

## **Reading Trans Resistance and Care in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen***

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**Abstract:** Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is the subject of scholarly literature studying domesticity, subjecthood, young adult life, and urban placemaking in contemporary Japan. This paper looks primarily at transgender life making, care, and hybrid resistance and struggle through the character of Eriko. Using the frameworks and critical analysis of transgender Marxist theory, I analyze Eriko's role in both the domestic sphere and the club where she works, finding that Eriko's care work makes, shapes, and gives life to queer joy in otherwise bleak capitalist modernity.

“I have cheerfully chosen to make my body my fortune. I am *beautiful!* I am *dazzling!* If people I don’t care for are attracted to me, I accept it as the wages of beauty.”

From Eriko’s will. (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 40)

Banana Yoshimoto’s 1988 work *Kitchen* stands at the center of multidisciplinary academic analyses studying space, objects, youth, and domesticity in modern Japanese literature (Stephenson, 1994; Treat, 2018). Though published as two separate stories in the English-translated novella, *Kitchen* as a singular narrative focuses on the lives of main characters Mikage and Yuichi, young adults who must navigate familial loss, move through grief, and ultimately build new relationships.

This work looks at the character of Eriko, whose life and death drive the events of the story, and who plays a central role in Mikage and Yuichi’s young lives. However, most existing literature studies Eriko’s character in relation to Mikage and Yuichi, treating her as a tool of the narrative, rather than a character worthy of full analysis. Reviews of Eriko observe her primarily as a companion to the other characters; for example, Ian Buruma (1993) writes in a review that “the kitchen is to Mikage what drag is to Eriko: a refuge from loneliness after the death of a loved one” (p. 29). Further, Deborah Garrison (1993) comments that Eriko’s transition “is a piece of superfluous inventiveness on the author’s part; it lends everything around it an air of cheerful unreality that mirrors Mikage’s state of mind” (p. 110). These assessments do not engage with Eriko’s trans identity in a way that allows a full and complete observation of her character; rather, they see Eriko’s transition and personality as ways to better understand Mikage and her own relationship with grief, love, healing, and whimsy.

To bring Eriko’s character and life to the forefront, this paper studies Eriko through the lens of transgender Marxist theory and analysis. I first lay out the framework of transgender Marxism and how it is productive in reading Eriko’s character. Building upon such an analysis, I narrow in on labor and care, observing the ways Eriko’s labor and care are made evident in two central ways in the story. I first analyze Eriko’s work outside of the domestic sphere, her work at the club that provides income, and then pose this against an analysis of Eriko’s labor within the domestic sphere, with Yuichi and eventually, Mikage. I observe how found family and new domesticities are shaped through her care work. In doing so, I argue that Eriko’s care work, both within and outside of the domestic sphere that serves as the primary setting for the story, offers a narrative of hybrid resistance and struggle—queer joy—in the face of a modernity synonymous with industrial capitalism.

### **Transgender Marxism as Method**

I employ transgender Marxism as a critical framework through which to read Eriko because it offers the most comprehensive and careful lens that Eriko’s trans identity might be understood by. Transgender Marxism draws heavily from Marxist feminist politics, which considers how socially reproductive labor is work that reproduces both workers as humans and their labor power under capitalism. However, transgender Marxism departs from a traditional

Marxist feminist analysis in the way that it ensures that trans life itself is made legible: as Gleeson and O'Rourke (2021) write in their introduction of *Transgender Marxism*, “we are opposed to the entrenchment of a transcendent principle of ‘trans’ that comes to obscure the particular struggles of trans people to survive in the face of capitalism” (p. 22). Transgender Marxism makes concrete trans life in the diverse ways that it is lived and considers the ways that transition demands a disruption in all of the “epistemic regimes” that involve property and ownership, work and labor networks, family structures, and domestic life (Gleeson & O'Rourke, 2021, p. 31). Indeed, transgender Marxism offers an opportunity to read Eriko’s character in a way that departs from the perspectives of existing scholarship.

The collection of essays in *Transgender Marxism* is the seminal work on which I refer to, and which grounds my analysis. Specifically, I call to attention the way literary modernism is rife with examples of trans women as “metaphorical figures for the destabilization of inherited gender traditions” (Gleeson & O'Rourke, 2021, p. 24). I hope this paper moves away from a more conventional study of how trans women often serve as literary tools to ground the experience of cis women and instead toward a study of a trans woman who captures agency and is able to live a life of queer joy under the systems of production that continue to oppress her and, ultimately, result in her cruel and untimely death. This work does not question why Eriko as a trans woman exists in a Japanese novel set in the 1980s but rather attempts to explore how her care work is shaped by her experiences, and her experiences shape her labor in a reflexive way.

In engaging with transgender Marxism as a framework, I hold that this paper will emphasize the forms of socially reproductive labor that Eriko engages with as a trans woman under the conditions of marginalization and stigma and this care work and labor is at the center of the queer community and familial support that Mikage finds solace in. Nat Raha’s (2021) essay in the collection calls for a queer and trans social reproduction that “makes legible the caring labor that enables and maintains queer and trans people and lives” (p. 123). Furthermore, because the labor of feminized, queer, and trans workers is often made invisible and therefore materially and socially undervalued, it is necessary to situate this work in the divisions of labor under capitalism.

The story focuses in particular on an urban center of Japan as a location from where queer lives and worlds might be written and therefore reconstructs notions of the domestic household and family structures. Transgender Marxism recalls “that the struggles of living one’s life transgender must be threaded, rather than dispersed into distinguishable ‘spheres’” (Gleeson & O'Rourke, 2021, p. 37). In an analysis of this literary work and the character of Eriko, observing her labors of care and work in the public and domestic sphere separately—and together—offer various insights into how she engages in work under capitalism. These divisions are also symptoms of capitalism but still serve as effective modes of understanding Eriko’s engagements and interactions with work in a text whose thematic setting is the domestic space of the kitchen. It is the work of recognizing Eriko’s agency as a trans woman, as well as her care and labor, that deserves attention.

## Eriko's Work in Public Space

“Trans people waging struggles for economic survival offer a means of imagining a class politics that pursues the potential for full human development.”

Michelle O’Brien (2021) in “Introduction: Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labor Discipline, and Gender Freedom”

The public character of queer sexuality and labor is made most visible through Eriko’s work in the club. Although Eriko’s profession is mentioned repeatedly as Mikage stays at the Tanabe home, it is primarily to the effect of Eriko arriving back to the home at early morning hours. This section focuses on Eriko’s work through a more traditional and mainstream conception of work and labor: that which is an exchange of goods and services for payment. When Yuichi first tells the story of Eriko’s transition, he recounts how Eriko quit her job, transitioned, and bought the nightclub, raising Yuichi as a woman alone. There are more details about Eriko’s work revealed in her conversations with Mikage, though these details remain minimal—she works at a “gay bar,” and “she would come home a little tipsy,” in Mikage’s observations (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 15). Readers continue to see glimpses of Eriko from Mikage’s conversation with Chika, the head girl at Eriko’s club who is also a trans woman, and in Mikage’s memories and descriptions of Eriko.

Chika, to whom Eriko had willed the club, is the only other character in the story with insight into Eriko’s public life and work. Mikage’s interaction with Chika is brief and primarily about Yuichi, but it reveals that Eriko’s work and labors of care in the public sphere were far-reaching. The space of the night club is thus understood as a safe haven for trans women, and there is the implication that a form of sex work is involved. Eriko has been able to create a space of care and community for trans women in the face of capitalism: her struggle is against the stigma and marginalization that trans women experience.

In presumably reshaping the nightclub into a space of care and queer support systems, we observe how Eriko has been able to build queer joy. Survival sex work, which is a major site of class struggle for trans women of color, can offer further insight into how Eriko has built networks among otherwise socially marginalized trans women through the physical space of the night club and through the metaphorical spaces of mutual aid networks where trans women engage in collective struggle. Work itself, which imposes gendered expectations on everyone, is therefore a site where Eriko’s experiences reveal the ways she, as the club owner, is able to resist gendered expectations and instead transform these gendered expectations to produce opportunities for trans women’s self-determination, dignified expression, and joy and pleasure.

Eriko’s work at the nightclub transcends a traditional transactional relationship of payment for goods and services; rather, it is evident through her personality and her relationships with the other girls at the club, such as Chika, that her labors of care extend far beyond the private sphere. While liberal feminisms have not meaningfully challenged capitalist production, transgender Marxism offers a way to understand Eriko’s care labor so as “to undo the ‘hierarchy and domination’ inherent in the division of reproductive labor across gendered lines” (Zazanis,

2021, p. 51). Trans social reproduction, in this case performed by Eriko, is a practice by which trans people produce means for their survival. Eriko's work in the nightclub, accumulating capital and being able to support herself and Yuichi, and later on, care for Mikage, are examples of ways trans people produce and reproduce their own identities in relationships and social spheres. The public sphere of Eriko's workplace is unique because it involves her care labor and the informal, unpaid labor of building transgender networks of care for which Marxist analyses are well-suited. Gleeson (2021) writes that trans social reproduction occurs in community, but there is no one trans community that exists (p. 54). This is true for *Kitchen*, wherein the trans community is that of Eriko's nightclub, one which she actively and intentionally fosters.

Eriko's work at the nightclub is integral to a comprehensive understanding of how she navigates capitalism as a trans woman: her form of resistance is in the way that she builds a community of trans women, materially supports them, and provides them with care that goes beyond the work itself. Chika, for example, is said to have often spent the night at the Tanabe apartment, underscoring the importance of Eriko's leadership and care in urban trans woman community spaces (Yoshimoto, 2021, p. 63). Kellerman (2010) observes that Yoshimoto does not reveal any details about Eriko's career before her transition (p. 54). Because the focus is on her labor and work as the owner of a queer nightclub, I find that Yoshimoto reveals the importance of Eriko's work at the nightclub not only for her struggle as a trans woman, but also for the other trans women who are all unified in their collective struggles. Under the framework of transgender Marxism, trans work struggles, like Eriko's, and "what they offer to the broader gender freedom of the working class, breaks open the relationship between identity liberation and class struggle" (O'Brien, 2021, p. 75). For Eriko, her gender expression is central to her human fulfillment, dignity and life, and her experience and expression of beauty and pleasure. These fulfillments and joys are made visible through her work and her commitment to following a nonconforming self-expression that is, against all odds, fulfilling her whole identity.

### **Eriko's Labor in Domestic Space**

"If a person wants to stand on her own two feet, I recommend undertaking the care and feeding of something... By doing that you come to understand your own limitations. That's where it starts."

Eriko to Mikage (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 33)

The care and affective labor that Eriko does in her place of work is reproduced also in the domestic space that readers have the most access to; though the kitchen and Tanabe home is a private space, the story offers a unique interiority of Eriko's domestic life as Mikage stays at the apartment processing her grief. In the private space of the Tanabe home, Eriko is able to engage in queer world making that extends beyond her work in the nightclub and manifests in a family of social support and community building. It is notable that Eriko's role as a single mother to Yuichi disrupts the heteronormative, nuclear family that is upheld by gendered divisions of labor. Transgender Marxism thus emphasizes a "concept of the affective work of gender as

gender labor that supports gender expressions” and queer and trans conceptions that are produced in queer households (Raha, 2021, p. 116). I argue that Eriko has created a queer household in the Tanabe apartment, where her queer life is reproduced and exists separately from the traditional gendered norms of care labor. The Tanabe apartment is a place where she has raised Yuichi as a mother, and though a queer household such as hers may be considered illegitimate or unrecognized in mainstream social and political structures, it is one that does the work of creating queer community space.

Wages Due Lesbians (1977) argue that “the familial forms we have been inhabiting and creating for decades are often rendered invisible as sites of social reproduction” (p. 124). In this process, the costs of social reproduction are reliant on private relationships, ones that exist in the domestic sphere. However, Eriko is able to move beyond traditional familial forms in a queer household: Her familial relationships involve not just Yuichi, her son, but also Mikage, who she takes in, and Chika, whose roles transcends being just a coworker at the club. Eriko’s role as a trans woman in her queer household, where she is the sole caretaker of Yuichi, reveals how she is able to live the best she can amidst capitalist alienation. In her will, Eriko writes that she is “body and soul a woman. A mother in name and in fact... I have loved my life” (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 40). Transgender Marxist theory affirms the necessary work for trans survival; in Eriko being able to live fully as a trans woman and produce forms of community and sociality in her private space, this caring work is made visible.

In the framework of transgender Marxism, it is clear that the care work that Eriko engages in within the Tanabe household—emotional and psychological support, performance and expression, and feeding and housing and raising and cleaning—is work of survival. Her labors of care are situated as domestic labor in that space; as the primary provider, Eriko’s labor is made distinct against a heterosexual nuclear family structure. In place of this structure is a found family, a queer trope that finds its place in the story as a place of grounding for Mikage as she grows through her grief. Mikage’s found family is Eriko and Yuichi, and for these characters, it appears that they are not just content with, but also find joy, in their queer family. Eriko’s affective labors are not just for her own survival—rather, the networks of care shown in the novel, such as purchasing extravagant machines like juicers and bringing Mikage gifts like a banana print glass, serve the family that she has constructed.

The found family and new domestic space is indeed a site, physical and emotional, of Eriko’s resistance and desire to create queer and trans joy despite external influences. In her will, she explicitly warns Yuichi not to contact any biological family from his birth mother because they “cursed” her (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 40). Eriko, who was an orphan and who was taken in by her wife’s family, has constructed a family and identity outside of any state recognized relation. This is an outright rejection of a hetero-patriarchal family structure, one that capitalism demands and depends on. Her existence and identity as a trans woman necessarily subvert that, but more than that, her home can serve as a radical and transformative space that can be articulated as a site of “knowledge and praxis for resistance” (Raha, 2021, p. 119). In particular, this domestic

space, one that exists despite the constraints and scorn of capitalist structures, serves as both a means of survival for Eriko and also as a means for loving and caring for her loved ones.

In a less generous reading of the domestic space that Eriko has created as a trans woman and mother, Eriko's role as performing the bulk of emotional care labor is one that reproduces the reliance on women to perform the endless free labor of caring and holding up social support systems. In queer communities too, gendered stereotypes may play out where queer femmes do this labor without their communities acknowledging the nature of this work. However, in a transgender Marxist perspective, Eriko's work takes the necessary role of creating trans livelihoods while living in the material pressures of capitalist society. In trans social reproduction theory, it is critical to recognize that Eriko's specific labor is undertaken under material conditions that also socially abject her. Therefore, the affective labor that she engages in her queer household is not just necessary for her survival, but also a way that she creates joy and love despite the constraints of capitalism.

## Conclusion

Indeed, understanding how trans people engage in class struggle and form community, joy, and family can offer broader visions of gender freedom in the midst of capitalist society. I hope to briefly bring attention to Eriko's death: it is the catalyst for Yuichi and Mikage coming together throughout the second half of the story, and it is what leaves both of them with no family left besides each other. How can we make sense of Eriko's death and the particular circumstances of her death? Her life is fleeting, and in Mikage's eyes, it is Eriko's joy and care that become the most visible. For her to be a trans woman character in the story and then suffer the violence of transmisogyny in one of the places that she has cultivated to be home, Yoshimoto ends Eriko's story in a way that is almost expected, but still disappointing. It is significant, however, that even in her final moments, Eriko is no passive observer to violence and transmisogyny. She beats her stalker to death and so is able to continue her resistance to the capitalist structures that put trans women at risk. Perhaps this final form of resistance is a way that Yoshimoto might justify Eriko's death. Still, this moment is contextualized by her work; her stalker finds her in the club she owns and works at—a space that she has built to be safe.

Eriko's care work, in the domestic space and as labor in the nightclub, is a unique site to observe her simultaneous resistance and struggle despite the suppression of industrial capitalism. Transgender Marxism offers an appropriate framework through which to understand Eriko's relationships to care, work, love, and her trans identity. Eriko's work in the public sphere, where she creates space for trans women to find comfort, informs her narrative of resistance against hetero patriarchal capitalism. This work cannot be extracted or understood separately from her care work in her domestic life and the family that she has built in the Tanabe apartment, shaping new relations of care. Ultimately, Eriko's character and story is one of resistance and of joy, speaking to the deeply material ways trans people struggle, restructure, and reproduce new relationships between home and production.

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