

# Medical Anthropology Quarterly

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States.** *Denise Brennan*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 304 pp.

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In her latest monograph, Denise Brennan, long regarded as an eminent scholar of sexual economies, widens her ethnographic scope of attention to forced labor in the United States writ large. Trafficking into sex work receives far less attention than one might expect from Brennan, but this shift in focus is, indeed, part of her intervention and one of the book's many strengths.

As Brennan makes clear, ever since the last Bush administration turned attention away from other forms of migrant labor (which would reveal the state's own failings) and launched a crusade on sex trafficking, sensationalistic accounts of women forced into selling sex have so dominated media narratives that social scientists have adapted their research in response. They ultimately countered the moral panics with evidence-based scholarship, but thereby neglecting other forms of trafficking into forced labor such as domestic work, childcare, sweatshops, packing plants, and agricultural work (p.

65). The result is that anthropologists have not yet fully revealed how the failed immigration system in the United States makes trafficking into forced labor possible, or how forced labor undergirds the nation's economy (p. 9).

This relationship between policy and lived experience is the one Brennan pulls apart for readers throughout *Life Interrupted*, bringing rich ethnographic detail and compelling stories from survivors of trafficking, case workers, advocates, and others. She eschews any grand theoretical gestures in favor of rigorous but readable prose and has crafted a book that is at once a major academic contribution for specialists and also a text that should be required reading for public health workers, policymakers, NGO administrators, and undergraduate or graduate students interested in the practical applications of anthropology. To that effect, she also includes as appendices useful "ideas and resources for action" and listings of relevant organizations across the United States, making it ideal for course adoption and opening up additional pedagogical possibilities.

Brennan's work focuses mostly on T-visa recipients, these being among the 4,000 people each year who the U.S. government grants a path to citizenship by virtue of their "authenticated" status as "trafficking

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victims.” Despite the designation, almost none of Brennan’s interlocutors experience their status as “trafficked” as a socially coherent identity, and many may not even understand themselves to be trafficked, per se. Far from a monolithic group, Brennan’s interlocutors come from a wide variety of countries, backgrounds, and experiences.

In Chapter One, “Dangerous Labor,” we learn about the history of sweatshops and labor abuses as well as the various laws and policies directed at these issues, usually with poor results and sometimes with poor motives. Brennan draws farm workers, domestic workers, nannies, day laborers, and sex workers into the common framework of labor, urging readers to understand these as related issues best addressed through labor rights organizing and interventions. We also learn about the government’s battle against women who sell sex, both documented and undocumented. Law enforcement officers target women who “look like” sex workers, using racial profiling, taking condoms as evidence, and using harassment and assault as policing tactics.

Beginning with the Bush administration and continuing under Obama, efforts at combatting trafficking shifted to focus mainly on sex trafficking, but the government has consistently failed to find sufficient numbers of victims. The government has continued to demand more be done to produce victims of sex trafficking, while conspicuously avoiding prosecutions of other forms of trafficking into forced labor. (It also failed to recognize the sexual exploitation and assault that is all too often part of other

forms of forced labor that are not prostitution related.) The funding for anti-sex trafficking initiatives is largely earmarked for evangelical Christian groups who oppose all sex work, an entrenchment of federal funds originating with Bush’s “charitable choice” initiative.

Having made clear why it is important to work outside the trafficking framework imposed by the Bush and Obama administrations, in Chapter Two, “Chains of Fear,” Brennan moves to the question of conditions of forced labor and exit routes from it. Here, we learn about the complicated situations that foster trafficking, including poor job prospects, the economic calculus of sacrificing for the sake of the children left behind, and the chains of intimacy binding some people to abusive partners. Brennan also enumerates the actual conditions during forced labor and the experiences of intimidation and violence, using extended case studies from her interlocutors that are gripping to read, but never tip over into the titillating.

And amid the harrowing details, Brennan also finds agency, as in the case of Flo, who learned about the justice system from watching *People’s Court* while trapped in forced domestic labor, taking photographs to gather evidence of her abuse, learning her rights, and eventually challenging her employers and freeing herself. In fact, readers may find themselves so caught up in the fates of Brennan’s interlocutors that they may be disappointed during the book’s eventual epilogue that we simply can’t know all the cases’ outcomes, and we almost never learn what, if anything, is done to perpetrators.

Chapter Three, "Imagining the Possible," kicks off Part Two of the book, which focuses on reintegration, a thoroughly understudied issue. This turning point in the text marks another of its great strengths, as readers learn about the challenges formerly trafficked persons face after escape, exit, or rescue. From inadequate shelters, poor social service provisions, continued poverty, difficulties with poorly trained social workers, and a lack of social capital, they often struggle to get ahead. It's true that sometimes the problem is not a lack of help but too much help from overly eager rescuers or Good Samaritans who may pressure them to join churches or communities. Chapter Four, "Living the Possible," continues beyond the immediate challenges to enumerate longer-term challenges of reintegration, including being caught in "legal limbo," physical health difficulties, and establishing surrogate kin networks. Chapter Five, "Laboring after Forced Labor," examines formerly trafficked persons work lives, which often still exist on the spectrum of exploitation.

Other cases presented are inspiring as some of the women go on to demand rights, organize, and engage in advocacy. And they *are* almost all women; perhaps the biggest weakness of the book is that Brennan does not include formerly trafficked men, a fact that she attributes in her methodology section to issues of access and referrals. Ethnographers will no doubt sympathize, but the omission does gender trafficking in ways that seem inconsistent with Brennan's larger goal of broadening the scholarship on trafficking into forced labor, which has been previously highly

feminized because of the emphasis on sex trafficking.

*Life Interrupted* is a beautifully written, ethnographically rich, and highly accessible work. It is certainly a must read for anyone researching migration, labor, or related policy issues, but its greatest impact may be in the public health and social services sectors, particularly for students and practitioners who may encounter formerly trafficked persons but whose jobs may not specifically focus on this population.