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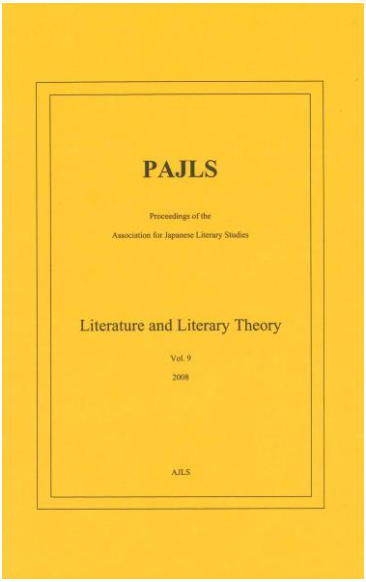

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Chasing The Tails of Tales: Nakagami Kenji and the End of Folklore

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My paper today is on Nakagami Kenji's *Kishū: ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari* (Ki Province: the Tale of the Land of Trees and the Land of Roots).[1] *Kishū* is the record of a "story gathering" expedition made by Nakagami in 1977 around the Kii peninsula, largely to villages designated as *hisabetsu buraku*, or the quarters of those discriminated against. The narrative was serialized in the popular *Asahi Journal* weekly newsmagazine from July 1977 to January 1978.[2] In the *Nakagami Kenji zenshū* it is included in one of the volumes of essays and other non-fiction, and classified as "*documento*," or document, in the accompanying chronological table (*nenpyō*).[3] Watanabe Naomi dubs it reportage.[4] From a superficial perspective, *Kishū* might be regarded as engaged in what James Clifford called "salvage ethnography," or an ethnology dedicated to "preserving a dying tradition."[5] However, a more careful reading reveals that Nakagami is interested in *Kishū* as (1) a site that reveals a structure, or a set of persistent binarisms at the core of so-called Japanese culture, (2) a conduit to antecedent narrations, and (3) an example of the inability of language or narrative to describe material reality, or the land of Kishū as *the limit of signification*. Finally, (4) *Kishū* challenges the distinctions between ethnography, literature, and history through a narration process that mixes up all three discourses. Hence, rather than topography, *Kishū* describes the mythic space of a topos. To put these four points together: *Kishū*'s oral histories and tales of local residents call up the haunts of Japanese literature and mythology in order to explore a topos indebted to a topological structure *cut up* into a set of binarisms, or discourses of discrimination, precisely through the agent of narration, but paradoxically this is also a signification mitigated by a different mobilization of that same agent of narration. I hope to make these last two statements clear in the articulation of my argument that follows.

Let me lay out three quotes, all from the preface to *Kishū*:

> (1) I had thought that by means of a reporting, or rather documentation that recorded the facts (*jijitsu*), I (would) violate (*kuiyaburi*) the novel, while yet fortifying (*hokyō*) the novel. (482)

> (2) I will reiterate that this is neither a simple sightseeing trip nor a descriptive topography of the region. Rather, it resembles American novelist William

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[1] Nakagami Kenji, *Kishū: ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari*, in Karatani Kōjin, et al., eds., *Nakagami Kenji zenshū*, vol. 14 (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996), 479-679. Hereafter pagination will follow quotations parenthetically in the text.

[2] *Nenpyō*, in *Nakagami Kenji zenshū*, in Karatani Kōjin, et al., eds., *Nakagami Kenji zenshū*, vol. 15 (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996), 751.

[3] *Nenpyō*, 751.

[4] Watanabe Naomi, "Nakagami Kenji zenshū kakukan no yomidokoro," *Subaru*, no. 7 (July 1995), 46.

[5] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 112-113.

> Faulkner's mapping of Yoknapatawpha in Jefferson County, Mississippi, his method of possessing and writing it. (482)
>
> (3) The story in the *Nihon ryōiki* of the man who went into the middle of the mountains, wrapped a rope around his ankle, and dangled himself off the edge of the cliff reciting the Lotus Sutra is reality. If to travel about Kumano in Kishū is to enter into the world of the miraculous, then it is also possible to stare straight at the red tongue that would not rot in the skeleton who kept the Lotus Sutra in his heart. (486)

On the one hand, Nakagami claims he is recording "facts." And this recording of "real things" (ethnography and history) will somehow both fortify and violate the novel (or fiction). On the other hand, he claims to be following Faulkner's mapping of a fictional town, Yoknapatawpha, but is describing real places. And finally, the haunts—ghosts and legends of the *past* called up by the discourses in the present—are the "truth" of this topos. The *Ryōiki*, of course, is a collection of Buddhist miracle tales, not the stuff of modern narrative history. I assume that Nakagami was neither psychotic nor on LSD at this time. So his assertion that the tale of the devout reciter of the Lotus Sutra is "reality" must be taken somehow *un-literally*. That is, looking at all three quotes, the reality of *Kishū* is precisely not what we generally take for reality, but lies on another plane, so to speak, an *elsewhere*, where the measure of significance—what he is after by designating it reality—is *something else*. And in fact, this something else is, in *Kishū*, as Watanabe Naomi and Anne McKnight have also pointed out, first and foremost a *structure* of *sabetsu* (差別), or discrimination.[6] Nakagami writes, "What is the structure of *sabetsu*? . . . for Japan, if *sabetsu* is what has given birth to Japanese-style nature, then the structure of Japanese literature and the structure of Japanese culture are also at the same time the structure of *sabetsu*" (486-487).

I think that here one must grasp this concept of *sabetsu* at its most fundamental level, or at that of signification itself—that to be or mean anything, there must be an opposing, differentiating term that it is not or does not mean. At the same time, as the word *sabetsu* itself signifies, these terms are rendered into binarisms by being hierarchized. And we should remember that it is also a specific term to describe Japanese discrimination.

To backtrack a bit, *Kishū*'s "reality" turns out to be a Buddhist miracle tale of a *faithful tongue* that would not rot in an ancient skeleton. To reiterate, I am reading this "reality" as a topos. This topos is also a *narration*, or discourse, of some things unfathomable before which our reason fails. The very bodily organ *that narrates* is what will not rot, because of its faith in the power of recitation, or iteration. A tale of a modern inhabitant of Kishū awakens the ancient miracle tale, which Nakagami calls the "current reality" of Kii. As such, it seems to me that in addition to discovering *sabetsu* as the founding structure of Japanese culture, Nakagami also points us toward what is behind this "reality," or way of signifying and comprehending, to the point where our comprehension *falters*. This is of course what can be called the "Real," in the Lacanian sense, because the Real is always the limit to description, to comprehension itself. Pointing himself towards an apprehension of the Real, Nakagami nonetheless finds himself always in the realm of discourse, which is also to say *sabetsu* or distinction.

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[6] Anne McKnight, "Ethnographies of Modernity: Nakagami Kenji's Counter-history of Modern Literature (1968-1983)" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001). Watanabe, "Nakagami Kenji zenshū kakukan no yomidokoro," 46.

A topos does not exist, materially, anywhere—it cannot be "mapped" in time or space. One might also make use of the Lacanian notion of topology, or his example of the Möbius strip, a topological *structure* that cannot be explained within Euclidean geometry—a structure that cannot be *oriented.* It is a single continuous strip that when folded and joined at its edges (sutured) *appears* to have two oppositional components; however, if one traces the length of the strip, one returns over time to the point of origin, having always been *on the same side of the strip* although it appears to have an inside and outside.[7]

The circular binarism of purity and pollution that, as Watanabe points out, Nakagami discovers everywhere throughout his journey through Kii, is like the sides of the Möbius strip.[8] They appear to be two distinct entities, but are no more than opposing modalities of a single shared structure. Thus inside/outside, conscious/unconscious, love/hate, etc. are not binarisms proper, but continuities. As Tim Dean puts it, "[I]t is not so much a question of 'blurring the boundaries' between inner and outer as it is of revealing how the outside—an alien territory—inhabits the subject's most intimate inwardness."[9] Which reminds me of Nakagami's discovery in *Kishū* of things "beautiful because they are ugly,"[10] or how pollution lies at the core of pure aesthetics in Japanese culture.

When the Möbius strip is cut down the center it remains one continuous strip; however, it now has two different sides or surfaces. Elsewhere Lacan identifies a cut as being the process that produces the subject as such, and the *objet a*, or object of desire, which *falls away* from the subject.[11] Hence it is the function of a *cut* in the structure that produces subjectivity. And the "agent" of this cut is, of course, language (or the symbolic).[12] Later Lacan had recourse to the model of the Borromean knot to perhaps better describe this structure—in which the three interlinked rings (which, however, when cut become three separate rings), representing the realms of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, are interlaced and "connected" to one another by

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[7] See Ellie Ragland and Dragan Milovanovic, eds., *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (New York: Other Press, 2004).

[8] Watanabe singles out an episode in *Kishū* as a model example of the circularity of filth and purity that Nakagami explores throughout the text. Watanabe, "Nakagami Kenji zenshū kakukan no yomidokoro," 46. In this episode, Nakagami has come to Asso and upon a young man working in a factory that produces violin strings from horse hairs. Nakagami discovers that at the core or origin of the most exquisite, acculturated strains of violin music (an apical symbol for cultural refinement) lurks a stinky, rotten horsetail which has not only been literally "hacked" off from the horse, but hacked off from representation, forgotten, disavowed as the origin of that artistic pinnacle in the violin string. The following is from that passage. "The youth was sitting cross-legged in the shadows of the farthest interior of the workshop, where he could not be seen from the outside, plucking hairs from a horsetail, which had been hacked off whole, flesh and all. The horsetail was as long as from one's shoulder [to the floor]. A lone radio sat on a dais. The youth was swiftly plucking and ordering the tail hairs surrounded by the stench of rotting flesh. Of course the fleshy tail had been salted, but there were still several horseflies on the hair. It was shocking. If I try and put that "shock" into words, it's something akin to awe. You can match up words with the hard core one encounters at the heart of the words "miraculous," as well as with the knot of the circular flow between the saint [the holy] and the humble man [the base] in Japanese nature. But they don't satisfactorily transmit the import of that shock." Nakagami, *Kishū,* 545; additions in brackets mine.

[9] Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.

[10] Watanabe, "Nakagami Kenji zenshū kakukan no yomidokoro," 46.

[11] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan trans. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 223-224, n. 18.

[12] Lacan, *Écrits*, 223 –224, n. 18. See also Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 59. I borrow the use of the word "agent" here from Dean.

the *sinthome*, or the individual's symptom—his or her particular configuration of unconscious *jouissance*.[13]

Nakagami appears to endow narration itself with the function of a *cut* in the structure that produces *sabetsu*, a cut which delineates oppositions (subject/object, purity/pollution), and also severs us from the Real, yet strives, always imperfectly, to fill in the void of the Real (in the Lacanian sense) with symbolization or representation. In this sense, the narrative of *Kishū* is constitutively self-consciously fictional in the sense that all narration is a mis-representation of "reality," or as Derrida might put it, a breach in communication, a dis-semination.[14] Language fails as communication, because it *must*. Yet, it is "not nothing."[15]

Probing the limits of an ethnographic discourse with oral histories, folklore, and literature proper, in *Kishū* narration *cuts* out (demarcates) their differences and yet also sutures over this cut. This "fact gathering" as Nakagami says, "violates and fortifies" the novel (482). Polluting the purity of the ethnographic text with oral histories and a poetics (or literature), Nakagami discovers that each of these distinct narrations ends up narrating *the same reality or facts*—of a topos of a circular logic of *sabetsu* as structure, and which all fail to capture reality as they bump up against the limit of signification itself. This limit of signification is plural. In *Kishū* the narration self-reflexively addresses a failure within narration's insistent *presence*. Simplistically, noting the inadequacy of words' constative function as description, "Mountains piled on top of mountains. The mountains thick with trees washed in sun[light] were too vast to simply be called *fūkei* (scenery or landscape). Words don't measure up" (556).
Or, somewhat more complexly:

> I am a novelist. I am a person endowed with the capacity to connect pretty much anything I see directly to my novels, but in an instant, I saw that there are stories that can be narrated and dramas that can be performed dramatically, but also there are things completely beyond the realm of (literally: completely boil over) narratives and dramas. That's exactly it. In short, it is the relationship between the novel and the novelist. (545-46)

This relationship between the novel and novelist resembles somehow the "faith" of the red tongue that would not rot, but it is also the structure of *sabetsu*. One chooses one word instead of another, one organizes a huge web of incommunicable apperception (sounds, smells, affects) into a communication that *must* fail to communicate that reality, but this narration is all there is, hence, it *insists* itself in the place of that which we would, if we could, see, interpret, or communicate. Margherita Long explains how Nakagami would

> . . . string homophonic kanji across the Kii spectrum from sacred to profane and argue that they are metaphorically interchangeable. For instance, he merges the "ki" of "Ki Province" [ki no kuni]—meaning "tree" and evoking the area's dangerous, rapacious logging industry—with the safe ethereality of the "ki"

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[13] See Dragan Milovanovic, "Borromean Knots, Le Sinthome, and Sense Production in Law," in Ellie Ragland and Dragan Milovanovic, eds., *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (New York: Other Press, 2004), 368-79.
[14] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-24.
[15] Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, Cecile Lindsay et al. trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 64.

> character meaning "spirit." From here, he uses the "ki" of "Kii Peninsula" [kii hantō]—meaning "historical annals"—to connect the dark of the "ki" for "ogre" with the light of the "ki" for "rejoice." The connections are established intermittently across many essays, as anecdotal evidence permits. Whenever another kanji is added to the list, Nakagami offers the new collection in a line of text that our eyes see as different characters but our inner voice pronounces as the same sound, "ki, ki, ki, ki, ki, ki, ki, ki."[16]

According to Long, Hasumi Shigehiko calls this a "style of stuttering" that reveals language's "otherness" and inherent "confusion" as communication.[17] Throughout *Kishū* Nakagami explores the insufficiency of language to capture the whole of reality. Language fails itself in writing-as-representation of "the facts." In fact, after introducing the readers to his first local informant in the figure of San bāsan (Grandma San), Nakagami notes:

> Grandma San was the departure point of Shingū, which I had chosen as the departure point for my trip. The biography that Grandma San narrated had a flavor like that of a solid, trustworthily written realistic novel. And then, from Grandma San's narration I was able to deduce the peninsular condition of a peninsula being a peninsula. Shall I put it like this—it is the concept of "*kanata*" (elsewhere). (484)

Narration has a sense or flavor (*aji*) that imparts realism to the biography (facts), "like a trustworthy novel"—something of an oxymoron itself. San Bāsan's biography, an oral narration, is putatively true, or indebted to its being referential to "reality" (real things). However, Nakagami has shifted the discussion suddenly, from a story about an individual living in a particular community (the stuff of ethnography) to a focus on a *place* which is important both *as material that cannot be narrated* and *as a topos constructed of nothing but narration*—an "elsewhere." And not only does her narration sound like a novel—i.e. a fictional construct to Nakagami—this novel-like narration also holds a clue to analyzing the condition of the so to speak ontology of a peninsula, which has something to do with a "beyond-ness" or an unreachable, uniterable alterity, that of "elsewhere." In fact, readers of *Kishū* have already met the peninsula as "limit" to comprehension just four lines into the preface:

> While traveling Kishū on the Kii Penninsula, I thought about the meaning of the peninsula. Korea, Asia, Spain, somehow they have something in common. Also Africa, Latin America. Let's try calling it the condition of (being) peninsulas. It is like ***being*** the lower crotch of the continent, the shameful part (*chibu*) of continental land and plains. I tried grasping it as the shameful part, the genitals, of the peninsula, no, rather, as the nature that cannot be subjugated, as a metaphor for sex. No, rather, while traveling the Kii peninsula, I thought, the peninsula is not a metaphor for sex, it is the reality of sex, its actuality. For example, Shingū, the very first location I arrived at. Because I, the man who was traveling the peninsula, had been born, and grew up there until the age of 18, I had written novels using as my setting the land I remembered as Shingū, but I had not thought

[16] Margherita Long, "Nakagami and the Denial of Lineage: On Maternity, Abjection, and the Japanese Outcast Class," *Differences*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2006), 8. Additions in brackets are Long's.
[17] Long, "Nakagami and the Denial of Lineage," 9.

> of it as nature that cannot be subjugated, the land of sex. Kumano River is a woman's genitals, it is like ***being*** a vagina. (481)

The material landscape is, as the "thrust of nature" (or "inch of nature"),[18] the very limit of comprehension or signification—the peninsula as phallus or vagina, which designates the peninsula as not-it, as *kanata* (elsewhere). This is indeed the psychoanalytic concept of sex as the limit to reason.

> Sex is the stumbling block of sense. This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a production of signification, but we intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification. It is only there where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning—that sex comes to be. To say that the subject is sexed is to say that it is no longer possible to have any knowledge of *him* or *her*. *Sex serves no other function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the realm of possible experience or pure understanding.*[19]

The truth of Ki Province, as peninsula whose essence is sex itself, then, is that limit to reason, relation and communication. The structure, *sabetsu*, or discrimination, that symbolizes through the cut of narration in the topology of being—and that makes partners of histories, mythologies, and literatures—is the very core of Japanese being. *Kishū*, Nakagami's nonfictional ethnography is neither simply nonfiction nor ethnography, but an ethnography tainted by the rupture of history into the present, and of literature into reality. It is the description of a topos in which "reality" is a *structure* of discrimination, or *sabetsu*, the cut from the Real made by language, that hence makes consciousness and representation possible and in which narration functions as a constitutively impossible attempt to represent what is at the limit of representation. And in fact, *Kishū* fails as ethnography, fails as oral history, and fails even as literature, because, in part, as Hasumi Shigehiko puts it, it "takes the stuttering to extreme," and in the process "degenerates into nonsense." Clearly, Nakagami's *ultimate disinterest* in rendering a "facsimile" of reality in *Kishū* suggests that the text is indebted less to a historical or ethnographic mission and more to Nakagami's literary project of *rewriting Kii as a topos*, which one might also read as his *sinthome* (symptom), or *jouissance* in a psychoanalytic sense. Hence, perhaps it succeeds as an expression of Nakagami's *sinthome*—the *jouissance* by which he knit together his perception of reality.

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[18] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, James Strachey trans. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 44.

[19] Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 204 & 207.