Book Review

Thomas, Susan (2024) *Indebted Mobilities Indian Youth, Migration, and the Internationalizing University.* University of Chicago Press.

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Introduction

The U.S. university is a focus of much idealizing and critique with a range of implications for institutional processes and faculty and student lives. International students face particular precarity in these developments. Susan Thomas' (2024) rich study, *Indebted Mobilities*, provides a sophisticated, textured analysis of the varied forces shaping the internationalizing university and migrant students' aspirations and experiences pursuing a U.S. graduate degree. Thomas, who is faculty in Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University, directs her ethnographic gaze to a group of primarily middle-class Indian men through 16 months of fieldwork and analysis of the interlocking discourses, histories, and structures that inform their experiences. Although she focuses on one group in one public institution, her analysis is salient to the forces shaping the hopes and realities of many groups seeking education on U.S. soil fueled by the call of the "American dream" and the symbolic value of a U.S. degree for their futures. Thomas brings years of theorizing to bear on these students'

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subjectivities, aspirations, and precarities with a range of implications for current scholarship and practice.

Thomas' text offers a compelling contribution to social foundations and higher education and raises important insights into contemporary international issues affecting campuses and students. Her empirical work is woven with rich analysis across an introduction, a brief epilogue, and 5 chapters. She conducted her study in 2011 and 2012 on a New York campus using ethnographic participatory methods of "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) and interviews in a range of social, campus, and home spaces. Men from India were the primary participants, including some Sikh and Bangladeshi men, and some women. She notes the limited work on Indian students despite their numerical prominence in international student demographics and India's unique dimensions that shape global flows of students.

Content of Chapters

The introduction, "Going Global," sets the contextual stage for her critical analysis and highlights key points for the coming chapters. Here she describes the significance of the internationalization of higher education, the economic forces and desires (global, local, and individual), and the "imaginaries of neoliberal empire" that sustain a now billion-dollar industry of U.S. education (p.5). Positioning her work in critical university studies, she highlights the many violences of U.S. higher education, the power of the enduring discourse of U.S exceptionalism, and the construction of U.S education as an object of desire for the youth she studies to forge a "globally mobile, marker of successful modern masculinity" to build their futures (p. 9). She introduces the generative concepts of indebted subjectivities and gendered masculinities that inform the men's experiences. Indeed, the men were primarily from non-elite middle-class families which incurred significant debt, both familial and financial, to sustain their years of study. Her attention to cultural logics includes institutional desires for international students' enrollment dollars following decreased state funding. The reverberations of the post-9-11 (the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center in 2001) context of racialized surveillance also complicates the men's experiences.

Chapter 1, "Traces of Empire," describes the rise of U.S. hegemony and higher education historically, the national dynamics in India, and the nature of U.S. exceptionalism that inform the context of the Indian students' education. Chapter 2, "Debt and Desire," offers a compelling and often sobering exploration of ways Indian youth's desire for a mas-

culine transnational experience shapes their experiences in U.S. higher education in the face of fewer perceived options in India. In enabling these desires, they leave a trail of indebtedness in their wake through accruing student loan debt and family debt. Families and students alike envision long term benefits in return for these sacrifices. Thomas' notion of "indebted subjectivities" is a powerful anchor to help conceptualize and articulate the vulnerabilities and networks of obligation that burden the international masculine Indian subject. This anchor reflects the men's (and some women's) feelings of uncertainty about their futures and the reality of financial and kinship indebtedness that haunt them throughout their studies.

Chapters 3, "Institutionalizing the Empire," and 4, "Inclusion's Exclusions," detail the complexity of the contradictions and ambiguities for Indian men living in the post-9/11 surveillance state. Institutionally, they are both desired and marginalized subjects. They represent welcome diversity and valuable tuition dollars and yet their male, Othered, and sometimes bearded bodies are also regularly rendered suspect when institutional actors read them as potential terrorists through the logics of racialized colorism. Indian students are thus constantly navigating their institutional precarity. These chapters also demonstrate the men's tendency to absorb some of the institutions' imaginaries and explain their unjust treatment with institutionalized arguments—an attitude of complying with their subjection to Othering troubling to Thomas, a point to which she returns in her epilogue. Thomas traces the rhythms of men's life in these contradictory conditions as they forge connection amid forms of exclusion— subpar, segregated housing, limited work opportunities, and vulnerability to exploitation. As Thomas summarizes,

> the notions of sacrifice, duty and individual responsibility that are part of [their] logic of indebtedness were formative to how the students made meaning of their encounters on campus, their anxieties over their futures and how they imagine themselves as men who succeeded overseas. (p. 73)

Chapter 5, "the Precarious Path," painfully brings the men's anxieties and vulnerabilities into sharp relief as they complete their graduate programs and seek jobs with little certainty they will be hired. These are fraught endings to years of hopes, navigations, and growing feelings of indebtedness as they decide their next steps. They grapple with the reality of their migrant precarity in the global economic market and their sense of masculinity and indebtedness, despite the "unfairness" of doing all the right things as "good" migrant educational

subjects.

Discussion

Thomas's sophisticated analysis is continually demanding and satisfying. This book is not a light or sunny read. Befitting the complex topic, her textured writing seems to chew at every theoretical point to tease out the range of contradictions shaping the men's education and to relentlessly connect individual actions to global economic flows, desires, discourses, and histories. As one example of her layered analysis and writing, in assessing the International Studies office's changing mission to serve the surveillance state, she writes

> As stringent post 9/11 security measures and their accompanying discourses were carried into the already existing bureaucratic spaces of a public university facing state defunding, a contentious struggle over the meaning, agenda, and managerial practices of international education work at [the university] emerged. The nexus of surveillance and austerity produced a site of neoliberal governance at the office as it made its way toward a leaner and more efficient bureaucracy… state power was not only deployed and routinized…[but] normalized …which left intact the need to maintain an authoritative knowledge of student migrants. (p.104)

Such analysis surfaces the brew of precarity, racial violence, and politics of institutional exclusions that shaped youth experiences of "(un) belonging."

The range of ethnographic examples was effective. Participants' personalities shone through many descriptions as Thomas followed them in campus and home spaces navigating their transnational worlds. She captures students' joy in socializing and their educational hopes as well as their ongoing analysis of their realities in complying with racialized profiling and marginalization as "understandable" outcomes of their outsider and temporary status. However, readers interested in ethnographic methodology will be left wanting by Thomas's limited attention to methodological scholarship and details of her field practices, note-taking, obstacles, and decision-making regarding data inclusions and exclusions intrinsic to the art and craft of ethnography. As a middle-class female researcher of Indian heritage, she does refer to awkward interactions involved in hanging out in the apartments and social spaces the men frequent as they go about their lives cooking, joking, drinking, and socializing in their few years on campus. Her bibliography includes ethnographers such as Dorothy Smith and Clifford Geertz as touchstones. It also includes a rich variety of theorists of diaspora, immigration, university studies and transna-

tional issues, positioning her work well in critical university studies and scholarship on internationalization of the universities.

The conclusion sits in stark contrast to the depth of the preceding chapters. In the epilogue, "the American Dream and its Others," Thomas returns to her observation of students' responding with complacency to racialized surveillance that she addresses in Chapter 4 and the various indignities and injustices to which men were subject in their living arrangements, service jobs, and segregation from white student college life. Thomas rightfully identifies student collective resistance as a worthy reaction to the conditions they face in institutions for which they are incurring much indebtedness to attend. This call for student action also reflects the spirit of critical university studies in which she positions the book that outlines the extractive, racialized, neoliberal forces that shape contemporary universities. As U.S. activist history indicates, students have had power to change the realities of educational structures.

Yet the conclusion's unidimensional focus on student action is at odds with the complex terrain her very analysis has so richly uncovered. Student activism seems only part of the puzzle, particularly in the current 2025 context in which we must ask seriously what resistance can look like among international students who are under increased surveillance and structurally vulnerable to the whims of the state. The study data invites alternative visions that merit sustained attention. For example, increasing accessibility of visas postgraduation depends on industries demanding the nation state reduce bureaucracy and streamline hiring processes for migrants. Faculty reading about the instances of discrimination, economic vulnerabilities, and desperation for jobs should interrogate their program practices to ensure they are transparent and humane. International student service offices should advocate for better housing, campus jobs, and more opportunities to integrate international and domestic students. The work of resistance and transformation should never fall only on youth themselves.

Conclusion

Thomas has done an exemplary job detailing and theorizing the forces positioning these men and shaping the contours of their daily navigations in U.S. graduate education. "The university" emerges as utterly complicit in their precarity. Through deploying a range of potent examples and wisps of spoken dialogue, each chapter contributes to a rich understanding of the complex internationalizing forces fueling men's subjectivities, positioning, and masculinized ambitions

for the "good life" through studying abroad, post-9/11 racialized state surveillance, substantial indebtedness to family and financial systems, the fraught U.S. market for hiring graduates with F1 visas, the gendered vulnerabilities of seeking a respected professional class position, segregation from whites on campus due to housing and financial limitations, and the struggles of supporting oneself financially while studying abroad. The complex analysis is the book's greatest strength.

Though the book contributes to knowledge on Indian students, the implications of Thomas' analysis multiply by the chapter as we consider other student groups nationwide all fueled by similar hopes, incurring similar kinds of kinship and economic debts, and navigating similar kinds of complexities as nations' needs, conditions of precarity, and the politics of empire unfold in new ways. Students' precarity may indeed only amplify as universities become subject to restrictions and the newest manifestation of the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism renders outsiders unwelcome altogether. The concern that some international students are potential terrorists endures in contemporary discourse just as the study data underscored a decade ago. Thomas' analysis provides powerful insights to understand the implications of these complexities for lived experience, international education, and migrant subjectivities, appropriate for any reader interested in international issues, higher education, justice studies, or social foundations courses.

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Other Reference

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