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Contested Modernities: Representations of the Brazilian Dekasegi and the Nipponization of Brazil in Nikkei cultural production¹

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The dekasegi ([temporary workers](#)) phenomenon was the last major historical landmark for Japanese Brazilians, as they have formed a new minority in Japan that, for the most part, remains segregated from Japanese society. Since the early 1990s, one in five Brazilian Nikkeijin has moved to Japan at least once (it has been estimated that there are 1.5 million Brazilian Nikkeijin), thus creating the third largest community in Brazil, after the Korean and Chinese ones. Although because of the economic crisis in Japan since 2008, the number of Brazilian dekasegi has been reduced from 312,582 to 177,953 in 2014, the recent economic recession in Brazil may turn the tide again. In any case, the re-migration or second diaspora has made Brazilian Nikkeijin more transnational than ever before.

By the first decade after the inception of the dekasegi exodus, many Japanese Brazilians had settled and created a vibrant community in Japan. Yet the reverse migration forebodes a grim situation for Latin American Nikkei communities as it aggravates the situation of a population that was already declining due to an aging population, decreased birth rate, intermarriage, and the dilution of Nikkei ethnic identity.

Although emigration was forbidden during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), temporary internal migration was common. Jerry García explains:

Internal migration had been well established under the concept of dekasegi, the practice of leaving one's home place for temporary work long before the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Yet even by the early twentieth century, the Japanese

populace did not look favorably upon the *imin* (immigrants). In fact, many Japanese emigrants were viewed by their own country as uneducated or lacking a “national consciousness and were often criticized for abandoning the nation.”

([García 2014, 22](#))

This historical background may reveal the reasons Brazilian dekasegi in Japan are occasionally not well received by Japanese relatives, though both the Emperor and the Meiji government encouraged emigration to South America to reduce surplus labor. These widespread and antagonistic attitudes have transformed the dekasegi’s image of Japan.

The dekasegi diaspora timidly began in the late 1980s with the recruitment of mostly male Issei and increased significantly in the 1990s to include Nisei, Sansei and women (half of the dekasegi). This increase was in response to the “push factor” during the Latin American economic crisis of the late 1980s and to the “pull factor” created by an unskilled labor shortage in Japan. Another pull factor was the amendment to Japan’s Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in 1990 that allowed Japanese descendants up to the third generation (Issei, Nisei, Sanseis) and their spouses to have work visas, with the veiled intention of replacing unskilled (often unauthorized) labor from China, Korea, Pakistan, and the Middle East. Japanese politicians, unashamedly proud of Japan’s purported “ethnic purity,” assumed that, after several generations, Latin American Nikkeijin had managed to preserve their Japanese cultural characteristics; this expectation was often unfounded, even though many were still familiar with Japanese culture and self-identified as ethnic Japanese in Brazil.

Most dekasegi were recruited to work in small or medium manufacturing firms and in the construction sector; Japanese youth refused these jobs, popularly known as the 3ks (*kitsui, kiken, kitanai*, meaning “dirty, dangerous, and difficult”). Soon, feeling disappointed, exploited and

discriminated in Japan, a considerable number of them switched alliances from an idealized, ancestral Japan to their native Brazil and even developed a performance of “Brazilianness” unknown to the Nikkeijin living in Brazil, at times exaggerating their interest in soccer and samba, for example. As it turned out, the lived, inhabited space of Japan was quite different from that enchanting space described by their ancestors. And though these negative feelings toward the host country may eventually improve, such an evolution is not generally mentioned in dekasegi cultural production.²

Dekasegi experiences of displacement are described in testimonials, films, novels, poetry collections, chronicles, and films. Part of Japanese Brazilian cultural production, rather than proposing integration into mainstream Brazilian national culture in order to eliminate social problems affecting an ethnic minority, instead it suggests that non-Nikkei Brazilians should emulate Nikkei work ethics and value systems. An alternative version to this message is Brazilian dekasegi Agenor Kakazu’s *Crônicas de um Garoto que Também Amava Os Beatles e Os Rollings Stones*,³ where he recommends the Nipponization of his native Brazil, not by letting Nikkeijin take the lead (as Alberto Fujimori suggested in Peru), but rather by learning from Japan itself. While it would be far-fetched to assign these labels to Kakazu’s chronicles, some testimonial traits may be found: this is the author’s first book, where he presents the facts as historical truths that he witnessed, and narrates his personal experience while claiming to represent the voice of an entire social group (dekasegi in Japan). In fact, the author records not only his impressions and memories, but also those of other dekasegi, thus adding to the sense of a collective voice. And as it is typical of testimonials, Kakazu had also written about the events narrated soon after they transpired.⁴

Even though any claim to truth found in an autobiographical text (by extension, most first-person narratives) can often be problematized, here there is no apparent ulterior motif to exaggerate or invent the information provided. Yet, as in other dekasegi texts, there is a clear intention to prove the author's patriotism (occasionally falling into the "more-Brazilian-than-thou" mode) and to present the dekasegi as Brazilian patriots who actively contribute to improve the national image overseas. On the other hand, rather than denouncing a situation of oppression or persecution, Kakazu claims to provide a voice for a social group whose adaptation experience has been at times so traumatic that some of its members became suicidal or suffered serious mental disorders. The book's original subtitle, "Que não precisou lutar no Vietnã, mas se viu obrigado a batalhar no Japão" (Who Did Not Have to Fight in Vietnam, but Forced to Do So in Japan), later omitted by Kakazu, together with his frequent references to his workplace as "the battlefield," suggest the harsh nature of the dekasegi experience.

The chronicles of Kakazu's stay in Japan begin in 1991, that is, soon after the inception of the dekasegi phenomenon. The author explains that his first impulse after witnessing other Nikkeijin move to Japan was to stay in Brazil at all costs. Later, however, he explains that his change of mind was out of concern for his family's wellbeing and economic security. In reality, these passages function as a veiled caveat through which the author, perhaps feeling remorse or guilt, shifts responsibility for his decision to leave the country to the government, whose economic failures forced him to migrate.⁵ However, though most dekasegi texts cite the economic crisis as the main push factor, Joshua Hotaka Roth provides another: "Although economic conditions underlay this dramatic migration, many Nikkeijin, even those who had never been to Japan before, framed it as a return to homeland that offered the possibility of self-understanding" (Roth 2002, 3).

Without abandoning his modest and conciliatory tone, Kakazu proceeds to narrate his minor epic. He recalls his apprehension before the trip, his fear of the unknown, and his awareness of the possibility of being discriminated in Japan. He also daydreams about the economic benefits of working in Japan: “one day of work there represents, for millions of Brazilians, almost a month salary here.”⁶ Initially, no signs of cultural motivation or ethnic nostalgia are found in his decision to “return” to the ancestral homeland. Yet, with time, unlike most dekasegi (according to the author), his curiosity about Japanese culture increases and when he returns to Brazil, he is convinced that, more than economic gains, it is his augmented knowledge of Japanese culture that validates his arduous experience. Again, these passages distance the dekasegi experience from an exclusively economic pursuit (potentially perceived as selfish or unpatriotic), bringing it closer to an idealistic voyage of self-exploration and self-improvement.

Throughout the narrative, Kakazu proudly manifests his love for Brazil, one that geographical distance only intensifies: “We are all a great family and we are all brothers. We feel this bond to be stronger when we are far away.”⁷ His patriotism allows him to see the Brazilian flag’s colors in Japan’s fall landscapes: “Nothing is prettier than a Japanese garden in the fall. The green and yellow are mixed on the top of great trees that make us, Brazilians far away from home, remember the colors of our flag.”⁸ Paradoxically, the worldwide interdependence in economic and cultural activities generated by globalization processes, which besides producing a global exchange of worldviews are supposed to be undermining the powers and importance of the nation-state, have increased Brazilian patriotism among dekasegi. As Svetlana Boym points out,

Globalization encouraged stronger local attachments. In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals. ([Boym 2001](#), xiv)

Kakazu's declared patriotism is then nuanced with an avowed sense of guilt for leaving his country in the midst of a historic economic crisis: "I felt like one who abandons ship as it is sinking, abandoning my loved ones who are sinking along with a large cargo ship named Brazil. My beloved homeland was sinking because of the worst recession of its history. Still, in my heart, I felt the strong conviction that, upon returning, I would find the situation stabilized and back to normal."⁹

Kakazu claims that it is his patriotic love that moves him to describe the benefits of Nipponizing Brazil, a country that could learn invaluable lessons from Japan's post-World War II economic miracle. A didactic approach is apparent in the author's willingness to advise those Brazilians who may have plans to become *dekasegi*. It is also noted when he compares the pristine waters of Tokyo's Sumida River with the environmental degradation of São Paulo's Tietê River: "Because it is long, clean, and very busy, it reminded me, with certain sadness, of our poor and polluted Tietê River, full of domestic and industrial trash, transformed into a large open-air sewer. . . . If Tokyo managed to clean up the Sumida River's waters, polluted to the point of being considered 'practically dead,' São Paulo can well do likewise with the Tietê River."¹⁰ Therefore, while Kakazu takes advantage of his sojourn in Japan to familiarize himself

with the local culture, his experience there also opens his eyes to potential solutions to his own country's problems through its Nipponization.

The same formula for national recovery is revisited further on in the book. The author begins a passage complaining about the discrimination suffered by his dekasegi predecessors. Not allowed to speak Japanese in the factory, they were forced to use interpreters. Yet, among his cold and indifferent Japanese co-workers, he befriends Shioya, who eventually opens up to other Brazilian co-workers; he even pays for a party on their last day of work at the factory. The generous Shioya teaches them the intricacies of the job and answers their questions about Japanese culture, as he becomes more interested in Brazilian customs. Shioya turns out to be the exemplary embodiment of selfless sacrifice for the collective, national good. He and others like him, who rebuilt a country left in ashes after the World War II become, in Kakazu's eyes, models of dedication and patriotism and the key to Japan's economic success:

Moved by responsibility, seriousness, and a strong determination to overcome difficulties, they devoted themselves to transforming rubbish into wealth, dire poverty into affluence, ruins into buildings and, after a few years, the great Japanese economic miracle took place.

Certainly, none of this would exist if, instead of working, they had folded their arms and complained about bad luck, pains, hunger, and weather.

I would like to extend my deeply felt gratitude to my friend Shioya-san for teaching me to value and believe in the force of work.¹¹

Convinced of the benefits of discipline and hard work, Kakazu goes on to vehemently exhort his countrymen to adopt Japanese behavioral patterns for the betterment of Brazil: "BRAZILIAN is

our surname. Once we decide to work, I believe that we must try our best to fulfill our obligations, trying not to denigrate the positive image that was built, with so much effort, by our country's famous and consecrated heroes."¹²

I contend here that the occasional uncritical idealization of Japanese patriotism and work ethics in dekasegi cultural production forms part of an indirect, ongoing celebration of the Nikkeijin's potential for leadership in Brazil: just as the abnegated Japanese workers are selflessly sacrificing themselves for their country's economic progress so will Nikkeijin sacrifice for that of Brazil.¹³ This discourse, therefore, presents Nikkei behavior as a model for Brazil, particularly considering that this country often considers them to be identical to Japanese in Japan. (Lesser, *A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy* [2007]).

When Kakazu returns to Brazil, his initial exaltation suddenly turns into bitter disappointment, for he is robbed at the airport and fined for excessive luggage and not declaring goods purchased abroad.¹⁴ Kakazu cannot help but contrast the politeness and respectfulness of airport employees in Japan with the mistreatment meted out in Brazilian airports. He also recalls how a wallet that a dekasegi friend lost in Japan was turned in to the police, a gesture that, according to him, would never take place in Brazil. The author confesses that he finds Brazil's poor image abroad embarrassing and then argues that Brazilian politicians are not solely to blame: "In reality, each of us is also partially guilty."¹⁵ In my view, he includes this observation to laud the patriotism of Brazilian dekasegi, whose honesty and hard work continue to improve Brazil's image in Japan:¹⁶ "Today, there are thousands of Brazilian brethren abroad, struggling to make a small contribution to help those illustrious personalities [Pelé, Ayrton Senna, Oscar Niemayer] in solidifying an image of an honest Brazil. Consciously or not, every Brazilian

worker abroad carries with him the Brazilian flag, we are all representatives of our country.”¹⁷

This is, however, a questionable argument because, as is well known, Latin American dekasegi have often been associated with crime in Japan.¹⁸ Dekasegi criminality, in my view, is intimately related to the fact that, in contrast with Nikkei social status in Brazil, they have become a lower class in Japan and, in some cases, their offspring have become an underclass.

In spite of the ethnically charged nature of certain Kakazu’s claims and of the solemn patriotism of his message, he consciously avoids sounding overly dramatic in his description of dekasegi sufferings in Japan. In fact, the general tone of Kakazu’s book is optimistic, often resorting to humor. Yet he does criticize the dekasegi’s poor work and living conditions along with the discrimination they suffer; he wonders, for example, why some Japanese shop clerks refuse to sell goods to them.¹⁹ The chronicler also disparages his boss at the factory, “whose answers were always dry, cold, and full of scorn.”²⁰

Brazilian Nikkeijin arrive in Japan with a Brazilian notion of time that is radically different from that of the Japanese. The breakneck pace followed at Japanese factories and the meticulous assignment of time often shock the easygoing dekasegi. Thus, the chronicler lists workplace accidents caused by the rapid pace at his factory and by various cases of dekasegi victimization in others.²¹ Kakazu, therefore, offers Japan as a model that Brazil should follow, while concomitantly denouncing abuses against dekasegi workers and expressing his disappointment with certain aspects of Japanese life—its commercial approach to Christmas and his neighbors’ complaints about noise whenever the dekasegi have a party.²² But his strongest criticism is directed at the automatization of life and what he sees as the Japanese obsession with manufacturing productivity: “For the sake of productivity, the surrounding area turns into a battlefield where automatized machines are constantly tweaked to increase their speed in order to

meet daily quotas.”²³ The chronicler dislikes the repetitiveness of his job, as well as the long working hours (fifteen occasionally), which he describes as “a year of slavery, subjected to quotas and time clocks.”²⁴ By contrast, he identifies with Okinawan lifestyle when he attends the “Ryukyu Festival 96”; it provided a valued opportunity to reconnect with his ancestors’ culture.

In consonance with the overall didactic and philosophical tone of the chronicles, some can be read as a useful guide for potential future dekasegi. Thus Kakazu warns his readers about the temptation of consumerism and about the need to adapt to strange customs and culinary habits. He also provides advice on how to avoid accidents at work. But perhaps the most important recommendation is to undergo an appropriate psychological preparation before leaving for Japan in order to overcome the feeling of *saudade* (homesickness, longing, nostalgia).²⁵

Overall, behind Kakazu’s testimony of the way he managed to overcome hardships in Japan, there is a declaration of patriotism aimed at offsetting his ostensible feeling of guilt for having abandoned his native country at a time of critical economic crisis. More important, *Crônicas de um Garoto que Também Amava Os Beatles e Os Rollings Stones* suggests that Brazil needs to follow the path to success traced by Japan, based on principles of honesty, hard work, patriotism, and selfless collective work for the national good. He ends his testimony in a hopeful, patriotic, and cheerful tone: “I have unlimited confidence in the future of our young and beloved Brazil!”²⁶

Within the same subgenre, another book published with the goal of helping potential dekasegi improve their living and working conditions in Japan is Reimei Yoshioka and Silvio Sam’s²⁷ collection of chronicles, essays, and articles *Dekassegui. Com os Pés no Chão... no Japão* (Keeping Your Feet on the Ground... in Japan, 1999).²⁸ Two years before its publication, Silvio Sam had already delivered similar advice for dekasegi, but in a more enticing way, in his

novel *Sonhos que de Cá Segui* (Dreams that I Followed from Here, 1997).²⁹ The novel, which is based on autobiographical experiences and on real people, includes epigraphs taken from interviews with real-life dekasegi, which further add to the sense of verisimilitude.³⁰ The messages scattered throughout the plot are openly didactic as several characters in the novel provide useful advice on how to prepare oneself for the cultural shock of life and work in Japan, as well as for the also potentially traumatic eventual return to Brazil.

As a former migrant worker in Japan who returned to Brazil, Sam contrasts the dekasegi dreams mentioned in the title with the harsh reality that disappointed dekasegi usually find in Japanese factories. *Sonhos que de Cá Segui* tells the story of a fictional Brazilian family that, reacting to the economic crisis and lack of professional opportunities in their homeland, joins the dekasegi exodus. It also describes the dekasegi phenomenon as an outcome of social injustice: young Brazilians were given the false hope of earning a college degree that would lead to financial security. Most of all, it reflects the author's anxiety about Japanese Brazilians' national loyalty. Readers thus again find a patriotic claim to place, one that cements an unquestionable loyalty to the Brazilian nation.

Whereas the most symbolically charged space of the Issei pioneer experience was the coffee plantation (with perhaps the *Kasato Maru* ship), the undisputed dekasegi chronotope is the Japanese mid-size factory that functions as a trigger for reidentification, namely the simultaneous collective rejection of Japanese social conventions (dekasegi often perceive Japanese society as over-regulated) and the embracement of Brazilian individualism. It is in the workplace where dekasegi have a more fluid contact with Japanese and where their frustrations become exacerbated by the work pace. Eventually, if dekasegi workers want to abandon their sojourner mentality—as the Japanese did in Brazil—and adapt to Japanese culture, efforts to create a

Brazilian social subject throughout generations must be undone. The true frontier has become cultural rather than racial.

Through a process of voluntary, societal amnesia, the same subjects who identified as Japanese in Brazil now reidentify as unmarked Brazilians because of their rejection by Japanese society and their inability or unwillingness to negotiate Japanese life. Roth explains that “some Japanese Brazilians who have gone to Japan to study, and many who have gone there to work, have come to feel less a sense of belonging than they may have expected in their ancestral homeland. Some have come to think of themselves as Brazilians who happen to have Japanese parents or grandparents” (Roth 2002, 2). Therefore, new identities are emerging from this palimpsest of identifications owing to the effects of economic globalization, the subject’s personal relationship with spatiality, and a reconfigured notion of belonging. In this sense, Boym, discussing nostalgia, postulates that “It is not surprising that national awareness comes from outside the community rather than from within. It is the romantic traveler who sees from a distance the wholeness of the vanishing world. The journey gives him perspective. The vantage point of a stranger informs the native idyll. The nostalgic is never a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal” (Boym 2001, 12). Indeed, spatial and temporal perspectives provide Brazilian dekasegi with new views of their South American birthplace as well as of their ancestors’ phantom homeland.

Whereas certain Nikkei authors acquiesce to the assimilation discourse, which rejected the stereotype of the unassimilable Asian immigrant and tried to prove the viability of the Nikkei social subject as Brazilian, the second diaspora seems to evince the author’s need to evidence their Brazilian patriotism. A common tactic used is the explicit representation of the dekasegi’s refusal to assimilate to Japanese culture, a sort of litmus test of true Brazilianness. Another tactic

is the author's framing of the displacement of Japanese Brazilians as forced (economic exile) rather than voluntary. In other words, these texts turn the *dekasegi* from a social subject into an object of sympathy. This approach is part of a rhetorical justification of the massive departure of *Nikkeijin* since the early 1990s. It also contributes to a redefinition of ethnic identities and to a reconfiguration of the production of a transnational *Nikkei* space in the context of late capitalism. By extension, we witness a symbolic remapping of the transnational Brazilian space. The reterritorialization produced by the circulation of transnational *dekasegi* bodies, shuttling back and forth between Japan and Brazil, makes national borders more porous. It also elicits *Nikkei* cultural production's reclaiming of space through a conscious collective effort to represent the *dekasegi* phenomenon as part of Brazilian national history, rather than as just a chapter of *Nikkei* ethnic history. This symbolic broadening of Brazilian national borders is even propitiated by those *dekasegi* who choose to settle in Japan permanently, but who identify with all things Brazilian more so than before.

The dedication of *Sonhos que de Cá Segui* introduces the protest to be elaborated in the plot: "To the *dekasegi*, former *dekasegi*, and all Brazilians who one day pursued their dreams out there. Dreams that should be realized in the country of birth. It is their right."³¹ According to one of the novel's arguments, it is because of the government's mismanagement that the frustrated Pedro must work as a sales person, despite having a degree in mechanical engineering.³² Toward the novel's end Pedro voices his wish that his son Quinho would become a mechanical engineer like him and that his daughter Nana would major in Asian Studies like her mother, but that, unlike their parents, they would be able to find a job in their field and in Brazil, rather than having to accept unskilled, blue-collar jobs abroad.³³ After four years of working and saving money in Japan, Pedro's family returns to Brazil, where they buy a house and open a business.

The story, however, is not entirely optimistic: the business is unrelated to Pedro's engineering degree, which implies that he has given up on working in that profession.³⁴

Protagonist Pedro Tanaka compares their experience and that of all Latin American dekasegi to the adventures of Issei pioneers in Brazil during the first years of the twentieth century. Likewise, an empreiteira employee, in his conversations with César and his co-worker Yamaguchi, defends the thesis often included in dekasegi cultural production that, with the dekasegi phenomenon, history repeats itself: just as the pioneer Issei, disappointed with their reality, fled the plantations at night, some dekasegi left their broker company after dark in search of another; however, they often were just as exploited by the one they found.³⁵ And as Pedro's father falsely believed, many Brazilian dekasegi plan to return to Brazil within a couple of years with their savings but end up staying in Japan. In both historical cases, Pedro argues, the government is to blame for harsh economic crises. César also compares dekasegi suffering with that of the first Issei.³⁶ Yet, the French political scientist Pauline Cherrier warns about the dangers of taking for granted that the Brazilian dekasegi diaspora in Japan will necessarily follow in the footsteps of their Issei ancestors in Brazil:

The constant association of dekasseguis' fate and success with their ancestors' may lure migrants into thinking, even if it remains unconscious, that their working period in Japan guarantees this success they are running after. Deluded by the illusion that they are in total control of their fate, migrants may also feel guilty, in case they do not manage to reach their goal. While ethnic media represents migrants' collective conscience, it could also foster the gap existing between their imaginary and reality. ("Japanese immigrants" 42)

Indeed, the artificial convergence of a common imaginary dangerously blurs the very different

sociopolitical and economic circumstances surrounding both migrations.

In contrast with Kakazu's *Crônicas de um Garoto*, which thank Japan for welcoming the dekasegi, Sam's novel maintains that it is Japan that should be grateful to Latin American Nikkeijin for their contribution to its economic success. Thus Pedro tells Meiko, his Japanese wife, and his friend Yamaguchi: "The departure of those thousands of Japanese to Brazil and other countries must have contributed a bit to Japan's becoming the economic power of today . . . after the war, after a large community campaign, Japanese immigrants in Brazil created associations to help war victims."³⁷ He reminds those Japanese who discriminate and marginalize Brazilian dekasegi workers, though they share the same blood, of these historical facts and defiantly argues that dekasegi deserve more working rights and better health insurance.

Sonhos que de Cá Segui also includes numerous self-critical passages that denounce the unscrupulous behavior of some dekasegi. After their return to Brazil, Pedro and Mieke learn from César about the "growing decadence of the Nippo-Brazilian community in Japan".³⁸ "The number of serious offenses committed by Brazilians, such as armed assaults, gang fights, fatal traffic accidents and drug dealing, rose with every letter received from César."³⁹ However, in *Sonhos que de Cá Segui*, Pedro justifies dekasegi crime rate by pointing out that their overall number in Japan is comparable to that of a large city. César, instead, expresses his concern about the deterioration of Brazil's image in Japan, a consequence of the "jeitinho brasileiro" (Brazilian "cutting corners") among the dekasegi: "It is true that we are considered a Third World country, but we don't need to go along with that, so that they may continue to see us that way."⁴⁰

In consonance with other dekasegi texts, *Sonhos que de Cá Segui* depicts dekasegi residing in Japan as true Brazilians. Thus the narrator emphasizes the protagonist's (stereo)typical Brazilian behavior in several passages: "Well, at least there is no physical

education in the afternoon,' relieved, he once again rejoiced in Brazilian style."⁴¹ Later, when his peers stretch a rest break a few minutes, we learn that "As a good Brazilian, Pedro joined them fully and happily"⁴² Again, even more important is the fact that the novel describes the protagonist and, by extension, all Brazilian dekasegi as devoted patriots. Therefore, in the closing passages Pedro declares: "My dream... continues to be... to one day see my country great... developed... and serious! And in the future, to see my children... and yours... getting a good education and being able to get a worthy job in their country of birth. Without having to leave it to survive."⁴³

Sonhos que de Cá Segui also functions as a repository of abuses committed against the dekasegi in Japanese factories and of unexpected sufferings that serve as a warning to future dekasegi. There is also an implicit warning: if adaptation to living in Japan is difficult for an educated family whose members speak Japanese, three of whom are Japanese nationals (Pedro's family), then the experience will be harsher for those unfamiliar with Japanese language and culture.

Refuting the generalized assumption in Brazil that Nikkeijin are no different from Japanese nationals, *Sonhos que de Cá Segui* follows a realistic approach that distances the images of the two social groups. It follows that, by differentiating Nikkei culture from Japanese culture, Sam strategically revalidates the Brazilianness of his ethnic group.⁴⁴ On the other hand, dekasegi characters' admiration of Japan contributes to their "foreignness" within Japanese culture.

Overall, the cultural production by and about the dekasegi recall how these mobile subjects' widespread social field has created permanent links between the distant societies of Japan and Brazil. Unlike the traditional migrant or immigrant, many Nikkei transmigrants do not

entirely forsake their native land; in fact, some make no effort to familiarize themselves with the host culture. As shown, their lives are marked by fluid transnational sociocultural relations and interaction, often engaging politically and economically with two countries by voting in elections and sending remittances, or by reciprocally transmitting cultural values, work ethics, gender relations, and other social practices. Engagement in local politics is generally a good indicator of social integration. It means that Brazilian nationalism and Nikkei cultural nationalism become deterritorialized as transmigrants go beyond a nation-state. As Nestor García-Canclini points out, “The most radical inquiries into what it means to be entering and leaving modernity are by those who assume the tensions between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. With this I am referring to two processes: the loss of the ‘natural’ relation of culture to geographical and social territories and, at the same time, certain relative, partial territorial relocalizations of old and new symbolic productions” ([García-Canclini 1995, 229](#)). Part of this cultural production is also aimed at training (potential) dekasegi to navigate and contest hegemonic social constructions dealing with race, culture, and ethnicity (the marginalization of dekasegi in Japanese factories through segregated restrooms, lack of compensation for work-related injuries, among other injustices).

Ultimately, the dekasegi’s sudden shift in affiliation from Japanese ethnicity to Brazilian nationality pointed out in these works as well as in studies on Brazilian dekasegi in Japan seems to suggest that they have generally not felt welcome in the land of their ancestors. Japan moves from being a model country to be imitated by Brazil to becoming an ungrateful country that wants to be rid of its dekasegi presence, which it considers an ersatz version of its “genuine” citizens and a foreign irritant to the national body, after its cheap labor is no longer needed. Therefore, dekasegi cultural production adds yet another twist to the ongoing process of identity

(re-)construction and to the seemingly endless processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization experienced by the Nikkeijin in Brazil and in Japan.

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~~[Sam, Silvio. Sonhos que de cá Segui. São Paulo: Ysayama, 1997.](#)~~

Notes

¹ Part of the information included in this essay was previously published as part of a chapter in my book *Japanese Brazilian Saudades: Diasporic Identities and Cultural Production* (Louisville, Colorado: UP of Colorado, 2019).

² Tellingly, revisiting tired clichés about the Japanese, in his poem “Gueixa” (Geisha), Khaorin fantasizes about beautiful geishas with kimonos of the Edo period, only to realize that Ginza is now a commercial area; likewise, in “As rãs” (The Frogs), he daydreams about encountering heroic samurai with *katanas* (swords) in the Chūbu region. The two poems underscore the contrast between an idealized ancestral Japan and his contemporary Japan.

³ This title makes reference to a popular 1967 rock song titled “Era um garoto que como eu amava Os Beatles e Os Rolling Stones...” sung by the band Os Incríveis and included in the album *Para os Jovens Que Amam Os Beatles, Os Rolling Stones e... Os Incríveis!*. This song is a Portuguese version of a 1966 Italian song composed by Brancato Jr.

⁴ He previously published twenty of the sixty chronicles included in *Crônicas de um Garoto que Também Amava Os Beatles e Os Rollings Stones* in *Tudo Bem*, a journal aimed at Japanese Brazilians residing in Tokyo. Kakazu also mentions other journals aimed at the Brazilian diaspora, such as *Jornal Tudo Bem*, *International Press*, *Folha Mundial*, *Nova Visão*, *Brazilian News*, and the bilingual *Jornal do Clube do Brasil*.

⁵ Likewise, Khaorin, in his poem “Destino” (Destiny), blames Brazil for his reluctant departure: “Deep in my soul I confess / that in distant lands I truly search / for what my country has denied me / a country that my hopes did dash. / - I feel in this stanza unrighteous / But I seek not forgiveness for dire poverty / to which millions of citizens my country subjects / through laws knotty indeed / that cause injustices I never could desire.” (“Eu consinto na alma que longínquo / Busco direito que a pátria negou / Pátria que a esperança me toldou / Me sinto nesta estrofe um iníquo // Mas não peço perdão pela miséria / Em que submete milhões de filhos / Nas legislações que são redilhos / Injustiças eu jamais as quereria” [[Khaorin 1996, 9](#)]).

⁶ “Um dia de trabalho lá representa para milhões de brasileiros quase um mês inteiro, em termos salariais” ([Kakazu 1988, 31](#)).

⁷ “Somos todos uma grande família, e somos todos irmãos. Sentimos o laço destes vínculos um pouco mais apertado quando estamos longe” ([Kakazu 1988, 144](#)).

⁸ “Nada é mais bonito que um jardim no outono japonês. O verde e o amarelo se misturam nos topos das grandes árvores e fazem lembrar a nós, brasileiros distantes de nossos rincões, as cores do nosso Pavilhão Nacional” ([Kakazu 1988, 57](#)).

⁹ “Me senti como quem abandona o navio durante o naufrágio, deixando os meus entes mais queridos submergindo juntamente com o grande cargueiro chamado Brasil. A minha Pátria amada mergulhava na pior recessão da sua história. Contudo, em meu coração, eu levava uma forte convicção de que, ao regressar, encontraria as coisas já estabilizadas e tudo nos seus devidos eixos” ([Kakazu 1988, 17](#)).

¹⁰ “Por ser larga, limpa e muito movimentada, lembrava-me com certo pesar do nosso pobre e poluído rio Tietê, cheio de detritos domésticos e industriais, transformado em um grande esgoto ao céu aberto. . . . Se Tóquio conseguiu recuperar a vida do rio Sumida, que também já esteve muito poluído, a ponto de ser considerado por especialistas como ‘praticamente morto,’ São Paulo pode muito bem devolver vida ao rio Tietê” ([Kakazu 1988, 34](#)).

¹¹ “Munidos de responsabilidade, seriedade e forte determinação de superar dificuldades, puseram-se a transformar lixo em riqueza, miséria em fartura, escombros em edifícios e, em poucas décadas, acontecia o grande milagre econômico japonês.

Certamente nada disso existiria se, ao invés do trabalho, cruzassem os braços e se pusessem a reclamar da sorte, das dores, da fome e do frio.

Ao amigo Shioya-san, gostaria de externar os meus profundos sentimentos de gratidão por ter me ensinado a valorizar e acreditar na força do trabalho” ([Kakazu 1988, 43](#)).

¹² “BRASILEIRO é o nosso sobrenome. Uma vez que a gente se propôs a trabalhar, acho que devemos nos empenhar ao máximo para cumprir as nossas obrigações e procurar não denegrir a imagem positiva, tão arduamente construída pelos famosos e consagrados heróis de nosso país” ([Kakazu 1988, 147](#)).

¹³ This approach is also evident in Khaorin’s poem “Japão” (Japan), where the poetic voice pays homage to Japanese patriotism and culture: “No other people love their homeland so much / or created such a just society / inspired by simple honesty / and extensive efficiency”. (“Nenhum povo ama tanto sua pátria / e nem erigiu tão justa sociedade / inspirada na simples honestidade / e na multiplicação da eficiência” [[Khaorin 1996, 73](#)]).

¹⁴ Indeed, Carvalho observes that “there are often gangs waiting for the *Dekasegui* at São Paulo airport, and many are robbed on their arrival. Others are robbed shortly after their return” ([Carvalho 2003, 110](#)).

¹⁵ “Na realidade, cada um de nós também carregamos uma parcela de culpa” ([Kakazu 1988, 145](#)).

¹⁶ Kakazu laments Brazil’s image in Japan, as evidenced in Akira Kurosawa’s 1955 film *Ikimono no Kiroku* (Record of a Living Being): “The most important thing this film showed me was to see on the screen the image of our country that the Japanese have. Most still believe that Brazil is the Amazon basin, inhabited by half-naked Indian tribes, and that the cities are just a jumble of slums, without electricity, without roads, and malaria-ridden.”

(“O que de mais importante me mostrou este filme, foi ver na tela a imagem que os japoneses fazem a respeito do nosso país. A maioria ainda acredita que o Brasil é a Amazônia, habitada por tribos indígenas seminus, e que as cidades não passam de um amontoado de favelas, sem luz elétrica, sem estradas e empestado de malária” [Kakazu 1988, 197]).

¹⁷ “Hoje, existem centenas de milhares de irmãos brasileiros no exterior, lutando e dando a sua pequena contribuição para ajudar essas grandes e ilustres personalidades a solidificar a imagem de um Brasil honrado.

Consciente ou inconscientemente, cada trabalhador brasileiro no exterior carrega em sua figura a bandeira brasileira, somos todos representantes de nosso país” (Kakazu 1988, 146). Whereas Kakazu, in *Crônicas de um Garoto que Também Amava Os Beatles e Os Rollings Stones*, praised the dekasegi for improving the image of Brazil abroad, Khaorin, in the dedication of his 1996 poetry collection *Poema para Você* (Poem for You), elevates this group to the category of heroes: “I dedicate this book to all dekasegi who carry, in the silence of anonymity, the courage and the obstinacy of heroes.” (“Dedico este livro para todos dekaseguis, que levam no silêncio do anonimato a coragem e a obstinação de heróis” [Khaorin 1996]). Heroism and bravery are again highlighted in Orlando Orfei’s poem featured on the back cover: “If I lose money, / I don’t lose anything. / If I lose a friend, / I lose. / But if I lose courage / I lose everything.” [“Se perco dinheiro, / não perco nada. / Se perco um amigo, / perco. / Mas se perco a coragem, / perco tudo” (n.p.)].

¹⁸ Carvalho, for instance, states: “The number of crimes involving Brazilians has been on the increase in recent years. In 1994, there were 587 reported cases, an increase of 17 percent on the previous year (*Notícias do Japão*, 8-14 March 1996). The number of adolescents committing crimes is also on the increase, although the figure for arrests is uncertain. However, in 1997, in the Kurihama reform school in Kanagawa, there were ten Brazilian teenagers and in Nagoy two (*International Press*, 6 December 1997). In January 1996, about 30 Brazilians were awaiting trial and two years later, 27 cases were receiving support from the Brazilian Consulate. Crimes include shoplifting, car theft, robberies of pharmacies, pachinko parlours and job contractors, burglaries, sexual assaults and rapes, forgery of documents (driving licences, passports, etc.), violent acts, drug dealing, infringement of labour laws, and the daubing of graffiti in Portuguese. Car accidents involving Brazilians also occur very frequently” (Carvalho 2003, 106).

¹⁹ Indeed, Carvalho notes that “In July 1998, it was reported that some shops in Hamamatsu were reluctant to accept Brazilian and Peruvian customers, apparently because of their behavior in the shops” (Carvalho 2003, 131).

²⁰ “Cujas respostas eram sempre secas, frias e carregadas de desprezo” (Kakazu 1988, 41).

²¹ “Stories of workers who developed diseases resulting from toxic, unhealthy workplaces abound. . . . There are also cases of people injured while working in poor work conditions made worse by dishonest companies, exploitative, irresponsible bosses, bad-intentioned colleagues, etc. There are also workers who simply disappear without leaving a trace trace. Their relatives in Brazil, lacking information, are stricken with despair while finding themselves in dire straits.” “Existem muitas histórias de vítimas que contraíram doenças por trabalharem em ambientes tóxicos e insalubres. . . . Não faltam também os casos de pessoas lesadas por empregadoras desonestas, patrões exploradores, chefes irresponsáveis, colegas mal intencionados, etc. . . .

Existem também aqueles que simplesmente desaparecem sem deixar nenhum vestígio do seu paradeiro, deixando os familiares no Brasil sem notícias e em desespero e quase sempre, em sérias dificuldades” (Kakazu 1988, 191-92).

²² Perhaps here the chronicler fails to notice that not being a traditionally Christian country, it should not be so surprising that Christmas has become a commercial event rather than a heartfelt religious holiday or celebration in Japan. In fact, it has only been celebrated for the last few decades.

²³ “Em nome da produtividade, tudo ao redor se transforma em campo de árdua luta contra as máquinas automatizadas, para superar-lhes a velocidade e conquistar a meta de produção estabelecida para a jornada daquele dia” (Kakazu 1988, 193).

²⁴ “Um ano de vida escrava, subjugados pelas obrigações e pelo relógio” (Kakazu 1988, 68).

²⁵ Sam and Yoshioka provide the same warning about the cultural shock future dekasegi will probably experience in Japan: “One of the causes of the emotional traumas suffered by dekasegi in Japan is, undoubtedly, the lack psychological preparation to confront a completely different culture.” “Uma das causas dos traumas emocionais ocorridos com dekaseguis no Japão é, sem dúvida, a falta do preparo psicológico para o confronto com uma cultura completamente diferentes” (Sam and Yoshioka 1999, *Dekassegui* 98).

²⁶ “Deposito irrestrita confiança no futuro de nosso jovem e querido Brasil!” (Kakazu 1988, 217).

²⁷ Pen name of the architect and author Silvio Kazushi Sano.

²⁸ The architect, journalist, and author Silvio Sam was born in Fernandópolis, São Paulo, in 1941. His first book was the 1996 detective novel *O Seqüestro*. In 1997, he published *O Meio Faz o Homem and Sonhos que de Cá Segui*. Two years later, he published, with Reimei Yoshioka, *Dekassegui, Com os Pés no Chão... no Japão* and in 2006, *Confrontos & Conflitos*. Sam is a founding member of the Associação de Amigos do Memorial do Imigrante (Association of Friends of the Memorial to the Immigrant) of the Secretariat of Culture of the State of São Paulo, and a member of the Conselho Deliberativo da Aliança Cultural Brasil-Japão (Deliberative Council of the Brazil-Japan Cultural Alliance).

²⁹ The chronicles precede the novel, since they were published independently in dekasegi journals before their inclusion in the volume.

³⁰ The book cover by Ysayama publishing house includes Silvio Sam's drawing of a shaky and insecure dekasegi on his way to Japan for the first time ("na ida..." [on the way there]), alongside another one with the same dekasegi on his way back, who is now full of confidence, sports sunglasses, and boasts of his purchasing power. Tellingly, however, there is a question mark after the words "na volta...?" (upon return) placed under the second drawing in order to open the readers' eyes to potential dangers and false expectations.

³¹ "Aos dekasseguis, ex-dekasseguis, e a todos os brasileiros que um dia, de cá, tiveram de seguir um sonho lá fora. Um sonho que deveria se realizar dentro do próprio país em que nasceram. Por direito" (Sam 1997, n.p.).

³² "It's directly linked to prior bad governments in my country characterized by absurd and continuous economic plans, thorough corruption, embezzlement and, worst of all, impunity." For this reason, his wife Mieko Saito has to put her college studies on hold to work as an administrative assistant at a law firm. Pedro clarifies that their situation is not unique, as unemployment among Brazilians with college degrees is widespread; his friend and former classmate Fred, for example, is now an undocumented worker in the United States. Yet the novel, like Yoshioka's chronicles, still celebrates emphasis on education and scholarly success: "But I think that our parents' great virtue was to maintain the same domestic structure that has lasted throughout Japanese history, prioritizing education . . . Among descendants of the various ethnicities that settled in Brazil, the Nikkei ranks first in education."

³³ Like other Nikkeijin, the protagonist feels disappointed when he realizes, after months of desperate job-hunting in the field of mechanical engineering, that he will be unable to meet his professional and financial goals in Brazil. Although, like Kakazu, his family initially resists the temptation of joining the dekasegi diaspora, financial shortcomings eventually compel them to leave Brazil. They move to Japan with the children, where they remain for four years, though they initially planned to return after two years. To emphasize the importance of mental preparation before resettlement, the author describes Pedro's cultural shock in Japan. After their arrival, he learns that he is unauthorized to work until he obtains a permanent work visa—the employment agency neglected to inform him that it is illegal to work in Japan with his three-month tourist visa. In any case, Pedro eventually acknowledges that the financial benefits of working in Japan offset his feeling *déclassé*, that is, an engineer doing manual labor. As the narrator (the author's alter-ego) clarifies, For those who, like Pedro, had not worked in their professional fields for a long time, working manually would not bruise their almost inexistent pride."

³⁴ In Japan, the family befriends César, a Brazilian who works for an *empreiteira* (labor broker or contract employment company) helping Brazilian dekasegi with transportation, visas, accidents and, at times, criminal charges. This Nikkeijin is invaluable in learning how to navigate the dekasegi experience in Japan. With time, César becomes an interlocutor who, because of his ignorance of his ethnic group's history, allows Pedro to reactivate social memory as he revisits the epic adventures of the first Issei in Japan and compares them with the second diaspora. This narrative device reminds the readers of how important it is to know one's history and to learn from past mistakes. Incidentally, Pedro begins to relate the history of Japanese migration to Brazil with the allegation that Chinese immigrants are to blame for the anti-Asian hysteria in the United States and for the exclusionary laws that followed:

Japanese emigration to the United States was hampered as a result of the poor ethical behavior of Chinese immigrants who had arrived before. They would work for ridiculously low salaries. This willingness caused them problems with other immigrants and made life very difficult for all Asians. As a result, restrictions were placed to reduce Asians immigration, a fact that kept many Japanese from settling in California.

While it is true that Chinese "coolies" were known for accepting low wages, Pedro fails to note that during the California Gold Rush, they were generally well received and that it was only once gold became harder to find that economic competition fomented anti-Chinese animosity. White supremacy and the post-Civil War economic decline became a culture medium for a renewed nativist and xenophobic atmosphere. Therefore, not only economic concerns (the Chinese were soon replaced by Japanese immigrants) but also, perhaps largely, racial discrimination drove the passing of these exclusion laws.

³⁵ In Khaorin's poem "Taisho," history likewise repeats itself when the poetic voice visualizes his countenance in old photographs of the Taisho Period, where his parents appear full of hope right before leaving for Brazil.

³⁶ "I was present during major surgeries because I had to be included when it came to Brazilian patients. I also encountered an endless number of patients with mental issues caused by a number of reasons . . . like those I've already told you: loneliness, nostalgia, powerlessness, and even paranoia . . . stemming from cultural shock, new customs, diet, mistreatment, not knowing the language, etc. Who knows what else. . . (he paused here) only now I understand how much our parents and grandparents suffered after they went to Brazil as emigrants..." "Assisti ao vivo a cirurgias de ferimentos graves, pela necessidade da minha presença ao lado de pacientes brasileiros. Sem contar os casos de alterações nos estados psicológicos de alguns, devido a uma série de motivos... Como alguns que já te contei. Tais como solidão, saudade, sentimento de incapacidade e até complexo de perseguição, etc... etc... devido ao choque cultural, costumes, alimentação, tratamentos, desconhecimento da língua, etc., etc. Se lá o que mais... -fez uma pausa—Só agora, sei o quanto os nossos pais e avós

sofreram quando foram para o Brasil como emigrantes” (Sam 1997, 171).

³⁷ “A saída desses milhares de japoneses para o Brasil e para outros países também deve ter contribuído com uma pequena parcela, para que o Japão se tornasse a grande potência que agora é . . . logo após a guerra, numa grande campanha dentro da comunidade, os imigrantes japoneses no Brasil criaram associações de socorro às vítimas da guerra” (Kakazu 1988, 155-56).

³⁸ “Degradação crescente dentro da comunidade de nipo-brasileiros naquele país” (Sam 1997, 213).

³⁹ “A frequência de casos graves, como assaltos à mão armada, briga entre gangues, acidentes fatais de trânsito e agora até de drogas, entre os brasileiros no Japão, aumentava a cada nova correspondência de César” (Sam 1997, 213). Carvalho explains the case: “Maeda was the first Brazilian *Dekasegi* known to be convicted in Japan. He was accused of having murdered a Japanese neighbor in 1991. The explanation for the crime presented by the police and the media was that he could not communicate with anybody, owing to his poor command of Japanese. As a result, he developed paranoid tendencies and became mentally unbalanced. According to a rumor, he was the scapegoat for the *Yakuza* (Japanese Mafia). The fact is that although he signed a confession in Japanese and was jailed as a result, there was no corroborating evidence to his confession” (Sam 1997, 107).

⁴⁰ “Tá certo que somos ainda considerados país de terceiro mundo, mas também não precisamos ficar colaborando ainda mais com isso, para que continuem pensando assim da gente” (Sam 1997, 143).

⁴¹ “‘Bom, ao menos à tarde não há ginástica,’ aliviado, comemorou mais uma vez brasileiroamente” (Sam 1997, 101).

⁴² “Como bom brasileiro, Pedro aderiu plenamente e com muita satisfação” (Sam 1997, 102).

⁴³ “O meu sonho... continua sendo... ver um dia o meu país grande... desenvolvido... e sério! E no futuro, ver os meus filhos... e os seus... se formarem bem e poderem trabalhar dignamente dentro do próprio país em que nasceram. Sem precisar ter de sair para sobreviverem” (Sam 1997, 219).

⁴⁴ Likewise, the following lines in Khaorin’s “Poema para Você” stress the poet’s lack of familiarity with Japanese culture by surprisingly resorting to a common stereotype about Asians: “The Japanese is an inscrutable being / in his righteous indifference.” (“O japonês é um ente inescrutável / Em sua virtude a impassibilidade” [Khaorin 1996, 20]).