

**Beyond the Hyphen: Representation of Multicultural Japanese Identity
in Maximiliano Matayoshi's *Gaijin* and Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de
un solo día***

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In 1954, *La Plata Hoshi*, the newspaper for the local Japanese community in Argentina, published a poem by the gaucho Ángel Sirimarco, together with a picture of him in traditional clothes. Entitled “Dedicada a la colectividad japonesa,” it depicts Argentina as a country of freedom and equality for all immigrants, with particular emphasis on those from “the land of the Rising Sun”:

Lindo es ver y admirar
Colectividades de países foráneos
Que se divierten y son felices
Como en el hogar patrio.
En esta tierra están contentos
Sin ignorar su patria querida
Que les dió ilusión y vida
Al ver la luz del mundo:
Sólo recuerdan madres y parientes
Que dejaron en tierra del Sol Naciente. (Sirimarco 4)

These words are meant to celebrate the purported “diversity” that existed in the nation governed by Juan Domingo Perón. After the massive immigration in the first decades of the twentieth century, Argentina became a self-proclaimed *crisol de razas* wherein different racial and ethnic groups were supposedly coexisting. The Japanese were no exception in this imaginary picture. For Sirimarco, these immigrants from Asia were integral constituents of the modern Argentina.

Although Sirimarco’s white, western perspective does not necessarily reflect the actual experience of Japanese immigrants, his narrative contains certain historical truth. In Argentina, the Japanese have enjoyed a relatively comfortable social status, unlike their counterparts in Brazil and Peru who experienced strong anti-Japanese sentiment. One

obvious reason is the difference in size: while Brazil and Peru are known to have the largest Japanese communities outside the country, there is a significantly smaller Japanese population in Argentina. This contrast can be highlighted further if we look at the recent scholarship. On the one hand, there is an increasing number of studies that investigate the cultural and sociopolitical contributions of the Japanese in Brazil and Peru.¹ On the other hand, the influence of the Japanese diaspora in Argentina has received little critical attention from scholars, with some notable exceptions.² One of the goals of this essay is to grapple with this hollow through the analysis of both history and literature that explore the presence of Japanese immigrants in Argentina.

In particular, this essay focuses on the manifestation of the “Japanese-Argentine” identity in two contemporary novels, namely Maximiliano Matayoshi’s *Gaijin* (2003) and Anna Kazumi Stahl’s *Flores de un solo día* (2002).³ What their works share is the way in which the immigrant identity is defined not through the conventional hyphenation and biculturalism (e.g., “Japanese-American” or “Japanese-Brazilian”), but through the mingling of three different cultural contexts, including Japan, Argentina, and the United States. In his study of *Flores de un solo día* alongside two other novels that deal with Asians in Latin America (Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Brazil-Marú* and Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*), Gustavo Geirola mentions that these works “desestabilizan la idea de una identidad concebida en términos de una oposición binaria, lo que en inglés se traduce como *hyphenated-identity*” (119). I would go a step further and argue that Matayoshi’s and Kazumi Stahl’s novels articulate the immigrant identity in terms of a *ternary* rather than a *binary* construction, thus challenging the structure characterized by oppositions. From this perspective, both texts call into question the conventional post-colonial notion of “diaspora” that is determined exclusively through antithesis, whether between colonizer/colonized, occident/orient, master/slave, center/periphery or self/other. At the same time, my focus on a minority group in Argentina sheds new light on the idea of nation, which is frequently essentialized and homogenized. My central concern is to show how the emerging generation of writers provides an alternative narrative to the understanding of the Japanese diaspora in Latin America, on the one hand, and the meaning of national identity in today’s Argentina, on the other.

Theories of hybridity

In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall theorizes the notion of “cultural identity” in two ways. First, he captures its collective nature by referring to “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves,’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (234). Hall’s second definition involves not only the fact of “being” but also the process of “becoming”: “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being externally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (236). For Hall, this fluid nature of cultural identity is most evident in an immigrant subject, a wandering insider/outsider who readily transgresses geopolitical boundaries. As a result, a diaspora is constructed and reproduced through constant negotiations between multiple languages, traditions, and histories. Hall defines the diaspora experience “not by essence of purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (emphasis in original, 244).

Homi Bhabha takes a different approach to the notion of hybridity, which he describes as “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘defined’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (114). Unlike Hall, Bhabha invokes hybridity as a way to contest colonial domination and to turn objectified, marginalized others into subjects of their own historicity. In this sense, hybridity creates resistance against cultural hegemony. Bhabha famously calls the location of hybridity the “Third Space” wherein cultural differences between colonizer and colonized are transfigured into a productive contact zone for the subaltern subject. In his words, this “in-between” space represents “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). This “Third Space” of hybridity is both disruptive and subversive because it “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture

as a homogenizing, unifying force” (37). In his writing, Bhabha is essentially concerned with a dialectic process of identity formation that involves two opposite cultures and two distinct discourses. My proposition resists such duality of hybridity and instead suggests another model that emphasizes the tension caused by three points of cultural reference, or the centroid of a triangle.⁴ In other words, my approach to the Japanese-Argentine identity is not lineal (i.e., Bhabha’s reference to “in-between-ness”) but more dimensional and spacious.

History of the Japanese in Argentina

Because of the prevalent influence of immigration, the theories of hybridity provided by Hall and Bhabha are more relevant to Argentina than to most other countries in Latin America. By the 1930s, the country had already experienced the world’s second largest immigration wave, only after the United States. Between 1880 and 1916, almost 2.9 million people arrived, followed by another million in the 1920s. As a result of this enormous settlement, the Argentine population exceeded 10 million by 1930 (Brown 148). It is important to recognize, however, that it was a kind of hybridity wherein ethnic minorities were overshadowed by the dominant presence of European immigrants. Scholars have examined the contributions of Jews and Afro-Argentines in the making of modern Argentina over the past two decades.⁵ Nevertheless, the presence of Asia or the Orient in Argentine literature and culture still remains largely underexplored.⁶

The history of Japanese immigration in Argentina dates back to the late nineteenth century. As elsewhere in the region, the majority of the first immigrants came from Okinawa, also known as one of the Ryukyu Islands. Unlike the rest of Latin America, however, those who settled in Argentina did not arrive directly from Asia but from neighboring countries, such as Brazil and Peru. As Daniel Masterson and Sayaka Funada-Classen show, “they were refugees from the poor conditions on the sugar plantations of these two nations [Brazil and Peru], and many of the Japanese pioneers in Argentina entered the country covertly” (89). The first wave of Japanese immigration (until World War I) can thus be described as an indirect “transmigration” or “remigration.”⁷ In a sense, the singularity of these individuals was already defined through ternary at the initial moment of

settlement: Japan as the origin, Brazil or Peru as the transition, and Argentina as the new “home.” In other words, Argentina was viewed as an alternative not only to their native country, but also to other Latin American nations.

By comparing the experience of Japanese-Argentines to that of Japanese-Brazilians, we begin to see how their example presents a different layer to the study of the Japanese diaspora in Latin America. One of the most notable differences between Argentina and Brazil is the degree of state-sponsored persecutions. In Brazil, the anti-Japanese movement known as “Campanha Anti-Nipônica” was notoriously influential in the 1920s. An advocate of this campaign, Federal Deputy Fidélis Reis once claimed that “the yellow cyst will remain in the national organism, unassimilable by blood, by language, by customs, by religion” (cited in Lesser 2002, 39). Such a negative view was also shared by Miguel Couto, the most vocal proponent of this movement, who believed that the immigration from Japan was a devious plot to overtake the Brazilian nation (cited in Lesser 2002, 39). Moreover, under the regime of Getúlio Vargas, there were overt attacks against people of Japanese descent through the politics of “Estado Novo.” Of particular importance was the 1939 campaign called “brasildade,” which represented “the state-driven homogenization program sought to protect Brazilian identity from the encroachment of ethnicity by eliminating distinctive elements of immigrant culture” (Lesser 2002, 45). When Brazil declared war on Japan during WWII, Vargas’s anti-Japanese propaganda intensified further. Similar to what happened in Peru, Japanese-Brazilians became the last “enemy aliens” who were the targets of systematic oppression by the state.⁸

Compared to their countrymen in Brazil, the Japanese in Argentina lived under a more agreeable sociopolitical climate in the twentieth century, although this does not mean that there was never an instance of discrimination, as we shall see in Matayoshi’s *Gaijin*. Besides Argentina’s predilection for European immigrants, the smaller scale of the Japanese community can be explained from various perspectives. To begin with, it was not based on a government-subsidized contract, and the country lacked an accessible land-tenure system for these newcomers. Upon their arrival, most Japanese had neither the information about rural conditions, nor a large sum of capital investment to start a business (Tigner 204). Despite

these obstacles, they found employment as taxi drivers, waiters, gardeners, domestic servants, and doorkeepers (Olsen 159). The most thriving business was *tintorería*, or dry cleaner's, the first of which was established in 1921. This industry attracted many Japanese immigrants because, unlike agriculture, it required minimum funds and experience to set up a shop (Masterson and Funada-Classen 92). Because of the efficient service at *tintorería*, the Japanese gradually gained respect and confidence from the society, creating upper-working class families. Argentina maintained stronger commercial ties to Japan than most other Latin American nations before WWII, and the country had one of the largest Japanese communities in the region after the war (Tigner 204; Masterson and Funada-Classen 205).

Moreover, their successful assimilation and acculturation can be attributed to at least three major social factors. First of all, the Japanese were extremely open to the local community, admitting native Argentines to their recreational events (e.g. sports activities) and hiring local residents in their shops. This openness is in sharp contrast to the exclusive nature of the Japanese communities in Brazil and Peru, where the industrial and commercial districts were strictly segregated (Masterson and Funada-Classen 91). At the same time, the rapid modernization and industrialization of the country during the early twentieth century allowed Japanese immigrants, many of whom settled in Buenos Aires, to directly interact with urban Argentines rather than living in isolated rural areas. Second of all, intermarriage was a common practice for these settlers. The contrast with Brazil and Peru is also stark in this regard: unlike in Argentina, the Japanese men who first migrated to Peru tended to avoid intermarriage by later bringing "picture brides" from their homeland (López-Calvo 6). The third element was the willingness to accept the Catholic faith. Although many of those converts were not active members of Roman Catholicism, the adaptation to the country's religion was an integral part of the process of assimilation into Argentine society (Tigner 211).

From the political perspective, it should be noted that the Argentine government has always maintained sympathetic relations with Japan, beginning with their assistance during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). For instance, Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear, Argentina's president from 1922 to 1928, implemented a policy that encouraged Japanese immigration in

order to develop agriculture and fishing industries (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2004, 297). His administration also sent emergency funds to Japan in support of the damages caused by the great Tokyo earthquake in 1923. During WWII, Argentina kept a neutral stance in relation to Japan and only declared war toward the end when pressured by the United States in 1945. Consequently, Japanese residents did not suffer serious political persecutions. The Japanese-language newspapers were not censored until the last months of the war, and there was no evidence of the destruction of their property (Tigner 207, 212). While Japanese-Brazilians were labeled as “enemy aliens,” Japanese-Argentines were merely regarded as “foreigners under vigilance.”

The political history of the Japanese in Argentina cannot be discussed without mentioning their ties with Juan Domingo Perón and his first government between 1946 and 1955. He and his wife, Eva Duarte (Evita), helped the Japanese residents in Argentina to send emergency supplies to their homeland in order to support postwar reconstruction. Evita later identified Japanese immigrants as her fellow “descamisados,” considering them an integral part of Argentine nationalism (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2005, 110). As she told the members of the Japanese community in 1949, “Yo quiero que ustedes encuentren en mí no sólo una aliada, sino a una amiga” (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2005, 111). For his part, Perón had long been interested in Japan and its culture. Regarding the Japanese tradition, he said that “los japoneses tienen un alto espíritu de humildad y un profundo sentido de agradecimiento. Sé perfectamente que eso brilla dentro del espíritu de la población japonesa como el sol y como el escudo de crisantemo del Emperador” (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2005, 102). In the speech he delivered at the Japanese association in 1949, Perón suggested not only the idea of coexistence between Japanese and Argentines but also the mutual respect between the two nations:

Esta colectividad japonesa que uniéndose se honra y nos honra a nosotros con su convivencia, debe tener la sensación más absoluta de que para nosotros, en esta tierra, sus miembros son tan argentinos como nosotros, tienen el mismo respeto que nuestros hombres, y no hay diferencia alguna entre un hombre japonés y un hombre argentino. (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2005, 110)

These remarks can be certainly interpreted as his political campaign through which to celebrate the country's racial diversity. However, his discourse highlights the unique position of Japanese immigrants in Argentine history in comparison to other minority groups, as they maintained a privileged relationship with the government.⁹

It is also worth mentioning that the legacies of these Japanese-Argentines continue to resonate to this day. In her recent article, Chisu Teresa Ko describes the Japanese in Argentina as a group that “because of its historically privileged position in the national psyche—compared to other racial minorities—can embody the complexity of multicultural values and reveal some important aspects of contemporary racial production” (2). Ko's study points to Argentina's radical transformation, which occurs both at the state and the non-institutional level, from a homogenous, white country to a more heterogeneous, multicultural one. According to her, Japanese immigrants play a key role in creating a new paradigm of racial politics in the country for they represent “ideal champions of multiculturalism in their ability to articulate disparate—and at times contradictory—demands of contemporary multiculturalism” (14). As Ko rightfully observes, the construction of a Japanese-Argentine identity is deeply related to the idea of national identity, both in the past and in the present.

Gaijin

The singularity of the Japanese experience in Argentina provides us with an appropriate framework through which to study a young writer interested in uncovering the history of his ancestors. Maximiliano Matayoshi is a second-generation Japanese-Argentine, or *nisei*, who won the Premio Primera Novela UNAM/Alfaguara in 2002 for his first novel *Gaijin*, often translated as “foreigner” or “outside person.” He is the first Argentine author of Japanese descent to receive such an international recognition. According to Mercedes Giuffré, Matayoshi's novel “[r]econstruye la metamorfosis interior y lingüística de dicho individuo y, como corolario, viene a instalar en nuestro imaginario en plena revisión, el recuerdo de aquel grupo de personas que llegaron de un país tan lejano y cuya descendencia es hoy una parte muy rica y poco explorada de nuestra identidad argentina” (Giuffré 2004, 205). Based on the true story of his father, *Gaijin* narrates the journey of a 13-year-old boy named Kitaro, who leaves his family in the postwar Okinawa to find a better life in

Argentina.¹⁰ Kitaro and other passengers in the ship make stops at numerous port cities, including Hong Kong, Manila, Singapore, Lourenço Marques (Mozambique), and Cape Town (South Africa) before reaching Buenos Aires. Upon arrival, the protagonist is sent to a separate room because he has no family to receive him in the unknown land. However, one of his best friends during the trip, Kei, returns with his uncle to welcome him in the Arakaki family. Together with Kei, Kitaro starts working at their *tintorería*, while learning Spanish and adapting himself to the new environment. His experience as a Japanese immigrant is depicted through first-person narrative, alongside episodes of assimilation, integration, friendship, and love. When he finally completes a degree in medicine in Mendoza, he decides to return to his homeland after fourteen years. At the end of the story, we find him determined to return to Argentina because of his girlfriend Julieta, one of the daughters of the Arakaki, and his newly acquired sense of belonging.

In the novel, Japanese elements are shown in how Kitaro strives to preserve emotional ties to his homeland. After living in Argentina for years, he still refers to Japanese as “mi idioma” (209) and Japan as “mi país” (223). One of the values that Kitaro embraces is silence, which is described as an essential mode of communication for many Japanese immigrant characters in *Gaijin*.¹¹ For these immigrants, silence does not imply the absence of emotions. On the contrary, it represents a productive space through which to express joy, anger, frustration, and love. For example, only a few words are spoken at the dinner table in the Arakaki family (122), while Kitaro and Kei walk in silence on the street when they return from their Spanish lessons (126). In particular, silence plays a key role in the relationship between Kitaro and Julieta. As the protagonist states, “con Julieta no me molestaban los silencios” (139). When he returns from Mendoza to Buenos Aires, he still feels comfortable with her in silence: “Aún era muy fácil conversar con ella, los silencios no eran incómodos y no necesitábamos tantas palabras para entendernos” (232). In a way, their love for each other is nurtured through quietness rather than through dialogue. As we shall see later, silence is also celebrated as a significant value of Japanese culture in *Flores de un solo día*.

Moreover, we can detect a different kind of silence in Kitaro’s father who died in the war. The narrator frequently refers to memories of his father through flashbacks. For

example, he says that it is his father who taught him that the Chinese are not cruel—the stereotype that was taught at school during the wartime period—and that one’s fear stems from ignorance (22-23, 92). Gazing at the night sky on the ship deck, Kitaro recalls his father’s belief about shooting stars: “La historia que contaba papá era mucho mejor: las estrellas fugaces eran las almas de las personas bondadosas que, en la noche, veían a todos los que amaban y después regresaban junto a las otras estrellas” (74). On a different occasion, while looking for a shirt at the *tintorería* in Buenos Aires, Kitaro finds one that looks like his father’s: “Al final encontré una camisa que me gustaba y que era como la que papá usaba todo el tiempo” (124). The quiet and yet constant presence of his father is thus palpable, so much so that even Eva Perón’s funeral brings back memories of his father (174-75).

Another moment of Kitaro’s Japanese identity emerges after his breakup with Nenina, a native Argentine and the daughter of his Spanish teacher, Ms. Hoffman. When they first meet at church, Kitaro immediately falls in love with Nenina and begins to attend mass regularly just to see her. Kei tells him that she would never be interested in him because she is “gaijin” and he is not (151). Nevertheless, the two become good friends and even entertain the idea of semi-romance, until one day Ms. Hoffman and Nenina leave the town without bidding farewell to Kitaro. Heartbroken, he regrets having left Japan: “¿Qué hacía yo en aquella casa? Había viajado miles de kilómetros durante meses para planchar ropa durante el resto de mi vida. Debí haberme quedado en Japón” (169). Later, while living in Mendoza, Kitaro experiences a failed attempt at love again with Lara, another Argentine girl. Although Lara develops a closer relationship with him, they also end up going in separate directions, and she eventually marries a man who resembles him (235-36). These two episodes can be interpreted as instances of racial “otherness,” in which the Japanese protagonist is considered the exotic “other” in Argentina and is forbidden to date the Argentines of European descent (Nenina/Lara). Instead, Kitaro’s only successful relationship involves people from his own community (Julieta). In this sense, despite being narrated from the perspective of an “insider” rather than from a western viewpoint, Matayoshi’s novel seems to reinforce the essentialist understanding of race based on

stereotypes, which is in opposition to the real history of frequent intermarriage that I mentioned earlier.

The other aspect of this “otherness” involves the experience of racial discrimination. First, the novel describes Julieta’s frustration when her friends call her “china” and make fun of her at church (127). Later, Kitaro experiences the same kind of racism when he moves to Mendoza:

A pocos metros de su casa, unos chicos que jugaban fútbol dejaron escapar la pelota, que se detuvo cerca de mí. Che, chino, pasame la pelota. La pateé pero de alguna forma no se dirigió hacia donde yo quería. Chino boludo, volvé a China, chin chu lin, gritaron y dejé de escuchar los otros insultos. (204)

According to the author, this scene was based on a real life experience, which initially led him to resist his Japanese identity (Reinoso 2). As I explained before, the Japanese in Argentina did not endure the kind of state-sponsored racism that was practiced in Brazil and Peru. Nevertheless, neither Kitaro nor Matayoshi can escape the reality of racial “otherness” marked by their Japanese heritage.

While such “Japanese-ness” is clearly engraved in Kitaro, the Argentine aspect of his identity becomes evident as the country begins to constitute more prominent place in his immigrant life. By the time he returns to Japan, he has been so integrated into society that he has difficulty remembering the faces of his mother and sister. Instead, his family in Mendoza has replaced those in Japan as the people he feels closest to (243-44). It is at this point that Kitaro realizes that Argentina has become his new home, as demonstrated in his following remarks:

Trece años atrás me había embarcado para cruzar todos los océanos en busca de poder, algún día, regresar a casa. Y para lograrlo aprendí a plantar, aprendí un idioma y también aprendí que existen tierras desde donde ni siquiera se puede imaginar el mar, crucé aquellas tierras y ahora me encontraba otra vez dispuesto a cruzar océanos. (245)

The stereotypical image of an *issei*, first-generation Japanese immigrant, is someone who is reluctant to accept the country of migration, always yearning to go back to his homeland. However, Kitaro seems to represent the opposite: for him, Argentina is the ultimate place he

belongs to. At the same time, it is also important to recognize that neither country is able to offer him the kind of security he seeks. In other words, his “home” is not exclusively Japan or Argentina. Japan is not a home in a geographical sense and yet his cultural associations are strong enough to constantly remind him of his roots. Argentina, on the other hand, is physically closer but not safe enough to prevent the experience of discrimination.

Of particular relevance to this capricious concept of home is the ambiguity of the term “gaijin” in Matayoshi’s novel. The Japanese passengers on the ship use it to refer to Westerners (Americans, Dutch, and Argentines with European heritage), but not to other non-Japanese people, such as the Chinese (“tres gaijin y un chino”) (18). The word is also mentioned to depict the white colonizers who exploit black slaves in Lourenço Marques: “gaijin con látigos en la mano” (63). However, as an immigrant subject, the real “gaijin” in Argentina turns out to be Kitaro himself, the mysterious “foreigner” trying to be assimilated into society. In Mendoza, Kitaro expresses a strange sense of detachment: “De modo que ahora yo tenía un apellido que no era mío, vivía en un país al que no pertenecía, y con una familia de la que no formaba parte” (241). By applying multiple meanings of foreignness, the novel questions the extent to which the term “gaijin” can be applied to the non-native, while demarcating the shifting boundary between insider and outsider. To borrow Bhabha’s phrase, we can argue that Matayoshi’s “gaijin” resides in the “Third Space” or the in-between location of hybridity.

Furthermore, the foreignness of Kitaro’s multicultural identity goes beyond the Japan-Argentina dichotomy because it is also defined through a third party. Prior to his trip, Kitaro imagines Argentina to be “better” than the United States. As he recalls, “Yo conocía a unos chicos que se habían ido y a otros que decían que era como América, pero mejor: los argentinos no matan a los japoneses” (15). This image of Argentina as a kind of “utopia,” as opposed to the violent America, also appears in his mind during the war: “Intenté pensar en otra cosa, en cómo sería Argentina sin tanques, sin soldados americanos y sin muerte” (21). As an alternative to the U.S. imperial power, Japan’s enemy country, Argentina is viewed here as a protective asylum for the protagonist. In this regard, Kitaro’s characterization of the Arakaki family’s house has a symbolic meaning. According to him, “siempre me pareció

que aquella casa funcionaba como un refugio para todos los japoneses que, como yo, comenzaban una nueva vida en Argentina” (139). Similar to the aforementioned historical account concerning the first Japanese immigrants who saw their lives in terms of three references (e.g., Japan, Brazil/Peru, and Argentina), Kitaro seems to articulate his cultural identity at the centroid of a triangle.

It is also worth mentioning that he manages to learn English before Spanish. Although English does not directly link him to the United States, it shows that there is more than a simple juxtaposition between Japanese and Spanish in Kitaro. On the ship, he studies English from his friend, Kiyoshi, who previously attended a bilingual school in Japan. Because of his English lesson, Kitaro’s first foreign phrase is not in Spanish but “good afternoon” (42-43). He also learns to sing a song in English without understanding the meaning of the lyrics (57). As a result, the conversation between Kitaro and Kiyoshi turns multilingual: “*Buenas tardes, ¿cómo estás?*, dijo en castellano [Kiyoshi]. *Very good*, respondí y no pude evitar reírme” (119). Considering that the rest of the dialogue takes place in their native language, this linguistic play involves English, Spanish, and Japanese. It is the tension that stems from the confluence of these three languages that Kitaro finds entertaining. Later, Kiyoshi’s English lesson turns out to be very useful when the protagonist becomes a translator in Mendoza. This occurs in 1964 when Tokyo hosts summer Olympics, and his job entails listening to various radio stations overseas and writing report on the Olympic games in Spanish. The task requires not only the knowledge of Japanese and Spanish but also that of English since some stations are only transmitted in English. Kitaro recognizes his gratitude to Kiyoshi: “Cuando conseguí dar con una radio en inglés, agradecí las clases de Kiyoshi y redacté lo que faltaba del informe” (227-28). This episode once again demonstrates how the triple linguistic codes comprise Kitaro’s multidimensional character. His worldview is defined through the negotiations between three languages, countries, traditions, and cultures. These tensions then allow the protagonist to contest the traditional dichotomy that views Latin America’s Japanese diaspora in terms of the confrontation between two countries. The multilayered identity that Matayoshi portrays offers an alternative notion of selfhood.

From a different perspective, we can perceive another American element in the narrative structure of the novel. In an interview, Matayoshi acknowledged the influence of U.S. writers, especially J.D. Salinger, in his works. According to the author, *Gajjin* was written while he was reading Salinger's classic text:

Es una novela iniciática para autor, lector y personaje. Yo empecé a escribirla mientras leía *The Catcher in the Rye* de Salinger. Lo leía en inglés. Entonces encontré, entendí, cuál era la estructura que quería que tuviera mi novela: eso de redactar y hacer flashback todo el tiempo y contar algo que tiene que ver con la persona adolescente que se convierte en adulto, que era lo que yo estaba viviendo. (Giuffré 2003, 2)

Both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Gajjin* are narrated by the first person "I" who tells the story of "my" adventure. I have already mentioned that Kitaro employs the technique of flashback to recall his father's memories throughout the novel. Like him, Salinger's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, frequently uses flashbacks to recount his journey during his adolescence (e.g. his initial expulsion from Pencey Prep). The effect of this narrative device for both Salinger and Matayoshi lies in the convergence of past and present, which mirrors the protagonist's changing state of mind as well as his development into maturity. In fact, we can argue that both novels similarly belong to the tradition of *Bildungsroman*. Although a detailed comparison is not my intention here, Salinger's influence in Matayoshi creates an additional layer to the American aspect of the Japanese-Argentine author and his work.

Flores de un solo día

While the reference to the United States is not always a direct one in *Gajjin*, it is an essential part of the representation of Japanese immigrants in Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de un solo día*. Both Matayoshi and Kazumi Stahl are *nisei* writers, and their novels are similarly autobiographical in nature. A daughter of Japanese mother and American father, Kazumi Stahl spent her childhood and early adulthood in New Orleans. She studied in Argentina as a college student and later decided to settle in Buenos Aires. *Flores de un solo día* is her first novel and a finalist for the prestigious Rómulo Gallegos Prize for new Latin American fiction. The story revolves around Aimée Levrier, also a second-generation Japanese-

American, and her mother Hanako who is mute because of a brain disease she suffered during her childhood. Mother and daughter live in New Orleans until the death of Hanako's husband, Henri, at which time they are sent to Buenos Aires by Aimée's grandfather, Francisco Oleary or "El Argentino." Aimée is only eight and has no knowledge of Spanish when she arrives in Argentina. Years later, Aimée becomes fully integrated into society, living with her Argentine husband, Fernando Marconi, and running a small flower shop where Hanako specializes in the art of *ikebana* (flower arrangement). Their comfortable life is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a letter informing Aimée that her grandmother has passed away in New Orleans and that she is the only heir to an estate that is worth \$750,000. Despite her fear of confronting a forgotten past, Aimée decides to return to the United States. During her brief journey, she discovers a complex web of family secrets that reveals not only the history of Hanako and herself in Japan and the U.S., but also the real reason why the two were sent to Argentina.

The Japanese identity is demonstrated through Hanako in several manners. With her reticence and gracefulness, she is the quintessential symbol of Japanese femininity: "Si Aimée es linda, la madre lo es en mayor grado, de facciones japonesas que, por su armonía, expresan una belleza universal" (17). In addition to her muteness, Hanako is unable to leave the house because of her agoraphobia—fear of being outside—, which is a disorder she developed after witnessing the atomic bombs during WWII (32). Her muteness and agoraphobia can be understood in symbolic terms: while the former represents the experience of Japanese immigrants' inability to speak Spanish upon their arrival in Latin America, the latter indicates the traumatic history of violence in Japan. For Hanako, the small apartment in Buenos Aires is the only place in which she feels safe and protected. The familiar faces of Aimée and Fernando not only guarantee her emotional stability but also promise her spiritual well-being. As the narrator comments, these faces "la dejan vivir en un universo conocido y previsible. Le permiten la felicidad; casi siempre se muestra feliz, silenciosa pero sin angustia, sin aire de enfermedad mental" (17). Hanako's speech disorder also reflects the silence that permeates their apartment, which reminds us of the earlier reference to silence in *Gaijin*. Similar to what we saw in Kitaro, silence is an important mode

of communication for the Japanese characters in *Flores de un solo día*, especially between the mother and the daughter. For Hanako, it is far from “un silencio vacío” for it symbolizes “un espacio cálido y fácil, que se abría entre dos personas y se llenaba no de palabras sino de las cosas que hacían juntas” (29). Due to her speech impediment, subtle gestures display Hanako’s feelings, including the almost imperceptible sound or melody she makes, the delicate expression of her face, and the firm posture of her body. Of particular importance is the way in which she interacts with others through her gaze: “ella siempre hablaba con los ojos: miraba a las personas—a las que conocía—y podía expresar un millón de cosas en un instante, directo a la mente y al corazón de la otra persona” (275-76). Despite her disabilities, Hanako’s unique language transcends silence as her eyes clearly articulate her thoughts and expressions. Indeed, it is her extraordinary gaze, “una mirada abierta, casi risueña” (128), that defines the relationship between Hanako and Aimée.

Besides her communication through silence and gaze, Hanako (whose name uses the Japanese kanji for both flower “hana” and girl “ko”) also turns to *ikebana* as a way to express her feelings. *Ikebana* is the traditional art of flower arrangement that has been practiced in Japan since the fifteenth century, though its origin can be traced as far back as the sixth century (Ohi 4). In *ikebana*, a variety of plants are used to compose a multicolored work of art, ranging from flowers and branches to leaves and seeds. Although this tradition is often associated with home decoration, it is more than a mere style of ornamentation, given that it encompasses various philosophical and spiritual values. For instance, one of the fundamental principles of *ikebana* is the inseparability between humans and nature, between one’s internal thoughts and one’s external environment. Based on this idea, the basic structure of flower arrangement is a scalene triangle created by three main points. It is usually understood that these three points represent Heaven, Earth, and Humankind.¹² In *Flores de un solo día*, Hanako is an adept *ikebana* artist, as evidenced by the fact that her customers mistakenly associate “hanako” and “ikebana” as synonyms: rather than request a specific design they prefer, they only ask for a “hanako-style” (121). According to the narrator, she has a direct and immediate relationship with the flowers she works with:

Hanako da a las flores forma, altura y aire, definición; y recibe de ellas color y calidez o frialdad, la curva o el ángulo severo, y de esa sociedad a la larga lo

que emerge es una expresión, la sugerencia (casi más completa de lo que podría hacerse por medio de las palabras) de un sentimiento, una postura o actitud. (133)

By communicating through (or with) flowers, Hanako establishes her own way of thinking, feeling, and living. As both practitioner and guardian of the *ikebana* tradition, she embodies Japan's unique culture and spirituality in the novel.

Aimée also represents some Japanese aspects, especially through her “oriental” eyes (12), but her identity is not easily definable through a single country or culture. Unlike her mother, Aimée demonstrates the multicultural immigrant identity, similar to Matayoshi's Kitaro. When she arrives in Buenos Aires, the 8-year-old Aimée is depicted as a mature and independent girl who takes care of her disabled mother. Here, the traditional roles of mother and daughter seem to be reversed. During their trip, Hanako keeps her eyes closed out of fear, while Aimée bravely protects her: “La hija la guiaba, una mano femenina de huesos pequeños dentro de la otra más chica pero gordita, acolchada, una mano de niña” (56). The narrator characterizes Aimée as “una pequeña persona locuaz y enérgica a quien sólo le faltaba el idioma para desenvolverse” (45). She does learn Spanish quickly and find it relatively easy to be adapted to Argentine society. Her new identity is perhaps most clearly shown through her marriage with Fernando, a native Argentine of Italian ancestry, who selflessly supports her when her tranquil life is disrupted by the mysterious letter from Louisiana. Confused about the meaning of the letter, she discovers peacefulness in her husband's voice: “La voz de ese hombre y la densa solidez de su cuerpo le dan fuerza, porque confirman el pertenecer, la idea de que ella está donde debe estar, que éste es *su* lugar, con él al lado y con todas las cosas que ella conoce, que entiende y determina por sí misma” (81). For Aimée, Fernando's Argentina is the familiar home—“*su* lugar”—where her life is insulated from unusualness and uncertainty.

Although Hanako and Aimée take a different approach to the reality of immigrant life in Argentina, they have an undividable connection with each other. In fact, Kazumi Stahl characterizes their relationship in terms of a unity that depends not only on their family ties but also on their female bond. As illustrated by the narrator, “Eran como dos gotas de agua arrojadas al petróleo; más allá de su similitud y su unión, enfrentaban juntas lo extremo

foráneo, y vivían juntas la lenta transición” (11). Even when Aimée was young, she completed all the schoolwork close to her mother, perceiving her gaze and feeling the caress of her hands (128). Both their physical proximity and spiritual union are critical because they enable the mother and the daughter to survive together in a foreign country. Here, the role of silence is once again essential, as they understand each other better through silence than through words: “Son las dos de la misma estatua; caminan al mismo tiempo; se semejan en los movimientos fluidos de los brazos delicados, las piernas delgadas. Preparan la comida, y están juntas en ese silencio que comparten, que no es frío, sino cálido y continente, como un ambiente en sí” (69). Such an inseparable bond cannot be understood by Fernando, who is frustrated by his inability to perceive Hanako’s thoughts through her expressions (19). What the two women share is a connection based on their female solidarity as well as their mutual struggle as immigrants, which is incomprehensible from the white male Argentinean perspective.

Moreover, we can find another example of female connection between Aimée and Bess Tibbets, the black servant in the house in New Orleans where Aimée and Hanako lived before arriving in Buenos Aires. Since Aimée was still quite young and Hanako was unable to take care of her daughter, Bess gave both women the protection and support that they needed. Her role was especially crucial for Aimée. If Hanako was Aimée’s biological mother, Bess was her spiritual mother, always providing her with “el sostén, el piso, las paredes y el techo, la firmeza del mundo” (175). At the same time, Bess was an extraordinary teacher for Aimée who had many questions about the world, such as how school functioned or why her parents did not sleep together like other parents (177-79). Aimée trusted the black servant more than anyone else in the house, seeking in her “un modelo de mujer adulta” (175). Consequently, as an adult searching for her origins, we find Aimee constantly remembering her second mother during her trip in New Orleans (283).

The influence of Bess’s presence in Aimée’s life should not be underestimated. Most importantly, it reveals a significant American aspect of Aimée’s identity. Bess comes from a poor neighborhood where violence and crime occur frequently (175). With her African roots and her voodoo practice, she embodies the racial and religious diversity of New Orleans. In

fact, *Flores de un solo día* depicts this U.S. port city as very different than the rest of the country: “Todo comenzaría más tarde que en otras ciudades, que en las más sajonas por lo menos” (187). In fact, the reference to the “less Anglo-Saxon” aspect of New Orleans is already noticeable in the author’s previous collection of short stories, *Catástrofes naturales* (1997).¹³ Perhaps we can go so far as to claim that the city itself is one of the central characters for Kazumi Stahl, who is a Louisiana native. For Debra Castillo, *Flores de un solo día* is one of the few contemporary novels that portray “New Orleans” as “a placeholder to anchor a theory and practise of writing that goes beyond the thematic in transcending national boundaries” (98). As Castillo points out, there are many “Latin American” features in New Orleans, which she characterizes as “a border city between the US and Latin America, as well as a city that has long been seen as an exotic outpost in the US urban imaginary” (99). For Aimée, therefore, the “American” influence marked by Bess has a specific regional connotation, grounded in the cross-cultural nature of New Orleans.

The other side of Bess’s America is the racism that Aimée and Hanako undergo before moving to Argentina. Earlier we saw how Matayoshi’s *Gaijin* portrays Argentina as a shelter for Japanese immigrants, which is juxtaposed with the violence of war symbolized by U.S. imperialism. Similarly, *Flores de un solo día* demonstrates a utopian image of Argentina *vis-à-vis* the white America. In the novel, Hanako experienced racial discrimination in her previous community in New Orleans. According to the narrator, it was “una época de racismo aún impune” (180), and “la época de la segregación racista” (198). She was even mistreated by her stepmother, Marie Levrier, who employed the racist rhetoric of the time to annul the marriage between Hanako and her husband, Henri, referring to the infamous Louisiana state law that prohibited mixed marriages (198). Marie eventually gained custody of Aimée by making a false accusation against Hanako (197). For fear of losing the girl to the manipulative Marie, her supposed husband, Francisco Oleary sends both Hanako and Aimée to his sister in Argentina. Unlike the hostile circumstances of the xenophobic community in Louisiana, Argentina offers Hanako a place of security where she can safely practice her *ikebana*. It is also the apartment in Buenos Aires that allows Aimée and Hanako to maintain their solidarity. As Gustavo Geirola highlights in relation to the novel, “América Latina

aparece como una tierra para refugiarse de la guerra y como destino definitivo para las refundaciones comunitarias o personales” (117).

Marie’s mistreatment of Hanako is one of the many secrets Aimée uncovers during her sojourn in the U.S. In addition, she learns that her biological father is not Henri but her putative grandfather Francisco, “El Argentino.” In reality, Henri and other American soldiers killed Hanako’s father during the war, leaving the 8-year-old orphaned. Tormented by his fervent Christian faith, Henri brought the mute Japanese girl to the U.S. and married (“adopted”) her in order to protect her from “evil” (252). However, it was Francisco who Hanako actually fell in love with. Despite her speech disorder and agoraphobia, Francisco was one of the few people she opened herself up to, and the only person she sought outside the house. Although “El Argentino” was married to Marie, their marriage was solely based on a contract he had with Marie’s father, Claude Lavrier. He had asked “El Argentino” to spy on her because he feared that her obsession with power and control would ruin him (212-13). As a reward, Francisco received a property in West Feliciana where he met with Hanako clandestinely (214-15). He died without ever revealing the truth to his daughter, knowing that it would destroy her familiar world, especially her relationship with Henri and Hanako (362). When Aimée arrived in New Orleans, she visited Francisco’s house and discovered the poems, letters, and pictures that he had written for Hanako and their daughter. One of the poems reads,

Sos la verdad que oculto
Te amo sin que me veas
Quisiera hacerme valer
De verte, mi hija, crecer. (360)

After recovering the bittersweet history of her family, Aimée is finally able to give closure to her personal journey and returns to Buenos Aires where Hanako and Fernando are waiting.

As it turns out, Aimée’s biological roots actually consist of Argentina (Francisco) and Japan (Hanako). However, she transcends the simple binary structure of the Japanese-Argentine, as evidenced by her close relationship with the United States. In the novel, we find Aimée struggling with a conflict between multiple languages. The letter from New Orleans forces her to examine her forgotten past, and it is at this time that Aimée realizes

that she no longer feels capable of reading in English, which she had essentially abandoned for twenty-five years (80). While she has difficulty deciphering the language, she also perceives the phantom of her eight-year-old self. The blending of English and Spanish, of childhood and adulthood, takes center stage in her narrative as she examines the mysterious letter:

Revisa algunas de ellas [cartas]—*we duly notify, the express agreement, the holder, the owner, not by marriage or blood relation*—y de repente, como un rayo, se le aparece una vocecita en la mente que dice: “*I am eight, and I... this is my... her name is... just for a little... because then... to take us back to...*” ¿Es ésa su propia voz? ¿De cuándo? ¿A quién está diciendo todo eso? (80-81)

This critical reflection—the encounter with the interior “other”—is made possible thanks to her Japanese mother who silently encourages her to go to the U.S. It is Hanako’s quiet expression that gives Aimée final assurance: “Su expresión demostraba la dulce seguridad característica en ella, lo opuesto de la duda, hasta en las facciones físicas parecía encarnarse la armonía” (166). Aimée is not interested in the house in New Orleans since the purpose of her trip is to find out about her and her mother’s past. Rather than beginning a new life, she wishes to find closure with her past in order to guarantee the familiar life she has already established in Buenos Aires (297). For her, discovering a connection to the U.S. is an inevitable process toward the construction of a transnational, multilingual selfhood. It is through this flux of cultural exchange that Kazumi Stahl articulates the dynamic relationship between Japan and Argentina.

Although Matayoshi’s *Gaijin* and Kazumi Stahl’s *Flores de un solo día* show different historical and socio-political settings, they equally belong to the group of contemporary Argentine literary works that describe the multilayered experience of Japanese immigration.¹⁴ In diverse ways, these novels delineate the immigrant identity beyond the conventional, hyphenated notion of the Japanese-Argentine. While the representation of the United States is more direct in Kazumi Stahl than in Matayoshi, both writers create a hybrid space that seeks to negotiate distinct meanings among three linguistic and cultural codes. From a broader perspective, this emphasis on a ternary identity provides us with important clues toward a new understanding of the Japanese diaspora in Latin America as well as a more

inclusive historicity of immigration in Argentina.

At the same time, we can argue that the analysis of the Japan-Argentina relation in comparison to the United States poses a challenge to the traditional area studies model. This kind of study is interdisciplinary by nature for it transcends the boundaries between, for example, Latin American Studies, East Asian Studies, and the U.S.-based American Studies. Under the structure of a triple categorization, the idea of otherness becomes ever more complex and unpredictable. Who becomes the “other” and at what point? What happens if there are two “others” in relation to the national identity? How do we define the relationship between the two subaltern “others” in opposition to the imperial subject? Such questions are becoming increasingly relevant today as more people are moving around the globe than ever before. In order to grapple with these questions, cross-cultural writers like Matayoshi and Kazumi Stahl give us alternative ideas on the politics of identity formation.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Jeffrey Lesser's *A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960-1980* (Duke University Press, 2007), Rebecca Tsurumi's *The Closed Hand: Images of the Japanese in Modern Peruvian Literature* (Purdue University Press, 2012), and Ignacio López-Calvo's *The Affinity of the Eye: Writing Nikkei in Peru* (The University of Arizona Press, 2013).

² The only systematic study on this topic is the two volumes of *Historia del inmigrante japonés en la Argentina* (2004-2005), published by Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina in both Spanish and Japanese. While these excellent volumes minutely trace the history of Japanese immigration based on sociological and anthropological perspectives, my study emphasizes the cultural production of the Japanese immigrants, especially in literature.

³ Here I am using the term "Japanese-Argentine" not without skepticism. As the cultural anthropologist Marcelo Higa points out, "in the Argentine context, there did not even exist a descriptive term such as 'Japanese-Argentine': one was 'Argentine,' a term that could be softened occasionally by adding the clarification 'descended from Japanese'" (262). Nevertheless, the notion is useful in my study because it suggests both the possibility and the limit of the hyphenated identity. My argument is in line with Trinh Minh-ha who discusses the challenge of the hyphenated space between Asia (Vietnam) and America: "It is in having to confront and defy hegemonic values on an everyday basis, in other words, in assuming the between-world dilemma, that one understands both the predicament and the potency of the hyphen" (159).

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Gayatri Spivak criticizes the theory of hybridity from a different angle. She claims that abundant scholarly discussions on postcolonialism have allowed some migrant populations in the metropolitan area to appropriate their status as "the triumphant self-declared hybrid" (361). For her, the problem lies in the unequal cultural relations of "neo-colonialism," or what she calls a "hybridist postnational talk" that seeks to celebrate "globalization as Americanization" (361).

⁵ Some important works on the Jews in Argentina include Leonardo Senkman's *La identidad judía en la literatura argentina* (Pardes, 1983), Saúl Sosnowski's *La orilla inminente, escritores judíos argentinos* (Legasa, 1987), and David William Foster's *Latin American Jewish Cultural Production* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2009). For studies on Afro-Argentines, see George Reid Andrew's *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires: 1800-1900* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), Marvin Lewis's *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora* (University of Missouri Press, 1996), and Alejandro Solomianski's *Identidades secretas: la negritud argentina* (Beatriz Viterbo, 2003).

⁶ An exception is Christina Civantos's *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (State University of New York Press, 2006), which studies the representation of Arabs in Argentine writings.

⁷ After 1914, the transmigration movement was replaced by the so-called "calling" procedure as the principal mode of entry to Argentina. This way, an immigrant could bring his relatives or friends from the homeland by calling them (Tigner 205). However, the remigration process emerged again after WWII as the Japanese unsatisfied with their living conditions in Paraguay, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic emigrated clandestinely to Argentina for better economic opportunities (Federación de Asociaciones Nikkei en la Argentina: 2005, 305).

⁸ Like in Brazil, the Japanese in Peru also endured the experience of severe persecution. The most traumatic episode was the kidnapping of 1,771 Japanese-Peruvians who were sent to internment camps in the United States during WWII and the refusal of the Peruvian government to give permission to their return thereafter. See Ignacio López-Calvo's analysis of Seiichi Higashide's testimonial, *Adiós to Tears: The Memoirs of a Japanese-Peruvian Internee in U.S. Concentration Camps* (33-66).

⁹ For example, the experience of the Japanese can be compared to that of the Koreans who struggled with racial discrimination, especially during the 1980s. For the history of Korean immigration in Argentina, see Junyoung Verónica Kim's article where she deconstructs the notion of "mito blanco" (170).

¹⁰ In an interview, Matayoshi stated that he wrote the novel based on the history of his father, Tetsuji Matayoshi, who had arrived in Argentina in 1951: "El personaje protagonista de GAIJIN, siempre digo que soy yo teniendo que vivir la vida de mi papá" (Giuffré 2003, 1).

¹¹ Matayoshi also chooses silence as a central theme in his short story “En silencio” (2005), which narrates the story of a Japanese warrior who tries to recuperate the family’s honor, which was lost due to his grandfather’s silent disobedience to their feudal lord.

¹² In the history of *ikebana*, the tradition of the “heaven-earth-man” triangle was established in the early nineteenth century (Ohi 31-32).

¹³ Many of the stories in *Catástrofes naturales* narrate the life of Japanese immigrants in New Orleans after WWII. One of the salient features of these earlier works by Kazumi Stah is the insertion of Japanese conversational phrases into the Spanish texts (31, 39, 42, 66). Moreover, Aimée as a character appears in some of the stories, most explicitly in “Rigor.”

¹⁴ In this group, we can also add Héctor Dai Sugimura’s *Buscadores en mis últimas vidas* (Almagesto, 1995) and Juan Forn’s *María Domecq* (Emece, 2007). Moreover, Gaspar Scheuer’s recent film, *Samurai* (2013), shows a visual representation of the Japanese in today’s Argentine culture.

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