

RACHEL H. BROWN, *Unsettled Labors: Migrant Care Work in Palestine/Israel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).
Pp. 316. \$28.95 paper. ISBN: 9781478030591.

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Rachel H. Brown's *Unsettled Labors* offers a nuanced examination of migrant care work in Palestine/Israel through the dual lens of settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. The book's use of Marxist analysis to unpack the exploitation of caregiving workers in Israel is sophisticated. Changes in the Israeli mode of production and subsequent changes in the social relations of production, their impacts and alienation on indigenous Palestinian labor, other discriminated groups within the Israeli society, and migrant (caregiving) laborers are all analyzed within the uniqueness of the Israeli colonial context (6). In the author's own words, the paradox of "unsettled labors" in post-neoliberal Israel emerges from "the liminal positioning of migrant caregivers as workers whose 'labor[s] of care' disrupt the constitution of the Jewish Israeli home and nation as the exclusive realm of Jews, even as their labors ensure its reproduction" (4).

Israel's neoliberal reforms since the mid-1990s facilitated a strategic shift in labor demographics, enabling the state to systematically reduce its dependence on Palestinian workers (18). The unwanted indigenous working force was mostly replaced by migrant labor who are equally cheap while having no claim to the land. The caregiving industry and the caretaking of the elderly in Israel feed and function upon the ideology of the Jewish exclusive claim to the land (e.g., Israel as a safe haven for the survivors of the Holocaust). Moreover, the state leverages its caregiving sector to project an image of modernization and progress.

Brown demonstrates that the indigenous population was systematically excluded from caregiving roles both before and after the

1990s. More significantly, Israel's neoliberal reforms enabled the state to effectively marginalize Palestinian labor from the West Bank and Gaza, rendering this workforce a “redundant surplus.” Brown's incisive analysis illuminates the complex social and racial hierarchies that structure Israeli society and its labor force. Her examination of these stratified power relations offers valuable insights into how ethnic, religious, and national identities intersect with labor politics in settler-colonial contexts. Particularly noteworthy is her ability to trace how these hierarchies shape not only workplace dynamics but also broader patterns of social exclusion and economic marginalization. As in other settler colonial societies, on top of the Israeli social hierarchy rest politicians and a white elite. These are European Jews known as the Ashkenazi. The second layer and lower classes (as compared to the white Europeans) are mostly Middle Eastern Jews known as the Mizrahi. The third layer of the Israeli society and its racial hierarchy encompasses the “Arab Israelis”. Through meticulous ethnographic analysis, Brown reveals how migrant caregivers—predominantly Filipino women selected through gendered and racialized criteria—occupy a paradoxical position in Israeli society: while essential to its social reproduction, they are relegated to its lowest hierarchical stratum and systematically excluded from meaningful social inclusion. This precarious status, Brown argues, exemplifies how settler-colonial states strategically deploy temporary labor regimes to maintain both demographic control and social hierarchies (29).

The first chapter of the book examines the peculiarity of the “contemporary colonial accumulation” in Israel and the way in which it impacts and exploits migrant gendered laborers (44). However, the book's novel contribution is its focus on the reshaping of Israeli colonial accumulation through the neoliberal epoch. Brown demonstrates how the restructuring of the labor market served a dual purpose: the systematic replacement of Palestinian workers with foreign laborers and the effective erasing of Palestinian presence from public spaces (32). In this regard, companies involved in providing foreign laborers to the Israeli market advertise their business as a one that provides security to Israeli society by replacing the Palestinians with foreign laborers (32). This chapter provides a compelling analysis of how private sector recruitment practices reproduce and reinforce racial and gender hierarchies within Israel's caregiving market. Brown documents the wage stratification among migrant caregivers, revealing how intersecting systems of discrimination manifest in concrete economic terms: Indian male caregivers command the highest salaries, while Filipino female workers face systematic wage depression (43).

This wage hierarchy, Brown demonstrates, reflects broader patterns of racialized and gendered labor valorization in the global care economy.

In chapter 2, Brown offers a theoretically sophisticated analysis of alienation within Israel's migrant caregiving sector. She illustrates how caregivers experience multiple forms of estrangement—from their labor, social connections, and sense of self—while navigating Israel's stratified social hierarchy. Her analysis enriches classical Marxist understandings of worker alienation by examining these dynamics in the specific context of migrant care work. In multiple sections, the book provides lengthy details on the Israeli discriminatory laws and policies toward migrant labourers. These can vary from preventing a migrant worker from coming to Israel with an immediate family member, prohibiting migrants from getting married or even becoming pregnant, and other policies that can end with the deportation of a migrant worker (45). Even in cases when Israeli laws provide rights such as having one's own room for "round-the-clock" workers, such rights can be easily ignored by Israeli employers or become practically unpracticable for a variety of reasons (76).

The spatial alienation of migrant caregivers, manifested in their living conditions, represents only one dimension of their marginalization in Israel. Brown documents an array of structural inequities: indefinite working hours, lack of occupational injury protection, chronic sleep deprivation, and gendered job displacement due to automation's emphasis on physical labor (76–82). Through these detailed accounts, she demonstrates how precarity is systematically embedded in the caregiving sector's labor regime. Moreover, the caregivers are often treated as aliens, surveilled, accused of theft, and demonized as Others (63–64).

Chapter 3 analyzes the contribution of migrant caregivers to the post-neoliberal narrative regarding the "settler home" in Israel. This narrative, promoted by both the private sector and the state, is shaped around "portray[ing] aging-in-place as key to the cohesion of the Jewish Israeli home in an economically liberalized Israel" (102). Additionally, the caregiving industry and its foreign workers are portrayed as key to taking care of the next Israeli generation and allowing Jewish Israeli women to work outside the home.

Chapter 4 discusses and analyzes migrant caregivers' resistance and coping strategies with their harsh conditions. These tactics vary from creating a counter-narrative to the hegemonic Israeli perspective that treats the workers as subalterns, to public protest and the demand of better working conditions (140–44).

As part of reflecting on the labor resistance in its “transnational context,” chapter 5 offers a good comparative study on the condition of migrant workers. Regionally, Israel is a late comer in hosting migrant workers; the first Filipino group to arrive was in 1987. By comparison, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states began hosting similar migrants in 1973, and other Arab states such as Lebanon and Jordan have continued to host foreign caregivers since the early 1980s. Brown notes that migrant workers in Israel enjoy less unionizing and protesting rights compared to the migrants in Lebanon (179). Internationally, migrant workers in Israel are granted fewer rights than their counterparts in Hong Kong, Singapore, Denmark, and Taiwan where, similar to Israel, workers’ visas are tied to the status of their employment (179–80).

Unsettled Labors thus illuminates the experiences of migrant workers, particularly the caregivers, as an often-overlooked community within Israel’s settler-colonial landscape. Given the Israeli colonial project’s subjugation of Palestinians and their resistance, it is understandable why other socio-economic issues such as migrant workers are overshadowed. However, while documenting their exploitation, Brown weaves together narratives of resistance and resilience, revealing how migrant workers navigate and challenge the constraints of their precarious position in Palestine/Israel.