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Resemanticizing *Yamato-damashii* in *Los samuráis de México*

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With his relentless energy, curiosity and originality, David William Foster helped shape Latin American Studies. His many influential publications pioneered the exploration of several subfields in our disciplines, including LGBTQ studies (with books such as *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing* (1991); *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing* (1997); *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2003); *El ambiente nuestro: Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Writing* (2006)); Jewish studies (*Latin American Jewish Cultural Production* (2009)); urban photography (*Urban Photography in Argentina: Nine Artists of the Post-Dictatorship Era* (2007); *Argentine, Mexican, and Guatemalan Photography: Feminist, Queer, and Post-Masculinist Perspectives* (2014); *Picturing the Barrio: Ten Chicano Photographers* (2017); *The City as Photographic Text: Urban Documentary Photography of São Paulo* (2021)); film studies (*Gender and Society in Brazilian Cinema* (1999); *Mexico City in Contemporary Mexican Cinema* (2002); *Latin American Documentary Filmmaking* (2013)); and graphic narrative (*El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil* (2016)).

Inspired by this last book, the first English-language study on Latin American graphic narratives, my essay moves from Foster's interest in the Argentine and Brazilian traditions to Mexico (via Japan). More specifically, it explores the rhetorical maneuver of resemanticizing the

xenophobic and ultranationalist concept of *Yamato-damashii* (the Japanese spirit) in the manga *Los samuráis de México*. It also studies the celebration of the liminal position taken by the first Nikkei pioneers in Mexico and how the manga encourages today's Mexican Nikkeijin to follow suit by taking advantage of their ancestor's heroic deeds.¹

In 1888, President Porfirio Díaz's Mexico became the first country in the world to sign a treaty with Japan based on equal treatment, which allowed citizens from both countries to travel to the other: it was known as the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. With Mexico as the first Latin American country to accept Japanese immigrants, the first considerable migration began in 1897 when twenty-eight "colonos" along with six other free immigrants, financially supported by their government and promoted by Viscount Enomoto Takeaki, emigrated to the southern state of Chiapas to grow coffee there, as part of a mission aimed at helping the Japanese economy and imperialist projects. In 1896, the Japanese government, represented by Enomoto, purchased 65,000 hectares of land in Escuintla, Chiapas, and created the Sociedad Colonizadora Japón-México with the goal of creating coffee plantations for export to Japan. Other Japanese, however, migrated on their own and purchased land without government support. Overall, as Melba Falck Reyes explains, it has been estimated that between 1888 and 1910 "Llegaron a México alrededor de 10 000 japoneses. Por otra parte, los japoneses que habían arribado a Estados Unidos fueron objeto de leyes discriminatorias y ello fomentó el flujo de estos a México" (22).

Encouraged by three different Japanese immigration companies, more Japanese immigrants would soon arrive in Mexico to work in mining; sugar cane industries in Minatitlán, Veracruz; construction and railroads (between Manzanillo and Guadalajara); and fishing in Baja California (Ota Mishima 56-57). Many, however, refused the hard labor and re-migrated to other

areas in Mexico and, mostly, to the United States. Additional skilled laborers—both documented and undocumented—arrived later, settling mostly in Baja California. In spite of their small numbers, the Nikkeijin eventually dominated cotton farming and the fishing industry in Baja California Norte (Masterson and Funada-Classen 60). Others worked as small business owners, small farmers, or found work in the mines and fields of Sonora and Coahuila, often showing an impressive upward mobility. Before World War II, the largest Nikkei communities were in Baja California, Mexico City, and Sonora, where they worked mostly in fishing and agriculture. Their economic success, however, would be cut short when they became racialized and demonized, during World War II, as an internal enemy that needed to be uprooted and controlled. As happened with the Chinese before them, it became apparent that the Nikkei did not possess the full rights of Mexican citizenship.

Japanese immigration stopped during World War II. After the FBI spread rumors about a purported landing of the Japanese imperial navy and a Japanese conspiracy to take over several Latin American countries, countries like Peru were happy to rid themselves of their Japanese residents (out of the 2,118 Japanese nationals deported from Latin America to the United States, 1,800 came from Peru). With the excuse of national security, the U.S. government asked several Latin American nations to deport the leaders of their local Japanese communities to internment camps in the United States. Although Mexico was not among them, after breaking diplomatic ties with Japan in 1941 it did comply with the U.S. request to relocate its Japanese residents, including those naturalized Mexicans, from Pacific coastal areas and the border with the United States (Chiapas, Baja California, Sinaloa) to quasi-internment camps.²

The 2008 manga *Los samuráis de México. La verdadera historia de los primeros japoneses en Latinoamérica*, written by Hisashi Ueno, with illustrations by the artist Konohana

Sakuya, and originally published in Japanese in 1994, narrates mostly the adventures of the first Nikkei pioneers in Chiapas, during the Meiji era. The term “manga” refers to comics or graphic novels typically printed in black-and-white, serialized in large manga magazines, and made in Japan. Although this medium has been used for a wide range of genres (romance, sports, science fiction, fantasy, horror, erotica [*hentai*]), in this case it is a historical manga. *Los samuráis de México* originated in Japan and is not really a comic but a graphic novel. As Latin American cultural studies scholar David W. Foster explains,

It has been well established that one fundamental difference between comic book art (with its rather ad hoc graphic exuberance and an accompanying thinness of narrative profundity) and graphic narrative as it has established itself as a contemporary cultural genre has been a set of underlying principles of narrative coherence that promote reader introspection and the sustained contemplation of a complex and ambiguous aesthetic object. Over-the-top WHAM! BANG! KERPOW!, often tied to fanciful action images of raw physical experience, yield to the often highly nuanced and multiple ambiguous sequencing of lived human events, often with no conclusive sense of THE END. (83-84)

The cover of the manga features three Nikkei men, signaling the historical absence of Nikkei women in this pioneering project. One may argue that *Los samuráis de México* displays some testimonial traits. In Chiapas, Ueno, the author and character, meets an elderly Nikkei immigrant named Seiichi Niimi, known locally as Don Santiago, who is the last surviving member of the Enomoto group. Niimi was, therefore, an eyewitness to the historical events narrated in the manga. As if it were a Latin American *testimonio*, he informs Ueno about the Enomoto group’s trials and tribulations, not just his own; his testimony represents the collective voice of his community. For additional information, Ueno also conducted numerous interviews with Nikkei descendants—six photographs at the end of the book show the large number of collaborators in Mexico City, Tapachula, Escuintla, and Acacoyagua. And as is also typical of

testimonios, there is a claim to historical truth, which is evident in the subtitle of the graphic narrative, “La verdadera historia de los primeros japoneses en Latinoamérica.”

In a way, the manga responds to a previous ethnical commitment, delivering a veiled sociopolitical denunciation of injustice and corruption. There is, indeed, a pragmatic impetus to disclose how the Japanese government turned its back on these pioneering Issei, who, as a result, ended up suffering all kinds of hardship, illness, and even an untimely death. This manga, like *testimonios*, deviates from historical discourse’s purported impersonality: the author, the first character to appear in the story, openly expresses his admiration for these brave men who crossed the ocean with the goal of helping their fatherland in an unknown, far-away country. Of course, unlike Latin American *testimonios*, there is no sense of urgency here, since the main events took place a century earlier. Instead, the real goal is didactic: the author expresses, in the acknowledgments section, his interest in making sure that the Nikkeijin in Chiapas are aware of their ancestors’ heroism and that other Mexicans learn about the historically friendly relations between Mexico and Japan. If, as Stuart Hall suggests, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225), knowing this particular history of the first state-sponsored Japanese immigration to Latin America has the potential of shaping not only Japanese Mexican identity but also Mexican identity in general, since they are both malleable and in constant negotiation. Therefore, Ueno, the writer and character, together with the manga artist Sakuya, are lending their voice to this group of countrymen and their descendants who had been, for the most part, forgotten by history. Ueno’s research also mediates the direct testimony of the Colonia Enomoto’s last survivor.

Samurai-like Heroism and the Japanese Spirit

As the first character to appear in the manga, Ueno is on his way to a vacation in Guatemala when he happens to discover, in the town of Acacoyagua, in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas, a Nikkei community. His car breaks down and a Nikkei helps him out. Konohana Sakuya, in his manga depiction of the scene, goes to great pains to make it clear that the descendant no longer has a typically Japanese phenotype: his physical features are Western, including curly hair and hairy arms, and so is his demeanor, since he hugs Ueno and—perhaps stereotypically—invades his personal space with too much familiarity, considering the fact that they have just met. Ueno’s character is, at first, visibly uncomfortable with the unexpected exchange.

In a panoramic view that extends over two pages, we see that the Nikkeijin has taken Ueno to a park in the outskirts of the town, where an obelisk with the names of the first thirty-six Enomoto pioneers was erected in 1968 to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the inception of Japanese immigration to Chiapas. Reflecting the importance given to the monument in the story, Sakuya draws it no less than six times, four in the opening pages and two in the closing ones. The Spanish words “homenaje y gratitud del pueblo de Acacoyagua” are visible on the base of the monument. Engraved in it, there is also a Spanish translation of the following seventeenth-century haiku by the most famous poet of the Edo period, Matsuo Bashō, which was included in his masterwork *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 1689):

Hierba de verano
combates de los
héroes

huellas de un
sueño.

(natsukusa ya tsuwamono-domo ga yume no ato). (17)³

Following Bashō's haiku, therefore, all that remains from the pioneers' efforts, sacrifice, and heroic deeds are the ruins or aftermath of their dreams in the form of summer grass. While the Spanish version of the haiku in the manga uses the term "héroes" instead of "warrior," both words convey admiration for the epic achievement of these brave and resilient immigrants. Looking at the obelisk, the vacationing staff member from the Japanese embassy suddenly feels emotional, sensing "El aliento de los antepasados que dejaron su vida en México" (17). The same haiku will reappear twice (the first version and then a different one as interpreted by Ryojiro Terui, a leader among the Enomoto immigrants, in which the word "sueño" is replaced by "un andar" in the last pages of the manga to underscore, all the way to the end of the story, its symbolic importance and the protagonists' samurai-like heroism.

In consonance with the mainstream discourse of Nikkei-Latin American narratives (e.g., one can find a similar approach to the indomitable Nikkei pride and epic heroism in the face of terrible adversity of Nikkei pioneers in the 2008 Japanese Brazilian manga *Banzai! História da imigração japonesa no Brasil em mangá* by Francisco Noriyuki Sato and Julio Shimamoto), in *Los samuráis de México* we find real-life heroes of an epic overseas adventure. Upon arrival to their destination, the Enomoto immigrants are immediately reminded that they must try to improve the Empire of Japan's international reputation, one of the main reasons for state-guided migration to Latin America in connection with Japanese imperialism: "Ustedes son los representantes de Japón. Muestren su fuerza y valentía a los mexicanos" (38). Tellingly, in an

ensuing vignette Terui, senses the historic importance of their adventure and declares: “Siento como que somos como personajes de novela” (23).

Charles Joseph MacRobie Fliss has studied the Orientalization of what he calls a “Pure-Japan” among American anime and manga fans:

Pure-Japan is an Orientalist narrative created by American anime and manga fans to represent Japan, but the narrative also serves to provide collective identity for the fan community. [...] Through their interpretations of anime and manga, the elite of the fan community developed an idyllic view of Japan. Japan symbolized a haven for fans, a physical place where the normal rules of the everyday world seemed to not apply. [...] This narrative of Japan, however, is thoroughly Orientalist. I name it pure-Japan, because it tolerates no hybridity, no swirling of cultural odors. The narrative textualizes and essentializes the people of Japan and their nation, binding them within the interpretations made by American fans through anime and manga. Fans appropriate the right to speak from the Japanese, silencing Japanese narratives of self and nation. [...] When American fans consume these small narratives of anime and manga they expect the grand narrative of “Japan” to be behind them; viewing the products through the grand narrative of Orientalism, fans thus create from the database the derivative Orientalist grand narrative, pure-Japan. New fans accept pure-Japan as a true narrative, and thus consume anime and manga through the lens of pure-Japan and endlessly perpetuate the narrative. (85-87)

A similar essentializing operation takes place in the narrative of *Los samuráis de México*. It unproblematically privileges the existence of an unchanging, static, and unique “Japanese spirit” (*yamato-damashii*; literally meaning “The great spirit of harmony”) that guides the resiliency of the pioneering Nikkei protagonists. Thus, the supervisor of the group, Kusakado, states: “¡Vamos a sembrar el espíritu japonés *Yamato* en esta gran tierra mexicana!” (28). Likewise, at the beginning of the second chapter, another character, faced with the grueling task of logging and farming the jungle, proclaims the same promise: “Aquí demostraremos nuestro espíritu japonés *yamato*” (49). This approach is also underscored by the use of the term “samurais” included in

the title, one of central archetypes of Japaneseness in the West, which would later be gladly adopted by the Nihonjinron discourse (theories or discussions about the Japanese), a sort of strategic essentialism through which the Japanese have taken advantage of positive stereotypes about them propagated by Westerners. These modern Nikkei immigrants in Mexico, therefore, come to metonymically symbolize the survival of the values associated with the idealized, brave, stoic, and fearless warriors of medieval and Early Modern Japan.

Yet it is important to keep in mind that, during the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese nationalists turned this idea of the timeless Japanese spirit, invoked several times in the manga, into one of the key concepts in their imperialist political propaganda. Encouraged by the Meiji government's ideological and repressive state apparatuses, it was a central aspect of Japan's imperial military doctrines. In this sense, in the Brazilian context, the Portuguese social psychologist Daniela de Carvalho reveals that "In the 1930s, the nationalistic orientation of education towards the promotion of *yamato-damashii* (the Japanese spirit) was strengthened. The *Nisei* were taught how to be 'good Japanese,' and the *Kyōiku Chokugo* (Imperial Rescript on Education), retained as a 'relic,' guided the education system" (14). It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that this same Japanese Spirit is repeatedly invoked and even celebrated in the text without any sort of caveat, even if it did guide the young protagonists' actions and ideals.

The *yamato-damashii*, with its emphasis on emperor worship and the belief in Japan's military invincibility, has also been associated with ultranationalist groups like the Japanese Brazilian terrorist organization Shindō Renmei, whose leader, Junji Kikawa, a former Japanese army colonel, was a fanatic believer in this concept. Guided by its principles, Shindō Renmei's *Kachigumi*, who believed that Japan had been victorious in World War II, sent their *Tokkotai* (synonym for *Kamikaze*) to commit acts of sabotage, wounding 147 of the more culturally

integrated *Makegumi*, who accepted the fact that Japan had been defeated, and assassinating at least twenty-three of them with firearms or *katanas* (traditional Japanese swords).

Interestingly, *Los samuráis de México* resemanticizes the term “Japanese spirit” away from its original ultranationalistic and xenophobic meaning. This maneuver is particularly noticeable in chapter six, where we learn about two Japanese immigrants, contemporary to the Enomoto group, who, fleeing the generalized anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States, left their college studies there and moved to Mexico in 1897: Tsuchihiko Kishimoto and Tokichi Kohashi (whose long hair in the drawings may be anachronistic and more in tune with today’s manga characters). Two years later, they created the Kohashi-Kishimoto Society in Escuintla, the first Nikkei-owned coffee production company in Mexico. Their generous, philanthropic pursuit of creating a great company in order to have access to more money that could be then used to help the local population is now described in the manga as “the Japanese spirit:” “Aquí también quedó arraigado el espíritu japonés en la tierra mexicana” (168). With branches in Acapetahua, San Isidro and other towns, the Kohashi-Kishimoto society provided jobs for more than one hundred employees and became the most prosperous company in Chiapas, along with the Mexican Japanese society. Even though it survived the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the dream would be cut short when, during World War II, the Mexican government expropriated Kohashi and Kishimoto’s coffee plantations and forcibly displaced them to Mexico City. After the war, Kohashi remained in Mexico City, but Kishimoto returned to Escuintla, where he worked as a medical doctor (even though he was a veterinarian) until his death. It was Kishimoto’s initiative to build the Benito Juárez school for the benefit of local children.

Incidentally, Kishimoto would not be the only Nikkei immigrant who worked as a medical doctor without having earned a medical degree. In consonance with this new meaning of

the term “Japanese spirit” provided by the manga, after Dr. Nihei Tamiya passed away, the local population asked the kind and generous Renji Otta, a former farmer who had served as Dr. Nihei’s assistant for the Enomoto cooperative, to become the new physician. Otta agreed to be their new doctor, never minding if his patients could not afford paying him. He ended up as the town’s physician and advisor, beloved by all the locals, until he died of malaria at age forty-two, in 1917. A former patient paid back Otta’s altruism by donating his cows to Otta’s wife and four children so that they could sell them and return to Japan. *Los samuráis de México* celebrates the fact that a street and a monument in town are dedicated to him.

Along with “Japanese spirit,” one can find other originally colonial or imperialistic vocabulary being used uncritically throughout the manga. For instance, early in the narrative we are told that Viscount Enomoto—drawn realistically three times by Sakuya as the distinguished military man with moustache and big sideburns that appears in a well-known photograph—purchased “virgin” forests in Chiapas in order to use them for agriculture and “colonization” (another obvious concept typically used in colonial and imperial contexts). The adjective “virgin” is used again in chapter six, when we learn that a Nikkei botanist, named Dr. Eiji Matsuda, fashioned a taxonomy of “La entonces virgen” (158) flora of southwestern Mexico. This vocabulary is reminiscent of the time-honored stereotypes of the colonial gaze, characteristic of imperialist projects that conceived of places like Africa and Latin America as an exotic *tabula rasa* patiently waiting to be populated and exploited by imperial subjects. Yet we later learn that as soon as the Enomoto immigrants arrive in the purchased lands, they enter in contact with the “natives” who live there. The reason for using the term “virgin” was, perhaps, to avoid the speculation that Nikkei immigrants were displacing the local population, which is referred to, again in colonial terms, as “natives.” This word does not seem to be used here as a

synonym for “indigenous people,” since there is no allusion to indigeneity anywhere in the manga.

Los samuráis de México also buys into the Meiji government’s use of overpopulation as an excuse for state-guided migration, when, in fact, the real goal was to expand the empire’s political sphere of influence. In this context, historian Sidney Xu Lu reveals that even though the Japanese government declared the need to accommodate its excess population abroad, it actually saw a continued domestic population growth as a key tool for the construction of the empire:

It rationalizes migration-driven expansion, which I call “Malthusian expansion,” as both a solution to domestic social tensions supposedly caused by overpopulation and a means to leave the much-needed room and resources in the homeland so that the total population of the nation could continue to increase. In other words, Malthusian expansionism is centered on the claim of overpopulation, not the actual fear of it, and by the desire for population growth, not the actual anxiety over it. (4)

Overpopulation was, therefore, a mere excuse to send migrants abroad, where they would increase Japan’s sphere of political influence.

In the manga, we are reminded that the first thirty-six Enomoto pioneers, all men in their twenties, were trailblazers of Nikkei migration in Latin America (1897), having arrived in Mexico before the mass migrations to Peru (1899) and Brazil (1908). They were part of the nearly one million Nikkei who moved to the Americas as *dekasegi* (temporary workers), fleeing poverty and, according to the manga, also overpopulation. In yet another wink to colonial imagery, in the sixth chapter Sakuya draws the botanical scientist Eiji Matsuda oddly wearing what seems to be a British colonial pith helmet.

Consistent with this colonial-minded viewpoint, *Los samuráis de México* mobilizes a paternalistic outlook in which the Nikkeijin appear to have a salvational role in the region: they

donate three schools for local children, cure the sick, and evangelize the locals, thus improving the dismal lot of these seemingly forsaken “natives,” as they are referred to in the manga.

Although acknowledging deficiencies in the pioneers’ agricultural dexterity (a local farmer in a traditional Mexican sombrero—like, somewhat stereotypically, many of the Mexican characters in the manga—has to explain to them what type of crops are more suitable for the terrain and what the proper season for planting is), overall there are condescending overtones in the description of their activities, as evident in the following passage from the very first page of the manga, in which “the Enomoto spirit” had not yet become “the Japanese spirit:” “Estos jóvenes japoneses iban impregnados del espíritu Enomoto que se basaba en una nueva idea migratoria consistente no solo en amasar una fortuna, sino también en convivir y atender con devoción a los nativos del lugar, con el objeto de establecer un asentamiento permanente para el beneficio del pueblo” (2). Tellingly, switching to the Brazilian context, political scientist Philip Staniford argued that there was a superiority complex among the Nikkeijin in relation to the local population:

Os imigrantes partilhavam juntamente com seus compatriotas de uma imagem positiva, solidamente desenvolvida, de si próprios como japoneses. Tal sentimento se manifesta explícita ou implicitamente na forma do “espírito japonês” (*yamato damashi*) e na convicção de que o japonês é capaz de enfrentar e vencer a adversidade. Consideram-se aptos a trabalhar árdua e inteligentemente, a dominar a situação e a encontrar soluções adequadas. Essa auto-imagem positiva é ainda mais ressaltada no além-mar pela comparação do que consideram sua própria polidez “civilizada” e finesse como os aspectos “rudes” que eles encontram na cultura estrangeira. Nós, como “povo,” somos distintos “deles” que são considerados “primitivos” (*geshijin*) ou “selvagens” (*yabanjin*). (47-48)

In any case, this Nikkei altruism emphasized in the manga does echo historical events. It is supported by the fact that during World War II, the Nikkeijin in Chiapas were allowed to stay

in their homes longer than those in the Pacific and Northern states (before being later forcibly displaced to Mexico City), precisely because of the strong demands made by local citizens and politicians, who, grateful for everything the Nikkeijin had done for them, considered them vital elements for their community's progress and well-being. In this context, the introduction to the manga strategically presents what will be the main message throughout the ensuing pages: it claims that the Enomoto Nikkeijin's altruistic and virtuous spirit at the inception of the immigration process has forever marked Japanese-Mexican relations, all the while fomenting the friendship and respect for Nikkeijin in Mexico.

Unconditional Patriotism Despite Deception and Betrayal

In *Los samuráis de México*, the Japanese government does not receive the same praise as the pioneer, Nikkei immigrants. Ueno and Sakuya do not shy away from denouncing the fact that the Enomoto pioneers were deceived by false promises (“El éxito está garantizado” (22) affirms one of the sponsors) made by Viscount Enomoto and the government he represented. These exaggerations and lies led the unwary immigrants to suffer such hardships that part of the expedition actually fled to Mexico City and implored the Japanese diplomatic legation to allow them to return to their homeland. And neither do Ueno and Sakuya recoil from declaring the Enomoto project a failure—in fact, the title of the second chapter is “The Failure.” Yet he does celebrate how some intrepid members of the original group eventually managed to reinvent themselves: in September of 1904, the survivors of the Enomoto group (Ryojiro Terui, Kumataro Takahashi, Rokutarō Arima, Asajiro Yamamoto, Saburo Kiyono, and Waka Suzuki) created the

San-Ou cooperative in the Tajuko ranch, which would later become the Sociedad Cooperativa Mexicano-Japonesa. Among the numerous obstacles they had to overcome were two major historical events that curtailed their aspirations: the Mexican Revolution and World War II.

Los samuráis de México celebrates the Enomoto group as unconditional patriots who devoted their lives to supporting their fatherland abroad. Indeed, a decision that distinguished them from most Nikkei immigrants to Latin America was the fact that they did not see themselves as temporary immigrants; from the beginning of their trip they had decided, instead, to establish themselves in Mexico permanently. Even though at first there were some clashes between students and employees, as well as between workers under contract and the six free, independent immigrants, they all shared the common goal of helping Japan as much as they could. This is repeatedly emphasized throughout the manga with drawings of them holding the Japanese flag and often including Japanese kanji to evoke cultural authenticity. Thus, celebrating their patriotism, a large vignette shows one of the remaining thirty-five immigrants holding a large Japanese flag, after an arduous walk toward their destination in which four of the Enomoto immigrants became sunstroke, and declaring: “¡Haremos historia aquí! ¡¡¡Arrrrranquemos!!!” (46). Arriving on 19 May 1897, they are shocked to find a jungle near the town of Escuintla, but they are still in high spirits. Although disillusionment and even desperation sink in soon, another immigrant declares his patriotism and national pride: “¡Somos gente de primera que venimos a colonizar esta tierra para la gloria de Japón!” (59). Feeling abandoned by their government, they still invoke Japanese pride to achieve their goals.

From Socialist to Christian Utopias

Like the Nikkei protagonists in Karen Tei Yamashita's 1992 novel *Brazil-Marú*, based on real-life Nikkei immigrants in Brazil, several of the pioneers in Chiapas were Christian and/or seemingly of the socialist persuasion. Thus, in his novelized chronicle *El samurái de la Graflex. De enfermero de Villa a cronista fotográfico de Tijuana* (2019), Mexican Daniel Salinas Basave explores the sources of Viscount Enomoto Takeaki's fascination with Mexico and socialist affiliation:

El vizconde Enomoto, integrante de una noble estirpe del shogunato, vivió en Francia entre 1862 y 1867, cuando estudiaba tecnología naval de la Armada francesa. Durante estos años tuvo tiempo de charlar con muchos oficiales que habían formado parte de la Intervención francesa en México, especialmente con el capitán Jules Brunet, que logró colocar en su imaginario la idea de un país mágico, abundante y misterioso. Además de escuchar testimonios fantasiosos sobre México, Enomoto se familiariza con las teorías del socialismo utópico de Charles Fourier. [...] No abandona sus ideas socialistas y en el fondo de su corazón sigue soñando con fundar una comuna regida por los principios del trabajo igualitario y la ética samurái. (52)

After returning to Japan at the age of thirty-two, Enomoto tried to found an independent community on the island of Hokkaido, the Republic of Ezo, ruled by Fourier's collectivism and the ethics of the samurai but he was defeated by the Emperor's army and imprisoned for three years. According to Salinas Basave, after Enomoto was rehabilitated and named Foreign Minister by the emperor, "No abandona sus ideas socialistas y en el fondo de su corazón sigue soñando con fundar una comuna regida por los principios del trabajo igualitario y la ética samurái" (52). He therefore tried to found in Mexico a version of the community that had failed in Hokkaido.

In *Brazil-Marú*, the Nikkei families who migrate to Brazil are pacifists fleeing the Meiji government's ever-increasing militarism. Feeling alienated in their own country, these prosperous, educated, and westernized expatriates dream of creating a new, more perfect society with Japanese values, a utopian, little Japan in the hinterlands of the state of São Paulo. From this perspective, one may well wonder whether the real-life Enomoto pioneers who also identified with Christian and/or socialist values were likewise fleeing Meiji militaristic and imperialist politics, as opposed to the patriotic, nationalistic subjectivities portrayed. This would imply a paradoxical motivation to the one offered in the manga.

Following the latter model, at one point in *Los samuráis de México* a vignette depicts all six immigrants of the Cooperativa Mexicano-Japonesa holding the Japanese flag and promising to be the foundation for the dreams of future generations of Nikkei immigrants. To overcome the failure of the Enomoto project, they create, under Terui's leadership, the San-Ou cooperative in which private property is vanished: they will have to abandon their personal interests, expect no salary, and accept that all property is shared; in return, the cooperative will cover their food, clothing, and lodging expenses. Ueno and Sakuya point out that although the idea is reminiscent of a socialist country, in reality the events took place twenty years before the 1917 Russian Revolution and twenty-four years before the birth of Chinese communism in 1921. The previous story of a failed capitalist venture, therefore, now turns into one of successful socialist planning: "La cooperativa fue la organización más importante fuera de Japón" (101), state, perhaps hyperbolically, Ueno and Sakuya. Besides the strong Christian influence, another thing that may surprise the reader when looking at the catalog of characters at the beginning of the manga is that some of the pioneers, including Tsunematsu Fuse and Eiji Matsuda, were devout Christians.

Strategically Liminal Positioning

It should come as no surprise that a diplomat like Ueno would create a text celebrating the amicable and mutually beneficial relations between Mexico and Japan over the decades. But there is also in this manga a somewhat veiled message to today's Mexican Nikkeijin encouraging them to serve as a fruitful cross-cultural conduit between the two countries just like their ancestors did. Thus, early in the first chapter we find a representative of the Mexican legation in Japan addressing the soon-to-be emigrants thus: “Confío en que ustedes que van a radicar en nuestro país contribuirán a estrechar los lazos de amistad entre los dos países” (22). Later, in one of the key vignettes in chapter three, Terui, one of the leaders, reiterates the idea: “Creo que al cabo de cien años nuestros descendientes deben de hablar español y japonés y sirvan de puente entre México y Japón” (104). It is thus implied, via the example provided by their ancestors, that Mexican Nikkeijin must strategically establish themselves as a nexus for the improvement of economic, political, and cultural relations between the two countries, a stance that has been commonly adopted by Nikkei communities throughout the region.⁴

The cooperativists, faithful to their original goals when they first migrated to Mexico, implemented their altruistic instincts by donating three schools in the towns of Acapetagua, Acacoyagua, and Escuintla. As stated, these important social contributions will later be one of the reasons why the local population in Chiapas resisted the government's forced displacement of the Nikkeijin to Mexico City. The cooperative's next major project, the creation of a much-needed Spanish-Japanese dictionary, symbolizes this liminal role between both cultures adopted by the Nikkei community.

After the Mexican Revolution was over in 1920, President Obregón, drawn realistically in one of the vignettes, decided to compensate foreign companies for their losses during the long war in order to create trust for foreign investment. Then—and this key exemplum takes center stage in the manga—in contrast with the United States, France, and England, which demanded strong compensations, the exemplary Nikkeijin in Chiapas decided to send a letter written by Terui and the Japanese consul to the Mexican president in which they renounced their right to a compensation in spite of their major economic losses: “Nosotros, aun siendo residentes extranjeros, viviendo en la tierra mexicana, debemos compartir el mismo dolor de los mexicanos” (125).

The manga includes a summary of the letter decorated by the Mexican and Japanese flags representing the fraternity between the two nations. In it, the Nikkeijin express their thankfulness to Mexico, a country they now consider their second fatherland. A vignette shows an emotional President Obregón in tears (there is a lot of crying in this manga) and slamming his desk after reading their letter. It is followed by another vignette that brings us back to the manga’s title by stating in a triumphant, minimalist way against a black background: “El país de los samuráis . . . Japón” (128). Another patriotic vignette flying the Japanese flag reveals that, following the example of Terui and his Sociedad Cooperativa Mexicano-Japonesa, the entire Nikkei community in Mexico renounced their right to the government’s compensation. Emphasizing the main idea in the manga, the reader is again reminded that this exemplary generosity strengthened the trust between both countries. Terui’s motto is then repeated: “Seremos el puente de unión entre México y Japón” (129).

Chapter five continues the same strategic, liminal positioning of the Nikkei community by celebrating the Mexican patriotism of one of their pioneers. Thus, when in 1911 Fuse gives a

lecture in Japan, a member of the audience notices the marks on his neck. After Fuse explains that he was attacked by Mexican bandits who hang him and almost killed him, another audience member argues that those cruel bandits should be machine gunned. To everyone's surprise, Fuse defends the bandits, who, in his view, not only do not hate the Nikkei but were simply marginal groups fighting for their own survival, exclaiming: "¡No les permito que ofendan a los ciudadanos de mi país, México!" (143). Proud of his cross-cultural identity, he now unashamedly calls Mexico his country, even when surrounded by a Japanese audience in Japan.

The closing chapter, focusing on the World War II period, emphasizes again the impressive altruism of Nikkei immigrants in Chiapas as well as the reciprocity of the local population. It also praises what Ueno and Sakuya consider the Mexican government's benevolent treatment of the Nikkeijin, as, unlike the government of Peru and those other Latin American countries, it refused to send their Japanese nationals to internment camps in the United States. Instead, the Nikkeijin allowed to live freely in Mexico City and Guadalajara, if they could afford it. *Los samuráis de México* then speculates that it was perhaps the Nikkei community's refusal to accept compensations after the Mexican Revolution that influenced the government's purported magnanimity.

The chapter also reveals that although a few Mexicans mocked the Nikkeijin during World War II, most treated them well. Among the latter, when the mayor of Escuintla calls Japan a country of savages in one of his speeches, an elderly lady throws a rock at him and accuses him of being ungrateful, rhetorically asking him: "¡Quién ayudó en el parto de tu hija!" "¿Quién construyó la escuela?" "¿Quién puso la luz?" "¿Quién puso el puente a la entrada del pueblo?" "¡Todo gracias a los japoneses!" (191). In the ensuing vignettes, an angry mob takes the mayor

away. We are then told that despite having lost all their possessions, the Nikkeijin behaved in an exemplary way and there was no turmoil.

Next, a Nikkeijin named Tadasu Tsuji sends a letter to the Mexican President offering to help in the new alphabetization campaign and reminding him that his community had donated schools in Chiapas. In response, the President, through Mexico's interior secretary Miguel Alemán, acknowledges their contributions and allows the seventy-three Nikkei families of the state of Chiapas to return home so that they can continue their alphabetization efforts. When Alemán conveys to Tsuji that he hopes to have partially offset their suffering, the latter reminds him that there have been more moments of joy than of suffering. Tsuji proceeds to explain how Nikkei and non-Nikkei had been living together in harmony and how there has been a process of transculturation by which the locals fraternally play sumo, cook *mochi* (balls of sweet rice dough) as well as *onigiri* (rice ball) and beans, and make fireworks. Finally, Tsuji declares that the Nikkeijin in Chiapas love Mexico and will always live there, because, for them, it is a land of eternal hope. A melodramatic vignette then shows Alemán shedding tears. In this way, the Nikkeijin fulfill the original teleology of attaining economic success, living in harmony with the locals, and contributing to Mexico's prosperity. In the happy ending's double-page drawing, we see how once the Nikkeijin return to Chiapas by train, they are welcomed by the locals and the army with a music band. They all hug and greet one another, expressing their fraternal love. The last illustration of the manga, before the bilingual farewell "*Gracias, México. Arigatou*" (218) depicts a road with a mountain in the background that is reminiscent of Mount Fuji.

In the acknowledgments, which appear at the end of the story, Ueno emphasizes the traditionally excellent relationship between Japan and Mexico, the first country to sign a treaty with Japan in equal terms and the first Latin American country to open a Japanese consulate

(1891). Thanks to the Enomoto cooperative, Ueno reminds us, the first Japanese-Spanish dictionary was published and the *Convenio de Libre Ejercicio del Médico, Dentista y Farmacéutico* was signed by the two countries. After World War II, the Mexican representative in the United Nations insisted, for the first time, on the incorporation of Japan to the international organization. In 1955, Mexico was the first country with which Japan signed a cultural agreement and in 2005, both countries signed an agreement of economic cooperation. Hoping that his manga may help the Nikkeijin learn about their ancestors' achievements, Ueno closes his acknowledgments by wishing that the story of the Enomoto group may one day be turned into a film.

Overall, *Los samuráis de México*, not surprisingly written by a diplomat (after interviewing one of the Enomoto pioneers and many of their descendants), celebrates the history of reciprocity and mutual benefit between Mexico and Japan (the Japanese term “*otagaisama*” [お互い様], meaning “each one looks out for the other” comes to mind). Its point of origin must be found in the Enomoto group's sustained and disinterested altruism. *Los samuráis de México* is also intended to educate today's Mexican Nikkeijin who, despite being proud of their ethnic origin, are, according to Ueno, often unaware of their ancestors' heroism. It implicitly encourages them to take advantage of their ethnocultural background and strategically liminal position to advance binational exchanges between their country and the ancestral homeland.

As seen, the manga recycles colonialist or imperialist imagery (pith helmet) terms (“Japanese spirit,” “virgin lands,” “natives,” “colonization”), even providing a completely different nuance to the word in the case of “the Japanese spirit,” in order to disguise a case of state-guided migration that was intimately linked to Japanese imperialism as Japanese

disinterested philanthropy in faraway lands on the other side of the planet. As a sort of *captatio benevolentiae*, Ueno and Sakuya, as well as several of the pioneering protagonists throughout the manga express their gratitude to Mexico—defined several times as a land of eternal hope—in spite of the fact that the pioneers were robbed and physically attacked during the Mexican Revolution, as well as dispossessed and forcibly displaced during World War II. Regardless of its apparent sincerity, this grateful attitude works as a rhetorical device to capture the goodwill of Mexican readers. And again, despite the manga’s testimonial traits and its re-creation of the immigrants’ relentless patriotism in the face of their government’s deception and betrayal, it is tempting to consider the paradoxical possibility that the Enomoto pioneers, as well as their contemporary peers in *Los samuráis de México*, may actually have been fleeing Meiji militarism, just like the real-life socialist and Christian Nikkeijin portrayed in Yamashita’s novel *Brazil-Marú*. Paradoxically, in a sort of Japanese Orientalism directed at Mexico, this manga describes Chiapas as a Japan-Mexico contact zone from the perspective of the Nikkei immigrants, but mediated by a Japanese national, living in Mexico, who works for the Japanese embassy and is, as a result, invested in enhancing—once again—the international image and reputation of his country. This hero-producing narrative, therefore, effectively mobilizes colonial vocabulary to praise the purportedly selfless altruism of a group of exemplary Japanese turned Mexican (“gone native”), who have learned to respect and love their host country.

Notes

¹ In this essay, I refer to Japanese people residing overseas and their descendants as “Nikkei” (adjective) or —“Nikkeijin” (singular and plural noun). Although, as Masterson and Funada-Classen explain, “The Japanese

government legally recognizes that people are of ‘Japanese descent’ if their [Japanese] lineage can be traced back three generations” (xi), in my research I use “Nikkei” or “Nikkeijin” to refer to all persons who have one or more ancestors from Japan or who define themselves as Nikkeijin. This term, which generally —refers to the Japanese overseas, has been increasingly used in Latin America since the late 1980s.

² Jerry García has explored how the Mexican government took advantage of the strained Japan-U.S. relations: “Although Mexico denied any alliance with the Japanese empire, it nevertheless used the deteriorating Japanese-US relations as leverage to antagonize the United States as an early form of diplomatic weapons of the weak” (187).

³ **The original in Japanese:** 夏草や兵どもが夢の跡.

⁴ The same can be said about communities of Chinese ancestry in Latin America, which have strategically positioned themselves as useful links between China and their countries.

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