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### Commuting to Tokyo with Marco Polo: Disorientalism Revisited

The Britannica Concise Encyclopedia describes the city of my youth as follows:

Fukuoka

City (pop., 2000 prelim.: 1,341,489) and port, JAPAN. It incorporates the former city of Hakata and is located on the southern coast of Hakata Bay. An ancient port, it was the scene of attempted invasions by Kublai Khan in the 13th century. It is now a regional, commercial, industrial, administrative, and cultural centre. It contains an active fishing port and is the site of Kyushu University (1911). *Hakata ningyo*, elaborately costumed ceramic figurines found in most Japanese homes, are made there.

Nothing in this description is false. I know Fukuoka well; yet, I really don't know this city. The entry on Hakata ningyo perplexes me. This could perfectly be replaced with any of the following items:

Hakata obi, densely woven silken sash with thick warps and thin wefts found in most Japanese kimono dressers' homes in Japan, are made there.

Hakata niwaka, punny comedy skits performed at festivities by classically costumed comics with eye masks, are performed there.

Hakata ramen, thin noodles served in some pork-based rich white soup, eaten by most Japanese people, are made there.

Etc., etc.

Can one speak of a city without living there? Or even without visiting there? How open can a city be to our shared vision? Can Kublai Khan as well as the Britannica claim Fukuoka? How does a stranger approach a city in contrast a resident? In Souk Ukaz, whichever city we discussed, our creativity engaged with cities in two ways: recapturing the city by an acrobatic leap of imagination (Gamerro, Hvorecky, Ruy-Sánchez) or checking and reconsidering the power of our writerly imagination for a better poetic commitment to reality (Ford, Khalef, Ras).

I grew up in a bedroom suburb of Fukuoka in a nuclear family of four, moving twice in my childhood. These towns were surrounded by gentle mountains, to mark the end of my small world. I would take a train to go to school, a half-hour commute to the city.

When I was eighteen, on my way to the station to catch a train for Hakata (where ningyo dolls are made), down the shadowy slope under the deep green cherry trees on the cliff, it suddenly occurred to me, this is not my home. It wasn't that I didn't feel I belonged to the place. It was more like a mutual consent between the place and me that it does not own me. It just didn't feel like home whatever home meant. Or I didn't care much about home. I felt I was set loose.

So I was homeless at eighteen.

Not long after, I left my parents' home for Kyoto, 600 kilometers away, and since then I've lived in cities in Japan and the United States. Once Kyoto seemed almost home-like to me, but the business of Kyoto is a business of hospitality, making tourists and college students at home. Perhaps I was both. Then Milwaukee took me in. And people there were mind-boggled as to why, of all places, I chose the Cream City. They kept asking me, why Milwaukee? Why? How do you like it? Is it Okay? They seemed to suffer from a chronic case of diffidence, which went hand in hand with their pride for the city's reputation as a "best-kept secret," as if people couldn't have decided whether to hide or show off their self-esteem.

After five years in Milwaukee, I got my present teaching job in Tokyo and Yokohama and found an apartment in Kawasaki, an industrial satellite of Tokyo, 1000 kilometers away from Fukuoka. I've been getting further and further away from home.

Now I live in Yokohama, historically the outport of Tokyo and today one of its many satellite cities, a bedroom community of five million people. I commute to two campuses in Yokohama and Tokyo, both moderate commutes compared to the average salarymen in the metropolis.

Tokyo is not even a city. Tokyo ceased being a city in 1943. Tokyo as municipality does not exist. Metropolitan Tokyo, an equivalent of other prefectures in Japan, consists of the 23 central wards and 27 other cities. Altogether, the overall population exceeds 12 millions in two thousand square kilometers. Tokyo is a cluster of wards, cities of their own, connected by the snarl of public transportation extending to suburbs and satellites.

My husband once aptly remarked that Paris is a village compared to Tokyo. To put it differently, Paris is a city as much as Fez, Tripoli, Manhattan or Jerusalem... but Tokyo is something else.

Tokyo has been rebuilt thrice in the last one hundred and fifty years. The first major makeover came as the result of the Meiji Restoration and Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 flattened the capital, erasing the remains of the old Edo. Immediately after the first quake hit around the noontime, fires that started from 122 spots across the city, spread fast and burned down everything. The occasion served the authority to modernize Tokyo and to take greater control of the city planning. The first subway was introduced soon after the

earthquake.

World War II leveled the city for the second time. The Great Tokyo Air Raid of March 1945 marked the beginning of the indiscriminate bombing across Japan. In Tokyo alone, a hundred more nocturnal raids of incendiaries followed before the unconditional surrender.

The defeat was the greatest renewal the nation has ever experienced. The familiar cityscape was gone and so was people's memory.

In 2007, a film titled *Always*, a family drama set in Tokyo's downtown working-class neighborhood in the 1950s, made a big hit. *There were communities in Tokyo back then; people had good work ethics and were hopeful for the future; we were poor but we were happy*: the film depicts the era in a fantastically reminiscing way, highlighting Tokyo Tower still under construction as the core symbol of the optimism about post-war recovery. Here, the hope is a synonym for nostalgia. The 333 meter high TV tower was completed in 1958. In the following decade, the Japanese GNP doubled.

Recently, with the nation under recession, the metropolis has ironically enjoyed the benefits of centralization and accumulation of money and resources, allowing major redevelopments in the city centers. Futurist skyscrapers have been popping up and new subway lines deeper beneath the existing lines connect one exurbia to another across the metropolis.

It is not by coincidence that a fantasy replaces the popular memory even while Tokyo is going through another renovation in order to fully exploit its global brand. Tokyo's present candidacy for the 2016 Olympics is another example of selective memory: it is a comeback of the 1964 Olympics, a yearning for the imagined past that was full of hope for the future (=today). Meanwhile, we tend to forget that the 1964 Olympics was itself meant to be the revival of the original Tokyo Olympics, the 1940 games that never took place.

What's needed today is an active urban archaeology, a way to represent the city's history geographically, as layers, as accumulation, rather than as slices of time.

Nomura Kiwao is a poet traveler I met in Iowa. Wherever he is, Kiwao walks and writes, walks and writes. This rule even applies to his home Tokyo. In the poem sequence titled "Recurring Drift," the poet walks about Shibuya, the Mecca of youth and pop culture, obsessively tracing the footprints left by a group of writers and poets from a hundred years ago. A completely strange Tokyo materializes through his urban stratigraphy. He imagines a private literary history through a delirious urban topography. Kiwao is a born traveler, even at home. He proposes to us a strategy of peeling off the top layer of the palimpsest, not adding fresh scribbles but rather superimposing the past on the present grid.

Kiwao introduced me to Victor Segalen (1878-1919), who, through his poetry and prose, strived for an esoteric aesthetic bliss called "exoticism." His literary

reconstruction of Imperial Peking is not a mimesis of the city where he had spent many years of his life, but an autonomous space that only belongs to the human imagination. According to the fragmental miscellanea of his unfinished poetics, the poetry of exoticism is for “exots,” the born travelers, those who see, smell, and hear varieties in Otherness. Segalen vehemently rejects tourism and the geographic brand of exoticism, for example the novels by Pierre Loti. Exoticism is spatial as well as temporal. It is a privately imagined history whether it is set in the past or the future, always fleeing from the petty present as PDQ as possible. Yet the aesthetic sensation of exoticism does not endure. Segalen is aware that the euphoria evaporates instantaneously. Against his ongoing escape from the now, Segalen’s experience of exoticism takes place at none but the fleeing present.

The present—this is where the traveler meets the tourist. An exot wishes to reside anywhere but in the present while a tourist nowhere but in the present. They are standing back to back on the same spot.

I admire Segalen and Kiwao, but must admit that my relationship to exoticism is perverse. It often happens that a Japanese from the prefectures neighboring Tokyo misrepresents herself as from Tokyo when abroad. She was afraid you would not recognize her city, let’s say Omiya, whereas she well knows that you know, well, Tokyo! She’s not lying exactly, she tells herself, because her job or school in Tokyo defines her life. She wants to see the sparkle of recognition in the eye of her new foreign acquaintance. Ah, Tokyo, I know the city. Yes, we all know the city even if we’ve never set our foot there because Tokyo is a sign, a red dot on the map, a shadow image flickering on the giant screen over the intersection, not an actual place as long as it remains a potential destination. So many of us who live in the vicinity of Tokyo present ourselves as Tokyoites abroad, relying on the outsiders’ knowledge and ignorance. In short, we are exoticizing ourselves to fit your vision of us. We are very accommodating people.

This self-exoticism is not quite a gesture of submission; rather, we are repackaging ourselves for easier consumption, because the exotic Japan still sells (a lot!) We kindly spoon-feed our customers. We want them to guzzle up our image. And we love the sight of the gaijin consuming us.

This form of perversely xenophobic marketing screws up the national psyche; my act of writing in English, which excludes the Japanese general public from my audience, is highly suspect, too, because, at a subconscious level, I am not immune from self-promotional exoticism.

In 2005 at IWP, I presented a pseudo-manifesto called Disorientalism, partly as an attempt to undermine this subconscious. To recapitulate the concept of Disorientalism, I cannot think of any better city in the whole world than Fez, the oldest medina of the Maghreb, the city designed to disorient outsiders. In 2005, I was mainly concerned with strategies to disorient the reader. Now, having lived in

proximity to Tokyo for ten years, I feel I am the disoriented one. My question today would be: what would be the Disorientalist poetics for a resident alien?

Norman M. Klein's curious study of Los Angeles's urban development, *The History of Forgetting*, describes the city with the memory of a computer or a tourist—utterly erased every time it boots up. It is a city where “one can easily live a lifetime ... as a tourist, see mostly what the smoke sends, by way of promotion, never visit what is left out, except by way of crime movies. That is why L.A. begins to resemble a nether world” (86). In those movies, the noir “consumer folkmares,” the myths inspired by “consumer erasure,” “become less about losing place, and more about losing the ability to remember altogether—a topology of forgetfulness” (81).

If the city we commute to every day is as dystopic and nightmarish as Klein insists, then I feel that our only sensible choice would be to dream the nightmare together, to envision the life of resident tourist who repeats the same damn tour every day, forget every day, swallowed into the shapeless Tokyo that Marco Polo prophesies to Kublai Khan.

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan don't speak the same tongue at first. Marco describes cities with objects and gestures before he learns the language of Kublai Khan. Soon the two are able to exchange words in meandering dialogues, but in the end, the two find words insufficient and fall back to gestures and silences, as a means of communication, in which the cities Marco visited become their shared vision, the space they dream together. Toward the end of his mute travelogue, Marco anticipates the cities that come after the age of real cities:

The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyôto-Osaka, without shape. (139)

The shapeless cities are shapeless in their various shapeless ways. Can clueless tourist-residents ever find their way in this new medina where even locals can't tell their way? Can tourists ever strike back?

William Gibson's Chiba City in *Neuromancer* is a far-eastern (or extreme-western, whichever you pick) lawless frontier of gaijin cyber cowboys. It presents itself absolutely devoid of history or geographical orientation. The knowing reader gets a kick out of the reference to Chiba a provincial city east of Tokyo, population about a million, and considering the fact that Chiba Prefecture incorporates Tokyo Disneyland and the New Tokyo International Airport, Gibson's particular pick of the locale increases its irony. In the real future, the cyber Chiba may well be renamed Nouvelle

Akihabara of Greater Neo Tokyo.

Perhaps it is not Tokyo that sprawls and encroaches on the territories of neighboring cities, but it is the surrounding suburbs that are invading Tokyo. Just like we commuters from suburbia call ourselves Tokyoites, the peripherals take over the core identity, completing its metamorphoses into a perfect simulacrum, Tokyo as a pure sign, until Tokyo vanishes.

As a Disorientalist, I always end up choosing the bad taste of tourism and bad faith of Disorientalism over the good will of Peace Corp and good taste of Exoticism. Tourism is the ticklish balance between the fantasy of happenings, and the prescribed desires of mouth and hands and eyes. My exemplary tourist is Misha Vainberg, the hapless hero of Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan*, who practices the Western counterpart of Disorientalism, the Accidentalism.

In was 1992 when I met Barbie dolls at the state department store in Irkutsk. All the shelves—absolutely every one of them—were filled with pink identical boxes. Floor after floor, we gazed at the spectacle. Talk about choices of free market economy. The sight was numbing; it was a state of climax in the ecological sense—a space taken over by a single species. The seventh-inning heaven of the pink angel battalion, the quiet feast of movable strip malls. The opening ceremony of capitalism also happened to be a funeral—thousands of identical cardboard coffins in pink in Irkutsk.

Exoticism prefers Hakata ningyo elaborately costumed ceramic figurines found in most Japanese homes and made in Fukuoka; Disorientalism will do with Barbie ningyo, gaily costumed PVC dolls found in most American homes and made in China. If tourists are inherently fake people, the cover of my fake passport says “genuine fake leather.”

Compounds of daydreams/nightmares and the actual locations, the cities according to Calvino's *Marco Polo*, Segalen's *Imperial Peking*, and Klein's *noir City of Angeles*—their existences are purely cerebral, found only inside our skulls. The cityscapes evaporate city after city, page by page, as we read on. Only the afterdream sensation remains, and Coleridge named this evanescent vision “Kubla Khan,” the alien invader of Fukuoka, who finds himself foreign through *Marco Polo*. Who is to tell the Xanadu Coleridge dreamt wasn't the shapeless City of touristy Barbie Angels?