Connecting bridges : a critical disability reading of A silent voice

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CONNECTING BRIDGES: A CRITICAL DISABILITY READING
OF A SILENT VOICE

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Abstract

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Disability scholars have read stories in the form of manga to see how their
depictions of disabilities can be harmful or helpful to those possessing disabilities. Most
manga examined in this way usually consists of a story where either only one character is
present with a disability, or the story falls within the “supercrip” narrative. Yoshitoki
Ōima’s A Silent Voice differs from this trend as it displays multiple characters with
different types of disabilities and falls into the slice-of-life genre. This thesis exists to do
a critical disability reading of A Silent Voice as a piece of disability literature. I argue that
the text is unique in how it depicts the othering process through linguistic and cultural
othering, how we define disability, and why overtly defensive or violent responses under
the guise of disability justice fail to help anyone.
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I would also like to thank my family and friends (both past and present) who have encouraged me in this endeavor.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and give my respects to the lives lost and destroyed due to the Kyoto Animation arson attack of 2019. Kyoto Animation’s film adaptation of this thesis’s subject is how I discovered A Silent Voice and was one of the key reasons as to why I chose to write about it. This thesis exists, in part, as a thank you to the studio and in remembrance to all of those who have chosen to give voices to those who have been silenced.
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If a (deaf) tree falls in the (hearing) forest, does anyone then really “hear” it?

– Brenda Jo Brueggemann
Chapter 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a large increase in the popularity of manga and its “twin” anime. Manga such as *My Hero Academia*, *Attack on Titan*, and *Spy x Family* have all reached sustained success both domestically and abroad, creating a feedback loop of a manga doing well, getting adapted into an anime, and then boosting the manga sales as a response to the adaptation’s success. This coincides with the recent popularity of disability literature in the form of live-action films. This is seen in the critical and box office successes in Hollywood with films that feature characters with disabilities. From John Krasinski’s sci-fi horror *A Quiet Place* and the Academy Awards best picture winner *CODA*, more deaf and hard-of-hearing characters are appearing prominently. Manga, anime, and disabilities are all currently “trending” as the demand for manga and anime has increased exponentially and the popularity of stories where featured characters have disabilities has also increased (*Finding Dory*, *Wonder*, *Sex Education*). Because of this, the questions of ethics remain essential in the realm of depicting disabled characters especially when these two trends converge.

Several mangas exist that feature disabled characters. Most of these are found in stories that are based on fantasy such as Sōsuke Tōka’s *Ranking of Kings*, Rifujin na Magonote’s *Mushoku Tensei*, and ONE and Yusuke Murata’s *One Punch Man*. If the story is not based on fantasy then it usually only features one character with disabilities much like Rie Aruga’s *Perfect World*, Tomohito Oda’s *Komi Can’t Communicate*, and
Ousaka Mieko’s Pro-chichi. Even when disabled characters are featured they often only exist on their own. There is one manga, however, that deviates from these trends and that is Yoshitoki Ōima’s A Silent Voice.

*A Silent Voice* (Koe no Katachi, literally translated to *The Shape of Voice*) is a slice-of-life manga written by Yoshitoki Ōima that was completed in 2014 and consists of seven volumes. The plot follows a young man, Shoya Ishida, attempting to reconnect with the deaf girl he bullied, Shoko Nishimiya, in sixth grade. On their journey, they reconnect with other kids from their past and make new friends along the way while also trying to exist in a world that is indifferent and harmful to those with disabilities. Violence, extreme anxiety, self-destructive tendencies, bullying, and the haunting of the past follow the characters throughout. The story ends with Shoko and Shoya learning to communicate with each other and living with their own disabilities.

This thesis aims to perform a critical disability reading of *A Silent Voice* by examining its place as a manga and as a piece of disability literature. *A Silent Voice’s* combination of genre and subject matter, along with its deviation of not being based in fantasy as well as featuring more than one character with a type of disability throughout makes it unique for this type of analysis. It should be noted, however, that when discussing many of its aspects, the film adaptation of the manga will be brought in to help visualize some of the manga’s concepts. Similar to how this thesis will bring in cross-cultural ideas to help discuss certain Japanese historical figures, the use of the film adaption will exist as a supporting role rather than the focus. Ultimately, this thesis highlights both comic and disability scholarship alike to show what each can learn from the other and how *A Silent Voice* exists to do both.
This thesis is concerned with disability rhetoric, specifically the rhetoric identified as discriminatory in the forms of ableism/ableist beliefs. Ableism is the discrimination of people that have disabilities in favor of those that do not have disabilities. Beth Haller defines the term as the “dominant beliefs that ignore or stereotype disabled individuals negatively” (Haller 67). This could come in the form of believing that being disabled is a negative trait, something that a person does not want to be. This idea can be seen in a term such as “wheelchair-bound,” where it is assumed that a wheelchair user is “stuck” in a wheelchair and would rather not be, rather than viewing it as a personal assistive device. The negative stereotypes of disabled individuals also work to create a view of the world that separates those with disabilities and those who do not have them, which also results in ableist beliefs. As suggested by Lennard J. Davis, “ableism seeks to remove the blame of those most responsible for creating a disabling society” (Davis 37). Not only does ableism exist in a way that puts a negative stigma on disabled individuals but it also works to push the blame of that stigma onto the disabled rather than recognizing it is the world that they created (an ‘able-bodied’ one) that disables individuals to begin with. To continue on with the negative stereotyped wheelchair-bound individual example, ableism would also involve blaming the individual for having to use a wheelchair rather than understanding that the dominant majority created a world in which wheelchairs are necessary.

Ableism is not always so easy to find, however. In fact, ableism can come in the form of “structural ableism”. Structural ableism is the creation of systems and/or physical structures that disadvantage people with disabilities and/or make people disabled. Jay Dolmage states, “In this way, the structural ableism of society mandates not just that
structures be built only for preferred bodies, but that this preferred status is borne out and proven by all of the bodies that are denied access” (Dolmage 54). This could come in the form of creating a building whose only way of entry is via stairs, which makes it harder for people who can’t use them. Additionally, structural ableism occurs in societies that benefit those who are ‘able-bodied’ and discriminates against those who are not. This could come in the form of an audiocentric community (one that prioritizes languages that are spoken and heard orally) making it harder for people who cannot speak to be one within the community. Dolmage’s use of structural ableism is similar to that of “structural racism” in that it focuses on systems for their role in creating and upholding discriminatory beliefs. Likewise, just like how racism and structural racism are different, so are structural ableism and ableist actions as both ableism and racism are focused on individual practices that discriminate against individuals and groups, and structural racism and structural ableism are focused on the systems and physical structures that perpetuate those discriminatory beliefs.

Yoshitoki Ōima through A Silent Voice depicts ableism in Japan. Before even opening the manga it is important to understand that Japanese cultural norms are hegemonic in nature. This means that people within society are to not be different from one another in presentation. This would also suggest that people are less likely to speak up when there are problems due to the fear of disrupting the hegemony. Therefore, if there already exist ableist structures within Japanese society, people are less likely to do anything about it, or if a person is someone who is different than the ‘norm,’ then than person will be viewed as disruptive and maybe even a danger to the hegemony. As mentioned earlier, Jay Dolmage focuses on ableist structures that all go back to academic
ableism. He argues that higher education often creates barriers under the guise of
prestigious architectural aesthetics, such as through the use of long steps of the infamous
entry to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. “If we were to object that such steps make the
university inaccessible, many universities would make the argument that steep steps are
stylistically desirable” (Dolmage 2). This suggests that, through physical structures,
ableism can be upheld as they are created without the thought or care of those who can
use the structure. This is a physical representation of what Dolmage defines as structural
ableism; however, Dolmage is also critical of how individuals choose to help those that
are not originally thought of when creating such structures via accommodations. Those
that would need accommodations may be less likely to do so in order to not disrupt the
hegemony and therefore remain silent despite needing assistance. This mindset allows
ableist beliefs to continue as many could be afraid to speak up due to them not wanting to
be seen as different from their contemporaries. So, regardless of whether structure is
inherently ableist or not, the chances of people speaking up about the matter will be lesser
in a society like Japan’s. This exists outside of Japan as well, as suggested by Dolmage’s
examples; structure ableism and ableism itself will be discussed in different cultures and
it is within those cultures where the likelihood of things changing will depend on how
hegemonic they are and how willing they are to change or not.

In *A Silent Voice*, the first major plot point is Shoko entering the school in sixth
grade. She is introduced by the school teacher Takeuchi and then she informs the rest of
the class through her notebook that she is deaf. Since no one knows sign language in the
class, she has others communicate with her through her notebook. Not only that, but
Ueno, a classmate, has to write in the notebook for Shoko due to Takeuchi teaching
mostly audibly. Takeuchi, through his teaching methods, has disabled Shoko from being a part of class like everyone else. This is a critical disability theory (CDT) reading of the situation. CDT exists within critical theory, as it concentrates on and analyzes disabilities and how those disabilities are informed by the culture, as well as the political, societal, and historical times they exist within, and how socio-political systems oppress individuals and groups who are determined to be disabled within those systems. This is based on Delvin and Polthier’s argument in their book *Critical Disability Theory Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law*. They state, “disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to” (Devlin & Pothier 2). In other words, power structures designate who possesses power over who is deterred from understanding the ableist world we live in as it is often those in power that create and allow people to become disabled and be seen as lesser than others. For *A Silent Voice*, Takeuchi is the one possessing the largest amount of power in the classroom and therefore through his decision to continue to teach in a manner that Shoko will struggle to understand, he is disabling her in the classroom.

After Shoko is disabled in the classroom, the school choir teacher tries to help the situation by getting the entire class to learn sign language as it would be easier for Shoko to learn that way. This does not go as planned, however, as Takeuchi never goes through with learning sign language and Ueno goes as far as stating that it would be easier for her to just write in Shoko’s notebook instead. That being said, there is one girl, Miyoko who goes out of her way to learn sign language. The choir teacher, and Miyoko, by extension, are doing what Bauman in his book *Open Your Eyes – Deaf Studies Talking* suggests in
his opening chapter. He created the book because he strongly advocates that “Deaf ways of being human are not only valid but are worth preserving and promoting” (Bauman 25). By learning sign language, people are allowing deaf individuals to learn and communicate at a rate more quickly like their peers and therefore they are less silenced by the auditory classroom environment. Even if they recognize themselves as doing so or not, people who choose or promote learning sign language are doing so as a reply to those who continue to push for their annihilation. However, as alluded to earlier, many of these practices can be hard to see on the surface. The classroom that Shoko joins is one where she sticks out the most as she is deaf. In the not-too-distant past, someone like Shoko would be pushed to be sterilized and not even be allowed entry into such a classroom with non-deaf students. However, the classroom itself is still not created with deaf individuals in mind and therefore, Shoko remains a bit lost within it. She has to use a notebook to speak to others as she can not hear like everyone else which puts her at a disadvantage when the person in power (the teacher, Takeuchi) chooses to still teach mostly auditorily. This, in part, leads to her eventual bullying as she is blamed for the class losing the choir competition, the class moving too slowly, and also Miyoko transferring to another school.

Shoko is bullied in class more severely after Miyoko leaves and Takeuchi never really shows any care for actually helping the situation. Shoya and others physically and mentally harm Shoko throughout the remainder of sixth grade until the school administrator gets involved to try and find out who is destroying Shoko’s expensive hearing aids. The class decides to put the full blame onto Shoya and, in turn, decides to then bully him in ways that paralleled what they had done to Shoko in the past. After
discovering what was happening in school, Shoya’s mother pays Shoko’s mother for the destruction of the hearing aids to which Shoya feels financially indebted to later. From there Shoya is bullied and Shoko tries to help him despite everything, only for Shoya to turn her away. Shoko is then transferred out of the school not to be seen again by Shoya and other until years later. Shoya, as a result of his ostracization, loses all self-confidence, becomes severely depressed, and cuts out everyone from his world. When he enters high school he decides that he is going to end his own life but first he decides to pay back the debt he owed his mom and he learns sign language to reconnect to Shoko so he can say goodbye personally to her. After tracking her down to an alternative school, Shoya gives Shoko her old notebook and it becomes quickly apparent that Shoko has been relying on the community of her family to communicate. Hilde Haueland’s “Sound and Belonging: What is a Community?” suggests that languages have their own community which has always made people rethink our definitions of what makes up a community itself.

“Communities create languages and languages create images of communities that eventually also are defined as societies or states” (Haueland 111). The problem is that most Deaf people are rarely able to find their own community, which makes it a regular occurrence that they are not thought of when creating a community at all. A community made up of only an audible language harms those who cannot speak it, and therefore leaves them behind. Worse, those who do not speak the language are forced to speak it to create a hegemonic community or as Haueland states there are, “attempts to integrate Deaf children in local community schools to force them to use audible languages of their surroundings” (Haueland 121). Since deaf individuals cannot communicate audibly they are forced to assimilate into the audible culture if they even wish to be one with the
community which was what was happening in sixth grade to Shoko. Now away from the
school, she is relying heavily on her sister (Yuzuru), mother, and grandmother to create
any form of community. This community, however, is not the best as Shoko’s mother
never learns sign language. Additionally, Yuzuru and their grandmother are either too old
or too young for Shoko to rely on forever despite them both learning sign language. This
community is also only created as a reaction to the hegemonic community found in a
school and society forcing Shoko to assimilate which is something she can never truly
achieve as she is deaf.

All that being said, thanks to the reintroduction to Shoya in her life, Shoko begins
to create a new community in the shape of a friend group. The friend group first consists
of Shoya, Shoko, Yuzuru, and Tomohiro (a new friend that Shoya made after stopping
Tomohiro from getting his bicycle stolen). This friend group then grows as Shoko pushes
for them to find Miyoko which eventually turns into Ueno, Miki (a former classmate in
the sixth grade), Satoshi (the love interest of Miki), and also Miyoko joining the friend
group. The friend group decides to meet each week to work on a film project which
Tomohiro directs. The film project, however, brings up a problem as the friend group
struggles to find how Shoko can help as the film is audiocentric in nature. Shoko is
illiterate when it comes to film and likewise, she cannot communicate with many of the
people within the friend group as she has to completely rely on Yuzuru, Shoya, and
Miyoko to relay information back to her and this is due to the friend group being
audiocentric. Marlon Kuntze’s “Turning Literacy Inside Out” argues that the reason why
those who cannot speak audible languages will be designated as being illiterate is due to
the fact that we live in an audiocentric world. “A discussion about literacy in sign
language or visual media is essential since the conceptualization of literacy has been constrained largely by perceiving it in an audiocentric framework” (Kuntze 146). The audiocentric framework that Kuntze refers to is a structured society that privileges those that can speak and hear audibly. This form of the framework is one that will often determine anyone that cannot work within it as illiterate; however, as Kuntze points out, this is ignorant as we do not value literacy as only just one auditory component. “While literacy is usually associated with language, it is nevertheless helpful to think about dimensions of literacy in visual media such as pictures, movies, cartoons, and art, especially when attempting to document examples of literacy events in a nonwritten language like American Sign Language (ASL)” (Kuntze 146). People have never just communicated through audible noises. Instead, people have done so through other means for centuries; therefore, it is of the utmost importance that we do not designate someone as literate or illiterate solely on audiocentric frameworks, as they do not give us the whole picture of how we communicate as people. This is what the friend group in A Silent Voice struggles with throughout and they never really come up with a solution to this problem until a while later.

Before the friend group is able to fully come to terms with their audiocentric biases, they are first broken up due to forms of audism. One day, the friend group decides to go to an amusement park which helps both Shoko and Shoya in the beginning as they get to be friends with others without really having to care about the outside world. However, this comes to an end as Ueno tries to reintroduce Shoya to his former friend Kazuki. From this point, Shoya begins to cut people off from his life again. Ueno, never being bullied like Shoya did for her own role in the bullying of Shoko in sixth grade,
blames her own and Shoya’s misery on Shoko. Shoya disagrees with this, but Ueno hates her anyways. This leads to Ueno assaulting and belittling Shoko on the Ferris wheel away from everyone. On the Ferris wheel, Ueno forces Shoko to talk to her audibly instead of through her notebook as Ueno states that Shoko is not being her true self unless she talks verbally like Ueno herself. Here is where audism comes into play as Ueno is suggesting that non-auditory forms of communication are illegitimate. Audism is the belief that one is superior if they are able to hear like a “normative” person. Eckert and Rowley describe the term as “a schema of audiocentric assumptions and attitudes that are used to rationalize differential stratification, supremacy, and hegemonic privilege” (Eckert and Rowley 105). Audism is a form of ableism in that it is usually based first on the idea that being ‘able-bodied’ is preferable over being disabled. Also, much like ableism, audism exists in different ways; there is individual, institutional, metaphysical, and “laissez-faire” audism. All of these different forms of audism are expressed in different ways such as “overt, covert, and aversive” audism (Eckert and Rowley 108). Audism can come in the form of just believing that being able to hear is preferable, creating a system that privileges people who can speak and hear audibly over those who cannot, and forcing people to assimilate into the audiocentric culture through socioeconomic means. Audism is prevalent throughout the depiction of the classroom that *A Silent Voice* shows and it can be violently illustrated by reading Ueno as an antagonist even more so in the Ferris wheel scene that is being depicted. After discovering what Shoko had gone through on the Ferris wheel and finding out that she hates herself, Shoya makes it a point to work hard to make Shoya like herself. However, along the way, his anxiety gets the best of him
and he pushes the friend group away leaving only himself, Shoko, and Yuzuru to hang out together.

The ending of *A Silent Voice* occurs after a great fall. Due to Shoya pushing everyone away, Shoko has only Yuzuru and Shoya to communicate with. Her grandmother has passed, creating an even bigger hole in her home life. This loss and the end of the friend group result in Shoya trying to make up for all of the people that are no longer there. Unfortunately, this was not enough as Shoko attempts to take her own life by jumping off of a balcony during the summer festival. Shoya saves her but in turn, falls instead. While in a coma, Shoko is attacked by Ueno who blames her for Shoya’s state but is eventually stopped by Shoko’s mother and some of the members of the old friend group. At this point, Shoko takes it upon herself to recreate the friend group with the aim to finish the film project together. One night Shoya awakes from his coma and meets Shoko once again on the bridge that they have been meeting on every Tuesday. There is where Shoya finally apologizes for all of the things he had done in the past to Shoko and asks her to help him learn to live. Shoko agrees to do so together and they both don’t meet again until the school festival. At the school festival, Shoya sees the film project for the first time to find that it was a silent film, in black-and-white, a film that is not audiocentric so that Shoko can understand it in the same way as everyone else. The friend group then gets together to walk to the festival outside which is where Shoya finally allows himself to not cut himself out from the world, allowing himself to hear others. This is where the narrative deviates a bit from the trend that Alison Kafer’s book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* focuses on. Throughout the book, Kafer focuses on the issue of the lack of futures thought of for people with disabilities. It is a common thought that when
imagining a perfect world people leave out people with disabilities in it as they may believe that in a perfect world, disabilities would not exist. Kafer questions that line of thinking by asking, “What is it about disability that makes it a defining element of our imagined futures, such that a ‘good’ future is one without disability, while a ‘bad’ future is overrun by it?” (Kafer 10). If we imagine a world that is good due to its lack of disabilities but bad if there are too many people with them, what does that tell us about how we think of those with disabilities now? This rhetorical question is seemingly answered by understanding that many people view disabilities through medical lenses, which means they believe that disability is to be cured and that should be the objective when discussing disabilities. This is not the case for A Silent Voice as the story is not about ‘overcoming’ one's disability. Shoko is still going to be deaf and Shoko still has anxiety and self-confidence problems after the school festival. This is best shown at the end of the manga where he is hesitant about the future, but he knows, he can face it as long as he is still alive.

After discussing the plot of A Silent Voice, while also discussing many of the disability study concepts find throughout, it is important to also recognize that this thesis is also concerned with graphic novel / comic scholarship. The graphic novel / comic industry is worth billions and when adding manga (comics or graphic novels from Japan) you have an even larger multi-national industry. All of these have become even more popular thanks to film adaptations of the source material from the likes of Batman, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man from comic books to Demon Slayer, Dragon Ball, and the Evangelion series from manga.
One of the most often cited sources, in the realm of comic book scholarship, comes from Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. In the book, McCloud explores the many unique aspects of comic books from trying to pinpoint their historical beginnings to how we see them today, from discussing the vocabulary comic artists use for it and how we interact with comic books in different ways compared to other forms of media. One of the main ideas that McCloud stresses several times throughout the book is the idea that comics need to be taken as a serious piece of media just like anything else. “The artform – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (McCloud 6). To understand comics, one needs to understand that it is like any other medium in that it is trying to communicate ideas through the pages however where comics differ is that they bring in images, text, sequences, symbols, etc. in one package to deliver a message in its own format. Due to the ability of comics being a form of medium where one artist or writer does not have to excel in writing or drawing, they have the ability to communicate messages that are more accessible than any other form of medium. As argued by McCloud, “comics is one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices still have a chance to be heard” (McCloud 197).

The accessibility of comic books as a medium does lead to a wider audience being able to read them; however, there are still issues found within comic books in that they can often reinforce stereotypical gender roles, body types, sexualities, and racial identities much like any other form of media. Esther De Dauw argues in their book *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits* that stereotypes persist most in comic books with characters that are not the main hero. This is due to the fact that the main hero of stories usually reflects the
often-dominant culture that they are written for. De Dauw claims, “The dominant cultural narrative favors bodies that are white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and gender-conforming. In turn, it discriminates against bodies that do not fit these ideals in specific ways depending on the nature of the nonconforming body” (25). In other words, if a character does not represent the ‘norm’ of the dominant culture then they are often depicted in a negative light. Similar to what Haller says about the dangers of media, De Dauw suggests that it is a problem as negative messages are prominent towards those perceived as being outside the ‘norm’ which reinforces and heightens a certain stigma. “While it is easy to dismiss the messages in entertainment as merely entertainment, it is important to understand that one of mass media’s functions is to disseminate and reaffirm the dominant cultural values and ideology of a society” (De Dauw 25). The stereotypes and negative attitudes shared through media are dangerous but comic books can create a more significant issue as comic books are designed to be more accessible compared to other forms of media and with the increase of superheroes being shown in film and television it is important to be critical of them.

Being critical of comic books for the role they play in society is essential. Furthermore, it is also important to recognize how those messages are displayed through different cultures. *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Culture Perspective* not only shows how manga is perceived through lenses in cultures across the globe, but it also reaffirms how manga itself is unique in its messaging. In most comic books the style of each comic stays similar and consistent, this is not the case in a lot of manga. “Often drawing techniques are mixed on the same page; thus, the same character can be rendered as a full-sized angular person or a small chubby one” (Johnson-Woods 5). This
willingness to change the style in the middle of a story makes manga as a whole unique from most comic books. Add that with how a manga is read right-to-left as opposed to left-to-right and you have a compelling but different experience (for American readers) compared to other media out there. Much like comic books, they should be read critically, as they also can reinforce the dominant culture and values of the society in which they are from. Manga in particular is both famous and infamous for their content. “Manga’s contribution to popular culture is fascinating because it is essentially a comic book, and comic books have always been ignored (at best) and condemned (at worst). Manga has caused moral panics about its violence and sexual content even though it grapples with deep philosophical questions” (Johnson-Woods 12). Manga’s significance in pop culture is complicated due to it both asking questions about how our world functions, and it can also contain sexual and violent content. This is not to say that comic books do not serve a similar function, but it acknowledges that manga does it in a certain style that sets itself apart in media.

This thesis is not the first to delve into the intersection of comic and disability scholarship. I follow in the footsteps of the writers and editors of Disability Comic Book and Graphic Narratives, which consists of essays focusing on pop culture icons such as Batman and Cyborg and also examining the more autobiographical work of individuals like Alison Bechdel. The book exists to highlight the problem of how disabilities are shown and discussed in comic books throughout history. The authors argue that it is important to show that “the comic medium continues to implicate itself in the objectification and marginalization of persons with disabilities, perpetuating stale stereotypes and stigmas” (Whalen et al. 2). Similar to that of other comic book scholars,
the authors are aware of how accessible the medium is and how it can easily reinforce negative stigma towards groups that usually find themselves outside the “norm”. With this in mind, the authors make the claim that comic books are inherently political. They argue that “comics are by their nature concerned with and bound up in the politics of representation by way of the normalizing or oppressive stare of their implied readers” (Whalen et al. 4). Comics have the unique ability to show an accessible text through both text and images throughout the pages and the narrative of a story and it is how they choose to visualize types of people is where politics comes into play. This is an idea to keep in mind when it comes to the depiction of those with disabilities in comic books as comic books are read by a wide range of audiences. Therefore, they can help reinforce the dangerous thoughts that people have about disabled people which thereby reinforces the ableist world we live in. Alternatively, due to their accessible nature, graphic narratives can also bring in issues and ideas that are found outside the hegemonic/dominant culture. There is potential for good here as the medium’s accessibility can be used to bring attention to problems facing those who are often not portrayed in other mediums.

Yoshiko Okuyama’s Reframing Disability in Manga works in a similar manner to Disability Comic Book and Graphic Narratives except it focuses more on Japanese manga as opposed to comics written in the United States and Europe. One of the main arguments that Okuyama makes through the book is that, like comic books, manga has a relationship with culture in that it often reinforces beliefs that exist in the world already. With that in mind, manga’s relationship with depicting disabilities tells us about how modern Japanese society feels about disabilities as a whole. “In contemporary Japan,
people with disabilities are regarded not only as ‘different’ but also as ‘worthless,’ ‘unfortunate,’ or ‘unpleasant’ due to society’s ignorance and indifference to the rights of the disabled” (Okuyama 9). In other words, a disabled person in Japan is often not only seen as different than most but you are wished to be not seen and to not be in the public eye. This mindset leads to many people with disabilities hiding their disabilities to ensure that they fit into the hegemonic society. Okuyama states that “When people with disabilities ‘pass’ as nondisabled individuals, either intentionally or unintentionally, they may encounter more obstacles. By contrast, when their disability is ‘visible,’ they are more likely to be put into the nonnormal category, inevitably becoming the Other to society.” (Okuyama 19). Due to individuals attempting to “pass” as not having a disability oftentimes things are never fixed in the system so that it can be better for everyone, not just “able-bodied” people.

Additionally, Okuyama wrote the only book to date that has discussed the subject of this thesis, A Silent Voice. However, she only brings it up in relation to why she did not choose to dedicate a chapter to it in her book as she argues that despite the manga’s beautiful illustrations it is more focused on bullying as opposed to disabilities themselves which is where I differ from her and base my entire argument (Okuyama 60). I do agree with Okuyama that one of the main ideas explored through the manga is how bullying affects individuals differently, however, I argue that there is more being said in the text than just that. As it is throughout A Silent Voice that bullying is contextualized as not just being unwanted physical and verbal abuse but that it works within a society that discriminates against the bullied already. It is throughout A Silent Voice that linguistical and cultural othering occurs which is a part of and leads to the bullying of the deaf girl,
Shoko. It is throughout the manga that questions of what a disability is is brought up by comparing “visible” and “invisible” disabilities. Additionally, actions, under the guise of disability justice, are also brought in to show how some actions fail to help anyone.

For this thesis, I will explore issues of otherness and disability that Yoshiko Okuyama hints at but also misses about *A Silent Voice*. I argue that Ōima’s *A Silent Voice* is unique in how the manga shows the othering process through linguistic and cultural othering, how we define and discuss disability in society, and how overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice fail to help anyone. Not only is the manga interesting in these aspects alone, but it also suggests alternatives under the guise of what Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “radical love” in an attempt to answer the question of how someone can manage the haunting of their past. Through a communal effort of “radical love” between the other, the disabled, and those seeking disability justice, Ōima makes connections that help negate processes that impede human life.

Each following chapter of this thesis will be devoted to different aspects of reading *A Silent Voice* through critical lenses. The readings will all address disabilities and how they are informed by society. To start this process the second chapter consists of examining the linguistical and cultural “othering” of the character Shoko Nishimiya. To understand othering as a concept, major critical thinkers are brought in to help define the term and it is then used to help explain the dehumanization and exclusionary practices happening throughout *A Silent Voice*. By analyzing the othering of Shoko, I show how the othering process happens and how it is uniquely depicted by Ōima as a linguistic and cultural process directed toward her. Due to the text existing in the form of a manga, I bring in Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* to assist in giving
context to the othering happening throughout the pages. His work is used to help display the discriminatory actions occurring outside the main focus of the story and around the main characters and also assist in describing the elements that haunt disabled individuals in their day-to-day lives. I also address how language and other systems result in Shoko being viewed as less than human and otherworldly. To do this I bring in Mel Chen’s book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Matter, and Queer Affect* to assist in my examination of animacy hierarchies that show how harmful rhetoric places individuals below that of humans. For *A Silent Voice*, this is shown in how Shoko is compared to animals, bugs, non-living beings, and even a virus. By discussing animacy hierarchies, I argue that disabled individuals are often placed separately and often below that of ‘able-bodied’ people. This chapter ends with the assertion that to stop the process of linguistical and cultural othering, multilingual communities need to be created.

The third chapter of this thesis focuses on questioning how society defines disability and the ramifications of those definitions. After using notable disability scholars’ definitions and thoughts on “disabilities” I construct a definition for both it and “impairments” as separate but related descriptors. I then go on to argue that due to the complications of the terms *A Silent Voice* offers a hybrid model on how to discuss disabilities. To do this I return to the likes of Haller, Zhang, and Okuyama who have each written substantially on the seven models media uses when presenting people with disabilities to show how the manga offers an alternative model. From there I analyze the characters Shoya and Ueno as characters with “invisible” disabilities to see what that tells us about disabilities and the stigma attached to them. Finally, I refer to disability scholar
Jay Dolmage and others to discuss the problems of the accommodation system and how they affect the characters in *A Silent Voice* and in real life.

The fourth chapter of this thesis displays how overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice are critiqued in *A Silent Voice* and identifies how the manga promotes a reconciliatory response instead. To understand disability justice, I bring in Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Care Work* to outline it. I use their work to help analyze the characters Yaeko, Satoshi, and Yuzuru to show how and why their overtly defensive or violent responses fail to help anyone other than themselves temporarily. From there I return to *Care Works'* idea of “radical love” to suggest that *A Silent Voice* promotes a similar model in place of the failed answers for disability justice. I use the term to describe and analyze the bridge motif presented throughout the manga and to read key scenes.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I wrap up all of the arguments and compare the manga to the film adaptation. Manga and anime are twins, and anime is frequently brought into this thesis to assist in providing visualizations when discussing certain topics. That being said, the two pieces differ in many areas, and it is in the conclusion that I highlight particular differences between the two. After the comparisons are over I argue once again why I believe highlighting *A Silent Voice* is so important and how it helps with our understanding of both comic and disability scholarship alike.
Chapter 2. The Othering of Shoko Nishimiya

A young man, Shoya Ishida, walks across a bridge where he meets with a young girl, Shoko Nishimiya, every week. However, on this day Shoko is not there. Instead, he finds their friend Miyoko there instead. After being told that Shoko had something to take care of that day and being left alone Shoya sees Yuzuru (Shoko’s sister) across the bridge and is startled by her appearance. The usual strong and tomboyish Yuzuru is wearing her school uniform and is found crying. Shoya isn’t exactly told the complete truth as to why Yuzuru is acting that way, but he eventually discovers it is because Yuzuru and Shoko’s grandmother had passed away and that today was her funeral. Shoya believes that the funeral and the fact that it is their grandmother who has passed is the reason for Yuzuru finally breaking down from the usual façade that she often puts on. However, as the story goes, on the reader understands that their grandmother shared something with Shoko and Yuzuru that no one else did and that was a linguistically diverse relationship between the three. Sign language and Japanese have both been used interchangeably between the three ever since it was known that Shoko is hearing impaired. That being said, later Shoya re-enters Shoko’s life allowing her to talk to someone in a friendly manner through sign language which offers Shoko and Yuzuru new possibilities. Despite this, Shoko and Yuzuru’s grandmother death is still shown to be tragic and eventually Shoko herself attempts to take her own life although unsuccessful. Even with Shoya, Yuzuru, and others
trying to help Shoko by communicating in sign language, why does Shoko still attempt to end her own life?

Yoshitoki Ōima’s best-selling manga series *A Silent Voice* has been praised for its honest and colorful portrayal of bullying, suicide, depression, mental illness, and disability. The story follows a young man, Shoya Ishida, as he attempts to reconnect with the girl he bullied in the sixth grade, Shoko Nishimiya, who is deaf. Through its brutal portrayal of bullying and the haunting that occurs after the characters’ time in class together, *A Silent Voice* displays a coming-of-age story where both the bullies and the bullied attempt to heal and learn to live with their past and current struggles of everyday life together. Many aspects to the story exist outside and around Shoya and Shoko’s relationship including friends, teachers, and family members that help highlight the chosen issues and themes of the manga. These additional elements of the manga add complexity and realism as well as a sense of community. Furthermore, the film adaptation of the manga also ensures the story’s complexity and color are shown on the big screen in a nuanced and respectable manner. That being said, what does the mistreatment of Shoko mean for deaf individuals who live within and outside of ableist communities, and is there any hope for those who are pushed outside of communities due to their deafness?

Shoko Nishimiya is linguistically and culturally Othered throughout *A Silent Voice*, and it is through this constant Othering that allows Shoko to believe that everything is her fault and that she shouldn’t exist at all. For this chapter, I will first define “Other” and “Othering” and then give examples of them through the text. To further this endeavor, I will also use Scott McCloud’s work *Understanding Comics: The
Invisibl* Art to go deeper into the forms of Othering of Shoko through the people that are not the main focus of the story. Additionally, the harmful rhetoric thrown at Shoko will also be examined by using animacy hierarchies as similarly used in Mel L. Chen’s *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Effect*. Finally, the results of the Othering process, viewing sign language as language, and the birth and death of communities and cultures will also be discussed, as it is through the Othering process that alternative communities form and eventually die. This chapter argues that Yoshitoki Ōima’s *A Silent Voice* critiques the rhetoric of ableist systems present in Japanese society that marginalizes people by displaying the linguistical and cultural Othering of individuals that result in a negation of life and the eventual death of Deaf communities.

Furthermore, this chapter argues that is through reading Yoshitoki Ōima’s *A Silent Voice* that we can comprehend how people become the Other via linguistical differences, how that process hurts the individual, how anyone can become the Other, how Othering can lead people down negative paths and be excluded from the community by destroying diverse and non-audiocentric cultures, but also how those processes can come to an end through the creation of healthier non-audiocentric communities.

For starters, the original usage of the other stems from Hegel and Freud’s work in identifying the metaphysics of the self and the I. From their work Jacques Lacan further defined the other by making the distinction between the “big Other” and the “little other.” The “little other” is described as being something that we create while children as we slowly recognize objects outside of ourselves as being something else. If a child sees themselves in the mirror and they do not recognize their image within it, then this would be an instance of a person creating the “little other”. Meanwhile, the “big Other” would
be the beings or order that is an authority in our lives from the real to the supernatural. Jacques Derrida disagreed with Lacan’s definition by suggesting that there is an unbridgeable gap between oneself and another self. Whereas Lacan would suggest that his “little other” doesn’t exist beyond our psyche and is therefore not real, Derrida would suggest in his work “Violence and Metaphysics An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” that the other is real as “the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I” (Derrida 125-6). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre critiqued Lacan’s definition in arguing that the Other is never independent from the ego. Sartre argues that since the Other comes from one’s own psyche than they can never truly be independent from the subject. In other words, Sartre suggests that the Other is always connected to the ego as once it is created from it, it is a part of it. Meanwhile, Simone de Beauvoir suggests that the Other is a construct created by men to subjugate people as men are the ones who define women as the Other, not allowing women to define themselves on their own merit (Beauvoir). Frantz Fanon was also critical of how we defined these terms as he argued that it the ontology in which Hegel used to define his terms is “unattainable in a colonized and civilized society” (Fanon 109). Unlike Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Sartre, both Beauvoir and Fanon are more focused on the hierarchies that are created thanks to how we define the Other and other. Beauvoir is a woman and Fanon is a person of color, which are a part of two groups that have and continue to be Othered from individuals and groups thanks to racist and patriarchal hierarchies.

In a more recent work, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin also define the Other and Othering in Post-colonial Studies: the Key Concepts. Ashcroft et al.’s focus differs from most of the previous scholars mentioned works as they are more focused on post-colonial
theory as opposed to the metaphysics of Lacan, Freud, and Hegel. Much like Lacan, Ashcroft et al. defines the concept as having two different variations. Instead of Lacan’s “little other” and “big Other” they use the capitalized and non-capitalized variants of the term which are presented as the other and the Other. The lower-case version of other is defined by the individual as “anyone who is separate from oneself” (Ashcroft et al 187). Meanwhile, the Other exists to help define what is ‘normal’ and what is self. In a colonized land the Other could refer to a binary between peoples deemed as civilized and those who are viewed as primitive by comparison. This is where the lowercase and capitalized versions of the same term differ. The capitalized Other is created by groups to help define themselves as being separate from differing groups, meanwhile the lowercase variant of other is a tool used to define oneself. Additionally, there is the concept of “Othering” which “describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces subjects” (Ashcroft et al 188). In the instance of colonization, Othering occurs exactly when a people become colonized as both the colonized people and the people who are colonizing will see each side as being the Other in their own ways.

Yoshiko Okuyama, a professor of Japanese whose expertise is in Japanese mythology, folklore, religion, and deaf studies, writes about the concept of the Other in the context of disability in Japan in her book Reframing Disability in Manga. Her definition of the Other is best suited for this chapter as not only is this thesis concerned with filling the gaps she left out in writing about A Silent Voice but also because Okuyama’s definition is more concerned with the coupling of disability and the Other. Okuyama argues that the Other label is usually bestowed upon minority groups as being different from the majority as the minority is viewed as exotic, strange, or bizarre.
compared to that of the majority (Okuyama 5-6). Additionally, who decides who is Othered and who goes through the Othering process is argued to be by those who ensure that they are viewed as normal. If we also consider the issue of being Othered and society's already negative view of the disabled we can see how going through the Othering process just adds to the already existing discrimination faced by people who are perceived to be not the “norm”.

From here, I will define the Other as a concept used by groups to distinguish themselves as either being the ‘norm’ or to separate classes of people and we will also define Othering as the process in which the Other becomes defined. These definitions are created in order to add flexibility when discussing the terms and also considers previous scholars’ work. Additionally, it allows for different forms of Othering to be discussed such as linguistical and cultural Othering. Both linguistic and cultural Othering are similar in that cultures are often defined by their linguistical attributes (i.e., choice of language, either orally or not) so more often than not, discrimination of one, either that be by culture or language, leads to the discrimination of the other. Sometimes the Othering of culture leads to the unintended Othering of language and vise versa. This is where A Silent Voice finds itself to be unique in that it is not just the Othering of those possessing a disability that occurs but also the Othering of cultures and linguistics.

The most obvious examples of the Other and Othering can be found in the first volume of A Silent Voice where Shoko is introduced to the sixth-grade class. These moments of Othering occur not only in the manga’s text but are also found through the visual storytelling of the frames the manga is made of as well as the still images found throughout the film adaptation. Through visual storytelling both the writer of the manga,
Yoshitoki Ōima, and the director of the film, Naoko Yamada, are able to display the idea of the Other and disability by highlighting how individuals react to Shoko.

The first instance where Shoko is Othered can be found in her introduction to the classroom. At first, nothing appears to be that out of the ordinary going into the introduction of Shoko to the school. After hearing that the new transfer would be a girl, Ueno (Shoya’s friend) teases Shoya by saying, “isn’t that great Shoya?” (Ōima, v. 1, 45). However, after Shoko arrives, her classmates notice something different about her when she only responds to Takeuchi’s (the teacher) touch. “What’s with this girl?”, one classmate asks (Ōima, v. 1, 52). After this comment, Shoko’s notebook is revealed and she tells everyone through her writing, “I can’t hear” (Ōima, v. 1, 53).

![Figure 2.1 Shoya sees Shoko as an alien. Ōima, v. 1, 53.](image)

Shoya responds by giving Shoko a long stare (fig. 2.1) and eventually exclaiming, “What a weirdo!” (Ōima, v. 1, 56). Through these pages, Othering occurs towards Shoko, from
just being a new student and thereby different from the present students at the school, and then she is Othered for not being able to hear which means she is also being Othered thanks to her linguistical difference found within the audiocentric culture (a culture that preferences and/or is dominated by language that is auditory) that is the classroom.

In the above centerfold, Ōima further distances Shoko’s deafness by presenting her as otherworldly compared to that of Shoya. This visualization of Shoya’s initial reaction to Shoko lets us know that not only does Shoya see Shoko as an Other, but he is immediately comparing her to beings found in space. Not being able to hear in space is an idea that would probably be in the front of Shoya’s mind as he is shown to play space-based video games throughout his childhood (Ōima, v. 1, 18, 28, 42, 47-8). Therefore, Shoya’s initial reaction to Shoko is similar to the way aliens in video games are depicted to be the other. This is shown in a similar scene in the film adaptation, suggesting that Shoko sees Shoya as more of an alien due to her not being able to hear (fig. 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Shoko being compared to an alien in a video game. ASV 5:45-5:50.
The visual of an alien arriving as the final boss from a video game is placed in the film immediately after Shoya discovers that Shoko can’t hear as opposed to what we see in the manga. This is more apparent compared to the manga’s depiction of a similar idea, but the film speeds up a moment that is found later in which Shoya states that Shoko is an alien invader. “She isn’t just an alien raised in a different culture. She is an intruder sent to bring harm to our class” (Ōima, v. 1, 94). Even if the film adaptation is a bit quicker in showing a more severe form of Othering occurring (cultural Othering), the end result and how Ōima chooses to illustrate it ends up being similar.

To the film’s credit, more visual forms of Othering and metaphors for disability are shown in their relation to Shoko. One such moment occurs while Shoko and her classmates are at the school’s playground. It is within this scene which Shoko is left alone after her classmates decide to leave. However, before this occurs a telling visual appears on the screen (fig. 2.3).

![Figure 2.3 Shoko plays in a jungle gym as Ueno faces away from her. ASV 9:13.](image-url)
This visual presents Shoko again being separate from a classmate (this time it's Ueno instead of Shoya). Shoko is shown to be separated from everyone else visually as she is the one behind the jungle gym meanwhile Ueno and presumably everyone else in the class are not. This form of visual storytelling allows us to see that Shoko is the Other in school and she is even behind bars thanks to her disability. This isn’t to say that her disability is what is keeping her behind the bars alone, but having Ueno face the opposing direction shows that her classmates are a part of the process of allowing Shoko to be the Other and not allowing her to be part of the “norm”. The film’s way of both visually showing the Othering occurring to Shoko and her disability in this scene (fig. 2.3) and combining it with how it is shown in the manga (fig. 2.1) allows us to comprehend the Othering of Shoko more. Additionally, it shows how Shoko’s social patterns differ from the those in an audiocentric world. Shoko is more likely to learn things through haptics and communicate in such a manner; meanwhile, Ueno is privileged in that her form of communication does not have to adhere to touch or where her hands are placed. For Shoko how she communicates is limited, but her hands and everyone else’s hands allow her to communicate. This is why she places her hands on the jungle gym where she can feel the vibrations of others. The communication through physical touch is not as essential for someone like Ueno and therefore she presents herself as having her hands at her side while also facing away from both Shoko and the jungle gym. By doing this she is facing away from communicating from the linguistically Othered individual by avoiding to communicate through haptics, facial communication, and sign language all in one. This privilege of those who can more easily participate in an audiocentric world more
often than not is something that is taken for granted but also thanks to the ignorance of that privilege nothing is done when people are linguistically othered due to it.

In *A Silent Voice*, it is not only the kids who Other one another but also the authority figures in the classroom. Takeuchi, the class’s sixth-grade teacher, witnesses the Othering of Shoko from the very beginning but does little to stop it, even attempting to legitimize her Othering. Takeuchi chooses to push the responsibility of Shoko needing help onto his students and sits down with Shoya several times in an attempt to get him to stop bullying Shoko. However, as time goes on, he begins to show his true beliefs on the matter. At one point he insinuates that having Shoko in his class is something that they, “just have to deal with” (Ōima, v. 1, 78). Later Takeuchi appears to have given up on Shoya’s behavior towards Shoko. “All I’m saying is, don’t embarrass me. Though, well… I do understand how you feel” (Ōima, v. 1, 107-8). Shoya believes this was a way of his teacher legitimizing the bullying and the Othering of Shoko, “So even Mr. Takeuchi gets it” (Ōima, v. 1 108). Takeuchi’s position is that he wishes Shoko was not there as there is no way for her to actually conform to the cultural ‘norm’. Since Shoko cannot conform to the audiocentric culture that is present in the classroom, Takeuchi legitimizes her Othering as he believes that doing so is for her own sake and for the rest of the class’s. This evidence by no means excuses Shoya and the rest of his classmate's behavior toward Shoko, but it does make it apparent that even the authority figure who was in charge of these kids was either making the Othering worse or at the very least not doing enough to stop it. All that being said, even where Takeuchi fails, the rest of the school does little to help Shoko. They attempt to accommodate Shoko first by having students write notes down for Shoko and eventually pushing for everyone to learn sign
language (an idea that only results in one classmate, Miyoko, attempting to learn it). However, by doing this the school only ends up putting a target on Shoko’s back even further allowing for additional Othering to continue.

As stated earlier, these are instances of linguistical and cultural Othering occurring throughout the text that are easy to find. The Othering is shown to occur from Shoya, Ueno, Takeuchi towards Shoko throughout the text. It is also apparent that both cultural and linguistical Othering led to Shoko being bullied in school which eventually leads to her leaving for an alternative school that is more understanding of her. All that being said, Shoko is not just being Othered in school but also outside of it as she is linguistically and culturally Othered by strangers and historically significant people that still haunt her and other non-normative individuals in Japan. These factors are not made too apparent in A Silent Voice, but they are hinted at through the story’s choice of medium.

To understand the additional outside factors that are attributing to the Othering of Shoko, Scott McCloud’s concept of the “the gutter” can be used to read the text. In McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art the concept of “the gutter” is introduced as a way to explain what occurs in between the panels. McCloud writes, “..that space between the panels? That’s what comics aficionados have named ‘the gutter’ And despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics!” (McCloud 66). “The gutter” is in-between frames we as readers make up ourselves in our heads to fill in the gaps of missing movement. These “gutters” can come in different shapes and forms such as moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and the
non-sequitur (McCloud 74). For *A Silent Voice*, and the comic medium as a whole, the use of “the gutter” is found in between almost every frame we see on the page. Some “gutters” are easier to fill in the gaps of compared to others as displayed by the examples that McCloud brings up. As for *A Silent Voice* and how I can use McCloud’s “the gutter”, I will alter it slightly. For the purpose of explaining and providing examples of how additional Othering is occurring outside the main focus of the story, we will use the term “bleeding gutters”. The term “bleeding gutters” is similar to that of McCloud’s “the gutter”, the difference however is that with “bleeding gutters” I will refer to panels that aren’t given too much focus by the main characters in the story, but these panels appear to bleed into the Othering that is occurring throughout it. Essentially, ‘the gutter’ is where our imagination comes in to fill in the in-between frames that appear in a comic book or manga, a “bleeding gutter” is frame or still image that is not the sole focus of a narrative but rather a frame that we do see that is not focused on but seemingly “bleeds” into the themes of the narrative. Now that “bleeding gutters” are explained, we can focus on those moments and how they add to the Othering of Shoko. This is essential as Othering is not always made easily apparent as to when it is occurring, but rather that it is often found around the individual being Othered rather than directly which ends up emboldening and sometimes even justifying the more discriminatory and apparent forms of Othering.

A negative attitude toward sign language is common in *A Silent Voice* and those negative thoughts seep into the thoughts of the major characters in Shoko’s life. Later in the manga, Shoya begins to befriend Shoko. Thanks to Shoya coming back into Shoko’s life, Shoko wishes to meet with her other former classmates from sixth grade. The first of those was Miyoko, the only classmate that elected to learn sign language when asked.
Miyoko goes to a different school than Shoya and Shoko which results in both of them having to take the train to try and find her. Although they are shown to be unsuccessful together in finding Miyoko, Shoko and Shoya do get to spend some time together. After one unsuccessful day of tracking Miyoko down, Shoko and Shoya say their goodbyes to one another in sign language outside the train station. In response to this, three unnamed characters make comments about seeing Shoko and Shoya using sign language (fig. 2.4).

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 2.4** Shoya listens to strangers talk about Shoko. Ōima, v. 3, 28.

These frames tell us that not only do some people view sign language as neat, but that seeing people use it made it to where one person even wanted to learn it. However, after hearing this, another unnamed character tells the two excited characters, “Watch your mouth, girls” (Ōima, v. 3, 28). These frames are later followed by Shoya wondering what Shoko thinks of these types of situations. “I wonder if she overhears conversations like that. I wonder what she thinks if she does…” (Ōima, v. 3, 29). This moment of a ‘bleeding gutter’ visually shows Shoya listening and responding to the unnamed characters' comments. That being said, what is stated by the unnamed characters in these frames appear to bleed into Yaeko’s (Shoko’s mom) thoughts about sign language as shown in a later dinner scene where Shoko and Yuzuru and their grandmother use sign
language at the table. “Don’t use sign language at the table. It’s indecent…It’s bad manners” (Ōima, v. 4, 107). The unnamed character who says, “watch your mouths, girls”, is one way of stating that sign language is frowned upon and adding that Yaeko’s later comments displays that those who do not know sign language may negate it as not being a language at all and/or outside the “norm” which are likely common comments that someone like Shoko would encounter frequently. This linguistical Othering espoused by many unfortunately leads to people who have a harder time speaking aural languages either being forced to learn aural languages that are the “norm” in society or the use of non-aural languages becoming frowned upon as shown by the unnamed stranger and Yaeko. An additional reason why Yaeko never learns sign language is due to these existing issues and another reason why is because she does not feel a part of the conversation at the table. As suggested by the “bleeding gutters” present in A Silent Voice, Shoko is also being linguistically and culturally Othered in her own home and around outside. These additional moments make it nearly impossible for Shoko to find an area where she is not being viewed as the Other due to her linguistical differences.

The “bleeding gutters” also show up in still frames where no dialogue is present and through monetary symbolism. One of the earlier consequential moments present in A Silent Voice is Shoya repaying his debts to his mother. In the first volume of the manga, Shoya torments Shoko by destroying and displacing her hearing aids (Ōima, v. 1, 104-5). This form of torture goes on until Shoya is outed in class for his behavior and his mother pays Yaeko the money that she lost by constantly having to purchase new hearing aids for Shoko. When Shoya gets old enough to work he attempts to pay off that debt that his mother used to pay for Shoko’s hearing aids. The faces on the currency that are shown
when Shoya earns are hard to make out on their own (Ōima, v. 1, 184). Here the face on
the currency is more so an “icon” than an actual picture of someone as it is hard to
decipher who it is trying to show but it appears to be an image that is “used to represent a
person, place, thing or idea” (McCloud 27). The intention of showing this hard-to-
decipher “icon” by Ōima could just be a way of showing how currency looks in Japan,
but as Whalen et al. from the introduction of their book Disability in Comic Books and
Graphic Narratives states, “comics are by their nature concerned with and bound up in
the politics of representation by way of the normalizing or oppressive stare of their
implied readers” (Whalen et al 4). This belief that there is a political motivation to show
the hard-to-decipher “icon” of a political figure on Japanese currency is explored in the
manga’s film adaptation as we can clearly see a man on the currency on three separate
occasions (ASV 1:17, 19:30, 55:10).

The clearest of these images can be found in the above picture (fig. 2.5). The person the
makers of the film may believe that Ōima is drawing attention to in her hard-to-decipher
“icon” is Fukuzawa Yukichi.

Figure 2.5 10,000-yen note being given to Shoya. ASV 55:10.
This important figure in Japanese history is commemorated on the 10,000-yen note for his job in helping Japan modernize during the turn of the 20th century. Some argue that Fukuzawa was a “proponent of civil liberties, who promoted independent thought and egalitarian humanism. This is regarded as the popular or mainstream image” (Uchiyama 64). However, there are people who are critical of Fukuzawa’s body of work such as Debito Arudou, who highlights Fukuzawa’s influential book *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* as it “borrowed from contemporary Western eugenics science on racial hierarchies” (Arudou). These ideas that Fukuzawa borrowed from the West resulted in the understanding of Japanese society by Othering people into different categories. By defining Japanese society by Othering everyone that isn’t deemed a part of it, the result was a “society that lead to differentiated, ‘othering,’ and subordinated treatment of peoples by physical appearance”. (Arudou). The Othering pushed by Fukuzawa pushes for a conformity into a homogenous culture in order to from a nation and in order to achieve that, unique cultural aspects and linguistics must die in order for a unified nation to exist. This is why the creators of the film adaption of the mange decide to promptly feature such a figure as suggested by Whalen *et al.* the reason is completely political as the studio who created the film adaptation (Kyoto Animation) is known for its progressive working environment and products that feature critiques of work culture, nationalism, and conservative definitions of family just to name a few. For Kyoto Animation to highlight Fukuzawa in the film adaptation in order to raise awareness and criticism wouldn’t be too surprising all things considered. That being said, Fukuzawa has long been dead and so has the fascist Japan that came right after him. That doesn’t mean however that the echoes of such ideas aren’t still prevalent in Japanese society, as
suggested by how Ōima’s work provides us with examples of different forms of Othering still occurring. Now knowing about the controversy of Fukuzawa’s legacy it makes the currency depictions in the film and the manga more terrifying. In every scene where money is shown or brought up, it is always in relation to helping Shoko, a person who Fukuzawa’s oppressive theories would subjugate and mistreat as being a part of the Other and not a part of Japanese society as she can never truly assimilate. Shoko can never escape this form of historical discrimination either, as it is through the currency that bears the face of Fukuzawa that she is able obtain her hearing aids and to exist at all in Japan.

These “bleeding gutters” are just one of many aspects of the Othering occurring throughout A Silent Voice. As shown in the manga (and even in the film) “bleeding gutters” impact Shoko’s world both directly (through her mother and random people she doesn’t even know) and indirectly (through the faces on the currency that she has to use to exist). All of this evidence indicates that there is a certain amount of additional Othering occurring from outside the school setting that is always impacting Shoko one way or another even if it isn’t as apparent at times. Additionally, the mistreatment taking place in the school shows that no matter where Shoko is at she will always be Othered for one reason or another.

Shoko in A Silent Voice is Othered as she is negated by insults that describe her as non-human. Throughout the manga, Shoko is Othered in different ways by her peers, family, school, unnamed strangers, and even by the faces on the currency in Japan appear to be a representation of a historical discrimination that is ever-present. However, the ways in which Shoko is Othered can also be found in the objects that she is compared to. This rhetoric places Shoko as not only an Other compared to the “norm” but also negates
her life entirely. To understand this more, Mel Chen’s use of animacy hierarchy in their work *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Effect* will be used to further comprehend the hateful rhetoric being cast upon Shoko throughout *A Silent Voice*. Animacy hierarchy is similar to other hierarchical examples except that humans are usually the dominant group and everything that is not human is placed below it based on how animate those beings and objects are perceived to be. An example hierarchy would be one where humans are on top followed by animals, insects, plants, and then stones. This hierarchy helps illustrate that the more animate an object appears to be, the more value humans put upon it. Additionally, racial hierarchy could still exist which could lead to some infamous results such as putting some animals, such as dogs, above certain races and/or ethnic groups depending on who decides who goes where in the social stratification. With Shoko, let’s say that as a person with disabilities she is placed below the ‘norm’ in her society as it is an ableist one. She would still be placed with the humans, but on a lower end of it as she is not a part of the dominant mythical “norm”.

For understanding Ōima, Chen provides another example of animacy hierarchy that has to do with disabilities. Chen takes the phrase “I just don’t want to be a vegetable” and provides an analysis of it. The phrase itself doesn’t mean much at first glance but this is a common fear people have. It comes from “a person who fears a loss of mental capacities” (Chen 40-1). This type of thinking comes from those who have seen people be described as being in a “vegetative state”. By stating someone is in that state they are suggesting that they are someone who, “cannot think; they are passive; they merely survive; they are dependent, not freestanding plants, but partaking of plants’ nutrients” (Chen 41). People who are said to be in this state are no longer compared to that of
humans and therefore less than and fall down the animacy hierarchy, they are objectified
and thereby also dehumanized. This form of rhetoric may make it easier for someone in a
“vegetative state” to be euthanized if the option comes up, as the rhetoric of them no
longer being human is already there. In an example provided by Chen in which a “court-
ordered removal of [a] feeding tube” occurred to a woman in a “vegetative state”, Chen
suggests that “different politics—even different legal consequences—would have
ensued” if that person would have been described as disabled rather than a vegetable
(Chen 42). This is a good point to make as it is with chosen rhetoric that can result in
different outcomes depending on the biopolitical implications that the chosen rhetoric has
in relation to the negation of life via animacy hierarchy.

In the end, the animacy hierarchy adds to the ability for us to understand the
concept of the Other and Othering and the different forms these processes take. As
displayed in a simple animacy hierarchy, everything outside of humans is considered the
Other. Also, anything outside of the animacy hierarchy itself could also be considered the
Other. Who and what is the Other is determined by the ones who wish to define
themselves by Othering everything else. If humans define themselves as not being
animals, insects, plants, or stones then that is what makes them human. If humans follow
a simple animacy hierarchy then anything outside that hierarchy would also be the Other.
However, as argued by Chen, it is of the utmost importance that we critically think about
these hierarchies and the rhetoric around them as, “everyone loses by not thinking deeply
enough about their underlying connections” (Chen 41-2). By building upon Chen's
arguments on animacy hierarchy that they often bring up we can look at how Shoko in A
Silent Voice is further Othered through animacy hierarchy and that the choice of words in
the negation of her life is ultimately a consequence of the rhetoric thrown her way. In addition to Shoko’s Othering by her peers and everyone else, we can apply animacy rhetoric in order to understand how she is being Othered. Therefore, animacy hierarchy will be used to analyze the rhetoric cast towards Shoko from Shoya, Yuzuru, and Ueno.

Shoya demeans Shoko by comparing her to animals and insects. Shoya, as shown earlier, has Othered Shoko by presenting her as an alien invader (fig. 2.1)(fig. 2.2). These are common ways to display someone or something as being the Other. In a simple example animacy hierarchy, Shoko would be placed outside of it as she is an invading alien trying to either destroy the hierarchy or to find a way to be a part of it according to Shoya. This is similar to the rhetoric used in alien invasion stories such as Independence Day, War of the Worlds, and Invasion of the Body Snatchers. An “Us vs Them” narrative can be spouted out easily from this type of framing and it can allow for Shoya and Ueno to view Shoko as being the problem and the enemy as someone to hate. That being said, there are additional ways in which Shoya talks about Shoko and how he decides to torture her as shown in the following page (fig. 2.6).
Through this framing, Shoko is being compared to all of the insects and animals that Shoya also torments frequently. To break each of these parallels down we’ll start with the first parallel. “When I see a slug, I pour salt on it…So I’ll pour water on her…” (Ōima, v. 1, 103). In this instance, Shoko is compared to a slug (an animal) and thereby placed lower on the animacy hierarchy which is further illustrated by Shoko being on the bottom half of the page below the animals and insects. This parallel is more interesting than the rest as by placing salt on slugs Shoko is dehydrating them and by hosing Shoko, he is overhydrating her. The use of contradictory language is a unique choice to display as the other three parallels on this page are not contradictory in nature. Shoya is forced to do the contradictory action towards Shoko here as salt does not dehydrate someone like it does to slugs, so he decides to do the opposite by overhydrating Shoko by drenching her with
water. Shoko is also shown chasing pigeons and doodling on cats, additional ways Shoko is compared to that of animals as he also decides to “...chase her...and doodle on her stuff” (Ōima, v. 1, 103). Finally, Ōima parallels Shoko with ants (insects) as he throws both of them “off track” (Ōima, v. 1, 103). Through each parallel and frame, Shoya compares Shoko to a slug, pigeon, ant, and cat. By doing this not only is Shoya presenting us with his mindset on how he views tormenting Shoko as no different than tormenting animals and insects but by doing so he is devaluing Shoko’s existence by presenting her similarly to those same animals and insects. Shoya, through his behavior and mindset, has not only thought of Shoko as being an alien invader but he also dehumanized her and negated her life by placing her lower than human and closer to that of an animal or even an insect. This rhetoric is not only shown to be physically harmful to Shoko but also mentally as her life is being negated overtly by her bully.

The bullying from Shoya towards Shoko leads to a young Shoko wanting to end her own life and in response to this her sister Yuzuru attempts to help her with those thoughts. Furthermore, Yuzuru unintentionally negates Shoko’s life by comparing her to dead objects. Yuzuru is depicted as taking a lot of pictures with her camera throughout A Silent Voice. All of the objects that she takes pictures of are dead. This appears to be strange at first but later we discover why she does it. After Shoko attempts to end her own life but is saved by Shoya, in the sixth volume of the manga, we are shown flashbacks from Yuzuru. At a time that is undefined (we will assume it is at the same time when Shoko is in sixth grade while being tormented thanks in part due to the clothes she is wearing in the frame), Shoko signs to Yuzuru, “I want to die.” (Ōima, v. 6, 52). Yuzuru at first does not know how to respond but she eventually comes across the idea to
take pictures of dead objects to show Shoko what death looks like in order to scare her from wanting to die (Ōima, v. 6, 52). These pictures Yuzuru takes are found all across the family’s home, taped to the walls, all for Shoko to see. However, Yuzuru later realizes that the endeavor did not help at all. “It was all for nothing. All of it…none of it got through to her…” (Ōima, v. 6, 53). It is never outright stated as to why Yuzuru’s idea didn’t work, but that can be explained through animacy hierarchy. In a simple animacy hierarchy there are humans, animals, insects, plants, and stones. Something not included in this common example is dead objects, which is what Yuzuru was taking pictures of and incidentally comparing Shoko to. It is one thing to compare someone to an insect or animal as done by Shoya, but it is another to refer to comparing someone to dead objects entirely.

The question of where a dead thing lies within the animacy hierarchy is why the stones were mentioned earlier. Chen in their work brings in Aristotle and his De Anima to talk about stones and how they are different than everything else in the hierarchy due to their usual inanimate existence. Aristotle doesn’t get too much into what it means to be dead or a stone, but he suggested that nobody “want to be a stone” (Chen 41). The reason for this, as argued by Chen, is that stones are valued almost at zero on the animacy hierarchy scale for their complete lack of animacy (Chen 5). That being said, much like what is expressed by Aristotle, “stones might as well be nothing” (Chen 5). To be a stone is to be at the bottom of the animacy hierarchy and to be dead is to be similar to that of a stone as you are no longer animate. This makes Yuzuru’s idea to help Shoko by showing her what death looks like dangerous as she is unintentionally comparing her sister to something that is worth nothing or at the bottom of the animacy hierarchy. After Yuzuru
recognizes that her plan was a failure she asks, “should I have just put it into words?”
(Ōima, v. 6, 53). If Yuzuru would have just used sign language and told Shoko about how
she doesn’t wish for her sister to die and to help her with those thoughts, the further
negation of Shoko’s life and existence could have been avoided here. That being said,
even with the absence of Yuzuru’s misguided attempts the rhetoric of Shoko being
compared to the non-human would still continue from different individuals who continue
to Other her.

Later, Ueno Others Shoko by calling her a blight. In one of the more climatic
scenes in the manga, Shoko attempts suicide by jumping off the balcony from her home.
Thankfully, Shoya is there to save her, however, it came with the cost of him falling in
her place which results in him going into a coma. Shoko’s family, Shoya’s family, and
their friends all frequently visit the hospital to check up on Shoya. At one point Ueno
confronts Shoko as she believes Shoya’s current state is Shoko’s fault entirely. After
Ueno berates Shoko and starts beating her, Ueno says, “You’re a blight! A blight! A
frigin’ blight!!” (Ōima, v. 6, 35) This insult directed at Shoko is an interesting one as it
isn’t usually presented in animacy hierarchies as a blight is a disease that kills plants. As
suggested by Chen in their example of someone in a “vegetative state” those people are
viewed as less than human which can make it easier for people to agree to medically
euthanize them. However, Shoko isn’t being called a vegetable here. Shoko is being
called a disease that actively kills vegetables. This is interpreted in a few different ways.
Ueno is viewing Shoya as being temporarily a vegetable. As a temporary vegetable
Shoya cannot communicate verbally and cannot interact with those around him. This
temporary state makes it to where different people have to take care of Shoya so that he
does not stay in the “vegetive state” permanently and to ensure that he does not die. Even though Shoya is being negated from being a human to a vegetable it comes with the caveat that this disability may not be permanent which gives a reason as to why Ueno would be treating him differently compared to Shoko. It is already suggested that Ueno believes that Shoko is responsible for Shoya’s “vegetive state” (that also Other’s Shoya) and therefore calling Shoko a blight is calling her a disease that is trying to kill him. This would be adding layers to the way Shoya viewed Shoko as an alien invader earlier, as by calling Shoko a blight Ueno is stating that Shoko is not only not a part of the animacy hierarchy, but she is an invasive disease attempting to kill things within it. This unique comparison to a disease, which is not usually found in the animacy hierarchy, much like dead objects, is different as it suggests that Shoko is not an inanimate object but an animate one that actively harms the figures found in the animacy hierarchy. Another way this is read is that Ueno could also be suggesting that the girl with a physical disability is a disease and by proxy so are all people with disabilities.

This isn’t an insult that is uncommon, and it is even something that Shoko’s parents may have suggested as well. In a flashback, in volume four of the manga, Yaeko and Shoko’s dad talk about getting a divorce due to Shoko’s dad not wanting to have a disabled child. Shoko’s dad states, “you should have gotten the vaccination!”, to which Yaeko replies, “Well.. if I had known at the time” (Ōima, v. 4, 167). It is never outright stated what disease they are referring to that led to Shoko’s deafness, but both parents blame one another for it to some degree. However, since the disease is never outright stated, the situation reads as disability being a disease itself. This would recontextualize Yaeko’s line about not knowing in time as she could have decided to not have a kid at all.
However, since neither of those happened, Yaeko is regarded as one who gave birth to a disease within this context. This could add to the reasons why Yaeko was scared to find out that she was pregnant again with Yuzuru (Ōima, v. 4, 173). Comparably Ueno is calling someone with a disability a disease just like Shoko’s mom and dad talked about her. This places Shoko as an active danger to everyone around her, a disease that kills.

The linguistical and cultural Othering of Shoko is a constant thread throughout A Silent Voice. Throughout the entire manga, Shoko is dehumanized and Othered by her family, classmates, authority figures in school, and even by people that weren’t alive when the story takes place and they all do so by comparing her to beings that are not human and/or alien in nature as she does not exist within the linguistical and cultural “norm” of society. This constant rhetoric and haunting that Shoko faces almost every day in her existence is a lot to ask for someone to handle on their own. So, if she is constantly being Othered due to her linguistical difference where does that leave her? For Shoko, and many throughout history, those who are Othered create and look for their own communities outside the “norm”.

The Othering of Shoko results in her finding alternative avenues for education. After being Othered in school, Shoko leaves for an alternative school that helps those who have a hard time speaking aural languages. Aural languages are just one type of language. There are also non-aural languages such as sign language which becomes Shoko’s main way of communicating. Shoko, alongside her grandmother, and Yuzuru are able to create what H-Dirksen L. Bauman (professor of Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University) refers to as a “signing community” (Bauman 12). It is important to note, however, that Shoko’s sister and grandmother do not solely exist in this community as
both Yuzuru and their grandmother are also able to speak in Japanese with little effort. That being said, an additional reason as to why Shoko would choose to stay in these types of communities is that she would be believed to be illiterate by the school and the groups she just left, and this is because those communities are culturally audiocentric and speaking Japanese is the ‘norm’. Kuntze argues this happens because many cultures are audiocentric in their framework. “A discussion about literacy in sign language or visual media is essential since the conceptualization of literacy has been constrained largely by perceiving it in an audiocentric framework” (Kuntze 146). For an audiocentric community, sign language is not a language.

This doesn’t mean that the audiocentric community is always committing a form of intentional audism (discrimination against Deaf people), as they may be committing different forms of it. These audiocentric communities are committing a form of “laissez-faire audism” which is where deaf individuals are acknowledged but their autonomy is either denied or denigrated (Eckert and Rowley 107). This form of audism views deaf individuals as existing “but through the denial of Deaf autonomy coupled with a social evolutionary goal to end Deaf-centric structures, schemas, and praxis ends up perpetuating a dehumanization” (Eckert and Rowley 107). There is also aversive audism, which is where an individual may romanticize Deaf culture, but they are also under the assumption that, “Deaf people wish to be assimilated and that assimilation leads to increases in socioeconomic status” (Eckert and Rowley 109). The language-sharing communities that are sometimes created for a good purpose of trying to help Shoko (and other deaf individuals) communicate verbally are often built on the assumptions that Deaf people either wish to not be deaf or are okay with institutions forcing assimilation.
through coercive means. The belief thereby linguistically Others the deaf once again as they are seen as people who are a misfortunate and that need help. Considering that good intentioned communities could have audiocentric biases makes it to apparent that even language-sharing communities may not view sign-language as a legitimate language at all, they may see it as an unfortunate side-effect of being deaf and nothing more. This suggests that the Japanese language-sharing communities that Shoko is a part of are mostly hegemonic and not multilingual which linguistically Others her further and leads people within the hegemonic community to believe that Shoko is illiterate since she cannot communicate in their aural language as they work within an assumed audiocentric framework of culture/community. The community that Shoko is in with Yuzuru, and their grandmother is not audiocentric. Their community is multilingual in that different languages are used and so do the cultures that come with them.

The death of Shoko and Yuzuru’s grandmother can be read as even more tragic given her place within the “signing community.” In the fourth volume of A Silent Voice Shoko and Yuzuru’s grandmother passes away. This is shown to be quite tragic as even Yaeko (someone who hasn’t shown much emotion) is shown to have a breakdown (Ōima, v. 4, 122). Yuzuru and Shoko were close to their grandmother not only due to their family relations but also because their grandmother went out of her way to learn sign language for Shoko, and she shared a community through that language with her granddaughters. For Shoko and Yuzuru’s grandmother to die means the death of a community and even the death of a Deaf Culture. As shown throughout the manga using sign language, being deaf, and assisting those who are, is shown to be viewed as negative by Shoko’s parents, school, unnamed strangers, and later even movie critics (Ōima, v. 7,
In the “real world”, this is not something uncommon. “Deaf people have been defending the right to use sign language, the right to intermarry, and the right not to be subjected to medical and religious cures, the right simply to be left alone. Yet, increasing numbers of parents opt for surgical cures to deafness. The argument of cultural genocide, however, often falls on deaf ears” (Bauman 15). As suggested by Bauman, the death of Yuzuru and Shoko’s grandmother is not only tragic for them personally, but it is another step into the cultural genocide of “sign communities”.

The birth, death, and rebirth of a new community occur thanks to Shoko gaining new friends. In A Silent Voice, Shoya coming back into Shoko’s life is first presented as a way for him to tie up loose-ends before he attempts suicide, however thanks to Shoya’s willingness to learn sign language to speak to Shoko a new community slowly forms. This community, though not everyone learns sign language, is multilingual in that it is made of individuals who use different forms of language as it is comprised of Shoya, Shoko, Yuzuru, Miyoko, Tomohiro, Satoshi, Miki, and Naoko. At first, the community is slowly built thanks to Shoya and Shoko wanting Shoko to communicate with the people that used to bully her but slowly and surely the group also forms a community that agrees to make a film together. This birth of a community allows for Shoko to feel more comfortable with herself as someone who is deaf and has trouble speaking aural languages to try and face those fears by tying back her hair (displaying her ear-pieces) and attempting to confess her love for Shoya by speaking Japanese as opposed to sign-language (though this attempt ultimately fails due Shoko not being able to communicate properly and a combination of Shoya not being able to understand Shoko and his own lack of self-confidence) (Ōima, v. 3, 163-84).
All that being said, Shoko and even Yuzuru and Shoya appear to be happy for a bit as they have found a multilingual community through a shared language. This community exists in a way that not only shows different ways in which one can communicate but also shows how multilingual communities can help everyone not just those who can only speak one language. This community exists for a time; however, when Shoya discovers that Shoko was once again bullied and assaulted by Ueno, the community breaks down, becomes smaller, and starts to die as Shoya pushes everyone away from them in volume five. This dying community results in Shoko lacking a stronger voice as she has less people within her community and thereby her voice becomes more silent. By pushing everyone away, Shoya silenced himself and by extension also silenced Shoko and Yuzuru.

After Shoko and Shoya’s near death, the community is reborn with the same friends as before with even Shoko still trying to make friends with Ueno. In the text the death of multilingual communities results in Shoko attempting suicide, and the birth of them helps everyone including her. Within multilingual communities is where Shoko is no longer linguistically or culturally Othered and neither is anyone else, they have their own voices, thereby creating a community where everyone feels like they can belong. Hyacinth Udah in their work “Searching for a Place to Belong in a Time of Othering”, argues that in order for systems to change from ones that favors some but disadvantages and dehumanizes the Other, a sense of belonging must be created in order for a space to be more livable and multilingual. “Belongingness entails, therefore, an unwavering commitment not only to tolerate and respect difference, but also to ensure that everyone is provided with the necessary conditions to achieve or realize his or her full potentials.
within their community’s structures and institutions” (Udah 11). Being able to belong to a multilingual community allows for more than just one type of individual to be a part of it as the multilingual community allows for different forms of communication, or as suggested by ASL and Deaf Studies professor Benjamin Bhan, “when one communicates one belongs. And when one belongs, one is at home in the world” (Bahan 94).

As suggested throughout the text, *A Silent Voice* displays the Other and Othering and how those processes haunt the individual even when is not apparent. Through everything, Shoko becomes the Other due to individuals and ableist systems deeming her as such. This can be seen through the ways in which Shoko is bullied and compared to aliens, insects, animals, intruders, plant diseases, and even dead objects. Though not all of the ways in which she is Othered are intentional as shown through Yuzuru’s attempts to stop Shoko from wanting to die, the consequences are the same. Furthermore, Shoko is not only constantly Othered by the people she is close to, but she is also culturally and linguistically Othered by random strangers that don’t even have names and people who aren’t even alive anymore like Fukuzawa Yukichi. After putting this all into consideration it appears that not only is Shoko being Othered, but she is constantly being haunted by the Othering of her. In the manga, the theme of haunting is presented in Shoya’s own thoughts as he is shown throughout the text to be haunted by his own past actions and the things that people say about him and/or to him. However, given the amount of evidence found through looking at Shoko who is constantly being Othered in differing ways, it appears that she too is being constantly haunted but even more so as she is Othered for her differing linguistical communication. It is through Othering that we can
begin to understand why Shoko would attempt suicide as everyone was Othering her from the moment she was born.

Although Shoko is tormented by the Othering that is occurring to her in text and potentially always will be, there is hope to be found in multilingual communities. Within these communities, not only is Shoko able to communicate more easily with everyone around her but as shown in the manga they also allow for the linguistical and cultural Othering process to stop. It is only when the friend group comes back together that Shoko is no longer Othered by the group. There is also an Othering that occurs with Shoya and Ueno as well. Ever since Shoya is cast as the “bad egg” of the class and is given the sole blame for the mistreatment of Shoko, he becomes Othered. Likewise, Ueno also becomes Othered by Shoya (and maybe also by the reader) as she is viewed as a bully as she still mistreats Shoko when they are older. That being said, Othering is also stopped by the multilingual community that Shoko, Shoya, and friends created as Shoko never stops trying to befriend Ueno, and eventually, they are shown to at least begin to speak to one another which thereby stops the Othering process from occurring again. In the end, it is through examining Yoshitoki Ōima’s *A Silent Voice* that we can comprehend how people become the Other via linguistical and cultural differences, how that process hurts the individual, how anyone can become the Other, how Othering can lead people down negative paths and be excluded from the community by destroying diverse and non-audiocentric cultures, but also how those processes can come to an end through the creation of healthier non-audiocentric communities.
Chapter 3. Redefining Disability

Two young girls, Shoko and Ueno, ride a Ferris wheel at a carnival in an attempt to communicate to one another without any of their friends getting in the way. Ueno does not allow Shoko to communicate through writing but instead wants her to talk verbally. Shoko, who is deaf, struggles to talk verbally but she does listen to Ueno’s confession which includes the reasoning of why she bullied her and continues to hate her. Ueno does not see herself as being all that different from Shoko as they both refused to understand each other in the past and therefore Ueno is also under the belief that Shoko hates her too and that they should just go on co-existing by hating one another. Shoko replies to Ueno’s suggestion by stating that she only hates herself which leads to Ueno striking her in response. This violent outburst leaves a mark on Shoko’s cheek which is seen by their friend Shoya as the two girls exit the Ferris wheel. Shoya gets ice cream thrown at him after asking Ueno what occurred on the Ferris wheel leading to him being more confused. Even after getting nothing out of Ueno, Shoya never asks Shoko what happens on the Ferris wheel as he once again struggles to communicate during important moments. In this scene and others, Yoshitoki Ōima’s manga *A Silent Voice* asks readers to consider how we define disability as Shoko, Ueno, and Shoya are paralleled with one another.

*A Silent Voice* focuses on two young adults, Shoya and Shoko, as they try to coexist and live in a world that is ableist even when institutions, such as schools, try not to be. Both of these characters parallel each other throughout the series as both are shown
to have similar but different struggles as Shoko is someone who is deaf and Shoya is presented as having crippling anxiety and trauma. Additionally, there is a fellow student, Ueno, who also represents a disabled character in her own right as she fails to meet classroom standards. In *A Silent Voice* the two characters, Shoya and Ueno, are used to question the ways we define disability and the models we view them under. Additionally, the two characters are used to critique the accommodation systems we use for those that possess disabilities. Through *A Silent Voice*, Ōima argues that those possessing impairments and/or disabilities are unique individuals, implicitly arguing for a need to expand views of disability as the uniqueness of people with impairments and/or disabilities are often silenced due to ableist accommodation systems.

The most commonly used definitions of disability rely heavily on limits which suggest that being disabled is a restriction compared to being “able-bodied”. The *Oxford Online Dictionary* chooses to define disability in several different ways one of which is a “lack of ability (to discharge any office or function); inability, incapacity; weakness” (“disability,” def. 1a.). This appears at first to be a good starting definition but there are also two other definitions that are worth highlighting as they provide us with additional clarity. “An instance of lack of ability” and “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities; (a mass noun) the fact or state of having such a condition” (“disability”, def. 1b, 2). With all three of these ways the *OED* defines disability, we can assert that the term means the lack of the ability to do a certain task (how long that is can be an instant or seemingly forever) and the ability not to do such a task could be due to either physical and/or mental conditions. There are problematic choices present in the *OED* such as equating disability with weakness, that being said
people with disabilities are perceived as weak by many. The first definition pulled from
*OED* reads similarly to the Americans with Disabilities Act as it defines disability as “a
physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a
person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived
by others as having such an impairment.” (ada.gov). One of the key points in the ADA’s
definition of the term is that it brings up “major life activities” as a way to define
disability. (ada.gov). However, it appears that the ADA is more interested in covering
impairments in their definition of disability, or at least they are conflating the two terms
here. So, when the ADA mentions “major life activities” it leaves more questions than
answers as it can assumingly be attributed by the ADA to any activity that is also defined
as “major” by them. This could cause issues as the ADA may disagree that not being able
to lift more than forty pounds is a problem as being able to lift that amount of weight is
something often found on job applications which means that there are less jobs that a
disabled individual would be able to apply to which lessens the chances of them
obtaining a job. In a capitalist world, not being to obtain a job could be a death sentence
depending on the time, place, and socioeconomic status of the disabled individual. If the
ADA defines “major life activities” as not being able to feed yourself than you would
have a disability under their definition. That being said, if they don’t define it as not
being able to lift forty pounds due to physical restrictions than such an individual would
not be seen as having a disability which could cause them to become impoverished
without any potential benefit of government support. Much like the *OED*, the ADA
leaves as many questions as answers in how we define disability and is problematic when
broken down, but it is a good start, nonetheless.
The conflation of disability and impairment is also found in how disability scholars have described the two terms. Haran Lane in “Do Deaf People Have a Disability” suggests disabilities are an attribute due to an impairment. “A disability is a limitation of function because of an impairment” (Lane 277). This appears to link the terms impairment and disability once again as it suggests people obtain disabilities from the impairments they have. That being said, Lane does go on to argue that the biological definition of disability is problematic and instead argues that disability is more of a social classification than anything (Lane 281). “A disability is a social classification in a particular time, the outcome of a power struggle among interested parties” (Lane 284-5).

To be disabled is to be put into a group that is not perceived to be abled. This idea places disability as being social, as the groups that are abled and disabled must be defined by them to be so. Similar to how the ADA doesn’t define what “major life activities” are, to define someone with a disability, Lane argues that those major activities are always changing and are conceived of through cultural and societal norms depending on the time period, or in other words, “today’s disability may be tomorrow's normal variation and vice versa” (Lane 279). Lane’s argument is echoed similarly by fellow disability scholar Jay Timothy Dolmage, in his book Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education. Dolmage suggests that disability is defined through social constructions and that being defined as such can be harmful. For Dolmage, much like Lane, disability is defined by the society at the time defining it as being separate from the “able-bodied” and it is due to this social construction that political consequences can occur. “Social constructionism, in some ways, can be used as a method of silencing. Particularly, social construction can remove the focus on the particularity of differences of bodies and minds—if we are all
disabled by an oppressive environment or architecture or pedagogy in some way, why
does the disability perspective really matter?” (Dolmage 54). This silencing is also why
some within the Deaf community do not wish to be perceived as being the same as those
with other disabilities which is argued by other disability studies scholars such as Brenda
Jo Brueggemann. She argues that “deaf people may want to resist being labeled as
‘disabled’, the fact remains that they are often labeled as such and that these labels- in all
cases- are not always accurate though they may be, as it were, with consequences”
(Brueggemann 180). As suggested by Dolmage and reiterated by Brueggemann, the
social construction of disabilities may alienate certain groups when distinctions are not
made between those possessing disabilities and thereby either silencing them by giving
them the disability term themselves or by identifying too many people as having a
disability.

In the end, disability can be defined socially but distinctions need to be made to
ensure that no individual is silenced. Therefore, with this in mind, I will define the term
impairment as an attribute that an individual possesses that is not only socially defined as
being separate from the “able-bodied” within a culture/society but also that impairments
will exist even when a culture/society is not present. This does not mean that someone
with an impairment does not have a disability, but it does ensure that not all disabilities
are also impairments. This is because a disability is a social construction prescribed to an
individual who is unable to achieve certain important tasks and those important tasks are
decided upon by cultural/societal norms that are fluid and always changing over time.
These definitions allow for the most flexibility and they also allow for people who have
an impairment to decide if they wish to give themselves the descriptor of disability.
The complications of how disability can be defined led Yoshitoki Ōima to not only write a story in which different characters possess different forms of disabilities, but she also argues for a hybrid model of how we discuss disabilities. Zhang and Haller, as well as Okuyama in her own work, describe seven models in which disabilities are presented in media: medical, social pathology, supercrip, business, minority/civil rights, cultural pluralism, and legal models (Zhang and Haller 321)(Okuyama 32). Each of these models is found in fictional and non-fictional media and many times characterizations of individuals could be described as existing in several different models at once depending on how we read the characters. Not all of these models are present throughout the manga; that being said, Ōima suggests that a hybrid model of social pathology and cultural pluralism is the most desirable model above all.

* A Silent Voice* portrays the social pathology model as being preferable to the business model. In the fourth volume of the manga, there is a flashback scene where Shoko’s parents have an argument over what to do with their deaf daughter. Also involved in the argument are Shoko’s grandparents who have opposing views on the matter of how their disabled granddaughter should be treated. The grandparent from the father’s side of the family views Shoko and her disability one way, “you’re gonna mooch off the government aren’t ya?!”, while the grandparent from the mother’s side of the family views it through another way “who wouldn’t accept a little help?!” (Ōima, v. 4, 170). These two viewpoints are opposed to one another. The grandparent from the father’s side of the family views Shoko’s disability through a business model which “represents a disabled individual as an economic burden on society or as someone who requires additional expenses from businesses for improving accessibility” (Okuyama 32).
Meanwhile the grandparent from the mother’s side of the family views the disability through the social pathology model which views “people with disabilities are depicted as disadvantaged and have to turn to society for support” (Zhang and Haller 321). Both of these models go together as they both present the individual with disabilities as someone who will need additional funds to ensure equity between them and the ‘able-bodied’. However, they opposed one another in that one corresponds with charity as being a positive, and the other questions why that charity should even be given and considers it close to being a sort of “hand-out” which is a negative attribute.

The business and social pathology models are also highlighted in Aie Aruga’s slice-of-life manga series *Perfect World* with a similar message being told. In Aruga’s manga the main character, Ayukawa, is an architect who uses a wheelchair. Part of the designs he makes for his job is to ensure accessibility for people with wheelchairs so they may access buildings more easily. This is part of the social pathology model as Ayukawa acknowledges the disadvantages of people in wheelchairs within an ableist society and thus argues that society must provide support for them. As claimed by Ayukawa, “even a small staircase is an obstacle for the elderly, or wheelchair users” (Aruga, v.1, 50). However, his plans to make a more accessible space are denied as the man who is in charge of approving Ayukawa’s designs argues that “creating a restaurant that accommodates disabled people when we don’t even know how many will come a month is frankly difficult.” (Aruga, v.1, 50). The reason why these two characters are at odds is that Ayukawa views disability through the social pathology model, meanwhile the person who denies Ayukawa’s designs views disability through the business model. These models view the financial needs to help people with disabilities through different lenses.
One model promotes the idea that someone has to have support and the other model sees it as a burden. Furthermore, it is made clear that the social pathology model is preferable for both Aruga and Ōima’s narratives due to the fact that the two people pushing for those models are the male lead of the series and the other is the grandmother from whom Shoko leans on the most throughout *A Silent Voice*.

Although viewing disability through the social pathology model is shown to be preferable in *A Silent Voice*, the existence of the film project within the narrative further complicates its issues. Throughout the manga, the friend group works together to create a film for a contest, and throughout their endeavors, the question of what Shoko can do to help keeps coming up. Tomohiro, the film’s director, eventually decides to add Shoko to the film and give her a role. However, it is first dismissed by Miki as she argues that, “We don’t need to work Shoko just because she’s disabled you know” (Ōima, v. 5, 20). The argument being made by Miki here is a counter to the social pathology model in that she is suggesting that a person with a disability should not be added just because of their disability. Tomohiro responds to Miki by suggesting that Shoko can decide for herself what she can and cannot do and the group agrees to move on. That being said, it appears that Miki’s argument is an idea that Ōima wants us to think about just like another common model of how we view disability that is also shown in relation to the film project.

One of the drafts from the film project highlights the shortcomings of the supercrip model. At the beginning of the fifth volume of *A Silent Voice*, Tomohiro sketches a superhero-inspired story for the film. The imagined film depicts Tomohiro as a lone hero being attacked by the cat-costumed Ueno. However, the chiseled-out-of-stone
hero Shoya drops in to protect Tomohiro and saves the day. This isn’t the final draft of the film project, but when reading it as meta-commentary it becomes interesting as the most popular manga with disability characters in them are supercrips ones such as *Mushoku Tensei* and *Ranking of Kings*. The supercrip model is probably the most popular model found in media, especially in manga and/or comic books. In this model “people with disabilities are represented as ‘superhuman’ because they achieve unexpected accomplishments or live a normal life just like people with no disabilities (Zhang and Haller 321). Disability in this model can be used to inspire others through real-life stories or fictional ones. Anytime a story runs on *ESPN* about a person with a disability overcoming the odds and competing against “able-bodied” or other disabled people it is presented through the supercrip model. This could come in the form of Shaquen Griffin, a one-handed American football player making it to the NFL, or the paralympic swimmer Jessica Tatiana winning 29 medals. In fictional stories, these are best found with superhero characters such as Marvel’s Daredevil and Charles Xavier as well as DC’s Cyborg. The problem with this model is that it can create an expectation of excellence from disabled people that may not have the same capabilities to achieve the success of fictional and/or real supercrips. Additionally, as suggested by the example characters of Daredevil, Charles Xavier, Cyborg, these are characters found within superhero comic book stories that aren’t real. This could also be said for the manga series mentioned earlier, *Mushoku Tensei* and *Ranking of Kings* as their disabled characters are set in fantasy lands. There is a way to differentiate the fantasy and the reality here in this model by calling the characters found in fantastical stories as “super-crips” and their real-life counterparts as “supercrips”. However, much like how Miki questions the social
pathology model briefly, Ōima wants the reader to do the same here as in real life there are no real “super-crips”. This is why *A Silent Voice* differs in its own medium as it lies within the more realistic avenues of the slice-of-life/romance genre and therefore not presenting a super-crip and/or supercrip narrative but instead critiques the one most often found in manga and comic books themselves. Ōima through *A Silent Voice* argues for a hybrid of the models we view disability through, and by providing the meta-commentary of supercrip stories and questioning the social pathology model, she furthers her argument for a more hybrid model.

The cultural pluralism model is the model that Yoshitoki Ōima pushes for more in *A Silent Voice*. To go back to the scene first mentioned at the beginning of this chapter we have one character that presents one form of a disability, that being Shoko the deaf girl. Meanwhile, we also have Shoya, a boy who struggles to communicate his feelings towards Shoko and others which results in him not being able to end conflict and other problems as soon as they need to be as he avoids asking Shoko important questions about her own safety and how that relates back to him. On a similar note, Ueno is also paralleled with Shoko here as she suggests that the two aren’t that different (Ōima, v. 4, 76-7). These are all characters that are read as having disabilities in their own way as not only is Shoko someone who could be described as having a disability but also could Shoya and Ueno. *A Silent Voice* exemplifies the cultural pluralism model by presenting individuals with different forms of impairments and/or disabilities throughout the story. The cultural pluralism model, “represents a disabled individual as just another human being like anyone else and whose disability needs no undue attention” (Okuyama 32). This model is one that presents people with disabilities as being just another part of a
multicultural society. However, the issue with this model is that it also states that people with disabilities need no extra attention. This would cause the problem of making people with disabilities feel invisible as argued similarly by Dolmage and Brueggemann. For *A Silent Voice*, the cultural pluralism model is being used to create a multilingual society within the friend group and this can be read more easily if the definition of disability created earlier is used as we could prescribe the disability descriptor to several of the characters in the friend group. Furthermore, not only does *A Silent Voice* present this as the preferable model to view disability, but it appears to critique the “needs no undue attention” part of the model as it critiques the accommodation system and chooses to identify disability and impairments as being similar but possessing separate problems.

A hybrid model of the social pathology and cultural pluralism model is presented to be preferable in *A Silent Voice* as this model works best when disability is redefined as a social construction prescribed to an individual who is unable to achieve certain important tasks and those important tasks are decided upon by cultural/societal norms that are fluid and always changing over time. Under this definition, the friend group that is created in the manga is one that is multilingual by having different languages spoken within it and is also shown to thrive when each of the characters are allowed to have their own voice. Additionally, they create an environment where different languages can be shared and when they make a silent film together they do so with subtitles so that no individual is left out in the artistic production as the film is created with everyone in mind from the friend group. By creating such an environment people with disabilities are allowed to have their own autonomy and are seen as equal to those not possessing a disability and they also avoid the issue of becoming invisible as they create a film that is
accessible to all of its members. Shoya, Ueno, and Tomohiro could all be read as having disabilities. Tomohiro becomes disabled around cats as he is allergic to them (Ōima, v. 3, 92-4). This instance is less consequential than what we see with Shoko, Shoya, and Ueno but the definition of disability created earlier (being unable to achieve certain tasks at certain times and places), would mean that is read as being disabled in that certain instance. Since the previous chapter focused on Shoko and she was used to help explain some of the examples in this chapter already, Shoya and Ueno will be read as characters with disabilities in the remaining of this chapter. By reading Shoya and Ueno as characters with disabilities we can discover different ways that A Silent Voice presents disabilities and how it critiques some of the “solutions” to them.

Shoya Ishida’s disabilities are obtained through his past trauma. Throughout the manga, Shoya is constantly haunted by his past. This can be found when Shoya thinks about telling Satoshi that he was a bully but he “couldn’t bring himself to do it” (Ōima, v. 5, 42). He follows this up by saying, “ugh… my stomach hurts.. I don’t… I don’t want to go… back to school” (Ōima, v. 5, 42). This can be read as Shoya being afraid to tell Satoshi and that fear manifests itself as a stomachache. A similar moment occurs after Satoshi tells Shoya that he would punch the bully who happened to be the ringleader that hurt Shoko to which Shoya responds by imagining Satoshi and others leaving him (Ōima, v. 5, 97-9). This haunting of the past disables Shoya and causes him to not speak up when necessary which results in misunderstandings and later negative outcomes for him and others. As stated earlier, to read Shoya as a character with a disability we must define him as one who obtained one. This is a trope found in disability studies quite often according to Okuyama.
One is that most disabled characters acquire their disability later in life. Another is that the acquisition of disability often coincides with another life crisis (e.g., the loss of a dear friend). As the story progresses, it is revealed to the reader that the emotional shock from the crisis was so strong that it caused the disability.

(Okuyama 28-9)

For Shoya we learn that the life crisis was being ousted by his friends and Othered for his mistreatment of Shoko. As time goes on Shoya is shown to compare what he sees in the present to what he was a part of in the past.

Figure 3.1 Shoya imagines his friends leaving him if they were to find out about his past. Ōima, v. 5, 98-9.

This is shown in that same scene where Shoya imagines Satoshi and others leaving him as he imagines the words that Satoshi says about bullies as also coming from his
childhood friend Kazuki’s mouth similarly (fig. 3.1). These constant reminders of the past not only disable Shoya from time to time but also lead to him misremembering things.

Shoya misremembers events of his past which could be a symptom of trauma and depression which leads to extreme social anxiety. When Ueno tries to make Shoya talk to Kazuki again, Shoya’s memory of Kazuki is contradictory to what we are visually shown. Shoya starts off by stating that, “When we were assigned to the same class we clicked immediately. We played together all the time,” but then he states that “I don’t remember him that well” (Ōima, v. 4, 43). Just by looking at the text, we can read how Shoya starts to contradict himself, but we are also given visuals of him and his old school friends playing together. At first, this could be read as Shoya wanting to completely separate himself from his past, but he also suggests that his memories have been altered later in the manga. “…I probably altered my memories to make myself feel better…It’s no use. I don’t know. I can’t remember. Damn it. I don’t know what to believe anymore” (Ōima, v. 5, 112-3). In the context of this quote, this could be read as Miki manipulating Shoya as he has these thoughts after she confronts him about the past in front of the class. That being said, Shoya was already shown to misremember things before this part of the manga as presented at the moment he is reintroduced to Kazuki. Lauren Berlant in her book Cruel Optimism suggests that “the literature on the traumatic event has been dominated by a consensus that trauma detaches the subject from the historical present, sentencing its subjects to a terrifying suffusion of the past into something stuck in the subject that stands out ahistorically from the ordinary” (Berlant 80). Shoya, as suggested by Berlant, in regard to traumatic events, keeps becoming detached from the present and
he becomes suffocated by his past which does not allow him to move and thereby becomes stuck in the present. Being stuck in the past while in the present not only results in Shoya having anxiety but also makes him depressed and suicidal. When Shoya and the friend group are shown discussing what their film should be about Satoshi suggests that they “do a revenge drama” where the hero of the story will beat up the bullies of the past (Ōima, v. 4, 49). Miki then questions the idea with “what does the hero do after that?” to which Shoya responds with “he wants to die…” (Ōima, v. 4, 49). Shoya cannot help but self-insert himself into such a story and when he does so he verbally communicates how he feels. However, with such a remark he is only adding additional trauma to himself as, “conversation is a space of time that makes its own rules and boundaries, its own terms of being contemporary and of taking over what would otherwise seem the arrhythmic rule of crisis” (Berlant 57). Shoya, by being stuck in the past while in the present has become suicidal and depressed and it is due to these exchanges that his anxiety elevates itself to the extent that he struggles to look at and even hear others correctly even when they may be saying things to him that are not harmful in any way.

Shoya’s anxiety is shown through the visual storytelling of the manga and the film adaptation. Probably one of the more striking visuals found in A Silent Voice is the Xs that Shoya places on people’s faces. These Xs are placed on anyone that Shoya refuses to look at and/or decides to cut off. The Xs are also something that Ōima is often asked about in interviews. When asked what the Xs on people’s faces represented Ōima stated that it meant that Shoya, “doesn’t want to, or cannot see that person’s face. It’s like the symbolism of indifference. Or sometimes you are really interested in that person
but trying not to be” (Kido). The Xs appear throughout the entire manga and appear most frequently when Shoya is in school as shown in the following image (fig. 3.2).

![Figure 3.2 Xs appearing on classmates’ faces as seen by Shoya. Ōima, v. 1, 176-7.](image)

The Xs appear to not only represent who Shoya is cutting off, but it also hints at the fact that Shoya cannot look into people’s faces at all. Shoya lets Shoko know that he can’t look people in the face when they return to his school together after his hospital stay. “I haven’t told you before. But I don’t really fit in at school. I mean, sure, part of it is in my mind, but people’s faces are just kind of a blur to me” (Ōima, v. 7, 65-6). Shoya cannot look people in the face which results in him being disabled in the community as he is shown to run away when people look at him (Ōima, v. 7, 80). This tells us that Shoya is placed outside the ‘norm’ which is why he believes that he does not “fit in at school” (Ōima, v. 7, 65). Shoya being disabled in school, and unable to communicate with his
classmates without fear and/or anxiety, also makes it to where he struggles to communicate outside of it. As shown in the film adaptation (which also puts the Xs on people’s faces, seemingly placed after the characters are animated) Shoya can’t even look at Yuzuru in the face when talking about something important (fig. 3.3).

![Shoya covering his face with an umbrella while looking down and talking to Yuzuru. ASV 50:58.](image)

Figure 3.3 Shoya covering his face with an umbrella while looking down and talking to Yuzuru. ASV 50:58.

These visuals go together in that not only are we shown the metaphorical disconnection of Shoya from others, but it also shows that he actively blocks them from seeing his face. The haunting of the past is disabling him to the point where he can’t always communicate in a manner that would otherwise be intimate.

Shoya’s disability does not allow him to live in the present and results in him not being able to communicate. At the end of the third volume, Shoko gains the confidence to pull her hair back (displaying her earpieces) and to confess her feelings towards Shoya, but he is unable to understand her. Shoko attempts to say I love you but instead it comes
out as “I lub moo!” (Ōima, v. 3, 178-9). A frantic Shoya doesn’t appear to know what Shoko says and eventually questions if she said, “the moon?” (Ōima, v. 3, 183). This is read as just Shoko being unable to verbally communicate, however, given what we know about Shoya’s disability it is also suggesting something else. Prior to Shoko’s confession, Shoya thinks about the past again “I want to kill the old me…If it weren’t for him…It would have been much easier to find out how she feels…” (Ōima, v. 3, 176). By connecting these thoughts to Shoko’s confession, Shoya’s interpretation of what Shoko said is now read as him being so caught up in the past and/or his self-esteem is so low that he cannot accept what Shoko was actually trying to say. In this instance, Shoya is disabled from being able to receive Shoko’s confession. Reading Shoya in this way, would mean that one of Shoya’s disabilities is not being able to listen, and therefore the relationship between Shoko and Shoya becomes a relationship between two people with contrasting disabilities. It is a relationship between a girl who can’t hear and a boy who refuses to.

Reading Shoya as a character with disabilities allows us to read the parallels between Shoya and Shoko on a more physical level. Already present in *A Silent Voice* is how Shoya being Othered paralleled Shoko’s own process of being Othered. However, as presented in their relationship as they get older the parallels become more physical as both have disabilities that make it hard for them to communicate within the audiocentric culture. At one moment, Shoya even starts to sound like Shoko after he awakes from his coma in volume 7 (fig. 3.4).
This broken, hard-to-understand, language from Shoya reads very similar to Shoko’s own struggles presented earlier in the manga. We are presented with Shoko’s confession “I lub you” and then later Shoya’s “Pleah tay all of theth out!” at the hospital (Ōima, v. 3, 178-9) (Ōima, v. 7, 10). Interestingly enough, this moment occurs right after Shoya awakens from a temporary ‘vegetative state’ (a coma). So, in a way, Ōima is using an old trope of presenting a disabled character as bedridden which is often found in the medical model of presenting disability (which is the most commonly found model in media). That being said, Shoya’s disability is more than just this scene, so this scene instead reads as one of the final parallels between Shoya and Shoko. If the reader didn’t catch the disability parallels between the two characters up to this point, then Ōima makes it impossible not to see them here.

Ueno parallels Shoko as well but it is harder to read her as such as she is easily read as the bully who never got her comeuppance. Shoya was given the sole blame for Shoko’s mistreatment during sixth grade which results in him obtaining his own form of disability through the trauma of the past. However, characters such as Ueno (who was also a key figure in the Othering of Shoko) were never punished for the roles they played. Her lack of being punished is one reason why she still bullies, but it may be more than
just that. As suggested by Ōima herself, there are no bad or evil characters in this story. “I don’t quite get why people think in such ways. When I look at people’s reactions to this manga online, it makes me wonder why certain people feel a certain way about a certain character” (Kido). For Ōima, Ueno (along with all of the characters in her story) is neither bad nor evil. For readers, this may be hard to grasp at first as Ueno is the one still attacking Shoko both verbally and physically throughout. In some instances, she is presented as being outright hateful when she beats Shoko on the Ferris wheel and outside the hospital. That being said, what she says gives us insight into why she is hateful, which is more than just her never getting her comeuppance and being jealous as she likes Shoya. After telling Shoko she hates her, Ueno goes on to say why. “Back in elementary school. I didn’t understand you well enough. I think that's what made me hate you. But you didn't understand me either” (Ōima, v. 4, 76-7). Ueno wishes that Shoko could understand her. This reads very strangely as Ueno is comparing herself to Shoko who is someone who cannot communicate verbally, but she can. Ueno compares herself to Shoko because she is stating that she also has a disability.

Ueno has a learning disability. Ueno as a character is one who is shown to be reeking of jealousy and hatred, but those appear to not just stem from Shoko being close to Shoya. Ueno is also jealous of Shoko because she has a disability that is either not diagnosed and/or remains “invisible” to the naked eye. In one scene in the first volume, the sixth-grade class is made to read out loud as shown in the following image (fig. 3.5).
As seen here, Ueno is scolded for her lack of ability to read to Takeuchi’s (the teacher) standards. Right after this Shoko is asked to read (forcing her to communicate through the dominant culture’s way of doing so). After Shoko reads, Takeuchi says, “Good, next”, to which Ueno responds frantically with “Are you serious?” (Ōima, v. 1, 77). This scene is important in that it shows how Shoko is having to read just like everyone else, but it also shows us how Ueno and others respond to that type of treatment from Takeuchi towards Shoko. For Ueno, she is annoyed because she was scolded for not being able to read to a standard while Shoko is allowed to read at a different set of standards. This scene on its own appears to be non-consequential at first glance, but even the movie adaptation chose to keep the scene. Now, if Ueno’s later comments are to be considered when she compares Shoko to herself then that would recontextualize this
scene as Ueno suggesting that she and Shoko were both treated in an unfair manner but in
different ways. Shoko had the more apparent disability and was treated a certain way, but
Ueno had one too and was ignored. To understand why this happened, and to understand
why Ueno would be jealous and hateful for not being understood then we must first
comprehend the accommodation system that the school uses.

The accommodation system the school uses in *A Silent Voice* is set up only to
help those with apparent needs which causes Ueno to be left behind. The accommodation
system is one that has been analyzed and criticized by disability scholars such as
Barteaux, Bauman, Brueggemann, Dolmage, McGuire, etc. The accommodation system
in schools are often set up in a way where the student has to inform the school and the
teacher of their disabilities. The school system must then decide how to accommodate
that student. For the school system, this results in students being accommodated through
a social pathology or business model meaning that the school either sees the student as
someone needing help through charity or is seen as an economic burden. What we see in
*A Silent Voice* is a classroom where students are forced to accommodate without really
knowing why. The ‘burden’ of the student with disabilities is put onto the entire class
instead of the student being supported by the school system. This is why when the class is
asked to learn sign language, Ueno states that it’s easier for her to communicate with
Shoko through writing and that’s because she and others feel like learning sign language
is a burden as they don’t understand why they are the ones having to accommodate and
are even blamed for being at fault for anything involving Shoko as opposed to the school
and teachers (Ōima, v. 1, 87). Furthermore, by putting all of the pressure on the students
to accommodate, Shoko gets a target placed on her as she is the one viewed as not only a
burden but is also viewed as the reason why the class fails at certain tasks such as the choir competition. As argued by Dolmage, the accommodation system puts the student with disabilities into the medical gaze.

So, a student becomes the object of the medical gaze, and hence the object of therapeutic and corrective pedagogy. Or the student evades this process and remains invisible… Or the academy makes (a limited range of) accommodations its moral mission, making students with disabilities objects of pity. (Dolmage 81-2)

It is through this gaze where Shoko and others are shown to be constantly needing correction but also where they can be shown to be hated by fellow students as they may be viewed as receiving “special treatment” compared to others. If to be accommodated is to be put on a pedestal and to also have a target on your back like Shoko, why would anyone choose to disclose their disabilities? Ueno chooses to remain “invisible” due to how Shoko is being treated and also within the context of Japan she may also be doing so because her disability may not be seen as one needing accommodating at all.

“Furthermore, the researchers point out that the Japanese tend to be more intolerant of those who are ‘slightly’ different (e.g., people with a milder degree of disability or a hidden disability) than of those who are ‘very’ different…” (Okuyama 112). Ueno having a learning disability of her own is her only being ‘slightly’ different compared to Shoko. Therefore, she has additional pressure to stay hidden as she may receive additional intolerance from society compared to what Shoko faces.

Through A Silent Voice author Yoshitoki Ōima attempts to redefine what disability is. This is shown through how the manga parallels the problems faced by Shoko
and Shoya. When reading Shoya as also being a disabled character it makes it apparent
that the manga is not only interested in telling a story of how the bully becomes the
bullied and the consequences of that occurring, but it also suggests that some of the issues
faced between people with impairments and/or disabilities are similar but also different in
how they are attached to one’s identity and how society views them. These problems
become even more highlighted when Ueno is also read as a character with disabilities as
her story could also be paralleled with not only Shoya’s but also Shoko’s. By
understanding Ueno as a character with disabilities, the accommodation system critique
becomes more apparent as Ueno is someone who chooses not to be accommodated due to
how the school treated Shoko. This also brings up the question of why anyone would
choose to be accommodated if to be accommodated is what leads to Shoko’s own misery.
Through reading Shoko, Shoya, and Ueno as all possessing their own different forms of
disabilities the reader can comprehend that disability comes in many shapes and forms
and that each of them are treated differently based upon their visibility. By
acknowledging these differences, A Silent Voice makes the argument that impairments
and disabilities have similar problems but are different in how they are treated and
accommodated, and it is due to these differences that some school accommodations
systems fail to help those needing accommodations as they often only accommodate
those who have more easily found impairments and/or disabilities. Additionally, it is
through this critique where A Silent Voice makes the decision to view disability similarly
to the cultural pluralism model which views an individual with a disability “as just
another human being like anyone else and whose disability needs no undue attention” but
adds that bits of the social pathology model is also needed as through the story those with
disabilities and/or impairments need the attention due to the fact that we live in ableist audiocentric societies and therefore those individuals need to be helped in a way that does not alienate them (Okuyama 32). It is thanks to all of these criticisms in how we define disabilities, impairments, and how we choose to view them through the common models we can then come to a better understanding as to why all of the common definitions of terms and the common models all have flaws even though some are better than others.

In action, to prevent these issues from occurring, and by redefining disabilities and the models we look at them through, we can create more inclusive and accessible spaces. One of the main problems with how we define disability is that we assume that someone will let us know that they have one and it is at that moment where accommodations are made. Why this is an issue is that someone may not recognize that they have a disability which means a more accessible space will never be created which makes defining these terms hard. So, instead things like universally designed classrooms can be created which are classrooms that assume that anyone can be disabled and already have built in accommodations before a student enters the classroom. This can be similarly done in businesses by creating ramps to access buildings at the beginning of the construction process rather than afterwards. Such simple changes like these remove some of the burden of the potentially disabled individual from having to let someone know that they need accommodations and also helps those who may not recognize that they have a disability and/or those that may not have the access to get such a diagnosis. However, since the definition of disability changes based on time and place and due to the fact that creating universal designs is a bit of an oxymoron as there will always be disabilities/impairments that a designer may not account for, it is an inevitability that
future problems can occur despite good intentions. This isn’t to say that it is pointless to even try to accommodate people based off of these shaky definitions and models, but instead it does highlight the need to improve these ideas so that people like Shoya, Shoko, Ueno, and individuals like them in real life, don’t find themselves in a situation to where they aren’t seen or Othered by people within society and the systems they exist within.
Chapter 4. Radical Love and Disability Justice

At a hospital, a young man, Shoya Ishida, is in a coma after falling out of a building in an attempt to save Shoko Nishimiya, a deaf girl's life. Later, Shoko’s sister, Yuzuru, and their mother, Yaeko cry in front of Shoko as they failed to stop Shoko from attempting suicide. Yaeko’s overprotection of Shoko’s livelihood appears to have not helped in the end. Despite Yuzuru doing everything she thought she could do and doing everything she was told to do by her mother; she wasn’t able to protect her sister from herself. In these scenes and others, Yoshitoki Ōima's manga *A Silent Voice* asks readers to reconsider how society decides to help those with disabilities and by doing so presents Yaeko and Yuzuru’s struggles as examples of failing at disability justice by using overtly defensive or violent responses.

*A Silent Voice* is a best-selling Japanese manga that focuses on two young adults, Shoya and Shoko, who try to make amends with themselves and one another and attempt to heal from their own pasts that still haunt them. Their pasts are shown to haunt them not only by their own memories that cause anxiety, but they also do so as their friends and family become overprotective. By attempting to protect Shoya, her mother and sister make her even more isolated from the past and others, resulting in her inability to communicate with anyone without them being around. Eventually, Shoya is able to meet Shoko again, but Shoya is physically reprimanded on three separate occasions by three separate characters. However, despite these physical altercations, it is shown that such
acts don’t really solve anything as the one being protected, Shoko, attempts suicide anyways. In *A Silent Voice* the three characters, Yaeko, Satoshi, and Yuzuru exemplify failures of disability justice which are overtly defensive or violent. Beyond this critique, disability justice in the form of ‘radical love’ is presented to be the preferable answer to the haunting of disabled individuals. Through *A Silent Voice*, Ōima suggests that the often-used overtly defensive or violent responses for disability justice is short-sighted and only temporarily helps those acting in such manners; therefore, forms of ‘radical love’ is needed actually to help those with disabilities, and it is in those acts that those who are disabled and those seeking disability justice can truly begin to heal.

Disability justice is a social justice practice in which individuals and/or collectives work to create a future where oppression through the means of ableism no longer exists. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in their book *Care Work* focuses on disability justice and suggests, like other disability rights activists, that there are ten principles of disability justice: intersectionality, the leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist rhetoric, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation (26-8). These ten principles all work on their own and together as pieces of disability justice and not all of them will be found so easily given every situation. That being said, when those principles aren’t being met and are instead replaced by ableist people and/or systems and/or those with misguided good intentions then future problems can occur. Such problems could have been avoided if the autonomy of the disabled individual was given more personal liberation as opposed to being coddled as there can be no disability justice without the disabled having personal
liberation. Without personal liberty the disabled individual may be silenced, leading to disability justice being defined by those without the say of the one attempting to be helped. For disability justice to be achieved autonomy of the disabled individual must be respected so they themselves can inform others of their needs and wants so they may achieve disability justice and the ten principles on their own terms, and this thereby allows self-liberation of the disabled individual.

In the case of A Silent Voice overtly defensive or violent responses (ODVR) under the guise of disability justice is what is opposing self-liberation. ODVR is a term that will be used throughout this chapter to help describe the many forms of failed solutions to disability justice. I define ODVR as an attempt to solve problems through overtly defensive or violent means in an order to protect those that are believed to need to be protected in such a manner. It can sometimes fit under the umbrella of patriarchal norms when it is being performed by those displaying what they believe to be masculine traits such as protection of the weak through violence, aggression, and/or domination which all exist within and uphold a patriarchal society. The masculinity aspect is a form that it often takes as individuals who use it will attempt to display traits they believe to be culturally/traditionally masculine to achieve ODVR under the guise of disability justice. However, as shown throughout A Silent Voice, ODVR only really temporarily helps the one using it and often hurts the one that it is supposedly being used for. If anything, ODVR only works as an act of self-indulgence that harms others in different ways.

Yaeko denies Shoko’s potential liberation by overprotecting her. Yaeko's response to Shoko being bullied in elementary school was to pull her from the school and have her go to an alternative school instead. This move is one that is shown to be
reasonable as the elementary school that Shoko attends fails to accommodate her and also lied about paying for the damages that the bullying caused her as shown by Miyako paying Yaeko herself (Ōima, v. 1, 130). That being said, Yaeko’s overprotection is never shown to be agreed to by Shoko herself. Even her haircut is decided by Yaeko and not Shoko which is presented in the first chronological time both characters are presented in the text as Yaeko yells at Miyako for cutting Shoko’s hair in the way that Shoko preferred. “I didn’t ask for your opinion!! Or Shoko’s!! What’s important is keeping my daughter from being bullied!!” (Ōima, v. 1, 65). For Yaeko, all decisions involving Shoko are in an attempt to protect her from further bullying even if that protection undermines Shoko’s autonomy. As time goes on, the text gives the reader more information regarding how long Shoko was being bullied in and out of school and shows the effects of the broken household that had on her and her family. For Yaeko it becomes reasonable as to why she believes she is doing the right thing by overprotecting Shoko as people that she thought she could trust like her own husband abandons their family (Ōima, v. 4, 165-174). Okuyama, in her work *Reframing Disability in Manga*, explains this common relationship shown in manga by suggesting that, “Together with insufficient social support, these overprotective and shamed parents have come to interfere with the independence of people with disabilities” (Okuyama 112). The overprotection of the disabled child is commonly found in manga. In the case of *A Silent Voice* the interference that Yaeko is having on Shoko’s life is her placing herself in an area where she believes she needs to be culturally/traditionally masculine in order for her to use ODVR for Shoko. This all results in Shoko not being able to make her own decisions as her mother does not allow her, which also results in her struggling to form relationships on her own.
Yaeko even goes as far as slapping Shoya in the face when she first discovers Shoya and Shoko talking to each other as high school students which also presents Shoya with his first obstacle (other than himself) in trying to connect with Shoko (Ōima, v. 2, 40).

But even when Yaeko isn’t there to demonstrate ODVR, Shoko still has her sister. Yuzuru follows Yaeko’s desire of providing ODVR for Shoko by displaying additional culturally/traditionally masculine traits for her mother and sister. While Yaeko cannot always be there to protect Shoko, Yuzuru is often found by Shoko’s side.

Yuzuru is shown to be the constant obstacle in Shoya’s way of talking to Shoko as she physically blocks the doorway from allowing Shoya to talk to Shoko. Due to Yuzuru
being short compared to Shoya, he is able to look over her and see that Shoko is in fact in the classroom and questions Yuzuru’s claim about Shoko not being there. “But she is, isn’t she?” (Ōima, v. 2, 72). Yuzuru replies by doubling down on the lie, by stating again that Shoko’s “not here” even when Shoya and the reader can see that she is (fig. 4.1)(Ōima, v. 2, 72). Although Shoya is eventually able to talk to and to start meeting with Shoko on the regular, Yuzuru uses her short haircut and demeanor to indicate that she is not only a man but also Shoko’s boyfriend in an attempt to get Shoya to stop talking to Shoko (Ōima, v. 2, 98). This along with Yuzuru also kicking Shoya’s bicycle from underneath him and kicking him in the chest indicates that Yuzuru is following along with Yaeko’s own physical response in an attempt to display a violent action to protect Shoko (Ōima, v. 2, 96). However, unlike Yaeko, Yuzuru disguises herself as a boy and gives herself culturally/traditionally masculine traits as a byproduct. She does this not only to protect Shoko but also to stop Yaeko from continuously trying to get Shoko to cut her hair. During the earlier mentioned scene in which Yaeko became upset about Miyako giving Shoko the haircut she asked for, Yaeko states that she wanted Shoko to have a different haircut. “Listen…I want my daughter to be stronger. Like a boy” (Ōima, v. 1, 63). Yaeko believes that the only way for Shoko to stop being bullied is to appear and act more masculine. Therefore, when Yuzuru hears this herself she chooses to cut her own hair for Shoko instead. This belief that appearing to be culturally/traditionally masculine is best for Shoko is a common one found in media as “when disabled characters are female, they are more likely to be protected by male characters..” since there are no male characters in Shoko’s life to protect her, Yuzuru takes on culturally/traditional masculine characteristics for her (Okuyama 28). This role
is also taken on by Yaeko as she takes on a fatherly role in the Nishimiya home in the absence of a traditional male figure. However, this is a flaw as Yaeko and Yuzuru are under the assumption that Shoko needs to be protected in this way. Much like Yaeko, Yuzuru’s display of overprotection is presented to be overbearing as they harm Shoko as she struggles to obtain her own autonomy such as making friends on her own. The ODVR that Yaeko and Yuzuru present helps no one and is shown to be even irrational and self-indulgent rather than helpful to anyone. 

Yaeko and Yuzuru are not the only ones presenting the self-indulgent nature of violent answers as Satoshi displays all of the traits I have mentioned as the overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice. Although Shoko does not have a traditional masculine character living in her own home, she does end up with a friend who fills that role. Shoko and Shoya befriend Satoshi in the process of making their film. Satoshi is depicted as a handsome masculine young boy who has a big heart. However, it becomes quickly apparent to Shoya that Satoshi is someone who believes that people should be protected from bullies through physical action as he sprays Takeuchi (the students’ elementary school teacher) with a soda and throws a bag at school children to get them from taking advantage of another child (Ōima, v. 5, 38, 54). Satoshi is willing to be the protector at all times as he has a disdain for bullying. When he asks Shoya about who was bullying Shoko he replies back to him by asking, “So, who was the ringleader? I wonder what that loser looks like these days. If I saw them right now, I’d punch them right in the face. Wouldn’t you?” (Ōima, v. 5, 97). He is willing to strike anyone who had bullied someone else even if it occurred in the distant past which is what happens when he finds out that it was Shoya who was bullying Shoko in
elementary school as he punches Shoya in the face (Ōima, v. 5, 136). Also, the inclusion of, “wouldn’t you” would also mean that Satoshi is asking for validation to his belief from Shoya, meaning that he either wants reassurance that he is right for thinking that way or wants to know if Shoya agrees with his proposed overtly defensive and violent response (Ōima, v. 5, 97). Similar to Yuzuru and Yaeko’s failed attempts, it is evident that these actions are short-sighted and only really help the ones acting out the actions temporarily. Even Satoshi appears to smile as he was asked by Shoya to punch him, and then claims after doing so that such actions were him being “a passerby doing my part” (Ōima, v. 5, 137). These actions appear to only self-fulfill his own fantasies of being a white knight (someone who comes to the defense or rescue of someone else without being asked to do so) and nothing more.

The symbolic forms of cultural/traditional masculinity are shown to exist through Yaeko, Yuzuru, and Satoshi, but it is ODVR itself, not masculinity that is shown to be the problem. Satoshi is presented to be an archetype of masculinity found in supokon manga which is best understood not only in his violent answers but also in how he is depicted with significant bushy eyebrows as “supokon manga feature stories about protagonists in sports, mostly male athletes, who are typically drawn with thick eyebrows signifying masculine power, virility, and endurance” (Okuyama xii-xiii).
In the text, his eyebrows are shown to be more than just a drawing quirk from the author but are presented as a part of Satoshi’s own backstory as he is presented as being picked on for his non-normative feature (fig. 4.2). There was a deliberate choice in how Satoshi was presented as he is shown to be the more traditional masculine character compared to the non-traditional masculinity found in the Nishimiya family. Compared to Satoshi, however, Yuzuru may be acting as more of a self-insert as she presented to be like a tomboy which is also how the author of the manga has described herself: “I was the youngest sibling in my family… I was a tomboy who liked to play imaginary gunfights” (Kido). Not only is Yuzuru similar to that of Ōima in her tomboy qualities but Yuzuru is the youngest in the family just like Ōima. So, if Yuzuru is read as a self-insert and Satoshi is read as an archetype from supokon manga and both are shown to fail in their
more violent attempts to protect Shoko, then it is evident that Ōima is suggesting that it is not masculinity that is the problem. The problem is the overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice. Although ODVR may be used by figures trying to emulate traits of culture/traditional masculinity, they are not mutually exclusive. This is an important distinction to make as this is shown at the end of the text with Yaeko doing to herself what she asked Shoko to do at the beginning of the manga.

Figure 4.3 Yaeko gets her hair cut short by Miyako Ishida. Ōima, v. 7, 172.

Yaeko has her own hair cut short at the end of the manga presenting the reader with the understanding that it was not masculinity that was the problem but rather ODVRs under the guise of disability justice. When Yaeko’s hair is cut short she finally lets Shoko make her own decisions as she responds to Shoya’s question about where Shoko is going to work by stating, “Don’t ask me. That’s her decision” (Ōima, v. 7, 173). This scene helps show that it is not masculinity that is the problem as Yaeko goes further into presenting herself with more physical cultural/traditional masculine traits by cutting her hair short, but rather it is the attempt of people putting on their idea of masculine traits such as
protection of the weak through violence, aggression, and/or domination being the issue that makes it impossible for the protected to have their own autonomy. However, up until the end of the story, it is shown repeatedly that the actions of ODVR add to the misery and haunting of those seeking healing.

The effects of ODVRs under the guise of disability justice are shown to further hurt its victims, disallowing progress of healing and self-liberation alike. The violence that occurs to Shoya appears not to help anyone other than the ones doing the violence temporarily. Additionally, ODVRs do not stop Shoko from wanting to end her own life, furthermore, it is shown to deflate moments of change for Shoya. When Shoya is attacked by others it is a hindrance to him and makes it harder for him to connect to Shoko. These moments are also shown in non-real threats as well as presented in one of the ideas for the film where the story would be a revenge drama. Satoshi suggests that he wanted the film to be a revenge drama, “one where the hero kills the crap out of the guys who bullied him”, to which Shoya responds to the idea as the hero would want to die after the story was over (Ōima, v. 4, 49). In a narrative that Miki creates for the film, Tomohiro believes that there is a masculine need for the story as he argues that “the protagonist is too effeminate and uncool” (Ōima v. 5, 24). Much like Tomohiro’s meta-commentary of the supercrip stories that he presents earlier, it is apparent that these moments of a need for cultrual/traditional masculinity are misguided as they are performative and/or self-defeating as Miki’s script is critiqued and Shoya’s response to the ideas are negative. These ideas come from both Satoshi and Tomohiro, two characters that love filmmaking and protecting the weak. However, this form of love is flawed, as it dismisses others
completely. Therefore, the form of love that is needed is not under some form of a misguided attempt of masculinity through ODVRs but rather radical.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in their book *Care Work* argues that there is a dire need for what they call “radical love”. Piepzna-Samarasinha discusses throughout the book how many people who try to help individuals with disabilities often do so under the belief that can do it all by giving out charity, doing social justice marches, and helping push laws that protect people with disabilities. These actions are a start but there is more to be done. Piepzna-Samarasinha’s calls for creating spaces that are accessible as an act of love for the disabled community. When they called for this they got an unexpected reply. “I guess writing about access as a form of radical solidarity called love hit a nerve. When I think about access, I think about love” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 75). For the author, creating access is an act of love, but not just a regular love but a “radical love”. It is not the same as regular love as it exists as a preferable answer under the guise of disability justice. “Radical love” goes further than love as it is done under the understanding that the accommodation system and legal systems that exist to help and protect disabled individuals are not enough. “Radical love” is applied in order to fill all the gaps that those systems leave and then some and one can do this by first understanding that access is central to it all. “I mean that when we reach for each other and make the most access possible, it is a radical act of love. When access is centralized at the beginning of a dream of every action or event, is radical love” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 76). These are the ideas that appear to be Ōima’s answer for disability justice rather than ODVRs as shown by the bridge motif, the depiction of disabilities, and the film project. For *A Silent Voice*, ‘radical love’ appears in different forms and it also
allows for a better understanding of disabilities and what it means to obtain disability justice.

“Radical love” in the text is shown to be necessary for disability justice and it is through bridges that such love can happen. Through the text, Shoya and Shoko are presented to meet in critical moments on bridges. These bridges exist for them to see each other and are also where they are cut off from one another. Many of the moments in which Shoya is denied in communicating with Shoko are on bridges. When Shoya helps to find Shoko early in the manga he is met with violence from Yaeko when he gets across a bridge (Ōima, v. 2, 40). When he still goes on to meet with Shoko each week he is attacked as he crosses a bridge (Ōima, v. 2, 96). Finally, when he begins to self-destruct in front of everyone he is punched while sitting on the bridge by Satoshi (Ōima, v. 5, 136). These were all moments where violences occur in an attempt to show love and justice for Shoko. However, they came at the hindrance of any progress being made as the bridge that Shoya uses to connect with others is shown to be harmful to him. If going across, sitting on, or walking on a bridge to possible connections results in pain, why still try to connect? This question is asked due to the existence of overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice. However, it is ‘radical love’ that is needed, not violence as violence ends with only more damage being done. As suggested by Piepzna-Samarasinha, “Love gets laughed at. What a wreck, nonpolitical, femme thing. Love isn’t a muscle or an action verb or a survival strategy” (Piezpna-Samarasinha 78). The muscle that ODVRs are stretching, the protection of the weak through violence, aggression, and/or domination are ones that are unneeded and makes bridges harder to cross. That being said, when those bridges are crossed, there are no negative
repercussions for them and connections can be made, and healing can finally occur. As suggested at the end of the manga, bridges are needed to help people live happier lives. When Shoya and Shoko meet again after Shoya awakes from his coma, it is on a bridge, and it is there where they finally begin to truly communicate with one another. It is there where Shoya asks Shoko “to help me live” (Ōima, v. 7, 37). This is a touching moment and acts both as a kind of a climax to the manga and also a confession scene. That being said, such an act is singular, and more acts of radical love would need to be shown by others and different ways.

However, it should be noted that constructing and then crossing bridges as an act of radical forgiveness can be hard and therefore it can be difficult to not jump from them or burn them down in an attempt to protect oneself. Throughout the text, Shoya is shown over and over again to want to burn bridges and even willingly jump off of bridges. The act of burning bridges or not allowing new bridges to be made can come in the form of putting Xs on people's faces, to wanting to disconnect from the past, or as Shoya puts it, “I’ll cut off my ties to the past.. That’s how I’ll solve things and save myself” (Ōima, v. 3, 75). This form of cutting oneself off from past actions and people is shown to be negative as Shoya returns to this mindset each time something bad happens in an attempt to hide from the past. He effectively burned a bridge from all of the friend groups except for Yuzuru and Shoya while on the bridge sitting down and confronting everyone after the past catches up to them. However, this is shown to not only harm himself as he cannot form new relationships but also leads to Shoko still attempting suicide despite the fact that he himself tried to fill the hole that was everyone not being there by being more energetic. Eventually, Shoya understands that his mindset is wrong after Shoko’s attempt
at her own life and the recovery from his own coma. When he finally accepts this and allows his defenses to come down, the Xs falls off and he is shown to be truly happy for once (Ōima, v. 7, 94-95). Similarly, Shoko chooses to continue to attempt to build bridges and cross them despite everything, as one of the major actions she makes after her attempt at suicide is to rebuild the friend group, she wants to rebuild relationships that she believes she helped end. “I want to restore what I destroyed” (Ōima, v. 7, 75). These activities are shown to be hard however as Ueno is dismissive of her at first. However, the work that Shoko is doing is expected to be difficult as it is a lot to ask anyone to do what Shoko is doing, considering everything that has happened as it takes a lot out of the person. That being said, she tries anyways and even gets Ueno to agree to work with her to help rebuild things and commence in life-building via building bridges of communication.

“Radical love” helps to allow people with disabilities and/or impairments to make their own autonomous decisions. It was stated earlier that the coddling of Shoko from Yaeko and Yuzuru was one of the misguided attempts at protection. Eventually, however, Yaeko comes to understand that it was a problem as she allows Shoko to make her own decision on where she wants to work (Ōima, v. 7, 173). Tomohiro responds in a similar manner earlier in the manga by responding to Miki’s comments about not needing to put Shoko in a film just because she was disabled. Tomohiro responds to the statement by saying, “She’ll be the one to decide…what she can and can’t do!” (Ōima, v. 5, 20). Both Yaeko and Tomohiro at these points are at the understanding that Shoko must be the one to make her own decisions. That being said, Shoya also struggled with this as he tries to scare Shoko into not going to Tokyo for job training. “You can’t go to Tokyo! T-
Tokyo’s a scary place! There’s a lot of crime! And tons of murders! If you go there all alone... You’ll be hassled by weirdos!... (Ōima, v. 7, 125-6). Shoya soon reflects on this and mentions that his doing so was selfish. “The long and short of it is that I just don’t want her to go. It’s nothing but pure selfishness” (Ōima, v. 7 133). With this self-reflection comes eventual understanding and Shoya wishing Shoko the best of luck in Tokyo. Much like everyone before him, Shoya understands the importance of allowing Shoko autonomy which also leads her to be able to cross and build new bridges.

“Radical love” is best presented in the final version of the film which is created by the friend group. Early on in the process of creating the film, it is suggested by Miki that they don’t have to put Shoko in the film just because she is disabled (Ōima, v. 5, 20). This is later shown to be a sharp contrast in the film that is later created as they create a silent film that can be universally read by everyone. The film is in black and white, it is silent, it has subtitles, it can be enjoyed by not just those who can hear but by everyone. Like the bridges that the characters go across to meet one another, the film is designed so that everyone can access it the same way. Such a move shows “radical love” for Shoko as the project goes from trying to fit a girl with a hearing impairment into a traditional audiocentric film to creating a film that is simply not trying to accommodate her specifically but is enjoyed by all like a universally built bridge designed for anyone to cross. Piepzna-Samarasinha argues that this is one of the most radical types of love as access is centralized. “I mean that access is far more to me than a checklist of accessibility needs- though checklists are needed and necessary” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 76). The friend group did start with a checklist in order to fit Shoko into the film in someplace. However, as time went on, they decided to make accessibility central to the
films production, they created a film that you wouldn’t immediately recognize as not being their original idea as the end product doesn’t have any trace of it. Like Piepzna-Samarasinha suggests the friend group committed “radical love” by radically changing their own ideal film so that access was centralized. However, this attempt at creating a more accessible film is not adored by all as suggested by one of the film critics who evaluated their visual narrative (Ōima, v. 7, 100-3). The film critic is representative of individuals who care more about aesthetics than they care about functional accessibility. This is not only common in film but also everyday structures like architecture. If a building is designed without a ramp and then the designers are pushed to place one, a common complaint is that the ramp will make the building less aesthetically appealing. This framework cares more about how things look rather than if they can be accessed by everyone. Similar to the film critic, these types of individuals care more about pleasing themselves than they do about anything else. That being said, Shoko and others were able to appreciate the nature of the film as shown by Shoko’s tears and Shoya’s out-of-character applause (Ōima, v. 7, 76-7). There are some who may look at attempts of “radical love” through constructing accessible and/or universally designed spaces as pretentious but for those that are in those spaces, it is the difference between being invited and not being invited into a space.

“Radical love” eventually comes with the understanding that disability is not something to overcome. A key moment at the end of the manga is when Shoya allows the Xs to fall off everyone’s faces. If the story was focused more on his narrative, then perhaps the story would have ended there. However, Ōima does not end her series at this moment and instead ends it quite a bit differently. For the story to end with Shoya
allowing the Xs to fall off it could signify him “overcoming” his disability. This, however, is a shortsighted flaw in understanding disabilities as disabilities are not something to just be overcome or to be fixed. Instead, *A Silent Voice* chooses to present characters as still living with their disabilities happily and seemingly forever as the story is more interested in displaying what healing looks like rather than ‘overcoming’ anything in particular. This is shown with Shoya’s anxiety still being an issue as he attempts to stop Shoko from leaving for Tokyo and being worried about their future throughout the last chapters of the manga. As suggested by Piepzna-Samarasinha, “We remake ideas of healing away from being fixed and towards being autonomously and beautifully imperfect” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 104). For *A Silent Voice*, the story was never about trying to “overcome” both “visible” and “invisible” disabilities, but instead learning to live with them and accepting them, it’s about creating bridges with others for them to understand themselves and others, it’s about being afraid of crossing bridges and making them but doing so regardless. This can be both a frightening and radical experience, but it is shown to have life-saving consequences. At the end of the series, Shoya and Shoko are shown a door for them to walk through toward an unknown future and it is here where this idea is presented best. Shoya eyes the door and thinks to himself, “whatever is on the other side of this door… is probably from my painful past. But there’s more than that… there are possibilities. And I can open those doors anytime… as long as I’m alive” (Ōima, v. 7, 185).

“Radical love” throughout *A Silent Voice* shows that it is needed in order for people to live. Love being an action that is needed is a trope and moral that has been tried, talked about, and discussed many times before in many stories, seemingly ever
since stories were passed on between people it has been mentioned. However, it should be understood what that exactly means. For some they may interpret acts of love as being almost engulfing someone with such acts and thereby making it impossible for the recipient to make their own decision due to an act that results in overprotection. As suggested in the text of A Silent Voice, such acts have consequences that can be harmful to the recipient of misguided attempts of love and others. Instead, it is suggested that a “radical love”, one that allows for the recipient to make their own decisions is the one most needed. This isn’t so much something that is inherently needed just for disabled individuals, but it is an idea that that should be thought about when trying to seek justice for them. Sure, disability justice via “radical love” can be hard, but if it wasn’t hard then it would have already been achieved and such stories wouldn’t persist in their existence. “Radical love” can come in the form of understanding that disability is not something to overcome, allowing people with disabilities and/or impairments to make their own autonomous decisions, refusing to burn bridges no matter how hard things get, and constructing accessible and/or universally designed spaces for all. It is through radical love that disability justice and its principles can be followed as it is only when the “radical love” of allowing the disabled individual autonomy can disability justice truly begin to occur. Likewise, it needs to also be understood that the often-used overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice are not good alternatives to radical love as they create additional problems and only help those who use that form of a solution. It is when violence is absent and people are allowed to make their own decisions, they can then make new bridges, connecting themselves with the Other and thereby begin to live and heal.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

As referenced and mentioned several times throughout this thesis, *A Silent Voice* does not only exist on the pages of manga, but it also exists in theaters. Manga will sometimes become so critically acclaimed and commercially successful that an adaptation in the form of an animated show or movie becomes inevitable. On the other hand, there are times when a show or movie is adapted from a manga that is not extremely popular but due to the success of the adaptation the manga becomes a success too as a consequence. Either way one looks at it, it is important to notice how they both are related and how they exist to build off one another. That being said, since manga and anime exist in two different mediums it is always important to notice the differences between them. For *A Silent Voice*, the difference between manga and anime is mostly found in how it chooses to depict disabilities through characterization and perspective.

For starters, the anime film decides to often use the camera’s focus as a way of showing Shoya’s perspective. This choice allows viewers to see that his struggles are mostly inward. In other words, Shoya placing Xs on people’s faces is clearly shown to be a metaphorical representation of his inability to look people in the eye and to truly see or hear anyone and thereby cutting himself off from the world. This disables Shoya from being able to communicate to people in a manner that is more intermittent as shown in the manga, however by animating the Xs as actually being placed and falling off in real-time, it adds to the message of the manga as they are seen as being stamped on or gently
falling off depending on the situation that is often triggered by Shoya’s past coming back to haunt him. The choice to place the point of view through Shoya allows the viewer to be more sympathetic to him and see things from his own point of view. However, this choice in adaptation comes with a consequence as the film ends with the Xs falling off at the school festival as opposed to how the manga ends with both Shoya and Shoko meeting again a while after their time in high school is over. Due to the film’s choice to focus on being mainly Shoya’s own journey in his quest for redemption, it makes sense as to why the film ends the way it does. The Xs falls off showing that he forgives himself for what he did and by doing so he opens himself up to the world. This choice of an ending does come with one major consequence as it can easily be read as Shoya ‘overcoming’ his disability instead of learning to live with it. This messaging can potentially be damaging as it can portray disabilities as a struggle to ‘overcome’ rather than living with it. To ‘overcome’ a disability would be to potentially showcase it as a struggle that anyone can get through, which is not always the case. Likewise, the idea ignores that there are those with impairments that do not see themselves as having a disability and/or suggests that it is the world that disables them so there is nothing to ‘overcome’. In this way, the messaging of disabilities differs in the manga as it depicts Shoya as still anxious and potentially still disabled with social anxiety. What is shown in the film adaptation contradicts the message of the manga a bit as the ending of the manga points to accepting the past and yourself and learning to live after that acceptance.

Similarly, Ueno’s characterization in the film also differs from the manga but that difference adds to A Silent Voice’s rhetoric of building better worlds where disabilities are included. The manga ends with Ueno winning an award for creating a beautiful outfit
for Miyoko, but this happens after the school festival which is where the anime ends. So, instead of showing Ueno as being connected to Miyoko due to their love of modeling and creating costumes for it, the anime chooses to focus more on Ueno and Shoko’s relationship. This is best found in her last appearance in which she speaks, which is also where the film’s choice of deviating from the manga works best. It pushes further into the idea that bridges need to be built to allow multilingual cultures to grow which will help put a stop to ableism and othering. Ueno last appears at the moment when the friend group gets back together for the first time since Shoya comes back to school from the hospital. Ueno rejoins the group last and calls Shoko a moron. However, instead of Shoko taking it as an insult she notices that Ueno called her a moron both verbally and through sign language and Shoko even corrects Ueno for slightly doing the signage wrong. Ueno decides that, through everything, she is going to try and learn sign language so she can communicate with Shoko despite her contempt for her. This further highlights not only the bridge motif that the manga and anime use throughout their respective mediums but also shows the further creation of a multilingual culture for all.

The film adaptation of *A Silent Voice* chooses not to include some of the violent scenes in the manga, which removes one of the critiques that Ōima provides regarding actions under the guise of disability justice. In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I discuss the overtly defensive or violent responses that Satoshi, Yaeko, and Yuzuru all use in an attempt to do disability justice in their own way. All of these characters attack Shoya at least once throughout the manga and it is shown in violent detail through action panels. However, in the anime, only Yaeko attacks Shoya. Yuzuru never physically harms anyone in the anime and even emotionally reacts to the moment when Yaeko slaps
Shoya. Meanwhile, Satoshi does not ever show any type of aggression like he does in the manga. Satoshi is also a character who mostly differs from the manga as his own personal chapter is cut (just like everyone else’s) from the anime. There is no violence from Satoshi, instead, he acts as a stand-in for the audience by acting as an outsider looking in and judging Shoya and others for what they did in the past. Due to these massive changes in direction for Satoshi and Yuzuru, *A Silent Voice*’s display of depicting overtly defensive or violent responses under the guise of disability justice as being misguided changes from a motif shown through different characters to it just a show of overprotection from Yaeko over her daughter.

Nevertheless, there is one large piece of the manga that is absent from the film adaptation and that is the film that friend group creates together. The film project works as it is an objective for the friend group and it also highlights the struggle of creating something that is not ableist. The friend group goes from trying to just put Shoko into the process out of obligation to creating a film that she can access just as much as anyone else. In a meta-reading, this is how the manga functions. Comics are more accessible than other pieces of media as they exist in a way that uses both text and visuals to convey a message. It goes one step further than a book by giving us images to go along with the text and it also doesn’t rely on noise like a movie does. In this way, the film adaptation of the manga is less accessible due to it having sound. On the surface a film adaption of this specific manga feels almost contradictory to its whole message as those that cannot hear are unable to access it with as much ease as those who can hear. That being said, this not the complete truth as the film adaption did design sound with hearing impaired individuals in mind. The most constant instrument that can be heard is the piano, an
instrument best suited for those that are hearing impaired. The choice to use the piano as
the key instrument throughout the film adaptation is evidence that the manga succeeded
in getting people to create art with more accessibility in mind. So, even though the film
project does not exist within the film adaptation of the manga, the film adaption works in
place of the film projects overall purpose by just existing in the way it does.

Because it is important to highlight the differences between the twins of anime
and manga as they are ultimately both attempting to tell the same story but through
different mediums which was always going to result in cuts and simplification of ideas
which can come in the form of the manga not being able to portray movement at times to
the anime just focusing on one character’s journey. Regardless of these differences,
however, it is shown that through a communal effort of ‘radical love’ between the other,
the disabled, and those seeking disability justice, *A Silent Voice* makes connections that
help negate processes that impede human life and these are the ideas that are shown
throughout.

The research of this thesis helps us both understand manga/comic and disability
study scholarship better. There already exists an abundance of scholarship out there about
manga/comics and disabilities, and there are even some places where the two converge.
Through this thesis, I highlight how through the manga/comic medium we can show and
see important issues that plague the everyday life of those with disabilities and/or
impairments. The visual nature of manga/comic books is easily accessible as they depend
on visualizations often more than text. The accessible nature of manga/comic books as a
medium is why it is interesting to read through a critical disability theory lens as
accessibility is at the forefront of ideas when discussing disability and/or impairments. I
believe by highlighting *A Silent Voice* and manga/comic books as a whole when discussing such important issues is of the utmost importance as the increase in popularity in comic book stories has captured the culture at large thanks to films from DC and Marvel on one hand and the boost in manga and anime popularity highlighted by the COVID-19 and the “post-COVID” worlds we live in on the other hand. This thesis pushes for manga/comic and disability scholars alike to continue doing cross-curriculum work to not only highlight one another but to better understand the world we live in and to show the value of both forms of scholarship for that world.
References


McGuire, Joan M. *Universally Accessible Instruction: Oxymoron or Opportunity?* pp. 387–89.


