Interview

Between the Photograph and the Poem: A Dialogue on Poetic Practice with Roy Miki

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Introduction

“Between the Photograph and the Poem” explores the capacity of creative work to generate possibilities that elude the instrumental terms of dominant visual and discursive regimes, whether regimes of racialization, trans/nationalism or commodification. The interview focuses on the creative work of Roy Miki, who has received a Governor General Award for his poetry and has been named a member of the Order of Canada for his work in cultural politics. The interview explores Miki’s changing relation to photographic imagery, especially with respect to his poetic work over the last several decades. With his experience as an activist in the Japanese Canadian movement for redress, along with the role he played in opening up literary studies and more generally the study of cultural formations in Canada to questions regarding the politics of race, Miki discusses how he has navigated spaces of erasure in language and visual regimes amidst expanding transnational commodification. McAllister and Miki constructed the resulting dialogue over a four-month period.

Photography and a language of displacement

KM: Your recent visual collages re-envision places in Vancouver within the contemporary global landscape through the life of commodities, or to be more precise, through the ethereal world of mannequins that brings commodities to life. This could be viewed as a departure from your poetic work with the written word and your concerns about “race” and the discursive constitution of Japanese Canadian and Asian Canadian subjects. But from our discussions about moving into the recesses of representation—into the internal workings of language and its discursive power—and making sites for creation that exceed the limits of language, whether by subverting rhythms, hanging on the resonance of a vowel or the metonymic slippage between meanings, it is clear that you have had a complex and changing relation to photographic representations over the years, starting with photographic representations of the Japanese Canadian (JC) body.

RM: What you say rings true, though it’s difficult, if not impossible, for me to pinpoint the moment I began to think critically about photographic representations of...
the JC body. From childhood onwards I have been intrigued by internment photos. In
the photos of the war years used in books and documentary films, especially the im-
ages that have become iconic, JCs are typically objectified and racially framed as alien
to BC’s white population. For the longest time these wartime images—of fishermen
whose boats were being confiscated, for instance, or people surrendering their cars at
Hastings Park or standing at the train station saying goodbye to friends and relatives
being shipped to road camps or internment camps—were simply taken for granted as
transparent records of historical events. There was little, if any, attention paid to the
reasons why these photos were taken, their specific occasions, the photographer’s iden-
tity, or the government’s use of them for propaganda purposes. I include myself in this
uncritical acceptance of these photos.

KM: When did you start looking more critically at the internment photos?

RM: I came across a collection of internment photos in the national archives in
Ottawa around 1984 when I started archival research on the government’s treatment
of JCs. I remember being struck by the amazing shots that were often used to represent
the second uprooting. In 1945, thousands of JCs were shipped to Japan in what was eu-
phemistically called the government’s “repatriation” program. For the majority,
Canada was their patria, so they were, in fact, being expelled to a foreign country. I
found it astounding that Tak Toyota, a nisei photographer, managed to photograph
this moment. When I first saw the photos in various historical texts, I assumed they
were from different times and even different locations. But as I pieced them together
in the archive, it became evident they were part of a time-based series of photos.
Viewed as such, I became aware of Toyota’s presence as a photographer as he framed
his shots with an artistic eye. What he captured on film made him a witness to this
cataclysmic historic event.
KM: Were these photos different from the official photos taken by the National Film Board for the British Columbia Security Commission and the Department of Labour?

RM: Oh yes. Tak Toyota’s photos embody a sense of fear and uncertainty in the faces of the women, the men, and the kids. As a nisei photographer who was part of the uprooted community, Toyota was obviously attuned to the emotional disturbance in his subjects.

KM: So the government images did not capture much about what JCs were experiencing.

RM: In most media, including the government’s propaganda film, Of Japanese Descent (1945)—clips of which you see in nearly all the news stories about the internment, even today—JC bodies do not speak. For me, growing up in the immediate aftermath of the internment, in the late 40s and early 50s, the JCs represented in images of internment always came across as mute (or muted) figures. The aura of speechlessness around them struck me. Thankfully, later, when undertaking research on nisei writer Muriel Kitagawa for This Is My Own, I discovered there were nisei and issei who actively spoke out against the government’s racist policies and demanded justice, writing poignant letters and accounts about the community’s ordeals, as Muriel did to her brother Wes Fujiwara in Toronto (Miki, 1985). So, you could say that, in contrast, the government photographs rendered JCs speechless, which was associated with what I imagine was their condition of displacement.
KM: Can you talk more about the relation between speechless or mute bodies and the condition of displacement?

RM: In my late teens, when I started trying to make sense of the internment from the perspective of JCs, I was disheartened by what seemed to me the absence of a subjective history. Where were the voices of those speaking back to the injustices, challenging the government’s imposition of race-based categories? Of course, as my later research would teach me, there were voices of protest, but these were suppressed, or if not suppressed, contained, by government regulations and the machinations of the administrators who controlled JC responses to the mass uprooting. The silent JC figures in the dominant portrayals of internment came to signify for me the state of speechlessness that resulted from what I felt was an exile from the west coast of BC.

KM: In your poetic work, how does displacement, or rather, the alienation from place and voicelessness work?

RM: Instead of feeling comfortable writing poems about my attachment to place—a common concern of Canadian poets in the 60s and 70s—I felt stymied, if this is the right word, as if I was tongue-tied, and this had to do with my relationship to the English language. JCs of my parent’s generation were bilingual, but the English language was seen as the medium of power—the power to disenfranchise and dispossess them, the power to define them as “enemy alien” and intern them, and the power to impose boundaries on their social and political aspirations. Where, then, was a place for a creative voice in this language? For anyone interested in writing poems, this kind of question opens up the challenges of form, positioning, and process.

Family photographs and (s)elf

KM: I want to return to the photos that families managed to bring with them when they were forced to leave their homes on the coast, and then later, when they were either shipped to Japan or to other provinces after 1945. Photography was a popular
hobby in the prewar period as well as an important part of family life, documenting important milestones, including births, weddings, and graduations. So Japanese Canadians from different class backgrounds would have taken photographs avidly, recording their lives in BC before the war, collecting images and also mailing them to friends and family members elsewhere in the Americas and overseas to Japan. So what about your own family photos? There are a number of family images that make their way into your earlier work, first in your descriptive imagery, and then as images.

**RM:** I've always harboured an uneasiness with the photographic image and how it frames events, and this would include family photos of the internment years, a period which for me goes from 1942 until the early 50s. I have always been reluctant to use such photos in my work because of the dangers inherent in their valorization of identity. But when the editors for *Random Access File* (Miki, 1995) were going over the layout, I recall talking about inserting a few photos, though not on the cover. These were to function as a counterpoint to the poems gathered together, which were conceived as a movement away from the desire for an identity located or originating in a particular place towards an exploration of the myriad ways that all identities are mediated by power-laden discourses. I used two of my favourite images from Ste. Agathe, both taken by my father. In both photos, my pregnant mother and her three children, my brothers Art and Les and my sister Joan, stand alongside her close friend Nori Hayakawa, who travelled with her to Manitoba from their home in Haney, British Columbia to help with the kids. In the two other photos, I am a young kid growing up in post-internment Winnipeg.

**KM:** In the image accompanying your poem, “September 22” (Miki, 1995)—the one with your mother, her friend and your siblings—where are you?

**RM:** Well, I suppose I am playing with the notion of absence and presence. It will be another few months before I am born, so I am absent in the new landscape of internment in Ste. Agathe, but in being present in my mother’s womb I have already begun to absorb the new conditions into which I will be born through the body of my mother. These are the same conditions that will shape the emergence of my consciousness in and of language, more specifically the English language in relation to the loss of spoken Japanese. Like many JCs, my first spoken language was Japanese. My grandmother who brought me up did not speak English. But my first language—that is, the language I will think and write in—will be English. Japanese will disappear as a working language. What is interesting, though, from a writer’s angle, is that my first spoken language will remain as a lingual residue, those sounds and rhythms of Japanese lingering tentatively in bits and pieces in the body of memory.

**KM:** Can you tell me about the decision to use the two photographs in the poem, “Story”?
They are images from your childhood, but you have rearranged and reframed them.

**RM:** I can’t remember the exact details in the editorial process but it’s probably one of the shortest autobiographical poems ever written! We started with the idea of fragmenting the photo with my father, grandmother, and sister to go along with the brief sections of the poem, in a way mimicking the frames of a comic book.

**KM:** This is one photograph across three pages?

**RM:** Yes, three pages, plus on the first page there is a photo of me with some neighbourhood friends. The poem undoes the referential *i* of conventional autobiography. As a textual *i*, it is playful, resistant, and unruly, coming to life in language; and when the spaces between the letters open up and re-form, the self turns into something else, in this case, who’s elf. In the idea of an elfness that subverts a stable selfness, language becomes creative, so that *i* be fore getting can suggest that *i* am a being before (as in the past) forgetting, as well as a being for getting something before (as in the future). It all gets pretty heady I guess, but what comes through—or came through for me—is that such an apparently simple process like a letter shift can also shift the entire edifice of meaning. This letteral movement is very much a part of the poems of bpNichol, a friend whose work has been so important for me.

**KM:** It is interesting that you’re working with the family photograph. In family photographs, members of the family are typically arranged hierarchically in positions that designate their role and status according to their gender, age and marital status. There is very little room for the self in this genre and so family photos, as Annette Kuhn shows, function through erasure as well as projection especially with respect to children (Kuhn, 1995); but, it is even more complicated in your instance because of the way the government tried to dismantle the Japanese Canadian family as an institution during the 1940s. Here, like Annette Kuhn (1995) and also Marianne Hirsch (1997), you create a space within the photograph from which you can work, in your case, with the emerging (s)elfs.
RM: Yes, I like your idea of creating space within the photography. The elf in textual space produces new possibilities and contexts for re-envisioning the photos in a new time. In the opening photo of the (s)elf with the neighbourhood kids, we see the autobiographical self located as a typical Canadian kid. I’m wearing a hat from Niagara Falls, from a big trip I took across Canada and through the US with my parents. It was the first time I had encountered a sense of the larger expanse of geographical space beyond the confines of the central Winnipeg neighbourhood where I grew up in the early postwar years.

KM: What about the end of the “Story” and your reference to ocha?

RM: The poem ends with a Japanese ocha, ocha, then flips away to o cha cha cha. This embryonic moment opens up the double bind. Ocha embodies a kind of ground—even if you know next to nothing about Japanese culture, as a JC you will know that ocha, the word itself, is central to home life. But ocha is subject to radical transformations in the everyday social spaces of Canada where “Japanese” has evoked so many negative associations. How do you dance your way through such a minefield? Cha cha cha, I suppose, is one way, or the poet’s way with always potentially dynamic syllables. Maybe the shift from ocha to o cha cha cha can be understood as a kind of efferent affect that signals the potential for transformation through the poetic act. If it is not an “authentic” cultural phenomenon in the way we think of culture, it can still be understood as an epiphenomenon of growing up in residual lingual spaces, and as such it has implications for understanding the creative resources available through literary practices.

Photographic memories of landscapes: Radical recontextualizations

KM: The very first photograph in Random Access File is from Ste. Agathe, and it is also the very first photograph that you include with your poetic work.

RM: I have always thought that the Ste. Agathe photo with my mother, her friend, and my brothers and sister captured what is involved in the idea of radical recontextualization. They are standing there in the middle of Ste. Agathe, a little French Canadian town in Manitoba. They had just been shipped from Haney, British Columbia, over a thousand miles away. One landscape has been violently replaced with another landscape. To me that’s radical. Your entire life script has been altered. The photo takes on such symbolic importance for me because it was taken a few months before I was born. Though I was conceived in BC, this is the environment that will initially shape my consciousness.

KM: What about the poem you selected to go with that image? I am thinking about how this image, an image that symbolizes such a profound foundational moment, finally enters the world of language, enters your poetic work. I am thinking of “September 22,” the Redress poem, which ends:

We say what’s left
Until all’s said
For the sake of story
in our telling times.

(Miki, 1995, p.33)

Can you comment on these lines?
RM: As I recall, it was as if the entire redress struggle was about trying to say everything until everything was said, but of course you cannot ever reach that point. When you think of the gulf of years between the mass uprooting and the redress movement, you think of all the stories that were not told, or if told, told to deaf ears. And you think of all the years that JCs carried within themselves the trauma of being branded “enemy alien” and the shame that came from it. It seemed to me that collectively we did not have the language to speak about the enormity of all that had happened. But during the redress movement, in the struggle to respond to the injustices of the internment years, what mattered was the effort to say all. Since the “all” can never be achieved, in the post-redress years we need to keep working to ensure that the language of redress is always open to change and transformation.

KM: In a sense that photograph opens up so much of what was and continues to be unsaid. Uncertainties. There’s the moment the photo was taken, when no one knew what would happen. Now we can look back and see what came of everything, or can we? Then there’s the fact that you’re absent but you’re present. The photo seems to speak to many themes you explore in your work.

RM: That picture was very present in my imagination while I grew up, and this is perhaps why it came to mind while doing the final editing on the book. I was drawn to its wide-open spaces, which was in stark contradiction to the reality that my family was being confined there. All that space and nowhere to go, at least nowhere they could go without a government permit. Nevertheless, there was a position enacted in the pose—in standing together in that expanse of space. The photo serves the function of informing relatives and friends: this is where we are; this is the spatial context of our post-Haney lives.

KM: The way that the photograph is positioned on the page emphasizes the open horizon, or in fact, more accurately, the open sky. Vertically the space of the sky is extended by the placement of the photo on the bottom of the page with a blank space, one could say emptiness, above it. The emptiness of the page fuses with the sky in the photo creating a sense of expansiveness upward above the scene of displacement in Ste. Agathe, opening up imaginative possibilities. This image contrasts with Roy Arden’s photographic work on internment, where he appropriates government photographs of Japanese Canadians being removed from Vancouver. He inserts a black block of space above Japanese Canadian figures, giving them an apocalyptic feel. Your space continues from the sky to the page of the book, to an empty space on the page of unwritten text, whether a future of what is to be written or a past of what might have been written.

RM: What I referred to as a radical contextualization, I think, allows the photos of the internment to re-enter the present moment of composition where the spaces of textuality offer the opportunity to imagine a future that transfigures the past. In a way, the whole redress movement can be read as an unfolding text that reinvented the past in order to free it from the discourses that contained it within the language of racial categorization and identification. At least, I thought of it that way during the course of the struggle.
New formal possibilities: Remembering the future

KM: I now want to jump ahead to your book *There* (Miki, 2006) where you write the prose poem, “The Young Kid” (Miki, 2006) in response to a photograph of Trudeau autographing a photo for a young boy. This photograph was part of a public rather than a personal family record.

RM: The occasion of writing “The Young Kid,” is pretty specific. I was among a group of writers who were asked by Karen Love, at the time a curator with Presentation House, to participate in a book project that became *Facing History: Portraits from Vancouver* (Love, 2002). She asked each of us to choose one photo from the exhibit of Vancouver photographs, and to write up to 350 words using whatever form that appealed to us. One photo struck me immediately. It was a photograph of Prime Minister Trudeau taken by Glenn Baglo for the *Vancouver Sun* in 1972. Trudeau was passing through Vancouver and had stopped for what looked like a photo-op, signing a poster of himself for a young kid, who could be Asian or First Nations, but strikingly non-white. Remember, Trudeau rose to power on the new currency of the language of multiculturalism following from the liberal policy first announced in 1971. The photo made me think of myself as a young kid, but if it had been me, the photo would have been taken in 1952, and the prime minister would have been Louis St. Laurent, a prime minister, coincidentally, whom Trudeau admired. St. Laurent hated Japanese Canadians, and while he was cabinet minister even went so far as to recommend to Prime Minister Mackenzie King that all Japanese Canadians be expelled from Canada. So it would have been unthinkable for me to be that kid in 1952, but then, twenty years have passed, and according to the language of multiculturalism it’s now culturally “ok” to be Japanese Canadian. During my childhood, assimilation into the white mainstream was the mandate.

KM: In a sense, then, your reading reveals how two different temporalities intersect in this photograph. The intersection opens up possibilities not just to re-imagine, but also to experience, in this case, the discursive regime of race politics at particular historical moments that are fundamentally different, yet strangely interconnected. You continue to explore these themes in *There* (2006).

RM: What I wanted to do in *There* was to examine in the language of poetic performance the possibility of shifting identities, of remaking memories, and of exploring the implications of different historical trajectories. I wanted to imagine myself outside of the conditions that located me, and to imagine alternate conditions that would have produced different memories from the ones that structured my personal and social formation, in this sense, to remember a future. For instance, in what is a quite straightforward way, in “Local” (2006), I place myself in a specific geographical location in the Ontario landscape, remembering growing up in a place that I passed through in less than five minutes. Some people might want to challenge this process and say we shouldn’t tamper with memory.

KM: Are you suggesting that memory has the power to lock us in the realities of particular times and places?

RM: When I was working on “The Young Kid,” and also more broadly on *There*, the way I viewed the world was still shaped by the historical framework developed
during the redress movement, which had produced me as a particular kind of subject. Yet, at the same time, I kept feeling that I could not connect with other dimensions of the past. It was as if my memory had been scripted by these discourses. I wondered what happened to all those things that I could no longer remember, or were perhaps removed in order for the reigning form of memory to preside. It is not that I was living in the past, but it took such an effort to situate myself in a more immediate present, and I found it a struggle to distance myself from constant references to the past that had been so important to my work.

**KM:** When you say “immediate present,” do you mean a form of time that is immanent rather than one that is scripted by particular narratives?

**RM:** That would be a way of understanding what I was after. I recall not wanting a narrowly bounded relational experience with my past. Often in my writing over the years, I have had to struggle with the tendency of my consciousness to gauge the passage of time according to the internment, and that is primarily because the experience of internment was such a dominant force in my personal and social formation. As far as I could see, there was no other framework for me. Everything that was other than that framework is what we now call “post-memory” (Hirsch, 1997). That history came through my family, so all the pre-internment details took on mythic dimensions, including the BC landscape, and especially the Powell Street area, the centre of Nihonmachi or Japantown where my father grew up. I knew the difference between the conditions I was born into and the conditions that preceded my birth, but because I was born in the midst of internment, and in Manitoba instead of BC, the birth site for the rest of my family, I was always considered an internment kid. I think that led me to measure the course of my life in relation to the internment.

**KM:** If displacement means the evacuation of life, I wonder what the implications were for all those years of living in all those places where Japanese Canadians made their homes in British Columbia before the war? How did you locate yourself, or existentially ground yourself? There continues to be a need for a reference, the need to hold on to something, which paradoxically becomes the evacuated space of British Columbia, or alternately, the newly alien ground where Japanese Canadians were sent but did not belong. The ability to re-narrate yourself, to reposition yourself—to be—must have been impossible because all you and other Japanese Canadians had was the evacuation of the past and the inability to be in the present.

**RM:** In response to what you are saying, it just struck me that the whole effort to reclaim and, at the same time, not be taken in, hook, line and sinker, by the relation to internment has been a constant tension for me. For the most part it has pressured me to keep exploring new formal possibilities that can handle spaces of contradiction and indeterminacy, those spaces where things do not get resolved.

**Tracing the body memories and the presence of the “O”**

**KM:** I'm interested in hearing more about your relation to photographic images. In some ways, it is almost as if the images in Random Access File had been haunting you, outside of language, in your optical unconscious (Benjamin, 1972), and then they came forward as you were finishing the book.
RM: I can recall other poems with imprints of photographic images from my childhood, prior to those in Random Access File. Here I have to provide some context. I wrote poems pretty avidly in my early 20s, but then quit and went through a fairly lengthy period of not writing regularly. I didn't feel that I was making any headway with form and thought that I wasn't meant to be a poet, so I figured I should concentrate more on becoming an intellectual, and at the time this meant getting a PhD in literary studies. I had always loved studying literary texts. I slowly came back to writing poems in the mid-70s, when I was also doing some of my own research on the conditions of internment. In the top drawer of my study desk, I used to keep the 1941 registration cards of my grandmother and grandfather. As a little kid, I was very close to my grandparents. When Slavia and I moved to Vancouver in 1967, I asked my mother whether I could take the cards with me. She said, sure, go ahead. So in Vancouver I would look at these photos from time to time, and then one day I just started to write in response to them. It was really something I did without thinking, an intuitive process, but what emerged was the sequence called “sansei” (Miki, 1991).

KM: As identification cards, they are one of the most prescriptive forms of identification. Still, you were able to find movement within these strictures for something else to come into poetic form.

RM: I looked at my grandmother's signature, and as I say in the opening poem, I was taken by the trouble she had making the O for Ooto (Miki, 1991). She struck out her attempt. Her hand must have been shaking from the difficulty and the anxiety. That moment in which they were categorized as enemy aliens became immediate to me in their signatures and their thumbprints. The method of identification—the very materiality of this form of identification—was used by the government to strip them of their rights. But at the same time, it brought them back to me through the imprints of their bodies.

KM: I am trying to imagine all that is entailed in the act of writing the O, and in a sense, tripping in this act, being unable to perform the signature for the government. There is her shaking hand, but also the inability to completely conform, to be contained by that act.

RM: Yes, the seeming inability to form the letter O smoothly reveals a non-conformity that exposes the tyranny of the state-regulated injunction to sign their names in English. The English alphabet was foreign to her. The registration card made very tangible the enormous power the state exercised over her life and the lives of her family and friends.

KM: So she escapes that form in the movement of her O. And so you move into its sound and bring out the elf of the word.

RM: Yes, and the lines we're talking about read:

the neat letters of my grandfather
in english my grandmother's in kanji
in english her letters shake
she scratched out one attempt
they are almost broken
she could barely close a circle
to form the o for ooto
‘large sound’
...
as for ‘marks of identification’
—none for my grandfather
my grandmother had
a mole on her chin. (Miki, 1991, p.11).

In a way, I was astonished by the simple piece of information that could be used to identify my grandmother—by perhaps a diligent RCMP officer—by a mole on her chin. Some people think that it is a mark of beauty. I found the distinction striking, not only that someone’s beauty mark can be read as an alienation mark, but also how the same phenomenon can take on radically different meanings according to the system of representation in which it is framed.

**Ste. Agathe: Writing the photographs into words**

**KM:** What I am beginning to realize is that years before you include the photograph in your work as a visual image, you first approach the image through writing—what I mean is that it first appears as a textual image.

**RM:** Yes, I wrote about one of the photos we talked about in *Random Access File*, the one with my mother on the wide and empty main street of Ste. Agathe. What I called the “pre-face” to *Saving Face* begins with a memory of that photographic image.

**KM:** You write about the photograph.

**RM:** It’s funny that I don’t have that image in *Saving Face*. At the time, I was still very suspicious about the overt use of family photos in a poetry book. But there is one childhood photo that I managed to slip into the cover, which was designed by Linda Ohama. We had so much fun working on it and thinking it through, making the image both there and not there. You have to focus carefully to see the figure of my mother with three of her kids. We are sitting in a field in Ste. Agathe.

**KM:** The image fuses with the other elements in the cover, yet if you look closely enough you can trace their faces.

**RM:** We have already talked about this notion of emergence from the sugar beet fields and from the prairie landscape.

**KM:** But clearly you are not referring to some sort of origin, as if searching through your memories of the prairie landscape would explain who you are.

**RM:** Body memory is something that eludes the expectations of documentary realism. The genre remains problematic for me because it is often complicit with modes of containment, even when it is used to represent personal memory. As writers, we need to be careful about self-appropriation and the assumption that we have the automatic right to use anything that has happened to us in whatever manner we desire. The presumption that what the self experiences is that person’s property is based on neo/liberal ideas. Experiences are actually saturated with contingencies, as well as
forces, that reach far beyond the singular I; and even if they are filtered through an individual's consciousness, they are still part of a larger field of language in changing discursive regimes. As writers, we need to acknowledge and be responsive to the multiple constituents of experience. I remember when the politics of cultural appropriation raged in the late 80s and early 90s, and a number of writers came out against First Nations writers and minority writers who raised the ethical question of incorporating internal cultural perspective that was not part of the writer's subject formation. These writers were upset by the notion that the imagination could be complicit with racialized discourses and fantasies that continue to have damaging effects on the lives of others. Although the issue caused considerable enmities amongst writers, I think it made all of us more conscious that writers are not immune from containing their I's in ways that inhibit an awareness of the ways in which it is entangled in creative forms that embody unequal relations of power and representation.

**KM:** At the same time, there is a danger of us responding in moralistic authoritarian terms, through the language of us and them, of prohibitions, which continues to reproduce the very discourses that are being critiqued. But then it is just as problematic to write about Japanese Canadians in ways that allow other Canadians to identify with us simply as figures in their own dramas, reading their lives into the lives of Japanese Canadians.

**RM:** I think this is where state multiculturalism comes into play with its production of what I call mandatory ethnic identities, which has at times encouraged writers and artists to perform according to the expectations of prescribed cultural identities. If, for instance, you are a good Japanese Canadian multicultural subject/writer, you use your history in order to lead readers into that history, but without addressing, through the material form of the work, the conditions within and against which their imaginations perform the creative act.

**KM:** So they are implicitly reproducing state discourses.

**RM:** The reader is also involved. As we read, there is the ethical question of what we are doing while reading and interpreting literary works. To what extent are the reading practices we bring to them complicit with representations that contain and manage resistant or abnormalizing discourses?

**Kiyooka:** Somewhere in the discursive universe

**KM:** You just talked about the ethics of reading. What are your thoughts on the conditions of reading? What I mean here is the limits we face as readers, especially when memories of particular times and events are overwritten by dominant discourses.

**RM:** I was referring to a problem of remembering that has preoccupied me. We construct our memory by articulating the events we are remembering; but at the same time, the articulation relies on the vocabulary and the discourses that we habitually use to frame our current awareness of things. Even if we remember the circumstances vividly, it is not possible to recover the constituting discourses from the period being recalled—because the recollection will always be conditioned by the situated-ness of the consciousness processing it. It gets more complicated when what we remember—the memory in situ—has coalesced without any critical awareness, without any form of resistance or transformational possibility, that we may articulate in the (later) remembering.
**KM:** “The Side” (Miki, 2006) works explicitly with memory and its mutable migrant forms. In this poem you directly work with a series of photographs. Can you talk about the use of serials here in relation to memory?

**RM:** The series, “This Side,” began as an exploration of the limits and possibilities of memory constructs, and it is also the first time I self-consciously set out to write some poems based on a series of photos. The photos consist of quite bland images taken in an area of Calgary called Victoria Park, where Roy Kiyooka and his family lived prior to World War II. I had a chance to walk through the area with Kiyooka’s brother, the artist Harry Kiyooka, who reminisced about growing up with his brother. I also remembered Roy talking about his childhood years there. Everything from those times was pretty well gone, erased—except for the school—but Harry recalled some elements from the geography of their childhood, especially an imposing wall that separated Victoria Park from the rest of Calgary, which cordoned off the area as a ghetto. When I asked him what it was there for, he said he was not sure, but that it was always there, and became for the kids a boundary zone. Just as we walked towards what we thought would be an imaginary zone, we came upon a fence that now marks the boundary, which we thought was strangely ironic and hilarious. As we walked further along the streets where he and Roy played we came upon a building with a sign “Critical Mass.” We were taken by all the signs of transformation. There was also the playground that had now become a parking lot!

**KM:** As images of empty street scenes, they make references to a particular genre of photography. And while there is a certain stillness or quietude, there is also something dynamic about them. They’re quite colour-saturated and they capture the margins of the city in transition.

**RM:** I like that. There was the strangely overwhelming presence of power lines through the whole neighbourhood.

**KM:** And the colouring has a 1950s feel, so even though it is the present, there is a reference back to the 50s. The way you work with photographs in this poem is quite different from your early writing where you work with haunting family images. Here you are working metonymically across different historical moments, places, and subjects, and they become condensed in these images in what appears to be these vacant memory spaces being built over with a slew of condos, a new cellular growth of private individuals.

**RM:** Here I am just kind of documenting in the most ordinary kind of way. Click, click, click. These are the scenes. These are the buildings. This is where the action occurred. A parody of the old documentary tradition that was used on Japanese Canadians. You know, “Line up! Let’s take a photo of all of you.” And yet the photos taken came to link Calgary and Winnipeg. This school, for instance, was very similar to the kind of schools I went to in Winnipeg.

**KM:** The brick Victorian schoolhouses, with a huge playground around them, quite empty.

**RM:** With a chain link fence.

**KM:** Yeah, the chain link fence. Cordoned off. Restricted.

**RM:** If you look closely, you will see a bell shaped cutout in this fence. Even though
the area was shaped by boundaries such as fences, I also wanted to look at the flip side and the different openings that are always possible against or within boundaries. The break in the mesh, when I saw it, came as a relief for me. It is not clearly evident in the photo, like a lot of anomalies that are not all that visible to the unsuspecting eye, but it made its way into one of the poems.

**KM:** In this text you include not just the photograph, but also the practices of photography. You actually take photographs rather than working with an archive of images and reworking them. You actively appropriate space. Can you talk about the role of the photographs here?

**RM:** While Harry and I walked through Victoria Park, I found myself noting certain similarities with my own very poor childhood neighbourhood in central Winnipeg, the Logan area, where I grew up in the postwar years. Even the structure of the houses resembled those in my own memory. When I began to consider the possibility of writing a series of poems alongside the photos, I started by imagining that these images, which only obliquely represented the geography of Kiyooka's childhood, were reflections of my own childhood neighbourhood, and, almost impossibly, that my imagination of Kiyooka's childhood would become a screen on which I could explore elements of resistance, escape, and empowerment in my own childhood. In this way, the poems could function as a creative and critical remembering that did not merely service the interests of the autobiographic “I.” Was I then simply appropriating Kiyooka’s childhood for my own poetic purposes? I hope not. What I wanted was to enter into a dialogic process that opens an interactive site of conversation, exchange, and invention.

**KM:** Can you talk about what was involved in writing these poems?

**RM:** These poems were written over a period of many months. I started by rotating the photos as my desktop image so that I could allow my consciousness to inhabit their spaces while I used my computer for other purposes. It may have been for this reason—though I cannot be sure of it—that I ended up trying out a compositional method different from what I was used to at the time. I decided to write each poem over and over and over, and in each successive rewriting I worked by expansion from within, so that, for instance, I would re-enter a phrase and expand it, or I would try pushing the boundaries of every line. This went on, over and over for each poem, until I got to a point where I felt the pieces took on a voice and form that worked alongside and in response to the photos.

**KM:** So there’s another type of excavation—I always think of archival work as an excavation—but here it is within the text you generated, which is to be re-worked and excavated. So it is almost like what you did with your earlier poems, where you re-worked the images from the old photographs through writing. I am thinking of the first poem—I do not know if it was an encounter or how you describe it—an encounter with an image that in some ways has become mythic; and then, through poetics, you explore and rework its internal operation.

**RM:** Yes, the poems grow from the inside out, whereas a piece such as “The Young Kid” was written more like an essay that unfolds. As I recall, I worked purposefully to expand from the inside out, because I needed to see what was inside. I wanted to find out more and more things inside the poems where the memories were latent, and also
where there were signs of interconnections, or intersections, or convergences between the material and psychic geographies of Kiyooka’s childhood and my own in early postwar Winnipeg. I was trying to read the limits of my memories in a poetic conversation with what I imagined as the limits (both discursive and material) of Kiyooka’s childhood. I don’t know if this is all kooky to you, but I enjoy trying out different formal processes.

**Flow nation**

**KM:** I have been really wary about turning this discussion into a genealogy of your Japanese Canadian-ness—or doing the opposite, mapping some kind of creative evolution away from your “ethnic origins.” Rather I have been interested in your exploration of the interrelation between language and visual fields—scopic regimes—as fields of power and the creative possibilities that you open up in these spaces of confinement and erasure. It seems that the photograph as a technology of seeing has been present in your work for many years. First, photographs enter your work textually, through descriptive imagery, and then, it is as if through language you began to undo their discursive power over memory and bodies ... and when you directly started engaging with these images and they began to appear, some of the most haunting images, in your books, on the pages. They seem to have opened up a problem with being. In your explorations of being discursively bound as a JC subject, by exploring this, it allowed you to examine a formal problem in language and the grounds of a language of what you refer to a language of displacement.

**RM:** As I look back over the course of my writing, I think there has always been an uneasiness with a too easy acceptance of the linearity of memory formation and all the ways that it has been mobilized in the interests of continuity and coherence, especially in the beleaguered conditions of so-called minority subjectivities in Canada (Miki, 2005). The construction of an autobiographic I is often valorized at the expense of a critical engagement with the more dynamic and power-laden conditions that govern the formal possibilities of the poem in which the past is always open to negotiation in the present moment of remembering. For Japanese Canadians, and for me in particular as a child of the mass uprooting, the historic moment of internment has functioned as a constituting temporal marker. I have written about this history as both a burden and gift—a burden because it was such a time of major upheaval for my family, but a gift because it has given me a subjectivity that motivated me to become a writer and teacher. The problem—and this is always a danger for a poet—is that subsequent memory formations are usually restricted by what become articulated as foundational historic events, like the mass uprooting, and therefore, to an extent, are over-determined by these constituting markers. Without in any way taking away from the value of writing that makes visible these markers, to be conscious of the present we also need to be open to new formations that transform our relation to our memories of the past while maintaining a critical engagement with what is happening around us.

**KM:** You point out the dangers of being caught or trapped in static subject formations, notably the autobiographic I. With its organization of memory into linear narratives, the autobiographic I promises minority subjects the recognition they long for in the national past, a past from which they are typically removed or in which they
are vilified. And as you discuss elsewhere, this I is appealing especially with globaliza-
tion and the commodification of the “ethnic subject” in literature and visual media
(Miki, 2000). Yet, while you critique this subject formation, it is not as if you are arg-
uing that maintaining a critical engagement with the world means “leaving the past be-
hind,” as if this were a way to emancipate the troubled, historically wounded subject
(which in itself is a narrative that reproduces the individuated autobiographic I). I am
thinking of “Flow Nation” (Miki, 2006), which like many of your poems, is very playful.
You pass through a series of what I would describe as discursively overgrown historical
sites—both geographic and temporal—and you integrate a series of photographs into
the poem. Can you talk about how this poem took shape?

RM: It was conceived while I was in Banff to take part in a residency program for
the Intranation project, coordinated by Ashok Mathur. I was among a lot of very dy-
namic and talkative artists who were working on fascinating projects in visual art and
videography. I went there to work on the final draft of my redress book, but I was soon
drawn into all the conversations around questions of representation, equity, and aesth-
etics vis-à-vis the minoritization process in countries like Canada. I had just pur-
chased a digital camera so I went on walks around Banff taking shots, and then during
the residency, Glen Lowry, Cindy Mochizuki, Rita Wong and I decided to take an
overnight trip to New Denver to visit the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, built
by the Kyowakai Society of New Denver after the redress settlement to memorialize
the remains of one of the camps where Japanese Canadians were incarcerated during
WWII. I kept thinking about how much had changed for me through all the years of
involvement in cultural struggles of one form or another. I was struck by how my re-
lationship to the past had shifted and transformed in so many directions, and what
had seemed so fixed and monolithic in my childhood now appeared so fluid and open
to negotiation. As I took the photos, I also started writing a series of poetic prose pieces
that explored a complex of internment memories.

KM: Can you describe what you captured through the photographs? At a very
basic level I can see that you are travelling against the linear movement of memory
since you drive from the interior of the province—actually from Banff in the Rocky
Mountains—which became a racialized geographic boundary in 1944, when MP Ian
MacKenzie declared, “No Japs from the Rockies to the seas,” back to New Denver,
where the government interned over 1,500 Japanese Canadians during WWII. But
looking at the first set of images, there is a turbulent stream with the word “random”
and on the facing page, a book lying open on a grey blanket—a bible?—in what looks
like one of the restored internment shacks in New Denver. “Ran down” is written on
this image.

RM: I had no set idea when I took the photos, but as the series got going, I thought
of assembling images of the immediate context of composition, the Banff centre and
its environs—which are still steeped in Canadian colonial history—in conversation
with images drawn from the site of the former internment camp at Sandon (the photo
of the stream) and the interior of internment shacks at the Nikkei Internment Memo-
rial Centre in New Denver. Although it is not possible to retrieve exactly what I had
“in mind” when juxtaposing the word “random” with the book, which could be a
bible, I think it brings out the twisted nature of the internment through the eyes of Japanese Canadians. So many of the decisions that decimated their lives and that sentenced them to unknown places of incarceration were experienced as groundless and arbitrary, but, once made, these decisions took on the monolithic authority of the printed language of law. “Ran down” can be read as both a transformational echo of “random” and as an action that reflects the way Japanese Canadians were rounded up and trapped, as if they were criminals on the loose.

**KM:** I would like to return to the idea of being trapped—the way the JC body is so discursively overwritten that it can seem impossible to visually present this body free of significations to “the Oriental,” “the Japanese” with all the insidious innuendos of primitive cruelty, inscrutability, the arts of pleasure and war, of “yellowness.” It is necessary to develop a way to undo the ocular logic, so deeply embedded in our visual regimes. In your poetic work, it is as if you make the photograph a site of investigation where you explore this binding logic. As with the colonizing forces of the English language, you also find fissures in the visual structures where there are new possibilities. So what does this piece do, in terms of the possibility of transforming the past, and, more specifically, its hold on the body/self?

**RM:** I think that in having the poetic texts disrupt the closed space of the photos, and at the same time, in having the photos play up against the narratives formed in the poetic texts, a more flexible and open-ended process emerges to renegotiate memory formations. I should mention that in its initial publication the series and photos were part of an art print, “Unbound Chapbook,” that was produced in a limited edition during the residency. It was my first experience of a visual art piece, and I found it enormously engaging—and at the residency the production process gave me a way of talking to the visual artists in the residency. I received excellent feedback and encouragement from a number of artists, but especially from Glen Lowry, whose advise on the interplay of photo and text was incredibly helpful to me. As someone who had worked more or less exclusively with printed texts, working directly with photos opened up new possibilities. I think that too was embodied in understanding memory, including the body’s memory, as itself a flow that is always immediate to new creative forms.

**KM:** In terms of being “present” in the contemporary world of globalization, then, this is what your current poetic-visual collages explore? Not severed from the past, but linked in ways that do not demand that you constantly return or stay there. For myself, I can experience “the return” in my own research on JC camps as continuing to be incarcerated in the past. By working across media—and intermediations time and place—how has your understanding of power and politics changed? And of here I am thinking in terms of art and writing, not instrumental notions of politics.

**RM:** Your question is difficult to answer because it calls for the kind of linearity associated with autobiography rather than the more dynamic conditions of actual lives where understanding is more organic and immediate. A short answer might invoke a statement made by Hiromi Goto some years ago in a short essay that we published in *West Coast Line*, when I was still editing that journal. Talking about her writing practice, she says: “I am troubled by reaction. When I would much rather be acting.” In the
heady period of identity politics, which for me encompasses the time from the early 70s to the early 90s, so-called minority writers and artists often began by reacting to what they perceived as the dominant structures of representation and producing work that mirrored the forms (often autobiographic) of normative subject positions. I think Roy Kiyooka’s work is exemplary in going against the grain of this tendency and exploring the aesthetic dimensions of representation where the power and politics of form reside. Instead of reacting to accepted forms, he acted by creating forms that were reflexive in pushing the limits of representation. I hope my own work has been shaped by the same impulse toward open-ended forms in honouring the present. For poets, the question of form always implicates the relations of power that are inherent in the materiality of language as the medium of representation, and this condition has called for a combination of creative acts that are critically informed and critical acts that are creatively performed.

Notes
1. This interview is a companion piece to “Always Slippage: An interview on a Collage/Poem in Process,” published in the journal West Coast Line in 2008, that Fred Wah requested for a special issue dedicated to Roy Miki. Chris Lee and Larissa Lai, from the Department of English at UBC, and Christine Kim, from the Department of English at Simon Fraser University, asked us to develop “Between the photograph and the poem,” following a symposium in 2008 entitled, “Tracing the Lines: A Symposium in Honour of Roy Miki,” to mark his retirement from Simon Fraser University. Roy Miki’s work as a scholar emerges from the intersection of work in the field of civil and human rights (the Japanese Canadian redress movement) and culture (for instance, the groundbreaking “Writing thru Race” conference). His scholarship, activism and poetic work in relation to Asian Canadians, as well as racialized subjects, multiculturalism, nationalism, transnational capital, and citizenship have created an interdisciplinary field that transcends any one discipline and has been vital for scholars seeking to move beyond the disciplinary norms and orientalizing/racializing terms and erasures of their institutions. In particular, on the west coast of Canada, his work has been in dialogue with the ongoing work of scholars who have either been geographically or conceptually travelling this terrain over the last several decades (if not more), whether Smaro Kamboureli, Fred Wah, Shirley Bear Annharte, Jo-Ann Archibald, David Chariandy, and writers Marcia Crosby, Dara Culhane, Jeff Derksen, David Fujino, Monika Kin Gagnon, Hiromi Goto, Yasmine Jiwani, Christine Kim, Larissa Lai, Chris Lee, Jo-Anne Lee, Helen Leung, Glen Lowry, Lee Maracle, Daphne Marllatt, Ashok Mathur, Sophie McCall, Scott McFarlane, Mona Oikawa, Rita Wong, Jin-me Yoon, or Greg Young-Ing to mention only a few.

2. Thanks to Michael Barnholden, writer and editor, for transcribing the original conversation.


References


