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"Normal" Feelings in "Abnormal" Worlds: On the Political Uses of Emotion in Science Fiction Manga

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CHAPTER 6: *ZETTAI KAREN CHILDREN* AND THE POLITICAL EVERYDAY

Emotions can contextualize the effects of the novum and can even be deployed as a part of the novum itself in order to create and explore complex conceptual spaces. While in the previous chapter this involved spaces generated by the interaction between emotions and the science fictional events in the narrative, this chapter expands these ideas even further by analyzing the manga *Zettai Karen Children* by Shīna Takashi (2005-present, hereafter *ZKC*). In doing so, this chapter explores how political ideas and solutions can be expressed using the emotional experience of an “everyday”—an uneventful and non-violent setting assumed to be typical in the lives of normal children—that appears commonplace yet is nevertheless science fictional. Ostensibly a story where powerful psychics use their abilities to fight crime, the superhero-like trappings of *ZKC* belie a subtler and more varied approach to presenting the tension between psychics and non-psychics that permeates the society portrayed in the manga. More than simply conveying this social divide solely in terms of overt opposition and animosity, this chapter shows how *ZKC* depicts the friction between the human and the superhuman through the common actions and interactions of the two groups, and then uses emotion to emphasize the political potential of feelings such as love, trust, and the desire to be normal.

Before proceeding, there are certain details of this chapter that need to be explained in order to set a clear boundary for analysis and to avoid any confusion in meaning that might arise. First, while the manga is over 30 volumes long, this chapter focuses on volumes 1 through 15 of *ZKC*. This is based on the fact that there is a clear delineation between volumes 15 and 16, a narrative time-skip during which the main heroines age from childhood into adolescence. Also, as *ZKC* is an on-going series and continues to have new chapters released every week, presently the overall narrative does not have a conclusion. This chapter is not meant to be a prediction of as-of-yet unpublished events in the story, and is instead an analysis of ideas that are already present in the work. Additionally, although there are indeed later developments in the manga (as well as animated adaptations and

spinoffs) that expand upon or clarify certain themes discussed in this analysis, these will also not be mentioned for the sake of setting boundaries.

Second, ZKC uses many English words to refer to specific concepts in the narrative, notably “the Children” and “Normals.” This risks confusion because of the fact that this analysis is in part about how the idea of being “normal” is portrayed with respect to young people. Thus, this chapter employs capitalization in order to distinguish the specific terms of *Zettai Karen Children* with the regular English usage, such that “the Children” always refers to the main heroines, while “children” refers simply to kids in general. Similarly, “Normal” means a non-Esper, while words such as “normal” and “normality” possess their common English definitions. “Society” mostly refers to a fictionalized version of Japan, but can also mean the world at large depending on context.

6.1. ZETTAI KAREN CHILDREN AND THE CONCEPT OF THE ESPER

Extrasensory perception is not inherently science fictional. Historically prevalent in Japanese mass culture, the list of works that concern themselves with “ESPer” [esupā] or “super-powered beings” [chōnōryokusha] include not only manga such as the comedy-focused *Esper Mami* (Fujiko F. Fujio, 1977-1982)³⁰⁷ and the romance-oriented *Kimagure Orange Road* (Matsumoto Izumi, 1984-1987),³⁰⁸ but also anime such as the long-standing *Gundam* meta-series (Sunrise, 1979-present)³⁰⁹ and even the popular video game franchise *Pokémon* (Nintendo, 1995-present), which features as one category of its titular pocket monsters the “Psychic Type” (Esper Type in Japanese).³¹⁰ In many of these cases, psychic abilities are utilized in decidedly

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307. “Anime News Network Encyclopedia: ESPer Mami (manga),” *Anime News Network*, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/manga.php?id=6823>.

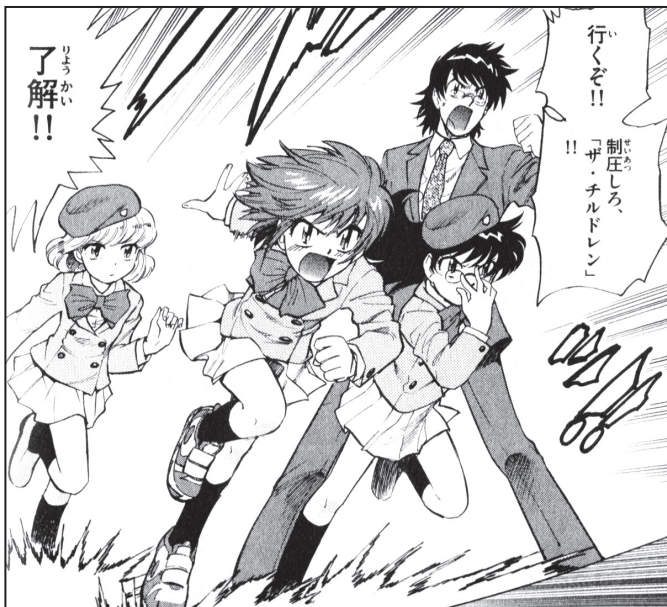
308. “Anime News Network Encyclopedia: Kimagure Orange Road (manga),” *Anime News Network*, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/manga.php?id=2711>.

309. Anime referenced: *Mobile Suit Gundam*, directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki, Mobile Suit Gundam Movie Collection (1981; Cypress, CA: Bandai Entertainment, 2003), DVD. *Mobile Suit Gundam II: Soldiers of Sorrow*, directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki, Mobile Suit Gundam Movie Collection (1981; Cypress, CA: Bandai Entertainment, 2003), DVD. *Mobile Suit Gundam III: Encounters in Space*, directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki, Mobile Suit Gundam Movie Collection (1982; Cypress, CA: Bandai Entertainment, 2003), DVD. *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char’s Counterattack*, directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki, Mobile Suit Gundam Movie Collection (1988; Cypress, CA: Bandai Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

310. Games referenced: *Pokémon Black*, Nintendo DS (created and published by Nintendo, 2011). *Pokémon Black 2*, Nintendo DS (created and published by Nintendo, 2012). *Pokémon Y*,

non-science fictional ways, associating both the origins and applications of those abilities with science-baffling occult phenomena, but *ZKC* cannot be dismissed for this reason. While the existence of psychic powers in *ZKC* could be explained more thoroughly (in many cases they resemble generic “superpowers”), *ZKC* is firmly “science fictional” in that it lays out the consequences of ESP as an ever-present element woven into the fabric of their society and as a catalyst for change. Moreover, it is the treatment of those with ESP rather than the presence of psychic power itself that is the focus of political and science fictional exploration in *ZKC*.

ZKC is premised around a 21st-century society divided between two groups: regular human beings, otherwise known as Normals, and those with psychic powers, who are referred to as Espers. Common throughout the entire world, Espers are still a minority to the Normals, many of whom fear Espers for their abilities. The story focuses primarily around the characters Akashi Kaoru, Nogami Aoi, and Sannomiya Shiho (middle, right, and left in figure 6.1, respectively), three 10-year-old girls who are the most powerful Espers in Japan. Under their collective code name “the Children,” the three work for the Japanese government agency B.A.B.E.L. as field agents who fight crimes and prevent disasters. They are placed under the care of a Normal man named Minamoto Kōichi (figure 6.1, rear), who acts not only as their supervisor but also as a father figure, and is thus responsible



for raising the Children and dealing with their tendency towards mischief.

Figure 6.1. The central characters of *ZKC*: Sannomiya Shiho (left), Akashi Kaoru (middle), Nogami Aoi (right), and Minamoto Kōichi (rear). Source: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 12 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2008), 22.

Panel 1: “Go! Control the situation, the Children!”
“Roger!”

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Nintendo 3DS (created and published by Nintendo, 2013).

While the series appears to lack broader social and political consequences in its narrative, there is also within the manga a recurring narrative thread concerning the future of the Children. A prediction states that, in 10 years' time, the Children will become the leaders of a global Esper rebellion and eventual war against the Normals. Further reinforcing this possibility is the fact that the Children's most prominent adversaries are vehemently pro-Normal and pro-Esper militant groups, who provide two potential avenues for the Children's move towards violent rebellion against their current society. "Futsū no hitobito" ("Normal People"), a terrorist organization with members at all levels of society and government that is dedicated to the belief that Espers are inhuman and need to be violently suppressed, are potentially the catalyst for a future where violence might be seen as the only option to stop them. Opposite them is the pro-Esper terrorist group "P.A.N.D.R.A." which aims to establish a world where Espers are in control of society based on a belief of inherent superiority, and to whom the Children could ally themselves if anti-Esper attitudes were to reach a dangerous point. One of the central questions of the manga thus asks what values the Children will have as they mature into adulthood, where it is heavily implied that the Children's futures are connected to not only their experiences fighting but also to what they learn both directly and indirectly in the more peaceful, "everyday" aspects of their lives.

Of course, *ZKC* is not the only manga (or indeed science fiction story in general) to explore the concept of the Esper in a science fictional setting, and is therefore not the focus of this chapter primarily due to a sense of "originality." In terms of narrative and setting, *To Terra* is also concerned with a societal division between those with and without psychic powers, albeit on a grander, galaxy-spanning scale. The American superhero comic property *X-Men* shares a similar premise, where the "visual and narrative articulation of 'mutation' to social and cultural differences more broadly underscored the tie between expressions of popular fantasy and the ideals of radical politics in the postwar period."³¹¹ *A Certain Scientific Railgun* (hereafter *Railgun*) bears an especially strong resemblance to *ZKC*, with its number ranking system for psychic abilities, its general aesthetics, and its tensions between Espers and non-Espers.

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311. Ramzi Fawaz, "'Where No X-Man has Gone Before!' Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America," *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (2011): 357, accessed October 31, 2013, <http://americanliterature.dukejournals.org/content/83/2/355>.

My reasons for choosing *ZKC* over the titles mentioned above (aside from some of them falling outside of the post-2004 publication time frame established in Chapter 1, and *X-Men* technically not being a manga) are as follows.

While *To Terra* aims through its science fictional portrayals of Espers for grander, more far-reaching “revolutions,” and makes emotion an overtly significant component of its narrative (the strength of Espers are tied to their emotions), *ZKC* utilizes the concept of everyday alienation more extensively, with the science fictional importance of emotion being less clear-cut. While *X-Men* gives comparatively little guidance for achieving peaceful co-existence other than “defense and protection” (as seen in the “Days of Future Past” storyline, for instance³¹²), *ZKC* in contrast offers a possible solution for the social divide and feelings of alienation experienced by its characters. *ZKC* and *Railgun* are especially similar, but *ZKC* provides more material for how ostensibly non-science fictional elements such as “trust,” “the everyday,” and “child-raising” can become science fictional through the conceptual exploration of emotions, especially love, happiness, anger, and frustration.

6.2. OUTWARD EMOTION IN *ZETTAI KAREN CHILDREN*

ZKC has been published in *Shūkan shōnen Sunday* [Weekly shōnen Sunday], a popular mainstream manga magazine, since 2005. While longevity does not automatically equal popularity, as a work designed to be an accessible form of mass culture *ZKC* possesses a number of common qualities for a manga in its position, including its use of “beautiful fighting girls”³¹³ and its status as a “battle manga,” a genre ubiquitous to the *shōnen* manga category that revolves around combat

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312. A storyline where in the future mutants are forced into internment camps, preventing this future hinges upon simply stopping a particular senator from being assassinated. Chris Claremont and John Byrne, “Days of Future Past” and “Mind Out of Time,” *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2013), originally published in Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *Uncanny X-Men*, issues 141-142 (New York: Marvel Comics Group, 1980), 107-152.

313. A term coined by Saitō Tamaki to describe the ubiquity of female characters in anime and manga who are portrayed as strong, beautiful, and vulnerable. In using the term, I am not prescribing to his arguments about the role and function of beautiful fighting girls, but rather referencing the same general trend seen in anime and manga that has developed since the 1960s. However, if I were to describe the Children of *ZKC* according to the historical categories put forth by Saitō, they would in fact be hybrids of the “magical girl,” the “transforming girl,” and the “team.” See: Saitō Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3-8 and 128-129..

between protagonists and antagonists. In terms of its visual qualities, *ZKC* uses a paneling style often seen in *shōnen* manga (and even many *seinen* manga³¹⁴) where rectangular panels with little angular variation and mostly solid borders are common.³¹⁵ Though this type of paneling in itself does not imply a certain way of portraying emotions, when combined with the fact that *ZKC* often places emphasis on the overt physical gestures, voiced concerns, and even the position of its characters on the page, it results in a work where emotion is conveyed primarily through characters outwardly expressing themselves to others. The effect is that the manga relates internal emotion to the external physical world on a regular basis. Together with a fairly restrained usage of major overlapping objects (such as a single human figure touching multiple panels) while minor elements such as word balloons and onomatopoeia effects overlap more frequently, *ZKC* presents its information and its emotion in a straightforward fashion. Even abstract imagery in *ZKC* becomes at points indicative of the “external” instead of the “internal,” such as in figure 6.2, where the aura radiating from Kaoru on the left page is not merely a representation of her anger but is literally a display of Kaoru’s psychokinesis³¹⁶ as well. This, in turn, also shows that a visual relationship exists between emotion, psychic ability, and characterization in *ZKC*.

Figure 6.2.
Emotions are expressed through outward gestures.
Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 176-177.



314. See *Pluto* in figure 4.1, for example.

315. *Coppelion*, which is the subject of the next chapter, is similar.

316. Also known as telekinesis, the ability to move objects with one’s mind.

Panel 1: “The man who shot me used to say that too.”

Panel 2: “They’re all the same.”

Panel 3: “You’re lying!” “I’m not lying. I just want to protect the three of you.” “You’re wrong!”

Panel 4: “Minamoto is different!”

Panel 5: “He would never do that to us!” [impact]

Panels 6 to 7: “Ugh!” (“Kaoru!”) “Major!”

The effects of this “stable paneling” become especially apparent when comparing *ZKC* to an SF manga that takes a decidedly different approach, such as *To Terra*. The image of Kaoru’s figure during the beginning of her outburst in panel 4 of figure 6.2 is the only large visual element to cross the gutter, which draws greater attention to the display of emotion in that particular panel and the one immediately after on the next page. *To Terra*, on the other hand, despite also being a *shōnen* manga which also features deep divisions between regular humans and psychics and a strong correlation between the expression of psychic abilities and emotions, has a far different panel layout derived from Takemiya’s background as a *shōjo* artist who rose up in the 1970s (figure 6.3).³¹⁷ Unlike the approach taken by *ZKC*, the lack of gutters in conjunction with the large amount of overlapping visual elements create a greater sense of continuous flow from one panel to the next, rendering the characters’ thoughts and emotions as an overwhelming cascade of imagery. While both figures 6.2 and 6.3 show how emotions are visually manifest through not only physical actions but also displays of psychic power, the depictions of psychic powers-as-emotion consistently dominate the page in *To Terra*, whereas for *ZKC* this effect, as described in Chapter 4.3, is more about having that display of emotion act as the culmination of what has come before it on the page.

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317. Takemiya Keiko is one of the manga artists associated with the Year 24 Group, a number of young female artists in the 1970s often credited with revolutionizing the field of *shōjo* manga. Hagio Moto, whose manga can be seen in figures 3.1 and 3.14, is also considered a member. For more information, see: Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 78-79. Frederik L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, 2nd edition (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1997), 97. Jennifer S. Prough, *Straight from the Heart: Gender, Intimacy, and the Cultural Production of Shōjo Manga*, (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 47-48.

Figure 6.3. Different from *ZKC*, the constant violation of the panel borders in *To Terra* render psychic powers explicitly in terms of their emotional power. Source: Takemiya Keiko, *To Terra*, vol. 3 (New York: Vertical Inc., 2007), 242-243.



ZKC is thus similar to Sadamoto Yoshiyuki's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* manga, where understanding of character psychology is culled from active character interaction more than it is moments of deep introspection,³¹⁸ though *ZKC* does not come with the same degree of pained communication that *Evangelion* is known for. Through this approach, *ZKC* focuses heavily on how the actions and behaviors of others have a significant emotional and psychological impact on the Children.

318. Carl Li, Nakamura Mari, and Martin Roth, "Japanese Science Fiction in Converging Media: Alienation and Neon Genesis Evangelion," *Asiascape Occasional Papers*, no.6 (2013): 7-8, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://asiascape.org/resources/publications/asiascape-ops6.pdf>

6.3. EVERYDAY ALIENATION

Through mainly the use of outward expression, *ZKC* depicts how the Children are exposed to and affected by the social tensions between Espers and Normals. Figure 6.4, for example, features an interaction between Shiho and a nurse in a government hospital that shows how a sense of alienation can arise from everyday situations. The nurse reaches down to take Shiho to another room for additional tests, only to suddenly pull away as if touching a hot stove. In the context of the story, this is because Shiho, a “psychometer,” is able to read via physical contact a person’s thoughts, feelings, and even health and personal history, and the manga expresses through page 29 on the right in figure 6.4 the nurse’s fear of having her inner self laid bare. Through her lack of response and solemn expression, this scene expresses the idea that Shiho has become accustomed to being an object of fear, and that circumstances such as this have an emotional impact on the Children. Additionally, the nurse is depicted as someone otherwise supportive of Espers, which highlights the idea that a fear of Espers does not necessarily arise out of willful malice, and that social tension is not simply a matter of feelings of hatred.

Figure 6.4. The nurse’s unconscious fear of holding Shiho’s hand, Minamoto’s active effort to do so, and Shiho’s own reactions highlight the deployment of emotion in *ZKC*. Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 29-30.



[Page 29]

Panel 1: "The MRI examination room is ready." "Oh, okay." [turning] "No response?!"

Panels 2 to 3: [swipe] [touching] [pulling away]

Panel 4: "Ah... I'm so sorry..."

[Page 30]

Panel 1: "You two are coming too!" "Grrr! What about you, huh?" "Well I have more than you!"

Panel 2: [phone buzzing]

Panel 3: "Yes, Minamoto speaking... What?!"

Panel 4: "That teleporter found an opening and escaped from the police?!"

This focus on how the Children are affected by the tensions between Espers and Normals applies not only to scenarios that affect them personally, but also ones in which they are not directly related. In the story arc titled "Gift of Children," the manga features two other children who are concerned about their places within the Esper-Normal dichotomy. The first, a friend and classmate of the Children's named Hanai Chisato, is a weak telepath who learns that her psychic ability remains unchanged and wishes she could either gain or lose power so that she would be able to more strongly identify with either Espers or Normals. The second, a once-Normal boy named Kawamura Takeshi, discovers in contrast to Chisato that he has become a powerful Esper. For him, the dilemma comes from the fact that his father is a staunchly anti-Esper propagandist, thus burdening Takeshi with the idea of being viewed as inhuman by his own family, a fear that is reinforced when his attempt to save another boy from a bully results in both attacker and victim joining together to fend off the "monstrous" Takeshi.³¹⁹ These situations act not only as elaborations on the portrayal of the common and subtler Esper-Normal tensions in society, but also as ways for the manga to show how the Children connect to the plights of others from their own unique perspectives as girls whose immense powers encourage people to view them as especially dangerous. In response to Chisato, the Children suggest that more power might come with its own disadvantages as their knowing glances on the right page in figure 6.5 indicate that they are basing their statements on

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319. Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 13-19.

their own experiences as powerful Espers.³²⁰ With Takeshi, the Children try to comfort him by giving advice on living as an Esper; the left page in figure 6.5 shows how Kaoru’s soft expressions convey the idea that the Children can empathize with the boy’s plight.

Figure 6.5. The Children react to the varying difficulties faced by others in terms of the Esper-Normal divide. Source: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 160 and 174.



[Page 160]

Panels 1 and 2: “Well not quite. While I think being a Normal would be nice, I think it’d be fun if my powers could grow to Level 7, and I could then become a Special Agent Esper.”

Panel 3: “Hmm... well if you did become one, there would be a lot of things to deal with.”

Panel 4: “It’s not like he was being terribly distant.” “So you’re worried about Momotarō then?”

Panel 5: “Not so much worried as... well, at that time...”

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320. Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 159-160.

[Page 174]

Panel 1: "So your parents are both Normals, and both of them work?" "Yeah. They both teach at universities." "Hmmm."

Panel 2: "Hey Takeshi, if you became an Esper, what kind of power would you want?"

Panel 3: "Hmm, I don't really know. What kinds are there?"

Panel 4: "Well there are two major groups, ESP and Psychokinesis. I'm a Psychokinetic myself."

The particular qualities of these interactions relative to the society in *ZKC* can be seen more clearly when comparing Chisato and Takeshi to a character with a similar situation from *Railgun* named Saten Ruiko, who also feels caught between two worlds. Much like Chisato, she perceives herself as not quite belonging to the Espers or the non-Espers. The key difference with *ZKC*, however, is that *Railgun* takes place in a relatively closed-off city designed to foster the talents of Espers such that the equivalents of the Children in terms of psychic prowess are praised and seen by the majority with aspiration and pride. The result is an Esper-dominated societal structure where the pressure to grow stronger is too much for some. In contrast, *ZKC* presents a society where, even as Espers have a clear advantage in terms of their abilities, regular human beings are the majority and dictate the definition of "normal." Thus, while Ruiko in *Railgun* learns to cope with her low position in a unidirectional power structure, Chisato and Takeshi's circumstances show how societal pressure in *ZKC* not only comes from both Espers and Normals, but that there are many different degrees of alienation for Espers. By then showing the Children in relation to Chisato and Takeshi, the manga further expresses the idea that their power forces them to be keenly aware of the tension between Espers and Normals.

The "Gift of Children" arc communicates this concept even in its opening scene, which shows a power disparity between the Children and other Espers, as well as how the Children are wary of actions which might contribute to the Esper-Normal distinction as a divisive force in their society. Figures 6.6 through 6.8 portray an annual examination to measure psychic power. Kaoru is shown to be literally immeasurable in figure 6.7 (Level 7 in the setting of *ZKC* is the absolute highest category for Espers, far above even a Level 6), while Shiho nonchalantly "examines the examiner," using her ability to demonstrate her superiority over another psychometer. Figure 6.8 then uses Shiho's face as a primary recurring element to dictate the flow of the page, emphasizing it in order to

lend significance to her concern about the potential dangers of the exam turning into, in her own words, a “witch hunt.”³²¹

Figure 6.6. A school-wide Esper examination highlights both the power of the Children and the potentially divisive nature of the examination (part 1). Source: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 152-153.



Panels 3 and 4: /ESP Exam/ “Okay, next question.”

Panels 5: “There’s a snail on top of a razor blade. You want to use the razor. What do you do?”

Panels 6: “Me? I don’t quite get what you’re saying.”

Panels 7: “I still haven’t grown any hair yet, so I wouldn’t need to. I wouldn’t use the razor.” “It’s a question to test the main component of your psychic powers. Just answer it, okay?”

Panels 8: “I wouldn’t do anything.” [machine sounds] “That razor would be gross.”

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321. Shīna, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8, 156.

Figure 6.7. A school-wide Esper examination highlights both the power of the Children and the potentially divisive nature of the examination (part 2). Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 154-155.



Panels 1 to 5: [Beeping] (“Incredible...! All of the devices are unable to measure her power!”)

Panel 6: “Uh...”

Panel 7: “You’re a Level 2! No problems in particular.” “Yay, that’s a relief!”

Panel 8: “Next, please.” “Okay.”

Panel 9: “So, first question. You’re dating a secretary.” “I’m the one who’s asking the questions here!”

Panel 10: “...There really isn’t any need to test us, right?” “You know we’re Level 7s.”

Figure 6.8. A school-wide Esper examination highlights both the power of the Children and the potentially divisive nature of the examination (part 3). Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 156-157.



Panel 1: "We came here just so that your secret wouldn't be leaked. Might as well take some comparison samples between the Children too." "I'm not really fond of these exams."

Panels 2 to 3: "They're almost like witch hunts. Like we're being evaluated and picked out."

Panel 4: "You might be right... Unlike you three, who've had your powers since you were little, I found out about my abilities from an exam."

Panels 5 to 6: "Is that right?" "Dr. Sasaki! Wait just a-"

Panel 7: "Minamoto!" "What's the matter, 'Dr. Minamoto?'"

Panel 8: "Would you mind taking over examining the younger grades? There are some kids here who've caught my attention."

Panel 9: "Got it. I'll leave this side to you." "Oh, and..."

Panel 10: *“Are there any symptoms from the last incident? How is Kaoru doing?” “She seems normal, I guess?”*

Panel 11: *“From my experience though, this is the time when girls are scariest.”*
[chuckling] “...Is, is that right?”

Panel 12: *[touch] “It’s nothing to worry about though.”*

The one panel not depicting Shiho on the right page of figure 6.8 shows four girls waiting in line. This panel is made to look similar to a panel in figure 6.6 that shows from a distance a line of students waiting for the examination, the main difference being that the once faceless bodies in figure 6.6 are portrayed in figure 6.8 with clear and unique physical traits. Two of the girls in figure 6.8, Aoi and Chisato, are meant to be recognizable to the reader, while the other two are unidentifiable as Espers or Normals based on sight alone, thus implying the possibility that such labels could divide them. By having Shiho’s multiple appearances on the page surround the more detailed view of the girls in line, the manga also portrays Shiho’s feelings about the whole process, and thus also the possible ways in which it affects her and the other Children emotionally.

By showing how the characters seek to identify themselves within the Esper-Normal dichotomy, *ZKC* establishes that how people perceive the concept of normality is a subtle yet broadly underlying issue within their society. The Children are no exception, and they occupy a particular position that affords them great advantages over other human beings at the potential expense of their emotional and psychological health. The depiction of their psychologies is a strong factor in expressing this sense of alienation in their society, but, as will become clear in the next section, this same focus on emotion is also how *ZKC* communicates its ideas for political solutions to this social tension.

6.4. THE MEANING OF “NORMALITY”

The concern expressed by the Children in the various circumstances where they are made to feel “abnormal” either directly or indirectly, forms the foundation for an equally emotion-based attempt to solve this sense of alienation. Through its portrayal of their lives, *ZKC* also communicates the political impact of emotions such as love, trust, and acceptance. Looking again at figure 6.4, the

scene acts not only as an example of a Normal fearing an Esper, but also as a way to show both how Minamoto attempts to instill in the Children a strong sense of personal normality and that this has a profound effect on the Children. After the nurse pulls away, the last panel features a hand grasping Shiho's, preventing the panel sequence from being solely about the nurse's unconscious fear and Shiho's sense of alienation. The next page reveals the hand to be Minamoto's, and the fact that he is more concerned with stopping Kaoru and Aoi from bickering than Shiho reading his mind gives the impression that he regards her ability as just another part of everyday life. Shiho's smile in the following panel, when compared to her disappointment at the nurse's reaction on the page prior, indicates the positive emotional effects Minamoto's actions have on Shiho, namely how it gives her the confidence to believe that she can be treated normally. By showing how Minamoto treats their powers so matter-of-factly, *ZKC* grounds its potential solution for the divide between Espers and Normals within a "normality approach" that encourages the Children to perceive themselves as normal no matter their circumstances in order to prevent a sense of alienation. *ZKC* also establishes that, as their caretaker, Minamoto is extremely influential in the Children's lives, as well as someone who places great importance in raising them. At one point Minamoto declares, "Their 'present' is just as important as the future of humanity. Even if it doesn't seem to matter much, that's how I want to approach things."³²² In this context, a concept as common as teaching children to have confidence in their self-identity takes on a decidedly science fictional significance.

Figure 6.5 uses the contrast between more dramatic and more humorous expressions of anger to highlight how the nurse and Minamoto view the Children differently. In stark contrast to the more serious, dramatic expression by the nurse on page 29 in figure 6.5, Minamoto's focus on Kaoru and Aoi instead of Shiho not only deflates the tension in the panels involving Shiho and the nurse but also shows the level of trust that the Children and Minamoto have for each other. This use of visual exaggeration to indicate humor and thus a level of emotional comfort between the Children and Minamoto is a technique the manga frequently employs to express how these characters try to encourage in each other a personal sense of normality. In particular, as stated in Chapter 4.3,

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322. Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 20.

the humorous depiction of intense anger in *ZKC*, though similar to the “graphic emblem” for anger as depicted by Neil Cohn,³²³ becomes symbolic of that comfort, and by extension a sense of confidence in identity for the Children. In this respect, one of the most prominent recurring gags of *ZKC*, where Kaoru uses her psychokinesis to slam Minamoto against a wall after he has angered her, is representative of this contextualized use of the visual motif of exaggerated comedic anger. Presented ostensibly as Kaoru misbehaving, these scenes tie the Children’s use of their powers to their psychological ease around Minamoto, while also contributing to the idea that Minamoto treats the Children’s abuse of their abilities more as tantrums or childish mischief rather than as evidence of their potential threat as Espers.

In figures 6.9 and 6.10,³²⁴ Kaoru asks if Minamoto would prefer if they were never Espers. Kaoru shows visible concern over this question, but when Minamoto tries to cheer her up, Shiho reveals that Minamoto does indeed believe that life would certainly be easier without them. However, the nature of Minamoto’s thoughts, “I could live without having my feelings read [by Shiho], without anyone trespassing on me [due to Aoi’s teleportation ability], and without being slammed into walls [by Kaoru],”³²⁵ as well as Aoi’s response that both Minamoto’s thoughts and Kaoru’s reaction to them are familiar territory,³²⁶ point to the idea that these are the most common ways in which the Children cause him trouble. The image of Kaoru’s violent response (figure 6.10) and Shiho’s frequently unasked-for reading of Minamoto’s inner self become ways of presenting the Children as engaging in natural, comfortable behavior while also showing how Minamoto on a fundamental level encourages this because it fosters their sense of normality. The frivolity with which the Children use (and abuse) their abilities, at least with Minamoto, indicates that they are indeed capable on some level of viewing themselves as “normal,” which transforms the act of encouraging such confidence in identity into a political strategy that is a part of the cognitive process of an SF environment.

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323. Neil Cohn, “Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga,” in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 193.

324. Also seen in figures 3.9 and 3.10.

325. Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2. (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 168.

326. Shīna, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2, 168.

Figure 6.9. A serious moment sets up the use of anger as a sign of trust and comfort (part 1).
 Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 166-167.



Panel 1: "If low-cost, high-level ECMs [Esper Counter Measures] become popular, it can break down the wall between you and Normals. The reason there's all this trouble is because of the sense that Espers are overwhelmingly superior."

Panel 2: "Well, you might be right about that." "If that were the case, we'd be able to go to school normally." "But..."

Panel 3: "Doesn't that mean that others get to decide when we can and can't use our powers?"

Panel 4: "Don't worry. There's another reason that we can release your powers."

Panel 5: "What about you, Minamoto? Would you feel safer?"

Panel 6: "Do you think it'd be better if we never had these powers? Is it really that scary for others who are like us to not be under control?"

Panel 8: "Kaoru! That's not it!"

Panel 9: "I just- uh oh." [grab] "Well obviously it'd be a relief."

Figure 6.10. A serious moment sets up the use of anger as a sign of trust and comfort (part 2).
 Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 168.

Panel 1: “I could live without having my feelings read, without anyone trespassing on me, and without being slammed into walls,’ is what he was thinking.” “Urk!” [slam] “Really now!!!” “Speaking of obvious, that reaction was totally obvious too.”

Panels 2 to 3: “Officer Minamoto! We’re at the scene! [helicopter flying] “We’re estimated to arrive in 15 minutes.”

Reinforcing the use of humor to emphasize this active pursuit of normality is the fact that the manga does not portray the close relationship between Minamoto and the Children as an inevitable development, instead showing how their mutual trust has been actively built up over time. In a chapter where Minamoto and Kaoru first meet, ZKC uses the familiar image of Kaoru throwing Minamoto against a wall with her powers, only to subvert the expectation of humor associated with it by having the pages concentrate on Kaoru’s tearful expression and her fear of showing weakness to others (figure 6.11). Kaoru’s expressions in the first and last panel of the left page in figure 6.11 contribute heavily to the panel flow and make it primarily about her emotional state, while the story reveals that Kaoru’s resistance towards opening up to others in this instance derives from being treated like a dangerous animal, as evidenced by the fact that during this time the Children are forced to wear disciplinary shock collars.³²⁷ This stark contrast allows for Kaoru’s comedic acts of violence against Minamoto in the main



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327. Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2008), 156.

narrative (such as in figure 6.10) to be interpreted even more as a product of a conscious effort towards fostering their own perceptions of themselves as normal.

Figure 6.11. A younger Kaoru's true frustration contrasts heavily with the more comedic anger depicted in figure 6.10. Source: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2008), 151-152.



[Page 151]

Panels 2: "A child...! That couldn't be...?"

Panels 3 to 4: [gasp] "Wh-what are you looking at?" "Wha? No, it's just, you looked so sad, and I was wondering why~"

[Page 152]

Panel 1: [blush]

Panel 2: "Sad?" [pressure] "Me?"

Panel 3: [Slam, wall cracking] "Argh!"

Panel 4: "Don't say such careless things, stupid!"

Martha Nussbaum questions how political theory defines the minimally capable human being, and that it is perhaps necessary to re-evaluate the idea of “normal” so that it can account for a greater range of people,³²⁸ an argument that connects to *ZKC* and its question of how terms such as “human” and “normal” are utilized with respect to Espers. While Nussbaum’s concern is with disabled people, however, *ZKC* can be seen as taking into consideration those who are “super capable,” yet still feel as if they suffer from being unable to adequately conform to their societal standard, which assumes Normals over Espers as the norm. This can also be seen in regards to the extremist groups whom the Children fight, as Futsū no hitobito re-evaluates normality such that anyone who is above their range of capability is considered inhuman, while P.A.N.D.R.A. perceives Espers as the “sighted” and Normals as the “blind,” but it is also evident in the contrast between the everyday alienation the Children experience and the love and acceptance they receive from Minamoto. The Children, positioned in the narrative as being both the most “inhuman” of all yet also the ones with the greatest potential for change, help to emphasize the idea that “normality” is consciously lived by the Children and Minamoto through their everyday actions.

The relationship between Minamoto and the Children becomes visually representative of how trust, or more specifically the conscious pursuit of trust, acts through its connection with emotion to become a force with political potential, as well as a component that contributes to the depiction of the science fictional world in *ZKC*. As Nussbaum explains, love and trust were traditionally considered apolitical concepts, where “people do things out of love and affection rather than mutual respect... The bonds of family love and the activities that flow from them are imagined as somehow ... natural, not part of what the parties themselves are designing.”³²⁹ However, Nussbaum also points out that this has changed, as “it is widely acknowledged that the family is itself a political institution defined and shaped in fundamental ways by laws and social institutions ... [families] are shaped in many ways by social background conditions and by the expectations and necessities that these impose.”³³⁰ While a fictional family of course does not have to follow the behavior of a real one, the manner in which Minamoto tries to encourage a sense of normality within the Children

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328. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 189.

329. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 105.

330. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 105-106.

relies on similar political notions of love and trust. The fact that this sense of normality is shown to be a product of conscious effort emphasizes the idea that these actions are indeed a response to the Children's specific backgrounds as powerful Espers and how the world both implicitly and explicitly responds to them. Thus, the political aspect of the normality approach lies in its attempt to foster emotional and psychological strength, and by extension a sense of happiness, in order to maintain one's self-identity. Minamoto's desire to create a home and environment where the Children feel that they are indeed normal acts as an alternative political space where they do not feel alienated by their inherent differences compared to others.

However, *ZKC* also shows that, while trust is an important component in this conscious pursuit of normality, it is not necessarily an unbreakable sentimental bond. This is seen in the manga primarily through scenes that utilize in part the "battle manga" aspects of *ZKC* to present a possible future where the Children have grown into adulthood and are a part of the global war against Normals. *ZKC* features a recurring image of this future, where Minamoto points a gun at an adult Kaoru poised to retaliate, as seen in figures 6.12 and 6.13. Figure 6.12 renders Minamoto and Kaoru as the primary focal points of each page, prompting a view of these pages in terms of their relationship. Unlike the familiar depiction of Kaoru as mischievous and prone to violence, the adult Kaoru appears much more levelheaded, as the images of destruction surrounding Kaoru appear not to be the product of the short temper that characterizes her younger self but are instead due to some unexplained and irreconcilable point of difference. While the actual narrative itself implies that there may not have been a complete loss of trust between Kaoru and Minamoto, the fact that it ends with Minamoto shooting (and presumably killing) Kaoru in figure 6.13 expresses a form of betrayal in its own right. Representing an extremely personal failure on the part of Minamoto as the man who raised Kaoru, it highlights the potential fragility of the need for close trust as a way of repairing relations between Espers and Normals before violence occurs, especially when mistrust between the groups is already prevalent and even on some level expected.

Figure 6.12. A future vision of Minamoto shooting Kaoru shows a potential loss of trust between the two (part 1). Source: Shīna, Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 112-113.

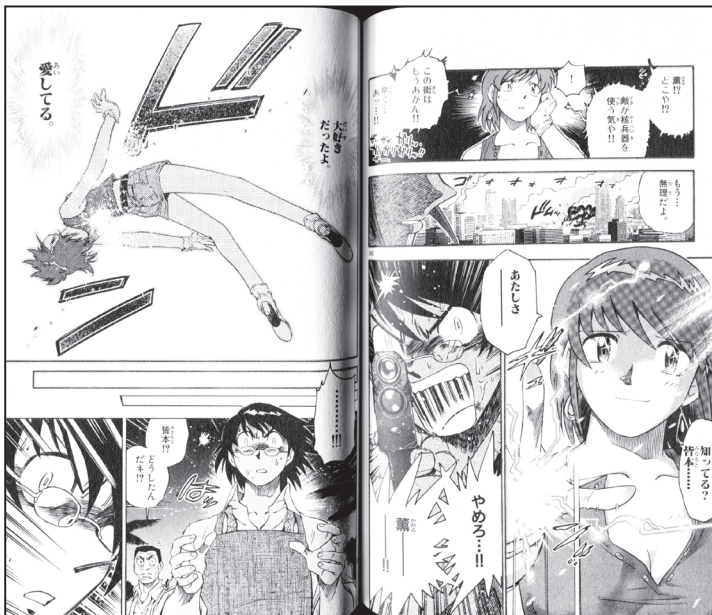


Panels 1 to 2: "At this distance, that blaster will definitely kill. Shoot me, Minamoto."

Panels 3 to 4: "But even if I'm gone nothing will change. The other Espers won't stop fighting."

Panel 5: "Then stop them... please! Espers, Normals, what's going to come out of this fighting?!"

Figure 6.13. A future vision of Minamoto shooting Kaoru shows a potential loss of trust between the two (part 2). Source: Shina, Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 114-115.



Panel 1: “Kaoru, where are you? It looks like the enemy’s planning on using nuclear weapons!” “This city is done for! Quickly-!” [static]

Panel 2: “It’s too late.” [explosions]

Panel 3: “Did you know, Minamoto?” [energy welling up]

Panels 4 to 5: “I always...” “Stop it...! Kaoru!” “I always loved you. I still do.”

Panel 8: “Minamoto, what’s the matter?”

A later chapter, titled “Day of Reservation,” reinforces figures 6.12 and 6.13 as images representative of betrayal and failure by utilizing similar imagery to portray how the leader of P.A.N.D.R.A., a man named Hyōbu Kyōsuke, is himself the product of a loss of trust.³³¹ Hyōbu, who fought in the Second World War as part of the group that would later become B.A.B.E.L., reveals that the commanding officer that Hyōbu looked up to as a father figure was also responsible for the prominent bullet wound on his forehead. The chapter draws clear parallels between Minamoto and Hyōbu’s commanding officer and thus to the Children and Hyōbu himself (who in terms of psychic power is on par with the Children), while the moment of betrayal clearly resembles the image of Minamoto and Kaoru in the future. Figure 6.14 shows a comparison between the two, with both images featuring an Esper’s outstretched hand alongside a shooter with an intense (and non-humorous) expression. This visual parallel serves to emphasize the fact that, despite the strides made by Minamoto and the Children, they are still psychologically affected by the Esper-Normal tensions in society. Kaoru’s passionate outburst in figure 6.2 is in fact a response to Hyōbu’s words, and her exclamation that Minamoto is different from other Normals³³² conveys the idea that, on some level, Kaoru still sees Normals as a group of hateful, intolerant people. In highlighting trust and Kaoru’s response to the potential loss of it, the role of emotion in the normality approach becomes an important part of the science fictional world of *ZKC* and its cognitive processes.

Figure 6.14. Similar imagery is used to show the loss of trust. Sources: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 1 (Japan: Shogakukan, 2005), 114 (right). Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Shogakukan 2007, 164 (left).

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331. Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007), 113-184.

332. Shīna, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 10, 176.



[page 114]

(see figure 6.13 for translation)



[page 164]

Panels 1 to 2: [stands up suddenly] "Impossible!"

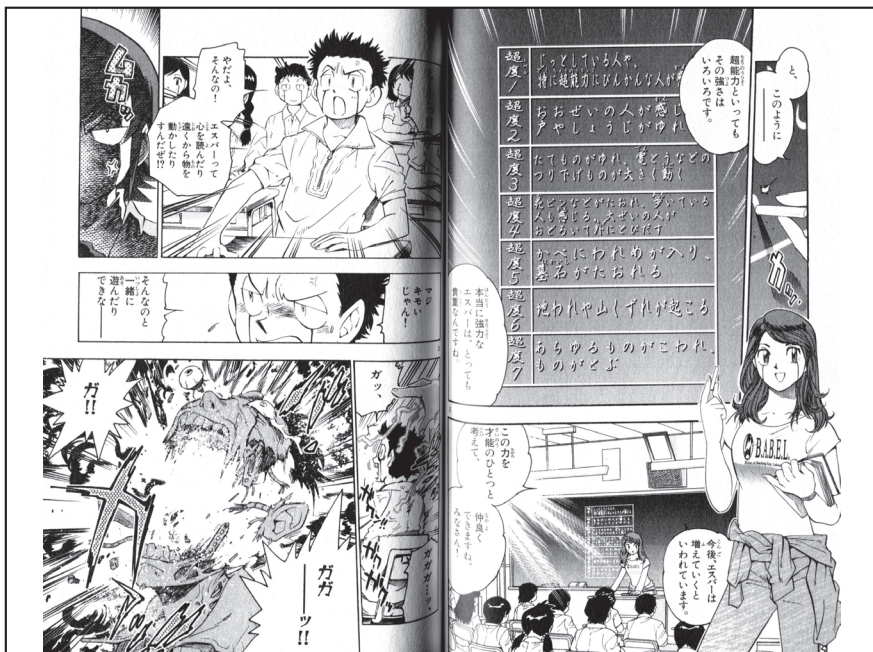
6.5. "NATURAL NORMALITY" VS. "SOCIAL NORMALITY"

The normality approach as described thus far is based primarily on the interactions between Minamoto and the Children and rests on the pursuit of "natural normality" whereby psychic abilities are considered normal because they are an inherent part of Espers. By assuming this, it potentially frees the Children from the shackles of constant comparison and judgment. In addition to this sense of self-as-natural, however, *ZKC* presents an additional component to the normality approach, which is to have the Children feel that they belong to and are able to participate in society. This "social normality," which can be seen as "the will of the majority or the standards of society," manifests in the narrative mainly through the fact that the Children attend school. Unlike many manga where school (or an idealized form of it) is taken as a default environment for its characters, *ZKC* specifically portrays going to school as an active step by the Children to reinforce their self-identities, further expressing the idea that the "everyday" is something that the Children on some level strive to achieve

amidst the tensions in their society, as opposed to something that simply happens around them.

In volume 1 of *ZKC*, the Children are described as being educated in government facilities, under the fear that letting them interact with those weaker than them (i.e. most if not all people) could lead to someone getting hurt. Figure 6.15 is a scene designed to show that these fears are to an extent justified, as an attempt to test their patience by having a robotic “dummy” student spout anti-Esper rhetoric causes Kaoru to violently explode its head. While this is played partly for comedic purposes, and there are hints that the people in the classroom are robots from the beginning (the vertical lines underneath their eyes showing some “artificiality,” the B.A.B.E.L. T-shirt worn by the teacher, the small bits of wire and metal that jut out from the exploding dummy’s head), the fact that the manga does not reveal the whole situation to be a simulation until after Kaoru destroys the dummy in such an overtly violent display draws attention to the possibility of the Children accidentally (or intentionally) harming others out of frustration. Here, the manga uses the visual motif of exaggerated anger while initially obscuring the fact that the violence is not “real” in order to show how the natural normalcy of the Children pushes up against the social environment of an “everyday” classroom.

Figure 6.15. A mock classroom scene emphasizes the potential threat of Kaoru’s abilities. Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 86-87.



Panels 1: "And so, as you can see..."

Panel 2: "When it comes to psychic powers there are various levels." A chart explaining the signs of various Esper levels. "Especially strong Espers are very valuable to us."

Panel 3: "These days, the number of Espers is on the rise. If you think of these powers as talents, then you can get along with them just fine!"

Panel 4: "No way! Espers can read your mind and move things from far away, right?"

Panel 5: [anger]

Panel 6: "That's so gross. I could never play with them-"

Panels 7 and 8: "Gh-gh-gh-gh-gh!" [crackling and explosions]

The scene in figure 6.15 sets up the significance of when the Children are later allowed to attend a real school, as ZKC presents the school environment not only as a fulfillment of their desire for social normality but also as a locus of interaction between the concepts of natural and social normality. Figure 6.16, which depicts the Children's first day of school, uses a variety of emotional elements both visual and narrative to connect the Children's attempts to "normalize" within their society at large. The left page of figure 6.16 depicts Kaoru's excitement over the very idea of getting her own seat, emphasizing how the Children's attendance stems from their desires to engage in the activities others their age would take for granted. Another important visual element appears on the right page in the close-ups of the jewelry worn by the Children. Established previously as "limiters," devices designed to inhibit their psychic abilities, the Children voluntarily wear them as a sign of their mutual trust in Minamoto, who in return makes them easily removable (and thus easily ignored, leading to the Children's misbehavior as seen in figures 6.9 and 6.10). In the context of the classroom, however, it becomes a part of their goal of presenting themselves as regular children, both in the sense of concealing their identities as the most powerful Espers in Japan and hoping to fit in with their classmates. The actual appearances of the limiters are also important in terms of the Children's psychological relationship with their world, not only because they are reflections of the Children's individual personalities and emotional perspectives (Kaoru is a tomboy so she wears her limiter like a wristwatch, for example) but also because their resemblance to jewelry ties into the idea of social normality. As a concession that reduces their prominence as Espers, the limiters are also visually symbolic of social normality because their appearance implies a desire to avoid standing out.

Figure 6.16. Reactions from the other characters indicate awareness that the Children are Espers. Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 70-71.



- Panel 1: "Please take care of us!" [chatter] ("Wow...") ("All three of them are cute!")
- Panel 6: "Those accessories... could those three be...?!"
- Panel 7: ("Wow! There are so many kids here.") ("Sure was a lot of baby-making to have all of these kids!") ("She's thinking of something dirty, isn't she.")
- Panel 8: "Those seats all the way in the back are yours!"
- Panels 9 to 10: "Our... seats!"
- Panel 11: "Now then..."

This camouflage aspect of the limiters becomes a focal point of the Children's interactions with their classmates as it prompts the subtle displays of emotions such as joy, quiet anticipation, and suspicion on the right page of figure 6.16. Two classmates are shown, the telepath girl from figure 6.5, Chisato, and a Normal boy named Tōno Masato. Chisato's surprise at seeing the Children's "jewelry" and the accurate guess that they are in fact Espers, along with Masato's corresponding reaction to Chisato, are the prelude to a confrontation between Kaoru's senses of natural and social normality. Here, the limiter both hides and draws attention to the fact that they are Espers, as while Chisato uses their mutual commonality as Espers to try and befriend the Children, in the case of Masato it

becomes the impetus for him to begin ridiculing the Children for being Espers, thus replicating the same issue that Kaoru encountered with the robot dummy. What renders this conflict between natural and social normality all the more potent, however, is the fact that the Children are so powerful that, even with their limiters, they are still more than capable of causing serious harm to others. The significance of this is shown through Kaoru's expressions, which come out in response to Masato shoving Kaoru after a sequence of panels depicting an escalating sense of tension between the two. Masato expresses the mistaken belief that the limiter has completely neutralized her abilities (figure 6.17), which Kaoru responds to by threatening the possible use of her psychokinesis (figure 6.18). Here, her frustration and the sheer size of the panel give the scene a decidedly non-humorous weight to Kaoru's mindset that is similar to her expressions as a younger child in figure 6.11, before she met Minamoto and began to accept herself as normal. While figure 6.18 comes from a chapter published before figure 6.11, its dramatic appearance expresses a similar sense of legitimate anger stemming from a sense of pain and alienation and acts as a reminder of what Kaoru and the other Children must deal with in terms of their identities.

Figure 6.17. Kaoru shows a legitimate sense of indignation over being ridiculed for being an Esper (part 1). Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 80-81.



Panel 1: "Well, of course you'd get along with those ugly Espers." "What!"
 Panel 2: "Hey punk, what did you just say?"
 Panels 3 to 4: [hit] "Wha-!"
 Panel 5: ("Hey, what the-? Kaoru, did you...?")
 Panel 6: "You've done it now, Psychokinetic!" "It wasn't me! Are you using that as an excuse, punk?" "No, that wasn't an excuse."
 Panel 7: "Well then, why did the blackboard eraser fly off and hit me?" "How should I know? You let it hit you!"
 Panel 8: "You want to start something? You're just a girl." [shove] "And even without your limiter, you're only a Level 2!"



Figure 6.18. Kaoru shows a legitimate sense of indignation over being ridiculed for being an Esper (part 2). Source: Shina Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 82.

Panel 1: "You think so?" [menacing, room shaking]
 Panels 2 and 3: ("K-Kaoru! Are you trying to make your progress all for naught?")

Although this interaction is ostensibly an argument between elementary school students, it also presents the potential risks of denying one's sense of natural normality in favor of appealing to social normality. The boy sees the limiter not as an opportunity to become friends but to take advantage of a leveled playing field, while Kaoru must consciously restrain herself from using the psychokinesis that comes to her so naturally in spite of his intolerance, especially because of how she is capable of overpowering the restrictions imposed by the limiter. This interaction, conveyed primarily through the characters' emotions, shows not only how natural normality and social normality can run up against each other, but that to achieve both requires for the Children a level of diligence unique to their circumstances.

In this situation, visual humor again plays an important role, as *ZKC* uses it to express the sense that Kaoru's belief in her own normality enables her to overcome this scenario. Although she comes close to harming the boy, Kaoru reflects upon the faith that Minamoto has in her and soon after declares that she will not use her abilities, and instead would prefer to fight him in the conventional sense (figure 6.19). "I don't need psychic powers for someone like you! If you're a man, then come at me with your fists!"³³³ When compared to figure 6.18, Kaoru's anger in the second to last panel is so comedic in its exaggeration that it conveys Kaoru's confidence in her own normality in a fashion similar to when she attacks Minamoto in figure 6.10, thus differentiating between her anger when she is made to feel abnormal or alienated and her boastful "rage" when she is simply acting out of pride. Kaoru's struggle and eventual resolution with her own abilities thus demonstrates how *ZKC* presents a mundane environment such as school through the emotional experience of its characters in a way that draws heavily from its established science fictional setting, using it to further explore and influence the concept of normality.

Figure 6.19. Comedic anger indicates Kaoru's confidence in her identity as an Esper. Source: Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 86-87.



333. Shīna Takashi, *Zettai Karen Children*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005), 87.

Panel 3: *[relax]*

Panel 4: "I won't use my psychic powers!"

Panel 5: You used them already, liar!" "I didn't lie!" "Then show me some proof!" "I don't need to!"

Panel 6: "No matter what you think, I made a promise to not use my powers, and there's someone who believes in me!"

Panel 8: "I don't need psychic powers for someone like you!" *[roar]* "If you're a man, then come at me with your fists!"

Panel 9: "If you're going that far, then fine with me! Take this!"

6.6. HYBRID NORMALITY

The contribution that emotions make to the science fictional world and the elaboration of political alternatives in *ZKC* comes out primarily in terms of the normality approach. *ZKC*'s portrayal of the Children as young but powerful girls who experience the tension between Espers and Normals from a unique perspective, as well as their method for achieving a stable self-perception all result in a variation on Carol Hanisch's idea that "the personal is political,"³³⁴ that voicing or acting upon one's personal problems can be considered political action. A feminist writer, Hanisch states that women are "messed over, not messed up"³³⁵ as a rebuttal to the idea that the sessions of personal therapy engaged by her peers are because something is psychologically wrong with them. "The very word 'therapy' is obviously a misnomer if carried to its logical conclusion. Therapy assumes that someone is sick and that there is a cure, e.g., a personal solution."³³⁶ The effort taken by Minamoto and the Children in order to achieve a sense of normality can be viewed similarly, because of how the environment he creates for them through the normality approach ideally allows the Children to cope with and prepare for a society that singles them out due to their differences, and then indirectly places blame and responsibility on them for being the most extreme representations of Espers as "super capable."



334. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political: The Women's Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction," *Writings by Carol Hanisch*, 2006, accessed October 16, 2013, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

335. Hanisch, "The Personal is Political."

336. Hanisch, "The Personal is Political."

Even greater complexities of the normality approach can be found when considering the conflict between natural and social normality, as the desire to strengthen both forms highlights the contradictions between them. While the former hinges on the idea that normality is the here and now and the reality of one's existence as opposed to a constantly moving set of social goalposts to chase after, the latter is primarily concerned with this pursuit. Thus, environments such as school, where natural and social normality come into conflict with each other, draw attention to the possibility that attempting to achieve one can come at the expense of the other. This would thus result in the Children either being alienated from their own identities as Espers when attempting social normality, or from the majority of people by pursuing natural normality. These problems are further compounded by the fact that the Children's otherness comes from a real capacity to inflict great harm on others, which makes the fear that they can inspire in others understandable. In this respect, the divide between natural and social normality resembles the difference between Ludwig Feuerbach's and Karl Marx's conceptions of human essence (sometimes translated as "species-being"). Feuerbach views human essence as inherent to individuals regardless of society, while Marx takes it to be the product of particular social and historical formations.³³⁷ In other words, *ZKC* asks whether normality something you are, or something you do or have done to you. This contradiction is maintained on a deeper level by the idea that a strong, active effort to foster that acceptance of self through love can provide a stable foundation to resist feelings of alienation and the sense that one is being dehumanized, but it is also shown to be a delicate balance reliant on the concept of trust.

However, while it is possible to perceive the normality approach as fundamentally unfeasible due to a potentially irreconcilable contradiction between the two types of normality, this "problem" can be seen as an advantage. Minamoto's decision to increase the Children's normality does not rest on pursuing one form of normality at the expense of the other, but instead involves trying to instill both simultaneously. This is apparent in how he allows them to integrate into a regular school while also encouraging them to view their own abilities as simply a part of life. Uncomfortable competition can occur between the two conceptions of normality, but *ZKC* also shows in the Children's reactions to the conflicts

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337. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 1888, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Second Edition, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171-173.

in normality that they are potentially able to benefit from this contradiction.

Within the context of the narrative of *ZKC* and the idea of “social normality,” the manga places the self-based solution provided by “natural normality” into a greater social space, testing it against a definition that contradicts it on a fundamental level, all while considering the central role that the Children’s emotional health plays in this interaction. In showing how exposure to different forms of normality can grant the Children multiple perspectives on the relationship between Espers and Normals, *ZKC* suggests that having natural and social normality clash with each other can help create stronger senses of self-identity and thus potentially act as the key to helping their society overcome the Esper-Normal divide. Along with the role of trust as a component of psychological development, this contradiction lends a critical and science fictional aspect to the prominence of emotion and psychology in the normality approach as a solution. Aiming for both types of normality encourages a competition between natural and social normality in order to expose their contradictions, but instead of leading them to choose one or the other, the Children are encouraged to discover their own hybrid conceptions of normality through a process of criticism and self-reflection.

6.7. CONCLUSION: EVERYDAY LIFE AS POLITICAL STRATEGY

Through its visual and narrative presentation, *Zettai Karen Children* shows how its characters are deeply and emotionally connected to the Esper-Normal distinction that affects their society. By emphasizing the externalization of the characters’ internal psychologies and utilizing comedic expressions in contrast with more serious and dramatic ones, *ZKC* not only highlights their experiences with subtler forms of alienation in their science fictional society but also suggests a potential method for dealing with that sense of difference. The Children in particular are shown as being witness, both directly and indirectly, to a variety of small tensions between Espers and Normals, while their own unique circumstances as being among the most powerful Espers in the world leads them to feel especially “abnormal.” In response to this, the Children, with the help of their supervisor and caretaker Minamoto, are portrayed as consciously working towards perceiving themselves as inherently “normal” by politically utilizing the love and trust they have for each other. While this may appear

to be a compromise of the logical and rational process of the science fictional narrative, in actuality these emotions act as the very foundation of the sense of cognitive estrangement in *ZKC*.

The effects of emotions in terms of the novum in *ZKC* are twofold. First, it utilizes the emotional perspectives of a variety of characters, especially the Children, as a means of experiencing the alternative environment of the manga. Second, while the use of emotions in *ZKC* is in certain ways conventional and would likely fit into a more purely literary narrative, the active pursuit of normality and the challenges that arise from it transform the Children's emotions into a part of the SF environment that is then cognitively explored in great detail. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that, as a method for reinforcing their senses of identity, the "normality approach" reveals itself to be quite complex despite its seeming simplicity. This is not merely because it functions by combining Carol Hanisch's idea of the personal as political with Martha Nussbaum's argument for re-evaluating the way society defines "normal," but also because it involves embracing a substantial contradiction.

The normality approach requires encouraging in the Children a sense that their comparatively superhuman abilities *make* them normal (natural normality) while also fostering the idea that they can participate in society in ways other children would take for granted (social normality), and to concentrate on one comes at the possible expense of the other. Rather than treating this as a problem, however, *ZKC* suggests that this incongruity can be useful, as it potentially allows for a more complex and ever-shifting conception of normality that continually challenges and improves itself. Overall, *ZKC* takes the seemingly conventional concepts of love, trust, and the desire to be normal and transforms them into the cornerstone of an SF narrative that is political because of its focus on emotions. Elaborating the problem of "everyday alienation" in the Children's lives, the presence of emotions such as happiness and anger, and their visual portrayals in the manga, allow *Zettai Karen Children* to offer and then investigate the idea that actively thinking of oneself as normal (as opposed to merely trying to present oneself as normal) can become the foundation for a political strategy located in the everyday.