

TRAVAILING GERRY SHIKATANI'S PROTEAN POETICS

“LOOK ASSIDUOUSLY, FORTUITOUSLY, PRECIPITOUSLY, GRATUITOUSLY,
INTERROGATIVELY, ALL”

» RACHEL ZOLF

We catch a fleeting glimpse of Gerry Shikatani's poetics in the first anthology featuring his work, a 1974 collection of writing by poets who hung out at Toronto's House on Gerrard, aptly titled *The House Poets*.¹ In the photo/biography that precedes his segment [Figure 1], a full-lipped, close-fisted Shikatani stands ramrod straight in tie, white shirt, jaunty hat and jeans next to a somewhat mysterious chunk of rock (chip off the Canadian Shield?) and stares out at the reader, daring us to contain him: "I write to liberate what's not-there inside (me) & inside any body else who happens to be interested ... I use a lot of styles etc.—language as unlimited media ... to communicate hardness & purity of voices & language ... I hope my stuff will help alter the consciousness of all people! && maybe a hint of city-life (grew up on Spadina) & smell of shoyu—& a touch of Buddhism."² Besides detailing his height, weight and former junior and secondary schools, Shikatani also names an interesting range of artistic influences, from Buddhist Dada poet Shinkichi Takahashi to multidisciplinary abstract/collage artist Hans Arp to the renowned Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca leaping between the unconscious and conscious.³ What's remarkable is that one can still sense this poetics and these influences in Shikatani's work almost thirty-five years later.

Not that Shikatani would necessarily agree. He says very little publicly about his practice, and the *House Poets* statement is an atypical moment of relative transparency. For an accomplished writer

of seven trade books and five chapbooks, Shikatani is not terribly invested in his author function—the work itself seems much more important to him than its scribe. One could perhaps attribute this refreshing humility to the multidisciplinary nature of his practice, extending far beyond the printed poem. He is also a visual and sound poet, fiction writer and journalist and has collaborated with filmmakers and other artists as well.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the breadth and depth of his practice, Shikatani has received scant critical attention. This unfortunate oversight could be related to him not producing easily digestible writing "made" for Canadian literary critics. It's not possible to do a close reading of one or two distinct poems and come away with a clear sense of his project. His texts are difficult to penetrate, seem almost hermetic at first. They require immersion, and the process is puzzling—like trying to decipher the pattern of a mosaic, one of his recurring metaphors. One clue to entering his work may be found in a concrete poem from *The House Poets* in which Shikatani tries to "recapture my Japanese name," translating his first name Osamu as "one who enriches himself, grows through ardent study."⁴ A similar kind of exacting presence and "ardent study" is required to understand his work. Those looking for mastery of content or form could come away disappointed; far better to give in to the multifaceted sensory and intellectual experience of participation and enriching travail. In fact, a reader who devotes patient and keen attention to Shikatani's prismatic work—who "tr[ies] to look assiduously, fortuitously, precipitously, gratuitously, interrogatively, all"⁵—may indeed find his or her consciousness altered.

» FAITH IN THE CHAIN

Shikatani's work is more concerned with process than

1 Hans Jewinski, ed., *The House Poets: Eight Toronto Poets* (Toronto: Missing Link Press, 1974). Shikatani was an active participant in the 1970s reading series organized by the late Ted Plantos at The House on Gerrard St. attached to the Toronto Public Library's Parliament Street branch. The other poets in the anthology were Kent L. Bowman, Brenda Saunders, John L. Jessop, shant basmajian, Sam F. Johnson, Plantos and the editor, Jewinski.

2 Ibid. np.

3 Robert Bly, *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations* (New York: Beacon Press, 1975).

4 *The House Poets*, np.

5 Gerry Shikatani, *mortar rake glove sausan broom basin sansui: Three Gardens of Andalucía* (Vancouver: Capilano Review, Series 2, No. 39/40), 27.

GERRY OSAMU SHIKATANI
 BORN: Toronto, February 6, 1950
 HEIGHT: 5'6"
 WEIGHT: 130
 EDUCATION: Lansdowne Public School
 Harbord Collegiate Institute
 University of Toronto
 RESIDENCE: Toronto

dear Hans: an intro into me. I write. & write to
 liberate what's not there inside (me) & inside any body else
 who happens to be interested.
 & these days I'm working at all kinds of odd jobs to make \$\$.
 ###
 my writing? I use a lot of styles etc. — language as unlimited
 use any thing to communicate hardness of & purity of voices media
 & language.
 I hope my stuff will help alter the consciousness of our all people
 & maybe a hint of city-life (grew up on Spadina!)
 & a smell of shoyu (soya sauce) — & a touch of Buddhism. !!!
 ###
 I've benefitted much from LINK poetry work_{shop} — a group
 of poets-friends who get together regularly.
 & of course, the house on Gerrard.

O.K.
 & finally — let me mention some names important
 to me, because of their art.
 in poetry — Garcia Lorca & Shinkichi Takahashi
 " & art/esp. sculpt. — Hans Arp.

A chapbook published



Figure #1

product. Similarly, my aim is not to fix his poetry in any particular category or style of writing (personal lyric, experimental/innovative, aesthetic, anti-aesthetic, etc.) or to explicate it in any limiting way. Rather I'd like to pull out a few strands to perhaps hang onto as we enter his texts—one of which is seriality. It's possible to read all of Shikatani's work—his poetry, performances, fiction as well as the food journalism he does for money—as one work. A foremost practitioner of the Canadian long poem, Shikatani composes books (and series of books), not epiphanic one-off poems randomly collected. To use Robert Kroetsch's definition, the serial writer creates "the poem as long as a life."⁶ For Shikatani, the task broadens to "the poem as life,"⁷ forging links among writing, spirituality and being-in-the-world.

The serial is defined as a form composed of many loosely associated parts; modular, discontinuous, it is incapable of linear order-

6 Robert Kroetsch note to "Seed Catalogue" in Michael Ondaatje, ed., *The Long Poem Anthology* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), 311.

7 Comment by Gerry Shikatani on the night (November 20, 2006) that I presented a version of this essay at Margaret Christakos's "Influency" class at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies. Influency is an interesting pedagogical experiment in which Toronto poets talk as critics on the work of other Toronto poets.

ing. The long poem has similar attributes, and reading one becomes an act of discovery, an interpenetrative performance. The titles and covers of three of Shikatani's poetry books point to his serialist poetics. *A Sparrow's Food*, 1988, and *Aqueduct*⁸ all bear a similar design—a minimalist use of three colours (designed by Shikatani's brother Stan)—and each relates to a specific time period. Yet this isn't a straight narrative or chronological story; there are lapses and overlaps in time and space. For example, *A Sparrow's Food* was published in 1984 and its subtitle is *Poems: 1971–1982*. Yet when 1988 comes along in 1989, it purports to cover 1973–1988, thus overlapping with *A Sparrow's Food*. Then *Aqueduct* is published in 1996, but its subtitle includes the date range 1979–1987 and the book itself travels beyond 1987 in places.⁹ While these shifts don't really affect how we read the texts, they do demonstrate a sense of time's rhythms and flows that is closer to lived experience than linear chronology. Nicole Brossard's notion of history as not linear or dialectic but *spirale*¹⁰ comes to mind, as does Gertrude Stein's insistence that "beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series."¹¹

The title of Shikatani's most recent book of poetry (inspired by his visit to three gardens in Andalucía, Spain) is *mortar rake glove sausan broom basin sansui*. This title is itself a serial or associative list—a list that also presents us with a clue. Perhaps these are the tools we need to read this book

(and perhaps by extension all of Shikatani's work). It may be that after working hard cultivating this text garden and practising "faith in the archaeology of things, of detail ... the chain,"¹² we will catch a glimpse of something extraordinary: a white lily (translation of Arabic *sausan*); a beautiful landscape (the Japanese *sansui*).

Given his emphasis on process, it's not surprising that Shikatani is deeply invested in the form and production of the book object; in fact he has deliberately challenged the book's perceived formal boundaries on a number of occasions. For example, *Aqueduct* could easily have been published as three separate books, but instead Shikatani shepherded an unprecedented collaboration among three Canadian small-press publishers (Mercury, Wolsak and Wynn, and Underwhich) to produce one monumental serial bookwork of over four hundred pages. He also chose to publish *mortar rake...* as a special double issue of the west coast journal *Capilano Review* (also a serial form), in turn distancing himself from the authorial function attached to and promoted with trade book production.

As alluded above, a key aspect of serial poetry is that it plays with repetition over the spatial and temporal fields of each book—and over multiple books in the series. Between its covers, the text folds back on itself and demands close attention: "(repeat again the phrase, for it threatens even the closed, shaded eye, the / uncovered skin)."¹³ *Aqueduct* turns and returns to the same locales and themes throughout the book, and like "[a] tape looped round,"¹⁴ *mortar rake...* repeats aspects of certain archival texts to emphasize and re-emphasize particular fragments. *Mortar rake...*, whose subtitle is *First Book, Three Gardens of Andalucía*, picks up some of the Spanish content introduced in

8 Gerry Shikatani, *A Sparrow's Food: Poems 1971–1982* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984); 1988: *Selected Poems and Texts, 1973–1988* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1989); *Aqueduct: Poems and Texts from Europe, 1979–1987* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, Underwhich Editions, Wolsak and Wynn Publishers, 1996).

9 For example, the poem on page 394 refers to events in 1995.

10 *The Aerial Letter*, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988).

11 Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" in Carl Van Vechten, ed., *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 516.

12 Shikatani, *Aqueduct: Poems and Texts from Europe, 1979–1987* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, Underwhich Editions, Wolsak and Wynn Publishers, 1996), 342.

13 *Ibid.*, 344

14 *mortar rake*, 96.



Figure #2

Aqueduct, and also refers in passing to Japanese “Zen” gardens when Shikatani won’t actually go to Japan until the next book—the promised second book in the series (not yet published).¹⁵ Shikatani’s repetitions make good ecological use of difference and deferral while keeping the work grounded in specific times, places and things. Like an aqueduct’s manmade mechanism of gathering and controlling water, these seemingly artificial collections of disparate moments become books weighted by archives of speech and objects—flowing phenomena that the reader helps accumulate, make meaning of, however fragmentary: “Aqueducts collect speech, there is this direction outwards. Wine in the glass, in the hand, or wash hung to dry. This is collected speech. She is (collect) dreaming of aqueducts, her river is flowing outwards. Now the scarlet, bleached, snapping in the wind.”¹⁶

» CREATION MADE ACT

Fully experiencing Shikatani’s work requires an immersive performativity and interactivity similar

to what the poet himself enacts as he “catalogue[s] the senses’ confusion held from within the body’s investment.”¹⁷ Shikatani has been performing sound poetry since the 1970s, when he was active in the Kontakte writers-in-performance series in Toronto that included bpNichol and the Four Horsemen and Owen Sound, among other performers.¹⁸ One of the only existing documentations of Shikatani’s ephemeral sound work is a collaboration he did with filmmaker Philip Hoffman in the 1990s on the seven-minute film *Kokoro is for Heart*. According to Hoffman’s notes on the film,¹⁹ the project emerged from Shikatani and Hoffman travelling to a nearby Ontario gravel pit and spontaneously shooting a few canisters of Super 8 film of Shikatani in the pit. This footage was shown as part of Hoffman’s *Opening Series* (the serial again!) performances in which he placed sections of the film in canisters painted with abstract scenes then invited the audience to choose the order of the canisters (and hence the film). In this third installment of *Opening Series*, Shikatani improvised his sound poetry²⁰ live in front of the audience while the randomly ordered gravel pit film ran behind him. This aleatory performance was later fixed in serial time in the film and sound editing suite and renamed *Kokoro is for Heart*. It premiered to acclaim

17 *mortar rake*, 52.

18 Kontakte was organized by Richard Truhlar, Steven Ross Smith and, later, Brian Dedora. Besides the performers mentioned above, other writers featured in this series that were key influences for Shikatani included Thomas A. Clark, Bernard Heidsieck and Québécois writers Nicole Brossard and Michael Delisle. Shikatani lived in Quebec and France from 1990–2000, and he says his immersion in the francophone writing world “has informed a more European-influenced sensibility and perspectives I feel at home in.” Personal email to author, 4 Jan., 2008.

19 See Hoffman’s website <http://www.philiphoffman.ca/film/filmography/opening-series3.htm>. Date retrieved 10 Jan., 2008

20 This sound work was inspired by an earlier work of Shikatani’s commissioned by Boston sculptor/performance artist Bart Uchida.

15 Press release for launch of *mortar rake* on *Capilano Review* website: http://www.thecapilanoreview.ca/events_readings.php (8 Nov., 2003). Date retrieved 10 Jan., 2008

16 *Aqueduct*, 316.

at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1999 and was named Best Experimental Film at the Athens Film and Video Festival.

Sound poetry foregrounds the verbalness and iconicity of language while also challenging its seeming “natural” transparency, just as experimental film challenges the iconicity of the image and defamiliarizes it. While shooting the film with Shikatani, Hoffman was unaware that there was a technical problem with the camera that made the image shake. This potential creative nightmare proved serendipitous, however, as for Hoffman the marred image “rendered the filmed nature unnatural.”²¹ In fact, the image’s discontinuities matched and contrasted the rhythms and breath patterns of Shikatani’s voice, and Hoffman exploited this in the editing room. In addition, while Hoffman shot some images of surrounding nature for the film, he and Shikatani chose not to include background natural sounds in the final cut. Instead we hear the material sounds of the Bolex—the scratches and beeps of the camera’s inner workings dialoguing with Shikatani’s fractured and overlapping English, French and Japanese phrasings, “his tonal gestures coming to meet the sound that light makes.” The result is a performative breath rhythm of a film “created through shooting rather than through editing.”²² Also an apt analogy for Shikatani’s body of work that continually strives for the right form to embody the creative act in and of the moment, the quiddity of daily attending and witnessing:

*this way this
cloth enters this poem
on the thin edge
of a line this word*

*or scarf which
knots the desire
of breath
into the hand.*

*writing this passion
into the respiration
world.*²³

In sound poetry we experience language as a plastic medium, the fragmented voice presenting rather than re-presenting language and demonstrating that sound does not always equate with language. The voice becomes pure gesture—another analogy for reading Shikatani’s work. To see a collection of impressions, gestures of the now rather than whole pictures of experiences gone by: “a moment / repeated, / of a bird’s eye / view a / moment repeating out / & in / a design / in time.”²⁴ Similarly, silences, gaps and scorings have profound meaning and consequence in all of Shikatani’s artwork, be it text, visual or sound. A Japanese-Canadian man working primarily in English but with an oral/aural knowledge of Japanese from his childhood, Shikatani’s knowledge base includes the silencing of his Japanese language and identity that the imperialism of the English language and its inherent racism enacts. He performed one sound piece in the 1980s in which he took a fork to his teeth, inflicting real pain on himself while repeatedly reciting “Once a Jap Always a Jap,” a racist slogan used in British Columbia during World War Two and likely endured by some of Shikatani’s family members.²⁵ This horrifying enactment of the power of language and racism to hurt and maim (language as “anguish,” in poet M.

21 <http://www.philiphoffman.ca/film/filmography/opening-series3.htm>. Date retrieved 10 Jan., 2008.

22 *Opening Series: an interview with Philip Hoffman* by Barbara Sternberg, Cinecycle, Toronto, Winter 1993. <http://www.philiphoffman.ca/film/filmography/opening-series3.htm>. Date retrieved 10 Jan., 2008.

23 *Aqueduct*, 154.

24 *Ibid.*, 47.

25 I’m indebted to Beverley Daurio, longtime publisher of Shikatani’s work at The Mercury Press, for telling me about this performance.

NourbeSe's Philip's terms²⁶) is palpable without even having witnessed the performance.

Like an operatic score, multiple things happen on multiple planes simultaneously in Shikatani's work, and one must travel a vertical, rather than linear, trajectory through it. Shikatani has intimated that his work is influenced by Cubist practices of making "things common to us ... unfamiliar."²⁷ Like the Cubists, he arrives at the real by nonrealist means²⁸ and we must negotiate the multiple spaces, silences and "leaps" (to borrow from Robert Bly on Lorca) in thought and action. This will always be an "unfinished"²⁹ project (like life, or the serial)—we'll never be able to contain its excesses to form a teleological whole. But we can experience moments of lucidity, layers of momentaneity—the "this. this. this." that appears in *Kokoro is for Heart* and recurs in *Aqueduct*.³⁰ Essentially, "how we find names / in breath in the / movements of each day."³¹ As time shifts, jags and ultimately passes in *Kokoro is for Heart*, residual "memory trace[s]" remain, just as each of Shikatani the archivist's books contains traces of its predecessors. Our task (not a simple one, being the task of life itself) is to "pick up what is hand"³² and make of it what we can:

memory upon
memory, stone upon
stone, do we point

towards home.³³

The language, rhythms and silences in and of the sensual and feeling body that flow throughout Shikatani's work—"that writing you wear / across your body"³⁴—also inhabit *Kokoro is for Heart*. Words broken from the signifying chain become visceral breath, silence and fragment—approaching corporeal and semantic limits through complex patterning and repetition: the stuttering "k. k. k." and "ne. ne. ne." as he attempts to make shape of heart (the English translation of *kokoro*) and tears (*namida* in Japanese). "Image. distant. hand. fossil. hand. sand. fossil. this sea ... fossil equidistant and shape of hand, sand, distant hand ... a place a map a wave a thought:" these meditative, associative word/sound sculptures prick the listener/viewer's mind to attention, all the while embedded within a powerful concave acoustic and visual space. "Memory washes into frame, into this,"³⁵ just as in Shikatani's text work "words [are] placed / wet into a chosen frame."³⁶ We must listen closely and bear witness before they wash away.

The skin prickles too, as the film's ecstatic synesthetic sound and visual collage "signs this site with weaving a drenched taste."³⁷ We find ourselves in the realm of the *duende*, that mysterious spiritual force engendered "not in the throat; the duende climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet"³⁸ according to Shikatani's beloved Lorca—the Andalusian poet driven by the "emotion of the landscape"³⁹ and

26 M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1989), 58.

27 Shikatani, "Writing as delight, the pleasure," *Open letter* 12:5, 93. Available online at <http://www.sagehillwriting.ca/keynotes/shikatani04.htm> Date retrieved 10 Jan., 2008.

28 Gerald Kamber, *Max Jacob and the Poetics of Cubism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), xx.

29 "Writing as delight, the pleasure," 90.

30 *Aqueduct*, 37.

31 *Ibid.*, 166.

32 "Writing as delight, the pleasure," 88.

33 *Aqueduct*, 167.

34 *Ibid.*, 219.

35 *Kokoro is for Heart*..

36 *Aqueduct*, 123.

37 *Kokoro is for Heart*.

38 Federico García Lorca, "Play and Theory of the Duende" in *In Search of Duende*, trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998), 49.

39 C. Brian Morris, *Son of Andalusia: The Lyrical Landscapes of Federico García Lorca* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), 6.

the *cante jondo* (deep song) of flamenco that Shikatani also explores in his poetry and journalism. Duende is the palpable creation made act, “a power, not a work ... a struggle, not a thought”⁴⁰ akin for Shikatani to “when a dancer stretches beyond mere form.”⁴¹ Swept along by *Kokoro is for Heart*’s jagged, overlapping images and sounds, we too feel “heart’s accelerant tongue passing, pressing,”⁴² the weight of *namida*, loss, mourning, the weight of blood—coupled with the aleatory mystery of sexuality, spirituality and *jouissance*: duende’s “life and death, a snicker.”⁴³ Throughout the course of the film, Shikatani cultivates his own Japanese dry garden in the gravel pit, at times “push[ing] the line”⁴⁴ in the sand with a stick *qua* gardening broom. By the film’s end, the “rhythm of the / oral landscape”⁴⁵ has become concrete (pardon the pun) as Shikatani places stones in a shape resembling a Japanese written character (*kokoro*, perhaps), embedding inscription in the landscape: “Word / when it was not / electric; stone. Was.”⁴⁶ Like the film’s recurring image of a feather barely hanging on to the edge of thistle [Figure 2], Shikatani continually complicates our perceptions of the “real” or “natural” way of things and beings, and emphasizes the precariousness of all life and beauty, much like a garden.

» PLANT LANGUAGE

In *mortar rake...* Shikatani visits gardens and former palaces in Andalucía in the southernmost region of Spain. Andalucía is a remarkable place where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together under Islamic rule from the early eighth century until the

Christian Reconquista in a period marked by tremendous intellectual and cultural flourish. In fact, the region’s largest city, Córdoba, was the centre of learning for all of early modern Western Europe. Andalucía’s model of cultural tolerance and respect came to a final end in that fateful year 1492 when the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella routed the last Muslim centre of Grenada and took up residence at the sumptuous Alhambra palace before sending Christopher Columbus off to conquer “new” worlds. Christian rulers systematically destroyed most evidence of Islamic and Jewish presence in Andalucía. The palaces and gardens that Shikatani visits and writes about are mere traces of the storied history of Muslim (“Moorish”) influence on the area. Yet *mortar rake...* could also be read as a Buddhist-inflected cry to revisit previous models of cultural, linguistic and religious cohabitation for possible clues to healing this violent and ruining world.

A fascinating, multilayered text written during the first Gulf War, *mortar rake...* interweaves photos, archival documents and fragments of book and newspaper citations, and also includes a few of Shikatani’s visual poems, here called “Collage Gardens.” One of these visual pieces, “Three New Gardens: Museo,”⁴⁷ forces you to see the entire poem at once—its whole and its parts in a kind of multiplied simultaneity that is emblematic of Shikatani’s work [Figure 3]. The piece is also visually reminiscent of a mosaic, an appropriate recurring image in his poetry, the always unfinished whole: “mosaics / broken // see speech fragmented, in a way hey lizard.”⁴⁸ In “Three New Gardens: Museo,” Shikatani creates a collage “garden typescape,”⁴⁹ with multiple languages and images coexisting in an “architecture of thought”⁵⁰ that could serve as a model space for reaching across

40 Lorca, 49.

41 *Aqueduct*, 341.

42 *Kokoro is for Heart*.

43 *Aqueduct*, endotes, 409.

44 *Ibid.*, 230.

45 *Ibid.*, 78.

46 *Ibid.*, 334.

47 *mortar rake*, 143.

48 *Aqueduct*, 337.

49 “Writing as delight, the pleasure,” 96.

50 *Aqueduct*, 249.

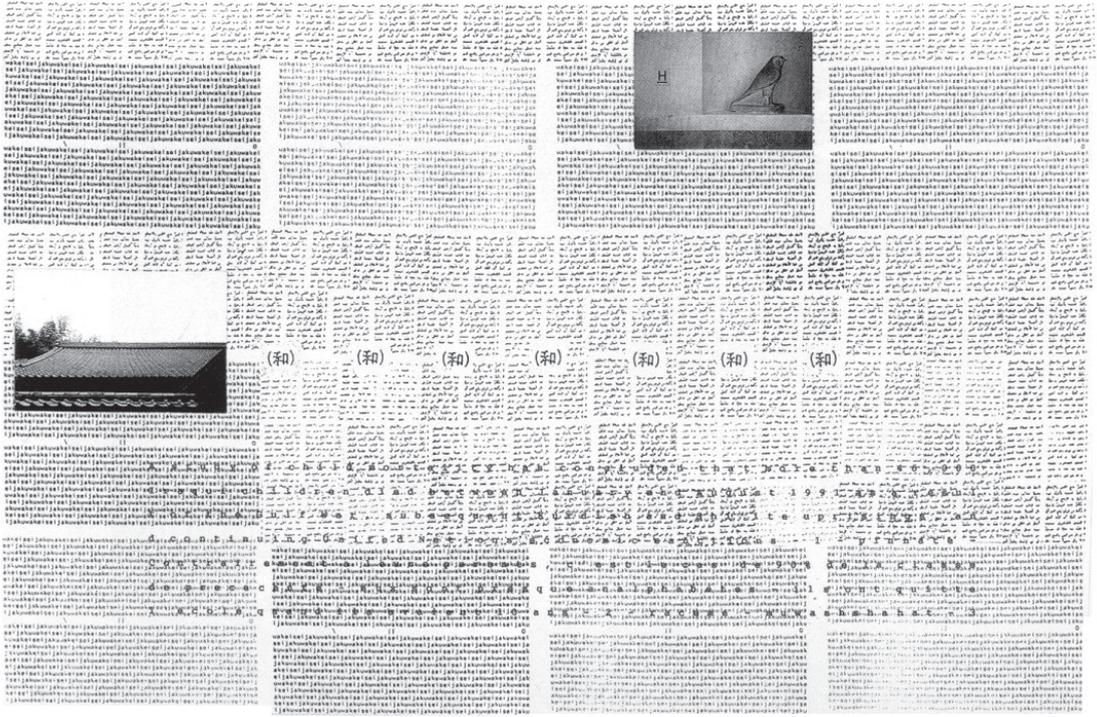


Figure #3: Gerry Shikatanı, “Three New Gardens: Museo.”

cultural and language barriers, trans-lating the alterity of the Other.

One layer of “Three New Gardens: Museo” contains serial suites of Arabic poems taken from the walls of the Alhambra and *romaji* (anglicized Japanese) Zen words for gardens—*wei, kei, sei, jaku*—representing the need to cultivate humility, harmony, order and a calm mind, to cultivate our garden. Because no iconic images are permitted in Muslim architecture, words carved into these monumental Andalusian buildings take the place of the icon, and in turn take on their own iconicity. The Alhambra is literally covered in a mosaic of poetry, enacting a semiotics of the land akin to the *Kokoro is for Heart* stone sculpture that Shikatani builds with his hands. In fact, looking at his body of work as a kind of collage garden is useful. A garden is a performance that can’t be fixed—that lasts for a duration of time and must be repeated cyclically to be re-experienced. A collage garden is an unfolding, ever-changing composition enacted in the body of the poet and poem and recorded through the eyes of the spectator.

Layered over the word fragments in “Three New Gardens: Museo” are images of a Japanese pagoda and a bird (with an “H” beside it, perhaps in homage to the late poet bpNichol, another “gardener and labourer”⁵¹ and profound influence on Shikatani’s work). The final element of the collage is excerpts in English and French from articles on infant deformity and mortality in Iraq due to American usage of depleted uranium in bullets during the first Gulf War. Shikatani wrote *mortar rake...* during that war in Iraq, yet this work is still powerfully relevant during the present Iraq incursion and in response to the continuing devastation wrought by Western imperialism on the East.

» THE GRAMMAR OF THE ROAD

In a rare statement on his poetic practice, Shika-

tani describes his peripatetic nature (not to mention his class position): “The most valuable piece of real estate I’ll ever have, where I’m standing.”⁵² This brings to mind James Clifford’s notion of “dwelling-in-travel”⁵³—here a postmodern displaced subject replacing Heidegger’s utopian back-to-the-pure-Germanic-land notion of dwelling. In *Kokoro is for Heart*, Shikatani intimates that “the way is for wandering,” but the journey poems in *Aqueduct* and *mortar rake...* are not transparent travelogues: “I am given to the meandering way.”⁵⁴ There is a deliberate distancing to this work, what the back of *Aqueduct* calls a “marvelous elliptical indirection,” that forces us to ground ourselves in the *tierra firma*⁵⁵ of our own associative reading paths.

At first glance the form of *Aqueduct* seems spontaneous, site-based (as evidenced in titles) and epiphanic lyric in style. We see three of four stanzas on a left-justified page—and poems that seem to reflect on trips to common European tourist sites such as the Louvre. But on closer inspection it becomes evident that Shikatani’s poems are anything but consumable travel ditties. In fact, we learn more about the smell of coffee, the taste of cigarettes, the body in space, what “the ness / confers”⁵⁶ than we do about the Louvre. “[H]alf hieroglyph and half / colour,”⁵⁷ Shikatani’s poems require a reader’s openness and patient attentiveness to “an exact present”⁵⁸ in order to enact “euphony crossing from inside to outside.”⁵⁹ What they bring across our thresholds is a much

52 “Writing as delight, the pleasure,” 88.

53 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

54 *mortar rake*, 136.

55 *Ibid.*, 113.

56 *Ibid.*, 25.

57 *Aqueduct*, 220.

58 Lorca, 54.

59 *mortar rake*, 138.

51 *mortar rake*, 169.

deeper wisdom than any poetic Baedeker's could ever aspire to. As Lorca noted, "there are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the duende."⁶⁰

The narrator/collector/archivist of *Aqueduct* and *mortar rake*... is no Grand Tourist on a classic enlightenment European quest for the Sublime. No rakish Lord Byron setting his "Don Juan" poem in Andalucía and later penning "A Very Mournful Ballad on the Siege and Conquest of Alhama"⁶¹; nor Washington Irving enjoying the many pleasures of the Alhambra palace then going back to the U.S. to write allegorical tales of Christian values subjugating Islam.⁶² These stances are of course classic examples of what Edward Said would call Orientalism, the process by which Western imperialism justifies its acts by conflating history with fiction and ideology.⁶³

Shikatani's poetic persona is an artist. He's a traveller, a *travailleur*. Not white, not privileged in any way (other than having a certain degree of cultural capital), he works for his experiences. On the scent for the perfect meal, the best flamenco experience—"the hunt for taste / street after street"⁶⁴—and writing newspaper articles about these experiences to get by. "[T]ravel touches these / words, so sharply / defined by instance the grammar / of the road."⁶⁵ He's no picaresque Tom Jones or Candide, or flâneur for that matter. Not for him to penetrate the heart of darkness, his task is more to "penetrate my own diffidence, in difference, / own colour Orient not Occident."⁶⁶

While most travel narratives concentrate too closely on the self, self and Other are not clearly demarcated in much of Shikatani's work, as its professed aim is "to lose the self by the trace of a path."⁶⁷ We discover little about the narrator's subjectivity, and even when Gerry Shikatani appears in a photo (as a volunteer palace gardener) in *mortar rake*...,⁶⁸ this character remains once or twice removed from our grasp. Shikatani's narrator-persona takes the stance of the unmarked observer in the landscape: "Can we say a poem is proper to an individual for it is of the territory, the soil banked beneath the feet this."⁶⁹ Yet there are interesting paradoxes in a Western man with roots in the East travelling in Andalucía, the last Eastern paradise/enclave/trace of history in the West. "I am this Japanese guy but proudly Canadian made."⁷⁰

A subtle irony and tension becomes attached to the Shikatani persona's big European adventure, just as there's a similar irony attached to a Japanese-Canadian man writing about whitebread Ontario cottage country and the "north"—as Shikatani did in his Eastern White Pine project of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷¹ He places himself in the classic position of the unmarked man while destabilizing readerly expectations of what defines that subject, just as his form and content confounds our latent (or not so latent) desire for easy, packaged poems. Entering Shikatani's poetic landscapes we experience a sense of the uncanny—*unheimlich* (unhomelike)—an uneasy displacement within the pages of the book

60 Lorca, 51.

61 *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1842), 576.

62 Washington Irving, *Tales from the Alhambra*. (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1910).

63 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

64 *Aqueduct*, 122.

65 *Ibid.*, 187.

66 *mortar rake*, 55.

67 *Aqueduct*, 318.

68 *mortar rake*, 175.

69 *Ibid.*, 71.

70 *Ibid.*, 114.

71 See for example, *The Book of Tree: A Cottage Journal* (Toronto: Underwhich editions, 1987) and the chapbook *Haliburton* (Toronto: The Missing Link Press, 1975). Like all aspects of his serial work, Shikatani says the Eastern White Pine project "is never finished." Gerry Shikatani, email to author, 4 Jan., 2008.

that reflects the displaced subject himself: “No time now me in his bright, to hold the self the hostile this uneasy weight, thing of not knowing a home, a place to rest crumpled creased papers and notes, heavy table and pen.”⁷²

This may be a projection of my own sense of rootlessness and displacement that I partly attribute to my family’s diasporic experience and brush with Shoah tragedy, but I wonder how much of Shikatani’s dwelling-in-travel relates to a fundamental sense of displacement due to his family’s forced internment during World War Two. He wasn’t born yet but was sure to bear some of its transhistorical tragic effects: “these ways dreams are scored on body, / and / body’s event, / ‘all’.”⁷³ In fact, one of his new projects, another film collaboration in progress, takes him back to his family’s former home in northern British Columbia on the River Skeena to explore “where my language came from.”⁷⁴ Perhaps this journey will provide a form of return—“and now my way is clear”⁷⁵—and rest for Shikatani; perhaps he will “Arrive, arrive, arrive, arrive, arrive, arrive, arrive, / arrive, arrive, arrive, arrive.”⁷⁶

But we’ll never know for sure. For while he may give us a few tools to work with, there’s no prescription for interpreting Shikatani’s work; there’s “hardly a solution here, dear.”⁷⁷ As readers, we have to travail the whole way through—digging in and down and bearing witness with the same rigour and humility as he does: “Here, I plant my first page smudged with soil.”⁷⁸ If we don’t get it, we just have to “Begin again,

smarty pants.”⁷⁹ Like any good quest, “we come to lose the way”⁸⁰ while gleaning what we can.

*A garden too has its secrets. Open, virtual, disclosed, the plant-language. But alcoves – man-made – corners little stairways leading to damp or dry places where there could be a bench but there is not. All that is wanted all that the instinct really moves to is a fragment of some pottery just, a cedar bush a twig of rosemary or discarded paper, fragment only edges are torn are furred, joust, play, the veritable talking stick, imbedded with inherence.*⁸¹

72 *Aqueduct*, 216.

73 *Ibid.*, 220.

74 Comment of Shikatani’s from November 20, 2006 “Influency” class. The working title of the film is “Follow the river, the Skeena.”

75 *mortar rake*, 38.

76 *Aqueduct*, 238.

77 *mortar rake*, 91.

78 *Ibid.*, 167.

79 *Ibid.*, 91.

80 *Ibid.*, 150.

81 *Ibid.*, 19.