Dr. Lyle De Souza

"Literature of the Japanese Diaspora"

Q: What are you currently researching under your JSPS fellowship?

I am researching literature written by Japanese diaspora, often called "Nikkei." These are people of Japanese origin who have either themselves or their ancestors emigrated from Japan to other countries. I hope to complete a monograph on this topic by the end of my two-year stay here in Kyoto. I've found that many Japanese are surprised to hear that there are about three million people of Japanese descent residing in various countries around the world. Some are even more surprised to learn about the unique histories of the Nikkei communities in these countries, particularly the installment of Nikkei people during World War II. The novels written by Nikkei that I am researching not only breathe fresh life into those historical events but also portray them from the special perspectives and sensitivities of people in the Japanese diaspora. This is important because for a long time their voices have been submerged beneath more dominant narratives. My work focuses on cultural identity embedded in these novels, particularly in relation to setting straightforward representations or stereotypes of Nikkei identity and history.

Q: Why did you choose this research subject?

Identity and diaspora are topics that are directly relevant to me. I am British, as I was educated and have lived most of my life in the UK. However, I was born in Kenya into a mixed Portuguese-Indian family. I have lived in those countries and others including the US, Canada, and Australia. For me, identity is fluid, evolving, and sometimes ambiguous, even confusing. I did not want to research my own background directly, so I chose instead to focus my research on the Nikkei, who have a fascinating history. I particularly like the portrayal of cultural identity suffused in Nikkei novels. Wide in variety, I find these novels to be a more nuanced way of understanding identity than most identity theories are capable of achieving.

Q: Who among the diaspora novelists are you most interested in?

If I had to pick three influential Nikkei writers whose work is closely related to my research, they would be John Okada, Joy Kagawa, and Kuren Te Yamasita. Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy* tells the story of a Japanese American who experienced difficulty in cultural adoption after being released from a World War II internment camp. On the one hand, his first-generation Nikkei parents didn't approve of the way he had come to embrace American ways and values while, on the other, the American society perceived him as being disloyal for having answered "no, no" on a questionnaire regarding his willingness to serve in the US military. Kagawa's 1961 novel *Obon* traces the experience of a Nikkei girl who later regrets her painful childhood memories while staying in the home of her aunt (Obon). In Yamasita's 1990 novel *Through the Arc of the Rainbow*, a Japanese expatriate goes to Brazil looking for work. While he witnesses the ravaging of Amazonian communities, he discovers a magical site in the rainforest, called "Mataozo," around which the twists and turns of the story unfold. Not to give away the ending, this is a particularly intriguing read.

Q: With the advent of Brexit and the results of the American election, we seem to be witnessing a movement toward conservatism in the West. Concurrently, we are seeing large migration flows. How are Japanese diaspora authors responding to this environment?

Over the past 5-10 years, I think there has been a shift toward extremes on both liberal and conservative sides around the world. Amidst these big transitions, I've found in my research so far that the vast majority of Nikkei writers are very liberal. While recently conducting interviews in Australia, I spoke to a number of Nikkei authors, one of whom was self-aware enough to say that she might be stuck in a "liberal bubble." Even though they dislike what's happening on the right, they want to be open-minded to differing points of view, not least to address them accurately in their writing.

I think the role of diaspora literature now is just as important as in the 1980s when Joy Kagawa's *Obon* was written and many Canadians had no idea about the Japanese internment experience. Nikkei novels are important not just because they tell Nikkei history, but also because their renderings can be emotive, putting the reader in the shoes of people who speak from oftimes bitter experience. Reading *Obon*, one can vicariously experience the pain of a small Nikkei girl who, separated from her family, was forced to live in an internment camp.

Q: What characterizes Japanese diaspora literature within the contemporary environment?

I hope this literature can help us learn from past mistakes. I'm speaking particularly of attitudes towards Muslims living in Western countries. After 9-11, some Nikkei people contacted the Canadian government, asking them to be circuitous in the way they speak about Muslims as an ethnic group so as not to repeat what happened to the Nikkei community in the past. Like the Nikkei Japanese who had no involvement in the Pearl Harbor attack, Muslims living in the West were altogether innocent of any involvement in the 9-11 attack. Picking up this theme, I think Nikkei writers are attempting to foster a more understanding public.

Q: Please give some advice for young researchers who may be thinking about doing research in Japan.

Take the plunge! Many have done so enjoyably and successfully before you. Japan's Ministry of Education and Science and JSPS generally receive amazing reviews for their international programs. Though not essential, it can help to learn some Japanese and as much as you can about the country and its culture before coming here. Pack light as you can get everything you'll need here.

Start preparing to apply for your fellowship very early on, as it takes time to find and develop a relationship with a host researcher. My host Prof. Takerzawa has been wonderful personally and professionally. I think that partly because we started collaborating almost a year before my JSPS fellowship actually started. It can also take time to prepare a winning proposal. I found that I needed to write at least three drafts of my proposal and ask several people to look at it before I was confident enough to think that I had a good chance!

In our interview with Dr. De Souza, we found his research to be as unique as interesting. Of course, all eruptions of Japanese literature from the Tale of Genji to works of Nikkei laureates in literature Kawabata Yasunari and De Kawabata are studied exhaustively in Western universities. Dr. De Souza's study, in contrast, delves into a much less explored component of the body of Japanese literature. It would seem that there are marked differences in Nikkei experience and thought vis-à-vis those of Japanese in Japan. Dr. De Souza says that Nikkei writers are liberal. It's imagined that their liberalism is more Western than Japanese, not to mention their reliance on the "yes right." Being neither Japanese nor Nikkei himself, Dr. De Souza's penure gives him a unique focal point in researching not only the literature of the Nikkei but also the ethnic identity and socio-political bent underlying it. We believe that his analysis and findings can be uniquely multilateral to inform the research of his Japanese colleagues.

Introducing Japan: Kyoto City

Kyoto University, or Kyodai, is located in the eastern part of Kyoto, so it is where I spend most of my time. There are many sights at this area such as Ginkakuji (Silver Pavilion) and Nanzen-ji (temple complex). Two of my favorite places are Hie Inari Shrine and the Philosopher's Path (Tenmangu-no-michi). I live the proximity of Hie Inari Shrine, just a minute or two from my dormitory. I know the days and times when the shrine is less crowded and I can enjoy its calmness and serenity. It's so serene. Kyoto's most impressive historical site but is very special to my friends and me because it's local. Lined with hundreds of cherry trees, the Philosopher's Path runs about two kilometers along the Lake Biwa Canal between Ginkakuji and Nanzen-ji. Just a short distance from the university, the path is named after the late Kyoto philosopher Nishi Natori, who walked it for daily meditation and to validate his footsteps I now strolled along while thinking about my own work. I find Kyoto's serenity to be very conducive to thinking. Also evocative of drama and passion, it is no surprise that Kyoto provides the setting for famous Japanese novels, such as Murakami Haruki's 11th century *The Tale of Genji*, Mishima Yukio's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha.*

Much of the fun of Kyoto—perhaps even more so now that every major sight tends to be clogged with tourists—is finding new places to be a hidden path. Kyoto never fails to surprise; last recently when attempting a shortcut from Kyodai to Ginkakuji, I discovered a wonderful shrine that I had no idea existed. I always love to discover new places in this way, especially restaurants. In Kyoto, the quality of entries and cuisine is so uniformly good that it's well-worth taking a chance on eating at places of serendipitous discovery. Of course, I'm not going to tell you the names of all my favorite places. Part of the fun is finding places for yourself and making Kyoto your own city.