

BOOK REVIEWS

Björkman, L. ed. 2021. *Bombay Brokers*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Bombay Brokers is an impressive and engaging volume that delves into the lives and practices of “people whose material and practical expertise animate the everyday workings in and of one of the world’s more dynamic cities, but whose labours are simultaneously (and paradoxically) subject to much moralizing and hand-wringing” (p.3). The book adopts the specific yet open-ended idea of brokers or brokerage to explore such mediating practices, what Björkman, in the Introduction, calls the “morally fraught but socially necessary work of transgression, translation, and transborder navigation” (p.16). The thirty-six individual chapters in this book are profiles or portraits of the titular brokers — Mumbaikars who work across dizzyingly varied industrial and economic sectors like electoral politics, social work, labour contracting, real estate, food and catering, waste recycling, urban transport, to name just a few — which makes this volume a unique work of urban ethnography. These chapters are innovatively structured across six parts, each of which contains about five to seven profiles, and includes an introduction that traces thematic and ethnographic convergences or comparisons between the profiles/portraits. These parts are respectively titled: Development, Property, Business, Difference, Publics, and Truth.

In her introduction, Björkman starts by focusing on four interrelated aspects of

brokerage: material-practical work, knowledge and resources, moralizing talk, and the historical and ethnographic specificity of these practices (pp.3–4). She then provides an in-depth historical and political account of mediation, especially its ambivalent and paradoxical nature, which exemplifies the book’s focus on the “necessary-yet-suspect character of such ‘local expertise’” (p.10). The rest of the introduction further explores the very nature of mediation, including a critique of methodological nationalism, and the “material dimensions” and “embodied character of expertise” (pp.14–15); contemporary discourses of corruption, where the “stability and coherence of things such as state, law, and identities of all kinds is invariably a temporally distal outcome of the very sorts of mediations that are held to be corrupting of those same formations and framings” (p.23); and the generation of value, including the “normative presumptions that animate these value-creating activities, as well as the moralizing critiques that are levelled against these activities and those who perform them” (p.29).

The profiles in Part I: Development showcase “the expertise of the people ... in materializing the city’s built environment — physically bringing the fabric of the city into being” (p.48). While most of the people profiled in this section broadly deal with various aspects of civic and infrastructural development, like real estate or labour contracting, the portraits themselves are rich explorations of themes like gender and kinship (Kamath, Chandra), artisanship (Baitsch), and networking (Björkman,

Searle). In Part II: Property, the profiled individuals “demonstrate the vast array of claims-making practices and legitimating idioms within which the institutionally and ideologically empowered language of ‘property right’ finds its rightful place as one among many” (p.109). The thematic convergences in these profiles include the arbitrariness of idioms like illegal/legal (Truelove, Banerji) and the intersections between neighbourhoods and caste- and sex-based notions of purity (Kundu, Vachani).

Part III: Business looks at individuals “whose labors not only facilitate market exchanges but also bring those markets into being”, where people are “fundamentally engaged in a variety of value-generating activities, operating at multiple territorial scales” (p.164). These include food (Bedi, Kuroda), reproduction (Deomampo), transnational value chains (Cheuk), local real estate (Björkman), and development aid (Rangwala). The evocative profiles in Part IV: Difference is devised to “unmoor us from settled understandings of how identifications and representations of difference and belonging operate within a city like Bombay” (p.234). These include forms of aesthetic labour and politics that both critique and reproduce hierarchies of gender and caste (Paik, Swaminathan), mediations between religious/linguistic/ethnic identities, secular cosmopolitanism, and urban survival (Strohl, Finkelstein), and forms of historical and linguistic labour that chart out Bombay’s unique identity (Simpson, Pemmaraju).

The stories in Part V: Publics “call attention to some of the changing ways in which practices and technologies of mediation, social imagination, and self-making are animating new forms and formations of social collectivity and their representation” (pp.297–298). The fields in which these brokers operate are both well-defined, like electoral politics (Chauchard, Bagchi) or the Hindi and Bhojpuri film industries (Shivkumar, Hardy), or diffused and affective, like building and sustaining social relations (Korgaonkar, Gandhi). Finally, Part VI: Truth explores the work of people who either “display ... mastery in duplication or disguise’ or engage in ‘investigation and truth telling” (p.355). These truth-making or truth-seeking practices, thus, include investigations or critiques of familial or social rumours (Basu, Udupa), affective, embodied but also precarious practices of deceit (Sen) or communication (Kusters), and practices of datafication in Mumbai’s knowledge economies (Shetty and Gupte, Bhide).

The individual portraits in this book provide a sense of ethnographic intimacy and immediacy, thus grounding readers in the lives and dynamics of its protagonists. At the same time, *Bombay Brokers* provides an expansive ethnographic scale from which one can survey the urban — in this case, we are able to see Mumbai/Bombay as the megapolitan behemoth it is. However, having read the book in a somewhat linear manner, the introductory parts felt too long and gave away too many rich details of the profiles that were to follow (in fairness, the Introduction does encourage a non-linear

reading of the book, which I think readers might find more fulfilling). The book also comes with a glossary that includes a list of linguistic terms, bureaucratic acronyms, and important political and historical figures that are peppered throughout the book, which might help readers navigate the city's urban colloquialisms.

I also read this book as a “native” Mumbaikar who has lived, worked and studied the city, and has therefore had a fair share dealing with (and studying) brokers — NGO workers who care for survivors of domestic violence, commuter associations who strategically liaise with politicians and Railway bureaucrats, and precarious labour contractors who perform the vital care of urban infrastructures. On account of this insider/outsider position — being a native ethnographer, as it were — I could both appreciate the book and identify some of its flaws, like the tired anthropological exoticizing gaze (e.g., Kamath's description of a peripheral region as a “Wild West frontier”, p.59), or novice researchers navigating fieldwork ethics (e.g., Taskar negotiating access with the e-waste recycler Muhammad, pp. 187–188; and Kuroda realising the productive capacity of monetary exchange with the dabbawalla Shankar, p.213).

These very minor weaknesses aside, *Bombay Brokers* presents deeply engaging ethnographic and thematic reflections that provide grounds to interrogate the future of popular politics and mediations in contemporary Mumbai. For instance, Björkman's introduction engages with the Gramscian notion of *interregnum* — the transitional state where sovereign power is

exercised without political legitimacy — though observing that “contemporary Bombay is neither in a state of imminent crisis nor overrun by monsters” (p.13). Yet, I think this conclusion may be troubled by recent contentious political transitions that have taken place in Mumbai and the state of Maharashtra. Inasmuch as *Bombay Brokers* provides a necessary engagement with the ambivalences and paradoxes of mediation, I am wondering if such ethnographic projects have any potential for cultural critique — which has been a vital part of the anthropological toolkit.

Needless to say, *Bombay Brokers* will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for students and scholars who have a deep interest in, and/or are based in, Mumbai. It is also a must-have for those working in and writing about other large metropolitan cities, particularly in South Asia and the Global South, who will surely find great merit in the volume's ethnographic and comparative analysis. Here, I see the volume overall, as well as the individual chapters, being important interventions in broader discussions around themes like labour, gender, class, caste, kinship, politics, and mobility, to just name a few. Finally, I believe that prospective readers would find the individual profiles/portraits to be fascinating exercises in ethnographic writing, including instances where the ethnographic gaze is also turned on the writers, thus interrogating their presence and relationship with Bombay — or the cities and spaces which we call both home and the field.

Proshant Chakraborty
University of Gothenburg
proshant.chakraborty@gu.se

Cruces [Villalobos], F. 2022. *Metropolitan Intimacies: An Ethnography on the Poetics of Daily Life*. New York: Lexington Books.

Lives are mostly experienced through, apparently uneventful, daily routines, small gestures seemingly irrelevant, filled with sameness, the prosaic features of “normality”, when nothing appears to be happening and yet there is much to be told about the dynamics of such experiences, ways of living, which are, after all, a significant part of a larger picture, encompassing memories, identities, aspirations, interactions and a myriad of aspects that are specific to each one of us, trespassing boundaries of time and space.

Intimacy is, usually, hidden from public view, inscrutable. The author clearly exposes his intention to explore “the poetics of micro storytelling in contemporary urban life [because] little stories matter.” (p. 2). They matter in themselves and in what they tell about the way they mingle with a certain form of being part of the wider world.

Rather than exploring the questionable classical dichotomy of the *public* and *private* spheres, the author, simultaneously producer and participant, (p.61) expands the concept of intimacy as whole embracing category, centred on the self, a complex, assertive, agent, through whom disparate composite meanings are blended, construed, and experienced. Boundaries are ill defined, as they always have been, and a constant flux permeates our living experience. Similarly, disciplinary boundaries are increasingly irrelevant, or altogether absurd.

Irrespective of the location this is “anthropology *in* the city” (Prato and Pardo

2013), evoking similarities in diverse social and cultural settings, because “in the metropolitan ecumene, strong similarities in the ways intimate habitats are made can be found across world cities” (p.68). The research is multilocal, despite, intentionally or not, all settings being in Castilian speaking countries (Madrid, Spain; Mexico City, Mexico; and Montevideo, Uruguay). It is fundamentally multidisciplinary and spans over a long period of seven years (from 2010 to 2017).

The book explores in detail multiple variables featuring the intimacy of twenty individuals and their stories “in order to make sense of the whole.” (p.3). The whole is both *in* and *out* of the private realm of each of the participants, launched from a set of seminal questions: “Would it be possible to understand today’s urban life without the rise of the intimate sphere? What are the intimate, the ordinary, and the domestic made of? What is the fate of the ongoing metropolisation of urban dwelling? Can we record intimate life without ruining it? How can intimacy be properly narrated?” (p.4).

Intimacy is not, necessarily, solitude or isolation, it gathers onto it the metropolis. Intimacy is, apparently, reserved but may be, at the same time, cosmopolitan. Focusing on individual experiences, as told by the actors themselves, the book sheds light not only on their inner selves but also in the appropriation each one makes of their realities in, direct or indirect, interactions with others, in a constant dialogue.

Houses, as living spaces, play a relevant role in the experiencing of our lives. They may be perceived as a retreat, our own castle, but whereas they may be depicted as

“closed”, delimited by bricks and mortar, they are, simultaneously, a reflection of the way we are, they mirror our ways of being and living.

The home is a construed entity, filled with meaning, and can be as peculiar as each one of us (Pardo 1996: 6). Is this a feature of the “western” urban way of living? Maybe the rise of individualism results in the inevitable constraints of neoliberal schemes of globalization becoming impinged upon the minutest details of our lives. There is, therefore, an inherent conflict, constantly calling for ingenious interventions to redress some form of desired equilibrium. In that sense, attempts to preserve one’s own intimacy may be viewed as a sort of retreat, a strategy of resistance and a way to preserve some sort of sanity. Truly it might be possible to live a life without intimacy, but such a life is not really worth living.

Each of the twenty characters that are present in this ethnography has a unique perspective, a personal narrative, a diverse way of experiencing their lives, the stories told, the gestures, the interactions with others, the displaying of the self. Their stories are filled with their own paths, their own meaningfulness. Some live in relatively conventional family units (with or without children), others have housemates, others live alone, and yet others have their own arrangements. For one of them, “Home is any place where I don’t have to ask permission to open the fridge.” (p.121).

A relevant object that has a place in someone’s living space is imbued with meaning. Objects were collected from different places or may have been gifted by

someone or carefully chosen to be bought, they move along with us and each has its own history and an intrinsic potential to produce emotional responses. Inherited objects may be cherished or rejected, according to the recollections they summon. The ability, or willingness, to share mementos with others conveys meanings — the proudly kept box of family photographs, the grandmother’s ring, the grandfather’s watch (that never worked) or, in contrast, the discarded possessions of a Francoist father are significant in the sphere of deep emotions.

Somehow, the home is a retreat from all the rest. Everyone strives to define a space made to the measure of one’s own expectations, creating order or, even, indulging in the disarray that living alone allows. Nothing is static, as life moves on, prospects are rearranged, to accommodate new realities. People move, the new house is different from the previous but nonetheless it will be featured to become a home. A chapter on IKEA (chapter four and several references throughout the book) highlights the “circularity between the public sphere and the private” (p.162), bringing to the debate the redefinition of taste through a transnational, massified concept of furnishing the living space.

The book is divided into 5 chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. It is accessible to anyone, interested in one or more of the many subjects explored in the book, and to students, including undergraduates, owing to an ethnography rich in details, a solid theoretical analysis and a set of sound methodological, mostly collaborative, strategies. An extended

literature review delves on a wide range of fields of knowledge. Disparate as they may seem, they are well intertwined, offering to the readers a comprehensive bibliography, certainly enriched by the author's ability to master at least four languages (Castilian, English, French and Portuguese).

A valuable complement to the book (or vice-versa) is a video produced in 2018 by Jorge Moreno Andrés and Francisco Cruces [Villalobos], available online, with English subtitles, titled *The order I live in. An indoor urban symphony*.

Margarida Fernandes
Nova University Lisbon
m.fernandes@fcs.unl.pt

Reference:

- Moreno A. J. and Cruces, F. 2018. *The order I live in. An indoor urban symphony* [online] Available at <https://canal.uned.es/video/5c07ac67b1111f5b718bb727> [Accessed 20/10/2023]
- Pardo, I. 1996. *Managing Existence in Naples: Morality, Action and Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prato, G. B. and Pardo, I. 2013. Urban Anthropology. *Urbanities*, 3 (2): 80–110.