silence. I desired women, but I felt that somehow it was different from being a woman who loves another woman. I always thought that I might be a man. That my body was wrong.
>
> (Sakuraba 2003, 270–271)

This narration seems like a *naturalistic* representation of transgender experiences, which is remarkable for a *shōnen* light novel created within the manga/anime-like realism model. Satsuki's words, though very simple, express very clearly the experiences of a person suffering from gender dysphoria. In both accounts, Satsuki mentions how their dysphoria was potentialized by the sexual desire for women. However, taking the whole statement into account, it is impossible to ignore the elements of aversion towards the signs of femininity in their own body, and towards wearing female clothes. Lastly, it is by succeeding in love with a woman (Chinatsu) that Satsuki can finally accept their own gender identity and overcome the fear of returning home. The novel ends with a hopeful note that Satsuki will come out to their parents now that they are unafraid of the world's judgment.

Finally, Sakuraba not only decided to have the narrative of coming out as the climax of her story, but she also alluded to a celebrity who came out as transgender around the time that she wrote the novel. The name of the character "Andō Chinatsu" is a reference to Andō Hiromasa's (安藤大将) deadname, a transgender man who was a renowned boat racer before his transition. Curiously, Sakuraba used Andō's deadname for one character, and the narrative of gender dysphoria for another. Sakuraba also directly mentioned Andō's deadname in the postface of the original publication expressing that it is "a novel dedicated to a woman that

no longer exists, Andō Chinatsu" (いまはもういない安藤千夏さんっていう一人の女の子に捧げる小説) (Sakuraba 2003, 281). Although deadnaming is controversial as it is considered a form of microaggression for dismissing one's gender identity, other publications in the same period, such as Andō's autobiography, and Sakai Tōko and Shono Rui's manga *Arigato, Chinatsu* (2003), also mentioned it apparently with his consent (considering that he gave interviews for the authors of the manga). Therefore, though deadnaming can be criticized as a practice, there is no evidence to support that Sakuraba's use was considered offensive at that time. On the contrary, Sakuraba's novel dramatizes sexual minorities' narratives, in a simplified form for young male audiences, which can help growing attention to their dilemmas and promote social acceptance and understanding from a young age.

8. Conclusion

Sakuraba Kazuki succeeded as a light novel writer for young male audiences by initially masking her gender and trying to adjust to the genre's conventions. However, she became renowned for transcending the boundaries of genre and demographics by narrating stories of characters who represent the experiences of young girls and gender-nonconforming people dealing with the oppressions of a patriarchal heteronormative society. In *Red × Pink*, Sakuraba sheds light upon various family issues that are rooted in gender inequalities that can traumatize young people and lead them to the loss of their agency and identity. Mayu suffers from a need for affection and attention because of the abuse she suffered from her mother at a young age. Miko lacks agency and lives her life to satisfy others as a consequence of the rejection, the ostracism, and the need to conform with the expectations of society for her. Satsuki leads a life of repression due to the gender dysphoria that they could not accept or share with their loved ones. Chinatsu is a victim of domestic violence and also suffers pressure for not fulfilling her father's and husband's expectations for her. The novel, thusly, represents those issues, but also develops narratives of overcoming them, through self-discovery, acceptance, empowerment, and most importantly, the retrieval of the agency.

As this close reading demonstrates, Sakuraba employed the conventions of manga/anime-like realism, such as the portrayal of attractive female characters that are created based on the *otaku* subculture database, as a form of engaging male readers with her story. However, not only does her narrative succeed in representing the gendered experiences of young women and sexual minorities to this male audience, but also her metafictional approach evinces the problems of representation in the *kyara* model. Ultimately, the protagonists in *Red × Pink* abandon their oppressive *kyara*-like personas to become fully-realized characters.

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