

Riger Tsurumi, Rebecca. *The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian Literature*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2012. Print. Pages 313.

DEBBIE LEE-DISTEFANO
SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian Literature is a commendable work that strives to present the images of the Japanese by juxtaposing two bodies of literature: texts written by Peruvians of Japanese descent with texts by Peruvian authors of other ethnic backgrounds. Riger Tsurumi's project is quite aggressive but in the end manages to achieve a comprehensive study, weaving the reader down a path that begins with history, continues on to discuss the images of the Japanese in Peruvian literature, and finishes with analyses of Nisei poetry. In the end the book, like many comparative projects, brings forward more questions than it strives to answer.

The collection starts with the history of Japanese immigration and subsequent presence in Peru, focusing primarily on the early history. The chapter discusses the economic climates in both Peru and Japan that prompted migration, passes through the discriminatory World War II period, and lightly touches on the post-WWII period that followed. This section is very useful for the uninitiated scholar. Her timeline is succinct and gives the most pertinent information. This chapter is focused on presenting the reader with possible reasons as to why the contract labor system was needed, why bring laborers from Japan and the ramifications of them both. She also briefly discusses Fujimori and his fall from grace to be convicted of human rights abuses. Her discussions of the Peruvian political climate and the inclusion or exclusion of the Japanese-Peruvians are rather simplistic and could use more substance. Her discussion of the APRA, for example, and Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre's negativity toward the Japanese could be extended to José Carlos Mariátegui and his *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad Peruana* (1928). Indeed, most pro-indigenous critics would have viewed Peruvians of Afro or Asiatic descent as a cog in the movement, an element that would detract from the restoration of Tiwantinsuyu. The historical aspect, however, is very well taken and serves as a proper introduction to the analyses that follow.

The focus then shifts from the historical aspect to the literary, beginning with the Orient seen as object. She proposes to discuss how the "Orientals" were viewed, particularly through the lens of *modernista* writers in Latin America, such as Julián del Casal, José Juan Tablada, Rubén Darío and José Martí, to name a few. She quotes Edward Said from his fundamental text *Orientalism*, and while she does present Saidian ideas regarding European orientalism and the use of the Orient by European writers, she stops short of engaging any of this theoretically. Her use of Araceli Tinajero's critiques of the Spanish American writer's interrogation of orientalism are useful (see *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano* 2004); however, she fails to find her own voice regarding these images. There is little engagement of writers and their poetry; they are well-presented, but the discussion is not fully developed. A more thorough elucidation of the own approach would enhance the discussion.

The book then continues by engaging writers and their presentations of the Japanese in literature. The authors that Riger Tsurumi has included are: Mario Vargas Llosa (*La casa verde*); Miguel Gutiérrez Correa (“Maravilela”); Alfredo Bryce Echenique (“Muerte de Sevilla en Madrid”); Carmen Ollé (*Las dos caras del deseo*); Pilar Dughi (*Puñales escondidos*); Mario Bellatín (*El jardín de la señora Murakami* and *Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción*). The discussions of the plot and character development in each work are quite interesting. The reader, via research and interviews with the authors, forms a clear picture of the why and the how regarding the inclusion of Japanese characters in their fiction. For example, in the case of Vargas Llosa and *La casa verde*, clearly the most well-known of all the works, Riger Tsurumi goes to great lengths to discuss Vargas Llosa’s fascination with a mythical Japanese character, Tushía, after which the main character, Fushía, in *La casa verde* is modeled. She describes this character and his pivotal role as being “one of the Japanese protagonists with a major role in Peruvian narrative (73). Her discussion on the level of character development is quite well done.

Another example is Pilar Dughi’s *Puñales escondidos*. The focus shifts to literature written by Japanese authors and how Dughi incorporates these ideas in her own narrative. Although the structure and narrative technique of *Puñales escondidos* seem very delightful and intriguing, the chapter seems more of an analysis of the Japanese narratives rather than that of Dughi. Riger Tsurumi writes that the Japanese literature that inspired Dughi and serves as the impetus behind the novel’s movement and development, presents “existential questions involving identity, nationality, religion, and morality...during the chaotic period following their defeat in World War II and subsequent recovery” (113). Riger Tsurumi’s analysis of the novel seems to be secondary to the discussion of the Japanese literature, with no premise behind why these images of the Japanese are pertinent.

Indeed, the major flaw that stands out throughout the book is that there is no real interrogation of the texts in any of the chapters, with the exception of the last chapter regarding the poetry of Doris Moromisato, especially regarding what seems to be the central theme: the images of the Japanese. There is no comment or observation regarding similarity, difference or contrast. The chapters seem to be simple plot summaries and character development sketches. Given the title, the reader would anticipate a discussion of these images rather a mere presentation of them. As mentioned before, the chapter regarding Doris Moromisato and her poetry appears to be the one attempt to analyze the poetry. The choice of poems is excellent, which are exemplary of Moromisato’s expertise. Moreover, Riger Tsurumi engages the Japanese images, which allows the book to end with what the title promises. The previous chapter regarding José Watanabe, a well known Nisei poet, seems more of a recapitulation of the poet’s own analyses, given that his voice during interviews, are present throughout.

In sum, each chapter has its merits, especially in regards to plot summary and character development. However, the chapters are lacking the voice of Riger Tsurumi. Her analyses are elusive, hidden behind the interviews, characters and plots. She falls short in each chapter in adding a critical perspective that is indeed her own. Moreover, there is no explanation or interrogation that would unify these contiguous chapters. She leaves the reader wanting to know why these works and what, if anything, could be inferred? Her mastery is presentation of plot and character; however, each chapter lacks critical, intellectual engagement.

The most notable, and perhaps most troubling, concern is the essentialist approach. There is textual evidence, throughout entire book, that Riger Tsurumi is assuming a definition of what it means to be Japanese in Peru without actually stating it. Often her references to Peruvians as being Japanese, rather than Peruvians of Japanese descent,

implies that perhaps there is confusion regarding their nationality, belying an underlying authorial prejudice. Indeed, many literary and cultural studies critics could take issue with the muddle of signification that occurs on many levels. Riger Tsurumi is coloring each chapter with her own interpretation of what it means to be Japanese Peruvian. In the case of *La casa verde* and the main character, Fushía, she writes that “he channels his native intelligence, ambition and talents” (66). The use of native is an interesting choice and perhaps speaks more to the author’s own definitions of the characters that she is describing. Indeed, earlier on she writes that: “Although he is of Japanese ancestry, Fushía does not speak or write Japanese; neither does he know anything about Japanese customs or culture” (62). Given that he is Brazilian, not Japanese; it would appear that Riger Tsurumi is partaking in orientalism on the critical scale, assuming it to be odd that a Brazilian of Japanese descent doesn’t speak Japanese. In the poetry of Watanabe and Moromisato, there appears to be a constant strive to connect them to a Japanese past. Seldom does she refer to the Peruvian elements nor does she connect the Japanese elements to their Peruvian context. To her credit, these are the two chapters where the Japanese images are being discussed and interrogated. However, a definition or clear plan or scope from the beginning could have clarified the author’s intent.

In conclusion, Rebecca Riger Tsurumi’s *The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian Literature* has many merits. The interviews are extremely helpful because they allow the reader contact with the creators and the thought processes behind their creations. Her explanations of plot and character allow the reader to fully understand what is happening in each text. Finally, she has included, in one collection, many fictional images of the Japanese in Peru. Although the book falls short by failing to promote a beginning point of inquiry, other than the fact that there are Japanese images, and does not critically engage the texts, it is still a valuable addition to the study of Asians in the Americas. Riger Tsurumi may not have had this critical approach in mind as she was completing the manuscript. However, *The Closed Hand* could serve as a beneficial point of departure for future critics who would like to assume the challenge to take the analyses further.