



A baton passed between Toronto and Tokyo

BY JUNICHI MIYAZAWA

Junichi Miyazawa, PhD, is a Japanese author, critic, and professor at Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo. His work covers literature, music, and media, with a special focus on Canadian Studies. He was Visiting Professor of the Robarts Centre in 2018–19.

“Robarts Centre?” I did not know the name until I received a newsletter from the Japanese Association of Canadian Studies (JACS) in January 2018 with an announcement of the Robarts Centre’s Visiting Professorship for 2018–19. The professorship was open to full-time faculty members who worked on issues concerning Canada and who were based outside the country.

As a Tokyo-based professor of literature, musicology, and media studies with a focus on Canadian Studies, I had been looking for an academic home somewhere in Canada where I could spend my forthcoming sabbatical leave. Moreover, York University was one of the most desirable places for me because I wanted to live a whole year in Toronto, the city of my long-time heroes (and research topics), Glenn Gould and Marshall McLuhan.

I naturally started to prepare a CV and a statement of my research project, but I noticed that there was an obstacle. As one of the application requirements, I needed a letter of support from a current tenure-track professor at York who was an associate of the Robarts Centre.

“Barbara Godard!” The name of the distinguished professor in cultural studies at York University came to my mind. In 2006, I was vice-chair for the annual conference of JACS in Tokyo, and along with chair Professor Yoko Fujimoto, I invited Dr. Godard as a keynote speaker. I was fascinated by her talks about postmodernity within the multilingual circumstances of Canadian culture. I greatly enjoyed our time together and was happy to reunite with her when I read a paper in Toronto the following year. I naturally wanted to ask her for a support letter, but unfortunately she passed away in 2010.

I wrote to the Centre with a slight sense of bewilderment. “I wish I could apply from Japan, but the only professor at YorkU who might have been able to give me a referral letter was Barbara Godard. What should I do?”

Laura Taman, the Centre coordinator, gave me a surprisingly kind reply. She suggested that I choose one of the professors on the Centre’s membership list and email them for recommendation. I decided to get in touch with Professor Jody Berland, whom I knew to be one of the leading scholars in Canada and who enhanced the ideas of McLuhan in the field of cultural studies. I explained the situation and asked her to be my nominator. Again, to my surprise, she readily agreed. She was generous enough to read my CV and proposal and issued me a “visa” to the Centre. Finally, I received the post of Visiting Professor, and started my sabbatical year in a study room on the 7th floor of the Kaneff Tower.

The research theme I proposed for my professorship was “Retrieving the cultural landscapes of Glenn Gould: A Japanese perspective on Canadian lifestyles and customs.” I wanted (and still want) to understand the basis of Canadian culture, the aspects to which Canadian people and scholars would never refer. I thought that experiencing daily life, talking with local people, visiting various places,

and attending as many events as possible might allow a non-Canadian scholar to assimilate the Canadian mindset on a deeper, unconscious level. York University offers abundant opportunities, and the Robarts Centre was an excellent base for developing such activities. During the year, I participated in various lectures and workshops organized or presented by Robarts, ranging from literature to Northern Studies. They were all enjoyable and thought-provoking. I was told that no visiting professor had ever attended as many events as I did. The lecture I delivered at Keele campus on February 14, 2019, “Why Was Glenn Gould Canadian? A Japanese Perspective on the Pianist’s Mindset,” was in part a return gift for receiving such a valuable opportunity.

Two years after my sabbatical leave in September 2021, during the decidedly not funny time of the pandemic, I chaired the keynote session for the 46th Annual Conference of JACS in Tokyo, titled “Funny Not Funny, Here Not Here: Navigating the Canadian in Contemporary Popular Culture.” The keynote speaker was Dr. Jody Berland herself, joining from Toronto via Zoom. Through the Robarts Centre, an international baton of Canadian Studies had been passed from Barbara to me and from me to Jody—like a flame, passing from candle to candle. Without the Centre’s Visiting Professorship, this would not have been possible. ■