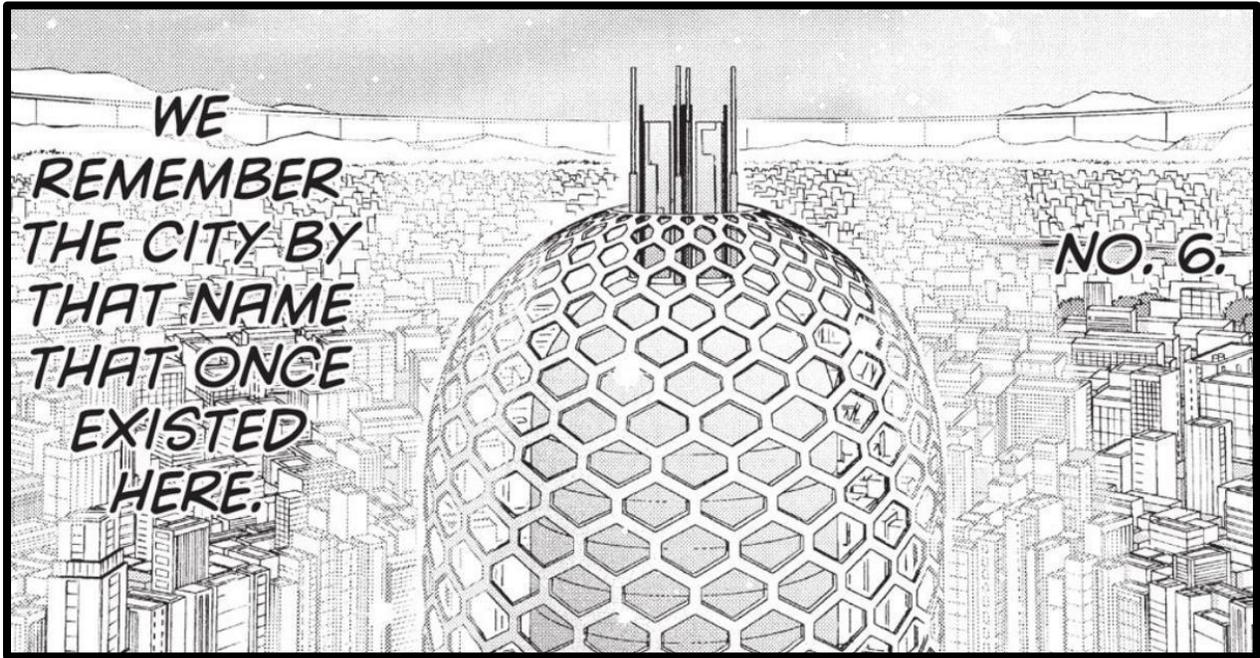


EXPLORING QUEER REVOLT IN ATSUKO ASANO'S *No. 6*

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(Asano/Tarbox 2014, Volume 9, 179)

Asano Atsuko's *No. 6* follows a queer trajectory. The first chapter of the manga begins with "the beautiful city in which we live – No. 6" and ends with "No. 6. We remember the city by that name that once existed here." We follow as No. 6 transforms from a futuristic utopia to dystopia, and finally to a metaphorical disintegration. This transformation is aided and explored through Shion who follows No.6's descent from his position as ideal citizen to terrorist and finally to something else. The obfuscation of naming that occurs at the end signifies a rejection of the conventions of intersectionality as highlighted by Jasbir Puar in her conclusion to *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Together, No. 6's and Shion's turn from identity and the positionality of identity, marked by stability and stillness, to one of futurity, of eternal becoming and mobility, is enacted through revolt. (Puar 2007, 213-214) Furthermore, I argue that Shion's actions throughout Asano's narrative that result in the revolt are queer.

Utilizing queer theory, I will show how No. 6 is characterized as an exceptional state, stuck in the position of utopia, and how the collective events and efforts, initiated without grand intention, creates a queer revolt that results in the metaphorical destruction of No. 6.

Asano Atsuko's *No. 6* started as a Japanese light novel series published by Kodansha between October 2003 and June 2011. An anime series of eleven episodes was produced by Bones in July 2011 and licensed by Sentai Filmworks for distribution in the United States. In March 2011, a manga adaptation illustrated by Kino Hinoki began in magazine *Aria* and ran through December 2013. Kodansha USA later distributed the manga in the United States. This paper will consider only the anime and manga that have been released in professionally translated English.

No. 6 is a speculative science fiction story set in the future. Shion lives in No. 6 with his mother, Karan, and attends a school for the intellectually elite with his friend Safu. On his twelfth birthday, Shion aids a boy named Rat who is hunted by No. 6's security. He is thrown out of his elite education program and he and his mother are forced to move out to Lost Town. Four years pass and Shion takes a job maintaining robots in one of No. 6's parks. Following a mysterious death in the park one day, Shion starts to question the integrity of No. 6. When his coworker suffers the same fate, Shion is arrested. Rat returns to free him as Shion is enroute to the Correctional Facility. Together they escape to West Block, outside the wall surrounding No. 6. Shion learns to survive in the vastly different setting outside the wall. He meets Dog Keeper and Rikiga, who eventually help him and Rat break into the Correctional Facility to rescue Safu. Upon reaching the top floor of the facility, Safu confronts them revealing her near-death existence, her image just a projection. She urges them to blow up the computer she is a part of. The resulting explosion destroys the Correctional Facility and the nearby wall. Shion and Rat barely escape with their lives and manage to stop the formerly enslaved deity, Elyurias, from destroying the city. With the Correctional Facility gone, and the chaos resulting, No. 6 ceases to exist as No. 6. Rat leaves on a journey, while Shion stays behind, waiting for Rat to return and aiding reconstruction following the destruction of West Block and parts of the city.

No. 6: An Exceptional Utopia

According to Puar, exceptionalism gestures to narratives of excellence and exceptional force is justified to protect that excellence. (Puar 2007) In the case of *No. 6*, “exceptional force” is represented by the control of citizens’ thoughts, actions, and motions, policing aided by secret informants and technology, and secret military actions. This shows how Shion, Rat, and other characters are constructed as queer “others” and threats to the nationalist project of No. 6.

The world of No. 6 is separated into six independent city-states. While we only get a brief glance of No. 5, primarily in the anime, there is a sense that No. 6 is distinct in its focus on science. Citizens at age two are given an exam that discerns their future potential. Both Shion and Safu are ranked at the top, which allows them, and their families, to live in Chronos, an exclusive residential section of the city. Seemingly, the focus on scientific achievement and advancement is responsible for the technologies that establish No. 6 as an exceptional city. No. 6 is described as “the culmination of human science—the city of the future,” “with a beautiful, *orderly* cityscape,” with “medical technology (that) has made it possible to eliminate the suffering that comes with accidents, illness and surgery. Our citizens receive the most cutting-edge medical care,” an “enormous forest park” where citizens “can enjoy the splendid natural beauty of the four seasons and interact with small animals and insects,” and “the holy city No. 6, where despair has been eradicated.” (Asano/Tarbox 2013 Volume 1, 9-11. Emphasis added) Citizens of No. 6 can expect to live an orderly life in the city, without fear of despair. The wall surrounding the city is made of “a special metal alloy” and “impregnable.” The fruits of the city require you to “pledge your unwavering loyalty to the city.” Shion further develops the control of No. 6 in his thoughts, “the environment, the animals—even the people are managed... a stable, equal world where everyone is treated the same.” (Asano/Tarbox 2013, Volume 1, 16) In all, the manga starts with the picture of a future utopia, where citizens live a life of ease.

Throughout the narrative, No. 6 is characterized as a city of control and quantifiable attributes. The focus on science de-privileges emotional response in favor of rationality. This is most visible in the anime where Safu tries to verbalize her feelings to Shion. In the first episode, she gives Shion a kiss as a “birthday gift.” Shion responds, claiming that there was no difference between the kiss his mother gave him in the morning. She refutes that her kiss is “a behavioral expression of the emotional desire to reproduce.” In the following episode, now sixteen, she asks

specifically for Shion's sperm as a way to express her desire to have sex. Her reliance on scientific explanation to communicate unquantifiable emotions is regarded as a desirable trait because she is chosen to attend school in No. 5. During her term in No. 5, she is confronted by unqualifiable objects, such as poetry, art, and romance, all of which she struggles with, to the joy of her No. 5 classmates. She is then stopped at the entrance to No. 6 because her art book is considered contraband. Shion suffers similarly when he is exposed to literature in Rat's home where he reads Shakespeare for the first time. This dual experience of odd encounters with the "foreignness" of art, literature, and emotions, suggests that No. 6's control extends to citizens' thoughts, emotions, and relationships. By focusing on the rational, quantifiable, and logical, citizens are more easily controlled. The reduction of passion, emotion, and desire, leaves the citizens still, with very little motivation to become willful and desiring subjects. No. 6's status as an exceptional utopia is wholly dependent on maintaining a calm, controlled, and ultimately passive population.

Citizens who fail to support the exceptional narrative of No. 6 are deemed unworthy and dangerous. No. 6 features no judicial system, so any transgression of law or citizenship results in immediate incarceration. Imprisonment, execution, GPS tracking, border control—movement in general is controlled, and closely monitored. Each citizen has a wristband (anime) or a tablet (manga) that tracks their movements and actions. This item represents their status as a citizen of No. 6 and is required for legal movement within the city. Furthermore, this passport allows the government of No. 6 to send notices, such as a warning regarding the escaped "VC," Rat, and requires citizens to acknowledge the bulletin. This passport insures that citizenship in No. 6 comes at the cost of privacy. Freedom is only gifted on the privileged, citizenship is not a right. When Safu leaves for her term abroad (anime) she is forced to relinquish her device and then collect it when she returns. Citizenship in No. 6 has no meaning outside of No. 6.

The more exceptional the narrative, the harder it is to protect, as such public safety and security in No. 6 also relies on citizen informants. When Safu returns to No. 6 following her grandmother's death, she is approached by an old lady. Similarly, Shion's mother Karan, following Safu's abduction by security and subsequent record wipe, is approached by an old lady while she is crying on a park bench. In both these situations, Safu and Karan come close to being identified as a potential terrorist. The old lady who confronts Safu, points out that Safu is returning to No. 6. She seems to understand behaviors of arrivals despite the lack of border

crossings. Furthermore, she recognizes that Safu has been away for sometime, attributing her observation to this “wind” she feels. While this encounter appears organic, there is the slightest sense that Safu’s term abroad has placed her in the position to be watched. Unlike Safu, Karan’s situation occurring in the subsequent anime episode, is visibly constructed as ill intentioned. She is stopped by Yomin, the uncle of one of Karan’s child patrons, just short of questioning No. 6’s narrative of exception. These events occur following Shion’s own incarceration in the beginning when he observes the blatant skewing of information following the first parasitic bee related death. To challenge, in voice or action, the utopian narrative of No. 6 is to transgress the pledge of loyalty, and ultimately labels failures as criminals and terrorists.

This narrative of exception is further protected through military action. Despite the ban on military action and weaponry following the treaty that ended the last war, No. 6 engages in extreme acts of imperialistic and punitive military violence. Rat is identified as the sole survivor of a native population that lived in the forests around No. 6 before the city was built. When the scientists in No. 6 came and studied their culture and people, they discovered the “deity” Elyurias. Seeing as Elyurias was capable of creating and also controlling life, they made a violent grab for her. They burned the forests, massacred the native population, and took Elyurias. Rat manages to survive, alongside a few survivors of No. 6’s purges. Similarly, on the approach to the “Holy Day,” assumably a founders’ day celebration, new weaponry rolls into West Block. These tanks fire what appear to be massive sound waves that destroy the shantytown, as well as residences. Rat refers to it as clean up. Once again echoing Puar, No. 6’s narrative relies on exceptional forces. These forces in turn justify exceptional events, as well as exceptions and exemptions. Only citizens of No. 6 are safe, but the moment you voice discontent, citizenship is revoked.

Queer Acts, Queer Failures, Queer Assemblages?

Puar critiques intersectionality through her analysis of post-9/11 discursive strategies of the United States that constructed the terrorist as profanely other, perversely queer, in stark contrast to the impeccability of American nationalist identity. In place of intersectionality she presents the idea of assemblages, different from intersectionality because an assemblage cannot be broken down into specific parts, into separate identities. She argues that queer (or terrorist)

assemblages “allow for complicities of privilege and the production of new normativities even as they cannot anticipate spaces and moments of resistance, resistance that is not primarily characterized by oppositional stances, but includes frictional forces, discomfoting encounters, and spurts of unsynchronized delinquency.” (Puar 2007, 222) The power of the assemblage is in its ability to change, morph, adapt, and continuously avoid assimilation into the nation as a catalogued other. In essence, it is to continually fail to be hammered down into discourse. Perhaps, to be something else by the time nation has named you. Unknowables are always destined to be named and catalogued, to embrace constant acts of change. As Jose Esteban Muñoz described, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality.” (2009, 1) The hope of a queer future, one that never arrives, acts as a shared goal that constantly shifts.

In Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*, he echoes Muñoz in questioning the vision of utopia as one offered by the dominant power. The embrace of failure is a queer aesthetic, “recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline.” (Halberstam 2011, 88) In essence, the queer art of failure is an alternative mode of behavior, one that rejects the definition of success as success.

The dream of an alternative ways of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naive, simplistic, or a blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing animates all kinds of knowledge projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naive. (Halberstam 2011, 52)

Queers succeed through failure. Halberstam, Muñoz, and Puar all discuss queerness as an unknown and eternally unknowable construction.

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain... Queerness is a longing that propels us onward... Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough... Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. (Muñoz 2009, 1)

This feeling of movement is where my presentation of queer revolt takes root, as the often stalled wind power mills finally start to move again.

I cannot identify or claim to know queer revolt, but, according to Muñoz we can catch glimpses of queerness within the aesthetic. Puar argues “queerness as an assemblage that is

spatially and temporally contingent.” (Puar 2007, 204) However, I argue that the revolt in *No. 6* is a queer revolt. A single fleeting moment when a queer collective failed and succeeded at causing destruction that creates something new. When Rat plants explosives in the mainframe computer of the correctional facility, at the request of Safu, now just a visible representation of who she was, he triggers the destruction of the seat of disciplinary power. In place of what we consider to be a nation, No. 6 is reborn as something new. “We remember the city by that name that once existed here.” (Asano/Tarbox 2014, Volume 9, 179) Through the actions of Shion and Rat, No. 6 ceases to exist and something unknown rises. They erase the stalled vision of a reached utopia and instead return to the chaos of evolution.

Throughout both the anime and manga, Shion is constructed as a thoroughly queer individual. Perhaps the best example is in the opening credits of the anime. Shion appears as a young child, in washed out colors, always walking with a bored look on his face. His expressions are devoid of emotion. There is a close up on his wrist where he wears his ID card, potentially signifying the tethering of Shion’s nature. We see his trophies, and his uncomfortable smile at accepting another one. This clearly defines Shion’s history before the series as one of state defined success. Despite the success, however, the following frame has the trophy discarded on its side on the floor. Overall, he is cast as uncomfortable, as though he is lacking something that cannot be easily formulated into words. Everything changes when he comes face to face with Rat. The animation explodes into vibrant color and Shion’s emotionless face suddenly slides through surprise and contentment. This opening clearly shows that Shion psychically unhappy with No. 6. That is to say this is not a political dislike, but a psychic one.

The narrative further develops this relationship between Shion, No. 6, and Rat. Upon meeting Rat as a 12 year old, Shion’s life is thrown into chaos for a brief moment. Four years later, he throws away his citizenship, because to remain a citizen would mean his death. He fails so grandly, that only through Rat’s intervention does Shion gain the capacity to survive. In West Block, Shion is repeatedly mocked for his altruistic nature. As in No. 6, Shion does not fit in with the dominant power of free-for-all survival. Whereas he has to fear Public Safety and Security in No. 6, he has to fear passing strangers in West Block. Nevertheless, he holds on to his identity and altruistic nature. When he is caught between Rat’s wish for No. 6’s destruction and his desire to save the people of No. 6, he comes up with an idea.

Shion: “Everything is always black and white to you. Love or hate... friend or enemy... inside the wall or outside... Why can’t you see there might be a third option... You can break down the wall! Get rid of it... Exactly! If there was no wall, No. 6 as a city would cease to exist! Everyone could come and go as they pleased!” (Asano/Tarbox 2013, Volume 3, 137-139)

A third option: Shion’s nature manifests as a utopian imagining of a world outside of binaries. To echo Halberstam, he advocates an alternative action, one that is delinked from destruction or perseverance, but also depending on both. Shion visualizes No. 6 as “we know it” as a city that robs free movement. The wall prevents entry and exit. The wall separates privilege populations from non-privileged. In all actuality, this is a dream. Nowhere in this exchange or future or past exchanges does a plan ever form to destroy No. 6 or destroy the wall.

The destruction of the wall comes as a byproduct of Shion and Rat’s failed attempt to rescue Safu from the correctional facility. Safu, now just a brain in a jar controlled by Elyurias, but still retaining memories and some manner of control, requests destruction. She requests that both her and the biocomputer be destroyed. The ensuing explosion destroys the correctional facility, in turn, destroying the wall separating West Block from the city. Simultaneously, both the control of movement, citizenship, and detention are destroyed. Shion’s dream is reached completely by accident. They intended to rescue Safu or die trying. Instead they failed, destroyed the complex, and survived.

Shion and Rat’s actions are distinctly separate from two other revolts that follow the destruction of the wall—that of the deity Elyurias and the riot of citizens brought on by fear. Elyurias is the deity that No. 6 sought to control. They destroyed Rat’s home in the hope of capturing and enslaving this unknown entity. Elyurias appears as an assemblage of the parasitic bees, forming what appears to be a larger bee, mixed with a phoenix. Thus, in many ways, Elyurias is a binary in one, death and rebirth, destruction and creation. However, she seeks vengeance on No. 6. Her revolt is of total destruction, not just the buildings or symbolic sacking of the city, but the people as well. She is death, pessimism, the true end of all. Shion and Rat stop her, once again proving that to stand still renders the unknowable knowable. The gift of research provided Shion and Rat a method to counteract even the supernatural powers of Elyurias.

Elyurias’s manifestation as a bee (little significance is placed on differentiation between wasp and bee within *No. 6*) is further indicative as a force for violent change. Halberstam notes that:

Bees have... represented the menacing power of the mob... anarchism... fascism... organized and soulless labor structures proposed by communism... potential ruthlessness of matriarchal power... movements that oppose global capitalism... the swarm presents as a mass rather than a unitary enemy and offers no obvious target... the swarm is elusive, ephemeral. (2011, 51)

Similarly, Muñoz discusses the experience of a vigil following Matthew Shepard's death that turned violent in *Cruising Utopia*. He describes how the police came with horses, and the descent of the vigil into an exploding mass. "The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses... The state... understands the power of our masses, a power that can be realized only by surpassing the solitary pervert model and accessing group identity." (Muñoz 2009, 64) Elyurias can be viewed not as a fantastic creature, but as a known and catalogued mass. A political collective of shared anger. As a mass, Elyurias wields deadly and destructive forces, threatening to literally wipe No. 6 off the map. Unfortunately, the state has named Elyurias, brought her into the light where she can be known. Thus, unlike Shion and Rat, Elyurias loses her revolutionary potential.

The third revolt is partially instigated by Yomin, who lost his family to No. 6's policies. His ongoing relationship with Shion's mother Karan slowly reveals why he will fail. When he approaches Karan, asking for her cooperation with his anti-government activities she rejects him. She observes that his eyes were the same as the men who built No. 6. Unlike Elyurias, and Shion and Rat, Yomin plays on negativity. He claims the officials have a vaccine that could save them, playing on their fears for his political gain. This is one of the most common depictions of revolt. We saw it in *Metropolis*. It is one almost always doomed to narrative failure because of the manipulation used. Yomin's revolt fails at the cost of several lives.

At the heart of No. 6 is a critique of utopia. While we as viewers are never afforded the luxury of freely enjoying the utopian aspects of the city, both manga and anime make it abundantly clear that for the most part No. 6 is perfect. Crime is close to 0%. There are amazing forests and parks where all four seasons can be experienced and you can interact with small animals. Medical care is perfect. "A stable world where everyone is treated the same... even people are managed." The utopia of No. 6 is one that is fully managed with no room for error. Cracks in the appearance of utopia form from the onset, with Rat fleeing for his life. Safu's grandmother further destabilizes the utopian perception through her melancholic observation that since the city provides everything the only way of providing for her granddaughter is through

knitting but even that is viewed as anachronistic with the wide availability of cheap clothing made from synthetic fabrics. She has no way of moving forward, and like the other elderly, is rendered obsolete in the fantastic city. As a whole, No. 6 lacks any momentum. They have stalled, in part, because they believe themselves to be the epitome of human achievement. After all, when you believe a place to be utopia that is the end.

This utopian claim made by No. 6 is completely emblematic of Puar's theorization on US exceptionalism. No. 6 claims to be a utopia, a perfect city. They're a shining beacon, the holy city. Meanwhile, the truth behind that near 0% crime rate is the city's lack of a judicial system. If you are arrested and charged with a crime, you are sent outside the city to the correctional facility. Furthermore, despite signing a treaty of peace, they manufacture weapons and engaged in violent clashes with residents outside the city, such as the destruction of Rat's forest folk. What they say is not what they do, but also a cover of what they do. Rat's escape and pursuit in the beginning gets justified as necessary, to protect the peace, the same claim is leveled against Shion to cover up the first two public deaths of hosts of parasitic bees. This is the process by which Shion and Rat are both queered, they are both positioned as dangerous, queer, terrorists. They are not the good upstanding citizens, which goes double for Shion who has been afforded all the privilege No. 6 offered. Security claims he cracked, following his expulsion from the gifted program, a highly intelligent deranged psychopath.

Outside of No. 6's stale air, Shion grows as a character. Throughout the narrative he is constantly searching for an explanation. The unknown paralyzes him. While escaping security with Rat, he cries for an explanation of what is happening. He is so dependent on the positionality of objects that he feels unable to act even in life or death struggles. Furthermore, he is constantly bothered by Rat's obtuseness leading him to pry into Rat's history in search of both a name and a reason. The manga highlights this interaction superbly. Shion asks Rat about his past, how long he has lived in West Block, where he was raised, and other such general questions. Rat responds by pulling Shion's hand to his chest to feel his beating heart. The lesson Rat is trying to impart is the only detail that matters is his beating heart, while Shion is seeking information to categorize him. This interaction parallels Shion's desire to learn Rat's birth name. However, at the end Shion's monologue reveals that he "never knew your (Rat's) name. Well, I don't need to know it." (Asano/Tarbox 2014, Volume 9, 170) This highlights Shion's turn from the stable confines of his origins to the mobility of Muñoz's and Halberstam's queer futurity.

Walls separating identities are unmoored and become a continuous interdependent and inseparable mass. In these ways, Asano really destabilizes the concept of utopia as a reachable goal, instead, offering something more in line with futurity. A constant making and becoming. A queer assemblage that meets at the right time.

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