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# Walking Underground: Two Francophone Flâneurs in Twenty-First-Century Tokyo

Akane Kawakami

**I**N THE LONG HISTORY of East-West relations, in particular that of French visitors to Japan, walking constitutes a prominent and recurring activity through which the foreigner seeks to find out about the other. Pierre Loti wandered around the picturesque streets of Nagasaki, Paul Claudel sauntered alongside the moat that encircles the Imperial Palace, and Henri Michaux picked his way disdainfully through throngs of soldiers in a heavily militarized Tokyo. Of course, flânerie is hardly peculiar to French travelers to Japan; it has been practised for centuries by travelers across the globe, and it is a recognized trope of the travel-writing genre.<sup>1</sup>

But there is an obvious problem with transporting the flâneur in this way to cities with which he is not familiar; he cannot be—or become—an ‘expert’ on Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Montreal or Nairobi in the way that Baudelaire was an expert on Paris, although that was the flâneur’s original *raison d’être*.<sup>2</sup> The figure was invented as a sense-making device, in order to counter “a sense of space-time dislocation and disorientation due to the expanding scale of social relations,” to embody “a mythology of scopic penetration and freedom from social norms.”<sup>3</sup> To remove that function from the flâneur is to make him futile, especially in today’s world of social relations expanding exponentially on a global scale. On the other hand, this position of mastery from which the flâneur hails, even if illusory, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the superior stance of the ‘colonial’ (or post-colonial) visitor to a foreign country.<sup>4</sup> The traveller who claims to have ‘understood’ a foreign culture after the briefest of visits, and then goes on to write about it in great detail and with even greater authority, has been an embarrassing but common phenomenon in European travel literature for many years.<sup>5</sup> Ethnographers of the post-colonial era have had analogous problems in relation to works of colonial ethnography.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-first-century travelers to Japan have tended, on the whole, to be painfully aware of their predecessors’ mistakes and have taken great care to avoid the colonizing or orientalizing stance, whilst trying nonetheless to retain the freedom of vision that is an essential part of being a flâneur.<sup>7</sup>

There is another way in which the twenty-first-century flâneur has had to evolve, this time in response to physical changes in the cities themselves. The

carefree connoisseur of nineteenth-century Parisian pavements would have a very short life expectancy in any twenty-first-century city. The growing dominance of cars in the city had already been predicted by both Benjamin and Musil; the former's flâneur takes refuge in the arcades, and one of the latter's is run over by a lorry in *The Man without Qualities*. Driven off the streets, latter-day flâneurs move into the suburbs, travel up skyscrapers, wander around indoor shopping centers, or, in the spirit of joining what cannot be beaten, get into trains, buses, monorails, and trams;<sup>8</sup> public transport becomes an essential part of the walker's progress rather than a danger to be avoided. Indeed the "street," fundamental to de Certeau's understanding of the city, has become—in today's mega-cities—a multi-layered space. In Tokyo, for instance, "La notion même de 'niveau rue' se perd. Le rez-de-chaussée tend de plus en plus à devenir un *pack*, un bloc à plusieurs étages qui raccorde des niveaux orographiques différents, mais qui, surtout, descend en profondeur à la recherche d'un espace de plus en plus vital."<sup>9</sup> In all of these cities, but most notably in Tokyo, the most recent "orographic" layer—or layers—are to be found underground, and these have become the new playground of the flâneur. In this article I want to examine two very different underground walkers in twenty-first-century Tokyo, Régine Robin and Michaël Ferrier. Robin is a French Canadian, born of Jewish-Polish parents in France but now based in Montréal; and Ferrier is a Frenchman who grew up in Réunion and Mauritius who lives in Japan. They both walk all over Tokyo but find especially intriguing the underground spaces of the city. I will argue that their fascination stems from there being something global about the underground; it is a quality the two writers experience differently, but that allows them to go beyond national and cultural boundaries in their flânerie. For both of these cosmopolitan flâneurs, underground Tokyo becomes a space in which a common humanity, based on a universal syntax, is to be found.

### **Régine Robin**

Régine Robin is a French-Canadian novelist, historian, translator, and professor of sociology at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her writings, both fictional and non-fictional, are prolific and postmodern; they are primarily focused on the themes of identity, culture, and the sociological practice of literature. She has received numerous prizes for her work, being a Chevalier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques; a less 'classic' distinction, the Prix Jacques-Rousseau, was recently awarded to her in recognition of her 'interdisciplinary' achievements. Robin is also a self-confessed addict of the post-modern mega-city. *Mégapolis*, a book with chapters dedicated to New York,

Los Angeles, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and London, traces her flânerie through these huge conurbations; on foot, on various modes of public transport, and even in taxis and cars, she explores these cities through a selection of films, novels, and poetry dedicated to each one. (For instance, her guide in Los Angeles is Harry Bosch, the hero of Michael Connolly's popular detective novels.) She is well acquainted with New York and Los Angeles, much less so with Buenos Aires, London, and Tokyo. Her visit to Tokyo takes place during her first stay in Japan, but what interests her there is not "le Japon traditionnel,"<sup>10</sup> but modern or even postmodern Japan, as depicted in films and science fiction. In Kyoto, she is fascinated not by the temples, but by the new station, which is said to contain no fewer than "seize mille points de connexion structurels, analysés pendant trois mois par ordinateur" (224). In Tokyo, it is the postmodern architecture, the huge outdoor screens in Shinjuku and elsewhere, that ceaselessly reproduce and transmit images from all over the globe, and the choreography of the famous "scrambled" crossing in Shibuya that attract her (229). Tokyo by night, and from a great height, is another discovery, albeit one she knew to look for thanks to a number of films:

Du haut de la tour Roppongi, du cinquante-sixième étage, au bar du Park Hyatt de Shinjuku comme dans *Lost in Translation*, [...] ou du balcon de *Babel*, le film d'Alejandro González Iñárritu, quand, à la fin, la jeune fille muette et frustrée se penche nue au balcon de son immeuble, donnant l'occasion au spectateur de découvrir ce Tokyo somptueux qui scintille dans la nuit comme un diamant. (227–28)

In the introduction to her book Robin discusses the possibility that she might just be one of those "cinéphiles" described by Thierry Paquot who "consomme la ville au cinéma, une certaine image de la ville," coming out into the real city only to see it selectively and superficially, as an "après-ville" (42). In any case, certain cities have been so incessantly photographed and filmed that it is almost impossible for a traveler to obtain a clear vision of the city uncluttered by the iconic images they have already seen.<sup>11</sup> This superficial appreciation of the city is one of the main hurdles facing the post-modern flâneur: the danger of ending up as a consumer of ready-made images. Another obstacle to a real appreciation of these modern cities is their sheer size; "les mégapoles aujourd'hui, sans limites, sans contour, informes, hétérogènes, rien qu'une orgie de lumières, insaisissables" (73). They have no obvious center, unlike the more compact, well-designed cities of the nineteenth century; they are overrun by cars, appear not to contain any real people, and seem in some cases to be no more than a "lieu de transit" where huge motorways criss-cross before heading off in myriad directions. This vision of the mega-city as an

“ungraspable” entity is a stereotype that Robin will attempt to undo in her visits to each of her destinations.

In Tokyo, however, Robin seems to fall into the trap—at least at first—set by both of these stereotypical ways of seeing the city: “cinema-guided” vision and the myth of the ungraspable. Worse, both of these ways of seeing are exacerbated by a latent Orientalism. The three films set in Tokyo that Robin chooses to discuss are all by non-Japanese directors, and one of them—the aforementioned *Lost in Translation*—is described as “une traversée dans l’opacité, la difficulté de comprendre quoi que ce soit” (238). Even if one accepts that this film is a philosophical meditation on the impossibility of understanding “quoi que ce soit,” setting it in Tokyo and giving it an interculturally suggestive title can only bolster the belief that the city in question is peculiarly ungraspable, a place whose shiny surfaces are singularly difficult to pierce. Outside of her discussions of film, Robin frequently evokes the reflective, non-porous surfaces of Tokyo—“l’architecture ultramoderne, toute de verre et de métaux irisés, est faite de surfaces, de reflets et de reflets de reflets, démultipliés à l’infini”—and goes on to call it “la ville qui réalise le mieux l’interconnexion généralisée” (252), the apotheosis of Benjamin and Kracauer’s “culture de la surface et de la distraction” (253). This modern image of a city of screens and electronic, not human, connectivity, Tokyo as the ultimate “cyber-city,” feeds into the myth of the mega-city’s alien, unknowable nature. There is an added twist: Akihabara, the Mecca of all gadgets electronic, turns out to be resistant to translation (the feather-light computer Robin wishes to purchase does not allow users to install Word in English). This further barrier to communication and knowledge of the other, a familiar trope from earlier Orientalist texts, only serves to strengthen the overall stereotype of unknowability—not only are Tokyoites cyborgs, they won’t accept comprehensible Word installations. As Robin writes (somewhat insultingly to Japanese-speaking Westerners): “Tout est écran dans les quartiers centraux, à Shinjuku, à Shibuya, à Ginza, à Odaiba, tout brille, scintille, s’inscrit en bandes passantes avec des chiffres et des lettres, de ces lettres japonaises indécodables pour l’Occidental” (253). This rather crude observation is a personal one, of course—there are plenty of “Occidentals” who are able to read Japanese—and the linguistic barrier is clearly one of the main reasons why, compared with the other mega-cities that Robin visits in this book, Tokyo appears so inaccessible to her. As a result, her depiction of Tokyo is markedly more schematic than those of the other cities. The only exception is underground Tokyo, which she finds both interesting and congenial. This predilection may be due partly to Robin’s familiarity with Montréal’s “ville

souterraine,” the enormous complex of interlinking shopping malls and underground stations that constitutes an integral part of her home city. We will see, however, that Robin identifies a universal, human aspect of the shopping mall—a space designed for shopping, particularly for women<sup>12</sup>—and makes use of it to dissolve cultural boundaries and become a “native flâneuse” in underground Tokyo.

Early on in the chapter on Tokyo, Robin mentions that her favorite kind of city is the “ville-patchwork,” sprawling cities where “dans ces juxtapositions de ‘villages’ fait de bric et de broc, je m’épanouis, je m’insinue dans les interstices, je crée mon espace. Ce sont des villes ‘entre.’ Elles ne me terrorisent pas par leur passé, leur monumentalité” (224). This “patchwork” effect describes exactly the underground spaces of Tokyo, especially the “passages souterrains” of the huge stations, which double as shopping malls:

Les gares, les croisements sont des rhizomes où les nouveaux flâneurs peuvent déambuler durant des heures. Ce sont d’énormes complexes, des nœuds de communication comportant des centres commerciaux, des boutiques, des cafés, des restaurants, des entrées d’hôtel, des salles de spectacle. Bref, le tout constitue une ville souterraine faite de couloirs, d’enseignes, de kiosques, de correspondances. Au sens fort du terme, ce sont des passages, dans une ville en perpétuel mouvement où tout est en transfert, en déplacement. (246)

The “passages” hark back to Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*, and thence to the classic flâneur. But his nineteenth-century Parisian flâneur has metamorphosed into a twenty-first-century (Canadian) flâneuse in Tokyo, wandering in a carless, skylless space described as a “rhizome,”<sup>13</sup> and in which the sense of overall movement is heightened by the functionality of the space (as station). Barthes too liked the stations in Tokyo, finding them to be “centers” that, unlike traditional centers, are both unstable and “prosaic”:

[la gare japonaise est] nettoyée de ce caractère sacré qui marque, ordinairement, les grands repères de nos villes: cathédrales, églises, mairies, monuments historiques. Ici, le repère est entièrement prosaïque; sans doute le marché est-il lui aussi, souvent, un lieu central de la ville occidentale; mais à Tokyo la marchandise est défaite par l’instabilité de la gare: un incessant départ en contredit la concentration.<sup>14</sup>

The underground passages that constitute the Japanese station are an attractive combination of the everyday (what Barthes calls “prosaïque”), mercantilism (the outlets are mostly shops), and incessant movement (they are stations). This huge “ville souterraine” (246)<sup>15</sup> is nevertheless more approachable for the flâneuse than the city above ground; there is a definite sense that the human scale of life is most accessible at underground level in Tokyo. Robin

calls the stations “rhizomes”; the word is suggestive of an organic construct, a space that the flâneuse can begin to fashion in accordance with her own inclinations and desires. She has indeed begun to “avoir mes habitudes” in the underground passages of her favorite stations: “le café Starbucks de telle station, le restaurant italien de telle autre, le *New York Times* enfin trouvé à une troisième” (266).

These reference points are clearly not Japanese; they are globally recognizable labels (an “Italian restaurant” is a universally accepted category of restaurant that does not necessarily denote authentically Italian cuisine), but that does not invalidate them as intercultural access points. In a global consumer society, the exchange of goods and services is the basic and most common way in which human beings can relate immediately to each other, and in which both sides exert a level of control over their surroundings. Correspondingly, there is nothing very subtle about consumer culture, and traditionally the flâneur has elected to look, but not to buy.<sup>16</sup> Peter McLaren warns us that “within postmodern, postorganized, late capitalist culture [...] the flâneur/flâneuse seeks out the mystery of life, unaware that such seeking can surreptitiously fuse with the very logic of commodity that fascinates, thrills, and repulses with equal force.”<sup>17</sup> But Robin is a self-aware flâneuse in a late capitalist world, a world in which global brands dominate; she is savvy enough to make the “logic of commodity” work *for* her in her flânerie. She even confesses to a fondness for kitsch tourist tat (267), ugly new suburbs, and soulless shopping malls, all consequences of capitalism and the commodification of culture, because her main aim is “de vivre de cette pulsation, de ce rythme de la mégapole, d’expérimenter, de ‘performer’” (18).

For her, therefore, going into a Starbucks in Tokyo constitutes not a failure to stand up for cultural difference, but an attempt to turn the admittedly annoying ubiquity of the coffee-shop chain to her own advantage. For the global nature of these capitalist monster-chains has, ironically, one positive consequence; being universally recognizable, they offer a common language (“one skinny latte, please”) that is spoken by city-dwellers all over the globe. It is of course an impoverished language invented purely for the purposes of moneymaking, but as with all languages it goes beyond its remit, allowing any traveler or foreigner to take the first step in communication. It is thus possible for postmodern flâneuses such as Robin, even with an ironic self-awareness that we are all enslaved—to some extent—to the Starbucks empire, to capitalize on such capitalist phenomena for the higher purpose of communication.

Robin is of course a member of an ideologically informed population that recognizes Starbucks as a capitalist monstrosity, but as a flâneuse abroad she



is also able to see it as the “grand refuge des voyageurs” (340), perhaps because of its ubiquity and its reassuring sameness in any country. Like Annie Ernaux who patiently records human interactions in the hypermarchés of Cergy-Pontoise,<sup>18</sup> Robin in *Mégapolis* is not particularly interested in being an ideological purist or an “aristocrate un peu snob” (an epithet she uses to describe Iain Sinclair for his dislike of the huge Bluewater shopping center in the suburbs of London). The underground station malls of Tokyo thus function for Robin as an arena in which she can “créer mon espace”; not only is it free of monuments or buildings designed on a non-human scale that can intimidate (224), but it contains shopping outlets where she can speak the universal language of capitalism in order to communicate, receive sustenance, and feel at home.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the underground station shopping area is a relatively non-aggressive space in terms of gender. Traditionally the “grands magasins” of nineteenth-century Paris were seen as safe areas for women to navigate on their own,<sup>20</sup> and in our century also, covered spaces dedicated to shopping are perceived as being relatively protected havens for the female consumer and flâneuse.<sup>21</sup> This combination of safeness, approachability, and functionality makes these particular areas of underground Tokyo the most accessible, and most human, sections in Robin’s overall experience of the city.

### **Michaël Ferrier**

Like Robin, Ferrier is an academic and a writer, but he is based in Tokyo and clearly speaks the language with ease. Ferrier has edited a collection of academic essays on Japan,<sup>22</sup> as well as a selection of extracts from both French and Japanese writers on Tokyo—they include Natsume Soseki, Maryse Condé, Philippe Pons, and Nishimura Kyotaro<sup>23</sup>—and authored a number of fictional, autofictional, and non-fictional works, many of which feature Japan; the most recent is a deeply personal witness account of a trip to Fukushima immediately after the nuclear disaster.<sup>24</sup> He is emerging as one of a number of “post-japoniste” French writers who have fuelled a renewed interest in Japanese culture, such as Gérard Macé, Philippe Forest, and Jean-Philippe Toussein, but Ferrier is distinguished by his first-hand knowledge of the Japanese language and culture. Like all of these contemporary post-japonistes, he is highly sensitive to the ‘mistakes’ of his predecessors, taking care, as we will see, not to repeat them. But this attitude has not resulted in a wary style of writing; on the contrary, Ferrier’s accounts of Japan and Japanese are rather romantic in tone, at times adopting the stance of the hard-drinking male traveler, entranced by beautiful women and seeking truth in the small hours of the morning through, if not merely in, a glass of saké.

It is in *Tokyo: Petits portraits de l'aube* that Ferrier's explorations of Tokyo underground are to be found. Ferrier's narrator much prefers Tokyo by night to Tokyo by day, underground Tokyo to the city above the ground:

Fluide et organisée en surface, Tokyo est fougueuse et syncopée dans ses bas-fonds. Dès que l'on s'en approche un peu, on est surpris de constater à quel point c'est un bordel inénarrable qui sous-tend cette apparence de rationalité. De Tokyo, le voyageur pressé ne verra que ceci: trains et métros en files d'attente bien rangées, emballages soigneusement étiquetés, personnel attentionné. [...] Mais sous les apparences, dans les marges ou sur les côtés, à la lisière de cette formulation claire et impersonnelle, s'agite tout un peuple de fainéants, de buveurs, de rieurs et de lézards, de chanteurs improvisés sur des morceaux de comptoir. C'est un jazz permanent qui soutient la ville.<sup>25</sup>

The stereotypically "efficient" Tokyo is here set up against what is by definition another stereotype, its "opposite": a Tokyo of drinking, sloth and excess, "de fainéants, de buveurs, de rieurs et de lézards." The contrast with the original stereotype is clearly the selling point of this new vision of Tokyo, so much so that this extract is used as the blurb on the back cover. But Ferrier goes on to justify his contrastive stereotype with a plethora of detail, and the habitually metaphorical description, "sous les apparences," turns out also to be literal; the real Tokyo is under the surface, *underground*.

*Tokyo: Petits portraits de l'aube* is a slender volume made up of four highly stylized and evocative essays, each of which constitutes a different approach to the mysteries of Japan's capital. "Ces tribus qui nous habitent" is about a Frenchwoman who is slowly driven mad by her desire to commune in a peculiar way with the culture; "La chambre du fond" is made up of four parts, each of which is inspired by a kanji; "Cent ans de solitude" is a meditative walk through Shinjuku station to a little bar in the entrails of the city. The second essay, "Syntaxe de Tokyo," is the one that concerns us here, being another four-part piece on the four successive stages of an evening in Tokyo. As Ferrier explains, "les Japonais divisent la nuit en plusieurs 'soirées' successives," starting with a civilized dinner in a restaurant for the "première soirée" but moving to different venues and a more selective group of individuals as the night becomes older and the alcohol more copious. The second and third "soirées" of this chapter take Ferrier's narrator on two nocturnal flâneries, in the company—unusually, for a flâneur—of a "native" companion who is willing to share his flânerie and knowledge with the foreign flâneur. This is Yo, by day a brilliant linguist, a Japanese scholar of the French language whose international reputation is such that "quand Yo participait à un congrès de linguistique à New York, Noam Chomsky se déplaçait en personne pour lui

serrer la pince et s'entretenir avec lui de questions théoriques qu'eux seuls peut-être pouvaient comprendre" (40). By night he is a drinker of mythical proportions, irascible and pedantic, and an incomparable connoisseur of the mysteries of underground Tokyo. With this almost mythological figure Ferrier's narrator goes out drinking on a regular basis, and is rewarded with a series of adventures.

One evening, after meeting in their usual drinking hole, the two men set off on a journey involving various metro lines and many changes: "avec lui Tokyo devenait une course-poursuite, un immense polar" (45), that is to say a flânerie of the modern sort that makes use of public transport. They finally arrive at Kokubunji station:

En sortant du train, il bifurqua soudainement; au lieu de s'engager vers la gare, il prit un petit escalier de traverse, juste à côté du rail, puis il poussa une barrière [...]. Nous étions arrivés sur une plate-forme entourée d'herbes, l'obscurité était presque totale, seule une loupiote jaune indiquait l'entrée d'une trappe, surmontée d'un verrou que Yo tira sans hésitation. La planche se souleva en grinçant, dévoilant l'entrée d'une cavité de terre. C'était un trou dans le sol d'environ trois mètres de profondeur: en penchant bien la tête, on pouvait voir une série d'arbustes étranges plantés bien régulièrement en contrebas. (46)

The plants turn out to be *nanpaku-udo*, a species of asparagus and a much-prized delicacy that grows best in the dark; indeed, the two have come from precisely the kind of bar that might serve *nanpaku-udo* tempura as an expensive side dish. Yo informs the narrator that certain farmers have identified these abandoned passages of the Tokyo train network as ideal places for cultivating the plants. In true flâneur fashion, the two men are completely satisfied with the fact of the discovery, and leave the costly vegetables safe in their underground plots. Kokubunji is the beginning of the western Tokyo suburbs, so this is an "underground space" that is completely different from the ones described by Robin; suburban as opposed to metropolitan, a place of secret, organic growth that is plunged in darkness. It is the antithesis of the underground station malls that are public, inorganically shiny, and brightly lit at all times of day.

Indeed the Tokyo underground as described by Ferrier is the site of organic growth as opposed to inorganic development, of genuine life as opposed to the Baudrillardian spectacle above the ground. Another adventure with Yo takes the narrator and his friends to a minuscule bar, this time in central Tokyo, with a very peculiar cellar:

S'il nous avait conduits dans ce bar, nous révéla-t-il après quelques verres de saké, c'est qu'il était pourvu d'une cave de 30 m<sup>2</sup>, où l'on entreposait de la levure de champignon avec du riz. Envi-

ronnement parfait pour la fermentation: préchauffée à une température de trente degrés, la cave gardait l'humidité de manière idéale. Au bout de quatre jours, on récoltait un saké doux superbe: *Amazaké* [...] Unique rescapée du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, c'était la dernière cave du Japon à produire du saké doux de cette manière, à l'ancienne, dans les entrailles de Tokyo, six mètres sous le portique sacré d'un temple et à deux pas d'une ligne de métro. (50–51)

The reference to the seventeenth century and the singularity of this particular place may make it sound like a lone curiosity that has survived the ages thanks to a bar owner with an amateur interest in rare alcohols. But Yo goes on to make it clear that this cellar is only one of a plethora of such active underground sites in Tokyo:

“Partout où l'air de la surface n'entre pas, la vie de Tokyo se développe [...] La température et l'humidité restent constantes, c'est un environnement idéal, tu comprends ? Et pour les travaux scientifiques également !... [...] La plupart des expériences high-tech se mènent aujourd'hui sous le sol, dans les abîmes de Tokyo. Tu vois, je ne te parle pas seulement des lignes électriques ni des circuits de télécommunication, des pipe-lines qui font quatre mètres de diamètre ou des câbles à fibre optique” (51–52)

The image conjured up is one of intense activity and development taking place under the surface of the city, unbeknownst to the human beings leading their lives on and above ground level; like the engine of a car or the unseen galley slaves in the hold of a ship, underground Tokyo hosts activities that are crucial to the workings of the city. These activities are also not especially human, as Ferrier's narrator confirms when he expands metaphorically on Yo's comments:

Tokyo était à l'image de cet alcool mûri dans la douceur des caves: la douceur et la fluidité de la surface cachaient une intense activité des profondeurs, un travail collectif, obscur et térébrant, où les siècles se confondaient, où agriculture ancestrale et science des particules se faisaient écho, où la nature et l'homme se rejoignaient. Recherche, rumination, macération, fermentation, la vie surgissait de ces mystérieux tressaillements, de cette intense réflexion sous-jacente: il ne fallait pas rompre des liens avec cette étrange aventure souterraine. (52)

Life underground is collective, unseeing, insect-like or even plant-like (“où la nature et l'homme se rejoignent”); there, the notion of time collapses, and the activities described are not discernibly human (“rumination, macération, fermentation”), although “recherche” and “réflexion” are also mentioned.

What exactly is the nature of this image? It is certainly the opposite of the shiny, commodified Tokyo above the ground, the fluid and organized city that the tourist is apt to see. But is it yet another stereotype, this vision of a part of Tokyo as unthinking and collective, perhaps a version of the older stereotype

of the Yellow Peril? Or is this 'life' something more basic, more profoundly human and therefore shared by all human beings? Ferrier's narrator feels that Yo's attachment to underground Tokyo is a consequence of exactly that, a belief in the basic interdependence of all human activity: "Yo croyait encore aux relations qui existent entre les unités élémentaires, il allait vers le fond indifférencié des phénomènes, ce qui nous était commun. Dans l'indifférence formidable des grandes villes modernes, il continuait à affirmer la place nécessaire des uns et des autres, leur irrémédiable enlacement" (53). Yo is a flâneur who seeks the elements common to all human beings; a Japanese linguist of the French language respected by Chomsky, he believes in a universal basis for all language, and analogously he believes that the mega-city is a giant organism in which everything is linked and interdependent. What is described here variously as "un travail collectif, obscur et térébrant," "le fond indifférencié des phénomènes" from whose "mystérieux tressaillements [...] la vie surgissait," is that invisible, wordless movement that emanates from the rhythm of life itself. Nathalie Sarraute's "tropisms," for instance, precisely designate "la pulsation secrète de la vie,"<sup>26</sup> an element common to all human beings yet unique to each, like blood.<sup>27</sup> The rare species of asparagus, the hi-tech experiments, and the heavy drinkers in the amazaké bar all partake of the rhythm of life, sheer life, observed on the scale of the city as a gigantic organism in itself. At the end of the evening, just before dawn, the narrator—now alone in the bar—tells us that he can hear this "life": "Là-bas, loin sous la surface, j'entends cette régulation première, une immense reptation souterraine, [...] quelque chose comme une respiration. C'est cette rumeur profonde, cette vie au revers de l'existence, la petite musique du fond des êtres dont je n'ai jamais cessé de vouloir m'approcher" (54). For Ferrier's narrator, the sound of life is "quelque chose comme une respiration" that he hears most reliably at the heart of the megapolis, as deep under the ground as he can manage to get, in the small hours of the morning.

Underground Tokyo supplies both of our writer-flâneurs with a point of access to a universal element that allows them to cross cultural barriers and reach a common humanity that makes them feel at one with the city. The fact that they both hail from multicultural backgrounds doubtlessly influences the ease with which their flânerie nullifies cultural and national boundaries, but this is especially the case beneath the surface of the Japanese metropolis. In underground Tokyo, Robin discovers the shopping malls of the major station complexes, where she interacts with Japanese shop assistants and partakes of the rhythm of departures, arrivals, and mass consumption. The rhythms of a

monster shopping complex, in Robin's view, are an authentic part of the "pulsation" of any megapolis; global franchises are the common elements, unfortunately but inevitably, of any capital city. She visits Starbucks cafés in every chapter of her book, in New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and London; they give her coffee, provide her with basic human communication, and punctuate her interminable walks. Indeed, one might argue that for her at least part of the syntax of a capitalist mega-city *is* the rhythm created by the frequency with which such brand names occur. This is not to say that Robin wants readers to become capitalist stooges, but she does encourage them to recognize the mega-city for what it is, and to embrace the evolution of *flânerie* alongside the evolution of the city. She herself is a self-conscious practitioner of the latest kind of *flânerie*; wandering through the Bluewater shopping complex in the London suburbs, towards the end of her book, she recognizes herself as the latest, most up-to-date version of the *flâneuse*, one who has come a long way since Benjamin strolled through Paris:

J'ai traîné dans le centre, de café en restaurant, de Marks & Spencer en House of Fraser. J'y suis allée au cinéma voir *The Kingdom* avec Jamie Foxx. J'ai monté et descendu cent fois les escalators. Je dois figurer mille fois sur les caméras de surveillance. Je suis entrée dans les librairies, les maroquinerie, les boutiques de dessous féminins. Je me suis arrêtée dans des Starbucks pour lire le *Guardian*, prendre des notes dans mes petits carnets vénitiens, contempler la foule, méditer sur le devenir suburbain des villes; mais cela ne m'a pas attristée. Je suis sans doute plus accordée au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, ou plus aliénée que Sinclair le nostalgique. J'incarne peut-être, à ma façon, ce nouveau *flâneur* des gigantesques centres commerciaux et des cafés qu'on retrouve partout à la surface du globe: Starbucks, Second Cup, Neos, etc. (345–46)

The new *flâneuse* must be adaptable and resilient enough to appreciate wandering around in shopping centers all over the world, drinking Starbucks coffee, and exchanging a few words—in the local language—with the "barista."

For Ferrier's narrator, the organic is key; it is through finding something growing quietly underground, such as the *nanpaku-udo* asparagus or the slowly fermenting saké, that he is led towards "ce qui nous était commun," paradoxically in a way, as these are both highly *recherché*, uncommon phenomena. But be we Japanese or French we all share a basic "fond indifférencié," felt through Sarrautean tropisms, Chomskyan linguistics or the rhythm of the mega-city; the fact that the title of Ferrier's essay is "Syntaxe de Tokyo" indicates that this is also what he wants us to share, that which is shared by all the inhabitants of Tokyo, whether they are human beings or species of asparagus.

Of equal significance is the fact that these discoveries are made not by him on his own, but in the company of a Japanese *flâneur*-figure. In this way Ferrier's *flâneur* can make sure that he cannot be found guilty of adopting a colo-

nializing or orientalizing stance; he relinquishes the solitude beloved of the traditional flâneur in exchange for a Japanese companion-guide. The companion in question, however, is no mere excuse for authenticity. As we saw earlier, he is an erudite linguist who straddles the East-West divide, as well as being an almost demonic figure of excess; he is an excessive drinker who is excessively well-informed. The almost mythical proportions of Yo's attributes link him to the classic guides who traditionally lead epic heroes such as Aeneas or Odysseus through their underground journeys, journeys on which the hero, like Ferrier's narrator, is required to remain an observer rather than a participant.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps non-participation is the rule for safe passage for both epic heroes and postmodern flâneurs underground; certainly Ferrier's narrator abides by it on his journey to discover, in the bowels of the mega-city, the universal "syntax" of Tokyo.

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#### Notes

1. Since the publication of Tester's classic volume, *The Flâneur*, there have been a number of excellent studies of flânerie of various kinds, for instance Catherine Nesci's *Le flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (Grenoble, ELLUG: 2007), and a collection of essays on flânerie and the senses in *Dix-Neuf*, 16:2 (2012), a special issue edited by Aimée Boutin.
2. H. Hazel Hahn provides a helpful discussion of the figure of the "discerning" flâneur abroad in "The Flâneur, the Tourist, the Global Flâneur, and Magazine Reading as Flânerie," in Boutin, ed., 193–210.
3. Rob Shields, "Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on Flânerie," in Tester, *The Flâneur* (77–78).
4. See Hahn for a nineteenth-century take on the "colonial flâneur" (204).
5. Michaux satirizes the "three-day China expert" in *Ecuador* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 82.
6. See Chris Jenks and Tiago Neves, "A Walk on the Wild Side: Urban Ethnography Meets the Flâneur," *Cultural Values*, 4:1 (2000): 1–17.
7. For an account of two twenty-first-century travelers who succeed, and one who over-compensates for the sins of his predecessors, see Akane Kawakami, "Flâneurs cosmopolites: Écrire/voyager entre Paris et Tokyo," Fabien Arribert-Narce, ed., *Détours par le Japon: Réceptions de la culture japonaise en France depuis 1945* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2016).
8. See Jacques Roubaud, *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Inventaire/Invention, 2003).
9. Livio Sacchi, *Tokyo, architecture et urbanisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 90.
10. Régine Robin, *Mégapolis* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2009), 223.
11. See Akane Kawakami, *Travellers' Visions: French Literary Encounters with Japan, 1881–2004* (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 2005), introduction.
12. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 118–19.
13. Robin is perhaps thinking about the Japanese station here as a concrete instance of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system" with "multiple entryways and exits." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 21.
14. Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes* (1970), *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 2:774–75.

15. “Ville souterraine” is, of course, the accepted appellation for the underground section of Montréal.
16. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* (London: Verso, 1997), 54.
17. Peter McLaren, “The Ethnographer as Postmodern Flâneur: Critical Reflexivity and Posthybridity as Narrative Engagement,” William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *Representation and the Text* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997), 144.
18. For a discussion of Ernaux’s “external diaries” in which she writes about everyday scenes witnessed in the “Ville Nouvelle” of Cergy-Pontoise, see Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 85–92. Ernaux has also published *Regarde les lumières mon amour* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), a year’s worth of observations made during visits to the Auchan “hypermarché” in a Cergy-Pontoise shopping center.
19. Again, the resemblance here with Montréal may play a part in Robin’s feelings of reassurance in the Tokyo underground. In Montréal, the “ville souterraine” is a particularly protective space because of the inclement weather outside; this was in fact one of the reasons for its creation.
20. See R. G. Saisselin, *The Bourgeois and The Bibelot* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1984).
21. “The mall is not a completely *public* place. Like the arcade before it, the street is made safely distant inside the mall” (Friedberg 113).
22. *La tentation de la France: La tentation du Japon* (Paris: Philippe Picquier, 2003).
23. *Le goût de Tokyo* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2008).
24. *Kizu, la lézarde* (Paris: Arléa, 2004); *Japon, la barrière des rencontres* (Paris: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2009); *Fukushima, récit d’un désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
25. Michaël Ferrier, *Tokyo: Petits portraits de l’aube* (Paris: Arléa, 2004), 43–44.
26. Nathalie Sarraute, “Roman et réalité,” *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 1652.
27. See Akane Kawakami, “Nathalie Sarraute’s Accent: The Poetry of *Tropismes*,” *French Studies*, 58:4 (2004): 499–512.
28. I am grateful to Paul Davis for pointing out the connection between the guides of epic heroes and Ferrier’s guide, and the fact that both types of journey occur underground.