



# A DISCONTENTED DIASPORA

Japanese Brazilians and the  
Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960–1980

JEFFREY LESSER

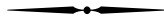
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*Dedicated to the memories of my father,*

*William Morris Lesser, זייל*

*my sogro,*

*Michael Shavitt, זייל*

*and my mentor,*

*Warren Dean*



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

People respond to my research on Japanese-Brazilians in numerous ways. Academics from the United States are usually aware of concepts like *ethnicity* and *diaspora*, but they are often surprised that the United States is not the only multicultural country in the Americas and that São Paulo has the largest population of Japanese descent of any city in the world outside Japan. Brazilians, be they academics or not, are often puzzled that a researcher (me), born outside of Brazil (in the United States) and belonging to a non-Asian ethnic group (Jewish) would be interested in Brazilian Nikkei.

As I conducted the research for this book, many people I met asked, “I know someone who is Japanese-Brazilian; would you like to meet her (or him)?” This did not come as a surprise: São Paulo is filled with Japanese-Brazilians. Evangelicals or atheists, auto mechanics or economists, old or young, male or female, gay or straight, they all have what Daphne Patai termed “Minority Status and the Stigma of ‘Surplus Visibility.’”<sup>1</sup> Although Japanese-Brazilians are a minority both numerically and conceptually, members of the majority often extrapolate individual experiences with Nikkei to the whole group. This book, then, is about how ethnicity operates in a city where Japanese-Brazilians are the most visible ethnic minority of all.

The inspiration for *A Discontented Diaspora* came from my undergraduate mentor, Anani Dzidzienyo, and my graduate mentor, the late Warren Dean. It was Professor Dzidzienyo who led me, and an entire generation of Brown University students, to study Brazil. His classes were always passionate and political, much like the subjects of this book. For Professor Dzidzienyo, actions spoke louder than words. Professor Dean was equally passionate and political, demanding that his students look for the agency among historical actors. Both Professor Dzidzienyo and Professor Dean insisted that I spend

as much time as possible in Brazil, not only reading documents but listening to people. I hope that their influence is apparent in this book's theme and in its style.

...

This book could not have been written without the generosity of many people. Patrick Allitt, Roney Cytrynowicz, Jerry Dávila, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, Koichi Mori, and Thomas Skidmore read the entire manuscript (some of them more than once!), and their comments always pushed me to rethink my ideas. Stephanie Dennison, Sandra McGee Deutsch, James Green, Shuhei Hosokawa, Victoria Langland, Kenneth Serbin, Kerry Smith, Tzvi Tal, and Barbara Weinstein all read chapters, and all helped to improve the manuscript.

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SINOS), the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, UFRGS), the São Paulo State University (Universidade Estadual Paulista, UNESP)—Marília, the Institute of Philosophy and Social Science (Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais, IFCS)—Rio de Janeiro, Michigan State University, the Southern Japan Seminar at Florida International University, the German Association of Latin American Studies (ADLAF), and the Federal University of Santa Maria (Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, UFSM). Special thanks go to my students at Emory University, who have never failed to ask the hard questions that constantly inspire me.

A number of foundations were extraordinarily generous in funding my research and writing over the past few years: the American Council of Learned Societies, the Ford Foundation Program in Human Rights and Society, the J. William Fulbright Commission, the Fulbright-Hays Commission, the International Nikkei Research Project, and the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation. Emory University aided the project with both funds and time, and I want to particularly thank Walter Adamson, Cristine Levenduski, James Melton, Robert Paul, and Steven Sanderson for their support. Susumu Miyao and Kazunori Wakisaka invited me to spend a year as a fellow of the Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros, and Marco Antônio Rocha and Eva Reichman from the Brazilian Fulbright Commission were always helpful and kind as I did my research.

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The final editing of this book was done as I taught a graduate seminar on Diasporas in Latin America with the support of a Fulbright Fellowship at the S. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies at Tel Aviv University. The wonderful students in that seminar read the final draft of the manuscript, and their intellectual and cultural challenges to my work were a constant inspiration. My dear friends in Tel Aviv, Raanan, Esti, Omer, and Noa Rein, as well as Rosalie and David Sitman, helped make my family's stay a pleasure.

To the Lesser and Shavitt families goes my great love. Finally, and most important, I want to thank my wife, Eliana Shavitt Lesser, and our twin sons, Gabriel Zev and Aron Yosef, for their love, sense of adventure, and good nature.

## Abbreviations

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| ACENB   | Arquivo do Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros<br>(Archive of the Center for Japanese-Brazilian Studies, São Paulo)     |
| AEL     | Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Unicamp   |
| AERP    | Assessoria Especial de Relações Públicas (Special Advisory Body for Public Relations)                                  |
| AESP    | Arquivo do Estado de São Paulo (São Paulo State Archive)   |
| AHI-R   | Arquivo Histórico Itamaraty, Brasília (Archive of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry)                                      |
| ALN     | Ação Libertadora Nacional (National Liberation Action)   |
| AN      | Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (Brazilian National Archive)  |
| APERJ   | Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro)                            |
| APP, SJ | Arquivos das Polícias Políticas, Setor Japonês (Archives of the Political Police, Japanese Section)                    |
| ARP     | Assessoria de Relações Públicas (Advisory Body for Public Relations)   |
| BJKS    | Biblioteca Jenny Klabin Segall of the Museu Lasar Segall, São Paulo  |
| BN      | Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro  |
| CEAGESP | Companhia de Entrepostos e Armazéns Gerais de São Paulo<br>(Warehouse and General Grocery Stores Company of São Paulo) |
| CEDEM   | Centro de Documentação e Memória, São Paulo  |



|          |  |
|----------|--|
| CENB     | Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros (Center for Japanese-Brazilian Studies)   |
| CENIMAR  | Centro de Informações da Marinha (Naval Intelligence Center)   |
| CIE      | Centro de Informações do Exército (Army Information Center)  |
| COLINA   | Comando de Libertação Nacional (National Liberation Command)   |
| CPDOC    | Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil, Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro (Center for Research and Documentation on the Contemporary History of Brazil) |
| DEDOC    | Departamento de Documentação da Editora Abril (Department of Documentation of the Abril publishing house)  |
| DEOPS    | Departamento Estadual de Ordem Política e Social de São Paulo (São Paulo State Department of Political and Social Order)   |
| DOI-CODI | Destacamento de Operações de Informações—Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna (Department of Operations Information—Center of Internal Defense Operations)                                  |
| ECA      | Escola de Comunicações e Artes (School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo)  |
| FAL      | Fuzil Automático Leve (Light Automatic Rifle, a Belgian-made light machine gun)  |
| FCB      | Fundação Cinemateca Brasileira, São Paulo  |
| GV       | Getúlio Vargas   |
| IBGE     | Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)  |
| IHGB     | Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute)  |
| INA      | Indústria Nacional de Armas (a Brazilian-made .45 caliber machine gun)   |
| INC      | Instituto Nacional do Cinema (National Cinema Institute)   |
| INCRA    | Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform)  |
| ISI      | import-substitution industrialization  |
| ITA      | Instituto Tecnológico de Aeronáutica (Aeronautics Technological Institute)   |
| JAL      | Japan Airlines   |
| MASP     | Museu de Arte de São Paulo (São Paulo Museum of Art)   |

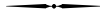
|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| MOLIPO       | Movimento de Libertação Popular (Movement for Popular Liberation)  |
| MR-8         | Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (8 October Revolutionary Movement)                                   |
| NARC         | National Archives and Record Center, Washington, D.C.  |
| OBAN         | Operação Bandeirante   |
| PC do B      | Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil)  |
| PCB          | Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party)   |
| POLOP        | Política Operária (Workers' Politics, Marxist Revolution Organization)                                     |
| PRO          | Public Records Office, London  |
| PT           | Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party)  |
| SABESP       | Companhia de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo (Basic Sanitation Company of the State of São Paulo) |
| SNI          | Serviço Nacional de Informações (National Intelligence Service)  |
| UNESCO       | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization   |
| USP          | Universidade de São Paulo (University of São Paulo)  |
| VAR-Palmares | Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária–Palmares (Armed Revolutionary Vanguard–Palmares)                           |
| VPR          | Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária (Popular Revolutionary Vanguard)  |

**SEMP TOSHIBA**  
OS NOSSOS JAPONESES SÃO MAIS CRIATIVOS QUE OS JAPONESES DOS OUTROS.

FIGURE 1. Semp Toshiba advertisement,  
“Our Japanese are more creative than everyone else’s Japanese”

## Prologue

### THE LIMITS OF FLEXIBILITY



This catchphrase shown in figure 1, an advertisement created by the Talent agency in 1992 for the Brazilian consumer electronics firm Semp Toshiba, was “one of the most talked about . . . in Brazilian advertising.”<sup>1</sup> It reflected a complex relationship between Brazil and Japan that was linked to the national identities of Brazil’s one million citizens of Japanese descent. Connecting Brazil to Japan was not simply a marketing strategy: in popular language Nikkei (the term many Japanese-Brazilians use for themselves) are known simply as “japonês,” because no linguistic distinction exists between Brazilians of Japanese descent and inhabitants of Japan itself.<sup>2</sup> Rachel de Queiroz’s short story “Nacionalidade” illustrates the point. Its young protagonist is called “japonês” by his friends, even though he constantly reminds them that he and his parents were born in Brazil. One child insists that “I never saw a person who was Brazilian and had a Japanese face. I thought that all Brazilians were the same.”<sup>3</sup> In the story race is a powerful metaphor for national identity and social hierarchy for Nikkei and for all Brazilians who are not “the same.”

Relating ideas about Brazil and Japan to people of Japanese descent has a long history. It began in 1908, when the first of some 250,000 Japanese immigrants arrived. By 1960 Brazil had the largest Nikkei population in the world. São Paulo was the world’s largest “Japanese” city outside of Japan.

Over the course of the twentieth century, ties between Brazil and Japan included interactions at all political, economic, cultural, and social levels.<sup>4</sup> Ideas about Japan flowed constantly into Brazil, via images, products, and people. Brazil and Japan were deeply enmeshed in popular culture: Brazilian parents told their children that if they dug deep enough they would arrive in Japan, while Japanese parents told their children that if they kept digging they would pop out in Brazil.<sup>5</sup> Some people considered this tale in more “adult” ways. A 1969 cartoon in a Brazilian men’s magazine showed a man leering through the earth at a woman (i.e., from below) and explaining happily, “If the world was transparent I would live in Japan.”<sup>6</sup>

This unusual bond between Brazil, Japan, and Japanese-Brazilians was apparent in the Semp Toshiba advertisement. “Our Japanese are more creative than everyone else’s Japanese” was a nationalistic slogan, but it suggested ambivalence since national pride might be expected to result in a phrase like “Our Brazilians.” Yet for many in São Paulo “our Japanese” was a code for a superior kind of Brazilian, and elites in the nation’s most populous, economically powerful, and politically dominant city spread ideas about race and national identity to all Brazilians through the media, educational materials, and government policies.<sup>7</sup> “Our Japanese are more creative than everyone else’s Japanese” implied that São Paulo was better than the rest of Brazil, but this hierarchy was not the advertising agency’s invention. Throughout the twentieth century, São Paulo’s elite often looked to Japanese international power as a goal and to Japanese industry and society as models.<sup>8</sup> Political and economic leaders saw the city’s “Japanese” residents as important actors in making São Paulo better than the rest of Brazil. In the 1970s the São Paulo-based Bamerindus bank insisted in its advertising that “[we] need more Brazilians like the Japanese.”<sup>9</sup>

This book triangulates one city (São Paulo), one country (Japan), and one ethnic group (Japanese-Brazilians) and asks what the relationship between the three in the sixties and seventies teaches us about ethnicity and national identity. My approach thus presumes that identity (ethnic, national, regional) is multifaceted and simultaneously global and local. My arguments are based on the word *and* rather than *or*, but this is not a linguistic trick. Rather it allows what might appear as contradictory phenomena to be analyzed as part of the regular lived experiences of identity.<sup>10</sup> While the subjects of this book made “either/or”-type choices in their presentation of identity, they were also comfortable holding multiple identities that might seem superficially contradictory.

On the first day of each semester my students and I examine the book titles on our syllabus. My goal is to convince them that the titles were carefully chosen and, when analyzed, will tell a great deal about an author's approach and content. The title of this book, *A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese-Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960–1980*, is not simply a collection of buzzwords. The questions I have asked myself are: “Do Japanese-Brazilians have a sense of diasporic identity?” “Were Brazilian Nikkei discontented?” “If so, what made this diaspora more or less discontented than any other?” and finally “Why did Japanese-Brazilians become a focus of cultural comment in São Paulo, and by extension Brazil?”

“A discontented diaspora” suggests that many people in Brazil erroneously assume that Nikkei feel “Japanese” and thus have an emotional attachment to Japan as an irrefutable homeland. While Japanese-Brazilians rarely see themselves as diasporic in this classic sense, the strong imprint from the majority has had an impact on their identity construction. The Nikkei subjects of this book always asserted their claims of Brazilianness and the presumed diaspora, which was so vibrantly imagined in São Paulo by non-Nikkei society and by their Japanese immigrant parents, created an oppressive ethnic community and an oppressive majority society. It produced discontent by making questions about the location of home, and thus Japanese-Brazilian loyalty, ever present.

“Ethnic militancy” also demands attention. U.S. readers may imagine the term to mean an openly asserted ethnicity where people join political movements or demand to be denominated in certain ways. In the United States “ethnic militancy” brings to mind African-American, Latino, Asian-American, and Jewish-American mobilization both separately and in coalition. In Brazil this kind of militancy occasionally took place in Afro-Brazilian political and cultural movements, but it was rarely seen among other ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup>

So why use “ethnic militancy” in the title? Because in the absence of formally constituted Nikkei rights movements, ethnic militancy took other forms. In the United States in the sixties and seventies this often included carving out “ethnic spaces” in the national arena, but in Brazil the majority presumed that minority groups wanted to live entirely in “ethnic spaces.” For Japanese-Brazilians militancy meant escaping the ethnic boxes of majority society and of their immigrant parents’ generation in an emphatic way. Whether joining banned political movements, training as guerrilla fighters, or acting in erotic films, the subjects of this book militantly asserted their

Brazilianness and in doing so, much to their surprise, reinforced their minority status.

In putting together ideas of diaspora, discontent, ethnicity, and militancy, I take seriously the “nation” and “national identity.” While the latter is a heuristic device that the state attempts to create and control, it is constantly modified through lived experience. This line of analysis is useful because the heavy presence of Japanese and Japanese-Brazilian images and products in São Paulo is contextualized by a population of Japanese descent numbering 750,000. São Paulo is different from other cities in the Americas where images of Japan may be strong but where the Japanese descent population is small and the personification of images only occasional.

Nikkei are engaging subjects for several reasons. The long-standing and deep Brazilian adherence to the cultural ideology of modernization linked Japanese-Brazilians with Japan, one of the world’s strongest and fastest-growing economic powers. In contrast, Portugal, Brazil’s “mother country,” figured unfavorably on the world stage through most of the twentieth century as a place of repression and economic and cultural stagnation. Since at least 1920, many in the Brazilian elite saw Japan, not Portugal, as a national model where traditional and economic modernization created international power. Nikkei appeared to many of their fellow Brazilian citizens as hard working, enterprising, and successful, just like Japan itself. When the magazine *Realidade* asked in 1966, “Is it worth being Brazilian?” one positive answer came from the naturalized farmer Hiroshi Saito (born in Nagasaki), who made Brazil better by planting “foreign” agricultural products.<sup>12</sup> The way for Brazil to move forward was to import a foreign population with foreign products, foreign technologies, and a foreign work ethic.

Analyzing Nikkei identity makes clear some of the ways Brazil differs from other American republics with significant populations of Japanese descent. In Peru, many citizens of Japanese descent are configured as Chinese, creating a complex Asianness that competes with the identity of the indigenous majority.<sup>13</sup> In the United States, most Japanese immigration was prohibited in 1907 (just when it began in Brazil), and the state unjustly interned U.S. citizens of Japanese descent during World War II.<sup>14</sup> By the sixties and seventies ambivalence in the United States was related to a fear of Japanese efficiency and economic growth, which reminded many Americans of the values of individuality that they imagined most Japanese lacked. Brazil also stands out from the United States because ethnic, physical, or gendered attributes are discussed explicitly, although not necessarily comfortably, in

the former. People call each other *gordinho* (fatty), *gostoso* (hot), *careca* (baldy), or *japonês* (Japanese). The Nikkei experience in Brazil thus reveals what is often hidden in the United States, where, starting in the 1960s, cultural pressure often muted public expressions of stereotypes.

In Brazil upward social mobility often brought a change in ethnic and racial categorization, and Japanese-Brazilians generally have been economically successful. By the 1930s Nikkei were often moved from the “yellow” (the term used in the Brazilian census) into the “white” category: when a federal deputy said before the Brazilian House in 1935 that “Japanese colonists . . . are even whiter than Portuguese (ones),” there was little disagreement.<sup>15</sup> These racial shifts were not unique to Nikkei. The anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro tells of a cocktail party conversation between the famous painter Santa Rosa and a young Afro-Brazilian complaining about racial barriers to his ascent in the diplomatic service: “I understand your case perfectly, my dear boy,” Santa Rosa supposedly replied. “I was black once, too.”<sup>16</sup>

The belief that race could be subsumed by class, and was thus inconsequential, made Brazil a racial showcase by the second half of the twentieth century. A post–World War II UNESCO study suggested that Brazil was a location of positive race relations and an example of the permanence of racial inequality without legal segregation.<sup>17</sup> This research reformulated intolerance as primarily a class issue and suggested that socially ascendant individuals and groups could not be victims of racism. With class as the critical marker, many “ethnic” Brazilians became part of a vague whiteness. The association of affluence with entry into the common Brazilian “race” means that studying Japanese-Brazilian ethnicity, while commonsensical in the United States, seems odd in Brazil, where presumed prosperity often makes Nikkei seem at times nonethnic and at others non-Brazilian. The hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Brazilians in São Paulo in the 1960s and 1970s were simultaneously exotic and commonplace.

For this study, I have not chosen to analyze typical experiences. Rather, my focus is on two potent topics that emerged in the 1960s, sexuality in cinema and political militancy. I have chosen these two themes because they highlight how Japanese-Brazilians imagined themselves to be Brazilian. Nikkei were sure that their participation in these two realms would be recognized for its Brazilianness, and they were constantly faced with the reality that they were incorrect. Nikkei saw themselves as ethnic militants for their rejection of ideas about “Japanese” ethnicity, but what they learned was that marking themselves as Brazilians only brought their Japaneseness to the fore. Nikkei



were trapped in a framework of normalcy and convention, and swerving from the well-traveled path did not lead the subjects of this study to unusual ethnic experiences. On the contrary, it underscored the cultural artifacts of Brazilianness so integral to ethnicity. While this book's Japanese-Brazilian subjects were not normative, their ethnic experiences were.

...

Brazil is a huge country and São Paulo is its largest city. Between 1960 and 1980 São Paulo grew from 4.7 million (out of a national population of 70 million) to 12.5 million people (out of a population of 119 million) (see table 1). During these decades, ideas about Japan and Japaneseness influenced most major events in the city and images of Japan and Japanese-Brazilians became common throughout Brazil. In Belém do Pará (at the mouth of the Amazon), Campo Grande (in far Western Brazil), and in cities large and small throughout the states of Paraná and São Paulo, one might see São Paulo-like Nikkei ethnicity in its broadest sense. Studying São Paulo, then, is similar to studying New York City: both ethnic centers have a widely diffused national resonance.

In São Paulo, where residents believed their regional identity should also be the national one, the relationship between Brazilianness and Japaneseness was the subject of constant discussion. For many of the city's residents, contacts with images of Japan and with real Nikkei were as daily a reality between 1960 and 1980 as they are today. Residents of the city bought their *pasteis* (fried filled dough) from "Japanese" street vendors, they brought their clothes to "Japanese" dry cleaners, and they purchased their fruits and vegetables from "Japanese" stands in open markets around the city. Students met Nikkei in their classes and city dwellers had Nikkei neighbors. In the popular imagination, the neighborhood of Liberdade, São Paulo's centrally located "Japantown," represented an ideal of social ascent to petit-bourgeois status.<sup>18</sup> In the sixties and seventies a trip to that "exotic" district gave Brazilians the impression that visiting a foreign country was only a bus or car ride away.

The belief that Japan was in São Paulo, however, was not limited to a single neighborhood. Japanese gardens were a rage among the elite in the fifties and sixties, as were Japanese industrial and managerial models in the sixties and seventies. In the sixties "Japanese" decoration and fake characters became familiar in the city, frequently without any Japanese or Nikkei context. The advertising campaign for Brazil's most famous "Japanese"

TABLE 1. Population, São Paulo (state and city) and Brazil, 1960 and 1980, with percentage increase

| Year | State of São Paulo | City of São Paulo  | Brazil             |
|------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1960 | 12,809,231         | 4,791,245          | 70,070,457         |
| 1980 | 25,040,698 (+95%)  | 12,588,725 (+162%) | 119,002,706 (+70%) |

Source: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, *Evolução da População Residente: Brasil, Estado de São Paulo, Grande São Paulo, 1960, 1980*.

film, Tizuka Yamasaki's *Gaijin: Os Caminhos da Liberdade* (*Gaijin: The Roads to Freedom*), framed Japan as critical to its central message of *mestiçagem* (racial and ethnic mixing) and Brazilian national identity (figure 2). The names of cast members prominently (and perhaps unintentionally) represented all of São Paulo's major immigrant groups (Portuguese, Italian, and Japanese), whose arrival in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries created uncertainty about the authenticity of Brazilianness. In *Gaijin*, as in São Paulo, Nikkei became a focal point for national identity anxiety; as the newspaper advertisement suggested, Japanese immigration and its aftermath were unique spaces for characterizing broad Brazilian experiences of ethnicity.

The *Gaijin* advertisement invites readers to think of this book with another title (that is now the title of chap. 1), "The Pacific Rim in the Atlantic World." In the introduction to that book I might have argued that the image makes clear a problem with using oceans to discuss national and regional space. The advertisement's reproduction of Japan in Brazil and its linkage to Nikkei shows the ease with which transnational imagery flows without direct oceanic contact.<sup>19</sup> Japanese-Brazilians seem the embodiment of how global and local relate in a transnational and a transoceanic world.

Real and imagined geography is critical to the construction of ethnic identity. For many *paulistanos* (residents of the city of São Paulo), Japan served as a backdrop to explore their own national pathos, be it in politics, culture, or economic development. They imagined a powerful relationship between Nikkei and Japan because they rejected in Nikkei what many scholars have pointed to as a dominant feature of Brazilian culture: ethnic mutability. Nikkei in São Paulo, more than any other ethnic group in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, were essentialized by the majority and they essentialized themselves.