



HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN
LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA

The Poetic Artistry of José Watanabe

Separating the Craft from
the Discourse

Randy Muth ·
Alfredo López-Pasarín Basabe ·
Shigeko Mato

palgrave
macmillan

Historical and Cultural Interconnections between Latin America and Asia

Series Editors

Ignacio López-Calvo, University of California, Merced, Merced, CA,
USA

Kathleen López, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

This series is devoted to the diversity of encounters between Latin America and Asia through multiple points of contact across time and space. It welcomes different theoretical and disciplinary approaches to define, describe, and explore the histories and cultural production of people of Asian descent in Latin America and the Caribbean. It also welcomes research on Hispano-Filipino history and cultural production. Themes may include Asian immigration and geopolitics, the influence and/or representation of the Hispanic world in Asian cultures, Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Hispanic world and Asia, and other transpacific and south-south exchanges that disrupt the boundaries of traditional academic fields and singular notions of identity. The geographical scope of the series incorporates the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Pacific Rim and the Caribbean region. We welcome single-author monographs and volumes of essays from experts in the field from different academic backgrounds.

About the series editors:

Ignacio López-Calvo is Professor of Latin American Literature at the University of California, Merced, USA and director of the UC Merced Center for the Humanities. He is author of several books on Latin American and US Latino literature. He is co-executive director of the academic journal *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*.

Kathleen López is Associate Professor in the Department of Latino and Caribbean Studies and Department of History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, USA. She is author of *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (2013) and a contributor to *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought* (2015), *Immigration and National Identities in Latin America* (2016), and *Imagining Asia in the Americas* (2016).

Advisory Board:

Koichi Hagimoto, Wellesley College, USA

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Brown University, USA

Junyoung Verónica Kim, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Ana Paulina Lee, Columbia University, USA

Debbie Lee-DiStefano, Southeast Missouri State University, USA

Shigeko Mato, Waseda University, Japan

Zelideth María Rivas, Marshall University, USA

Robert Chao Romero, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Lok Siu, University of California, Berkeley, USA

Araceli Tinajero, City College of New York, USA

Laura Torres-Rodríguez, New York University, USA

More information about this series at

<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15129>

Randy Muth · Alfredo López-Pasarín Basabe ·
Shigeko Mato

The Poetic Artistry of José Watanabe

Separating the Craft from the Discourse

palgrave
macmillan

Randy Muth
Faculty of Education
Kio University
Nara, Japan

Alfredo López-Pasarín Basabe
Politics and Economics Sciences
Waseda University
Shinjuku City, Japan

Shigeko Mato
School of International Liberal
Studies
Waseda University
Shinjuku City, Japan

Historical and Cultural Interconnections between Latin America and Asia
ISBN 978-3-030-81614-8 ISBN 978-3-030-81615-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81615-5>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer
Nature Switzerland AG 2021

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To Louis and Christa
and
in loving memory of Sharon*

FOREWORD BY TERESA AND ENRIQUE WATANABE

José, Peru, The Peruvian North, Laredo, Our Home

What made José a poet? What were the circumstances that produced his artistic sensitivity? Why did he write the poems that he so painstakingly elaborated? How did he find the way to express himself the way he did?

These are some of the questions that we, his siblings, ask ourselves every so often but rarely openly talk about with each other. Nor do we attempt to determine why he was the strange one, the one that was designated by who's know which god of art. Maybe the first thing that we should point out is his propensity to all artistic expression, neither painting, sculpture, music, handicrafts, architecture, theater, nor cinema were foreign to him. José chose poetry, but he was always involved in some project designed to stimulate minds through his peculiar sensitivity.

José grew up as a survivor of the terrible epidemics that caused the deaths of countless children prior to the spread of vaccines. In Laredo, children died by the dozens, among them two of our siblings. Whether it was because of the fevers, or because of the trauma that followed the deaths of two of their children, our parents were particularly protective of José, to the point that those of us who followed him in age felt compelled to take care of him, to make sure that nothing disturbed his health or his weakened heart.

As kids we loved to listen to our father's stories. He was very much a storyteller, and he always came home with some story, sometimes about Japan. We came to know a Japan idealized by our father: a country of

vast beaches, huge fruits, mountains, snow, and natural hot springs with flower petals. Other times he would tell us fables populated by rabbits, foxes, sea turtles, demons, and the great Momotaro, that good boy born out of a peach.

There were also our mother's stories. The stories, in her words, were valuable testimonies: the revolutions of the beginnings of the twentieth century, the trade-unionists, the bandits who wore machetes on their belts, the relatives in the military who were killed or politically persecuted, the rains and the floods, the earthquakes, the crimes, the epidemics; whether they concerned real people or were fabricated out of ghostly matter, it didn't matter: All of them were heightened to mythical dimensions in her mouth.

There was no shortage of imagination in our home, both when we were in Laredo and in Huanchaco; but this imagination co-existed with our reality, and all the while our father would tell us about the necessity of volition and care when carrying out any task. This always remained present in José's mind. When he was writing and he felt that he had come up with the idea, the phrase or the word he was hoping for, he would read it and ask if the old man would have approved. He said that he couldn't help himself from telling tall tales when he wrote. His greatest obsession was to say something, to find the exact place for his idea of a poem, and then little by little bring about the best way to say it.

Throughout all his endeavors, whether graphic compositions, scenography, historical investigations, the treatment of texts, or poetry, the rigor obsessed about transcending mediocracy and the anguish at the uncertainty of not knowing whether he was doing it right were always present. And then, as a decisive trace in his judgment of his works and of people, there appeared his intolerance, and at the same time, his greatest fear: that of being considered vulgar or ridiculous. It was not only sensitivity—he would say—but also talent, the ability to observe, to find the best solutions in matters of duty, as in art.

Surely as something he learned from architecture or from the visual arts, he said that poems unveil unfathomable connections, but that in the end these can be understood and can be seen because they strike nerves. That is why he equally admired Le Corbusier, Aalto or Gaudí, and also Van Gogh, Cézanne and Tilsa [Tsuchiya]. His poetry is thus filled with what José used to call visual culture, but also with territory and space, where there are the omnipresent sun and the desert, the sand, the stone and the hills of the northern coast of our country, bare of vegetation, and,

of course, Laredo, the register of his poems is Laredo. The rest is a certain lyrical poetry, a musicality that he often insistently searched for humming around the house potential melodies, which he later refused to turn into songs when Rafo Ráez suggested it.

And there's politics as well. Little has been said about José's commitment to society and his activism in favor of the causes of the dispossessed and marginalized people of Latin America. There are few societies as unequal as Peru. Sometimes, when we talk about his poetry, we clearly identify facts or images that shot out of family conversations on social or political issues. And not to forget how deliberate and determined he was to make sure that his poems did not become just social denunciations without poetry, or just pamphlets.

Lima, Peru
May 2021

Teresa Watanabe
Enrique Watanabe

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following for their support and collaboration during the process of researching and writing this book:

Tilsa Watanabe, Teresa Watanabe, Ignacio López-Calvo, Yuri Alithú Sakata Gonzáles, Keiko Shimizu, Jaime Arequipeno Sifuentes, José Li Ning Anticona, José Canziani, Camilo Fernández Cozman, Diego Alonso Sánchez, Alonso Belaúnde Degregori.

We would also like to express special gratitude to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for their generous financial support: Grant No. 17K02668.

INTRODUCTION

The coup d'état led by General Velasco on October 3, 1968, which deposed the democratically elected presidency of Fernando Belaúnde, commenced a military dictatorship that would impose authoritarian rule on Peruvian society until 1975. Characterized by a fierce suppression of any degree of political dissent, the military administration instituted strict censorship on the media, a situation that culminated in 1974 with the expropriation of newspapers, television and radio. This social landscape, coupled with the long list of political and ideological upheavals that defined the late 1960s, cultivated the fertile conditions that later produce prominent Peruvian literary circles such as Hora Zero and Estación Reunida that would play a paramount role in uniting influential poets that eventually formed the poetic movement known as Generación del 70. The proponents of this generation shared a common dissidence toward the dictatorial government that manifested itself in a politically charged poetry that sought social and political transformation. The poets of these circles were also bonded by similar experiences of dislocation, the majority having relocated to Lima from provincial regions. Authors like Antonio Cillóniz (1944), Abelardo Sánchez León (1947), Tulio Mora (1948–2019), Enrique Verástegui, and Carmen Ollé (1947) would sow the seeds of a poetic movement whose central figure was the chaotic, urban life in the capital. The desire for social and political reform led to the development of a colloquial poetry more capable of reaching the

masses than previous classical styles characteristic of Cesar Vallejo (1892–1938) and Carlos Oquendo de Amat (1905–1936). Tulio Mora sums of the atmosphere of the period:

The provincials wrote about the Lima they had invaded, and about not finding in Lima a place where they believed, theoretically, that their personal problems would be solved. They believed Lima continued to be a landscape of doubt and uncertainty. Consequently, their vision was somewhat pessimistic, especially due to the treatment these provincials received. The important thing is that this was mutually nurtured and deliberately thought out by the members of Hora Zero. In addition, it was meant for provincial poets to write not only to speak about Lima, but also to question their place of origin. Subsequently, provincial poets appeared dealing with similar issues on style, as well as a common interest in incorporating the everyday into poetry from their own sector.¹

Proponents of this movement adamantly rejected the exclusivity of literature as a professional vocation, advocating that poetry was for anyone with strong convictions. This gave rise to a completely novel concept in poetry that utilized colloquial, less refined language to depict the “unpleasant” and “ugly” reality of life in Lima. This notion that poetry could be an impetus to social change was a driving force in much of the poetic production of this generation. In his comprehensive anthology of the Generación del ‘70 entitled *Estos 13*, José Miguel Oviedo recounts the social and political circumstances that would unite these young Peruvian poets under one ideology, and highlights the historical events that most fomented their literary activism.

José Watanabe (1945–2007) was undoubtedly a unique presence in this context. Although being actively involved with these literary circles, he maintained a side-line position with respect to the more radical aspects of the movement labeling himself as a “izquierdista no orgánico” (non-organic leftist) (De Paz 96). However, what most distinguished him from other proponents of this literary movement was his particular conceptualization of poetry which insisted on the dissociation of literary production and political ideology. Coinciding with the idea of a colloquial language accessible to the masses, Watanabe was not inclined, however, to fixate on the urban spaces that predominated Lima. He preferred to use visual references from provincial settings, focusing more on scenes found in nature and less on political statements. This contrasting perspective to the literary

objectives of his generation, along with his unique predilection for poetizing about scenes in the natural world, would result in 1971 in his first book *Álbum de Familia* (Family Album) which won him the prestigious award of Young Poet of Peru that same year, and would later contribute to positioning him among the most important authors of contemporary Spanish poetry.

Much has been written about the biography of José Watanabe, the influence of his childhood on his poetic creativity, and especially his Japanese ancestry. It is not our intention, as the saying goes, to beat a dead horse by reiterating the much repeated discourse that identifies Japanese elements and Oriental sensibilities in the Peruvian poet. This book intends to do just the opposite. Our study here aims at de-orientalizing the figure and poetic creations of José Watanabe. The underlying purpose that serves as a cohesive glue binding the essays in the following pages is twofold: 1) establish that orientalized perceptions prevalent in Western views of Japan have shaped public discourse on the figure and poetic works of Watanabe and 2) demonstrate that the literary quality of Watanabe's poetry does not reside in an inherent "Japaneseness", but can be located in the masterful manipulation of poetic devices and the skillful usage of language that evokes particular sensorial and emotional responses.

The first chapter explores popular discourse which traces Watanabe's meditative style to his paternal Asian heritage demonstrating how orientalized perceptions of "Japaneseness" have predominated discussions on the poet's figure and artistry. The analysis also highlights the role Watanabe himself had in proliferating stereotypical notions of "Japaneseness" that shed light on how the poet projected a personal identity that appealed to orientalized discourse. In addition, a discussion on the prevalence of haiku in discourse related to Watanabe underscores exoticized interpretations of this poetic genre and how these have shaped perceptions of the poet and his works.

The second chapter is dedicated to an analysis of rhetorical and stylistic characteristics, as well as rhythmic bases prevalent in Watanabe's poetic creations. This analysis, developed around the concept of "realist" poetry, emphasizes the interweaving of stylistic-rhetorical, and rhythmic-metric constituents that are characteristic of the poetic cosmovision of Watanabe. This exploration uncovers the diverse literary devices that have gone unnoticed by the great majority of literary critics and underscores the complexity of the creative process of this profound lyricist. The analysis

hopes to open the door for future studies of a technical nature that have until now been neglected.

The third chapter offers an approach to understanding Watanabe's poetry that goes beyond theories and methodologies aligned to specific, rather rigid, schools of thought and disciplinary orientations. Drawing on Rita Felski's "postcritical reading" (not uncritical reading) and the notion of affect articulated by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, this chapter aims to articulate how Watanabe's poetry matters to us, which contrasts largely to conventional readings that propose "digging down" in order to uncover hidden meanings behind poetic works (Felski *Limits* 56). The examination intends to demonstrate how his poetic creations stimulate our sensory and perceptual pathways to invite us to become co-partners who interact with his dexterous words in order to illuminate unprecedented ways of reading, thinking and existing. This exploration sheds light on the affective interminglements and networks of Watanabe's poetry, readers' engagement and beyond.

Finally, by dismantling orientalist discourse that has surrounded the figure and poetry of José Watanabe and by demonstrating that the genius of his artistry is not the by-product of an essentialist notion of Asian sensitivity, but the result of his particular and personal creativity and artistic talent, this book hopes to impel studies of a more diverse nature on the cosmovision of this extraordinary poet.

Randy Muth

NOTES

1. López, Ana Espejo. "Entrevista a Tulio Mora" in *Ciudad Letrada*, 2001, May, 7. "Los provincianos escriben sobre la Lima que ellos han invadido y no encuentran en Lima el lugar donde teóricamente creían que iban a resolver sus problemas personales; creen que Lima sigue siendo un escenario dudoso, incierto. En consecuencia, es una visión un poco pesimista. Sobre todo por el trato que reciben los provincianos. Lo importante es que hubo una retroalimentación de esto y eso fue deliberadamente meditado por la gente de Hora Zero y consistía en que los poetas provincianos no solamente escribían para hablar de Lima sino que llevaban este cuestionamiento a su lugar de origen. Entonces aparecen poetas provincianos tocando temas muy similares en cuanto al estilo y al interés de incorporar lo cotidiano a lo poético en su propio sector."

CONTENTS

1	Poetry, Identity and Being “Japanese”	1
	Randy Muth	
	<i>“Japaneseness” and Nihonjinron</i>	3
	<i>Identity and Poetry</i>	7
	<i>José Watanabe and Being “Japanese”</i>	9
	<i>Haiku and Nihonjinron</i>	19
	<i>The “Spirit” of Haiku in Watanabe</i>	22
	<i>Conclusion</i>	30
2	Rhetorical Approaches to the Poetry of José Watanabe	39
	Alfredo López-Pasarín Basabe	
	<i>Semantic Analysis and Figurative Language</i>	41
	<i>Metaphor</i>	42
	<i>Visionary Image</i>	47
	<i>Vision</i>	48
	<i>Simile</i>	51
	<i>Comparison</i>	53
	<i>Symbol</i>	56
	<i>Homogeneous Symbols</i>	57
	<i>Heterogeneous Symbols</i>	60
	<i>Conclusions</i>	68
	<i>Metapoetic Approaches</i>	70
	<i>Meter and Rhythm</i>	82
	<i>Conclusion</i>	99

3 José Watanabe's Poetic Capacity and Energy Beyond Critique for Critique's Sake	115
Shigeko Mato	
<i>Introduction</i>	115
<i>Attunement Between Watanabe's Poetic Vision and "Postcritical Reading"</i>	119
<i>"Prayer Before My Mother's Cadaver:" Not Just a Dead Body?</i>	122
<i>What Does "Prayer Before My Mother's Cadaver" Do?</i>	125
<i>"Laughing and Clouded:" Proof of the Living Around the Dead</i>	126
<i>Feel the Vitality of "Laughing and Clouded"!</i>	128
<i>"Flags Behind the Fog:" Walking and Pausing</i>	131
<i>"Visceral Forces" in "Flags Behind the Fog"</i>	135
<i>"The Algarrobo:" "Hooked on" a Tree in a Dessert</i>	138
<i>Entangled "Visceral Forces" in "The Algarrobo"</i>	141
<i>Conclusion: Starting to Walk, See, and Cuddle</i>	143
Conclusion	155
Bibliography	161
Index	167



Poetry, Identity and Being “Japanese”

Randy Muth

Growing up in a Southern California suburb during a time when public transportation was virtually non-existent, driving was more necessity than luxury. As a young adult with a recently acquired driver’s license preparing to make my debut into society, I was very much interested in TV commercials which flashed expensive new cars I knew I would never afford. The Volkswagen commercials were especially intriguing because the strange foreign word “fahrvergnügen” was constantly repeated to explain the unique German sensibility to driving. The idea that the particular notion of driving enjoyment found in German culture was impregnated in the engineering of Volkswagen cars completely fascinated me. Years later on a family trip in Frankfurt, I innocently asked a middle-aged taxi driver who, sporting a dapper tweed blazer and listening to Bach, emitted a presence I thought surely to be “fahrvergnügen”, about this refined notion of driving. To my embarrassment, he laughed and explained that the word I thought manifested exotic cultural sensibilities to driving was no more than a neologism compound created specifically for advertising.

R. Muth (✉)

Faculty of Education, Kio University, Nara, Japan

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2021

R. Muth et al., *The Poetic Artistry of José Watanabe*, Historical
and Cultural Interconnections between Latin America and Asia,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81615-5_1

During university, and still a young, impressionable adult, I needed a few more credits to complete my degree and decided to enroll in an elective course on Japanese society. Throughout the entire semester, I was utterly captivated by the descriptions and explanations of this exotic culture so foreign to my own. The students were expected to learn a long list of Japanese vocabulary buzz words that supposedly expressed unique artistic sensibilities and superior notions of integrity and moral conduct. The cultural specificity of these words was later reinforced when I initiated studies in Japanese literature and expressions like “wabi”, “sabi”, and “mono-no-aware” would often appear in literary anthologies. Shortly after graduation, and armed with an intense desire to experience this exotic culture, I left for Japan where almost 30 years later I still reside. My first years were characterized by intense efforts to learn the language and comprehend in the most experiential way possible its unique culture and spirituality. Around this time, and confident that my linguistic skills had facilitated a better understanding of the vocabulary that explains uniquely Japanese sensibilities, I was introduced to José Watanabe. In September of 2003, and convinced that his poetry embodied these unique notions I was trying to understand in my adopted Japan, I set off for Lima to meet the man who would occupy my reflections for many years to come. My analysis of his poetry and of our conversations would eventually result in one the first books dedicated to examining the “Japaneseness” in the poetic creations of this Peruvian author.

However, since then the escalated popularity of José Watanabe and his poetry, especially after his unfortunate passing in 2007, has generated numerous studies on his writings, many of which refer to those Japanese buzz words in their analysis of his poems. With a less idealistic and more holistic perspective of Japanese society and its culture, I began to question many of the associations between Watanabe and Japan made in these studies, including my own. Many of the notions attributed to Japanese sensibilities in Watanabe were frankly absent in my surrounding reality, or rather, were present in any other society I could think of. These reflections led to a reevaluation of my approach to understanding the poet and his artistry. I began to understand that the “Japaneseness” that so infamously accented Watanabe’s figure, as well as his literature, was less inherent and more socially constructed. A more objective review of Japanese history and literature, coupled with a profound interest in identity studies, resulted in the present analysis, which in the end aims to

contribute to the ever-increasing body of academic studies intended to better understand the artistic genius of this Peruvian poet.

“JAPANESENESS” AND *NIHONJINRON*

While modernity paved the way for the development of the Japanese industrial machine and the resulting economic affluence that has placed Japan among the most economically solvent nations on the planet, it left an ontological vacuity that induced a desperate search among its people for a “Japanese” identity. This pursuit to define “Japaneseness” manifested itself in a binary paradigm that situated Japan in direct opposition with the West and evolved into what would be known as *Nihonjinron*, or theory of Japaneseness. *Nihonjinron*, in its aim to delineate the identity of the Japanese people, has propagated a discourse characterized by essentialist notions of cultural and racial uniqueness. Disseminated by intellectuals, politicians, and cultural figures, *Nihonjinron* has systematically projected stereotypical imagery related to the idea of Japanese ethnic homogeneity, as well as, cultural and racial superiority. The continued popularity of books like “*Amae*” *No Kouzou* (The Structure of *Amae*) by Takeo Doi (1971) and *Tate No Shakai No Ningen Kankei: Tan Itsu Shakai No Riron* (Human Relationships in a Vertical Society: Theory of a Homogeneous Society) by Chie Nakane (1967) attests to the interest the Japanese population shares in the construction of a unified identity. Other proponents of *Nihonjinron* such as Tetsuro Watsuji (1935), who proposes an essentialist relationship between the “unique” Japanese character and the climate, and Sukehiro Hirakawa (2013), who proclaims Japanese identity can be traced to the “uniqueness” of its language, attempt to highlight physiological and environmental factors that supposedly explain the nature of “Japaneseness”. The nationalist project of *Nihonjinron* is not limited to convincing the Japanese of their own exceptionalism, but also to enlighten the West on their singularity in hopes of forging a legitimate place among Western hegemonic powers.

The publication of *Bushido* by Inazo Nitobe in 1905 would become one of the most emblematic and influential works of *Nihonjinron* in the West and would impact Japanese cultural representations for generations to come. *Bushido* appeared at a time in which fierce anti-Japanese movements, stirred by Japan’s imperial expansion, spread throughout North America and culminated in the U.S. ban on Japanese immigration in 1907. It has been suggested that its publication was not necessarily