Chapter Eleven

The Domestication of the Cool Cat

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The domesticated cats in the stories of Yoshiyuki Rie (1939–2006) provide an unusual model for coolness as communication strategy: a feline sociality based around keeping others at a distance, with a buffer of quiet and privacy in between. Yoshiyuki’s cat stories document both the desirability and the danger of keeping calm and distanced—of being reisei, “cool and still.” In Yoshiyuki’s “The Little Lady” (Chiisana kifujin, 1981), this emotional distance becomes a way of life. Sensitive to noise and socially awkward, the story’s protagonist mostly keeps to herself, living quietly with her cat Cloud in a small apartment in central Tokyo. The narrator’s quiet life models a form of domestic solitude based around keeping social interaction at a minimum. The way cats relate to each other becomes an ideal alternative to the brusque dynamics Yoshiyuki documents in the human realm. While the humans in these stories tend to quickly lose their cool, the calm cats keep their distance, softly purring nearby.

DOMESTIC SOLITUDE

The quiet life sought by Yoshiyuki’s narrator can be situated within a larger movement toward domestic solitude in urban Japan, beginning in the postwar period and continuing on today. We might first ask why someone in Tokyo might come to prefer a solitary life in the first place. In Yoshiyuki’s writing, the reasons her characters choose to keep society at a distance are clear. In “The Little Lady,” the moments of quiet the narrator is able to achieve are continually offset by hostile interruptions from society at large. Over the course of the story the narrator describes living for eleven years in what seems to be a cursed apartment building, constantly accosted by noise from
ongoing nearby construction work and the busy street outside. Random drunks come by and urinate on the walls, and she even has to ward off a stalker, making her the subject of neighborhood gossip. When she leaves home and enters public space, she feels she is constantly being judged negatively; more than once in the story she describes a sudden shameful awareness that shop owners and passerby are probably looking at her with suspicion. On top of all this, the narrator suffers from a chronic and severe psychosomatic illness, made worse by environmental and social stressors. All of this leads to a situation where the quiet life must be understood as a much needed and hard-won refuge from the pressures of daily life.

At the same time, it is clear Yoshiyuki’s narrator is never completely alone even when she wishes to be. She is never at liberty to disregard the people circulating all around her in the city, and the larger expectations of the society within which she has carved out her livelihood. She has not fled out to the mountains, but is trying to maintain her solitude while living in a busy area at the center of what was, at the time, the largest city in the world. In Yoshiyuki’s work the scarcity of quiet in Tokyo combines with the pressures of the surrounding human community, making for a situation where the problem is often with too much social engagement rather than too little.

In this context, the solitude of home offers a much-needed place of refuge. In Yoshiyuki’s stories, home is often the only space where an individual can develop a selfless subject to ongoing social pressures to conform. Keeping this in mind allows us to understand how the narrator’s reluctance to engage in interpersonal exchange is less anti-social than an attempt to rethink the shape society might take, such that it supports rather than undermines her sensitive constitution. Yoshiyuki uses her writing to carve out an alternate set of principles for urban living, more supportive of her own need for personal space.

At the same time, Yoshiyuki’s domestic solitude is thoroughly informed by what Eva Illouz refers to as emotional capitalism: the mutual penetration of emotional and economic discourses, particularly among the middle class (60). Yoshiyuki and her narrators’ emotional attachments are organized around pets, art, and tourism: “When it comes to people, I do not feel sustained feelings of love. I love Cloud, the cat I raised. I love things like books, films, music, paintings, and places discovered while traveling” (Yubune, 164). Yoshiyuki reserves her deeper feelings for those ownable experiences supporting her need for sustained calm: Claude Debussy records, reproductions of paintings by Paul Klee, visits to the sea. But it is the domestic cat, above all, that serves as her ideal companion. Having Cloud around helps keep her calm and emotionally detached.

In Yoshiyuki’s short stories, it is cats, not humans, who best provide a model for the social and emotional distance needed to sustain calm solitude. While her earlier poetry collections (1963–1967) and first short story collection (1970–1972) make no mention of cats, felines come to play an increasingly important role in Yoshiyuki’s writing, eventually emerging as the main theme of her work. After Yoshiyuki first raised a cat herself, cat characters began to appear with increasing regularity in her work, beginning with the fairy tale “The Magical Kushan Cat” (Yonaha 155; Yoshiyuki, Mahô tsukai).

Yoshiyuki’s newfound fascination coincided with a larger “cat boom” starting in the 1970s, when Japanese pop culture turned to all things feline (“Shizuka ni neko bûmu”). This included a small community of women writers publishing stories in the “cat literature” [neko bungaku] genre. Yoshiyuki’s works occasionally make reference to this larger trend, and, as we will see, they play ironically with the cliché of the cat-obsessed single woman, an image Yoshiyuki was consciously playing into and playing with.3

The pop culture of the cat boom can be divided into two groups. The first group of works focus on everything “cute” [kawaii] about the cat. Here Hello Kitty (introduced by Sanrio in 1975) and the Namemayo cats (1980–1982) play a starring role.4 The second group imagines cats as graceful, clean, and noble, and in these terms often compares them favorably to members of the human species. The refined and quiet qualities of the latter group are clearly the major draw for Yoshiyuki and her literary community of cat lovers. The cats they describe are often beautiful, but rarely are they “cute” in a helpless and bumbling way. Kittens are nearly absent, whereas mature cats figure prominently.

These noble cats play two specific roles in Yoshiyuki’s work. They generate a calm ambience for their owners, and they model a type of cool, distanced sociality that Yoshiyuki hopes might carry over to the human world.

For the narrator of “The Little Lady,” the preference of cats over people can be traced back to a particular episode in her youth. One day, not long after hearing a middle school teacher declare that she has no social skills and no ability to make friends, she notices a cat wandering casually through the door of her family house. She is surprised to discover that while watching it a strange calm has descended over her (Yubune 296).

The narrator’s own cat, Cloud, has a similar ability to calm the narrator’s stresses and allow her to focus on her work: “As I was writing I would suddenly sense a pair of eyes on me, and from some tall place or dark area there would be Cloud gently watching over me. When I grew tired I would gaze at Cloud. The haze in my mind would dissipate and I would feel the strength to go on writing gathering inside” (Yubune 272–73).
At other times, the text links Cloud with the narrator's other favorite cooling environment, the seashore. Cloud's light blue and pale-violet eyes are said to be the color of the sea (291). Like the sky, the shore serves as a relaxing landscape for the protagonist, and she describes early on in the story her practice of leaving the bustle of Tokyo behind and traveling out to the coast whenever she needs to clear her mind. The sea here is therapeutic primarily for its soundscape, with the leisurely pulse of the waves helping to slow the narrator's breathing. Thinking back on Cloud's life, the narrator links his purring with this restorative rhythm: "Whenever I heard that rumbling, a sound that reminded me of waves, I used to feel unaccountably calm" (282).

Cloud is associated not only with the calming environments surrounding Tokyo, but with the aesthetic landscapes of the narrator's (and Yoshiyuki's) favored artworks: the paintings of Paul Klee and the music of Claude Debussy. The story revels in quintessential Paul Klee colors: charcoal grays, desaturated pinks and blues, light violets, and gray greens. Like a Klee painting, Yoshiyuki's lush atmospheric backgrounds seem coextensive with the characters and objects that appear within them. Similarly, the impressionistic contours of Debussy's music allows Yoshiyuki's narrator to bring a little bit of the ocean back into the domestic environment with her. After Cloud's death, the narrator stays up all night listening to a recording of his orchestral work "Fêtes" (1899), apparently one of Cloud's favorites.  

Cloud and these related aesthetics allow the narrator (and Yoshiyuki, and her readers) to merge the domestic space of the apartment with these larger restorative environments. In a nonfiction essay about Cloud, Yoshiyuki writes, "I love how this animal is completely free, with eyes that change shape, and a body, particularly as a kitten, as fluffy as a cloud" (Kumo no iru sora; qtd. in Yonaha 155). These fluid qualities of the cat connect not only to Yoshiyuki's favored landscapes, but also to her literary style. Just as Cloud is constantly melting into the sky and sea, Yoshiyuki's writing is marked by an extreme porosity between characters, between objects, between moments, and even between publications.

The flow of "The Little Lady" is marked by an almost constant slippage between different times and locations, between waking and dreaming, and between domestic life and a world of the imagination. The temporality of the story is constantly shifting, jumping backwards and forwards to different episodes in the narrator's past and present at least once every few paragraphs. The present of the story is thoroughly interlaced with memories from Cloud's life, his death two years prior, the events of the intervening years, and more distant childhood episodes, as well as the stories of the other characters and the alternate world of the fairy tale serially excerpted within the story. These shifts in scene often have only the slightest transition between them. The narration often slips back and forth mid-paragraph between
an account of what another character said and the narrator’s personal recollections, blending them into one larger imaginative space.

Like Cloud, clouds, and personal recollections, characters often blend into one another in Yoshiyuki’s fiction. The main characters in “The Little Lady” all share similar traits. G, an older female writer of cat fiction, the narrator meets at the stuffed animal store, appears to be a doppelganger; the narrator notes at one point they may in fact be the same person (Yubane 297). The cats also overlap a great deal: Cloud, G’s late cat Diana, and the stuffed cat all look alike, and G’s characters for “Cat Murder” (the fairy tale she is writing, excerpted in the story as the narrator reads it) are based on a photograph of Cloud and his “little sister.” The mother of the stuffed animal store owner, also parallels G and the narrator, having once owned a charcoal-gray cat that looked just like Diana and Cloud. As one character states, “it’s said everyone has two identical twins somewhere in the world” (284). One critic peremptorily describes the three women as “sensitive variations” of Yoshiyuki herself (Kōno and Saiki 204). In the end, all the characters in the story appear to be acting out different versions of the same basic relationship between an introverted, sensitive, and socially-insecure woman and a more beautiful, noble, sexually androgynous feline (we will return to this pairing later in the chapter).

Moreover, as Yoshiyuki Junnosuke notes, “The Little Lady” is characterized by a great deal of fluidity between the human world and the cat world (“Dai 85-kai” 341). The narrator jokes that she is aging faster than usual because she is turning into a cat, while the cat in G’s fairy tale tries to become human to slow down her life cycle.

This use of repeated themes and images is the central technique of Yoshiyuki’s literary style. Repetition is central to the impact of her poetry, which often repeats phrases and entire lines verbatim, allowing shifting contexts to shade the language differently with each iteration. Repetition re-emerges as a central interest in her prose works, though here the repetition also works intertextually across her various publications. Personal experiences described in her essays regularly reappear verbatim within her stories, couched within larger fictional constructs. Meanwhile, her narrator is almost always a figure clearly identifiable as a version of Yoshiyuki herself, with some minor details altered. Okuno Takeo describes Yoshiyuki’s style as “somewhere between poetry and novel and essay” (qtd. In Yonaha 156), and “The Little Lady” often seems to be operating in several genres simultaneously, freely mixing fairy tale, poetic reverie, and personal memoir.

This proliferation of parallels takes on additional complexities when we consider that a few years before this story appeared Yoshiyuki published a story of her own with the same title as the fairy tale excerpted in “The Little Lady.” Yoshiyuki’s “Cat Murder” (“Neko no satsujin”) is not the same as the tale excerpted in “The Little Lady,” but rather is a story told by a woman who works at a post office. A woman named G also figures prominently in this work, seemingly the same character that appears in “The Little Lady.” In both stories, G is working on a fairy tale entitled “Cat Murder,” though it is only excerpted in the later work.

This overlap of episodes and characters between autobiography, fiction, and even seemingly different fictional texts lends to the atmosphere of amorphousness characterizing Yoshiyuki’s work. The world of imagination and the real world of lived experience appear inextricably intertwined. Both Yoshiyuki and her characters are constantly laping into daydreams (kūmari), and this half-dreaming, half-awake state is the mode of awareness to which her poems and stories often aspire. Yoshiyuki has her narrator ironically reference these qualities in “Cat Murder” as she is listening to G ramble on incoherently: “The way she spoke it was hard to distinguish between people and cats, dreams and reality, but her stories were interesting and I found myself listening intently” (“Neko no satsujin” 131).

In her poetry, Yoshiyuki often features similar moments of shape-shifting, using the precise ambiguities of the Japanese language to produce a remarkable blending of figure and landscape.

Hiding somewhere in the sky...

You
climbed up the cypress tree
“wait for me”

Though I began to sob
you
transformed into a bird of violet
and flew away

I wander lost in this graveyard

Hiding somewhere in the sky
you suddenly transform into rain
as if copying me and my tears, back then

(Yoshiyuki Rie shishō 40–41, author’s translation)

Here Yoshiyuki deftly realigns an ostensibly human subject of address to a more impersonal and dispersed environment; the “you” of the poem shifts from an implied other (perhaps dead) to a departing bird, then to an enveloping rain. This rain, in turn, comes full circle to express the initial internal emotions of the speaker, subsuming “you” into the poem’s I through metonymic liquidation. “You” become the rain blending with “me and my tears,” just as time suddenly folds back on itself at the poem’s end. This sudden alignment of emotion and atmosphere, of affect and perpect, serves as a
moment of catharsis for the speaker. The rain falls as a gift from “you,” both acknowledging and dispersing the speaker’s grief. Through these substitutions, the poem works to shift the discomfort of loss to a scene of immersion, in which the landscape cooperates with the speaker’s emotions, providing a field for their release and dispersal.

In a discussion of contemporary women’s fiction, writer Kōno Taeko and literary critic Saeki Shōichi note the paradoxical spaciousness of Yoshiyuki’s work. Though her stories seem to take place in small and enclosed worlds, these prove to be especially “reverberant” settings, hinting at a much larger universe lying beyond. Noting the overlapping voices in Yoshiyuki’s fiction, Kōno compares her work to a performance of chamber music, where the acoustics allow just a few players to produce a sound much larger and more layered than the small number of players would seem to imply (204).

This type of dispersal is key to the cloudlike quality of Yoshiyuki’s stories. Like the poem above, “The Little Lady” constantly renders emotions atmospheric. Daily encounters remind the narrator of Cloud, and Cloud reminds the narrator of sky and sea. The sensorium of domestic life is constantly steered, through the soothing properties of the cat, toward a more porous world of soft colors and calm emotions. In the next section, I explore more closely what it is about the company of cats—as opposed to the company of humans—that allows Yoshiyuki and her characters to cultivate this cool dispersion.

FELINE SOCIALITY

Yoshiyuki’s appreciation of the feline way of life extends to their reserved way of relating to others. Cats offer an appealing mirror of Yoshiyuki’s quiet lifestyle, providing positive reinforcement for her own distance from society: “Because cats instinctively hate things that make loud sounds, it seems they like me as an owner, as I hardly make a noise and do not restrict them” (Kumo no iro sora; qtd. in Yonaha 155). In her study of cats in the work of writers like Rudyard Kipling, Natsume Sōseki, and Charles Baudelaire, Katherine M. Rogers notes the repeated use of the cat as a symbol of individualism and distance from social influence: “imagining ourselves as cats, we can imagine ourselves free of impractical aspirations, moral inhibitions and social pressures to conform” (150). Yoshiyuki’s cats are well within this tradition of outsiders. As Yonaha Keiko writes, Yoshiyuki finds in cats an ideal form of relationality, where individuals keep a respectful distance from one another (155). While social standards of the time might have looked askance at her lifestyle choices (particularly her decision to remain unmarried and live alone), in her work Yoshiyuki uses feline sociality to portray domestic solitude in a more dignified and poetic light.

Through her work she explores feline sociality as a superior model for human relationships as well. The humans her stories favor are always careful not to impose too much on one another. The narrator describes how “people who don’t avert their eyes when talking to another person usually embarrass me, but with Shino [the owner of the stuffed animal store] it is as if she is looking at the air between us” (Yubune 277). As Rogers describes, “Cats have a habit of looking at us steadily without showing any sign of emotional engagement” (49). Shino reproduces this feline quality, as noted approvingly by the narrator.

The stuffed animal shop also serves as a displacement of feline relations onto the world of humans. Alongside stuffed animals the store is full of cat-related goods and publications of cat literature, including the narrator’s own stories. Through the narrator’s repeated visits, the store emerges as a gathering site for women to talk about their dead cats and purchase these cat-related objects. This cat-oriented community models cat behavior in its forms of sociality, as the women get to know one another in a way that, like Shino’s gaze, always carefully refrains from coming too close.

As described earlier, the line between cats and humans often blurs in Yoshiyuki’s work. This blurring often serves to locate sympathetic characters’ appeal precisely in the amount of “cat” they have within them (Yonaha 156). The narrator even jokes about how she herself is becoming a cat, and thus aging faster than the ordinary humans around her. These feline-qualities are contrasted favorably with the majority of humans in Yoshiyuki works, so much so that she even bases the positive human characters on cat models. As the narrator of “The Little Lady” notes, “There were always plenty of real people to model my thick-headed, insensitive, mean-tempered characters on, but in cases where I was writing of a kind and gentle child, I would draw on Cloud” (Yubune 272–73).

As Sachiko Schierbeek writes, “Yoshiyuki is not comfortable with people who are insensitive, greedy, or egocentric” (248). As this quote from the story also hints, however, there is an element of infantilization mixed in with the narrator’s relationship to Cloud. He serves the narrator both as a source of cool feelings and a model of social restraint, but both of these depend on the disavowal of her role as Cloud’s master and domesticator. In the final part of this chapter, I begin to unravel these mixed feelings that threaten to upset the narrator’s carefully cultivated calm.

NOBILITY, DOMESTICATED

A large part of Cloud’s appeal for the narrator clearly lies in his implicit otherness, the mystery of encountering a creature of another species. And yet the narrator herself has domesticated him, turned him into an apartment cat
serving her with companionship and consolation. Aware of this aspect of their relationship, she feels some degree of guilt about having robbed Cloud of his freedom to roam, particularly after he passes away having lived his life largely confined to the interior of her apartment.

These conflicted feelings manifest in repeated comments about Cloud’s “noble” appearance. As stated earlier, one aspect of the cat boom was the attribution of a noble character to cats. More specifically, they were associated with a reticent but morally-resolute masculine ideal, akin to the type of chivalry found in European fairy tales. This type of princely cat emerged in Japanese popular culture in the 1970s, feeding off a general Rococo turn in influential manga like *The Rose of Versailles* (1972–1973, anime 1979–1980) and building off a longer fairy tale tradition of royal cats in stories like Madame d’Aulnoy’s *The White Cat* (*La Châtelie Blanche*, 1698). Feline nobility later surfaces in two Studio Ghibli animated features, *Whisper of the Heart* (*Mimi o sumaseba*, Kondō Yoshifumi, 1995) and *The Cat Returns* (*Neko no ongaeshi*, Morita Hiroyuki, 2002). All of these cats are “cool” and in line with an older upper class masculine model of emotional control, emphasizing pure, resolute feelings, carefully concealed.

Crucial to the noble cat image is a sense of contained ferality, as if the surface gentleness did nothing to tame the wild tiger under the surface. On rare occasions in the story Cloud turns fierce, as when he is on his deathbed being attended to by a veterinarian. Otherwise, and especially when interacting with the narrator, Cloud is never anything but genteel.

Alongside these chivalrous fantasies, however, the story makes clear that the relationship between woman and cat is never equal. Although the narrator’s masculine ideal is influenced heavily by the cat’s strength of character and understated wildness, she submits Cloud to a series of domestications that can only be described as emasculating. Cloud is physically neutered, restricted to remaining inside the apartment at all times, and eventually replaced by a stuffed version of himself—named “The Little Lady”—after he passes away. This final indignity also serves as the trigger for the narrator to rethink her relationship with Cloud as she struggles to accept his passing two years on from his death.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is out on a shopping trip when she happens upon Shino’s store and a stuffed cat for sale that looks exactly like her lost Cloud. She anxiously purchases the doll and brings it home with her, not exactly comfortable about the idea of replacing Cloud with a stuffed doll, but nonetheless unable to resist the urge to do so. At first she enjoys the doll’s uncanny resemblance to her lost cat, feeling as if Cloud has returned to the apartment at last. The stuffed cat is frozen in Cloud’s most noble pose, as the narrator points out, and the narrator is finally free to do whatever she likes with him. She thinks first of sleeping side-by-side with the stuffed doll—something the living Cloud would have never allowed—but ultimately decides against it, for it would somehow betray Cloud’s memory.

Gradually, however, the inertness of the stuffed cat begins to haunt the narrator, making her long even more for Cloud when he was alive. She attempts to distance the stuffed doll from its origin as a consumer object by returning to the store to make sure another copy of Cloud has not appeared to replace the one she purchased, assuring herself that the stuffed cat she is growing attached to is not merely a mass-produced item with hundreds like it elsewhere. She later sews a scented sachet onto the doll’s tag to cover up the words “Made in England.” These ongoing efforts to treat the stuffed animal as a replacement for the real thing appear more and more futile as the story continues.

Sitting perched on the narrator’s dresser, the doll increasingly appears to make a mockery of the once-living Cloud. The narrator finally wraps him up and packs him away. The lifelessness of the manufactured cat fails to produce the same atmosphere as the living Cloud, as only the latter successfully references the open ocean and the open sky. Cloud was calm and domesticated, but also maintained a degree of independence and aloofness that the narrator found alluring and endearing. The stuffed cat lacks the capacity to echo and respond to the narrator’s feelings—even at a distance—and lacks the sense of tempered wildness that enabled Cloud’s calming effect. What the narrator ultimately misses is the sound of Cloud’s breathing, a soft purring she relates to the sound of ocean waves, the mark of an energy both infinite and sublime. This sound of a living creature in all its otherness is ultimately undomesticatable. The stuffed Cloud, we might say, passes from being cool to just plain cold.

In this way the human-cat relationship is laced with contradictory desires. The narrator imagines Cloud to hide a feral chivalrous strength within him, a wildness that persists despite his domesticated and emasculated existence. At the same time, in his trajectory from wild cat to stuffed animal wrapped in plastic, Cloud submits to her desires for permanence and stability. She wants to protect him from getting dirty, from the noise and ugliness of the outside world. Ultimately, he is reduced to serving as a mood-regulator for the narrator, involuntarily participating in forms of emotional labor historically performed by women in human society (Hochschild).

Yoshiyuki’s narrative implicitly registers these conflicts. The highly independent women in her stories feel guilty about taking away the independence of their cats, ironically through disempowering forms of domestication that they themselves have resisted. The narrator secretly wants Cloud to remain untamed even as she works to ensure his domestication. Her desire for ownership mixes with guilt and nostalgia over what this ownership has destroyed.

This affective amalgam might be understood as one of the paradoxes of coolness in the domestic arena. In the case of “The Little Lady,” the narrator
CONCLUSION: COOL DEPENDENCIES

Yoshiyuki’s “The Little Lady” traces a fine line between emotional distance and death-by-domestication. Cloud serves the narrator as an ownable version of sky and sea, bringing their amorphous expanses into the narrator’s otherwise circumscribed life. This domestication enables the narrator to keep cool and to keep the discomforts of human society at a safe distance. However, the narrator feels guilt for being the agent of Cloud’s imprisonment, robbing him of his external wildness while still secretly hoping to find it burning within. The story powerfully articulates the pleasures of a quiet life with cats while simultaneously exploring the dangers this isolated existence poses when the desire for domestic control is pushed too far.

This “free time for looking at clouds” appears at first to be a solitude with no connection to anything beyond itself, and privately ownable in the form of a cat. As Yoshiyuki’s story implicitly recognizes, however, to own this freedom is always to take away the freedom of others. The coolness of apparent solitude can only be sustained through the continued support of others.

As the narrator begins to finally accept Cloud’s passing, she becomes more aware of the less attractive cat with the smashed face, so far neglected, and turns slowly to a measure of self-acceptance and a way out of grief. She may continue gazing out at the clouds, finding relief in the imagination of a boundless existence, but she might also come to value the less immediately endearing parts of the world around her, including those parts of herself less boundless and free.

NOTES

1. This work won Yoshiyuki the Akutagawa Prize, Japan’s most prestigious literary award, in early 1981. Her more famous older brother, novelist Yoshiyuki Junnosuke (1924–1994), was on the jury. The older Yoshiyuki received the same award in 1954, making the two of them the first pair of siblings to both receive the prize. For an English translation of “The Little Lady,” see Yoshiyuki 1982.

2. While shrinking households are a common feature of urbanism across the globe, the single-member household stands out as a particularly prominent feature of Japanese cities over the last four decades. The number of people living alone in Japan has steadily increased since the 1970s, and has recently surged even higher. According to the 2010 census, over thirty percent of the population now lives alone. The average number of people per household in Japan is at a record low of 2.46 (2.06 in Tokyo), and these numbers are expected to decrease even further (“Only the Lonely”).

3. For example, “Cat Murder” makes fun of a woman who suddenly begins raising a cat and declaring cats are better than men around the time of the cat boom, despite having no interest in them prior to this time. “Neko no satsujin,” 132.

4. The Namennayo [Don’t Lick Me] cats were real cats dressed in miniature human outfits, photographed in front of scale dioramas depicting human scenes. Pioneered by Tsuda Satoru, the trend quickly spread in the early 1990s, no doubt to the dismay of pet cats everywhere.

5. Hagihara Sakutarō (1886–1942) was a major figure in the development of free verse poetry in Japan, and one of Yoshiyuki’s key influences.

6. “Fêtes” is the second of three “Nocturnes” Debussy composed inspired by the eponymous impressionist landscapes of painter James McNeill Whistler.

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Chapter Twelve

Marketing National and Self Appearances: Cool and Cute in J-Culture

Aviad E. Raz

This commentary on coolness in Japanese culture begins with a return to a “scene of crime” that I left about sixteen years ago, namely my study of Tokyo Disneyland, or TDL for short (Raz, 1999). It was in TDL that I came to know, and appreciate, the Japanese passion for cuteness, or kawaii. It is from that vantage point that I later became interested in cool, or cult as it is rendered in Japanese. My exploration of cool as a leading icon of “J-culture” (Japan’s consumer culture) will therefore start with cute in the context of Disney’s success in Japan. I will then come to the inter-connectedness of cute and cool. Since the 1990s, “Cool Japan” and “cute Japan” have become the dominant international tropes through which Japan markets itself in the global consumerist world. Consequently, it is important to understand how cool Japan has become a cultural text that is interconnected to cute Japan, exploring the two as a dyadic structure reflecting a cultural syntax of woman/man, childlike/mature, dependent/self-sufficient, kitsch/chic, stable/dynamic, traditional/novel, and of course Japan/America. My underlying argument is that such a dyadic structure should be examined as a cultural construction in which oppositions are never objective and stable but rather hybrid and reversible (Raz, 1996). I will conclude with some thoughts on the role of Japanology in the construction of national and self-representations of the empire of signs which is “Japan.” Indeed, the point of departure for this analysis is that “Japan” does not exist, except within inverted commas. “Japan,” perhaps more than any other modern country, signifies a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of images. As Roland Barthes (1982: 3) wrote: “If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it a fictive name ( . . . ) which I shall call: Japan.”