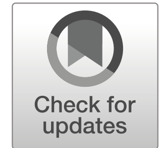
Society
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-021-00621-8

BOOK REVIEW



Charles Piot with Kodjo Nicolas Batema: *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*

2019, Duke University Press. 232 pp., ISBN: 978-1478003045

Ben Judah: *This is London: Life and Death in the World City*

2016, London: Picador. 428 pp., ISBN: 978-1447272441

Ana P Gutierrez Garza: *Care for Sale: An Ethnography of Latin American Domestic and Sex Workers in London*

Oxford University Press. 2018, 224 pp., ISBN:978-0190840655

Polaris (U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline), Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Businesses, 2018

https://massagetherapy.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/massagetherapy.nv.gov/content/Resources/FullReportHumanTraffickinginIllicitMassageBusinesses.pdf

Human Rights First, Dismantling the Business of Human Trafficking: Analysis of Six U.S. Cases, 2014

(https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/HRF-6-Trafficking-Cases-Analyzed.pdf)x

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However dysfunctional American society gets, large numbers of immigrants still want to move to the USA. Advocates for global mobility tend to share optimistic assumptions about how well immigrants do in the country of their dreams, whether this is the USA or somewhere else. One assumption is that immigrants know what is best for them and their families. If they believe that life in the new country will be better, we should rely on their judgement. Another assumption is that their previous lives were so bad that any life at all in the new country will be better.

Yet we know that most transnational migrants do not come from the poorest of the poor, but from middle-income strata. We also know that, for all their optimism and determination, too many will spend the rest of their lives working for poverty-

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level wages and experiencing downward mobility. A good number will regret they ever came.

Poor outcomes are often blamed on illegal migration, not migration per se. Thus journalists tend to focus on people who cross borders without permission, especially when they do so in large numbers, such as African boat people or Central American asylum seekers. But we know that higher numbers of irregular migrants arrive legally, on tourism or other visas, before they overstay and go to work.

How overstayers fare in their quest for jobs and legal status is a bit of a mystery because they come from every country on earth, not just the most afflicted ones. Compared to Syrians and Hondurans, most overstaying tourists have a harder time arguing that they are refugees who deserves asylum. Having no incentives to draw attention to themselves, visa overstayers blend in with larger communities and become invisible, but not necessarily with happy results.

Juggling Several Different Biographies

Fortunately, visa overstayers do show up in social research. One good example is Ana Gutierrez Garza's *Care for Sale: An Ethnography of Latin American Domestic and Sex Workers in London*. Gutierrez is a cultural anthropologist from Mexico who got to know women like herself struggling for a foothold in the alluring but high-rent London of 2009–2012.

Tourist visas are usually the cheapest way for labor migrants to reach a magnet country. That is why, wishing to avoid an oversupply of foreign workers, governments have gotten tougher on applicants who could be less interested in seeing the sights than finding a job. Yet requirements such as healthy bank accounts are not hard to fake, millions of labor migrants in high-wage countries have arrived on tourist, student, or business visas.

According to Gutierrez, the twenty-four middle-class Latin American women in her sample were victims of neoliberal restructuring policies in their homelands—that is, austerity policies that took their jobs or houses or that destabilized their marriages—so they moved to Europe in the hope of somehow staying in the middle class. However, Gutierrez acknowledges, she was not always getting the full story.

To manage conflicting obligations, some of the women were juggling several different biographies which they could not always keep straight. "I am so many different persons," Denise told Gutierrez, "that sometimes I even get confused and do not know anymore who I am" (p. 109). Generally, the women wanted to send generous remittances to their families, more often aging parents than children. They also hoped for a more fulfilling life in Europe, free of the gender constraints at home.

Some of the women were struggling to pay off financial debts in their previous life. Getting to London required going further into debt, as did making the transition from a tourist visa into Britain's closely regulated job market. One approach was to "sublet" a National Insurance Number from an actual holder in return for a monthly rent. By the time Gutierrez was doing her fieldwork, the government was cracking down on that arrangement as it was on another—enrolling in a phony college that provides a student visa in return for £2–3000 in annual fees. A third approach was to pay a citizen or legal resident £3–4000 for a bogus marriage.

Given the women's limited English, domestic work for upper-class Londoners was an obvious niche. But at home, they had been the matrons, not the maids. Since they work for Londoners with higher consumption levels than anyone in their previous life, they could view a step down in social status as a step up.

Still, the hip egalitarianism of their employers was confusing, because it required figuring out when they were expected to be a friend and when they were expected to be a servant. Being "like family" did not necessarily protect them from being humiliated and fired (p. 92). Although some of the women were repelled by London's increasingly multi-racial population, they consoled themselves by playing up their whiteness vis-à-vis darker-skinned Latinas.

More than a third of Gutierrez's sample of twenty-four women found their way into sex work—apparently because it was more remunerative, not because they were coerced by debt collectors. For Vanessa, who had been raised to make herself beautiful in order to attract a husband, cleaning and cooking came less naturally than stripping in a night club. She referred to her body as a "gold mine," saw commodifying herself in this way as an empowering experience, and, like others, hoped that it would lead to a husband (p. 98).

Sex work had drawbacks. During Gutierrez's research, an oversupply of sex workers was driving down prices. If the women did not wish to share their earnings with managers, they had to rent a private flat to host clients who, in the absence of security back-up, could become dangerous. If sex work did lead to a husband, they would lose their income and also have to worry that he was still sneaking off with other women.

Freedom to experiment with a new life in London was facilitated by distance from home. But it was far easier to deceive distant relatives than fellow Londoners. Certainly, the women could be proud of some things. Aged parents who would have died of shame, had they learned how their daughter was earning money in London, were instead benefitting from remittances that they otherwise would not have received.

But the women were also paying quite a cost. "I am not myself" in London, they told Gutierrez, as opposed to "who I really am"—which they defined in terms of the homeland for

which they now felt nostalgia (p. 4). In their own country, they had lived with their family, but in London, most had been reduced to bedrooms, which were piled high with purchases and which they kept locked to avoid being robbed by apartment mates.

However much these women have commodified their gender as maids or sex workers, Gutierrez concludes, they are pursuing an "ethics of care" (p. 21)—that is, they wrestle with guilt but do whatever is necessary to support their families. All the blame for their complicated lives Gutierrez places on neoliberal capitalism. Thus if Latin American governments had not been forced to cut their budgetary deficits, if the British government would stop cracking down on immigration dodges, if it was easier for these women to obtain full legal status, then they would not have to resort to as many subterfuges, Gutierrez believes, and they would experience better outcomes.

"A Whole Illegal City in London"

If legal status is the fundamental issue, making it easier to obtain therefore should protect migrants from the worst forms of exploitation. That conclusion can also be drawn from a wider look at immigrant London by the British journalist Ben Judah. Judah's Mideastern looks, his command of Romanian, and years of forays into awkward situations have given him access to an array of labor migrants, civil servants who work with them, a Russian trophy wife, a trapped Arab princess, and young criminals, many of them living in London neighborhoods where white Britons are now odd ones out.

Some of Judah's protagonists are Africans and Middle Easterners who only slowly and painfully manage to legalize themselves. Thus, trapped in the heat and steam of a hotel laundry, Nigerians and Ghanians who dreamed of a glamorous life in London now "curse the tricksters who brought them here, or the ones who counterfeited their visas, or passports, and left them in this lurch, in the hidden city of illegal workers" (p. 45).

"They was all lying" declares Akwese, a short-order cook whose cousin told him that he could save £3,000 a month in London and send it home, and that in six months he could become an international businessman (p. 88). Akwese's plan was to import and export clothing. "But nobody had explained to me about the papers," he told Judah. "Like most Africans, I did not even know I needed the work papers" (p. 89). And so, when he and his wife arrived on student visas, their 5 years of savings vanished in 3 weeks, and they had no choice but to go work in basements, to pay back the relatives who had financed their naïve journey.

Complicating the hope that easier legal status will help people like Akwese is the startling number of different migration streams that converge on London, in the belief that it is a mini-America of opportunity that will transform their lives. One group that gets poor reviews in Judah's book are Romanians, who constitute the second largest European nationality (after Poles) in Britain. When Judah visits fifteen Romanians jammed into a house, the majority have been reduced to day labor, which requires hanging around a construction supply store in the hope that someone will hire them.

When large numbers of Romanians began to arrive, according to Judah, they underbid the Russians and Poles who preceded them, with the result that wages dropped by half to seven pounds an hour. Now they too are being underbid, and wages are supposedly dropping to four pounds an hour. "Look at this park," a Romanian complains. "You'd think you're in Pakistan. Just look at them everywhere. All these shops in Arabic. This was not what I expected" (p. 154). Many of the people competing for jobs in Judah's London (2013–2015) were legal and had the right to work. If so, then legal status alone will not alleviate an oversupply of labor attracted to a magnet city.

One of Judah's angles is how Britain's official doctrine of multiculturalism becomes a veneer for power structures that subvert civil liberties. "When I started," a schoolteacher tells him, "I knew there would be migration, but I never thought there would be this, this much, so much migration, that there would be barriers like this, between me, and the children… and a lot of barriers that affect students' learning….I never imagined the barriers" (p. 288). From Nigeria, the teacher is now a lonely outpost of British culture in a school where 10% of the students are white Britons and 80% speak English as a second language. Officially this school is defined as multicultural, but how that works out in practice is defined by Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims who are not cultural relativists.

Thus Muslim girls at the school lead two lives. One is defined by London popular culture and the other by their very conservative parents. And so parents are subjecting their girls to arranged marriages. Other youth are imported from Bangladesh to be exploited by relatives: thus, Judah hears of one lad that "his family they just immigrated him" to work for an aunt in London (p. 284).

US Diversity Visas as a Gaming Industry

Like migrants hoping for a better life in London, the West Africans in Charles Piot's *The Fixer* hanker for America, but they do not arrive on tourist visas. Piot is an anthropologist like Gutierrez. His guide and co-author is Kodjo Nicolas Batema, a citizen of Togo who makes his living from an odd feature of the US immigration system, the visa lottery.

The lottery dates to 1990 legislation authored by Senator Ted Kennedy and other Irish-American politicians who wanted "diversity visas" to favor the Irish and other West Europeans.

However, the primary beneficiaries have been Africans and East Europeans. In 2018, 10.7 million of the 23.1 million applicants were from Africa, and playing a critical role in this international game of chance are brokers like Kodjo.

The most important thing to know about Kodjo's country is that it has been ruled by the same family since 1967. The absence of democracy makes Togo very stable politically but also very corrupt, so social trust is extremely low. Thus in what our anthropologist Piot calls its "hustle economy," no one in his right mind would leave a car at a repair garage (p. 28). If the mechanics are not kept under observation, they will steal or substitute parts. And so the American visa lottery has become a beacon of hope. One year, as many as one of every six Togolese applied for it.

What makes intermediaries like Kodjo crucial is that, while anyone can enter the lottery freeof-charge, a winning What makes intermediaries like Kodjo crucial is that, while anyone can enter the lottery free-of-charge, a winning number is just the first step. Winners do not obtain a visa for themselves, their spouse, and their children unless they (1) fulfill requisites that many Togolese lack, such as a high school education; (2) pass a face-to-face interview at the embassy; and (3) have the funds to pay for their own transportation to the USA. Such costs are far beyond the means of most Togolese. And so Kodjo and other brokers not only coach lottery winners for their embassy interviews and assemble high-quality documentation (much of it false); they also arrange the financing.

You might think that Kodjo and his competitors are big moneylenders. But once safe in the USA, winners have little incentive to repay. Instead, Kodjo arranges for Togolese who have already reached the USA to pay the winners' expenses in exchange for sham marriages with their own relatives whom they wish to join them.

Kodjo's innovations, lovingly detailed by his anthropologist, include mass marketing the lottery to rural high schools previously untouched by migration fever. He also signs up entrants free-of-charge, thereby "owning" the application. This maximizes his freedom to assign phony dependents who have the best chance of convincing consular officers that they are genuine. When a marketing trip to Burkina Faso goes awry and Kodjo spends 3 months in jail, US diplomats also try to bag Piot, who professes shock! But his explanation of Togolese morality is important. For Togolese in their highly competitive environment, he explains, concealment is a necessary defense against jealousy and spiritual attack. The value that Americans place on truth-telling, Piot ventures, Togolese place on the opposite value of artful deception.

The complexities of faking marriages and children, and making this convincing enough to fool consular officers, give Kodjo's cases as many twists as a Shakespearean comedy. Here's an example of "conjugal acrobatics" in Kodjo's own words:

After arriving in the U.S., the woman will divorce her visa spouse before returning to Lomé to remarry her husband and apply for a visa for him and an older daughter of theirs. However, since the consulate's registry has her married to another man without [a] daughter, she won't be able to claim their daughter as hers. Instead, her husband will say she's a daughter from a previous marriage and will have to generate the appropriate papers—a birth certificate with another 'wife's' name on it and a letter from that imaginary wife allowing him to take "their" daughter to the U.S. (pp. 65, 70)

Piot mirrors the sporting attitude of his co-author Kodjo but admits that there are losers. Among the most obvious are spouses. Buoyed by a prosperous future in the USA, visa couples not infrequently fall in love at the expense of their actual spouses, who are not necessarily informed of the proceedings until it is too late to object. The outcome "can be particularly difficult for women," Piot concedes, "with some even developing 'psychosis'" (p. 153). Whether they are in the USA or Togo, the power differentials in West African marriages make it harder for women to find reliable partners and can produce what he calls "marital apocalypse" (p. 154). Yet sham marriages can become genuine. For example, Kodjo's assistant won the lottery, somehow got through the embassy's fraud filters, and made it to Boston with a visa wife to whom he is still married and with whom he is having children.

Thanks to overtime pay, as well as health insurance and other benefits, many Togolese experience the USA as a rocket ship of opportunity. After just 4 years, a truck driver is working 70 hours a week and making $100,000 a year. When Piot asks about racism, most Togolese say they. have not experienced it; ethnicity and gender are their big dividers back home, not race, so they must learn about race from US society. In the meantime, they report more scrapes with black Americans than white ones.

Sadly, Togolese visa winners experience the same downward mobility that most immigrants do. "Most, including some I know who were bankers, teachers, or school principals back home," Piot reports, "work in the U.S. packing meat, sorting luggage at the airport, cleaning toilets in hotels, flipping burgers at McDonald's" (p. 157). Seven hundred work at a single Tyson's plant in the Midwest. Ever anxious about their welcome in the USA, longing for the intense sociability in which they were raised, most say they would go home if it did not mean returning to poverty. "In the U.S. I make a living but I don't have a life" is an expression Piot heard more than once (p. 168). As a result, Piot concludes, the American Dream resides more in Togo than it does in America.

Migrants Renting Their Legal Status to Other Migrants

Kodjo's endeavors illustrate how US visas have become a tradable commodity far beyond the control of the American government. In Kodjo's case, he is selling the legal status obtained by lottery winners to other Togolese. In Togo there

is even a future market in which brokers sell each other promising dossiers for, say, $2,000.

So valuable is US legal status that anyone with access to it arguably has the power to extract "rent" from others who seek it. Rents are extracted when an entitled class derives its income, not from its ability to compete in markets, but from its monopolization of land or other resources. Rentiers are usually visualized as a comfortable upper class, but the term can be applied to anyone who uses control over a resource to extract income from have-nots. In the case of Togolese lottery winners, they can be said to be renting their legal status to others, with the payment consisting of funding for their own trip.

When these transactions lead to "force, fraud, or coercion" as defined by US law, they become human trafficking. Hence cases such as the following were reported by watchdog group Human Rights First:

- In the Afolabi case, traffickers used diversity visas to bring more than twenty Ghanian and Togolese girls to the USA, to work in hair braiding salons in New Jersey. According to Human Rights First, the traffickers paid the expenses of diversity visa winners in exchange for the winners claiming that the girls were their relatives. Once in the USA, the victims were forced to work without pay, prevented from attending school or communicating with family, and beaten or forced to have sex with the traffickers, four of whom eventually went to prison. According to the traffickers, they "had merely been running an apprenticeship program….The traffickers claimed that the girls were treated according to the same strict cultural rules and standards that are typical of most Togolese households" (p.9).
- In the Maksimenko case, traffickers used sham marriages and J-1 student visas to import a dozen Russian, Ukrainian, and Czech women who were told they would work as fashion models. Upon arrival in Detroit, they were told that they were deeply in debt, forced to work as strippers, and beaten if they tried to escape.

Trafficking Victims Who Refuse to Define Themselves as Such

Couldn't this kind of exploitation be avoided by giving legal status to anyone who wants to work in the USA? This would prevent traffickers from trapping victims into illegality and making them afraid to go to the police. But labor exploitation is a function of underlying power disparities, which spring up wherever jobs are scarce and migrants must compete with each other. Such is the case in immigrant enclaves, which often conceal mutual exploitation in ways that prevent enforcement of labor laws.

One example is the massage parlor industry. In 2019 the state of Florida indicted the owner of the New England Patriots, Robert Kraft, for patronizing a suburban massage parlor that turned out to be a brothel. The masseuses were from East Asia, but one was bailed out by a lawyer from Flushing, the Chinatown in New York City's borough of Queens. The entire chains of parlors turned out to be operated by Chinese networks out of Flushing.[1]

An anti-trafficking group called the Polaris Project has published a fascinating profile of the massage-parlor industry. Based on data from the US National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris estimates that more than nine thousand "illicit massage businesses" operate across the USA.

Most of the masseuses are from China and South Korea, with some from Vietnam and Thailand, and they usually arrive on tourism visas. Most are also middle-aged women with children to support. A composite victim says that she divorced an abusive husband and needs money to put her son through school (that is, a high-quality school giving her child a shot at upward mobility). She borrows an average of $9,000 from relatives, obtains a tourism visa, and soon after arriving finds her first massage job. But loans to reach the USA run as high as $40,000, and any misfortune pushes the women deeper into debt.

One avenue into sex work are the discount bus lines that run between America's burgeoning Chinatowns. The passengers include immigrant women on their way to work in ethnic restaurants which have become accustomed to violating labor laws. Such women are easy to spot, so recruiters give them business cards offering much higher pay as masseuses. Explains Polaris:

Once the women realize how little they can earn in their gruelling restaurant jobs, especially after they subtract payments for any debts owed, they will be more likely to show interest in the traffickers' offer. Women who are already falling behind in their debts are even more vulnerable, as they may be facing threats of violence against themselves and their families. (p. 40)

Yet most of these women resist the idea that they are victims of sex trafficking:

[They] do not feel comfortable using the word 'sex' when describing their experiences, preferring to say things like 'the bad massage' or 'the service' instead of 'the place I was made to sell sex' or 'the sex the buyer asked for.' Similarly, the term 'victim of trafficking' does not often resonate with survivors. They might not be aware of its meaning, or they might simply feel that it does not describe their experience. Many trafficking survivors "tend to define themselves not as

[1] Nicholas Kulish, Frances Robles and Patricia Mazzei, "Behind Illicit Massage Parlors Lie a Vast Crime Network and Modern Indentured Servitude," *New York Times,* March 2, 2019 (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/us/massage-parlors-human-trafficking.html)

'victims of trafficking' but simply as 'migrant workers who have had some bad luck as a result of bad decisions or a bad contract'. (p. 27)

If this is how they feel, why define them as trafficking victims? According to Polaris, the critical issue is not the sale of sex per se. Instead, it is labor exploitation. Managers tend to be former sex workers themselves, which means that the industry has a pyramidal aspect, in which individuals rise in the hierarchy by subjecting newcomers to the same abuses that they suffered. Owners and managers—usually Chinese and Korean women with legal status and operating in family groups—do not feel under any obligation to comply with US labor laws. For example, the up-front price paid by the customer often goes entirely to management, not the masseuse, such that she only receives a good tip if she does whatever the customer wants. Some managers pile on fees and penalties, adding to the women's debts and turning them into debt peons.

How Guest Worker Programs Can Also Be Manipulated to Extract Rent

The premise of temporary visas—whether tourist, student, or business—is that holders will not jump into the workforce. If some go ahead and do so, why not just allow them—but with temporary legal status as guest workers? Unfortunately, temporary status sets up power disparities making guest workers almost as likely to be exploited as undocumented ones.

Guest workers also can be deeply in hock to labor recruiters, as occurs with the US government's temporary visas for agricultural and service workers. In low-wage countries, the demand for H-2A (agricultural) and H-2B (service) slots in the USA is so much greater than the supply that you cannot just walk up to a US embassy and apply. If this was possible, the queues would stretch into the millions.

Instead, citizens of low-income countries find out about H-2A and H-2B jobs only through labor recruiters who, in effect, extract rent for this crucial information. In a case reported by Ariel Ramchandani, a woman named Racida learned that she could obtain a $7.50/hour housekeeping job in Florida if she paid a fellow Filipino $800 for the interview at the US embassy. After she booked her flights, the broker exacted another $7,500, which she was obliged to borrow at 25% interest. Once in Florida, Racida went to work for a Marriott hotel in Miramar Beach, but only via a contractor called Coastal Ventures which charged her $147 a week for rent, utilities, and transportation. The job also turned out to be flex rather than fulltime with the result that, working as few as 10 hours per week, Racida did not always earn enough to eat, let alone pay off her debt.[2]

The majority of H-2A and H-2B workers do not fare as badly as Racida, but her story illustrates a quandary at the heart of global mobility: allowing employers to import cheap labor, or allowing tourists to overstay and jump into the labor market, is a recipe for undermining labor standards. Migrants desire higher wages so badly that they are willing to accept conditions that native-born workers will not. Allowing foreigners to take a gamble on these jobs enables Americans and Britons to see themselves as inclusive, welcoming societies. What the migrants end up experiencing is quite different.

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[2] Ariel Ramchandani, "A Horrifying path to America for Hotel Workers," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2018 (https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/03/hotel-workers/554135/)