

Introduction

A cinematic script that could not possibly be filmed; a set of voices, chopped up and multiplied on a tape recorder; a declaration in front of a train station by an activist with cerebral palsy; a pop song about menstruation performed on live TV by a woman wearing giant dragonfly wings; hundreds of augmented reality roses floating above the streets of Tokyo. All of these were called poems by their creators at different points over the last hundred years in Japan. They were, however, at the margins of conventional poetic practice. The majority were not even considered to be poetry by the literary establishment of their time; they were largely ignored, regarded as minor works or even dismissed as frivolous. Yet these poets made radical interventions not just in literature but also in the media cultures of each era. Their works existed at the outer edges of both poetry making and media making, and they used this position to rethink the possibilities of each.

Expanding Verse explores the role of experimental poetic practice in Japan from the 1920s to the present, focusing on key moments of media transition. In it, I argue that experimental poetry did not just engage with different forms of media, but was a primary mode of thinking about and creating media *otherwise*, in opposition to dominant modes of composition and reception. Sometimes this meant experimenting with forms of media more traditionally associated with the literary: the book, the journal, the page, the typeface. Sometimes this meant manipulating media technologies, newly emerging or at crucial points of inflection: film, tape recording, pop music albums, online video, smartphone apps. But all of these were different paths toward a more fundamental goal: using poetry not just to evoke but to *create* new ways of being and experiencing the world that pushed up against dominant media ideologies, technologies, and practices. Poetry became an

alternative to systems of media that threatened to control, capture, and set limits on bodies and voices. Poetry, in other words, was not just a subcategory of literature but a site in which poets in Japan attempted to remake the relationship between media, language, technology, and the body.

The poets in this book were silent film actresses, socialites, composers, bloggers, disability activists, feminist self-help authors, and pop stars, all of whom aimed to create new forms of writing across different media and modes of embodiment, resulting in works that continue to resonate today. Their poems took the form not just of printed text but of films, audio recordings, visual art, magazine spreads, collages, photographs, performances, protests, and staged events; they were written on concrete, vibrated through the air, and were assembled from ink, paper, light, voices, bodies, and reels of magnetic tape. Poetry in print, of course, played a key role—it continues to be the dominant form of poetry in Japan and will remain a central concern in this book. But what happens when we treat “other” poetic practices like those described above *not* as exceptional or one-off experiments but instead as key to how we think about poetry? Literature is largely conflated with certain forms of print media, and poetry, especially modern poetry, is often simply treated as a category within that medium. Poetry is, in fact, often held up as the paragon of literary expression, untainted by the concerns of capital, technology, and popular media: backward looking, bound to strict tradition, unpopular among the masses, mostly found in (text)books, journals, and, perhaps, live readings at coffee shops. But what if poetry is not just a short type of literature littered with line breaks but is instead something that always exists at the edges of media, a mode of media practice? What happens when we understand poetry not as a medium or a submedium but rather as something that comes into being when the borders of media are expanded, transgressed, and reconfigured?

Modern Japanese poetry is strikingly underresearched and undertaught in both English- and Japanese-language academia when compared to fiction, art, and film. Yet poetry, historically, does what other forms of expression do *not*, almost as a *modus operandi*. Due to its tendency to be at the forefront of literary experimentation and its relative economy of form, poetry has a special capacity to be incorporated more agilely and intensely into a variety of media and social formations. It is not only particularly open to changes in media technology but can also change how we think about and use those media. Criticism and histories of modern Japanese literature, however, if they include poetry at all, rarely touch upon these capacities, and they almost exclusively privilege a certain narrow subsection of poetic works. There is a conventional history based completely on poetry in print in certain venues: poems that were published in a handful of esteemed literary journals and then gathered into books, despite the vast array of other forms of poetry that flourished throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But to focus in *Expanding Verse* on these “other forms”—treating poetic experiments across media as central and not just fringe phenomena—is to foreground an

expanded approach to poetic composition where not just words but embodiment and sensation itself could be rethought. Bodies, viewpoints, and voices that were historically excluded or rendered invisible could, through poetic experiment, be made central. The common narrative of new media forms and technologies influencing poetry—"opening it up" to new modes of expression—obfuscates the perhaps more crucial practice of poets trying to make media itself anew. Over and over, poetic practice was used as a way to think each medium *otherwise*, and to find new possibilities at media's edge.

WHAT ELSE WAS POETRY?

The vast majority of the works in this volume were called *shi* by their creators, a Japanese term that now usually refers to modern poetry written in free verse. Japan's twentieth century saw the rapid proliferation and transformation of this modern free verse poetry as an alternative to older fixed poetic practices such as *waka* (referring to a variety of forms, especially what were later called *tanka*) and haiku, the former dominant since at least the early eighth century, the latter gaining purchase starting in the seventeenth century. It was also distinguished from *kanshi*, "Chinese-language" poems written by poets in Japan, the most common association with the term *shi* before it became firmly attached to modern free verse.¹ Free verse poetry in Japanese is generally accepted to begin with the publication of *A Collection of New-Style Poems* (*Shintaishishō*) in 1882, a group effort by three scholars—the sociologist Toyama Masakazu, the botanist Yatabe Ryōkichi, and the philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō—that consisted largely of translations of English poems by figures such as Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Longfellow, as well as five original free verse works in Japanese. The general consensus on this compilation is that, although it inspired many younger poets, it was more impactful than successful.² As Lucy Lower notes, despite even the anticipation of intense criticism of this new type of poetry—with the three scholars expecting the anthology to be called "freakish and vulgar" by the general public—it was met with "derision beyond the compilers' wildest fears."³

Yet this rough start was certainly not the end of the free verse poem. Over the course of the next three decades, the "new-style poem" (*shintaiishi*) rapidly grew in popularity and acceptance and loosened its remaining strictures, eventually becoming referred to as just the "poem" (*shi*). If we were to continue this conventional history of modern Japanese poetry (*kindaishi* and *gendaishi*), we would usually then point to the publication of the first highly recognized and lauded free verse collections written in literary Japanese, such as Shimazaki Tōson's *A Collection of Young Herbs* (*Wakanashū*) in 1897, followed by the first major works written in colloquial Japanese such as Kawaji Ryūkō's *Flowers of the Roadside* (*Robō no hana*) in 1910 and Hagiwara Sakutarō's *Howling at the Moon* (*Tsuki ni hoeru*) in 1917.⁴ Accounts usually then turn to the highly compressed introduction of a variety of

avant-garde movements in poetry to Japan: the 1920s and 1930s saw the proliferation of Futurist, Dada, and Surrealist as well as proletarian poetry, with the innumerable poetry journals of the era publishing experimental poems translated from European languages alongside original Japanese-language works. Like earlier free verse poems in Japanese, these modernist poems often continued to be unfairly characterized—even at the time, and even within Japan itself—as merely Japanese “imitations” of Western poetry, a reputation of unoriginality that has hindered the study of modern Japanese poetry in both English- and Japanese-language scholarship ever since. World War II is usually portrayed as a major turning point, during which the vast majority of prominent publishing poets either stopped writing or wrote propagandistic poetry supporting the Japanese empire. After Japan’s defeat and subsequent occupation, the story usually goes, came a resurgence in poetry’s popularity and the establishment of an enormous number of new journals, associations, and awards in the 1950s; the rise of a second avant-garde in the 1960s and of performance poetry in the 1970s; a “women’s poetry boom” in the 1980s; a wave of young and disillusioned poets in Japan’s “lost decades” of the 1990s and 2000s; and a turn to more grounded, activist, and environmentally conscious work in the 2010s in the wake of the triple disasters in northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011.

The comprehensive histories and surveys of modern Japanese poetry that are out there—a very small handful in English, many in Japanese—tend to have a structure that matches this general framework. While they differ in the specific poets favored by the author or editor, each usually consists of chapters or sections ordered chronologically and dedicated to different literary movements within poetry (e.g., Romanticism, Futurism, naturalism, lyricism, “women’s poetry”), with an account of the main journals and poets associated with each, followed by a few examples of famous works. This kind of format allows for a wide range of poets to be presented and makes perfect sense considering the scope of the task at hand. It is undeniable, after all, that the majority of well-known modern Japanese poems were published in a select few prominent journals, or in certain poets’ individual poetry collections, though the latter only tended to be published by the most famous (or wealthy) poets. This remains a useful heuristic when the aim is to give a broad sense of what kind of poetry was being read and talked about most widely in each era.

This kind of approach, however, structurally elides poetry that was not published in prominent journals or by prominent poets, works that did not fall neatly under existing movements, and works that were not in print, or where printed text was just one element among many. There is another crucial story not represented here, one at the center of this book: of poetry intimately engaged with multiple media beyond printed literature, and, by virtue of this, being powerfully connected to artistic and social practices that extend far beyond the page. This is a phenomenon that cannot, of course, be completely contained to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, though this is the time period focused upon in this

volume. Asserting that poetry is something that inherently exists across and in engagement with multiple forms of media is, of course, old news to any aficionado of ancient, classical, medieval, or early modern Japanese poetry—including *waka*, *renga*, *chōka*, *haikai* (now called *haiku*), *bussokusekika*, and *shi* (in the older sense of poems written solely in “Chinese”). The distinction between “poem” and “song” (*uta*), for example, was never a given, and it was drawn differently in different eras. For much of the history of Japanese poetry, poems were composed to be chanted or sung, often with instrumental accompaniment, and were woven into ceremonial and theatrical performances; they were thus not solely a textual, but first and foremost a musical and oral, practice.⁵ There was also no such thing as a “neutral” written form: written poetry was inextricable from calligraphy, embodiment (and the gendering of different forms of writing), the choice of characters (particularly significant before the standardization of written Japanese), the opacity and viscosity of ink, and the patterns and textures of paper, and it was often accompanied by all manner of illustration.⁶ Poems were also a part of material culture—they were inscribed, painted, and carved onto scrolls, folding screens, fans, cups, vases, swords, statues, and landscape models.⁷ Poets were attentive to entanglements of word, form, material, sound, image, and memory in a way that often centered their embodiment: embedded within their works are implicit and explicit reflections on processes of composition in the head, through the hand, before the eyes, on the tongue, and by the ear.

Again: pointing out the inherent intermediality of premodern Japanese poetry is to state something obvious. Yet a similar assertion for *modern* Japanese poetry is harder to come by. There are several reasons for this. One is a shift in the dominant ways poetry came to be composed and consumed in the Meiji era (the commonly accepted beginning of the “modern,” after the Tokugawa period’s “early modern”). The creation of free verse “new-style poetry” mentioned earlier is inextricable from the context of Meiji print culture, in which poems and other literary works came to be published with moveable type in books and the newer media of journals and newspapers.⁸ These often had limited or no illustration, and less emphasis was placed on complex visual elements (specialized paper, unusual character choices, unique handwriting, different inks, and so on) compared to early modern and premodern works. This might be called a “printification” of poetry, deemphasizing its visual, embodied, and handwritten aspects, as well as its connection to nonprint media. This also applies to sound: as Maeda Ai argues, the uniformity of modern print lent itself to silent reading at great speed, with “the sound of the voice thus naturally disappear[ing]”; he notes how poets must “rely on devices” like lineation or the extensive use of kana syllabaries in order to preserve a sense of voice in print.⁹ Another reason for the suppression of the intermediality of modern Japanese poetry is the conventional understanding in both Japan and elsewhere of modern Japanese free verse as an imported “Western” mode, actively unmoored from “traditional” Japanese poetic forms of centuries

past. This becomes recapitulated in much writing about modern Japanese poetry, which focuses on the texts alone and deemphasizes their connection both to other media and to older poetic forms and artistic practices.

In other words, while there were certainly changes happening to how poetry was composed and circulated at the beginning of the modern era—which led to much poetry becoming less spectacularly intermedial than it was before—this often becomes conflated as the story of the entirety of modern Japanese poetry. There were, of course, vast amounts of poetic work that did not fit this schema and were actively engaged with embodiment, orality, musicality, visuality, and multiple media forms, continuing throughout the Meiji era and into the present.¹⁰ But these were deemphasized in the construction of the category of “modern Japanese poetry,” within which poetry was rebound to print culture alone. In their task to draw the contours of modern Japanese poetry, many scholars, critics, and editors have consistently focused solely on printed poetry anthologies, certain journals, and sole-authored collections, excluding works in engagement with other media that do not easily fit, or reprinting and reframing them so they did.

The aim of this book is not to step in and “expand” modern and contemporary Japanese poetry to include lesser-known works and works in “other media,” but rather to use these to recenter poetry’s always-present capacity to expand past fossilizing norms of mediation, and to bring that capacity to other forms of practice. I thus do not want to give the impression that the largely twentieth-century poetic works under consideration represent an entirely new relationship of poetry to media, categorically different from everything that came before it. This is not an argument about the “evolution” of poetry, a rupture, or a total shift. Rather, in choosing a handful of extraordinarily vivid modern and contemporary poetic works that spectacularized their status at the edge of media, I want to foreground poetry’s intense engagement with media and mediation writ large: the complex and often fraught relationship it has always had to embodiment, orality, visuality, and technology.

In order to do so, the question of what “poetry” is or was thus cannot be limited only to examples of what happened to be typeset texts in certain venues without bracketing out a vast amount of significant poetic practice. The works that did not take the form of print, or were relegated to obscure corners of the amateur publishing world, were often the most powerfully experimental and held major importance to those communities marginalized from mainstream literary spheres. Alongside the narrative at the beginning of this section, Japan’s long twentieth century also offers us a particularly striking example of the significance of thinking of poetry *across, in relation to, and as a site of critique of media*, which will be the focus of this book. Extraordinarily compressed changes in poetic form and language occurred concurrently with vast social, political, and technological transformations—including developments in media technology—over the course of the century. These factors make “modern Japanese poetry” a particularly rich lens through which to

consider the shifting and entangled relationship of media technology, conceptions of the body, and artistic expression, and one that is not captured by the conventional account of its literary history sketched out above. Poetry can be all too easily flattened out by considering it only to be a subcategory of a printed medium called “literature”; indeed, this formulation misrepresents the capaciousness of literary practice as well. “Literature is more than just texts or just words on a page, more than printed books or manuscripts,” as Ingo Berensmeyer puts it. “It comes in many different material—and sometimes apparently immaterial—forms, different sensory environments, and transient media configurations.”¹¹

By focusing on poetic works in an emphatically broad sense—looking at poems in journals and books, but also on film, on tape, in performance, in galleries, on websites, and created by those not conventionally deemed poets—I hope to present an alternative exploration of modern Japanese poetry that is in conversation with disciplines and movements in relation to which it is rarely discussed. Literary studies’ privileging of works of printed fiction means that most investigations of literature’s relation to media focus largely on questions of adaptation and book history. Media studies, on the other hand, still has an overwhelming focus on visual media, especially screen media. This occurs to the extent that literary works are rarely considered “media objects” in the same way as films, television programs, and installation art pieces, leaving them out of most conversations in the field. In expanding the scope of poetry under consideration in this book beyond what are conventionally considered literary works, I do not wish to dilute or diminish literature’s role within a broader network of media practices, but the opposite: I aim to highlight the forces of literariness even in places we are not conditioned to look for them. As the poet and literary critic Kitagawa Tōru argues, “poetic media” (*shiteki media*) is not just the constellation of print genres associated with poetry—“poems, poetic theory, or poetry criticism”—but is any type of work that follows “the vision called poetry” (*shi to iu vijn*); “poetry,” he argues, “never simply indicated only the entity called a ‘poem.’”¹² Along these lines, throughout this book I emphasize the diversity of encounters between “poetry” and “media”: not poetry as a medium, but the poetic as a literary mode, stance, or approach to composition and sensation that allows media to be rewritten. For more concrete examples of what these encounters might look like, let us turn to what will be covered in each of the chapters of this book.

THE CHAPTERS OF *EXPANDING VERSE*

This book does not aim to be a comprehensive history, but rather focuses on specific experimental poetic practices at moments of media transition and social change, when the fossilized norms of media and embodiment came into question. At each of these moments we find radical hybrid poetic forms—like the cine-poem, the tape recorder poem, the protest performance poem, the music video

poem, the internet sign language poem, and the augmented reality poem—at the edges of literature and media alike. These will form the focus of each of the five chapters of this volume, in which I combine methods from literary, media, and disability studies to attempt to do justice to these poetic interventions into normative modes of reading, writing, sensing, and being. This approach has necessitated an enormously diverse range of topics, eras, and foci. At its core, each chapter has its own time period; its own particular medium or grouping of media; and its own central type of embodiment and sensation (vision, sound, movement, bodily functions, and a sense of place respectively). Each chapter also has a different structure depending on what best fit its subject matter, the first focusing on a wide range of poets, the second on just one poem, the third on one poet, and the fourth and fifth each comparing two poets. In juxtaposing this broad range of works from over the course of about a hundred years, I hope to foreground recurrent aspects of what poetry's approach to media can *do*, inflected differently in each era but instructive in the concerns, strategies, and ethos they share.

Chapter 1 looks at poems that rethought the medium of cinema, a phenomenon that flourished in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s more than anywhere else in the world. These poems—some called “film-poems” (*eigashi*), others “cinemoems” (*shinemoemu*)—often took the form of musings on Western film stars, or experimental short scenarios for films that did not, or could not, exist. They peaked in popularity just as “talkie films” threatened to forever change the medium into something far more homogeneous and less experimental than what came before. In the face of rapidly fossilizing norms of filmic production, poets created new kinds of film through their poetry, films that needed neither camera nor screen. They did this to reimagine the possibilities of cinema beyond its technological capabilities, market pressures, and social norms—questioning the primacy of vision to the medium, centering the relationship between cinema and the body, and challenging the gendered limitations of who was allowed to be a filmmaker at a time in which no woman in Japan had yet directed a feature-length film.

Moving to the period after World War II and the wake of the Allied occupation of Japan, chapter 2 is a deep dive into a “Poem for Tape Recorder” (“Tēpu rekōdā no tame no shi”). Composed by Akiyama Kuniharu in 1953, this work prefigures by almost a decade the better-known experimental “intermedia” practices of the 1960s. His tape recorder poems were the world's first of their kind, using newly invented recording technology not yet accessible to the general public in order to manipulate and recompose the voices speaking the poetic text. Their audio, however, is now lost, and just one of these poems exists in the form of a thirty-page script/score—provided to me by the world-renowned experimental concert pianist Aki Takahashi, the late Akiyama's wife—which will be extensively analyzed here for the first time. Produced at a time of major political and social transition, these tape recorder poems were first performed in a concert hall housed in the same building that had housed the occupation headquarters just

two years earlier. Yet poetry readings were at this point closely associated with the Japanese empire's propaganda—live reading events and radio broadcasts during the war. Akiyama's tape recorder poems not only challenged this association, but they also used poetry as a way to reshape and reclaim the voice as raw sonic material that could be endlessly remade into new types of expression through cutting-edge media technologies.

Chapter 3 centers poetry's relationship to nonnormative embodiment and sensation by exploring the work of Yokota Hiroshi, a poet with cerebral palsy who was a leader in Japan's disability rights movement from the 1960s to the 2010s. He is best known for being the main subject of Hara Kazuo's controversial 1972 documentary *Goodbye CP* (*Sayōnara CP*), yet his poetic work is rarely discussed, with this chapter (and its earlier article form) serving as the first introduction to it in English. Like in much of the world, Japan's 1970s saw the emergence of disability movements that aimed to challenge the inaccessibility and cruelty of a society made by and for nondisabled people. At and leading up to this time, Yokota published multiple books about the ideologies that justified killing disabled people, the construction of disabled society and culture, as well as several books of poetry. In his poems, as well as his poetic performances in *Goodbye CP*, he aimed not only to shed light on the oppression and dehumanization of disabled people, but also to rethink dominant conceptions of embodiment and "able-bodiedness" promulgated by mass media and mediation.

Moving to the 1980s, chapter 4 focuses on gender and the realm of pop culture, and how two poets used popular media forms to create feminist poetry about the body. The two core figures in this section are poet/performers who were also public media figures: one poetry superstar, Itō Hiromi, and one alternative pop star and poet, Togawa Jun. Rejecting the limitations of the "women's poetry" movement and the trend of pop "idols" dominating the music charts respectively, each created a kind of feminist poetic practice centered around a shocking and unconventional portrayal of bodies and mental illness, with graphic depictions of menstruation, sex, and pregnancy. Above all, they used popular media forms like music videos, television appearances, magazines, photo books, and self-help guides as tools for radical poetic expression and critique, using poetry to reimagine "women's media" against the stylized and hyperfeminine norms leading into Japan's economic bubble era.

Finally, chapter 5 explores two forms of internet poetry in Japan in the 2000s and 2010s: augmented reality (AR) poetry (*AR-shi*), in which poetic texts and images float in the air when looking through one's smartphone at specific locations, and Japanese Sign Language poetry (*Nihon shuwa shi*), a form of literature that cohered in the age of online video sharing. Drawing from disability media studies, I explore how poets used these forms to challenge digital media's prevalent ideology of perfect communication and access. The feminist poet and artist ni_ka did so by using AR apps in a way that made their utility completely break down,

creating poems that made screens unusable in order to express the impossibility of mourning after the triple disaster in northeastern Japan in March 2011, aiming to draw attention to the culpability of Tokyo-based power structures in the disasters and their aftermath. Tanada Shigeru, a Deaf activist and Japanese Sign Language poet, created Deaf spaces on an internet made by and for the hearing, with poems that highlighted the inadequacies and frustrations of media technologies that assume “able-bodiedness” and recreate audist, anti-Deaf ideologies. Both of these poets have in common a desire not just to use the internet to share their work, but to rethink the platforms from which they had been excluded, including “literature” itself.

“WELL, LET’S JUST CALL IT POETRY, SHALL WE?”

So, if all of these works are poems, then what even is poetry? The questions of “what is a poem” or “what is poetry”—as well as, in this case, “what is *shi*” or “*shi to wa nani ka*”—have been written about extensively by poets, critics, and philosophers both inside and outside of Japan. These definitional questions are seemingly even more pertinent in a project such as this one, where even some of the base assumptions of the “poem”—that it is, say, a written text, or that it is a work of language art—do not always hold in the face of works declared to be poems by their creators that may not fall under any of those categories. As a way into *Expanding Verse*’s approach to these questions, I wish to turn to a recent book by Yoshimasu Gōzō (1939–), titled—conveniently enough for our purposes—*What Is Poetry?* (*Shi to wa nani ka*). Yoshimasu, while not one of the figures focused on in this volume, embodies its viewpoint like few others. He has been one of Japan’s best-known poets for nearly six decades, and his poetic work across media refuses easy categorization, ranging from electrifying live performances (as one of the early pioneers of performance poetry in the 1960s), poetry collections encased in metal sculptures, short poem-films he calls gozoCine, and thousands of startling handwritten manuscript pages where tiny lines of poetic text in tens of colors intertwine across the page like tapestry threads.¹³

What Is Poetry?, published in 2021, is a tour-de-force exploration of the titular question and Yoshimasu’s views on poetics, which resonate strongly with this book’s central approach. For him, poetry is expression made otherwise—“delayed” (*oso*i), “warped” (*magatta*), “distorted” (*yuganda*)—but not just for the sake of doing so. There is a dominant idea, he says, that “expression can only be achieved through ‘well-worn’ words that are already in circulation and used by everyone,” but he argues that poetry has a unique ability to create new kinds of expression and communication, capturing “that which has not yet taken a proper shape, or that is still in the process of taking some kind of ‘form,’ as ugly as it may be.”¹⁴ He locates poetry at the edges of conventional modes of expression, as well as underneath, on the other side of, and hidden within them: it is the “reverberations

of the world below the surface of a sheet of paper.”¹⁵ Crucially, poetry also inherently exists across media: it is the thing that “leaks out” (*moreru*) of conventional expression, and it is precisely within that leakage that “pathways might suddenly appear that can reach towards music, art, or even thought itself,” often beginning with language but impossible to contain within it or conflate with it.¹⁶ For this reason, he says, any discussion of what “poetry” is cannot limit itself to things that are conventionally considered “poetry” alone, or even only to writing: we must “go beyond written works to look deeper into ‘poetry’s’ essential touch within broader artistic expression more generally,” and in doing so take care to not overemphasize “dead specimens,” in other words, poems printed on paper that are deemed “finished works.”¹⁷

Over the course of the book, he gives an astonishingly diverse range of examples of this expansive approach to poetry. He points to Emily Dickinson’s dashes that startlingly break up her verse, and to the expressive force of her handwriting; to the modernist poet Nakahara Chūya’s theory that to make poetry was to “make wrinkles” (*shiwa o tsukuru koto*); to the postwar poet and critic Yoshimoto Takaki’s assertion that “poetry is expression gone wrong” (*shi wa machigatta hyōgen nano da*); to the poet, novelist and environmental activist Ishimure Michiko’s childhood stories about her blind and mad grandmother, “O-Moka-sama”; to the distorted temporality of the work of the eighth-century Tang dynasty poet Li Bai; to the films of his friend Jonas Mekas, Francis Bacon’s paintings, Jimi Hendrix’s use of noise, and Dylan Thomas’s “muddled voice” in his poetry readings.¹⁸ Poetry for Yoshimasu is also something inextricable from the body. He uses Yoshimoto’s idea of “visceral language” (*naizō gengo*) to link together Ishimure’s grandmother’s feeling of speaking from a “sea inside her body,” Dylan Thomas’s vocal texture that made his body palpable in his poems, and Yoshimasu’s own poetry readings in which he searches for “some kind of deep ‘voice’ that comes from within [his] own body, at internal organ-level.”¹⁹

He ends by pushing back against systematic definitions or theorizations of poetry—ones that would pin it down and neatly inscribe its boundaries—saying we must get away from limiting ourselves to “poetry-y poetry” (*shi-rashii shi*) or making declarations like “This is poetry!” (*Kore ga shi da!*). Instead of this declarative stance, he proposes something much more open, flexible, and subtle—not “This is poetry!,” but “Well, let’s just call it poetry, shall we?” (*Maa, shi to itte oite ii kana?*).²⁰ This is not to say that the definitional question of “What is poetry?” is already a lost cause, but that it must be recast to do justice to these materials and to constitute a useful frame of analysis. Throughout *Expanding Verse*, then, this question emerges in a handful of other forms: What definition of poetry is being used by this practitioner? What did it mean to create a “poem” in or about the medium at hand? How did poetry-as-thought differ from dominant theorizations of media and the body at the time? Why did these poets call their creations poems, and what work was the term doing for them?

The approach of this volume, however, is not to take up certain works of media and deem them “poems” solely based on my own judgment, or even—like Yoshimasu—to identify a kind of poetic impulse that runs through a range of expressive practice, regardless of medium, and to call that “poetry.” Without exception, every work that will be analyzed was at some point *explicitly* called a “poem” (*shi* or *poemu*) by its creator. It has been crucial for the aims of this book to take someone at their word when they identify themselves as a poet, and their creations as poetry. In other words, rather than starting off in a place of skepticism—about whether a given figure was “really” a poet, for example, or if what they created was “really” poetry—I instead use this act of naming something as a “poem” as an entryway into how a poet understood the nature and stakes of their practice. Munechika Shin’ichirō argues in his “transmedia poetics” (*toransu media no shigaku*) that “the more acute the contingent nature of choosing poetry amidst the multiplicity of media becomes, the more the givenness of poetry [*shi no jimeisei*] fades away before our eyes.”²¹ Yet it is precisely when that happens—when “poetry” is still chosen by name, even as its self-evident characteristics come into question—that the potential of poetry as a capacious approach to thinking media otherwise becomes clear. Poetry, says Munechika, becomes able to “harbor all other dominant media within itself as contradictions” (*igai no subete no yūsei media o hairi toshite haramiuru*), exposing not just its own contingent nature but that of all media.²²

Like the poets highlighted in this book, I thus continue to insist on the word “poetry.” By doing so, I aim to center a kind of chiasmus: what the “literary” might offer to the study of media, and what “media” might bring to the study of literature. This does not, however, necessarily imply a symmetrical two-way relationship. Part of poetry’s potential lies in how vivid it can make *asymmetries*—of representation, of mediation, of power—in its commitment to “to come from wrinkles,” in Nakahara Chūya’s words, or to “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” in Emily Dickinson’s.²³ “Literature’s relation to media,” writes David Trotter, “has often most instructively been a relation to the relation established, at a given historical moment, by the unceasing rivalry between media technologies and institutions.”²⁴ It is onto this “relation to the relation” that a focus on poetry gives us a particularly powerful lens. Poetry in each era under consideration took on the task not just of capturing but creating shifts in the relations—and the relations to the relations—between expression, sensation, and imagination, as crystallized in media.

THINKING POETRY FROM THE MARGINS

“Poetry is always an act of crossing over a border into an unknown world” (*shi wa tsune ni michi no sekai ni mukete no ekkyō kōi de aru*), wrote Oda Kyūrō.²⁵ The critic Shimaoka Shin expanded upon this statement, arguing that poetry’s border-crossing nature means that to do justice to it as a critic, “it may be necessary to return to a past that might seem anachronistic”—to not be “submissive to what

our predecessors have decided” and to acknowledge that just because a work or poet “was highly regarded in a certain historical stream at a certain time” does not make that into an absolute.²⁶ The reverse is also true—that is, just because a work was *not* regarded as important or even regarded at all in its time by the poetry establishment does not mean it is not worth considering.

Along these lines, this book’s task of centering crucial capacities of poetic practice in relation to media and embodiment has meant that the vast majority of poets in these pages were not part of the institutionalized or organized poetry world in Japan (sometimes called the *shidan*). With few exceptions, their works were either published in obscure journals, not published at all, or took forms other than written text. While there are certainly a few “canonical” poets that will be considered (Tak-enaka Iku and a few other “cinapoets” of chapter 1, and Itō Hiromi in chapter 4), the bulk of the poets do not fall into this category. As seen in the chapter summaries, the focus will be on—to name a few examples—reader submissions by female film fans; works by socialites better known for their fashion than their skill at writing; tech demos by early twentysomethings who had never seriously written poetry before; works by disabled activists publishing in journals by and for those with cerebral palsy; lyrics by eccentric pop stars; sign language works by Deaf poets uploaded to their personal homepages; and installations by a blogger better known for her floods of Hello Kitty imagery than for being the radical poet she is. Many of these were and are not considered poetry even by the relatively open and expansive poetic establishment in Japan, by which I mean the still-thriving network of local and national poetry associations, journals, award-giving bodies, publishers, critics, and scholars. If the works discussed have received critical attention at all, they are largely relegated to being treated as one-off novelties—or perhaps important to the history of Japanese art, music, disability rights activism, new media, and so on—but not as significant literary practice.

Expanding Verse analyzes poetic practices firmly within a broader context of other practices—medial, artistic, social, political, and otherwise—and focuses on what might be considered the eccentric margins of an already marginal form. In doing so, my approach takes cues from two ideas proposed by Isabelle Stengers that strongly resonate with Yoshimasu’s take on poetry: an “ecology of practices” and “thinking in the minor key.” Stengers writes of practices—scientific, artistic, and so on—not in terms of solitary examples, but within “an ecology of practices” that “function[s] in a minor key.”²⁷ This is opposed to “major key” thinking, which might entail producing a theoretical vision around an identified “center stage”—or, conversely, putting the disavowal and critique of the center stage itself on center stage—with an implied aim of an antihegemonic “critical and deconstructive enlightenment.”²⁸ The “minor key” thinking of ecologies of practices, on the other hand, rejects such “either/or” notions, and even the possibility of critique from the “outside.” Minor key thinking is an *immanent* and not a transcendent critique, one that recognizes that “there is no identity of a practice independent of its environment” and rejects “grounding

definitions or an ideal horizon.”²⁹ Practices are often thought of in terms of a kind of progression that naturally leads to current and future states—a kind of teleology that accounts of scientific practice are especially prone to falling into, but which also certainly applies to histories of poetry focusing on its “development” or even “evolution.” Stengers, however, instead focuses on practices “as they may become,” on connections and divergences and “the etho-ecological difference between a practice and its outside” within a specific environment.³⁰ She emphasizes that this approach to a practice—in the case of this book, poetic practice—means “approaching it as it diverges, that is, feeling its borders, experimenting with the questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they are not their own questions.”³¹

Stengers realized the need for these approaches when working with experimental physicists. The title of this book, *Expanding Verse*, was inspired by my own long jaunt of reading books by and about astronomers and astrophysicists, grappling with understanding our expanding universe, endlessly hurtling outward.³² Though they were of course working in a dramatically different context, I was struck by resonances between those scientists and the poets in this this book, all of whom were pursuing their own experiments with poetry, media, and the body. Some of these poets were recognized as experimental artists in their time. Just as often, however, this book seeks experimentality in places and from communities where it is not often recognized—highlighting, for example, the cultural pioneering of young women and girls, and the innovative approaches to writing and corporeality foregrounded by Deaf and disabled activists.

This focus means that my aim in this book is not to compile a comprehensive lineage of poets in Japan who actively engaged with nonliterary media. To do so in a book like this one that covers the 1920s to the 2010s would necessitate many hundreds more pages. Yet there were indeed countless other poets who participated in such practices and debates. Many of the most prominent “canonical” modern Japanese poets were also curious about the “edge of media”—fascinated by the media of their time, often writing about or critiquing them, and creating poetic works about or through those media. Hagiwara Sakutarō, for example—perhaps the figure most firmly in the center of the modern Japanese poetic canon—was an enormous fan of photography, especially stereoscopic photography, going so far as to call his stereoscope his “one and only companion.”³³ He was also fascinated with cinema, and in this was joined by such prewar poetic juggernauts as Ishikawa Takuboku, Kitahara Hakushu, Horiguchi Daigaku, Miyazawa Kenji, and Yosano Akiko.³⁴ The 1950s and especially the 1960s saw an even more significant explosion of poets working across media forms and questioning the borders of those media. As will be touched on in chapter 2, there were innumerable works of poetic “inter-media” from that time that remain enormously influential today, by figures such as Yoko Ono, Niikuni Seiichi, Kanno Seiko, Matsumoto Toshio, Takemitsu Tōru, Abe Kōbō, Shiomi Mieko, Terayama Shūji, Kitazono Katsue, and many more. Poets like Shiraishi Kazuko and Yoshimasu Gōzō created sprawling performance

poems in the 1960s and onward, bringing their poetry into jazz clubs and concert spaces. And Tanikawa Shuntarō, perhaps the most famous living Japanese poet—active from the 1950s to the present and ninety-two years old at the time of writing—is another consummate poet across media, someone who has collaborated with experimental animators and composers; has written over a hundred picture books, lyrics for Studio Ghibli, and screenplays for Ichikawa Kon; translated all of Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* comics; exchanged avant-garde “video letters” with Terayama; hosted a radio show and countless live poetry readings; and somehow found the time to create a Twitter account and an email newsletter.

There is certainly a book yet to be written that rereads the modern Japanese poetic canon through the lens of media—indeed, even the “canonical” figures of modern Japanese poetry remain largely un- or underexamined in English-language scholarship due to the field’s overwhelming focus on fiction. *Expanding Verse*, however, is not that book, and I have instead opted to look at figures who are largely marginal even within the already-marginal realm of modern Japanese poetry. There are several reasons for this. One is that the force of poetry can often be felt even more strongly outside the conventional contexts where one would expect to find it: the innovations allowed for by a poetic approach might be unremarkable within the norms of “literature,” but are especially potent in the realms of cinema, experimental art, disability activism, and pop stardom. In other words, it is precisely *because* most of these poets exist outside the poetic establishment that their interventions are so striking. They were less beholden to the conventions, tastes, and expectations of their times in ways that freed them to make poetry and media differently both from the poetic mainstream (often a tenuous idea in the first place) and from those who were commonly recognized as experimental and cutting-edge; they functioned in a mode of “minor key thinking,” to use Stengers’s term. Another reason I focus largely on marginalized figures is not to create a new or alternative canon of modern Japanese poetry, but rather to underline how the agility and fluidity of poetic practice lends itself to a more capacious, playful, and malleable conception of “canonicity,” one that can take the cultural force and prestige afforded to poetry while remaining open to multiple types of bodies and perspectives. What might a “canon” look like in which the most award-winning books of poetry in print can exist alongside experimental blog poems by teenage girls, and in which Japanese Sign Language literature is just as important as Japanese literature?

POETRY AS MEDIA OTHERWISE

Expanding Verse is not just about poetry in connection to different media, or composed through different media, but how poetry *thinks* media. I argue that poetry in an expanded field, both within and outside of the literary world, consistently acted as both a theory and practice of media and mediation that took an alternative, more minor, more capacious, and even actively oppositional route toward

rethinking the technologies of expression. When I say that poetry consistently functioned as a kind of media theory, I do not wish to reduce poetry to a poor imitation of philosophical writing, only shorter and stranger. Poetry as a form of thought did what other kinds of thought did not, and highlighted different things than criticism or theoretical essays did or could. The media theoretical force of poetry was deliberately unsystematized and contingent. It was often from marginalized or lesser-heard perspectives, ones that might not have otherwise been able to have their works respected as criticism or philosophy. Along the lines of Vilém Flusser's formulation that "poetry produces models of experience," it was particularly attentive to the composition of the experience of media and mediation, and had a special focus on nonnormative embodiment and sensation.³⁵ Finally, connected to this last point, it resisted treating the "body" as a given, framing it as something vulnerable to media and reclaimed and rearticulated through poetry.

These aspects are also at the heart of poetry's political potential. Jacques Rancière sees artistic practices—including poetry—as interventions, not only in the political and social problems of a given time, but into the ways members of a society have been conditioned to see, hear, move, and even think. He uses the phrase "the distribution of the sensible" in his explorations of the relationship between politics and aesthetics, and the role of artistic practices within this framework.³⁶ He proposes that aesthetics is the system that "determin[es] what presents itself to sense experience," "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise." Politics and artistic practices are intertwined in their restructuring of experience: "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."³⁷ In other words, there is an aesthetics central to both art and politics, one that allows for certain things to be known to the senses but also makes others remain invisible or inaudible. To him, artistic practices are "ways of doing and making" that "intervene" in this; in other words, they challenge dominant "modes of being and forms of visibility."³⁸

If artistic practices are interventions, what kinds of interventions did poetry make, and how were they specifically linked to their status as "poetry"? Poetry—in this case, *shi*—is certainly a literary form, but it is also a mode of literary practice, an approach to both the act of literary composition and to composing literarily, across the media landscape and its sensorium. Poetry is enormously self-reflexive and self-critical about its usual material—that is, language. Of course, poetry is not alone in this: self-reflexivity and experimentalism are hallmarks of all kinds of modernist and postmodernist fiction, film, music, visual art, design, dance, and theater. But poetry has a unique capacity to work across and against media, coming from its being consistently short, transmutable, prioritizing of innovation, not market-driven, and—particularly in Japan—widely accessible, with casual poetry composition being a regular feature of public life. Even the most conventional poetry takes the stuff of which it is made—words, typography,

lineation, and arrangement—and makes it otherwise. In Japan's twentieth century and up to the present, this aspect of poetry, again and again, became applied as a mode of composition not just within printed text on a page but in a variety of media, especially at moments of media transition. As argued by the feminist digital poet *ni_ka*—one of the main subjects of chapter 5—poetry does not only reflect changes in the media environment (*media kankyō no henka*), but it can also use the changing media environment as a methodology (*hōhōron*) in its creation.³⁹

Following from this, we can see as each form of media emerged, came to dominate, and crystallized (or fossilized) into a “standard” mode, the poetic was repeatedly held up as the experimental “other” that differed from the dominant mode in many of the same ways as poetry differed from the novel. The “poetic” version of a medium tended to be more compact; more experimental (or more difficult, or even just weirder); more self-reflexive and ready to critique its own form, genre, or medium specificity; more focused on the body (whether that of the composer/performer or the audience); more about nonnormative experience and sensation rather than plot or characters; more open to a variety of creators; and more agnostic or even actively transgressive of the boundaries between media. Along these lines, practitioners and critics alike created or identified poetic others to each dominant media practice: poetry was to the novel what the avant-garde short film was to long-form narrative cinema; what the manipulated audio recording was to the live reading; what performance art was to the concert or play; what a pasted-together collage of headlines was to the newspaper or mass media; or what the personal webpage was to the massive social media network. Poetry didn't just happen to exist at the edges of media, but was actively used for its special capacity for remaking and reimagination, with an aim to expand what the edges of each medium encompassed. The creators of these kinds of works, notes Moriyasu Toshihisa, “traversed media [*media o ōdan*]; and while they were on the precarious dance floor of media disintegration [*media kaitai*], they were taking up the challenge of the comprehensive innovation of expression.”⁴⁰

Finally, disability plays a key role throughout this book—not just as a main subject of two of its chapters, but in fundamentally informing and structuring my approach to poetry and media, and to poetry's interventions in media practice. Countless critics, philosophers, novelists, and poets have used disability as an easy metaphor, abstracting it into an “alternative” mode of being without any recognition of the lived experiences of disabled people.⁴¹ What better way to think about embodiment and sensation differently—about mediation, writing, reading, speaking, cognition, and movement—than to think about bodies that do these things “differently,” and to use this as a starting off point to “open up” our preconceived notions to other possibilities? Yet all too often an approach like this, rather than centering disabled people, becomes another act of marginalization, making disability into just another artistic or theoretical tool in the toolkit. This temptation is particularly strong when looking at poetry—after all, modern poetry, especially

experimental poetry, favors the inarticulable, silenced, strange, unspeakable, contradictory, and impossible; it strives for, or strives to be, that which cannot be easily defined, claimed, pinned down, recovered, expressed, categorized, repeated, commodified, understood, contained, seen, heard, touched, thought, or felt. I take a cue from Legacy Russell, who proposes that the “glitch”—that, I argue, poetry so often aims to be—is at once error and erratum, a “correction to the ‘machine’” that can become “a vehicle of refusal” and “a strategy of nonperformance.”⁴² But as Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne stress, we cannot resort to an “easy celebration of glitch, error, noise, jamming, or hacking” that simplistically holds up literal and metaphorical disabling as the “most convenient Other to the smooth functioning of contemporary corporatized media.”⁴³

In this book, I will attempt to avoid the traps of this kind of approach, though I will not always be successful in doing so. I take seriously the fact that “disability and media are co-constituted,” as Mills and Sterne argue, the core of their concept of “dismediation.”⁴⁴ By dismediation they mean centering disability—the processes of disabling, nonnormative embodiment and the “presumption of communicative and medial difference and variety”—in the analysis of media. In its intertwined explorations of poetry and media, *Expanding Verse* combines a dismediation-informed perspective with insights from the growing body of work on disability poetics, which, as articulated by Christina Scheuer, “critique[s] stereotypical or banal representations of disability as a sign of loss, pity, or fear” and instead focuses on how disabled poets “write disability from inside the body.”⁴⁵ From its earliest stages, this book was informed by disability studies. This is reflected both in its consistent highlighting of disabled thinkers, poets, and media practitioners throughout, and in how it centers embodiment and sensation outside of or actively against the norms or givens of how bodies, poetry, and mediation “should” function—focusing not only on the “otherwise” but also on the constructedness of the “normal” against which that otherwise comes to be.