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## **Between Assimilationism and Cultural Celebration: Miscegenation in Ryoki Inoue's novel *Saga***

This presentation explores racism, miscegenation, and ethnic celebration in Ryoki Inoue's novel *Saga*. The author addresses not only Nippophobia, but also the Japanese immigrants' racist and xenophobic feelings toward Okinawans, mixed-race Nikkeijin, and Brazilians, both black and white. Other issues explored are the relation between tradition and prejudice, as well as transculturation and miscegenation. *Saga's* celebration of Nikkei sociocultural and economic success becomes a tool for such cultural and identitarian negotiations, which ultimately provide a voice for this ethnic group's collective agency.

Nikkei author Ryoki Inoue's (São Paulo, 1946-) novel *Saga. A História de Quatro Gerações de uma Família Japonesa no Brasil* (*Saga. The History of Four Generations of a Japanese Family in Brazil*, 2006; henceforth, Saga) has five parts, titled "Gaijin," "Issei," "Nisei," "Sansei," and "Yonsei" respectively, in addition to its prologue and epilogue. Although each part explores the social, political, cultural, and economic processes that affected each generation, the last one is significantly lengthier, suggesting that the novel's emphasis is on Yonsei daily life in contemporary Brazil, even though this group only makes up 13 percent of the Nikkei community—the Sansei (42 percent) is the largest group. To Inoue, these Yonsei characters' full appropriation of Brazilian culture and Portuguese language, coupled with their apparent absence of cultural alienation and of dislocation sentiments, proves their ethnic group's success and integration.

Inoue chooses the title Saga, which has a double meaning: it is the "epic" history of one particular Nikkei family and, by extension, also that of the Nikkei minority. In other words, Inoue

re-creates, through the voice of a subjective and omniscient narrator, the trials of four generations of a Japanese immigrant family in Brazil, a synecdoche of their ethnic group's history. The story begins in the Japan of the early years of the twentieth century, when the spirit of Bushidō, the samurai code of conduct, was central to that society's worldview, and moves through the pioneers' adventures in Brazil up to the integrated Paulista urbanites of its last generation, who are represented as well-educated, economically successful, cosmopolitan, and proficient in Portuguese language and Brazilian culture.

Transnational Nikkei cultural production belongs to one of the peripheral discourses that are reinterpreting and challenging the definition of national identities and literatures, including the Brazilian. Inoue's *Saga* is another piece in a collective Nikkei discourse that demands, since the end of World War II, the democratization of knowledge and the recognition of alternative Brazilian identities. While it celebrates miscegenation and proposes integration into mainstream Brazilian culture, it also revels in Nikkei achievements.

Through Saga and other cultural production, Brazilian Nikkeijin deliver their self-definition that, not surprisingly, portrays their ethnic group positively. The disposition of the novel's chapters and their titles seems to suggest a historicist, evolutionary teleology whose ideal and ultimate goal is a miscegenized and assimilated better present. This approach, which implies that to understand contemporary Nikkei identities one must be knowledgeable of their historical development over time, unequivocally postulates *mestiçagem* and sociocultural integration (assimilation perhaps?) into mainstream Brazilian society as desirable outcomes. In one scene, for example, Masakazu unsuccessfully tries to convince his Nikkei classmates in college, Motoaki and Kadota, of

the benefits of having a good relationship with other members of Brazilian society, instead of continuing to be isolated within the Nikkei community. However, *Saga*, in its rejection of a separatist Nikkei subnation within the country, tries to offset or resist the danger of falling into a celebration of the production of “acculturated” urban subjects by emphasizing the importance of keeping one’s cultural traditions. In any case, the last part leaves the reader wondering whether the novel mostly celebrates the telos of social assimilation and the process of homogenization of Nikkei identities. If it does, it stands counter to the mostly anti-essentialist discourse of much of Nikkei literature and film’s exploration of Nikkei identitarian heterogeneity.

Saga also explores the intersectionality found among different but interconnected forms of discrimination in ethnic and sub-ethnic terms. As relates to Okinawans in Brazil, their experience must be understood in terms of two separate, socially constructed ethnic (Japanese) and (sub)ethnic (Okinawan) identitarian categories that interact at different levels, contributing to their systemic discrimination and racialization in an unjust social hierarchy. Instead of considering their discrimination by majority Brazilians and by Naichijin separately, one must take into account the interactions that often reinforce each other. Thus, in the fourth part of Saga, Nelson Harema Fukugawa, a Sansei Air Force pilot, gains the unexpected animosity of another Nikkeijin, sergeant Tomita Arakaki. The latter speaks Japanese correctly and behaves “like a real samurai,” but refuses to interact with other Nikkeijin up until he reveals the reason to Nelson by admitting that “‘You are a mestizo. . . For that reason, you have an advantage in many ways. But me . . .’ He shook his head negatively and whispered: ‘This face does not help . . .’” Sergeant Arakaki is convinced that, in contrast with Nelson’s more accepted mestizo features (his mother is

Euro-Brazilian), his Japanese phenotype and surname prevent him from promotion to the rank of colonel: “Look at me! What do you see? A Japanese! Nothing but a Japanese! If I had a civilian outfit, I would easily be confused with a grocer or a laundry worker.”

Curiously, these two traditional professions of the Brazilian Nikkeijin, linked to their social integration in urban areas, are here implied to be inferior.

While Nelson initially hesitates to believe that racism remains prevalent in Brazil, Araraki convinces and reminds him of the double discrimination he suffers for being of Okinawan stock: “When I have to talk with a Japanese, the expression on his face when I give my name is more than enough to show me that I’m not welcome.” Plausibly reflecting his author’s ideas, he claims that the Naichijin have no reason to feel that way toward Okinawa, considering that it was the only area of Japan to be invaded by the United States and that, as a result, it suffered more casualties than any other in the country, except for Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and Tokyo, I would add). Araraki consequently suffers the intersectionality of rejection by both Japanese and majority Brazilians.

As in Júlio Miyazawa’s novel *Yawara!*, another symbol of Nikkei cultural integration in Inoue’s *Saga* is the revolutionary Mário Japa. Nelson, who became a military helicopter pilot in 1968 (during the military dictatorship), is combating the rural guerrilla Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária led by, among others, ex-captain Carlos Lamarca, an army deserter. Taking a page from real life, Inoue narrates how on 27 February 1970, the Nisei Chizuo Ozawa suffered a car accident in São Paulo while transporting numerous weapons. After police interrogation, he was identified as Mário

Japa, “one of the most important members of the VPR guerrilla,” who had then completed intensive guerrilla training.

Saga also participates, like other Nikkei cultural production, in a subtle denial of coevalness with Brazilian society, as if claiming that, rather than being coetaneous citizens, they embody Brazil’s future. Inoue hides neither the existence of racism within his own ethnic group nor the sense of ethnic superiority that some Japanese immigrants felt. Thus, in the second part of the novel, when the dismayed immigrant Yoshiro Kasai fears that she will never be an equal citizen in Brazil, her husband, Ryuiti Fukugawa, protests: “We don’t have to be considered equals, mainly because we’re not equal. We are superior and that’s what we need to show them!” At the end of Saga’s second part, this feeling resurfaces when Nikkei college students recall their parents’ repeated dictum: “We need to show that we’re superior. We are better in all things. Second place is nothing but defeat.” Still, the narrator does not shy away from essentialist notions, praising the work ethics, initiative and superior intellectual ability of Nisei students who, according to him, tended to outscore their classmates. This appreciation continues in the fifth part, where Nelson and Yoko feature among those Nikkei students who receive the best grades and help other students through study groups. The novel shares with much of Nikkei cultural production the celebration of the social ascension of the overachieving Japanese Brazilians as a result of their economic and scholarly success.

Indeed, in *Saga*, as in much of Nikkei cultural production, the most celebrated Japanese values are their impressive work ethics, abnegation, self-denial, and stoicism. Therefore, toward the end of the novel’s first part, Brazilian landowners celebrate their investment in Japanese labor and admire their resilience. Later in the plot, the remarkable

economic success of Nikkei workers in Cotia—often described as a proud achievement in Nikkei discourse—is used as a microcosm for all Japanese communities throughout Brazil. New Issei arrive yearly from Japan to work in Cotia and are joined by Brazilian workers who prefer to work for Japanese employers; they are known to be more respectful with their employees and to pay higher wages—the topic of miscegenation, however, continues to be avoided.

At the risk of listing cultural peculiarities that may give credence to the belief in Japanese “essential cultural purity,” another Japanese trait proudly highlighted in *Saga* is their stoicism and ability to hide their true emotions. Thus, in the second part, we find a situation where the Japanese hide their true feelings to maintain social harmony, a type of behavior that evidences a major psychological split with the local culture. After a greedy Brazilian landowner named Bastos Araújo refuses to lend the Japanese a vehicle to take a sick child to the doctor, the latter ends up dying. Their calm reaction surprises the landowner.

Inoue also addresses one of the most shameful episodes in Nikkei history: Shindō Renmei’s terrorism. *Saga* gives “Japanese spirit” as a reason for the violent conflict between the Kachigumi, who believed that Japan won World War II, and the Makegumi\_ who “were not upset by either victory or defeat of their country of origin, having effectively assumed Brazil as their homeland.” Another important factor in the appearance of the terrorist group, according to the narrator, was the presence of former military officers among those Japanese immigrants who arrived in Brazil between 1928 and 1933. In *Saga*, Carlos Masakazu Fukugawa is included in Shindō Renmei’s blacklist. The terrorist organization considers him a traitor because, besides being married to a

gaijin, he dared to call a meeting in Campos do Jordão to assure his Japanese audience that Japan had lost the war. Hiromiti Suzuki, the same man who advised Carlos not to marry Maria de Lourdes, warns the protagonist about the impending threat, but only as a favor to his father. Henceforth, Carlos goes to work at the hospital accompanied by bodyguards. As mentioned in the novel, by the time the terrorist campaign was over, numerous Nikkeijin had been arrested, imprisoned, or deported. Other Kachigumi committed suicide after realizing that they had been deceived by compatriots who assured them that the Emperor wanted them to sell their property and return to Japan or its occupied territories.

All considered, beyond the exploration of racial discrimination, miscegenation, transculturation and tradition, *Saga* is primarily a celebration of Nikkei sociocultural and economic success in Brazil. Although the author does not refrain from recalling the darkest pages in his group's history, including Shindō Renmei's terrorism and its racist discrimination against mestizos, Okinawans and non-Nikkei Brazilians, readers are left with a most favorable impression of Brazilian Nikkeijin. The last chapter in particular, dedicated to the Yonsei generation, leaves no doubt about their socioeconomic success and complete integration into mainstream society. It may be argued that the plot contains two lessons or messages, in addition to its apology for cultural integration. One is that as important as it is to preserve cultural and ethnic traditions, it should never be an excuse for racial discrimination; the other is the dissemination of cultural translations aimed at encouraging readers to familiarize themselves with (and preserve) Japanese and Nikkei cultural traditions.



The four generations of this family are a synecdoche of the Brazilian Nikkeijin's experience, as a minority and migrant group, in negotiating its cultural differences through many years. In fact, this type of literature becomes a tool for such cultural and identitarian negotiations, one that ultimately provides a voice for Nikkei collective agency. Plausibly, behind the words of the most progressive and tolerant characters is the implicit author's not-so-veiled articulation of his opinions and ideas, including the celebration of miscegenation, transculturation and sociocultural integration. This articulation stands counter to that of the Issei characters who arrived in Brazil at the beginning of the immigration process and of some Nikkei elders today.

Ultimately, Saga, like other works by Japanese Latin American authors, presents a claim for national belonging: the transnational Nikkei and, by extension, all Asian communities in Brazil must be added to the national imaginary, alongside the larger communities of European, African, and indigenous descent. Yet we will have to wait for other cultural production to find a more openly anti-essentialist approach, as certain passages of Saga tend to offer a homogenous vision of what it is to be a Nikkeijin that brings the novel dangerously close to the *Nihonjinron* genre, as opposed to considering the possibility of multiple identities. Inoue's discourse navigates, in numerous passages, between a pro-assimilationism approach and a cultural celebration of Nikkei sociocultural and economic success reminiscent of the "model minority" myth.