Deconstructing *Nikkeijin*

Politics of Representation among People of Japanese Ancestry Migrating from the Americas to Japan

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Since the mid-1980s and the so-called 'bubble economy', Japan has received an increasing number of migrants, including thousands of ethnic Japanese from the Americas – especially from Brazil, but also including people from Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay and the United States. These descendants of Japanese emigrants to the Americas challenge the paradigm of conflated national and racial identity in Japan, as foreign nationals with a shared Japanese background. Usually referred to as *Nikkeijin* in Japan, these migrants have varying levels of Japanese language ability and exposure to Japanese culture and society. In some ways they are considered close to 'Japanese' while in other ways they are not. This article interrogates the ways in which *Nikkeijin* are understood and defined in Japan, exploring, in particular, how the contemporary construction of *Nikkeijin* intersects with the notion of *Nihonjin* (ethnically Japanese citizens of Japan) and *dekasegi*, a term used originally to describe Japanese labour migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

During the *Meiji* period (1868–1912), Japan rapidly underwent a process of industrialisation and modernisation, including widespread land reform which resulted in the economic displacement of thousands of people, especially farmers in rural western Japan. In addition to internal migration and settlement in Japanese colonies in Korea and Manchuria, international migration became another solution favoured by the state. Beginning with 29,000 contract labourers to Hawaii in 1885, Japanese emigrants ventured to the South Pacific, Latin America, the Philippines and North America seeking a better future (Kikumura-Yano, 2002). Until the Second World War, the majority of those migrants aspired to return to Japan. But, as with most migrant populations, having families, developing social networks and economic challenges led many Japanese to settle outside Japan. Though there was limited migration to or from Japan during the Second World War, after the war emigration to South American countries, Brazil in particular, continued. Ethnic Japanese communities have developed around the world, now up to the sixth generation in Hawaii and Brazil. By 1993, Brazil and the United States (including Hawaii and the continent) were hosts to the largest ethnic Japanese populations outside Japan – at more than 1,300,000 (JICA, 2003, 12) and 760,000 (Kikumura-Yano, 2002, 29), respectively.

 ISSN 1753-9021 (print) 1753-903X (online) ©LUP

As the Japanese economy flourished in the mid-1980s, Japan became a place that attracted migrants, including the descendants of earlier Japanese emigrants. Labour migrants from neighbouring countries in Asia began to seek out unskilled work in Japan, and in an attempt to control the flow of movement – and, more importantly, its supposed ethnic homogeneity – the Japanese government revised its immigration law in 1990 to allow ethnic Japanese to obtain legal entry to Japan. The result of this '*Nikkeijin* visa', as it is colloquially known among migrants and scholars, was that ethnic Japanese from the Americas, especially Brazil, have been migrating to Japan in waves, providing Japanese businesses with a supply of unskilled labour. In addition to the thousands from Brazil, their counterparts from Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina, Canada and the United States have also been migrating to Japan. These descendants of Japanese emigrants, or *Nikkeijin*, as they are commonly referred to in Japan, include 316,967 registered Brazilian residents in Japan as of 2007 (out of a total population of 2,152,973 registered foreigners) (Ministry of Justice of Japan, 2008). Most research on *Nikkeijin* in Japan focuses on the experiences of Brazilians, the majority of whom take on unskilled jobs in factories (Lesser, 2003; Linger, 2001; Roth, 2002; Takezawa, 2002; Tsuda, 2003; Yamanaka, 2000).

While recognising the importance of examining the majority Brazilian *Nikkeijin* migrants, this article discusses more broadly how *Nikkeijin*, as a social category, has been constructed in Japan based on the image of migrant workers. We do this based on original research conducted in Japan consisting primarily of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analysis of ethnic media. All of our research looks at ethnic Japanese foreign migrants in Japan, though we use different methodologies to study different populations. Drawing from the rich data collected from four different studies, we offer a discussion of how *Nikkeijin* have been constructed and how they construct themselves in Japanese society. Hugo Córdova Quero's research, based on multi-site fieldwork in seven parishes and more than 50 qualitative interviews, investigates how interaction within the Roman Catholic Church in Japan allows Brazilian *Nikkeijin* to reify and negotiate their 'Brazilian' identity *vis-à-vis* the imposition of the category *Nikkeijin* by the larger Japanese society. Based on over 50 qualitative interviews with Americans of Japanese ancestry living in the Tokyo area, Jane H. Yamashiro's research examines how Japanese Americans reconstruct their racial and ethnic identities in Japan through the process of their adjustment to Japanese social categories and a notion of Japaneseness that greatly differs from that to which they were previously exposed and socialised in the United States. Mélanie Perroud explores how Japan and access to the Japanese territory are mobilised by Brazilians to support varied migration projects. She has con-

ducted over 50 interviews with mobile Brazilians in Japan, Brazil and Australia. Alberto Fonseca Sakai has analysed the personal testimonies of about 30 South American long-term resident workers in Japan from a narrative approach, contrasting these stories with the dominant discourses of the local ethnic media.

This article contributes to extant work on *Nikkeijin* in Japan in two ways: first, our approach is distinctive in that it does not take the *Nikkeijin* category for granted – rather, we discuss the way in which it is constructed; and second, we employ research on multiple nationality and language groups to reach our conclusions. As foreign nationals with a shared Japanese background, the descendants of Japanese emigrants challenge the paradigm of conflated national and racial identity in Japan. Contributing to the ways in which *Nikkeijin* have been discussed by other scholars, we interrogate the ways in which this category is understood and defined in Japan, exploring, in particular, how the contemporary construction of *Nikkeijin* intersects with the notion of *Nihonjin* (ethnically Japanese citizens of Japan) and *dekasegi*, a term used originally to describe Japanese labour migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In drawing from multiple case studies and research projects, we deconstruct the category of *Nikkeijin* and show how its meaning changes according to the context of its usage. Examining *Nikkeijin* within the context of Japanese identity politics as well as migrants' self-identifications provides insight into how Japanese national identity is constructed not only against racially 'other' 'foreigners', but in the case of *Nikkeijin* also intersects with issues of language, citizenship, class and religion. Throughout this article we use both *Nikkeijin* and *Nikkei* to refer to descendants of Japanese emigrants. While the term *Nikkeijin* is used in Japanese society, the term *Nikkei* is more commonly used by ethnic Japanese communities in the Americas.

Deconstructing the category of *Nikkeijin*

On becoming *Nikkeijin*

John Lie has proposed an elegant translation of the Japanese term *Nikkeijin*: 'ex-Japanese' (2001, 146). Such a translation has the advantage of combining both the contemporary expression of anteriority ('ex-' as 'what formerly was') and the Latin and Greek preposition for origin ('ex-' as 'emerging from'). The multiple layers of meaning the translation offers conveniently overlap the meanings of the Japanese suffix '-kei', without impacting on its ambiguity. Just as ex-Japanese implies a variety of relationships with Japanese, *Nikkeijin* suggests

a variety of relationships with *Nihonjin*, as people born to Japanese parents and raised in Japan are called in Japanese.

Literally, *Nikkeijin* means 'person of Japanese ancestry', though this never seems to include Japanese nationals in Japan (Roth, 2002, 23). The frontier between having Japanese origin and being Japanese is not openly defined, although it is usually taken for granted that such a frontier indeed exists. In daily practice, there is no obvious criterion for determining who is a *Nikkeijin* and who is a 'Japanese' or *Nihonjin*. Nationality is insufficient, as Japanese citizens who were born and raised in Brazil, Peru, the United States and the like are usually taken to be *Nikkeijin* by Japanese citizens who were born and raised in Japan.

In Japan, relations between the categories of *Nihonjin* and *Nikkeijin* seem to have been conceived as a continuum, drawn from the former to the latter and beyond. Because acquiring *Nikkeijin* status means moving farther from *Nihonjin* along this continuum, *Nikkeijin* is associated with being less than Japanese. This lays the ground for unifocal representations of *Nikkeijin* as loss, in which gains are widely ignored. *Nikkeijin* living in Japan often complain that not only are they deemed insufficiently Japanese but expressions of their national identity (their US or Latin American affiliations) are also met with suspicion: how could one be a proper Brazilian, for instance, with a Japanese background? Since what is at stake in such representations is *Japaneseness*, legitimacy to set the defining criteria is on the side of the *Nihonjin*.

Legal recognition of Japanese ancestry does not ensure social recognition as 'Japanese'. This is the case for long-term expatriates, and for children who have spent time abroad. There is a special expression to describe the latter – *kikokushijo*, which literally means 'a child who returned to his/her home country' – and there is an impressive educational apparatus to bring them support and help their reinsertion (see Goodman, 2003).

Until the 1990 reform of the Japanese immigration law and the influx of Latin Americans of Japanese ancestry, multiple and often conflicting representations of Japaneseness coexisted in geographically separate societies. In the case of the Americas, creolised versions of the Japanese words *Issei* ('first generation') and *Nisei* ('second generation') are frequently used to designate the members of the Japanese community. Furthermore, one did not make the transition from *Nihonjin* to *Nikkeijin*, but from *Nihonjin* to *Issei*, and this change of status was not deemed irreversible. Above all, the distinction between *Nihonjin* and *Issei* is situational and relational: one can only become *Issei* when there exists a second generation, assimilated in the country they were born in, to look on the *Issei* as the origin of their family's establishment in the country. In this context, it was

expected that if an *Issei* were to return to Japan, she or he would resume her or his former status as *Nihonjin*.

The increasing migration of *Nikkeijin* to Japan has meant that multiple constructions of Japaneseness are being brought into contact with one another (Yamashiro, 2008). More specifically, this means that the distinctions between *Nihonjin* and *Nikkeijin* and Japanese representations and definitions of the previously faraway latter group are being challenged by the self-representations and identities of Brazilian, Peruvian, North American and other migrants.

Generational distinctions

Before examining how *Nikkeijin* themselves identify in Japan, we must first look at the larger social context for their representations. Perhaps one of the most significant ways in which *Nikkeijin* are currently constructed in Japan is in relation to current laws. Despite the continued multiplicity and fluidity of definitions of *Nikkeijin*, one particular definition has been granted significance by its institutionalisation. The Japanese government has established two legal visa categories ('Spouse or Child of Japanese National' and 'Long-term Resident') and both allow for unrestricted work activities.

The Japanese administrative definition of who may obtain such visas emphasises the importance of generational distinction. *Nikkeijin* up to the third generation – those who can prove they have at least one grandparent who was a Japanese citizen – can apply for a long-term visa based on this special status as a descendant. This contrasts with more open definitions of *Nikkeijin* that exist in many communities outside Japan; with goals not of regulation but of community inclusion, many *Nikkeijin* communities see anyone of any part Japanese ancestry as a community member. Different perspectives, thus, reflect different motivations and goals for defining a population as, and creating boundaries around, *Nikkeijin*.

An arbitrary line is drawn between third- and fourth-generation *Nikkeijin* – designating them as those who may or may not legally work in Japan. The visa requirements symbolically exclude the latter from claiming state recognition as *Nikkeijin*. It should be noted that the recently introduced obligation to submit a certificate on the state of one's criminal record implies that a misdemeanour could abolish one's status as a *Nikkeijin*, or at least one's right to be formally recognised as such.

The administrative choice to favour some generations over others has contributed to a certain *essentialisation* of generations outside Japan, each generation corresponding to a degree of Japaneseness. In recognising some Japanese

descendants as kin and ignoring others, the Japanese state has acted as a legitimating authority where Japaneseness is concerned. But generations have also come to signify the practical ability to be mobile and work temporarily in Japan. In this instrumental dimension, one's 'generation' can be reinvented as an asset. For example, in several Brazilian community newspapers published in Japan, the personal columns feature 'Male Sansei' or 'Female Nisei' advertisements: generations can also be an argument for love and partnership.

The importance of examining multiple representations of people of Japanese descent in Japan resides in the agency that people and communities exercise in order to make their daily life as well as their identities understood. In doing so, they underscore their heritage and particular experiences as standpoints for identity politics in broader Japanese society whether it be through local governments, mass media, religious organisations, NGOs, labour associations or everyday life. We will inquire into these topics in order to offer a broad perspective on how the politics of representation of people of Japanese descent are impacting on Japanese society.

Resisting Nikkeijin identification: the case of the Roman Catholic Portuguese Mass

Religious organisations are one context in which people resist using the term *Nikkeijin*. More broadly speaking, whenever a migratory path has been forged in history, both religious beliefs and practices have been present (Hirschman, 2003). Neither *Nikkeijin* in Japan nor their ancestors in the Americas are an exception to this phenomenon. Resembling the religious map back in the Americas, varied religious beliefs can be found among *Nikkeijin* in Japan. While the majority of *Nikkeijin* – specifically Japanese Brazilians – are Catholics, other Christian denominations and religions are also practised. After migrating to Japan, most *Nikkeijin* have retained their respective religious traditions, Brazilian and Peruvian *Nikkeijin* incorporation in the Catholic Church in Japan as perhaps the most significant example (Córdova Quero, 2007b).

Religious spaces such as the Roman Catholic Church in Japan constitute places of empowerment where *Nikkeijin* have the opportunity to interact and network with Japanese. At the same time, they are also places where the negotiation of Brazilianness *vis-à-vis* the imposition of the category *Nikkeijin* by Japanese occurs. Although Japanese people refer to them as *Nikkeijin*, in the context of the ethnic Masses (those performed in a language other than Japanese) at the Roman Catholic Church, the terms 'Brazilian', 'Peruvian' or other nationality labels are preferred by the people themselves. The terms *Nikkeijin* and *dekasegi* are not only ignored, but are also actively resisted. If individuals

want to stress a connection to Japan, they simply state that they have 'Japanese ancestry', and the terms *Nikkeijin* and *dekasegi* are generally avoided. Generational categories such as *nisei* or *sansei* are only mentioned when an individual is purposely questioned about them.

If at the beginning of *Nikkeijin* migration to Japan, the role of the Catholic Church was only as a place of socialisation, that situation may have changed. Mira, reporting on the case of Brazilian *Nikkeijin*, states that today spirituality is gaining importance (2003, 149). Carvalho has also noted that many Brazilian *Nikkeijin* have joined the church more actively in Japan, while prior to their migration they were only nominal Catholics (Carvalho, 2003, 102). Research has shown that many Brazilian *Nikkeijin* in the Kanto region (Tokyo and surrounding prefectures) also convey this experience (Córdova Quero, 2007a), suggesting that it may be the same for *Nikkeijin* from other parts of the Americas.

The reconstruction in Japan of prior religious beliefs and practices from the Americas reflects the complexities of transnational identity formation. That is, at the same time that migrants attend churches in Japan and may be socially categorised by Japanese in Japanese societal terms, they are reconstructing national identities that resist these labels. In this way, the interaction between South American *Nikkeijin* and Japanese is a complicated one. In many ways, it could be said that South American *Nikkeijin* Catholics, although a sizeable population, are 'visitors' in their own church. In many places they are not part of the parish councils or the diocesan councils. In the few places where South American *Nikkeijin* have a representative, it is merely a role of transmitting back to the Brazilian, Peruvian or other South American community the decisions that have already been taken by the Japanese. In this sense, gaining political representation within the Catholic Church represents a goal and challenge for South American *Nikkeijin*. These tensions encourage South American *Nikkeijin* to resist the categorisation imposed by Japanese by strengthening their national identities.

Nikkeijin self-representations as dekasegi

The *dekasegi* movement

To most Japanese people, *Nikkeijin* have been a distant population. But from the 1990s, *Nikkeijin* became more visible in Japanese society with the emergence of the so-called *dekasegi* movement. The term *dekasegi* may be understood as 'temporary migrant worker'. In Japan, it was used historically in reference to people from impoverished rural areas, mostly farmers, who were displaced from their

home towns in order to earn a living. Destinations included the industrial centres of Japan such as Tokyo and Osaka, as well as foreign countries such as the United States, Brazil or Peru. Following the example of their ancestors, ethnic Japanese migrants from Latin America defined themselves as *dekasegi*. It was that term which began to bring cohesion to several different national communities of *Nikkeijin*.

The catalyst for the large-scale migration of *Nikkeijin* to Japan was the reform of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (hereinafter referred to as the Immigration Control Act) by the Japanese Parliament on 8 December 1989 (Sassen, 1998, 60).[1] While this law sharply reduced the immigration of South East Asians and Middle Easterners to Japan, it also facilitated the migration of *dekasegi* from Latin America (predominantly Brazilians and Peruvians) on the grounds of ethnicity. The benefit for the Japanese labour market was that *dekasegi* offered a low-wage, low-skilled, temporary labour force. But based on ethnic grounds, *Nikkeijin* were seen as not disrupting the homogeneity of Japanese society and were preferred to other migrants. The discourse of Japanese uniqueness or *Nihonjinron* conveys the message that Japanese society is mono-ethnic and monocultural (Befu, 2001; Yoshino, 1992). Through education and mass media, this self-perception of Japaneseness is reinforced. Lie also states that the supposed homogeneity of Japan is juxtaposed against the heterogeneity of foreigners, resulting in a dichotomy where 'inside denotes simplicity and purity, [and] outside represents complexity and pollution' (2003, 83).

According to Shipper (2002, 42), in the Japanese foreign work hierarchy, *Nikkeijin* are below *zainichi gaikokujin* (Japan-born Koreans and Chinese), but above other non-Japanese unskilled temporary workers such as Filipino, Vietnamese and Iranians, among others. This indicates that foreign workers in Japan are hierarchically organised according to 'race' and 'nationality'. Despite their ancestry, soon after their arrival to Japan, many *dekasegi* suffered discrimination because of their poor Japanese language skills or social and cultural behaviours that differed from the expectations in Japanese society. In this sense, *dekasegi* are considered to be *gaikokujin* (foreigners) and are sometimes discriminated against in social interactions in both workplaces and neighbourhoods. Interestingly, when Japanese people encounter North American *Nikkeijin*, they are often viewed and treated more positively than South American *Nikkeijin*. This may be due to their social positions in Japan as primarily white-collar workers or to the social and cultural capital attributed to native English-speaking North Americans. In any case, it is clear that not only are categories of 'blood', 'race'

1. The legislation was passed by the Diet in 1989 but enacted in 1990.

and ethnicity taken into account in Japan, but also that these categories intersect with language, culture and national identity.

In Japan, *dekasegi* usually work in small and medium-sized factories, in jobs that are known as the 'Three K', coming from the Japanese words *kiken* (dangerous), *kitanai* (dirty) and *kitsui* (tiring). In Japan, *dekasegi* take jobs that are refused by Japanese nationals but are necessary to the development and functioning of the Japanese industrial market. *Dekasegi* populations in Japan were originally concentrated around the industrial areas of the prefectures of Aichi, Shizuoka, Gunma and Nagano. Today, it is possible to find *Nikkeijin* in every city and rural area of the country, and a growing number of them live and work in the Tokyo megalopolis. While the dispersal of South American *Nikkeijin* is due to their particular work and living arrangements, North American *Nikkeijin* are concentrated in more urban areas, such as Tokyo, due to their occupations as white-collar professionals (e.g. lawyers, businesspeople), English teachers, and college and language students.

According to Tajima and Yamawaki (2003), some scholars consider the period from the mid-1980s to 1990 to be the first wave of the *dekasegi* movement, or at least its prologue (Higuchi, 2003; Sasaki, 2000). Since this was before the reform of the Immigration Control Act, most of these early *dekasegi* had retained their Japanese citizenship, being born either in Japan or to Japanese parents abroad. Since 1990, however, there has been a generational shift: the migrant population to Japan includes second-, third- and even fourth-generation *Nikkeijin*.

The majority of *dekasegi* are from Brazil. Brazilian *Nikkeijin* entrants to Japan peaked between 1989 and 2001 at about 250,000 people (Higuchi and Tanno, 2003, 34). Since then, the influx of migrants from Brazil has consistently risen. As in the case of other migrants from Latin America, currently not all of the migrants from Brazil are of Japanese ancestry, as some spouses are from other ethnic groups. In the same way, not all migrants from Latin America are unskilled workers, as some of them or their spouses are university students or, albeit in relatively small numbers, highly skilled or white-collar professionals. The number of Peruvian *Nikkeijin* is lower than that of their counterparts from Brazil (Takenaka, 2003). There are 59,696 Peruvian *Nikkeijin* registered in Japan (Ministry of Justice of Japan, 2008). The numbers of Argentinean *Nikkeijin*, Paraguayan *Nikkeijin* and other *Nikkeijin* from Latin America remain even lower than that of the Peruvian *Nikkeijin*. North American *Nikkeijin* are not usually seen as *dekasegi* because of the aforementioned class dimension of this term. In addition to working as professionals and teachers, many are also participants on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, an international work programme that brings college graduates to Japan.

The ways in which South American migrants have asserted *dekasegi* identities as an alternative to *Nikkeijin* categorisation can be seen through analysis of the ethnic press in Japan. To understand better how individuals negotiate their social categorisation, the next section explores articulations by individual migrants about who they are and how they want to be perceived in Japan.

The ethnic press

The *dekasegi* category has been adopted by contemporary South American *Nikkeijin* migrating to Japan. Though some people believe that the recent usage of *dekasegi* since the 1980s is reminiscent of the earlier, negative image of the 'loser' who has to abandon his or her family in search of a job, this is not necessarily so. The contemporary usage of the term *dekasegi* is not exclusively negative, and in many cases it expresses a new kind of identity: one that does not refer only to class, ethnicity or nationality, and is not specifically grounded in just one of these catgories, but, rather, incorporates all of them. For many workers, 'coming from Latin America and working in Japan' is what it means 'to be' a *dekasegi*. It can have positive or negative connotations depending on each person's perceptions and expectations. Since the negative connotations have been discussed, it is important to point out how the term is becoming less stigmatised. First, many *dekasegi* have actually saved enough money in Japan to be able to realise their objectives back home (running a business, repaying loans, etc.) (Sasaki, 1996; Sasaki, 2000, 37, 49–63). They are now 'winners', at least in economic terms, compared to many of their compatriots who stayed at home. Some have helped their family accumulate wealth or education by sending large remittances while staying in Japan. In addition, many families settle in Japan (whether voluntarily or *de facto*), so that being a *dekasegi* has acquired more of a sense of community identity and is less associated with merely temporary residence in Japan, as it was in the original usage. Certainly, there are many people who still reject this word, but most of the South American *Nikkeijin* migrants would not hesitate to define themselves as *dekasegi*, and even to affirm that they have an emergent and differentiated (sub)culture (Ishi, 2003).

This change in the perception of the *dekasegi* experience is very important in terms of the migrants' sense of community. As in other migrants' experiences around the world (Fortier, 2003) we have observed a range of identity politics taking place in relation to the 'narratives of *Nikkei* migration'. One way to understand this process is to examine how the ethnic press has been defining its community/audience. *International Press* is a Tokyo-based company that launched Japan's first weekly newspapers in Portuguese (1991) and Spanish

(1994) (Ishi, 1996; Shiramizu, 2004). Because of this, Brazilians and Peruvians are the most represented in the '*dekasegi* ethnic media' in Japan, though other populations are also represented.

There was a significant shift in the vocabulary of the Portuguese version between 1994 and 1995. Before that time, there was profuse utilisation of *Nikkei* as a synonym for the community, while afterwards the preferred term was *comunidade brasileira* (Brazilian community). This shift was not radical, and the use of the latter did not mean the disappearance of the former. The change in vocabulary is subtle yet significant: the use of ethnic criteria (a *Nikkei* community, formed by descendants of Japanese people in contrast to 'pure' Japanese people) is replaced by more national/cultural criteria (people of Brazilian citizenship, including *Nikkeijin* and non-*Nikkeijin*).

A prime example of the former ethnic point of view is the first edition of the Portuguese newspaper, whose editorial made links among the then recently emerged *dekasegi* movement and the experience of Japanese migrants to Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, there was a clearly ethnically identified community of Brazilian *Nikkeijin*, who were coming to Japan in large numbers in order to work for a short period of time. The newspapers aimed to help these people cope with the language and cultural difficulties they might face, providing news from their home country at the same time. At first, news from Brazil and other Latin American countries were the main stories. After some time, news concerning the community in Japan was added in, but it was considered an extension of the *Nikkei* communities in Latin America. A clear example is seen in a letter sent by a Peruvian reader:

> I am a Peruvian nisei female. [...] In your newspaper there is a section called 'Colonia Brasil', where you present articles about Brazilian niseis that have earned merits. Perhaps it could be expanded and report the experiences of Argentinian, Peruvian or Bolivian niseis, since, regardless of our nationality, our roots are the same. International Press (Portuguese), 29 August 1992, 2

The Spanish version of the newspaper had not yet started at that time, but because of the closeness of the Spanish and Portuguese languages, a large number of Latin Americans from countries other than Brazil were avid readers. Here the word *nisei* is used to refer to *Nikkeijin* regardless of nationality. Thus, it is clear that this reader considers *International Press* to be a newspaper for people who have the same ethnic 'roots', that is, Latin Americans of Japanese descent.

Articles published from 1995 onwards show this premise of 'ethno-raced' community changes, and references to the community are preferably expressed in terms of nationality, i.e. *brasileiro* (Brazilian) or *comunidade brasileira* (Brazilian

community). The use of the term *Nikkei* is gradually relegated to those cases when ethnicity is relevant for a concrete article or news – for example, something related to *Nikkei* traditions or visa-related news.

This change of editing policy in the categorisation of the community could be well explained from a quantitative approach, since some surveys have revealed an increase of non-*Nikkeijin* members among Brazilians in Japan towards the end of the 1990s. Given that statistics show that 19.6 per cent per cent of the so-called Brazilian *Nikkeijin* do not actually have Japanese ancestry or are racially mixed (HICE, 2003) or that more than half of the (third-generation) *Nikkeijin* are racially mixed (Kajita et al., 2005), then it seems natural that the perception of the community would also change.

However, posing the question in terms of 'community perception' does not sufficiently express the implications of the change in the categorisation of the community. This type of shift in vocabulary also reflects a change in the personal perceptions and narratives of individual members of the community (Plummer, 1995). Thus, from a narrative point of view, what changed in that period was not just the 'ethnic' configuration of the community, but the idea of *Nikkeijin*-ness itself (Fonseca Sakai, 2006). The category of *Nikkeijin*, until then socially preserved as a historical/cultural heritage and personally experienced through the narratives of the 'return to homeland', started to waver in that period.

To understand this, we need to consider not only the increase in non-*Nikkei* members, but also other factors. In *International Press* issue number 210 (1 October 1995) there was an editorial entitled 'The so-called *Nikkei* identity?', which states that the 'profile [of the *Nikkeijin* in Japan] will suffer alterations' due to a decrease in education level and the continuation of manual labour, which contrasts with the prototype of the well educated middle-class *Nikkeijin* in Brazil.

This situation has helped to challenge the ethnic ('*Nikkeijin*') identity and to construct a national ('Brazilian', 'Peruvian') or pan-national ('*dekasegi*') identity. In these terms, the Spanish version of *International Press* has held a more radical posture since its launch than its sister Portuguese paper. Given the international position of the Spanish language, one of the objectives in the beginning was to target Japanese language students, but now its aim is to serve as an 'active community press', in the words of the editor.

Although targeted at Spanish-speaking readers in general, most of the news and articles currently relate to the biggest national community among them, that is the Peruvians. Contrary to the situation of the Brazilians, there is a more visible and recognised rate of undocumented Peruvian workers who have entered Japan (Takenaka, 2003). Because of this, the Spanish version of *Inter-*

national Press has actively placed the issues of identity and illegality to the forefront, defending the human rights of undocumented workers and their families, always trying to highlight stories of those people who are working honestly in Japan and are in danger of being deported. However, the issue of '*Nikkeijin* identity' was also a relatively taboo subject for a long time.

An article published on 21 July 2001 raised discussion on this topic. It was an interview with the eminent professor of Latin American History, Toshio Yanagida. The content of the article was not so polemical. It was the title, decided on by the editorial board, which created the controversy. 'To be *Nikkei* is to be nothing', a phrase that also appeared on the front page, made waves and led to an overwhelming response from readers. While this phrase was indeed used by Yanagida during his interview, in context it is clear that his intention was not to offend *Nikkeijin*:

> So, what is it to be a nikkei? In fact, to feel that one is a nikkei is to feel nothing, since being nikkei is not an identity. In my opinion, these people are Peruvians who have customs or culture of Japanese origin. International Press (Spanish), 21 July 2001, 7

The reaction of the readers was fast and heated. Opinions were divided, some critical, others supportive, and the newspaper used those messages in its pages, creating a vivid epistolary debate for several weeks. This is one example of a critical letter:

> This affirmation, made in such a casual way (supposedly reaffirmed and in a way supported by non-nikkei intellectuals) attempts against the identity of millions of nikkei in the western hemisphere, with different nationalities but with a history, values and many other things in common.
> International Press (Spanish), 28 July 2001, 2

The newspaper tried to give space to differing opinions from its readers. The following extract is from a letter written by a woman who supported Yanagida's statements. It is noticeable that, according to the name that it was signed with, the reader is a *Nikkeijin* herself:

> It was the time for many nikkeis, who believe they're the best, to be told their own truths. I witnessed how those nikkeis make impossible the life of thousands of latinos that are working here. Just because they don't have slanted eyes [sic], they suffer many abuses. I'll never be able to understand the behaviour of these people. International Press (Spanish), 28 July 2001, 2

The chief editor of the Spanish version of the newspaper recognises that this and other articles were quite problematic. However, it could be said that nowadays there is a consensus of solidarity among Peruvians of different ethnicities. In the last few years, the newspaper has been able to provide, more often, stories

of fraternity in the community, compared to the generalised confrontation that seemed to pervade the early years. An article published in the 6 November 2004 issue showed the testimony of a neighbourhood in Chiba prefecture where foreign residents –which included not only *Nikkei* and non-*Nikkei* Latin Americans, but also people from the Philippines and other countries – decided to organise a fund-raising event for a Peruvian neighbour who had been arrested by the immigration authorities. This situation would have been unimaginable a few years previously.

In a Spanish speech contest promoted by the newspaper in October 2005, some young *Nikkei* participants gave speeches related to the problems faced by undocumented workers. 'Despite being still very young', said one of the winners, a Peruvian high school student, 'I have learnt a lot from these experiences. Because I learnt to consider the problems others face as my own problems' (*International Press*, Spanish version, 31 October 2005). Young generations seem to follow the path of solidarity, going beyond the borders of ethnicity. How these changes in *Nikkei* identity fit into the broader Japanese society remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the competing ways in which *Nikkeijin* are constructed and discussed in Japan. Drawing on four different research projects, we show how the category of *Nikkeijin* (1) overlaps with yet is distinct from the category of *Nihonjin*; and (2) overlaps with yet is distinct from the category of *dekasegi*. While *Nikkeijin* often refers to the contemporary migration of ethnically Japanese South Americans, it has a more specific class dimension whereby it refers to factory workers in Japan, sometimes linking or conflating their experiences with those of their Japanese emigrant ancestors – the original *dekasegi*.

Contemporary *dekasegi*, by migrating to, not from, Japan, are also reconstructing their experiences in their own terms. Through the examination of ethnic media, we observe how they are redefining what it means to be *dekasegi*, and in doing so, exercising agency in relation to their own processes. The multiple and dynamic usages of these terms to describe ethnic Japanese migrants to Japan reflect the fluidity and contextuality of identity formation. These people, who challenge narrow definitions of Japaneseness, offer possibilities for thinking about how we label and categorise ourselves and others, and how migration entails encounters between multiple schemas of social categorisation. By focus-

ing in our analysis on the *Nikkeijin* and *dekasegi* labels applied to populations of Japanese ancestry from the Americas to Japan, we contribute to future research, especially through studying *Nikkeijin* populations case by case according to national background and how that impacts on their options for incorporation into Japanese society and culture.

The main contribution of our analysis resides in the fact of questioning the assumption of the universal validity of labels applied to populations who, despite sharing common ancestry, are by-products of different backgrounds, different historical processes and disparate geographical locations.

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