The immigrant other: Lived experiences in a transnational world

Rich Furman, Greg Lamphear, & Douglas Epps (Eds.), 2016
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The Immigrant Other is a powerful and heart-rending presentation of the lived experiences of immigrants who struggle to survive in their transnational space, sometimes pejoratively termed and treated as aliens, and yet are criminalised, detained, incarcerated and deported, often resulting in agonising separation from those most dear to them including their spouse and children. The editors, Rich Furman, Professor of Social Work at the University of Washington, Douglas Epps, a former detention officer and current practising social worker in the USA, and Greg Lamphear have determinedly given a strong presence of authors who are social workers and community activists, and “chapters that reflect experiences that occur within community-based contexts,” with the aim of focussing on “lived experiences of undocumented people in transnational spaces” (p. 2).

Migration and asylum-seeking occur perennially for various reasons including conflict and violence that leave no room for people’s continued existence in their country and no choice except to escape to another as refugees. Hope of economic progress and providing financial assistance to dependent family members are also compelling reasons for daring ventures to more affluent countries. And yet, political rhetoric of leaders and rulers reverberate globally with disdainful portrayal of migrants as the Other and as enemies whose entry has to be thwarted in the first instance and deported if found living as “undocumented,” “fugitive,” “criminal” aliens within a country’s geographic boundaries. It does not matter whether they lived there peacefully and within the law for more than a decade or two, their inability to provide documentary evidence of lawful stay when they are caught is reason enough for detention and deportation—to the dismay of their children, spouse and dependants who often become mute spectators of the wanton drama unfolding before them that engenders separation, distress, helplessness, powerlessness, and loss of dignity. The authors have, in an uncompromising style, captured these sentiments and given voice to the people who live a life of invisibility in a hostile land. The narratives reveal individual struggle and collective resistance, which challenge the powers that criminalise them.

The book’s introductory chapter outlines a justification for the title, intentions of the authors, summary of chapters and the history of how this book came about—from a compelling realisation of a need to devote a book to capture the lived experiences of immigrants. The first editor, Professor Rich Furman, co-edited a book entitled The Criminalization of Immigration: Contexts and Consequences (Ackerman & Furman, 2014) that examined legalistic and policy frameworks that criminalised immigration and highlighted the void that existed in relation to the “lived experience of the impact of these laws, systems, and structures” (p. 2). Douglas Epps, a former detention officer himself, wrote an auto-ethnography that described his experience in that job providing a powerful narrative of “structural violence.” The experience of these two editors paved the way for the book. The publication was conceived with the aim of
privileging the voices of immigrants, and
the authors have, to their credit, done this
job convincingly. The extremely memorable
narratives in the book paint moving pictures
of undocumented immigrants in the USA,
Mexico, Spain, Australia, Canada, Greece,
and Qatar and provide comparisons across
the globe of the treatment meted out to
immigrants by the guardians of national and
state immigration laws and regulations.

A criticism of the book could be its
overemphasis on narratives from America
as nearly the entire first half of the book
gives narratives of immigrants in America
such as the Muslims facing discrimination,
struggles of Latino day labourers, agonising
stories of Brazilian parents horrified at facing
separation from their children, and Filipino
immigrants living in fear of deportation.
However, the country being the “land of
opportunity” attracts the highest number
of immigrants even today and the editors’
efforts, therefore, can be justified.

Although a happenstance, it seems apt
that the publishing of the book coincides
with the presidential election campaigns
in the US where a calculated propaganda
of a leading party is the war on terror that
sentimentalises insecurities related to the
presence of immigrants in the country.
Constructing boundary walls to prevent
immigration and immediate deportation of
undocumented immigrants was repeated
propaganda aimed at vote bank politics.
Power elites have shrewdly supported the
propaganda machinery. For instance, the
work of Ken Rogoff, a Harvard economist,
entitled The Curse of Cash proposes total
elimination of paper currency to defeat social
ravages such as illegal immigration problems
in the US. His argument is that the flow of
illegal immigration will shrink drastically
because the absence of paper currency will
abate the lure of jobs as American employers
will not be able to pay illegal workers in
cash. Rogoff’s work is certainly an elitist
manifesto designed to privilege them while
dehumanising and disenfranchising “the
Other”.

As the editors aptly claim, this book will
be of interest to students, practitioners and
scholars from varied disciplines and, most
significantly, to those “who provide services
to undocumented people and also those who
 teach those who will engage in this work”
(p. 3). Grassroots level activists and
practitioners engaging in this work will
find the book particularly useful because
of its focus on community narratives, but
the insights can equally be illuminating
for policy makers and leaders.

The Immigrant Other is a “must read” for
all those interested in making constructive
changes to the lives of immigrants who
live with constant fear of deportation in
transnational spaces that have dehumanising
systems to criminalise them and thwart their
survival.

References
Ackerman, A., & Furman, R. (2014). The criminalization
of immigration: Contexts and consequences. Durham,
NC: Carolina Academic.

Reviewed by Shajimon Peter University of Auckland