2.4 Haven’t We Met? On the Scales of Connection

Christopher L. Hill

In 1891 Tayama Katai encountered an English translation of Emile Zola’s novel *The Conquest of Plassans* (*La Conquête de Plassans, 1874*) in a used bookstore in Tokyo. Katai had learned about Zola a few years earlier—ironically, because a friend refused to lend Zola’s “atrocious” (*hidoi*) novels—and borrowed from his mother to buy the book (Tayama 1994, 476–78). The purchase may have been the beginning of naturalist fiction in Japan. By the end of the 1890s, Katai and a few peers—inspired too by English translations of Maupassant—were developing alternatives to the sentimental realism then in vogue. The *shizen shugi*—or naturalism—practiced by Katai dominated fiction for twenty years, morphing along the way into a psychological realism.

In 1897, just as Katai and peers began to craft the new style, Aluísio Azevedo, a Brazilian diplomat and ex-novelist, arrived in Yokohama to take the post of vice consul. Azevedo had been a pioneer of naturalist fiction in Brazil through novels such as *The Mulatto* (*O Mulato, 1881*) and *The Slum* (*O Cortiço, 1890*). One wonders: How great would it be if Azevedo had met Katai and played an unnoticed role in the rise of naturalism in Japan? The peripheries meeting, pace Moretti. An instance of the contiguity that, as Keiji Kunigami observes, one is expected to produce to justify comparisons that do not run through Europe. Alas, the manuscript of *Japan* (*O Japão*), the ambitious book of reportage Azevedo began before he was reposted to Argentina in 1899, says nothing of it. The only mention of literature is the “renaissance” in the literary arts in the Edo
The careers of Azevedo and Katai, and the histories of naturalist fiction in Brazil and Japan, were unentangled—or they were not entangled where they actually crossed. Azevedo probably knew nothing of Katai, and vice versa, yet the fact that each contributed to what critics called “Zolaism” tells us that their careers were connected, in fact, through the geographically extensive history of naturalist fiction. Perhaps the absence of a meeting, this instance of noncontiguity, can tell us something about how to approach a history unfolding on such a large scale.

Zelideth Rivas evocatively describes another literary encounter, of haiku with the land and climate of Brazil upon the arrival of the first ship of Japanese migrants to São Paulo in 1908. “Asian–Latin American” writers were practicing—but, more significantly, developing—genres such as haiku that may have originated in Asia but were in current practice in communities of Asian migrants. Their poetry was neither Latin American nor Asian according to the conventional boundaries of fields, revealing fissures in existing research methodologies. Comparative methods also seem unlikely to get much purchase. To whom should these writers be compared? As Asian writers to Latin American ones? As Latin Americans to Asians? And as much as these writers’ arrival in Latin America would seem an epitome of entanglement—as a meeting of Azevedo and Katai would also have been—their fit-nowhere quality shows instead how much the idea of entangled history assumes the existence of cultural unities that are distinct before the snarl.

Why do these writers occupy such a seemingly anomalous position? Conditions both local and global put them where they were: locally, the shortage of agricultural labor in Brazil and the surplus of it in Japan; globally, the production, trade, and consumption of coffee, sugar, and other commodities. Brazil and Japan were connected directly (by migration) and indirectly (by the capitalist market). As I would put it—this is a renga after all—the positionality and genealogy of Rivas’s poets reflect a “history of connection” manifest on multiple scales.

This history is not just the backdrop but provides the substance for the narrative sociology of Azevedo and other Brazilian naturalists, such as Adolfo Caminha. *The Mulatto* is a study of the social milieu of a provincial capital (Sao Luís do Maranhão) as revealed through the arrival of a character whose late father settled in the town after escaping an anti-Portuguese and slave rebellion. His mother was a slave who alerted her master to the peril. Raimundo, who has returned from studies in Portugal and wants to sell his property before settling in Rio de Janeiro, stimulates a slavocratic racism more powerful even than the town’s Lusophilia. He is murdered to stop a marriage to the privileged young woman who carries...
his child. If *The Mulatto* is a rather static study of social relations, *The Slum* examines their creation in a poor quarter of Rio. Two characters originally from Portugal follow diverging paths, João climbing into the city’s white capitalist elite, Jerônimo melting into a hybrid popular milieu modeled both by the neighborhood and by the novel’s argotic narrative voice. Both novels announce Azevedo’s affiliation with Zola, notably through references to *L’Assommoir* (1877), and yet are more than localizations of Zola’s method. Rather than reflecting a literary “compromise,” in Franco Moretti’s (2000) phrase, or an attempt to catch up with the “literary mean time” of Paris, as Pascale Casanova would have it, Azevedo’s naturalism seems both a revision of and a departure from Zola’s. In Quentin Skinner’s term, it was a “redescription” of earlier naturalist practice that by definition changed it.

Writers such as Katai produced their own revision of naturalist themes and form through their interrogation of the forces shaping Japanese society. The most obvious engagement with the geoconditions linking writers in Japan and Brazil can be found in Shimazaki Tōson’s *The Broken Commandment* (*Hakai*, 1906), at whose end members of Japan’s *burakumin* minority emigrate to Texas to escape discrimination, and Katai’s “One Soldier” (“Ippei-sotsu,” 1908), set during the clash of European and Japanese colonialism in the Russo-Japanese War. Like Azevedo and other naturalists in Brazil, these writers created characters that embodied social contradictions, but with a stress on the anguished subjectivities society was creating. Young intellectuals in Tōson’s *Spring* (*Haru*, 1907) struggle against the ideologies of striving and success that appeared during the new Japanese state’s “civilizing” project of the 1870s and 1880s. Katai, in a series of stories such as “The Quilt” and “The Girl Watcher” (“Futon” and “Shōjo byō,” both 1907), described transformations in male subjectivity that followed the superficial liberation of women. (The protagonists slip into a state of envious, lecherous passivity.) Defined by fatalistic description of social transformation, on one hand, and of the mental life shaped by it, on the other, this variety of naturalism too departed from the forms traveling under the name of Zolaism, but in a way markedly different from Azevedo and his peers.

A question arises: would Azevedo and Katai have recognized each other’s naturalism? If the answer is no, one explanation—the Casanova explanation—would be that Azevedo and Katai mis-imitated French naturalism differently in their attempts to catch up to Europe. Another, however, would be that the history of the naturalist novel consisted of multiple, dissimilar revisions of a form to which French writers contributed less and less. Iterations of naturalism in Brazil and Japan were
connected through their joint engagement with naturalist methods. Yet they were entangled—if one keeps the phrase—in something big enough that they did not directly cross.

The mediated quality of the connections among naturalist writers in Brazil and Japan (and Finland, Greece, the United States, etc.) is evidence they formed a kind of literary field that we do not yet have the method and vocabulary to describe well. The field was not national or regional in a way intelligible to area studies, but neither was it global. There were patterns to the naturalist novel’s circulation, but looking only for the contiguities they created would miss the way writers across an ocean, and on opposite sides of Europe, imagined themselves contributing to the same enterprise, however different were their views of it. Understanding a history like this, then, requires working on multiple scales; a willingness to look beyond received expectations of comparability; and perhaps the conviction, shown by all the contributors to this renga, that theory comes from practice, never the other way around.

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■ NOTES TO FIELD TRIP

1. I use here the familiar terminology of “line,” “syllable,” and so on, but more precise terms would be used by specialists. See the “renga” entry in Greene (2012) for a brief but helpful primer.

2. The citation here refers to the essay as reprinted in Moretti (2013).

3. All translations in section 1.1 by André Keiji Kunigami.

4. This passage appears in the latest reedition of his travel writings published in 2015.

5. See Lamarre’s (2005, 112) discussion of Tanizaki’s A Lump of Flesh (Jinmenso, 1918). Other examples of this process in Tanizaki’s writing can be found in Naomi (Chijin no Ai, 1924) and Mr. Aozuka’s Tale (Aozukashi no Hanashi, 1926).

6. Murayama includes smell as a feature of film in a note to his screenplay Actress (Joyù) in the film journal The Age of Film (Eiga Jidai) in 1926, transcribed in Iwamoto (2012, 225–58).

7. In 1915, Malfatti drew a second version of the man’s face in profile in charcoal and pastel on paper with the same title.
8. Although the New York–based Kuniyoshi was not sent to an internment camp during World War II, he was denied American citizenship and classified as an “enemy alien.”


11. For a recent English-language account of Prado’s important role as a patron of Brazilian *modernismo*, see Gouveia (2013).

12. For a recent collection of French-language war haiku, see Chipot (2013).

13. I do not mean to conflate the Spanish and Portuguese senses of *modernismo* (the latter being closer to what in Spanish would be called the *vanguardismo*) but rather to bring out the common use of import–export metaphors to describe the dynamics of their cultural relationships to Europe and North America. For a concise overview of this critical model, see Franco (1975).

14. The internal citation is from González de Mendoza (1924, 113).

15. Tablada is discussed in many of the sources cited in section 1.4, but the most recent and extensive study of his relationship to Japan is Ota.

16. Provinces were administrative units within the Society of Jesus, and those appointed provincials were the superiors within those units.

17. Henshall dates the purchase at 1891 (Tayama 1987, 66). Japanese names throughout are given in the customary order (family name first), but section 2.4 will refer to Tayama and the novelist Shimazaki by their pen names (Katai and Tōson, respectively).

18. Christopher Hill thanks Melissa Gelinás for help with Azevedo’s book.


20. On the importance of working on multiple scales, see Revel (2010).


22. So-called *burakumin* were historically associated with occupations considered unclean, such as leather tanning. Although the official designation was abolished in 1871, discrimination continues.

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