

Book Reviews

Roth, Wendy D. (2012) *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*. Stanford University Press (Stanford, CA), x + 234 pp. \$78.36 hbk, \$24.95 pbk.

Today, social scientists consistently teach that race is a social construction, but seldom demonstrate it, as Wendy Roth's analysis of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans who migrated to the US does. The major strength of Roth's *Race Migrations* is its research design: 120 in-depth interviews with Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, both those who migrated to New York City and those who stayed behind in Santo Domingo and San Juan. This design enables us to understand how differently race is understood in the Caribbean; how the migrants' racial understandings change as the result of their move to New York; and how, as a result of their transnational involvements and return migration, these changes also have an impact on non-migrants' racial understandings. In her interviews and through photo elicitation, Roth searches for 'racial schemas' – shared representations of race –, including the terminology (e.g., *indio* in Dominican Republic means mulatto, not Indian).

Roth identified three types of racial schema: the *continuum* racial schema, used in the Caribbean, which classifies the intermediate mixed race population with many different terms, such as *mulatto* or *indio*; the *nationality* racial schema, which includes only nationalities, such as *Puerto Rican* or *Italian* or pan-ethnic identifiers such as *Hispanic*; and the *US* racial schema, which historically included only black and white, although it now also includes Latinos.

The major weakness of the book is that it is not sufficiently moored in the historical analysis of race. As Charles Wagley, a Brazilian anthropologist, pointed out in 1968, in the Americas, where the intermixture between the three major racial stocks (European,

African and Indian) was extensive, ancestry, physical appearance and social and cultural criteria were used to classify people.

In the Deep South of the US, *ancestry* was stressed – e.g., *quadroon* (1/4 black ancestry). In the Indian highland and Andean nations, from Mexico down to Chile, *sociocultural* criteria was stressed – an Indian was one who shared the culture, lived and dressed as an Indian, spoke an Indian language. In the Caribbean, *physical appearance* was the primary basis for classification together with *socioeconomic status*, irrespective of one's ancestors. Thus, a mixed race person might be classified as black in the US, mulatto in Brazil, and mestizo in Mexico.

For historical reasons, this intermediate population (intermediate in every way: social class, occupations, colour, culture) was so much larger in Brazil than in the United States, that the polarisation between the races that took place during the 'Jim Crow' years of legal segregation in the Deep South was, in fact, impossible. Moreover, it was that very segregation that prompted the simplification of the far more complex system of racial classification into the binary two-caste system of black vs. white: the strict colour line.

Since Roth's analysis is not well-moored historically, the labels she uses to describe the existing racial schema – the US racial schema vs. the *continuum* racial schema – are not as apt as those used in the past. This leads Roth to call the 'US racial schema' at present a 'Hispanicized' one that takes into account the presence of Latinos and the use of other criteria – language, accent, dress, customs, culture – for classification.

Nevertheless, Roth's *Race Migrations* has a strength: the focus on the impact of migration. She shows that as people migrate, their understanding of race also migrates, which gives evidence that race is a social construction. This is particularly important because for many people migration is not a once and for all phenomena but a transnational way of life. The media as well as return migrants diffuse much information, including different conceptions of race. As Roth underscores, the 'internalization of the binary US schema by non-migrants ... suggests that at the same time that American conceptions of race are seen as becoming Latin Americanized, Latin American conceptions of race are also becoming more Americanized' (p. 125). In the end, that is the fresh contribution of her work, made possible by her research design – the two-way street which she herself traversed.

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References

Wagley, C. H. (1968) 'The Concept of Social Race in the Americas' in C. Wagley (ed.) *The Latin American Tradition*. Columbia University Press: New York, 155–174.