

*Filling the “less” of Murakami’s Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki:
Alienation, Signification, and Positive Identity Formation through Kristian Kahn’s
Asexual-as-Artist Archetype*

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“We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.” - Lao Tzu

Haruki Murakami’s novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* unfolds the story of five friends, four of whom, suddenly and without explanation, decide to cut off one of the members, the main protagonist, the “colorless” Tsukuru Tazaki. Desperately, Tsukuru pieces together the cause of this drastic alienation. The reader eventually learns that the reason for this betrayal is the alleged rape of a cis female member of their group, Shiro, by Tsukuru himself.

Unfortunately, these basic plot points are fleshed out through a profoundly sexu-normative rhetoric. Murakami never directly degrades - nor even uses the word - asexuality, but rather repeatedly creates situations that exhibit a lack of sexual desire as being unnatural and alien. I am not accusing Murakami of being anti-asexual, nor of intending this novel to be a treatise establishing the superiority of “natural” and “healthy” sexuality; he simply takes for granted sexual desire and attraction, and his critics suffer from the same assumptions. Though the ones who make mention of Shiro describe her as “the asexual type” - whatever that label means to them - I was unable to find any critique of a potential (anti)asexual spin to the novel. The following paper explores the implications of this language relying heavily upon the recent work of Kristian Khan and the archetype of the asexual-as-artist as elaborated in her paper, “There’s No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship? Asexuality’s Sinthomatics” included in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks. As an artist and ally, I intend this paper to be a lens through which to read *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* that contributes to the dialogue surrounding the construction of a positive asexual identity.

Murakami's sexu-normative undertones surface through such statements as, "in what seemed like a *natural progression* of events, they had gone back to his apartment and made love"¹ and "And of course I was interested in sex. *Just like anybody else.*"² Murakami's diction relentlessly equates sexual desire with psychological and physical soundness: "...a *healthy* physical desire"³, and "He wanted to hold a woman close, caress her body, inhale the scent of her skin. It was an entirely *natural* desire for a *healthy* young man"⁴, and "He had no problem with feeling those desires - they were, after all, the *natural* urges and cravings of a *healthy* adult male."⁵ Not only is an interest in sex framed as natural and innate, but also hetero-sex is specifically established as essential. As Tsukuru recounts the incredibly strong friendships he experienced to a present girlfriend, Sarah, he describes how the specter of sex did, however, always hang over them: "Abstinent? I'm not sure that's the right word. It wasn't something that dramatic. It's true, though, we were careful to keep relations with the opposite sex out of the group."⁶ Sara asks him, "But isn't that *unnatural*? If boys and girls that age get close to each other, and are together all the time, it's only *natural* that they start to get interested in each other sexually."⁷ At perceiving her discomfort, Tsukuru acknowledges, "I can see that there was something *unnatural* about it."⁸ Additionally, in regard to the sex between Tsukuru and Sarah, reaching orgasm is considered to be a teleological imperative⁹; an erection stops during intercourse, and, afterwards, he "...apologize[s] that things hadn't *worked out*"¹⁰ and regrettably laments that, "...he'd *failed* in bed."¹¹ These phrases undeniably link coupled, orgasmic hetero-sex with normalcy and annihilate the validity of any other experience of desire.

So should one simply conclude that here is another novel scattered with sexu-normative rhetoric compounding the marginalization and "otherness" of the asexual community? Maybe, except that, very late in the novel, on page 310 out of 386, Murakami gives pause: he suddenly reveals the possible asexual orientation of one of the cis females belonging to their group of friends, Shiro. She is described as "...never [being] interested in anyone of the opposite sex" and "...always [having] a strong aversion to anything sexual" so that "...whenever sex came up, [she] quickly changed the subject."¹² Until this point in the novel, the reader primarily knows Shiro as the catalyst of Tsukuru's ostracism from the group through her allegation that he raped her. Why this

sudden description of a possible asexual character explained so matter-of-factly after so much bias? What are the implications of this character's asexuality within the novel? What new insight into asexual identity can be revealed?

Identity formation is examined through Tsukuru's "years of pilgrimage" precipitated by the sudden alienation from his friends; Tsukuru is completely left in the dark when one mysteriously tells him not to contact them anymore and harshly states that if he thought about why, he would know. He tellingly replies, "If I think any harder about anything, I won't know who I am anymore."¹³ This moment marks the brink over which Tsukuru falls, plunging into a period of intense existential scrutiny; he is described as "Standing on the edge, staring down at the abyss, unable to look away."¹⁴ With the threat of an empty abyss looming large upon him, his identity has completely unraveled and the destination of his pilgrimage is a redefined self-identity.

To aid this piecing together of Tsukuru's identity, Murakami makes reference to the Lacanian process of subject formation. The description of the period immediately following Tsukuru's alienation from the group involves repeated instances of Tsukuru looking into a mirror: "He stared at his naked self in the mirror... someone near death"¹⁵ and "Every morning he'd stand at the bathroom sink and study his face in the mirror."¹⁶ This experience describes a Lacanian mirror stage with the associated misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). Murakami writes, "The person here now, the one he saw in the mirror, might at first glance resemble Tsukuru Tazaki, but it wasn't actually him."¹⁷ Tsukuru remembers that, "When I looked in the mirror, it felt like I'd been put inside a container that wasn't me."¹⁸ These instances metaphorically connect Tsukuru's experience looking into the mirror with what Lacan describes as the ego formation that occurs very early in life as the subject learns language and enters the realm of the symbolic: a realm already full of ideas and identities that the subject must choose from and adopt.

Tellingly, before the rejection, Tsukuru was deeply embedded in an identity prescribed to him by popular values, his family, and peers. Just prior to his plunge into the existential unknown, Tsukuru comments, "I don't plan on doing anything people don't want me to do"¹⁹ Recognizing the subject's inevitable identification with a preexisting, prepackaged identity, Kristian Kahn states that, "...identifying with an identity that has already been named prior to an individual's adoption of this term for

him- or herself stresses the fact that language - similar to Foucault's own mention of identity - is a game all speaking subjects are required to play: that is, we are obliged to adopt preexisting discourses in order to speak of oneself."²⁰ Murakami further complicates the matter by acknowledging the fundamental inability of language to accurately describe all possible experiences; Tsukuru's girlfriend, Sarah, the one person in Tsukuru's life who encourages him to seek answers to the unresolved alienation that occurred in his past, comments, "Some things in life are too complicated to explain in any language."²¹ When Tsukuru finally does find out the reason for the alienation, Murakami observes, "They didn't speak. Words were powerless now."²² By calling into question the very power of words, Murakami sets a stage for linguistic work; Tsukuru's pre-rejection identity - deeply grounded within normative language and culture - is destroyed through the existential break and metaphoric mirror stage, thus offering the opportunity to establish new linguistic symbols to describe his identity anew.

Importantly, throughout this metaphoric mirror stage, Tsukuru experiences a sort of asexuality. Murakami describes Tsukuru as having "no sexual desire to speak of"²³ and conspicuously uses words such as "inconsequential"²⁴ and "aimlessly"²⁵ to describe Tsukuru's thoughts and actions, a diction that, according to Elizabeth Hanna Hanson in "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure" - also included in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks - is dialectically opposed to desire. These descriptions that point toward asexuality in conjunction with a metaphorical period of ego formation provide an opportunity to re-imagine the urgent problematic of the very term "asexual" as recognized by Kristian Kahn: "...the individual adopting the term "asexual" to speak about his or her identity is not only adopting a medicalized model that, in Foucauldian terms, disqualifies the subject from being a viable social subject, but is also using a discourse that, in Lacanian terms, can never completely signify 'asexual'."²⁶ Therefore, we will see that Tsukuru's asexuality during a metaphoric mirror stage provides the opportunity to re-imagine the subsequent linguistic formulation of such an identity described by that which it *is*, rather than by that which it is not.

Again representing the pressures of normative culture, Murakami writes that, as an adolescent, Tsukuru had already formed an identity for himself based on relative lack: the names of his friends could each be associated with a word for a color, but "Tazaki was

the only last name that did not have a color in its meaning.”²⁷ Tsukuru confides, “I’ve always seen myself as an empty person, lacking color and identity,”²⁸ and “Because I have no sense of self. I have no personality, no brilliant color. I have nothing to offer. That’s always been my problem. I feel like an *empty vessel*. I have a shape, I guess, as a *container*, but there’s nothing inside.”²⁹ Earlier in the novel, Murakami had already described Tsukuru as seeing his image in the mirror as a container. By now saying that he, *himself*, feels like a container with nothing inside, Tsukuru confesses that he identifies with an imaginary that emphasizes the nothingness within the container rather than with positive attributes of the emptiness itself, thus forming an ego based on lack.

In contrast, however, to Tsukuru’s identification with colorlessness and lack, Murakami introduces the literal meaning of Tsukuru’s name: to make. Tsukuru strongly identifies with this meaning, stressing, “I’ve always liked making things that you can actually see.”³⁰ Crucially, this literal meaning comes from *within* the very word used to name Tsukuru at birth and precedes his self-identification as *colorless*, a quality applied from *without* through an imposed comparison with the majority tendency within his peer group. Murakami establishes the primacy of this inceptive meaning: “First he was given a name. Then consciousness and memory developed, and, finally, ego. But everything began with his name.”³¹ Therefore, Tsukuru’s primary identification as a “maker” should be read as preceding the formation of his ego based on lack and as a more veritable signifier of his essential self.

Murakami employs this primary identification to create a potent linguistic locus from which to empower Tsukuru toward defining his true self. Tsukuru is an architect - a maker - of train stations realizing a fascination that had been with him since childhood. Murakami states that, “The only real interest he had was train stations”³² and even uses the jargon of sexuality, “...he was so *attracted* to the stations...”³³ Train stations are sites of rest and change, of intentional embarking or disembarking, nodes on an endless circuit of travel. This endless circuit can be viewed as a metaphor for language, as Kristian Kahn writes, “Language is never ours, yet we are taught its rules, its expectations, and its functions, and, in order to identify ourselves as anything - be it male or female, sexual or asexual, self or other - we are forced to use a preexisting discourse that can never fully articulate who we are because language is a chain of endless signifiers.”³⁴ Citing Lacan,

Kahn goes on to observe that, “language - filled as it is with empty signifiers - is ‘a curious sort of closed circuit’ ... In this initial misrecognition that constitutes the subject’s introduction into language, the symbolic realm, and self-identity, the subject identifies and desires the Other, an endless ‘circuit’ of desire that, like the signifying chain, has no end.”³⁵ Therefore, Tsukuru is the *maker* of nodes of pause on a linguistic chain, sites interrupting the endless circuitry of language and desire, places to rest and reflect on the uncharted map of identity before the charged assault of the Symbolic.

Murakami’s emphasis on *making* becomes important fodder for an application of Khan’s asexual-as-artist archetype. Importantly, Murakami conflates Tsukuru with Eri and Shiro, the two cis females in his friend group, both talented artists/makers. Shiro is a talented piano player - “...a beautiful, shy artist... Shiro used to play a lot.”³⁶ Tsukuru is metaphorically linked with her character when he adopts the place and occupation attributed to Shiro in “a long, bizarre dream. He [is] seated at a piano, playing a sonata.”³⁷ Murakami again equates Tsukuru with the archetype of the artist/maker when Eri, a ceramicist, comments, “So even after you’re gone, your wonderful stations remain. Just like me putting my initials on the back of my plates.”³⁸ Murakami observes, “[Eri and Tsukuru] both shared a desire to create and build things with their own hands, things that were meaningful.”³⁹ Importantly, Eri is a maker of *empty vessels*; though containing nothing, her objects are meaningful in and of themselves, metaphors for positive signification despite implicit lack. Through this conflation of Tsukuru - maker of resting points on the endless chain of signification and symbol of the signifier, “asexual”, associated with lack - with Shiro, an artist of sound - empty language - and Eri, an artist of vessels - empty containers -, Murakami creates a linguistic opportunity for the term “asexual” to dispense with a signifier based on “lack of” through the asexual-as-artist archetype as posited by Kristian Khan. Khan states, “the artist, like the asexual, can exist in between imaginary and symbolic realms, defying categories, resisting identities while forging new discourses, and also questioning the dichotomous logic of heteronormative culture.”⁴⁰ In fact, when describing Tsukuru’s experience at train stations, that which he *makes*, Murakami states, “What was real and what was imaginary mingled in his mind...”⁴¹ Murakami thereby reveals that the archetype of the asexual-as-artist has the

agency and the capacity for symbolic work in forging a positive identity for asexuality as distinct from the normative signification of that which it *is not*.

Crucially, however, the relationship between Tsukuru and Shiro is profoundly different from that of Tsukuru and Eri. Murakami describes instances of penetration by Tsukuru's phallus - the signifier that "inaugurates the process of signification itself,"⁴² - of Shiro, the asexual character. Though Tsukuru experiences incessant sex dreams wherein both Eri and Shiro are simultaneously present, Shiro is the only one he ever penetrates upon orgasm, "in the end the one he always ejaculated in was Shiro."⁴³ Murakami even emphasizes the imperative that the reader ponders this circumstance: "Shiro was the one he penetrated. *Why Shiro?* ... Why does it have to be Shiro?"⁴⁴ The sex act between Tsukuru and Shiro enters the world outside of Tsukuru's dreams when Shiro alleges that Tsukuru raped her, penetrating her vagina - her empty vessel - with his phallus. Crucially, these penetrations occur only within Tsukuru's dreams and Shiro's nightmare, respectively, both of which belong exclusively to the realm of the Symbolic. These penetrations can be read metaphorically as the phallic signifier - at the root of the chain of signification - filling the "lack" implicit within the term "asexual," a term symbolized by Shiro who embodies a lived asexual experience that is positive and productive in its artistry, if not in its reproductive futurity⁴⁵.

Murakami goes on to describe how the phallic signifier has suffocated the asexual within the realm of the Symbolic. Toward the end of the novel, the reader learns that Shiro is murdered by strangulation. Having occurred while she was alone in her apartment, her murder is completely abstracted, and no tangible culprit is held responsible. Murakami describes, "Robbery wasn't involved... and there were no signs she'd been assaulted. Nothing was disturbed in her apartment, and there were no signs of a struggle. Residents on the same floor had heard no suspicious sounds... They never discovered the motive for the murder. Someone had come late at night, strangled her without making a sound, not stolen or disturbed anything else, and then left."⁴⁶ The murder is unsolved, with no namable culprit, and Tsukuru confesses that, "...he still couldn't escape the feeling that, in some *indefinable* way, he was responsible. And not just for the rape, but for her murder."⁴⁷ Here, Tsukuru realizes that through the indefinable slippages of meaning and his own "alienation in signification" - of which the

phallus is the signifier⁴⁸ - the word “asexual” has been violated and stolen of positive attributes. Importantly, Murakami points out that “...maybe he *had* tried to kill [Shiro], in a purely symbolic way”⁴⁹, thereby revealing that the phallic signifier has suffocated the asexual within, as Kahn defines, “...the symbolic realm (where one encounters not only the restrictive language barriers Lacan situates there but also the oppressive power and knowledge structures that Foucault’s work highlights)”⁵⁰ Therefore, the word “asexual” is denied a positive linguistic existence because the phallus-ruled Symbolic realm of normative sexuality has already annihilated a viable reading of the term.

Yet, perhaps from out of this symbolic tumult between the term “asexual” and the phallus - at the beginning of “the chain of signification”⁵¹ - a new linguistic account can emerge. Murakami reveals Tsukuru’s initial (misguided) speculation, “And being strangled was, perhaps, *exactly*, what [Shiro] wanted. In the mingled darkness between them, perhaps he had sensed that *desire*.”⁵² Kahn’s “endless ‘circuit’ of desire” is imposed upon Shiro, as asexual, by Tsukuru, as phallic signifier, revealing that, as Khan states, quoting Lacan, “As such, as an adult, if the individual attempts to position him- or herself within language and identify as sexual, asexual, or otherwise, a paradox makes itself evident as ‘man’s desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other’ only.”⁵³ Tsukuru supposes and imposes an imagined desire upon Shiro, a desire that will legitimize his *own* desire of the other. The asexual is, however, free of the desire of the other and thus destabilizes the very foundation of the meaning of desire for sex-normative culture; if the asexual individual does not desire an object-oriented *jouissance* - “the sexualized, transgressive enjoyment”⁵⁴ of an incestuous union with the referent of the phallic signifier -, the asexual subject is free to develop their own Real, as stated by Kristian Kahn: “...the asexual *does not actively strive for jouissance* and might instead be viewed in psychoanalytic terms as an autoerotic or self-containing individual whose desires and fantasies are expressed elsewhere and in other venues”⁵⁵, “reject[ing] the notion that pleasure or life instincts dominate an individual’s psychical and sexual life.”⁵⁶ Shiro, as the asexual/artist, violated by the phallic signifier, does not crave *jouissance* nor subscribe to Edelman’s reproductive futurism. In fact, - supplying a metaphor - “[Shiro] wanted, if possible, to have her womb removed.”⁵⁷ Tsukuru recognizes that he has misplaced this desire and turns the suffocating act back on his self, stating, “it was this

pain, and this sense of being choked, that *he* needed.”⁵⁸ Here, I postulate that the dual roles of Tsukuru as a symbol for the term “asexual” as defined by lack and as a symbol of the phallic signifier confront each other in a relation akin to Lacan’s observation that, “...in the labor which he undertakes to reconstruct *for another*, he rediscovers the fundamental alienation that made him construct it *like another*, and which has always destined it to be taken from him *by another*.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the phallic signifier itself - the signifier of the desire of the Other - must be suffocated, its linguistic breath squelched, if the term “asexual” is to move away from being defined by lack, shedding the comparison with that which implies its relative lack in the first place.

With the very last sentence of the novel, Murakami returns to the image of Tsukuru sitting in a train station, “The rear light of consciousness, like the last express train of the night, began to fade into the distance, gradually speeding up, growing smaller until it was, finally, sucked into the depths of the night, where it disappeared. All that remained was the sound of the wind slipping through a stand of white birch trees”⁶⁰ Here, seated at a train station - a metaphoric vantage point that, crucially, he designs himself, determining his own boundaries, foundations, and structure - Tsukuru watches “the rear light of consciousness” - the Symbolic - disappear, finally finding liberation from normative culture’s reign. As the Symbolic recedes from view along the pre-determined “endless circuitry” of language, Tsukuru remains in a place marked only by the sound - language without signification - of wind - a force without form - rustling through white - the color associated with Shiro’s name - birch trees. Therefore, the asexual as defined by lack and dominated by the sexual desire implicit within the hegemony of the phallic signifier finally finds peace at a linguistic node where the lived asexual experience is not described through recourse to founded, formed signifiers - that which *lacks* -, but rather through highly personal, abstract, sensory experience: that which *feels*.

¹ Murakami, *Colorless*, 20. emphasis added.

² *Ibid.*, 230. emphasis added.

³ *Ibid.*, 144. emphasis added.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77. emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116. emphasis added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 230. emphasis added.

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- ⁸ Ibid., 231. emphasis added.
- ⁹ Przybylo, *Asexuality*.
- ¹⁰ Murakami, *Colorless*, 239. emphasis added.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 234. emphasis added.
- ¹² Ibid., 310.
- ¹³ Ibid., 39.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 303.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 48.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 56.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 49.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 304.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 39.
- ²⁰ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 66.
- ²¹ Murakami, *Colorless*, 273.
- ²² Ibid., 324.
- ²³ Ibid., 5.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 5.
- ²⁶ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 66.
- ²⁷ Murakami, *Colorless*, 10.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 179.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 336. emphasis added.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 58.
- ³¹ Ibid., 66.
- ³² Ibid., 16.
- ³³ Ibid., 17. emphasis added.
- ³⁴ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 65-66.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 66.
- ³⁶ Murakami, *Colorless*, 14.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 353.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 335.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 329.
- ⁴⁰ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 71.
- ⁴¹ Murakami, *Colorless*, 17.
- ⁴² “Phallus.” No subject.
- ⁴³ Murakami, *Colorless*, 138.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 126. emphasis in original.
- ⁴⁵ Edelman, Lee. *No Future*.
- ⁴⁶ Murakami, *Colorless*, 318.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 331. emphasis added.
- ⁴⁸ Lacan, “Desire”, 28.
- ⁴⁹ Murakami, *Colorless*, 332. emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁰ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 73.
- ⁵¹ “Phallus.” No subject.
- ⁵² Murakami, *Colorless*, 332. emphasis on “exactly” is original. emphasis on “desire” is added.

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- ⁵³ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 67.
⁵⁴ Sharpe, "Jacque Lacan."
⁵⁵ Kahn, *Sinthomatics*, 67. emphasis in original.
⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.
⁵⁷ Murakami, *Colorless*, 311.
⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 343. emphasis added.
⁵⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, 46. emphasis in original.
⁶⁰ Murakami, *Colorless*, 386.

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