Netflix Originals

Performing the Private Lives of Marginalized Communities for a Global Audience

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Abstract

The Western fascination with geisha began with the travels of Sadayakko (1871–1946) and Hanako (Ōhta Hisa, 1868–1945), the first geisha to perform overseas in the United States and Europe. Hanako's captivating face inspired Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) to sculpt her numerous times, making her the only Asian he ever depicted. To Rodin, she symbolized Asian beauty and mystery, leading to her Orientalization. Early photographs of Japanese individuals sent to the West, often featuring geisha and kabuki actors, further fueled Western interest in geisha.

The West's initial encounters with geisha were not part of the Meiji government's official narrative. Sadayakko, often overlooked in Japanese history, was the first Japanese woman performer to travel to the West since the Meiji era. Early photographs of geisha were possible because many Japanese people were hesitant to pose for photography, fearing it could capture their souls.

Starting in the 2000s, Japan embraced its "soft power," heavily exporting its cultural identity through the "Cool Japan" campaign, which aimed to market Japanese culture globally. Scholars analyze "Cool Japan" as a cultural phenomenon and its impact on national branding and Japanese nationalism. As technological advancements increased access to Japanese cultural goods, the ownership of Japan's cultural narrative shifted away from the government's campaign.

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This paper explores Netflix's role in disseminating Japanese culture globally, focusing on *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House* (2023) and *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (2016, 2019). *The Makanai* challenges stereotypes surrounding maiko while *Midnight Diner* pairs Japanese recipes with heartwarming stories of overlooked individuals. Netflix redefines storytelling by featuring complex characters deeply rooted in Japanese culture, promoting active engagement among viewers and challenging Western stereotypes. Utilizing Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, this paper illustrates how Netflix content respects the complexity and mystery of Japanese culture, fostering a deeper understanding and respect.

Keywords: Geisha and Maiko, Japanese cooking, Japanese performing arts, Manga, Japanese drama

"Kyoto Bans Tourists from Parts of Geisha District Amid Reports of Bad Behaviour," reads the headline from *The Guardian* posted on March 7, 2024.[1] With the resurgence of tourism in Japan following the reopening after the pandemic, local residents of Kyoto have expressed dissatisfaction with the behavior of foreign visitors. Complaints include tourists acting as amateur paparazzi, trespassing on private properties, obstructing maiko and geisha on their way to meet clients, and even attempting to grab their kimonos. In response, Kyoto government officials announced a ban on tourists from entering the narrow and private streets of Gion, effective April 2024.[2]

The fascination with geisha in the West began with the travels of the first geisha to perform overseas in the United States and Europe: Sadayakko (1871–1946) and Hanako (Ōhta Hisa, 1868–1945). Hanako's captivating

1. Justin McCurry, "Kyoto Bans Tourists from Parts of Geisha District Amid Reports of Bad Behaviour," *Guardian*, March 7, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/08/kyoto-geisha-district-tourist-ban-gion.
2. McCurry, "Kyoto Bans Tourists from Parts of Geisha District Amid Reports of Bad Behaviour."

face drew the attention of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), leading him to sculpt her numerous times, making her the only Asian he ever depicted. To Rodin, she symbolized Asian beauty and mystery. Thus, Hanako became one of the first geisha to be Orientalized through the eyes and hands of Rodin. Additionally, early photographs of Japanese individuals sent to the West featured geisha and kabuki actors, further signaling the beginning of the West's interest in geisha.

The West's initial encounters with geisha were not part of the official narrative promoted by the new Meiji government. Sadayakko has been largely overlooked in Japanese history, frequently denied the acknowledgment she deserves as the first Japanese woman performer to travel to the West since the founding of the Meiji government. Furthermore, the early photographs of geisha were only made possible because many Japanese people were hesitant to pose for this new technology, fearing that photography could capture their souls.

What constitutes the official narrative? Which aspects of Japanese culture are "official" enough to represent Japan? In the late 1980s, Japan began to reclaim global attention through the exportation of its culture via the transnational flow of media and popular culture. Notably, the television drama *Oshin* (1983–1984) epitomized this success, garnering widespread acclaim and viewership in Japan and becoming an iconic series in the country's history. Its popularity extended internationally to over forty-seven countries, especially in Asia, where it was dubbed and broadcast in multiple languages, reaching millions of viewers worldwide. Koichi Iwabuchi explores how Japanese TV dramas like *Oshin* transcended national borders and contributed to the emergence of transnational cultural flows and connections in popular culture. He emphasizes that these dramas are actively interpreted and reinterpreted by audiences in diverse cultural contexts.[3]

3. Iwabuchi Koichi, "Introduction: Cultural Globalization and Asian Media Connections," *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 1–22.

Starting in the 2000s, the Japanese government embraced its "soft power," a concept coined by Joseph Nye,[4] heavily exporting its cultural identity, ranging from traditional Japanese cuisine and arts to contemporary Kawaii culture, in a campaign dubbed "Cool Japan." Ironically, the term "Cool Japan" originated not from within Japan but rather from Douglas McGray's concept of "Gross National Cool."[5] Scholars have analyzed the effects of the "Cool Japan" campaign as a cultural studies phenomenon, examining its impact on the global world[6] or its political[7] and economic[8] implications in national branding, particularly in relation to Japanese nationalism. The significance of the "Cool Japan" campaign lies in Japan's endeavor to market specific aspects of its culture (such as food, anime, manga, and fashion) to the global community, aiming to control its own narrative while boosting its economy.[9]

As technological advancements have provided the international community with greater access to Japanese cultural goods, the ownership over the "official" narrative of Japanese cultural identity has shifted away from the Japanese government's "Cool Japan" campaign. Over-the-top (OTT) media services such as Netflix have played a significant role in facilitating access to aspects of Japanese culture represented by individuals who have often been marginalized from the official Japanese cultural narrative. This paper aims to explore the role of Netflix in the dissemination of Japanese culture within the global world, focusing on two different Netflix original

4. Joseph Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71.
5. Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* 130: 44–54.
6. Iwabuchi, *Feeling Asian Modernities*.
7. Michael Daliot-Bul, "Reframing and Reconsidering the Cultural Innovations of the Anime Boom on US Television," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 75–91; Yoshiko Nakano, "Share Memories: Japanese Pop Culture in China," in *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, ed. Yasuchi Watanabe and David McConnell (M. E. Sharpe, 2008), 236–58.
8. Nobuko Kawashima, "'Cool Japan' and Creative Industries: An Evaluation of Economic Policies for Popular Culture Industries in Japan," in *Asian Cultural Flows*, ed. Nobuko Kawashima and Hyu-Kyung Lee (Springer, 2018), 19–36.
9. Kawashima, "'Cool Japan' and Creative Industries," 28–30.

dramas: *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House* (2023) and *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (2016, 2019).

Kiyo in Kyoto: The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House, based on a manga by Koyama Aiko, dispels stereotypes surrounding maiko by depicting the harsh realities of this fading profession and the challenges faced in becoming a maiko and later a geisha. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, this drama series aims to challenge misconceptions perpetuated by Hollywood films like *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) and certain Japanese films such as Mizoguchi Kenji's *A Geisha* (*Gion Bayashi*, 1953).

Another Netflix Japan original series, *Midnight Diner*, also originally based on a manga by Abe Yarō, enjoyed a successful three-season production run (2009, 2011, and 2014) and two theatrical feature films produced by TBS (2014) and MBS (2016) before Netflix Japan acquired the streaming and production rights. Netflix Japan subsequently produced two series of *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (2016 and 2019), which were streamed both domestically in Japan and internationally. Despite enjoying immense popularity in Asia prior to Netflix, *Midnight Diner* had minimal presence in the West. This is because each episode of *Midnight Diner* pairs Japanese recipes with heartwarming stories of individuals often overlooked by mainstream society, traditionally deemed unworthy of screen time.

In these two cases, Netflix redefines storytelling by featuring complex characters deeply rooted in Japanese culture. These portrayals go beyond simply showcasing a diner cook or a stereotypical maiko, instead delving into the complexities—both good and bad—of characters immersed in the richness of Japanese cultural performance. These intricacies allow viewers to engage with otherwise inaccessible art forms, creating an experience where they are not passive spectators but active participants projecting their own experiences and sharing in the characters' triumphs and struggles. In this way, viewers become performers, drawing parallels between their own lives and those of the characters, thereby gaining deeper insights into both themselves and Japanese culture.

Netflix's *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House* and *Midnight Diner* promote active engagement among viewers, challenging previous stereotypes of Japanese culture often created by the West's fascination, exoticization, and need to "normalize" Japan. Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity refers to the idea that individuals and cultures should be allowed to exist without being completely understood or transparent to others. Glissant argues against the Western tendency to demand transparency and comprehension of different cultures, which often leads to reductionism and domination. Instead, he advocates for the right to opacity, acknowledging and respecting the complexity, mystery, and irreducibility of others. This concept challenges the notion that understanding is a prerequisite for coexistence, promoting instead a form of relationship based on mutual respect and acceptance of differences.[10]

Utilizing Glissant's concept of opacity, this paper illustrates Netflix's role in creating content that often addresses topics that stereotypical to appeal to a broader audience while it also provides additional depth and insights into a world frequently misunderstood and stereotyped by the West.

The Unpainted Face: The Unsung Heroines Behind the Painted Faces

Netflix's *The Makanai: Cooking for a Geisha House* is based on the best-selling manga series *Maiko-san chi no Makanai-san* by Akiko Koyama. The manga, first serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Sunday* in 2016, quickly became a success, earning the prestigious 2020 65th Shogakukan Manga Award in the "Shōnen" category.[11] By September 2022, it had amassed over 2.7 million copies in circulation.[12]

10. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94.
11. "*Manga* Maiko-san chi no makanai-san *ga* NHK *de anime ka*," Daily Tōhoku Digital, March 31, 2020, https://www.daily-tohoku.news/archives/33106.
12. "Netflix *Maiko-san chi no makanai-san 23 nen 1 gatsu 12 nichi haishin hatsu eizō kōkai*," Cinema Today, September 25, 2022, https://www.cinematoday.jp/news/N0132581.

The popularity of the manga inspired a twelve-episode anime series produced by *Nippon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK) and directed by Suzuki Yōhei. The anime originally aired from February 25, 2021, to January 27, 2022.[13] In January 2022, the manga's success prompted Netflix to officially announce a collaboration with Japanese film director Kore-eda Hirokazu, marking Kore-eda's debut as a director of a drama series.[14]

The twelve-episode Netflix series *The Makanai: Cooking for a Geisha House* (hereafter referred to as *The Makanai*), was globally released on January 12, 2023, exclusively on Netflix's streaming platform and is currently accessible only to Netflix subscribers. The series stays faithful to the original manga's storyline, tracing the journey of two sixteen-year-old girls, Kiyo and Sumire, as they leave their hometown in Aomori (northern Japan) to pursue their dreams of becoming geisha in Kyoto.

Viewers are invited to join Kiyo on her journey, witnessing both her failures and triumphs. After just three months in Kyoto, Kiyo encounters a setback when it is recommended that she discontinue her maiko training, seemingly dashing her dreams of becoming a geisha.

However, a silver lining appears when the *makanai*, a position that is not a prestige chef but a cook for a large number of people, sustains an injury. This presents an opportunity for Kiyo to step into the role of the new *makanai*. Throughout the series, audiences explore the profound significance and comfort that food provides to those whom Kiyo nourishes, further emphasizing the depth of her character and the impact of her journey.

In an interview given to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Kore-eda explains his interest in directing *The Makanai*:

13. "*Anime* Maiko-san chi no makanai-san *Kiyo-yaku wa Hanazawa Kana, maiko no Sumire-yaku ha* MAO," Comic Natalie, January 20, 2021, https://natalie.mu/comic/news/413182.
14. "Netflix Announces New Series 'The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House' Directed by Hiokazu Kore-eda," Netflix Entertainment News, January 6, 2022, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-announces-new-japanese- series-the-makanai-cooking-for-the-maiko.

> Well, I was interested because this was a world that I did not know. In films, I had seen this world portrayed by Kenji Mizoguchi and Mikio Naruse, but I didn't have any idea how geiko [the Kansai term for geisha] and maiko actually live their lives in the present day. . . . From what I understand, there's often a lot of international misunderstanding about Japanese geisha and the historical realities of the tradition. And I believe there is even debate within Japan about just how empowered geisha were, historically, and how the tradition should be perceived in relation to modern feminist ideals. . . . When I interviewed one of the Okami-sans, the former house mothers, they told me that a lot of the foreigners who visit them have seen *Memoirs of a Geisha* and their understanding of geisha have been totally shaped by that film. So they assume all of the girls were sold to the house because of a poor upbringing, or that they are there out of desperation.[15]

In this interview, Kore-eda highlights the two major influences that have shaped the perception of the geisha world for both Japanese and international audiences: Mizoguchi Kenji's *A Geisha* (1953) and Hollywood's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). What Kore-eda accomplishes in directing the first two episodes of *The Makanai* is a direct challenge to the preconceptions of geisha and maiko portrayed in these two films.

Mizoguchi Kenji (1898–1956), one of Japan's critically acclaimed directors, is renowned for creating films that sympathetically portray women victimized by Japanese patriarchal society. His perspective on women may have been influenced by his personal experiences, including his sister's plight as an indentured servant to settle their father's debts accrued from a failed raincoat business during the Russo-Japanese War. Despite this, Mizoguchi's reputation was contradicted by reports of his frequenting brothels and his

15. Patrick Brzeski, "Hirokazu Kore-eda on Exploring World of Japanese Geisha for Netflix Series 'The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House,'" Hollywood Reporter, January 12, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/hirokazu-koreeda-geisha-netflix-makanai-1235298582/.

mistreatment of women on set, and he often considered himself to possess special insight into women's lives.[16]

Mizoguchi's *A Geisha*, also known by its Japanese title *Gion Bayashi*, is regarded by Japanese critics as a remake of his postwar film *Sisters of the Gion* (*Gion no shimai*).[17] *A Geisha* is set in Kyoto's Hanamachi, one of the five main geisha and maiko districts, during 1953, a period marked by significant change following the end of the American Occupation of Japan in 1952. Despite the progressive shifts in Japanese society, the lives of geisha and maiko show little improvement in terms of their civil rights within the traditional world they inhabit. Peter Grilli observes that *A Geisha* illustrates a world where "women were still dependent on men who patronized them lavishly before abruptly discarding them, and geisha remained tightly indentured to their houses by social relationships and the financial debts they could almost never escape."[18] Furthermore, Jan Bardsley notes that *A Geisha* is not a call to action. Instead, the film seamlessly aligns with Mizoguchi's recurrent theme of portraying beautiful, self-sacrificing women; blending pity with a sense of resignation; and ultimately adopting an aesthetic perspective.[19]

It is within this depicted world that Mizoguchi's influence on the Japanese perception of the geisha and maiko is profound. The Japanese title, *Gion Bayashi*, which translates to "the rhythm or melody of Gion," evokes the distinct percussion rhythm unique to the renowned Gion Festival, Kyoto's largest summer festival typically held in July. Unlike the English title, *A Geisha*, which focuses on a singular geisha, *Gion Bayashi* conjures an

16. Catherine Russell, *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited* (Bloomsbury, 2011), 59.
17. Yoshii Isamu, "*Gion Bayashi* o mite," in *Kyō no uta goyomi* (Daviddosha, 1957), 102–5; Noborikawa Naoki, "*Gion Bayashi*," *Kinema junpō* 72 (1953): 56–57, Matsuura Hisaki, "Ōga to kenryoku: Mizoguchi Kenji, *Gion Bayashi*," *Shineteikku* 1 (1993): 120–44; Sugiyama Hei'ichi, "*Gion Bayashi*," *Eiga hyōron* 10 (1953): 76–78.
18. Peter M. Grilli, "Geisha on Stage and Screen," in *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* (George Braziller/Peabody Essex Museum, 2004), 145.
19. Jan Bardsley, "From Victim to Artist," in *Maiko Masquerade: Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan* (University of California Press, 2021), 119.

image of a collective group in synchronous harmony, creating the melody. Perhaps metaphorically, it symbolizes the geisha and maiko performing their roles collectively, maintaining tradition without veering into individualism.

A Geisha begins with the resonant tones of the *kokyū*, a traditional Japanese three-string instrument originally introduced from China and played with a bow, akin to the Chinese *erhu*. Accompanying the *kokyū* are the melodic strains of the *shamisen*, another traditional Japanese three-string instrument played with a *bachi* or plectrum, alongside vocals from the *jiuta* genre "The Summer Is Fireflies" (*Natsu ha Hotaru*). *Jiuta* encompasses the regional songs of the Kansai area (Kyoto/Osaka), popular during the early modern period (1603–1868) and traditionally performed in the tea houses of the pleasure quarters. These traditional sounds are juxtaposed with the cords of the Western harp, creating a "dreamlike" effect. While the vocalist/*shamisen* player, *kokyū* player, and harpist may appear to perform in harmony, there exists a stark contrast between the traditional song "The Summer Is Fireflies" and the dreamlike chords of the Western harp. The harp's presence symbolizes the intrusion of Western ideals into the traditional Japanese context, creating an atmosphere where neither element quite fits seamlessly. This juxtaposition reflects the very issue that Mizoguchi addresses but does not offer a clear resolution to.[20]

Visually, the camera captures a long shot overlooking Kyoto, panning smoothly from right to left in a continuous, unbroken shot, evoking the sensation of unfurling a Japanese picture scroll (*e-maki*) for the viewer.[21] The camera then gradually descends into the Hanamachi district, seemingly reiterating the collective essence of the area through the synchronized

20. An essential aspect of analyzing *A Geisha* involves delving into the contrasting ideals surrounding human rights and the status of Japanese women in comparison to the traditional world inhabited by maiko and geisha. In this paper, my primary focus is on analyzing the traditional performances depicted within *A Geisha*. For a comprehensive overview of the analysis regarding issues of human rights and the status of Japanese women, please see Bardsley, "From Victim to Artist," 113–19.
21. Mizoguchi Kenji, *A Geisha* (New Yorker Films, 1998), VHS, 0.00.05–0.01.25.

performance of the geisha musicians, who play the melody and sing the lyrics to "The Summer Is Fireflies."[22] The viewer is immediately immersed in the narrow, winding streets of the Hanamachi district, a sharp departure from the open expanse experienced just moments ago while hovering over Kyoto. Mizoguchi skillfully allows the audience to navigate these claustrophobic streets, evoking a sense of entrapment akin to what young girls undergoing maiko training, aspiring to become a geisha, might feel within the district. These street scenes, coupled with the persistent reminder of Kyoto's oppressive summer heat, create a suffocating atmosphere, enabling viewers to empathize with the oppression experienced by the young girls as they enter the traditional world of the maiko and geisha.[23]

In contrast to Mizoguchi's approach, Kore-eda initiates *The Makanai* drama series with a montage of long shots capturing a town blanketed in snow, initially leading the viewer to believe it might be the snow-covered streets of Kyoto. The camera then transitions into the protagonist Kiyo's room, accompanied by her voice-over revealing that after graduating from middle school, she decided to leave her hometown of Aomori, withholding exactly where her next destination may be from the audience. The subsequent shot introduces viewers to the first of many homemade dishes yet to come in the series: sweet red bean soup served with rice flour balls, known as *nabekko dango*.[24] This *nabekko dango* is an Aomori regional dish, similar to Japanese mainstream *oshiru-ko*, another sweet red bean soup that is served with glutinous rice balls.

Kiyo's grandmother stands over the pot of *nabekko dango*, affectionately stirring it as she takes a taste, remarking, "That's a good flavor."[25] In contrast to the coldness of the snow enveloping the town, Kore-eda immediately infuses warmth into the scene through the grandmother's affection in

22. Mizoguchi, *A Geisha*, 0.01.26–0.01.38.
23. Mizoguchi, 0.01.38–0.02.46.
24. Kore-eda, Hirokazu, "Change," from *The Makanai: Cooking for a Geisha House* (Netflix, 2023), 0.00.00–0.00.45.
25. Kore-eda, "Change," 0.01.03.

preparing the *nabekko dango*, which will nourish Kiyo as she begins her new journey. In this poignant moment, Kore-eda challenges the stereotypes he mentioned in the *Hollywood Reporter* about young girls being forced into becoming maiko due to their family's financial struggles. He does so by portraying Kiyo's deliberate decision to leave her hometown and bid farewell to her grandmother, who has been her source of nourishment and support.

Once Kiyo and Sumire arrive in Kyoto, Kore-eda presents the viewer with shot sequences capturing the Kamo River, with the Shijō Bridge in the foreground and the Minami-za Theater to the right—a historic Kabuki theater that has stood in Kyoto since the beginning of the early modern period.[26] Subsequent shots follow Kiyo and Sumire as they explore famous sections surrounding Shijō Avenue before eventually reaching their new home to commence their training. In contrast to the opening of *A Geisha*, the accompanying music in this sequence is a Western composition titled "*Minarai*," or "Watch and Learn," composed by Kanno Yoko. The upbeat melody, coupled with the series of visual shots, evokes a sense of hope and aspiration rather than entrapment. One particular shot highlights Kiyo and Sumire on one side and two maikos on the other, both pairs bowing to each other, symbolizing mutual respect and potential for growth.[27]

The evolving perspective of integrating maiko and geisha into contemporary society reflects recent efforts to preserve these cultural traditions. In 2008, Murase Shigeyuki reported that since 1955 the number of maiko had steadily declined, reaching a low of only twenty-eight in the mid-1970s. However, this trend began to reverse around the 1980s, with the number hovering around eighty until 2008, when it finally surpassed 100.[28] This could be attributed to the efforts of the Hanamachi to alter the Japanese public perception of maiko and geisha. The Hanamachi worked to open up and introduce their world, making it more accessible to outsiders.

26. Kore-eda, 0.04.31.
27. Kore-eda, 0.04.40.
28. Murase Shigeyuki, "'Maiko' Fever Strikes Kyoto," Asahi Shimbun, April 18, 2008, http://www.asahi.com/English/Herald-asahi/TKY200804180064.html.

Through these initiatives, they aimed to recruit girls into apprenticeships to become maiko and later geisha. This campaign is exemplified by the work of film director Suo Masayuki, best known for *Shall We Dance?* (1996), who depicted this theme in his 2018 film *Lady Maiko* (*Maiko wa Redi-*).

Lady Maiko follows Haruko, a young girl from the Kagoshima countryside with dreams of becoming a geisha. Despite her lack of refinement, she auditions for a maiko (apprentice geisha) position in Kyoto, where she encounters stern training and ridicule from her peers. With the help of a quirky linguistics professor, she learns the art of traditional Japanese dance and etiquette. As Haruko struggles to adapt to the rigorous geisha lifestyle, she discovers her passion for performance and the beauty of Kyoto's cultural heritage. Through perseverance and determination, she overcomes obstacles, wins the respect of her mentors, and ultimately achieves her dream of becoming a maiko. *Lady Maiko* allows one on a journey of self-discovery, cultural appreciation, and the pursuit of one's dreams set against the backdrop of Japan's ancient traditions.

The central theme of *Lady Maiko* revolves around the challenges of mastering various arts while attempting to attract viewers to the profession. Prior to the title screen, the audience is transported to the annual district stage dance performance. While the music initially appears to be traditional Japanese, it closely resembles the *Yamatogaku* genre, which originated during the Meiji period (1868–1912) and is heavily influenced by Western vocalization and harmony styles. The music then transitions into a Western musical, with the geisha moving from the traditional Japanese theater setting to the streets, where their dance includes moves such as shimmying while holding branches of cherry blossoms.[29] This approach diverges from the openings of Mizoguchi and later Kore-eda, as Suo's primary objective is to depict the world of the geisha as being accessible, to encourage the younger female generation to consider entering the profession. Likewise, a significant obstacle for Haruko is overcoming her Kagoshima dialect.

29. Suo Masayuki, *Lady Maiko* (Toho Co., 2014), DVD, 0.20.40–0.23.46.

Despite her efforts to assimilate by adopting the Hanamachi dialect through imitation, she finds herself constantly grappling with her accent. While others may tease her about it, they never abandon Haruko.[30] The viewer also witnesses her clumsiness during Japanese dance, percussion, and singing lessons. Haruko is consistently corrected and disciplined for her mistakes, a natural part of the learning process for any beginner. Suo emphasizes to the audience that while initial struggles are common, perseverance will ultimately lead to success if one persists.

While *Lady Maiko* romanticizes the world of maiko through a musical lens, *The Makanai* portrays this world more realistically. Upon arriving at their new house and during their formal greetings with the mother of the house, Kiyo and Sumire are instructed that for Kyoto's maiko and geisha, they must use the proper Gion vocabulary with the correct accent. Sumire quickly adjusts her Aomori accent to the Gion dialect, but Kiyo struggles to do so. Kiyo's accent even throws off the mother of the house, who tries to correct her.[31]

Not only does Kiyo struggle to overcome her native dialect but the regular courses in traditional Japanese arts, *ikebana* (flower arrangement), *tsuzumi* (hand drum) and *Kyō-mai* (Kyoto Japanese dance), also pose challenges for her.[32] During her *Kyo-mai* (Kyoto style of Japanese dance) lesson, while learning the *Jiuta* dance called *Kadomatsu*, or "New Year Decorations," the viewer sees Kiyo struggling to keep up with the rest of her colleagues.

Eventually, the instructor removes her from the group and forces her to sit and watch. As Kiyo watches her colleagues practice, the camera captures them dancing with their backs to the open yard and the bright blue sky. The camera shifts from their backs to their front at the same height as them.[33] However, when Kiyo is removed from the group and told to sit, the camera switches to a lower position, aligning with Kiyo who is now sitting. Kiyo is

30. Suo, *Lady Maiko*, 0.41.24–44.43.
31. Kore-eda, "Change," 0.06.05–0.06.50.
32. Kore-eda, 0.17.21–0.19.42.
33. Kore-eda, 0.18.20–0.19.05.

no longer framed by the open, bright sunny yard but rather against a dark wall with a row of covered shamisen, awaiting to be played.[34] This framing suggests that Kiyo's career choice is uncertain, unlike her colleagues who seem to have a bright future ahead as future maiko.

This realistic approach presented by Kore-eda, based on Koyama's manga, underscores that not everyone is destined to become a maiko. Unlike Haruko in *Lady Maiko*, who perseveres against all odds and ultimately achieves her dream of becoming a maiko, Kiyo is advised to discontinue her studies and return home. This highlights the notion that not everyone is meant to pursue a particular path and sometimes acceptance of one's limitations is necessary. In this manner, while Kore-eda redefines and illustrates the actual world of Hanamachi through his camera, he also utilizes Japanese culture to personalize this message: everyone has a place where they belong and a career that is meant for them.

Interestingly, Kore-eda departs from focusing solely on Kiyo and how Kiyo's cooking interacts with the other girls in her household. The manga series focuses on Kiyo and how the various dishes she creates soothe those who partake in the meal, easing their worries and stress. Instead, *The Makanai* follows the other household members, highlighting each of their issues and allowing them to become protagonists.

In all three of the Japanese films or drama series centered around the world of the geisha discussed in this paper, performance plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of maiko and geisha. The division between the representation of the self in private space, known as *honne*, and the way one puts on an act in the public space, or *tatemae*, serves as a form of performance for these individuals. How a maiko or geisha conducts herself in the private space should not be transferred into the public space. It is when these two worlds collide that conflicts arise, as seen in Mizoguchi's *A Geisha*, where the introduction of American progressive ideals clashes with the traditional world of the geisha. In Suo's *Lady Maiko*, the audience witnesses the private

34. Kore-eda, 0.19.14.

space through the training of the maiko while in Kore-eda's *The Makanai*, viewers come to realize that maiko and geisha are ordinary people with their own worries, dreams, and desires by being exposed to the most intimate personal spaces of the protagonists. These depictions contrast with Hollywood's perception of the geisha, exemplified in Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, where the portrayal of geisha performances becomes sexualized rather than humanized.

Memoirs of a Geisha is based on Arthur Golden's novel of the same title. Set in pre–World War II Japan, it follows the life of Chiyo, a young girl sold to a geisha house in Kyoto. Renamed Sayuri, she undergoes training to become a geisha while she competes with her rival, Hatsumomo, for the attention of wealthy patrons. Sayuri's journey is marked by challenges and betrayals, including her unrequited love for the chairman, a wealthy businessman.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the line between private and public spaces blurs, exposing viewers to manipulations, conflicts among colleagues, and constant strategizing to become the top maiko or geisha. One scene that exemplifies this is Sayuri's dance on stage during the annual performance. Unlike Suo's approach in *Lady Maiko*, where dance is modernized to appeal to a younger generation, Sayuri's performance in *Memoirs of a Geisha* is aimed at gaining power through her sexual appeal. Before Sayuri's performance, the camera focuses on the dimly lit stage, dominated by a red hue, hinting at a type of Japanized burlesque show without the stripping. This scene underscores the Hollywood stereotype of the sexualized, darker, more exploitative aspects of the geisha world depicted in the film.[35]

Sayuri's dance in *Memoirs of a Geisha* differs from the traditional *mai* seen in Kore-eda's *The Makanai* and does not present a hybrid of traditional and contemporary styles like in *Lady Maiko*. Instead, Sayuri's dance attempts to portray itself as a "traditional" Japanese dance. The music employs only traditional Japanese instruments such as the *yoko fue* (Japanese flute), *shamisen*,

35. Rob Marshall, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Sony Pictures, 2005), 1.18.56.

and Japanese percussion instruments, creating an image of tradition. Yet, as the camera captures a dimly lit stage with snow falling as Sayuri appears on the *hanamachi*, or "flower path," a runway connecting the main stage on stage right to the back of the theater, Sayuri walks on *koma geta*, footwear reserved for only for the *oiran* or courtesans of the early modern period. Here, there is the blurring of the understanding between the difference of the maiko, geisha, and *oiran*, as all three seem to be grouped together, represented as sex workers. The dance also seems loosely choreographed based on the kabuki dance-drama *The Heron Maiden* (*Sagi Musume*, 1762), but the actual music is from *The Subscription List* (*Kanjinchō*, 1840), a Kabuki drama about the aftermath of the famous Genpei War (1180–1185) and its general Minamoto Yoshitsune and his follower Musashibo Benkei.[36]

Cultural performativity provides a lens through which we can interpret Sayuri's dance as an enactment of the identity that Hollywood has constructed and assigned to the maiko and geisha. In this interpretation, Hollywood has reappropriated an element of Japanese culture, the Hanamachi identity, and reimagined it by actively shaping its performance according to its own cultural framework. Through the process of cultural performativity, Hollywood imposes its imagined portrayal onto the cultural practice, influencing how it is perceived and understood by non-Japanese viewers.

The sexualization, exoticization, and eroticization of Sayuri's dance are underscored by her hairstyle. The portrayal of Asian women as mysterious, submissive, and sexually alluring often involves emphasizing features like long hair, perpetuating stereotypes. Western depictions frequently focus on physical appearance, including hair, as a symbol of exotic beauty and femininity. Sayuri's dance in *Memoirs of a Geisha* encapsulates these Hollywood tropes of exoticizing Asian women, particularly geisha. Her free-flowing hair, at times covering her face, adds to the sense of mystery. However, in traditional Japanese theater, such hair styling typically signifies madness (*kyōran*). Hollywood's reinterpretation of free-flowing hair as part

36. Marshall, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, 1.18.56–1.23.00.

of the geisha identity illustrates its tendency to exoticize and distort cultural symbols. Perhaps film critic Roger Ebert put it eloquently when he stated, "I realize that my doubts and footnotes are completely irrelevant to the primary audience for this movie [*Memoirs of a Geisha*], which wants to see beauty, sex, tradition and exoticism all choreographed into a dance of strategy and desire. *Memoirs of a Geisha* . . . supplies what is required, elegantly and with skill. The actresses create geisha as they imagine them to have been, which is probably wiser than showing them as they were."[37]

In contrast to Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Kore-eda remains faithful to the traditional *mai* of the Gion district. While Kore-eda presents a limited number of traditional dances, possibly to cater to a broader audience unfamiliar with their significance, the performances are authentic dances from the Inoue School of *Kyō-mai*. However, Kore-eda uses the *mai* to emphasize the internal struggles of the protagonists. For instance, in episode 5, titled "Choice," when Momoko reflects on her career as a geisha, she decides to replace her *mai* with another entitled *Kuro kami* or "Black Hair." This approach not only showcases the authenticity of the Gion district's traditional dances but also delves into the emotional turmoil experienced by the characters.

The viewer is briefly introduced to the story of *Kuro kami*, a *mai* that portrays the emotions of a woman patiently awaiting her lover's visit. However, the significance of this *mai* runs deeper. *Kuro kami* first debuted in November 1784, centering around the protagonist Tatsu-hime, who experiences jealousy while combing her hair. Her lover, Minamoto no Yoritomo, has forsaken her for Hojo no Masako. The song captures the poignant longing of a woman with black hair who, on a quiet night with snow accumulating, imagines her sleeve as her absent husband while she sleeps alone. This imagery conveys the fleeting nature of time, as her black hair gradually

37. Roger Ebert, "Life through a Rose-Colored Lens," RogerEbert.com, December 15, 2005, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/memoirs-of-a-geisha-2005.

mingles with white strands, symbolizing the passage of time and the inevitability of change. It is important to note here that *Kuro kami*, as the *mai* teacher explains to Sumire, is a dance that must not solely focus on the man, as this weakens the true meaning of the dance. Likewise, one must reveal one's emotions or thoughts to the audience without over-expressing them.[38] In this manner, the performance of *Kuro kami* is the perfect balance between *honne* and *tatemae*.

Through Momoko's performance of *Kuro kami*, the audience perceives her loneliness and sense of entrapment in a profession that appears stagnant, confining her to a repetitive daily routine. This feeling is accentuated by the setting of Momoko's dance, performed at night under the full moon on a floating boat, accompanied only by musicians. The imagery of the full moon, a poetic symbol of longing in Japanese literature, coupled with the drifting motion of the boat on the water, serves to underscore the transient nature of our existence. Against the backdrop of darkened stone walls enclosing the water, the viewer's gaze is drawn to a crimson-leafed tree, suggesting that while Momoko's life may seem beautiful and vibrant outwardly, she is slowly withering as an individual. This moment exemplifies the collision between her private and public spaces. Despite her outwardly composed, cool persona, which has garnered her popularity among clients, Momoko's personal passions as a geisha are gradually chilling over. It is only through her encounter with Kiyo's food, the cream stew, and Kiyo's philosophy on cooking that Momoko begins to shift her personal outlook on her career.

Momoko's first encounter with Kiyo and her culinary skills occurs through the dish known as "cream stew." Cream stew represents a fusion of Japanese and Western cuisine, originating in 1945 during the American occupation of Japan. At that time, the US Army provided Japanese children with powdered milk to address nutritional needs. To encourage the consumption of vegetables, school cafeterias combined powdered milk with

38. Kore-eda, "Choice," 0.02.17–0.03.44.

protein and vegetables to create this stew. By 1947, the cream stew roux became accessible to households and emerged as a staple comfort dish in Japanese cuisine.

As Momoko observes Kiyo cooking cream stew, the camera emphasizes the cramped kitchen space without conveying a sense of entrapment or confinement for Kiyo.[39] Kiyo appears to belong in this environment, thriving rather than feeling imprisoned by it. After sampling the cream stew, Momoko asks Kiyo if she ever grows bored of being the *makanai*. Kiyo shares her philosophy, explaining that she approaches each ingredient as if she is encountering it for the first time. She believes that even familiar ingredients can yield different flavors depending on factors like the season, the individuals involved, and their moods, requiring her to adjust accordingly. This mindset allows Kiyo to find fulfillment and creativity in her role as the *makanai*. Through Kiyo's explanation, Momoko realizes the notion of impermanence, a central theme highlighted in her performance of *Kuro kami* the previous night. Just as Kiyo transforms the cream stew into a new second dish, *guratan*, or gratin, Momoko understands that she too can break free from her mindset of being trapped in a constant cycle, realizing that even repetitive acts differ at every moment.

The world of the maiko and geisha presented by Kore-eda is not characterized by catty fights among them, nor is it dominated by men. Viewers do not see them as objects of desire, lust, or sensual beings but rather as young women who face similar struggles to those experienced by the viewers themselves. Furthermore, Kore-eda draws attention to the unsung heroines, such as Kiyo, who work behind the scenes in the geisha house, providing support, cleaning, cooking, and most of all nurturing the souls of the maiko and geisha.

39. Kore-eda, "One-sided," 0.08.00–0.10.00.

Midnight Diner: A Safe Space where the *Honne* and *Tatemae* Collide

The success of *Midnight Diner* and *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (hereafter, *Midnight Diner TS*) in neighboring nations such as South Korea and mainland China underscores recent scholarship on the globalization and triumph of Netflix as an OTT platform. Analysis of media content consumption data has revealed that viewers tend to gravitate toward programming that shares linguistic similarities, is geographically close, and exhibits high cultural affinity.[40] Remarkably, according to the viewership data from Parrot Analytics as of March 2024, *Midnight Diner TS* continues to maintain a commendable viewer demand. It averages 1.2 times the audience demand of the average TV series in the United States over the past thirty days, with a 78.6 percent higher demand compared to all drama titles.[41] Additionally, the top three consumer countries for *Midnight Diner TS* are Japan, Canada, and the United States, with South Korea trailing far behind its Western counterparts.[42]

This data, however, contradicts the scholarship that argues media content consumption is primarily based on geographical proximity and cultural similarities. Why has *Midnight Diner TS* become so popular in countries such as Canada and the United States, two nations that are neither geographically close to nor culturally similar to Japan?

Critics in the United States have been effusive in their praise for *Midnight Diner TS*. Hua Hsu writes,

40. Moonkyoung Jang, Dokyung Kim, and Hyunmi Baek, "How Do Global Audiences of TV Shows Take Shape? Evidence from Netflix," Applied Economics Letters, 30:30, 289.
41. "United States TV Audience Demand for Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories," Parrot Analytics, accessed March 17, 2024, https://tv.parrotanalytics.com/US/midnight-diner-tokyo-stories-netflix.
42. Parrot Analytics, "United States TV audience."

> "Midnight Diner" is the rare show that I love but can't binge-watch—I need to savor the show's slow, meditative rhythms. The same goes for the food, which we see the Master prepare, and which always looks delicious. It's particularly moving when regulars ask him to make their childhood favorites—a reminder of the basic comfort that his diner provides.
>
> Nighttime is when feelings of euphoria, or despair, feel particularly acute. Yet there's a simple pleasure to eating with strangers, and swapping stories, in a small room full of people who can be alone together.[43]

Hsu is not alone, as other critics echo similar sentiments, all noting the delicious Japanese dishes featured within the series. John Powers connects the nostalgia that each episode revolves around with the Japanese dishes that act as catalysts for the recollection of those memories.[44] It is perhaps the comfort of food paired with memories that allow viewers to connect their own experiences with the stories unfolding on the screen.

The series revolves around a small, cozy diner in Tokyo that opens only from midnight until dawn. The owner, known as Master, is a chef who listens to the stories and problems of his customers while serving them simple yet delicious comfort food. Each episode typically focuses on a different customer and their personal struggles or joys. Through the diner's atmosphere and interactions among the patrons, themes of love, loss, family, and human connection are explored. The show celebrates the unique characters who frequent the diner and the bonds that form among them in the late-night hours. Overall, *Midnight Diner* offers heartfelt and often poignant vignettes about the human experience, set against the backdrop of a humble diner where people come together to share their lives over food.

43. Hua Hsu, "Midnight Diner," *New Yorker*, March 25, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/midnight-diner.
44. John Powers, "Cozy Up in Tokyo's 'Midnight Diner' for the TV Version of Comfort Food," NPR, https://www.npr.org/2023/08/23/1195438595/midnight-diner-toyko-review.

Each episode of *Midnight Diner TS*, as well as the original television series, begins with the haunting melody of a guitar piece titled "Omoide" (2006), which translates to "Memories."[45] This piece was composed by the late Suzuki Tunekichi (1954–2020), inspired by an eighteenth-century Irish ballad, "A Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow" (Irish, "Cailín Deas Crúite na mBó"). The English version of "A Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow" is attributed to Thomas Moore (1779–1852),[46] and it was even performed by Judy Garland in the 1940 film *Little Nellie* Kelly.[47] The lyrics evoke a sense of nostalgia, likening past memories to drifting clouds in the sky.

Visually, viewers are instantly transported to Shinjuku, a bustling district within Tokyo itself. The journey begins from Nishi Shinjuku 1-chome, accompanied by the melancholic strains of "Omoide," creating a sensation akin to floating along the street. However, the lower camera angle suggests the perspective of riding in a car as it navigates toward Shinjuku's Kabukicho district, an area often associated with less desirable aspects of urban life.[48] As the viewer travels through Shinjuku, a palpable sense of loneliness pervades the atmosphere. Amid the dazzling billboards and throngs of people, individuals become indistinguishable, leaving the viewer feeling lost among the bustling masses.[49]

The scene transitions to a high-angle shot overlooking Shinjuku, accompanied by the voice of the Master, whom we later come to recognize. He solemnly states, "As the day concludes and people rush to get home, my day begins."[50] Next, the viewer is guided through the labyrinthine backstreets of Shinjuku, known only to locals. Close-up shots depict the Master

45. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
46. Linda Kelly, *Thomas Moore: Ireland's Minstrel: Poet, Patriot and Byron's Friend* (I. B. Tauris, 2006).
47. Norman Taurog, *Little Nellie Kelly* (MGM, 1940).
48. Matsuoka Joji, "Fried Chicken Wings," from *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (Netflix, 2019), 0.00.10.
49. Matsuoka, "Friend Chicken Wing," 0.00.30–0.01.07.
50. Matsuoka, 0.01.07–0.01.30.

meticulously preparing *tonjiru*, a hearty miso soup infused with root vegetables and pork.

Through this act, the Master begins to share his insights about his diner: "My hours of operation are from midnight until around seven am in the morning. People refer to [this place] as 'Midnight Diner.' You might ask, 'Do you really have any customers?' Oddly, they do come."[51] It is at this rare moment the Master breaks the fourth wall. The fourth wall is a theatrical convention where an invisible, imaginary barrier separates the performers from the audience.

Although the audience can see through this "wall," it is understood that the actors behave as if they are unaware of the audience's presence.[52] Thus, breaking the fourth wall is a theatrical device wherein a character directly addresses or acknowledges the audience, thereby disrupting the illusion of the fictional world and acknowledging the artificiality of the performance.

Breaking the fourth wall challenges the conventions of spectatorship and invites audience engagement. It blurs the boundaries between performer and observer, empowering the audience with a sense of agency as cocreators of the theatrical event. This interaction can foster a sense of intimacy and connection between performers and viewers, enhancing the overall impact of the performance.

In Abe's manga, the Master is illustrated making direct eye contact with the reader as he utters the line, "Oddly, they do come," creating the impression of a direct response to a question posed by the reader moments earlier.[53] In the *Tokyo Diner TS* adaptation, the Master's physical appearance remains unseen, but his voice is heard initiating a question to the audience before providing an answer. The camera angle positions the viewer's perspective across the counter, where the Master is seen wiping it down, mirroring the height as if engaged in conversation with a patron. This technique immerses

51. Abe Yarō, "*Dai hito yoru: Akai winna-*," from *Shinya shokudō* vol. 1, ep. 1 (*Shogakkan*, 2022), 5.
52. Elizabeth S. Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Sage Publications, 2008), 203.
53. Abe, "*Dai hito yoru: Akai winna-*," 5.

viewers within the diner environment, fostering a sense of intimacy as though they are casually conversing with the Master while he prepares for the diner's opening.[54]

The Master's voice frequently breaks the fourth wall in the series by providing additional information about the individual stories to the viewers. In addition, viewers are consistently greeted by his introduction before every episode alongside "Omoide." As mentioned earlier, "Omoide" invokes nostalgia, and even for those unfamiliar with "A Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow," its Western melodic chords may evoke a sense of familiarity. This is where *Midnight Diner TS* excels—it invites viewers to become active participants and blurs the lines between the fictional world it creates and our reality.

In season 2, episode 4, titled "Fried Chicken Wings,"[55] of *Midnight Diner TS*, a mid- thirties model named Morino Chizuru is grappling with the fear of her career nearing its end. At a party, she encounters a fan named Kanzaki Tōru, whom she decides to bring along with her to the Midnight Diner. There, the Master serves Morino's favorite dish, fried chicken wings (*tebasaki no kara-age*). However, she refrains from eating them, feeling embarrassed about sucking on the chicken bones in front of her love interest. Later, Morino observes Kanzaki happily enjoying the chicken wings with another girl, one who is not ashamed of eating them, leading her to realize that no one is worth hiding her true self. In this poignant episode, viewers can empathize with Morino's struggles with self-worth, both in her professional and personal life.

The bond between the viewer and Morino is strengthened by the frequent use of close-up camera angles. Alternating between shots from behind and in front of the protagonist's head, the camera immerses viewers as active participants in Morino's conversations.[56] Similarly, within the diner, shots

54. Matsuoka, "Fried Chicken Wing," 0.01.40–0.01.50.
55. This episode is loosely based upon Abe, "*Dai 285 yoru: Tebasaki no kara-age*," from *Shinya shokudō* vol. 21, ep. 285 (*Shogakkan*, 2019), 35–44.
56. Matsuoka, "Fried Chicken Wing," 0.06.56–0.08.18.

are consistently taken at the height of a patron sitting at the counter.[57] This positioning removes viewers from the privacy of their own space, placing them directly in the communal realm of the diner.

The Japanese dishes featured on *Midnight Diner TS* are not the typical Japanese dishes one might expect. Viewers do not encounter the "Japanese" dishes that were actually invented in the United States, such as teriyaki beef or chicken and California rolls. Nor are they bombarded with dishes one would be served at a *kaiseki-ryōri*, a traditional multicourse Japanese meal dominated by male chefs that requires multiple techniques in its preparation. Instead, viewers are introduced to dishes that are typically made for family meals by the mother within the household.

Midnight Diner TS highlights the concept of *honne*, the true self, which is typically represented in one's private space. Geographically, the diner itself is not situated on the bustling main streets of Shinjuku but rather tucked away in the backstreets, hidden from the main thoroughfare. Similarly, the homey dishes prepared in each episode by the rough-looking Master challenge our stereotypes about traditional gender roles. Despite the mysterious appearance of the Master, with a knife-cut scar running down his left eye and constant smoking, his portrayal contradicts the simplicity and warmth of the dishes he prepares.

In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Judith Butler argues that gender should not be defined strictly in binary terms based on physical characteristics (male or female). Instead, she contends that gender is constructed through societal norms and perceptions. Butler compares the construction of gender to a theatrical performance, coining the term "gender performativity." According to her, the actions one performs are not entirely original but are influenced by preexisting societal norms. Gender, therefore, is like a rehearsed script, needing individual actors to bring it to life and reproduce it as reality. Butler emphasizes that gender is not a fixed

57. Matsuoka, 0.08.30–0.012.38.

identity but rather a fluid and ever-changing concept.[58] Her theory of non-binary gender performativity has had a significant impact on LGBTQ+ theory, particularly the idea of gender fluidity. This concept allows individuals to remain flexible in their gender identification, moving between different expressions of femininity and masculinity (or any other representations that fall in between) throughout their lives.[59] The Master thus takes the role of a protector through his masculine, gangster-like attitude while fluidly becoming the nourisher and consoler through the dishes he cooks.

The diner becomes a space where everyone can feel a sense of belonging. Under the cover of darkness in the wee hours of the night, the often-marginalized protagonists and their stories are given prominence, providing viewers with an opportunity to relate and share their own similar experiences in the spotlight. As Clarence Tsui notes, "*Midnight Diner* is more homey meal built around three narrative strands, each reflecting the slow-burning sentiments felt by the people living in the margins of a glimmering metropolis."[60] Here, the dichotomy between one's true feelings (*honne*) and public façade (*tatemae*) dissolves, allowing for the sharing of personal, sometimes shameful or embarrassing, emotions alongside happiness, joy, and laughter—typically reserved for private spaces. This transformation turns the diner into a sanctuary, where individuals, including viewers, can feel accepted. Despite the initial impression of the Master as unapproachable, he emerges as a paternal figure to his clientele. Through his home-cooked dishes, he not only nourishes the souls of his patrons but also those of the viewers.

58. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 526.
59. Kristin Cronn-Mills, *Transgender Lives: Complex Stories, Complex Voices* (Twenty-First Century Books, 2015), 24.
60. Clarence Tsui, "'Midnight Diner' ('Shinya Shokudo'): Shanghai Review," Hollywood Reporter, June 18, 2015, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/midnight-diner-shinya-shokudo-shanghai-803371/.

Just One Cookbook: Cooking like the Master and Kiyo

In both Netflix series discussed in this paper, besides analyzing the formal strategies employed by the directors, there's a notable emphasis on the home-cooked meals featured throughout the dramas. While not all dishes featured may be familiar to everyone, the concept of homestyle cooking evokes a sense of comfort. Interestingly, these dramas have sparked increased interest in cooking the Japanese dishes showcased in the series.

One resource viewers can turn to for guidance in recreating these dishes is Namiko Hirasawa Chen's food blog *Just One Cookbook*.[61] Known as Nami to her readers, she has graciously taken time from her busy schedule to answer a few questions for this article.[62] The answers to the questions are summarized as follows.

****

Namiko Hirasawa Chen, known as the food blogger behind *Just One Cookbook*, was born and raised in Japan, specifically in Yokohama. She moved to the United States at the age of twenty to study abroad, initially sparked by an interest in geography, geology, and environmental studies after visiting Yosemite National Park. Her passion for cooking was nurtured by her mother, who involved her in meal preparation from a young age. While initially viewing cooking as a chore, Namiko's perspective changed when she started her own family, finding joy in preparing meals that brought happiness to her loved ones.

Drawing from her upbringing in the Kanto region (Tokyo) and exposure to Kansai-style (Kyoto/Osaka) cooking through her mother's heritage,

61. Namiko Hirasawa Chen, "Home," Just One Cookbook, accessed May 17, 2024, https://www.justonecookbook.com.

62. The interview was conducted via email on February 12, 2024. Prior to the interview, fifteen questions were sent to Namiko Hirasawa Chen, to which she promptly responded.

Namiko's recipes predominantly reflect the flavors of the Kanto region. However, she occasionally incorporates Kansai-style dishes into her repertoire and shares regional recipes inspired by her travels around Japan.

The process of creating a recipe for *Just One Cookbook* involves meticulous testing and refinement, typically taking two to three attempts to perfect. Once finalized, the recipe is photographed and, if applicable, filmed for a video tutorial. Namiko's husband, Mr. JOC, assists with editing and production, ensuring high-quality content for the website.

Just One Cookbook was launched in 2011 as a platform to share Namiko's recipes with friends and family, with the added aspiration of creating a digital archive for her children. Over time, the blog evolved to include travel guides, cooking tips, and cultural articles, all aimed at helping readers recreate authentic Japanese cuisine at home.

Namiko's dedication to providing reliable, easy-to-follow recipes has garnered a loyal following, with *Just One Cookbook* attracting approximately five million visitors per month. Popular dishes on the website include miso soup, chicken curry, *oyakodon*, soufflé pancakes, and *okonomiyaki*, reflecting a diverse range of Japanese culinary favorites.

In response to reader requests, Namiko has created recipes inspired by popular Netflix series such as *Midnight Diner* and *The Makanai*, enriching her website's content with dishes featured in these shows. She values the feedback and connections she receives from her audience, continually striving to provide valuable content and support to home cooks worldwide.

Beyond recipes, Namiko shares glimpses of her personal life and travels on social media platforms like Instagram, fostering a sense of community among her followers. Through her blog and social channels, Namiko aims to empower home cooks to confidently recreate authentic Japanese dishes and create cherished culinary memories for their families.[63]

63. Namiko Hirasawa Chen, "Interview Questions for Namiko Hirasawa Chen," interviewed by Kirk Kanesaka, February 12, 2024.

Netflix's *Midnight Diner TS* and *The Makanai* effectively break the fourth wall by not only having protagonists speak directly to the viewer but also by inviting viewers to become emotionally invested and actively participate in the dramas themselves. These series appeal to viewers' senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. While viewers enjoy the visual and auditory aspects of the series, their emotional attachment to the characters and the foods portrayed motivates them to recreate those dishes themselves, perhaps seeking the same level of comfort as the protagonists. Namiko Hirasawa Chen's *Just One Cookbook* facilitates this process by providing access to comfort. By recreating the dishes featured in the dramas, viewers can engage their senses and experience the same flavors that cannot be fully captured through the television screen alone. This recreation blurs the viewers' reality with the fictional worlds portrayed in the series, allowing them to identify with the protagonists and find solace through the foods they prepare.

Conclusion

The forthcoming ban, set to begin in April 2024, on tourists in certain sections of the Gion district isn't the first attempt at regulation. Following the novel's publication and film release of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, tourists inundated the Gion district, brandishing the book and harassing maiko and geisha for photos. In response, the Hanamachi enforced a no-photos policy in 2019. Iwasaki Mineko, the retired geisha whom Arthur Golden interviewed and drew inspiration from for *Memoirs of a Geisha*, expresses her profound regret regarding the highly sexualized depiction of geisha in both the novel and subsequent film adaptation.[64] The Western world has largely dictated the cultural identity of the geisha, framing it through a lens

64. Chad De Guzman, "The Rich Cultural History of Netflix's New Show *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House*," *Time*, January 12, 2023, https://time.com/6246425/the-makanai-cooking-for-the-maiko-house-netflix/.

of Western-centric narratives. This control has influenced how individuals perceive themselves, with Westerners often viewing themselves as the standard or default, while non-Westerners are often exoticized as the mysterious "Other." As Edward Said aptly articulates, "The Orient was almost a European invention . . . a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."[65] This very notion is what *The Makanai* and *Midnight Diner TS* boldly challenge: the Western narrative, as well as the Japanese government's.

The Makanai and *Midnight Diner TS* challenge viewers to see beyond the stereotypical representations of Japanese culture exported through the "Cool Japan" campaign as merely being reduced to geisha, sushi, ramen, anime, manga, video games, Hello Kitty, and Kawaii culture.

Instead, they encourage viewers to recognize the real individuals behind the cultural facade. Whether by delving into the private lives of the protagonists, sharing moments in their kitchens, or revealing oneself under the cloak of darkness within a community bound by shared experiences, these dramas unveil the authenticity and depth of Japanese culture.

Sato Takuma and Okuyama Hiroshi, codirectors of *The Makanai*, express their desire for viewers to savor the treatment of food in Japan. Takuma emphasizes, "I would be happy if the audience would pay attention to the aspects of eating that can excite and relax people, and inspire them to think what to cook or what to eat."[66]

The allure of the dishes showcased in both *The Makanai* and *Midnight Diner TS* lies in their comforting, home-cooked dishes that can be prepared in any household. Most of these dishes are Japanese *yōshoku*, which are Western inspired, fostering a sense of familiarity without imposing dominance over another's cultural narrative. This hybridity invites viewers to embrace the fusion of culinary traditions and explore the rich diversity of flavors and textures found in Japanese cuisine.

65. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Vintage Books, 1994), 1.
66. De Guzman, "The Rich Cultural History of Netflix's New Show *The Makanai*."

Thus, what Netflix's *The Makanai* and *Midnight Diner TS* achieve in these drama series is a representation of reflective fluidity. While transculturalism addresses the transfer of culture between nations and its impact on the cultural identity of the recipient nation, and cultural performativity explores how the performance of culture can reshape identities, *Midnight Diner TS* and *The Makanai*'s accomplishment surpasses these concepts. Applying Glissant's concept of opacity, the Japanese culture isn't simply transplanted to Netflix's international viewers, nor are viewers expected to assume the role of the Master or a geisha in order to have a profound impact of their own identities. Instead, through the protagonists' performance on screen, viewers connect with universal themes of entrapment, loss, and uncertainty about the future alongside joy, happiness, and hope. *The Makanai* and *Midnight Diner TS* are not attempting to redefine viewers' identities but, rather, creating moments of mutual understanding by reflecting upon their own experiences shared through the stories on screen, transcending cultural boundaries.

Ironically, although *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* has been fairly successful in global markets, *The Makanai* has struggled to gain mass popularity with its international viewers. Perhaps Netflix miscalculated the global interest in a humanistic portrayal of the geisha and maiko as opposed to the stereotypical depiction of them as a form of sex workers.

Evan Elkins critiques the notion that platforms like Netflix truly fulfill the desire for intercultural connection, suggesting that their global expansion projects are driven more by commercial interests than by genuine cosmopolitan ideals.[67] Thus, although these drama series forge a common bond among cultures, fostering an ability to empathize, understand, and relate to the characters on screen, illustrating the fluidity of human connection across cultural divides, it will be interesting to see if Netflix will produce a second season of *The Makanai*.

67. Evan Elkins, "Algorithmic Cosmopolitanism: On the Global Claims of Digital Entertainment Platforms," *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 36, no. 4: 379–80.

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I also edited the article for repetitive areas that added to the unnecessary length of the paper in hopes of clarifying my arguments. Again, I thank the reviewers for their insights, knowledge, and time.

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