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Review/Reseña

Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters. Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

The Promise and Challenge of Transnational History

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Micol Seigel wraps up her wide-ranging book *Uneven Encounters* by emphasizing the often unseen ways in which “non-elites” have used transnational exchanges to weaken extant power structures. With the dramatic flair that enlivens the book’s narrative, she concludes, “The transnational lens that reveals the uneven encounters shaping repressive notions of race and nation also spotlight another dynamic: the ways such encounters are determined and brilliant people, allowing them to occupy the interstices of constricting conceptual structures, scabble at the mortar, and break out into new ground” (239). This passage eloquently encapsulates the great promise—and, I’ll suggest later, also the challenges—of writing transnational history.

The book grows from Seigel's dissertation, completed in 2001, when, she points out in the preface, scholars paid much less explicit attention to transnational encounters than they do today. A Proquest search for the keyword "transnational" yields more than 1,900 dissertations (in all disciplines) written since the beginning of 2001.¹ (Around 1,000 hits come up between 1980 and 2000.) As its back cover promises, the book is destined to guide this expanding field, particularly as it relates to popular culture and U.S.-Latin American exchanges. Seigel uses a "motley set of 1920s characters crossing barriers of many sorts" (4) to convincingly show "that ideas of race and nation in the United States, as in Brazil, have been constructed in interrelation" (15). She provides the following "working definition of 'transnational' and of transnational method": "Where international history explores the relations of nation-states (or just states) as well-bounded subjects, transnational history explores the global in the local, via interactions of groups or entities that do not fit national borders, whether they are greater or lesser or both" (xiii). In her critique of comparative method she is unrelenting. Early on she writes, "Comparisons require generalizations about U.S. and Brazilian national racial identities that cannot be right because they cannot be *national*, for truly, nothing is. No single social trait characterizes a whole nation and nothing but the nation, and no single ideological framework pertains evenly across an entire national space...Notions of national racial ideologies of the United States and Brazil get nation wrong and race wrong, and they get the specifics wrong too" (xi-xii).

The book's central point—that Brazilians and North Americans defined their racial and national identities through transnational dialogues—is overwhelmingly convincing, and the book's contributions are many. Chapter One employs a close reading of coffee advertisements to show how hierarchies internal to the United States were often constructed in concert with the nation's rising global star. One ad portrays a white man, his wife, and an African American maid in separate hierarchical spheres, and then joins them within a collective national identity, defined in relation to a fanciful, tropical Brazil. Seigel uses the piece to illustrate how the

¹ I conducted the search in May, 2009.

identities of coffee drinkers in the United States were shaped by their relationship to Latin America, whose people grew, picked, and loaded onto ships the raw materials for products which helped U.S. consumers demarcate their privileged place in the world. She also shows how the same advertisements, which assisted consumers in forgetting (or at least not feeling guilty about) the other end of the commodity chain facilitated a similar glossing over of their relationship with domestic “help.” Foreign and national imbalances, Seigel clearly shows, informed and often reinforced one another.

Chapters Two and Three follow two other global commodities: *maxixe*, the Brazilian dance and music, and jazz. Chapter Three employs the luminary musician Pixinguinha (Alfredo da Rocha Viana Filho) as a “guide” (95), performing in Rio and traveling with his band, the “Oito Batutas,” on a highly publicized trip to Paris in 1922. Chapter Four focuses on the African American stage performer Olive Burgoyne and on Elsie Houston, a singer, writer, scholar, and more, whose dizzying array of identities “bel[y] categorization” (166). The stories of these two remarkable women are harnessed to a vibrant collection of anecdotes, which illustrate and explore how performers of color made creative use of “exoticist performance over the (long) 1920s” (140).

Chapters Five and Six focus on dynamic exchanges between black newspapermen in Chicago and São Paulo. Utilizing the collections of São Paulo’s early-twentieth-century black press, Seigel makes several important points. Perhaps most significant is the argument that, years before Gilberto Freyre helped popularize the idea, Afro-Brazilians actively constructed and shaped the idea that Brazil was or could become a nation built on racial mixture and equal rights: a “racial democracy.” The argument that Afro-Brazilians, and not just whites, shaped and embraced that idea at an early moment is not entirely new, but *Uneven Encounters* represents one of the most thorough published expressions to date.² Her argument that São

² Martha Abreu, “*Mulatas, Crioulos and Morenas: Racial Hierarchy, Gender Relations, and National Identity in Postabolition Popular Song: Southeastern Brazil, 1890–1920.*” In *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, eds Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, translated by Amy Chazkel and Junia Claudia Zaidan, 267–88. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Paulina Alberto, “Terms of Inclusion: Black Activism and the Cultural Conditions

Paulo's black press was in constant dialogue with individuals and ideas from the United States is well crafted and leaves no doubt that racial democracy, that quintessentially Brazilian idea, was conceived, at least in part, along transnational pathways.

These arguments represent only a portion of the many ideas advanced in *Uneven Encounters*. The book's diverse subject matter and its multiple lines of analysis reflect the potential payout from engaging in the kind of creative, ambitious research and analysis required of any transnational study. Seigel's work promises to teach students of U.S. history and culture about the U.S., Brazilianists about Brazil, and each about the other. This is no small feat for a single book. I can think of few works about Brazil that reveal so much about the United States, and no work about the United States that tells us so much about Brazil. As in any wide-ranging study, this one struggles at times to balance breadth and depth, a challenge—it is worth noting—which comparative scholars know well. Readers will find little to critique in terms of the breadth of Seigel's research. Her primary and secondary sources include a wide array of English, Portuguese, French, and Spanish documents, some written, others recorded, drawn, or painted. But as far flung and exhilarating as it often is, the book's journey across continents often feels truncated, as if the itinerary only allows for a quick touchdown on one country's shores before it is already time to shuttle back to the other. As Seigel readily admits, her study straddles a number of fields and histories and purposely entangles itself "in disciplinary Twister™" (xiv). Several instructive challenges that arise from doing so, each related in some way to the balance between breadth and depth, are discussed below.

for Citizenship in a Multi-Racial Brazil, 1920–1982." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania, 2005; Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917–1945*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Kit McPhee, "Standing at the Altar of the Nation': Afro-Brazilians, Immigrants and Racial Democracy in a Brazilian Port City, 1888–1937." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Melbourne, 2004; Seigel and Tiago de Melo Gomes, "Sabina's Oranges: The Colors of Cultural Politics in Rio de Janeiro, 1889–1930." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2002): 5–28.

Narrative and Historiographical Focus

Seigel fixates on what might be described as the most transnational aspects and episodes of the individuals and commodities under consideration. Doing so effectively highlights the limitations of nationally bounded research and also lays bare two challenges. First, while a “motley” set of characters and objects may help us see a complex, dizzying collection of exchanges, relationships, and identities, they do not always make for a cohesive story. For example, while the chapter on coffee is extremely interesting, it feels somewhat tangential when the story turns to musicians in Rio de Janeiro and journalists in São Paulo.

Second, though the book’s “disciplinary Twister™” engages with a number of literatures, and while the bibliography is generally robust and diverse, Seigel’s historiographical engagement is too often either incomplete or unnecessarily dismissive. Carlos Sandroni’s influential work is surprisingly absent in the chapters on maxixe and jazz. In a footnote, she rightfully critiques a dubious statement he makes about music and racial mixture, and then all but leaves him aside (277, n87). This is a shame because his sharp insights about the transatlantic formation of lundu, for example, and his pioneering analysis of samba share some of the same general impulses as Seigel’s work and could have been put to good use.³ Likewise, the wonderful material and keen insights which Seigel puts forward in Chapter Four are dulled somewhat by the fact that they are tethered to a misleading and unnecessary critique of the increasingly deep and varied field of minstrelsy and vaudeville scholarship, which she suggests “rarely gaze[s] beyond U.S. borders” (140). In fact, several important works absent from her bibliography do just that. For example, Daphne Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent* examines a number of individuals who traveled similar paths to the ones discussed in *Uneven Encounters*.⁴ Brooks’s insights about how entertainers used performance to turn marginalization into an asset rather than an obstacle are particularly relevant to Seigel’s discussion. Similarly, Louis Chude-Sokei’s work on the

³ Carlos Sandroni, *Feitiço decente: transformações do samba no Rio de Janeiro, 1917-1933*. (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 2001).

⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

West Indian-born entertainer Bert Williams would have been extremely useful. Like other Caribbean immigrants living in New York, Williams was often on the receiving end of racist taunts (“monkey chasers” was among the ugly invectives) hurled at West Indians by U.S.-born African Americans. Chude-Sokei’s innovative work deepens and also complicates Seigel’s arguments about the empowering uses that some performers of color found through performing the “exotic.”⁵ Similar omissions plague her discussion of São Paulo’s black press. While taking reductive treatments of Afro-Brazilian politics to the mat, she neglects to tag in Kim Butler or Paulina Alberto, both of whom work with the same material, address many of the same issues, and even make similar points.⁶ This recurring problem (additional important missing works are mentioned below) stems at least in part—but only in part—from the book’s wonderfully broad scope. With so many different bodies of literature to engage, perhaps overlooking or marginalizing certain key works is unavoidable.

Sources

Seigel has done wonderful work in tracing maxixe’s path to, and short career in, the United States, a story that has rarely if ever been told. While her research on the U.S. side is exceptionally strong, on the Brazilian side it is largely confined to newspaper articles reprinted in or cited in secondary sources. This, in itself, is not necessarily a bad thing, and her analysis greatly exceeds that offered in most of those secondary works. But the comparatively slim set of Brazilian maxixe sources hinders her argument that maxixe’s disappearance in the U.S. may be explained by the way that it was packaged and performed in the North. On a certain level,

⁵ Louis Onuorah Chude-Sokei, *The Last ‘Darky’: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). Two additional works, on mid-twentieth-century blackface performance in Ghana and Peru, would have also been useful here. Catherine M. Cole, *Ghana’s Concert Party Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001; Heidi Carolyn Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

⁶ Butler, who was a reader for the book and is thanked in the acknowledgments, appears infrequently in the footnotes. Alberto’s excellent work inexplicably goes unmentioned. Paulina Alberto, “Terms of Inclusion”; Kim D. Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador*. (London: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

the argument works, but Brazil conspicuously falls out of the story. After 1914, she states, “maxixe continued to be played and danced in Brazil and elsewhere but not in a way that commanded metropolitan attention outside of Brazil” (82). While maxixe certainly did not die altogether in 1914, it was, by that time, in its final stage of mass popularity in Brazil. By 1917, samba (the word if not yet the distinct music) was nudging maxixe aside on its way to national and global renown. Could maxixe’s disappearance in the U.S. be explained by its fading status and the rise of samba *in Brazil*? One guesses that the answer might be yes. A careful reading of Brazilian newspapers and a more thorough treatment of sound recordings would provide a more definitive answer, but the line of inquiry is not pursued. As a result, half of this transnational equation all but disappears.

Flipping convention on its head, Seigel makes jazz, not samba, the focal point of Brazil’s 1920s music scene. This is a wonderfully subversive maneuver, one with great potential, but the sources used do not support the statements made. Quoting a definition put forth by Krin Gabbard, Seigel qualifies her remarks by explaining, “I am not weighing in on whether the music called ‘jazz’ in Rio in this period was ‘really’ jazz or not; I prefer to use the term ‘jazz’ as a category of practice, as in Gabbard’s definition—‘the music that large groups of people have called jazz at particular moments in history’” (271, n11).⁷ Such a framework might work if enough evidence were presented to show that “large groups of people” in Brazil indeed called their music jazz. While a number of bands used “jazz” in their names, it is unclear how often they, or anyone else, applied the same label to their music. It would seem logical that a self-described “jazz-band” played music that it thought to be, or called, or at least marketed as jazz, but it is not clear that this was the case in 1920s Brazil, where samba was on the rise and where a wide array of flexible musical labels, including but certainly not limited to jazz, were bandied about. Pixinguinha once recalled, “What we played commercially—as professionals, in our group—came from everywhere. We’d go to dances, to play what was ours. But we’d sprinkle in

⁷ Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and American Cinema*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 8.

a little fox-trot to vary things. Commercially, we had to play a little bit of everything. And we survived like that, varying the program.”⁸

“Sprinkling” a genre into a larger repertoire is quite different than the widespread use Seigel suggests. Despite telling us that she will not weigh in on whether the music in question was ‘really’ jazz, she does just that, at one point writing, “Many of the future pivots of Brazilian musical nationalism cut their teeth on jazz,” and at another, “Brazilian popular musicians played jazz enthusiastically in the twenties, repudiating it, like a romance, after a long engagement” (100, 101). Her provocative point about jazz’s influence in Brazil would have been better served via fewer overarching (and unsubstantiated) statements and through more analysis of dress, style of play, and interviews. She includes the well-known interview from which Pixinguinha’s comment is drawn but not those buried in newspapers. All of this would have required deeper engagement with Rio’s massive press archives, underused in the book, and more time in the city’s rich but scattered collection of personal and private archives and in its two branches of the Museu de Imagem e do Som (MIS). At this point it is worth restating that despite its uneven depth, Seigel’s source base is wonderfully broad. As with the case of narrative and historiographical focus, source balance is hard to achieve in a project of such ambitious scope.

Transnational Connectivity

Seigel convincingly shows that transnational travel, dialogue, and imagination were not the exclusive reserve of elites, a point often lost in top-down intellectual, diplomatic, and economic studies. This point might have carried even more heft had the book’s individual vignettes been harnessed more firmly to national and local particularities. While the vignettes are fascinating, Seigel misses several opportunities to tie them more tightly to one another. At times the individuals who populate the book appear circumscribed by a kind of international provincialism which put them in conversation with individuals abroad but not those closer to home. There is little discussion about the relationship between individuals in Rio

⁸ Donga, et al. *As vozes desassombradas do museu*. (Rio de Janeiro: MIS, 1970), 26.

and São Paulo, for example, a topic explored at length in Paulina Alberto's brilliant work and also in Orlando de Barros's meticulously researched *Corações De Chocolat*, yet another key work missing from Seigel's bibliography.⁹ The fact that *Uneven Encounters* does not trace national pathways with the same vigor as international connections undermines Seigel's repeatedly stated intention to articulate the global, the local, and the national.

The book's emphasis on international connectivity produces a distorted portrait of Pixinguinha and the other Afro-Brazilian musicians and performers, whom Seigel describes collectively as "poor, [and] marginal" (114) and lumps together with the book's other "non-elites." Linking black musicians to poverty is nothing short of a topos, in Brazil, the United States, and elsewhere, and it hides the tensions and hierarchies that often marked the relationships between ascendant, relatively privileged artists like Pixinguinha and musicians who came from truly impoverished backgrounds. If it is misleading to call Pixinguinha "elite," his upbringing and the financial support afforded by his parents make it equally deceptive to describe him as "poor" or "marginal."¹⁰ The book's "non-elite" category is never clearly defined and it lacks the depth and complexity with which others have treated Brazil's immense and diverse poor urban populations.¹¹ These points are counterbalanced somewhat, but also made all the more surprising, by the fact that Seigel offers a welcome critique of literature which has long denied agency to Afro-Brazilian musicians.

In Chapter Five, Seigel presents a tantalizing counterexample to diasporic connectivity and transnational solidarity by examining how Afro-Brazilian journalists alternately approximated and distinguished

⁹ Orlando de Barros, *Corações De Chocolat: a história da Companhia Negra de Revista*. (Rio de Janeiro: Livre Expressão, 2005), Esp. 82-83, 89, 147, 154, 156, 175-6, 188, 254-57, 268-82.

¹⁰ Though not explicitly concerned with Pixinguinha, Maria Clementina Pereira Cunha delineates important socioeconomic differences among Rio's Afro-Brazilian musicians. Maria Clementina Pereira Cunha, "Não me ponha no xadrez com esse malandrão." 9th Meeting of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA). New Orleans, 2008.

¹¹ The relevant literature is expansive. Brodwyn Fischer's recent book, based on her dissertation (1999), is particularly instructive. Brodwyn Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

themselves from members of the black press in the United States. That strategic distancing represents something of a fork in the road for *Uneven Encounters*: treat it as an anomaly or explore its connections to larger movements and trends. Seigel chooses the former. Without exploring possible connections or exchanges between São Paulo and Rio or Salvador, she frames the chapter by depicting transnational and diasporic connections as an ideal. She writes, “The asymmetry of inter-American relations kept Afro-Brazilians from the liquid clarity of empathic Pan-African solidarity.” Then, quoting Brent Hayes Edwards’s work on black Modernism, she continues, “Like the transnational circuits of black literary Modernists, the ‘often uneasy encounters of peoples of African descent with each other’ frequently evinced ‘unavoidable misapprehensions and misreading, persistent blindnesses and solipsism, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness’” (183).¹² This is an unsatisfying frame, indicative of how easy it is to treat connectivity and affinity as natural or default positions when lenses are trained so intently on transnational connections. By equating diasporic solidarity with “liquid clarity,” Seigel does the opposite of what she sets out to do and reifies an ideal form of racial activism in much the same way as the comparative works which she so convincingly and forcefully critiques.

Part of the allure of tracing transnational connections is that doing so often lines up with important and effective social movements. Black solidarity networks, workers, environmentalists, indigenous rights groups, and GLBT activists represent just a few examples of individuals and groups who have found inspiration—to say nothing of crucial alliances and resources—across national borders. Precisely because the stakes are so high, it is paramount to exercise greater caution in treating national and even insular cleavages as exceptional or blinding. Philip Deloria’s observations about the disjunction between American Studies and Native American Studies are particularly instructive in this regard. For all of the value in American Studies’ conscious effort to de-center the United States and the nation as subjects, that same effort “does not always mesh well” with Native

¹² Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

political projects. He writes, “Many Native scholars have pointed out that the de-centering of ‘nation’ comes at a particularly inauspicious time for Indian people, who have invested a great deal of political and intellectual energy building a careful argument in courts, Congress, and regulatory agencies that treaty rights and sovereignty rest upon an acknowledgement of themselves as *nations*.”¹³ The point is not to draw a simple parallel between contemporary Native rights struggles and the individuals discussed in *Uneven Encounters*. Rather, Deloria reminds us that “liquid clarity” is not always or only achieved via transnational connectivity. As it was for the Afro-Brazilian journalists who strategically distanced themselves from their counterparts elsewhere in the diaspora, the nation remains a vexing but crucial frame of reference, one with its own opportunities to both scrabble at and reinforce the mortar of constricting conceptual structures. Seigel is clearly aware of this, but her determination to trace transnational pathways tends to overwhelm that awareness. Even still, this is an important, thought-provoking book. I look forward to teaching it this semester and in the future.

¹³ Emphasis in the original. Philip J. Deloria, “American Indians, American Studies, and the ASA.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 2003), 672.