Shikata Ga Nai

Brent Ryan Bellamy and Sheena Wilson

Pronunciation: shi-cata ga-nai
(ɕi̥kata ga nai)

Part of Speech: Colloquialism

Provenance: Japanese and speculative fiction (Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy)

Example: To those who say that transforming our petroculture is too big a task, we say **shikata ga nai**.

Shikata ga nai is a historically layered term that speaks to the delicate balance between pragmatism and idealism—a critical negotiation as we face an ecologically compromised future. A Japanese-language phrase, **shikata ga nai** translates roughly as "it cannot be helped."[1] During and after World War II, it was commonly used largely by issei—first-generation Japanese American and Japanese Canadian immigrants. Policies of racial profiling and confinement were undergirded by similar attitudes on either side of the U.S.–Canadian border, resulting in the displacement of entire communities, from infants to the elderly, without due process. During the war, people were forced into internment camps or to work; at war's end, they faced resettlement to mandated zones of North America or "repatriation" to Japan.[2] During this period, **shikata ga nai** expressed a collective resignation to these policies, which produced incalculable suffering. It also signaled an acceptance by the speakers that these policies were an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable outcome of World War II. By uttering **shikata ga nai** and other-

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wise remaining silent about this experience of injustice, many Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians endeavored to assimilate and move on.[3] Most were successful.

Yet in spite of the resignation that **shikata ga nai** expressed, we see within it a kernel of collective possibility, a glimpse of how best to work toward a positive future in difficult times. The generation that came of age in the postwar period, composed largely of nisei and some sansei (whose parents and grandparents, respectively, were born in Japan), was frustrated by their treatment during and after the war. Inspired by the civil rights movement, they sought to discover their silenced histories, reverse the attitude of quiet acceptance, and fight for official redress. Their struggle succeeded in gaining formal apologies from both the Canadian and American governments. In 1988, each acknowledged that other choices were possible, even during wartime. Suddenly what was inevitable began to shift.

The wartime history of **shikata ga nai** plays an important role in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (comprising *Red Mars* [1993], *Green Mars* [1994], and *Blue Mars* [1996]), one of the major works of Western science fiction in the last three decades. Written in the shadow of the 1988 formal redress settlements, the trilogy shows how the phrase might be productively recontextualized for environmental politics without erasing its racialized history.[4] Our proposed adoption of this loanword looks to the lived experiences of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians rebuilding their lives in the ruins of racist World War II government policies, on the one hand, and an imagined fictional future where humans are forging new communities on Mars in partial response to environmental catastrophe on Earth, on the other.[5] In this context, **shikata ga nai** as loanword reflects a need to persevere despite traumatic and even shameful histories, drawing a line between historical policies that were intended to erase racial minorities and contemporary environmental crimes.[6] **Shikata ga nai** asks all of us to recognize that in the face of the seemingly insurmountable, we have to be resolute

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and willing to redefine what is inevitable. In the current and coming moments of climate crisis, this lesson will offer some shelter to weather the storm. As per our suggested use to those who say that transforming our petroculture is too big a task, we say **shikata ga nai**. As the redress movement accomplished in the preceding decade, Robinson's saga about the future colonization of Mars transforms the meaning of **shikata ga nai** from passive acceptance of historical injustices and hardships to a politically expedient mobilization. In the Mars trilogy, **shikata ga nai** signals the sense that the politics of the inevitable can be flipped; in the case of the present, **shikata ga nai** is a bridge built toward a necessary and welcome political and ecological transformation.

Robinson's Mars trilogy captures the malleability of **shikata ga nai**: characters mobilize a logic of inevitability and practicality to justify decisions about the future of Mars. These visions are in competition with one another: will Mars be terraformed or not? If so, how? At stake in these decisions is not only the ecology of a historically lifeless planet but also the question of the eventual, real-world geoengineering of planet Earth—once science fiction but now a very real possibility. In *Red Mars*, the first book in the series, there are at least four different visions for the future of Mars, led by four women who arrive as part of the First Hundred (botanists, a psychologist, scientists, and engineers): Hiroko Ai, Nadia Cherneshevsky, Ann Clayborne, and Phyllis Boyle. Robinson fashions these four female characters as a political synecdoche. Each embodies one of several attitudes about the relationship of Earth colonists to Mars. **Shikata ga nai** as a disposition is associated with three of these leaders as they work to shape the future. Although their plans for Mars are quite different, three of the four involve extracting resources from and manipulating their new environment to meet the needs of human communities. In each instance, the phrase downplays the ecopolitical significance of their decisions.

Ai first introduces **shikata ga nai** in *Red Mars* during a debate over which energy sources to rely on for the development of Martian

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settlements. Born in Japan, Ai's story-world history could easily be entwined with the real Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians who used the phrase, especially if one reads the trilogy as an extension of Earth's real history. They debate the merits of nuclear power capacity and wind power infrastructure, with the American Phyllis Boyle in the corner of capitalist expedience and the Russian Arkady Bogdanov arguing for a radical new vision of collective social life:

> It was Hiroko who cut Arkady off with what she said was a Japanese commonplace: "*Shikata ga nai*," meaning *there is no other choice*. Windmills might have generated enough power, but they didn't have windmills, while they had been supplied with a Rickover nuclear reactor, built by the U.S. Navy and a beautiful piece of work; and no one wanted to try bootstrapping themselves into a wind-powered system, they were in too much of a hurry. *Shikata ga nai*. This too became one of their oft-repeated phrases.[7]

Though she stops the argument, Ai has ulterior motives: the nuclear power generators will work better to serve her goal of forming a hidden colony to develop a truly Martian culture. To quicken the realization of her secret goal, Ai declares "there is no other choice" than to opt for nuclear power solutions. Though not capitalistic in motive, this expediency echoes economic justifications that rely on the privileging of short-term gains over long-term ramifications, a mind-set that has resulted in disastrous climate change here on Earth.[8] To declare that "there is no other viable option" attempts to evacuate this critical energy infrastructure decision (to implement nuclear power on Mars) of its politics. Furthermore, the absence of a shared vision for the future of Mars, and an energy strategy for achieving these visions, means the First Hundred use capitalist productivity quotients (value ÷ time) as a justification for acting in their own interests, sometimes driven by differing ecopolitical

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visions and sometimes seemingly motivated by scientific curiosity and a desire to exercise their technological know-how, looking to implement the most efficient or practical short-term, if not long-term, solution.

In the trilogy, both Russian and American characters grab hold of Ai's term, **shikata ga nai**. Nadia Cherneshevsky, the Russian cold-weather engineer, thinks through the practical problem of having enough water on Mars:

> They needed more water, but the seismic scans were finding no evidence of ice aquifers underground, and Ann thought there weren't any in the region. They had to continue to rely on the air miners, or scrape up regolith [Martian soil] and load it into the soil–water distilleries. But Nadia didn't like to overwork the distilleries, because they had been manufactured by a French–Hungarian–Chinese consortium, and were sure to wear out if used for bulk work.
>
> But that was life on Mars, it was a dry place. *Shikata ga nai*.[9]

While the colonists eventually develop methods to introduce more water into Mars's planetary system, Cherneshevsky's use of the phrase during the initial settlement establishes pragmatism as the governing ideology. Here, **shikata ga nai** means "it cannot be helped." Rather than acknowledging the political and ecological implications of her multiple decisions about infrastructure, Cherneshevsky addresses the practical, mechanical issues in front of her. She accepts the phrase **shikata ga nai** not for its political expediency but because it allows her to continue with her work. There is no need to acknowledge the larger forces shaping the direction of development on Mars (such as Earth-based metanational corporations) so long as the projects succeed and the colonists have enough air, water, sustenance, and shelter. For Cherneshevsky, **shikata ga nai** names a form of acceptance in the face of what, from her vantage,

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are merely engineering problems, but which are ultimately political in that they fulfill the official mandate of the mission: to colonize and prepare Mars for the arrival of waves of immigrants.

Cherneshevsky faces immediate crises that demand solutions, while the American Boyle marches toward a grand vision of Martian resource development. As Boyle contemplates the energy well of Martian gravity, she takes on the attitude of capitalistic pragmatism.[10] Her monumental plan: to build a space elevator. In a conversation with another American, John Boone, she says,

> "This gets us out of our gravity well, eliminating it as a physical and economic problem. That's crucial; without that we'll be bypassed, we'll be like Australia in the nineteenth century, too far away to be a significant part of the world economy. People will pass us by and mine the asteroid directly, because the asteroid has physical wealth without gravitational constraints. Without the elevator we could become a backwater."
>
> *Shikata ga nai*, John thought sardonically.[11]

The "it" in **shikata ga nai** makes space for ambiguity, and here Boone's cynicism manifests as a refusal to engage politically. "It" can be read as either resignation to the fact that Boyle cannot resist her capitalist impulses or as ambivalence about Mars becoming a backwater. Boone, as an observer of Boyle's planning, amid a range of other political actors, thinks "*shikata ga nai*" ironically, because he can see quite clearly that there are alternatives beyond succumbing to the economic imperative or being rendered obsolete. This use of the phrase might describe how many people currently experience resignation to a vision of the doomed fate of the Earth. Yet this ambiguity also presents us with an opportunity to argue for a shift in what "it" is that cannot be helped: from a seemingly inevitable future of capitalism and ecological devastation

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to a viable and resolute response to the ongoing global environmental crisis.

Finally, Ann Clayborne takes an explicit position against development, extractivism, and scientific progress for its own sake. From the outset of the trilogy, Robinson highlights the misguided belief that Mars exists only through human intervention, much as European colonizers believed their gaze made manifest the New World. The dominant impulse to treat Mars as a resource triggers Clayborne's dogged opposition to terraforming the planet. *Red Mars* begins the trilogy with the line, "Mars was empty before we came."[12] From the arrival of the First Hundred, two ways of seeing Mars emerge: those interested in terraforming (called, ironically, the Greens) and those who see it as a place with its own integrity, despite its surplus of rocks (the Reds). Clayborne's desires reach beyond the conflicts of the others, and it is for this reason that she does not utter **shikata ga nai**. In spite of her disinterest of entering into politics, people treat her attitude as a rallying point, crafting a revolutionary movement that has a major impact on the eventual Martian constitution. Clayborne's refusal to admit "it cannot be helped" wins the Reds several concessions, such as the guarantee that certain areas of the Red Planet will not be touched by the terraforming efforts. Though Clayborne is less than thrilled at these compromises, the results of her passionate engagement complete the picture of a struggle over the future of Mars. Clayborne critiques the underlying assumptions made by those saying **shikata ga nai**. She flips the referent, inverting the (eco)logic and the worldview of what "cannot be helped." Instead of assuming that "it" is terraforming, what becomes inevitable for Clayborne is the need to leave some of the planet as they found it. **Shikata ga nai**.

From its first use in the Mars trilogy, the logic of **shikata ga nai** resonates with its historical usage—as a means of efficiently and productively forging forward by remaining silent about the unjust politics of detainment, dispossession, and dispersal experienced by the Japanese

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Americans and Japanese Canadians. Ultimately the lesson of the postwar era was that these injustices could not be forever suppressed, let alone redressed, through resignation; resistance and a robust politics of collective action was needed to drive the redress movement for almost two decades until the governments apologized. Since then, scholars, writers, filmmakers, and artists have been rewriting the official histories from the perspective of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians. In borrowing the phrase **shikata ga nai**, Robinson subtly invokes not only histories of injustice but also the notion that whatever decision is made, even those born of necessity, there may in the future be need for redress and reconciliation.

This need arises today in the realm of environmental policy as many prioritize the maintenance of "the economy." It is taken as a given that one cannot act differently, and that the only commonsense approach to the future lies in creating policy that balances the economy and the environment. But common sense is a dangerous measure for any problem requiring radical departure from current ways of being and doing. Policy makers around the globe seem unwilling to disrupt the accumulation of capital or make decisions against corporate interests. Rather than deep and immediate decarbonization, government decision makers are influenced by corporate lobbyists to ensure that the energy transition is slowed or delayed indefinitely. It's now clear that the decision to press forward with business as usual will not stand the test of time; those who have allowed for these delays in the interest of the corporate wealth will be judged for the devastating "slow violence" that failing to address climate change is already causing.[13] As in the redress movement, **shikata ga nai** could be a part of an environmental politics that seeks to foreground multispecies ecological justice in decision making.

We do not imagine the comparison between the real-world histories of Japanese North Americans and an imagined future history to be simple or easy. Yet **shikata ga nai** can contain disparate histories of

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use in a doubly resonant meaning—one that features a reverberation of the past into the future. Just as people in the past suffered the loss of home and lands, displacement and restrictions on mobility, so too will millions of climate refugees in the coming years. The "it" in "it cannot be helped" is the fact that our ways of doing and being in the world—our relation to one another, other species, and the environment—must change. The "it" that "cannot be helped" is that although we are deeply enmeshed and complicit in the causes of climate change, even though we lack an objective and clear answer about how best to respond, we must act. There will be many experiments and many failures, but each action toward addressing climate change and every failed experiment will yield necessary lessons.

As a loanword, **shikata ga nai** reminds us that accepting that "it cannot be helped" has constituted an act of survival specific to many times and places. To ensure a livable planet for humans and nonhumans alike, we need to use this loanword to disrupt capitalist relations, colonial relations, and patriarchal relations. Robinson argues for these goals in the Mars trilogy through the polyvocality of the story line that provides a mirror onto the real-world politics of climate change now as it did in the 1990s. Whereas Robinson illustrates how **shikata ga nai** is a malleable signifier that can be used to obscure political end goals, we argue that its use could—in the real-world politics of the current ecological crisis—be mobilized as a valuable loanword. On this planet, in the twenty-first century, we can confidently say **shikata ga nai**: there is no other way forward than through radical environmental politics and policies.

NOTES

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1. Roy Miki, *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2004), 260; and Mitsuye Yamada, "'You Should Not Be Invisible':

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An Interview with Mitsuye Yamada," conducted by Caroline Kyungah Hong, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, and Sharon Tang-Quon, *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8, no. 1 (2014): 15.

2. The euphemism of "repatriation" used at the end of World War II overwrites the fact that Japanese Canadians, born in Canada, were among those sent back to Japan—a country they had never been to. This only adds to a list of injustices and their legacies, which are too numerous to articulate here. For more details, see Miki, *Redress*, and Sheena Wilson, "*Obāchan's Garden*: Maternal Genealogies as Resistance in Canadian Experimental Documentary," in *Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema*, ed. Asma Sayed (Bradford, Ont.: Demeter Press, 2016).
3. Assimilation involved more than remaining silent about the historical civil and human rights abuses they had to endure. It meant denying their language and culture as well. As Roy Miki writes, "Many Japanese Canadians did not have the language to account for the unspeakable monstrosities that manifested themselves internally as shame and guilt for being singled out, ostracized and labeled the 'enemy alien' within the social body of their own country," and therefore people reverted to "common phrases . . . to mediate a past that refused resolution" such as **shikata ga nai**. Miki, *Redress*, 260. See also Lucia Lorenzi, "Shikata Ga Nai: Mapping Japanese Canadian Melancholy in the Field of National and Literary Trauma," *West Coast Line* 71 (2011): 100–105.
4. In 1988 both the U.S. and Canadian governments offered apologizes to Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians and began their respective processes of financially compensating former internees. Nineteen ninety-three, the year *Red Mars* was released, was the year that marked the completion of the distribution of the financial settlement in the United States.
5. In mid-February 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which lead to the removal of 110,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Less than a week later, the Canadian government passed Order-in-Council 1486 that allowed for the removal of Japanese Canadians from the West Coast, given that a previous order had declared it a protected area.
6. Muriel Kitagawa captures this sensibility well when she says, "Who knows but that the next time will be made easier for the plunderers because we shrugged and said: 'Shikata ga nai.'" Kitagawa, *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941–1948*, ed. Roy Miki (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2010), 216.
7. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 109.
8. As opposed to the fictitious geoengineering on Mars, and then, of course, the experiments and proposals to use terraforming on Earth in the twenty-first century—

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well after the trilogy was written—as a response to manage anthropogenic climate change.

9. Robinson, *Red Mars*, 124.
10. This metaphor describes the gravitational limit to spaceflight. Humans look out to the stars as if from the bottom of a well. Only with the proper tool (a jetpack or even a ladder) could they hope to climb out.
11. Robinson, *Red Mars*, 307.
12. Robinson, *Red Mars*, 2.
13. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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