

Yuri!! on (Thin) Ice: Conflict and Convergence in Transcultural Media Fandom

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This paper began life as a look at inter-fandom conflict in the transcultural ‘contact zones’ (Pratt 1991) of online *Yuri!!! on Ice* fandom, a topic that was thrown into hopefully productive disarray by something my husband posted on Facebook about a week and a half ago [slide]. This post, to me, captures the essence of *Yuri!!! on Ice* as a transcultural fan object, and it’s emblematic of the challenges that face both its fandom and academia more generally. That is, *Yuri!!! on Ice* is an unruly text in an equally unruly reception context, and this unruliness foregrounds the extent to which our own structured scholarly environment remains ill-equipped to address it.

Yuri!!! on Ice was a 12-episode animated series that aired in 2016 during the overnight hours on Japanese broadcast television, and it was simultaneously streamed both in Japan and internationally, with multilingual subtitles, through anime streaming service Crunchyroll.com and China’s Tuduo video hub. As its title suggests, *Yuri!!!* is set in the world of international figure skating and follows Japanese figure skater Katsuki Yūri, a world-class skater who nonetheless suffers from anxiety and insecurity, particularly following his poor performance at the Sochi Grand Prix Final. When a video of him privately skating a program belonging to Russian champion Victor Nikiforov goes viral, Victor takes it upon himself to fly to Japan with the intention of becoming Yūri’s coach. All of this, as well as the comedic tone of the show itself, is illustrated nicely in the summary Yūri gives at the beginning of Episode 2 [slide].

If you’re unfamiliar with the aesthetics of this form of anime comedy, the back-and-forth between different images of Yūri [slide] may seem confusing, but here they help fix the series’

point of view on Yūri, acting expressionistically to augment not only the show's narrative, but also its affective dimensions (Cohn and Ehly 2015, 22) and focus on interpersonal relationships. Together with images of Victor as the object of Yūri's gaze [slide] (and our own [slide]), we can begin to discern why *Yuri!!! on Ice* might have invited the spectatorship of viewers outside both Japan and anime fandom - particularly those involved in the shipping-centric fandoms of Anglo-American media.

Indeed, in a press statement, Crunchyroll.com's founder Kun Gao wrote, "We are thrilled that *Yuri!!! on Ice* has both captivated passionate anime fans and introduced new viewers to anime" (Crunchyroll 2016); put more irreverently by a fan on YouTube, "This is the show I chose to lose my anime virginity with and I am incredibly happy about my decision" (Phangirl__ 2017). Informal (and admittedly imperfect) evidence from the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own appears to support the claim that the show was responsible for bringing new fans into anime spectatorship [slide]: of the top fifty *Yuri!!! on Ice* fanfiction writers (in terms of 'kudos', or likes), 64% had written fanfiction based only on *Yuri!!! on Ice* and Anglo-American, or mostly Anglo-American media, compared to 36% who wrote mostly or all anime-based fanfiction. For comparison's sake, [slide] writers of fanfiction based on the popular sports anime *Haikyuu!!* were essentially the reverse of this, 62% to 38% in favor of all or mostly anime-based fanfiction. Thus, given the relatively large influx of casual and non-anime fans into *Yuri!!! on Ice* fandom, it's perhaps unsurprising that some of these fans might have entered into the fandom with the (heavily US-centric) fan cultural assumptions of Anglo-American online media fandoms.

In particular, fandom debates surrounding the arguably contested phenomenon of ‘queerbaiting’ were at the forefront of English language fan ‘meta’, or analysis, of *Yuri!!! on Ice*. As understood within this fan culture, queerbaiting is [slide] “a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of a queer viewer via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying or laughing off the possibility” (Fathallah 2015, 491). Fans frequently locate queerbaiting in, among other things, both the semiotics of the look [slide] and a show’s failure – even refusal – to realize its emotional potential (something that was also a frustration for *X-Files* fans [slide] who wanted the romantic tension between Mulder and Scully to be realized in a relationship). In this sense, particularly in early episodes of *Yuri!!! on Ice*, it’s not difficult to see where it could have been perceived as queerbaiting by such fans [slide]. Even comparatively straightforward moments of romantic intimacy between Victor and Yūri were seen by some through the lens of a general culture of creator-side dismissiveness towards such interpretations, effectively priming these fans to perceive obfuscation where ambiguity was intended [slide].

At this point, it’s tempting to focus on the clash of different interpretative cultures within the contact zones of online *Yuri!!! on Ice* fandom; and, indeed, this is what I had initially proposed to discuss today. However, not only are such clashes neither new nor especially noteworthy in of themselves, but such a focus effectively reaffirms an approach that cannot adequately address the unruliness of either *Yuri!!! on Ice* or its fandom. Questions of whether or not *Yuri!!! on Ice* queerbaited its fans are something of a zero-sum game, particularly given the extent to which evidence relies on subjective interpretations of both images and creator intent. If we want to understand *Yuri!!! on Ice* as a transcultural text – even phenomenon – I would argue that it’s

more productive to shift our focus to the show's unruliness – which lends itself to the very frustrations that prompt criticisms of queerbaiting – and, from there, to how that unruliness is reflected in its online, transcultural fandom.

At a textual level, Yūri's identity itself remains largely unfixed throughout the show: he's at once insecure and confident, unassuming and bold, and when Victor assigns him the task of interpreting a piece of music called "Love ~Eros~" as a means of tapping into his sexual side, Yūri's breakthrough comes when he jettisons his preconceptions about masculine sexuality and instead channels his feminine side [slide]. Gender conventions common to the sports romance genre in anime and manga are equally upended in *Yuri!!! on Ice*, beginning in the first episode when Yūri is reunited with his childhood friend, Yūko [slide]. His description of Yūko as the "Madonna of Hasetu Ice Castle" evokes associations with the other 'Madonnas' of anime and manga, iconic paragons of wholesome perfection and, importantly, heterosexual first love. This is reinforced in the following scene [slide]. Yūri's attempted utterance here, "Boku wa zutto [cut] Yūko no koto –" ('I've always') is generically followed by "suki datta" ('liked/loved you'), but here the expectations established by what he says are sharply undercut by the abrupt appearance of Yūko's triplets, husband, and her own harried reactions to them. In particular, the girls – decidedly *not* cute, but rather excitable, self-described skating otaku – definitively shut down any possibility that *Yuri!!! on Ice* might be a generic sports romance, through their bluntness and the way they signal both Yūko's unavailability and Yūri's awareness of it.

In surreptitiously filming Yūri skating Victor's program, then uploading the video to Yūko's social media account without her permission, the triplets at once embody fans' own affect-

driven, social media-facilitated transgressiveness, and they act as a catalyst for Victor's unpredictable arrival in Yūri's hometown [slide]. In role-playing terms, Victor is Chaotic Neutral: unpredictable, unconventional, capricious, and a genre-buster in his own right [slide]. In a broader sense, Victor is an amalgam of non-binary 'both/ands' called into Yūri's life via a technology that itself amplifies the blurring of distinctions between public and private, domestic and foreign. Social media in *Yuri!!! on Ice* disrupts social norms and the binaries of nation, language, and identity in which a 'proper subjectivity' lies. In so doing it reflects the social media-enabled disruptiveness of transcultural media fandoms, foregrounding the difficulty of talking about them within scholarly paradigms that – however unwittingly – privilege ontologically stable identities and affiliations.

Present-day online media fandom is, in fact, characterized by nothing so much as its resistance to discrete identifications and communities; that is, its own unruliness. One such example is the breaking of the perceived fourth wall separating fans and creators on social media, resulting from competing imperatives of media marketing that are often thrust onto actors and creators, and some fans' affect-driven desires to be heard (and acknowledged) by them. In the case of *Yuri!!! on Ice*, fans converged on the personal Twitter account of one of the show's two women creators, Kubo Mitsurou, in order to communicate to her (and sometimes one another) both their appreciation and delight, as well as disappointment and critique, over developments in the show – a practice that has become common on creator accounts. In particular, fans seeking a definitive resolution to the ongoing question of the nature of Victor and Yūri's relationship flocked to Kubo's account, posing questions and leaving sometimes-frustrated and disappointed replies to posts that failed to confirm their interpretations.

One such example occurred in December 2016, following weeks of debate over the rinkside ‘kiss’ that concluded Episode 7. Responding [slide] to fans’ repeated requests that she confirm or deny that it was, in fact, a kiss, Kubo tweeted [slide], “Ultimately, I’m not saying what happened in Episode 7, or I’m not pushing any [interpretation] on anyone, so please decide for yourself” (8 Dec 2016). 59 direct responses from fans to this ranged from appreciative – for both the moment and the ambiguity – to confused, disappointed and critical. In of themselves, these reactions were in no way outside the norm of Twitter-based fan cultures. Rather, what stands out here is, first, a general tendency on the part of Japanese tweeters to play along with Kubo’s exhortation to decide for oneself, and the equally general tendency of non-Japanese fans to express a greater diversity of reactions ranging from appreciative to critical. Such tendencies begin to suggest divergent cultural assumptions and norms underlying fans’ reactions; yet, given the inherently unruly locus of this activity, much more evidence is required before we can say that nation or language determines the reach of these cultures.

That is, in examining the replies to Kubo’s tweet, one thing that stands out is that not all tweets in Japanese are from Japanese nationals, nor do Japanese language replies necessarily correspond to that first tendency to play along with Kubo, hinting at the politics of popular culture consumption in an age of nation branding and soft power. Neither do English language tweets reflect a tweeter’s national or cultural identity, as this confused exchange [slide] on the reply thread between a Spanish fan and a Nepalese fan illustrates. Instead, they foreground English as a global lingua franca, fueled at least in part by the economic prerogatives of nations where English predominates. That this *mélange* of tweets resides within the already transcultural

contact zone of fan-creator cultures speaks to what we might call the constitutive unruliness of contemporary online media fandoms.

Moreover, what constitutes the contact zone of fan-creator cultures is itself unstable and, as such, dynamic and constantly open to renegotiation. *Yuri!!! on Ice* proved to be quite popular among professional ice skaters, notably Johnny Weir, who tweeted extensively about his love for the show and its uncanny verisimilitude [slide]. Asked about her personal reaction to such attention, Kubo responded, “One of the reasons that I hesitate to answer is because, while this anime has given me the opportunity to talk directly with several world class skaters, I never want to use this as an opportunity to get close and try to become friends with any of them. As a fan, I feel like I’m obligated to stay a fan forever. That doesn’t mean that I’ll neglect putting all my effort into the work, but I tend to instinctively put up a guard, and make sure that I always remain a fan to them.” Co-creator Yamamoto Sayo agrees, but adds that, “When I actually see first class skaters mention that they follow and watch *Yuri!!! on Ice*, I get this feeling that they are encouraging me to do my best. There are times when I’m not feeling fully motivated, but when I see social media postings from Johnny or Medvedeva, I really feel that I am getting encouragement from above” (Castillo 2018). Kubo and Yamamoto’s seemingly contradictory responses – at once desiring distance from and finding meaning in proximity to professional skaters – are, in fact, entirely congruent with many fans’ experiences of the waning fan-creator divide (Larsen and Zubernis 2012) as both tantalizing and discomfiting. Here too, then, we see a different kind of blurring that equally complicates those discrete categories – this time of ‘fan’ and ‘creator’ – we unwittingly reproduce in scholarship [blank slide].

If the transcultural unruliness of online media fandoms is emblematic of “convergence culture... where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins 2006, 2), then I would argue that scholarship may be able to discern it but is as yet unable either to adequately address it or effectively mobilize it. A cursory look through the table of contents of most recent fan or Japanese popular culture studies anthologies offers a telling example of the extent to which we remain constrained by essentialist and largely binary understandings of nation, language, culture, and identity that limit not only our ability, but especially our willingness to cross disciplinary borders in order to better account for what we observe. Such understandings are reinforced and perpetuated by the institutional trappings of the humanities, in which order and quantification facilitate control over the potentially unruly among us. We are cordoned off into disciplinary silos, warned against doing too much collaborative work, admonished if we fail to maintain ‘critical distance’, legitimized through arbitrary titles and affiliations, and, in all, rewarded for following the unspoken rules of scholarly participation and engagement.

And it’s here that we might look to convergent, transcultural fandoms for models of how to break free of this limiting paradigm. Henry Jenkins has argued that, “the age of media convergence enables communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception” (2006, 26), through what he, borrowing from Pierre Lévy, calls “collective intelligence.” We see such collective intelligence in fans’ pooling of knowledges – language, cultural, and so on – as a means of more fully (if not better) grasping the transcultural dimensions of online media fandoms and their objects. Thus, in conclusion, I want to suggest that scholarship – specifically that of fan and Japanese popular culture studies – would benefit from a similarly collective

approach, enabling us to pool our scholarly and cultural resources towards a more thorough and complex understanding of transcultural fandoms.

Works Cited

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