

Dirty Pair of What?

Cloning texts and subtexts in *The Dirty Pair* comics and yuri fan fiction

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YURI GOOD GIRL. KEI BAD GIRL. TOGETHER, THEY MAKE THINGS GO BOOM.

– Adam Warren, interview

Yuri and Kei are two genetically enhanced cartoon vixens uniformed in tiny chrome bikinis who tote big guns and destroy planets in the service of fighting crime. Armed with bombs, high-tech gadgets and a mastery of kung-fu, they work as “Trouble Consultants” for a futuristic “pangalactic supragovernmental organization” called the Worlds Welfare Work Association. Although they call themselves “The Lovely Angels,” the rest of the universe pejoratively know them as “The Dirty Pair” because of their Pandora-like habit of accidentally unleashing fatal catastrophes in the process of doing their job. Yuri is the long-haired “good girl” who strives to be properly modest and demure. Rei is the spiky-haired “bad girl” with a reckless temper who talks trash and flaunts her sexuality. Despite their opposing personalities and frequent catfights, Yuri and Kei are a devoted team and best friends. The Dirty Pair have appeared in varying incarnations throughout their history, from their 1980 creation in a series of Japanese novels by science fiction author Haruka Takachiho, through a half-dozen Japanese anime series for television and cinema which have been translated into English and found an eager audience in the United States.¹ This paper will focus on two parallel representations of the Dirty Pair that originated in the U.S. — the ongoing, officially licensed, pseudo-manga series created by Adam Warren and published by Dark Horse Comics, and the proliferation of “yuri” (lesbian)² amateur fiction distributed by fans primarily via the internet. Both official and unauthorized American renditions of the Dirty Pair story engage with fantasy, pleasure, and sexuality in ways that potentially disrupt dominant representations of heteronormative sexuality and gender expression. While they often reify certain cultural ideologies of gender and race that privilege the desires of a dominant white male audience, both texts also produce multiple, unpredictable possibilities for female/lesbian fantasy through very different but interconnected systems of creation and distribution.

Adam Warren’s bright, bloody and frenetic *Dirty Pair* comics parody as well as enact the sexual titillation and techno-fetishism typical of mainstream “girls with guns” science-fiction/action-adventure manga. Stylistically and narratively opposite to the visual density of the comic book series, yuri fan fiction based on *The Dirty Pair* is text-only and earnestly sentimental in exploring the often overwrought emotional lives of its overtly lesbian characters. While *The Dirty Pair* comic series is published and distributed through a mainstream comic book industry that is dominated by straight male producers and readers, yuri fan fiction’s relatively recent profusion online is decentralized and non-commercial, and the race, gender and sexual identities of its online communities are indeterminate. What are the connections between the licensed, heterosexually situated, hard-copy comic books and the unauthorized, sexually ambiguous, online realm of yuri fan fiction? How does the rifting of normative gender and sexuality in the *The Dirty Pair* comics through parody, exaggeration, ironic distance, and infinite subtext work differently than in yuri fan fiction about the Dirty Pair, which overtly represents homoeroticism as well as graphic sexual acts between women in the utopian, romantic, unironic mode of melodrama? Does writing subtext into text exchange desire for satisfaction and produce representations that foreclose further experiments in fantasy and are subsequently bland? How does the communal act of discursively exploring *The Dirty Pair*’s homoerotic subtext, when

proliferated throughout the web, change the way that the ‘original’ or official Dirty Pair texts are read?

They’re violent! They’re controversial! They’re scantily clad! –Fatal But Not Serious
Six *Dirty Pair* comic book series have been published by Dark Horse Comics since 1988.³ Written and drawn by American comic book artist Adam Warren, the series imitates the visual language of Japanese manga – gigantic, kewpie-doll eyes, speed lines, unusual panel shapes, and graphic violence. However, unlike the translated Japanese comics which are marketed in the U.S. as manga, *The Dirty Pair* is written and drawn in the United States, in English, and primarily for an American audience. The comic book’s density of playfully exaggerated signs, including the de-contextualized cultural signifiers appropriated from Japanese manga, produces manifold layers of irony and subtextual meanings.

Embodying the fantasy of possession and control over new technology and technical jargon, the Dirty Pair are masters of high-tech gadgets and lethal toys, as well as gadgets and lethal toys in themselves. The comic book satirizes this techno-fetishism through the outrageous secret weapons embedded and concealed in Yuri and Kei’s cyborg bodies. In *The Dirty Pair: Run From the Future*, Yuri tosses her razor-sharp hair to slice off the arms of her captors and Kei deploys her strobing underpants to induce seizures in a gang of criminals. The Dirty Pair’s bodies are repeatedly called out as manufactured products of biotechnology that can be upgraded, re-installed, replaced, or cloned. In *The Dirty Pair: Fatal But Not Serious*, Yuri is attacked by her evil clone, who has been neurologically imbalanced to produce self-loathing and rage, and programmed to believe that she is the real Yuri and that the real Yuri is a clone. However, the punch line of the series is that after both the original Yuri and her “copy failure” are killed side-by-side in a bloody spectacle, it is the cloned Yuri who has been revived and reunited with Kei by the end of the story. The reader recognizes that the “real” Yuri has been abandoned and replaced by her clone, but subsequent series cavalierly continue without further reference to the switcheroo, in the way that soap opera characters are played by different actors between seasons without any narrative interruption. In other words, female bodies in *The Dirty Pair* are not essential. Rather, these bodies are arbitrary, synthetic iterations and the distinction between original and real vs. copy and fake and is both unstable and indeterminable.

The racial mapping of Kei and Yuri, particularly in relation to the comic book’s imitation of Japanese manga, subverts certain dominant representations of Asian women, but eventually posits Asian women as less threatening and more assimilable into Western/American culture than Asian men. The Dirty Pair’s perfect English and modern girl power sensibilities code them as absorbed into the prevailing Western culture, in contrast to the backwards Oriental patriarchy represented by the evil, Japanese-speaking robot who curses Kei as a “geno-fixed bitch” and “miscegenated whore.” (*Fatal*) The accusation of miscegenation, ostensibly referring to the fact that the Dirty Pair are mech-implanted, is particularly nuanced in its direction at the brown-skinned, red-haired Kei, whose un-Japanese features combined with her bad-girl sexual openness mark her as bi-racial, and like the cultural stereotype of the “sexy mulatto woman,” the very incarnation of both miscegenation and the sexual availability of women of color to white men. In the binary of western/oriental, dominant/submissive, masculine/feminine, Yuri’s exaggerated femininity, as well as her pale skin and long, blue-black hair, code her as more “Asian,” but still more assimilable than the utterly foreign Asian male. Fear and hatred for the post-modern, cyberpunk world of racial hybrids and bodily pastiche which the comic book celebrates is displaced to a robotic Asian male Other who seeks to preserve natural racial purity and to keep women in their natural place.

Like many mainstream comics in the “bullets ‘n’ booty” genre, *The Dirty Pair* comics lavishly fetishize hyper-sexualized female bodies and their uncontrollable capacity for wreaking mass destruction. When explosions and evil criminals have failed to tear their clothing into suggestively draped shreds, the Dirty Pair disport themselves in metal underwear and high-heeled boots, asserting a dominatrix-like sexual potency. The comic panels frame Yuri and Kei’s bodies to maximize tantalizing displays of their gravity-defying cleavage, splayed thighs, and pert bottoms, even as they dispatch evildoers in violent combat. The series *Fatal But Not Serious* cleverly anticipates the standard debate over its representation of dangerous female sexuality (“Dirty Pair or Lovely Angels?”) by parodying the opposing spectator positions of cultural feminists, anti-sex feminists, media theorists, and especially comic book fans, all of whom have converged at “Kei ‘n’ Yuri Con” – a convention for Dirty Pair fandom modeled after the famously geeky comic-cons.⁴

A parade of spectator positions is lampooned one after another, from the anti-sex feminist stand-in, “Jeanne Eichler, Genetic Upgrade Activist, Thinks Yuri and Kei are Negative Role Models,” to cultural feminist stand-in, “Rachel Lazallari, ‘Paracultural Pundit,’ thinks The Dirty Pair are cool (maybe).” The religious fanatic accuses the pair of being “dressed like whores, spreading mass death and untold destruction,” while the creepy, stuttering fanboy salivates over “t-their lithe, taut, perfect young bodies always on display” and the young fangirl chirps, “Hey, I’m a nineteen-year-old woman, and nobody is scared of me, right? But they’re nineteen-year-old women, and practically all of humanity lives in fear of them! ...Now that’s real power!” Where in this saucy, self-reflexive send-up of all these possible critiques is there room for critique? Despite its knowing self-awareness, the comic book reflects only a smattering of the multiple identifications possible in relation to these outlandishly dangerous and sexual female bodies. It limits the discussion to whether *The Dirty Pair*’s portrayal of women is negative or positive (for straight men and women). What spectator positions are conspicuously absent? The comic book’s mockery of comic book fan subculture provides a useful counterpoint to the actual queer subculture of yuri fan fiction readers and writers. The availability of “licensed” and “unlicensed” Dirty Pair simulations at Kei ‘n’ Yuri Con speaks to the spectator’s desire to create and experience repetitions of Yuri and Kei as shaped by his/her own sexual fantasies, and hints at the culture of yuri fan fiction:

Oh, we’ve got all kinds of sims! Hundreds of scenarios! Low-memory amateur sims and big-budget disaster recreations, fully interactive and semi-passive scenarios, all featuring ‘Los Angeles Bonitas,’ Kei ‘n’ Yuri! Adult Kei ‘n’ Yuri sims? Sure, we’ve got plenty of ‘em. A few SimRelationship™ long-term scenarios where you go through an epic, tumultuous romance with Kei, say... and a couple hundred homebrew pornsims, involving The Angels in every conceivable kink, fetish, and sick situation you can think of... (62)

Contrary to the mainstream comics visual dichotomy where gender is usually very clearly marked, both the person advertising these “AI-generated interactive simulations” and the person shown stumbling out of a simulation booth are gender-ambiguous, suggesting the possibility of polymorphous spectators outside of traditional heterosexual gender roles.

What do a bunch of straight guys know about lesbian sex? – “About Yuri”

While much critical work has been done on the “yaoi” or slash fan fiction genre, where male characters in popular culture are homosexually paired in amateur fiction⁵, less attention has been directed towards the less prevalent and less distinctly female-marked subgenre of lesbian images and fiction known as “yuri” that imagines sexual scenarios between “beautiful girls” from manga

and anime. Yuri fan fiction authors can be read as critical spectators who take heterosexual narratives and “queer” them by inventing sexual relationships between the women, creating alternative texts that potentially re-define the heteronormative comic book discourse. While the fans of yaoi are overwhelmingly self-defined as straight females (though this assumption is also worth questioning), yuri fans are a less clear-cut mix. Female/female fan fiction is marginalized within the already marginalized arena of male/male fan fiction, and its internet fan base elides the cultural background, age, gender, and sexuality of its participants. Establishing the identity of members of these marginalized online communities is therefore problematic. While some online yuri fans are openly politicized under the rubric of homosexual, bi-sexual, or queer, other fans express multiple and ambivalent identity categories:

The Mission: ...to unite the online community in expressing their acceptance and support of YAOI/YURI couples and of homosexuality in general. We want to show the world that we're proud to support real gay and lesbian relationships as well as made up ones.
(Clay)

People like to read shoujo-ai [girl-love] for a variety of reasons. For some of those who have a soft spot for warm-and-fuzzy-feeling romantic stories, it is the appeal of seeing a nice girl-girl relationship, which while not rare, is also not as common in anime fan fiction as some of us would like.

Others get bored with predictable everyday situations in anime fan fiction, where the roles in relationships are clear cut: the man's job is to defend, provide food and shelter and be manly, while the woman's job is to support the man, keep the food and shelter straight, and be demure. In a lesbian relationship, these roles are not clear cut at all; the relationship becomes exciting and unpredictable again.

There are also those (many are heterosexual males) who like to see their favorite female character(s) involved in a romantic relationship. Rather than watching or reading about a female-male relationship and concentrating on the girl (while mentally blocking out the guy), it is more satisfying to see a female-female relationship and concentrate on both of the girls. This also allows the character to be depicted in a relationship without appearing as “some other guy's catch.” (Mak)

The second excerpt is particularly notable in that it first queers things up by casting lesbianism as an exciting romantic seduction in contrast to boring and utilitarian heterosexuality, but then re-centers the heterosexual male spectator as the privileged position vis-à-vis representations of lesbian relationships. In either case, the manifestly disembodied nature of the web forefronts the instability of all identity categories in imagining spectators and subject positions.

Lesbian sex scenes are an accepted strategy for turning on straight men. In *Run From the Future*, Yuri clutches the barely conscious and barely clothed Kei in her arms after saving her from certain death, and we see a close-up of Kei bringing her fingers to Yuri's lips as if poised for a kiss. Because *The Dirty Pair* comics are primarily circulated in a comic book market dominated by heterosexual male fantasies, the series' overbrimming lesbian subtexts seem engineered to ultimately recuperate the primacy of heterosexual male desire. Thus the queer potential of the Yuri/Kei simulation machine in *Fatal But Not Serious* seems hot and enticing, but is immediately shut down as “sick.” However, Judith Butler elaborates on psychoanalytic interpretations of fantasy to postulate that sexual fantasy is a site of multiple significations that cannot be contained in a unitary subject identification:

There is, then, strictly speaking, no subject who has a fantasy, but only fantasy as the scene of the subject's fragmentation and dissimulation; fantasy enacts a splitting or fragmentation or, perhaps better put a multiplication or proliferation of identifications that puts the very locatability of identity into question. (492)

Thus comic books like *The Dirty Pair* that appear to cater to heterosexual male fantasies are open to other subject positions. Readers can explore queer subtexts within storylines that on a literal level disavow any homoerotic content but nevertheless invite a lesbian interpretation. As if demanding a full disclosure of a suppressed lesbian fantasy from the official text, yuri fan fiction forces the lesbian subtext into explicit representation. Fan fiction authors write alternative fantasy narratives into existence that would otherwise be steamrolled by dominant heterosexual culture. This amateur fiction is often awkward and unpolished compared to the slick packaging of the comic book series, but its non-commercial, dispersed circulation through disembodied online communities forms a powerful parallel to the officially authorized interpretation of the *Dirty Pair* story proffered by the comic book series.

Rather than fixating on the allure of gadgets, space ships, and gravitational manipulation grenades, yuri fan fiction usually focuses on the emotional as well as sexual entanglements between the female characters in the story. While the writing often contains lesbian sex scenes, a large portion of yuri fan subculture is focused on how "cute," "sweet," and "romantic" female-female couples are, as well as on doomed relationships and impassioned death scenes that are designed to function as tear-jerkers:

Now, you are a beautiful, strong woman. It's a shame I will not be there to fall in love with you, marry you, all those special things...So I write this letter for you to remember me by. I wish I could turn back time and change everything. I wish I could have just a few days... I would hold you high in the air, days in the park, kisses, lovemaking, outings... But I cannot turn back time. So I'll cherish those memories dearly, and I hope you do the same. Sometimes that's all you have. Promise me you'll live your life to the fullest. Don't have any regrets like I do. Regrets will forever bring you down. Be happy. Marry a nice girl and have a family of your own. Keep your eyes on your dream. I know you'll make a great Agent one day, and I know you will make a great mother and wife. But just remember that you'll always be my Angel...
I love you, Kei. With all my heart. Always and Forever, Yuri

When she finished reading her lover's letter, tears were running down her tanned complexion. Carefully, Kei wiped the salty tears away and stared at the heartfelt letter in her hands. Yuri had written it just weeks before she died. Kei stood up from where she had sat down roughly in a chair, and gazed at the loving statement in her hands.... "I love you too, Yuri..." (Kino)

The friendship and devotion implicit in other versions of Yuri and Kei's relationship with each other is unabashedly represented here as romantic love. This focus on mutual, monogamous, romantic love, nuclear family, and the nurturing roles of mother and wife are in marked contrast to the polymorphous sexuality, fetishized desire, and non-reproductive cyborg bodies imagined in *The Dirty Pair* comics.

In the following passage, Yuri is imagined as the smitten lover and Kei the repressed and self-hating dyke. The story explores the psychic stresses of being inside/outside the closet within a besieging homophobic culture:

“Then, we had one particularly tough mission at Beta Cygnus Three.” Her face looked haunted. “It was genocide on a scale unmatched since the Third Reich on Old Earth. After that mission, we fell into each others’ arms as if hoping the magic would cleanse us. It did... but we were careless.”

Tears began to glisten in Yuri’s eyes. “We had our reputation by that time, as the D-that name. The tabloids were always hounding us. That night, one of them got a few pictures...”

Zen sat down next to Yuri and hugged the taller girl as she began to cry.

“The pictures were bad, and they... they had to touch them up, so we could deny it was us... but t-they were so nasty about it. When we found out, Kei and I stormed their offices and K-kei... she...”

“What, Yuri?”

Yuri took a deep breath. “She told them she didn’t love me. She said that she’d never love another woman and that she’d ‘rather die than be a dyke.’” (Hosmer)

Unlike the exuberant, glossy surfaces and future-lust that characterize *The Dirty Pair* comic books, these intimate lesbian melodramas are pervaded with tragedy and nostalgia. This mode of sentimental writing is traditionally associated with feminine writers and spectators and thus culturally denigrated as insipid compared to the sharp, masculine mode of parody. Suggesting perhaps that there is something inherently erotic about sexual objectification and the prohibitions of the closet, this form of amateur writing can indeed seem maudlin and banal. This is not to say that all *Dirty Pair* yuri fan fiction involves only tender explorations of lesbian relationships and vaguely described nights of vanilla passion. However, since this fan fiction is distributed in the context of de-centralized virtual communities made up of websites, chat rooms, forums, and online role-playing games, readers and writers fluidly provide and solicit feedback on individual works. Sometimes sappy writing is cheered on and encouraged; sometimes it is skewered, but in all cases texts and their meanings are challenged, appropriated, revised, and re-written. An MST treatment⁶ that irreverently ridicules the “bad lesbian sex” portrayed in a sexually explicit fan fiction featuring characters from *The Dirty Pair* is as readily available online as the original fan fiction. Since both are “copies” anyway, neither carries the authority of the official, the authentic, or the original.

Indeed, the shift in fan discourse effected by unauthorized lesbian fan fiction re-invigorates readings of the homoerotic subtext in the official comic series. The *Dirty Pair* story can have meanings far outside the boundaries of the original text that created it, through a fan culture that re-imagines and literally re-writes the characters and the terms of the story, riffing off not only “the original” *Dirty Pair*, but off of successive “bad copies” as well.

¹ The loaded cultural intersection between Japanese-produced anime and American audiences and the processes of exoticization, adaptation, and translation in that intersection, and the series' Japanese distribution and audience, is outside the scope of this paper.

² The word "yuri" means "lily" in Japanese and is also a common female name. Fans speculate that the term developed to describe lesbian relationships in manga/anime because of the popularity of Yuri/Kei pairings in fan fiction.

³ *The Dirty Pair: Biohazards*, 1988. *The Dirty Pair: Dangerous Acquaintances*, 1991. *The Dirty Pair: A Plague of Angels*, 1994. *The Dirty Pair: Sim Hell*, 1994. *The Dirty Pair: Fatal But Not Serious*, 1996. *The Dirty Pair: Run from the Future*, 2002. Warren's American series are the only licensed Dirty Pair comics; there are no licensed Japanese manga series.

⁴ Cons are conventions where comic book, science-fiction, fantasy, or gaming fans gather to hound autographs, dress-up as their favorite characters, party, view displays of related paraphernalia, attend panel discussions with prominent members of the industry, play games, and most importantly, to trade, sell, buy, and talk about everything having to do with their object of fandom with other fans.

⁵ See *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* by Constance Penley for a feminist analysis of male/male slash fiction.

⁶ MST stands for "Mystery Science Theater 3000," a comedy series that originally aired on cable television in the early 1990's and featured atrocious B-movies shown in their entirety, but accompanied by a running commentary of irreverent jeers and punning asides from a man and his two robot buddies, who have been forced to watch these bad movies by a mad scientist. In written MST, the original story is framed by the story of the "riffers" or the commentators, who interrupt just about every other line of the original story with their own comments, as in this excerpt from an MSTing of "After the Rain," originally by Musicdied, MSTed by Kage no Ryu. (Note that "lemonfic" refers to fan fiction that depicts graphic sex):

>Lina ran her fingers through Yuri's hair and then kissed her deeply.

J-chan: <Lina> Hey! give me back my Tic-Tac!

> "SHIT!" Thought Yuri. "Oh man this is really bad.

Jaye: I see she's read the fic, too...

>Well maybe it's

>not that bad." Lina ran her hands down to Yuri's ass and started to squeeze

Magus: *bang!*

Jaye: <Yuri> My implants!

>it. "Thats nice." Yuri brought a hand up under Lina's shirt and started to

>squeeze her breast.

J-chan: *bang!*

Magus: <Yuri> Haha! Revenge!

>Lina ended the kiss.

> "Oh Yuri, I've dreamed of being with you."

Silv: <singing> To dream... the impossible dream...

Magus: Hate to break it to you, but very little is impossible in a lemonfic.

> "Umm, me too."

J-chan: <Yuri> I've dreamed of being with me, too...

> "Yuri could we please take a shower together?"

> "Why?"

Jaye: <Lina> Because you stink terribly.

> "Ever since I saw you that day, I've dreamed of making love to you
>in the rain."

Jaye: <singing> Somebody left a cake... out in the rain...

J-chan: Well, just a pair of muffins, really.