

Japan

Mieko Nishida, *Diaspora and Identity: Japanese Brazilians in Brazil and Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 312 pages. Hardcover, \$68; paperback, \$28. ISBN: 9780824867935 (hardcover); 9780824867928 (paperback).

Diaspora and Identity: Japanese Brazilians in Brazil and Japan intends to rethink the traditional discourse of the historiography of Japanese immigration to Brazil, giving voice to those who actually lived the entire migration. It was not long ago that the first ship bringing Japanese immigrants to Brazil landed in Santos, filled with people who had to re-evaluate their lives and their own identity in the São Paulo coffee farms.

Attracted by misleading advertising, which said that Brazilian trees gave money when shaken, these immigrants arrived in Brazil with the desire to enrich themselves quickly, finding belatedly that they had been deceived by migration agents. With the idea of returning to Japan more and more distant, and facing the harsh reality of having to settle in a new country permanently, these immigrants laid the foundations for what would become the largest community of descendants of Japanese outside of Japan. Decades later, thousands of descendants of Japanese born in Brazil returned to Japan in one of the largest cases ever of return migration to work in Japanese factories.

These trajectories are beautifully portrayed by Nishida, confronting the experiences of these people with important topics that are present in the history of Japanese immigration to Brazil, such as the nation-state, identity, and ethnicity, among others. The author incorporates real-life testimonies that show how these people created and thought of their own identities after arriving in a new country full of challenges and prejudices. This book examines: who are the Japanese Brazilians besides those portrayed in the traditional historiography of Japanese immigration to Brazil?

In a comprehensive analysis that combines extensive historical research and interviews with informants in Japan and Brazil, Nishida brings the reader some of the key issues facing this transnational flow, focusing on the trajectories of those not contemplated by the history books and especially women. To hear the voice of the voiceless, she turned to the life stories of several Japanese immigrants and their descendants in a series of in-depth interviews conducted from 1997–2013 in São Paulo and Japan.

Presented in compassionate stories, Nishida shows us the complexity surrounding the “Japanese Brazilian community;” to achieve this she had to adopt a flexible approach to diaspora and cultural identity to cope with such diversity. In dealing with countless individuals whose personal narratives and trajectories are spread both in space (considering the physical distance between Japan and Brazil) and time (considering all the years of migration and the successive generations of Japanese and Japanese descendants), the author wisely departs from the crystallizing discourses about a homogeneous “Japanese Brazilian community” and a unique “Japanese Brazilian identity,” which are so often present in the academic literature both in Brazil and in Japan.

In this way, this book is structured in several periods of Japanese immigration to Brazil and Japanese Brazilian migration to Japan, intending to understand the processes of identity construction in this diasporic context. Foremost, the book focuses on the notions of immigration and diaspora as a way to introduce the tensions around the identity of the Japanese Brazilians in Brazil. The book also sheds light on several generations of Japanese immigrants and Japanese descendants, discussing the relation between the first immigrants and their identity perceptions in comparison with subsequent generations. Throughout the analysis, the author discusses identity not only in relation to generational differences but also to race, class, and gender. In this sense Nishida presents a very diverse scenario, presenting various identity perceptions relative to Japan in a mechanism marked by a series of prejudices that these Japanese and descendants suffer in Brazil.

Nishida also discusses the meaning of the experience of “being Brazilian in Japan,” considering the fact that most Japanese Brazilians have lived in the country for decades to work in Japanese factories and other manual labor jobs. In this transnational context, these individuals reevaluate their identities based on other identity markers and often perceive themselves as “Brazilians” for the first time. All these experiences, both those in Brazil and in Japan, are often traumatic, marking the lives of these people in unprecedented ways.

It is important to observe the centrality of phenotype in this matter. Nishida emphasizes its importance through ethnographical examples. Seen as “Japanese” in Brazil, Japanese Brazilians are confronted with identity discourses that embrace purity and Japanese ancestry as the guiding pole when considering their positionality in Brazil.

Nishida’s greatest contribution to the field is her gender analysis, through which one can still see the influence of the Japanese patriarchal family system on the life of Japanese and Japanese Brazilian women, something that is not well-observed in much other literature. This is noted in rules about marriage in particular. The preference for endogamy within this group prevented women from marrying Brazilians, while the reverse could be observed. Nishida shows that, with the social and economic rise of the Japanese Brazilians in Brazil, in the face of the absence of the ideal Japanese Brazilian marriage candidate, some Japanese Brazilian women focused instead on attaining formal education and looking after their parents rather than pursuing marriage. Her

analysis of both the historical data and the life stories of the interviewees brings light to a rich and complex scenario; these are brought together in a book that can be considered one of the best books portraying the Japanese immigration to Brazil and the Japanese Brazilian migration to Japan.

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