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"Mi experiencia en el Japón": Peruvian Nikkei Creating Meaning from Transnational Experiences

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Abstract

This article analyzes the search for identity and community in essays written for a Peruvian contest on the theme "Mi experiencia en el Japón: Una lección de vida." I argue that the texts show complex relationships among ethnicity, nationality, language, and class as the authors consider the effect of their time in Japan on themselves and their communities. Peruvians of Japanese descent, the nikkei, write of their suffering and alienation whereas a non-nikkei finds inspiration for Peru's future in Japan. All the authors try to reconcile an ideal of global citizenship with their individual experiences of difference.

In their written narratives, Peruvians who have lived in Japan explore new ways of understanding their identities in a transnational context. The migrations from Peru to Japan take place in the context of economic conditions in Peru and in Japan; assumptions about ethnic identity that led to changes in Japanese immigration laws; and beliefs about identity, nationality, and ethnicity in the Peruvian-Japanese community. The editors of *New Worlds, New Lives: Globalization and People of Japanese Descent in the Americas and from Latin America in Japan* conclude that the studies in the International Nikkei Research Project indicate that "there is a series of new, hybrid identities that began to emerge markedly in the 1980s and 90s, and that have been fueled in part by globalization processes" (Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi, "Retrospect" 366). The new identities are especially salient among women, Okinawans, mixed-race families, and most relevant to this paper, migrant laborers in Japan (336). In *Flexible Citizenship*, Aihwa Ong limits the term *globalization* to "the narrow sense of new corporate strategies," whereas she uses "*transnationalism* to refer to the cultural specificities of global processes, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of 'culture'" (4). Cultural factors are paramount in the descriptions Peruvians write of their experiences as transnational subjects.

As Daniel M. Masterson notes in *The Japanese in Latin America*, there are various definitions of the term *Nikkei* (xi). Most broadly, "it refers to the Japanese overseas" (Masterson xi). In legal terms, to the Japanese government, "people are of 'Japanese heritage' if their lineage can be traced back three generations" (Masterson xi). Another definition allows for individual choice. At the Eleventh Panamerican Nikkei Conference in 2001, scholars developed "a working definition of *Nikkei* that defined it as an individual 'who has has [sic] one or more ancestors from Japan and/or anyone who self-defines as a Nikkei'" (Masterson xi). To others, community is essential: "We defined 'Nikkei' as a person or persons of Japanese descent, and their descendants, who emigrated from Japan and who created unique communities and lifestyles within the societies in which they now live. [. . .] 'Nikkei' also potentially encompasses people of part-Japanese descent, to the extent that they retain an identity as a person of Japanese ancestry" (Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi, "Impact" 19). My use of the term is closer to the Panamerican Nikkei Conference's broad definition, although the Nikkei authors discussed below also meet the Japanese government's requirements. Most of the Nikkei in Japan are *dekasegui*. *Dekasegui* is the Spanish spelling of the Japanese term *dekasegi*, which originally referred to migrant labor. Among Nikkei it has come to be used to refer to both the phenomenon of migration to Japan and to the migrant workers themselves (Higa [Oshiro] 258, Fukumoto 387, Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi, *New Worlds*xv).¹

While a number of historical and anthropological studies, some including extensive interviews, have recently been published in Peru and in the United States about the history of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Latin America as well as the migration of Latin Americans, particularly Nikkei, to Japan, they have not specifically addressed the narratives written by Peruvians about their experiences in Japan.² Such autobiographical texts are not common. Even so, a full analysis of the narratives is beyond the scope of this essay. This paper focuses on three texts that highlight significant issues that also appear in other accounts.³ The essays analyzed here provide insight into the way in which the Peruvians themselves construct the narrative of their experience in Japan when they write it down. While a questionnaire or interview might elicit responses more amenable to certain kinds of

analysis, the content and form of the essays show not just what the authors experienced and learned, but what they wanted to learn and how they want to portray themselves. Aihwa Ong notes the limitations of narrative analysis when context is elided (13). On the other hand, it provides an important dimension to the understanding of Nikkei identity that may not be available in other types of studies.

In 1999, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Japanese immigration to Peru and in recognition of the large numbers of Peruvians working and studying in Japan, the Asociación Peruano Japonesa (along with Kyodai and the alumni associations APEBEMO, APEBEJA, and APEBENI)⁴ sponsored a contest including the categories of "testimonio," "fotografía," and "historieta" on the theme of "Mi experiencia en el Japón: Una lección de vida."⁵ The winning and honorable mention entries were published in a booklet. This paper discusses three of the essays, in which the Nikkei recall their experience of difference at home and in Japan, reflecting on the role of ethnicity, nationality, language, and class in their own hybrid identities, while a non-Nikkei author draws unexpected parallels between Japan and Peru, positing lessons for his society's development. The most striking feature of the life stories of Peruvians in Japan is the compulsion for a happy ending in the form of a conclusion that justifies the difficulties endured. It is not surprising that the Asociación Cultural Peruano Japonesa and its co-sponsors chose the theme "Mi experiencia en el Japón: Una lección de vida" for the contest, since the idea of knowledge gained through experience is common to Peruvian accounts of life in Japan. For dekasegui in particular, the weight of negative experiences in their narratives usually overwhelms their optimistic conclusions. Particularly interesting is the contradictory juxtaposition of describing Japanese and Peruvian cultures as incommensurable and concluding that all humans are essentially similar global citizens. Despite the assumption on the part of the Japanese government and the Nikkei themselves that people of Japanese descent can adapt more readily to life in Japan, in the *Mi experiencia en el Japón* booklet, the Nikkei dekasegui, in contrast to the non-Nikkei student, describe numerous difficulties with Japanese culture and conflicts with Japanese people. The experience leads them to reflect on their changing sense of ethnic, national, and transnational identity.

Even before many Nikkei's self-image was challenged by their experience in Japan, the Peruvian Nikkei identity was complex and evolving. Aihwa Ong argues that it is important to consider the individual experiences of migrants in the context of policies that shape transnational migrations: "What are the mechanisms of power that enable the mobility, as well as the localization and disciplining, of diverse populations within these transnationalized systems? How are cultural flows and human imagination conditioned and shaped within these new relations of global inequalities?" (11). The original migration of Japanese to Peru resulted from social and economic conditions and related government policies in the two countries. The more recent migrations to Japan have similarly taken place in the context of economic inequalities, business needs, and government policies.

Although there has been contact between Latin America and Japan since the colonial period (del Busto 21), Peru signed the first treaty between a Latin American nation and Japan in 1873 and large-scale immigration from Japan to Peru began in 1899. Peru needed agricultural laborers, and Japan saw a way to deal with overpopulation. Before World War II, Japanese immigrants in Peru identified primarily with their country of origin; they hoped to stay only temporarily in Peru and were not interested in assimilation (Fukumoto 517). On moving from rural to urban areas, the immigrants looked down on their working class Peruvian neighbors: "Los japoneses se sintieron—parcialmente—en una posición de superioridad económica, moral e incluso 'racial,' respecto a los peruanos de clase baja con quienes convivían" (Fukumoto 519). Anti-Japanese sentiment in the 1940s, including looting in 1940 ("la experiencia más traumática de la colectividad *nikkei* en el Perú"), was followed by World War II, which included deportations of Japanese immigrants to the United States (Fukumoto 521). The destruction in Japan seemed to preclude any return to the home country, and in the post-war era, there was a "reconocimiento de los aspectos positivos de la sociedad peruana y un cuestionamiento sobre la propia cultura e identidad," and the immigrants were more open to assimilation with Peruvian culture (Fukumoto 528).⁶

After his election in 1990 as President of Peru, Alberto Fujimori presided over the "Fuji-shock" economic policies, including floating the currency. One reaction to the immense currency devaluation and economic difficulties was an increase in the wave of "return migration" of Nikkei to Japan that had begun during the economic crisis of the previous government. Most were dekasegui. At the same time, during the economic boom in Japan, the Japanese government gave preferential visa treatment to those foreigners of Japanese descent, believing them to be more likely to assimilate (See Altamirano Rua 239, Mori 242). As Daniel Linger notes, the immigration law that took effect on June 1, 1990, "promised a flexible, low-cost, culturally tractable and racially correct labor force to do the industrial dirty work disdained by Japanese citizens" (23). Both the Nikkei and the Japanese were disappointed by the cultural difficulties encountered by the descendants of Japanese in Japan.

As early as 1988 the *Prensa nikkei* newspaper's *Anuario* featured a section on the dekasegui phenomenon and the issues it raised ("Nota" 32-39). At the time of the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Japanese immigration to Peru in 1999, another Peruvian-Japanese newspaper, *Perú shimpo*, published articles on many of the same concerns, from the daily life of the dekasegui to the effect of their immigration on the Nikkei community at home. There are tens of thousands of Peruvians, Nikkei and non-Nikkei, in Japan.⁷ The dekasegui phenomenon has given many Nikkei the opportunity to experience Japanese culture first-hand. Benefits cited include greater discipline and knowledge of Japanese culture (see Fukumoto 361). Negative results include disruptions in individual families and the Nikkei community in general, as well as the suffering many dekasegui experience during their stay in Japan.⁸ Mary Fukumoto notes various factors that affect the Nikkei experience in Japan: the young adapt better than their elders, those of higher education and social status find the work in Japan more degrading, and those who enter Japan illegally suffer more abuse from unscrupulous employment agencies (362; see also Higa [Oshiro]).

Fukumoto, like many scholars and dekasegui, notes that the experience tends to change dekasegui's perception of their Peruvian, Japanese, and Nikkei identity: "Por el *dekasegi* los '*nikkei* puros' han tomado consciencia de que no son japoneses. Este fenómeno los ha llevado a apreciar lo nacional y ha contribuido al surgimiento de una nueva identidad *nikkei* que revalora la peruanidad sin desconocer las raíces japonesas" (563). Even though living in Japan leads them to recognize their differences from the Japanese, the Nikkei insist that it is important to distinguish themselves from non-Nikkei. According to Fukumoto, even mixed-race Nikkei, who realize in Japan how limited their knowledge of Japanese culture is, recognize themselves as authentic in contrast to the many "false Nikkei," those non-Nikkei Peruvians who have bought or forged a "Nikkei" identity in order to take advantage of the provisions in the Japanese law that favor Nikkei and their families (563). While the distinction between "pure" and mixed race Nikkei can be a contentious issue in the Peruvian Japanese community, it is not significant in the accounts I have studied of Nikkei in Japan.⁹ In contrast, criticism of the "*nikkei chichas*," as the false Nikkei are called, is common.

All the Nikkei dekasegui describe the difficulty they have adjusting to Japan and the experience of feeling more Japanese in Peru and more Peruvian in Japan. This might seem such a common experience as to be almost unremarkable, but it was a shock not only to the Japanese who invited Nikkei to come based on their compatibility, but to the Nikkei themselves. Difficulty adapting is not limited to Peruvians (see Linger 118). Nor is it limited to immigrants returning to a Japanese "home"; Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is just one text that explores the experience of Chicanas in Mexico

Carmen Higa Shimabukuro

In my research into the Peruvian experience in Japan, stories about men predominated. Few autobiographical texts have been written about the dekasegui experience, and in the early phases of the phenomenon, most dekasegui were men, resulting in a limited sample of women's writings about life as a dekasegui. The *Mi experiencia en el Japón* booklet is of interest in part because of the number of women included: two essayists, one photographer, and one comic strip author. Of these, the only adult, and only dekasegui, is Carmen Higa Shimabukuro, who won honorable mention in the "testimonio" category of the contest. Compared to other dekasegui accounts, her essay is notable for its focus on family relationships and responsibilities. In her narration, the dekasegui experience brings her closer to her father and grandparents, but distances her from her children. She differs from other authors in how she finds meaning in the alienation she encounters. In the end, her conclusions, like those of many dekasegui, contrast sharply with her narrative.

In "I Woman, I Man, I Nikkei," Doris Moromisato Miasato analyzes the gender dynamics of the Peruvian Nikkei community. In describing the women she interviewed, she distinguishes them primarily by generation. Higa Shimabukuro is in one sense *nisei*, because her father emigrated from Japan, but she is also *sansei*, because she is the granddaughter of immigrants. As a migrant in Japan, she identifies with her *issei* relatives, who emigrated from Japan. She exhibits many qualities that Moromisato Miasato found in the *sansei* women she interviewed, including having married a non-Nikkei, which is more common for *sansei* (196). A married woman working full time was also more common amongst *sansei* women than *nisei* (Moromisato Miasato, "I Woman" 196). Most significantly, Higa Shimabukuro does not exhibit the "total submissiveness and obedience" that Moromisato Miasato writes was a characteristic of *nisei* women as a result of their lack of status in the Nikkei community ("I Woman" 193). In Moromisato Miasato's study, "For *Sansei* women, to become a professional is the most important thing in their lives, because this will allow them economic independence and 'to become somebody in the eyes of society'" ("I Woman" 196). Higa Shimabukuro describes her work not as a profession but as a way to maintain the family, an attitude Moromisato Miasato found among the *issei* ("I Woman" 192). This perspective may arise from the fact that, like many dekasegui, Higa Shimabukuro was overqualified for the manual labor she did in Japan.

Despite her devotion to her family, particularly her four children, Higa Shimabukuro does not define herself only in terms of the family. On the other hand, while most Peruvians in Japan also mention separation from family as an aspect of their suffering, family plays a more central role in Higa Shimabukuro's essay.

Like many dekasegui, Higa Shimabukuro gives two motives for going to Japan: sentimental and financial. A generation earlier, her father left Japan for Peru, not primarily for economic reasons but rather to find his own father, who had already immigrated. While Higa Shimabukuro describes herself as following her father's path, she acknowledges that money is in fact the determining factor in the decision to go to Japan. Given the economic situation in Peru, few families can afford to travel to Japan for purely sentimental reasons, whereas the financial prospects for dekasegui seem irresistible. There are differences of opinion on the financial success of Latin American dekasegui in general. In a study of Brazilian dekasegui, Edson Mori claims that the dekasegui phenomenon has been economically advantageous to all parties: Japan, Brazil, and the dekasegui (246). The film *Gaijin II* also portrays the dekasegui experience positively, "contrary to the popular image" (Moniz 233). Accounts in the Peruvian Nikkei press and the testimony of Peruvian dekasegui, however, are primarily negative. Even as the Peruvian community in Japan becomes more stable, with more support services available, Japan's economic problems have made saving money more difficult (Higa Shimabukuro 18). The hopes of earning a great deal of money quickly often turn out to be as unfounded as the dream of a family reunion. As one dekasegui warned in an interview, "Venir a Japón es una trampa" (Doi 3). Higa Shimabukuro at least succeeds in helping her family financially.

Higa Shimabukuro's essay is notable for its detailed comparison of the experience of alienation in Peru and in Japan. Linguistic inadequacies cause the worst problems, and despite having spoken Japanese as a child she seems to have as much difficulty in Japan as her ancestors did in Peru. She opens with a comparison of her own difficulties upon entering school in Peru with her experience when she first arrives in Japan. As a child, "Las espontáneas risas de mis compañeras de aulas me despertaron a una realidad: no hablaba igual que ellas. Mi lenguaje tenía una extraña mezcla de español, japonés y hasta un poco del dialecto de Okinawa" (15).¹⁰ She informs the reader toward the beginning of her essay that her father sent her to a Peruvian school rather than a Japanese-Peruvian one because he wanted her to assimilate to Peruvian culture, since she would have no need to speak Japanese in her life. His plan worked too well, and his daughter must start from the beginning in Japan. As when she was a child, her inability to speak correctly is the basis of her culture shock. Her main complaint about Japanese people is that many of them mock her inability to speak or her attempts to learn Japanese: "¡Qué ironía! [. . .] hoy escribo estas líneas en el silencio habitual de una madrugada japonesa [. . .] volviendo a sentir nuevamente el 'choque de culturas': ahora son japoneses los que se ríen de mi poco conocimiento de su idioma" (15). The comparison to childhood underscores her lack of control over her life in Japan. As an adult, it is difficult to solve her linguistic problems because, as a dekasegui, her schedule and the location of her jobs far from any language schools limit her opportunity to study Japanese. Her experience serves as well as a reminder of the loss that results from assimilation.

She then compares her journey to Japan with her father's and grandparents' immigration to Peru: "Seis décadas atrás papá llegó al Perú en barco. Ahora iba yo a Japón en avión. El círculo se había cerrado" (17). The idea of the dekasegui completing or reversing the journey of their ancestors is not new. In the early days of the dekasegui phenomenon, *Prensa nikkei* printed charts comparing Peru to Japan in 1899, 1988, and 1992, noting that similar economic and social forces drove the waves of immigration from Japan to Peru and later from Peru to Japan ("Una historia que se repite" 34, "Fenómeno dekasegi" 79). Once in Japan, Higa Shimabukuro explicitly compares the attitude of Japanese who disdain her because she cannot comprehend their language to the Peruvian overseers who beat her grandparents for not following instructions in Spanish that they could not understand: "-Japonés bruto ¿por qué no entiendes, carajo? Y el látigo restallaba. Pero el japonés no era bruto: aún no había tenido tiempo de aprender el castellano" (16). Higa Shimabukuro does not face violence in Japan, but she feels that she evinces a similar scorn from her interlocutors: "Peruana tonta ¿Por qué no entiendes? Pero la peruana no era tonta. Aún no había tenido tiempo de aprender el idioma japonés" (17). Because she cannot communicate, she feels as powerless as her grandparents. Furthermore, her first job and residence are like a prison, since supervisors restrict her freedom of movement both during and after the working day. This recalls her portrayal of her grandparents who worked under indentured labor contracts in a life that she describes as "semi-esclavitud" (16). In contrast to other Nikkei authors, however, Higa Shimabukuro describes very little of her working life. Aside from the problems at this first job, she merely notes the location and type of factory for subsequent positions.

In another contrast, she does acknowledge some advantage to having come from a Nikkei community, despite her culture shock. She believes, for example, that her non-Nikkei husband had more difficulty adapting to Japan than she did. Most Nikkei conclude that their Japanese background does not help at all in Japan. Their disillusionment may in fact make the experience even more traumatic as they must reevaluate their previously unquestioned

relationship to Japanese culture. Higa Shimabukuro, in contrast, has close at hand an example of a non-Nikkei, her husband, who is slower to adapt than she is. She therefore concludes that despite the problems, her Nikkei background has helped to some extent.

Higa Shimabukuro takes three "lecciones de vida" from her experience in Japan. She begins her essay with the idea that the experience of immigration helps her to better understand her father and maternal grandparents. Higa Shimabukuro's ability to find connections to her immigrant ancestors may be the most striking lesson. It is, in fact, more common for dekasegui while in Japan to discover the strength of their Peruvian roots than their Japanese ones. Furthermore, her ability to see parallels between her experiences and those of her relatives allows her to see her culture shock in Japan as an affirmation of her Nikkei identity rather than a challenge to it.

She concludes with two more lessons. One of these conclusions involves her immediate family. She left her children in Peru while she was in Japan for five years, her biggest sacrifice.¹¹ She seems compelled to insist that it was worthwhile because the experience strengthened the family:

Hoy trato de no pensar en el tiempo transcurrido ni en todo lo que perdimos. No podemos marchar atrás, pero miro a los míos y siento que de toda esta experiencia se puede rescatar, muy aparte del bienestar económico que significó el alejamiento físico, el haber logrado una familia seria y responsable y unos hijos maravillosos que aprendieron a sobrellevar con asombrosa madurez la extraña situación que les tocó vivir. (18)

As is often the case in Nikkei descriptions of life in Japan, the attempt to conclude that positive results made the experience worth the effort is overwhelmed in the narrative by the suffering described. Adversity may have made her five children more responsible, but she has already more vividly described the anguish she felt at having to leave them during their formative years. Her conclusion is understandable: if leaving her family had had no positive effects, then her sacrifices would have been fruitless, because for Higa Shimabukuro, financial support is not a sufficient justification to herself for leaving her children. As in the motivations for going to Japan in the first place, financial and emotional issues are intertwined.

Higa Shimabukuro's final lesson is typical of Nikkei narratives about Japan. In fact, this conclusion is even more common than the idea that Nikkei learn about their own families or their own Nikkei community or their Japanese roots. Learning to love her parents' and grandparents' homeland combined with her existing love of Peru leads her to appreciate all nations. That is, discovering that she can love two countries teaches her the value of "universal love":

Aún no tenemos resuelto todos nuestros problemas ni Japón resultó ser la "varita mágica" de nuestros sueños infantiles, pero la experiencia en la patria de mis padres deja una honda huella en mis sentimientos como nikkei, porque el reencuentro con mis raíces me permitió comulgar, por primera vez, mi amor a la tierra que me vio nacer con el amor a la tierra de mis ancestros y, a través de este sentimiento, descubro el Amor Universal en mi corazón, que me concilia con todas las naciones. (18)

Where Higa Shimabukuro differs from other Nikkei who have discovered a bond with all of humanity is that she tries to ground the discovery specifically in her appreciation of Japan. Many Nikkei, including Pedro Pablo Arasaki Kian (21) and Augusto Higa Oshiro (12), write that they did not like Japan and the Japanese but that they did learn (from other foreigners or from the few Japanese that they did like) to feel a common ground with citizens of the world. Significantly, Higa Shimabukuro's story does not include any anecdotes or descriptions of how she came to love Japan. The greater part of her essay is about feeling like a stranger rather than universal love. Leaving one's own country often allows a traveler to overcome provincialism or chauvinism. This seems to have happened to Carmen Higa Shimabukuro, even though her portrayal of suffering subverts her conclusion.

Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi conclude that globalization has not led to "a marked trend among Nikkei away from their ethnic identities and toward a greater concern for and identification with the world as a whole" (336). My research has found that when Nikkei dekasegui write about their experiences, they do in fact usually insist on a global consciousness. The stories themselves may not illustrate such an identification, but the authors want it to be true. This identification does not entail abandoning a Nikkei or Peruvian identity, but rather the awareness that such an identification does not preclude a sense of world citizenship. As Aihwa Ong argues in *Flexible Citizenship*:

[. . .] in the era of globalization, individuals as well as governments develop a flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power. "Flexible citizenship" refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes. (6)

The fact that Higa Shimabukuro's conclusions about global love and community do not follow seamlessly from the story she tells indicate that her development of a sense of "flexible citizenship" is still in process.

Pedro Pablo Arasaki Kian

Pedro Pablo Arasaki Kian, author of another honorable mention essay in the "Mi experiencia en el Japón" contest, writes that life in Japan is completely foreign to him, despite his Nikkei background. Although he tries to conclude that there is the potential to find common ground between Japanese and Peruvian cultures, the body of his essay does not actually offer support for such optimism. In this and in his attitude towards Japan, Arasaki Kian's essay is typical of the vast majority of dekasegui accounts. Unlike Carmen Higa Shimabukuro, Arasaki Kian writes that being a Nikkei did not help him in Japan. Neither does the experience of alienation in Japan bring him closer to understanding his ancestors. Instead, as with most dekasegui authors, his dissatisfaction with Japanese culture helps him clarify what he most values in Peruvian culture. Arasaki Kian says that he and other Nikkei mistakenly thought that being Nikkei would give them an advantage in Japan: "Pensaba, por ejemplo, que el hecho de tener ascendencia japonesa nos haría más fácil habituarnos a la sociedad, pero no fue así" (21). Here, Arasaki Kian voices the same assumptions as those who wrote the immigration law that allowed him to work in Japan. To him, Japanese culture is completely different from Peruvian, even Peruvian Nikkei, culture. The only point in common is exclusion: like many dekasegui, he compares the feeling of being a Japanese outsider in Peru to that of being a foreign outsider in Japan: "Cuando estaba en el Perú, donde iba se nos denominaba 'chino': chino esto o aquello (mal denominados por cierto). En Japón, no importase de donde viniéramos, simplemente éramos extranjeros [. . .]" (21).¹² That is, the only relevance his life as a Nikkei has to his life in Japan is the experience of marginality rather than any appreciation of Japanese culture.

Arasaki Kian says that while he eventually adapts, at first everything including the food and the language is utterly strange to him, as much as for other foreigners: "experiencias vividas [. . .] desde que llegué a este lado del mundo, empezar todo de cero, adaptarme a todo, realmente a todo. Pensaba en lo duro que fue al comienzo: el idioma, la comida, la forma de vida, el trabajo y cuántas cosas más que, al igual que cientos de extranjeros, tuvimos que vivir para adaptarnos a este medio para labrarnos un futuro diferente" (19). The culture shock is so great that Arasaki Kian piles emphasis upon emphasis: "de cero," "a todo," "realmente." In fact, writing from the perspective of his life in Japan, his memories of Peru barely include ethnicity. Life in Japan does not invoke memories of relatives who had immigrated or of any Japanese customs maintained in his family.¹³ Aside from recalling the pejorative "chino" applied to Nikkei and Chinese Peruvians, the only other mention of any Japanese in Peru is of Alberto Fujimori, whose economic shock policies created the need for Arasaki Kian to go to Japan. Otherwise, the way of life for which he is nostalgic is not Japanese, but rather non-Nikkei Peruvian.

Once in Japan, assimilation is a necessary but threatening process. Arasaki Kian must adapt in order to succeed in Japan, but he does not want to change his Peruvian attitude toward life, which he describes as incompatible with a Japanese outlook. For example, he misses Peruvian friendliness: "Un abrazo entre amigos, un fuerte apretón de manos y no una simple gesticulación de la cabeza" (21). This is a common complaint (see Higa [Oshiro] 53). While he can understand that the Japanese way of expressing friendship is as valid as the Peruvian way, he does not want to adopt it: "Con esto no desapruébo en absoluto la manera de expresar afecto de los japoneses: debo comprender que es su manera de hacerlo y que, probablemente, así son felices. Pero nosotros hemos sido criados de otra forma, y sólo espero en el futuro no cambiar mi manera de ser" (21).

Arasaki Kian comments on his realization that after four years in Japan he has adapted to Japanese life so well that he feels depressed. His successful assimilation is like a disease. At the same time that a renewal notice for his work permit reminds him that he has been in Japan more than four years, he begins to suffer from an allergy to cedar that he has been warned affects those who have been in Japan a few years. This coincidence leads him to reflect on his time in Japan in his essay, which focuses on the spiritual crisis he undergoes upon realizing that he has slowly adapted to a Japanese way of life in which "todo es trabajo" (19). Like other dekasegui, on arriving in Japan he is dismayed by the centrality of work to people's lives; as a Peruvian he believes that the most important aspect of life, his real life, should be something that he controls, not the circumscribed time at work: "daba por sabido que en la vida, esa VIDA, sería la mía" (19). Work allows one to live, but it should be a means to an end.

This belief that Japanese people do not know how to enjoy themselves, especially with friends, is common in dekasegui accounts.¹⁴

When Arasaki Kian realizes that he has become like the Japanese, allowing his life to turn into a routine dominated by work, he is horrified: "Fue cuando mi ser se sintió bombardeado por una desolación tan devastadora que marcaba aún más mi vacío espiritual como ser humano" (19-20). The crisis leads him to reflect on his priorities and to take steps to live consciously according to his values. He and his wife decide that they must make changes, including studying in their free time and spending more time in nature, in order to lead more fulfilling lives. They must exchange routine, associated with an excessive emphasis on work, for "sentido de vivir" (21). For Arasaki Kian, routine symbolizes the dehumanizing potential of working in Japan as it involves going through life taking care of what is required without doing anything meaningful. Dekasegui often complain that both the Japanese factory and society as a whole turn people into robots.¹⁵ Arasaki Kian also reflects on the importance of remembering the Peruvian way of life that he came to Japan to support: "El recordar todo lo que nos obligó a venir a este país, nos hizo ver cuan importante es saber de dónde venimos, de dónde somos, cómo queremos que se crien nuestros hijos, qué herencia cultural van a recibir, etc." (21). The differences and difficulties he encounters in Japan serve to remind him to cherish what he has left behind.

Arasaki Kian concludes that the "lección de vida" that he has learned from his experience is to work hard and to respect all human beings, but he expresses these sentiments with many reservations. One should work hard, but for oneself rather than to please the manager, an idea that implies a criticism of Japanese attitudes towards work. It might appear inconsistent that he suggests work as the arena in which people can demonstrate their value: "Y en el trabajo, sin importar de dónde provengamos, demostremos lo mejor de nosotros, hagamos nuestro mayor y mejor esfuerzo, pero no para quedar bien con el jefe, sino para nosotros mismos, como personas. Partiendo de nosotros, la historia será diferente" (21). It is significant that Arasaki Kian's last sentences would focus on work as a way to show the best of "nosotros" who will make a better future, since he does not approve of making work the center of one's life. This conclusion is part of a strategy for improving the image of dekasegui in Japan, rather than a lesson for how Peruvians could emulate the Japanese.

Concern for the reputation of dekasegui in Japan also pervades his conclusion that we need to recognize that we are all fellow human beings, despite many examples of individual bad behavior that can lead to negative generalizations:

No importa de dónde seamos, nacionalmente hablando, somos seres humanos, unos diferentes de otros, cada quien con su respectiva personalidad. [. . .] De momento estamos en la mira de la sociedad japonesa, en cada movimiento que hacemos, por el fenómeno dekasegui. Venimos de dos culturas que son, probablemente, diametralmente opuestas, pero con la esperanza de que en un futuro puedan converger. Hay que entender y hacer entender que en todas partes del mundo hay personas buenas y malas, de todo tipo y raza, como las hay japonesas malas y buenas. (21)

Whereas Carmen Higa Shimabukuro's appreciation of all human beings results from positive (albeit unspecified) feelings towards both Japan and Peru, Arasaki Kian's conclusion does not advocate "universal love" so much as tolerance. Negative experiences provide the basis for this conclusion. The wave of dekasegui moving to Japan can provide an opportunity for two cultures to come together, but there is little in the essay or even in his own statement of possibility to support this idea. The rest of his account supports the pessimistic "diametralmente opuestas" rather than the hope of convergence. He has emphasized resisting Japanese culture, specifically stating his hope that he will not change his "manera de ser" (21). In his vision of world citizenship, understanding the commonalities of all people does not imply abandoning his own particular identity.

Apart from his stated conclusions, Arasaki Kian has decided after living in Japan that the most essential part of his identity arises from the spirit underlying the Peruvian characteristics he most misses while away. Customs such as greeting someone with a friendly hug come from the same source of values that tells him there is more to life than work and that will someday guide the way he raises his children. Coming from a Nikkei family is not the most important part of this identity, at least as he portrays himself in this essay. Although he has felt like an outsider in Peru, his values seem to be Peruvian, not Japanese. He does not define himself in ethnic terms, although his ability to work legally in Japan was facilitated by his Japanese ancestry. His description of the economic conditions that led him to go to Japan is not tempered, as are other dekasegui accounts, by the hope of discovering his ancestors' homeland. He provides enough of his life story that the reader knows he is a university graduate who left Peru during an economic crisis. Since he has not found a professional position commensurate with his training, it is

not surprising that he resists making work the center of his life. On the other hand, he does not resent his low status as a blue-collar worker in Japan in itself, perhaps because he has already faced professional disappointment at home.

Julio Antonio Gutiérrez Samanez

Most of the prizewinners in the "Mi experiencia en el Japón" contest were Peruvian Nikkei. The winner of the "testimonio" section, however, was a Peruvian artist from Cuzco, Julio Antonio Gutiérrez Samanez, who is not from a Nikkei family. Although I am primarily concerned with the Nikkei in Peru, I include a short analysis of Gutiérrez's account because he won the contest and because his story offers an instructive contrast with those of Nikkei in Japan. Gutiérrez's essay portrays a more positive experience in Japan and explores deeper connections between that country and Peru than the accounts of the Nikkei authors. In his essay, Gutiérrez finds many parallels between Japanese and Peruvian cultures. He then concludes that Japan's path to contemporary prosperity could be a guide for Peru. He admires Japan's ability to maintain its traditions while succeeding as a modern nation.

It is important to consider the question of why a non-Nikkei wrote the most positive description of "mi experiencia en el Japón," with the most enthusiastic recognition of common ground between Peru and Japan. To a certain extent, the status of Gutiérrez in Japan as a "becario" means that his life there is easier than that of the dekasegui. Gutiérrez does experience some of the same hardships detailed in other accounts, especially the distance from his family. Nevertheless, as the recipient of a scholarship he has a more positive experience in Japan than the Nikkei dekasegui. He is welcomed into the country, invited into people's homes, and taken on excursions: "Japón abría sus puertas y corazones; íbamos a vivir la más rica y profunda experiencia de nuestras vidas profesionales" (7). Therefore, unlike the dekasegui, he does not complain that Japanese are unfriendly, racist, or inhospitable. Like the dekasegui, Gutiérrez bonds with other foreigners, but he also makes Japanese friends. It is in fact the personal element that is radically different than the experience of dekasegui in the factories. Rather than being forced into a robot-like job on assembly line, he is part of a small community of foreign apprentices learning from a master.

I believe that while Gutiérrez's artistic sensibility, pride in his heritage, and status as a scholarship recipient all played a role, he was able to focus on commonalities rather than differences because those differences did not call into question his sense of himself, as they did for the Peruvian Nikkei. The problems he encountered did not challenge his identity as a Peruvian. Therefore, Gutiérrez's reaction to Japan, where he constantly finds connections to his homeland, contrasts markedly with the description of Peruvian Japanese workers and students in Japan, as they almost always stress the differences they encounter and the culture shock they experience, despite coming from a Japanese enclave in Peru. Whereas the dekasegui complain that the Japanese system tries to erase their individuality, Gutiérrez feels a personal connection to his fellow students and teachers as they build a high-temperature kiln. Even the fact that they wear identical uniforms is a positive experience leading to better personal relations by encouraging equality (9). The standardization that the dekasegui find oppressive is to Gutiérrez "aquella sencilla verdad que sí cumplen los japoneses: 'Diez milímetros es siempre diez milímetros,' es decir la exactitud es siempre exactitud" (9). To the artist Gutiérrez, in the context of a ceramics factory, quality control is part of the creative process rather than a dehumanizing force. Because his experience is largely positive, Gutiérrez's description of those difficulties he does encounter in Japan does not overwhelm the claim that any suffering in Japan is worthwhile, unlike Carmen Higa Shimabukuro and Pedro Pablo Arasaki Kian. Together, the three essays demonstrate the possibilities and difficulties of the transnational experience of Peruvians in Japan.

Globalization and Community

In contrast to utopian portrayals of transnationalism as a vehicle for bringing together communities and promoting peace, many theorists have noted disturbing aspects of the phenomenon. Focusing on mass media, Beatriz Sarlo analyzes the significance of a photograph of Alberto Fujimori from his first presidential campaign in which he is dressed as a black belt in karate.¹⁶ In order to gain the approval of the Peruvian electorate to lead the country, he exploits oriental stereotypes to portray himself in various photographs as the ultimate political outsider: "también se fotografió vestido de samurai y explotó a fondo su japonesidad, noción que lo convierte en un semi-extranjero deseable: no sólo no es político, tan siquiera es del todo peruano y, mejor aún, lo que le falta de peruano lo tiene de japonés industrial, práctico, afable, renovador y tradicionalista. Un milagro" ("Basuras" 15). To Sarlo, the pictures of Fujimori are emblematic of a "post-politics" in which image replaces content and the idea of a global culture is a dangerous illusion:

El ícono técnico y el simulacro producido por los medios de comunicación de masas compactan la sociedad proyectando la imagen de una escena cultural unificada, un *lugar común* donde las oposiciones (que podrían transformarse en conflicto) se disuelven en el poliglótismo: la cultura mass mediática y la política massmediatizada buscan producir la ilusión de una cultura común que uniría a actores cuyo poder simbólico y material es bien

diferente. Si esto asegura la cohesión, no queda en absoluto demostrado que esa cohesión sea deseable. ("Basuras" 16)

In this view of globalization, any sense of commonality results from forgetting about real conflicts under the influence of the media. More than Fujimori, however (despite his own move to Japan), the dekasegui and other Peruvians in Japan face questions of local and global identity in their daily lives. Their own accounts show the tension between the desire to believe in a shared culture and the reality of cultures that are incompatible if not incommensurable. Nevertheless, their attempts to position themselves as global citizens in a world of universal tolerance and love represent not simply an acceptance of the manipulation of mass media that Sarlo describes but rather a need to salvage meaning from a difficult experience.

That is, despite the fact that my analysis shows the incompatibility of the dekasegui's idealistic conclusions with the content of their own texts, it is difficult simply to dismiss their hope as manifestation of their acquiescence to the blandishments of the media. Perhaps the gap between their experience and their "lessons" does not simply represent the failure of their experience to measure up to their dreams or a need to rationalize suffering, but rather the opposite of what Sarlo criticizes. The narratives of the dekasegui provide what is lacking in the "illusion of shared culture" that she decries: the content of their stories is overwhelmingly a description of the differences in "symbolic and material power" and the resulting conflicts that they experience in Japan and to a lesser extent in Peru. The dekasegui have not successfully negotiated the breach between experience and ideal—hence the strangeness of many of their conclusions—but their yearning for a world of tolerance and international brotherhood is more poignant precisely because of their detailed descriptions of contrary experiences. The Peruvian dekasegui in Japan, participants in the global movement of labor and capital, want to learn the lesson of a transnational community, even when it does not necessarily follow logically from the experiences they narrate.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Both *dekasegui* and *dekasegi* are used in Peru. The Portuguese spelling is *dekassegui*. [Return to reading](#)
- 2 For an analysis of Japanese emigration patterns, see Befu. On the history of the Japanese and Nikkei in Peru, see del Busto; Fukumoto; Gardiner; Morimoto, "Los japoneses"; Moromisato Miasato, "Rememorando"; Rocca Torres; Sakuda; and Watanabe, Morimoto and Chambi. Recent studies of Latin American Nikkei and dekasegui published in the United States include Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi; Masterson; Lesser; and Linger. For analyses of interviews and surveys of Nikkei and dekasegui, see Linger; Fukumoto; Morimoto, Población; Morimoto, *Los japoneses* 183-225; and Moromisato Miasato, "I Woman." [Return to reading](#)
- 3 For additional accounts besides those analyzed here, see, for example, Castro, Doi, Higa [Oshiro], and Higuchi. [Return to reading](#)
- 4 Asociación Peruana de Becarios del Ministerio de Educación del Japón-MONBUSHO, Asociación Peruana de Ex Becarios del Gobierno del Japón, and Asociación Peruana de Ex Becarios Nikkei de la JICA. Kyodai, which defines itself as "una organización creada con la finalidad de brindar servicios de apoyo y bienestar a los peruanos que laboran en el Japón y a sus familiares en el Perú," provides financial services such as remittances and other support to Nikkei in Japan (Tokeshi n. pag.). Kyodai also subsidized the publication of Augusto Higa Oshiro's *Japón no da dos oportunidades*. [Return to reading](#)
- 5 I would like to thank Doris Moromisato, one of the judges, for telling me about the publication of all the winning entries in the contest, and the staff at the Centro Cultural Peruano Japonés for providing me with a copy. An essay, a comic strip, and photography by three adolescent prizewinners, while beyond the scope of this essay, provide a telling contrast with the concerns of the adult winners (see Nakamoto, Kikushima Higa, and Kina Guivo). The booklet also included another dekasegui, who received honorable mention in the photography section. [Return to reading](#)
- 6 Fukumoto provides a detailed analysis of generational differences in Nikkei identity (530-58) as well as tensions between immigrants from Okinawa and mainland Japan and evolving Nikkei views of intermarriage. Doris Moromisato Miasato analyzes the gender dynamics in the Nikkei community in "I Woman, I Man, I Nikkei." [Return to reading](#)
- 7 The exact number is difficult to verify. Teófilo Altamirano in his 1996 study cites varying estimates of up to 40,000 Peruvians in Japan at that time, though he concludes the number was probably closer to 14,000 (242-44). In 1999 the Convenio de Cooperación Kyodai advertised that it had 19,000 active members in Japan (Tokeshi n. pag.). [Return to reading](#)
- 8 See also Sakuda 354-9; Morimoto, *Los japoneses*... 224-25; "Fenómeno dekasegi..."; and "Nota de fondo." [Return to reading](#)
- 9 The writer José Watanabe has spoken of the rejection he experienced from the Japanese Peruvian community as the child of a mixed marriage ("Peruano" 28). Doris Moromisato Miasato addresses changing attitudes towards exogamy in her analysis of gender relations in the Peruvian Nikkei community ("I Woman" 187, 189-96, 200-01). [Return to reading](#)

10 For more information on the distinct experiences of Okinawan immigrants to Peru, see Fukumoto 520-21, 561; Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi, "Retrospect" 337; and Moromisato Miasato, "Rememorando."

[Return to reading](#)

11 It has become more common for Latin American dekasegui (and others) to take their families with them to Japan. Other families have sent children to study in Japan. Those children's experiences reveal further dimensions to the permutations of Nikkei identity. [Return to reading](#)

12 See Higa [Oshiro] 58-59 and Lesser 170. [Return to reading](#)

13 Unlike Carmen Higa Shimabukuro, Arasaki Kian does not provide information about his parents or grandparents, only that he has Japanese ancestry. He does not mention, for example, whether he is "nikkei puro" or not, only that he expected to fit in once he arrived in Japan. However, "Kian" is a Chinese surname. [Return to reading](#)

14 See Higa [Oshiro], Doi, and "Nostálgicos peruanos." [Return to reading](#)

15 See especially Higa [Oshiro] (23), Higuchi (6), and Doi (3). [Return to reading](#)

16 Two articles in *Punto de vista*, "Basuras culturales, simulacros políticos," and "La guerra del Golfo: representaciones pospolíticas y análisis cultural" were revised and published in English as "Aesthetics and Post-Politics: From Fujimori to the Gulf War." [Return to reading](#)

17 A Research Enhancement Grant from Texas State University-San Marcos funded research in Peru for this paper. [Return to reading](#)

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