

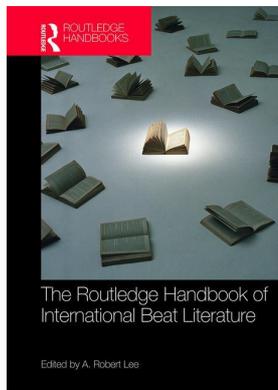
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature

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Beat Japan

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-22>

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Published online on: 16 May 2018

How to cite :- A. Robert Lee. 16 May 2018, *Beat Japan from: The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature* Routledge

Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-22>

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22

BEAT JAPAN

Shiraishi's Jazz Scroll and Sakaki's Foot Trail

A. Robert Lee

Kazuko Shiraishi is the Allen Ginsberg of Japan.
Donald Keene (1975)¹

Nanao Sakaki's poems and presence are known from Tokyo to Amsterdam, New York to London, Maine to San Francisco. He also lives and works—completely at home—in the mountains of Taos, in the deserts of the lower Rio Grande, in pine forests of the Sierra Nevada, the subtropical islands of the Ryukyu archipelago, the chilly spruce woods of Hokkaido, the narrow valleys of Kyoto, and the ten thousand bars maze of Shinjuku, Tokyo. He is one of the truly cosmopolitan poets to emerge from Japan, but the sources of his thought and inspiration are older than east and west. And newer.

Snyder 1996: xi

Beat Entrance

Clad in multicolor outfit with flying-saucer hat a typical reading has Kazuko Shiraishi, now well into her eighties (born 1931), unfurling her poetry scroll and whether in Japanese or English reading to jazz accompaniment. For his part, clad in hiker-gear, anorak and boots, full-bearded, wiry, and with his maps and neatly loaded backpack, Nanao Sakaki (1923–2008) spends a lifetime walking not only the length of Japan and its forests (which he did no less than four times) but different swathes of the US, Australia, Europe, and other Asia. The two of them, more than any other Japanese authors, give grounds for speaking of Beat Japan. Within the necessary wealth of their own culture's traditions and from the country's World War II surrender aboard the USS *Missouri* in September 1945 well into the twenty-first century, both would win countercultural celebrity. In the search for alternatives to the busy but grey reconstruction of war-defeated Japan, accordingly, they were early to be cast as literary black sheep, controversial, on occasion shock-horror voices from Japan's supposed margin. Beat may not be the total profile in either case, especially as their work evolves over time, but it plays a greatly important pointer in understanding their role in the making of modern Japanese literature.

The post-war Japan dominated by political conservatism, corporation economics, and a conformist family and education regime, might almost have been predicted to create anti-bodies. So it did. Fiction confirmed the signs in Beat-flecked novels like Kaoru Shoji's *Akazukin-chan Ki Wo Tsukete/Be Careful Little Red Riding Hood* (1969) and Ryu Murakami's *Kagirinaku Tomei ni Chikai Buru/Almost Transparent Blue* (1977). A yet greater impact was created by Haruki Murakami's 1960s-centered *Noruei No Mori/Norwegian Wood* (1987) with its Beatles title and panorama of alienated

Japanese generational life after the war. Terayama Shūji also offers a sightline, an experimentalist in cinema as in theater, poetry, and other literary arts. His achievements are especially to be met in his indie debut film, *Throw Away Your Books/ Rally in the Streets* (1971), which frames its critique of yen consumerism within Beat-like visual and musical experimental flourishes.² None of these, quite evidently, carries some fully paid-up western Beat imprimatur. But they share the same cultural albeit transnational vicinity, a counter-Japan to defy consensus.

In the cases of Shiraishi and Sakaki the connection to Beat is fairly explicit. Throughout the 1960s, and then beyond, Shiraishi enjoyed a friendship with Allen Ginsberg, and Sakaki with Snyder, with any amount of further shared encounters and crossways. There were the frequent co-readings, Tokyo or Kyoto, but also outside Japan. If Shiraishi links to Beat through her jazz as much as her poetry interests, Beat linkage for Sakaki especially includes his visitations to Boulder's Naropa Institute at the behest of Anne Waldman and other sponsoring colleagues. But however either took to Beat, that hardly meant abandonment of Japan's own wealth of tradition.³ Their Beat-ness, however silhouetted in their work, needs always, inextricably, to be situated within Japan's own cultural stylings.

Both, wholly to their own manner, echo Buddhism, whether Zen or Mahayana/Pure Land. One hears *kabuki* in their verse, not to mention the *haiku* and *tanka* legacies of Bashō, Buson, and Issa or the eroticism of *shunga*. At the same time their work equally signals modernism, not to say postmodernism, and its discontents. "Shiraishi found a way to create abstract art in her poetry" runs the shrewd assessment of Samuel Grolmes and Yumiko Tsumura in their Introduction to *Let Those Who Appear* (2002: vii). Sakaki as "post-modern wandering troubadour poet," writes Stephen Kuusisto, combats even as he ironically and reflexively invokes a world "increasingly negotiated by televisions, satellites, and 'spokespersons.'"⁴ Their embrace of un-ceremony and spontaneity, and their language of drop-out or popular-culture, sexual and other dissidence, has on occasion led to "respectable" Japanese rebuke. But they both have held their ground. If, indeed, Shiraishi and Sakaki make for Beat's Japan, then quite as equally, they make for Japan's Beat.

Beat authorship may well have been largely a US and Western project. But Japan, like China, India, Korea, and Tibet, have from the outset fed into the reckoning, whether a sense of place, spirituality, or lifestyle. Kenneth Rexroth's anthology, *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese* (1955), gave influential literary longitudes and latitudes, an English-language lineage to Japan's verse accomplishments. Gary Snyder, Zen practitioner as well as poet, environmentalist, and frequent temple resident and visitor in Kyoto, brings not only his own work but that of luminaries like D. T. Suzuki—notably his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927–34) and *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959) to the attention of Ginsberg and others.

Other well enough known Japanese seams have been much reflected in Beat art, never least by Kerouac in his exploration of the concept of *satori* and related Buddhist concepts of reality, in both *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Mexico City Blues* (1959). Allen Ginsberg draws greatly from Zen in "Howl" (1956) as Beat's signature anthem and "Kaddish," as memorial to his psychologically fissured mother Naomi. Joanne Kyger reprises her time with Snyder at the Daitokuji monastery in Kyoto in *The Japan and Indian Journals 1960–64* (1981). Bob Kaufman, much influenced by Japanese disciplines of self-abnegation, takes his ten-year vow of silence in the light of John F. Kennedy's assassination, and looks to Zen legacy throughout his poetry from *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (1965) through to *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1965–1978* (1981). Anne Waldman filters Japan's Zen alongside tantric Indian and other subtexts into her seminal pattern poem, "Fast Speaking Woman."

In however relative a way Beat finds itself if not exactly paralleled, then near-paralleled, within Japanese coordinates. But it needs also to be seen as part of the wider bandwidth of Japan's post-war countercultural activity, whether text, film, music, theater, or popular culture through to *manga* and *anime*. Cultural fusion and refashioning, Japanese and Western, has taken a number of key directions. The Japanese venture into surrealism justifiably looks to, say, the disjunctive human figurations in the painting of Tetsuya Ishida (1973–2005). Dada loops into Zen in the poetry of Shinkichi Takahashi, notably *Triumph of the Sparrow* (Lucien Stryk translation, 1986). Narrative fiction takes its

postmodern/magic realist turn in Haruki Murakami's *Umibe no Kafuka/Kafka on the Shore* (2002), the lives of its teenage runaway Kafka Tamura and the war-damaged simpleton Nakata told in often fantastical spirals.

In Shiraishi's case, and in the aftermath of the bizzarerie and wordplay of *Tamago No Furu Machi/Falling Egg City* (1951), the subsequent *Seinaru Inja No Kisetsu/ Seasons of Sacred Lust* (1970, rep. 1978) undoubtedly give off a more discernible Beat patina. Time and again the footfalls make themselves felt: Beat as though traces, wisps, the one or another echo. Those coming to her work with minimal or no Japanese, and albeit that she occasionally has written in English, have the good fortune of translations either wholly fashioned or at least polished by poets to include Rexroth and Ginsberg, together with a Japanese and Japanophile consortium of John Solt, Ikuko Atsumi, Carol Tinker, Yasuyo Morita, Samuel Grolmes, Yumiko Tsumura, Tetsuya Taguchi, Roger Pulvers, John Evans, and Katsuya Hiromoto.⁵ In the case of Sakaki the hallmarks pointing towards Beat were discernible from the time he made his bow with the pamphlet *Bellyfulls* (1966; written 1961) and would continue through to his best-known collections *Break the Mirror* (1987), *Let's Eat Stars* (1997) and *Inch by Inch: 45 Haiku by Issa* (1999). He wrote mainly first in Japanese, then with help, translated most of his writings into English—though occasionally he did preliminary drafts in English.

The poetry of both Shiraishi and Sakaki assuredly refracts different lives and genders, perceptions of the world in two different registers of idiom. Furthermore, one meets not Greenwich Village or North Beach but Harajuku or Okinawa, a Japan taken up not only with its own geographies but its own impulses of non-conformity and counter-voice. Yet given the manifest differences between them, and whether in the original Japanese or in the transition from Japanese into English, Beat in Japan—and again Japan in Beat—can be said to know no stronger presences than either Shiraishi or Sakaki.

Kazuko Shiraishi

The designations, and increasingly the accolades, began early. Ginsberg, no doubt wryly, liked to speak of Shiraishi as his “Japanese wife” (she was the arranger of his 1998 tour). In truth she hardly needed any kind of marital hyphen, fully possessed of her own self-identity and fully centered in her own poetry and performance art. Her Vancouver birth, childhood in Tokyo, and education at Waseda Daigaku (Waseda University) all serve as prelude to the more than twenty collections that, among other awards, led to the prestigious Yomiuri Literature Award, the Takami Jun Poetry Award and the Emperor's *shijuhosho* or Purple Ribbon Medal. Her debut, at twenty, with *Tamago No Furu Machi/Falling Egg City* made clear that she was a poet of gamesome, indeed surreal, invention as befits a poet with interests in Dalí, Miró and Gaudí, along with Dylan Thomas, Kafka, any number of Latin America's magic realists, and as far as sexual content went her readings of Henry Miller. The frequent mixed media readings, whether in clubs, festivals or the campus, grew into legend.

Equally notorious have been her celebrated parties, the dance-till-dawn jazz and nightclub outings in Shibuya and Roppongi, and her affiliation with the Tokyo-based avant-garde visual arts and magazine group VOU under the inspirational leadership of the poet, photographer, and Ezra Pound correspondent and friend Katsue Kitasono (1901–1978).⁶ Yoko Ono would be a fellow affiliate. Shiraishi has performed and recorded her poetry with a wide range of jazz and blues musicians, among them Sam Rivers, Leo Smith, Itaru Oki, John Handy, Abby Lincoln, David McKay, Frank Morgan, Nobuyoshi Ino, and Kazutoki Umezu. It cannot surprise that Anne Waldman, among others, heralds her “exclamations of fierce energy and playfulness.”⁷

If, in addition, she acquired a domestic reputation in the making of 1950s–1960s alternative Tokyo, full of willingness to take the creative chance and act as a singular antidote to the city's contrary mix of neon consumer glitz and office grey, she has also been nothing if not the internationalist. She has read at UNESCO-sponsored gatherings and at a host of East–West festivals from Tokyo to Rotterdam and from San Francisco to Milan as well as in Asian venues in South Korea, Bangladesh,

and Indonesia. That, on several occasions, put her alongside not only Ginsberg but the likes of Andrei Voznesensky, Václav Havel, and Yehuda Amichai. The publication of her work by New Directions, much under the auspices of Kenneth Rexroth, has led to regular stints in Manhattan. Yet, amid the bravura, and the travels, her loadstone was, and still continues to be, the poetry. Beat and its seams, however approximate, find frequent space in her work. It is in this respect that *Seasons of Sacred Lust*, the most “Beat” of her poetry collections, does immediate service.

“My Tokyo” takes ironic, abundantly capricious, aim at a city world seen in the aftermath of massive reconstruction of the 1950s/1960s as though confined in concrete, an office and suburb wasteland largely lost to the creative human spirit. The opening stanza nicely inverts Buddha piety, a shy in due slang phrasing at Tokyo’s power to inhibit:

I’m like Buddha
 At last I’ve settled down on this town
 October’s knocked me up
 With boredom

Shiraishi 1970: 23

The speaking voice turns to “ravenous America” as contrast. A friend in New York paces her loft “nude...hysterically vivacious.” There are couplings, kisses, beer, squeals, all as against “My glum October/Hung over in sullen concrete” (23). The images augment into surrealist riffs as “chaos” prevails (24). The “phony tears of fake people” become “smelly sardines.” (23). The “flesh” of the speaker’s “interior city” is to be thought to subvert the “ghost” of the metropolis (25). The poet retreats “into my interior canal” and conjures up Egypt’s eighteenth dynasty pharaoh Amenhotep, whom she thinks a sexual partner across time. He has “nowadays” transformed into a “bus conductor/ A butcher/A racing driver/A poet/A Revolutionary/And so on” (24). The poem remembers Max Roach’s exquisite drumming, “a lyrical accusation” (25). “The city that’s almost a womb” is to be compared with the gyrations of the “stunning” black lesbian go-go dancer Sandra, “a black madonna.” (26). Only in “poetry and art” (23), writes Shiraishi, lies redemptive counter-action.

A lively recent sexual encounter is summoned (“Let’s dive beneath the sheets” [26]). The “music” of her senses with its unabashed genital references, whether penises or “my tail thrashing as furiously as a crocodile of hatred” (27), chafes against the autumnal “October to November” of feeling. Little wonder, perhaps, that Shiraishi would come to be known as “Japan’s penis poet,” much as eventually she came to resent the label. “The spider almost got me” she complains (27) as though the fly caught in the urban web. She speaks of wanting to “bury my city completely” (27) and “my hot will in the ashes” (27). “A fog of foreboding” (28) has descended, a cloud or seal against individual passion. The vision at hand, albeit “momentary,” is said to be that of “an exhausted pilgrim” (28).

In summary this is the self burdened within the dead metropolis, yet vitally and inventively resistant:

My city is
 Now far distant
 It struggles close to the stranger’s face
 Its head dropping on its concrete neck (28)

The playful imagining is set against the city’s own un-imagining, the creative senses at odds with lack-luster surrounds. Tokyo and New York, in the poem’s landscape, make necessary polarities, the former a city of uniformity as against Manhattan’s vibrant multiplicity. In writing disengagement, however, Shiraishi keeps her voice, and its galleries of imagery, quite wholly engaging, Japan’s capital city seen and contested to her own kind of Beat measure.

“My Tokyo” brackets perfectly with “My America,” also a mainstay of *Seasons of Sacred Lust*. The opening stanza might be talking blues, a half-whimsical love chant and plaint almost the literary kin of Ginsberg’s “America”:

You've got me on the line
But baby I want to see you
Thinking won't help
It isn't politics on my mind
It's my baby
My darling darling America
Shiraishi 1970: 19

The poem moves from would-be flirtation (“So you’re called America? [19]) to mock sex-talk (“So good in bed/I like the inside of your thigh/your tough elegant penis” [19]), speaker and spoken joined in a tryst and “after the late show” lovemaking (19). The action continues into morning-after familiarity, an America full of nighttime sexual appetite and then as it were breakfast and the day-to-follow. It makes beckoning fare, a wry-ironic prompt to attention. This America, moreover, is hooked on capitalism’s market promise, dreaming Big Bucks at the horse races and forever “dying to make an American million” (20). For it is an America also of “Egoism,” “Money lust,” “Optimism,” as though the spoiled gambler inveterately holding its betting slip. Shiraishi keeps the trope persuasive, tactically pitched.

A shift of scene takes the poet “and my old man” (20) to North Dakota and to a locale “Smaller than Harajuku” (20) with its “henhouse airport” (20), and from there aboard the night train, to the blues city of Chicago. This next America is Lou Rawls crooning “Stormy Monday” but in a nice twist “on Friday,” the windy city but a “womb station/Enormous, crummy, decrepit” (20). America too, has become tough-guy Hollywood with cancer (“You only call hippies gentle these days” [21]) and as unrefined as “cheesecake” (22). So a species of reprimand is needed: get over puritan alarms at homosexuality, promote “education, culture, art galleries, museums” (22), and with an eye to the heat of dollar over all else, “baste with honey your infernal barbecue” (22).

These upbraidings, so to speak, are offered fondly and with love, and point the way to a closing stanza that revels in blues and “private” and “soul food” vernacular America:

Hey stranger –
So you’re called America?
You, glittering, nameless
My private custom-made America
Not processed, as fresh and sweet to me
As soul food
Spending a little time together
Soul time
Baby,
Keep your eye on the snake
But give me a kiss
Goodnight (22)

The open line, the easeful flirtation of voice, play their contributing parts. Beat? Close enough, one might say.

If any one poem in *Seasons of Sacred Lust* plies Beat, jazz, and hip into a single compositional riff, it has to be “Dedicated to the Late John Coltrane.” Comparisons immediately arise, whether to Ted Joans’s “The Wild Spirit of Kicks” written on the death of Jack Kerouac (“JK says hello to JC/John Coltrane that is!”), or Kerouac’s own Chorus 239 in *Mexico City Blues* with its tribute to Charlie Parker (“All is Well/This was what Charley (sic) Parker/Said when he played, All is well”).⁸ At the same time the poem bears all the hallmarks of Shiraishi’s “abstract art” tactics, each wholly appropriate to what in regard to Coltrane’s massive saxophone virtuosity, bebop and free jazz, she eulogizes as “the colors of your sounds” (44).

It would be hard not to be struck by the opening notice of Coltrane's demise (he died in 1967), at once synoptic and bluesy:

Suddenly
 He went to heaven
 John Coltrane
 Shiraishi 1970: 42

The tribute enlarges into Beat-surreal turns of image. "Blue rain" has fallen (42). Listeners "sit cross-legged on the richness of meaning" (42). Word of his death causes them "to weep goldily/uncontrollably in misery" (42). At his ascent through "a whole in heaven" (42) they intone *Kulu Sé Mama*, the title of one of his best-known albums, as though it were sacred litany, a funeral mass. Given Coltrane's profound commitment to spirituality, rarely more formidably expressed in word and music than "A Love Supreme" (1964), the religious terms of reference make a perfect fit.

Construing Coltrane's life as "your extremely heavy/and short pilgrimage" (43) the images aggregate into a run-on of improvisation again in line with Coltrane's music. The "spicy sweat" of forehead is invoked. The playing at times resembles "an otter's scream." His music might be cicadas crying out as though in memory (43–44). His "forty-one years," as Shiraishi sees them, embody those of an "Orange sun, African sun, American sun" (44). He inhabits a "black, soul room" in which he is "bathing" (44). Even the sun takes to diving in the music's waters on hearing "a saxophone blown by you" (44), a typical audacity of image.

Each of his solos is to be thought "a cascade of will," "blazing rain" (44–45). Coltrane so invites being imagined as having taken "giant steps/Walking through the Cosmos" (45), a John the Baptist, a Messiah, of sacramental jazz ("You met woman, son, friend, God/you met music and its Holy Spirit/Then you became the Holy Spirit/You became the music itself" [46]). Shiraishi makes her acclamation, its picturing sounds and sights, virtually a Beat palimpsest, the poem written as it were straight out of the music ("For the strong, black soul/Of Saint Coltrane/In heaven" [46]).

More or less all the other poems in *Seasons of Sacred Lust* share this Beat style of open-form line and image. "A Chinese Ulysses" turns to Homer's wanderer as the figure of modern rootlessness. "The Man Root," on the other hand, centers upon the human penis as generative organ, the means to joyous sexual connection. "Alley Rat," its name adapted to metaphoric use, speaks as though the voice of wider appropriation ("I am a thief of love, food, money, passion" [39]). "Seasons of the Sacred Sex Maniac," the collection's longest piece, turns the calendar seasons into a chart of human seasons, actual and mythic cycles of coitus and reproduction.

This same will to redemptive creativity as riposte to the fear of life reduced to routine, presses throughout Shiraishi's work. The title poem of *Burning Meditation* (1991) reads "my meditation... is red from desire" (6). In *Little Planet* (1994) "Carnivorous Plants" has its speaker saying "yesterday I passed through/insomniac planets" (89). *Sheep's Afternoon* (1997), a text and image composition (sketches by Suzanne Treister) includes a poem like "Milky Way" as a reflection on the small, enclosed human signature within time-space ("last night in Kitakami I went drinking with Kikuchi-san/we traced back 5000 years/to the Sahara's marvelous butterflies, people's lives/we spoke of bones/ and walls round houses" [np]). "I and I," in *Let Those Who Appear* (2002), ponders, with purposive line-spacing throughout, the interior dialogues of self:

"Hello, it's me! Am I there?
 "Yes, this is me"
 I get a phone call from another me
 What shall I answer me (1)

Whether or not Shiraishi enters the roster as fully registered Beat enlistee, there can be little doubting Beat's silhouette even as it combines with a life and work indisputably of her own prevailing.

Nanao Sakaki

“Who Am I?,” a Sakaki poem from 1982 in *Break the Mirror*, gives his own half-literal, half-playful identikit. The opening stanza bears much of his usual voice, seeming direct speech, the sense of conversational immediacy:

I’m a poet because they call me so.
Psychiatrist because
 everybody in the world is insane.
Ecology freak, because I’m Mr. Nature.
Free in love, free in spirit.
Without reason, crazy for music.
Cook dinner for everybody.
Friend of anyone who walks with me.
I’m a Third Stone Age Man.
 Sakaki 1987: 122; poem is dated 1982

The poem, however, typically bears a serious undertow as the speaker recalls sojourning in the American southwest of the Chihuahua desert before returning “home to northern mountain” (122) and where “I sing and weep for love with robins” (122). Sakaki’s surface deceives, the immediacy concealing an imagist depth and circumference. But much as that reflects heirship to *haiku* or Japan’s spatial subtleties of calligraphic and ink wash/*sumie* tradition, it also gives off the percussive touch of Beat (“Ecology freak,” “crazy for music”), a vocabulary of the countercultural West within his native East. The poet, moreover, vaunts credentials as therapist, ecologist, lover, music-buff, cook, hiker and history-bearer, seeming both the one person and Japanese-Beat composite.

Beat, as in the case of Shiraiishi, takes its place as but one tributary of several in his poetry. The passionate environmentalism remained undiminished throughout. He spoke and took part in protests against loss of habitat, de-forestation, dams, golf courses, Japan’s wayward use of concrete and its notorious favoring of corporate building interests, and above all nuclear power and its shadow back to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The journeying took him wide, across Japanese island routes from Hokkaido to Okinawa but also into both Atlantic and Pacific hemispheres and their range of international trail ways. He even saw himself traveling across mythic terrain, the Japan re-invented as Yaponesia by the novelist Toshio Shimao (1917–1986) in *Shutsukotō-ki/A Tale of Leaving a Lonely Island* (1940).⁹ The second section of thirty or so poems in *Break the Mirror* he so entitles “Yaponesia Freeway” (Sakaki 1987: 55). Sakaki can rightly be thought, one way or another, to have been nearly always en route if not exactly on the road.

Behind the poetry, and its lead-in to his Beat connections, lies a biography whose serial inter- and cross-continental treks by foot, boat, train, and air flight, might as it were have left even Kerouac or Cassidy standing. Born in Kagoshima in the island of Kyushu his witness to World War II as a navy radar specialist during which he met departing kamikaze pilots at Izumi Air Base and tracked the B-29 bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, left indelible marks. A school-leaver at twelve his autodidact’s reading took him into Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Marx, and especially Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, and into Asian classics by Li Bo, Du Fu, the Taoist master Lao Tzu, not to mention the Vedas and Zen. His prime Japanese influence lies in the person of the haiku master Kobayashi Issa (1763–1827) of whom, in his “Translator’s Note” to *Inch by Inch*, he writes admiringly: “Very skeptical of authorities, either political or religious, he (after Bashō’s revolutionary breakthrough) opened the democratic trail for common people” (Sakaki 1999: 9) Beat connections, when they came, were far from unexpected.

All fed severally into his creative identity from when he saw first-hand the bombed-out post-war Japan of the food shortages, unemployment, and cratered buildings. For two years he would live in an underpass in Tokyo’s Ueno Station, and from 1955 onward hike the forests of Japan with the wood sculptor Shin Higuchi. In the late 1960s, having become a founder in Shinjuku of The Tribe, sometimes known as The Tribes (*Buzoku*), he was instrumental in setting up the Banyan Ashram, an

alternative commune, on the south-of-Japan Ryuku island of Suwanosejima, where Gary Snyder would spend time living and writing.¹⁰ His meeting with Snyder and Ginsberg in 1963 in Kyoto and then Snyder's invitation to California led on to ongoing link-ups from Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boulder to Prague and a host of European venues. In June 1988 he enlisted Ginsberg, Snyder, Waldman, and Michael McClure to help fund resistance to the coral reef of Ishigaki-jima becoming an airport landing strip. The making, and contour, of Sakaki as Japanese-Beat poet would involve hugely rich and diverse life sources.¹¹

His various autobiographical poems return time and again to the self seeking to position itself as under Buddhist moment-for-moment process and unfettered by convention or rule-book. "Homo Erectus Ambulant" (*Break the Mirror*) gives working latitudes and longitudes (Sakaki 1987: 74–75). There is recognition of the full girth of humankind ("No two the same voice/No two the same eye/No two the same destiny" [74]). Nonetheless, it is to be insisted, "But with only one heart we human beings are born" (74). The poem ponders the ebbs and flow of human contrariety ("Why so crazily varicolored, our human minds?" [74]). Citing newspaper headings for August, 1983, there are reports of Japanese political corruption, teacher unionization against exploitative conditions, right wing violence, and from the September to follow the sixtieth year remembrance of the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake with its devastating impact on Tokyo and Yokohama. Amid this breakage, man-made and natural, the poem goes on to envisage a way the world, and Sakaki himself, can arrive at better global health.

To that end he pictures himself afoot and "on the way home from a big town" (74), a participant (and biped) partaker in the natural order. He walks amid horseflies, dragonflies, and yet other flies, sees a winding snake, and witnesses cross-gliding swallowtails and a trio of departing crows. This conjunction of air and earth, flight and ground, bespeaks dynamic harmony, the interacting oneness of "all living creatures on earth" (75). To perambulate as the speaker is doing is to have access to this same spectrum. Mankind, humankind, if sufficiently aware and ready, could become the salutary co-traveler in what "planet earth" best avails:

Homo erectus ambulant –
One more bouquet for the planet earth

Tomorrow's wind could be
North, south, east or west (75)

For human beings to become a "bouquet" there needs be readiness to "planet earth," a full inclination to embrace the wind's cardinal directions without the encumbrance of human confusions of voice. That, in the visionary terms of Sakaki's poem and not unlike many a Beat directive, is to learn how to walk the earth respectfully and quite fully upright.

"Autobiography" (*Let's Eat Stars*), dated as the Summer Solstice 1993 and thereby offering an implication of the earth's natural clock, speaks in shared vein (Sakaki 1997: 39–40). The poet's opening self-credential bespeaks humble beginnings, poverty, the detritus and aftermath of a lost war ("Bullets, starvation & concrete wastelands" [39]). Yet however bare the day's comestibles ("a cup of brown rice, vegetables, /small fish, a little water, & a lot of wind." [39]), there has been a Thoreauvian yield from basic life alongside farmers, fishermen, carpenters and blacksmiths ("Paying no attention to soap, shampoo./Toilet paper & newspapers" [39]). The speaker-poet's propulsion towards the earth's ecological plentitudes and geographies wholly merits double-stanza quotation:

Now & again
Loves to suck the nectar of honeysuckle,
To flutter with dragonflies & butterflies,
To chatter with winter wrens,
To sing songs with coyotes,

To swim with humpback whales,
And to hug rocks in which dinosaurs sleep.
Feels at home in Alaska glaciers,
Mexican desert, virgin forests of Tasmania,
Valley of Danube, grasslands of Mongolia,
Volcanoes in Hokkaido & Okinawan coral reefs.
And – one sunny summer morning,
He will disappear quietly on foot
Leaving no shadow behind. (39–40)

This expansive horizon, and Sakaki or his persona within it, might well remind of Sabastião Salgado's epic photographic series *Genesis*, similarly given over to an inclusive visual map of fauna, insect life, animalia and place.¹² In Sakaki's case the sound and sight lies in his hold on a vocabulary of personal encounter, honeysuckle nectar to coral reef. The image of his own "sunny summer morning" disappearance, in aptest relevance of phase "quietly on foot," brings a winning Beat sense to having lived in the all and the Buddhist prospect of spiritual transition.

In "If I Have Tomorrow" (*Let's Eat Stars*) Sakaki again uses actual and futurist timescale, and site, as metaphors to en-capture the sense of his own evolving life (Sakaki 1997: 21). The poem so begins in November 3, 1990, reaching forward to an imagined January 1, 11,923, and spans the volcanic Pinacate Desert, Mexico, to the Milky Way. This is the one life venturesomely located within time-space, yet another of Sakaki's sportive autobiographies. The departure point under "full moon" (21) from Elegante Crater (in Mexico's Sonora) leads into a serial pattern, each a staging-post, a shelf-mark, in the speaker's expanding consciousness. January 1993, astride donkey, horse, and camel, there is journeying from Korea to England. 1999 sees "tribal gathering," unspecified as to purpose but likely ecological in intent. 2023, a 100th birthday, offers a mind's eye view of climbing Mt. Olympus on Mars. 2923 steps further into planetary terrain in a visitation to Miranda, Uranus's moon, with its link to Shakespeare's brave new world of *The Tempest* and Prospero's daughter-heroine. Finally, 11,923, a 10,000 birthday, and himself "a grain of stardust" (21), the poet takes on the prospect of "a new solar system" and the Milky Way as stir to his "tomorrow's" galaxy of new imaginings. The scale of speculation might well have suited Ginsberg or even Burroughs.

Further Beat-like autobiographical time and space is to be met with in a poem like "All Over the World" (*Break the Mirror*; Sakaki 1987: 29). Haiku-ish in its lexicon and spacing, from opening to closing stanza, the voice is again redolent of both Buddhism and Beat:

London tower of nightmare
New York mental hospital
Tokyo slave market
Los Angeles ghost town
Kalamazoo, Michigan
 one of the first American cities to close streets
 for a pedestrian shopping mall
Taos, New Mexico
 construction of
 a giant supermarket commences.
Taos Mountain
 an idiot
 sits on a lotus flower
 all day long
 in a tipi (29)

Each place name takes on imagist mantle, iconographic resonance. These are cities given over to concrete, urban cells to enwall and regulate their dwellers. The contrast with the perspective of a Zen “idiot,” figuratively seated on the lotus as Buddhism’s legendary symbol of purity, could not be sharper. That the lotus/waterlily is then combined with a Buddhist-Beat meditative time-span (“all day long”) and with a Taos Mountain tipi, historic tribal lodging derived from the natural world, gives the poem its sharply arresting fusion of sources.

Other autobiography bears a more literary signature. In “Prague” (*Let’s Eat Stars* [13]), written “Sept. 1988, Mt. Taisetsu, Japan” (13) as a Prologue to the Czech translation of his work, he engages in a kind of grateful but at the same time fantasy lineage. The geographic reach is again insistent, Hokkaido’s volcanic peaks to the Czech capital. Each of the four stanzas opens as though fairy-tale (“Once upon a time” [13]), but they then affiliate the speaker with key Czech authorship. The trick, however, is to imagine himself and the other writers as though doubly employed, possessed of not just the literary life but also one lived in the world.

He so writes:

Once upon a time
I was a glass cutter in Prague.
That time
They called me Rainier Rilke. (13)

To follow are Franz Kafka (“I was a violinist in Prague” [13]), Karen Capek (“I was a flower gardener in Prague” [13]) and Sakaki himself (“I was a brewer in Prague./That time/They called me Nanao Sakaki” [13]). All, Sakaki included, can be thought to have drawn from other living, be it real or playfully imagined. This style of reflexive association has its Beat analogues, whether Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” and its coalition with Whitman, or Ferlinghetti’s homage to Stendhal in the fifth sequence of his *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955).

The insistence on the poet figuratively as indeed literally *in situ*, and/or in motion, recurs across Sakaki’s oeuvre, the insistence on trails of personal arrival and departure. “Twilight Man” (*Let’s Eat Stars* [19]) has him, just ahead of sunrise, rambling along Gifu Prefecture’s Nagara River, and imagining himself passing into time as though the shadow of the maker of a piece of neolithic earthenware among the river’s pebbles (“Drifting into history’s debris/I will be a twilight man tomorrow” [19]). In “Me, a Caterpillar” (*Break the Mirror* [26]), in conversation with a mountain road truck driver, they speak of a caterpillar infestation that ate much of the surrounding greenery. But with the spring rain and the return of the greenery it causes the driver to ask where the caterpillars are now: the “sudden” memory this stirs in the poet is at once olfactory (“smell of sage, flowers, and dry air” [26]), visual (“Snow-capped peaks, rainbows, lightning” [26]), and human (“A face, a smile, a voice” [26]). He envisages himself in caterpillar form (“eating the greens of life... Carrying shaggy dreams into the future” [26]). It is a vision that comes on him like a smack, a jolt (“On a sudden turn in the road/Thunder claps in my spine” [26]). Another Beat moment of revelation? Plausibly so.

These site and journey poems have a small summa in Sakaki’s translation of a best-known Issa haiku, again centered in one of Nature’s smaller creatures. It lies behind the title itself of *Inch by Inch: 45 Haiku by Issa*:

Inch by inch –
Little snail
Creep up and up Mt. Fuji
Sakaki 1999: 17

To implicate the snail with Japan’s Holy Mountain (*Fuji-san*), its spiritualized national symbol, is also to give expression to the relationship of poet and world. Sakaki, as Issa before him, implies the self’s

resolute and possible upward journeying towards mountain top tranquility—arrival at Zen, and latterly Beat, consciousness.

The more explicit Beat-referencing poems make for a call to attention in their own imaginative right. *Nanao or Never* usefully reprints Sakaki's own brief handwritten chronology 1955–1998, a log of travels, encounters, protests, and ecopoetry and species day happenings (Lawless 2000: 241–243). Among the included American names recur Ginsberg, Snyder, McClure, Kyger, Burroughs, Peter Coyote, and Patti Smith, each for Sakaki an obvious co-spirit. Ginsberg especially operated in Sakaki's life as a point of contact, a friendship reciprocated in “Gloves/For Allen, sixty light-years old glove” (*Break the Mirror* [83–84]). Set on a degree-zero February midnight, and with four pairs of gloves drying at the fireplace, he thinks that for all their utility when digging out firewood from snow they will in due course fade and burn. Yet for the moment they serve as protective companions, guardians against chill. The poem tacitly associates them with the Sakaki–Ginsberg relationship, the fondly “gloved” familiarity of Japanese writer and American dedicatee.

The affinity is also confirmed in a poem like “Who Needs Allen Ginsberg in Today's Japan?” (*Let's Eat Stars* [8–9]), dated “Feb. 1988” (9) and written in the appropriate location of “East Village, NYC” (9). The single-phrase line form in “Who Needs Allen Ginsberg...?” gives a tabulation of his native country's local plenitude, its variety of cultural strength. In shared spirit with Ginsberg, and in assembling his sequence of human, animal, ecological, and literary-creative allusion, Sakaki gives the lie to any one-size-fits-all national or individual identity. Stereotype has been a particular burden for many Japanese, to be sure it is a culture of intimately shared signs and signals but also of its own styles of variation. The poem, as though to tease the staccato listing, is set in motion by its spatial framing from the natural world:

Air
Water
Soil
Coral reefs
Oak virgin forests
Ezo grizzlies
River otters
Iriomote wildcats (8)

The coordinates of air, water, soil, reef and forest give one kind of pictorialization, so, likewise, the grizzlies, otters, and wildcats give another. Place-names equally contribute, a Japan far from geographically diminutive. To that end Sakaki invokes Ezo, the terrain of the Ainu peoples in the northern island of Hokkaido, and Iriomote-jima, Okinawa's far-southern second largest island. As the condensed allusions built and coalesce it would be obtuse not to react expansively.

The ensuing lines give a milling human population. Ainus, Okinawans, and Korean Japanese are invoked to underscore Japan's ethnic diversity. There is an ironic shy at the “Happy Middle Class” (8) and “Unhappy millionaires” (8). Sexual and class diversity is to be recognized (“Gays, Lesbians. Beggars, Criminals, Hobos” [8]). A phalanx of liberators, and their creative life-energies, make for a redemptive Japan, its own Ginsbergism (“Organic farmers, Fishermen, No Nukes, Free Schools, Housewives, Musicians, Artist, Poets” [8]). The closing couplet acts perfectly to draw the poem into a rally:

Leaves of grass –
Roots. (9)

In Sakaki's fashioning of the poem a number of junctures come into being. Within Japan the one national culture is again seen and heard to harbor many. As Ginsberg, Beat's premier versifier, links

back to Whitman as Good Gray Poet, so Sakaki, Japanese poet foot-patroller links to Ginsberg, America's counterculture bard. Beat America steers towards Beat Japan, and as equally, Beat Japan steers towards America.

Perspectives

It bears repeating that the confluences mapped in this essay, Beat American and Beat Japanese, do not constitute the whole profile for either Shiraishi or Sakaki. They both clearly also work in ways that venture beyond Beat auspices. Shiraishi has pursued her open-image modernism with its ongoing and frequently unreal jazz turns and energies into later collections like *My Floating Mother, City* (2003, English translation, 2009). In "Cup of Tea, Plate of Fish: An Interview with Nanao Sakaki," conducted with John Brandi and Jeff Bryan in Corrales, New Mexico in 1999, Sakaki answered the question of when he first started what they term his "walkings" with "Oh, always the same question! My answer is—before I was born!" The gloss reads "*laughter all round*" (Sakaki 1999: 67). Within both sets of bearings lies if not some whole impress of Beat then necessary resemblances, a shared life-and-art disposition. Beat has its own Japan no more and no less than Japan has its own Beat.

Notes

- 1 Cited as cover endorsement for Kazuko Shiraishi in *Little Planet and Other Poems*, Tokyo: Shichigatsudo Publishing, 1982, reprinted 1984.
- 2 For a helpful account not only of Shuji but the counterculture generally, see Steven C. Ridgely, *Japanese Counterculture: The Antiestablishment Art of Terayama Shūji*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- 3 "Who Am I?" in *Break The Mirror*, 122.
- 4 Stephen Kuusisto, "Nanao Sakaki's 'Real Play,'" *Nanao or Never: Nanao Sakaki Walks Earth A*, ed. Gary Lawless, Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Book, 2000, 68.
- 5 The names of these translators are taken from across the range of Shiraishi's books.
- 6 For a major assessment of Kitasono's achievement, see John Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning – The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katue (1901–1978)*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Katue is the French version of his name.
- 7 Cover endorsement for *Seasons of Sacred Lust*, New York: New Directions, 1978.
- 8 Ted Joans, *Ted Joans: Selected Poems by Ted Joans*, Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1999, 97.
- 9 Toshio Shimaō, *Yaponasia kō*, 1940. Reprinted Fukuoka Ashi Shobō, 1977. For a full study see J. Philip Gabriel, *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimaō Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.
- 10 Snyder offers an illuminating account of the venture in *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*, New York: New Directions. See also Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- 11 I develop a more comprehensive biographical portrait, with analysis of his writings, in "Japan Beat: Nanao Sakaki," in Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl (eds) *The Transnational Beat Generation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 231–248. A revised version of the this essay, "Nanao Sakaki: Transnational Poet Wanderer," together with visuals of Sakaki himself, his books and manuscripts (including his signature self-sketch of the poet as Orphic flautist), appears in *Kyoto Journal*, 78 (2011), 127–138.
- 12 First exhibited in 2013. Salgado's photography can be found in book form in Lélia Wanick Salgado and Sebastião Salgado, *Genesis*, Cologne and New York: Taschen, 2013.

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