



From Private Trauma to Public Memory: Hansen's Disease Poetry and Social Reconciliation

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In 2020, as the question of responses to illness became a global dialogue, the history of Hansen's disease and the stories of survivors in Japan have been revisited in Japanese media. Media coverage of Hansen's disease in Japan in recent years has largely been shaped by the struggles and experiences of men; the experiences of women become invisible.

This presentation takes up the question of how the legacy of Hansen's disease transforms from an individual experience of quarantine and illness into a part of Japanese and cultural memory through an examination of the work of the poet Kitada (née Hayashi) Yukiko (1909-1993). Kitada was first diagnosed with Hansen's disease at a time when the illness was not curable. Over the course of her life effective drug therapies were discovered, laws governing the treatment of the disease were challenged and changed, and survivors launched public campaigns to protest the violation of their human rights. Her writing was deeply personal and in dialogue with social responses to illness. She also used her poetry to celebrate doctors, nurses, fellow residents, and the history of the institution where she lived, Nagashima Aisei-en. Her poems become an act of negotiation reflective of personal and collective identity meant to reconcile lived experience with broader narratives. Ultimately this paper demonstrates that such poetic testimony can also be an important part of social reconciliation in that it foregrounds the complexity of the experience of Hansen's disease in Japan and the dangers of attention to a single dominant narrative.



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