

This article was downloaded by: [Purchase College Suny]

On: 17 June 2014, At: 20:30

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Japanese Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjst20>

Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan

Lorraine Plourde^a

^a Purchase College, SUNY, USA

Published online: 17 Jun 2014.

To cite this article: Lorraine Plourde (2014): Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan, *Japanese Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/10371397.2014.928183](https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2014.928183)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2014.928183>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan

LORRAINE PLOURDE, *Purchase College, SUNY, USA*

This article examines the Japanese cat café boom, which peaked in 2009 yet remains a significant retail phenomenon throughout Japan, and in particular Tokyo. How do humans encounter animals in contemporary Japan, not as private owners and companions, but as consumers seeking direct, sensory engagement with cats at a moment of profound social and economic anxieties? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tokyo, this article examines how cats have become a newly emergent commodity within the ‘healing boom’ that first emerged in recessionary-era 1990s Japan. Such healing commodities – therapeutic music, aromatherapy, robot interaction, among others – are designed to invoke an affective engagement with the consumer in order to cope with the uncertain and stressful conditions of life in still recessionary, and now post 3/11, Japan. I situate cat cafés within the increasing immaterialization of the economy in post-bubble Japan during which social relationships have become commodified and marketed to those who can afford it. Cats are the affective object through which patrons seek a sense of healing and relaxation.

‘When you’re lonely, cats are the best at listening.’ So remarks the main character of the movie *Renta Neko* (Rent-a-Cat), a free-spirited yet entrepreneurial young woman named Sayoko who lives in her deceased grandmother’s house that is overrun with cats – the proverbial ‘cat lady’ household. To make productive use of the cat hordes that have seemingly taken over the house, Sayoko devises a business plan to rent cats to the lonely. Her customers include an elderly widower, a businessman who lives apart from his family due to a job posting, and a lonely young single woman who works a tedious and monotonous shift at the front desk of a car rental company. Despite its lighthearted and quirky tone, *Renta Neko*, a film that premiered in Japan in May 2012, nevertheless raises questions that are central to the backdrop of this article.¹

This article explores the desire for healing through human-animal interaction, specifically with cats, in post-economic bubble Japan. I examine the Japanese cat café (*neko kafe*) boom, which peaked in 2009 yet remains a significant retail phenomenon throughout Japan, and in particular Tokyo. I ask, how do humans encounter domestic animals in contemporary Japan, not as private owners and companions, but as consumers seeking direct, sensory engagement with cats in a time of profound social and economic anxieties? Tokyo’s cat cafes are public spaces where customers – curiously enough, some of them already cat owners – pay by the hour to relax, read manga, and interact with

¹Following the 2011 Japan earthquake, the increasing precarity of everyday life in Japan became the focus of a front-page article in the *Asahi Shimbun* that explored what effect this disaster would have on Japanese citizens. As Anne Allison notes, the article queried whether the disaster would either ‘wake people up to the importance of human connections or lead them even further into social deterioration and isolation as a “country of loneliness”.’ Allison, ‘Ordinary Refugees’, 349–350.

cats. These public cafes are nevertheless highly domestic spaces that evoke the feeling and ambience of being in one's apartment, through a carefully staged use of furniture, lighting, reading materials, and background music.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Tokyo between 2010 and 2013, this article examines how cats have become a newly emergent commodity within the 'healing boom' that first gained momentum in recessionary-era 1990s Japan.² Such goods are designed to produce an affective engagement with the consumer that helps them to cope with the uncertain and stressful conditions of life in still recessionary, and now post-3/11, Japan. The desire for healing through cats at this moment resonates strongly in Japan amidst stagnant economic growth and increasing social and economic precarity.³ As I argue, cat cafés' aesthetics of healing and domesticity through human-animal interaction suggest an alternative and more flexible sense of home at a moment in which older and more hegemonic notions of home and family life (marriage, children, lifetime employment) have become increasingly difficult (if not impossible) for most Japanese youth to attain.⁴

This article explores the social and affective networks that produce a desire for cats in a peculiar, yet provocative, staging of human-animal interaction. I argue that the labor performed by the cats can be explained in terms of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have termed affective labor. As they explain, affective labor – one of the types of immaterial labor that is most visible in the service industries – has replaced industrial labor as the hegemonic form and involves the 'production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labor in the bodily mode'.⁵ Affective labor is immaterial because 'its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, excitement, or passion'.⁶

With respect to affective labor in cafes, the cats' labor is material with very real effects (which are carefully monitored and regulated by café owners and employees), yet the products of such labor – feelings and sensations of healing, relaxation, and calm for the customers – are decidedly immaterial. Affect has been defined by Brian Massumi as 'intensity' and 'sensation', something which precedes emotions, which, as Hardt and Negri point out, are 'mental phenomena', while 'affects refer equally to body and mind'.⁷ More importantly, affect inherently contains a 'dynamism, a sociality or social productivity'.⁸ Following Gabriella Lukacs' discussion of cell-phone novelists in Japan, I distinguish affective labor from emotional labor, the latter first outlined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild as the 'management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display', seen in service sectors such as the airline industry and the fast-food industry.⁹ While cat cafes intersect with the service economy in certain ways, I argue

²For a discussion of the healing boom and mood regulation in recessionary Japan in relation to popular literature, see Roquet, 'Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm'.

³Anne Allison defines social precarity as 'a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one's (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community'; Allison, 'Ordinary Refugees', 348–349.

⁴For ethnographic work on intimacy and immaterial labor in neoliberal Japan, see Galbraith, 'Maid in Japan'; Takeyama, 'Intimacy for Sale'.

⁵Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 293.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 108.

⁸Wissinger, 'Always on Display', 232.

⁹Lukacs, 'Dreamwork', 46; Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

that the labor performed by the cats and advertised by the cafes as healing falls more precisely under the rubric of affective labor.¹⁰

The notion of cat labor in this article moves beyond an anthropocentric view of industrial labor, and draws upon the idea that ‘affective labor always directly constructs a relationship’.¹¹ It is the relationships and intimate interactions forged in the space of the café that this article examines. However, what might such labor and human interaction suggest if the contact is facilitated through a nonhuman (often unruly) actor such as a cat who is both the object and laborer? Here, the putative healing qualities of cats are integral to their ability to facilitate and create social (and interspecies) relations among cats and patrons. The healing boom is intimately tied to the larger shift towards immaterial and affective labor in post-bubble Japan and an increasing desire for new forms of intimacy and social connectedness, whether that relationship is formed with a cat or a regular café patron.¹² Cat cafes, I argue, are indicative of transformations in social connectivity in which café patrons can flexibly connect with other patrons and cats in a space that is both intimate and homey but also nonproductive. It is precisely the unruliness and flexibility of the cats that is instrumental to the café’s production of a feeling of domesticity and home.

Entering a Cat Café

Faint new age music fills the space of the room, though the volume is not high enough to distract the customers or workers; it is there simply to provide a comforting aural backdrop, similar to incense. All customers must remove their shoes in the café’s entrance and put on soft velour slippers that are stored in a large wicker basket by the elevator. After the staff explain the café’s rules regarding the patrons’ physical engagement with cats – cameras are allowed but the flash must be turned off; hands must be washed and dried then finished with alcohol sanitizer; if the cats cry or appear to struggle with your touch, put them down immediately; don’t wake up or disturb cats who are sleeping – they direct the new customers to read the etiquette guide. New patrons are also given the *neko sutaffu* (cat staff) album upon entry, featuring glossy photos of the individual cats, as well as biographical information such as likes/dislikes, favorite toys, or type of meow, thus fleshing out their personal history and temperament for the patron to consume in a neat photographic and textual package.

Before entering the cat room, the patrons must decide on a time, which can range from a one- or two-hour session typically costing 1,000–1,200 yen per hour to a quick session as short as ten minutes. They are then given a time-stamped card in a plastic holder to wear around their neck. Upon entering, new patrons will visually scan the room taking in the cats (ranging from 10 to 20, depending on the size of the café) that are dotted throughout the room, some on couches, some on the floor, and some perched high on shelves. At its busiest times – evenings and weekends – there is a seemingly endless flow of customers ranging from young women, often in pairs, to young couples on dates, the occasional foreign tourist,

¹⁰For ethnographic work on emotion management and the service sector see Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*; Leidner, *Fast Food, Fast Talk*; Raz, *Emotions at Work*.

¹¹Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 147. For ethnographic work that brings together theories of affective labor and animal studies, see Parreñas, ‘Producing Affect’.

¹²Recent scholars have explored the shift towards affective labor as an effect of neoliberal policy. See Muehlebach and Shoshan, ‘Introduction: Post-Fordist Affect’; Rutherford, ‘Commentary: What Affect Produces’.

and young to middle-aged salary men, who come alone after work and stay until closing, often not interacting with any other patrons. After becoming accustomed to the environment, new customers may tentatively reach out and try to pet the back of one passing by but are sometimes quickly rebuffed; with great timing and agility, the cat slinks under their outstretched hand so there is no actual physical contact. Often patrons will look around to see if any other patrons witnessed this snub and can possibly share or empathize with the awkward public embarrassment. The intimacy of this exposure is not out of place within the café's staged aesthetic of homey, cozy domesticity.¹³ Many new customers will immediately retrieve their cell phones for documentation. What is striking about this scene is that new customers are rarely able to engage directly with the cats. Instead, the camera lens mediates their engagement.

The *Iyashi* Boom and the Commodification of Intimacy

Despite the cat café boom having officially ended in 2009 (according to some café owners themselves), it is impossible to ignore the vibrant consumer culture surrounding cats and the discourse of direct contact with animals as healing (*iyashi*). Within Tokyo's café world, cats are both marketed and desired as simultaneously healing, laboring, and sensory objects. While the cafes vary in terms of design aesthetics and overall concept, they are both situated within and draw upon existing discourses of healing and contact (*fuzeai*), a more recent Japanese word that invokes mutual (and emotional) contact between two parties, including contact between human and nonhuman actors. I explore the commodification of cats in contemporary Japan as healing objects for those who are marked as 'lonely'. Such patrons participate in the cafés at a moment in which the lack of social connectedness (*tsunagari*) and human contact is becoming an increasingly prevalent topic in post 3/11 Japanese news media and everyday discourse.¹⁴

While cat cafés are frequently explained as a quintessentially Japanese phenomenon, it is important to note that the trend first began in Taiwan in 1998 and soon spread to other East Asian countries, including South Korea. Despite this history, the phenomenon is most widespread and predominant in Japan, with the first café having opened in Osaka in 2004 and the first café in the Tokyo area in 2005.¹⁵ The logic and necessity of such cafes in Japan is often neatly explained in materialist terms; Japanese apartments typically do not allow pets, thus cat lovers have no choice but to go to cat cafés to fulfill their feline yearnings, so to speak.¹⁶ While this may be the case for some patrons, I resist

¹³I often witnessed patrons make eye contact with other patrons when they were snubbed or visibly rejected by cats, perhaps seeking some kind of shared register of embarrassment in this highly intimate space.

¹⁴Allison, 'Ordinary Refugees', 350.

¹⁵There are currently over 40 cat cafes in the Tokyo area, according to an owner I interviewed. Because many cafes go out of business quickly, official numbers for cafes in Japan nationwide are more difficult to ascertain, although estimates from Japanese media and ethnographic research have listed the number in Japan nationwide as exceeding 100. For a discussion of its history in Japan, see 'Konkai no odai'.

¹⁶In addition to the healing boom, there are other factors that may contribute to the popularity of cat cafes in Japan, including the pet boom which has become increasingly prevalent since 2003. Scholars and journalists have linked the pet boom with Japan's declining birthrate, observing that pets are coming to be treated as family members. In this article, I am more concerned with the linkages between the cat café boom and the desire for healing services and goods in post-3/11 Japan. For discussion of the discourse of pets as family members in Japan and the pet boom, see Hansen, 'Urban Japan's "Fuzzy" New Families'; Veldkamp, 'The Emergence of "Pets as Family".'

explaining this phenomenon solely in causal terms and instead linger on the cats as both healing, calming objects and affective laborers. In doing so, I situate the emergence of cat cafés within the lineage of the *iyashi* industry that depends upon the sense of loneliness and ‘affective malaise’ that is prevalent in post-bubble Japan, a time when companionship (virtual or otherwise) and intimacy itself has become a marketable and desirable commodity.¹⁷ On the one hand, it is important to be critical of the highly commodified discourse of *iyashi*, in which passivity, inaction, and relaxation (a discourse which is thus antithetical to political action) is valorized.¹⁸ And yet it is also crucial to explore the redemptive (and therapeutic) possibilities for such human-animal interaction in post-bubble (and now post-3/11) Japan under the rubric of a highly commodified service economy.

This was my first time here.

All the cats were sleeping because it was nighttime,
but I still felt healed [*iyasaremashita*].

People go to cat cafés to be healed, a sentiment frequently reiterated by customers in café guestbook entries, as seen in the above quote. Café owners, employees, patrons and advertising language all explicitly told me this as well. Salarymen come here after work as a way to cope with their grueling jobs, one customer confided in me. After they spend time at a café they are able to persevere (*ganbarimasu*) and work hard the next day, she explained. The healing industry became widespread in the early 1990s following the collapse of Japan’s economic bubble, the Kobe earthquake and Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack in 1995.¹⁹ Healing goods and services such as music, color therapy, aromatherapy, robot interaction, and pet therapy became marketed as necessary tools for coping with the economic and social anxieties that intensified by the mid-1990s.²⁰

What does it mean to think of a cat in particular as *iyashi*? A recent special issue of the Japanese literary journal *Eureka* pithily captures the appeal of cats, ‘one of the most familiar and appealing yet enigmatic and mysterious of all friends’.²¹ While cats are often represented in Japanese folklore as auspicious animals, I never encountered this discourse among café employees or patrons.²² Instead, it was their perceived unruliness and carefree nature that was brought up as part of their charm and cuteness; a sense of charm that is distinct from the more ‘obedient’ (and implicitly, submissive) personalities of dogs, as a café employee explained it to me. How then do café owners and patrons articulate these supposed healing qualities of unruly cats? One regular customer

¹⁷Allison, ‘Ordinary Refugees’, 367; Allison, ‘The Cool Brand’, 101. This malaise is an effect of neoliberal policy in post-bubble Japan in which the state has been steadily withdrawing from providing social welfare and job security for its citizens. This has produced a visceral insecurity that Anne Allison has termed ‘social precarity’.

¹⁸Paul Roquet discusses the social critique of *iyashi* as it has been embraced by the Japanese right-wing history textbook reform movement who seek to sanitize history for young people. Roquet, ‘Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm’.

¹⁹Paul Roquet notes that the word *iyashi* refers to physical and psychological healing and was first used in an ethnography of a Sri Lankan village written by a Japanese medical anthropologist in 1990. The term was later picked up by the Japanese news media and soon became a popular media catchphrase as well as finding its way into marketing campaigns. Roquet, ‘Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm’, 88.

²⁰One recent example is the development of Paro, the Japanese therapeutic robot seal used in elderly homes and hospitals to provide lonely residents with a haptic sense of social contact, thus supplementing, or perhaps replacing, human interaction. Stevens, ‘Touch’, 1.

²¹Kakuta, ‘Cat’.

²²For discussion of cats in Japanese folklore, see Ooki, *Neko no minzokugaku*.

explained the *iyashi* qualities of cats in terms of their physical warmth and the visceral, pleasurable texture of their fur, using the common onomatopoeic phrase, *fuwa fuwa* (fluffy), noting that these qualities were comforting to him.

It is not surprising that a patron would explicitly articulate these particular sensory qualities of comfort and relaxation, as the café owners actively work to cultivate an atmosphere that is not only highly domesticated but soft, comfortable, and gentle on all of the patrons' senses. Some cafes provide fluffy blankets for patrons to use while lounging on the sofas, should they choose to take a nap. I recall overhearing two new female customers exclaim loudly, 'This is so comfortable!', as they happily sank into the plush, velvety sofa cushions, a reaction that is precisely anticipated by and engineered into the café owners' design, which is centered on the customers' relaxation and comfort. Most café employees I spoke with referred specifically to these qualities of relaxation as central to the café's atmosphere, a point I will return to in the next section. And yet, the cat itself is integral to the management and creation of such a relaxed and homey environment.

In order to capitalize on the affective and sensorial qualities of cats and attract not only cat lovers but also cat-owning customers, cafés often market the space as offering the possibility to experience a variety of cats with personalities different from your own pet. There are cafés that specialize in certain breeds (Norwegian Forest cats, for example) or specific age-types (kittens only), perhaps hoping to attract a specialized crowd of patrons or distinguish themselves from cafés that feature a wide mix of breeds. Some venues employ cats that are exclusively from breeders; others feature a mix of cats from breeders, pet shops, kittens from a litter in the owner's circle of friends, and even stray cats. In all cases, cafés try to appeal to both cat owners and cat lovers who may not be cat owners.

I spoke with a café owner about the phenomenon of cat-owning café patrons and he likened this to a secret love affair (*uwaki*). With a laugh, he explained that when the customer returns home after spending time at the café with a different cat, his or her own cat will surely recognize the scent of the café cat and know that they have been 'cheated' on. Despite the intended cheeky humor of recasting the patron-cat relationship in intimate, romantic (and, to be sure, anthropocentric) terms, this logic nevertheless evokes the belief in cats' powerful sensory ability to recognize and respond to regular patrons, a discourse in which the café and the regular patron are heavily invested. Indeed, other cafés have drawn upon the discourse of *uwaki* in their advertising, promoting the café as a means for customers to 'try out' and experience different types of cats. Regardless of whether a patron frequents the café as a cat owner seeking sensory engagement with a different type of cat than their own, or is merely a cat lover seeking to create a bond and attachment with one specific cat, all patron-cat relationships are undergirded by the discourse of healing, which is itself predicated on the idea of the cat as a sensory object.

Christine Yano points out that *iyashi* objects (in her case, Sanrio characters designed to promote social communication between the consumer and character) are not necessarily social objects, but can also be solitary and privately consumed healing commodities, such as aromatherapy candles, essential oils, or herbal teas. Yano notes that certain inanimate objects can be seen as 'primary sites of developing an *iyashi* relationship'.²³ How, though, do we explain the use of *animate* objects as healing commodities that are designed to be consumed and interacted with publicly in the space of the café? What

²³Yano, 'Reach Out and Touch Someone', 25.

affective appeal does a cat have that, say, a crystal or aromatherapy treatment cannot provide? Indeed, what is the nature of an *iyashi* relationship between a café patron and a cat that is imagined and represented by the café itself as a member of ‘cat staff’?

The use of animals as a therapeutic means to relieve stress or provide physical and emotional support for their human companions is not a unique practice by any means – some recent American examples include service dogs used for veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the provision of puppies for college students to play with during exam week.²⁴ The commodification and packaging of cats within the space of the café as affective objects for material and psychological investment, however, intends a wholly different engagement and interaction with animals than in the use of service dogs to help overcome PTSD. What mode of therapy is possible between a patron and members of the cat staff? One regular customer that I interviewed explained his view of cat cafés as providing a form of pet therapy. The appeal of such therapy for him is that it allows for the possibility that the cats become dependent on the patron.

Despite the discourse of healing that surrounds cat café marketing, there has been opposition to this culture within Japan’s animal rights movement and animal welfare organizations more generally. Objections to the commodification of animals came into sharp relief in June 2012 as Japan’s Animal Welfare Law was updated with a new regulation, which imposed a ban on the public display of animals after 8pm.²⁵ The law was aimed primarily at pet shops, many of which are in active nightlife areas and open until late with caged animals forced to stay awake under bright lights, but cat cafés also fell under this new regulation. Many animal welfare organizations are similarly opposed to cat cafés, arguing that cats are overstimulated by the constant attention from customers. After an outcry from café owners, the law was further revised to allow cat cafés to return to staying open until 10pm.

The Café as a Healing Space

The *iyashi* atmosphere of the cat café does not reside solely in the affective qualities of the cats themselves, but is also created through the highly controlled and staged ambience of the cafés, which aim to evoke a domestic feel that is not only calm and gentle on the senses but also *familiar*. One owner I spoke with explained his Okinawan-themed café as drawing upon the warmth of Okinawa through its design with low wooden tables, and soft, healing background music. This particular café’s concept, like many others, is that of being ‘at home’.²⁶ There is an explicit recognition of the cats’ healing and therapeutic effects by the café owners – café fliers, websites, and street signs market the café as a space for healing, calm, and relaxation. One café promotes itself as a ‘cat café and healing space’. Another, as shown in [Figure 1](#), explains the store’s concept on its flier as a café that offers a healing space where you can play with cats at your leisure, pet them, and take their photos while drinking tea.

As a ‘third place’, neither home nor work, the café has long served as a public space for intellectual activity on the one hand, and coffee connoisseurship on the other.²⁷ In

²⁴See <http://warriorcanineconnection.org>; Cross, ‘College Students’.

²⁵See Dow, ‘Japanese Cat Cafés’.

²⁶This café owner’s choice of Okinawan design aesthetics complicates the notion of being ‘at home’ in Tokyo.

²⁷See Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place*, for his discussion of the café as a third place.

ねこ・JaLaLaとは...

ゆったりお茶をしながら猫と遊んだり、猫を撫でたり、写真を撮ったりそんな癒しの空間を提供するカフェです。

ね (ne) こ (ko) Ja

料金
 最初の30分 530円
 延長 10分 160円

ドリンク
 コーヒー、紅茶、日本茶、ハーブティー
 フレーバーティー、炭酸類、100%ジュース
 アルコール etc...
 ¥320~

Map

←オレンジの花と扉の猫の取っ手が目印です♪

QRコード

携帯サイトもあるよ☆

営業時間 平日11:00~20:00 土日祝11:00~19:00
 F101-0021 東京都千代田区外神田3-5-5-1F TEL:03-3258-2525

La La La

FIGURE 1. Café flier advertising space as a ‘healing (*iyashi*) space’.

her recent book on the history of the café and coffee drinking in Japan, Merry White explains how cafés in urban Japan can serve as public spaces that offer a sense of private refuge for patrons to seek sensory relief (and perhaps anonymity) from the stress of everyday life, whether at work or at home.²⁸ Indeed, many cat cafés position themselves as occupying a distinct temporal space by drawing on discourses of leisure (*yuttari*), relaxation (*kutsurogi*), slowness (*yuruyuru*), and the idea of ‘cat time’ (*neko no jikan*) all of which mark the temporality of the café as one positioned outside the frenzied and presumably stressful experience of everyday life in Tokyo. Such usage of the space by

²⁸White, *Coffee Life in Japan*.

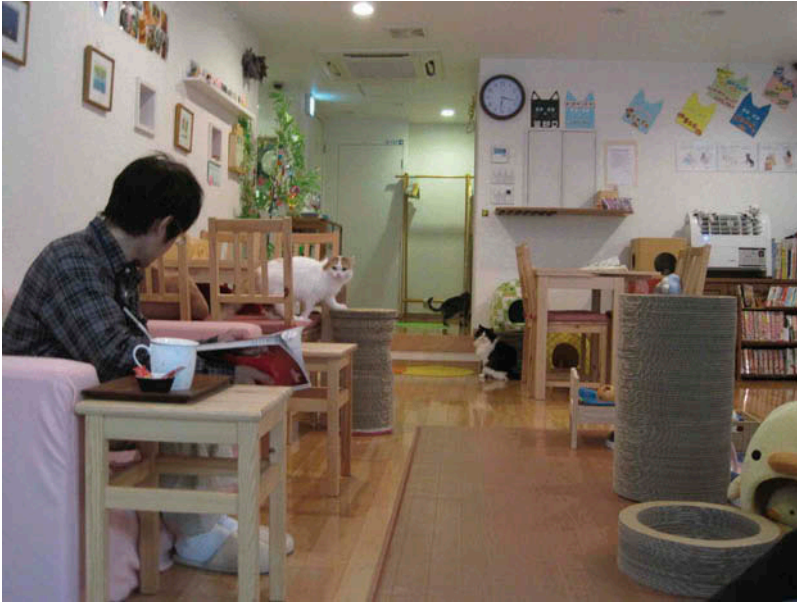


FIGURE 2. Pastel interior of café (photo by the author).

patrons also corresponds to the development of Internet cafés which are open 24 hours a day and offer private (though tiny) rooms with PCs, armchairs, and small desks, in addition to the use of a private shower.²⁹ Both types of patrons, cat café patrons and net café refugees, exemplify the workings of the contemporary social precarity. Cat cafés, I argue, signify the loss of social relationships through the commodification of affect. In this case, cats signify the need and desire for affective contact with animals.

Similar to other cafés in Japan, cat cafés pay careful attention not only to interior design, but also to the comfort of the customer. One café employee explained a design as focused on the use of light colors such as yellow in order to cheer up or enliven the space. Many cafés, moreover, draw on design themes that are childlike, innocent, and non-threatening, often evoking the ambience of preschool environments. The most typical design format of a cat café features pastel colored walls and soft furniture (often low to the ground), bright lighting, soft mats or rugs, velvety blankets, and quiet, often barely audible background music, as shown in Figure 2. In many cafés, soft textures, roundness, and avoidance of sharp edges are predominant aesthetic themes. All cafés work to actively create a sense of intimate domesticity. The patron should feel as if they are at *their* home (or, at least, a generalized and recognizable sense of home), playing with what might be *their* cat.

Still other cafés draw upon different design aesthetics to create a sense of comfort and healing. One worker explained to me that their interior was created in direct opposition to those of the typical pastel-colored café, the ones that tend to evoke the feeling of a ‘children’s room’, as she pejoratively put it. This particular café features dark furniture, neutral walls and dim lighting. Interestingly, the café owner specifically chose interior colors that would blend well with the breed and markings of the cats themselves. It also

²⁹Such cafes have recently become temporary living quarters for precarious homeless laborers who have been termed ‘net café refugees’. Allison, ‘Ordinary Refugees’, 353.

features an extensive selection of manga and cat-themed books and magazines. Their aesthetic, according to the employee, is to create a relaxed atmosphere, and if customers happen to fall asleep because of the dim lighting and calm ambience, that is perfectly acceptable; in fact it is even encouraged. They want customers to feel as if they are at home reading manga in a space that happens to have cats sleeping nearby.

Prior to opening this café, the owner tested out a variety of couches to determine the most comfortable ones for creating this type of sleep-inducing atmosphere. The result has been that it is not unusual to see customers sprawled out on couches with blankets lightly covering them as if they are sleeping in their own bed, completely oblivious to the cats around them. During a recent visit, I witnessed a middle-aged male patron flop down on the couch with several cats also asleep nearby. His snores soon resounded around the café as nearby patrons stifled giggles and exchanged amused glances. This was, in fact, nothing out of the ordinary for café behavior. The domesticity of the café itself is critical in evoking a sense of familiarity and comfort for patrons that lets them engage in such intimate yet banal (and unproductive) behavior as sleeping and snoring in front of other patrons and cats.

Though the sensory power of direct contact with cats is, of course, critical to the café's promotion of itself as a healing space, what is striking is that new customers do not always touch or directly engage with the cats; indeed, sometimes they are simply unable to when cats sequester themselves out of reach. If new customers are not able to have direct contact with sleeping or out-of-the-way cats, what is their actual engagement with them? Cafés promote this relationship in various ways, but all of them are designed to compensate for the cats' general indifference to new customers in order to encourage patrons to eventually become regulars.

Cat-Customer Relations: Regular Patrons and New Customers

I watched quietly amidst the calm atmosphere of the room as a male patron in his forties sat casually on the floor with his back against the wall (eschewing the couches that all the other patrons were sitting on), spatially separated from the other patrons who, based on their behavior, appeared to be new. While the new customers tried in vain to gain some sort of recognition or response from the cats by following them, calling out, enticing them with toys, and taking photos with their cell phones, this lone patron sat at a clear distance from them casually thumbing through a newspaper with three cats lounging contentedly at his side, one curled up asleep in his lap. 'They [cats] recognize their voice and their face,' a café employee told me as we discussed regular customers and their difference from new patrons. 'You can always spot a new patron based on their behavior,' she told me. 'It's completely different from that of regular customers.'

Regular patrons tend to come alone on weekday evenings after work and rarely on weekends when cafés are mostly filled with newcomers and tourists. Some will call in advance to see if the café is crowded. One regular customer told me that he goes two to three times a week, usually for a one-hour session, unless he is on vacation in which case he will often stay for up to three hours. He will occasionally go to the café in the morning before work if he feels a need to interact and spend time with 'his' cat. Regulars, many of whom are young salarymen in their late twenties and thirties, typically spend their time quietly reading manga while a cat sits or sleeps nearby, without directly approaching the cats; rather, the cats come to them. When they recognize a regular patron entering the café, one or more cats will run to their side, as one café owner told

me. This is in direct contrast to new customers who vigorously seek out contact with the cats, that respond by fleeing and rejecting their advances. New patrons are constantly on the move, sweeping through the entire space of the café trying to find interested and awake cats by luring them with cat toys. Regular patrons behave in a manner most identifiable as *iyashi*; that is, with minimal attention and effort. They simply sit back and read, often only occasionally looking up to observe or interact with the cats around them, or sometimes not at all. The ‘cool, distanced sociality’ of regular café patrons perhaps uncannily echoes the apparently inscrutable and emotionally cool behavior for which cats are often either romanticized or rejected.³⁰ An employee I spoke with surmised that the cats likely prefer the young male regular customers because they tend to be the most calming for the cats and interact with them the least. Cats will often directly approach the regular customers they recognize, whereas they appear to strenuously avoid contact with new customers.

The difficulty of establishing direct contact with cats is often reflected in online reviews of cat cafés; customers rate cafés on the availability of the cats and their liveliness. Customers often give low scores to cafés in which cats are always sleeping or don’t approach them directly. Cafés manage the unruly and unpredictable behavior of cats by appealing to new customers with a relaxed ambience, but they also work to promote a space for regular customers to invest in and develop a relationship with cats over time, often with one cat in particular. Some cafés turn the possibility for patron engagement with cats into a theatrical event. The cats’ feeding time is often publicly advertised and customers are encouraged to participate. At one café I attended, each patron was assigned a specific bowl and cat and ordered to place the bowls on the floor in a synchronized, dramatic fashion following the chants of the café worker. Here, the act of feeding cats becomes a staged public spectacle for customers to consume through their participation. At other cafés, patrons themselves do not directly participate in feeding; instead, they stand back surrounding the cats – who are arranged into a semi-circle around their bowls – and document the event through photographs. A number of cafés permit customers to buy snacks to feed the cats themselves, as shown in Figure 3. This is one of the rare times when cats directly approach new customers.

In addition to the interspecies relationships that are created, the relationships between regular solitary patrons are an important social dynamic and effect of the peculiar domesticity that is invoked in the cat café. Many regular patrons spend their time in the cafés alone, not touching the cats at all, yet the intimacy that is shared and experienced in the space of the café – sleeping and snoring on a couch while cats and other patrons sit (or sleep) nearby – suggests a new imagining of intimacy, domesticity, and social connectivity. Here, cats are central to this new and more flexible type of domesticity. Regular events at these cafés, such as cat birthday parties, are celebratory spaces for solitary patrons to attend after work and meet other cat lover patrons. Indeed, one employee of a popular cafe told me that he viewed his café’s primary purpose as encouraging and nurturing relationships between patrons.³¹ A crude but telling diagram he sketched for me during the interview identified the cats as intermediaries that bring patrons together.

³⁰Roquet, ‘The Domestication of the Cool Cat’, 239.

³¹He went so far as to hypothetically suggest that if they had a sign on the door saying that all the cats were out sick that day, their regular patrons would still enter the café.



FIGURE 3. Patron feeding cats with snacks purchased at café (photo by the author).

The Cat as Fetish

While I was sitting on a couch in a café and leafing through the cat album, an employee approached and presented me with a tabby cat curled up asleep in a wicker basket. ‘This is Kiri,’ she announced while gently but pointedly placing the basket within arm’s length of my seat. In an attempt to engage the employee further, I asked about the whereabouts of a cat in the guidebook that caught my eye, a fluffy grey and white Maine Coon named Edward. She nodded and quickly left to retrieve the cat for me, returning moments later with Edward who was sleeping quietly in a makeshift cardboard box, plainly visible through the open front flap. With a flourish, she placed the box on the couch across from me and left, leaving me to figure out how to interact with this cat, who was now languidly appraising me. As I stared at him, I wondered absurdly if he could sense that I was not a regular customer. After sitting awkwardly across from one another for several minutes, I decided not to disturb the cat any longer and gave him a pat on the head, farewell greeting, and stepped away. As I paid to leave at the register, that same employee asked if I was able to spend quality time with Edward, a query that laid bare the fact that these cats are to be desired and imagined as healing commodities – they are there to produce pleasure for the customer, to fulfill their desires and quell their loneliness.

In the case of cat cafés, the traditional therapeutic model of the companion animal relationship, such as with service dogs for example, is tipped on its head, for the café patron can only interact with the cat through the medium of commodity exchange. Here, the cat worker / human customer relationship is entirely cultivated and premised on the cat itself as a sensual commodity in which the patron invests over time, both materially and imaginatively. This investment is heightened by the café’s extensive packaging and marketing of each cat as a distinct and complex individual.

One striking example is the celebratory birthday party, mentioned earlier, that many cafés hold for each of the cats. Primarily attended by café regulars, such events serve to lavish and focus attention on the birthday cat in a very routinized yet ostentatious spectacle, while also creating occasions for regular lone customers to reconnect and mingle with one another. On the night I attended, the birthday cat was dressed in a miniature pink kimono and given a special birthday meal after the café's patrons and employees all clapped and sang 'Happy Birthday' in unison. As the grey cat quietly and unceremoniously ate its celebratory meal alone (the other cats had been momentarily put back in their cages) patrons gathered in a row in front of the cat capturing the scene on their cameras and cell phones, evoking the image of a cat celebrity before the paparazzi throng. Some customers brought small birthday gifts for the cat. Others entered into the spirit of the event as evident from the copious guestbook entries congratulating the cat, many of which referred to the cat's appearance that night as well as its unique personality.

It is, in fact, the cats' personalities and physical presence, highly managed and advertised by the cafés, that become sensual and fantastic sites of investment and imagination for both café owners and patrons. The cats' bodies and overall physical appearance are sometimes marketed dramatically in albums with terms such as 'sexy', 'dazzling' or 'pretty' – one fluffy white Ragdoll breed being compared to Marilyn Monroe in the cat staff album at one café I attended. During the birthday party celebration mentioned above, the birthday cat was repeatedly (and quite seriously) referred to by café employees as having a 'sexy body', a phrase which was also repeated throughout many of the customers' well-wishes for the cat in the café guestbook for that night. The patrons' guestbook comments evoke the staging and marketing of the cats as sensual objects, to the extent that they often become anthropomorphized and imbued with affective qualities often attributed to humans such as 'sexy' or 'pretty'. The logic of this staging extends into the cafés' positioning of the human-cat relationship as one that is comparable to an 'affair'.

Some cats are explicitly marked in guidebooks or posters as 'most popular cat', a phrasing that uncannily evokes the coveted 'number-one host' position at Japan's male host clubs, a status to which all male hosts aspire.³² While the notion of an 'idol' cat, as one patron termed the category, might seem unusual, in fact, most regular patrons have 'their cat', one that they become attached to and invest in over time as patron. One regular customer told me that his favorite cat happened to be the cat that first approached him on his first visit to the café.³³ He explained that while he dotes on one particular cat and likes when it approaches him directly, he also enjoys sitting back and simply observing all the cats in the space. This patron, who only attends this café, explained his preference for this space because it features cats with the most distinct personalities, which for him is the biggest attraction. Each cat is different from the next, he explained, an idea that is vividly and strategically evoked in the café's photo albums and advertising. He dismissed other cafés which are often focused more on providing entertainment goods and services such as manga, video games, Internet access, and massage chairs, while the cats are just an afterthought. As he emphasized, at his favorite café 'the cats are the main attraction'. The fetishistic nature of the cat-customer

³²Takeyama, 'Intimacy for Sale', 236.

³³When I mentioned the cat that I thought was the most appealing, this patron laughed and nodded knowingly and explained that he is the café's 'idol cat'. By choosing the most popular and obviously cute cat (the 'superstar'), my apparent naïveté in this social setting was made starkly evident.

relationship is further heightened by the moment of the patron's entry into the space itself; at many cafés, patrons mark their entrance into the café with a time-stamped card that they wear in a plastic badge around their neck, thus visually marking and temporally carving up their investment in the café itself.

The structure of cat cafés recalls aspects of the structure of host clubs in Japan, which Akiko Takeyama examines as being organized around an affect economy.³⁴ As she argues, this economy is linked with the service and entertainment industry in Japan, in which affect itself is creatively imagined, marketed, and commodified. Here, hosts perform affective labor and become 'objects onto which women's fantasies are projected'.³⁵ In the host club context, new customers are given an album of the hosts (glossy photos with name and bio) and are encouraged to select a specific host, thereby (and ideally) developing an intimate, yet wholly commodified relationship with their chosen host. Similarly, such packaging of individual cats (as personalized, distinct individuals) uncannily evokes what Takeyama refers to as the 'capacity to appeal' in the case of host clubs. By this logic, 'any thing that has a capacity to appeal, including a human being, can also potentially be turned into a commodity to be bought, sold, and invested'.³⁶

It is useful to think of the way in which such affective contact and intimacy is staged and commodified for café patrons in parallel with the affect economy of host clubs in Japan. For the cafés, such overt emphasis on the cats' individuality is an attempt to refute the notion that 'animals are semi-individuals, at once personal yet incarnates of an anonymous mass'.³⁷ The album information is critical for customers to learn about their chosen cats, but also in staging the cats as highly differentiated and complex animals with distinct personalities and temperaments. This is not a café with random unnamed cats to be crudely bought and sold. That such staging is perhaps also an attempt to cover up the broader commodity status of the cats is suggested by a single contrary example I encountered during my fieldwork – a kitten café linked with a pet shop that rejected such efforts. There, the kittens have no names and are referred to simply by number and breed. There is no album available for customers to peruse. Instead, there are signs throughout the café reminding customers that the kittens are for sale and to speak with an employee if they find a particular kitten that they like. At other cafés, however, the cats' individualization is heightened by the anthropomorphic presentation and staging to a point where they become imbued with human attributes and interests – such as the cat with a Twitter account. When I inquired as to the viability of a cat having her own Twitter page, the café employee disregarded my question and merely explained that patrons who are 'fans' of this particular cat will choose to follow her Twitter feed, which also serves as a means of extending the relationship between cat and patron beyond the physical boundaries of the café itself.

Cat Labor

'We use the term ["cat staff"] because they're working!' A café worker gave this very matter-of-fact response when I queried her about what *neko sutaffu* precisely means. I was curious to find out how it is understood by the 'human staff' (*ningen sutaffu*),

³⁴Takeyama, 'Intimacy for Sale'.

³⁵Ibid., 237.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Song, *Pigeon Trouble*, 49.

another phrase that is often used by employees to distinguish between but also invoke the interdependence of the human and non-human animal labor in the space of the café. 'We [human staff] work for them and support them [cat staff],' she further explained, 'but everything they do is work. When they play, it's work. When they eat, it's work.' While it might be tempting to dismiss 'cat staff' as an ironic and cute anthropomorphism, a play on standard retail-speak, there is nevertheless a clear recognition of the cats as laborers on some level by the café employees and owners.

As patrons seek affective contact with cats, so the cats perform immaterial (in this case, affective) labor, to use the terms advanced by Hardt and Negri that have been discussed above. Hardt and Negri also remind us, however, that immaterial labor is always interlinked and integrated with material labor; thus, café employees perform the necessary material labor (cleaning up after the cats, working the register, interacting with patrons, etc.) alongside the affective labor the cats perform. Certain aspects of the café's necessary material labor (dealing with litter, refuse) are hidden from the patrons' eyes, while others such as grooming (brushing, nail clipping) are often performed by employees in the café in full view of the patrons.³⁸ It is crucial then to examine how the affective sensations produced by the cats are valued, as well as how the cats' labor itself is measured, assessed, and regulated. If we concede that the cats are performing labor that produces feelings of home, domesticity, and healing for patrons, we should also consider how the café employees manage the potentially negative bodily effects of such labor on the cats themselves.

There are, however, café owners and employees who resist the usage or implications of the phrase 'cat staff,' with many finding it dehumanizing, despite the fact that the cafés themselves use the language in advertising. One employee told me that while they use the phrase 'cat staff,' it can evoke feelings of coldness towards the cats, so they also use '*nyanzu*,' a hybrid version of the more diminutive and colloquial word for cat in Japanese.³⁹ I spoke with one café owner who laughingly rejected the phrase 'cat staff,' which for him explicitly (and crudely) evokes linkages between the payment of money and the display of cats. Another café owner I spoke with stated his opposition to referring to cats as workers, explaining that at their café they view both the human employees and the cats as a unified family. When I asked where the cats sleep at night after business hours (it is common for cats to sleep in cages inside the café after it closes), he told me that every night the cats are taken to a nearby house. He claimed that, if the cats were to sleep inside the café itself, they would not be happy the next day during business hours.

Despite the occasional opposition to referring to cats as staff or workers, there is nevertheless a recognition and awareness of the effects of this labor on their overall physical and mental well-being. To speak about cats not being 'happy' if they were to sleep overnight in the café is to recognize the effects of such affective labor on their bodies and minds. This recognition is itself predicated on the owners' desire to maintain a strict division between the domestic space of rest, recovery, and leisure, and work itself. Other café owners draw upon similar strategies for managing the effects of such

³⁸Death is also sanitized and hidden from patrons. One café that I visited featured a large shrine in honor of a former café cat that had died after a long illness. Here, patrons could affix personal (and often very heartfelt) notes of remembrance and mementoes to memorialize the deceased cat. The shrine produces affective sensations for the patrons while simultaneously hiding the process of death, thus highlighting the sanitization of what some Japanese animal rights activists believe to be the cats' exploitation.

³⁹*Nyan* is the Japanese onomatopoeic word for 'meow' and is also a colloquial word in Japanese for cat. At this particular café, *nyanzu* is a hybrid Japanese-English neologism that denotes all of the café's cats by playfully evoking the English plural through the 'zu' ending.

labor on the cats. At several cafés I observed, I was told that new kittens can only stay in the cafe around customers for half the day. In addition, some will rotate the cats between periods of working in the café and ‘vacation’. Here, ‘vacation’ means spending a few days or a week at a worker’s nearby apartment. In other cafés, cats can take short breaks during business hours in a staff-only back room within the café.

One café employee told me that once the café closes, all the cats are effectively ‘on break’ together until the café reopens the next morning, thus implicitly acknowledging the cats’ necessary labor during business hours. The employee’s response reveals a telling use of language that acknowledges the importance of the cats’ labor to the structure of the business. At some cafés, the back room where the litter boxes are located is accessible by a swinging cat-sized door, so they can enter and exit freely. However, if a customer requests a particular cat and they are in the break room, the employees will retrieve the cat for the customer. I spoke with some employees and asked how they evaluate the cats in order to determine whether they are in need of a break from customers or not. One worker told me that if cats are injured or sick (or just seem ‘off’), they will take them to a back room, inspect them, and determine whether to give them a break. Sometimes, as a worker explained, after five minutes in the break room, the cats will immediately cry to be taken out of the room. I spoke with another café owner who rejected the necessity of a break for cats except in cases of physical sickness. He expressed the view that there is really no need for a break if the customers are just sitting and reading manga and the cats are not being petted and are able to sleep all day in the café.

The cats’ labor is carefully monitored and controlled in other ways as well. Unproductive cats – those that are sleeping or sitting quietly – are often made productive. The café manager keeps a watchful eye knowing that patrons are paying for direct contact with cats. The manner in which cats are nurtured and raised in a retail environment in which they are faced with the burden of performing affective labor for patrons has been critiqued as a form of exploitation by Japan’s animal rights movement. To ask what the cat gets out of this exchange is not a flippant question, for it is clear that most human patrons get something out of the relationship (with both cats and patrons). Japan’s animal rights activists pose the question quite seriously as they believe the very structure of the cat café, similar to pet shops, is overstimulating for the cats and therefore inherently exploitative. Most cafés provide etiquette guides that instruct patrons not to wake sleeping cats, thus implicitly acknowledging cats as nocturnal animals.⁴⁰ In my fieldwork, however, I never witnessed employees scold patrons or dissuade them from petting or otherwise disturbing sleeping cats. Instead, cats were often woken up and placed into waiting customers’ laps during the daytime, a time when most cats are sleeping. One café devised a business strategy to deal with this. Because cats sleep for between 14 and 16 hours a day, patrons who visit the café when most of the cats are asleep will likely be bored. Thus, it trains its human employees to interact and engage directly with the patrons, which it sees as crucial in facilitating interaction among patrons, and in the fostering of long-term patronage.

Such monitoring of the cats’ interactions with paying customers can lead to uncomfortable situations, such as the one I found myself in when I casually mentioned to an employee that I thought one cat – who I mentioned by name as I had just read his bio in

⁴⁰Café owners reacted strongly to the 2012 amendment to the Animal Welfare Law (discussed above), which would have required businesses to close by 8pm; most were (and are) usually open until 10pm. It is during the final two hours of operation when cats are the most lively and awake and is also the time when most regular patrons, who often come directly from work, are in attendance.

the album – was particularly cute. The employee very quickly rushed to the ‘break room’ and to my dismay retrieved the cat and plopped him in my lap. She automatically assumed that I, as paying customer, wanted only to interact with the cat instead of engage in a conversation with the café employees.

By referring to the cats as staff alongside the human staff, the owners acknowledge the value of the cat’s labor to be just as indispensable as the human staff performing material labor such as checking customers in, cleaning up after the cats, and maintaining the daily business environment. As one employee of a popular cat café explained to me, ‘I view the cats as my fellow workers.’ An employee from a different café articulated the relationship in more hierarchical terms, proclaiming that the cats are at a much higher level than the humans, explaining that ‘we [humans] work for the cats and support them’, while still acknowledging the cats as fellow workers. As she put it, ‘We feed them, play with them, and give them toys’, and thus the business can flourish and prosper.

Conclusion

How can we explain this particular desire for cats at this moment in post-bubble Japan? What does it mean to commodify emotions and intimacy and what is the place of nonhuman animals in this economy? The profitability and popularity of cat cafés and *iyashi* services in Japan is clearly evident; the relationships between patrons and cats (and among patrons themselves) that are intimately fostered in the space of the café, however, suggest more than simply a new type of economic exchange. More significantly, cat cafés seem to offer possibilities for new modes of social belonging, public intimacy, and connectedness, in particular to young people for whom the normative postwar model of domestic life (marriage, children) is increasingly deferred or perceived as out of reach.

Indeed, cat cafés perhaps fulfill a desire for intimacy beyond the earlier postwar notion of the family, with cafés offering a domesticity that is predicated on relaxation, healing and non-labor on the part of the patrons. The mode of domesticity that is designed by café owners and consumed by patrons is an implicit rejection of the productive family unit that was hegemonic during the postwar period. Instead, the domesticity that is invoked in the space of the cat café is predicated upon the affective labor performed by the cats that helps solidify and create intimacy within the space, both among patrons and between patrons and cats.⁴¹ The common perception of cats as less ‘faithful’ (than dogs) paradoxically works to create and sustain affective ties between patrons and cats, ties that are further strengthened by the café’s staging and reimagining of domestic public space. Here, patrons are encouraged to relax and seek a sense of *iyashi* and simply do nothing, thus encouraging intimate, relaxed, and shared (but ultimately non-productive) patron behavior such as snoring or sleeping in front of strangers. The relationships between patrons that are created and evoked in the intimate space of the café are just as significant as the relationships that develop between patrons and cats. In contrast to the postwar hegemonic notion of domestic life in Japan, the mode of domesticity created in cat cafés is flexible – patrons can enter, connect, disconnect, and exit the space freely. As a fetishized symbol of domesticity, the cat

⁴¹Given the relative newness of the cat café phenomenon, one wonders about the *iyashi* and affective appeal of old or aging cats. The kittens at a kitten café I attended were displayed and highlighted dramatically through street-level floor-length windows designed to solicit pedestrians walking by. Once they are no longer kittens, as I discovered, they are placed in a windowless room on the second-floor for patrons to play with, in a space that is decidedly out of view of passers-by.

is an ideal nonhuman actor through which to create and sell an alternative sense of home in post-3/11 Japan, one that idealizes calm, solitude, and relaxation.

Café patrons are encouraged to interact with (putatively) ‘their cat’ as a fantastic and imaginative object in which they invest, both materially and psychically, while actual ownership of any of the cats is an impossibility. Despite the café’s attempt to encourage patrons to invest in and develop bonds with individual cats, they are openly circulated and shared among café patrons.⁴² Their imagination of the cats is facilitated through the café’s extensive advertising highlighting the cats as desirable, sensory objects. Patrons describe the *iyashi* experienced in the café in terms of the pleasure of feeling as if the cat is dependent on them, as one male patron explained to me. Here, patrons are able to perform the role of nurturer and quasi-companion for a cat that they can imagine is their own, in a space they can imagine to be their home.

The cat café phenomenon is an intriguing example of the increasing immaterialization of the economy in post-industrial Japan, a moment in which social relationships have become increasingly commodified, privatized, and marketed to those, we should not forget, who are able to afford it.⁴³ Similar to the advertising for pet robots and other electronic companions, cat cafés are marketed and predicated on a sense of loss, the loss of social relationships and contact. Cats, then, are the affective object through which customers can receive ‘healing and stimulation’ to cope with such loss.⁴⁴ Affect both shapes subjectivities and produces multiple interactions; thus, the affective labor performed by the cats is critical to the creation of patron-cat and patron-patron relationships that are fostered in the space of the café. The affects produced in these cat cafés – often articulated through advertising in terms of the cats’ individual personality and sensory qualities – can serve as a node or intermediary through which solitary patrons can connect with cats or other patrons. It is the cat’s perceived flexibility and unruliness that are critical to producing an alternative sense of domesticity, intimacy, and healing; patrons can flexibly connect and disconnect (with either cats or other patrons) in a nonproductive yet homey and intimate public space.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Rie Baechel, Kendall Heitzman, David J. Kim, Mari Nitta, Shunsuke Nozawa, Jason Pine, Carolyn Stevens, Akiko Takeyama. Thanks especially to the journal’s editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and productive feedback, as well as to the café patrons and employees for their openness in speaking with me.

References

- Allison, Anne, ‘The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth’, *Theory Culture & Society*, 26:2–3 (2009): 89–111.
- Allison, Anne, ‘Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 85:2 (2012): 345–370.
- Cross, Laura, ‘College Students Relieve Exam Stress by Playing with Puppies’, *Vetstreet*, 25 April 2012, <http://www.vetstreet.com/our-pet-experts/college-students-relieve-exam-stress-by-playing-with-puppies> (accessed 1 June 2012).

⁴²Similar to the relations between regular patrons and maids in maid cafes, cat-patron relationships are neither ‘private nor exclusive’; Galbraith, ‘Maid Cafes’, 3.

⁴³Allison, ‘Affective Activism’, 101.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 100.

- Dow, Carrie, 'Japanese Cat Cafes in Peril with New Law', *The Examiner*, 17 April 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/japanese-cat-cafes-peril-with-new-law> (accessed 2 June 2012).
- Galbraith, Patrick W., 'Maid in Japan: An Ethnographic Account of Alternative Intimacy', *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, 25:2 (2011), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue25/galbraith.htm> (accessed 1 June 2013).
- Galbraith, Patrick W., 'Maid Cafes: The Affect of Fictional Characters in Akihabara, Japan', *Asian Anthropology*, 12:2 (2013): 104–25.
- Hansen, Paul, 'Urban Japan's "Fuzzy" New Families: Affect and Embodiment in Dog-Human Relationships', *Asian Anthropology*, 12:2 (2013): 83–103.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, [1983] 2003.
- Kakuta Mitsuyo, ed., 'Neko: Kono airashiku mo fukashigi na rinjin / Cat: One of the Most Familiar and Appealing yet Enigmatic and Mysterious of all Friends', *Yuriika/Eureka*, 43:11 (2011).
- 'Konkai no odai: wadai no "neko café" ni kuru okyakusan-te donna hitotachi?' [Today's Topic: What Kind of People Are Going To These Cat Cafes That Are All The Rage?], posting on Nikkei Trendy Net, 2 May 2008, <http://trendy.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/column/20080422/1009762/?ST=life&P=1&rt=nocnt> (accessed 1 August 2013)
- Leidner, Robin, *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Lukacs, Gabriella, 'Dreamwork: Cell Phone Novelists, Labor, and Politics in Contemporary Japan', *Cultural Anthropology*, 28:1 (2013): 44–64.
- Massumi, Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Muehlebach, Andrea, and Nitzan Shoshan, 'Introduction: Post-Fordist Affect', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 85:2 (2012): 317–344.
- Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.
- Ooki Taku, *Neko no minzokugaku* [Cat Folklore Studies]. Tabata Shobō, 1975.
- Parreñas, Rheana 'Juno' Salazar, 'Producing Affect: Transnational Volunteerism in a Malaysian Orangutan Rehabilitation Center', *American Ethnologist*, 39:4 (2012): 673–687.
- Raz, Aviad E., *Emotions at Work: Normative Control, Organizations, and Culture in Japan and America*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Roquet, Paul, 'Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm: Mood Regulation in Contemporary Japanese Fiction', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 35:1 (2008): 87–111.
- Roquet, Paul, 'The Domestication of the Cool Cat', in U. Haselstein, I. Hijiya-Kirschner, C. Gersdorf, E. Giannoulis, eds., *The Cultural Career of Coolness: Discourses and Practices of Affect Control in European Antiquity, the United States, and Japan*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2013, 237–250.
- Rutherford, Danilyn, 'Commentary: What Affect Produces', *American Ethnologist*, 39:4 (2012): 688–691.
- Seki Yuka, *Neko kafe: nekotachi ni aeru kutsurogi kafe gaido* [Cat Cafés: A Guidebook to Meeting Cats in Relaxing Cafes]. Take Shobō, 2007.
- Song, Hoon, *Pigeon Trouble: Bestiary Biopolitics in a Deindustrialized America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Stevens, Carolyn S., 'Touch: Encounters with Japanese Popular Culture', *Japanese Studies*, 31:1 (2011): 1–10.
- Takeyama, Akiko, 'Intimacy for Sale: Masculinity, Entrepreneurship, and Commodity Self in Japan's Neoliberal Situation', *Japanese Studies*, 30:2 (2010): 231–246.
- Veldkamp, Elmer, 'The Emergence of "Pets as Family" and the Sociohistorical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan', *Anthrozoos*, 22:4 (2009): 333–346.
- White, Merry, *Coffee Life in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Wissinger, Elizabeth, 'Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry', in P. Clough, ed., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 231–260.
- Yano, Christine R., 'Reach Out and Touch Someone: Thinking Through Sanrio's Social Communication Empire', *Japanese Studies*, 31:1 (2011): 23–36.