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Producing *iyashi*:

Healing and labor in Tokyo's sex industry

ABSTRACT

Women working in the Japanese sex industry provide deeply gendered affective labor to male white-collar workers. Their services center on *iyashi* (healing), a carefully constructed performance of intimacy that commingles maternal care with sexual gratification. Sex workers value this labor as providing socially necessary care to men who work in valorized sectors of the Japanese economy. Yet their own labor is produced within conditions of economic precarity. Moreover, intimate encounters in the sex industry are never divorced from the terms of a gendered economy. Sex workers use gendered discourses of productivity that reflect hierarchies of the value of labor to shape their performances of intimate care. These discourses demonstrate the centrality of gendered assumptions to conceptions of production and the economy. [*affective labor, gender, sex work, productivity, care, precarity, Japan*]

現代の日本性風俗業界で働いている女性は、ジェンダー化された感情労働を、とりわけホワイトカラー層の男性客に提供している。セックスワーカーのサービスは「癒し: healing」を中心として成り立っている。ここで議論される「癒し」とは、母性的なケアと性欲処理を混合させる事によって親密さを入念に演出する、構成されたパフォーマンスである。セックスワーカー達は、自身の労働が日本経済において重要な地位を占める男性から必要とされているのだから価値があると思っているが、性風俗の仕事は経済的に不安定な条件の中で営まれている。それに加え性風俗業界内での親密な出会いは、ジェンダー化された経済の条件から切り離す事はできない。セックスワーカーは生産性に関するジェンダー化した言説を用いるが、それは彼女らの親密なケアを形成する労働の価値の階層を映し出している。これらの言説は、「生産」や「経済」の概念形成の中心に、ジェンダー的前提が存在していることを明証している。「感情労働、ジェンダー、セックスワーク、生産性、ケア、不安定性、日本」

One evening in late November 2011, a taxi driver taking a sex worker and me to a nearby train station in northeast-central Tokyo gave us his unsolicited opinion about the sex industry's existence. My friend and I had spent the evening touring a local sex-industry district whose history spans four centuries of operation, and we struck up a conversation with the taxi driver, a sexagenarian native to the area. We had been talking about recent changes to the district's physical landscape when he suddenly seemed to want to make sure that I, his young, female, and visibly foreign customer, understood the significance of the sex industry's existence.¹ "Japanese men," he told us, as my friend nodded along, "work so hard that they just don't have the time to spend on seducing a woman. It's easier to just pay a woman to be healed [*iyasareru*] by her instead of investing a lot of time and money in a relationship."

The taxi driver was conjuring up normative images of male subjects laboring under an excessive work ethic. Whether he was speaking from personal experience or his observations of the countless male customers who had climbed into his cab (perhaps heading toward or leaving this particular sex-industry district), he was suggesting that being a productive worker is incompatible with having romantic relationships. Male workers did not have the time for emotional investment, yet there was something they apparently needed to be successful: *iyashi* (healing) from sex workers.

A few weeks earlier, Shiori, a veteran sex worker, had offhandedly told me something similar about the men she encountered in her work:

Most customers are sincere and completely ordinary individuals. They put all their effort into their work and when the exhaustion and stress become too much, once in a while they go to the sex industry and refresh themselves. I've often had customers show up exhausted who left saying, "Thank you so much. I'm really glad I came. Now I'm ready to face anything again!"²

In our conversations about the sex industry, Shiori had often mentioned *iyashi*. Now, in referring to exhausted customers coming to the sex industry to "refresh themselves," she was suggesting—as the taxi driver did—that her customers came for a "healing" that replenished their productive capacities as laborers.

These anecdotes are just two of many references to healing that I encountered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo on the sex industry. The sex workers I spent time with foregrounded healing—whether as *iyashi* (healing) or *iyasu/iyasareru* (to heal/to be healed)—as the central service of their industry. But healing *from* what? And *for* what?

Since the 1990s, a multivalent discourse of healing has become a focus of popular attention in many arenas of Japanese life. This discourse is modified in particular gendered ways in the sex industry, where it is a means through which sex workers conceive of and articulate both the nature of the intimacy they provide and its importance.

Women working in the contemporary Japanese sex industry value their care—or *iyashi*—for what they see as its contributions to the productivity of male white-collar workers.³ Recent political-economic and social transformations, especially neoliberal restructuring and shifting family forms, have put middle-class, white-collar masculinity in a newly precarious position. These political-economic circumstances lead sex workers to produce new understandings of the deeply gendered affective labor and care work they provide. Their services center on *iyashi*, manifest here as a carefully constructed performance of intimacy that commingles maternal care with sexual gratification. By helping men to achieve sexual release within a reenactment of a relationship of care and indulgence, women in the sex industry understand themselves as enabling men to renew their productivity. While sex workers see themselves as providing socially necessary care to men who labor in valorized areas of the economy, their own work is stigmatized, short term, and unprotected. This contradictory position demonstrates that intimate encounters in the sex industry cannot be separated from the gendered nature of conceptions of “the economy.” How sex workers talk about productivity reflects gendered hierarchies of the value of labor and shapes their performances of intimate care.

My analysis is based on 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Tokyo from 2008 to 2013. My fieldwork took me to sites in and around the sex industry, including diverse establishments where female employees offer sexual services to male customers (e.g., sex parlors, strip theaters), training sessions for new employees, sex-industry exhibition shows for male customers, and venues on the peripheries of this industry (e.g., swingers’ clubs), where I observed and spoke with sex workers and others. In addition to spending time with adult Japanese women working in the sex industry when they were not at work, I conducted formal and informal interviews with female, male, and transgender sex workers, sex-industry business managers and support staff, customers, sex-industry journalists, police officers, and lawyers. My analysis is also informed by the prolific Japanese-language commentary on the sex industry.

Healing, intimacy, and the gendered division of labor

Healing by women working in the Japanese sex industry produces feelings of well-being, pleasure, connectedness, recognition, and masculine distinction in their customers. The interrelated concepts of emotional, intimate, caring, and affective labor account for the nature of production in (feminized) service-sector work and can help us to make sense of the labors involved in generating these affects. *Emotional labor* refers to how workers manage their emotions so as to generate a particular state of mind in their customers (Hochschild 1983, 7). *Intimate labor*, of which caring labor is one manifestation, “entails touch . . . bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity . . . or close observation of another and knowledge of personal information” (Boris and Parreñas 2010, 2). *Affective labor* refers to how the ability to make human relationships itself has become a primary site of labor in postindustrial economies (Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2004). More than just “selling personality,” affective labor facilitates the well-being of others, sustains personhood, and reproduces sociality (Buch 2013; Hardt 1999; Muehlebach 2011; Weeks 2007). We might also consider using the concept of *performative labor*, as suggested by Gregory Mitchell (2016), which refers to how sex workers, in catering to customers’ desires, stage relational aspects of their identities, especially race and gender.

These analytic concepts address the question of how to expand the category of labor to account for feminized affective and caring labors, a question that has long concerned feminist theorists of the gendered division of labor under capitalism (Delphy 1984; Engels 1978; Kuhn and Wolpe 1978). With the recent mass movement of middle-class women into the full-time workforce in many post-industrial contexts, the identification of unacknowledged forms of women’s work remains pressing, as unpaid reproductive labor previously relegated to the domestic sphere—itsself a culturally and historically specific phenomenon of capitalist relations—is increasingly subject to the market and filled by a global supply of flexible workers (Constable 2009).⁴ As Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby note, “Domestic tasks, sexual services, care provision, and . . . the process of biological reproduction itself have migrated out of the private space of the family into the labor market and are now central to post-industrial accumulation strategies” (2014, 5).⁵ At the same time, despite these changes, conventional gender norms and ideologies of intimacy from the private sphere (especially the naturalization of care as feminine) continue to be reproduced via their movement to the marketplace, thereby obscuring the roles of sex workers and others as skilled professionals.

As with other forms of feminized labor, the qualities that make *iyashi* effective as “healing” rest precisely on its being downplayed as labor. Sex workers go to great lengths

to produce something understood by their customers as based on an effortless and intrinsic femininity even as its successful achievement obscures the labor involved in their work. What is notable about iyashi, then, is that Japanese sex workers' own discourses about the importance of their work for male productivity are related to their own insecure and unstable laboring conditions. Sex workers themselves believe that there is a connection between iyashi and male white-collar productivity. The goal of supporting male workers who labor in protected and "important" areas of the economy is privileged in ways that naturalize feminized forms of economic productivity and that reflect gendered hierarchies of the value of labor.

In Japan male sexuality has long been seen as something that should be managed so as to productively direct the energy of men, whether in the service of wartime empire or the postwar economic "miracle" (Allison 1994; Frühstück 2003; Y. Matsui 1993; Soh 2008; Yoshimi 2000). For example, the recent blustering in 2013 of Osaka governor Tōru Hashimoto, who suggested to a US military commander that US troops stationed in Okinawa would be more easily managed if they were permitted to patronize local sex-industry businesses, was just one episode in a long history of ideas about how to productively canalize men's energy by controlling their sexuality.⁶

The precise forms of care, concern, attraction, romance, or love that sex workers may perform for customers emanate from particular political-economic moments (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2004; Hoang 2010; Parreñas 2011; Zheng 2009). As Elizabeth Bernstein has argued, "bounded authenticity" may best capture the nature of postindustrial commercial sex, wherein sex workers offer their customers "authentic emotional and physical connection" (2007, 103) but maintain boundaries so as to keep this intimacy firmly in the marketplace. The emotional labor of sex workers, Bernstein suggests, lies in producing intimacy that customers experience not only as authentic but also as equal, or even preferable, to that found in "private" relationships (see also Frank 2002). Women in the Japanese sex industry likewise implicate aspects of their "real" selves in producing iyashi, in ways that make the work personally meaningful and endow it with a sense of value and distinction.

Moreover, how male customers in the sex industry imagine the national economy in the global order and their own position within it shapes their desires—and sex workers' perceptions of these—for particular embodied performances of femininity by sex workers. As Kimberly Kay Hoang (2015) has argued, men's differential access to economic capital within global markets produces competing masculinities that play out in the intimate relations of the sex industry. In Vietnam, for instance, sex workers in four different sectors of the sex industry manifest distinct affective performances to cater to their customers' aspirations

for masculine distinction, whether that entails exhibiting the conspicuous consumption of an ascendant Vietnamese business elite or assuaging expatriate Western businessmen's feelings of failed masculinity (Hoang 2015).

What is distinct about iyashi is that it explicitly links sex work to a form of healing through maternal care, connecting this reparative care to new conditions of male white-collar labor. Intimacy in the Japanese sex industry relies on both normative, middle-class family tropes of nurturing and on relations that are possible only outside of households and domestic units. This is particularly apparent in how iyashi commingles maternal care with sexual gratification and the sensation of "being a man." The touch, attentiveness, intuition, indulgence, and maternally inflected erotic care of iyashi produce feelings in customers that sex workers understand as allowing them to relax and, ultimately, to work again, renewing and enabling their productivity. The connections that sex workers make between their services and an imperiled masculinity demonstrate the *reparative* aspects of intimacy in sex work.

Exhausted men

To consider what forces are exhausting Japanese men, I return now to what the taxi driver and sex worker at the beginning of this article collectively asserted: that excessively productive male workers periodically go to the sex industry to "refresh" themselves. Both speakers were referring to the dominant gender ideal of postwar masculinity: the "salaryman," a middle-class white-collar corporate or government worker (Dasgupta 2013; Roberson and Suzuki 2003). Credited with producing the postwar economic "miracle," this figure has long been defined by excessive work and devotion to his employer, an entity whose corporate paternalism deeply remaps the lines between public and private, work and play, in employees' lives (Allison 1994; Borovoy 2005).

Recent political-economic and social precarity have recast this gender ideal as a source of tremendous social anxiety in a context in which the tenets of the postwar male breadwinner ideology and nuclear family have come undone. Since Japan's asset bubble burst in 1990, the national economy has suffered two decades of slow growth punctuated by periodic recessions. Neoliberal reforms implemented by Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi in the mid-2000s and large-scale economic restructuring have refashioned the dominant postwar employment system, whose hallmark had been (male) lifetime employment and seniority-based wages (Kushida, Shimizu, and Oi 2013; Rosenbluth and Thies 2010). Workers of all statuses now experience instability and risk. To lower costs, companies have slashed full-time entry-level positions for university graduates. Nonelite young men who previously had been guaranteed stable employment upon graduating high school now face the emergence of multiple tracks within

companies and the rise of temporary work (Allison 2013; Brinton 2011). Similarly, job security is no longer assured for middle-aged and older male employees, and although seniority remains important in determining promotion and compensation, performance factors have become more significant (Conrad 2013). Most striking, however, has been the rise of nonregular employment—meaning part-time or temporary—as a permanent sector of the male labor market: about 20 percent of male workers are now nonregular (Shimizu 2013, 166).⁷ The rise of male economic precarity has prompted national political and media attention to growing inequality and male poverty, including anxieties about the end of the “mass middle class” (Satō 2000).

The postwar male breadwinner ideology has eroded hand in hand with decreasing rates of marriage and child-birth among the younger generations, calling into question the nuclear family’s continued dominance (Ronald and Alexy 2011). The unpaid reproductive labor of the housewife, in particular, which has long subsidized male labor, is no longer available for many men in their 20s and 30s, as women delay—or put aside entirely—marriage and child-birth. This altered picture of male economic stability has led to simmering anxieties about Japan becoming a “sex-less” society, as media commentators view men who are not competitive economically as losing out in the marriage market as well (Kadokura 2009). These men are widely expected (by those in the media and elsewhere) to seek sexual partners in the sex industry instead. It is no surprise that, in this context, domesticity and disappearing family forms have become prominent signifiers for some sex-industry businesses (see Figure 1).

Since the late 1990s, salarymen have become the cultural representatives of both depression and suicide in the popular imagination as depression has become a more culturally salient category and diagnoses of it have skyrocketed (Kitanaka 2012). It turns out that salarymen’s “self-sacrificing devotion, discipline, and sense of responsibility” (Kitanaka 2012, 131), vaunted as their normative values, have made them not just ideal workers but also the most likely candidates for excessive fatigue, alienation, and workplace-induced stress. This is especially so as the strains of a long-term economic recession have reconfigured which workers are valuable assets.

Against this backdrop of economic and social dislocation, a generalized and multivalent discourse has emerged around the concept of *iyashi*. *Iyashi* first became a focus of popular attention in the mid-1990s, amid a growing adoption of psychiatric categories of mental illness (especially depression) and increased concern with forms of “existential alienation, loneliness, and loss of meaning” (Ozawa-de Silva 2008, 536) in the face of both national affluence and economic recession and restructuring. Its prominence as a discourse only increased in the 2000s, as Japanese commentators coined the term *muen shakai* (a society

ヘルスコパニオン 日給35,000円以上 月給80万円以上

熟女専門店ですから40代ではまだ若い!
60代・60代の方も日々活躍! 明るく・甘えた・
マザコンがコンセプトの「おかあさん」

資格 ◆40才~60才位まで (年齢・ポディラインは一切不問)
勤務地 ◆新大久保
勤務日 ◆自由出勤制 (貴女のご都合に合わせて)
時間 ◆10時~22時の間のお好きな時間でOK!
待遇 ◆初心者歓迎、アリバイ対策、日払い可
体験入店可、最低保証有、自由出勤制
交通費支給、罰金・ノルマなし、寮完備
個室待機、各種ボーナス有、専用出口
その他、生理休暇有り。

応募 ◆10時~22時
お気軽に電話・メールで♪
業種 ◆デリバリーヘルス
交通 ◆JR新大久保駅より徒歩2分

新大久保おかあさん
新宿区大久保1-7 ☎0120-989-556

これから働く 40代 50代 60代
元気で働く まだまだ稼ぐ
おかあさんは 明るく元気な ポジティブな 主婦

当店最高年齢 62歳 平均年齢 50.3歳 当店限界年齢 69歳

♥おかあさんのコンセプト
「明るく」マザコン「アニメ」新世代接客層の獲得。
“熟女店”でありながら、明るく・下向き・密着感を一切排除し、従
来の理由あり常連層中心の熟女店ではなく、「ポジティブ」で「明る
い」をコンセプトに毎日「新規・フリー」で働くお盛況店です。

♥年齢やポディラインは一切問いません!
「おかあさん」は世の男性なら誰もが憧れる「母性」「甘え」「包
容力」(40歳~60歳)をコンセプトとしています。見た目ではわ
からない程やかな貴女なら稼げることをお約束致します。

池袋 0120-013-612
新大久保 0120-989-556
鷺谷 0120-448-456

Yell! おかあさん 風俗 検索

Figure 1. An advertisement for Okāsan (Mother), a Tokyo escort business, in the February 2011 issue of *Momoco*, a free employment magazine for the sex industry. Motherhood and domesticity are prominent signifiers for Okāsan, which recruits women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. The headline at left, above the vacuuming housewife, reads, “Mother is positive, bright, and cheerful.”

without connections) to characterize the moment of insecurity and alienation that captured the nation (Allison 2013; NHK 2010). The term recalled “the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails,” as Andrea Muehlebach (2013, 298) notes in summing up recent ethnographic attention to precarity.

The continued discursive salience of *iyashi* in postbubble Japan suggests a widespread sense of incompleteness, stress, and trauma that existing social relations have left unaddressed. Alongside these influences, *iyashi* also refers to the need for relief from the unhealthy or antisocial buildup of exhaustion, tension, or negative feelings. More concretely, *iyashi* (along with related terms) has been used as an umbrella term for a diverse set of activities and services aimed at helping those affected by the March 11, 2011, earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster to overcome tragedy and trauma, especially through methods that physically or mentally displace people from their

everyday circumstances. The use of *iyashi* by counselors and therapists coexists with statements by figures such as the president of the Japanese Olympic Committee, who announced in 2012 that securing the 2020 Olympic bid for Tokyo would “heal” the nation (AFPBB News 2012).

Iyashi, then, is less about healing in a medical sense and more about “something that is soothing, is comfortable, or brings one heavenly feelings” (Ozawa-de Silva 2008, 536), thus spanning a broad range of mental, emotional, and psychological meanings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a consumer market quickly developed around proliferating discourses of *iyashi*. Today, it has an expansive use as a marketing term, and all manner of products and services are advertised as “healing type,” including vacations, music, aromatherapy packages, food, and collections of puppy or kitten photographs. Even personalities—such as those of actors or musicians—can be signified in this way. The market for *iyashi* falls along deeply gendered lines, with products and services aimed at women centering on health and beauty, while for male consumers *iyashi* typically implies sexual services (T. Matsui 2011).

In the sex industry, this generalized discourse around *iyashi* is modified in deeply gendered ways. Here, *iyashi* figures as a pivotal discourse in relation to which sex workers conceive of and articulate both the nature of the intimacy they provide and its importance. Although there are historical continuities running through the affective, emotional, and intimate dimensions of sex work and other forms of commodified erotic intimacy in Japan, *iyashi* is particular to the postbubble economy sex industry. For instance, the elite hostesses whom Anne Allison (1994) worked with in Tokyo during the bubble economy did not use *iyashi* as an operative term, and Allison did not mention it in her ethnography. Rather, it is under conditions of increased concern with an imperiled masculinity that *iyashi* has become a key term within the sex industry. My fieldwork interlocutors echoed one another in commenting that although sexual gratification was ostensibly what was on offer in the sex industry, *iyashi*—the “natural” product of the encounter between female sex worker and male customer—was what they understood as the central service.

Producing *iyashi*

In September 2011, I participated in a training session for new employees of a sexual-massage business at the invitation of the session’s instructor, a woman I call Mika. Sexual massage is only one category within a broad array of legal sex-industry businesses in Japan today, which offer any and every service short of penile-vaginal intercourse. In the early 1980s, the sex industry diversified heavily, and among the new types of businesses emerging, many were characterized as representing a *nyū fūzoku* (new sex industry) organized around role-playing, arousal, and “changing one’s

day-to-day frame,” perhaps anticipating the emergence of the discourse of *iyashi* (NHK 2002, 153). These businesses dominate the legal sex industry today. More broadly, the sex industry exists at one end of a spectrum of a larger market for eroticized intimacy in which women, men, and transgender people provide affective labor and sexual(ized) services. For example, the proliferation since the 1990s of host clubs, where female customers pay for romanticized or intimate conversations with young men, shows that Japanese men may also be affective-erotic laborers. But this industry is dwarfed by the male-centered heteronormative industry, and many of the host-club customers are themselves hostesses or sex workers (Clennell 2006; Takeyama 2005, 2010).

At the time of the training session, Mika was 28 and had already worked in the sex industry for 12 years, having furtively (and illegally) started during high school. Since then, Mika has explored the breadth of sex-industry businesses and been Number One—a designation given to the highest-earning employee—numerous times. Being ambitious as well as entrepreneurial, Mika had started a successful side career as a sex-industry instructor and consultant three years earlier, and had even written a book about her experiences. Businesses interested in increasing their clientele and reputation hire her to train employees in everything from technique to conversational skills to creating an appropriate ambience for customers. These sessions are also available for purchase on DVD.

Mika is friendly and outgoing, with a charm capturing one of the qualities most highly valued among unmarried women in the Japanese sex-gender system: being *akarui*, or bright and cheerful with a consistently positive outlook. She also manifests the highly developed interpersonal skills that seem to be shared, without fail, by successful sex workers: conversational dexterity, a memory for small details, and a seemingly effortless ability to personalize relationships. Speaking with Mika, one feels what Sayaka, another veteran sex worker, summarized as the essence of what all customers yearn for: “the sense that the other person really understands you and that your individual existence matters to them.” As in other healing contexts, these healers perceive things that others cannot—or, at least, do not.

When I exited the ticket gate at a train station in central Tokyo early in the afternoon on the designated day, Mika was there waiting for me, smiling broadly. A few minutes later, the training session’s live model showed up—a man in his late 20s named Mr. Mori, dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt.⁸ Although he did not volunteer any personal information, Mr. Mori’s availability in the middle of the afternoon suggested that he, like many of his generation, was a nonregular worker (Brinton 2011). He had participated in Mika’s demonstrations several times before as a way to earn extra income. The three of us left the station on foot. In keeping with the general proximity of sex-industry

businesses to central commuter hubs and entertainment districts, our destination was only a two-minute walk from the station. Twenty meters down a side street off the main avenue, we turned into the entrance of a multistory building housing several sex-industry businesses.

The training session took place in a former Internet café being converted into the office of an escort sexual-massage business. There, eight spectators, including myself, sat on the floor around a massage bed in the center of the room. As Mika changed into a “sexy nurse” tunic with hearts on the sleeves and bust, visually exemplifying gendered care, a staff member distributed clipboards, notepaper, and pencils for us to take notes with. Over the next two hours, Mika and Mr. Mori demonstrated to us an ideal encounter between sex worker and customer.

What can be described as making a customer “feel like a man” was made manifest through the collapsing of the role of child and lover in the customer. Mika narrated as she performed on Mr. Mori, often pausing to comment on her actions. She explained to us that the reigning metaphor for the encounter between sex worker and customer should be a maternal one. Assuming a maternal stance allowed sex workers to create the circumstances in which a customer could momentarily suspend his responsibilities and obligations, replacing them with a desire to be indulged and to act selfishly. For example, Mika told us that women should speak to their customers as mothers to their children. If men were going to the sex industry to seek *iyashi* from work and responsibilities, then doing things “like a mother” was the ideal position from which to praise them and acknowledge their efforts. Similarly, when Mika demonstrated how to carefully dry a man off following the shower that preceded the massage, she suddenly enveloped his head in the towel and vigorously rubbed his cheeks, mimicking a familiar childhood gesture. In a high-pitched voice she exclaimed, “That felt good, didn’t it!” This explicit infantilization served to highlight that these white-collar salarymen could allow themselves to be passively guided by the sex worker.

In articulating this interpersonal dynamic, Mika was borrowing, in part, from long-standing Japanese psychoanalytic discourses. The formulation of performing a mother-child relationship, while perhaps also involving a degree of incestuous role-playing (although this was never mentioned), expresses a model of social relations developed by the Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi (1973).⁹ Doi’s widely popularized model holds that *amae*, or the desire to be passively dependent on a benign caregiver, governs all Japanese social relations, including those between mothers and children, wives and husbands, and companies and their employees (see also Borovoy 2005). Thus, when Mika told us that the customer desired to play *amaechan* (spoiled child), she was drawing on the expectation that (male) selfish behavior would be indulged by an unconditionally

nurturing and warm caregiver, and that this indulgence would endow the customer with a deep sense of psychological well-being and security.¹⁰

Framing the sex worker’s care as maternal also allowed Mika to foreground the customer’s laboring status, enabling the man to recognize himself as a white-collar worker through the sex worker’s expression of intimate concern. This was evident during various subtle physical and verbal references. For example, later during the massage, as Mika was rubbing Mr. Mori’s shoulders, she told us to express concern, saying, “Your shoulders are too stiff. You’re working too hard again, aren’t you!” It was not expected that the customer would respond to this with anything other than perhaps a grunt. In making such a comment, Mika acknowledged the man’s efforts as a productive and capable worker, and acknowledged, too, the importance of this work in her resigned reference to the habitual state of the man’s exhaustion—he was working too hard *again*. His hard work was corporeally manifest to her in his tight shoulders and his weary body, in his passivity and desire to simply let himself be taken care of.

Although Mika highlighted the importance of maternal intimacy in producing *iyashi*, the forms of eroticized flirtation, arousal, and indulgence that constitute this “healing” depart in many ways from the types of intimate and personal relations linked to households and domestic units, such as mother-child or even wife-husband relations. The difference here is that the relationship between sex worker and customer is *not* a durable one saddled with implicit obligations and future expectations. The exchange of money frees the customer of these obligations. Instead, these are relatively anonymous relationships that are made to appear highly personalized. Rather than another mother or wife, what customers desire is someone skilled at making them “feel like a man,” including carrying the service through to (male) orgasm.

Mika had a twofold understanding of *iyashi* in relation to male laboring bodies. First, *iyashi* involves an acknowledgment of the efforts, burden, and hard work shouldered by the individual. She explained to us that to succeed, men must steel themselves, subordinating their needs and desires to put all their energy toward a larger goal. “Lots of individuals,” Mika told us, “at their companies and in their families depend on them to do this, but no one ever thanks them. That’s what being a man means, after all.” Mika and other sex workers I spoke with imagine *iyashi* as both an acknowledgment and a momentary suspension of customers’ responsibilities and obligations. In other words, *iyashi* is understood, in part, as a form of deep psychological or mental relief.

Although Mika thought this first understanding of *iyashi* was primary and the most important, a second conceptualization acknowledged a carnal aspect. Mika dramatically explained male sexuality as following a wavelike

trajectory, wherein male workers are asked to “endure, endure, endure, and then phewww! They can release.”¹¹ Rather than explaining this aspect of male sexuality in biochemical terms, however, as she had earlier when discussing what happens in the brain during an orgasm, she reiterated her earlier description of pushing oneself for the sake of a larger goal. Her description of male orgasm, in fact, imagined it as an act of social reproduction necessary for the continued existence of the company, the family, and even society at large.

Postwar Japanese corporate settings have long relied on commodified erotic intimacy to motivate or reward male productivity (e.g., through company-organized international sex tourism), but iyashi presents an important departure. As Allison (1994) illustrates, Japanese corporations during the 1980s bubble economy devoted significant time and money to male after-hours “play” in Tokyo’s high-class hostess clubs as a way of reinforcing social attachments within and between companies. The hostesses’ feminized and often highly sexualized conversations flattered male egos, catalyzing a corporate masculine bonding that produced committed workers for Japanese companies. Crucially, in the recession and restructuring of the mid-2000s, corporations scaled back their funds for hostessing and sexual entertainment. Although the Ministry of Finance recently adjusted its tax policy such that 50 percent of selected entertainment expenses would be tax-deductible for large companies, this has not included expenses for sexual services (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 2013). In this era of flexible spending, individual men must now take on their own commodified erotic intimacy without explicit company sanction or financial support. As companies have reconfigured which workers are essential, their workers have become responsible for their own healing, even as this is still understood as ultimately directed toward the company’s benefit.

Attendant with the changing political economy of both corporate entertaining and labor relations, it is the reparative dimension of iyashi as manifest in the reenactment of a relationship of care and indulgence—and even infantilization—that is characteristic of the new era of social and economic precarity. At the same time, even without overt corporate financial sanctioning, patronizing the sex industry still figures within the realm of corporate leisure. Visits to sex-industry businesses are still often a social event facilitated by relations between coworkers, often senior and junior colleagues. According to the women I spoke with, many white-collar workers have regularly scheduled visits, suggesting that using these businesses is less a leisure activity than part of a health-maintenance regime. Furthermore, deal making still occurs around the parameters of a night of corporate entertaining, of which a visit to a sex-industry business may still be one component. In Mika’s description (echoed by other sex workers), the sex industry

has now taken over the integral function of caring for exhausted workers.

Cultivating attentive empathy

The qualities that make iyashi effective as “healing” rest precisely on the downplaying of it as labor—that is, as work that is productive of capital. Generating affect in this context rests on establishing intimacy. This, in turn, rests on the assumption that sex workers’ performance emerges not from the pursuit of wages but from a basic kindness that is naturalized as female. Through their reiterative performances of normative femininity (Butler 1990), especially maternal intimacy, women in the Japanese sex industry naturalize iyashi as deriving from the very “essence” of being a woman. As with other forms of affective labor and care work, however, the supposedly effortless femininity seen to produce iyashi is grounded in deliberate and often exhausting labor.

Despite claims by Japanese commentators (on Internet discussion boards and elsewhere) that sex work is “easy for women,” most of the women I spoke with vehemently reject the idea that “anyone” can do it. Such misconceptions infuriated Aimi, a single mother who had worked in the industry until her late 30s. Seated in a crowded Starbucks Coffee Shop with the next patrons only half a meter away, she exclaimed angrily, indifferent to her surroundings, “I think every woman should really have to do an interview [at a sex-industry business] once in their life. That way they’d understand that you could be the cutest girl in the world and still fail your interview!” Like Aimi, other sex workers bristled at people who failed to appreciate the skill and effort their work demanded, and who instead attributed sex workers’ success to factors such as personal attractiveness. Women without technique, empathy, or interpersonal skills, they told me, cannot attract a regular clientele, and those who do not think beyond their own needs cannot offer iyashi.

Successful sex workers, I was unanimously told, are those who are—through effort and cultivation—able to embody customers’ desires. This requires significant self-awareness and dedication, work that is accomplished individually through the woman’s own initiative. In fact, the sexual-massage training session that I attended is something of a novelty. Across the industry, substantive training for new employees rarely extends beyond a short orientation and a brief run-through of the standard service “menu” with a staff member. Women working in the sex industry are, in other words, largely left to their own devices in cultivating erotic technique, interpersonal skills, and industry savvy, and in finding legal and sexual-health information. Job training is thus incumbent on women’s individual initiative and takes numerous forms. Mika, for instance, uses her free time to immerse herself in music, movies, and manga comics popular among men. This gives her a

repertoire that she can draw on to converse with customers and produce a sense of connectedness. More critically, she is always on the lookout for models that she can emulate in embodying an “ideal” feminine figure to her customers, and she scrutinizes women whom she is told possess strong erotic energy.

Attentive care in the sex industry comprises numerous “subtle and mundane acts of care” (Buch 2013, 637) that make up care work generally—for instance, warming up the shower beforehand, carefully deflecting shower spray from the nape of the customer’s neck, kneeling in front of the customer while taking off his shoes, and suggestively grazing a customer’s knees with one’s breasts while undoing his belt. Sex workers’ care also involves a deeper approach to attentiveness itself, which is a central component of hospitality and sociality in Japan generally and a key aspect of intimate labor elsewhere (Boris and Parreñas 2010, 4). Attentiveness is especially associated with service work, in which workers are expected to think on behalf of the customer, anticipating, for example, when customers will want their sheets turned down, ice or alcohol added to their drink, or a lighter for a cigarette.

For instance, when prompted, Mika easily rattled off five different forms of attentive empathy that she employed in her work. Drawing on overlapping (and perhaps at times conflicting) notions of the body, its feelings, and its capacities, they included *mekubari*, *kikubari*, *kokorokubari*, *kizukai*, and *kokorozukai*. While the first three compound words can cumulatively be glossed as variants of “to be considerate” or “to take care of,” the first parts of the compounds refer to the *kubari* (distribution) of senses originating in different parts of the body: *me* (eye), *ki* (vital energy in the body), and *kokoro* (“heart-mind,” understood as being “the locus of feelings, consciousness, and authenticity” [Robertson 1991, 88n1]). Similarly, *kizukai* and *kokorozukai* refer to an earnest concern or solicitude mobilized through the use of one’s *ki* or *kokoro*. For sex workers like Mika, these embodied forms of attentiveness are understood as assisting them in knowing how to care for customers.

When producing *iyashi*, sex workers do not rely on attentiveness alone. Equally important is a form of cultivated deep association or empathy that recalls Viviana Zelizer’s definition of intimacy as interactions that depend on “knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third parties” (2005, 14). Shiori summed up this necessity with a piece of wisdom passed down to her by a more experienced “older sister” at her first workplace: *Kiku jyanakute, kanjiru* (“Don’t ask, feel”). The exhortation to “feel” expresses the need to build a deep association with each customer that is both intuited and based on experience. In doing this, sex workers construct male workers as individual selves who need to be—and can be—intimately understood. This contrasts considerably with how workers are treated in the male-gendered corporate or bureaucratic

workplace, where their needs are wholly subsumed under those of the company.

A story about another Number One told to me by Sayaka illustrates this.¹² The highest-earning woman at a store where she had previously worked was much older than the other employees. Although she was not stylish or attractive and had never appeared in any of the business’s advertising, she always put in more effort than anyone else.

She would write notes about each customer so she could remember details, like what they had spoken about. She would bring new socks as presents to her bachelor customers and would always remember birthdays. When she was with a customer, you could hear her moaning from across the store. Because she put in more effort than anyone else, the customers took a liking to her and would become her regulars. I always thought it was strange that she did so well since she was a single mother and could only work in the early afternoon [an unpopular time]. When I think about it now, though, I see that it’s *because* she had had various life experiences—like raising a child—that she really understood what hardship was and what it meant to do this work well.

Sayaka’s statement that the woman “understood what hardship was” suggests that this older employee had a heightened capacity to genuinely empathize with others and to offer them understanding and acknowledgment. This capacity, coupled with the woman’s ability to personalize each encounter, generated an attentive empathy that set her apart from her peers as an exemplary sex worker.

As with other forms of emotional, intimate, caring, and affective labor, what makes *iyashi* effective is the appearance that it derives from authentic feeling rather than calculated and deliberate labor—from what Kathi Weeks calls “spontaneous eruption rather than cultivated display” (2007, 240). Women in the sex industry cannot present themselves as skilled experts who deliberately and self-consciously cultivate their proficiency in producing *iyashi*. Rather, to be valued, the work that goes into producing *iyashi* must be concealed.

Amateurs, not professionals

Feminized labor is precarious labor in Japan, and this is especially true of sex work, given that it remains stigmatized and relatively unprotected work. Although *iyashi* is understood to heal or assuage the exhaustion and anxieties of white-collar men, it is produced within conditions of economic precarity for women as laborers. This becomes apparent when we look at the material realities of the female labor market that structure women’s participation in the sex industry. While the naturalization of gender normativity in this industry could be seen as advantageous in allowing women to participate in this lucrative corner of



Figure 2. A billboard located prominently across from a train platform at busy Shibuya Station, Tokyo, July 2011. In this advertisement for Vanilla, an employment website for the sex industry, the “cute” graphics highlight innocence, naïveté, and access to a consumer lifestyle. The text reads in part, “Get information on high-paying work!! I want to earn more! I really love money! Access us now and get information by searching ‘vanilla’ and ‘wanted ads.’” (Gabriele Koch)

the labor market, it also entrenches a labor structure built around undervalued and insecure female labor. In other words, sex workers’ exclusion from the full-time labor market is often justified by their successful enactment of the very assumptions of naturalized femininity that produce successful “healing” (e.g., authenticity, innocence, naïveté, and nurturing care).

Although Japanese political and media attention in the late 2000s fixated, as noted earlier, on a poverty “crisis” catalyzed by the economic restructuring of the male labor market, this attention has largely ignored the reality that female nonregular employment and poverty have long been the overlooked norm (Asia-Japan Women’s Resource Center 2009; Fujiwara 2009). In a context in which all workers now experience instability and risk, female workers are still typically the first to be downsized, and the feminization of poverty has become increasingly apparent.

In what remains a limited female labor market, the sex industry has acquired prominence as a site for women’s short-term employment in Japan. That is, insofar as *iyashi* is understood as female care work and thus aligns with widespread ideas of what women’s work is or should be, the sex industry has become more prominent as a venue for women’s temporary work. This is substantiated, among other things, by the quotidian visibility of advertising for the sex industry in urban public space (see Figure 2) as well as by anecdotal evidence from sex workers and managers.

While many of the same forces that threaten middle-class masculinity are also affecting female labor practices, fully *half* of the female workforce consists of nonregular workers (Shimizu 2013, 166). Overwhelmingly, women work

in the service industry. The situation is particularly unstable for women outside of normative family forms, especially single mothers, 80 percent of whom are divorced (Kōseirōdōshō 2012). Welfare restructuring from 2003 onward has diminished the already-minimal financial assistance given to single mothers (Ezawa 2006; Fujiwara 2008). Against this backdrop, the sex industry presents a uniquely lucrative and reliable economic opportunity for women. In fact, my interlocutors often stated that the sex industry is the highest-paying option for women who are struggling financially, whether because they are caring for children or relatives, paying off credit card debt, or coping with financial misfortune.

Yet, despite the attractiveness of this industry as a lucrative employment venue, women’s economic participation in the sex industry embodies their lack of recognition as laborers. Their labor in this industry premised on high turnover is typically short term, with lengths of stay averaging 11 months for 18- to 23-year-olds and roughly two years for women in their late 20s and in their 30s (Kaname and Mizushima 2005, 27). Sex workers are treated as part-time workers by the management. They receive roughly half the earnings that they bring in and are paid daily in cash. In contrast, male management and staff members are considered regular employees and have their wages credited to their bank accounts. Although average earnings for sex workers vary drastically, even women working at low-end businesses with few regular customers will earn roughly double the wage of the average “office lady” (a low-wage female office worker). In contrast, the average manager will earn roughly the same wage as a typical salaryman (Tachikawa 2010, 101, 119). Sex workers are perhaps best understood as individual contractors who are given a place to legally work but who receive few of the benefits of being regular employees and must negotiate their own embodied risk, especially vis-à-vis safety and physical and sexual health. Labor laws offer few protections to sex workers, and women in this industry receive no workplace benefits, including worker’s compensation when they contract a sexually transmitted infection.

While the nature of all affective labor and care work necessitates that its laboring aspects be obscured to some extent, female sex work in contemporary Japan is notable. Sex workers themselves believe that there is a connection between *iyashi* and white-collar male productivity. This discourse, which requires that their labor be concealed and downplayed, operates in relation to their insecure and unstable laboring conditions. Yet sex workers do not suffer from a “false consciousness” in which they do not recognize that their own actions and ideology undermine their interests. Many are keenly aware of the social value of the skills that make them successful at their work and cognizant of the double standard by which these are not recognized as having equivalent economic value to male-gendered

activities. They are thus placed in a contradictory position: they understand and articulate their work through the idioms of value available to them (e.g., female care of men), even as they are aware that the logic of a sexist economy denies this work social recognition.

Conclusion: The gender of productivity

Women working in Tokyo's sex industry often speak with great pride about their work. For them, the stress and exhaustion of their customers is self-evident, just as it is understood that the labor these men do is important. Against the backdrop of pervasive anxieties around an imperiled white-collar masculinity, sex workers value the care, or *iyashi*, that they deploy to repair the capacity of these men to be productive. They invest considerable effort in making their intimate encounters emotionally authentic and in doing so implicate aspects of their "real" selves in the work. At the same time, as Gregory Mitchell reminds us, in contexts of limited labor opportunity, sex workers' "ability to navigate and perform in the complicated affective terrain of desiring subjects" often entails considerable stakes (Mitchell 2016, 6). In shaping their intimacy and gendered performances around what they assume to be the needs of men who are facing new economic pressures and challenges, sex workers experience in an embodied way the larger shifts in the national political economy (Bernstein 2007; Hoang 2015; Mitchell 2016), as well as, more generally, the exclusion of women from the labor market.

Discourses of *iyashi* in the Japanese sex industry demonstrate that ideas about who plays a productive role in the economy shape how sex workers imagine and engage their customers' desires. The centrality of male laboring identities and questions of who is a productive worker in a context that might otherwise seem disconnected from such considerations illustrate that intimate encounters in the sex industry are never divorced from the terms of a gendered economy. Feminized affective labor is deeply implicated in regimes of male precarity in postindustrial capitalism. At a moment of perceived socioeconomic decline, sex workers' performances of gender and intimacy emphasize a reparative, maternal care that understands middle-class, white-collar men as hard-working producers who labor to the limits of their physical and psychological capacities, and whose search for relief is met with the reenactment of a relationship of care and indulgence.

Feminist scholars have long been interested in rethinking categories of labor to account for the unacknowledged economic roles of women. By thinking through gendered discourses of productivity that reflect hierarchies of the value of labor, we can see how it is that women may centrally assess the value of their work in terms that foreground its contributions to men's work. Adult Japanese women working in the sex industry imagine "the economy" as a

fundamentally masculine space, thereby "eclipsing" their own forms of feminized productivity (Strathern 1988, 155). Examining how sex workers narrate their industry's contribution to society thus powerfully demonstrates the enduring truth that there is no way to even begin to talk about "the economy" outside of how the concept of production is implicated in gendered assumptions. In other words, *how* people imagine the relationship of gender to production continues to constitute the basic terms of how they think about economic activity under neoliberal capitalism. Despite the movement of middle-class women into the full-time workforce in many postindustrial contexts, conventional gender norms and ideologies of intimacy continue to be reproduced, thereby obscuring the roles of women in service-based industries and elsewhere as professionals. Whatever else may have changed in the realities of the labor market, the gendered division of labor is still one of the most defining elements of the nature of work at present. Although questions of productivity might seem ideologically separate from intimate performances in the sex industry, the point is precisely that they are not—the performance of an eroticized and maternal care that is understood to enable men's productivity, in other words, *is* the gendering of the economy.

Notes

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1. Although the 1956 Prostitution Prevention Law (effective in 1958) prohibits prostitution, the law's narrow definition of "sex" as penile-vaginal intercourse has allowed for the gradual proliferation of a sex industry that legally offers every service short of this act. Since same-sex commercial sexual services do not involve this act, they are unregulated by this law. According to the most recent statistics published by the National Police Agency, there are about 31,700 legal sex-industry businesses across Japan (Keisatsuchō 2016, 1). There are no official data on the number of women working in the sex industry. Nonetheless, if we estimate that any given business has at least 10 women on its payroll—while taking into account the politics of numbers (Andreas and Greenhill 2010; Best 1990)—we can calculate that there are upwards of 300,000 female sex workers employed in legally registered

businesses nationwide. Up to a quarter of them work in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area.

2. All names in this article are pseudonyms, including the stage names used by women working in the sex industry.

3. The scope of this article is limited to the heteronormative sector of the sex industry, in which male customers patronize female sex workers. I do not take up questions of whether or how iyashi manifests itself in male same-sex or transgender sectors of the sex industry. (For Anglophone sources on same-sex and transgender sex workers in Japan, see McLelland 2002; McLelland, Suganuma, and Welker 2007.)

4. I use “reproductive labor” in the Marxist sense to mean all work that reproduces labor power, including housework, the care of family members, and procreative labor.

5. Although women have formed a flexible labor force in Japan since the onset of industrialization in the late 19th century (Sievers 1983), the more recent movement of women to the full-time labor market has taken place more gradually than in other post-industrial contexts. This is due in part to the enduring strength of ideologies valorizing women’s primary identity as wives and mothers. The market for domestic care and reproductive technologies is relatively small in Japan, while the demand for child care and elderly care, in contrast, is burgeoning.

6. In his comments to the press, Hashimoto reported that he had told the US military commander, “In Japan there are places [sex industry businesses] that are regulated and where you can legally go to release your sexual energy. If you don’t make use of such places, you won’t be able to control the sexual energy of hot-blooded marines” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2013). US Department of Defense regulations place sex-industry businesses off-limits to service members stationed overseas.

7. Kay Shimizu (2013, 166) notes that, in 2011, 35.4 percent of all workers were nonregular, including a staggering 54.6 percent of all female workers and 20.1 percent of all male workers.

8. Through terms of address, I am trying to replicate how status is constructed between sex workers and clients. While sex workers go by their personal names as a way of demonstrating a lower and familiar relational status, customers are referred to deferentially by their surnames.

9. There is a precedent for the theme of the overindulgent mother taking advantage of her son. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, anxieties over the excessiveness of the housewife as micromanager of her (male) children’s socialization and education manifested in stories of mother-son incest that circulated in the Japanese media (Allison 2000).

10. Other scholars have similarly identified applications of *amae* discourse in earlier eras of commodified intimacy (Allison 1994). Its deployment here differs insofar as Mika used it instrumentally as a means of reparative care through healing, a use that makes sense only in a context of widespread discursive attention to new pressures on male workers.

11. Mika’s interpretation of male sexuality (and masculinity writ large) in the passive framing of endurance is counterintuitive and contrasts with widespread notions of the aggressive “fighting” spirit associated with white-collar manhood in the prebubble era, especially since endurance has usually been associated with normative femininity. One explanation is that economic recession and restructuring have emasculated male corporate workers. Another is that female sex workers translate their understandings of male labor and exhaustion into female terms.

12. Stories of Number Ones abound in the sex industry. As symbols of success, they become objects of curiosity to other women working at the same business and, often, models against which to measure oneself. In many of the stories I heard, the punch line was

that an older woman thought to be “past her prime” was in fact the most successful worker.

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