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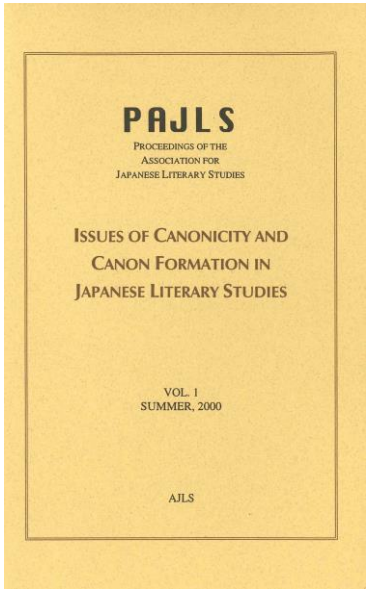

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HELL AT HOME: NAKAGAMI KENJI AND THE DISCOVERY OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD

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> Age eleven: I knew I had to sing, even if the long line of mountains crushed me.
>
> Age thirteen: People got married, dressing a plan of slaughter in dazzling vainglory in their dreams. A young man, not understanding heroic excitement or the proper songs to sing, killed himself at the funny sight of the procession. The body, fresh with chrysanthemums and filled with the anger of human beings, burned.
>
> Age sixteen: Time became something that should stop forever.
>
> —From "Record of a Life"[1]

In 1965, a group of people gathered in Shingū, Wakayama, to celebrate the publication of *Michi*, a local literary magazine. Sitting in the room that day was Nakagami Kenji, aged 19, back from Tokyo on a short visit to his hometown. He had come to hear comments on the poem he had published in that issue, entitled, "Record of a Life." But the audience remained silent on the subject of Nakagami's poem, and the editor reported that people had complained about its difficulty.[2] The silence about the poem in the room that day echoes down to the present; ultimately, Nakagami's poetry would be read as a footnote to an intricate body of fiction. By the mid-1970s, Nakagami's name would be linked far more with naturalism than symbolism. As Eto Jun wrote about Nakagami in the *Mainichi Newspaper* in 1977, "he cre-

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[1] Nakagami Kenji, "Record of a Life," *Nakagami Kenji Zenshū*, Vol. 14 (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996), 28.

[2] Asari Mizuho, "My First Meeting with Nakagami Kenji," *Kumano-shi* 39 (1995): 77.

ates characters through the pulse of his own heart which drinks in earth and blood."[3]

Ironically, the poems of the mid-1960s owe their survival to the same writers and critics who have canonized Nakagami as a writer of fiction—the editors of the *Zenshū* (collected works) who included twenty-four poems in a section in Volume 14 entitled, "Juvenalia."[4] With the exception of Yomota Inuhiko, however, little critical commentary on the poetry exists. Takazawa Shūji, Nakagami's biographer, for example, states that by 1969 Nakagami Kenji's poetic flame had burned out.[5] Like Kafka's Gregor, runs the prevailing view, one morning Nakagami awoke to find himself transformed into a writer of fiction.[6]

Nakagami's rise to fame as a fiction writer (and his decision to turn full-time to fiction eventually) reveals much about the conditions of the 1970s —to growing interest in issues of discrimination and social justice and to a resurgence of writers focusing on the darker forms of the personal.[7] In the press at least Nakagami fulfilled the promise of the angry young man of the

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[3] *Mainichi Newspaper*, 24 February 1977.

[4] The editors include Karatani Kōjin, Yomota Inuhiko, Asada Akira, and Watanabe Naomi.

[5] Takazawa Shūji, *Nakagami Kenji Hyōden* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1998), 47. Mark Morris, on the other hand, describes Nakagami as a "deflected poet of abjection." See Mark Morris, "Gossip and History," *Japan Forum* 8 (1996): 49.

[6] Yomota Inuhiko, who emphasizes the importance of the poetry to Nakagami's fiction, for example, reads a poem entitled, "Burying the Hometown" as the catalyst that moved Nakagami from poetry to fiction. By literally burying those in the hometown (the poem mentions family members by name) and exorcising his demons, Nakagami could then afford to begin to fictionalize certain starkly literal elements of his early work. See Yomota Inuhiko, "On Nakagami's Early Poetry," Essay appended to Vol. 14, *Nakagami Kenji Zenshū* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996), 11.

[7] For the former, see Noma Hiroshi and Yasuoka Shōtaro, ed., *Sabetsu Sono Kongen o Tou* (Investigating the Roots of Discrimination) (Tokyo: Asashi Shimbun-sha, 1984), a series of *taidan* on discrimination held in the late 1970s. For the latter, consider the rise of women's writings in the 1970s, particularly a writer such as Tsushima Yūko, with her strangely refracted personal tales.

buraku.[8] But I would argue that we should not forget the poems. Most obviously, they show that Nakagami read. Rather than a natural talent who sprang from nowhere, Nakagami was a precocious autodidact who worked hard at his craft. Even more importantly, the poems reveal Nakagami's fascination with the forms and textures of language itself, a preoccupation that would bear fruit in the experimental works of the 1980's. From the very beginning, Nakagami Kenji worked above and beyond the boundaries of naturalism.[9]

At the same time, the poems reveal the complex negotiations that Nakagami made with the hard, explosive material of life—how he would transform certain "shocks" into literature. One unsettling "shock" to the young Kenji was the suicide of Kinoshita Yukihira, Kenji's elder half-brother by a different father, who hanged himself in his Shingū apartment in 1959 when Kenji was thirteen years old. When the brother's body was discovered, the local newspaper reported, "Kinoshita had been suffering from mental illness."[10] The shadow of the brother floats through the poetry, stirring ripples of despair and mournful love. Over time, the figure of the brother (*ani*) more generally comes to represent the young man of the alleyway who suffers violence at his own hands or at the hands of others. The poems in particular exorcise masculine ghosts.

One map to the early poetry—and to Nakagami's creation of the literary landscape of Kumano—is the work of the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). After Nakagami takes up residence in Tokyo in 1965, he publishes a number of poems that show him to be an enthusiastic reader of Rimbaud. Of the twenty-four poems published in the collected works, nine have the word "season" (*kisetsu*) in the title, which Nakagami

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[8] See, for example, an article in the *Sankei Weekly* written soon after Nakagami won the Akutagawa Prize in 1976. Nakagami serves as a special guest on a late-night radio show, drinks whiskey, and complains about the Prize: "I hate the Akutagawa Prize. I did it all on my own. I even smoked pot. I didn't graduate from Tokyo University and write a novel. I can't believe the writers around now." "'Personality' Nakagami Kenji Speaks his Mind," *Sankei Shunkan*, April 29, 1976.

[9] Even his fascination with the pronouns *boku* (I) and *kare* (he) in the early fiction resemble the *boku's* of modern poetry rather than the fully-fleshed-out and named characters of fiction.

[10] Takazawa Shūji, 46.

himself links to Rimbaud's 1873 work *A Season in Hell* in a note appended to a poem entitled, "Trying my Hand at the Season . . ."[11] Nakagami claims that he encountered Rimbaud while still living in Shingū when a friend named Nakamori lent him a book of Rimbaud's poems in French. In Nakagami's own words:

> I went to high school with a guy named Nakamori Morio. At first he was writing lyric poetry and showing it to me, but after awhile he started to write this modern stuff filled with big words. I think it had something literary about it, but for me, coming from a background that had absolutely nothing to do with literature, I was only drawn to him because of his slightly menacing air which came from the fact that he was over a meter and 80 centimeters tall. I encountered Rimbaud at Nakamori's house. I borrowed a collection of the poems. Somehow I understood them. Once I told Nakamori that I'd translated Rimbaud. He looked surprised. You mean, you understand French? . . . I explained that I had translated it in my own way. Nakamori just laughed.[12]

Nakagami positions himself at this early stage as an uneducated youth who cannot comprehend the language of modern poetry. At the same time, he reveals tremendous self-confidence in his ability to understand and even replicate poems which prove difficult to the native speaker of French.[13] As

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[11] He states that the use of the word *kisetsu* MAY be a reference to Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* or it may not. See *Zenshū*, Vol. 14, 38.

[12] Nakagami Kenji, "Poetry in Translation ," *Zenshū*, Vol. 14, 460.

[13] Gretchen Schultz has suggested to me that Nakagami's fascination with Rimbaud might also have been extra-literary. Like Nakagami, Rimbaud was born in a provincial French town, and although he was forced to return frequently when he was ill or out of money, he spent most of his time in Paris and abroad. And, like Rimbaud, Nakagami gives up poetry early. Perhaps Nakagami was also drawn by Rimbaud's frank exploration of alternative sexualities. I am also indebted to Hosea Hirata for pointing out another route by which Nakagami might have reached Rimbaud—through the essays and translations of Kobayashi Hideo. In particular, in his essay on translating poetry, Nakagami describes how Rimbaud's language "exploded" inside of him. This echoes the language of an essay by Kobayashi on Rimbaud in

if in anticipation of such quibbles, Nakagami assures his reader that he translated Rimbaud instinctually "in his own way (*ore no ryūgi ni kikaeta*)—" or, as he states later, echoing a line from Rimbaud, in the same essay, "I thought I could create my own language."[14]

Before turning to Nakagami's versions of Rimbaud, we might briefly consider Rimbaud himself. Put simply, Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* traces the links (and the disjunctures) between travel, selfhood, and writing in rich, symbolic, and at times paradoxical language. While Rimbaud's "poetic notebook" depicts a descent into hell, it nevertheless lurches forward with the rhythm of self-discovery. The sea, for example, becomes the medium for movement and utopian dreaming. Toward the end of the work, the speaker describes how a fit of terror drove him to bed and how simple movement on the ocean calms his mind:

> I was forced to travel, to disperse the enchantments crowding in my brain. On the sea, which I loved as if it were sure to cleanse me of a defilement, I saw the rising cross of comfort. I had been damned by the rainbow. Happiness was my fatality.[15]

The sea, while damning the speaker with its iconography (the cross and the rainbow), also delivers him from madness and cures him of defilement. Furthermore, even while the speaker identifies with the convict and suffers unspeakable sadness as he travels, he also experiences visions of unknown places and records the existence of great riches.

Perhaps most relevant for our purposes, *A Season in Hell* traces the speaker's rejection of his own land and people for an imaginary and primitive Orient. In a section entitled "Bad Blood," he deplores the legacy of vice, sloth, and lechery that he inherited from his ancestors, the Gauls. In

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which he writes, "This small book exploded in the most marvelous way, so that years later I still remain in the vortex of the event." Did Nakagami merely invent his discovery of Rimbaud later from the vantage point of Tokyo? See Kobayashi Hideo, trans. Paul Anderer, *Literature of the Lost Home* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 100.

[14] Nakagami Kenji, "Poetry in Translation," *Zenshū*, Vol. 14, 464.

[15] Arthur Rimbaud, trans. Oliver Bernard, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 335.

view of the baseness of the present, the speaker turns toward the Orient, where, he believes, he will finally discover his "race—":

> My day is done; I am leaving Europe. The sea air will scorch my lungs; lost climates will tan my skin. . . . I shall return with limbs of iron, dark skin, a furious eye: from my mask I will be judged as belonging to a mighty race. I shall have gold. I shall be idle and brutal. (305)

The section climaxes in a fantasy of escape when the speaker repudiates his identity as a Christian and, denying that the whites will ever land on his island, declares "hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance!" (309).

By turns ecstatic and despairing, the speaker of *A Season in Hell* admits to his own utopianism, confessing that his vision has nothing to do with the history of the Oriental races but is simply the reformulation of the edenic dream (339). At the same time, the notebook holds out the possibility of escape and self-transformation over the surface of the sea. In the end, we come to understand that the speaker uses the metaphor of travel to describe his journey into the heart of poetry itself, from whence he emerges weary and defeated. Or, as Rimbaud concludes: "I tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new tongues. I believed that I had acquired supernatural powers. Well! I must bury my imagination and my memories! A fine fame as an artist and a storyteller swept away!" (345).

In this passage, the speaker chastises himself for his dreams of poetry, but he does so in language that is drunk on sensuality. Imagine the young Nakagami reading this account of a nearly worshipful Orientalism with its dreams of poetic catharsis, its irreverence, and its fearless embrace of the lower depths. Imagine, too, the way in which Rimbaud's interest in "bad blood" would have resounded with the young Nakagami trapped as he was in his own peculiar caste system. The speaker mesmerizes; he descends through the layers of hell and then fills them with heavenly visions. To see how Nakagami interpreted the visions of his poet/brother, we turn to the first poem, which takes the form of a counter-proposal to Rimbaud and his famous *A Season in Hell*:

"A Proposal and a Lament for the Season"

Climbing Kumazaka hill
You can see the sea stretching whitely beyond Kumano River
The sea rumbles angrily, flaying our skin,
The god sends a curse,
whispering in the young men's ears—
"Board a boat, swim, walk here . . ."
Can you see them? Kasuga Mountain and
the town which surrounds us in a burning whirlpool,
the color of flayed skin,
the town is rotting,
breathing smoke, it rots away,
Once a speculator came and bought mountain land
bought young men, too.
Then a clown came, playing the flute and dancing,
preaching about the victory of our race
he bought young men, too.
Can you see them?
Those sold mountains and those young men,
their tongues protruding as they die in agony.
Can you hear the words of the god?
"To the sea, to the sea!
They'll sell you off somewhere
Don't follow speculators and clowns."
Climbing Kumazaka Hill
you can see the rice paddies, and beyond
the sea breathing blue
"Don't be fooled, don't be sold"
Can you hear the never-ending curse of the silver sea?
Can you hear the whispers—
"Board a boat, swim, walk here."

Nakagami echoes Rimbaud's florid language in images of whirlpools and sea that flays the skin. But he responds to Rimaud by writing in the local dialect of Shingū; the speaker testifies to the history of the town with the experience of age. By climbing to the top of Kumazaka hill, the speaker makes

the counter-proposal not through an allegorical mental landscape but through the contours of the familiar. This familiar space, saturated with the sacred, contains the angry god of the sea who "rumbles and flays our skin." The god's anger is directed at the young men who, restless and gullible, sell themselves cheaply for their labor or for their military service. In retaliation, the god casts a curse, a never-ending whisper of the silver sea that will draw the young men to a different fate—perhaps to their deaths upon the water.[16] While the sea offers Rimbaud the means to explore a private mental landscape, the young men in the Kumazaka poem are puppets either of unscrupulous outsiders or of a harsh god. A romantic journey through the darker reaches of the self has been denied to them.

In contrast to the ancient and sacred space of the sea, the town itself is rotting, breathing smoke. The town that surrounds us in a burning whirlpool suggests the ways in which the outcastes are segregated, kept apart, even while the town rots around them. But the line also suggests a main narrative thread of Nakagami's early work: the burning of the town by land speculators who wanted to displace the outcastes and develop their land even at the cost of human life. The mention of speculators and clowns, too, suggests the easy exploitation of the young men of the back alleys. The speaker warns that the price of following speculators and clowns is high: the young men will die in agony, tongues protruding from their mouths—either an image of death in war or a shadow of Nakagami's brother, who hanged himself in his own apartment.

The dilemma of the young men trapped between an angry god and unscrupulous outsiders illuminates the poem's title, which wavers between being a "proposal" or a "lament" and speaks to anxiety about poetry itself. The speaker, tormented by aural delusions—the whispers "to board a boat, swim, walk here"—fears poetry itself as a kind of death. The silver sea tempts and curses, and the speaker dreads being submerged in a dangerous sea of words. The title itself poses two alternatives: does one respond to Rimbaud's poetry or does one simply lament what might have been? The word "lament" even suggests feelings of inadequacy or remorse. But what would the poem

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[16] I am grateful to Ikumi Kaminishi for pointing out that Nakagami may also be drawing on a local folk belief about a paradise (*potalaka*) that lay just off the shores of Nachi; in medieval times, pilgrims would row their boats to the spot and throw themselves into the water.

lament if not the realities of class and social position that forever deny one the freedom to move over the sea, even if just metaphorically? While luxuriating in Rimbaud's language, Nakagami struggles to make sense of his own position.

An anxious note sounds in the Kumazaka poem over the fate of the young men, their tongues protruding in agony. This note reverberates through Nakagami's other poems, too, in which dead male bodies are linked to bodies of water—to Kumano River or to the sea. In a number of the early poems, Icarus appears, already on the way down, where he melts into a "sea of desire." On the one hand, the figure of the dead young man parallels the story of the brother, which would be told and retold in the early fiction. On the other hand, the figure of the dead boy or young man transcends the coordinates of autobiography and serves as a means to explore marginalized status in general. To be an outcaste male in patriarchal Japanese society is to dwell, in Nakagami's words, outside of the *ie*, or family system, in which legitimacy is passed down from father to son.[17] The outcaste boy, truly the "expendable" male, is also the scapegoat—the victim upon whom society's fears of pollution are projected. To use Rene Girard's language, the scapegoat, by definition, absorbs society's violent urges, which, if unleashed, would engender chaos.[18] Thus, in the death of the outcaste boy, we see the mechanism of sacrifice itself—the consumption of the expendable being which ensures the continuation of the social order.

In "A Poetics for the Season," Nakagami further explores his fascination with masculine expendability—with male death itself—in what may be his most disturbing poem:

"A Poetics for the Season"

Tonight the dream of shaving whiskers, now objectified,
    fingers moving,
as blackly flowing passions numb my tongue
Where did I put my poetics of spring
    that sustained dedication to a trembling love?
Kumano River, in its ancient form,

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[17] Personal interview with Nakagami Kenji, January 1989.

[18] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 39-67.

flows on and on bearing my curse
to the town thick with silver flies,
the town shivering with ague,
where the people rot as they stand.
The railroad crossing bar of Kasuga-chō clicks up and down
and I drown in the toilet of the apartment.
Rainbow flowers, shed their petals,
laughing at a man who enjoys the end of a love affair
like a cockroach
Shall I tell you a tale of night crashing to the floor?
Or reveal how a flag, fluttering over the bottom of the ground,
enfolded our starved and cursed heads?
Or recount the story of how my strangled brother and I fucked
my fingers scattering blood, frozen
weeping thick tears like the sperm of one who enters from
behind,
my throat crushed, too, I roll into the street,
drenched by the same rain that struck the swollen penis of my
half-naked, headless, earless brother
The town burns, flashing a pistol, singing the song of the betrayer
The April night that threatened us and yelped at us
and tore us to pieces
my eyeball falls down into the room
Waiting for the thud of tidings from the season
I hear a grass flute playing inside my ear,
my body stained with bad intentions (like Bachelard's) flies
through the sky.
Kumano River floods every spring
floating the body of a dead boy,
it drinks in the man who exalts over the flowers of Monaco
and gently melts a chocolate-colored love affair.
It's too late to slip into the ditch of vulgarity
but, like before, the people rot where they stand
completely rotten, they're still standing.
In room 306 of an apartment building in Nagayama
a wife and husband have straight sex
again and again and again—
not tiring, still rotting, they wait for the dissolution of night.

"Poetics" unfolds from many points of view, sketching a vision of disintegration and despair. The first section of the poem sets up a contrast between "tonight," when blackly flowing passions numb the speaker's tongue, and the lost "spring," when a poetics could sustain his love. The image of the river brings the first section to a close, sounding a note of fatalism. Unlike the poetics and the fragile love, the river flows on and on, floating the speaker's curse, an image of immutable mythic repetition that weakens his hold on a "poetics." Later we discover that the river floods every year, bearing the body of a dead boy. Working again with the image of the expendable male, this time Nakagami identifies him with the poet, another useless body drifting out to sea.

As in the previous poem, the image of the inexorable river anchors the poem in local space, drawing the contours of the talismanic landscape that would later become the backbone of Nakagami's fiction. But the space of this poem is much darker; the speaker draws us inward and downward, first past the town shivering with sickness and the majority townspeople who rot as they stand and then further into the outcaste alleyways of Kasuga-chō, the district which lies behind the railroad station on the other side of the tracks. Finally, we descend further into the toilet of an apartment where the speaker drowns, an image reminiscent of a line by Rimbaud, "the fly drunken in the inn's privy" (50). Through this descent, Nakagami grounds his poetics in the alleyways, making it the sphere of the decadent poet or the man who cheers the end of love like a cockroach (possibly a reference to Rimbaud himself).

After this brave inversion—the toilet becomes the world—the speaker of "Poetics" hesitates. From this point on, his perspective shifts frequently, moving from outside Kasuga-chō, to inside and back out again as if he meant to gauge the reaction of his audience. Suddenly the speaker plays with the reader. Should he tell a tale of night falling on the floor? Or a story about two starving, cursed brothers? Or a strange story of death and necrophilia? In the end, the speaker chooses the last tale. The sexual encounter between two brothers, one dead and one living, reads both as an act of murder (blood scattering) and an act of love (the speaker, weeping tears of sperm, keens for the brother). While the speaker has sex with the dead brother, he soon becomes the dead brother through a long series of possessive particles (*no*) which blurs identities. In the lines that begin "my throat crushed, too," the speaker overlaps with the brother through the rain that strikes their bodies (*ore no kono nodo mo mata tsubure atama mo mimi mo nai hanratai no ani*

no bōdai shita seishokuki ni furu ame ni utareta mama kono machi no rojō ni korogaru. . . .) In this strangely ungrammatical line, the speaker functions both as the recorder of trauma and the figure of the suicide rolling in the street.

After the final violent spectacle of brother/self rolling out into the street, we find the speaker in the room, still waiting for the tidings of a poetics. In the face of violent death, however, it seems that poetry will not serve. The image of the river returns, floating the body of the dead boy, a reminder of male expendability and the speaker's curse. And this time the river absorbs the man who enjoys the flowers of Monaco, another reference to the poet or to Rimbaud himself. Finally, in his disillusionment, the speaker declares that it is too late for decadence ("it's too late to slip into the ditch of vulgarity"). Even the promise of decadence cannot deliver him from the chaos that engulfs him.

At the end of the poem, the speaker's point of view changes once again. Whereas before the "I" identified with the realm of the toilet and the cockroach, now he stands outside the alleyways looking in. From this viewpoint, he despises the people of Kasuga-chō who, like the townspeople, rot where they stand, have straight sex and naively wait for the break of day. The "straight" couple in Nagayama cannot access the bizarre realm of the speaker's family drama, where violence reigns, tears and sperm flow together, and identities cease. Like a chameleon who turns all colors and appears to be everywhere at once, the speaker becomes lost in a deep, spiraling sense of dislocation where he cannot find the poetics that once sustained his ardor. The poem descends into a whirlpool of blood, sperm, and body parts—both the brother's and the speaker's own—and language rises in a tide that has gone out of control.

In this bizarre poem, Nakagami gives us his most violent version of Arthur Rimbaud. As we descend into the muck of rotting bodies and violation, language itself becomes a weapon that wounds both poet and reader, even as the speaker waits for the deliverance of a poetics. The parameters of Nakagami's hell, unlike Rimbaud's, which resides in a fully phantasmagoric mental landscape, begin to take the familiar shape of the confessional family drama which unfolds behind the railroad barrier of Kasuga-chō. In the end, Nakagami writes, one need not travel far. Hell begins at home.

Through the vision of a French symbolist poet, Nakagami Kenji began to sketch the main lines of the fiction to come—the landscape of Kumano, the mythic topos that lay hemmed in by rivers, mountains, and the sea—and

the wrenching family drama that would unfold along the alleyways of Shingū. Rather than die out prematurely, however, Nakagami's poetic flame burned ever brighter until, as Yomota Inuhiko suggested, he took refuge in the house of fiction. In the Rimbaud poems we can see the flames licking at the doors and windows and the figures passing back and forth behind the glass. We can also read Nakagami's determination (difficult as his task was) to speak to the pain of outcaste origins and to transcend the coordinates of those origins in dreams of "new stars, new flowers, new flesh and new tongues."