

HEIDBRINK, L. 2014. *Migrant Youth, Transnational Families, and the State: Care and Contested Interests*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. 196 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4604-9

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Migrant Youth, Transnational Families, and the State engages expertly with both critical Migration Studies and Childhood Studies to examine the experiences and perspectives of 'unaccompanied minors' in the United States. In so doing, the book makes an important contribution to both disciplinary fields in relation to themes of agency, vulnerability, and transnational chains of care and responsibility. Critical of reductive depictions of unaccompanied minors as either passive victims or delinquent offenders, Heidbrink provides a much needed account of the complexities of children's participation in migratory processes. In writing with Childhood Studies, Heidbrink makes a compelling case for considering children as active decision makers, negotiating, challenging, sharing knowledge about, and even changing immigration policy. Through interrogating the imaginaries of Western childhood which inhabit much American immigration policy, she points to the ways that unaccompanied migrants are transformed from the 'at risk' child, where mobility is deemed pathological, to 'the risk' as alien Other (p.48). From Migration Studies, Heidbrink draws on the notion of transnational families, making the case that separated children are embedded in communities of care which often cross national borders. Undertaking perilous journeys for the sake of caring responsibilities, circulations within extended kin networks, and provision of remittances to non-migrant family members make short work of the notion that such children are 'untethered to family' (p.137) or that their mobility is independent at all.

Drawing on a three-year ethnography with separated children and their families, legal advocates and enforcement officers, government and non-government 'stakeholders', the book provides a unique view as it traces children's movement across multiple sites. These include immigration and family courts, 'secure' detention facilities and euphemistically titled 'shelters', foster care, and kinship networks within the United States, as well as children's circulations in Central America following 'repatriation'. This extensive and meticulous research illuminates a series of intractable contradictions surrounding children's engagements with the 'Kafkaesque' (Bhabha and Schmidt, 2006) American immigration and child welfare systems. State protection and legal status as an unaccompanied child migrant requires a child to deny or sever ties from her family, often those people who have made survival on the dangerous journey to the United States possible. Separated children cannot leave state 'shelters' without documentation. Yet the conditions of migration often preclude

such documentary evidence, and children are often excluded from accessing certification whilst in state custody. Children are trapped by arguments over jurisdictional responsibility between state and federal governments and various arms of the immigration regime, some of which employ more punitive approaches of detention, surveillance, and deportation and others which take up the role of 'paternal protector' (p.3). Many of the non-state actors who have the ability to contest both individual status determinations and the implications of policy more broadly receive funding from the state, constraining their ability to challenge discriminatory decisions and compromising independent oversight. Heidbrink demonstrates that unaccompanied minors are effectively trapped by their position at the nexus of so many paradoxes and conflicting practices.

Despite the book's focus on mobility, another theme which permeates the book's narrative is that of 'waiting'. Children have to wait in 'shelters' while assessments are conducted to determine: legal status, possible deportation or care plan, and suitability of sponsors for family reunification. As Heidbrink points out, unlike criminal sentences which have a fixed sentence, these prolonged periods of waiting have no set end point, but are contingent on the collection and evaluation of evidence by a variety of actors. This echoes Reinisch's (2015) description of migrants' position in the unofficial refugee camp in Calais, France, as 'forever temporary' in the absence of coherent immigration policy and without addressing the conflict, persecution, and global inequities which impel migration. In her account, Heidbrink highlights the simultaneity of both movement and extreme stasis in the lives of unaccompanied minors, offering an implicit warning against the reification of mobility as the primary, or only, framework for conceptualising the migratory experience.

Perhaps if there was something that was missing for me from this otherwise excellent book was the mismatch between reference in the title to 'contested interests' and the book's contents. Whilst contested *practices* were certainly brought to the fore, there was only limited reference to the contradictory *interests* behind many of these practices. In her brief historical review of child migration, Heidbrink does argue that public discourses and approaches to child migrants have shifted over time, 'align[ing] with strategic government interests in politically charged contexts' (p.5). For instance, she mentions State interests in the nuclear family as a site of socialisation for future citizens, demands for (cheap or free) labour, concerns with perceived threats to national security, and mediating social crises. However, this examination carried over less into the more contemporary context of her ethnography. Many questions were left unexplored about the potentially competing interests within and across varying state actors, different sectors of national and global capital, and smugglers/traffickers in the midst of, for example, a global economic recession; *why* these conflicts were resolved, however temporarily and incoherently, in the way that they were;

and the particular contexts these produced for migrant children's action. Overall, this limited the explanatory power of Heidbrink's analysis for, as she herself argues, understanding the conditions of children's lives is as much about understanding their agency as it is about those multiple factors which shape such interactions in the world.

Clarifying underlying factors which are productive of particular approaches to migration is not only conceptually edifying, but is also necessary for designing effective political strategies for transforming dehumanising immigration and child welfare policy and practice. Given the contribution Heidbrink has already made to Migration and Childhood Studies, as well as towards social justice for migrant children, I would certainly hope that her further work continues to explore these questions in more detail.

References

- BHABHA, J. & SCHMIDT, S. 2006. *Seeking Asylum Alone: Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Refugee Protection in the US.*, Cambridge, MA, President and Fellows of Harvard College.
- REINISCH, J. 2015. 'Forever Temporary': Migrants in Calais, Then and Now. *The Political Quarterly*, 86, 515-522.