

## World Webs

### *Augmented Reality Poetry and Japanese Sign Language Poetry Online*

There have always been other worlds on the web. We can glimpse one of them in a video file uploaded to a personal web page over two decades ago in which a Deaf poet, Tanada Shigeru, used Japanese Sign Language (*nihon shuwa*) to capture a moment where he drove past a mountain in the autumn. In this poem he renders into sign the colors of the leaves that once intermingled and the harsh lines of transplanted pine trees separating them now; he is haunted by a landscape that no longer exists, one that cannot help but remind him of a Deaf world in danger of receding. We can catch sight of other worlds, too, in the hundreds of digital roses that were suspended in the air above the streets of some neighborhoods of Tokyo on the chilly evenings of March 2011 by the poet with the pen name *ni\_ka*. This was one of her “augmented reality poems” (*AR-shi*), tributes to the thousands of victims of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in northeastern Japan that occurred just a few days earlier in a catastrophe now called “3/11.” They were her attempt to use an AR app called Sekai Camera (World Camera) to find a new way to mourn, overlaying the world of the dead onto the world of the living, creating poems that were themselves ghosts, invisible to the naked eye.

This chapter is centered on these two forms of internet poetry in Japan: *ni\_ka*’s augmented reality (AR) poems, in which poetic text and images float in the air when viewed through a smartphone app at particular geographical locations, and Tanada Shigeru’s Japanese Sign Language (JSL) poems, an example of a form of literature largely by Deaf poets that has intensified in the age of video-sharing services like YouTube. It is also about digitality itself, and how both AR poetry and JSL poetry challenge digital media’s prevailing ideology of perfect communication and access. We will see how the poet *ni\_ka* used AR apps in ways that made their

utility break down, making screens unusable in order to express the impossibility of mourning after 3/11, and how sign language poets in Japan's Deaf community have used their work to grapple with an internet, and broader media environment, largely designed without them in mind.

Why consider these seemingly disparate phenomena—ni\_ka's augmented reality poetry and Tanada's Japanese Sign Language poetry—together? Both of the types of poetry they created center otherwise marginalized perspectives while underlining how technologies of communication themselves are structured in a way that keeps certain voices dominant and others erased, inaccessible, or silenced. These poets also shared a desire not just to use the internet to share their work, but to rethink the platforms from which they had been excluded, including the conventional idea of literature itself. Finally, like many of the other works examined so far in this book, both AR poetry and JSL poetry also foreground experimentality from people and communities that are conventionally kept outside of who gets to count as being "experimental." In ni\_ka's case, this takes the form of her use of girls' web language and aesthetics and in her engaging with platforms that rely on user-generated content like blogs and the Sekai Camera app; in Tanada's case, it is the creation of a space for sign literature by Deaf poets to thrive as *literature* within a digital world dominated by hearing perspectives.

We have considered in previous chapters how poets use their work to rethink media from the edges—cinema, tape recording, the news, magazines, pop music—and how by doing so they posit new forms that those media might take. Digital media is no exception to these kinds of poetic intervention. The internet has, in many ways, been invited to the literary party in Japan. This was not always the case, but after more than two decades of debates about poetry being under threat by the free-for-all of online publishing—a 1999 essay by Inoue Toshio, for example, expressed fear that the lack of quality control for internet poetry meant that "once you take a look, you'll never want to go to [a poetry site] ever again," implying that it would eventually shrink the readership of poetry as a whole even further—few within today's poetry circles take inherent issue with poetry on the internet, especially online poetry journals and anthologies.<sup>1</sup> Yet the acceptance by the poetic establishment of one narrow kind of internet poetry—poems that closely resemble print poetry in form and circulation—is a kind of acceptance that is predicated on an exclusion of works like ni\_ka's and Tanada's, forms of internet literature that fit neither the conventional ideas of how the internet should function nor of what "literature" should look like. Sign language literature is largely excluded not only from literary history in Japan and elsewhere, but also from counting as literature at all, a perspective rooted in hearing people's prejudices of sign languages as not being "real languages." Tanada pushes back against this through a firmly literary framing of his web page, which he calls a "sign language poetry collection" (*shuwa-shi shishū*), using the same term generally applied to print anthologies. Similarly,

ni\_ka has written of being rejected by the literary establishment, particularly by poetry circles: while her work gained much critical attention from critics and theorists of art and media, she is almost completely absent from the hundreds of books and journals published in Japan each year on poetry. Yet her digital-born poetic work achieves things that would be impossible without this expanded version of literary practice, which is uniquely emplaced in specific locations while also being displaced, haunted by the disasters while themselves haunting the streets of the capital.

As for understanding how JSL poetry and AR poetry challenge the norms of the internet and digital mediation, it is important, as seen in several previous chapters, to think through the lens of disability and how ableism implicitly and explicitly shapes not just how we think bodies should behave but also how media technologies should function. Disability poetics, explored in depth in chapter 3, is a mode of inquiry that asks how a body otherwise might make poetry otherwise, and how nonnormative embodiment and cognition might generate new forms of expression. Dismediation—a term coined by Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne—makes a parallel argument about media.<sup>2</sup> Media—media forms, media technologies, and so on—are often talked about in certain ways with certain closely held assumptions about the types of people who use them and how they do so, each with a “normal,” generalizable body. This body is of a certain shape, with four limbs that move in specific ways; it can carry this amount, see this well, hear this much, speak in this way. It holds a smartphone like this, types like that, uses some functions over and over and others only rarely, if ever. The dreamed-of goal of these media technologies is to put these bodies in perfect communication, with instant access, infinite information at one’s fingertips, and so on—a kind of language that still suffuses the marketing of web services, applications, smartphones, and computers in what Imar de Vries calls “the communication sublime.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, we know that these are promises and exaggerations, not reflections of how technology actually functions in the real world. But these ideologies of perfect communication and access—and they are ideologies—continue to shape how we imagine what digital media should be. An approach informed by dismediation questions this. What do our base assumptions about how digital media could and should work elide the “for whoms” and “for whats”—work for whom? For what configuration of sensorium? For what modes of hearing, of engagement with texts, and so on?

These questions resonate with what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes as the “habitual new media” of the internet, and how it—or our imaginary of it—“grounds and fosters habits of using,” habits that “remain by disappearing from consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> Analyzing digital media is not always about the new and the disruptive, she argues: it is just as much about how “so-called obsolescent media remain in users’ bodies” through layers and layers of habituation. It is this habituation to the internet in all of its eras—its interfaces, its modes of reading and writing, its use of image and text and link and algorithm and location and sound and touch—that

some internet poetry, as is poetry's wont, aims to break, make stranger, and make otherwise, and not always in the way that new media, under the pressures of capitalism, also tend to "seek to undermine the habits they establish" in order to continually appear "new."<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the florid aesthetics of Japanese girls' internet culture, ni\_ka's work highlights a long and often-dismissed history of how girls and young women creatively disrupted digital habituation through their experimentations in excess. Deaf poets like Tanada Shigeru often use their work to directly challenge hearing society's habituations to those technologies that inscribe and reinscribe being hearing as the "default." They push against dominant ideas of what it means to live a good life; what constitutes literature or even language itself; and what "poetry" is, what it should look like, and how it might be shared.

The "world" of the World Wide Web has been a key part of how the internet has been imagined from its early stages: as a system of networks that connect everyone across the globe—instantly, evenly, freely—and have themselves become a world parallel to our own. But of course there is not, and never was, just "the internet," but myriad internets, each with its own histories, practices, communities, and desires. In this chapter we will consider a few of these—Japanese internets, girls' internets, Deaf internets, and, of course, poetic internets—each of which asks what online worlds might look like that do not center certain privileged modes of writing, speaking, looking, hearing, and being to the exclusion of all others, and how these worlds might exist together: a world wide web rewoven.

#### NI\_KA'S AUGMENTED REALITY POETRY

The Tokyo-based poet and artist ni\_ka first became known for her "monitor poems" (*monita shi*) starting in 2009. These were poems in the form of blog posts with text in a wild range of fonts, colors, and sizes, each interlaced with hundreds or even thousands of emoji, icons, and animated images.<sup>6</sup> Words flowed across the screen, bounced up and down, phased in and out of sight, jittered, and spun, Japanese scripts often becoming combined with many other languages. Her text is opaque and difficult, with an often manifesto-like diction that declares truths about her poetics. In one poem—with the characteristically complex title of "W E B h a l l e l u j a h 'a"—blood/arch (WEB • Hemal Hallelujah)"—she tells the reader to "scream through the Web through your heart/so you don't have to use your THROAT."<sup>7</sup> On top of this, as soon as you entered her website something startling happened: roses, bubbles, hearts, stars, butterflies, and Hello Kitties bloomed across the screen like fireworks, sometimes reacting to the movements of your cursor, sometimes blithely ignoring them. No matter how advanced your hardware, your computer heated up under the strain of rendering such excess. Eventually, the text itself often became entirely obscured. Monitor poems, as their name indicates, were specifically designed for the screen—but the actual experience deliberately *worked against* the act of simply reading the text from your

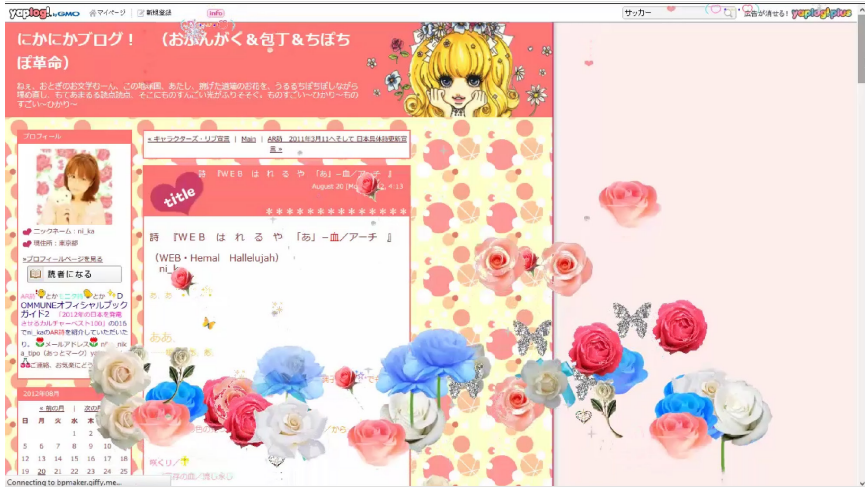


FIGURE 15. A screen capture of one of *ni\_ka*'s monitor poems, “WEB hallelujah ‘a’—blood/arch (WEB • Hemal Hallelujah)” (2011).

monitor, or the idea of the screen as a transparent vessel for information. Eventually, there were times in which you could only catch glimpses of the poems in the gaps before the next barrage of bubbles and flowers (figure 15).

A core inspiration to *ni\_ka* was the experimentality of girls' web language: the literary practices of teenage girls on their computers and phones is a foundational impetus for her work.<sup>8</sup> As Larissa Hjorth observed in 2003, it was “the keitai [cell-phone], adorned with a plethora of kawaii characters, that ha[d] become the main portal for Internet access” in Japan, a highly decorated cute aesthetic spearheaded by young women and girls that became inextricable from the mobile internet.<sup>9</sup> These media practices were and still are marginalized, with blog and social media-based poems by middle and high school girls, for example, not taken seriously as either literature or art, despite their often radical formal experimentation and consistent use of cutting-edge communication technologies. Emoji, to give just one more example, remain a key part of global digital textuality, but they simply would not exist as we know them today without the underrecognized influence and innovation of Japanese girls using mobile pagers in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> A dominant preconception of new technologies is that they aim—or should aim—for a “futuristic” aesthetic of clean lines and smooth surfaces, often coded as masculine or gender-neutral. On the other hand, *ni\_ka*'s work centers technology's impact on communication while simultaneously being aggressively, garishly, exultantly feminine and cute, actively challenging the common view of girlish things as frivolous, unserious, or nontechnical. In her vision, intensely “girly” aesthetics create a radically intimate connection with digital media in ways unintended by the corporate creators of given platforms and technologies. She makes conventional poetic text



FIGURE 16. A screen capture from the Sekai Camera demo showing a cluster of air tags viewed through a smartphone screen (tonchidot, “Introduction of Sekai Camera,” YouTube video, 3:57, November 10, 2010, <https://youtu.be/oxnKOQkWwF8>).

into something more like *texture*, just one element of an expanded poetic form that rejects new media’s ostensible promises of efficiency and improved apprehensibility and plays against the expectations of how a website should look and behave.

These tendencies continue in *ni\_ka*’s AR, or augmented reality, poems (*AR-shi*), another screen-based poetic form of which she is the best-known practitioner and originator. While virtual reality largely aims to create an immersive, seamless virtual world with a helmet or goggles, augmented reality tends to be an overlay on the “real world.” This might be through specialized glasses or lenses, or, more commonly, through the screen of a smartphone or tablet. To make her poems, *ni\_ka* used the AR smartphone app Sekai Camera (World Camera), which allowed users to “air tag” real-world locations with notes, photographs, and audio or video clips. In this app you looked at the space around you through the screen and could see what tags other people had left in the area floating in the air in front of you—café and restaurant recommendations, photos taken there, messages, audio notes, and so on (figure 16).

Sekai Camera’s debut in 2009 was highly anticipated after impactful demonstrations that year and the year before showcasing what Japan might look like with augmented reality elegantly woven into the experience of walking around its cities, providing content generated by users themselves. Iguchi Takahito—the founder of the company behind Sekai Camera—memorably declared that it would cause people to “look up, not down” at their phones, reorienting their gazes to the world around them and allowing them to gain information about their surroundings through a new content platform literally floating in the air.<sup>11</sup>

The approach to the app that ni\_ka took, however, was dramatically different. At first, in early experiments in 2010, she used it as a tool to create location-based poetry, bringing her distinct aesthetic to the realm of augmented reality. But, in response to the events of 3/11, she used it to find a new way to mourn. Almost 20,000 people perished and more than 2,500 went missing, including several of ni\_ka's family members, in the triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown—of March 11, 2011, in the Tohoku region of Japan. Many things, she says, made it difficult to grieve properly: her distance, as someone born and raised in Tokyo; the complicity of the Tokyo-based power structures in allowing the Tohoku region to become so marginalized, and the Fukushima meltdown to be so severe; and the fact that so many of the victims' bodies could never be recovered, contributing to a lingering sense of unreality. Recalling when she saw the meager bouquet on a relative's makeshift coffin, she wrote, "The colors of the flowers were a representation of the colors of life—but having been already plucked, they were also embodiments of death. There seemed to be something like an ephemeral augmented reality suspended there, a poetic sensation of aliveness and death."<sup>12</sup>

In other words, to ni\_ka, augmented reality is not something limited to an app or device: it is instead a poetic sensation of contradictory overlay, of worlds coexisting in a kind of suspended impossibility. This impossibility itself became for her a poetic tool to express the impossibility of mourning—to use an app largely meant for photo sharing and restaurant recommendations and make it into something overwhelming (figure 17).

When seen through the screen, ni\_ka's location-specific poems seemed to fill the skies of Tokyo, taking up every centimeter of the smartphone's surface, as seen in the screen captures of various AR poems in figure 17. As in her monitor poems, we see an overall aesthetic of excess and of girliness; Hello Kitties continue to jostle for screen space with her text and more conventional images of mourning, but here they also become a haunting echo of the toys often left on the graves of children. There are some legible bits of text: "toward 3/11" (3/11 e); "cannot mourn" (*tomuraenai*); "inexhaustible regrets" (*tsukinai kui*); "I'm sorry" (*gomen nasai*). But these words are only a small portion of the work, and they seem to actively draw attention to their own *lack* of power to articulate the magnitude of the disaster. As Jeffrey Angles notes, accompanying the influx of poetry after 3/11 were broader debates related precisely to this concern: "3.11 brought about not just a crisis on the ground; it brought about a crisis in representation and language as well."<sup>13</sup> Along these lines, even more important than the words in ni\_ka's AR poetry is the sense of language *exhausting* itself. Alongside the text are symbols of mourning, like paper cranes, roses, and candles. Sometimes they exist alongside scenes of the "real world" underneath, and sometimes they cover them up entirely. She thus takes an AR app designed for helpful commentary and uses it otherwise to evoke the impossibility of expression.





FIGURE 17. ni\_ka, screencaps of various AR poems in the “Poetr-I Float to March 11, 2011—From Tokyo” (“AR-shi—mo no genkai e, wata-shi wa fuyū suru”) series, 2011–12.

Her AR poems left an immediate impression, one that lingered to the extent that—even several years later—they are still used as a point of comparison with other AR works. Kotani Mari, the feminist science fiction scholar, noted that their impact “was enormous, most dramatically in the post-3/11 world,” and wondered if ni\_ka’s work prefigured 2016’s wildly successful *Pokémon GO* AR app and its popularization of a “Sekai Camera-esque sense of augmented reality.”<sup>14</sup>



A Twitter user, doniakatu, remarked that whenever they saw depictions of augmented reality, they couldn't help but "compare them to the shock of seeing ni\_ka's AR poems for the first time."<sup>15</sup> In order to capture in a small way what these shocking poetic encounters were like, let us turn to a few of them in detail.

#### FLOATING THROUGH NI\_KA'S POEMS

The post-3/11 AR poems by ni\_ka are deliberately overwhelming—in scale, in length, in their fury, and in their grief. In their original form they existed within the Sekai Camera iPhone app, but they were also thoroughly documented in a series of her blog posts. These blog posts—the first posted a week after the disasters and the last about a year after—became, in effect, the work itself, and the way that most people experienced her poems. They consisted of documentary images of each AR installation in the form of screen captures of the Sekai Camera app, preceded or followed by a blog post in the form of an often-lengthy poetic text, ranging from brief statements of mourning and prayer to sprawling manifestos.

The first of her post-3/11 AR poems, captured in a post just a week after the disasters, was called "Poetr-I Float to March 11, 2011—From Tokyo, Floating #1" ("2011-nen 3-gatsu 11-nichi e mukete, wata-shi wa fuyū suru—From Tokyo, dai-ichi fuyū"); this came to be the name for this series as a whole, each blog post becoming a numbered installment called a "floating" (*fuyū*). There are nine screen captures in total in this post, all seemingly of nondescript Tokyo streets at night with brightly colored air tags floating over them. Looking at them, we can imagine ni\_ka walking aimlessly through the city, leaving these air tags all the while. The first image is of two pink air tags with bubbled edges, floating above the street in front of a Lawson convenience store; "To March 11th, 2011—ni\_ka" is split across the two tags in white text. The second image is of a plush Hello Kitty, seemingly in a store window; each tag floating in front of it contains a fragment of text: "want to live" (*de ikitai*); "is." (*masu.*); "here/tokyo" (*koko/tokyo*); "overflowing life" (*koboreru life*); "poetr-I am" (*wata-shi wa*); "I am a poem" (*watashi wa shi desu*). More photos: an underground walkway, a train platform, a darkened station, several shadowed crosswalks. The air tags multiply, image by image—eight of them, twenty-seven of them, forty-three of them—sometimes cohering into readable phrases or sentences by color, and just as often not. "Memory," one reads in Japanese, alongside "LIFE"; "swept away by the waves"; "for a requiem"; "turning towards life"; "with images"; "north country/the hometown returning"; "actual bodies not shown"; "this is a poem of 2011"; "turning emptiness"; "on the retina"; "overwhelmingly dropped" "air tags" "on our home." Below the photos there is a short piece of poetic blog text in which ni\_ka hints at her personal connection to the disasters and literally identifies herself as one and the same as her poetry, using the invented first-person pronoun "wata-shi," わた詩 (which I translate here

as “poetr-I” or “poe-me,” being a hybrid form of the most common word for “I” and the kanji for “poem”).

To the parts of poe-me who loved the sea of Miyagi, and were swept away by it.  
 To everything that has no blood/earth connection.  
 Poetr-I float to Tokyo again.  
 I am a poem. Nika. March 18, 2011.<sup>16</sup>

The next AR poem blog post, “Floating #2”—posted five days later, on March 23, 2011—is longer, with seventeen images. Countless numbers of colorful air tags are scattered all over photos of concrete staircases, glowing vending machines, street-light-drenched crosswalks, train station turnstiles, railroad tracks, and fences. Some of these tags seem to be ni\_ka’s family photos, and some have fragments of Japanese text with phrases like “there are waves / tears (*namida* / *namida*)”; “a metrical void”; “drip, drop”; “accumulation of the past”; “unarrivingness” (*tadoritisukanasa*). The underlying photographs lose their integrity as the post progresses, with the previous images becoming tags in and of themselves, eventually all floating in a disorienting white void. This is followed by another intensely grief-filled text that speaks directly about the deaths in her family and the vast numbers of dead and missing who could not and would not be recovered, and it laments her inability to project the “images on her retina.”

Many of my relatives, including young children, died in the seas of Tōhoku.  
 Many, many people are dying who are not my relatives.  
 Those who are being buried without anyone knowing, those whose bodies/  
 emptinesses/remains will never be found.  
 Those who have family and friends waiting for them.  
 Those who have no one waiting for them.  
 Although poetr-I was only thinking of how inexcusable it is that even the images  
 on my retina are not being projected,  
 I am endlessly grateful to those who are searching for remains and are saving lives.  
 Nika.<sup>17</sup>

The third post, uploaded about a week later (April 1), is dramatically longer than the previous two, with thirty-five images and twenty-four short paragraphs of text.<sup>18</sup> The screen captures are of a walk through a public garden, air tags floating in front of pink camellia bushes, cherry trees, pansies, and verbena in full bloom, decorative ponds, and groups of people gathering. At first the tags are mainly text based and point toward the impossible-feeling coexistence of the beautiful spring day and the horrors that had happened three weeks before: “Phantomuniverse” (*maborouchū*); “flower buds”; “spring”; “blossoming facts and falsehoods” (*saku kyojitsu*); “veils of the unknown” (*michi no tobari*); “burials”; “some day’s spring”; “scrawls in the air” (*kūki no rakugaki*); “helplessness” (*yarusenasa*); “lived”; “that distant river”; “living space.” In later photos these text tags too fall away and are

replaced by photo tags of candles—hundreds of candles hovering in the air in front of the cherry blossoms, fields, and streets, an augmented reality version of a candlelight vigil. Once more the images are followed by a long stream-of-consciousness poetic text, for the first time reflecting on the work she was creating itself as a response to the impossibility of mourning. A brief excerpt:

In Tohoku, the facility in which dead bodies are gathered and burned has been  
totally destroyed,  
And the baseball stadium, in Ishinomaki where my older cousin got married and  
had children, a place where balls are supposed to be thrown and hit,  
Has now become a burial ground, and my cousin and her small children and the  
accumulated remains/pains of so many others are burned

.....

There are no flowers on the coffin of someone whose identity is unknown, no  
mourners, no one weeping.

.....

Before being buried in the soil, some meager flowers were placed on the caskets of  
my cousin and her children.

I wonder, in which land's soil did the flowers placed on caskets grow? . . .

The flowers that bloomed in the soil of another land, somehow, send a poem of  
spring to the lands that were birthed in Tohoku.

I am gently floating in the space of augmented reality, even though it might be  
really idiotic, every aspect of it meaningless,

though it may not even be poetry, not be visible to the naked eye, not be anything  
but just graffiti of the air.

But I don't care about that, within my fears, because I must mourn my cousins,  
and aunt, and uncle, and cousin's children, and tens of thousands of other people  
who had to die, their bodies covered in soil, and holding soil in their mouths.

She ends by addressing her poems to those “who continue to embrace the endless regrets and wounds that still grow moment by moment,” saying that she is creating “layers and layers of AR-like veils,” and she ends with a vow: “Even if the app called Sekai Camera disappears, even if my iPhone breaks, I think that I will continue to float in this Tokyo from now on.”

The fifth post, on July 30, consisted of thirty-one image captures of the AR poems and a text beginning with an epigraph from the poet and critic Iijima Kōichi pithily encapsulating ni\_ka's approach: “Those who are tired of language can only be comforted by that same language (but with its circuits rearranged).”<sup>19</sup> In this poem, her text tags—“in fabricated dreams” (*kyokō no yume ni*); “the clouded stream of language” (*gengo no dakuryū*); “lived” (written in English); “goodbye” (*sayōnara*); “gates of blame” (*kashaku no mon*); and so on—give way to images of hearts, the earth, and, in more traditional associations with mourning, candles and origami paper cranes. In the blog text, she decries how in the wake of the disaster, “many existences were declared by language to be symbols of nothingness,” and how “Tokyo, left out

from the obvious signs of invisible radiation contamination, grew accustomed to its numbness,” living “side by side with these dark atrocities.” She describes language as something that “wounds” her, as something that “emerges unceasingly like agitated snakes from the thickets of the plum trees of Twitter and the media,” as a “muddy stream” disintegrating “in the traps of contradiction.” She longs for “the end of the hell of language [*gengo no jigoku*] woven by the web, by the media, and by people,” and to one day “forgive it,” but she cannot help but see language itself as akin to the turbid waters that cruelly overtook her father’s hometown. To her, “the thing that is called poetry” is “floundering in that muddy stream.”

The seventh post—and the final in this series—is the first with a subtitle: “Manifesto for a Japanese Concrete Poetry Update.”<sup>20</sup> It features not only the longest text of the series (almost eight thousand characters long), but also an astonishing 132 AR poem photographs taken over the course of a day, requiring the reader to scroll down seemingly endlessly: if copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document, this single post is nearly a hundred pages long. It was posted just over a year after the disasters—on March 16, 2012—but is by far the most emotionally raw of her poems, a powerful indictment of Tokyo’s apathy toward the victims and survivors, and once more a cry of desperation at the impossibility of language to capture what happened. “What happens when this floating and wandering reaches ‘the limits of mourning’ [*mo no genkai*]?” she asks, in the face of mass death and disappearance. She likens her floating AR poems to the temporary makeshift burials of both identified and unidentified bodies and criticizes the common terms to describe the disasters—“FUKUSHIMA,” “The Great East Japan Earthquake,” “Tohoku,” and “3/11”—as wholly inadequate “zombie maquettes produced by the living.” She spells TOKYO in capitalized Latin letters instead of the usual kanji, and she calls it “TOKYO, which is not really anywhere” (*hontō wa doko ni mo nai TOKYO*), a place that conveniently pretends to be a nonplace, free to ignore the horrors happening in other places.

unable to find the things that can't be found in those works of language aimed at  
 only the living, I weep, I cry out,  
 and try to anticipate how language can't express—with our existing zombie  
 words—the uncertainty of those who have become the dead and those of us  
 who are still alive,  
 brimming over with tears of blood, I pry open unprecedented dimensions  
 of language  
 and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and  
 pray and pray until language is annihilated  
 and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and  
 pray and pray until its arrival  
 and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and pray and  
 pray and pray until it's broken

.....

I can't mourn without risking my life reaching toward or bringing into being  
 the rifts within the space called AR, or the computer monitor, paper, the body,  
 all media, and all spaces; without making my fundamentally floating experience  
 itself come into being as words of mourning

I can't mourn I can't mourn I can't mourn!

The 132 photos in the post are taken from the Tokyo City View observation deck in Roppongi Hills, looking down from a vantage point more than eight hundred feet above sea level. There is some daylight left in the first few photos, and a few air tags floating—text fragments, candles, screenshots of her prior AR poems. As the images progress, the daylight quickly fades into a pitch-black night. Nighttime is when Tokyo becomes its most iconic self, lights glimmering from its thousands of towering buildings; many come up to these observation decks at night precisely to see this spectacle. She takes a photo of the darkened view in front of her, perhaps with a few flickering city lights visible, or the orange glow of the Tokyo tower. She takes another photo like this, then another, then another, rapidly walking around the observation deck; by the wavy lines and smearing lights, you can tell she is moving quickly, her hands trembling. She then takes each of these photos and makes *them* into air tags, obscuring the actual view of the city with dark, confusing blurs. Once again, she takes a screenshot of this AR scene, of the hundreds of the photographs she has just taken floating in front of the dark Tokyo landscape, ghostly white frames holding swaths of blackness and faint light blurs. She makes an air tag of these images, too, each air tag containing hundreds of floating frames, and then in turn used to make an even denser cloud of air tags visible from the deck, with even less of the landscape visible, and so on, and so on, and so on, in seemingly endless repetition, a *mise en abyme* (figure 18).

We thus see even the words and images fall away, leaving only nighttime pictures of a screen where barely any of the city is visible, which are in turn filled with more frames of screens where barely any of the city is visible, on and on into blankness, darkness, fogginess, and silence. Finally, some text tags start to appear again, above the darkness and chaos: “cannot mourn,” “to 3/11,” “I’m sorry,” “I’m sorry,” “I’m sorry.”

In this, as in the rest of her work, *ni\_ka* twists and even arrests the communicative powers of the internet, of the screen, of language. Here she places the user in a physical site meant to provide the best possible view of the city but makes it impossible to see much of anything, making Tokyo absent to Tokyo in the way that it was absent to Tohoku. It takes the location-based nature of AR and makes it into to a delocation, a contradictory viewing-deck-made-unviewable. Her poems are seemingly meant for an audience of Tokyoites. They were startling reminders to anyone who opened the *Sekai Camera* app at certain locations, or who saw the blog- or gallery-based versions of these works—not just of the unignorable tragedy of thousands dead and missing, but also of the selfishness of those who



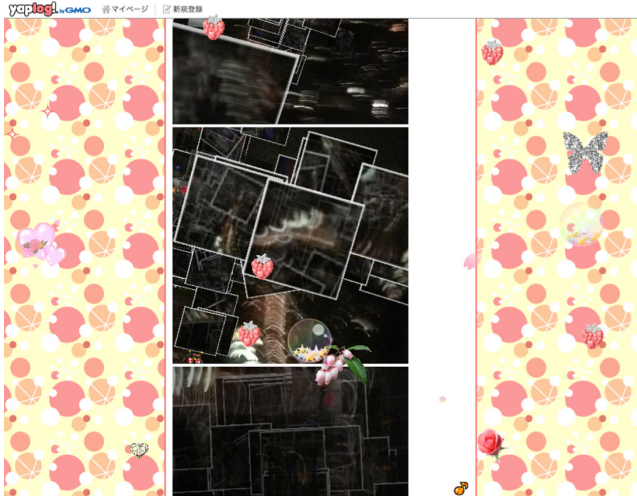


FIGURE 18. A portion of the blog post of ni\_ka's "Floating #7" AR poem with images captured at the Tokyo City View observation deck (March 16, 2012).

only worried about the potential effects on their own city and not the poorer regions hardest hit by the disaster. Underlying all of these poems are critiques of the Tokyo-based centers of power that made a natural disaster into a man-made one through decades of corruption, resource deprivation, and actively ignoring repeated warnings about a lack of proper safeguards.

In the time after the disaster, the airwaves were thick with platitudes: reminders that all of Japan should work hard together (*ganbarou Nihon*), of the bonds (*kizuna*) between all Japanese people, and so on, all of which rang hollow to many of those affected in Tohoku.<sup>21</sup> These AR poems not only reject language like this but eventually come to reject language almost entirely, ni\_ka moving from more conventional text-based air tags in her first AR works, to poems in which these are crowded out or fully replaced by other symbols of mourning and healing: flowers, candles, and paper cranes bloom across the AR view in much the same way they do across ni\_ka's blog, images stepping in when words fail. By the final "Floating," in fact, both have broken down—the blog post format is stretched to its limits by a hundred pages' worth of text and images, the text constantly repeating itself and changing sizes and colors, the images cancelling themselves out amidst the reader's scrolling descent down ni\_ka's page, or the AR viewer's blocked sightseeing panorama. This is poetry pushing the edges of both online publishing and augmented reality, and of user-generated "content" more generally. Both are made unusable by ni\_ka's deliberate orchestrations of excess: the impossibly long posts, the CPU-scorching screen blossomings, and the AR app crowded out by

thousands of her tags all in one location, all of which require enormous amounts of processing power and smartphone battery drain, her poems not just hosted on the platform but devouring it.

Although almost entirely ignored by the poetic establishment, ni\_ka's AR poems drew the attention of several critics of art, culture, literature, and media. The media scholar Kadobayashi Takeshi saw her earliest AR poetic experiments from before the 3/11 disasters as something of a failure, with the urban environment not particularly contributing to the experience of the "world of her work" (*sakuhin sekai*).<sup>22</sup> This changed when he encountered her poems created in the wake of 3/11, which he said "greatly transformed the nature of ni\_ka's work," now far more intensely woven into the experience of being in the city. Sugita Shunsuke called "Poetr-I drift towards March 11, 2011 from Tokyo" "magnificent" and "overwhelming," "a work that 'made Tokyo drift toward and confront the disaster areas and victims of 3/11' and 'a 'landscape' where the living, the dead, characters, language, and the internet form a unified entity.'"<sup>23</sup> He argued that "ni\_ka confronts in a true-to-life way the absolute disconnection between Tokyo and the disaster-stricken area, its living and its dead," and said the experience of the work is "a feeling of powerlessness that penetrates one's entire body."<sup>24</sup> Later the same year, the critic Nakata Kentarō asked, "Where do words go that did not reach their destination?"<sup>25</sup> He saw ni\_ka's AR poems as the answer, seeing her works as messages that never arrived at their recipient—that never could—and remained as ghosts drifting through the skies of Ochanomizu and Shinjuku. "The thoughts of loss that must not be summed up into sentences float without any proper reading order," he noted: "'Abducted by the waves,' 'tears unshed,' 'unarrivingness.' Candle lights, origami cranes, photos of roses, and so on whirl around as air tags. These things have not become words but seem to be *language itself as loss* [*sōshitsu toshite no gengo sonomono*]."<sup>26</sup> The literary critic Nakazawa Tadayuki saw ni\_ka's AR poems not just as a "requiem" but as a "critique of the hypocritical message of 'Let's connect, Japan!' [*Tsunagarou, Nihon*] that the media all too carelessly disgorged" in the wake of 3/11; he sees her work as trying to grapple with the fundamental question of "how to connect what cannot be connected." He describes a general attempt at this time to fumble for words to "seek a childlike, ephemeral connection," one that kept running up against the impossibility of "sharing the disaster" (*hisai o kyōyū*).<sup>27</sup>

Along with these accounts from essays and blog posts, there was Twitter, which is the most extensive record of engagement with ni\_ka's work.<sup>28</sup> The platform, although already somewhat popular in Japan, rapidly gained in popularity and attention in the wake of the 3/11 disasters; as Chun notes, crises like this are often what make new media into mass media, suddenly valuable and even crucial.<sup>29</sup> Twitter saw vast numbers of written accounts of experiences of ni\_ka's work by published critics and "amateurs" alike, both before and after 3/11. Several were energized about the new artistic possibilities pointed to by ni\_ka's use of AR

technology to rethink literary practice. Matsudaira Kōichi tweeted that “ni\_ka’s AR poems engage with the internet . . . and through that ask multilayered questions about what reality is. I want all of humanity to experience what is truly a prototype for a new literariness.”<sup>30</sup> Nakazato Shōhei noted with a shock just how visceral the encounter with ni\_ka’s work was, one that “really lifted the scales off [his] eyes to the fact that AR poems and monitor poems are really bodily expressions!”<sup>31</sup> Nakazawa noted how at its core AR poetry was an “alternative use of AR technologies” that “expanded the genre of poetry itself,” pointing out how one’s mode of interaction with them—holding the smartphone up, going through the information displayed on the screen—reinforces their literary qualities by making it into an act of “not just ‘seeing’ or ‘experiencing’ but also ‘reading.’”<sup>32</sup> Another common thread running through these tweeted reactions was to point out the haunting, phantom-like aspect of her work. Even a few days *before* the 3/11 disasters, Nakazawa highlighted how ni\_ka’s AR poems captured the “ghostly and interesting aspects” (*yūreiteki na omoishiroi bubun*) of poetry.<sup>33</sup> The artist Nitō Kento called her work “mysterious” (*fushigi*), referring to the fact that the words placed in space through AR technology “are invisible, but they’re there, even though they seem like they’re not.”<sup>34</sup>

As previously argued, ni\_ka directly grappled with the frustrations of digital media to the extent that she made them key to her work, which consistently goes against simplistic ideas of “ease of use” and “straightforward communication” in order to make visible the ideologies that underlie such givens when it comes to media technologies. But some accounts of her AR poems point toward things outside ni\_ka’s control and what seemed to be the intended experience, and the difficulty of engaging with her poetry. A user named Takekura tweeted about their experience of seeing AR poems in person, instead of just screen captures, for the first time. “As seen through the Sekai Camera app, AR poems overlap with the scenery of Tokyo. Before, my aim was to set out to read AR poems that had been arranged in space, but I didn’t really understand the method of seeing them. But this time, I came to realize that the *space itself* where the AR poems are arranged was actually the work.”<sup>35</sup> Suzuki Koji called her AR poetry a “state of chaos in AR space” and a “must-see,” though he noted an element of friction to her poems’ consumption: “each and every time, the battery of my smartphone ran out.”<sup>36</sup> And the Twitter user sana captured another potentially exclusionary aspect of ni\_ka’s poems: “I was sorry that I couldn’t experience ni\_ka’s AR poems because I do not have a smartphone,” she tweeted, “but I created a mental image of them from the photographs.”<sup>37</sup>

In a Twitter thread from December 2013, ni\_ka gave her own account of the development of her experiments with AR poetry before and after 3/11, including how she chose to present her works in an art installation that year called “Floating View.”

My father is from Kesennuma city, and I have many relatives there, in Ishinomaki, Sendai, and other places in that region. When I saw the devastation on TV that day and the next, I couldn't get in touch with them. So I started making AR poems the day after the earthquake as if I were praying.<sup>38</sup>

Until that point, my AR poetry on Sekai Camera had just been a fun way to play around with legally hacking different places, and transforming the air into a notebook on which you could write poems. But the day after the earthquake, it became a way to release prayers into the air, the sky, and the heavens leading to Tōhoku. It might have been self-indulgent, but I believed it, and desperately created these AR poems.<sup>39</sup>

I later found out many of my relatives went missing or died as a result of the earthquake and the tsunami, and I began to have a powerful feeling that my AR poetry and prayers, floating around Tokyo like ghosts, were at the intersection of the world of the dead and the world of the living.<sup>40</sup>

At the time, I was furious with the people of Tokyo, people who were so focused on the nuclear power plant that they forgot to care about the dead and mourn.<sup>41</sup>

When I was looking through Sekai Camera at the ephemeral AR roses in full bloom, invisible to the naked eye, I saw pedestrians going past the roses and was so grateful that I wept. I felt like the souls of the dead and of the living had crossed paths. So I continued to create AR poems.<sup>42</sup>

Much of the work of the poet and disability activist Yokota Hiroshi (the focus of chapter 3) was characterized by what Arai Yūki calls his poetics of accusation or indictment (*kokuhatsu no shigaku*)—using poetic language in order to accuse the reader and society of playing a role in the oppression of disabled people, and to self-reflexively make the limits of language visible in a way that parallels the structures of that oppression. As made clear in her Twitter thread above, ni\_ka's AR works on 3/11 function through their own kind of poetics of indictment; here, the accusations are aimed toward Tokyo and Tokyoites, including the Tokyo-based national government, the headquarters of massive national energy corporations like TEPCO (the Tokyo Electric Power Company), and even herself. Her works are certainly works of mourning, but it is a mourning that is itself an indictment—a mourning that explores what it means to not be able to mourn, when those who must be mourned cannot be recovered, or when public mourning is tamped down, redirected, or dominated by those in power who have released themselves from accountability. “Which bodies are made to pay for ‘progress’?” asks Jasbir K. Puar; “Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, available and valuable enough for rehabilitation, and which cannot be?”<sup>43</sup> We can see debility in both the effects of the disasters themselves on the bodies of the survivors, and in the effects of the marginalization on those regions of Japan in the decades leading up to those disasters. There were not just the missing and the dead, but also the health problems induced by the effects of radiation, countless injuries,

post-traumatic stress disorder, diabetes, and other chronic conditions, as well as a whole host of psychological, social, and medical-related issues for mandatory evacuees, especially disabled people, the elderly, the hospitalized, and children.<sup>44</sup>

As a key strategy to address these injustices, ni\_ka's AR poems center dismediation. Her works are not simply examples of taking a media technology and subjecting it to error or glitch or overwhelm for aesthetic purposes alone. She instead uses these techniques to explore underlying structures of unequal access, and the marginalization of certain bodies central to processes of disabling and debilitation. Who is allowed to have a voice, and who is not? Who can be mourned, and who cannot? Which parts of Japan and Japanese society "matter," and which do not? Her poems arrest the communicative powers of augmented reality in order to lay bare the ideologies behind mediation at a time of crisis. She rethinks the media technologies involved completely, using smartphone technologies to create augmented reality compositions that worked against themselves in a way that revealed the rupture between dominant society and the ghost worlds left behind by the disasters. In her hands, Sekai Camera stops being a platform for messages from Tokyoites to other Tokyoites—an intensified experience of their own city—and instead becomes a way to talk to ghosts, and for them to make their presence known, in a floating digital space between the worlds of the living and the dead. Instead of focus, she creates distraction; instead of helpful bits of information, she breaks down meaning in an information overload; instead of an app that lends itself to a blithe everydayness, she creates a lens through which the ignored becomes the unignorable.

In the next section we will consider another type of poetry that is often excluded from conventional definitions of literature and aimed not just to take advantage of new media but to actively reshape them. Over a decade before ni\_ka's works, Japanese Sign Language poets took advantage of the capacities of the World Wide Web in order to share their work in the form of digital videos. As we will see, however, this work was a critique in both form and content of the ideologies that informed the creation and development of digital media. In the wake of unimaginable tragedy, ni\_ka asked us to imagine an internet that was not just by and for the living; Deaf poets used digital technologies to imagine an internet that was not just by and for the hearing.

#### TANADA SHIGERU'S JAPANESE SIGN LANGUAGE POETRY: "MOUNT AKAGI"

"Mount Akagi" ("Akagi-san") is a 1997 Japanese Sign Language (JSL, or *nihon shuwa*) poem by Tanada Shigeru, the best-known practitioner of the form and the leader of Japan's foremost radical Deaf association, D PRO.<sup>45</sup> It is short, around only twenty-five seconds in length; a video of it was posted alongside several other poems on a page of Tanada's personal website, Sign Language Poetry Collection



(Shuwa-shi shishū), in 2000 and then reposted to his YouTube account eleven years later.<sup>46</sup> It at first seems to be a fairly straightforward work, capturing a moment experienced by the narrator out on a drive, the titular mountain in Gunma Prefecture passing by his window. The following is a translation of Tanada's written Japanese summary of his own poem:

Driving down the highway at a comfortable speed  
 I saw Mount Akagi out of the right side window  
 It looked like fabric of different colors, stiffly overlapping one another  
 As if each were a piece of cloth sewn together  
 I thought back to the old days—  
 Red, yellow, orange  
 All of them gently intermingled  
 Vividly getting along with one another—  
 That's what I thought  
 And as I was thinking this, Mount Akagi  
 Passed by.<sup>47</sup>

But some details about the poem and its performance—not just the base meaning of each sign, but how they are inflected, transformed, and combined with facial expressions and other nonmanual indicators—point to something else happening. The same sign is used to represent the overlapping colors of the mountain in the present and in the past, for example, but the first time the movements are stiff and awkward, the second time gentle and floating. As Tanada “sews” together the metaphorical cloth pieces in the former, he does so as he frowns and shakes his head; in latter, with the colors more freely intermingling, he smiles and nods. But why is it better that the colors of the autumn leaves were mixed together before, and undesirable that they are in distinctive groupings now? Why is this the crux of the poem?

In a written explanation from a few years later, Tanada answers these questions, delving into the meaning of the central image of “Mount Akagi”—one that would be apparent to many Deaf viewers, especially those familiar with his previous poetic, scholarly, and activist work.<sup>48</sup> The many species of trees on Mount Akagi indeed intermingled freely in decades past, but a new policy of transplanting coniferous evergreen trees resulted in separated patches of colors divided by the stark, artificial lines of these dark green pines. In the poem, Tanada says, this is an allegory for the history of Deaf education in Japan. Whereas Japanese and Japanese Sign Language were once allowed to exist separately, like the colors of Mount Akagi past, the Ministry of Education in the 1990s continued to ban JSL as a medium of instruction for Deaf students. They mandated an oralist focus on mouthing spoken Japanese, and, if any signing was used at all, it was to be Manually Signed Japanese (*Nihongo taiō shuwa*)—in other words, signing each Japanese word in a sentence according to Japanese syntax, unlike the distinct language that is JSL.<sup>49</sup> This is reflected in the transplanted pine trees, which are artificially

inserted into the landscape, forcibly “sewing together” two distinct languages. Just like the crude seams produced by the harsh lines of green amidst the red, yellow, and orange threaten to obliterate the autumn colors once and for all, oralist (normative hearing-centric) educational practices threatened the extinction of JSL.

In chapter 1 I discussed how cinemoems in prewar Japan were not just a type of poem influenced by the forms and aesthetics of film, but also experiments in reimagining the medium in a way that did not require a camera, projector, or screen. There is a similar move with the remediations of cinema in Tanada’s JSL poetry and sign language poetry more generally: signs are often used to create shifts in perspective, scale, time, and place, paralleling cinema’s language of shots, the traffic of gazes, and both moment-to-moment editing (“cuts” between two figures, for example) and structural editing (like flashbacks). “Nearly as long as there has been formal analysis of ASL grammar, it has been described as cinematic,” Rebecca Sanchez notes.<sup>50</sup> In an essay, Tanada also discusses the long history of Deaf people recreating movies for one another through sign language, and he posits sign language, especially sign language poetry, as something inherently cinematic—or, more accurately, as a form of expression that achieves some of the same things as cinema, and more.<sup>51</sup> He points to André Bazin’s conception of film as the preeminent medium of reproducing reality and argues that sign language has a similar effect on the Deaf viewer, creating a mind’s-eye manifestation of scenes through the logic of montage: “through fusing the language of images and the language of signs,” he writes, a “new world of images [*arata-na eizo no sekai*] becomes visible.”<sup>52</sup>

The centrality of worlds coexisting and overlapping with one another—sometimes uneasily, sometimes generatively—becomes particularly clear near the end of the poem, in the “flashback” sequence to Mount Akagi’s past. Tanada renders this moment in his written summary of the poem as “I thought back to the old days,” but what is really happening in the original sign language is the sign equivalent of a “reverse iris,” a type of cinematic transition where a circular preview of the next scene, beginning with a pinhole, expands until it takes up the whole frame. He begins with both hands clasped together and then expands them outward until his hands are wide apart on either side of his head, opening them up until all fingers are extended, each in what is known as a “five” handshape. In JSL, both hands being in this shape signify the concept of “world”; in this way, we are cued to the fact that this is not only a flashback but also an entry into another world. In this case, we shift to the Deaf world of the past, in which JSL and Japanese could coexist, the different colors on the mountain gently intermingling. But this is soon reversed by another “iris,” the wide circle made by “five” handshapes compressing into a tiny circle again like the black aperture that closes at the end of many older films, “a return from another world to the real world” of the present.<sup>53</sup>

We are thus presented with two different visions of worlds whose overlap is made possible only within the spatiotemporal structure of the sign language poem itself: in the past, a Deaf world and hearing world coexisting organically;

in the present, a Deaf world and hearing world forcibly sutured together. As in *ni\_ka*'s augmented reality poetry, there is a brief suspension of overlapping worlds within the space of the poem. In her poems, those are the worlds of the living and of the dead. In Tanada's poem, there are actually four: the worlds of the Deaf and of the hearing, and of the past and present, all simultaneously existing within each other in the poem's twenty-five seconds. One is left not with the sense that what has happened to the Deaf world—like what has happened to the mountain—is irrevocable, but rather that there remains the potential for recurrence. The colorful trees can cross the line of pines again one day; Deaf education in Japan can and must change.

#### PROCLAIMING "DEAF IDENTITY"

The particular intersection of the radical Deaf politics of Tanada's JSL poetry and the presence and absence of Deaf worlds becomes particularly clear when looking at another one of his poems, "Deaf Identity" ("Rō no aidentiti"), composed in 1998, published, like "Mount Akagi," on his web page in 2000, and reposted on his YouTube account in 2007.<sup>54</sup> In this poem, however, there is one more layer: an exploration of the edges and limitations of digitality itself, questioning in form and content the stakes of the encounter between Deafness and media technologies.

##### SIGN LANGUAGE POEM: DEAF IDENTITY

by Tanada Shigeru

This is the story of a certain person  
 He was surrounded by hearing people  
 But he could not hear  
 Hearing aids were put in both his ears  
 And he began to walk a difficult life path  
 And then . . .  
 When he saw the world of speaking with one's hands  
 He resolved to do something  
 That's it—he took out his hearing aids  
 And began to speak in sign language  
 This is  
 His identity

This is a translation of the subtitles that Tanada added to his online video of "Deaf Identity"; it is the only one of his poems subtitled in this way. In terms of content, the poem is very much in line with the vision promoted by radical Deaf groups in Japan and across the world. As Karen Nakamura notes, "when the youngest generation of deaf activists emerged in the 1990s, they introduced a totally new frame, one that advocated a cultural deaf identity and recognition

of a Japanese sign *language*.”<sup>55</sup> Three years earlier, for example, saw the publication of the pioneering manifesto by Kimura Harumi and Ichida Yasuhiro (like Tanada, members of D PRO), “Deaf Culture Manifesto: Deaf People as a Linguistic Minority,” which begins as follows: “Deaf people are a linguistic minority who speak Japanese Sign Language, a language different from Japanese’—this is our definition of ‘Deaf people’ [*rōsha*]. This is a shift from ‘Deaf people’ as equivalent to ‘people who cannot hear’ (a pathological perspective), towards ‘Deaf people are people who use JSL as everyday language,’ and who are thus a linguistic minority (a shift towards a sociocultural perspective). This shift in viewpoint became possible for the first time upon the recognition of sign languages used by Deaf people as ‘complete’ languages, fully equivalent to spoken languages.”<sup>56</sup>

It is precisely within this radical new vision of a Deaf identity in Japan that signed literary practice, like this poem, emerged and continues to grow as a central part of Deaf culture. It is also a vision that resonates with the concept of “Deaf Gain” (as opposed to “hearing loss”), a term coined by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray referring to “the unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world,” pushing against the reduction of Deafness to mere lack and instead shifting the focus to the worlds, communities, and cultural spheres of Deaf people.<sup>57</sup>

Like with “Mount Akagi,” the textual rendition of the poem above—I would hesitate to call it a translation—captures little of what makes “Deaf Identity” poetic. Just reading the few lines of the “translation” in written Japanese (or in my English version), this might not be immediately apparent. But the subtitles are, in fact, just a summary of a type of poem—a sign language poem—that is impossible to fully render into text. One hearing-centric misconception of sign languages is that they are no different from orally spoken or written languages, and that to “translate” from Japanese into Japanese Sign Language, for example, means to sign the Japanese language word by word, with Japanese syntax, particles, and so on. This does happen sometimes, in the previously discussed practice called Signed Japanese or Manually Coded Japanese (as opposed to Japanese Sign Language), but, as we saw with “Mount Akagi,” that is a source of controversy and trauma among many parts of the Deaf community since it was and is often used as an educational tool to circumvent or actively deprive Deaf people in Japan from being taught JSL.

As with other forms of poetry performance, part of what marks a sign language poem as poetic is the rhythm and pacing, usually with ample pauses after each line, akin to the line breaks on a page that characterize most verse. But even more important to Tanada’s JSL poems (and sign language poems more generally) are their creative rethinking of common signs, movements, facial expressions, and three-dimensional space in ways that often differ from conventional signed speech. In this poem, for example, a sign for “hearing person” is made with five



FIGURE 19. A sequence of screen captures from Tanada Shigeru's Japanese Sign Language poem "Deaf Identity" ("Rō no aidentiti").

fingers instead of one to convey the overwhelmingness of the hearing world; the crooked finger handshapes used in the sign for "hearing aid" become two legs, agonizingly trudging forward amid an environment that makes devices like those compulsory; a single index finger representing the protagonist is made at first by the left hand and at the end of the poem by the right, a movement symbolizing rebirth or self-actualization; and the sign language technique of "role shifting," in which the signer assumes different characters in a scene or recounted anecdote, is used in elaborate and complex ways that allow Tanada to take on the role both of the central Deaf figure and of the hearing communities around him. As an attempt to capture just some of these nuances, what follows is a translation into English of Tanada's own transcription of the signs of his poem, using one of the many systems for rendering sign language into text.<sup>58</sup> Each line of transcription is followed by my expanded description of what is happening moment by moment in the one minute and one second of the poem.

SIGN LANGUAGE POEM: DEAF IDENTITY

JSL: [/CL(L) /1/: BIRTH [/CL(R) 78:HEARING PEOPLE]]

→ *This is the story of a certain person. He was surrounded by hearing people.*

The "one" handshape, an index finger held up by the left hand, is used as a "classifier" to represent the main character; it comes up from below, representing his birth. Normally the sign for "hearing people" consists of both index fingers held upright, one in front of the speaker's chin, one next to their right ear; here, it is combined with the sign for "surrounded," using a "five" handshape (all five fingers spread out) to represent not just a single "hearing person" but all hearing people—the hearing world—moving back and forth in a semicircle around the main character; the poet mouths the vowels "aiai" to further represent the world of orality surrounding the central Deaf figure.<sup>59</sup>



JSL: [/CL(L) /1/: [/CL /1/:EAR /5/:CANNOT HEAR]]

→ *But he could not hear.*

The left hand maintains the index finger position; the right hand moves to the ear and switches to the same handshape, the two together being the conventional sign for “hearing person,” before it switches to a “five” handshape and shakes in negation, meaning “cannot hear,” with the solitary index finger on the left hand continuing to represent the main character as the poet’s gaze links the two signs by remaining on the index finger.<sup>60</sup> The main character’s status as “hearing person” is thus briefly presented and then canceled out, as the hearing world realizes he cannot hear.

JSL: [/CL(L) /1/: [/CL(R) /1/[BENT]:PUT IN HEARING AID] [/CL(L) /1/[BENT]: PUT IN HEARING AID] ]

→ *Hearing aids were put in both of his ears.*

The conventional sign for “hearing aid” is to crook an outstretched index finger and make the motion of putting it in your ear. Here instead both hands have their index fingers bent, and the motion is not the poet putting hearing aids in his own ears, but rather into the ears of an imagined head in front of him at chest level—an example of a “role shift” where the poet, who had until this point been playing the main character, takes on the role of the hearing world. The motion of the hearing aids being stuck in is sudden and violent; the poet’s facial expression is both determined and almost horrified. The “bent one” handshape used for “hearing aids” is also a variation of the “one” index finger used to represent the main character, visually evoking how mandatory hearing aids are literally forcing him into a different shape, a different type of body.

JSL: [/CL(LR)/1/[BENT]:WALK [gaze(up)(NOTICING SOMETHING)]]/(L,R) /5/:SIGN LANGUAGE/]

→ *And he began to walk a difficult life path. And then . . . When he saw the world of speaking with one’s hands.*

The poet role shifts again, taking the role of the main character. He performs a variation of the sign to walk forward, but with great difficulty and a pained look on his face. Instead of the conventional handshapes (with the fingers looking like “walking legs”), however, the “hearing aid” handshape with a bent index finger is used instead, distorting the act of “walking forward” and literally becoming the obstacle to his progress.<sup>61</sup> Then, he looks up, above the viewer’s head, noticing something: at a position above him, the poet does the sign for “sign language” itself, a vigorous movement of two hands in conversation, but with all five fingers fully extended representing a “world” instead of the conventional index finger-only sign. Above and beyond the difficult life path he is on, the main character has seen the “world of sign language” for the first time.

JSL: [/CL(LR)/1/[BENT]:TAKE OUT HEARING AID][CL(R)/1/[BENT]: TAKE OUT HEARING AID/]

→ *That’s it—he took out his hearing aids, and . . .*

With a triumphant and determined expression, and a slight smile, he forcefully signs taking off his hearing aids, one by one—a sharp downward movement from each ear, almost as if he is casting each hearing aid to the ground. Each line, the poet’s gaze has been moving gradually upward, to indicate the situation improving over time.<sup>62</sup>

JSL: [/CL(L,R) /5/:SPEAK SIGN LANGUAGE][gaze(look)(ENLIGHTENMENT)]  
 [/CL(R) /1/:EXISTENCE]

→ . . . began to speak in sign language. This is his identity.

The poet does the sign for “sign language” once more, this time in front of himself rather than above his head—a sign that the main character is now himself speaking in sign rather than just glimpsing it from afar. His facial expression is happy and peaceful as he looks directly into the camera and at the viewer. The forward circles of the “sign language” sign begin to slow—in the last of these cycles, his right hand comes to a pause, now in the “one” sign from the beginning of the poem, a single index finger held up. As before, this is a classifier representing the main character, now firmly within the “world of sign language.” This time, Tanada notes, it is the right hand making this sign instead of the left hand at the beginning of the poem, showing the transition of the main figure from infancy to adulthood, or birth to rebirth.<sup>63</sup> The screen fades to black and the words “This is his identity” [*kore ga kare no aidentiti de aru*] appear in Japanese text.

Where “Mount Akagi” ended on a somber note with just the glimmer of possibility for a Deaf world to thrive again, “Deaf Identity” ends in triumph. The protagonist has rejected the hearing aids binding him to the world of the hearing and of orality and is reborn in the world of the Deaf, the “world of sign language” (*shuwa no sekai*).<sup>64</sup> Once again, this “worldness” is represented by a handshake with every finger on both hands extended, combining the concepts of “sign language” and “world” and realizing them in this way through sign language itself. He is not just describing but *enacting* this world.

#### JSL POETRY AND HEARING PLATFORMS

Both of these poems—“Mount Akagi” and “Deaf Identity”—were uploaded alongside several others on Tanada’s personal website, Sign Language Poetry Collection (*Shuwa-shi shishū*), in 2000 (figure 20). Unlike most personal websites from that time, Tanada’s was still online and carefully maintained all the way up to 2019.

The video of “Deaf Identity” is a two-megabyte MOV file, created using iMovie, a program that had come out just the year before. At the average internet speed of the time, it would have taken somewhere between eleven and twenty minutes to download, after which the viewer would finally be able to watch it in their browser, or in QuickTime or RealPlayer. Yet the majority of this poem is taken up by intermittent *blankness*: due to the inadequacies of the software of the time, the easiest way to create captions for Tanada was as scene titles, with accompanying freeze frames and fades to black (figure 21).

Tanada’s decision to make this one among his videos accessible to those who do not speak JSL thus resulted in making the video somewhat *less* accessible to sign language speakers, chopping up his fluid signing with freeze frames and fade-outs every few seconds, and with the final line expressed completely in another language, written Japanese text. The triumphant protagonist of the poem finds his own Deaf identity by rejecting hearing aids and the hearing world in favor of sign

**手話詩 詩集**

※注意 手話詩ムービーを見るためにはQuickTime4.0以上が必要です。Appleサイト (<http://www.apple.com/jp>) からQuickTimeをダウンロードしてください。

「手話詩」と聴いて、あなたはどんなイメージを浮かべますか。多くの人は日本語の詩を手話に置き換えたものとする人が多いようです。しかし、これは本来の意味での手話詩ではなく、日本語の詩を手話に翻訳しただけにすぎず、日本語におけるリズムが壊された状態、もしくは本来の手話が持つリズムが生かされないものになってしまっています。

筆者は1997年にDプロ主催オータムスクール97においてアメリカから招聘したVali博士によって、本来あるべき手話詩について確信を持つに至りました。Vali博士はアメリカ手話詩の詩人であり、博士論文でも手話詩の分析を試みています。彼の手話詩に対する分析と言語学的手法を学び、日本においても手話詩の創作が可能であることを確信しました。あれから4年。手話詩の創作活動並びに、日本においても明治時代からすでに多くのろう者によって創作発表されていることを確認するまでに至りました。多くのろう者はそれが手話詩であることをただ知らなかっただけにすぎないのです。

今回は、拙作ですが、筆者の作品とフィンランドの手話詩人Kimmo氏による作品を紹介します。これらの手話詩の解説は修士論文を書き終えた後に発表したいと思っています。まずは、生の手話詩をご覧ください。(2000.11.22)

現在、工事中。お待ちあれ。

手話詩 By 棚田		
ろうのアイデンティティ	赤城山	天地創造と結婚
噴水	田園風景	雨

手話詩 By Kimmo Leinonen	
<a href="#">言葉・・・奪われた言葉</a>	<a href="#">林檎の家</a>

Kimmo氏の手話詩のタイトルは筆者が付けたものである。

手話詩にはリズムが必要であるが、メタファーにおいてもポジティブ・ネガティブの繰り返しが重要である。上記に挙げた手話詩の多くは自然謳歌が表面的であるのに対し、内面的にはろう者の世界を表現している。

FIGURE 20. Tanada Shigeru's personal website, Sign Language Poetry Collection (Shuwa-shishū), created in 2000; screenshot of an archived version of the page from July 15, 2001.



FIGURE 21. Two stills from Tanada Shigeru's Japanese Sign Language poem "Deaf Identity," showing one instance of the video fading to black after a line.

language and the Deaf world. But these constant fades to black underline how the "certain person" of the poem, almost certainly Tanada himself, is surrounded not just by hearing people but by digital video technology designed by and for hearing people as well.

In 1998—the same year as this poem's composition—Tani Chiharu noted in an article about Japanese Sign Language poetry that there were not many opportunities for these poems to be seen by the public at large. Not only that, he added, "there is almost no academic literature on Japanese sign language poems or

the criticism thereof. As of now, it seems that it is too early to talk about a field centered on ‘original’ sign language poems, that is, created and published in sign language—there is simply no material.”<sup>65</sup> The lack of scholarship, unfortunately, is still the case more than a quarter century later, but the accessibility of JSL poetry by the general public has certainly changed due to advances in online video sharing like those taken advantage of by Tanada, first on his personal web page, and later on YouTube.

The capacities of the internet have allowed for sign language literature to be distributed with a speed and ease akin to written literature, solidifying and cohering it as a literary practice. Brenda Jo Brueggemann observed this phenomenon in 2009, noting that with online technologies, “the potential is vast for the further development of sign language literatures” beyond the “limited degree and quantity on videotape and DVD/CD-ROM” available up to that point.<sup>66</sup> This is an intensification of a long history of sign languages’ intimate relationship with technologies of moving image reproduction since the early twentieth century. Even as early as 1913, the president of the National Association of the Deaf in America, for example, said that film was the key element in their campaign to preserve and pass on sign language.<sup>67</sup> But this effect becomes particularly marked in the case of sign language literature. Christopher B. Krentz argues—and he is not alone in doing so—that the impact of film on ASL literature in many ways parallels that of the printing press on oral European culture, with all of the concomitant effects associated with that transformation: the standardization and stabilization of texts, freeing them from performance in a particular time and place, preservation, separation of performers from audiences, commodification, massification, experimentation, the emergence of finer textual interpretation, and so on.<sup>68</sup> Rachel Sutton-Spence briefly touches on a similar dynamic concerning the relationship between sign language poetry and video. She notes that “sign language poetry, as we know it today, can be seen as a phenomenon made possible by the videotape,” pointing to scholars like Heidi Rose, who have “divided ASL literature into the eras of ‘pre-videotape’ and ‘post-videotape’ because of the importance of videotape to the preservation and distribution of sign language compositions.”<sup>69</sup>

Since the 1990s, Japan’s national broadcaster, NHK, has shown multiple weekly programs in sign language education; other channels have broadcast a wide variety of TV dramas that involve signing Deaf and hard of hearing characters, including *Orange Days*, *Tell Me You Love Me* (*Aishiteru to itte kure*), and *Love Letter*. A hit manga and animated film featuring a Deaf character and dialogue in JSL, *A Silent Voice* (*Koe no katachi*), was released to widespread acclaim in 2016; *A Sign of Affection* (*Yubisaki to renren*), a romantic anime series based on an earlier manga and starring a Deaf main character, premiered in January 2024. There are sign language dictionary websites, sign language-learning smartphone apps and mobile games, and so on. Something that all of these have in common, however, is that they are largely created by and for hearing audiences, with varying levels

of involvement—and sometimes none at all—of Deaf consultants, writers, actors, animators, and programmers, leading to overly simplistic or flat-out inaccurate portrayals of Deaf life and Deaf culture. This is not to say, of course, that there is no screen media made by and for the Deaf in Japan. There is a long history of Deaf films in Japan, like those made by the Deaf director Fukagawa Katsuzō in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>70</sup> Deaf Movie Entertainment PRODIA is an association of Deaf filmmakers who have released several feature-length films in a variety of genres over the last two decades in which the main language is JSL. A few contemporary Deaf directors like Makihara Eri, DAKI, and Imamura Ayako also make independent films, many of which are shown on national television and at global film festivals, including the annual Tokyo International Deaf Film Festival, inaugurated in 2019. Content by and for the Deaf, of course, has also proliferated in the age of social media. With stable high-speed internet, computers and smartphones with high-quality built-in cameras, and so on, the opportunities for Deaf people worldwide to share digital video online—whether in the form of chat, streaming, or videos on platforms like YouTube, Nico Nico Douga, or TikTok—are more widespread than ever before.

But there was, and is, a price to uploading videos of sign language literature like Tanada's JSL poems on major video-sharing networks. In cases like these, the creation of a Deaf world online through such platforms is also something that incidentally makes these poets just some among many millions of bodies "doing things" on video-sharing websites, where they are often viewed by largely hearing audiences. These poems are put in a position where they can be and are easily viewed or stumbled upon by those who do not know sign language and thus often only apprehend the poem as a body acting out a series of gestures, caught between interpretive dance and unintelligible speech. This is attested to by endless comments on any video that features sign language like "Sign language is so beautiful!" eliding the semantic completely in favor of the aesthetic. "For me, ASL is not *just* a beautiful language, a mere aesthetic adornment," writes Rachel Kolb. "It is also a language that has given me access to a world otherwise governed by assumptions of sound and hearing. 'Your signing is so beautiful': with this expression, followed by nothing else, my communicative process, history, and richer sense of self all disappear."<sup>71</sup> It is a justified anxiety about misrecognition or miscirculation that Brueggemann notes as well: "ASL authors (and critics too) may still be a bit unsure about the shape-shifting nature of audience here in the dawn of the digital age."<sup>72</sup>

There are easy narratives of new media "opening up" literature and the arts to new forms of expression and enabling ever-expanding modes of communication. But these narratives elide feelings of media *frustration*, exemplified by many Deaf poets like Tanada, who in the form and content of their works repeatedly push up against the inadequacies of "new media" and its cultures. Like most media technologies, the internet was and continues to be largely by and for the hearing. The vast majority of videos online do not have human-written captions, for



example, compared to much of television in Japan and all television broadcasts in the United States; automatic captions generated on platforms such as YouTube are often poor substitutes. An apparent solution like free video-sharing services also place Deaf author/performers into the modes of spectacularization, consumption, and commodification of these hearing-dominated platforms. Any sign language poetic content by Deaf poets is also largely drowned out by another phenomenon: the vast majority of creative sign language works on YouTube and Japanese video-sharing services like Nico Nico Douga tend to be sign language interpretations of pop songs—an interesting practice in their own right, but, again, one largely by and for the hearing.

There continues to be a desire for Deaf spaces on the internet, including Deaf literary spaces, ones that exist apart from hearing platforms. We can see this desire manifesting itself in the many existences of Tanada's "Deaf Identity": its original composition in 1998, performed live by him on many different occasions; the specific performance captured on video in what seems to be a noisy restaurant, Tanada wearing a white shirt and fleece vest; the MOV file of that video, uploaded to his website in 2000; the subtitles for that video, summarizing the poem in written Japanese; the YouTube upload of the same movie file in 2007; the extensive transcription and gloss in his article from 2006; and my English translation of the subtitles and extensive summary/explanation above. The internet's "eras" are often framed as subsequent: the Web 1.0 of personal pages like Tanada's and the Web 2.0 of social media platforms like YouTube, with one totally taking over the other. The fact is, of course, that different "stages" of technology coexist, linger, and intermingle to such an extent that it makes it clear that this model—that media "evolve" and totally replace one another—is misleading. Tanada's act of maintaining his personal web page from the year 2000 as long as he could, even while posting some of the same decade-old poem videos on YouTube as well, shows the value of a diverse internet ecology. The capabilities of the "web" have, of course, changed since the year 2000. But many poets like Tanada were and are willing to maintain web pages that largely function as they did then, rejecting the "efficiencies" of new platforms in favor of a smaller internet space dictated by them, frustrations and all—not only continuing to embrace the lingerings of a "Web 1.0" for nostalgia's sake, but also imagining an internet that is more customizable, variable, capacious, and perhaps poetic, its many colors intermingling like the autumn leaves of Mount Akagi's past.

## CONCLUSION

Tanada's sign language poems and ni\_ka's AR poems share a poetics of overlapping worlds that are suspended in impossible coexistence through their work. But they also resonate with one another in how they use this poetics to expose the processes by which that coexistence itself was made impossible. The blossoms in ni\_ka's poetry became a spectacle of the kind of mourning that *wasn't* happening;

Tanada's brocade of autumn colors was not just a melancholic seasonal image, but through sign became a way to articulate the trauma of oralist forms of Deaf education that undermined sign language itself. The impossibly coexisting worlds—the worlds of the living and the dead, of Tokyo and disaster-struck Tohoku, of oralism and Deaf thriving—become reflected in the failures of language itself: the clichéd postdisaster platitudes falling away in the face of an overwhelm of text, image, and emotion in ni\_ka's work, and the dramatizations of failed attempts to make Deaf people speak only Japanese and not JSL in Tanada's. These tensions also become spectacularized in the generative failures of digital platforms, with the constant fades to black upon each subtitle appearance in "Deaf Identity" and ni\_ka's rendering Sekai Camera nigh unfunctional for its original purpose.

But despite the common sentiment that once something is on the internet it's out there forever, works of digital media are extraordinarily fragile. "Silent" cinema remained to many an important respite from sound cinema; vinyl records can still be played, and so can old magnetic tape recordings with a bit more effort; vintage magazines might be yellowed but are readable; and any number of cinephiles will tell you exactly how to tweak vintage projectors to play even the most questionable 8mm films. "Cloud-based" computing and storage suggests an image of something floating above our world, heedless to its complications, unaffected by any turmoil below, infinitely accessible, ever expanding. But when the underlying structures break down, or go defunct or unsupported, there is often no equivalent of a yellowed magazine page or degraded celluloid to fall back on. YouTube still exists—for now—and one can see Japanese sign language poems by Tanada and many others there with the right search terms. Yet Tanada's personal web page is no more; it vanished in early 2019 as its hosting service shuttered, and it only exists as an Internet Archive snapshot from July 15, 2001.

At least there's that—but sometimes, there isn't. Though Sekai Camera, the augmented reality app that ni\_ka used to create her AR poems, was continually updated, many of its functions started to disappear. She noticed that audio tags, for example, were the first to go, erasing all the clips she left of her voice reading parts of the poems out loud. Even back in October of 2011, right in the middle of ni\_ka's series of post-3/11 AR poems, the filmmaker Sasaki Yusuke noticed that Sekai Camera had already ceased some its functions: though he wanted to capture ni\_ka's poetry, the ability to take high-quality screenshots had suddenly vanished.<sup>73</sup> Finally, Sekai Camera itself was completely shut down in 2013, less than two years after ni\_ka's series of works began. A few screenshots of these poems remain, but these only offer glimpses of what was once a three-dimensional experience tied to a specific location, ever changing as the air tags left by other users floated in the air alongside ni\_ka's.

When the shutdown was announced, many immediately thought of its implications for ni\_ka's work. "I've been anxious about what will happen to the AR poems after Sekai Camera shuts down—can they be saved somehow?" asked one

Twitter user who went by Purin Zeroshiki. “I hope they can linger on in some other form.”<sup>74</sup> She “went to try to get one last look at ni\_ka’s AR poems on Sekai Camera before the application shuts down,” she added later.<sup>75</sup> In 2019, Yaplog—the service that hosted ni\_ka’s blog, including all of her monitor poems and posts of her AR poems—also announced it would be shutting down completely on January 31, 2020, leading to a desperate scramble (on my part and others’) to save her work on the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. A couple of years before that, the hundreds of roses, stars, and Hello Kitties that once bloomed across her blog had suddenly stopped working as well, with the external sites that hosted the extensions that produced those effects having shut down; now only the oldest of her archived pages still contains these floral explosions that were once so key to the original experience of her work.

Tanada’s and ni\_ka’s works are not alone in this. We are at a moment in which countless marginalized spaces of digital media practices and their histories have either disappeared or are on the verge of doing so. Influential Shockwave-based poem generators like exonemo’s “BM394—biomorphpoet” from 1997, for example, result now only in garbled text (*mojibake*, “transformed characters”) instead of the original Japanese.<sup>76</sup> Many of the blog services (like Yaplog) and website hosts that held the bulk of poetic activity in Japan have shut down long ago, taking thousands of pages with them. Even GeoCities Japan—a longtime holdout—finally shut down in 2019, ten years after its US counterpart, along with its own massive corner of internet poetry.

I mention how easily these poems have been lost in their original forms not as a call to lamentation, or to fossilize these works, often deliberately ephemeral, in amber—indeed, much of what is striking about the materiality of digital poetry emerges in repeated encounters and makes itself felt in loss. As José Esteban Muñoz wrote, ephemerality “is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance. . . . It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”<sup>77</sup> Instead, I want to point to an urgency of maintaining an openness in what we deem valuable, and what we deem poetic, so that some of these encounters with other online worlds can still happen in the first place, and—like the Mount Akagi of the past being brought back into the present, or the floating digital roses haunting Tokyo’s streets—continue to happen, in some form or another.

The “www” in many internet addresses, of course, stands for “World Wide Web.” The web of online worlds in this chapter, however, is more akin to the one in Clayton Valli’s “Dew on a Spiderweb,” one of the best-known sign language poems, in which the speaker glimpses dew glittering on the threads of a web and quickly takes several pictures of it, only to later discover that they had not wound the film properly and that the images have disappeared forever. Yet as Rebecca Sanchez argues, “The web’s image *has* been preserved, made present on

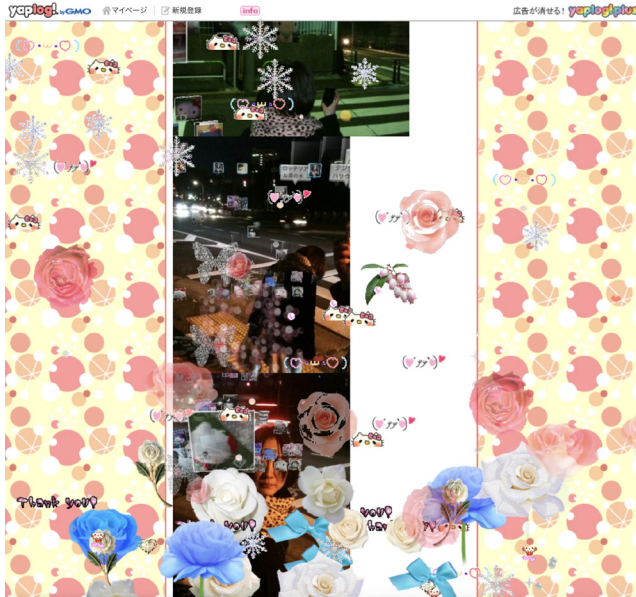


FIGURE 22. Images of ni\_ka's final walk to capture images of her AR poems before the shutting down of the Sekai Camera app, from her December 23, 2013, blog post "hello! AR poetry."

the signer's hands. More than just describing how the web looks, the signer has created a thing in the air—not identical to the web but nevertheless physically, tangibly present, no more ephemeral than the web itself.<sup>78</sup> In a December 23, 2013, post called "hello! AR poetry"—which was, in fact, a goodbye—ni\_ka reflected on her work just a month before the Sekai Camera service was scheduled to end, taking her poems with them (figure 22).<sup>79</sup> She recalls the lonely process of creating these poems, walking furiously around Tokyo with hands numb from the cold almost every day for a year and a half, the 3/11 disasters happening shortly after her initial experiments and changing the direction of her work entirely. In the days before the final shutdown, ni\_ka walked through the streets of Tokyo, capturing her poems before they too became ghosts. "My AR poetry," she wrote, "will quietly drift from now on only at the edges of memory and of record." This was, she mused, perhaps an appropriate conclusion.