Home and Belonging: Weaving Japanese Experiences into the Narrative of the Nation

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Abstract: Brazil hosts the largest Japanese diaspora outside Japan, yet their experiences have often been overlooked. This essay examines *Nihonjin* (2011) by Oscar Nakasato and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007) by Bernardo Carvalho, analyzing how urban space and cultural practices shape the sense of belonging. The essay discusses how the notion of home is constituted through physical and imaginary borders, producing multiple and often conflicting experiences of (non)belonging.

Keywords: Japanese immigration. Japanese diaspora. (Non)belonging. Home. Myth of return.

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Introduction

It has been over one hundred and fifteen years since the first group of Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil. In 2022, the Brazilian Secretary of Tourism estimated that more than 2 million Japanese and Japanese descendants reside in Brazil, most of them living in the southeast of the country[1]. However, although Brazil is home of the largest population of Japanese and Japanese descendants outside Japan, there has been a lack of representation of this community in the literary canon. A few exceptions would be *O Japão,* posthumously published in 1984, by Aluísio de Azevedo; *No Japão: impressões da terra e da gente*, by Manuel de Oliveira Lima, in 1903; and a few characters in Modernist novels and short stories (Vejmelka 2014).

Most of the time, Japanese immigrants and their descendants are perceived through the lens of fear, exoticism, and curiosity, or as a threat to the nation's identity (López-Calvo 2019). More recently, various books, dissertations, conferences, and documentaries have been devoted to the Japanese immigration, its cultural heritage, and struggles. In 2019, for instance, Ignacio López-Calvo published a breathtaking book titled *Japanese Brazilian Saudades:* Diasporic Identities and Cultural Production, which traces cultural works produced by Japanese Brazilian writers and filmmakers since the 1980s. The book delves into how different authors/filmmakers, across different historical periods, navigate themes of racial discrimination, miscegenation, transculturation, and ethnic tradition – some of the themes that will also be explored in this essay.

In the literary field, writers such as Adriana Lisboa have provided a more complex glimpse into the worlds of the Japanese immigrants and their descendants. One example is Lisboa's novel *Rakushisha* (2007) that tells the story of Celina and Haruki (a Japanese descendant) who, after meeting by chance, decide to travel together to Japan. However, it was not until the 1980s that artists, filmmakers, and writers of Japanese ancestry gained more visibility, as exemplified by the filmmaker Tizuka Yamasaki. Released in 1980, *Gaijin: os caminhos da liberdade* was recipient of major national and international awards, such as Best Film at Havana Festival and Nova Delhi Festival, as well as an Honorable Mention Award from Cannes Film Festival. In the 1980s, women novelists such as Fusako Tsunoda, with *Canção da Amazônia* (1988), Kawai Mitsuko, with *Sob dois horizontes* (1988), and Hiroko Nakamura, with *Ipê e sakura: em busca da identidade* (1988), offered different ways of reading "past narratives, immigrant history, race suffering, and communal relations … to create a new woman character, out of the often oppositional but intertwined demands of their ethnic and gendered selves" (Stevens, 2006, p. 40, 43). Equally important is the *Antologia de poesia Nikkei* (1993), organized by Akemi Waki et al., which brings together a collection of poems written by Japanese descendants exploring their sense of otherness based on their ethnicity.

This essay examines two novels: *Nihonjin* (2011) by Oscar Nakasato and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007) by Bernardo Carvalho. The linkages between the two novels are worth exploring, as both stories take place in São Paulo (the entry point

1 In the 2010 Census, over 2 million Brazilians identified themselves as Asian. However, in the 2022 Census, only 850,130 Brazilians identified themselves as Asian. This significant discrepancy has been contested, leading the IBGE to acknowledge an error in the data collection process (Oliveira, 2022).

for millions of immigrants), the stories are narrated by a Japanese descendant, explore the motif of return, and revolve around the ambivalent notions of home and belonging to two distinct cultures. Furthermore, both novels prominently feature, to varying degrees, the urban space as an important element in the development of the argument[2].

Informed by theories of urban studies and belonging, this essay draws on the practices of identity-making and explores how axes of difference geographically locate and establish where the limits of inclusion/exclusion should be drawn. Particular attention is paid to the ways cultural practices, everyday encounters, and urban settings can function as vehicles to define and challenge concepts of belonging, problematizing too-easy notions of ethnic affiliation and the myth of return. By exploring these dynamics, the essay illuminates the complex, socially produced processes through which urban spaces are inhabited, contested, and imagined, demonstrating how literary representations of the city and home can expose broader patterns of spatialized power, cultural negotiation, and social stratification.

FLOWS OF IMMIGRATION: JAPAN AND BRAZIL

Several factors can explain the increase in Japanese immigration to Brazil in the 19th century: Japan's push for modernization during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the adoption of a deflationary economic policy, as well as the government's concern with the population growth rate (Hastings,1969). The export of labor was perceived as a key element to achieve internal order and capitalist expansion for Japan (Quan, 2004). The Japanese government made intensive efforts to motivate a target population to migrate – those who had limited farmland, the unemployed, and the discontents (Quan, 2004). Immigrant flows were controlled by the Japanese government through the active presence of a diplomatic team and Japanese banks and associations in the receiving country (Hastings, 1969).

These institutions sought to prevent labor tensions by relocating workers from conflict areas while also preserving emotional ties to Japan, thereby sustaining labor flows and fostering future economic links. This is one of the reasons why Donald Hastings attributes capitalistic overtones to the Japanese immigration, as "emigrants once established initiated trade with the mother country to bolster weak sections of the economy" (1969, p. 40).

The Japanese migration to Brazil was mutually beneficial because it provided jobs for those displaced by the Meiji Restauration and solved labor shortages on the coffee plantations in São Paulo[3]. The mutual desire for capitalist expansion and economic growth set the stage for an agreement signed between the government of São Paulo and a private Japanese company, the Kokoku Shokumin Kaisha, in 1907 (Nogueira, 2000). This economic partnership was further supported by the propaganda promoted by the Japanese government and the Paulista

2 As discussed by Rex Nielson, *O sol se põe em São Paulo* also allow us to examine issues of racism and ethnicity regarding the arrival of Japanese immigrants in Brazil, expanding the black-white dichotomy that traditionally has defined race in Brazil. For more see Rex Nielson, "Reorientando a identidade nacional em *Native Speaker*, de Chang-rae Lee", or "*O sol se põe em São Paulo*, de Bernardo Carvalho," *Estudos de literatura brasileira contemporânea*, v. 44, 2014, p. 193-222.

3 The coffee plantations needed to replace the European immigrants (especially Italians), who stopped migrating to Brazil due to the poor living conditions in Brazil.

elite that described Brazil as a paradise with fertile land and as a welcoming society further encouraged immigration to Brazil (Lesser, 2003).

From 1908 to 1922, the government of the State of São Paulo agreed to partly subsidize the trip costs for 3,000 immigrants (Nogueira, 2000)[4]. In 1924, the Japanese government started financing the trip to Brazil (Nogueira, 2000). The influx of Japanese immigrants to Brazil had its peak between 1924 and 1935 when almost 141,732 (57% of the total pre-war immigrants) individuals migrated to Brazil (Lesser, 1999)[5].

However, from the late 1980s onwards, due to a long and prolonged economic crisis in Brazil, we witness the rapid growth in migration to Japan. The demand for labor to work in the manual sector and in unskilled jobs led the Japanese government to modify its ethnic immigration policy beginning in 1985. The new law facilitated the issuance of work visas for Japanese Brazilians with up to fourth degree of parentage to a Japanese citizen. Most of these immigrants were hired to occupy poorly paid jobs in the industrial or manufacturing sector (Tsuda, 2003). According to Mieko Nishida, the number of *dekasegis* (temporary workers) traveling to Japan increased from 67,300 in 1979 to 250,000 in 1996 (Nishida, 2018). They were hired to work in jobs the Japanese themselves did not want; however, they were never considered as part of the society. In other words, despite an apparent cultural and racial affinity, Japanese Brazilians were victims of discrimination for being perceived as "descendants of poor and uneducated Japanese of low social class background who could not survive economically in Japan and thus had to abandon their homeland and emigrate to Brazil" (Tsuda, 2003, p. 210). Cultural prejudice was another factor that contributed to the discrimination of Japanese Brazilians, as the Japanese did not approve of Brazilian customs and because, among other things, they were not able to speak fluently in Japanese.

This reality persists today, as evidenced by the abundance of videos on the internet, publications, and newspaper reports that highlight cases of discrimination against Japanese Brazilians residing in Japan. In the context of Brazil, scholars like Jeffrey Lesser (2007, p. 150) argue that while many Japanese descendants consider Brazil their homeland, a significant portion of Brazilians "continue to imagine that Japan is the "homeland" for Nikkei, thus introducing a new layer of tension and ambiguity, as we will see in the novels.

Furusato as a place of no return[6]

Grandson of Japanese immigrants, Oscar Nakasato is a professor and writer. In 2012, he published his first novel, *Nihonjin*, which won the Jabuti Prize in the category of novel[7]. He is the first writer of Japanese descendant to win this award. *Nihonjin* follows major events of three generations of Japanese immigrants, focusing more specifically on the life of Hideo Inabata's family. Despite the fear of the unknown, Hideo and his friends decide to migrate to Brazil to save

4 The agreement was strongly criticized by a Brazilian elite who was against Asian migration to Brazil. This elite wanted to create a modern and civilized country by whitening the nation through the entry of white European immigrants only.

5 For more on Japanese immigration to Brazil, see Mieko Nishida's discussion.

6 Furusato means an old village, a native place, home.

7 Jabuti is one of the most traditional and prestigious literary awards in Brazil.

enough money to build a better life back in Japan. When they arrive in São Paulo, they are transported to a coffee plantation in a rural area where they must work under unbearable conditions. After working on leased land, Hideo takes his family to São Paulo capital where he opens a shop in the Liberdade neighborhood.

The novel addresses the myriad challenges faced by immigrants and their descendants as they navigate the intricate process of adapting to a new society. It points to the need to preserve a subjective and collective memory based on rituals, customs, and the language of their country of origin – elements that not only play a crucial role in maintaining their ties to the country of origin and their sense of self but that also serve as a basis of communal solidarity in the host country. In the novel, the determination to uphold the Japanese traditions and customs, and the ambiguity of belonging are at the core of the characters' conflicts. The patriarch of the family, Hideo, is described as "a sturdy bridge that took his children to Japan. A concrete bridge, built over the years, with thick pillars sunk into the earth, over the murky water" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 93, our translation)[8]. An illustrative example of his determination is seen in the construction of a *furuô* (a Japanese bathtub), despite the fatigue from working all day in the coffee plantation – a *furuô* where "every day, whether cold or hot days, they prepared the bath, and everyone of their family and the Kawaharasan's family bathed" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 26, our translation)[9]. Yet, the urge to preserve the notion of the homeland alive, exemplified in the construction of the *furuô*, is not that simple, as "the concrete bridge [...] [with] thick pillars sunk into the earth" coexist with the presence of "murky waters", suggesting the persistent tensions and uncertainties inherent in the immigrant experience[10]. As Joane Nagel observes, the constant negotiation between the new and the old, the here and there, or the ways in which "symbols, activities, and materials are continually added to and removed from existing repertoires" constitutes an integral part of the immigrants' daily lives (1994, p. 162).

This tension becomes even more pronounced in the case of the descendants, who must grapple not only with generational differences but also with the challenges of negotiating their identities across two cultural worlds. Haruo, Hideo's son, embodies this struggle as he resists singular forms of belonging based solely on ethnicity or tradition, as dictated by his father. At school, for instance, Haruo is constantly referred to as "the Japanese" by his peers, a label that underscores his persistent sense of otherness. When his teacher attempts to rectify the situation by affirming his Brazilian identity on the basis of birth, Haruo immediately contests: "Teacher, dad taught us that we are not Brazilian. We are nihonjin" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 63, our translation)[11]. His brother, however, urges him to adopt a more pragmatic stance, advising: "You are stupid, you need to listen to what the teacher says and be quiet. At school you are Brazilian, at home you are nihonjin" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 64, our translation)[12]. Yet when pressed by his father to embrace his Japanese essence, Haruo openly declares: "I feel that my

8 "*uma ponte firme que levava seus filhos ao Japão. Ponte de concreto, construído ao longo dos anos, com pilares grossos fincados na terra, sobre a água turva*".

9 "*todos os dias, dias frios e dias quentes, preparavam o banho, e todos de sua família e da família de Kawaharasan se banhavam*".

10 "a ponte de concreto [...] [com] pilares grossos fincados na terra".

11 "*Professora, papai ensinou que nós não somos brasileiros. A gente é nihonjin*".

12 "*Você é besta, você precisa escutar o que a professora diz e ficar quieto. Na escola você é brasileiro, em casa você é nihonjin*".

heart is Brazilian" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 67, our translation)[13]. His father, appalled by such defiance, responds by punishing him with *yaito*[14]. This depiction of the house as a site of rigid discipline underscores how strict adherence to Japanese traditions is enforced by his father within the domestic sphere. The severe punishment meted out to Haruo for resisting his father's expectations illustrates that deviation from prescribed cultural norms is not merely discouraged but actively penalized. In this way, the home becomes both a bastion of tradition and a space where the costs of nonconformity are made tangible.

This strict enforcement of tradition within the household shapes not only Haruo's behavior at home but also his attitude toward broader cultural expectations, particularly in his indifferent approach to learning the Japanese language. During lessons with Ohara sensei, he consistently drifts away, distracted by the Brazilian boys playing soccer outside the classroom as Ohara's account reveals:

> *Haruo set at a desk near the window and, instead of paying attention to his explanations, let him get caught up with a group of kids playing ball in a courtyard near the school [...] Ohara sensei punished him, [...] After the break, when he realized that the student had not returned to the classroom, he went to the window and saw him among the kids running after the ball* (Nakasato, 2011, p. 75-76, our translation)[15].

Haruo's seat at a desk by the window becomes symbolic: it places him in a liminal space between the two worlds that claim him. Inside the classroom, the rigidity of Japanese discipline, sustained through language and tradition, and, outside, the allure of Brazilian sociability and play. Within the home and during Japanese lessons, strict rules and disciplinary measures prevail; outside, Haruo encounters a more open, playful environment that offers him a different mode of belonging. His identity is thus shaped within imaginary borders that separate school and home from the outside ("courtyard"), Brazil from Japan, and childhood freedom ("the kids") from parental discipline. Caught between his father's insistence on cultural preservation and the social pressures of assimilation, Haruo recognizes that his physical appearance and cultural practices mark him as the Other. Yet, in this in-between space, he expresses a deep longing for integration, confessing his desire "to be like everyone else" (Nakasato, 2011, our translation).

Yet the experience of inhabiting these in-between spaces is neither uniform nor static. Experiences of displacement and disillusionment vary according to social class, generation, gender, and sexuality, shaping how individuals articulate a notion of belonging. This generational contrast is especially visible between Haruo and his father. Whereas Haruo actively resists imposed forms of identity, yearning to belong to his Brazilian surroundings, his father Hideo remains steadfast in upholding Japanese traditions, believing that strict adherence is essential not only for preserving their heritage but also for securing a future return to Japan.

13 "*eu sinto que meu coração é brasileiro*".

14 In certain regions of Japan, parents historically invoked yaito as a disciplinary measure, threatening children with a small burning treatment to encourage compliance and proper behavior. In the context of the novel, this practice is literalized when the father applies small burns to his son's back using a form of incense, illustrating both the physical and symbolic dimensions of traditional corporal discipline.

15 "*Haruo ficara sentado numa carteira próxima à janela e, em vez de prestar atenção às suas explicações, deixava-se envolver por um grupo de moleques que jogavam bola num pátio perto da escola* [...] *Ohara sensei o colocou de castigo [...] Após o intervalo, quando percebeu que o aluno não retornava à sala, foi à janela e o viu entre os moleques correndo atrás da bola*".

In fact, trapped for a time by the myth of return (Dahya, 1996)[16], Hideo's personal struggle to reconcile his attachments to Japan with the life he has established in Brazil exemplifies the ways in which identity and home are negotiated within imagined and physical borders. Yet his experience cannot be fully understood in isolation; it reflects broader patterns of immigration, settlement, and cultural adaptation among Japanese immigrants in São Paulo. The neighborhood of Liberdade, where Hideo and many others settled, serves as a material and symbolic site where the tensions between memory, heritage, and adaptation are enacted on a collective scale. The proliferation of Japanese small markets, tea houses, and cultural establishments demonstrates a conscious effort to replicate familiar aspects of homeland life, creating social and economic structures that attempted to ease the dislocation of migration while simultaneously producing a distinct "in-between" space. Hideo's shop, for instance, maintained ties to Japan through its display of "fabric flowers and porcelain with cherry blossom designs [...] fans [with Japanese phrases]" (Nakamura, 2011, p. 100-101, our translation)[17].

This emphasis on culturally specific goods illustrates how commercial spaces functioned not only as sites of economic activity but also as repositories of cultural memory, allowing immigrants to maintain a sense of identity and continuity amid displacement. In navigating these hybrid spaces, immigrants like Hideo engaged in an ongoing negotiation of home, blurring conventional boundaries of geography and culture. The continued presence of Japanese lampposts, cherry blossom trees, traditional restaurants, supermarkets, museums, and churches in Liberdade illustrates how collective memory and cultural practice intersect to stabilize this blended sense of place. In this way, Hideo's personal negotiation of identity reflects broader processes of diasporic cultural formation[18].

Yet residing in Liberdade did not provide Hideo with an unproblematic sense of belonging. Despite his commitment to cultural preservation, the very symbols and values of Japanese identity often highlighted the fractured world he inhabited. This tension becomes particularly evident during World War II, when Hideo volunteered as a teacher after the Brazilian government closed Japanese schools, convinced that "The president wanted nihonyin to become gaijin, he wanted the impossible, he wanted to force the Japanese to betray their homeland" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 90, our translation)[19]. This assertion highlights not only the discriminatory pressures exerted by the Brazilian state but also the profound internal conflict within the Japanese immigrant community, as many of them believed that preserving their cultural identity (nihonyin) was integral to their sense of self, while becoming a *gaijin* signified both a condition of inferiority and a betrayal of the emperor. This conviction also explains Hideo's decision to join the Shindo Renmei (Way of the Subjects of the Emperor League), an organization dedicated to "unify the Japanese colony in Brazil, to maintain strong ties of loyalty to the

16 According to Badr Dahya, the myth of return functions as a cohesive force that sets kinship boundaries of belonging; boundaries that are defined by the preservation of connections to the place of origin and its culture (Dahya; 1996).

17 "*flores de tecido e porcelanas com desenhos de cerejeira [...] leques [com frases em japonês]*."

18 The presence of Japanese lampposts, cherry blossom trees, traditional restaurants, supermarkets, museums, and churches in Liberdade today illustrates how collective memory and cultural practice intersect to stabilize this hybridized sense of place. In this way, Hideo's individual negotiations of identity mirror the broader processes of diasporic cultural. Only that nowadays Liberdade neighborhood also houses Chinese and Korean descendants.

19 "*O presidente queira que nihonyin virasse gaijin, queria o impossível, queria obrigar os japoneses a traírem sua pátria*."

emperor" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 91, our translation)[20]. It is interesting to observe how, in both moments, the image of and loyalty to Japan ("betray the homeland") and the Japanese emperor ("loyalty") continued to occupy a central place in the immigrants' way of being. Hideo's faith in and loyalty to both the association and his conservative ideals, however, are shattered when his son, Haruo, is killed by members of the Shindo Renmei for publishing a newspaper article reporting that the emperor had surrendered to the Allies. This episode further problematizes the notion of Hideo's imaginary borders: his identity and sense of home are shaped not only by the tension between Japan and Brazil, heritage and adaptation, but also by the violent consequences of allegiance to homeland ideals within a diasporic context. It underscores that identity and belonging are continually mediated by historical, political, and generational forces, complicating any straightforward conception of home.

When conversing with his grandson towards the end of the novel, Hideo expresses regret for the treatment inflicted upon Haruo and his daughter Semie who, following the Japanese tradition, was no longer accepted as a member of the family after eloping with a *gaijin* (Nakasato, 2011)[21]. At the same time, his wife's recognition that "without realizing, a new life, which was neither the Japanese nor the Brazilian life, was taking shape around him" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 111, our translation) embodies the essence of his journey – an ever-conflicting synthesis of the old and the new, the familiar and the foreign[22]. In doing so, it presents a notion of home: not as a fixed geographical or cultural place, but "a new life" as a dynamic, lived space that must accommodate both heritage and adaptation, tradition and personal desire.

Interestingly, it is Hideo's grandson who ultimately embarks on the journey back to Japan. Married to a Brazilian lawyer, he decides to travel to Japan to work as a *dekasegi*. Unlike other *dekasegis*, his decision to work in Japan is not driven by economic or political reasons, but by the desire to return to a homeland kept alive in his imagination. This feeling may explain why the narrator articulates his notion of being at home beyond the borders of a nation – a sense of belonging in which words such as "return," "recognize," "revive," or "reunion" evoke a historical community that transcends geographical and temporal boundaries:

> *[...] that going to Japan is almost like returning home, that at the first opportunity I will kick off my shoes, step onto the white sand and feel an ancient connection, the feet reviving the touch, molding themselves to shapes drawn many and many years ago [...] that I will sit in a field of white cherry trees that ...that I will go to the foot of mount Fuji, look at the snow-covered peak and recognize it, that it will be a reunion* (Nakasako, 2011, p. 162, our translation)[23].

20 "*unificar a colônia japonesa no Brasil, para manter firmes os laços de fidelidade ao imperador*."

21 The novel continuously refers to the gender roles of women in the Japanese society and the punishment for those who did not perform the roles they were expected to play as is the case of the narrator's mother. The issue of gender is beyond the scope of this essay. For more on this issue, see López-Calvo, Ignacio. *Japanese Brazilian Saudades*. Colorado: UP, 2019.

22 As his wife notes, the refusal to return to Japan is also linked to the "humiliation of returning to Japan in the same condition as when I left" (Nakanura, 2011, p. 110), a sentiment the politician inferred when the first group of Japanese immigrants traveled to Brazil.

23 "*que ir ao Japão é quase um retorno, que na primeira oportunidade me desvencilharei dos sapatos, pisarei a areia branca e sentirei um contato antigo, os pés revivendo o toque, moldando-se a formas desenhadas há muitos e muitos anos* [...] *que me sentarei num campo de cerejeiras brancas... que irei aos pés do monte Fuji, olharei o pico coberto de neve e o reconhecerei, que será um reencontro*."

According to Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, immigrants' lived experiences and spatial imaginaries often revolve around complex dialogues about home – "the relationship between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, diverse homemaking practices, and the intersections of home, memory, identity and belonging" (Blunt; Dowling, 2006, p. 199). Home is thus lived as material and immaterial, a tangible and imagined space of belonging. Avtar Brah further advances this notion, asserting that home encompasses "the lived experience of locality, its sound and smells," as well as the "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination [...] a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin" (Brah, 1996, p. 192). In the novel, the grandson's words evoke the typical imagery of Japan – the snow-capped Mount Fuji, "field of white cherry trees", the sensation of stepping on "the white sand" where he will feel "an ancient connection," whose stones, bushes and songs will allow him to localize in himself "an old man [...] That was the man I wanted to meet in Japan" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 173, our translation)[24]. He strives toward this mythical place, shaped by childhood stories – a place of no return, as Brah (1996) warns us, existing only in the nostalgic dreams of immigrants and their descendants.

The nostalgic tone deepens in significance as we witness the conversation between the grandfather and grandson, which unfolds against the tranquil backdrop of the grandparents' garden, where the grandfather is about to meticulously prune the branches of a bonsai tree, following the millennia-old traditions of bonsai with its "*wires and pliers, for his skilled hands*":

> [...] *ojiichan and i were on the back porch of the house, standing in front of a wooden workbench, where a young ficus bonsai waited patiently, alongside wires and pliers, for his skilled hands. Next to it there was a well-formed azalea in its best neagari style* [...] (Nakasato, 2011, p. 165-166, our translation)[25].

In this liminal space, the grandfather endeavors to reconcile his life in Brazil with the unattainable prospect of return, as he himself acknowledges when he confides in his grandson that "my furusato no longer exists" (Nakasato, 2011, p. 169, our translation). The enduring presence of Japanese words in the family's conversations and daily interactions, along with the art of the bonsai, underscore the tension inherent in navigating between life in Brazil and Hideo's profound connection with Japan, which remains a pivotal aspect of his identity. Through these cultural markers, the novel delves into the impact of immigration on individuals and communities, thus offering a nuanced perspective on what it means to live between two or more cultures.

Doreen Massey corroborates this idea, noting that the "place called home was never an unmediated experience" (Massey, 1988, p. 08) and that the "past was no more static than the present" (Massey, 1988, p. 08), describing places as "complex locations, where numerous different and frequently conflicting communities intersect" (Massey, 1988, p. 13). These conflicting intersections appear in the lives of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Brazil, where the notion

24 "*um homem antigo [...] Era esse o homem que eu queira encontrar no Japão.*"

25 "[...] *ojiichan e eu estávamos na varanda que havia nos fundos da casa, diante de uma bancada de madeira, onde um bonsai jovem de fícus aguardava pacientemente, ao lado de arames e alicates, as suas mãos habilidosas. Ao lado havia um bonsai de azaleia já bem formado no seu melhor estilo neagar*i [...]"

of home takes on multiple dimensions as it intersects with diverse cultural, historical, and geographical elements. In the dialogue between Hideo and his grandson, the concept of home extends beyond the confines of physical boundaries to encompass emotional and cultural connections with Japan, exemplified by the grandson's decision to work in Japan as a *dekasegi*, driven by a sense of home that transcends national boundaries.

Growing up straddling two cultures, second– and/or third– generation of immigrants (nisei and sansei) may experience home not as a geographical entity but rather as a fluid, multifaceted, and ambiguous notion. Scholars like Hamid Naficy argue that home exist in "any place; it is temporary, and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory by acts of imagination" (Naficy, 1999, p. 6). As depicted in the novel, the images of the ancestral homeland with its traditional customs are continuously recreated and preserved through the stories, the art of the bonsai, language, and everyday practices transmitted from generation to generation. Implicit in the narrator's temporary stay in Japan is the myth of an ethnic return that could foster a stronger affiliation to his grandparents' homeland. This becomes evident when, reminded by his grandfather that Brazil is his *furosato*, the grandson affirms that his trip to Japan is a necessary step toward achieving coherence and stability, that is, a sense of self and belonging. Nevertheless, the preservation of ethnic heritage and values, central to the conflicting relationships among the various characters/generations in both novels, can lead to varied and conflicting responses as it will be demonstrated in Carvalho's novel.

Home and a Sense of Un-rootedness

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Bernardo Carvalho is a writer and journalist. *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007) was named a finalist for the 2008 Jabuti Prize and it was on the shortlist for the 2008 São Paulo Best Book of the Year award. In *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, the protagonist is the great-grandson of Japanese immigrants. One night, the narrator is approached by Setsuko, the owner of a Japanese restaurant in the Liberdade neighborhood, who asks him to author a story. The starting point is the apparent love triangle that begins after World War II and involves Michiyo (a member of a middle-class family who lost everything during the war), Jokichi (the son of a rich merchant) and Masukichi (a poor kyogen actor). To fill in the gaps in Setsuko's story after her disappearance, the narrator embarks on a journey first to Promissão (a town in the interior of São Paulo) and then to Osaka (Japan). As his search for Setsuko progresses, the narrator realizes that Setsuko and Mishiyo are the same person. The revelation prompts him to question the facts narrated by Setsuko. At the same time, the narrator starts to question his own identity and sense of belonging.

The close tie between urban space, identity, and memory arises early in the novel. In the opening chapter, the narrator recounts a vivid dream he had – he was driving a car around the historic downtown area of São Paulo on a Sunday afternoon, and, for the first time, he paid attention to monuments constituted by decrepit architectural fantasies:

> *The Moorish and ecletic mansions of the early 20th centyrt (most of which have been demolished) and the Mediterranean, Neoclassical, Florentine, and Norman*

> *buildings [...]. Each immigrant, thinking they were transplanting the style of their homeland and their ancestors, ended up contributing to the local caricature* (Carvalho, 2007, p. 14, our translation)[26].

The city is depicted as a patchwork quilt, its layers of architectural styles serving as an index of the role played by immigrants' homeland ethnic traditions – "Moorish," "Mediterranean," "Neoclassical," "Florentine," and "Norman" – in shaping São Paulo's urban and cultural landscapes. These diverse styles, each bearing imprints of their homelands' architectural influences, offer immigrants a sense of home and community within the city; yet the constant feeling of estrangement in the narrator's voice when describing the city center suggests that the mere presence of ethnic buildings does not necessarily create collective urban memories for immigrants' descendants. Moreover, the narrator critiques the impact of global flows of capital on the production of space, particularly in the architectural transformations that have rendered São Paulo an outdated copy of New York, portraying the city as one in which cultural memory and global modernization coexist uneasily[27].

This tension is evident in the "stucco buildings, [...] christened 'Florentine style', in an attempt to imitate old New York" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 13-14, our translation)[28]. Through such examples, the narrator highlights how architectural interventions operate not merely as stylistic choices but as instruments for establishing meanings and shaping socio-economic relations of power. Facilitated by the collaboration of financial and real-estate interests with the state, these interventions have dictated the spatial organization of the city and influenced its societal and economic fabric, reinforcing a persistent sense of temporal ("everything is out of time") and spatial disjunction ("everything is out of place"), which produces a city "that wants to be somewhere else and at another time. And that desire only makes her more and more what she doesn't want to be" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 13-14), thereby revealing the city's struggle with identity which in turn mirrors broader societal contradictions[29].

The narrator's discomfort extends beyond the cityscape, becoming particularly evident in his encounter with Setsuko/Mishima's house, where the negotiation of place-based identities unfolds in intricate detail. Located in the bustling Paraíso neighborhood of São Paulo, the house is approached through an empty two-story building, leading beyond an iron gate to a small bamboo grove and a wooden bridge adorned with Japanese stone lanterns arching over a watercourse. The house itself is a miniature replica of a Japanese poet's residence in Kyoto, Japan, reflecting Mishima/Setsuko's effort, like that of many immigrants, to recreate a home infused with the ambience and traditions of her upbringing. This practice exemplifies what Mariana Ortega describes as "hometactics", a strategy through which immigrants cultivate "a sense of familiarity, ease, or sense

26 "*As mansões mouriscas e ecléticas do começo do século XX (a maioria derrubada) e os prédios mediterrâneos, neoclássicos, florentinos e normandos* [...]. *Cada imigrante, achando que transplantava o estilo da sua terra e dos seus antepassados, acabou contribuindo para a caricatura local*."

27 Various scholars have drawn attention to the profound transformations in São Paulo. The city's expansion has been driven as much by rapid population growth – the population quadrupled between 1950 and 1975 and then nearly doubled again between 1975 and 2005 – as by planning and design. Designed in 1951 for the then booming city center, it was, like the New York Rockefeller Centre, to be a model of high-density urban living, incorporating shops and restaurants, a hotel, and places of entertainment (Almeida, 2014).

28 "*prédios de estuque, [...] batizados de 'estilo florentino', na tentativa de imitar a antiga Nova York*."

29 "*que quer estar em outro lugar e outro tempo. E essa vontade só a faz ser cada vez mais o que é e o que não quer ser*"

of belonging in a space or location, even though the space is a new or foreign one" (Ortega, 2008, p. 205), highlighting how memory, cultural heritage, and spatial adaptation intersect in the shaping of lived environments.

Mishima/Setsuho's home illustrates the innate urge for homestatics that drives the homemaking endeavors of many immigrants. Only that, in her case, the decision to migrate to Brazil is linked to the possibility of living closer to her husband. Yet, despite the strong emotional and territorialized attachment to her hometown, she repeatedly acknowledges that the idyllic Japan of her memories no longer exists, "The Japan I knew no longer exists" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 31, our translation). It is within these diverse spatiotemporal contexts that the author asserts the character's ongoing negotiation of identity and a sense of belonging.

The narrator's ironic reaction to the Japanese miniatures – "a world of whitewahed flower beds built by dwarves in the interior of São Paulo [...] a playground, at once poor and unreal" – reflects his uneasiness with a world he cannot fully comprehend or inhabit (Carvalho, 2007, p. 27-28, our translation)[30]. The miniatures evoke "a feeling of horror, of not belonging to this world and of no longer having the means, either the materials or imaginary, to escape it" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 27-28, our translation), conveying a profound sense of alienation[31]. In this context, the small miniatures, along with the irony in his description, conceal the narrator's internal sense of inadequacy in fully inhabiting a world that appears inherently unattainable.

The narrator's sense of alienation intensifies during his first journey to Japan. From his hotel, the distant silhouette of Mount Fuji evokes familiarity: "[e]ven though I had never set foot there before, everything felt familiar, as if I were returning home" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 122, our translation)[32]. Yet, the narrator's sense of "returning home" or "recognition" collapses when he gets lost and realizes that his appearance and English alone do not grant acceptance: "I tried to get close to people [...] I was leprosy" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 106, our translation)[33]. The cultural shock in a "familiar" setting underscores that inherited social practices and places of memory, transmitted and recreated from generation to generation, do not automatically produce belonging. For the narrator, his grandparents' imagery evokes estrangement, alienation, and cultural shock. The metaphor of leprosy vividly conveys the societal rejection he experiences due to his inability to speak Japanese fluently, echoing the historical segregation and ostracism faced by "lepers".

His visit to Mount Koya adds further layers of complexity to his relationship with his ancestors' homeland. Mount Koya has long been a focal point for religious activities and houses one of Japan's largest cemeteries. As the narrator wanders through the cemetery, he soon realizes that the tombs reproduce social and political power structures:

> *The monuments to the directors were not the same as those to ordinary workers. Some elements identified the company's area of production (rockets, for example, to designate high technology, I deduced), while statues of workers,*

30 *"um mundo de canteiros caiados construídos por anões no interior de São Paulo [...] um parque infantil, ao mesmo tempo pobre e irreal"*

31 *"uma sensação de horror, de não caber neste mundo e de já não ter os meios, nem materiais nem imaginários, de escapar dele"*

32 *"[e]mbora eu nunca tivesse pisado ali, tudo era reconhecimento, com se eu estivesse voltando para casa"*

33 *"Eu tentava me aproximar das pessoas [...] Eu era a lepra."*

> *reminiscente of socialist realism decorated those of the subordinates* (Carvalho, 2007, p. 118, our translation)[34].

As Nakamaki Hirochika notes,

> *[...] originally the daimyo erected five-story stupas to take care of their ancestors and pray for the prosperity of the family or the han, but today companies and their members pray for the spirits of former presidents and employees who died while serving the company* (Hirochika, 1990, p. 132).

Disappointed, the narrator soon realizes how the logic of capitalism has reshaped everyday life in Japan, replacing traditional rituals with new forms of veneration that prioritize corporate loyalty over family or ancestral devotion.

The novel also challenges the official discourse that labels Japanese Brazilians who go to Japan for temporary work as "returnees." This is evident in the case of the narrator's sister, who migrated to Japan in search of better income and quality of life. Despite living modestly in Nagoya for two years and working in a car factory, she still struggles with the Japanese language and faces a strict work schedule that leaves little time for herself. Her only friends are Brazilian workers, and her days are consumed by work and sleep.

Like the brother, her connection to Japan is shaped by the stories of her Japanese grandparents and the maintenance of certain rituals and traditions – geographical and cultural coordinates that could have facilitated her rooting process when she migrated to Japan. Despite her Japanese physical traits, her limited language skills mark her as a foreigner. Here, language functions as a cultural boundary, establishing those who belong to the community and those who are excluded. As with their grandparents, her migration (in reverse) project ultimately falters, leading her brother to describe her as the "miniature of a promise" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 113, our translation). This perspective helps explain why the narrator repeatedly critiques the rigid notions of success and failure in Japanese society, referring to it as a "shadow that marks the failure to adjust to a society accustomed to interpreting the experience of immigration as a sign of poverty" (Carvalho, 2007, p. 113, our translation)[35]. The novel highlights the tensions immigrants, and their descendants face in negotiating the expectations of both their ancestral homeland and host country. The pressure to conform can generate internal conflict and alienation and depicting her as a "the shadow of a promise" encapsulates the notion of unfulfilled potential, reflecting a profound feeling of being caught between her lofty aspirations/dreams and the stark reality of her circumstances.

The shadow also materializes in the dim spaces of a cybercafe. When the narrator asks his sister's assistance in locating the Japanese actor involved in the love triangle, she suggests meeting at a cybercafe in Osaka instead of at her home in Nagoya or his hotel. Intrigued, the narrator concludes that the dimness of the cybercafe cubicles was a deliberate strategy to prevent him from noticing how thin and pale she had become since arriving in Japan. He then describes the cybercafe, located on the ninth floor:

34 "*Os monumentos aos diretores não eram iguais aos dos operários comuns. Neles, alguns elementos identificavam a área de produção da empresa (foguetes, por exemplo, para designar alta tecnologia, deduzi), enquanto estátuas de operários que faziam lembrar o realismo socialista decoravam os dos subalternos.*"

35 a "*sombra que marca a falta de se ajustar a uma sociedade habituada a ler a experiência da imigração como um sinal da pobreza*".

> *Except for the attendants' clothes, everything was white, the floor, the walls, the counter [...] From the brightness of the hall one suddenly entered the darkness of the computer room [...] at the back, beyond the computer room, there were showers, in case I wanted to take a bath, and vending machines with various types of food and drinks* (Carvalho, 2007, p. 111– 112, our translation)[36].

Cybercafes illustrate the blurred line between public and private spaces in a capitalist society. In Japan, cybercafes are typically on upper floors, divided into two zones: a public access area with reception and library, and private booths ("the computer rooms"). The narrator notes that the booths provide internet access and reclining chairs as well as "vending machines with various types of food and drinks" and showers for freshening up before going to work.

Osaka, Japan's second-largest metropolitan area, is renowned for its neon-lit skyscrapers. Viewed through the cybercafe's smoked glass, the city center becomes *"dimmed lights,"* adding another layer of exclusion and isolation (Carvalho, 2007, p. 112, our translation). The cybercafe illustrates both physical and symbolic borders shaped by socio-economic contexts. Its layout – private, dimly lit booths amid public reception areas – reflects a space of seclusion that contrasts with the bustling city outside. Cheaper than hotels, such spaces have become home for low-paid, temporary workers, revealing micro-territories where otherness and social exclusion intersect, challenging narratives that celebrate modernity (Yuasa, 2008; Fukada, 2020).

By bringing together memories, experiences, as well as urban landmarks, *O sol se põe em São Paulo* illustrates the power of cities as arenas for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of notions of cordiality and belonging. The novel offers insights on how cities provide powerful venues for exploring the interplay between state/economic policies, spaces of exclusion, and issues of identity and belonging. The city emerges as a layered patchwork, where historical traces, cultural landscapes, and social meanings coexist in tension. In doing so, the text highlights the effects of neoliberal policies, modernization, and diverse cultural and ethnic formations on the shaping and reshaping of the urban environment. Ultimately, it underscores the challenges of grounding identity and exposes the social conflicts embedded in daily urban life, showing how places are constantly made, remade, and contested.

Conclusion

When the first Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil, most did not intend to settle permanently but rather to save enough money to build a better life back in Japan. The myth of return shaped their lives, upholding traditions and fostering solidarity among immigrants. This might explain the persistence to preserve daily practices that anchored them to their homeland. Yet, rather than portraying the Japanese diaspora as a uniform or monolithic experience, both novels explore the emotional toll of migration and the search for a sense of home and identity. They emphasize the need to forge new forms of belonging that transcend geographical and conventional boundaries.

36 *"Com exceção da roupa dos atendentes, tudo era branco, o chão, as paredes, o balcão* [...] *Da claridade do hall passava-se de repente à escuridão da sala de computadores* [...] *no fundo, além da sala de computadores, onde havia como duchas, no caso de eu querer tomar banho, e as máquinas com vários tipos de comida e bebidas."*

In *Nihonjin*, home is defined through the preservation of costumes, rituals, objects, and language, as well as through interpersonal connections that mold identities and notions of belonging. Home emerges as multilayered, relational, and fluid, reflecting an ongoing negotiation of identity and attachment. As López-Calvo notes, subsequent generations, exemplified by Hideo's grandson, create "new, transnational, and unstable maps beyond the Brazilian and Japanese national borders, while concomitantly building symbolic bridges between the two countries, as well as a third space of liminality" (López-Calvo, 2019, p. 15-16). Yet, this process, as depicted in *Nihonjin*, is guided by a quest for a mythical or a mirage of an irretrievable homeland, echoing Brah's notion of a place of no return.

O sol se põe em São Paulo depicts characters marked by a feeling of non-belonging, inhabiting an in-between space between two cultures without necessarily fitting in either. The city's ethnic landscape, though inscribed with immigrant culture, does not guarantee belonging; both people and buildings often appear out of place. Journeys to ancestral homelands similarly fail to restore a coherent identity, challenging the notion that return can resolve the complexities of belonging. As the narrator reflects, theirs is *"a story of outcasts, like me and my people, people who cannot belong to the place where they are, wherever that may be, and dream of another place, that can only exist in their imagination"* (Carvalho, 2007, p. 163-164, our translation)[37]. The imagined elsewhere, rather than any physical return, becomes the only possible space of belonging, underscoring the impossibility of escaping one's condition of displacement.

Taken together, *Nihonjin* and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* urge us to reconsider how notions of home, neighborhood, and nation are constructed and naturalized. Left unexamined, these categories obscure the power dynamics that define spaces of inclusion and exclusion -whether physical or symbolic – shaping diverse experiences of (non)belonging. These questions remain central to contemporary political debates, demanding continuous reflection on the fragile and contested nature of belonging.

Lar e pertencimento: tecendo experiências japonesas na narrativa da nação

Resumo: O Brasil abriga a maior diáspora japonesa fora do Japão, mas suas experiências foram frequentemente negligenciadas. Este ensaio examina *Nihonjin* (2011), de Oscar Nakasato, e *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007), de Bernardo Carvalho, analisando como o espaço urbano e as práticas culturais moldam o sentimento de pertencimento. O ensaio discute como a noção de lar se constitui a partir de fronteiras físicas e imaginárias, gerando múltiplas e frequentemente conflitantes experiências de (não)pertencimento.

Palavras-chave: Imigração japonesa. Diáspora japonesa. (Não)pertencimento. Lar. Mito de retorno.

37 *"uma história de párias, como eu e os meus, gente que não pode pertencer ao lugar onde está, onde quer que seja, e sonha com outro lugar, que só pode existir na imaginação."*

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