Deconstructing Artistic Narratives of Asexuality:
A Critical Exploration of Community Dynamics and Identity Formation in Contemporary Manga

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis critically examines how artistic narratives in contemporary manga represent asexuality, exploring their role in shaping community dynamics and influencing identity formation. Through an in-depth analysis of two selected works - *Our Dreams at Dusk* (March 6, 2015 – May 16, 2018) by Yuhki Kamatani and *I Want to Be a Wall* (May 17, 2022 – June 18, 2024) by Honami Shirono - this study investigates the ways in which these narratives contribute to the understanding and visibility of asexual identities. Through these texts, this research investigates the multifaceted representations of asexual identities within - and against their interactions - with allonormative constructs. This thesis employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating asexual theory into visual analysis, with the aim of shedding light on the complexities of asexual identities as depicted through artistic, linguistic, and narrative expressions. The first section offers detailed case studies of the selected manga, beginning with Kamatani's *Our Dreams at Dusk*. Here, linguistic performativity, spatial metaphors, and visual distance are analyzed as mechanisms for addressing themes of self-discovery and community. In contrast, Shirono's *I Want to Be a Wall* explores asexuality within relational contexts, highlighting the impact of allonormativity, visual and emotional alienation, and essentialist societal pressures; while also presenting queerplatonic relationships as transformative kinship models, offering alternative ways to conceptualize intimacy and connection. In the second section, the focus shifts to audience reception. This part examines reader reviews and interpretations sourced from independent blogs and other platforms, revealing how audiences engage with and respond to asexual representations in these works. By analyzing both positive and critical feedback, the study considers whether these narratives empower or alienate readers, particularly those with limited prior exposure to asexuality. Such responses provide insight into how artistic portrayals contribute to public discourse on intimacy and sexuality, challenging conventional norms and expanding perspectives. Ultimately, this thesis bridges the gap between creative representation and cultural understanding. It argues that manga has the potential to function as a form of narrative activism, reshaping perceptions of identity and fostering inclusive conversations. By offering nuanced and authentic portrayals of asexuality, these works not only combat misconceptions but also amplify marginalized voices, positioning manga as a vital medium in the global discourse on identity, intimacy, community, and asexuality.

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This thesis represents not just my work but the collective support I have received from each of you. I look forward to cherishing these memories and connections as I conclude this chapter of my academic journey, and embark on my next adventure.

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"THERE IS NO ONE ASEXUAL (OR ACE) STORY and no book can capture all of ace experience."

- Angela Chen

Introduction

> "Even if recent interest in studying asexuality ultimately aims to develop a deeper understanding of sexuality more generally, the enterprise takes the form of adding asexuality-informed bricks to the building, maybe even adding a new sun room, without fundamentally changing the underlying structures of the building."
>
> -Chasin CJ DeLuzio, *Theoretical issues in the study of asexuality*

In academic scholarship on asexuality, it is common practice to begin with a clear definition. This ensures that readers, regardless of their familiarity with the topic, have a shared understanding of what is meant by ***asexuality***. Over time, this has become a kind of monotonous ritual: one that is driven not only by a need for clarity but also by a recognition that asexuality still lacks mainstream awareness. Historically - and admittedly currently - asexuality has not received as much attention in academic discourse as other sexual orientations, and many readers may be encountering it for the first time. Therefore, authors define it upfront to orient readers, provide a foundation for discussion, and set the stage for deeper analysis. Even with growing visibility, asexuality remains a misunderstood and often marginalized identity. Ironically, I like to think that this repetitive act of defining asexuality might actually contribute to its normalization. I do not intend to follow such a tradition in the following paragraphs. Instead, I will allow the concept of asexuality to emerge organically through the discussion, without confining it to a rigid definition at the outset. By doing so, I aim to challenge the expectation that asexuality must always be neatly framed before it can be understood.

In Living a Feminist Life, British-Australian writer and scholar Sara Ahmed emphasizes that "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow."[1] Ahmed positions citation as a vital mechanism for acknowledging our intellectual debts to those who have shaped our understanding, particularly when dominant narratives obscure alternative paths of

[1] Sara Ahmed, (2017), *Living a Feminist Life*. PG. 16.

knowing. This concept of citation extends beyond academia; it invites us to reflect on the importance of recognizing the contributions of marginalized voices in all fields of inquiry. An examination of asexuality displays this relevance. Much of the existing research on asexuality has concentrated on delineating its parameters and exploring the interpersonal dynamics of asexual individuals (e.g., Prause & Graham, 2007; Scherrer, 2008; Brotto et al., 2010). These studies have been instrumental in establishing a framework for understanding asexuality - specifically - as a distinct and valid orientation. But - as the prominent scholar in the field of asexuality studies - Karli June Cerankowski suggests, there is an academic need to develop beyond this and engage in "asexual literacies in order to learn how to read absences for their asexual possibilities" and to "[recognize] the fullness of nonsexual events and intimacies that revalue asexuality as not mere absence but as an expression of different desires and pleasures."[2]

Recent research on asexual identity has aligned with Cerankowski's suggestion, shifting its focus to what constitutes asexual identity beyond simply the absence of sexual attraction (e.g., D.M. Mandigo et al., 2022; C. Winer et al., 2022; S. Kelleher et al., 2022). This scholarship emphasizes two primary areas: the process of identifying as asexual and the social contexts that influence asexuality.[3] One can discern from these studies that asexual theory and scholarship is shifting from elaborating on absence to enacting difference, both linguistically and culturally, by embracing pluralities[4] and alternative manifestations of identity; or as Sinéad Kelleher thematically assigns in their study *Asexual identity development and internalization*, the difference between becoming asexual and being asexual.[5]A key factor influencing these research trends is the focus on narratives about sexual norms and identities; these narratives help redefine and give meaning to

[2] Cerankowski, Karli June. (2014). "Illegible: Asexualities in Media, Literature, and Performance." PG. 3.
[3] Hille, Jessica J. (2022). "Beyond sex: A review of recent literature on asexuality." PG. 1.
[4] Pryzbolo, Ela (2011) "Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety." PG 456-457.
[5] Kelleher, S., & Murphy, M. (2022). The identity development and internalization of asexual orientation in women: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. Abstract.

various sexual identities, including those related to non-sexuality.[6] Within this context, asexual scholarship acknowledges that we inhabit a "'sexusociety' - a society organized around sex: we are told to have sex, to want to have sex, and above all else, to enjoy it."[7] In 2011, Ela Przybylo introduced the term "sexusociety" to emphasize the pervasive dominance of sex and sexuality within allonormative cultural frameworks. This concept illustrates how societal structures dictate experiences of joy, love, and fulfillment through the lens of the sexual imperative and reproductive essentialism.This imperative comprises of four key elements: "the privileging of sex over other forms of relationships, the fusion of sexuality with self-identity, the categorization of sex as "healthy" within specific cultural contexts, and the fixation on genital, orgasmic, and coital experiences, particularly in heterosexual contexts."[8]

The privileging of sex over other forms of relationships still dictates many cultural narratives which in turn impacts how individuals perceive their value and fulfillment. Moreover, the fusion of sexuality with self-identity continues to influence how the populace understands themselves within their relationships. So, I posit that more crucial than defining asexuality, that we, as readers and scholars alike, must first engage with the rhetorics of allonormativity: the understanding that "most societies operate under the assumption that all, or almost all, individuals are straight, allosexual[9], alloromantic[10], cisgender, with anything else being an unspoken deviation."[11] Allonormativity is the hegemonic sociocultural and religiopolitical structures that come "as a combination of macro- and micro-level messages that reify anti-asexuality to the detriment of aces'

[6] Webster, Kyle Kreye, (2024). "ACE INVISIBILITIES: ASEXUAL SOCIAL IDENTITY THROUGH PODCASTING AND DIGITAL MEDIA" PG. 4.
[7] Maria Markiewicz. (2024). "Sexuality is Over. Long Live Asexuality; Post-Sexuality in the Post-Post Era." PG: 13.
[8]Baptiste. (2014). Asexuality and the sexual imperative: An interview with Ela Przybylo (part 1). The Asexual Agenda.
[9] Allosexual is a term used to describe individuals who experience sexual attraction to others.
[10]Alloromantic is a term used to describe individuals who experience romantic attraction to others. It is often used in contrast to aromantic, which refers to individuals who experience little to no romantic attraction.
[11] Kirichanskaya, Michele. (2023). *Ace Notes: Tips and Tricks on Existing in an Allo World*. PG. 21.

sense of self and relationships."[12] It functions much in the way of heteronormativity, which treats heterosexuality as the standard: perpetuating an unspoken standard against which those who do not conform are seen as deviations.[13] In their book, *Ace Notes: Tips and Tricks on Existing in an Allo World*, Michele Kirichanskaya discusses how allonormativity and compulsory sexuality harm not only asexual individuals but also many allosexual people by reinforcing an unattainable definition of "normal."[14] So, fundamental to the asexual identity and the advancement of asexual theory is understanding its development and internalization amidst the vulnerability of allonormativity.

The formative self-image of most asexuals is that of their dominant culture. They are almost invariably nurtured in an allonormative institution which is by definition counteractive to their futurity: as such, the issue of self-imaging becomes of paramount importance to asexuals when critically examining asexual culture. This is compounded by the very nature of asexual identity: wherein the community is often defined by 'lack', when it is in fact not 'lacking'. To allosexual individuals, asexuals are often stereotyped as emotionless, uninteresting, arrogant, potentially autistic, and deprived of life's most fulfilling experiences.[15]Asexual people are subject to "pity and perceptions of being broken, as well as labels such as 'late bloomers,' 'emotionally immature,' or simply 'going through a phase.'"[16] The asexual is feared only because of the subjugation it seems to imply to allonormativity, particularly because it embodies a distinct absence of *action*. Asexuality as an identity becomes problematic within allonormativity precisely because it serves as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic sexual norms dictated by 'sexusociety'; therefore, asexuality is often reduced to a form of insufficiency, seen as a repression or lack.

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[12] Brandley, Ben. (2023). "Ace Awakening: Communication Sources That Lead to Affirming Asexual-Spectrum Identities". PG 23.
[13] Brandley, Ben & Leland G. Spencer (2023) "Rhetorics of Allonormativity: The Case of Asexual Latter-day Saints." PG. 4.
[14] Kirichanskaya, Michele. (2023). *Ace Notes: Tips and Tricks on Existing in an Allo World*. PG. 182.
[15] Tokheim, Darren Jacob. (2018). When the Invisible Become Visible: How Asexuality is Represented in Popular Culture. PG. 3.
[16] IBID.

The right of a community to represent itself is inalienable; yet, in order to do so, the community must achieve sufficient independence from the dominant culture. By sharing their personal narratives and defining their identities, asexual individuals - and their community - have the potentiality to disrupt the notion of a universal sexual drive, to thus question the essentialist premise that positions sex as a natural force foundational to social life: subverting the excessive preoccupation allosexuals have on nonsexualities. So, when these asexual theories are placed in dialogue with forms of non-sexuality, both historical and contemporary, it opens up potential exploration of how to conceptualize intimacy, relationships, and ethical frameworks beyond sexual attraction. This dialogue allows for a varied understanding of how diverse forms of intimacy - emotional, platonic, familial, intellectual, companionship-based, community - have been valued and understood across different cultural contexts. By juxtaposing these asexual theories with nonsexual practices and ideologies - concerning platonic relationships, familial bonds, aesthetic attraction, and romantic asexual relationships - from the past and present, new insights emerge into alternative ways of forming and sustaining meaningful connections that do not rely on sexual desire or attraction.

Normative frameworks shape and influence how individuals perceive themselves and others, and they often define what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ within a given cultural context; when we weigh these normative frameworks in artistic representations, asexuality is thus often absent or simplified. This thesis proposes to address these limitations by analyzing manga as a medium uniquely suited to engage in counternarratives around sexuality. By examining Yuhki Kamatani’s *Our Dreams at Dusk* (March 6th, 2015 – May 16th, 2018) and Honami Shirono’s *I Want to be a Wall* (May 17th, 2022 – June 18th, 2024), as case studies, I explore how these two manga are responding to recent development in contemporary sexual identity experience by reveling in the challenges posed by allonormative reaction. They present a thematically asexual driven fractured

corpus - a body of work that, while unified by its engagement with asexual themes, resists heteronormative narrative cohesion through structural and visual divergence. This “fracturing" allows the corpus to be divisible into thematic clusters, each emphasizing different aspects of asexual identity formation and negotiation. Through this fragmentation, Kamatani and Shirono assert their distinct authorial creativity and autonomous identities. Ultimately, however, these works aim to serve as introductions to the diverse self-representations of the asexual experience, as shown through their visual narration of the contemporary asexual’s lived experience.

The visual analysis will focus on key panels and artistic choices - such as composition, spatial relationships, and corporeality- that the mangaka make to convey asexual identities. Its purpose is to identify and analyze both subtle and overt expressions of asexuality, including those articulated through non-corporeal visual elements, such as emotional or psychological states. These may be conveyed through the manipulation of form, the positioning of figures, and the interaction of character and space, which together challenge and disrupt conventional representations of intimacy and desire within the artistic context. This approach then is grounded in Art History’s long tradition of exploring the relationship between text and image, allowing for a nuanced and holistic methodology that integrates visual, corporeal, and spatial analysis. Additionally, the visual analysis will then grow through an epistemological framework informed by asexual and queer studies, which will examine how these manga generates, legitimizes, and disseminates knowledge about asexuality within a cultural landscape shaped by allonormative assumptions[17]. By integrating reader-response analysis, this study further explores how audiences engage with asexual representation, assessing the extent to which these works challenge dominant discourses. This methodological approach not only

[17] Allonormative assumptions refer to the belief systems or societal norms that center and prioritize allosexuality as the default or "normal" experience, while marginalizing or disregarding asexuality. These assumptions are based on the idea that sexual attraction is inherently part of human experience and that all people experience sexual desire or attraction in some form.

evaluates the effectiveness of asexual portrayals in the mangas but also considers their broader cultural impact in shifting understandings of desire, connection, and belonging.

The Case of Japan: Cultural Context and Scholarly Positionality

In order to situate this analysis within a broader cultural framework, it is crucial to examine the specific cultural context in which these works emerge. This section provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the nuances of asexual representation within Japanese manga, while also reflecting on my own scholarly positionality in approaching this subject matter. Currently, a significant portion of asexuality-based research has relied on surveys of sexual behavior, emphasizing a relative lack of sex and relationships; this focus often frames asexuality through the lens of absence rather than exploring its broader dimensions.[18] Furthermore, much of this research is based on data from Western countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, which are shaped by specific historical and cultural understandings of sexuality.[19] These limitations restrict the generalizability of findings to non-Western societies, where cultural frameworks of gender and sexuality differ significantly.[20] Given the limited and often reductive representations of asexuality in Western visual culture[21], this thesis turns to Japanese visual culture, specifically manga, to examine alternative portrayals of asexual identities. Japanese manga provides a unique space for subverting

[18] Esther D. Rothblum, Kyra Heimann & Kylie Carpenter (2019) The lives of asexual individuals outside of sexual and romantic relationships: education, occupation, religion and community. PG. 83.

[19] A 2019 Williams Institute study found that 1.7% of U.S. sexual minority adults identify as asexual, offering crucial insights into asexuality within these communities. This pioneering research, the first to use a representative sample of U.S. sexual minority adults, highlights the need for further exploration of asexual identities. Internationally, a 2017 Japan Sociological Society study revealed cultural nuances, reporting that 11.9% of men and 9.2% of women responded to questions about asexuality. Among respondents, 50–60% identified with asexual behavior, 30–40% with asexual identity, and 3–5% with asexual desire.

[20] Hiramori, Daiki, and Saori Kamano. (2020). "Understanding Sexual Orientation, Sexual/Romantic Attraction, and Sexual Behavior beyond Western Societies: The Case of Japan."

[21] *BoJack Horseman*: Todd Chavez's asexuality is used for comedic effect, rather than being explored as a complex identity, reinforcing the marginalization of asexuality in mainstream media. *The Big Bang Theory*: Sheldon Cooper's lack of interest in sex is framed as a quirky trait rather than a serious depiction of asexuality, reflecting a reductive view of the identity. *Big Mouth*: Elijah's initial asexuality feels forced, as it is framed more as a result of his strict Christian beliefs, which view sex and masturbation as sins, rather than an intrinsic aspect of his identity.

dominant allonormative narratives, offering more complex and varied depictions of asexuality that contrast with the predominantly heteronormative framework of Western media. By focusing on manga, this analysis engages with a broader cultural Japanese context, one that allows for a more expansive exploration of asexual identities within the intersection of visual and narrative forms.

Kaida Lehtonen contends in their master's thesis *NO ROMANTIC FEELINGS - ASEXUALITY IN JAPAN 恋愛感情*ない ・ 日本におけるアセクシャリティthat asexuality is perceived differently within the Japanese cultural context, since it was shaped by local gender and sexuality discourses; sexual orientation, identity, attraction, and behavior in Japan are interrelated but distinct. As such, Japan presents an interesting field for socio-culturally focused asexuality-related research. Especially since, despite the presence of self-produced asexuality-related materials like blogs and longstanding attempts to establish small-scale asexual internet communities (such as Asexual.jp since 2002), Japanese asexual discourses have continuously evolved distinctively from mainstream Western-centric discourses in several aspects.[22] According to Lehtonen, there is a lack of academic research on asexuality in Japan that has been conducted thus far. While there have also been a few studies in the field of medicine and psychotherapy that are mainly related to asexuality[23], these studies have not approached asexuality as a sexual identity or orientation. A key limitation of these studies is their exclusion of asexuality as both an identity and a sexual orientation, leading to a failure to accurately represent the lived experiences of individuals who identify as asexual.[24] As such, Lehtonen's work emphasizes the necessity of exploring asexuality beyond Western paradigms to account for the influence of diverse cultural perspectives.

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[22] Lehtonen, Kaida. (2018). NO ROMANTIC FEELINGS - ASEXUALITY IN JAPAN 恋愛感情**な**い ・ 日本におけるアセクシャリティ.

[23] Haraguchi, Y. Kunitake H. and Yamada S. (2009). Joseitekina shigusa ga mirareta museiai no dansei sesshoku shougai ni ichirei (A male asexual patient with anorexia nervosa with effeminate behavior: a case report 2009)

[24] Rothblum, E.D., Krueger, E.A., Kittle, K.R. et al. (2020) Asexual and Non-Asexual Respondents from a U.S. Population-Based Study of Sexual Minorities.

In recent years, Japan has garnered attention for its changing attitudes towards sex and relationships, with particular focus on the phenomena of "celibacy syndrome" (セックスしない症候群, sekkusu shinai shōkōgun) and hyposexuality, which refers to the media hypothesis proposing that a growing number of Japanese adults have lost interest in sexual activity or do not desire sex. Daphne Gershon points out in *More than a makeover: Discourses of masculinity, hyposexuality, and marriage in Queer Eye: We're in Japan!* that the Anglo-American media's growing interest in Japan's hyposexuality raises questions around compulsory sexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and queerness. These discussions are "[creating] space for discussing the changing value and purpose of sex", particularly in modern Japan, where "societal expectations for individuals to conform to traditional marriage and family norms have created pressure for those who identify as asexual or have non-heteronormative sexual orientations."[25] Yoko Tokuhiro[26] analyzes that there is a "complex interplay between conservative Japanese attitudes towards marriage and Japan's increasingly liberal views on sexuality."[27] She argues persuasively that although reproduction remains strongly linked to the institution of marriage - sexuality is no longer the exclusive domain of marriage in Japan.[28] Japanese society is marked by a form of "compulsory conformity," where social success is often measured by adherence to expected life paths such as marriage and reproduction. This pressure can leave little room for individuals who do not fit into these conventional categories, such as asexual individuals.[29] Gender and sexualities scholar Miyu Higashimura[30] further highlights the invisibility of

[25] Gershon, Daphne. (2022). "More than a makeover: Discourses of masculinity, hyposexuality, and marriage in Queer Eye: We're in Japan!". PG. 158.
[26] Lecturer at The Center for Liberal Arts, Meiji Gakuin University, Japan.
[27] Koike, Evan. (2013). Marriage in Contemporary Japan by Yoko Tokuhiro (review). PG. 319.
[28] IBID.
[29] Colecio, Nicholas, (2022). "Compulsory Conformity in Modern Japanese Culture: An Exploration of Asexuality in the works of Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yuki" (2022). PG. 19.
[30] Miyu Higashimura's B.A. thesis, "Liberation from the 'Sexual Minority' Framework: The Invisibilization of Asexuality within 'Romanticist' and 'Physical-contactist' Japan" was selected to receive the RAGSS award in AY2018. Higashimura's thesis is an ambitious attempt at discussing asexuality.

asexuality in Japan, arguing that in a society where "romantic love and physical contact are prioritized," asexuality is rarely even considered, "[it] is not even up for discussion"[31].

Japan's declining birthrate and changing relationship dynamics, particularly among younger generations, have also led to increased global attention: "asexuality appears to be not the identity of a minority but increasingly characteristic of a generation."[32] The so-called "celibacy syndrome" has been interpreted by some Western narratives as evidence of widespread asexuality, but this interpretation is overly simplistic. While some individuals may identify as asexual, others may abstain from sex or romantic relationships for reasons unrelated to sexual orientation, such as financial insecurity or dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles. The actual identification of asexuality in Japan remains complex; and, this complicates efforts to measure the prevalence of asexuality in Japan, as the boundaries between different forms of sexual abstention are often blurred, therefore, "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."[33]

When engaging with topics such as asexuality in Japan, it is essential to acknowledge the positionality from which my analysis is being conducted. As an anglophone, North American-based scholar, I must firstly recognize my perspectives on asexuality and sexuality - in general - are shaped by social, cultural, and academic Western frameworks. Western scholars may be inclined to interpret Japanese phenomena through frameworks familiar in their own societies, such as assuming that low rates of sexual activity directly correlate with asexuality, without accounting for other factors like

[31] Higashimura, Miyu. "Liberation from the "Sexual Minority" Framework: The Invisibilization of Asexuality within "Romanticist" and "Physical Contactist" (「セクシュアル・マイノリティ」からの脱出 ―恋愛・身体接触至上主義社会における不可視化 されたアセクシュアリティ) ." PG. 123.
[32] Kim, Eunjung. (2024). "Asexual Kinship: Capitalism, Reproduction, and an Imperiality of Asexuality" PG. 306.
[33] Colecio, Nicholas. (2022). "Compulsory Conformity in Modern Japanese Culture: An Exploration of Asexuality in the works of Murata Sayaka, Kawakami Mieko, and Kamatani Yuki". PG: 9.

economic concerns, work culture, and the pressures of familial and societal expectations. Furthermore, Western narratives often frame non-Western sexualities in terms of their alignment - or divergence - from Western norms, which can obscure asexual experiences. This perspective inevitably influences the interpretation of Japanese cultural norms, gender roles, and sexual identities. Understanding asexuality and the broader spectrum of queerness in Japan requires a sensitivity to local contexts and an awareness that Western models of sexuality may not always apply. Recognizing these limitations allows for a more nuanced engagement with the complexities of Japanese society while avoiding the imposition of external narratives on an evolving and diverse cultural landscape. I will be adopting such a practice in my research.

Additionally, when discussing asexuality from a queer perspective, it is important to remember that in societies like Japan, "where categorization and dichotomies are highly valued, discussing asexuality or any other queer experience can lead to a binary and gender-biased explanation of certain phenomena."[34] Despite these challenges, the visibility of asexuality in Japan is slowly increasing. Online communities and LGBTQIA+ activism have helped bring attention to the experiences of asexual individuals, who often feel marginalized within a society that prioritizes marriage and family. Overall, Japan's evolving approach to sexuality is shaped by both internal cultural forces and global perceptions. While asexuality is becoming more visible, it remains on the 'fringes' of mainstream discourse, often overshadowed by concerns about declining birth rates and the country's shifting family structures. However, as activism and media representation continue to grow, discussions about asexuality and non-traditional relationships will likely become more central to Japan's ongoing reexamination of gender and sexuality.

[34] Ristè, Camil Valerio. (2024). "With(out) love from Japan: An analysis of the asexual spectrum in Shirono Honami's I want to be the wall and Isaki Uta's Is Love the Answer?" PG. 156.

SECTION 1: ***The Case Studies***

The history of asexuality is one fraught with conflicting interpretations and competing narratives in both Western and Japanese visual culture. With this in mind, I will first consider how to negotiate the authentic portrayal of asexuality in our global contemporary erotonormative visual culture.[35] What counter-hegemonic models can be proposed to create new frameworks for progressive ace representation in relation to the visual arts?[36] Firstly, let us look at the common symbols of the ace-spectrum: the black ring, often worn on the middle finger by individuals identifying on the asexual spectrum, and the white ring, symbolizing those on the aromantic spectrum. The Ace of Spades is used to represent aromantic asexuals, while the Ace of Hearts is used by alloromantic asexuals[37]. Finally, the asexual flag, composed of shades of white, purple, gray, and black, also communicates identity across the spectrum.[38] Now, admittedly, these are the most well-known 'asexual' symbols. But, while art can and does engage in asexual culture, it should not be expected for one to understand or even be offered visual and artistic asexual thematic through the obvious cues, since it is challenging to define or show something by its absence. More likely, the contemporary viewer would have difficulty recognizing explicit examples of asexual artistic representation, especially considering that asexual theory has just begun developing in the last two decades.[39]

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[35] Erotonormative refers to the societal belief or assumption that erotic (sexual) desire, attraction, and sexual relationships are the standard, expected, and ideal forms of human intimacy and connection. This norm suggests that sexual fulfillment is central to personal happiness, relationship success, and even identity, marginalizing those who do not experience or prioritize sexual attraction, such as asexual individuals.

[36] Jones, Amelia, and Erin Silver, eds. 2016. *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. PG. 207.

[37] Alloromantic asexuals are individuals who experience romantic attraction but do not experience sexual attraction. They may desire romantic relationships and engage in romantic behaviors, such as dating or affection, but without sexual desire.

[38] Kent State University LGBTQ+ Center. (n.d.). Symbols of the ace-spectrum. Kent State University.

[39] Cerankowski, Karli June and Megan Milks. (2010). New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice Feminist Studies, PG. 655

In addressing the invisibility of asexuality in the arts, I position my research within a Foucauldian framework, which will involve tracing genealogies of prior asexual discourses to "uncover the political forces shaping current understandings, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of fully grasping the past."[40] By critically examining the influences and power dynamics - such as institutions, ideologies, and social practices - that shape how knowledge about asexuality is produced and disseminated, I aim to reveal the ways these forces contribute to its marginalization. Historically, "invisible minorities occupy ambivalent positions within dominant regimes of vision"[41], which makes a visible and influential asexual art history quite elusive. Asexuality is sometimes reflected in narrative and visual culture, but it is still frequently portrayed in ways that reinforce its stereotypes. Yet, by subverting this representation and positioning asexual theory in the arts, we can establish pathways for how artists can subvert these normative understandings of compulsory sexuality through their work, and offer radical interventions that challenge allonormative visibility and move toward a future-oriented asexual historical thinking and praxis.

Integral to this disruption is the role of affect, which extends beyond representation to shape the ways in which asexual identities are felt, experienced, and embodied in visual culture. Affect theory, as a mode of analysis, bestows a crucial advantage over representation alone, as it enables an interrogation of the agency of art itself. As scholar Mieke Bal notes, "affect, thus, enjoys analytical advantages that 'representation' does not - to put it succinctly: the affective effect is a specific instance of the more general concept of performativity."[42] In the context of asexual representation, manga's affective power lies in its ability to destabilize entrenched assumptions about desire, intimacy, and relationality, inviting audiences to

[40] Jones, Amelia, and Erin Silver, eds. PG. 14
[41] Jones, Amelia, and Erin Silver, eds. PG. 95
[42] Bal, Mieke. (2019). "Affectively Effective: Affect as an Artistic-Political Strategy." In How to Do Things with Affects.PG: 181.

reconsider and reimagine asexuality beyond the constraints of allonormativity. Affect, as a temporarily "congealed yet turbulent relationship between perception and the action that coincides with subjective agency", plays a crucial role in this disruption.[43] The emotional and sensory engagement elicited by these narratives unsettles normative frameworks, compelling readers to navigate the tensions between recognition and resistance, expectation and deviation, asexuality and allonormativity.

Critically with this affective disruption, I seek to reorient the parameters within which such 'asexual practicing' artists are situated, examined, and evaluated; as such, I have strategically sought to broaden the scope of art by examining visual and material cultures in relation to the concepts of asexual theory in order to pose a conscious challenge to the boundaries of canonical art historical understanding(s) of artistic value. Asexual scholars Julie Sondra Decker and Sherronda J. Brown mark the societal invisibility of asexual individuals as a condition that mirrors their obscurity in the visual arts. Decker explains that "active persecution of asexual people on the basis of their sexuality is usually fairly invisible to the outsider observer," unless specific educational efforts make it visible, often provoking "uninformed, superficial hatred and an influx of dismissive, invalidating strangers" claiming concern for asexual happiness.[44] Societal invisibility underscores the challenges of recognizing asexuality in art, where the absence of clear markers or symbols often leads to its misinterpretation or neglect. Just as our society struggles to see the marginalization of asexual individuals, art viewers may find it challenging to identify asexual representation in visual narratives. In this context, Brown's assertion that "asexual queerness is always transgressive of normative

[43] Bal, Mieke. (2019). "Affectively Effective: Affect as an Artistic-Political Strategy." In How to Do Things with Affects. PG: 190.
[44] Decker, Julie Sondra. (2015). *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. PG. 45

sexuality, in one way or another"[45] aligns with the idea that asexuality disrupts dominant frameworks of sexuality, such as allonormativity. Though this transgression varies across the asexual spectrum, Brown advocates for the recognition of asexuality as an intrinsic part of the LGBTQIA+ community, challenging the gatekeeping that often excludes it. This recognition, both within society and in visual art, is crucial to dismantling the hegemonic systems that obscure all ace-spectrum identities and their visibility. Practicing an asexual reading in art involves actively identifying and interpreting works that depict asexual experiences, not only by recognizing overt representations of asexuality but also by acknowledging subtle or alternative expressions that challenge allonormative expectations.

By understanding these artistic erasures, we can begin to grasp the necessity of creating space for asexual identities within the contemporary visual arts, positioning them as radical, future-oriented interventions: comprehending how the visual arts - and the narratives they carry - offer an opportunity to disrupt hegemonic imposed normative frameworks of sexuality. As we have seen, asexuality challenges both societal perceptions and artistic visibility, demanding a more nuanced approach to representation: this necessitates an exploration of how contemporary artists and storytellers engage with asexual identities, using nuanced and often symbolic visual elements - such as composition, corporeality, and spatial relationships - to reflect the complexities of the lived, embedded asexual experience. The following case studies examine two manga that tackle this challenge by introducing asexuality at different narrative points - one at the story's end, the other at its beginning. Through an analysis of the artistic decisions made by the mangaka, we will be expanding our understanding of how asexuality is visually portrayed, whether through emotive abstraction[46] or a more elusive, yet persistent, presence. These case studies offer pragmatic forms of

[45] Brown, Sherronda J. (2022). *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture.* PG. 17.

[46] Emotive abstraction is a style of abstract art that focuses on conveying emotions and feelings through non-representational forms and colors. It is a form of art that prioritizes the expression of the artist's innermost thoughts and emotions over realistic depictions of the external world.

resistance, venturing into how asexual identities can be represented and understood beyond and within their invisibility.

SECTION 1.1: Our Dreams at Dusk, Yuhki Kamatani: Community and Self-Discovery

Yuhki Kamatani (鎌谷 悠希), a Japanese manga artist born in Hiroshima in 1983, is well-known for their work in addressing LGBTQIA+ themes through artistically rich narratives. Their most prominent work, *Nabari no Ou* (隠の王), brought them into the spotlight, but it is their more recent series, *Our Dreams at Dusk* (しまなみ誰そ彼, Shimanami Tasogare)[47], that delves deeply into the complexities of queer identity, including asexuality. Kamatani's personal identification as X-gender and asexual, which they shared publicly in 2012[48], informs much of the emotional depth and complexity of the queer narratives they depict[49]. Their lived experience, coupled with a focus on societal marginalization, provides a nuanced foundation for examining asexuality, particularly as embodied by the character Someone-San (誰か Dareka- San, Somebody). In *Our Dreams at Dusk*, Kamatani explores queer identity through the protagonist Tasuku Kaname (要 介), a gay teenager struggling with the trauma of being outed in his small, rural community. At a critical moment, Tasuku contemplates suicide, standing at the edge of a towering wall, his hands gripping the railing as he utters, "I just can't anymore". In that moment, stars blur his vision and redirect his gaze to an unknown figure who seems ready to jump. He watches in horror as this individual throws themselves from a window [Fig 1]. Startled, Tasuku races to the spot where he witnessed the mysterious figure leap. It is through this harrowing experience that he finds himself drawn to a local drop-in center

[47] しまなみ誰そ彼 4 (in Japanese). Shogakukan. July 19, 2018. Retrieved August 12th, 2024.

[48] Kamatani, Yuhki [@yuhkikamatani] (May 7, 2012). "隠**すことでもわざわざ**言うことでもカテゴライズするようなことでもないと分かっているけど、無難に生きようと、へらへら誤魔化している自分に対して無性に腹立たしく思う時があります。誤魔化したくない。私はXジェンダーでアセクシャルなセクシュアルマイノリティ**です**。**そんな**程度**の**人間**です**" [I know it's nothing to hide, say, or categorize, but there are times when I feel really angry with myself for trying to live a safe life. I don't want to mislead you. I am X gender and asexual. That's the extent of who I am.] (Tweet) (in Japanese). Archived from the original on May 19, 2018. Retrieved September 6th, 2024 via Twitter.

[49] Yamaguchi, Ryo (February 9, 2018).「お前、ホモなの？」疑われた高校生、失った居場所。描いた漫画家**の**過去**とは**. BuzzFeed News (in Japanese). Retrieved September 6th, 2024

where LGBTQIA+ individuals gather to form a community. Upon arriving, he encounters the individual who jumped, who looks at Tasuku with an unsettling calmness and remarks, “You didn’t jump after all, hmm? I thought you might die. But I guess not, hmm?”.

As readers, this is our first encounter with Someone-San, a key yet elusive figure in this narrative whose identity is marked (or will be marked by the plot progression) by both their self-identification as asexual and their detachment from societal norms. Someone-San aka Anonymous (誰か) is the mysterious founder and owner of the ‘Drop-in Center.’ They are asexual and, as Kamatani has observed, their gender identity is indeterminate; as Someone-San states in the manga, they use any/all pronouns although most people misgender them and use she/her pronouns[50] for them in the manga.[51] Someone-San has dark brown hair and green eyes. They wear their hair in a ponytail and are mostly seen in rather loose, baggy androgynous clothing. Overall, Someone-San’s personality is hard to grasp. Most drop-in center members seem to not know much about them. However, while they are quiet and mysterious, and may come across as cold, many drop-in members find them to be highly perceptive and receptive of what other people are currently going through: “[Someone-San] acts as something of a mirror for the other characters rather than a direct mentor, listening to their confessions and troubles with no promise of feedback.”[52]

Someone-San’s role within the *Our Dreams at Dusk* narrative is multifaceted, existing at the intersection of reality and abstraction. Here, “abstraction” refers to their character being grounded in the tangible realities of their world while simultaneously operating on a symbolic or metaphorical level, representing themes of identity, self-awareness, and societal expectations.This dual existence

[50] Misgendering, especially in the context of asexuality, can significantly impact the representation of non-binary or gender-fluid identities. In this case, Someone-San’s use of any/all pronouns reflect their indeterminate gender identity, yet the consistent misgendering they experience, with others defaulting to she/her pronouns, highlights the social tendency to impose binary gender norms. This misgendering not only underscores societal discomfort with non-conforming gender identities but also mirrors the erasure and invisibility that many asexual individuals face, as their identities - whether sexual or gender-related - are often misunderstood or invalidated.

[51] Shimanami Tasogare Manga. Chapter 21. Volume 3.

[52]Karleen. (2020). Art as Discovery, art as hope: Kamatani Yuhki, x-gender and asexual mangaka. Anime Feminist.

enables them to move beyond simple representation, offering a more complex exploration of asexual identity. In doing so, we can examine whether this representation provides a visual and thematic articulation of asexuality that transcends the typical allonormative portrayals, which often position the asexual as the other. Or, as psychology researchers Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson found in their research "Intergroup bias toward "Group X": Evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals", the prevalence of allosexuals evaluate asexuals negatively, often dehumanizing them by perceiving them as cold and mechanistic, and viewing them as less sophisticated.[53]

Kamatani's visual depiction of Someone-San stands out in its departure from traditional, dialogue-based explorations of identity construction. Rather than relying on mostly verbal expression, Kamatani employs wordless imagery and metaphorical visual cues to subtly convey the intricacies of asexuality, but it is precisely this absence of direct verbal articulation which gives way to how emotive abstraction[54] is being used to negotiate the character's lived asexual experience. All of the recurring abstract imagery such as expansive, dreamlike spaces, dynamic shapes, swirling lines, flowing forms, and fluid, non-linear panel arrangements offer a visual representation of Someone-San's identity, one which resists rigid categorization because of their asexuality. What I aim to explore in this visual analysis is whether the use of 'recurring abstract imagery' reflects the complexity of asexual existence. The analysis will be divided into three sections: Ephemerality within Linguistic Performativity, Spatial Metaphors and Disconnection, and Microaggressions and Visual Distance. Through these sections, I will demonstrate how the visual imagery can be

[53]MacInnis, Cara C., and Gordon Hodson. (2012) "Intergroup bias toward "Group X": Evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals.". PG. 738.

[54] Emotive abstraction, in the context of these arguments, refers to the use of abstract visual or narrative techniques that convey emotional experiences or sentiments without directly representing specific, concrete details. It's an approach where emotions, feelings, or identities (such as asexuality) are expressed in a way that doesn't rely on traditional, explicit representations, but rather through symbolic, metaphorical, or non-literal means. This abstraction allows for the exploration of complex or marginalized identities in a way that resonates emotionally without adhering to conventional norms or expectations.

understood within an asexual narrative activist framework, drawing attention to the microaggressions and visual alienation experienced by individuals on the ACE[55] spectrum. I view these visuals as expressions of resistance, artistic counter-reactions, and narrative activism - powerful forms of defense constructed by and for the asexual community.

Ephemerality within Linguistic Performativity

Someone-San is visually depicted as an ephemeral figure, intermittently appearing and disappearing throughout the narrative, giving the impression of an almost spectral quality to their existence. This spectral presence signifies a broader narrative detachment from the societal expectations they are placed within, calling into question the conventions associated with coded notions of "*normalcy*." Furthermore, their ephemeral nature positions them as an observer within the manga's narrative, rather than someone seeking definition within these conventional boundaries. Ahmed maintains *In the Cultural Politics of Emotion* that it is "important to consider how heterosexuality functions powerfully as a series of norms and ideals, but also through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds: (hetero)norms are investments, which are taken on and taken in by subjects."[56] To Ahmed, heteronormativity shapes not only our personal identities but also our broader social realities. These "norms and ideals", while powerfully allonormative, are ultimately - like Someone-San - ephemeral in nature; they can shift, dissolve, and be challenged over time. Likewise, the notion of identity, particularly in the context of asexuality, can be referenced in regards to these societal transient perceptions of heteronormativity. Specifically, within the tension they create between presence and absence; the polymorphousness of not only the asexual viewing themselves, but also the allosexual[57] who views the identity of the asexual. The idea of ephemeral presence in the asexual narrative can be

[55] A nickname or short name for someone who is asexual.
[56] Ahmed, Sara. (2014). "Queer Feelings." PG. 146–147
[57] Allosexual means the ability to experience sexual attraction, regardless of sexual orientation. The term "allosexual" is often used to describe people who are not asexual.

understood through the lens of Carolyn Abbate's statement, "realizing the latent as overlooking the ephemeral, extracting hidden meaning is simply to reconstitute the hermeneutic under another guise."[58] Attempts to uncover a deeper, latent meaning in asexual identity risk obscuring its more immediate, lived dimensions - particularly the ways in which asexual people navigate the fleeting, everyday moments of self-expression. Asexual individuals often have to balance authenticity with the pressures of educating others, shaping how and when they make their identities visible. In this sense, their presence can be ephemeral, appearing only in selective moments of disclosure or recognition, rather than existing as an assumed, ever-present identity. It is a form of accountability, "that amounts always, and only, to fabulation of the self, a queer authenticity that participates playfully by way of the universal(-ising) norms that threaten the erasure of one's own self."[59]

As Haruko Daichi (大地 春子), member of the drop-in center who works for a non-profit organization that restores vacant houses in Onomichi, states: "Someone-San was already…well, she was a weird one right from the start" [Fig 2]. Precisely when the experience of asexuality is compared to allonormative values, it appears as a transient and often invisible. To the allonormative subject, the asexual character "markedly short-circuits the confessional dialogue. In a context by which the account must disclose a salacious and innermost truth, the non-sexual 'subject' 'should' "cause a system-collapse where the truth that centres confessional subject-ivity is rendered a fiction, for there is no truth (sex) to be spoken of, whether virtuous or otherwise."[60] This concept is explored in both the lived reflections of asexual individuals and the visual representation of characters like Someone-San from *Our Dreams at Dusk*, whose presence signifies the impermanence and invisibility that asexual individuals frequently encounter.

[58] Abbate, Carolyn. (2017). "Overlooking the Ephemeral". Pg 77.
[59] Jukes, Joe. (2018). "Towards Asexual Theory: Practicing a Queer Accountability of the Non-Sexual. Master of Arts (Sexual Dissidence)." PG. 5
[60] Jukes, Joe. (2018), PG. 8

In the interaction between Tasuku and Shuji Misora (美空 秋治) regarding Someone-San, Tasuku's inquiry, "Who is Someone-San really? She's a total mystery…," serves as a moment of confusion and uncertainty about Someone-San's identity. This moment reflects the broader theme of incomprehension toward asexuality. Shuji's physical gesture of moving their hand from left to right, obscuring and revealing Someone-San as they walk away, visually represents the elusiveness and complexity of their identity to the other characters in the narrative. When Shuji remarks, "Someone-San is…a grown-up who grew up without becoming anyone. She's nobody, but she exists. She can live like that" [Fig. 3], this statement marks a paradoxical truth about asexuality and identity in general: that one can exist meaningfully without conforming to social or sexual expectations of what a fully realized person should be. The pauses and hesitations in Shuji's speech further emphasize the difficulty in articulating Someone-San's asexual identity. The ellipses between thoughts suggest that they are grappling with how to describe someone who defies traditional categorizations, who cannot easily be described. These pauses are not just rhetorical devices but point to the cognitive dissonance in trying to define someone whose existence, as Shuji admits, is "nobody" yet undeniably present.

We can also reflect on Someone-San's own words regarding themselves: "How about I tell you about me? You don't have to listen, though. If you asked me who I am... I'd answer that I'm the me you think I am." These words reveal the fluid and externally shaped nature of their ace identity. There is a flicker of hesitancy in their offer, with the claim, "I'm the me you think I am," reflecting the pervasive tendency for asexual individuals' identities to be framed by external perceptions rather than an internally defined sense of self. This framing aligns with Judith Butler's[61] theory of performativity, wherein identity is constructed through repeated external acts and

[61] Judith Butler is an American feminist philosopher and gender studies scholar whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics, and the fields of third-wave feminism, queer theory, and literary theory.

interpretations by others. But how is Butler's theory of performativity, framed through linguistic performativity, connected to asexuality?[62] For Someone-San, performativity means that their asexual identity is often shaped and expressed through the language they are using, as they can either choose to challenge or conform to the allonormativity language concerning sexuality. At the beginning of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that within "the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be."[63] When an asexual person's identity is defined not by who they are, but by what they lack in the eyes of society - namely, sexual attraction or desire - their asexuality becomes a socially constructed absence; in this context, Someone-San's identity is reduced to what it is not, rather than being affirmed for what it is. The pauses in speech when discussing them, the hesitant acknowledgment of their existence, and the metaphor of them vanishing and reappearing all underscore the societal invisibility and erasure they experience as an asexual; and the performativity that comes attached to this paradoxical truth.

There is an undeniably strong connection between linguistic performativity, gender, and asexuality. Butler's notion that gender is performative suggests that identities are not fixed or inherent, but created through social practices and language. Artistically, an asexual character such as Someone-San reframes existing discourses when they linguistically prove their asexuality rather than conforming to the expectations that would have them perceived as "normal." As such, Someone-San's identity is both hyper-visible - subject to scrutiny and confusion - and invisible, eluding clear definition or understanding. In response to the questions about their asexuality, Someone-San says, "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 your enemy. I'm clouds, rain, maybe hail. I'm asexual with an interest in sex. I'm asexual without any curiosity about sex" [Fig. 4]. Confessional truth here can be seen as a form

[62] Salih, Sara. (2007) "On Judith Butler and performativity." Sexualities and communication in everyday life: A reader. PG 56.
[63] Butler, Judith (1990; Anniversary edition 1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. PG 24.

of linguistic performativity. When individuals confess, they often do so within established frameworks that dictate what constitutes their truth. Someone-San's list of identities - "I'm tall, I'm short. I'm black, I'm white" - captures the idea that their selfhood is multi-faceted and often contradictory; moreover, that their identity is ever-changing: much like a form of paradoxical social commentary - the duality of being misunderstood yet simultaneously noticed. Becoming asexual versus being asexual.

Spatial Metaphors and Disconnection

Asexual scholar Kristin S. Scherrer's research highlights the invisibility of asexuality within broader societal and queer contexts. In her article "Coming to an Asexual Identity", Scherrer asserts that "sexual essentialism, [or] the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions…is a widespread assumption of modern society."[64] Contending that the construction of asexual identities complicates the dichotomy between sexual and non-sexual by redefining traditionally sexual behaviors as non-sexual.[65] This redefinition can lead to tensions within queer communities, as asexual individuals potentially face exclusion. According to Scherrer, "[the] construction of asexual identities problematizes the boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual - by redefining traditionally 'sexual' behaviors as non-sexual."[66] Due to the unique orientation of asexuality, it can be perceived as a threat to queerness, given that it diverges from common understandings of sexual and romantic attraction. In contrast to those with non-normative gender and sexual identities, who are often readily categorized as queer by a dominant heteronormative society, the distinctions among queer identities can influence how asexuality is discussed and accepted.[67]

[64] Scherrer, Kristin. (2008.). "Coming to an asexual identity: Negotiating identity, negotiating desire". PG 629.
[65] IBID.
[66] IBID
[67] Canning, Dominique A. (2015) "Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces," PG: 66.

Our Dreams at Dusk adeptly exemplifies the interpersonal dynamics within an LGBTQIA+ Drop-In Center, where the presence of an asexual character brings to light the concept of asexual distance: referring to the emotional and relational space that asexual individuals may navigate in interactions with those who experience sexual attraction. Kamatani employs spatial metaphors to visually convey asexual distance and the tensions between isolation and belonging that asexual individuals often navigate. The expansive, uninhabited spaces surrounding Someone-San stand in stark contrast to the cramped, confined panels featuring other characters. As such, there is a sense of disconnection that is emphasized by Someone-San's presence in liminal and ambiguous spaces - on the edges of scenes, behind windows, frequently distanced from the center of action. In Figure 5, Tasuku is depicted gazing at Someone-San from the doorframe, with Someone-San's back facing him. In front of them, the light of the night sky manifests as abstract bubbles that float freely across the panels, casting a dreamlike quality. This illumination partially obscures Someone-San, transforming them into a silhouette and positioning them as an anomaly within the visual narrative. As a result, Tasuku's silent observation underscore's themes of distance and contemplation, suggesting a complex interplay between presence and absence in their relationship. Someone-San's physical form frequently feels just out of reach - either depicted in distant panels or obscured by abstract elements [Fig.5].

Kamatani's spatial framing in *Our Dreams at Dusk* effectively showcases the physical and emotional asexual distance between Someone-San and the other members of the Drop-In Center. In one poignant scene, Someone-San is depicted walking away from the group, with one member partially obscured on the right beside a Christmas tree. This visual composition accentuates that there is a separation between Someone-San and the others, as they glance through the window at their retreating figure. As they walk away, the remaining group members remark, "[she] manages to dodge

every question you ask her…so we put her in this box of 'unknowable person'" [Fig. 6]. The group struggles to understand Someone-San, through this dialogue they reinforce their position as an outsider. Their comments, such as "she's not some colorless, transparent something. Someone-San's a person just like that," suggest a desire for a more accepting attitude towards their identity [Fig. 7]. However, the visual emphasis on their feet during the conversation serves to underscore not only their physical presence but also to symbolize a deeper sense of disconnection, both from themselves and from others; they are disjointed, disfigured, and not fully present. Although the group acknowledges their humanity, their inability to fully engage with them, reflects this asexual distance: there remains a relational gap that persists despite the group's attempts at acceptance. So, in this manner, the use of space is visually quite deliberate.

Sexual normativity - or allonormativity - is characterized by the prevailing belief that being allosexual or non-asexual is preferable to being asexual. It often manifests "in more insidious, mundane contexts - such as suggestions that asexual people are 'missing out' on sexuality, or warnings against people 'pigeon-holing' themselves as asexual too soon"[68] Such attitudes reflect a systemic opposition to asexuality that is rarely rooted in malicious intent; instead, this opposition arises from a visual society shaped by compulsory sexuality, where the dominant framework assumes that asexual individuals do not belong. The non-asexual world, lacking established spaces for asexual identities, often behaves as though such individuals do not exist.[69] It is such a practice of systemic exclusion which contributes to asexual distance, as asexual people find themselves navigating spaces that do not fully recognize or understand their identities. This distance not only reinforces feelings of isolation but also complicates the formation of connections with others. A lack of understanding regarding asexuality creates barriers to communication and acceptance, further entrenching asexual

[68] CJ DELUZIO CHASIN. (2014). Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community: Navigating Relationships and Identities in a Context of Resistance. PG 170.
[69] IBID.

individuals in a state of disconnection from normative social frameworks. CJ Deluzio Chasin[70] explains that asexuality "is not limited to the kinds of relationships that asexual people do not form but is more importantly about the kinds of relationships that do constitute asexual/ace people's social lives."[71] Therefore, the problem is not so much asexuality, but the fear of asexuality; the surrender to allonormativity.

Microaggressions and Visual Distance

An awareness of the self as different from others typically initiates the discovery of sexual identity; it is the asexuals lack of sexual attraction which causes them to feel '"abnormal", 'disconnected' and 'different', preciously bringing them to search for an explanation"'[72] Feelings of abnormality and disconnection motivate asexual individuals to seek an explanation for their experiences; this search often leads them to explore concepts of asexuality or other non-normative (as in nonsexual) sexual identities. It is a search designed to make sense of their identity and experiences, to confirm one's own aceness. But, the search itself is caused by "the pervasiveness of rhetorics of allonormativity" which are designed to "alienate aces and/or aros" and "have a negative influence on their self-worth."[73] This exclusionary framework is encapsulated in the concept of allonormativity, a hegemonic system that enforces the expectation of romantic and sexual relationships as central to personal identity and societal belonging. For asexual and aromantic individuals, this construct can erode self-worth, fostering feelings of exclusion, abnormality, and invalidation. However, even within this performative hegemonic system, individuals can assert and affirm their asexuality. This

[70] C.J. DeLuzio Chasin is a scholar whose work focuses on asexuality, compulsory sexuality, and the broader socio-cultural frameworks that marginalize asexual identities. Their research examines the systemic mechanisms that render asexuality invisible and explores the intersections of sexuality, normativity, and identity within contemporary society.
[71] CJ DELUZIO CHASIN. (2014). Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community: Navigating Relationships and Identities in a Context of Resistance. PG 175.
[72] Sinéad Kelleher & Mike Murphy (2024) Asexual identity development and internalisation: a thematic analysis, PG. 872
[73] Brandley, Ben and Marco Dehnert. (2024) "I am not a Robot, I am Asexual": A Qualitative Critique of Allonormative Discourses of Ace and Aro Folks as Robots, Aliens, Monsters, PG. 1568.

struggle is poignantly articulated by Someone-San, who captures the experience of disconnection from societal norms and expectations: “Say the world is a big boat. Women. Men. Wives. Husbands. Families. Bosses. Rivals. Everyone has the idea of belonging to something as a foundation. [...] But I can't board any of them. And I'm sure I'll never be able to” [Fig.8]. Someone-San laments on how others easily ‘board’ these social constructs and find a sense of community and purpose. In contrast, Someone-San feels unable to join or participate in these connections, commenting: “I think I'm probably asexual.” They exist outside of these “boats,” standing alone and unable to board.

Asexuality, “[questions] a form of neoliberal ‘liberal humanism’ in which a productive (in all sense of the term) individual is valued.”[74] In this context, a “productive individual” can refer to various dimensions: for the purposes of the asexual and the character of Someone-San, we shall reference specifically neoliberalism’ emphasis on social contributions (e.x. family roles, community involvement) and emotional labor (e.x. maintaining relationships). As in, the ability to board one of those aforementioned boats. If individuals do not live up the expectation set by “neoliberal ‘liberal’ humanism”, inadvertently, the constant exposure to narratives that equate life value with such productivity can lead to internalized feelings of inadequacy. When you define an asexual person by what they’re not, well there’s millions of things they don’t do or aren’t. So, it's quite problematic in nature to frame asexuality through a lens of absence; asexual individuals are often reduced to what they do not do, rather than being recognized for the fullness of their personhood. Megan Milks[75]’ discussion in *Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation* offers an important theoretical framework for understanding this erasure. Milks critiques the tendency to label asexual individuals as “a-social and a-everything,” a designation that renders them invisible not only

[74] Dawson, Matt, Susie Scott, and Liz McDonnell. (2018) ‘“Asexual” isn’t who I am’: The politics of asexuality." PG. 377

[75] Megan Milks is an author and scholar whose work explores queer theory, asexuality, and the intersections of literature and identity. Their writing often challenges normative narratives around gender and sexuality, offering nuanced insights into marginalized identities, including those within the asexual spectrum.

in relation to sexual desire but also in terms of social identity, community participation, and engagement.[76] This labeling perpetuates the broader cultural perception that asexuality is not simply a lack of sexual attraction but a fundamental absence of identity and personhood. *Our Dreams at Dusk* visually articulates this notion through the depiction of Someone-San's liminality, emphasizing their position on the margins of societal belonging.

How are asexual identities negotiated in social contexts? What micro-level processes shape the ways asexual individuals construct their identities within and against societal norms? By adopting a symbolic interactionist approach - focusing on the meanings attached to human interactions - how might we better understand the ways asexual individuals navigate and redefine these cultural expectations?[77] The narrative reaches a pivotal moment when Someone-San, after experiencing a microaggression from a coworker who told them they would soon need to "find a good person" or "regret it in ten years," decides to leave their job. This moment marks a significant turning point in their journey toward self-assertion and identity formation. Shortly after, they attended a coffee class, where they met Seichiro and Tchaiko - who later became active members of the Drop-In Center. After Seichiro shares a heartfelt talk about how sometimes living as a "no one, just someone from who-knows-where" can be a sort of happiness, Someone-San gets a sudden revelation and stands up firmly, and with a proud smile, they declare they are "no one. Intent on [their] solitude. Something even [they] can't see. [they're] just *someone*" [Fig.9]. From that day forward, as Tchaiko explains to the other members of the Drop-In Center, Someone-San shed all labels, rejected the constraints of their past and future, and began to live with complete transparency. Rather than adopting a rigid label such as "asexual," Someone-San rejects the confines of fixed

[76] Milks, Megan. (2014). "Stunted growth: Asexual politics and the rhetoric of sexual liberation." In *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. PG. 100-118.
[77] Scott, Susie, Liz McDonnell, and Matt Dawson. (2016). "Stories of non‐becoming: Non‐issues, non‐events and non‐identities in asexual lives." PG.270.

categories, choosing instead to embrace a fluid and evolving sense of self. This moment serves as a compelling critique of the reliance on labels in identity formation, urging a reconsideration of how identity can be constructed beyond societal norms and categories, particularly for those whose experiences resist neat classification such as asexuality. Their assertion that "Being asexual isn't what makes me Someone-San" [Fig.10], reflects a critical shift from earlier uncertainty regarding their sense of self. While asexuality remains an important facet of their identity, it does not encompass their entirety. Instead, their asexual identity represents a step toward self-acceptance and personal autonomy, emphasizing the complexity of identity beyond a singular defining characteristic.

1.2: *I Want to be a Wall*, Honami Shirono: Depicting Asexuality in Relationships

Having explored the visual and textual portrayal of asexuality in *Our Dreams at Dusk* through the character of Someone-San, it is now essential to examine how asexuality is approached in another manga that similarly centers around identity and human connection. In this second case study, we turn to *I Want to Be a Wall* (壁になりたい, Kabe ni Naritai) by Honami Shirono. Shirono is an active supporter of disability, trans, and queer campaigns, and has publicly shown her support by displaying the rainbow and transgender flags next to their name on Twitter/X[78]; "while it could be speculated that this may indicate either allyship or Shirono being queer themselves, there is no confirmation of either of these theories."[79] *I Want to Be a Wall*, while differing in artistic style and narrative focus, also grapples with asexuality, particularly in the context of relationships and the emotional intricacies that arise from living in a society hegemonically structured around compulsory sexuality. Shirono in *I Want to Be a Wall* presents a nuanced exploration of asexuality, relationships, and the complexities of human connection within the context of a lavender marriage, academically referred to as a queerplatonic relationship, and to some understood as a Boston marriage: referring to Henry James's

[78] Twitter/X profile, https://twitter.com/ShironoHonami (Last access on 7th October 2024).
[79] Ristè, Camil Valerio (2024). With(out) love from Japan: An analysis of the asexual spectrum in Shirono Honami's I want to be the wall and Isaki Uta's Is Love the Answer? PG. 162.

1886 novel *The Bostonians*. The narrative centers on two protagonists, Yuriko and Gakurouta, who enter a marriage of convenience - one absent of romantic or sexual desire - driven by external social pressures and personal motivations to conform to societal expectations [Fig. 11]. Central to the story is the protagonist's internal struggle to reconcile their asexual identity with the allonormativity that pervades the surrounding social environment. Through a process of self-reflection and interactions with their queerplatonic spouse, the protagonist embarks on a journey of reflective asexual acceptance, ultimately finding a small sense of belonging in a society that marginalizes and invalidates her experience.

Przybylo, in *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, argues that framing asexuality through the concept of "sexual attraction" allows for greater visibility of asexual identities alongside other sexual orientations.[80] However, the spectrum of sexuality is not always clear-cut, as asexuality itself encompasses a range of experiences, often residing within "gray areas" that complicate its definition.[81] Asexuality is not easily defined within the traditional framework of sexuality, as it encompasses a range of experiences that resist clear categorization especially in the case of narrative or more specifically asexual narrative. In her work, *Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure*, Elizabeth Hanna Hanson[82] critiques the conventional consumption of marriage as an institution inherently linked to heterosexual monogamy, highlighting its role in legitimizing relationships based on reproduction, benefits, entitlements, and care.[83] Hanson contends that while asexuality exists beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity and can be considered queer, it remains profoundly marginalized, even within queer spaces, due to the pervasive sexual assumptions that continue to shape and delimit social recognition.[84] This erasure is symptomatic of a broader narrative

[80]Przybylo, Ela. (2019*). Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality.* PG. 4
[81]Decker, Julie Sondra. (2015). *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality.* PG. 35.
[82] Elizabeth Hanna Hanson is a scholar whose work focuses on queer theory, asexuality, and the intersection of identity, culture, and sexuality.
[83] Hanson, Elizabeth. (2024). Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure. PG. 277.
[84] Hanson, Elizabeth. (2024). PG. 278.

structure that prioritizes desire - often leading to the reductive interpretation of asexual characters and their uniquely situated asexual experiences. Instead, Hanson advocates for reading narratives that disrupt these assumptions, treating asexuality as a meta-construct that reflects the internal diversity of the asexual community.[85] Such an approach not only allows for a more nuanced understanding of asexual experiences but also challenges traditional narrative frameworks that rely heavily on teleological closure and linear causality.[86]

By centering desire rather than absence, the asexual narrative disrupts the dominant discourse that frames asexuality as a deficiency or absence of sexual attraction. This shift in focus enables a more nuanced exploration of asexuality, one that emphasizes the presence of distinct forms of desire, pleasure, and intimacy.[87] Instead of reinforcing the idea that asexuality is defined by what it lacks, this approach opens up new avenues for understanding asexual identities on their own terms. It allows for a broader conceptualization of intimacy that includes non-sexual forms of connection and acknowledges the complexity of asexual experiences, thereby challenging the traditional pathologization and marginalization of asexuality within both heterosexual and queer frameworks. It is distinctively asexual. This reorientation of asexuality as a distinct and complex form of identity and narrative praxis is reflected in Shirono's narrative, which acknowledges that while some individuals find resonance within clearly defined sexual identity categories, others - particularly those who identify as asexual - encounter significant ambiguity. Such ambiguity often renders their experiences invisible or narratively incomprehensible within a society that defaults to compulsory sexuality. Yuriko, Shirono's protagonist, confronts this dilemma as she faces ridicule and ostracism for failing to conform to the cultural presumption that sexual desire is universal. Her experience

[85] Hanson, Elizabeth. (2024). PG. 284.
[86] IBID.
[87] Kenney, Theresa N. (2024). "#platonicintimacy Asian North American Asexualities and Their Fairytales." PG. 326.

underscores how sexual identity does not always align neatly with societal norms, revealing the tensions asexual individuals face as their experiences become either misunderstood or erased within broader cultural narratives. By shifting focus from narratives of lack to those of desire, a more expansive view of asexual identity emerges within Yuriko - one that highlights the unique ways asexual individuals navigate and reimagine intimacy and fulfillment.

To understand how asexual identities are rendered unintelligible within mainstream narratives, I will examine the role that societal expectations play in constructing our understandings of desire, happiness, and fulfillment within Shirono's narrative through the protagonist Yuriko's asexual context. Shirono's narrative for Yuriko is predisposed to create fantasies that both mimic and resist conventional notions of happiness, challenging the norms of compulsory sexuality and monogamy.[88] Moreover, these cultural imperatives are further reinforced by common assumptions that uphold compulsory sexuality and allonormativity as accepted mainstream practices. Within this mirroring and challenging of ideals, allonormativity builds its narratives on the constructed nature of happiness. Joe Jukes[89] articulates this complexity, describing the self as a "fabulation" within a "matrix of recognition-norms," and "that those norms are built on systems of concept-establishment that default in their entirety to story-spinning."[90] Here, Jukes highlights how identities are formed and recognized through dominant social narratives, which susceptibly reinforce particular modes of essentialism. This realization of the self as a cultural construct, rather than an inherent truth, reaches what Jukes calls a 'queer conclusion.'[91]

[88] Kenney, Theresa N. (2024). "#platonicintimacy Asian North American Asexualities and Their Fairytales." PG. 327

[89] Joe Jukes is a scholar whose work explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and media, with a particular focus on queer theory and asexuality. His research examines how media representations and cultural narratives shape and challenge normative understandings of identity, desire, and relationships.

[90] Jukes, Joe. (2018). "Towards Asexual Theory: Practicing a Queer Accountability of the Non-Sexual." PG. 8.

[91] IBID.

In *I Want to Be a Wall,* Shirono's visual strategies function as a form of resistance, reflecting the asexual protagonist's challenges towards navigating the societal expectations surrounding sexuality. Drawing on Joe Jukes' concept of asexual refusal as articulated in *Toward Asexual Geographies*, I will present Yuriko's narrative progression as a refusal not only of compulsory sexuality but also of the societal norms that dictate intimacy. Asexual refusal "(the saying of no, an embrace of inoperativity or remaining 'still, nothing') takes the form of an exodus, or a turning and moving away from that which is refused."'[92] Yuriko's refusal, rather than being a passive resistance, involves an active reorientation: a moving away from societal expectations and a relocation into a different subject position. As Ahmed discusses in *Queer Phenomenology,* orientations shape how bodies inhabit spaces and how certain identities are rendered visible or invisible based on their alignment with normative structures. She further explains that the process of becoming "straight" requires more than just turning toward the objects and aspirations offered by heterosexual culture; it necessitates turning away from those objects that disrupt or challenge this alignment.[93] Yuriko's shift can be understood as a reorientation that disrupts allonormative trajectories, carving out a space where a queerly nonsexual identity can exist beyond traditional frameworks of sexuality. In this way, the protagonist's movement is not simply a rejection of societal norms but a deliberate turning toward a new mode of selfhood. Through this process, the protagonist transitions from feeling alienated by allonormativity to embracing a form of "queerly nonsexual" identity that transcends traditional frameworks of sexuality. Like the previous case study, the analysis will be divided into three sections: Allonormativity and Body Language, Visual Alienation and Refusal, Queerplatonic Relationships as Kinship. Through these sections, I will demonstrate how the visual imagery in *I Want to Be a Wall* can be understood within an asexual narrative activist

[92]Jukes, Joe. (2024) "Toward Asexual Geographies: Void-Publics and Spaces of Refusal." PG. 190.
[93] Ahmed, Sarah. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others.* PG: 21.

framework, drawing attention to the microaggressions and visual alienation experienced by individuals on the ACE spectrum.

Allonormativity and Body Language

Body language often becomes a powerful tool for representing allonormativity. Characters positioned within or conforming to allonormative frameworks frequently exhibit body language that signifies mutual attraction, intimacy, and closeness through gestures like prolonged eye contact, physical proximity, and open postures. These visual cues can reinforce societal expectations of connection through sexual and romantic attraction, making deviations from these norms appear dissonant or unnatural. For Shirono's representation of Yuriko's asexuality, body language plays a central role in highlighting the characters' hesitation and discomfort in navigating compulsory sexuality. In Figure 12, Yuriko and her husband, Gakurouta, are shown seated across from each other, their positioning and gestures suggesting an unease that reflects uncertainty about their recent marriage. Yuriko's hands, either placed nervously on the table or clenched beneath it, are subtle yet telling indicators of her discomfort, illustrating her hesitance in discussing romantic experiences that she has little familiarity with. These gestures mirror an emotional asexual distance from the subject of romance, emphasizing the struggle both characters face in articulating their inexperience or lack of romantic feelings. To add a layer of vulnerability, we hear her confessional truth with linguistic performativity when she says to Gakurouta, "I've never fallen for someone" [Fig. 12]. By vocalizing this truth, Yuriko not only confesses but also performs rejection of compulsory romantic narratives, thus asserting their selfhood in a context where such an identity may be marginalized. Her downward glance not only affirms her hesitation but also reflects the tension of sharing something that deviates from normative expectations; both the fear and reluctance of acknowledging difference from the standard and the cautiousness in admitting one's divergence from societal expectations.

This scene can be analyzed through Ahmed's concept of "heterosexual happiness" as a script that acts as a "straightening devices' functioning to orient aspirations and desires toward alliances felt and lived 'in the right way, toward the right kind of thing.'"[94] These scripts not only shape how individuals navigate their desires but also how they interpret what is considered the 'right' kind of relationship; in this case, through heterosexual and romantic engagement. In the context of asexuality, these normative frameworks produce an inherent tension, as they often exclude those who do not conform to these 'traditional' sexual scripts. Ben Bradley's[95] assertion that "frameworks shape and influence how individuals perceive themselves and others, and they often define what is considered 'normal' or 'acceptable' within a given cultural context," grounds this analysis within a broader socio-cultural context.[96] For asexual individuals, these frameworks impose significant challenges in affirming their ACE-ness, as they exist in opposition to dominant cultural narratives that prioritize sexual attraction as a marker of personhood. Asexual individuals, then, must contend with these systems, which influence their ability to both affirm their identities and realize their sense of self.[97] As a result, individuals who identify as asexual may experience a pressure to either conform to these norms or internalize the notion that their identity is less valid, incomplete, or even abnormal. Accordingly, Yuriko's confession in Figure 12 becomes a confrontation with the limitations of these normative frameworks, highlighting the personal struggle of existing outside their prescribed boundaries.

Building upon this analysis of normative frameworks, the subsequent figures 13 and 14 offer further insights into how these constraints manifest as a tension between allonormativity and

[94] Ahmed, Sarah. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness.* PG. 96.
[95] Ben Bradley is a scholar whose work explores themes of queer theory, asexuality, and the intersectionality of identity. His research critically examines how sexual and gender norms shape and limit our understanding of non-normative sexualities, with a particular focus on asexuality as both a lived experience and a conceptual framework.
[96] Brandley, Ben. (2023). "Ace Awakening: Communication Sources That Lead to Affirming Asexual-Spectrum Identities." PG. 25
[97] IBID.

Yuriko's struggle to affirm her identity specifically in relation to their asexuality. These images visually convey the isolation and discomfort that asexual individuals experience as they navigate societal frameworks that prioritize allonormativity as the default. Her partner's observation, "See? You don't react when I touch you… and the way you look at me isn't different from how you look at everyone else" [Fig.13], encapsulates the complexity of asexuality, a spectrum where individuals may experience romantic attraction and pursue relationships, yet feel disconnected from conventional expressions of love. Asexual people can identify across a range of orientations, some "may experience romantic attraction, pursue romantic relationships, and have (straight, gay, lesbian, or bi) romantic orientations or may alternatively be aromantic."[98] The distinction between sexual and romantic attraction is crucial in understanding asexuality; it highlights that asexuality isn't merely defined as absence of sexual relationships, "[it] is not limited to the kinds of relationships that asexual people do not form but is more importantly about the kinds of relationships that do constitute asexual/ace people's social lives."[99] This lack of distinction between the two accentuates a demand for conventional expressions of love - an expectation that Yuriko finds herself unable to meet with the former partner featured in Figure 13. The visual representation of her former partner as faceless, either turned away or lacking defining features, symbolizes his emotional distance and reinforces his role as a conduit for normative romantic ideals. His facelessness mirrors Yuriko's own dulled, downcast eyes, and timid body language, which convey her discomfort and hesitation as she struggles to articulate feelings that defy conventional understandings of love to an allosexual. Her brief, stammered replies reflect the inner conflict of someone who feels pressure to conform to standards she cannot fully embody. Her partner, defined solely through his disembodied gestures,

[98] Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. (2015) "Making sense in and of the asexual community: Navigating relationships and identities in a context of resistance."PG:170
[99] Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. (2015). PG: 175

becomes less a person than a symbolic representation of intimacy, casting Yuriko's inability to reciprocate within an allonormative framework that she cannot align with.

Later, on the left side of the panel, her coworker approaches her, initiating the only verbal space where Yuriko can voice her feelings. Her co-worker's comment, "I heard you guys broke up. You and Makita-Kun from general affairs," [Fig. 14] further situates Yuriko's experience within a context where even her attempts at self-expression are subtly shaped by external assumptions about love and relational expectations. In Figure 14, the conversation between Yuriko and her coworker reveals the character's inner conflict with societal expectations of romantic love. Yuriko haltingly confesses, "I've…never fallen in love before. Th-that feeling of having your heart race because of someone else … I don't really understand it. I've always… been like that now that I think about it." As Yuriko struggles to articulate her lack of romantic attraction, her coworker is visually cropped, her eyes unseen and mouth drawn into a frown, signaling her disapproval. Yuriko continues, stating, "Not with men…not with women… Not with anyone. I don't get what it means to 'love' someone as more than a friend." Here, the manga invokes normative cultural assumptions that reinforce the belief that romantic love is essential to the human experience. Yuriko's posture, slouched with downcast eyes, and her isolated positioning against an empty background emphasize her internal struggle -which manifest physically as well - with her divergence from these social expectations, as well as the loneliness it brings. Asexual people "are subject to other people systematically devaluing their most important (romantic and non-romantic) relationships or failing to recognize them altogether."[100] Her body language conveys hesitation and self-doubt, reflecting a sense of internalized ace phobia, suggesting that she feels inadequate or "wrong" for her experiences. Her co-worker's response - cutting her off with, "What're you talking about? You're joking, right? Don't tell me you're serious"- flickers with the social invalidation Yuriko faces, reinforcing the expectation that romantic attraction

[100] Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. (2015). PG. 176.

is universal. Only at this moment does Yuriko look directly at her coworker, her eyes blank and unshaded in shock, conveying the impact of this easy dismissal on her sense of self and ACE-ness.

Visual Alienation and Refusal

Further drawing on Jukes' concept of refusal "as an initiatory gesture for an asexual politic"[101], entailing a shift away from the pressures of normative spaces, Yuriko's emotional detachment can be interpreted as a deliberate move from the psychological and emotional weight of conforming to amatonormativity[102]. Her visual alienation becomes a form of in-operativity, a stillness that symbolizes her refusal to engage in conventional expectations. Refusal for the asexual subject seeks to "expand the conceptual space asexual refusal might occupy, and to illuminate some spatial, re-locative, tools through which asexual relationalities might be apprehended."[103] Yet, this refusal is not merely passive; rather, it represents an active reorientation toward a more authentic self-understanding. By rejecting the parameters of compulsory sexuality, Yuriko not only resists traditional labels but also begins to create space for nontraditional forms of intimacy to emerge. Figure 15 captures a younger Yuriko at a party, visually isolated from the rest of the group as she sits alone on a couch. The right side of the manga panel depicts her as physically separated from the group, yet the conversation continues to center around her; visually, this arrangement serves as a representation of her social alienation. Comments about her lack of romantic experience fill the left panel, ranging from "No matter how much I insisted, she didn't want a boyfriend" to "She's wasting her life" and "Should I see if I can be the one to change her mind" [Fig.15]? These remarks, which become increasingly critical, progressively isolate Yuriko from the scene; as the dialogue intensifies, the background fades, until she is depicted alone in darkness, enclosed by jagged, harsh speech

[101] Jukes, Joe. (2024). "Toward Asexual Geographies: Void-Publics and Spaces of Refusal." PG: 188
[102] Amatonormativity is the assumption that all human beings pursue love or romance, especially by means of a monogamous long-term relationship. The term was coined by Elizabeth Brake, in her book *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law.*
[103] IBID.

bubbles that encircle her figure. The left panel's progression of imagery emphasizes this alienation further: as such, Yuriko is abstracted in stages - from her whole figure on the couch, to her face, and finally her eyes, which are unusually detailed compared to their dull, shaded state when she is older. Here, her eyes capture the impact of these comments, reflecting the raw vulnerability she endures. Surrounded by these judgmental remarks, Yuriko's inner monologue, "I'm too tired to deny it anymore," reveals her resignation to the social misunderstanding and scrutiny she faces. In line with Jukes' framework, this detachment serves as a refusal to conform to normative demands, marking a "shift in location" away from the psychological environment of expectation. Rather than engaging with societal norms, Yuriko's resignation to the words spoken around her ("I'm too tired to deny it anymore") demonstrates an in-operativity - a stillness in the face of social coercion that allows her to move beyond the confines of normative sexuality without direct confrontation, as she "appears to 'negate,' exceed, or refuse sexual norms.'"[104] Her refusal, therefore, is not passive but represents a quiet reorientation; by choosing not to participate in the sexual economy that dictates her peers' assumptions, Yuriko carves out space for her identity.

In Figures 16 and 17, Yuriko's resistance to societal norms regarding marriage and reproduction further embodies Jukes' concept of refusal, particularly through the visual and emotional toll of rejecting reproductive essentialism. In Figure 16, Yuriko and her husband Gakurouta are silently depicted standing side-by-side after his great-grandmother expresses her desire to live until she meets a great-grandchild, a remark that underscores society's expectation of marriage as a vehicle for procreation [Fig.16]. Though presented as a married couple, Yuriko and Gakurouta can only look down, sharing a heavy silence instead of affirming this reproductive expectation, their downcast gazes a subtle yet powerful visual cue of their discomfort with societal pressures to fulfill the role of childbearing. This silence signifies a non-verbal resistance: a moment of in-operativity

[104] Jukes, Joe. (2024). PG: 186.

where both characters refrain from outwardly contesting these norms but do not engage with them either. In Figure 17, the pressure intensifies as Yuriko's parents react negatively when she confesses, "I'm sorry… But I… have no intention of bearing children." Her mother's response, "No children?! Then why did you even get married?" for a second time reinforces the deeply ingrained expectation of childbearing within heteronormative marriage. This moment forces Yuriko to confront her own motivations, shown through her thought, "Why did I get married?" as she questions the societal scripts that once seemed self-evident. Her father's response, too, reinforces this reproductive essentialism, suggesting that perhaps Yuriko is simply "being too modest" or deferring to her husband [Fig. 17].

This pressure reflects what Ahmed terms "heterosexual happiness," where familial "support" is conditional on conforming to forced heteronormative goals like reproduction, rather than being based on personal choice or identity. As Ahmed writes, "to inherit the family is to inherit the demand to reproduce its form," with the family itself becoming a pressure point, necessary for a good or happy life.[105] In their article "Homonormativity and the Queer Love Story in Love, Simon (2018) and Happiest Season (2020)," Isabella Francis draws on Ahmed's discussion of the "good life," showing how a heterosexist society orients us toward a heterosexual ideal, with family interactions reinforcing the expectation to reproduce that ideal.[106] This queerness, as a resistance to futurism, challenges the normative path, questioning the dominant logic of narrative and symbolic reality. In this way, as Edelman argues in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, queerness emerges as a resistance to the very futurity that the heteronormative structure seeks to impose.[107] The physical

[105] Ahmed, Sara. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness.* PG. 46
[106] Francis, Isabella. (2021). "Homonormativity and the queer love story in Love, Simon (2018) and Happiest Season (2020)." PG: 84.
[107] Edelman, Lee. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* PG: 27.

and emotional strain of this pressure is starkly conveyed through Yuriko's bodily response to these expectations.

Her body language shifts from seated and slightly passive to a total collapse, her form slumping and withdrawing into a small, enclosed space - a literal "box" that becomes a visual metaphor for the containment she feels under societal pressure. This withdrawal reflects an embodied refusal, as she physically retreats into herself from the heteronormative demands placed upon her. The visual focus on her collapsed posture emphasizes the internal toll of rejecting traditional family structures, Yuriko's refusal is not visually shown as outright opposition but of stepping back from, or turning away from, the normative scripts of "heterosexual happiness" in favor of a path aligned with queer asexual futurity. Together, these figures visually embody the essentialist expectations placed on Yuriko and the visual alienation that results when individuals deviate from normative scripts. This alienation becomes a silent protest, a quiet refusal to participate in roles that do not align with their sense of self, positioning Yuriko's experience as one that exists outside the prescriptive, heteronormative narratives of marriage and family life.

Queerplatonic Relationships as Kinship

Kinship and queerplatonic relationships can subvert the essentialist expectations embodied in the asexual figures by offering alternative frameworks for understanding intimacy, connection, and family that exist outside traditional norms.[108] These constructs challenge the prescriptive narratives of marriage and reproduction that dominate societal discourse, allowing characters like Yuriko and Gakurouta to explore identities and relationships that resonate more authentically with their lived experiences. In this narrative, the representation of asexuality is purposefully illustrated through a protagonist who physically occupies allonormative spaces. Within these allonormativity spaces,

[108] Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. (2015) "Making sense in and of the asexual community: Navigating relationships and identities in a context of resistance." PG:176.

Shirono uses visual motifs to encapsulate the protagonist's internalized ace-phobia caused by their alienation. But, contrasting this initial sense of alienation, the narrative shifts towards exploring the kinship and connection that develops between Yuriko and her platonic spouse, Gakurouta. Shirono employs visual cues to depict moments of mutual understanding and emotional intimacy between the two, illustrating their attempts to bridge the gaps in their platonic relationship. Both Yuriko and Gakurouta pretend to be a conventional married couple to maintain appearances with family and friends, using scripts that mimic societal expectations. Yet, through shared interests, food, and life experiences, they form a "found family" that subverts the traditional heterosexual, monogamous, and procreative family model. The story redefines what it means to be a "partner" and challenges rigid gender roles associated with marriage. Yuriko and Gakurouta's relationship, based on mutual care rather than sexual fulfillment, disrupts conventional expectations of what a family unit should look like.[109]

Shirono presents asexual desire as a valid and meaningful form of intimacy in relationships. By doing so, the manga opens space for readers to understand Yuriko's journey toward self-acceptance as a form of personal empowerment, one that resists the pressures of allonormativity. The narrative emphasizes Yuriko's resilience in the face of societal marginalization, offering a hopeful portrayal of those who similarly navigate the complexities of non-normative identities.[110] As Decker notes in the introduction of *The Invisible Orientation*, for some individuals, sexual identity fits easily within well-defined categories, while for others, particularly those in the asexual spectrum, sexual identity exists in a gray area that complicates societal understandings of desire and intimacy.[111] Shirono's narrative deftly navigates this gray area, presenting asexuality as a fulfilling experience,

[109] Ristè, Camil Valerio (2024). "With(out) love from Japan: An analysis of the asexual spectrum in Shirono Honami's I want to be the wall and Isaki Uta's Is Love the Answer?" PG 163
[110] Brandley, Ben. (2023). "Ace Awakening: Communication Sources That Lead to Affirming Asexual-Spectrum Identities." PG. 34
[111] Decker, Julie Sondra. (2015*). The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality.* PG. 35

while critiquing the normative frameworks that marginalize those who do not conform to them. In Figure 18, the narrative captures Yuriko's experience of allonormativity and asexual marginalization through her physical demeanor and visual presentation. In moments of discomfort, she visibly withdraws, her eyes appearing lifeless as she looks downward, with her arms crossed tightly against her body. This posture re-signifies her attempt to shrink away from the external world, encapsulating a desire to disappear rather than confront the discomfort of her situation.

However, beneath this exterior lies a framework of desire that transcends her asexual identity, specifically in relation to her platonic spouse, Gakurouta. As CJ DeLuzio Chasin suggests, "asexual people are forging their own discourses and ways of being, resisting against the dominant societal centrality of the (hetero)sexual partnership."[112] " This resistance becomes evident in a pivotal moment when Yuriko unexpectedly reaches out to grasp Gakurouta's hand, her sudden movement causing a loud bang against the table that makes him flinch.. This gesture, while impulsive, indicates a critical shift in her emotional state. While her eyes remain somewhat lifeless, her spoken words come through with clarity, contrasting sharply with her previous interactions marked by hesitation and ambiguity. She remarks, "Ah ~ like I thought. It doesn't seem to be the case with you. Doing this with family more or less is fine." Despite her discomfort with physical contact in general, Yuriko's willingness to reach out to Gakurouta suggests a burgeoning sense of trust. Her internal reflection - "It's fine…with this person…He's someone…who could understand me" - reinforces the notion that her connection with Gakurouta is rooted in mutual understanding and emotional intimacy; acknowledging a desire for connection, even in the absence of sexual attraction [Fig.18]. Yuriko and Gakurouta's relationship can be understood as a queerplatonic marriage. It defies *conventional* expectations of romantic love, linearity, and time commitment traditionally associated with marriage.

[112]Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. (2015) "Making sense in and of the asexual community: Navigating relationships and identities in a context of resistance." PG:176

As they contemplate their future - five to ten years - they recognize that their union is not rooted in romantic love, nor will it develop in that direction. Instead, they must consider what their lives will look like moving forward: will they continue to live together, and if so, in what capacity [Fig. 19]? Yuriko articulates this dynamic when she tells Gakurouta, "I'm on your side. We can't have a romantic relationship ...but…we can support each other" [Fig.20]. Her statement embodies the essence of their kinship; while it lacks romantic elements, it is built on a foundation of mutual support and understanding. Accordingly, Yuriko's affirmation of their status as husband and wife further underscores the complexity of their bond, one that embraces emotional intimacy without conforming to societal norms of romantic love.

Refusal necessitates a change in location, and Shirono skillfully illustrates this transformation through Yuriko's evolving kinship with Gakurouta. Narratively we are presented with a gradual reorientation toward a new subject position; her and Gakurouta's partnership becomes one grounded in mutual care rather than traditional sexual or romantic desire. This alone can be seen as a refusal of allonormativity, which, as Jukes suggests, requires the abandonment of a subject position that conforms to societal norm; "performances that animate sexual and social subject positions also re-work the very spaces in which they are situated, and by which they are comprised."[113] Yuriko and Gakurouta's kinship is both a reflection of, and an influence on the context in which they exist; together, they occupy a queerly asexual - nonsexual - space, one where intimacy is redefined through mutual respect, emotional support, and personal growth. Their relationship is a relocation into a non-normative subject position that opens up possibilities for new forms of connection that challenge conventional ideas of intimacy and desire amongst a married couple.

[113] Jukes, Joe. (2024). "Toward Asexual Geographies: Void-Publics and Spaces of Refusal." PG: 183.

SECTION 2: ***Manga as a Platform for Asexual Visibility***

The integration of asexual characters in manga holds significant potential to contribute to global discourses on asexuality by challenging the deeply ingrained allonormative visual assumptions prevalent across many cultures. By depicting asexual identities in accessible and popular mediums such as manga, these narratives have the capacity to reduce the disruptive nature of identity confirmation. Inclusive representations offer a space where individuals can see their identities reflected, validating their experiences and affirming their sense of self. Moreover, for Western readers, engaging with Japanese visual culture provides an opportunity to learn more progressive and nuanced views of asexual subjects, expanding their understanding of asexuality beyond the dominant cultural narratives they are often exposed to. Manga's ability to foster visibility and understanding of asexuality extends beyond its immediate cultural context, resonating on an international scale. This positions manga as a powerful medium for promoting inclusivity and broadening the scope of human nonsexualities depicted in art.

As Matthew Rampley emphasizes, the "affective operations" of art create embodied shifts in perception, transmitting affect in ways that resist immediate conceptualization. Affect, in this sense, is not merely a reaction but an "energetic intensity" that bridges sensation and interpretation, transforming how subjects experience art.[114] This aligns with the idea that art's materiality - its composition, tone, and visual language - produces an affective charge that fosters both individual and collective modes of engagement.[115] The affective power of manga, then, lies in its capacity to trouble entrenched assumptions about desire, intimacy, and relationality, prompting readers to reconsider and reimagine asexuality beyond the constraints of allonormativity. How does representation move

[114] Rampley, Matthew. "Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observation." PG: 2.
[115] Bal, Mieke. (2019). "Affectively Effective: Affect as an Artistic-Political Strategy." In How to Do Things with Affects. PG: 193.

beyond mere depiction into a space of performativity? As Bal further notes, "affect enjoys analytical advantages that 'representation' does not" by facilitating the agency of art, enabling works to actively intervene in dominant discourses: certain images and narratives unsettle us, compelling us to act or rethink our assumptions.[116] In the context of asexuality, this section examines whether artistic portrayals empower readers by fostering awareness and acceptance or alienate them.

Evocations of ambiguity play a critical role in the representation of asexuality in contemporary manga. Rather than relying on essentialist notions that equate asexuality with roboticism, as discussed by Brandley and Dehnert in their article "I am not a Robot, I am Asexual," these works diffuse asexual identities through imagery that prioritizes community and connection. Brandley and Dehnert critique how asexual and aromantic individuals are often depicted as robotic, alien, or monstrous in allonormative discourses, and these representations often reduce the complexity of asexual identities.[117] In contrast, these manga offers more nuanced portrayals that emphasize relational and human aspects of asexual existence. Such visual strategies hold significant potential in combating acephobia and challenging allonormativity by articulating the fundamental experiences of asexual individuals: moreover, these depictions provide a vital framework for fostering a sense of belonging within the asexual community. The impact of these representations, though often subtle and diffuse, is particularly noteworthy in their seemingly innocent portrayal of asexual characters. These portrayals are situated within a broader cultural landscape marked by misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge regarding asexuality; and it is through the discourse of pictorial narrative, that these manga emerge as effective tools for documenting and exploring asexuality.

[116] IBID..
[117] Brandley, Ben and Marco Dehnert. (2024) "I am not a Robot, I am Asexual": A Qualitative Critique of Allonormative Discourses of Ace and Aro Folks as Robots, Aliens, Monsters.'

These mangaka harness the credibility of the manga format to empower one of the most vulnerable and misunderstood sexual orientations, offering a visual strategy that advances both visibility and inclusivity for asexual individuals. These works highlight the nuanced experiences of their protagonists, offering both individual and collective reflections on the complexities of asexual identity. Someone-San in *Our Dreams at Dusk* and Yuriko in *I Want to Be a Wall* are critical representations that resist the pervasive erasure of asexual narratives in popular culture. Their stories not only challenge societal expectations but also illuminate how readers engage with these characters in ways that emphasize the importance of such representation. Readers' varied interpretations underscore the multifaceted nature of asexuality and its depiction in contemporary media, reaffirming manga's role in fostering dialogue about sexual orientation and identity. By presenting multidimensional characters who navigate their asexual identities in complex ways, these manga series make meaningful contributions to both Japanese and global understandings of asexuality. These ace-affirming narratives have the potential to inspire broader conversations about intimacy and relationships, promoting a more inclusive framework for conceptualizing identity and fostering a sense of belonging for asexual individuals.

In this section, I will examine the extent to which the inclusion of asexual characters in these manga expands or limits asexual representation by introducing alternative frameworks that challenge assumptions about normative sexuality.[118] A key area of analysis will be the responses and interpretations of readers: How do individuals connect with these characters and their stories? What emotions do these portrayals elicit? And how do these representations contribute to broader conversations about asexuality? To clarify this impact, I will analyze independently written reviews posted on personal blogs, examining both positive reactions and critiques. These reviews, often

[118] Dawson, M., McDonnell, L., & Scott, S. (2016). Negotiating the boundaries of intimacy: The personal lives of asexual people. PG. 356.

discovered through search engines and among the first encountered by potential readers, serve as pivotal reference points that shape initial impressions of thematic depth, narrative quality, and resonance. For undecided readers, these responses function as a guide in determining whether these narratives align with their interests or expectations. This compilation of reviews from readers will explore how differing reader perspectives shape understandings of asexual representation. In particular, I will examine whether these artistic portrayals empower readers by fostering awareness and acceptance or alienate them, especially those unfamiliar with asexuality. By addressing how these readers are engaging with these narratives, the emotions they evoke, and the ways they contribute to broader discussions of asexuality, this section aims to uncover the deeper implications of these works.

2.1: Reader Reviews of *Our Dreams at Dusk*

The manga *Our Dreams at Dusk* by Yuhki Kamatani has garnered significant attention for its nuanced portrayal of queer identities and complex emotional landscapes. Reader reviews provide invaluable insights into how diverse identities are represented and interpreted; this section analyzes several reviews, focusing on recurring themes of representation, authenticity, and reader connection to the characters. The reviews examined here reflect key themes such as the representation of asexuality/aromanticism, character depth, and the spectrum of queer identities. These themes highlight the varied reader experiences and interpretations, emphasizing the importance of authenticity in manga's visual and thematic choices.

In one review, YurisTargirl reflects on the character of Someone-san, particularly their asexual/aromantic identity. The reviewer expresses uncertainty regarding the authenticity of this representation, stating, "I don't have much experience or first-hand knowledge of asexuality/aromanticism… it felt like their asexuality/aromanticism was carried to a very extreme

place that did not feel real."[119] This perspective raises important questions about the portrayal of marginalized identities in media, especially in terms of how non-asexual readers may expect representations to align with their own understanding of what feels "real." Rather than calling for a more authentic depiction, this situation underscores the problem with the very ideal of authenticity itself. It reflects the pressure asexual individuals may feel to conform to an idealized image of their identity, reinforcing the need to reject the notion that there is a singular, "authentic" way to represent asexuality.

Helen's review offers a contrasting view, describing Someone-san as more of a "force of nature or a whimsical spirit"[120] rather than a grounded character. This characterization choice invites discussion on how such depictions influence reader engagement with the narrative. The distinction between fantastical and relatable characters can significantly affect how audiences connect to the story and its themes, prompting a deeper exploration of what it means to embody a queer identity.

Another review by Books Real When Shared emphasizes the remarkable diversity present in Our Dreams at Dusk, noting that it encompasses a wide range of identities, including transgender and aromantic characters. The reviewer asserts, "This story is not only about being gay... the author included a lot of diversity."[121]Such representation fosters a sense of belonging and recognition among readers, illustrating the importance of diverse narratives in media. By showcasing varied experiences, the manga resonates with a broader audience, reinforcing the idea that queer stories are multifaceted and richly layered.

Flamwenco Girl's piece in 12 Days of Anime: Indispensable Asexuality in Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare highlights the theme of connection in the story, stating, "Someone-san

[119] YuriMother. (2024). Shimanami Tasogare - LGBTQ Review. The Holy Mother of Yuri.
[120] Helen. (2019). Our Dreams At Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 1 Review. TheOASG. The Organization of Anti-Social Geniuses.
[121] Samuele. (2020)."Our Dreams at Dusk" Series by Yuhki Kamatani – Review. Books Real When Shared.

symbolizes the message of Shimanami Tasogare: you may not be able to fully understand someone, but you can connect to and respect them."[122] This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding diverse experiences, illustrating that personal connections can transcend differences in identity. Tasuku's journey in coming to terms with his own attraction serves as a reminder that one cannot impose their experiences on others, showcasing the rich tapestry of identity present in the narrative.

Additionally, a review from Yuri Mother reflects on the character of Somebody, resonating with those who struggle to fit into traditional labels. The reviewer states, "I am queer, as a person who falls under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, but no more than that."[123] This sentiment underscores the complexities of identity, emphasizing that not everyone feels comfortable or represented by specific labels. This highlights the inclusive nature of Our Dreams at Dusk, where various identities are validated and explored.

The review from Anime Feminist further underscores the authenticity brought by Kamatani, who identifies as asexual and nonbinary. The reviewer shares, "As an ace, X-gender (nonbinary) author… I still found myself connecting to each and every character's personal struggles."[124] This connection illustrates the value of authentic representation in literature, as it resonates deeply with readers who share similar identities. The interplay between the author's own experiences and the narratives presented enriches the storytelling, allowing for a more genuine exploration of identity and belonging.

[122] Flamenco Girl. (2018). 12 Days of Anime: Indispensable Asexuality in Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare. Coherent Cats.
[123] YuriMother. (2024). Shimanami Tasogare - LGBTQ Review. The Holy Mother of Yuri.
[124] Dani,M. (2019). Our Dreams at Dusk and the process of healing through found families. Anime Feminist.

2.2: Reader Reviews of *I Want to Be a Wall*

In her review for *Women Write About Comics*, Paulina Przystupa describes the relationship between Gaku and Yuriko as one that transcends traditional romantic boundaries. She notes, “It isn’t not a love story... But it’s not exactly, not romantic.”[125] This nuanced understanding highlights how the characters dedicate themselves to a caring partnership without the typical expectations of romance. The story allows for moments of mutual appreciation, such as when Yuriko realizes, “They say ‘like marries like’?”, reinforcing the idea that relationships can thrive on affection and understanding without romantic attraction.

Josh Piedra’s review for *The Outer Haven* echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the manga’s laid-back, relatable storytelling. He appreciates how the narrative addresses real-life situations and emotions “without forcing it down your throat,” suggesting that the manga is more focused on telling a good story than pushing an agenda.[126] This approach allows readers to engage with the characters' experiences authentically, making it a pleasant and comfortable read.
Briana Lawrence, writing for *The Mary Sue*, underscores the clarity of Yukiko's identity as an asexual character, stating, “I Want to Be a Wall isn’t a story where you have to tilt your head and wonder if someone is ace; it’s stated plainly in the synopsis and in the story.[127] This openness fosters a connection with readers who might see reflections of their own experiences in Yukiko’s journey of self-discovery. The narrative affirms that love and care can manifest in various forms, showcasing that even within a platonic framework, deep emotional bonds can flourish.

Sakura Eries, in her review for *Fandom Post*, notes the poignant moments that arise as Gaku and Yuriko navigate their pretend marriage, describing them as “co-conspirators in a pretend

[125] Przystupa, Paulina. (2022). REVIEW: “I Want To Be a Wall” Is a Winner. Women Write About Comics. Retrieved June, 2nd 2024
[126] Piedra, Josh. (2022). Manga Review: I Want to Be a Wall Vol. 1. The Outerhaven.
[127] Lawrence, Briana. (2022). ‘I Want To Be a Wall’s’ Ace Protagonist Only Likes Romance in Fiction, and I Love Her. The Mary Sue.

marriage because they're social misfits."[128]This insight touches on the characters' feelings of alienation, particularly Yuriko's introspection regarding her fujoshi hobby and her struggle to fit in. Their partnership, marked by understanding and support, provides a comforting narrative for those who feel out of place in traditional societal roles.

As the series progresses, Sarah from *Anime UK News* remarks on the character development seen in the second volume, which offers deeper insights into Yuriko's experience as asexual. This continued exploration allows readers to engage with the characters on a more profound level, fostering empathy and understanding of their unique challenges. [129]

Finally, Kate Sánchez's review highlights the emotional weight of the story, noting that it portrays a love that deviates from conventional expectations. She writes, "While Yuriko is grappling with embracing that she isn't broken because she is asexual, Gakurouta is trying his best to hold back his romantic feelings."[130]This dynamic emphasizes the complexities of love and identity, reminding readers that relationships can be meaningful even without traditional romance.

2.3: Synthesizing Findings and Insights

In *Our Dreams at Dusk*, the diverse cast of LGBTQIA+ characters -including the asexual embodiment of Someone-San - engages with themes of identity, acceptance, and community. The story showcases the complexities of queer identities, emphasizing that being queer is not solely about romantic attraction. Characters like Someone-San exemplify how asexuality can manifest in ways that challenge conventional narratives, offering a nuanced portrayal that resonates deeply with readers. This narrative encourages a broader understanding of what it means to connect with others, regardless of romantic involvement. Similarly, *I Want to Be a Wall* centers on a married couple - an

[128] Eries, Sakura. (2022). Manga Review: I Want to Be a Wall Vol. #1. The Fandom Post: Anime, Movies, Comics, Entertainment & More.
[129] Sara. (2023). I Want to Be a Wall Volume 2 Review. Anime UK News.
[130] Sánchez, Kate. (2022). REVIEW: 'I Want to be a Wall' Volume 1. But Why Tho?

asexual woman and a gay man - whose relationship is grounded in care and mutual support rather than romantic attraction. This portrayal shifts the focus away from traditional romantic tropes, presenting a narrative that affirms the validity of non-romantic relationships. The characters' journey towards self-acceptance and understanding is a powerful representation of the asexual experience, reinforcing the notion that love can exist in various forms, even outside the confines of romance.

Interpreting reader reviews is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of asexual representation in manga such as *Our Dreams at Dusk* and *I Want to Be a Wall.* These reviews offer critical insights into how audiences engage with characters and narratives, particularly in relation to their own experiences with asexuality and queer identities. Many readers express a profound sense of validation and connection with characters who navigate their identities outside of normative frameworks, underscoring the importance of authentic and nuanced representation. Moreover, these reviews frequently highlight the complexity of relationships depicted in these works - such as the non-romantic yet deeply intimate bonds in *I Want to Be a Wall* - which actively challenge conventional narratives centered on romantic and sexual fulfillment. Beyond individual storytelling, these manga serve as vital educational tools, fostering greater awareness and understanding of asexual identities while contesting the marginalization and misconceptions that often surround them. By centering asexual experiences, both *Our Dreams at Dusk* and *I Want to Be a Wall* not only empower readers but also provoke critical conversations about the representation of asexuality in contemporary media. Reader responses reveal both the strengths of these narratives and areas where further depth and complexity could enhance representation. Through analyzing these perspectives, this study deepens our understanding of the affective resonance of these stories, the efficacy of their portrayals, and the broader societal attitudes they engage with.

Conclusion: ***Final Thoughts on the Importance of Asexual Representation in Manga***

> "At what expense does asexuality become interesting or accessible? Must it be presented as a spectacular object of fascination in order for it to be interesting and desirable? Must it again be subsumed within a language system that cannot account for it in order for it to be made accessible?"
>
> - Karli June Cerankowski, *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*

By way of conclusion, I briefly offer my own positionality as a practicing art historian, a printmaker, and as someone who identifies as asexual. Ace Week, also known as Asexual Awareness Week, is an annual campaign that takes place during the last full week of October. In October of 2023, during my first semester as a graduate student in art history, I wanted to create a post in celebration of Ace Week. This was just a small, fun way to highlight practicing asexual artists. This led me to conduct some research. Firstly, I encountered a 2021 post announcing that the "Asexual Artists" platform was still on hiatus and would "no longer have a presence on Tumblr due to the constant cyberbullying and harassment the creator had experienced since going on hiatus." I also found a Reddit thread, last active four years ago, titled "any other asexual artists out there?", as well as a 2020 AVEN forum thread titled "Ace Artists? - Visibility and Education Projects." Finally, there was a Wikipedia page titled "List of people on the asexual spectrum." These resources suggested that while interest in asexual artists does exist, it appears fleeting, often disappearing before gaining momentum. Moreover, there were few credible and established sources; so, without practicing extensive academic research…I was unable to find a well-known artist to share for Ace Week. So, with this context in mind, I would like to conclude this thesis with a reevaluation of what has been discussed. There is an academic need to develop beyond this and engage in "asexual literacies in order to learn how to read absences for their asexual possibilities" and to "[recognize] the fullness of nonsexual events and intimacies that revalue asexuality as not mere absence but as an expression of different desires and

pleasures."[131] How can we extend academic theory toward pluralities?[132] How can we consider alternative manifestations of asexual identity through art?

Asexuality remains one of the most misunderstood and underrepresented sexual orientations, both in academic discourse and popular media. But, *Our Dreams at Dusk* and *I Want to Be a Wall* illuminate the nuanced ways asexuality can be depicted visually through a culturally significant and globally influential art form such as manga. The two manga we studied are endowed with great provocative powers and break some of our culture's most fundamental allonormative taboos. By doing so, it addresses a critical gap in the literature and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of nonsexual diversity. Asexuality is often misunderstood due to its deviation from societal norms that equate sexual desire with personal fulfillment and identity. This misunderstanding is exacerbated within the realm of arts, where asexual characters are either absent or misrepresented, often depicted as stunted or in need of "fixing." These portrayals reinforce a harmful stereotype and contribute to the marginalization of asexual individuals. It is precisely the lack of accurate and positive representations which perpetuates a limited view of human asexuality, ignoring the rich diversity of experiences that exist beyond allonormativity. By examining Yuhki Kamatani's *Our Dreams at Dusk* and Honami Shirono's *I Want to be a Wall*, as case studies, my thesis explored how manga can act as narrative activism, creating a space for asexual identities to emerge through visual culture. In these manga, the seemingly straightforward portrayals of asexual characters carry an implicit impact, as both mangaka attempt to challenge allonormativity despite the limited alternative artistic representations of the asexual currently available.

However, this research calls for continuous critical engagement with narratives that seek to depict asexuality. As the representation of asexuality continues to evolve within contemporary

[131] Cerankowski, Karli June. (2014). Illegible: Asexualities in Media, Literature, and Performance. PG. 3.
[132] Pryzbolo, Ela (2011). "Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety." PG 456-457.

artistic practice, it is imperative for artists to remain attuned to the implications of their portrayals: to authentically show the lived experiences of the asexual within the art and narrative. To better understand the implications of art as asexual resistance, future studies could look more closely at asexuality using the methodology of formalism. Admittedly, asexual theory is currently stuck in a complex process that has more to do with defending itself than exploring its futurity. By displaying the signs of asexuality and challenging its common misunderstandings through visual imagery, the aim is to show that asexual identity is not inherently transgressive. Rather than being framed as deviant or disruptive, asexuality can be depicted in a way that resists the allonormative taboo. Further research is needed to explore how specific signifiers associated with asexuality can be employed as a methodology to resist transgression in relation to the allonormative taboo, ultimately enabling the creation of works that affirm asexuality without reinforcing its perceived deviance.

Figures

Figure 1 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 1. Original release date, December 11, 2015. English release date, May 7, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

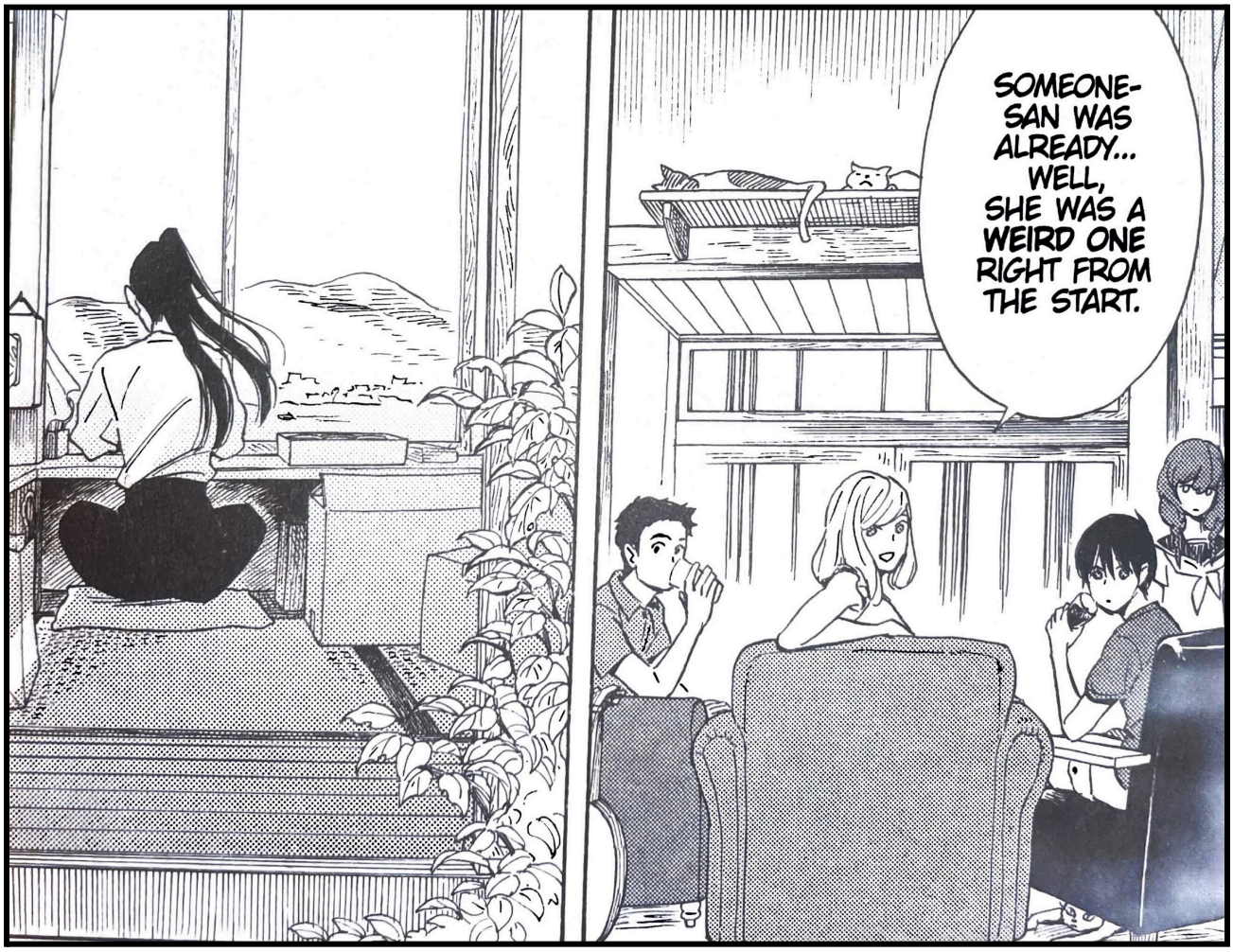

Figure 2 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 1. Original release date, December 11, 2015. English release date, May 7, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

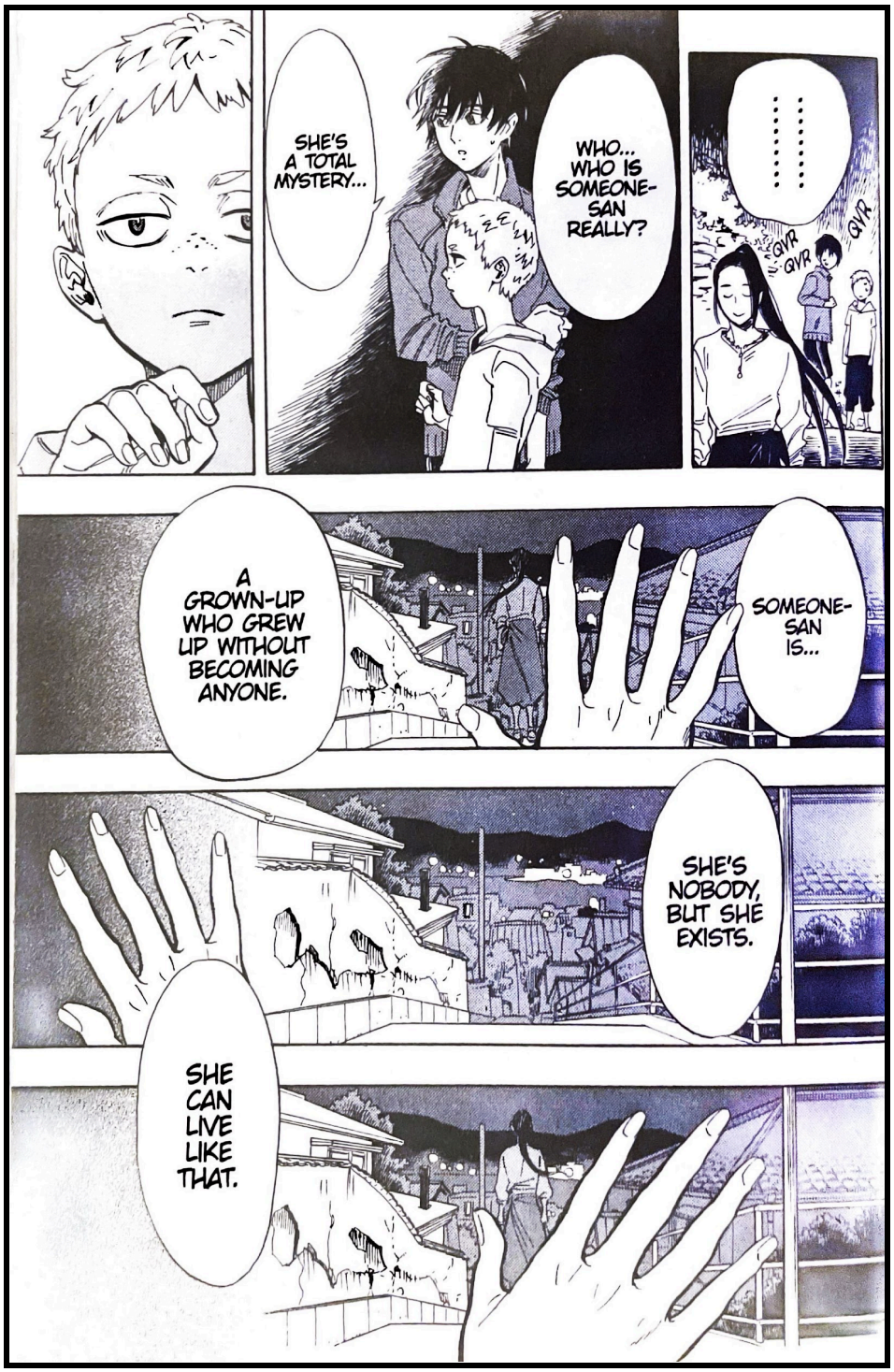

Figure 3 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 2. Original release date, October 12, 2016. English release date, July 23, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

Figure 4 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 4. Original release date, July 19, 2018. English release date, December 17, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

Figure 5 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 1. Original release date, December 11, 2015. English release date, May 7, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

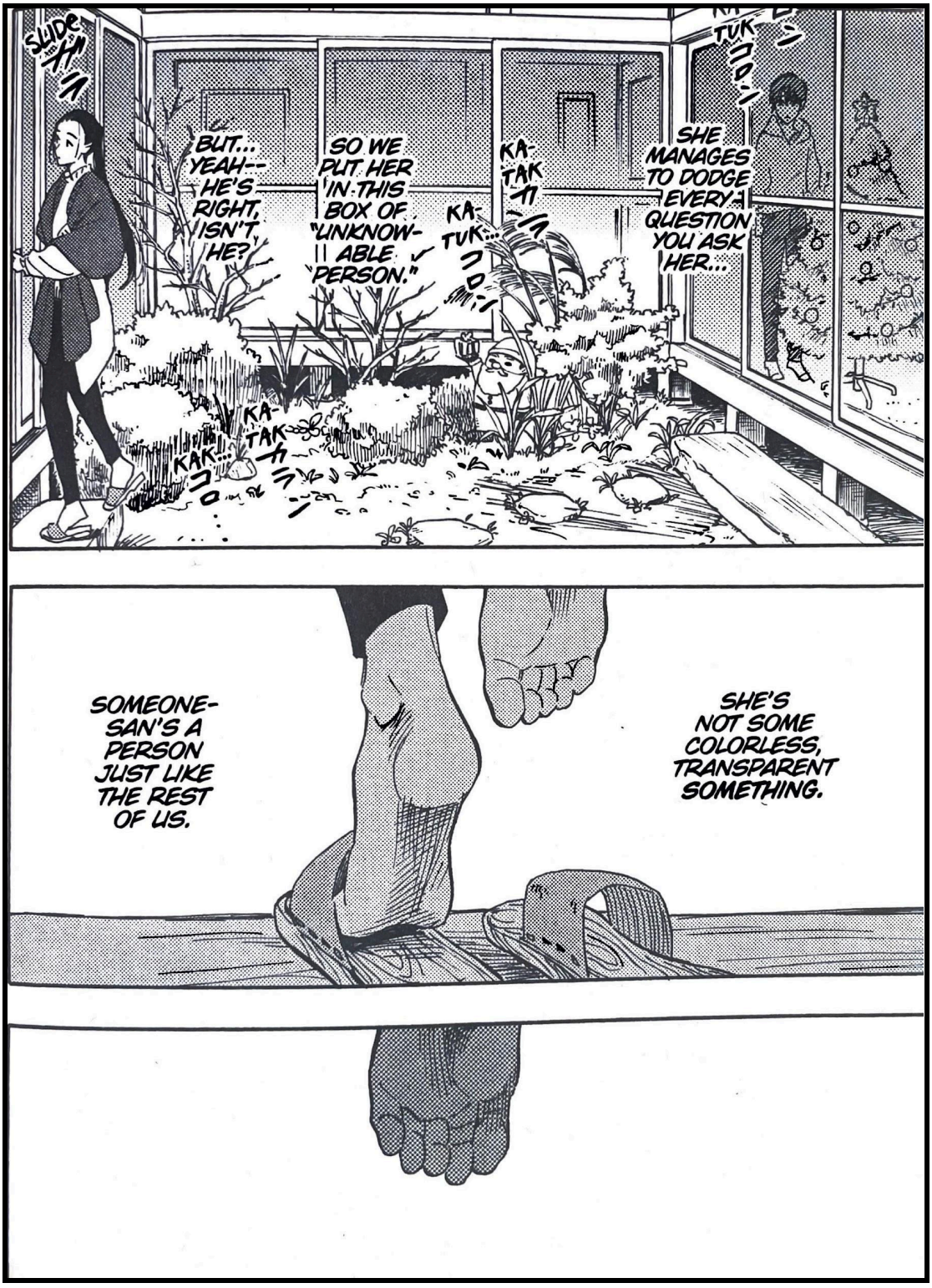

Figure 6 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 2. Original release date, October 12, 2016. English release date, July 23, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

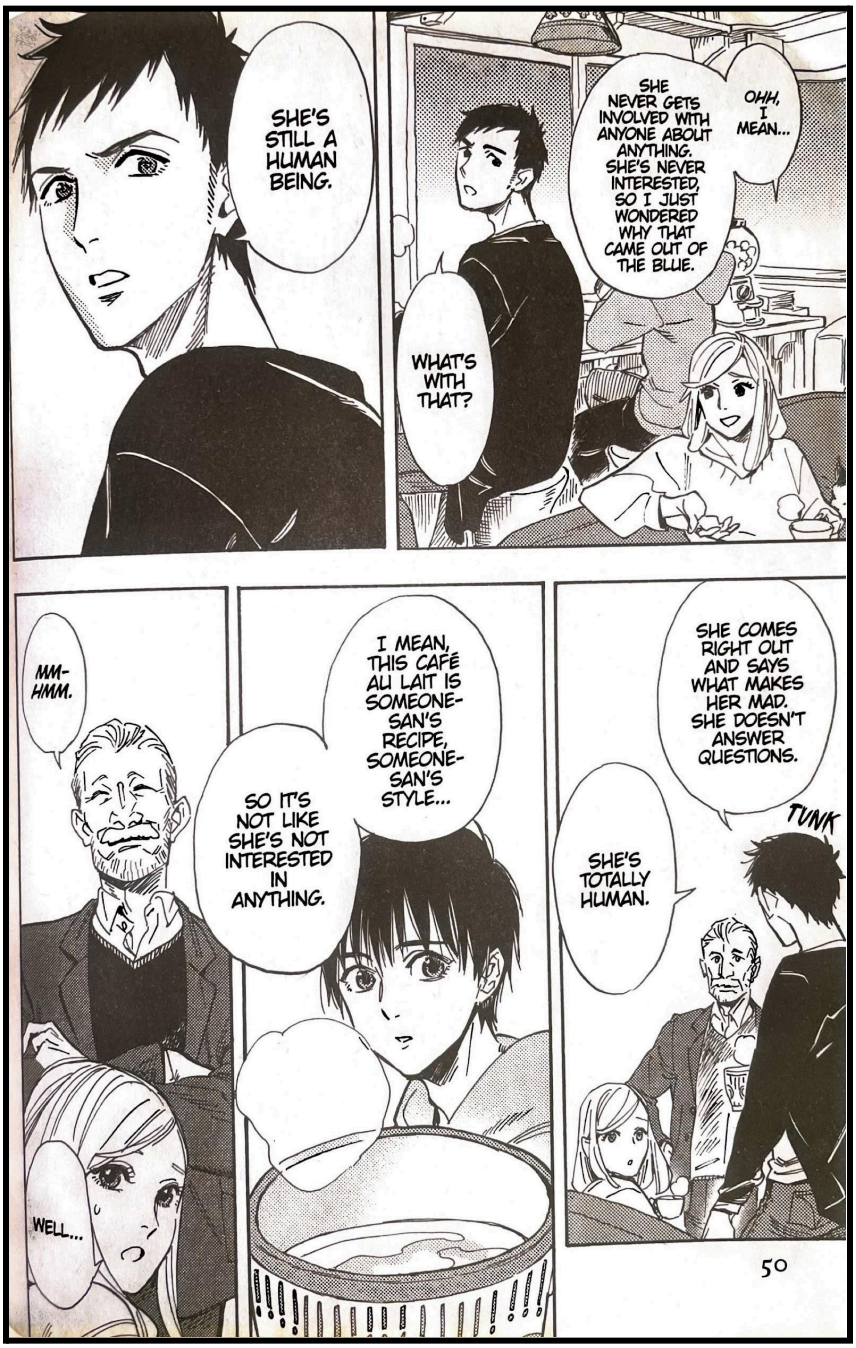

Figure 7 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 4. Original release date, July 19, 2018. English release date, December 17, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

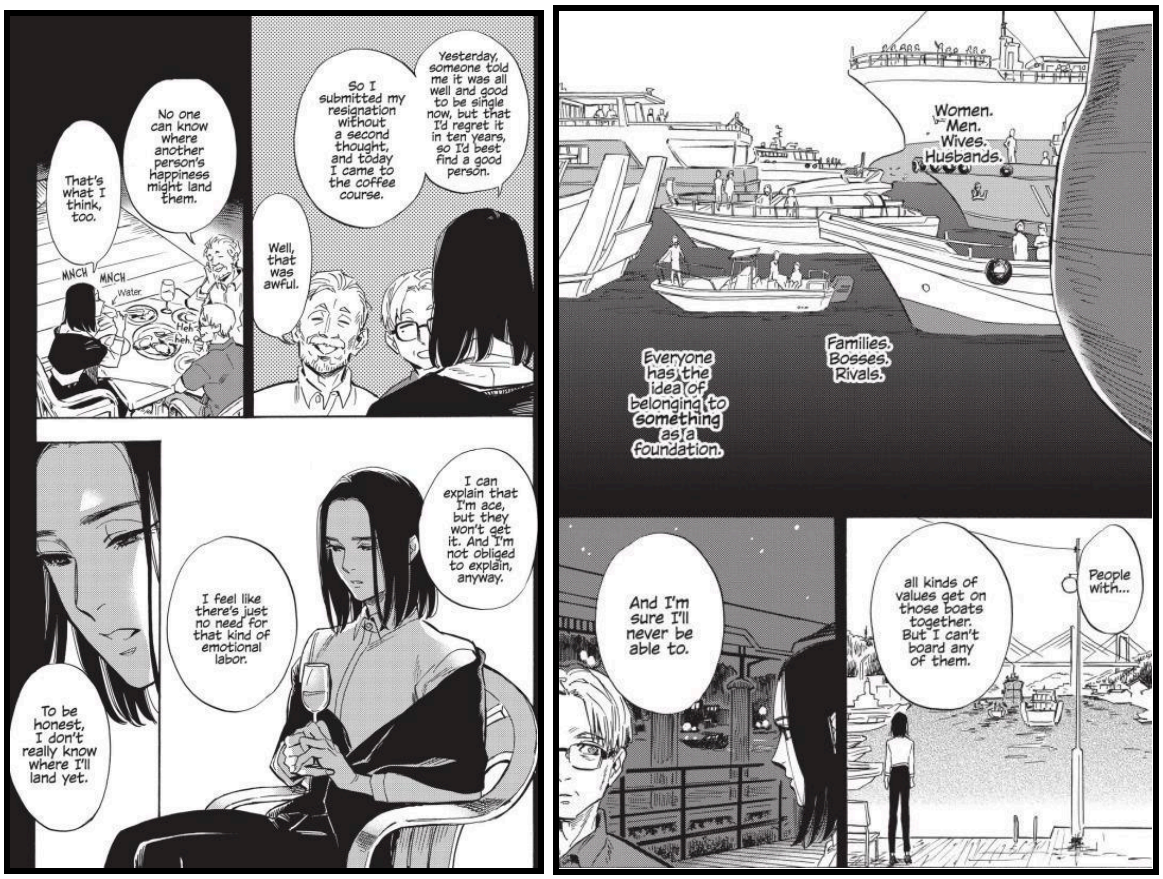

Figure 8: Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 4. Original release date, July 19, 2018. English release date, December 17, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

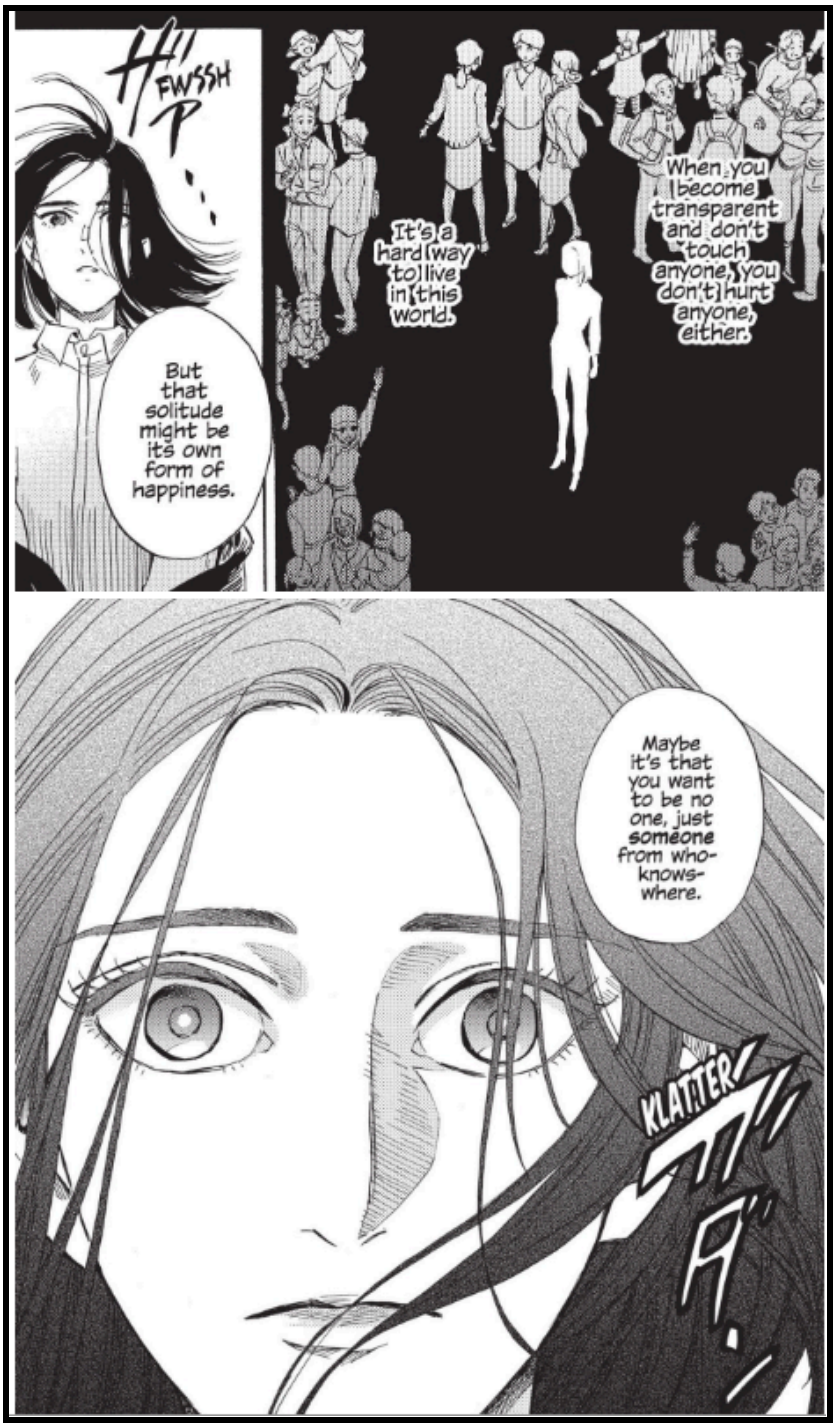

Figure 9 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 4. Original release date, July 19, 2018. English release date, December 17, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm.

Figure 10 - Yuhki Kamatani, Panel from Our Dreams at Dusk: Shimanami Tasogare Volume 4. Original release date, July 19, 2018. English release date, December 17, 2019. Seven Seas Entertainment. 12.7 x 1.27 x 18.03 cm

Figure 11 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

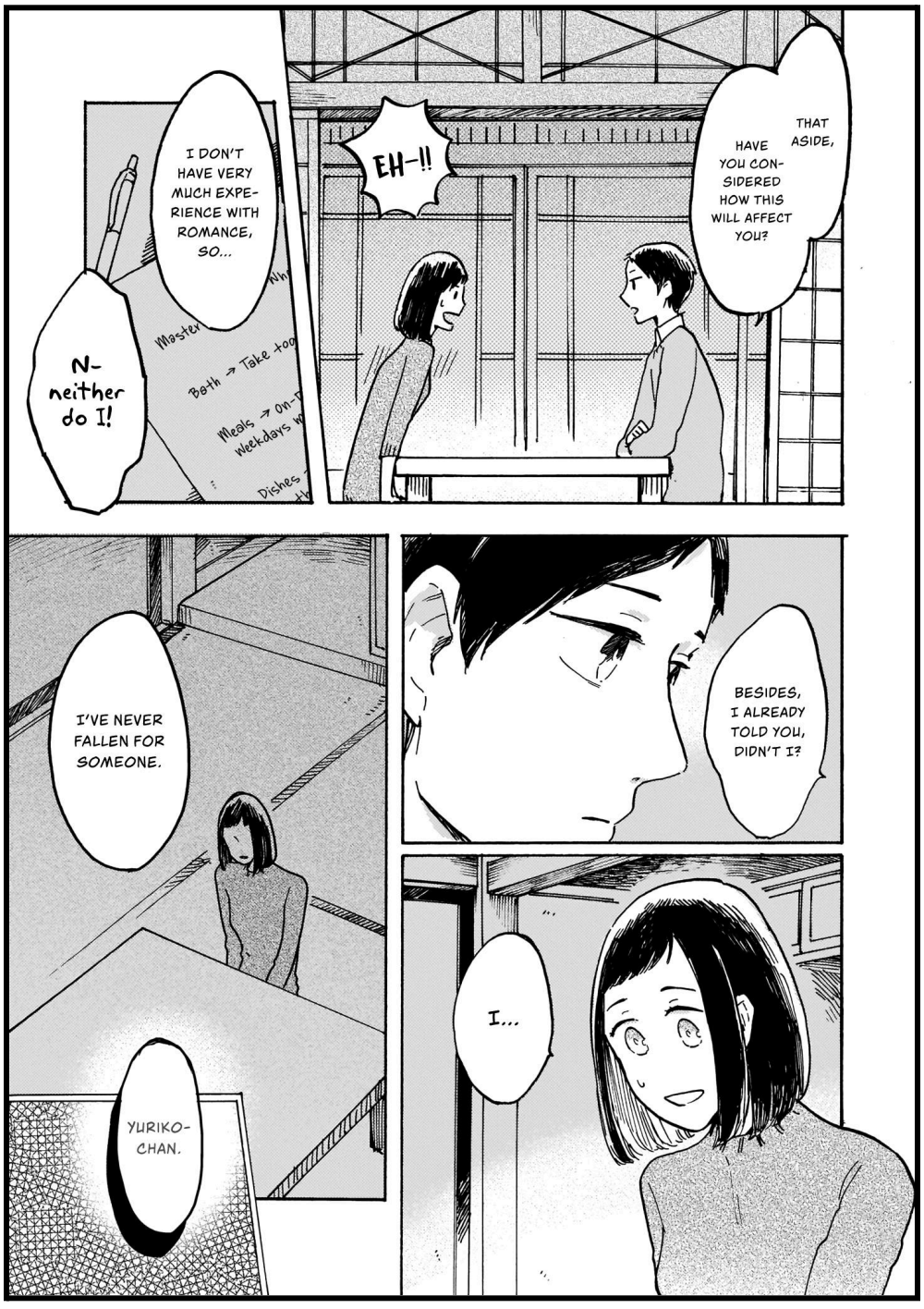

Figure 12 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

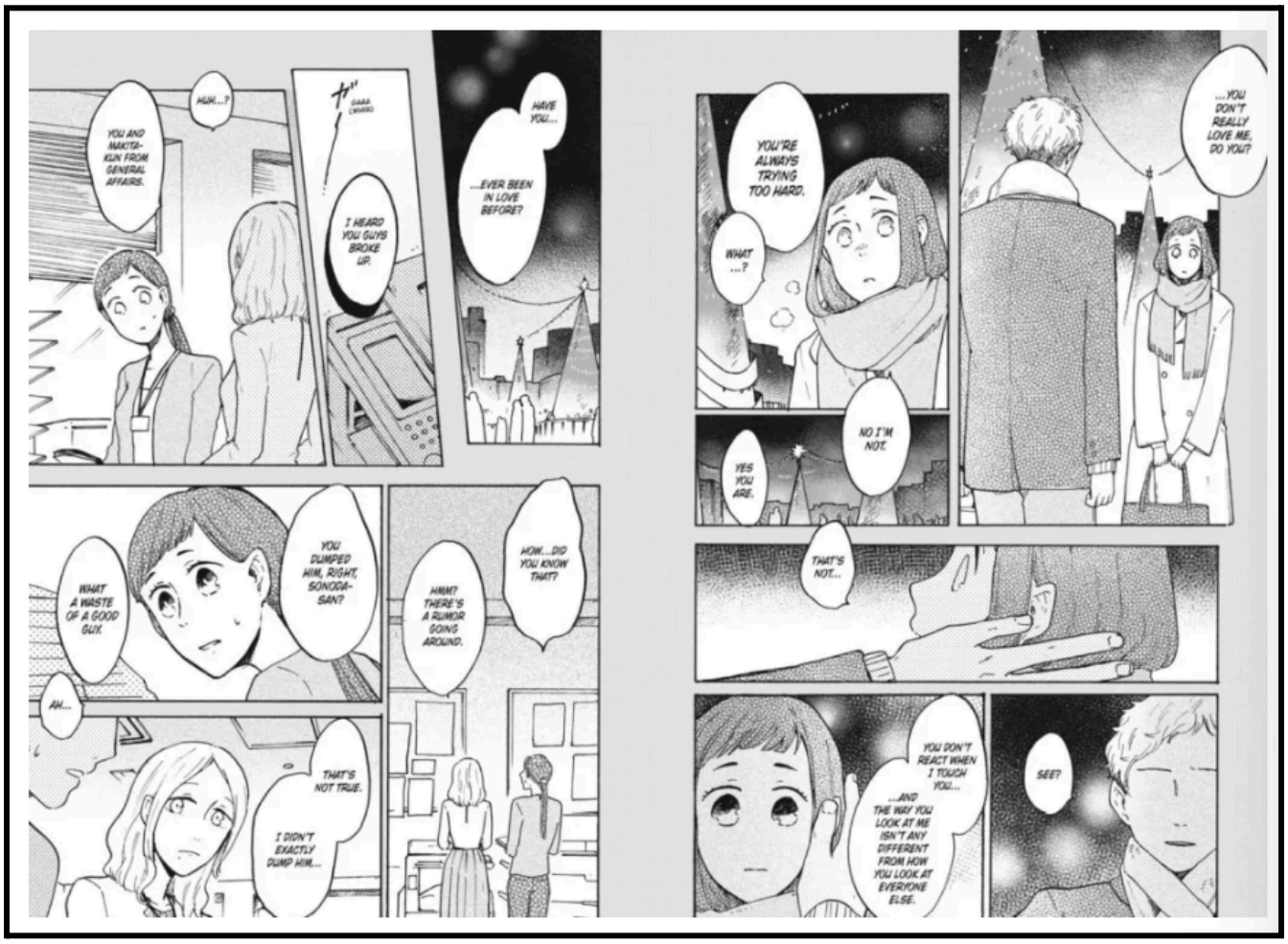

Figure 13 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

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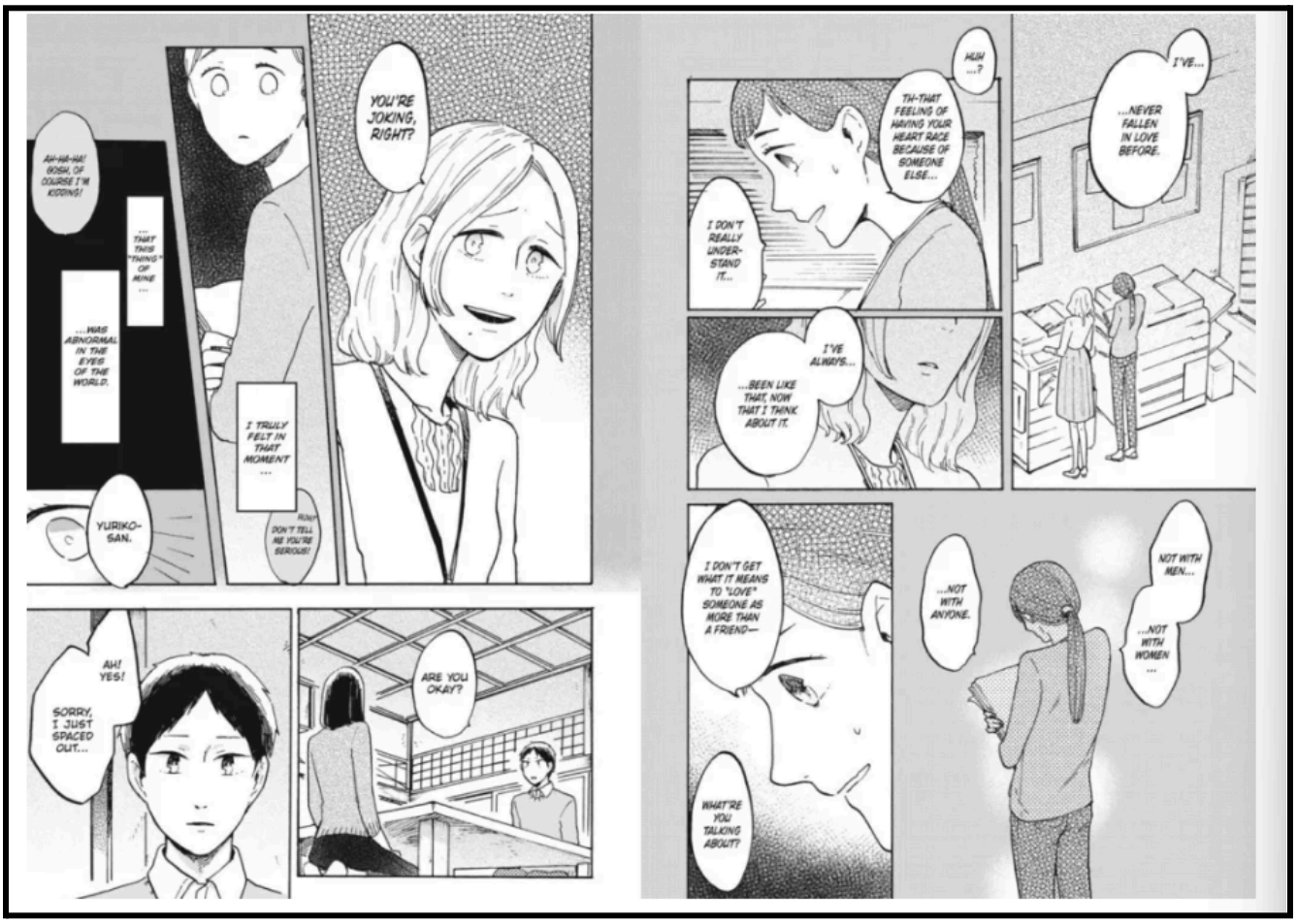

Figure 14 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

Figure 15 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

Figure 16 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 3. Original release date, November 18, 2020.. English release date, June 18 2024. Yen Press.14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

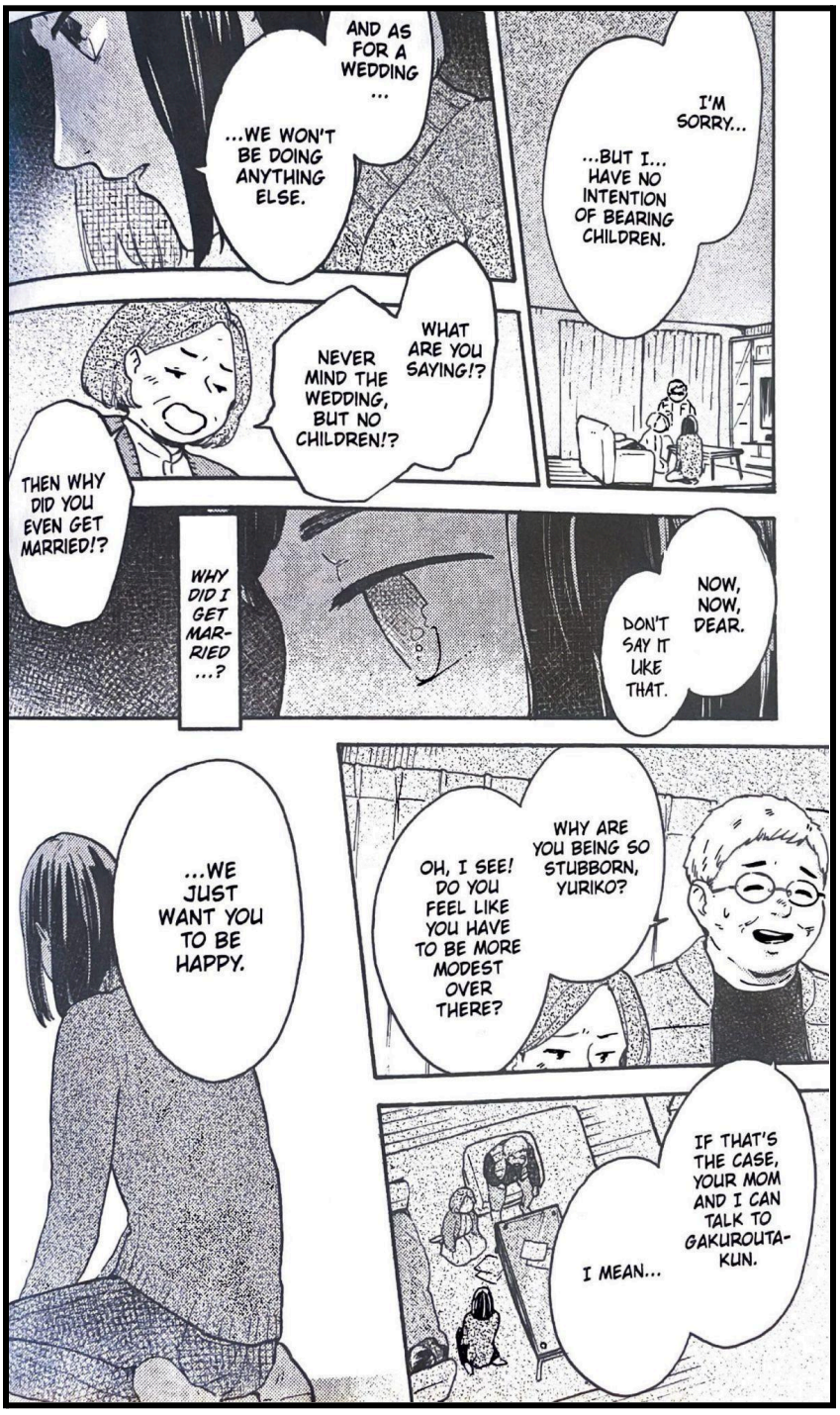

Figure 17 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 3. Original release date, November 18, 2020.. English release date, June 18 2024. Yen Press.14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

Figure 18 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

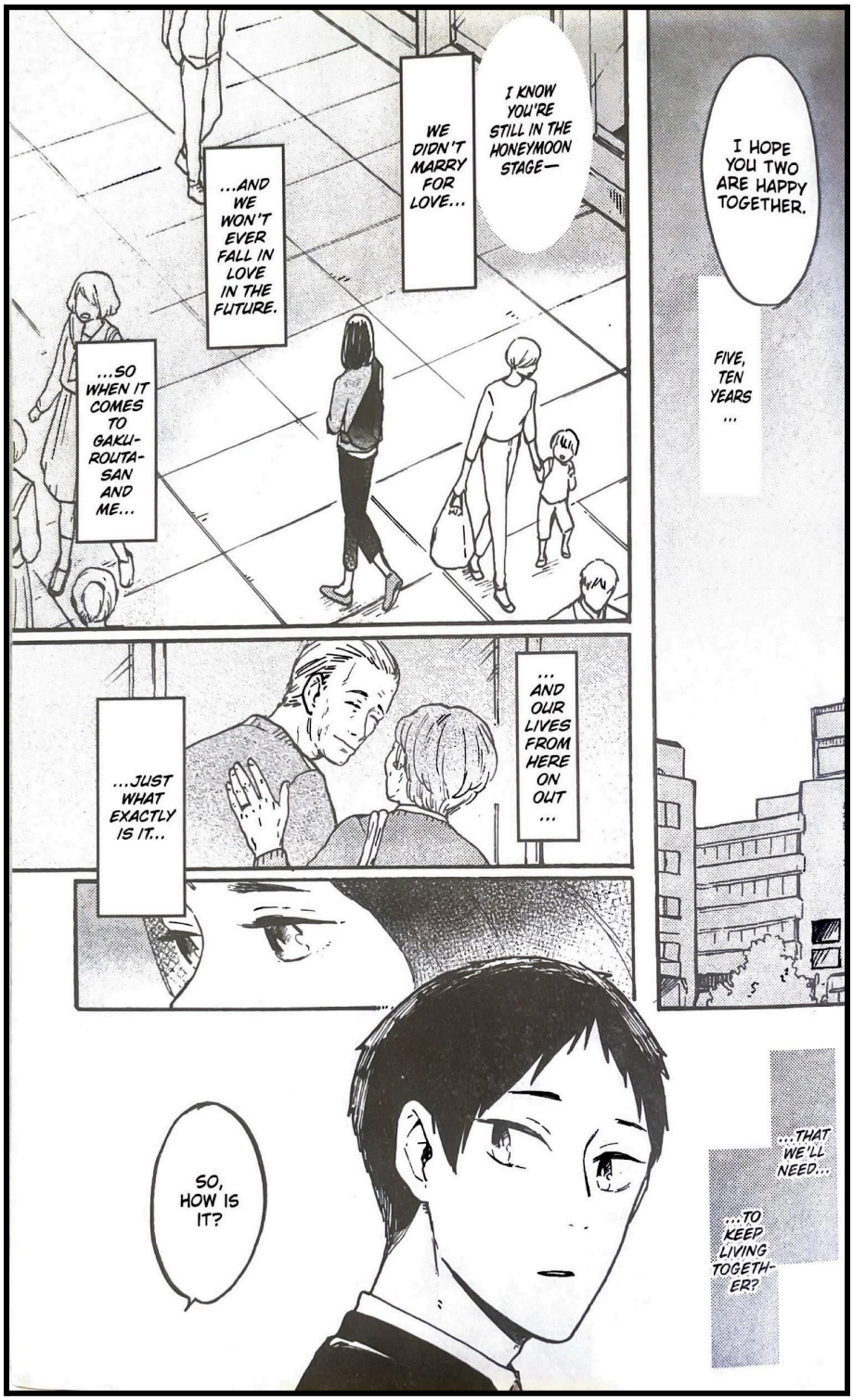

Figure 19 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 2. Original release date, February 18, 2020. English release date, Jan. 17 2023. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

Figure 20 - Honami Shirono. Panel from I Want to Be a Wall, Volume 1. Original release date, December 1, 2020. English release date, May 17 2022. Yen Press. 14.61 x 1.43 x 21.08 cm.

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