

Anton, Alina–Elena

Articulating a hyphenated conscience : the racialized artist in Roy Kiyooka's Pacific Rim Letters

In: *Variations on community: the Canadian space*. Otrisalová, Lucia (editor); Martonyi, Éva (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2013, pp. 29-36

ISBN 978-80-210-6404-1

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81394>

Access Date: 03. 03. 2025

Version: 20250212

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Alina-Elena Anton

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași, Romania

Articulating a Hyphenated Conscience: The Racialized Artist in Roy Kiyooka’s *Pacific Rim Letters*

Abstract

Canada lends itself to a multitude of readings, interpretations and identity (re)articulations along such connecting nodes as culture, politics and literature. The present paper proposes to investigate the mechanisms of articulation and creative sustenance through which a racialized and hyphenated voice can become woven into the literary fabric of “the Canadian space.” The investigation structures itself around the epistolary poetics of Japanese Canadian artist Roy Kiyooka in selections from the volume entitled *Pacific Rim Letters*. The focus will be on identifying structuring elements such as ethnicity, representation and visibility, as well as on analyzing the manner in which the artist (re-)claims these elements to articulate literary creations and become embedded into Canadian cultural history.

Résumé

Là où il s’agit des rencontres entre la culture, la politique et la littérature, le Canada se prête à une multitude de lectures, d’interprétations et de (ré)articulations identitaires. Notre article se propose d’étudier les mécanismes d’articulation et de support créatif par lesquels une voix représentée comme étant ethnique et amalgamée peut être incorporée dans le « tissu » littéraire de « l’espace canadien ». L’analyse se structure autour de la poétique épistolaire de l’artiste canadien d’origine japonaise Roy Kiyooka, telle qu’elle se reflète dans les sélections du volume intitulé « Pacific Rim Letters ». Le travail met l’accent d’un côté sur l’identification de certains éléments structurants tels l’ethnicité, la représentation et la visibilité et, d’autre côté, sur l’analyse de la façon dont l’artiste revendique ces éléments pour articuler ses propres créations littéraires, dans le but de s’intégrer dans l’histoire culturelle canadienne.

Canadian reality is so multi-faceted that, if an attempt is to be made to encompass it with one single term, the notion of *mosaic* is what most readily comes to mind. Culture, history and geography, politics and economy, art and literature all play a part in the articulation of Canada’s constantly shifting identity. What, then, are the mechanisms by which a hyphenated creative voice inscribes itself on the literary canvas of the national space to which it belongs by birth, but which represents it as racialized? A definite answer could hardly be given, as individual artistic consciousnesses and the cultural framework within which they create inevitably dictate different sets of tools for dealing with the inherent tension of a hyphenated identity. In the articulation of his literary creations, for instance, Japanese Canadian artist Roy Kiyooka negotiates ethnicity, visibility and representation (primarily cultural and political) as structuring elements for his poetic consciousness, as well as personal identity. Working with selections



from Kiyooka's *Pacific Rim Letters*, this article will follow the manner in which these elements are employed to create a personal artistic identity and, ultimately, a unique place in the tapestry of the Canadian literature.

As Ernest Gellner suggests in *Nations and Nationalism*, the modern nation is defined by a linear progress that strives to assimilate or, more specifically, to erase difference, in the attempt to create “equalized citizens with a new history free from the past” (Gellner 21). This effort to eradicate necessarily constructs its object of destruction: the other posed as a threat to the nation. Settler societies in particular have repeatedly marked certain peoples within their national borders as “racially other” from the point of view of a dominant order. The discursively attributed “racial” difference is rejected as a result of the nation's displaced anxiety regarding the violence that lies at its very foundation and which the nation employs in order to preserve its unitary existence. Thus, while the nation attempts to repress the knowledge of its violent nature, the presence of those marked as racially different confronts and evokes anxiety about what the nation has repressed. In reaction, the nation displaces its anxiety back onto the racialized others (cf. McAllister 83).

Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans, then, have been perfect examples of racialized others who could not shed the visible marks of their difference. In the heyday of Asian immigration to North America, several thousand Japanese settled on Canada's west coast, which offered living conditions similar to those of the homeland they had left behind in their search for prosperity and freedom. And since no federal constraint limited the right to naturalization of Asian immigrants in Canada, the majority of these hard-working immigrants became naturalized Canadian citizens. However, neither they, nor their Canadian-born children could vote in British Columbia, the province where more than 90% of the Canadian Nikkei resided. In fact, until 1949, the Canadian nation officially regarded the “Japanese” as unassimilable. In consequence, public authorities and institutions worked to symbolically and physically write Japanese Canadians, along with other racialized groups – most notably the people of the First Nations – out of the Canadian nation. Until the redress movement in the late 1970s, the economic and social contributions of Japanese Canadians to the development of Canada, their mass uprooting, their forced internment during WWII and their exile were excluded from the public sphere. Ian Mackenzie's 1945 exhortation (“Let our slogan be for British Columbia... No Japs from the Rockies to the sea”) undoubtedly fueled the efforts to physically get rid of the Japanese Canadians. The epitome of these attempts was the solution envisioned by the government after Japan's defeat in 1945: a programme of forced resettlement across the country and the “repatriation” to Japan of over 10,000 Japanese Canadians. Those “repatriated” were at the same time signaled out as disloyal. Loyalty and disloyalty were determined based on the choice between resettlement and repatriation. The Nikkei who chose resettlement east of the Rockies were loyal; those who opted for repatriation to Japan were not. That the majority of these repatriates had a perception of themselves that belied their public perception as “enemy aliens” is tellingly exemplified in the documentary *Minoru: Memory of Exile*, when Minoru Fukushima reflects on the offer made by Canada to Japanese Canadian men in Japan to join the United Nations' army in Korea:



I must have wondered, you know, how come they forced us to Japan, and now they were recruiting us to fight. I mean, Canada only ever saw me as Japanese, but *I'd always been a Canadian* (emphasis added).

The expulsion of Japanese Canadians (and Japanese Americans) from the spaces they recognized as home is paramount in the process of their othering. They were inscribed with alterity not only from the point of view of the dominant group, but also in their own articulations of identity. As Canadians and Americans exiled upon their own land, they became others to themselves. Nevertheless, the manner in which they negotiated this attributed alterity made possible a certain degree of agency. By providing alternate narrative accounts of their individual and group experiences (either in documentaries, oral and written histories or fictions), the Japanese Canadians (and Japanese Americans) deconstructed the received, official history, and thus positioned themselves as what Michèle le Doeuff calls “minority subjects in struggle and resistance” (Le Doeuff 101). By drawing on the community, they resisted becoming passive others; they “answer[ed] back and retain[ed] independence in relation to the dominator’s viewpoint” (McAllister 83). Through community they identify with a “we” that offers them the power of resistance:

Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil ... We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spiders’ legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. Where do we come from Obasan? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt. (Kogawa 248)

Roy Kenzie Kiyooka – the Japanese North Americano

The telling of those “untold tales” can be accomplished through such means like political and social activism, literary narratives and artistic manifestations. For the artist in Roy Kenzie Kiyooka, the latter represent the most adequate tools through which he can give voice to the hyphenated pulse of his community. As a Nisei (2nd generation) Japanese Canadian, born to hard-working Japanese immigrants on the West coast of Canada, Kiyooka inevitably experienced the effects of the racism that dominated the society of his time. Fingerprinted and registered as “enemy alien,” he spent part of his youth, between the ages of 17 and 22, working on farms and in a fish processor for 45 cents/hour in a fishing camp in the Northwest Territories. Still, the five years of hardships which marked Kiyooka came to be integrated in his artistic consciousness as a vital component of his personal self, “a part of my own mythology” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 26).



Kiyooka's life, as well as his intellectual and political views, was indelibly shaped by his Japanese heritage. Not only does he define his identity as Japanese North Americano, his art and writings thematically and structurally reflect this overarching identification. Kiyooka's consciousness seems to pulsate in both English and Japanese, he belongs to both (and neither) in various degrees: "I feel the very pulse of my thots in a North American/West Coast dialect of the English language with all its tenacious Indo-European roots. Now, concomitant with this recognition is the feeling that, when I am most bereft, it's the nameless Jap in me who sings an unsolicited haiku in voluntary confinement" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 109). As a consequence of this internal duality, Kiyooka declares himself to be "more interested in dis-course" rather than in being integrated in the standard canonical view, he aims to be "better hoarse and heard than a slot machine poet et cetera" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 12). Similarly, despite recognizing the importance of social and political activism in the articulation of a community, he rejects its limitations and refuses to be contained to one area of activity. Art with all its diversity (painting, photography, literature, music) is his preferred territory, the instrument he chooses in order to embed himself and his community into the Canadian fabric. In his own words,

I am on the side of those who hold to the minority view that we have to attend to our own pulse and extend our own tenacities... It's right here that 'art' (in any tongue) can and does get into the act... everybody is a bona fide member and an activist (each in their own way) in the ongoing histrionics of a given culture. Everybody's 'bearing' is, in that sense, equal and we N.A. Asians ought to act forthrightly on our own behalf. We shall remain vigilant if we are to insert ourselves in to the W.A.S.P. scheme of things, albeit their histories" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 110).

Kiyooka's *Pacific Rim Letters*

*"Dear Correspondent/s ... if I tell you
its all for the sake of the 'I'/ME'/WE'
revealed in and thru the litter-
will you believe in my good intensions?"*

(Kiyooka, *Transcanada* 355)

Acting for himself and on behalf of his community is precisely what the Nikkei artist does when he sets off to compose two "books of letters." Considering that letters possess a certain immediacy – "some kind of space whereby the actual occasions of one's lived life from day to day can be given a relevance at that time in one's life, rather than in the future" (Gilbert 12) – and confer a more encompassing power of expression – "[they] enabled me to speak at levels my poems left out" (Gilbert 12), – Kiyooka seeks to piece together fragments of life seen as essential. The epistolary snapshots are meant not only to capture the idiosyncrasies of personal existence by "snapping pictures of the Here and Now," but also to act as an original contribution to "The Big Book of Narrative Voices of the Pacific Rim Nations" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 252).

As Kiyooka had no "scruples abt literary properties and want[ed] to keep some sort of a record of [his] own thots viz letters," it was his accustomed practice to copy all missives, including those that remained unmailed. And it is those letters, "re-read/ alter'd/ a-mended/



and re-written” (Kiyooka, *Transcanada* 355), that provided the material for both *Transcanada Letters* and *Pacific Rim Letters*. Comprising 300 missives composed in the nine-year period between 1976 and 1985 and sent to a variety of addressees, including the artist himself, *Pacific Rim Letters* is structurally connected to its predecessor. It begins in the same place and time where the earlier “Book of Letters” (Kiyooka, *Transcanada* 356) had left off – in the town of Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, on April 15, 1975 – and ends with another letter to the Canada Council, in similar vein to the 1966 report opening *Transcanada Letters*. Most significant, however, is the fact that Kiyooka’s memories of discovering himself an unwelcome “Jap” at the age of 17 are inscribed in the *Pacific Rim Letters* in different ways, but never overtly. Averse to a perpetual “moanin’ of the old ‘yellow peril’” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 109), his artistic consciousness seeks to transfigure both ethnicity and life experiences into inspirational sources for creative manifestations. There are very few references to the traumatic experiences in both books of letters, which is not to say that either Kiyooka or the community has transcended their effect, or that the past is resolved and closed. On the contrary, just like in Sakamoto’s *Electrical Field*, the volume’s letters invoke Kiyooka’s personal history and the history of the Japanese Canadian community precisely through what they elide, indicating that the effects of traumatic history are never transitory.

With the introduction to the book taking itself the form of a letter and serving as ars poetica, *Pacific Rim Letters* is envisioned as “a biography of self cast upon / the study wall”:

...the dated letters: enfold blocks
 of other writings, obsessions, truculent
 thoughts from other contexts to bear
 in upon callit a weaving/wavering narrative
 (Kiyooka, *Pacific*, Introduction)

“Weaving” and “wavering” is indeed how the volume could be described. With Kiyooka, even the letters lose fixity of shape and intent, becoming flexible and shifting, merely “an attempt to create a form” (Gilbert 12). As Kambourelli points out, by taking place at the fine line between the personal and the public, the act of letter-writing is ultimately transformed into a performative gesture: the initial recipients seem to translate into present-day reader-addressees, who are themselves manifestations of the audience imagined by Kiyooka from the very beginning. In this process of exchanging letters, the letters – the admitted intent of which goes beyond mere communication and publication – gain new meanings and correspondences, “are transfigured ..., become othered to themselves” (Kambourelli qtd. in Kiyooka, *Pacific* 332).

Weary of what he calls disembodied art, that is “art without an actual community,” the Nikkei artist articulates his literary creations – not only the poems, but the letters as well – by (re-)claiming and incorporating dimensions like ethnicity, representation (primarily cultural and political) and language, which ultimately also work to inscribe Kiyooka on the Canadian cultural landscape.

Sound and silence: language between 'mother tongue' and 'father tongue'

34 “How many Languages does an Artist speak without saying anything?” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 286). Be it English or Japanese, the language of words proves repeatedly incomplete to the Nisei artist – it is nothing but “language-babble,” “a fool’s fruit” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 298). Although acknowledged as an indivisible part of the person, the uttered word still fails to communicate the most intimate part of the being. So unlike the actual communication of art, which “you can walk away with” and ideally “doesn’t need to go through an artifice to be something” (Gilbert 13).

If life had pushed him on a different path when he was younger, Kiyooka could have mastered Japanese as much as English. As it was, he only minimally acquired an old-fashioned brand of Japanese “shaped towards the end of the Meiji era and the beginning of the Taisho” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 108) and learnt most of his English on the streets of East Calgary, in a colourful ghetto made up of Jews, Hungarians, Chinese, East Indians and Native Indians. The rest he perfected through self-education and under the modernist influence of poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley (cf. Kambourelli qtd. in Kiyooka, *Pacific* 339). Nonetheless, given his fragmented personal mythology, Kiyooka confesses to an uneasy relationship with the English language. Of his own admission, he writes as “a white anglo saxon protestant with a cleft tongue” (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 107). His language is punctured by fissures; it is an “inglish” that repeatedly astounds readers and leaves them wondering whether the slips and inadvertencies are intentional or accidental. The artist punctuates his sentences unconventionally, abbreviates words and names on a whim, uses (or does not use) capitalization in an equally haphazard manner and repeatedly employs unconventional syntax. As Smaro Kambourelli notes, Kiyooka’s writing inconsistencies mark, on the one hand, the fact that he grew up “athwarted”: “You are of it [the dominant culture], and you are not, and you know that very clearly” (qtd. in Kiyooka, *Pacific* 339) On the other hand, his “inglish” is also the result of his effort to forge an individual linguistic style as the instrument of power, a language that would allow him to be present in the world as himself. Kiyooka, in fact, vacillates between an almost organic attachment to Japanese as a mother-tongue and English as the acquired language. Although dated (“my own brand of Japanese is previous to both the 2nd WW and television”) and lacking the power of meaningful communication (“I didn’t have enough of a handle on my mother tongue to tell them that all the Japanese I know had been distilled in me by the time I was six or seven...What has been grafted on down thru the years...rudimentary”), Japanese is invested with emotional value as the nostalgic container of a unified identity that can never be fully grasped – geographical and cultural displacement has rendered it forever partial. Kiyooka actually takes the notion of mother tongue in its most basic meaning, so that Japanese becomes the language not only passed down by his mother, but actually absorbed from the mother’s body while feeding and therefore permanently inscribed on his being:

my mother gave me my first language, a language I began to acquire even as I suckled on her breast... Need I say that she couldn’t save me from that fate. But I have seen a look on her face that told me she understood (wordlessly...) the ardour of all *such displacement*. Thus it is that I always speak Japa-



nese when I go home to visit her. More than that, I can, for the time being, become *almost Japanese*. I realize that it's one of the deepest 'ties' I have in my whole life" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 109, emphasis added).

If the mother tongue is passed down through the bodily connection between mother and son, the father tongue is marked by cadences of silence that impress equally strongly on Kiyooka's consciousness. Silence is overlapped with the quiet, unsurly figure of the father, "him who planted the tree-of-silences inside of me" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 110). One could even surmise that Kiyooka's poems – notable for what they leave out – stem from these very "trees-of-silence," which also seem to translate into the real world in the shape of the author's beloved pear tree, in the shade of which he loved to write. Drawn, "like the typical Asian immigrant of his day," by "tall tales of a N.A. ... [as] a mythical wilderness surmounted by a tall gold mountain and a handful of Indians," the artist's Japanese father takes pride in being able "to shape a mask for the Asian in himself and to speak thru by learning to read, write, and speak a no-nonsense English." Still, despite such adaptability, he communicates himself most profoundly through silences, which become "the measure of all that remains unconditioned" in life (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 109). In Kiyooka's case, however, the "flesh bears / the 'sounds' as well as the 'colours' of / more than a given language" (*Pacific* 44), so that the consciousness becomes inevitably hyphenated.

Language and sound are equated for the Nikkei artist with literature, with the impetus to write, that usually grips him in the cold seasons. Silence, "the hard-won language of familial testament," on the other hand, is symbolically equated with painting and photography, which are most frequently done in the green and warm seasons of spring and summer. If under the "60 watt [of an] incandescent light bulb" as the "writing sun," the artist surrenders to the impulse to "heap stones on sheets of paper" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 5), under "a March sun" words seem to become redundant and even tyrannical.

Art and ethnic representation

Never an adherent to "the notion of an utter specialism" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 111) in either life or art, Roy Kenzie Kiyooka repeatedly moved between art forms just like he frequently travelled between the east and west coasts of his Canadian homeland, or between Canada and Japan. Be it poetry, letter writing, painting, sculpting, photography, music or filmmaking, everything amalgamated into the flexible persona of the artist as "a permeable thing caught up in the penumbra of time" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 6). Multitalented, polyvalent, multi-disciplinary can all be used to describe the artist Kiyooka. But most importantly, through his artistic practices, Kiyooka eluded categorization – both in terms of facilely labelling the products of his artistic endeavours and in terms of the art forms (and literary genres) that an ethnically represented artistic consciousness would approach. Working with the knowledge that "the typical Canadian artist is as marginalized as ever" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 24), and possessing a deep awareness of his ethnic background, he persistently created art as a means of moving beyond the double marginalization: the social and political marginalization of the Japanese Canadian as ethnic



and the relegation of the artist's persona to the margins of the Canadian culturescape. In Kiyooka's view, in spite of significant financial investments in culture, "the average kanuck is culturally poor as a protestant church mouse" (*Pacific* 24). Influential and inspirational, a teacher, as the musician Minoru Sumimoto experienced him, "one of the most articulate people... articulate not just about the visible world, but the invisible world," as writer Michael Ondaatje remembers him (qtd. in F. Kiyooka), the Nikkei artist not only made art, he lived it – "the sometimes 'mean' even scurrilous life of an obsessed artist" (Kiyooka, *Pacific* 6). Art seems to have furnished Kiyooka with a language that was fissure-free, so unlike the "language-babble" of English and Japanese, in which the artist never managed to feel fully at home. Precisely through its refusal to be placed, pigeonholed, Kiyooka's multidisciplinary art provided him with a rich tool for leaving his own indelible imprint on the multicultural Canadian canvas. The escape from categorization was not, however, the result of a studied, conscious effort, but rather stemmed from an emanation of Kiyooka's intrinsically artistic consciousness. Consequently, the stunning acknowledgement that "everything that I have done in art, I have never known what I was doing" (qtd. in F. Kiyooka) reveals how much Kiyooka's relationship with art was marked by abandonments and returns to creative projects.

Placing himself at the intersection of "polis" and "eros" with art, Kiyooka's artistic creations speak as much to the present as to the future, and inevitably contain and reflect community. The diversity of his art is his greatest contribution to "The Big Book" of Canada. His hyphenated consciousness and repeated crossing from art form to art form are ultimately no less Canadian.

Works cited

- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. 2nd ed. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008. Print.
- Gilbert, Gerry. "Laughter: For Conversations with Roy Kiyooka." *Artscanada* 202/203 (Winter 1975–76). Web. 24 Nov. 2012.
- Kiyooka, Fumiko. *REED: the life and works of Roy Kiyooka*. 2012. Video. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.
- Kiyooka, Roy. *Transcanada Letters*. Edmonton: NeWest Publishers Ltd. 2005. Print.
- . *Pacific Rim Letters*. Edmonton: NeWest Publishers Ltd., Oct. 2004/Spring 2005. Print.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983. Print.
- Le Doeuff, Michèle. *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* New York: Columbia University Press. 2007. Print.
- McAllister, Emiko Kirsten. "Narrating Japanese Canadians In and Out of the Canadian Nation: A Critique of Realist Forms of Representation." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 24 (1 Jan. 1999). Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

