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Connoisseurs of Urban Life: Creativity, Sovereign Enjoyment, and Aesthetic Practice Among Japanese Migrant-Artists in New York City

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Abstract

This paper examines forms of creative self-expression and aesthetic practices among Japanese migrant-artists in New York City. I show how reflections on everyday city life inform both representations of the migrant experience to other Japanese, as well as the actual products these artists and designers produce. This paper argues that conventional scholarly approaches to migration to large mega-cities place inordinate emphasis on material or political considerations. Instead, I argue for the importance of non-instrumental desires and creative aspirations for migrant populations within cities. The paper also highlights how large urban spaces such as New York, even in a time of heightened security concerns and cultural parochialism, still serve as repositories for cosmopolitan mixing and thus catalyze innovative production.

The greater New York City area is home to the largest Japanese expatriate population in the world, with unofficial estimates placing the population around 200,000.¹ Generally, Japanese who go to New York City (NY) place themselves in one of two categories—corporate employees (*chuuzaikin*) and their families, or single, voluntary migrants—often called “lifestyle migrants.” This paper concerns this vast, latter group of people who, desiring a different kind of life from what is available to them in Japan, choose to leave home in search of self-fulfillment. Among these migrants, NY

¹ Statistics from Japan Consulate of New York City, 2005, place the population at over 80,000 in the Greater New York City area.

is perceived as a place where one can fulfill one's self-potential and live a fuller, and freer life than in Japan. While most studies in the social sciences privilege material and economic need and disadvantaged social status as factors in explaining migration, I want to suggest instead that we take the self-understanding of these migrants, which are consistently freighted with non-instrumental and non-material concerns, seriously. Urban and migration scholars have generally privileged material or political concerns when examining non-western migration to western cities; instead this paper will highlight the centrality of the imagination and practices of self-cultivation as motivational factors in international migration to cities. Further, following in a long history of aesthetic practices and forms of creative self-expression historically intertwined with large mega-cities, Japanese migrants to NY also use their time in that city as a platform for vanguardist experimentation and the development of skills that they then return to Japan with and use in propelling fields such as fashion design, architecture, and photography.

NY is commonly understood among Japanese migrant-artists to be a "world-stage" of vanguardist ideas: the transition from Japan is narrated as the move from a more peripheral, insular space to one where moribund ideas and traditional influence can be successfully transcended. Many leave predictable jobs in Japan to undertake risky, dramatic jumps into non-instrumental fields such as art, dance, and design. While some are artists before they left Japan, others abandon corporate and other conventional forms of office work to follow their artistic ambitions in NY. What is interesting about these migrants is that migration entails not a socioeconomic leap up, but one that almost inevitably leads down. Moving to NY is thus a process of voluntary *déclassement*. Moreover, following the American government's crackdown on illegal immigration following September 11th, it is increasingly difficult for many of these Japanese to come and stay in NY. Many are undocumented, coming on student visas without attending school, overstaying tourist visas, and almost always lack basic support like health insurance and work illegally. Yet they continue to go, and such forms of unskilled work are means to survive for these migrants—allowing them to pursue what they feel are higher ambitions: engaging in their creative passions.

These migrants see moving to NY as providing them with a greatly expanded horizon of possibility for their lives. Given that they move for non-material and non-

instrumental purposes, we cannot understand why they migrate without serious engagement with their own preoccupations with NY as a place where one can fulfill a self-potential one already has. This self-potential is not to be fleshed out simply through finding a better job, financial gain, or social status. Rather, it comes from placing one's self in the city, imbibing its energies, having encounters (and also conflict) with different people, and being inspired by its diversity and dynamism. They thus construct NY as an urban space with special qualities, and it is in the realm of everyday life, in *how* one can live and experience urban life that migrants locate value.

Since many of these migrants are artists, they perceive a strong link between their innovative work and their lives in the city. Yet in this paper, I would like to expand the role of art and aesthetics by focusing on how aesthetics is used as the frame through which migrants and other Japanese narrate and represent the meanings of living in NY. Such a perspective allows us to see how forms of urban creativity and innovation frequently emerge from risky ventures in non-instrumental fields, as well as reflections on urban life. Moreover, it allows us to see how though cities such as NY are at one level suffused with discourse about security and increasingly closed to populations such as Muslim migrants, at another level the cosmopolitan pluralism of such cities allows for the fulfillment of newcomers' aspirations.

Representation

What is remarkable about Japanese representations of NY, whether by migrants or visitors, in web blogs, books or magazines, is that they consistently focus on aspects of enjoyment in urban life. While on the one hand they emphasize the mundane, such as shop and apartment interiors, street life, café and bar life, and daily activities like shopping, they distill out less beautiful or enjoyable practicalities such as work, the difficulties of finding a job, or getting a visa. When difficulties are presented in these texts, they are narrated (almost always) as positive, enriching experiences that develop the self and testify to the authenticity of NY life.

Representation of the city through creative media plays an important role in the circulation of ideas between NY and Japan. For instance, many migrants who successfully build a business in NY sell their work back in Japan, even as they remain

migrants, because the name “NY” adds cachet and cultural value to their products back at home. A far larger number disseminate their experiences back home through the publication of memoirs, or “I-novels” (*shishosetsu*—a genre of novel that tells the story of one’s current life), magazine and newspaper columns in Japan, books of photography, and blogs. These texts, always in Japanese and thus for a Japanese audience, give a voyeuristic glimpse into the everyday life of Japanese in NY, and as their authority is predicated on the authors “really being there,” they are soaked with the strong scent of authenticity.

Sovereignty

Through these texts, migrants reflect on how NY, through its dynamism and diversity, offers a more sublime experience of urban life than is available in Japan. These representations may be read as attempts to capture the experience of the sovereign moment. According to Georges Bataille the sovereign experience is fundamentally one of deep and utter enjoyment.² Sovereignty is not solely the domain of kings and rulers, but is rather something a person may experience in mundane moments. Sovereign life is opposed to productive life—in which one labors in the service of the future, rather than fully enjoying the present (198). Similarly, Japanese migrants choose explicitly to *not* focus on the productive, or “servile” dimensions of their life—the practicalities of food, shelter, career advancement, and legal dilemmas; instead they valorize experiences of pleasure in the city.

To illustrate a quotidian sovereign experience, Bataille uses the example (in *The Accursed Share*) of a worker savoring a glass of wine at the end of a long day. While the worker’s wages are what enable him to procure the wine, “he really drinks in hope of escaping the necessity that is the principle of labor...if the worker treats himself to a drink, this is *essentially* because into the wine he swallows there enters a *miraculous* element of savor, which is precisely the element of sovereignty. It’s not much, but at least the wine gives him, for *a brief moment*, the *miraculous* sensation of having the world at his disposal” (200). The sovereign moment soon passes, but not without having

² Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Zone Books, c1991, 1999.

had its effect: on the one hand, the worker experiences the “miraculous” by freely taking advantage of the world and its resources; on the other, this kind of experience “is the substance of our aspirations” (200). The experience of drinking the wine is also a moment of aspiration and the opening up of endless horizons of possibility, if only in the imagination.

The sovereign experience thus has three dimensions: it is 1) an experience of “unproductive” enjoyment, 2) it occurs in the everyday, 3) it is, or can be, a source of human inspiration and aspiration. One such text is from a popular Japanese men’s magazine that devoted one issue to NY in 2003. In one particular image of a cigar bar in Soho, there are two men at a cigar bar, being observed by a Japanese (presumably male) viewer. The top caption reads, “Have you not already decided that a beautiful woman and cigars are beyond your reach?” Below the photograph is a short story-like meditation on the scene:

“Two men who lean against the bar. Perhaps they are on their way home from work; their neckties are gone and they are totally in the mood to relax. They puff on their cigars and down in a gulp the scotch poured to the brim of rough glasses. Isn’t it all a little too casual? When you think of a cigar bar, you think of lounging on a leather sofa, drinking cognac from a (Baccarat) glass—it has a HIGH image...On top of that, the coquettishly charming Serena gazes into your eyes as she cuts your cigar...Where could there be more luxury than this?” (*Brutus*, 9/15/2003, p.65).³

Like Bataille’s worker savoring his wine, the Japanese viewer imagines the enjoyment of the two men in the photo as they smoke their cigars, drink, chat and flirt with the bartender. The passage fixates on the small details of the scene, and juxtaposed with the photo, this piece is evocative of a NY moment—beautiful, transient, unique, and ineffable. It attempts to portray the enjoyment of being in NY, sitting in just such a place, drinking, smoking, gazing at a pretty girl—all useless activities insofar as they are purely about enjoyment of the present moment. You may imagine yourself in the place of the author, who is himself a voyeur of the other two men, but the point of the passage is to incite desire in the reader to be there him/herself, and experience his/her *own, unique* enjoyment of the city. You should go to NY, it urges, because you could be in this moment, in this great city, with the world at your feet.

³ *Brutus: New York High and Low*. September 15, 2003. p.65.

When the magic becomes part of me

The worker partakes of the miraculous when he drinks a glass of wine not because of simple intoxication, but because he actively chooses to drink without good reason, just to enjoy himself. Drinking is an act of volition, of literally ingesting what the world has to give. Similarly, migrants seek to make their NY a part of themselves, rather than trying to become a part of NY. One fashion designer I worked for during my fieldwork, Tomiko Yaguchi, literally mapped out some of NY's miraculous qualities on a chart describing herself and how she captures different dimensions of herself in her products. One side lists "Japanese" traits such as delicacy, femininity, tradition, timelessness, while on the other, the designer "as New Yorker" embodies traits like boldness, curiosity, cutting-edge style, and dynamism. Tomiko portrays herself as channeling the energy of the city, by nature transient and intangible, into her products, something she is able to do because she has lived in NY for over 20 years. Her marketing demographic in Japan is the 27 year old, urban working woman, who "should carry [her] bags while dreaming of living in NY one day." What is interesting here is not so much her business sense, but her certainty that vague, immaterial, and non-instrumental qualities of the city hold powerful appeal for young Japanese women. Carrying a Tomiko bag is partaking in a bit of NY's magic, which, hopefully, will rub off onto you. And Japanese bohemians such as Tomiko thus show how the experience of migrants to the city, loaded with non-instrumental and aspirational desires, generates new forms of innovation. The experience of the city, even a city as security-conscious and defensive about certain kinds of migrants post-September 11 as NY, still provides a habitat for libratory forms of creative self-expression and for the flowering of artistic innovation.

Becoming a sense-ible designer

One of Tomiko's interns at her studio is Azusa, a 28-year old textile designer from Tokyo, who had only been in NY for five months when I met her. While Azusa had a promising career working for well-known designer Tsumori Chisato in Japan, she quit her job and migrated, in part for a better lifestyle in NY, and also, crucially, because she felt that in NY she could learn things she never could in Japan. She describes this in terms of fashion:

“Japanese like to imitate foreigners, but it doesn’t match the Japanese body. Foreigners have better style [bodies]...I want to learn how to coordinate clothes. I wanted to do this work, but I can’t learn to do this in Japan, I can’t learn the sense in Japan, though I can see everything there...I felt like the clothes of Tsumori Chisato were hard to coordinate because they’re so flashy (in color and design), and the girls wearing them were not so good at coordinating. The human body doesn’t change. So you can’t make such different clothes. So how do you make clothes that fit well?”

The key word here is “sense.” While she could “see everything” in Japan and had access to all kinds of materials, clothing, and resources to make fashion, something she calls “sense” was missing. This intangible and elusive quality is embodied, for instance, in the ability to coordinate clothing that suits one’s body, in this case, the Japanese body. Thus the secret to good sense is not so much in making radically different clothing—after all, Azusa herself is a Japanese woman learning fashion for Japanese in NY—but learning *how* to wear them (put them together, walk, act, stand, and style). Though NY is a “foreign” place, Azusa is not there to imitate what she sees. Rather, in the streets and life of the city, she hopes to capture the “sense” of NY, which is the ability to be original *and* fashionable at once. Azusa sees in the urban life of NY a realm of possibilities that would make her fuller as a person and as a designer. She perceives these possibilities, like in the cases of Japanese representations of NY and Tomiko’s understanding of her appeal in Japan, in terms of the possibilities in urban life in terms of art, design, and aesthetic renderings of daily life. The key to understanding these migrants’ aspirations lies not in practicalities and instrumental motivation. Rather, their dislocation as foreign migrants in a large city, takes them away from comfortable and taken for granted realities, which one overcomes for creative production. Urban innovation may thus hinge not on material comfort or cultural equilibrium, but precisely the shock of migration to a pluralistic urban space where one must create ever more sensitive and intelligent forms for a heterogeneous audience.

Conclusion

The three examples of Japanese NY presented above: the men’s magazine, the fashion designer’s conceptualization of her image, and the young intern’s aspirations to capture real “sense,” are linked by their common understanding that the aesthetic provides a crucial means through which to access meaning and value in everyday urban

life. Through an aesthetics of the everyday, migrants produce narratives of meaning about life in NY. The city is constructed as a field of possibilities, within which something, maybe anything, can happen, and that you, too, can be a part of. More importantly, possibilities are not seen so much as pragmatic opportunities, but rather as openings for everyday enjoyment of the city, suggested encounters, and repeated opportunities for creative inspiration and personal aspiration. In order to illuminate the nature of this aspiration, and why people move, we must consider migrants' own maps of cities and destinations, which show a complex landscape of existential concerns, where possibility is perceived in a logic that exceeds the scope of instrumental reason.

Works Cited

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