

LESSER, Jeffrey. *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 281 pages. ISBN 0-8223-2292-7 (paper).

Jeffrey Lesser originally made his name for his research into the Jewish population of Brazil and the history of its immigration. These investigations resulted in his 1991 *Colonização Judaica no Rio Grande do Sul, 1904-1925*. His 1994 *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question* is also focused on Jewish Brazilians, though it explores other issues, such as concepts of ethnicity and, as the title indicates, the ambivalent reception extended to immigrants. Since the publication of these works, Lesser has continued to become known as an expert on Brazilian Jewish communities and has served as secretary of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association. At the same time, his research concerns have been ranging more broadly. He has for some time been developing the concept of cross-cultural studies that focus on more than one ethnic group in the same country or region. One example of such comparative studies of ethnic communities is the 1998 reader that Lesser and Ignacio Klich edited, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities*, developed from a session held at the XVI Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, and Lesser, "From Peddlers to Proprietors: Lebanese, Syrian and Jewish Immigrants in Brazil."

Negotiating National Identity, a well-written study full of wonderfully eloquent examples and insightful observations, may surprise readers who associate Lesser with Latin American Jewish studies. The new book contains only a few passages

concerned with Jews in Brazil. It examines three occurrences of non-European immigration to and settlement in Brazil. Lesser first treats briefly an early case, that of nineteenth-century Chinese workers in Brazil, as setting the course for thought and discourse about non-European immigrants. He then examines the arrival of Middle Easterners over the years 1884-1939, and their establishment as an ethnic group within Brazil. The Japanese, who began arriving in significant numbers in 1908, come in for the most extensive coverage. Lesser considers how these immigrants and the ethnic minorities that they created within Brazil developed for themselves identities as members of national society. While these groups, like all immigrants, wished to win acceptance and to cast their contributions to the nation in a favorable light, there was an effort to attain these goals without sacrificing ethnic distinctiveness. The cases are alike in involving immigrants viewed as nonblack and nonwhite as well as non-European, but different in important aspects. As Lesser notes, the Middle Easterners, for whom "Syrian-Lebanese" is a good enough term, were not physically distinguishable from the long-standing Brazilian population, and during the years of most intense immigration, the majority were Christians. The Chinese and Japanese may have been nonblack, but their visible difference placed them in the category of yellow, and their religious outlook and practices were mysterious to the Catholic majority. In each case, though, the new ethnic group worked out a public identity by making use of the many concepts of race, ethnicity, and Brazilianness that were circulating in Brazilian society.

Concerning the material he used in his research, Lesser states: "... this is not a story of 'hidden transcripts'." Rather, the written, oral, and visual texts I have used were openly expressed and understood by immigrants, their descendants, and members of majority society..." (p. 5). Overt discussion of ideas about race and ethnicity is in abundant supply in, among other sources, newspaper editorials, speeches by public figures, essays and treatises, literary works, and satirical writings. Lesser makes good use of visual representations, particularly the São Paulo monument by Ettore Ximenes, *Amizade sírio-libanesa*, topped by the figures of "The Brazilian Republic, the Indigenous Warrior, and the Pure Syrian Maiden."

Lesser has been successful in locating examples that tellingly illustrate the malleable, maneuverable nature of ethnic categories. He narrates an episode that occurred after the 1910 Brazilian federal budget prohibited subsidies for Asian immigrants. The principal target of the budget's anti-Asian clause appears to have been the Chinese, who were associated in many Brazilians' minds with opium and clannishness. "Yet prior to the implementation of the budget, diplomats were able to secure a promise from the Brazilian government that Japanese would be excluded 'from the category of Asiatics,' and before the law was enacted, the offending words were expunged completely. Reconfiguring Japanese as non-Asians was an important step in creating 'ethnic' categories for immigrants, and Japanese diplomats eagerly played on such attitudes with constant reminders that their subjects were 'white'" (p. 87). The debate over whether the Japanese would intermarry with the previously established population involved a host of issues, drawing in eugenics, notions of Brazilianness, and a generalized notion that Asian women were antithetical to progress and a peril to sexual morality. There was an effort to argue that the Japanese, by virtue of their common ancestry with Brazil's Indians, were "more authentically Brazilian than most residents of Brazil" (p. 104); treatises and pamphlets sought to demonstrate that the offspring of Japanese fathers and Brazilian mothers exhibited few or no Asian physiognomic traits. Here Lesser does an excellent job of guiding readers through assertions that contradict one another and common sense.

On occasion Lesser overestimates nonspecialist readers' ability to recognize terms for religious, linguistic, and ethnic categories. I would have appreciated, for example, some explanation of the characterization of the Middle Easterners as "mainly Greek (Melkite) and Maronite Catholics and Orthodox" (p. 48). Since very few readers possess a specialist's knowledge of Brazilian, Middle Eastern, and Japanese cultures, more clarification would have been especially desirable. Even though Lesser may sometimes send readers to an encyclopedia in search of such terms as *Haquitia*, he writes clearly and without recourse to jargon.

Negotiating National Identity is not only cross-cultural but also interdisciplinary in its appeal. Readers who are

concerned with the history of immigration will be struck by the failure of policy-makers to produce either homogeneity or exceptional whiteness in the population. Students of literature and cultural anthropologists will be most fascinated by the study's memorable demonstration of the mutability and negotiability of racial and ethnic categories. While Lesser is unmistakably an historian, readers from literary and cultural studies should feel at home in his work, both because of his approach and because of the many examples he draws from literary and other cultural sources.

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