

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic* (New York University Press, 2012)

In their most recent book, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam invite their readers to a compelling analysis which involves the political and cultural histories of United States, France and Brazil. This triangular relationship bridges, both on a material and a symbolic level, three apparently different traditions, pointing at the possibility of an inclusive transnational and transcultural framework which could encompass all of them.

This critical perspective is mainly meant to deconstruct the common understanding of the ‘culture wars’ quoted in the title of the essay. Shohat and Stam, indeed, shift away from the politicised use of the term, which, for instance, was enhanced by public debates in the United States during the Nineties¹, and criticise its very bases. Among them, the authors are particularly effective in the criticism of the ‘Anglosaxonist/Latinist’ dichotomy: according to the authors, this is an underlying dialectics which, by nationalising and essentialising conceptual representations, has produced ideological divisions between those ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Latin’ intellectual traditions which share, on the contrary, many interesting and fertile foundations.

Drawing on the metaphor first coined by Paul Gilroy in his fundamental oeuvre, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Shohat and Stam define this triangular nexus among United States, Brazil and France as ‘Red Atlantic’. This is a formulaic expression which recalls a longstanding, transnational history, including the violent conquest of America, the Atlantic slave trade, the different forms of European colonialism and the following processes of decolonisation, and, finally, the present-day dynamics of globalisation.

Moreover, the label is meant to emphasise the sharing, in the three locations, of an ambivalent situation of conflict and cultural encounter between colonial settlers (or postcolonial elites) and indigenous peoples. As Shohat and Stam brilliantly recount, indigenous thinking and politics – in opposition to the common understanding of them – have contributed to the shaping and re-shaping of many ‘Euro-American’ traditions, being, thus, essential to their appreciation.

However, more consistently than the hypothesis of a ‘Red Atlantic’, which is sketched in the initial pages and then loosely retaken, the transnational reading enabled by such a broadly comparative approach constitutes a ‘Tale of Three Republics’ (following the title of the second chapter). From this perspective, the critiques of the Jeffersonian ideology of US republicanism, as well as of the centralising policies of the *République* and of the Brazilian myth of a ‘racial democracy’ are interrelated and appear to be strongly persuasive.

A similar take on wide intellectual debates, concerning also the political level of critical theory, is evident in the confrontation of the two authors with three important essays: Walter Benn Michaels’s 2006 book *The Trouble with Diversity*, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc

¹ As Shohat and Stam write in the Preface of the book, ‘[w]hile the term “culture wars” is usually taken to designate the heated polemics in the English-speaking world whirling around identity politics, Affirmative Action, the canon, feminism, multiculturalism, gay rights, anti-imperialism, and antiglobalization, the verbal skirmishes triggered by these wars form but the surface ripples of a deeper oceanic struggle to decolonize power structures and epistemologies’ (xiii).

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Wacquant's 1999 essay 'On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason' and Slavoj Žižek's 1997 article 'Multiculturalism, or The Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism'. These essays share the same general position, as they are left-wing critiques of the discourses involving 'multiculturalism', as well as other concepts which now form the core of disciplines such as Critical Theory or Postcolonial Studies: they are all dismissed, for being intrinsically 'eurocentric' and 'neo-imperialist'. In view of the harshness of these left-wing statements, Shohat and Stam pair them with right-wing critiques of multicultural discourses, like Pascal Bruckner's or Alain Finkielkraut's.

While the *pars costruens* of this argument seems to be quite over-stretched, linking positions which are partly similar and partly utterly different from each other, the *pars destruens* remains very attractive. The latter, indeed, eventually succeeds in showing the vitality and denseness of a variety of multicultural and/or postcolonial discourses, which cannot be easily dismissed, nor attacked by using the same objections that at least *some* multicultural and/or postcolonial theories have made available for the first time.

Another strong point of Shohat and Stam's rich essay is the interest for cultural movements, like French Hip-Hop or Brazilian Tropicália, which are commonly excluded from essays in critical theory. The analysis of Caetano Veloso's or Gilberto Gil's work might be even considered as 'paradigmatic', and Patricia Schor and Emanuella Santos have correctly emphasised this part of the book in their interview with the authors.²

The analysis of Caetano Veloso's 'Haiti', for instance, is an example of how the critical appraisal of such a complex 'text' as Caetano Veloso's song, could support the main argument of the two authors, about the necessity of a transnational framework for critical theory. In addition to this, the reading of 'Haiti', like many other comparisons suggested in the book, shows the relevance of a 'fourth' point – Haiti itself, as a nation – in the triangular relationship between American, French and Brazilian cultural histories. Once again, this reflection highlights the transnational openness of the comparison enacted, and, by resorting to the Haitian Revolution and its subsequent postcolonial history, strengthens the authors' critical take on different models of republicanism.

Other brilliant pieces of criticism make Shohat and Stam's essay really precious: among them, one interesting achievement is the retracing of a unitary history which ranges from the political movements for, or against, Affirmative Action, as located in the three nations under analysis, to the recent academic developments in the field of Whiteness Studies. As Shohat and Stam convincingly argue, wherever and whenever the concept of 'affirmative action' has been emphasized on a political level, this has significantly contributed to the progress of the studies on the prerogatives of 'whiteness', alongside the already established researches in the field of 'blackness'.

Slightly less persuasive are the passages in which Shohat and Stam reconstruct the 'seismic shift' which has set the academic processes of the 'decolonization of knowledge' forth, resulting in an inevitably sketchy history of the otherwise astonishingly complex history of contemporary academic thought. Equally debatable is the mostly negative appraisal of the impact of Postcolonial Studies in France, where recent developments in the wake of postcolonial theory have partially filled the theoretical gap produced by the rhetorical emphasis on *la Francophonie*.

² Emanuelle Santos and Patricia Schor, "'Brazil is not Traveling Enough": On Postcolonial Theory and Analogous Counter-Currents. An Interview with Ella Shohat and Robert Stam', *P (Portuguese Cultural Studies)*, 4 (2012) 13-40.

In conclusion, Shohat and Stam's essay provides readers with a fresh and compelling approach to transnational criticism, by legitimately insisting on the necessity of a triangular, as well as transnationally open, confrontation among the political and cultural histories of United States, France and Brazil. Despite some controversial passages, which seem to be inevitable in such a richly detailed enterprise, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic* surely constitutes a critical landmark for further literary, cultural and political analyses.

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