Pop and *ma*: The Landscape of Japanese Commodity Characters and Subjectivity

*Ma* is the pause, the space between words, between images. It is that part of the page, of the picture, left untouched, as ineffable white. In Japanese aesthetics, in any composition, whether verbal or visual, this absence is also supposed to be savored, enjoyed in its own right. . . . I'd met Meadowlark shortly after I'd first discovered this idea and was wondering whether such notions could be applied to a person. Could one, for example, find meaning in someone's blank spaces, in the juxtaposition between what was present in his character and what was quite absent? Certainly Meadowlark appeared to operate on the narrowest conceivable spectrum. A single ink squiggle in an awful lot of white space.—Gavin Kramer, *Shopping 2001*

Japanese young people often hang tiny, doll-like “characters” from their mobile phones, enabling them to signify something about themselves to all around. In Japanese, the term commonly used to refer to both mobile phones and other portable communication technologies, like the wap phones discussed below, is *keitai*, which means, literally, “portable.” Examples of characters commonly hung from keitai include Sanrio’s mouthless kitty known as Hello Kitty and Sony’s virtual email pink pet known as PostPet. At first sight, these “cute” (*kawaii*) characters may seem to reinforce highly conventional gender and sexuality stereotypes. However, the fact that Hello Kitty has been appropriated, for example, in lesbian dance party advertisements, indicates things may not be so simple. To understand this, we need to examine two concepts. First, difference in a Japanese cultural context may not be structured in binary oppositions but may appear in the indeterminate spaces and gaps, which may be understood through a rethinking of *ma*. In particular, kawaii reappropriations inside and outside keitai spaces could be seen to echo the ambiguity and ubiquity signified by *ma*. Second, the “cute” (*kawaii*) world—implying childhood or childlike qualities—is not an asexual space at all. Survey data suggest that for many Japanese users, in particular Japanese women users, cute characters may be appropriated to open up possibilities of nonconformist gender roles and sexualities.

This essay seeks to explore the character landscape attached to keitai cultures in Tokyo. Specifically, I explore the sexual and gender reappropriations and identifications apparent within the ongoing negotiations between kawaii and keitai consumer spaces. After recently spending three months in Tokyo, I became increasingly curious about the ways these various characters operate as signifying codes spanning gender and sexual politics. I frame the analysis of the landscape of characters and characterization through a revision of the Japanese notion of *ma*. Traditionally defined as a space to be contemplated (between images, words, or concepts), it has more recently been redefined as a rhetorical device connoting conceptual ambiguity, which in turn relates to the ambiguity of sexual codes in contemporary Japanese culture. In this way, a renegotiated *ma*, understood as a space for conceptualizing and practicing the ambiguity associated with contemporary modes of subjectivity, reflects the major shifts forged by the dialogue between kawaii and keitai. Many symbols of modernization and postmodern society, such as PostPet, are defined by conservative groups through the language of either *ma* abysses or consumer pop (meaningless trash). However, although the language and attached ideologies are ambiguous, they are far from meaningless.

For me, one of the most interesting facts about character culture is that it is a predominantly female preoccupation. Within the terrain of consumerism, the construction of women as consumers in both Western and Japanese culture highlights the various roles provided (or not) for women and female same-sex relations. As will be discussed, character culture as symbolic of female consumption is an important site for performing and representing the complexity of gender roles, specifically alternative female sexualities. The kawaii characters attached to keitai are in fact far from reinforcing traditional female representation within a heterosexual framework.
In particular, “cuteness” as symbolic of female subjectivities within consumer culture is being revolutionized by shifts toward the Internet, specifically mobile phone–based Internet gadgets, portables and gizmos such as the NTT WAP phone (Wireless Application Protocol) DoCoMo. These shifts in the cute also relate to the growing role and visibility of women within the economic and cultural logic of Japan. Following these recent technological changes, the cute is no longer the powerless in need of subversion by lesbian groups but instead a type of enfant terrible that could complicate, as much as lubricate, social relations. In particular, the changing role of women in Japan through vehicles such as new technology and the associated employment can be mapped through the changing role of characters from passive and sexual to active and sexualized. Specifically, because women are seen as the major market for characters it is no accident that changes in characters run parallel to shifts in the female demographics of Tokyo. Maybe in this instance it is not such a bad thing to be left “hanging on the telephone.”

Post-PostPet

In their article “In the Company of Strangers,” the Sussex Technology Group argue, “The mobile phone is a significant object; it is a guarantee of connection in (and to) the dislocated social world of modernity.” Their study, informed by surveys conducted in Brighton, England, attempted to map the spaces practiced and conceived by mobile phone users in relation to Erving Goffman’s notion of self-presentation and appropriation. Although their identification of paradoxes surrounding “mobile telephony” consists of shifting public/private zones and the changing definition of performative, physical, and psychological spaces is of interest to this study, their application of Goffman’s theories does not lend itself to a neat translation in a Japanese framework.

As argued by Todd Joseph Miles Holden in “I’m Your Venus/You’re a Rake,” the roles mapped by genderism in Japanese mediascapes are not identical to those found in the United States. Instead of attempting to stretch and twist a Western theory about space and identity into a Japanese context, I have opened up a revised notion of ma as an appropriated social and psychological space. This notion, as with my investigation into survey-

ing relationships to kawaii modes within keitai scapes, represents an attempt to navigate new roles for gender and sexual difference. Far from definitive, this is a peripatetic exploration of some of the relationships and modes of representation afforded to women and lesbians in Tokyo.

One problem when analyzing character cultures in Tokyo is understanding how individual use can be qualified and quantified as different from the consumer rhetoric espoused by the various companies. While in Tokyo I noticed the ways characters were appropriated and reappropriated by various demographics. However, I found it quite difficult to actually tease out these variations. To map out the identity landscapes, I initially conducted a survey asking questions about the roles characters provided in conventional consumerism and transgressive appropriations.

I was aware of the associated methodological restrictions imposed by survey-based studies, in particular the leading nature of asking set questions, and being sensitive to my own cultural baggage as an Australian ethnographically analyzing another culture. Related to this point was a need to negotiate the cultural and linguistic landscape encountered in analyzing Japanese popular culture. I try to resolve these potential problems by employing a reworked, self-consciously hybrid and contemporary notion of ma.

So, what is ma? Ma is defined as a spatial concept specifically within Japanese linguistics. Ma is meant to be contemplated and enjoyed—a space as meaningful as written characters (kanji). My use of ma highlights negotiations between traditional pre-Meiji and contemporary Westernized Japan. The use of a Japanese term by a Westerner could imply a type of exotification or “otherness” associated with functionalist, early anthropological methods. However, my appropriation of ma is not to resuscitate the original “timeless” concept but rather to survey a self-consciously contemporary discourse that is fraught with contested and often contradictory codes. The notion of ma, as I argue below of the notion of cute (kawaii), is a polysemic and ambiguous one. It began in Japanese writing and in my analysis extends out to represent the complex, and often contradictory, sites afforded to contemporary subjectivity and consumerism. In particular, my renegotiation of ma is as a space not only contested but also encoded with the ambivalence associated with a type of aesthetic blank canvas. The idea of the blank canvas implies a “whiteness” that is simultaneously all colors and yet none. It is both ambiguous and ubiquitous. I suggest that a rework-
The ubiquity of ma performed by Hello Kitty and friends are precisely what enable her to be appropriated by lesbian identity and sexuality. Her association with girl friendships, like her signifying childhood through kawaii, is far from asexual.

Fieldwork and surveys provide part of the basis for my discussion. The survey was conducted during September 2000 and consisted of a questionnaire through email and postal mail to two hundred Tokyo residents. I made a conscious decision to isolate the study to Tokyo rather than Japan as a whole. The questionnaire was devised through discussions conducted face-to-face with residents while I was in Tokyo from February to May 2000. During this time I questioned many participants about their own or others' use of and identification with characters, particularly in reference to characters attached to keitai.

These initial informal surveys attempted to understand the significance of characters in various social groups. In this study I was careful to encompass a range of different social backgrounds, aiming for a rough balance of men and women, both heterosexual and homosexual, of various ages spanning different employment fields. The survey consisted of questions pertaining to lifestyle issues and the respondents' thoughts about and relationship to characters such as Hello Kitty. From this survey I chose forty respondents for further discussion and questioning. I do not claim that this study represents all of Tokyo's residents but rather a sample study informed by the active respondents.

The demographics of the final survey consisted of 40 percent lesbians, 40 percent heterosexual women, 10 percent homosexual men, and 10 percent heterosexual men between the ages of 21 to 40. It is interesting to note that sexual preference in the category of women did not mark a difference in use of and identification with characters, although Hello Kitty seemed less preferred by heterosexual than homosexual women. In the male demographic surveyed, there seemed to be a preference for less well-known characters. From the survey, 82 percent identified with one or more characters (no more than five), and 16 percent rejected characters for their mainstream status, often identifying them as a “fad”; 2 percent were uncommitted. Of the 82 percent who identified with characters, 74 percent claimed that the chosen character or characters signified some personal meaning.

Of those surveyed, 75 percent attached characters to their keitai. This category was marked by a predominantly female demographic. Of the par-
participants, 60 percent had their own Internet service (either through the home computer or WAP mobile phone). This was a surprisingly high percentage considering it has been claimed that because Japan is the most expensive country for Internet service providers, only 20 percent of the population have their own Internet service. Of this percentage, only 30 percent had online characters such as PostPet.

The questionnaires quickly began to demonstrate that throughout all the variables, some constants, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, could be mapped. Identification with characters illustrated three interrelated points of negotiation. First, the cute, explicitly tied to the terrain of characters, was changing in accordance with shifts in new technologies and global tendencies. This change paralleled the shifting status of the prime consumers of characters: women. Second, the notion of cute occupied a particular relationship to adulthood and sexual identity rather than the frequently desexualized category of childhood as often assumed by adults. Third, the fashioning and consuming of characters in Japanese popular culture demonstrated simultaneously mainstream and subcultural affiliations.

From the survey, Hello Kitty was the most used example and provides material for an interesting discussion. Most participants were able to quote the characteristics attributed to Hello Kitty by the company Sanrio almost word-for-word and stereotype the marketed audience as “young girls (or women who want to be like young girls)”; however, Hello Kitty was frequently reappropriated into “other” modes of representation and identification. The most noted attitude toward Hello Kitty’s possible transgressive roles was the fact that character culture provided a space for humor to be deployed. In addition, Hello Kitty explicitly and implicitly represented same-sex, in this case female-to-female, relations, although consumption by males was on the rise.

Of those surveyed, 90 percent identified the characters as coming from ideal, middle-class families with lots of friends, and the initial market for characters such as Hello Kitty as children. The fact that the characters are animals role-playing human characters was noted by the respondents, but it was not a major focus of interest. The use of animals seems to be just a device to employ degrees of cuteness while playing into Japan’s popular cultural focus on childhood.

Significantly, almost all participants recognized the ability of the cute in many character cultures to afford individuals a space in which to negotiate taboo notions such as sexual identity. Although this was quite hard to map, as many attributed this activity to “others,” the notions of gender and, more specifically, same-sex relations were loud and clear. When stereotyping markets, participants articulated various characters to same-sex preoccupations. And although the cute was understood as initially a female concern, this was also changing quickly.

When questioned about the significance of characters in terms of sexual symbols or categories, participants unanimously commented on the characters’ lack of sexuality as relating to cultural taboos. However, all participants noted that they were aware of “others” who appropriated the characters, especially the “Lolita complex” of heterosexual men fetishizing Hello Kitty while simultaneously interested in its primary market of high school girls.

One interviewee, a Japanese heterosexual female art student, said, “Hello Kitty, My Melody, and Kiki Lara are so romantic if the owners are adults. But when men have them, that’s weird!!!” One heterosexual male participant, who collected the droopy panda Tare Panda, claimed, “I don’t know, he’s just so cute, he’s irresistible.” And one female heterosexual claimed, “The character goods are also for boys. Manga comics produce many recognizeable characters and the boys also get taken into the fashion. Like girls, they attach straps on the mobile phones, have key rings, watches, etc. Difference is, the boys are more open-minded and take interest in alternatives as well. They are clear about stating their identity by character goods. . . Otaku-people, manga-maniac (people over 20, tending to be professionals or businessmen) tend to relate the sexual contents of cute characters to girls, to feel as if the character existed as his girlfriend, or to feel like a girl.”

Kawaii Is Not Japanese for Kitsch

Kawaii in Japanese means cute and refers to the notion of childlike. To a Westerner, it is easy to identify the cute as kitsch in the classificatory framework associated with modernism’s definition of popular culture. From the Frankfurt School to Clement Greenberg, the denigration of the popular has defined it as contaminated by the mindlessness of mass production. Greenberg’s 1939 definition of popular by using the German word associated with

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the Berlin Olympics propaganda of the time—the kitsch—illustrated the strong political agenda of the West to create oppositions between high and low culture. The explanation of the kawaii in terms of kitsch reveals more about Western inabilities to comprehend popular culture than it does about Japan itself. In turn, it makes clear that although global popular culture may be ambiguous and ubiquitous, it is far from a homogenized terrain. In between the black-or-white binary canvas of modernism there is no space afforded to the “blankness” of ma. In other words, the reworked notion of ma that I am deploying here, like the concept of kawaii, represents a type of ambivalent in betweenness in popular culture rather than an opposition between popular culture and its “other.” In this way, discussion of the kawaii attracts the same debates and critiques surrounding rethinking “popular culture” in postmodern frameworks. It is the ambiguity and ubiquity of kawaii characters such as Hello Kitty that in turn renegotiates the “otherness” of childhood within a duplicitous and paradoxical space: “Some Japanese men are drawn more to the typical owner of cute merchandise than to the merchandise itself. The cuteness of a giggling girl clad in a Hello Kitty jumper isn’t entirely innocent. It ties in to what is well known in Japan as Lolicom, the Lolita complex. The phenomenon of the little girl as sexual 15. The phenomenon of the little girl as sexual abounds in Tokyo: Vending machines sell schoolgirls’ used panties, which the girls sell to middlemen; “image bars” specialize in escorts dressed in school uniforms.”

In this quote from her article “Cute Inc.,” Mary Roach outlines the often contradictory processes associated with the notion of cute culture and what it provides and performs in terms of gender and sexual roles. Character culture, from manga and anime to kawaii, demonstrates the diverse functions of sexual identification and gender role playing. In turn, it is capable of subverting and transgressing Japan’s repressive and strict censorship codes. However, as in many studies of kawaii character culture, there is a failure in Roach’s work to extend research and analysis into female representation and identification beyond heterosexual frameworks.

As David Buckingham identifies in “Electronic Child Abuse: Rethinking the Media’s Effects on Children,” the category of childhood is often defined by adults and thus positioned as “other.” In this binary model, childhood is illustrated as naïve, asexual, vulnerable, and powerless. In Western popular culture, the combination of childhood and sexuality is often seen as oxymoronic while also firing debates around moral bankruptcy. Especially within the plurality and cultural relativity of postmodernism, characters symbolizing childhood have become leaker and fluid, modes open to the various positions of the debate.

In delving into kawaii, we venture into the land of desiring childhood. The notion of childhood is ineluctably linked with the field of advertising, “pester power” being one of the most powerful forces in family buying. In the West, subcultures are defined by a historical linkage between the birth of popular culture and the teenager consumer in the 1950s (and its emergence in the United States of the 1930s); in Japan, mass consumerism and buying into subculture are not about youth cultures but child cultures: “We in the U.S. are said to be a youth society, but what we really are is an adolescence society. That’s what everyone wants to go back to. In Japan, it’s childhood, mother, home that is yearned for, not the wildness of youth.”

Childhood in Japan is openly a site for adult preoccupation. In “The Marketing of Adolescence in Japan: Buying and Dreaming,” Merry White identifies a great difference, both conceptually and pragmatically, between definitions of American and Japanese teenagers. For a long time the definition of Japanese teenager represented a type of “betweeness,” a “bridge between childhood and adulthood.” As I have argued, the kawaii presents a type of in between space paralleling my appropriation of ma. This in betweenness or “blank canvas” both enables a rethinking of gender and age and gives a voice to the traditionally silenced site of sexuality in Japan. So the kawaii is more about the idea of childhood rather than being a site actually occupied by children. According to Japanese teen magazine CREA, as cited in Kinsella, kawaii is “the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese.”

Kinsella goes on to argue that the cute craze supposedly began in 1970, when a fad for handwriting in big, rounded characters spread among teenage Japanese girls. “Scholars who studied the phenomenon dubbed it Anomalous Female Teenage Writing. Kids called it burikko-ji, translated as ‘kitten writing’ or ‘fake child writing.’” At one point in the mid-80s some 55 percent of 12- to 18-year-old girls were using it.

The arena of the kawaii has attracted much analysis, particularly from Western theorists. These studies have attempted to cover much ground in rethinking female representation in the changing fabric of contemporary Japanese culture, because the stereotypical consumer especially of the kawaii is female. I next briefly present two different approaches and arguments surrounding the ambiguous and ubiquitous landscape that tackle
notions of female representation. The two approaches are exemplified by the different theories, written around the same time, espoused by anthropologist Brian McVeigh in “Commodifying Affection, Authority and Gender in the Everyday Objects of Japan” and sociologist Sharon Kinsella in “Cuties in Japan.” Both theorists argue that the kawaii is important in rethinking the place of females in contemporary Japanese culture while simultaneously identifying the kawaii as a space of both ambiguity and ubiquity. In addition, both arguments highlight difference in terms of females through the filters of age categories. For McVeigh, the kawaii is symbolic of social power relations in Japan. McVeigh adds that “cuteness does not simply reflect the social world; rather, via communication, it constructs gendered relations.”

While McVeigh outlines ambiguity and ubiquity as part of kawaii, he argues that the kawaii results in reinforcing while simultaneously “softening” traditional power relations. His use of gender roles is homogenized into binary relations; while kawaii may be part of gift giving and thus various forms of relationships, McVeigh neglects to extend gender and sexuality beyond the heteronormalities where they remain problematically fixed. One is left thinking that the kawaii is essentially conservative and merely symptomatic of cultural change. Kinsella, on the other hand, maps the translation of the kawaii as an actively subversive space. In this way her understanding of the kawaii is comparable to my reconfiguration of ma, a “blank canvas” where such “voiceless” categories as female sexuality can be performed, all under the veneer of seemingly reinforcing traditional power relations.

McVeigh’s later essay, “How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp: Consumutopia versus Control in Japan,” is less reductive in its evaluations of codes for subvertivity within the kawaii site of Hello Kitty. Once again McVeigh’s exploration of female representation is predominantly within the variables of age rather than sexual difference. The argument, informed by surveys, constructs “consumutopia” (self-autonomy or counteridentification to the banality of popular, consumer culture) against “control” (a reflexive mode for thinking about Japanese culture). McVeigh sees Hello Kitty’s diversity as allowing her to present different female modes of self-representation/identification from childhood (cute) to adolescence (cool) and womanhood (camp). In particular, his alignment of female adulthood with the category of camp demonstrates Hello Kitty’s role as extending not only gender and age but also sexual categories. In this text, McVeigh seems to reiterate Kinsella’s position of the kawaii as a meaningful site for representing or prefiguring diverse subjectivities, in particular female same-sex relations or “kitty flip.”

Kitty Flip: The Gift of the Gap

As Kinsella and McVeigh argue, kawaii character culture such as Hello Kitty has been so successful because it plays into the Japanese tradition of gift giving. The gift in Japan is often used to express unspeakable relations and in between social spaces. The gap signified by the need for gift giving thus demonstrates cute as occupying a type of reworked ma space. Here the kawaii is absorbed into consumer categories of contemporary Japanese popular culture while also echoing the traditional role as a type of conventional ma “gap filler.”

Kawaii culture also presents a reconfiguration of the relationship between subcultural and mainstream within gender and sexual roles, similar to that often performed by media such as manga (comics). Mark McLeod in “Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Japan” maps a notion of homosexuality in Japanese media, specifically manga. As noted by McLeod, there has only recently been information available on male homosexuality in Japan, with very little research done in relation to Japanese lesbians. McLeod’s reflective analysis convincingly argues against Dennis Altman’s theory of “global queering,” highlighting the vertical imposition of such a model as a type of “cultural imperialist queering.” While arguing that gender flexibility is often collapsed into sexual difference in Japanese popular culture, McLeod is quick to point out that Japanese understandings of sexuality and gender roles do not neatly tie into Western frameworks and thus need to be “differently conceptualized.” He demonstrates this point through the representations of homosexual love in Japanese popular culture, that would be “unimaginable” in the United States or Europe. And yet, the sexual freedom and diversity provided by characters in comics and animations do not necessarily lend themselves to translation into actual lived experience. Rather, McLeod argues, Japan still suffers from the confusion between same-sex desire and cross-dressing/“transgenderisms.” Although this may be the case for sexual representation in manga, a dif-
Azuma argues that characters are "reproductions with aura," reflecting major changes in Japan's cultural and social fabric: "Loving a character and feeling like a character; these are not just hobbies but ways to live in the age of [the] postmodern."

Lending weight to Azuma's argument, one survey respondent emphasized that the character attached to the keitai personalized the mechanical nature of new communication technologies. Here the presumptively mainstream character is appropriated by the user to encode the standardized, mainstream keitai with a subcultural and personal signifier. The attached character operates as a ma space transforming the blankness and mainstream quality of the keitai into a personal signifier. But one design student noted, "Even though I said that the character gives some personal identity to the product (the keitai), I may be wrong. People just attach it just because it looks cute and erases the mechanical image of the mobile phone. For me, it personalizes communication." Or, as one respondent, a heterosexual female design student, suggested, "Attaching the character to the mobile phone gives something special to the owner because the mobile phone is a product and nothing personal (everyone has the same model). It gives a personality to add a character. But now everyone is doing this, the meaning of identity has become obscured by attaching character goods. These days, young people attach 'non character goods,' such as feathers and pebbles. But it's hard to say, because both genders and all age groups are obsessed with character goods."

Azuma's argument highlights the need to reconceptualize the kawaii, alongside the ma, in the light of character culture. In particular, the kawaii, like the ma, is capable of simultaneously representing and silencing sexual difference and identity. Both terms are fraught with tensions between the old and the new, the copy and the original, the lived and the imagined. In turn, they are both capable of being open signifiers in which blankness can be used to represent diversity while conversely, and problematically, avoiding representing it. The ma, like the kawaii, is ambiguous and yet ubiquitous. Each can be seen as a form of poetic contemplation in the frenetic pace of Tokyo and also as a deafening silence or background to the perpetual grappling between the old and the new.

As mapped by Kinsella, kawaii has grown from a once linguistic reappropriation in the form of the "kitten writing" in the 1970s to a visible saturation across all forms of popular culture, from fashion to music.
Through the translations and transitions of the kawaii one set of “characteristics” has remained: it has represented and continues to represent in between concepts through its ability to be simultaneously ambiguous and ubiquitous. In turn, the space of ma, once a conceptual site between linguistic symbols, can now arguably be reworked as a notion echoing the language of the kawaii. This is particularly apparent within the “blank canvas” of the seemingly voiceless quality of kawaii sexuality.

As Kinsella argues, the kotted writing of the 1970s saw Japanese youth rebelling against traditional Japanese culture, particularly by reconfiguring Japanese words, citing the example of the term kakkoi (cool or good) being intentionally mispronounced and misspelled as katchi. But in the context of my argument here, the most telling example of this intentional subversion was the phrasing of “sex” as nyan nyan suru or “to meow meow.” Following that logic, Hello Kitty is capable of representing paradoxical duplicity. Her seeming mouthlessness and lack of genitalia are misleading. Her kawaii is both sexual and a space for exploring repressed sexuality in Japan. An initial reading of character culture would seem to suggest that the characters reinforce heterosexuality by placing women as mainstream consumers into passive roles of heteronormativity. However, my survey results indicate that this is not the case, particularly as the kawaii landscape is often appropriated to play out the sexual repression associated with Japanese culture. One interviewee, a lesbian office worker, claimed, “Hello Kitty is being more and more used by men. This has to do with heterosexual men wanting to obtain the stereotypical user of Hello Kitty, which is high school girls. But I find this weird because Hello Kitty for me has always been about girls being with girls, whether as in just friends or sexual. The great thing about Hello Kitty is because it is cute—i.e. passive—it is easy used to stand in for unspoken sexuality.”

I asked one respondent about the significance of using Hello Kitty as a mascot for Japanese lesbians. She replied, “Everyone knows and thus identifies with Hello Kitty. She symbolizes girl friendships.” I then asked what the difference was between Hello Kitty as a symbol for heterosexual girlfriends and homosexual girlfriends. She replied, “Hello Kitty is about girls. She is about girls with girls. She is about one gender, not one sex.” This comment makes fairly obvious sense in light of Hello Kitty: she has no genitalia and arguably no mouth. But Hello Kitty is clearly a female, and this is one of the key attributes in character culture: they have a gender but no sex.

Returning to McLelland’s argument, character culture could be seen to highlight the way Japan conceptualizes same-sex relations and gender codes of masculinity and femininity as different from Western assimilations about the relationship between gender and sexual norms. In this way, character culture affords a type of renegotiated ma space for exploring gender through same-sex relations, a type of in betweenness rather than a highlighting of differences between genders. This allows the characters to symbolize the cute and a longing for childhood while being the object of fetishistic appropriations, without coming under the big sandpapering hand of Japan’s censorship laws. As one Japanese student said in relation to the role of character cultures and queer categories, “The cute image breaks stereotypical images about sexual categories. For example, sex relates to sinfulness in religion or morality, but putting sex and character goods together makes the image softer and more socializable and fun to others as well as queer culture.”

Dot to Dot: Mainstream Coloring on the Global Canvas

My discussion so far necessitates a clarification of the distinction between theories of cultural imperialism (or imported culture) and globalization. Cultural imperialism presents a model of vertical imposition where power is understood as a binary between powerful and powerless. On the other hand, globalization, as opposed to cultural imperialism, demonstrates the need to be able to think about power as a shifting betweeness. In this way, the grayness of globalization and what this provides for thinking about consumerism and sexual identity echoes the inbetweeness of ma. As Chris Barker points out, globalization is a process of both fragmentation and homogenization, unlike cultural imperialism (often known as Americanization), which is a vertical model where power is oppositional and imposed.

In his 1990 discussion of globalization, Arjun Appadurai argues that if there are indeed global frameworks and forces, they are saturated with ironies and resistances. In particular, this is evidenced by the paradox of seemingly “passive” Asian consumption of Western patterns in popular commodity culture. This is nowhere more evident than in the space of the kawaii, which Kinsella argues was initially borrowed, or in this case “seem-
The Whole World in Her Hand

The seeming passivity and mouthlessness of characters like Hello Kitty may appear to represent a type of sexual and gender inequality in which the feminine is marked by passive asexuality. However, the kawaii and its tie to childhood are by no means untainted by sexual identity. These characters have the ability to support conventional gender relations while also providing a site for nonconformist gender roles and sexualities. In turn, the associated signification of women’s shifting status as prime consumers parallels the increased complexity and diversity performed by characters in the terrain of new technologies.

To return to the spatial organization suggested by the reappropriated notion of ma, the scapes of kawaii and keitai culture are renegotiating gender and sexual representation and identification. The spaces of ma, like the kawaii scapes, are transformed and reconfigured by keitai logic; this is particularly prevalent in relation to women. As the roles of kawaii characters are transformed by the possibilities of this “mobile culture,” so too are women finding that new social and psychological spaces are opening up, as demonstrated by the movement of women like DoCoMo’s senior manager Mari Matsunaga into senior corporate positions.9 Far from silent and passive, appropriations of kawaii characters reflect the anything-but-empty space of ma. Both demonstrate the paradoxes and shifts associated with modernity. Similarly, both ma and kawaii enable the configuration of new categories of gender and sexual identity.

Kawaii culture reflects the ambiguity and ubiquity of consumerism. In turn, as keitai discourses begin to renegotiate communications through often unfamiliar cyberspaces, they utilize the familiarity of kawaii to induct consumers. Thus, ma can be a space used to conceptualize and practice modes of subjectivity inside and outside the keitai. Ma then becomes a site imploding with subcultural and mainstream, global and local, and personalized and standardized tendencies, and makes the “choice” of kawaii characters much more than a simple exercise of consumer preference, as demonstrated by the sample survey conducted for this project.

Lesbian musician Michiru Sasano, daughter of one of the most powerful women in Japan, Teiko Sasano, states, “Up until now, women have lived in the age of men—with its competition, materialism and disunion. But Japanese men seem to have lost their joie de vivre. I think I understand why. They have never developed a sense of their inner self.” Could Michiru Sasano’s words be interpreted to mean that men have been unable to develop their own sense of character because they lack access to the diverse gender and sexual roles (or ma space) signified by kawaii characters like Hello Kitty? Who says you can’t buy character?

Notes

1 One example was the use of “kitty” in the naming of Kitty Flip, a lesbian club night every third Saturday in Shinjuku.

2 NTT is the major telecommunications company in Japan. These new WAP phones afforded a growth in Internet accessibility and use and in turn demonstrated a new type of cute character representation inside rather than outside mobile phones.

3 An example of cuteness as powerlessness is Tare Panda, “a genderless sandbag of a bear so weak that it cannot walk, but has to roll slowly from place to place” at 2.75 meters per hour, according to company literature; cited in Mary Roach, “Cute Inc.,” Wired 7, no. 11 (December 1999). (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.11/cute.html) (25 July 2002).

4 I recognize that as I am writing this I am surfing a use-by-date. One of the problems with mapping the terrain of character culture in Tokyo is that, like all fashions, these characters will soon be left in the too-Yen shops and outdated. As indicated by my surveys, characters attached to mobile phones are quickly being made outdated by the virtual characters. So why choose something that is so flexible and transitory? It is for these very reasons that charac-

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ter culture is so interesting. Not only is it marked with current market forces and consumer politics, but it also bears weight to the discourse intersecting the conventional notion of "popular" within the cultural fabric of Tokyo.


8 A good example of an attempt to question the functionalist tendencies of traditional Western frameworks of anthropology is Edward W. Said's Orientalism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Said highlights the fact that many earlier studies of Eastern cultures by the West were problematic as they neglected to engage in processes of reflexivity.

9 This notion of "whiteness" as "all colors and yet none" is discussed in Richard Dyer's Whiteness, where he takes up arguments surrounding Anglocentrism as seemingly "neutral" in relation to Anglo and non-Anglo relationships and representation in films. Richard Dyer, Whiteness, in The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation (London: Routledge, 1993), 141-63.


12 Responses were in English, and therefore idiosyncratic grammar and spelling have not been changed.


14 Both Holden and Crammer highlight, specifically in relation to advertising and female representation in Japan, that Western theories about popular culture and mass media cannot just be superimposed on "other" cultures. Holden and, in less detail, Crammer use the example of Erving Goffman's theories to illustrate the inadequacies of "importing" Western frameworks for thinking about popular culture into Japan. See Holden; John Crammer, "Consuming Bodies: Constructing and Representing the Female Body in Contemporary Japanese Print Media," in Women, Media and Consumption in Japan, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1995), 197-210.

15 This specifically relates to the argument that the one defining characteristic of postmodernism's various trajectories is that popular culture is the focus, unlike modernism's negation of popular culture as "other" and "low" culture. See Jim Collins, "Postmodernism and Television," in Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video, ed. Will Brooker and Peter Brooker (London: Arnold, 1997), 192-207.

16 See Roach.


18 A great example of this was American evangelist Jerry Falwell's argument that one of the Telenovelas was advocating gay rights. Falwell observed that one of the characters was a purple male (although he has no genitalia) who carried a red handbag and whose antenna was shaped in a triangle. Purple, plus triangle, plus handbag equals gay! Ashleigh Wilson, "Unbridled Innocence," The Australian (12 October 2000), media section, 18.

19 Cited in Roach.


21 Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in Skov and Moeran, 221.

22 Qtd. in Roach. The quote refers to Sharon Kinsella's discussion of Yasame Kazuma's research into cute handwriting (between 1984 and 1986). Kinsella, 222.


25 Kitty Flipp, as pointed out earlier, is a name used by a homosexual Shinjuku club for lesbian and bisexual nights. The notion of "gift," as articulated in most Sanrio advertisements, is intrinsic to the concept of giving a gift of Hello Kitty. Here, Sanrio has capitalized on the Japanese tradition of gift giving.


27 In this case, McLellan illustrates the adequate models for thinking about Japanese homosexuality used in Barbara Summerhough, Cheiron McMahill, and Darren McDonald, eds., Queer Japan: Personal Stories of Japanese Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals (Norwich, VT: New Victoria Press, 1998); Mark McLellan, "Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Japan,"
Dharmachari Jnanavira argues that Japanese tradition has a long history of same-sex relations. Jnanavira uses Michel Foucault's notion of archaeology from *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* to map Japan's long history of same-sex relations and makes a very convincing argument for why Western models for defining sex, often attached to gender, are simplistic, inadequate, and problematic. Referencing the theories of the famous Japanese psychologist Doi Takeo to discuss the differences between Japanese and American same-sex relations, Jnanavira argues that whereas Western cultures value relations between men and women, Japan focuses on the relationship in between men and in between women. In other words, ma is negotiated between women or between men, rather than between men and women. Dharmachari Jnanavira, "Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition," *Western Buddhist Review* 3 (1999), (http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/homosexuality.html) (25 July 2002).

As argued by Staff, "Oliatu Culture Set for Extinction?" *Kobe Shimbun*, 7 November 2000.


Sanrio says characters such as Hello Kitty are a form of social communication, part of a gift-giving tradition that seeks to befriend. The character attached to the mobile phone demonstrates the ma between public identifications being contested within an electronic space and a commercial and yet personalized place. Sanrio Co. Ltd., Hello Kitty Special Feature," (http://kitty.sanrio.co.jp/characters/kitty/kitty.htm) (20 November 2000).

While in Tokyo I interviewed some visual artists for an article I wrote on "alternative" art spaces in Tokyo for *Art Asia Pacific* (January 2000). In one interview, the artist would not elaborate on the art apart from saying that it was about ma. In this way ma operates as a tool for evasion.

Kimella, 25.

This is discussed when Roach interviews Sanrio's Yuko Yamaguchi (the designer of Hello Kitty for the past nineteen years), who argues that Hello Kitty has a mouth but it is covered in fur.

Recently, Japan's methods for censoring books and printed matter changed from ink, which could be faded by lemon juice, to sandpapering.


Qtd. in Ito, 45. Teiko Sasaki has served in the House of Councilors since 1989.