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The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth

Anne Allison

Abstract

Japanese youth goods have become globally popular over the past 15 years. Referred to as 'cool', their contribution to the national economy has been much hyped under the catchword Japan's 'GNC' (gross national cool). While this new national brand is indebted to youth – youth are the intended consumers for such products and sometimes the creators – young Japanese today are also chastised for not working hard, failing at school and work, and being insufficiently productive or reproductive. Using the concept of immaterial labor, the article argues that such 'J-cool' products as Pokémon are both based on, and generative of, a type of socio-power also seen in the very behaviors of youth – flexible sociality, instantaneous communication, information juggling – that are so roundly condemned in public discourse. The article examines the contradictions between these two different ways of assessing and calibrating the value of youth today. It also looks at the emergence of youth activism around the very precariousness, for them, of socio-economic conditions of flexibility.

Key words

immaterial labor ■ J-cool ■ precariat ■ youth activism ■ youth culture

THE STORY of 'J-cool' – the global trade and cachet of Japanese youth goods – has been much trumpeted by the press and official leaders in early 21st century Japan. Spurred by an American journalist's description of 'Japan's GNC' (gross national cool) in 2002, the lexicon of 'cool', 'Japanese cool', 'J-cool' and 'GNC' quickly caught on to reference how successfully Japanese playgoods are selling abroad (McGray, 2002). Signaled here is a recognition that youth sells; that it sells to sell to youth; and that selling a particular iteration of youth sells something for Japan and

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something of Japan in all those global markets currently flooded with Japanese kids' goods. That is, in the new buzz around Japanese cool, interest is paid both to the capital generated by the youth market and to capitalizing on that market to extend the attraction Japanese youth goods have for global consumers.¹

The rise of J-cool – both in the marketplace and the national imaginary – represents a significant shift in Japan. Coming in the wake of the bursting of the bubble economy in 1991, the growth of Japanese play industries has been one of the few success stories in an era of economic recession. Yielding much-needed capital, both real and symbolic, J-cool refers, somewhat imprecisely, to everything from Japanese video games and vinyl toys to the superflat aesthetics of Murakami Takashi² and Harajuku fashion. As such fads and products circulate overseas, they get reported on, back home, as a sign of Japan's global reputation for its distinctive brand of youth-oriented cultural goods. Up until the 1990s, however, Japan was better known for its economic prowess in the production of high-quality consumer electronics by companies like Sony and Toyota. Rebuilding itself as an industrial producer of high-tech manufacturing after its failures at militarism in the Second World War, Japan succeeded by becoming a world economic power by the 1970s. The state engineered this growth by erecting a social economy around the three pillars of school, family and corporation. Under this 'enterprise society' (Yoda, 2006), Japanese subjects were disciplined to be hard workers iconically figured in not the youth who are cool but the *sararīman* (white-collar worker) who toils loyally for company and family.

The edifice of the enterprise society which fed not only Japan's economy as an industrial producer – and global power – but also the ranks of Japan's middle class, with secure jobs, steady incomes and high-priced consumer lifestyles, has come unraveled in post-bubble Japan. As is true everywhere around the world today, a more flexible (*ryūdōka*) economy is emerging: one based ever more on service rather than manufacturing, and on the irregular pulsations of a market driven by information, communication and speculation. Youth assume a critical position, I argue, in this shift of production away from material things to the immateriality of information, communication and affect. On the one hand, the flexibilization of the economy renders youth socio-economically precarious. In a country where regular employment (*seikikoyō*) has been both the ideal and norm for the adult worker – and particularly the adult male as provider of household – today one-third of all workers, but half of all young workers between the ages of 15 and 24, are irregularly employed (*hiseikikoyō*) (Yuasa, 2008a). Without steady employment, fewer youth are marrying, having children or leaving parental homes. Moving from job to job and getting stuck in time without the means to become 'adults', youth are futureless – a state they also get blamed for. On the other hand, an interminable childishness of flexible attachments, frenetic mobility and fictional role-playing is at the very heart of J-cool. Here, though, what could be called the cultural logic of Japan's post-industrial economy today is also productive of capital – and

therefore of national value. As in Hello Kitty, a cute cat that lacks a mouth, J-cool plays in the realm of virtuality – at once fantastic, timeless and addictively fun. So, when such a construct of youth sells commodities, it is claimed as ‘gross national cool’. But when real youth fail to get steady jobs or reproduce, as did their parents, they are castigated for not assuring Japan’s future – what gets rendered as a crisis in reproduction.

I adopt here the concept of immaterial labor to examine the shift in Japan’s economy today, the role assumed by J-cool, and the position of youth in both. As laid out by such scholars as Michael Hardt (2008), Antonio Negri (Hardt and Negri, 2004), and Maurizio Lazzarato (2007, 2008), capitalism today is transitioning away from the production of material goods to the immateriality of information, communication and affect. While the sheer numbers of workers engaged in material production such as agriculture or steel may still dominate, it is the immaterial labor – of the mass media, advertising, service providers, the Internet – that is hegemonic in shaping the logic, and future, of capitalism in the 21st century. Immaterial labor has two principal forms: (1) labor that is primarily intellectual or computational, involving symbols, ideas and codes, and (2) affective labor that engages affects such as well-being, excitement and ease. In both cases, communication is involved – communicating information and communicating affect – which is utilized in the process of production but also produced itself as an end product. In all the above, youth – given their pliability with technology, play and communicative goods (Allison and Grossberg, 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Cole and Durham, 2008; Weiss, 2009), and their vulnerability in an economy where flexibilization is restructuring time and futurity (Grossberg, 2005) – assume a very special position in the socio-economic shifts to immateriality today.

Of the two forms of immaterial labor, I concentrate on affective labor. As processes involving human interaction, affects of well-being, and even ‘a sense of connectedness or community’ (Hardt, 2008: 6), affective labor has always been a part of capitalist production. But what is different today is that affective labor has become not only directly productive of capital but at the very ‘pinnacle of the hierarchy of laboring forms’ (2008: 1). J-cool epitomizes this development. It works, as I will argue, at the level of affective labor, creating affects of well-being, excitement and attachment that are directly productive of capital. But, despite the acclaim J-cool gains for its contribution to the national economy (‘GNC’), the shift to immaterial labor it embraces is also accompanied by a crisis in reproduction (both biological and social). There is much public concern, even moral panic, surrounding the latter these days. But while young people themselves tend to be blamed for current reproductive failures (declines in birthrate, marriage, pension funds, regular employment), it is the socio-economic shifts towards immateriality that are more correctly the cause. This link – between the immaterialization of the economy and a crisis of reproduction – is overlooked in the GNC-hype in Japan. Pointing it out is one of the aims of this article.

But I also have a second objective: to consider the subversive potential of affective labor. Whereas affective labor has become not only directly productive of capital these days but (increasingly) hegemonic, it also – when channeled in a way so as *not* to (re)produce capital – bears the potential for anti-capitalist subversion. By operating in the domain of affects, passions and community, affective labor is the stuff of life – as it were. This is what Foucault calls biopower – how power works through the management of the social body at the level of population or – as I would push this further – in the ways sociality itself gets configured. While biopower works from above, we could also consider how affective labor, as biopower, works from below by considering ‘not so much the resistance of what might be called “affectively necessary labor”’ (citing Spivak, 1988) but ‘rather the potential of necessary affective labor’ (Hardt, 2008: 9).

The rest of the article is organized into three sections. In the first, I examine the case of one specific product – and global hit – as an example of J-cool. This is Pokémon, a virtual playscape of endless goods, perpetual travel and flexible connectedness whose brand of youth play, in being productive of capital and national value, became a brand of and for Japan itself (= GNC). Laying out its logic of play in terms of the affects it engenders, which embed a particular form of (immaterial) capitalism, I move, in the second section, to a discussion of the failures of Pokémon/GNC/immaterial labor to effectively reproduce. Here, I use reproduction not in the sense of whether the industry can reproduce, but rather, as the social crisis confronting the nation – and many of its citizens – of (not) being able to (biologically/socially) reproduce and even struggling to (physically/psychically) survive. In the last section, I look at the emergence of new forms of youth-initiated activism in Japan, targeting the precarious labor conditions and material/psychic/social instability of life for young Japanese in the 21st century. Calling this affective activism for the ways in which affect is centrally and multiply engaged in this work, I compare it with the affective labor involved in J-cool. Like Pokémon, a sense of ease, connectiveness and community is directly fostered here. But, unlike Pokémon – where these affects operate as a brand of coolness that serves the interests of capital (and the nation as well) – affective activism attempts to care for the wounds youth have incurred in a capitalist society where reserves of care have dried up. Questioning whether this makes for an affective labor that exerts ‘biopower from below’, I consider its subversive potential and also potential problems.

National Toy and Nation as Toy

An iconic example of GNC and the press it has garnered in Japan is Pokémon – what some have called the global kids’ trend of the 1990s.³ A property that started out small in 1996 – a Game Boy game designed for domestic consumers – Pokémon soon expanded into a media-mix empire – of trading cards, television cartoon, movie series, video games, tie-in merchandise. By 1998, it was selling around the world, including the United

States, where it generated a huge craze that the American press labeled ‘pokemania’. In the midst of a bruising recession, the success of Pokémon abroad was deemed a sign of Japan’s new *bunka pawā* (cultural power) at home. As one reporter expressed it, it made him proud to see Pokémon toys sell in the US, which he compared to the rebounding of national pride when Japanese consumer goods became global brand names after the war (Kondō, 1999: 4).

But, as a currency of cultural power, Pokémon would seem quite different from that of a Sony radio or Toyota automobile. For, lest we should forget, Pokémon is a toy: a toy that not only caters more to the child(ish) consumer than the adult, but is sold less as a material product than the production of a virtual, fantastic and immaterial world. Pokémon plays in the terrain of coolness, where its currency is built on an affect of ‘feeling good’, in the words of an official of the Foreign Ministry speaking at a conference on J-cool held in Tokyo. Putting two stuffed toys in front of him during his presentation – Kitty-chan and (Pokémon’s) Pikachu – the man pointed at them when summing up his position, ‘this is Japan’s future’. Despite the incongruity of the gesture – made by a sober government official dressed in business suit – the reference to national futures was serious. For, as he explained further, such traditional arts as *bonsai* and *ikebana* are passé with the current generation, and when tourists come to Tokyo these days, they flock to Shibuya⁴ rather than a tea ceremony or temple. But, as was the implication of his statement, it is not only cultural fashions that have changed, so has the grounding of the very nation. From Japan Inc. to J-cool – a restructuring of the national economy towards the immateriality of affect.

Embedded in the calculus surrounding J-cool is adherence to the notion of soft power. As formulated by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than coercion or money. By projecting images of one’s own culture/nation that inspire the dreams and desires of others, soft power builds – and is built on – national prestige that travels globally.

As has been generally agreed, only the United States has had the soft power – in the strength of its cultural industries; the appeal of a culture that has translated around the world as rich, powerful, and exciting; and the back-up of hard power – to dominate the global imagination through the 20th century. But, as Iwabuchi Kōichi (2002) and others have convincingly argued, global power is shifting today, becoming decentered and recentered by new cultural producers such as Japan. Soft power is the promise of J-cool in the eyes of increasingly many in Japan – including the government official mentioned above. The hope – and premise – is that as Japanese products like Pokémon circulate the globe, they do so by inspiring desires in global consumers for something Japanese.

But are such national/nationalist effects actually curried by J-cool working as soft power? In the case of Pokémon, the property certainly traveled widely around the world. By 2000 the games were selling in 70

countries, the cartoon was being broadcast in 51 countries, the movies were playing in 33 countries and the trading cards had been translated into 11 languages (Hatakeyama and Kubo, 2000). Praised as the singular success story in Japanese business during the recessionary times of the post-bubble, Pokémon had garnered US \$15 billion in global sales by 2003. Its prominence in a marketplace where the characters that have dominated global popularity have come primarily from the United States made Japan seem on the path towards becoming, as some called it, a ‘character empire’ (*Kyarakutā okoku no michi*, 1998: 91). Iconic of Japan’s emergence as a new character (producer) was ANA’s (All Nippon Airlines) appropriation of the Pokémon brand to sell its own service – travel to and around Japan. By painting carriers with huge Pokémon characters and converting its in-flight service into a Pokémon theme park, a plane was transformed into a giant toy and Japan a ‘fun’ country for travel.

The ability to generate affection in consumers is what distinguishes a brand – that exists more in people’s minds – from a product – that resides more as a material thing. The work of spinning stories and fantasies around products is the immaterial labor of advertising which, if effective, turns products into brands, brands into intimate friends and consumers into loyal fans (Holt, 2004; Klein, 2000). The premise of J-cool as soft power is that its operation is similar: turning Japan into a brand that makes friends and fans out of domestic/global consumers. But there is danger – as I will argue – in rendering a nation into a brand and in carving that brand so intimately into – and out of – (children’s) affective play. What is a form of biopower – the life of youth at play, in their imaginations and through the intimacies they form with others – becomes biocapital – making this productive of capital (and, as soft power, productive of national interests). Ironically, the intentions of the designer of the original Pokémon Game Boy game were quite the opposite of this.

Born in 1962 in a suburb of Tokyo not yet overrun by business, Tajiri Satoshi was an avid bug collector as a child. Roaming in the fields next to his home, he collected, catalogued and exchanged bugs in what was both play and sociality with friends. Later, when a video arcade opened, he switched his affinities to *Space Invaders*. But, upon graduating from high school, Tajiri started his own game company with the idea of creating a game that would merge these two worlds: a virtualized version of bug collecting for kids who no longer had the space of nature – or the time for buddies – as a play option. Inspired by a technological innovation – the *tsūshin kēburu* (communication cable) that allowed two Game Boys to hook up – Tajiri used this to foster information-sharing between two parties rather than the competitive matches the cable – and gaming in general – prioritized. Eventually financed by Nintendo, Tajiri designed Pokémon’s software to be challenging yet fun, and accessible to even young children. Tajiri also aimed to make Pokémon a game that would open children up to the world – of nature, imagination and other kids – outside themselves. Disturbed by an increased tendency towards atomism, not only in gaming – where increased

complexity tends to enclose players in a solitary fixation – but also in life itself – where children, overly-regimented by school, study and extra-curricular activities, spend more time alone – Tajiri crafted the virtual universe of his game to be a corrective of sorts to the atomizing and competitive environment for youth of post-industrial Japan (Allison, 2006; Hiratsuka, 1997; Nakazawa, 1997).

Believing that life in the 1990s came with a loss to humanity, Tajiri aimed to ‘tickle memories of the past’ (Hiratsuka, 1997: 168) to recreate something of pre-industrial Japan in the post-post-industrialized landscape of virtual gaming. Information was his medium: generating data on a screen that – once organized, assembled, manipulated and recombined – becomes animated like life itself, mimicking the mysteries of nature. Such ‘data-fied’ life materializes on the screen as the pocket monsters (= pokémon) which, cutely odd and a weird conglomeration of powers and parts, inhabit the virtual game zones waiting to be discovered, collected and evolved. As the first game alone has 151 monsters and each subsequent game adds ever more, this play of monster acquisition – spreading into ever more commodities to acquire – goes endlessly on. But, meanwhile, Pokémon engenders an imaginative universe with rich possibilities for what Tajiri considered to be the most important aspect of the entire game – its ‘gorgeous implications for communication’ (Hamamura, 1997: 138). Given the surfeit of information that needs to be mastered and manipulated in order to progress in the game, players are encouraged to trade data with one another, thereby opening a channel for human friendship alongside that of virtual intimacies of various sorts.

Such a playscape that not only relies upon but continually generates communication of information, affect and sociality is emblematic of immaterial labor. As laid out by Lazzarato (2008), immaterial labor produces, first and foremost, a social relationship based on a collective cooperation of sharing, trading and organizing information – what he also calls communication. Just as consumption became integrated into the cycle of production under Fordism, communication becomes integral to – and constitutive of – production under post-Fordism. And consumption – as in the case of Pokémon – no longer involves the destruction of a product but the continual creation, innovation and expansion of information. Information is key here (under what is also termed informational capitalism) and is as productive of capital as it is of sociality; indeed the two get confused and entwined. In what he calls a working hypothesis, Lazzarato argues that the cycle of immaterial labor takes ‘as its starting point’ (2008: 5) a social labor power that is independent – able to organize its own relations of work and to business entities. This labor power is not merely functional to and for the new stage of immaterial capitalism today. Rather, it represents new ‘anthropological realities’ (2008: 6) in work – and social life – itself: where the waged laborer, disciplined and subjugated by a contract, is being replaced by a ‘kind of intellectual worker who can get inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks changeable in time and space’

(2008: 6). A ‘polymorphous, self-employed autonomous work’ (2008: 6) is emerging as dominant in a capitalism of immaterial labor.

Work blurs into – and emerges from – the ways in which information is passed, communication conducted and play created via such techno channels as cell phones, iPods, and Game Boys. And what can be said of work is true of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as well; entities continually break apart, recombine and morph along new lines. This characterizes the logic of Pokémon as well: its logic of play, the social and affective world it constructs, and its productivity for capital. But what is at once a perpetually proliferating network of data/monsters/connections/capital also breeds – and is bred by – a self-referentiality that lends itself to narcissism and privatization. Once one enters this world, it is addictive – and addictively wired to one’s own sense of ease, acquiring more pokémon, gathering more data that will generate ever more pokémon for, ultimately, oneself. In this game whose objective is getting (*getto suru* in Japanese, which became ‘gotta catch ‘em all’ in the US ad campaign), the getting – and pursuit of getting – goes on and on. Attachments are flexible here – a pokémon is at once an object of affection, a tool of instrumentality, a property with value, a bit of information. But the desires driving this return to, and emanate from, the self; the child targeted to ride an ANA poké-jet is told she will be boarding not a plane but a toy specially equipped – for *her* – with personal ‘friends’.

In fuzzy consumerism or soft capitalism the player, as consumer, is also producer – not merely of stuff but of an entire social world. This is a world that is not only hard to leave once one has entered it, but also creates webs of attachments that are both self-serving and in the service of capital.⁵ To the degree this is true, the premise of soft power – as it has been tied recently to J-cool – is based on flawed logic. For when a child abroad – in Seoul or New York City – consumes a property like Pokémon, the desire aroused is less for Japan as it exists out there, as it were, as it is for a virtual world that refers back to itself. The global popularity of a Kitty-chan or Pikachu projects attractive images of Japan based more on its particular brand of virtual playmaking than on its policies, culture, or lifestyle. As I learned from my own ethnographic research with fans of Pokémon in the United States, while the popularity of the product generated positive associations with Japan, few expressed deep understanding or attraction for the country itself. Rather, the coolness of J-cool simply returned to coolness itself. In the words of one child: ‘Japan is cool because it produces cool toys for American kids’ (Allison, 2006). Japan as a toy itself.

Reproductive Failures and Prosthetic Socialities

Branding Japan on the basis of J-cool is an indulgence in misplaced concreteness. But, for all the silliness surrounding Japan’s cool buzz – driven often by nationalist yearnings (to become an ‘empire’, albeit of character goods) – there are far graver issues involved when it comes to embranding Japanese youth as the immaterial laborers of the future. For, when Kitty-chan and Pikachu are identified as embodying Japan’s futurity,

the logic of their play – and of socializing players into a world increasingly hegemonized by immaterial labor – has serious consequences. One of these is a failure to reproduce, not only in the biological sense of population – a crisis of which, with a declining birthrate⁶ and a rapidly aging population, Japan is widely seen as facing today – but in the sense of social reproduction as well – in what is often decried as the collapse of social institutions like the family, workplace and even sociality itself.

In the same period it has birthed and raised J-cool as a successful export – the early 1990s to the present – Japan has been beset by a nagging recession, national malaise and needling sense of futurelessness. In these years, since the bubble economy burst in 1991 triggering lay-offs, corporate restructuring, market downturn, job insecurity, rise in suicides, upswing in homelessness and a surge – across the board – in personal stress, public attention has been paid, unsurprisingly, to the issue of productivity. And, linked to this, scrutiny has been given to youth who, once the promise of Japanese modernity, have been held up as a source – or at least a sign – of all its postmodern problems. Decried for their very unproductive stance towards jobs, labor and the future, youth are chided for such behaviors as migratory work patterns (*freta*) and the propensity towards leisure and fantasy indulgences (*otaku*).

While this generation has faced a scarcity of jobs in what has been called the lost decade (*ushinawareta jūnen*), it has also been upbraided for its apparent unproductivity: its retreat from marriage and childbirth, its tendency to engage in part-time jobs rather than careers, and its engagement with a whole series of lifestyle behaviors from social withdrawal (*hikikomori*) to selling sexuality (*enjo kōsai*), said to typify the hedonistic, selfish and soft stance they indulge. As their lives and outlooks are so often portrayed in public discourse, youth today are simply too free-floating. They float from job to job in a pattern called *freta*,⁷ they lack skills or employment altogether in a pattern called NEET (not in education, employment, or training),⁸ they marry later or not at all, which means they have children late or never,⁹ and they over-spend time and money on pleasurable things such as brand name goods and the Internet.

Characteristic of this position – criticizing unproductive Japanese youth – is Uchida Tatsuru's 2007 book *Karyū shikō: manabanai kodomotachi hatarakanai wakamonotachi* (The Orientation to Go Downstream: Children Who Don't Study, Young People Who Don't Work). As is so common in the current panic over Japanese youth, Uchida evaluates the present generation according to the standards of the pre-bubble past. Accordingly, his thesis is that a new 'breed' of Japanese is coming of age today that is soft, rather than hard, in its commitments to social institutions of the past – school, family, work. Borrowing here the much-cited remark of Tokyo University Professor of Education Satō Manabu about the 'flight' from education of Japanese youth, Uchida cites statistics of how Japanese students have fallen in global rankings, losing their performative edge and even dropping in terms of the number of hours they commit to homework

(Uchida, 2007: 11–14). But other evidence shows that, given the shifts in the economic market and the precariousness of jobs even for those with academic pedigrees, youth are also striking out, sometimes quite effectively, in other directions. The fields of creative design – fashion, gaming, *manga*, animation – are booming (Condry, 2009) and lure youth with such success stories as that of Tajiri Satoshi, who achieved his Pokémon hit with only a high school degree. And, across the board, signs point to a youth population that has become more agnostic and diverse in their attitudes towards education – taking time off, going in and out of various schools, doing correspondence courses or vocational studies – rather than simply retreating from it altogether (Slater, 2009).

But if flexibilization has supplanted more steady – and linear – academic careers, the same can be said of work patterns. One of the catchwords of present times in Japan is *freeta* – those workers, mainly young people, who are employed in non-permanent jobs such as convenience stores. A hybrid of two foreign words – ‘free’ from English and ‘*arbeiter*’ for ‘worker’ from German – *freeta* came originally from a campaign slogan by the Recruit employment agency in 1989. Launching this concept in the flush period of the bubble economy, Recruit intended it to be an attractive alternative to what had hitherto been the normative ideal – lifetime employment in middle- to large-sized corporations. *Freeta* connoted freedom: to freely choose – and change – jobs, and to be freed of a permanent obligation to company and therefore freed up for other personal interests. The concept caught on and more and more young people joined the ranks of a free-floating workforce, abandoning the career paths of the postwar *sararīman* generation (Genda, 2005; Slater, 2009).

With the collapse of the bubble economy in 1991, however, what had started out as a lifestyle choice became economic fiat. As more and more companies downsized, laid off workers, reorganized or closed altogether, few were able to sustain the postwar corporate policies of lifetime employment and seniority (by which salaries and status go up over time). Where enterprises – and the government – put their priority was on older employees, assisting them – and protecting their jobs – in the anxiety of the post-bubble downturn. Less attention was paid to young people just entering the workforce and, for many in this ‘lost generation’, permanent jobs were never secured. Today, almost half of all young workers are irregularly employed (*hisekikoyō*). This means they lack the status, job security and progressive pay raises of a permanent or regular employee (*seishaiin*).

Freeta are also aging. Or, more precisely, an increasing number of people who entered the ranks of *freeta* when 18 or 19 are still there 15 or 20 years later. It is one thing to be a teenager working at a 7–11 and quite another to be doing so at age 30. And, for such irregular workers, the ability to become socially, personally or economically independent – and move from youth to adulthood – is held in abeyance. Numerous studies with females report that few say they would marry a *freeta*. To have a marriage and family – what 90 percent of young people report they desire – requires

job security and sufficient salary, according to boys as well (Yamada, 2002). The insecurity of employment for young people is a major factor in what has become a delay and decrease in both marriage and childbirth in Japan. Further, those who remain single are more likely than not to stay living with their parents (according to one report, 60% of unmarried males between the ages of 20 and 34 and 80% of females live at home) (Yamada, 2002).

The sociologist Yamada Masahiro (1999) has called this phenomenon the ‘parasite single’, of whom he is unabashedly critical. In his portrayal, the average stay-at-homer is an able-bodied youth (but as old as 30 or 40) living off Dad’s salary and mom’s cooking while spending all the disposable income s/he makes on designer clothes, boutique restaurants and overseas travel. Certainly there are young people who fit this profile. But for others – the youth who do not work or attend school (NEETs), or who live in a state of social withdrawal (*hikikomori*, of whom there are reportedly 1.5 million these days) – the situation is at once more complex and more precarious.¹⁰ Indeed, it is the state of such youth – whose numbers are rising – that is most clearly and problematically the symptom of Japan’s crisis of reproduction today. For, rather than free-floating, these are youth who can’t float at all. Burrowed – for the most part – in the homes they grew up in, such youth rarely work, attend school or leave the house at all. And many, quite apart from their failure to work or reproduce, are unable even to subsist on their own.¹¹

The cases of actual *hikikomori* are far more diverse and complicated than the simplistic portrait drawn of them in the press, and here. But it is the condition stripped bare – and barren youth – that captures the national imagination as a specter of the social stasis and futurelessness plaguing the country. The inverse of the *sararīman* of Japan Inc. who, so tied to his company, his job and his role of breadwinner, was barely home, the *hikikomori* is a sedentary homebody who, retreating into himself, rarely ventures outside at all. To adopt Erich Fromm’s notion of hope as a vision of the present in a state of pregnancy (Hage, 2003), social withdrawees are stuck in a timeless, infertile present. Such hopelessness is hardly unique to *hikikomori*, of course. Indeed, it has become a commonplace worldwide under neoliberal conditions of inequity, speculation and risk (Harvey, 2005). As states cut off welfare, the privatization of the marketplace exposes citizens to the desperation of immediate survival and a care deficit that is spreading globally (Hage, 2003; Ehrenrich and Hochschild, 2003; Grossberg, 2005).

The figure of the *hikikomori* captures the very specific complexion, and anxieties, of these socio-economic times in Japan. Contained within a home that fails to nourish them into adults and fails to be reproduced by the *hikikomori*, the withdrawee emblemizes a sense of social fissure and solitude that is growing in the country at large and is linked, both literally and figuratively, to home (as in lacking an ‘*ibasho*’ – whereabouts – or being, in some sense, ‘homeless’) (*Nihon Kodomo Sōshyaru Wāku Kyōkai*, 2006;

Tamura, 2007; Tsukino, 2004). As social institutions like family and corporate employment erode with Japan's turn to the immaterialization of the economy, what takes their place is a more multi-channeled, decentered, individuated form of sociality (Fukushigeiki, 2007). J-cool, in such properties as Pokémon, both imprints this social logic and offers a palliative for healing its ill-effects of uprootedness and loneliness.

In the story-versions of Pokémon, the main human character (Satoshi) is perennially stuck at age 11 – forever a kid. And, while he advances in powers and conquests, his journey and trek never end. There are no references or gateways to a world outside, and there are no images or story-lines of human life getting reproduced. Human families tend to be absent or fragmented, as with Satoshi, who – with no father and a mother he only sees occasionally – relies basically on himself and Pikachu, his steadfast pokémon. Kinship extends to, but is delimited by, pokémon and, indeed, inter-species (human/pokémon) relationships are given the idiom of family, community, kin. This virtualized social world is what commentators and marketers of Pokémon praised as being not only spectacularly profitable but also for providing a comforting space for post-industrial Japanese kids suffering the ills of loneliness, insecurity and stress. Filling in for the perceived losses and lacks of 'real' human contact and social support for youth at the end of the 20th century, Pokémon was said to offer kids a 'space of their own' (Nakazawa, 1997) and the 'unconditional love' (Watanabe, 1999) they may well be denied by a parent, a teacher, the state itself.

This commentary is intriguing, for while it expresses nostalgia for a 'vanishing' past (Ivy, 1995), it also gives license for the virtualization of social existence, companionship, even love. And, in the form of a commodity that sells on the marketplace, this virtualization is far more productive of capital in an era of immaterial labor than nostalgia – an age when the family, the community, the (stable) workplace are dissolving both in fact and in their utility for capitalism. There is a booming business – both in domestic and export sales – for electronic companion goods these days: everything, from 'pet robots' to aquariums stocked with digital jellyfish, that sells affective relationships with virtual creations (Allison, 2006). This is a 'prosthetics of presence' (Stone, 1995: 400) taken to the register of the social. Japan has so built up its trade in, and reliance upon, social prosthetics that it has shifted its primary production – and acclaim – from electronics to what one observer has called 'sof-tronics' (Asupekto, 1996: 51). But, again, the discourse about what is gained here is pitched in terms of a loss: about selling soothingly interactive techno-pals to a citizenship that has become increasingly stripped bare of (other forms of) social and human resources. The affective language found in the advertising for such products is one of both healing and stimulation. In the case of Takara's Aquaroid, for example, the digitalized jellyfish is presented as something that – with its hypnotic movements – arouses the imagination and eases stressed nerves. Priced at US \$750, it sells primarily to middle-aged businessmen.

As Walter Benjamin noted about a previous stage of industrialization:

It is in this way that technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience which technological *production* threatens to take away. (Buck-Morss, 1997: 268)

Yet the market in the technological reproduction of sociality not only ‘gives back’ a capacity for human experience, but is driven by its very lack. This is a lack that an economy of immaterial labor works to fill in and works, in fact, to generate. Producing the need that it will subsequently satisfy, the immaterialization of the economy fosters a social relationality based on commodification and privatization. Citizens are now expected to purchase their relations – for companionship, intimacy, care – as private consumers on the marketplace. Not only are those with less money disadvantaged in an era when older forms of social connectedness – family, workplace, community – are eroding, but the format given to sociality in such privatized prosthetics tends to be narcissistically self-referential. One may become deeply attached to a pokémon, a pet robot, or a customized doll – as is the new trend in Akihabara these days – but the relationship still rebounds to the owner and *her* needs/desires alone. Herein lies a source of Japan’s so-called crisis in social reproduction today.

Care Deficit and Caring Activism

If the cultural logic of Japan’s turn in the economy to immaterialization is indeed, as I have suggested, encapsulated in J-cool’s model of addictive fun, temporal suspension and affective virtuality, then it is hardly surprising that the country is experiencing reproductive failures on the ground. For both time and sociality have collapsed upon themselves here. Where is the outside to a world premised on private desire, and where is the future in a consumerism so riveted to the immediacy of a timeless present? And, sutured to youth – both in reality and as a construct built on affects associated with youth(fulness) – this is a cultural logic that extends the category of youth to everyone and asks (real) kids to effectively reproduce and take care of themselves.

But kids, or at least some of them, are having a hard time. Simmering underneath all the fanfare, and booming marketplace, devoted to feelgood ‘sof-tronics’, there is a palpable sense of abandonment, loneliness and futility in the lives of a not insignificant number of Japanese youth today – and adults too, as a recent news story about the rise of elderly shoplifters in Japan reported (engaging in an act associated with youth, they say they are driven by poverty and, sometimes, boredom). Suicide, which has risen dramatically nationwide in the last decade, has, since 2002, become the leading cause of death for people in their 20s (Amamiya, 2008). And, in a recent survey conducted with teenagers in Tokyo, 70 percent answered that, even if they weren’t literally a *hikikomori*, they had the sentiments (*shinjō*) of being one (personal interview with Miyamoto Michiko).

Given that biopower is the production of ‘collective subjectivities, sociality, and society’ and, in this sense, of life itself (Hardt, 2008: 7), what does it say about Japan today that so many youth feel all alone, socially stranded and – as with *hikikomori* – often more dead than alive? As Foucault (1979) saw it, biopower resides with governmentality to create, manage and control populations. Yet youth – or at least some of them – have lives that are failing to get managed, or sustained, at all. Certainly the government recognizes that some youth are in trouble and has labeled these – *hikikomori*, NEETs, *freeta* – and organized commissions to come up with strategies for recouping and reintegrating these youth into mainstream society. But the working assumption here is that such young people – particularly *hikikomori* and NEETs – fall outside the norms, and therefore the umbrella, of the state – a state that has become increasingly committed to neoliberal policies of privatization. Never a welfare state, Japan has retreated even further in recent years on welfare allocations, continuing to uphold what has been its policy in the postwar era of relying on the family and corporation to be its de facto welfare institutions (Funabashi and Miyamoto, 2008). But, as the economy has weakened and transformed in the direction of immaterialization, the ability – and willingness – to care for its members has dissolved, certainly for the corporation and increasingly for the family as well. This not only puts the lives and welfare of individuals at risk, but also that of the population at large.

A string of indiscriminate killings plagued Japan the summer of 2008, attributed largely to disaffected youth. The first occurred in Akihabara – the electronics district and hotbed of *otaku* (fandom) culture – on a Sunday at noon when the streets had been closed for pedestrian shoppers. Driving a 2-ton truck into the crossing, then jumping out to stab more victims, a 33-year-old man killed seven people within minutes. Katō Tomohiko, a temporary worker, was deeply troubled – as he admitted on the long trail of postings he left on a phone netsite. An addict of digital chatting, Katō wrote of feeling all alone, disconnected from the world around him, and deprived of every sort of human relationship. Enraged at his parents for being unsupportive, he also complained of having no girlfriend, sex life, friend base or stable workplace. Lacking any sense of a homebase (*ibasho*), Katō wrote, ahead of the crime, that he was going to Akihabara to kill because he had nothing to live for himself.

The Akihabara incident, which occurred on 8 June, triggered a series of random attacks in public places – department stores, train stations, streets. Fueling what was already a sense of insecurity hugging the pathways of everyday life, the killings provoked an intense public debate over the very parameters – and precariousness – of daily existence for youth, and everyone, in this first decade of Japan’s 21st century. As if rendering the death of Japan Inc. as most graphically gruesome, these indiscriminate attacks/attackers became a sign of the pain, and peril, of the new social order: an individuated citizenry detached from social ties that could either monitor or care for them. Much of what became known about Katō, for

example – someone suffering from solitude (*kodoku*), job insecurity, and lack of acceptance or approval from others (*shōnin*) – was seen as increasingly common in the population (particularly youth) at large. Given the brutality of his subsequent acts, Katō's case became a warning signal about the psychic, social and very material risks of everyday life in Japan today. For those all alone, without job security, deprived of a social safety net – whether that be family, workplace or friends – daily survival can be a life-and-death struggle.¹² This point was driven home in August by another indiscriminate attack at one of Tokyo's busiest train stations, Shibuya. This time the attacker was not a youth, but a 79-year-old homeless woman who stabbed two young women. As she confessed to the police, her motive was to be hauled to prison where she – a woman without family or other social support – could receive shelter and food. For such bare life, for her, it was worth killing others.

It is in the realm of life itself – in efforts being made to address, confront and transform the living conditions of Japanese who are struggling to survive – that signs of biopower from below are emerging today. This is the arena of what Nikolas Rose calls risk politics, the shape contemporary (bio)politics has taken around monitoring, controlling and overseeing the vital processes of human life. But if life itself, 'the vital reality of a people' (Rose, 2001: 2), has fallen under the sway of political authority today, so too has vitalism become the germ for inciting social protest – against the state for failing to ensure the well-being of (all) its citizens, and for moving creatively towards new forms of sociality that will reclaim and restore the very existence of/for common people. To use Rose's term, this is a form of ethopolitics (2001: 2), a new configuration of control developing around, but beyond, the biopolitics of the moment, with its technologies of self that privatize care through, for example, the market in social prosthetics. There are various groups becoming involved in such ethopolitics of care in Japan today; the elderly are some of the most active. But what interests me here are youth-initiated social movements and activism that, while still nascent and small, engage affective labor in a socially significant way.

Much, but not all of this, is directed to the labor situation in the form, for example, of *freeta* unions (which, in some cases, reach out to NEETs and even *hikikomori*), campaigning against *hakengai* (temp agencies with notoriously bad labor conditions) and NPOs (non-profit organizations) designed to help people find jobs. While these endeavors advocate for better work conditions for youth, there is also an increasing awareness of what activist Amamiya Karin (2008), using a term adopted from Italy, dubs the 'precariat' – precarious proletariat, also called the 'working poor' (or *hataraku hinkonsō*). 'Precariat' refers to the fragility of life, even for those who do have jobs (albeit low-paid and irregular ones) in Japan. As Yuasa Makoto puts it in his book, *Hanhinkon* (Reversing Poverty, 2008a), Japan is increasingly becoming an impoverished country. But by 'poverty' (*hinkon*), he doesn't mean financial poverty alone. Rather, poverty is a state of desperation, solitude, a life that is precipitously close to death. The

‘reserves’ (*tame*) people were once able to count on – whether savings in the bank, families one could turn to in time of need, or educational credentials – are drying up for more and more of the population. And this makes Japan less a society of ‘winners and losers’, as is often claimed (or a *kakusa shakai* – society of difference, in contrast to the great mass of middle-classness Japanese so prided themselves on being part of in postwar times), than a society of just plain losers (Yuasa, 2008a, 2008b).

In the rhetoric of the ‘precariat’, ‘working poor’ or even ‘poverty’ itself, as deployed by Yuasa, there is an attempt to generalize out to the entire population what tends to be (dis)regarded as exceptional – the ranks of the economically poor, socially vulnerable and psychically at risk. Communication, to return to the domain of affective labor, is critically important here, as many in the forefront of what I call affective activism put talking – about the life risks faced by everyone today – at the center of their political work. A forceful presence is Amamiya Karin and her politics of what she calls ‘*ikizurasa*’ or the hardship of life (Amamiya, 2007; Amamiya and Kayano, 2008). Speaking as an advocate for youth and as someone who, when younger (she is currently 33), was bullied in school, became a wrist-cutter, attempted suicide, overdosed, worked as a *freeta*, and was a member of rock bands as well as rightist religious organizations, Amamiya treats survival as the heart of her politics. While she has ample other political interests – from militarism and the G-8 to *freeta* and temp workers – Amamiya discusses these alongside the psychic/social/everyday issues that most plague youth these days. At public forums that range from street demonstrations and citizens’ symposia to ‘talk events’ held at everything from underground bars to smoky coffeehouses, Amamiya is a powerfully affective speaker. Dressed in cool clothes, sometimes goth, she openly shares with audiences the graphic pains of her own life, thereby inviting them – as she expressed it one night at a talk event on suicide¹³ – to step out of the isolation that so confines and haunts victims of depression and social withdrawal, and *freeta* with their labor insecurities. Confessing to audiences that the worst part of her own psychic problems as a teenager was feeling all alone, Amamiya tells youth that they now can, and do, have a community, urging them to write to her any time by email. At work here is the kindling of new communal bonds, the ‘production of collective subjectivities, sociality and society . . . created in the networks of affective labor’ (Hardt, 2008: 7).

Amamiya produces affects – of ease, connectedness and community – in the service of helping others, fostering a politics of survival, and also surviving herself. As she readily admits, it was at the age of 25 when, suffering depression and deep insecurities as a *freeta*, she published her first book, thereby managing to jumpstart her life. Being an activist has become her calling, and also a way to pay the bills. Indeed, Amamiya is a well-oiled operation these days, publishing prolifically (at least four books plus endless articles in a range of media this year alone) and appearing seemingly everywhere and all the time, on the public talk circuit. While Amamiya’s celebrity status as an activist may raise questions as to what degree her activism

blends into pop culture or capitalism itself, I would stress the deep and wide support she has from fellow activists, and also the importance of the ethopolitical work she is doing, including as a role model for young women. Her affective activism is also not stand-alone. Others are both picking it up or creating their own style such as the *Kowaremono* ('broken people'),¹⁴ a group of young to middle-aged adults who, quite literally, stage the travails they have had in surviving life or attempting to end it. Each has, or has had, a disability of some sort – alcoholism, eating disorders, domestic abuse, cerebral palsy, *hikikomoru*, depression – which they communicate to an audience through a performative medium – spoken word, poetry, music, prose. Based in the northwestern prefecture of Nīgata, the *Kowaremono* perform there as well as in Tokyo at 'talk events' that bring in moderate-sized crowds. They also form a support group for one another, and invite others to join their community or create one of their own making. Theirs is a form of risk politics; having been at risk of dying, the members assume agency and creativity in personal/social survival.

There are others who also work at the level of daily life and advocate for an everyday sustaining of people caught on the edge, slipping through the cracks, or simply trying to make ends meet in these increasingly precarious times. Yuasa Makoto, the author of *Hanhinkon* (Reverse Poverty) and the co-founder of the national *Hanhinkon* network, for example, is also the co-director of a Tokyo-based NPO, Moyai, that gives free service to anyone trying to find a job, locate housing or apply for welfare. Reaching out to those who, as it states in its pamphlet, are caught in the cycle of loneliness and scarcity of human relationships (*ningenkankei*) so endemic in Japan today, Moyai offers itself as not only a 'life support center' that helps people achieve independence, but also a stand-in or post-familial home. Implicit here is a recognition of how mutually constitutive, and how presently fissured, the relationship between life and sociality is. Seeking to fill in this gap and thereby help people survive, Moyai advocates for 'life within connectedness' (*tsunagari no nakade ikirutameni*) that can be akin to a 'community' (*chīkishakai*). And, indeed, staffed by volunteers and run out of a cozy little house, Moyai exudes communal warmth. Drop-ins are invited to stay for lunch, and Saturdays are devoted to a coffee klatch.

Conclusion

Stitching a fabric of sociality out of the daily struggles and diverse resources of strangers is a new concept in Japan, where a 'framing' of work/marriage/locale (Nakane, 1970) has fixed – and delimited – both social identities and human relations. But this older form of sociality is eroding. For, as the economy shifts from industrial to immaterial production, so do the social relationships needed to reproduce it – from the more rooted, long-term ties of Japan Inc. to a more fluid, mobile and detached subjectivity in sync with the speeded-up, informational circuits of immaterial labor. As with all transitions, however, this one is still ragged. And, aggravated by a nagging recession and a state that fails to pick up the care deficit left by

the retreat of the familial and corporate umbrella, the country is beset by what I have called a crisis in reproduction. By this, I mean the spiraling sense of solitude, anxiety and desperation faced by so many, including youth, in everyday life.

The failure to sufficiently care for and nourish its citizens is far more of a social crisis, as I see it, than the (mere) decline in childbirth – what is conventionally and officially rendered as the reproductive crisis in Japan today. But, just as the rhetoric of the reproductive crisis mistakes the family for the site of national production, reproduction and sociality, so too is there a widespread longing for, if not a nuclear home, then something nostalgically familial that can give people a grounded sense of ‘whereabouts’. In these times of change, however, the family is being displaced in a socio-economic order whose cultural logic has moved from Japan Inc. to J-cool. The conception of life here is different, constructed along the lines of Pokémon: chains of information that, once assembled, manipulated and recombined, become animated in a ‘data-fied’ form of life that is the medium for both communication and connection with others. But, while socializing young players into an informationalized subjectivity, J-cool also has a gap. Picked up as the logic of immaterial capitalism (‘GNC’) and packaged as a fashionable, profitable brand, J-cool falls short in providing a sociological roadmap sufficient to the times. With a recursive worldview and a timeless, endless play that is addictively, narcissistically fun, J-cool tends to collapse in on itself, encouraging youth to do the same. Neither it nor calls to revive the nuclear family are adequate to deal with the crisis in reproduction facing Japan today.

Needed instead are ways of implanting more security, futurity and compassion in daily living. Even as the very meaning of ‘life’ is in flux, youth, like everyone else, must be adequately nurtured in order to stay alive and be adequately equipped to nurture – others, a future – beyond themselves. As older support systems dry up, newer alternatives – for pursuing, sustaining and creating life – must emerge to take their place. This, as I see it, is the ethopolitics of affective activism like Moyai. In an era when the state is failing to tend to the ‘vital reality’ (Rose, 2001) of its citizenry, and when the privatized care – and social prosthetics – on the marketplace are outside the grasp of an increasingly many, Moyai works as a biopower from below. Crafting new forms of sociality to the end not of capital or the market, as is the case of J-cool, but of helping anyone/everyone survive, such endeavors exemplify the subversive potential of affective labor. This is a vitalist politics that creates forms of connectedness that, quite literally, sustain people in their everyday lives.

Herein lies a model whose sociality is progressive as well. For making care available for everyone, independent of their membership in distinctive units of family, work or anything else, is not only the potential but also the charge of a biopower working to reclaim and restore the vitalism of life in an era of incremental risk.

Notes

1. I use ‘youth’ promiscuously here as one of the characteristics of J-cool is that the youth who both consume and generate the trends are themselves an elastic category. In the case of *tamagotchi* (the virtual pets sold by Bandai that were a hit in 1997 and reappeared again in 2005), for example, it was young women in their 20s as much as young children under 12 who were the biggest fans. I also use ‘youth’ interchangeably with ‘kids’ throughout the article as I see the indeterminacy of the category – children, kids, youth – to be a defining mark of the times and of the turn to immaterial labor in the economy that I am tracking here. There is a way in which youth are held at a stage of being perpetually kids, with little hope or means of becoming adults (by the old standards of getting a permanent job, marrying and having children of their own, which, increasingly, young people feel they either can’t or don’t want to do). There is also a way in which the construct of youth that attracts consumers in J-cool similarly draws upon a timeless childhood suspended in both time and space (in the artwork of Murakami Takashi or a property like Hello Kitty, for example, characters with big heads, no mouths, and shortened limbs attract fans of all ages including adults in their 50s and 60s).

2. Merging the boundaries between high and low art, and art and consumer culture, Murakami Takashi is a contemporary artist known for his appropriation of themes from *anime* and *manga*, which he crafts into huge sculptures, colorful paintings and consumer goods (such as his superflat monogrammed Louis Vuitton bags). His show, ‘Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture’, held at the Japan Society (and co-sponsored by the Public Art Fund) in New York City in spring 2005, was named after one of the two atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and intended as a commentary on the psychic traumas – and social infantilization – Japanese experienced after the war. Postwar pop culture has emerged out of – and been created from – the shards of this experience, according to Murakami, and this culture’s dependence on the two-dimensional flatness of *manga* and *anime* has spurred his own aesthetic, which he calls ‘superflat’. The ‘Little Boy’ show was hugely popular in New York: a sign of Murakami’s stature as a global artist (and also the global success of the Murakami brand, which is aggressively marketed). (See Looser, 2006, for further discussion of Murakami’s superflat aesthetics.)

3. For more on the production, circulation, and logic of fantasy at work in the global trade of Pokémon, and J-cool in general, see Allison (2006).

4. A section of town considered a youth hang-out for its stores, shops and entertainment catering to teenagers and young adults.

5. Certainly, there are other – potentially more radical or subversive – potentialities to the ways in which Pokémon structures play and socializes players into the world. The information networks, continual disassembling/reassembling of identities and relationships, creation of attachments unmoored from other social institutions (such as family, school or school-based peer groups) – all these bear the seeds for a newer way of being in the world and, in particular, for mapping sociality. (For a discussion of the competing logics, between a commodity logic and logic of gift exchange, in Pokémon, see Allison [2006].) But when the over-arching agenda of the game is not only ‘getting’, but a getting that becomes addictively endless and coupled to what the game enjoins players to strive for – becoming ‘the world’s greatest Pokémon player’ – the potential radicality of the sociality gets compromised by the narcissistic and privatized shape it takes in the game. One question would be how, whether and with what effects the former could be delinked

from the latter. Indeed, might there be signs that youth raised in/on new channels of virtual communicative sociality – such as Pokémon – are growing up to become the affective activists (generating new kinds of social relationality) that I write about in the last section of this article? I don't take up this issue here, but find it intriguing and intend to pursue this possibility in future research.

6. Japan has been struggling with a decrease in births since its last baby boom ended in 1973 (when the birthrate was 19 per 1000 population). By 1993, the rate had plummeted to 9.6 and, despite a rise in 2006 (the first in six years), the rate decreased again – to 8.6 in 2007. This is one of the lowest birthrates amongst industrialized countries, and the issue – commonly termed '*shōshika*' (declining birthrate) – is given much attention by the government and press.

7. The numbers of *freeta* are hard to measure but a generally cited figure is at least 2.5 million (see Genda, 2005; Slater, 2009).

8. Statistics for NEETs are also difficult to come by. The figures that place *freeta* at 2.5 million, however, calculate NEETs as numbering between 650,000 and 850,000.

9. The marriage rate has declined from more than 10 per 1000 population to 5.7 today. The age of marriage has also been steadily rising; today the mean age for men to marry is 30.1 and for women, 28.3.

10. The two categories, of NEETs and *hikikomori*, also tend to run together, though they are not necessarily the same. Someone could be a NEET yet, by leaving or living outside the familial home, not be a *hikikomori* at all.

11. The typical pattern is for a parent (or sibling) to prepare the food and put it outside the room the *hikikomori* lives in, thereby avoiding physical contact – as is the desire of the *hikikomori*.

12. For critical commentary on the Akihabara incident, see YōsenShaMukku (2008).

13. The event was held at Loft+1 in Shinjuku: an underground space that, with bar, *manga* lending library, stage, and sound-system, holds events, performances, and meetings of multiple kinds.

14. The founder and leader of the *Kowaremono* is Tsukino Kōji who, now 43, suffered years being a *hikikomori* and alcoholic. Tsukino, who appears and performs at public events sometimes apart from the other *Kowaremono* (and sometimes alongside of Amamiya), is also an author. His most recent book is *Ie no naka no hōmuresu* (Being Homeless Inside Home), 2004.

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