

Repatriation But Not “Return”: A Japanese Brazilian Dekasegi Goes Back to Brazil 帰郷」ならざる帰還 ブラジルに戻ったある日系ブラジル人出稼ぎ労働者

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Précis

The predicted impending end of *dekasegi* marks an opportune moment to explore the almost unstudied repatriation of migrants from their country of ethnic origin (Japan) to their country of citizenship (primarily Brazil). I consider issues of adjustment and identity upon “return” through a case study of “Diogo Pacheco Moriyama,” a mestiço Japanese Brazilian who has lived and worked in Brazil, Japan, and the United States.

Keywords: Japan, Brazil, Japanese Brazilian, ethnic return migration, *dekasegi*, returnee syndrome

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japan dispatched well over one million citizens beyond its archipelago in an effort to relieve perceived problems of scarce resources, overpopulation, and social unrest. The majority of emigrants who relocated to Japan’s Asian empire were repatriated after 1945.¹ However, approximately half a million remained more or less permanently in the Americas, giving rise to Japan’s most significant contemporary diaspora. Within the Western Hemisphere, Brazil received the largest number of Japanese: by the early 1940s,

nearly two hundred thousand emigrants had settled there (Tsuchida 1998, 78). World War II severed Japan’s diplomatic and economic relations with Brazil and its neighbors and created a new domestic need for labor. Together, these factors temporarily interrupted Japanese settlement in the New World. However, in the early 1950s migration from Japan to the Americas resumed, and over the next two decades more than fifty thousand Japanese nationals came to join earlier arrivals in Brazil (Lesser 1999; Lone 2004; Masterson 2004; Maruyama 2010).

By the mid-1970s, the expansion of the Japanese economy had eliminated the primary rationale for expatriation (Endoh 2009). A decade later, Japan confronted a labor scarcity, brought on not only by development but also by demographic changes including a falling birthrate and an aging population. Shortages particularly affected the manufacturing and low-wage service sectors. Viewing Japan’s much vaunted alleged ethnic homogeneity as a source of its postwar prosperity and strength, government, the media and many social leaders opposed liberalizing foreign immigration policies by offering citizenship and stable working conditions to recent migrants, while making citizenship rights available to a growing number of *zaiichi* Koreans. Basically, descent-based migration was reaffirmed even as the nation sought to fill the worker gap. In 1990, the government revised the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (*Shutsuyunyū kanri oyobi nanmin nintei hō* 出入管理および難民認定法) to offer long-term,

renewable visas to the non-citizen children and grandchildren of Japanese emigrants. Bureaucrats insisted that these legislative changes were intended to strengthen cultural and affective ties between diaspora and the Japanese nation-state, rather than to overturn long-standing taboos against importing foreign labor. Most visa applicants, however, were drawn to Japan by the possibility of earning higher wages than their home countries offered.² Accordingly, few persons of Japanese descent from wealthy nations such as Canada and the United States sought work in Japan. Rather, labor migration tended to attract the children and grandchildren of Japanese emigrants to South America.

Brazil, home to the world's largest Japanese diaspora and in the throes of an economic catastrophe, furnished the overwhelming majority of *dekasegi* (出稼ぎ; literally, "to go out and earn money") (Yamanaka 1996, 65-97; Kawamura 2000; Kajita, Tanno, and Higuchi 2005). Between 1985 and 1999, Japanese Brazilian *dekasegi* remitted an annual average of more than \$2 billion—approximately the value of Brazil's imports from Japan. Measured in terms of income earned abroad, during these years labor migrants constituted Brazil's third most lucrative export "item" behind coffee and iron ore (Mori 2002, 237). At peak strength in 2007, over three hundred thousand Brazilian citizens of Japanese ancestry worked in Japan.³ However, their encounter with Japanese society, frequently marked by tension and disappointment on both sides, belied the Japanese government's assumption that common descent would facilitate not only harmony but integration. When the Japanese economy entered a period of recession in 2008, *dekasegi* were among the first to lose their jobs. As the labor market contracted, the state even actively attempted to deport these migrants. In 2009-2010, one program offered cash payments of nearly \$4,000 to defray departure expenses on condition that recipients leave Japan permanently (this proviso was

subsequently amended to three years). Nearly 20,000 South American nationals took advantage of the offer (Tsuda 2010, 630; Sasaki 2013a, 43). By 2011, the population of Japanese Brazilians in Japan had fallen by about a third, and repatriations to Brazil came to exceed arrivals in Japan (Sasaki 2013b, 7).⁴

Scholars have often represented Japanese Brazilian workers in Japan as ethnic return migrants, defined as "later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples who 'return' to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homelands for generations" (Tsuda 2009a, 1).⁵ Motives for ethnic return migration policies range from a fraternal sensibility to humanitarianism to economic interests. Nations with ethnic return policies include Israel, Germany, Spain, Italy, Sweden, South Korea, and various states in Eastern Europe. The legal treatment of diaspora differs by country, reflecting varying levels of enthusiasm for repatriation on the part of the state and its putative co-ethnics. By some estimates, in the past three decades nearly 5 million people worldwide have taken advantage of such opportunities afforded by their heritage (Tsuda 2009a, 3). For most receiving countries, however, "return" has engendered economic competition, exclusion, and the creation of new minorities rather than the social integration anticipated by policymakers. By the late 2000s, many nations had come to view repatriating diasporas as a threat to stability, and had adopted measures to reduce or curtail inflow altogether (Tsuda 2009b).

The concept of "return," which looms large in the literature on diaspora, is naturally of particular interest to scholars of ethnic return migration. In the words of one social scientist, return is "an idea, or, more precisely...an imaginary that defines the directionality of one's physical movement, gives particular meanings to mobility, and shapes the mobile subjects' self-positioning in the world" (Sasaki 2013a, 32). Yet whereas most case studies

acknowledge the ambiguous and socially constructed nature of “return,” they typically focus on only one destination: the country of ethnic origin. Consequently, they overlook reverse journeys to the country of citizenship or “host country” (Xiang, Yeoh, and Toyota 2013). In the case of Japanese Brazilians, an abundance of works have addressed the “return” to Japan, whereas few studies have examined the challenges faced upon repatriation to Brazil (for exceptions, see Urano and Yamamoto 2008; Ueno 2008; and Sawaguchi 2013).

Today, the predicted end of *dekasegi* in Japan, and the retrenchment of ethnic return migration policies in many states worldwide, provide an opportune moment to consider the meaning of “return” to the country of citizenship. Neither the Japanese nor Brazilian government has collected statistics on *dekasegi* repatriates to Brazil. As scholars of migration have demonstrated, however, individual-centered ethnographies offer a promising method of gaining insight into the challenges of “returnees” (e.g., Sussman 2010). Through a life history of repatriated *dekasegi* Diogo Pacheco Moriyama, I suggest some of the obstacles facing former ethnic return migrants as they attempt to situate lives and identities fundamentally impacted by long-term mobility and residence in the country of ethnic origin, in a country of citizenship that has also changed in their absence.⁶

A life transformed by *dekasegi*

I met Diogo by chance in December 2013 during a period of fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil. Following my return to the United States a month later, we maintained communication through electronic and social media. Our initial conversations took place in English, which Diogo speaks well but not perfectly. More recently, my ongoing study of Portuguese has made possible some written exchanges in his native tongue.

Diogo is now forty-six years old, with fair skin and black hair that bespeak his half-Japanese ancestry. Diogo’s father emigrated from Japan to Brazil as a child in the early 1930s. Three decades later, he fell in love with and wed Diogo’s mother, a woman of Italian heritage. Such a union would have been almost unthinkable in earlier times. Prior to 1945, most Japanese who emigrated to the New World viewed their sojourn abroad as temporary. They generally hoped to accumulate savings to improve their children’s prospects and return to their natal village for a comfortable retirement. Although few in fact achieved this ideal, endogamy helped to reinforce collective allegiance to the ethnic homeland. Well over 90 percent of Japanese emigrant marriages in the prewar period involved two Japanese partners (Lesser 2002, 50). However, with Japan’s defeat in World War II, the diaspora were forced to abandon the dream of “returning” in triumph. Unions between Japanese (particularly males) and non-Japanese Brazilians increased rapidly. Families formed by Japanese and Italian Brazilians were particularly numerous, reflecting their mutual outsider status vis-à-vis Lusophone society (Tsuda 2003, 99; Green 2008, 420). Over time, however, intermarriage served to facilitate the assimilation of both Japanese and Italian diasporas into mainstream Brazilian culture.

Diogo spent his childhood on a farm in São Paulo state. “Fresh fruit, fresh milk,” he reminisced. Over eighty percent of Japanese emigrants to Brazil settled in this province or in neighboring Paraná (Watanabe 2008, 123). Most came to Brazil as indentured laborers for coffee and jute plantations. Others, sponsored by quasi-public emigration corporations or led by charismatic pioneers, placed new land under cultivation. Swiftly transitioning from laborers and tenant farmers to owner-cultivators, Japanese Brazilians invested in infrastructure and introduced new crops, innovative farming techniques, and cooperative modes of distribution. By 1958, fifty years after the first

emigrants settled in São Paulo, only 3 percent remained landless (Burajiru Nikkeijin chōsa iinkai 1964, 241).

Whereas many emigrants idealized land ownership as a form of stability and belonging, their children often turned to education as a pathway to social and economic success. Second-generation Japanese Brazilians attended college in relatively elevated numbers compared to the general population. By the late 1970s, about 15 percent of students and nearly half of faculty at the University of São Paulo, Brazil's most prestigious institution of higher learning, claimed at least partial Japanese descent. At the time, such persons comprised less than one percent of the Brazilian population (Saitō 1978a, 31). Graduates achieved lucrative, high-status positions in public service, medicine, technology, jurisprudence, academia, business, and other fields (Saitō 1978b, 206). Diogo's older sister became a dentist.

In the late 1980s, however, Brazil experienced economic catastrophe. Amid domestic unemployment rates of over 30 percent and inflation of more than 1,700 percent annually, even professional employment could not guarantee a middle-class lifestyle. As a result, even well educated Japanese Brazilians were attracted by blue-collar opportunities in Japan. About a third of dekasegi held college degrees and gave up professional jobs in South America for better-paid work in Japanese factories (Brookes 1992, 5). Meanwhile, university attendance declined among Japanese Brazilian youth in their teens and early twenties. Though only a few years younger than his high-achieving sister, Diogo was just finishing high school when labor visas became available. He chose not to attend university. As he explained, Japanese employers did not value Brazilian educational credentials and only wanted workers for manual labor deemed "dirty, dangerous, or difficult" (the so-called three Ds). Further schooling would not improve his

earning potential in Japan, or, for that matter, in crisis-era Brazil.

Approximately a third of dekasegi followed Diogo's "farm to factory" trajectory. In 1990 a Japanese newspaper profiled Akira and Akio Yamada, Japanese Brazilian brothers aged 18 and 19, respectively. Their parents had grown cauliflower, lettuce, and watercress for more than two decades, but in the late 1980s the Yamada household, like many throughout Brazil, became caught in the crosshairs of runaway inflation and stagnant income due to fixed state prices for agricultural products. The father and sons took jobs on an automobile parts assembly line in Japan in an effort to offset losses of up to 40 percent annually. Meanwhile, the mother oversaw the crop and looked after her ill, elderly father-in-law and two youngest children. Frequently, even dekasegi income could not keep farms afloat. Families abandoned their plots, which turned to wasteland (*Daily Yomiuri* 1990, 2).

Like the Yamada brothers, Diogo found factory employment in Japan. After seven years, he returned briefly to São Paulo for personal reasons. Within a few months, however, he had renewed his visa and re-migrated to Chigasaki, a city in Kanagawa prefecture increasingly known for its ethnic diversity. Such repeat or circular migration is common: one 2005 study of a community in Shizuoka prefecture (then home to about 15 percent of all Japanese Brazilians in Japan) found that four in ten dekasegi had left and returned more than twice. Transience itself became a stable condition. Nonetheless, although repeat migration generally represents an attempt to maximize economic opportunity, social scientists have established a negative correlation with full-time, well-paid, secure employment in Japan (Takenoshita 2011, 162, 168).

During his twelve years as a dekasegi, Diogo, like many ethnic return migrants, never

achieved financial stability. However, he did not mind the work. Japanese Brazilians often encounter significant discrimination in mainstream society, yet their Japanese supervisors and coworkers are generally polite and helpful on the factory floor (Tsuda 2003, 136-141). One survey of Japanese Brazilian and Japanese workers found that both groups frequently noticed cultural differences in working norms, but did not generally view these disparities as problematic (Nishida 2003, 144-145, 160-161). During business hours, Japanese managers addressed Diogo formally and insisted on diligent performance of duties. Sometimes, however, they would go out for drinks together at the end of the day. “They called me *bakayarō* 馬鹿やろう (idiot),” Diogo remembered, using a term that can indicate scorn, but also rough male familiarity.

“Bakayarō” was one of Diogo’s few Japanese-language words. Earlier generations who emigrated prior to World War II viewed the Japanese language as essential to maintaining a connection with the homeland. Japanese schools were not only institutions of education, but also a nexus of community life. Use of the mother tongue began to decline during the *brasilidade* (Brazilianization) campaign launched by President Getúlio Vargas in the late 1930s, when foreign-language publishing and education were outlawed. Although this policy met with considerable resistance, by 1949 one study found that only 32 percent of Japanese Brazilians (9 percent under the age of 16) could read and write in Japanese. By contrast, 95 percent of adults were literate in Portuguese, and over 80 percent spoke primarily Portuguese or *koronia-go* コロニア語 (a creole of southern Japanese dialects and rural Brazilian Portuguese) at home (Willems 1949, 7; Izumi and Saitō 1954, 139). When ethnic return migration to Japan began in the 1990s, over half of all Japanese Brazilians were unable to read any Japanese, and almost three in ten could not understand even the rudiments of spoken language (Tōkei sūri kenkyūjo 1993,

13). Aside from a few phrases, Diogo did not acquire his father’s tongue as a child. Nor did he learn any appreciable Japanese during twelve years of working in a Japanese factory.

Upon the arrival of the *dekasegi* in Japan, language programs sprang up to accommodate the needs and schedules of full-time workers, as well as school-age children accompanying their parents. Yet social scientists have found a merely modest correlation between the length of residence in Japan and proficiency in Japanese of adult migrants (Maemura 2012, 49). The demands of an eight-hour day (and frequent overtime) left little time or energy for study. Moreover, the steady growth of the Japanese Brazilian community allowed members to enjoy a Lusophone life, centered around “Little Brazil” shopping malls, supermarkets, bars, social clubs, community centers, churches, schools, makeshift *praças* (plazas), company dorms, and apartment blocks (Carvalho 2003, 134). In these spaces, *dekasegi* consumed primarily Portuguese-language newspapers, journals, magazines, television, movies, music, and radio programs (Roth 2002, 92-117; Reyes-Ruiz 2005).



Japanese Brazilian supermarket in Oizumi, Gunma prefecture. [Source](#)

While the ability to navigate Japan in

Portuguese with increasing ease has diminished the urgency of learning Japanese, social scientists also suggest that many dekasegi give up or avoid language study altogether due to the fact that the tremendous investment required to acquire fluency is seldom rewarded by increased economic opportunities. Regardless of language skills, most dekasegi remain locked in low-wage, unstable positions. Both in and beyond the workplace, upward mobility is constrained by a lack of social credentials such as guarantors, family and residence records, and domestic educational credentials (Takenoshita 2013). Firms question the motivation and corporate loyalty of Japanese Brazilians, while offering only short-term contracts with no opportunity for advancement—in short, employment that discourages these qualities (Roth 2002, 75-91).

Dekasegi ambitions are also stymied by negative Japanese stereotypes of Brazil as a “Third World” country, and of emigrants and their descendants as “good riddance elements” (*kimin* 棄民). Ethnic return migration is predicated on assumptions that emigrant progeny possess the same cultural heritage as prototypical national citizens, and have adapted that legacy identically and synchronously with Japanese in the ethnic homeland. Dekasegi are thus expected to integrate into Japan’s allegedly homogenous society more easily than foreigners of non-Japanese descent. How

dekasegi seldom meet these hopes. For many ethnic return migrants, particularly those troubled by their status as a visible minority in Brazil, the realization of cultural incongruity with the Japanese in Japan suggests the impossibility of genuine identification with *any* nation. Others react to social exclusion in Japan by “discovering” Brazil as their homeland—an attachment that often persists well after repatriation (Tsuda 2003, 155-219). “I am Brazilian,” Diogo is still fond of repeating today, despite the fact that he left Japan more than ten years earlier.

To Diogo, “Brazilianness” encompassed character traits such as friendliness, romance, extroversion, and the desire to “enjoy life.” Conversely, he saw the Japanese as formal and cold, avoiding eye contact and touch (interactional norms in Brazil). As social scientists have noted, dekasegi attempts to distinguish between themselves and mainstream Japanese often reference essentialized notions of “warmth” (Linger 2001, 209-303). A few weeks after my initial encounter with Diogo, I interviewed Miki Nakatomi, a forty year-old Japanese Brazilian mother of three. During the mid-2000s, Miki spent four years in Aichi prefecture, home to a quarter of all Japanese Brazilians in Japan (Sasaki 2013b, 4). Unlike Diogo, Miki spoke Japanese fluently, having learned the language from her emigrant mother as a child. (During our interview, which was conducted in Japanese, she laughed gently at my Tokyo accent.) Even without a language barrier, however, Miki found her time in Japan lonely, even isolating. She felt ill at ease among her Nagoya neighbors, who complained that she was noisy and did not properly dispose of her trash (a process of increasing complexity in contemporary Japan).⁷

Some of Miki’s discomfort undoubtedly stemmed from her phenotypic appearance as the daughter of two Japanese parents. Like many non-Japanese Asians in Japan, she



Ad for Rodeio Grill ロディオグリル , a popular Japanese Brazilian restaurant in Oizumi, Gunma prefecture. [Source](#)

ever, owing to their Brazilian enculturation,

struggled with the “problem of similarity”: feelings of rejection and inadequacy at her inability to fulfill social predictions generated by the fact that she “looked” Japanese. As anthropologists have found, *dekasegi* of mixed or non-Japanese descent (including spouses and illegal aliens), who are not expected to know or follow cultural norms, often report paradoxically smoother relations with mainstream society and greater satisfaction with life in Japan (Takenaka 2003, 223).

As the child of only one Japanese parent, Diogo neither achieved nor sought such immersion. His sense of self depended not on acceptance in Japan, but rather in Brazil, where his mixed heritage constituted a marker of national belonging. In contrast to Japan, where putative ethnic homogeneity is a point of domestic pride, Brazil has long valorized plurality as a source of national strength. Historically, the Brazilian population has been characterized by tremendous diversity, encompassing the descendants of indigenous peoples, African slaves, Portuguese colonizers, and immigrants from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Brazilian policymakers, adopting Euro-American perspectives on race, deplored non-“white” elements as a biological menace to the nation within a Social Darwinist world system. They sought to “whiten” Brazil by restricting non-European newcomers and embracing Portuguese culture. In the 1930s, however, sociologist Gilberto Freyre reframed diversity as a source of pride and benefit to national welfare and culture (Freyre 1963, 47, 60; Freyre 1968, 430). By comparison with the United States, where Japanese emigrants lacked the right to naturalize and racist legislation curtailed all in-migration by “non-whites” by 1924, Freyre’s so-called racial democracy appeared a haven of toleration. Proponents of emigration cited Freyre’s conclusions regarding the relative absence of discrimination to encourage Japanese settlement in Brazil both before and after 1945

(e.g. Noda 1932, 276; Nakamura 1953, 195-197).

In the 1950s, scholars began to criticize Freyre’s “strategic mythmaking” for obscuring the very real phenomenon of racism in Brazil. Yet the sociologist remains revered for having transformed ethnic pluralism and *mestiços* (mixed-blood offspring) from a “deviation” from the ideal of whiteness into a national ideal (Skidmore 1974; Stepan 1991; Schwarcz 1999; Dávila 2003). Diogo took no particular pride in his Japanese heritage, despite the opportunities that it had afforded him and the association of Japanese Brazilians with certain positive characteristics: modesty, studiousness, industriousness, honesty, and respectability. By contrast, the fact of his *mestiço* descent gave him a sense of belonging as a Brazilian that was accentuated by his experience of life in a “homogenous” Japan that excluded him.

Diogo felt particularly shunned by Japanese women, whom he described as unapproachable and reluctant to interact with non-Japanese working-class men. Marriages between ethnic return migrants and Japanese nationals were and are relatively rare (Maemura 2012, 48). Most *dekasegi* find spouses among fellow Brazilians or other Latin Americans in Japan. Diogo, however, married a non-Japanese American woman who had come to Chigasaki to teach English. As in the world at large, American citizens (of both Japanese and non-Japanese descent) tend to enjoy high status in Japan’s marriage market based on the superpower standing of the United States (Tsuda 2009c, 238). Diogo’s good looks and proficiency in English, which he had studied in grade school, undoubtedly enhanced his appeal to an American mate.

After a total of twelve years in Japan, Diogo accompanied his wife to her birthplace, Chicago. His geographic trajectory reflected what social scientists have termed “firework migration,” in which the point of origin is

defined, but subsequent movements do not indicate the intention to settle down in a particular destination (Ishii 2003, 218). Diogo thrived in the new environment. His English improved rapidly, allowing him to achieve what he called the “American dream”: “I came to the U.S.A. without degrees or certifications. Just four years later, I was a quality specialist in a multinational company in charge of two production sections.” His wife gave birth to a son in 2008 and a daughter in 2010. In November 2011, he inaugurated his Facebook account with an optimistic post: “New opportunities. From now on I am in God’s hands!”⁸ He seemed to have it all.

Repatriation but not “return”

Then, as Diogo put it, “My life went to sh*t.” Six years into their marriage, his wife filed for divorce. In our first conversation, he simply told me, “She is not a kind person.” More than three years after their breakup, he still preferred not to talk about her or their relationship. I subsequently learned that their son’s devastating asthma, culminating in an induced coma and a year of hospital visits, had placed an unbearable strain on the marriage. In addition to his wife, Diogo lost his job and car. He biked an hour and fifteen minutes each way to see his children, his nose and ears stinging in the Windy City. Months later, he found employment in a factory. However, the job was not enough to save his visa: in November 2012 the United States government denied his application for renewal, and, within weeks, he was forced to return to Brazil. Remembering the pain of leaving his children, he moaned, “What kind of world is this?”

When we met in São Paulo, Diogo lacked a clear vision for his future. Would he go back to Japan? No: changing economic conditions in both Brazil and Japan had greatly curtailed the appeal of labor migration. Whereas the average dekasegi earned five to six times as much in Japan as in Brazil in the 1990s, by 2006-2007

the wage gap had narrowed to 2.16. At the same time, the cost of living in Japan was estimated to be 1.68 times that of Brazil (McKenzie and Salcedo 2009, 14). Now, rather than bringing foreign workers to Japan, many Japanese corporations are investing directly in Brazil. Ironically, these companies often view ex-dekasegi as desirable workers, given their familiarity with Japanese workplace environments and norms, and, in some cases, their language skills. Whereas Japanese corporations in Japan often characterize Japanese Brazilians as lazy, inefficient, and disloyal, their subsidiaries in Brazil view this same population as exceptionally honest, team-oriented, and punctual. Repatriates, however, tend to avoid Japanese workplaces, recalling their “rigid and stiff corporate climate” (Furusawa and Brewster 2015, 136). To fully tap potential human resources, contemporary researchers suggest that Japanese employers invest in the dekasegi during their time in Japan, particularly through language training (Furusawa and Brewster 2015, 139). Such policies would necessitate a shift in corporate views of dekasegi from disposable unskilled laborers to uniquely qualified bicultural interlocutors.



Japanese-language manga on display in a São Paulo bookstore. Author photo, Dec. 17, 2013.

Today, an increasing number of Japanese Brazilians in Japan are not *dekasegi*, but middle-class students like “Miss Carolina,” a fourth-generation seventeen-year-old who enrolled in a high school in Iwaki (Fukushima prefecture) to pursue an interest in the culture she had studied from afar since childhood (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2013, 27). Many Japanese Brazilians (particularly those outside large communities in São Paulo and Paraná) nurture a sense of cohesion through participation in traditional, elite Japanese arts such as calligraphy, origami, kabuki, taiko, koto, and shamisen. Meanwhile, global media provides access to manga, anime, and J-pop (Tsuda 2003, 71). Interest in “cool Japan” fuels diasporic desires for travel and immersion experiences (ironically echoing the Japanese government’s stated purpose in legalizing ethnic return migration).

During the 2012-2013 academic year, students at the Amazonia Nihongo Gakkō アマゾン日本語学校, a Japanese language school in Belém (Pará province) wrote compositions describing their goals for the future. Almost all of the students hoped to spend time in Japan, but (with the exception of one youth who simply wanted to attend the Tokyo Olympics in 2020) their ambitions were educational, including training for careers in teaching, engineering, medicine, and research. No one mentioned *dekasegi*. One adolescent beginner wrote,

I intend to learn enough Japanese to pass Level I of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test [proof of fluency]. Then, I would like to study abroad in Japan, experience Japanese culture, and hear real Japanese (*nama no Nihongo*) being spoken....In the future, it is my dream to work as a newspaper reporter in Japan and Brazil (Amazonia Nihongo Gakkō 2013, 20).

Such middle-class dreams would have been unimaginable in the days of Diogo’s youth, when Brazil teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and migration represented economic survival rather than professional opportunity. It remains to be seen, however, whether new ambitions on the part of Japanese Brazilians can be realized in recession-era Japan.



Entranceway, Nihon Amazonia Gakkō 日本アマゾンニア学校. Author photo, Dec. 30, 2013.

Of *dekasegi* who remain in Japan today, a growing percentage consists of long-term settlers (*teijūsha* 定住者) rather than short-term residents. In 2005, over half of all Japanese Brazilians in Nagahama (Shiga prefecture) had been working abroad for less than a year, while under thirty percent had lived in Japan for three years or more. By contrast, in 2010, 72 percent of *dekasegi* surveyed had resided in Japan for at least three years, with only 14.3 percent having arrived within the past twelve months (Kondō 2010, 49). Among Diogo's acquaintances, those who had not repatriated to Brazil had mostly married Japanese citizens or brought their Brazilian families to Japan. Although young, single males predominated among early *dekasegi*, in the mid-1990s the sex ratio became more balanced, reflecting increasing opportunities for women in the manufacturing, hospitality, and caretaking sectors (Yamanaka 1997, Yamanaka 2003). Japanese Brazilians who migrated in pairs or with families tended to stay longer, enjoy the experience more, and value Japan's relative safety and strong welfare system, accessible even to non-citizens. (Miki Nakatomi fondly recalled the comprehensive national health insurance system, which underwrote the delivery of her son and daughter during her sojourn in Nagoya.) Parents of children who

succeeded in the Japanese school system and became acculturated to Japanese life (a small minority) were often also more open to long-term settlement in Japan (Sekiguchi 2002; Oda 2010).⁹ For these *dekasegi*, Japan became "home."



Lesson at the Nihon Amazonia Gakkō. Source

By comparison with their solo counterparts, ethnic return migrants surrounded by loved ones were less troubled by social marginalization and *saudade*—nostalgia or longing for Brazil. Yet *saudade* also troubled those who had returned "home." "I really know how much it hurts, this word," Diogo lamented. "I feel like a stranger here where I was born." In Japan, this sensation was familiar, even expected. Ethnic return migration was no "return" for most *dekasegi*. But time abroad had reinforced Diogo's Brazilian identity, complicating his "homecoming" by revealing how little he belonged in his birthplace. In other words, Diogo's elevated sense of "Brazilianness," a coping strategy to reduce his feelings of marginality in Japan, was now a source of pained bewilderment as he struggled to accept permanent "return" to his country of citizenship.

Changed social and economic conditions in

Brazil left Diogo additionally disoriented, with his memories of the country offering no clear guidance for present actions and future plans. During his six years in the United States, Diogo had visited Brazil only once. He had no family ties to the city of São Paulo, yet he could not imagine settling down on the farm where he was raised. During his two-decade absence, Japanese Brazilians had completed the transition from a predominantly rural to urban minority. In the 1960s, over half of all employed Japanese Brazilians worked in agriculture. Today this sector claims less than 10 percent—a proportion that closely matches the percentage of farm workers in the national population (Burajiru Nikkeijin jittai chōsa iinkai 1964, 36; Makabe 1999, 704).



Scenes of contemporary Japanese Brazilian life. Author photos, Dec. 2013.

Diogo is not alone in battling to adjust to Brazil. Social scientists have recently begun to identify common difficulties of repatriated *dekasegi* as characteristic of “returnee syndrome” (*síndrome de regresso*) (Linger 2001, Ueno 2008, Sawaguchi 2013). In addition to their general disorientation, many Japanese Brazilians who suffer from this condition nurture a sense of economic betrayal. Cherished fantasies of a wealthy post-*dekasegi* lifestyle have in most cases proven unattainable, engendering depression. Whereas repatriating migrants often hope to open small businesses with savings amassed abroad, they find their experiences as blue-collar workers all but irrelevant as training in the strategic planning, investment, and management skills necessary for entrepreneurial success. Meanwhile, Brazilian firms remain hesitant to hire employees whom they fear might abscond to Japan for higher wages at any time. During the boom years of *dekasegi*, some migrants became trapped in a cycle of earning and spending, ultimately coming to depend on work in Japan for financial subsistence rather than capital accumulation (Tsuda 2003, 235-243). Now, accustomed to the “stability” of transience, they hardly knew how to live in one place.

Returnee syndrome also afflicts personal



relationships. Whereas many *dekasegi* have resumed pre-migration lives without significant disruption, others fail to reclaim their place in a society that has moved on without them. Single males without strong ties to their community are particularly vulnerable to anxiety, sleeplessness, inability to concentrate, and, in severe cases, hallucinations and paranoia. A few Japanese Brazilians, made hopeless by rootlessness, have harmed or killed themselves (Linger 2001, 47; Urano and Yamamoto 2008, 223-239).

Diogo's situation was hardly so dire. Upon returning to São Paulo in November 2012, he found employment in his field, quality control. He rekindled relationships with friends, including other Japanese Brazilians and former *dekasegi*. For a while he struggled to overcome the sadness he felt at the end of his marriage, but by the time of our meeting, he had begun to look for a new romantic partner. Six months later in the spring of 2014, he entered into a relationship with a beautiful younger woman. She was *mestiça*, as he told me he preferred, but not of Japanese descent. College-educated, she spoke excellent English and worked for the state government of Paraná province. By autumn, they were in love. Diogo's sense of *saudade* lifted. He wrote,

There is perfection and harmony found only in the midst of chaos.

A force, an energy that emerges after exhaustion.

A smile born of depression.

There is peace that only comes after despair.

This is the secret of those who have real strength, serenity, calm, patience, and empathy for the pain of others. Because they genuinely understand what it means to reach

the end of their rope. And what it means to seek strength, courage, and joy when they seem to have vanished forever.¹⁰

Yet in spite of his new happiness, Diogo chafed against the difficulties of daily life in Brazil. Although he remembered most of all the terrible loneliness he had suffered in Chigasaki, the passage of time now allowed him to romanticize Japan as he had once romanticized Brazil. Recalling the comprehensive Japanese train system, he deplored the inefficiency of public transportation in São Paulo. He also spoke out against environmental degradation, political corruption, and constraints on human rights and democracy in Brazil. In early 2015 Diogo joined in-person and online groups calling for the impeachment of Brazil's newly reelected president Dilma Rousseff, who was widely suspected of voter fraud.

On a more personal level, Diogo could not feel fully content without his children, who had remained with their mother in the United States. Diogo did not miss the U.S. itself. Spurned by an American woman and compelled to leave by immigration control, his most salient memories of the country were not pleasant. He also believed that, despite its political problems, Brazil was a more tolerant society than the United States. But now, he has not seen his son and daughter since his forced repatriation more than two years ago. Diogo talks to them on Skype in English, the only language they speak, the majority tongue of the only nation in which they have lived. "I play games with them, sing songs..." his voice trails off. For his daughter's most recent birthday, Diogo decorated a small T-shirt with a stick figure holding a heart-shaped balloon that read, "I'm Daddy's girl." He remains desperate to obtain a work visa for the U.S. and play a more active role in his children's lives.

As a *mestiço*, and, more importantly, a unique individual, Diogo can hardly speak for the

experiences of all Japanese Brazilian *dekasegi*, let alone those of ethnic return migrants worldwide. Any attempt to use a single member to represent an entire community inevitably fails to capture the sheer diversity of experiences, while also devaluing the distinctive personality under study. A close focus on a single case can, however, suggest patterns that may also structure the lives of others. Diogo's story offers compelling insights into the as yet unstudied ways in which ethnic return migration changes the migrant and complicates his adjustment to the country of citizenship. Returnee syndrome is not about the "return" to a former life, homeland, and identity. Rather, it is a process of creating a new existence and selfhood in a context that is also shifting under the very real pressure of laws, governments, and borders—state appurtenances that ground fireworks who might otherwise take flight.

Both the United States and Brazil automatically grant citizenship to the offspring of nationals, as well as all individuals born within their borders. Born in Brazil (to a Japanese father), Diogo was a Brazilian citizen. His children were born in the United States to an American mother, and were thus American citizens on two counts. In Japan, by contrast, citizenship follows the principle of blood: only the progeny of Japanese citizens are citizens themselves. Although persons of Japanese ancestry enjoy certain privileges, including preferential terms for visas, they are not citizens of Japan. Had Diogo established a family with a Japanese woman, his ethnic heritage would have allowed him to stay in Japan even if the union dissolved. But his son and daughter could not legally keep him in the United States after his marriage to their mother ended. Moving among the countries of his father, his children, and himself, the lifelong migrant was always returning, yet never home.

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Notes

¹ Japanese who did not repatriate after World War II included many spouses and family members of other Asian nationals, children left with local families (especially in the former “puppet state” of Manchukuo), and soldiers who were forcibly detained in China or removed to the Soviet Union. Additionally, many Japanese in the empire in 1945 died of disease, hunger, or violence at the hands of soldiers and others seeking vengeance against Japan (Adachi 2006, 11).

² Other motivations for migration included interest in Japan and its culture, the desire to reconnect with relatives, the encouragement of friends and family, and curiosity about life in a “technological superpower” (De Carvalho 2003, 65, 91).

³ More than 50,000 Peruvians and much smaller numbers of Argentinians, Bolivians, Colombians, Paraguayans, and others also obtained descent-based visas in Japan (Reyes-Ruiz 2005, 137).

⁴ This population has many modes of (self) reference, including Nisei, Nikkei, Japanese-Brazilian, and Jâpones. I follow academic convention in using “Japanese Brazilian” as the most broadly acceptable term.

⁵ It bears noting that, in framing its visa policies, Japan has carefully avoided the use of the term “return” in order to preempt demands for citizenship, welfare, and other benefits often associated with ethnic return migration. Most *dekasegi*, moreover, do not see themselves as “returning” to Japan (Sasaki 2013a, 43).

⁶ The informant’s name has been changed to protect his anonymity. No other details have been altered. The original interview took place in English in Luz, São Paulo, on the afternoon of Dec. 19, 2013, with follow-up in English and Brazilian Portuguese via social media through Mar. 2015.

⁷ I have used a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the informant. This Japanese-language interview took place in her home in Belém, Pará on the afternoon of Dec. 30, 2013.

⁸ Diogo Pacheco Moriyama, November 23, 2011. Accessed June 30, 2014. Translated by the author from the original Brazilian Portuguese.

⁹ Educational success is the exception rather than the norm for *dekasegi* children. Their parents’ inability to effectively navigate the Japanese educational landscape and curriculum, combined with language barriers, social exclusion, and bullying by Japanese peers leads to high rates of absenteeism and dropping out among Japanese Brazilian students. Although schools have responded by developing tutoring programs and other forms of assistance, support remains inadequate. Students in the small number of Brazilian schools in Japan, meanwhile, do not receive a degree that qualifies them to pursue higher education in Japan. They also face challenges in adjusting to Brazilian schools upon repatriation to Brazil (Castro-Vásquez 2009).

¹⁰ Diogo posted this poem to his Facebook account (in Brazilian Portuguese) on June 24, 2014. Accessed June 30, 2014. The translation is my own.