



**David Sheinin, Benjamin Bryce, eds.** *Race and Transnationalism in the Americas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021. 304 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4671-7.

**Reviewed by** Spencer Gomez (UC-Irvine)

**Published on** H-Slavery (September, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Andrew J. Kettler (University of California, Los Angeles)

*Race and Transnationalism in the Americas* explores the functionality of race and its continuous alterations across Latin America during the twentieth century. The editors, Benjamin Bryce and David M. K. Sheinin, have put together a collection of essays by Latin American scholars that challenges what appears like an endless search for global connections. Instead, this book seeks to promote studies that honor and understand local and national subtleties rather than comparative analysis. Whether a micro or macro historical essay, each chapter tests the boundaries of transnationalism as a framework. No longer fixed to the study of national borders, the overall body of chapters serves as a way to study the transformation of race within communities largely underrepresented.

Drawing from generations of scholars such as Frank Tannenbaum, Paul Gilroy, Lisa Lowe, Ada Ferrer, and Tatiana Seijas, among others, the authors of this book attempt to find nuanced readings of race, not by locating its origins but by examining its transformation in the twentieth century.[1] This means understanding the recent historiography done on race, transnationalism, and slavery to accurately place twentieth-century events in the same narrative as those mentioned

above. Studying race through a modern lens also allows for a wider range of source materials to be included, such as newspapers, printed oral histories, and governmental records.

The twelve scholars included in *Race and Transnationalism in the Americas* provide a broad array of scholarship that spans the geographical areas of the United States, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Panama, and Venezuela. In most cases, print culture plays a fundamental role in locating the voices of both the state and its inhabitants. Chapter 1 contributes to the broader discussions of Argentine racial thought by casting light on South Asian immigration from the 1890s to the 1920s. Benjamin Bryce argues that as Argentinian elites created policy to bring large numbers of Europeans into the nation to whiten the country, this also had the potential downside of attracting Asian migrants. To prevent this, journalists, politicians, and officials in Argentina did their part to spread racial anxiety among its citizens.

In chapter 3, Lara Putnam explores the debates over political membership and rights among British Caribbean migrants by tracing the multiple meaning of “citizen” and “citizenship” (p. 56). As nations became more concerned with exclusionary practices, they tied mobility rights to the

concept of citizenship. Local newspapers elaborated how British West Indians pushed for recognition by self-identifying as imperial citizens. Although the ambiguous nature of their status was intentionally written into British law, the attention given by newspapers, new parties, and petitions served the wider British West Indian community to challenge singular state-sponsored race bans (p. 73). Chapter 10 looks once again at Argentina during the mid-to-late twentieth century and the Argentine Muslim community. By tracing newspapers such as *La Prensa*, Raanan Rein uncovers the importance the press had in claiming Muslim Europeaness (p. 181). Peronism and its changing politics allowed space for officials to use Spain's Muslims to justify their presence in Argentina and incorporation into society, as seen by the construction of mosques and the presidency of Carlos Menem by the end of the twentieth century.

This collection also contains micro-histories from diverse communities within Latin America that challenged various national projects. Waskar Ari-Chachaki explores the life and political project of Geogoro Titiriku and the Republic of Qullasuya. Chapter 2 illustrates how Titiriku represented a "different kind of indigenous activist not [driven] by class concerns but by an interest in creating an ethnic, cultural, and spiritual revival of Indians" (p. 38). Titiriku espoused a different model of modernity where more than one version could exist. As Bolivian elites proceeded in banning Indigenous people from urban centers due to their clothing and language, Titiriku pushed for an Indian republic that could live separately from its white counterpart. In chapter 8, Marc Hertzman explores the all-male Filhos de Gandhi (Sons of Gandhi) to understand the group's early years and accurately place their interpretation and appropriation of Gandhi's vision within a set of global representations (p. 140). While scholars have taken opposing positions on their appropriation, it is possible to see how global events affected local black stevedores in Brazil's port cities. Even untrue memories, taken from printed oral histories,

provided a kind of international connection, real and imagined, that Filhos de Gandhi harnessed from print media, film, and word-of-mouth from India (pp. 143-144).

A number of scholars have approached US-Latin America relations through a racial lens to explore their impact on society, *mestizaje*, and the drug war. Three chapters by Alexander Dawson, Stephen Lewis, and Elaine Carey highlight transnational tensions regarding US, Mexico, and Indigenous communities. In chapter 4, Dawson explores US and Mexican perspectives of indigeneity through the material expression of peyotism (p. 77). Examining the treatment of peyote users across the borderlands, he shows that US officials based their treatment on the physical body, while Mexican officials tied peyotism to an archaic practice incompatible with modernity. Important comparative work is done here to show the distinctions made by a transnational object on the psyche of both US and Mexican officials.

In chapter 5, Lewis takes a look at how Mexican institutions developed both the cult of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* in the 1920s and 1930s. Incorporating neo-Lamarckian theories of evolution, Mexican officials ramped up governmental institutions to cultivate a Mexican identity based on improvements. Unsuccessful, these projects failed to incorporate large areas of Indigenous communities across the Chiapas highlands. Chapter 6 uses critical race theory and intersectionality to argue that "policy makers embraced constructions of race on the US-Mexico border from the 1930s to the 1950s to obstruct social and economic inclusion" (p. 106). Reading Senate hearings on illicit narcotics traffic in the 1950s, Carey demonstrates how the drug war serves as a form of white supremacy to marginalize Mexicans while downplaying their white counterparts. As an example, head of the Federal Bureau on Narcotics Harry J. Anslinger is shown to have constructed a racial narrative that portrayed both the US and white women as victims of the drug war (p. 113).

Others in this collection have looked to culture and media as a vehicle that redefined concepts of race. Looking to Venezuela, Sheinin explores the relationship Venezuelans had with baseball and racial conceptions of Blackness as a North American concept more so than local. Chapter 7 examines the construction of a Venezuelan “criollo” baseball identity that relied heavily on US media and Venezuelan consumers. In similar fashion, Sonja Stephenson Watson explores the transnational circuits of cultural, racial, and linguistic exchange found in Panamanian *reggae en español*. Chapter 9 highlights the highly mobile cultural elements of Caribbean migrants and the social practices that they borrowed and reworked from site to site in the 1920s and 1930s (p. 166).

In the final chapter, Kevin Coleman, in collaboration with Julia Ironion Martins, explores the 2015 documentary *Damiana Kryygi*, directed by Alexandro Fernández Mouján. Set in Argentina, Paraguay, and Germany, the film provides a critical portrayal of the Aché people and their quest to reclaim bones still in the possession of national museums outside their Indigenous lands. In the process of reclaiming the buried bones of a medical subject, the authors subsequently bring to light an honest critique of anthropology, racial science, photography, and public institutions. Most importantly, the interplay between print, photos, and film demonstrates how racial science can be repurposed to serve the communities and memories they once suppressed during the early twentieth century.

This collection of essays is heavily geared toward historians of modern Latin America, with references dating to contemporary political events such as the 2016 US election. However, as Marc Hertzman points out in the introduction, this work can be widely used by colonial and nineteenth-century scholars of Latin America looking to explore alternative themes, such as community, transculturation, and citizenship. It is also relev-

ant to point out once again the importance of print culture throughout the entirety of this book. Literacy rates, as Putnam demonstrates, were remarkably high among working-class people in places like Panama (p. 58). For historians of slavery, *Race and Transnationalism in the America* does not work well to explain slavery, a claim the editors and authors never make. Instead, these chapters work best to add new layers of complexity to the legacies of slavery and colonialism experienced by Indigenous populations across Latin America, as opposed to the African diaspora. For those reasons their flaws reside in connecting the dots for their readers. More specific contextualization on slavery leading up to the twentieth century could have made the book’s position on race much stronger in the end as it connects to transnationalism. Its approach to exploring smaller communities of Asian and Muslim descent proves to be its biggest contribution to finding continuities and discontinuities throughout Latin America.

#### Note

[1]. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Classic Comparative Study of Race Relations in the Americas* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

**Citation:** Spencer Gomez. Review of Sheinin, David; Bryce, Benjamin, eds. *Race and Transnationalism in the Americas*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. September, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56867>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.