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Micol Seigel. *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. xxii + 386 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4426-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4440-7.

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The Pitfalls of the Transnational Approach to Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States

Brazilian historians are well familiar with the Brazilianists: American scholars who travel to the Latin American country's archives looking, one might say, to encounter themselves as Americans. This sustained scholarly interest on Brazil has many roots. First, scholars began to be interested in the country in the wave of the postwar UNESCO research on race. This endeavor sought to find in the tropical nation an alternative to antagonistic racial relations in Europe and the United States following the brutal awakening of the Holocaust.

There is also an earlier route explaining American interests in Brazil through Brazilians encountering the United States. While studying in the United States, Gilberto Freyre observed Afro-Brazilian sailors disembarking in Brooklyn, New York. Freyre's ambivalent emotions regarding the racial makeup of these sailors inspired his extensive research on racial formation in Brazil. As a way of positioning himself vis-à-vis those Afro-Brazilian sailors who represented his country to the common American and toward white Americans to whom Freyre himself may have often appeared as an incongruity–as white and Brazilian–he began thinking about the fundamental aspect that defined him as a Brazilian and by extension what makes Brazilian society different than its American counterpart. The result was the brilliantly written and still relevant study of racial formation in Brazil that posited the Latin American country as a successful experiment of racial democracy, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande e Senzala): A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (translated into English by Samuel Putnam [1987]).

Understanding the roots of American interests in Brazil is fundamental to grasping the characteristics of the scholarship. By studying Brazil, American Brazilianists have sought to understand themselves just as Brazilian scholars have sought to understand themselves vis-à-vis Americans. As a result, the study of race relations in Brazil has been constructed through implicit and explicit comparative lenses.

Micol Seigel's energetically argued study of the transnational making of race and nation in Brazil and the United States attempts to transcend the inevitable pitfalls that the comparative study of race relations in the two countries engenders. Seigel rejects as skewed the view that Afro-Brazilian racial consciousness was nonexistent because they did not adopt the militant strategies of the civil rights movement in the United States. She takes issue at the lasting visions of race in Brazil and the United States as constructed within the boundaries of the nation. This vision, which she views as present in the popular imagination and in academia, leads to comparative depictions of race relations in Brazil and the United States that essentialize race and obscure the formative connections between the two countries. Her transnational study seeks to unravel the ways in which race and nation mutually constituted one another but also how they were constructed through transnational contexts.

She elected various domains to explore the "uneven encounters" that informed the making of race and nation in Brazil and the United States. These analytical domains extend from the study of production and consumption in advertising, jazz in Rio de Janeiro, vaudeville theater, the black press in the city of São Paulo, and the uses of the black wet nurse in postcolonial representations of the nation. Seigel deploys a variety of analytical lenses and demonstrates an admiring command of the extensive scholarship on race and nation in both the United States and Brazil. The first chapter focuses on advertising in the first two decades of the twentieth century where Brazil and the United States forged connections through the webs of commodity chains that bring Brazilian coffee to American tables. She analyzes the protectionist policies that the Brazilian coffee industry imposed on the commodity to control prices and how these policies influ-

enced the representation of Brazil in American publicity campaigns. Before the 1920s protectionist policies, coffee commercials represented Brazil on an equal footing with the United States by depicting the Latin American country as the producer of this essential drink of civilization, energy, and productivity, and as a necessary complement to masculine prowess and heterosexual desire. But when Brazil began controlling coffee prices after the 1920s, the depictions changed to represent the country as only one of the sources of coffee, and began to bring to the foreground the racial makeup of the population to American consciousness. Coffee publicity campaigns began to convey to the consumer that Americans can look toward the highland of Peru or Bolivia to get their morning drink. Even though this chapter addresses the ways in which the American Empire shaped the relations between Brazilian producers and American consumers of coffee, overall the analysis shows that the United States was more dependent on Brazil as the source of its elixir of productivity in the industrial factories on which American capitalism rested. This chapter stands disconnected from the rest of the book, appearing almost as an inserted article flimsily linked to a larger study.

The second chapter looks at the vogue of maxixe in the United States. Maxixe is an Afro-Brazilian musical form that preceded samba and enjoyed success in the United States. Its performance allowed the U.S. consumer to encounter Brazil in an exotic consumption of cultural production. The third and fourth chapters replicates the analysis in the second by traveling to Rio de Janeiro to unravel the making of race and nation in the then Brazilian capital through a study of jazz and vaudeville theater performances. The last two chapters, and most interesting after the first one, analyze the black press in São Paulo and race and gender in the representation of the nation through the figure of the black mother.

The chapter on the black press most saliently makes a contribution to the study of racial activism in Brazil; it examines how Afro-Brazilians sought to influence the discourse on race and nation across the Atlantic. In this chapter and the last, Seigel most efficiently and concretely contends with a transnational view of race relations in Brazil and the United States by showing how race and nation functioned as mutually constitutive categories and how they help explain particular antiracist strategies that Afro-Brazilians deployed in advocating for equality. This may not seem as novel now that transnational research has reached a mainstream status but at the time that Seigel was doing her research this perspective was still nascent. Here, however, it would have served the author to give more credit to scholars who have already analyzed the Afro-Brazilian press for studies of racial politics in Brazil, notably, Kim Butler (*Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* [1998]) and Michael Hanchard (*Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo* [1998]). She dismisses Hanchard's work too easily as imputing a lack of racial consciousness to Afro-Brazilians. It is a superficial reading of a much more complex and nuanced work. She also does not engage Butler's comparative work on racial activism in Bahia and São Paulo at the beginning of the twentieth century. Given Butler's extensive analysis of how the two Brazilian cities' socioeconomic contexts influenced the articulation of Afro-Brazilians' activism, Seigel's study of Rio de Janeiro could have expanded on this literature by inserting events in the capital city into this story and analyzing the connections between this locale and the black press in the Paulista cosmopolis. One gets the skewed view that the black press in São Paulo was more interested in transnational discourse on race and nation with the United States and Europe rather than in discourse with Afro-Brazilian communities in the rest of Brazil. Given Rio de Janeiro's importance as the Brazilian capital, one would expect at least an equal degree of engagement between Afro-Brazilian communities there and the city of São Paulo. Seigel's bibliography could also have been updated to include the newer studies on Brazilian race relations that do accomplish the transnational approach that she advocates, notably, Paulina Alberto's study of soul music in Rio de Janeiro and national identity. Alberto's study certainly contends in greater depth with Hanchard's study of racial politics in Rio de Janeiro.[1]

Lacking from Seigel's study is a critical analysis of the ways in which African American encounters with Afro-Brazilians were highly shaped by expanding the American Empire. She hints at this line of analysis by arguing that the prominent African American journalist Robert Abbot was ethnocentric when he and other fellow Americans insisted that Afro-Brazilians speak English to better themselves but she does not explore this line of analysis in terms of the transnational making of race and nation in the two countries. This comment hints at a second meaning of her title: "uneven encounters." To a certain extent, it is not enough to say that encounters between Americans and Brazilians shaped racial formations in both countries as a repudiation of comparative methods exploring the topic. An analysis of racial formation between the two countries need to explore the ways in which just as Afro-Brazilians viewed themselves and articulated strategies of resistance as African descended

and as Brazilians, African Americans approached Brazil and Afro-Brazilians with the assemblages of U.S. Empire attached onto them.

Finally, Seigel's book succumbs too aptly to one of the pitfalls of transnational studies: in their focus on connections that transcend the nation, these analyses readily neglect the force of this construct in shaping local connections. As a result, Seigel's book reads as a series of travels between the United States and selected geographical spots in Brazil while she never truly lands in any of these places. While she writes of the ways that Brazilians and Americans constructed race and nation through their "uneven encounters," she neglects to analyze the more immediate connections between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in similar lights. How did racial activism differ in Rio de Janeiro from the Paulista cosmopolis? Surely these two cities are closer geographically to one another than New York City's advertising and theater streets to São Paulo's nascent black press? One of the weaknesses of transnational studies is that even when they theoretically acknowledge the value of local events in history, they are so bent on highlighting connections beyond the boundaries of the nation-state that they end up representing those local events without their most immediate contexts for the sake of those extra-national linkages. This would have been a much better read if the author had not let her transnational lenses direct her narrative, and on the contrary, let her sources and the narrative that emerges from them speak the story of the past in the multidirectional and unpredictable way that history often evolves.

All in all, Seigel's book will enrich many graduate course syllabi on race and nation in American studies, African American studies, and Latin American studies, as well as courses on cultural studies broadly conceived.

Note

[1]. Paulina Alberto, "When Rio was Black: Soul Music, National Culture, and the Politics of Comparison in 1970s Brazil," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (2009): 3-39.

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