The Hostess at the Border: an emergent anachronism

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2014
Official Conference Proceedings
0221

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

In 2003 the Actroid range of robotic androids was launched in Japan. Its creators and vendors imagine that the ’bots will integrate into society, taking on companionship, entertainment and hostessing duties. To date, Actroids are modelled after young females, with the exception of (near) exact copies of two male Professors from Japan and Denmark, and a ‘brother’ released in 2011. Despite the theory of the so-called uncanny valley (Mori 1970), Actroids are designed to appear and behave as humanlike as possible so as to render them as familiar as possible, presaging a future of belonging, of ethically viable sociocultural identity (Ishiguro 2007).

Actroids’ familiarity is achieved via re-inscription of stereotypically gendered cultural narratives and attributes, as the machinic ‘women’ enact media campaigns and advocacies that are reactionary and ideologically superseded (Robertson 2010; Suchman 2007). The routinely gendered hostess figure, capable only of a chronic and controlled performance and embodiment, is anachronistically emerging at the vanguard of futuristic design. She is being embedded in a new episteme, as our most advanced humanoid machines are shaped in her familiar image.

As a distilled marker of institutional hospitality, ‘hostesses’ are also gatekeepers at borders with respect to the locally and globally marginalized (Rosello 2001). Derrida (2000) argues that hospitality is the basis of all culture but cannot exist. Actroids embody this political impasse in their robotic gesturing of hospitableness; the trope’s endurance is symptomatic of a world in which empathic sensibilities shift slowly—and sometimes regressively—while technologies evolve quickly. In this sense, paradoxically, they are ‘human’.

Conventional hospitality, defined in a Kantian sense, adheres to strict boundaries and relies on national structures for its propositions and protocols. In ‘Pera Peras Poros: Longing for Spaces of Hospitality’, Dikeç details the inclusive mode of hospitality sought by sociologists Beck (1998) and Barber (1998) but speaks of “an oppressive aspect beneath its welcoming surface” (2002: 228). Derrida (2000: 5) warns of the intrinsic conceptual impossibility of hospitality, of the impassive experential simultaneity of knowing and not-knowing the Other. This conceptualization is advanced despite him having stated elsewhere that “hospitality is culture itself” (2001: 16). Though Derrida and other poststructuralists problematize conventional hospitality, in indeterminately arguing for its effective impossibility the status quo of existing normative and oppressive power structures is preserved.

An inherent entitlement or ‘appropriation’ is at the basis of the conceptualization.

> To dare say welcome is perhaps to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be at home, …appropriating a space for oneself, a space to *welcome [accueillir]* the other… (Derrida 1999: 15; emphasis in original)

Appropriation without violence is typically only possible within a defined band of socially sanctioned privilege, and statements such as Derrida’s elide and exclude the Other(s) of and for whom they speak, assuring that the status of the Other remains stable. This allows construction of Other, not as un-known or strange-er, as Derrida seems to be saying, but as already constructed, known-about and known-for. ‘Daring’

to welcome is framed as a masochistic, risky or altruistic and commendable act whereas the prior and/or concurrent act of appropriation is naturalized.

According to Rosello (2001: 17), a postcolonial politics of hospitality that revises these conventions *in practice* "might seek to limit the arrogance of the postcolonial host". In the context of this paper and its focus on the hostess, the colonial system has legitimized and canonized

> a redistribution of roles in which Monsieur can afford to disappear (symbolically and physically) while Madame, who must pick up the task of domestic care in his absence (including the reception of guests), [ensures that] the servile aspects of hospitality can be delegated. (Rosello 2001: 133)

A self-declared host (Derrida's "oneself"), in performing but simultaneously outsourcing the welcoming gesture, rises above the polysemous dilemma of being at once master and slave in his own domain, responsible for and assessable on providing the conditions of well-being of another. In relying upon the extant politics of power within the established domain, the host delegates aspects of the servile, deferential task as necessary and

> the work has to be done by a subaltern, who finds herself transformed into an excluded third by the hospitable pact. It thus happens that when the host welcomes you … he has arranged for a system of hierarchical redoubling: the host remains in charge of the welcoming gesture, but he is no longer responsible for the work… (Rosello 2001: 123)

Embedded within colonial and also postcolonial discourse and praxis as ciphers of hospitality, 'hostesses' to whom the work of the hospitable gesture is delegated thus become representatively complicit in politics of inclusion/exclusion that infuse both the domestic and cosmopolitan spheres. The persistence of this outmoded version of 'welcome' in the public sphere is less related to welcoming than it is to cheerleading and team building, and therefore more aggressive in its ideology than might be assumed. The hostess performing 'welcome', a signified hospitality, a closed openness, is symptomatic of a lack of shift in the cosmopolitan sphere in terms of the ethical responsibility for and provision of hospitality.

The persistent embodiment of a limited repertoire of gestures, aesthetics and modes-of-being by certain women performing welcome in media, arts and futuristic design could be argued to derive at least in part from the persistence of an anachronistic division of labour in relation to the host/guest. This repertoire is passed on to android hostesses without rupture of the established performative tropes, and thus the restrictive formal aestheticization of this mode of labour is uncritically endorsed. Robertson, in 'Gendering Humanoid Robots: Robo-Sexism in Japan', maintains that

> most roboticists reinforce in and through their humanoids, by default arising from indifference, quite unprogressive notions of gender dynamics and the sexual division of labour... (2010: 28)

Robertson (2010: 29) raises the interesting metaphor of 'degrees of freedom' in robot-building as a way of illustrating the division. Degrees of freedom are corporeal capabilities of motion along particular independent planes. According to Robertson's research the design of the female model of the Actroid (or geminoid) allowed for 42 degrees of freedom and the male model (an aesthetically-accurate copy-version of its lead creator) for 50 degrees of freedom. However, according to the Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratories (Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International) website, the current iteration of the female Japanese geminoid, Geminoid-F (2011), whom Ishiguro hopes will become "common communication media for everyday life" (Burrows 2011; Ishiguro 2014), has 16 degrees of freedom in order that it be cheaper, more lightweight, and more easily applied to social environments and installations. Its possibilities of movement are thus delimited and likely to become as iconographically familiar as the airline hostess', the magician's assistant's, or the game show hostess', for example. Robertson describes this approach as characteristic of 'retro-tech': advanced technology in the service of traditionalism.

The focus here on Japan is not arbitrary in that the setting is well known as the "high temple of robot technology" (Ambo 2007), and global uptake of its innovations in the robo-tech arena is well documented. As outlined by Robertson (2010) and others, the Japanese central government's 2007 blueprint for revitalizing and repopulating Japanese society includes the official prime ministerial document *Innovation 25: Creating the Future*, which states that by 2025, as a core element of a robot-dependent society, every household should include a humanoid domestic robot[i]. The document's online précis illustrates the five key points of this decree with friendly-looking cartoons: one is a *Stepford Wives*-esque picture of a pink humanoid robot with a dress-shaped body, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. Ostensibly relieving the housewife/domestic subaltern from some of her 'duties' in the home, the government's professed ideal is that married women will benefit from their new degrees of freedom to regain an interest, flagging overall in Japanese society, in monogamous procreation. Another of these cartoons is of a large man being served by a slim, smiling airline hostess and communicating his wishes to her via prosthetic earpiece: this subsection of the decree promotes the use of robotic translators and the development of technological systems of virtuality whereby citizens will "realize the world without leaving home" (see Government of Japan 2007). There is ambivalence in the document toward globalization that attests to Japan's history with regard to nationalism and immigration; domestically, humanoid robots are

> regarded by the public as preferable to foreign laborers, ostensibly for the reason that, unlike migrant and minority workers, robots have neither cultural differences nor, in the case of (especially) East Asians, unresolved historical (or wartime) memories to contend with. …They carry no inconvenient historical baggage. (Robertson 2010: 9)

A focus on convenient, rather than inconvenient, historical baggage is perhaps typically and efficiently Japanese, though obviously not limited to this locale or set of histories. Unfortunately, though, current iterations of humanoid robots *do* carry inconvenient historical baggage for those who find themselves on the less privileged side of inscrutably integrated cultural borders (and ceilings). 'Conveniently' for suppressing discourse about these topics, some of these very citizens are 'lending' their image or persona to the perpetuation of the hostess trope. The gatekeeping of

conventional wisdoms by proxies/surrogates, specifically conventionally attractive, young, female proxies and/or robots, is rife in Japan and despite 'cultural differences' can be seen to correspond to common images of hospitality all over the globe.

An android hostess obviously has a desirable capacity for almost continuous menial work. In the advertisement for Actroids that are ostensibly available for hire in a human-resources sense through animatronics company Kokoro (2014), there has been no promotion of male-gendered robots doing these same types of continuous welcoming, caring and menial roles.

> [Machine] capacities for action are created out of sociomaterial arrangements that instantiate histories of labor and more and less reliable, always contingent, future re-enactments. (Suchman 2006: 653)

The fabricators and distributors of this commercial arm of the Actroid venture, which is otherwise framed as academic-scientific research into human presence and human–robot interaction (see Ishiguro 2007; 2014), is Kokoro, a branch of Sanrio— brand giant famous for the Hello Kitty franchise. Kokoro's other significant line of robotics production is in animatronic dinosaurs for theme parks and exhibition displays. What company, then, better placed to corporealize an emergent anachronism such as the Actroid? 'Female' worker Actroids are *kawaii* (cute), novel, and antediluvian in the gendered labour codes they restate and reclaim. Publicized in their specific cultural context as "society heading in a natural direction" (Hasegawa and Collins 2010), they are presented in official discourse as an innovative, twenty-first century approach to fulfilment of a social utopian dream of a privileged class. But by aestheticizing and deploying Actroids uncritically and unprogressively in the hostess' familiar role and image, one does not necessarily guarantee ethical treatment for the robots, their 'gender', or the workers they displace.

Public discussion of the societal assimilation of humanoid robots rarely occurs without reference to Masahiro Mori's theory of the uncanny valley (1970). A literal translation of the German *das Unheimliche* being 'unhomely', uncanniness might also be directly linked to being 'not like/at home' and therefore to the experience of *in*hospitality. In English we have referred to a homely woman as one who is aesthetically inappropriate for society outside the home. To be *un*homely, then, out of or inappropriate for the home, is also to be out of place, unwelcome or conditionally tolerated, and non-agentic in the public sphere. It is a liminal state that is becoming populated by a host(ess) of female Actroids.

The fourteenth Dalai Lama is said to have stated that compassion is the radicalism of our times. In 'Toward a Theory of Feminist Hospitality', Hamington (2010: 21) offers a vision of hospitality "that reflects a performative extension of care ethics by pursuing stronger social bonds, as well as fostering inclusive and non-hierarchical host/guest relations". I suggest that this picture, which yet exists within a cosmopolitical system of laws, limits and defining signs, requires in addition to its dismantling of certain hierarchies an investigation of the complex and relatively disguised social bonds in which the fetishized female is substituted for the male 'welcome' and permission to participate in culture. If the hostess figure is a distilled marker of domestic hospitality in cultures both East and West, she can also be seen as a symptom of wider, persistent and treacherously transmissible disorder, for instance

as a gatekeeper for constitutional reluctance to behave in an unconditionally hospitable way to refugees and the poor. The insidiousness of the persona, unhelpful to gender equality and unable to speak for herself, and her concurrent generic attractiveness, celebratory 'aura' and surface compassion, render her chronic and controlled performance of hospitality profoundly questionable as she is further developed at the very vanguard of humanoid simulation.

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[i] See also Robertson (2010: 11): "No other country (as yet) attributes to robots and robotics such powerful agency and efficacy as does Japan. The five-year Humanoid Robotics Project, launched in 1998 by the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), gave a consortium of 12 corporations and 10 universities a mandate to develop first-generation intelligent humanoid robots, able to use hand tools and work in human environments, including hospitals, offices and households. This project laid the groundwork for Innovation 25."

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