



review of:
Les Back and Shamser Sinha
Migrant City
Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, £105 hbk, (ISBN:
9780415715416), 194pp.

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Manuscripts

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3 Les Back and Shamser Sinha with Charlynnne Bryan, Vlad Baraku and Mardoche Yemba.

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5 *Migrant City*

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7 Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, £105 hbk, (ISBN: 9780415715416), 194pp.

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9 Reviewed by Georgie Wemyss, *University of East London*.

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11 This book is an important contribution towards the reconfiguration of the writing of ethnography through a
12 continuous and productive dialogue between (in this case) professional sociologists and the participants
13 in the study (in this case young adult migrants from a variety of backgrounds). The ongoing conversation -
14 from the identification of participants to the collection of data, presentations and writing - gave space to
15 insights that would otherwise have remained in the professional researchers' blindfield'. This mutual
16 correspondence in research aimed for participants to be credited as the owners of their own stories. This,
17 together with the voicing of their specific analyses by the young people, makes it impossible to ignore the
18 dynamic relationships between colonial racism and contemporary contexts of geopolitics and 'race' that
19 impact on their everyday lives. Throughout the book the detail and freshness of their narratives and
20 analyses demonstrate how the everyday lives of migrants have created and continue to recreate London,
21 the *Migrant City*.

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24 *Migrant City* was sent to the printers before what became globally infamous as the 'Windrush scandal' hit
25 the headlines. The catastrophes faced by members of the Windrush generation threatened by the hostile
26 environment policies of British governments exemplify the authors' argument that colonial histories and
27 dynamics of colonial racism continue to be relevant in the present day contexts of newer technologies
28 that construct and maintain divisions and hierarchies. The book's detailing of individual everyday
29 experiences allows for the untangling of the complex changes in British immigration legislation and shifts
30 in hierarchies of citizenship and belonging that has led to the deportation and destitution of racialized
31 individuals. The narratives of the co-writers expose the racism that caused the scandal and ensured that
32 it was obscured from public discourse for decades. Analyses of the micropolitics of everyday life of people
33 who migrated to the UK as subjects when their homes were colonies or as refugees from other parts of
34 the globe, link the present with the past, the global with the local, conveying experiences of normality
35 threatened by the extensions of border controls into everyday life. The data acquired through
36 ethnographic listening, co-analyses and co-writing contribute to an unavoidable critique of academic and
37 popular writing on diversity and Britishness which do not consider the legacies of empire and their
38 relationships with contemporary racisms. As the authors assert, the experiences of migrants explain the
39 global co-ordinates and historical composition of the city which are occluded in the political or academic
40 language of 'diversity' (149).

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43 The chapter themes emerged from the dialogues between participants and professional researchers that
44 took place during a timespan that encompassed the financial crash in 2008, the so called 'Migration
45 Crisis' of 2015 and the Brexit vote of 2016. Threaded throughout the chapters, and explained through the
46 experiences of individuals, is what the authors refer to as the 'paradox of divided connectedness'
47 whereby opportunities of online connections and exceptional mobility for some exist in the context of
48 confinement for others whose freedom of movement is curtailed through immigration policies. Chapter 1
49 situates the modern mobilities of people and borders in the context of postcolonial history, military
50 conflicts, the war on terror, EU (dis)integration and the increasing insourcing and outsourcing of border
51 controls to a wide range of people and private companies. Chapter 2 demonstrates how debates about
52 immigration in the UK are dominated by 'presentism' and 'parochialism' which obscure London's colonial
53 past and present global geopolitical interests that contribute towards poverty and conflict that have driven
54 migration to the UK. The narratives of participants offer the possibilities of multiple alternative histories of
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3 the city and its global connections. Chapter 3 foregrounds the shifting hierarchies of belonging, created by
4 contemporary racisms that work to remind migrants and racialized minorities that they are always
5 outsiders even when they work as border guards. Chapter 4 focuses on the time traps created by the
6 immigration system, examining migrants relationships to time as they are subject to the power of
7 institutions that keep their lives 'on hold'.. Chapter 5 considers how contemporary local lives are
8 connected nationally and operate globally and chapter 6 makes a serious endeavour to theorise
9 multicultural conviviality, offering a list of tools that can be employed in working towards its realisation.
10 Chapter 7 reflects on how 'careful listening' can challenge the 'national selfishness' of both the political
11 right and left that characterises the current anti-migrant times. In the Afterword, the authors reflect on their
12 sociable approach to writing ethnography. The combined authorship slowed down what they so aptly
13 label the 'research race' and in so doing they are successful in their challenge to the 'fast judgements and
14 superficial facts that proliferate in the immigration debate' (p.184).
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