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Nicole Constable. Born Out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor

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Nicole Constable. *Born Out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor*. 2014. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 259 pages, ISBN 978-0520282025 Paper (\$29.95)

In *Born Out of Place*, Nicole Constable sets out to write about “babies born of migrant worker mothers abroad” (p. xii) and the experiences of migrant mothers living and working in Hong Kong. The contradictions are numerous for these families: temporary migrant workers suddenly tied to a foreign country, domestic workers disciplined privately by their employers and again publicly for their sexuality, currents of opinion from their home societies and the families left behind which at once celebrate migrant women’s contributions yet chastise their babies born abroad. These paradoxical narratives make for a captivating read, as Constable pairs her analysis with rich ethnographic evidence that delves deeply into the intimate and difficult details of the lives of children “born out of place” to their migrant mothers. The book is a fascinating exploration into migrant motherhood from a vantage point that has yet to be studied and theorized—that is, the experience of migrant women who have children during their migratory experience.

Constable situates the experience of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong who have children while working and living abroad in the problems of contemporary neoliberal migration schemes. She opens her study with a critical analysis of the policies, institutions and cultural logics that have profited from feminized migrant labor, both in the Global North and the Global South. In her succinct and valuable preface, Constable delineates the three main arguments she aims to tackle in her book. The first is that migrant workers are rarely seen as anything but laboring bodies whose services are available for the consumption of their employers. They are shipped out from home countries and received by host ones who accept them as workers only. This restricted conception of migrant women workers makes the possibility of interpreting their lives in a holistic and humanized way impossible. Therefore when migrant women workers have babies or relationships, they are deemed failed workers or immoral women.

Gender is a central analytic in producing the tension between “good migrants” and “good mothers” as it shapes the stigmatized idea of single migrant motherhood. In chapters four and five, Constable writes in-depth profiles of the women and men, the parents of the babies born in Hong Kong, showing how gendered ideas about marriage and motherhood ultimately conflict with the reality of migrant parents’ lives. In chapters six and seven, Constable explores the legal advantages and disadvantages of migrant mothers whose babies are born in Hong Kong. She

discusses the lived experiences of these women and their children on a continuum she calls the “Migratory Status of Mothers,” whereby they experience more or less privileged or precarious statuses which shape their chances to work, stay, or claim legal status for their children. For migrant women who are legally married or have legal work status, Constable argues that patriarchal constraints of “good” motherhood and womanhood nevertheless circumscribe the lives of these relatively “privileged” women. On the other hand, migrant women who occupy precarious positions on the spectrum have few options, such as seeking asylum or filing torture claims and overstaying, that often put them in vulnerable positions legally. Yet the gendered policies cannot keep migrant women from staying in Hong Kong, as it is often the best decision for their babies in terms of generating income, combatting stigma, or staying together as a family. The ability to be a good migrant worker and a good mother is in opposition, thereby supporting Constable’s first argument that women workers are only seen as workers, no more, no less.

The book’s second intervention argues that the efficacy of temporary immigration policies that are supposed to monitor and regulate the provisional stays of migrant women workers in Hong Kong have an opposite effect. In fact, migrant mothers often overstay or use legal avenues to stay in Hong Kong precisely because they are pregnant or have children, thus clashing with the policies’ original intentions. A strong substantiation of her second argument is Constable’s framing of migrant women workers and their children’s lives as articulated through juridical modes. The contradiction in juridical terms here is quite interesting, as the law that is supposed to control and discipline the migrant population also provides migrants the opportunity to circumvent it. In chapter three, Constable describes the legal disciplinary measures, both in Hong Kong and migrant women’s home states of Indonesia and the Philippines, which make it impossible for migrant women to fulfill their duties as domestic workers when they give birth to their babies abroad. Hong Kong laws, such as the “two-week rule” that requires migrant domestic workers to depart fourteen days after termination or the process of filing a labor claim, disqualify women to work legally during times of unemployment, leaving them unable to support their new babies and families at home. Building on her first argument, she shows how the narrow conception of migrant women as strictly workers, and the failure to take into consideration their identities as mothers, merge with the juridical treatment of migrants via immigration policies and legal institutions that then push many women to overstay and work illegally.

The third major argument that Constable makes takes on a transnational examination of the stigma and pressures that migrant women face from family members in their homelands. In what she calls, the “migratory cycle of atonement,” Constable argues that serial migration becomes the only recourse for migrant women because of the shame and stress they face from their families upon return with their babies. Migration and remittances become the saving grace for many single migrant mothers. Constable introduces the concept of “cruel optimism” in the first chapter, borrowing from Lauren Berlant (2011), to discuss the potential and promise of child-rearing in the context of such steep inequality for migrant women. “Cruel optimism” is a helpful concept, as it encapsulates both the hopeful potential migrant women experience as they welcome their babies to the world, and also the difficult context under which migrant women workers make decisions that are often detrimental for them and their children. Chapter eight probes more into the paradox of gender and provides a convincing explanation of why migrant women often choose the solution of cyclical migration to atone for their babies born abroad.

Constable is successful in using these three arguments to demonstrate the chronic problems with temporary migration and the affixed issues of citizenship and belonging. With great care, she blends the theoretical contributions and lived details of migrant mothers and their

babies “born out of place,” arguing that gendered labor demands and the neoliberal response vis-à-vis temporary immigration policies promote a dehumanized and limited perspective on migrant workers, the value of their work, their lives, and the lives they bring into this world. Constable introduces these three arguments early, thereby allowing readers to quickly identify that neoliberal immigration policies are flawed. She then goes on, in the face of that critique, to offer an important portrait of migrant workers as whole people, humanized and multi-faceted, caring and fickle.

Another strength of the book is in the second chapter where Constable describes two trends in the research on migrant domestic workers as either a view from above—an analysis of macro, structural constraints on migration and labor—or a view from below—work on micro interactions and thick descriptions of how migrant women make meanings of their lives. She positions herself somewhere in the middle of these currents. As the book progresses, Constable writes a fair analysis of laws and policies as well as providing lengthy stories of the participants in her study, thus giving the reader a glimpse into how individuals negotiate and work within structures. In this chapter, Constable reports on her knotty positionality as a researcher that is not a “detached observer.” Through her participant observation and immersion in her participants’ lives, she describes the complicated ways her research process was intertwined in the even more complicated lives and needs of migrant mothers and their babies. It is refreshing to see a scholar take seriously how ethnography can be a way to understand the banal but also admit that it is challenging and problematic. The methodology piece of the book honestly reveals that the dynamics of research are often extractive, even if researchers are always trying to figure out how to “give back.” Overall, Constable is successful in fulfilling her stated objective to contribute to the literature through using a middle ground approach in analyzing the juridical modes that define the lives of migrant mothers and their babies. Moreover, she also admirably expresses the hope that her work can contribute to a social justice struggle to make these families’ lives visible.

Some issues that remain are the absence of the discussion of children that were born to their mothers before migration and the status of their transnational relationships to them. Additionally, there were many stories of violence in the ethnographic examples of migrant mothers, and giving context about the patriarchal logics of migrant masculinity in what R.W. Connell calls the “world gender order” could have been beneficial to situate how migrant femininity and masculinity are produced together. In the main, Constable’s book will be useful for those who are interested in exploring the literature on global sociology, immigration, gender, domestic workers, and ethnography.

References

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