Olga Kanzaki Sooudi

For anyone who has migrated to and lived in the United States for over a decade, the question “Why am I still here?” is not easy to answer. In her new ethnographic study of Japanese migrant artists in New York, Olga Kanzaki Sooudi provides many possible answers and poses other interesting questions. Japanese artists who came to New York in the 1950s and 1960s—including Yayoi Kusama and Yoko Ono, for example—found the Japanese art world conservative and limiting. According to Sooudi, this still seems to hold true for artists of Japanese descent regardless of age or background.

Through careful analysis of her subjects’ varied life narratives, Sooudi outlines a common scenario: most of these artists migrate to New York not for socio-economic betterment but for various projects of self-fulfillment. They see New York City as the embodiment of the “world” at large, as opposed to Japan’s “provincial” feel. They leave predictable lives to undertake risky ventures in their respective creative fields, such as the visual arts, design, dance, music, and fashion. The Japanese are commonly characterized as “lifestyle” migrants, in contrast to other immigrant populations who organize themselves by family groups in particular neighbourhoods.

These trends may have been witnessed in a general way, but it is fascinating to dig deeper into the stories and reasoning behind this particular mode of migration through an anthropological perspective. Lifestyle migration also makes an intriguing case study, since Sooudi’s subjects are not limited to visual artists, but also encompass musicians, dancers, writers, hairstylists, and fashion designers. The total number of such migrants in New York is estimated to be in the tens of thousands, and Sooudi interviewed hundreds. Utilizing her Japanese background and language capabilities, the author was able to closely follow the daily lives of these artists and provide a vivid and intimate portrayal.

One of her subjects, Naoko, was trained in industrial design and came to New York seeking better opportunities in her field. While looking for a suitable job, she worked in the same restaurant Sooudi once had. These relationships and coincidences helped the author gain access and insight to a “typical” young Japanese migrant’s New York lifestyle. Sadly, as reported in the epilogue, Naoko could not find a job before her visa ran out and had to return to Japan. Sooudi’s investigation, however, did not stop there. By keeping in frequent contact with Naoko even after she resumed living with her parents on the outskirts of Tokyo, she was able to observe Naoko’s process of reintegration and increasingly nostalgic reflection on her intense period in New York. Along with twenty-four other returnees whom Sooudi followed, Naoko represents a realistic case of migrants who could not succeed in staying abroad.

Although extensive details sometimes bog down the otherwise entertaining narratives, the strength of Sooudi’s book lies in its historical contextualization of