

On the Margin: Personal Archives of an Outcast—A Case Study

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Abstract: Norio Nagayama (1949-1997) is a Japanese death-row inmate executed in 1997. Raised in extreme poverty without proper education, he killed 4 people at the age of 19 in 1968. After his arrest in 1969, he spent 28 years of his life in detention, during which he taught himself to be an award-winning writer. Under strict prison rules limiting personal possessions, he was compelled to send out his papers, in small amount each time, to anyone ready to keep them. As a result, his personal papers had been dispersed among his supporters, defense lawyers and publishers, until a supporter re-collected 72 boxes of them after his execution.

What is intriguing about Nagayama's archives is the wealth of information besides actual, written content. All incoming and outgoing letters were censored. Only one notebook was allowed at a time, and its content was checked regularly. His papers carry traces of power exerted on them by the authority. On the other hand, one can see that Nagayama himself applied certain strategies to maintain the integrity of his records and left clues.

Using photographs and transcripts (translations) of his manuscripts, the poster will offer some examples of such traces left in the margins or other spaces usually left blank and consider what they can tell us. It will also examine if, in this particular case, the margins can be construed as a field of power-interplay between the prison authority and an incarcerated person who lived and died on the very margin of a society.

About the author:

Izumi Hirano is a master's student at Gakushuin University in Tokyo, Japan, and works part-time at the Center for Education and Research in Cooperative Human Relations in Saitama University since 2002. The Center has a huge collection of gray literature published by NGOs all over the world, and archives of many grass-roots movements in Japan. She holds a BA in German Studies from Sophia University in Tokyo.