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*Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy* by Gabriella Lukács (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Gabriella Lukács. *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 248 pp.

*Invisibility by Design* is about the “exploitation” of women by “the masculinist world of entrepreneurship” (73) in various pursuits in “Japan’s digital economy” (79) which rendered their labor “invisible” (73). It does so by describing the works and experiences of some women who have achieved varying degrees of celebrity status in several online activities—as photographers, net idols, bloggers, and amateur traders, and also as cell phone novelists—with the aim of “exposing the centrality of feminized affective labor” by online companies controlled by men for profits (12).

The book begins with the introduction which explains its aims, discusses the works of various authors in relation to the emergence of do-it-yourself or DIY careers and affective labor, describes the fieldwork, and ends with overviews of subsequent chapters. Conducted from 2010, the fieldwork comprises structured interviews with 43 women whose engagement with digital technologies was followed by the author, and reviews of the women’s online diaries, blogs, novels, self-help books, and trading tutorials (24). The author explains that the book “anchors each chapter to the stories of two to four women who had emerged as icons of the trends that the chapters focus on” (24), and that “versions of several chapters of the book have been separately published” (xi).

The works of several female photographers are described in Chapter 1 against comments made by male critic Iizawa Kotaro in his book *The Era of ‘Girly Photography’* published in 2020. Following descriptions of the growing popularity of digital cameras, the author discusses the works of Nagashima Yurie, Ume Kayo, Hiromix (Toshikawa Hiromi), and Ninagawa

Mika to illustrate the women's struggles with managing problematic self-identities against family relations and gender norms in Japan. Their endeavors are interpreted as "projects of disidentification" or "strategies" to critically engage mainstream representations of women and women's place in society (32). These are said to refute Iizawa's views, which are "emblematic" of the "male critical establishment in Japan" (35) which ignored "the feminist critique of gender inequity" encoded in women's works (54), when women photographers in Japan had played an important role in "introducing second-wave feminism into the mainstream," and that many "went beyond second-wave feminism and asked questions about third-wave feminism" (55).

The focus shifts in Chapter 2 to examining the works of several female net idols against accounts on the operations of "successful internet entrepreneurs," such as Horie Takafumi of Livedoor and Kikitani Hiroshi of Rakuten who are male (64). The works of Hirata Erika, Nanjo Aya, Ebihara Yuri, Tanaka Eris, and Nakamura Toyomi are discussed to illustrate how the varying efforts made by the women constituted the "labor of cute," which reinforced existing gender norms and hence "did not help women claim their own space within the masculinist world of entrepreneurship" (73). The chapter concludes that while female net idols were "instrumental" to the development of Japan's digital economy, their endeavors were made "invisible" (73), and their pursuits were "overwhelmingly a dead end" (79).

The activities of two female celebrity bloggers are discussed in Chapter 3 to demonstrate the "exploitation" of unwaged bloggers by male-controlled blogging portals such as Ameba and Jugem for profit. Some interesting descriptions are given to show how online portals and blog tutorials promoted blogging as a viable career that could offer "the good life" (104) in order to take advantage of the burgeoning number of female bloggers in Japan. The chapter then discusses the works of two famous female bloggers, Suzuki Junko and Tominaga Ayako, to demonstrate that blogging was not as effortless as it was portrayed and promoted by portals and online platforms. Their blogging activities are interpreted as unwaged labor with negative effects such as "precarity, vulnerability, and exclusion" (93). However, this is not forcefully conveyed with explanations or relevant data to elucidate what significant shifts in work patterns—especially among women—had occurred in Japan to give readers a meaningful context to understand women's changing labor participation and the critical roles

played by ideological shifts, educational reforms, and employment practices following the neoliberalization of Japan that led to the proliferation of particular understandings of neoliberal ideals such as “individual freedom” (93) and “the good life” (104).

Chapter 4 switches focus to discussing online trading and the activities of two celebrity female amateur traders. The author gives extensive descriptions of changes to the regulatory environment in Japan and the rising trend of online trading from the late 1990s when homemakers were said to be the specific targets of securities firms due to their being in charge of managing their family’s finances. The numbers of female online traders are said to surge to estimates “in the hundreds of thousands” (107), and the activities of Yamamoto Yuka and Wakabayashi Fumie are later described to illustrate how women’s increased participation in online trading furthered the “financialization of daily life” (108).

The book then turns the reader’s attention in Chapter 5 to how many young women from lower-middle class and working class backgrounds are “enticed” (143) by Internet platforms to “envision themselves as celebrity authors” (144) by working as cell phone novelists. Descriptions are made to show some online platforms such as Maho no i-rando and Gocco as operating to “make profits from selling ads” (146) by persuading young women to pursue the “dream” of becoming successful cell phone novelists. The experiences of two celebrity authors Mika and Chaco are then presented to demonstrate the hard work entailed in their pursuits, which entail “not only writing and completing research but also maintaining relationships with readers” (138) and concluded as “unpaid affective labor into writing novels” (143). The situation is explained by the author to be “not just a response to socioeconomic uncertainty in recessionary and post recessionary Japan,” but that they “also call attention to the precarious situations of Japanese women who have long been mobilized into unpaid labor in the domestic sphere” (151).

The final chapter briefly discusses the promotion of DIY careers by the British government; cites a reference to Ariana Huffington—founder of the American news aggregator and blog *huffpost.com*—as “slave owner on a plantation of bloggers” (157); and mentions the growing popularity of click farms. It ends with the story of Namba Tomoko, who is said to have worked for the international management-consultancy firm McKinsey before founding a mobile-games company where she was chief executive officer, but she later resigned to take care of her husband after he was

diagnosed with cancer, a reason described by the author as “baffling” (165) that “the only woman among the ten most successful owners of online platforms in Japan” (163) should take “a traditional female role of caregiver for a sick husband” (165).

The strength of this book lies in the descriptions of the experiences of various female online celebrities and the operations of several online platforms. There are also extensive theoretical discussions on “feminized affective labor.” However, the discussions on gender, work, and the digital economy in Japan are often not elaborate enough, and they are also not properly linked to specific contexts in Japan, especially in relation to pertinent shifts in the gender perceptions and practices generated by changes to the structure of the country’s workforce, labor patterns (both in the digital and non-digital economy), state ideologies, official policies, and regulations, especially with the emergence of neoliberal practices. Discussions in Chapter 1, for example, are limited to comments by one male critic as representative of the voice of patriarchy in Japan, and do not include the identity or works of women photographers who had contributed to the different waves of feminism (55). It is unclear in Chapter 2 as to how extensive the “masculinist world of entrepreneurship” in Japan’s digital economy is in rendering women’s labor “invisible” (73).

Chapter 4 is descriptive and informative, and it presents some important arguments about women’s increased participation in online trading. However, these are not clearly explained with relevant data to help readers understand the sources of information. It is unclear, for example, how the estimates of the number of women traders were obtained, and how gender ideologies and practices in Japan have shifted to produce specific types of households where women continued to be “homemakers... in charge of managing their families’ finances” (108). Readers are also not given explanations for how the increased number of women traders has “contributed to the destabilization of salaried employment as the dominant form of social recognized work” (114). While electronic trading is said to constitute “90 percent of all trading in Japan” (110), it is not clarified for readers as to what the total volume or value of trade was (on a daily, monthly, or annual basis); how online trading as a percentage of total trading had changed over time; what the volumes and values of online trading performed by female amateur traders were; or what female amateur traders’ percentage of the total volumes or values of securities trading were. Furthermore, some clarifications could have been given to indicate the

changes to the trading of specific types of securities products—such as equities, bonds, commodities, foreign currencies, and derivatives—and markets by key institutional and retail players (including individual traders both male and female) over time. Such details would have helped readers better understand the shifts in predominantly masculine trading products and patterns that have been “feminized” by the burgeoning number of female amateur traders.

The arguments made in Chapter 5 would also have been more forceful had the author explained the specific socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions in “recessionary and post recessionary Japan,” and how they generated various forms or experiences of “uncertainty” for individuals based on age, gender, education, and other important factors. Relevant details and statistical data would have meaningfully elucidated the continuities and discontinuities in Japan’s changing gendered work environment that have produced particular forms of “feminized affective labor” and generated varied experiences of ambivalence for young women seeking work and recognition in the country’s expansive and rapidly changing digital economy.

Overall, the author has done a fairly good job in presenting the struggles and accomplishments of selective female online “icons” (24) in one of the world’s most technologically advanced nations and complex digital economies. This book’s focus on such an important topic as feminized affective labor would be of interest to readers interested in or currently conducting research on the changing opportunities and challenges confronted by workers in today’s rapidly expanding digital economy. Readers would also find the extensive bibliography useful for references on Japan, gender, labor, and the digital economy. ■