

**Joane Nagel**

**Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality. Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers.**

Oxford University Press, 2003, 304 pp, \$43.95 (paper), \$87.50 (hardcover)

This book explores the “intimate intersections and forbidden frontiers” where race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality converge. The author defines ethnicity in a broad way to subsume nationalism, race, religious and linguistic groups, while pointing to the historical and contextual fluidity of these terms and, therefore, to their socially constructed character. In a similar social constructionist vein, she defines sexuality as the genitally-based distinction between men and women accompanied by culturally defined appropriate sexual tastes, partners and activities. Nagel wants to understand the social, economic, political, cultural, and / or religious agendas behind difference claims made in social constructions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. As a result, she proceeds, in eight succinct, cogently argued, and well documented chapters, to map out ethno-sexual constructions; show how hegemonic regimens of sexuality shape ethnic relations, conflicts and boundaries; and document the importance of sexuality in all things racial, ethnic and national.

Methodologically, the author chooses examples where ethnicity and sexuality collide in order to expose the often hidden ethnosexual connection. The intent is neither an exhaustive study of locations where race and sex can possibly meet, nor an in-depth analysis of any single era or country or racial or ethnic group. Nagel borrows methodologies and styles of interpretation eclectically from both the social sciences and the humanities, and draws equally upon census data and poetry, fieldwork and drama, archival documents and personal accounts.

The author explores first sites where ethnicity is sexualized and sexuality is ethnicized, such as in crossings of ethnic boundaries by “ethnocultural settlers,” “sojourners,” “adventurers” and “invaders” in order to engage in “ethnosex.” Such crossings, she argues, involve “an ethnosexual factor” as well as a gender factor, as the odds in black-white marriages (in 3 to 1 the wife is white) and in Asian-white marriages (in 2 to 1 the husband is white) powerfully demonstrate. If gender did not matter the percentages would be 50% in every case. Similarly, heterosexuality and heteronormativity play a major role in constructing ethnic (and national) identity. While there is no question as to how sexuality, gender and race intersect in ethnosexual connections, this analysis is not complete because socio-economic power has been left out from the decision-making process. For example, the white American men who marry the petite, shy, and less educated Filipina women do so because they can, by virtue of their class, and so is the case for Black American men “marrying up” to white American women (Tastsoglou, 2002).

Next, Nagel examines the social construction of ethnicity and sexuality and concludes that both are the result of a dialectical process between individuals. An individual’s ethnicity is a negotiated social fact – what you think is your ethnicity versus what others think is your ethnicity. Individuals have a portfolio of ethnic identities, some of which are more or less salient in various situations and vis-à-vis various audiences. A person’s ethnicity is thus a matter of structure and power: which ethnic categories are available in a society to be sorted into, and who gets to do the sorting (p. 42). But ethnicity is not only negotiated, situational and constructed, it can be seen as external to the

individuals and as a series of boundaries — spatial, cultural, legal, institutional, social, ideational and sexual — that shift to divide people into different categories at different times by different people. Similarly, sexuality can be seen as a set of similar boundaries dividing populations. Sexual identities are also negotiated, situational and shifting, and socially constructed, though this view has been relatively recent. Both positive and negative stereotypes about the sexuality of ethnic Others reinforce ethnic differences and sustain ethnic segregation. Ethnic boundaries are constituted by and constitutive of sexual boundaries.

In a series of chapters Nagel analyzes the historical linkages between ethnicity and sexuality in American history. First, she explores the clash of sexualities and sexual systems in the conquest of America and how this clash was an important feature in the development of ideologies that defined each group and separated them from each other. The American Indian was conquered, but also prevailed in the popular ethnic imaginary, as the characteristics of “rugged individualism, manly autonomy and inalienable right to freedom” of the heroes of contemporary American adventure fiction and film demonstrate. Furthermore, Nagel argues, sexuality has played a major role in building and supporting U.S. racial boundaries to our days. She draws support for such a claim in her analysis of the “ethnosexual sphere of slavery.” The roots of contemporary racism and racial conflict go back to sexual soil in early American history. They both thrived in an environment of lust, greed, and demeaning sexual stereotypes. The “forbidden frontier” of race / sexuality in the case of rape, for example, operated differently for black and white American men and women. There was a hierarchy of race over gender in America during slavery, manifested in the very different outcomes of rape cases. Black men accused were mostly executed, white men were never brought into trial for the most part. Rape in early America was a crime whose definition was structured by race.

Nagel makes an argument that national boundaries as well intersect with sexual ones. Implicit in the idea of the nation are certain prescriptions and proscriptions for sexual crossings — what good citizens should and should not do sexually, and with whom. Like ethnic groups and ethnicity, nations and nationalism can be thought of as a series of boundaries in time and space, dividing people and territory, and requiring active construction, maintenance and defense. But political and economic boundaries become sexualized as well. Sexual proscriptions for good citizenry have a gender dimension as well (i.e. a double standard for men and women). Gender has a particularly important place in the nation-building enterprise. Women are relegated to supporting roles, e.g. mothers of the nation, vessels for reproducing the nation, agents for inculcating national culture into new members, and national housekeepers. In addition, the national state is a masculine and heteronormative institution. Both feminists and homosexuals tend to be seen as potential sources of disloyalty since their commitment to gender and sexual equality raises doubts about the strength of their allegiance to the nation as the primary unit of identification.

Another ethnosexual front for Nagel is the military. She argues that rape in war is an ethnosexual phenomenon: spoil of war for the troops to enjoy, means of creating solidarity through mutual guilt among soldiers, technique of warfare designed to terrorize the enemy and equivalent to gaining territory, with the added symbolic significance of polluting the enemy. Rape in war, and other settings, is a transaction between men, where women are the currency used in the exchange (p. 181). I see the exception in this general theory provided by the recent case of Iraqi war prisoners, where sexual torture was used against Muslim men to render them symbolically into women, as a very

effective weapon of intimidation of other Muslim men. This case demonstrates how much rape is about power rather than sex, and raises the question of the politics of naming the military an ethnosexual front or, rather, a place of institutionalized violence where sex is very often the means. The post-WWII period with its economic competition and superpower geopolitical rivalry produced a massive military-sexual complex and further militarized sexuality, resulting in an international sex industry.

Nagel examines equally at length contemporary intersections of ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in sex and tourism, sex and globalization and the persistence of the black – white color line in the U.S. In each of these cases, the power, position and origin of the blended races or ethnicities are distinct in the hybrid cultural productions, yet, at the same time, some challenge and subversion of dominant positions takes place, be they western messages of femininity and beauty, challenges to the black-white color line by intermarriage, or romance tourism. The binary distinction is still there, but muted in the blending and at the same time subverted by it.

Overall, this is a fascinating read shedding light on a hitherto neglected dimension of ethnicity, race and nationalism. At the same time, although it is not the author's intention to embark on a mono-causal explanation of these phenomena, her laborious treatment of the sexual dimension in understanding them overshadows other possible approaches, and especially the political – economic one.

### References

Tastsoglou, E. 2002. "Race and the Politics of Personal Relationships: Focus on Black Canadian Women." *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 17,1: 93-111.

Evangelia Tastsoglou  
Department of Sociology and Criminology  
Saint Mary's University  
etastsoglou@smu.ca

Dr. Tastsoglou has researched and published on the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race, immigrant status and class in various historical and contemporary contexts.

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June 2004

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