

Book Reviews

Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham. *Assembling Ethnicities in Neoliberal Times: Ethnographic Fictions and Sri Lanka's War*. Northwestern UP, 2019. Pp. ix, 236. US\$99.95 (cloth)/\$34.95 (paper).

Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war between the state government and paramilitary rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known more simply as "the Tigers" or the LTTE) has officially been over for eleven years, but public knowledge of the war outside of the South Asian region remains scant. Even scarcer is critical writing and theory on the country and its ethnic conflict, especially work that situates these subjects within the greater context of British colonialism and postcolonial imperialism. This is why *Assembling Ethnicities in Neoliberal Times: Ethnographic Fictions and Sri Lanka's War* is particularly important—it does the much-needed work of thinking critically not only about the war itself but also about how it has been perceived and recorded by the Global North. The project of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham's monograph is three-fold: to trace the history of the Sri Lankan civil war through the lens of global capitalism; to show how neoliberal policies established and maintained ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils of Sri Lanka through the creation of nationalist assemblages; and to argue that ethnographic fictions should be studied as important texts that bear witness to war. Although the book's employment of critical theory could be confusing to readers not already familiar with the source texts, the project on the whole is successful in its three-pronged endeavor.

Perera-Rajasingham draws on assemblage theory, first presented by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), to discuss nationalism and ethnicity not as stable or fixed but as fluid systems that are affected by state and global interventions. Particularly, she argues that both Sinhalese and Tamil identities are assemblages built by the neoliberal policies of the state for the purposes of creating ethnic tensions that initially rationalised the oppression of Tamils and later justified an increasingly violent war. Perera-Rajasingham dismantles the neocolonial elitism behind the social science concept of impartial witnesses, who are by definition outside of the traumas in question, and encourages the study of "ethnographic fictions"—stories and accounts produced by those within and affected by the Sri Lankan conflict instead of (often white) outsiders of the Global North. In the service of this pursuit, she studies plays, novels, and films made by Sri Lankans both within and outside of the country.

Chapter One explores Gam Udawa festivals—state-sanctioned rural celebrations—and the sites built for them as locus points of Sinhala nationalism created by the United People’s Party (UNP) government’s neoliberal policies. As neoliberal assemblages, “the festivals presented Sri Lanka as essentially a Sinhala Buddhist agrarian nation . . . and war as restoring a glorious Sinhala Buddhist past that had been denigrated by both Tamil invasion and British colonialism” (56). Gam Udawa festivals specifically took place on rural sites where the government funded the construction of houses for villagers, replicas of pre-colonial Sinhala monuments, and modern civic buildings. These sites, which served as performative assemblages of a vision of pre-colonial Sri Lanka as primarily Sinhala Buddhist, instead of the heterogenous Sinhala-Tamil mixture supported by historical evidence, further justified the Sri Lankan government’s treatment of Tamils as foreign invaders and later supported the government’s war efforts. The same UNP party that began the Gam Udawa festivals is also the party that began the war with the militarized LTTE. Perera-Rajasingham points out that money for these festival grounds was derived from international aid and loans designed to guide Sri Lanka to a neoliberal free-market economy. In this way, international neocolonial and capitalist money was complicit in, and perhaps made possible, the erasure of Tamil presences in Sri Lankan history and recast the government’s war as a nationalist project of reclamation.

Chapter Two examines the shadow economies engaged in and promoted by the LTTE and the representations of its fighters through Shobasakthi’s work, notably his novel *Gorilla* (2001) and his film *Dheepan* (2015). Shobasakthi is the pseudonym of Sri Lankan Tamil author Antonythasan Jesuthasan, a former LTTE soldier who has written extensively about his experience within and escaping from the Tigers and his struggles as an immigrant in France. Pitting Shobasakthi’s ethnographic fictions against formal colonial ethnographies, Perera-Rajasingham sets up the argument, which she expands on in Chapter Four, that embedded witnessing from local observers intimately tied to their communities is important for scholars and outsiders in understanding the lived realities of a war that is the result of former colonial policies and postcolonial neoliberal pressures.

Perera-Rajasingham argues that “neoliberalism [is] a highly adaptable technology” (84) that allowed the LTTE to function not only as a paramilitary force in northern Sri Lanka but also as a capitalist corporation intent on maximizing its profits. The shadows of warfare, in her view, produce shadow economies outside of formal state trade. In the case of Sri Lanka, “[w]hen neoliberal forms of power—economic and governmental—encountered Tamil militancy, Tamil nationalism, and indeed the authoritarian politics of the

Tamil Tigers, it [capitalism] emerged as a shadow practice” (85). Eventually, this shadow practice allowed the LTTE to “organize themselves so well that their profits from trade paralleled those of a multinational corporation” (90). As Perera-Rajasingham successfully argues, Shobasakthi’s writing is a way for us to understand how the Tamil Tigers created a shadow version of capitalism outside the bounds of formalized state structures, a process which ultimately undermines accepted definitions of neoliberalism as necessarily originating from state-sanctioned economies.

Chapter Three focuses on working-class women’s theatre in the government-controlled Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in Sri Lanka, which are tax-free zones set up to provide multi-national corporations the factories needed to produce goods for international sale. A large portion of the workforce within these zones consists of working-class Sinhalese women, whose creative practice through theatre “illuminates the gendered forms of exploitation that happen within these zones” and allows the actors to inhabit characters who “reject the dominant neoliberal and bourgeois ideologies about them” (102). Looking specifically at *Yakku* and *Avashyathava*, plays written and performed by the EPZ workers, Perera-Rajasingham observes how the “workers’ theater critiques neoliberalism and patriarchy . . . [and] explores how workers reconstitute themselves in the process as agents of change rather than as victims” (102). However, she also complicates and pushes back against the supposed radicalization of these workers by pointing out the discrimination that Tamil workers face within the EPZs and how the same theatre that explores women’s oppression erases the intersectional experiences of working-class Tamil women by excluding their stories. The plays focus on class and gender discrimination, which the Sinhalese women experience, ignoring the ethnic and religious discrimination against Tamil women who work in the EPZs. In other words, the plays and the players are able to critically examine their own oppression but not their privilege of being Sinhalese.

Chapter Four further explores the idea of embedded witnessing introduced in Chapter Two through an analysis of Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), the documentary film *The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (2011), and a Sri Lankan performance of the play *The Trojan Women* by Euripedes, translated to Sinhala and directed by Dharmasiri Bandaranayake. In ethnographic and scientific traditions, only a detached observer with no stake in the happenings of a particular space or conflict can be perceived as objective and thus is the only person who can be considered a “true witness.” However, as Perera-Rajasingham observes, this privileging of objectivity replicates colonial power structures by devaluing the observations of embedded witnesses who have the lived experience to not just observe but also contextualize,

critique, and question accepted truths constructed by institutions of power. Embedded witnessing revises our notions of truth “as emerging from within contested networks of power rather than from outside of them” (147). Perera-Rajasingham calls for a rethinking of the parameters of human rights narratives that have traditionally been accepted by non-profit and state-established organizations of the Global North. Whereas organizations like the United Nations have emphasized the impartiality (and thus outsider status) of witnesses, Perera-Rajasingham argues that the experiences of embedded witnesses are an equally viable and more intimate way of understanding human rights abuses.

Perera-Rajasingham’s work is a necessary recontextualization of the Sri Lankan civil war within structures of colonialism and global capitalism. While the text at times fails to fully explain its theoretical backing—for example, it lacks a robust discussion of assemblage theory—the book brilliantly analyzes various ethnographic fictions and state-produced narratives to show how the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, through neoliberal policies and internationally funded and oriented structures, created and maintained ethnic divisions between Sinhalese and Tamil people to justify war. Because this book brings together various interdisciplinary subjects like global economic policy, literature, and human rights studies, it could be useful to scholars studying such varying topics as South Asian politics, postcolonial capitalism, South Asian literature, and ethnographic methodology.

Sinduja Sathiyaseelan

Andrea Medovarski. *Settling Down and Settling Up: The Second Generation in Black Canadian and Black British Women’s Writing*. U of Toronto P, 2019. Pp. 208. CAD \$37.50.

Andrea Medovarski’s *Settling Down and Settling Up: The Second Generation in Black Canadian and Black British Women’s Writing* offers a compelling analysis of the depiction of second-generation citizens in Black Canadian and Black British women’s fiction. Through a series of nuanced readings of the work of Dionne Brand, Tessa McWatt, Zadie Smith, Esi Edugyan, and Andrea Levy, Medovarski traces the manner in which second-generation citizens “settle up’ with the nation, to *remake* citizenship on other, more ethical or more