A DREAM KITCHEN FOR THE YOUTH IN THE EAST AND THE WEST: BANANA YOSHIMOTO'S *KITCHEN*

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Abstract: *This article seeks to analyze why Banana Yoshimoto's* Kitchen *is popular among adolescents worldwide vis-à-vis the social context of both the text and readers around the world. Electronic products have allowed young people in Japan to create their own private space 24 hours a day since the late 1980s, ushering in a new culture of "gentleness" through which people are loosely connected. This ethos has caused a chronic sense of loneliness and loss in youngsters in Japan and other places worldwide. The escape strategy apropos this feeling is to be "cool."* Kitchen *uses cool as a keyword and has been read globally for its quality of coolness.*

I. Universal Loneliness?

Michael O'Sullivan's fascinating research volume, *Cloneliness*, studies loneliness in the East and West and ancient and modern worlds. A scholar of literature and East-West studies, O'Sullivan critiques the stereotyped academic perspective of fundamentally dichotomous differences between the East and the West, using the discourse of varied texts as its evidence. For instance, he cites Will Storr's statements as examples: "In the East, it's those who neglect their duty to bring harmony to the group who are more likely to be considered failures;" "East Asians tend to be more aware of what's happening in their environment;" "The Asian self melts, at the edges, into the selves that surround it, whereas the Western self tends to feel more independent and in control of its own behavior and destiny" (O'Sullivan, 2019, 115–116).

Of course, there are no affinities without differences. Therefore, O'Sullivan also aptly indicates the differences. For instance, he points out that "Loneliness is a prominent feature of Japanese fiction" and iterates that "Japanese descriptions of loneliness, individualism, and nothingness in such writers as Soseki [Natsume] and Kitaro Nishida" are "representative of differences between these writers and their European existentialist contemporaries on such themes as identity" (O'Sullivan, 2019, 115–116).

The description of loneliness has changed in Japan, and O'Sullivan is obviously aware of this change. He says,

> Recent work by Haruki new metaphors for loneliness. Recent trends and practices in society such as hikikomori (shutting oneself off from others), kodokushi (the lonely death and even the "salary men" may also have their origin, or at least a very strong tributary root, in Japanese society (O'Sullivan, 2019, 116).

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However, the sense of loneliness that Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto illuminates in her work *Kitchen* is not unique to Japanese minds and society; it is universal." *Kitchen* was popular in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s and the United States, Europe, Korea, Hong Kong, and other parts of the world. Banana was awarded prizes both within and outside Japan. For instance, she won the Scanno Literary Prize in Italy in 1993, the Fendissime Literary Prize in 1996, the Literary Prize Maschera d'argento in 1999, and the Capri Award in 2011. Some writers outside Japan have also written novels inspired by Banana and won literary awards. One such author is the Swiss writer Zoë Jenny, who says she looks up to the writer of *Kitchen*." Jenny won Germany's most prestigious newcomer prize, the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, in 1997 for her first novel, *The Pollen Room*, which has been translated into 27 languages. A month and a half later, she won the Aspekte-Literaturpreis, awarded annually for the best debut novel written in German.

Kitchen was published in Japan in 1988. It became a bestseller in many countries. The first 40,000 copies of the book were sold out immediately after its release in the United States, and newspapers around the country published book reviews. The story was adapted to a movie in Hong Kong by director Yim Ho. The film was officially screened at the 1997 Berlin International Film Festival. It was subsequently distributed in Germany, England, Austria, and other countries.[1]

Interestingly, however, *Kitchen*'s aficionados in nations where it was read were exclusively people who experienced adolescence after the mid-1980s, when *Kitchen* was released to the world. Japanese magazine editor Yōichi Shibuya attributes this detail to the realization that "the mental structure and other aspects of the younger generation in a certain level of developed countries are clearly universal" (Yoshimoto and Yoshimoto, 1987, 177). In Shibuya's view, "from a marketing standpoint, Banana's works have grown out of the needs of the readers, and they were never written for critics, literary circles, or to be accepted by publishers" (Yoshimoto and Yoshimoto, 1987, 176). Renowned Japanese poet, literary critic, philosopher, and Banana's father Takaaki Yoshimoto also states that "other Japanese writers seem to have gone through a lot of painstaking effort to get their works accepted in foreign countries," but Banana's "work was received naturally by people in other countries" (Yoshimoto and Yoshimoto, 1987, 170).

Banana was aged 22 and 23 years old when she wrote *Kitchen* in the late 1980s. The above-noted circumstance would imply that her sensibilities are directly applicable to the youth of the world. If so, to what aspects of Banana's *Kitchen* did the youth respond? This article focuses on the idea that *Kitchen*'s protagonist Mikage Sakurai's favorite object is not a kitchen but a silver refrigerator. She also likes items and people with the features of the silver refrigerator. In other words, Mikage Sakurai loves things and people that can be characterized by the term "cool" and white light. Such things and people heal this woman who suffers from loneliness. Therefore, this article contemplates the meaning of cool in 1980s Japan and contends that something and somebody cool can heal Mikage. Finally, this article concludes that Mikage becomes a cool

[1] *Kitchen* continues to be disseminated to the world in the 21st century; for instance, the story was published in Bengali in 2008.

person and stands on her own feet. Such coolness was universal among the youth in the 1980s and 1990s.[2]

II. Cool Yūichi

The protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, remarks at the beginning of the narrative that "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 3). Mikage was "all alone" after her only living relative, her grandmother, had passed away (Yoshimoto, 1993, 4ff). She was "steeped in a sadness so great [she] could barely cry" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 4), and she could not sleep. Mikage found solace in the kitchen. She continues, "If it's a kitchen, I'll think, 'How good'" and asserts that she can even "stare death fearlessly in the eye" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 4). Death is a situation that a person ultimately faces and approaches alone. Mikage would recover from the experience in a kitchen without feeling sadness or fear.

The plot begins after Mikage's thoughts on a kitchen are described at the beginning of the story when she is visited by Yūichi Tanabe.[3] The latter attends the same university as Mikage and helps her significantly during her grandmother's funeral. Yūichi invites her to his house, saying, "[My mom and I] were thinking you ought to come to our house for a while" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 6). Mikage quickly accepts the invitation, and she moves in with the Tanabes. Mikage enjoys living with Yūichi and his mother, Eriko. She finds solace in their company because "Their faces shone like buddhas when they smiled" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 15). Her mental health improves. The story ends after Mikage finally recovers and decides to leave the Tanabes to live independently:

> Someday, I wondered, will I be living somewhere else and look back nostalgically on my time here? Or will I return to this same kitchen someday?
>
> But right now I am here with this powerful mother, this boy with the gentle eyes. That was all that mattered.
>
> As I grow older, much older, I will experience many things, and I will hit rock bottom again and again. Again and again I will suffer; again and again I will get back on my feet. I will not be defeated. I won't let my spirit be destroyed.
>
> * * *
>
> Dream kitchens.
>
> I will have countless ones, in my heart or in reality. Or in my travels. Alone, with a crowd of people, with one other person—in all the many places I will live. I know that there will be so many more (Yoshimoto, 1993, 42–43).

[2] This article is a substantially rewritten version of an essay published entitled "On Banana Yoshimoto's 'Kitchen': From Warm Community to 'Cool' Individualism" (2002). With updated information to respond to the question about a theme of loneliness in Japanese literature, Michael O'Sullivan posed in his fascinating research book *Cloneliness*.

[3] In the English version, his name is expressed as Yuichi Tanabe. However, "u" in "Yuichi" is a long vowel. In this article, Ithe author puts macrons on the long vowels in Japanese for correct pronunciation, for instance, Sōtarō instead of Sotaro, Ōhira instead of Ohira, and so on.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the premise of *Kitchen* is synonymous with the metaphorical signification of the space denoted by a kitchen. Mark Petersen (1999) describes the Kitchen depicted in the story as a dining room for family reconstitution. Ken Nishi (1989) develops his Bergsonian reading of *Kitchen* as a narrative that demonstrates the space within which one can overcome the spiritual death experienced by the loss. In contrast, Ian Buruma (1998) opines that the Kitchen in *Kitchen* depicts a change from the old Japan that was centered on large family settings and signals nostalgia for the new Japan centered on nuclear families. In any case, numerous scholars, including Mark Peterson, Ken Nish, and Ian Buruma, liken the Kitchen in *Kitchen* to a dining room space representing the typical image of happy family life. Thus, the Kitchen is portrayed as a space where human relations are reconstituted and support is extended to others.

Such a description is, however, too simple. Mikage cannot relax in either the dining room where the family gets together or in the kitchen space as a whole; instead, she requires a specific spot within the kitchen. Mikage is so lonely that she cannot sleep; however, she finally finds space for solace in the kitchen of her house, and she can sleep near the refrigerator.

> After my grandmother died, I couldn't sleep. One morning at dawn, I trundled out of my room in search of comfort and found that the one place I *could* sleep was beside the refrigerator. (Yoshimoto, 1993, 4)

This fact does not signify that Mikage does not suffer from loneliness in the kitchen. Positioning herself near the refrigerator soothes her loneliness.

> Three days after the funeral I was still in a daze. Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen. Wrapped in a blanket, like Linus, I slept. The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness. There, the long night came on in perfect peace, and morning came. (Yoshimoto, 1993, 4–5)

The refrigerator heals Mikage's loneliness, not the kitchen *per se*. Also, the refrigerator has to be silver-colored. Mikage refers to "the silver door of a towering, giant refrigerator" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 3) when she describes her ideal kitchen. At the beginning of the story, she states that "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 3); however, she would not have liked the kitchen without a silver refrigerator.

Interestingly, everything that fascinates and comforts Mikage can be characterized by the silver refrigerator: cool to the eye and the hand and lucent with soft light like moonlight. According to colorogy, "Silver is mostly associated with calmness and serenity for its affiliation with the moonlight. Associated with night, it is a color of silence. It envelops the dark when everything is quiet and pure" (*Colorogy com*. n.d.). Mikage says, "It was a good kitchen" and "I fell in love with it at first sight" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 10) when she looks at the kitchen in Yūichi's house. She sees "all kinds of plates," including things that are cool to the eye and the hand such as "porcelain bowls, gratin dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins" "lit by a small fluorescent lamp," "glasses sparkled," and "a Silverstone frying pan" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 9–10). The kitchen is also "lit by a small fluorescent lamp" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 9–10).

The characteristics of the silver refrigerator mentioned in the last paragraph are repeatedly depicted throughout the story against a background of darkness. To cite just a few examples, Mikage's favorite song lyrics are "A lighthouse in the distance/To the two of us in the night" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 38). Mikage sees the scenery outside the Tanabes' house as she lies down in peace. She intimates that it soothes her loneliness and describes it as a night scene where "[b]y now the rain had stopped, and the atmosphere, sparkling, replete with moisture, refracted the glittering night splendidly" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 16).

Noteworthily, Yūichi possesses the attributes of the silver refrigerator, which is why Mikage responds immediately when he invites her to live with his family in their home temporally. However, Yūichi is not the object of Mikage's affections. She says explicitly: "I wasn't in love with Yūichi" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 29), adding that "I barely knew him, really" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 8). Mikage quickly accepts Yūichi's invitation because he looks "cool" and glows softly like moonlight.

> "Okay," I said. "I'll be there."
>
> Bad as it sounds, it was like I was possessed. His attitude was so totally "cool," and so I felt I could trust him. In the black gloom before my eyes (as it always is in cases of bewitchment), I saw a straight road leading from me to him. He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on me.[4] (Yoshimoto, 1993, 6–7)

The scene illustrated in the last two sentences appears inspired by a famous oracle inscribed in number 38 of the Japanese fortune-telling paper: "The moonlight illuminates the narrow path in the field where I am lost in the darkness." This oracle signifies that God always looks out for people; therefore, the current suffering of an individual will surely disappear. The last two sentences of the above-cited text symbolize Mikage's mental imagery. As previously mentioned, the characteristics of the silver refrigerator are repeatedly depicted against a background of darkness, and Mikage symbolizes darkness. Notably, the Japanese first name Mikage is unreal. The Japanese noun *mikage* (御影) means "shadow" and, therefore, "darkness." Darkness is the English word for *kurasa* or the condition of being *kurai*, which signifies being depressed or unhappy in Japanese and conveys that the light is too dim to see things appropriately. The image of Mikage being with Yūichi, who is "cool" and "glows with white light" ahead of her, can be duplicated with the image of Mikage being with a silver refrigerator with white light, which heals her loneliness.

Everything that soothes Mikage's loneliness, notwithstanding the differences between people, objects, and situations, is represented through the characteristics of a silver refrigerator: for example, "soft light" and "cool" against a backdrop of darkness. This crossover is not strange because the author, Banana Yoshimoto, asserts that "Interchangeability makes me a writer unique. […] Features related to human relationship can be exchanged for features of relations between things and

[4] The second sentence of this quoted passage is translated as follows in the English version of *Kitchen*: "His attitude was so totally "cool," though I felt I could trust him." But "though" is mistranslation. The Japanese word for the part is *node*, which means "so," "and so," and "therefore." Hence, I have changed "though" to "and so" as is evident in the quotation.

places" (Yoshimoto & Yoshimoto, 1987, 127). The following section examines what coolness is and why it warms Mikage's heart.

III. *Kūlu* or New *Yasashisa* for Modern Japanese: The Neither Too Warm nor Too Cold Relation

Cool is *Kūlu* in Japanese, a loan word from English used to signify a tranquil, indifferent, curt, and cold-hearted personality. Indeed, Yūichi looks aloof (Yoshimoto, 1993, 8) and tranquil (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26). Conversations with him represent "incredible ease and nonchalance" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 30). He does not query Mikage about her mental state, ask her to make a life plan for the future, or try to cheer her up even after he invites her to come to his house because he is concerned about her dire circumstances; instead, he lets her do whatever she likes. This lack of intrusion does not mean that Yūichi is cold-hearted. Yūichi cries, completely disregarding the public gaze at Mikage's grandmother's funeral (Yoshimoto, 1993, 6–7). Yūichi is very worried about Mikage, but he does not passionately encourage her, utter too many words, or oppressively accommodate her. Instead, he maintains a little distance. This attitude seems to warm Mikage's heart. She says, "He struck just the right note, neither cold nor oppressively kind. It made me warm to him; my heart welled up to the point of tears" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 11). The phrase "neither cold nor oppressively kind" is an English translation of the Japanese phrase *hidoku atatakaku mo tsumetaku mo nai*. This phrase is literally translated to "neither too warm nor cold," and in short, "be cool." This phrase also explains why the term cool is not considered to mean cold-hearted or oppressively kind about Yūichi's attitude.

Yūichi's attitudes and attributes are diametrically opposed to Mikage's ex-boyfriend Sōtarō's. Mikage's thoughts about Sōtarō are expressed as "I thought, if I were with him [Sōtarō] … he would grab me by the hair, force me to decide on an apartment, and pull me kicking and screaming back to school" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26). Sōtarō always engages her, advises her, and pulls her along with him to follow his ideas. However, it is not that he is unkind. Judging from how he encourages her using the words "Chin up, kid!" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26), Sōtarō is as concerned about Mikage as Yūichi. Both Sōtarō and Yūichi are kind; they just evince different ways of helping people regain their footing.

The two men differ in certain ways: Yūichi is cool, and Sōtarō is hot. Thus, Yūichi is associated with soft white light like moonlight, while Sōtarō is related to glistening sunlight. Mikage describes it as "his sunny outlook" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26). Mikage further describes Sōtarō in the following manner:

> Green places, open spaces, the outdoors—he loved all of that, and at school he was often to be found in the middle of a garden or sitting on a bench beside a playground. The fact that if you wanted to find Sōtarō you'd find him amid greenery had entered into university lore. He was planning to do some kind of work with plants (Yoshimoto, 1993, 23).

Meeting Sōtarō for the first time in a long time, Mikage thinks, "In the old days, [she] loved him for his lively frankness, but right now it struck [her] as obnoxious, and [she] was only mortified" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 25). This thought makes

Mikage's heart heavy. "Heat" like sunshine just increases grief. Yūichi's quality of being "neither too warm nor cold," or cool like moonlight or a silver refrigerator, makes her feel warm inside. Mikage says, "what I needed now was the Tanabes' strange cheerfulness, their tranquility," and asserts, "When I got together with Sōtarō," "[j]ust being myself made me terribly sad" because of his brightness (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26).[5] Therefore, Mikage even "accidentally skipped Sōtarō" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 28) as she prepared postcards announcing her move.

Mikage can be herself when she is with Yūichi, a cool person who is "neither too warm nor oppressive kind." As mentioned earlier, such a cool person is described as a silver refrigerator in the kitchen that heals her. At the beginning of the story, Mikage says, "I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction," and "I lean up against the silver door of a towering, giant refrigerator stocked with enough food to get through a winter" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 3). Mikage's portrayal symbolizes her psychological reliance on Yūichi as she attempts to recover her mental equilibrium: the refrigerator has enough food to get through winter. Similarly, Yūichi can provide enough nourishment to surmount the present difficult period. He is like a silver refrigerator because he offers Mikage spiritual nourishment, and his coolness preserves her from decaying.

It is not merely Mikage's subjective judgment that Yūichi is cool. His mother, Eriko, also harbors the same opinion. When Eriko talks to Mikage about Yūichi, she says, "He's confused about emotional things and he's strangely distant with people." The phrase "he's strangely distant with people" is English for the Japanese *ningen kankei nimo myō ni kūlu dene*, which is literally translated to "he's strangely cool with human relationships." Nonetheless, Eriko continues to explain, "you know, he is. A good kid," and Mikage replies without missing a beat, "I know" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 19).

What, then, is the coolness that heals Mikage? Why does coolness heal Mikage? Japanese scholar Nobutaka Furuhashi explains that "'Kitchen' portrays gentleness in an extreme human relationship" in which "the one who faces death and is immersed in a grief so deep that it defies any words wishes to be healed, while the other takes on her wishes with the attitude of simply watching" (Furuhashi, 1990, 48). Certainly, Furuhashi seems to allude to the relationship between the two characters, but as Eriko remarks, Yūichi has always had this coolness; it is not a specific quality of his relationship with Mikage. In addition, the book's author Banana Yoshimoto says, "Probably I am not interested in death itself so much as I'm in the process in which one's heart is healed" (Yoshimoto & Yoshimoto, 1987, 167). Suppose *Kitchen* merely depicts the process of healing Mikage undergoes for a specific period after her grandmother's death. Why was the book so prevalent in youth everywhere at the end of the 20th century? The elderly face the death of their loved ones more often than the youth. Therefore, the story should have been well-liked by the elderly as well. It did not suggest that Mikage's grandmother's death is set and read as a metaphor. In other words, Mikage's mental condition of loneliness is not commonly experienced by youngsters on special occasions such as the death of someone close to them. Instead, it is a feeling that young people experience every day in their lives and

[5] The phrase "because of brightness with him" in the original Japanese version is deleted in the English version of *Kitchen*.

lifestyles. Mikage says at the end of the story, "I will hit rock bottom again and again. Again and again I will suffer" and "I will have countless [kitchens], in my heart or in reality" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 42–43). She knows and asserts that she will repeatedly experience the feeling that overtook her after her grandmother's death and that the attitude described in the narrative as "cool" will always soothe her heart, just as Yūichi's cool stance comforts her. *Kitchen* was popular among young people at the end of the 20th century. However, the attitude of being cool and the narrative of the healing process tugged only at the heartstrings of the young and not older individuals. Thus, ideal human relationships and preferences for gentleness differ between generations.

Japanese psychiatrist Ken Ōhira (1995) highlights that *yasashisa* or gentleness is a word that also means kindness, graciousness, and mildness. It has become increasingly valuable in the late 1980s, especially for many high school students and people under 30, the generations fascinated by *Kitchen*. Gentleness, or *yasashisa*, differs in human relationships for the *Kitchen* generation from its definition in the past. According to Ōhira (1995), the Japanese valued strong bonds. They often asked personal questions when they discovered a person was suffering and depressed. They asked people personal questions about the reason behind their suffering, depression, and sadness. They also offered varied advice, acted in myriad ways, and/or used their connections to help the person. Such conduct was regarded as kind or *yasashisa*, and such personalities were considered gracious and mild, or *yasashisa*. On the other hand, many youngsters of the *Kitchen* generation try not to intrude into another person's privacy. Instead, they help others heal by simply watching over them. This generation deems such aloof caring behavior as being kind or *yasashisa*. *Such* personalities are believed to be gracious and mild, or *yasashisa*. Ōhira describes the *yasashisa*, or the gentleness, of the past as "hot *yasashisa* (gentleness)" and labels the gentleness of the *Kitchen* generation as "neither hot nor cold but warm *yasashisa* (gentleness)" (Ōhira, 1995, 71ff). Oppressive kindness, hot-blooded encouragement, and coercion of unity are "hot gentleness." It is rejected and avoided by the *Kitchen* generation because it is psychologically injured and frowns at the invasion of the personal spaces of others. Hence, this generation "tries to maintain a smooth and warm relationship with each other" (Ōhira, 1995, 71), being very careful not to step into a person's privacy. "Caring for each other so as not to hurt each other" is "the gentle relationship between gentle people" (Ōhira, 1995, 178). The extreme care taken not to ask personal questions or intrude on the secluded sections of the lives of others evinces the depth of mutual care in this generation of people. It discloses the extent of their avoidance of the potential of hurting another because words are enemies of gentleness. Psychiatrist Ōhira's patient says:

> Words get in the way of gentleness. I think a gentle relationship is one in which we don't get into each other's feelings; instead, we just talk about the weather, TV shows, and travel. Therefore, listening to music, playing family computer, or reading manga together is even gentler. Just being together and doing something without talking is what I call a gentle, warm silence (Ōhira, 1995, 158).

The *Kitchen* generation feels comfortable conversing about trifling things and prefers silence in the face of action. Even a couple is not exempt from this

solitude: two people sit side by side on a couch, not far apart, and love the gentle warm silence (Ōhira, 1995, 161, 175, 178).

The space in which Mikage experiences healing is equivalent to this space filled with a warm gentleness. It is described as "warm" because it is "neither hot nor cold," which can be translated into other terms such as cool, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Banana Yoshimoto also states that "Gentleness and coolness can coexist in a person" (Yoshimoto & Yoshimoto, 1987, 119). The relationship between Mikage and her grandmother was warm/cool gentleness. Mikage would often talk with her grandmother about inconsequential matters, and her grandmother was not intrusive or pushy. Mikage says:

> She was a pretty relaxed grandmother and never gave me a hard time if I told her I was going to sleep over somewhere or whatever. We would spend a little time together before bed, sometimes drinking coffee, sometimes green tea, eating cake and watching TV. In my grandmother's room, which hadn't changed since I was little, we would tell each other silly gossip, talk about TV stars or what had happened that day (Yoshimoto, 1993, 20).

Mikage also feels relaxed when she views videos and talks about insignificant issues with Yūichi (Yoshimoto, 1993, 22–23). She also senses such tranquility when she is close to the silver refrigerator in the kitchen of her home. She explains, "The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness. There, the long night came on in perfect peace, and morning came" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 5). The silver refrigerator is cool and gentle for Mikage. Yūichi also prefers a relationship he can maintain without words. He is depicted as superimposed on the image of a silver refrigerator, and he overlays her image on a dog. Eriko tells Mikage, "Yūichi told me before that you reminded him of Woofie, a dog we used to have" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 18). A relationship with a dog does not need words. Why, then, did Mikage get along with Sōtarō, who is the exact opposite of Yūichi?

IV. The *Kitchen* Generation: Chronically Tormented by the Sense of Loneliness

Mikage was attracted to Sōtarō and enjoyed his company because of the *Kitchen* generation, or people who prefer warm/cool gentleness. He tends to quickly feel lonely, even when they enjoy trivial chit-chat with their friends. Their human relationships are looser compared to the connections forged by older generations. The *Kitchen* generation prefers human associations that are not too close or too distant. The older generations, as mentioned earlier, value robust ties with others, but the *Kitchen* generation avoids sharing private matters with others. To them, strong bonds represent bondage. This sense is reflected in Mikage's feelings about her relationship with her late grandmother. Mikage was already lonely before her grandmother died. She says, "Although I was raised with love, I was always lonely" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 21) and "Not even love can rescue a person" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 42). Mikage suffers a chronic sense of loneliness, and her grandmother's warm/cool gentle relationship has healed her. However, she still describes the space she shared with her grandmother as the "space that cannot be filled" and where "the deathly silence that, panting in the corner of the room, pushes its way in like a shudder." After explaining it, she "felt it very early,

although no one told." She also realizes that Yūichi also suffers from loneliness, saying, "I think Yūichi did, too" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 21). Thus, the *Kitchen* generation, who likes the warm/cool gentleness, suffers from loneliness. That is why Mikage is attracted to Sōtarō, who represents an exceptional person in the *Kitchen* generation. She "loved [Sōtarō's] hearty robustness" and "thirsted after it" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26), expecting in vain that his "hot gentleness" would save her.

It is indicated from the above discussion that Mikage cannot be healed, regardless of her association with Yūichi or Sōtarō. Yūichi removes her anxiety, but only temporarily. In fact, after moving to the Tanabes' house, Mikage feels that "this time [she] wasn't lonely." However, she knows that she is "able to stop thinking, just for a little while, about what happened before and what would happen in the future" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 16). However, the narrative does not simply illustrate how the *Kitchen* generation eases loneliness with the warm/cool gentleness. Mikage leaves the Tanabes at the end, implying that she does not need a person to support her psychologically. Mikage states explicitly, "As I stood there, I seemed to be making a new start; something was coming back" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 56). Therefore, *Kitchen* depicts a person who suffers from chronic loneliness because her favored human relations method—a warm/cool gentleness—helps her overcome her misery.

Before entering into a discourse on how suffering is surmounted and the significance of the "kitchen," it is important to explore why gentleness is an important value in Japan and why the nature of human relationships in the *Kitchen* generation, which includes Mikage and Yūichi, differs from the bonds forged by older generations.

Gentleness was considered an essential human value in the young generation in Japan in the 1970s. This attitude resulted from adolescents' resistance to productivism and the loss of a moratorium. According to Japanese sociologist Akira Kurihara, the affluence ushered by industrialization created a moratorium that accorded adolescents the freedom to explore identity and attain immunity from adult social obligations. At that time, the age of the moratorium was equal to the school age. However, after a while, the school-age was oriented toward the productive forces. Adolescents were presented with the image expected from individuals of an industrialized nation and world. Not satisfied with being practically deprived of the moratorium and aggrieved with social control, adolescents conformed superficially but became internally distinct. They found alternative fulfillment in their private lives, exhibiting outright opposition to the traditional values. They began to live according to principles contrary to productivism: values such as gentleness and tenderness that united people (Kurihara, 1989, 14–37).

This gentleness transformed in the 1980s because of some electric appliances. *Kitchen* does not depict the social circumstances in the 1980s, which is the time set for the story. Therefore, it is very difficult to ascertain the connections between the characters in the story and their contemporary society. Noteworthily, Yūichi likes electric appliances and evinces "a taste for buying new things that verged on the unhealthy" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 26–27). Electric appliances caused people to prefer living separately and without bonds. According to Tetsuo Kogawa (1988), the Japanese people, who had previously formed a group in the traditional spirit of *wa* (harmony), began to individually

enjoy their own spaces, isolating themselves from others as electric appliances, such as washing machines, radios, telephones, cassette tape recorders, vending machines, family computers, TVs, Walkmans made by SONY, computers, and so on, spread throughout Japan. Their connections with others became looser and more flexible through the uniformity of their shared illusions through the medium of similar software used in electrical appliances. Presently, such a commonality of association may be discerned in Internet algorisms of the so-called GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon).

People stopped gathering outside when doing laundry after the advent of washing machines. In the days before washing machines, people enjoyed water-cooler conversations by the water's edges and wells. In the past, they also came together and enjoyed watching street TV. This practice stopped when every family owned a television set. Then each person possessed a personal television in their rooms in the 1980s. In addition, the Walkman, which became very popular among the young generation of the time, blocked out the outside world through earphones and protected users from the noise. It eliminated the need to listen to every word that invaded the individual sensory realm from the outside, allowing people to create their own private space 24 hours a day. Simultaneously, disparate individuals connected through the music to which they listened without exchanging words. They could then return to being discrete individuals at the flick of a switch. This fact is also apparent in contemporary Social Network Service community groups. Electronic apparatus encourages people to enjoy their own private spaces physically and psychologically; they allow people to connect loosely with others without conversation. In particular, the Walkman exploded among young people, and its influence was significant. Naturally, the youth of the 1980s defined a person who was very careful of sustaining the privacy of others and not hurting them as being gentle. Such a person prefers to connect with other persons loosely and quickly feel lonely.

V. Becoming a Cool Refrigerator

In light of the above discussion, Yūichi and Mikage are both young persons tormented by loneliness. They are merely friends who help each other recuperate after setbacks. Mikage expected Yūichi to heal her in real terms, but he did not harbor the same hope. It is also important to remember the scene in which Mikage accepts Yūichi's invitation to stay at his house for a while. Mikage quickly accepts Yūichi's invitation because

> His attitude was so totally 'cool,' and so [she] felt [she] could trust him. In the black gloom before [her] eyes (as it always is in cases of bewitchment), [she] saw a straight road leading from [her] to him. He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on [her]" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 6–7).

This passage conveys two meanings: first, God always looks out for her and, therefore, her current suffering will surely disappear; second, a cool person would be instrumental in her psychological recovery. However, suppose the cool person is "glow[ing] with white light" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 7). In that case, it follows that Mikage can softly shine in the light when she is with the cool person in her state

of depression. As mentioned earlier, Mikage means "shadow" and, therefore, "darkness" or the absence of light. Mikage finally leaves the Tanabes, saying it is "a new start." This phrase suggests that Mikage would try to begin to glow with white light herself after being illuminated by a cool person; in other words, Mikage tries to become like a silver refrigerator.[6]

Indeed, Suzuki's survey (2002, 49–56) elucidates that *kūlu* or cool in Japanese means more than just warmth or gentleness for the *Kitchen* generation. It also represents a particular way of life admired by the Japanese youth of the 1980s. People say they feel an aura in a person who lives that way and use the word "cool" to describe that aura. This impression is sourced in a life in which one does not flock with others or become swayed by the opinions of others. Instead, people make decisions based on their own beliefs. Cool is a way of life in which one can overcome any obstacle and walk on one's path with a strong will, the power of action, and firm conviction. In short, the aura of cool emanates from living as an independent individual with a strong sense of self and self-confidence. It is also notable that people who show their inner beliefs and efforts do not project this aura; in other words, they are not cool. People regarded as cool do not talk passionately about their lives, beliefs, or efforts; they do not impose their views on others as advice. They do not exhibit any trace of effort or hardship in their actions or lives. A cool person makes others feel as if the individual lives naturally. A cool person is not a cold or blank person. The adjective cool represents a person who thinks a lot inside and acts as an independent individual with firm conviction, will, and power of action but does not reveal their ideas to others. Cool is an atmosphere in which inner heat is neutralized by outer coldness. Some people of the *Kitchen* generation describe this atmosphere as "silvery" or "light floating in the darkness," and most designate such a cool person as an ideal individual. The generation even mentions the name of Ichiro Suzuki, a former Major League Baseball player, as a typical cool person.

As an ideal way of life, the cool described above is different from the cool that expresses warm gentleness and shapes a warm human relationship. The author thus utilizes the expression "cool" for the former sense of cool, which is contrasted with the latter. Most people of the *Kitchen* generation regard a "cool" individual as their ideal, meaning that they cannot live that way. In other words, they can merely become longstanding sufferers of loneliness because of their preferred ways of interacting with others or a warm/cool gentleness. They are cool but cannot become "cool" and long for the way of life. This disconnect explains why, for instance, Japan of the 1980s and the 1990s witnessed a boom in music bands. Each individual in a music band serves a chosen role to the best of their ability. Each person's excellence in performance enriches the output of the music band. A *music band* is a space where each member is independent, discrete, and free to express individuality. Through this characteristic, the band becomes an enjoyable and warm place for a gathering of people. Each band member can be <cool> in a way that is opposite to the Japanese traditional method of *wa*, or

[6] Eriko's influence on Mikage was significant. However, the author will not go into it here because of the limitations of space. For more information, see Suzuki (2002). Notably, Eriko is, in fact, Yūichi's transgender mother. In other words, Banana Yoshimoto moots the ingenious idea that Mikage does not recover according to male-centered or female-centered norms, even if she uses Eriko as a role model.

harmonizing with others." A music band does not exist through its members compromising individual actions; it does not force members to compromise on individual desires by aligning and synchronizing.

As mentioned earlier, Mikage finally leaves the Tanabes, calling it "a new start." Therefore, while *Kitchen* illustrates how a woman is healed through proximity to a man who is warm/cool, it also describes the entire healing process from depression to recovery. It is essential to contemplate how Mikage can make a new beginning in her life. She can achieve her new start when she ceases to expect her comfort to emanate from something or somebody that stands beside her, such as the silver refrigerator. Instead, she must herself become a person resembling the silver refrigerator. Mikage elucidates: "When was it I realized that, on this truly dark and solitary path we all walk, the only way we can light is our own? Although I was raised with love, I was always lonely" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 21). When she returns to her own house the day before she moves out, desperate with loss and loneliness, the only thing she can do to support herself is to scrub the refrigerator and make it shine.

> When my grandmother died, time died, too, in this apartment. The reality of that fact was immediate. There was nothing I could do to change it. Other than turning around and leaving, there was only one thing to do—humming a tune, I began to scrub the refrigerator. (Yoshimoto, 1993, 22)

In the context of Japanese youth since the late 1980s, Mikage wants not to "sleep under the stars" in the darkness, to place herself under the "moonlight," or to be enchanted and healed by Yūichi's "cool" white light. She desires to herself glow with white light by becoming a "star," the "moon," and a "silver refrigerator." Thus, the main title of "Kitchen 2," which is the second half story of *Kitchen* while the first half is entitled by "Kitchen," and depicts Mikage's recovery and her transition into independence, is "Full Moon," a light that shines white in the night. In "Full Moon: Kitchen 2," Mikage asserts:

> Even though we're standing side by side, even though we're closer to each other than to anyone else in the world, even though we're friends forever, we don't join hands. No matter how forlorn we are, we each insist on standing on our own two feet" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 66).

Therefore, *Kitchen* is a story about the journey to becoming a "full moon" and shining with her light. Mikage (御影) becomes, as it were, Tsukikage (月影). As mentioned earlier, Mikage (御影) means "shadow," "darkness," "depressed," "unhappy," and indicates that the "light is too weak to see well." In contrast, Tsukikage signifies "moonlight." Mikage, therefore, leaves both her grandmother's house and the Tanabes' home, places in which she shares a warm/cool relationship with other people but cannot herself become "cool."

VI. A Dream Kitchen for Youth across the World

How does a kitchen, which inspires the novel's title, relate to Mikage's recovery and autonomy? Working on a chore in the kitchen is, for Mikage, akin to

performing in a music band. After Mikage cries over her grandmother's death, she stops in front of a house, draws attention to the kitchen, and remarks:

> Looking up, I saw white steam rising, in the dark, out of a brightly lit window overhead. I listened. From inside came the sound of happy voices at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging.
>
> It was a kitchen.
>
> I was puzzled, smiling about how I had just gone from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful (Yoshimoto, 1993, 35).

She pays attention to kitchens not because several persons are gathered in the dining room to eat but because they are working together to prepare a meal, cook, do the dishes, and wipe the table. Each person is devoted to a specific task, and all interact warmly with each other. This situation resembles the way people act and relate in music bands. Ian Buruma (1998) claims that Mikage's attention to the kitchen space denotes nostalgia for old Japan, where prominent families ate together, but such an opinion is incorrect. No one sits at the table in the kitchen; everyone *stands* individually, on one's own. Mikage would be attracted to Sōtarō, not Yūichi if her loneliness caused her to feel nostalgic for a large family.

Mikage states that Sōtarō "was the eldest son of a large family; without being aware of it, he got his sunny outlook from them, and I had been drawn to it. But what I needed now was the Tanabes' strange cheerfulness, their tranquility" (Yoshimoto, 19093, 26). The Tanabes do not have *wa*, the traditional Japanese way of harmony established by forcing members to compromise or the ideology that unites large families. Conversations between parent and son in the Tanabes home convey tones of "incredible ease and nonchalance" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 31), but their relationship is warm. Mikage can do whatever she wants at the Tanabes without worrying about the others. However, a traditional big Japanese family such as Sōtarō's would not allow every member to lead such a way of life because of *wa*. Mikage thus feels that it is impossible for her to freely walk her path with Sōtarō without worrying about her surroundings. With Sōtarō, she cannot become "cool" like a silver refrigerator or shine with white light: "if we were still together, I would be worrying about how I've just chipped the nail polish on my right hand scrubbing the refrigerator" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 24). Mikage loves the kitchen in the Tanabes home because of its individualism. She senses the distinctiveness of the tableware glowing with white light under the fluorescent lamp:

> Lit by a small fluorescent lamp, all kinds of plates silently awaited their turns; glasses sparkled. It was clear that in spite of the disorder everything was of the finest quality. There were things with special uses, like [...] porcelain bowls, gratin dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins. Somehow it was all very satisfying (Yoshimoto, 1993, 9–10).

Also, in the final part of *Kitchen*, Mikage feels comfortable cooking ramen noodles, and Yūichi makes grapefruit juice. They each make what they want to eat and drink and share their food. Both are free to do as they like. They can thus

relate to each other warmly.[7] Mikage is touched by this freedom, saying, "While what had happened was utterly amazing, it didn't seem so out of the ordinary, really" and "It was at once a miracle and the most natural thing in the world" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 41).

This cooking scene occurs just before Mikage leaves the Tanabes to make her new beginning. The scene is, as it were, a pre-Kitchen 2 phase for Mikage. She contemplates:

> Dream kitchens.
>
> I will have countless ones, in my heart or in reality. Or in my travels. Alone, with a crowd of people, with one other person—in all the many places I will live. I know that there will be so many more (Yoshimoto, 1993, 42–43).

"Kitchen" ends here, and "Full Moon: Kitchen 2" begins.

Kitchen depicts how a generation of youth overcomes the chronic feeling of loneliness stemming from a favored warm/cool relationship with others and stands autonomously. It is taking a "cool" worldview in which each person is independent, discrete, and free to express individuality and can develop warm human relationships. It is the new Japanese way of making human connections, which is divergent from the traditional Japanese *wa*." This disparity of stance explains *Kitchen's* popularity with a generation of youngsters, but not with older generations.

Why is *Kitchen* popular in other countries? For instance, the SONY Walkman was popular among the youth in the United States before *Kitchen* was published in 1993. Like the Japanese, American youngsters also protected themselves from the noise and words that disturbed their peace, creating private spaces. Many socialists, including Patricia Hersch (1999) and William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991), also agree with respect to the loneliness that American adults had become too disinterested in children because of excessive respect for autonomy. As a result, adolescents in the 1990s were spending more time alone than was previously possible while simultaneously wanting to herd together. However, they did not like strong bonds. Like the *Kitchen* generation in Japan, they preferred to remain neither too close nor too distant from each other. An American patient of Japanese psychiatrist Ken Ōhira states:

> In my opinion, the new gentleness [warm/cool gentleness] is much more international. Young people all over the world do not want others to step into their feelings. At least, the young people I know in the U.S. do not want. However, I think this is an international sub-culture of the youth. We all understand the story by Banana Yoshimoto very well (Ōhira, 1995, 160).

[7] Mikage also feels happy when she and Yūichi are cleaning together but performing distinct tasks. She feels it is like shining with light in the dark. "While I scrubbed the sink and Yūichi mopped, we sang together. It was so much fun, hearing our voices in the silent kitchen in the middle of the night. 'I especially love this part,' I said, singing the second stanza. A lighthouse in the distance/To the two of us in the night/The spinning light looks like/Sunshine through the branches of trees. In high spirits, we sang that part again, together, at the top of our lungs" (Yoshimoto, 1993, 38). The scene of their cleaning also illustrates that Mikage likes being "cool".

Thus, the sensibilities of young people worldwide have become similar, especially about human relationships and loneliness. That is why *Kitchen* sold very well in the U.S. and has become so popular worldwide.

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