

Untraceable Abjection: Nakagami Kenji and the Question of *Buraku-min* Writing

Nakagami Kenji, by his death in 1992 at the premature age of forty-six, had already established himself as one of Japan's most significant modern writers. In 1976, he won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for literature for his novella *Misaki* ("The Cape")—the first post-war born author to be so honored—and for the remaining decade and a half of his life continued his activity as a prominent writer. It is a history rendered even more remarkable when considering the fact that, in 1946, Nakagami had been born in an alley in the *buraku* community of Shinguu, a member of Japan's oppressed "outcaste" minority—the *buraku-min*. In such works as *Misaki* and *Jain* (*Snakelust*, a collection of his short stories), Nakagami explores the economy of abjection and exclusion, deploying tropes of violence, sexuality (itself often violent), and gendered stereotypes, all frequently located within the space of the *roji*, or alleys, which he saw as representative of the *buraku* neighborhood, to trouble the problematic dialectic between the *buraku-min* and dominant Japan. *Juuryoku no miyako* ("Gravity's Capital," from *Jain*), for example, is a short story about a young woman haunted by visions of a "dead Prince who lies in a grave beyond the mountains in Ise," during which the pain of his decaying corpse is transferred to her by his (sexual) touch. In the end, she asks her lover Yoshiaki to blind her, that she might not have to differentiate between him and her Prince. Here we find many of the themes which run through Nakagami's other works: the figure of the male outcaste or modern *hijiri* ("ascetics of the medieval period who were both sacred and taboo") who exhibits an animistic, almost clichéd masculine attitude towards women; the oversexed woman; and graphic depictions of sex and violence. Models of gender and sexuality are overturned; it is the woman who eagerly engages in the sex act, the man (the dead Prince from the Ise, which is traditionally the home of great *miko*, or shrine maidens, and thus a site that privileges the virgin female) who rejects a sexually promiscuous woman. Scenes of disturbing, often sexualized violence come to symbolize, like the *hijiri*, both the profane and sacred. To thus fully grasp the complex and often opaque itineraries of sex, violence, discrimination, and inverted social binaries in which Nakagami's work is situated, it is necessary to consider the *buraku-min* and the complicated history of its formation and origins, to ask a question: How were the *buraku-min* invented?

Buraku-min history traces itself along an intricate path that travels through diverse layers of Japanese history, but it is a path whose origins are hidden. The beginnings of the *buraku-min* are unclear, but it is believed that they originated in pre-modern Japan from an outcaste group called the *eta* (literally "abundant filth") or *hinin* (non-person), ostracized because its members were involved in occupations that regularly handled dead flesh—tanners, leatherworkers, butchers, executioners, and so on. (It was not until quite recently, during the Taisho period (1912-1924), that '*buraku-min*' (literally "hamlet people") was adopted as a euphemism.) In then predominantly Buddhist Japan, meat and dead animal products were believed to be impure, corrupting, unclean. There is thus a powerful linkage between death and pollution in which it is possible to locate the beginnings of *buraku-min* abjection: To come into contact with an *eta:hinin* was literally to come into contact with death—the inapprehensible, the non-human. Death, and by extension the *eta:hinin*, polluted by its dislocation from the symbolic, human realm of language. *Eta:hinin* were forced to live in segregated *eta* (now *buraku*) communities, often in abject poverty with scant prospects for improvement, for they could only acquire the most menial labor. It is important to note that "the line which separated the socially and ritually acceptable from the unacceptable was ill-defined" and changed from region to region. In a sense, then, the *eta:hinin* resisted categorization; they could not be *defined*. However, systematic discrimination (manifested in various aspects from the regulation of dress and hairstyle to work and marriage) did not come into play until the Tokugawa period (1600-1888). The four class model of soldier, peasant, artisan, and merchant implemented as a societal ideal (among other

reforms) radically excluded those who, like the *eta:binin*, defied easy classification. This invisible fifth class—the *eta:binin*—became social *excess* and was even further abjected.

Complicating these dynamics, however, is the ever-ambiguous relationship between the *eta:binin* or *buraku-min* and the dominant non-*buraku* Japanese majority. In pre-modern Japan they were considered essential for certain aspects of the economy even as they were rejected as sub-human “filth,” and they were often conscripted by the government into all *eta:binin* militia because their position as pariahs separate from the rest of society increased their effectiveness as a police force. Even seemingly progressive actions carried with them doubled ramifications. The Emancipation Declaration of 1871, for instance, which legally ‘freed’ the *buraku-min* from their oppressed status, failed to abolish the extensive prejudice against *buraku-min* and in fact made discrimination easier: Since *buraku-min* were now legally citizens, they were required by law to be listed in the national family registry; the clerk would unfailingly note down that they were “*shin beimin*” or “new commoners”—i.e. former *eta:binin*. It was thus now possible to research a comprehensive record of *buraku-min* alive in Japan, complete with their area of residence. Modern social movements, the largest of these being *Suiheisha*, succeeded to an extent in improving conditions within the average *buraku* community, but sometimes at the cost of increasing the already high tension between *buraku-min* and the rest of the Japanese population—the dominating sentiment was perhaps of resentment, that *buraku-min* were living better than ‘superior’ Japanese.

It is against this backdrop that Nakagami Kenji’s short stories and novellas emerge. They are thus inextricably bound up in his unknowable origins as a child of a *buraku* community. The idiosyncratically abrupt, opaque language that characterizes Nakagami’s work foregrounds this dislocation of origins and its subsequent abjection of the object of loss—the *buraku-min*. How does the inexplicable center of his stories and novellas mirror the untraceable abjection of the *buraku-min*? I am not seeking to determine the site of origin of the *buraku-min*, nor am I claiming that *buraku-min* are explicitly represented as such in Nakagami’s work; indeed, I believe such a contention would stand directly contrary to his aims. Rather, I argue that the registers of violence, isolation, inverted sexuality, and a certain coevalness of modern and ancient temporality dominant throughout his literature develop out of—and challenge—problems of social and individual subjectivity articulated by the dialectical history of the *buraku-min* in Japan. Nakagami resists ‘writing’ the *buraku-min*, for their history is precisely that of being written against their will, of effacement and abjection. This point of loss created by the sustained moment of abjection becomes crucial to understanding the unknowable, impenetrably *absent* space located between subject and the other, within the dialectics of discrimination.

My point of departure is literary and theoretical, but there will be a strong emphasis on historical and sociological research. I believe that productive theoretical work must have its point of departure in the more tangible or concrete; here, Nakagami Kenji and the *buraku-min* issue form the stabilizing locus for the intersection of critical theory (in its social, political, and psychoanalytic aspects), literary theory, and history. Nakagami Kenji cannot be considered outside the *buraku-min*. Therefore, I have chosen to begin by grounding my theoretical research in the historical, political, and sociological reality which surrounds the *buraku-min*. This quarter I am involved in an independent study, titled *The Dialectic of Japanese Cultural Identity in the Imaginary and Symbolic*, supervised by Professor Hall of the Department of English and Comparative Literature; our focus has been on historical, economic, and theoretical texts that consider the underlying dynamics of the enormous and astonishingly rapid changes that swept through Japan during its accelerated modernization. I will also be studying abroad in Tsuru, Japan for five months during the fall quarter through UCI’s Education Abroad Program. During my time in Japan, I plan to visit a modern *buraku* community located in Osaka (a major center for *buraku-min*) and collect primary research materials from two archival museums, the *Suiheisha Hakubutsukan* and *Nakagami Kenji Shiryoushushushitsu*. The *Suiheisha Hakubutsukan* (the

Suibeisha Museum), located in Goshou, contains information and materials about the Suiheisha movement, which is currently the dominant political and social movement devoted to enactments of *buraku-min* rights. The *Nakagami Kenji Shiryoushushitsu* (the Nakagami Kenji Research Collection), located in the *buraku* community in Shinguu where Nakagami was born, contains manuscripts, notes, and personal historical materials that include autobiographical accounts of Nakagami's life in the *roji* that later become such a dominant setting in his stories and novels. While my written, reading, and spoken Japanese is currently at an intermediate level (six quarters of language study) and not sufficient to translate difficult abstract texts, I believe it will be more than adequate to enlist in factual research and data collection from these two archives. After my return to UCI, I will begin the bulk of my theoretical research, focusing on the psychoanalytic theories of abjection and the subject (Julia Kristeva, Lacan), and social-cultural politics (Etienne Balibar), using my understanding of these various theories as a tool to explicate the problematic of the *buraku-min* and in the process formulate my final thesis.

TIMELINE

SPRING

- begin preliminary readings on *buraku-min* political and social history
- compile a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources and determine a reading list for summer and fall quarter
- meet regularly with Professor Hall

SUMMER

- continue secondary historical research
- remain in regular email contact with Professor Hall

FALL

- conduct archival research while in Japan
- complete historical readings
- begin reading related theoretical texts
- begin analyzing the historical material already gathered in relation to correlating theory
- remain in regular email contact with Professor Hall

WINTER

- complete all required critical and literary theory readings
- complete all necessary, primary research
- formulate a specific thesis statement and a detailed outline
- begin writing research paper
- meet regularly with Professor Hall

SPRING

- meet regularly with Professor Hall
- complete writing research paper
- present research findings at the UCI Undergraduate Research Symposium
- submit research paper to the UCI Undergraduate Research Journal for possible publication

ITEMIZED BUDGET

Photocopying ¹	\$ 50.00
Travel expenses ²	
train	\$325.00
hotel accommodations	\$325.00
Museum and archive entrance fees ³	\$ 20.00
Book expenses ⁴	\$200.00
Interlibrary loan	\$ 50.00
TOTAL	\$ 970.00

REFERENCES

BUDGET NARRATIVE

The exchange rate is approximately 114 yen per U.S. dollar, and I have used this value in calculating my expenses; but please note that due to fluctuations in currencies the figures I have listed may change.

¹ Archives tend to charge high per copy of any material.

² Travel expenses break down as follows. (I am studying in Tsuru, a small city located an hour and a half away from Tokyo by train, but for the purposes of this budget I will use Tokyo as my point of departure.

I will cover the cost of traveling from Tsuru to Tokyo myself.) Round-trip train tickets are not available for reduced prices as they are in the United States. Therefore, to keep down costs, I plan to gather my archival material during a five-day trip that will begin in Tokyo and pass through the cities of Shinguu, Goshou, and Osaka, ending again in Tokyo.

The cost of traveling by train from	Tokyo to Shinguu	\$138.00
	Shinguu to Goshou to Osaka	\$ 62.00
	Osaka to Tokyo	\$125.00
	TOTAL	\$325.00

Because of distance—it is perhaps a nine hour journey by train from Tokyo to Shinguu, for example—I will need hotel accommodations for five nights. An economy business hotel costs approximately \$65.00 per night. I will spend two nights in Shinguu, one in Goshou, and two in Osaka, for a total of \$325.00.

³ *Suiheisha Hakubutsukan* (the *Suiheisha* Museum) and *Nakagami Kenji Shiryoushushitsu* (the Nakagami Kenji Research Collection), located in Goshou and Shinguu, respectively.

⁴ Because there is not a great deal of secondary material written in English useful for my project, I will need to purchase several books otherwise not available to me.

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