INTRODUCTION

Nothing but Words

Empty hills
No one in sight
Only the sound of
Someone talking
—Wang Wei, “The Deer Park Hermitage”
(tr. Burton Watson)

Nakagami Kenji (1946–1992) rose to fame in the mid-1970s for his vivid stories about a clan scarred by violence and poverty on the underside of the Japanese economic miracle. Wrung from his own experience growing up in a provincial city in southeastern Wakayama, Nakagami’s writing burst apart stereotypes of a serene, precious, and exotic Japan. Possessing a highly sensitive ear, he wrote a rhythmic, kinetic prose that in the early years of his writing career scans in short poetic breaths and in his later work winds into great streams of words. In this prose, Nakagami captured his characters’ sudden widening of vision, depicting moments when physical experience transforms into knowing and knowing can be reduced to simple physical acts. Despite its deep roots in the real world, Nakagami’s writing nevertheless transcended realism. He experimented widely with narrative voice and hewed plots out of the bedrock of old tales, myths, and local legends. Even at its most experimental, however, Nakagami’s language...
sustains its living tissue, breathing immediacy into his writings, and linking disparate works across boundaries of time and genre.

_Nakagami, Japan, and Beyond_

In the years since Nakagami’s death in 1992, interest in his work continues to grow around the world. We read Nakagami because we cannot go around him. Through Nakagami, our perceptions of Japanese literature and culture are subtly, but indelibly, transformed. His brief but eventful life spanned the key years of the postwar Shōwa era and his work opens up those years to view. Nakagami’s early fiction, for example, traces Japan’s postwar recovery from the viewpoint of the underclass—in such portraits as a rogue father trading goods on the black market, an elder brother committing suicide, a family’s early poverty. The later work, which mines the myths and stories of Kumano (an old name for Wakayama and Mie prefectures), reflects a resurgent interest in nativism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when writers turned away from urban culture, searching for a rough folk edge.

During these decades, literature was serious business for Nakagami, who once stated that he had “nothing but words” at his disposal to effect change. Simply in the way that he formulated his arguments did Nakagami follow in the footsteps of a long line of Japanese writers who shouldered the burden of engagement with the world. His funeral in 1992 was held in Tokyo and open to the public. It drew 800 people, including such prominent intellectuals as Karatani Kōjin and Yasuoka Shōtarō, who lamented the void that Nakagami’s early death had left in Japanese intellectual circles. Coming on the heels of the 1989 death of the Shōwa Emperor, the funeral itself bracketed the close of an era, particularly for older writers such as Yasuoka who had seen the future of serious and engaged writing in Nakagami Kenji. Younger writers, too, remarked on his significance. In an oft-quoted adage, the young writer Shimada Masahiko described Nakagami as Japan’s “last author” (saigo no sakka).
We read Nakagami because he so clearly illuminates the literary scene of the 1970s and 1980s, which he largely helped to shape. During those years, he stood out as a master of the *taidan*, the published "conversation," a genre that captures, if not drives, the vicissitudes of Japanese intellectual life. By exploring Nakagami’s dialogues with contemporaries such as Karatani Köjin and Tsushima Yūko, we gain not only a fuller picture of Nakagami himself but also a taste of the rich print culture that filled the pages of monthly journals: *Bungei shuto, Bungei shunjū, Bungakukai, Yurīka, Subaru, Shinchō*, and others. Indeed, Nakagami’s willingness to experiment as a writer cannot be divorced from his sustained engagement with others, whether writers, critics, editors, or friends; he was a thoroughly social being who took a passionate interest in the issues of his times, and who argued, even wrangled, with those around him.

We read Nakagami because he transforms our understanding of the “edifice” of modern Japanese literature. For example, Nakagami offered incisive comments on the work of the influential critic Kobayashi Hideo—and after Nakagami’s reading of him, we do not see Kobayashi’s ideas in quite the same way. Indeed, Nakagami’s Shingū fictions serve as a barbed response to Kobayashi’s notion of the “lost home,” a metaphor for the modern intellectual, adrift in the anonymous space of the city, forever severed from the roots of the local home. In contrast, Nakagami shows the “lost home” to be the source of nagging anxiety and self-loathing, a home that never held out any prospect of comfort. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Nakagami took Ōe Kenzaburō’s project to its logical extension, mining the subversive possibilities of the mythic, the local, and the spoken. If we look across the political spectrum, we can see that Nakagami’s public life also resonates with the image projected by Mishima Yukio, another revealing example of how one’s life becomes one’s favorite text, and vice versa, how one’s texts transform one’s life. In a manner similar to Mishima, Nakagami showed great passion for telling his own idiosyncratic life story, using himself as the model for *buraku* discourse.
Nakagami also takes us beyond the borders of Japanese literature entirely. Like other writers before him, Nakagami read widely in French, American, and Latin American literature, revealing a global frame of reference that links Japanese writers dating back to the Meiji period. But from the beginning, Nakagami did more: he envisioned his own place within Japan by cultivating a view from outside, stressing his affinity to writers from other minority cultures. Cleverly, Nakagami hides a reference to Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in an early story; he coins the term “*buraku* is beautiful” in reference to the American black power movement of the 1960s. Repeatedly he draws the figure of the committed young tough from the *buraku* on a collision course with middle class values. Witness the titles of a few of the early stories: “Arakure” (Tough Guy, 1975); “Ja’in” (Snake Lust, 1975); “Jūkyūsai no chizu” (Map of a Nineteen-Year-Old, 1973); “Ore jūhassai” (I’m Eighteen, 1966).

As time went on, Nakagami expanded his frames of reference on a larger scale by forging relationships with Korean writers, discovering Latin American magic realism, and shading the narrow alleyways of the *buraku* or *roji* as ubiquitous spaces that one finds in the poor neighborhoods of every city. Nakagami not only cultivated his liminal identity but he parodied it: in copies of the novel *Sennen no yuraku* (A Thousand Years of Pleasure, 1982), for example, Nakagami chose the beautiful, bisexual character named Hanzō, signing, “Hanzō was me,” an ironic reference to Flaubert’s identification with Madame Bovary (“Madame Bovary c’est moi”). Through such playful gestures, Nakagami revealed his familiarity with the literary canon and his sense that he too belonged on the world stage.

*Nakagami and the Alleyway*

Last, but not least, we read Nakagami because he challenges our preconceptions about minority identity in Japan. Nakagami was born and raised until the age of seven in the *buraku* or outcaste neighborhood of Shingū, Wakayama, a small city in southwestern Japan (pop. 35,000). Nakagami’s open admission in 1977 that he was from the *buraku* marked a turning
point in Japanese literary history, as I shall discuss in the first chapter of this book. Yet his buraku origins were a complicated matter for him, as we shall see below.

Burakumin or “people of the village,” a seemingly neutral term, refers to a class of people in Japan who have long been viewed as a group apart from the majority of Japanese. Historically, outcaste status was linked to jobs that were considered to be defiling or demeaning: leather worker, undertaker, slaughterer, shoemaker. In premodern Japan, such status was relatively flexible, but under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1868), outcaste status became linked with bloodline rather than simply with occupation. Gradually, burakumin were pushed to the margins of towns and prohibitions against them were codified. In a historical novel entitled The River with No Bridge (Hashi no nai kawa, 1958), Sumii Sue details discriminatory practices against the burakumin in the late Meiji period (1868–1912): these include refusing to hand money directly to burakumin farm workers, breaking cups that had touched workers’ lips, and forcing dress codes on burakumin (such as leather badges) in order to identify them. Discrimination did not necessarily abate with the Meiji government’s Liberation Edict of August 1871, which legally abolished the caste system. In Wakayama prefecture, for example, fears of equality spurred local farmers to go on violent hunts for buraku residents (eta-gari). It would take many years of struggle on the part of the burakumin themselves, coupled with government policies, to combat the most oppressive aspects of discrimination.

Although such blatant practices are not visible in Japan today, discrimination against the burakumin has remarkable staying power. In fact, burakumin do not differ ethnically from other Japanese yet they continue to be construed as somehow of different origin: ethnic Korean or Ainu or simply “other.” Given the lack of ethnic difference, the disappearance of many traditional buraku occupations, and the growing mobility of the Japanese population, contemporary buraku status is somewhat mystifying. Its survival testifies to lasting discriminatory
cultural attitudes and to the power of place in constructing Japanese identity: one’s legal identity lies in the local family register (koseki) of one’s birthplace. According to the Diène Report on Discrimination and Racism in Japan, which was issued by the United Nations in January 2006, the lack of a national law against discrimination has hampered positive change. (The Law on Special Measures for Dōwa [“assimilation”] Projects, which targeted specific reforms for buraku living conditions, expired in 2002.) The Japanese still tend to construe poverty and difference in distinctly ethnic and unfavorable terms.⁶ Even burakumin population figures are the subject of controversy. Depending on whether one consults government figures or the figures of the Burakumin Liberation League, an advocacy group, there are between 1.2 and 3 million Japanese who are either of buraku ancestry or who live in buraku today.⁷ Mirroring these intangible buraku population figures, the Shingū buraku had disappeared by 2004, its narrow alleyways erased and its people moved to other parts of the city. But even without a geographical location, one’s surname could still be used as an indicator of buraku status, and discrimination in marriage and employment persists. In 2004, a cheerful sign adorned the Shingū city office (shiyakusho), testifying to stigmas that outlast urban transformations: “Starting with discrimination against the buraku, let’s get rid of all kinds of discrimination (buraku sabetsu o hajime, arayuru sabetsu o nakusō).”

As a former resident of the Shingū buraku, Nakagami turned his gaze on his own community, transcribing a record of buraku culture in fiction and nonfiction that remains unmatched in scope and content to this day. Nakagami left Shingū for Tokyo in 1965, but he returned periodically, broadening his circle of acquaintances in the buraku. From the mid-1970s to his death in 1992, Nakagami remained active in Shingū, holding symposia with Tokyo intellectuals, staging his own play, collaborating on the 1986 film Himatsuri (Fire Festival) for which he had written the screenplay, and producing dozens of essays about aspects of Kumano culture. In 1977, for example, he spent
months traveling around the Kii Peninsula, interviewing and recording the stories of people from scattered buraku, a work that became Kishū: ki no kuni ne no kuni monogatari (Tales of Kishū: Land of Trees, Land of Roots, 1986), a polished work of nonfiction that had important repercussions in his fiction writing. In these activities, Nakagami clearly worked against the fact that Tokyo had become the center of cultural production; he meant to shift the balance.

Although Nakagami openly discussed his views on the buraku, he was highly skeptical of political orthodoxies and fiercely independent in his opinions. He himself was the subject of controversy, much of it his own making. For example, Nakagami found himself on uneasy terms with the formal burakumin organizations such as the Burakumin Liberation League (BLL), once calling them the “secret police of words.”

Even after his death, the BLL sent a representative to a 1993 symposium in Nakagami’s honor to monitor the use of discriminatory language among its participants. Nakagami also seemed prone to making sweeping statements about the buraku that at times shaded toward rhetoric: he once criticized the label of “minority writer” because he equated it with a position of weakness.

In addition, although his own writing contains references to African American literature, he would not delineate a category of buraku writing in Japan that paralleled African American writing in the United States. Referring to the challenges that he had faced in achieving mainstream success, he stated about burakumin writers, “I am the only one.”

Finally, his literary practices rendered his buraku identity elusive, at least in his early work. Nakagami uses the term roji or alleyway to describe the small streets that once zigzagged through the Shingū buraku; for many readers, however, roji does not necessarily connote buraku but simply a common space in Japan.

Nakagami’s skepticism about his own position as “minority writer,” though at times awkward, seems prescient today of our increased consciousness of issues around representation and voice, or who speaks for whom. First, we should simply
be grateful for Nakagami’s pioneering example when we view the literary landscape of contemporary Japan, where such “minorities” as the Okinawan writer Medoruma Shun and the Japanese Korean writer Yū Miri flourish. Second, we should be grateful for Nakagami’s tough skepticism because it forces us to reexamine our notions of minority literature as shaped by the West. Nakagami prompts us to ask what are the strands that intertwine to create a status “on the margins” in Japan? Rather than the term “minority” writer, perhaps we need to use different categories, depending on geographical origin (Okinawan), socioeconomic class (burakumin), or ethnic identification (Japanese Korean [zainichi]). Or perhaps we need a binary model based on the slippage and the tension between standard and regional Japanese. Given that the production of print culture is based in Tokyo, how do writers “on the margins” (loosely conceived) navigate between their own communities and the literary world of Tokyo without succumbing to its numbing pull? How do writers in Japan work simultaneously in different modalities and different tongues?

Nakagami’s ambiguous stance on these issues—his insistence on maintaining his own independence—is replicated in critical discourse. Critics take issue as to whether Nakagami was properly authentic, or whether his buraku origins figure prominently enough in his writing. Hirano Hidehisa, for example, a critic from the buraku himself, questioned whether Nakagami’s literature should even be included in the category of buraku writing, and if so, how. More recently, in his assessment of how the buraku has been used and abused in twentieth-century Japanese literature, Edward Fowler compares Nakagami with Hijikata Tetsu, the burakumin writer and activist, and finds Nakagami lacking: “Unlike Nakagami’s mythologized landscapes, in which the characters’ identity as burakumin is almost inconsequential, Hijikata’s work presents a visceral sense of marginality and characters who wrestle head-on with their burakumin-hood.” Seen from the perspective of a century of burakumin writing, however ignored and
reviled, Nakagami does not dovetail seamlessly with other buraku writers.

There has also been resistance on the part of critics to tie Nakagami too closely to the actual buraku of Shingū. For example, Nina Cornyetz breaks the link between the Shingū buraku and Nakagami’s fictional map, stating: “the roji in Nakagami’s texts must be recognized as a narrative [sic] topos; it is not a mimetic representation of the “real buraku,” and there should be no assumption that there exists a transparency or interchangeability between the two.” Curiously, Fowler and Cornyetz display quite different agendas when reading Nakagami: Fowler bemoans the lack of social realism in Nakagami, while Cornyetz challenges an overly literal reading of Nakagami and stresses the primacy of the text. Both critics make undeniably important contributions to their respective areas of interest—Fowler to creating a wider picture of burakumin writing in Japan, and Cornyetz to gender studies within the Japanese literary field. But neither adequately appraises Nakagami’s poetic vision, in which the actual buraku and the imaginary topos function not as opposites but as mutually determining elements of an equation that lies at the heart of Nakagami’s creative process.

We sacrifice something if we fault Nakagami for not being engaged enough, or if we deny the link between the real buraku of Shingū and Nakagami’s roji. Simply stated, we lose the story of Nakagami Kenji himself and his connection to history. For example, Nakagami’s texts are dotted with the names of people whom he knew. On one trip back to Shingū, he was introduced to Tabata Ryū, an old woman who kept the genealogy of the community in her head. Tabata’s stories make their way, however indirectly, into Sennen no yuraku (A Thousand Years of Pleasure, 1982), a collection of tales about six beautiful young men named Nakamoto, a common roji name. Kinoshita Katsuichirō, the first husband of Nakagami’s mother, had once gone by that same name. The name of Mon, the barkeeper in Chi no hate shijō no toki (The Sublime Time at the Ends of the Earth, 1983) came from a woman who
kept Nakagami’s books over her bar in Shingū even though she herself could not read; a photo of Roku, a lumberman in *Chi no hate*, appeared in the pages of a local magazine.

I do not mean to suggest that these people served as literal one-to-one models for Nakagami’s characters or that we can explain the complexities of fiction through reference to “real” life. Rather, the correspondences reflect Nakagami’s own interest in and passion for the concrete details of experience and for the people whose lives intersected with his. Most importantly, these fragments of names and places illuminate Nakagami’s predilection for stitching together “this and that” in his making of a fictional world. The world ebbs and flows outside the text, but the world also bleeds into it. Names and places of the world spark connections in the mind so that Nakagami’s reader exists both simultaneously in the world and inside the text. Or, as filmmaker Aoyama Shinji expressed in a discussion about his 2001 documentary film, *Roji e: Nakagami Kenji no nokoshita fuirumu* (To the Alleyway: Nakagami Kenji’s Roji Film), when we visit the roji or alleyway of Nakagami’s fiction, we embark on a real journey to a non-existent place (*nai basho ni iku*).17

How do we read Nakagami’s buraku origins? Rather than attempt to judge whether Nakagami’s texts accurately reproduce the alleyways, or whether Nakagami overplayed or betrayed his origins, we might instead read his fiction from the outside in. If we look at what Nakagami said and did in relation to the Shingū buraku during his lifetime, his words (re)create voices that stir up other voices and these in turn reverberate until we find ourselves awash in a sea of language. Dialogic and multifaceted, Nakagami’s roji consists of words that rise from speech acts—stories and accents and dialects—that occur “out there” in the world. To use M. M. Bakhtin’s terms, Nakagami’s fictional roji arises from heteroglossia—different modes of discourse that jostle one another on the page.18 To Nakagami alone, perhaps the roji was simply the space of memory or was merely the beginning of an impulse to write. But to his readers who get on the train to Shingū, or to those who come from the buraku, Nakagami’s roji bursts out
of its narratological dimensions. Nakagami began a discussion about writing and difference that continues to this day, spilling out of Shingū, out of Tokyo, out of Japan, into classrooms, bookstores, libraries, and rooms around the world. In this roji that drifts free, we hear the sound of voices talking.19

**Presenting Nakagami Kenji**

In this book, I address the triangular relationship between a body of texts, an author, and the world outside. Given the contemporary nature of the material, I take an “ethnographic” approach, sketching out certain elements of Nakagami’s life and drawing on four long interviews that I conducted with the author himself; with his mother, Nakaue Chisato; with his friend and mentor, Matsune Hisao; and most recently, with his widow, Kasumi. The book grew organically out of these conversations and a Ph.D. thesis that I completed at Columbia University under the supervision of Paul Anderer. As time passed, my goals for the book shifted, moving away from a straightforward academic study. Instead, I decided to incorporate more of Nakagami’s story. I had translated a few pieces of Nakagami’s early fiction in 1999 and my views on the import of his work changed considerably during this process. The history of the project, which unfolded over time, thus shapes my approach in this book. Rather than account for Nakagami’s work in toto, I present Nakagami in various stages of transformation, each stage emerging from his dialogue with the voices around him. Instead of a writer’s strategies, I highlight a writer’s responses, for the writer, like the rest of us, lives in time.

To create a tighter narrative, I focus on Nakagami’s work of the 1970s and 1980s. Each chapter takes up a period of his writing life organized around a single topic, whether it focuses on a genre (poetry), a formal concern (literary style), or a theme (violence and narrative). I have also chosen the works that I believe were Nakagami’s most innovative, from the early short story “Ichiban hajime no dekigoto” (The First Thing that Happened, 1969), to the tales in the late collection *Jūryoku no miyako*
(City of Gravity, 1988). Frequently, Nakagami would come up with a new idea, which he would work and then overwork with time. For example, Chi no hate shijō no toki builds on the earlier work Karekinada (Withered Tree Straits, 1977), drawing upon and developing certain plot threads; however, it suffers from an overly ambitious scope, a lack of internal cohesion, as if Nakagami did not know when to stop. I include Chi no hate in this book because I believe it to be one of Nakagami’s most daring works of realism despite its flaws. But I have skipped over the works that struck me as weak or repetitive, and I leave it to other Nakagami readers to explore the later works, Sanka (Hymn, 1990), Keibetsu (Scorn, 1992), and the unfinished work Izoku (The Tribe, 1993).

Chapter 1 explores the literary persona of Nakagami Kenji, or how he created himself as a writer, beginning with his childhood in Shingū, moving through his literary career in Tokyo and abroad, and touching on the ways in which minority identity is encoded in the early fiction. It highlights Nakagami’s extraordinary rise in the mid-1970s, focusing on the overlap between Nakagami’s fiction and his activities as a public intellectual. Admittedly not all of Nakagami’s critical work is of the same caliber, but Nakagami’s identity as a writer stretches beyond pure fiction, and we need to draw on the criticism, if selectively, to create an accurate picture of a social writer. As stated earlier, Nakagami was extraordinarily responsive to his environment; he had an ability to identify the key issues of the times, to engage in debate with others, and to shape his fiction accordingly. Chapter 1 puts Nakagami in the context of his times, highlighting the sudden conjunction (or disjunction) of events, voices, and discoveries that propelled his writing forward from the mid-1960s to his death in 1992.

Chapter 2 explores Nakagami’s early experiments with poetry, particularly his discovery of the French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud. The poetry written between 1965 and 1969, even more than the early fiction, offers a clear glimpse of Nakagami’s struggle to choose a writerly language for himself. In 1959, when Kenji was 13 years old, his elder half-brother Ikuhei
committed suicide. This death stirred ripples of incomprehension and despair in the younger brother. It also served as the starting point for an extended rumination on buraku male identity and its intersection with sexuality. The poems obsessively repeat the figure of a young man dying or dead, who floats on water, inspiring fear and desire in the speaker. Referred to variously as “Icarus,” “brother” or “me,” the speaker explores the spectacle of male death, linking the fate of the young man to the “expendable” males of his community, and using poetic language to mark himself off from his brother. In the early poems, Nakagami spins the tale of the family saga, his words bursting out of the abstract contours of the poem. He would stop writing poetry in 1969, but he carried his poetic interests into his fiction, particularly through his use of mythic tropes and symbolism, his poetic sense of closure, and his interest in birds, grasses, and exotic (even invented) flowers.

By the early 1970s, Nakagami had moved decisively into the writing of fiction. Between 1975 and 1983, he wrote three works that transformed modern Japanese realism: Misaki (The Cape, 1975); Karekinada (1977); and Chi no hate (1983). In these works Nakagami explores the character of Akiyuki, the brooding laborer with a tragic family history and a streak of violence. Working within the parameters of the shishōsetsu (the semi-autobiographical form of modern Japanese fiction), Nakagami creates a rich narrative dotted with identifiable characters and places, a facsimile of Shingu. However, by plotting a different kind of family romance that spins on the dynamic of brother-sister love, Nakagami veers away from the oedipal plot of many shishōsetsu—the archetypal story by which the son defines his identity in opposition to his father. In underlying plots of brother-sister love, Nakagami explores the son’s struggle to break free of the mother’s realm, the locus of abjection and death, which is identified with the alleyway itself. Through the brother-sister plot Nakagami expounds upon the complexities of buraku identity and empties out deterministic notions of the blood. Chapter 3 uses the trope of incest to read Akiyuki’s story of maturation as a new kind of
shishōsetsu, one that unfolds at some distance from other Japanese works of the modern period.

Chapter 4 turns to Nakagami’s fiction of the 1980s. The stories of this period incorporate the myths and legends of Kumano, and foreground the grotesque, the uncanny, and the unseen. During this period, Nakagami once again combined the roles of fiction writer and public intellectual. In particular, Nakagami and other critics took up the term monogatari as they assessed the state of modern Japanese literature. The term monogatari simply means “tale” (as in Genji monogatari, or The Tale of Genji), but the critics were not urging a return to a premodern tradition. Rather, they used the term monogatari in a number of diverse—and at times contradictory—ways. Perhaps most importantly, Nakagami took in his fiction a far more open-minded approach to the literary past than his critical essays might suggest. During the 1980s, for example, he engaged in an examination of different types of monogatari that might provide new directions for his fiction. In place of high-culture literary monogatari, Nakagami turned to popular religious folk tales (sekkyōbushi), fantastic stories of foreign lands (Utsubo monogatari), and local folktales and legends. He then began to write what we might call newly conceived monogatari, tales that drew on mythic tropes and experimented widely with point of view and narrative voice. The titles of the 1980s speak to Nakagami’s fascination: Sennen no yuraku (A Thousand Years of Pleasure, 1982); Kii monogatari (Tales of Kii, 1984); and Kumano shū (Tales of Kumano, 1984).

However, Nakagami’s goal was not to preserve a disappearing rural culture but to forge a new literary art form—a facsimile or approximation of oral buraku culture that would alter the cadence of written Japanese prose. Not all his experiments succeeded, but during this period, Nakagami made his most daring contributions to modern Japanese literature.

Nakagami transformed Japanese modern prose radically through his experiments with language in the tales of the 1980s. Chapter 5 explores the mechanics of his texts, or how he used language to subvert and transform existing norms.
The local dialect of the alleyways, for example, with its grotesque and hyperbolic characteristics forms what Henry Louis Gates in his study of African American literature terms a “point of consciousness,” a binding of communal energies for the alleyway people that resists the homogenizing powers of the culture of the center. Nakagami drew on this local language to disrupt the highly subjective style of Japanese prose, creating not only an amalgam of voices (the old women of the alleyways, for example) but also experimenting with sudden switches in subject, wandering, disjointed passages, and other forms of stream of consciousness writing. Nakagami’s numerous experiments with style serve as the focus of this chapter.

The final chapter of the book breaks with the chronological pattern of earlier chapters, addressing a topic that has received much attention in Western academic circles: the prevalence of violent spectacles, often with erotic content, in Nakagami’s work. Certain critics read violence as the continuation of Nakagami’s assault on the modern literary canon. Violence is thus equated with subversion, a direct blow to discrimination itself. Chapter 6 asks a different question of Nakagami’s fiction: what ends does violence serve? Does violence dismantle discrimination when its object is a woman, or a weaker younger brother? A recurring theme in Nakagami’s work concerns a tough young laborer who meets a beautiful and mysterious woman, often a female shaman. Unsettled by her beauty, the man secludes himself with the woman but passion soon turns to violent blows. In 1993, the critic Watanabe Naomi stated that violence against women in Nakagami’s work springs from his desire to overturn the Japanese literary canon. But a close reading of these scenes reveals the intense need of Nakagami’s protagonists for domination and their palpable misery and alienation in the aftermath of such violent encounters. Nakagami’s protagonists return from their encounters with female shamans broken, weary, and defeated. Can we read violence in Nakagami’s fiction as an allegory for his own eventual hopelessness vis-à-vis literature itself?
At the end of *Chi no hate*, the alleyway of the outcasts explodes in flames and Akiyuki disappears from Nakagami’s work forever. In subsequent years, Nakagami’s fiction moved into new locales; his fiction literally “took to the road.” One example of this shift is *Nichirin no tsubasa* (Wings of the Sun, 1984), the story of a group of old women from Shingū who travel around Japan in a refrigerated truck visiting sacred sites. In the early 1990s, Nakagami began to experiment again, searching for the next mode. He wrote about the Tokyo underworld in *Sanka* and *Keibetsu*. He started *Izoku*, a work with a pan-Asian theme now counted among the eight “unfinished” works so classified in the *Nakagami Kenji zenshū* (Collected Works of Nakagami Kenji, 1996). Before his death, Nakagami also dabbled in the graphic novel form, publishing four installments of a work entitled *Nankai kisen* (The Nankai Ferry, 1989–90) with artwork by Tanaka Akio. Even when his health began to fail, Nakagami continued to write, experimenting with form and voice. In a short conclusion to this book I explore Nakagami’s legacy to young Japanese readers at the time of the memorial service in 2004 that marked the thirteenth anniversary of his death. Recent films, lectures, and fiction reveal an ongoing process of remembering and sorting that continues to this day. How is Nakagami being remembered? How is his legacy being shaped? We might also put the question in reverse: how do we reconcile current-day Japan—with its seeming eradication of marked differences, its dominant urbanism, and its consumerist proclivities—with the stories of Nakagami Kenji?

Before we turn to Nakagami’s fiction, however, we will first consider a portrait of the author and his times—or, more accurately, we will separate out the polyphony of critical and creative voices that held sway in the 1970s and 1980s when Nakagami Kenji stepped forward. We begin with an overall picture, a birth, a place, a name, like a patchwork of fields seen from above, a shifting but indispensable view.