

# Theory

## Doing Occidentalism in contemporary Japan: Nation anthropomorphism and sexualized parody in *Axis Powers Hetalia*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—*Axis Powers Hetalia* (2006–present), a Japanese gag comic and animation series, depicts relations between nations personified as cute boys against a background of World War I and World War II. The stereotypical rendering of national characteristics as well as the reduction of historically charged issues into amusing quarrels between nice-looking but incompetent boys was immensely popular, especially among female audiences in Japan and Asia, and among Euro-American manga, anime, and cosplay fans, but it also met with vehement criticism. Netizens from South Korea, for example, considered the Korean character insulting and in early 2009 mounted a protest campaign that was discussed in the Korean national assembly. *Hetalia's* controversial success relies to a great extent on the inventive conflation of male-oriented *otaku* fantasies about nations, weapons, and concepts represented as cute little girls, and of female-oriented *yaoi* parodies of male-male intimacy between powerful "white" characters and more passive Japanese ones. This investigation of the original *Hetalia* by male author Hidekaz Himaruya (b. 1985) and its many adaptations in female-oriented *dōjinshi* (fanzine) texts and conventions (between 2009 and 2011, *Hetalia* was by far the most adapted work) refers to notions of interrelationality, intersectionality, and positionality in order to address hegemonic representations of "the West," the orientalized "Rest" of the world, and "Japan" in the cross-gendered and sexually parodied mediascape of Japanese transnational subcultures.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Boys' love; Critical Occidentalism; *Dōjinshi*; Hegemony; Manga; Nation anthropomorphism; Parody; *Yaoi*; Youth subculture

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### 1. Introduction: Critical Occidentalism and hegemony from below

[1.1] In the modern age of colonialism and imperialism, Occidentalism as a

constellation of discourses, practices, and institutions based on the idea of "the West" has played a hegemonic role in the configuration of collective identity and alterity. The imagined geography of "the West" has been effective in inscribing the whole of humanity along hierarchic yet fluid lines of inclusion and exclusion, encompassing global relations of power in geopolitical contexts as well as knowledge practices in geocultural spheres. Although since the 1990s transnational, transcultural, and hybrid signifying practices induced by globalization have intensified, and critical engagements that question notions of "the West" have increased in postcolonial and cultural studies, "the West" continues to be reproduced as an unmarked assumption—a deep-rooted, self-evident, and ultimately naturalized term—in every sphere of public and private life, as well as in academic jargon (Hall 1992; Coronil 1996).

[1.2] I rely here on an extended notion of Occidentalism as referring to every discourse or practice that contributes to the idea of the existence of "the West" or "Western," setting aside whether it is a pro-Western or an anti-Western discourse. As has been pointed out in postcolonial and cultural studies, Occidentalism is not limited to a simple reversed or counter-Orientalism, expressed by anti- or pro-Western ideologies, and used strategically for internal nationalism or subversion. Rather, Occidentalism is the condition of Orientalism's very possibility and refers both to self-definition on the Euro-American side as well as to the definition of the other on the non-Euro-American side (Coronil 1996).

[1.3] The ambivalent historical position of modern Japan with regard to the Euro-American world order has already provided a strategic perspective to overcome monological studies focusing unilaterally on either the hegemonic or the subaltern, and to stress instead the interrelational process of Occidentalism, Orientalism, and self-Orientalism in regard to the construction of national identity ([note 1](#)). But today, even in the absence of direct domination or coercion exercised by a Euro-American power, Occidentalism continues to be hegemonic in Japan, as Naoki Sakai argues: "What gives the majority of Japanese the characteristic image of Japanese culture, is still its distinction from the so-called West...The loss of the distinction between the West and Japan would result in the loss of Japanese identity in general" (2002, 564).

[1.4] In order to contribute to further critical understanding of Occidentalism and to explore its contemporary rearticulation in Japan, I draw on an interrelational, intersectional, and positional approach inspired by the

Gramscian concept of hegemony (note 2). Gramsci has suggested that there can be no effective hegemony without the active consent of the subaltern. This means that it is not only important to address, from above, the interiorization of the imagined geography of "the West" on an international and institutional level, but also its reproduction in common sense, everyday life, and popular cultures on an intrasocietal level, from below.

[1.5] The crucial question to ask is, what kind of strategic advantages does this subaltern self-positioning offer in relation to "the West" as universal reference? And focusing on the intrasocietal level, what kind of heterogeneous axes of sociocultural identification and othering (nation, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class) cumulatively intersect in this self-positioning? What kind of pleasures, desires, and emotions are mobilized to articulate it as attractive? Finally, how does this self-positioning and reaction to Occidentalism differ according to the specific positionality of the actors involved?

[1.6] Karen Kelsky (2001) has critically highlighted the gendered fetish of the "white" man and the longing (*akogare*) for everything "Western" among young women in contemporary Japan; such objects are strategic signifiers of emancipatory projects, internationalism, and social upward mobility. Similarly, the wider dissemination through mass media and urban consumption of an idealized "West" has been investigated by Yuiko Fujita (2009) as motivating middle-class youth to migrate to London and New York. And mostly significant for the purposes of this study, Kazumi Nagaike (2009), in analyzing boys' love magazines, has convincingly examined the stimulation in female fantasies of romantic tensions and male homosexual eroticism. These tensions and this eroticism are articulated through the superiorization of racialized "white" men.

[1.7] The tremendous popularity of the amateur Web manga *Axis Powers Hetalia*, which focuses on male-male intimacy between anthropomorphized Euro-American nations and Japan, offers a precious opportunity to reexamine, from below, Occidentalism and its intersection with a wide range of spheres of identity and alterity, be it geopolitical, historical, national, racial, gendered, or sexual (note 3). *Hetalia*, as the most adapted work among female-oriented *dōjinshi* (Japanese fanzines, ranging from manga to light novels and simulation games), provides further insight into the ways in which different dimensions of pleasure, such as parody and sexuality, are strategically mobilized in *yaoi*-inspired fantasies (note 4).

[1.8] This investigation of *Hetalia* builds on an earlier examination of its multimedia platform, including Web manga, printed manga, anime series, and amateur adaptations, and the heterogeneous discourses surrounding it. Further

integration of textual and visual reading of *Hetalia* relies on participant observation of national *dōjinshi* conventions ("*Hetalia* Only" events), informal interviews with organizers, authors, and attendants, and participation in the everyday *Hetalia*-related practices of fans, which includes Web surfing, karaoke, and gadget shopping (note 5). Finally, because the nation inspiring the original work is Italy, a brief period of fieldwork I conducted in Italy on cosplay groups and interviews with fan fiction writers has provided further insight into the transnational diffusion of *Hetalia* (note 6).

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## 2. The boom of *Axis Powers Hetalia*

[2.1] *Hetalia* is a gag comic and animation series depicting historical and military relations between (so far) more than 40 nations, anthropomorphized as cute-looking and incompetent boys and kids (note 7). These male characters personify broad-stroke national, ethnic, and linguistic stereotypes; international relations are transfigured as intimate and childish quarrels, mainly between the trio of the historic Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, and Japan) and between the characters of the Allied Forces (the United States, England, France, Russia, and China). There is no general and linear narrative providing a unifying frame to the mostly four-panel manga format and to the 5-minute anime episodes. It is basically plotless, a loosely connected series of nation-character-centered, short, silly gags played across the background of World War I and World War II, but including also episodes from ancient and medieval history and present-day geopolitics.

[2.2] *Hetalia* started as a Web manga drawn by a male amateur artist, Hidekaz Himaruya (b. 1985), and posted on his personal Web site Kitayume (<http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/hetaria/index.htm>) in 2006 while he was a student in an art school in New York (figure 1). In the months that followed, the online text slowly gained a cult following among female Net surfers. This convinced publisher Gentōsha Comics in Japan to release in 2008 two printed volumes of *Hetalia*'s vignettes. By late 2009, a million copies had been sold. This was followed by the release of a third volume in 2010, a fourth in 2011, and a fifth in 2012. At present, the estimated total sales are 2 million copies (figure 2). Meanwhile, starting in 2009, an adaptation of the first series of short animation episodes (*Hetalia Axis Powers*) by Studio Dean in Tokyo was also released online by Animate.tv (<http://animate.tv/>); in late 2012, it was in its fourth season. A feature-length animated film, *Paint It, White!*, was released in 2010. As is usual for successful Japanese manga or anime, it has been heavily merchandised: CDs of character songs, dramatic CDs, video games, cute figurines, vending machines with *Hetalia* drinks, photo booths

(*purikura*), and gadgets (note 8).



**Figure 1.** Screen shot of Kitayume

(<http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/hetaria/index.html>), the Web site of the original Web manga by Hidekaz Himaruya. [View larger image.]



**Figure 2.** Hetalia printed manga editions by Gentōsha Comics (2008–12). [View larger image.]

[2.3] If we consider that *Hetalia* was originally an amateur work with no aesthetic or graphic sophistication, nor any narrative consistency, even more remarkable than its commercial success has been its extraordinary popularity among *dōjinshi* (fanzines). During the summer and autumn of 2010, hundreds of *Hetalia*-inspired amateur adaptations were piled in boys' love corners in the biggest Animate and Mandrake manga stores in Tokyo, especially at Otome Road in Eastern Ikebukuro, one center of *yaoi* fandom and related *fujoshi* (rotten girls/women) subculture. An even larger number of texts—thousands of different titles, ranging from manga to light novels—were exhibited for sale at manga and cosplay conventions dedicated to the *Hetalia* world. Hundreds of "*Hetalia* Only" events have been held in major Japanese cities, from the all-inclusive "World Series" to the more segmented "Kyara Only" events, which are limited to specific characters and combinations (figure 3). Besides the biggest amateur manga/anime event in Japan, known as Comic Market or Comiket, attendance at "*Hetalia* Only" events from June to October 2010 ranged from 50 fan circles (approximately 1,000 visitors) to 450 circles

(approximately 10,000 visitors). Excluding some of the organizers and myself, most of these events had an astonishing 100% female attendance. At the summer 2010 Comiket 78, the 1,586 registered *Hetalia* fan circles ranked second in number, only behind the more male-oriented shooting game *Tōhō Project* circles (note 9). From 2009 to late 2011, *Hetalia* was by far the most adapted work among female-oriented *dōjinshi* in Japan (note 10).



**Figure 3.** "Hetalia Only" events organized by Youmedia. "World Series" event (left); "Japan Only" event (right). [View larger image.]

[2.4] The chain of derivative works, parodies, and spin-offs of the original is not limited to Japanese versions but has spread to almost every language used on the Internet. Through the Web, thanks to intensive scanning (scanlation) and fan subbing, *Hetalia* has had a dramatic impact around the world among female lovers of Japanese comics and animation, even before being translated into English or other main languages (note 11). Since 2009, an *Axis Powers Hetalia* Day has been celebrated on October 24 among international fandom, especially in English-speaking nations, by gathering together, cosplaying *Hetalia* characters, exhibiting huge national flags, and discussing coupling combinations. In 2010, *Hetalia* Day was celebrated in 35 countries, with 160 registered meet-ups (<http://hetalia-day.com/2010/directory.html>). In late 2010, the first two manga volumes were finally published by Tokyopop in English, topping the *New York Times* manga best-seller list in the United States and entering a more commercialized stage of international diffusion.

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### 3. Controversial success

[3.1] Hardcore fans, especially fans in Japan, prefer to consume and display their reproductions of *Hetalia* (*dōjinshi*, cosplay, fan art, fan fiction) in mostly intimate spheres together with other fans; they venture out to more public spaces such as *dōjinshi* events only when they are sure to meet other fans. There is a widespread reluctance to expose this hobby to the nonfan gaze, possibly to avoid incomprehension or refusal, or simply because it is easier, more enjoyable, and more rewarding to experience it only in intimate spaces or with other fans. This applies in general to many subcultural spheres as

well, but it is arguably more relevant for a boys' love/*yaoi*-inspired and mostly female subculture, especially considering its overtly male homoerotic tone. Among all the *Hetalia* fans I interviewed in Japan, nobody expressed the desire to go public or to be acknowledged by the mainstream, and academic attention was considered surprising and extremely embarrassing. However, in Italy, as in many Euro-American countries, public display of huge *Hetalia* national flags and uniforms in the streets are standard during Japan festivals or events centered around J-culture (manga, anime, video games), likely the result of the variety of cosplay conventions and the accepted coolness of J-culture (figures 4 and 5). Still, as a result of homophobia, critical parents, and hate speech from other J-culture fans (and even some *Hetalia* fan girls), there is widespread criticism of *yaoi*-inspired activities (note 12).



**Figure 4.** *The Italian Hetalia Cosplay Project at Lucca Comics & Games 2010 (personal photo, November 1, 2010). [View larger image.]*



**Figure 5.** *The Hetalia Cosplay Project performing at the Lucca Comics & Games 2010 cosplay competition, November 1 (personal video, posted on YouTube by the organizer of the group; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0BhIDvzppw>). [View larger image.]*

[3.2] *Hetalia* might have passed quite unnoticed—like many works addressed to and reproduced by a specific, more or less subcultural audience, in this case mostly girls and young women in their late teens and 20s—by the mainstream had there not been some vocal protest among netizens outside

Japan, who reacted vehemently to *Hetalia*'s representation of history, nationhood, and ethnicity. On the occasion of the scheduled broadcasting of the anime adaptation in early 2009 on Kids Station, a Japanese cable and satellite TV channel, a huge protest movement arose among South Koreans. They criticized the stereotypical rendering of the Korean character in the original Web manga, organizing a petition signed by about 17,000 netizens to stop the broadcast of the TV program. Finally, Congresswoman Jeong Mi-Kyeong of the South Korean Grand National Party, a conservative party holding the majority in the assembly, brought the protest to the National Assembly Committee. At the Special Assembly Committee on Defensive Measures for the Liancourt Rocks, on January 13, 2009, she accused the manga of being insulting to the Korean people, calling *Hetalia* a criminal act, even if created by a private person, and urging the government to take diplomatic action against the Japanese government as well as to draft a law in order to handle this kind of national offense. One of the most criticized aspects of this protest was the Korea character's obsession in the original manga with touching Japan's breast (and Japan's reluctance to allow it). The breast was arguably taken to represent the Liancourt Rocks, a small group of islands, the sovereignty of which is disputed between South Korea and Japan (figure 6) (note 13).



**Figure 6.** Episode ("Boobs are forever!") showing Korea touching Japan's breast in the original Web manga. [View larger image.]

[3.3] This accusation was covered by both the South Korean and the Japanese media, and it brought about the cancellation of the TV broadcast of *Hetalia*. The anime adaptation continued its diffusion via Webcasts and mobile phones after the Korean character had been removed. More informal criticism was ubiquitous among online discussions worldwide, condemning the omission in the original *Hetalia* of disturbing aspects related to modern history, such as genocide, the Holocaust, and fascist totalitarianism, and disapproving of Euro-American cosplayers for dealing casually with controversial symbols of World War II, such as national flags and military uniforms.



[3.4] In other words, *Hetalia*'s national and global popularity, even if limited to a subculture, is inevitably embedded in complex, contested, and intertwined issues of identity, history, and power—issues that are not easy to disentangle. If we consider *Hetalia* in terms of its possibilities and limits, three sorts of questions may be raised according to their different positions and aims.

[3.5] First, is *Hetalia* anti-Korean? Is it a stereotyped, essentialized, and racialized rendering of national cultures? Is it historically misleading about the tragic reality of war and of totalitarian ideologies, contributing to aestheticism, banalization, and uncritical appreciation of global power relations? (Modernists, mostly male.)

[3.6] Second, is *Hetalia* a creative and empowering expression of an autonomous and female-oriented subculture inspired by boys' love/*yaoi* fantasies? Is it a typical mode of parodic, playful, and postmodern consumption of late capitalism, a mangaesque media mix detached from direct connections to social, political, or historical references (note 14)? Does it favor a transcultural network of international fandom, thanks to increasing media convergence, Internet literacy, and the globalized popularity of Cool Japan? (Postmodernists and postfeminists, mostly academics.)

[3.7] Third, is *Hetalia* stimulating a cosmopolitan and genuine interest in other countries, their histories, and their people? Or is it simply funny, joyful, and entertaining, and therefore immune to critical scrutiny? After all, it is basically a gag comic created for fun by a young amateur and enjoyed privately as a hobby without any explicit message or ideological intention. (Fans, mostly female.)

[3.8] It would be easy to argue that each interpretation has validity. Furthermore, this division into three groups is inevitably shaped by my own subject position. I am Japanese, but not a Japanese native speaker (I grew up in Germany and Italy); I am middle-aged and married; and I am a man. During fieldwork, I displayed the following: a modernist impatience with historical mystification and ethnic stereotyping in regard to representational content; a sensibility inspired by cultural studies and gender studies for the potential of popular media and female youth subcultures; and, to a more limited extent, an appreciation of some of the fan practices as an enjoyable aspect of participant observation. In addition, considering the large and proliferating *Hetalia* world, all the questions listed above may be affirmable with empirical evidence. I suggest instead that a perspective inspired by critical Occidentalism can contribute to the understanding of some of the

underlying assumptions of *Hetalia*'s popularity, for both the original and its adaptations, and on national and global levels.

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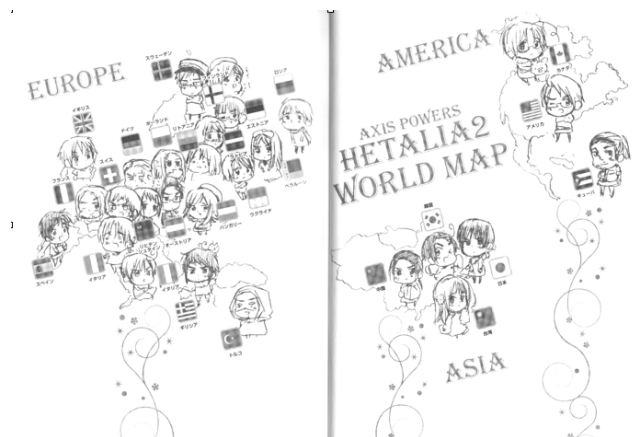
## 4. Doing interrelational Occidentalism: Eurocentric cartography and whiteness

[4.1] A first crucial aspect for understanding the hegemonic role of Occidentalism and its ongoing reproduction is interrelationality with regard to the international sphere. In the contemporary postcolonial, postimperialistic age, the effectiveness of hegemony relies less on direct imposition from above supported by the political, military, or economical supremacy of a specific Euro-American nation, institution, or individual. Rather, Occidentalism relies for its reproduction more and more on acceptance and active consent from below by the non-Euro-American sides, more or less subaltern, including Japan. One effect of this interrelational process, a sort of globalized and dispersed mirror game articulating representations of specular identity and alterity, has been in modern times to mutually reinforce and reproduce the Eurocentric cartography of "the West" as the universal reference of the world (Miyake 2010).

[4.2] With regard to contemporary Japan, Yuiko Fujita in her fieldwork on Japanese cultural migrants highlights a revealing imagined geography, which can also be seen in the fact that the author, Himaruya, started composing *Hetalia* while he was studying in New York as an international student. Japanese young women and men were asked, before migrating to or going to study in New York or London, to draw a world map and write place-names on it. The main aspects of these drawings were, first, that Japan was drawn in the center of the world and oversized relative to other countries and continents; and second, that the drawings focused on Euro-American countries. Nearly all respondents drew North America and Europe, but most omitted the so-called "Rest" of the world—Africa, the Arabian nations, and large parts of Asia (Fujita 2009, 44–45).

[4.3] The imagined geography as displayed in *Hetalia* world maps replicates these drawings and their interiorization of a Eurocentric cartography (Himaruya 2008, 10–11) (figure 7). Apart from Japan, almost all the main characters in the original manga and anime versions are cute "whites," namely the Axis Powers (Italy and Germany) and the Allied Forces (the United States, the England, France, Russia) and the Five Nordic Nations (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark). Most of the episodes are inspired by events that occurred during and between World War I and World War II, and

they center on intimate quarrels between the European characters, the American character, and Japan. In reality, most of the actual historical and military events in this period involved dramatic and tragic contact between imperial Japan and its Asian neighbors. However, in *Hetalia*, only a few Asian characters are included—mainly China as a member of the Allied Forces in some independent episodes, and to a limited extent Korea in the original Web manga. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Vietnam appear mainly as sketch characters on Himaruya's Web page and blog.



**Figure 7.** Eurocentric geography in the original *Hetalia* (Himaruya 2008, 10–11). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.4] In addition to the textual and visual levels of the text, the modern cultural history of national identity as regards "Japan" versus "the West" is confirmed by reader preferences for "white" characters. A readers' poll by *Hetalia* publisher Gentōsha Comics about the most loved characters looks like a kind of *gaijin akogare* (fascination for Western foreigners) ranking. After Japan, which was voted top, the most popular characters are the England, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Greece, the United States, and Sweden, with China, at a rank of 17, being the only character representing "the Rest" of the world (figure 8) ([http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index\\_02.html](http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index_02.html)).



**Figure 8.** *Gentōsha Comics survey on preferred characters among Hetalia readers (July 2010).* [View larger image.]

[4.5] This kind of mangaesque and gendered attraction for the "white" man is also confirmed by the *dōjinshi* scene. Catalog maps at *Hetalia*-centered conventions show how the distribution of the author circles is framed according to the boys' love/*yaoi* code of *seme* (active, stronger, penetrating character) and *uke* (passive, weaker, receiving character) pairings. The most popular is the *seme* United States/*uke* England pairing, followed by the *seme* England/*uke* Japan pairing, the *uke* Prussia corner, the *seme* France/*uke* England pairing, and the Scandinavian characters' corner (note 15). Japan is not only the most popular character among general readers of the original, but also very popular as an *uke* character in the *dōjinshi* scene (figure 9). The circle distribution in the conventions that center exclusively on Japan as an *uke* character show that the most popular *seme* partners are all "white": England ranks first, followed by the United States, France, Prussia, Italy, and Russia (note 16).



**Figure 9.** *Polymorphous and cross-gendered Japan (Kiku Honda) in dōjinshi*

works including amateur manga, illustrations, and postcards. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.6] But Occidentalism is not only a matter of generic relevance attributed to "the West," to "Western" history, or to "whites." Occidentalism is deeply rooted in the modern history of colonialism and imperialism, framing asymmetrical and hierarchic dispositions of identity and alterity. This is evident and enforced in the parody configuration and appropriation by *dōjinshi* authors according to the *seme/uke* code of the *yaoi* grammar. Almost all pairings are framed by and reproduce a geopolitical and geocultural top-down hierarchy. The stronger, aggressive, more experienced, taller, masculine *seme* character is performed by the more powerful nation, while the more passive, younger, effeminate *uke* character is played by the weaker nation: *seme* United States/*uke* England, *seme* Germany/*uke* Italy, *seme* England/*uke* Japan, and so on (figure 10).



**Figure 10.** *Dōjinshi* manga covers. From left: United States × England, Germany × Italy, England × Japan (Koffy 2012; Gessekikan-Haiyorulooop 2010; Chimamire moimoigō, 2010). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.7] As regards the interrelational process of Occidentalism, the interiorization of a Eurocentric cartography plays a relevant role in the popularity of *Hetalia* not only in Japan, but also worldwide, especially in Euro-American contexts. Eurocentrism and whiteness contribute to the immediate familiarity and to the direct appropriation of the *Hetalia* world and characters by Euro-American readers, without any complex mediation imposed by displacing difference or otherness (note 17). This familiarity is further enhanced by the specific stereotyping of *Hetalia*'s original characters according to modern clichés of the so-called national characters, which have been adopted by Himaruya after mostly ethnic jokes diffused among his American friends while he was studying in New York. For instance, Japan is shy and well-mannered, and loves the changes of seasons and technological gadgets, but is clumsy in communicating his feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, Italy is a light-hearted idler, a pizza-, pasta-, and music-loving coward. The United States is an energetic, self-confident, hamburger-eating character who loves

to play the hero but is superstitious and afraid of supernatural beings.

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## 5. Doing intersectional and positional Occidentalism: Nation anthropomorphism, *moe*, and sexualized parody

[5.1] A second crucial aspect for the hegemonic effectiveness of Occidentalism is intersectionality, which refers to a more intrasocietal level (note 18). Occidentalism has been in the modern age a self-definition as "the West," first in Europe and then in the United States, articulated through intertwined paradigms aimed at defining its presumed modern identity: reason, science, progress, universalism, individualism, masculinity, white race, adulthood. In other words, Occidentalism, as any kind of hegemonic identity, is not limited to an isolated or homogenous paradigm. It is instead the effect of a cumulative intersection, mobilizing very different axes of sociocultural identification related to nation, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age, activating very different modes of representation, practices, and affect, and arguably cutting across every dimension of human existence.

[5.2] As Edward Said has shown, this modern self-definition of the so-called West was configured in the imperialist age by a hierarchic contrast with an other-definition about what is or should be other to itself (Orientalism), framing the existence and meaning of "the Rest" of the world as "the East," including Japan. This cultural other, being mainly constructed as antithetical to Euro-American modernity, will be, or must be, reduced to nonmodern paradigms: "the East" or the subaltern "Rest" of the world has been configured as a cumulative intersection of nonmodern paradigms including tradition, emotionality, stasis, particularism, groupism, femininity, colored race, and infancy. The paradigms and combinations of this imagined geography can obviously vary, depending on specific periods, contexts, and actors, and it may not necessarily be configured through a dualistic antithesis.

[5.3] Hegemonic effectiveness requires both interrelationality and intersectionality with regard to the acceptance and active consent from the subaltern other. This applies both to the other-definition of "the West" as cultural other (Occidentalism) made by the subaltern, as well as to the self-definition of the subaltern themselves as "the East" or "the Rest" (self-Orientalism), in both cases interiorizing and reproducing the paradigms and contrastive dualism articulated by Euro-American Occidentalism. The key aspect for Occidentalism is how the interrelational process is combined with a specific cumulative intersectionality activated from the subaltern side. Its hegemonic range relies on how imitation, interiorization, and reproduction of

its intersecting paradigms contribute to corroborating the sameness of discursive identity and alterity; or, on the contrary, are able to introduce some ambiguity, slippages, or even subversive disruptions to the game of mirrors. Hegemony is intrinsically a polyphonic process, which means that Occidentalism is always a mutually constituted process, according to multiple and fluid positions of dominance and subalternity, as well as to the interacting convergence of different discourses and practices.

[5.4] Returning to *Hetalia*, besides its general Eurocentric cartography and fascination for whiteness, it is therefore important to pay attention to specific positions and differences introduced by its recontextualization of Occidentalism, and to acknowledge other intersections related to more ambivalent spheres of identification and to nuanced modes of appropriation. According to a survey conducted by *Hetalia* manga publisher Gentōsha Comics (<http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html>) of general readers who were asked to define *Hetalia* in one word, *nation* was the second most appreciated aspect (figure 11). Nations are anthropomorphized as cute-boy characters (*shōnen*), and, in the absence of a supporting narrative and graphic sophistication, are condensed as the exclusive focus of the short episodes. This means that on the one hand Eurocentrism, whiteness, and geopolitical asymmetry are made clearer and more essentialized as a result of the wide use of stereotypes related to nation, ethnicity, and language, and because characters, at least in the original text, hold only nation names like Japan, Italy, and Germany (note 19). Entire nations are personified through a unified human body, personality, and name, contributing to the erasure of internal diversities and historical complexities. For instance, Occidentalism is enhanced by personifying the United States, Russia, or Germany as strong, blond, active characters, while self-Orientalism is reaffirmed by Japan as a shy, passive, insecure character.



**Figure 11.** *Gentōsha Comics survey among readers on defining keywords of Hetalia: 1, love; 2, nation; 3, pleasure, 4, moe (burning-budding passion); 5, laughter (July 2010). [View larger image.]*

[5.5] But on the other hand, it is the very anthropomorphic and caricatured incarnation of modern nationhood, as seen in the insistence on childish and intimate male-male relations, that introduces an ironic slippage to conventional images of world history, international relations, and national politics. This contributes to its exhilarating effects and stimulates a polymorphous range of symbolic associations and emotions, which have all been crucial in mobilizing the text's widespread readings and adaptations. It is evident in the readers' preferences, where love ranked first, pleasure third, *moe* fourth, and laughter fifth (figure 11). It is even more evident if we consider *Hetalia's* appropriation and multiplication among the *dōjinshi*-related fandom. According to authors, cosplayers, readers, and organizers of the "*Hetalia Only*" events in Japan, two revealing points are recurrently underlined with regard to the attractiveness of the original *Hetalia*, as follows.

[5.6] First, by resorting to cute-boy (*shōnen*) personifications, *Hetalia* has extended to a female readership *moe* inspiring nation personification. Nation anthropomorphism has become popular in the last decade and was originally developed among male-oriented *otaku* culture (hardcore fans of manga, anime, video games, and figurines), but it was limited to cute-girl (*shōjo*) personifications and therefore was mainly targeted to boys and men ([note 20](#)).

[5.7] Second, compared with other popular original works adopted among *dōjinshi*, stories and characters in *Hetalia* are extremely loose in terms of emplotment, setting, and psychological characterization. This discloses infinite spaces of appropriation and parody. It stimulates the most genuine fantasy with regard to preferred nations and coupling combinations of characters.

[5.8] In relation to the first point, *Hetalia's* male author, Himaruya, claims being originally inspired by discussions on the popular Japanese message board 2channel about war and military themes, and specifically about Italy being judged as having the weakest and clumsiest army in the world ([http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/d\\_i0.htm](http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/d_i0.htm)). His inspiration can be considered quite male-oriented, as can be seen in the widespread *otaku* interest in online discussions about weapons, national characters, history, and race. However, the personification of this idea did not take the form of cute and sexy girls, inspiring the complex affective responses of *moe* (Galbraith 2009)—a conflation of childlike innocence and adult desire, an ambivalent and



polymorphous stimulation of pure, protecting, and nurturing feelings for cute and helpless characters (*lolicon*, Lolita complex), and the stimulation of desire for eroticized young girls (*bishōjo*, beautiful girls). In *Hetalia*, the male-oriented and heterosexualized fantasy of *moe* has been transposed to a more female-oriented version, staging a combination of cute boys and preadolescent characters (*shotakon*, or Shōtaro complex), as well as emphasizing their intimate and male-male relationality. All main nations are personified in the original *Hetalia* as cute or androgynous boy characters and are alternated with mini cute versions. For instance, the ancient version of Italy, with his origins in the Roman Empire, is personified as adult, masculine, and strong; the premodern version of Italy is depicted as Chibitalia (Mini-Italy), a babyish and feminized version, wearing the characteristic maid outfit of male *moe* fantasies and shown as the object of attraction for the stronger and aggressive mini cute version of premodern Austria (figure 12) (note 21).



**Figure 12.** Polymorphous Italy in the original *Hetalia*. From left, cute-boy modern Italy (main version), grandpa Roman Empire, mini cute modern Italy, mini cute premodern Italy (Mitarai 2009, 54, 61, 57, 108). [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.9] In relation to the second point, regarding the pleasure of parodying *Hetalia*, it is important to stress that the original is not a straight personification of Euro-American nations or of Japan, but rather a parody of them, a pastiche that oscillates between a homage to Eurocentric history and fascination for whiteness, and the mocking caricature of their national stereotypes and their infantile behavior. Occidentalism thus functions in the original as a kind of discursive hypotext. The hegemonic grand narrative of Eurocentric history performed by "white" actors, so familiar in both Euro-American and Japanese contexts, is transformed by resorting to an effective bricolage of highly popular icons, strategically borrowed from both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures (note 22).

[5.10] Boys' love and *yaoi* fantasies are instead dominant in the *dōjinshi* adaptations, displaying in many cases a male homoerotic and sexually explicit, often pornographic version of Occidentalism (figure 13). On the one hand, anthropomorphized Eurocentrism and geopolitical hierarchy may be further

emphasized as a result of the top-down *yaoi* code of *seme/uke*, focusing on a far more restricted relation and narrative as in the original (note 23). This makes the hierarchic and dualistic dialectic of identity and alterity even more evident. As Kazumi Nagaike (2009) has highlighted in her study on the racialized textuality of commercial boys' love magazines, this hierarchic dialectic is mostly performed as the masculine superiorization of the Euro-American other as *seme*, the feminine inferiorization of the Japanese self as *uke*, and the exotic orientalizing or erasure of "the Rest" of the world.

**Figure 13.** "Learning Western culture." *Dōjinshi* sexualized parody of United States (*seme*) × Japan (*uke*) (3x3Cross 2009, cover, 10). [[View explicit image.](#)]

[5.11] On the other hand, unlike commercial and original boys' love works, these *yaoi*-inspired *dōjinshi* are amateur adaptations, parodies of the original *Hetalia*. So if Himaruya's *Hetalia* is already itself a parody of the hegemonic hypotext of Occidentalism, then these *dōjinshi* are a parody of a parody. As a result of the different subject positions of *dōjinshi* authors living in Japan, the discursive distance with regard to Occidentalism and to Euro-American referentiality is therefore further enhanced and diluted. Himaruya was composing *Hetalia* while living in New York and was inspired directly by Euro-American friends and students when creating his manga characters. *Dōjinshi* authors are instead living in Japan, and therefore recontextualization is shaped both by different gendered positions and by reference to different material, social, and institutional conditions.

[5.12] According to my interviews, *dōjinshi* authors and readers are actually not very keen on Euro-American history and nations, whiteness, the original work and its author, or male homosexuality. That is, *Hetalia* authors and cosplayers are not necessarily interested in foreign countries or concrete persons per se. Most of them have never been to Europe or North America, have never met a white boy or man, and do not necessarily express interest in doing so. Instead, they focus on how to use these settings and icons according to the visual grammar and established conventions of the boys' love/*yaoi* genre in order to share and enjoy them with other fans. Much time may be invested in studying the preferred nation character's history, language, customs, dress, food, and architecture, all in the most minute detail. This includes bibliographic research, online or in libraries, and in some cases short trips to European cities, which may become on their return the setting for their own *dōjinshi* adaptation. Interestingly, this acquired knowledge can also be used to legitimate what might be perceived as an

embarrassing hobby. What matters to these fans are the specific and concrete needs of a teenager or young woman in relation to the gendered and sexualized norms informing external relations with other teenagers, men, and adults, as well as their internal relations with the *dōjinshi* or *Hetalia* fandom (note 24).

[5.13] As the readers' poll suggests, it is the two top-ranked keywords, *love* and *nation*, that provide the reading paradigm among general readers of *Hetalia*, as well as, arguably, the discursive hypotext for the *dōjinshi* parodies. Love as an intense and idealized longing for absolute intimacy among nation characters is ubiquitous and often the only framing narrative of the very short *dōjinshi* adaptations, regardless of the presence or absence of explicit sexual content. It is often romanticized, with a profusion of dating, courting, and bridal symbolism (figure 14). But as the male homoeroticism and often overt sexualization suggest, most of the *dōjinshi* transfigure and parody both hegemonic love (in its modern form of a heteronormative ideology sustained by patriarchal, reproductive, or consumptive societal imperatives) and modern nationalism by insisting on an idealized love, explicit sex, and childish quarrels among nations (note 25).



**Figure 14.** *Dōjinshi romanticism. From left, Italy × Japan, England × Japan, Germany × Italy (Malomondo 2010; Miwa-Sakakibara 2010; Miyasha 2010).*

*[View larger image.]*

[5.14] Cross-gendering or transgendering, combined with explicit representation of sexual intercourse, may induce playful and even therapeutic effects with regard to heteronormative, homophobic, or patriarchal restraints on female readers, fans, and authors in Japan (Suzuki 1998; Azuma 2009). It is this specific kind of mangaesque intertwining of ultimate love, male homosexual relations, and polymorphous cuteness that has proven to be effective in exonerating participants from anxieties regarding real heterosexism and in disclosing autonomous space for experimental fantasies and intimate fan practices. In a more general sense, it has been strategic in establishing over the last few decades the mangaesque media mix of boys' love/*yaoi* as arguably the most diffused genre of female-oriented erotica or

porn production and consumption in Japan ([note 26](#)). The displacement and creative results are immediately evident on the textual and visual level of *Hetalia dōjinshi*, considering the sheer numbers and polymorphous parodies of nation characters. It is also visible on the social and interpersonal levels—consider the proliferating network of *Hetalia* communities, fostered by conventions, circles, cosplaying, and online fandom in Japan and worldwide (figure 15).



**Figure 15.** *Collective cosplay performance in Italy (including the contested Korea-Japan episode) at Rimini Comics, June 2010 (video posted on YouTube by a member of the group, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-fLtXG98T4>). [View larger image.]*

[5.15] However, parodies exhibit ambivalence, a paradoxical double bind with regard to their hegemonic hypotext in terms of critical subversion or repetitive confirmation; this also applies to youth subcultures and their relationship to wider society. Regardless of cosmopolitan idealism, socializing effects, and liberating potential, these parodies do not erase their founding hypotext or pretext, making it invisible or ineffective. On the contrary—racialized Eurocentrism and Orientalism, hierarchic geopolitics, and revisionist history still remain visible, as the South Korean protest and hate speech by European Net surfers both show. It may be too simple to dismiss it as nothing more than narrow-minded nationalism and essentialism.

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## 6. Conclusion: The West or "the West"?

[6.1] Karen Kelsky's account of women's internationalist narratives and practices in late 1990s Japan might also apply to the *Hetalia* world: "The West becomes not so much a source of critical comparative perspective (which can be evaluated for its 'accuracy,' for example) as an imaginative simulacrum infinitely available for the production of discourses that motivate and explain

resistance or accommodation" (2001, 28). But if "the West" as a simulacrum is everywhere, then does it make sense to criticize it? Should we instead resign ourselves to this ubiquity and limit our focus to its strategic uses in order to highlight resistance or accommodation in more specific contexts?

[6.2] Yet *Hetalia's* textuality and related practices display many of the de-essentializing and liberating aspects for female authors, readers, and practitioners, at least in specific terms of sociality, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, that have been widely investigated in boys' love/*yaoi* studies. Fieldwork on *Hetalia* fandom outside Japan, as in China, has focused on the critical potential in stimulating engagement with domestic politics and overcoming parochial nationalism (Yang 2011), or, in North America, on contributing to transcultural networks and allowing socially transformative, critical, and reflexive conversations, even on the controversial issues *Hetalia* itself has raised (Annett 2011).

[6.3] Nevertheless, if we shift our perspective to very different gendered and national positions (male Koreans, Italians, Japanese), we may reactivate mutually exclusive interpretations similar to the ones that have animated the heated debate on boys' love/*yaoi* discrimination of gay men and culture over the last two decades. On the one hand, boys' love/*yaoi* is entertainment for women who indulge in fantasies about homoerotic male intimacy shaped by idealized stereotypes in order to enjoy escapist stories about ultimate love; they may have no interest in real-life, concrete gay men or in their realistic depiction. On the other hand, it may be disturbing for gay men, who may feel uneasy at being objectified by this othering process, or who may criticize its ineffectiveness in overcoming homophobic prejudice in contemporary Japan (Hori 2010).

[6.4] From the wider perspective of a critical Occidentalism, "the West" constitutes a problem not only for its historical origin embedded in colonial and imperialist capitalism, which has configured difference between civilizations, cultures, and people according to asymmetrical relations of geopolitical power. It also constitutes a problem on the intrasocietal level, because as a globalized and dispersed form of hegemony, it frames more specific axes of modern identity/alterity (nation, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality) and is reactivated through their cumulative and fluid intersection. In *Hetalia*, "love" and "nation" may be enjoyable objects of cosmopolitan, cross-gendered, and sexualized parody, at least for its boys' love/*yaoi*-inspired fandom. Nevertheless, as a kind of hegemonic hypotext or pretext, they continue to function as underlying criteria of reference used to mobilize more

emotional, spontaneous, and physical dimensions, ultimately contributing to a biopolitical extension of Occidentalism. Without Eurocentric history and "white" men, and also without "love" and "nation," both the original and its adaptations would be impossible.

[6.5] What is at stake in this critical reading of *Hetalia* is not only the mangaesque reproduction of Occidentalism from below, but also its intersecting paradigms. Are the notions of "the West" intersecting "race," "nation," and "love," as established in the modern age, even if reproduced as postmodern simulacra devoid of empirical referentiality, like the air we must inevitably breathe? Is it even possible to imagine texts and images, or to practice alternative ways of geopolitical, societal, and personal relations, without relying on these criteria, even as parodic hypotexts?

[6.6] Stuart Hall (1990) has discussed inferential racism in contrast to overt racism, referring to those kind of discourses in which a subtle naturalization of unquestioned racial assumptions remains largely invisible even to those who deploy them. I suggest that the contemporary reproduction of Occidentalism relies largely on this inferential process, without depending on an overt or intentional Occidentalism with regard to representational contents in terms of modern racism, nationalism, sexism, and classism. Thus its hegemonic effectiveness is directly proportional to its becoming familiar, naturalized, and ultimately invisible, like the air we breathe.

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## 7. Acknowledgments

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## 8. Notes

1. Even if not using the same terminology, the tangled process involved in the construction of cultural identity in Japan regarding the West and the East has been investigated since the 1980s (Dale 1986; Iwabuchi 1994; Yoshino 1992;

Sakai 1997).

2. Long before postcolonial studies and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Antonio Gramsci addressed the arbitrary notions of West and East, as well as the mutually constitutive relations of hegemonic effectiveness and subaltern interiorization, including Japan (Gramsci [1929–35] 1975, 874, 1419–20).
3. Studies on *Hetalia* have mostly addressed its transnational reception (South Korea, China, and North America), focusing on Web fandom and discourses (Kim 2009; Yang 2011; Annett 2011).
4. Like boys' love, *yaoi* refers to the transmedial constellation of female-oriented manga, anime, light novels, games, and so on, featuring idealized male-male intimacy. Unlike boys' love, which is related to original and commercialized works, *yaoi* is more associated with fan fiction, mostly self-produced, homosexualized short parodies of already existing mainstream works.
5. Fieldwork in Japan was conducted from May to October 2010 as a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science postdoctoral fellow, Department of Sociology, Kyoto University, Japan.
6. The word *Hetalia* of the title is a contraction of the Japanese slang term *hetare*, "incompetent, useless, pathetic," and *Italia*, "Italy." Fieldwork in Italy was conducted from October 2010 to January 2011 as a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellow, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.
7. Some of the minor characters are female personifications (Belarus, Belgium, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Seychelles, Taiwan, Ukraine). For a detailed description in English of all the characters throughout the different media platforms, see the *Hetalia* wiki ([http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_Axis\\_Powers\\_Hetalia\\_characters](http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Axis_Powers_Hetalia_characters)).
8. As for the CD nation character songs from the anime series, my informants (female college students) in Nara, Japan, used to spend 5–6 hours even on weekdays in karaoke boxes, singing, dancing, and performing their preferred character. Except for the first Italy CD, seven character CDs (Germany, Japan, England, and so on) were released monthly during 2009–10, and all hit the top 10 in the Oricon weekly rankings (<http://www.oricon.co.jp/>).
9. Comiket 78 (summer 2010): 1, *Tōhō Project* (2,416 circles); 2, *Hetalia* (1,586); 3, *Reborn* (822); 4, *Sengoku Basara* (575); 5, *Gin Tama* (532) (<http://news020.blog13.fc2.com/blog-entry-788.html>). An online survey of

visitors to Comiket 78 have confirmed *Hetalia*-inspired works to be the most desired items for purchase among female attendees: 1, *Hetalia*; 2, *Reborn*; 3, *Durarara!!*; 10, *Tōhō Project* ([http://otalab.net/news/detail.php?news\\_id=1024](http://otalab.net/news/detail.php?news_id=1024)).

10. At Comiket 80 (summer 2011), *Hetalia* circles diminished but still ranked second: 1, *Tōhō Project* (2,808 circles); 2, *Hetalia* (1,302); 3, *Sengoku Basara* (880); 4, *Reborn* (572); 5, *Vocaloid* (558) (<http://otanews.livedoor.biz/archives/51807832.html>); YahooAuctionsJapan listed 8,443 Japanese *Hetalia dōjinshi*-related titles and 2,565 cosplay-related items (<http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp>).

11. In Italy—which according to Pellitteri (2010, 556) is the Euro-American nation with the highest number of Japanese animation series broadcast on television since 1978—*Hetalia* has been the most popular work among hardcore female cosplay and fan fiction fandoms since late 2009, even before being officially translated into Italian.

12. Some *Hetalia* cosplayers and fan fiction authors in Italy denied me interviews because I mentioned the term *yaoi*. Interestingly, Lucia Piera De Paola, the founder of the first Italian publishing house of *yaoi* manga and novels, Tekeditori, is a veteran activist against homophobia.

13. The picture of Korea touching Japan's breast shown at the National Assembly Committee was not an original but was arguably a product of Web fan art. An English translation of part of the speech is available on YouTube ("*Hetalia* is like a criminal act. Koreans are furious," [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo\\_bt9s9-kM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo_bt9s9-kM)).

14. Jaqueline Berndt (forthcoming) has suggested considering the mangaesque as pointing to "collaborative creativity, codification and mediation, an aesthetic emphasis on fantasy rather than realism and impacts rather than messages, further, an astonishingly precise depiction of emotions and intimate relationships, often at the expense of allegorical and metaphorical thinking."

15. See catalogs of "*Hetalia* Only" events (Sekai Kaigi Series) organized by StudioYOU in Osaka (Intex Osaka, September 19, 2010, 1) and Nagoya (Sangyō Rōdō Center, September 12, 2010, 8).

16. See catalog of "*Hetalia* Nihon Uke Only Event: Sekai no Honda 2," organized by StajioYou in Tokyo (Ryutsu Center, September 5, 2010, 1).



17. For a critical investigation on whiteness in Euro-American media, see Dyer (1997).
18. Intersectionality has been theorized since the late 1980s by feminist sociologists in the United States to examine how attributions of identity interact on different, interdependent, and often simultaneous levels, thus contributing to a systematic configuration of social inequality, as in the case of Afro-American women.
19. In *dōjinshi* adaptations, personal names suggested by Himaruya himself on his Web site are widely used: Italy = Feliciano Vargas; Germany = Ludwig; Japan = Kiku Honda; United States = Alfred F. Jones, and so on.
20. For an investigation of the wider popularity of *moe* anthropomorphism in Japan, see Thompson (2009).
21. Fascination for Italy in Japan has played a prominent role in terms of gender and age since the early 1990s, resulting in recent national surveys listing Italy as the most loved foreign country when considering all female age groups (15–59 years) and all young respondents (15–29 years) (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute 2008, 113–16). A crucial aspect of this popularity has been the ambivalent configuration of Italy as an orientalized "West" framed by an ambivalent process of both a superiorization of its past (Roman Empire, Renaissance) and inferiorization of its premodern present (chaotic nation, joyful people, family-style cuisine, romanticism, fashion, and so on) (Miyake 2012).
22. Sexualized and male homoerotic overtones of Himaruya's *Hetalia* characters remain mostly implicit, allowing appreciation by a wider readership who are not interested in or may even detest *yaoi*-inspired themes.
23. Most of the *Hetalia* cosplayers in Japan perform as an *seme/uke* couple, while cosplayers in Italy appear more often in large groups as well as alone.
24. Among fandom in Italy, these needs and problems are very similar, attesting to the globalized structure of heteronormative and patriarchal norms, as well as the potential of *Hetalia* and *yaoi* fantasy to cope with them and to stimulate liberating pleasures, expressions, and practices. What differs is the specific way of expressing and performing the *Hetalia* world. Compared with Japan, there is less manga parody and much more emphasis on collective cosplaying and fan fiction, as well as some involvement of male manga/anime fans. For a public, collective, and joyous performance, see the *Hetalia* Cosplay Group at Rimini Comics 2010 (figure 15).

25. In this sense, love may be considered as an expression of the recent pure love (*jun'ai*) boom, which cuts across both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures (Honda 2005). Love as an ambivalent coexistence of both emotional attachment and ironic formalism and its connection to nation may well represent a gendered variation of the more general tendency to enjoy the nation as a depoliticized icon. In this regard, cynical romanticism has been pointed out as an emergent mode of postpostmodern youth nationalism in contemporary Japan (Kitada 2005).

26. See Akiko Hori (2009) for an analysis of the gendered gaze and visibility in male- and female-oriented erotic/porn manga.

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