

Reviews

Eli Elinoff, *Citizen Designs: City-Making and Democracy in Northeastern Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021, 310 pp. ISBN 9780824884598.

Many of the countries in Asia might not be good examples of democratisation, but could represent the failure of political reform. Thailand has similar characteristics to other countries that have continued to have repeated crises with military interventions, failures in government, and a fractured society. The northeast region, called Isan, will be highlighted by focusing on the area as a significant source of conflict and resistance.

To understand the conflicting citizen designs which reflect the contemporary struggles over citizenship, the limits of democratic inclusion, and the complex effects of mass urbanisation in Thailand, Eli Elinoff, a political and environmental anthropologist from Victoria University of Wellington, investigated the railway squatter communities of Khon Kaen city, one of the major municipalities in Northeast Thailand. His study found that citizenship struggles in Khon Kaen reflect 'Citizen Designs' through the improvement of the physical spaces for settlements and residents' personal lives. It also enhances aspirations for political equality and better quality of life, which are engaged by residents, activists, and participatory architects as well as motivated by the socio-political challenges around them.

Elinoff brings us to his fieldwork research through the book entitled "Citizen Designs: City-Making and Democracy in Northeastern Thailand". Interestingly, Elinoff interprets the main state railway running through the city of Khon Kaen not only as infrastructure, but in other dimensions. For instance, the railway as capital represents urban growth and economic development. In another way, the railway as a community gives us a better perception of the diversity of residents living along the tracks. They share common interests in terms of their political agendas, ideas, and empathies. The railway and its related issues annex them together.

Under the anthropological approach with enriching ethnographic and historical material, this book comprises ten chapters divided into three main sections, namely 'Prototypes', 'Assemblies' and 'Fragmentations'. Elinoff clarifies interrelated concepts between design and politics, particularly the context of despotic urbanism after the 2014 military coup. Then, he provides background concerning the turbulent periods of Thai politics, which meshed with electoral competitions, mass demonstrations, state violence, and the aftermath of military rule that led to disagreement concerning the term 'happiness', which the Junta has defined and enforced on people for harmony restoration.

Furthermore, long-standing historical issues such as inequality, exclusion, and socio-political subordination have become the roots of conflict and resistance between Isan and the Thai nation-state. These experiences and socio-economic changes expose ideas of the democracy of everyday life. They encourage people's political awareness and promote a sense of belonging into their community affected by state and non-state investments as well as the expropriation of land paralleling the rail line. Besides,

he gives us the background of political situations and conditions that illustrate how people learned from the crises and used their experiences to get through the struggles of political life as well as to strengthen their political claims and legitimacy over urban space, including authoritarian retrenchment.

Elinoff inspires us to draw an imaginary political map that comprises various actors in terms of residents, activism, and other political organisers, including hierarchal authorities and numerous activities in cooperation and competition such as in protests, local meetings, and contentious arguments. Under discussion on citizen designs, it refers to “the entangled visions of citizenship, politics, and the good life these actors imagined, debated, built, and struggled over in the spaces along the tracks. Citizen designs were expressed in actual designs of houses and communities as well as in protests, local meetings, contentious arguments, and highly personal, future-oriented visions of the good life.” (p.10). It also lets us understand the relationships among infrastructures, nations, and citizens in terms of how they shape and impact others. Why does urban design necessitate supporting citizens’ desire to promote democratic cities and citizens, including the redesign of democracy itself?

This book also provides fruitful guidance to answer why designing the city relates to the emergence and persistence of democratic citizens. Next, what means do the Thai state and communities use for enhancing their power over urban planning and design to locate rights and laws, including maintaining their existence? Lastly, how can the nation, the city, the house, and the body be a space to enact democracy for the citizen? Last but not least, Elinoff ends the book with the outcomes of political disagreement between democratic and undemocratic modes of governing and being. His contribution raises questions about how urbanisation spreads democracy and better local governance as well as how citizens’ voices matter for developing plans and democratic values under military-bureaucratic polity.

Due to the various on-going contestations and unreconciled conflicts, it seems problematic for the poor, who lack both the financial and political resources to act cooperatively and think politically. It would be a considerable concern for promoting democratic urban governance nowadays. Similarly, urban design and city management in Thailand may not wholly support citizens’ desires since they depend on the authorities who govern or dominate the city. For this, public participation and residents’ disagreement are frequently disguised by forming a consensus under bureaucratic lenses. He states that “design without politics is not democratic at all, but instead another mode of policing” (p.235).

In conclusion, the value of Elinoff’s work is that it opens up and enables a better understanding of the far more complex questions about citizenship and a city as a potential space of democracy. Although Khon Kaen City is a brilliant case for studying urbanisation and its challenges in transforming cities, including democratic transitions, it could not fully represent all cities confronted with different contexts. However, his analysis should be required reading to comprehend the current issues in Thai urbanised transformations and reconsider the socio-political changes within the city and across the country related to the sense of political life. Likewise, his arguments and methodology could be good models for future research.

*Reviewed by SUTHIKARN MEECHAN
Mahasarakham University, Thailand*

Himadri Lahiri, *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English*. Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021. xxiii+271 pp. ISBN: 978-81-953067-8-7.

The present book is a critical venture into the study of travelling cultures in and from Asia. In three broad sections—"From Home to the World: Pan-Asianism and Diaspora," "Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives" and "Settling Down in the Diaspora"—Himadri Lahiri examines the concept of Pan-Asianism and the diasporic literary narratives through the lens of Asian travel experiences. The book is unique in the sense that it brings together the study of fictional works produced by the diasporic Asian writers of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Afghan and Pakistani descent, which is hardly found in a single volume on Asian Studies published in the recent years. It also discusses the Pan-Asianist cultural discourses of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913). These thinkers were not diasporic but they had travelled extensively and their cultural associations led to the growth of Pan-Asianism in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the interwar period.

Lahiri views Pan-Asianism as a historical phenomenon and relates it to the history of the Asian diaspora in the twentieth century. Despite the differences among the different Asian communities, they are often portrayed as a group with common cultural traits. The book explores this perception from a Pan-Asianist perspective. First, Pan-Asianism is viewed as a cultural discourse that looks beyond the geo-political borders of nation and nationality. Secondly, in the diaspora, it serves as an index for distinguishing Asians from other ethno-cultural groups. The anthologies of Asian diasporic writings helped forging an 'Asian' identity in the face of white racism and served as a platform for consolidation. Lahiri calls Pan-Asianism "a transnational ideology" and "a geo-cultural theory" which analyse "the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other'" (ix). He explains the dialectics of the 'self' and the 'other' in the following definition of Pan-Asianism: "it is a discourse born out of a spirit of going out of the nation and coming back 'home' (often in metaphorical sense) with the urge to form a neighbourly relationship with the people of other nations in the continent of Asia" (ix).

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win Nobel Prize in literature, looked upon the concept of Asianism from cultural, philosophical and spiritual perspectives. He was against the Western ideology of aggressive nationalism and his travels abroad were "marked by an attempt to interweave nations of the world into a single web of belief in cultural interaction" (35). His concept of "Greater India" in his *Java Jatrir Patra (Letters from Java: Rabindranath Tagore's Tour of South-East Asia)* explains that he sought to discover the cultural similarities between the rites, rituals and mythological consciousness of India and the islands of Southeast Asia. With the passage of time and with the spread of anti-Imperialist nationalist movements, the concept of Pan-Asianism shifted from a cultural concept with spiritual corollary to a political concept exuding aesthetic and cultural activism.

This book is not about travelogues. It is about reading 'travel' as a trajectory for reaching out to the Asian voices in Asia and abroad: "The book is about travel, dwelling in travel, and sharing transnational solidarity with fellow travellers from the same continent—Asia. It is about going beyond national identity while on the route (in both literal and metaphorical sense)..." (vii). Lahiri explores travel as a trope of,

and facilitator for, an inter-cultural dialogue among the Asians in Asia and beyond. He examines the effect of “dwelling in travel” on the cultural identity and the social lives of the diasporic Asians. He also studies the impact of the political upheavals in the country of origin and the country of immigration, such as the Partition of India (Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* and Ranbir Sidhu’s “Border Songs”) and Japanese American Internment (Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* and Hisaye Yamamoto’s “The Legend of Miss Sasagarawa”). All these aspects contributed significantly to the development of a distinct literary culture. Lahiri traces the development of Asian American literature and the politics of its institutionalisation. He finds in this history the seeds of Asianist ideology and links it up with diasporic aesthetics.

Immigrant cultural displacement plays an important role in the development of diaspora aesthetics. Lahiri observes that “[t]he idea of the diasporic subject as a rootless being gives birth to the image of a traveller” (57). The idea of ‘embodying travel’ (Amitava Kumar) dominates diaspora aesthetics, which the Asian American writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Bapsi Sidhwa, Khaled Hosseini, Maxine Hong Kingston and Monica Sone represent in their works. They look forward and backward into the history of travel experiences of their respective communities. Their perspectives are shaped by either their own experiences of travel or the experiences of their ancestors. Their reception in the hostland and their existence in a multicultural matrix are embedded in the memory of travel.

In Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, an immigrant girl from rural Punjab in India not only enacts the myth of receding American frontier but also goes through a series of cultural rebirth (and death) by adapting to the changes she encounters. Her geographical displacement is juxtaposed with the changes in her first names—Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane—thereby representing her ‘travel’ as a site of shifting cultures. Lahiri observes that a diasporic individual’s experiences of dwelling in the interstices of cultures promote “cultural citizenship” the scope of which is broader than legal or political citizenship (170). The varied experiences infer on the diasporic subjects a pluralistic vision, which is characterised by the propensity to ‘cross borders’ physically, metaphorically and even generically in literary representations. This is evident in Maxine Hong Kingston’s “constant shifting of spatio-temporal focus in *The Woman Warrior* or *China Men*” (61) and in Amitava Kumar’s *Passport Photos* (2000), the latter representing the postcolonial immigrant condition. While Kingston is of Chinese descent, Kumar is an Indian American. Yet, Kumar “like Kingston, blurs the genre boundary of his work by mixing up personal narratives, critical observations, photographs, border signs, poems and so on” (62). Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003), a novel largely based in Afghanistan, conveys that a diasporic writer can challenge the stereotyped representation of his homeland in Western media by highlighting the cultural heritage of his people.

A remarkable feature of the present volume is its inclusion of the travel experiences of the lesser known Asian diasporic communities. The chapter on the diaspora of the Himalayan nations such as Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet which discusses the literary works of Kunzang Choden (of Bhutanese descent), Majushree Thapa (of Nepalese descent) and Jamyang Norbu (Tibetan) adds a different dimension to the scholarship on Asian diasporic literatures in English. The book reviews in the Appendices provide relevant information about some of the latest works produced by writers such as Tishani Doshi,

Lee Chiu San and others. This book is indeed a pioneering project in its endeavour to find out the connections between Pan-Asianism and the Asian diaspora. The book is recommended for postgraduate students, university teachers and scholars of Anglophone diasporic literatures. It is indispensable for research scholars interested in Asian American fiction.

*Reviewed by SHYAMASRI MAJI
Durgapur Women's College, West Bengal, India*

Jacqueline Leckie, *Invisible: New Zealand's History of Excluding Kiwi-Indians*, Massey University Press, 2021, 247 pp.

The Indian diasporic community which represents more than five percent of New Zealand's national population, has now got its own historian. Jaqueline Leckie in her first book *Indian Settlers: The Story of a New Zealand South Asian Community*, published in 2007, had charted the history of migration and settlement of this small settler community in New Zealand since the nineteenth century. It was a celebratory narrative, which recorded this southernmost Indian diaspora's courage, endurance, enterprise, their social and cultural life, and above all, their contributions to the national life in New Zealand. In this second book on the community, Leckie brings out their pain and sadness, their struggles and resilience. It is a story of incessant racial discrimination that these people have endured ever since they arrived in this country; and that sad saga continues even today. These discriminatory practices were or are not always violent or dramatic, but often institutional and subtle. But even this history of covert racism, Leckie argues, seriously disturbs New Zealand's self-image of being an inclusive and open society.

Leckie's *Invisible* is a bold challenge to mainstream New Zealand historians to acknowledge this unpleasant past. In the early post-war period, Australian historians acknowledged that there was a 'white Australia policy'. Leckie's book shows there was a "white New Zealand policy" as well, and she establishes that fact with evidence and documentation. She is not the first historian to point that out, but it is yet to be recognised in mainstream New Zealand historiography. This reluctance is either due to an attitude of denial, or because of an overwhelming focus on biculturalism. So, while the story of the Māori has been incorporated into the national history, the tales of historic discrimination against Asian minorities, like the Chinese and the Indians, have remained excluded, making them 'invisible' in the nation's past. This uncomfortable racist past, Leckie reminds us, needs to be acknowledged and addressed, rather than ignored.

The book starts with the little-known fact that the Indians arrived in Aotearoa in 1769, only a few months after James Cook. And so, their association with the land goes back to the earliest days of first contact between the Māori and the Europeans. Since then, many British East India Company ships touched the shores of Aotearoa, in search of timber and sealskin, and all these ships were manned by Indian *lascars* (sailors) and *sepoys* (soldiers). Some of them jumped ships and settled down in this land. Others in course of time came in search of fortunes, but their number remained small. In the nineteenth century Indian manual workers could be seen working all over New Zealand, contributing to its various development projects.

Their number remained small because from the late nineteenth century, like other white settlement colonies such as South Africa, Canada and Australia, New Zealand too endeavoured to raise immigration walls to stop Asiatic migration. But there was a problem. Unlike other Asians, the Indians were already British subjects, and Queen Victoria had promised them freedom to travel across the empire. So, London authorities blocked racist legislation from time to time. But the New Zealand government managed to bypass those objections, and in 1899 and again in 1920, subjected the Indians to immigration restrictions. These laws reflected a “White New Zealand policy”, Leckie argues, although it was successfully hidden from international attention. These restrictions on the movement of Indians continued in various forms in the post-war period, until a new law opened immigration to all in 1987.

These restrictive immigration laws, Leckie shows, were in response to an emerging political consensus in favour of keeping New Zealand society white. Such racist attitudes were reflected in various forms of discrimination that the Indians faced at both institutional and community levels. This was incited by various racist organisations that began to appear from the early twentieth century, leading to the establishment of the White New Zealand League in 1925. It scared people about a possible deluge of Asian migrants who would destroy the New Zealand way of life.

At this point the enterprising Indians also appeared to be economic competitors. The devastating impacts of an economic depression could easily be translated into rhetoric of race. This led to various forms of discrimination in the workplace, as Leckie shows. There was a concerted attempt to nudge them out of the retail trade in fruits and vegetables. Some trade unions thought that the Indians were taking away jobs from the Pakeha workers and unfairly depressing wages; so, their members refused to work with them. New Zealand Army systematically excluded Kiwi-Indians on various excuses during both world wars, even though the few Indians who were accepted were showing exceptional bravery. For a long time, the Indians and other Asians did not get an old age pension.

Apart from such institutional racism, Leckie discovers various other forms of “casual and informal racism”, such as name calling, imposing European names, denying rental housing, or not allowing access to certain seats in theatres. Compared to the Europeans, the Māori were more friendly and respectful towards the Indians. But this camaraderie was frowned upon and caused anxieties. Significantly, this book documents how such covert discrimination continues even today, although often in the form of passive aggression, betraying nonetheless the arrogance of white privilege. Sometimes it is also overt physical violence, such as the recent attacks on Indian dairy owners or the Christchurch mosque massacre of 15 March 2019.

Leckie’s book also shows that the Kiwi-Indians, despite their small numbers, resisted such discriminatory practices through collective action. In this sphere, most remarkable was the role of the New Zealand Indian Central Association (NZICA), formed in 1926. It organised protests, wrote petitions, lobbied the government, and in many cases successfully secured redressal of their grievances. It is important to note that both books by Leckie on the Kiwi-Indian diaspora were sponsored by the NZICA.

So, this present book is as much to appeal to the collective conscience of the nation as it is to inform the Kiwi-Indian community of their arduous past and their courageous resistance and resilience.

This book is therefore not just for academics, but for the general readers as well. So, Leckie has skilfully integrated her metanarrative of racial exclusion with several microhistories on the margin. These are short parallel narratives on ordinary individuals and communities, and their extraordinary adventures, and achievements. These are accompanied by facsimiles of actual documents, newspaper reports and cartoons, and above all, plenty of interesting photographs from different periods. Like her first book, this one too is going to be appreciated by both scholars and interested general readers. Whether or not it will lead to any revision of the hegemonic historical narrative of the New Zealand nation is another matter.

Reviewed by SEKHAR BANDYOPADHYAY
Victoria University of Wellington

