



Navigating Precarities: Agency, Intergenerational Care, and Counter-Narratives among Indigenous Migrant Youth
—Diane Sabenacio Nititham

Heidbrink, Lauren. *Migranhood: Youth in a New Era of Deportation*. Stanford UP, 2020. 240 pp. \$25.00 pb. ISBN 9781503612075.

In *Migranhood: Youth in a New Era of Deportation*, anthropologist Lauren Heidbrink shares the perspectives of unaccompanied youth migrants from Guatemala to Mexico and the United States. She urges scholars to rethink common perceptions of youth as “non-agents” in need of protection and to re-evaluate the idea that youth migration is disconnected from the underlying social and political institutions that engender migration. This multi-sited ethnography offers rich and thorough evidence that migration is not simply a linear journey and that youth are neither helpless nor passive. Through the counter-narratives of Indigenous youth, Heidbrink brings to life the impact of the nexus of institutional apparatuses, migration, and deportation on individuals and their communities.

Heidbrink’s background as an ethnographer and engaged public scholar is clear through her approach. The text offers readers rich descriptions and deep understandings of how Indigenous youth in Guatemala sit at the intersections of transnational processes, externalized borders, securitized development, genocide, and violence. Drawing on multiple methods of data collection conducted over several years, Heidbrink utilizes observations and in-depth interviews along with mixed-methods community-based research, including workshops, video and photo elicitation, walking ethnographies, and a community household survey. In partnership with Indigenous organizations, teachers, and older youth, this comprehensive and multilingual approach (English, Spanish, and K’iche’ and Mam) is attuned to the ways in which migration is used as an intergenerational strategy to navigate marginalization and precarity. The text is both thought-provoking and gripping. In sharing the counter-narratives of diverse Indigenous youth, Heidbrink makes visible

how they understand and respond to their migration circumstances. They are active agents, navigating local economies, transnational social networks, and global processes as they migrate from Guatemala to Mexico and the United States.

In each of the book's seven chapters, Heidbrink reminds the reader that the values, experiences, and decisions of youth do not exist in a vacuum. Violence, intergenerational trauma, and legacies of colonialism and conflict are always present for Indigenous communities, even if the ways in which they take form are not always explicit. Providing the social and political contexts of youth migration in each chapter imparts a pressing urgency. It is also helpful for educators who may choose to assign isolated chapters instead of the entire book, as each chapter can stand alone with informational framing for students who may be new to the topic.

The first two chapters focus on how Indigenous youth conceptualize and understand their migration. In chapter 1, "Youth as Agents, Caregivers, and Migrants," Heidbrink problematizes and interrogates the framing of economic migrants as simply making individual choices to improve their quality of life. Whether engaging in seasonal, internal, and/or transnational migration, youth migration becomes delinked from the conditions that motivate it when it is viewed as an individual rather than a public issue. These predicating events can include historical genocide, armed conflict, and migration management decisions. Further, the application of an intersectional lens emphasizes how embodied trauma and racialized, politicized geographies shape the emotional and social lives of youth and their families, their meaning-making processes, and what is at stake when youth do decide to migrate. Because migration is deeply woven into the social fabric, even when youth do not migrate themselves, the consequences reach far beyond the individual and their families: they also have significant impacts on households and communities. Thus, reframing economic migration provides depth to the varying degrees of agency that Indigenous youth have within interconnected global systems.

Chapter 2, "Widening the Frame," focuses on the disconnect between how youth and those in power make meaning of migration and deportation. Increasingly restrictive policies, media campaigns, and public service announcements try to keep migrants from moving.

While these messages are framed around protecting youth, they contain dehumanizing discourses around Indigenous youth, their parents, and their identities. Heidbrink uses a multimedia elicitation focus group to give youth a space to respond to these discourses and how they both connect to and disconnect from their experiences. For example, public service announcements were either reductive, assuming child migrants were ill-informed innocents, or were broadcast in Spanish, when ninety-five percent of young migrants are Indigenous from Guatemala (67). In this way, the announcements failed to correlate with youths' race, class, language, or experience. The youth identified that they not only knew of the social and financial costs and risks of transnational migration but also recognized the diverse experiences, paths, and meanings of migration for themselves, their families, and communities. While they may not believe the erroneous and problematic portrayals, they were also acutely aware that the goals of restrictive policies and media campaigns did little to address the mechanisms that underpin their social positions.

Neither migration nor the historical, political, and economic contexts in which Indigenous youth lives are situated are linear processes. In chapter 3, “¿Quédate y qué?” Heidbrink delineates how the influxes of migration between 2014 and 2018 were policy-made crises and contends that colonialism, conflict, and extraction have led to generational displacement of Indigenous people. Ensuing interventions by governments, NGOs, and humanitarian organizations to address this migration—by prevention or deportation—have not fixed the structural inequalities that compel youth to move, nor has providing sustainable assistance in the form of, for instance, public goods, schooling, fair wages and working conditions, and adequate healthcare; the dependence on remittance of earnings and eventual migration continues. Reductive representations of youth migration actively render invisible the challenges that Indigenous youth and their families face: physical and symbolic violence, cycles of debt, intergenerational traumas, discrimination, criminalization, and pathologization of their identities and experiences.

Compounded by racialized US discourses that conflate illegality and criminality, the cycle of deportation and return adds additional layers of violence and precarity for migrants, families, and communities to negotiate, including migratory debt, disruption of education,

underemployment, unemployment, and reintegration. In chapter 5, “Negotiating Returns,” Heidbrink raises the issue that reintegration assumes prior membership and that resources to help with settling and adjusting are scarce, if they exist at all. Further complicating reintegration is the emotional toll on migrants and their families and how return may sit within dichotomies of success/failure and thus accompanied by guilt or ostracization. The household community survey, which appears in chapter 6, “Debt and Indebtedness,” provides further information on the profound impacts of migration and deportation at the community level. The apathy toward and systemic mistreatment of Indigenous people appears through multiple dimensions, including discriminatory practices, under-resourced schools, inadequate healthcare, and deregulated financial institutions leading to cycles of debt-driven migration. Yet the migration stories of youth highlight that their complex trajectories are about more than just remitting money. Whether with regard to their own migration experience, that of their parent(s) or family members, or their return to their communities, youth work in different ways to survive as they resist discourses of criminalization, pathologization, and victimization. They make sense of the social costs of migration, including how they handle tensions that arise from parents forgetting K’iche’ or Mam, adjust to changes in and access to food or dress, or manage social relationships across time and space. Heidbrink’s focus on the thoughts, values, and beliefs of youth with regard to family and community obligation provides important contributions to studies on youth migration, revealing that marginalized youth are not voiceless actors and that migration is not just about the migrant. Heidbrink dutifully includes the multiple social actors, generational dynamics, and racialized and politicized geographies. Julian, an eighteen-year-old born in Colorado and de facto deported to Guatemala, sought ways to learn of his Indigenous history and cultural identity. As he focused on adapting to his new life, he, like many others, showed that “vulnerability and exclusion are intertwined with experiences of inclusion and strength because ‘everything is connected, and nothing is left out’” (133).

Chapter 7, “El derecho a no migrar,” concludes the book. In the face of their precarity, youth engage in strategic practices to be caregivers and providers for their families. Even with the increasing visibility of migrant youth in global crises, their experiences and voices remain obscured. The counter-narratives in this book reframe how and why youth migrate and call for

research-informed public policy to create programs and practices that better respond to migrants' needs. The heart of *Migranthood* lies in the ways that Heidbrink makes visible the multi-faceted and multi-layered lives of Indigenous youth. In learning why youth are on the move, the book responds critically to dominant discourses in US policy and practices that see youth as dependent on their parents until adulthood. Employing collaborative methods to attend to the role of youth as knowledge producers, Heidbrink offers a multipronged approach that emphasizes how youth are social actors and active agents within their families and communities amid state and institutionalized violence. This violence is not random but rather a result of systemic failures. Despite the emotional, psychological, and physical impact of the violence youth face, their stories reveal their strength, resilience, and deep commitment to their families. Their understanding of their contributions must therefore be situated within their experiences.

Migranthood places the perspectives of youth at the forefront, making visible the ways in which youth respond to and strategize within their experiences of marginalization and violence, limited availability of resources, and movements across borders. The book is an important addition to the growing work on youth migration and deportation. It examines how migration is multidirectional, complex, and contradictory, as well as subject to and shaped by colonialism, conflict, securitization policies, and development discourses. As such, this book challenges views of undocumented youth as passive children making uninformed choices. Instead, it understands them as critical social actors and family caregivers embedded within global processes. Heidbrink engages anthropology, sociology, and human rights public policy, appealing to policy-makers, practitioners, and activists working for child protection. *Migranthood* validates youth agency, clearly making connections between systemic failures in immigration policy, securitization, and development. It is a much-needed contribution that gives depth not only to the consequences of migration and deportation beyond youth and their families but also to how the effects reverberate across communities, temporally and spatially.

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