

## Domesticating the Global: Manga Beyond Japan

Casey Brienza (Ed.), **Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics Without Japan?** Farham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015, 224 pp., \$112.00 (hardcover).

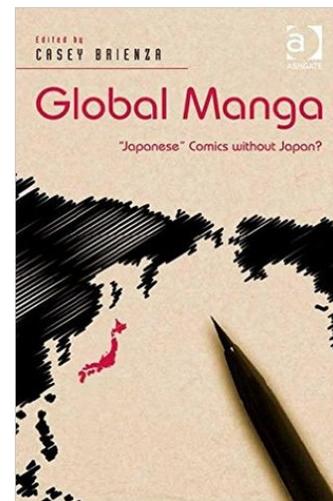
Casey Brienza, **Manga in America: Transnational Book Publishing and the Domestication of Japanese Comics**, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 232 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

James Lee

University of Southern California, USA

Can something be Japanese without any input from Japan? This is the question that begins **Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics Without Japan?**, edited by Casey Brienza, which is developed further in Brienza's subsequent book, **Manga in America: Transnational Book Publishing and the Domestication of Japanese Comics**. To begin, the term *manga*, the Japanese word for *comics*, is itself a point of contention for those who study it and those who consume it. Although there has been increasing growth and interest in studying Japan's culture industry, embodied in cases such as the Japanese government's soft power efforts at branding a "Cool Japan," there is a surprising lack of study in how manga is transformed along the way and subsequently what people, inspired by it, do afterward. Much of the popular discourse surrounding manga implies that it embodies a Japanese essence that cannot be replicated by others without being derivative. Yet the reality of culture is that it flows freely, is consumed readily, and changes dramatically. Is there something intrinsic and inextricable about manga that makes it "Japanese?" As Brienza (2015) notes, manga is, on one level, anything first published in Japan, but on another, more cynically, it is simply "anything a publisher says it is" (p. 7). Yet for others, particularly fans, is it more than a marketing gimmick forced by faceless corporations. *Global Manga* challenges the notion of culture as object and pushes toward understanding culture as an ongoing process. While *Global Manga* confronts the flexibility in what manga means for different people, *Manga in America* delves into the meaning manga has for those who domesticate it. What defines an authentic and by extension legitimate cultural object is not any inherent quality of the object but instead the relations it enables. This means that people are, and will always be, the essential to determining whether something is meaningful and legitimate.

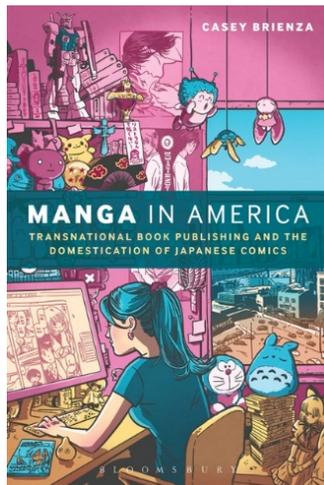


As it turns out, the motivations for accepting something as legitimate can be endlessly complex. This gets to the deeper question underlying the initial one. What is at stake when attempting to define authenticity and legitimacy? The answer, broadly speaking that emerges from both texts, is power, manifested across race, gender, class, and so forth. Take, for example, chapter 10, "Pinoy Manga in Philippine *Komiks*," in *Global Manga*. The ambivalence toward manga's influence on Philippine *komiks* serves as an intermediary for the Philippines' own history of colonial subjugation by the Japanese. Chapter

Copyright © 2018 (James Lee, lee526@usc.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

1, "The Western *Sailor Moon* Generation," points to how the *Sailor Moon* manga inspired female participation in various comics fields, professional and amateur, by being marketed specifically to females and by providing an alternative media object that did not conform to Western assumptions of gender. Manga serves as a way to connect to others and face larger issues tied to one's identity in these cases. In a similar vein, *Manga in America* points out how translators and editors are motivated to participate in an industry with scant benefits by the pride they feel influencing a larger scale international flow of culture.

Although *Manga in America* offers a more focused look into an American context, *Global Manga* provides a wider range of international perspectives. This is unsurprising, given their titles, but noteworthy



to understand how the strengths of each inform and address the weaknesses of the other. *Manga in America* weaves together a complicated picture of the important and often invisible work involved in domesticating foreign culture, but this only represents a specific context. This speaks more to the practical limitations of an individual researcher and the book format, but it does illustrate the problem of how gaining a complete image of a topic that involves ongoing change and upheaval will be elusive. It is when these books are read together that they shine brightest. Importantly, *Global Manga* includes various international perspectives, from Brazil to Germany to France to the Philippines. This collection is a welcome addition to expanding limited perspectives on comics studies and to showing that culture is constantly in flux, flowing from one place to another. The inclusion of a more diverse international collection also makes it easier to imagine alternative solutions to problems in one context. While differences in history, culture, and so forth will lead to divergences, what this collection also shows is that there are nevertheless similarities across nations. The fundamental, and arguably universal, issue at stake is not one of whether an object is authentic. Instead, it is what kinds of relationships tied to power are expressed through these cultural objects and thus what these objects do for someone. Both of these works push back against the obsession with purity centered on objects, and rightfully focus on the relationships and actions they inspire instead.

These books, perhaps by virtue of thinking of culture as a relational process, have interdisciplinary appeal. Scholars from different fields will find both of these books useful for the ways they weave together history, race, gender, and class issues. The international perspectives these books bring also serve those in comics studies quite well, especially in places like the U.S., where an overly dominant corporate machine that treats comics as a cheap testing ground for blockbuster movies may mask some of the less conspicuous movements toward legitimizing comics as an expressive form and field of study. Fandom studies will also find these books useful for the ways they show how fans make the transition from consumer to active participant in production, as well as how they navigate gender identity in a similar thread to Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992). More contemporary examples of fan work that eventually developed into mainstream success, as in the case of E. L. James's (2012) romance novel, *50 Shades of Grey*, which originated as fan fiction based on *Twilight*, a young adult vampire romance series by Stephenie Meyer (2005), also make the parallel between fan cultures surrounding Western cultural products and foreign ones more apparent.

More importantly, however, these books give voice and speak to those who face the question of work for love or survival. The issues surrounding domesticating manga represent larger societal issues surrounding precarious labor in an increasingly uncertain and transnational world. This is evident in the term Brienza uses, "domestication," in both books to characterize the transnational flow of cultural production over more obvious ones, such as translation, adaptation, or localization. The reason, she notes, is that domestication captures a wider range of the social activity involved in the production of global manga and, most importantly, describes a multidirectional process where "one can be simultaneously domesticating the object, oneself, *and* the nation of origin" (2015, p. 4). Why domestication is a more apt term over others to describe the work being done becomes grimly apparent in *Manga in America*, when Brienza delves deeper into the process of publishing manga for a domestic U.S. audience. Domestication, unlike translation, invokes the notion of home and its associations with gender norms. This works on multiple levels to point out the invisible and undervalued labor that goes into the work here, its subordinate position when compared with "real" work, and the collapsing boundaries between professional and private life that makes work inescapable. Although *Global Manga* often celebrates the potential for creative objects to build relationships, *Manga in America* brings the dangers of such optimism to the forefront. The narrative that emerges is one that evokes Angela McRobbie's (2016) critique of creative industries and the precarity they enable through the sweet deception of love but no sustenance. Youth, precarity, and femininity are not accidental side effects of this industry but rather absolute necessities for its successful continuation (Brienza, 2016, p. 135). At times the story that emerges of the people in *Manga in America* can be a bleak one. But this is not for lack of hope. Instead, it reflects the reality that involvement in a system built upon a hierarchical and unequal structure will almost inevitably replicate those same inequalities.

One, however, should not downplay the potential for change, given that domestication, like culture, is a process that flows in all directions. There is optimism in these pages, but one tempered with harsh realities. What *Global Manga* and *Manga in America* show are differences in context can lead to different outcomes, but the fundamental concerns and motivations of people globally tend to be similar. In that regard, the promise of a global manga is to accept contradiction as inherent and to understand culture not simply as something that flows globally unchanged but more specifically as something that connects locally through the relationships people build and the actions they take inspired by it.

### References

- Bacon-Smith, C. (1992). *Enterprising women: Television fandom and the creation of popular myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- James, E. (2012). *Fifty shades of Grey: Book one of the Fifty Shades trilogy*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Meyer, S. (2005). *Twilight*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.