

Book Review: Lukács, G. (2020). *Invisibility by design: women and labor in Japan's digital economy*. Duke University Press.

Xanat Vargas Meza¹

Introduction

If one would take internet ads seriously, one would assume that men are fascinated by feminized digital assistants not only in Japan, but also in the rest of the world. If not, why does Alexa have a feminine voice? Why are so many chatbots employing cute, feminized characters, saturating services related websites? It looks like women-related stereotypes and unpaid labour go hand in hand even when we remove the physical women from the web platforms. However, there is another side to this dice that Gabriella Luckas described in her book *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*.

Her argument is simple but compelling: throughout the latest decades, amid the rapid diffusion and changes of communication and digital technologies, women's labour was critical and unpaid. She explores several cases of women in Japan who aspired to build careers based on digital technologies, investing long-term efforts that were not publicized or made visible by their partner companies and societal groups. The vast majority of such women pioneers did not receive enough compensation from their labour.

Other central arguments of the book are the relevance of the concept of “fulfilling work” in driving digital innovations related to capitalist accumulation and the expansion of extractive

¹ Assistant Professor, University of Tsukuba, correspondence address:
meza@digitalnature.slis.tsukuba.ac.jp

activities from unpaid labor through digital technologies as their most prevalent characteristic. The author starts with a brief overview of the digital economy in Japan, which evolved in parallel with the deregulation of the labor market. The floating idea was that “willingness to take risks had economic value” (location 284). The author employs several concepts from western academics in this section of *Invisibility by Design*, such as the “social factory” by Tronti (1962), applied to how capitalist enterprises in Japan integrate society into their production systems. From Terranova (2004), the author rescues the loss of fixed time and place for work. She also includes housewives in the analysis of capitalist dynamics, as proposed by Dalla Costa and James (2017).

Next, Luckas argues that owners of online platforms generate profits by dissociating internet users’ activities online from the idea of labor. She employs examples from Arvidsson (2005, 2008) such as consuming advertising, producing data, and increasing brand value via platform usage. With this theoretical framework, the author models feminized affective labor based on affective labor (Hardt, 1999) on internet platforms. She further employs other definitions of labor to describe general activities by online users: emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996), articulation labor (Star & Strauss, 1999), intimate labor (Boris & Salazar Parrenas, 2010), phatic labor (Elyachar, 2010), reproductive labor (Federici, 2012), care labor (Tronto, 2013), and hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013); concluding that affective labor is the main shape of digital labor.

The author proceeds by discussing other key concepts focused on the transition of human experiences to digital spaces in the Japanese context: the “automation with a human touch” by Ohno (pg. 634) and the internet ecosystem by Hamano (2008). Unfortunately, she does not mention women theorists such as Haraway (2006), who provide core concepts of digitized humans with a solid base on socialism. Moreover, she does not use any Japanese animation or sci-fi examples to discuss the intimate relationship of capitalism with artificial intelligence, opting to use only western pop culture examples. What she does, however, is incorporate women authors’ methods (e.g. Inoue, 2006) into her own analytical methods.

Luckas concludes the introduction section by giving a brief overview of Japanese society, its adoption of internet services, and presenting the general framework of *Invisibility by Design*. Instead of a timeline approach, she has divided the book chapters according to the activities performed by 43 women digital workers whom she interviewed and/or researched over the course of several years: photographers, net idols, bloggers, traders and cell phone novelists. There are time overlaps in each chapter, but the intentional choice to focus on the women and their craft allows room for their self-expression.

Women photographers and the initiation of the digital era in Japan

Chapter 1 discusses women photographers who have made relevant contributions to the transition towards digital photography. With a basis on cute culture, which has been identified at least since the 1960s, a type of “girly photography” became popular between the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennia. To promote their work, women photographers adopted the latest

technologies available, that is, automatic digital cameras, websites and html, which were vastly designed, programmed and commercialized by men. Even Konica (a maker of photography equipment) offered cameras to women by drawing on similarities with the female body. Looking at such commercial strategies, there is not a big difference to how iphones and filters are commercialized today, employing superficial stereotypes.

Returning to *Invisibility by Design*, in despite of their long learning curve, the technologies brought benefits such as large audiences and the option of anonymity, with the potential to allow all sorts of creative photographic-based explorations. Nevertheless, critics always anchored women photographers to their gender and used it to interpret and criticize their work.

The author draws examples of judges lauding women in photography contests and completely mistaking their intentions, attributing them empathy, emotion and relationship craving, while women photographers elaborated on the intellectual labor that their work requires. In such terms, women photographers can be considered as designers, with specific intentions behind each shot, rather than being purely emotion driven. This is even noted in the selfie culture that was born in Japan, where such photos are always taken with a specific intention and often, with a specific audience in mind.

Luckas also discusses the link between women and nature versus men and culture, as an animalistic or liberated perspective of performative photography using the case of Miss Ninagawa. I would argue, however, that this is a limited interpretation. If we want to humanize nature, a more culturally closer approach would be to invoke the images and personalities of the *Kami*, the deities of Japanese Shinto religion. The main deity, the Sun Goddess called Amaterasu, is a woman herself, prone to generosity but also to fits of rage. As a graphic designer trained in professional photography, the author of this review argues that Amaterasu as a complex force of nature is more integrally equivalent to women photographers who, having multiple motivations for their work, act in a combined state of rationality and intuition while performing it.

Further, if we want to be as secular as possible when interpreting girly photography, the answer lies on Miss. Ninagawa's work itself. For example, she collaborated in *Sakuran*, a film based on a manga with participation of entertainment stars of the height of Anna Tsuchiya and Shina Ringo. The story, centred on a high-ranking courtesan (*oiran*) and on the sumptuous mostly female world that surrounds her, is rich in colourful visualizations of plants and animals that are juxtaposed with footage of the *oiran* during their daily life activities, thoughts, and emotions, ranging from the happiest to the saddest. This is a far away cry from the usually bland cinematography of non-action Japanese films set in the Edo period, striving for the most absolute realism and stoicism. Thus, we can notice that Miss. Ninagawa's photography is not merely "wild", but that it employs nature to reflect specific moments and cognitive processes.

Net Idols and the nascent Japanese internet

Chapter 2 centres on net idols, which surged within second-wave feminism marked by academic discourses at the end of the 20th century. Net idols were mostly housewives seeking their sense of self and coding their own websites until 2001, when broadband internet in Japan improved, lowering the costs of internet-related services.

Net idols also employed cute culture combined with the maintenance of their personal websites to gain online attention. Here, the author unpacks Kinsella, one of the most representative researchers of cute (*kawaii*) culture outside of Japan, who frames cute as a passive and playful resistance against adult society (Kinsella et al., 1995). In contrast, Luckas proposes to consider the production of cute as feminized affective labour. For example, posts by net idols that included cute behaviours were the most appealing to fans, and bulletin boards were enabled to encourage interaction. However, monetization of such actions was not possible at that time due to limited data storage space, which reinforced the unpaid nature of feminized labour.

This creates a vicious cycle where women cultivate and rely on their femininity as a source of livelihood and status, confirming their place in regimes of reproductive labor while accepting also that their best chance to enter the waged labor market is to monetize their reproductive labor (location 1613). The consequences are that women limit themselves to some types of labor, professional behaviors and appearances, and thus negotiations to change such conditions become challenging.

Moreover, cultural industries in 1994 started to create relaxing or comforting (*yasuragi*) products such as music and videogames. Therefore, self-made net idols were eventually co-opted by ranking sites, academies, and agents, creating increasing competence and exploitation. By the mid-2000s, most net idols had migrated to blogging platforms.

Women bloggers in Japan

Blogs evolved from online diaries, forums and bulletin board systems in the 1990s. Blogging platforms were already mature and monetized enough between 2004 and 2006 to allow writers and readers to form distinct groups of interest for advertisers. There was a general technological utopianism floating around, which is the assumption that technology per se will improve quality of life. Another concept that was in vogue was that of “nomad work”, where lifestyle is transformed into content (Tachibana, 2012).

Yet another concept employed was “the good life”, which is translated as a “productive life” in Japan, diametrically opposed to the nowadays famous *Buen vivir* (good life in Spanish) from indigenous and *mestizo* populations in Latin America, which implies work-life balance. What the Japanese concept of “the good life” entails is to have freedom to choose the type of employment one wants to pursue, avoiding the realization that the choices are limited due to market forces, laws, size of the economy and many other factors.

Luckas claims that blogging technologies contributed to dismantling the system of lifetime employment while leaving the post-war culture of paternalistic laborism intact in Japan. The idealization of the digital economy had a mouthpiece in blogging culture, where women strove to transform themselves into brands and make blogging a career, “faking it” until they supposedly “made it”. This is a distinctive feature of precariatization.

The author refers to the work by Elyachar (2010), who employs phatic labor to theorize how men advanced entrepreneurship building on women’s social practices in Egypt during the 1990s. While community resources are sustained by women and left as communal, male entrepreneurs use them to produce private profit, which is reflected in blogging technologies. Further, there is social capital accumulated by portraying women’s work as glamorous elite work, which apparently makes them more visible, but relies on conventional gendered roles. For example, by showing the results, and not the hard and difficult procedures on their blogs, women render their own labor invisible.

Due to all these characteristics, the few who have had success as women bloggers tended to be rich, graduated from elite schools, were early adopters of blogging technologies and had invested years to become successful.

In this section of the book, the author of this review would have liked a clearer definition or classification of blog types and blogging women. Were there types of careers that were depicted more often than the others or that made their pursuers more successful in blogging? The author implies so, but does not give exact details or more thorough descriptions. Were the surveyed women focused on written blogs, photoblogs, microblogs or on vlogs? A more detailed timeline of such technologies and their adoption by the Japanese public would have been helpful.

Women online traders

In Japan, the transition from a culture of saving to an investing culture also impacted online spaces. Because traditionally, women homemakers manage the family finances, they became the targets of security firms who own online trading platforms and publishers to promote online trading.

Because of their age (in their 20s and 30s) and background, women online traders were conceptualized as amateurs, and thus, as a completely different category from male traders. They were also charismatic and in pursuit of investment for the sake of social reproduction, just to complement their husband’s income. Thus, such women were portrayed as some sort of ideal wife that could be compared to a modern version of the British “angel in the house”.

However, women who did not fit this ideal were encouraged to cover up their real credentials. Those who tried to make a professional career as offline traders, or to pass as serious workers, were ignored. The few who were able to capitalize on their success were, again, from privileged backgrounds or followed the tropes dictated by firms and publishers.

Further, in the case of online trading platforms, women devalued their own labor by declaring that the technology did most of the work, when it took a lot of education and training in finance to be successful. Also, by supplementing the husband's income, the payment of family wages by employers was discouraged. Although the author does not clarify how much women online traders could have influenced this trend, it is clear that if some of them were so famous to have appeared on national TV regularly and/or published self-help books constantly, they were at least partly responsible for the weak focus on living wages.

Women cell phone novelists in Japan

This is a cultural movement that was born in Japan and eventually spread to other countries. Cell phone novelists have been nowhere as numerous as in Japan, particularly from early 2000s to 2007. By the end of 2002, almost 80% of cell phone users had internet access, while almost all Japanese people aged between 10 and 29 used cell phones in 2006 (Takeuchi and Kawaharazuka, 2011). Special web platforms were designed and developed to write and read cell phone novels.

The first cell phone novelists were mostly from lower to middle class or working-class backgrounds, often living in rural areas of Japan (Sasaki, 2008). As many writers claimed that they started writing their novels to confront their past through semi-biographical stories, they articulated politics of precarity in their novels and commentaries. The author mentions that by 2009, some 35% of Japanese workers aged between 15 and 34 were employed on temporary positions and 9% were unemployed (location 2884). Such economical shifts had ripple effects on daily life, including entertainment and hobbies such as creative writing. Based on Terranova (2004), who mentions that political activity emerges from social networks by providing a common ground, the author proposed that the common ground for Japanese women who wrote cell phone novels was the experience of precarity, with notions of individuals as disposable.

Many of these early cell phone novels included deaths. Luckas argues that this can be interpreted as the failing industry and state, as the latter has no ability to protect people from unregulated markets and there is a lack of job security from corporations. The epilogues usually encouraged readers to live meaningful lives, create connections and be positive about the future. There was an underlying theme that economic precarity should not equal social precarity.

Cell phone novelists used the new technologies at their disposal to forge emotional connections with their readers (*kokoro tsunagari*). While the first novels were mostly exaggerated and overly dramatic accounts based on real-life events, the genre branched out and by 2005, most of the content was fictional. The novel-crafting process also changed, from personal accounts by the author to a collaborative approach with the fans.

This movement was eventually co-opted by publishers and editorials, who enhanced competition by giving money prizes and running ads. They also enhanced content farms where labor was underpaid. If we add the fact that most cell phone novelists remained anonymous, this increased their vulnerability to be exploited by such corporations. Moreover, the author argues

that the gendered sacrifice dramatized in the content of cell phone novels undermined the potential for women empowerment.

Most cell phone novelists stopped writing by 2020. Although Luckas does not elaborate further from this point, we can assume that the combination of blog with video technologies was already catapulting the fame of video-based social networks and their influencers.

Some discussion and conclusion points

Throughout her description of Japan during the internet boom and the diverse elaborations from Japanese women seeking to have an income or at least a positive outcome from it, the author allows us to see some condemning facts about the entertainment and internet economies. The transition from tightly ruled and socialized labour places to loose, anonymized labor is better described in her own words:

“The digital economy not only replaces traditional places of salaried employment but also complements conventional spaces of human capital development. It becomes an apparatus that prepares young people for entering a labor market that draws on casualized work and flexible specialization. It socializes them to embrace the ideology of the possible. More important, it teaches them to invest their labor in developing ever newer forms of human capital with no resistance, to unlearn them with no remorse, and to learn new ones with no resentment” (location 1788).

The author also discusses technology based on Dean (2010), arguing that free software might seem democratic, but that the communities around it are not sustainable and that pushes for an individualistic discourse that tends to pro-capitalism. The aforementioned arguments laid by the end of *Invisibility by Design* allow us to ponder the consequences for the next generation of labourers in the middle of an ever-unstable employment situation. It is rather sombre to think about Japanese youth, increasingly alienated and ignorant of how labour laws and corporations worked 10, 20, or even 50 years ago. If Japanese youth are conditioned to desire whatever agrees with the free market, which type of responsibility (or irresponsibility) do corporations hold in the crisis of solitude and lack of meaningful lives of the current generations?

The author proposes several measures to address the inequality of women’s online work. Some pertain the government, some companies and all of them can be advocated by citizens: a) Device different ways of managing anonymity online; b) Device portable benefits for workers; c) Develop democratically governed service platforms and online marketplaces that are owned and operated by the people who rely on them; e) Eliminating the link between spouses’ income and taxes; f) Expand the concept of employment; g) Inform workers about their rights; h) Living wages; and g) Universal income.

Read in this way, most of the points can be seen as beneficial not only for women, but for any type of worker. Luckas acknowledges that these are imperfect solutions and that the

construction of digital identities compatible with the current reality of precarious work in Japan is an ongoing process.

Despite the author employing a large poll of digital and labour related research from the West, and even including phatic labor by Elyachar (2010), a more comprehensive comparison with digital internet workers in China, Korea and other areas of Asia would have been desirable. Sungjin Park (2015), Augustine Pang (2016) and Crystal Abidin (2016, 2018) have been conducting thorough research on those fronts. Another unexplored factor is foreign women within the Japan digital labor market, but that could be a subject for an independent treatise.

While reading *Invisibility by Design*, the author of this review could notice the parallelisms to the cases of YouTube and Instagram influencers. In sum, the author of this review can say that *Invisibility by Design* is a warning to any creator who aspires for a digital-based career in an era of Metaverses and Non-Fungible Tokens, but it is an especially pertinent read for historically exploited social groups such as women, people of color and queer people. The current deregulation of the digital economy is but a mere turn to the screw, and vulnerable groups have to organize and defend their labor rights as soon as any symptom of precarity appears. However, in order to recognize such symptoms, readings such as *Invisibility by Design* can be enlightening.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Agentic cute (^.^): Pastiche East Asian cute in influencer commerce. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2(1), 33-47.
- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Arvidsson, A. (2005). Brands: A critical perspective. *Journal of consumer culture*, 5(2), 235-258.
- Arvidsson, A. (2008). The ethical economy of customer coproduction. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 28(4), 326-338.
- Boris, E., Salazar Parrenas, R. (2010). *Intimate labors: Cultures, technologies, and the politics of care*. Stanford University Press.
- Dalla Costa, M., & James, S. (2017). The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community. *Class: The Anthology*, 79-86. doi: [10.1002/9781119395485.ch7](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch7)
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Polity.
- Elyachar, J. (2010). Phatic labor, infrastructure, and the question of empowerment in Cairo. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3), 452-464.
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM press.
- Hamano, S. (2008). *Aakitekucha no Seitakei: Jōhō Kankyō wa Ikani Sekkei Saretekitaka* [Architecture ecosystems: How has the information environment been designed, Japanese]. Tokyo: NTT Shuppan.
- Haraway, D. (2006). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century. In J. Weiss, J. Nolan, J. Hunsinger, P. Trifonas (Eds) *The international handbook of virtual learning environments* (pp. 117-158). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2017). *Assembly*. Oxford University Press.

- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart*. University of California Press.
- Inoue, M. (2006). *Vicarious language*. University of California Press.
- Kinsella, S., Skov, L., & Moeran, B. (1995). Cuties in Japan. *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, Routledge, 220-254.
- Kuehn, K., & Corrigan, T. F. (2013). Hope labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 1(1).
- Lazzarato, M. (1996). Immaterial labor. *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 133-47.
- Lukács, G. (2020). *Invisibility by design: women and labor in Japan's digital economy*. Duke University Press.
- Pang, A., Yingzhi Tan, E., Song-Qi Lim, R., Yue-Ming Kwan, T., & Bhardwaj Lakhanpal, P. (2016). Building effective relations with social media influencers in Singapore. *Media Asia*, 43(1), 56-68.
- Park, S., Lee, J., Ryu, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2015). The network of celebrity politics: Political implications of celebrity following on Twitter. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 659(1), 246-258.
- Sasaki, T. (2008). *Keitai shōsetsuka: Akogare no Sakka 10-nin ga hajimete kataru "jibun"* [Mobile novelists: 10 aspiring writers' first glimpses of "self", Japanese]. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.
- Star, S. L., & Strauss, A. (1999). Layers of silence, arenas of voice: The ecology of visible and invisible work. *Computer supported cooperative work (CSCW)*, 8(1), 9-30.
- Tachibana, T. (2012). Nomado Wākā to iu ikikata: basho wo erabazu yatowarenaide hataraku hito no senryaku to shūkan [The nomadic worker way of life: strategies and times for working people anywhere and everywhere, Japanese]. Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha.
- Takeuchi, K., and Kawaharazuka, M. (2011). Keitai Shōsetsu ni okeru onna-dōushi no kankei: Koizora būmu to wa nan datta no ka? [Women's relationships in cell phone novels: What was the "Koizora" boom?, Japanese] *Ochanomizu Jōshidaigaku Jinbunkagakukenyū* 7, 25-40. <https://teapot.lib.ocha.ac.jp/records/34239>
- Terranova, T. (2004). *Network culture: Politics for the information age*. *European Journal of Communication*. 20(1), 142-143.
- Tronti, M. (1962). *Factory and Society*. (J. Guio, Trans.) <https://operaisoinenglish.wordpress.com/2013/06/013/factory-and-society/>
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy*. New York University Press.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)