

Book review

Oliveira-Monte, Emanuelle K. F. (2018). *Barack Obama is Brazilian: (Re)Signifying Race Relations in Contemporary Brazil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barack Obama is Brazilian by Emanuelle Oliveira-Monte suggests an interesting and original attempt to highlight the interconnections between political humour, race and gender, a stimulating area of study in humour research. More specifically the book explores the ways Brazilian media portrayed the former US president with a specific focus on political cartoons and internet memes. As the author argues, Brazilians celebrate their country as a racial democracy while the US, seen as a racially exclusionary country, works as its nemesis. The election of an African-American president to the office of the most powerful country of the world had a tremendous impact on the collective unconscious of the African Diaspora worldwide and especially in Brazil; it also led some analysts to postulate that the US was entering a new post-racial era. President Barack Obama emerged as an open sign, as a symbol of hope and change not only in the US but also globally.

This provocative monograph, an interdisciplinary study on comparative race relations, analyses Obama's shifting portrayals and investigates how the election of the first black US president complicates Brazilians' own racial discourses. The data is mainly drawn from institutionalised humorous genres (Kuipers 2008: 374), namely political cartoons and memes, but other types of cultural products, such as books, films or posters are also explored. The main question, around which the whole book is articulated, has to do with the meaning of Obama's victory to Brazil, a country in which almost 54 % of the population is of African origin (p. 139). Did Obama's victory eventually confirm or challenge Brazil's racial relations imaginary?

The book consists of six chapters which are divided in sections, all originally and funnily titled. The first chapter ("Introduction") provides a concise summary of the book's contents and identifies the main issues (race, class, social inequality, identity, collective imaginary, etc.) discussed in the study. Moreover, Oliveira-Monte refers to the theoretical approaches she opts for to consider the visual representations. The author questions the possibility that in African countries or in Brazil, the land of presumed racial harmony, an African Obama would ever reach power. At the same time, she clarifies that in the Obama era "racism outmanoeuvred post-raciality, demonstrating that the election of a black president did not bring a less bigoted social reality" (p. 3); on the contrary, racial tensions escalated in the last years of his mandate.

The second chapter, "Obama dreams of Brazil: a mulatto in the Land of Racial Democracy," first examines the publication and reception of Obama's *Dreams from my father* in Brazil, released before the US 2008 elections. The book quickly became a best seller and went through six editions, as some aspects of his biography could draw parallels with the nation's supposedly inclusive racial system. As is highlighted, reviews praised the autobiography and focused on the successful mulatto and cosmopolitan (and not an African-American) Obama: he is seen as an individual "hero," who affirms his self and constructs a

positive bicultural or biracial (or multicultural and multiracial) identity, and not a member of the (negative stereotyped) black community. The author argues that in fact Obama's biography was intentionally and conveniently "misread" to ratify Brazilians' idealised construction of race relations in Brazil. The significant differences between US and Brazilian editions systematically deemphasise the effects of Obama's critical racial assessments, by mistranslating some of the words of the English original. The analysis of the book's cover is particularly interesting: the title *Dreams from My Father* (Obama 2004) in the Brazilian version becomes *A Origem de Meus Sonhos* ("The origin of my dreams") and the subtitle *A Story of Race and Inheritance* is completely erased (Obama 2008). According to the Oliveira-Monte, "the 'inheritance' (Africa) and the 'race' (blackness) are conveniently deleted, giving place to the mestizo subject, one who is an opportune product of a whitening project" (p. 24). The pictorial representation (two different worlds/cultures that unite and produce a third novel component) of the original cover also gives place to a victorious face with the trademark smile. The idea is to focus on the personal achievements of the individual mulatto rather than on the historical roots, the paternal figure and Africa. Based on Bhabha's (1983: 28) analysis on colonial discourse and the ideological construction of "otherness" and Mulvey's (2003: 59) reflections on *scopophilia* (i.e. pleasure in looking), Oliveira-Monte concentrates on the episode of Obama's mother watching the film *Black Orpheus*, which was exhaustively retold by the Brazilian media, as another example of how the Portuguese translation "conveys an idea more attuned with the celebrated Brazilian notion of *mesticagem* [i.e. miscegenation]" (p. 24). She illustrates that Obama's critical perception of a racial stereotyped portrayal of blacks as infantile and untroubled and his critique of the celebratory and racially harmonic image of Brazil are minimised and the power relations embedded in colonial visual discourses are being undermined.

The next section of the second chapter reviews Fernando Jorge's (2009) book with the bizarre title *Se não fosse o Brasil, jamais Barack Obama teria nascido* ("If it were not for Brazil, Barack Obama would have never been born") that suggests that the phenomenon of Obama is only possible thanks to Brazil, an all-embracing nation; even though he was born outside Brazil, Barack owes his existence to its history, art, music and literature, to the "Brazilian spirit," thus he is Brazilian *par excellence*. The author takes the opportunity to emphasise the stereotyped representations of blacks or "otherness" used in the book she comments on. This chapter ends up discussing the depiction of the close relationship and mutual admiration between Obama and the Brazilian President Lula, highlighting Brazil's economic and political rise in the world stage. Mainstream media repeatedly focused on the similarities between the two presidents, namely their humble origins (despite being outsiders due to their ethnic or social class backgrounds, they landed to the presidential office), inclusive perspective (bridging race and class gaps – their similar mottos are indicative) and charismatic personality, thus reaffirming both nation's democratic structures that can realise the American dream. The two cartoons presented here accentuate Brazil's position as an economic powerhouse and depict Lula displacing Obama as the key economic player.

The third chapter of this study, "Barack Obama is Brazilian," is dedicated to the reinvention of Obama in the Brazilian media according to their country's racial anxieties, desires and aspirations. Adopting Li's (2011: 23) notion of "race-specific, race-free language," the author shows how Obama's "rhetoric of hope," which emphasises and celebrates racial diversity while not speaking about racial tensions, converges with the Brazilian ideal of racial democracy. The author then refers briefly to how Brazilian artists reimagined Obama as Brazilian. Obama's characterisations in the Brazilian media, produced during his visit to Brazil in March 2011, are also put under scrutiny. The emphasis is on how mainstream media and political cartoons reappropriated the U.S. president as "one of us," a Brazilian, linking him to symbols of national identity – soccer, samba and miscegenation – and the country's famous landmarks to transform him into a "legitimate" Brazilian. In this section, Oliveira-Monte analyses banners, campaign's

mottos and their parodies, as well as cartoons, and focuses mostly on *futebol*, “the national sport and a crucial marker of Brazilian nationality” (p. 72). This “Brazilianisation” of Obama, she asserts, was intentionally seeking to demonstrate that, if Brazil could not elect a black president, Brazilians had to show how he was not really American, but in reality a “true” Brazilian – if not by his nationality, then by his “essence.” Analysing his speeches during his visit, the author argues that “by articulating his ‘Brazilianness’ Obama hopes to be accepted as an equal, consequently enjoying all the privileges that would pertain to this group” (p. 50). Inversely, this chapter also examines, albeit not in depth, how Obama emerges negatively in several political cartoons, as a “foe” and not a “friend,” being portrayed as an instrument of the oppressive US imperialism, as a symbol of intervention or domination, or as both. This confirms Tsakona’s (2013: 233) observation that the press employs humour to criticise political power; this critique identifies with or, at least reflects, widespread beliefs, values and ideological tendencies.

Chapter four, “Obama and Dilma in Love: Race and gender in the realm of political humour” delves into the discursive construction of an Obama seduced by the Brazilian charms of Dilma Rousseff, carefully describing how political cartoons and the social media/internet memes represent the relationship between the first black US President and the first female Brazilian president. The focus is on the 2013 US espionage scandal. Given that the Brazilian government and media condemned Obama’s administration systematic surveillance of Brazilian companies and Rousseff herself, in the first section we see how cartoonists portrayed Barack once more as a tool of imperialism and a tyrant who seeks to exploit the secret riches of the most important economy of Latin America. Yet, in many of the cartoons and memes, there is an interesting interplay of race and gender, as Obama appears infatuated by Dilma. Therefore, the US’ eavesdropping is not portrayed as a serious diplomatic incident between two nations, but as “a humorous gender-play in which Obama is sexually obsessed with Rousseff and pursues her romantically” (p. 89-90). This peculiar perspective on this political incident depicted Obama not as a villain interested in material exploitation, but “rather sympathetically as a devoted lover who has developed an infatuation with Rousseff” (p. 94). In the view of Sampson’s (2012) theory of viral contagion, the author argues that the series of memes about the “kiss episode” represent Brazil’s affective and emotional discursive, rhetorical, and visual references: the imagined biracial affair between a “Brazilianised” Obama and a feminised Dilma makes up part of the country’s collective imaginary and ratifies its national mythology. Hence, political humour rereads and once more celebrates miscegenation, a strong value in Brazilian national identity and an essential part of the collective unconscious, a notion that is described thoroughly by Oliveira-Monte in this point. Satirical memes and cartoons also recreate scenarios in which important political figures such as Angela Merkel or Vladimir Putin emerge to disrupt the harmonic romance.

In the cartoons examined, Rousseff’s body emerges as a focus of male gaze and desire; represented as fat and grotesque, it produces repulsion and desire simultaneously. It is assumed that this concept of the monstrous feminine is constructed by the patriarchal phallogocentric ideology (p. 96). Interestingly, the elements of seduction and fear produce the humorous gag: “the paradoxical pairing of the seductress female with the masculinised woman-in-charge” (p. 11). In other words, linguistic incongruity is here combined with visual incongruity: language and image permit the cartoonist to reconstruct faces and events and give them a humorous dimension through the coexistence and contrast of different cognitive scripts (Tsakona 2013: 238).

Furthermore, gender is a significant issue in the portrayal of politicians throughout the spectrum of political cartoons. As the author underlines, “in the male-dominated realm of politics, female politicians are frequently subjected to society’s stereotyping, their policies being secondary elements to their physical appearance” (p. 98). Press coverage consistently portrays women politicians through a series of clichés and focuses on their appearance rather than their

policies or ideas. While running for president, Rousseff had to be feminised to appeal to a larger number of voters; to be transformed “from a guerrilla fighter and career woman politician to a ‘nicer’ and more palatable candidate” (p. 99). Besides, the author also notes that in cartoons Dilma appears with symbols of female domestic life, which is a very common motif in the depictions of women stereotyped representations. As Templin (1999: 27-28) asserts, it is common for cartoonists to draw on imagery associated with a whole set of ideas about women’s roles (wife, mother, lover) that are perceived “natural” to them and probably to most of their readers. Similarly, it is accepted that the frequent repetition of sexist symbols in political cartoons does not seem to be accidental; it imposes and consolidates a certain way of perceiving certain situations and ultimately reinforces stereotypes (Tsakona 2013: 245).

In general, one of the most discussed questions in political humour research is whether or not political humour affects politics or public opinion, possibly inverting “dominant” perceptions and practice; on the one hand, it is argued that humour in general reflects ideas and positions that are already in circulation, hence it reproduces “dominant” positions rather than overturning them; on the other, it is suggested that it can create and put into circulation views and stereotypes at the expense of specific goals (Tsakona 2013: 180). To our understanding, political cartoons become powerful tools for reinforcing and not challenging the traditional hierarchy of the private and public spheres; or as Billig (2005: 212) notes, rebellious humour “can have conservative and disciplinary functions. Far from subverting the serious world of power, the humour can strengthen it.” Attacks related to Dilma’s gender and Obama’s race are only one example of this function of humour.

Chapter 5 “‘Our’ candidate Obama: Barack Obama in the Brazilian elections,” scrutinises the “obamisation” of Brazilian politics, that is, how Brazilian politicians tried to replicate Obama’s story of personal achievements and political success in pursuit of victory in local and national elections; Afro-Brazilian candidates, outside mainstream politics, tried to follow Obamas’ example of overcoming social, economic and racial barriers, even renaming themselves after the US leader. A specific young white centre-right politician even sought to emulate Obama’s image, reappropriating and reshaping his campaign’s visual and discursive cues. The author focuses on how Afro-Brazilian “wannabe” representatives placed race at the core of their campaigns and celebrated their “blackness,” thus promoting a “darkening” of Brazilian politics, whereas contrariwise Obama downplayed racial issues in his 2008 political campaign by articulating a race-neutral discourse. The chapter also addresses how Dilma and Aécio Neves tailored their presidential campaigns in 2014. The analysis of textual and visual elements of their and Obama’s campaigns (mottos, posters, videos, jingles, messages) shows that Dilma focused on her gender constructing herself as a “mother of the people” and as a “brave heart” woman, capitalising her past role as a fighter against the military regime; on the other hand, Aécio underlined his youth as an element of renovation in the political scene, evoking Obama’s iconic political slogans and visual signs of “hope,” “change,” and “progress.” Yet, Neves’ “campaign concept of change was centred on his persona, whereas Obama’s discursive devices emphasized change as a collective experience” (p. 136). In short, the author demonstrates how “ever-changing Obama transforms from cosmopolitan mulatto to black icon” (p. 118); thus, the author concludes that “Obama is a floating signifier which has been continuously altered, renewed and adapted in order to appeal to diverse audiences and to fit into different conjunctures” (p. 139).

Barack Obama’s presidency concluded on 2017 and it became more than clear that the celebrated post-racial America was a mere myth. Donald Trump, a billionaire who represents the very opposite of everything Obama stood for, became the 45th President of the US. “Could Trump’s victory be a backlash from certain segments of the lower white classes who felt threatened by minorities?” the author asks (p. 145). In her conclusion, Oliveira-Monte examines the shortcomings and virtues of Obama’s administration and reflects upon the impact of his

symbolism internationally. She argues that when white male privilege is challenged mainstream groups fight back in order to reassert their power within the social, political and economic arena (p. 145). Although Obama will always represent a “sense of possibility,” in the sense that “everything is possible, even in light of apparently insurmountable racism, sexism or classism” (p. 150), his social, political and racial legacy is under consideration. The author, however, claims that Obama – the sign – will remain a powerful representation for blacks around the world. In Brazil, she adds, his legacy as well as Lula’s and Rouseff’s ones unlocked a political imaginary that has been restricted to a white male bourgeoisie. Yet, in the country with the largest African descendant population in the world (p. 121), not only a “Tropical Obama” (p. 139) was neither nominated nor elected, but the extreme-right Jair Bolsonaro came to power; “openly and unapologetically anti-gay, anti-feminist and pro-torture” (p. 146), an admirer and of like mind to Trump with similar nationalist rhetoric of hate against the “other” (the identification between the two acting presidents resembles inversely the similarities between their predecessors discussed in the study), Bolsonaro underscores the emergence of extreme right and right-wing populism worldwide. Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s elections prove indeed that hope only momentarily trumped classism, racism and sexism in US and Brazil, to rephrase Oliveira-Monte’s witty title “Lula and Obama: How hope (momentarily) trumped classism and racism” (3rd section, chapter 2); “the American dream, which is a continental theme” (p. 150), is still to be realised in both societies.

Rather than providing an extensive analysis of the means of political humour or of the related theoretical framework, the author delves more into the racial perceptions and political, social and economic contexts of US and Brazil, constantly contrasting and comparing the racial systems in these two countries. The focus on ex-presidents’ backgrounds, CVs, campaigns and media coverage as well as on race issues is also reflected in the extended bibliography and the endnotes. Nevertheless, this approach equips the reader with the necessary background knowledge so as to “read” the content of cartoons or memes; the political and social context is essential for understanding and conveying the meanings of political humour (Tsakona 2013: 179, 234). The cartoons examined in the study affirm that cartoonists take for granted political and cultural references, thus meanings produced require informed on political issues readers (see also Tsakona 2013: 248). Last but not least, the detailed discussion of how humour (and other discursive and visual representations) constructs racial and/or political identities is one of the greatest merits of this study; it becomes more than clear that this construction is achieved by connecting Obama, Lula, and Dilma with the values and views shared by their societies, and this construction is scrutinised by an author who seems to have a deep understanding of both realities and cultures.

All in all, this book is a thought-provoking, rewarding and enjoyable read. Exploring this original issue through an impressive amount of material for analysis, the author offers an insight into Brazilian politics, society, economy and culture, from a contemporary and historical point of view, as well as into the relationship between the most powerful nation of the world and the largest economy in Latin America and the personalities of the three ex-presidents discussed above. The different paths and objects of analysis (newspapers, books, speeches, films, images, posters, cartoons, memes, slogans, personal interviews, etc.) never makes it boring. It can be easily understood by non-scholars while at the same it can be inspiring for researchers and students of different disciplines such as sociolinguistics, political sciences, identity studies, gender studies, race studies and, of course, communication and media studies.

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