

Queer Intimacy as Autotherapeutic Practice in Nagata Kabi's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*

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Abstract:

This article examines how Nagata Kabi's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (2016) portrays sexual intimacy not as an erotic spectacle but as an autotherapeutic process of self-recognition. Through close visual-textual analysis, the study reveals how fragmented panel structures, averted gaze, restrained bodily contact, and selective use of colour construct sex as hesitant communication shaped by loneliness, family pressure, and internalised normativity. Rather than emphasising pleasure or mastery, the memoir depicts intimacy as emotional labour and ethical negotiation. The article focuses solely on Nagata's text and situates its findings within existing scholarship on comics and queer theory, prioritising ongoing engagement with the primary material. In doing so, it demonstrates how graphic memoir can make vulnerability and psychic work understandable through form.

Keywords: Nagata Kabi, graphic memoir, queer intimacy, autotherapy, visual analysis, manga.

Introduction:

Graphic memoir has become a vital form for exploring sexuality, mental health, and identity in contemporary literature. Unlike prose autobiographies, graphic narratives convey meaning through the interplay of visual and verbal elements, allowing bodies, emotions, and memories to be expressed in distinctive ways (Whitlock). Yet representations of sex and intimacy within comics remain highly contested. Historically, the medium has been viewed through two reductive lenses: as entertainment for children or as pornography. This binary has long constrained critical approaches to comics and limited sustained engagement with adult themes such as queer sexuality and intimate experience (Sabin).

Queer graphic memoirs challenge this divide by foregrounding marginalised narratives of desire, embodiment, and self-discovery that mainstream culture often silences. Authors such as Alison Bechdel and Maia Kobabe explore sexuality and gender through autobiographical storytelling, illustrating how queer identities are shaped through lived bodily experiences and ongoing social negotiations (Chute). Despite the growing body of such work, much scholarly attention has centred on questions of visibility, coming out, or the political significance of queer representation. Comparatively less attention has been given to the formal and visual strategies through which intimacy itself is constructed within graphic memoirs (Whitlock).

This relative critical neglect is also tied to the medium's long history of moral suspicion surrounding sexuality. Critics such as Fredric Wertham famously argued that comics could "stimulate children sexually," reinforcing anxieties about the medium's supposed moral dangers (Wertham 80, 175). Such claims helped establish a cultural framework in which adult comics were caught between accusations of childish triviality and pornographic excess (Sabin 13). Within this framework, representations of queer intimacy are frequently misread as pornographic or sensational, obscuring the narrative, emotional, and aesthetic complexities through which these experiences are articulated. Addressing this gap, the present article offers a close reading of the queer graphic memoir *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*.

Life writing, including graphic memoirs, constructs identity through narratives grounded in lived experience. As G. Thomas Couser argues, "life narrative is essential to the formation of individual identity and human relationships" (25). Autobiographical texts claim a direct connection to the author and their social world, distinguishing themselves from fiction while often organising experience around thematic rather than strictly chronological structures (Couser 81). In graphic memoirs, this process becomes both visual and embodied, as the drawn body, the spatial arrangement of panels, and the interaction between text and image create what Gillian Whitlock describes as "new and troubled spaces" for self-representation and self-exploration ("Autographics," 976).

Kabi Nagata's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (2016) provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics. The memoir recounts the author's struggles with depression, social isolation, family expectations, and her first sexual encounter with a woman. In Nagata's narrative, sex is neither celebratory nor straightforwardly liberating. Instead, it is depicted as awkward, incomplete, and deeply intertwined with feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and self-doubt. The encounter becomes less about erotic fulfilment than about a tentative attempt at self-understanding. In this sense, intimacy functions as an

autotherapeutic practice through which the narrator confronts emotional vulnerability and begins to articulate a fragile sense of self. Drawing on comics studies, queer theory, feminist theories of the body, and autobiography studies, this article examines how Nagata employs formal elements such as panel composition, gutters, temporal compression, and visual close-ups to depict desire as fragmented, anxious, and socially mediated. By foregrounding the formal construction of intimacy, the analysis demonstrates how queer graphic memoirs can function as spaces of self-reflection and autotherapeutic exploration. In doing so, the article argues that queer intimacy in graphic memoir should not be understood as scandalous or pornographic but rather as a complex process of subject formation, recognition, and emotional negotiation—one that operates as a form of autotherapeutic practice.

Literature Review:

Scholarship on graphic memoir has emphasised how comics mediate autobiographical subjectivity. Gilliam Whitlock (2006) introduced the concept of autographics to describe how the drawn self is produced through visual framing, sequencing, and the tension between exposure and control. In this sense, graphic memoir does not function as a transparent record of experience but as a constructed performance shaped by cultural scripts and the formal constraints of the comics medium. Hillary Chute (2010) situates graphic memoir within feminist and trauma studies, arguing that the visual-verbal form enables authors to represent embodied experience and affect in ways that challenge linear narrative and stable identity. At the same time, Chute cautions against overgeneralizing from single case studies and stresses the need for comparative analysis across multiple texts. Within queer theory, Judith Butler (2004) conceptualises gender and sexuality as performative, constituted through repeated acts that are shaped by regulatory norms. Building on this framework, Jack Halberstam (2011) demonstrates how queer lives frequently diverge from dominant life schedules, producing experiences of delay, failure, and belatedness. These insights have been widely applied to queer life writing, where narratives often organise themselves around moments of recognition, disidentification, and self-acceptance. In comics studies, Scott McCloud's (1993) theory of sequential art remains foundational. McCloud argues that meaning emerges in the gaps between panels—the “gutter”—where readers actively infer action, continuity, and emotion. Complementing this approach, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) develop a grammar of visual design that provides tools for analysing gaze, social distance, and perspective in images. Recent scholarship has applied these frameworks to queer graphic memoirs. Kate Kedley and Janna Spiering (2017) highlight the pedagogical potential of LGBTQ graphic narratives, while Shobitha (2021) reads *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* as a counter-discourse that challenges the pathologisation of queer mental illness.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing scholarship prioritises thematic interpretation over sustained formal analysis of specific visual sequences. This article addresses this gap by undertaking detailed close readings of selected panels and sequences, demonstrating how graphic form—panel composition, repetition, and visual framing—shapes the representation of queer intimacy and subjectivity.

Method:

This article employs qualitative close reading of selected sequences from *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*, paying particular attention to panel composition, framing, gaze, sequencing, and color. Following Scott McCloud’s account of how meaning in comics emerges through panel transitions and visual inference (McCloud 1993, 63), the analysis examines how Nagata’s formal choices shape the reader’s understanding of intimacy and self-recognition. The scope of this study is deliberately limited. It does not aim to represent queer graphic memoir as a genre; rather, its conclusions are confined to Nagata’s memoir and are presented as a focused case study rather than a generalizable model.

Analysis

Kabi Nagata’s *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (2016) situates sexual experience within a broader narrative of unemployment, social withdrawal, and an intense dependence on parental validation. Early in the memoir, Nagata frames her primary objective as becoming “a normal person” in the eyes of her parents (Nagata, 24). Within this framework, adulthood is measured through a narrow set of social expectations: stable employment, independence from family, and participation in heterosexual partnership. Sexuality therefore appears not as a domain of exploration but as one of the developmental markers through which normative adulthood is confirmed. Nagata describes her parents’ approval as her “sole driving force,” emphasizing that their opinion was “everything” (24). These expectations do not merely regulate her sexuality externally; they are deeply internalized, shaping how her body, desire, and sense of legitimacy are experienced from within.

Nagata’s understanding of intimacy is further complicated by the fact that much of her sexual knowledge derives not from lived encounters but from erotic manga. She explains early in the memoir that her expectations of sexual interaction were largely informed by erotic *dōjinshi*—fan-produced comics that rely on highly stylized and exaggerated conventions of erotic representation (Nagata, 6). Long before her first sexual encounter, her imagination of intimacy had therefore been mediated through fictional scripts. These fantasy images appear in the memoir as exaggerated visual fragments that contrast sharply with the hesitant realism of the escort scene that follows. This juxtaposition exposes a fundamental disjunction between culturally circulated representations of sexuality and the uncertainties of lived experience.

Nagata repeatedly characterizes her life as marked by developmental delay, explaining that she feels she has “jumped over a huge swath of things you’re supposed to experience” (Nagata, 95). This sense of belatedness frames sexuality less as an organic expression of desire than as a milestone she believes she has failed to achieve. The memoir visualizes this perception through schematic diagrams that represent life as a rigid sequence of stages. Within these diagrams, sex appears not as an exploration of intimacy but as an attempt to correct a perceived developmental failure. Her decision to hire a female escort therefore emerges less from erotic desire than from a tentative effort to explore and clarify her own sexuality, using the encounter as a means of testing feelings that had previously existed only in fantasy.

This tension between personal desire and normative expectation resonates with Judith Halberstam’s argument that queer subjects often need to “forget the heterosexual family as a source of origins” in order to challenge the temporal and relational structures that organize normative life trajectories (Halberstam, 71). Nagata’s narrative reveals the difficulty of such a break. Her sense of legitimacy remains deeply entangled with parental approval and with broader cultural expectations surrounding heterosexual adulthood. Within this context, the encounter with the escort becomes a tentative experiment in negotiating intimacy outside these normative frameworks.

The love hotel sequence (5-6; 90-103) in which Nagata meets the escort is structured through the distinctive visual grammar of manga. The scene unfolds through short, horizontally stacked panels that slow narrative time and fragment bodily movement. Rather than presenting a continuous erotic sequence, the page isolates hands, shoulders, and partial faces. The absence of a unified full-body image prevents the reader from constructing a stable erotic tableau. Instead, bodily contact appears hesitant and incomplete. Nagata’s hands frequently hover above the partner’s body without making contact, visually enacting the gap between desire and action. At one moment she narrates that “This is the first time I’ve ever set foot in a love hotel” (Nagata, 6), “her breasts, her body—everything was right there in front of me, but I couldn’t touch any of it” (Nagata, 103). The accompanying panel depicts her hands suspended awkwardly above the partner’s body, transforming hesitation into a visible compositional element.





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Fig.1, Kabi Nagata, *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (2017), p. 5 & p. 103.

This visual fragmentation reflects what Gillian Whitlock describes as the distinctive “shuttling between words and images” through which graphic memoir constructs autobiographical meaning (Whitlock, 978). In autographic narratives, the drawn body becomes both a site of exposure and a mechanism of control, allowing authors to negotiate vulnerability through visual mediation. Nagata’s fragmented panels therefore do not merely depict awkward intimacy; they stage the difficulty of inhabiting the autobiographical body itself. Gaze plays a crucial role in structuring the reader’s relationship to these images. Nagata’s eyes are repeatedly averted, closed, or directed downward, and direct eye contact with either her partner or the reader is largely absent. In the scene where Nagata and Yuri engage in sex, there is no direct visual contact between the depicted participants and the viewer (92, 103). When an image addresses the viewer indirectly, the viewer becomes not the object of the gaze but the subject observing the scene. In the terms developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, such images function as “offer” images rather than “demand” images (Kress and van Leeuwen 119), presenting the scene for contemplation rather than soliciting identification, arousal, or emotional engagement. This indirect address is

reinforced through shifts in social distance and angle. Social distance concerns how close or distant the viewer appears to be from the represented bodies, conveyed through framing such as close-ups or medium shots (Kress and van Leeuwen, 124). Close-ups of Nagata's face and fragmented body parts draw attention not to pleasure but to anxiety, marked by sweat, rigid posture, and frozen expressions, while overhead and oblique perspectives create emotional distance and mirror her sense of dissociation and self-surveillance.

Demand images establish direct visual contact with the viewer and invite engagement, whereas offer images present the scene for observation. By withholding direct visual address, the memoir positions the reader as a witness rather than a participant in the encounter. The visual emphasis shifts away from erotic engagement and toward the narrator's internal state. Sweat marks, trembling lines, and rigid postures dominate the visual field, redirecting attention inward toward anxiety and self-consciousness rather than outward toward sexual action (5-6).

The manga's visual vocabulary intensifies this inward orientation through the use of emanata—expressive marks that externalize emotional states. Dark swirls and smoke-like strokes envelop Nagata's body during visualizing what she described as a "dark, painful space with nothing below my feet" (Nagata, 17). Such graphic conventions function as visual shorthand for internal affect, allowing psychological states to become legible through symbolic marks (Davies, 8). In Nagata's memoir, however, these emanata also emphasize isolation: they represent internal turmoil that remains invisible to other characters within the scene. Color further structures the emotional register of the narrative. The memoir's dominant palette consists of soft pink tones that frequently accompany moments of vulnerability and self-exposure. During moments of crisis, however, the palette shifts abruptly into grayscale, including both the sexual encounter and the scene in which Nagata's mother learns about her sexuality. Color therefore operates less as a marker of erotic intensity than as an index of emotional rupture. The disappearance of pink visually signals the collapse of the fragile emotional equilibrium that structures the memoir's narrative world.

These visual strategies resonate with Judith Butler's account of how bodies are constituted through regulatory norms that determine what forms of embodiment become recognizable. As Butler argues, the norms governing sex operate performatively to "constitute the materiality of bodies" (*Bodies That Matter*, xii). In Nagata's narrative, these norms appear not as explicit prohibitions but as internalized scripts that shape how desire is experienced and recognized. The paralysis she encounters during the sexual encounter therefore reflects not simply nervousness but the difficulty of recognizing desire outside the cultural narratives that define legitimate sexuality.

Michel Foucault's analysis of sexual discourse provides another framework for interpreting the scene. Foucault argues that silence should not be understood as the absence of sexuality but as one of the mechanisms through which sexual meaning is produced: "Silence itself...functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them" (*The History of Sexuality*, 17). In Nagata's memoir, hesitation and fragmentation operate precisely in this way. Dialogue during the encounter frequently dissolves into incomplete phrases and awkward deflections. When the escort gently asks whether Nagata would like "to make your partner feel good, too," she responds that it is "totally fine," later admitting in fragmented narration that she wanted to touch more but could not bring herself to do so (Nagata, 140–41). These incomplete utterances mirror the fragmented visual composition of the page, reinforcing the sense that desire remains only partially articulated.

Nagata reflects repeatedly on how erotic manga shaped her expectations of sex and intimacy (Nagata, 6). Long before her first encounter, her understanding of desire was mediated almost entirely through stylized representations rather than lived experience. These fantasy images appear in the memoir as exaggerated, idealized fragments that contrast sharply with the hesitant realism of the escort scene. The visual shift between these registers marks a fundamental disjunction between scripted sexuality and embodied experience. This disjunction becomes explicit when Nagata asks, "Was I seeking something that didn't even exist in reality?" (Nagata, 117). The question signals not only disappointment but an epistemic crisis. Desire itself becomes unstable, no longer experienced as an inner truth waiting to be expressed, but as a set of borrowed expectations that fail under the pressure of lived encounter. The collapse of fantasy does not produce immediate clarity or liberation. Instead, it generates doubt and self-interrogation. In this moment, desire becomes an object of inquiry rather than a foundation of identity. As Butler (2004) argues, the self does not emerge through transparent self-knowledge but through the destabilization of normative scripts that organize bodily possibilities. Nagata's failure to inhabit erotic fantasy exposes the contingency of those scripts and the fragility of the identities built upon them. Rather than discovering who she is through sex, she confronts how profoundly her sense of desire has been shaped by external narratives.

Throughout the escort episode, sex is framed not as pleasure or performance but as a fragile form of communication marked by interruption, delay, and misalignment. Speech repeatedly breaks into partial phrases and unfinished sentences ("mm. MNH!," "ooh," 103), while bodily movement stalls at critical moments. Hands hover above skin without making contact, and bodies stiffen rather than move fluidly toward intimacy. These interruptions prevent the scene from developing into a coherent erotic sequence. Instead, they foreground

the difficulty of making oneself legible to another person. Intimacy appears here not as a natural flow of desire but as a laborious attempt to translate feeling into action.

This emphasis is reinforced by the dominance of reactional processes over actional ones. As Kress and van Leeuwen explain, reactional structures organize meaning around perception and response rather than goal-directed action (Kress and van Leeuwen, 124). In Nagata's memoir, close-ups of widened eyes, sweat marks, trembling lines, and averted gazes repeatedly displace physical movement as the primary carriers of meaning. The reader is directed not toward what the body accomplishes but toward what the subject feels and fails to do. The encounter therefore culminates not in mastery or narrative resolution but in partial recognition. Sex does not resolve confusion or confirm identity; it renders hesitation visible.

The escort episode thus functions as a form of autotherapy in a limited but significant sense. Therapy here does not operate through healing or narrative closure but through the externalization of internal difficulty. Only after the sustained depiction of anxiety and self-fracture does drawing emerge as a possibility within the memoir. What had previously appeared as paralysis—social anxiety, self-harm, sexual confusion, and muteness—begins to reorganize itself into creative urgency. When asked what she truly wants, Nagata replies, “My number one choice for work is probably manga” (32). This declaration signals a decisive shift: suffering is no longer merely endured but redirected into creative production. If bodily pain once helped her “understand” her feelings—“It’s easy to understand the pain when it’s my body that’s being hurt” (13)—then drawing becomes a non-destructive parallel, a way of seeing pain without inflicting it. Creative work gradually replaces self-harm as a means of processing emotional distress. The page becomes a structured space where divided selves can coexist and where experiences that once felt overwhelming can be framed and examined. By drawing her own hesitation, shame, and paralysis, Nagata renders internal states visible and available for reflection. The act of representation thus becomes a mode of working through experience rather than overcoming it.

Her insistence that “I want to draw some manga and make my debut before I die” (41) underscores the existential urgency that underlies this creative turn. When she writes, “I’m OUT,” likening the sensation to emerging “out of a deep cave” (42), the metaphor signals not a miraculous recovery but the gradual reorientation of energy. The transformation is procedural rather than redemptive: she channels “that bottled up energy” (68) into work, makes calls she once avoided, and eventually receives “the go-ahead for one of my pitches” (69). Drawing does not eliminate anxiety; instead, it renders it workable. What was once immobilizing becomes narrative and visual material. Autotherapy in this context therefore

consists not in cure but in the careful articulation of psychic difficulty through creative practice.

This strategy also establishes a distinctive ethics of representation. By refusing erotic spectacle, the memoir resists the commodification of queer intimacy and the positioning of the reader as a consumer of sexual imagery. As Gillian Whitlock argues, graphic memoir constructs an ethical relation between author and reader through the tension between exposure and restraint. In Nagata's work, access to the autobiographical body is granted, but pleasure is deliberately withheld. The reader is invited to witness vulnerability rather than to consume it. Intimacy thus becomes an occasion for reflection rather than performance, modeling a mode of looking that is attentive, restrained, and ethically implicated in the narrator's fragility.

Importantly, the episode itself offers no narrative closure. The encounter ends without catharsis or transformation, reinforcing the memoir's broader refusal of therapeutic resolution. Its significance lies not in sexual success but in the recognition that desire cannot simply be performed according to cultural expectations. It is through the act of drawing and narrating this encounter that the experience becomes meaningful. Through the fragmentary grammar of manga—its gutters, cropped bodies, and hesitant dialogue, as seen in *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*, the memoir renders visible the emotional labor involved in navigating intimacy. In this sense, the representation of sexual experience becomes part of the memoir's autotherapeutic process. The drawn body becomes a site where internalized norms can be examined and partially unsettled. As Judith Butler observes, the body is always "given over to others even as it is one's own" (*Undoing Gender*, 20). Nagata's autobiographical body—sweating, trembling, and exposed—redirects the reader's gaze away from erotic spectacle and toward the fragile process of self-recognition. Through the interplay of visual fragmentation, narrative hesitation, and theoretical reflection, the memoir ultimately reframes queer intimacy not as a moment of fulfillment but as an ongoing process of learning how to inhabit one's own body and emotions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* represents sexual intimacy not as fulfillment, mastery, or narrative resolution, but as an autotherapeutic practice grounded in hesitation, doubt, and partial recognition. Through sustained close reading of the escort episode and its narrative context, the analysis has demonstrated how Nagata Kabi's formal strategies construct sex as a process of self-inquiry rather than a spectacle of desire. Fragmented paneling, averted gaze, restrained bodily contact, selective use of color, and intrusive narration redirect attention away from erotic action and toward the psychic labor involved in navigating intimacy. Situated within a broader narrative of

loneliness, family pressure, and chrononormative anxiety, sexual experience emerges less as an affirmation of identity than as an attempt to repair a perceived failure of development. Sex does not confirm who the narrator is; instead, it exposes the uncertainty through which desire must be negotiated. Intimacy thus becomes a site of learning rather than achievement. The encounter does not resolve confusion. It renders confusion visible and communicable.

This reading contributes to comics studies by demonstrating the importance of sustained formal analysis in the study of graphic life writing. Rather than treating theory as a substitute for close reading, the article has shown how meaning emerges through specific compositional choices on the page. It also contributes to scholarship on queer life writing by challenging interpretive frameworks that privilege disclosure, affirmation, or narrative closure. In Nagata's memoir, self-recognition remains provisional and incomplete. Autotherapy operates not through confession or catharsis, but through hesitation, reflection, and the careful articulation of uncertainty. More broadly, this case study suggests that queer intimacy in graphic memoir need not be framed through visibility, triumph, or liberation. Restraint, fragmentation, and failure can function as equally powerful narrative resources. By refusing erotic spectacle, Nagata constructs an ethics of representation that positions the reader as a witness to vulnerability rather than a consumer of sexual imagery.

Finally, the paper underscores the value of carefully delimited case studies in the analysis of graphic life writing. Rather than generalizing about queer graphic memoir as a genre, it demonstrates how one text mobilizes visual form to make psychic labor legible. Future research might extend this approach through comparative analyses of other queer graphic memoirs or through reception studies that examine how readers engage with such representations of vulnerability and intimacy. Taken together, these findings affirm the capacity of graphic memoir to render intimacy not as performance or resolution, but as an ongoing negotiation with the self.

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