

Japanese Elements in the Poetry of Fred Wah and Roy Kiyooka

For nearly a century, Japanese poetic forms have provided inspiration for poets writing in English. The importance of Japanese poetry for Ezra Pound and its role in the formation of Imagism have been well documented (see, for example, Kawano, Kodama, and Miner). Charles Olson, in his manifesto “Projective Verse” (1950), drew examples from Japanese sources as well as Western ones. Several of the Beat Generation poets, such as Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen, studied in Japan and their work reflects a serious interest in Japanese poetry. Writing in 1973, poet and translator Kenneth Rexroth declared that “classical Japanese and Chinese poetry are today as influential on American poetry as English or French of any period, and close to determinative for those born since 1940” (157). Rexroth may have been overstating this influence; he, after all, had a role in creating it. Nonetheless, what Gary Snyder calls the “mysteriously plain quality” of East Asian verse has served as a model for the simple diction and directness of much contemporary poetry (“Introduction” 4).

Writers belonging to these two generations of Asian-influenced American poets—the Imagists and the Beat poets—had no ethnic connection to Asia. But the demographic changes of the last few decades have produced a third generation whose interest in Asian poetry derives at least in part from their own Asian background. Several Asian Canadian poets have written works that are modelled on Japanese genres or make sustained allusions to Japanese literature. For example, Joy Kogawa’s “At Maruyama Park, Kyoto” and Gerry Shikatani’s “So What! A Bashoesque: (a rendition for bpNichol)”

and “A Legend, Probably” re-work the famous haiku by Basho (1644-1694): “The old pond/a frog jumps in/ the sound of water.” Other examples of this kind of engagement with Japanese literary traditions can be found in Terry Watada’s *Daruma Days* and Kevin Irie’s *Burning the Dead*.

These connections between Japanese literature and the work of Asian Canadian writers are usually explained as reflections of ethnicity. Cathy Steblyk, for example, claims that “Japanese Canadian poetry reflects a strong dependence on the Eastern mode of communication of the lyric” (77). The Japanese Canadian writer Sally Ito observes that her own work has certain qualities—melancholy, impersonality, and restraint—often associated with Japanese literature. In her view, these values have been “unconsciously transmitted”: “The more I read and studied about Japanese literature, the more I realized how much Japanese aesthetics and ways of thinking informed my writing” (177).

In the case of writers who, like Ito, have studied the language and literature of their (or their parents’) country of origin, it seems legitimate to assume that ethnicity plays some role in forming their poetics. But attributing everything “Japanese” in Asian Canadian writing to ethnicity neglects the history of Japanese influence—a history which, through the legacy of Imagism and the New American Poetics, prepared the ground so that Japanese-influenced poetry could sound “poetic” in English. The assumption that there is a direct link between ethnicity and poetics is only a step or two distant from the attitude Hiromi Goto ridicules in her poem “The Body Politic”:

People ask me what I do
and I say, oh, I do a little writing.
Do you write poetry too? someone will ask,
and I say, yeah, a little bit.
Oh! please make up a haiku for us, we’d love to hear a haiku from you.
Uh—I don’t—
Oh, don’t be shy! You Japanese are so clever with haiku! (220)

What is the appropriate way to link poetics and ethnicity? What role does ethnicity play in a writer’s choice of form and technique? Two of Canada’s most prominent Asian Canadian writers, Fred Wah (born in 1939) and Roy Kiyooka (1926-1994), are among those who have made considerable use of Japanese poetic forms. In focusing on their work, I hope to offer some tentative answers to these questions, and to suggest some difficulties that arise when ethnicity is used to explain poetic effects.

Fred Wah

Since the early 1980s, Fred Wah has produced a number of works in Japanese poetic genres. His 1982 book, *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, is a diary-like record of a trip to Japan and China; originally published in Kyoto, it was reprinted in Wah's 1985 collection *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, where it is described in the prefatory note as "a *utaniki*, a poetic diary of mixed prose and poetry."¹ *Waiting for Saskatchewan* contains another experiment with Japanese form: "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun." In the preface, Wah defines *haibun* as "short prose written from a haiku sensibility and, in this case, concluded by an informal haiku line."² *Rooftops*, published in 1988, is a collection of haiku. In 1989, Wah published *Limestone Lakes Utaniki*, an account of a hiking trip. His 1991 collection *So Far* (where "Limestone Lakes Utaniki" also appears) includes two more works in this form: "Uluru Utaniki" and "Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki." *Diamond Grill*, published in 1996, is a prose work, but its form—more than a hundred chapters, all extremely short, with occasional inserted poems (for example, 12, 22) and bursts of lyricism (for example, 31)—suggests that it is not a novel or even a prose poem but rather another experiment in *haibun*.

Although Wah is not Japanese Canadian—his paternal grandfather was Chinese—his interest in Japanese poetic traditions derives at least in part from his self-identification as an Asian Canadian. In his critical writings, Wah has discussed two ideas that I think explain his attraction to Japanese poetics: defamiliarization and "alienethnic poetics" ("A Poetics" 99).

Defamiliarization

In "Making Strange Poetics," his 1985 essay on the Canadian long poem, Wah discusses the importance for his own poetics of Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization or estrangement. Shklovsky saw defamiliarization as the essence of artistic language: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (qtd in Wah, "Making Strange Poetics" 213).³

In his own poetry, Wah has certainly tried to "increase the difficulty and length of perception." For example, he avoids complete sentences and conventional syntax, and refers to people, places, and works of literature that are not easily recognizable. His use of Japanese forms can be seen as another of defamiliarizing strategy. Subtitles that include terms like *haibun* or

utanikki turn Wah's poems into foreign objects; they signal that something is going on that does not fit the conventions of poetry in English.

Wah's use of *haibun* in "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun" demonstrates the workings of defamiliarization. Each of the poem's twenty-one sections consists of a prose-like passage justified right and left, punctuated with one or two lines in boldface. In his statement on this poem for *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Wah describes the relationship between the "prose" sections and ending lines: "the haiku," he says, "settles out at the bottom" (373). The boldface ending lines are items of denser thought, finding their way to the bottom of the page. A few of these ending lines—for example, sections 6, 11, 13—actually scan like haiku, with phrases of 5-7-5 syllables.

If the word *haibun* and the unusual form of the poem create expectations that it will somehow seem strange and difficult, the poem itself fulfills them. In writing about the long poems of bpNichol, Wah describes how Nichol uses "a labyrinthine network of incomplete thought loops" to keep the reader suspended in an unresolvable, infinitely prolonged process of perception ("Making Strange Poetics" 217). Wah employs the same method in "Father/Mother Haibun," as this passage demonstrates:

Father/Mother Haibun #10

Working with my back to the window for more natural
light, dog chasing cows in the field, the words stubble
today, embedded there in the bracken at the edge of the
field, Chinese philosophy and numbers, the cloud-filled
night, "and they swam and they swam, right over the dam,"
etc., all this, and sugar too, holding the hook, time, the
bag, the book, the shape, you also carried on your back
yin and embraced yang with your arms and shoulders, the
mind as a polished mirror, there, back into my hand.

**I can't stop looking at the field of brown grass and weed
and feeling the grey sky** (Waiting 85)

Following the "incomplete thought loops" here requires constant reference to the background sources of Wah's poetry. The field is not only the open land behind the writer's house but also Olson's technique of "composition by field." When linked to the phrase "Chinese philosophy and numbers," the stubble in the field evokes the yarrow stalks used for divining with the *I Ching*. The lyric from the popular song "The Three Little Fishies"—"and they swam and they swam, right over the dam"—reminds us that Wah played trumpet in a dance band; it connects this passage to the many other

references to popular music in Wah's poetry. (The title of his 1981 collection, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, for example, derives from the dance tune "Deep Purple" [Bowering, "Introduction" 16]). "Holding the hook" refers to a movement in t'ai chi, another source of images in Wah's poetry; *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, the title of his 1982 book, is also the name of a series of t'ai chi movements. The image of the mind as a polished mirror derives from a Zen Buddhist parable. Throughout the passage, Wah's references alternate between "western" things, such as Olson and popular music, and "eastern" ones, such as t'ai chi, yin/yang, and the *I Ching*.

There are obvious differences between "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun" and Basho's *Oku no hosomichi*, the pre-eminent work of *haibun*. In *Oku no hosomichi*, the link between the prose and the haiku is clear; there is often an explicit description of the occasion on which the haiku was written, and the alternation between prose and haiku is not nearly as systematic as the pattern Wah adopts. Moreover, *Oku no hosomichi* is a travel diary that records a coherent itinerary. Its content is restrained and impersonal, in contrast to Wah's focus on family history. If Wah had not labelled "This Dendrite Map" *haibun*, surely readers would never think of comparing it with *Oku no hosomichi*. Apart from "defamiliarizing" his readers, what does he achieve by using this term?

First, he announces his allegiance to poetic and spiritual ancestors outside English literature. But the subtitle "haibun" is not only an ethnopoetic gesture toward Asian precedents. It also reflects a genuinely creative adaptation of a foreign model to the demands of English verse. Despite the many differences between *haibun* in Japanese and what Wah calls *haibun*, one essential quality has survived the journey from Japanese to English. Wah's prose sections present a series of ideas linked associatively; the haiku present an abrupt shift in perception, a summing up of a mood—precisely the role they perform in Japanese *haibun*. By adapting this form to English verse, Wah has developed a way to move from dense, mostly asyntactical recollections in the prose sections to a lyrical, descriptive mood in the bold-face lines. It creates a dynamic for which there are no readily available models in English verse.⁴

Similarly, in his "uta niki" or poetic diaries, Wah adopts certain structural devices from a Japanese genre in order to move between ordinary experience and more intense reflection or perception. Prose sections record the events of daily life; inserted poems present moments of greater intensity. In

Limestone Lakes Utaniki, for example, Wah includes an elegy, several poems made up of three two-line stanzas, and a palindromic poem (based on whole words, not individual letters).

In "Making Strange Poetics," Wah quotes approvingly Charles Olson's remark (made in a 1968 BBC interview) that "the exciting thing about poetry in our century is that you can get image and narrative both to wed each other" (216). By adapting *haibun* and *uta nikki* to English, Wah has suggested new ways to achieve this union of narrative and image.

Alienethnic Poetics

The subject matter of much of Wah's poetry is ethnicity: his family background has provided the material for some of his best work, such as "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun" and *Diamond Grill*. But Wah has endeavoured to go beyond simply writing *about* ethnicity. He has tried to develop a way of writing that through its form, tropes, and allusions also expresses his ethnic identity. In his essay "The Poetics of Ethnicity," Wah attempts to define what he calls "alienethnic poetics":

The culturally marginalized writer will engineer approaches to language and form that enable a particular residue (genetic, cultural, biographical) to become kinetic and valorized. For writers in Canada like Joy Kogawa and Rohinton Mistry the stance is to operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness while investigating their individual enactments of internment and migration. But others, such as Roy Kiyooka and Marlene Nourbese Philip, who are operating from spatial allocations similar to Kogawa and Mistry, have chosen to utilize more formal innovative possibilities. This second group of writers seems to me to embody an approach that might properly be called something like "alienethnic" poetics. (99)

Wah, whose entire career has been devoted to exploring "formal innovative possibilities," clearly belongs in this second group. While acknowledging the success of writers such as Kogawa and Mistry, Wah classifies the kind of realistic novels they have written as "colonized and inherited."⁵ He links innovation to the desire to find "the right tools" (100) to represent ethnicity. He acknowledges that there are other reasons to pursue formal innovation:

This [alienethnic] poetics, while often used for its ethnic imprint and frequently originating from that desire, is certainly not limited to an ethnic, as they say, "project;" the same tactics could as well be used for other goals. Feminist poetics, for example, has arguably contributed the most useful strategies to the ethnic intention. (99-100)

This is a necessary admission, for many of the formal innovators whom

Wah has most admired—Charles Olson, for example—do not belong in the category of ethnic writers.

Jeff Derksen has pointed out that Wah is usually discussed as a member of the Canadian *avant-garde* of the sixties and seventies. Along with other poets such as George Bowering and Frank Davey, Wah was a founder of the newsletter *Tish*. The problem with focusing on this aspect of Wah's career, claims Derksen, is that it has "separated his racial identity from his poetry" (63). In directing their attention to the form of Wah's poetry, critics have neglected its content—Wah's working-class Chinese Canadian background. Derksen points out the irony in this reading, for a central principle of the *avant-garde* poetics Wah embraced is that form and content are inseparable (66). Derksen suggests that Wah's innovative poetics in itself has constituted a kind of racialized statement, a refusal to be assimilated by conventional literary practice.

I think Derksen is right (and Wah's own statements on alienethnic poetics support Derksen), but he neglects to point out how *avant-garde* poetics may have led Wah to the ethnopoetics he practises. Wah's use of Japanese-influenced elements can be traced to the New American Poetics of the 1960s, which in many respects was inspired by the poetry of Japan and China.

In 1963 Wah attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference at which Charles Olson introduced his poetics to a new generation of Canadian poets (Kröller 19). Wah later studied with Olson at the State University of New York and, through his teacher, absorbed poetic values that had East Asian origins. Allen Ginsberg, a central figure in the New American Poetics, sees a lineage of Open Form poets running from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams to Olson and Robert Creeley (99; see also Beach for another description of Pound's influence). Ginsberg traces East Asian influences in American poetry to Ezra Pound's axiom, "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective." According to Ginsberg, Pound

derived that American application of twentieth-century insight from his study of Chinese Confucian, Taoist and Japanese Buddhist poetry. There was a Buddhist infusion into Western culture at the end of the nineteenth century, both in painting and in poetry. Pound put in order the papers of "the late professor Ernest Fenollosa," the celebrated essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." Fenollosa/Pound pointed out that in Chinese you were able to have a "direct treatment" of the object because the object was pictorially there via hieroglyph. Pound recommended the adaptation of the same idea: the Chinese poetic method as a corrective to the conceptual vagueness and sentimental

abstraction of Western poetry. In a way he was asking for the intercession of the bodhisattvas of Buddhist poetry into Western poetics because he was calling for direct perception, direct contact without intervening conceptualization, a clear seeing attentiveness, which, echoing in your brain, is supposed to be one of the marks of Zen masters . . . (96)

Despite the importance of Asian verse in the modernist revolution, its role was quickly obscured. Its values—brevity, directness, no moralizing or sentimentality, erasure of the speaker’s feelings, a reliance on natural images to convey emotion—became naturalized as aspects of modernism. The Japanese verse tradition was more or less forgotten until the 1950s and 60s, when, with the expansion in scholarship on Japan during the Occupation, a new wave of translations became available. Kenneth Rexroth’s “hundred poem” collections and Burton Watson’s translations of the poetry of Su Tung-p’o and Han Shan attracted a new generation of poets to East Asian verse. Many Beat poets travelled to Japan, primarily because of their interest in Zen Buddhism. Gary Snyder, a scholar and translator of both classical Chinese and Japanese, began to employ haiku and other Asian verse forms in his own poetry (see, for example, McLeod, Norton).

Wah is, in a sense, a northern member of the Beat generation. Like his American counterparts, he was attracted to Japan and its literary traditions as radical alternatives to Western society and poetry. Dan McLeod, in writing about the poetry of Gary Snyder, notes that for American poets, “the Asian influence has, in each poetic generation, offered vital options to the overwhelming presence of the Western literary tradition” (165-66). Wah had an additional reason for turning towards the East: as an Asian outsider in Canadian society, he saw Japanese poetics as a way to make this difference visible in his work.

There is, however, no special match between the themes of Asian cultural displacement that interest Wah and Japanese forms such as the *uta nikki* or *haibun*. If a Japanese-style poetic diary can be written in English, then it can be written to serve many different themes—even those “universal” concerns of love, aging, and the journey of life that pervade the original Japanese models of this form. Indeed, bp Nichol described the *uta nikki* as his “retroactively recognized formal model” for *The Martyrology* (Ondaatje 336).

Wah’s choice of Japanese models is awkward for any theory of ethnopoetics. Whatever aesthetic a Canadian-born person of Chinese ancestry might unconsciously absorb from the conversation of parents or grandparents, it is not a Japanese one. It is possible to argue on historical grounds that

because Japanese poetry owes much to Chinese poetry, there is an affinity between these two traditions in East Asian verse, but this argument is uncomfortably close to the view that all Asian cultures are the same. Moreover, the very techniques Wah associates with alienethnic poetics—fragmentation, estrangement, a mixture of genres—are associated with other forms of writing in English, such as postmodernist fiction (see, for example, Hutcheon). In the concluding sentences of “The Poetics of Ethnicity” Wah admits that there is no necessary connection between ethnicity and formal innovation:

... the ethnopoetics toolbox isn't even only “ethnic,” at least in the sense of racial. These tools are shared, it seems, by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, in short, in need of any tool that might imagine, as the poet George Oppen believed, the unacknowledged world. (108)

Surely this statement comes close to acknowledging that there is in fact no particular “poetics of ethnicity.”

Roy Kiyooka

A first-generation Japanese Canadian, Roy Kiyooka was already an established painter and art teacher when he began writing poetry. Although he was born in Canada, Kiyooka had sustained contact with Japanese culture throughout his life. He spoke Japanese with his parents and, as a child, visited relatives in Japan. In 1963 he returned to Japan to reunite with a sister who had stayed in Japan throughout the war years; in subsequent years, he made many trips to Japan to visit friends and relatives. In 1969, he lived in Japan for four months, working on a sculpture for the Canadian pavilion at Expo 70 in Osaka.

Kiyooka's first book of poetry, *Kyoto Airs* (1964), records his return to Japan as an adult. It provides what now seems like the standard traveller's version of Japan: the stone garden at Ryoanji, bonzai trees, shrines, green rice paddies, and, in the midst of Eastern tradition, incongruous touches of Western modernity—here metonymized as “red high heels” (*Pacific Windows* 23). Although it deals with a Japanese subject and setting, it owes very little to Japanese literary traditions, except as they were filtered through the New American Poetics.

When he was in Japan in 1963, Kiyooka met Ginsberg, Snyder, and Corman (Miki, *Broken* 63). Later that year, he attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference. As Kiyooka's editor Roy Miki points out, nearly thirty

years later Kiyooka recognized the conference as a “turning point”: *Kyoto Airs* was “in part borne of that memorable occasion” (qtd in Miki, *Pacific* 308). According to Miki, the writing of this first book of poems was dominated by Kiyooka’s effort to make himself into a poet, to discover his ability to write in English.

Kiyooka had never finished high school. When the war with Japan started in 1941, his father and brother lost their jobs. In order to survive, the family moved to a small farm, and Kiyooka had to work to contribute to the family income. His lack of formal education embarrassed Kiyooka, despite his success as an artist. When he began to see himself as a writer, Kiyooka laboured to find the right words: “To me it was an act of retrieval in terms of the detritus of my language, just the shit of it. I had to go over and over and over again” (qtd in Miki, *Pacific* 307).

In 1969, Kiyooka visited Japan again. With his father and a Japanese friend, he travelled by train from Kyoto northwest to Tottori and Matsue on the Sea of Japan, circling around to the south through Hiroshima, and back to Kyoto. He kept a journal and took many photographs on this journey; these materials were ultimately turned into *Wheels: A Trip thru Honshu’s Backcountry*. Ann Munton unequivocally identifies *Wheels* with Basho’s *Oku no hosomichi*:

His *Wheels, a trip thru Honshu’s Backcountry* ‘69 is most like the utanikki models, a travel diary of a trip through Japan. . . . Unlike Basho with his bed lice and young guide with “short curved sword at his waist,” Kiyooka encounters souvenir shops and punk kid taxi drivers. (104)

She also quotes Robert Kroetsch as making the same comparison: “Roy from the prairies, ventured into rain forest, into the Basho-journeys of his far ancestors, into dream, into the color of words” (Kroetsch 77). *Oku no hosomichi* chronicles Basho’s travels from Edo (Tokyo) north as far as Hiraizumi, then west to the Sea of Japan coast, and finally back to Ise in the south. This seventeenth-century Japanese work seems a likely model for Kiyooka’s own travel diary, but Munton does not consider the parallels between *Oku no hosomichi* and *Wheels*; rather, she seems to assume that Kiyooka’s Japanese ancestry is sufficient to justify the comparison.

There are, in fact, many specific points of similarity. Like the *haibun* of Basho, Kiyooka’s *Wheels* combines short poems with prose (for example, letters home to his mother). None of the short poems attempts to be a haiku, but some have haiku-like features. For example, many employ a precise

image, such as the following snapshot-like description of Kiyooka's father:

resting his head on his suit-
case father nods off his empty cup
jiggles on the window ledge (138)

Another haiku technique Kiyooka uses is the *kireji* or cutting word (an interjection) to mark a shift in images:

hailed by the slant rain –
bus loads of high school kids stomping
across its prodigious arches
hoot and holler heel to heel hallowed
by this ah Sudden Rainbow! (161)

At “ah,” the arched stone bridge is forgotten, and attention turns to the image of the arching rainbow.

In subject matter as well, Kiyooka's *Wheels* provides echoes of *Oku no hosomichi*. Many passages in Basho's diary recount legends or describe famous temples, shrines, or ruins. Kiyooka reports one of the “local legends” associated with the area around Hinomisaki (145); short poems and photographs document his visit to a shrine (146-7) and a temple (154); he also describes a ruined castle (154) and the contents of a museum (155). Basho visits a hot spring; so, too does Kiyooka (158).

Moreover, like Basho's travel diary, *Wheels* is permeated with reflections on death and mortality. Even the title refers to the turning of the dharmic wheel, a Buddhist symbol for the endless cycles of life and death. These themes are particularly prominent in the section on Hiroshima. One poem describing the atomic bomb museum is constructed in couplets, each of which ends with “(click)” as Kiyooka takes a picture of the exhibits: charred clothes, a stopped clock, melted bicycles, and charred toys. The poem builds to the gruesome and pathetic image of the final couplet, and then ends with a chilling envoi:

o the bronze angel with a charred hole for a face
o the lurid, lopsided, sake bottles

(click)

which hand
pulled the trigger?
which hand
turned gangrenous?

In terms of poetic form, there is little in this section of *Wheels* that can be directly attributed to Japanese poetics, unless it is the austere reliance on

images to tell a story. The content, however, is intensely Japanese Canadian, for only Japanese who were living in North America at the time of the war could feel this painful mixture of guilt, compassion, and connection. It is a particularly dramatic example of what Shirley Geok-lin Lim has called the “double perspective” of minority writers (22).

Kiyooka’s work through the 1970s and 1980s shows his continuing engagement with Japanese formal models. His *StoneDGloves*, a collage of text and photographs taken at the Expo site in Osaka in 1970, has some affinity with the *e-maki* or picture scroll tradition in Japanese art. In pre-modern Japanese literature, text and image were often closely related; for example, the *uta-e* or poem pictures combined paintings and hand-lettered poems; the *byobu-e* or screen pictures sometimes incorporated poems written on elegant paper. George Bowering asserts that *StoneDGloves* was the result of “a peculiarly Japanese esthetic process” (“Roy Kiyooka’s Poetry”). In support of this claim, Bowering quotes the very Imagist lines from the work’s title page:

gathered
blossoms

scattered
a gain (57)

Bowering does not point out (perhaps because he felt it was obvious) that scattered blossoms is a time-honoured Japanese image of fleeting beauty.

The Long Autumn Scroll (completed in the mid-1980s and exhibited in 1990) was a further experiment in the *e-maki* tradition. A work that combines poetry and sheets of photocopied leaves, Kiyooka explained it as a “long saunter via the Long Scroll [that] has its roots and flowering in the legends & the agendas of one man’s asian roots” (qtd in Miki 313). The excerpt reprinted in *Pacific Windows*, subtitled “Written in the Manner of a Chinese Scholar’s Autumnal Journal,” shows the confluence in Kiyooka’s work of Japanese traditions and Asian-inspired American poetics. The notion that this poem is modelled on “a Chinese Scholar’s Autumnal Journal” probably owes more to Gary Snyder’s translations of the poems of Han Shan or to Burton Watson’s translations of classical Chinese poetry than to any direct Japanese source. The opening lines suggest the mountain hermitage of Chinese classical tradition:

here, the mountain air is already frost-laden:
‘neath sun-dog moon, scarlet leaves and pine needles glisten.

The poem moves from the timeless impersonality of these lines to Vancouver, in the present, where an old friend has died. The poem addresses the friend directly, remembering the music they shared. Kiyooka then uses a line with numerous Japanese echoes to shift the scene from British Columbia to Okinawa:

the first snow
clasping the pine branches sings the plum-colored eventide

“Snow,” “pine,” “plum,” and “eventide” are standard elements in the restricted lexicon of traditional Japanese verse. Kiyooka’s use of them is odd: how can the eventide sing the snow, or is it the snow singing the eventide? Perhaps he makes the syntax confusing in order to avoid the too-precious quality of a haiku about snow on pine branches.

The next section of the poem describes Kiyooka’s summer in Okinawa.

umagi-mura interlude)
down the well-worn path barefeet share with civic ants
orange tiger lilies abut calligraphic roots & tendrils.
down the herbaceous incline towards the unrevealed but
not unheard plaintive mutterings of ol’ mother pacific—
i strode thinking i would find myself a place in the sun and
let the ol’ crone harp me all afternoon. but, need I say,
i was wronged: hide your tuberous bod under a huge boulder:
wedge yourself into its seaweed armpit and watch the
pummelled tide ride the black pebbles up the foreshore to-
wards your unwebbed feet. beat a hasty retreat. . .

shikoku no aoi yama
kaigan no osoroshi kaminari
otosun no hosoi koe

This “interlude” in Japan begins with ten lines of verse that rely on English prosody for their coherence. Kiyooka uses a standard line length of fifteen syllables (with some variation). He also incorporates several sound devices: alliteration (“well-worn”; “plaintive mutterings of ol’ mother pacific”); repetition (“abut” and “but”; “feet”; “ol”); and internal rhyme (“feet” and “retreat”; “tide” and “ride”). After this unmistakably “English” section, he then shifts into Japanese. The three lines of Japanese are not translated; their literal meaning is “blue-green mountains of Shikoku/the frightening thunder of the shore/the thin voice of my father.” (“Otosun” seems to be Kiyooka’s version of what is usually romanized as “Otoosan” [father]).

Kiyooka’s 1987 work, *Pear Tree Pomes*, has been described in terms of

Japanese poetics: Sharon Thesen, editor of the *New Long Poem Anthology* in which this work was reprinted, asserts that it “can be firmly placed in the *utaniki* [sic] tradition” (15). Thesen offers no evidence for this connection other than the poem’s “concern with time” and with seasonal change. *Pear Tree Pomes* seems closer to a sonnet sequence than anything Japanese: most of the individual poems range between ten and twelve lines, and all are concerned with defining love and lamenting its loss. In *Pear Tree Pomes*, Kiyooka refers to the work itself exclusively in English terms. He calls it “plain-song” (202), a “small psalm to an old pear tree” (203) and “an ode to an old pear tree” (204). References, too, are overwhelmingly “western” (for example, Wallace Stevens, King Solomon, Adam and Eve), although Kiyooka does compare writing the poem to turning a Buddhist prayer wheel: “i would, given another spin of the wheel chant/ each new-born syllable aloft and watch it haunt the combustible air” (202).

Kiyooka’s last series of published poems, the chapbook *Three Nippon Weathervanes*, includes the bilingual poem “Kumo/Cloud/s.”⁶ One page of this poem consists of three columns of Japanese text, with occasional insertions of the English word “cloud.” One column is in typed romaji (Japanese written in the roman alphabet); the next is handwritten romaji; the third is written in Japanese script. At the bottom are Showa 60 (the year according to the Japanese system), Kiyooka’s name, and his Japanese collaborator’s name, all in Japanese characters. On the facing page appears a loose translation of the Japanese, printed over a background of photocopied leaves. An explanatory note also appears on this facing page: “translated into english / the night after Matsuka-san & i / translated my roma-ji in- / to plausible japanese & sang.” Presumably the materials for the Japanese text came from notebooks described in an earlier section of “Kumo/Cloud/s”: “i filled 3 notebooks full of / an oftimes indecipherable ‘romaji’ alternating / with pages of cluttered ‘english’” (260).

These two pages with Japanese text and translation are best understood as an experiment in combining images and text, similar to *StonDGloves* or *The Long Autumn Scroll*. The Japanese words belong in the realm of image, for few of Kiyooka’s readers are likely to understand them; those who do will find the hand-lettering and misspelled words hard to read.

In an interview in 1975, Kiyooka was asked how his Japanese heritage had affected his painting. In reply, he described his 1963 trip to Japan and the writing of *Kyoto Airs*, which he explained as “partly about these very

things—origins, kinships, and what you call heritage.” But then he took issue with the question itself:

I’m truly bored with labels, what they pre-empt, and I’m sick of having my origins fingered. It’s as though an utterly “Canadian” experience couldn’t embrace either ocean and what lies on the far side of each. (*Roy Kiyooka: 25 Years*)

In the same year, in an essay written for Joy Kogawa and Tamio Wakayama, Kiyooka described how he had learned Japanese from his mother. He acknowledged “the ironical fact” that now he could discuss this experience only in English, even with Japanese Canadian friends (“We Asian” 118). He concluded that “whatever my true colours, I am to all intents and purposes, a white anglo saxon protestant, with a cleft tongue.” Yet Japanese remained the language of his emotions: “when I am most bereft, it’s the nameless Jap in me who sings an unsolicited haiku in voluntary confinement.”

Works such as *Wheels*, *The Long Autumn Scroll* and “Kumo/Cloud/s” show Kiyooka’s efforts to bring together the Japanese and English-Canadian elements in his experience. In a note found in his papers, Kiyooka described how the Japanese spoken on the streets of his parents’ ancestral village in Shikoku somehow sounded like his own language: “everytime i’ve gone back there and walked the streets of that lovely city on the pacific, i hear the cadences of my own native speech: both nihongo and english subtly transmuted into an undialectical syntax” (*Miki Pacific* 320 n. 21). “Undialectical” is the key word here, for Kiyooka did not see east and west, Japanese and English, as opposed. In his poetry he attempted to create a imaginative realm that encompassed both.

Conclusion

Roy Kiyooka never downplayed the importance of his Japanese background, and at times wrote passionately about the racism Japanese Canadians had experienced (see, for example, “October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae,” *Pacific Windows* 281.) But in a 1991 interview, Kiyooka steadfastly avoided making any polemical or theoretical statements about his role as a Japanese Canadian writer. He pointed out the importance of Japan in his formation: for example, he noted that all his texts started in Japan, and he speculated that if things had been even slightly different in his childhood, he might have learned to read and write Japanese. Nonetheless, the interview as a whole conveys the impression that aesthetic concerns, not ethnic ones, dominated Kiyooka’s work. Towards the end of the interview, he asserted

that “the most critical thing about my activity is the inter-face between myself as a painter and myself as a language artificer” (Miki *Broken* 73). This interest in both poetry and painting happened to find a congenial match in the traditions of Japanese literature; perhaps this, even more than Kiyooka’s own Japanese heritage, explains why he turned so often to Japanese sources and forms in his poetry.

Fred Wah and Roy Kiyooka are not only Asian Canadians; they are also North American poets of a particular generation, a generation that wanted to revitalize poetry by turning away from its traditional European sources. Like so many of their American contemporaries, Wah and Kiyooka found inspiration in Japanese verse. By seeing Wah and Kiyooka only in the context of their ethnicity, we miss their place in this historical pattern of interaction with Japanese traditions, and we obscure their significance as innovators in the broad landscape of Canadian poetry. I am not suggesting that we should ignore their ethnicity. Rather, we should see ethnicity as one factor among many that has determined their interest in and adaptation of Japanese verse forms.

NOTES

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- 1 Wah spells this term *utaniki*, but the standard romanized version is *uta nikki*. *Uta* means poetry or song; *nikki*, ‘diary,’ combines *nichi* ‘day’ with *ki* ‘record’. In *Grasp the Sparrow’s Tail*, Wah mentions reading the *Tosa Diary*, a tenth-century example of the poetic diary (*Waiting for Saskatchewan* 36).
- 2 *Haibun*, which combines the *hai* of haiku with *bun*, the character which means prose or writing in general, is usually associated with Basho’s *Oku no hosomichi*. Various translations as *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Yuasa), or *Narrow Road to the Interior* (Hamill), *Oku no hosomichi* is also a poetic diary or *uta nikki*, and presumably one of the models Wah uses for this genre.
- 3 This quotation comes from Shklovsky’s essay “Art as Technique” (Lemon and Reis 12).
- 4 One might suggest the relationship between the quatrains and closing couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet as a possible (distant) English model, but Wah’s closing lines do not resolve the themes and tropes of the poem, as the couplet of a sonnet would.
- 5 The Japanese Canadian poet and critic Roy Miki sees *Obasan* not as a conventional novel but as one in which “formal disruptions, such as the generic crossing of fiction,

history, autobiography, and documentary . . . become strategies of resistance to norms” (*Broken Entries* 117).

6 “Kumo/Cloud/s” was also published separately in *West Coast Line* 24.3 (Winter 1990).

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