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Rebecca Riger Tsurumi. *The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian Literature*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2012. 313 pages. ISBN 978-1-55753-607-5

Rebecca Riger Tsurumi's *The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian*

Literature is the first book focusing on the representation of the Japanese in Peruvian fiction and literature. In particular, it looks at literature published by both Nikkei and non-Nikkei Peruvian authors from 1996 to 2005. Although there is not a clear thesis presented in the introduction, it is the topic, the image of the Japanese in Peruvian literature, which logically provides a certain coherence to the study. She blends self-representation in the poetry of the Nisei authors José Watanabe and Doris Moromisato with the representation by majority Peruvian authors, such as Mario Vargas Llosa, Mario Bellatin, and others. The book closes with an appendix containing excerpts of valuable interviews (both in person and by correspondence) to six authors whose works are analyzed in the book: Miguel Francisco Gutiérrez Correa, Carmen Ollé Nava, Pilar Dughi Martínez, Mario Bellatin, José Watanabe, and Doris Moromisato. These interviews are particularly interesting because two of the authors, Dughi and Watanabe, died in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

The first two chapters are introductory. Chapter 1 presents the socio-historical context as well as the “push” and “pull” factors of Japanese emigration to Latin America. Interestingly, Riger Tsurumi defines the contrasts between Chinese and Japanese workers. Then, she moves on to the conditions surrounding the Japanese community before, during, and immediately after World War II, reaching to the present period. The author briefly points out, among other issues and events, anti-Japanese sentiment during the mid-1930s, anti-Asian stereotypes, the sacking of

May 13, 1940, reverse migration to Japan, and the election of the first president of Japanese descent.

The second chapter surveys, in dialogue with Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1978) and Araceli Tinajero's 2003 *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano*, Modernista approaches to the "Orient" in the works of Julián del Casal, Rubén Darío, José Martín, José Juan Tablada, José María Eguren, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, and Arturo Ambrogi. It also considers the image of the Orient in Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz, in light of Julia Jushigian's 1991 study *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz and Sarduy*. The rest of the chapters analyze contemporary Peruvian works, often comparing their fictional Japanese characters with real-life Japanese and Peruvian cultures.

In chapter 3, perhaps the most developed and interesting in the book, Riger Tsurumi analyzes Fushía's character in Mario Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde*. She describes him as one of the earliest, fully developed Japanese characters in Peruvian literature, the epitome of the Japanese outsider, and one of the few Nikkei protagonists in Peruvian literature. The author, contrasting the novel with Vargas Llosa's *Historia secreta de una novela*, establishes the connections between the fictional Fushía and the real-life Tushía, who inspired the novel. She affirms that "It is his rebellious temperament that attracts attention because it flies in the face of the traditional stereotype of the Japanese in Latin America as a reticent, hard-working, respectful person who keeps a low profile and maintains close ties with the Japanese community" (63). Riger Tsurumi goes on to point out how Fushía's lack of family allegiance and concern for his first son are atypical of Japanese culture, and how, in her view, the character has internalized Peruvian *criollo* society's prejudice against indigenous people. By contrast, she considers the

protagonist's ability to save money from an early age a Japanese trait. The chapter, then, delineates Fushía's psychological evolution, particularly after he starts facing mortality.

The fourth chapter explores the personalities of Japanese secondary characters in Miguel Gutiérrez Correa's fragment of a novel "Matavidela," covering the sacking of a Japanese family's business during the 1940s: "when the Japanese are threatened, they model their behavior on Bushido, the unwritten code of the samurai. Mr. and Mrs. Izumi summon this internal cultural response when the police raid their store and threaten their family" (85-86). The courageous Japanese man in this story, Mr. Izumi, is a positive example of a Japanese male character, who stands up to unjustified aggression by his Peruvian neighbors. Following the Bushido, once he is arrested, Izumi "recovers his composure with an impassive expression on his face" (Riger Tsurumi 198). The chapter also analyzes Alfredo Bryce Echenique's short story "Muerte de Sevilla en Madrid," where a nervous and awkward Japanese character, Achikawa, struggles to communicate with members of his group in Madrid and particularly with a Peruvian named Sevilla. According to Riger Tsurumi, "Bryce uses some prewar, physical stereotypes of the typical Japanese tourist, commonly accepted in the West, to poke fun at Achikawa" (88). In the end, we learn that Achikawa, first the object of ridicule, turns out to be noble, well intended, and kind young man.

The fifth chapter analyzes Carmen Ollé's novel *Las dos caras del deseo*, where a Nikkei secondary character, Eiko, is first described, in a traditional, stereotypical way, as a fragile and refined young woman who enjoys writing poetry, only to reveal, later in the plot, how she uses her sensuality to seduce and manipulate Ada and other women. Eiko experiments with heterosexual and lesbian love, alcohol and drugs, which, according to Riger Tsurumi, shows "her independence from her parents and other authority figures" (110). Overall, the author adds, she is

a selfish, aggressive, treacherous and disloyal character, who gives a very negative image of Japanese females. Although, according to Riger Tsurumi, Eiko is among the most developed female characters of Japanese origin in Peruvian literature, she still considers her a psychologically underdeveloped character whom we rarely hear speak. The author keenly adds that there is no female equivalent to the character of Fushía in Peruvian literature: “The next logical step in Peruvian narrative would be to create a believable Japanese female protagonist who would tell her own story in her own words” (Riger Tsurumi 111).

Chapter six is dedicated to Pilar Dughi’s novel *Puñales escondidos*, where the protagonist, Fina Artadi, learns, at a Japanese literature in a workshop, how to confront her own problems and reexamine her life. According to Riger Tsurumi, through the study of male protagonists who face moral dilemmas in these four works of post-World War II Japanese literature, the Fina Artadi reconsiders her own views on marriage, family, religion, relationships, death, and modernization: “After a lifetime of quiet submission, Dughi’s overlooked, middle-aged heroine chooses a daring course in which she commits a crime that she believes will guarantee her a more secure future” (128). Riger Tsurumi inserts, in her analysis of this novel, biographical information about Pilar Dughi as well as her responses in a personal interview with her. In this chapter, perhaps the analysis of the Japanese narratives read by the character should have taken more of a secondary role with respect to the study of Dughi’s text itself.

The seven chapter is also one of the strongest in the book. It looks at the treatment of seemingly Japanese characters and places in Mario Bellatin’s short novels *El jardín de la señora Murakami* and *Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción*, in order to examine the his reflections about literature, artistic creation, and the act of writing. Again drawing from Bellatin’s responses in her personal interview with him, Riger Tsurumi contextualizes these novels with biographical

information on the author. Then, she points out passages where Bellatin reflects what she considers authentic aspects of Japanese culture (filial piety, arranged marriages, religious concepts, appreciation of nature, strong work ethic, avoiding controversial topics in social situations) and others where he invents the allusions. More importantly, Bellatin's writing style itself shares Japanese traits: "clear, concise language, avoiding dialogue and weighty descriptions" (150). Overall, Riger Tsurumi considers the characterization of Japanese male characters in these two novels as decidedly negative; female characters, in turn, are too naïve and incapable of recognizing the base instincts of male protagonists. Riger Tsurumi acutely affirms that Bellatin "uses cultural material as a shield to obscure his identity as the author so he can focus on solving the dilemmas of artistic creation" (150).

Moving on to Nikkei insider self-representation, chapters 8 and 9, which share a heavy input from biographical information and the authors' responses in Riger Tsurumi's interviews with them, study autobiographical traits in José Watanabe's poetry collections *Elogio del refrenamiento* and *La piedra alada*, as well as in Doris Moromisato's *Chambala era un camino* and *Diario de la mujer es ponja*, particularly their portrayal of their parents. In the eighth chapter, Riger Tsurumi looks at Watanabe's celebration of his dual heritage, his peculiar adaptation of Japanese haiku into his own poetry, and the pictorial quality of his poems. She also points at other sources of inspiration for Watanabe, including nature, Japanese thought, the Bushido, and his father's restraint. The author highlights the positive portrayal of a Japanese male in Watanabe's essay "Elogio del refrenamiento" and in the poems where he portrays his father Harumi Watanabe's humility, sense of dignity, restraint, and bravery.

The final chapter is devoted to the exploration of issues such as gender, sexuality, family, identity, and national identity (Okinawan vs. mainland Japanese) in another Nisei poet: Doris

Moromisato. Riger Tsurumi demonstrates how Moromisato echoes, in her poetry, a sense of Okinawan marginality and “repressed memories of the harsh treatment they received as manual laborers in the coastal sugar plantations, the racists attacks, their ultimate betrayal by Peruvians in the years surrounding World War II, and the lingering doubts that keep full integration and acceptance by Peruvian society just beyond their reach” (175). As in the previous chapter, here Riger Tsurumi enumerates sources of inspiration, including childhood memories, nature, Buddhism, Bushido, Japanese art and literature, and everyday customs. In her poetry collection *Diario de la mujer esponja*, Riger Tsurumi adds, Moromisato echoes “two levels of marginality: as a lesbian and as an Okinawan/Japanese in Peru” (188). In her view, Moromisato creates one of the most positive portrayals of a Japanese woman in the poems inspired by her mother.

To close the study, Riger Tsurumi elaborates her conclusions about the imaging of the Japanese in modern Japanese literature. She explains, for example, that she added the two final chapters on Nisei poets to complement what is missing for the outsider Peruvian authors’ images of the Japanese. Riger Tsurumi also speculates about the possible influence of Alberto Fujimori’s controversial mandate in the negative images of Japanese and Nikkei characters in Peruvian literature. In her view, both majority Peruvian authors and Nikkei authors fall into “stereotypical models of loyalty, devotion, kindness, and sacrifice” (201) when they portray Japanese female characters. Yet, their overall image is not as negative as that of most of their male counterparts.

Overall, *The Closed Hand* is an important contribution to the study of both the representation of Asians in Latin American literature and self-representation by Nikkei authors in Latin America. If I had one small quibble with this study, it would be that I believe it would have benefited from not depending so much on plot summary, character development, the authors’ interpretations of their own works, the biographical information they provided in interviews, and

the opinions of other critics. The study excels precisely in the chapters where we hear more clearly Riger Tsurumi's voice and analysis, such as those on Vargas Llosa and Bellatin.

Furthermore, there seems to be, throughout the book, a certain assumption of a Japanese national psychology that could be problematic, perhaps touching on essentialism in some cases. This is particularly troubling in the cases where the authors and characters are actually Latin Americans, even if they are of Japanese descent.