

Preface and Acknowledgments

Grabbing the Cat by Its Tail, or How the Cat Grabbed Me

My interest in Hello Kitty as a research topic began in 1998, when I introduced the subject as part of a course I began teaching in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i on Japanese popular culture. I had grown up in Hawai'i, and Hello Kitty was part of everyday commercial fare from Japan. After giving my first lecture on the subject, I jokingly mentioned to Elaine, the department secretary who had also grown up in Hawai'i in the 1950s and 1960s, what I had discussed in class. To my surprise, she showed me her computer where she had bookmarked Sanrio's website. Although Elaine may not have literally grown up with Hello Kitty, she was my first Hello Kitty fan! Poring over the website, I was agog at the richness and complexity of the Sanrio world—a pink realm of fictitious characters, relationships, and of course goods, but also a world in which a consumer might live in interaction with a corporation and its products. I began to pay closer attention. Elaine had in fact provided me with my first textual (website) and ethnographic (fandom) components that have proven to be the basic blocks of what has become *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*. This was the start of a long, rich journey that began in the classroom, delved into research, and traversed different terrains many times over. During well over a decade of thinking, talking, and writing about Hello Kitty, I have taken a bit of ownership of the cat and its many, many lives—inasmuch as I fear that the cat has taken ownership of me. Like many anthropologists, I have inhabited the village of this subject matter over the *longue durée*, observing changing circumstances and whimsies of popularity, folding these into interpretive analyses.

In fact, this research had to compete with several other projects, from Japanese American beauty queens, delicatessens, and flight attendants,

to Japanese divas, emoticons, and television shows (e.g., Katsuno and Yano 2007; Yano 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2011). Hello Kitty became a research hobby: whenever I traveled to another city, I searched out Sanrio stores and fans.¹ Whenever I gave a talk on Hello Kitty, I asked audience members to join me and send me their “Kitty sightings”; over the course of several years, many did—far too many for me to include here. But the deluge of sightings gave me a greater and richer sense of the phenomenon than I could have surmised on my own. The long and sporadic *durée* provided me with different opportunities and insights of engagement. Every year when I taught the course on Japanese popular culture, I surveyed students about their knowledge of Hello Kitty. In some semesters I had students interview people about Hello Kitty. In other semesters I interviewed Japanese students about the concept of *kawaii* (cute). I began conducting interviews at Sanrio itself in 2002, when I traveled to South San Francisco and interviewed several employees (at the time, this was where the main branch office in charge of company operations in the Americas was located),² and to Tokyo to interview representatives at Sanrio corporate headquarters. I returned to both locations and conducted further interviews in several subsequent years. Because of the structure of the organization—which had a more formal vertical structure in its Japan headquarters than in branch offices—I had relatively greater freedom in the South San Francisco office to wander through hallways, meet a wide variety of employees, and get to know people. Over the course of my twelve years of research, some of the key personnel changed, particularly the spokespersons and marketing directors at both locations (Doug Parkes in Tokyo, Bill Hensley in South San Francisco), who were my primary contacts. I also conducted e-mail and phone interviews with fans, critics, and artists. In all, my methods include store observations, interviews (face-to-face, e-mail, phone), Internet, archival research, and textual analysis of company publications from 1998 through 2010.³ I recorded and had transcribed thirty-one formal interviews, but engaged in countless more informal conversations from which I jotted down field notes. The formal interviews took place at company headquarters in South San Francisco and Tokyo, as well as with other Sanrio employees and consumers in Honolulu, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

Conducting research over such a long period of time has had its pluses and minuses. With this kind of time depth, I have been able to follow Hello Kitty through ups and downs, and especially through a rela-

tively new wave of interest spawned by Japan's "cool" moment identified in 2002. I see great benefit in the fact that my research began in the incipient stages of Japan's "moment," because I take the Cool Japan frame as only one historical part of the story. The downside of such time depth is the sheer amount of material and its management. This is a subject with which I have lived (and on which I have given many public presentations) for the better part of my career as an anthropologist. It is time to get this cat off my back, and the best way I know to do it is to provide a comprehensive discussion in the form of a book such as this. Consider this publication my own personal form of (temporary) closure upon a subject that seems never ending.

A word about the format of the book: I feel strongly that Hello Kitty lives most richly in the complex variety of voices that give her meaning, from those working within Sanrio to far-flung consumers and critics. I have thus chosen to include excerpts from transcribed interviews, which I've presented in conversational form. (Note that the names of Japanese speakers and figures throughout the chapters and references follow the Japanese format of family name, followed by personal name. Names of Japanese Americans appear in the English format of personal name, followed by family name.) My goal is to showcase the speakers as persons, as well as their thoughts, embedded within the interaction that generated the words. I identify Sanrio employees and entrepreneurs—many of whom started out as avid consumers—by name and position. However, I have chosen to keep the names of the fans anonymous, identified only by pseudonymous initials, even if most fans gave me permission to use their names. In part, some of these interviews were conducted so long ago that I was not sure how they would feel now about such an intimate outpouring in print. I was also not sure that I could contact all of them to re-ask their permission. But the primary reason was to ensure that the story I was telling was a more generalized one, told through the specifics of individual lives, but retaining a certain amount of their privacy. Granted, I value these interviewees for their highly personal stories; however, I did not want their stories to be so tied to a specific name that they could not mesh into the woven texture of the book's overall narrative. I did not necessarily select the interviewees whom I quote at length as representative of all fans or even specific segments of fans. I selected them because of the inherent interest in and variety of their stories. They may represent a cast of outliers—or not—but I felt compelled to showcase the breadth and depth of their

responses to my questions about Hello Kitty. In many cases, their words knocked me off my feet.

As this book traces not only the myriad permutations of Hello Kitty in form, shape, place, and identities globally, but also the fan productions of meaning surrounding these, a mere anthropologist can only raise a glass of Hello Kitty wine in delirious resignation, waiting for the next newest feline thing.⁴ Undoubtedly, I will be astonished.

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A long-standing project such as this incurs many debts along the way. First and foremost, I would like to thank all those whom I interviewed, especially the staff at the Tokyo and South San Francisco offices of Sanrio. Those at Sanrio who were particularly helpful to me were Kazuo Tohmatsu and Doug Parkes in Tokyo, and Bill Hensley, Dave Marchi, Dan Peters, and Becky Hui in South San Francisco. I am also very grateful to interviewees who have taken interest in following my work and asking about its progress (a reasonable question, especially after several years' interlude): Don Sizelove, Adeline Tafolla, Frank Mauz, and many others. Second, I thank colleagues at home and in far-flung places whose queries, comments, and Kitty sightings shaped this work along the way, including (alphabetically) Neal Akatsuka, Ted Bestor, Keith Brown, Anne Cheng, Nancy Cooper, Pensri Ho, Todd Holden, Yoshikuni Igarashi, Keiko Ikeda, Koichi Iwabuchi, Hirofumi Katsuno, Bill Kelly, Aya Kimura, Mark McLelland, Laura Miller, Mara Miller, Jane Moulin, Susan Napier, Carolyn Stevens, Joe Tobin, Bill Tsutsui, Corky White, Gavin Whitelaw, and Jun Yoo. I have been invited to give talks on Hello Kitty at numerous venues, and I am grateful for each opportunity to establish a broad network of "Kitty sighters" and ongoing feedback. These include International House of Japan, University of Hawai'i, University of Texas at Austin, Princeton University, Yale University, Brown University, University of Wollongong, University of Kansas, University of London, Waseda University, University of Oregon, Earlham College, DePauw University, University of Memphis, Vanderbilt University, Doshisha University, and Japan Society of New York. Third, many thanks to those who helped transcribe my interviews over the years: Paul Christensen, Takashi Miura, Jaida Samudra, Shawn Smith, and Rachel Spitler. Thanks to the University of Hawai'i Shidler School of Business for a CIBER research grant that supported the late stages of this research. Thanks as well to Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press

and his expert staff, as well as two smart, critical reviewers of the manuscript. This is a better work for their gentle proddings.

I am entirely grateful to the following who gave me permission to use the visual images I include in this book (listed alphabetically): Leika Akiyama, Leslie Holt, Renee Keanu, Sarah Kobayashi, Scott McKie, Mariko Passion, Amy Podmore (and deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum), Jaime Scholnick, Kiki Sonnen, Denise Uyehara, and Marika Wilson. Special thanks to the photographer Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri who gave me permission to use the spectacular Lady Gaga Hello Kitty image. I also thank the following for permission to include substantially revised versions of previously published chapters and articles: “Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute,” in Todd Holden and Tim Scrase, eds., *Medi@sia: Global Media/tion in and out of Context* (Routledge, 2006); “Monsterring the Japanese Cute: Pink Globalization and Its Critics Abroad,” in William Tsutsui and Michiko Ito, eds., *In Godzilla’s Footsteps* (Palgrave, 2006); “Kitty Litter: Japanese Cute at Home and Abroad,” in Jeffrey Goldstein, David Buckingham, and Gilles Brougere, eds., *Toys, Games, and Media* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004); “Reach Out and Touch Someone: Thinking through Sanrio’s Social Communication Empire,” *Japanese Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2010); “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2009); and “Pink Globalization: Rethinking Japan’s Cute/Cool Trek across the Pacific,” *Bulletin of International House of Japan* (2010).

As always, my greatest thanks go to my family—Scott, Eli, Marika, and my parents—who have helped me live with this cat, through thick and thin. Scott helped organize the boxes and boxes of materials in my messy home office, read drafts of all chapters, and in the end helped me organize the artwork and permissions. Eli shared some of his enthusiasm for a Sanrio anniversary exhibit in Los Angeles in 2010. Marika took photos, listened to my public talks, forwarded me Internet sightings, and acted as a smart sounding board for my Kitty musings. She has lived and breathed this project as part of her growing intellectual habitus.

It takes a village, indeed, to begin to grasp such a multisited, multivalent global phenomenon. The names I list here are only part of the intellectual and social community with which I have tried to make sense of Sanrio’s mouthless cat. For many people in my network, I have been the go-to person for Hello Kitty news and thus the recipient of the lat-

est tidbits in an already Kitty-infused world. While I am ultimately responsible for the words on these pages, the thoughts they circumscribe reflect an ongoing, collaborative conversation around the village well (or office cooler), fueled by bits of gossip, gasps of astonishment, and plenty of conspiratorial giggles. The thought of finishing this book leaves me just a bit panicky at the prospect of going Kitty-less, cold turkey, after more than a decade of her research presence. The question remains to be seen, can I ever really cancel my “Hello Kitty” Google alert?