

MULTICULTURALISM IN LATIN  
AMERICAN STUDIES

Locating the "Asian" Immigrant; or,  
Where Are the *Chinos* and *Turcos*?

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**So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants to Modern Mexico.** By Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 272. \$24.95 paper.

**China-México: Relaciones bilaterales a través de la historia.** By Xiuwen Feng. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2007. Pp. 595. (In Chinese with title translated into Spanish.)

**Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil.** By John Tofik Karam. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007. Pp. 214. \$70.50 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

**A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960–1980.** By Jeffrey Lesser. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 219. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

**Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture.** By Ignacio López-Calvo. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. Pp. 227. \$59.95 cloth.

**The Coolie Trade: The Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America, 1847–1874.** By Arnold J. Meagher. N.p.: Xlibris Corporation, 2008. Pp. 486. \$34.99 cloth, \$23.99 paper.

**Perú en la era del Chino: La política no institucionalizada y el pueblo en busca de un salvador.** By Yusuke Murakami. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos; Kyoto: Center for Integrated Area Studies, 2007. Pp. 715.

**Xenofobia y xenofilia en la historia de México, siglos XIX y XX: Homaje a Moisés González Navarro.** Edited by Delia Salazar. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2006. Pp. 518.

**The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba.** By Lisa Yun. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008. Pp. 311. \$54.50 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

When the editors of *Latin American Research Review* invited me to write a review essay on the topic of multiculturalism in Latin America, which I

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interpreted to mean multiculturalism in Latin American studies, and offered a few new books from which to choose, I thought “of course” and “why not,” then “it’s about time.” But on further reflection, it seemed that, in a conventional sense of the meaning of multiculturalism, Latin American studies is by definition multicultural. After all, where would the field be if not for Indians and blacks? On still deeper reflection, I realized that, while there is no question about the centrality of race and ethnicity as far as blacks and Indians are concerned, the picture is incomplete: multiculturalism is considerably richer than reflected in scholarship on Latin America to date. I trace the omissions at issue to the marginalization of immigration and immigrants as a focus of research in Latin American studies. Let me venture to speculate on why this is the case, what we lose in not paying more attention to immigrants, and the subsequent implications for a more comprehensive approach and understanding of multiculturalism in Latin America.

In graduate school and during my early career in the seventies, I do not remember immigration being a major topic of discussion; indeed, I can recall only one major monograph in those days by a U.S.-based scholar who put *immigration* in the title. I speak of Carl Solberg’s study of immigration to Argentina and Chile at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Many of us can undoubtedly cite important works on the economic history and industrialization of Brazil during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Warren Dean and Thomas Holloway, published in 1969 and 1980, respectively, which highlighted the significant role of immigrant entrepreneurs, notably Italians, Portuguese, and other Europeans.<sup>2</sup> Holloway did note the arrival of Japanese immigrants and included them in discussing new patterns of landownership and agricultural development, while Dean highlighted individuals of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrant community in São Paulo’s new industrial base.

Immigrants remained peripheral until Samuel L. Baily came along in the late 1980s to call attention to “mass migration to modern Latin America,” editing a volume of essays by that title.<sup>3</sup> This alerted us to some of the excellent new work around the corner in the 1990s, perhaps none more acclaimed than that by his student José Moya on Spanish immigration to

1. Carl Solberg, *Immigration and Nationalism, Argentina and Chile, 1890–1914* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970).

2. Warren Dean, *The Industrialization of São Paulo, 1880–1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969); Thomas Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land: Coffee and Society in São Paulo, 1886–1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

3. Samuel L. Baily, ed., *Mass Migration to Modern Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003). Only one non-European immigrant group, the Japanese, merited its own chapter, while Italians and Spaniards received the bulk of attention; even the Danes had their own chapter.

Argentina.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Iberians (Spaniards and Portuguese) have formed the backbone of immigrants to Latin America, especially in the context of conquest and colonization. Moya most forcefully shifted this paradigm by naming the renewed flow of Spaniards to Latin America in the postindependence period for what it was: immigration. Other studies squarely in the immigration mode appeared in the same period, with more on Spaniards, even more on Italians, some on Germans and French. Much like immigration studies in the United States, where the field is much more developed and recognized, *immigrants* meant mainly Europeans, albeit with the difference that, in Latin America, southern Europeans and Catholics were not denigrated, even as British, Germans, French, and other Northern Europeans remained highly desirable. It would have been difficult for U.S. historians to avoid addressing immigration as a main theme in the building of the nation and in the construction of national identity, as there were so many immigrants who came and settled across the rapidly expanding frontier. Indeed, as a field of study, multiculturalism is built in the United States on immigrant *ethnic* diversity in addition to the complex and difficult relationship with race and racialization. It is a given that the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became a beacon for immigrants from an ever-widening swath of Europe, representing an amazing range of ethnic diversity while, during the same period, contending with undesirable but necessary immigrants from Mexico and Asia who were racialized as nonwhite and hence ineligible for citizenship according to the 1790 naturalization law. We also learned as graduate students that, because of a lack of free land and opportunities associated with an open frontier, republican ideals, and rugged individualism, Latin American countries were not attractive destinations to immigrants, and hence few came. The field of immigration studies was consequently a peripheral one, not worthy of much serious academic attention. I would venture to guess that few of us who came of academic age as Latin Americanists in the seventies and eighties chose immigration and immigrants as a field for our comprehensive examinations or as dissertation topics.

Admittedly, I have provided a very sketchy and incomplete survey of studies of immigrants in Latin America, but my point is that there have not been many immigrant-centered works, resulting in only a flicker on the radar screen of Latin American studies. I submit that this inattention to immigrants as a social category resulted in a really glaring inattention to Asians in Latin America. But this omission is rapidly being corrected by an exciting array of publications by researchers based in the United States and Latin America, and by others trained in Asia, representing a new gen-

4. José Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

eration of international scholars. The works formally under review here, together with others cited in the notes, illustrate serious research on Asian immigrants and their descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean published in the present century. These works—in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese, and by historians, anthropologists, literary scholars, sociologists, and political scientists—have been published in the United States, Mexico, Chile, Japan, and China. And they approach the subject of Asians in Latin America from multiple perspectives and disciplinary lenses.

To begin with, all of these works deal with Latin American populations not racialized as black or Indian, and who are not white or European, but have the shared experience of being considered at one time or another as undesirable immigrants. These are the Asians and Middle Easterners—notably Chinese, Japanese, and Lebanese (or Syrian-Lebanese, also *turcos* and *árabes*)—who started migrating to Latin America in the mid-nineteenth century and continued throughout World Wars I and II. To illustrate the significance of these immigrants and their ethnic communities, one need only point to megaindustrialist Carlos Slim Helú, the son of Lebanese immigrants to Mexico, whose wealth rivals that of Bill Gates; to Alberto Fujimori, the son of Japanese immigrants to Peru, who became a controversial president; to Wilfredo Lam, the mixed-race son of an immigrant Chinese father, who became Cuba's most celebrated national artist; to the 1.2 million Brazilians of Japanese heritage in cosmopolitan São Paulo; and to the ubiquitous Chinese found in every Latin American and Caribbean country, big and small. Who are these immigrants from Asia and the Middle East? When and why did they come to Latin America? How have they settled and integrated into local society? How have they maintained old and reinvented new identities in the context of national identity, especially in the process of seeking citizenship and belonging, political engagement, and social mobility? And how have they worked out relationships with the state and other ethnic and racial groups? These and many other questions inform these works.

The works under review represent different approaches to the study of Asians in Latin America. To begin, I would identify four simple groupings. The books by Alfaro-Velcamp and Karam study Middle Easterners in Mexico and Brazil, respectively. Alfaro-Velcamp, a historian, focuses on the first two generations of Middle Eastern or Lebanese immigrants to Mexico, covering the period from the late-nineteenth-century Porfiriato to the mid-twentieth century. The anthropologist Karam examines the surge of Syrian-Lebanese Brazilians in neoliberal Brazil, the post-1970 period of free market globalization. Both scholars offer novel frameworks to understand how an undesirable group of immigrants—read, *foreigners*—became economic elites in their respective countries. Middle Eastern immigrants have settled throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and

have produced presidents in Ecuador (Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahuad) and Jamaica (Edward Seaga) in the British West Indies. Collectively, these immigrants are commonly called turcos (if not Arabs) because they arrived in Latin America in the early twentieth century as subjects of the Ottoman Empire (Alvaro-Velcamp, 108; Karam, 10–12).

The next group of works illustrates the range of studies on Chinese immigrants to Latin America and is composed of works by Yun, Meagher, López-Calvo, and Feng, along with others by Lok C. D. Siu, Diego Lin Chou, and Catalina Velázquez Morales.<sup>5</sup> These address a range of subjects, from the notorious trade in Chinese coolies (indentured servants) to Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century to the new waves of Chinese immigrants in the post-World War II era and present day. They locate Chinese immigrants within national, regional, and local histories, using primary documents from numerous national, state, and municipal archives in Latin America, and from the National Library of China (Yun). Historians and social scientists meticulously put together historical processes of migration, community building, and identity formation (Meagher, Chou, Feng, Siu, and Velázquez Morales); humanists perform painstaking textual readings to uncover how national literatures represent and imagine the Chinese in their midst (López-Calvo), or excavate from first-person testimony (presented orally or written in Chinese) how coolies working alongside slaves on sugar plantations articulate their own subjectivity (Yun). This group of scholars represents an international cast, trained in their respective countries as well as in Latin American universities. Not surprisingly, those trained in Asia are also preoccupied with tracing the historical patterns of bilateral, state-to-state relations.<sup>6</sup> Those trained in the United States are drawn to new theoretical frameworks and conceits—such as “diaspora” (a word with no exact Chinese translation) and “transnational”—as well as analytical categories closely associated with American multicultural studies, notably race.

The works by Lesser and Murakami, together with another by Daniel M. Masterson and the collections edited by Lane Ryo Hirabayashi and col-

5. Lok C. D. Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Diego Lin Chou, *Chile y China: Inmigración y relaciones bilaterales (1845–1970)* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones de la Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile; Instituto de Historia, Centro de Investigaciones Diego Barros Arana, 2004); Catalina Velázquez Morales, *Los inmigrantes chinos en Baja California, 1920–1937* (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2001).

6. The two Asian-trained scholars in this group, Feng and Chou, are ethnic Chinese but with very distinct backgrounds. Feng is based in Beijing while Chou is Taiwanese. Chou received a doctorate in history from the Universidad de Chile, and Feng received advanced training at Mexico’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. What their two hefty books have in common is close attention to what both term *bilateral relations*.

leagues and Akemi Kikumura-Yano, address Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Latin America, known as Nikkei.<sup>7</sup> Of all the studies of non-European immigrant groups to Latin America, those on the Nikkei may be the best developed for several reasons. First, the Nikkei enjoy critical mass in Peru and especially Brazil. In Brazil, 250,000 rural migrants—who barely registered in the national consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century—have become a hypervisible group of model citizens, numbering some 1.5 million today. While much smaller in number (only fifty-five thousand), the Nikkei in Peru produced the single best-known co-ethnic in the person of former president Alberto Fujimori. The sheer size of Brazil's Nikkei population, along with Fujimori's fame and notoriety, has spawned a large body of studies in Japan concerning out-migration, migrants, and their descendants in Latin America. Murakami's study of Fujimori's presidency and political career is a recent example, one further distinguished by its cross-fertilization with Latin American-based scholarship, some by Japanese Latin Americans. Second, scholars based in Latin America, led to a considerable degree by highly trained historians and social scientists of Japanese descent, have produced serious scholarship on the Nikkei (see the roster of authors in Hirabayashi and Kikumura-Yano). Third, interdisciplinary scholars in the United States with backgrounds in Latin American studies (Lesser, Masterson), Asian American studies (Kikumura-Yano), or both (Hirabayashi) have also been drawn to this topic. This intersection of area and ethnic studies also informs some U.S.-based scholars engaged in the study of the Chinese in Latin America (Yun, López-Calvo, and Siu).

The last grouping offers comparative studies organized around a theme. Sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank's Latin American office, *Cuando Oriente llegó a América* offers sixteen essays concerning the contributions of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean immigrants to the development of Latin American societies and economies.<sup>8</sup> While none of the essays is structured explicitly as a comparison, the collection as a whole allows one to examine Asian immigrants side by side. Along similar lines, Kikumura-Yano's *Encyclopedia of Japanese Descendants in the Americas* can also be described as comparative, as each essay focuses on Japanese immi-

7. Daniel M. Masterson, with Sayaka Funaka-Classen, *The Japanese in Latin America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, Akemi Kikumura-Yano, and James A. Hirabayashi, eds., *New World, New Lives: Globalization and People of Japanese Descent in the Americas and from Latin America in Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Akemi Kikumura-Yano, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese Descendants in the Americas: An Illustrated History of the Nikkei* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

8. *Cuando Oriente llegó a América: Contribuciones de inmigrantes chinos, japoneses y coreanos* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2004). Available online in Spanish and Japanese on the Web site of the Inter-American Development Bank/Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo ([www.iadb.org](http://www.iadb.org)).



grants within a discrete national history (e.g., Japanese Argentines, Japanese Peruvians). The last two titles, both edited by Delia Salazar, spotlight recent interest within Mexican academic circles on immigrants, from Europeans to Middle Easterners and Asians.<sup>9</sup> Salazar and many of her collaborators in the two volumes follow the lead set by the great and prolific Mexican historian Moisés González Navarro, who began paying serious attention to immigrants and *extranjeros* more than a decade ago.<sup>10</sup> The term *extranjero* is significant because it is often used to refer to those foreigners deemed undesirable or *pernicioso* (injurious), meaning Chinese, Japanese, Arabs and Lebanese, and Jews.<sup>11</sup> But, as Alfaro-Velcamp and others point out, foreigners can also be seen in a positive light, particularly in the case of immigrants who have risen to elite status. Given these fluctuating ambivalences, the theme of xenophobia and xenophilia affords a good organizing principle for comparative immigration studies. When referring to Asian immigrants, Latin Americans often resort to the generic term *chino*, seemingly unaware of distinctions between Chinese and Japanese. Curiously, even when entirely aware of the national and ethnic origins of an immigrant or descendant of one, such as President Fujimori of Peru, the preferred label is still *chino*. Even the Japanese political scientist Murakami, whose work (in Spanish translation) is listed previously, refers in the title of her book to Fujimori by the code word *chino* rather than by name.<sup>12</sup>

To go beyond immigration into multicultural studies would require additional analytical categories that interrogate the complex, often-troubled

9. In addition to the collection *Xenofobia y xenofilia* already cited, see Rosa María Meyer and Delia Salazar, eds., *Los inmigrantes en el mundo de los negocios* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2003).

10. Moisés González Navarro, *Los extranjeros en México y los Mexicanos en el extranjero, 1821–1970* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1993). While not as openly acknowledged, there is also an implicit debt to the Japanese Mexican scholar María Elena Ota Mishima, who helped to pioneer immigration studies in Mexico. She is best known for two works: *Destino México: Un estudio de las migraciones asiáticas a México, siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1997), and *Siete migraciones japonesas en México, 1890–1978* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1982).

11. Jews as an immigrant category present certain challenges because they account for such a diversity of origins. There were Jews among Middle Eastern immigrants. However, most came from Europe and were therefore part of European flows. The study of Jewish immigrants has enjoyed a longer tradition in Latin American studies, enough to have made possible a book-length annotated guide published almost two decades ago: *Latin American Jewish Studies: An Annotated Guide to the Literature*, ed. Judith Laikin Elkin and Ana Lya Sater (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). Since then, studies on Jews in Latin America continue to appear, including several essays in the collections edited by Salazar.

12. Actually, the term *chino* (or *china*) is even more complicated than just as a generic label for Asians. In the colonial period, it was one of the terms for a mixed-race person or *casta*. By the nineteenth century, it took on the additional meaning of a lower-class servant girl, and by the twentieth century, *mi chinita* referred to a sweetheart.

relationship with host societies, national identities, and policies, raising the issues of race, ethnicity, citizenship, and belonging, as well as lingering identifications with homeland and co-ethnics in diaspora. So let me linger a bit longer on the six monographs that help to raise multiculturalism in Latin American studies to a new level by focusing on Asians (chinos) and Middle Easterners (turcos). The authors—Alfaro-Velcamp, Karam, Yun, López-Calvo, Siu, and Lesser—are all U.S.-trained and U.S.-based academics at leading research universities, and are affiliated with departments of Latin American studies or of history, anthropology, English, and Spanish. To a degree, their works are markedly informed by and speak to ethnic studies—especially Asian American studies, and to a lesser extent Latino studies and Africana (African diaspora) studies. For example, in the books by Yun and Siu on Chinese coolies in Cuba in the nineteenth century and on Chinese immigrants in Panama in the twentieth, Asian American studies created the initial space to situate and showcase their work. Lesser underscores his debt to Asian American studies for intellectual support and inspiration, while simultaneously pushing the limits of ethnic studies in his approach to understanding the Japanese Brazilian phenomenon.

Notably, none of these studies is fundamentally concerned with the immigration history of its subjects. Of course, they provide ample context and necessary details about how these subjects arrived and settled in Latin America. But the primary interests lie in a different direction and are twofold: how their subjects construct, invent, and reinvent their identities as historically contingent social formations, and how their presence and actions affect national identities and cultures over time. They address the salience of race and ethnicity, recognizing them as unstable categories that are ultimately political projects subject to negotiation among interested parties. These are certainly not the only works of new scholarship that demonstrate the intersection of Latin American studies with ethnic studies and Asian American studies; the floodgates are open and many more are on the horizon. Anyone unfamiliar with this terrain will do well to begin with these titles to locate the Asian in Latin American studies.