



# UNEVEN ENCOUNTERS

MAKING RACE AND NATION IN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES

Micol Seigel

## Uneven Encounters

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS / GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

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This series aims to stimulate critical perspectives and fresh interpretive frameworks for scholarship on the history of the imposing global presence of the United States. Its primary concerns include the deployment and contestation of power, the construction and deconstruction of cultural and political borders, the fluid meanings of intercultural encounters, and the complex interplay between the global and the local. American Encounters seeks to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between historians of U.S. international relations and area studies specialists.

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# Uneven Encounters

*Making Race and Nation in Brazil  
and the United States*

Micol Seigel

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*For my father:  
thank you.*



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## *Preface*

Over the years I have been working on this book, some of the circumstances that prompted its writing have shifted. There is now not quite such a dearth of transnational history or work on U.S. empire, for example. Yet other pieces of its prompting conditions remain intractably in place. One of the most recalcitrant is the comparative mindset people bring to the contemplation of race in the United States and Brazil. Even when I feel I have cleanly explained my objections to comparing race in national contexts, some of my interlocutors, academic and non-academic alike, will have failed to hear them. It is as if comparison were so essential to long-distance contemplation that no other lens were possible. Isn't it true, people offer, that U.S. and Brazilian racial systems are really different? Isn't Brazil a much more racially mixed society than the United States? In terms of racism, isn't Brazil/the United States better/worse? I wish my work would shift the frame of analysis so that such questions become not just unanswerable, but also unaskable.

My objections to these questions can be briefly and simply put.<sup>1</sup> 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. Most of these comparisons also biologize race by implying that mixture occurred in one of the two nations earlier or later than the other, measuring against an ostensible purity or positing a moment of purity at some previous point.<sup>2</sup> Notions of national racial ideologies of the United States and Brazil get nation wrong and race wrong, and

they get the specifics wrong too. That is, the perfectly opposed guiding myths of racial purity in the United States and racial harmony in Brazil reference social systems that have an awful lot in common. North Americans lived amid constant racial mixing, interracial social intimacy, a huge range of racial identities neither black nor white, and evidence everywhere of how hollow were the claims of white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Brazil's virulent, socially structuring racism included explicitly racialized processes of criminalization and discipline, the circumscription of social opportunities for darker citizens even to the point of lynching, and constant attempts by whiter citizens to deny African ancestry and prevent further Afro-descended members from branching into their family trees.<sup>4</sup> Both Brazil and the United States leaned heavily on "race" to structure social hierarchy, and within both vast territories, the experience of that reliance varied greatly.

This opposition, while wrong, is useful. It is useful in the unfortunate sense that it does ideological work. It helps people articulate and recirculate notions of purity and mixture and reassert the primacy of black and white at the exclusion of categories such as "Asian" or "Latino" that might disrupt the national narratives these fictions underlie. But it is also useful in the more productive sense of being "good for thinking," for such striking, impossible parity highlights the artifice of its own formation. It points us to the fact that comparison is a construction site, where U.S. and Brazilian racializations are built up together.

To get at that process of transnational racial construction, I have tried to develop a method that can serve as a counterpoint to comparison. Despite the full country names in the book's title (a concession to publisher and bookstore needs), this book does not compare the United States and Brazil or any subset thereof. It seeks instead a sample of the myriad connections linking people who resided (most of the time) in cities within the geographic borders of those two territories. Sometimes people gazed out at each other to understand themselves as national beings, using their viewfinders to locate useful touchpoints. More often in this book, they did so not as representatives of their national units but as members of other social formations, imagining themselves in relation to and in solidarity with each other. The communities they imagined in that process (to paraphrase Benedict Anderson) were odd-shaped beasts, neither fully within nor simply larger than their nation-states. They wove global filaments into local social worlds, operating at "scales that are both smaller and larger than the nation-state."<sup>5</sup>

This is my 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 because they are greater or lesser or both. Examples of such border-disrespecting units include geographic features such as rivers, political spaces such as borderlands, and far-flung people who imagine themselves in community. These could include individuals who identified within and across national borders as “men” or “law-abiding citizens” or “Christians” or even “coffee drinkers” and, of course, as members of the African diaspora. Diasporas and the African diaspora principally are the quintessential transnational units, unevenly distributed and defined, shaped in opposition to nation-states and in contested collaborations across national lines. “Diasporan subjects *are* transnational subjects,” as Robin Kelley points out, and in that sense African diaspora studies and its predecessors have always been transnational and are critical guides for transnational method now.<sup>6</sup> As these examples suggest, transnational subjects are not the exception but the rule, at least in globalized eras such as the past half-millennium of European expansion, capitalism, and African slavery. Everything has a transnational aspect or two, for every local has global threads woven through.

What I have delineated above is far from the only definition of transnational method in circulation today. Other scholars prefer other definitions, and the term “transnational” is in such vogue that many use it without any particular definition in mind at all. Some assume “transnational history” is a synonym for “world history,” as if “trans” meant merely “bigger.” Some posit any border crosser a “transnational” subject, with similarly dulling effect. I remain unconvinced that there is any difference between a migrant who crosses national borders and a “transmigrant.”<sup>7</sup> Many observers think transnational method assumes the obsolescence of nations. On the contrary; in my view, the value of transnational method is its ability to examine and critique the nationalism that remains a powerful political and intellectual force. Transnational subjects overflow and challenge national borders not in blithe disregard for those borders but because nation-states so profoundly, even violently, constrain them. Nationalism has ceded to globalized formations neither in world politics nor in the academy, where national frameworks continue to define both fields of study broadly and individual research projects.

In addition to its debt to African diaspora studies, this version of trans-

national method owes much to radical geographers extending the legacy of theorists of world systems, themselves in turn extending the legacy of that obscure nineteenth-century transnationalist, Karl Marx. I phrase in this way to emphasize again that transnational method is not new, despite its neologism, and to underline my debt to and continuity with such theorists, despite a critical difference. Where theorists of global economic exploitation tend to emphasize the power of the core over the periphery, I trace vectors of influence in opposite directions, from colony to metropole, marginal subject to enfranchised elite, black to white, and cultural to political (among others). That is not to minimize the power of the center to wreak enormous violence on regions under its control. The exchanges explored in this book do not right the imbalances of race, nation, gender, class, or region, for none escaped their hierarchical matrices cleanly. Still, the stories they animate both reflect and complicate our understandings of such imbalance and perhaps uncover ways in which people today might intercede.

Transnational method is well set to pay such attention to bottom-up flow thanks to another set of debts, these owed to scholars and thinkers struggling against colonialism, including internal colonialism. Elsewhere I have tried to elaborate this relationship and its implications for academic method.<sup>8</sup> *Uneven Encounters* reflects this debt to those post- and anti-colonial scholars within and outside the United States who have explored the ways identity and experience are shaped in relation—through such factors as proximity, distance, similarity, difference, affinity, and conflict. Scholars in queer studies have incorporated these insights as well, so that their arguments and mine regarding passing and drag or the key roles of gender and sexuality in the elaboration of national identity all contain a doubling back to Third World and U.S. women of color scholars writing since the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> That foundation is too often overlooked, just as coffee drinkers rarely remember the travels of the sweat-soaked bean. Their cumulative insights point to the transnational contours of the nation, which, like the self, emerges in relation to others.

Straddling diaspora studies, Brazilian history, and U.S. history, and drawing sustenance from postcolonial and queer theory, this book is engaged in disciplinary Twister™. If it stands squarely anywhere, it is among American studies' work on empire, which in the last decade and a half has grown into a vibrant field.<sup>10</sup> Amy Kaplan, whose essay in a 1993 anthology sounded a resonant call to address the absence of empire in the study

of U.S. culture, pointed her 2002 book toward the “confounding of the borders between the foreign and the domestic.”<sup>11</sup> Christina Klein more straightforwardly calls a critical perspective transnational if it “enables us to see how the local and the global are inextricably bound up with one another.”<sup>12</sup> Seth Fein calls transnational those “forces produced by the presence of one nation *within* another.”<sup>13</sup> While Kaplan and Klein focus on the world’s presence within the United States and Fein considers U.S. presence in Mexico, their applications of transnational method all pursue versions of the global in the local, as do mine.

The field of American studies has embraced transnational method in order to critique U.S. nationalism in the era of U.S. imperialism. Such work leans on the increased attention to nationalism in the wake of postwar, postcolonial, and post-Soviet “national explosions” (as Benedict Anderson called them) and the growing willingness to see the United States as an empire after the demise of the USSR and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>14</sup> By paying attention to the cultural aspects of international politics, non-elite agency, resistance, and hybridity (for example), and by historicizing the nation, revealing it changing over time rather than transcendent or essential, transnational scholarship can powerfully critique the nation form at a moment when we need such a critique badly.

In American studies, many scholars are pursuing the study of empire in imaginative and productive ways, yet few works extend themselves fully into the history and historiography of the places whose traces they track. Focusing only on the country in which one lives keeps a scholar from certain fertile encounters. Language acquisition, the assimilation of scholarly literatures, and the personal contacts of collegiality are investments that create both stakes and debt. If the only North Americans who enter into such commerce, reaping its benefits in insight, are scholars *of* those other places, then the entire fields of North American history, culture, and social life remain untouched by that insight, while all the theoretical wealth of American studies, such as queer and postcolonial substreams, explorations of intersectionality, and analyses of racial construction, can elude North American scholars of other places.

North America-focused work on U.S. imperial history or culture can posit but not pinpoint the agency of foreign subjects. Nor, in tracing the global in the local, can it see what foreign subjects do with those traces as they watch their ideological and cultural production resonate and distort in North American contexts. Nor can it see the reworked phenomena as



they alter local conditions and then travel yet again. The point is simply this: global circuits of culture and ideas never come to rest. To follow a single journey is to miss the previous trips woven into the slope and speed of the next. *Uneven Encounters* follows some of the multiple travels woven into ideas of race and nation by looking at a particular set of historical subjects who grabbed and manipulated them, infusing them with another dose of energy and sending them once again into motion.

The language of motion here is slightly misleading, for often the only traveling is done by ideas or cultural forms, which are subsets of each other (ideas are cultural forms, and cultural forms are also ideas; race and nation are both). In some ways a metaphor of conversation better conveys the dynamic this book explores, in which most people are standing more or less still, exchanging information about certain consequential social categories.<sup>15</sup> A conversation, though, is awfully calm. It fails to capture the violence that keeps some people in some places and sends others into motion and the resulting ways people engage, singing to and yelling at each other across achingly distant, distorting caverns of geography, language, station, time, and so on. Across these multiple distances and distortions, their suggestions and contentions reach intended and unintended targets who then — not willfully yet very carefully — misinterpret, rework, and re-circulate them in their intimate environs, propelling their collective, conflictive work once again to the echoing canyon.

Looking in this way can reveal some things that otherwise often remain obscure, particularly in comparative frameworks: the power of non-elite subjects to see very far afield; to understand the world as well as anybody can; and to influence people, institutions, and ideas that seem unyieldingly more powerful than they. It shows disfranchised people actively making careful decisions, sharply constrained by complex economic and political factors as well as outright repression, and it shows how their decisions matter. Eroding assumptions of the passivity, ignorance, and impotence of marginalized people, this optic would encourage imperial subjects who desire global justice to try to follow rather than assume they must lead.

## *Note on Language*

The descendants of Africans in Brazil in the 1920s called themselves and each other a broad array of terms. They used *negro*, *de côr*, *de classe*, *preto*, *pardo*, *mulato*, other color terms, and all the terms for white shades as well, of course—and many refused racial or color identifications at all, sometimes successfully. Historical actors are as inconsistent as contemporary subjects; all of us encounter and use the instability of racial categories. So how should a historian write of such subjects when discussing the impact of race?

For historians to use a single term carries elements of coercion, forcing people into categories they resist or exceed, and ironing over bountiful heterogeneity. Yet the use of multiple, inequivalent terms makes it difficult or impossible to recognize the organizing power of racism. Worse, accepting the classification system on the ground in the period studied can strengthen those elements in contemporary ideology that are the legacies of that period. I negotiate between these twin dilemmas with a split decision. In my own writing, I embrace the artifice of anachronistic umbrella terms that highlight rather than conceal that process of coercion and allow, albeit imperfectly, for a discussion of racism. For Brazilian subjects I choose “Afro-Brazilian” and “Afro-descended,” the terms emerging from anti-racist activism in Brazil since the late 1970s, avowals of solidarity with Portugal’s ex-colonies in Africa and with Afro-diasporic communities worldwide. I use “African American” for Afro-descended North Americans not from Canada (gritting my teeth about the equation of “America” with the United States as the alternative is simply too unwieldy). More happily, I use “Afro-American” for people of African de-

scent from anywhere in the Americas, including the United States and Brazil. I even indulge in “black,” most often in the pursuit of readability. I tend to prefer “whiter” to “white” to recognize the equally fluid, relative quality of this adjective and often use “elites” rather than “whites” in a nod to the imperfect convergence of race and power.

These are my choices for my own prose. When it comes to reprinting and translating primary sources, I take an opposite tack toward the same goals. The texts cited in this work adhere strictly to the original. I have not smoothed over errors nor modernized the Portuguese. Attentive readers will find occasional “errors” such as “paes” rather than “pais”; “cor” as well as “côr” (once even in the same sentence); and variations in the orthography of names (writers in the Afro-Brazilian press sometimes spelled their own names differently in different bylines; I do not presume to decide which one was their true name). For the most part these are offered unencumbered by the textual clutter of [*sic*]. Preserving these variations sustains the beacon of anachronism—that disjuncture that reminds the reader she is encountering a foreign country, the past. It respects the material and also the reader, who can more confidently form her own opinion in relation to sources free of yet another layer of mediation.

Yet my goal is not to provide a clear view based on unaltered primary sources—on the contrary. So many strata of mediation interfere in contemplating the history of race in the United States and Brazil from this book’s twenty-first century U.S. perspective: translating Portuguese to English, locating Brazilian racial systems in North American terms, and bridging past and present. Any rendering of Brazilian racial terms into U.S. English is necessarily multiply inadequate. I address the question of translation substantively in chapter six, but throughout the book I engage it implicitly by leaving many words for race in the body of the text alongside their translations, or untranslated words within translated sections when the meanings will be evident from context. I hope the awkwardness of anachronism and untranslated terms will help to highlight inequivalence, the changing of racial terms over time, the struggles behind those changes, and the ultimate irretrievability of precise meanings for extinct racial categories. This strategy contains a plea to recognize and accept a certain measure of ignorance about terms for race. Only such ignorance genuinely respects the status of race as a social construction—if we knew what race “really” was, what would we know it to be?

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this will strike some readers as odd, but I am also grateful to this book itself. Its provocations and demands in themselves at times sustained me.

Finally, one person is responsible for this work in more ways than is usually possible: my father. As a child, I would hang around his study, reading titles off the spines of his library and asking what each book was about. He answered with such joyous interest that it did not occur to me that I was interrupting him until I became a reader of similar books. All my life my father has engaged, disagreed, and debated with me with this same interested, fierce respect. At the same time, he has met my every joy with joy and every sadness with unmatched empathy. I am the scholar and the person that I am because of him.

## *Introduction*

All his life, anti-racist activist José Correia Leite, co-founder of the longest-lived newspaper in the São Paulo black press, retained a global perspective he had acquired just after the First World War. In his memoirs, Leite recalled in particular the window the war opened onto transatlantic racial politics:

The American Negroes in France, when they marched separately from the whites, began to notice that the United States was heavily criticized for its racial discrimination. And also when they saw how the Senegalese army marched in Paris—those Frenchwomen draped around the necks of those big Negroes [*negrões*]—they saw that they were wrong to think that American whites' racial discrimination was a generalized thing. . . . That came to our attention here. We also began to use those facts as example. . . . All that was published in the papers, and we saw it as based in the influence of the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

While Leite's local social sphere in São Paulo included few African American or African subjects, his understanding of the world incorporated them and more. Gazing over equator and ocean with the help of the newspaper press, Leite was entranced by the range of Afro-diasporic subjects and racial attitudes he observed, and he was transformed by his revelations, as was a generation of his peers in all the places he noted.

Perhaps it is surprising that such a modest figure paid so much attention to such far-away places and people in this moment prior to electronic telecommunication. From a twenty-first century vantage point, it



is hard to grasp “how effectively illiterate people with such particularist loyalties could communicate on a global scale, bridging continents,” as another observer of non-elite world travelers has noted.<sup>2</sup> It is easier to succumb to the evolutionist feeling that only now could such communication occur—as if, as one U.S. scholar of Brazil suggested, until “the 1970s, black Brazilians had little information about U.S. blacks due to the barrier of language.”<sup>3</sup> A related misconception imagines that marginalized people are too oppressed to act on their own behalf. As another North American academic wrote, explaining Afro-Brazilians’ “failure” to fight racism, “day-to-day survival [is] so difficult and time consuming that it is virtually impossible to concentrate on politics.”<sup>4</sup> As Leite confirms, these statements are simply not true.

The notion that non-elites in global peripheries were isolated rests upon the idea that the technology required for global communication has only recently emerged—that only in the last forty years or so has the world entered the age of “globalization.”<sup>5</sup> It underestimates the efficacy of all previous communications technologies from print media and music all the way back to the canoe, discounting as well the abilities of people in earlier moments to use them. The view that poverty prohibits politics forgets those for whom day-to-day survival *is* political. It erases the agency of non-elite historical subjects and confines politics to the tiniest formal arena, denying the utility of cultural politics.<sup>6</sup> While those to whom luxury travel and formal education are denied certainly have avenues of global encounter and action closed to them, no one stops thinking or negotiating the world around them just because they are working.

Communication among the enslaved is the quintessential refutation of such misconceptions. It bridged divides of distance, language, time, and culture since the first forced migrations of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>7</sup> Slave resistance mocks the idea that the overworked cannot engage in political acts, and it often grew or grew bolder due to long-distance communication.<sup>8</sup> Slave communication routes across the Americas and the Atlantic, evolved and reworked by commerce and technological change, undergird the twentieth-century channels of transnational exchange that are the subject of this book.

Transnational exchange reflects the global imagination and reach of people enmeshed in global systems, whether they toiled and traveled the reaches of the Roman or Mongolian empires, the trade routes of the thirteenth-century Mediterranean world, or the networks of capitalism,

European expansion, and African slavery that have traversed the planet in the last five hundred years. This framing reminds us that global links are forged in violence and resistance, a fact neglected by those who celebrate blithe, frictionless digital-age globalization. It also moves toward the recognition of the global formation of the largest units of social relation in our global era, the categories of race and nation. Situating Leite in his rightful place as an agent of transnational exchange adds a third point, distinctly hopeful: not only did non-elites develop large-scale social imaginations, but they used them to resist and reshape their local worlds. *Uneven Encounters* presents a cast of characters situated along the full range of international and domestic social hierarchies, who used their global vision to rework lived ideas of race and nation.<sup>9</sup>

Leite and his fellow journalists and their community of supporters and readers saw, understood, and acted. As Leite pointed out, they “began to use those facts as example.” The transnational exchange of views Leite described provided material for political struggle: Afro-Paulista (from São Paulo) newspaper readers and writers used the supposed lack of racism on the part of the French as well as the mileage U.S. African Americans made from a similar vision to inspire pride, fear, a sense of duty, honor, and hope among their various audiences, from fellow recreational and mutual aid society members to local and national elites. They drew on and enhanced a mental map that charted people and events in Africa, Europe, and the Americas and even included an understanding of how people in those places saw each other. Their global vision doubled up and back over the Atlantic and across the equator, revealing the complex self-awareness of subjects on multiple margins. From such a standpoint, people often develop achingly sharp insights on the structures that keep them in such precarious positions. Not despite but because of their marginal geographic and social positions, Leite and his peers knew about the world and put their awareness to use. While they did not make history exactly as they pleased, their tactics pulled a host of interlocutors into consequential interactions.

*Uneven Encounters* explores the ways people used the transnational mental maps they developed out of cultural exchange. In particular it focuses on the ways Brazilians and North Americans gleaned from transnational exchange to reshape two of the most consequential social categories structuring their lives: race and nation. The book selects a transnational lens in order to highlight the broad contexts in which these constructs

form. Race and nation must be understood together, I argue, for in our age these two categories are so profoundly intertwined that their relationship is constitutive of the meanings they both make.<sup>10</sup> Racialized national categories draw their shape and meaning not only from other social categories such as gender or region, but also from each other—that is, from other racialized national categories. Their process of construction therefore involves international and transnational relations. This insight carries implications for historical practice and social action: both must refuse the corrosive of nation(alism), still terribly powerful in what some would call a postnational age. To historicize race, one must consider multiple scales, including those both smaller and greater than the nation-state. To dismantle racial hierarchies, one must also target nationalism. So historians of race must surpass national frameworks, just as anti-racism must forego the seductions of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> The reverse is also true—to confront nationalism, one must ferret out racisms of all textures—but few readers these days will need to be reminded of that.

Race and nation are made together, this book contends, in cultural as well as political or economic realms, by non-elites as well as elites and out of pieces gathered very far away, as well as local, regional, and national elements. To support this claim, the chapters follow a motley set of 1920s characters crossing barriers of many sorts, reinforcing or undermining prevailing conceptions of race and nation in the realm of public, commercial, and popular culture. The cultural forms through which the characters work include ads (chapter 1), dance (chapters 2 and 3), music (chapters 3 and 4), vaudeville and other genres of popular stage performance (chapter 4), newspapers (chapters 5 and 6), and public monuments (chapter 6). All the forms detailed transcend the national: the advertisements are made by U.S. and Brazilian merchants together, and they market an import (coffee); the dance is Brazilian, enjoying a vogue in the United States; the music is jazz in Rio de Janeiro, and its players embrace its supposed foreign qualities explicitly; the vaudevillians are North Americans literally performing foreignness, either by dancing foreign dances and speaking foreign languages or pretending to be foreign; the newspapers are organs of the black Brazilian press that report intensely on external, particularly North American news and eventually enter into direct conversation with the U.S. black press; the monument is a figure of Brazilian history commemorated precisely because of what her champions hoped she would demonstrate about Brazil abroad.

Chapter 1 begins with a topic that permits a sketch of political and economic background: the coffee trade. This most concrete channel of U.S.–Brazil exchange in the post–First World War period brought together such elite actors as planters, businessmen, and politicians as they moved in ideological fields increasingly organized by the possibilities of mass culture. The chapter focuses on the quintessence of the culture industry, advertising—art in the service of capital—tracking the political unconscious it organized and that organized it. It tracks this unconscious, paradoxically, through the highly conscious ideological production circulated by relatively privileged people to middle-class North American audiences. They did not see the conditions of possibility for their work, set by their negotiations with less visible and less apparently powerful cultural producers, who are the subjects of the rest of the chapters.

Chapters 2–4 deal with popular performance. Their quick stops on a tour of the wartime and post–First World War entertainment world engage different aspects of leisure culture during a period of fervid celebration of racially marked cultural production. Chapter 2 follows the breakneck travels of the Brazilian dance *maxixe* into the limelight and then very far out. Remaining with the previous chapter’s focus on elites, it traces some of the ways culture industry avatars in imperial centers incited and appealed to exoticist tastes. Following this process helps explain how the profound hybridity of “American” culture could continue to escape observers, for the mechanisms through which *maxixe* was introduced to the United States and with which it won such acclaim were also those that ensured its quick erasure from collective memory.

Moving beyond elite subjects, chapters 3 and 4 consider the ways popular cultural producers used the exoticisms of the moment as fuel for artistic creation, professional advancement, and even collective and political possibilities. Chapter 3 listens to the ways performers of jazz in Rio de Janeiro played racial and social justice into their musical reality. In concert with fellow travelers such as religious officials, black press journalists, and popular audiences, mostly Afro-Brazilian performers used the transnational context of the “Negro vogue” to emphasize the virtue and value of blackness. Their overtures reconfigured notions of citizenship, modernity, and Brazilian national identity that have been attributed primarily to intellectuals and elites. Chapter 4 appreciates similar work by North American artists. Their exoticist performances cracked open space for black success onstage or stepped outside the category “black,” whether

by passing as foreign or via a national masquerade whose unworried admission of artifice places it closer to drag — nation drag.

From the elite (white, mostly North American) subjects of chapters 1 and 2 to the popular performers of chapters 3 and 4 (a mix of racial and national subjects), the book moves in chapters 5 and 6 to people who actively identified as black and engaged explicitly in political struggle. These two chapters take place largely in Brazil, following the anti-racist activists of the São Paulo black press as they wrestled to reimagine their several overlapping communities. Here we rejoin José Correia Leite as he and his peers moved in conversation with other Afro-Paulistas, Brazilians regardless of color, and Afro-diasporic subjects in and beyond Brazil, including black press readers and writers in Chicago. Chapter 5 highlights some of the uneven qualities and quantities in black North American and Brazilian subject positions that frustrated comprehension when people actually met and that frustrate any hope of comparing blackness across the two national contexts. Chapter 6 juxtaposes these fluid, inequivalent conceptions of race by examining a controversial plan to build a monument to the Black Mother of slavery times. As African American and Afro-Brazilian journalists read and translated reports of distant sets of events, they generated mismatch after mismatch in conceptualizations of social categories. Working to construct usable solidarities, journalists papered over yawning gaps in definitions of race with ostensibly coherent, constant categories of gender. Their strategic misunderstandings sprang from the same set of hopes mobilizing the Rio jazz musicians of chapter 3: that the tools to realize Brazil's much-touted "racial democracy" lay in international realms.

### Routes of Contact/Grounds of Relation

The backstory here involves the conditions that made these rounds of cultural exchange possible, and they are many and complex. Trails were blazed by previous travelers, trade routes and cowpaths, traditions of mutual interest or antagonism, and so on, all the way back to the slave communication networks that laid the groundwork for so many later webs of exchange.

Related to slave networks and more visible to historians, abolitionist complexes leaned on and expanded those networks in the nineteenth century. Abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world gestured to and invoked

Brazil, for its ostensibly peaceful racial relations seemed to prove the unnecessary cruelty of slavery in the United States. In their newspapers, lectures, plays, and presentations and through capacious oral networks of story and rumor, abolitionists gave wings to news of Brazil.<sup>12</sup> Abolitionists' opponents also found the apparent existence of a place of racial harmony useful. Proponents of slavery cited Brazil as proof that slavery could be benign or, in later years, as evidence for the terrible degradations of racial mixture.<sup>13</sup> That both sides in the debate over slavery found Brazilian conditions particularly relevant augmented its symbolic importance for considerations of Afro-descendants in the Americas. This is part of the historical basis that set Brazil in its prominent position in the transnational construction of race in the United States.

The images of Brazil conveyed to North American observers by travelers prompted several waves of migration in the nineteenth century, and these in turn strengthened and expanded webs of exchange. Disaffected white confederates set up relatively ill-fated settlements in the Brazilian interior just after the U.S. Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Brazil's peaceful abolition of slavery in 1888 and its transition from a monarchy to a republic the following year also commanded much U.S. attention.<sup>15</sup> After the end of Reconstruction, Brazil was one of the places to which African Americans dreamt of moving to find a haven from racism. By the mid-1920s, growing North American investment in South America and patterns of labor migration from the United States and the Caribbean had established a noticeable group of black foreigners in São Paulo and probably other cities as well.<sup>16</sup> These emigrants and events brought U.S. racial arrangements to Brazilian attention and vice versa.

Brazilians traveling to the United States have also contributed to the widening of avenues of exchange, though significant numbers of Brazilian immigrants did not appear in the United States until the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Brazilian travelers were sons of the elite sent to the metropole for finishing educations. They followed commercial and military sailors, those quintessential Atlantic voyagers. Seafarers bring back news of the places they have been, weaving a subtle transnational filament into the worldview and expectations of their circles of friends and acquaintances. Such voyagers have been key to Afro-American intercommunication, given the high proportion of Afro-descendants in navies, in port work (for example, stevedores), and as crew on commercial craft.<sup>18</sup> One cohort of Brazilian navy sailors disembarking

in Brooklyn provoked in Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, then a student at Columbia University, the tormented musings on the degradations of Brazilian miscegenation that would spark his inordinately influential comparative history of Brazil. Other sailors on shore leaves left impressions equally striking, if less resonantly recorded.<sup>19</sup>

Long-distance communication and awareness, of course, are geopolitically uneven—"lumpy," in Frederick Cooper's wonderful characterization of globalization (too bad "Lumpy Encounters" doesn't work so well as a book title).<sup>20</sup> People in peripheral places are often more aware of conditions and events in the powerful metropolises than people in the centers of power are about their counterparts in the periphery. Certainly Brazilians were more aware of the comings and goings of their northern neighbors than North Americans were of them. Brazilian popular culture was suffused with the output of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and Tin Pan Alley, as well as with locally produced items that made reference to them (though often more parodic than reverential). Formal political spaces lined themselves with citations of Brazil's most powerful hemispheric neighbor, and more informal public spheres, such as the press, made constant allusion to the social relations prevailing there. In the United States, the view of Brazil was more blurry. Occasionally Brazilian cultural forms enjoyed brief vogues with U.S. audiences, and thanks to the mass marketing of its coffee, Brazil could take its place as one of a number of tropical countries whose laborers bent their dark backs to the pleasure of the U.S. consuming public. The privileges of power include ignorance, and some of this book is about the construction of ignorance through the careful erasure of the lessons of transnational exchange. North Americans worked hard to assimilate images of Brazil into the iconography of empire, which in the opening decades of the twentieth century contributed profoundly to the always ongoing construction of racial and national identity. Still, multiple, overlapping fields of power and privilege mean that sometimes subsets of metropolitan populations have reasons to know about peripheral places and often choose not to erase—and even to expand—the information they encounter into usable fields of knowledge.

The example of this dynamic that is most important to this book is the interest in Brazil sustained by North Americans who identified as black. Brazil's reputation as a place of peace among the races was intriguing to African Americans, who amassed a serviceable storehouse of information about this supposedly non-racist New World state and set about drawing

attention to its example. Unconcerned to be projecting a utopian desire onto a deeply racist place, African Americans and allies used Brazil's image as a "racial paradise" to attack fear of miscegenation, to argue that racism was neither natural nor inevitable, and to invoke international disapproval of racial animosity in the United States.<sup>21</sup> African American and other travelers to Brazil updated and extended the transnational conversations forged by abolitionists, slave and free.

The First World War accelerated Pan-American exchange dramatically. Wartime innovations sparked interconnected booms in communications technologies, mass culture, and urbanization; these developments then in turn widened the paths for the travel of goods, services, ideas, and cultural products. The war realigned trade routes—for example, forcing Americans to seek markets within their hemisphere for the goods they had previously shipped to Europe.<sup>22</sup> As the largest two nations in the region, Brazil and the United States sought each other's markets for their exports with particular hope and zeal. Advances in communications technologies spurred the growth of mass culture, a swift and fluid traveler, and commercial realignments in those communications technologies further expanded inter-American exchange, as in the case of a German news service that telegraphed from Brazil and left in 1918, ceding its place to the Associated Press.<sup>23</sup> Another powerful spark to both commerce and cultural exchange was the advertising industry, which expanded in the early twentieth century in tandem with the rise of mass culture, postwar economic growth, the popularization of Freudian psychology, and innovations in media from print to wax to radio waves.

The war launched another set of developments that accelerated the pace of Brazil-U.S. exchange and Afro-American communication more broadly. It spotlighted global racial relations and questions of racial justice as the Allies' rhetoric of democracy and equality caught on the snag of their own racially stratified societies. As José Correia Leite made explicit in another forum, "the war, distributing ideas of liberty and equality, presenting itself as the great struggle for democracy, awoke in the laboring masses of color aspirations for a better fate."<sup>24</sup> Demobilization precipitated activism. Black soldiers had been highly visible in the conflict, whether in segregated U.S. troops, African and Caribbean colonial units, or European armies, and they remained visible in pacifying operations after the Armistice. During the peace African culture caught more than the passing fancy of metropolitan citizens, who reveled in jazz, primi-



tivism, futurism, and surrealism. Yet racist hierarchies failed to budge. Soldiers' determination to enjoy the rights earned by their patriotism spurred anti-racist activism, both in the United States and, as Leite reminds us, far beyond.<sup>25</sup>

Activism fed reaction. The U.S. anti-racist movement that followed the return of African American troops met a wave of anti-black race riots and lynchings, most notoriously during the nationwide "Red Summer" of 1919. Intensified racial terror constricted the segregationist codes of Jim Crow.<sup>26</sup> In this book, chapters 2 and 4 recount some of the ways popular cultural figures were a part of these reconfigurations. Brazilian elite response took a seemingly opposite path to the rhetorical embrace of racial harmony while staunchly reinforcing racial hierarchy in less audible ways. Chapters 3, 5, and 6 detail the roles of Afro-Cariocas (from Rio de Janeiro) and -Paulistas in delimiting the parameters of this elite response.

This process added yet another segment to the long tale of U.S.-Brazil exchange as postwar activism and reaction refreshed North Americans' and Brazilians' mutual focus. Brazilians of various sorts circulated news of U.S. racial violence because of its useful contrast to their supposedly harmonious nation's moral superiority. Racial terror sparked another wave of African American emigrationism, bringing Brazil back to center in an African American public sphere and making the renewed possibility of black migration once more an issue in Brazil.

These developments were far from limited to Brazil and the United States. The interwar period nurtured a range of global imaginaries, all irretrievably racialized. Leite's view from the south joined the Marxist vision of W. E. B. Du Bois's "dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of mankind," and both found a paranoid counterpart in Lathrop Stoddard's "rising tide of color." From imperial imaginaries to anti-imperialisms to black internationalisms in Pan-American, Pan-African, Black Atlantic, and countless other variations, these global racial imaginaries encompassed solidarities of many kinds, helping both to build momentum for social change and to hold the line against it, transforming ideas about race and racial configurations around the world.<sup>27</sup> These imaginaries would bear fruit in Depression-era radicalism, but their matrix was cultural exchange in the decade and a half before.

This context makes U.S.-Brazil exchange in the 1920s compelling to narrate as a consequential piece of the construction of race and nation in both places. The United States and Brazil were not necessarily more important to each other in this process or moment than other places were to either one. In fact the United States and Brazil are good candidates for the conjoined historicization of their racialized nationalisms because their connections are not obvious. They share no border, speak different languages, exchanged relatively few migrants before the late twentieth century, are incommensurate in political and economic power, and were never in a formal colonial relationship to each other. Yet as I shall show, they are bound up in each other in discursive and material arenas in uneven, awkward, sometimes brutal ways, earlier and with greater consequence than most observers have been willing to admit.

*Uneven Encounters* helps backdate the histories of interwar radicalism and globalized interconnection, contextualizing the classic cases of the 1930s and the 1970s, respectively. It does the same for the history of cultural exchange. At the point that these stories mostly end in the early 1930s, cultural exchange in the Americas began to shift in character. The consolidation of the Depression in 1932 preceded by two short years the repeal of the Platt Amendment (which had secured effective U.S. control in Cuba), the withdrawal of U.S. Marines from Haiti, and bilateral trade agreements between the United States and five southern neighbors: Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Colombia, and Honduras. These events signaled the coming of age of the southern-facing diplomatic stance of the Good Neighbor Policy elaborated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> The United States was increasingly invested in cultivating Pan-American friendship in the thirties and increasingly convinced of the fertility of culture in particular as grounds for political approximation. In the wake of the world war, Brazilians had also come to value the United States as trade partner, political ally, and hemispheric neighbor, and Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas, who came to power in the Revolution of 1930, gave unprecedented attention to cultural matters.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of the period discussed in this book, the state had taken cultural exchange into its jurisdiction.<sup>30</sup> Not exclusively, of course; informal exchange of the kind I explore here continued, often in tension with state-sponsored counterparts. The transnational back-and-forth that had convinced authorities of the potency of culture as a vehicle for politics,

however, was neither a state product nor the fruit of elite cultural or intellectual production. Over routes paved by performance, entertainment, pleasure, commerce, activism, journalism, tourism and more, people, ideas and cultural forms flowed abundantly, unevenly, and often at painful cost. Their travel constitutes a complex, consequential conversation. This book listens to it.

## *Producing Consumption*

### Coffee and Consumer Citizenship

Readers of North American popular magazines in 1922 may have paused to admire an intriguing advertisement for Butter-Nut coffee. It featured a coffee grower—a dashing patrician with black mustache and beard, bow tie, cummerbund, large sombrero, pointy boots, and flowing pants with mariachi silver buttons. This cinematic figure stood in front of a field of leafy shrubs (presumably coffee plants), with a group of low buildings behind them (perhaps his plantation) and mountains (probably volcanic) rising in the far background. As befit such a mishmash of geography and culture, the specific place went unnamed. The gentleman grower simply called it “my country,” though he made clear reference to the United States: “Coffee is as important an item to my country as wheat is in your United States,” he explained. Lest this lack of specificity mar his authenticity, the ad’s copywriter had him declare, “You can take my word for it—this is REAL Coffee!”<sup>1</sup>

The ad drew its readers further into the transnational realm of the coffee trade by imagining not only the tropical producer but also his North American consumer. The planter handed a steaming cup across the page to a carefully groomed white man in a conservative suit, at table in a gracious dining room. Behind him, a chandelier, a finely worked wooden dining table, and a mantle with adornments; under his feet, an Oriental rug, and across from him, gazing adoringly at the offer, a lovely blonde, surely his wife. Coffee passed from Latin to Saxon; from raw, authentic nature to refined civilization; and from a place of suggestively virile barbarity into a well-contained domestic space of bourgeois heterosexuality. Its vision of



FIGURE 1. "You can take my word for it—this is REAL Coffee!" Butter-Nut ad, 1922. Hills Bros. Collection, NMAH.

mutual attraction set a textbook Hollywood Latin leading man feminized by his smoldering sensuality (volcanos, barbarous virility, dazzling sartorial display) alongside an Anglo-Saxon lightly emasculated by the taint of citified over-civilization, a favorite fear of metropolitan urban dwellers at the time. Less homoerotic than homologous, the two lean in toward each other as if in the thrall of a "natural" magnetism.

This arrestingly evocative schematization of connection between coffee producers and U.S. consumers is a perfect entrée into an exploration of the local and global interrelationships shaping key facets of twentieth-century U.S. nationalism. Its picture conveys more than a thousand words regarding the process of imagining national community. Its two panels,

side by side, encouraged the viewer to contemplate self and Other. If the substance of their link was a cup of coffee, the ad suggested, the substance of their difference was not only race and place but their participation in the acts of production and consumption, respectively. Uninterested in reciprocity, the ad furnished its dining room with multiple items clearly coded as imports, implying that along with their whiteness and adherence to gender conventions, it was the couple's consumption of the world's products, rather than consumption in general, that made them appropriate objects for desire and identification. This was a vision in which undifferentiated Latin Americans produced and proffered, while "Americans" (in "their" United States) consumed.<sup>2</sup>

Such representations of global relations dovetailed with discursive productions of U.S. imperialism but were not reducible to a simple framework of political domination.<sup>3</sup> More directly and consequentially, this ad indexed and promoted the political-economic changes attendant to the rise of consumer capitalism. The Butter-Nut spot and its field of related advertisements helped to midwife the critical idea, emergent in this period, of consumer citizenship.

In this chapter I read 1920s coffee advertisements to argue that consumer citizenship is a racialized nationalism constructed in transnational context. I explore a tiny slice of economic history to introduce the book's overall contention that ideas of race and nation in the United States, as in Brazil, have been constructed in interrelation. To arrive at this contention requires several complicated steps, so let us pause a moment to consider what consumer citizenship is, why it is important, how it relates to U.S. nationalism, and why it ought to be apprehended within a transnational framework.

Notions of "consumer citizenship" emerged from the wedding of consumerism, "the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in society," to notions of *national* belonging.<sup>4</sup> That wedding was a historical process—that is, it happened slowly, over time. In the nineteenth century, U.S. notions of national identity were more likely to hinge on production, in a loose reflection of its agricultural and industrial output. The economic transition of the United States from a producer to a consumer society was a long process; it began in the eighteenth century and remained less than fully realized until after the Second World War. But representation need not cleave faithfully to economic conditions, and what concerns us in this chapter are the webs of signification spun around ideas

of consumption. People in the 1920s experienced consumerism with a palpable feeling of alarm. Critics expressed great discomfort at the thought of allowing self-indulgent (they charged) consumption practices to replace the producerist ethos that had long been a point of national pride. “Consumption” seemed to be spreading like its contagious homonym, and city dwellers worried about “neurasthenia” and “overcivilization,” romanticizing the sweat of the farmer or the muscular labor of the manufacturer.<sup>5</sup> Advertisers for all sorts of products, not just coffee, worked diligently to soothe this anxiety and coax audiences to think of themselves as “consumers” to promote the practices needed to drive commodity capitalism.

The short version of this story is that advertisers were successful. Over the course of the twentieth century, consumption has taken an increasingly important place in U.S. definitions of self and society, to the point of defining the parameters of citizenship. As its many critics have pointed out, consumerism has come to organize notions of who is a deserving member of society (those who consume wisely and responsibly), what freedom means (choice at the supermarket), and what constitutes political participation (buying green; the boycott).<sup>6</sup> Consumerism functions accordingly as a form of U.S. nationalism, worth going to war to protect. Further, as race and class remain deeply correlated in the United States (and the world), consumerism is a racially discriminatory nationalism. Its assumptions regarding “good” choices in the market divert attention from the structural factors that keep poor people poor, including racism, and so reinforce those structures.<sup>7</sup>

Many observers have discussed the development of consumer citizenship and criticized its effects, but few have placed it in the transnational context in which it belongs.<sup>8</sup> As illustrative pieces of a broader cultural field, the Butter-Nut ad and its fellow coffee advertisements can help us see the transnational aspects of consumer citizenship, for the ideological work they did hinged on the ways they were transnational themselves.

As I explained in the preface, by “transnational” I mean phenomena unconfined to—both greater and lesser than—the nation-state. The term directs attention to cases in which national borders are not the pertinent containers for the phenomena at hand. It is not intended simply to replace either “international,” which refers to the interactions of nation-states or representatives thereof, or “global,” a gesture to the earth’s largest scale. We might observe, to illustrate, that the global coffee trade was both inter-

and transnational. It was global in its production and consumption on seven continents and its shipping across seven seas; it was international in that it brought together state representatives and market sectors acting in the interests of their states. It was transnational in the shifting loyalties of market and state representatives, sometimes at one with each other, sometimes at odds; the regionalisms that foil a single national interest; and the links laborers (for example, farmhands or stevedores) maintained to their sending communities, for they were often migrants or immigrants. Its transnationalism was also simply a function of the fluctuating formations of cooperation and conflict among the trade's multiple sectors: growers, shippers, importers, greenmen, roasters, advertisers, retailers, bankers and other financiers, politicians (both federal and regional), laborers, and the families and environs of all of these people.

Coffee meant enormously different things to different people. In terms of its social meaning, the coffee that left the Brazilian port at Santos was not the coffee unloaded in New Orleans. Yet there is continuity in some senses. Economic historians speak of "commodity chains"—all the labor and production processes entailed in a commodity's formation—and there is a social level to such linkages as well.<sup>9</sup> As every piece contains traces of the whole, so the social relations entailed in coffee production are a part of its ads, just as they are present in every draft of the brew we sip. The transnational travels of the coffee trade were woven into its 1920s U.S. ads, sometimes via references to far-away places, sometimes in the form of non-state, non-nation concoctions such as "civilization," "the West," or "the Tropics." At times advertisers tried *not* to gesture to the broad geography of the commodity they pushed, and ads certainly often function to obscure, rewrite, and sanitize points along the chain of the commodity they hawk. Yet the effort required to suppress important details of coffee's provenance, as we shall see, often left its mark. Coffee ads inserted their foreign and transnational traces into circulation in the United States, planting them in the cultural fields in which the ads were at play. Those traces may have seemed buried, their impact attenuated and near impossible to specify, but their residue was critical. This chapter will show the ways in which their transnational aspects helped coffee advertisements effect a critical obfuscation: the portrayal of consumption as a national quality rather than the class-specific practice it is.

Such obfuscation is one clear reason to seek to understand the transnational dimensions of ideas of race and nation. Understanding con-



sumer citizenship first as a nationalism, then as a racialized nationalism, and ultimately as a racialized nationalism reliant on transnational context sharpens the tools critics can devise to intervene in the toxic social relations ordered by consumer citizenship, internationally and within the United States. So while a transnational approach forces the critic to work broadly—learning other languages, absorbing multiple historiographies, traveling to distant archives—its advantage is not necessarily that it illuminates a “global picture,” as many people construe its purpose. Rather, thinking transnationally reveals the specific mechanisms by which class, race, nation, and other social categories are constructed and the process of their construction occluded.

Few North Americans assume that Brazilian or transnational phenomena shaped U.S. life in any important way. Yet it is logical; everything from the foreign trade that generated profits for U.S. merchants to the nations or peoples against whose images North Americans defined themselves have been critical contributors to U.S. economic and ideological conditions. What historical cultural study can do is show *how* transnational phenomena matter. Where did they enter, and how did they work? Just as important, how was recognition of such contributions erased so that collective popular and scholarly memory meet them as exceptions rather than as rule?

This chapter, then, takes up one concrete instance of the transnational construction of ideas of race and nation: the development of the notion of consumer citizenship in coffee advertisements. After a scene-setting sketch of political-economic background, it narrates the unprecedented transnational collaboration of the Joint Coffee Trade Publicity Committee. It then explains the mid-decade breakdown of cooperative advertising in the wake of controversial attempts to price-protect coffee and finally ends by considering the reprise of the campaign in the late 1920s. Overall, since Brazilian coffee sectors successfully resisted political and market pressure not to “valorize” their country’s chief export, this is much more than a story of the United States imposing its will upon a subject of economic colonialism. Yet ultimately, the chapter points out that although Brazil refused to knuckle under in that moment, North American capital may have gained something more valuable in the long run, for the brouhaha in U.S. newspapers and political arenas over valorization helped rally relevant publics to the discourse of consumerism.

This tale unfolds within a complex confluence of circumstances. What