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## Reviews of Books

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### METHODS/THEORY

SUSAN A. CRANE. *Nothing Happened: A History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. Pp. 264. Cloth \$28.00.

The opening pages of Susan A. Crane's *Nothing Happened* make obligatory mention of *Seinfeld*, the 1990s television sitcom that was famously "about nothing." But Homer's *Odyssey* would make an even better text for the book that follows. Jerry and his TV pals are preoccupied with self-indulgent trivialities; Crane is after something far more profound. When cunning Odysseus tells the Cyclops that his name is Nobody, his Nobody naturally turns out to be a significant somebody, just no one whom the wounded Cyclops can easily blame when his neighbors want to know what happened. Successfully blaming Nobody is like knowing Nothing in Crane's history. If nothing happened, then something most assuredly occurred. But what was it? And how is the event that was (past tense) present in its telling? Crane pushes language toward its breaking point—confessing a love of puns, for one—as she explores the ways in which historical consciousness operates. She knows her object of inquiry—Nothing with a capital *N*—will take some mental adjustment on the part of readers (4). It will be worth the effort.

Crane organizes her book into three different "episodes." The first is an extended essay on "Studying How Nothing Happens." Riffing on the idea of capital *N* Nothing, Crane explores what it means to know about not knowing. Lovers of paradox, rejoice! How can we know about ignorance, know about forgetting, about omission, obfuscation, and other forms of knowing nothing? Closely related to this project is the question of how working historians can read gaps, understand blanks, and approach erasures. Ignorance of the antiscience, antivax stripe—familiar from current events—does not make an appearance here, but the Know-Nothing Party of the 1840s certainly does, along with Holocaust denial, of course, and some fascinating examples in which indigenous knowledges have variously flummoxed Western epistemology. It really requires concerted attention,

it turns out, to see something—Nothing, in this case—that has been hiding in plain sight.

Crane's second episode tacks closer to her earlier works on German cultural history and historical memory. Episodes two and three are organized around opposing truisms familiar from vernacular speech: "Nothing stays the same," and "Nothing changes." The second episode centers on cities, ruins, and their visual representation, mostly in twentieth-century Germany. Reading photographs by Eva Mahn and others, Crane offers a master class in visual history, in the ways that photographs themselves resemble ruins and the kinds of clear-eyed work they demand of historians. She dwells next on the popular tradition of picture postcards depicting World War I ruins and a few examples of "then and now" postcards from post-World War II German cities, before turning to the contemporary "urban explorer" community—in places like Detroit or Chernobyl, for example—and its documentary ethos. As she charts the visual pleasure that representations of ruin and decay seem to have variously afforded observers, Crane explores the ways that lives lived in the forever-fleeting present are lived in relation to the imagination of history.

A final episode, "Nothing Happened," is less visual than metahistorical—after Hayden White. Crane works with at least two funny examples. On the one hand, she addresses the idea that nothing happened in the so-called Dark Ages, a notion that has proved so oddly tenacious in schoolbooks for generations. She also returns to White's essay on the *Annals of St. Gall*; the *Annals* record nothing for a few of the years listed between 709 and 725 CE. On the other hand, she considers a kitsch souvenir available for purchase since at least the 1980s, a commemorative plaque that reads: "On this site in 1897 nothing happened." The point is not to garner laughs but rather to continue exploring the ways that historical consciousness operates, both in the forms that collective memories take and in the practices that historians share. To that end, two further kinds of nothing occurring take center stage in this episode: the nothing that has so often greeted the prognos-

tifications of millenarians (the world doesn't end) and the nothing that too often constitutes injustice (wrongs are not made right). This last nothing, to say the very least, begs us never to forget.

*Nothing Happened* is a penetrating work of reflection that is ultimately aimed at the ethics and aesthetics of history. As Crane reminds her readers, the past is past, but history "happens in the present" (19). We research, we write, we read. History is fundamentally selective: "Most of the past is Nothing until we notice it" (219). We notice something, and we'd better notice ourselves noticing too.

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NANDITA SHARMA. *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Cloth \$109.95, paper \$29.95.

Nandita Sharma's *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Migrants and Natives* is a provocative critique of nation-state sovereignty—the now ubiquitous global form for political community that became a truly global phenomenon in the breakup of empire states following World War II. What Nandita Sharma calls the "Postcolonial New World Order" is, in her uncompromising account, a "farce" (273). This is because the nation-state form of sovereignty is fundamentally unable to satisfy promises of true justice and equality for all. Decolonization in the form of the nation-state did not break from imperial violence and exploitation. Rather it continued and intensified the rapacious practices inaugurated by capitalist imperialism, producing unequal conditions between the wealthiest and the poorest around the world.

Sharma is a sociologist, and her book is chronologically ordered in a tight argument that draws on historical examples and evidence from a range of modern imperial and postcolonial locations in order to build up a critique of nationalism, although the majority of historical cases come from the British Empire. The approach is not based in archival research, and although the book claims at various junctures to represent or assess "life" in colonial and postcolonial contexts it does not examine the texture and lived tensions and contradictions of particular individuals and communities.

Sharma's work is a more abstracted account that seeks to explain the emergence and embedding of a binary distinction between two categories of "native" and "migrant." Building on arguments of Mahmood Mamdani and Peter Geschiere—who have both critically evaluated these colonial-era distinctions and their violent consequences for postcolonial societies, particularly in Africa—Sharma argues that the binary categorization forms a basic separation between peoples imposed by nation-state sovereignty.

Like these other scholars, Sharma finds the origins of the distinction between native and migrant in modern imperialism—namely, in the nineteenth-century British Empire. Following a useful introductory chapter that outlines the argument and key terms, chapters 2 and 3 argue that "native" and "migrant" categories are the product of twin processes: First, the development of indirect rule bifurcated "native" groups into what she calls "Indigenous Natives" and "Migrant Natives," pitting them against each other. Second, the regulation of the movement of "coolie" labor after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1835, which made the exploitation of such workers in the empire's plantations more palatable but also set the stage for the twentieth century's legalized immigration controls.

Subsequent chapters explain how controls on human mobility were globalized through the nation-state form, beginning in the aftermath of World War I and expanding with decolonization after World War II. In chapter 6, Sharma outlines the making of a postcolonial new world order in postwar international institutions and global trade and financial organizations and agreements. In Sharma's view, decolonization and the rise of neoliberalism are intertwined processes.

Provocatively, however, Sharma disputes the argument that the exploitation of the third world—a term that was first meant to evoke solidarity beyond superpower influence but soon became synonymous with underdevelopment—is best understood as "neocolonialism." The problem is that the theory of the pillaging of "national liberation states" misrepresents the postcolonial new world order. Neocolonialism proposes that implicit imperialism continued under so-called postcolonialism, a continuity in domination that deferred meaningful national freedom. In Sharma's argument, however, the problem is not the deferment of nationhood but its realization. Leaders of new nations exploited their own populations in the name of development. They further entrenched distinctions between native and migrant and "whitewashed the incredibly violent process of nation building undertaken in the name of national liberation" (157).

As she demonstrates in a series of tables and a litany of examples in chapter 7, with nation-statehood has come increased regulation of mobility and immigration control. This is as true of the postcolonial world in Asia and Africa as it is of the West. Building on and extending imperial-era discourses is the firmly established and privileged category of "National Natives" or "people of a place" who are separated from migrants or "people out of place" (203). The terms of inclusion or exclusion are still racialized and often become a site of nationalist violence.

The discursive power of the "National Native" rests on a politics of autochthony. If, in the imperial past, autochthony was the mark of subordination, in the