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Hyphenated Brazilians and the Struggle for Ethnic Identity

Anyone who has visited Rio de Janeiro's Ipanema beach has seen the vendors who sell suntan lotion, drinks, and food to the bustling weekend crowds. While many of these vendors shout out unique pitches or dress in bright clothing as a way to distinguish themselves from their many competitors, few are as distinctive (or as successful) as the tall man who tirelessly parades up and down the hot sand selling kibes and other "comida arabe" while wearing a long multi-colored robe and a white cloth on his head. While the vendor's costume is clearly designed to attract the attention of sun-dazed swimmers, as well as to evoke the "exotic" nature of his food, the success that this "Arab" vendor enjoys is precisely because the kibes and other foods he sells have become "Brazilian," available as they are in practically any corner lanchonete in Rio, Sao Paulo, and other cities across Brazil. Figures like the "Arab" beach vendor have led me to reflect on the nature of national identity. Can something or someone be both foreign and national? Or, in a slight modification of W. E. B. DuBois' notion of "double consciousness", can someone simultaneously be ethnic and Brazilian? Exactly who is "Brazilian" and what constitutes "Brazilianness"? Historian Jeffrey Lesser's new

book addresses these important questions about Brazilian identity and the forces shaping it over time.

In *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil*, Lesser masterfully documents the myriad debates over the role "ethnicity" would play in the formation of Brazil's national identity. Covering the period between 1850 and 1950, Lesser's engaging and well-researched monograph argues that ethnicity, along with race, "has been critical" to the negotiation of Brazilian identity over the last 150 years (p. 2). While Brazilian intellectuals, politicians, and members of the diplomatic corps insisted that separate ethnic identities must be eliminated in order for immigrants to become Brazilian, Lesser found that elite discourse surrounding terms such as "Brazilian" or "Brazilianness" were ambiguous, allowing immigrants and their descendants the opportunity to "push and pull" these terms and concepts to their advantage. While some newcomers to Brazil tried to insert themselves somewhere along a black to white continuum, other immigrant groups – specifically the Japanese and Middle Eastern immigrants who comprise the primary focus of Lesser's work –insisted

that “new, hyphenated categories be created under the rubric of Brazilian” (p. 2-3).

Lesser opens *Negotiating National Identity* by examining the nineteenth-century debates surrounding the desirability of Chinese immigrant labor. Aside from the several hundred Chinese recruited in 1810 to grow tea on the imperial plantations, few serious schemes to encourage widespread Chinese immigration to Brazil were proposed or acted upon in the first half of the nineteenth century. After mid-century, however, circumstances changed and increased pressures to end slavery caused planters and government officials to investigate alternative sources of labor. It was within this context that a widespread debate over the merits of Chinese immigration developed within Brazil. The participants in this debate defied easy political or occupational categorization. Large landowners, abolitionists, and both Conservative and Liberal politicians were found on both sides of the debate, leading Lesser to comment that “bizarre political alliances were the rule” with regard to the Chinese immigration issue (p. 15).

Opponents of Chinese immigration focused their attention on the resultant “social pollution” such an influx would bring to Brazil. Luiz Peixoto de Lacerda Werneck, the well-known coffee planter, wrote many editorials condemning Chinese immigration and warned that Brazil’s “race-in-formation” was not powerful enough to absorb the Chinese without ill effect. After all, he argued, Brazil was already greatly damaged by the large African and indigenous elements within its population (p. 19). Other opponents argued that the Chinese were not well suited for agricultural work, suggesting that only Africans could bear the burdens of plantation labor. Still others worried that the Chinese would simply become a neo-slave class incapable of fulfilling Brazil’s need for free and productive labor.

While their arguments were extremely diverse and often underpinned by equally erroneous racist assumptions, supporters of the proposals believed that encouraging Chinese immigration to Brazil could benefit the nation. Some supporters hoped that the Chinese would help Brazil move rapidly toward a wage-labor system. Others viewed the Chinese as more docile than European immigrants, thus proving to be a suitable substitute for African labor. Most interesting, however, was the belief that the Chinese formed part of the same racial stock as Brazil’s indigenous population. In these formulations, the Chinese immigrants (like the indigenous peoples of Brazil before them) would positively contribute to the creation

of a new Brazilian race.

Despite the vigor of the national debate, attempts to recruit, transport, and settle actual Chinese laborers within Brazil were few. Nevertheless, Lesser feels that the Chinese immigration debates left Brazil an important legacy. Even as an outright ban on all Asian and African immigration was passed in 1890, the debates surrounding Chinese immigration created space for the idea that non-European and non-black immigrants could be useful to Brazil’s national development. Within such a discursive space, the main question became “how” ethnicity would intersect with national identity and which immigrants would positively shape Brazil’s future.

While the debate over Chinese immigration raged on in the latter half of the nineteenth century, new groups of non-European/non-African immigrants began to arrive in Brazil from the Middle East. Between 1860 and 1950, three distinct groups from this region – the Moroccan Jews, the Syrian and Lebanese, and the Assyrians from Iraq – attempted to make Brazil their home. In his chapter entitled “Constructing Ethnic Space,” Lesser identifies the shifting attitudes toward these three groups within Brazil’s official circles (especially the diplomatic corps). The author also carefully describes the strategies employed by the Syrian and Lebanese immigrants to create their own ethnic space within Brazil.

Large numbers of Moroccan Jews emigrated from North Africa due to increased xenophobia and decreasing economic opportunities in the aftermath of the Spanish-Moroccan War (1859-1860). Settling initially around the mouth of the Amazon, more than a thousand Moroccan Jews lived in Para by 1890, and others were settling in and around Rio de Janeiro (p. 46-47). While members of the Brazilian diplomatic corps found the idea of “backward” and “uncultured” Arab immigrants settling in Brazil “distasteful,” the presence of Moroccan Jews in Brazil did not cause any great nativist backlash. In fact, Lesser demonstrates that Moroccan Jews not only enjoyed some economic success as peddlers, but also took advantage of the easy naturalization requirements to become Brazilian (p. 45, 47). Ironically, the problems associated with the Jews only seemed to arise when this group returned to Morocco and began demanding that Brazilian diplomats give assistance and legal protection due them as Brazilian citizens. These demands infuriated local Brazilian diplomats who urged the government to tighten naturalization requirements. In 1900, diplomats in North Africa refused to aid anyone whose naturalization certificate was issued after 1880. The conflicts between naturalized Brazilians

and other Moroccans so strained Moroccan-Brazilian relations that Brazil finally withdrew its diplomats in 1903 as a means to end the situation.

Between 1884 and 1939, some 107,000 Middle Eastern immigrants, largely from the present-day countries of Syria and Lebanon, arrived in Brazil. Unlike the Moroccan immigrants, the vast majority of this second immigration stream were Christian, thus easing their entry into Catholic Brazil. Once in Brazil, many of these immigrants sustained themselves through peddling household wares and dry goods in the countryside and cities. Even as the image of the “mascate” (or Arab peddler) was becoming a stock figure in Brazil’s popular imagination, members of this growing immigrant community were making the transition from peddlers to wholesale merchants to factory owners. As Lesser points out, the upward mobility of the immigrants was often mirrored by a shift in the ethnic label used to identify the successful immigrant. Both “Arabs and Brazilians began to joke that while newly arrived immigrants were ‘turcos,’ a first steady job transformed them into ‘Syrians,’ and shop or factory ownership remade them into ‘Lebanese’” (p. 49-50).

The visibility of “Arab” peddlers and the immigrants’ commercial success bred resentment and fear from the majority Brazilian population. In the late nineteenth century, warnings about “Arab” peddlers being little more than vagabonds and vagrants began to appear. Later, nativist tracts pointed to the high levels of return migration and the enormous sums of currency remitted to the Middle East as further proof that these immigrants could not become Brazilian. Reacting to this hostility, some Middle Eastern immigrants changed their names in an attempt, usually unsuccessfully, to camouflage their ethnic identity. Still others promoted a new Arab-Brazilian identity which “proved” that Arabs were good Brazilians while also allowing the immigrants to protect their culture and traditions within Brazil. One means for the creation of this space was the fourteen Arabic language newspapers that were in circulation by 1914. “While the use of Arabic helped maintain premigratory culture, articles on how to negotiate life in a new setting (by providing aid in finding jobs and housing) helped Middle Easterners acculturate [into Brazilian society]” (p. 53). Moreover, as individual Syrians or Lebanese grew prosperous in the early twentieth century, they worked to create a new Syrian-Lebanese identity, building institutions which promoted the “Brazilianness” of their community by giving money to charitable causes and supporting such “national” organizations as the Brazilian Boy Scouts (p. 55).

Yet, as Lesser carefully argues, the activities and institutions created by the Syrian-Lebanese community were not designed to promote assimilation. Rather, they were institutions which aided the community in carving out an ethnic space within Brazil, a space in which the community could acknowledge their ties to Brazil while remaining loyal to their own ethnic background. By the late 1920s, the Syrian-Lebanese community – with its Christian religion, economic success, and support for Brazilian institutions – seemed to have successfully created a space for Middle Eastern immigrants within Brazil.

Beginning in the early 1930s, however, a new debate arose which reexamined the relationship between ethnic identity and Brazilian national identity. While Syrian-Lebanese (as well as Japanese) immigrants came under increased scrutiny, it was actually the Assyrians who received the brunt of the anti-immigration backlash in the early 1930s. Iraq achieved its independence in 1932 and the Muslim-dominated government refused to allow the Assyrians, a resident Christian minority, to become citizens. The League of Nations and the British government were eager to resettle the Assyrians, and a British colonization company proposed settling the refugees in the state of Parana. The Vargas regime reluctantly agreed to the proposal, largely on the grounds that the settlers would come in family units and would be sent to a relatively uninhabited part of Brazil. Lesser describes how ultra-nationalist groups such as the Society of the Friends of Alberto Torres reacted to the proposal by using the press to whip up fear and resentment towards the “Arabs” among urban residents hard struck by the depression. Within a relatively short period, the positive image of the Assyrian Christian immigrant was reformulated into the much less desirable Iraqi (Muslim) refugee (p. 68-69). By April of 1934, the League of Nations abandoned its plans to relocate the Assyrians to Brazil. While the Syrian-Lebanese community continued to thrive and prosper within Brazil, the case of the Assyrian immigrants shows just how concerned and fearful government officials and ordinary Brazilians remained about the potential ill effects that certain ethnic groups might have on Brazil’s national identity.

Lesser’s fourth chapter, entitled “Searching for a Hyphen,” considers the experience of Japanese immigration to Brazil between 1890 and 1933. While Chinese immigration was officially banned in 1890, the Brazilian government still pursued the possibility of promoting immigration from Japan. The proposition was interesting to both countries since Japan was desperately looking for opportunities to relieve the rapidly growing pressure for

land in the countryside and Brazilians were anxious to find a suitable rural labor force. At the same time, neither the Japanese nor the Brazilians were entirely convinced of the suitability of the other party. Brazilians agonized over the racial impact of Japanese immigration, and Japanese officials (much like their Italian counterparts) were worried about the living and working conditions on Brazilian fazendas. As a result of these concerns, almost no Japanese immigration to Brazil occurred before 1908.

Yet, between 1908 and 1941, some 189,000 Japanese immigrated to Brazil (p. 83). The sudden increase in Japanese immigration after 1908 can be traced to shifts in Brazilian attitudes about the Japanese, as well as the Japanese reaction to the emergence of a strongly anti-Asian immigration policy in the United States. Brazilian officials began to reexamine their attitudes toward Japanese immigration after the Italian government banned the subsidized immigration of Italian nationals to Brazil in 1902. In part, this reappraisal of the Japanese by Brazilians was opportunistic; Brazil needed workers in the rural sector. At the same time, however, Japan's international reputation was undergoing substantial revision as the island nation continued to expand its industrial base under the Meiji leadership. Japan's 1905 defeat of Russia marked, in many ways, its emergence as an important economic and military power. While many Brazilians, including prominent members of the legislature and diplomatic corps, continued to oppose Japanese immigration, Lesser argues that a new discourse emerged among some Brazilians which stressed the "non-Asian" nature of the Japanese. This discourse, which pointed to the positive ethnic qualities of the Japanese such as literacy, cleanliness, and diligence, argued that the Japanese were not only superior to Asians, but were on a par with Europeans. In this new discourse, the positive contributions of Japanese ethnicity overshadowed the potentially adverse influence of the Asian race (pp. 87-88).

Attitudes among the Japanese were also changing. In December of 1907, the United States instituted a ban on Japanese immigration. In reaction, Japanese immigration firms began to pressure officials in their own government to pursue immigration to Brazil. Directors of these firms began to report favorable working and living conditions within Brazil and, most importantly to government officials in Japan, promised that wages paid to immigrants would be equal to those received by Europeans.

Much like the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants, Japanese residents in Brazil quickly began to construct a hy-

phenated ethnic identity that was both Brazilian and Japanese. Community-run schools utilizing Japanese educational materials exposed Brazilian-born children to the language and customs of their parents. At the same time, a growing number of Brazilian-based Japanese-language newspapers translated local news originally published in Brazilian newspapers, allowing the immigrants to remain informed about events and debates occurring within their adopted country. Along with news items, these newspapers dedicated substantial space to their readers' reflections, often in the form of poetry, on the Japanese immigrant experience in Brazil. Slowly, a *nikkei*, or Brazilian-born Japanese identity, was created and growing levels of immigration in subsequent years would work to both strengthen and change it (p. 92-93).

As immigration from Japan expanded in the late 1920s, outpacing the entry of all immigrant groups except the Portuguese, so too did the nativist campaigns to block any further entrance of Japanese into Brazil. Lesser argues that these campaigns were driven, in large part, by a fear that the Japanese government and colonists were buying up large tracts of land in the interior of Brazil that would be transformed into "kingdoms" outside of Brazilian state control. The Anti-Nipponic Campaign (*Campanha Anti-Niponica*), a movement which enjoyed the support of many well-placed and influential Brazilians, was a movement which focused on the "fact" that the Japanese would not assimilate into Brazilian society.

To counter these attacks, Brazilian and Japanese proponents of continued Japanese immigration relied on nefarious statistics which "proved" that the Japanese actually did assimilate (culturally and biologically) into Brazilian society. For example, photographer Bruno Lobo created a series of images which showed the "positive" physical (and presumably cultural) changes which took place in the children of Japanese and Brazilian parents (p. 106-107). [These photographs mirror the much earlier work of the Spanish artist Modesto Brocos y Gomez whose 1895 painting "Redencao de Can" powerfully illustrated that the intermarriage of black and European peoples could "whiten" (and, implicitly, improve) the Brazilian population within three generations.] Still other supporters highlighted the economic benefits of Japanese immigration, pointing to the higher production levels attained on lands cultivated by the Japanese farmers.

In the following chapter, covering the period from 1933 to 1950, Lesser continues his analysis of the

Japanese immigrant experience in Brazil. In an amendment dealing with immigration, the 1934 Constitution severely affected immigration by establishing an annual quota of just two percent of the number of immigrants that arrived over the last fifty years. While the quota system initially represented a serious blow to Japanese immigration, a number of special allowances allowed immigration levels to grow in subsequent years, although the number of Japanese immigrants remained well below their pre-1934 levels. For Lesser, the real importance of the 1934 Constitution amendment was not the reduction in the number of immigrants, but the impact the Constitutional debates had on the Japanese residents of Brazil.

The immigration debate of 1933 and 1934 pulled many familiar arguments both for and against admitting non-Europeans into Brazil back into the national spotlight. While proponents continued to brandish their economic arguments to justify continued Japanese immigration, Lesser argues that opponents to Japanese immigration began to modify their rhetoric in the early 1930s. In debates between 1890 and 1933, the focus had been almost entirely around the issue of whether or not Japanese immigration would improve Brazil's racial (*raca*) stock. Now, in 1933 and 1934, Lesser found that opponents were also focusing on the ethnicity of Japanese, arguing that "ethnicity was immutably tied to nationality" and questioning the loyalty of Japanese immigrants to Brazil (p. 118). As Lesser notes, the "anti-Japanese rhetoric [of the early 1930s] was particularly shocking to the many *nikkei* [Brazilian-born Japanese] who assumed they had neatly integrated into the middle and upper-middle class" (p. 122).

While *nikkei* groups in Brazil challenged the attempt to link Japanese ethnic expression with disloyalty to Brazil, the creation of the *Estado Novo* government in 1936 marked the beginning of a period of increased official hostility towards the Japanese community within Brazil. Beginning with the "*brasildade*" campaigns in the late 1930s and culminating in the seizure of property and forced removal of Japanese families from areas with strategic military importance in 1942, the national government seemed to have internalized the arguments that questioned the loyalty of the Japanese and other immigrant groups.

Ironically, as Brazil's government implemented rules and programs designed to eliminate immigrant ethnicity, the anti-Japanese sentiments and actions created a backlash among the Japanese and *nikkei* population, causing them to become more "Japanese" (p. 136). Lesser's

research indicates an increase in the incidence of emperor worship, the emergence of underground Japanese-language newspapers, increased support for the Japanese war effort, and the formation of ultra-nationalist secret societies between 1936 and 1950. The largest of these societies, the *Shindo Renmei* or the Way of the Subjects of the Emperor's League, was created by retired Japanese army officers whose goal was to create a permanent place for Japanese culture, language, and education – all elements of ethnic life threatened by the *Estado Novo* government – within Brazil. Groups such as *Shindo Renmei* remained active and influential within the *nikkei* community through the 1950s. For Lesser, the period from 1933 to 1950 is an ironic one: a period in which the *nikkei* community was increasingly committed to Brazil as their home, while also reacting to growing nativist backlash by becoming more Japanese.

In his final substantive chapter entitled "Turning Japanese," Lesser examines the writings and observations made by Brazilians who traveled to Japan between 1880 and 1950. He argues that when traveling abroad, Brazilians were free to speculate on Brazil's own future by commenting on Japan's present. By commenting on Japan, these writers were making observations and judgments about a Brazil transformed by Japanese immigration and Japanese ethnicity. While the travel writings were authored by many different Brazilians, Lesser notes that certain themes – emulation, modernity, and sexuality – were prominent in almost all the works written prior to the 1940s. For example, most Brazilian observers lauded the Meiji state and its technical accomplishments, characterizing Japan as a model for Brazil's own development. As Lesser carefully points out, this desire to emulate Japan's accomplishments was not total. In fact, much of the praise for Japan's technical achievements was paired with a streak of disdain for Japan's non-Christian, non-European heritage. In the end, only Japan's technical achievements merited emulation.

When the Allies broke with Japan in the early 1940s, Brazilian travel literature written about Japan abruptly shifted. Rather than a nation Brazil should emulate, Japan was now viewed as an enemy. While much of the wartime writing on Japan was pure anti-Japanese propaganda, Lesser's analysis does highlight a number of works that seem to continue the pre-war themes of emulation, even if these themes are hidden beneath the more blatant indictments against the Japanese. Throughout this short chapter on travel literature, Lesser provides readers with an interesting parallel to his previous chapters by showing the interplay between the changing im-

pressions of Japan in the eyes of Brazilian travelers and the shifting position of the Japanese within Brazil.

Among its many accomplishments, *Negotiating National Identity* contributes to the social history of immigration and the literature on identity formation in three main areas. First, Lesser provides students of Brazilian history with a first rate study of the experience of non-European immigrant groups in Brazil. While the literature on European (especially Italian) immigration to Brazil is quite well developed, much less has been written about other immigrant groups, especially in English. Second, by focusing on non-European immigrant groups, Lesser is better able to examine the specific ways in which eugenics and nation-building came together to influence debates over immigration policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, by highlighting the strategies used by non-European immigrant groups to forge a hyphenated identity within Brazil, Lesser provides an important corrective to studies which have focused primarily, or exclusively, on Brazilian identity as something constructed along a black/white continuum. Rather than replacing race with ethnicity, Lesser's

study shows the importance of considering how both race and ethnicity were important concerns for Brazilian policy makers and immigrant families.

The strength of Lesser's *Negotiating National Identity* is the way his analysis seamlessly flows back and forth between the changing nature of political discourse surrounding immigration policy and the actions of the immigrant communities themselves. The ease with which the author shifts between these two analytical poles is no doubt due to the impressive variety of sources which were consulted, including legislative debates and other official government documents from both Japan and Brazil, as well as an enormous list of foreign and Portuguese language newspapers published in Brazil and abroad. To the author's credit, the sophistication of the analysis is matched by the readability of the text, making this relatively compact text a joy to read for specialists and advanced undergraduates alike.

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