Preface

Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic is at once a report from various fronts in the race/colonial debates, a mapping of the germane literature in several languages, and an argument about the politics of the cross-border flow of ideas. Against the backdrop of an Atlantic space shaped by the conquest of indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and massive colonial and postcolonial dislocations, our book visits key ports along an oceanic continuum. We follow the transatlantic traffic of “race” within and between three national zones: the United States (and more broadly the Anglophone zone), France (and the Francophone zone), and Brazil (and the Lusophone zone). Our study goes beyond the three zones, however, in that it continually asserts the cultural presence of multiple geographies, while inscribing the race/coloniality problematic in the Atlantic generally. The various itineraries of the race debates, we argue, intersect in some surprising and illuminating ways.

Each chapter of Race in Translation treats a different dimension of the issues while highlighting the interlinked similitudes among the various manifestations of what we are calling the “Atlantic Enlightenment.” Most of the chapters chart the career of a series of ideas—Eurocentrism, the decolonization of knowledge, identity politics, multiculturalism, Affirmative Action, postcolonial theory, and so on—as they unfold in and across the public spheres of distinct spaces. The early chapters provide the broad historical framework by tracing the overall genealogy of the debates to the Renaissance “encounter” with indigenous societies, to the Enlightenment’s negotiation of the freedom/slavery dialectic, and to modernity’s fraught relation to the objects of its imperial “civilizing mission.”

The later chapters, meanwhile, examine the reeditions of these debates as encapsulated in the present-day culture wars. While 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. If in one sense the culture wars emerged in the post–World War II period, in a much longer view they participate in the five-century process by which the European powers reached positions of economic, military, political, and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Some of the major corollaries of this colonial
process were the massive expropriation of territory; the large-scale destruction of indigenous peoples and cultures; the enslavement of indigenous Americans and Africans; and racism within the colonized world and within the West itself. Although resistance to colonialism has existed since the very beginnings of colonization, we focus on the resistance that reached critical mass in the post–World War II period, generating what we see as the “seismic shift” in scholarship that contested established racial hierarchies, Eurocentric narrativizations of history, and canonical modes of knowledge production.

Against the grain of nation-state-centered analysis, we set the debates within what we term an “intercolonial” frame that addresses the tensions between colonizing nation-states that are at once collaborators and rivals. All nations are, in the end, transnational, indelibly marked by the presence of the other nations for and against which they have diacritically defined themselves. The cultural borders between national zones are therefore porous, often confounding “inside” and “outside.” Cultural phenomena imagined to be unique to one “nation” may in fact be shared. Intellectual debates deemed irrelevant and untranslatable in one historical conjuncture turn out to be relevant, even urgent, in another. As the debates move across national borders, we ask, how are they translated both literally and figuratively? Under what rubrics, keywords, and evaluative repertoires are they conducted? How do the terms themselves shift their valence as they move from one cultural geography and political semantics into another? How are ideas displaced, reinvoked, and recontextualized as they move back and forth between national fields? What are the grids, prisms, tropes, and even fun-house mirrors through which the debates are seen? What are the national doxa, the cultural institutions, and the global economic alignments that block, or facilitate, the transit of ideas about race/coloniality? What is the impact of exceptionalisms, narcissisms, and disavowals in what one might call, fusing Freud with Bourdieu, a “narcissism of national distinction”?

Our concern is with the ways intellectuals have textualized, mediated, and mobilized ideas. What anxieties and hopes, what utopias and dystopias, are provoked by words such as “race,” “multiculturalism,” and “identity politics” in the diverse sites? Why is the concept of la République central to the debates in France but not in the United States or Brazil, even though all three nation-states are republics? Why is miscegenation a dominant theme in Brazil but not in France or the United States, even though all three countries are, each in its own way, miscegenated? Why does “communitarianism” carry such a potent negative charge in France yet rarely figure in Brazil and the United States? What is the mediating role of language? In this sense, we not only engage the politics of translation but also cite and literally translate texts from French, Portuguese, Spanish, and other languages in order to convey the thrust of the
arguments, as well as the tone, the grain, and the cultural accents of the voices through which the arguments are presented.

The various chapters explore the multiple dimensions of these transnational/translational intersections. The first three chapters set out the larger conceptual and historical framework. Chapter 1, “The Atlantic Enlightenment,” outlines the intertextual backdrop of the “culture wars” in the foundational contradictions of the Enlightenment. How was Enlightenment republicanism, with its professed values of freedom and equality, to be reconciled with the actual practices of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism? Did colonialism represent a rupture with the Enlightenment, or its clearest expression? Was the Enlightenment an alternative to racism, or its very source? In what ways do contemporary polemics recapitulate while reconfiguring Enlightenment debates about the universal and the particular?

It is in this context that we advance, in conjunction with the well-known work on the “Black Atlantic,” the idea of the “Red Atlantic” and, on a different register, the “White Atlantic.” Although the expression “Red Atlantic” has been deployed to refer strictly to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, we conceptualize it in a broader sense to suggest that the entire Atlantic world is “Red” and indigenized, in that it has been impacted not only by the Conquest that enriched Europe materially but also by indigenous modes of thought and sociability that triggered a salutary epistemological crisis by provoking European thinkers—from Montaigne and Diderot to Pierre Clastres—to question the dominant social norms. What we call “the discourse of indigenous radicalism” has been invoked to support such varied progressive causes as Jacobin and socialist revolutions, communal property, class, gender, and sexual equality, ecology, collective jouissance, antiproductivism, and alter-globalization. The concept of a “White Atlantic,” meanwhile, conjures up the hegemonic ethnicity and “critical whiteness studies” as an integral part of the broader anticolonial project.

Subsequent chapters zoom in to specific currents within the Atlantic continuum. Chapter 2, “A Tale of Three Republics,” examines Atlantic republicanism and the transatlantic looking relations or intellectual polylogue between France, Brazil, and the United States. Transoceanic in their genealogies and repercussions, the colonialism, slavery, and race debates have been profoundly constitutive of the Brazilian, American, and French social formations. Here we highlight the longstanding role of France as cultural mentor of Brazil; the cornucopia of comparative race scholarship concerning Brazil and the United States; and the Afro-diasporic search for nonracist utopias, especially in France and Brazil. We also question the Anglo-Saxon/Latin culturalist dichotomy as an ideological construct that still haunts the race/coloniality debates. We thus shift the focus from Latins and Anglo-Saxons as putative panethnic groups to what we call Latinism.
and Anglo-Saxonism as discourses. Both “North” and “South,” we argue, have reproduced Eurocentric Hegelian-Weberian theories that naturalize the subordination of the African and indigenous elements in the “New World.” We call, finally, for a translational analysis of intellectual exchange as a way of avoiding petrified conceptualizations of national culture.

Chapter 3, “The Seismic Shift and the Decolonization of Knowledge,” delineates the protocols of Eurocentrism as the discursive precipitate of colonialism and sketches out the post–World War attempts to decolonize scholarship within diverse fields of inquiry. Here we discuss Frantz Fanon’s work as a metonym for the broader decolonizing move that led not only to national independence in the “Third World” but also to the radicalization of academic disciplines and ultimately to novel transdisciplinary formations such as ethnic studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies. This seismic shift, we argue, forms the indispensable backdrop for the post-1960s debates about such fraught issues as race, identity, and multiculturalism. The critique of Euro-diffusionist narratives of knowledge dissemination and the discussion of the radicalization of the disciplines here lay the groundwork for our critique of some otherwise progressive thinkers later in the book.

The remaining chapters explore the debates as they have evolved from the 1990s to the present. Chapter 4, “Identity Politics and the Right/Left Convergence,” examines a certain left’s hostility, shared with the right, toward identity politics, as voiced by such writers as Walter Benn Michaels, Pierre Bourdieu/Loïc Wacquant, and Slavoj Žižek. What explains this bizarre secret sharing between political adversaries? The leftist arguments against “critical race” and “multicultural identity politics” bear an uncanny resemblance to those advanced by the right, even if they are articulated in the name of opposed visions. The dismissal sometimes derives, as we shall see, from a fool’s choice between class and race, or between economy and culture. The blithe dismissal of an easily criticized “liberal multiculturalism,” we argue, distracts attention from the less easily dismissalable work on race and coloniality. The problem, we argue, lies not so much in the arguments themselves as in the uninformed and Eurocentric assumptions undergirding them.

Chapter 5, “France, the United States, and the Culture Wars,” traces the shift in French intellectual life that takes us from the ardent Third Worldism of the 1960s to the backlash against it in the 1970s, on to a certain left-right United Front against multicultural identity politics in the 1990s. Here we dissect the attacks on critical race/multicultural thought by prominent French intellectuals such as Pascal Bruckner, Tzvetan Todorov, and Alain Finkielkraut. What anxieties underlie this defensive stance toward what some have called the “specter” of multiculturalism? How can we explain the immense gap between the multi-
cultural France of hip-hop and the antimulticultural stance of French intellectuals? Here we also examine the rightward turn—summed up in the catch-phrase “from Mao to Moses”—taken by the self-defined “pro-American” and “Zionist” nouveaux philosophes. Against those who see Jews and Muslims, and Jews and blacks, as necessarily antagonistic, we stress their historical, discursive, and allegorical affinities, from the catalytic moment of 1492 up to the present. In the end, we argue, issues of colonialism, anti-Semitism, Indian-hating, Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Islamophobia, and antiblack racism are all intimately connected, sharing intersecting impulses and logics. Finally, the chapter evokes what could be called the “multicultural turn” in French scholarship since the turn of the 20th century.

Chapter 6, “Brazil, the United States, and the Culture Wars,” explores the South Atlantic version of the seismic shift as expressed in anti-imperialism, dependency theory, and the black consciousness movement in postwar Brazil. What explains a certain Brazilian skepticism, at once similar to and distinct from that found among French intellectuals, toward multicultural identity politics, at least in the 1990s? We frame these issues against the backdrop of the prolific comparative scholarship concerning Brazil and the United States. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the comparative method? In this chapter, we also foreground the brilliant ways that Brazilian popular musicians such as Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso have staged debates about race and indigeneity through lyrics, music, and performance. Deploying multicultural dissonance as a creative resource, we argue, these musicians give aesthetic form to social desire. At the same time, we show that Brazilian academics, in tandem with the artists, have been exploring the race/colonial debates with great depth and precision, often challenging the “racial democracy” myth.

Chapter 7, “From Affirmative Action to Interrogating Whiteness,” explores the debates about Affirmative Action and reparations as new editions of Enlightenment debates about freedom and slavery and the universal and the particular. Here we anatomize the ricocheting conversations about the long-term consequences of colonialism and slavery in the three zones, especially emphasizing the cross-referential and transnational character of the conversation. Why do both the supporters and critics of Affirmative Action constantly bring up comparisons to the United States? At the same time, we note the emergence of “whiteness studies”—or its functional equivalents—in all three sites, with an eye to potential zones of reciprocity.

Chapter 8, “French Intellectuals and the Postcolonial,” further probes the gap between France as a multiracial postcolonial society and a French academic field that has only recently begun to wrestle with race and postcoloniality, despite the historically seminal role of French and Francophone anticolonial thinkers. What
explains the initial aversion to postcolonial theory and the subsequent partial fading of that aversion? Here we probe some of the ironies of this hesitation-waltz about postcoloniality, while also pointing to the recent writing, especially since the 2005 rebellions, that traces the continuities between colonial practices and postcolonial France. The various genres of postcolonial writing, we suggest, now form part of what has become a lively intervention close to the pulsating center of French public life.

Chapter 9, “The Translational Traffic of Ideas,” theorizes the axioms operative in multilateral polemics in which scholars from one country (France) engage scholars from another country (the United States) who write about a third country (Brazil). We focus especially on the polemic between Bourdieu/Wacquant and political scientist Michael Hanchard concerning the Brazilian black consciousness movement. In an infinite regress of readings, Brazilian intellectuals themselves “read back” against the Bourdieu/Wacquant reading of an African American reading of Brazil. We contextualize the polemic against the intertextual setting of the work of the French and American “Brazilianists.” At the same time, we explore the impact of the dissemination of poststructuralist French theory in Brazil and the United States. Examining the transregional circulation of ideas, we criticize narratives of intellectual exchange that posit dichotomous axes of foreign/native, export/import, and original/copy, proposing instead a more fluid transnational and translational methodology appropriate to cross-border intellectual interlocution.

Hovering around and in the interstices of our text is the metaquestion of theories and methodologies that address questions of transnational intellectual exchange. How do cultural practices such as hip-hop and Tropicália, in tandem with academic scholarship, bring their “excess seeing” (Bakhtin) to the table? What advantages accompany the “view from afar?” (Lévi-Strauss), especially when the “view from afar” and the “view from within” become intermingled when intellectuals such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roger Bastide are transformed by their Brazilian séjour? What is the cognitive function of comparison? What does it illuminate or fail to illuminate? How can comparison take on board the constitutive unevenness that structures the world in dominance? Are national comparisons always tendentious, narcissistic, prescriptive, hiding what R. Radhkrishnan calls the “aggression of a thesis”? Does comparison assume, or construct, an illusory coherence on both sides of the comparison? How does comparison change when we move from the comparison of two entities (with the danger of reified binaries) to comparing three or more entities (with the danger of a chaotic proliferation)?

Cross-national comparisons are imbued with affect, fears, vanities, desires, and projections. Comparatists can idealize or denigrate the “home” country, just
as they can idealize or denigrate the “away” country. They can also deconstruct nation-state thinking by discerning commonalities. Comparison is both problematic and inescapable. (Even when one rejects comparison as a method, after all, one is still comparing comparison to other supposedly superior methodologies.) The epistemological impasse occurs when reified dichotomies based on nation-state units ontologize a putative national character, now locked into what might be called an “ontologi-nation.” The Venn diagrams of comparison focus on the shared comparable territory, leaving outside the anomalies not susceptible to comparison, that which is incomparable. We attempt to avoid this bind through formulations that conjoin identity and difference, emphasizing shared contradictions, differentiated commonalities, and family resemblances—differences that connect and similarities that separate. We will thus highlight a multidirectional polylogue within which intellectuals are constantly hybridizing, indigenizing, translating, and transforming “ideas from elsewhere,” while still being shaped by their national contexts and by uneven relations to power.

Comparison often entails generalization, yet any sentence that connects an entire nationality or ethnicity to the verb “to be” (“The French are . . .”) is inevitably problematic, as suggested by the ancient conundrum “All generalizations are false.” But even more circumscribed generalizations concerning “all white French sociologists” are equally likely to be false. Comparisons that result in static overdrawn dichotomies make one wish for a comparative analysis of exceptions, focusing on Brazilians who hate soccer and samba, Americans who despise hot dogs and baseball, and French people who abhor Beaujolais and Camembert. Such analyses would at least have the virtue of unpredictability, of not leaving complex cultures incarcerated in the prisons of national stereotype.

This book’s title, Race in Translation, signals the dominant thread that runs through the volume. In a relational frame, we recount how Brazil, France, and the United States have been historically implicated in the dynamics of race and coloniality, and how those dynamics still reverberate in the present in the form of palpably unjust social formations. While the specific demographic ratios and power hierarchies might vary, the historical interplay between race and coloniality is constitutive in each national case. The evasion, the refusal, and the sheer denial of this constitutiveness is what triggers and propels the “debates.” The evasion/denial draws on different rhetorics in each case: “racial democracy” in Brazil, “republicanism” in France, and “equal opportunity” in the United States. The crux of the debate, in our view, is between those who acknowledge the shaping presence of race and coloniality as against those who deny it.

Race in Translation evokes a multicolored Atlantic seascape. In this sense, our work forms part of a movement within scholarship toward postcolonial and transnational frames, a trend manifested linguistically in the proliferation of
such prefixes as “trans-” “cross-,” and “inter-” and in words such as “intercultural,” “transnational,” “transcultural,” “diasporic,” “exilic,” “global,” and so forth. A stream of aquatic and oceanic metaphors—“Black Atlantic Civilization” (Robert Farris Thompson), “the Black Atlantic” (Paul Gilroy), “flux and reflux” (Pierre Verger), “circum-Atlantic performance” (Joe Roach), and “tidalectics” (Edward Kamau Brathwaite)—gives expression to a poetics of flows and eddies mingling myriad currents, reflecting a search for a more fluid language of analysis. At the same time, fluidity is no panacea. Slavery too was transnational, and Atlantic waters harbor the corpses of the enslaved thrown overboard. Moreover, not all flows are progressive; Wall Street bankers also speak of “liquid assets” and “capital flows.” Our Atlanticist title, in this sense, clearly echoes the triangular traffic by which Europe, in a lucrative loop of commercial appropriation, sent manufactures to Africa, African slaves to the colonies, and raw materials back to the metropole.

The metaphor of “currents” is especially suggestive here in that the Atlantic Ocean is literally swept by vast circular “rivers” and “streams”—a northern circle running in a clockwise direction from its southern beginnings and a southern circle flowing in a counterclockwise direction, in a swirling movement in some ways evocative of the trade of ideas and goods back and forth between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Given these liquid transfers and “trade winds”—an expression redolent of the slave trade—the goal becomes one of discerning the common currents running through the various zones, the ways that histories, texts, and discourses mingle and interact within asymmetrical power situations. We are interested, in this sense, in what Édouard Glissant calls “transversalities,” or the hierarchical and lateral syncretisms and dialogisms taking place across national spaces. We hope to shed light on the linked analogies between three colonial/national zones too often viewed in isolation, in order to provoke a salutary confrontation of perspectives concerning shared and discrepantly lived histories.