

RHACEL SALAZAR PARREÑAS, *Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 232. \$80.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper. ISBN 9781503614666.

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Unfree is a well-documented book on Filipino domestic labor in the United Arab Emirates. Being an ethnographic exploration of migrant labor conditions, the book is composed of an introduction, five chapters, the conclusion, and two appendices. The introduction provides an exhaustive summary of the experiences included in the book: the diversity of employers, the complex response of domestic workers to their employers' attitudes, and the UAE government's view on migrant domestic labor as respite from poverty. The introduction offers an in-depth explanation of the theories which undergird *Unfree's* arguments and the debates it intends to inform. By endeavoring to deconstruct universal definitions of unfreedom, the book begins with exploring its different conceptualizations, such as the nuanced understandings of "positive" and "negative liberty" (8) that are advanced by Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and Robert Nozick, as well as Saba Mahmood's women's adherence to patriarchal norms. Against this theoretical backdrop, Salazar Parreñas mainly argues that we need to understand the inequalities that underlie domestic work as relational rather than structural to finally see the ability of the workers themselves to negotiate with their employers and to capture the diverse culture of employment within the UAE. Viewing domestic work as a structure fails to explain why the *kafala* system, which sponsors domestic workers in the UAE, is not merely about universal abuse, slavery, and violence.

Chapter one deconstructs the exceptional way in which domestic labor in the UAE is internationally depicted and discussed (29). The chapter illustrates the attempts of the Philippine government to protect the rights of its own citizens, while, over the last decade, it

signed a Memorandum of Understanding with several states in the Gulf. It also shows the failings of such agreements in securing minimum standards of employment and the legal difficulties domestic workers encounter in responding to abuse (35). The chapter discusses the tendency of employers to “legally infantilize” the workers (29), controlling and disciplining their social and sexual conduct through moral paternalism to avoid employment related consequences. As this is also a praxis for foreign employers, Salazar Parreñas invites us to deracialize the abusive Emirati employer and to look at the whole variegated picture of legal infantilization carried out by all nationalities.

Chapter two details how the Philippine government fosters labor migration while informing aspirant workers of the risks they may face once they start employment. Most Filipinos choose Arab states as their destination – indeed making up 20 percent of the UAE’s domestic workers (51). In order to protect labor standards, Salazar Parreñas stresses that the Philippine government, in the past, banned migration towards some countries, including the UAE. This chapter is highly informative on how the Philippine government regulates the activities of the agencies who recruit the domestic workers; it documents how rarely the latter can choose the country where they will work. It explains how the government’s Pre-Departure Education Program seeks to shape the worker’s professional role and identity within the receiving country (67). However, Salazar Parreñas also highlights how the government accepts and remains complicit in the vulnerability and abuse of Filipino workers (71), since the recruitment agencies, the receiving states, and the employers are all able to reject the labor standards. In this chapter, we are provided with a broader political economy of migrant labor from the Philippines to the world. I find this section particularly insightful to the extent that readers may wish the author had chosen to carry out a full-fledged multisite ethnography of migrant labor from Manila to the UAE, and back.

While other studies suggest that domestic workers are all unable to negotiate for better work conditions, *Unfree’s* chapter three shows that the workers try to mobilize the morality of their employers to resist their arbitrary rules. According to Salazar Parreñas, neglecting the mediation of such “moral entrepreneurs” (102) prevents us from acknowledging the variety of experiences within the *kafala* system. While the author provides a satisfying number of valuable accounts both from employers and domestic workers, adopting the perspective of the interviewees to classify employers as either “bad” or “good” may

leave readers with some questions: Did the interview guideline, the identity and positionality of the interviewers, and the fact of being interviewed as a likely vulnerable subject shape data collection, as generally happens? This chapter could have been the place to share such ethical and epistemological issues. Importantly, chapter three discusses how, in the households that employ Filipino workers, food consumption is used as a complex prism of (in)humane treatment, where some domestic workers are ill-fed, and others, by contrast, prefer not to eat with their employers. Here the author proposes a meaningful threefold analysis of “de-humanization,” “infantilization,” and “recognition” of dignity to examine the way employers use food as an instrument of power in the household and outside (89). This analysis documents that food is not merely an instrument of oppression but also can show the cultural diversity of employment in the UAE. In this section, we also learn how morality can turn into a mobilization tool to deter or mitigate subjugation.

Chapter four documents the reality of domestic workers who are killed or diversely abused by their employers, illustrating how unlikely they are to fight back as they would be easily arrested and imprisoned. However, Salazar Parreñas reminds us of the informal, yet effective, forms of support they often receive from different people: notably, South Asian taxi drivers who let them ride for free, the domestic workers of their neighbors, or the employers’ neighbors themselves who offer money or other forms of help (119). It is here that *Unfree* draws the Sisyphean cycle between the unfreedom of poverty in the Philippines—where the children and relatives of these domestic workers make livelihoods thanks to their remittances—and the unfreedom of servitude, where any form of rebellion and illegality would force them to deportation, denial of basic rights, and low-end jobs (121). Yet, this cycle is not exclusive: poverty, alongside servitude, also continues in the UAE, as most migrant domestic workers there cannot afford healthcare, becoming even more vulnerable to criminalization.

Chapter five illustrates the dramatic precarity in which the Filipino returnees and their families need to navigate despite having someone sending remittances from the UAE. Indeed, natural disasters such as typhoons can wash away their houses, pulverizing what the domestic workers have earned over the years while abroad (136). This chapter also shows the various reasons behind workers pursuing labor elsewhere: the inhumane treatment by employers is not the only factor prompting such a “serial labor migration” (139). Even longstanding

workers are unlikely to find higher-status jobs, despite their English language skills. Their disadvantaged status results in a continual reproduction of poverty and, therefore, the failure of paving the way to sustainable returns.

In the conclusion, Salazar Parreñas mentions the misleading campaigns of several international organizations advocating for human rights. In response to this claim, these organizations may be motivated to work against the systematic nature of abuse, which persists despite the “good” experiences in domestic labor. This section recapitulates the continuum of unfreedom running through poverty, servitude, and criminalization, to which the Philippine government does not respond effectively. Indeed, it transfers culpability onto the aspiring migrant workers who decide to depart despite the known risks (153). Only morality can become resistance. Yet, *Unfree* shows how morals are not an effective “force of antipower” (154): while looking beyond the law might be helpful to capture other ways of addressing everyday violence and inequality, a morals-based law in the workplace cannot replace Law. *Unfree* provides examples of how domestic work is a “morally mediated experience” (155), but it does not tell us how Filipino workers collectively relate to the international presumption that structural violence characterizes their work and life. While a destigmatized approach is dutiful, readers may remain unclear with the final argument on the greater likelihood “that domestic workers will encounter considerate employers than sadistic ones” (150). No statistics or other quantitative data evidence this important argument, which seemingly contradicts the many harrowing employment scenarios that *Unfree* itself documents in empirical depth. The abovementioned statement also contradicts the author’s statement that these experiences are still “varying forms of subjugation” (175) and that this book’s story is still about “unfreedom.” The methodological details in Appendix A would have been better incorporated into the heart of the book, as they explain the research team’s ethical dilemmas while undertaking such challenging research in the UAE. In the name of the experiential variety the author herself powerfully claims back, I wonder why the author opted for a broader title which risks decontextualizing the local specificities of domestic work. The book’s title, in fact, refers to “migrant domestic work” while *Unfree* only navigates employment cultures and moralities amongst the Filipino community; and it refers to “Arab states” while it only focuses on the UAE.

I find the book particularly insightful on outlining the pre- and post-migration conditions of UAE-based Filipino workers (20). *Unfree* is also extremely effective in corroborating contemporary scholars' attempts at de-exceptionalizing the Gulf by showing how not exclusively Emirati citizens, but also Western citizens, strengthen this abusive economy of migrant domestic work.¹ Abuse most likely happens in the Gulf rather than other countries because labor laws are not enforced, not because the Arab world is inherently uncivilized and immoral (149).

Unfree guides us through the transnational mobility of these domestic workers and their subsequent economic immobility. Using relatively plain language, the book is accessible to academic and non-academic audiences from disparate disciplinary backgrounds who are interested in understanding Filipino domestic work in the UAE beyond victimhood.

NOTES

¹ For example, see Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).