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CHAPTER ONE

Creating Brazilians

> My mother is Japanese, my father is Taiwanese, and my wife is Korean – I am the best Brazilian of all.
>
> William Woo, a politician from São Paulo, in an interview with the author in 2001.

Introduction

Figure 1.1. "Migratory Streams," 1974 stamp celebrating immigration to Brazil.

The faces tell the official story. Entitled "Migratory Streams," the stamp 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.

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Immigration is so important to Brazilian national identity that even those not born abroad are often defined as "immigrants." In the mid-1940s, when foreign entry was at its lowest in a century because of the closing of sea lanes during World War II, Dr. Cleto Seabra Veloso of the Federal Department of Children reflected that newborn babies were "our best immigrant[s]. Let's not forget this profound truth and let's support those who will make the future Brazil bigger, stronger, and more respected."[1] Thirty years later, a new superhighway linking Brazil's Atlantic coast with the city of São Paulo was named the Immigrant's Highway (Rodovia dos Imigrantes). Its path makes drivers into immigrants metaphorically as they repeat the journey of the millions of Europeans, Asians, and Middle Easterners who arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A number of countries in the Americas, from Canada to Argentina, describe themselves as "nations of immigrants" just as Brazil's secretary of the Ministry of Justice did in 2011.[2] 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. Yet as we will see, "improvement" took place in the most Brazilian of ways, through absorption and mixture, as well as with the use of increasingly flexible racial and ethnic categories.

Most Brazilians understand immigrants and immigration in an equally elastic way, challenging those who suggest that the exclusive definition of an immigrant is "an individual who moves by choice from one nation to another." In Brazil, individuals represent themselves and are labeled as immigrants in situational ways. Brazilians often treat "immigrant" as a status that is ancestral or inherited, one that can remain even

[1] Dr. Cleto Seabra Veloso, "Construindo gerações," *Boletim Trimensal do Departamento Nacional da Criança*, 4: 19 (December 1944), 41. My thanks to Cari Williams Maes for pointing this out to me.

[2] Paulo Abrão, National Secretary of Justice, quoted in "Brasil vira meca para mão de obra imigrante: Regularização de estrangeiros salta de 961 mil em 2010 para 1,466 milhão até junho," *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 19 November 2011.

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among those born in the country. Those of immigrant descent rarely use hyphenated categories (such as Japanese-Brazilian or Italian-Brazilian), instead focusing on the birthplace of their ancestors, calling themselves (and being called) Japanese or Italian. An advertisement for the Bandeirantes Television Network's 1981 hit nighttime soap opera (333 episodes over fourteen months) "The Immigrants" makes the point in a different way: *"Portuguese, Japanese, Spanish, Italians, Arabs – Don't Miss the Most Brazilian Soap Opera on Television."*[3]

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 (made up of landowners, politicians, intellectuals, and industrialists) to see a future that was different and better than their present one. Not surprisingly, immigrants and their descendants generally agreed with the elites. More telling, nonelites often took the same position, even when they had no 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 finite experience of movement did not end with the arrival of foreigners. Immigration was and is about creating a future, superior Brazil.

In 2003, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a migrant from the Northeast to São Paulo whose career ranged from metallurgical worker to labor leader to politician, was elected president. While his personal story was unusual in a country where politics has traditionally been elitist, nondemocratic, and often repressive, his ideas about immigration as a source of strength and national improvement followed traditional patterns. President Lula and his allies insisted that Brazil was a multicultural country and that the slogan "Brazil – Everyone's Country" was not only about economic class. The visual representations for the motto often included photographs of Brazilians from many different ethnic backgrounds.

Celebrations of the immigrant past were notable during Lula's presidency, with the state investing significant funds, as it did for the 2008 centenary of the first Japanese arrivals. Much of the language that government institutions produced for the event insisted that Brazilians of Japanese descent were permanent immigrants, that there was little

[3] *Jornal do Imigrante* (São Paulo), 4: 422 (September 1981), 2.

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difference in the high status of their great-grandparents born in Japan and their own Brazilian citizenship. The rise to prominence of another politician at the end of the Lula presidency reinforced the idea that immigrants and their descendants had created a "better Brazil." Petar Stefanov Rusev fled political persecution in Bulgaria, arrived in Brazil in the 1930s, and became a successful businessperson. In 2011 his daughter, Dilma Rousseff, became president.

A walk down any main street in Brazil, whether in a huge metropolis or small town, emphasizes the importance of immigration to national identity. A common Brazilian bar food is kibe (a torpedo-shaped fried croquette made of bulgur and chopped meat), even though most consumers are not descendants of the hundreds of thousands of Middle Eastern immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the 1960s, many young middle-class Brazilians have been obsessed with manga (a type of Japanese cartoon magazine), while older Brazilians eat sushi and practice "new Japanese religions" in significant numbers. Most are not of Japanese descent, but they live in the country with the largest population of Japanese immigrants and descendants in the world. The huge Brazilian home appliance manufacturer BRASTEMP advertises its products with such lines as "An Arab married to a Japanese – what could be more Brazilian." Orthodox Jewish ritual events are often promoted to the public by serving sushi. In Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, a common saying holds that a typical *paulistano* (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).

A Hemispheric Perspective

Nowadays, Latin America often appears as a region of emigrants. The press and politicians in the United States frequently suggest that "Latin American" problems like crime and poverty are related to the movement of peoples north across the Rio Grande, whether by foot or plane. This contemporary image, however, is a new one. Europeans arrived in Latin America in large numbers from the sixteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century. Millions of African slaves were forcibly settled, often together with smaller numbers of free colonists.

By the early nineteenth century, the descendants of those who had settled, whether slave or free, were forming all sorts of new and changing "Latin American" identities. Their aspirations led to the creation

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of new nations. The new national elites, be they Argentine or Brazilian or Honduran, often disdained the local indigenous, African, and mixed-descent inhabitants who made up the majority. Many in the dominant classes wanted to remake their national populations and they looked to Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century, both North and South America had become destinations for emigrants with the United States, Canada, Argentina, and Brazil receiving the largest numbers. Yet the absolute numbers of entries are not the only important statistics. In countries with small indigenous populations, like Argentina and Uruguay, the impact of immigrants on population growth was significantly higher than in the United States. Foreign newcomers, both slaves and free immigrants, were also demographically crucial to the growth of Brazil, Cuba, and Chile. Even in Peru and Mexico, where the numbers of immigrants were relatively small in comparison with the large populations of indigenous peoples, immigration weighed heavily on the minds of policymakers and the public.

Between about 1870 and 1930, roughly four million immigrants settled in Argentina, two to three million in Brazil, perhaps one million in Cuba, and 400,000 in Uruguay. In North America, Canada received more than 1.3 million newcomers, while the United States settled more than twenty million. Although most immigrants to the Americas came from Europe, significant numbers arrived from the Middle East and Asia. These numbers challenge contemporary academic and popular stereotypes of Latin America as populated almost exclusively by indigenous people, those of African descent, and people of mixed backgrounds.[4] The multiple origins remind us that newcomers from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (and more recently in Brazil, from places like Bolivia, Argentina, Portuguese-speaking Africa, and Nigeria) played crucial roles in national identity formation. The presence and the attitudes of enslaved and free people were of equal importance in the creation of national identity among Latin America's other multicultural nations.

Throughout Latin America, immigrants were and are part of the discussion of national identity. In the Andes and Mesoamerica, national identity discourses often hail an Incan or Aztec past while dismissing it in practice. In Peru, Mexico, and Brazil, some immigrant leaders from Japan, China, Lebanon, and Poland claimed that Indians were in fact

[4] Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2d ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

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a lost tribe and thus that their new immigrant group was in fact native. Peru's former president (1990–2000) Alberto Fujimori, for example, dressed as both an Inca and a samurai as part of the political marketing of his Japanese descent.

Claiming to have an indigenous past was not in conflict with taking advantage of state policies that were often designed to keep indigenous people at the lower rungs of the political, social, and economic hierarchy. For many immigrants, this boost meant that by the mid-twentieth century, those who were described, or described themselves, as descendants of Middle Eastern, Asian, and European immigrants came to play important roles in all sectors of these societies. Politicians of Arab descent are common in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In those countries, as in Brazil, the large majority of Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants are Christian. Some of Mexico's most powerful tycoons are the children of German and Lebanese immigrants. Many Honduran economic elites are of Christian Palestinian background.

In the Caribbean and Portuguese America, where the largest numbers of colonial-era residents were African slaves and their children, free immigrants played an equally important role. In those regions, foreigners became part of a discussion about blackness and whiteness that continues to dominate both popular and elite discourses. The Southern Cone countries of Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina also were populated with African slaves and indigenous people, but independence leaders conveniently forgot them as they proposed the settlement of immigrants in "unpopulated" territory.

How does Brazilian immigration compare with that of other countries in the Americas? In many ways Brazil is unique. Its size is bigger than that of the continental United States. It now has the fifth largest population in the world, which is by far the largest in Latin America. Unlike the more populous countries of China, India, and Indonesia, however, most of the population of Brazil originated as migrants, arriving either involuntarily as slaves from Africa or voluntarily as free immigrants. Yet Brazil is important not only for its size. Its three-hundred-year status as a colony of Portugal (from 1500 to 1822) inhabited mostly by African slaves gives unique inflections to everything from language to food.

In Brazil, many in the elite believed in the mythical greatness of the Amazon's indigenous people. While this echoes aspects of Mexican and Peruvian national ideals of a "cosmic race" of mixed indigenous and European pasts, Brazil's innovation was the addition of Africa. Yet in spite of the Brazilian "myth of the three races" (where Africans, Indians,

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and Europeans supposedly melded together to form a single and unique Brazilian "race"), much of the discussion of immigration was based on the Southern Cone model of newcomers populating virgin lands. Elites often saw immigrants (who in turn saw themselves) as replacing the local population with something better. Newcomers helped to form another myth of Brazilian nationhood, that of a "country of the future" where whiteness would eclipse blackness.

Brazil, however, also reminds us of many other American republics. In both the United States and Argentina, Central European immigrants arrived in the early years of the nineteenth century and were followed by large numbers of Southern Europeans, especially Italians. Brazil, like Peru, Canada, Cuba, and the United States, had numerous decades of intense Asian immigration. In the Southern Cone and in Central America, large numbers of Middle Easterners arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Brazil is also similar to other countries in the Americas where immigrants entered within a context of slavery, although abolition in Brazil came only in 1888. Yet immigrants were not slaves, even if they were often treated poorly. Many immigrants separated themselves, often aggressively, from slaves or free people of African descent. This separation was ongoing and dynamic: While some immigrants "became white" by distancing themselves from blacks and indigenous people, others moved in the opposite direction, either by marrying a person of color or not fulfilling certain cultural, social, and occupational expectations. Those who did not conform to the whiteness mandate through self-segregation often lost the advantages of being an "immigrant." The new ethnic identities that emerged among the descendants of immigrants in the Americas must thus be understood in relation to broader attitudes about creating racial, social, and political separation from those of African descent.[5]

The Seeds of Mass Immigration

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese crown coerced less-than-desired populations to settle Brazil's frontiers

[5] Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

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with the Spanish colonies that would become Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. As a result, Brazil's inhabitants included some indigenous peoples, many Portuguese settlers and their descendants, and even more slaves toiling in the plantation economy. Political leaders, confronting a vast territory and believing that the population ought to be less "black" and more "white," increasingly looked to immigrants from Europe. Those they wanted – industrious, enterprising, light-skinned people who could nevertheless thrive in Brazil's unfamiliar climate – were not easy to attract. The people they were more likely to get – refugees, political and religious exiles, those in jails, and the poor – were correspondingly less welcome.

In the mid-1700s, however, new ideas began to emerge. The Portuguese prince regent, Dom João V, centralized "colonization" policy throughout a far-flung empire that stretched from South America to South Asia. His goal was to convince non-Portuguese to settle in Brazil, and in 1748, just two years before his death, he employed an agent to bring thousands of Azoreans from those crowded Atlantic islands to Brazil's southernmost territories and to Pará at the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil's North.[6] These plans had only modest success but set the stage for future state-sponsored settlement plans.

When Napoleon and his French Army invaded Portugal in 1807, the Braganças, the royal family now headed by Dom João VI, fled across the Atlantic. As they stepped off the ships in Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay on January 28, 1808, the center of the Portuguese Empire shifted to Brazil, now a de facto independent nation. Members of the royal court were struck by the vast differences between elite European and Brazilian society. They wondered whether encouraging European immigration would help to recreate the world that they had left behind. Dom João's first step was to open up Brazil's economy and culture. He decreed that non-Portuguese ships could now dock at Brazilian ports, and non-Portuguese subjects received the right to own land. For many Portuguese leaders in exile, Brazil was on the road to nationhood. Once the independence genie popped out of the lamp it would never return.

Independence was fed by Enlightenment ideas. Abolitionist literature from England encouraged members of the Brazilian elite to speculate about ending slavery as a step toward nationhood. Portuguese Prime Minister in Exile (1817–1821) Tomás António de Vila-Nova worried

[6] Karl Heinrich Oberacker, *A Contribuição Teuta à Formação da Nação Brasileira*, 2d ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Presença, 1968), 207.

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about the oppressive labor system in ways that would have been considered heretical a decade earlier. To the minister, slavery made Brazil "intrinsically weak" by preventing the growth of "a people" with a "national spirit." When the royal court had been in Portugal, all foreigners had been "categorically suspected of subversive activity."[7] With the move to Rio de Janeiro, non-Portuguese subjects were welcomed as residents and potential Brazilians.

New political and cultural ideas about foreigners as immigrants, rather than as spies, helped to reignite the discussion of slavery. For most elites, the system seemed necessary for short-run prosperity even if it, and slaves themselves, created barriers to national aspirations. At the same time, British pressure to end the slave trade was intense, albeit not wholly effective. Political and economic elites desiring to resolve the two positions looked north to the United States, which from afar seemed to be getting whiter, more European, and more productive. As Kirsten Schultz has noted, immigration "meant that in the new prosperous empire, at least in official visions of the political-economic future, whiteness and the ideal of utility as embodied in the small farmer could challenge successfully the ideal of linguistic, historic, and cultural unity and religious homogeneity of a heroic Portuguese nationhood that both exiles and residents evoked in explaining the transfer of the court."[8]

Many in the Portuguese court realized that the people they most wanted as immigrants were least likely to want to come. The sluggish response to Brazil's early-nineteenth-century desire for European immigrants forced political and business leaders to reevaluate their approaches. One idea was to target potential immigrants in France, England, and the United States by promoting Brazil as a neo-European country filled with empty land, where white immigrants would gain instant status in a slave society. However, the booming economies and political systems of all three countries meant that French, English, and Americans were not inclined to emigrate. Elites thus began taking other approaches. One was to use word of mouth, especially by inviting scientists who might return to Europe with positive impressions and create an aura of possibility for potential emigrants. Travelers, however, were rarely convinced. Their reports emphasized Brazil's Africanness,

7 Kirsten Schultz, *Tropical Versailles: Empire, Monarchy, and the Portuguese Royal Court in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1821* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 111.

8 Ibid., pp. 111, 210.

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the elite's sense of privilege, and the poverty of those few immigrants in the country. Other tactics were needed.

The Creation of a Multiethnic 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. The fluidity of these terms and their meanings, however, meant that Brazil became a multicultural 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 in the Brazilian context. 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 (the designation of whiteness was malleable).

Beginning with the arrival of Europeans in the early sixteenth century, Brazil was increasingly filled with migrants from throughout the Portuguese Empire and from Africa who came in contact with the indigenous populations. The newcomers were not immigrants in the classic sense; few arrived voluntarily and most were coerced. Portuguese subjects arrived as members of four distinct categories: The smallest numbers were those from religious orders or those in political leadership positions who chose to come to Brazil, often believing that they were engaged in a temporary service to the king. Most migrants, however, were either *degredados* ("degraded ones") or soldiers. Degredados were criminals sent to Brazil to populate frontier regions as a condition of their release. Soldiers, like degredados, were coerced to move within the empire and had no say in their postings. The fourth category, Portuguese women, arrived in low numbers, either accompanying their formerly imprisoned husbands or as orphans sent by religious orders to marry white men in the colony. The data for entry in the centuries after 1500 are incomplete, although it is estimated that about 700,000 Portuguese subjects were sent to Brazil between 1500 and 1760.[9]

When gold was found in Brazil in 1693, entries grew markedly. In the 1720s, when diamonds were discovered, the numbers exploded. About

9 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, available at: http://www.ibge.gov.br/brasil500/index2.html.

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