

## You Forbid Me to Walk: Yokota Hiroshi's Disability Poetics

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In a scene near the end of Hara Kazuo's 1972 documentary film *Sayōnara CP* さようならCP (*Goodbye CP*), Yokota Hiroshi kneels on the ground outside of Shinjuku station in Tokyo. Yokota has cerebral palsy (CP), a term that refers to a group of permanent neurological conditions that affect movement, coordination, muscle tone, and balance. His head and arms are in constant motion; his feet, wearing only black socks, are splayed out to his sides; his elbows and wrists are at sharp angles. The dolly-mounted camera rapidly moves forward across a concrete plaza toward him, coming to a stop when he fills the frame. He slowly and carefully writes something with a piece of chalk on the concrete ground, in reverse order starting with the rightmost character: "Yokota Hiroshi poem" 横田弘 詩 (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

A complete audio version of the article, read aloud by the author, may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-9967331>.

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The constant motion of his hands and arms makes this a laborious process; the chalk fractures under the pressure he applies to the pavement. As he finishes writing his name, he begins to draw a large circle around himself and the words he has just written, one small segment at a time (fig. 2).

While he draws this circle—at once stage, altar, and protective barrier—he begins to speak: “Please listen to my poem” (Hara 1972). His voice is shaped by his condition’s effects on the muscles of his jaw, lips, tongue, and throat. “This is ‘Legs,’” he says. The camera pans up to the large crowd of pedestrians surrounding him at a distance, and he recites the beginning of his poem (fig. 3).

Crowds of people gathered around me  
 You all have legs  
 You all—you all—I—you all forbid me to walk  
 And only through this do you keep your legs.

Crowds of people!  
 Gathered legs!  
 You—on what basis do you all forbid me to walk?<sup>2</sup>

The camera tilts from the crowd up toward the Shinjuku buildings behind them and then to the sky; the frame freezes, and another voice suddenly cuts into the poetry reading from off-screen. Two police officers ask who’s in charge; Yokota says he is. “What are you recording? You’re bothering everyone,” says one officer. “This has become a freak show. Please stop,” says the other. Abruptly, the scene ends. Yokota Hiroshi (1933–2013) was a poet and one of Japan’s most prominent disability activists who in a more than six-decade career of writing and political organization has left behind a legacy that extends far beyond his appearance in this film. Yet *Goodbye CP*, the first feature film by the now-famous documentarian Hara Kazuo, introduced the disability movement in Japan to many for the first time. Hara (2009: 74), who was an assistant at the Tokyo Kōmei Metropolitan School—the most prominent public school in Japan for children with physical disabilities, founded in 1932 and still active today—later described the central concept for *Goodbye CP* as the “dichotomy between ‘the healthy vs. the disabled’” and the necessarily “antagonistic relationship” between the two groups that results from that division.



**Figure 1** Yokota Hiroshi writing the character for poem followed by his name in a still from *Goodbye CP* (Hara 1972).



**Figure 2** Yokota drawing a chalk circle around himself and his words in *Goodbye CP* (Hara 1972).



**Figure 3** Yokota Hiroshi begins to recite his poem, "Legs," to a gathered crowd in *Goodbye CP* (Hara 1972).

This article will look first and foremost not at Hara's depiction of Yokota but at the works of Yokota himself, particularly his poetry. This includes the filmed performance described above, along with a wide variety of his printed poems, especially those published in literary magazines, anthologies, and nonfiction books throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Yokota was a major figure within the broader context of disability culture and activism in postwar Japan, especially as a member of Shinonome しのめ (Day-break)—the amateur literary coterie (*dōjin* 同人) and magazine for poets with CP—and as a leader of the disability activist group Aoi Shiba no Kai 青い芝の会 (Green Lawn Association). In his work with these groups and throughout his poetic career, Yokota's poems made the disabled body itself into his central medium of expression and site of experimentality. Focusing on Yokota's disability poetics—how his poetic acts function through and in relation to the body, and questions of ability and disability—I will consider the ways in which he explored how a *body otherwise can make poetry otherwise*: how he used form and language in his poetic work in order to challenge conventional conceptions of what it means to be disabled, as well as what it means to have and be a body.

There are certainly plentiful examples of, say, blindness, deafness, prostheses, immobility, muteness, and so on that are repeatedly returned to in the broader poetic sphere by “disabled” and “able-bodied” poets alike as motif or metaphor. There is also no shortage of artistic works in Japan and elsewhere portraying people with various disabilities as characters or subjects. But Yokota and many of the other Shinonome poets rejected the use of disability as only a metaphor or topic to represent. They actively aimed to make works that differed from those made with conventionally abled bodies, by means of carefully self-reflexive acts of composition and publication, and in experiments with poetic form and modes of narration and sensation. And Yokota's poems—live performances of poems, cinematic performances of poems, poetry collections, and poetry magazines—also consistently question not just what it means to be disabled in the world but how a world can make a body disabled. They consider what a body can do in assemblage with a wheelchair and typewriter and limbs that work nonnormatively, often of their own accord; they shed light on what it means to recast dis-

ability as generative, as a redistribution of dominant aesthetic, legislative, literary, and corporeal modes.

First, a return to “Legs.”

### “Legs” and Disability

“Ashi” 足 (“Legs”), the poem Yokota performs to the gathered crowd in *Goodbye CP*, is a new version of a poem published two years earlier. The original rendition is not addressed specifically to spectators but to the legs themselves.

Legs  
 Passing before my eyes  
 Wearing miniskirts  
 Pleated pants  
 White canvas shoes  
 Little sandals  
 You vast crowd of legs!  
 Look back at me  
  
 That’s right all of you  
 Are called legs  
 Only because you do not let me walk  
 Only by forbidding me to walk about the streets on my knees  
 Are you recognized as legs  
 Only through this  
 Can you sing, work, laugh  
 (Yokota 1970: 10)

In both the filmed and printed version, one sentiment is especially striking: in the former, “You forbid me to walk” (*Anatagata wa watashi ga aruku koto o kinzuru* あなた方は私が歩くことを禁ずる); in the latter, “You do not let me walk” (*Omaetachi wa watashi ga aruku no o yurusanai* お前たちは私が歩くのを許さない). Not “I am not able to walk,” as might be expected from a conventional understanding of disability, but *you forbid me* to walk. Yokota, addressing nondisabled spectators and readers, frames his words

as an accusation. The question of ability and disability thus departs from being about the capacities of any one disabled body, shifting the focus onto the process of *enabling* and *disabling*. Who is disabled? Who makes whom disabled, and how?

“You forbid me to walk.” The line can be taken several ways, each of which sheds light on a different mode of thinking about disability. The first and most straightforward is tied to the disability rights movements’ language of accessibility, focused on the improvement of policy: in an inaccessible place like the train station at the time of Yokota’s performance, infrastructure designed by and for people with normative mobility—without ramps or elevators—does not give access to those without.

But the last verb in this line is also far from straightforward: “You forbid me to *walk*.” How might we understand this poet with cerebral palsy’s argument that he is not *allowed* or *permitted* to walk, rather than the more conventional understanding that due to the form of his body and its condition that he is not *able* to walk? It is significant here to note again that Yokota is not performing this poem from his wheelchair but rather is kneeling, and writing, on the ground. Indeed, throughout *Goodbye CP*, Yokota drags himself across spaces on his hands and knees, often with bare feet, after a lifetime of either using a wheelchair or being carried by others. The critic Takasugi Shingo (1972: 31) highlighted the centrality of this act to the film in an article that came out the same year. “The act of a person walking,” says the first line of the article. “A documentary film that records this head-on. This is *Goodbye CP*. A person walking was filmed.”

Yokota deliberately spectacularizes his way of walking on his knees, his body constantly shaking and staggering—an unusual and strenuous mode of travel—as a way to emphasize the roads, stairs, and other pieces of infrastructure not built with someone like him in mind. Even further than that, he defamiliarizes the act of walking itself by engaging in it by means of an entirely different use of limbs, moving in unexpected ways. In this light, “you forbid me to walk” becomes less a question of policy than one of redefinition, rethinking what it means to perform an act like “walking” that is normally not questioned by those who have no reason to—that is, the non-disabled. Using his body *otherwise*, Yokota challenges an act as common as walking and refuses to take its conventions as a given, since those conven-

tions serve to marginalize him and people who move like him. “You do not let me walk”: you do not let my modes of travel be considered “walking,” to be considered easy or normal.

Normality, of course, can only be produced alongside abnormality. There is a “normal” way of walking, and everything else is “abnormal”; certain bodies are deemed normal, and any bodies that diverge from this are not. Only by preventing him from walking, says Yokota, can nondisabled people “keep your legs” (*ashi wa kakuho sarete iru* 足は確保されている), “are you [legs] recognized as legs” (*ashi to mitomerareru* 足と認められる). On a fundamental level, an aim of this poetry reading, this film, and many disability activists’ protest actions around the world was to make disabled people visible. People with disabilities—physical, cognitive, sensory, intellectual—were often shut away in institutions and homes, and certainly were not thought of by nondisabled society as having a collective identity that could be mobilized into political action. In the context of Japan’s postwar high-growth economy, disabled people who could not work could not “contribute,” were left out of decision-making and pushed out of public spaces. Making disabled bodies visible in public, like in the actions documented by *Goodbye CP*, makes the structures that allow people to be considered “normal,” “able-bodied,” “healthy,” or “productive” more visible as well. Recall the police officers who halt Yokota’s performance, calling his poetry reading a “freak show” (*misemono* 見世物), unable to see the significance of the deliberate public spectacle.

“You forbid me to walk.” This short statement, and the poem it came from, thus takes us through several distinct approaches to disability. One might think about this accusation in terms of disability as a question of rights, in favor of improvement of current societies, infrastructures, and policies to make them more accessible to disabled people. Or the focus might be placed instead on disability as a social construct, one that *disables* certain bodies within a society designed for bodies with a set of assumed “normal” characteristics and capacities. Finally, it might be thought of in terms of what might be called a critical disability studies, where even the givenness of the body itself (and its most everyday tasks, like walking) is brought into question, a stance that refuses any norm to which bodies are expected to cleave.

## Disability Poetics

The definition of *disability* is a main site of contention within disability studies and disability communities. One of the most well-known contributions of disability activism that was later developed in certain branches of disability studies is, as mentioned before, the idea of disability as a social construct. A woman who uses a wheelchair, for example, is not *inherently* “disabled” but *becomes* disabled when she encounters inaccessibility, like a building with a staircase but no ramp or elevator. This notion of disability is often contrasted with “impairment,” which is a state of having a lack/loss or abnormality in a limb, organ, or bodily system. Impairments are real characteristics of bodies and lived experiences, but disability is the product of societies and infrastructures that do not take nonnormative bodies into account.

More recently, however, what is often called a “critical disability studies” has emerged. This is an approach that rejects the neat categories separating “disabled” and “nondisabled” people—and even “disability” and “ability”—in favor of a refusal to recognize the given-ness of any body, stressing how disability is an intersectional and multivalent phenomenon. Some strands within critical disability studies also take issue with the above distinction between disability and impairment. In proposing a radical model of disability, for example, A. J. Withers (2012: 5) calls this distinction a “false binary” between bodies and culture that was once useful but is a tool of “continued oppression”; impairment itself, they point out, is also created through a constructed social meaning. Others such as Margrit Shildrick and Petra Kuppers emphasize the potential of disability to reveal how *all* bodies are constantly in the process of becoming, always in assemblage with other bodies and machines and environments, thus disrupting the norms of corporeality. Critical disability studies itself, of course, is not without its critiques. This kind of deconstructive approach toward the categories and ideologies of disability often stresses a kind of all-encompassing diversity of bodies that smooths over the differences between those bodies, while at the same time it purports to extoll the singular characteristics of each. In other words, an approach that stresses that *all* bodies are different, porous, and contingent can all too easily ignore the lived experiences of impairment and the realities of uneven access, recognition, and power.



It is against this unevenness perpetrated by “able-bodied” society that Yokota writes much of his poetry. One consistent inflection of Yokota’s work over several decades is what Arai Yūki (2011: 194) refers to as Yokota’s “poetics of accusation” (*kōkuhatsu no shigaku* 告発の詩学); the word *accusation* (*kōkuhatsu*) comes up yet again in the subtitle of the above-mentioned review of *Goodbye CP* at the time of its release, describing the film as an “accusatory thing” (*kōkuhatsu suru mono* 告発するもの) (Takasugi 1972: 31). Far from the shame, pity, or “inspirational” hopefulness that often characterizes writing about disabled people (and also much autobiographical writing on disability at this time in Japan), what we tend to see in Yokota’s poems is indeed a stance of *indictment*, of anger at a society that treats him and other disabled people in a violent and dehumanizing way. This is a key aspect of Yokota’s poetics, but not the only one. More broadly, Yokota’s approach to disability in his work is complex and often oblique, without many of the expected tropes of literary works that take up disability as their subject. His poems are indeed often accusatory, but just as often they are elegiac, sardonic, or hermetic, each mode expressing a different facet of his politics.

One way of bringing together these threads is through the concept of disability poetics, a framework for understanding how poetry and other media engage with and evoke nonnormative embodiment, sensation, and cognition. Christina Scheuer (2011: 156–57) describes how disability poetics center the “body’s experiences and ways of knowing” in form and language, linking the somatic and linguistic to “express a diversity of bodily practices and encounters.” Disability poetics also places the emphasis on poets who themselves have disabilities—who create poems that depict disability from the inside, “necessarily structured by the poet’s daily lived experience, with its attendant political and social contexts” (157). The disabled body within disability poetics is not a “vehicle for metaphor,” as is so often the case in works that depict disabled subjects, but rather is *co-expressed* with poetic language. The poet foregrounds a multifarious connectedness between the body and the forces, objects, environments, and institutions that are conventionally considered to be outside of the body but are in fact crucial to its being and expression (162, 172). Along these lines, Yokota’s poetry deliberately incorporates diverse ways of thinking about disability—rights-focused, socially constructed, and critically expanded—in its form and content, with

the possible implications of “Legs,” above, being just one example. There are poems where his own disabled body is described in excruciating detail, but there are just as many where the body is seemingly *not* present, with disability evoked through unusual approaches to sensation, or in playing with the “body” of the poem itself. Indeed, throughout his poetic practice, there is a commitment to experimentality that rivals that of far more well-known figures of Japan’s illustrious avant-garde, though creations by disabled practitioners have historically been left out of being considered to be part of such movements except in certain narrow categories like “outsider art.”

In exploring Yokota Hiroshi’s disability poetics, we find an idiosyncratic theorization of disability, the body, and language that does not quite fit neatly into any one of the strands within disability thinking and activism described above. Not only that, his work anticipates by several decades many of the approaches in disability studies today, a field still largely dominated by the English-speaking world with the vast majority of cited theorists and texts coming from the United States, the UK, and Canada. One unique feature of the disability movements in Japan—and something that makes them particularly relevant to increasingly prevalent discussions on the intersections of disability, literary, and media studies—is that many of their leaders, including Yokota, were poets. Their disability poetics manifested across their literary writings, theoretical writings, and political actions, with poetic practice leading directly to their later activism.

### Yokota Hiroshi and Disability Movements

Yokota Hiroshi was born in Yokohama to a poor working family in 1933. Showing symptoms of severe CP from birth, his participation in obligatory schooling was not accommodated, and he never received a formal education. His older brother helped him learn how to read and write, with the help of wooden block toys (Arai 2011: 165). He started writing poetry in 1955, joining the Kanagawa-area amateur literary coterie Katachi 象 after reading about them in a newspaper, with his first poetry collection *Ayumi* (*Walking*) published by them shortly afterward in 1958. He actively followed the publications of the disability activist group Aoi Shiba no Kai from the beginning of its magazine in 1957, and he also started submitting to *Shinonome*, an asso-

ciated amateur literary magazine by and for poets with cerebral palsy, starting with its forty-second issue in 1960 (Arai 2011: 168). Yokota was unhappy with a living situation in which he was confined to various relatives' homes. Hanada Shunchō, the head of Shinonome coterie, introduced Yokota to Maharaba Village (Maharaba mura マハラバ村), a radical independent living colony for people with CP that existed from 1964 to 1969 in Ibaraki Prefecture; Yokota moved there in its first year. There, he met and married his wife Nagayama Yoshiko, who also had CP; in 1968, she gave birth to their son Satoru, and Yokota moved out of the colony, a fraught decision borne in the end out of a desire not to isolate his nondisabled son from wider society (168).

It is around this time he most fully began to participate in disability activism, forming the Japanese People with Cerebral Palsy Association “Aoi Shiba no Kai” Kanagawa Prefectural Organization (Nihon nōsei mahi-sha kyōkai “Aoi shiba no kai” Kanagawa-ken rengōkai 日本脳性マヒ者協会『青い芝の会』神奈川県連合会) along with several friends who also used to live at Maharaba Village. As the head of this subgroup of Aoi Shiba no Kai for several decades, Yokota spearheaded an activist strategy that first gained prominence in 1970, when members of the group protested the decision of the Kanagawa courts to treat a woman who killed her child with CP with more leniency than if the child had been nondisabled. He published several books of essays in this decade alone, including *Shōgaisha-goroshi no shisō* 障害者殺しの思想 (*The Ideology of Killing the Disabled*) in 1974 and *Korobi-gusa: Nōsei mahi-sha no aru kyōdō seikatsu no shōsei to hōkai* ころび草—脳性麻痺者のある共同生活の生成と崩壊 (*Fallen Grass: The Emergence and Collapse of Communal Living for People with Cerebral Palsy*) in 1975. He also published four more poetry collections: *Hanashibe* 花芯 (*Flower Core*) in 1969, *Umi no naru hi* 海の鳴る日 (*The Day the Sea Roars*) in 1985, *Soshite, ima* そしていま (*And, Now*) in 1993, and *Maboroshi o maboroshi o* まぼろしを (*On Phantoms*) in 2010, his last work before his death at age eighty in 2013.

Yokota's intentions for his poetic and activist work were summed up in his 1970 manifesto for Aoi Shiba no Kai: its five points include “We identify ourselves as people with Cerebral Palsy,” “We assert ourselves aggressively,” “We deny love and justice,” and “We deny able-bodied civilization,” with the aim to instead promote the creation of a distinct culture by and for people with CP.<sup>3</sup> Most telling, perhaps, is the following point of the platform:

**We do not choose the way of problem solving.** We have learnt from our personal experiences that easy solutions to problems lead to dangerous compromises. We believe that an endless confrontation is the only course of action possible for us, and we act on this belief. (Nagase 2008; bold text in original).

In his poetry and essays—themselves a kind of “endless confrontation”—each of these points is repeatedly articulated, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, as recurrent images, motifs, and arguments. This begins as early as his first published work, fifteen years earlier.

### The Limits of the Mind’s Eye

In “Shikakui sora” 四角い空 (“Square Sky”), Yokota’s first published poem—appearing in the second issue of the amateur literary magazine *Katachi* in 1955, when he was twenty-two years old—many elements of his poetry have already emerged fully formed. In his approach to language, imagery, and representations of his body and his relationship to the world, we can find a starting point to the particular disability poetics that Yokota developed over the following five and a half decades.

I do not know the extent of the sky  
 The sky is always fitted into a frame of black wood  
 A square thing  
 Through this square sky  
 Sometimes clouds glide listlessly from right to left  
 Sometimes birds fly diagonally across it  
 And sometimes  
 Multicolored laundry  
 Looking like it smells of soap  
 Takes up most of the square sky  
 When this square sky  
 Becomes faintly misty I rejoice that spring has come  
 When it is deeply cleansed I grieve at the arrival of autumn  
 This is me that people call a cripple  
 (Arai 2011: 171–72)<sup>4</sup>

When Yokota wrote this poem, he spent the vast majority of his time in his room in his aunt's home—Tokyo in 1955, just after the end of the American Occupation, was hardly an accessible environment for a wheelchair user. “Square Sky” is heavy with the sense of claustrophobia and confinement brought on by his living situation and his body's lack of mobility in its environment. Within his one-room universe, the “sky” is only the view outside a single square, wood-framed window, a mediated “thing” only accessible from a distance. All of his senses, from scent (soap) to sound (birds) are collapsed into sight. There is a distinct feeling that there is a “real” world outside the window that Yokota has only a limited, virtual access to, and it is this *limited experience of the world* that, Yokota says in the last line, makes people “call [him] a cripple” (*katawamono* 片端者, a pejorative term).

This is an important reversal of the expectations surrounding disability and identity, and one we can find throughout his work. In this poem from the mid-1950s—well before the emergence of global disability movements and the emphasis on disability as a construct created by an unaccommodating society, not as the “failure” of an individual body—Yokota already shows more than a glimmer of his later activist consciousness. In this final line, it is not he who considers himself a “cripple,” and it is not the way his body is that makes him such; rather, it is something he is *called* by other people. Furthermore, the reason they call him that seems less because of the way his body looks and more because of the way *he looks*—in other words, because of the way *sonna boku* そんな僕 (literally “that I”) can only experience the sky (and the rest of the world) through narrow mediation.

These themes are expanded upon further and made even more explicit in a later poem, “Hieru kokoro” 冷える心 (“Cold Heart”), from his 1969 collection, *Hanashibe* (*Flower Core*).

“Today was so nice out  
I could see Mt. Fuji, clear as day”  
said my aunt, who just came back from an outing  
“Oh, it's not just today!  
You can see it all the time around the end of fall.”  
It was in the mid-afternoon  
with a late November chill

I do not know the real Fuji  
 so when someone says Fuji  
 the prints of Hokusai are what immediately come to mind  
 but in my head  
 even though there's Fuji through Hokusai's careful eye  
 there is no form left to its own nature  
 even though there's the beauty of his deformed ridges  
 there is no joy in following smooth slopes with a naked eye  
 and I  
 came to believe that was the real thing  
 convinced that this was the real Fuji  
 my heart  
 is always full  
 of these deformed things  
  
 "I want to climb Mt. Fuji, even just once"  
 said my cousin  
 me too even just once  
 I think I want to see the real Mt. Fuji  
 I think I want to know the real world  
 (Yokota 1969: 14–15)

Again, Yokota here considers the gaps between the experiences in which he is able or allowed to participate and those of the nondisabled family around him. His aunt's story about seeing Mt. Fuji, and his cousin's exclamation of her desire to climb it one day, set off a series of introspections about his own desires and fears surrounding his relationship to the world. Once more, there is an anxiety around his own experiences, which he sees as virtual, as opposed to what he imagines as an encounter with the "real." While for his aunt, seeing Mt. Fuji is a somewhat noteworthy experience, it is implied to be a regular one; it is implied that for Yokota, however, due to the limits set on his mobility, even *seeing* Fuji is something he can only dream about. In the last stanza, his cousin expresses her desire to, "even just once," climb Mt. Fuji. Her fantasy is hardly out of reach; hundreds of thousands of people do this every year, and her body seemingly has the capacity to do so. "Me too," thinks Yokota, but he is not referring to climbing Mt. Fuji; to do this

is so far outside the realm of possibility he does not even allow himself the thought. Rather, he expresses his desire to *see* the real Fuji (“hontō no Fujisan o mitai to omou” 本当の富士山を見たいと思う). Just seeing Fuji might be something trivial for people with normative mobility, but for Yokota, the seeing itself becomes the fantasy, the impossible act that he longs for.

Even more striking is another collapse of all experience into the visual/virtual in the middle section of the poem: like the sky in “Square Sky” becoming only the view outside one window, “Mt. Fuji” to Yokota is only Fuji as mediated through the famous woodblock prints of Hokusai, known for works like “The Great Wave Off Kanagawa.” Again, like in the previous poem “Square Sky,” it is not his own body but that mediated experience *itself* that Yokota portrays as disabling. In this poem, Hokusai’s version of Mt. Fuji’s ridges, while beautiful, are described as *henkei* 変形, a word that when applied to a body means “deformed”; Yokota is rueful that the image of Fuji that he convinced himself was “real” is instead just one among the many “deformed things” (*henkei sareta mono* 変形された物) filling up his heart and mind. His body itself, instead, is made implicitly present through the description of his “naked eye,” which in Japanese is *nikugan* 肉眼—literally meaning “flesh-eye” or “meat-eye.” Rather than the convention of a poetic vision that is separate from the body, free to virtually roam the world and cosmos, Yokota’s vision in these early poems is firmly enfleshed, with both physical sight and the mind’s eye being subject to the limitations imposed upon his body.

### Yokota’s Contributions to *Shinonome*

Yokota’s blossoming as a poet largely occurred across the 1960s in the pages of *Shinonome*. *Shinonome* was an amateur literary coterie (*dōjin*) with its own journal, published from 1947 to 2012, written largely by and for people with CP. It was also eventually a parent body of Aoi Shiba no Kai, which became the most influential group of disability activists in Japan. The birthplace of *Shinonome* was the Tokyo Metropolitan Kōmei School for physically disabled children (the same school in which Hara Kazuo, the director of *Goodbye CP*, later worked as an assistant). The coterie was launched by the graduates of the Kōmei School’s “postgraduate course,” who received an

especially deep and broad education in Japanese literature. For the first years of the *Shinonome* journal, it was a handwritten circular (most of the issues of which are now lost), with the idiosyncratic handwriting characteristic of many people with CP (Arai 2011: 34–35). Each issue was largely centered around poetry: haiku, tanka, and free verse. There were also essays, responses to current events, reviews of books and films, advertisements, art, and short biographies of contributors (which will be touched on again later). By and large, especially in the first few decades of its existence, it was one of the few sites for public self-expression by and for disabled people—especially those confined to their homes or institutions—and we can find in its pages much of the foundation of later disability movements in Japan.

In *Shinonome* as before, Yokota's body continued to be a central image in his poetic works, but always in a way that resisted conventional depictions of the “disabled body” in literature and elsewhere. It is those external forces that actively tried to define his body as disabled—particularly medical institutions and professionals—which are the focus in Yokota's first poem published in the magazine in 1960 (and thus his first actively aimed at a disabled audience): “Karute” カルテ (“Patient Chart”).

“It's a real pity,  
but you're not going to get any better than this, you knoww?”

Name of Disease:  
Spastic paralysis due to infant cerebral palsy

“This isn't something  
You can cure with a single injection, you knoww?”

Right shoulder elevation about 40°  
Hand and finger movements sluggish

“Try stretching your leg out more  
Ahaa, just what I thought, your knees have gotten crooked, haven't  
theyy?”

A pronounced curvature  
In both knee joints



“If you’re touched by other people there  
Your joints are going to get completely stiff, you knoww?”

Second degree of severity confirmed  
On the statistical table for laws concerning those with physical disabilities

“Well, take care of yourself  
And try moving on your own, even if you have to gasp for breath, okayy?”  
(Yokota 1960a: 47)

Yokota’s body is at the center of this poem, described in almost obsessive detail; however, unlike most of his other poems written around this time, it is not explicitly from a first-person perspective. Each of the poem’s two-line stanzas alternates between two sources: quoted speech from what seems to be a doctor or nurse, and stanzas describing Yokota’s own bodily characteristics in highly medicalized language, as if written on the titular patient’s chart. The person who is speaking has a bedside manner that is far from gentle or compassionate; using everyday language instead of medical terminology, the figure instructs, chastises, and diagnoses the reader (as a young Yokota) in a gruff and casual way. The other stanzas, in the disembodied “diagnostic” voice, are replete with dense, specialized *kanji* and vocabulary, describing Yokota’s “spastic paralysis” and his having a “second degree” disability in accordance with the current governmental regulations. The focus again is on the *external* definition of him and his body as disabled, both within the systems of the medical industry and health policy, and through the voice of a health-care professional who roughly points out the failures, lacks, and grim futures of Yokota’s body.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that this was published as part of Yokota’s first set of poems for *Shinonome* is itself significant. A key part of the structure of *Shinonome* lies in its use of autobiography and biography. Apart from the poems themselves—some, but not all, of which speak on personal experiences on the part of the poet—every issue ends with a series of short biographical notes on each poet. This is usual for any literary journal in and of itself, but what is most striking is the addition of one element to the usual date and place of birth, educational background, and so on: a self-identification of their condition,

usually some form of CP, but also other kinds of paralysis, like those stemming from spinal injury.

Why is this the case? Certainly, the journal is the product of a coterie of poets with physical disabilities, almost all of whom can be described as having CP. Judging by the essays, editorial introductions, and targeted advertisements, the expected audience of the journal, too, is other disabled people. The presence of the specific nature of the poets' disabilities in their profiles can be considered in several ways. One is related to identity: the specific nature of a poet's disability is included as a self-description in a way analogous to the biographical elements of age, hometown, and schooling that precede it; including their specific disability gives a fuller view of them as a person, pushing against the assumptions of "able-bodiedness." Another way this can be thought of is as a form of resistance to the medical model of disability, one replete with an abundance of nomenclature for every specific form of physical variance—a model of naming and then of "rehabilitation" or "cure." The extremely specific, medicalized terminology used by the poets in these autobiographic or biographic blurbs seems at first to fit right into this model, making *Shinonome's* biographical page read like a series of patient charts like the one in Yokota's poem above. Most of these poets met each other in specific educational and rehabilitative institutions for children and youth with physical disabilities, where the language of such diagnoses would be inescapable. But the specificity of these terms also has another effect: it reflects the enormous diversity of these poets' bodies, a diversity that is all too easily smoothed over by a society that often thinks of disabled people as a monolithic group. Naming particular conditions by the poets themselves in this context—not by doctors or government agencies—becomes an act of self-identification, using the words that were used to define them in the context of their autobiographies as writers, a gesture that strikes one as both empowering and tongue in cheek.

"Shinkaigo" 深海魚 ("Deep-Sea Fish"), published in the same issue, is strikingly different from any of Yokota's work up until this point:

eyes searching for  
lost light  
are no more

enduring  
 silent water pressure  
 the whole body became antenna

today too poisoned wine  
 has sharply soaked through  
 (Yokota 1960b: 48)

Completely divorced from any conventional idea of life-writing, “Deep-Sea Fish” instead is almost surrealist in its language, presenting the reader with an imagined landscape of the deep ocean. Yet this poem, too, is an exploration at the edges of Yokota’s disability poetics, focusing on embodiment and mediation otherwise: each section, in turn, considers blindness, sensation, and injury. No humans nor animals explicitly appear, but an organismic presence is implied. The beginning has disembodied “eyes” that are instantly negated out of existence, an act of “seeing” that occurs without either light or sight organs. In the next stanza, some unspecified “whole body” (*zenshin* 全身) is “antenna-fied” (*shokkaku-ka shita* 触角化した), becoming a sensory appendage characteristic of nonhuman animals. In the last stanza—“today too poisoned wine / has sharply soaked through”—not much is clear besides a feeling of chronic hurt: “poisoned wine” has “sharply” penetrated something (perhaps the “whole body” of the previous stanza, though this is not specified), and what’s more, this is seemingly a regular occurrence (“today too”).

### Yokota and the News

One of Yokota’s most reprinted works is “Kazaguruma” かざぐるま (“Pinwheel”), another seemingly autobiographical work that uses startlingly surreal imagery to complicate conventional tropes.

Since my childhood days  
 it had been weakly spinning

On a quiet night with the nonstop chirping of crickets  
 in the mystery of the transparent colors  
 revolving in my mother’s eyes

I caught a little longing  
and a faint fear  
with my whole body

For the first time  
wind blew through my heart  
in the sunlight of a languid autumn afternoon  
It was only the red enamel  
adorning the surface  
that brittlely went up in flames  
(Yokota [1974] 2015: 1)<sup>6</sup>

The poem focuses on a particular moment between the narrator (again, seemingly Yokota himself) and his mother; Yokota's mother died when he was very young, placing this scene in his early childhood. The "whole body" (*zenshin* 全身) of "Deep-Sea Fish" returns here, only this time as a vessel of affect, depicted as having "caught" (*uketometa* 受け止めた) longing and fear from his mother's eyes. "For the first time," a wind blows through the narrator's heart, the titular pinwheel, which was until that point only "weakly spinning." Finally, some kind of "red enamel" covering the narrator's body suddenly bursts into flame (*moe agaru* もえ上がる).

It is certainly a cryptic work. But before delving into the specifics of its imagery, it is important to consider where the poem eventually ended up: as the frontispiece of Yokota's first nonfiction book, 1974's *Shōgaisha-goroshi no shisō* (*The Ideology of Killing the Disabled*). This book was written in response to numerous high-profile incidents in the early 1970s in Japan of mothers killing their young children who had CP and the feeling of rage and helplessness that disabled people felt in the face of a public outpouring of sympathy for those mothers whose actions were framed as tragic but inevitable.

At this time, Aoi Shiba no Kai and the burgeoning radical feminist movement *ūman ribu* ウーマンリブ (women's lib) worked together on a range of issues, most notably as a united force against 1972's Eugenic Protection Law Amendment Bill, which simultaneously aimed to reduce access to abortion and to promote selective abortion of disabled fetuses.<sup>7</sup> There were, however, significant conflicts between the two groups. Radical feminist movements

worldwide pushed for easy access to safe abortions with few restrictions, while global disability movements pushed back against selective abortion, in particular, bringing up fears of eugenics and the disproportionate aborting of fetuses that were likely to have disabilities. Radical feminists argued that their aim was to create a society in which disabled and nondisabled children alike could be raised without discrimination; disability rights activists were skeptical of any approach that did not foreground the specific dangers faced by disabled people in the present and the future. Another point of conflict arose surrounding these incidents of *kogoroshi onna* 子殺し女, women who killed their children; many *ribu* activists repeatedly expressed solidarity with these mothers as part of their overall ideological project of exposing and destroying societal conceptions and policies of gender roles, motherhood, and family as inherently oppressive to women. Tanaka Mitsu (1972: 207), a core member and the most prominent mouthpiece of the *ribu* movement, expressed this succinctly in 1972: “*ribu* and the child-killing women are nothing but two extreme branches coming from the same root.” This and similar statements, however, elided the fact that a large proportion of children killed this way were killed due to their being disabled.<sup>8</sup>

In light of Yokota’s decision five years after its first appearance in *Hanashibe* to put this poem on the first page of *The Ideology of Killing the Disabled*—seemingly the only poem in the entire book—certain nuances of “Pinwheel” become more apparent. Like in his other poems, Yokota does not describe his own body as disabled, yet his body absorbs “fear” and “longing” from his mother’s eyes, with any surface armor he has burning up in her presence. There is a porosity between their bodies, but also an atmosphere of potential violence, the narrator becoming more and more vulnerable as the poem progresses. Yokota’s favored motifs within his disability poetics return in this poem—alternative modes of feeling and sensation, bodies otherwise, the presence of relatives, natural environments combined with a sense of distance and lack—but are here, in the face of several horrific murders of disabled children, used to convey a feeling of threat within the context of a familial tableau.

As mentioned earlier, “Pinwheel” is ostensibly the only poem that appears in Yokota’s first nonfiction book, despite his being known first and foremost as a poet. Yet this is not entirely true. At the end of the third section

of the first chapter, “Masukomi no ‘hanzaisei’” マスコミの「犯罪性」 (“The ‘Criminality’ of Mass Media”) are two pages that look nothing like the rest of the book—indented, loosely and irregularly lineated, with ample blank space (Yokota [1974] 2015: 20–21):

A Rainy Roadway, and Wandering Through the Night

A Mother, Following in Suicide      Kills Her Beloved Disabled Child  
(Yomiuri Shimbun)

Mother Who Kills Her Paralytic Child

Suicide “Settlement”

A Year of Caregiving, Total Exhaustion

One More “Disabled Children’s Home” Tragedy  
(Mainichi Shimbun)

Tragic “Suicide Conclusion”

Killing Son with Cerebral Palsy      Mother Leaps to Death  
(Tokyo Shimbun)

Unidentified Mother Commits Suicide

Kills Disabled Child

A Tragic Conclusion      Near a Custodial Care School  
(Kanagawa Shimbun)

Mother Strangles Severely Disabled Eldest Son

Leaps from Building

Seeking Death

Body Soaked by Rain      Overnight  
(Sankei Shimbun)

Mother Jumps Too      Kills Mentally Retarded Child and Leaves Home  
(Tokyo Shimbun)

Jumping to Her Death Near Her Child’s School

The Mother Who Killed Her Disabled Child  
(Asahi Shimbun)

Yokota highlights the language, often pejorative and cruel, used by the mass media to describe disabled people and their murders by selecting and

arranging a series of eight newspaper headlines from February 11, 1973, concerning one of the incidents that became the catalyst for this book: a woman in Kanagawa killing her son who had cerebral palsy and then leaping to her own death. The victim is alternately described as a “beloved physically disabled child” (*shinshō no aiji* 身障の愛児), a “paralytic child” (*mahi no ko* マヒの子), a “son with cerebral palsy” (*nōsei mahi no musuko* 脳性マヒの息子), a “physically disabled child” (*shinshōji* 身障児殺し), a “mentally retarded child” (*chie okure no ko* 知恵遅れの子), and a “severely disabled eldest son” (*jūdo shinshō no chōnan* 重度身障の長男). The overall tone is melodramatic, touching on the mother’s love and exhaustion, the rainy street, and the “settlement” reached by the act of murder.

Yet beyond the specific language used in these headlines, what is most striking is their *poemification*. This is most obvious, again, from the visual arrangement of words, standing out from the rest of the book, with creative indentation, lineation, and use of space. Beyond that, the first line contributes to the effect: “ame no machi, ichiya sasurai” 雨の街、一夜さすらい (“A Rainy Roadway, and Wandering Through the Night”). In other words, a phrase of five syllables, followed by a phrase of seven syllables, like the first two lines of a haiku or tanka. While the rest of the headlines do not follow this pattern, Yokota’s decision to put this particular quotation first serves as a subtle signal to the reader, along with the formatting, to read this sequence as *lyric*.

What is the effect of this decision? Jahan Ramazani (2013: 63–64) points out a consistent trope of positioning poetry as “antigenre to the news,” held up for its resistance to the urgent pressure of immediacy and simplification inherent to journalism. Nevertheless, he says, poetry across the globe in the twentieth century has consistently incorporated the news while still defining itself against it dialogically (66). In a way akin to this, Yokota uses the language of journalism against itself, by directly taking headlines and arranging them in a sequence and on a page in order to look “poetic.” He thus asks the reader, even subconsciously, to read these headlines—ubiquitous, designed to be graspable and to convey information in an instant—as a poem. In other words, to read them *intensively* instead of *extensively*: carefully, with a heightened attention to the choice of words used by mainstream society to describe disability as a tragedy and the murder of a disabled child

as an understandable and inevitable conclusion. Again, in Yokota's disability poetics, there is a consistent spotlight on the cultural formation of disability and the power imbalance inherent to the act of deeming something or someone disabled. The journalistic depictions that were the main source of framing of these incidents for the vast majority of people become, in Yokota's act of poemification, removed from a context in which they can purport to be a neutral and objective account of events, the ideology behind their language made apparent.

### The Experimentation of the Disabled Body

Yokota, as well as the many other poets within Japan's disability movements, took up disability and the lives of disabled people not just in their poems' content but in their striving to think of poems themselves otherwise—in Yokota's case, his use of imagery and unusual poetic sources like patient charts and headlines, and his dedication to making his disabled body visible in performance and articulation. The work of these poets was no less innovative than the much-heralded "experimental art" of Japan's 1950s and 1960s, but with an innovation firmly centered on the day-to-day lived experiences of bodies otherwise, and of those with CP in particular. They aimed not to reduce disability to a metaphor, as is so often the case, but to consistently challenge the *body of the poem* in a way that refuses to take it as a given, much like the disability movements of this time refused to accept a "norm" that only allowed certain bodies within it.<sup>9</sup>

Consider once more Yokota Hiroshi, sitting on the ground outside Shinjuku station, writing in chalk and reciting his poem out loud. In the scene of *Goodbye CP* that precedes this, we hear a conversation between the director Hara Kazuo and Yokota; Hara points out to him that Yokota once said that people don't understand what he says, and wonders how that will work in the poetry reading. "I think they will understand something," replies Yokota. "Even if they don't understand every single word . . . if they're really listening, they'll understand" (Hara 1972).

His speech is, indeed, difficult to understand entirely. A review of the film from the time by the critic Satō Shigechika (1972: 52) notes the film's "largely unintelligible dialogue." This is because the Japanese release of the



film did not have any subtitles to aid the audience in understanding the words of the subjects with CP (though transcripts were distributed in programs for people to read later). Though in a later essay Hara (2009: 74–75) claims he would have added subtitles for protagonists who were not Japanese or with strong regional accents, he argues that “the difficulty an audience is confronted with when people with cerebral palsy talk doesn’t have to do with dialect. I think an audience has to become accustomed to how people with cerebral palsy speak. That is, if the audience gets used to this, if they spend some time with them, they’ll come to understand them.”

Indeed, Hara says, while the rest of the crowd remained silent, audience members with CP laughed and reacted throughout: they were able to understand all the dialogue (92). In the earlier Takasugi Shingo (1972: 33) article about *Goodbye CP*, however, Hara claimed that “none of the people that were crowded around recognized what Yokota was saying in his squeezed-out voice as a poem.” Even disregarding the fact that Yokota wrote “Yokota Hiroshi Poem” on the ground in front of him before the reading, this is a pessimistic view and one that reduces the multifaceted encounter between poet, voice, body, audience, and poem solely to a question of intelligibility.

Whether or not the audience around Yokota or of *Goodbye CP* could understand the words of his poem is a debate that itself highlights the alternate yet no less important elements of the poetic encounter recorded in this scene. Yokota’s performance of “Legs” is also a performance of a poem across media, of a body otherwise, of writing otherwise, of speaking otherwise, and—on the part of the audience of both the reading and the film—of listening otherwise, of attempting to come to a different kind of understanding. This process can never be perfect but in itself continually articulates different modes of sensation and relation to others. “Disability is a word cut in the landscape of bodies,” says Petra Kupperts (2009: 238). “Experimental poetry is not only stuff that is unintelligible on the page. It is also poems that become unintelligible as they are performed, as their familiar words enter a machine that sticks and shudders with aching gears.” While many of Yokota’s poems might not fit what is conventionally thought of as avant-garde or experimental, by centering their disability poetics, he and the other poets of Japan’s disability movements achieved experimental-ity through other means: by handwriting their poems on pages and pave-

ment in a way that made visible the unconventional movements of their hands; by reading their poems aloud, even or especially when their voices were not easily understandable to those outside their communities; and by rethinking how embodiment can be expressed through language when their own bodies were made invisible or deemed expendable. Put another way: through these poems, bodies otherwise, though forbidden to walk, were able to speak—and what’s more, to make speaking new.

## Notes

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- 1 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Based partially on the transcript of the film in the expanded 2007 edition of Yokozuka Kōichi’s *Haha yo! Korosu-na* 母よ! 殺すな (*Hey Mom! Don’t Kill Me*) (373–75).
- 3 Translation from Nagase 2008. Originally published in *Ayumi* あゆみ 11 (October 1970): 1.
- 4 Reprinted in Arai 2011. First published in *Katachi* 象 2 (1955): 17; then in Yokota’s self-published debut collection *Ayumi* あゆみ (1958); then in *Shinonome* 44 (1961): 9.
- 5 For more on the concept of grim futures in relation to disability, see the introduction of Kafer 2013.
- 6 First appeared in *Hanashibe* (Yokota 1969).
- 7 See Morioka 2015.
- 8 *Haha yo! Korosu-na* (*Hey Mom! Don’t Kill Me*) by Yokozuka Kōichi ([1975] 2007)—a photographer as well as a writer, and the other main subject of *Goodbye CP*—is the other major text that represents the conventional stance taken by Japan’s disability movements at this time on these killings.
- 9 For more on the historical constructedness of the “normal” body, see Davis 1995.

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