

Pursuit of Happiness in Alternate Realities:

The Intersection of Queerness and the Metaphysical in Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*

INTRODUCTION

Haruki Murakami is a Japanese author widely renowned for his fictional repertoire specializing in magical realism. Magical realism is an incredibly nuanced genre that exists on the junction of realistic and speculative fiction, and Murakami seamlessly creates a balance between the two. This study aims to examine the intersection of queerness and the metaphysical in Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart* by focusing on the instances of magical realism as they are presented throughout the narrative and deconstructing them through a queer lens. This research will attribute Sumire's ultimate disappearance—a pivotal event within the narrative—to an escape from compulsory heterosexuality into a world free from binaries, while also concentrating on the role that magical realism serves to support this interpretation.

PART 1: SUMIRE AS A QUEER CHARACTER

Before dissecting the many elements of magical realism throughout the narrative, it is imperative to first establish the chronology of Sumire's character arc and pinpoint the multiple descriptors that code her as a queer character. From the very beginning of the novel, it is blatant that Sumire is idiosyncratic. She wears oversized secondhand clothing and work boots, harbors an aversion to bras and makeup, and carries herself as though she is “half a step away from picking a fight” (Murakami 6). While the act of defining queer fashion is largely based on stereotypes, there exists a myriad of nuanced signifiers utilized by members of the LGBTQ+ community in order to essentially advertise their queerness to others without explicitly announcing it. A study from the *Journal of Homosexuality* concerning the colloquial term “gaydar” explores the ways in which these signifiers are implemented into queer spaces: “[Queer] people may learn to display subtle

cues as well as learn to read cues—both intentional and unintentional—that increase the probability of correctly identifying another’s sexual orientation” (Woolery 16). These cues can be performed through fashion, mannerisms, speech, etc. In Sumire’s case, these queer cues are executed via her choice in dress, the brash and masculine manner in which she speaks, and even her antisocial tendencies. Sumire never displayed much of an interest in school, deeming her fellow students “hopelessly dull, second-rate specimens,” and eventually dropped out to pursue her true passion of writing novels (Murakami 3). Her lack of a desire to fit in with her classmates can be interpreted as a queer signifier as well, as it exhibits an unwillingness to interact with those who cannot relate to her profundity or her experience. Additionally, an article from the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* provides historical context to the phenomenon of innately queer fashion and discusses a handful of examples: “Gender, or the pushing of gender boundaries, is central to the expression of lesbian identity through appearance practices. Several scholars have described how lesbian women have fashioned their bodies to connect to masculine or masculine-leaning esthetics through their dress” (Reddy-Best 1). Some of these lesbian esthetics mirror Sumire’s fashion choices, such as oversized jackets, rugged work boots, and traditionally masculine silhouettes. She rejects conventional feminine clothing and does not give much thought as to what she wears, prioritizing function over fashion. Further, to comment on the pushing of gender boundaries, Sumire is described as an unceremoniously blunt individual with a total lack of inclination to adhere to gender norms.

Sumire is explicitly introduced as a queer character from the very first page of the novel. The narrator, K, indicates early on that the majority of the story will revolve around Sumire’s emergence into her queer identity. The introduction to the novel illustrates that “in the spring of her twenty-second year, Sumire fell in love for the first time in her life . . . The person she fell in

love with happened to be seventeen years older than Sumire. And was married. And, I should add, was a woman” (Murakami 3). In addition to the tumultuous feeling of falling in love for the first time, Sumire continually places emphasis on the fact that she has never experienced sexual desire up to this point. “To be perfectly frank, sexual desire has me baffled,” she confesses to K on more than one occasion (Murakami 8). When Sumire meets Miu, however, she is instantly struck by something indescribable. They initially meet at a wedding reception for Sumire’s cousin, to whom Miu previously gave piano lessons. They get to talking, and eventually Miu offers Sumire a simple clerical job. At some point in the conversation, Sumire speaks about her father, expressing that it is a burden to be related to someone so conventionally attractive when she, herself, is not. This confession is puzzling to Miu, and she responds, “You don’t realize how very attractive you are,” before lightly brushing her hand against Sumire’s from across the table (Murakami 20). It was in this instant that Sumire realized she was in love, a life experience with which she had not been acquainted prior.

Soon after their meeting, Sumire begins to work for Miu, and the pair travel together internationally on business. Sumire, once a vehement writer, suddenly finds herself struck by a wave of uncharacteristic writer’s block. She attempts to describe this slump to K: “My head is like some ridiculous barn packed full of stuff I want to write about . . . Problem is, once I sit at my desk and put all these down on paper, I realize something vital is missing” (Murakami 15). This missing component, she speculates, is her sexual desire. However, once she discovers that desire through Miu, she is met with an inability to write a word. K suggests that, since Sumire has found love for the first time in her life, perhaps she feels she is existing inside a fictional landscape, and therefore is no longer compelled to invent new ones through her writing. Sumire asserts that she loses the ability to think when she is with Miu, claiming that “Miu and I were always together, two

interlocking spoons, and with her I was swept away somewhere . . . and I just thought, OK, go with the flow” (Murakami 133). Here, it is evident that Sumire is attempting to submit to her feelings rather than agonizing over them, allowing the natural order of things to take its course. Further, the insistence on Miu’s ability to sweep Sumire away reads as deliberate, as it foreshadows her ultimate disappearance. In an effort to surrender to her feelings, Sumire accompanies Miu to Italy, France, and eventually settles in Greece on a small island near Athens. However, their trip is cut short when Sumire disappears, “like smoke,” and Miu summons K to the island to help search for her (Murakami 93).

PART 2: COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

While many of the plot points in *Sputnik Sweetheart* encourage inquisition, Sumire’s abrupt departure is arguably the most inconclusive component of this novel. After Sumire disappears in Greece, K and Miu are unable to recover her, and presumably carry on with their respective lives once they return to Japan. This development can be inferred from K’s description of his homecoming: “Tomorrow I’ll get on a plane and fly back to Tokyo. Summer vacation is nearly over, and I have to step once more into the endless stream of everyday. There’s a place for me there,” he narrates, assuring the reader that he belongs in the material world, fulfilling his mundane daily tasks (Murakami 178-179). However, although the method by which she disappears is equivocal, Sumire undoubtedly possesses multiple incentives for leaving, which are exacerbated by the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. In order to establish this argument, this section will unveil the ways in which Sumire and Miu respectively are afflicted by the confines of compulsory heterosexuality, and how this institution inevitably influences the outcome of the narrative.

Compulsory heterosexuality is integral to the characterization of both Sumire and Miu for a plethora of reasons. In Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay concerning the impact of compulsory heterosexuality on queer women, she exposes the way in which compulsory heterosexuality is perpetuated by patriarchal strongholds both within media and society overall. She defines compulsory heterosexuality as the institution in which "heterosexuality is presumed as a sexual preference of most women, either implicitly or explicitly," and "the idea of 'preference' or 'innate orientation'" is never "even indirectly questioned" (Rich 14). In other words, most women are assumed to be heterosexual by default, which has in turn constructed borderline insurmountable obstacles for queer and questioning women. It is not uncommon for queer individuals to navigate a large portion of life presenting as straight before ever questioning their sexuality, because heterosexuality is all they've ever been exposed to. This issue is further propagated by insufficient representation of queer relationships in television, pop culture, and even advertising. Conversely, an increase in constructive representation would enable women with the agency to investigate their sexuality—beyond the baseline standard that is heterosexuality—more accessibly. Compulsory heterosexuality is relevant to this novel because its repercussions are exhibited through both Sumire and Miu respectively.

Before her eventual disappearance, the narrative demonstrates that Sumire is afflicted by compulsory heterosexuality in many ways. For starters, Sumire equates her inability to feel sexual desire for men with an inability to feel sexual desire in general: "I'm not proud of it, but I don't have any sexual desire. And what sort of experience can a writer have if she doesn't feel passion? It'd be like a chef without an appetite" (Murakami 17). Here, Sumire is yet again admitting to K that she does not have sexual desire, at least in the context of her life experiences thus far. She catastrophizes that she will never be a great writer solely because she does not want to have sex

with men, without so much as glossing over the notion that she could be queer. However, when Sumire meets Miu for the first time, she is struck with that very desire she had been missing all her life, and immediately begins grappling with an uncharted array of feelings and urges. “It explains everything,” she tells K, “Why I don’t want to have sex with any guys. Why I don’t feel anything. Why I’ve always thought I’m different from other people” (Murakami 52). This revelation is evidently groundbreaking to Sumire, as it is a development she had not taken into consideration until it practically smacked her in the face. Sumire’s internal confirmation of her queerness eases the sense of alienation she has always carried with her, from both her classmates and society as a whole. It is worth noting that Sumire jumped to the conclusion that her sex drive was broken before even considering that she could be a lesbian, and this mentality is attributed to compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality enforces the belief that, “despite profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women, there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ which draws women toward men” (Rich 17). Even though Sumire did not possess an inclination toward desiring men, compulsory heterosexuality obstructed her from grasping—or even beginning to ponder—that she desired women. If queerness was accurately and constructively represented within the worldbuilding of this novel, perhaps Sumire would have come to terms with her sexuality much sooner, which would have, in turn, solved her internal dilemma as a writer more efficiently.

Another instance in which Sumire is subjected to compulsory heterosexuality lies in her reasoning for pursuing relationships with men in the first place. When K introduces Sumire to the reader, he surmises that if she had ever endured a sexual encounter with a man in the past, it would have been motivated by “literary curiosity” rather than sexual desire (Murakami 8). While this claim is mere speculation, K has valid reason to believe that this conclusion would be the case, as

it aligns with Sumire's assertion that she has never experienced sexual desire in her lifetime. It can be inferred that, although Sumire never expressed any genuine interest in men, she participated in such relationships regardless because it was expected of her to do so. This expectation is rooted in compulsory heterosexuality, as "heterosexuality is compulsory for women, not only in being required but also in being actively pressed on women and girls, beginning at puberty" (Tolman 75). Due to the fact that Sumire presumably pursued these relationships during adolescence, it is reasonable to infer that she did so in order to fulfill the expectations that had been projected onto her since puberty. These expectations ultimately shed light on the reason Sumire is so adamant apropos of her conviction that something is inherently wrong with her for not experiencing desire—that is, until she meets Miu.

Moreover, another direct consequence of compulsory heterosexuality is exhibited in the text through Sumire's insistence that she is a "good-for-nothing lesbian" (Murakami 65). She refers to herself in this derogatory manner a handful of times, establishing a negative thought pattern surrounding the possibility that she could be a lesbian. This declaration is prompted by an article Sumire reads in the paper, which details how lesbians are "born that way," and that there exists a "tiny bone in the inner ear that's completely different from other women's that makes all the difference . . . ever since I read about it I can't get the idea out of my mind of this little good-for-nothing bone inside my ear" (Murakami 52). The degrading language that Sumire uses to describe lesbianism is once again attributed to compulsory heterosexuality, as lesbianism deviates from the norm. According to Rich, "Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life . . . it has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown," etc., which explains why Sumire demonstrates a negative visceral reaction to uncovering her sexuality (Rich 27). This concept of a "good-for-nothing lesbian" is also

reminiscent of the useless lesbian stereotype, which stems from the idea that lesbians are oblivious when it comes to reading romantic encounters with other women (Murakami 65). Whether Sumire is intending to use such language in a light-hearted manner or otherwise, there exists an underlying apprehension to the prospect of identifying as a lesbian that is enforced by compulsory heterosexuality.

The final example of compulsory heterosexuality found in Sumire's character is her emergence into a delayed adolescence after she begins to accept her sexuality. Sumire meets K at a cafe dressed in uncharacteristically business-like attire, as per her newfound employment with Miu. K comments that he hardly recognizes her, to which Sumire replies, "It's that season" (Murakami 61). When K invites her to elaborate, she explains, "A delayed adolescence, I guess. When I get up in the morning and see my face in the mirror, it looks like someone else's" (Murakami 61). The overall concept of a delayed adolescence is relatively common within the queer community, as many LGBTQ+ individuals do not come out until their late teens or early twenties. A journal on the process of coming out categorizes delayed adolescence as part of an exploration stage, and explains that "such a delayed adolescence can be very disturbing for individuals who may be aged twenty and up, yet quite mature in other areas of their lives . . . because they were raised as heterosexuals, they may lack the interpersonal skills to [socialize with other homosexuals]" (Binks 15). In other words, this integral aspect of the coming out process mimics the turbulent and unpredictable stage of life that is adolescence, including the process of navigating romantic and/or sexual relationships with others for the first time. Sumire describes her transformation as a delayed adolescence because she is actively making up for the growth that she was deprived of as a teenager, which was instilled in her to begin with due to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

Aside from Sumire's experience, Miu is also considerably afflicted by compulsory heterosexuality, but her afflictions are much more subtle and nuanced than those of Sumire. In order to understand Miu's character and make sense of her speculative encounters, it is essential to first make the case for her queerness, as her character is not explicitly queer-coded like Sumire's. An obvious indication of Miu's queerness stems from her claim that she never had time to love someone: "I had a lot of boyfriends, and if the mood struck me, I didn't mind one-night stands. But never once did I truly love someone. I didn't have the time" (Murakami 159). Miu's lack of experience with true love could be indicative of a reluctance to romantically commit to a man, which introduces the possibility of queer tendencies. It is also worth noting Miu's choice of language here; she explicitly states that she "didn't mind" sleeping with men on occasion, but this statement is not synonymous with enthusiastic consent (Murakami 159). Her indifference to sexual encounters with men is directly correlated to compulsory heterosexuality: "If [it is presumed] that female homosexuality issues from a disappointed heterosexuality, as observation is said to show, could it not be equally clear to the observer that heterosexuality issues from a disappointed homosexuality?"—meaning, if homosexual tendencies arise partly due to negative experiences with heterosexual encounters, the same can be said about heterosexual tendencies stemming from negative homosexual encounters (Butler 37). In Miu's case, although she has had countless heterosexual encounters, it is evident that these encounters were unfulfilling to her, which could, in turn, imply that she may gravitate toward pursuing homosexual encounters in the future. This correlation between compulsory heterosexuality and Miu's sexual history further corroborates the proposition that she is a queer character. A testimonial from a Smith College dissertation supports this notion: "[I realized] that I could be a lesbian despite having a history of dating a man"

(Meresman 39). In context, Miu's dating history does not necessarily represent her sexuality, as many queer women start out pursuing relationships with men due to compulsory heterosexuality.

Another indication of Miu's queerness surfaces when she reveals she is involved in a sexless, platonic marriage. She is friendly with her husband, clarifying that she sees him on the weekends and that they are "like good friends, life partners able to pass some pleasant time together" (Murakami 160). Similar to her indifference toward her previous boyfriends and hook-ups, Miu's marriage is less rooted in true love and more rooted in comfort, consistency, and a lack of willingness to deviate from the norm. The default relationship standard—that is, a marriage between a man and a woman—is perpetuated by compulsory heterosexuality, and Miu actively contributes to that institution through her platonic marriage to her husband. She even confirms that the relationship is sexless: "We never make love, though—never even touch each other. I feel bad about it, but I don't want to touch him. I just don't want to" (Murakami 160). Here, Miu admits that she feels guilty for not wanting physical intimacy with her own husband, but it is evident that she cannot overcome her reluctance. This dilemma can easily be explained by compulsory heterosexuality, as "heterosexuality is produced through sets of belief and practice that both keep women apart and force women, both overtly and covertly, into partnerships with men" (Tolman 74). In other words, compulsory heterosexuality prevents Miu from even entertaining the potentiality of exploring relationships with women; instead, she is burdened with an obligation to remain in a relationship with a man—even one that entirely lacks intimacy.

A life-altering experience of Miu's that further exacerbates her relationship with compulsory heterosexuality is the ferris wheel incident. This incident is a major fantastical event in the narrative and will be thoroughly expounded upon in the following section. For now, though, a brief summary is as follows: fourteen years prior to the events of the novel, Miu was studying

classical piano in Switzerland. While she was living there, she would continually run into a local man everywhere she went named Ferdinando. His presence made her increasingly uneasy with each encounter, and she developed a suspicion that he was following her. One night, Miu decided to visit the local carnival on her way home from dinner, and wound up trapped in one of the ferris wheel gondolas overnight. In search of a distraction, she resolved to using the binoculars she carried with her to spy into the window of her own apartment. She scanned the buildings, located her apartment, and spotted a man—presumably Ferdinando—having sex with a woman in her room. Upon closer inspection, the woman appeared to be Miu herself. While the woman—the version of herself she was observing—appeared to be enjoying herself, Miu did not want to participate, and was thoroughly repulsed by what she was witnessing. According to Rich, “Lesbian existence . . . is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (Rich 27). In the context of this scenario, Ferdinando believed he was entitled to Miu’s sexual submission, which is a product of compulsory heterosexuality. This bizarre, fantastical encounter that Miu underwent many years ago effectively “split her in two” as the text puts it, and her ability to feel sexual desire joined her other half on the “other side” (Murakami 157). Put simply, the part of Miu that harnessed the ability to feel sexual desire completely disappeared after that night, crossing over to a seemingly inaccessible alternate reality. According to the text, “Ever since the incident in Switzerland, she was totally frigid, and couldn’t manage sex with anyone. Something inside her had vanished forever” (Murakami 160). When Sumire and Miu arrive in Greece, the two spend an exorbitant amount of time together, and Sumire decides to confess her feelings to Miu by attempting to make an advance on her. However, Miu is unable to reciprocate due to this missing part of her. This disconnect can be interpreted as a metaphor for compulsory heterosexuality, as

Sumire and Miu are physically unable to be happy together regardless of how resolutely they desire to be.

When Miu reminisces on her brief sexual encounter with Sumire, she reveals that she has “never had a homosexual experience, and never considered I had those tendencies. But if that’s what Sumire really wanted, I thought I could oblige . . . I like Sumire, and if it made her happy, I didn’t mind whatever she did” (Murakami 116). This quote is the first time in the narrative that Miu offers a glimpse into her perspective regarding her own sexuality. Miu is seventeen years older than Sumire, and claims that she had never given any thought to the prospect of homosexual desire until this particular encounter. This sudden realization can be ascribed to compulsory heterosexuality as well, and is reinforced further by Miu’s platonic marriage. As previously stated, Miu’s prior encounters with men do not prohibit her from the possibility of being queer. She goes on to admit that although she wanted to oblige, she was incapable of doing so: “But my body and mind are two different things. A part of me was happy that Sumire was caressing me so lovingly. But no matter how happy my mind was, my body resisted. My body wouldn’t yield to her. My heart and head were aroused, but the rest of me was like a hard, dry stone. It’s sad, but I couldn’t help it” (Murakami 116). Here, Miu admits to her arousal following Sumire’s advances, which is a confirmation of her inherent queerness. Her inability to act on this arousal denotes her sexual adversity due to compulsory heterosexuality. Regardless of how desperately she wants to comply, the dissonance between her mind and body is too cumbersome. Rich explains that, “As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, this limiting the erotic itself”—essentially, the term lesbian is oversexualized due to the male gaze, and this issue resultingly diminishes meaning from the word (Rich 28). This reference offers insight into the purpose of

Miu's splitting in two, as the version of Miu in the material world is erotically stunted, while her other half is unlimited. In short, Miu verifies the disconnect between her mind and body, while simultaneously acknowledging that Sumire's advances elicit mental arousal from her, and this development aids in designating Miu as a queer character more feasibly.

Now that Sumire and Miu's relationship to compulsory heterosexuality is determined, it is possible to verify the argument that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is the catalyst for Sumire's inexplicable disappearance in Greece. The overall concept of compulsory heterosexuality offers insight into Sumire's ultimate disappearance for a variety of reasons. For starters, the urgency that Sumire assigns to Miu's ability to carry her away somewhere is too on-the-nose to be coincidental. She asserts this notion multiple times throughout the text: "I'm in love. And this love is about to carry me off somewhere. The current's too overpowering; I don't have any choice . . . I might end up losing everything. But there's no turning back. I can only go with the flow. Even if it means I'll be burned up, gone forever" (Murakami 25). Upon first inspection, this declaration of love can be interpreted as figurative. It mimics the dramaticized, embellished language that is often used to articulate the overwhelming feeling of falling in love for the first time. Since newfound love is so turbulent, it is natural to describe it in hyperbole. However, once the connotation of Sumire's disappearance is established, this speech takes on an entirely new meaning: when Sumire claims that she might lose everything, or "be burned up, gone forever," in reference to pursuing a relationship with Miu, she is being sincere (Murakami 25). In essence, Sumire is aware that her infatuation with Miu is going to carry her off into the unknown from the very beginning, and she submits to this fate when the time inevitably arrives. Additionally, when in Greece, Sumire is unrelenting in her decision to confess her feelings to Miu. She insists that if she withholds her confession for any longer she will certainly disappear, and states that if Miu does not accept her

advances, she will “cross that bridge when the time comes”—again hinting at the prospect of crossing over to the other side (Murakami 140). As previously stated, because of the confines of compulsory heterosexuality, Sumire and Miu are unable to physically be together in the material world. Since the text introduces the existence of a metaphysical world—a world in which Miu can explore her sexual desire openly and without reservations—Sumire is incentivized to go there as well.

The appeal of the other side is simple: the metaphysical world in which Miu’s other half resides is a world free from judgment, binaries, and compulsory heterosexuality. This appeal is unveiled when Sumire confesses to Miu in Greece, and Miu is unable to reciprocate. When Miu retells the situation to K, she states, “I told her how I felt. ‘I’m not rejecting you,’ I said, ‘but I just can’t do that kind of thing.’ Ever since that happened to me, fourteen years ago, I haven’t been able to give myself physically to anyone in this world. It’s something that’s out of my hands, decided somewhere else” (Murakami 117). Here, Miu specifies that her rejection of Sumire is not intentional, nor is it what she wants. However, her inquisitive and traumatic experience in Switzerland permanently barred her from intimacy, at least in the material world, and this fate is fully out of her control. The specification that Miu is unable to give herself to anyone in this world implies the existence of the other world—the aforementioned metaphysical world. With this in mind, this quote denotes the appeal of the other side for Sumire. Again, Miu’s inability to yield to Sumire is attributed to compulsory heterosexuality. This claim is reinforced by Butler’s journal on gender performativity: “the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality . . . the overthrow of compulsory heterosexuality will inaugurate a true humanism of ‘the person’ freed from the shackles of sex” (Butler 26). In other words, compulsory heterosexuality reserves sexual encounters for reproductive purposes, effectively ostracizing not

only the queer community, but also any sexual act that is unintended for procreation. Butler proposes that the abolition of compulsory heterosexuality, such as in the narrative's metaphysical world, perpetuates an idealistic and humanistic approach to sex that is open and freeing. Miu, in short, is a manifestation of someone restrained by the "shackles of sex" as Butler puts it, and the Miu on the other side is unrestricted by said shackles (Butler 26). So, although Miu let her down gently, this rejection emotionally eviscerates Sumire in such a way that can only be remedied with drastic measures. A world in which Sumire cannot physically be with Miu is a world she cannot tolerate existing in. With this in mind, Sumire crosses over to the other side, to an alternate world in which she can be with Miu without restriction, without binaries, and without the unshakeable confines of compulsory heterosexuality.

Miu's rejection of Sumire is seemingly the direct catalyst for her disappearance, but there is also a compelling appeal to crossing over to the other side that undoubtedly incentivized her decision. It is evident that Sumire chose to cross over to the other side by the very end of the novel, when she calls K from a payphone: "Hey, I'm back. It wasn't easy, but I somehow managed it" (Murakami 208). A more in-depth analysis of the ending will be conducted in the following section, but this encounter confirms that Sumire consciously chose to cross the bridge; it was not an abduction nor an accident. In the alternate reality Sumire crosses over to, there is no compulsory heterosexuality. There is no gender performativity. These claims are supported by Miu's splitting in two, as the half of her on the other side is the one with unlimited sexual desire. Sumire's disappearance occurs so she can have a relationship with Miu on the other side; that is, an absolute, rounded, sexual relationship at its full potential.

PART 3: DREAMSCAPES, ALTERNATE REALITIES, AND THE ENDING

Magical realism is a considerably nuanced genre because upon first inspection it reads as paradoxical. Realism is firmly rooted in reality, while the word magical implies surrealist, speculative literary devices. Magical realism employs both; while the overarching story is based in reality, little flashes of abstraction are sprinkled throughout. While these fantastical elements can certainly be jarring, they generally do not tamper with the fluidity of the narrative. Murakami is a notable contributor to the genre; the majority of his work—with the exception of a few nonfictional pursuits and *Norwegian Wood*—falls under the magical realism umbrella. According to an analysis of Murakami's repertoire, "In virtually all of [Murakami's] fiction . . . a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or the magical" (Strecher 267). Murakami imagines landscapes within magical realism that are simultaneously magnetic and devastating; he intertwines the darkest crevices of the mind with reality in such a manner that is too authentic to be fantasy but also too speculative to be plain realism. This section aims to argue that the elements of magical realism in *Sputnik Sweetheart* are, in fact, rooted in reality. Additionally, this section will confirm the correlation between magical realism and the overarching theme of this research: the means of access to an escape from compulsory heterosexuality.

Throughout the text, Murakami manipulates incredibly bleak and melancholic themes into magical and fantastical storylines, and he partly accomplishes this feat through the integration of dreams. He initially pokes fun at the notion that dreams make for bad writing through Sumire, when she states, "They say it's a dangerous experiment to include dreams in the fiction you write. Only a handful of writers—and I'm talking the most talented—are able to pull off the kind of irrational synthesis that you find in dreams" (Murakami 137-138). While Sumire raises a valuable point that dreams are irrational and, therefore, difficult to nail down and effectively put into words,

Murakami has a knack for effortlessly weaving dreams into his narratives. Further, the inclusion of dreams complements Sumire's character seamlessly, as she is—similar to the nature of dreams—irrational and erratic herself. It can be argued that Sumire's efforts to decipher her dreams assist her in her pursuit of embracing her queerness. Early in the novel, she asks K, "Have you ever felt confused about what you're doing, like it's not right? . . . Sometimes I get so frightened, like everything I've done up till now is wrong. I have these realistic dreams and snap wide awake in the middle of the night. And for a while I can't figure out what's real and what isn't" (Murakami 50). Here, it is evident that Sumire is feeling despondent and alienated regarding her place in the world. She feels as though she is doing wrong, and it is unclear if she is referring to her sexuality, her writing, or both. Regardless, she mentions that she has been having dreams so vivid that she cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. Pseudoscientist Rupert Sheldrake's research on the collective unconscious offers insight into Sumire's manifestation of such dreams: "The personal unconscious is made up eventually of contents which have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed" (Sheldrake 251). In short, Sumire's dreams could potentially stem from previous encounters or traumas that she has since repressed, but they could also stem from something else entirely, such as a collective unconscious of which she has no influence. Sheldrake goes on to describe this collective unconscious: "The contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity"—in other words, Sumire could have acquired the subject matter of her hyper-realistic dreams through heredity rather than from her own subconscious (Sheldrake 251). Regardless of the means in which Sumire acquires this information, her dreams ultimately help her come to terms with her sexuality, as one of the dreams she has in Greece inspires her to confess her feelings to Miu.

The aforementioned dream that influences Sumire's decision to pursue Miu is one that she records in a journal entry the night before disappearing. In the beginning of the entry, she ruminates a bit over her feelings for Miu, and fantasizes about living in a world of dreams in order to evade confrontation: "So what are people supposed to do if they want to avoid a collision {thud!} but still lie in the field, enjoying the clouds drifting by, listening to the grass grow—not thinking, in other words? . . . The answer is dreams. Entering the world of dreams, and never coming out. Living in dreams for the rest of time" (Murakami 135-136). Here, Sumire is romanticizing the prospect of not thinking, which is reminiscent of her previous proclamation that she forgets to think when she is in Miu's presence. With this connection in mind, it can be inferred that Sumire associates her relationship with Miu to the feeling of lying in a field and watching the clouds go by—an infinite vacation from reality. She affirms this connection by mentioning the world of dreams, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the other side, or the alternate reality she crosses over to when she disappears, and amplifies this interpretation further by expressing her desire to live in dreams "for the rest of time" (Murakami 136). In Guattari's interpretation of the machinic unconscious, he inquisitively attempts to define the unconscious: "What is the unconscious really? Is it a magical world hidden in who knows which fold of the brain? An internal mini-cinema specialized in . . . the projection of fixed archetypal plans?" (Guattari 9). In other words, the unconscious could potentially be a magical world, but it could also very well be a meaningless vessel for entertainment—i.e. the "mini-cinema" inside of the brain—and there is practically no method of measuring either possibility (Guattari 9). Either way, Guattari's speculation of the unconscious offers insight into Sumire's depiction of the world of dreams; the magical world Guattari presents, if taken literally, correlates directly with Sumire's dream world. She elaborates on her proposition: "In dreams you don't need to make any distinctions between

things. Not at all. Boundaries don't exist. So in dreams there are hardly ever collisions. Even if there are, they don't hurt. Reality is different. Reality bites" (Murakami 136). Here, Sumire is declaring that it is not required to exert energy while dreaming; in dreams, she can simply exist, passively, without binaries. She mentions that within dreams, it is impossible to experience pain even if collisions do occur, in either a literal or hypothetical sense. However, due to the fact that Sumire cannot truly escape from reality through dreams, as dreams are fleeting entities, and "reality bites" as she so eloquently puts it, she resorts to transcending reality entirely, cutting across to an alternate reality in which she and Miu can truly be happy without obstacles (Murakami 136).

The dream that Sumire composes in her journal concerns her mother. Sumire's mother passed away when she was very young, and she has little-to-no recollection of her; she only knows her through photographs. In the dream, Sumire climbs an unending spiral staircase, looking for her mother. She loops around and around, trying to reach the top, but when she finally gets there, her mother disappears. This is troubling to Sumire, as her mother allegedly "has something she wants to tell Sumire, a critical piece of information Sumire desperately needs in order to live," and whatever that piece of information may be, she has no idea (Murakami 138). An interesting component of the dream to note is the fact that the mother in her dream is not the same mother that she knows from photographs, but she somehow "knows at a glance that it's her mother" (Murakami 138). This development mimics the nonsensical essence of dreams that Sumire discloses in her prior disclaimer. Sheldrake offers a thoughtful hypothesis for how these types of dreams materialize: "If we are influenced by morphic resonance from particular individuals to whom we are in some way linked or connected, then it is conceivable that we might pick up images, thoughts, impressions, or feelings from them . . . in a way that would go beyond the means of communication recognized by contemporary science" (Sheldrake 221). Because Sumire and her mother share an

inherent genetic connection, then, according to Sheldrake's theory, Sumire is able to conceive dreams about her mother regardless of whether she ever knew her personally. Although Sumire's mother died when she was much too young to remember her, Sumire still picks up these images, impressions, and feelings that Sheldrake describes through her dreams. To continue, Sumire finds a door at the top of the stairs, and when she opens it, the walls disappear, and she discovers she is trapped up in the clouds, infinitely waiting to be rescued. Upon waking up, she decides that she must confess to Miu. She concludes that the important message her mother needed to convey to her in her dream must have been concerning her trepidation, and resolves that she no longer wants to participate in the daily regimen of dreading the unknown: "I can't stay like this forever, hanging . . . All the dawns and all the twilights will rob me, piece by piece, of myself, and before long my very life will be shaved away completely—and I would end up nothing" (Murakami 140). Again, there is this insistence on the notion that Sumire will fade away, which, of course, foreshadows her disappearance. In short, Sumire's dream validates her queerness—a part of her that she has been wrestling with for the majority of the narrative—by convincing her to pursue love despite the confines of compulsory heterosexuality.

In addition to dreams, a major element of magical realism employed in this narrative is the concept of alternate realities. The "other side" that houses Miu's other half, as well as Sumire, can certainly be defined as an alternate reality or dimension, and this connotation offers a plausible explanation for both of these supernatural occurrences (Murakami 157). Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance, which expands on the aforementioned idea of a collective memory, offers logical insight into many of the otherwise inexplicable speculative phenomena that occur in the narrative. According to Sheldrake, morphic resonance is "the idea of mysterious telepathy-type interconnections between organisms and of collective memories within species" (Sheldrake 108).

Put simply, morphic resonance is the concept of telepathic communication through memory. A simple example is an individual's ability to feel someone staring at them. A more complex example is exhibited through evolution, when members of a species perform the same behaviors as other members of said species in an entirely different place—or time—so communication through the morphogenetic field would have to take place. A particular instance in which this theory pertains to the text is Sumire's ability to dream about her mother, a person who she has never truly known, and receive messages from her. Sheldrake proposes that the feelings and experiences, such as those in Sumire's dream, are transmitted through a field—namely, a morphogenetic field in which members within a species are able to communicate with one another, regardless of space or time. So, although Sumire's mother has passed away, it is still possible for her to send Sumire messages through her dreams. It is valuable to touch on morphic resonance and the postulation of alternate realities as it proposes an interpretation for the intangible, magical, and unresolved events within the narrative.

Sumire's disappearance, which is triggered by compulsory heterosexuality, can be explained by morphic resonance. In Sumire's journal entry, she ponders the unknown: "On the flip side of everything we think we absolutely have pegged lurks an equal amount of the unknown. Who can really distinguish between the sea and what's reflected in it?" (Murakami 134). Here, Sumire admits that it is impossible for her to be certain of absolutely everything, regardless of how secure and collected she is. She suggests that for everything she knows, there exists an equivalent amount of the unknown—similar to the philosophical prospect of pinpointing the difference between the ocean and its reflection. This sentiment is parallel to the unknown in terms of morphic resonance. Sheldrake proposes that the morphogenetic fields are "inevitably mysterious . . . Physics cannot explain the nature of the different kinds of fields, unless it be in terms of a more

fundamental unified field, such as the original cosmic field. But then this too is inexplicable—unless we assume it was created by God. And then God is inexplicable” (Sheldrake 99). This is a tangential way of explaining that morphogenetic fields are complicated to study because they are both invisible and immeasurable. Sheldrake offers that, if the fields are orchestrated by the cosmos, then they are far too out of reach to measure. Further, if these cosmic fields are controlled by God, then there is no tangible method to measure God, either. Thus, there remains an unending series of questions concerning the unknown. Like the fields, the unknown itself exists in the abstract. While certain aspects of the unknown can eventually be uncovered through trial and error, there are also limitless unsolved mysteries in life. When Sumire mulls over the prospect of crossing over to the other side, she acknowledges that she will be forced to reckon with the unknown. She states, “Time’s limited—no room for detours . . . Inside of us what we know and what we don’t know share the same abode. For convenience’ sake most people erect a wall between them. It makes life easier. But I just swept that wall away. I had to. I hate walls. That’s just the kind of person I am” (Murakami 135). Here, Sumire declares her readiness to delve into the unknown by sweeping the allegorical wall away, regardless of the arduous implications that will follow. While she acknowledges that it would certainly be easier to disregard the unknown, Sumire would rather take a chance with Miu than spend the rest of time wondering. When she ultimately disappears, she does so by tapping into the morphogenetic fields. Sheldrake states that the laws that dictate morphic resonance “are not material things that can be located in space and time; rather, they are potentially present and active throughout the universe: they always have been and always will be” (Sheldrake 111). In other words, the morphogenetic fields are intangible and immeasurable, they simply exist. Without the introduction of morphogenetic fields, there would be no conceivable way for Sumire to communicate with Miu’s other half, as Sumire is living in the physical world,

and Miu's other half resides in the metaphysical world. However, because Sumire and Miu's relationship mimics the bond of "two interlocking spoons," and morphic resonance occurs between beings that share an intrinsic connection, it is safe to assume that Sumire discovers how to traverse to the world of dreams—the metaphysical world, free from binaries—by channeling Miu's other half through morphic resonance (Murakami 133).

Another instance of alternate realities displayed in the narrative is Miu's splitting in two, as Miu's other half resides in the metaphysical world. This experience is derived from the aforementioned ferris wheel incident. Again, the supernatural encounter that Miu undergoes while trapped in a Swiss ferris wheel gondola permanently scars her, both physically and mentally. Physically, it strips her of her sexual desire and turns her hair pure white. Mentally, it strips her of her passion. When recalling the experience, Miu explains, "I was still on this side, here. But another me, maybe half of me, had gone over to the other side. Taking with it my black hair, my sexual desire, my periods, my ovulation, perhaps even the will to live" (Murakami 157). In other words, the part of Miu that was removed from her had not disappeared entirely; rather, it still exists, in human form, in the metaphysical world. The concept of splitting in two can be attributed to morphic resonance as well. According to Sheldrake, "The appearance of a new kind of field involves a creative jump or synthesis. A new morphic attractor comes into being, and with it a new pattern of relationships and connections"—put simply, it is possible for new morphogenetic fields to emerge through creativity, due to the meditative impact that creativity has on the human mind (Sheldrake 321). This quote is a perfect explanation for Miu's splitting in two; her ability to traverse to the other side is equivalent to the inception of a new kind of field sparked by a creative leap. The fundamental difference between Miu and Sumire is that Sumire manages to uncover a method to access the metaphysical world, while Miu could only go there once. This disconnect

can be attributed to compulsory heterosexuality; while Miu actively submits to compulsory heterosexuality by remaining in a loveless heterosexual partnership despite her unwillingness, Sumire rejects compulsory heterosexuality entirely, sweeps the wall away, and crosses over to the other side. While Miu is acquiescent, Sumire is restless in her pursuit of a reality in which she and Miu can be happy and fulfilled together.

Moreover, music plays a tremendous role in the fantastical elements of this narrative. Music as a subject is repeatedly brought up in this novel, namely through Sumire and Miu's mutual appreciation of classical compositions. They discuss classical music when they first meet at the wedding reception, and listen to Brahms together in Greece. Miu was a classically trained pianist as well, but abandoned her musical pursuits following the ferris wheel incident; she found that when she lost her sexual desire, she also lost her ability to move audiences, regardless of her technical skill. However, the most impactful utilization of music arises when K visits the island in search for Sumire, and undergoes a speculative encounter with inconceivable music he hears from atop a hill. He wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of strange music and feels compelled to follow it. When he eventually reaches the hilltop, he is overcome with the sensation that he is about to be whisked away, and he struggles to maintain his composure. The music plunges him into an uncontrollable out-of-body experience: "Someone had rearranged my cells, untied the threads that held my mind together," he explains (Murakami 170). Nevertheless, he manages to keep himself grounded, and the music finally stops. K's convoluted experience with this music was elusive like a dream, to the extent that he felt as though it had not even occurred in the first place. Upon reflection, he concludes that before Sumire disappeared, she "had awakened to the same music, her curiosity getting the better of her as she clambered up the slope in her pajamas," only, instead of resisting like K, she submitted to it, allowing herself to be pulled apart,

rearranged, and transported to the other side (Murakami 169-170). The inference that Sumire underwent the same experience as K indicates that music functions as a vessel for accessing the other side—an alternate reality free from binaries. This conclusion can be supported by a psychological study on the correlation between music and altered states of consciousness. Participants listened to the same music, and reported similar findings: “Qualitatively, a consistent subjective theme emerged, with our subjects reporting a profound cathartic experience, often described as going to a ‘place where they had never been before’” (Battles 6). While the described “place” is certainly hypothetical, reading it as literal illuminates the interpretation that music transported Sumire to another world, in which she “had never been before” (Battles 6). Again, Sumire’s experience implies that music functions as the bridge between the physical and metaphysical worlds, and confirms that the nonbinary metaphysical world is accessible. Music connects Sumire and Miu in the beginning through their mutual love of classical music, and again in the end through its role in ensuring that Sumire can reach Miu’s other half, so they can ultimately be happy together on the other side.

The final instance of magical realism in *Sputnik Sweetheart* occurs in the ending. The ambiguous ending of this novel encourages speculation because it cuts the narrative short, almost abruptly, and leaves the reader with dozens of unanswered questions. There are virtually infinite interpretations that can be taken away from the ending, and this research aims to speculate on some of the possibilities. The novel concludes with K routinely waking up in the middle of the night, envisioning Sumire calling him from a telephone booth like she used to. He waits for his phone to ring, and of course it never does. However, one night, he reveals that it does, in fact, ring: “But one time it did ring. Right in front of me, it actually rang. Making the air of the real world tremble and shake. I grabbed the receiver” (Murakami 208). Here, it is worth noting that K emphasizes

that this phone call tethers both himself and Sumire to the real world. He answers the phone, and Sumire speaks into the receiver, “Hey, I’m back. It wasn’t easy, but somehow I managed it. Like a fifty-word precis of Homer’s *Odyssey*” (Murakami 208). Here, Sumire reveals that her experience navigating between alternate realities is reminiscent of the hero’s journey. K implores her for her location, and she states that she is in the telephone booth. She requests for him to come and get her before the line goes dead. Then, K narrates, “I get up out of bed. I pull back the old, faded curtains and open the window. I stick my head out and look at the sky. Sure enough, a mold-colored half-moon hangs in the sky. Good. We’re both looking at the same moon, in the same world” (Murakami 210). Here, K is convinced that he and Sumire are in the same world, but whether that world is real or metaphysical is unclear. The open-endedness of this conclusion is, of course, deliberate on Murakami’s behalf. Overall, there are three possible endings: one interpretation is that Sumire returned to the physical world to reunite with K. The other interpretation is that K somehow managed to reach the metaphysical world himself. At first, K was apprehensive about crossing over to the other side, which can be inferred from his resistance to the musical encounter he had in Greece. However, upon returning to Japan, he found he was inconsolably depressed, and perhaps decided he was ready to make the trip. The final interpretation is supported by the introduction of morphic resonance, as “morphic resonance does not involve a transfer of energy from one system to another, but rather a non-energetic transfer of information” (Sheldrake 108). Since, according to Sheldrake, it is possible to transfer information without transferring energy, there is potential that Sumire tapped into the morphogenetic field, established a telephone line between the metaphysical and material worlds, and gave K a call. Ultimately, there is no canon, definitive ending to this narrative, and this ambiguity can be attributed to Schrödinger’s cat. Schrödinger’s cat is a thought experiment within quantum mechanics that

simply starts with a cat in a box. Schrödinger proposes that the cat is placed in the box with a small amount of a radioactive substance: “so small, that perhaps in the course of one hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none” (Schrödinger 155). In other words, after an hour passes, there is an equal likelihood that the cat is dead or alive. Therefore, in terms of quantum mechanics, “the psi-function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and dead cat mixed or smeared out in equal parts”—in simple terms, the cat is, paradoxically, both dead and alive at the same time inside of the box (Schrödinger 155). Similar to the cat paradox, multiple endings of this narrative can be true at once. The only conclusion that is definite is the fact that Sumire crossed over to the metaphysical world to escape compulsory heterosexuality, and ultimately found fulfillment in her relationship with Miu.

CONCLUSION

Overall, *Sputnik Sweetheart* is a narrative that is tightly packed with gut-wrenching realism and incorporeal surrealism. Its characters contain multitudes, each carrying their own respective baggage, but somehow find themselves interconnected through compulsory heterosexuality, unrequited love, and magical realism. Murakami has a distinguished talent for depicting the primordial forgotten spaces of the mind in a truly compelling and poetic manner. This research ultimately concludes that, in spite of the many hurdles they fought to overcome, Sumire and Miu are existing happily together on the other side. This narrative serves as a reminder that the material world is transient and that suffering is an innate human experience, but it also opens up the probability of a metaphysical world free from gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality, binaries, and judgment. In short, this novel deduces that a better world is possible. Not only do Sumire and Miu escape from the restrictions of reality, they also fully embrace an alternate reality in which they can be happy, together, for the sake of themselves.

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