

## Introduction

# KITTY—JAPAN—GLOBAL

Commodities are not just objects of economic exchange; they are goods to think with, goods to speak with.

—John Fiske (1989:31)

Pink makes you happy.

—Yamaguchi Yūko, *Hello Kitty designer* (quoted in Belson and Bremner 2004:69)

This book begins and ends with headlines. And there is good reason for this: headlines create buzz that feeds into celebrity that helps sell products that surround people's lives that give those objects meanings. Many of the “goods to think with, goods to speak with,” which Fiske notes above, come into our possession through the buzz and celebrity generated by headlines. Further, headlines travel instantaneously across oceans and national borders and by way of interpersonal networks. Let me thus begin with a few headlines of note.

In a 2007 “mockumentary” book entitled *Japanese School-girl Inferno: Tokyo Teen Fashion Subculture Handbook*, the journalists Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers chronicle girl-culture street fashion in urban Japan from the late 1960s to 2007, ending with what they call “Cute Overload.” There, as an example of this overload (see figure I-1), stand two young women in various shades of pink (with some splashes of red) from head to toe: shocking pink hair adorned with multiple pink barrettes, fuzzy pink kitten earmuffs, pink empire baby-doll dress, mismatched pink knee-high socks, and pink-laced shoes (2007:140). Around one woman's neck hangs that icon



I.1. Photo from Macias and Evers, *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno* (2007).

of cute: Hello Kitty. Among the barrettes in the other woman's hair is, again, Kitty. Standing at the entrance to Harajuku—commercial mecca of street youth culture in Japan—they pose, leaning into each other, hands clenched, kitten-paw-style at their cheeks. The look is, as Macias and Evers claim, cute overload. But let us examine more closely the “look.” In the insouciant style of these Tokyo women, the look is not sweet but highly ironic, no-holds-barred cute. It is in-your-face cute as a highly stylized, overwrought visual aesthetic. It is cute that performs for the street—whether the audience includes other Japanese women and men (many equipped with camera-ready cell phones), or professional photographers who capture and capitalize on the look through online venues, art magazines, and international publications such as *FRUiTS*.<sup>1</sup> The women pose to the multiple gazes, knowing that what they donned that morning might be seen by evening thousands of miles away. The interaction between gazer and gazed-upon define and reify the spectacle of what I call “Japanese Cute-Cool.” Nestled within the interaction, tucked among the frills of this Tokyo cute overload rests that mouthless icon of Japanese girl culture, Hello Kitty. One photographer's click spreads virally to gazers (and sometimes headlines) globally.

In that same year, a continent and an ocean away in New York City, Macy's Eighty-First Annual Thanksgiving Day Parade featured three new giant helium balloons, one of which was Hello Kitty. Making her debut as “Supercute Hello Kitty” in superhero outfit complete with cape, tiara, and signature bow, Sanrio's cat floated down Broadway Avenue to marching drums and fanfare in the nationally televised annual broadcast. More than forty-four million viewers tuned into the parade of stars that included Hello Kitty alongside other icons of American popular culture from Disney to McDonald's to Sesame Street. Celebrating this most American of holidays in a display of corporate-media extravagance, at once old-fashioned (i.e., a parade, especially when viewed in person) and up to date (i.e., broadcast by multiple networks, live and tape delayed, with further iterations posted on the Internet), the inclusion of Hello Kitty within the parade signaled nothing less than membership in the public club of well-known global characters.

The clubbiness of those characters paves the way for some surprising collusions between its members. One example is the Hello Kitty Barbie, which debuted in 2007. As the advertising for this new collector fashion doll proclaims, “There's something perpetually trendy about Hello Kitty, the globally renowned Sanrio icon that's embraced by kids



I.2. Rio de Janeiro street vendor (2007). Photo by Marika Wilson.

and fashionistas alike. And who better to keep fingers on the fun fashion pulse than Barbie?"<sup>2</sup> Thus, two iconic figures that may have been considered on opposite sides of the girl-culture spectrum—curvaceous Barbie and mouthless Hello Kitty—join hands. Note, however, that what is being sold is a Barbie doll—not a Hello Kitty plush—dressed in black and white with pink Kitty accessories. So it is Barbie who may don Hello Kitty as part of a trendy new look, not the other way around.<sup>3</sup> Hello Kitty here acts as part of the “fun fashion pulse” for the American adult doll, demonstrating overlapping worlds, colors, and buyers. No longer rival figures but co-conspirators, Hello Kitty and Barbie—“kids and fashionistas,” respectively, or to a degree interchangeably—lead the charge in a new girl culture that links females from a wide age range.

Another vignette: in a tree-lined square in Rio de Janeiro in August 2007, a thin, wiry street vendor with a twinkle in his eye carries his wares, displaying a novel, moveable store (see figure I-2). His specialty? Bubbles! Blow into one of the gadgets he is selling and watch bubbles appear, floating before one’s eyes, blown gently away by the afternoon

breeze. His bubble makers come decorated in three varieties: Sponge Bob, Spiderman, and Hello Kitty. As he strolls down the street, bubbles trailing after him, he forms a one-man parade within which Hello Kitty sits pretty. His parade may be only a fraction of the size of Macy's Thanksgiving Day extravaganza, but it is a spectacle nevertheless that affirms Hello Kitty's place among global characters.

In fact, it is exactly the parade of characters constituting a global spectacle in the 2000s that I examine here. From the trinket-laden streets of Harajuku to the living rooms of America to the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Japanese Cute-Cool, as exemplified by Hello Kitty, inhabits a commodified space of pink global visibility. In the 2000s, kittenish Japanese schoolgirls, American media extravaganzas, and Brazilian street vendors alike incorporated Hello Kitty as part of their visual display. The eyes of many parts of the industrial world, it seems, have turned to Hello Kitty as a source of Cute-Cool. But what, exactly, have they seen? More important, perhaps, what do they want to see?

Japanese Cute-Cool has been touted by the American journalist Douglas McGray as one part of Japan's "gross national cool" in 2002. Joseph Nye's "soft power"—that is, the power to indirectly influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means, rather than through overt military or economic domination—has been the backbone of much talk about Japan's "cool" (2004). A now-famous statement by Nye—"Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow" (1990:167)—has pushed governments such as Japan's to take notice. The heated gaze upon "cool" by Japanese government, media, and industry rests in the purported expansiveness of exactly this "soft-power" capital. Cute-Cool provides global currency in a market trade of youth culture that spans continents and oceans. At a time when Japan's economic ascendancy has been overshadowed by that other East Asian giant, China; when its political regime faces constant global and domestic challenges; and when natural disasters and nuclear threats stand poised to overturn much of the infrastructure of contemporary life, a retreat into the easy comforts of soft power sounds like a welcome respite. This is the stuff of headlines, large and small, public and private.

At the same time, the soft-power position of Japanese Cute-Cool comes with its own set of challenges. Even cute can suffer the excess

of its riches. Thus, Japanese Cute-Cool prompts a certain amount of internal and external debate (see chapter 4). The concern arises that the new global cultural capital in cuteness trivializes Japan as infantile and superficial. Hiroto Murasawa of Osaka Shoin Women's University explains, "[Cute is] a mentality that breeds nonassertion" (quoted in Kageyama 2006). Takashi Murakami—an international megastar artist and himself a producer and purveyor of cute images—proclaims that the ubiquity and trade in Japanese Cute-Cool is symptomatic of Japan's infantilized, emasculated (even "castrated"), postwar condition (2005a:141; see chapter 7 for further discussion). Critics have found an easy target in Hello Kitty. A 2004 editorial in the *Japan Times* calls out, "Time for Goodbye Kitty?" and laments the cat's "potential to embarrass Japan abroad," proclaiming that, "as a cultural ambassador, Kitty presents Japan as the ultimate kingdom of kitsch" (*Japan Times* 2004, discussed further in chapter 4). Superficiality, castration, and kitsch: who would have thought that such volatile controversies could trail a figure as benign as Hello Kitty?

### Pink Globalization: Kawaii Commodities on the Global Stage

In this book, I embed Japanese Cute-Cool within processes of what I call "pink globalization"—the transnational spread of goods and images labeled *kawaii* (glossed in English as "cute," but with different cultural nuances, which I discuss in chapter 1) from Japan to other parts of the industrial world, with a focus on the United States. In using *pink* I refer to the connotations of the cute and the feminine, as one might expect, and bridge these into particular regions of the sexy embedded within the notion of *kawaii*. Given the fetishization of schoolgirls in Japan (including their uniforms), practices of *rorikon* ("Lolita complex"; a fixation upon young girls as sexual objects), and the commercialization of these two in the form of *enjo kōsai* ("compensated dating," that is, teenage girls socializing with men for pay), the sexy is not such a far reach from *kawaii* in contemporary Japan. Although pink draws upon already gendered images of Japan, including that of the geisha, it spins these ever more deeply into youth-based consumer culture. In these different locales, I query the various meanings given Japanese Cute-Cool, asking what are the consumerist, gendered, and potentially political aspects of this product, and perhaps more important, what do

these aspects enable? What is the sociocultural work they effect and in what global contexts? I ask, what exactly is it about Hello Kitty that allows her to function as a nodal point—a point of juncture and perhaps even rupture—in transnational popular culture flows (see also LaMarre 2009:xxiii; Shih 2007:45)?

The answer to that question begins and ends with *kawaii* (for our purposes here, cute). Shuri Fukunaga, a managing director at Burson-Marsteller, which advises global companies in Japan, comments, “Cute is a boom. This style has suddenly become a fashion element among youths around the world. . . . Marketers in Japan are seeing this and are adept at churning out products that incorporate this style for overseas” (quoted in Kageyama 2006:C9). Fukunaga’s comment makes analyzing the phenomenon a bit of a chicken-and-egg question: Are Japanese global companies merely responding to demand for cute fashion, or are they generating the wave that creates this demand? I argue in this book that pink globalization connects numerous factors overseas, including the strategic expansion of Japanese companies to foreign markets, coupled with the enhanced distribution of Japanese products from specialty ethnic stores to mainstream megastores. This expansion parallels the rise of Japan’s “gross national cool,” with the popularity of *manga* and anime paving the way. Electronic simultaneities of access to information and consumption across national borders enhanced by the Internet also provide paradoxically ethereal and material infrastructural networks within which these flows take place.

At the same time, rising postfeminism in the West in the 1990s and 2000s has made pink—in other words, feminized, including the possibilities of cute or even sexy—self-presentation acceptable and desirable for some segments of the female population in the industrial world. Witness the rise of American magazines such as *Pink*, founded in July 2005, targeting businesswomen, and continuing as an Internet resource ([www.littlepinkbook.com](http://www.littlepinkbook.com)), or Victoria’s Secret, the American women’s lingerie and undergarment purveyor known for its sexualized presentations: its line of stores, products, and interactive website geared to a younger crowd called Victoria’s Secret Pink touts itself as a “Pink Nation” with social media posts, horoscopes, campus and other public events calendar, and electronic photo wall of cute sightings ([pink.victoriasecret.com](http://pink.victoriasecret.com)).

Faith Popcorn, a consumer trends forecaster, explains, “Hello Kitty’s popularity among adult women strikes me as kind of a ‘wink on pink.’ . . . It’s like saying women are complicated—that we can’t be contained. We

can wear monochromatic Armani suits and whip out Hello Kitty notepads at a moment's notice. . . . It's a small but very public act of rebellion" (quoted in Gorman 2005; see chapter 5 for more on Hello Kitty in acts of subversion). Her identification of the means by which cute may be conjoined with cool—specifically by the “wink on pink” work of figures such as Hello Kitty. If “(winking) pink is the new black” in the 2000s, then cute (including *kawaii*) extends its range as a public signifier. Within this winking-pink-infused frame, Japanese Cute-Cool provides an additional Asian spin upon the scene. Consider ways in which Hello Kitty may figure variously in the following lineup of female consumers: mall-denizen tweens, Asian American performance artists, Wall Street executives, media celebrities, punk rockers, lesbians, and porn stars (see chapters 3–5). Hello Kitty works as part of the visual vocabulary of these female consumers exactly through her iconicity: her recognizability in parts of the global, industrial world makes her a shorthand for irony, humor, girl power—and sometimes, though not always, Japan. Throwback, reconfigured femininity in industrial Euro-America can be seen as part of a more generalized nostalgic reaction to a highly technologized, depersonalized world. Thus, “cute”—Japanese or otherwise—can represent a turn to emotion and even sentimentality, in some of the least likely places, such as art museums, boardrooms, and banking logos.

Or not. In examining Hello Kitty and the meanings attributed to the product, I want to leave an interpretive space that avoids overreadings. A significant number of consumers purchase Hello Kitty for simple reasons, including aesthetics and quality. These consumers do not necessarily care that she is from Japan; nor do they intend to make a public statement by their purchase. They do not talk about their identities as consciously manipulated, compromised, or defined by their Hello Kitty coin purse. Some purchase casually and circumstantially; others purchase intentionally, building up a collection of items (chapter 3); still others purchase subversively (chapter 5). Others receive Hello Kitty passively as a gift. *Pink Globalization* acknowledges a variety of modes of consumption (casual, whimsical, systematic, fervent, and otherwise) and the meanings given these practices. While some meanings remain superficial, others signal more significant social trends in local settings. This book addresses these disparate but interconnected factors in tracing the global popularity of Japanese Cute-Cool specifically through Hello Kitty.

As Marta Savigliano writes of a world political economy of passion



in analyzing Argentinian tango's global trek across nations, continents, and oceans (1995), let us consider here the possibility of a "world political economy of cute" in the 2000s, of which Hello Kitty is a part. This macroperspective embraces the complex factors that frame the phenomenon of both production and reception: nation-cultures, political interrelationships, and global economies. At the same time, *Pink Globalization* seeks to intertwine these with the microperspective of everyday lives—of girl tweens and their badges of belonging, of housewives and their all-pink kitchenware, of punk rockers and their in-your-face co-optations, of Asian Americans and their icons of ethnic identity, of media mavens and their newly black pink. These personal stories etch intimacy upon the pink, global encounter. *Pink Globalization* thus searches for the personal in the political as much as the political in the personal.

### Why Kitty? Thinking/Feeling with Kyarakutā

I focus on Hello Kitty for a number of reasons. First, in the 2000s, she (I "genderize" her as her fans and producers do) garnered headlines, both in and outside of Japan. Some of the Kitty sightings with which I begin this chapter and scatter throughout this book detail only a small fraction of the headlines—whether in global media or private communications. In short, she is newsworthy. The number and scale of media mentions provides a neat gauge of her celebrity niche—in marketing terms, her "buzz." Hello Kitty's celebrity feeds well into Sanrio's hand: news items act as a form of product placement with far greater impact than paid advertising. Through headlines, Hello Kitty becomes part of the everyday "mediascape" of contemporary global life, rather than a top-down, heavily promoted commodity. Headlines create and reflect the global gaze upon her, as well as upon Japanese Cute-Cool and its pink globalization.

Second, Hello Kitty has been a global product since the mid-1970s, and therefore charts different flows of products to and from Japan, the United States, and elsewhere. In fact, Sanrio, the maker of Hello Kitty, always intended this plush toy to be a global figure. Only two years after her "birth" in 1974, she was marketed in the United States in 1976, followed by Europe in 1978, and Asia in 1990 (see appendix 1 for Hello Kitty and Sanrio history). This pathway—from Japan through Euro-America, and finally to Asia—represents the general direction and status hierarchy of global flows in terms of prestige and marketing.

Third, her popularity is long-lasting. Unlike sweeping fads from Japan such as Tamagotchi (peaking and declining in 1997) and Pokémon (peaking in 2002), Hello Kitty has been a relatively quiet and steady presence on the American consumer scene of young girls and women for decades. Hello Kitty's global trek predates Japan's "gross national cool" millennial moment. As a long-standing member of toy shelves globally, Hello Kitty garners widespread recognition. The recognition is not only of the round orb of her head or blank expression of her mouthlessness; it extends to the assumption of globalism itself in children's consumer culture, as well as to a broader band of girl culture that more recently includes adult women. Recognition also extends to global consumer culture that originates not in the United States or Europe, but in Asia/Japan.

Fourth, Hello Kitty is pure product. Her popularity does not stem from tie-in cartoons,<sup>4</sup> movies, videogames, or electronic handhelds. Rather, it builds on brand alone. Her image graces any number of products primarily through licensing arrangements that expanded the marketing of Hello Kitty multifold in the 2000s. However, whereas media tie-ins add to the imaging of the figure, especially by providing a narrative backstory or other kinds of consumer involvement, licensing arrangements merely add the image of the figure to a broad range of products. Sanrio saturates the public in multiple modes of consumption without the benefit of a backstory, trading-card incentives, or gaming schemes. In lieu of these props, Hello Kitty sells untethered as a pure commodity, building upon her image by the strength of past sales in combination with constant new tweakings of the brand. She goes beyond the constraints of narrative and rests in the commodity fetishism of a singular image, which I discuss in subsequent chapters.

Fifth, Hello Kitty's products go beyond targeting female children to targeting their mothers. In fact, by the 2000s, the core customers for Hello Kitty had become adult women, eighteen to forty. These adult products include vacuum cleaners, snowboards, scooters, jewelry, and vibrators (albeit sold as "massage wands"). It is this very extension out of the toy realm to more general and adult consumer goods that makes it possible to surround oneself with a total Hello Kitty environment, from cars to toothbrushes. Sanrio's move to licensing agreements allows the company to offer a Hello Kitty lifestyle. Further, the extension of goods to include women means that mothers and daughters may form a continuous loop of consumption, tying generations through the fa-

miliarity of the icon. Young mothers may take the birth of their daughters as an opportunity to renew a relationship—now “nostalgized”—to Hello Kitty as a symbol of their own childhood as consumers.

How might we think with and through an object like Hello Kitty? What kinds of structures of feeling does Hello Kitty enable? What does Hello Kitty, in effect, *do* in the private worlds of her fans, as well as in the larger public worlds of global goods? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the Japanese notion of *kyarakutā* (“character” or “characters”; anthropomorphized cartoon figures), a common part of Japanese consumer life in the twenty-first century, and a subject that I discuss more fully in chapter 1. In Japan, *kyarakutā* can be found everywhere, from straps decorating cell phones to billboards instructing the public on issues of health and safety. As Anne Allison points out, *kyarakutā* exist as “enchanted commodities” that transmit “enchantment and fun as well as intimacy and identity” (2006:16–17). Here lies exactly the *kawaii* effect these figures impart by their very transmission. Allison focuses explicitly on toys and children’s culture. What might this transmission suggest when extended to adult culture, as is very much the case in contemporary Japan, and to a certain extent in the pink-as-black marketplaces of industrial nations? I argue that *kyarakutā* transform the adult world—fraught with responsibilities, dangers, and global matters—into a haven of play and nostalgized childhood. Another way of looking at it is this: if Hello Kitty remained only a child’s toy, her analysis would not be quite so compelling or far-reaching. By contrast, Hello Kitty’s extension *beyond and including* children’s culture to adult realms in different parts of the industrial world broadens her impact and the purview of this book. This extension becomes fodder for what may be interpreted as kitsch in Euro-America (discussed further later in this chapter), with Hello Kitty painting an adult world many times over as mere child’s play.

Equally important, most *kyarakutā* are commodities, bought as souvenirs, collectibles, personal icons, and gifts, primarily by females. In other words, *kyarakutā* circulate through capitalist realms of exchange and social relations of consumption. Hello Kitty lies at the heart of Japan’s multibillion-dollar *kyarakutā* industry, taking its place as one of the most highly recognized figures within and outside of Japan. “Thinking with” *kyarakutā* such as Hello Kitty spans a variety of processes that lie out there in diverse global markets. These processes coalesce around gender, age, class, place, ethnicity, and nation. As David Howes reminds

us, “We need to know more about the social relations of consumption . . . , the logic by which goods are received (acquired, understood and employed) in different societies” (1996:2). This book grapples with the social relations of consumption surrounding pink globalization (by way of Hello Kitty), pointing toward the multiply worked commodity logic and critique of Japanese Cute-Cool.

### Globalization from the “Rest” to the “West”: Decentered Critiques

Pink globalization flowing from Japan (and other East Asian countries) outward has its critics, but these dissenting voices form a different kind of chorus in comparison with that surrounding Euro-American-centered globalization. Referred to by Ulf Hannerz as “Coca-colonization” (1992:217), the widespread movement of Euro-American products signifies far more than mere sales of goods and services. Rather, the goods and services append an overwhelmingly seductive tide of powerful images: modernity, freedom, individuality—as well as cultural imperialism and global empire. It is not so much that these are luxury goods (although they may be for some consumers); rather, it is that their consumption marks participation in global culture. Thus, purchasing these Euro-American goods signifies membership in a sorority of modern global consumers who have access to these goods through formal and informal distribution systems, disposable income, knowledge, and taste. Arjun Appadurai describes his own seduction, reciting a litany of American products that spelled out modernity itself: “I saw and smelled modernity reading *Life* . . . , seeing B-grade films . . . from Hollywood. . . . I begged my brother at Stanford . . . to bring me back blue jeans and smelled America in his Right Guard when he returned” (1996:1). Appadurai’s confessional depicts the bodily, consumerist hunger for these goods, lusting after the larger global membership—specifically led by America—that they represent. This is palpable global desiring, both intimate and grand.

Global desiring—and the movement of goods and services it subtends—always occurs within specific times, places, market infrastructures, and political-economic interrelationships. Likewise, local reactions to global flows arise as a product of these different contexts. Often, the images of the goods and services precede their influx to newly found markets; thus many consumers welcome these products with long-awaited

excitement and anticipation. Current critics of globalization forget the time only a few decades earlier when a community boasted—rather than protested—the arrival of its very own McDonald’s.

The welcome mat for these products comes as no accident. As Paul Rutherford explains, an American product such as Coca-Cola has marketed itself as not simply one drink among many but as “the universal cola, a single, unchanging soft drink” suiting “the taste of everyone— young or old, female or male, white or black, American or foreign, rich or poor” (1994:44). Here are the features of industrialized modernity— standardization, reliability, predictability—found in a bottle of dark, sweet liquid. The appeal of Coca-Cola thus spans pan-cultural markets with the authority of such late-capitalist, middle-class attainment. To drink Coke is to perform one’s own cosmopolitan consumership. Critics of globalization suggest that buying Coke results in a cultural “gray-out,” whereby consumers throughout the company’s empire turn their backs upon indigenous drinks in favor of the global beverage (Howes 1996:3). This points both to opting out of local drink choices and more importantly to the omnipresence of Coke within the array of local beverages and the interaction of local beverages in a Coke-dominated market. The presence of Coke, then, lies both in the actual American-brand drink, as well as in the influence of the American drink upon indigenous beverages (i.e., a plethora of local colas). In this way, Coca-Cola becomes constitutive of many soft drinks globally.

The argument goes that drinking Coke not only means choosing an American beverage (simply “Americanization”), but more importantly indexes buying a set of goods that consumers share across cultures (“homogenization”). Homogenization arises from the sameness that permeates consumer options worldwide. One may travel thousands of miles and end up shopping at the same stores, wearing the same brand of jeans (or jeans themselves as a genre of clothing), and drinking the same or near-same beverage. It is the very seductiveness of Coca-Cola’s images, tempting thirsts with the promise of global consumership that prompts anti-imperialist, antiglobalization, antihomogenization, anti-American opposition made famous in World Trade Organization protests of 1999 in Seattle. The impending threat of a gray-out lies in the loss of separate colors and cultures, as well as the overpowering of these colors and cultures by the consumer imperialism of the United States. It is significant that this gray-out has not materialized in exactly the way critics predicted. Consumer-based studies such as James L. Watson’s

edited volume *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* provide ample evidence of local meanings that form a buttress against the cultural imperialism of McDonald's and other multinational corporations (2006). The authors of Watson's collection describe an interactive process of globalism: McDonald's effects small but influential changes in East Asian societies, as well as in those societies transforming McDonald's into local institutions (2006:6). In spite of this interactive process, fears and talk of fears of domineering global corporations and waning local cultures continue. The ongoing wariness points to the ways in which American-led globalization links the fields of popular culture, economics, and politics in a powerfully overlapping, internally reinforcing web. The fact that these often dovetail within a racial hierarchy only adds fuel to the fire of overdetermined globalization. In this, the putative quotation by Den Fujita, president and chief executive of McDonald's Japan—"If we [Japanese] eat hamburgers for a thousand years, we will become blond, and when we become blond—we can conquer the world" (LaFeber 1997:365)—underscores the vectors of power along political, economic, national-cultural, and racial lines, if even in jest.<sup>5</sup>

When one examines Japan's pink globalization (including Hello Kitty sales), however, these vectors do not coincide in quite the same way. Analyzing an Asian-originated global process—linked to "decentered globalization," as Koichi Iwabuchi has labeled the movement and popularity of Japanese goods and media products in and through Asia (2002)—highlights aspects that are characteristic of transnational flows in general from those that are specific to this Japanese (or Asian) movement. Buying Hello Kitty, for example, does not threaten global customers with a form of cultural gray-out. Whereas critics within a global homogenization paradigm may question whether or not other nation-cultures are becoming too American, one does not hear portents of Americans/Europeans becoming too Japanese as a result of buying Hello Kitty—at least in Europe and America. In short, Japan does not command the automatic link of goods with hegemonic modernity in quite the same way as do Euro-American nations. A Japanese product such as Hello Kitty remains more of a product, and less a bearer of lifestyle or national identity than Coca-Cola, McDonald's, or Starbucks.

This characterization changes again when one looks at Asia and the reaction to Japanese products within this more circumscribed regional setting. Here, Japan is, at least in the early 2000s, the popular culture hegemon, asserting an alternative Asian-inflected modernity. The con-

trast reinscribes the importance of examining globalization flows within particular nation-culture (qua racial) hierarchies and histories. As I discuss in chapter 4, Hello Kitty has her critics, but these look more specifically at the product, isolating qualities such as her mouthlessness, her cuteness, and her representation of Japan, rather than inciting a more generalized cultural panic.

### *Mukokuseki: Performing Commodity White Face*

When I began this research in 1998, I spoke with many consumers abroad who did not know that Hello Kitty was from Japan. Although this situation has changed considerably with the wave of Japan's "gross national cool" in the 2000s, consumers in the United States and Europe have been buying Hello Kitty for decades previously without necessarily linking the plush toy or image with its country of origin. If one looks back, even some consumers in Japan did not originally know that the cat was a domestic product. With a company enigmatically named "Sanrio" and a cat called "Hello Kitty" (officially "Kitty White"), the national origins of the product and business remain somewhat obscure. A knowing native speaker of English may recognize these monikers as a Japanese version of English known as "Japlish," but a Japanese (as well as some native-English speakers) may well not. The process of devising a company name and image followed a careful strategy. What was once a dry goods company called Yamanashi Silk Center Co., Ltd., and established in 1960 underwent a complete makeover in 1973. To reinvent his company from dry goods to the nascent industry of frilly merchandise for girls known as *fanshii guzzu* (literally, "fancy goods"; stationery and other small items designed for purchase by a primarily young female market), the founder, Tsuji Shintarō (b. 1927), searched for a name that would reflect a fresh approach. Leaving behind the "Japanese odor" of the company's original name (see Iwabuchi 2002), Tsuji looked abroad for ideas. He devised "Sanrio" from a combination of San (as in many names of West Coast cities in the United States, such as San Francisco and San Diego) and Rio (Spanish for river). The resulting name referenced not so much Spain or any Latin American country, as California, home of his hero and idol Walt Disney.<sup>6</sup>

One could say that names such as Sanrio and Hello Kitty effectively perform commodity "white face," conflating nationhood, culture, and race. And yet we have to question assumptions of exactly this conflation

and query those involved in marketing, naming, and consuming, the answers to which they themselves may not know definitively. Thus, invoking an English-language (or quasi-Spanish-sounding) name may mark modernity, while not necessarily or specifically whiteness, even if these concepts may not be so neatly separated in people's minds. The ambiguity of the boundaries contributes to the power of the words and images that resides both historically on a macrolevel and contextually in microsituations and surroundings.

This attempt to untangle threads of meaning says as much about the domination of Euro-America in global markets of the 1970s, as about the growing confidence of Japanese companies intent upon competing in the global marketplace. During this period, *mukokuseki* (without nationality) erasure became the common means for Japanese companies to dodge any negative imaging of cheap, poorly made goods that “Made in Japan” may have held. If Euro-American goods represented the standard bearer of modernity in the years after the war, then what Tatsumi Takayuki has called “Japanese mimetic desire” shaped the imaging of Japanese companies and products intended to go global in the 1960s and 1970s decades of Japan's economic ascendancy (2006:9). Processes of *mukokuseki* erasure first took place in the world of Japanese electronics, where, as Iwabuchi explains it, companies took care not to impart a trace of “cultural odor” in order to make those goods more globally marketable (1994). Electronics was a naturalized home for *mukokuseki*, especially given the widespread belief that technology was culture neutral. Children's culture represented a new field of globalized products.

But what exactly constitutes “Japanese mimetic desire” of the time? During this period, Walt Disney signified all things global in the world of children's culture, including that of Japan. With grand ambitions and an ever watchful eye on his idol Disney, Tsuji intended Hello Kitty, his company's flagship character, to be nothing less than the Japanese cat who would overtake the American mouse, Mickey. Trumping Disney—or even entering the ring of Disney-led competition—signified gaining parity, on the one hand in the marketplace and on the other in people's imagination. The mixing of capitalist ambitions and global competitiveness fueled the working and reworking of Hello Kitty into far more than a plush toy. Hello Kitty's success as a global icon was part of a triumphal discourse of personal, corporate, and national achievement.

Disney's world of America, however, provides merely an umbrella at



the symbolic level for Tsuji's imagining. The details of the storybook world of Sanrio's characters are to be found elsewhere. In 1976, Sanrio endowed Hello Kitty with a quasi-British backstory, available on the company website ([www.sanrio.com](http://www.sanrio.com)) and through its limited cartoons. Living in London, the Whites are a fairy-tale family reworked for the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries: mother, father, Kitty, a twin sister named Mimmy, grandfather, and grandmother (see chapter 1 for further details). Hello Kitty also has a boyfriend named Dear Daniel. Of these other characters, only Dear Daniel appears occasionally as a plush toy and image on products. The others remain within the imagination of those who peruse Sanrio's website. (Note that although Sanrio creates a number of characters, each has a separate biography and imagined world, narrated primarily on the company website. Thus the imagined Sanrio world is not an interconnected one for these characters, but several separate narratives with a particular character at its center.)

This British biography of middle-class coziness should come as no surprise, given the place of England as the home of much fantasy in Japan inspired by Western literature, whether for children or adults. As Karen Kelsky notes, "England seems to hold a special place in [Japanese] women's internationalist narratives as the home of a truly sublime sophistication, an apotheosis of 'class,' that is contrasted favorably to the 'coarseness' of the United States" (2001:6). England—home of canonical Western literature, "mother country" to the United States, imperialist exemplar, model of the pomp (if not lives) of royalty, and source of nostalgia embedded within classics of English children's literature—provides a rich source of borrowings. The veracity of Hello Kitty's British biography, or the integrity of her imagined pedigree, mixing as it does elements of Britain and the United States matters less than Tsuji's conjuring of England as the fount of storybook charm and the "natural" home for global, mukokuseki cuteness.

Can something deliberately designed to reference Britain (or at least a Japanese version of Britain) truly be called mukokuseki? Is it truly "without nationality" (or culture or race)? I argue yes on both counts, primarily because this form of mukokuseki points to vectors of power and the invisibility of Euro-American culture as an identifiable marker. Thus, what is interpreted as "without nationality" is actually very much imbued *with* Euro-American culture or race—or at least one interpretation of it. To "have nationality" is to exhibit traits that are distinct

from Euro-America. This is the same kind of reasoning that explains “ethnic culture” as “anything but white” or, more specifically, “anything but white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.”

Mukokuseki may be analyzed within the framework of Peggy Phelan’s category of “unmarked” culture—that is, elements taken for granted as “the way things are” (1993). Unmarked aspects of culture go relatively unnoticed as the norm, situated in hegemonic positions within structures of power. In Euro-American culture these include the masculine gaze or white, middle-class values. Simply put, unmarked elements indicate where normative power lies. By contrast, marked elements—for example, female or nonwhite—highlight the relatively powerless. The use by the Japanese company Sanrio of the visual and narrative vocabulary derived from Euro-America demonstrates the degree to which that aesthetic had become the unmarked norm in Japan as elsewhere. Like Japlish, it matters less that this version of Euro-America may differ from what is actually found there. (Checking the “Japanese version” against the Euro-American one involves matters of imitation and authenticity that are separate from our concerns here.) What matters is that Euro-America forms the template for imagining a set of products and aesthetics dubbed variously mukokuseki, white, “Western,” modern, or simply normative. The story, however, does not end there. As commodity white face with a twist—painted freshly with what is now recognized favorably as “yellow expression”—the template parses a new framing device embraced by consumers and marketers in the 2000s as part of Cute-Cool Japan (see the discussion of official, government-sanctioned Cool Japan in chapter 7). Cute has arrived as part of this national cool. Given the Cute-Cool label, mukokuseki has become newly *kokuseki* (nationality) as more and more people globally construct the chic dimensions of Japanese kitsch. Hello Kitty inhabits this nodal point of transnational connection.

### Lost and Found in Translation: Shifting Meanings of Goods

Tracing an object’s path across oceans and continents means not only following the “thing” but also maintaining a sense of the physical “thing,” even as it finds meaning in new homes and contexts. The circulation of objects involves movement and displacement, as part of what Nicholas Thomas calls “a jostle of transaction forms” and mean-

ings (1991:123). This jostle changes continually in response to socio-political conditions, even as it plays a part in constituting those conditions. Thus I argue that an object such as Hello Kitty gains meaning as well as creates conditions for the large-scale processes of which it is a part. The value of Thomas's work on the exchange of material goods in the Pacific lies in examining the refractions of meanings and uses on both sides of the trade equation—European and Pacific Islander. These range from the inconsequential and mundane to the parodic and ritualistic (1991:187). Likewise, the movement of a commercial object such as Hello Kitty incorporates multiple uses and processes of meaning making. From the Japanese side, there is Kitty's faux-British biography, creatively co-opted as a Japanese version of a happy middle-class life for a global family. From the Euro-American side, multiple personal meanings fill the image of the cat: some consumers link the cat to Japanese mythology; others interpret Hello Kitty as a symbol of Asian females; yet others imbue the object with a strong sense of personal nostalgia for their own past. From the Asian side, Hello Kitty can be seen as a racially inflected product that happily asserts yellow parity in a previously white-dominated marketplace; in short, Sanrio's triumph in the global scene becomes Asia's achievement as well.

Meaning may be flexible, yet not entirely so. Hello Kitty does not circumscribe the terrain of the "floating signifier"—as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously puts it, "an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning" (1987:63–64). She is not an object without referents whose meaning floats untethered to any embedded set of denotations. On the contrary, Hello Kitty always begins with plenty of meaning in a carefully constructed design of aestheticized, feminized blankness. She inhabits the "thingness" of the "thing" in the physical properties of cuteness she brings to meaning making. The cute thing in particular may be the most "thinglike of things," an "object par excellence" through its very passivity (Ngai 2005:834). This so-called object par excellence calls upon interaction—thing and humans—for use and meaning, including aspects of selection, acquisition, collection, care, display, gifting, reuse, and disposal (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:1; see also chapter 3). These many-layered processes contribute to meaning making in significant ways that emphasize the active component of interaction between object and user.

Resurrecting Robert Plant Armstrong's notion of art as an "affecting

presence”—which I extend here to include commercial objects—helps us analyze the appeal of Hello Kitty (1971). Armstrong argues that material objects carry an emotive force through their association with stories, significant events, or particular cultural codes. Certain objects may be linked even more specifically to positive affective resources—however defined—as what Sara Ahmed calls “happy objects” (2010). She explains: “Objects become ‘happiness means.’ Or we could say they become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness” (2010:34). Happiness, in fact, coalesces as an important theme of this book as the notion of Hello Kitty as a source of well-being is created, marketed, sold, cherished, vilified, and deployed by various constituencies.

The emotive forces coalescing around “art” objects make them sites of personal and collective negotiations of identity negotiation. Objects of material culture in the hands of human agency thus help construct identities and meanings, playing an active role in embodying and constituting social relations (Adams 2006:26; Hardin and Arnoldi 1996:16). Ahmed explains the role of the “happy object”: “Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight. If the same objects make us happy . . . then we would be orientated or directed in the same way” (2010:35). It is this very active role of a transnational “happy object” such as Hello Kitty in shifting and variable processes of meaning making and identity that I wish to explore here.

In this framework, we can consider the relationship between humans and objects and particularly objects such as Hello Kitty, whose blankness may be interpreted as a mirror in her very thingness. But what exactly constitutes the relationship? Here Jean Baudrillard suggests a reflexive mode of regard that ties the collector with the object: “As a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones. . . . What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you. *That is why everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects*” (1996:96; emphasis in original). An object such as Hello Kitty fits this description eerily well, reflecting back desired images (or rather, the image that always fits every situation so neatly), a mute presence that does not look back at you or judge. Many of the fan narratives express these kinds of sentiments and attractions to Sanrio’s mouthless cat (chapter 3). Consider, too, the gendering of the mirror: thus the seeming inevitable links between ob-

jects, mirrors, muteness, blankness, and femininity. Hello Kitty acts as a powerful coalescence of these elements.

The simplicity of the design—the abstraction of the face evoking a particular blankness that can subsequently become or reflect all things—has historical precedents in Japanese art.<sup>7</sup> As Miyeko Murase writes in a catalogue for an exhibit of *emaki* (narrative scrolls) that includes twelfth-century depictions from *The Tale of Genji*:

The conventional figures of men and women are portrayed with no attempt to indicate facial expressions or physiognomic differences. . . . All have small, full, rounded faces that lack individuality; the eyes and heavy brows are straight ink lines, the noses simple hooks, the small rosebud lips are those of young girls. The style, called *hikime-kagihana* (“dashes for eyes, hooks for noses”) was a familiar device in the illustrations of romantic tales. . . . According to one theory, the very anonymity of the characters allowed viewers to identify themselves psychologically with the individuals portrayed in the paintings. (1983:66–67)

One can see a historical lineage of the practice of *hikime-kagihana* (abstracting a face through shorthand stylistic symbols) in subsequent seventeenth-century woodblock prints, through twentieth-century practices of sketching and twenty-first-century computer-mediated and text-messaging practices of *kaomoji* (emoticons) (Katsuno and Yano 2002). In each of these practices, the mouth itself may be depicted with only the smallest of visual gestures or sometimes not at all.<sup>8</sup> In briefly mentioning this historic arc, I do not mean to reify Hello Kitty as the inevitable product of “a Japanese aesthetic tradition” placed on a global stage. Rather, I find this historic link useful in providing a background for interpreting mouthlessness as less of a lack (as many Euro-American observers do) than of situating Sanrio’s design within a historically placed visual repertoire of meanings.<sup>9</sup>

The thingness of Hello Kitty rests not only in the many extrinsic features of consumerism, identities, nationhood, and transnational flows, but also in intrinsic physical aspects. These may be pared down to specific design elements: a bow (or other decoration) set at an angle over small white ears; simple, round head; dots for eyes and nose positioned almost in line with one another; three lines on either side of the face to indicate whiskers; mouthlessness; pink or red, and white. The inclusion of these design and other elements has varied throughout the image’s

history, so that by the 2000s, Hello Kitty could be anything but a cat. With no tail and never depicted walking on all fours, she insistently remained a *kyarakutā*, a cartoon figure. (To prove her departure from feline existence, in 2004, Sanrio added a new member to the White family—a pet kitten named Charmmy, who sits and walks like a cat.)

Scrupulously attentive to the pulse of the times, the “situatedness” of the place, and fresh opportunities for marketing, Hello Kitty appears ever anew: in summer one year, deeply tanned and bikini clad; for the cohosted Korea-Japan World Cup of 2002, in full Korean costume; for the anniversary of the end of World War II, as a Japanese kamikaze pilot. Meanwhile, in Yokohama’s Chinatown, she appears as a steamed dumpling; in New York’s Times Square, as the Statue of Liberty; in Hawai’i, as a pineapple. The permutations are endless as part of the thingness of the thing. Interpreted within the esoteric spirit of Buddhist *henshin* (transformation), Hello Kitty changes form: she *becomes*, accruing and transmitting a certain amount of charismatic and mercantile power with each iteration (Kiryama 1971). This results in what I have called “emergent authenticity”: “authority and validation accrued over time through processes of imitation, repetition, and tribute” (Yano 2010b:99). Hello Kitty’s emergent authenticity builds as she inhabits every guise. Further, it is not so much Hello Kitty *in* a kamikaze pilot outfit, but rather Hello Kitty *as* a kamikaze pilot, that results in the possibilities of cute as a symbolic intervention upon militarism, wartime, and Japan’s extremism during World War II through the Hello Kitty touch. The endlessness of the permutations of what Hello Kitty may become suggests that theoretically anything may be made cute—that is, rendered innocent, playful, guileless, appealing, and ultimately marketable. At the same time, Sanrio’s borrowings of different guises extends Hello Kitty’s reach centrifugally. The processes of revaluation go both ways.

To add to this scenario, Sanrio’s move into licensing arrangements with a broad range of manufacturers and tie-ups with other character brands means that the Hello Kitty figure now adorns an ever wider array of products that keeps growing exponentially. In the 2000s, she could be seen on Airstream Trailers, Toyota Camrys, Compaq computers, and more.<sup>10</sup> The thingness of the thing goes beyond resting in the figure of Hello Kitty, to resting in the many types of objects she inhabits. Hello Kitty can also be seen with many other American popular culture icons, including Barbie, as mentioned previously, as well as a monkey by artist

Paul Frank. This tie-up agreement between two (or more) companies makes for a new kind of imagining of commodities crossing nations and character species. A consumer first seeing the cat and the monkey together on a T-shirt might react with surprise—"I didn't know they knew each other!" But it is exactly this kind of juxtaposition that soon naturalizes the thingness of the thing, reinforced through a chorus of *kyarakutā*. Thus, Hello Kitty now has cheery company that is not even of Sanrio's making. Instead, she shares space in a community of characters, cementing her membership in global children's culture. She joins that club as ambassador of Japanese Cute-Cool.

Finally, the thingness of Hello Kitty rests in the commodity fetishism that surrounds her. In classic Marxist terms, commodity fetishism denotes "a definite social relation between men, that assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 1906:83). A "thing" such as Hello Kitty becomes a stand-in for the expression, mediation, transformation, and objectification of the social relations that produced and surround her. She is not simply an object or image; she is specifically an object/image for sale, attributed with special powers derived in part through the multiple manifestations of late-capitalist excess. In short, the commodity fetishism of Hello Kitty lives in and through excess. Governed by the market logic that more is better, Hello Kitty can only get better by inhabiting more spaces, adorning more and different objects. Saturation does not seem a threat to Sanrio, which monthly issues hundreds of new products, separately in Japan and in its overseas markets. Nor does it seem a threat to Hello Kitty's more avid fans, some of whom work hard to keep abreast of all the newest products by means of the company website, magazine, newsletters, word-of-mouth information, and stores (see chapter 3). Rather, in affirmation of commodity fetishism, saturation is nothing more or less than the fabric of life of consumers built around objects and given meaning, as Baudrillard puts it, through the very "relationship of consumption—of consuming and being consumed" (1996:218–219).

The question remains, What kinds of significance do these objects and their consumption hold for fans globally? What are the processes of cultural translation surrounding a global commodity? How is Japanese Cute-Cool interpreted in marketplaces as diverse as Milwaukee, London, Hong Kong, and Honolulu? And how are these meanings engaged as shaping and shaped by nations, cultures, and peoples? I discuss further the shifting meanings given Hello Kitty, including the personal

and group uses to which she is put, in chapters 3 and 6. One need only enter a convenience store here, a department store there, a children's products website anywhere, and find the image of Hello Kitty. Given this, it is but a short leap from Hello Kitty's pink world of excess into the semantic domain of kitsch.

### Cute as Kitsch

Defined variously as “something of tawdry design, appearance, or content created to appeal to popular or indiscriminating taste” (*Random House* 2001:733), or succinctly put, “pretentious trash” (Dutton, 1998), kitsch implies critique based in social class in its very conceptualization (cf. Adorno 2001). Taste and class shape the word and concept: from Viennese turn-of-the-century slang *verkitschen etwas* (to knock off or cheapen something) to a 1925 pamphlet entitled *Der Kitsch* by the Austrian art critic Fritz Karpfen deriding the vulgarity of “high art” imitations within mass-produced items, kitsch targets the excesses of those vying to emulate upper classes (Ward 1991:12). The art critic Clement Greenberg's well-known pronouncement “Kitsch is the culture of the masses” softens some of the vitriol, even as it defines the class foundations of the concept (1939). The term drips exactly with the kind of class-based disdain that Pierre Bourdieu inscribes in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). According to Bourdieu, one's aesthetic choices rest ineluctably in the power dynamics of social class; thus, working-class choices are made in the shadow of the aesthetic of the dominant class (1984:41). Kitsch exists as part of that shadow. Mimicking the trappings of upper classes without the “refinement” of breeding and education, kitsch signifies that worst of sins—acting beyond one's station. The pretensions of the nouveau riche prompt the class-based clucking of the kitsch label.

The pejorative dimensions of kitsch—even when displayed ironically—outline value judgment and critique focused on excess. Thus, while emotion may be part of the human condition, the sentimentality of kitsch suggests emotions out of control, knee-jerk pandering to the lowest common denominator of taste. The defining moment in locating kitsch lies exactly in the borderline of taste crossing into the unrestricted territory of excess. Of course, excess lies very much in the eyes of the beholder, embedded in a particular time and place. A figure such as Hello Kitty might be derided as kitsch by some, while embraced



favorably by others as simply and overtly kawaii. The judgment call on Sanrio's cat is not unanimous; rather, it varies by and within cultures, as well as through time. The shifting "kitschiness" of Hello Kitty exemplifies the "moral economy" surrounding goods that Igor Kopytoff discusses, assessing value as a project infused with sociocultural meaning and judgment (1986:64). As Susan Stewart puts it: "The kitsch objects offers a saturation of materiality, a saturation which takes place to such a degree that materiality is ironic, split into contrasting voices" (1993:167). The contrasting voices of Hello Kitty juxtapose the child and the adult, the innocent and the sexy, the cute and the cool—thus constituting the semantic overview of kawaii.

It is not so much that Sanrio's cat necessarily represents class-based kitsch. One does not normally associate Hello Kitty with "tawdry design, appearance, or content" or even with "pretentious trash." Rather, many of the qualities she embodies—sentimentality, cuteness, commercialism, and even the excesses of her omnipresence—make Hello Kitty and kitsch associative bedfellows. Hello Kitty shares that bed with other usual suspects—including the American icons Cabbage Patch Kids ("ugly-cute" dolls produced by Coleco, popular in the United States in the 1980s), Strawberry Shortcake (the licensed character of a girl dressed in strawberry-plastered pink, owned by American Greetings since the 1980s), and Precious Moments (the dewy-eyed, quasi-religious collectible figures designed by a self-professed born-again Christian, Sam Butcher). To wit, Hello Kitty manages to rise above the rest as a particularly clever, high-quality, aestheticized, Japanese image. She claims a space in the marketplace as one of the best and cleverest of the cute lot. Moreover, there is nothing exactly cheap about Hello Kitty. The Japanese product sold abroad commands a midrange price, and the quality of goods tends to be high. Yet some would contend that cuteness itself, especially its extension into items for adults and its saturation of the marketplace, threatens to veer into the critical territory of kitsch. Kitsch colors the ground upon which Hello Kitty treads abroad as an icon of Japanese Cute-Cool.

Instead of acting beyond one's station, the kitschiness of Hello Kitty lies in adult consumers acting *below* their age-graded station, clinging on to the relics of what might more properly be considered children's goods. Hello Kitty links with kitsch particularly in the hands of women (or men) still attached to cuteness. Marita Sturken outlines the connections between children's aesthetics and adult kitsch: "It is not incidental

to this critique of kitsch as innocent and naive taste that kitsch is an important aesthetic for children's cultures. Thus, the cute cultures of children's aesthetics form a continuum with the cute cultures of adult kitsch" (2007:19). However, what befits the child appears mockingly infantile in an adult frame. Critics of Hello Kitty police the kitsch terrain for the cuteness she represents and the excesses of her ubiquity. She becomes kitsch in the transgressiveness of her adult appeal (discussed further in chapter 4).<sup>11</sup>

According to Sturken, however, kitsch holds the potential for more than simply transgression. As a form of comfort amid the stresses of the contemporary world, as a means of escaping confrontations with hard-edged political realities, and as a source of consumer delight that may crop up in times of tragedy, kitsch plays a potentially critical role in public culture. Sturken's analysis of the production and sale of kitsch objects surrounding national traumas such as the September 11 attacks upon New York's World Trade Center details ways in which these objects and their consumption produce an illusion of comfort, banality, and ultimately national innocence. Sturken's analysis of "consumer practices of security and comfort . . . [and their] attendant politics of affect" in post-9/11 United States draws upon "the promise of the kitsch object . . . that innocence can be regained" (2007:5, 285). In the chapters that follow, I examine ways in which Sanrio, Hello Kitty, and a cult of cute may be embedded within related practices of the global production of commodified innocence.

### Cute as Cool: The Winking Oxymoron

Cute and kitsch fit neatly together, the sentimentality fitting the maudlin like a glove. Cute and cool, however, fit far less neatly. The frisson of this coupling, in fact, lies in the wink of Hello Kitty's global appeal, at least for certain segments of her fandom in the 2000s. Here is the "wink on pink," as coined by Faith Popcorn (mentioned earlier).

As Lewis MacAdams warns, "Anybody trying to define 'cool' quickly comes up against cool's quicksilver nature. As soon as anything is cool, its cool starts to vaporize" (2001:19). It is exactly the "quicksilver nature" of cool that maintains its location at the forefront of trends, ever moving, ever shifting, claiming the edge as its own. The trendiness of cool requires marketers and consumers alike to constantly capture its fleeting status, to identify who or what or where is cool and for how

long. (This is the problem with Japan's governmentally backed cool moment that includes the cute culture of Hello Kitty, as discussed in chapter 7.)

Suggesting more than mere popularity, cool refers to a certain sub-cultural appeal, a certain distance from the status quo or mainstream. In fact, some of Hello Kitty's global fans hail her exactly as the non-Disney, non-Precious Moments cute figure (see chapter 3). In their minds, her distance—and Japan's—from the Euro-American mainstream makes her cool. Their fandom may be seen as a small act of rebellion against other American products in favor of this Japanese one. Dick Pountain and David Rogers take cool as an attitude tied directly to a strong version of this kind of distancing (see chapter 5 for subversive uses of Hello Kitty): "Cool is an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals to express defiance to authority. . . . Cool [is] a *permanent* state of *private* rebellion, . . . a new secular virtue" (2000:19; emphasis in original). This overtly defiant aspect of cool may get lost in Japan, where cool is more likely to devolve into a consumer choice label as mere style.<sup>12</sup> (Note that the Japanese loan word *kuuru* does not necessarily carry as subcultural connotations that are as strong as the English word *cool*; it refers more generally to stylishness.)

Peter Stearns ties current usage of the term not to a consumer style, but to an emotional style best characterized by detachment: "Being a cool character means conveying an air of disengagement, of nonchalance. . . . Cool has become an emotional mantle, sheltering the whole personality from embarrassing excess" (1994:1). Here we can see why cool and cute/kitsch seem to be fundamentally at odds with one another as they fall on opposite sides of the fulcrum of emotion. Cool may also be seen as an aesthetic, associative style that Robert Farris Thompson refers to as "a deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and of play" (1973:41). Thompson cites the closely related English terms "cool, composed, collected" as resulting in a "mask" of coolness (1973:41).

That mask is often gendered male, creating another point of contrast with cute/kitsch. The American image of the rebel—in particular the coolness of the teenage rebel of the 1950s and 1960s, James Dean style—relies heavily on a masculinist code of self-presentation. His self-control, composure, and social equilibrium combine with rugged individualism performed as an aloof, sangfroid stance. Daniel Harris calls

coolness “an aesthetic of the streets, a style of deportment. . . . Coolness grows out of a sense of threat, . . . giving rise to a hyper-masculine folk religion that fetishizes poise and impassivity” (2000:52–53). By contrast, cuteness calls upon sweet dependency performed as an infantilized state of neediness. In fact, it is the overdetermined nature of the gendered divide between cool and cute—the impassive, distant male versus the earnestly yearning female—that may require extra symbolic effort to be overcome.

That extra symbolic effort lies in the wink, a brief ocular tic that resolves the contradictions of cute and cool through the frame of play. This is not to say that cute and cool become one. Instead, the frame of the wink allows us to retain both elements and derive meanings from their juxtaposition. The wink creates the possibility of two-way interactions whereby cute might be cool and vice versa, kitsch might be art and vice versa, Hello Kitty might become anything at all and vice versa. It is the possibilities of the two-way, double move that interests us here. Chapter 1 traces the thirty-year path in Japan by which Hello Kitty became cool (and cool embraced cute)—in Sanrio’s words “kuuru de kyuutu” (cute/cool) from 1998 to the present (see appendix 1). Notably in this most recent period of her iteration,<sup>13</sup> Hello Kitty often takes the form of a winking cat, thereby creating a semantic and visual space that is critical for our discussion.

Examining Hello Kitty as a wink in the 2000s enables us to tie together various strands of pinkness central to this book—girl culture, play, sexuality, exotica, even kitsch. A wink frames Hello Kitty specifically as play (including irony, parody, and sexual innuendo) and, more importantly, it gives Hello Kitty creative license *to* play. The wink resolves logical inconsistencies—a child’s toy fetishized by female adults—and provides a no-holds-barred shield behind which Hello Kitty can truly become anything, anywhere, anytime, and still remain Kitty. The wink creates divides of knowing—front stage and back stage—with membership extended to those who understand and assume the frame of play (see chapter 5). Producers and many adult consumers understand implicitly the value of the wink and deploy it as a fundamental component of the Cute-Cool positioning of Sanrio’s cat. The semantic space opened up by the wink is, rather than a trivial matter, a part of the very fabric of cute as cool (and vice versa), of “pink as black” globalization, and of Sanrio’s strategically commodified innocence. Here lies the soft-power

hopes and hypes of Japan's nation branding by way of its Cute-Cool (see chapter 7).

### Kitty as Global Children's Consumer Culture

Even as Japanese Cute-Cool (and thus a young adult market) dominates Sanrio's output and marketing, the global production of commodified innocence rests in the continued association of Hello Kitty with the world of young consumers. In fact, Sanrio's cat garners our attention as a Japanese veteran on the block of globalized children's culture. Because Hello Kitty has been part of globalized children's culture for more than three decades, it is possible to examine an entire generation of youth-based consumption, as well as the effects of multigenerational ties through purchasing the Japanese cat. Although my field research did not include interviews with children, Hello Kitty as part of youth-based consumer culture forms one part of the necessary backdrop for our discussion.

Hello Kitty is part of the "market-culture of childhood" of the twentieth century and the twenty-first, including what the sociologist Daniel Cook calls "pediocularity"—that is, reconfiguring the world from the viewpoint of a child—here, specifically for commercial purposes (2004:2). Whereas previously, marketers assumed that parents (i.e., mothers) bought goods for their children, in the United States since the 1930s merchants, manufacturers, and advertisers targeted children as consumers in their own right. This change in perspective resulted in "pediocular" goods, retail spaces, and advertising techniques, including the use of popular characters decorating age-graded, gendered retail spaces (2004:3). Cook historicizes the transition during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States of reconceptualizing the child from customer—a person involved in an economic transaction—to consumer—"a continuous identity regardless of whether purchases are being made at any given time" (2004:70). Decades later, Hello Kitty inhabits this child-as-consumer marketplace. Cook's point, however, goes beyond examining who is doing the looking and shopping; rather, he argues that the very act of buying spells out a new construction of childhood as a "status of more or less full persons" based in consumption (2004:3). Children buying Hello Kitty—and other youth-oriented products—confirm their status as fully functioning capitalists, even as financed by parents. Increasingly, the toy shop in which children in

industrialized countries eagerly partake has been global and, more specifically, led by Japan and the United States (with China rising quickly) (Cross and Smits 2005:880).

Although Hello Kitty can be found in toy departments in many industrial countries, she is not strictly a plaything. Even now, when one purchases a Hello Kitty plush toy, she represents not so much something to play with as a visual symbol accompanying a child through daily life. She is less doll than *kyarakutā*, marking her territory with the scent of *kawaii*. Her place within toy departments globally signifies the *pediocularity* of which Cook speaks, effectively making children's spaces as their own within the vernacular of commercial idioms. One may see this kind of visual nesting as a gendered domain built upon the appeal of a physical environment that is personalized and aestheticized with cute, matching decor. It is not so much that little boys do not like personalized, aestheticized spaces, but that this stereotyping of little girls' desires fulfills gendered notions of female domesticity, regardless of age. Part of the genius of Sanrio lies in offering the Hello Kitty imprint upon any number and variety of goods. Whether a girl purchases one item, two items, or ten, they link easily into a well-coordinated suite (e.g., backpack, pencil case, notebook, as well as mug, toothbrush, and chopsticks), in effect a symbolic cocoon of age-graded, gendered identity. Furthermore, as a transnational emblem of cuteness, Kitty's lifestyle branding helps female youth from Asia to North America and beyond share in a consumerist, global girlhood. Buying Hello Kitty marks shared membership in a newly minted, underage shopping cohort, imbued with all the coolness of global modernity.

Hello Kitty's highly marketable "coolness" circumscribes the market-driven birth of the "tween"<sup>14</sup>—the female between eight and twelve who has been newly asserting her peer-driven identity through practices of consumption since the late 1980s in industrial nations. In fact, it is objects and practices of consumption that constitute not only the hallmark of the mercantile age grade, but also part of the birth of the very category.<sup>15</sup> As Daniel Cook and Susan Kaiser argue, "The case of the tween girl underscores . . . how social persons, cultural positions and consumption cannot be conceptualized as separate entities that occasionally come into contact with and influence each other; rather, they mutually constitute each other in multiple ways" (2004:223–24). This book concerns itself specifically with this very nexus of the social, the cultural, and the global marketplace for tweens and other consum-

ers of Sanrio's cat. Hello Kitty lies on the outer cusp of coolness for the middle-school crowd, particularly because she references earlier age grades, from toddler through elementary school years. From Sanrio's perspective, however, tapping into—and helping create—the tween market has become invaluable to Hello Kitty's success (Tohmatsu, personal communication, May 30, 2002). Thus, in the 2000s, tie-ups with other female tween icons, such as Paul Frank's monkey, are critical for establishing the continuing cool of Kitty. The monkey cannot do it alone. Part of what keeps Hello Kitty from falling off the cliff of acceptability for the middle-school set rests in linking her with the larger wave of "Cool Japan" (see chapter 7). Running alongside the global popularity of manga, anime, and Japanese videogames, Hello Kitty draws on the passing moment of the soft-power hype.

As well as being a functioning capitalist the buying child, according to Lauren Berlant, is an "infantile citizen" whose private acts of consumption critically and creatively engage with media and the marketplace (1997:6). Consumption (along with sexuality) forms part of the new politics of the intimate, a private sphere that defines citizenship. Sarah Banet-Weiser's study of the American children's cable network Nickelodeon helps us understand the complex linkages—that is, consumerism as the basis for constructing citizenship, which may include children as audience members, consumers, and members of class positions (2007:12). Youth-based brand membership and loyalty fit right into the practices of such underage consumer citizenship. The private-in-public link of consumption creates interpretive communities built around the circulation of objects and information, creating what Banet-Weiser calls "the nation of the brand" (2007:20). In markets globally, brand loyalty functions as its own kind of citizenship practice, built around affect and enabled through class structure. Identity—including that of children consumers—is not simply sold through branded, fetishized consumer objects; "it is *created* and made meaningful by . . . brands" (Banet-Weiser 2007:22). Hello Kitty leads the way in this global process of identity making through (often underage) consumption.

Youthful middle-class consumers in industrial countries recognize the power of brands implicitly. With little concern for the political and cultural ramifications of soft power or globalization, they understand the practices and affiliations of brand loyalty. They learn these lessons early and often, through practices of purchase and use (Bourdieu 1984:78). Increasingly the marketplace includes goods from far-off

lands, as a function of cheap labor, and more importantly as a growing shared pool of merchandise and taste. Kid consumers assert and articulate their own consumer citizenship as they browse the global toy shelves. Some of them browse the Internet as well, making connections with other Hello Kitty fans around the world. In doing so, they assert the global nature of their own citizen-consumer selves, celebrating the commodified childhood. To adult critics who see in this process the manipulation of innocent youth, a purchase by tweens essentially mimics the middle-class proliferation of goods that nurtured their emergence as consumers, every step of the way. As Juliet Schor argues, in many ways, tweens were (born and) bred to shop (2004).

Whereas other children's branded goods make their mark specifically through age-graded niche marketing, Sanrio cleverly surpasses these boundaries by attempting to appeal as broadly as possible. No longer only a part of children's consumer culture, Hello Kitty serves less as a generational divide than as a shared bridge. How it manages to do so—that is, convincing consumers within a broad span of ages of the desirability of the global icon, of the irresistibility of Japanese Cute-Cool—is in large part the subject of this book.

### **Everything's Coming Up Pink? Hello Kitty as Global Girl Culture**

That desirability is a highly gendered phenomenon. Hello Kitty flourishes as part of global girl culture—whether bought by tweens, housewives, secretaries (“office ladies” or OL, in Japan), punk rockers, female business executives, or gay males (for whom pink, at least in some Euro-American urban subcultures, has become emblematic). Herein lies the widespread demographics of pink globalization. But what does Hello Kitty's pink signify to these and other consumers? It is not so much that Hello Kitty herself is always depicted as, or in, pink (in fact in her original 1974 image she was dressed in primary colors of red bow, blue overalls, yellow nose), but that pink as a concept has become a touchstone for Sanrio and its cat. Walk into Sanrio headquarters in Tokyo or any of its stores throughout the world in the 2000s, and the message of pink is clear. Inasmuch as pink is Sanrio's color and Hello Kitty is the company's flagship character, the mouthless cat is encoded by both marketers and consumers as inhabiting the world of pink. Symbolically, Hello Kitty is as pink as they come.



In our tracing of pink globalization, it is useful to pause briefly and consider the color pink in Euro-America, as well as Japan. According to the social chronicler Karal Ann Marling, pink did not become strict gender coding for girls in Euro-America until after World War II as part of the standardization of children's apparel and accessories during the postwar baby boom (1994:39). But even before then, pink had often encoded various gendered meanings, especially in consumer culture. Here I discuss a few twentieth-century American consumerist icons who made pink their signature color in order to suggest some of the previous uses and meanings of the hue.

One of these was Elizabeth Arden, a businesswoman tycoon, who established a cosmetics empire in the 1930s around "Arden Pink," a vibrant signature hue adorning all salons, packaging, and apparel. In her book *Hope in a Jar*, detailing the history of America's beauty culture, the historian Kathy Peiss argues that Arden used "pink femininity" as a weapon and image, concealing cutthroat business practices, tough negotiations, and personal turmoil (1998:80). During that same period, the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli promoted "shocking pink"—and its associations of "zany, unpredatory sexiness"—as a splash of color that could perk up the drab, subdued palette of the economic belt-tightening of the 1930s (Marling 1994:39). "Shocking pink" was also the name of Schiaparelli's perfume issued in 1936 and sold in a bright pink hourglass-shaped container (reputedly the shape of buxom actress Mae West).

Another businesswoman of an entirely different reputation also used pink as a signature color: Brownie Wise, a single mother who made Tupperware parties a household word in the 1950s and sponsored the hybridization of a color named "Tupperware Rose." The pinkness with which she surrounded herself—including pink furnishings, a pink Cadillac, and a canary dyed pink—symbolized the feminine connections that drove the company and sales techniques built on housewife sociability (Clarke 1999:132). In fact, pink was a dominant decorative color of America in the 1950s. First Lady Mamie Eisenhower (from 1953 to 1961) proclaimed pink her favorite hue, after which "First Lady Pink" (also known as "Mamie Pink") became a recognized color for apparel, accessories, dishware, bathroom fixtures, and home furnishings (Marling 1994:38).

"First Lady Pink" contrasted with "sassy pink," a candy shade with a hint of rebellion preferred by the sex idol Jayne Mansfield and even

rock-and-roll phenomenon Elvis Presley. Whether it was Mansfield in her pink swimming pool filled with pink champagne, or Presley fans paying tribute to “The King” with lipstick named “Heartbreak Hotel Pink,” this bolder pink added spice to the palette of commercial popular culture in the 1950s. In Marling’s words, “Pink was young, daring—and omnisequal. . . . The sudden ubiquity of pink seemed to signify a culture in love with novelty, change, and visual stimulation” (1994:40, 41). Or at least the vibrant, sassy version of the color did. In what might be considered a generational and class divide over which pink to celebrate, lady-like older women decorated bathrooms in powder-puff “Mamie Pink,” while their teenage daughters painted their lips with the hot hue of rock and roll to match the swish of their pink poodle skirts.<sup>16</sup>

The competing pinks of America in the 1950s echo other earlier twentieth-century references, when pink was both the color of youth and innocence, as well as the chosen hue of worldly exotica, romance, sex, and commerce. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel—AKA “The Pink Palace”—was built on the shores of Waikiki Beach in 1927 to evoke Spanish-Moorish architecture; later, the industrial tycoon Henry J. Kaiser (1882–1967) flaunted his signature color of shocking pink in the design of hotels, vehicles, and even housing developments in 1960s Hawai’i (*Time* 1960). Note as well the ease with which pink veers into kitsch, especially when mass produced (e.g., pink flamingos of the 1950s). Pink kitsch derives its meaning through iconic associations with the feminine, the exotic, and the emotional—especially when multiplied manifold.

Here I only briefly suggest some of the associative derivations of the many meanings given the color, emphasizing not so much their natural bases, as the uses to which these may be put.<sup>17</sup> Pink is the color of flowers, with a host of symbolic meanings differing by culture. In an Anglo-centric global world, pink is the color of female newborns and youth in general. It is the pan-racial color of erotic orifices: the mouth and its tongue, the vagina, the anus. In fact, the word Eros—Greek god of love and desire—might be analyzed as encompassing the word *rose* anagrammatically (Schawelka 2006:43). Pink, along with being the color of a healthy glow (“in the pink”), is also the color of a sexual glow or, more complicatedly, a blush. As the artist Barbara Nemitz argues, “Pink is more closely associated with emotions than any other color” (2006:26). These run a gamut; however, all include a sense of heightened intensity spilling over the bounds of control, whether in anger, rage, excitement, or embarrassment. The gendered blush combines knowledge, shame,

morality, and masking: one may blush for various reasons, of course, but the act of blushing and its interpretation assumes the presence of an audience (which may include one's self) (Schawelka 2006:46). It is the self-revelatory aspect of blushing—one's emotions exposed bodily—in combination with the fact that certain individuals or categories of persons may blush more easily than others, that links the act to vulnerability.<sup>18</sup> This vulnerability is not that of the infant; instead it is that of the socialized child, suggesting that knowledge is critical for triggering this form of blood rushing to one's face. Blushing is a social act that performs a position of powerlessness and thus symbolizes those in less powerful positions—particularly young females. Although others blush as well, when young females do, they enact their positions by fulfilling social expectations. Becoming pink thus feminizes the actor.

One particular icon of pink from the 1950s and continuing in popularity through the 2000s is not associated with blushing—Barbie, a doll of adult attributes and imaging created by the designer Ruth Handler for Mattel Corporation in 1959. Handler's Barbie both wears pink and accessorizes her life with a pink car, house, and furnishings. The social historian Stephanie Coontz situates Barbie within the contradictions of the 1950s: "The marketability of toys like Barbie . . . was a logical, though ironic, extension of 1950s gender roles, marital norms, and consumerist values. . . . Indeed, an explicit theme in 1950s pop culture was that both types of women [the wholesome and the sexy] wanted the same thing in the end"—that is, a man to take care of them (1999:41). Barbie thus fully inhabits and manipulates a woman's role in a male-dominant world, ensnaring a man in particular through the curves of her body. Although Barbie's pink world of adult mores superficially contrasts with that of innocent Hello Kitty, perhaps the differences are less important than the similarities. Both pink worlds depend less on who a female is and more on what she represents: the one through the adult come-on of sexuality, the other through the infantilized allure of dependency. Thus the pinks they share only reinforce the symbolically laden domain of femininity.

That contrast between the pink worlds of Barbie and Hello Kitty has shrunken considerably, as evidenced by the Hello Kitty Barbie, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These combined worlds find a fitting place in what has been identified by an author and mom, Peggy Orenstein, as "the new girlie-girl culture" of twenty-first-century American tweenhood in a book provocatively entitled *Cinderella Ate My*

*Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (2011). Connecting the American media and commercial dots of Disney media productions, American Girl dolls, Pottery Barn Kids, preschool beauty pageants, online female avatars, and her own observations as a mother of a tween, Orenstein chronicles a pink sparkly commercial world of girlhood of the 2000s that shades the cute and the sexy in alarming ways. Angela McRobbie critically circumscribes this girlie-girl culture as “the whole pink and frilly world of affect and emotion within which the girl herself is permitted to ‘become,’ the intensity of focus on body and its surfaces, and of course the heteronormative assumptions underpinning these endless rituals of sexual differentiation” (quoted in Banet-Weiser 2007:124). Furthermore, these “endless rituals” with a “focus on body and its surfaces” take place within a growing marketplace that plies the waters of girlie-girlhood. In short, the pink tools of the trade—cute and sexy—need to be bought. While most Disney or American Girl doll executives would likely disavow promoting sexualized images of girls in their “wholesome” products and productions, the juxtaposition with underage beauty pageant strutting in an overall American culture of twenty-first-century everyday princesses creates leaps of shared pink images and meanings. The blur of the leaps makes common “girlie-girl” currency of (Barbie) sexuality and (Hello Kitty) cuteness in the United States in the 2000s.

In contemporary Japan, the shared *pinku* (pink) of sexuality and cuteness finds expression in the fetishization by adult men of young girls.<sup>19</sup> Known as rorikon, this practice leads to enjo kōsai and pornography that features not underage females but adult females whose personas enact their own infantilization (discussed further in chapter 1). In short, rorikon extends the possibility that Hello Kitty (the infantilized female) may become Barbie (the sexual object). The shared pink of sexuality and cuteness colors media as well, in particular through a major genre of soft pornography known in Japan as *pinku eiga* (pink films). Low-budget and independently produced, pink films resurrected a flagging movie industry when they began in the 1960s, and they continue as a major source and revenue from films in Japan. The attractions of pink films derive in part through an aesthetic built upon censorship laws, which officially prohibit all depictions of pubic hair and genitals.<sup>20</sup> The resulting dance of veiled eroticism utilizes strategic camera angles, well-placed objects, and extreme close-ups (e.g., armpit hair shot to look like pubic hair) as the centerpiece of the genre (Domenig 2002). In many

ways, it is this very dance of ambiguity—the seen but not seen, the innocent who is not so innocent—that infuses the voyeuristic sexiness of pink in Japan. As Allison comments, whether the veil is built into the visual expression, or layered in postproduction as overt marks of censorship (e.g., blurring, blackening, or masking with a digital mosaic), “desire is stimulated by simulating something that can never be entirely had” (1996:170). The question that I raise is, To what extent does Sanrio play with this desire and ambiguity in its marketing of the pink world of Hello Kitty? Is the cat (or its maker) really so innocent?

Ambiguity surrounding pink exists outside Japan, as well. With the rise of postfeminism in the United States and elsewhere, media expression of pink as a power hue is part of this newer trend. For example, Cynthia Good, the founding editor and CEO of the magazine *Pink*, writes in an article entitled “Pink Power,” “Throughout your life pink has been symbolic. . . . At times pink was confining, girlish, degrading, liberating or all of these. But today a growing number of women who are at, or heading for the top, are comfortable with their own pinkness—the color, the attitude, and the opportunity it represents. They are embracing their femininity along with their strength, their compassion and resilience, power and passion” (Good 2007). The magazine *Pink* thus calls upon women to assert themselves specifically as women, albeit in a man’s world. In a postfeminist era, frilliness and dominance may co-exist, resulting in the sly pink-as-black comment quoted earlier. Hello Kitty, presiding over a quintessentially pink domain, is part of this new “power” position, sharing the authority of black. However, within these contemporary contexts—including businesswomen trading consumer goods with tweens—what does pink-as-black mean? What kinds of positions or power does it enable? And at what price? Moreover, given the globalism of Hello Kitty, what elements are shared as part of transnational “girl culture”?

Within the climate of Euro-American postfeminism of the 1990s and 2000s, “girl culture”—or as it is more pointedly framed by marketers and media, “girl power”—rests in part upon the easy acceptance of individual practices, ignoring the group politics that have paved the way to create the “look” of empowerment without the ramifications of the feminist struggle (see chapter 5). Postfeminist “girl culture” turns away from politics and critiques of power and instead turns toward practices of the marketplace and boardroom to celebrate the “girl” or even the underage “girlie-girl” as a newly crowned consumer citizen, as a newly

configured feminine—not feminist—player. Hello Kitty and Japanese Cute-Cool nestle comfortably within this global pink milieu, whose shifting complexities concern us here.

## Scope and Limitations of the Book

Sanrio divides the company's and Hello Kitty's history into three phases: (1) 1974–86, Hello Kitty's birth and growth; (2) 1987–97, the Hello Kitty boom in Japan, especially in its appeal to the adult female market; and (3) 1998–present, Hello Kitty's global reach, becoming a “world idol” (Sanrio 2004:144–55; see appendix 1). This book focuses on the third phase of Hello Kitty's history, which coincides exactly with the period of my research.

Although I am concerned with “pink globalization,” it is difficult for one researcher to truly cover the globe. Thus, my purview attempts to be inclusive yet is necessarily uneven. For one, my focus is on Hello Kitty outside of Japan. For the most part, I do not include interviews with Hello Kitty fans in Japan, although they are numerous and fervent in their collecting practices. Many of their attitudes are shared by other Hello Kitty collectors globally. Instead, I glean information on Hello Kitty in Japan primarily through corporate interviews, textual analysis, and observations. I take this as a backdrop of *kawaii* culture from which Hello Kitty arose in the 1970s (discussed further in chapter 1).

Second, an important part of the discussion of pink globalization should rightfully include a comprehensive study of Asia and the popularity of Hello Kitty there. Asia is where Hello Kitty makes headlines with lines of customers waiting for hours to obtain the latest McDonald's Hello Kitty premium in cities such as Singapore. Asia is where Hello Kitty adorns maternity wards in order to calm anxious mothers-to-be in Hau Sheng Hospital in Taiwan in 2006. A hospital owner, Tsai Tsung-ji, explains, “When new moms feel anxious and lost about how to deal with their new babies, Hello Kitty can make them more relaxed and reduce their sense of discomfort while giving birth.”<sup>21</sup> Asia is also where an airline (Taiwan's EVA) decorates their airplanes and departure lounges completely with Hello Kitty. Asia (specifically China) is the site of the first Hello Kitty theme park outside of Japan. Partnering with the Chinese company Zhejiang Yinrun Leisure Development, Sanrio has scheduled a 2014 opening for its park, with an area of 95,000 square meters, in Anji County, Zhejiang Province. Asia is also where Hello

Kitty has been used as a form of punishment for Thai police. Reported widely from the Associated Press to BBC to CNN International to Kyodo News to Al-Jazeera, the story revolved around a new strategy devised by Bangkok police to discipline their own male patrol force (Mydans 2007). Any delinquent officer would be shamed into compliance by being forced to wear a bright pink Hello Kitty armband. Asia is also the site of a Cat Museum at North City Hall in Kuching (a town whose name means “cat”), Sarawak, Malaysia, which includes a colorful display of Sanrio’s cat.<sup>22</sup> Asia is where heads would not necessarily turn in surprise at the monthly shadow play held on the grounds of the Yogyakarta Palace to see the older distinguished male leader of the *gamelan* (Javanese orchestral ensemble) in elegant formal attire complete with headgear and sacred *keris* (dagger) tucked in his waist band, carrying a large Hello Kitty bag.<sup>23</sup> Asia is also the site of a three-year touring Hello Kitty musical begun in 2008 entitled *Hello Kitty’s Dream Light Fantasy*, which traveled from Beijing to Malaysia and Singapore, and eventually to the United States. The list goes on, continually updated and often covered in non-Asian foreign media, as part of the global face of contemporary Asia. Hello Kitty forms part of an intra-Asian pop culture flow, of which Chua Beng-Huat writes: “The result is the emergence of transnational communities of consumers variously constituted through their collaborative practices and modes of consumption, through a body of shared knowledge about the East Asian pop culture scene” (Chua 2008:88). Undeniably, a separate edited volume cries out to be written on Hello Kitty as a significant node for those Asian transnational communities of primarily, but not exclusively, young female consumers.<sup>24</sup> In short, Asia is the site of a complex flow of goods, images, and meanings surrounding Hello Kitty that deserves far more critical analysis than I can do justice here. I leave it to other scholars to fill this important gap.<sup>25</sup>

Third, a full account of pink globalization should also include Latin America, where Hello Kitty’s market and fandom are extremely strong. Perusing Sanrio’s Hello Kitty fan website one easily finds many fans from Latin American countries. In fact, Brazil has become one important center of Sanrio’s licensing division. Pink globalization should also include Europe and Australia as further significant markets, with flourishing stores and customers.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, although Kitty may travel easily and readily, an anthropologist’s grounded purview is much more limited. My coverage of the Kitty-infused globe, then, is admittedly uneven, with far greater

detail in those cities in which I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork of varying lengths outside Japan, such as Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, New York, and Toronto, and far less detail elsewhere, for which I have had to rely on secondary sources, Internet connections, and e-mail interviews (see the preface). Rather than attempt to cover the globe with equal depth and breadth, my discussion of pink globalization raises issues that may be generated in America but are not necessarily exclusive in their relevance.

## Overview of Chapters

The rest of this book analyzes the path, meanings, critiques, and subversions of pink globalization by way of Hello Kitty, from Japan to different arenas of the industrial world.

Chapter 1, “Kitty at Home: Kawaii Culture and the *Kyarakutā* Business,” locates Hello Kitty within kawaii culture in Japan, both historically and in the present. It discusses key concepts: *kawaii*, *shōjo* (young, unmarried female), and *kyarakutā guzzu* (character goods). The chapter also provides an overview of Sanrio history and the thirty-fifth anniversary celebration of Hello Kitty in 2009 and 2010.

Chapter 2, “Marketing Global Kitty: Strategies to Sell Friendship and ‘Happiness,’” analyzes some of Sanrio’s marketing techniques and strategies in the process of building a customer base in the United States. The chapter takes the model of “friendship” created by Tsuji, the president of Sanrio, and analyzes the strategies of extending pink globalization beyond Japan. The chapter also examines the place of Hello Kitty’s designer, Yamaguchi Yūko—now a celebrity herself—in projecting the image of Sanrio’s cat as artisanal product. The employees at Sanrio’s South San Francisco office project their own informal ethos of “happiness,” tying this to their cute products and marketing strategies.

Chapter 3, “Global Kitty: Here, There, Nearly Everywhere,” examines the consumption of Hello Kitty outside Japan, primarily in those parts of the West where I conducted fieldwork. The chapter interweaves extended fan interviews drawn from fieldwork with my analysis. My goal here is to show a range of adult female fans, from whites to Asian Americans to Latinas, as well as one heterosexual male. Gathering these disparate voices, I focus on consumer meanings in the fandom surrounding Hello Kitty, especially as these meanings etch issues of gender, class, nation-culture (“Japan”), and nostalgia.



Cute in Euro-America comes with its own set of critiques. These range from Internet flammers to teenagers who wish to distance themselves from childhood toys. Chapter 4, “Kitty Backlash: What’s Wrong with Cute?,” looks at how critiques of Hello Kitty point to engagement with specific sites of “public and personal danger.” What are the charges laid upon Hello Kitty that arouse critics’ ire? What are critics policing by these critiques? And how do the critiques become themselves fodder for anti-Kitty commercial products?

Chapter 5, “Kitty Subversions: Pink as the New Black,” examines the subversive uses to which Hello Kitty has been put by consumers. These include punk appropriations, gay and lesbian fandom, and pornographic citations. In these subversions, how does “Japan” or “Asia” become a reference point? How does Sanrio itself subsequently adopt some of these subversions in the interest of marketing to a newly expanded group of potential consumers? (And what is suggested by the fact that even subversion may be commodified?)

Chapter 6, “Playing with Kitty: Serious Art in Surprising Places,” discusses how, in the 1990s and 2000s, certain artists in Euro-America and elsewhere have constructed whole pieces around Hello Kitty, building on the cat’s very iconicity. This chapter details these forays into pink-infused aesthetics, including works linked or curated by Sanrio for the thirtieth and thirty-fifth anniversaries of Hello Kitty, as well as those created independently.

Chapter 7, “Japan’s Cute-Cool as Global Wink,” reflects on Joseph Nye’s soft power and the place of Hello Kitty-led pink globalization within it. How has Hello Kitty become a spectral presence shaping Japan’s global reach? I offer an assessment of Japan’s “gross national cool” moment and its inevitable passing from the global spotlight. Hello Kitty and Cute-Cool provide a “Superflat” veneer of play that glosses daily life. That play culminates in the wink she provides that is simultaneously corporate and individual, national and subcultural, mainstream and subversive, global and “Japan.”