

A PLACE TO BE: *IBASHO* AND SPACES OF COMMUNITY  
COMFORT IN THE TV SERIES *MIDNIGHT DINER*

by

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This thesis will discuss the concept of *ibasho*, "a place to be," as it appears in the beloved television and Netflix show *Midnight Diner* (*Shin'ya Shokudō*, 2009). In my research, I examine stories of the many patrons of one small diner in an alleyway in Tokyo, who come together over nostalgic foods and share the burdens of the difficulties they each face. I argue that spaces like the *Midnight Diner* exemplify *ibasho*, or "places to be," which offer community support and provide warmth, acceptance, inclusion, growth, and healing to troubled souls in a fast-paced and complicated world. This *ibasho* modeled in *Midnight Diner* bears relevance to us now as an example of deeply supportive community. In this thesis, I analyze depictions of *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner*, showing the value it has to offer us as we look for ways to connect with one another in our lives.

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## Introduction

### Background on Midnight Diner

“When people finish their day and hurry home, my day starts. Pork miso soup combo, beer, sake, shōchū—that’s all I have on my menu. But I make whatever customers request as long as I have the ingredients. That’s my policy. My diner is open from midnight to seven in the morning. They call it “Midnight Diner.” Do I even have customers? More than you’d expect.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins *Midnight Diner (Shin'ya Shokudō*, 2009), a Japanese television series spread globally by streaming service Netflix during the past seven years. Since its uptake by Netflix in 2016, *Midnight Diner* has become a favorite of fans worldwide as a show that delivers touching stories of everyday people navigating their lives and sharing their burdens over delicious and nostalgic foods. Reviewers of the show call it “a hidden gem,” “quietly intimate,” and “wistfully contemplative,” and praise it as a “heartwarming and universally relatable” series.<sup>2</sup> A review from *The New Yorker* comments that *Midnight Diner* “finds whimsy in the mundane,” making it a uniquely comforting watch in the eyes of many.<sup>3</sup>

For all its recent acclaim as a television drama, this Japanese series actually originally began as a manga series, written and drawn by creator Yarō Abe. *Midnight Diner* was first serialized in 2006 in Japanese publisher Shogakukan’s *Big Comic Original Zōkan*, a magazine targeted toward young adult men, and was switched to magazine *Big Comic Original* the following year. The manga has continued on since then, currently spanning twenty-six volumes, with the most recent release in February of this year (2023).<sup>4</sup> *Midnight Diner* has over 2.3

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<sup>1</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 1, “Akai Weiner to Tamagoyaki,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 9, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>2</sup> Christy Gibbs, “Midnight Diner is the Hidden Netflix Treasure Anime Fans Will Love,” [www.cbr.com](http://www.cbr.com), Comic Book Resources, September 15, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/midnight-diner-review-anime-fans/>.

<sup>3</sup> Hua Hsu, “The Vibrant Solitude of Midnight Diner,” [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com), *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/midnight-diner>.

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, “*Shin'ya Shokudō*,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified March 28, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shin%27ya\\_Shokud%C5%8D](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shin%27ya_Shokud%C5%8D).

million copies in circulation and has won awards from the 55th Shogakukan Manga Award in 2009 to the 39th Japan Cartoonist Award in 2010.<sup>5</sup> After gaining prestige, it also gained a variety of adaptations. *Midnight Diner* has been adapted not only into the now well-known Japanese television series, but also into three movies, a live musical, and two Korean and Chinese television dramas (released in 2015 and 2017, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

In this thesis, I will focus on the *Midnight Diner* Japanese television series, which was first televised on the Mainichi Broadcasting Systems (MBS) station in Japan from 2009 to 2014 for three seasons before being picked up by Netflix in 2016 for an additional two (separately entitled *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*).<sup>7</sup> These five seasons, comprised of ten episodes each, create an omnibus collection of fifty vignettes centering on nostalgic food, human struggles, and the healing support of caring community.

In the stories of *Midnight Diner*, a prevalent theme is the creation of “*ibasho*,” or “place to be.” The Japanese word *ibasho* derives from the verb “*iru*,” meaning “to be,” referring to the act of existence of living beings or animate objects; “*iru*” also means “to stay,” as in to occupy a place for a while or inhabit a space temporarily. This is combined with the noun *basho*, meaning a “place,” “location,” or “space.” The resulting “*ibasho*” has two primary definitions: first, it refers to one’s location or whereabouts, a place where one is or where one can be found; second, it refers to a place of belonging where one fits in or can be themselves—a place *for* one to be. For this reason, *ibasho* represents both habitual places and places of belonging. *Ibasho* can thus be

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<sup>5</sup> Anime! Anime! “「深夜食堂」ポスタービジュアル公開 阿部夜郎の大ヒットマンガが小林薫主演で映画化,” October 11, 2014. <https://animeanime.jp/article/2014/10/11/20465.html>; Shōgakukan Comic, “小学館漫画賞 過去受賞作,” October 25, 2018. <https://shogakukan-comic.jp/shogakukan-mangasho-archives>; Nihon Mangaka Kyōkai WEB, “日本漫画家協会賞,” Accessed May 4, 2023, <https://nihonmangakakyokai.or.jp/about/about07>.

<sup>6</sup> *Midnight Diner*, music by Kim Hye-seon, dir. Kōichi Ogita, Tokyo Metropolitan Sun Mall Theater, Tokyo, Japan, October 26, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, “Midnight Diner (Japanese TV Series),” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified April 4, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midnight\\_Diner\\_\(Japanese\\_TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midnight_Diner_(Japanese_TV_series)).

thought of as similar to the idea of “a home away from home,”<sup>8</sup> as it represents a place of belonging, ease, and comfort.

In academic discourses, *ibasho* is discussed widely as a concept that influences social dynamics and behaviors within communal circles. Professor of Human Science at Sophia University, Haruhiko Tanaka, writes that wide use of the term *ibasho* in academic discourse followed from its use in the title of a formal report by the Japanese Ministry of Education (now the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture, and Technology) from 1992, which addressed the problem of truancy in Japanese schools.<sup>9</sup> This report spotlighted the creation of *ibasho* as places for young people to inhabit where they could socially engage with others.<sup>10</sup> Tanaka describes *ibasho* as “a place or community one feels at home,” and as “a place where one feels ‘safe, secure, accepted, and approved.’”<sup>11</sup> Tanaka also compiles a wealth of English definitions of *ibasho* from academic discourse. These include the definitions of *ibasho* as: “free-space,” “existential place,” “place of being,” “a place of their own,” “one’s psychological place,” “one’s sense of interpersonal rootedness,” “one’s psychological home,” “a place where one can feel secure and be oneself,” “a place of community where one feels at home,” “any place, space, and community where one feels comfortable, relaxed, calm, and accepted by surrounding people.”<sup>12</sup> Examining the many ways in which *ibasho* is used and defined, Tanaka then identifies three elements in *ibasho*: a spatial element of “place,” an element of positive human relationships, and an element of time.<sup>13</sup> This spatial element of *ibasho* refers to a place or

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<sup>8</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. “Definition of HOME AWAY FROM HOME,” April 8, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/home+away+from+home>.

<sup>9</sup> Tanaka, Haruhiko, “Development of the *Ibasho* Concept in Japanese Education and Youth Work: *Ibasho* as a Place of Refuge and Empowerment for Excluded People,” *Educational Studies in Japan* 15 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.15.3>, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

community, but *ibasho* does not have to be a literal place; Tanaka includes the example of cyberspace as an *ibasho* for many people.<sup>14</sup> The element of human relations refers to *ibasho* as a safe space of good social relationships and no threats.<sup>15</sup> The element of time in *ibasho* deals with *ibasho* as promoting personal growth or a sense of hope for their future.<sup>16</sup> Through these three elements, Tanaka discusses *ibasho* as a space that fulfills a variety of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, including the needs for safety, belonging, and recognition.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Tanaka argues that *ibasho* can function as a refuge for the socially oppressed and a foundation for their empowerment, aligning this with some of the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>18</sup> In another article, Hayao Nomura, researcher at Nagoya University of the Arts, similarly describes *ibasho* as “a place or community one feels at home.”<sup>19</sup> Nomura refers to *ibasho* as “places of belonging,” and examines how the possession of *ibasho* in and outside of schools affects the life paths of Japanese youth.<sup>20</sup> Nomura cites that active communities such as musical groups can function as *ibasho* as a space that promotes social participation.<sup>21</sup> Through these articles, we see *ibasho* discussed as safe spaces of social inclusion and even empowerment.

Drawing on these academic studies, in this thesis, I argue that *Midnight Diner* exhibits the concept of *ibasho*, “a place to be,” and through its gentle and contemplative approach toward community and support, extends warmth, acceptance, and healing to its troubled characters. As a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid; Maslow, A. H. “A Theory of Human Motivation.” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370–96. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>.

<sup>18</sup> Tanaka, Haruhiko, “Development of the *Ibasho* Concept in Japanese Education and Youth Work: *Ibasho* as a Place of Refuge and Empowerment for Excluded People,” *Educational Studies in Japan* 15 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.15.3>, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Nomura, Hayao. “Places of Belonging (*Ibasho*) and Pursuing One’s Dream: The Unstable State of Transition Driven by Youth Culture.” *Educational Studies in Japan* 15 (2021): 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.15.57>, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 59.



whole, *Midnight Diner* represents a valuable example of what *ibasho* can look like and how it can benefit a diverse array of people.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss how the setting of the diner, the food it serves, and its patrons all create a space of comfort conducive to *ibasho*. First, I explain how the small diner becomes an accessible place for people to reside outside of the roles and expectations of their daily lives. Second, I introduce the connection between *ibasho* and the nostalgic foods that are served in the diner. Next, I give examples of the patrons that we see most often in the diner, showing how their stories in the diner engage with *ibasho* and set the tone for each of the vignettes in the series. With an image of the diner and the significance of its food and its patrons developed, I will then begin to show how *ibasho* is formed and promoted within the different parts of *Midnight Diner* on the whole. In Chapter 2, I will highlight what *ibasho* in the diner looks like for individual customers through the story of one particular patron, a young singer named Miyuki. I argue that her story is an example of how quickly and easily the Midnight Diner becomes an *ibasho* with support and belonging for its customers, even through struggle and tragedy. In Chapter 3, I will look at *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner* through the interpersonal connections that customers build with one another there. Customers build meaningful connections with one another in the diner, often through sharing their favorite foods. In the following chapter (Chapter 4), I will broaden my view of *ibasho* in the diner to examine the accepting and open community it builds as a collective whole. As an example, I will discuss the final episodes of each season, which give particular insight into how *ibasho* manifests in community gatherings. In Chapter 5, I will chronicle the construction and outcomes of *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner*, through the various contributions of its central character Masutā, the owner of the diner. I will highlight elements such as his provision of “service” (*sābisu*) toward his

customers, a form of support and recognition provided at establishments like restaurants, like giving an extra side dish or paying particular attention to a patron's request. This kind of service can uplift characters through their struggles and shows how small kindnesses can have large impacts. In addition to "service," I will introduce *ibasho* as Masutā's systems of support toward his customers, including his role in informational exchange, providing customers with a space for consultation about their difficulties, and enforcing a safe environment for each person within the diner. In this chapter, I will pay special examination to the contributions of Masutā to show how the kind and open approach of one person can help create a positive *ibasho* where communities can flourish. Finally, I will examine the larger significance of *ibasho*. With the example of *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner*, I will argue that these simple but powerful forms of support can be applied in spaces of gathering and connection to create comfortable and safe spaces to be.

My methods for this thesis center on a close cultural analysis, aspects of the field of television studies, and a close reading of *Midnight Diner*. I examine *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner* through the social dynamics displayed within the diner as a community in the series as a whole. Pulling from the many vignettes of the series, I use the examples of many individual stories to illustrate overarching themes of caring community and social inclusion. I also draw from the first five volumes of the original Japanese *Midnight Diner* manga to orient these dynamics in the show's original text. Engaging with both the television drama and the manga series allows me to distinguish cinematic additions to the series in its adapted episodes from its original core material in the short vignettes of the manga. My methods also include a linguistic analysis of communication between characters in the diner to highlight social dynamics of community

between them.<sup>22</sup> Through these forms of close cultural, cinematic, and linguistic analysis, I show the existence and impact of *ibasho* within *Midnight Diner*.

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<sup>22</sup> As part of the process of linguistic analysis, I have done my own Japanese-to-English translations for this thesis. All translations appearing in this thesis are my own unless otherwise cited.

## Chapter 1: Food, People, and the Diner

*Midnight Diner* encompasses many genres, including comedy, slice of life, and food.<sup>23</sup> In Japan, it is also categorized as a “*ninjō* manga” (meaning “emotional manga”) and exemplifies the genre traits of humanity, empathy, kindness, and sympathy.<sup>24</sup> Thus, this gourmet, food-oriented fiction conveys strong themes of human connection and sympathy, which are drawn out further in its dramatic adaptation. Most vignettes in the *Midnight Diner* manga are around 10-12 pages, with around 5-6 panels on each page. The Japanese television series follows select vignettes from the manga in a 25-minute episode format; it centers as much, or even more, on people as it does on foods. In later seasons, the show increasingly focuses on the stories of its customers. In *Midnight Diner*, stories show individuals as they encounter very human joys and difficulties, and in their struggles finding kindness and comfort in the food and company within the walls of one small diner. In order to demonstrate how *ibasho* appears in the *Midnight Diner*, I will first introduce the diner itself, as well as its central operator, known as *Masutā*.

### The Setting

The stories of *Midnight Diner* take place in a small one-room diner somewhere in the alleys of Shinjuku, Tokyo. From outside, the diner is marked only by an entry banner with the word “*meshiya*,” meaning “restaurant” that serves simple, home-cooked, comfort foods. Indeed, it is a simple and modest place, from its size and interior to its practices as a business.

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<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, “*Shin'ya Shokudō*,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified March 28, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shin%27ya\\_Shokud%C5%8D](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shin%27ya_Shokud%C5%8D).

<sup>24</sup> Jisho.Org: Japanese Dictionary, “*Ninjō*,” Accessed May 7, 2023, <https://jisho.org/word/%E4%BA%BA%E6%83%85>.

The unassuming appearance and small size of the diner make it an unintimidating and accessible place for troubled customers to come. The inside of the diner is simply decorated, with a sparse menu of just four items listed on the wall: pork *miso* soup combo, beer, sake, *shōchū*.<sup>25</sup> A curtain runs along the back wall that separates the central serving and dining area from a small kitchen where food is prepared. The room is no larger than around ten by ten feet; central to the room is a square countertop seating area that wraps around three sides of the space, with a standing space for serving food at its center, and a curtain to a home-sized kitchen on the back wall. The diner seats no more than twelve customers at one time (four on each side of the counter), making it an inherently intimate setting for dining. Around this counter, patrons gather to share food and company with one another at all hours of the night, as the diner is open from midnight to seven in the morning. These hours thus become its namesake: “midnight diner” (*shin'ya shokudō*).

This midnight diner is run completely by its owner—a middle-aged man of few words with a mysterious facial scar and a penchant for home-cooking—who the customers affectionately refer to as *Masutā*. This word, *masutā*, which literally translates to “Master” in English, is used in Japan to refer to the proprietor of a restaurant. When addressing this character, the patrons of the diner only call him “*Masutā*”; he has no other canonical name.<sup>26</sup> However, *Masutā* is not the only person that inhabits the walls of the diner. While he may be the only one running the establishment, a large cast of characters of all kinds fill its walls nightly.

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<sup>25</sup> At the end of the second episode of the second season, one additional item, the highball, is permanently added to the menu. This is the only change to the menu in the series.

<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this paper, then, I have chosen to refer to him in the same way they do. I choose “*Masutā*” over options such as “Master” or “the Master” for a few reasons: first, to avoid association with English connotations surrounding the word “master” and index the Japanese word, instead; second, to avoid a feeling of rigidity and formality, as this word is used more akin to a name than a formal title in this case. I also saw it appropriate to capitalize the “M” in *Masutā* for its use as both a title and a surrogate name. Therefore, from here forward and throughout this paper, I will be referring to the owner of the Midnight Diner as *Masutā*.

Between the gathering place of the diner, *Masutā*, and his customers, we gain the building blocks for a community to flourish and *ibasho* to develop. In the next section, I will introduce the food served in the diner as another element that contributes to the formation of *ibasho* within the diner walls.

### **The Significance of Food in Midnight Diner**

Masutā's cooking is central to *Midnight Diner* as a series. As a gourmet manga, *Midnight Diner* has an original focus on food; the show organizes its episodes around the dishes requested by customers that Masutā makes for them. Each episode is named for its highlighted dish, which stands as a symbol for the story of the person that comes to the diner to order it. Therefore, a large part of Masutā's role, both in the diner and in the series as a whole, is bringing his customers into connection with a food that symbolizes their pasts, presents, or futures.

One of the things that brings an element of comfort to Masutā's cooking is its intimacy. First, the diner itself is a singular room, where the kitchen and the dining seating are separated only by a short curtain. Customers who order food can easily see, hear, and smell their food being prepared only a few feet away, making the experience closer to home cooking than to a standard restaurant meal. Second, each meal is made-to-order, as Masutā makes anything customers request as long as he has the ingredients for it. The freedom of customers to ask Masutā for anything that they want makes the food they receive very personal by nature. The creation and provision of this personal food becomes an act not simply of business, but of kindness and personal care, turning a place of service into a place of comfort.

When creating a new dish for someone the first time, Masutā often comments that he hopes that what he has made meets their taste and what they were hoping for. This shows extra

care toward the preferences of customers, increasing their comfort and sense of belonging in the diner. Often their responses are excitedly affirmative, and many even remark that his food has the remarkable and distinguished taste of a food of memory. For example, the *Midnight Diner* broaches the topic of distinct regional foods in an episode in the second season—customers the pickled napa cabbage in their home region of Miyagi is different than everywhere else, but Masutā’s pickled cabbage manages to meet their standards.<sup>27</sup>

A peculiar point to note about the food requested by patrons of the *Midnight Diner* is that many of the dishes they order are simple enough to make for oneself at home. In fact, some of the recipes are almost shockingly uncomplicated, such as *ochazuke* (green tea or broth over rice) and butter rice (warm white rice with a tab of butter and a little bit of soy sauce on top). However, despite the simplicity of these recipes, customers still choose to come to the diner to order them rather than make them for themselves. This points to the diner as more than just a restaurant, as having some other compelling draw that brings its customers there time after time. Indeed, there is something more than just a meal that customers enjoy at the *Midnight Diner*; they receive a warm welcome, food cooked for them personally with care, and a safe place of belonging in the company of others. These things create *ibasho* for a wide array of customers in the diner.

In the stories of the *Midnight Diner*, there exists a close connection between Masutā, who prepares the meal, the significance of the meal itself, and the customer that receives and enjoys it that fosters an emotional intimacy and sense of comfort in the diner. One of the biggest points characterizing the effect of the *Midnight Diner* on its customers is its engagement with the issues that each person faces in their daily lives. One way in which this is facilitated is through the

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<sup>27</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 7, “Hakusaizuke,” directed by Shōtarō Kobayashi, aired November 25, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

foods that they request at the diner. Many new customers of the diner that we are introduced to in the course of the show come there for the first time looking for a place where they can have a specialty dish made. These dishes act as personal comfort foods for the characters, and the diner, with its policy of made-to-order dishes, is the perfect place to have them actualized. *Midnight Diner* as a series employs nostalgia in food to narratively contextualize the stories of issues that people face and catalyze healing by bringing them gently into contact with them in a safe space. The food a character orders at the diner, then, often becomes the first step of engagement with the hardships that they face. For example, in the fifth episode of the series, a man named Oki frequents the diner to order Masutā's potato salad, which he says has a nostalgic flavor to it.<sup>28</sup> In the course of the episode, we find out that he has unresolved family troubles, as he has been long disconnected with his family over his line of work and success in the field of adult entertainment. The potato salad that he comes to the diner for reminds him of the flavor of his mother's recipe, which he has not been able to eat in years. In this way, the dish Oki orders brings him into contact with his current guilt and regret over his long disconnect with his family through the nostalgia of its flavor. Serving nostalgic foods to customers of the diner is a simple way in which Masutā can create comfort within the space of the diner. This element of comfort and care reinforces the diner as a safe *ibasho* for customers to come to during their struggles as much as for relaxation.

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<sup>28</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 4, "Potato Salad," directed by Takurō Oikawa, aired October 30, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.



## The People of the Midnight Diner

Equally important to the food in creating community and *ibasho* are the people that populate the Midnight Diner in each episode of the series. While there is a large cast of rotating characters between episodes and seasons, there are a few characters that serve as staples to the series as frequent and long-term patrons of the diner. These characters have their own episodes early on, and are found in the background of many episodes throughout the series after. They also represent a small portion of the people that find a place for themselves and a community that they can be a part of in the Midnight Diner. Here, I will introduce a few of these recurring characters and their connections with the diner, as their stories not only show long-term engagement with the diner community, but also since they are most often a part of the community that accepts and welcomes new customers into the *ibasho* of the diner.

The first customer we are ever introduced to in the diner, Marilyn, is a young woman who works as a stripper in downtown Tokyo. When we first meet her, Masutā describes her as fickle in love, as she often brings different men to the diner and orders her dishes according to their taste. The more we see of Marilyn, the more it becomes clear that Marilyn's changing tastes relate to her wish for acceptance as someone working in the sex industry. Marilyn is a very successful stripper who even performs internationally, but even so, she struggles to be truly accepted and celebrated by her friends, her partners, and her mother. At the diner, she is celebrated by fans of hers like Mr. Chu, a local retiree that frequents the diner, and her accomplishments are regularly recognized by Masutā and other patrons. Further, she is able to make connections there that boost her self-acceptance and help her communicate her wish for support to her partners and family. In the first season, she struggles against the prejudice of her former friends and peers, but finds a place of support in the company of the diner. She makes a

serendipitous connection with an older woman named Yachiyo who turns out to be a famous stripper from years ago, and they quickly become close friends.<sup>29</sup> Marilyn is one of the very few characters that is featured in more than one episode. By the time we see her in the third season, Marilyn is more self-assured and able to confront her boyfriend and her mother about their treatment of her work.<sup>30</sup> For Marilyn, the diner is a place where she can be among familiar faces and be accepted for who she is and what she does. This ultimately helps her to cast off internalized prejudice and allow herself to wholeheartedly enjoy her work, which brings her happiness and success.

Another character who finds a sense of *ibasho* at the diner is Kosuzu, an older effeminate gay man who owns a nearby gay bar. He comes to the diner to enjoy food, conversation, and company when he is not running the bar. Often, he will offer comments and advice to other patrons, and is a staple member of the diner community who appears in many episodes. He also makes deeper connections through the diner. Kosuzu often visits the diner with hopes to run into Ryū, a local *yakuza* (Japanese gangster) boss with whom he forms an unlikely friendship. Kosuzu wishes to be near Ryū and hopes to develop a closer, romantic relationship with him, and he also visits the diner to enjoy the friendships that he develops with others through his frequent patronage. For example, in Season 2, Episode 7, Kosuzu's close friendship with Tsukiko, a screenwriter who comes to the diner, leads to Tsukiko even adopting a kitten from Kosuzu's cat's litter, which they fawn over together.<sup>31</sup> Though Kosuzu does not seek external validation in

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<sup>29</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 9, "Aji no Hiraki," directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired December 4, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>30</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 6, "Roll Kyabetsu," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired November 24, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>31</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 7, "Hakusaizuke," directed by Shōtarō Kobayashi, aired November 25, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

the way that Marilyn initially does, he finds community in the diner as a place of welcome and acceptance nonetheless.

The final example is a group of three “office ladies,” often abbreviated as “OL,” or women who work in administrative jobs at Japanese corporations. All in their thirties, the three friends—Miki, Rumi, and Kana—are nicknamed after their dish of choice: *ochazuke*, warm green tea or *dashi* broth poured over cooked rice. They come to the diner after work to socialize and chat with the other patrons. In the setting of the diner, they can be comfortably open and frank with their opinions, mingle with others, and comment on their own lives, which they do throughout the series. For example, after a customer has a falling out with their first love from many years ago, Miki comments that first loves never seem to work out.<sup>32</sup> Often, they will express agreement with a comment by looking toward one another and saying “right?” (*ne?* in unison). These three women are conscious of the fact that they are looked down upon because they are still single. They feel pressure from their family and people around them to marry, such as when Rumi attends a traditional marriage interview (known as an *omiai*) in order to ease the worries of her ailing mother.<sup>33</sup> However, they are determined to find romantic love and settle for no less, and they encourage one another when they meet at the diner. Their struggles with societal expectations and pressure around marriage lead them to frequent the diner after work, where they can talk freely together about their frustrations, hopes, and dreams.

While these are the main recurring characters, most of the episodes feature characters who are new to the diner. The people who come to the diner are of all ages, occupations, genders, and backgrounds. They are not a group necessarily composed of social outcasts, but are

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<sup>32</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 7, “Hot Pot for One,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>33</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 3, “Ochazuke,” directed by Takurō Oikawa, aired October 23, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

a wide variety of people looking for a place to be. They include famous people who want a place where they can go to enjoy a simple meal and not need to maintain their public persona; people who are just making it by and want someone to care about and believe in them; people who are struggling with their choices and want a place to rest and process their lives; people who are socially sidelined, who want for a place to be themselves; and people who simply want to enjoy a peaceful meal in close company. These are the things that draw people to the Midnight Diner and make it an *ibasho* for people of all walks of life. As an example of the storytelling surrounding these characters and the development of the diner as a place for them to be, I will take a moment in the next section to introduce the story of Miyuki, a young woman who comes to the diner in the first season. Her example shows how quickly customers can find a place for themselves at the diner, becoming a regular after visiting only once, and finding a community there that supports her for the rest of her life.

## Chapter 2: The Stories of *Midnight Diner*

It is dark out, and the flashing lights and sounds of Tokyo's Shinjuku neighborhood are buzzing with nightlife, echoing just a little softer down one small, tidy alleyway. Here, comfortably tucked away in a pocket of neighborhood, is a diner, adorned only with a short navy curtain and lit with the soft glow of a large, round paper lamp. Next to it, an even light seeps out from behind the paper and wooden screen door, promising warmth, a meal, and maybe even company. Far and late into the night, so far that the night has become a yet-dark morning, the sliding wooden door shutters open, and the half-curtain hanging from the doorway parts inward as a young woman enters from the outside air. As she steps forward through the curtain, she stumbles face-to-face with the proprietor, who seems to be preparing for closing. Startled, she ducks back out, but reappears with courage not a moment later, and though a little yet unsure, manages to ask a question: "Do you have any bonito flakes?"<sup>34</sup>

This young woman is Miyuki, a struggling *enka* singer who has found her way into this diner in search of a bowl of *neko-manma* (which translates as "cat rice"), a dish of warm rice topped with shaved dried bonito flakes and a dash of soy sauce. *Enka* is a genre of music that blends traditional Japanese and modern musical styles in sentimental ballads, and Miyuki goes to karaoke nightly to sing songs in this style. Her unusual request for *neko-manma* mirrors her peculiarity as a young person with a taste for music popular with an older generation. Though she does not have much money, Masutā accepts her request under the excuse that he would like a bowl, himself. Eating gratefully, Miyuki opens up to Masutā about her love for *enka* and her difficulties writing her own songs. He offers to connect her with another one of his customers,

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<sup>34</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 2, "Neko Manma," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 16, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

who happens to be a lyricist, and even allows her to do a small performance for the other customers at the diner. Miyuki soon becomes a regular at the diner, and the song the lyricist helps her write becomes a hit, boosting her to instant fame, which the Masutā and his patrons at the diner celebrate greatly. However, not long after, tragedy strikes, and she collapses, becoming hospitalized for a terminal illness. Seeking a bowl of *neko-manma*, Miyuki comes to the diner one final time, thanking Masutā for what he and the diner have done for her: “Masutā, thank you. If I hadn’t come to this diner, I would have never known what it’s like to be this happy. I can never thank you enough for that.”<sup>35</sup> She dies shortly later, and the patrons of the diner gather together dressed in black to mourn her passing in one another’s company.

Miyuki exemplifies how people of all ages and walks of life come to the Midnight Diner searching for a place to be themselves, to be with one another, to be open about their problems, to be supported, and to find comfort despite the everyday issues they face. Their stories are laced with joy and tragedy, celebration and mourning, but through the gathering place of the diner, each person finds sympathy and support for their woes, gaining acceptance and belonging in the close community of the Midnight Diner.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

### Chapter 3: *Ibasho* in *Midnight Diner*

In *Midnight Diner*, the diner functions as an *ibasho* for its many customers as they navigate the difficulties of daily life, encounter troubles from their pasts, and look for a way forward. The diner serves as an *ibasho* in both senses of the word: both as a habitual place that they can be found and as an emotional place of comfort and belonging that they feel at home in.

First, the Midnight Diner is a place for people to enter during the odd hours of the night. For many of its customers, the Midnight Diner serves as a place that they can inhabit for a time in between their time at work and at home. Since the Midnight Diner is only open from 12:00 am to 7:00 am, it becomes a place that deals exclusively in the hours when other restaurants and community spaces would not be accessible as places for tired souls to gather. Throughout the series, a handful of episodes include a short interlude narrated similarly to the opening sequence, which describes the diner in this light, as a space to go for those who feel they have unfinished business and wish to stay somewhere for awhile:

“As each day ends, people hurry to their homes. Only, there are some nights when they feel like there is still something left to be done and wish to drop in somewhere else for a while.”<sup>36</sup>

Here, the diner becomes an *ibasho* in the sense that it is a space for customers to be themselves and spend time in social connection and community outside the responsibilities and roles in their daily lives. The cover of night as a contextual setting for the diner and its operations is conducive to emotional openness, as people are tired and wish to lay their burdens down at the end of the day. People that come to the diner after a long day at work or in school therefore find rest in the diner as a place free from the responsibilities of both work and home; a place where they can be open about their difficulties and find support, whether in the form of advice, interpersonal

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<sup>36</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 5, “Egg Tofu,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

connection, or simply through the comfort of a warm meal. Professor Haruhiko Tanaka discusses this sort of space outside of work or home as another treatment of *ibasho* as a “third place.”<sup>37</sup> Tanaka borrows this term from sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his book *The Great Good Place*, which examines the importance of social community spaces.<sup>38</sup> Tanaka illustrates the concept of the “third space” through the example of a nurse’s office in Japanese schools. Unlike home or the classroom, which are associated with roles and grade-based evaluations, the nurse’s office is a free space in which students can comfortably reside, and thus becomes an *ibasho* for some Japanese students.<sup>39</sup> We see this same idea appear in American media, such as in the television series *Cheers*, where a bar setting acts as a third space outside of work and home for relaxation and social connection.<sup>40</sup> In the same way, the *Midnight Diner* functions as a “third space” for its patrons as a separate place free of expectations.

As a series, *Midnight Diner* places value on the community that is built from the connections that form between its characters. Within the small confines of the twelve-person seating, many customers make serendipitous connections and build community, turning the diner into a place not just to go, but a place to be and belong. For example, in an episode in the second season, film students Genki and Yūki come to the diner after their classes and work, and happen to meet a young woman there named Yukino.<sup>41</sup> They connect over their love of canned foods, and Yukino eventually goes on to play the main character in one of their film projects.

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<sup>37</sup> Tanaka, Haruhiko, “Development of the *Ibasho* Concept in Japanese Education and Youth Work: *Ibasho* as a Place of Refuge and Empowerment for Excluded People,” *Educational Studies in Japan* 15 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.15.3>, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place*. Da Capo Press, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Tanaka, Haruhiko, “Development of the *Ibasho* Concept in Japanese Education and Youth Work: *Ibasho* as a Place of Refuge and Empowerment for Excluded People,” *Educational Studies in Japan* 15 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.15.3>, 7.

<sup>40</sup> “Cheers.” National Broadcasting Company (NBC), September 30, 1982.

<sup>41</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 5, “Kanzume,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired November 11, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.



Unbeknownst to them, Yukino is struggling with finding her purpose in life after an affair goes horribly south, but her connection with the two of them at the diner spurs her to take the time to find it again. In this way, the diner becomes a place where customers find happenstance connections that can end up aiding them in the troubles they face.

The community in the *Midnight Diner* is often expressed through the interactions between customers. As a place that attracts a wide array of people, the *Midnight Diner* often facilitates bonds of familiarity and friendship between individual parties. Through the community of the *Midnight Diner*, we see people that may seem very different from one another caring for each other, standing up for one another, and enjoying their time together in a place they can feel at home in. This show of care and community creates *ibasho*, as customers find social belonging, safety, and comfort within the space of the diner.

One way in which customers connect with one another is through the dishes that they order. In addition to their own favorite dishes, customers are also inspired to order other dishes and foods from Masutā when they see another character enjoying them. In the seventh episode of the first season, an order of egg salad sandwiches sparks a conversation between two college students.<sup>42</sup> They find something in common and become close friends. A salaryman asks for a highball after seeing a young woman order one.<sup>43</sup> A young man sees another customer enjoy *nikogori*, or jellied fish broth, and asks for a bowl of his own.<sup>44</sup> A food critic orders buttered rice with soy sauce after watching an elderly man eat this comfort food.<sup>45</sup> Not only does this connect

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<sup>42</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 7, “Tamago Sando,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired November 20, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>43</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 2, “Karaage to Highball,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired October 21, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>44</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 4, “Nikogori,” directed by Fumio Nomoto, aired November 4, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>45</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 5, “Butter Rice,” directed by Takuma Tosaka, aired November 6, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

people through their palates, it also serves as an icebreaker topic through which they can express interest in and get to know one another as individuals outside of their regular social circles. For example, in the case of the egg sandwiches, Risa, a college student and hopeful star, sees Nakajima, a student working as a newspaper deliverer, come to the diner one night. He brings a bag of bread with him to give to Masutā as a necessary ingredient for his order of egg salad sandwiches. As he eats and looks over his work, he notices Risa looking at the sandwiches, and offers her some, asking: “Would you like some?”<sup>46</sup> She replies, “Oh! May I?” and thanks him.<sup>47</sup> A week after, she returns to the diner with bread in tow, looking to repay the favor, and the two become close. Given that Nakajima works in most of his free time, though they attend the same university, they likely would not have met if not through their encounter at the diner. In this way, food facilitates social connection between the diner’s customers, promoting the familiarity and comfort between them representative of *ibasho* spaces.

Sharing food not only becomes a matter of social connection in the diner—it also becomes a matter of social re-connection, as characters also use food as a manner of apology or to make amends with one another. For example, after a sustained and emotionally trying fight, two of the *ochazuke* sisters reconvene at the diner to make up with one another over their favorite dish; only, rather than ordering their regular flavors of *ochazuke*, they order each other’s and try them for the first time.<sup>48</sup> A mother and son rebuild their relationship over a shared bowl of steamed clams.<sup>49</sup> Two old friends share a bowl of hotpot in reconciliation after an argument

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<sup>46</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 7, “Tamago Sando,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired November 20, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 3, “Ochazuke,” directed by Takurō Oikawa, aired October 23, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>49</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 3, “Asari no Sakamushi,” directed by Shōtarō Kobayashi, aired October 28, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

over their life choices.<sup>50</sup> A retiree shares ham cutlets with his long lost brother in apology for how he treated him when they were young.<sup>51</sup> A comedian and his student eat corn dogs together again after nearly coming to blows over the discrepancy in their fame.<sup>52</sup> These are but a few of the many examples of how the diner becomes a place where people find a sense of community and reconcile with one another over well-prepared comfort foods.

These bonds that form between customers in the diner can also be seen when they come to one another's defense. For example, near the end of the first season, we see this in action between characters Marilyn and Yachiyo. During this episode, Marilyn encounters a former classmate from high school who continually insults and demeans her because of biases against her work. Yachiyo quickly comes to her defense and slaps him. She tells Marilyn that there is nothing shameful about the work that she does. This makes Marilyn feel validated and protected against his prejudice.<sup>53</sup>

There are many other examples of characters protecting one another and coming to each other's defense. Gen, a young *yakuza* who is normally abrasive to others, gets to know Saya, a soft-spoken worker at a pachinko parlor. Saya's abusive boyfriend Shō comes to the diner drunk and angry, and tries to hit her. Gen comes to her defense, engaging Shō to lead him outside, instead. At the first sign of violence, Masutā also emerges from the back of the diner with a bottle in hand, intending to defend Saya.<sup>54</sup> In another episode, Mr. Chu, a lone retiree who

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<sup>50</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 7, "Hot Pot for One," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>51</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 9, "Ham Cutlet," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>52</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 2, "Corn Dog," directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>53</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 9, "Aji no Hiraki," directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired December 4, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>54</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 2, "Karaage to Highball," directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired October 21, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

frequents the diner, stands up for Okae, another customer. He defends her to her deadbeat nephew, who is taking advantage of her and draining her financially, when he comes to the diner and demands money from her.<sup>55</sup>

These examples illustrate the meaningful interpersonal relationships that form in the diner. Even if they have not known each other for a long time or do not see one another outside of the diner, these people develop care for one another and enact that care in their community at the diner. Whether a reconnection between people who were once acquaintances or an unlikely friendship, characters protecting one another shows at a base level the care and safety that exists for characters at the Midnight Diner.

These social bonds developed between the individuals that come to the diner create a community that is at once familiar to individuals and open to all. The diner thus models *ibasho* as a space where people can associate with one another in common, regardless of age or personhood, differences, regrets, or the difficulties that they each carry with them. In the diner, customers get to know and accept one another as they are, being a support for each other's burdens and even defending them in their time together. The diner thus becomes a place of meaningful social connection and belonging between its customers, turning it into an *ibasho*. In the next section, I will outline how *ibasho* is created in the diner through more than just individual connections, through a collective sense of community between its many patrons.

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<sup>55</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 7, "Hot Pot for One," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

## Chapter 4: Community and Communication in *Midnight Diner*

While there is certainly much to be said about individual social connections that are facilitated by the Midnight Diner, it also models *ibasho* as social belonging through the collective community, which comes through as a theme in the series. In particular, we see a strong emphasis on community and demonstration of the *ibasho* of the Midnight Diner at the end of every season. In each season's final episode, the characters all get together and crowd into the small space of the diner, eating celebratory New Year's dishes and enjoying their time together there at the end of the year. This is where we also see direct acknowledgement of the fact that many of the diner's most frequent regulars treasure the diner as a place for them to be and to celebrate together during the customary New Year's festivities. The focus on community is also shown in these episodes through sweeping camera shots that slowly pan all the way around the diner, showing how each customer enjoys their New Year's meal in the company of the other familiar faces of the diner. While we normally see the diner from angled shots that highlight conversation between just a few people at a time, these long, panoramic shots highlight the connectivity of all customers in the diner as a single community. During the thirtieth episode, the members of the diner also crowd outside of the diner's door and take turns helping each other pound *mochi*, or glutinous rice cakes.<sup>56</sup> This participatory event also shows their sense of community, as the *mochi* is achieved through their collective effort.

Some of the customers in the diner give a more cynical view of their gathering, such as in the case of a patron salaryman: "This is depressing. Christmas only comes once a year, but here we are, a bunch of social misfits with nowhere else to go."<sup>57</sup> Others relish the time together all

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<sup>56</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 10, "Toshikoshi Soba," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 22, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>57</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 10, "Ramen," directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 11, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

the more; one of the *ochazuke* sisters comments in this particular episode that “It’s just so nice to be here with all of you,” shedding tears.<sup>58</sup> On an occasion where family and friends often celebrate with one another, characters here find the Midnight Diner as their *ibasho* place to be, where they can comfortably enjoy celebrating the holiday together. This picture of the Midnight Diner community gathering in celebration shows the diner as its core as an *ibasho* place of community: humble and warm, open and accepting, communal and personal, where all can enjoy food in the company of one another.

Another factor that promotes the Midnight Diner as an *ibasho* for its customers is the communication style Masutā employs. The language that Masutā uses in his diner is very friendly and casual. At the same time, he recognizes the nature of his relationship with his customers. He speaks in a standard masculine plain form of Japanese for the majority of his communication and employs common shortened forms of polite restaurant language to serve his customers. In Japanese, polite language consists of sets of honorifics and humble language, known as *keigo*. *Keigo* phrases such as greetings are used widely in the service industry in Japan. Masutā’s use of shortened forms of these *keigo* phrases mix politeness with casualty, as shortening a phrase makes it less formal in Japanese. This allows him to respect his customers while seeming friendly and close to them. Below is a short list of examples of common phrases that Masutā uses in the diner:

- *Irasshai* - a shortened version of *irasshaimase*, a polite phrase used by staff to welcome customers into an establishment.
- *Aiyo* - a short confirmation resembling *hai* (“yes”) and *yo* (a sentence-ending particle used to call out to or address others), with the meaning of understanding and accepting a request.

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<sup>58</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 10, “Toshikoshi Soba,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 22, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

- *Omachi*, or *Hai*, *omachi* - a shortened version of *omatase shimashita* (“I’ve made you wait”), a polite term used when the addressee has waited for the speaker. “*Hai*” means “yes.”
- *Maido* - a shortened version of common sentences thanking customers for their patronage (such as *maido arigatou gozaimasu*, “thank you for coming again” or *maido, mata irasshai* “thank you, please come again”).<sup>59</sup>

These greetings sometimes change to further become openly caring. For example, on occasion, instead of greeting a customer who enters the diner with *irasshai*, Masutā will greet them with *okaeri*, also a short form greeting, meaning “welcome back” or “welcome home.” For example, after the tragic death of a young customer, Masutā sets out her favorite dish, and a stray cat comes by to eat it. Treating the cat as the customer and calling it by their name, he tells it simply and tenderly, *okaeri*.<sup>60</sup> In a similar example, Masutā tells customer and local college student Yukino *okaeri* at the end of her story, when she returns to the diner from time away volunteering and finding a new reason to live.<sup>61</sup> One other example shows Masutā greeting a *majong* player and his son with *okaeri*; this also happens to be especially significant because his young child is allowed to stay at the diner and use the upstairs at one point in the episode as though it is their home.<sup>62</sup> In this way, Masutā’s use of *okaeri* heightens the feeling of the diner as a home for its customers. Similarly, Masutā also occasionally swaps the greeting *maido* with *oyasumi*, which is a shortened and familiar form of saying “good night.” For example, he says this to regular Kosuzu as he leaves the diner.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This particular phrase is slang commonly used in the Kansai region of Japan. However, since Masutā’s backstory is not revealed in the series, it is unspecified whether or not he is originally from the region.

<sup>60</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 2, “Neko Manma,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 16, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>61</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 5, “Kanzume,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired November 11, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>62</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 5, “Egg Tofu,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>63</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 1, “Futatabi Akai Weiner,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 14, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

Overall, the communication style Masutā uses creates a close and informal feeling for customers promoting the diner as a comfortable space in which there is no need to stand on linguistic ceremony. His use of the particularly informal *okaeri* and *oyasumi* is often toward but not limited to his regulars. This communication serves to highlight an open friendliness toward even the newest of customers and underlines the function of the diner as a familiar and comfortable *ibasho* for many of its patrons. In the next section, I will discuss four other ways in which Masutā promotes *ibasho* in the diner: through exchanging information between customers, acting as a listening ear for them, creating a safe environment for them within the diner, and showing them support through acts of “service.”



## Chapter 5: *Ibasho* through Emotional Support, Safety, and “Service”

Other than the language he uses, there are multiple ways in which Masutā promotes *ibasho* in the diner. Many times in the series, the contribution of Masutā in the story and resolution of issues in the highlighted character’s story comes through his serving as a middle man for others’ connections through informational exchange. When customers of the diner have relational issues or problems between them, Masutā will often tip them off to the situation of the other, inspiring empathy and reconciliation. Take, for example, the case of Serao and Hajime, an up-and-coming student and down-and-out teacher in the field of comedy that are at odds with each other over their disproportionate successes and fame. After they begin to show, Masutā reveals to Serao that Hajime was the one who got him hired for his new appearance in a television drama, promoting gratitude and further reconciliation between them.<sup>64</sup> In another episode, Masutā helps connect a professional boxer with a single mother after both parties express romantic interest in one another.<sup>65</sup> At the end, both of them come to the diner with the mother’s daughter to order bowls of *katsudon*, a meal of rice topped with chicken cutlet. However, Masutā symbolically serves them the same dish but with egg, a bowl known in Japan as *oyakodon*. This dish is named with the words *oya* and *ko*, meaning “parent” and “child,” symbolically giving them a nudge to lean into their new connection as a family. Through both informational connection and encouragement, Masutā supports the people that come to the Midnight Diner in finding joy and happiness in their lives.

On the other side of things, Masutā also provides another form of support in the diner to characters who are struggling. While characters grapple with issues or frustrations, the diner also

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<sup>64</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 2, “Corn Dog,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>65</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 6, “Katsudon,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired November 13, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

becomes open to them as a place of consultation, where a customer can find a listening ear to confide in, and if they like, receive well-intended advice. In a majority of the episodes of *Midnight Diner*, there comes a point where the highlighted character or characters have a private conversation with Masutā in the diner, laying their hardships out in the open. This, I refer to as “the heart-to-heart.”

This heart-to-heart between characters and Masutā functions as a key part of the episodes of *Midnight Diner*. First, it acts as a cathartic experience for the character in question; second, it allows them to safely and privately confront the issues that they face and look for solutions. There are two primary types of heart-to-heart that take place in the series: either one person directly confides in Masutā; or two or three highlighted characters converse with one another at a key moment of difficulty or reconciliation, and Masutā acts as a facilitating presence to the discussion.

In some stories, characters struggle with doing what they believe will be good for them, while in others, they face problems with unclear answers or solutions. To both, a caring ear from Masutā helps them to process their grievances so that they can look for a way forward when they are ready. For example, in the story of a woman named Sayuri, the development of love between her closest friend and long-time unrequited love puts her in an emotionally distressing position. In her heart-to-heart, she confides in Masutā about her situation; he offers her his sympathies, and offers that she doesn’t have to smile if she doesn’t feel like it, sitting with her as she cries the night through.<sup>66</sup> As closing time comes in the morning, Sayuri thanks Masutā and exits the diner with a refreshed mood and hope for the future.

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<sup>66</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 5, “Harusame salad,” directed by Fumio Nomoto, aired November 17, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

One thing to address in relation to these heart-to-hearts is that while Masutā does not always have a perfect solution to the problems of his customers, he is often positioned as having a wise approach toward helping them through their struggles. Never in the series do we see him give advice or push someone in a direction that causes them undue harm or suffering.

While this dynamic is more idyllic than realistic, the simple underlying comfort of having someone to talk to who cares to listen first and foremost does heavy lifting in terms of emotional support and healing for these characters. In fact, in a study on stress mitigation for Japanese men, Ohnishi et. al. discuss the potential role of staff in Japanese pubs (known as *izakaya*) as “listeners,” contributing in small part to stress reduction and suicide prevention by providing a space for customers to air their difficulties and find informal counsel.<sup>67</sup> The detached nature of the pubs from customers’ daily responsibilities allows them to use it as a space to open up about personal issues without worrying about their image, such as those dealing with family and finance. In the same manner, Masutā acts as a listener in the diner, providing emotional support through keeping confidence, extending sympathy, and providing counsel to characters who are struggling. This in turn further develops the space of the diner as a safe emotional home for all who enter it. The combination of safety, comfort, and healing thus becomes another factor that creates *ibasho* in the Midnight Diner.

Another form of support that creates a sense of *ibasho* in the diner is Masutā’s gifts of *sābisu*, or “service,” to his customers. In Japanese, the word “service” is used to refer to an extra gift or free service given by one party to another. In English, we might refer to this as something

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<sup>67</sup> Ohnishi, et. al.. “Utilization of Bar and Izakaya-Pub Establishments among Middle-Aged and Elderly Japanese Men to Mitigate Stress.” *BMC Public Health* 12, no. 1 (June 18, 2012): 446. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-446>, 7-8.

like a “freebie,” a gift, or an act of service. In the *Midnight Diner*, “service” is a common occurrence that underscores the caring relationship between Masutā and the diner’s customers.

As a story taking place in a diner, much of the service in *Midnight Diner* is food-related. For example, Masutā makes a customer, Oki, an extra bowl of potato salad as service after the death of his mother, who made the recipe for him often as a child.<sup>68</sup> In another episode, a young man named Masahi suffers after becoming disillusioned with the woman he was infatuated with; as a service, Masutā waives his normal limit of three drinks per customer and tells him he may have as many drinks as he likes just for that night.<sup>69</sup> Other examples of “service” extend beyond food: Masutā not only celebrates his customer Yoona with a free meal after she finishes paying back her parents’ debts; he also lets her use his diner’s kitchen to make omurice for a romantic interest<sup>70</sup> In the following episode, Masutā lets a customer’s child nap in his upstairs room connected to the diner while the child’s father looks for a new source of financial support.<sup>71</sup>

For the patrons of the diner, these acts of service become another benefit that makes the diner particularly special as a space of comfort and communal support. Service becomes a way for Masutā to show characters sympathy and an extra bit of support when they struggle, providing them a different source of encouragement. By offering the few resources that he has, he creates a space of active, personalized care and provides comfort to those that need it the most. In this way, service strengthens the feeling of *ibasho* for those that come to the *Midnight Diner*.

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<sup>68</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 4, “Potato Salad,” directed by Takurō Oikawa, aired October 30, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>69</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 4, “Nikogori,” directed by Fumio Nomoto, aired November 4, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>70</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 2, “Omelette Rice,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

<sup>71</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 5, “Egg Tofu,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

Another point that shows the Midnight Diner as *ibasho* is its maintenance as a safe space for its customers. At key points of conflict or chaos that come to or break out in the diner, Masutā shows a firm value toward creating a safe and equal space for his customers. For example, when Marilyn’s former classmate insults her and belittles her occupation, Masutā has him step outside, telling him: “If you want to come into my diner, leave your pride at the door.”<sup>72</sup> A quote from one of his regulars echoes this, saying: “In this diner, everyone is equal. We leave our job titles at the door.”<sup>73</sup> In another scenario, Masutā becomes angry when one of his customers, a former police detective, suggests using the diner as a way to catch a man who committed a crime in many years past and was never caught, but who has recently become a regular at the diner for its cold noodles. He passionately tells the former detective: “No. Absolutely not. Go away. This is a diner, not a police station. Take your work elsewhere.”<sup>74</sup> In another case, a fight breaks out between a teacher and student at the diner; Masutā prevents it from escalating by pouring cold water on the instigator and telling them to take it outside, which stops them in their tracks.<sup>75</sup> From these instances, we can see the value placed on keeping the Midnight Diner as a place that is safe for all its customers, whoever they may be. By promoting a consistent space of safety in the diner, Masutā further supports it as a place that they can comfortably reside.

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<sup>72</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 9, “Aji no Hiraki,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired December 4, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>73</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 9, “Rebanira to Nirareba,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 15, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>74</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 2, episode 8, “Hiyashi Chuuka,” directed by Shōtarō Kobayashi, aired December 2, 2011, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>75</sup> *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, season 1, episode 2, “Corn Dog,” directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita, aired October 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113037>.

## Conclusion

Through the form and function of the diner, the construction of community and belonging, and the many types of personal and interpersonal support it offers, the *Midnight Diner* shows a model of *ibasho* as a place that people seek to be. While it first meets an individual's simple need for a place to go temporarily for comfort food, it further satisfies the hopes to be cared for, listened to, accepted, comforted, and connected with, becoming an emotional home. For people from all walks of life, the value of this *ibasho* space becomes pivotal to their stories as they find support and healing comfort in times of trouble. Through this, they are able to survive grief, loss, heartbreak, and all manners of hardship, moving forward toward growth and healing. At the same time, those same networks of support and social connection through the diner give them another place to relish in joy and celebration when things go well.

At their core, these episodes of *Midnight Diner* are spaces of healing, but also spaces where the story of healing increasingly does not have to look like a happy ending. Romantic connections begin but find missed timing, and characters struggle to understand and come to terms with grief and loss. Neither does healing have to be complete by the end of an episode—or for recurring characters, even by the end of the season. Whether that is that they are simply moving forward—often, a positive direction is hinted at in their heart-to-hearts with Masutā—or gaining an important experience, the customers of the *Midnight Diner* experience growth of some kind through their exchanges there. However, by the end of each episode, there is hope that some positive change or valuable growth has occurred. This may be a hard lesson learned or a character finding new courage. In the vignettes of *Midnight Diner*, each person gains something from interacting with others in this close and humble setting. While the characters in these stories face all matters of hardship, the valuable relationships and *ibasho* space that characters find in

the Midnight Diner become a safety network promising to be with them through the difficulties they face.

Thus, the fictional television series *Midnight Diner* models an image of *ibasho* a space of support and healing that we can look for in our own lives. The diner itself functions as an “anydiner”: a kind of restaurant that could be found in any city alleyway and where people from all walks of life could gather and be welcomed. The program makes us feel like we, too, would be welcomed there. In fact, in each season-ending episode, the show breaks the fourth wall to directly address the viewer as a customer. At the end of the first season, the camera shows a first-person view of entering the diner as Masutā emerges from the back kitchen. Looking at the viewer, he declares: “Welcome. I’ll make you anything you like, as long as I have the ingredients.”<sup>76</sup> In the thirtieth episode, he stands with all of the regulars of the Midnight Diner outside its doors, saying: “I make whatever my customers request, as long as I have the ingredients. That’s my policy. So, if you ever find yourself in the neighborhood, feel free to drop in sometime,” and the patrons say in unison, “We’ll be waiting!”<sup>77</sup> By extending these invitations to viewers, *Midnight Diner* implies that these kinds of spaces of *ibasho* are open to us, as well.

Overall, the model of *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner* teaches us lessons about kindness, social connection, and belonging. From the examples of customers engaging with and helping one another to the kindness of Masutā toward each customer, we are shown strategies to create meaningful spaces of warmth, comfort, acceptance, healing, and belonging. Through the

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<sup>76</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 1, episode 10, “Ramen,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 11, 2009, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

<sup>77</sup> *Midnight Diner*, season 3, episode 10, “Toshikoshi Soba,” directed by Jōji Matsuoka, aired December 22, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113541>.

depictions of *ibasho* in *Midnight Diner*, we gain tools for understanding how to extend comfort, empathy, and humanity toward others, and we see the positive impact those kindnesses can have. These lessons can be applied to any community and gathering space we inhabit, creating mindful interaction between ourselves and the spaces in which we find belonging. *Ibasho* as it is shown in *Midnight Diner* demonstrates that through the ways in which we engage with one another, even the smallest and humblest of spaces can transform into a true place for us to be.



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