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Blonde is the new Japanese: Transcending race in *shōjo manga*

Olga ANTONONOKA

Abstract

There is not much research available on the issue of race in generic manga. If addressed at all, the focus is on manga as overcoming the confines of race. The assumption that manga representations overcome racial barriers can lean on the fact that characters' supposed race and visual representation frequently do not correspond, creating a character design visually abstracted from any specific race. Furthermore, on a global scale, manga has a racially diverse readership: readers project themselves onto allegedly Caucasian manga characters regardless of their own skin colour. In this paper I will focus specifically on shōjo manga, and will trace how visual racial abstraction transcends specific race, yet remains involved with race-related topics such as alienation and otherness. I will start by analysing possible meanings of race-relevant elements in character design with emphasis on gender. In order to do that, I will begin with investigation of Oshiyama Michiko's analysis of essential gender traits in shōjo manga. Further, I will introduce several discourses of race in manga, such as theory of "speciesism" by Thomas LaMarre's and Terry Kawashima's theory of "selective reading" of racial traits. In the framework of shōjo manga, I will focus specifically on the image of the Westerner, from early shōjo manga elaborated on by Ōgi Fusami and Ishida Minori, and proceeding with analysis of the eroticized image of the foreigner in contemporary women's manga by Nagaike Kazumi. I will introduce theory of "plastic lines" by Thomas LaMare in order to focus on the construction of "the other" in relation to the visual representation of race via specific lines. I intend to conclude that shōjo manga may transcend visual traits of any specific race, but that it retains the recurring theme of conflict and otherness, which in part is related also to racial issues. Visual abstraction from specific race, however, appears to imply "otherness" as an external feature, placed by society upon the characters' bodies, while the visual representation of their interiority facilitates the impression of sameness, or absence of otherness.

Introduction

Race¹ is frequently addressed in the media of comics. In celebrated works such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi,

¹ Race is a category of population classification based on common ethnic or genetic descent. However, the term is so intricately caught up in national, legal, discursive and scientific history that the use of it is always socially constructed. Further, racial categorisation is routinely assigned

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang and others the topic of race is addressed as both a basis for identity construction, and the context of “otherness” and discrimination. Race is thoroughly explored in the comics and these works are in turn analysed by extensive research. However, in case of Japanese mainstream manga, the issue of race is rarely explored. When addressed academically, mostly the focus is placed on manga as overcoming the confines of specific race.² In this context, the assumption that manga representations overcome racial barriers appears to lean on the fact that a character’s supposed race and physical appearance frequently diverge, creating certain visual abstraction from any specific race. Moreover, contemporary mainstream manga seldom addresses specific racial problems, such as discrimination, neither does it represent race as a basis for identity formation.

Furthermore, on a global scale, manga has multiracial readership: these readers project themselves onto racially abstract, yet in most cases light-skinned, manga characters regardless of their own skin colour.

Of course, character designs which are visually abstract from specific race are not characteristic of all manga. While *seinen manga* (young adult manga), especially *gekiga* genre frequently favour recognisable racial features, *shōnen* (boys’) and *shōjo* (girls’) manga are famous for

on the basis of visible characteristics, especially skin-colour, and so it may be only indirectly connected to biological inheritance. In other words, visible racial markers have entered the realm of the sign, where their biological origins do not determine the way they are used in **ideological** communication, culture, or politics. (Hartley 2011, 220).

² In Japanese discourse of manga, this specificity is referred to as “mukokuseki”, which literally means, “without a nationality”.

flamboyant designs unrelated to a character's race. In this paper I will focus on *shōjo manga*, which has a long history of subversive contents and subversive readings. I will focus on the race, and on the gendering of certain race and racial features in the conventions of *shōjo manga*.

Although the generic character design has been diversified since the genre's inception, on a larger scale it still preserves following tendencies: positive (which frequently is synonymous with innocent) characters in *shōjo manga* generally have big round eyes, blank or light eye and hair colour, which becomes vibrant on the cover illustrations. Beautiful, evil, and sexually aggressive characters are depicted with slanted narrow eyes that rise at the outer corners as a sign of sexual deviousness and insubordination or independence and aloofness. However, interpreting these signs as racially significant would be incorrect, as a diversity of such allegedly racial features appears within one and the same character; respectively, juxtaposition of racial-looking traits in character design renders it visually racially abstract.

One possibility is to perceive visual racial abstraction in character design as symbolic representation of universality, which allows multiracial readers to identify better with the characters. Matt Thorn suggests that visual design of manga characters is abstract and dependent on the specific artists' style. Therefore, unless otherwise specified it would appear Japanese to the Japanese reader by default. He suggests that "Caucasian"-like perceptions of manga characters by white readers is based on the fact that US readers expect Asian to be represented with Asian stereotype-features, such as dark hair, slanted

eyes etc., and therefore interpret the unspecified stylised characters as Caucasian by default (Thorn 2004). Terry Kawashima (2002), through her analysis of contemporary titles, in a similar vein suggests that while design is abstract, separate elements may be recognised, conditioning the reader to focus *selectively* on certain visual elements of such juxtaposed character design which they recognise as close to their own racial self-image. In precisely this way, manga is supposedly transcending any *specific* essentialist notion of race. Meanwhile In “Shōjo manga to seiyō – shōjo manga ni okeru “nihon” no fuzai to seiyōteki imeji no hanran ni tsuite” (2004), Ōgi Fusami traces the gradual historical transformation of Caucasian-looking race-relative features into conventions which represent the “universal” qualities of the character, consciously introduced in early shōjo manga of the 1960s, which was not intended for the international reader.

Moreover, in early shōjo manga from the 1970s, such as *Poem of the Wind and the Trees* by Takemiya Keiko or *The Heart of Thomas* by Hagio Moto, race is sometimes addressed directly in the context of “otherness” and discrimination. However, the visual representation of characters was also largely ambiguous. For example, visual elements of race such as darker skin were alluded to with the use of screen-tone only in the introductory page, while later the character was depicted with the same blank skin as other characters.

As a result, there is no visible racial difference in character design. Rather, race is indicated through other conventions, related to

verbalisation or sometimes through culturally specific narrative settings.

I will trace in this article how in *shōjo* manga the elements that could be perceived as racial are disassembled and serve to mark a specific gender rather than a specific race; this culminates in the trope of gendering a certain race. In turn, this produces a dual “otherness” in a variety of contexts. Consequently, this paper will attempt to critically analyse the possibilities and limitations of racially abstract visualisation and the possibility of manga to transcend and subvert an essentialist reading of race and gender. In the multifaceted media of manga, the visual dimension has proved of great importance as one of the levels of meaning-construction. In this article I will focus on the racially abstract character design, with an emphasis of its role in the construction of gender and vice versa. I will pay special attention to one gendered race trope in *shōjo* manga: the Westerner.

Selective Reading of Racial Traits: Marked and Unmarked Races

Terry Kawashima in her article “Seeing Faces, Making Races: Challenging Visual Tropes of Racial Difference” (2002) analyses the mechanism of reader-identification in relation to the racially abstract characters of *shōjo manga* in the case of Caucasian readers. She addresses the assumption made by white consumers that multi-coloured character designs are modelled after the Caucasian race. Kawashima acknowledges that certain traits may be perceived as racial features, however she emphasises how the juxtaposition of supposed different racial features derails attempts of discerning any specific race.

In order to inspect how racial traits are juxtaposed visually in *shōjo manga* characters, Kawashima focuses on the *Sailor Moon* manga and anime series and the widespread misconception of *Sailor Moon* protagonists appearing white to white readers.

Kawashima suggests that in order to identify with characters better, the white reader focuses *selectively* on certain traits, noticing for example round, light eyes as signs of Caucasian descent, while ignoring the same character's allegedly Asian small nose, mouth, or flat, round face that present a certain balance of features, characteristic of Asian faces, in her opinion.

Throughout her argument, Kawashima builds up a theory that the visual juxtaposition of different racial traits becomes an invitation for multiracial readers to identify with the respective traits which they recognise as close to their own self-image. The same character may be selectively interpreted as Japanese and as Caucasian, and both Japanese readers and white readers may therefore interpret these abstract depictions as identification anchors. Therefore, the deformation style of *shōjo* manga appears to encompass a variety of signs.

Matt Thorn, in his online article "The Face of the Other" (2004, n.p.), suggests that in general that visual character design in manga does not so much adhere to stereotypes, as they are subjugated to the author's specific style, and racial diversity is omitted even in the stories which

are introducing race and racial elements in the narrative setting, in order to maintain the stylistic visual consistency.

He further objects to the assumption that manga character's faces appear Caucasian due to colourful eyes and hair as well as the size of the eyes and their proportion (Thorn 2004, n.p.). Thorn suggests that since manga is primarily targeted at the Japanese consumer, the non-marked visual representation of a human being will be by default read as Japanese. Therefore, the homogeneous visual depiction of both Caucasian characters and Japanese or other Asian characters in manga do not mean that the model for these representations had been initially Caucasian. Thorn suggests that character design is "unmarked" by stereotypes (Thorn 2004, n.p.).

Readers who have been raised in a symbolic system, that uses Caucasian as default, would expect the markers of Asian to indicate the "Asian" race, and in the absence of such stereotypes, perceives the "unmarked" character as their own default, that is, in Matt Thorn's argument – Caucasian.

Therefore, manga indeed transcends specific race. I would like to suggest, that in precisely this way, manga is engaged with issues of race by deleting the visual distinction and giving a variety of juxtaposed stereotypical features new symbolic significance. Let us consider how certain race-relevant elements are further employed in gender construction. And enquire if through inspecting certain gender-related tropes there is a possibility to trace back the racial context.

Gender and Conventional Character Design

The basic literacy of *shōjo* manga conventions allegedly conditions the reader to interpret the character design, including the race-like features, as indicative of personality and gender rather than race. In Japanese *shōjo* manga criticism, certain visual conventions are usually regarded as signifiers of one specific gender-stereotype, such as innocent character, macho character, femme fatale, etc.

Nevertheless, dismissing the possibility of stereotypical racial traits connoting actual race in certain contexts is also dangerous. Furthermore, manga is not only composed of visual elements, as Ōgi Fusami reminds us, while maintaining visual homogeneity, the race of the characters in *shōjo manga* is indicated otherwise verbally, or visually through interaction with background and other means (Ōgi 2004, 545).

Oshiyama Michiko's analysis of gender representation in Ikeda Riyoko's *Rose of Versailles* presents a good example of frequently used essentialist gender tropes in *shōjo manga* which remain relevant for the majority of contemporary titles. Oshiyama assumes that femininity is indicated by light colours and soft curved lines, big blue or green eyes, round faces, and blonde wavy hair. These traits are further amplified by the flowing ribbons, ruffles, flowery elements on the backgrounds and harmonious flow of panels into one another. The epitomes of such femininity are the young Marie Antoinette and Rosalie. In contrast, strong male characters are distinguished by smaller eyes, low-key eyelashes, pronounced noses, and elongated thin

faces. Traits we see in Fersen and André. The adapted table below lists essential elements, which Oshiyama analyses in her text (2007, 165-170).

Masculinity	Femininity
<p><u>Face:</u> Narrow eyes; eyes with outer corners turned up; short eyelashes; long, angular face; prominent high-bridged nose; bigger mouth without lip-contour; emphasized eyebrows.</p> <p><u>Hair:</u> Shorter hair; dark or subdued and cold-hued hair; limited highlights; darker skin tone on color illustrations.</p> <p><u>Body:</u> Bigger body frame in relation to other characters, wide shoulders, broad frame, musculature.</p> <p><u>Clothes:</u> Masculine clothes, suits, uniforms, emphasized masculinity of the body-shape.</p>	<p><u>Face:</u> Wide, round (innocent) eyes; long eyelashes; round (childish) face; small nose; small mouth with lip contour; thin eyebrows.</p> <p><u>Hair:</u> Light (warm hued) hair; long hair; curly hair; highlights showing the glossiness of the hair; elaborate hairstyles.</p> <p><u>Body:</u> Smaller body frame in relation to other characters, narrow shoulders, narrow body, no muscle.</p> <p><u>Clothes:</u> Feminine dress elements, flowing fabrics, frills, lace, patterns, emphasizes the smallness of the frame.</p>

Furthermore, Oshiyama traces how these elements are combined within specific characters, indicating their personality with respect to gender (Oshiyama 2007, 165-170). For example, independent and malicious women are depicted with longer face and slanted eyes. Or

certain male characters have bigger eyes and softer features, which are visual indicators of their more passive personalities.

Both male and female features constitute the protagonist Oscar's visual design, who had been born a woman, but raised as a man and a soldier. In the narrative, everyone knows her actual biological sex, but it is her ambiguous gender-role that becomes one of the central problems of the story, in contrast with the excessive femininity of Marie-Antoinette. By analysing eye-shape, length of eyelashes, and in the case of colour illustrations, also shades of hair colour, Oshiyama traces cross-dressing Oscar's gender ambiguity. Narrower, sharper eye-shape may indicate dominance/subjectivity in a specific situation, for example, when Oscar takes command of men. But similar visual markers are also used when Oscar is presented as a strong counterpart to female leads, such as Marie Antoinette and Rosalie. Or, in reverse, when she attempts to look feminine, and objectifies herself for her unrequited love-interest – Fersen, Oscar's eyes are depicted rounder with much longer eyelashes, while in her romantic scenes with her true love André, their visual similarity fosters the impression of their equality.

Respectively, gendered elements may not just indicate visually the personality of the character, but furthermore they fluctuate in the same character's design, emphasising their various faculties in specific situations, similarly to Oscar's shifting appearance between more feminine and more masculine. Within the same manga work, these traits can fluctuate, visualising narrative context. Specifically, these

changes imply a changing power-position (subject/object) and gender nuances.

However, Oshiyama does not touch upon racial and class connotations of visual designs in *Rose of Versailles*. Although *Rose of Versailles* is set in Europe and all characters are Caucasian, we see that a variety of gender traits appear to overlap with certain racially recognisable elements. Furthermore, race-related traits such as darker hair on servants and poor people, contrasted to the overwhelmingly blank-haired elite (most elite characters are depicted without wigs), are bypassed.

In addition, in *shōjo manga* racially-coloured visual traits are mostly blended within the same character. *Shōjo manga* faces combine different racial traits in one and the same character's visual representation, achieving visual abstraction as well as borrowing symbolic meanings and stereotypes from a variety of sources. This provides spaces for re-contextualisations beyond plot-related contents of the manga.

Speciesism and Plasticity

Another stylistic and narrative trope that comes from early manga is replacing race-specific depictions with another type of visual distinction. In his analysis of pre-war anime such as *Norakuro* (1935), *Momotarō: umi no shinpei* (1945), or in the post-war, Tezuka Osamu's animal-centric franchises such as *Janguru taitei* (1965) Thomas

LaMarre in his article “Speciesism, Part I: Translating Races into Animals in Wartime Animation” focusses on anthropomorphic animals as the racially amalgamated ambiguous character designs in relation to the concept of “speciesism”. During the war and in the aftermath of it, essential “otherness” had been represented as various animals coexisting in peace or conflict and in a vertical hierarchy. In his example of *Norakuro*, LaMarre demonstrates how in this animal metaphor-based narrative certain animals could be recognised as of a specific race, such as Tiger standing in for Korea, however, he suggests that such an approach not only substitutes animal species for race, but essentialises the “otherness”, justifying the ostracising of the “other” who is inherently bad or inferior. He further elaborates on the scenario of *Momotarō Umi no Shinpei*, where animal races coexist peacefully and help human Momotarō. However, in their position as helpers and other species we see a clear hierarchy of superior (Japanese) human and inferior “animals”. Furthermore, on the example of Tezuka’s “*Janguru Taitei*” franchise, LaMarre demonstrates that while sentient animal “species” are not metaphors of actual races, they epitomise certain differences and conflicts as they cannot crossbreed, even if they live in harmony and cooperate (LaMarre 2008). Species imply that inherent, essentialist distinction is acknowledged as justification for expelling the “other”, however is no longer equivalent to recognizable race or specific incident.

Further I will apply speciesism theory to the unification of race in manga character design. Going back to Terry Kawashima and her example of selective reading of racial traits, we might notice how the

villains in *Sailor Moon* are visually unified with human-characters, however, they are inherently “others”, and are demonised and punished, their inhuman origins mark them as inferior and bad. What defines these villains are certain features, such as slanted eyes, thin faces, and sexualised behaviour.

Visual dimension simultaneously with plot-development produces a variety of direct emotional responses from the reader. Therefore, it is legitimate to assume, that specific visual interpretation of racial and gender traits indicates a variety of symbolic layers which are not directly involved in the narrative; however, they may broaden the scope of re-contextualization. Specific direct impact of visual contents is explored by Thomas LaMarre in his article “Manga Bomb: between the lines of *Barefoot Gen*”, where he introduces the concept of plastic and structural lines (2010b, n.p.). His theory emphasises how visual forms affect the reader beyond the direct comprehension of contents. He differentiates between the lines that are subjugated to signification of the form, and the lines that possess figural force prior to signifying the form; specifically, precise, geometrical structural lines and pliant plastic lines. In this paper, I will particularly focus on the plastic lines. Harking back to Sergei Eisenstein’s analysis of Disney’s animated animals, he coins the term “plasticity/plastic line” that signifies the ability of characters to visualise life-force by transcending their own physical barriers as well as the physical barriers of others. Respectively, when being impacted, they spring back, or when their body freely changes shape in visual response to outside factors beyond physical capacity. Ultimately, plasticity implies that the character

possesses an immortal body throughout the narrative or in a concrete situation (LaMarre 2010b, 280-282).

I would like to apply these two theories, speciesism and plasticity, further to *shōjo manga*, and to the specific racially distinct character trope which existed from as early as 1960-70s – namely the Westerner. I suggest that in *shōjo manga* we might encounter plastic lines not so much as related to immortality, but to transcending the character's physical shape and visualised merging of physical and internal emotion. The plastic line in *shōjo manga* visually indicates a character's emotional interior; it is another trope to focus on the interior world of the character, as it interacts with external events. Plasticity can be traced in characters as they visually merge with background designs or other characters, transcending the panel frames, and correspondingly transcend the spatial and temporal logic of the page layout. This type of visual depiction provides a physical impact upon the reader beyond the comprehension of the text. Furthermore, this occurs especially in scenes with interior monologue, when the outlines of the character's body merge with the lines of the background, decorative elements, and panel layout, emphasising the emotional response of the character to certain events. Designs in plastic line present more than sequential narrative. In short, the plastic line in *shōjo manga* visualises interiority and administers a direct physical impact on the reader beyond the sequential comprehension of the plot.

Interrelating LaMarre's "species" and "plastic line", we may ask: What happens, when plastic or structural lines are being read not only

in a gendered, but also in a racial context? Does unified visualisation of interiority suggest that “otherness” is a staple applied from outside after all, and having nothing to do with essential, inherent qualities of the character?

Subverted West, Gendered Race

Shōjo manga of the 1960-70s appropriated the Art Nouveau period of quasi-Europe as their favourite setting. Paraphrasing Takemiya Keiko, Ishida Minori observed that the West in *shōjo manga* was a semi-fantastic world which maintained roots in “reality”, and that precisely the reiteration of “realistic” details in the setting granted believability to the symbolic characters (Ishida 2008, 144). According to Ōgi Fusami, the Westerner in *shōjo manga* was intended not as the “other”, but implied the unification of interiority of *shōjo* and *shōjo* desire across the world (Ōgi 2004, 546-548).

According to Ōgi Fusami, in this period the princess character and her aristocratic lifestyle were at the centre of girls’ desires as epitomes of universal *shōjo*. However, the West as a space for *shōjo* dreams did not go hand in hand with a representation of it as domineering or masculine. Gradually *shōjo manga* subverted the hegemony of the West by objectifying, or in Ōgi’s terms, “feminizing” the masculinity of the West. This was achieved via unifying visual gender conventions of male and female characters respectively, making the male appear more feminine and/or underage (Ōgi 2004, 546-548; Ōgi 2008, 152).

I would like to develop this idea further and suggest that male and female counterparts were equally represented in plastic lines. Thus the otherness of the West and otherness of the male is reinterpreted through *shōjo* desire.

Such male characters appeared both in heterosexual scenarios and later on in *shōnen ai/boys'* love scenarios (quasi-homosexual male-male stories developed as a sub-genre of *shōjo manga* in the 1970s). In these stories the ideal men frequently looked indeed European, but also underage, and their visual representation was rendered in plastic lines that created soft, infantile, effeminate males, which blended with the decorative backgrounds, trees and flowers just as much as did their female counterparts. Thus their emotions were visualized and focused on at the same level as *shōjo* protagonists'.

In these stories the ideal men were rendered in plastic lines that visualized their emotions on the same level as that of *shōjo* protagonists. Visualised interiority made them simultaneously identification anchors and the object of the reader's gaze. The combination of race and gender in this type of character became indistinguishable and carried a high erotic charge.

According to Ōgi, through such depictions the West became subservient to *shōjo* subjectivity. It was not only de-masculinised, furthermore, these characters allowed girls to escape the norms of Japanese femininity. Nevertheless, although *shōjo's* desires and interests were supposedly universal, these characters were

represented as non-Japanese, symbolizing the “otherness” girls felt in themselves as they confronted expectations of Japanese femininity (Ōgi 2004, 548).

But did the West remain “the other” to the readers? Or was “the other” constructed on a different level? Where and how is otherness articulated, if at all?

I would like to pay attention to the narratives about mixed-race characters such as *Poem of the Wind and the Trees* by Takemiya Keiko or Hagio Moto’s *The Heart of Thomas*, which address racial discrimination. Incidentally, these and many more titles are from the subgenre of *shōjo* manga, which developed in 1970s, currently referred to as boys’ love or *yaoi*. These stories are based on quasi-homosexual romantic relationships between men, however are written by and aimed at young women. This genre started off as an experimental and critical venue and addressed a variety of issues, such as gender, class and race. Nonetheless, despite accentuating the problem of racial discrimination, the only visual indication of race in these manga is darker olive skin, which is hardly represented visually, but is rather alluded to. For example, in *Poem of the Wind and the Trees* protagonist Serge is depicted with darker skin tone only in the introductory panel. Later in a few psychedelic scenes of lovemaking, Serge’s darker skin appears in screen tone, to accentuate his grounded nature, his earthly character as contrast to the airy whiteness and transparency of his vulnerable lover Gilbert. Therefore, these racial features acquire symbolic signification beyond racial identity. In Hagio Moto’s *The Heart*

of *Thomas*, protagonist Julismole is introduced as having southern blood in him, and olive skin, but this is never indicated visually through utilisation of tone.

There is no frightening or negative difference, no visual discord in the fabric of the work or in the lines. The discord is introduced verbally, while visual representations remain within the boundaries of overall style.

Ambiguous race gradually became a trope. This type of character would be identified as “the other” by the supporting cast in the plot, while being accepted by the second romantic protagonist as very special.

What Ōgi does not mention is that the ultimate negative “other” to the protagonist, respectively, the antagonists also became rendered in plastic lines. These plastic villains were visually attractive, frequently constructed in accordance with feminine gender conventions combined with conventions of representing the attractive “evil” archetype, such as slanted eyes, contoured lips, and elongated faces.

These villains’ interior motives were visualized in scenes of symbolically charged internal monologues. Their flowing hair blew in the wind, their eyes with a sexy slant had stars and highlights in them, and they wore flowing costumes that merged with backgrounds, flowers and other decorative elements. The sexually deviant villains were marked as “other” by their violent sexuality, which was visually represented in their design, their gestures and clothes. Inherent negative otherness of the plastic villain became encoded in specific gender-tropes, which serve as essentialist visual identifiers of their “otherness”, much like skin colour would.

Their internal monologues served to demystify them to the reader; presenting a variety of reasons for their being evil. Their weakness is revealed, subverting their power. Despite being villains and quite powerful, these characters, too, were established as objects for the reader's gaze. They, too, became an approachable gender.

According to Ōgi, objectifying characters allowed girls to find their own subjectivity, and escape the norms of Japanese femininity (Ogi 2004). Nevertheless, following Ōgi's logic, it appears, that although *shōjo's* desires and interests were supposedly universal, these characters were represented as "the other" and as non-Japanese, symbolizing the "otherness" girls felt in themselves as they confronted expectations of Japanese femininity, while growing into their adult bodies and responsibilities. The universal ideal was in conflict with their own race and gender.

Eroticised Racial Stereotypes: Racialised Gender

Ōgi Fusami in her essay "The West in *Shōjo manga*" elaborates on how, in the 1970s, the West was gendered as beautiful and de-masculinised, introducing the first examples in gradual development of gendered race or race-related gender (Ōgi 2004).

Through the examination of 140 periodical boys' love magazine issues published between 2004 and 2008, including "BE-Boy", "Chara", "Ciel" and "Gush", Nagaike Kazumi approaches the issue of race in contemporary manga by applying post-colonial studies (2009, n.p.). She investigates how racial stereotypes are related to a specific gendered and sexual behaviour, showcasing race-relevant character

tropes in contemporary boys' love manga which is a descendant of the early works, such as *The Song of the Wind and the Trees*, and is therefore continuously operating with similar tropes, and generous utilisation of plasticity, specific to shōjo genre. Out of 140 magazines, one hundred featured stories with foreign characters, proving popularity of the trope. In particular, Nagaike is intrigued by the power relationship in these stories. Respectively, Nagaike has traced a tendency in most of these stories of foreigners playing the role of the so-called *seme* characters—that is, penetrating partner in BL relationships; meanwhile *uke* — the penetrated partner—is Japanese. Nagaike specifically focusses on foreign *seme* (*gaijin seme*) character type. These foreign *seme* characters are represented as “superior” and are mostly depicted as Caucasian or Arab men. In Nagaike’s words, Japanese female readers show a predilection to consume “superiority” via characters who are marked as non-Japanese. Superior in this case means: noble birth, economic superiority, sexual proclivity, for example, elegant European aristocrats, persistent macho American new rich or somewhat deviant Arab princes with harems and petrodollar wealth (Nagaike 2009, n.p.).

Thus, in certain settings, the race of a character is gendered and sexualised to the point that the gender of the character becomes indivisible from the racial stereotype. This “otherness” has morphed into a sexually titillating element.

It goes without saying that erotic attraction can also belong to an Asian or Japanese character—there are plenty of scenarios featuring noble and rich Japanese *seme* characters. But in the case of *gaijin seme*, the emphasis is clearly placed on “otherness as foreignness”, and it is

the foreignness amplified by higher status which facilitates erotic attraction. Furthermore, this plastic foreigner, who also inevitably succumbs to the irresistible charm of Japanese lover, has to repeatedly make sacrifices for the privilege of becoming monogamous with his *uke*.

In these stories too, characters who are supposed to be Western or Arab actually do not look much different from their Japanese lovers, with the exception of occasionally applied screen tone in case of Arabs. Race is indicated through clothes, setting and verbalisation. Similarly to boys' love manga with a mono-racial setting, the equalising visual style facilitates both character types—that is, the active *seme* as well as the receiving *uke*—as equally available for reader identification, and thus provides different power-positions as entries to the same situation. Nonetheless, a strong stereotyping is at play which equals race with a certain gendered stereotype.

Conclusion

The trope of the gendered Westerner/“racial other” which had been conceived in a racially conscious way came to represent the claim of shōjo manga for universal values. Gradually the connection to an actual race had been lost and these characters transformed into approachable gender. Racially abstract characters came to represent on the one hand the “self” as sharing the universal value-system, yet on the other hand “the other” who is not threatening; respectively – the object of the gaze. The crucial quality of this character is the ability to shift between

“sameness” and “otherness” and it can be traced back to its racial origins.

As a result, the line between gender and race became very blurred. They transcend one another while simultaneously enforcing stereotypes. Yet at the same time, racial abstraction asks “what are the criteria for recognizing essential differences?”. If a visual representation of interiority renders characters homogenous, the “otherness” ascribed to them must have come from outside.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the allegedly race-free character design neither necessarily addresses nor negates issues of race, but may indeed showcase these issues from another angle. Racial abstraction culminates in visual sameness of characters’ appearance; however, it participates in the discourse of “otherness”. By doing so, the question is raised: where exactly is “otherness” articulated?

By avoiding any specific race and any equation of race with phenotype/physical appearances, manga potentially showcases race as social performance. That is to say, through its visual rendering, manga may raise an awareness of the fact that race is a discursive construct, not a biological essence. In addition, we can assume that *shōjo manga* is not just race-free, but transracial. It employs racial traits as markers of gender and social rank, retaining a tension between self and other which can be related to racial issues under certain circumstances.

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