

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

NANDITA SHARMA, *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, xv + 216 p. + index.

The post-war period induced large-scale immigration programs throughout liberal democratic states in an effort to placate the labor demands engendered by the economic boom. The recently intensified scrutiny into transnational migration – catalyzed by renewed interest in terrorism, human trafficking, and domestic protectionism – has, however, posited alien workers in increasingly ambiguous socio-legal positions. Indeed, the ongoing crackdown on undocumented laborers in the United States is indicative of political endeavors to regulate the composition of the national labor force and, tangentially related, to reify the citizenship binary which pivots on fixed reference points of exclusion and inclusion.

In her illuminating book, *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada*, Nandita Sharma engages with an anti-racist perspective – wherein she emphasizes the importance of a holistic analysis which considers the interplay between race, class, and gender – to provide a critical account of how migrant workers remain outside the ideological purview of those who substantively qualify as “Canadian.” Underlying Sharma’s inquiry is the assumption that the Canadian state, which historically espoused the ethos of colonialism and which today acquiesces to the neoliberal mandate, is the quintessential edifice whereby Canadian citizens – under the banner of “nation-ness” – can be demarcated from and regarded higher than non-citizens, namely those diverse individuals who constitute “the nation’s Other” (4). Hence, Sharma contends that through various trajectories of identification and difference the state ensures a hierarchy in which groups are contextualized vis-à-vis their state-defined category of belonging – categories that include citizens, (im)migrants, and refugees.

*Home Economics* is divided into five interdependent chapters, which collectively chronicle the necessity for reframing how we might understand migrant workers in Canada. The first chapter is theoretically situated, explaining how (national) identities pivot on the notion of “home” which fundamentally excludes Others. In the following chapter, Sharma explores how neoliberalism has induced a reorganization of work under the backdrop of global capitalism. She observes how this reorganization has increased competition within the labor market; a competition which serves to subjugate foreign workers. In chapter 3, perhaps the strongest section of

the book, Sharma identifies how various discourses which emerge from the liberal democratic regime – regarding citizens’ rights and responsibilities to the state and the question of civil society – revolve around the politics of exclusion. In the final two chapters, Sharma uses Canada’s Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program (NIEAP) to tease out how discriminatory public policy operates as a mechanism that allows Canada to benefit from foreigners who provide cheap labor yet without affording them standard citizenship rights.

The main objective of the book is clear: To illustrate the plight of migrant workers in Canada and to identify its origins through the etiology of social beliefs and public policy. In successfully making this point, Sharma does not delimit her examination to the body politic of migrant workers alone. She engages with a much broader discourse. Through a brief genealogical overview of how racialized subject identities are established alongside androcentric values, Sharma explains that, “one would not be recognized as a full-fledged member of Canadian civil society, or fully enjoy its entitlements, unless one was a free White male” (64). She tactfully traces the contemporary subjugation of migrant workers to the historical marginalization of those who constituted the non-White male.

Amongst Sharma’s most astute observations is that nationalism is not simply restricted to being “the artificial homeyness of belonging” (30). As such, it is prudent to conceptualize nationalism within a discursive framework through which its nuances can be ascertained. Sharma accordingly implores readers to consider nationalism as being part of an overarching political project that functions not only to distinguish Canadians from citizens of other states but also as a method through which internal fragmentation amongst people who possess different classifications of citizenship is congealed. Herein, Sharma posits what is now Said’s infamous elucidation of the Othering phenomenon in the domestic realm. She suggests that many migrant workers occupy subaltern statuses; their voice-consciousness becomes systematically silenced by the hegemonic forces of the status quo.

Interestingly, those who advocate social justice for migrants or otherwise repudiate segregationists’ claims habitually incorporate into their arguments the notion of hybridity – the idea that cultural homogeneity is a fallacy derived from the essentialist narratives of various bourgeois nationalist elites. For Sharma recourse to hybridity should not be made without caution. As she explains, hybridity “[relies] on tropes of purity for its very meaning” (160); thereby, negating omnipresent liminality. Herein Sharma presents a thought-provoking inquiry: In the conjecture that discursive negotiations manifest amongst and between cultures, so forwarded by influential postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and others, is there an undergirding assumption of cultural ontology? That is to say, does liminality presuppose the existence of uncontaminated cultures? Sharma’s definition of hybridity suggests a reframing of how culture has been understood hitherto, even in some progressive definitions.

The minor drawback, however incidental to the main purpose of the book, is the lack of explicit articulation regarding how best to address the needs of migrant workers. The author offers only a cursory analysis into how the Canadian state should accommodate this group. Sharma advises that “people must have the self-determinacy of *movement*” (165) regardless of citizenship. This is a reoccurring theme in the text, and while many readers may afford credence to it, it remains highly impractical in the current global order. Without anything short of a paradigm shift in which the rights and responsibilities of the nation-state are substantively reassessed, if not entirely eradicated, Western governments are surely not going to open their borders to migrant workers on altruistic, or otherwise, ethical grounds. Providing pragmatic ways to make the current conditions of migrants more ameliorable – even if perhaps only tentative – would add greater richness to this already solid work.

Notwithstanding the modest shortcomings apparent in the text, Nandita Sharma offers an insightful glance into the interweaving complexities between nationalism, capitalism, and migration on the one hand, and systems of social oppressions on the other. With the laudable talent to bring together a series of problematic subjects into a coherent analysis, Sharma forwards a penetrating critique of why the precarious contexts in which many migrant workers in Canada routinely find themselves is a concern for social scientists, the general populace, and the Canadian government. In suggesting yet another pejorative corollary of neoliberal capitalism, *Home Economics* would be a welcome addition to the library shelves not only of students specializing in transnational migration and diaspora studies, but also Marxist and other critical class analysts.

Ajneesh Prasad, *Queen's University*

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