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Book Review - Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers (J. Nagel, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

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Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers, by Joane Nagel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 308 pp. NPL cloth. ISBN: 0-19-512746-3. NPL paper. ISBN: 0-19-512747-1.

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Review:

Nagel offers an interesting exploration of the intertwined social constructions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. Drawing principally on the existing research that similarly examines these “ethnosexual intersections”(p. 9), Nagel weaves a compelling narrative of “how sex matters in ethnic relations, and...how sexual matters insinuate themselves into all things racial, ethnic, and national” (p. 1). While scholars familiar with the research in this area will likely not find her observations necessarily groundbreaking or novel, if one (in my opinion) appropriately deduces Nagel’s intended audience as novices in this area (i.e., undergraduates), s/he may indeed find, as proclaimed on the book jacket, this work an “ideal text for undergraduate courses” exploring the political, cultural, and ideological juncture of race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality.

The introductory chapters provide the theoretical and substantive background that guides Nagel’s central argument. In the Introduction and Chapter Two particularly, Nagel does an exemplary job of concretizing complex and highly-abstracted understandings of the social construction of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality put forth by scholars such as Judith Butler, Michel

Foucault, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, and others. As the social-constructionist critique of these “realities” is often difficult for undergraduates to grasp, Nagel’s condensations provide firm footing for these novices to venture into the subsequent chapters.

In the remaining chapters, Nagel offers numerous examples of “ethnosexual intersections” (p. 9). Chapters Three and Four focus locally on the construction of indigenous peoples of the Americas by European settlers as hypersexualized savages and similar constructions of Africans rooted in the power relations of slavery and lingering to current day. In these discussions, Nagel elucidates that while these constructions drew sexual as well as ethnic boundaries between whites and these racial/ethnic “Others,” they also titillated whites to sojourn into these “forbidden frontiers”—be it for personal gratification, assimilating these Others into the dominant culture, or reinforcing power relations. In Chapters Five through Eight, Nagel looks globally for examples of these ethnosexual intersections. She examines sex and nationalism in Chapter Five, illustrating sexuality’s role in the constructions and deployment of nationalist ideology as well as offering an interesting discussion of how nationalist ideologies reinforce “the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 159), providing examples from various nationalist ideologies that celebrate hypermasculinity while denigrating threats to this construction—namely feminism and homosexuality. In Chapter Six, Nagel turns to sex and war, devoting lengthy discussion to the use of rape and sexual exploitation as weapons during wartime to reinforce racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. She subsequently explores

global sex tourism in Chapter Seven, elucidating how this industry thrives on the eroticization of the racial/ethnic Other, then in Chapter Eight to how various aspects of globalization have impacted ethnosexual relations and constructions. Finally, Nagel concludes her text by reiterating her central thesis, offering yet more examples of how the “politics of ethnosexuality” (p. 255) are repeatedly evinced.

As this synopsis suggests, Nagel rather ambitiously tackles the many facets of the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. So doing, she admittedly sacrifices an “in-depth analysis” (p. 4) for a broader but comparably surface-level exploration of these ethnosexual intersections. Similarly, Nagel relies heavily on existing research rather than analyzing newly-collected data sources. Thus, scholars in this area seeking new and/or groundbreaking insights will possibly find her work wanting. Moreover, in my opinion Nagel’s explorations in Chapters Three, Four, and Five were far more nuanced and more explicitly incorporated her central thesis and were thus stronger when compared to the remaining chapters, which often sacrificed deliberate discussion of the connection of her illustrations with the theoretical/substantive groundwork she laid in her introductory chapters for what at times read like laundry lists of examples. Thus, while I realize Nagel’s stated aim was breadth of treatment rather than depth, I believe she could have woven her argument more explicitly and thoroughly throughout the text as well as delved somewhat deeper in her own analyses.

Returning to the question of whether or not Nagel's work is an "ideal text" for undergraduates, I propose that it is pretty close to the mark. Nagel's illustrations of the multitudinous ethnosexual intersections will doubtless be novel and intriguing to the inquisitive undergraduate, sparking his/her sociological imagination to critically examine the intertwined constructions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. At first the academic notions of "hegemony" and the "Other" may seem perplexing to him/her, but their illustration throughout Nagel's work buttressed by classroom discussion will clarify for the novice their application in understanding the examined phenomena as well as other lines of inquiry. In conclusion, were I teaching an undergraduate course concerned with the "politics of ethnosexuality" (p. 255), I would not hesitate to place Nagel's work on my course syllabus as a required text.