Communicating isolation and personal struggle

Nagata Kabi's *My Lesbian Experience with loneliness*

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In June 2018, Nagata Kabi achieved unexpected international success by winning the Harvey Award for her essay manga, 'My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness' (*Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo*). The plot is quite simple: the author, a 28-year-old Japanese woman with no sexual experience and a history of mental health issues, decides to hire a female escort to have sex for the very first time. Despite the seemingly straightforward plot, this manga is not about sex. The original title, which translates to 'Report: I was too lonely, so I went to a lesbian escort service,' reflects the main theme of Nagata's struggle with loneliness and her continuous search for belonging. Sex with a sex worker serves as a tool for Nagata to explore her physical and mental status, her vulnerabilities, and to express her personal development.

Nagata is an outcast for the standards of the Japanese society: despite being an adult, she is not employed full-time, and her aspiration to pursue a career in the manga world concerns her parents. Additionally, her homosexuality further marginalizes her. Nagata's deviation from the societal norms is underscored by her limited sexual knowledge, acquired solely from reading manga. Initially, Nagata's struggle appears to revolve around meeting parental expectations and becoming a *shakaijin*, or a fully functioning member of Japanese society. However, it ultimately evolves into a journey of learning to relate to others, demonstrating how sex (and manga) can serve as a means of communication among individuals. This article examines how Nagata, through her manga, portrays the communication challenges faced by individuals who do not fit neatly into established categories, particularly those who experience a life development following a 'queer temporality,' in contrast to heteronormative life trajectories. Ultimately, it demonstrates how manga can serve as a tool to alleviate isolation for individuals who do not conform to the established norms of Japanese society.

1. Introduction[1]

Manga are very well-known to be one of the most iconic (pop)cultural production from Japan. Despite comics worldwide are increasingly seen no more as a media specifically targeting an audience of children and teenagers, manga have always been characterized as a product suitable for very different categories of audience. The possibly most famous works outside Japan belong to the 少年漫画 *shōnen* manga category, ideally aimed at young male readers, and to the 少女漫画 *shōjo* manga category, targeting female adolescents. However, alongside these primary categories, there are also manga specifically thought for young men (青年漫画 *seinen* manga) and women (女性漫画 *josei* manga) aged roughly 18-30, or for an audience of adults (成人漫画 *seijin* manga and レディコミ *redicomi*, ladies' comics). These divisions originally emerged in the mid-20th century from the publishers' side, which assumed that potential readers would better connect with protagonist of the same gender and age (Tanaka 2020). However, this demographic segmentation no longer neatly defines the manga landscape, particularly over the past decade, as different fruitions methods and a wider international distribution have contributed to change and mix up the above-mentioned reader categories (Ingulsrud and Allen 2010: 7). Especially digital platforms and fan communities played a pivotal role in reshaping audience engagement (Bouvard 2024:117), specifically in a transcultural perspective (Baudinette 2020). In this context, readers are drawn to emotional resonance and narrative complexity, rather than strictly seeking out protagonists who match their own demographic profile. This shift in perspective is especially relevant when examining autobiographical manga and essay manga—a (sub)genre of autobiographical Japanese comics that has gained significant traction, particularly on social media, in the past fifteen years (Okuyama 2022). Autobiographical manga tend to focus explicitly on the authors' life stories or on significant events in their life, often adopting a more narrative-driven and introspective approach. The genre delves deeper into personal identity, memories, and pivotal life events, sometimes dealing with heavy emotional content. On the other hand, essay manga—or alternatively, essay comics コミックエッセイ *comikku essei*, a definition which emphasize the writing aspect rather than the drawing one (Hosokawa 2010:58)—is a genre that blends non-fiction, often autobiographical or documentary-style writing, with the manga format. The term 'essay' refers to the

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author's personal reflections or observations, which are presented in comic form. This genre tends to take a diary-like format, and involves a more casual and reflective storytelling style, deriving from the author's personal life experiences. The stories typically focus on real-life experiences, thoughts, or insights on a variety of topics often explore themes such as family life, mental health, illness, and everyday experiences, with a humorous or observational tone.

In both these genres the protagonist is not a fictional representation of a demographic category (such as a male adolescent or an adult woman), but rather the author themselves—a real individual whose multidimensionality and experiences resonate uniquely with readers compared to fictional characters. In this case, relatability with the character is not solely linked to age and gender, but rather to shared experiences. Specifically essay manga—often initially serialized on women's or information magazines targeting general readers, or on web platforms—with their episodic structure and by vividly capturing moments from the artist's life, have been able to attract a broad audience made not only of manga enthusiasts but also of casual readers who appreciate personal storytelling (Nagaike 2023; Sugawa-Shimada 2011). As the authors, serving as the main characters, depict their individual experiences rather than a generic human archetype with universal concerns, those manga become a platform for manga artists to express their personal challenges while also fostering a sense of community among readers who can relate to similar experiences.

As well expressed by Seko Yukari and Kikuchi Minako: "Like any other form of fictional literature and popular art, manga is deeply immersed in a particular social environment. It constantly reproduces dominant norms, cultural values and beliefs" (Seko and Kikuchi 2020: 3-4). So, what we read in manga is at the same time an expression of the author's ideas, believes and creativity, but also a representation of the Japanese society, at least as it appears at the eyes of the author.

While it could be argued that a faithful representation of a reality well-known by the audience helps the readers to connect with the stories represented, at the very same time it is also true that manga offer a way *to escape* the reality. According to Masuda Nozomi (2015: 28), through the different characters portrayed in manga, readers can have a glimpse of another identity. Exploring the character's thoughts and life experiences, they can find a way to relate to the world as the characters of the manga they are reading would do. Through manga it is thus possible to explore an alternative reality, which can be purely fictional (as in 異世界漫画 *isekai*[2] manga), or just the same of our world but experienced by somebody else.

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[2] Manga based on the adventures of a normal person from Earth being displaced or transported to an alternative world with different culture and rules.

The opportunity to experience an alternative identity or reality also takes on a different perspective when the text in question is autobiographical. In this case, the reader is not prompted to identify with a fictional character in a made-up world, but rather with the real situations, feelings, and struggles of another human being—namely, the author. Although equating autobiography with 'authenticity' and identifying the protagonist as a real person—specifically, the author itself—should be problematized to avoid oversimplifying the complexities inherent in these narratives, nevertheless, autobiographical and essay manga offer a powerful tool for developing empathy and enhancing understanding of issues that may lie beyond our direct experience. In these works, authenticity is not an innate quality, but rather an effect produced by specific narrative techniques, which create an interplay between the 'real' person and the 'fictional' character, as well as between 'made-up world' and 'real feelings' (Eakin 2004). However, these texts can represent a tool for identification for people experiencing the same problematics as the author, and a way to create a sense of bonding, overcoming individual loneliness. This perspective is particularly relevant considering that manga have been often associated with *otaku* individuals, who are unfortunately pointed out for their supposed lack of social skills and preference for 'antisocial' hobbies over fostering human relationships.[3]

Nagata Kabi's essay manga 'My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness' (hereafter *MLEWL*) delves into various themes such as the struggle with mental health issues, homosexuality, and the quest for meaningful connections and communication, often resulting in feelings of isolation. The manga serves as a tool for grappling with these issues as experienced by another human being—a tool to raise awareness about the topics addressed, as well as a platform for sharing experiences with the author and potentially with other readers.

Through the analysis of this manga, my aim is to discuss how Nagata Kabi narrates herself and her story, illustrating how creating a manga became a coping strategy for enduring her condition. This demonstrates that manga represent an effective means of overcoming loneliness for the author and potentially for the readers, contributing to reshape the concepts of sociality and community bonding. *MLEWL* discusses various themes, such as negotiating between parental expectations and self-actualization, sexual orientation, as well as coping strategies for depression. I argue that all these issues are expressions of Nagata's 'queerness' and her existence within a 'queer temporality' (Halberstam 2005), which constantly place her in contrast with societal and parental expectations. In the following sections, I will highlight how MLEWL functioned as the way for Nagata to overcome her personal

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[3] Several studies have been focusing on alternative forms of *otaku* sociality. See for instance Lamarre et. al. (2007), Galbraith (2013), Cervelli and Schaper (2022), Smith (2022).

problems by expressing her discomfort, to communicate with others by sharing her experiences, and ultimately to find her place in Japanese society as a professional *mangaka.* I will thus demonstrate that Nagata's self-actualization occurs through her use of manga as a communication tool. I will use the words comics for the European and American productions, and manga for Japanese works instead of the label 'graphic novel.' In fact, as scholars in the field of comics have already noted, the definition 'graphic novel' is often used to conduit a sense of cultural production of a 'higher' nature, bearer of deeper meanings compared to comics (Hatfield 2011). Following Charles Hatfield and Elisabeth El Rafais (2012), I advocate for the use and rehabilitation of the terms 'comic and 'manga,' even when referring to works intended for adult audiences or addressing serious topics. In my view, these terms do not diminish the intrinsic value of comics and manga as cultural productions, whereas I find the label 'graphic novel' to be misleading and not fully representative of the medium being discussed.

2. Autobiography in manga

Autobiography is commonly defined as the self-narration of an author's life and experiences, and it is one of the oldest literary genres. The first example is often considered to be St. Augustine's 'Confessions' (397-398 AD), and since then, many authors have engaged in the literary endeavor (or torment) of writing about themselves.

Autobiography seems to have been linked to the world of comics from the very beginning. In fact, Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro attempted an autobiographical comic exercise in 1881, with his book *No Lazareto de Lisboa* ('The Lazaretto of Lisbon'), where he included himself among the characters, sharing personal thoughts and reflections. Other early examples of autobiographical comics date back at the beginning of the 20th century, with works such as Fay King's strips (1910s-1930s) and Carlos Botelho's one page-stories (1928-1950), which included elements from the authors' lives. The number of autobiographical titles increased through the years, reaching a boom in the US between the 1970s and 1980s (El Refais 2012). In contemporary comics market, autobiography is identified as a central genre (Hatfield 2005: x), specifically—as El Refais states—in the "alternative, small-press comics production in North America and Western Europe today" (2012: 36).

The possibly earliest example of autobiographical work from a Japanese author is Kiyama Yoshitaka's (also known by its pen name Henry Yoshitaka)'s *Manga Yonin Shosei* (in English 'The Four Immigrants Manga') published in Japan between 1924 and 1927, and then in 1931 in the US. It tells the American experiences of Kiyama and his three friends in San Francisco between 1904 and 1924 as Japanese immigrants (Boatright 2010). Amano Ikuho (2015), quoting Suzuki Tomi, states that in Japan

autobiographic manga developed as "a semantic shift from 私小説 *shishōsetsu* (I-novel), the narrative form that is generally built upon 'the Cartesian model of the self as a seer of objective reality'" (Suzuki 1996: 2–3 quoted in Amano 2015:240). A similar view is also shared by Béatrice Maréchal (2004), who identifies four artists, whose works were published from the 1960s onward, that she considers to be the founder of autobiographical genre in Japan: Tsuge Yoshiaharu (1937-) and his younger brother Tsuge Tadao (1941-), Takita Yū (1931-1990), and Abe Shinichi (1950-). All these authors produced *gekiga* (劇画) a term literally meaning 'dramatic pictures,' to be intended in opposition to manga (漫画) 'funny pictures.' The term *gekiga* was coined by Tatsumi Yoshihiro in 1957 and adopted by other Japanese artists who did not want their works to be defined as manga (Tatsumi 1968). *Gekiga*, unlike manga, were usually not characterized by cartoonesque, curvy lines, but it was drawn in cinematic, sharper lines, sometimes with an avantgardesque or experimental taste. Thematically, *gekiga* was focused on dramatic and more mature themes (Okazaki 2002). The Tsuge brothers, Takita Yū, and Abe Shinichi are all considered among the greatest names of the *gekiga* movement (Sato 1996).

For Maréchal, the main feature of autobiographic manga is the authors' discomfort with themselves, their lives and/or environment (2004: 156). This theme is evident in the works of the above-mentioned four authors. During his adolescence, Tsuge Yoshiharu occasionally worked in small and unhealthy electroplating laboratories. These experiences, including witnessing respiratory diseases and enduring poor living conditions, frequently appear in his works (Orsi 1981: 97). In his manga *Chiko* (1966), Tsuge Yoshiaharu described the struggles of his daily life while living with his partner, a bar hostess who were providing the money for the couple to live out of. His family life is also at the core of his works from the 1970s, which were "reflecting on the various unsuccessful attempts made by a struggling manga artist to find alternative employment" (Gill 2012: 476). Not only his personal life but also his inner conflicts became the story materials for his production. Along with his brother, Tsuge Tadao represented in his manga the struggles of growing up in the misery of postwar Tokyo. He portrayed the life of outcasts people, and he is considered the first artist doing reportage-based manga, as between the 1950s-1960 he worked in blood banks and he drew manga about this experience, focusing on those in need of selling their blood to survive and on the poor hygienic conditions and the issues related to the use of unchecked blood (Holmberg 2019: 316). With regards to Takita Yū, his *Terajima-chō kidan* (1968-1970), set in the working-class Tamanoi neighbourhood, is an autobiographical novel based on the story of his childhood from his third year of elementary school to the second year of junior high school, a time he spent in Higashi Mukōjima, Sumida Ward, Tokyo (Matsumoto 2017). The Italian scholar Maria Teresa Orsi highlights that for the extreme subjectivity of the narration and the evocative atmosphere in between the regret and the nostalgic idealization, it is

possible to talk of a specific type of autobiographical manga defined as *watakushi manga* 'I-manga,' again emphasizing the connection with the 'I-novel' (Orsi 1981: 125). Abe Shinichi, the youngest of the four, recounts in *Miyoko Asagaya Kibun* (1971) his love story with Miyoko, his muse and source of inspiration, and his desperate search for success in the manga world, which ultimately leads him into alcohol addiction.

As it is possible to understand from these examples, since the very beginning autobiographic manga have been closely linked to the narration of personal trauma or traumatic experiences, the lack of money, the struggle to get success and recognition as manga authors and mental health issues. This holds true also in the case of essay manga. However, essay manga also often rely upon a humorous approach to discuss these themes. For instance, Azuma Hideo's *Shissō Nikki* ('Disappearance Diary,' 2005), uses a comedic tone to tell how the author, notwithstanding the good success of his works, felt so under pressure to just leave his house to start a homeless life, developing a strong alcohol addiction. The use of irony as a narrative device is specifically true for female artists of essay manga, who made use of laughter and humor "to express taboo themes such as depression, alcoholism, divorce and death" (Sugawa-Shimada 2011: 172) and to provide an easy access to their texts for non-manga readers. In this sense, *MLEWL* does not represent a rupture with the major trends which characterize the essay manga.

Nagata Kabi descended into a deep depression at the beginning of university. She experienced eating disorders and engaged in self-injury, both methods she used to express her pain, loneliness, and struggle to find her place in the world. She lacked self-confidence in her skills as a manga artist, yet simultaneously desired to be a productive member of society—an aspiration she felt she could never achieve as a *mangaka.* Societal, and especially parental, expectations exacerbated Nagata's feelings. She described herself as solely focused on making her parents happy, rather than seeking her own satisfaction. This situation led her to consider herself unworthy of gratification—a feeling manifested through self-deprivation of food—and deserving of love only as a child, consequently inhibiting her exploration of sexuality, which she associated with adulthood.

Embarking on a process of self-analysis, Nagata became aware of her lack of complete self-knowledge and understanding of her desires, a realization she linked to her limited sexual knowledge. For this reason and recognizing her being more attracted by women than men, she decides to hire a lesbian escort to have her first sexual experience and to learn more about herself and her feelings.

3. Self-representation in *MLEWL*

The main feature of autobiographic and essay manga is the representation of the author's experiences, feelings and mental status. In this sense, manga (and comics at large) have the power to universalize

the individual experience of the author. Obviously, this representation takes both a verbal and a visual form. As Amano Ikuho argues:

> the strength of autobiographical manga lies in its visual form, which communicates more intuitively and perhaps more concretely [...] with the reader. While narrating 'res gestae,' or what actually happened, the visual medium allows the author to concretize the self and others' images, emotions and other abstract forms of experience without completely leaving them to the reader's imagination and interpretive capacity (Amano 2015: 240).

Autobiographic manga thus allow to the readers' imagination a certain space to work but they also *guide* the readers, through a visual perspective, into *how* to imagine the experiences, emotions and situations the author narrates. Andrew Kunka states that autobiographic manga dealing with the author's traumatic experiences get higher scholarly and critical attention (Kunka 2017: 2). Hence it is possible to argue that this media represents an effective way *to communicate* traumatic experiences. In fact, if trauma can be seen as an extremely negative experience which is very hard to recollect or convey to others, the combined use of words and images becomes a tool to overcome its incommunicability and to render it representable. This view is supported by Hillary Chute, who states that comics are a kind of textual practice allowing a productive and ethic representation of trauma (Chute 2010: 3). This is particularly true in the case of those texts which directly draw upon the individual (traumatic) experience of the author.

The graphic depiction is a way to communicate and share what lies in the authors' mind and what led them to experience pain and distress. The possibility for the authors to graphically express their personal issues might represent a sort of healing process. In the specific case of Nagata, she identifies her inability to communicate her feelings as one of the reasons behind her depression. In terms of communication, it is extremely interesting to analyze the graphic representation she chooses to represent herself, her problems, and to understand what she wanted to communicate and how. *MLEWL* presents simplified depictions of people and of the environment while still carrying strong emotional power and introspective insights. Internal monologues are spelled out, to clarify the author's mental processes. At the very same time, abstract concepts and negative feelings are often visualized under the shape of kinetic lines and dark auras surrounding Nagata's character.

To easily explain depression and the negative backlashes it entails under a graphic shape is a clear effort towards communication. Nagata talks and draws in an unequivocal way bringing her feeling lonely at the center of her narration. It is not a case that in most of the panels she appears alone, surrounded only by her words and her thoughts: an extremely concise representation of depression

and the isolation that follows. Her feeling alone and isolated in life is reflected in her being alone in the panels.

Since the very first pages of the manga, we are told by Nagata that she has a bald spot on her scalp due to trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling) and several self-inflicted cuts lined up on her arms. The graphic depiction of these issues is honest, and not hidden by Nagata. In Japan, mental illness is considered a 'priority disease' for the medical service (Ito *et al.* 2013). Representation of self-injuring in manga, as highlighted by Seko and Kikuchi (2020), is often stereotyped: typically, it involves an adolescent girl who cut herself as a coping strategy with negative emotions, as self-punishment or to interrupt a dissociative episode. These behaviors are framed within a sense of shame, with scars being kept hidden from others. In contrast, Nagata's representation is much less sensationalistic and conveys the idea of something non-artificial and realistic. She explains that while psychological suffering is invisible and difficult to understand, physical pain provides a visible and tangible form of suffering. For this reason, she cut herself—to give her psychological hardships a material dimension. Nagata's narration of self-injury offers deep autobiographical insight. Her self-inflicted cuts are not a narrative device, and their graphic representation makes the reader feel genuinely involved in the real situation experienced by the author.

Another perspective worthy investigation is the way in which Nagata represents herself. The entire manga is drawn in a simplified way and characters' depiction resembles the *chibi* style. *Chibi* can be translated as 'little' and is a caricatural style usually adopted for ironic and humorous sketch in manga. It is often overlapped with the Super Deformed (SD) style. Characters drawn in *chibi* style present slightly altered anatomic proportions, with the head bigger than normal, and very big and round eyes. This style is meant to depict cartoonesque, infantilized characters and it is closely connected to the *kawaii* aesthetic.

Kawaii (often translated as 'cute') is a pivotal term to analyze the representation of femininity and women in Japan. Sharon Kinsella, in her seminal analysis of cuteness in Japan, defined *kawaii* as a concept defined by being shy, pathetic, embarrassed, vulnerable, lovable and small, all qualities usually paired with pets, children, and women—especially young girls (Kinsella 1995: 220-221). Kinsella notes that individuals defined as *kawaii* are appreciated for being weak and unable rather than for their strength and skills. In terms of outer appearance, *kawaii* characters have big round eyes, are small-built and cute, speak in high pitched voices and are usually clumsy in sports, physical activities, or everyday life. While the cuteness expressed in Nagata's drawings differs from the typical understanding of *kawaii* as a generator of the 'aww' feeling, a connection can still be found between this definition of cuteness and her self-representation. Nagata explicitly states that she does not make her character resemble

her real self, perhaps to shield herself and protect her privacy. Specifically, she draws her character as particularly cute because it is always on display. Representing herself in a cute way is seen by Nagata as a pivotal feature of her main character, namely herself, in the manga.

Nagata's messy hair, sloppy and dirty clothes, and even her bald spot on her scalp are all features represented in a *kawaii* way that does not generate discomfort in the viewer. Instead, they work to create a connection and sympathy between the author and the reader. The limited palette used in the manga—black and white paired with pink—increase the feeling of cuteness. When we see Nagata stuck in bed, contemplating suicide, the overall image we are left with is a tragicomic one that makes us smile—not just by acknowledging the deep, dark well of loneliness she is struggling within. The *kawaii* representation of something that is scary or unpleasant makes it more acceptable, as demonstrated by Sugawa-Shimada Akiko in her analysis of essay manga drawn by female artists (Sugawa-Shimada 2011). Cutely-drawn characters create a "comfortable detachment" (Sugawa-Shimada 2011: 175) that does not alienate the readers' favors. This technique allows readers to avoid fully identifying with the characters, enabling them to enjoy the story (Sugawa-Shimada 2011). By drawing herself and her problems in this way, Nagata ensures that the reader will continue reading and will understand and accept her and her weaknesses, rather than being scared or disgusted.

Acceptance is indeed one of the pivotal needs Nagata expresses in her manga, which can be summarized as the desire to communicate with others in order to be loved and accepted by them. Her longing for love and acceptance is primarily defined in relation to her parents: Nagata states that she has contemplated not becoming an adult so that she can always be loved as a child by her parents. The 'kawaii' aesthetic helps to convey this feeling and fosters a similar attachment to her childlike character in the readers. In addition, having a fandom is for Nagata a validation of being accepted, receiving positive feedback from others. Consequently, she carves her path to acceptance by portraying herself as a *kawaii* and likable character whose struggles are supported and cheered on by the readers.

4. Female homosexuality and queer temporality in *MLEWL*

Another autobiographic insight that Nagata share with the readers in MLEWL is her sexual attraction towards women. Her homosexual desire is characterized by a need to find a motherly figure who accepts her completely.

It must be pointed out that female homosexuality does not represent a new topic in manga (Fanasca 2021). The first representations of lesbian love appeared in the 1970s, with Yamagishi Riyoko's *Shiroi heya no futari* ('The two of the white room,' 1971), Ichijō Yukari's *Maya no sōretsu* ('Maya's funeral

parade,' 1972), Satonaka Machiko's *Ariesu no otometachi* ('Maidens of Aries,' 1973), and *Oniisama e* ('Dear brother,' 1974) from Ikeda Riyoko, to name just a few, well-known, examples. Furthermore, from the early 2000s onwards, a new genre emerged, focusing on love between girls and labeled as *yuri*. However, the classification of *yuri* manga as lesbian/queer manga is debatable, as *yuri* manga not very often address issues relevant for the LGBTQ+ community and for self-identified lesbian identities, such as coming out, gay rights, discrimination and homophobia. Furthermore, instead of depicting lesbian desire and relationships, it is more accurate to say that *yuri* manga focus on describing sentimental (and sometimes sexual) relationships between girls. The age of the characters is in fact a distinctive point of this manga genre, as the majority of *yuri* works are focused on feelings and love stories experienced by adolescent girls during the high school years. Moreover, the word lesbian is rarely used in these manga, thus to assimilate manga focused on LGBTQ+ themes and openly lesbian with *yuri* manga could potentially lead to a problem of misrepresentation of the female homosexuals community and its issues.

MLEWL it is not an isolated example of a manga discussing female homosexuality but, is one of the few essay manga from a female queer author addressing this topic.[4] However, it's important to note that homosexuality is not the main focus of *MLEWL*, despite what the title (and especially the English title) might suggest. Besides her attraction to women, Nagata also explores her gender identity. Although she affirms that she is not a man and is unwilling to define herself as such, she also expresses reluctance to accept being categorized as a woman. In fact, she fears being defined solely by her gender more than as an individual (Nagata 2016: 53). By prioritizing self-definition over externally imposed classifications, Nagata emphasizes an individual autonomy that challenges gender essentialism, supporting a nuanced critique of identity frameworks that reduce personhood to often stereotyped gendered constructs.

According to Frederick Aldama, in *MLEWL* and other works from feminist and LGBTQ+ comic authors "we see authors building on a bedrock of biographical and historical facts (those oft-swept under rugs of mainstreamed history) the powerfully reconstructed journeys of their queer and gendered subjectivities and experiences—all given unique expression through the respective creator's unique visual (and verbal) style" (Aldama 2019: 3). I will argue that what Nagata presents to her readers is not a coming-of-age story, nor a tale about the awakening of her sexuality in lesbian terms, but rather an intimist depiction of the development of her queer identity, where queer comes to define not only

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[4] Other essay manga investigating female/female and lesbian relationships are Takeuchi Sachiko's *Honey & Honey: Onnanoko Dōshi no Love Couple*('Honey&Honey: an in-love couple of two girls') and Nakamura Ching's *Okaasan Futari itemo Ii kana!?* ('Is it ok even if they have two moms?!').

a sexual orientation, but a wider sense of being at odd with different 'normalities.' According to Ann Madill, "Where categories are placed in opposition, one is usually associated with greater hegemonic value and the second Othered. Hence, queer theory is also a critique of dominant status and power hierarchies" (Madill 2015: 280). Nagata's story challenges the hegemonic worldview based on the (hetero)normative sexuality, logic and timeframe, presenting instead a disordered, queer space and time marked by her struggle for acceptance.

As brilliantly explained by Jack Halberstam (2005), dominant heteronormative temporalities are regulated by the assumptions that a life course should be a sequential progression of events such as birth, growing up, marriage, reproduction. These events signal developmental phases in one's life, and are often marked and celebrated by specific 'rituals' as, for instance, wedding, christening or anniversaries. However, a queer life course does not always follow the same linear development, and it may pass through different phases that are often uncelebrated (i.e., coming out) or even unnoticed to the other people (i.e. identification of a non-straight sexual desire). Thus, queer identities develop through different stages, often outside the traditional institutions of family and reproduction, as these events may occur much later in life, or being absent. As Jodie Taylor argues "Queer lives often skip over some of the steps of the heteronormative timeline and thus they skew the responsible progression towards maturity by favouring [...] a prolonged youthfulness and a lingering within early adulthood" (Halberstam 2010: 894). Nagata's wish to keep showing herself as a child to be loved by her parents is another demonstration of her queerness compared to the (hetero)normative life development.

The very opening of *MLEWL* states: *Dare ka to tsukiatta keiken mo seitekina keiken mo tsuideni shakai hito keiken mo nai mama 28-sai ni natta watashi* (Nagata 2016: 4), which can be translated as "I turned 28 years old and I had never dated anyone before, nor had I any experience sexually. I didn't really have any experience being a functioning member of the society." What Nagata does in *MLEWL* is, in fact, to express the problems and pain of a queer identity, unfitting with the heteronormative environment and the processes of development as intended by her family and by the Japanese society at large. To not find a full time, corporate job, not getting married, being 'unproductive' in economic and sexual terms are all evidences, for Nagata, of being an outcast in the Japanese society. By following Nagata through her 'queer temporality' (Halberstram 2005), *MLEWL* becomes an exploration of the author's necessary negotiations with herself, her parents, and society at large towards (self-)acceptance. Her queerness thus encompasses different layers: she is queer as she is attracted by women. She is queer as she does not want to clearly define her gender identity. Moreover, Nagata's queerness extends to her deviation from the supposed normal path of 'normal' Japanese adults.

Therefore, to describe *MLEWL* as a lesbian' manga is to reduce its queer potentiality, which actually covers different aspects of Nagata's life. The author's queerness is not only related to her sexual orientation and gender identity, both aspects usually paired with queer identities when non-heteronormatively aligned. Nagata is queer because she defies societal expectations of what it means to be a fully functioning Japanese adult woman in many different ways.

5. Failed relationships?

Nagata identifies her sexual desire as oriented towards women more than men. However, aware of her lack of social skills, instead of attempting meeting someone she decides to seek out a female sex worker to experiment with her sexuality.

Sexual services offered by female providers to female customers are part of the larger Japanese *fūzoku* 風俗 (sexual entertainment) market, and are specifically called *rezu fūzoku* レズ風俗 (which can be translated as 'lesbian sexual entertainment' or, less accurately, 'lesbian brothels'). These service are provided through the so-called デリヘル *deriheru* ('delivery health') mode. In this modality, a sex worker is dispatched to a hotel where she will meet with the customer to engage in sexual activity for a certain amount of time. While *deriheru* is common in male-oriented sexual services, there are peculiarities that are mostly, if not exclusively, found in services targeting women. For instance, the デートコース *deeto cōsu* (date course), is an option always available in all the *rezu fūzoku* establishments but rarely found in services for men. For a fee ranging between 10,000 and 16,000 yen for two hours (roughly 60-100 euro), this option allows a female client to experience a date with a sex worker. This is meant to give a woman the possibility to know and get acquainted with the sex worker before to decide if she wants to have sex with her. Customers have the option to purchase the date course alone or combine it with the sexual experience. As explained by Obō, the nick name of the manager of the *rezu fūzoku* agency in Osaka that Nagata used to reserve a sex worker, in his book *Subete no Josei rezu fūzoku ga hitsuyōnano kamoshirenai* ('Lesbian Escort Agencies May Be Necessary for All Women,' 2018), the date option is fundamental in services oriented toward satisfying women's sexual pleasure. A date helps foster intimacy between the client and the provider, and intimacy is fundamental for women to enjoy sexuality (Obō 2018: 31).

Nagata's search for commodified intimacy is a way to overcome her loneliness and to connect and communicate with the 'other.' However, while being with her escort and attempting to engage in sex, she becomes aware that sex is nothing but an advanced form of communication between two human beings. Lacking basic communication skills, sex becomes an extremely advanced level of

communication she is unable to endure. Nagata is not acquainted with the girl and describes herself as extremely nervous throughout their meeting with the sex worker. This experience is framed as a topic for discussion with potential readers, and thus becomes the starting point for *MLEWL*. The problem then revolves around how to establish human relationships and the gratification that can be obtained from these exchanges.

Nagata recounts struggling with depression towards the end of high school. After a few months at university, she decided to quit studying and began to feel lost, lacking a sense of belonging or purpose in her daily life. This feeling of loss was compounded by her continuous efforts to meet her parents' expectations of her obtaining a stable job. Despite finding a part-time job and managing to work and save money despite her eating disorders, we see in various instances how her mother would remind her to find 'a real job'—meaning to pursue a more conventional career path, such as clerical work or full-time employment, which is considered the most common choice for Japanese women before marriage.

In Japanese society, fresh college graduates are expected to enter the job market soon after their degree ceremony and take on the role of 社会人 *shakaijin*, or 'person of society.' A *shakaijin* is a fully functioning adult member of society who contributes positively through their work and fulfills their social duties. In this context, marriage and having children are also considered 'duties' to be fulfilled. Failing to secure a stable job, moving from one part-time occupation to another, and lacking interest in human interactions leading to a solitary life are viewed by Japanese 常識 *jōshiki* ('common sense') as a form of societal sabotage. Given the current negative trend in the Japanese birthrate, not marrying and not having children is seen, especially for women, as being unsupportive of society. Women's choice to remain unmarried and/or childless is criticized by conservative factions of the government and media as selfish and opposed to the nation's interests (Rosenberger 2007). In an increasingly aging Japan, conservative critics of the government have focused their concerns about 'unproductive' youth generations on categories such as freeters, parasite singles, NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), and *hikikomori* (Saitō 2017), however women have been the target of openly harsh critics from politicians, as in the case of Suga Yoshihide who in 2015 candidly stated at Fuji TV: "With their marriage, I am hoping that mothers will contribute to their country by feeling like they want to have more children. Please have many children."[5]

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[5] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/japanese-politician-yoshihide-suga-in-sexism-row-after-call-for-women-to-have-more-babies

In Nagata's case, it is evident how precarious her situation is: she does not identify with heterosexuality, prioritizes her aspiration to become a *mangaka* over securing a full-time corporate job, and her depression impedes her from living a 'normal' life—finding and maintaining stable employment, taking care of herself, socializing, and seeking a partner. She is categorized as a NEET and additionally relies on her parents for financial support. Due to her lack of social interaction outside of her family and extended periods spent at home without activity, from a societal perspective, she is deemed unproductive.

The rejection of society and the resulting loneliness have been addressed by anthropologist Anne Allison, who describes being alone as the "new human condition for Japanese in the 21st century" (Allison 2012: 349), and Japan as a 'relationless society'—her translation of 無縁社会 *muen shakai* (Allison 2013). These definitions describe a situation of social isolation resulting from the breakdown of familial and other human bonds.

However, other forms of interaction and provision of human intimacy have been developing, creating alternative forms of sociality, as relationships between *otaku*[6] customers regularly attending maid cafes and their favorite maids working there (Galbraith 2013), or the commodified sentimental relationships between *dansō* (Female-to-Male crossdressers) escorts and their clients (Fanasca 2023). *Otaku* often develop unique social connections and forms of intimacy, which are frequently overlooked in a society that primarily values romantic or familial relationships. However, the significance of these alternative connections remains unchanged. Take the case of Nagata, for instance: the knowledge she gains from meeting an escort provides her with the same information about sex and the female body that a non-commodified encounter could offer, and the feelings she experiences are not less intense or important due to the paid nature of her experience.

Similarly, the relationship she establishes with her readers, with the positive comments she receives for her manga and the support she gets on Pixiv, the platform where she firstly uploaded her story, is another example of a non-normative relationship. It has traits of similarity with the 'circle' discussed by Patrick Galbraith. In his words, a circle is:

> a loose association of people who support someone or something. Relations between any given member of the circle and what they support are not private or exclusive, because others are also in relations with the person or thing and with one another. A promiscuous affective charge moves through the circle [...] the circle is a concrete, joyful encounter of heterogeneous bodies (2013: 113).

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[6] An *otaku* is described as an individual with obsessive interests, mostly (but not exclusively) oriented towards anime and manga. The term is often linked to the neighborhood of Akihabara, were most of the manga/anime/games relates shops and entertainments are located.

The audience, reading Nagata's manga and showing appreciation, fuels her with positive feedback, which eventually led her to be contacted by publishers interested in her manga.

These relationships cannot be considered as 'failed' only because they differ from heteronormative coupling and their goals, as they perfectly work in fulfilling different aims, namely acceptance and success, which are equally significative. Nagata identifies the success generated by the acceptance of her work by the readers as 甘蜜 *kanmitsu*, in English translation "sweet nectar" (Nagata 2016: 126), which becomes her reason for working and putting her efforts into something—a motivation for living. She notes that for someone the 'sweet nectar' can take the shape of the family, or a place to belong to. In her specific, queer, case, transmitting her signal to people who can actually receive it and being appreciated for this is what makes life worthwhile. For someone who once considered suicide, this must be seen as a very successful step, achieved through a successful relationship based on a different form of sociality. The goals Nagata reaches through her relationships with a female escort first, and her fandom then, even though not aligned with the aims of heteronormative relationships, are not less significant.

6. Conclusion: overcoming loneliness

Spending time in her room, only finding part-time jobs, dreaming of becoming a *mangaka* but lacking the strength to work on her manga, and depending on her parents for money are all features that define Nagata as one of the unproductive members of Japanese society. However, she turned her problem into a source of creativity and realized her essay manga by honestly narrating her struggles.

The bulk of the *MLEWL* focuses on Nagata's struggles with depression, which negatively affect her daily life and work routine. Her experience with a female escort serves as a way to expand Nagata's horizons as an author and as a human being. It represents a topic to write about, but in the end, it also becomes a revelation. In fact, Nagata arrives at the conclusion that sex is communication—an intimate communicative expression between two human beings, which she is not yet ready to enjoy. Despite 'failing' to deal with the sexual act, the entire experience cannot be framed as a failure. Through this opportunity, Nagata recognizes her desire to establish relationships with others and, specifically, to be accepted by them. Moreover, she finds the topic of her successful manga. Therefore, if we evaluate this relationship in terms of its results, it is actually positive. The feelings of acceptance that Nagata was unable to find in her family or previous workplaces, she begins to obtain through publishing her manga and receiving positive feedback from readers. These achievements overshadow the supposedly failed

sexual experience. By choosing to share her story, Nagata takes her first step towards communication, which she ultimately recognizes as what was missing in her life.

The narration is expressed through cute and simplified drawings consciously designed to be *kawaii*, or cute. This serves the purpose of engaging the reader despite the negative and dark topics the manga deals with, such as depression, self-injury, eating disorders, loneliness, isolation, and suicide. This effort towards communication configures *MLEWL* as the tool Nagata uses to open her heart and start a discussion with her readers.

Since its initial release on Pixiv, *MLEWL* has experienced seemingly unstoppable success. It was noticed and published in Japan by East Press in 2016, and then translated into several languages, including English, Italian, and Spanish. It was awarded the prestigious Harvey Award for Best Manga of 2018. This experience is nothing short of a resounding success, mirroring Nagata's successful efforts to communicate. With her unique drawing style and candid recounting of her personal traumas, she captivated both audiences and critics alike. By overcoming her loneliness and making her weaknesses the focus of her manga, she achieved her long-sought goals of communication and acceptance by others. There is no way to define the relationships that led her to this point—whether her sexual relationship with a female escort or her connection with the audience—as failed. Despite being commodified, brief, alternative, or openly queer, these relationships prompt a reconsideration and reconfiguration of what constitutes a successful relationship, especially in non-normative terms.

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