Title: Compulsory Conformity in Modern Japanese Culture: An Exploration of Asexuality in the works of Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yuki

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AN EXPLORATION OF ASEXUALITY IN THE WORKS OF MURATA SAYAKA,
KAWAKAMI MIEKO, AND KAMATANI YÜKI

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2020

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2022
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the representation of asexual individuals in the works of Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yūki, all of whom are contemporary Japanese writers that portray near–suffocating social environments in their depictions of modern-day Japan. Their texts illustrate the augmented demands Japanese society places upon a cross-section of asexual and neurodivergent individuals. Despite the thematic and character–related similarities in their works, I argue that each author presents a unique interpretation of how these asexual individuals interact with—and try to integrate into—wider Japanese society and mainstream culture. Murata’s texts demonstrate an unapologetically radical separatism by invoking an idealized queer utopia free from constraining notions of heteronormative sexuality present in Japanese society. In contrast, Kawakami’s text suggests a more subtle—yet still subversive—integration of asexuality into society, one where asexual individuals strive for the same rights and privileges as all other citizens but still struggle to obtain acceptance or genuine equality. Kamatani’s text, on the other hand, strikes a balance between these notions. Our Dreams at Dusk offers a utopic space for asexual and other queer individuals but does not go as far as suggesting a radical separatism like Murata’s texts. Analyzing these texts alongside such seminal Queer Theory texts like Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet, Jack Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place, and José Esteban Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia uncovers the hidden sexualities buried within the texts: Not all asexual characters in the texts are explicitly labeled as such, yet they still occupy closeted lifestyles. This innovative examination of the existence of queer spaces within these works
demonstrates the increasing prevalence of the presentation of asexual identities in Japan, allowing for the broader discussion of the invisible queer members of Japanese society.
This thesis is dedicated to all of my loved ones. Thank you for supporting me throughout the long year of writing this thesis. I could not have done it without you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Louise Kane for chairing this thesis and guiding me throughout the entirety of this project. I would also like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Anna Jones and Dr. Anthony Grajeda. Additionally, I would like to extend my gratitude to my fellow students, all of whom have offered me help along the way. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for always supporting me.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to examine the ever-increasing presence of asexual characters in Japanese media from the Heisei and Reiwa eras. My thesis explores representations of asexuality in modern Japanese literature written by women and individuals who identify as X-gender, a Japanese-specific descriptor similar to the terms nonbinary and genderqueer. This exploration of asexuality is set against the cultural backdrop of societal expectations and the notions of social and sexual conformity within modern Japan. Despite the country’s drastically declining birth rates—only 864,000 children were born in 2019 according to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s Vital statistics, year-on-year comparison document—

It is essential to acknowledge my position as an Anglo-American scholar studying translated versions of Japanese text. From this position, I recognize my inherent theoretical distance from the subjects under examination in this thesis. This linguistic distance can be best exemplified in texts like Minae Mizumura’s The Fall of Language in the Age of English, in which she discusses the hierarchies inherent to the languages of the world, with English standing at the top. She questions this status and warns of dependence on one language when writing and

1 Japanese text appears in this document only when it is next to my own translations of the original texts. All professionally-translated texts appear as English only.
reading scholarship. It is with these power dynamics in mind that I carefully tread into the world
of scholarship of these translated texts.

Contemporary Japanese literary fiction, especially texts written by those who identify as
female or queer, has gone some way to placing a greater spotlight on asexual individuals. To
illustrate this, this thesis analyzes Murata Sayaka’s *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) and
*Earthlings* (2018), *Breasts and Eggs* (2019) by Kawakami Mieko, and *Our Dreams at Dusk*
Her novels touch on a multitude of subjects including conformity, nonconformity, individuals
who do not ‘fit in’, sexuality, asexuality, and reproduction; these thematic concerns are all
situated against the wider backdrop of daily life in modern day Japan or dystopic imitations of
Japan. Kawakami Mieko was born in Osaka, Japan, in 1976. Kawakami’s works range from full–
length fiction to short stories and poetry. While Murata’s characters fundamentally refuse to
adhere to Japanese societal ‘norms’, Kawakami’s works depict characters who struggle, but still
manage, to find ways to ‘fit in’ to Japanese society despite their nonconformist traits. Kamatani
Yūki was born in Fukuyama, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan, in 1983. Kamatani identifies as
asexual and X-gender.\(^3\) While Murata and Kawakami write primarily within the genres of the
novel and short story, Kamatani is best known for writing *manga*, or Japanese visual comics.

All three writers construct narratives whose protagonists tend to be adolescents and
young adults coming to terms with their typically nonnormative identities. Their texts illustrate

\(^2\) All of these texts are translated versions. The texts are all originally written in Japanese. The Japanese titles are as follows: コンビニ人間 (*Convenience Store Woman*), 地球星人 (*Earthlings*), 乳と卵 (*Breasts and Eggs*), and し
まなみ誰そ彼 (*Our Dreams at Dusk*).

\(^3\) Kamatani Yūki identifies as X-gender and asexual in their *Twitter* biography: “toXでアセク” (2016).
the augmented demands Japanese society places upon a cross-section of asexual and neurodivergent—or, those whose brains function differently than what is broadly considered to be ‘standard’—individuals under an ever-increasing, uncaring capitalistic gaze. Despite the thematic and character–related similarities in their works, I argue that each author presents a unique interpretation of how these asexual individuals interact with—and try to integrate into—wider Japanese society and mainstream culture. Murata’s texts demonstrate an unapologetically radical separatism by invoking an idealized queer utopia free from constraining notions of heteronormative sexuality present in Japanese society. In contrast, Kawakami’s text suggests a more subtle—yet still subversive—integration of asexuality into society, one where asexual individuals strive for the same rights and privileges as all other citizens but still struggle to obtain acceptance or genuine equality. Kamatani’s text, on the other hand, strikes a balance between these notions. Our Dreams at Dusk offers a utopic space for asexual and other queer individuals but does not go as far as suggesting a radical separatism like Murata’s texts.

Asexuality in Japanese and Global Literature: A Brief Literature Review

As scholars like Miyu Higashimura claim, the notion of asexuality itself has been left widely unaddressed in Asian society because where “romantic love and physical contact are prioritized… asexuality is not even up for discussion” (Higashimura 123). Tracing these notions from the past, Meiji and Taisho manifestations of asexuality revolved around asexual

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4 Scholars dispute arguments that claim romantic love and physical contact are prioritized in Japanese—and more broadly, Asian—societies. For example, in Japan, the phenomenon of hikikomori confounds declarations that romantic love and sex reign supreme since they represent a significant portion of the Japanese population: with the lower bounds of some studies estimating 200,000 and the upper bounds of others finding figures around 600,000 to 1 million hikikomori in Japan (Furlong). Some scholars, on the other hand, like Sonya Ryang claim love in Japan is a form of state control, comparing love to a “political technology” that was “installed and implemented as a state apparatus” (2).
relationships between those of the same gender. For example, relationships between two girls who share a strong romantic bond with no physical intimacy would be “coded as pure, innocent, and asexual” (Shamoon 11). Discussions of what most consider modern ideations of asexuality are sparse, if not non-existent. Many instances of the word asexual simply denote relationships lacking in physical intimacy, rather than denoting an entire identity category. Essentially, asexuality is tied to the body, rather than the identity. Since chastity was a highly valued idea within Meiji-era [1868–1912] (and to some extent, Taisho-era [1912–1296]) Japan, asexuality has sometimes been broadly conceived as connoting purity; in some senses the term “becomes the ideal expression of spiritual love” (Shamoon 11). Terms like ‘chastity’ or ‘purity’ do not, of course translate effortlessly across the Meiji, Taisho, and the current Reiwa (and previous Heisei) eras. Generally—as suggested by Shamoon—the literature of older two eras does not consider abstinence as an essential aspect of one’s identity formation; it simply indicates a relationship that is not dictated by sex.

Despite these lack of specific reference to asexuality in previous eras, there has been a noticeable rise in the prevalence of asexuality within recent Japanese literature. The authors I am studying, Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yūki, are at the forefront of the conversation. In addition to an increasing presence of asexuality in literary fiction, a significant amount of asexual—or asexually coded—characters can be found within other light novels, manga, and anime. Some of these works include So I’m a Spider, So What (2017) by Okina Baba, Gugure! Kokkori-San (2011) by Midori Endō, Bloom Into You (2015) by Nio Nakatani, and The Disastrous Life of Saiki K. (2012) by Shūichi Asō.
Much of the discussion of asexuality in Japan lies outside traditional academic realms or fields of study, such as Gender Studies, and instead exists primarily in online communities on Twitter or Line (much like it does in other countries). For example, the website Stonewall Japan houses a directory of forums and Twitter pages in which asexual individuals can communicate and organize:

![Stonewall Japan Resources](https://www.stonewalljapan.org/)

**Source: Stonewall Japan**

*Figure 1: Asexuality Resources Page*

However, passionately sexual relationships and the nature of sexuality itself have been widely addressed in Japanese literature: renowned authors of past and present like Mishima Yukio, Watanabe Jun'ichi, Kawabata Yasunari, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Ōe Kenzaburō, Ogawa Yōko, Murakami Ryū, Yoshimoto Banana, Kirino Natsuo, and Murakami Haruki all contend with sex and sexuality throughout their respective canons. Sexuality, then, is the antithesis of asexuality in both novelistic content and critical engagement.

Despite the existence and popularity of Murata, Kawakami, and Kamatani’s works—with Murata and Kawakami having won a handful of the most prestigious Japanese literary awards (like the Akutagawa, Mishima Yukio, and Tanizaki Prizes)—it is still difficult to find other literature that deals directly with asexual characters. There are, however, multiple works that deal
with discussions of reproduction, some of which are dystopic in nature. Other works by Murata Sayaka, such as “A Clean Marriage” (2014), The Birth Murder (2014), and Dwindling World (2015), deal with mandatory reproduction without the need for sexual desire. In these works, Murata explores the nature of sex and reproduction. However, these novels do not confront asexuality as directly as Convenience Store Woman, Earthlings, Breasts and Eggs, and Our Dreams at Dusk.

The relatively underexplored nature of asexuality means that asexual characters have generally received little to no coverage in contemporary novels. Although young adult, science fiction, and fantasy works from around the globe feature asexual characters, these texts are not considered as literary fiction. The acknowledgement of asexuality within these genres cannot go unmentioned, though. Becky Chambers’ To Be Taught, If Fortunate (2019) represents the potential for asexual representation in genre fiction since it embodies both science fiction and literary fiction. Some other popular books from North America featuring asexual characters include Every Heart a Doorway (2016) by Seanan McGuire, The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy (2018) by Mackenzi Lee, Let’s Talk About Love (2018) by Claire Kann, How to Be a Normal Person (2015) by T.J Klune, Vicious (2013) by V. E. Schwab, Tuf Voyaging (1986) by George R.R. Martin, Tash Hearts Tolstoy (2017) by Kathryn Ormsbee, and Archivist Wasp (2015) by Nicole Kornher-Stace. From the United Kingdom, Radio Silence (2016) and Loveless (2020) by Alice Oseman have established her as a leading figure in the representation of authentic asexual characters in the young adult genre. In New Zealand, Tamsyn Muir writes asexual characters into her Locked Tomb fantasy series, which includes Gideon the Ninth (2019), Harrow the Ninth (2020), Nona the Ninth (2022), and Alecto the Ninth (2023). Australian writer Garth Nix has also included asexuality in his young adult fantasy series The Old Kingdom
(1995). It is quite difficult to find novels or scholarly works that discuss asexuality within non-Anglophone Global literature. Even finding Global Anglophone literature that includes asexual characters is rare.

**Asexuality as an Identity Category**

In his book *Understanding Asexuality*, Anthony F. Bogaert claims that “one of the main definitions of asexuality is a lack of sexual attraction” (Bogaert 12). Therefore, asexuality cannot exist without the implication of sexuality, much like the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Where homosexuality is defined by heterosexuality, asexuality is defined by sexuality. As explained by Julie Sondra Decker in *The Invisible Orientation*, the world is becoming increasingly progressive regarding the proliferation of varying sexual identities, but asexuality is still frequently regarded with derision, dismissal, or erasure altogether (47). As a result, asexuality is commonly overlooked and rendered an invisible queer identity. While Bogaert recognizes that there are no national surveys “assessing an asexual ‘identity,’” he asserts that there is an increasing rate of response by people whose responses—such as “never felt sexual attraction to anyone at all,” “low sexual desire,” and “something else”—mean that they fall into categories that have significant overlap with asexual identities (44–48). Some of these estimates of asexuality’s prevalence range from 1–2.5% of the population of varying western countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Bogaert remarks that the common incredulous attitude with which such statistics are received can be attributed to the “false consensus effect,” the “human tendency to believe that everyone must be just like us” (51). Essentially, Bogaert asserts asexuality as a minority identity category is on the rise, yet the general response to the identity is still tinged with disbelief. Asexuality’s presence in
queer communities becomes erased, and many misconceptions regarding asexuality still linger (Decker 48). Therefore, it is essential to identity asexuality as a multiplicity. There is not one way to be asexual.

In *Celibacies*, Benjamin Kahan asserts that some asexual people consider themselves to be romantic or aromantic, where “romantic asexuals seek coupled or paired relations which are more normative in relation to gender and sexual expectations and closely resemble romantic friendship,” while “aromantic asexuals do not” (145). These distinctions are important to keep in mind when discussing asexuality, as one iteration of asexual identity may be entirely distinct from another: Kawakami’s Natsuko identifies as a romantic asexual while Kamatani’s Someone-san identifies as an aromantic asexual. Similarly, in Angela Chen’s narrative–based book, *ACE What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex*, she explores her own journey as an asexual individual. After initially discovering the term asexuality, Chen realized:

> I had been so perplexed when a high school classmate got pregnant. It was so easy to never have sex, I thought. It was the default state and it took real effort to do anything else. What could have compelled her to take such risks? Our experiences had been fundamentally different but not in an obvious way enough to make me question them.

(14)

Chen later discusses the complicated feelings harbored by different asexual people. Some people feel a desire to be in a relationship and want no sexual contact. Others are the opposite and seek out sexual contact but harbor no romantic feelings. Essentially, Chen emphasizes that the asexuality is a spectrum.
**Queer Identities in Japan**

In Japan specifically, discerning actual rates of asexuality is a difficult task, and one which is becoming even more so. As the prevalence of sexual intercourse and marriage continues to drop in younger populations, the visibility of asexuality as an identity category is continually decreasing (NIPSSR). While there may be an overlap in the percentages between those who identify as asexual and those who wish to abstain from sex due to other reasons, the latter category is much more socially acceptable: As seen in *Convenience Store Woman*, resorting to abstinence due to dedication to one’s job is not viewed as a character trait that needs fixing, while asexuality is considered to be a perverse abnormality that results in an exchange of “uncomfortable glances” (Murata 36). In the worlds of the texts under analysis (which, of course, imitate and critique the societies within which they are situated), asexuality does not constitute a valid identity category; rather, it is pathologized through insistence upon therapy, social pressures, and familial intervention. The presence of characters like Keiko and Natsuko effectively challenges these prejudices.

The pathologization of asexuality then brings into question other queer identities in Japan. In her 2020 essay titled “Introduction: Queer Lives in Contemporary Japan,” Sabine Frühstück maintains that there has been a “proliferation of representations of same-sex sexuality and a substantial increase in the elasticity of gender and sexual identity representations—many of which remain uncommon elsewhere in much of the postindustrial world” within Japanese...

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5 Scholars have discussed the importance of recognizing asexuality as a valid identity category, and argued that this recognition is imperative because “such identification with regard to sex, gender, and intimacy issues is a powerful part of self-expression and may satisfy basic human needs in the modern world” (Bogaert 247).
6 Anthony F. Bogaert also argues against the pathologization of asexuality, claiming that “asexuality should not necessarily be synonymous with a pathological state” because it does not have the identifying factors of other pathological conditions (Bogaert 249).
popular culture (79). Despite these advancements, Japan has not yet legalized same-sex marriages. While they do offer partnership programs in some prefectures, these certificates are not legally binding, and they offer no civil rights to same-sex couples. However, as Frühstück explains, queer identities are becoming increasingly prevalent in media and society. Yet, these mainstream depictions do not necessarily signify widespread healthy attitudes toward such queer identities. These revelations then question the status of asexuality: Is asexuality queer in Japan? In recent years, asexuality is widely considered to be a queer identity. Sarah E.S. Sinwell—author of “Media Representation, Queerness, and Asexual Visibility”—posits that asexuality is queer because it is “nonnormative” and exists in the liminal spaces of identity while questioning “the links between sexuality, sexual attraction, and desire,” and in the process of doing so, it “challenges the meanings of intimacy, romance, sexual acts, and sexual relationships” (162–163). In Japan specifically, where social conformity is essential, identifying as asexual immediately signifies outsider status. The outward refusal to take place in the near–mandatory reproductive apparatus—encouraged most heavily by family, friends, and government–run matchmaking programs—unquestionably denotes queerness.

Discussions of asexuality in society raise questions regarding the role of celibacy. Does being celibate imply asexuality? No, not necessarily. Celibacy in Japan may be practiced for a variety of reasons, not only by those who consider themselves asexual. A survey completed by The Japanese Association for Sex Education found that many Japanese people live sexless lives.

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7 Some scholars question the claims that Japanese society is highly conformist in nature. Tuukka Toivonen, Vinai Norasakkunik, and Yukiko Uchida discuss how younger generations are disproving the characterization of Japan as a “prototypical conformist society” as a result of globalization. They ultimately maintain that “though certain qualifications need to be made, Japan remains a conformist society par excellence where, due central cultural features as well as the coincidence of seniority-based hierarchies (Nakane, 1970) and accelerating demographic aging, conformist pressures remain strong, especially in the labor market sphere” (Toivonen, Norasakkunit, and Uchida).
for a variety of reasons. A significant portion of the responses (~20% and ~5%, respectively) claim they are too “tired from work (仕事で疲れている),” or that there “are things more fun than sex (セックスより楽しいことがある)” (JASE 5). These significant minority populations are not the same as those who identify as asexual, but is it safe to assume that celibacy is not considered queer? Classic definitions of celibacy and asexuality render the two as diametrically opposed: “Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation” (Kahan 151). However, Kahan notes that the gap between the two may be narrowing as some recent scholarship on asexual identity claims that “Asexuals have ‘chosen’ to actively disidentify with sexuality” (152). In what circumstances, then, would celibacy indicate a queer identity? Celibate individuals, while not overtly queer in identity, could be considered queer when they choose not to partake in the socially mandated sexual apparatus for reasons that would be considered distasteful by society. When refusing to conform to sexual standards for reasons of personal health, disability, trauma, or even sexual aversion, celibates occupy a role similar to that of asexuals or other queer members of society, a role that is viewed by the hegemony with derision, pity, and contempt.

**Conformity in Japan – Women and Queer Individuals**

In Robert Frager’s study of conformity and anticonformity in Japan, which has become widely cited in critical discussions, he questions the belief that Japanese citizens “tend to devote themselves completely to one group, and relate their behavior and sense of identity to that group,” and that “and that there is a ‘social nexus’ at the root of most Japanese behavior” (Frager 203). Essentially, Frager remarks that critics usually assume individuality is less prevalent in Japan than it is in some Western, or other Asian countries. For example, he describes how in “the
traditional form of Japanese group decision making … all decisions were made ‘unanimously.’ Individual members would never vote on an issue but would acquiesce to the ‘will of the group’ even if they privately disagreed” (203). In this instance, the will of the individual is assumed to be subdued. However, in his study, he found that “Japanese conformity may be a response to strong social pressures,” and that “the more old-fashioned subjects are the most conformist” (208). His data suggests that older generations are more widely acceptant of senses of collectivism rather than individualism, while the younger generations seem to prefer social independence. More recent discussions of conformity in Japan qualify Frager’s positions. Tuukka Toivonen, Vinai Norasakkunkit, and Yukiko Uchida write that in a society like Japan, “acquiescence to respected protocols, roles, and institutionalized life paths tends to be so important that ‘success’ does not exist independent of such legitimate means, at least for those who subscribe to mainstream values.” These qualifications suggest that a general sense of conformist culture remains prevalent in Japan because the older generations are the ones in power and are dictating social mores. Therefore, being an asexual member of Japanese society implies enduring constant societal pressure to conform to common sexual identity practices.

This sense of conformity is particularly stifling for some women in Japan. Women in Japan are entering the workforce in record numbers: In 2019, “Japan's workforce totaled 67.47 million people, 44.5% of which were women” (Mishima). Even as Japan is becoming more progressive in this regard, women are still encouraged to produce children (since it entirely relies on women), and they are increasingly expected to cultivate both a career and a family. This is most notable in texts like Convenience Store Woman, Earthlings, and Breasts and Eggs: All the women in these novels fabricate excuses as to why they cannot reproduce. Essentially, Japanese society places women in a position where they cannot satisfy everyone. Polemical liberal critics
such as Ishihara Risa argue against the traditional and conservative beliefs that women should stay home and be housewives, often in such a way that implicitly derides the aims and ambitions of women who choose to be housewives:

Full-time housewives do not earn their own keep; they spend more time than necessary on housework, and enjoy housework as their hobby. They arrange their homes as if they were [in] display model rooms and spend half the day leisurely prepping meals … They want better feed [esa] from their husband–masters, so their life’s ambition is for their husbands to climb the corporate ladder … They treat their own children like dress-up dolls, and rather than trying to realize their own dreams, they hoist their dreams onto their children. (Kano 130)

Fundamentally, Kano argues that by attempting to satisfy all aspects of society, women are expected to be perfect mothers while pursuing a successful career of their own. They are nearly obligated to partake in systems of capital and reproductive labor at the expense of their individual wishes. This system characterizes asexual women as cold and unfeeling, and it pressures them to pursue careers considered “worthwhile” to avoid additional ire from society.

Tracing these discussions into the Meiji era (1868–1912), early Japanese feminist movements and groups like Seitō represent some of the origins of feminist literature that can be traced to Murata, Kawakami, and Kamatani’s works. Inspired by the Blue Stocking Society of eighteenth–century England, Seitō was a literary magazine helmed by five women including Hiratsuka Haru Raichō, Yoshiko Yasumochi, Kazuko Mozume, Teiko Kiuchi, and Hatsuko Nakano, many of whom were recent “graduates of the newly founded women’s college” (Reich and Fukuda 284). At one point, five publications by Seitō were banned by the Japanese government because they included erotic and scandalous content, including “a short story
describing somewhat erotically the reminiscences of a woman who had spent the preceding night in an inn with a man” (284). They focused intensely on “social problems” all circulating around the treatment of women in Japanese society (285). Seitō’s influence “later brought about social reform in [sic] behalf of women” (281).

Seitō’s considerable impact can be felt throughout subsequent eras. Hayashi Fumiko—an influential woman writer whose works were highly appealing to “middle-class, family-oriented housewives”—while not an official member of a society like Seitō, wrote about similar problems decades later (286). Hayashi, who published from 1951, still remains incredibly influential with women in Japan, with some women claiming that “Hayashi’s struggles represent those endured by their mothers’ generation” (286). Reich and Fukuda maintain that Hayashi’s works “[evoke] the struggle of the independent woman” in Japan, bolstering her cultural relevance (286).

Hayashi’s impact is present in feminist writers of more recent eras in Japan. Ueno Chizuko, for example, spearheaded Japanese feminist movements during the 1980’s with publications like The Study of the ‘Sexy’ Girl and Reading the Housewife Debates. Her more recent publications, like Nationalism and Gender, still grapple with the treatment of women in Japanese society. Across her canon of work, Ueno has touched on a wide range of subjects including “debates on gender and history with her reflections on gender, nationalism and imperialism” (Mackie 220). While somewhat controversial in nature, Ueno’s influence can still be seen today within current discussions of feminism in Japan and with women writers in general. As mentioned earlier, the paucity of explorations of asexuality in both popular and scholarly writing leaves asexual characters relegated to genre fiction like Young Adult or Science Fiction. While these genres represent asexual characters in varying ways, literary fiction falters. The works of Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yūki, then, engage and reflect the proliferating
discussions of asexual individuals taken up by women and X-gender individuals in recent years (between 2008 and the present).
I.  *Convenience Store Woman* and *Earthlings* – Compulsory Sexuality and Neurotypicality

This chapter will discuss how Sayaka Murata subverts societal expectations for what it means to be a woman in Japan. Her first novel translated into English, *Convenience Store Woman*, depicts the life of Keiko Furukura, a life-long convenience store worker who struggles against constant social and familial calls for conformity. Keiko, a seemingly asexual and neurodivergent individual, is forced to create a façade in which she is perceived as “normal” by her community. Her only refuge is the convenience store to which she has dedicated her entire adulthood. In this convenience store, she finds solace and purpose in her repetitive daily tasks. Japanese society, however, does not accept such eccentric individuals, and Keiko is urged to find both a career and a husband. Throughout this chapter, I will build on the idea that nearly all her works deal with issues regarding the social status of women and their relationship with sexual, labor–related, and reproductive standards. More specifically, asexual and celibate characters are quite common in her writing. Her most recent novel, *Earthlings*, is no exception. This novel follows the life of Natsuki as she ages from adolescence to adulthood, and it outlines her struggles coming to terms with her identity at all stages of her life. I conclude that *Convenience Store Woman* and *Earthlings*, then, showcase the lengths neurodivergent, asexual individuals must go to avoid resentment from the rest of society.

II.  *Breasts and Eggs* – Conformity or Resistance?

This chapter will discuss how Kawakami Mieko, on the other hand, presents a much more down-to-earth depiction of asexuality. While the depictions of asexuality in Murata’s novels verge on radical, Kawakami’s characters in *Breasts and Eggs* are presented in a manner that
would be more widely accepted in Japan. Natsuko is perfectly integrated into society in all aspects except her sexuality. She is even a widely successful author. She keeps the fact that sex repulses her a secret from nearly everyone around her, and her friends just assume that she is not good at finding a partner. Ultimately, I claim that while Murata’s characters grapple with fitting into society altogether, Kawakami tries to determine what it means being a woman and a mother while identifying as asexual.

III. **Our Dreams at Dusk – New Beginnings**

This chapter will argue that Kamatani Yūki’s depictions of asexuality balance out those in Murata and Kawakami’s. *Our Dreams at Dusk* occupies the middle of the spectrum of radicality that is bookended by Murata and Kawakami’s presentations of asexuality. Tinged with magical realism, *Our Dreams at Dusk* circles around Kaname Tasuku, a young boy who joins a LGBTQ discussion lounge after being outed as gay. The leader of the club, Dareka-san (which translates as ‘Someone’), is mysterious, aloof, and asexual. The members of this club occupy a range of queer identities such as the lesbian couple Daichi and Saki, Utsumi (a trans man), and Misora (a gender–questioning individual). In this club, Kaname comes to terms with his identity and discovers what it means to be queer in Japan. I argue that *Our Dreams at Dusk* offers a realistic portrayal of how asexual (and queer) individuals find their place in modern Japanese society.
CHAPTER 1 – _CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN AND EARTHLINGS:_ COMPULSORY SEXUALITY AND NEUROTYPICALITY

_Convenience Store Woman – Asexuality, Neuroatypicality, and Capitalism_

“You’re out of your mind. The village mentality of society will never permit such a creature to exist. It goes against the rules! You’ll just be persecuted by everyone and live a lonely life” (Murata 161). Murata’s presentation of Japan’s preference for collectivism results in heavily restricted expressions of identity. While the acceptance of queer identities is on the rise in Japan, many queer individuals are still not offered the same rights as those who identify as heterosexual and cisgender. Such unequal treatment results in compulsory conformity where citizens act how they are expected to act. If they fail to comply, they will be ostracized by society.

Rachael Hutchinson and Leith Morton write that, “since the 1970s … feminist readings, queer readings, masculinity studies, and so forth have proliferated” in Japan (7). These feminist readings, often by women writers “challenge and problematize the canon of modern literature in Japan” (7). Murata Sayaka exists at the forefront of these challenges since she “use[s] the female body as a powerful metaphor … to grapple with social issues that could be represented in somatic form” (7). For Murata, the social issues with the highest stakes involve those of individuals who do not fit into the confines of the society in which they are situated.

_Womanhood, Asexuality, and the Heterosexual Inclination_

Ayako Kano claims that “the basis of social policy in modern Japan is the assumption that all women are potential wives and mothers (and that all men are potential breadwinners and heads of household)” (Kano 8). However, as noted in the introduction, record numbers of women
enter the workforce and are now expected to both lead a career and raise children. The implication here is that having children is a primary goal for both men and women. In Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” she claims that the institution of heterosexuality is forced upon women as the natural order of life. In Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*, the same notion is confronted. Keiko is socialized in an environment in which “heterosexuality [is] the ‘natural’ emotional and sensual inclination for women” (Rich 652). All of Keiko’s friends and coworkers continually rave about wanting to find a man to marry. These ideas are foreign to Keiko as she has never felt such desires. Since she does not fit the typical picture of female desires, she is “seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived” (652). When in reality, she has never felt deprived. At one point, while listening to her friends urging her to find a man, she thinks to herself, “I’d never experienced sex, and I’d never even had any particular awareness of my own sexuality. I was indifferent to the whole thing and had never really given it any thought. And here was everyone taking it for granted that I must be miserable when I wasn’t” (Murata 37). Keiko realizes what it is to be normal, and she feels she has to adhere to that normality, or she will be seen as an outsider. The compulsory heterosexuality within her surroundings continually reminds her that she is a foreign body that is not accepted.

As discussed in the introduction, the current literature discussing women and their sexualities originates from early feminist movements in Japan. The ideas posited by writers from *Seitō* can be seen in modern discussions of women’s roles in Japan. In Ayako Kano’s *Japanese Feminist Debates*, when discussing the state of feminism in Japan, she writes:

An important and powerful strain of Japanese feminist thought has been highly critical of the family, wifehood, and motherhood. This stems in part from the insight that the
oppression of women can be most persistent and most obscured within the walls of the family and within the dynamics of couples and of parent–child relationships. In this, Japan is not unique. But the forcefulness and persistence of the Japanese critique is notable. (13)

She then frames this within the wider apparatus of the labor system within Japan: “Japanese society’s reliance on women’s unpaid labor has meant that Japanese feminists have had to resist the temptation to merely seek recognition or redistribution of resources for this labor. Instead, they have had to question the whole structure of society resting on this labor” (13). Murata Sayaka’s works, then, outline and represent the debates present within contemporary Japanese society.

Since Keiko is depicted as asexual, it is not only compulsory heterosexuality that ostracizes her but also the sense of compulsory sexuality in general. The sexualizing mindset within her environment places her in a position where she is seen as abnormal for having no sexual desire at all. When asked if she had ever been in love, Keiko forgets to respond with her usual formulated response of “Well, there was someone I liked but I’m not a good judge of men” (36). Her friends then suggest that other sexualities are becoming more normalized, even awkwardly bringing up the prevalence of asexuality in society: “These days you can also be asexual or whatever you like… Like there are young people who just aren’t interested in it all” (37). While outwardly supportive of such sexual identities, their relief is noticeable when Keiko assures them that this is not the case. Even if they are outwardly accepting, they have been acculturated in a society that dissuades queer identification, and they feel relieved when they are not forced to directly confront such a taboo topic.
However, in her book *The Invisible Orientation*, Julie Sondra Decker insists that “Asexuality isn’t a complex…a sickness… [or] an automatic sign of trauma” (3). Instead, asexuality is “usually defined as the experience of not being sexually attracted to others” (3). Keiko’s friends fail to relate to the concept of asexuality altogether and pity those who identify as asexual, signifying that they view asexuality in a pathological manner. Keiko does not suffer due to her asexuality. She is not in a loveless phase of her life and simply unable to find a suitable partner. Despite this, Japanese society seemingly does not view her sexuality as a healthy or mature state. Her friends believe that “sex is natural” since they have been socialized in a society that upholds “sex … as a normal and necessary part of all people’s lives – especially if it’s heterosexual, potentially procreative sex” (9). Her peers harbor the misconception that asexual people are not “whole or healthy people if they lack sex, sexual attraction, or sexual inclination in their lives” (9). While Keiko does not outwardly identify herself as asexual toward her friends, they can still sense that she does not entirely fulfill her societal expectations and that, as a result, she must be horribly unhappy.

*Asexuality in Murata’s Japan*

Being an asexual woman comes with particular struggles. Later in the novel, Keiko’s friends are becoming increasingly persistent with their insistence that she find a mate. They imply that she must be feeling some sort of urgency and claim, “You can’t go on like this, and deep down you must be getting desperate, no? Once you get past a certain age it’ll be too late” (Murata 79). After showing considerable confusion at what they meant, Keiko thinks, “The next thing I knew, just like that time in elementary school, they all turned their backs on me and started edging away, staring curiously at me over their shoulders as though contemplating some
ghastly life form” (81). Her friends cannot fathom that she feels no pressing need to have children. Essentially, society casts out those with no intention to reproduce. Her asexuality is too abnormal for her friends to understand; for them, it is as if the defining trait of womanhood is reproduction. These feelings are acts of sexual essentialism, which—as Heather Mitchell and Gwen Hunnicutt define it—is the “assumption that sexual desire and sexual activity are biologically determined” (508). Since she is a woman of child-bearing age, she must want to have children and start a family. Keiko’s characterization suggests the existence of a compulsory reproductive apparatus within Japanese society. As birth rates are dropping, the social and governmental pressures to reproduce are becoming increasingly present in Japanese life. At times, Keiko is encouraged to sign up for government matchmaking programs, which have real-world equivalents in Japan. Asexual lives are rejected from all angles. They are alien lives that are either forced to acquiesce to societal standards, or they are deemed unfit for participation in society.

Being an asexual man in Japan, then, also comes with its share of unique struggles. Asexual men are “subjected to more mockery and ridicule due to their lack of desire for sex” because many people assume that all “men are expected to want sex” (Mitchell and Hunnicutt 514). Men, like women, are expected to partake in the reproductive apparatus. Instead of being deemed barren or dry, however, they are seen as useless and are emasculated. Shiraha, a man in a similar situation to Keiko, angrily explains that “When you’re a man, it’s all ‘go to work’ and ‘get married.’ And once you’re married, then it’s ‘earn more’ and ‘have children’! You’re a slave to the village … Even my testicles are the property of the village! Just by having no sexual experience they treat you as though you’re wasting your semen” (Murata 107). Like the experience of being an asexual woman, being an asexual man means weathering constant
societal pressure to produce offspring. If an asexual man does not reproduce, then they are of no use to society, and if they do not want sex altogether, they are seen as a bizarre iteration of a man.

Like homosexuals—for whom the “gay closet is not a feature only of [their] lives” and “is still the fundamental feature of social life,” as described in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Epistemology of the Closet”—Keiko and Shiraha are forced to create a façade of heterosexuality and must keep their true identities a secret from the outside world (68). When Keiko and Shiraha move in together to avoid the ire of their friends and family, they form a mutual—but not romantic—bond over their shared mistreatment by society. While their relationship is subversive in nature, it still represents the lengths to which asexual individuals must go to hide from society. When living together, Shiraha—since he is extremely rude and reclusive—initially sleeps in Keiko’s closet. The two of them only achieve social “normality” after they have devised the plan to live together to pass as respectable members of society. Even then, Keiko’s friends and family continually question her intentions and effectively restrict any semblance of privacy in her life.

**Neurodivergence, Invisibility, and Queer Experiences**

In Robert McRuer’s “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” he explores the consequences of being disabled amid a society in which able-bodiedness is mandatory: “Because able-bodiedness is considered a ‘normal’ requirement for life in the industrial capitalist system, having an ‘able body’ becomes compulsory. Like heterosexuality, able-bodied identity is defined by its repeated performances” (353). Then, neurotypicality—or, those whose brain functions do not represent what is considered “normal”—is akin to disability,
at least in its treatment by society. Keiko is not only subjected to compulsory sexuality throughout the novel but also to a sort of compulsory neurotypicality in which neurodivergent individuals are not tolerated and are expected to conform to idealized notions of consciousness. From a young age, Keiko was viewed as different than normal, and her parents always felt she needed fixing. Because of her treatment as a child, she feels that “The normal world has no room for exceptions and always quietly eliminates foreign objects,” and she knows that “Anyone who is lacking is quietly disposed of” (Murata 80). The Japanese society depicted in Murata’s novel is unforgiving for those who do not fit a specific neurotypical mold. After watching her friends turn her back on her, she thinks to herself, “So *that’s* why I need to be cured. Unless I’m cured, normal people will expurgate me” (81). Keiko’s experiences mirror those outlined by McRuer, that “compulsory heterosexuality’s casting of some identities as alternatives Ironically buttresses the ideological notion that dominant identities are not really alternatives but rather the natural order of things” (354). It stands then that being neurodivergent is not an alternative to being neurotypical because, in reality, there is no alternative to being neurotypical in a world designed solely for those individuals.

Being a neurodivergent individual—as Keiko is—is not seen as normal and generally elicits attempts to fix their “disability.” This belief that neurodivergence is a disability that needs fixing or curing is commonplace. However, this is not the case. When discussing issues of audism, H–Dirksen L. Bauman explains that deaf people can form their own communities and may not want “fixes” such as cochlear implants. In a similar vein, neurodivergent people also do not always want to be “fixed.” Like how “audism is homologous with colonialism, including ‘the physical subjugation of a disempowered people, the imposition of alien language and mores, and the regulation of education on behalf of the colonizers goals,’” compulsory neurotypicality is
also akin to the colonization of the neurodivergent mind at the hands of the neurotypical majority (835). Neurodivergent individuals are often physically subjugated when they are placed in mental health facilities against their will; they are forced to assimilate into a neurotypical culture in which their own mores are disavowed; they are socialized and educated within a system that does not take their varying neurological states into account. Keiko’s own sister places such impetuses upon her, even desperately asking, “Will you ever be cured Keiko…?” She continues, remarking that “I simply can’t take it anymore. How can we make you normal? How much longer must I put up with this?” (Murata 131). Her sister does not even begin to realize Keiko’s struggles, and instead, she frames the situation so that she is pitied. Keiko herself may not even realize the extent of her differences. Yet, she is continually begged to go to different counselors, when in reality, “[she doesn’t] even know what it is [she] need[s] to be cured of” (131). If Keiko does not see anything wrong with herself, then she should not be forcibly “cured.”

Another struggle of neurodivergent individuals is their inherent invisibility. Because it is not a disability that can be easily discerned, neurotypical individuals mandate their likeness upon individuals whose neurodivergence is often unnoticeable without hesitation. Joseph Straus defines a disability as follows:

[A disability is] [A]ny culturally stigmatized bodily difference. By “difference,” I refer to deviation from whatever is understood as normal at a particular time and place. As with gender, race, and sexual orientation, the construction of disability involves the opposition of a normative standard (e.g., male, white, straight, able-bodied) and a deviant Other (e.g., female, non-white, gay, disabled). Indeed, femaleness, non-whiteness, and gayness can all be understood as forms of disability ... Disability is the "master trope of human
disqualification,” the fundamental form of deviant Otherness of which gender, race, and sexual orientation are specific manifestations. (Straus 9–10) (Bassler)

Keiko, then, fits this definition perfectly as she is neurodivergent in a world that expects women to lead a certain lifestyle, a lifestyle that is entirely incongruent with her sexuality and neurological condition. Bassler builds upon Straus’s definition of disability by insisting that “anything outside of society’s perceived norm can be construed as disability, or a supernatural ability, which is nevertheless abnormal.” She continues by claiming that “Mental illnesses … then pose a peculiar problem, as they do not mark the body, and yet can render it incapable or abnormal, due to a condition or extra-normal experience, or function, of the mind” (Bassler).

Keiko is seen as abnormal by her family, friends, coworkers, and society as a whole. While in the store, she frequently emulates the voice and tone of her coworkers so that she does not stand out and sound disinterested. After the night shift workers did not fulfill their duties, she hears her coworkers complaining and is forced to improvise: “Hearing the two of them speak with such feeling, I felt a twinge of anxiety. There wasn’t a trace of anger in my body. I stole a glance at Sugawara and tried to mimic her facial muscles as she spoke, the same way I did in training, and parroted … I can’t believe he’d do that knowing how short-staffed we are” (Murata 28). Keiko feels the compulsion to emulate the mannerisms of her neurotypical coworkers so that they do not view her as abnormal or as an outsider. Her environment does not permit her to exist as her natural self. The omnipresent sense of compulsory neurotypicality mandates that those who are neurodivergent must manufacture and reproduce a socially acceptable version of themselves.

As Cynthia Barounis explains in her essay on compulsory sexuality and asexual/crip resistance, asexuality and disability can be viewed as “political apathy, civic irresponsibility, or even treason” (188). Those who identify as both asexual and neurodivergent experience a cross-
section of identity–related oppressions that magnify both their invisibility in society and the sense of compulsory conformity that they feel. For Keiko—and even her fake boyfriend Shiraha—avoiding procreation is an act of treason since they are actively not contributing to society. Everyone within their social circles continuously attempts to convince them to partake in society and fulfill their expectations. They are oppressed on multiple levels: sexuality and neurological condition. This dual oppression mimics the ideas posited in Cathy J. Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” when she calls for the “recognition that multiple systems of oppression are in operation and that these systems use institutionalized categories and identities to regulate and socialize” (458). Indeed, where intersectionality exists, so too does intersectional oppression. Keiko’s identity is oppressed as that of an asexual, a neurodivergent individual, and as a woman in general.

Barounis continues her exploration of asexuality and disability by discussing the shortcomings of both queer theorists and disability scholars:

If queer theorists have been slow to engage the insights of disability studies, disability scholars, in attempting to refute the “imposition of asexuality” onto disabled bodies, have been similarly slow to form alliances with asexual scholars and activists. In forcefully de-linking physical disability from asexual stigma … scholars [miss] an opportunity to engage with and affirm asexual identifications and practices. (178)

Keiko’s invisible neurodivergence is translated to that of a physical disability. Her friends assume that something must be wrong with her since she is not actively seeking a partner. However, she is unwilling (and unable) to disclose her neurological condition, so her sister provides her with the lie that she is “just not strong” and has a “chronic condition,” ultimately preventing her from finding a suitable mate (Murata 38). Barounis insists that this association
with physical disability and a life without sex is becoming increasingly common, and it is a harmful association. The assumption—and subsequent confirmation that—Keiko does not partake in sexual practices due to a physical disability is detrimental to multiple effects. On the one hand, it strengthens societal assumptions that those who are disabled are asexual. On the other, it erases the existence of disabled individuals who genuinely identify as asexual, all while simultaneously negating the existence of asexual, neurodivergent individuals. Because of these societal stereotypes, asexuality is not “explored or defended as a legitimate way of life for disabled or non-disabled individuals” (178). Her friends’ immediate acceptance of her excuse shows that these ideas are substantially stratified throughout societal understandings of disabilities and sexualities. This is not Keiko’s fault; however, it is the fault of a society that fails to recognize the multiplicities of both disability and sexuality.

*Keiko and the Convenience Store*

In Marx’s “The Working Day,” he describes how the capitalist system spends its human capital hastily, claiming that the system “produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour–power itself. It extends the labourer’s time of production during a given period by shortening his actual lifetime” (389). The implications of the intersection of Keiko’s asexuality and neurodivergence are fully realized under the capitalistic apparatus to which she belongs. The intersections of her identity are meaningless in the unfeeling capitalistic presence in the Japanese work culture in which she is situated. To society, she is just another worker. Keiko is aware of this, as she notes that “once we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality – all simply workers” (Murata 38). She even exclaims, “Shiraha, we’re in the twenty-first century! Here in the convenience store we’re not men and women. We’re all store
workers” (51). Interestingly, the title of the book—*Convenience Store Woman* (*コンビニ人間*)—is not a direct translation from Japanese. The direct translation is more akin to *Convenience Store Human*, further highlighting the disinterested eye of capitalism. This unsympathetic work culture thrives off of the expected life-long dedication of a worker to their job or career. Keiko is no exception, and she is aware of this fact: “When you do physical labor, you end up being no longer useful when your physical condition deteriorates. However hard I work, however dependable I am, when my body grows old then no doubt I too will be a worn-out part, ready to be replaced, no longer of any use to the convenience store” (Murata 83). Her identity is irrelevant within the larger system of capitalism; it will utilize her labor regardless of how she identifies. In this way, capitalism erases all identity. Keiko’s already invisible sexuality and disability become utterly nonexistent within the eyes of the convenience store. Capitalism unerringly homogenizes populations with the goal of producing the ideal laborer, laborers that accept they “[exist] only in the service of the convenience store” (47). Essentially, Keiko’s entire life is dedicated to the betterment of herself as a worker.

Even when Keiko is not actively working in the convenience store, she is living in service of it. She selflessly (as she views it) ensures the well-being of her body so that she is able to perform flawlessly as a cog in the machine of the convenience store. This mirrors the ideas posited by Marx:

> The working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of repose without which labour–power absolutely refuses its services again. Hence it is self-evident that the labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour-power, that therefore

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8 Critics like Yoshida Akiko go as far to write that “singlehood in Japan is caused partly by this limitation in chances for romance, a consequence of the tension between existing power structures and individual desires” (Yoshida 215).
all his disposable time is by nature and law labour–time, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free-play of his bodily and mental activity, even the rest time of Sunday. (Marx 388)

After Shiraha convinces her to leave the convenience store, she does not know what to do with herself. She thinks, “normally I would be concerned about work the next day and would be sure to care for my physical needs with food and sleep. My body had belonged to the convenience store even when I wasn’t at work. Having been liberated from this, I didn’t know what to do with myself” (Murata 144). Keiko’s life and body are dedicated to the store. The rhythm of the convenience store has been drilled into her consciousness. She has watched workers come and go, and she knows that if she fails to be productive, the system will eliminate her. As she bluntly puts it, the convenience store and “the normal world [have] no room for exceptions and always quietly [eliminate] foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of” (80). She always eats healthy and gets ample sleep so that her body will be able to endure the physical expectations of her job. Her mind and body are entirely subjugated to the will of the convenience store to which she has pledged herself.

This capitalist apparatus takes advantage of Keiko’s neurodiversity and molds her into the ideal worker, one without any hesitation to devote herself entirely to the convenience store. From the moment she begins working there as a young woman, she is made aware that “a convenience store is a forcibly normalized environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated” (60). She knows that if she acts out of line or fails to emulate the habits and personalities of her coworkers, she will be seen as abnormal foreign matter. Shiraha fails to—and even refuses to—adapt to the expectations of the store, and he is fired almost immediately:
“And so one of the cells of the store was again being replaced” (72). Her neurodivergence is exploited by the convenience store to the extent that she cannot fathom an existence without it. After giving in to her desires to be back at the store, she proudly remarks, “I realize now … More than a person, I’m a convenience store worker. Even if that means I’m abnormal and can’t make a living and drop down dead, I can’t escape that fact. My very cells exist for the convenience store” (Murata 161). She accepts her abnormality and highlights how the convenience store essentially acts as a coping mechanism for her. In this way, she is simultaneously imprisoned and set free by the convenience store she loves dearly.
Earthlings – Asexualities, Celibacies, and other “Oddities”

Nearly all Murata Sayaka’s works deal with issues regarding the social status of women and their relationship with sexual, laboral, and reproductive standards. More specifically, asexual and celibate characters commonly populate her writing. Her recent publications, however, have become hyper-fixated on the plight of asexual individuals within Japanese society. Earthlings is no exception. This novel follows the life of Natsuki as she ages from adolescence to adulthood. During her childhood, Natsuki and her cousin, Yuu, fall in love over their bonding time (and mutual acceptance that they are both aliens) at their grandparents’ house in Akishina (before they are old enough to know the implications of such a relationship). Due to increasingly escalating sexual assaults at the hand of her private tutor, Natsuki begs Yuu to have sex with her before she is “ruined” by her rapist. They are caught, and their lives are irrevocably altered: Their family separates them indefinitely. Later, in an out-of-body experience tinged with childhood imagination, Natsuki murders her rapist, but she does not remember the event at all. The horrors she experiences during her childhood remain with her through adulthood, as she still cannot taste food or hear anything out of one ear (both places she was violated by her tutor). In her adulthood, Natsuki meets an asexual man online, Tomoya, and they get married to avoid mounting familial criticism. The two are essentially roommates and share no physical or emotional bond. After hearing about her childhood memories at Akishina, Tomoya is enthralled and wants to visit to escape the social pressures surrounding them. While there, Natsuki and Tomoya must stay with Yuu, much to their family’s chagrin. In Akishina, Natsuki and Tomoya help Yuu to see their perspective on the world, one that rejects “The Factory,” a societal machine that results in continual reproduction. Together, they all refuse to reintegrate into society, and they re-classify themselves as aliens, ultimately resulting in a surreal scene in which they begin to consume each
other and an old couple who had earlier tried to kill them after running out of food due to a blizzard. The next morning, the three of them revel in the horror of their rescue party as they boldly claim that all Earthlings will eventually become aliens like them.

_Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu: Cultural Outsiders_

In post-war Japan, women are expected “to fulfill increasingly demanding and complex duties of modern and rational household management, overseeing family finances, maintaining the family’s physical and psychological health, and supervising children’s education” (Yoda 874). Since early adolescence, Natsuki is identified as an outsider within her culture. She does not fully accept the “natural order of things” and realizes that her “town is a factory for the production of human babies. … The nests are lined up neatly in rows, and each contains a breeding pair of male and female humans and their babies” (Murata 35). She understands that her role in society is to grow up, find a husband, and make babies with him. Even as a young child she recognizes that “Once shipped out, male and female humans are trained how to take food back to their own nests. They become society’s tools, receive money from other humans, and purchase food. Eventually these young humans also form breeding pairs, coop themselves up in new nests, and manufacture more babies” (35–36). Natsuki is painfully aware of how she cannot meet society’s expectations for her.

Like the situation of homosexuals—for whom the “gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people” and “is still the fundamental feature of social life,” as noted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Epistemology of the Closet”—Natuski (and Tomoya) must keep their identities a secret from their families and society as a whole (68). Within such a society, an asexual woman would be deemed useless since her “womb [as] a factory component” would prove to be
unproductive (Murata 36). After the traumas of her childhood, Natsuki is incapable of fulfilling society’s mandates, and she is forced to hide her existence as an improper factory member. Their existence as asexual members of society is stifled by the sexed world. They are forced to live in the closet, so to speak, and are assumed to be sexual beings by their peers.

Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu’s eventual self-classification as aliens (more specifically, Popinpobopians, an alien race from a distant planet) further represents their closeted status. Much like homosexuals throughout history, they are forced to partake in social, romantic, and sexual activities that are incongruous with their actual, hidden identities. As Natsuki remarks,

Everyone believed in the Factory. Everyone was brainwashed by the Factory and did as they were told. They all used their reproductive organs for the Factory and did their jobs for the sake of the Factory. My husband and I were people they’d failed to brainwash, and anyone who remained unbrainwashed had to keep up an act in order to avoid being eliminated by the Factory. (106)

Their lives and livelihoods were at risk if they did not hide their true identities. Although they do not appear outwardly queer or asexual, they run similar risks to other queer members of society and face ostracization, forced therapy, familial intervention, or even arranged marriages if they fail to comply with societal standards.

*Variable Asexuality and Queer Spaces*

The presentation of asexuality in *Earthlings* is variable. For Natsuki, her asexuality is left vague. Her childhood is defined by sex: her act of love with her cousin and her rape at the hands of her tutor. Her reasoning behind never engaging in romantic or physical relationships during adulthood is left unexplored, and she never outright defines herself as asexual. Her life suggests
the possibility that asexuality, for her specifically, is a coping mechanism for the pain and suffering of her adolescence. Tomoya, on the other hand, is explicitly described as asexual on the dust jacket. However, in the novel, Natsuki describes him as heterosexual with certain caveats: “My husband was heterosexual, but he’d had to bathe together with his mother until the age of fifteen and simply couldn’t handle a real woman’s body. He did have sexual appetites but he could satisfy them with fiction and wanted to avoid seeing female flesh as much as possible” (104). For Tomoya, asexuality seems to be the label that most closely aligns with his identity; he cannot have—and does not want—sexual contact. Natsuki later explains, “It wasn’t that my husband had no interest in sex. Instead he thought it wasn’t something to do but rather something to observe. He enjoyed watching, but he was apparently disgusted by the notion of touching or being touched by someone who was discharging fluid” (106). These characterizations suggest the existence of a spectrum within asexuality. Asexuality, then, in Murata’s world can be an umbrella term for many different identities. Murata’s characters seem to imply that asexuality is the base state of existence, and everyone else has just been acculturated into a sexualized society for the ultimate purpose of reproduction. In the minds of the characters, there is nothing inherently wrong with their identities. Instead, they believe that everyone else has been sold the lie of having innate sexual desires. Tomoya professes the radical notion that “Deep down everyone hates work and sex,” and that “they’re just hypnotized into thinking that they’re great” (106). Tomoya refuses to partake in the sexual apparatuses created by society and ignores any sexual urges he might have. In this way, Tomoya blurs the lines between asexuality, aromanticity, and celibacy.

In Jack Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place*, he introduces the idea of queer spaces and queer temporalities. He writes that queer spaces “develop according to other logics of
location, movement, and identification” (1). He insists that these queer spaces are crucial in analyzing and “assessing political and cultural change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (4). *Earthlings* also suggests the possibility and viability of queer spaces. Natsuki and Tomoya meet on Surinuke dot com (擦抜け), a website where “people seeking to evade society’s gaze for some reason, such as marriage, suicide, or debts, could appeal for information or find collaborators” (103). The name itself means “to slip through, or to make one’s way through quickly.” It can also mean “escape, either physically or mentally.” This mirrors the experiences and desires of queer life. Many queer members of society exist in a liminal state where they are simultaneously highly visible and invisible. Therefore, Surinuke dot com acts as a place where their needs and desires can be met, free from the scrutiny of the hegemonic, sexualizing institutions present in their society. This website is not entirely fictional; there are ones just like it that have become increasingly popular in modern Japan. Fictitious partnerships like Natsuki and Tomoya’s are also on the rise, aided by the proliferation of such websites. Tomoya’s advertisement, save for the asexual aspects, is markedly representative of the experience for many queer Japanese citizens:

Thirty–year–old male, Tokyo resident, urgently seeks marriage partner to escape family surveillance. Businesslike arrangement with all housework shared, separate finances, and separate bedrooms preferred. Absolutely no sexual activity, and preferably no physical contact beyond a handshake. Someone who refrains from showing bare skin in shared spaces preferred. (103)

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9 In Japan specifically, many queer spaces are essential in providing safe spaces for queer individuals: “Ni-chôme (as the district is affectionately known) has become especially central to Japan’s gay male culture, with its bar scene emerging as crucial to facilitating intimate interactions between members of Japan’s still-stigmatised gay community” (Baudinette).
They have to resort to using queer spaces to find solidarity. A survey regarding queer lives in contemporary Japan found that,

Almost 40 percent of respondents said that, indeed, discriminatory language was used for non-heteronormative individuals; more than 20 percent of respondents listed how such was used, including ‘staring and marginalizing,’ ‘bullying at school or work,’ and ‘ignorant behavior at school or work.’ And yet, 26 percent said they were not sure any such discrimination existed at all. (Frühstück 81)

The 26 percent of respondents who claimed discrimination against queer lives did not exist represents a sizable portion of the population. This data necessitates the existence of such digital safe spaces for queer individuals. Surinuke dot com, then, acts as a safe space where people with queer identities can communicate and collaborate.

Within the world of *Earthlings*, Japanese society is depicted as harboring views that make sexuality mandatory. The Factory, as Natsuki and Tomoya name it, is similar to the notions presented by Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In Rich’s piece, she explains how society has manufactured the male control of women through notions of inherent heterosexuality. Like an asexual existence, “Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (Rich 649). Asexual existence subverts the compulsory sexuality of Japanese society in which one must marry, reproduce, and become a productive member of the community. Again, like a lesbian existence, being asexual in Japan is an act of “nay-saying to patriarchy” and “an act of resistance” (649). Their identities do not contribute to society in the expected manner; thus, they are vehemently rejected altogether and forced to comply to society’s prescribed identities.
In addition to digital safe spaces, *Earthlings* also suggests the possibility of queer utopias free from the compulsory sexuality and societal productivity of Japanese society. To avoid the compulsory sexuality surrounding them, Natsuki and Tomoya flee to her grandparents’ old house in Akishina. This house in the countryside acts as a queer utopia for them, a place where they are free to practice their alien identities away from the scrutiny of their families and the “observation by the Factory” where “anyone who didn’t manufacture new life – or wasn’t obviously trying to – came under gentle pressure,” and “couples that hadn’t manufactured new life had to demonstrate their contributions to the Factory through their work” (Murata 106). Here in Akishina, Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu act out their true identities, free from the judgmental gaze of the factory:

‘If the town we live in is a Baby factory,’ my husband said seriously, ‘this place is an abandoned factory, isn’t it? A factory where nothing gets produced anymore. And where nobody expects to make anything either. I feel so much more comfortable here. I wish I could live the rest of my life here as a discarded worn-out component.’

(156)

The remote mountaintop house represents freedom for the trio of outcasts. They can embrace their invisibility. Rather than being forced to censor their identities, they choose to be invisible here. Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu only allow their true selves to blossom when isolated from the harmful, ever-present eye of the factory.

Much like the hopeful notions of utopia presented in José Esteban Muñoz’s “Feeling Utopia,” the house in Akishina acts as an embodiment of his desire for a queer utopia that thinks beyond the moment. The house situates itself as a “temporal arrangement in which the past is a
field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (16). The house in Akishina represents a safe haven for outcasts. All throughout her life, Natsuki senses the house’s special powers. The house, “deep in the mountains of Akishina” harbors mystical forces, making it seem like “fragments of night linger even at midday” (Murata 1). Whenever her family visits the house, they must partake in a long and arduous journey through the twisting mountain roads. On these trips, her sister falls violently carsick, but Natsuki remains unphased. Natuski traverses to this location without any trouble, while her sister, who has been fully acculturated to the factory, resists the voyage and succumbs to illness every time. The house is not a utopia for all; instead, it is a utopia for those who need it: those who embody and identify with queer identities. It allows Natsuki to live out her fantasies of being invisible and nonhuman. While resting in the evening, Natsuki notes that “Nonhuman lives jostled against the window” and that “The presence of nonhuman creatures was stronger at night” (26). After reflecting on her environment, Natsuki remarks, “Strangely enough, though I was a little scared, I felt as though my own feral cells were throbbing” (26). From a young age, Natsuki realizes the utopic potentiality of her surroundings. The house—which feels like “a parallel world”—acts as a place where Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu can reconceptualize their past while identifying themselves as aliens in the present, all with the goal of spreading Popinpobopian life on Earth (122). The shift from concrete reality to abstract surrealism within the house in Akishina emblematizes their queer rejection of the compulsory sexuality and hegemonic ideals present in Japanese society.

While horrifyingly surreal and grotesque in execution, Earthlings represents a subversive narrative that works against the naturalized sexual existence of human beings. Earthlings does not cower in the face of the rampant sexualization of society. Instead, it offers a profoundly bizarre account of nonconformity that represents the refusal of people with “unacceptably” queer
identities to remain invisible any longer. The novel’s closing lines encapsulate this refusal:

“Holding hands, shoulder to shoulder, and engulfed in light, we slowly stepped out onto the Earthling’s planet. As if in concert with us, the cries of Earthlings rang out to the far corners of the planet, setting the forests trembling” (247). They will no longer accept their forced conformity and concealment.
CHAPTER 2 – BREASTS AND EGGS: CONFORMITY OR RESISTANCE?

“Sex was so painful for me that I never wanted to do it again. Sex was the reason we broke up, even though I loved him as much as I did” (178–179).

Breasts and Eggs, by Kawakami Mieko, follows the lives of Natsuko and her family members. Book One chronicles a summer when Natsuko’s sister (Makiko) and her niece (Midoriko) visit her in Tokyo. While there, Makiko is enthralled with the idea of getting her breasts augmented, since she feels it would make her more desirable for customers in her bar. Midoriko thinks breast augmentation is abhorrent and refuses to speak to Makiko, only communicating via responses on her memo pad. All three women contend with questions of what it means embody the role of women in society. Unlike Makiko, Midoriko wishes she could stop her breasts from growing and shows no interest in the realm of sexual desires. Natsuko, too, reveals that she lacks sexual desire entirely. Throughout their time together, they grapple with their shared traumatic pasts and attempt to reconcile and repair their relationships. Book One ends with Makiko and Midoriko returning to Osaka.

Book Two begins eight years after Book One ends and sees Natsuko writing her second novel following the success of her first. Unlike Book One, Book Two mainly focuses on Natsuko. Where Book One revolves around the topic of breasts, Book Two discusses pregnancy. In this section, Natsuko details the disgust she feels by all sexual activity. She is able to love and pursue romantic relationships, but sexual acts horrify and traumatize her. Even with her aversion to sex, she still wants a child. Artificial insemination and adoption are both difficult in Japan for single women. Because of this, Natsuko seeks alternate methods of artificial insemination. Despite her best efforts, she is unable to find a viable means of impregnation without sexual contact.
Eventually, she attends a Children of Donors meeting and meets Aizawa, a man who is unaware of his father’s identity because he was an anonymous sperm donor. Natsuko and Aizawa fall in love over time. Natsuko, now dissuaded by the traumas held by the members of Children of Donors, decides to use Aizawa to conceive. Ultimately, they fabricate a lie in which they claim they have been unsuccessful in conception and receive the doctor’s approval to move forward with artificial insemination.

Unlike *Convenience Store Woman* and *Earthlings*, *Breasts and Eggs* presents a less radical and more measured approach to the integration of asexual individuals within Japanese society. In *Breasts and Eggs*, Kawakami Mieko presents a fluid representation of asexuality. For Kawakami, asexuality is not an inherently alienating trait. Instead, asexuality is simply an identity category that can somewhat fit into society. Being asexual in Kawakami’s Japan still comes with struggles, but Natsuko fits into society with great effort. She leads a successful career as a writer and eventually succeeds in becoming a single mother. Ultimately, asexuality is a valid identity category for individuals in Kawakami’s *Breasts and Eggs*; however, that identity category is still tinged with prejudice. Where Murata’s characters utilize queer spaces to escape prejudice, Kawakami’s characters gain refuge by employing and embracing queer temporalities.

**Asexual Women, Sexualized Bodies, and the Reproductive Imperative**

“Once you get your period, that means your body can fertilize sperm. And that means you can get pregnant. And then we get more people, thinking and eating and filling up the world. It’s overwhelming. I get a little depressed just thinking about it. I’ll never do it. I’ll never have children. Ever. –Midoriko” (Kawakami 45).
In Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, he outlines and explains the existence of a heteronormative temporality. These temporalities “chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation,” and they “create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (Halberstam 4). Queer lives exist in opposition to these temporalities since they do not necessarily prioritize life’s heteronormative milestones like childbirth and marriage. Such heteronormative temporalities revolve around a reproductive timeline which “values, wealth, goods, and morals” that are “passed through family ties from one generation to the next” (5). Contrasting a heteronormative temporality, a queer chronology rejects the typical heteronormative “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Embracing these queer, nonnormative temporalities allows for the proliferation of different values, meanings, and consciousnesses free from the oppressive ideals of a heteronormative outlook.

From the beginning of the novel, Kawakami clearly outlines the sexualizing society of modern-day Japan. From the moment women are born, society traps them in a heteronormative chronology. In her journal, Midoriko discusses her fears of getting her period, stating:

> When it happens, I’m not going to tell Mom. I’ll hide it. In most books where a girl ‘gets’ her first period (they always make it sound like it’s some kind of present), there’s always this scene where the girl is like, great, now I can be a mom, thanks for having me, Mom, I’m a part of the circle of life now, I’m so happy to be alive. The first time I saw a story like that, I couldn’t believe my eyes. (Kawakami 44)

From a young age, Midoriko notices the cycle into which she has been acculturated. Her fertility is celebrated, and she is assumed a sexualized body capable of—and desiring—reproduction. This
type of society normalizes both heterosexuality, sex, and reproduction. Essentially, women in Kawakami’s Japan live in a heteronormative chronology that mitigates and erases the presence of nonnormative individuals. A heteronormative temporality places great emphasis on multiple major milestones: “Heteronormative life narratives are marked by a particular set of celebrated milestones, which include birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, reproduction, parenthood, anniversaries, retirement, and death” (McCann and Monaghan 215). Jack Halberstam claims that queer individuals can disrupt these heteronormative temporalities since “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2).

Midoriko, although she does not identify as queer, embodies queerness and asexuality by rejecting the expected, heteronormative chronology of women’s lives in Japan.

Childbirth acts as the most prominent marker of life experience that fills Midoriko with dread. She continues in her journal:

The other day at school, between classes, I forget who, but someone was saying ‘I was born a girl, so yeah I definitely want to have a baby of my own eventually’. Where does that come from, though. Does blood coming out of your body make you a woman? A potential mother? What makes that so great anyway? Does anyone really believe that?

Just because they make us read these stupid books doesn’t make it true. I hate it so much.

(Kawakami 44)

Mirroring the thoughts of Halberstam, Midoriko despises that “The time of reproduction is rules by a biological clock for women” (Halberstam 5). She feels she is being positioned against her will in a sexualized hierarchy in which reproduction is mandated. The fact that she will
experience puberty and become able to reproduce disgusts her, and she wholly rejects the social expectations of reproduction surrounding her. She stands against the sexualizing, heteronormative chronology present in Japanese society. Midoriko concludes her journal entry by affirming her outlook on childbirth and reproduction: “I’ll never do it. I’ll never have children. Ever” (Kawakami 45). Midoriko’s views suggest the necessity of a queer temporality within Japanese culture. Such a queer temporality would free women like Midoriko from the sexualizing, reproductive imperative present.

Midoriko’s mother, Makiko, feels the same imperative of having sexual appeal. However, her livelihood depends on it. Unlike Midoriko and Natsuko, Makiko embraces the sexualizing atmosphere present. Since she works as a waitress in a bar, she relies on her sexual appeal to entice customers to spend more money. As she ages, she feels the need to rely on surgeries like breast augmentation to remain desirable to her customers and society. Midoriko despises her mother’s choice, writing that “It’s gross, I don’t really understand it. It’s so, so, so, so, so, so, gross. So gross…What the hell is wrong with her?” (93). Midoriko cannot comprehend her mother’s desires for breast augmentation solely to seem appealing and desirable. To Midoriko, Makiko’s wishes to lengthen her perceived reproductive window by amplifying her breasts is repulsive; it represents the normalization and expansion of the sexualizing, reproductive norms in Kawakami’s Japan.

Natsuko, too, feels the effects of society’s sexualizing gaze. Even as a more explicitly self-identifying asexual individual, she is constantly comparing her own body to the bodies of other women. While observing other women’s bodies in a bathhouse, she thinks “I guess on some level I thought that someday all those parts of me would fill out, too, and I would have a body just like them. Except that never happened. My monolithic expectation of what a woman’s
body was supposed to look like had no bearing on what actually happened to my body” (55). Despite showing no sexual interest in other bodies, Natsuko still realizes the sexual potential in both her body and those of others around her:

And what was I expecting? The kind of body that you see in girly magazines. A body that fit the mold of what people describe as ‘sexy.’ A body that provokes sexual fantasy. A source of desire. I guess I could say that I expected my body would have some sort of value. I thought all women grew up to have that kind of body, but that’s not how things played out. (55)

Natsuko’s body has little value in society because she does not embody certain traits that make up a “sexy” body. She admits as much when thinking over her physical value, “People like pretty things. When you’re pretty, everybody wants to look at you, they want to touch you. I wanted that for myself. Prettiness means value. But some people never experience that personally” (55-56). This phenomenon affects sexual and asexual individuals alike. If a woman’s body does not match the ideal in Kawakami’s Japan, it does not have value. Ultimately, Natsuko contains less value because her otherness is doubled: She is asexual, and her body has little perceived societal value.

When Midoriko and Natsuko spend the day together, Midoriko develops her harshest criticism of the compulsory sexuality within Japanese society. She writes: “Before I was born, I already had everything I needed to have a baby of my own. In some ways, I was even more prepared than I am now. Set up to give birth, Before I was even born …This isn’t just in books, though, It’s happening now, as we speak, inside of me” (110). Essentially, her biological imperative to give birth horrifies her. The idea repulses her so much that she writes “I wish I could rip out all those parts of me, the parts already rushing us to give birth. Why does it have to
be like this?” (110). Midoriko’s vehement rejection of the compulsory sexuality indicates a wholesale refusal to accept a “normalized life narrative” since she is “rejected and pathologized by them” herself (McCann and Monaghan 216). Simultaneously repudiating—and being repudiated by—the society in which she resides results in the creation of an asexual body that is drifting outside the boundaries of typical societal expectations, one free from “conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (Halberstam 2).

**Body Politics and Asexual Individuals – Disembodied and De-feminized**

“My hands move. My feet move. I don’t know how to move them, though. It’s like everything is moving all these parts. It’s funny. It’s like I’m in there, somewhere inside myself, and the body I’m in keeps on changing, more and more, and more and more, in ways I don’t even know. I wish I didn’t care. But I do care. And everything is always changing. Everything gets dark, and that darkness fills my eyes more and more. I don’t want to keep them open. I don’t want to see. I’m afraid, though. What if I close them and I can’t open them again? –Midoriko” (Kawakami 65)

Throughout Kawakami’s *Breasts and Eggs*, Natsuko experiences multiple disembodying sensations relating to her physical body and sense of self. The seemingly apparent disconnect between her mind and her physical body creates a sense of distance within herself. At times, she feels as if she is having an out-of-body, hallucinatory experience. Since she feels no sexual desire, she is detached from her femininity. Consequently, she questions her views on gender throughout her life. The first disorienting scene takes place in Part One when Natsuko and Makiko enter a bathhouse and observe the other people there. At one point, she recounts the entrance of two individuals who caught her attention because “something about them was off.” Natsuko continues, thinking that “One of them, who looked like she was in her twenties, had a
typical woman’s body, but the other one was something else. She had to be a man” (Kawakami 59). Natsuko, a social outcast herself due to her asexuality, identifies another individual who does not fit into Japan’s expected gender norms. Her queer identity does not excuse or reprieve her from the extensive social stigmas created by the society in which she was acculturated. Japan’s typical gender and sexual roles are highlighted by Natsuko’s descriptions of the newcomers: “The one, still wearing makeup, whose slender neck and curves and blonde hair reaching down her back were unmistakably feminine, looped her arm around the bicep of the other – who had a guy’s haircut and a thick chest that was basically flat, and a towel pressed over her crotch” (59).

The entrance and existence of the transgender male confuses Natsuko. Her worldview is upended, and her views regarding gender and sexuality become muddled. She attempts to link physical sexual organs to gender when she “tried to see what the tomboy had between her legs” (59). Prior to this event, sexual organs dictated gender for Natsuko. However, once she realizes the “tomboy” is an old classmate, Natsuko begins to question femininity and gender itself. While staring at her classmate, she enters a hallucinatory state in which her classmate’s muscles slough off and become small homunculi that loudly exclaim “THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS WOMEN” and “THERE ARE NO MEN AND NO WOMEN AND NOTHING ELSE” (64).

This surreal experience acts as a turning point for Natsuko. She abandons her former beliefs regarding strict ideations of sex, gender, and sexuality. From this point in the novel, Natsuko embraces and accepts more aspects of her own asexual identity.

Catalyzed by scholars such as Ehara Yumiko and Ueno Chizuko, desires for the right for bodily and sexual autonomy proliferated across Japan. In her landmark piece on self-determination, Ehara Yumiko insists that “a woman’s right to self-determination is not an assertion of absolute and total control over her own body but an assertion of her right to have her
decisions valued by those around her, in a historical context within which those decisions had traditionally not been valued” (Ehara 194). These ideas apply to self-determinations of sexuality and gender as well. In *Breasts and Eggs*, Kawakami’s characters embody these struggles. Natsuko’s confusion—and subsequent realignment—after encountering the transgender man in the bathhouse mimic the transformation of tightly held beliefs regarding gender and sexuality. Years after the incident in the bathhouse, Natsuko still experiences confusing sensations within her own body. At times, she feels her body is not her own. When recounting her childhood, she thinks “Those summer days felt worlds away, as if they happened in another life. But they happened to me, and to my body. The thought gave me chills” (Kawakami 164). The disconnect between her mind and her physical body reverberates across her entire existence, not just during contemplative moments regarding her sexuality. Society’s rejection of her asexual identity only further loosens her tenuous grasp on her bodily and sexual autonomy.

Hallmark feminist theorists frequently debate whether sexuality is inherently tied to personality and what level of control different state apparatuses should have over the populace. Since the 1990’s, the general “paradigm of ‘sexual sovereignty’” has “become the default position of mainstream Japanese feminism” (Kano 34). In this viewpoint, individuals have the right to determine their own sexuality. Despite these recent views, Natsuko still feels uncertain about her femininity. When speaking to her editor, Natsuko airs her concerns about her womanhood. She explains how when they were younger, “sex wasn’t a thing, it had no real role

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10 Some current feminist scholars, like sociologist Sechiyama Kaku, qualify these views. For example, Sechiyama rejects both “conservative definitions” of sexuality and “modernist (kindaishugi) definitions, those that equate sexuality with personality or romantic love” (Kano 56). He concludes that “these definitions of sexuality are ultimately incompatible with the larger goals of feminism, because any attempt to define sexuality will inevitably turn out to be oppressive for those people who cannot fall in line with it” (56). For Sechiyama, sexuality or identities should not be delineated by the government. Instead, “he proposes regulating sexuality without relying on a certain definition of it” (56).
in our lives,” and that “it didn’t matter if you were a woman or not” (315). Natsuko feels like that aspect of her never grew up: “That’s why sometimes I have to ask myself: Am I really a woman? Like I said, I have the body of a woman, I know that. But do I have the mind of a woman? Do I feel like a woman? I can’t say either way with confidence. I mean, what does feeling like a woman actually mean? I’m not sure how that relates to how I feel about sex, but it has to” (316).

Natsuko worries that her lack of a sex drive alienates her from her womanhood and from the society in which she resides. Near the climax of the novel, Natsuko again questions her femininity and her role in society. She fears that she will never integrate properly, and that she will never obtain a firm grasp on her own body:

What did it mean to be incapable, or for that matter capable, of having sex? I was a grown woman, sexually mature. I knew I wasn’t physically incapable. So what was stopping me? That wasn’t how my body worked. That part of me, the part I had just touched, to see the way it felt – it wasn’t made for that. It was a part of me, but that’s not what it was for. I knew for sure. I’d had it forever. Of course it’d changed as I’d grown, but I’d had my vagina my whole life. No one expected me to use it as a kid, so why should I have to use it now? What’s wrong with that part of me staying the way it’s always been? (376)

Due to her sexuality, Natsuko is forced to endure life without a romantic partner. She unwillingly embodies the role of the Ohitorisama which roughly translates to “one person” or “single woman” and indicates a lack of romance. Ohitorisama, a term popularized by Ueno Chizuko, is “a state that all (women) are likely to experience, if only at the end of their lives” (Dales 227).

When a younger woman embraces these roles (willingness notwithstanding), some portions of the general public label them as “Christmas cakes” (that is, of less value after the 25th) and more
recently they have been called “parasite singles” (Dales 227). These derogatory terms serve to denigrate women and have the secondary effect of further marginalizing asexual women. Despite the fact that she desires a romantic partner, save for the sexual aspects, Natsuko involuntarily occupies the title of a “parasitic single,” a woman who is wasting her youth and her reproductive potential. Effectively, Japanese society ostracizes asexual individuals to such a degree that Natsuko would rather inhabit the role of the *Ohitorisama* than be an openly romantic asexual woman.

In Kawakami’s Japan, Asexuality is not a normal life experience for most individuals. Young members of the population are expected to find a partner and create a family, as exemplified by Natsuko’s friend group, the majority of whom are housewives with children. With these societal demands comes an inherent sexualization of relationships and young adults. However, two population groups are depicted as sterile and lacking sexual identity: children and the elderly. Throughout the novel, these two groups are described by their inherent lack of sexual activity. When remembering her mother, Natsuko thinks, “Komi was old, without a doubt. I can only picture Komi as an old lady. As far as I was concerned, no part of her could be described as sexy; sex played no part in her existence” (32). Once her mother aged out of her sexual prime, she was assumed an asexual being without sexual desires. Rika, Natsuko’s editor, expresses similar ideas during a conversation later in the novel:

Well it’s the same with growing older, right? Maybe some women are still doing it at seventy or eighty, but not most, right? … In the future, as medicine advances and our lives get longer, we’ll be old for an even greater portion of our lives. Which translates into more time on earth
without sex. Less time spent fucking – no more panting and gasping, in and out, sweating your miserable face off, the temporary insanity of our lives. (316)

Since Japan is an aging nation, a larger portion of their population is entering into this seemingly asexual stage of life. Despite widespread acceptance of the normalcy of an asexual existence during childhood and old-age, asexuality remains a contentious identity category for those of child-rearing age.

**Asexual but not Aromantic: Traumatic Sex and Nonsexual Relationships**

“How come these things had to overlap? Why did caring about someone need to involve using your body?” (376).

In his book *Understanding Asexuality*, Anthony F. Bogaert explains that “a lack of sexual attraction is not the same as a lack of romantic attraction, and asexual is not synonymous with aromantic” (13). He continues, claiming that “some asexual people demonstrate that you can have one without the other. So, if one defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction to others, one should also be aware that it is not necessarily defined as a lack of romantic attraction to others” (Bogaert 13). For Natsuko specifically, sex is utterly repulsive, but she is still capable of love. Importantly, not all asexual individuals experience disgust at sexual acts, though. Since asexuality is a spectrum, assuming all asexual individuals experience trauma from sexual acts would be too broad of a categorization. Even when having sex with someone she loves, Natsuko

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11 A study by the European Parliament found that “Japan is aging fast. Its ‘super-aged’ society is the oldest in the world: 28.7% of the population are 65 or older, with women forming the majority. The country is also home to a record 80,000 centenarians. By 2036, people aged 65 and over will represent a third of the population.” The study also claims that “since 2011, the Japanese population has also been shrinking: it is a rare case of large country whose overall population is becoming smaller in prosperous and peaceful times. Japan’s population is expected to drop from 127 million in 2015 to 88 million by 2065.” They conclude that this phenomenon could be due to “the working culture, a deterioration of employment opportunities for young men and the traditional gender division of labour.”
is unable to feel any pleasure from it, only disgust. During her conversation with Rika, Natsuko explains that “When I was younger, I’d talk to my friends, about sex and everything. About how I felt. About how it makes me want to die. They said all kinds of things to me. How they felt bad for me. How maybe there was something wrong with me. Or how maybe I’d feel different if I had better sex. I never listed to them, though” (316). For Natsuko, asexuality is not a response to traumas involving sex. Mere sexual acts are traumatic themselves and thinking about sex makes Natsuko dizzy. These feelings of disgust compel her to question her own womanhood multiple times throughout the novel. During one of her conversations with Rika, Natsuko confesses, “Sometimes I wonder if I’m really a woman. I know I have the body of a woman. I have breasts like a woman, I get my period like a woman. When I was with that guy, there were times when I wanted to touch him, and I wanted to be with him. But sex … opening my legs and having him inside me … was the worst” (312). She only divulges this information to Rika because they are both inebriated and have a mutual trust in one another. Her overt repulsion to sex and her desire for love suggest that she is a romantic asexual, an aberration within a compulsory reproductive societal framework.

In Anthony F. Bogaert’s “What Asexuality Tells Us About Sexuality,” he explains that “asexual people may serve as an exemplar that sex/lust and love/romance are, at least partially, separable constructs and can be “de-coupled” in individuals… given that many asexual people evince romantic attraction without sexual/lustful attractions” (Bogaert 630). Natsuko fits this description perfectly. Unlike some asexual individuals, for whom sex is physically painful, sex is a mentally painful act for Natsuko. She experiences mental anguish during sex, and she becomes anxious at the mere thought of sex. During her early-adulthood, Natsuko dated a man named Naruse. Her and Naruse were sexually active at the start of their relationship, but it was so
torturous for Natsuko that they stopped sexual intimacy entirely. Natsuko claims that “Sex was so painful for me that I never wanted to do it again. Sex was the reason we broke up, even though I loved him as much as I did” (Kawakami 178–179). Unlike the asexual characters in Murata Sayaka’s novels (who occupy asexual and aromantic identities), Natsuko desires love, passion, and intimacy. However, for her, intimacy and sexuality are inherently decoupled. She remembers moments of sexual intimacy between her and Naruse, thinking,

I wanted him to feel good, but I didn’t understand myself. I thought it was on me to make it better, that I had to make some effort. I tried, too, but somehow it never felt right. It wasn’t physically painful. It just made me so uneasy, and I couldn’t make the feeling go away. Lying naked on the mattress, I felt like I could see black spirals coming from the ceiling and the corner of the room. When Naruse moved his body, the spirals grew larger and edged closer, until they swallowed me, like somebody had slipped a black bag over my head. The sex was never enjoyable or comforting or fulfilling. Once Naruse was naked on top of me, I was alone. (174)

Sex estranges Natsuko from romantic relationships. Sex causes moments of dissociation throughout her life. She has no physical ailments or problems with her sexual organs, she just inhabits an alternate sexuality than the majority of those around her. Her obligation to partake in sexual acts with romantic partners results in these traumatic, dissociative states. Natsuko continues, “Whenever we got naked and I let him start, the world went dark. It felt so wrong that I wanted to cry. Sometimes I wished I could just die. Other times I felt like something had to be seriously wrong with me – how could I not enjoy doing this with someone I love?” (175). Society leads her to believe that she has something severely wrong with her. She would rather die than be forced to have sex. Throughout the novel, Natsuko despairs that she will never love
again, and her friends simply think that she is bad at finding a partner. She must hide this side of herself to avoid ostracization by her peers and her audience, since she is a semi-famous writer.

Despite positive movement in realms of gender equality, scholars like Tomomi Yamaguchi claim that Japan still struggles with treatment of women. Conservative and neoliberal politicians alike still expect women “to be ‘active’ as laborers who are part of a cheap labor force working to strengthen Japan’s faltering economy, as mothers increasing Japan’s troublingly low birthrate, and as caregivers taking care of Japan’s rapidly increasing elderly population, but not as individuals actually benefiting from gender equality and women’s rights” (Yamaguchi 80). Society still holds them to conventional gender roles, so Natsuko must try to conform to keep from being outed as asexual. Unlike the asexual characters of Murata’s texts, Natsuko can fit in more easily. Natsuko’s identity suggests the possibility of love and romanticism without sexual acts. For Natsuko, love exists entirely without sex. Because she desires love, she is not seen as entirely abnormal. Despite these normalizing aspects, Natsuko’s hesitation to find love illustrates the heteronormative, compulsory sexuality present within Kawakami’s representation of Japanese society. Even when entirely enamored with her boyfriend, Naruse could not, and did not, want to engage in any sexual acts with him: “Naruse meant everything to me. I wanted us to be together. I could see us decades down the road, talking about all kinds of things and going all kinds of places. I wanted us to build a life together. But sex with him was not something I needed – not something I wanted” (Kawakami 174). She envisions a normative chronology for her life, but she must give it up due to her aversion to sex. In this moment, she rejects a heteronormative temporality, and is forced to embrace an alternate temporality, one that exists outside the boundaries of the expected life chronology within her society. If she could, Natsuko would have embraced a normative existence, but her identity
prevented her entirely. When recalling her relationship with Naruse, she thinks, “I could never bring myself to tell him. We could talk about anything else, and if I had something to say, I knew that he would listen. He was basically my best friend, but something stopped me short of being honest about sex with him” (174). Just like all of Murata’s asexual characters, Kawakami’s asexual characters are forced to live life in the closet, even hiding their sexuality from those closest to them. However, a key aspect of Natsuko’s closeted status hinges on her fears of not being a proper woman. She knew her boyfriend was reasonable, but societal expectations stifled her: “I wasn’t scared that he would hate me. It wasn’t like that. I just assumed I had to go along with him – because it was on me, as a woman, to fulfill his sexual desires. This wasn’t something anyone had said to me, or that I thought was right. But at some point, I picked up the idea that when you’re with a man – your man – it’s our job as the woman to go along” (174–175). In her mind, her role as a woman trumps her needs as an asexual individual. Any facets of her identity shrink in the face of the strictly outlined identity of women in Japan.

According to Tiina Vares, love is entirely possible for romantic asexuals because they “experience romantic attraction and often desire an intimate, non-sexual relationship” (Vares 521). As long as both partners understand the necessity of a sexless relationship, love is possible. For example, later in the novel, Natsuko falls in love with a man named Aizawa, a spokesperson for the Children of Donors. After avoiding love since Naruse, the experience shakes Natsuko. Her feelings are uncertain, and she fears rejection due to her asexuality. Despite being asexual, Natsuko still desires intimacy and passion, at one point desperately thinking,

I understood wanting somebody beside you, wanting to hold somebody’s hand. I’d felt those bursts of passion after saying something major, or when it hit me just how strong my feelings were. I wanted to share this sensation, but once things started getting

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physical, my shoulders tightened, and I tensed up all over. Passion and sex were incompatible for me. They didn’t connect. (Kawakami 175)

When she describes her feelings for Aizawa, she clearly exudes affection toward him: “Hearing from him turned my day around. If I read something or saw some cute animal video, I wanted him to see it, too. I imagined us listening to our favorite songs together. I wanted us to talk about our favorite books and really delve into our thoughts about the world” (302). Despite an outpouring of emotions, she forces herself to remain distant from Aizawa. For Natsuko, affection, passion, and intimacy revolve around emotional bonds and nonsexual contact. She thinks that her “feelings were private, an indulgence, a charade” because of her asexuality (303). The notions of compulsory sexuality in the society surrounding Natsuko force her into an isolation of sorts.

Natsuko’s forced alienation incites a self-rejection of her asexuality. Instead of accepting herself as an individual constituted by a valid identity category, she pathologizes herself. In Anthony F. Bogaert’s essay titled “Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality,” he explains asexuality’s state as a pathological disorder. Bogaert claims that generally, asexuality should not be pathologized because it is not a “health-comprised state” (Bogaert 241). A pathological condition would be one that causes “marked distress or interpersonal difficulty” (247). He concludes that even if a certain portion of the asexual population displays “elevated level of distress or other mental health issues,” these statistics “should not be used to pathologize all asexual people or asexuality in general” (248). Applying this to Natsuko’s mental state, then, invites the possibility that her distress does not stem from her asexuality itself; rather, her mental distress originates from the outside pathologization of her identity category itself. Her environment causes her to question herself on multiple occasions. At one point, she recounts her
confession of asexuality to Aizawa, “I told Aizawa that having sex had been intolerable for me. How it had made me sad and made me want to die. How it had never worked, no matter how I tried. How I had never felt desire, since, or felt like I was missing out, though I admitted there were times I thought I must be crazy” (Kawakami 299). Her asexual identity itself would not cause her elevated levels of stress if her surroundings did not ostracize and suffocate her. Her sense of suffocation manifests in her doubts about any possible relationship with Aizawa, even during supposedly happy moments: “But once I’d gotten myself worked up with all these happy thoughts, I saw the figure of a man, turned away from me, facing a world that may as well be empty” (302). She continues, saying that “As much as I loved to hear from Aizawa, I always felt a little lonelier after we spoke” (303). If Kawakami’s Japan did not persistently pathologize Natsuko’s asexuality, then her identity could be more widely accepted and acknowledged by the general public, mitigating feelings of shame and delirium.

Asexuality and Childbirth: Natsuko’s Victory

Is this my life?  
I’m glad that I can write  
I’m thankful for this life  
And all the good it’s given me  
But can I live like this? Forever?  
I can’t take it – actually, that’s not true, that’s a lie  
I’m fine on my own

It’s fine, but what about you  
Am I really okay  
Not knowing you? What if I regret it?  
My child, unlike any other,  
Can I really say I’m okay  
Never knowing you? (Kawakami 166)
In her paper titled “Maternal Sexuality and Asexual Motherhood.” Susan Weisskopf explains how “good mothers are generally asexual” (Weisskopf 768). While the asexuality that Weisskopf discusses relates more to ideas of chastity during motherhood, her argument provides a thought-provoking lens through which to analyze Kawakami’s presentations of Japan. As Weisskopf implies, childbirth, motherhood, and asexuality are commonly associated. On the one hand, being asexual during and after childbirth is acceptable. On the other hand, asexuality is not acceptable before pregnancy as an identity category. It is only acceptable as a choice. Obligatory asexual due to motherhood is acceptable, while an asexual identity is blasphemous. Halfway through *Breasts and Eggs*, Natsuko begins to want a child. She wonders, “would I ever have a child? If so, when? I didn’t have a partner, and I wasn’t looking for one. Could I really have a baby if I couldn’t handle sex?” (Kawakami 179). She wants to experience childbirth, and she wants to get to know her child more than anything else. Clearly, her identity as an asexual woman complicates manners. Japan’s strict laws regarding sperm donors frustrates Natsuko since, as a single mother, she has no legal recourse to begin the sperm donor process. Her identity, one that is inherently chaste, is only viewed as problematic because it does not conform to the expected manners of reproduction. Natsuko destabilizes the heteronormative reproductive ideals of Kawakami’s Japan.

The moment when Natsuko decides to find a way to become pregnant without engaging in any sort of sexual intercourse, she rejects the compulsory sexuality surrounding her and embraces her identity, opening up new future for those afflicted by sexualizing norms. Despite this vehement rejection, she still questions the nature and ethics of childbirth: “what about the rest of us, who were alone and planned to stay that way? Who has the right to have a child? Does not having a partner or not wanting to have sex nullify this right?” (Kawakami 276). In these
moments, she realizes the inherent absurdity in restricting a woman’s decision to choose to have a child, mirroring Weisskopf’s claim that “to be a mother by choice and a sexual person should be a woman's right” (Weisskopf 780). Later, Rika encourages Natsuko even more, calling out the questionable standards in their society, declaring that

If you want a kid, there’s no need to get wrapped up in the desire of men … There’s no need to involve women’s desire, either. There’s no need to get physical. All you need is the will, the will of a woman. If Natsu makes up her mind to take that child into her arms, to always be there for them, through thick and thin, then that’s all that matters.

(Kawakami 320)

With Rika’s encouragement, Natsuko confesses to Aizawa. After the two become somewhat enamored with one another, Aizawa agrees to pose as Natsuko’s husband. Together, they lie to doctors and begin the process of sperm donation. Natsuko subverts and rebels against the system that is diametrically opposed to her existence. Natsuko and Aizawa do not stay together since childbirth and child rearing remain Natsuko’s main goals. Natsuko, while beleaguered by ostracization, emerges victorious. She successfully exists as a single mother and an asexual individual within Kawakami’s Japan. Unlike Murata’s asexual individuals, who maneuver outside typical social apparatuses, Natsuko provides a blueprint for the integration of asexual women into Japanese society.
CHAPTER 3 – OUR DREAMS AT DUSK: NEW BEGINNINGS

*Our Dreams at Dusk* [Shimanami Tasogare] (2015), a Japanese coming-of-age manga written by Kamatani Yūki, follows high schooler Kaname Tasuku in his struggles of coming out as gay amid bullying and self-doubt. After deciding to commit suicide, Kaname stumbles upon a drop-in center in a neighborhood in Shimanami. Here, he discovers a vast array of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The drop-in center acts as a hub for those disaffected and cast out by the wider society. Within the drop-in center, they can find kinship, family, and acceptance. The members help to better the local community by forming a group called Cat Clutter. Cat Clutter renovates dilapidated and vacant houses in Shimanami, repurposing them as various community hubs, restaurants, coffee shops, and homes. The drop-in center is led and funded by Someone-san, a mysterious individual about whom little is known. Many members only know that she is an asexual individual, and that she encourages them all in her own ways.

Throughout the manga, Kaname becomes acquainted with all the drop-in center members. These individuals’ identities span across entire spectrums of both gender and sexuality: Utsumi, the unofficial leader of the drop-in center, is a trans man; Daichi and Saki are a lesbian couple; Misora, a younger member, is gender-questioning; Tchaiko and Seichirou are an older gay couple; Someone-san explicitly identifies as asexual and aromantic. These individuals fulfill the role of side characters, but they all help Kaname come to terms with his own identity, culminating with a confession of his feelings for Tsubaki (another closeted student struggling with homophobic feelings and his own sexual identity).

In contrast to *Convenience Store Woman*, *Earthlings*, and *Breasts and Eggs*, *Our Dreams at Dusk* does not feature an asexual character as the main character. Instead, Someone-san
embodies a mysterious, yet nurturing, role. Where Murata’s works are radical and Kawakami’s works are realistic (but narrow and hyper–specific in perspective), Kamatani’s manga is more broadly accessible. *Our Dreams at Dusk* represents the culmination of manga’s potential: a narrative that showcases the maturation and evolution of the Shōjo genre combined with a practical example of queer self-identification. Similar to all the texts discussed so far, *Our Dreams at Dusk* emphasizes the importance and legitimacy of queer spaces. However, *Our Dreams at Dusk* advances these ideas even further by addressing the role asexual individuals can play with such queer spaces. The manga locates itself primarily within the drop-in center, placing achievable queer spaces at the forefront of the narrative. *Our Dreams at Dusk* distinguishes itself as a steadfast proponent for the effectiveness of queer spaces as facilitators of self-identification and community involvement for queer individuals. Additionally, *Our Dreams at Dusk* offers a unique perspective on asexual individuals’ roles within queer communities: they have the power to act as mentors and mediators for both queer individuals and the heteronormative world.

**A Brief History of Manga**

Manga, as defined by Adam Schwartz and Eliane Rubinstein–Ávila, are “printed comics found in graphic-novel format” (41). This art form spans across Japanese history. For example, scholars like Kinko Ito claim that manga’s progenitors were thought to have originated in ancient times (458). Relics of these comic arts can be found in Horyuji Temple (the oldest wooden structure in Japan): “Caricatures of people, animals, and ‘grossly ex-aggerated phalli’ were found on the backs of planks in the ceiling of the temple during repairs in 1935,” and “these caricatures are among the oldest surviving Japanese comic art” (458). Examples of manga appear throughout
the Middle Ages, Tokugawa period (1603–1867), the Meiji period (1868–1912), and up through the modern eras as well (Ito).

Throughout its history, manga has been uniquely positioned to discuss controversial topics, only during times of censorship was its freedom stifled. In Ito’s discussion of manga’s long history, they claim that “one of the most important functions of Japanese manga in its long history is satire, and the satire of authority was most dynamic during the civil rights and political reform movement known as the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement, which started at the beginning of the Meiji period” (462). Manga’s easily accessible format allows for social criticism to reach wider population groups than normal news or writing forms which are subject to tighter speech restriction. It owes its accessibility to its unique visual format that skirts speech restriction laws: “Things not allowed to be voiced aloud could be expressed in manga drawings” (462). This sense of resistance still courses through manga today, with Our Dreams at Dusk as a prime example.

Critical Manga Analysis, Shōjo Manga, and BL (Boys Love)

Manga are not solely visual comics for pleasure or entertainment. While they do contain “images of dynamic black and white pages filled with characters with big eyes, spiky hair, and school uniforms, or chibi (small and chubby) characters,” they are still “renowned for tackling weighty human concerns in ling narratives, for comic-book-style stories that are not just for

12 Even during times of censorship, manga’s primarily visual mode of expression allows it more freedom. For example, “In 1877, Fumio Nomura, a samurai from Hiroshima, began publishing the Maru Maru Chimbun, a weekly satire magazine covering current events for the Dandansha Company. Chimbun, which means ‘novel gossip’ or ‘novel story,’ rhymes with shimbun, or newspaper. The objects of Nomura’s satire were not limited to the government, and they often included the emperor and the royal family. The Japanese government tried to oppress him, but the magazine increased its sales as the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement became more popular” (Ito 462).
children” (Prough 277). Manga contains similar potential to other genres worth studying, like literature and film. Essentially, “they have all but become a genre of global popular literature” (Prough 277).

With manga’s popularity on the rise, 13 arguments discussing manga as literature have risen to the forefront of the discussion. Scholars focusing on multimodality, like Adam Schwartz, and Eliane Rubinstein–Ávila, have latched onto manga’s increasing market share and insist that “manga have been used as both a teaching tool and a subject of cultural study,” and that “manga provide a way for youths to negotiate alternative identities” (Schwartz and Rubinstein–Ávila 42). They claim that compared to traditional U.S. comics, “gender is addressed more flexibly, less moralistically, and in greater complexity” (42). Manga’s flexible presentations of gender places it in a position ripe for queer analysis. Our Dreams at Dusk, a queer manga at heart, represents Manga’s possibility as a vehicle for the presentation of—and education about—queer lives in Japan.

More specifically, the genre of shōjo frequently displays queer lives and identities for the consumption of its young female audience. Shōjo, which translates to “girl,” primarily targets younger girls as its core audience. The modern iterations of the current shōjo genre—as noted by Deborah Shamoon in her essay titled “The Beautiful Men of the Inner Chamber: Gender–Bending, Boys’ Love, and Other Shōjo Manga Tropes in Ōoku”—stretch back to the 1970’s and was formed when “young women artists known collectively as the Year 24 Group (Niju yonen gumi, after the year of their birth, Shōwa 24 or 1949) took over the genre and instituted long-

13 Manga’s popularity has been steadily increasing across the 21st century. In 2003, Sales were estimated to gross US $100 million” (Schwartz and Rubinstein–Ávila). This number has more than doubled in 2020, as manga sales reached “just under $250 million” (ICv2). In Japan specifically, manga sees “gross revenues totaling 531 billion yen ($5 billion)” (Wood 394).
running, complex stories that focus on the inner lives of teenagers as they negotiate adolescent maturation” (287). Another manga scholar, Grace En–Yi Ting explains that these manga have “been known for representations of gender–bending characters and homoerotic relationships” and for portraying “queer or non-normative forms of gender and sexuality” (313). One prevailing theory regarding the popularity of shōjo’s subversive representation of gender and sexuality argues that consumers and readers of shōjo manga allow readers to self-insert and question their own identities in a safer way: Homosexual romances are “safer” because no young women are involved themselves.  

14 Scholars studying shōjo manga have “shared a commitment to acknowledging the desires and agency of girls and women as well as theorizing a unique homosocial space for community and expression” (314). Another prevailing theory, outlined by Deborah Shamoon, insists that “themes of cross-dressing and gender–switching have remained common in shōjo manga as a way of creating more satisfyingly equal romantic relationships and getting around sexist structures” (288). The narrative and character designs allow female readers to envision themselves within the story: “The boys’ feminine appearance invites girl readers to identify with them. Even when BL stories feature adult men as characters, often with one more stereotypically masculine and the other more feminine, it is a mistake to assume readers only identify with the feminine characters” (288). The audience often identifies with both roles presented: the stereotypically masculine and the more typically feminine characters. Shamoon continues, claiming that shōjo, and more specifically, boys’ love shōjo, allows girls access to sexual fantasies detached from the dangers and stereotypes of heterosexual relationships. While sexual violence and rape do appear in BL, the fact that

14 In Akiko Mizoguchi’s 2003 analysis of male-male romances in manga, she claims that the genre helped her recognize her own sexual identity: “I write from the subject position of a fan and a researcher who ‘became’ a lesbian via reception, in my adolescence, of the ‘beautiful boy’ comics of the 1970s” (49).
the characters are boys, not girls, provides a safe sense of distance, avoiding the threat of unplanned pregnancy. Not only can make characters more easily demonstrate sexual agency, but it is also easier for the characters to achieve more equality in their relationships. (288–289)

Clearly, the shōjo genre allows for a freer discussion of gender, sexuality, and love since it acts as a ground of experimentation for its readership.

Within the genre of shōjo, the subgenre named shōnen ai (boys love) depicts sexual and romantic relationships between boys and men. These manga work to destabilize the heteronormative aspects of society, and they "allow for female readers to identify with male characters in order to experiment with gender and sexuality in a space of fantasy removed from the restrictive realities of Japanese society" (Ting 316). Effectively, shōjo and shōnen ai allow girls more freedom of expression within Japan, especially along the lines of gender expression. Boys’ love manga do not solely feature homosexual romance between men. Often, these manga contain other queer characters as well. Andrea Wood, writer of “‘Straight’ Women, Queer Texts: Boy–Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic,” claims that “The gender representations and sexuality visualized in boy–love manga challenge and trouble the belief that these categories are ontologically coherent, contained, and one dimensional – something that is at the very heart of queerness” (397). Our Dreams at Dusk exemplifies these notions: The main romance is between two boys, but nearly all the side character experience romantic and identity struggles, too. It demonstrates the fluidity of identity and allows readers to see themselves in the text.

Furthermore, there is a mutual relationship between the audience and the content of shōjo manga itself; the manga influences the audience, and the audience influences the manga.
Usually, manga are published in weekly magazines. These magazines often gather feedback from their readers. Jennifer Prough describes how shōjo magazines “provide readers with small samples of serialized manga to see if they like them” (277). Additionally, shōjo magazines “solicit readers’ feedback and use a small group to represent the whole when making decisions about which manga to continue, and they include small amounts of consumer goods from girls’ culture, like accessories and clothing, as prizes or presents for readers, enabling them to mix the world of manga into their daily lives” (277). The writers and producers of the shōjo magazines know their audience well. They take feedback and mold their stories and content around that feedback. When analyzing the weekly shōjo magazine feedback process in conjunction with the representation of queer individuals in shōjo manga, the complementary nature of their relationship becomes clearer. The fluidity of gender presented within the manga represents the changing dynamics and ideals of the audience itself. The manga simultaneously contains queer characters and queers its audience (while being queered by the audience itself). Their reciprocal relationship highlights how “boy–love manga are not simply queer because they depict homoerotic love stories between men, but rather because they ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity” (Wood 397). The queerness is not defined by the homosexuality present; instead, it is denoted by the manga’s willingness to adopt and portray alternate, multiplicitous identities. The queerness queers both the genre and the readers, as not all readers identify as queer themselves. Wood continues, claiming that “The very fact that characters' gender and sexual ambiguities are encoded visually allows for myriad shifting and fluid identifications and interpretations among readers” (Wood 397). The queerness of some shōjo works, like *Our Dreams at Dusk*, represents its truly radical potential to transform social landscapes.
Theorizing Queer Spaces – Queer Spaces and Queer Communities in Japan

As noted by Natalie Oswin in her essay titled “Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space,” queer theorists “generally depict queer spaces as spaces of gays and lesbians or queers existing in opposition to and as transgressions of heterosexual space” (89). Studies of queer spaces usually take place within the field of geographical studies. Early geographical studies scholars “argued that just as individual persons do not have pre-existing sexual identities, neither do spaces,” and that space is not inherently straight or heteronormative, but that it is “actively produced and (hetero)sexualized” (90). Early queer spaces existed as “a gay and lesbian (and less frequently bisexual, transsexual and transgendered) space that offers a radical alternative to heterosexual space” (90). These spaces become inherently radical because they resist the heteronormalizing notions of society which automatically delineate nearly all spaces as heterosexual. Queer spaces “[enable] the visibility of sexual subcultures that resist and rupture the hegemonic heterosexuality that is the source of their marginality and exclusion” (90). These queer spaces, which actively subvert the dominant heteronormative spaces, simultaneously increases the visibility of—and help create legitimacy for—queer individuals and groups alike.

In Japan specifically, queer spaces bolster imagined queer communities. Imagined communities are communities that are made up of individuals who “form a sense of belonging through invisible imaginative ties” (Wallace 668). Since these communities cannot always be physically engaged due to local restrictions or public disavowals, imagined communities often form organically, without all their participants knowing one another. When these imagined communities

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15 It is important to note that Natalie Oswin insists for a reconceptualization of queer spaces. She argues that critical geography must go “beyond a sexual politics of recognition and a queer geography that engages deeply with feminist, postcolonial and critical race theories” (90).
communities become realized, their queer potential increases exponentially. Shinjuku Ni-chôme, a queer neighborhood in Japan, represents the radical potential of queer spaces in Japan. In his essay on queer space in Tokyo, Katsuhiko Suganuma argues that Shinjuku Ni-chôme “functions as a discursive site of containment as well as resistance to hetero-normative narratives of the metropolis” (345). However, these queer spaces do not exist without controversy. In 2006, Ishihara Shintarō (the mayor of Tokyo), described Shinjuku Ni-chôme as “a district ‘unfit’ or ‘damaging to the decency’ of the Tokyo metropolis” (346). Likening the neighborhood to a place solely for debauchery, Ishihara denigrates and lessens the legitimacy of queer spaces in Japan. Suganuma insists that this denigration is integral to the power of queer spaces themselves: “Queer space serves twin functions: it is to be minoritised in the process of maintaining heteronormativity; at the same time, certain localities, such as Ni-chôme, function as a queer counter–public space in opposition to the heteronormative ‘mainstream’” (347). Queer spaces gain their subversive power precisely because they exist in opposition to the majority. Essentially, “The space of Ni-chôme can be interpreted not only as a site for the containment of difference, but also a site of resistance to hetero-normative views” (348). They act as the alternative against which heteronormative society is positioned.

Nightclubs, one of the most common forms of queer space in Japan, allow for the proliferation of varying identities and the expression of those identities in a safe environment. Mark Pendleton’s firsthand account of these nightclubs expounds their influence on queer individuals:

Over the few months I had left of that year in Japan in 1998–9, I soaked up my newfound community. I had a part-time job at a department store in the nearby city of Osaka, which conveniently spat me out of work at 9:30 pm every Saturday night, just in time to walk
the ten minutes to the queer bars of Doyama-cho for a night of drinking and dancing till
the first trains began to run early on Sunday morning. I made lifelong friends, who taught
me about divas (it was the year in which it was impossible in any gay bar anywhere to
escape Cher’s Believe), dance music (house was in the ascendancy) and local musical
cultures. Perhaps typical of gay and queer communities, these lessons focused primarily
on pop, camp electronic music and the latest acts. (299)

These clubs, which act as queer spaces, facilitate the production of—identification with—new,
queer identities. Their presence affirms the existence of current queer lives while promoting the
creation of new queer identities. Pendleton continues, writing that “Clubs have for many decades
been important, if imperfect, sites for queer community cultivation and engagement with the
past” (300). Pendleton’s work builds upon that of early queer–space theorists. For example, in
his landmark essay titled “Troping the Light Fantastic: Representing Disco Then and Now,”
Gregory W. Bredbeck explains that “divergent strains of personal and communal history, of age
and youth, and of authenticity and illusion to play themselves out both within and between
people” (72). These spaces become necessary for the integration of queer individuals into a
cohesive community full of multiplicities. Pendleton ultimately concludes that “creating spaces
to express joy collectively is as important as spaces for the expression of collective anger” (302).
These spaces enable resistance against the dominant ideals and identities of the society in which
they are situated. Their mere existence is both subversive and productive.

Along with nightclubs, digital queer spaces reinforce queer imagined communities. Gay
dating apps exist at the forefront of these digital queer spaces. Existing alongside physical queer
spaces like Shinjuku Ni-chōme, gay dating apps facilitates the growth of these spaces.
However—as noted by Thomas Baudinette—some scholars fear the rapid development of these
dating apps can stifle physical queer spaces like Shinjuku Ni-chôme (93). Baudinette describes how these detractors “fear that men would stop visiting the district since they could instead use such applications to find men for friendship, romance or sex wherever they happened to be. Simply put, there is a fear that Ni-chôme will become obsolete due to online dating” (93–94). However, Baudinette disagrees with these criticisms of gay dating apps. Instead, he argues that “Ni-chôme concurrently exists as both a real, physical space and a virtual, imagined space and that this ‘real-and-imagined’ space is accessible via gay dating applications and social media services” (94). Digital queer spaces and physical queer spaces do not necessarily exist in opposition to one another. Fundamentally, Baudinette claims that “gay dating applications produce and/or reinforce queer space rather than limit or threaten it” (94). Together, physical and digital queer spaces can carve out larger, more significant cultural capital for queer individuals within Japan.

Queer Spaces in Our Dreams at Dusk – The Drop-In Center and Cat Clutter

*Our Dreams at Dusk* takes ideas of queer spaces amid city centers, like Shinjuku Ni-chôme, and transplants them into the suburbs of Shimanami, a coastal town far from Tokyo. When Kaname first stumbles upon the drop-in center, he is in an utter panic because he thought he saw Someone-san jump from the balcony of the building. Searching for help, he peeks inside hesitantly, only to be welcomed immediately: “Come on in! We’re open” (Kamatani, Vol. 1, 10). The members casually brush off Someone-san jumping from the balcony, instead explaining how she was probably just going for her daily walk. Kaname then learns that Someone-san owns the drop-in center. The manga depicts the drop-in center as a friendly and cozy environment, full of books, music, stuffed animals, and other assorted odds and ends. This spaces sharply
differentiates itself from the other spaces shown thus far in the manga. The manga portrays other spaces, like the classrooms of Kaname’s school, as harsh and devoid of personality. The next day, after being bullied again at school, Kaname finds himself at the drop-in center, distraught and questioning his own existence. After speaking to Someone-san (who just listens to him without commenting), Kaname sleeps on their couch at the insistence of the drop-in center members. While lying on the couch, the Kaname transitions into a dream-like state. His problems shift into wispy trails of smoke and float out of his body. Without realizing it, the drop-in center becomes a safe haven for Kaname, a place where he does not need to fear slurs and insults. The drop-in center acts as a queer space amid the extremely heteronormative suburbs of Japan, far from the more–accepting city centers.

Notably, the drop-in center resists against the heterosexual notions of Japanese society. Haruko and Saki’s lesbian relationship best exemplifies this resistance. Their relationship bookends the entire manga; Haruko opens up to Kaname early in the manga, and the story ends with Haruko and Saki’s wedding. Haruko, while confident in her own identity, still struggles due to the notions of compulsory heterosexuality surrounding her. Her struggles can be seen in the following flashback when Haruko was watching the news with her parents:

**News Broadcaster:** “The first same-sex marriage was held in the hall…”

**Haruko’s Father:** “Oh. Lots of that these days.”

**Haruko:** “They’re both so beautiful. It’s… nice isn’t it?”

**Haruko’s Father:** “It is nice, but… I feel bad for their parents.”

**Haruko’s Inner Monologue:** “I wish I could wake up tomorrow and find myself in the future. Maybe society’s values and people’s thinking will be just a little bit kinder then.”
Until that day…When will that be? But someday. Once things change enough that they can understand…Someday” (Kamatani, Vol. 1, 127–131).

While the Japanese society presented by Kamatani seemingly tolerates queer identities, they have not entirely accepted them. Society still labels them as detrimental and shameful identities. Haruko’s father does not see the harm in a lesbian relationship, unless it affects him directly. Only when imagining himself as the couple’s parents does he recoil and show his true colors. These queer identities carry baggage in Japanese society, and they still bring shame to their families. Within this same flashback, Haruko becomes determined to open the drop-in center as “a place where people can talk about what they want to now. A place where no one’ll be rejected,” mirroring the descriptions of Shinjuku Ni-chôme and queer nightclubs as queer spaces. (139). Haruko’s determination only manifests after coming into contact with Someone-san. In Our Dreams at Dusk, Someone-san acts as a catalyst for change; she constantly creates new opportunities for queer individuals by carving out queer spaces in Shimanami.

When discussing queer nightclubs, Mark Pendleton outlines how their marginalization gives them power: “Queer marginalization from and active rejection of heteronormativity and its institutions have also led us to claim ‘nightlife and trash as spaces for social justice’” (306). Our Dreams at Dusk’s achieves a similar task through the drop-in center and Cat Clutter. For example, queer spaces multiply throughout the series. Cat Clutter makes “trash spaces,” or literal dilapidated houses, into functional properties. What starts with just the drop-in center, evolves into coffee shops, community centers, and wedding venues. Cat Clutter, the organization led by Haruko and Utsumi and funded by Someone-san, helps to proliferate these queer spaces. Their organization represents the viability of queer spaces as vehicles for social change. Pendleton ultimately showcases the true potential of queer spaces in Japan:
And that really gets to the heart of what queer spaces can be, whether in western Japan, or not. A retreat from the heteronormative world outside. A place to grow into cultures and histories marginalized from that world. That flash of bliss that gives a sense of a future beyond those dull places that fettered us. (307)

The drop-in center and Cat Clutter helps the culture of Shimanami grow. By revitalizing places long forgotten, they create a future for themselves in the suburbs. These spaces can simultaneously act as refuges and as demarcated spaces situated in opposition to the heterosexual spaces of the Shimanami suburbs.

**Asexuality as the Outcast Queer – The Mysterious and Benevolent Someone-san**

As outlined by Megan Milks in her essay titled “Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation,” asexual individuals often become scapegoats both within and outside of queer communities. She writes that “Being ‘ASEXUAL’ (gasp) is equated with being ‘a-social and a-everything’: asexual people are apparently neither social beings nor … anything, really” (108). Someone-San’s presentation aligns with these descriptions. At first, Someone-san is presented as asocial, aloof, and uncaring, telling people that they can talk to her, but she will not listen. Only after Tchaiko explains her past does Someone-san become a real person. Her mysterious aura remains throughout the narrative, though. Her name itself shows the invisibility of asexual individuals. Someone-san has no identity; she is just someone, anonymous, no one.

Multiple times throughout the narrative, Someone-san floats off of balconies, never falling after jumping. Someone-san exists in an ephemeral state. No one at the drop-in center truly knows her except for the older members, like Tchaiko. This non-human portrayal of Someone-san mimics the dehumanizing and antisocial aspects of asexuality outlined earlier by Megan Milks.
However, Someone-san’s characterization changes throughout the manga, modeling the necessity for a reconceptualized vision of the asexual body. As Kaname becomes acquainted with Someone-san, he begins to see her humanity. Late in the manga, Kaname and Someone-san have a conversation about anger and its power if focused correctly. This conversation, as follows, acts as a key moment in the characterization of Someone-san because her personality shines through her façade of detachment:

**Kaname:** “You ever get mad about stuff, Someone-san?”

**Someone-san:** “What does it matter if I get mad or not?”

**Kaname:** “… I was just wondering if you ever got mad and regretted it. Or ever regretted not getting mad.

**Someone-san:** “Tasu-kun. Getting angry makes you tired. If you don’t get angry, people won’t hear you. If you go through life without being angry…If nothing else, things might seem clearer” (Kamatani, Vol. 3, 142–143).

Someone-san’s character arc – one that sees her evolve from seemingly unapproachable and indifferent to dependable and kind – takes place solely through the eyes of Kaname. Importantly, Someone-san has *always* been kind and dependable. Rather than Someone-san evolving, Kaname’s view of Someone-san evolves. Kaname realizes that even though she is asexual, she still has friendships, feelings, and desires.

In Julie Sondra Decker’s *The Invisible Orientation*, she explains how “active persecution of asexual people on the basis of their sexuality is usually fairly invisible to the outsider observer – with the exception of specific educational efforts that attract uninformed, superficial hatred and an influx of dismissive, invalidating strangers purporting to be motivated by ‘concern’ for asexual people’s happiness” (47). The persecution Someone-san experiences reflects that of
other asexual individuals. For examples, the manga only reveals details of Someone-san’s identity late in the narrative, in the fourth (and final) volume. She exists in a near-invisible state prior to this reveal. During mid-winter, Someone-san emerges from her office and decides to make Café au lait for the members of the drop-in center. Someone-san’s emergence surprises everyone and humanizes her:

**Haruko:** “What?! She’s gonna make Café au lait?! Someone-San?! Seriously?!”

**Saki:** “Haru-chan, quit it!”

**Haruko:** “Is this the end of the world?!”

**Someone-san [to Tsubaki]:** “Give me a hand.”

**Tsubaki:** “Oh! Sure!”

**Haruko:** “It’s a Christmas miracle from God!” (Kamatani, Vol. 4, 46)

The drop-in center’s members’ previous ignorance and reactions match the prevailing views regarding asexual individuals: “By and large, the message asexual people get from society is that they do not exist” (Decker 47). Someone-san’s image remains that of an unapproachable, mystical being prior to the Café au lait event. Only after this event do some of the members actively view her as a human with a personality, with Haruko claiming “We’ve never seen this side of you!” (Kamatani, Vol. 4, 48). As Decker indicates, these notions of invisibility endure even within queer communities. She explains how “even though some asexual people are also LGB and/or T and therefore theoretically ‘belong’ on the basis of another part of their identity, they often find that the asexual part of their identity – or how they express it – can be misunderstood or erased in queer spaces” (48). Unknowingly, the drop-in center members erase Someone-san’s asexuality and identity altogether. Even within the safe, queer space of the drop-in center, her presence and identity become obfuscated behind her mystical exterior. Tsubaki, the
newest member of the drop-in center, points out their hypocrisy shortly after Someone-san leaves:

**Haruko:** “It’s not just me, right? That was extra weird. That **was** Someone-san just now, right?”

**Tsubaki:** “What’s so weird about it?”

**Haruko:** “Ohhh, I mean… She never gets involved with anyone about anything. She’s never interested, so I just wondered why that came out of the blue.”

**Tsubaki:** “What’s with that? She’s still a human being. She comes right out and says what makes her mad. She doesn’t answer questions. She’s totally human. I mean, this Café au lait is Someone-san’s recipe, Someone-san’s style… so it’s not like she’s not interested in anything. I know she lives like she has no past or future…But that doesn’t make it true. Ultimately, it’s a question of… who Someone-san is, right?

**Kaname’s Inner Monologue:** “She manages to dodge every question you ask her…so we put her in this box of ‘unknowable person.’ But…yeah—he’s right, isn’t he? She’s not some colorless, transparent something. Someone-san’s a person just like the rest of us” (Kamatani, vol. 4, 49–52).

In this moment, Kaname and the rest of the drop-in center finally recognize how they have been treating someone-san. They recognize their omission of her from the “normal” human experience. Rather than assigning her a unique identity, they simply assigned her *no* identity at all. This pivotal turning point calls attention to the treatment of asexual individuals and the need for broad change within queer communities that addresses the unequal treatment of asexual individuals.
When further discussing the queer potential of asexual individuals, Decker explains that the label of asexual is not just a descriptor for someone who dislikes and does not engage in sex. She asserts that “asexual people are also fighting for recognition and tolerance, just like LGBT people are, and some feel a sense of belonging because of their experiences fighting the same or analogous battle,” and that “it’s important for people who use the term to understand why they’re using it and to be aware above all that it doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone” (Decker 56). These multiplicities of asexuality suggested by Decker manifest explicitly in Someone-san’s self-characterization. Near the climax of narrative, Kaname attempts to convince Someone-san to attend Haruko and Saki’s wedding. During this exchange, Someone-san finally asserts her identity for herself, asking Kaname, “Do I have to fall for people?” and insisting that “I’ve never especially wanted anything” (Kamatani, vol. 4, 162). Someone-san resists Kaname’s characterization of her:

Kaname: “A person who wants nothing…It’s hard for me to wrap my head around. When I try to think about you Someone-san, you’re like a cloud. There’s nothing to grab onto. I’ve just never understood. But if the actual reason there’s nothing to hang onto is because you don’t want anything and…If that’s because you’re asexual…When I think about it like that, then it sort of makes sense. It feels like your silhouette gets a little more solid for me. I’m sorry if I’m way off base here…But that’s where I’m at.”

Someone-san: “Yeah, you’re wrong. Being asexual isn’t what makes me Someone-san. That’s one facet. I’m a composite. Think about it. It’s not like being gay is what makes you Tasukun, right?”

Kaname: “Right…”
Someone-san: “If you asked me who I am…I’d answer that I’m the me you think I am. If you think I’m a man, then I’m a man. If you think I’m a woman, then I’m a woman. If you told me I was neither, I guess I’d be neither. If you think I’m a good person, then I am. If you think I’m a bad person, then I am. I’m tall, I’m short. I’m black, I’m white. I’m neither. I’m in my teens, my thirties, my sixties. I’m asexual with an interest in sex. I’m asexual without any curiosity about sex. I’m clouds, rain, maybe hail. I’m your enemy. I’m your ally. I’m human. I’m a dinosaur. I’m not a person, I’m not a bird. I’m an Earthling. I’m a whirlpooling Jupiterian. I’m not even a fragment of a shooting star! So: Who am I?! Someone-san--!” (vol. 4, 169–171).

Someone-san explicitly defines herself as a multiplicity. She is simultaneously everything and nothing. Her declaration reinforces the idea that she is more than her identity as asexual. Someone-san rejects Kaname’s descriptions of herself, instead opting for a radical self-identification as asexual and more. She refuses to allow sexuality to be her sole defining trait. Therefore, Our Dreams at Dusk portrays asexuality as a fragment of a whole: asexuality, just like any other sexuality, merely represents a portion of one’s identity.

Through the character of Someone-san, Our Dreams at Dusk reveals the radical role asexual individuals could occupy within queer communities. Someone-san facilitates every aspect of the drop-in center. She funds it and brings in members constantly. More importantly, Someone-san helps individuals who visit the drop-in center self-identify. Without Someone-san, the drop-in center could not exist in its current state. She constantly exists in the minds of those unsure of their own identity. Tsubaki struggles with his possible bisexuality throughout the narrative. After Someone-san directly confronts him, she continually appears before him as a persistent apparition, forcing him to come to terms with his own identity. Someone-san’s
stubborn insistence for self-identification eventually results in feelings of self-acceptance and catharsis for those subjected to it. However, she seems to know when to lighten her tone and simply listen, or as she puts it, not listen. Her characterization suggests the possibility of asexual individuals as mediators for self-identification within queer communities. Her position uniquely equips her to aid those struggling with their own identities within the queer spaces she creates. She is at once a constructor of queer spaces and a facilitator for the acceptance of queer identities.
CONCLUSION – RECONCEPTUALIZING ASEXUAL IDENTITIES AMID NOTIONS OF COMPULSORY SEXUALITY

In Chapter 1, this thesis focuses on the presentation of asexuality in Murata Sayaka’s *Convenience Store Woman* and *Earthlings*. Murata Sayaka’s presentation of asexuality in these novels varies: Keiko represents the cross-section of asexual and neurodivergent individuals; Natsuki is asexual but lives with Tomoya to avoid scrutiny; Tomoya is asexual, but he still feels semblances of sexual desires. Yuu lives a life of abstinence, not entirely asexual but fulfilling the role of an asexual individual in society. All of these characters upend typical expectations placed upon them by Japanese society and suffer through the intensified expectations that come with their abnormal identities. Murata’s characters enact radical stances against the senses of conformity surrounding them. Her characters combat conformity by implementing and occupying radical queer spaces. In *Convenience Store Woman* Keiko gives herself up completely, minimizing her selfhood in service of the convenience store, successfully averting the gaze of society. In *Earthlings* Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu rebel against society entirely: they refuse to integrate into humanity; instead, they embrace their Popinbopopian identities and vow to spread their kind across Earth. By refusing to acquiesce to society and by identifying as asexual, Murata’s characters resist against the pervasive notions of both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory sexuality.

In Chapter 2, this thesis analyzes Kawakami Mieko’s *Breasts and Eggs*. In this novel, Kawakami portrays a more normal iteration of asexuality, one that does not involve utter dedication to one’s job or rejections of humanity altogether. Kawakami’s depiction of Natsuko’s asexuality centers around her womanhood and desires to become a mother without engaging in sexual acts. By highlighting the humanity of asexual individuals, Kawakami’s presentations of
asexuality offer a view entirely distinct from Murata’s. Natsuko’s intense desires to fit in, to have a child, and to be normal showcase the spectrum of possible for asexual individuals. Kawakami’s characters, notably Natsuko, still struggle with notions of compulsory sexuality—her friends always think her repulsion to sex is bizarre and is a trait that needs fixing. Despite these difficulties, Natsuko perseveres, and is able to embrace her identity as a romantic asexual. She successfully overcomes the restrictions on single–mother parenthood in Japan by fabricating lies and receiving artificial insemination, eventually subverting typical asexual life narratives by giving birth and becoming a mother. In doing so, Natsuko rejects the stifling pressures of compulsory sexuality in Japanese society by embracing a queer, nonnormative temporality.

In Chapter 3, this thesis studies Kamatani Yūki’s manga, Our Dreams at Dusk. While not entirely focused on asexual individuals, like Murata and Kawakami’s novels, Our Dreams at Dusk presents asexuality in straightforward manner. In this manga, asexuality simply exists alongside other queer identities. While initially nebulous, the identity becomes clearer throughout the narrative. Someone-san, the sole asexual individual in the entire narrative, identifies as an aromantic asexual, claiming that she has no desires whatsoever. As the proprietor of the drop-in center, Someone-san facilitates the creation of both queer spaces and queer identities within the suburbs of Shimanami. Someone-san’s presence in the manga balances and accounts for the varying forms of asexuality presented thus far: She embraces the multiplicity inherent to asexuality, refusing to be confined to one prescribed identity. In doing so, she rejects society’s claims that she has a pathological condition because she desires nothing. Ultimately, the queer spaces employed in Kamatani’s works and its general accessibility result in a highly feasible narrative that outlines both the importance of queer spaces and the unique role asexual individuals could play within these spaces.
This thesis calls for a more detailed examination of more nonnormative identities within Japanese literature. All the characters across Murata’s, Kawakami’s, and Kamatani’s texts are disaffected in some ways; however, the characters still visibly fit into the seemingly homogenous Japanese society. Minority characters—while ostensibly a small part of the overall Japanese population—are left unaddressed. To better understand the situation of asexual individuals across Japan, studying asexual individuals within minority groups would be necessary. As noted by Jane H. Yamashiro in her essay titled “The Social Construction of Race and Minorities in Japan,” some of these often–unaddressed minority groups include the “Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin, ethnic Koreans, foreign workers, Japanese Brazilians and mixed race Japanese” (147). Analyzing the asexual individuals belonging to these minority groups would effectively allow for a more comprehensive portrayal of asexuality in Japan.

If this thesis were a Ph.D. dissertation, it would analyze more literature that portrays a wider group of individuals from varying minority categories. Analyzing the intersection of multiple minorities within Japan—including cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, and economic minorities—would prove fruitful, allowing for more perspectives on the asexual experience within Japan. For example, analyzing literature from an Ainu writer that contains asexual individuals would serve two purposes: It would allow for discussions of asexuality and queerness in indigenous populations, and it would present the treatment of those populations by the majority group (members of the Japanese race).

16 Scholars like Jane H. Yamashiro dispute notions that Japan is entirely homogenous in terms of race, language, and identity, writing that “While Japan may be more homogeneous relative to places such as the United States, this does not mean that Japan lacks racial or cultural diversity. Rather, minority populations have existed in Japan for centuries and continue to be studied by scholars from a variety of disciplines around the world” (147).
Additionally, if this were a Ph.D. dissertation, it would include analysis of more multimodal forms of writing. Ideally, a dissertation studying compulsory sexuality’s effects on asexual individuals would account for more genres. It would include works that represent asexuality within Japanese television, film, anime, manga, and literature. Each section would delve more deeply into the analysis of asexuality’s presence and impact on the narrative and each respective form itself. For example, examining the interactions between Someone-san’s character and the paneling within *Our Dreams at Dusk* could reveal latent senses of resistance against compulsory sexuality within the layout of the manga panels themselves.

Finally, a longer form analysis of asexuality within Japanese literature calls for the recognition—and investigation—of more iterations of identity within asexuality’s wide spectrum. While this thesis surveys multiple asexual identities, it also leaves many unaddressed. It is necessary to account for identity categories like Gray–asexual, demisexual, and the many other various asexual identities. A dissertation that fully embraces the multiplicities of asexuality would prove more successful in identifying specific modes of resistance against compulsory sexuality within Japanese society.
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