

Hannah Borenstein reviews Victoria Bernal's *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and Citizenship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson claims that the advent of print capitalism - the mass circulation of newspapers, novels, and other forms of media in a widely understood vernacular - conjured up imaginations of nations, belongings, and common discourses. In the ethnography *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace and Citizenship*, anthropologist Victoria Bernal urges us think of new ways to understand nationalism with more contemporary technologies that produce alternative discourses - namely, the internet. Bernal's ultimate task is to think through dynamics of cyberspace in order to take up Anderson's notion of the imagined community, and push for a more adequate conceptualization of the nation: in terms of a network. For Bernal, some of Anderson's ideas have come to fall short in understanding borders, distance, and space, following developments in digital innovation and transnational mobility.

In order to do this, Bernal works within three genealogies of thought: (1) the political climate of Eritrea following decades of war and violence (2) considerations on how notions of citizenship and sovereignty operate in a nation with an authoritarian regime that places a premium value on martyrdom, and (3) diaspora and the migration of people, ideas, and information, specifically as it pertains to Eritrea, a nation with a large percentage of its populace living in separate physical territories. Situating herself in friction with famous theories of sovereignty, Bernal coins a new term which foregrounds the whole book: "infopolitics." Through this framework, Bernal looks to "advance theories of sovereignty and understandings of the internet by foregrounding the management of information as a central aspect of politics" (2). While the internet is an information-based platform for state power, it can also be undercut, especially by the diaspora, by the very mechanisms it uses to diffuse its power.

The first chapter is where Bernal begins to lay out leading theories of sovereignty, and the place of Eritrean infopolitics in creating an ethos of "sacrificial citizenship." The one-party ruling regime led by President Isaias Afewerki "manages information, censors, authorizes, disseminates, and communicates" to the point that citizens self-censor, and thus become "embodied political subjects" (31). This notion of sacrificial citizenship extends to the diaspora, one-third of the population, who are vital members of Eritrean society. They occupy an odd space of "offshore" and "outsourced citizenry" because they are an important source of income (they pay taxes and remittances), but do not burden the state with providing resources.

In the second chapter, Bernal turns to a newfound mediation and resistance on the websites *Dehai*, *Asmarina* and *Awate* - her internet-based field sites. Interestingly, she chooses to foreground this chapter with the fact that many of the prominent actors on these websites from the United States are taxi drivers and parking-lot attendants showing how their "invisibility on the American scene presents a sharp contrast to their stature as internet intellectuals and media personalities" (57). Although traces of sacrificial citizenship and infopolitics inform and sculpt many of the interlocutors, they can still, in this virtual space, contest both forms of Eritrean suppression and the concealment they face as a result of American economic structures. However, Bernal is interested in the tension foregrounded by the book: while the internet creates new possibilities and agency, there is a need for a "greater caution on [those] who assume digital media are inherently liberating and democratizing" (103).

Bernal then turns to a particular instance on *Awate*, the site where the building of a virtual national memorial was constructed. In 2005 the diaspora virtually built the "Martyrs Album" deliberately

“seiz[ing] infopolitical power from the state” (120). While the online platform, also a national day in Eritrea, in many ways reinforces the ethos of sacrificial citizenship, it also pushes against this state-led narrative, specifically when the *Awate* team writes that the memorial is for those who “mostly [died] to protect their comrades” (125). The wording here, the adverb “mostly” is key, as the writers gesture that *not all* deaths are for the nation, deliberately pushing back against the martyrdom narrative.

The fifth and final chapter concerns gender. Posts written on *Awate*, Bernal concludes, buttress a gender divide in which “women’s statements are not accorded the same weight of authority as men’s statements” (157). Despite the fact that women in the diaspora are able to share their stories of abuse, which in some respects can be a form of civic discourse, other posters question the veracity of their testimonies, almost exclusively written from the diaspora, elucidating how infopolitics continue to insert themselves into diasporic life.

One avenue Bernal does not explore is the formation of national identities in the new physical spaces diasporas inhabit. Bernal’s object of study is Eritrean nation-formation, not that of the United States, so this is less a critique and more of an inquiry, but given the central role of the United States in the wars between Eritrea and Ethiopia, there seems to be several places in which an analysis of how American immigrant identity is also mediated by other diasporas could be inserted.

In all, Bernal does an impressive job of elucidating the ways in which the internet is a “cultural medium where social texts and cultural artifacts are produced and circulated.” As borders have become more porous, and people and goods have become more mobile and transnational, yet the power of the nation-state has, if anything, grown and gathered strength, Bernal is right to take up digital media as an imperative place for interrogation. While specific to an authoritarian regime, Bernal’s study can lead us to broader questions as to whether and to what extent we can escape being interpolated by agents of states.