

Motions and Moments:

More Essays on Tokyo

By Michael Pronko

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Epigraph

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Wallace Stevens, "*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*"

Note on the Glossary

I included a glossary at the end of the collection. All Japanese words that work better in Japanese have been given in italicized Roman alphabet form, called *romaji*. The reader can flip back to the glossary to find those, or read on and experience the confusion of being in Tokyo. Check the back for the fun words, the crucial ones and sometimes the strange.

The words glossed in Japanese *romaji* are one of two kinds. First, they are words so common they are easily and quickly picked up by any non-Japanese visitor or short-term resident. For example, *onigiri*, which means rice ball, in rough translation. It's such a necessity to Tokyo life and so special it could only be called *onigiri*. "I was starving so I had to stop by a convenience store for a couple *onigiri*," sounds natural. If you said "rice ball" instead, people would think you got a new game app.

The second type of gloss are words that translate into English awkwardly or only with elaborate explanation. It would be cumbersome and distracting to take a sentence like, "I have to wash *shiokara* down with beer," and instead say something like, "I have to wash *raw fish guts fermented*

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in a paste of salt, visceral juices and malted rice down with beer,” though the latter sentence in some ways better expresses the pungency of fermented fish guts and makes the need for beer clearer.

True to Tokyo’s inconsistency, I sometimes use some English, like “cell phone,” in the essay on cell phones. But at other times, I put in *keitai*, short for *keitai denwa*, which means cell phone. English speaking friends and I rarely use the English word because that little object is so central to Tokyo life. A little inconsistency never hurt anyone, I figure, and anyway, Tokyoites switch terms whenever they feel like it, dropping a little English in here, taking it out there. Inconsistency is part of life here—or maybe its only consistency.

Apologies in advance for the glossary, but it would have been worse if I had tried putting words in one of the three other writing systems: *hiragana*, *katakana* or *kanji*. That would clear things up for readers who know Japanese, but would just confuse everyone else. The readability of *romaji* seems a fair compromise. Words have their own beauty, usage and repetition, stronger than what users can control, so sometimes you have to leave them as they are and keep going. Hope you feel the same.

Intro and In

City of Eyes

The other day, for the first time, a young woman sitting on the Chuo Line train won the contest of “who will look away first.” In the past, I could always stare longer than anyone in Tokyo, but this Tokyo woman outstared me. I felt surprised, and maybe a little humiliated, that she could hold the eye contact longer than me—a Westerner!

When I first came to Tokyo eighteen years ago, I felt bewildered because no one met my eyes. At the time I wondered: was something wrong with me? I felt alienated, anonymous, unseen. Shopping, teaching or walking around, it was hard to get a clear look into the heart of the city since people’s eyes quickly shuttered.

Of course, I knew that in Asian countries eye contact carries vastly different meanings than in America where I’m from. In Asia—Japan especially—downcast eyes express humility and respect. But when eyelids clamped down, I felt the human side of the city was veiled and hidden from me.

That frustration whetted my curiosity to peer inside Tokyo life, always hoping to join that elusive, secreted Tokyo life to mine. But, I gradually noticed there was a lot

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of freedom in that looking away too. I could look around all I wanted. I started to care less if people “saw” me. I had too much else to look at in Tokyo to worry about that.

Now, eighteen years later, when I make a purchase or look around on the train, people’s eyes linger on mine as they hand me my bag, sit across from me on the train, or cut in front of me up the escalator. Has Tokyo changed, or have I? Tokyoites have always been masters of the side-glance and the stolen glance. But these days, Tokyoites are starting to master the direct stare too. I’ve had to re-up my eye game.

I suppose some of this change comes from more Tokyoites going abroad. I can almost always tell when Tokyoites have spent a lot of time overseas. Their eyes holler out, “Hey, how ya doin’?” Along with foreign words, foreign eye contact has crept into Tokyo life. Recently, when I order a coffee at one of the foreign chain stores invading every corner of Tokyo, I was startled by the way young, part-time workers looked directly into my eyes. It made me think, “Where am I? New York?”

It’s a strange thing for a westerner to have western culture shock in the middle of Tokyo, but I still have plenty of the regular kind, too. These essays are one way I big-eye back at that ongoing shock and pick through causes and ponder meanings. E.M. Forster said, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” But for me in Tokyo,

I always wonder: How do I know what I see until I read what I wrote about what I saw.

Trains always help me see the city, so that is where most of these essay ideas were hatched. Tokyo trains are a standing refuge, a place for thought and observation. The solitude of the train, even when elbow-to-elbow, back-to-back, bag and butt at rush hour, is strangely contemplative. But it also forces you to look, and to see.

There are many excellent books about Tokyo that draw tight topographies of the city's architecture, history or politics. I often pore over my Tokyo books about journalism, history, editorial, maps and more maps, urban studies and anthropology, but I don't discover my essay topics by reading. I find essays springing from the day to day, or rather, the train to train of life here.

Each day, each train ride, presents its own topic in pleasingly random ways. A book of essays about Tokyo should cohere, but not too perfectly, I feel. Once it coheres too well, it loses the delight of diversity. And that would be less Tokyo.

As just one more person jammed onto another crowded train, I always feel connected to humanity, but sometimes pretty far from humans. Tokyo seems to push one deeper into oneself and to strip away the pretensions of the self. What with all those other selves wandering around, it's hard to feel too special.

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The pressure of people around all the time is like weights at the gym. Pushing against Tokyo psychologically, and sometimes physically, keeps the brain muscles in shape. Tokyo is always a workout. One to write up.

I started writing essays about Tokyo fifteen years ago. Since then, I've written and published over 200 of them. When I started, I was writing jazz reviews for an on-line magazine about Tokyo and I proposed short essays to round out the concert listings, restaurant reviews and practical what-to-do's.

My editor at the time saw Tokyo as objective information. I saw it as subjective enticement. He wanted broad coverage. I wanted to ponder the urban experience. He wanted correct addresses. I wanted juicy stories. We soon parted ways. He kept on filling in the blanks. I continued essaying Tokyo's elusive meanings.

Despite the years and the essays, and the visa renewals, Tokyo has never completely normalized for me. I realized little by little that though I am very much *in* Tokyo, I would never quite be *of* Tokyo. That's a good place to write from—and in Tokyo maybe the only place to write from.

I feel more fluidity between my self and the city than I did when I first came eighteen years ago, but as Virginia Woolf said, the essay writer's central conflict is: "Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem." The

irresolvable problem, I'd say, is how to be myself and yet also be a Tokyoite, a trick I'm still mastering.

For ten years, I wrote a monthly column about Tokyo for *Newsweek Japan*, reactions and opinions from my point of view. My early columns were collected into three well-received books in Japan, and two of those are now in English: *Beauty and Chaos* and *Tokyo's Mystery Deepens*.

For this new collection, I am drawing from my later columns in *Newsweek Japan* published mainly in the four years after the 2011 earthquake. I added a few new essays as they arrived in my head—on the train mainly.

I let some of the essays in this book grow a little beyond their original size, but I kept most around *Newsweek Japan's* one-page max because Tokyo life is about spatial limitations. In Tokyo, efficiency of time and space is paramount. Entire stores are devoted to getting things to fit inside closets, kitchens, drawers, bags and six-tatami-mat apartments. In Tokyo, things have to fit. Words are the same. Fewer words do more—and different—work.

In his book on Paris, Adam Gopnik has written, “The essayist dreams of being a prism, through which other light passes, and fears ending up merely a mirror, showing the same old face.” Writing in first-person, I do check the mirror of my own creations from time to time. But I don't look too long. These essays are less mirror and more prism.

Most of my days in Tokyo are suffused with the white

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light of daily experience. But from time to time, it hits the prism at the right angles and explodes into meanings, ideas, associations, directions. With a slight tilt, Tokyo diffracts wild spectrums of meanings.

Living in Tokyo over the years, teaching, writing, agonizing through the earthquake and tsunami, and riding out the economic downturn, political protests, attitude shifts, and odd westernizations, I feel Tokyo's careening meanings and beguiling contradictions continue to multiply and beg to be written about.

A few years ago, NHK—Japan's PBS or BBC—invited me to help make videos on the topics in my essays. A director, small film crew and I made short English-language videos on Tokyo's maps, shop signs, drinking joints and other topics. As I stood around waiting to jump in front of the camera on side streets, I started thinking about how words and images are two different ways of exploring and re-presenting the world. Tokyo on TV and Tokyo in essay are two different cities.

I started to wonder if the visual images were getting closer to the real Tokyo than my words were. I felt videos caught the city from different angles and in different patterns than essays did. Words do such different work, no matter what language they're plucked from. Video captures the visual surface in all its splendor, while essays push beneath. Neither explains away the confusions of

Tokyo, but essays hold them up for a longer look.

As an American who has made Tokyo home, I'm used to confusion, of course, but then again, maybe "home" is a confusing word no matter what size city, no matter what intensity of urban experience, envelops you.

Being contradictory might be Tokyo's only consistency. Writing about it is like writing about two sides of the same coin at once. The immensity and weirdness of the city makes it hard to get a foothold, or a "pen-hold." Essays seem a trifling tool with which to take on the immense project of Tokyo. But they catch the surging energies and fleeting instants of life here.

As the Zen Buddhists say, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The essay pointing at Tokyo is not Tokyo. But then again, a finger or two pointed towards the motions and moments of a fascinating city makes it easier to glimpse them before they slip away.

Part One

Surfaces

*More than any other city, Tokyo demonstrates
that “city” is a verb and not a noun.
Toshiko Mori, **Tokyolife Art and Design***

Why Ask Me?

I was sitting at a ramen counter for lunch when an older—perhaps retired—man next to me asked, “You like ramen?”

“Of course, don’t you?” I asked back.

He chuckled and said, “I’m Japanese, so of course, I like ramen!”

“Well, I love ramen, too,” I assured him. He asked me a few more ramen specialty questions about oiliness, flavors and extras and appeared amused by my detailed knowledge. I shrugged off his questions finally and we got back to slurping.

This same conversation happens all the time. I’m questioned about whatever Japanese cultural undertaking I’m engaging in. The belief lingers that only Japanese can truly enjoy Japanese culture, so sometimes, I get a whole list of questions. Do I like: *sake*, *sushi*, *natto*, bathing at night?

When I say I don’t like *natto* so much, people assume fermented beans are very Japanese, an un-crossable line. When I order a particular kind of cold tofu at the local tofu store, which I happen to like, the neighborhood women waiting in line assume I have a Japanese wife and I just memorized the special tofu name. Even when Tokyoites

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don't ask openly, their eyes ask me what I'm doing in some out-of-the-way temple, or little-known bar.

For the record, I like most Japanese things, but draw the line at *shiokara*, salted squid guts fermented raw in gastric juices—but then so do a lot of Japanese. But are the *shiokara*-hating Japanese somehow less Japanese? Does the “*shiokara* line” divide cultural understanding or individual taste? I probably eat more ramen than most people in Tokyo, but does that mean I AM more Japanese?

Of course, the super-naïve questions I got years ago are no longer as common as they once were, with, “Can you use chopsticks?” being the classic. Tokyoites have moved the cultural dividing line further inside as they have more contact with foreigners. But still, I have to assure people, no, no, I truly feel *sashimi* washed down with a glass of *sake* is a bit of heaven and am genuinely awed by the old-wood beauty of Japanese temples. I'm not just pretending.

But, maybe my reasons *are* different. As for the ramen-eater beside me at the lunch counter: Was he eating ramen as an expression of his Japanese-ness or because he loved ramen himself? Was I enjoying ramen differently as a non-Japanese, or were we united as noodle-lovers? Was my order of *kotteri miso ramen* foreign praise of Japanese cultural genius or just my personal taste?

In New York, no one would ask a foreign visitor if they enjoy eating a juicy steak. No Parisian would ask a non-

French person if they enjoy drinking a glass of wine at a café. It's a given. It's obvious. It's a pure pleasure—not some expression of being American or French.

But in Japan, it's not that simple—or maybe not that universal. All such activities are part of a web of cultural associations. In the west, pleasures are either individual choice or a universal human experience. In Japan, pleasures are Japanese.

It gets even more confusing, though: Do Japanese attending an *ukiyo-e* woodblock print exhibit go to engage in some sort of cultural homework assignment, or do they go because they feel the prints are beautiful and interesting? Do Japanese savor a dry rock garden in Kyoto in order to express their inner Japanese character or are they searching for self-enlightenment? Isn't standing in the huge hall of a Japanese temple, staring up at the serene face of the Buddha, a universal experience by which any soul is awed?

Being Japanese seems to include an automatic copyright to a massive catalogue of cultural activities. You don't have to actually suffer repeated kicks and throws in an *aikido dojo* or apprentice yourself for years to a master pottery craftsman, as a couple of my non-Japanese friends have done. You just have to be born Japanese and it belongs to you. Japanese claim their right to their cultural activities, often without much effort.

The reluctance to share those rights and let experi-

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ences transcend cultural boundaries is centered in justifiable pride. Transcending doesn't come easy to many Japanese. When boundaries are opened up to let anyone in, culture moves from ritual activity to broader considerations. Who owns the experience of a certain taste? How is appreciation learned or acquired? Which comes first, individual likes or cultural imperative?

I wonder if the Japanese observing me doing something Japanese consider all these questions. They do at least in part when they ask me about it. Often, though, I feel they are thinking about themselves. Asking is a way of re-claiming heritage, of course, and by asking at least Tokyoites break their usual wall of silence to actually interact with a stranger. I suppose that's enough of a break from the usual in itself.

But that moment of seeing me do something Japanese is also, I guess, a bit threatening. So, that question is also a way of re-asserting cultural difference, and, at other times, I like to imagine, it's a way of opening up.

On the other hand, I'm curious as to why non-Japanese are drawn to Japanese culture too. I wonder what other parts of Japanese culture will become accepted around the world as more and more tourists come to Japan. Sushi and animation films have become globally popular perhaps because of their unique Japanese-ness or their exotic strangeness, but more likely because they tap into univer-

sal desires for meaningful fantastic stories (animation) or unprocessed, direct taste (*sushi*) shared by people in many, diverse cultures.

As the Tokyo Olympics gets closer, Japanese culture will get a massive reconsideration as more and more people around the world turn their attention to Japan. Maybe we will find out what parts of Japanese culture are more broadly loveable, as more people start trying out everything from love hotels to *geta* to *shiokara*, though I doubt the latter two will catch on worldwide.

I wonder if Japanese will keep asking non-Japanese why they like Japanese things, or if they will come to accept that Japanese culture shares a great deal with other world cultures, and that opening it up to others may not do any harm, and might do a great deal of good. As more tourists come to Japan, more and more of the hidden-away sides of Japanese culture will come out into the light, to more universal acclaim and acceptance, and maybe understanding too.

As for ramen, how much more universally loveable a lunch could there be?

The Language Dance

Tokyo is a city where one can go for weeks without needing to converse with anyone. You can silently order, pay the bill, use an IC or credit card to slip in and out of stations, and get by at work or shopping with set polite phrases that involve no real thought. But Tokyo is also a city of conversations. There are so many people so close that conversations always lie waiting whenever you want them.

As a foreigner in Tokyo, though, finding a language to converse in can be as confusing as interpreting the dance of a honeybee. In which linguistic direction should we fly? As an obvious English-speaking-looking person, I am constantly placed in the position of deciding what language to engage in.

I always start to talk in Japanese, but some people, it occasionally turns out, speak better English than I speak Japanese. Before I can find that out, though, we have to perform the ritual language dance.

The ritual goes like this: I comment in Japanese about the weather; then, a few questions are asked about where I'm from and why I'm here; gradually, the other person

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will insert a word or two in English to kind of test the waters; and finally, if I catch the hint and ask a question in English—Presto! We switch around and enter an English conversation!

Or, non-presto, they nod politely and we remain in Japanese. It can take several polite rounds before we settle on one or the other, depending on our relative language levels, relative pride or relative fatigue. At times, it feels like a pleasant decision, like choosing either chocolate or vanilla, or both. But at other times, it feels like two sumo wrestlers grappling for the strongest hold.

This ritual is much more sophisticated than it was years ago, when English conversations mainly involved red-faced *salarymen* stammering, drunk, in a smoky bar about my chopsticks skills. In those days, though, random strangers on trains and high school kids on school trips to Kyoto, would try out their *eikawa* lessons on me, following the textbook patterns precisely. They treated me like a practice session.

Recently, though, people interact more naturally in both languages. They seem less afraid of conversations with foreigners—double strangers. The new-style English conversations are a sign Tokyoite English is getting better, and that their cultural fearlessness is getting a foothold.

Sometimes surprisingly so! Calling my local city office to arrange for a *sodai gomi* pickup last summer, the woman

had to know the exact type of water heater and the exact kind of bookshelf to know how much to charge me for pickup and disposal. Though I speak Japanese passably well, I stammered finding the right vocabulary to discuss the complexities of disassembling and setting out the used furniture in my house.

After a bit of stumbling around, the woman at the call center impatiently switched into fluent English. An English conversation about trash was a first for me. She skipped the dance and charged straight into English to get things done. It was a cultural dance, too, switching over to the American let's-just-get-this-done mode.

Part of the problem is that my presence always provokes a conversation about English, even when no English gets spoken. Slipping into a chair at the counter of a craft beer bar at the start of the summer, the voices of a middle-aged couple next to me lowered as I ordered a pint. They stole furtive glances at me. Then, I heard them whisper to each other *sotto voce* that wasn't so *sotto*, "*Eigo zenzen dekinai!*" or, "I can't speak English at all."

But I'm sure the woman at the counter next to me who denied being able to speak English could in fact order a beer in New York City if she had to. She felt provoked, obligated maybe, to discuss *my* language, as if I couldn't understand *hers*. But she did not want to lean over for the ritual dance. Fair enough. In her mind, I could tell, she

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was doing the language dance on her own.

Other times, though, it's entirely the opposite. One off-duty tour guide (it turned out) next to me at a counter one evening spoke to me in Japanese for quite a while about *sake*, Japanese food, and politics before dispensing with the ritual and switching suddenly to flawless English. But he was the dance-less exception, and one with a sense of humor my lapses in Japanese no doubt amused.

At the start of the dance, it's always hard to gauge if someone really can't speak English. In that case, my forcing the flow into English would be embarrassing, or that person might just be acting humble and actually wants to speak English but hesitates in case I want to speak Japanese. It might also denote politeness, a way of not embarrassing me in case my Japanese is not up to it.

So, we have to dance around a bit figuring out which language will best manage what we both want without imposing too much on one another. All of that happens in a few conversational turns, so I try to pay attention to where the dance is headed.

Because conversations with strangers in Japanese tend to be less personal and more informational—for instance, taxi drivers explaining their working conditions or someone in a bar talking about similar bars—I like it best when English helps us break out of the formal patterns and polite language, allowing the conversation to fall into fresh

exchanges. The Japanese can really loosen up in English.

In English, the Japanese switch not just language, but cultural assumptions, body language, and mindsets, and end up telling me more in English about themselves and their lives than they ever would in Japanese. What emerges in the ensuing conversation is something like: “I lived in Africa when I was young,” or, “I worked in a restaurant in London for ten years.” I get a whole story, not just a conversation. English is central to the direction of their lives, so the language reveals more than just their vocabulary score. It gives me their life stories.

On the train from time to time, I like to peek over at lone, uniformed students prepping for their English exams. With great concentration, a student will move a red plastic sheet off and on their study list in order to hide or show the answers. During the inevitable pause to cram a word or pattern into long-term memory, the bedraggled student looks up, startled to see a real, live English speaker right beside them, as if magically conjured from the pages of the book.

I often give them my teacher’s glare, which says, “Study hard.” But if they are standing close enough, I like to whisper a friendly “*Ganbatte!*” “Go for it!” The student, usually a girl, since boys do not want to appear uncool by studying in public, will blush as red as the plastic sheet that hides the answers below, and mumble, “Yes, I will, thank

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you,” even if the words don’t come out as anything more than a polite, silent bow.

Though the student may still be unsure how to pull the words off the page and let them live, the language dance is still a ways off. But I know that after a few more years of study, she’ll be engaging in the language dance, too, no matter which direction in life her language study leads.