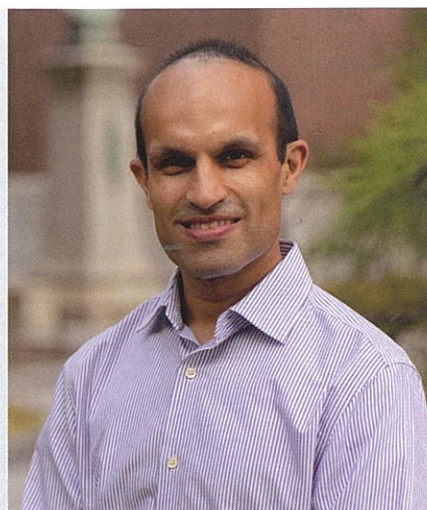


Research and Life in Japan
By a JSPS Fellow
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Dr. Lyle De Souza
“Literature of the Japanese Diaspora”

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Coming to Japan from the UK, Dr. Lyle De Souza is conducting research with his host, Professor Yasuko Takezawa, at Kyoto University under a JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowship. We asked him about his research topics and activities.

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

I am researching literature written by the 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 those countries, particularly the internment 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 straight contested 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 portrayals 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 Kogawa, and Karen Tei Yamashita. Okada’s 1957 novel *No-No Boy* tells the story of a Japanese American who experienced difficulty in cultural adaptation 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, American society perceived him as being disloyal for having answered “no, no” on a questionnaire regarding his willingness to serve in the US military. Kogawa’s 1981 novel *Obasan* traces the experience of a Nikkei girl



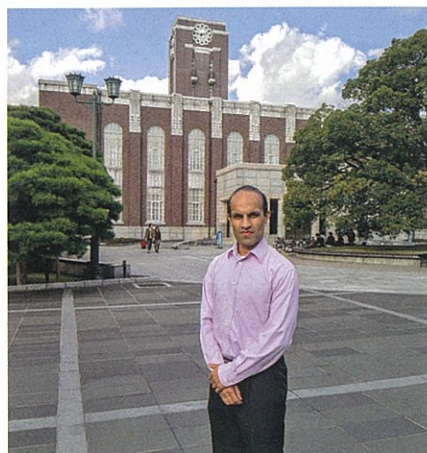
With Joy Kogawa

interned in Canada, who later recounts her painful childhood memories while staying in the home of her aunt (*Obasan*). In Yamashita’s 1990 novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, 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 “Matacao,” 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. Whilst 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 “far 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



Before Kyoto University's Clock Tower Centennial Hall

just as important as in the 1980s when Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* was written and most 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 oft-times bitter experience. Reading *Obasan*, one can vicariously experience the pain of a small Nikkei girl who, uprooted from her home, 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 circumspect 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. Takezawa has been wonderful personally and professionally. I think that’s 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 eras of Japanese literature from the *Tale of Genji* to works of Nobel laureates in literature Kawabata Yasunari and Oe Kenzaburo 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 slant on the “far right.” Being neither Japanese nor Nikkei himself, Dr. De Souza’s posture 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 in a uniquely multicultural way 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 famous sights in this area such as Ginkaku-ji (Silver Pavilion) and Nanzen-ji (temple complex). Two of my favorite places are Heian Shrine and the Philosopher’s Path (Tetsugaku-nomichi). I love the proximity of Heian Shrine, just five minutes from my dormitory. I know the days and times when the shrine is less crowded and I can enjoy its calmness and familiarity. It’s by no means Kyoto’s most impressive historical sight 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 Ginkaku-ji and Nanzen-ji. Just a short distance from the university, the path is named after the late Kyodai philosopher Nishida Kitaro, who walked it for daily meditation and in whose footsteps I now stumble 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 Murasaki Shikibu’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 off the beaten path. Kyoto never fails to surprise. Just recently when attempting a shortcut from Kyodai to Ginkaku-ji, 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 eateries 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.



Philosopher's Path



Heian Shrine