

# H-Net Reviews

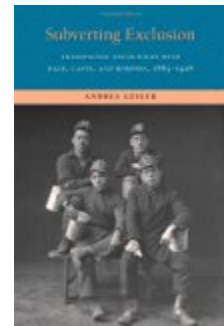
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrea Geiger. *Subverting Exclusion: Transpacific Encounters with Race, Caste, and Borders, 1885-1928*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. xiv + 286 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-16963-8.

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Through the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Tokugawa shogunate classified Japanese people into status groups called *mibun*: samurais, peasants, artisans, and merchants. Tokugawa laws accorded Japanese men and women distinct privileges and responsibilities, enforcing *mibun* hierarchies and restricting social mobility. In addition to the four *mibun*, other groups of outcastes had specific roles in Japan. The *eta* (also referred to as *kawata* or *buraku*) was an outcaste group forced to perform occupations associated with defilement and death, such as executing prisoners and shoemaking. The development of the *mibun* Japanese caste system and the social norms regulating the lives of *eta* in Japan have been the focus of scholars and artists. In separate studies, a growing body of academic research on the Japanese diaspora has added layers of complexity to the analysis of migrant communities in the American continent. In *Subverting Exclusion*, Andrea Geiger ties together several major themes of these two areas, offering a groundbreaking narrative and interpretation of the transnational history of exclusion and subversion characterizing the Japanese migration. Geiger's integration of the *eta* population, *buraku jūmin*, or outcastes, and the social structure surrounding the *eta* culture in Japan and white supremacy in the American continent demonstrates how "two culturally distinct ways of understanding difference overlapped and intersected in the North American West" (p. 4). Whereas previous studies emphasize the heterogeneous character of the Japanese immigrant communities in terms of economic class, religion, ideology, gender, and education, Geiger explains the works and divides of a transoceanic hierarchical caste system. She argues that *mibun* hierarchies, and the ex-

istence of *eta* groups, shaped the culture, identities, and politics of Japanese communities and, thus, their strategies to face racism in the American continent.

Geiger discloses the difficulties of carrying out quantitative analysis of Japanese migration in relation to *eta* or the outcaste system. Silence on the caste system that survived the official abolition of *mibun* privilege has prevailed, undermining the efforts of scholars to produce accurate reports on the demographics of *eta* individuals and communities. She establishes their number at 2.5 percent of the Japanese population during the Meiji period; nevertheless, Geiger proves that the quantification of *eta* or *buraku jūmin* population is not as relevant to our understanding of Japanese transnational communities as the impact of the *eta* culture on the social relations of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in the American continent. While other scholars have underscored the role of original culture in the lives of immigrant groups, Geiger asserts that the persistence of the *eta* stigma, and its reference to ideas of purity and pollution, sets apart the experience of Japanese culture and assimilation in the Americas.

Geiger visited national repositories in Canada and the United States to document official responses to Japanese immigration, anti-Asian activism, and the development of legal obstacles for entrance and assimilation of Japanese men and women. More interestingly, she located other primary sources that reflect the views of Japanese immigrants on events pertaining to their status in North America. Japanese-language newspapers, oral histories, poems, and essays provide glimpses of the everyday dynamics of *eta*-based culture

In chapter 1, Geiger studies the social stratification that gave origin to *eta* ideologies during the seventeenth century. The Tokugawa shogunate dictated fixed geographical and social places according to four major status categories: samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants. This classification, known as *mibun*, excluded occupations performed by *eta* individuals who, in spite of being indispensable for the economy of Japan, were regarded as pollutants. Members of the *eta* minority worked with coal, leather, blood, and straw, among other elements representing impurity in the Japanese society. Such variety in economic activities has driven some scholars to consider *eta* as mere unclassified people, an assessment Geiger rejects. Her argument is that, while various types of outcastes existed outside of the *mibun* classification, the *eta* status was permanent and inherited (p. 16). Phenotypical characteristics did not show differences between members of the *eta* and the elite *mibun* classes; however, sumptuary laws made the external appearance of outcastes a marker of low status and impurity, paralleling the obligation of Jews to follow a specific dress code in the absence of bodily distinctions from other white persons in some European societies.[1]

Nineteenth-century Meiji reforms officially terminated the *mibun* system as the new leaders sought to introduce notions of modernity resembling U.S. and European social systems. Geiger argues here that the Meiji state not only promoted the industrialization of the country to claim a place among the powerful nations of the world, but also rejected the *mibun* classification and privileges rooted in geographical places to show proof of its civilization. All Japanese, therefore, were to be treated according to “civilized” equalizing laws abided internationally. The official disappearance of the caste system endowed *eta* individuals with the right to migrate with their compatriots in search of opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Chapter 2 makes another important contribution to the analysis of migration patterns, complicating the idea that European immigrants had social or political reasons to migrate to the American continent, and that Asians were motivated exclusively by the possibility of economic gain. While outcastes could acquire certain wealth or more dignified occupations, they had to adhere to humiliating social norms with limitations that included the prohibition to marry non-*eta* individuals. Furthermore, *eta* men were more vulnerable to military draft and exposure to high risk positions during wars. The persistence of social hierarchies and restrictions under industrial and military expansion made migration attractive for individ-

uals associated with the *eta* class. The possibility of canceling hereditary stigma through migration was an incentive to leave Japan. Outcaste individuals were able to pay their ticket to Canada or the United States through savings or community networks, asserts Geiger, challenging scholars who view *eta* workers as incapable of gathering resources to travel to North America. Subverting exclusion in Japan, outcastes, thus, attempted to start a new life on a clean slate across oceans. The Japanese state, however, made efforts to curtail the mobility of “low-class” laborers to elevate the image of Japanese emigrants in the United States and Canada. In tandem with American racist ideas, the Japanese state denigration of *eta* people would eventually place all Japanese immigrants in a subservient position at their arrival in North America.

Chapter 3 emphasizes the role of Meiji leaders in creating a positive image of Japan in the world with the idea that the notion of civilization was inextricably linked to entitlement to international rights. Nationals of a modern country, such as Japan, argued Meiji officials, deserved respect when residing in other nations. The United States, however, did not fully acknowledge Japan as a world power as shown through the Gentlemen’s Agreement and the marginal status that the Japanese and their children held in America. If the 1882 act excluding the Chinese was an affront to China, leaving the Japanese government the task to control migration to the United States communicated, nevertheless, the idea that Japanese men and women were not welcome in North America either. Equating “modern” with “western,” and blaming the Japanese who had not adopted North American cultures, Meiji diplomats saw Japanese emigrants through the prism of *eta* ideology and justified the claims of European American racists. Consequently, Japanese consuls demanded the adherence of Japanese immigrants to Western demeanor and appearance and urged Americans to distinguish between the “low class” and the respectable Japanese men and women the consuls represented. Their plea did not help Japanese immigrants or their children. The Japanese government public disapproval of “certain” Japanese immigrants supported white supremacist claims that any and every Japanese ought to be evicted from the United States.

Geiger argues that while the Meiji state adapted its *eta* policies to American racism, Japanese immigrants negotiated their new status in the American continent also in reference to the *eta* social system. Japanese outcastes strove to obtain the acceptance of their compatriots, erasing their ties to ancestral *eta* communities by changing

surnames, keeping to themselves information on their hometowns, or altering the description of their occupations. Those stratagems to subvert exclusion proved limited before the demands of the U.S. and Japanese governments to control the immigrant population. According to Geiger, attempting to pacify American racists, the Japanese state created a new linguistic code stamped on the passports of immigrants to sort them out following officially extinct social hierarchies. In addition, Meiji officials made mandatory the registration of Japanese men and women in local consular offices. Such information was used to distinguish high-status and low-status immigrants. Consequently, government measures reestablished the strength of the caste structure in North American Japanese communities.

Chapter 4 explains the tensions between *eta* and *mibun* individuals as racism forced them to share social spaces in North America. The refined analysis of the subtle weaving of alliances that took place across social classes within a community deeply divided by a caste system is one of the many merits of Geiger's research. And so is the examination of the disciplinary actions that powerful Japanese men exercised against prostitutes and other outcasts removed from their original context. Geiger contends that the failure of Japanese immigrant leaders to distinguish between racism and caste-based prejudice promoted the false idea that critiques and marginalization of Japanese immigrants were the product, not the cause, of white exclusionism.

In chapter 5, Geiger examines Canadian and U.S. legal measures to restrict the entrance of Japanese immigrants. She states that the Meiji administration reacted to racist legal measures in North America involving health reasons to exclude Japanese immigrants with a stricter monitoring of applicants for passports. Japanese sojourners, on their part, used an international approach to defeat obstacles placed by the three national states across geopolitical boundaries. This triangular correlation of legal and undocumented entries framed by different legal systems makes possible the identification of clever communal strategies used by Japanese immigrants to enter the United States or Canada. It is this transnational approach and the various points of views through which we can understand the complexities of racist legal constrictions as well as the resourcefulness of Japanese immigrants that characterizes Geiger's outstanding research.

Chapter 6 extends the scope of Geiger's study southward into Mexico and other countries of Latin America, which, unlike the United States and Canada, per-

mitted the entrance of Japanese laborers and approved their contracts with agricultural and industrial corporations. The growing restrictions on entry to the United States compelled Japanese immigrants to seek a passport stating Mexico or other Latin American country as final destination. Against the idea that all Japanese laborers deceived Japanese and Mexican officials when their real intention was to travel to the United States, Geiger documents the efforts Japanese laborers made to comply with their labor contracts in Mexico in spite of their employers' broken promises of economic compensation, harsh working conditions, and maltreatment. The international right of transit, invoked by the Japanese state, gave some Japanese individuals permission to travel from Mexico to Canada through the United States. By staying in the United States instead of completing their trip to Canada, or crossing the Mexican/U.S. border without inspection, Japanese immigrants circumvented the conventions of the Gentleman's Agreement and the legal exclusion of Asian immigrants.

Chapter 7 discusses issues of citizenship in Canada and the United States, tracing the development of laws that effectively marginalized Japanese immigrants. Although both nations developed anti-Asian policies, they had distinct exclusionary systems. Canada, for instance, allowed naturalization but disfranchised all persons of Japanese descent, limiting their political participation and representation. The United States prohibited naturalization and ownership of land by Japanese immigrants, but allowed their children to vote and acquire property. Geiger addresses the role of the Japanese state in the discriminatory practices against the Japanese and their children. The differential and often humiliating treatment of Korean men and women residing in Japan did not help elaborate a sound argument based on universal practices of full citizenship rights for Japanese immigrants and their children. Geiger argues that Japanese officials continued to blame marginalized Japanese for their oppression following the *eta* logic. Japanese immigrants and their children performed the duties that Canadian and U.S. dominant societies demanded from their citizens through civic engagement and nationalist expressions of their allegiance to Canada or the United States. Interestingly, Japanese migrants who were associated with *eta* strata publicly joined some rites of cultural citizenship, such as parades and festivals, which were denied to outcasts in Japan.

In chapter 8, Geiger argues that "historical distinctions continued to order interpersonal relations in North America" in the second decade of the twentieth century

(p. 161). She states that although some Japanese immigrants called for a change in state of mind, abolishing prejudices against “impure” occupations to embrace the possibility of acquiring economic power through technical careers and interracial alliances, social taboos prevented marriages across caste lines well into the twentieth century. Since the United States demanded the registration of vital information in local registries, which tied geographical origin to caste, Japanese immigrants had to go through great lengths to hide their *eta* origin. Marriage in Japan and in the United States attained new meanings for Japanese immigrants when Immigration and Naturalization officials rejected traditional Japanese ceremonies and records. Contrary to the white supremacist and feminist claims that picture brides were immoral subjects, Japanese men viewed arranged marriages as the columns of an ordered society and compared Western matrimony with the relations held by *eta* individuals in Japan. Geiger asserts that picture brides and prostitutes were present in every other community in North America; however, Japanese women were particularly scrutinized both in their country of origin, and in that of their destination. Their final exclusion, argues Geiger, was an attempt to prevent the formation of families in the United States and rights for their children that could destroy the fabric of racism.

Central to the analysis of racial relations in chapter 8 and in the concluding section is the notion of homogeneity. Geiger contends that, on the one hand, the desire to appear as a united community in the face of American racism forced members of the Japanese dominant society to tolerate outcasts to a certain degree. On the other hand, the idea of Japan as a homogenous society obfuscated the role of *eta* culture in the formation of Japanese communities and ideologies in North America. Geiger discusses the empowerment of *eta* leaders and the wide rejection of the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed severe restrictions on Japanese immigration to the United States. While some Japanese officials argued that Japan was a racial democracy, and expected respect and full rights granted to Japanese immigrants and their children residing in other countries, *shinheimin* (new commoners) denounced such statements as a hypocritical expression of an oppressive government. Members of Suihesha, an organization formed in 1922 to combat the discrimination of outcasts, declared that only through the effective abolition of racist practices in North America would Japan acquire the moral authority to demand equality for Japanese immigrants and their children in the United States.

Geiger’s research on transpacific racial and caste relations enters academic conversations on immigration, identity, gender, class, and borderlands history. Her extensive use of seminal secondary sources by Western and Japanese scholars, as well as primary sources not visited before by Western scholars, is a great step in our understanding of transculturation processes affecting migrant communities and responses to the application of racial power. Geiger’s treatment of the Japanese presence in Mexico, however, is not as exhaustive as her analysis of Japanese immigrant communities in Canada and the United States, omitting a discussion of naturalization, enfranchisement, and miscegenation in northwestern Mexico. Such study of the formation of *mestizo* families as factors in the assimilation of the Japanese into Mexican cultures could answer questions on the disappearance or affirmation of *eta* cultural practices in hybrid microsocieties. The study of Asian Indian communities in the United States, Mexico, and Canada presents similar challenges and opens the inquiry to comparative studies on transnational caste systems.[2]

Geiger effectively manages the methodological challenge posed by an extremely reduced number of outcasts in Japan and abroad during the Meiji period. This methodological problem grows when Geiger examines Japanese migration to or through Mexico. The detailed description that Geiger provides of *eta* cultural practices in Canada and the United States is absent in the case of Mexico. The qualitative analysis of *eta* ideology in Japanese Mexican communities would expand our understanding of the Japanese experience in Mexico and the *casta* systems in migrant communities. Nevertheless, Geiger’s linguistic analysis of state-produced texts supports the assessment of *eta* culture as determining governmental and immigrant processes in Canada and the United States. Ultimately, Geiger demonstrates that notions of *mibun* created intra-ethnic divides and a distinctive definition of race among the Japanese throughout the modernization process of the Japanese society.

Geiger’s coherent arguments and novel narrative earned *Subverting Exclusion* the well-deserved Theodore Saloutos Memorial Book Award sponsored by the Immigration and Ethnic History Society.

#### Notes

[1]. See Eli Lederheller, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920: From Caste to Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[2]. Other scholars who have dealt with castes in

transnational communities are Sunil Bhatiam, *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Tony Balantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Vinay Lal, "Establishing Roots, Engendering Awareness: A Political History of Asian Indians in the United States," in *Live Like the Banyan Tree: Images of the Indian American Experience*, ed. Leela Prasad (Philadelphia: Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1999): 42-48; Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); and Nayan Sha, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

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