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## Book review forum: Transnational geographies of the heart

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## **(Re)thinking Privilege through Bickering**

**Sophie Cranston**

In sections of Katie Walsh's *Transnational Geographies of the Heart*, she discusses what could be described as the bickering between partners and falling out between friends. This is part of the 'textures of intimacy' in the lives of British migrants in Dubai—how intimate relations with others, in the context of friendships, relationships and families, both constitute and are re-constituted by the experience of mobility. This then is a book about how intimate lives, or more specifically interpersonal relationships, shape how belonging to a place is negotiated.

I suspect some might ask: why should we be interested in understanding the bickering, friendships and other intimate practices of privileged British migrants? For over a decade now, academics have sought to challenge both academic and popular conceptions of what migration is through the examination of 'expatriate' mobilities (Fechter, 2007; Benson 2010; Fechter and Walsh, 2010; Cranston, 2017). Researchers in this field have reported being asked 'what the point is' of researching privileged migrants, as exploring this type of migration is not deemed worthwhile (see, for example, Cranston and Lloyd 2019). The subjects of Walsh's book are privileged in their global status, their occupations within a stratified labour market, the passports that they hold, often the income that they gain and their ability to bring their family as they migrate. As the rich ethnographic detail through the book demonstrates, some British migrants use their privilege, manifest in their whiteness and affluence, as a resource to navigate and encounter the city in ways that maintain their comfort.

However, bickering points to a key contribution of Walsh's book — the privilege in mobility is contingent. For example, throughout the book, Walsh shows us the gendered nature of privilege. The requirement of pregnant women in Dubai to show a marriage certificate to receive healthcare demonstrates similar fears of pregnancy to any other single (migrant) female in Dubai, having a potential impact upon sexual practices. The gendered nature of the working culture in Dubai means that non-working women feel that their husbands are being removed from domestic life. This is what can result in bickering. Bickering therefore points to a reworking of gender relations in migration, reconfigurations of patriarchies in space. The migrants in Walsh's book may therefore be privileged in comparison to others, but she demonstrates that these privileges are uneven and linked to wider power relations.

Bickering also highlights a second key contribution of the book—that privilege is a practice and not just a possession. In focusing on intimate lives through the lens of emotional geographies, the scale of analysis looks at how the contingencies of privilege are felt and practised through the body. For example, we see how some feel that they are escaping domesticity in the United Kingdom, which manifests itself in promiscuity in Dubai, and how this can intersect with hypermasculine discourses that draw on affluence as a resource. The temporariness of life in Dubai, through visa and citizenship practices which preclude settlement, is felt and practised in superficial friendship practices. For some, the supply of new people to be friends with means that others are easily discarded. One respondent discussed how a friend she played tennis with every week shoved her aside when someone better came along. The ability to have a life where promiscuity can be played out in swanky bars and friendships lost down the tennis club does show privilege, but the role that relationships and friendships play in constructing people's sense of self is human. Looking at

intimate lives therefore contributes to research that shows how privilege plays out in space, but points to how we should be more reflexive in considering how this relates to emotional lives.

Walsh could have demonstrated more reflexivity in framing the book as being about transnational migration. Arguably, migrants are the subject of the book, but not the analytical lens. Hui (2016), in looking at mobility, questions migrant exceptionalism—the framing of migration as being of primary importance in understanding the everyday lives of people who move. In Walsh's book, mobility is arguably important, as the intimacies discussed are produced both by being in, and moving to, a different spatial context. Walsh highlights that it through mobility that the significance of intimacy is uncovered. Yet this is a point that we can make about any move whether it crosses international borders or not. For example, many early career academics may recognise the challenges of being away from established relationships through fixed-term contracts that render them transient in a location. I certainly recognised some of the challenges of friendships I faced, how the other early-career friends who made up my social network were also moving through as opposed to settling in a location. Therefore, the intimacies discussed throughout the book help explain more how the subjects of the book make sense of their belonging in Dubai, a different spatial context, than what migration itself means. Many of the respondents in the book don't even consider themselves migrants (or expatriates). The book is therefore arguably about intimacies felt and practised through mobility, of which migration is one example. The intimacies discussed are given the label of migration, but it could be anyone. Walsh does hint at this in relation to the geographies of intimacy, writing about the need 'to understand intimacy in the production of selves for the spatialization of everyday life, whether migrants or not' (p153). However, a framing of the wider geographies of intimacy would have further demonstrated the value of understanding practices like bickering. The book shows that the personal is political, by showing the relationship between intimacies, the self and power more broadly.

This latter point also would have been further evident if Walsh's own bickering was more present in the book, though this is not a criticism. In the ethnographic sections, we see some of her relationships, for example, her attempts to understand the thinking behind her flatmate's gentleman's evening. However, she has actively chosen not to include her own intimate feelings and closest friendships in the book. Part of her absence is described, quite rightly, as a need to have a work-life balance. Her closest friends were friends, and not research. By extension, I would imagine that a choice not to include her own intimacies in a 'work' book, is a way to separate life from work. Occupying a similar positionality as your research subjects, it must be challenging to think about the geographies of intimacy without seeing yourself in it—Walsh does highlight how her analysis could not be separated from her wider experiences. I completely understand why Walsh chose to directly take her own experiences from the book; academia increasingly demands so much of your life that boundaries need to be set. However, she does suggest that she actively resisted the Dubai expat (British migrant) stereotype. I would have liked more discussion of how this resistance played out at the scale of her intimate life. For example, I was reminded of my own experiences conducting fieldwork with a similar group—British migrants in Singapore—and how one incident of bickering with my flatmates helped me think through different positionalities and the conflicts I had as a researcher. This is a point that methodological papers looking at the geographies of intimacy could draw upon.

Therefore, to return to the question of why we should be interested in the bickering and falling out between privileged friends, *Transnational Geographies of the Heart* raises interesting questions about intimacies, privilege, mobility and how these relate to space. Through bickering, we see how the assumed privileges of people are unequal and how privilege can be felt, clearly highlighting the need to understand privilege as intersectional. The respondents' privilege often results from their migration to Dubai. However, the intimacies discussed in the book are much wider than this. Walsh shows how the movement of people from one location to another disrupts and uncovers the relationships that are important to people's sense of self and wellbeing. It is in this way that we can see the contingencies of privilege even more broadly — that privilege is not manifest in all everyday intimacies and relationships, but plays out differently both between people and within people's lives. Bickering therefore highlights why we should be interested in the small everyday practices of life, a point that Walsh so clearly demonstrates throughout the book.

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