Flipping Places: Japanese in Brazil and Brazilians in Japan

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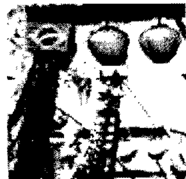

It is winter 2006. It is dusk. The snow is piled a foot high on the ground. I trudge awkwardly through it in my galoshes, a commodity I had until recently known only through stories - I being from the warmer climate of Marietta, Georgia. Most the shops are closed or are closing. A few shop owners bow casually and mutter "*konbanwa*" as I pass - a tactic for soliciting a final sale before dusk. I am hungry; I am looking for dinner.

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From where I trudge, I can see both the Ibi River, which runs through the center of Ogaki, and the town itself, which stands above the river and me with impeccable posture, like a proud man holding himself out as such. The river sparkles like a diamond, reflecting sunset; beneath it swim the submarine bodies of orange carp. The sunset feels warm on my face, and I wonder that it is not some indication of spring.

Ogaki is located in the middle of Honshu, the main island of Japan, about a forty-minute's train ride from Nagoya. Before World War Two, it was known as "The City of Water," and photographs from this time reveal a Venice-like geometry of aqueducts and streams. After the war, these channels were paved over, and the city transits became more practical and less aesthetic. Ogaki lies in the Gifu planes, which stretch charmingly into the horizon, interrupted by a spattering of houses and buildings - and eventually by vast, snow-topped mountains.

I rarely make my way to this part of town; but because I am an adventurous eater, I often trudge unknown sidewalks aimlessly and in hopes of random scents of food. Tonight, I cannot smell well because I have a cold. Choosing dinner may be a dithering task.

At last, tired of wandering and afraid of losing my bearings, I chance a back alley, recalling that I have yet to chance a back alley in Japan without discovering *something* interesting. Sure enough, I see a neon sign for an *izakaya*, the closest thing to a Western "bar" that one will find in rural Japan. The place surprises me. The generous hours of my job and my affection for after-work beers should have led me here before. Besides, I have visited nearly every other *izakaya* in Ogaki. How have I missed this one?

I walk inside.

"*Irashaimase*!" yells a raisoning old man with hair the color of cigarette ash. Welcome to my store!

"*Konbanwa*," I submit, bowing slightly.

"*Konbanwa*," he echoes, gesturing for me to take a seat at the bar. I do.

He pours me a cup of *ocha*, or hot green tea, and I glance over the menu of raw ocean food. The old man indicates his specialty on the menu, so I order that: a mysterious fish and a beer. I wait patiently, sipping at my *ocha* and just watching my beer, putting off my first taste until the foam dissolves.

Eventually, an odd sound bumps in the street. It crescendos into what feels like a weak earthquake. Earthquakes are common

here, and I brace myself for the kind of rumblings I have experienced on many mornings. I feel vibrations on the ground beneath my feet and against my back as I lean to the wall. The raisoning old man blushes. He peeks at me almost apologetically and then knives furiously at the meal he prepares; but he does not brace himself as I do. The noise has frazzled him, but he knows that it is not an earthquake: It is music.

The old man delivers my food and makes an under-the-breath comment, in English, about rap music. The hip-hop hybrid base rattles my plate, which I suspect would rattle off the table were it not for my supervision. The base feels out-of-place in this traditional, *tatami*-matted *izakaya*, and my curiosity grows such that I cannot finish the meal.

I swallow what is left of my beer, pay, and leave the *izakaya* to figure out where the music is coming from. It does not take long: one door over, the red-bricked walls shake as though the building itself were dancing. I hear voices and shouts from the window above. Could this be a club in Ogaki? I have yet to discover such a thing in these rural parts.

I surmise at once that the rumbling is a dance floor full of people. I pull open the door and confront steep wooden stairs that I fear will be treacherous for the (presumably) intoxicated partiers above. The walls are plastered in a rainbow of colors. Graffiti. At the top of the stairs, a painted mural of non-Japanese faces frames the door. I do not recognize any of them, but I assume that they represent icons from another culture. Somewhat nervously, I step to the top - to the unknown - and push open the door.

The music slaps me in the face. The air is thick with smoke. The lights flash. Several girls dance suggestively, shaking their back-sides for the men at the bar who look on with beer in hand and cigarette in mouth. I see mostly Brazilians and other *gaijin* and a few Japanese. A British man greets me and explains that this is a Brazilian club, run by and for Ogaki's Brazilian population.

An enormous Brazilian flag is tacked to the wall on the far side of the room. Given Ogaki's large Brazilian population, I should have known that somewhere within the city the Brazilians celebrated their culture - this culture that seems to differ greatly from that of the Japanese. Looking around the room at the general vivaciousness, I decide that I like this atmosphere, that I should frequent this Brazilian club more often, that I should stop thinking and start dancing.

Gaijin, or foreigners, make up 2.1% of the population of Ogaki, Japan (See Official Website of Ogaki, Japan). Brazilians make up 60.1% of these *gaijin*. That means that 3,188 *gaijin* live in Ogaki, of whom 1,917 are Brazilians. These numbers are not insignificant. After all, Ogaki's total population (at 152,000) is small for a Japanese city.

When I leave Ogaki and return to America in July 2006, I do not know that I will soon study in Brazil, where I will learn about a similar phenomenon: the number of Japanese living in São Paulo.

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In November 1895, Japan and Brazil established diplomatic relations with the signing of the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. When Japan abandoned its feudal system - thereby suffering a mild economic depression - its Meiji Government (1868-1912) sought to create colonies abroad.

Because the vast population of Japanese farmers was disproportionate to Japan's small landmass, this movement abroad was necessary to "free up" farmland from overuse and congestion. At the same time, Brazil welcomed farmers from abroad because its government no longer permitted slavery after becoming a federative republic in 1889.

Thirteen years after the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, the ship Kasato Maru voyaged to Brazil, launching the first wave of Japanese immigrants. The ship held 791 immigrants in total and arrived on June 18.

The Japanese immigrants "were on their way to coffee plantations in the countryside of the state of São Paulo, which was suffering from a shortage of labor" (Joseph Page, 1995: 102).

Several factors facilitated this migration. The need for workers to maintain Brazil's coffee plantations was, perhaps, the most important, but the U.S. exclusion of Asian immigrants beginning in 1924 contributed substantially. Furthermore, Japanese companies promoted immigration because they aimed to combat rising unemployment and overpopulation.

Naturally, as with any group migrating from one very unique culture to another very unique culture, the Japanese immigrants to Brazil, some of them pressured by their country to immigrate, did not assimilate: "Confronting an unfamiliar language and a culture totally different from their own, [the Japanese immigrants to Brazil] endured harsh exploitation at the hands of their employers" (Joseph Page, 1995: 103).

Brazilians disenfranchised these Japanese workers, whom they may have regarded as "mere foreigners" perhaps because they were accustomed to owning slaves and treated the Japanese as such. Or perhaps the Brazilians were xenophobic, a theory that seems preposterous in light of Brazil's cultural and ethnic heterogeneity, which predates Japanese migration by hundreds of years.

Over time, the Japanese began to assimilate; they inevitably became more "Brazilian" as they immersed themselves in Brazilian culture and intermarried with Brazilians. Moreover, the Japanese contributed to the successes of Brazilian industry. In fact, the productivity of the Japanese workers was such that, by 1935, "Japanese farmers and laborers were responsible for 35 percent of vegetable and fruit production in Greater São Paulo" (Joseph Page, 1995: 102).

These successes generated new waves of Japanese immigrants and, with these new waves, the interiors of Brazilian towns like Alvarez Machado, Arujá, and Mirandópolis became populated almost entirely by Japanese. Robert J. Smith indicates that between 1908 and 1942, around "190,000 persons came from Japan [to Brazil], almost 70 per cent of them between the peak years of 1926 and 1935" (Robert J. Smith, 1979: 53). Many Japanese hoped to return home to Japan after their short stints working on coffee, cotton, and banana plantations; most did not return.

World War Two worsened relations between the Japanese immigrants and the Brazilians. "When Brazil declared war on Japan and the Axis powers in 1942," Joseph Page explains, "[the] Japanese residents found themselves under further constraints" (Joseph Page, 1995: 104).

The Brazilian government prohibited the speaking of Japanese in public. It committed 55,000 workers to the Amazon "to harvest rubber for the Allied war effort," and historians estimate that "nearly half [of these workers] perished before Japan surrendered in September 1945" (Larry Rohter, 14 November 2006).

Many of these workers probably despised the Japanese, whom they considered not only the enemy, but also the reason behind their having to forsake their homes and families for a life in the rainforest. Furthermore, the Brazilian government seized the assets of Japanese citizens, disbanded Japanese schools, prohibited Japanese radio, and confiscated Japanese newspapers. To be Japanese in 1940s Brazil was to be a pariah, a threat, a menace.

That is not to say that the Japanese did not, in some ways, provoke their isolation. For instance, Japanese nationalism, with its selective and sensational coverage of current events and with its historical amnesia, only exacerbated the ostracism of the Japanese. Page reveals that "the Japanese community in Brazil were celebrating the 'report' that the Japanese navy had sunk the entire Allied fleet in the Sea of Japan," when really Emperor Hirohito had just announced Japan's surrender after the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Joseph Page, 1995: 104).

Furthermore, the *kachigumi* ("victory group"), a fanatical clan of Japanese that refused to acknowledge Japan's World War Two defeat, terrorized members of its own Japanese community in 1946, killing fourteen Japanese citizens and justifying those deaths as a victory against the *makegumi* (the "defeatist group") (Joseph Page, 1995: 104).

The Brazilian government's response to this terrorism, of course, was backlash. Brazil's Constituent Assembly considered disallowing any more Japanese migrants into the country; but it ultimately rejected a constitutional provision stating as much.

This backlash notwithstanding, Brazil not only allowed Japanese migrants to continue entering the country; they also quickly

forgave the Japanese for their role in a war that did not drastically affect Brazil. Consequently, around 60,000 Japanese migrated to Brazil between 1953 and 1968 (Robert J. Smith, 1979: 54).

Scores of Japanese settled in São Paulo and maintained a dependency on the Japanese consulates; these settlers often remained Japanese citizens, fearing the consequences of naturalization - namely, severe legal inequities. By the 1970s, most Japanese had resolved that they would never return to Japan and that they would call São Paulo home.

In fact, around one-third "of the Japanese population and their descendents were concentrated in the Greater São Paulo area" (Cristina Moreira da Rocha, 2000: 2). Consequently, the Japanese influenced some of the city to convert to Buddhism and Shintoism, the most popular Japanese religions. Because they had concluded that they probably would never return to their home country, the Japanese immigrants realized that they must acculturate.

And acculturate they did.

By the turn of the millennium, Nippo-Brazilians boasted a history of three cabinet ministers, four members of the Chamber of Deputies (one of whom was from São Paulo), a mayor of Curitiba City, more than thirty-six mayors in Paraná and the state of São Paulo, and various governmental positions. The influx of Nippo-Brazilians into government indicated representation for a group that the government of Brazil had marginalized since the beginnings of World War Two.

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In Rio de Janeiro, I meet a beautiful, witty girl named Giuliana. She is from São Paulo. We spend many hours together and delight in our remarkable compatibility.

Almost inevitably, I return to Brazil a month after leaving it. I meet Giuliana in the São Paulo airport. She tells me that she wants me to see Liberdade (translated "Freedom"), which boasts the largest concentration of Japanese citizens outside Japan.

We drive into Liberdade, and it immediately strikes me as familiar. The entrance to the district is announced by a massive orange gateway that looks like the gateways outside many of Japan's Buddhist temples. The buildings and billboards are marked in *kanji, hiragana,* and *katakana*. I feel as if I am back in Japan.

"Would you like to get out of the car and walk around?" Giuliana asks.

"Definitely," I answer.

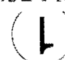
We spend a couple of hours shopping, talking, and observing. I test my Japanese with a few shop owners and recognize that my skills have gotten rusty. I will need more practice before I return to Japan in a few months.

A couple of days later, Giuliana takes me to meet her family at Mercadão Municipal, popularly referred to as just Mercadão, a bustling marketplace where we taste several fruits, many of which have no names in English and which I have never seen in the United States.

We then walk up metal stairs that lead to a large platform patio overlooking all of the shops. I lean over the railing and gaze down at the restless foot traffic below. I marvel that everyone is going about their daily routine, oblivious to me, and that I am somehow detached from the process, an observer, a gringo.

Then I hear laughing behind me. I turn to see a lady snickering and pointing at a large painting on the wall. The words above the painting read, "JapaLouco." The painting portrays a Japanese man, his mouth gaping comically, his tongue unfurled, his hair disheveled, and his index finger pointing towards his ears as if making a looping motion.

The image is supposed to signify a Japanese man demonstrating his looniness. The painting appears quite old - and quite odd. I



wonder that it still hangs in this era of political correctness.

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I travel to Vitória and stay with my friend, Daniel, a young Brazilian attorney who has recently passed the Brazilian bar exam. On my first night in Vitória, he takes me to a popular area of the city called the Triangle. Stunning girls flaunt their figures along the sidewalks outside the bars; they make eyes at the college boys. A girl obviously of Asian descent approaches Daniel and me; she smiles, hugs Daniel, and speaks in Portuguese. I cannot understand the conversation, but Daniel relays most of it to me in English.

"She is Japanese," he explains.

"Really?" I reply, not totally surprised. I turn to her and ask, "*Nihongo wakarimasu ka*?" Do you understand Japanese?

She stares at me blankly.

"What did you say?" asks Daniel. "You didn't say anything. What are you trying to say?" Unnecessarily panicked, Daniel assumes that I have attempted Portuguese.

"No, no," I say, "I was speaking Japanese. I asked if she understood Japanese."

Daniel translates. Apparently, she does not speak much, if any, English. She answers Daniel in Portuguese, and Daniel relays that she speaks some Japanese.

Encouraged, I ask, "*Nihongo dekimasu ka*?" Can you speak Japanese?

Again, she does not respond. This time, her face reddens. "*Desculpe*," she apologizes, shaking her head.

Daniel and she continue to talk, and Daniel continues to translate. Apparently, the girl's grandparents, who are still living, are Japanese and speak Japanese exclusively. They do not know any Portuguese. Yet this girl does not understand the elementary Japanese phrases I put to her. She seems to know only Portuguese. How does she communicate with her grandparents, I wonder.

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I return to Japan in the Spring of 2008, to study law at the Temple University campus in Tokyo. As my plane descends over Tokyo, I gaze out the window at the tall buildings and lights of this seemingly unending city. From this altitude, I think, one cannot tell the difference between Tokyo and São Paulo.

Citations

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