

The Art of being novel: rethinking cartographies of personalisation

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ABSTRACT

In a global period whereby the “personal” is no longer associated with people but with affective technologies (Shirky 2008; Lasén 2004), the old feminist adage of the “personal as political” takes on new dimensions of meaning. Through the rise of social, networked media such as Web 2.0—characterised by Social Networking Systems (SNS like Facebook)—concurrent to the force of user created content (UCC), how we experience a sense of media, place, locality and globality is dramatically transforming. With the emergence of UCC “vernacular creativity” (Burgess) there is a need rethink intimacy, creativity, authorship and labour (social, creative, affective and emotional) in terms of how we imagine and practice art and new media. Drawing from my research into UCC in the Asia-Pacific, I will reconsider how emerging practices such as *keitai shōsetsu* (mobile phone novels) reflect, expand and remediate older media practices. In particular, I explore some of the possibilities and limits of this phenomenon and how it is impacting upon twenty-first century paradigms for creative practice and labour.

Keywords: user created content, social media, Japanese mobile phones (*keitai*), gender and labour practices

Introduction

In an age of convergent social media and attendant user created content (UCC) there has been much hype and rhetoric about the potential subversion of traditional media and consumption/production paradigms. Advocates such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have heralded a new era in which “participatory media” contests twentieth century “package media”. Indeed, questions around production/consumption shifts from top-down industry driven models towards bubble-up, user created content have been all-pervasive. And yet, after the honeymoon of hype around user-empowerment starts to settle, the realities of convergent social media’s undulating landscape appear and we are left with cartographies of multiple narratives, stories and practices. Within the various localities and technocultures we can see a diversity of practices that contest didactic models of the digital divide in terms of the haves and the have-nots. Indeed, within twenty-first century technocultures we are seeing new forms of work and class paradigms in which the “have-less” increasingly become the norm (Qiu 2008).

One obvious demography that has been overtly affected by twenty-first technocultures—in both developed and developing contexts—is women. This can be noted not only in terms of consumption and increased engagement with new media and media literacy through everyday technologies such as mobile media, but is reflected in the shifts in higher education and employment within these ICTs industries (ILO 2008).¹ As I have argued elsewhere, since the 1997 financial crisis in Asia, locations in the region have sought to rebuild and reconceptualise their economies from a series of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) manufacturing sites into models of twenty-first century informational societies (Hjorth 2009). The mobile phone has become both the *symbol* and *vehicle* for these transformations around consumption and production paradigms. It is also one of the most personal and intimate objects (Fortunati 2005), so much so that it is often personalised to the point of personification (Hjorth 2009). It is indicative of broader socio-cultural shifts in which the “personal” has become political. The recent deployment of Twitter by the Iranian protesters was exemplary that no media, however banal in its production, remains unstained by the politics of the personal.

¹ Indeed, just as female paid employment (predominantly in precarious, new media sectors) has increased over this ten-year period (ILO 2008), so too have the new forms of mobile media and social labour accompanied this phenomenon. According to the International Labour Office’s (ILO) 2008 report on “Global Employment Trends for Women”, these increases in female employment can be noted in East Asia and the Pacific whilst South Asia remains relatively unchanged with an ‘untapped female potential and sizeable decent work deficit’ (2008: 21). This parallel and interrelated phenomenon has resulted in the re-working of gender, labour and technology. From social intimacy to creative user content, labour has taken on various immaterial and material guises. Labour can be creative, affective, emotional, and social. It is inflected as much by culture and gender as it is by class.

I argue that one way in which to conceptualise these emerging forms of creative paradigms is through the notion of the lens of personalisation. With the ushering of ubiquitous social media, two dominant tropes of “personalisation” have occurred — one being the top-down industry-driven, with the other being user generated/created (UCC) content. It is the latter that I have been interested in as forming new modes of engagement, creativity, labour and literacy.

In an age of “participatory media” (Jenkins 2006), the role of the *personal* has taken on new paradoxical positions as the struggle of power between the industry and UCC — especially in terms of labour. Such notions as playbour (Kücklich 2006) highlight that UCC (creative, emotional, affective and social) labour, like artists, continue modes of exploitation and unpaid / unremunerated exploited under the rubric of leisure whilst industry profits. Through the pervasive rubric of personalisation and tropes of amateur / professional blurring in the form of the “prod-user” (Bruns 2007), how can we conceptualise the art of being urban today?

One way is to rethink the politics of the personal. This notion forms the rubric for this paper.

The politics of the personal: vernacular creativity and the politics of emotional and social labour

The politics of the personal can be seen as an extension of “relational aesthetics” (Bourriaud 2002) and “altermodern” (Bourriaud 2009) by emphasising the haptic navigations of the urban with the personal. Here I briefly deploy the analogy of the parkour, the alternative navigation of the urban via aerobic type exercises. Invented by French David Belle, the art of parkour—though the act of the traceur (the person doing parkour)—can be a way of providing new ways of experiencing a city and its temporal spatiality. These are the new exercises of the urban in which artists and creative labour are shaping new cartographies that contest conventional notions of bounded spaces in the form of nation-state. I argue that the role of the personal can be seen to have the potentiality of the parkour by inviting new ways of conceptualising and moving through the city and the world. These movements involve mobility and immobility across various levels and also demonstrate new forms of creative, social, emotional and affective labour through acts of “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2008). The personal can take the form of act between people, but it can also refer to the practice between person, technology and community in which often various spaces and places are negotiated simultaneously.

By personal, this is a revised notion, one in which affective technologies such as mobile phones and social media have added a new layer of mediation in the form of seemingly non-mediation, the personal. Indeed, conventional ideas of the personal, like the intimate, were that they were not mediated. However, as many critiques of the intimate have identified (Jamieson 2000), it is always mediated at both an individual (by gestures, memories and words) and collective (culture, locality and language) level. The personal has become global, it is about new forms of class, creativity and labour. Thus, by trying to redefine the personal in terms of locality we can see emerging forms of artistic and UCC-driven politics.

Spaces such as social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Xiaonei and Cyworld mini-hompy are inverting the way in which the personal played out public and private spheres. In the “emotional capitalism” (Ilouz 2008) and full-time public intimacy prevalent today, the personal is being redefined. According to Clay Shirky, the personal no longer belongs to people but technologies (2008). In a mediascape dominated by affective technologies like mobile phones, the personal—as with the intimate—has changed. However, unlike Shirky I would argue that the personal still relates to people, but this relationship is mediated by technologies, images and capital. It is the third stage of capital mediation — firstly there was the financial (Marx), then images (Baudrillard) and now technologies. Through the lens of these technocultures we can begin to reclaim a revised notion of the personal as political located in the shifting cartographies of personalisation. Through acts of UCC, the personal is reclaimed and relocated to people.

In my seven-year virtual ethnographic study of gendered mobile media in the Asia-Pacific I deployed two conceptual rubrics to explore the phenomenon of the personal around affective technologies. Firstly, cartographies of personalisation (*ideologies*) — that is, rather than framing the region as a set of geographies and nation-states, we see them as a series of “cartographies of personalisation”. These are new technocultural

maps of the region in the 21st century. As I have suggested elsewhere, the region can be understood as a series of (ideological) cartographies of personalisation. These cartographies are both industry/technonationally driven as they are redefined and questioned by the bottom up users. It is a productive dynamic between the two top-down and bottom-up that provide fuel for new forms of digital storytelling, creativity and media literacy.

Secondly, at a micro, practice level, I deployed the notion of “imaging communities”.² These were the micronarratives, politics and tactics that gave way to new forms of labour (emotional, social, creative, affective) and gendered forms of media literacy. UCC is indicative of these emerging forms of “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2008). The rise of personalisation has been marked by the politics between industry “packaged media” and user “conversational media”. In short, the rise of a technology and media practice can be seen as a product of the tensions between industry and user. One of the most famous is the rise of the *keitai* (mobile phone) in Tokyo by young female users hijacking the pager technologies aimed at businessmen. In order to demonstrate these revised notions of the personal as political I will explore a case study that exemplifies these new politics of the personal in which we can see vernacular creativity as well as remediated forms of older media at play. This practice is about creative forms of writer-reader paradigms that transform the context of new media through the lens of the personal. I speak of *keitai shōsetsu*, mobile phone novels.

How novel: *keitai shōsetsu*

The cell-phone novel, or *keitai shōsetsu*, is the first literary genre to emerge from the cellular age. For a new form, it is remarkably robust. Maho i-Land, which is the largest cell-phone-novel site, carries more than a million titles, most of them by amateurs writing under screen handles, and all available for free. According to the figures provided by the company, the site, which also offers templates for blogs and home pages, is visited three and a half billion times a month (Goodyear 2008, n.p).

According to Dana Goodyear’s “I ♥ NOVELS”, the phenomenal rise of *keitai shōsetsu* has to do with the highly significant role played by the *keitai* within Japanese everyday life (2008). While the mobile phone is for many one of the most intimate and personal objects (Fortunati 2005) this is especially the case for the *keitai*. For many Japanese, the *keitai* is their main internet portal, thus rendering the device both a tool for communication and for information/entertainment. In a culture where long train journeys back and from work are the norm, the transformation of the *keitai* into *shōsetsu* is but just one possibility. Within the large frame of the *keitai* in Japan (to support the various multimedia capacities of the device), the phone takes the place of the book in hand on trains. What began as a ‘filling in’ activity within moving urban spaces soon became a fascinating interest for many thousands upon thousands of Japanese readers.

The rise of mobile media has seen the conflation between the personal and intimate. This situation is amplified in the case of the *keitai shōsetsu*. Such a conflation is a product of numerous shifting discourses around intimacy and mediated co-presence — a phenomenon that gave birth to the novel and numerous literary traditions. Thus it is important to contextualise *keitai shōsetsu* in terms of these older traditions, especially within Japan and the rise of women’s writing through *hiragana* and ‘kitten writing’ (Kinsella 1995) — key features deployed with *keitai shōsetsu*. Moreover, *keitai shōsetsu* not only remediates older media, it is adapted and translated into those forms, highlighting the co-dependent dialogue between the various media. Far from a fetish of “newness”, the odes of *keitai shōsetsu* to hard copy novels and women’s writing traditions in Japan is unavoidable.

Often enduring *keitai shōsetsu* stories will move from *keitai* UCC to films and *manga*. The rise of the *keitai shōsetsu* — a short story written for the *keitai* that, in some cases, are translated into other forms of media such as films and *manga* — is a great example of the power of UCC in Japan. The *keitai shōsetsu* further extends the UCC and amateur *manga* phenomenon of the 1970s in which female producers featured prominently (Napier

2 By “imaging” I refer to all the mobile media UCC practices that can take the form of the visual, textual, aural and haptic modes of expression. From text messages and camera phone images to *keitai shōsetsu*, these practices of imaging communities reflect forms of intimacy and creative, social, affective and emotional labour that provide ways for configuring, and intervening that shape the region’s “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). Rather than the region being the sum of what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls “imagined communities”—that is, nations formed through the birth and rise of printing press and print media, what Anderson styles “print capitalism”—networked mobile media is best conceptualised as a series of ongoing, micro “imaging communities” that can span visual, textual and aural forms. Moreover, in contrast to Anderson’s imagined communities that saw the rise of the nation lead to the demise of the local and vernacular, “imaging communities” further amplify the local and the colloquial.

2001). While *keitai shōsetsu* seems to herald the significance of new forms of creativity within social media, we must ask what types of gendered labour practices are being played out. Is this a vehicle for reinforcing gender stereotypes about drama and literature, or can this phenomenon be viewed as part of a broader process of empowerment and gendered performativity subversion that can be mapped back to literally transgressions such as the rise of “kitten writing” in which women used *kawaii* (cute) culture to create new vernacular forms of language? I would argue that the new media presented by *keitai shōsetsu* is a remediation of various forms of older gendered practices such as kitten writing, just as it is a vehicle for creolising old and new media genres and traditions such as *haiku* and *manga*. Now *keitai haiku* and *keitai manga* dynamically converse with such techniques.

The *keitai shōsetsu* phenomenon began with the founding of one of Japan’s most pivotal UCC site, Maho i-Land (*maho* meaning “magic”), in 1999. Although *keitai shōsetsu* were initially written by professionals, by the mid 2000s everyday users had begun to be inspired to write and disseminate their own *keitai shōsetsu*. Maho i-Land provided avenues for various forms of UCC—poems, images, music and stories. It was its template “Let’s Make Novels”—along with unlimited data packages for the *keitai* in 2003—that saw the dramatic rise of writers and readers of *keitai shōsetsu*. By 2007, nearly four million different *keitai shōsetsu* had become hard copy. With one million *keitai shōsetsu* being produced in 2007 and 1.9 billion page views per month, Maho i-Land has become an exemplary case of the popularity of UCC. Successful *keitai shōsetsu* such as *Koizora* have been made into films, hard copy novels and *manga* — highlighting that *keitai shōsetsu* as new media is very much in dialogue and remediated by older media.

I argue that *keitai shōsetsu* typifies a localised example of emerging gendered forms of creativity and how the personal can be viewed as political. Like the *keitai*, *shōsetsu* plays on the significance of the *personal* within Japanese tradition (Fujimoto 2005; Ito et al. 2005); a fact that can be evidenced in Japan’s successful role in “electronic individualism” (Kogawa 1984) from the Sony Walkman to GameBoy. The *keitai shōsetsu* epitomises the specific role the *personal* has played in Japan upon both micro (individual) and macro (nationalism) levels (McVeigh 2004). Japan’s *keitai* culture has provided a form of gendered performativity around personalisation that can be found within in different cultural contexts (of course, massaged by the local and thus taking on diverse characteristics) in the region. Through the lens of mobile media we can gain insight into localised forms of creativity, power and labour.

In the case of micronarrative practices such as *keitai shōsetsu*, we see a specific gendered politic coming into play — what I call the politics of personalisation. While earlier models of mobile phones in 1980s were characterised by industry driven personalisation, the rise of the mobile phone can be noted by a shift from personalisation being an industry-driven condition to be a subversive practice on the behalf of the user. This is exemplified in Japan by the aforementioned rise of the high-school pager revolution (Hjorth 2003; Matsuda 2005; Okada 2005). These mobile media practices must be understood as running concurrently and interdependently with the rise of female writers and “producers” within the *manga* and *anime* amateur movement from the 1970s onwards (Napier 2001; Aoyama 2009; Freedman 2009). Today, there is a productive tension between the top down and bottom up processes of personalisation. Hence, through a revised notion of the personal as political we can gain much insight into the emerging and remediated practices that move beyond empowerment versus exploitation “participatory” paradigms in agency around media practice.

The “personal as political”, with its feminist overtones from 1960s and 1970s body politics, plays a particular role in *keitai shōsetsu* given that they are predominantly written *by* women *for* women. What began as a youth-oriented activity (much of *keitai shōsetsu* are written and read on the long commuting journeys that is part of living in Tokyo) has, more recently, become a medium for women of different generations and class. Arising from older female participatory UCC practices such as amateur *manga* (i.e. *dojinshi* movement), *keitai shōsetsu* demonstrates the significant role women as “producers” have played in within late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Japanese media cultures. The shift of *keitai shōsetsu* away from just a youth prerogative (the conflation between youth and new technology is a familiar one) has indeed made the medium become a more compelling study for not only understanding the relationship between new media such the *keitai shōsetsu* and older media such as the novel but also gaining insight into Japanese women’s practices of storytelling.

According to Ito et al. Japanese *keitai* culture is part of broader “personalization” techniques that can be

mapped back to the eighteenth century (Fujimoto 2005) and thus should be contextualised as part of broader shifts within industrialism and post-industrialism. However, within these broader cartographies, localised and temporalised features occur — exasperated at particular key socio-cultural and economic periods.³ One of the key factors that ensured Japan's success of media convergence represented by *keitai* was the central and defining role *personalisation* played in the uptake of new technologies. And so, what does it mean to think about a politics of personalisation in an age whereby the “personal” is being branded with technology via industry whilst movements such as UCC attempt to claim it back for the people?

Undoubtedly, as social media and digital storytelling spreads, the attendant forms of emerging creativity, collaboration and community in the form of UCC becomes increasingly pervasive. One of the key attributes of this personalisation phenomenon is what Jean Burgess calls “vernacular creativity” (2007). Here Burgess spearheads the emerging amateur / professional nexus that has been altered networked social media. Within these new media social cartographies of UCC, users and their labour—or “playbour” in the case of gaming (Küchlick 2005)—are increasingly become co-producers or “producers” (Bruns 2005). This, in turn, begs the question about what types of creativity and power relations are emerging within these new forms of labour and personalisation.

A key example of UCC “vernacular creativity” is *keitai shōsetsu*. *Keitai shōsetsu* vividly demonstrates the increasingly role personalisation plays in the politics of social media. Far from renouncing older media, personalised media such as *keitai shōsetsu* rehearsed and remediated as it converges and diverges — extending and expanding upon the women's tradition of subversive writing around new media in the form of “kitten writing” (or *kawaii* cultures) as well as highlighting the significant role women—as both writers and readers—play in the rise of the novel. *Keitai shōsetsu* is indicative of not only new forms of negotiating art and creativity, it is also exemplary of a revised notion of the personal as political.

In the face of literary critics of new media *keitai shōsetsu* highlights the significance of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999)—that is, new media always mediates and adapts the content of older media, which in turn impacts upon those traditional forms and revises them. This remediation is evidenced by the fact many of the successful *keitai shōsetsu* (millions produced yearly) are adapted into older media such as film, *manga* and *anime*. This practice can be seen as an extension of earlier gendered tropes of Japanese new media that was dubbed in the 1980s the “Anomalous Female Teenage Handwriting” phenomenon (Kinsella 1995).⁴

Keitai shōsetsu can also be seen as an extension of literary traditions evoked by arguably one of the novels in the world (written in 1000AD), *The Tale of Genji*. Drawing on *haiku*, letters and love sonnets, Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* deployed *hiragana* (‘women's language’ as opposed to men's *kanji*) to tell both the male and female side of the numerous lovers of playboy, ‘Genji’. In this light the *keitai shōsetsu* is far from a new fad but rather deploying specific localised linguistic and socio-cultural features that I call “emotional vernacular”.

Far from eroding Japanese ‘high’ literature, *keitai shōsetsu* invoke the art of *haiku* poetry (arguably Twitter also draws on such a tradition) as well as recalling the significant role played by female writer, Murasaki. Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* is arguably one of the first novels not only in Japan but also in the world. In this context, *keitai shōsetsu* highlights not only early models of literature but also the role female writers played in the field. Given that women were not allowed to learn the art of *kanji*, *hiragana* was seen as Japanese women's language. *The Tale of Genji* is written in *hiragana*, further reinforcing the development of a female-centred, emotionally charged vernacular. In contemporary *keitai shōsetsu* we can see *hiragana* and the female-emotionally driven favour being further extended, especially through the deployment of emoticons (*emoji*) and “kitten writing” (a hybridisation between *emoji* and *hiragana*).

3 In the case of the Asia-Pacific, whilst the birth and rise of “personalisation” as a key characteristic of post-industrial rhetoric can be noted for decades, it is from the 1997 economic crisis that we see significant transformations in its vernacular — as the region unevenly moves away from being a global site for technological production towards having increasing ideological prowess.

4 Characterised by *kawaii* (cute) transformations of the Japanese alphabet, *hiragana* (the alphabet known as women's, as opposed to *kanji* which was for men), this emerging genre of new media writing soon dominated mobile communication from the pager onwards — thus heralding what has been called the aforementioned “high-school girl pager revolution” whereby female UCC hijacked (through personalisation techniques) technologies industry had aimed at businessmen (‘salarymen’).

Through *keitai* UCC we can see many examples of female users finding inroads into creative activities. Thanks to UCC orientated organisations such as Maho i-Land, these users can be empowered on various levels — sharing and collaborating on stories as well as potentially making a career, and gaining professional recognition in the form of book publishing or film contracts. Far from *keitai* cultures eroding the significance of older, remediated media such as *manga* and film, they are providing new material for and interest in adapting stories by everyday users. The tendency of customisation to be cute — or what Brian McVeigh called “technocute” (whereby the cute makes warm new technology) — has taken various guises and turns in the rise of gendered new media in Japan. It has been an important part in women gaining access and feeling comfortable with the emerging technocultures. The fact that “kitten writing” has now part of the industries’ gender scripting (i.e. the *keitai* now comes with increasingly varieties of *emoji*) highlights how the UCC feminised practices have not only a long tradition — they have become institutionalised.

Conclusion: the shock of the personal

In Japan, we can see that creative labour around mobile media and Web 2.0 drawing from the history of gendered genres of expression such as *gyaru-emoji* (girl emoticon), *hiragana* and kitten writing, has transformed into a multifaceted industry of popular *keitai shōsetsu* and is now being adapted into other media such as film. Women’s stories are being heard. Millions of micronarratives are written, millions of readers appreciate and enjoy. These stories take flight across a variety of old and new media — with the *keitai shōsetsu* reinvigorating other media canons such as *manga*. Here we see that mobile media as new media is undoubtedly remediated with *keitai shōsetsu* feeding back into older media such as printed novels, *manga* and film. Through Web 2.0 SNS media such as 2ch and mixi, community storytelling is taking on new value again, featuring the rise of female directors, creators and producers. These practices are creating new forms of gendered labour, art and new media that rethink the personal, often the moving space of the urban (particularly trains).

As I have demonstrated through the *keitai shōsetsu* example, the rise of affective technologies such as social media has been accompanied by UCC practices — often with subversive results. *Keitai shōsetsu* can be seen as part of the kitten-writing phenomenon that began in Japan in the 1970s — accompanying the birth and rise of personal technologies. *Keitai shōsetsu* extends three traditions — the gendering of *keitai* culture, the gendering of Japanese language and the significant role female writers such as Murasaki have played in the birth and rise of the novel. For these three reasons and more, it is hard to ignore the role of *keitai shōsetsu* as not only evoking the personal but also linking it a political currency in which gender is mobilised as a form of performativity and potential subversion. Thus through the example of the *keitai shōsetsu* we can revise notions of “the personal as the political” in light of changing paradigms for art and new media.

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BIO

Dr. Larissa Hjorth is artist, digital ethnographer and Senior Lecturer in the Games and Digital Art Programs at RMIT University. Since 2000, Hjorth has been researching and publishing on gendered customising of mobile communication, gaming and virtual communities in the Asia-Pacific — these studies are outlined in her book, *Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific* (London, Routledge). In 2009 she began her ARC discovery fellowship with Michael Arnold exploring the role of the local and online with communities in the region. This three year cross-cultural case study will locations such as Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Manila, and Melbourne.

Hjorth has been practicing art for over a decade and has received grants such as The Australia Council new work fellowship (2006), Australian Council Tokyo studio (2000), Akiyoshidai International Art Village residency (2002) and the Asialink Seoul visual art residency (2005). Hjorth has had over 10 solo exhibitions at institutions such as EAF and CACSA, participated in over 50 art exhibitions (such as *Yokohama Triennale 2001* with Japanese Internet group, Candy Factory) and curated many cross-cultural and social commentary projects such as the Japanese and Australian magazine and exhibition project, *gloss* (2002).