

GUEST FEATURE

“Welcome Home, Princess”: Performing Care and Creating Belonging in a London Maid Café

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Project Description

This piece was originally produced for AN298 Ethnographic Research in London, a compulsory second-year course in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics taught by Professor Catherine Allerton. The course trains students to design, conduct, and write up an independent ethnographic project in London.

Throughout the Winter Term, students develop practical research skills, including observation, participation, interviewing, listening, analysis, and ethnographic writing, while receiving workshop-based guidance on ethical dilemmas and fieldwork challenges. For the summative assessment, each student completes a 4,500–5,000 word ethnographic essay based on their own research.

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This piece examines the affective, embodied, and relational labour that shapes everyday interactions inside Usagi Maid Café, a maid café in London where I conducted participant observation as a volunteer. Through attention to gestures, voice, costume, choreography, and emotional performance, this piece explores how intimacy is produced, negotiated, and commodified in this transnational subcultural setting. Drawing on feminist anthropology and theories of affective labour, it traces how maids balance a playful work-persona with the demands of service, customer expectations, and backstage exhaustion. Rather than treating the café as a site of escapist fantasy, the piece highlights the tensions, contradictions, and creative agency that emerge through the maids’ situated practices. It reflects on my own positionality as both worker and observer, and the ethical complexities of researching intimacy and performance.

INTRODUCTION

Just around the corner from the museum, the Maid Café feels like it belongs to a different world. The rose-pink window frame and hand-drawn illustrations: stars, ribbons, a white rabbit in a frilly maid outfit, hint at something childlike and gentle. The drawings are imperfect, but in a way that feels sincere. Plush toys press softly against the glass, and a chalkboard reads:

“Welcome Home, Master and Princess.”

When I first entered on a quiet afternoon, the outside world dissolved. Warm air, the scent of milk tea and cakes, the soft glow of fairy lights,

and the steady hum of an anime theme song filled the room: pink chairs, strawberry placemats, hand-folded notes with heart stickers. Everything had been arranged with care and love. The café seats no more than eighteen people, and yet the attention to detail was overwhelming in the gentlest way.

A maid stepped forward and welcomed me with a soft “Okaerinasaimase, Goshujin-sama, Ojō-sama (Welcome home, Master and Princess)”, forming a heart with her hands.

Another guided me to a seat with a precise, ceremonial movement, without ever touching me. Her name tag read “Mashiro,” outlined with

bunny stickers. Before I had fully settled into the seat, the maid had returned to my side. She stood with her hands gently folded and gave a small bow. “Please let me take care of you today as well.” Her voice was soft but perfectly timed to rise just above the lyrics in the background. The song whispered the words in Japanese: I want to spend time only with you.

The figure of the maid has a long history, rooted in domestic service under European patriarchal households. However, in Japanese ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture, the maid has been reimagined through subcultural aesthetics. Detached from historical servitude, the maid became a figure of play, often entangled with cuteness, submission, and fantasy. In Akihabara’s maid cafés, where the maid cafe originates, the live interaction between maid and customer stages a particular kind of intimacy: scripted, playful, and full of deliberate care.

Reflecting on my first visit to the Maid Café in early January, I would have described it as excessively pink, slightly cramped, and a source of vague fantasy. Now, in May, almost nothing about its appearance has changed. Yet instead of calling it absurd, I would describe it now as carefully constructed, soft-edged, and dreamlike in a way that feels deliberate.

As a customer in the early days of fieldwork, I felt detached, unsure of how to position myself within the space of the cafe. The interactions around me appeared theatrical and controlled, but the boundaries were not always stable. I witnessed two instances in which male customers crossed lines of appropriateness in their gestures toward the maids. On another occasion, a man, likely homeless, rushed in from the street and began undressing before being escorted out. These early moments left me with a sense of unease, reinforcing the common assumption that

spaces like maid cafés are closely tied to fantasies of sexuality or male desire. And yet, as I spent more time inside—first as a regular visitor and then as a volunteer working behind the scenes—I began to notice something more complex. Behind the fantasy lay a rhythm of real affective labour, mutual care, and quiet collaboration.

This essay is not about defining what a maid café is. Instead, I ask:

how is a fantasy world like the Maid Café made and sustained through everyday practices of performance, attention, and shared belief? What does it mean to “belong” in a space where intimacy is staged, but still felt for both customers and the staff?

METHODOLOGY

This ethnography is based on participant observation at a London Maid Café between January and May 2025. In the first month of fieldwork, I visited the café six times as a customer to gain an initial sense of its aesthetics, customer rituals, and staff dynamics. From February onward, I began volunteering three to four evenings a week, assisting with cleaning tasks backstage in exchange for homemade meals from Miss Wang, the owner. Over time, I built close relationships with Manager Miss Wang, Mako (the head maid), Ukiyo and many others. In total, I worked alongside twenty-seven staff members and observed a wide range of activities both in front of and behind the scenes. I recorded my observations in handwritten fieldnotes after each shift or visit, focusing on gesture, tone, objects, and spatial arrangement. With permission, I reviewed message books and staff-run social media accounts. Sensitive details, especially those related to private lives, have

been anonymised.

CO-PERFORMING FANTASY AND SCRIPTED INTIMACY

At the Maid Café, with the exception of a few temporary helpers, nearly all staff members are Chinese international students. Over time, I began to recognise a small circle of regulars, mostly Chinese-speaking students, who often requested the same maid or sat at the same table. Meanwhile, themed events tended to attract new guests, including local anime fans and even tourists. Intimacy and care are not one-sided or simply service-driven by the maids. Interactive scripts and performative care co-construct it.

On a regular day at the Café, the performance follows a familiar script: the maid bows, calls the guest “master” or “princess”, and gently guides them through a menu of staged interactions. Each gesture is practised but flexible, leaving room for improvisation based on the customer’s mood and the maid’s energy. These routines produce a form of care that feels soft and predictable – something between play and hospitality.

On Special Event Days, however, everything feels heightened. The café was reservation-only on Valentine’s Day. Two female employees were dressing as otome game characters as the perfect boyfriends. It was a time for game-lovers to enter a familiar world they had already spent hours inside, via a screen.

At the door, I ran across a white girl wearing a black jacket with dyed pink hair and thick boots. She was quietly checking her phone and smoking. When I requested a cigarette, she said her name was P and that she had just left a

Korean class. At first, she didn’t say much, but I could tell from her eyes that she was very excited. Inside, she sat by the window and took a laptop from her bag. A bit later, her friend came. Opening the game together, they started carefully matching the outfits of the café personnel to the in-game characters. They looked at little details, including the angle of a tie, the button fastening, and the shine on a pair of glasses. Every little game brought them joy.

Both girls sat up straighter when Xavier came dressed in a deep red coat with silver accents. One of them said softly, “That’s him.” He strolled over slowly, glanced at them, and remarked, “Good evening, Princess. Your return to the realm is an honour. His voice was deliberate, quiet, steady. They both responded right away. P covered her mouth and turned to her friend. Her buddy held her breath.

He gave them the menu and enquired whether they wanted to start the Valentine’s mission. Though the language was dramatic, they took it seriously. Flipping through the laminated sheets, they referred to him as “Xavier-sama.” It was beyond a menu. They already knew the script for it. They had previously played this game, but now they were inside it.

Later, when taking the photo, P selected the shy confession posture. Xavier turned his gaze a little away and placed a hand over his heart. Just before the shutter, he remarked, “I hope tonight stays with you.” The moment seemed calm and weighty. The two of them looked at the picture later. They said nothing of framing or blur. They nodded after reading the handwriting on the edge. “My dearest Princess”. That sufficed. Their replies were not overstated. They were genuine. Their movement, shoulder leanings, and voice softening when they spoke to him all revealed it. They weren’t only observing

a performance. They had joined it.

For the consumers, that blurring may be appealing. The maid doesn't have to be real in the same sense as a friend. She just has to match the emotional tempo the client identifies.

You know her smile is work-related, but you still smile back. That decision is what gives the café its function. Everyone inside decides to adhere to the same guideline. The customer reacts; the maid plays her part. Its significance is shaped by the effort put into it. It's not about being duped. It's about creating something magical and gentle that nevertheless seems worthwhile to hold onto.

OBJECTS OF ENCHANTMENT

Inside the Maid Café, objects are never just functional. Each carries emotional meaning and helps sustain the fantasy that the café promises.

I remember one evening when Mako sent a message saying the weekend event still lacked a pink die. Not just any pink, but the right kind. Manager Wang looked at me, smiled, and said we should try the adult shops nearby. We walked through Soho in the dark, checking dice trays in shops that smelled of rubber and perfume. One Indian convenience store had loose dice behind the counter, but they were too dark or filled with glitter. When Manager Wang held up a lilac die, snapped a photo, sent it to Mako. She replied with an angry face and said, "No, we needed a pink that felt dreamy". She emphasised that where it came from did not matter, pink alone was the rule.

Wang later explained to me that any object that enters this room must match a visual logic, sweet, unified, filtered through a hint of fairy

tales. Eventually, in the corner of a basement stall, we found one that worked. Fluffy pink, the colour of bubble gum. The next day, it sat on the table. Rolling a one meant a heart-hand photo with a maid. A two invite a ketchup charm drawn on your omelette rice. A three gave you a soft "thank you for coming home today." The die was small and cheap, but it activated a whole set of interactions. Its colour had to blend with the room.

At the Maid Café, how something looks matters more than where it comes from.

This rule also shapes how food is served. When someone orders omelette rice, the maid asks whether a magic picture is desired. Most guests say yes. Miss Wang cooks the dish and hands it to the maid, who then rehearses a ketchup drawing at the side table. A heart, a cat, or a pair of wings. They help each other fix crooked ears or uneven lines before bringing the dish to the table. Then, in a soft voice, the maid chants, "Moe-moe magic, moe-moe heart, be happy today." The chant varies each time. Mashiro might use snow words, and Haru adds a cheerful bark. Phones rise. Clicks follow. Guests whisper, "So cute." An ordinary meal becomes a tiny stage performance.

"Chekis", the Polaroid photos, hold a different kind of meaning. These small instant photos are taken with a maid after your meal, often in a chosen pose, and decorated with handwritten messages or drawings. Each photo captures a moment of scripted affection. Guests are asked if they want a "nyan-nyan" pose or a heart. One shy customer once posed stiffly. The maid leaned in and told him to relax. After the shutter, she decorated the border with stars and wrote, "Thank you for coming home." He read it, smiled, and tucked it away. That photo stayed. Others don't. I've seen maids peel off stickers from

cheeks they dislike, whispering, “My face looks weird.” Unflattering ones are quietly thrown away. Only photos that match the mood of the Café are allowed to remain.

Another item sits quietly by the counter: the message book. Each one, decorated with glittery stickers and labelled with a maid’s name, invites customers to leave drawings, thanks, or short letters. At the end of the day, the maids gather to read them aloud over leftover curry, often laughing, sometimes quietly moved.

But their meaning doesn’t always last.

One evening, I heard a short conversation near the register. “She said she won’t be back for them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just throw them away.”

Without hesitation, two thick message books were dropped into a black bin bag without hesitation.

A pink die, a bowl of rice, a cheki photo, and a glittery message book. None of these are just props. Their meaning only takes shape within the moment of play. Each one holds value when it becomes part of an interaction, part of a shared rhythm between maid and guest. When the stage is empty and the performance ends, they return to being ordinary things. What gives them life is not what they are, but how people use them to care, to connect, and to create something fleeting yet real. In the Maid Café, objects carry emotion not because they last, but because they are held, looked at, and gently believed in.

Crossing the boundary: blending between persona and self.

At the Café, the boundary between performance and self is not fixed. Each maid moves between her role and her everyday identity, often without drawing clear lines. Over time, some parts of the character begin to settle into her behaviour. The persona is not discarded when the shift ends. It is repeated, absorbed, and gradually folded into the self.

This overlap is most visible in the backstage routines. Maids pay much attention to their makeup, rehearse their magical chants, and take selfies in costume. After work, some remain in the café to take pictures under the lighting they like best. They study the images closely and ask each other whether they still “look like a maid”. These gestures are not understood as labour. For many, the role becomes a way of being worth recording and sharing.

One quiet Sunday, I saw two maids filming TikTok dances outside the café under the afternoon sun. They were still in full uniform, wiping sweat from their necks between takes. One fixed her bangs in the reflection of her phone and said, “Okay, genki mode (switch to the energetic model)” before stepping into a practised smile. The choreography was simple, but it had to feel light.

“The cuteness had to feel effortless,”

one of them said. After each take, they bent over the screen to review. They weren’t chasing technical precision. Instead, they were aiming for a mood, a way of being that aligned with what a maid should look and feel like. The maid persona extended beyond the café and into social media, photo albums, and self-image. Over time, the lines wore down. Not with a single moment of collapse, but through soft repetition. Eventually, the performance wasn’t just for others. Part of them wanted to become

her.

But this absorption is not always consistent. In moments of discomfort or disruption, the line between fantasy and reality can quietly fracture. One evening, a cheerful maid named Nemu went quiet after interacting with a male customer who made her uncomfortable. Her shoulders tensed, and her voice lost its brightness. After serving his drink, she stepped into the kitchen without a word. That night, she told me she had tried to stay in character, but in that moment, she just wanted to walk away.

During a staff meeting, the manager reminded everyone: "If you ever feel unsafe, you don't need to keep performing."

At other times, something softer emerges. A man in his seventies, dressed in a formal suit and tie, visits the café almost every week. He says he is a retired professor. He always orders omelette rice and several happy hour tokens (10 pounds for 10 minutes), not for the food, but to talk to the maids. He tells them about his daily anxieties, his past travels, and his quiet loneliness. The maids respond gently. Sometimes they stay in character. Sometimes they don't.

One smiled and said, "It sounds like the real world has been difficult again. Let's give you some magic today."

Another one replied with more personal details and said the professor's situations were similar to her grandpa, and suggested he engage in more outside activities.

Before leaving, he wrote in the message book: "I really admire your performance."

Such interactions reveal how performance at the Maid Café is not always about maintaining illusion, but about offering a framework through

which care and connection can be meaningfully expressed, even when the persona slips.

Not all performances end gently. Rin's case shows that when someone stops taking the performance seriously, the shared fantasy starts to fall apart. The boundary between self and role is not just about work, it holds the essence of the café.

Rin was the first maid in the Café's history to be dismissed. She had been popular at first, welcoming customers with warmth and energy. But over time, her co-workers noticed she often vanished mid-shift, hiding in the restroom to play video games on her phone. "Sometimes we'd be about to introduce 'the other maid from the magical world,'" one colleague said, "and she'd just be gone."

The final incident came when Rin sat next to a customer and began fixing a cosplay wig, speaking in an ordinary tone and criticising other maids' makeup. She had fully stepped out of character in front of a guest. In the next team meeting, Mako announced that Rin had "graduated." The word softened the fact of dismissal but signaled something real: the performance had broken down.

These boundaries are also crossed in quieter ways. One afternoon, a few maids were sitting at a side table during a break, talking about food. When someone nearby asked a casual question: What kind of filling was in the dumplings? One maid immediately leaned forward. Her voice shifted. She didn't call anyone "princess" or "master." She answered like a student, chatting about which shop had the best flavour. In that moment, the role dropped away entirely.

Moments like these reveal that the maid's identity is not something always worn. It is

activated. At the Café, the performance is not continuous, and it does not need to be. Unlike the fully immersive cafés of Akihabara, the Maid Café allows space to pause, to step in and out of character. The fantasy does not rely on permanence, instead, it relies on choice. Everyone inside knows it isn't real. But everyone agrees to believe in it, together, for a little while. And that's enough to make it feel like magic. These moments show that fantasy in the Maid Café is neither rigid nor purely escapist. It is fragile, responsive, and always negotiated between comfort and control.

MORE THAN A MAID CAFE

As I spent more time with the staff, especially after becoming close with the manager, who often came to my flat for dinner, I began to gain a deeper understanding of the working system of the café and what made the Maid Café unique. Unlike maid cafés in Akihabara or Hong Kong, where performance is shaped by commission systems, customer rankings, and the pressure to maintain popularity, the Maid Café operates on an equal, hourly wage structure based on the UK minimum wage. At first glance, this may seem like an unimportant administrative detail. However, over time, I came to realise how profoundly this structure reshapes the atmosphere and working environment of the café.

One afternoon, I worked alongside a new maid who had worked for two years in a maid café in Hong Kong. She hummed throughout her shift, chatting with customers and colleagues with happiness that caught my attention. Behind the bar, I asked her how she felt about the Maid Café.

"It's so much better here," she said, smiling. "In

Hong Kong, every day you're stressed about whether anyone will request you as their specific maid by calling your name. Your pay depends on it. But here, even if I don't take a single cheki or no customer knows about me today, we all still eat dinner together after work."

She illustrated to me the details of typical maid cafes. In Hong Kong and Japan, many maid cafés operate under far more rigid and hierarchical systems. Uniforms are often based on the aesthetic of the "French maid", and their design varies according to the customer's ranking system, which means that the more elegant and colourful the costume, the higher the maid's position. Maids are typically young and are expected to strictly adhere to physical and behavioural standards. For example, gaining weight is not permitted. If a maid can no longer fit into the largest size of the standard uniform, she is quietly asked to resign.

The London Maid Café makes no such demands. There are no ranked uniforms and no pressure to maintain a specific body shape. Most maids wear similar outfits regardless of seniority, and performance is never quantified in terms of sales or popularity. What matters instead is reliability, presence, and care for others. Praise is often given for small, quiet gestures, such as helping another maid rehearse her chant, adjusting someone's hairpin before a photo, or staying behind to clean without being asked. These are small gestures, but they reveal a different ethic of labour: one grounded not in visibility or profit, but in co-performance and shared pleasure.

That same evening, I invited Manager Wang over for dinner at my flat. Over hot pot and jasmine tea, she shared the story of how the Maid Café came into being two years ago. Listening to her, I began to understand more

clearly why the Maid Café is not a conventional maid café. She told me that when she decided to open the Maid Café two years ago, there was no business plan at all. A classmate had invited her to co-found the café, and she simply said yes. “I just thought it would be fun to do something with people who love ACG culture”, she said, laughing.

“Whether it makes money or not does not matter. I could always go back to Shanghai and let my parents fund me forever.”

That comment revealed something important. The Maid Café was never designed to be a profit-driven enterprise. It was born out of a desire to build a space where anime lovers could enjoy something together. Not commercial, but rather a project started by a financially secure international student who wanted to create a room for her passions.

Originally, there were two partners involved. But before the café even opened, one of them suddenly disappeared, what Wang, the manager, called “running away.” That period, she said, was almost unbearable.

“I was in the kitchen cutting onions alone, crying, and wondering if I should just shut everything down.”

It was then that Mako (the leader of the maids) stepped in. She had only been a part-time student hired to help plan events, but suddenly she found herself taking over all the operations, including scheduling shifts, managing supplies, and running the floor. The team started to take shape. Together, they stayed up late designing event charts, adjusting the menu, and decorating the interior by hand. In Wang’s words, “We built [the Maid Café] piece by piece, from scratch.”

This space is not driven by profit, but by shared

affection and imagination. It gives customers a brief break from daily life, and at the same time, offers the maids a place of comfort and belonging, like a shelter.

Ichika works as a high school physics teacher during the day. After class, she hurries to the café to change into the costume of an “18-year-old washed-up idol.” While fixing her makeup one evening, she told me,

“At school, I have to be serious, I have to act like an adult. But here, I can sing, dance, and act spoiled. Putting on this identity feels like a relief.”

Hena and Pupu are students in medicine and biology at two different universities. Their schedules are packed, and the pressure before exams can be overwhelming. Yet each time they tie their aprons, they smile and say, “Working at [the Maid Café] is the only happy moment in my week.”

Most of the maids come from well-off families who can afford international tuition fees. The salary isn’t what matters. Many of them arrive in luxury clothes. Expensive bags rest casually in the corner of the changing room. Some spend their earnings on new cosplay outfits or a cute dress they saw online.

At the bar, it’s not unusual to see more than just the staff on shift. Maids who aren’t working that day still come by, dressed in their regular clothes, helping to serve drinks or tidy up. Many live nearby in student housing or shared flats. The café has become a spot they pass by every day, a place they stop in just to say hi. After closing time, we often gather at the entrance to smoke, sketch, watch anime, or brainstorm ideas for the next themed event.

This is not a business in the conventional sense. It

feels more like a subcultural shelter, a space built collectively by Chinese international students. On the surface, it's all about performance. But underneath, it's a way of being together. Here, they've found a rhythm that doesn't belong to school or work. And more importantly, they've found people who don't need them to explain who they are.

Maybe that's why the Maid Café feels so different. It doesn't survive on profit or the pressure to maintain a marketable persona. It survives because people keep coming back, not just to perform or to be served, but to stay a little longer.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

The Maid Café is not simply a stage for fantasy to make profits. It is a space where care, belonging, and co-performance are gently crafted through everyday gestures.

What sustains its magic is not illusion, but the quiet agreement to believe together, even if only for a little while.

Unlike commercial maid cafés shaped by rankings or desire, the Maid Café follows a different rhythm. Its maids are not performers to make money, but students building a community in a foreign city.

Reflecting on this project, I must acknowledge several limitations that shaped both what I was able to observe and what remained beyond reach. As a researcher, I made the conscious decision not to wear a maid costume or actively position myself in front-stage service, in order to avoid interfering with the natural flow of interactions between maids and customers. That is the reason why I did not mention too much

information about customers in this report.

Instead, I took on a backstage role, folding napkins, cleaning floors, preparing drinks, and gradually becoming part of the café. This gave me access to informal scenes of shared labour and intimacy among staff, but it also meant that I observed far less of the customer experience, especially the more gendered dynamics that often structure conversations around maid cafés. Unlike many previous studies, I did not focus on performance as a spectacle of gender, desire, or identity. Also, while maid cafés have Japanese origins, their adaptation here creates tensions of cultural borrowing and reinterpretation that this essay does not fully explore, but which remain analytically important.

My cultural and linguistic advantages also shaped the data collection. As a Chinese student familiar with the aesthetics of ACG culture and fluent in Mandarin and Japanese, I could easily understand the everyday jokes and subtle emotions that circulated in the room. I was also an insider, not only to the language but to the shared cultural world of Chinese international students in the UK. This enabled trust, but may have reduced my sensitivity to what an outsider would have found strange, difficult, or meaningful. I could understand without always questioning.

Finally, this research did not aim to offer an explanation of maid café culture in general, nor to make comparative claims across national or commercial contexts. The Maid Café is highly specific: a small, self-funded café built by Chinese international students, operating in London, with limited commercial ambition. The themes of care, collectivity, and co-performance explored here are rooted in that specificity.

I once believed that anthropological research required clear research questions and constant inquiry. But at the Maid Café, I gradually realised that when a researcher enters the field with too strong a sense of purpose, relationships can become strained. In my first few weeks as a volunteer, I asked almost nothing. I simply wiped tables, washed cups, swept the floor, and cleaned the corners of the kitchen. Slowly, the staff stopped seeing me as an outsider. They began offering me snacks, stickers, and handwritten notes. I was added to the event planning group chat and invited to co-design new theme days.

I once spent an afternoon with Wang laying down flooring for the café, cutting and fitting vinyl tiles on our knees from 3 to 7 p.m. That evening, as she smoked by the doorway, she said to me,

“Meeting you and other staff has been such a gift. I used to feel like I was trying to erase all traces of myself from this world. But now, being here with you all in London and creating happy memories, which makes me feel lucky.”

I never expected an interlocutor to share something so personal. That moment made it clear: we were no longer observer and observed.

I celebrated my 20th birthday at the Maid Café. They brought me cake and cards. Mako always saved me a pack of my favourite cigarettes.

“When you return from Japan, let’s start a rock band.”

I did not approach it as a site to be researched. I became part of it. I lived alongside a group of girls who didn’t care about the idea of fieldwork, and yet gave me a field more vivid

than I could have imagined. And when I heard those words again, “Welcome home, Princess”, I realised that somehow, I truly had come home.

It is a story beyond sexuality or commodified intimacy, about how we understand maid cafés, not only as spectacles, but also through the lens of belonging, labour, and diasporic togetherness.