Core Readings in Kawaii Studies: An Annotated Guide

Below is a list of curated readings, each accompanied by a brief explanation, that address key issues in the field of *Kawaii* Studies.

Allison, Anne. "Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product." In *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*, edited by Joseph Tobin, 34–49. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

In this essay, Anne Allison argues that cuteness "involves emotional attachments to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and also Japanese traditional culture" (pp. 34–35; see also pp. 39–41). Traditionally popular stag beetle collecting and trading, for example, became the technologically advanced and nomadically portable millennial product of Pokémon that now resonates in capitalist settings around the world. This in turn feeds into a discourse of Japan's mounting "cultural power" (p. 35)—a bright spot amid recession and decline. Allison points out that Pokémon leave the card table and screen to become part of the everyday world. By providing ways of interacting with the world through imagination, such products are ambiguous—blurring borders between good and bad, real and fantasy, animal and human in the "cute business" (p. 39)—and serve the purpose of "healing" (p. 46). Bringing all of these together, Allison suggests the concept of "pocket intimacy" (p. 45). "While cuteness may bring postmodern relief," Allison concludes, "it comes at the expense of cascading commoditization" (p. 47).

Aoyagi, Hiroshi. "The Making of Japanese Adolescent Role Models." In *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan*, 56–85. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.

In this chapter, Hiroshi Aoyagi argues that idols "reflect and contextualize the concerns of their audience, offer models of attractive lifestyles, and substantiate adolescent identity as a socialization project to make some sense out of how to bring together separate life forces such as age, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 85). Inasmuch as their goal is to be "publicly adorable" (p. 63), idols are "agents of public socialization" (p. 56). They are "images of becoming" (p. 83). Focusing mostly on female fans and female idols, Aoyagi points out the dominance of the "cute style" (p. 73). He ends the chapter by suggesting that the cute style went into decline in the 1990s.

Bow, Leslie. "Racist Cute: Caricature, *Kawaii*-Style, and the Asian Thing." *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 29–58.

This article explores the impact of *kawaii*'s globalization from an Asian American perspective. Leslie Bow studies *kawaii*-style kitsch collectibles with caricatured Asian features now common in the United States to understand how *kawaii*'s recent popularity in American culture plays into Orientalist fantasies. In critiquing these "racist cute" representations, Bow shows how *kawaii* has amplified the fetishization of Asia and Asian people in the American imagination. At the same time, she acknowledges the ambivalent feelings that these goods carry for many Asian Americans who may feel fondness for their cuteness despite their ties to racial objectification. This article is an excellent resource for understanding the racial resonances that *kawaii* assumes when it travels overseas.

Dale, Joshua Paul. *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired our Brains and Conquered the World*. London: Profile Books, 2023.

This book is a cultural history of cuteness that reveals how one of our most powerful psychological impulses has remade global style and culture. Joshua Paul Dale traces the deep history of cuteness in Japanese art and literature, beginning in the Heian era and continuing to the formation of the modern *kawaii* aesthetic. He also covers the more recent historical development of the Western cute aesthetic from Renaissance cupids to Kewpie dolls. *Irresistible* explores the reasons why humans evolved to feel cuteness in the first place to reveal how both the *kawaii* and cute aesthetics follow from our neurological and psychological responses to cute objects.

Dale, J. P. et al., eds. *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*. New York, London: Routledge, 2017.

This edited volume is a multidisciplinary exploration of cuteness as a cultural and social phenomenon, as visible in visual, material, and global culture. The book "situate[s] cuteness in the complex of power relations that comes with a neoliberalizing economy and its accompanying cultures" (p. 5), demonstrating how the liminal space inscribed on cuteness reinforces and subverts social norms, power structures, cultural expectations, responses to political hierarchies, and economic and technological shifts. The contributors work to build a picture of the shifting gender configurations, communities, affective encounters—and, ultimately, the precarity and nostalgia—that manifest via cuteness.

Gould, Stephen J. "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse." In *The Panda's Thumb*, 125–133. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980.

In this chapter, Stephen J. Gould explores how Mickey Mouse has become "juvenile in appearance" over the years (p. 1). Gould estimates measurements at three stages in Mickey's development and notes a "larger relative head size, larger eyes, and an enlarged cranium – all traits of juvenility" (p. 1). Gould introduces Lorenz, who has argued that juvenile features trigger caring and nurturing responses from adult humans and

emphasized "the power that juvenile features hold over us" (p. 2). According to Gould, "Mickey Mouse's evolutionary road down the course of his own growth in reverse reflects the unconscious discovery of this very biological principle by Disney and his artists" (p. 3).

Hasegawa, Yuko. "Post-identity *Kawaii*: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art." In *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, edited by Fran Lloyd, 127–141. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

Working through contemporary Japanese art (and some comparative global examples), author Yuko Hasegawa proposes a shift away from the "*kawaii* syndrome" of the 1990s "towards a more positive undetermined state" (p. 127). Her point of departure is the "infantilization of culture," which contains within it the "postponement of maturity" and "a potential for transformation, the third sex or intentionally remaining in an undetermined state" (pp. 127–128; 140–141). *Kawaii* appeals both to men and women in this scheme. However, according to Hasegawa this can lead to a syndrome in which immature men seek mothers and girls who "respond passively to [men's] overtures" (p. 128). This in turn shifts to an awareness, coming from women themselves, of "a sense of hollowness or emptiness underlying the image" and the ability to critique, manipulate, and play with it (pp. 130, 138). Works analyzed include those by Minako Nishiyama, Miwa Yanagi, and Mariko Mori, as well as a discussion of *Ghost in the Shell* and related art.

Iseri, Makiko. "Flexible Femininities? Queering *Kawaii* in Japanese Girls' Cultures." In *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*, edited by Claire Nally and Angela Smith, 140–163. New York: Palgrave, 2015.

This chapter proposes that flexible femininity, often associated with liberatory and transformative potential in the rise of cuteness within girls'

culture in Shibuya and Harajuku from the 1990s, (as opposed to manga/anime or the art it inspires [pp. 143–148]), might instead serve to reinforce "oppressive logic" (p. 160; see also p. 142). Three areas of concern are raised: neoliberalism, orientalism, and nationalism. Issues are laid bare by discussing Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. First, women are overrepresented in the irregular labor market, which is to say they are "flexibility employed" and serve the needs of the "market" (p. 153). Iseri ties this to discussions of Kyary as an entrepreneur, as well as to her performance of a song about seeking part-time employment to support dreams and consumption. Next, Kyary's putative quirkiness and cuteness are tied to immaturity and imperfection, which links up with orientalist imaginings of "Japan" and nationalist reimagining of "uniqueness" and the girl as "resource" (pp. 149, 160).

Kanesaka, Erica. "Racist Attachments: Dakko-Chan, Black Kitsch, and
     Kawaii Culture." *Positions: Asia Critique* 30, no. 1 (2022): 159–187.

This article addresses the presence of anti-Black racist imagery in *kawaii* by studying the "Dakko-chan boom" and its legacies. Dakko-chan was an inflatable doll featuring American blackface tropes that started a runaway fad in postwar Japan and played a significant role in the rise of *kawaii* culture. Erica Kanesaka critiques the logics by which this type of racist imagery has been able to pass as harmless due to *kawaii*'s associations with innocence and playfulness and its use of a "deformed" style. This article is helpful for understanding how global racial politics has shaped *kawaii* culture from its historical development to the present day. Together with Leslie Bow's "Racist Cute," it also casts light on how anti-Black and anti-Asian racisms are entangled in *kawaii*'s transnational circulation.

Lamarre, Thomas. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life."
     Mechademia 6 (2011): 110–136.

Arguing that the force of the moving image is "directed into nonhuman,

humanoid, or animaloid characters" (pp. 112, 114), Thomas Lamarre suggests a form of techno-animism or "techno-vitalism." This leads finally to Lamarre's new approach to "neoteny," where animating forces are playing out through lines on paper and celluloid. Neoteny indicates, first, "excess in modes of cuteness" (p. 124), and, second, "a way of thinking evolution differently" (p. 125). As Lamarre clarifies: "cute little species bring into play immanent, nonlinear, nonteleological forces that promise to underdetermine teleological scenarios of maturation and socioeconomic progress (modernization), as well as hierarchical organization and social Darwinism" (p. 126).

Lukacs, Gabriella. "The Labor of Cute: Net idols, Cute Culture, and the Digital Economy in Contemporary Japan." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 23, no. 3 (2015), 487–513.

In this article, Gabriella Lukacs argues that "performing cuteness" is "labor" (p. 489). Contrary to earlier scholars (whose views are summarized on p. 496), cuteness is the facing of real material conditions rather than an escaping of them. The rise of net idols—who labor to articulate their own brand of "cuteness," made possible by the concept's "semantic flexibility" (p. 497; as compared to social media influencers)—is understood in the context of the rise of the digital economy from the 1990s, the broader socioeconomic crisis and subsequent "care deficit," and the "healing boom" (pp. 488, 493, 503). Lukacs also invokes the Italian autonomist Marxist concept of the "social factory" (p. 491; see also the feminist update on p. 501).

McVeigh, Brian J. "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp: 'Consumutopia' versus 'Control' in Japan." *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 2 (2000): 225–245.

In this article, author Brian J. McVeigh argues that there is a spectrum of understanding cuteness in Japan, which spans from "consumutopia," or "a

sort of counter-presence to mundane reality fueled by late capitalism, pop culture industry, and consumerist desire" (p. 226; see also pp. 228–237 for conditions of "unifying leitmotif, accessibility ubiquity, projectability and contagious desire"), to "control," or the less positive pressures that demand "partial participation" (p. 227). Crucial here is that the object and individual may remain the same, but McVeigh's data shows that feelings and engagement differ based on generational and social dynamics. Hello Kitty, the lead character of Sanrio, is "an icon for the everyday, an idol for the masses, an image of modernity, [...] a symbol that allows meaning displacement" (p. 242). McVeigh gives a list of examples of what might be called "cute control" (p. 242). In this way, he concludes, capitalist ideologies in Japan are "given a powerful aesthetic spin" (p. 242).

Miller, Laura, and Carolyn Stevens. "From Beautiful to Cute: Shifting Meanings in Japanese Language and Culture." *International Journal of Language and Culture* 8, no.1 (2021), 62–83.

This article begins by discussing the concepts of beauty and cuteness in the Japanese language, then explores the history of *kawaii*'s antecedents in the Edo era. Miller and Stevens continue by analyzing the post-war rise of the *kawaii* aesthetic and its emotional and social functions. They close by exploring the complex spectrum of meanings that *kawaii* has taken on in contemporary Japan; in particular, they consider the many compound terms that *kawaii* has engendered, from grotesque-cute (*guro-kawaii*) to homely-cute (*busaiko-kawaii*).

Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan.* London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

In this book, Masafumi Monden explores how clothes are represented in contemporary Japanese culture. His four case studies are young men's fashion publications, female performers' use of Lewis Carroll's Alice in music videos, Lolita fashion in *Kamikaze Girls*, and men and women

associated with the preppy or "Ivy League style." Monden marshals data suggesting that young Japanese people are perhaps less affected by gender norms than they are assumed to be (p. 9). Important here is the idea of a "delicate kind of revolt" (p. 3). In chapter three, Monden explores boyish and playful cuteness in men's fashion, including the designer label Milkboy. In chapter four, Monden explores how idols use the figure of Alice, performing simultaneously as subjects and (to a certain extent, self-producing) objects. In chapter five, Monden demonstrates a positive and well-received vision of women who wear lolita, as a form of feminine androgyny.

Murai, Noriko. "The Genealogy of *Kawaii*." In *Japan in the Heisei Era (1989–2019)*, edited by Noriko Murai, Jeff Kingston, and Tina Burrett, 245–258. London: Routledge, 2022.

In this chapter, Murai considers how *kawaii* became a mainstream social and cultural value that has mediated the lives of girls and women in Japan since the 1990s. She is especially interested in the intersection between *kawaii* and attempts at female empowerment. Murai analyzes the "*otona-kawaii*" (adult *kawaii*) phenomenon in which some women seek to maintain *kawaii* as a form of self-styling and expression into adulthood. Murai questions whether or not *kawaii* can truly be considered a form of female empowerment in contemporary Japanese society.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Sianne Ngai's theorization of cuteness as an aesthetic category has been foundational to the development of cute studies. Alongside its studies of the "zany" and "interesting," *Our Aesthetic Categories* argues that cuteness is a relatively new aesthetic arising from modern capitalist consumerism and situates cuteness vis-à-vis the historical elevation of the beautiful and the sublime in Western literature, art, and philosophy. Ngai further

theorizes the power dynamics embedded in cuteness as an aesthetic associated with smallness, softness, and simplicity and with ties to the childlike and feminine. While Ngai briefly addresses *kawaii* culture in Japan, the work's primary focus rests in American and other Western contexts. Nevertheless, it is a touchstone for studying cuteness through aesthetic theory.

Plourde, Lorraine. "Babymetal and the Ambivalence of Cuteness." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2016): 1-15.

Through the case study of Babymetal, Lorraine Plourde's article analyzes "cute metal" (p. 2). Metal is "not typically associated with cuteness, girlhood or bubble-gum manufactured imagery," and "Babymetal's choreographed girl-centered aesthetic would seem to be fundamentally at odds with metal's insistence on rebellion, anti-conformity and transgression" (p. 2). By bringing cuteness to metal and metal to cuteness, the group opens up the complexity of this aesthetic category. The author casts these dimensions in relief through a dialogue with Sianne Ngai's work, specifically her observations that cuteness is tied to "ugly feelings" and can trigger "aggressiveness," on the one hand, and that consumers often feel that they are being "manipulated" or "exploited" by "cute objects" (p. 3). Taking up examples such as Babymetal's shared screams and teaching their audience to "headbang" (p. 8), Plourde argues that this cuteness, usually connected to weakness, vulnerability, and girlhood, becomes empowered and "subversive" (pp. 4, 12–13). (See also Monden's approach to "rebellion.")

Sherman, Gary D., and Jonathan Haidt. "Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanizing and Dehumanizing Effects of Emotion." *Emotion Review* 3, no. 3 (2011): 245–251.

In this work, authors Sherman and Haidt note that the "cuteness response" is "prosocial," or that it tends toward attributing an inner life to and

humanizing the object and encouraging interactions and relations with it. (The response in the opposite direction is "disgust.") This challenges the prevailing view of cuteness as a releaser of parental "instincts," which has been championed since Lorenz in 1950. The authors' model explains the broad range of affiliative behaviors elicited by cuteness, the marketing of cuteness to children by toy makers and animators to elicit play, and the apparent ease and frequency with which cute things are anthropomorphized.

Shiokawa, Kanako. "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics." In *Themes in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, edited by John A. Lent, 93–125. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

In this essay, Kanako Shiokawa argues that cuteness can be observed everywhere in Japanese mass culture, but that manga plays an oversized role (p. 97). Inspiring followers and rivals, Tezuka Osamu's cuteness in round and squat forms became the default of comics in Japan. Next, comics for girls, which had become a major incubator of cuteness (p. 99), went through a revolution from the late 1960s into the 1970s and attracted even adult male audiences. As Shiokawa notes, the net effect of having an expansion of girls' comics into the mainstream was generations comfortable seeing hyper cuteness and girls and women in the lead role of their manga, anime, and related forms (p. 117).

Slade, Toby. "Cute Men in Contemporary Japan." In *Crossing Gender Boundaries Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, edited by Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry, 78–90. Bristol, United Kingdom: Intellect Books, 2020.

This chapter traces the development of *kawaii* from the early 1970s—a period that followed one of significant social and political unrest. It was then that *kawaii* fully entered fashion and self-styling, for men as well as

women. Author Toby Slade shows how *kawaii* fashion destabilizes social constructs, such as the role masculinity claims for itself as "the gender that is mature, serious and exclusively useful," by embracing the playful and childish (p. 79). In this way, he reveals how *kawaii* can blur the authority of gender binaries.

Yano, Christine R. *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Christine Yano's groundbreaking study remains an important text for understanding Hello Kitty and her significance as an icon of *kawaii* culture in Japan and beyond. *Pink Globalization* traces the social, historical, and political factors shaping Hello Kitty's creation, her mass popularity, and her promotion to the role of serving as Japan's cute face to the world. Positioning Hello Kitty as a global phenomenon right from her creation in 1974, Yano illuminates how transnational influences both informed Hello Kitty's original character design and concept and facilitated her ability to cross borders as a *kawaii* ambassador of the "Cool Japan" campaign. Yano likewise examines Hello Kitty's symbolic flexibility as a character who has come to be either reviled or admired by diverse communities around the world.