Princess Robot Bubblegum" Critiques "Cool Japan:" An Illustration of the Impact of Japan's Soft Power Movement through a Cross-cultural, Cross-media Response
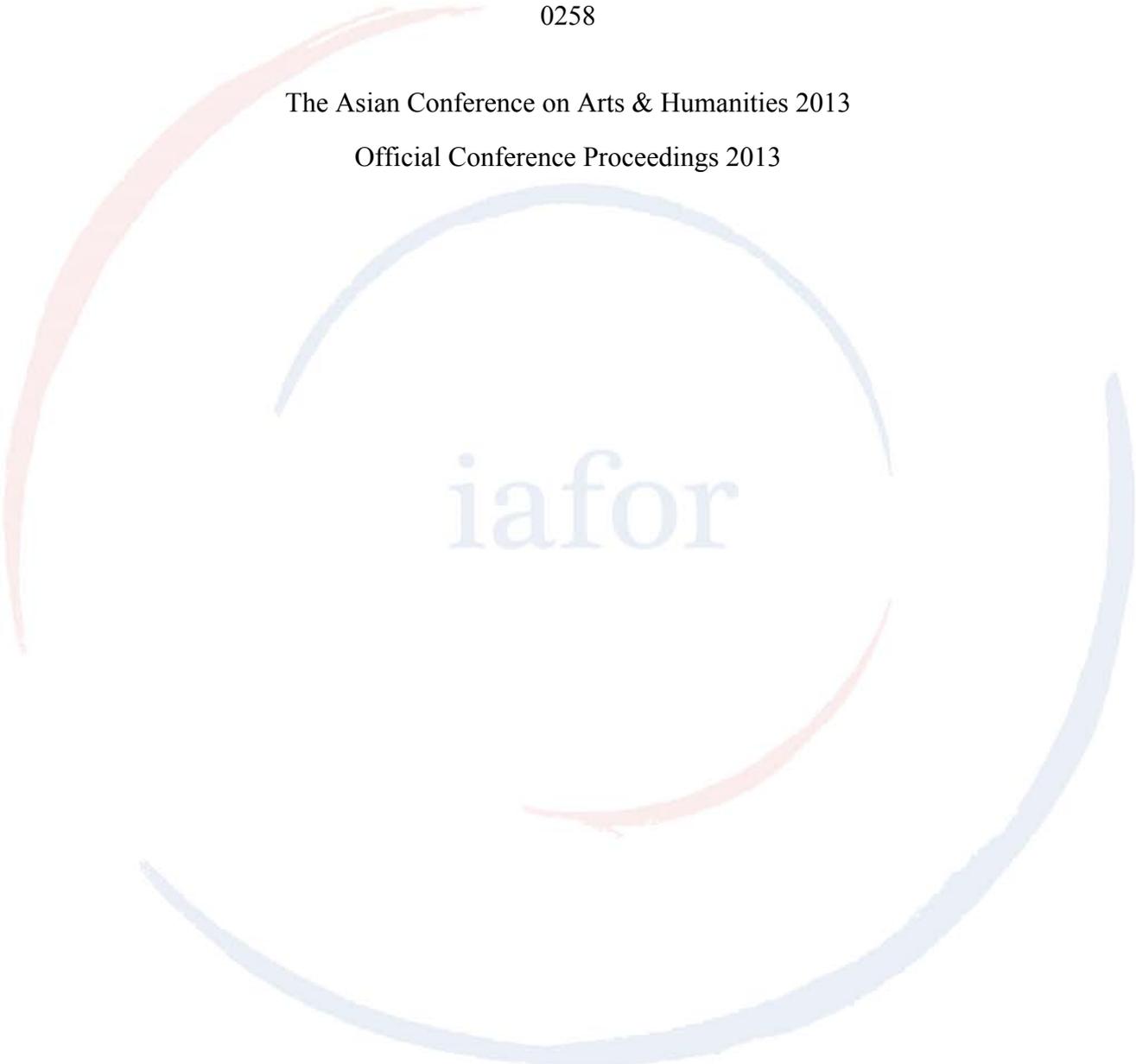
Christina Bethel

East Carolina University, USA

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As an anime fan, I was particularly intrigued by *Princess Robot Bubblegum,* an anime parody found in the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV* that has stirred controversy in both video game and anime fan communities. Some members recognize the parody's alienation as a critique of Japan's attempts to build cultural capital and soft power; others argue that the episode illustrates how humor can be used to foster global connectedness.

To examine this situation, I have begun to conduct a cultural and rhetorical analysis of the parody through the lens of Dani Cavallaro's concept of anime synergy (2007). In this presentation, I argue that the inclusion of this parody in one of America's most popular video games illustrates Japan's soft power success. I will explore what Japan's anime success means to Japanese and American culture in terms of connectedness and alienation by focusing on how *Princess Robot Bubblegum* parodies five values commonly treated by anime and the practice of incorporating fan service that has become popular in anime.

Animerica: Anime Synergy in Action

But first, let's develop a shared vocabulary and some common contextual ground. For content, I've focused on four key terms common in the anime community and two abbreviations common in the gaming community that I've been asked to define in academic conversations, and for theory, I've focused on concepts I've been aware of for a long time as a fan but that I'm only now building the academic vocabulary to analyze and discuss as a scholar. Anime is the term that has been most widely accepted by both the fan and the academic communities who discuss the medium of Japanese animated films and television shows. Anime differs from other popular animation in American culture in many ways, but most notably in depth and complexity of cultural, thematic, and character exploration, and in animation style. Literary scholar Susan Napier (2001) includes a detailed historical analysis of the term in her appendix to *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*.

Hentai is the adult erotic genre of anime being parodied in Grand Theft Auto IV. As Mariana Ortega-Brena (2009) explains in "Peek-a-boo, I See You: Watching Japanese Hard-core Animation," hentai often gets conflated in with pornography in both perception and popular use. However, as she also explains and as I have discovered through my fan experiences, hentai is erotic art, not pornography. Japanese writers and animators seem to use this art form to explore social and cultural issues with a depth and complexity that deserves much more scholarly and popular attention than it currently receives. Historian Andrew McKevitt (2010) in the article, "'You are Not Alone!': Anime and the Globalizing of America," identifies otaku was a long-time slur that referred to socially inept individuals obsessed with anime who become reclusive and focus all of their energy on fan activities.

However, Ortega-Brena and McKevitt agree that the term seems to have been appropriated by fan communities, particularly in the West. And this appropriation has not gone unnoticed by the artists, who demonstrate a keen rhetorical awareness of their audience by using fan service to create and nurture fan communities. Fan service is the practice of including generic elements and allusions designed specifically to appeal to long-time audience members. This practice has become common across multiple media platforms because it illustrates artists' appreciation for

their audience members. Fan service also illustrates the social, dialogic nature of art and is one of the avenues where we can observe anime synergy in action.

I discovered this instance of anime synergy through observing game play of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. *GTA IV* is the abbreviation used in both fan and academic communities to refer to this internationally popular video game. Over 50 articles have been published in English about this particular video game, and according to Forbes.com, it has sold over 22 million copies since its 2008 release. And TBOTG is the abbreviation used to refer to "The Ballad of Gay Tony," a set of additional playable missions that were released after the initial game, in which players may continue to experience the world of Liberty City from the perspective of a new character. This downloadable content is where the episode of *Princess Robot Bubblegum* originally appeared.

"Cool Japan" and Japanese soft power: Exploring Potential Motivations for Japan's Quest to Foster Anime as a Global Phenomenon

In The Future of Power, Joseph Nye (2011) argues that "states are no longer the only important actors in global affairs; security is not the only major outcome that they seek, and force is not the only or always the best instrument available to achieve those outcomes" (19). One of the types of power Nye describes that influences global affairs is "soft power," which he defines as "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (21).

American scholars such as anthropologist Anne Allison (2009), sociologist Jonathan Abel (2011), and historian Andrew McKevitt, all writing for international, cross-disciplinary audiences, discuss Japan's efforts to gain soft power through strategic production and international distribution of anime. Scholars and fans agree that anime's unique success as a medium comes from its versatile appeal to wide audiences. "Cool Japan" is the most common term I have found used in academic research to refer to the movement to explore the cultural power that Japan has gained through creation and distribution of Japanese cultural material internationally. Jonathan Abel defines "cool" using two categories of meaning: First, the historical meaning "of cool as form of cultural production,… a style of art that maintains a particular stance towards society. And second,… cool as affect in cultural reception,… a mode of desire for that which resides at the limits of comprehension" (61). He both critiques and perpetuates use of the term "Cool Japan," explaining that by studying something, it loses its coolness, but he also recognizes the cultural power that Japan has gained by fostering intercultural competency and global connectedness.

One of the ways this connectedness manifests itself is through widespread, active fan communities that are international, intercultural, and interactive. Napier analyzes these fan communities, and in the same appendix where she defines anime, she presents a profile exploring the cultural identity of the anime fan. Myron Lustig & Jolene Koester (2010) define cultural identity as "one's sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group… formed in a process that…involves learning about and accepting the… [shared] beliefs, values, norms, and practices" of a particular group (142-3). Rebecca Black (2008) also explores the cultural identity of anime fans in Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction.

Cavallaro's concept of anime synergy makes perfect sense when we consider the prevalence of these communities and the potential soft power they represent. In Chapter 11 of Anime Intersections: Tradition and Innovation in Theme and Technique, Dani Cavallaro defines anime synergy as the ability to "persistently engineer[s] fruitful exchanges between disparate geographical areas, their cultures and histories, as well as between discrete media and genres" (169). According to this definition, anime is a cultural tool being used to foster intercultural competence, and the existence and fan response to *Princess Robot Bubblegum* illustrate part of the tool's effects.

The GTA franchise has also become interesting to cultural studies because of the value of its genre as a potential acculturation tool. Marjorie Zielke and her colleagues (2009) use GTA IV as the example to introduce and define the term "living world game" in the article "Serious Games for Immersive Cultural Training: Creating a Living World." They define "living world" as an immersive 3D video game that develops a shared set of beliefs, values, norms, and practices for characters within the game that the player must learn to succeed within the game world. They assert that "living world" games are valuable tools for teaching culture.

Before we look more carefully at Princess Robot Bubblegum as an example of anime synergy, it will be helpful to briefly explore the history of anime in America. Andrew Mckevitt asserts that historians have only begun to explore "the impact of global economic and cultural exchange within U.S. borders through histories of consumption and globalization" and uses "the case of anime…as one tangible illustration of the impact of cultural globalization" in the past 35 years (894). The earliest anime introduced into U.S. popular culture in the 1960s and '70s, through series like Osamu Tezuka's *AstroBoy* and *Speed Racer*, was barely recognizable as Japanese. In the 1970s and '80s, the animation style shifted to what Japanese literature scholar Susan Napier refers to as "nonculturally specific." McKevitt acknowledges that the "'nonculturally specific anime style' appealed to American audiences… because it was aesthetically transnational – its apparent nonethnic style facilitated its diffusion across borders," and he adds that "the mingling of Japanese and Western aesthetics, genres, and racial and gender categories…permitted anime to be a truly hybrid global product" (900).

But it was not only the visual style of anime that appealed to wide audiences. McKevitt also demonstrates how anime distribution in the U.S. reinforced the development of activitst fan communities as a further illustration of Japanese soft power over U.S. cultural evolution. When he explains Robotech's success in U.S. syndication during the 1980s, garnering syndication in 90% of the U.S. market, he argues that "likely teenage boys watched for the fast-paced action sequences…while adult women and men appreciated the mature 'space opera' storylines about friendships, romance, and the tragic social consequences of war" (903). Anime's tendency to explore complex social issues through a combination of engaging character development and interaction, imaginative plots and settings, and exotic yet familiar visuals seem to have contributed largely to what McKevitt calls "anime fandom's most conspicuous characteristic[:]…its emphasis on activism within the community" (905). Through his explanation of fan activism's three primary forms, "fan clubs, conventions (or 'cons'), and…an underground, self-published, English-language literature on anime," McKevitt argues that this fan activism allowed anime

fans to foster a sense of community among themselves and begin to develop a cultural identity (905).

Across several texts, Napier seeks to develop a dynamic profile of the anime fan community as "an increasingly diversified audience, expanding from its original core of university students to include professionals in high tech industries, finance, and law....a thoughtful, intelligent, and articulate group of people" (2001, 240-1). Napier developed a fan profile survey in response to what she saw as stereotyping being perpetuated through scholars' tendencies "to see fans in somewhat narrow terms," which Napier saw as an injustice to fans whose interaction with anime she saw as "deeply engaged, transcending issues of national boundaries, content, style, or ideology" (2001, 242).

McKevitt, Allison, Napier, and Abel describe a variety of forms of fan activism across different contexts illustrates the potential and real ways in which anime can be and has been used to further Japanese political, economical, social, and cultural agendas through agenda-setting, persuasion, and positive attraction, Nye's three criteria for building soft power. Anne Allison even establishes a link between the Cool Japan movement, which she refers to as J-cool, and the concept of soft power (93), using the example of political activist Amamiya Karin to explain Japanese affective activist rhetoric (103-105). Her purpose is to demonstrate a causal link between the Japanese cultural "shift towards immateriality" and Japan's reproductive crisis as well as to "consider the subversive potential" of what she calls "affective labor," a type of Foucauldian biopower (91-92) with an ultimate purpose of exploring "J-cool" as a subversive cultural tool in the context of modern Japanese youth activism being used to combat a global trend into "care deficit" (99).

As I mentioned before, I came to anime as a fan. My parents met in Okinawa, where my mother became pregnant with me. Because of their affinity for the culture and the somewhat unique context of how I came into this world, Japan has always held a special place in my heart. When I was young, my mother recorded one of Tezuka's Unico films for me when she saw it on American television because she recognized it from her time in Japan. I watched the tape so many times during my formative years that I wore it out. For many years, I searched and was unable to find a copy to watch, but the beauty of the characters, the animation style, and the message stayed with me.

Since beginning to research anime and cultural identity, I've come to realize that the title character's values and actions have heavily influenced my own identity formation. I was lucky to be able to attend a Tezuka exhibit in Kyoto in 2008 as part of a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad where, although I was unable to obtain a copy of the film, I purchased several Unico-related items, including a change purse with the following message printed on it: "Unico is a little unicorn that does not take to human beings usually but he takes to one with a pure, honest and gentle heart, with a sense of security. Unico can show his magical powers for people being kind to him and once he takes to someone he shall bring eternal happiness to that person."

Because of my intimate emotional and implicit cultural affinities for Japanese culture, I realize I must work hard to develop a critical distance from the subjects I study relating to Japan. Abel's explanation of how "conscious fetishism" and "Japanophilia" become problematic modes of inquiry when they "articulate [themselves] through a privileged point of [false] authority [that]…still contains an unquestioned preserved

point for the coolness of Japan" (63) reminds me to keep my bias toward Japan in check as I transition from "fan" to "responsible researcher". Analyzing the parody *Princess Robot Bubblegum* has helped me develop a stronger critical distance, along with a new appreciation for genres within anime and video games that I previously dismissed.

As I observed *Grand Theft Auto IV* game play more critically for my research, my feelings about the game started to change. *GTA IV* was a game I had purposefully avoided until I learned about *Princess Robot Bubblegum* because of the controversies surrounding the game's apparent celebration of gratuitous violence and organized criminal behavior, I discovered that while I could see why these controversies emerged, this game develops a rich, complex argument about the state of American culture. I realized that this game deserved not only my, but the academy's, attention.

My first encounter with *GTA IV* in academic publications was in Zielke et al's article. Marjorie Zielke and her colleagues claim that "as a major strategy of the game, players spend time learning Liberty City's culture" and that video games with "living worlds" like *GTA IV* can be successful as cultural tools because of "the veracity of the 3D environment...and immersion...learning tools" (49-50). Adoption of video games as cultural training tools by the U.S. military demonstrates the U.S. government's acceptance of interactive media's effectiveness as an acculturation tool.

If we take into account GTA IV's international success in the gaming community - the 22 million copies estimated to have been sold is a highly conservative estimate of population impact – it becomes important to ask the question "What do players learn from GTA IV," but that's a question for a much larger project. For now, all I'll say on what we learn in *GTA IV* is that the subtitle captures the theme well: "Where the American Dream Goes to Die." You play and meet characters who have been marginalized by society – immigrants, African-Americans, GLBT individuals, criminals, and so on – and who struggle to survive and thrive in a world indifferent to their struggles.

GTA IV incorporates all three of the functions of humor described by Claire Dormann and Robert Biddle in the article, "A Review of Humor for Computer Games: Play, Laugh and More": "Superiority theory suggests the social aspects of humor, while relief theories address emotions, and incongruity theory is related to the cognition and mechanisms of humor" (806). Dan Houser, British writer and developer of the GTA series, and Lazlow, an American radio personality who has also become the dominant radio personality in GTA's Liberty City, are masters of humor and rhetoric. Much of the humor injected into the game takes the form of in-game media, which includes a dynamic variety of radio and television stations with limited content conceptualized and scripted by Lazlow, an radio talk show host reminiscent of Howard Stern, and Houser.

According to Dormann and Biddle, humor plays an important role in making "games richer, more engaging, as well as fun…[by drawing] on the functions of humor in the real world for enhancing communication, learning, and social presence" (803). Dani Cavallaro's purpose in defining and illustrating anime synergy is to illustrate the positive and powerful impact of anime on art forms and genres, such as video games, in order to argue anime's value as a cultural tool with similar aims. By including an anime parody in its living world's radio and TV programming, *GTA IV's* creators

acknowledge the ubiquity of anime in American media as well as the cross-cultural connections between anime and gamer fan communities. While the sometimes "hostile" jokes in *Princess Robot Bubblegum* exhibit mostly superior and incongruous humor*,* the authors also incorporate tension relief significantly by addressing common taboo anime topics.

Princess Robot Bubblegum as Cultural Identity Critique: A Scathing (and Dated!) Reaction to Japan's soft power success

One of these taboo topics is Princess Robot Bubblegum herself: the star character of the series is an orphaned young woman who, in the reflexivity characteristic of anime that Ortega-Brena (2008) describes, stars in a hentai series. *Princess Robot Bubblegum* is, on the surface, a scathing and dated critique of Japan's efforts to build soft power and cultural capital through international distribution of anime and related entertainment media and products. The title character is a princess who practices a school of martial arts that incorporates sexual practices as moves. The episode's existence itself illustrates the game developers' understanding of the cultural identity of their fan base.

GTA IV authors Houser and Lazlow (2008) use the episode to explore several Japanese value paradoxes, including: the affinity for peace and preserving honor through the use of what seems to many to be gratuitously and graphically violent scenes; the dual affinities for preserving the environment and adapting both the environment and the self through technology; and the desire to promote globalization and global connectedness while privileging Japanese cultural values. On the surface, *Princess Robot Bubblegum* is a scathing and dated critique of Japan's efforts to build soft power and cultural capital through international distribution of anime and related entertainment media and products. The game seems to argue through the anime parody against the capitalist element to "anime video game synergy[, which] has been deeply affected by commercial imperatives" (Cavallaro, 2010, 180).

Napier recognizes the partial validity of the critques levied against anime here. She criticizes Pointon and Newitz for their narrow framing of the anime and hentai fan, but she admits that "both critics are correct to a degree when they suggest that a prime audience of young males often find a 'fantasy escape and source of identification' within anime's graphic violence, voluptuous female characters, and politically incorrect male-female relationships" (*Anime* 241). However, seven years before *GTA IV* and *Princess Robot Bubblegum* were released, Napier emphasizes the limited validity of such arguments when considering "that anime's attraction for Westerners is far broader and more diverse" than this narrow critique implies (*Anime* 241). Other outdated critiques relate to localization, translation, and animation quality issues that, while they still exist, have lessened considerably over the past 30 years, mostly due to fan demand and activism.

Princess Robot Bubblegum opens with a collision of unexpected images: a battle in futurist Tokyo is implied by four *Power Rangers*-esque characters taking flight amid neon skyscrapers. Then cut to Princess Robot Bubblegum lying in bed, only shoulders and arms exposed as she reads a copy of *Restoring Honor for Idiots* while half-heartedly reassuring her tentacular monstrosity of a bedfellow about his lack of performance. This image presents the princess as an empowered though anti-heroic female character. Their dialogue is interrupted by the princess receiving a call from

"Master Hentai," her martial arts trainer, chiding her for being late for training. She replies by equivocating: she tells him that she has been "tending the garden," an apropos double entendre. The humor here plays on an allusion to the Victorian sexual metaphor of the garden and the literal sexual encounter with an anthropomorphized plant.

The developers also include shockingly realistic visuals reminiscent of the incongruous yet meticulous attention to detail in anime that often illustrates the paradoxical blending of nature and technology in Japanese environments. For example, as Princess Robot Bubblegum exchanges dialogue with her radioactive tentacular plant monster partner, a fly buzzes around them, and a train rolls by the apartment window The game seems to argue through the anime parody against the capitalist element to "anime video game synergy[, which] has been deeply affected by commercial imperatives" (Cavallaro, 2010, 180).

Houser and Lazlow (2008) also explore the Japanese desire to both preserve traditions and adapt them for modern contexts, as well as the treatment of sexuality as both something exotic through incorporation of fantasy and technology and something mundane through what seems to many to be gratuitous focus but seems to better mirror the realities of how humans experience sexuality than traditional Western media treatment. One of the fan service elements of *Princess Robot Bubblegum* is the tentacle rape scene that Ortega-Brena notes has become a trope in hentai but has a rich, complex history in Japanese erotic art. The scene is an allusion to the first hentai film to become popular with Western audiences, to which Ortega-Brena, Napier, and Cavallaro all make reference: *Urotsuki-doji*, or *Legend of the Overfiend*. This blend of science fiction, slasher horror, and gratuitous sexual violence seems to be the most often-cited example of hentai in current scholarship. She explains, though, that the first recorded instance of erotic art involving tentacles was Hokusai's 1814 woodblock print *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, a depiction of an obviously consensual sexual encounter between a human woman and two octopi (2009, 20). This connection is new for me, so I have only begun to explore the significance here.

Brad Rice of *Destructoid.com* reinforces the datedness of the critique in the 2009 news article "GTA IV isn't helping anime with *Princess Robot Bubblegum*," and as an anime fan, he feels the need to defend the improvements to anime against the outdated critique. However, I don't think that the significance is lost on the episode's writers. Houser and Lazlow mark themselves as members of the fan communities they criticize by demonstrating an intricate understanding of both the source medium and their fan base. Based on the quality of character and cultural development in *GTA IV's* living world, the writers are most likely aware that their critique of anime is both narrow and outdated. They likely realize that fans like themselves, and like me, will appreciate the nostalgic nature of the critique instead of interpreting it as a critique of current anime, and they are capitalizing on the common anime trope of incorporating fan service.

Anime creators successfully build soft power through fan service by increasing and blending use of popular genres and archetypal characters. In their anime parody, Houser and Lazlow combine multiple genres as well: hentai, science fiction, fantasy, shojo, and traditional martial arts generic elements are all easily identifiable within the 11-minute episode. And the characters Princess Robot Bubblegum, her tentacular bedfellow, Master Hentai, the blind samurai, and the princess's animal sidekick Saki

are all representative of archetypical anime characters. As fan service, they also incorporate references to popular Japanese cultural elements through Tokyo, dojo, and nature scenery and a plethora of visual and auditory references, like the otaku boys waiting in line at the panty vending machine that transforms into a mech robot. It's also common to find fan service referencing other popular culture phenomena through intertextuality, and including specific and sometimes gratuitous hyper-sexualized scenes, like the training montage reminiscent of *Sailor Moon* and the tentacle rape scene, which Princess Robot Bubblegum refers to jokingly as "monster, monster rapey-time," implying that the scene is both a tired trope and an expected fan service scene.

Embracing *Princess Robot Bubblegum* and Learning to Laugh at Ourselves

Globally we need to build stronger awareness of how popular media actively participates in the framing of political, economic, and cultural agendas. Nye recognizes that "in an information age, communications strategies become more important, and outcomes are shaped not merely by whose army wins but also by whose story wins" (19). And Japanese stories have been winning international audiences, and particularly American audiences, for decades, inspiring other artists to respond. But if Houser and Lazlow are critiquing anime as nostalgic fan service through their parody, what are the real issues they're trying to address, and should viewers, particularly members of anime and gaming communities, be offended?

I would like to suggest that *Princess Robot Bubblegum* is more likely designed to act as an example of the kind of subversive affective labor Ann Allison describes. When I hear the princess complain about her sexual martial arts training or her less-than-ideal working conditions, I interpret it not a scathing critique of fetishizing anime but a complex and layered argument against practices in the American sex industry and an illustration of the value of animation as a medium for exploring human rights issues in ways that will captivate audiences without compromising the rights, safety, or security of live human beings. Their argument is nuanced and connects dynamically to the theme of oppression, in this case, of laborers in the sex industry.

Princess Robot Bubblegum is an example of the kind of subversive affective labor Allison describes in "The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth" (91-92). *Bubblegum*'s mundane and reserved attitude about having a consensual sexual encounter with her on-screen rapist, being continually objectified by Master Hentai who also acts as the father figure for the orphaned princess, and engaging in competitive conversation with the blind swordsman of Teppanyaki about whose occupation is worse seem to illustrate Houser and Lazlow's desire to promote more ethical treatment of sex workers than to illustrate a need for genre reform in anime.

And by examining responses to *PRB* from anime and gaming fans, we can observe at least two affective responses to the Japanese attempt to secure cultural capital through US popular culture: from a few, validation of the critiques the writers make; from some, recognition that the critiques are superficial and outdated; and from others, recognition that even if some of the critiques are valid, the amount of time and effort Rockstar put into developing such a high quality parody illustrates their love for anime and reinforces the need to be able to laugh at ourselves.

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