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Face to Face: On-line Subjectivity in Contemporary Japan

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Merleau-Ponty argues that for a blind person, the cane becomes an extension of the realm of senses. The cane, in other words, fills in for what the blind person lacks in apprehending the world. In cyberspace, the computer user as represented on the screen lacks a body--a phenomenon that Murray and Sixsmith term "disrupted bodies" (1999). In this paper we analyze the compensations made for the "disrupted bodies" of Japanese computer subjects by asking the following questions: 1) what kinds of extensions of the body might there be in computer-mediated communication; 2) how might these extensions be culturally embedded; and 3) how do these bodily extensions shape the communities of which they are a part? We take as a case study the frequent use of *kaomoji* (literally, face marks; known in computer studies as emoticons)--manipulations of keyboard symbols to create faces--by e-mail and Internet users in Japan.

Our methods include surveys of Internet users in Japan, face-to-face and on-line interviews, and participant observation in chat rooms from June through November 2001, as well as hard-copy and electronic archival research. We first administered a survey (see Appendix A) by e-mail among fourteen informants from acquaintances and contacts in Tokyo, divided equally

by gender and across age groups from nineteen- to fifty-year olds. These initial respondents then circulated the same survey to their acquaintances, who ranged in age from teens to seventies. In all, we gathered data from sixty-eight surveys. Furthermore, we conducted six on-line and three face-to-face interviews among the survey respondents.

Although there has been much written about on-line communities and identities, relatively little research has been conducted on the tools of those communities and identities--here specifically the emoticon--graphic symbols of emotion drawn from elements commonly found on computer keyboards (Witmer and Katzman 1998, Sugimoto and Levin 2000). Emoticons originated in the United States in 1980 with the smiley, variously depicted as :-) or :) (Sanderson and Dougherty 1993). However their subsequent development in the United States has been limited in variety and usage (cf. Godin 1993; Raymond 1991). By contrast, the rapid and extreme development of *kaomoji* in Japan suggests a different confluence of social interaction, technology, and culture within the disembodiment of cyberspace. The contrast between American and Japanese emoticons has been summarized as twofold: 1) direction of the symbol, with American symbols read at perpendicular angles to the words, as shown above, and Japanese symbols read in line with words, as (^_^) or (^^;) ; and 2) expressive focus, with American emphasis on the mouth (hence, smile-y), and Japanese emphasis on eyes (Sugimoto and Levin 2000:144). However, these differences exist at the surface level of analysis. Our aim is to go beyond these superficial differences by utilizing phenomenological and semiotic approaches in analyzing the development of Japanese emoticons and their usage. The comparative aspects of analysis are embedded in our own collaboration between a Japanese (Katsuno) and American (Yano), as well as the American context in which we conducted our

analysis of Japanese materials.

We argue that Japanese emoticons or *kaomoji* re-embody Internet-based communication by pictorializing emotion as both sub- and supra-text. Although this may be true generally of emoticons everywhere and thus part of a more generalized technology-based culture, we place *kaomoji* within pre-existing processes and narratives in Japan as well, explaining their cultural referentiality. The processes of re-embodiment made possible through *kaomoji* exist by means of stereotypical forms of graphic representation. Japanese cultural processes, therefore, create the code by which *kaomoji* is made intelligible to users. Although based upon the human body (and therefore potentially universal), the interpretation of meanings given to that body and their code of representation suggest a culturalized approach. *Kaomoji* draws upon a well-developed language of graphic expression even as it pushes that code further. Moreover, by creating an adjunct means of expression based in the body, *kaomoji* thrusts that body on screen where it lays stake to electronic intimacy.

We analyze *kaomoji* as a retreat into body-hood, not post-human but nostalgically neo-human. The means by which *kaomoji* do this is through reasserting bodiliness on the computer screen, thereby redressing what has often been called the cybernetic condition of "leaving the meat behind" (Bell 2001, 140). As David Bell points out, "What we find in cyberculture are *techno-bodies*, rather than *tech-nobodies*" (2001, 141). "It is not a question of leaving the meat behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis" (quote from Hayles 1991, 290-291; Bell 2001, 143). The prosthetic, phantasmic quality of *kaomoji* is what compels us to research its use and development.

Theorizing On-line Communities, Bodies, and Subjectivity

In theorizing on-line communities, bodies, and subjectivity, we might do well to repeat David Porter's questions on Internet as a culture in itself:

1. What are the distinctive, defining characteristics of the Internet as a cultural sphere? . .
2. How does the Internet affect our understanding and experience of community? . . .
3. What can be said about the psychology of virtual personhood? . . .
4. What does communication become in this new cultural dimension? . . .
5. Finally, what are the political dimensions of Internet culture? (1997:xiii-xiv)

These aspects--culture, community, personhood, communication, and politics--shape our approach to *kaomoji* as a globally related, but locally distinctive element of Internet usage in Japan.

Another key question that guides our analysis is the extent to which computer-mediated communication is a mere extension of face-to-face talk or is, in the words of Allen Chun and Luke Cheng, a form of "counter-talk" creating "counter-publics" (n.d.:9). Indeed, in much early theorizing of the Internet, the potential for virtual sociality to create a public sphere of opposition caused great excitement. The linking of the Internet with its potential for resistance was understandable, especially since one of the first large-scale users of the Internet and e-mail was the academic community. However, since business and the general public have joined the ranks of regular users, that potential has become somewhat diminished. Nevertheless, in our discussion of *kaomoji* we retain the possibility of cyberculture as a culture of resistance, rather than complicity.

E-mail and other Internet messages become nothing short of Goffmanesque performances of self, keyed through conventional cues not unlike those framing verbal interactions with "a wink, gesture, posture, style of dress" (Goffman 1959; Hymes 1986, 62). What Richard Bauman asserts for oral performance holds true for computer-based electronic performances as well: "Performance . . . calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity" (1977, 11). That act of expression includes non-textual features such as *kaomoji*, which by virtue of their departure from text, call forth special attention. Gregory Bateson discusses the perceptual framing of social interaction as one in which participants constantly separate out the foreground from the background, the communication from the metacommunication (1972). *Kaomoji* provide the supra-text of metacommunication by invoking a performative frame in which messages may be read.

Danet et al identify five nested frames of experience invoked in their study of Internet relay chats [listed here from most to least inclusive]: 1) real life; 2) the Internet relay chat game; 3) party; 4) personal play; and 5) performance (1998, 52-66). Within the performative frame, users draw upon various keyboard devices that not only acknowledge, but inhabit the gaze of others by, for example, showing off. They present an example of virtual marijuana smoking that includes standard emoticons, such as the smiley :-), as well as variant facial expressions to denote different stages of intoxication (Ibid., 60-65). For example, the sequence

:-Q :| :| :\sssss :) may be read as "I put a joint into my mouth; I inhale twice, exhale, let the smoke out, and then experience pleasure." Their examples also include non-semantic, onomatopoeic and/or visual entries [e.g., sssssssssssssss to denote virtual smoking marijuana;

increasing the numbers of ‘s’s’ as the smoking extends; decreasing the number of ‘s’s’ as the smoke dissipates], indications of physical actions marked with a pair of asterisks [e.g., *passes joint*, *puff*, *exhale*], deliberate mis-spellings [e.g. “Sushpishus” for “suspicious” to simulate the slurred speech of intoxication], and silence [e.g. a blank line of entry followed by another line of entry, “Wow” to suggest an appreciative pause in the smoking] (Ibid., 60-65).

Debates on cyberspace heat up over issues of the body. The concept of cyberbodies was first mentioned in William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, which utopianized a computer-centered culture as one that transcends physical bodily limitations. Norbert Weiner’s notion of cybernetics as the reimaging of the human body into digital information created the hybrid form of human-machines, in other words, cyborgs (1984). Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows characterize cyberspace as “cultures of technological embodiment” (1995), by which they suggest that technology has reconfigured bodies into new realms of possibility. Following this line of argument, radical theorists such as Stelarc call for a post-biological hardening, hollowing and dehydrating of the organic body, getting rid of what he calls “primitive programming”--emotions, subjectivity, humanness. He calls the organic body the “psychobody” whose carbon chemistry generates outmoded emotions. In its place he proposes the “cyberbody”, an object of human, technological engineering. This, then, is the “post-human” (Stelarc 2000, 571).

The possibilities of post-humanness seduce and startle even the most jaded Cartesianist. The August 2001 issue of *Wired* proclaims, “Your body. Get over it,” focusing on technological advances for the disabled and their pioneering role in challenging limits of the physical body with reconfigured electronic prostheses. In a more academic sphere, a special issue of *Public Culture* edited by Carol Breckenridge and Candace Vogler focuses on disability criticism as a

new challenge to old mind-body concepts (2001). As the editors explain, "Disability studies teaches that an assumed able body is crucial to the smooth operation of traditional theories of democracy, citizenship, subjectivity, beauty, and capital" (Ibid., 350). Like queer studies that came before it, therefore, disability studies disrupts our assumptions of normalcy central to values and hierarchical structures. Donna Haraway sees cyberspace as a call to feminists to configure a world of their own making through the development of the cyborg, "a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (2000, 292). The cyborg, then, becomes all things to all critical intents and purposes. In the hands of these radical theorists, the [able] body becomes not merely dispensable, but an outmoded and dangerous albatross, tying concepts and practices directly to loci of power.

By contrast, *kaomoji* as a nostalgic retreat into bodyhood, become electronic prosthesis quite specifically of the face, suggesting their parallel with masks.[1] As art theorist E. Gombrich points out, masks invite the contradictory principles of camouflage and conspicuous marking, in both concealing identity while making one stand out (quoted in Danet et al 1998, 49; cf. Turner 1986). Danet et al analyze on-line nicknames as textual masks (Ibid.); here we extend the concept of electronic masks to include atextual *kaomoji*. Rather than camouflage, *kaomoji* mark the screen by their presence, performing identities and emotions within a well-defined cultural code.

Bell suggests, "We experience cyberspace in all its spectacular and mundane manifestations by *mediating* the material and the symbolic" (2001:2). Guobin Yang, too,

emphasizes the symbolic nature of cyberspace interaction when he writes, "Visibility [on the Internet] is directly expressed in symbolic forms, which means that visiblity struggles are symbolic struggles" (n.d., 12). The body thus becomes one important option as the material upon which the symbolic, *née* the visible, may be drawn. Cyborgs and *kaomoji* share the interface between humans and machines, but whereas cyborgs continually deny the humanness of machines, *kaomoji* continually insert humanity into machines. *Kaomoji* act as "perceptual mechanisms that interpret, negotiate and synthesize . . . external material processes" within the local context of culture (Bell 2001, 4).

Kaomoji here become electronic prosthesis not only of the face (and other parts of the body), but also of emotion that accompanies social interaction. Arturo Escobar notes that computer-mediated technologies have brought about a "regime of technosociality, a broad process of sociocultural construction" (2000, 57). We argue that *kaomoji* is a critical part of this technosociality, humanizing encounters with its own brand of Japanese spin.

Social History of Kaomoji: From Male *Otaku* to Female Youth Culture

In the mid-1980s to 1990s prior to the advent of today's Internet in Japan, Japanese cyberspace consisted of two major network communities: 1) academic users who relied on JUNET [Japanese Unix Network], and 2) general public users, connected to each other through *pasokon tsûshin* [from *pâsonaru konpyûtâ*--personal computer; *tsûshin*--communication]. JUNET linked universities and other research institutes through a non-commercial computer network, much as in the United States and Europe, for purposes of academic interaction and research. *Pasokon tsûshin*, on the other hand, linked individuals through commercial networks

similar to America Online or CompuServe in the United States. According to a 1993 survey of 969 *pasokon tsûshin* users, the major reasons for participation in computer-mediated communication was for the pleasure of on-line interaction, as well as to gain access to information (Kawakami 1993). Early and heavy users of *pasokon tsûshin* gained a reputation as *otaku* [colloquially, "geeks" or "nerds"; typically young males with narrowly focused interests, such as computers or comics] characterized by their obsessive computer-centered lives and isolation from mainstream society.

Although it is extremely difficult to document the first creation and/or use of *kaomoji*, it is said that the most popular and basic symbol (^_^) appeared in *pasokon tsûshin* around 1986. During this initial phase, *kaomoji* were inserted after the sender's name as part of a "signature." In subsequent phases, *kaomoji* appeared within the body of the message. The variety and number of *kaomoji* increased rapidly around 1990 with the establishment of large network service companies such as NIFTY-Serve and PC-VAN (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 December 1994).

The relationship between the two major network communities developed around the use of the Internet. Prior to 1993, the two communities retained separate spheres. While *pasokon tsûshin* users latched onto and developed Japanese *kaomoji*, JUNET users during the same period more typically used American emoticons [e.g., smiley] (Nojima 1993, 137). Because of the transnational links between academics globally, JUNET users shared a cyberculture with Americans more than with other Japanese users of *pasokon tsûshin*. In 1993, the government approved the commercial use of the Internet. Once *pasokon tsûshin* users gradually became accustomed to connecting to the Internet, the cyberculture they developed [i.e., *kaomoji*] came to supplant that of the American cyberculture adopted by JUNET users [i.e., smileys]. In addition,

the advent of Windows 95 with its preinstalled software and headline-making entry into the Japanese market in November 1995 accelerated the dominance of *pasokon tsûshin* cyberculture, including *kaomoji*, over all computer communities in Japan. Therefore, although JUNET is the predecessor of today's Internet in Japan, the cyberculture of which it is a part owes much to *pasokon tsûshin*.

The widespread use and development of *kaomoji* owes a great deal to what is known as FEP [front end processor][2]--that is, a conversion system developed for Japanese word processing to utilize a basic phonetic keyboard [typing romanized *kana*; syllabary] to produce pictographic ideographs [*kanji;* Chinese characters]. In this system, the user first enters romanized *kana* after which a particular *kanji* appears; if this is not the desired *kanji,* then by pressing the space key, alternate choices of homophones appear with different *kanji* spellings. The user may also customize the word processing with designated combinations of characters. In this way, they can enter particular *kaomoji* as a string of keystroke characters for future use when typing in appropriate words. For example, a user may preprogram their computer to automatically call up the *kaomoji* (^_^) when typing in *niko* [smile]. In this way, a user need not remember exactly how to produce particular *kaomoji*, but may reproduce it easily with a *kana*-spelled word. This keystroke conversion system greatly facilitated the inclusion of *kaomoji* in computer messages.

As a result of the increasing popularity and ease of usage of *kaomoji*, computer users--particularly *otaku*--began to develop hundreds and even thousands for their own use. Since 1993, at least twenty *kaomoji* dictionaries have been published, both in print and electronic media (e.g., StereoMagic 2000, Nagaoka 2001). These dictionaries list and classify *kaomoji* typically based on emotional patterns. Someone browsing through the dictionary can look up a

particular emotion and see the various *kaomoji* which have been developed to express it. The reader can then manually type the *kaomoji* into a message or program their computer to call it up with a designated keyword. Some of these dictionaries are available on CD-ROM or downloaded from websites (e.g., http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milano-Aoyama/8842 with about 45,000 *kaomoji)*, facilitating the installation of *kaomoji* into one's computer hard drive. Furthermore, all Japanese computers themselves now sold come with well over one hundred *kaomoji* preinstalled.

As *pasokon tsûshin* use became more widespread, so, too, did the use of *kaomoji* extend from *otaku* to other segments of the population. However, the true popularization of *kaomoji* rested in the hands of another technological fad and its users--*pokeberu* [abbreviation of "Pocket Bell", a brand-name of the most popular pager in Japan] and female high-school students. *Pokeberu* were introduced in 1992, became popular from around 1993 when pager companies reduced their basic fees, and reached its peak in 1996. *Pokeberu*, as pagers elsewhere, sent phone-back messages to receivers. Although *pokeberu* were originally marketed targeting businessmen, it was teenage girls who latched on to this new piece of portable technology and made it a social phenomenon. In the hands of teenage girls, *pokeberu* became wildly popular, tying up phone lines in big cities, especially at night, and causing Japan's NTT [Nippon Telegraph and Telephone] to restrict sales (*Asahi Shimbun* 13 August 1996). According to Masayuki Sasaki, director of the pager division of NTT, "while people usually receive pager messages no more than one hundred times a month on average, in the case of female teenagers, some of them get four or five hundred in a week" (Ibid.).[3]

With the inclusion of the pager's small digital screen, sized to hold little more than the call-back number of the sender, teenage girls began to exchange simple messages cleverly using

numbers and their dual pronunciation in Japanese as shorthand for words. For example, “0840" became “*Ohayô*“ [Good morning] through the following: 0=”o”; 8=”*ha*” from *hachi*; 4=”*yo*” from *yon*; 0=”o”/lengthening the previous “o”. Similarly, “724106" became *Nanishiteru* [What are you doing?], “0833" became *Oyasumi* [good night], and “3341" became *Samishii* [I am lonely]. Sugimoto and Levin analyze this use of *pokeberu* by Japanese female youth as an example of the emergence of new literary practices (2000, 138). Furthermore, smaller cliques of girls developed secret codes, creating exclusionary bonds of friendship centered around *pokeberu*.

In 1995, some pager companies capitalized on this primarily teenage female social phenomenon and developed *pokeberu* capable of sending brief text messages by translating numbers into *katakana* syllabary. Shortly thereafter, *pokeberu* users began sending not only text messages, but also *kaomoji* using the available fonts on their pagers. Many of these *kaomoji* depicted favorite cartoon characters and dolls, and could be created, then stored in the *pokeberu* data bank (Fujimoto 1997, 26-27). In a study of *pokeberu* users, Kazuko Miyake identified three basic types of messages: 1) greetings; 2) expressing emotion; and 3) asking another’s whereabouts (2001, 11). Of these, *kaomoji* appeared particularly frequently in the first two types (Ibid).

By 1997, the *pokeberu* had been displaced by the cellular phone as the technology of choice by teenage girls. One of the key components to this switch to cell phones and subsequent demise of *pokeberu* was the capacity of cell phones to send and receive text messages developed in 1996 (Matsuda 2000). Cell phones made another giant leap toward popularity in 1999 with the advent of the i-mode [Internet-capacity] phone put on the market by NTT DoCoMo. With

this, the Worldwide Web can be accessed by cell phone, *kaomoji* downloaded from particular websites, and installed in users' phones. Furthermore, most cell phones sold today come with preinstalled *kaomoji*. For example, in summer 2001, NEC released its N503I model of cellular phone which has preinstalled forty-five *kaomoji*, accessed by simply entering *kao*/face on its small screen [see Appendix B, Table 2].

In a survey of 1000 people in the Tokyo area conducted by NTT DoCoMo in February 2000, 91 per cent of high school students, and 95 per cent of college students own and use cell phones (DoCoMo Net 2000). By 2001, the cell phone had gained tremendous popularity, not only among youth, but in the general public. According to a poll taken by Nomura Sôgô Kenkyû jo in March 2001, 71.1 per cent of the Japanese population between the ages of fifteen and fifty-nine use cell phones (Miyake 2001, 6).

Furthermore, cell phones account for a great deal of Internet connectivity in Japan. In a poll conducted in November 2000, over 25 per cent of cell phone owners were found to use their cell phones, not computers, to access the Internet (Hashimoto 2001, 27), with that ratio increasing amongst the younger teenage generation. *Kaomoji*, too, dwell on-line often through cell phones, not computers. In a 2001 survey of 127 college students, 53.5 per cent of cell-phone users admit to including *kaomoji* in their text messages (Tanaka 2001, 41).

Intertextual Connections

The extreme development and frequent use of *kaomoji* does not, of course, come within a cultural vacuum. Rather, *kaomoji* draw from a wide range of intertextual connections that make its development not only possible, but also entirely plausible, if not predictable. These include

the following: 1) the conventions of play and aesthetics in traditional writing systems in Japan; 2) the modern embracing of technology and gadgetry in part for its own sake, in part for its very newness; 3) the pattern of "boom"/fad culture in Japan; 4) the development of an *otaku* subculture; 5) the rise of *shôjo* "cute" culture in Japan from the late 1970s and 1980s through the present; and 6) *manga* [comics] with its highly codified visual language.

Danet et al suggest that American computer expressivity derives in part from comics as visual display of action and emotion that straddles text and non-text (1998, 61). Likewise, Japanese keyboard expression such as *kaomoji* draws upon the visual language of *manga* (Japanese comics) in its development and proliferation. According to Fusanosuke Natsume and Kentarô Takekuma, a cell [single frame] of *manga* consists of not simply drawings and words, but a complex visual grammar of subject, object, word balloon, movement, background, *keiyu* [figure symbol], and *onyu* [sound symbol] (1995).[4] Each of these elements is taken as a means of expression, rather than as a neutral aesthetic component. Furthermore, *keiyu* may be subdivided into *manpu* (*manga* symbol or code) and *kôka* (effect), which together depicts the psychological state of characters or tensions within a scene (Ibid, 108). Creators of *kaomoji* draw upon the *manga* visual language depicting internal emotional states in fashioning faces from keyboard strokes. The strong influence of *manga* upon the development of *kaomoji* can best be seen in more elaborate examples that combine text and graphemes to produce, in effect, on-line *manga*-like cells of expression [see Appendix B, Table 3].

As one basic example of the visual language of *manga* utilized in cyberspace, the *kaomoji* (^_^;) includes (;) as a *manga*-derived symbol for sweat. This sweat drips both physiologically and psychologically as *hiyaase* [cold sweat], expressing nervous tension and

restlessness (Natsume 1995, 81). Another example is (- -#), which utilizes (#), a *manga*-derived symbol for a bulging vein at one's temple. This indicates anger, even rage (Ibid, 92). One example of the visualization of movement taken from *manga* is ((((((((((/^O^)/. This *kaomoji* represents running after somebody, with a quasi-Duchampesque stylization of movement.[5] This *kaomoji* may be used in a chat room when a partner is logging off, as in ((((((((((((((/^O^)/ wait!!

In *manga* and *kaomoji*, the eyes are considered to be the locus of facial expressivity. Therefore, elaborate codes have been developed around eyes, depicting characters, frame, movement, and emotion. Within emotion, eyes represent joy, fear, anguish, puzzlement, and astonishment (Yomota 1994, 122-125). Furthermore, eyes depict as modular parts in conjunction with other symbols. For example, whereas (^_^) means smiling, (^_^;) suggests a wry smile, because of the addition of a framing element of (;), meaning cold sweat. Elements such as these from *manga* become part of the visual vocabulary by which *kaomoji* may be more readily understood. This is not to say that all *kaomoji* are easily read (see Appendix B, Table 3). We cannot assume the universality of *kaomoji*'s interpretation, even within Japan. Any one person's familiarity with *manga* and other intertextual elements of *kaomoji* depends on several factors, not least being age, gender, education, and occupation. However, most of what are considered basic *kaomoji* are understandable to a broad segment of the population in Japan and need little explanation.

Negotiating Intimacy with Kaomoji

Because of the parallel development of *kaomoji* from *otaku* to teenage girls, from

computers to cell phones and back, it is important to analyze *kaomoji* use within its specific niches, rather than trying to generalize across subcultures. Therefore, we will discuss each of these niches separately: 1) electronic bulletin boards [including news groups and conference rooms], 2) Internet chat rooms; 3) e-mail; and 4) personal web pages.

Electronic bulletin boards

Electronic bulletin boards or news groups used to be the most popular niche in *pasokon tsûshin*. However, according to a 2000 survey conducted by the World Internet Project Japan,[6] the ratio of electronic bulletin board users in Japanese cyberspace is only 10.7 per cent, as opposed to 21.0 per cent in the United States (2000). *Kaomoji* used in this niche tends to be limited to basic ones, such as (^_^;) and (^^;). According to Sugiyama and Levin, these two *kaomoji* are used in instances when "Japanese writers are afraid they are saying something too strongly. It is an expression of the Japanese cultural value of modesty in communication" (2000, 144). For example, Mr. Kato,[7] a 32-year-old male employee of a computer company in Kanagawa, explained this in regards to his participation in electronic bulletin boards since the early 1990s.

> I used *kaomoji* when my messages sounded too serious. *Kaomoji* has the power to soften the nuance of a message. Conversely, I also used it when I wanted to put emphasis on something. Then I would use a *kaomoji* that showed my emphasis. Whereas in my face-to-face conversations, I felt I could always transmit the nuance of my sentence through my tone of voice or facial expression, in cyberspace-chat or e-mail communication, I cannot express the gap between what the sentence represents and what I want to say. To fill this gap, I used to use *kaomoji*. For instance, in Net News fj [a news group] when

> there is a discussion with many people, on the one hand, some kind of slight may be expressed by formal language, even if that is not people's intention. On the other hand, if one uses really casual expressions to prevent this, it sounds insulting and may even evolve into flaming. I solved this dilemma by using a formal mode of writing, and then making it informal by adding *kaomoji* like (^^;).

Mr. Kato talks about using *kaomoji* as a mediator between the formal language that he writes and the lighter mood he wishes to convey. The *kaomoji* soften the message in his cyber-dialogue, adding nuances of shade that vocal tone and body language would in face-to-face interaction. *Kaomoji* in this context becomes an electronic social lubricant.

Some theorists suggest that the Internet becomes a forum for faulty communication. David Porter, for example, argues, "In a medium of disembodied voices and decontextualized points of view, a medium . . . beholden to the fetishization of speed, the experience of ambiguity and misreading is bound to be less an exception than the norm" (1997:xi-xii). According to this, confusion reigns in Internet communication, unless senders append some kinds of extra-textual accommodations. The accommodations, then, made to these ambiguities and misreadings--including clarifications such as *kaomoji*--become part of what Porter calls "the collective response to this experience of ambiguity, the gradual process of adaptation to the semiotic universe of free-floating electronic alibis [. This] constitutes the unique culture of the Internet" (Ibid.:xii). Furthermore, not only is electronic communication more confusing, it is also potentially more inflammatory. Several researchers note that computer-mediated communication is more susceptible to argumentative discussion known in computer jargon as "flaming" than face-to-face interaction (Kiesler and Sproull 1991, Weisband 1992, Mabry 1998).

In both the case of Japan and the United States, the first emoticon was a smile--a grapheme intended to defuse the seriousness or argumentativeness of the text. The grapheme smoothed social interaction which might have dissolved into argument by words alone. *Kaomoji* thus become electronic cues of peace-making, de-flaming the interaction in its framing.

Internet chat

The ratio of Internet chat users in Japan is slightly lower still than those using electronic bulletin boards. In 2000, those who use this service make up only 9 per cent of users [as opposed to the US, where these are 18.7 per cent] (World Internet Project Japan 2000). However it is here in the informal arena of cybernetic chat that some of the more creative developments in *kaomoji* have taken place. Yahoo! Japan has various kinds of chat rooms in which ten basic *kaomoji* are made readily available (see Appendix B, Table 1). The user does not have to type in the *kaomoji*, but can simply click on the desired one and insert it in this manner. Even with the simplicity of access, however, many users prefer to use more complicated *kaomoji* (see Appendix B. Table 3). Why do so many chat users prefer more elaborate *kaomoji* than those proffered by Yahoo! Japan? Mr. Saito, a 31-year-old Tokyo businessman and former *otaku* explains:

> What I thought was fun about *kaomoji* was taking the time to make and use such an unproductive symbol. I always try to get a jump on my friends by creating new *kaomoji*. That's why, when using *kaomoji*, I like chat rooms rather than electronic bulletin boards, because in chat rooms conversation takes place one after another. This makes me want to use *kaomoji*, because somebody will respond immediately with another *kaomoji*.

Here we see *kaomoji*'s use as public display, as personal spectacle, in particular coming from an

otaku world. He also explains that in the past era of *pasokon tsûshin*, creating and using many kinds of *kaomoji* were a form of one-upsmanship for *otaku*. This competition for *kaomoji* held little regard in the non-*otaku* world, but led to the creation of hundreds and thousands of *kaomoji* now found in dictionaries. However, according to Mr. Saito, he and his friends no longer use *kaomoji*, explicitly because of its current widespread public popularity. For these *otaku*, *kaomoji* has become *passé* by virtue of its ubiquity.

Another aspect of chat room interaction in relation to *kaomoji* is that it operates in nearly real time. In chat rooms, most utterances are quite short, consisting of just one or two sentences, in the interests of quick banter-like social interaction. Moreover, the utterance often does not take the form of complete sentences, but fragments resulting in sequences of words. Because of the nature of the interaction, speed is important. According to Mr. Nakamura, a 23-year old university student in Tokyo:

> In chat rooms, you really need to be able to type fast, because typing is the basis of your conversation. Therefore, I type directly what I think in my mind. As a result, I cannot write whole sentences, but just some words, quickly. In this case, adding *kaomoji* to my words helps express my feeling or emotion more clearly.

The shorthand discursive style combined with the directness of communication from thought to text lends itself to *kaomoji* usage. Furthermore, the topics of conversation in chat rooms tends to be not serious, but light, suggesting *kaomoji* appropriateness. This type of communication differs from that in electronic bulletin boards or e-mail, which assumes a certain time lag in communication, affording the sender more time to think.

The timing of communication can greatly affect the style, content, and mode of

communication, including the use of *kaomoji*. For example, one of the frequently heard criticisms is that *kaomoji* degrades people's writing skill or is used as a crutch by people whose writing skills are already low. However, this criticism overlooks the fact that there are multiple modes of communication, even within computer-mediated interaction. Some are bilateral and in quasi-real time; others are unilateral and completely asynchronous. Moreover, this kind of criticism assumes a literary point of view. Indeed, quasi-real-time computer-mediated interaction uses text, and may be considered a form of literacy. However, it is not the same written literacy of whose texts Walter Ong writes: "establishes . . . discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be, because written discourse has been detached from its author" (1982, 78). The literacy developed in quasi-real-time computer mediated interaction should be distinguished from both the primary literacy of books and formal documents, as well as orality, into its own form which we call "secondary literacy"--that is, an oral mode of writing highly dependent upon the sequential unfolding of communication. Within this secondary literacy, chat room communicators do not have to write in complete sentences. However to express nuances of emotion or situation, they exploit the resources of the keyboard in the form of *kaomoji*.

To what extent can formulaic *kaomoji* express what words cannot? What are the communicative resources exploited by *kaomoji*? How do *kaomoji* "speak"? When we posed these types of questions on the powers of communication of *kaomoji*, users themselves were hard put to comment. Most answered that *kaomoji* express "just somehow [*nantonaku*]." Part of the difficulty in explanation lies in the fact that *kaomoji* express in part from their juxtaposition within a particular social context of interchange. In many ways, one could say that *kaomoji*

"speak" much like a mask does, in particular a mask with very little written on its face, and therefore one in which much may be read.

In addition, although dictionaries identify *kaomoji* with specific meanings as dictionaries must [and which we continue in Appendix B], we argue that users themselves do not necessarily take each *kaomoji* at face value for their stereotypical meaning. Instead, *kaomoji* remain open to interpretation, adding to the texts they embellish, while drawing upon those texts for their own meanings. The meanings of *kaomoji*, as we have discussed earlier, are highly contextual and interpretive. Furthermore, *kaomoji* make possible an on-line surrogate face, received as not just any face, but specifically that of the person with whom they are interacting. The screen itself--and the symbols flickering on it--become objects to behold, akin to Roland Barthes' "pleasure of text"(1975). The disembodiment of cyberspace seduces with its own stamp of pleasures.

Kaomoji must also be embedded within play, as several authors point out (Danet et al 1998; Danet 2001). Drawing upon classic play theorists such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, Danet et al analyze the considerable overlap between real-life and digital play as both being "voluntary, intensely absorbing, done for its own sake, and . . . more or less rule-governed" (1998, 43). Part of this sense of play over the Internet derives from the visual spectacle of language on screen (Ibid, 47-48). Words on-screen are coupled with their own display as a form of aesthetic packaging that lends itself to play. A viewer of these messages switches between different codes of interpretation from strings of characters as words to characters as aesthetic objects in themselves.

Our interviews with *kaomoji* users point to the essentially social nature of the communication style, in particular when many respond, "I use *kaomoji* only with others who use

them." *Kaomoji*, in other words, become part of the communication context, and users match their language to those around them, much as any code-switcher would. The use of *kaomoji*, then, lies both in the person, as well as in the situation. In different situations, different persons may or may not use *kaomoji*. In fact, chat rooms themselves could be characterized as *kaomoji*-friendly or -hostile. A user would be far less likely to use *kaomoji* when entering a chat room that already had none. As Miss. Kaneda, a 22-year-old college student in Tokyo explains, "When I get a message with *kaomoji* as a clear response to the *kaomoji* I sent, it's really exciting!"

E-mail

In discussing *kaomoji* in e-mail, we have to differentiate between that generated on computers (dominated by *otaku*), as opposed to that from cell phones (dominated by teenage girls). The former depends specifically on senders and receivers working on computers, and typically incurs a time lag in communication. The latter depends only upon senders and receivers having access to their cell phones, which most carry with them constantly. Since most cell phone users in Japan keep their phones on at all time, the interaction over cell-phone-based e-mail more closely approximates real time. Furthermore, with *soku-resu* [literally, "quick response"] interaction, senders and receivers quickly exchange short messages, carrying on an e-mail conversation with hardly a lag.

Besides the difference in users, and the approximation to real time, computer-based and cell-phone-based e-mail differs in use of *kaomoji*. In a 2001 survey of college students, among computer-based users, 32.2 per cent include *kaomoji* in messages, while 36.7 per cent do not; whereas among cell-phone-based e-mail users, 53.5 per cent include *kaomoji* and 17.3 per cent

do not, as discussed earlier (Tanaka 2001, 41).[8] Statistics such as these show the nature of the communication with which *kaomoji* may be associated--that is, light, playful, near-synchronous, even female. *Kaomoji*-laden e-mail messages have the tone of a light-hearted chat.

Users identify particular contexts in which *kaomoji* is considered inappropriate. These include: 1) messages to one's superior; 2) messages from one's superior; 3) messages from a stranger; and 4) messages from an intimate. As one can tell, not all users agree on the particular "netiquette" of *kaomoji* use, but they all have personal rules that they follow. In other words, *kaomoji* is seldom left unpoliced, but often comes amidst clashing codes of usage developed by different users. For example, Miss Takahashi, a 26-year-old secretary at a large company in Tokyo, explains:

> *Kaomoji* certainly functions to make the nuance of sentences clear. But such marks are not needed in messages sent between my close friends and me. We can understand what the other party means to say without such marks. Actually, I feel that *kaomoji* have the power to make the tone of my message less serious. Therefore I use them only when sending little messages or jokes to some people I know. Also, I use them with those to whom I'm not so familiar, although with them I only use a happy mark. Of course, I can't use angry *kaomoji* when I really want to. I also can't use an apologizing *kaomoji* when I really should, because it doesn't convey the seriousness of my intentions to the other party.

Miss Takahashi has quite specific rules in mind when she sends *kaomoji*. She uses *kaomoji* among those at a particular social distance from herself--casual acquaintances rather than close friends. She also includes *kaomoji* within the light, playful context of "little messages or jokes."

Kaomoji signal both a positive bond, as well as a certain social distance between sender and receiver, for her. The stereotyped and standardized emoticon defines and performs the relationship, negotiating different circumscribed rings of intimacy. She also restricts herself to particular *kaomoji* depending on the relationship.

When Miss Takahashi comments that she and her really close friends do not need *kaomoji*, she implies that they know each other so well that they can assume familiar, embedded contexts. This parallels Edward Hall's characterization of Japanese culture as a high-context culture (1983). By this he means that interlocutors share a great deal of information prior to any particular conversation. Therefore, less need be made explicit, and more can remain implicit.

Miss Shibata, a 25-year-old secretary in an accounting office in Tokyo, describes how she uses e-mail both at work on a computer and at play on her cell phone. In her mind, she includes *kaomoji* in her cell-phone e-mails to close friends to affirm the intimacy of their relationship. She never uses it in business e-mails, nor in messages to her office co-workers. She talks about feeling uneasy when receiving an e-mail message with *kaomoji* from one with whom she is not particularly close, primarily because it looks inappropriately overfamiliar. Furthermore, she feels insulted when receiving a message with *kaomoji* from an elder and/or superior because she feels the inclusion of *kaomoji* mocks her, treating her as if she were a child. Why, then, does she prefer *kaomoji*-laden messages among her close friends? "Because," she explains, "using *kaomoji* increases the feeling of intimacy between us and because I feel that with *kaomoji* I can say my *honne* [true intentions]." Whereas Miss Takahashi dispenses with *kaomoji* among close friends, Miss Shibata draws upon *kaomoji* as an expression of intimacy.

It is worth noting the nature of the messages that include *kaomoji*. Although Miss

Shibata claims that *kaomoji* help her express *honne*, the messages we have seen that include *kaomoji* are more often than not small--sometimes even trivial--commentaries. They accompany people's thoughts as fleeting occurrences, rather than ponderous ideas. They tend to be light, chatty, and short, such as, "I just found out that the new version of Pringles is for sale at 7-11 /(^^)/," or, "So many people in the train today (-_-#)." *Kaomoji*-endowed messages are often accompaniments to everyday life, a means of filling in the social gap with the presence of friends whose interaction may be one of simply being there.

For Miss Nagata, a 19-year-old college student in Tokyo, even the meaning of the same *kaomoji* may differ, depending on the message and the recipient. When a high school student, she used to compete with her friends as to the number of phone numbers they could input on their cell phone data banks. But that did not mean that she talked to all those people on a regular basis. Even now, she includes numbers of people she barely knows. In a typical day, she does not "need" to call them, because she sees them face-to-face. However, she wants to keep their friendship electronically as well. This is where *kaomoji* comes in. She regularly e-mails them with idle messages such as, "What's up?" or "Did you listen to the new CD of SMAP?" and in doing so, she unfailingly includes *kaomoji*. According to her, *kaomoji* lends her casual messages a friendly, cute sense, framing what she says with a light I'm-bored-and-how-about-you ennui. *Kaomoji* become for her a way of asserting her presence with an appropriately passive stance--a light tap on the shoulder, a warm smile, a small wave of greeting, performed electronically. Her message shows her ready for interaction, if not committed to significant interaction itself. She still maintains limited contact with some high school friends, in spite of the fact that they go to different colleges. According to her, "We rarely meet each other, so I don't know if we're really

friends or not." In fact, she is more comfortable maintaining their relationship electronically in cyberspace, in part through *kaomoji*. In this case, *kaomoji* does not lead to greater intimacy, but maintains a casual relationship, purposely light and "thin." Cute *kaomoji* in this context fits and maintains the social relationship perfectly.

She employs the same *kaomoji* in messages to her close, intimate friends, but interprets their use entirely differently. In this case, *kaomoji* asserts not "light" or "thin" relationships and emotions, but deep long-lasting ones. She says, "I also use *kaomoji* with my close friends, as I do with my casual acquaintances. But when e-mailing my close friends, I use *kaomoji* to express my emotions, which I cannot describe with words alone." *Kaomoji* for her suggest two differently performed selves and relationships: one keeping people at a measured distance with light banter, the other bringing them in close with confessions from the heart.

Personal web pages

On the Internet, there are untold numbers of websites that use *kaomoji*. In fact, some of these distribute *kaomoji* word-processing packages for free. Among these personal web pages, one of the most popular is that of the *nikki-kei* [diary pages]. In the section of personal web pages on Yahoo! Japan, for example, *nikki-kei* are the most numerous.

Kaomoji make frequent appearances on these diary pages. But their usage on these web pages is fundamentally different from that of other computer-mediated interaction we have discussed, in that these are monological and public. The communication in these diaries is meant to be primarily one-way, rather than interactive. In some instances, *kaomoji* may not be used at all, or sparingly; in other cases, *kaomoji* may be used extensively, creatively, and elaborately. Although we have not attempted to conduct a demographic survey, according to our

observations, the creators of web pages using the most and elaborate *kaomoji* tend to be teenage girls.[9] In this way, *kaomoji* becomes a gender marker, at least for performed selves.

The tradition of diary-keeping and sharing is a long one in Japan. The so-called *nikki bungaku* [diary literature] is a well-known literary genre. So, too, a common elementary school assignment for summer vacation is that of the *e nikki* [illustrated diary of one's activities]. *Kô kan nikki* [diary exchange] is another popular practice, especially among teenage girls. According to Merry White, *kôkan nikki* is "a kind of semi-public diary, almost a letter to a friend, but freer. It has its own conversation . . . You can also be creative, and most girls like to illustrate them with cartoon figures and detailed drawings of clothing and gear" (1993, 137). Many of these illustrations may be likened to cute *kaomoji*–that is, small, decorative, and depicting emotion.

On-line diary pages are not without their critics. Mr. Ishibashi, a 28-year old male working at a bank in Fukuoka says, "*Kaomoji* are helpful in chat rooms where I need to express how I feel as quickly as possible, but I do not like to see them in personal websites. It somehow doesn't look right." His criticism may be explained as a critique of the use of graphics in a genre which is literary. It may also be interpreted as imposing too much personal emotion upon the reader. Part of the problem lies in the mixing of genres. Whereas the practice of *kôkan nikki* is traditionally one-on-one and private, the display of diary pages in cyberspace is one-to-many [including strangers], and exponentially public. It is intimacy displaced.

The Challenge of On-line Subjectivity

Let us return to the subject of disrupted bodies. John Thompson suggests that the

untethering of communication from space and time itself creates a fundamentally new form of sociality: "The use of communication media transforms the spatial and temporal constitution of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, and new modes of exercising power, which are no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale" (1995:4). But does this untethering necessarily change interaction itself? Or does face-to-face interaction become the model upon which communication rests, even when electronically generated (Mabry 1998)? If one takes face-to-face interaction as the pure and ideal form of communication, then intimacy is accomplished only through physical adjacency. Computer-mediated communication, then, conducted in non-adjacent space by disrupted bodies, looks to be an impoverished second as a mere interaction of mechanical symbols. However in reality, face-to-face interaction itself consists of a combination of the symbolic and physical. What our study shows is that kaomoji users create another kind of intimacy which draws upon the symbolic, not as a secondary or derivative experience, but as a primary form of interaction, as they negotiate and manipulate non-adjacent communication. The symbolic does not stand in for disrupted bodies; it is its own kind of embodiment. The prosthetic--here, *kaomoji*--enacts within a realm of electronic sociality.

In light of this, covers, reveals, displays, and negotiates. In one sense, *kaomoji* cover identities through the play of a stereotyped visual language of expression, flattening the flux of human interaction into a two-dimensional code. But in doing so, *kaomoji* reveal a subtext of word-based expression, filling cyberspace with graphemes of emotion–laughing, winking, crying, trembling, gasping–

open to the creation and interpretation of users. *Kaomoji* display selves, making public the private, in a postmodern confluence of bewildering domains. The display in some cases lays bare a cult of electronic celebrity, the subject emboldened by practices that avoid face-to-face. Subjectivity lies framed in disclosure. Finally, *kaomoji* engage in the social dance of negotiation as an interface, the electronic articulation of one with another. For some users, *kaomoji* keep friendships at bay–"intimacy lite," if you will. For others, *kaomoji* place their own bodies up on the computer screen, drawing intimates into their "true feelings," a face staring back amidst a sea of characters. These negotiations, conducted over cyberspace, provide a subtext–the meanings behind the words. At the same time they provide a supratext–the frame within which those words might be read.

The embedding of *kaomoji* within Japanese culture brings these emoticons to light as not mere technological tricks, but deeply seated processes. This is not to say that *kaomoji* are the "natural" outcome of thousands of years of Japanese history, but that their appearance in cyberspace, on computer and cell-phone screens, might be naturalized through culture. This is also not to say that *kaomoji* will be a part of the Japanese computer-mediated social interaction forever. Putting the "culture" into our analysis merely asserts that *kaomoji*, like other human products and processes, characterize a particular moment in history as a meeting of the material, social, and cultural. *Kaomoji*, too, will pass, as some may say it has done already. But it leaves in its wake a stream of cultural processes which have come before, and are sure to come again.

The communities of which *kaomoji* have been and are a part rest upon their not insignificant contribution to interaction, communication, and subjectivity. In the neo-human world of *kaomoji*, technology combines with subjectivity to suggest the possibility of a reconstructed sense of personhood, lying somewhere between selves, computers, cell phones,

and web pages. Placing a face on a computer screen is no large feat. Making that face do the work of the social heart may be considered a masterpiece of human intervention. The question remains, why leave it to technology to accomplish this? What is the draw of cybernetic intercourse? What *kaomoji* accomplish is a direct challenge to face-to-face, showing ways in which the non-computer-mediated "real world" might fall short. In the neo-humanity of *kaomoji*, disembodied faces beckon some of our most basic impulses to engage in new practices of intimacy, re-embodying the computer screen with on-line laughter and tears.

Notes

1. *Kaomoji* include non-facial depictions, as well, especially hands (e.g., bowing, waving). Nevertheless, their central feature is the face--therefore literally “face symbols.”

2.

3. This and all other translations are those of the authors.

4.

5. See Marchel Duchamp’s painting *Nude descending a staircase,* Nos. 1 and 2 (1911 and 1912, respectively), in which the artist depicts a flow of movement as a serialization of snapshots juxtaposed upon one another.

6.

7. This and all other names are pseudonyms.

8. The remainder of those surveyed answered “I don’t know” or were unclear in their responses.

9. Of course, it is impossible to verify the actual age and gender of the person creating the web page. As researchers, we can only comment upon the selves performed on web pages [i.e., what the web pages purport to portray].