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‘Marginal’ student mobilities: Cruel promise, everyday mobile belonging and emotional geographies

Student mobilities and international education in Asia: emotional geographies of knowledge spaces, by R. Sidhu et al. Palgrave, 2019, 163 pp., £51.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-27855-7

Everyday mobile belonging: theorizing higher education student mobilities, by K. Finn and M. Holton, Bloomsbury, 2019, 256 pp., £63.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781350041080


At the time of writing this review, many universities around the world are facing unprecedented challenges brought forth by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Almost over night, universities have had to move teaching and assessment online, while closing many of their buildings on campus. These sudden changes have serious implications for students, who find themselves having to adapt to new ways of learning and interaction amid growing anxiety and uncertainty. Student mobilities, no matter daily commutes to and from universities, or transnational movements from one country to another, have been curtailed, unduly reinforced or coerced, in the face of such novel circumstances. It is, therefore, high time to consider student mobilities with renewed theoretical and empirical lenses.

This collection of three books is a welcomed addition to literature on student mobilities as they refocus our gaze on the ‘marginal’ forms of student mobilities. By ‘marginal’, I refer to the marginalised positions of the students or institutions involved, or the under-explored modes of mobility carried out by students. Specifically, Stevenson and Baker (2018) zoom in to the multiple barriers that refugee students encounter daily in the UK and Australia, Finn and Holton (2019) examine the commuting experiences of ‘living at home’ students in England, while Sidhu, Chong, and Yeoh (2019) chart the emotional landscapes of international students choosing to study in universities situated in the relative periphery of knowledge production, i.e. East Asia. Together these three books offer much needed empirical details and theoretical tools that allow us to add to our existing, predominant focus on the ‘large-scale international and intercultural movements’ (Finn and Holton 2019, p. 1) of students from positions of relative privilege to study in centres of knowledge production (i.e. in the West) (Brooks and Waters 2011).

As such, there is little surprise, therefore, that all three books have made a focal observation on how a model of ‘deficit’ has been adopted by policy, media and institutional discourses regarding these ‘marginal’ forms of student mobilities. For instance, Finn and Holton note that in the UK, living at home students’ mode of mobility ‘is persistently badged as inferior, deficient, immobile, and “second-best”’ (p. 2) while Sidhu et al argue that international students choosing to study in East Asian countries are often coded as ‘deficit’ or ‘lesser’ within ‘biopolitical project[s]’ that are ‘driven by gendered, classed and racialised dynamics’ (p. 157). Stevenson and Baker explore ‘how political and media rhetoric serve to create particular subjectivities of people
seeking refuge (such as the ‘worthy’ refugee as opposed to the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker)’ (p. 24), thus turning refugees and asylum seekers into ‘political pawns, with pejorative descriptions of immigrants and asylum seekers used to chase votes and sell newspapers’ (p. 25). As ‘non-traditional,’ ‘non-mainstream’ participants of student mobilities, these three different groups of students have commonly been made to defend their legitimacy against their more privileged, mainstream counterparts. This precarious positioning, as a result, has further reinforced the multiple challenges that they encounter in navigating their higher education journeys.

One common challenge among these different students has been the emotional impacts and subsequent subjectivity formation. When discussing refugee students’ experiences amid the Widening Participation projects in the UK and Australia, Stevenson and Baker evoke Lauren Berlant’s (2011) thesis of cruel optimism to suggest that promises of accessing higher education have become a toxic fantasy for refugee students as these promises are not being met. To illustrate this, Stevenson and Baker evoke vivid yet disturbing case studies of three students, Aaliyah and Sadiya (in the UK, from the Republic of Guinea and the Republic of Iraq respectively) and Andy (in Australia, from Afghanistan) to demonstrate how higher education institutions and the social environments have ‘undermine[d] feelings of belonging and entitlement and [had] a profound [negative] effect on self-esteem, self-worth, confidence and identity’ of these students (p. 90).

Also on the affective experiences, Finn and Holton focus on how, for living at home students, their feelings of (not) belonging and the shame associated to not belonging have become everyday fabrics of their university experiences. They write, ‘belonging is always a risky endeavour for working-class, living at home students and student parents, who are marked as “Other” and fear their true identities might be “found out”’ (p. 52). This pertinent sense of fearing to be found out is amply resonated within the accounts of Stevenson and Baker’s refugee students.

For Sidhu et al, they focus on charting the emotional landscapes of international students in East Asian universities through prisms of ‘affective economies’ (Ahmed 2004), ‘governmentality’ (based on Foucault) and ‘geographies of emotions’. They distinguish between emotion and affect, emphasising that emotions are sensitive to ‘power geometries and historical memories’ (p. 9). Regarding governmentality, the authors argue that ‘Circulating emotions help to sort and administer bodies and places according to regimes of value’ (p. 10). This theoretical framework thus provides useful tools for the authors to employ rich empirical details to demonstrate how emotions have been mobilised to govern the individuals (be they international students, or university officials) by institutions and states across the East Asian region. In this regard, Sidhu et al’s book is an important point of reference and exemplary example for scholars interested in operationalising and analysing the often difficult-to-pin-down emotional aspects of mobile students’ experiences.

Specifically, by foregrounding emotions, this book thus challenges the ‘rational, utility-seeking’ stereotype of international students and ‘complicates established assumptions that frame “Asian” students as subjected to familial projects that are concerned largely with acquiring “flexible citizenship” through the accumulation of repositories of cultural and symbolic capital’ (p. 13). They demonstrate how ‘technologies of anxiety’ play a pivotal role in dictating the knowledge and innovation spaces of East Asian universities (p. 31). More intriguingly, they draw on vivid empirical details about students’ daily encounters in laboratories, tutorials, lecture spaces, student residences and neighbourhoods to examine the ‘politics of belonging seen through the interplay of communication, friendship and learning encounters’ (ibid.). In this sense, Sidhu et al’s work has obvious parallels with Finn and Holton’s book as both have paid focused empirical and theoretical attention to the production and maintenance of belonging through everyday lived accounts of mobile students.

Another similar trait between Sidhu et al’s book and that of Finn and Holton is the sense of agency that has been uncovered among the mobile students. For instance, against the background
of ‘affective nationalism’ that East Asian states have deployed to engender emotions of ‘righteousness, anger and disappointment’ among the sojourning students as a governing technique, Sidhu and colleagues note that some international students displayed ‘alternative ways of acting, including critically questioning standard nationalist tropes’ (p. 137); instead, these students ‘distance[d] themselves from the ambitions of states by either claiming an apolitical subjectivity or by displaying a kind of “voluntary insubordination”’ (ibid.). Similarly, despite the afore-mentioned sense of shame resulted from not belonging, Finn and Holton point out the possibility of agency for such living at home students to mobilise emotional dimensions of belonging to achieve transformations. They highlight how their live at home students ‘shirked the “typical” pathways associated with university trajectories (leaving home, drawing upon (others’) past experiences, “fitting in”, etc), instead exhibiting some interesting signs of resistance and innovation in how they chose to approach higher education’ (p. 137). Instead of feeling constrained by their ‘non-traditional’ mobility practices, these live at home students ‘forge[d] their own feelings of belonging that focus on moving forward rather than being fixated upon historical (and perhaps outdated) notions of student life’ (ibid.). Such intriguing sense of refreshing and surprising agency displayed by these live at home students could be considered as novel challenges to existing understanding of and biases against the living at home option.

Regarding agency, Stevenson and Baker have discussed the positive differences that individual tutors or individual local initiatives can make in helping refugee students to overcome certain barriers, and to feel a sense of belonging and empowerment. However, they highlight that such individual-level efforts are not only piecemeal, but may inadvertently contribute to the pernicious effect of concealing the responsibility of institutions and governments, leading to further stigmatisation and segregation of these students (p. 45). As for agency within the refugee students, it remains under-discussed, given that the authors have presented empirical cases of only three refugee students whose experiences seem to be overwhelmingly fraught with difficulties and displayed little agency. It is unclear whether it has been impossible for other refugee students to exercise different degrees of agency in resisting or challenging institutional and structural constraints. In fact, compared with the other two books which are both endowed with detailed and painstaking empirical evidence, Stevenson and Baker’s book may appear a little thin on empirical details and theoretical application.

Regarding empirical bases, Finn and Holton’s book includes solid data drawn from three different but related studies. Study 1 engages undergraduate students at Portsmouth University who live at home through a web-based survey (>1,000 responses) and walking interviews (n = 31), focusing on how they negotiate place and mobility within their term-time locations. Study 2 investigates everyday mobilities among students who self-identified as ‘commuters’ in Lancaster using a range of research techniques understood as ‘mobile methods’, including ‘go-along, in-situ, and campus walking interviews’ (p. 10). The study explores ‘how belonging and well-being are cultivated, or indeed hindered, by the act of commuting’ (ibid.). Study 3 focuses on ten women students’ graduate (im)mobilities and the ways in which these are implicated in experiences of belonging to particular notions of the graduate class, in a northern England town. As for Sidhu et al’s book, it is based on data collected from 82 interviews with university officials in senior leadership positions in Japan, Taiwan, mainland China, Singapore and Korea. This is in addition to biographical interviews with 199 international students and 92 alumni from sampled universities in the cities of Taipei, Singapore, Beijing, Guangzhou, Osaka, Seoul and Tokyo. In contrast, Stevenson and Baker’s book does not offer accounts regarding their methodology nor have the scope and scale of their research study been outlined. This is a pity as it would have been a delight to engage with much more empirical accounts similar to the three riveting refugee student stories that they have depicted. More crucially, in analysing their empirical data, the first two books have
had robust application of conceptual tools by drawing on their unique theoretical contributions, which is not evident in Stevenson and Baker’s book. Admittedly they have drawn on a range of theoretical resources such as Berlant’s cruel optimism; yet, such conceptual tools have not come through in the data analysis chapter (Chapter 8).

In terms of theoretical frameworks, as introduced above, Sidhu and colleagues have demonstrated in-depth theoretical innovation in marrying affective economies with Foucauldian governmentality to examine emotional geographies of international students in East Asian universities. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 6), they propose ‘critique and care’ as an ethical framework to analyse the prospects for regional sociabilities and solidarities (p. 137). This framework echoes the preceding empirical evidence and theoretical efforts inspired by postcolonial feminist schools of thoughts. Drawing on theoretical works from various disciplines, including sociology, human geography and education studies, Finn and Holton have proposed an intriguing framework called ‘everyday mobile belonging.’ Regarding ‘everyday’ dimension of this framework, Finn and Holton foreground ‘the routinised, mundane, dynamic, visible and invisible behaviours that compromise our daily interactions’ (p. 64), which challenge ‘the assumptions that engagement should take place in specific socio-spatial contexts and not others’ (p. 9). As for mobilities, Finn and Holton accentuate the relevance of ‘digital, imagined and corporeal mobilities for ameliorating tensions and/or feelings of distance’ (p. 64). Regarding belongingness, Finn and Holton consider belonging as ‘a mobile performance, rather than fixed acquisition’ (ibid.). They have drawn on concepts such as rhythmmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004) and the language of dance and choreography (McCormack 2008) to analyse their ample empirical cases based on three different projects. Undoubtedly, Finn and Holton’s book can serve as an excellent theoretical resource book for scholars interested in analysing ‘everyday’ forms of student mobilities. Despite their usefulness as separate theoretical sources (i.e. the ‘everyday’, ‘mobile’ and ‘belonging’ dimensions), I struggle to organically piece them together as an overarching theoretical framework. It seems to me that they are each made up of multiple pieces of works and concepts, which may still need some further conceptual work to develop into a coherent whole.

In terms of methodological innovation, Finn and Holton’s book is a rare treasure to indulge in. The book devotes two chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) in Part 2 to discuss and demonstrate how everyday mobile belonging is researched in existing literature and their own studies. For readers interested in learning about a range of innovative mobile research methods, you should not miss Chapter 4. For a vivid demonstration about how Finn and Holton have employed and reflected on the use of different mobile methods in their own research, you should read Chapter 5. On a related note, Stevenson and Baker have had some fascinating discussion about how to conduct ethical research with refugee students in their Chapter 9, evoking key literature in the field, which is an excellent resource to consult for readers interested in this area of research. Still, to play devil’s advocate, it would have been even better if the authors could draw on their own empirical examples to demonstrate how they have managed to research ethically with refugee students and how they responded to challenges in such processes. As for Sidhu et al’s book, their methods were more ‘standard’, involving (biographical) interviews and a survey. However, they have some stimulating methodological discussion about how they engaged with researching ‘emotions’ (pp. 17-18) and about difficulties in tackling recruitment of alumni (p. 21).

My critique for Sidhu and colleague’s book is to do with their empirical analysis, which in my view lacks nuances in unpicking some key factors that may be important from the contexts of some of these international students. For instance, in Chapter 5 (pp. 120-102) the authors evoked the accounts of Ngoc from Vietnam to suggest that her employment decision (i.e. to return to Vietnam) was motivated by her existing familial social connections in the country. On p. 122 the authors employ the cases of Zhou and Li from China who both studied in Japan but with Zhou and his wife eventually returning to settle in Shanghai while Li decided to return to China, leaving his entire nuclear family in Japan. The authors argue through these cases that
‘emotions function as spatial practices’ which are shaped by individuals, networks, families, and institutions. My concern is that the focus on emotions, while worthwhile, may have prevented the authors from perceiving national social inequalities in these students’ contexts. For instance, Ngoc’s advantageous class and urban positions (e.g. she grew up in the central district of Hanoi, and was surrounded by highly educated people who work for the government) was never acknowledged. It might be worth considering what a student who grew up in an impoverished rural area of Vietnam would do in regard to their employment if they had the chance to study in Singapore. Similarly, Zhou and his wife returned to China’s Shanghai, one of the most prosperous and resource-rich cities in China, instead of to a deprived rural area in Western China. The rampant rural-urban divides and inequalities in China have not been taken into consideration when the focus was on the affective experiences of these privileged middle-class students based in metropolises like Shanghai. This critique could also be applied to the authors’ discussion about the gendered norms expected of international students from Sri Lanka too. In other words, as well analysed as this book’s data can be, I argue that considering important mediating factors such as within-country class, caste, religion and rural-urban inequalities would strengthen the analysis much more.

Overall, it has been a privilege to engage in-depth with these three exceptional books on ‘marginal’ student mobilities. I have thoroughly enjoyed reading every one of them, in particular the sections where the authors reflect on how their own educational trajectories have shaped their research focuses, approaches and subjectivities. As I finish writing this review, I the UK has adopted ‘social distancing’ as a strategy to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to impeded mobility for live at home students, and in some cases international students from Asian countries have been subjected to racist attacks due to ‘maskaphobia’ and are forced to leave their destination countries while getting rejected by their countries of origin, thus embodying a state of limbo. In view of such circumstances, it appears that ‘social distancing’ as a term has been misleading and it should more accurately be translated as ‘physical distancing’ but with heightened ‘social solidarity’. Mobile subjects, especially marginalised students of all backgrounds, similarly should be treated and researched with an increased sense of social solidarity and responsibility in our global communities.

References


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