



A better Brazil

LESSER, Jeffrey. A better Brazil.
História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos,
Rio de Janeiro. Disponível em:
<http://www.scielo.br/hcsm>.

Abstract

Many countries in the Americas describe themselves as “nations of immigrants.” In the United States, the myth of the “promised land” suggests that foreigners better themselves upon arrival because the nation is intrinsically great. In Brazil, however, the relationship between immigration and national identity is different. Many intellectuals, politicians, and cultural and economic leaders saw (and see) immigrants as improving an imperfect nation that has been tainted by the history of Portuguese colonialism and African slavery. As a result, immigrants were often hailed as saviors because they modified and improved Brazil, not because they were improved by Brazil. This “improvement” took place through absorption, mixture and with the use of increasingly flexible racial and ethnic categories.

Keywords: national identity; immigrants; ethnicity; transnational; diaspora.

Jeffrey Lesser

Professor, History Department/Emory University.
221 Bowden Hall
561 South Kilgo Circle
30322 – Atlanta – GA – USA
jlesser@emory.edu

Received for publication in December 2012.

Accepted for publication in August 2013.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702014005000010>

A number of countries in the Americas, from Canada to Argentina, describe themselves as “nations of immigrants.” In the United States, the myth of the “promised land” suggests that foreigners better themselves upon arrival because the nation is intrinsically great. In Brazil, however, the relationship between immigration and national identity is different. Many intellectuals, politicians, and cultural and economic leaders saw (and see) immigrants as improving an imperfect nation tainted by the history of Portuguese colonialism and African slavery. As a result, immigrants were often hailed as saviors because they modified and improved Brazil, not because they were improved by Brazil. “Improvement,” however, took place in the most Brazilian of ways, through absorption, mixture and with the use of increasingly flexible racial and ethnic categories.

Using immigration and immigrants as synonyms for a “better Brazil” can be traced back to the decades of mass entry that began in the nineteenth century. Yet, even when the numbers dropped, the importance of the idea of immigration remained. This helps us to understand why in the mid-1940s, when foreign entry was at its lowest in a century because of the closing of sea lanes during the Second World War, Dr. Cleto Seabra Veloso, of the Federal Department of Children, reflected that newborn babies were “our best immigrant. Let’s not forget this profound truth and let’s support those who will make the future Brazil bigger, stronger, and more respected”¹ (Veloso, dez. 1944, p.41). Thirty years later a new superhighway linking Brazil’s Atlantic coast with the city of São Paulo was named the Immigrant’s Highway. Drivers and their passengers became metaphorical immigrants as they repeated the journey of millions of Europeans, Asians, and Middle Easterners who arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Less symbolic was the 1974 stamps series celebrating immigrants and immigration. The first was entitled “Correntes migratórias” (migratory streams) (Figure 1) and insists that Brazilian identity is synonymous with the nation’s immigrants. The background map, with its lines representing human movement from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas, places Brazil at the center of the world.

Understanding immigrants and immigration in an elastic way challenges those who suggest that the movement of individuals by choice from one nation to another exclusively defines the “immigrant.” Brazilians, on the other hand, often treat “immigrant” as a status that is ancestral or inherited and can remain even among those born in the country. Those of immigrant descent rarely use hyphenated categories (such as Japanese-Brazilian or Italian-Brazilian), instead they focus on the birthplace of their ancestors and call themselves (and are called) “Japanese” or “Italian.” An advertisement for the Bandeirantes television network’s 1981 hit nighttime soap opera *Os imigrantes* (the immigrants) makes the point in a different



Figure 1: “Correntes migratórias”, stamp from 1974 celebrating immigration to Brazil

way: “Portuguese, Japanese, Spanish, Italians, Arabs: don’t miss the most Brazilian soap opera on television” (Portugueses..., 1981, p.2).

Immigrants and immigration, as these examples suggest, include both the settlement of foreigners and the belief that their descendants continue to improve national identity. The idea of immigration, thus, helped Brazil’s elites to see a future that was different and better than their present one. Not surprisingly, immigrants and their descendants generally agreed with the elites. Furthermore, non-elites often took the same position, even when they did not have direct contact with immigrants or their descendants. When Brazilians claim, as they often do, that they live in “the country of the future,” they are suggesting that the country’s national identity is changing for the better. Immigration was one of the main components in the improvement and, thus, the experience of movement did not end with the physical arrival of foreigners. Immigration was, and is, about creating a future, superior Brazil.

The obsession with a better Brazil is, of course, deeply linked to questions of race and blackness. Those intersections led to a long-term national obsession with miscegenation as nineteenth-century elites often tried to figure out who was white, who was black, who was neither, and who were both. As Leo Spitzer’s brilliant and tragic *Lives in between: assimilation and marginality in Austria, Brazil and West Africa, 1780-1945* suggests, co-existing clear and unclear racial categories dominated the psychological and political lives of the Rebouças family, to give just one example (Spitzer, 1989, especially chapter 4). In contemporary Brazilian popular culture, the references to miscegenation are frequent, although inconsistent in message. When the rapper Gabriel o Pensador complained in his 1994 hit “Lavagem cerebral” (brainwash) that “By the way, in Brazil white is rare because here we are all mixed” he was simultaneously critiquing racism and asserting that race does not exist. Two years later, the rockers Os Paralamas do Sucesso took a different approach, insisting that Brazil’s people were mixed of discernible separate identities in their 1996 hit “Lourinha Bombril” (Steel Wool Blond):

This black woman has blue eyes
 This blond has Bombril (a brand of steel wool) hair
 This Indian has a southern accent
 This mulata is the color of Brazil
 The cook is speaking German
 The princess is dancing Samba
 The Italian is cooking beans
 The American is in love with Pelé

These more intellectualized visions of the relationship between immigration, race, and national identity are mirrored in a walk down any main street in Brazil, whether in a huge metropolis or small town. A common Brazilian bar food is kibe (a torpedo-shaped fried croquette made of bulgur and chopped meat), although most consumers are not descendants of the hundreds of thousands of Middle-Eastern immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For decades young middle-class Brazilians have been obsessed with manga (a Japanese cartoon magazine) and typical Brazilian *rodízios* routinely include sushi and sashimi. Most of the consumers are not of Japanese descent, but they live in the country with the globe’s largest population of Japanese immigrants and descendants.

The huge Brazilian home appliance manufacturer, Brastemp, promotes its products with lines like “An Arab married to a Japanese – what could be more Brazilian.” Some Orthodox Jewish groups encourage attendance at ritual events by serving Japanese-style food. In Brazil’s largest city, São Paulo, a common saying holds that a typical resident of the city is “a Japanese who speaks Portuguese with an Italian accent while eating an *esfiha*” (a pizza-like dish topped with meat and vegetables, common in the Middle East).

Creating global Brazil

As Brazil moved from a colony of Portugal (1500-1822) to independent empire (1822-1889) and then republic (1889-present), a number of processes led to the creation of a pluralistic society with a racial hierarchy that placed whiteness at the top and blackness at the bottom. Fluidity meant that Brazil became a multi-cultural nation even as its citizens often imagined themselves and their country becoming whiter. Terms like white, black, European, Indian, and Asian (among others) were not fixed. As different people and groups flowed in and out of these ever-shifting categories, Brazilian national identity was often simultaneously rigid (whiteness was consistently prized) and flexible (considering someone white was a malleable issue).

When Brazil declared its independence from Portugal in 1822, immigration and national identity took on new meanings. Foreigners were expected to become citizens who would make the new country strong in everything from policy to culture. Yet many old attitudes remained, especially in the conflation of nationality and biology, and the certainty that there was a hierarchy of race with white Europeans at the pinnacle.

The linkage of blood and nation may have originated in the sixteenth century with the Inquisition, which sought to insure the blood purity of Catholics. By the nineteenth century, human hierarchies were part of a larger Euro-American elite culture, and different institutions helped to naturalize and formalize racial difference. In the United States, segregation legally separated “whites” and “blacks” and miscegenation was a subject of terror. In Argentina, those of African descent became socially invisible, as elite and middle class Argentines insisted that the country was “white” and “European” rather than multi-cultural (Andrews, 1980).

The anxiety that many Brazilians felt and feel over questions of race were apparent to immigrants, who quickly realized after stepping off the boat that they had some influence on their own placement in the racial (and thus social and economic) hierarchy. This anxiety led many nineteenth century elites to embrace a new political and cultural philosophy on race. “Whitening,” as they called it, proposed that the population could be physically transformed from black to white through a combination of intermarriage and immigration policies. “Strong” white “blood” would overwhelm that of “weak” non-whites, and law would prevent the entry of “feeble” races. Immigrants (and others) often accepted and used these categories. Becoming “white” was as important to the newcomers as it was to many citizens.

Whitening was crucial to the formulation of Brazil’s modern immigration policy. Almost two million European immigrants entered Brazil between 1820 and 1920, although many left as well. The newcomers were not evenly distributed across the Nation. Indeed, immigrants were lured mainly to the central and southern sections of Brazil. This population concentration

was one result of an enormous shift in the Brazilian economy, which had been strongest in the sugar growing and gold areas of the north during the early colonial period and had moved towards the center of the country with the discovery of diamonds in the mid-colonial period. Most immigrants arrived in the mid-nineteenth century with the growth of the coffee economy in the south.

European newcomers arrived in a superior position to the ex-slaves, who for generations had been deprived of formal education, and whose work had been largely uncompensated. Brazil's highly racialized social and economic spheres were reinforced with the unreliable statistics that were a hallmark of nineteenth century "scientific" states. The numbers showed that Afro-Brazilians had higher levels of illiteracy, malnutrition, and criminality than the population as a whole (Dean, 1976, p.173-174). These kinds of statistics helped policy-makers argue that whites were "better" than blacks.

Many late nineteenth and early twentieth ideas about race in Brazil stemmed from earlier European pseudo-science about race and human difference. German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's 1776 craniometrical scale created a continuum of racial excellence with European whites at the top, Asians (whom he called Mongoloids) in the middle, and black Africans at the bottom (Blumenbach, 1969, p.273). A century later, many Brazilian elites became enthralled with the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a French naturalist who theorized that traits and culture were acquired via local human and climatic environments. He proposed that a single "national race" was biologically possible and this provided the scientific scaffold for the creation of Brazilian immigration policies in which miscegenation did not inevitably produce "degenerates," but could forge a healthy mixed population growing steadily whiter, both culturally and physically (Stepan, 1991; Skidmore, 1993; Schwartzman, 2001). Intellectuals and politicians often saw themselves as social chemists using Brazil as a "racial laboratory" for whiteness. The chemistry metaphor reminds us that elites viewed the population as a base to which human "reagents" could be added or subtracted. In other words, policy-makers used eugenics to create a correlation between immigrant entry and racial change. An influential nineteenth century book on colonization, originally written as a formal report to Brazil's minister of Agriculture, is an excellent example. João Cardoso de Menezes e Souza's *Teses sobre colonização do Brasil: projeto de solução às questões sociais que se prendem a este difícil problema* (1875, p.403-426; *Theses on Brazilian colonization: solutions to the social questions related to this difficult problem*) proposed that Brazil was a unique national "embryo" (p.403) which had to be rejuvenated in order to extinguish the country's African heritage. Immigrants were the "seed" from which would spring the "powerful force of homogeneity and cohesion that will pull together and assimilate" the population at large (p.426).

Visions of the other

More than five million immigrants flowed into Brazil between 1872 and 1972, though many left as well. Yet in spite of the whitening policy, and the high numbers of European arrivals, those categorized as "others" by officials also came in large numbers. Who was represented in this category? Japanese were the single largest group, and the contemporary

claim of over one million Brazilians of Japanese descent seems reasonable. Many others were of Middle Eastern descent, and their national classifications often shifted from Turk to Syrian to Lebanese. The claim that millions of ethnic Arabs live in Brazil today is rejected by serious scholars. Eastern Europeans, who only recently have become white, also made up a large part of Brazil's immigrant stream. There were moments when almost 20% of all Jews leaving Europe went to Brazil. As the 1944 cartoon by Belmonte suggests (Figure 2), Brazil's ethnic multiculturalism was related to blackness, whiteness, non-whiteness, and apparently, male facial hair.

Attention to those in the "other" category that we see represented in the cartoon changes an often-told story about Brazil that focuses primarily on catholic immigrants from Italy, Portugal and Spain. The hundreds of thousands of non-European entries received disproportionate attention from the press, policy-makers and intellectuals. They also have levels of success (measured by income, education or residential settlement) higher than Portuguese, Spanish and Italians. Even so, the large numbers of non-European immigrants should not suggest that the concept of whitening became less important. Rather, what it meant to be "white" shifted markedly over the course of the twentieth century. Federal Deputy Acylyno de Leão summed it up with clarity, in 1935, when the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies voted to give subsidies to Japanese, but not to Portuguese, immigrants. In his speech, he proclaimed that the Japanese colonists were "even whiter than the Portuguese [ones]" (Brasil, 1935, p.432).

Such ideas continue to resonate and have a profound impact on the construction of national identity. This became clear to me when I conducted a small research project, in 1998, focusing on Brazilian politicians of Asian descent. The subjects represented a range of political viewpoints and party affiliations, but each positioned their ethnicity as crucial to their success as Brazilians. Luiz Gushiken, at the time national coordinator of presidential campaign of Partido dos Trabalhadores (Labour Party), and later Brazilian minister of Communications, explained to me that his Okinawan parentage and leftist leaning meant that Japanese-Brazilian voters rarely supported him. Even so, he emphasized his Japaneseness in his political self-promotion because, as he explained, "everyone knows that Brazilian politicians are corrupt and lazy – but as a Japanese everyone knows that I am the best Brazilian politician possible" (Gushiken, 1998). William Woo (1998), a law and order politician from São Paulo, told me the same thing in a rather different way, "My mother is Japanese, my father is Taiwanese and my wife is Korean – I am the best Brazilian of all."

That certain groups – among the most visible are Japanese, Arabs and Jews – are whiter than many European Christian groups has important implications for understanding of Brazil. Two brief, and very different, examples suggest how this whiteness was negotiated as part of Brazilian national identity formation. While the historiography might suggest that my examples are not really "Brazilian" because they involve nikkei, I propose the opposite and do not use grandparental birthplace to define who is "really" Brazilian.

Japan wins the Second World War

Like most historians, I often use grand political events as temporal markers, but sometimes reality does not conform to chronology. The following tale began in 1942 and ended in

CHARGES DA SEMANA: — Trabalhos de BELMONTE publicados na "Folha da Noite" durante a semana finda DIZE-ME EM QUE RUA ANDAS E EU TE DIREI QUEM ÉS...

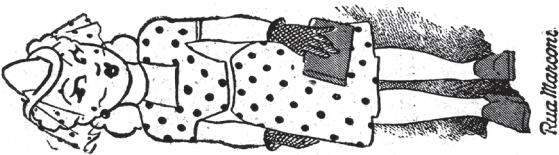
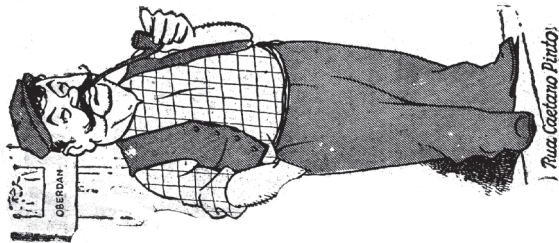
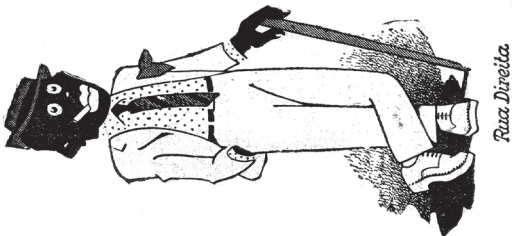
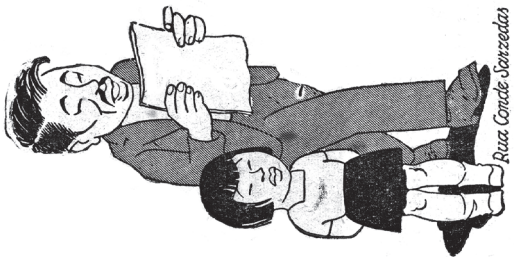
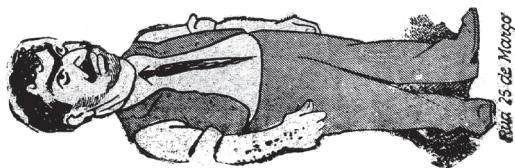


Figure 2: The cartoon reads, "Tell me what street you are walking on and I will tell you who you are..." (Charges..., 15 out. 1944, p.15)

the mid-1950s. It involved the Second World War, but in a very different way than readers might imagine.

In the 1940s, some immigrants and their Brazilian descendants began to strike out at the regime's nationalist *brasildade* campaign by emphasizing their Japanized identities via militarism and emperor worship. Rumors spread about babies born fully-grown, speaking Japanese, and predicting that Japan would win the war (Handa, 1987). Yet the monster babies (I have found no traditional historical evidence of their existence) pale in comparison to the Brazilian secret societies that emerged at the end of the Second World War. These groups first came to the public's attention in 1942, when they destroyed some Japanese-immigrant owned silkworm farms, believing that the silk was being sold to the United States Army for parachutes (Lesser, 2013, p.169). Nevertheless, what triggered a massive expansion of secret societies was President Vargas's decision, in July 1944, to send 25 thousand troops to Italy as part of the Allied Forces. The Brazilian Expeditionary Force's arrival in Europe generated immense nationalist sentiment, xenophobia, and anti-Axis feeling. Brazil declared war on Japan in May, 1945, so that the US military could continue to use bases in the northeast Brazilian coast to refuel Allied planes on the way to Africa. Since Italy and Germany had surrendered, Japanese immigrants and their offspring were suddenly the last "enemy aliens" in Brazil.

The largest secret society was the Shindo Renmei (Way of the Subjects of the Emperor's League) and it exploded in importance after the Second World War ended and after Vargas's Estado Novo was toppled in 1945. The leaders of the Shindo Renmei were retired Japanese army officers whose goals were to maintain a permanent Japanized space in Brazil through the preservation of language, culture and religion, and the re-establishment of Japanese schools. The Shindo Renmei posited that Japan had "won" the Second World War, and, by December 1945, the group claimed fifty thousand members.² This group is not as exotic as some of those who have written about it have claimed. In fact, putting the Shindo Renmei within a broader context of millenarian movements like that of the Muckers (1873-1874) and Canudos (1896-1897) shows a continuity of ways in which the Brazilian public, especially in rural areas, reacted to State repression.

Critical to the growth of the Shindo Renmei was its monopoly on information because of Brazil's ban on the foreign-language press. The group's circulars and secret newspapers mixed fact and fiction. Reports of Japan's defeat in the Brazilian press were described as US propaganda. Photos of President Truman bowing to Emperor Hirohito circulated along with reports of Japanese troops landing in San Francisco and marching towards New York. Just a week after Emperor Hirohito broadcast his real surrender message over short-wave radio on August 15, 1945, the Shindo Renmei released its own version of the event, in which "The Japanese employed for the first time their secret weapon, the 'high frequency bomb.' Only one of the bombs killed more than one hundred thousand American soldiers on Okinawa. [This led to the] unconditional surrender of the Allies [and] the landing of Japanese expeditionary forces in Siberia and the United States" (Shindo Renmei, 29 abr. 1947, p.1).

Along with the propaganda came murders. The assassinations began in early March 1946. That was when Japanese immigrants divided into two camps: the *kachigumi* (triumphalists)



Figure 3: Members of a Shindo Renmei Assassination Team (Breve relatório..., 12 out. 1946)

and *makegumi* (defeatists) who called themselves cultivated in Portuguese. The Shindo Renmei put evil spells on “defeatists.” Fanatical youth were recruited to gun down those who spoke of Japanese defeat (Figure 3). Kidnappings took place, with the ransom a promise never to speak of Japan’s defeat.

Between March and September 1946, 16 Japanese-Brazilians were assassinated for insisting Japan had lost the Second World War. Hundreds of others received death threats. Numerous silk, cotton, and mint farmers had their homes and fields destroyed. Brazilian authorities were stunned by these developments, especially when one captured *kachigumi* told police that “Japan did not lose the war. As long as there is one Japanese on Earth, even if he is the last, Japan will never surrender” (Handa, 1987, p.673). Japan’s post-war government sent documents to Brazil proving the Allied victory, but the *kachigumi* dismissed them as false (As atividades..., 1946).

The police raided Shindo Renmei headquarters in early 1946. There they found piles of propaganda materials and a list of 130 thousand members. Four hundred leaders were arrested and eighty were scheduled for deportation to Japan. Then something remarkable happened. Brazilian government representative José Carlos de Macedo Soares (a former Foreign minister) invited police, military officials, and secret society members, including those in jail, to a meeting at the São Paulo Governor’s Mansion.

Some six hundred people gathered that night, the majority Shindo Renmei members. Macedo Soares begged for the violence to end. He called Japanese immigrants and their Brazilian children “a treasure” and “the most important part of the Brazilian population.” (Americano, 1963, p.186-187). According to news from July 20, 1946 on *Correio Paulistano*, *Diário de São Paulo*, *A Gazeta* and *Jornal de São Paulo*, the meeting ended as Shindo Renmei leader Sachiko Omasa lectured Macedo Soares to the delight of his colleagues: “we Japanese do not believe ... in Japan’s defeat. If Your Excellency wants to end the disputes and terrorist acts, begin by spreading word of Japan’s victory and order that all false propaganda about defeat be stopped” (Lesser, 2013, p.172).

Macedo Soares did exactly what Omasa wanted. He prohibited Brazilian newspapers from publishing news of Japan’s defeat, and ordered the term “unconditional surrender” taken out of all official communications. The high court ruled that those convicted of the murders could not be deported. Even so, the end of the secret societies only came in 1950. That was when Japanese Olympic swimming champion Masanori Yusa arrived in Brazil with his team, the Flying Fish. Six thousand people crowded into Congonhas Airport in São Paulo to meet the athletes. An exhibition match at the Pacaembu Stadium was a sell-out and included music by the State Military Police Band and the presence of the Governor. During an interview, the youthful members of the Flying Fish expressed shock when presented with the idea that Japan had won the Second World War. The result was a *kachigumi* poster campaign claiming the swimmers were Koreans masquerading as Japanese (Noticiário, 21 mar. 1950). Japanese immigrants and their children were offended. When the Brazilian government indicted two thousand Shindo Renmei members, the Japanese-Brazilian community breathed a sigh of relief. It was 1950. The Second World War had finally ended in Brazil.

The young Koreans masquerading as Japanese (if we accept the Shindo Renmei version of the story) are only one example of how Brazilian national identity has come to include ethnic switching. Another example emerged fifty years later, when a roughly 40-year-old historian heard that Tizuka Yamasaki, one of Brazil’s most important cinema personalities, and director of the film *Gaijin: caminhos da liberdade* (Gaijin: paths of freedom), Brazil’s 1980 nomination for the Cannes Film Festival, was holding an open casting call for young Japanese-Brazilian actors and actresses to work in *Gaijin 2: ama-me como sou* (Gaijin 2: love me the way I am), a feature about the migration of Brazilians to Japan that started in the 1980s (Figures 4 and 5).

The historian was of European descent and born in the United States (Figure 6). There he was often demarcated as “white” and “bald.” Even so, the scholar decided to see if he could “pass” as a fifteen-to-twenty-five-year-old Japanese-Brazilian to test the flexibility of cultural categories of foreignness.

The historian woke up early on a Sunday morning and joined a long line of fifteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds. After a while, a few of the others in the line began to probe his ethnic background. At first, he insisted that he fit the ethnic and age profiles, but finally admitted that he was neither Japanese-Brazilian nor fifteen to twenty-five years old. Immediately the person in front of the historian expressed relief. “I am Chinese” he said, and then showed the historian his carefully constructed “Japanese” credentials. A woman overhearing the exchange broke into a smile. She was of Korean descent and had also created a “Japanese” name to “pass” into the audition.

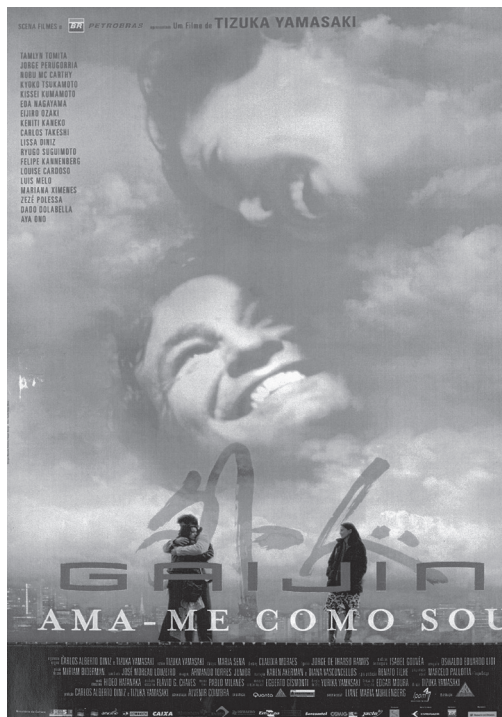
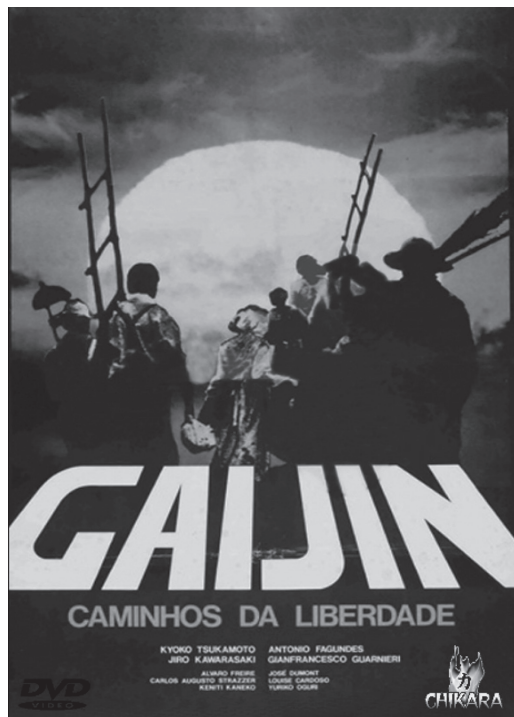


Figure 4: Posters promoting the films *Gaijin* and *Gaijin 2*



Figure 5: Tamlyn Tomita, star of *Gaijin 2*

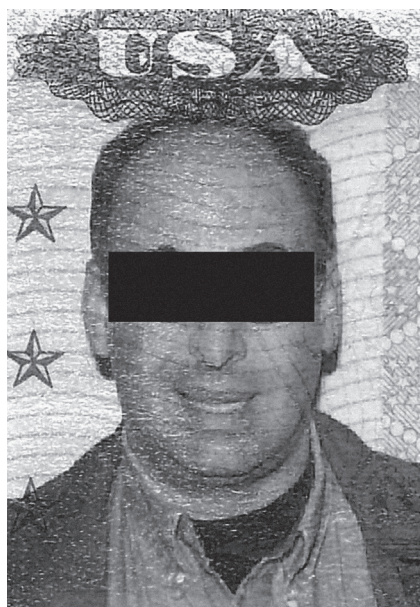


Figure 6: The historian

Final considerations

Discourses on Brazilian national identity become particularly visible when examining the ethnicities that emerged out of immigrant entry. Thinking of immigration as the first step in the creation of “better” Brazilians allows us to move away from the strict and often-replicated black/white or Indian/white paradigms of race and nation that dominate studies of Latin America, and especially Brazil. Expanding the categories helps us to understand how national terms like “Japanese” become synonyms for “a better Brazil” in the widely quoted Semp Toshiba advertisement that reads, “Our Japanese are more creative than the Japanese of others.” At the same time, thinking of categories as flexible helps us to understand why a “Brazilian” may be considered a person in need of improvement from abroad. Such ideas are not limited to people – the recent film *Faroeste caboclo* (Mestizo Western) (2013) has as a subplot that planting foreign marijuana in Brazil creates a better (stoned) Brazilian.

Readers may be asking if the examples above are more than symbolic. For me, the answer is a resounding yes. In the post-war period, to marry a Japanese-Brazilian, a Jewish-Brazilian, or an Arab-Brazilian is seen as a step up for cultural reasons, not exclusively class ones. The Brazilian state promotes itself by using images of certain ethnic groups (and never others) and a major bank has advertised itself for the last twenty-five years with a close-up of a nikkei and the caption “We need more Brazilians like this Japanese.” This is just the most recent formulation of the great Brazilian paradox – that policies constructed to re-make Brazil as “white” in fact created a multi-cultural society.

Greil Marcus (1989, p.4) commented in his wonderful history of punk rock that that history is the result “of moments that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the spectral connections of people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language.” Did Japan win the Second World War? If Japanese can be white, can whites (at least if they are not historians!) be Japanese? Brazil remains a nation where immigrant – descent ethnicity continues to create the country of the future.

NOTES

¹ In this and other citations of texts from Portuguese, a free translation has been provided.

² See translation of Shindo Renmei objectives and statutes in report of João André Dias Paredes to Major Antonio Pereira Lira (Paraná, 30 abr. 1949).

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