

Sounding: Roy Miki's Tokyo

A Chance Aural Encounter

Tokyo creates the poet Roy Miki but, as befits a writer of such complex negotiations in meaning, it does so by initiating productive displacement.¹ A chance aural encounter in the city's historic entertainment district initiates Miki into the project of sounding the "clashing" formations of "Japanese and Canadian under the sign of transnational processes":

I was sauntering along a street in Asakusa, in Tokyo. I was drawn to the insistent rhythm of a barker's voice. A tightly knit crowd had cohered around him. Entering that circle, my imagination suddenly shuttled back and forth from the voice to the site of the Royal American Show in my Winnipeg childhood. There, at least for a "normal" kid, the barkers were mesmerizing for the uncanny ability they had to perform a stream of constant talk. I fantasized that, one day, I too might be able to perform so fluidly in the English language. But it wasn't only the voice that attracted me; it was also the discursive calling into appearance the object of its gaze—the so-called freak show. ("Turning In" 65-66)

Sound on a Tokyo street, the wondrous verbal dexterity of a barker drawing a crowd, stirs a memory of *home*, but that memory, sparked aurally, is unhomey, a reminder of visual, and racialized, exclusion. Just like "the so-called freak show," the young Miki's racialized body was, in 1940s and 1950s Winnipeg, exposed like "objects displayed for their divergences from the normative gaze" (66). In Asakusa, however, "among the normative bodies there," it was his "own invisibility" that "took on some uncanny effects" (66).

Miki found himself “slipping into the barker’s world” and “anticipating the gaze”: invisible, or not racialized, in the Tokyo crowd, Miki “could enter the language and ‘pass’ in a critical space” that began “to warp” his imagination. Far from this being a moment of return, however, or a feeling of home after the uprootedness of racist exclusion in Winnipeg, “the act of slipping into the barker’s voice” makes Miki conscious of his “own displacement in the crowd” (67):

The translation process that allowed the barker’s voice to be folded into the remembered childhood moment disrupted my consciousness of the scene. . . . As the barker’s voice trailed on, there I was, on a warm and pleasant Saturday afternoon, utterly immersed in the memory of a racialized, hence “freakish” as well, body that haunted my childhood in Winnipeg.

In what was then a largely unconscious move to redraw boundaries, I decided to return to Canada, convinced that the I in the crowd at Asakusa would never be Japanese, whatever that term might have meant at the time. . . . But, for a JC, one born into the aftermath of uprooting and cultural deracination, the same moment initiated a turn away from Japan as a point of origin and towards Canada as the site of future critical work. (67)

Miki concentrates, with a particular intellectual intensity, on a cluster of lifelong political and poetic associations in this autobiographical fragment. Tokyo initiates, in this narrative, a double refusal, prompting a turn from the idea of Japan as a place of return, the ideal destination *home* for Japanese Canadians, in the language of both racist slurs and the official language of orders-in-council for repatriation, at the same moment as it spurs a critical approach to the problem of Canada itself. The passage, with its language of redrawn boundaries and turns, emphasizes the poet’s productive *dislocation*, the juxtaposition of Winnipeg and Tokyo, not-here and not-home, with the promise of “critical work” as something done in the spaces between. Tokyo, across Miki’s writing, is a real place but, more importantly, it is a signifier, a proper noun invested with and circulating between multiple, sometimes contested, national, personal, communal, and political histories. It also makes this link through a *sound* memory, the performed and denaturalized *thickness* of the barker’s Japanese discourse drawing out the memory that Miki had “fantasized that, one day, [he] too might be able to perform so fluidly in the English language” (66). A barker’s performance is a rendering of language enlarged, made strange and wondrous, and Miki, in one of the

understated substitutions so typical of his achievement, enacts it in this very sentence by the substitution of “fluently,” the more obvious adverbial pairing with its associations of assimilation and the normative, with “fluidly,” the language of *flow*, movement, transformation, and his own aesthetics of change. Tokyo, then, is a point of origin for a poetic oeuvre “w(e)ary of / all labelled things” (“Crossing the Date Line” 525)² and both suspicious and tired of the restrictions enforced by narratives of origin and national belonging. This essay positions Tokyo as central to Miki’s poetry for its *soundings*. I use this term to cover both the importance of sound to Miki’s exploration of the city, an aural- and performance-based dimension to his poetry perhaps neglected in our critical focus on the visual elements of West Coast innovative poetry, and to indicate the way the city initiates, or is the occasion for, a certain intellectual restlessness and openness, an opportunity for sounding out ideas and political-cultural developments.

Why take these soundings now? What is urgent, for readers now, in this decades-long poetic project to sound Tokyo? Two answers present themselves. In the literary sphere, the publication of Miki’s *Flow: Poems Collected and New* (2018) offers chances for readers to take his poems as part of a continuous project, reading between collections and lines for continuities, threads, loops, and returns. Miki’s individual poems work on their own terms, to be sure; the substance of his *Collected* poems, taken together, however, allows us to follow some of the streams through which his imagination flows. The focus on Tokyo in *Mannequin Rising* (2011), for instance, casts a different light on earlier poems when they are read as part of this recent, expansive, and generously conceived edition. More troublingly, in extra-literary contexts, Miki’s poems take on new resonance and find new urgency amongst the racialized discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Miki’s “Viral Travels to Tokyo,” with its exploration of colonies “of restless sojourners bent / on global migration to forge mobile identities” (427) and its careful ear for the racialized language of “social / distancing” (427), “viral globalization” (427), and “the hot zone” (427), gains an uncannily prophetic force, its representations of the “post-pig” (427) security at Narita Airport around the time of the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic now acting as a kind of anticipatory interrogation of the racialized discourse of COVID-19’s spread and containment. Trump’s repeated designation of COVID-19 as a

“Chinese virus” (or “kung flu”), the surge in anti-Asian racism in Canada through 2020, and the revival of older racialized metaphors of invasion, contagion, and spread in media descriptions of COVID-19 make Miki’s “viral travels” (425) to and from Tokyo newly relevant.³ His soundings, I will argue here, anticipate and respond to these limiting and destructive associations of racialized subjectivity with infection and viral spread, while finding in Tokyo opportunities for rethinking—and hearing—the subject in a freer composition of discourses.

Tokyo in Wobble

This prose rendering of Miki’s Asakusa moment—suspended between sound (the barker) and sight (the freak show), the present and invisibility (Tokyo), and the past and racialized hyper-visibility (Winnipeg)—deploys what Louis Cabri has designated “wobble,” Miki’s literary technique to generate “semantic slippage” and “change of state” (“Floward” xii). Readers, Cabri contends, “need to adapt to the wobble of Miki’s writing, not try to either force the wobble out, or downplay it” (xii). If Tokyo initiates wobble across Miki’s oeuvre, appearing as a proper noun in the first poem of his first collection, *Saving Face* (1991), and in the titles of a further three poems across the next twenty-seven years’ writing, it is also reimagined, in the poetry, as a wobble place, a space where Miki’s own writing tries to give Orientalist discourse the slip, making dashes for spaces of freedom in an intensively imagined and narrated globalized space. Tokyo has, in English-language writing since the 1980s,⁴ been deployed as part of what Fred Wah has called “a kind of current western Orientalism that seeks cultural inhabitation by globalization” (6-7). The source of much of this imagery comes from William Gibson’s cyberpunk texts, work produced, like Miki’s poetry, in Vancouver and its particular racialized spatial politics. Miki’s poems, by contrast, often focus on everyday and intimate forms of sociality and experience with other Asian Canadian writers, from an evening out with friends—“On the plate sit three uneaten gyoza / neatly arranged as if we had not leaned / together with our backs to the wall” (“Glance” 351)—to the details of ordinary exchange: “the little yellow / melons wrapped / in cellophane on / styrofoam plates” (“Viral Travels to Tokyo” 435). Each of these details, accumulated across the poems, acts as a counterweight to wobble the stock “neon shudder”

(Gibson, *Neuromancer* 15) of Tokyo as a synonym for globalization. This may seem a belated recognition—Asian Canadian literary studies has, after all, for several decades now been turning critical attention to the tropics of the Other in white writing—but Miki’s work takes on, I want to suggest, in this current moment, a new rhetorical power and insight. COVID-19 is, as Iyko Day puts it, “a great revealer, laying bare the structures of racial disposability that have sacrificed people, from migrant detainees to meat packers” (64), across North America. It also, she goes on to observe, highlights the ways in which current discourses presenting Asians as “viral transmitters of disease” are “symptomatic of something much more deeply ingrained” in settler-colonial ideologies, a “romantic anti-capitalism” seeing authentic community threatened by “peril” (64) from elsewhere. It is of scholarly interest that Miki’s writing, (produced in the decades when “Japan bashing” on the American right, and cyberpunk on the literary left, were at their strongest), threads responses to these twin discourses in his Tokyo poems; it is of troublingly contemporary relevance that they continue to speak to and against these discourses’ ongoing mutations and adaptations.

Tokyo is an opportunity for wobble, too, between and through the deadening nationalisms of our current era, whether Canadian, American, or Japanese. Tokyo is a productive place for a Japanese Canadian writer seeking to trouble *both* the logic of racialized exclusion encoded in traditional Canadian identities *and* the erasures of its updated, official, multicultural variants. Tokyo is, after all, a city characterized by its status as an intensely *American* space, subject to a continuous US military presence since 1945 and dominated, politically and economically, by its place in the US empire.⁵ Its cultural life is characterized by what Takayuki Tatsumi has called “never-ending intercultural oscillations between Americanization and Japanization” (1). Miki’s Tokyo is not a place for personal return; his ancestors’ homes were in Kyushu and not a place where stabilizing identities can be forged. It is, rather, a site for wobbling in the slippage between an American-dominated cultural globalization (“the health of the local in / the spectrum of its splintered ends” [“Five Takes on Culture” 357]) and an always inadequate because constraining Canadian identity.⁶ This Tokyo allows the writer to “re-orient himself” (“Tokyo Evening” 355), finding his bearings in both reorientation as mapping and spatial familiarity and as a kind of willed,

critical immersion in the discourses of Orientalism and its processes of racialization. My desire here is not inadvertently to orientalize Miki, and any number of essays could be written on an archive as rich as his taking as their bearings the visual poetics of bpNichol, say, or the inspiration of William Carlos Williams. Tokyo in Miki's work is, I hope to show, a place created by way of the *dislocative* qualities of the poet's voice; if you never quite know where you are with a Miki poem—"where is here?" once more!—that *generative* confusion is part of his poetry's elegance and imaginative provocation.⁷ Miki's Tokyo is not held to be strange by some putatively objective measure, as it is in the discourse of "weird Japan."⁸ Miki's Tokyo is rather, *made strange*, estranged, subject to the imaginative vivification of poetry. The early "Tokyo Poem" (1969/76), for example, the opening poem in the "Sansei" sequence, begins with wobble:

shadows return one & by one cling
to a single calla lily (a yellow
pistle set deep as desire too is
a conch a white petal a surface

to pull the bee into its mysteries[.] (9)

The line breaks, for starters, slow us down: is desire "set deep," or is it "a conch"? Is a conch serving to "pull the bee" or is it "a surface"? The "mysteries" that follow these lines are quotidian details that, for all their names may be unfamiliar to white Canadian readers, are markers of the anti-exotic and domestic everyday. "[D]aikon gobo & lotus roots" (9) are commonplace features of the Japanese garden and larder. "Shadows" are both spatial, the darkening on a lily, and markers of time, the place of the sun and their "return" indicating patterns and order. How is the reader to place all of this in sequence? Flowers and seasonal markers are crucial to many forms of Japanese poetics, and to North American developments from them, certainly. Flowers are, in fact, a cliché in anglophone evocations of Japanese aesthetics and the discourse of authenticity. But Miki's "Tokyo" flower here is, crucially, an import, the calla lily originating in Southern Africa and being as readily found in British Columbia as in Tokyo itself.⁹ The "return" of this poem is neither to a nativist idea of Japanese purity or readily legible *difference* nor

to any universalizing globalization *avant la lettre*, but rather to a productive uncertainty, a wobble in the space between “a surface” and “mysteries.”

The swerves this poem performs away from meaning—from “one” to “& by one,” without contextualizing stabilization for this odd phrasing—illustrate the energy-giving power of Miki’s Tokyo as a site for poetic *refusal*. The barker’s call highlights language’s slippery, fluid, flowing powers in creating potential realities; the tout’s job, after all, is to evoke a promise and an imagined future in a crowd’s mind as much as it is to describe any given state. Miki draws on this affiliation to craft in his set of Tokyo poems a creative refusal, an imagined space outside what he has called “state multiculturalism,” with “its production of . . . mandatory ethnic identities” (“Between” 221). Always suspicious of “the truthfulness of ‘one’s primary experience,’ i.e., a point of origin for the ‘I’ that produces clarity of meaning to dispel the obfuscations plaguing contemporary life” (Miki, “The Future’s Tense” 41), and alive to “the problems of representing the contemporary, the ‘present,’ which appears and disappears in flickering sights, sounds, and silences of language” (52), Miki’s Tokyo is an imagined space neither reducible to the particularities of one Japanese Canadian biographical experience nor bleached of these details and their distinctive colourings and history. The imagined city balances between the “flow” of freely moving bodies and ideas and history’s constraints and the record of forced movement and incarceration, between the promise of what Eleanor Ty has named the “*Asian global*” (133, emphasis original), explored by writers who are “mobile subjects in a global age” (xxvi), and the ongoing projects of bordering, racializing, and distancing that Miki works within and against in Tokyo and Vancouver. If, for William Gibson, “Japan is the global imagination’s default setting for the future” (*Distrust* 124), Miki’s blending and clashing of registers, a Winnipeg barker shouting out alongside the smooth “absence of local references” (“Viral Travels to Tokyo” 445), restores a sense of history and contest to too-easily-commodified and stunted images of the Asian global city, rejecting an assimilation into the exoticizing presentations of the globalization or touristic travel document or its theoretical and literary equivalents. “Wily roots of the translocal,” the speaker of “Viral Travels to Tokyo” notes, “made for a daydream of origins and / ends” (445). Finding one’s “roots,” perhaps, is a matter of wiliness, being on one’s guard against both the seductive ideological quality of daydreams of “origin” and alert to the multiple meanings of local

things in other places: “vibrant maples set alongside the / towering bluer than blue yuletide tree” (“Tokyo Evening” 355). The recurrent images of waters and “waves that breach the / shore line” (385) in these poems gesture at movement and freedom, but they also signify *distance*. Miki’s poetic mapping involves, like Roy K. Kiyooka’s, a “pacific pilgrim’s solitude” (Kiyooka 101), writing a *somewhere*, a recognition of determinate Canadian material, the “solitude” being “no less conspicuous” than the more famous two, for Kiyooka (100), in a globalized space that is also shaped by its own unique and historically bound circumstances. The energy, and ethical promise, of this poetry is in its negativity, in what Raya Dunayevskaya called the power of the negative or “the dialectic of negativity as the moving and creative principle” (Marx qtd. in Dunayevskaya 62). As a place where the inadequacies of official multiculturalism can be refused and the “sheen of overwritten / landscapes wrong from the outset” (Miki, “Tokyo Evening” 355) can be countered by the journey to “re-orient” (355), Miki’s Tokyo offers a vantage point from which to demand more of the discourses of both Canadian multiculturalism and globalized mobility. Just as “*each segment*” of a Tokyo train station “*enacts a serial poem*” (“Viral Travels to Tokyo” 441), so too can we follow the references and asides in Miki’s poems, when read together in the solidity of *Flow*, as a kind of serial poem of Tokyo, with each return, from “TokyoPoem” (1969/76) to “subversion in tokyo” (2001) to “Tokyo Evening” (2011), adding nuance and complexity to the arrangement presented before.

Scavenged Lingo

Flow takes its readers on the currents of imagined sounds, introducing a Tokyo characterized by human voices and noise. The poet finds himself, in “A Pre Face” (1991) to *Saving Face*, “lost in a tokyo language school, sounds of childhood / japanese popping into my head” (Miki, *Flow* 5) while later poems will record more vertiginous pleasures in the “phonemic rush” (348) “in a sea of tossed eigo” (346) and “syllabic banter / mingling German with English with Japanese” (350) as speakers “[s]cavenged the lingo to survive in the city” (“Glance” 350). This is an intensely auditory poetics, a kind of sonic ekphrasis rendering the city as soundscape. “The chorus of chanting voices” (“Of Sentient Beings” 311) adds to the barker’s linguistic dexterity and Viral’s “chuckling” in “Viral Travels to Tokyo” (427). Tokyo’s streets are

“bantering” (429) and “chuckling” (430), and “the hubbub of migrant / souls” are voiced outside Shibuya Station (447) while “the / path the rain takes / to the pavement” turns “out to be laughter” (441). These are consistently human, or personifying, sounds, an earscape of human activity, pleasure (laughter and chuckling), negotiation, and negotiated communication. Tokyo residents, in Miki’s poems, *speak*. This sound city is in contrast, and an implicit rebuke, to the Orientalist tropes prevalent even in avowedly Critical Theory and oppositional texts produced to understand the globalizing 1990s. Critical works that positioned themselves as skeptical of, and resistant to, official ideologies and the work of racism could still, in their association of Japan with global capitalism, reproduce and intensify Orientalist imagery and associations. Scott Bukatman’s influential account of the ways “[i]nvisible spaces now dominate, as the *city* of the modernist era is replaced by the *non-place urban realm*” (6, emphasis original) is symptomatic:

What characterizes Tokyo is the domination of the image: not simply the static, oversized posters with their staring eyes . . . but the endless flow of images across the television screen and the endless televisions. . . . Tokyo exists as pure spectacle; that is, as a proliferation of semiotic systems and simulations which increasingly serve to replace physical human experience and interaction. (26)

This is Gibson’s Shinjuku as a “manically animated forest of signs” (*Pattern* 125), or even, alas, my beloved Roland Barthes’ conclusion that “there is nothing to *grasp*” (110) in the “empire of signs.” Miki’s “realization that ‘Japanese’ could not provide an origin for subjectivities produced in the historical contexts of the Canadian nation-state” (“Turning In” 68) by way of his encounter with the Asakusa barker and his unexpected poetic reach allows him to draw on noise and speech—on the barker’s “fluidity”—to slip past both the restrictions of the Orientalist othering of the Asian as inscrutable, absent, or silent, whether in traditional or cyberpunk articulations, and to make this imagined city habited and habitable. A sound city is, after all, a city that is in good shape. Listening, rather than looking, is a method by which one may make one’s way in Tokyo, a city of human experience and exchange. Kirsten Emiko McAllister, in conversation with Miki, prompts him to link the punning of “shopping” (consumption) and “scoping” (getting one’s bearings and, via etymology, being a poet) with “a way to find some bearings, perhaps a way of ‘orienting’—with the perhaps

somewhat shaky or loose pun on ‘Asian’” (159). A shaky, loose pun can *flow*: scoping, as mapping and poem-making, is also a reminder of the role of speech in this process, the scop someone who “commanded a mastery of the complex oral-formulaic materials” (Bessinger and Brogan 1127) their audience expected. A scop, as “professional entertainer, [] harpist and poet-singer” (1127), needs to be heard, their scoping a kind of barking for the unruly, unhoused, human flows that counteract anti-humanist and Orientalist narratives of the city. “i’ll take all the disorder // the reel spills out” (Miki, “albert house, wednesday” 132) Miki’s poetic “i” announces: this overflow, of speech, discourse, signs, sounds, is how he scopes his Tokyo.¹⁰

“the let down”

If Miki’s Tokyo is a sound city in its lexical patterning and through the poet’s focus of attention, it prompts and encourages in turn certain pleasures in the poet’s own soundings. Much of the thrill in Miki’s work, for my ears anyway, comes from the ways in which he sounds out the complexities, hurts, and possibilities of his historical situation in unexpected rushes of competing vocabulary. Memories of Tokyo, in “A Pre Face,” are preceded by “the spoken in the bleached record of memory” that follows “in the wake of / assimilation, the ad after bc” (5). The liberation of activism and activist assertion, in Miki, is not so much the finding of a settled (state-sanctioned, identifiable) *voice* so much as it is an invitation to *voicing*, to having sounds and word patterns bristle in poems. The poet has, in conversation with Louis Cabri, mentioned how “the ghosted nature of Japanese as a mother tongue for me prompts me to think again of its ripple effects in a kind of somatic memory,” a memory that “could be a trace of sounds, or of rhythmic gestures, or of words” (“the coursing” 23). Miki practises a form of what Sarah Dowling calls “translingual poetics”; phrases, words, and sounds from Japanese heard and spoken in Tokyo and Canada work to decentre English as the central, canonical, or *native* language of the poems. In a strategic wobble, however, these words resist Orientalist mystification by being commonplace phrases rather than gestures at untranslatable or ineffable mystery. “[D]ensha” (Miki, *Flow* 212), “kasa” (347), “karada” (445), “ningen” (349), even “eigo” (346) itself: in *train, umbrella, body, person, English*, Miki’s soundings give voice to a Japanese language suppressed by assimilationist

Canadian experiences and given new energy in Tokyo streetscapes. This brief list provides no stabilizing linguistic register, either: the Japanese words, romanized in Miki's poems, are dislocated sounds. Meguro, the fashionable inner-city Tokyo suburb, unspools in punning play from "me guro" to "eye black" (目黒, a literal rendering of the meaning of the two kanji that make its name) to a promise of development: "follow me / grow me // me guro" (446). Miki's soundings wobble between the utopian "not yet" ("mada mada" [175]) and the trauma of the past, long ago ("mukashi mukashi" [165]) and yet still working on the present. This wobble can be playful, "English" rendered both distinctively Canadian ("eh") and Japanese in the questioning imperative "eh? Go!" ("Half Dozen Haiku Like" 451), or in the experiment testing "[w] hat happens when he / got the H out of Utah" (451) and ending up with "uta! uta!" (歌/song) in the "ah so / spry spirit of Kiyooka-san" (451), "ah so" being both a racist taunt or stereotypical expression given to Japanese characters in any number of Hollywood films and an everyday Japanese phrase.

The translingual wobble can in addition evoke and recreate the traumatic displacements of internment and Japanese Canadian forced dislocation:

jamais je crois hotondo on the way
 je crois caw carnage sumimasen domo
 le folie dans le foliage wasureta the let down
 ("Knocks at the Door—*ten*" 207)

Ste. Agathe French, the soundscape of Miki's youthful experience of cultural and personal dislocation in Manitoba, clashes here with French-derived English words ("foliage") and Japanese conversational phrases "hotondo" (almost, nearly), "wasureta" ("I have forgotten") in a bewildering recreation of the experience of a subject's breakdown and recreation. Miki brings this translingual energy from Tokyo to his wider poetic vocation in

feigned sites
 of nomenclature

 dine on burnt syllables
 interrogate the blythe
 seams of grammatique ("The Rescue" 111)

Grammatique is archaic French and yet legible even to a monolingual anglophone reader; what though of “feigned” sites of nomenclature? Naming and grouping can be activities of self-discovery—as with the “[c]olonies of restless sojourners bent / on global migration to forge mobile identities” (“Viral Travels to Tokyo” 427)—or they can be oppressive, systems of classification fixing subjects in their own definitions. “Blythe” suggests wobble between the two, with its standard meaning, as “blithe,” of kindly or joyous nestling within it the obsolete sense to do with that “of the waves” and their flow. Miki’s soundings—“this viral dispersion” (430)—sets meaning loose and into new relation.

“the firey heart of the city”

Japanese Canadian has, in these writings, always been a condition of possibility, a point of departure rather than an identity to fix and hold in place. Never static, Japanese Canadian has, in Miki’s work, “consistently been experienced as contingent and mobile, producing in its mediated relationships a network of signifying effects—effects that have been dynamic, sometimes turbulent, sometimes imprisoning, sometimes liberating and sometimes dumbfounding” (“Turning In” 64). As the Canadian state begins to “appear so much less tangible in the blurred border zones of transnational and global flows” (64), so too

the time of the nation needs to be reconceived as non-synchronous—in contradistinction to the linear and totalizing time of imperialism and colonialism—so that texts, and especially racialized texts, can have the mobility to open cultural transactions that encourage the re-articulation of a more radical democratic system of values. (Miki, “Altered States” 54)

Tokyo, as an imagined space elsewhere to the maps centring the forty-ninth parallel or memories of dispersal either east of the Rockies or by deportation to Japan, is a good place to think with, a site for investigation of new “contingent and mobile” (Miki, “Turning In” 64) identity formations. The proliferation of dedications to fellow Asian Canadian writers—“Fred W,” “Larissa L,” “Hiromi G,” “Ashok M,” and so on—gives a collective sociability to this creative enterprise, with its confidence “that nothing / is irretrievable in the descent” (Miki, “Viral Travels to Tokyo” 428) and that “[d]istance only figures a desire for more intimacy” (429).

Other poets have recorded the first negation Miki notes as the fact that “almost / Japanese is never enough” (“Half Dozen Haiku Like” 451). Joy Kogawa’s Tokyo poems, for example, emphasize the city’s “smoke haze” (“Descent into Smog” 4) and alienating pressures:

pelted shapeless in rush hour crush
bicycle pedestrian cart jostling
hip to bumper, wheel to toe
police whistle siren scream
political speech neon
flashing particle people blur
past ticket takers the world’s
most accurate mechanical man
pummel down subway stairs
and shove heave oh canada my
home and native land give
me land lots of land[.] (“Rush Hour Tokyo” 16)

Miki’s poems acknowledge this urban reality too, “the face looking / back not mine” in “the reflection / in the subway window in the tunnel” (“market rinse” 160) recording an alienation from self and community in the anonymous press of the city. But Miki’s work performs a second negation, registering the dislocation only, via the figure of the barker or insertions of the history of Japanese Canadian internment and displacement into the narrative of the present (“*a shift marked in jc time 1949, the turn of maple leaf forever*” [“market rinse” 157]), to in turn negate the first negation by way of Tokyo’s potentially productive displacements. Miki’s poetic “i” is not *not* at home in Tokyo, riding the wave of competing cultural currents and assumptions. Seeking out “islands of invention / to get thru the day” (“This is not political” 127), his Tokyo is not utopia but an imaginable, and desired, *elsewhere*:

the train from narita into tokyo, quantity assumes dimension, less and less space in the compartment. pulling in to the firey heart of the city, shinjuku, body pushing against the (now) cumbersome baggage. spilling in the station to enter the waves, the wheel of springs loose from the cart. sheer weight of paper and books works a stasis. stuck in the acentred gesture, the caricature of gaijin dragging baggage up the stairs. like stupid salmon going the wrong way and missing the tide. finally arrived.
 (“market rinse” 155)

Shinjuku is a “firey heart,” and the poem threatens to develop into katabasis, a narrative of crowds as hellscapes. But then the crowds become “waves,” the speaker, no matter what their struggle upstairs with baggage, is in movement, and, rather than Kogawa’s “oh canada,” in an image (salmon) inflected with Canadian associations linked inseparably to movement, migration, and travel. Salmon, stupid or not, have here “finally arrived,” travelling (“spilling”) against the current—as a salmon run takes the fish back to spawn and create?—in an act of creation. Negation, an openness to nothingness, turns the pedestrian crush of a crowded train into something like negative capability on the “*train to narita airport*” (“market rinse” 175):

(shade of sayonara
 say o
 say nara
 say nada (175)

This Tokyo is generative because of what it refuses to be, what it is not yet (“mada mada” [175]), what might be transformed by democratic forms of reading and imagining otherwise, unbound by affiliation either to Canadian state multiculturalism or Japanese nationalist essentialism. “[T]he viral dispersion disproves / the untimely death of history” (“Viral Travels to Tokyo” 430) in these shifting accounts of Tokyo, a city “fluid and capacious” (430) in its poetic occasions, initiator of wobble and aside and indirection, opening out ways the city’s legacies can be reimagined and repurposed. The obscurity or waywardness some readers report as a frustration with Miki’s aesthetics can be read, in his treatment of Tokyo, as a way of making material open for re-examination. When he has “[t]he friendly / hearts at Shibuya stare into a hundred million cell phones” (430), Miki upends both the renewed nationalist rhetoric of contemporary Japanese politics *and* the racializing accounts that would have wartime accusations of Japanese uniformity applied to minoritized groups today. A “hundred million cellphones” echoes the wartime slogan of “One Hundred Million Hearts Beating as One,” as well as, in the realm of Asian Canadian literature, Kerri Sakamoto’s powerful historical novel on similar themes, *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003).¹¹ Miki takes this history and, rather than repressing or centring it, lets it join, transformed and transfigured, the flow of his poetic accumulation.

Conclusion

Takayuki Tatsumi, writing before the new isolationisms of the Trump era, notes:

In the late 1990s, American and Japanese cultures entered a new phase of interaction: from then onward, essentially chaotic and transculturally infectious negotiations occur between orientalism and occidentalism; between the western belief in eternity and the Japanese aesthetics of the moment; between a western productionist and idealist sensibility and a Japanese high-tech-consumerist and posthistorical mentality; or even between the science-fictional Japan and the Japan of the American imagination and Japanese science fiction itself. The creative clash between cultures has made it easier for us to envision a new kind of theme park beautifully constructed within global space . . . a globalist theme park built by the nuclear imagination. (176-77)¹²

Where does Canadian writing fit in this “new phase of interaction”?

Tatsumi’s vision seems, in the wake of the war on terror, the global financial crisis, and the renewed nationalisms across East Asia and North America, a distant prospect. If I have stressed the inventive, playful, sounding qualities of Miki’s Tokyo in this essay, I want to conclude with a return to Kiyooka’s affiliation as a “pacific pilgrim” (101), and to link it to Miki’s playfulness as a form of work and imagining otherwise. Tokyo made a poet of the writer in its refusal of his invisibility, his 1970 encounter with the barker bringing him into an awareness of language. In the process, it created for him a scene for ongoing writing, a location outside of the North American continent, and other to Canadian literature as normative identity, that could speak to the ongoing struggles to document Japanese Canadian experience, and to redress Japanese Canadian injustice, while also placing these in wider global relation. “All my texts have started in Japan,” Kiyooka told Miki. “I don’t know why that is so but that’s true” (Miki, “Inter-face” 66). Whereas Kiyooka starts with Japan and asks “old mother pacific who truly keeps the family archives” (“Excerpts from the Long Autumnal Scroll,” *Pacific* 245), Miki *re-turns* Tokyo, starting in Canada and its racialized injustices and then re-turning, and with each encounter adding a new layer, to Tokyo, not as a point of origin, but as a place of re-vision, re-turn, and longing:

& to be among there are
no roots
there ships wait
to be moved and they

too cross the pacific
 once we said
 we say[.] (“Sansei Poem—five” 21)

We say: the “lyric present”¹³ gives over to readers each Tokyo encounter, in poems sustained over fifty years now, as a chance to sound the situation anew. Because “[a]ll the truths compiled in a list do / not add up to a usable commodity” (Miki, “Tokyo Evening” 355), and that, in Miki’s hands, at least, is their sustaining power.

NOTES

- 1 I first rehearsed an early version of this essay’s argument at the Aesthetics of Oceans conference, Seikei University, July 2019. I thank Fuhito Endo for his generous hospitality and intellectual and critical support and stimulation on that occasion and many others.
- 2 All poems are cited from *Flow: Poems New and Collected*.
- 3 Cathy Park Hong and Carol Liao have both written powerful accounts of the ways in which the pandemic has revealed and emboldened racial prejudice and violence.
- 4 See David Palumbo-Liu’s analysis of the ways in which “[t]he permeation of Canadian space” by Japanese subjects “brings the exotic home to Gibson” and allows him to create “with impunity the necessarily separate spaces of Asian America” (381).
- 5 My argument here is informed by Gavan McCormack’s analysis.
- 6 This fits with what Kit Dobson calls Miki’s “broader literary and political project of questioning the legacies of national and state structures . . . [as] the transnational dialogue comes to focus upon the differentiation between dominant, American conceptions of transnational subjectivity and a more mobile form of the subject” (162). This more mobile form, in Dobson’s reading, “comes to be aligned in part with Canada and with other spaces that are depicted as somehow escaping the hegemonic power of the United States” (162). Tokyo, in my reading, is both inside and out of this kind of escape.
- 7 I am grateful to *Canadian Literature*’s anonymous readers for prompting me to clarify these ideas.
- 8 See Patrick W. Galbraith’s work for an astute exploration of the mutually reinforcing Othering going on between state marketing in Japan and Western discourses of Japanese exceptionalism and oddity.
- 9 Yoshinobu Hakutani has written powerfully on the cross-pollination of Japanese haiku and North American poetic traditions.
- 10 What then of the silence of the mannequins, those humanoid figures of consumerism at work in *Mannequin Rising* (2011)? Louis Cabri, in a bravura reading, suggests that Japan “seems crucial to understanding the gradual turning to economic language in Miki’s poetry” (“the mannequin” 34) and that “the eponymous ‘rising’ mannequin is attempting to articulate the price Japan has paid for dominance by and success due to the inverse ratio. The price paid for such enormous economic success is cultural homogeneity and memory-loss. Consumerism—shrines of consumerism—would seem to be playing a

determining role in the public forgetting” (35). My own reading develops, I hope, as a dialectical complement to Cabri’s. If he has mapped the power of the negative charging the poems’ representations of a dominant consumerism, my readings here scop(e) the ways in which stray sounds and soundings show human activities and connections being made possible “in defiance of the injunction / not to expose the frailty of the codes” (“Scoping (also pronounced ‘Shopping’) in Kitts,” *Flow* 396).

- 11 See Dower, “Cultures of Defeat,” for a thorough account of the assumptions behind the slogan and the way these were shared by Imperial and Allied leaderships, material relevant to Miki’s unbundling of the phrase from its wartime past.
- 12 See also Andrew McKeivitt’s account of this process across popular culture.
- 13 The term, as I use it here, is Seo-Young Chu’s.

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