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A "Christmas Movie?": Teaching Kon Satoshi's *Tokyo Godfathers* as Japan's Social Problems All Wrapped Up

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Tokyo Godfathers (2003) by Kon Satoshi is often considered a Christmas movie in anglophone mass media sources. While the film has many clear references to Christmas, Kon himself chose to highlight the characters' journeys above Christmas references when discussing the film. This essay provides an example of how questioning dominant narratives by placing a film within a sociocultural and scholarly context and using disciplinary tools in a classroom setting—the kind of exercise that interdisciplinary fields like Asian studies perform all the time—fosters the development of the typical goals held by liberal arts institutions of higher education such as the support of global citizens who excel at critical thinking.

Introduction

In 2020, Kon Satoshi's (1963–2010) 2003 film *Tokyo Godfathers* was re-released in North America with a new English dub to the delight of many Japanese animation fans. Journalists and bloggers picked up the story, with NPR's John Powers dubbing *Tokyo Godfathers* a "riff on the tale of the Three Wise Men" (2020). Two years on, Emily Kavanaugh (2022) called it "the best Christmas movie you've never seen," and Andrea Gunert (2022) encouraged English-speaking audiences to enjoy a supposedly Japanese take on Christmas. Both bloggers published their posts online on Christmas Eve 2022.

It is undeniable that *Tokyo Godfathers* features Christmas imagery and symbolism. It begins in a church on Christmas Eve and features three "godfathers" who rescue an abandoned baby against a backdrop that features such images as angels, Santa Claus, and the number 1225 in various contexts. In the messy end-of-year social milieu of Japanese society, the trio strives to reunite the infant with her parents and, in the process, are all "saved." It is therefore not surprising that it has been labeled a "Christmas movie" by English-speaking audiences and writers.

And yet, in a 2008 interview with Justin Sevakis, director Satoshi Kon did not mention the Christmas elements at all. Rather, he stated that the film's focus was on the background of the characters and examining how people "separated from mainstream society" could "rejuvenate society." With the characters understood to be Kon's focus, how might viewers' engagement with the film (and Japan) change if they were encouraged to contemplate whether or not Christmas is to homelessness in *Tokyo Godfathers* as the Japanese backdrop is to American anomie in Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in Translation* (2003)?[1] In other words, what would it mean for viewers to question the assertions that appear in mass media that *Tokyo Godfathers* is a Christmas movie, instead positioning the characters' journeys as primary and the Christmas aspects as secondary? In a classroom context, how might teaching the film with this in mind alongside scholarly literature and disciplinary tools, prompt students to have more nuanced engagements with the film and Japan and foster critical thinking and consumption in general?

In this essay, I provide an example of how employing the lenses provided by disciplinary tools can foster such engagement with *Tokyo Godfathers* and the issues it raises. First, I provide a brief sociocultural context for the decade leading up to the release of the film and explain a few key points about religion in Japan. Next, I engage with the dominant mass media assertions that *Tokyo Godfathers* is a Christmas movie and explore the limits of this framing. I also briefly survey how other scholars have discussed the film. Third, I use scholarship on Japan and concepts from medical anthropology to provide contextualized character explication and position the Christmas story as "wrapping" for the deeper issues Kon raises about the social

factors involved in becoming and being homeless—and how Japanese society could be better if those factors were confronted. In doing so, I provide an example for how to operationalize pedagogy to foster engaged critical thinkers and ethically minded global citizens, a purported aim of many liberal arts institutions of higher education and interdisciplinary fields such as Asian studies. In the face of increasingly neoliberal and conservative political agendas that seek to refocus higher education on "skills," I think it is particularly important to demonstrate that disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, world languages, and history, as well as fields like religious studies and area studies, have long provided education in higher-order humanistic skills such as empathy *on top of* the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening that encourage students to make the world a place we all want to live.

Sociocultural Context

The decade leading up to the release of *Tokyo Godfathers* was characterized by a sense of anxiety and fear for the future of Japan. The passing of Emperor Hirohito ended a sixty-three-year reign (1926–1989) and left much of the nation in mourning. The Hanshin earthquake and the sarin gas attacks perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyo, in January and March of 1995 respectively, also contributed to a large-scale sense of unease during the 1990s. But perhaps the event with the largest and longest-lasting consequences was the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in 1991, which included a stock market and real estate market collapse (Bestor, Bestor, and Yamagata 2011, 3). Many companies folded, and many of those that survived did so by downsizing or relying on temporary employees. In turn, young Japanese struggled to live up to normative gendered ideals, which held that men should be breadwinners and women nurtures, that had been supported by promises of lifetime employment for salarymen whose earnings could support a whole family. Being a freeter or a gig employee, which had been widely seen as lifestyles only for indulgent outliers who chose to avoid corporate life in the 1980s, became more normalized out of necessity as traditional company jobs became less available (Slater 2011, 113). Job loss and declining incomes contributed to new cases of depression and substance use (White 2011,136). The distinction between being a day laborer and being homeless blurred; these populations did not only overlap but often found themselves caught between the police and the yakuza, making people living precariously incredibly vulnerable to various forms of abuse and violence (Stevens 2011, 167). Changes in the economy and job markets impacted family and marriage patterns, which resulted in larger numbers of people delaying or declining marriage and, in turn, a birthrate far below replacement level.

Moreover, the 1990s saw changes to Japan's immigration policies that allowed for more South Americans of Japanese descent to come to work in factories (Siddle 2011, 158). There was an established presence of laborers from other parts of Asia by this time as well (Stevens 2011, 169). Japanese women increasingly worked outside the home to buttress family finances; women who held supporting positions in companies (called *office ladies*, or *OLs*) who encountered mistreatment or found that opportunities for advancement enjoyed by men were unavailable to them sought ways to subvert gendered ideals (LeBlanc 2011, 124). Activists were becoming more vocal and visible about challenging heteronormative norms regarding gender and sexuality in public; Mark McLelland (2011, 147) also notes that Japanese queer theory was on the rise in the 1990s. There was also growing attention to the difficulties experienced by people whose gender identity and assigned sex did not align (148).

Overall, while young Japanese men struggled to get "real" jobs that would support a family and progressives attempted to redefine gender roles, older and more conservative Japanese who had benefitted from lifetime employment and the nuclear family model it supported blamed young people, the influx of non-Japanese immigrants, and louder calls for women's and non-binary rights for what they viewed to be perilous changes to the fabric of Japanese society, rather than blaming the economic practices that led to the recession. Young women were "selfish" for delaying marriage and childbearing (White 2011, 130) while men who could not find regular employment were "lazy." Challenges to gendered ideals pertaining to work and social roles pervade *Tokyo Godfathers,* reflecting its status as a product of its time.

Understanding the presence of aspects of Christmas in *Tokyo Godfathers* requires knowledge of a few points about religion in Japan. In general, religion in everyday Japanese life looks different compared to other societies in that less than ten percent of Japanese people report belonging to a religious group—even if they engage in ostensibly religious practices like visiting Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines (Mullins 2011, 65). This may be partially explained by the fact that the Japanese term for religion did not enter the lexicon until after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and many Japanese associate the term with practices involving membership in a religious group (Mullins, 63). It is also fairly common for people to incorporate both Buddhist and Shinto practices into everyday life, such as purchasing amulets at a temple and visiting a shrine after the birth of a child, rather than choose one over the other. In other words, things that could be understood as religious by outsiders may be coded as simply "Japanese" by insiders, and many Japanese people do not see the need to choose between Shintoism and Buddhism (or practices from other traditions).

Few Japanese identify as Christian; in Japan, only 2 percent of buildings affiliated with religion and only about 5 percent of clergy are connected to Christianity (Mullins 2011, 65). Familiarity with the intricacies of the Bible, including the birth of Jesus, is uncommon. But engagement with secularized aspects of Christianity such as white weddings and Christmas as a winter holiday is fairly high. It is not uncommon to see Christmas trees and lights, Christmas gift giving, and Christmas specials on cake and fried chicken, the result of Kentucky Fried Chicken having successfully marketed itself as *the* place to get Christmas dinner. For many Japanese, Christmas is a holiday for lovers to be celebrated with a date, not unlike Valentine's Day in the United States. Until the early 2000s, single twenty-five-year old women were often called "Christmas cakes," meaning that they were old or expired—that is, no one would want a woman older than twenty-five, just as no one would want a Christmas cake after December 25.

It is worth noting at this juncture that many mass media publications about Japan tend to frame it as monolithic and provide little sociocultural context if any. As Allison Alexy (2019) conducted research on intimacy in Japan, she noted the tendency for anglophone media to exoticize Japan. This fits with trends that frame Japan as a "weird" Other in relation to a "normal" Self (such as portrayals of Japanese men as misogynist, Japanese women as oppressed, or the whole nation as sexually repressed), as an ideal to emulate (in such fields as business or education models), or as an enemy to avoid (as seen in "buy American" campaigns or the Japan-bashing in response to automotive industry competition in the 1980s). Questioning the narratives about cultures and societies that are circulating within one's own society and viewing products of a culture in context are important strategies for combatting implicit bias and discrimination. So, with these points in mind, what does it look like when we question assertions that *Tokyo Godfathers* is a Christmas movie?

The Christmas "Wrapping"

Tokyo Godfathers begins in a Tokyo church on Christmas. Hana, a homeless trans woman listens enthusiastically to the pastor as he says that God will "bring salvation to those with no place of their own. Nothing is harder than to have no place." Hana's companion Gin has slept through the service, but he wakes up in time to agree. He has missed the pageant, sermon, and the singing of "Silent Night," and he is most interested in the meal that follows: "Joy to the world," he says, "the food has come." In this initial setting, the Christmas lens appears strong.

When Gin and Hana, joined by their third companion, a runaway teenager named Miyuki, come across an abandoned baby afterwards, the scaffolding of a Christ story coheres: named "Kiyoko," or "pure child," by Hana, the baby could be a Jesus figure

meant to save the lost, homeless protagonists. Indeed, Hana refers to baby Kiyoko as "a messenger of God" and refers to herself and her companions as "her servants." A series of coincidences that Hana interprets as miracles ultimately helps Kiyoko and her "godfathers" find their ways home to their respective families (not unlike a Hallmark Christmas movie). Christmas music, the pageant, the sermon, angel imagery, and the series of "miraculous" coincidences suggest a Christ story; secular Christmas images like Christmas trees, Santa Claus, angels, and the recurring number 1225 on coin locker keys, license plates, clocks, and even cab fare displays reflect the ways that non-Christian Japanese experience Christmas in Japan. But how deep do these references go?

The parallels between the protagonists' story and a birth-of-Christ or Christ-as-savior story are not as robust as they may first appear and are perhaps less compelling or attractive to the audience than the secular imagery. For example, Gin responds to the pastor's statements about the difficulty of not having a place by exclaiming, "You're telling me!"—effectively drawing attention to the difference between travelers turned away from a full inn and a homeless person struggling to survive in a society that puts a premium on its members being productive and gender-normative. Gin and his homeless friends are not just turned away for a night—they are turned away daily; that they find any welcome at Christmas is an exception. In other words, the homeless trio is not Mary and Joseph. Bearing gifts of heat, formula, and diapers for Kiyoko, they are more analogous to the three wise men but for their poverty and the life-saving qualities of their gifts. Taken together, John Powers's (2020) suggestion that the characters are a "riff" on the three wise men seems to make sense.

And yet, baby Kiyoko is not necessarily analogous to Jesus as a savior figure. Notably, it is the homeless trio that saves Kiyoko from certain death—something Jesus's earthly followers were unable to do. The trio is saved through their care of her rather than the other way around. Moreover, Kiyoko is a passive infant participant and is never shown as an adult within the film. And once returned to her parents, Miyuki points out, she is no longer "Kiyoko" at all: she is an ordinary newborn with ordinary parents. There are also two important sets of characters—the Nakashimas and a Latin American couple—that do not fit into the Christ story framework well, if at all. But they do play important roles, which I discuss below.

It is perhaps unsurprising that gestures toward a Christ story are loose given that the primary audience was a Japanese one that experiences Christianity, and Christmas specifically, in mostly secular ways. This is more in line with the Christmas imagery used by Kon. From this perspective, "Christmas" seems less an operative theme and more like a veneer—a type of "wrapping" that Kon uses to package his points about the social issues he wanted to broach with Japanese viewers through his characters.

And such wrapping seems to be attractive to non-Japanese viewers, too. So, what might some of these "wrapped up" social issues be? If Kon was focusing on character backstories of "discarded" (homeless) people, what clues do those backstories give us about what Kon sees as Japan's social problems and their possible solutions? Moreover, what have other scholars who have written about Kon and *Tokyo Godfathers* said about such approaches?

Scholarly Interpretations and Context

Although journalists and bloggers tend to utilize the Christmas story lens as described above, scholarly discussions about *Tokyo Godfathers* approach it in three key ways: contextualizing the film within Japanese cinema or Kon's body of work, analyzing the intellectual and artistic influences Kon draws from, and discussing the sociocultural context or aspects of the film alongside the merits of studying anime. These various approaches provide scholarly context for reading Kon's efforts in *Tokyo Godfathers* as social commentary.

In general, Kon's work frequently explores modes of being human. Kon (2008) himself refers to the plot of *Tokyo Godfathers* as simple, and some critics felt that simplicity made it less interesting or compelling than his other films. But Casper Jensen, Euan Auld, and Steven Brown (2022, 15–16) compare *Tokyo Godfathers* with Kon's films *Perfect Blue* (1997) and *Paprika* (2006) to argue that although it may seem "less experimental" than Kon's other works when framed in terms of the "superflat" critical lens used by some, *Tokyo Godfathers* is no less complex with regard to its engagement with modes of existence. Put another way, *Tokyo Godfathers* is complex because of its explication of the variety of homeless experiences through its characters, and its depiction of the ways in which they move through time and spaces. The main characters became homeless in different ways. They are alternately portrayed as both part of mainstream society and outside of it, and both as individuals and as emblematic of groups. Moreover, the various aspects of the characters' positionalities, such as their queerness, family roles, and addictions, come to the fore or recede depending on the situation—including whether they are in public spaces like hospitals, churches, and wedding receptions or in "underworlds" like abandoned buildings, drag clubs, and homeless encampments. The film's engagement with complexity involving time includes present-day reflections on the past and hopes for the future, as well as ventures into alternate realities like dreams and imagination. Such complexity defies simplistic explanations or critiques of *Tokyo Godfathers* as "less experimental" (and thus less sophisticated).

Jensen, Auld, and Brown (2022) also engage with some of the Christian imagery in the film to argue that Kon was playing with images like angels and what they can mean, do, and be across worlds. Angels are a part of Christian imagery, but they are *not only that.* The same is true for each of Kon's characters. They are each many things all at once and should not be reduced to any single status such as homeless, drunk, runaway, or trans.

David Scott Diffrient (2008, 154) places *Tokyo Godfathers* in the context of the works that came before it and likely influenced Kon; he writes that *Tokyo Godfathers* joins six American films that were inspired by Peter B. Kyne's 1913 novel *The Three Godfathers*. The most famous of these is arguably John Ford's 1948 film, *Three Godfathers.* By thus locating Kon's film and noting its intertextuality, Diffrient highlights the work of producing an ongoing interpretation of a story alongside technological advances in cinema, as well as the multitude of references to works of fine art from various cultures in Kon's film (154). He argues that the "ornamental" religious imagery functions as empty signifiers and does not further elaborate on any of the film's religious aspects (164). Ultimately, Diffrient describes *Tokyo Godfathers* as emblematic of "textual transformations that reflect social and geopolitical shifts in an era of transnational flows" (169). In other words, the film is a good example of how artists are influenced by one another and the works of others, and how such inspirations are mediated by ever-changing social conditions.

Susan Napier (2008) considers what might be gleaned by considering *Tokyo Godfathers* a commentary on everyday life, noting that the genre of anime comes with certain freedoms; Napier argues that "the art of animation can comment on what is essentially a sociocultural problem … because of the freedom of imagery and imagination" that animated works like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki evangerion*, 1995), *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001), and *Tokyo Godfathers* foster, in the same way that science fiction, fantasy and black comedy films like *Akira* (1988), *Rōjin Z* (1991), and *Kazoku gēmu* (1983) make family issues accessible by recontextualizing them outside "traditional 'home dramas'" (35–36). She further notes that the Japanese animation of the 1990s was dark in general and often featured "lost and vulnerable individuals … in a threatening world" (Napier 2011, 235). With regard to *Tokyo Godfathers*, Napier (2008, 48) asserts that Kon first paints a bleak picture of traditional families as a critique, then presents a version of chosen family comprised of homeless fictive kin, and finally restores the main characters to their own families—one of which is still a chosen family—through their efforts to care for and return a lost baby. Notably, it is through the teamwork of the "discarded" members of Japanese society that the institution of the family is, in Napier's words, "reconstituted."

In a 2008 interview, Kon (2008) himself noted that he intended the film to be a social commentary about who is and is not valued in society and the possibilities of redemption for society if people change their minds: "The important thing wasn't to just present the homeless problem in the script, but to focus on the mindset surrounding things we 'discard.' These are people who have been 'discarded' from society; the homeless, the runaway girl. In Japanese society, civil rights that the people have are few in number. I wanted to examine how someone separated from society would once again rejuvenate society." From the perspective of this particular comment, and from that of previous scholarship, it is not only logical but justice-oriented to consider that Kon's use of Christmas is intended as a form of "wrapping" to lure viewers into engagement with deeper social issues. Seeing it from this perspective makes it possible to consider how Kon drew inspiration from Kyne's novel and films like Ford's that focus on redemption to problematize how society treats people who are "separated from mainstream society," setting up the audience to ponder how society could be made better were marginalized people considered actors who might contribute to societal redemption rather than threats to be "trashed"—to continue down the road that Napier started. Such considerations not only allow for a more nuanced understanding of the titular characters; they also provide space to consider the roles of other characters as well—namely the Nakashimas and the Latin American couple. There are a number of ways to frame such considerations in accordance with one's particular disciplinary training, and I provide an example of one such framing below.

Applying the Violence Continuum: Characters as Examples of Marginalized Groups

In 2009, medical anthropologists Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg (2009, 16–17) united various anthropological perspectives of violence into what they termed "the violence continuum"; included in this continuum are structural, symbolic, everyday, and intimate violence. Structural violence is the result of systems of oppression, which includes policies guided by cultural norms that differentially advantage some groups over others. In plain terms, structural violence reduces choice to the point that people are left with "non-choices," like having to decide whether to pay rent *or* buy food. Common examples are policies that penalize people as they move through everyday life, such as poor minimum wage standards, lack of affordable housing, and even punishments for sleeping outside should one lose the ability to pay for shelter.

Symbolic violence normalizes structural violence and happens when individual people say that the status quo is "just how things are" or that systems are "too hard to change." Such violence takes various forms, including self-blame and victim-blaming, which both involve the misrecognition of the realities surrounding people's

poor situations, placing blame on individuals rather than on the systems that create the problems people find themselves in. Examples include failure to account for low minimum wages and high rent costs when telling people who can't make ends meet that they just have not worked hard enough or did not make smart choices, even as the wealthy are able to maintain wealth their wealth through such favorable structural advantages as tax breaks. Everyday violence happens when institutions practice symbolic violence and maintain the status quo. Examples include refusal to pass legislation that improves housing accessibility, wages, and tax structures and further criminalizing homelessness through sweeps of encampments under the pretense of public health.

Intimate violence includes those types of violence people are often most familiar with: physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. Fights, sexual assaults, judgment by passersby, and encampment sweeps all cause varying levels of trauma to people made vulnerable by homelessness. A key point Bourgois and Schonberg (2009, 16–17) make in describing the violence continuum is that the categories delineated here are not separate entities but function in negative synergy with one another: where there is structural violence, there is often symbolic, everyday, and intimate violence as well. In 1994, Robert Desjarlais coined the term "struggle along" as a natural complement to this continuum; this refers to the ways in which homeless people in particular have to work to get food, find shelter, and stay safe on the streets because many homeless people are on the streets because of structural violence. The two taken together also help refocus attention on the discrepancy between treating homelessness as a problem versus searching for the ultimate causes of homelessness and treating those as problems to solve.

There are many possible disciplinary tools and concepts that could be applied to explicate the backstories of the *Tokyo Godfathers* characters, but these two—the violence continuum and struggling along—suit my purposes as a medical anthropologist who studies Japan and is interested in the multilayered ways in which exclusion causes harm at both individual and societal levels. In my view, their combination fits with what Kon himself said he was trying to do with this film. Below, I show how the main characters fall into what I call a violence trap—a situation in which structural violence (gendered, heteronormative expectations of success) has contributed to their homelessness, and how they cannot escape homelessness and isolation without help because the intimate violence they experience (beatings, for example) is naturalized through symbolic and everyday violence (being called "human garbage" and how society fails to attend to them on days that are not Christmas, for example). In the process of explicating the backstories of Hana, Gin, Miyuki, and the Nakashimas, in

addition to characters for whom lack of a backstory is a device (Kiyoko and the film's non-Japanese couple), the diversity of those suffering from homelessness or a precarity that puts them in proximity to homelessness also becomes clear.

A Trans Woman: Hana

Through the character of Hana, viewers have the chance to consider how a trans woman might find herself on the street. Abandoned as a child, Hana longs to play rather traditional versions of the roles of wife and mother. She developed fictive kin[2] relationships with co-workers at a drag club where she was once employed, but her partner died and she quarreled with her club mother, so she feels unable to return there.[3] Abandoned by her biological mother, afraid to return to her fictive mother, and recognized by others as biologically male ("you can't fix feet," says Miyuki in reference to Hana's large feet, for example), Hana seems unable to play the filial daughter specifically or fully assert her gender identity more generally.

In her attempts to carve out a place for herself, Hana keeps company with her new family, Gin and Miyuki. Although they seem to accept Hana's identification as female, they barely tolerate her efforts to enact the roles of wife and mother. "Stop acting like my wife!" Gin shouts when Hana scolds him. When imploring Miyuki to "act like a woman," Miyuki spits back, "I *am* a woman"—not only rejecting Hana's version of femininity but also implying that Hana is not a real woman. When the trio comes across the baby in the trash, Hana exclaims, "She's a Christmas present from God! She's our baby!" and names her Kiyoko. Although Gin and Miyuki want to take baby Kiyoko to the police, Hana pleads, "This is a once in a lifetime chance! Let me feel like a mother!" before finally resolving to find the baby's parents and to force them to explain why they abandoned their infant daughter. And eventually, she is driven to return to her fictive mother, despite her fears of rejection, because of a maternal desire to protect Kiyoko (and a reticent-turned-docile Miyuki) from the cold. To put it another way, adopting Kiyoko becomes Hana's chance to fit conventional gender roles that have been denied her by society (and sometimes her closest fictive kin) because of her status as trans and homeless.

Through Hana, the audience begins to understand the pressures of life when one does not fit the gender binaries assumed by a large percentage of the Japanese population: being trans is at best a "mistake," and at worst, trans people may be viewed as being unable to play either set of gender roles authentically, thus making them a threat to society. Romit Dasgupta (2005) has described the steps of becoming a "full-fledged adult" (*shakaijin)* in terms of going to school, getting a job, getting married and having children; failing to do any of these steps puts one at risk for being labeled

"abnormal." Being trans or between genders in a place where many people subscribe to gender and sexuality binaries is challenging at best (Dale 2018). Given the definitions of marriage in Japan, Hana would not be legally permitted to play the roles she wants. In a society where social support and protections are predicated on heteronormative versions of family and marriage, Hana's trans identity makes her vulnerable to isolation and abuse. She is experiencing structural violence (barred from marriage as she would want it), which leads to other forms of violence. In fact, trans individuals are on average more likely to suffer from chronic disease, acute illnesses, substance abuse, intimate violence, and homelessness than their cisgender counterparts around the world (Winter et al. 2016).

A Runaway High School Girl: Miyuki

Teenaged Miyuki gives viewers insight into homelessness as a teenager and family pressures faced by Japanese teens in general. Like Hana, an argument with family drives her to the streets. Flashbacks reveal that when her cat, Angel, disappeared, Miyuki accused her policeman father of harming it, and she stabbed him in a fit of rage. Even though his wound was minor, she ran away because she was terrified that he would arrest her. She found herself adopted by Gin and Hana. While Gin and Hana provide her with meals (expired food from convenience store trash bins), their parent-like relationships are tenuous and different from her relationships with her actual parents. Gin grabs her breast and tells her she has "small tits" when she tries to argue that she's an adult, and he threatens to beat her when she talks back. Hana steps in to stop this sexual and verbal abuse (forms of intimate violence), but mouthy Miyuki resents Hana's efforts to make her act like the woman she asserts she is and indexes both Hana's assigned sex and age by calling her "Uncle Bag."

When Miyuki's father spots her on a crowded train, and she sees that he is making a frantic phone call, she assumes he is trying to capture her—so she jumps out of the train window. And even when Miyuki finds an ad in the paper saying "Angel has come home. —Papa" and calls home, she is unable to speak to him and instead hangs up and cries. Miyuki is too ashamed of the past and afraid of punishment to go home. Whereas Hana was compelled to put aside her fear of rejection by her chosen mother for the benefit of her fictive daughters, Miyuki has no such motivation and lacks the assurance she needs that she will be forgiven rather than punished. Miraculously, she is reunited with her father at the close of the film when he accompanies Kiyoko's parents, in his capacity as a policeman, to thank the trio for saving their baby.

Whether she is with chosen family or blood kin, the pressures of adolescence she experiences come to the fore. Despite having "failed" at being a filial daughter, Miyuki finds herself playing the role of child in her relationships with Gin and Hana. But the

rules of her strict parents are different from the rules of the street. In scenes with her parents prior to running away, Miyuki appears pudgy and sheltered; seemingly an only child, she had few responsibilities save studying and caring for her cat. On the other hand, while Gin and Hana feed her and provide some measure of protection, she must struggle along with them to get through each day in the cold on the street. Her role as a child within the trio is perhaps most obvious as Gin and Hana kick her out of the nest, so to speak, when Kiyoko arrives: she is sent to get food for the group and water for the baby's bottle. Playing the older sibling who had previously been babied, she resents being told "Them that gets, eats." Yet she does as she's asked and takes her turns feeding and changing Kiyoko. She switches from calling Hana "Uncle Bag" to "Ms. Hana" once she realizes how Hana has worked hard to care for her and Kiyoko. And near the end of the film, it is Miyuki who persuades a grief-stricken, desperate, and suicidal Sachiko (whom the trio had mistaken for Kiyoko's mother) to give Kiyoko back. On the street, Miyuki morphs from a petulant teen into a more competent and compliant daughter and protective older sibling.

Through Miyuki, the audience is reminded of the pressures adolescents in Japan face as they learn to be part of Japanese society. Goodman (2011, 53) notes that Japanese schools tend to focus on education for the betterment of society and not the individual; strict uniformity nationally is supported by a centralized curriculum and nationwide standards for everything from school architecture to school events like observations of Sports Day. Thus, educational goals seek to create good citizens who will be (re) productive contributors to the nation-state rather than fostering the development of well-rounded individuals. Moreover, being a good child at home means being a good child at school, because following the rules at school prepares students to get jobs and support families (both their own and the nation-state). Encouraged to value educational success as a means of attaining occupational and economic status for themselves and their families at both home and school, but sheltered from experiences outside those domains, children may not have the skills to navigate unpredictable situations or emotions (say, the unexpected loss of a pet). White (2011, 134) observes that children of this era generally also had little means of avoiding expectations of perfection. Not only are being a good child, student, and citizen inextricable, there is little room for deviation from the idealized norm. Moreover, making a mistake may not be perceived as something to learn from: it is a failure or something to be punished. Learning to follow the rules at school as a means of learning how to follow societal rules in general is paramount.

In Miyuki's case, viewers do not see her in school—they only see her pre-homeless life when she snaps and stabs her father, whose job is literally to enforce laws in Japanese society. Her transgression is worse than breaking school rules: by committing

assault with a weapon, against her policeman father, she shows disregard for rules in general. In this moment, she is a "failed" child (who attacks her father), citizen (who breaks the law), and student (who fundamentally disregards the importance of rule-following in Japan) all at once. It is no wonder she is afraid to go home. Institutional rules and norms that make it difficult for children to make good choices are forms of structural violence, and fear of or practical experience with other forms of violence in the form of punishment or bullying can make life unbearable for some.

An Alcoholic Gambler: Gin

With Gin, viewers are presented with cycles of sobriety and drunkenness that are fueled by shame. Although he tells Hana and Miyuki that his family members died because he threw a race as a professional cyclist and became unable to pay his daughter's medical bills, viewers later find out that Gin is actually a former bicycle shop owner who gambled, drank, and left his wife and daughter out of despair. Ashamed that he is unable to provide for them, and sure that they are better off without him, Gin, too, is afraid to go home. Like his companions, he also seems to have "failed" to perform his gender roles—in this case those of husband and father—and he tries to enact them through his relationships with Hana, Miyuki, and Kiyoko.

Although Gin seems not to reciprocate Hana's romantic affections, he searches for her whenever they become separated and ensures that she goes to the hospital when she's injured. He may not be in love with her, but he appears to love her. The audience becomes aware of his fatherly affections for Miyuki when she is confronted by another homeless pair while scavenging. The duo realizes that she is "the girl who hangs out with Gin" and is the "light in his life," so they leave her alone. The implication is that Gin has adopted Miyuki—perhaps to make up for abandoning his own daughter.

When Hana names the baby "Kiyoko," Gin is distressed: Kiyoko is his daughter's name. He begins to see his biological daughter (who is now in her twenties) in baby Kiyoko. When Hana decides that the trio should adopt Kiyoko, it is Gin who recognizes the baby girl needs a diaper change and a feeding. As he comforts the crying baby, Hana notes with some surprise that he is good at it. But taking care of the baby reminds him of his past transgressions. He shouts several times that there is no excuse for abandoning a child. This seems to be more of an angry reminder to himself in a fit of self-loathing than a judgment about Kiyoko's parents. But because Hana *does* pass judgment on Kiyoko's parents for abandoning her, not knowing that Gin has done a similar thing, Gin is driven to drink, quarrels with Hana, and finds himself alone and the victim of young men who beat him up as a means of "cleaning up … human trash" before New Year's.[4] The beatings perpetrated by the group, which result in the death of another

homeless man[5] and seem to go uninvestigated and unpunished, demonstrate the intimate violence homeless Japanese face; paired with the comments that the homeless are "human garbage," the audience gets a sense for how the homeless are treated and thought of the other 364 days of the year. To put it in Japanese terms, the sermon at the opening of the film is *tatemae* (face) while the actions and language of the young men are indicative of society's *hone* (true intention).[6] It is here that Kon's desire to illuminate and critique who is "discarded" become the most palpable.

Inebriated and beaten bloody, Gin refers to himself as "human garbage" and collapses in front of what happens to be Hana's old club. Miraculously, he is rescued by one of Hana's friends, who is dressed as an angel. Bathed, bandaged, fed, and reclothed, he is reunited with his chosen family. Hana is injured soon after and taken to a hospital, where Gin finds his daughter working as a nurse. His daughter forgives him for leaving, but Hana is enraged by his lies and storms out with Miyuki and Kiyoko in tow. Alone again, Gin locates Mr. Nakashima, the man the trio believes to be Kiyoko's father. Nakashima is drunk, alone, living in an apartment brimming with take-out trash and cigarette butts, and excited that he has won $100 in the lottery. Gin scolds him for doing exactly what he himself did—failing to live up to society's expectations as a husband and father.

Through Gin, the audience is encouraged to consider the pressures men face in performing the roles of father, husband, and productive member of society: men who do not live up to expectations are "trash" and a burden on society. It is also through Gin that the audience most clearly sees how people internalize societal expectations and ideals and turn to self-blame and shame (and perhaps problematic behaviors like substance use and gambling) when they find that they cannot meet these expectations. Victim-blame and self-blame, which normalize intimate violence as "the way it is" or "they had it coming" are examples of symbolic violence.

A Struggling Couple: The Nakashima

The Nakashimas are one of two pairs of characters who are critical to the story but are less easily understood through a Christmas lens than the titular characters. But with a character focus, it is possible to more fully imagine the *process* by which members of the trio became homeless. The Nakashimas are not homeless, but they seem to be teetering on the precipice. And they may serve as in-betweens for the audience, who might find it easier to relate to them than the trio.

As the story of the Nakashimas, the couple whom the trio assumes to be Kiyoko's parents, unfolds, viewers are presented with a failed and childless marriage. When the three discover baby Kiyoko, they find a coin locker key along with her. Inside the locker,

they find photos, business cards, and other clues about what Gin, Hana, and Miyuki assume to be Kiyoko's parents. They track down the Nakashimas' home and find it in ruins. The neighbors tell them that the Nakashimas seemed to be nice at first, but the husband drank and gambled, and the wife, Sachiko, provided the couple's income by working at a club. They fought a lot, and the neighbors suspected intimate partner violence. Sachiko left the club when she got pregnant, and they ran from debt collectors when they became unable to pay their bills. In other words, neither partner was fulfilling their familial roles in idealized ways—and the ruins of their house are evidence of their failures to each other and Japanese society.

In the ruins, the trio finds an address that Gin uses to find Mr. Nakashima. Hana and Miyuki run into Sachiko by chance as she is attempting to throw herself off of a bridge. They pull her down and begin interrogating her. Sachiko breaks down as she talks about how she suffered in her marriage. The two feel she is apologetic and return Kiyoko to her. It feels like this may be redemption, but the situation actually gets worse.

In talking with Mr. Nakashima, Gin has discovered that Kiyoko is not the Nakashimas' baby: After their own baby died, Sachiko envisioned Kiyoko as her child and kidnapped her from the hospital. Suffering from the traumas of a marriage marred by addiction, debt, and child loss, after Kiyoko has been returned to her, Sachiko tries in vain to breastfeed Kiyoko in a snowy playground. Meanwhile, the trio are miraculously reunited, and they search for Kiyoko and Sachiko again. Desperate and running from the trio, Sachiko plans to attempt suicide a second time—this time she tries to jump from a building with Kiyoko in her arms. Before she can jump, Miyuki convinces Sachiko to give the baby back to them, but they are swept off the building. Miraculously, the wind carries them down safely to the street. Everyone then goes to the hospital, and there Kiyoko is returned to her real parents.

Notably, Gin compares Mr. Nakashima to himself—suggesting that if Mr. Nakashima continues his current behavior, he will end up a homeless alcoholic like Gin. Mr. Nakashima's role in the story shows the audience what Gin's life looked like before he left his family and dramatizes the process of becoming a "failed" husband and father. But life is even bleaker for Sachiko, whose life is wholly unlike that of Gin's wife. Whereas Gin's wife seems to have made a life for herself and their child, thus fulfilling her roles as a mother and "good" Japanese woman, Sachiko has more difficulty. Sachiko's ability to play the dutiful wife who manages the home—the stereotypical and idealized role for Japanese women—is complicated by her occupation. Unlike Gin's wife who puts forth the effort to manage their family's shop (a reputable business), Sachiko works in a nightclub—a job that is contingent upon her being young and childless to attract customers (Allison 1994). Even if she does not literally sell her

body, her capital within the club is the idea that her body is available to be consumed by her salaryman clients. Once she is pregnant, not only is this idea is shattered, but it becomes impractical for her to work—there or anywhere, according to Japanese social norms that discourage women with children from full-time work.[7]

Without an income, Sachiko's marriage crumbles; her reputation in the neighborhood, probably tenuous due to her work in the first place, is further damaged by rumors that she beats her husband. On these two counts, she "fails" to play the part of the "proper" Japanese woman. When she suffers the death of her child, she seems to have "failed" every gender role she is expected to play: wife and mother at home, and "good" Japanese woman in society. Taking Kiyoko seems a desperate, last-ditch attempt to claim at least the role of mother, but when the baby refuses to nurse and Miyuki tells her that she is the cause of another family's pain, she cannot take any more. Sachiko, having "failed" and having her supposed failures pointed out to her, sees no other option but to die. Thus, it is with Sachiko that the audience feels the full weight of the social pressures to perform normative expectations of womanhood: it is better to be dead than unsuccessful at marriage and motherhood. Made to feel useless by society, she attempts to "discard" herself. While the circumstances of her life might lead to Mr. Nakashima ending up on the street, it seems more likely that she would end up dead.

An Unnamed Latin American Couple

A second pair of characters, a Latin American couple, also appear to lead a somewhat precarious life that Kon seems to want to visiblize. The trio find themselves guests at a wedding after saving a yakuza pinned under his car. It is the wedding day of the yakuza's daughter, whose name is also Kiyoko. At the same moment that Gin recognizes the groom as his old bookie, a server shoots the bookie/groom in the chest and flees, using Miyuki and the baby Kiyoko as shields. The shooter is "Latin American," and Miyuki struggles to understand his speech. He takes the girls to what appears to be his apartment and his wife, who also has a baby. As the woman nurses the babies (hers and Kiyoko), the two women communicate in broken language and bond over the discovery that their fathers are both policemen. Hana miraculously locates the girls, and they are back on their quest.

Unlike other similarly prominent characters in the film, this pair has no backstory. The audience does not know their names, their relationships, their occupations, why they are in Japan, or even why the server shoots the bookie/groom. They are generically presented as "Latin American" through their use of Spanish and accented Japanese. Similarly, whatever issues they have remain unresolved; Kiyoko does not save them or change them, and unlike many other characters, they are not reunited with family. This

lack of background and context is not a mere device: it is demonstrative of the realities of racial and ethnic minorities in Japan—many Latin Americans of Japanese descent (particularly Brazilians) have been brought to Japan to work as the population declines (Siddle 2011, 158; Tsuda 2003). Most Japanese people are unaware of the history of this movement and how the work these immigrants do supports the Japanese population at large. So when an unnamed Latin American mother tandem nurses Kiyoko alongside her own baby, it can be interpreted as a skillful metaphor that represents the work immigrants do to sustain their own families as well as the Japanese body politic: their physical labor nourishes the Japanese economy, but most beneficiaries of this labor are, like baby Kiyoko suckling at the breast, ignorant of or ambivalent about where this support comes from. The structural violence—such as policies that bring migrant workers to Japan but fail to protect their rights and generally disallow them from making progress in their lives—and everyday violence perpetrated against them is not just normalized through symbolic violence—their struggles are generally made invisible.

A Lost Baby: Kiyoko

Baby Kiyoko is the most passive character in the film, and viewers may glimpse Kon's hopes for societal redemption as people join forces to help her. Stolen from a hospital ward and discarded by Sachiko, found by three homeless denizens of Tokyo and toted through the city by them, returned briefly to Sachiko and nearly killed when she tries to end her life a second time, and finally rescued and returned to her parents, Kiyoko moves through the film as a typical baby: she cries, she coos, she has her diaper changed, and she's fed. Unaware of the violence she experiences, miracles happen around her—and it is the other protagonists who are moved to extraordinary acts and experience some sort of emotional homecoming through their care for her. Unlike her adoptive family members, she is seemingly unchanged and unaffected when she is returned to her parents at the close of the film. The audience never even learns her real name.

This pure, innocent, vulnerable baby girl is a blank slate onto which each character projects their own past "failings"—Hana sees her abandoned self, Gin sees the daughter he abandoned, Miyuki sees the doted-on child that she once was, Sachiko sees the baby she lost, and the Latin American woman sees a hungry baby just like hers. Rather than a Jesus figure, Kiyoko is more like Hello Kitty: as Christine Yano (2015) has argued, Kitty-chan's lack of a mouth makes her a blank slate upon which viewers project their own emotions. Kiyoko is a mirror in which the characters must face their most shameful moments, and their fears that stem from them: "I'm not a good father, husband, or Japanese man," "I'm not a good daughter," "I'm not a good wife, mother, or Japanese woman." But in having their shameful moments reflected through

Kiyoko, they are able to see the circumstances that led up to their "failings" and begin to move past them with the help of their kin—fictive or biological. By extension, this construction encourages the audience to consider the struggles of each character and not define them by labels such as trans, homeless, drunkard, gambler, foreigner, hostess, or runaway.

Through the saving of Kiyoko, the audience is faced with the humanity of each character and the violence perpetrated against them and is challenged to see the problems they face as issues common to everyone in Japanese society. The fears and silent struggles of the characters are the fears and silent struggles of the audience—ones that Kon wants to be addressed by people who are not (yet) "discarded" and do not deem themselves "trash" when they struggle (for now). The distance between viewers and the Nakashimas, and the Nakashimas to the trio, closes. Their struggles could be the viewers' struggles—if not today, someday. By placing issues and social problems that emerge from strict adherence to social ideologies and norms at the center of the stage, Kon provides his audience with opportunities to consider and further discuss them so that those policies and social ideologies that make it difficult for people to make choices that are good for them (structural violence) might change for the better, thus helping to prevent people from being regarded as abnormal (symbolic violence), ignored by policy (everyday violence), and physically beaten (intimate violence). When Mr. Nakashima makes a call to Sachiko to invite her to start over with him,[8] his call is not just for the couple—this call is what Kon has wrapped up and presented to Japanese society: we can be better, and people who have been marginalized can play an important role in revitalizing society.

Is *Tokyo Godfathers* a Christmas Story? and Other Questions

So where does this leave us? In this section, I reflect on what viewing the film as a "Christmas movie" and looking at it through the perspective of medical anthropology, applying the concepts of the violence continuum and struggling along, can help us say about *Tokyo Godfathers*. But perhaps more importantly, I demonstrate that what matters most is how exercises in critical thinking like this one contribute to the education of well-rounded students who can ask and answer good questions about the world and be aware of their growth as they do it.

As noted above, Kon indicated in a 2008 interview that his focus in *Tokyo Godfathers* was character-driven social commentary. Napier (2008) has written about the ways in which anime is a good genre for such commentary because of the level of freedom of expression it facilitates, and her own analysis of *Tokyo Godfathers* is that Kon "reconstitutes" a traditional family model as the fictive family unit works together to return Kiyoko and then all find themselves "back" with their loved ones. Using

the violence continuum and the concept of struggling along, I am able to build on Napier's work to examine the factors leading to and the realities of homelessness in Japan as portrayed in the film. Matching up the characters' experiences with aspects of the violence continuum, it becomes clear how people living precariously (homeless or homeless-adjacent) struggle along in search of food, water, and shelter while avoiding danger and abuse—regardless of how they came to be so vulnerable. Through the different lives of the characters (a former shop owner, a trans woman, a runaway school girl), the audience sees not only the variety of ways they became homeless and the variation that exists within homeless society but also how overall structures can keep them trapped and vulnerable to intimate violence if there is no group effort to extricate them. And finally, the film dramatizes the processes of precarious living that can lead to homelessness through characters like the Nakashimas and the Latin American couple.

From this perspective, *Tokyo Godfathers* can be seen a story about the messy social issues in contemporary Japan that are difficult to discuss and obfuscated by such social phenomena as the oft-repeated phrase *ware ware nihonjin* (we Japanese)—which assumes normativity and denies diversity in daily conversation (Befu 2001). Moreover, the social issues portrayed here are underscored by the violence inherent in subscribing to idealized, dichotomous notions of gender and gender roles. And from this perspective, the references to the Christmas holiday, which is annually consumed through dating and shopping by the largely non-Christian Japanese public, likely facilitate easier consumption of Kon's social critiques in Japan; Christian contexts may make the "exotic" familiar enough to become more relatable. This is in line with Napier's (2008) assertions that the recontextualization anime can achieve through its imagery and imagination anime can provide ways for people to engage with difficult topics.

So, is *Tokyo Godfathers not* a Christmas movie? Well, this essay was not set up to answer this question definitively. I did provide a degree of context and explication of characters to smash the simple assertion that it is one, but Kon of course specifically chose to feature the Christmas elements, and they are undoubtedly attractive to viewers. What repositioning the viewer's focus accomplishes, however, is to show that other questions—perhaps better, more interesting questions—are possible. Instead of asking whether it is a Christmas movie or not, we might ask who frames this film as a Christmas story and why? Why would this matter to someone like Powers, or to bloggers like Gunert and Kavanaugh? Why would viewers/readers be attracted to these aspects? Can perspectives change after different lenses of analysis are applied?

Similarly, my goal here has not been to assert that my analysis applying the violence continuum and struggling along is *the* way to understand *Tokyo Godfathers* (although I do maintain that until now, the character trajectories and religious imagery in this film have been underanalyzed). This is but one interpretation among many. Rather, my goal has been to demonstrate that the application of disciplinary tools like these can lead to deeper understandings of a situation or a work of popular or material culture. It can also lead to deeper questions about the tools we select. We can ask, is the violence continuum a worthy tool for this, or is there a better one? With these questions in mind, a person does not have to be a film scholar to model learning how to apply and evaluate tools for students, particularly undergraduates.

Additionally, I have purposefully used an undergraduate-friendly set of readings as sources to build the sociocultural context so that readers can literally borrow this framework to fashion a lesson plan, though other sources could of course be provided to students depending on their academic level. It has long been a challenge to encourage English-speaking non-Japanese people to consider Japan diverse and to question stereotypes about it. It is also challenging to recognize how various forms of violence are interconnected. And it can be challenging to talk about issues like substance use, child loss, and violence in general. Close viewing of this film supported by the careful reading of accessible academic writing helps address these challenges.

Overall, teaching something like *Tokyo Godfathers* with a set of both lay and academic sources can foster critical thinking and consumption by honing skills through reading, listening, watching, class discussion, and writing as well as deepening students' sense of positionality and empathy. By helping students learn to ask themselves questions about what they read and watch, we also help them learn how to be critical consumers. By learning how to ask themselves what tools could be used to answer their questions, they are not only learning how to be lifelong learners but also learning about themselves and what kinds of people they want to be. Students often say that they want to be good people who help others, while institutional learning outcomes often use fancier language like "fostering engaged, critical thinkers who are ethically minded global citizens." The good news is that this kind of work does all of that, and people working in the social sciences and humanities have been doing it for a long time.

Notes

[1] Anthropologist Anne Allison (2006) has demonstrated that Sofia Coppola used Japan as a backdrop and not a subject in that film.

[2] Fictive kin are not related by blood but are treated as family.

[3] The term used for "club mother" is *okaasan*. It is common for clients to refer to female owners or managers of such clubs as "the mama-san" but it is clear in this film that the workers at this particular club see themselves as a chosen family with the owner as the head of the "household."

[4] Cleaning the house and the neighborhood are often tasks undertaken prior to New Year's as a means of starting the new year "fresh" in Japan. This scene is a rather perverse interpretation of that tradition.

[5] They shout, "Time to die, old man!"

[6] *Honne* and *tatemae* are a linguistic pair that refers to one's real feelings (which are often hidden or revealed only to close friends and family) and what is acceptable to say publicly, respectively.

[7] It has been common for women to quit (or be expected to quit) their full-time jobs upon marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth so that they can more fully play the roles of wife and mother, although both men and women in Japan have a long history of refusing to play into the gender ideals promoted by government authorities—going at least as far back as the official dictates of the nineteenth-century Meiji government (LeBlanc 2011).

[8] Mr. Nakashima's words are *yari naoshi*, which literally means "start over"—but in English translation, they are translated as "born again," illustrating how translators also have played into the assertion of this film as a Christmas movie.

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