

Maid in Japan: An Ethnographic Account of Alternative Intimacy^[1]

Patrick W. Galbraith

Introduction

1. This paper presents an ethnographic account of maid cafés, a form of entertainment dining that boomed in Japan in the mid-2000s. In these cafés, waitresses wear costumes and communicate with customers while serving food, posing for pictures and playing tabletop games. Services are not sexual,^[1] which places maids in the realm of affective labour.^[2] Maid cafés are significant as an example of 'alternative intimacy' emerging in contemporary Japan. I use intimacy here to indicate a feeling of connectedness, closeness and comfort. This is an intentionally broad and open-ended definition; intimacy is negotiated while sharing space, time and activity. In the postwar 'Japan, Inc' model, intimacy was understood to be framed by '*nakama*' (group) relationships at home, school and work.^[3] However, the bursting of the economic 'bubble' was followed by recession and rapid neoliberal deregulation in the 1990s; the ideal of regular lifetime employment was replaced by the reality of 'irregular' (temporary, contract) and part-time employment, which destabilised income and the family unit based on it.^[4] Anthony Giddens has described relationships in the late-modern era as 'pure,' or based on individual needs.^[5] However, those who cannot strategise relationships may instead consume and fantasise intimacy to meet individual needs. Interactions in the maid café, described by those involved as 'pure fantasy' (*junsui na fantaji*), offer an opportunity to reflect on this phenomenon.
2. While there is a rich history of liminal play (*asobi*) in Japan,^[6] maid cafés differ in that regular visitors seek intimacy in the liminal space of play. Consider for example the contrast between maid cafés and hostess clubs, a fixture of Japanese nightlife in the 1980s. At the hostess club, women are paid to sit with men and attentively listen to them; they light cigarettes and pour drinks. Anne Allison, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a Tokyo hostess club in 1981, notes that most customers at the time were groups of (middle-aged) 'salary men' visiting at company expense.^[7] Their employers budgeted for this not only as a reward for hard work, but also because it extended work relations into leisure time. Allison argues that one of the primary functions of the experience was 'to expose oneself and have this self-exposure well received' (*jikokenjijyoku*).^[8] This took the form of homosocial bonding among a cohort of men, who performed together 'against' the hostess(es) at their table. In the hostess club, one is a workingman among workingmen gazed upon by women who affirm the value of efforts at work.^[9] Men are able to imagine themselves as men within the structures that define them as such. Each man imagines his future role or shared destiny, and this organises a performance that appears natural and inevitable.^[10] The hostess club, then, is a space of play that is articulated into the social structure and system of capital.
3. The maid café in comparison projects something that is unproductive of durable and respectable social identity. Kam Thiam Huat points out that the 'common sense' rule governing consumption and play in Japan is that these activities must lead back to 'reality,' which he interprets as social structure.^[11] The maid café breaks that rule. While visiting a hostess club regularly and alone might be seen as a sign of failure to perform at work and home, this is the norm at maid cafés. There is no (work) cohort with which to bond inside the café and no one imagined to be waiting (at home) outside the café. Rather than strengthening bonds forged outside the café, regular visitors invest economically and emotionally in creating intimacy *inside* the café. Where the hostess club keeps men away from home and connected to work,^[12] the maid café seems to keep them away from both. The space itself in many ways becomes 'home,'^[13] which one labours to earn a place in. The maid café is a place to be acknowledged, to be

accepted, to simply be. The dual concepts of 'place' (*ibasho*) and 'recognition' (*shōnin*) are key not only to understanding the dynamics of maid cafés, but also the motivations of young Japanese coming of age since the 1990s.

4. There is a significant difference between masculinity in hostess clubs and maid cafés. As one is not performing with other men against women, maid cafés noticeably lack the misogyny that was part of 'corporate masculinity.' In Allison's analysis, the hostess is both a 'mother' and a 'whore,' a caregiver that transgressively becomes sexual.^[14] In the maid café, however, sexuality is most apparent in its absence, appearing explicitly nowhere and implicitly everywhere, for example the glimpse of white bloomers beneath a frilly skirt. Such moments are charged, but at the same time defused in interpretation as merely unguarded innocence. The image of the maid is not an impure woman, but a pure child. This distinction is clear in the criteria for hostesses and maids. A hostess is a professional, mature woman who can carry on a conversation with men about matters of society, politics or the economy. Even if things do not become so heady, she can certainly talk about other 'adult' topics, for example sexual preferences or her breasts (as Allison discovered), accompanied perhaps by some touching. In contrast, the rules of conduct in the maid café explicitly prohibit personal questions and sexual harassment, be it physical or verbal. The maid, who cannot be personally or physically engaged, adopts a 'character image,' which she does not drop in front of customers. She introduces herself as 'eternally 17,' forever on the threshold and yet to be conditioned into roles of responsibility at home and work. She is characterised by (practised) amateurism, proof of her youth and inexperience. The maid and customer mostly talk about their hobbies. Indeed, asking the maid about anything more 'real' than this would betray the expectation of the café as a space of fantasy and play. Customers seldom discuss the world outside the café or their place in it. Unlike the myriad reflective surfaces found in hostess clubs, there are no mirrors in a maid café, both literally and figuratively, and visitors do not see themselves. They perform self as part of roleplay. The most famous maid in Japan, 'hitomi,' explains: 'Our masters don't look at us as friends, but rather as maids. And we don't look at them as men, either. They are always masters in our eyes.'^[15] Where hostess clubs are places to expose the self, maid cafés offer recognition without the self. Those attracted to this do not want the maid to be a woman, to possibly judge them based on performance of responsible and stable masculinity. The maid allows men to be inexpert and unconditionally accepts them. Those alienated from the group and 'unpolished' by those dynamics are granted a place to just be.^[16]
5. Not only do visitors not want maids to be women, but they also do not want them to be real. Maids are characters inspired by anime, manga and computer/console games, which provide what psychoanalyst Saitō Tamaki calls a 'fictional context' (*kyokō no kontekusuto*) that is 'deliberately separated from everyday life.'^[17] Desire for the maid is thus 'asymmetrical,' or oriented towards the imaginary and with no equivalent in reality.^[18] A good maid is said to inspire '*moe*,' a neologism used to indicate an affective response to fictional characters.^[19] No one is confused about what is real; they desire fiction knowing that it is not real. As Jacques Lacan has said, the woman does not exist, but regulars at the maid café know that she does not exist and desire her for precisely that reason. Intimacy with the maid is dependent on a fictional context, but it is nonetheless affecting and appealing.
6. The maid café phenomenon must be placed in the context of the 'information-consumer society' (*jōhō shōhi shakai*) that emerged in Japan in the 1970s. The tumultuous years of economic recovery and social upheaval were over, and consumerism was on the rise.^[20] This engendered a turning point in Japan so drastic that Yoshimi Shun'ya argues it was the beginning of 'post-postwar society.'^[21] Tokyo was one of the most capital-saturated urban centres in the world, and an unprecedented amount was invested in advertising, packaging, design and image production.^[22] The young girl, or '*shōjo*,' became a dominant image in the media, representing consumptive pleasure suspended from productive functions.^[23] John Whittier Treat comments:

Magazines, radio, above all television: in whatever direction one turns, the barely (and thus ambiguously) pubescent woman is there both to promote products and purchase them, to excite the consumer and herself be thrilled by the flurry of goods and services that circulate like toys around her.^[24]

7. Treat argues that the role of the *shōjo* in the new service economy was not to make products, but to consume them, or to symbolise their consumption.^[25] Ōtsuka Eiji, like Treat, sees the *shōjo* not so much as a 'young girl,' but as a way of being, and posits that it spread to all sectors of Japanese society, both a

symbol and symptom of the times.[26] He points out that not just young girls, but also boys and adults became 'pure consumers' (*junsui na shōhisha*) shut away in pleasure rooms and disconnected from social and political concerns.[27] The maid café is a direct extension of the logic of *shōjo* consumer culture, including the symbolic infantilisation and feminisation of those associated with it.

8. In the 1970s, some turned to the *shōjo*, the woman who is not one, as a source of alternative intimacy. Novelist and critic Honda Tōru argues that at the time consumption had come to play an increasingly important role in courting in Japan, and women gravitated towards men with resources.[28] He describes this as 'love capitalism' (*renai shihon shugi*), an extension of market logic also reflected in discussion of 'the love gap' (*renai kakusa*), roughly corresponding to the income gap. According to Honda, men marginalised by this system, especially '*otaku*' types investing in hobbies rather than relationships, turned to the fictional girls (the *shōjo*) of manga and anime.[29] Such characters provide 'pure love' (*junai*), or love free of socioeconomic concerns.[30] Honda is all too aware that this is an impossible ideal, which is precisely why it is only possible as fiction. Okada Toshio argues that *otaku* growing up since the 1980s approach their hobbies as a form of 'pure sanctuary' (*junsui de irareru tōhibasho*).[31] Stated another way, these men entered private rooms and found personal pleasure in consuming fantasy, rather than being consumed in pursuit of pleasure with other people. Seeing this as potentially liberating, Honda proposes that men should abandon love capitalism, and along with it the bonds of socially-constructed masculinity, and focus on building intimate relationships with two-dimensional girls.[32] This is intimacy without the other, or with images of the other, the commoditised, fantasised other.
9. The conditions identified by Honda—economic marginalisation, a breakdown in relationships structured by economic expectations and the emergence of alternatives in the creative output of 'lines of flight'[33]—ripened in the 1990s, overlapping with the rise of maids. Though these characters appeared in anime in the 1980s,[34] the history of maid cafés is more closely tied to *Welcome to Pia Carrot!!* (1996), a computer game where the player attempts to navigate relationships with beautiful girls working in a café. This is an example of '*bishōjo* games' (beautiful girl games), often referred to outside of Japan as 'dating simulator games.' Still images of girls appear on screen, and the player selects from dialogue prompts to communicate with the character/computer and advance the story. Some of these games are pornographic in nature, but the trend since the 1990s is towards melodrama, making them appear almost like interactive romance novels.[35] Extended interactions with the character/computer result in what Allison calls 'techno-intimacy.'[36] The maid café reflects the *bishōjo* game—scripted dialogue (often prompted), routinised interactions and standard character types—and follows a similar logic. That is, maids offer a sort of techno-intimacy, but combine this with the 'fleshy reality' of the young girl to ground attachments.
[37]



Figure 1. Image from *Welcome to Pia Carrot!!* This series of computer 'dating simulator games' inspired costume cafés in Japan. Image courtesy of F&C Co., Ltd.

10. In August 1998, a temporary café with costumed waitresses appeared at an event called Tokyo Character Collection as a promotion for *Welcome to Pia Carrot!! 2* (1997).^[38] By July 1999, Gamer's in Akihabara was hosting a Pia Carrot Restaurant, which continued sporadically until 2000. Akihabara was a particularly receptive environment for such cafés. Morikawa Kaichirō argues that in the 1990s the area became associated with computer technology, and specialists and enthusiasts, usually male *otaku* types, became the dominant population.^[39] Targeting this demographic concentration, a number of stores carried *bishōjo* games. However, cafés promoting specific stores and products in Akihabara were not autonomous and so had limited lifespans. The solution came in the form of generic maid characters, such as those appearing in the *bishōjo* games *Bird in the Cage* (1996) and *Song of the Chick* (1999). The Victorian image seen in these games was adopted for the first permanent maid café, Cure Maid Café, opened in Akihabara in March 2001. Morikawa points out that maid cafés were originally geared towards customers shopping for *bishōjo* games, who could relax there knowing that they were in the presence (but not company) of others who shared their interests, and could indulge the fantasy of being served by costumed characters rather than waitresses who might judge them.^[40] For Honda, maid cafés are '2.5-dimensional spaces' (*nitengo jigen kūkan*), or liminal spaces between fiction and reality.^[41] They represent 'potential spaces,' or spaces of 'intermediate experience' informed by inner and outer reality but ultimately neither of these.^[42]
11. In stark contrast to hostess clubs, in maid cafés staff do not sit down next to customers, but rather position themselves across from them, often separated by a counter or table. They are standing and move across customers' fields of vision, appearing and disappearing much like characters on screen. The goal is not flirtatious touching, but rather viewing. The pleasure is not physical or even personal. In the *bishōjo* game, the character perhaps says the name of the player in interactions with his avatar (assuming the player inputs his real name), but she is not physically interacting with the person sitting in front of the screen. Likewise, in the café, the maid perhaps says the name of the customer in interactions with her

'master' (assuming the customer uses his real name), but the distance across the counter or table remains. Just as the character in the *bishōjo* game is the same true love for every player, the maid attends to all her masters with the same 'personal' and 'loving' service.[43] Customers know from the beginning that they are only roleplaying, and yet, for many, this is a deeply affecting and intimate experience. Despite their origins, maid cafés should not be dismissed as just a subcultural phenomenon. The patterns of behavior observed among regular visitors, the post-*otaku*, post-tourist core customers that keep maid cafés operating, appear in various other settings in contemporary Japan. Maid cafés offer a window onto the dynamics of an emergent intimacy based on commoditised and fantasised place and recognition.

Data and methodology

12. I conducted participant observation in five maid cafés in Akihabara between 2004 and 2009, focusing on fifty 'regulars' (*jōren*), or customers who visited at least one café at least once a week. My main site was @home café, which I frequented from 2004, shortly after it opened, until 2009, by which time it had five locations and had served a total of one million customers.[44] While I was in the field, maid cafés were in the midst of a major boom, and later entered a period of market saturation, stagnation and sustained decline.[45]



↑ Figure 3. The March 21, 2007 issue of Newsweek speaks of Akihabara culture overtaking the world, prominently featuring an image of a maid.

← Figure 2. The cover of an official 2010 pamphlet from the Japan National Tourism Organization features a maid standing next to a geisha and sumo wrestler.



Figure 4. Hello Kitty, named Japan's tourism ambassador in 2010, is seen wearing a maid outfit. Photo by the author.



Figure 5. : A giveaway fan from @home café commemorating one million visitors.

- Cafés were eager to lure international guests and media, which provided me with a unique opportunity for access. I set up 'maid tours,' translated menus and wrote café reviews.^[46] In the process, I befriended (and interviewed) café owners, and used connections to place informants both Japanese and non-Japanese in the cafés as bilingual staff. They reported their work experiences to me, which inform my analysis. I also used my credentials as a journalist to interview working maids, but quickly learned that they are obliged to stay in character; some even responded to my questions under the scrutiny of their managers. I abandoned this tactic, and instead targeted retired maids, who could be more candid.

Specifics of the site

- Maid cafés are typically small rooms transformed into fantasy spaces with decorations, music and costumes. They are representative of 'concept cafés' (*konseputo kissa*), or more broadly entertainment/theme dining. For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to all concept cafés in Akihabara, regardless of the specific concept, as maid cafés. Some maid cafés attempt to recreate the grandeur of Victorian mansions with classical decor, music and uniforms. A bell is provided to ring for service. Most popular maid cafés, however, are characterised by child-like exuberance. They feature colourful decor, flashy costumes, saccharine music and energetic, talkative maids.



↑ **Figure 6.** View of the inside of a maid café. Photo courtesy of Maid Café Pinafore.

← **Figure 7.** View of the outside of a maid café. Photo



courtesy of Maid Café Pinafore.

15. While male managers and kitchen staff are on the premises, in most cases only the maids appear on the floor. During the 'maid boom' from 2005 to 2007, customers could wait in line for two hours to get a seat. To ensure rapid turnover, time is limited to 60 or 90 minutes; there is a seating charge of about 500 yen. Before entering the café, the customer is asked, 'Is this your first time coming home?' (*gokitaku hajimete desu ka*). The rather awkward question captures the ambiguity of an impersonal commercial space designed to be a personal intimate space. If it is indeed one's first time, the maid explains the café rules, which include no photography with a personal camera, no harassment, each customer must order at least one drink and so on. After this initiation, the maid ushers in the customer (hereafter referred to as 'master' or 'mistress'), rings a bell and announces his/her 'return.' All the maids on the café floor turn, bow and say in unison, 'Welcome home, master!' (*okaerinasaimase goshujinsama*) and/or 'Welcome home, mistress!' (*okaerinasaimase ojōsama*). This is not the ordinary greeting at commercial establishments in Japan (*irasshaimase*), signaling that beyond this point one can expect something extraordinary. After the customer is seated, the maid presents a menu and says, 'Thank you for coming home today' (*gokitaku arigatō gozaimasu*).

Figure 8. Maids greet guests at @home café. Photo courtesy of



16. While some menus are extensive, representative meals include omelet rice, curry and Salisbury steak, and representative desserts include parfaits, sweet beverages and cakes. Despite the mediocre quality, prices are notably inflated.^[47] This is said to reflect the value of service. One hallmark is 'non-ability' (*hijitsuryoku*), the aesthetic of innocence, inexperience and imperfection. Service is taken to be personal, heartfelt and irreproducible. The narrative (or fictional context) of the café is that the maids make the dishes for their masters. The food and drink are thus said to 'have heart' (*kokoro wo kometa*) or be 'filled with love' (*aijō wo tsumatta*). Maids empower customers in simple ways, for example kneeling down to eye level (so as not to look down) when addressing a master seated at a table, stirring drinks and allowing the master to choose the colour of his straw. There is also an interactive dimension to the service. For example, at @home café the maid asks her master to choose a picture or word for her to draw with ketchup on his omelet rice. This is followed by a request for him to join her in an incantation (most simply 'moe moe kyun') to 'inject love' into the food to make it taste better. This same ritual is repeated, with some small variations, every time an item is delivered to the table.



Figure 9. The maid takes requests from the customer and decorates his or her omelet rice with ketchup. Photo courtesy of Maid Café Pinafore.



Figure 10. The maid asks customers to join her in a magic incantation to make food and beverages taste better. Photo courtesy of Adrian A. Lozano, 15 March 2009.

17. The interaction becomes more overt with the entertainment menu, which includes options such as playing a tabletop game with the maid (500 yen for three minutes) or taking an instant photograph with her (500 yen per shot). Entertainment can also take the form of special treatment. For example, Nagomi, a 'little sister' café, offers '*tsundere*' service (1,000 yen), where the staff bully and insult the customer, and then beg him/her not to leave. *Tsundere*, a widely recognised character type in anime, manga and computer/console games, indicates that the character cares deeply for the object of her attention, but cannot express her feelings, gets frustrated/embarrassed and lashes out. One visits Nagomi to bodily experience *tsundere*. Others in the café witness the exchanges, which expands performative aspects.
18. Interaction as performance or play is common in maid cafés. For example, at @home café, every two hours or so there is an event called 'fun time' (*tanoshimikai*). Maids take to a stage set up in the café and challenge everyone in the room to a game of rock-paper-scissors. This has special gestures and vocalisations that go with it, which guests learn and perform together. The competition continues until only two or three customers are left standing; they then join the maids on stage and face off. Maids ask the winner questions and give him/her a small prize. When a customer has a birthday, maids sing to him/her, invite him/her on stage and present him/her with a small, personalised cake; all the maids on the floor then pose with him/her for a commemorative photo. At such moments, the customer is the center of attention—the café entertainment—but is more often embarrassed than empowered by the experience (not to say that it is not pleasurable). In another example, Cos-Cha offers the 'heaven and hell rock-paper-scissors mixed juice' (*tengoku to jigoku no janken mikkusu jūsu*) (2,500 yen). The maid asks the customer who orders this to stand, gathers the attention of the room and challenges him/her to four rounds of paper-rock-scissors. The winner of each round gets to decide one thing to put into the drink—tea or milk base, three kinds of sweet jellies/pastes, fermented soy beans, pickled seaweed and raw egg—and the customer has to drink the final product. If the customer loses two rounds in a row, s/he receives a slap to the face; if the customer cannot finish the whole drink, s/he receives a slap to the face. Those who finish the whole drink, without removing the glass from their mouth, can pose for a photo with the maid. Despite the masochistic overtones, regulars say the major appeal of this game is the attention from and communication with the maid, which takes places as a performance or game.



Figure 11. Maids challenge customers to a game of rock-paper-scissors. The winner gets to interact with the maids onstage. Photo courtesy of Daniele Mattioli, 15 March 2009.

'Soul care'

19. The goal of the maid café experience is communication in a controlled, comfortable environment. Sabashi Kunihiko, who opened the Maid Training Academy in February 2007, believes that maid cafés at their best are defined by '*iyashi*,' or (spiritual) healing. By Sabashi's estimation, *iyashi* spaces of peace and relaxation are necessitated by a modern urban environment of stress, anxiety and isolation: 'In a Japan where communication is getting ever weaker, the relations of intimacy established between the gentle maid and customer are most crucial.'^[48] Maids welcome customers, remember their names, ask after them and are generally obliging. In smiling and laughing, in showing an interest in their lives, maids give regulars the confidence to engage in communication. Maid cafés also facilitate communication by structuring and simplifying interactions. Each purchase, each performance, is an opportunity for contact. The more a customer consumes, the more time s/he spends with the maid and the more s/he is recognised. To this end some regulars make extravagant expenditures, for example ordering five photographs over the course of a single visit. As passive strategies of communication, some regulars wear anime costumes or T-shirts, bring in toys or dolls or fiddle with cell phones, computers and portable gaming devices to broadcast interests and invite comments. As one maid, Hazuki, saw it, 'Customers want someone to talk to who will listen. It is a matter of feeling like you're worthwhile. If they don't talk, maids draw them out with body language and games. It doesn't matter as long as it's communication.'^[49] Another, Suyaku, added: 'You have to listen to them, make them feel important.'^[50] Maid café Royal Milk makes a lucid connection between communication and (spiritual) healing. The café offers a service called 'soul care' (*kokoro no kea*)—6,000 yen for 30 minutes of conversation. This is roughly equivalent to the price one might pay in Japan for a private English lesson or cognitive therapy session. The point, however, is precisely *not* to talk about personal problems. Mikan, a maid at Royal Milk, says that most people who pay for the service just talk about their hobbies. She thinks that the 'soul care' for customers

comes from someone listening to them and recognising that what they have to say is important.[51]

ロイヤルミルク
Royal Milk
こころのケア

ご主人様お嬢様の心を当お屋敷のメイドが癒します。

コミュニケーション

30分	45分	60分
¥6,000	¥7,500	¥9,000

※お嬢様は料金が半額になります。

お屋敷からのお願い
メイドが嫌がる行為は
ご遠慮下さいませ。

担当料 ¥1,000
※ご希望のメイドが担当させていただきます。
コスプレ ¥1,000
※持ち込み可能
入会金 (初回のみ) ¥1,000

メイドによってできる者とできない者がおりますのであらかじめご確認下さいませ。

Figure 12. Royal Milk, a maid café in Akihabara, offers 'soul care.' For 6,000 yen, the customer gets 30 minutes of communication with a maid. Photo by author.

20. Over the course of participating in these interactions, revealing selective aspects of self and finding acceptance, regulars develop an acute sense of connection to maids and cafés. Aida Miho illustrates how intimacy works in the maid café through the example of the 'exchange diary' (*kōkan nikki*).[52] Most cafés have exchange diaries, which customers can freely write or draw in. The more times a customer comes to the café and writes in the diary, the more intimate messages become. Customers and maids often respond to one another (like an analog bulletin-board system) and others read these exchanges. Even if there is no response, the writer's presence is noted in the diary and his or her place in the café is marked. This right to passive recognition is purchased, and as long as one plays by the rules will not be refused. In much the same way, the café provides a sense of belonging and recognition to customers, whose motive to come is often to be included and acknowledged in the café.

Maid café regulars

21. All visitors that I encountered in the maid café, from the most casual tourist to the most dedicated regular, were attracted to the promise of the 'extraordinary' (*hinichijōteki*). Regulars differed only in the duration and intensity of their attraction. They visit a favorite café at least once a week, but many come every day, and some return to the same café multiple times a day. Maid café regulars are university students, part-time and irregular workers, those not employed or in education or training (so-called 'NEET'), the self-employed (often identifying as 'creators' or small business owners) and full-time company employees.

Most were single men between the ages of 18 and 40 living with their parents, meaning they had a degree of disposable income. Many of those with full-time jobs lived alone; some self-identified as 'single aristocrats' (*dokushin kizoku*), meaning that they did not have a great amount of social responsibility and could use their paychecks to pursue their own interests and hobbies. It is important to note that most regulars are not the most economically desperate people in Japan. Rather, it might be more accurate to describe them as 'reluctant insiders,' to borrow Lawrence Eng's turn of phrase. [53] They are basically part of the middleclass, though perhaps at its lower end, and yet feel disenfranchised. They engage in alternative consumption in search of a place on the margins of the socioeconomic order. [54] Eng's example is *otaku* fans of anime in the United States, but he acknowledges that the situation in Japan is similar in many ways. It is perhaps unsurprising that many regulars are fans of anime, manga and computer/console games. Such interests prepare people for the cafés, but interest in the maid performance keeps them there. The reasons for seeking alternative intimacy in maid cafés varied, but regulars tended to be somewhat dissatisfied at home and work. Almost all adopted some sort of nickname and avoided talking about life outside the café. [55]

'Level building'

22. Regulars engaged in a sort of 'level building' in the café. The concept is standard in roleplaying games,



where players build characters and work to strengthen them through simple repetitive exercises. In *bishōjo* games, the 'stats' of the player's avatar often allow for different results in interactions with virtual girls. The idea that effort results in predictable rewards is comforting. This seemed to resonate with regulars, who performed specified tasks (coming to the café and spending money) to obtain predictable rewards (attention from the maids) and measured success (recognition). One regular explained that the maid café was 'like a roleplaying game' (*gēmu mitai na kanji*). Maid cafés replicate the level-building system in the form of point cards. At @home café, guests progress through levels of the 'master card'—bronze (one visit), silver (five visits), gold (50 visits), crystal (200 visits), platinum (500 visits), black (2,000 visits) and super black (5,000 visits). In the narrative of the café, the card is a 'special licence' (*kakuteishō*) corresponding to a level of master recognition. [56] In case the dedication of regulars might be questioned, many of my informants at @home café were qualified to bear the black card.

Figure 13. Explanation of @home café's card system. Customers level up their cards, and with it their 'master recognition.' From [home café's website](#), accessed 20 October 2010.

Money as responsibility

23. I observed a general disinterest among regulars in the value of money. While maid cafés are relatively inexpensive when visited irregularly—a minimum of 1,000 yen, or a drink plus seating—regular visits are a cumulative expense. Further, most regulars did not spend the minimum monetary amount. They would

voraciously consume food, drink and entertainment, always saying that the service was worth the cost. Even those with limited economic resources checked their everyday concerns at the door to the extraordinary space. For example, 'Akiba Prince,' 28, was a part-time construction worker. He never talked about his family, and I only discerned his occupation because I overheard a discussion with a coworker. Akiba Prince had little money, and when in the maid café always ordered only tea; he then proceeded to drink as much water as possible in the allotted service time, which drew the maid over to refill his glass and provided a segue into conversation ('You must be thirsty...'). I asked him if we should meet someplace cheaper, or if I could buy a meal for him. He refused my offer, and further denied that food at the café was expensive. He did not want to think about the reality of money, or for me to remind him of it.[57]

24. Another regular, 'King,' who told me he was a 'professional wrestler,' seemed to have money only sporadically. When he did have it, he came to his favorite café and spent it all immediately. I asked him if he thought this binging behavior was wise, or if he ever thought about putting money away for the future, to which he responded, 'I am not so old or weak. Things will work out.'[58] Apparently King equated fiscal responsibly with old age and weakness, and his reckless behavior with youth and vitality. Even at age 32 this man could not imagine his future. He was stalled in an extended moment of sensual intensity, which recalls Gary Cross' discussion of 'boy-men' in the contemporary United States.[59] For King, maids accepted him 'as is' (*ari no mama*), even praised him for being such a big spender. Money was a way to buy a place in the café right now, he explained, that that was all that mattered. King was not unique either. When regulars stood on the stage at @home café, they often rejected the possibility of anything beyond that euphoric moment. For example, 'Ebi' was invited on stage for his thirtieth birthday, where the maids asked him if he wanted to travel anywhere. His response was, 'I will spend all of my birthdays at @home! Unpopular boy for life!'[60] While it is interesting to note the self-parody involved in identifying as an 'unpopular boy' (*himote*), more important is that the identity is extended into the future along with the café as experienced in the present. Nothing exists outside the space, and the self is recognised in it. Despite what might appear as radical behavior—denying the future and the roles that it engenders in the present[61]—regulars are actually quite conservative in their desire for 'home,' or a place to be(long).[62]

Regulars finding place

25. Almost all regulars stressed that the maid café was their place to be(long). For example, 'Dragon,' 34, a regular at @home café, said, 'This isn't just a place I eat. It's a place I belong. That is why I always come back here. I don't go to other cafés. This is where I want to spend my time.'[63] Dragon was an audio technician from suburban Tokyo. He did fairly well for himself (he had a car), but told me that he felt like he had given up on his dream of becoming a musician. He was single. Dragon started going to @home café in 2004. On his first visit to this or any other café, Dragon met Ringo, a maid who wanted to be a singer. She was part of @home's new maid idol (or 'maidol') group, Kanzen Maid Sengen. Dragon soon was coming to the café whenever he could; he never missed one of Ringo's concerts. Dragon told me that he wanted to help Ringo fulfill her dream. He was overjoyed at her growth and development, almost like a patron or producer. He reported feeling rewarded when he could help with carrying or setting up sound equipment. When Ringo thanked the audience, Dragon took this to be a personal affirmation. Perhaps there was rivalry among the regulars/fans competing for attention from Ringo, but it never showed through. Rather, Dragon and the others formed a 'circle' (*sākuru*) around Ringo to support and protect her. In an interesting twist on *nakama*, the circle is a loose association of people around a love-object; it is not constitutive of durable identity or bonds, and exists to ensure the continued existence of the love-object, the source of personal pleasure. Because the goal was not physical intimacy, it seemed no problem for these men to all be intimate with the same maid. Even when Ringo talked to each of her regulars/fans individually, often in front of the others (be it in the café or after a show), they interacted in a strangely asexual way. Dragon told me he loved Ringo, but the space near her (which he paid to occupy and shared with other regulars) was where he found a place, felt a sense of connection and was at peace. He did not want to risk losing this by changing it.
26. Sharing experiences is an important part of intimacy in maid cafés. Regulars often spend their birthdays in the cafés, are co-present during others' birthdays and celebrate the maids' birthdays (though they are 17

years old each and every time). In addition, there are event days and holidays, and repetitive references to these on the café's musical soundtrack (performed by the maids in the case of @home café). Indeed, there is not a single day in the café that is not marked as somehow special. The promise of the extraordinary, even on an ordinary basis, keeps regulars coming back. Among the many events in the café, informants referred to some as 'festivals' (*matsuri*), which invokes not so much Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque as the community building of shared experience. Ringo's 'graduation' (*sotsugyō*) provides a good example. Graduation ceremonies mark the life-transition of maids who leave the café and step out into the 'real' world; they also bring together the regulars, who come to see (worship) the maid (idol) one last time. When Ringo graduated, the regulars each independently planned to go and see her, and all ended up in the same place. In such a way I found myself next to Dragon in line. After waiting over an hour, we joined the capacity crowd jammed inside the café. Ringo was teary eyed, but talked to all the regulars, calling them by (handle) name and graciously thanking them for the good times. She then had one last emotional stage performance. Those in the audience were connected—to the place, to the moment, to one another. Dragon summarised what we all felt as 'a sense of unity' (*ittaikan*), but interestingly did not use the word *nakama* to describe our relationship. Though many of Ringo's regulars continue to go to @home café and follow other maids, they also read her blog and support her live shows.

Regulars consuming place

27. Place, like recognition, becomes a commodity in the maid café. One of the most conspicuous examples is photography. As a rule, photography is prohibited in maid cafés; one can only see the maid inside the café, and can only leave with her image. For a price, the image can be in material form, most often as commemorative/souvenir photographs called '*cheki*.' These instant photographs are about the size of trading cards. Customers earn points with visits or purchases to trade for the right to pose with the maid, or at some places can purchase a picture with her. The *cheki* is often decorated by the maid it represents. The most common features of decoration are the date the picture was taken and the names of the café, maid and master.
28. Similar to fans of idol singers,[\[64\]](#) regulars collect snapshots of maids (filling in for the woman who does not exist). Many informants had folders containing hundreds and hundreds of *cheki*, but ultimately could not

complete any imagined 'set.' There are many maids working in large cafés (180 at @home café in 2010), and details of appearance differ by day; the pose in the photo and decoration of it are somewhat unpredictable. However, rather than being frustrated, regulars seemed to enjoy variation in their *cheki* collections. Indeed, what makes images of maids qualitatively different from images of idols is that *cheki* are more personalised and less polished, which lends to the interpretation of them as intimate. As one regular put it, a *cheki* is 'proof of authentic affection' (*honkakuteki na aijō no shōmei*). Recall that 'authentic' here is part of the fictional context of the maid café, and the affection does not extend outside those bounds. Rather, the *cheki* is 'proof' of the intimacy one experiences *inside* the café. It connects its owner back to the café. Each *cheki* is a unique artifact coproduced by the customer and maid, bound to a specific place, time and set of people, all of which are noted on it. The *cheki* represents recognition—by the maid, by others in the café who witness the interaction, by the self that gazes back on it. The *cheki* is a prosthetic for imaginative work, making intimacy a visible and tangible thing.

Figure 14. Example of a standard *cheki*, or instant photo taken with a maid. She decorates it to create a unique artifact. Photo taken by Candy



Regulars struggling with place

29. There are, however, instances when regulars are consumed by the limitations of the maid café. Intimacy is built with the maid as character, or with the woman as image, which means it can be eternal and 'pure,' but also never realised. The distance is necessary for the visualising, for the fantasising, but maintaining it can be torturous for some. One such example is provided by 'Neko,' a 30-year-old part-time clerk who began frequenting @home café in 2004. He knew Dragon and was a well-known regular. By 2007, he had fallen for a maid, and mustered the courage to ask for her phone number. This was of course against the explicit café rules, and the implicit code of the regulars. The maid at first jokingly warned Neko to stop before he got into trouble, then Dragon directly warned him, but he persisted in his advances. Neko was summarily expelled from the café and ostracised. His mental and physical health failed, and he began to suffer from acute social withdrawal. Though we stayed in internet contact, I never saw him in the café again. Neko lost his place and source of recognition, which had dire consequences for his wellbeing.
30. Dependency on the maid café is not always entirely positive. During my fieldwork, I encountered 'Tanaka,' a young man who did not provide his age or occupation. He only said he worked nights, and slept 'somewhere' (i.e., a manga/internet café) near Akihabara. After he woke up in the afternoon, Tanaka went to his favorite maid café. He referred to his time there, away from home and work, as his 'reason to live' (*ikigai*). Hearing his story, I thought Tanaka a man at the absolute bottom and on the absolute edge, but found him to be disarmingly carefree and cheerful. When he talked about his lifestyle, he was so unconcerned that he almost seemed to be joking. Indeed, other regulars spoke with similar bravado about how far they had 'fallen in life,' and Tanaka was almost certainly exaggerating (perhaps more self-parody?). Nevertheless, this was the way he chose to narrate his life, and it should be taken seriously. The maid café and its imaginary intimacy were at the center of a socially disengaged existence, perhaps perpetuating this young man's behavior. While surely an extreme case, Tanaka provides a sobering example of how consumptive pleasure can potentially divert attention from a capitalist system that denies young Japanese a productive place in society.

The maid performance

31. Despite their importance in the lives of the regulars, the young women in the maid costumes are part-time workers making 850 yen an hour, near the national minimum wage.^[65] They tend to be students or 'freeter,' those making a living stringing together part-time jobs. Most are between the ages of 18 and 24 and live with their families, though some moved to Tokyo to attend school or find work and live alone. Many maids profess to have become interested in the job because they saw cafés in the media or were introduced to them by friends. Most maids say they are interested in anime, manga, computer/console games or something related like 'cosplay' (costumed roleplay) or voice acting. Having these hobbies heightens their exposure to cafés, both directly, as in visiting Akihabara to pursue interests, and indirectly, as in seeing representations of maids in anime, manga and games. Further, having these hobbies heightens their ability to communicate with customers, both in sharing points of reference and providing an understanding of ideal character types. Some maids have aspirations to become media personalities, artists, models, actresses or singers, though few pursue this after they leave the café (especially since the end of the maid boom).^[66] Events in their personal lives—university graduation, hunting for a full-time job, moving out of their parents' house—have them graduate from the maid café and into more stable roles and responsibilities. Maids do not have contracts, but before starting work they agree not to smoke, drink or be in the company of men in Akihabara.^[67] This sort of 'image management' is common for celebrities in Japan,^[68] but is uncommon for the service industry. While working in the café, staff adopt maid names and maid characters (i.e., background details), which they use in all interactions with customers. Contact with customers outside the café is discouraged, or channeled to blogs, often hosted on a monitored company website. Limiting the exposure of staff to the bounds of the café is surely due in part to safety concerns, and to encourage repeat patronage, but also to ensure that maids are not approached as 'real.'

Characterising self

32. Despite the low wages and high demands, maids tend to be surprisingly positive about their work experiences. Responses from informants about the appeal of the job can be divided into three categories: 'the work is fun,' 'I can be myself' and 'people like me.' Expanding on these explicit reasons, I argue that cafés provide maids with a source of recognition—a place to be themselves and be accepted as such. This is not an unusual reason to choose and stay in jobs where close interactions with customers are central, for example cabaret clubs,^[69] but it takes an unusual form in maid cafés. Informants reported having a complex about their hobbies, negatively interpreted as '*otaku*,' and their looks and personalities, thought to be undesirable. Many said they did not have people to talk to, and some were bullied by peers. Once they were inside the café, however, they were not just accepted, but adored, often specifically because of 'flaws.' This is indicative of a larger narrative about those who gather in Akihabara, who describe isolation, depression and low self-esteem before finding friends to share their hobbies with.^[70] Informants described working as a maid as 'like me' (*jibun rashii*), or something that they could see or imagine themselves doing. This idea of 'like myself' is a curious one, implying a range of self, an identifiable *character* against which actions can be judged. This character is in many ways located outside the self that judges it. Maids are living the contradiction of characterising self. To be a maid is to eradicate all traces of the real woman and exist as the image character, a very limited 'self' indeed. One maid, Arisa from Mai:lish, explained her job orientation: 'There was a manual for service tasks, like any other place, but not a manual for being a maid. They told me to be myself and find my character.'^[71] Implicit in this is the expectation to both be oneself and be a character. For her part, Arisa was content to keep interactions at the level of surface. This offered a simple affect and self-affirmation that she appreciated. Recognition of this ambiguous self that is also a character, that is a part of and apart from 'me,' is not the same as the recognition one might find in a cabaret club. Rather, it is closer in nature to the recognition sought by regulars.
33. To be a maid is as much to be someone else as it is to be oneself. Maids were often vastly divergent selves outside and inside the café. For example, Eri worked at Pinafore, but she was also a university

student studying sociology. Her English was superb, and she could have easily been a tutor, but instead chose to work in a maid café. She said, 'I work here because I like maid cafés. I often go to other maid cafés with my friends. All the maids do, I think. This is our world and we want to have fun.'^[72] A more detailed testimony comes from Mei, 25, who I interviewed after she graduated from Nagomi, where she worked while attending a prestigious school in Tokyo to earn an M.A. in chemistry. Rather than the money, she did the job—performing as a bratty little sister character, though she was an only child—to indulge a 'different self,' one that was not part of the very masculine world of a graduate program in the sciences. Mei said, 'Nagomi wasn't work and it wasn't school. It was something else. When I was there, I was in the maid world.'^[73] She saw the 'maid world' (*meido no sekai*) as a place to expose a part of herself, of her character, that had no other outlet. She felt that her desires overlapped with the regulars: 'I don't pity them, but I understand. We go to the place where we belong and can be ourselves. So did I.' Mei, like Arisa, equated being herself with being a character. In stark contrast to Mei, who left the maid world behind, is Rina, a self-proclaimed 'career maid' who worked at half a dozen cafés by the age of 20. When I met her, she was enrolled at an animation school in Akihabara, though she rarely attended classes. Rina said she lived to cosplay, which she described as 'changing myself' (*jibun wo kaeru*); she saw maid cafés as a logical extension of this practice. At last contact, Rina had dropped out of school and was planning to move in with her boyfriend, but was still working as a maid. She told me that she could not imagine herself doing anything other than being a maid.^[74]

34. In some cases, maids feel stifled by the expectations placed on them. Some reported discomfort at being



the object of affection for customers—or even for their employers.^[75] Though rare, unsolicited contact outside the café or working hours was a source of distress. There were comments about how regulars would sit down in the café and then just stare at the maids expecting them to initiate conversation and 'magically make everyone happy.' There was a special resentment reserved for regulars who made small orders and stayed in the café for extended periods of times, and for groups of customers, typically not regulars, who made a fuss over maid costumes and services and disturbed the peaceful atmosphere. Especially at cafés where staff were ranked and given special treatment based on popularity (gauged by *cheki* and game requests), maids expressed discontent at how they personally were not valued.^[76] In fact, Ringo left @home café for this very reason.

Figure 15. Quarterly rankings of the maids at @home café. Listed are the top ten sellers for bromides (glossy limited pictures), top ten accessed blogs and so on. Image from the June 2008 issue of the @gumi newsletter, mailed out to members of the fan club.

35. Some maids outgrew a two-dimensional self-image. For example, Sara, one of the most popular maids at @home café, started dating. After regulars got wind of it, she suddenly graduated from the café, and began working in the offices of LiNK-UP, the advertising agency behind @home. Sara had gone too far in being herself and disrupted her maid image. Stated another way, the reality of her as a mature woman eclipsed the fiction of her as a pure and innocent child. In the end, the self is a commodity in the maid café that is tightly controlled to ensure its exchange value.

Conclusion

36. This paper has presented an ethnographic account of maid cafés to reveal one example of alternative

intimacy emerging in contemporary Japan. The shift from Japan, Inc. to Japan post-Bubble is emblazoned in the contrast between hostess clubs and maid cafés. The former catered to groups of working men, the latter to individual consumers. The maid café is conditioned by a neoliberal economy that alienates young Japanese from the frames that structure identity, interaction and intimacy. Even as work becomes irregular, young Japanese seek a place to be(long) and be recognised in irregular consumption practices. For some, the possibility exists only as fiction. In maid cafés, intimacy is 'pure fantasy,' which is accessed and actualised via ritual consumption. Maid cafés promise (spiritual) healing, but as a service one pays for; it is not equally available to all.[77] In any case, such service may only act as catharsis, cementing regulars into an exploitative capitalist system. Maid cafés do not represent a radical politics of withdrawal or refusal. Regulars are not consciously denying what Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism.' [78] While Edelman calls for the symbolic destruction of the child as representative of the future, the maid café invites visitors to embrace, to become, the child.

37. However, what Honda Torū calls the 2.5-dimensional space [79] of the maid café might also be described as liminal space or potential space, which implies transformation and transition. The maid is a character connected to a fictional context, deliberately separated from the everyday. [80] Interacting with the imaginary other [81] can function to keep one in a perpetual state of transition, [82] an ongoing process of becoming where subject positions are fluid. While maid cafés do not represent a challenge to the capitalist system, they do provide an outlet for imagined alternatives, and the media spectacularisation of these spaces spreads that imagination. The prevalence of media-scripted spaces such as theme parks around the world demonstrates that maid cafés are not an isolated phenomenon. [83] Though the maid character is uniquely rooted in my fieldsite, meaning that it does not hold the same allure for everyone, and will not retain its allure indefinitely, the desire for the extraordinary is not limited to one neighborhood or nation. Likewise, the maid café is just one example of how intimacy and identity in late-stage capitalism are negotiated in spaces of imagination.

Endnotes

[*] I would like to thank Adrian A. Lozano for introducing me to Ringo, Dragon and others at @home café, and for sharing his vast experience. Thanks also to Evelyn Emery, whose insight into working as a maid was most appreciated. The project would not have been possible without the guidance of David H. Slater at Sophia University, and benefitted greatly from comments from Anne Allison during her stay in Tokyo in 2007.

[1] While fully acknowledging popular and pornographic articulations of maids, they are peripheral to my fieldsite. Sexual services were not observed in maid cafés in Akihabara between 2004 and 2009.

[2] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

[3] Chie Nakane. *Japanese Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

[4] Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 68–76.

[5] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[6] See Joy Hendry and Massimo Raveri (eds), *Japan at Play: The Ludic and the Logic of Power*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

[7] Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 36.

[8] Allison, *Nightwork*, p. 24.

[9] Allison, *Nightwork*, p. 14.

[10] I am alluding to the ideas of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

[11] Thiam Huat Kam, 'The Common Sense that Makes the "Otaku": Rules for Consuming Popular Culture in Contemporary Japan,' M.A. thesis submitted to the National University of Singapore, 2008, p. 79.

[12] Allison, *Nightwork*, p. 103.

[13] The fantasy of pre-capitalist solidarity is couched in these familiar terms. This approaches the performed or 'nostalgic' home as described by John Whittier Treat: 'This defensive concept of family, a response to the stresses of a modern life that demands the participation of each person in differentiated, specialized, and scattered tasks, is one in which men and women become "symbols," which presumably means we act out roles (such as "mother" and "father") that are certainly useful and expedient in "protect[ing] the home," but are not by any means necessarily determined or inevitable for "men and women".' See John Whittier Treat, 'Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: *Shōjo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject,' in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993): 353–87, p. 373.

[14] Allison, *Nightwork*, pp. 173–74.

[15] Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia: An Insider's Guide to the Subculture of Cool Japan*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2009, p. 134.

[16] For more on the idea of 'polishing' the self, see Dorrine Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

[17] Tamaki Saitō, 'Otaku Sexuality,' in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, Stan Csiscery-Ronay Jr. and Takayuki Tatsumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 222–94, p. 245.

[18] Saitō, 'Otaku Sexuality,' pp. 227–28.

[19] Patrick W. Galbraith, 'Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan,' in the *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, no. 5 (2009), online: <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>, accessed 12 December 2009. *Moe* is a keyword in maid cafés, but will not be addressed here due to issues of space. For a detailed analysis, see Galbraith, 'Moe.'

[20] Noi Sawaragi, 'On the battlefield of "superflat:" subculture and art in postwar Japan,' in *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, ed. Murakami Takashi, New Haven: Yale University Press. 2005, pp. 186–207, p. 193.

[21] Shun'ya Yoshimi, *Posuto sengo shakai* (Post-Postwar Society), Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2009.

[22] Yoshimi, *Posuto sengo shakai*, p. 56.

[23] Eiji Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku* (Little Girl Folklore Studies), Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1989, p. 20.

[24] Treat, 'Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home,' p. 361.

[25] Treat, 'Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home,' p. 362.

[26] Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku*, p. 18.

[27] Midori Matsui, 'Beyond the pleasure room to a chaotic street: transformations of cute subculture in the art of the Japanese nineties,' in *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, ed. Murakami Takashi, New Haven: Yale University Press. 2005, pp. 208–39, pp. 210–11.

[28] Tōru Honda, *Moeru otoko* (The Budding Man), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2005, pp. 66–67.

[29] Honda, *Moeru otoko*, pp. 59, 81, 151. Itō Kimio discusses this as a move towards a 'culture of distance,' or the tendency to avoid direct physical engagement and instead visualise and control fantasy objects. See Kimio Itō, 'Cultural change and gender identity trends in the 1970s and 1980s,' in *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1992): 79–98, pp. 93–95. Sharon Kinsella suggests that the *shōjo* is the form that most captures the tensions and concerns of male viewers, who both abuse and identify with her to navigate an ambiguous gender position. See Sharon Kinsella, 'Minstrelized girls: male performers of Japan's Lolita complex,' in *Japan Forum*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2006): 65–87, p. 83. The *shōjo* is a performance scripted by and for men, and she became central for those transitioning from the 'male' position of producer to the 'female' position of consumer.

[30] Honda, *Moeru otoko*, p. 209.

[31] Toshio Okada, *Otaku wa sudeni shindeiru* (You're Already Dead), Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2008, p. 79.

[32] Honda, *Moeru otoko*, pp. 16, 81.

[33] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

[34] The maid costume in Japanese popular culture originated in the erotic anime series *Cream Lemon, part 11: Black Cat*

Mansion in 1986. See Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 42. Another famous example is *Forbidden Blood Relatives* (1993), better known outside Japan as *GLO-RI-A*.

[35] Azuma, *Otaku*, p. 79.

[36] Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, p. 188.

[37] Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, pp. 139–40.

[38] Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia*, p. 137.

[39] Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia*, p. 14.

[40] Kaichirō Morikawa, *Shuto no tanjō: Moeru toshi Akihabara* (Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis), Tokyo: Gentōsha. 2008, p. 266.

[41] Honda, *Moeru otoko*, pp. 18–19.

[42] D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Penguin, 1971. Winnicott writes that some areas of intermediate experience include play, creativity, religiosity, daydreaming, fetishism, love, addiction and rituals involving symbolic objects.

[43] In a reversal of the fantasy of a master waited on by many maids, here there is a maid with many masters, who must wait on her for limited displays of affection as she waits on tables.

[44] This according to a press release from LiNK-UP, the advertising agency behind @home café. In 2010, they reported visitors had reached 1.5 million. See animeanime.jp, online: <http://animeanime.jp/release/archives/2010/04/homecafe150.html>, accessed 20 October 2010.

[45] At the turn of the millennium, Akihabara was caught up in the campaign to promote Japanese popular culture. *Bishōjo* games and fan-produced comics (*dōjinshi*), the major markets in the area at the time, were too sexual and subversive, so the media picked up maid cafés. The first TV appearance was on an economic program called 'Gaia no yōake' in 2003. See Morikawa, *Shuto no tanjō*, p. 264. Cafés soon were vying for media attention. Entertainment services began soon after, exemplified by the opening of @home café in 2004. In 2005, Pinafore maid café was featured in the primetime TV drama *Train Man*, and the media jumped on popular interest with more exposes. The owners of @home café report that the café saw a 336 and 685 percent increase in magazine and TV appearances, respectively, culminating in an appearance on an NHK Christmas special in 2005 that was broadcast in over 180 countries. Tourists, including women (about 35 percent of customers in 2006), started flocking to Akihabara to visit maid cafés. By 2007, there were nearly fifty establishments with maids in Akihabara. The market was saturated, even as interest was waning, and maid cafés began to appeal with even more unique themes, costumes and services. From around this time, rumours began to circulate of prostitution and compensated dating among maids, though I personally never witnessed any evidence of this.

[46] For details on the tour, see '[Akihabara Tour Information & Registration](#)' in *Otaku2.com*, online: <http://www.otaku2.com/articleView.php?item=16>, accessed 14 October 2010. For samples of my café reviews, see Gaigokujin (pen name of Patrick W. Galbraith), 'Maid Café Review: @home café,' in *Akibanana.com*, 3 March 2008, online: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080306225810/http://www.akibanana.com/?q=node/184>, accessed 17 October 2010.

[47] An omelet rice meal costs around 1,000 yen, parfaits 800 yen and soft drinks 500 yen. This is without seating charges, but still more expensive than standard casual dining establishments.

[48] Reported in *Sankei Shimbun*, 18 June 2007. This resonates significantly with many products and services that Allison observed in 'millennial Japan.' See Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, p. 91. It is interesting to note, however, that hers is a discussion of intimacy with objects and character goods, not people. Maids are part of the 'character therapy age.'

[49] Hazuki, interview with the author in Ueno, 21 July 2008.

[50] Suyaku, interview with the author in Yotsuya, 15 May 2007.

[51] Mikan, interview with the author at Royal Milk in Akihabara, 30 November 2007.

[52] Miho Aida, 'Moeru kūkan: Meido kafe ni kansuru shakaigakuteki kōsatsu' (Budding Space: Sociological Observations of Maid Cafés), in *Hiroshima Shūdō University Thesis Collection, Humanities Edition*, Hiroshima: Hiroshima Shūdō University Press, 2006, pp. 193–219.

[53] Lawrence Eng, 'Otaku engagements: subcultural appropriation of science and technology,' Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2006, p. 24.

[54] Eng, 'Otaku engagements,' p. 34.

- [55] Many informants identified themselves only with handle names and called one another by these names. I did not always know their real names, or other personal information for that matter. The same was true with maids.
- [56] 'Lv. 1 My Master,' 'Familiar Master,' 'Eminent Master,' 'Glorious Master,' 'The Paragon of Master Excellence' and 'The Legend.'
- [57] This occurred when Akiba Prince and I were together at Misty Heaven in Akihabara on 8 February 2008.
- [58] King made this comment at a 'maid event' (maids performing onstage) held in Ebisu on 2 March 2008. Tickets to this event cost 3,000 yen, plus 500 yen for a drink. In addition, King bought various items (i.e., a 3,500-yen shirt) from the maids in order to talk with them and shake their hands.
- [59] Gary Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- [60] This is something that I witnessed while doing participant observation in @home café. I did not interview Ebi.
- [61] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- [62] A middle-aged woman visiting a maid café on one of my tours described it as the 'spiritual sanctuary' (*seishinteki na ikoi no basho*) lost to Japan after WWII. Her articulation of traditional values seems to resonate with regulars, indicative of collapsing epitomes.
- [63] Dragon, interview with the author in Akihabara, 30 September 2007.
- [64] Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.
- [65] About 1,000 yen for work after 8 p.m. In contrast, a hostess makes around 6,000 yen an hour.
- [66] At the height of the maid boom, Terajima Hiroyasu, owner of MIA Café, reported that he received hundreds of applications for every open job position. In 2007, there appeared a Maid Standards Test (*meido kentei*) to earn credentials and get on the fast track to work in a café. As popularity waned in the late 2000s, maid cafés began to actively solicit applications, including taking on more foreign workers from temp agencies.
- [67] This from Eva, an American placed in @home café in the winter of 2007–2008.
- [68] Mark D. West, *Secrets, Sex, and Spectacle: The Rule of Scandal in Japan and the United States*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 177–78.
- [69] Atsushi Miura and Yanauchi Tamao. *Onna wa naze kyabajō ni naritai no ka* (Why Do Women Want to Become Cabaret Girls?), Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 2008.
- [70] The Akihabara blood donation centre reported in 2009 that one out of every ten girls they see have attempted a wrist cut. Interview with Kobayashi Takuya in Akihabara, 21 April 2009.
- [71] Arisa, interview with the author in Akihabara, 4 August 2008. Arisa suggested that most newcomers learn the character from other maids, or 'pick it up' from watching anime.
- [72] Eri, interview with the author in Akihabara, 17 May 2007.
- [73] Mei, interview with the author in Ikebukuro, 7 May 2007.
- [74] Rina, interview with the author in Shinjuku, 20 June 2007.
- [75] This from Anna, who worked at Popopure. She mentioned this while we talked in the café, but I did not conduct a formal interview.
- [76] In 2008, @home café started making massive renovations to combat the shrinking maid market. This included ranking maids and charging extra to interact with popular ones. Eva spoke of a written statement from the management encouraging girls of 'all ranks' to do everything possible to increase their popularity. Eva was upset, saying, 'The only other places I know of with a system like this are cabaret clubs.' As many as ten maids, including Eva, left the café soon after. Eva, interview with the author in Tokyo on 29 April 2008.
- [77] Consider the tragic slayings in Akihabara in 2008. The perpetrator was a young man working an irregular position in an automotive factory. Dissatisfied with this, he sought solace in posting messages online and pursuing his hobbies. He claimed to love Akihabara, and visited a maid café, but was ultimately disgusted with the clientele, who had the time and money to invest in the café in ways he could not. Okada Toshio suggests that feelings of jealousy and exclusion prompted the attack on Akihabara. See [Patrick W. Galbraith](http://www.otaku2.com/articleView.php?item=62), 'Otaku2 Interview: Okada Toshio,' in *Otaku2.com*, 24 June 2008, online: <http://www.otaku2.com/articleView.php?item=62>, accessed 14 October 2010.

[78] Edelman, *No Future*.

[79] Honda, *Moeru otoko*, pp. 18–19.

[80] Saitō, 'Otaku Sexuality,' p. 245.

[81] I am drawing on the concept of the "body without organs" here. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

[82] Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 244.

[83] Shun'ya Yoshimi, *Riariti toranjitto* (Realities in Transit), Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 1996. What distinguishes maid cafés from theme parks is that only a limited number of people would visit Disneyland, for example, everyday with the intension of forming an intimate relationship with Mickey Mouse (the costume, not the person inside).

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue25/galbraith.htm>

© [Copyright](#)

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#).

Last modified: 24 February 2011 1223