

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



**Pallavi Banerjee, The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program (New York: nyu Press, 2022)**

Neda Maghbouleh

Volume 91, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102186ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0027>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Maghbouleh, N. (2023). Review of [Pallavi Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program* (New York: nyu Press, 2022)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 91, 336–338.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0027>

the mark, though I suspect some readers may take issue with his rather cavalier description of the “banal instrumentality” (100) of light-skinned Blacks “passing” as white to avoid segregation and discrimination, whether temporarily or permanently. Surely, such efforts to navigate Jim Crow took an emotional toll. Indeed, remarkably, Reed’s otherwise forthcoming memoir remains almost entirely silent on the phenomenon of “colorism,” an ideology that did much to infuse class politics with racial phenotype, not least in New Orleans. Then again, as he remarks in another context, sometimes we just want to “get our oyster sandwiches and go home.” (115)

ALEX LICHTENSTEN  
Indiana University, Bloomington

**Pallavi Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program* (New York: NYU Press, 2022)**

PALLAVI BANERJEE’S *The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program* is a thoughtful, compassionate, and richly detailed study of the lived experiences of racialized, high-skilled migrant families in the United States. The book is comprised of seven chapters that pull off the feat of explaining and critiquing American immigration policy towards migrant workers and their families through thick description from the author’s interviews with and observations of 55 married heterosexual couples hailing from India. From within her analysis of an immigration and labour regime characterized by severe governmentality, gendered and racialized subordination and surveillance, and intense stress placed on workers’ personal lives, Banerjee vividly describes everyday people’s struggles and failures

to affirm their personal dignity and build a good life under such conditions.

Core to Banerjee’s research design is her novel comparison of two different types of migrant worker households: those in which the “lead” migrant (i.e., the spouse holding a skilled worker visa) is a man who works in information technology (IT) versus a woman who works in nursing. This important variation allows Banerjee to trace how gender and occupation (and the concomitant caste, class, linguistic, religious, and regional diversity among her study participants) interact with the visa regime to change how spouses relate with one another and feel about themselves following migration. Banerjee’s other key innovation is to focus significant scholarly attention on the “trailing” spouse, extending the earlier inquiries of scholars like Payal Banerjee (2006) and Bandana Purkayastha (2005). Under U.S. immigration policy, the trailing spouse necessarily holds a subordinate legal status through the H-4 dependent visa, which prohibits the holder from employment or obtaining a Social Security Number. Banerjee’s crucial decision to focus especially on the women and men who are configured and labeled as “dependent” provides her readers with productive sightlines into the imbrication of labour with personhood and citizenship. It also reflects Banerjee’s political and ethical commitment to an intersectional sociology that centers the margins, a theme that recurs throughout the book.

*The Opportunity Trap* begins with “The Anatomy of State-Imposed Dependence,” a gripping introductory chapter that introduces readers to Banerjee’s thoughtful, empathic rapport with the fifty-five couples in her study and her careful analysis of their collective and individual dehumanization under what Banerjee terms the American “gendered and racialized visa regime.” The introduction also situates the study vis-à-vis relevant

theoretical frameworks in sociology like Cecilia Menjivar's "liminal legality" (2006) and "legal violence" (2012) and Barbara Risman (2004) and Raewyn Connell's (1987) respective theorizations of gender as multi-level and structural. In an especially poignant section of the introduction called "Standpoint Dilemmas," the author places readers alongside herself in an immigration queue in an American airport in 2005. Banerjee's introspective lens on herself and her role as a researcher is warranted and does not distract from the study; every personal detail is there for a reason.

The first substantive chapter, "The Visa Regime: Indian Migration and the Interplay of Race and Gender," provides a succinct history of immigration laws and Asian migration to the US and defines key terms relating to the employment, migratory, and legal statuses of her study participants. Banerjee also weaves in relevant feminist of colour critiques of global capitalism. This is an especially useful reference chapter for early career scholars who would benefit from an overview of scholarly literature at the nexus of labour, gender, and migration. It is also notable for two helpful tables that Banerjee assembles to compare visa characteristics and display trends in the allocation of U.S. visas to high-skilled foreign workers. In Chapter 2, "Model Migrants and Ideal Workers: How Visa Laws Penalize and Control," Banerjee engages political scientist Mark Salter's concept of the "global visa regime" as she provides ethnographic detail on dependent spouses' interactions with the state. These fraught interactions occur in front-line border settings like visa interviews but also in interior settings like local bureaucratic offices (e.g., obtaining a state-issued driver's license), where dependent spouses must navigate significant administrative burdens without legal access to identity documents like a social security

number, or having one's name on a utility bill, or other acceptable "proof" of one's personhood. Chapter 3, "Beholden to Employers: Gendered and Racialized Dependence," shifts attention to the high-skilled worker spouses. Banerjee draws on study participants' knowing reflections, shared in interviews, on how their labour power is exploited by the employers to whom they are, through binding employment contracts and precarious legal statuses, effectively indentured. Chapter 4, "At Home: Dependent Spouses and Divisions of Labour," brings readers to the kitchen tables of Banerjee's study participants, where men and women narrated their troubles and kept detailed time diaries of their daily chores, including carework. Banerjee allows her study participants' voices to shine in this chapter, as with Mili, a dependent spouse of a tech worker. When Banerjee asks her to compare her life before and after migration, Mili offers self-aware, deadpan diagnoses like "My life is now boring as hell." (172) Chapter 5, "Transcultural Cultivation: A New Form of Parenting," is the last substantive chapter of the book. Here, Banerjee draws on observations of parent-child dynamics within households, including information about children's weekly schedules, to challenge archetypes around both middle-class and Asian immigrant parenting. Because of her study participants' liminal social positions as visa-holding, racialized and marginalized migrant workers, she argues that it is not possible nor sufficient to understand their parenting styles as adhering to authoritarian, permissive, or straightforward "concerted cultivation" scripts. More than pure class reproduction, the "transcultural cultivation" parenting style is at once deeply transnational and fundamentally unstable. This is Banerjee's most exploratory chapter, with intriguing unfinished threads for future scholars to pursue related to children,

grandparents and extended families in India, and transcultural cultivation as a form of labour and carework. The conclusion, “Dismantling Dependence,” discusses the implications of rising authoritarian and revanchist politics in the US and India and offers suggestions for reforming the Visa system.

*The Opportunity Trap* is highly teachable and would work well in undergraduate and graduate University courses related to work, migration, gender, and the family. Scholars who teach courses on labour will appreciate the countless examples of how immigration pathways tied to labour and dependency erode ordinary peoples’ sense of self-worth and their intimate ties with others. Scholars with research interests in power and labour may be especially keen to extend ideas from this book into an accounting of the opportunities and challenges of solidaristic organizing or labour activism among high-skilled workers and their dependents. Rigorous, heartfelt, and intersectional, *The Opportunity Trap* is an important contribution.

NEDA MAGHBOULEH

University of Toronto

**Helen Johnston, Barry Godfrey, and David J. Cox, *Penal Servitude: Convicts and Long-Term Imprisonment, 1853-1948* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022)**

*PENAL SERVITUDE* provides an extensive look at the convict system, which persisted for almost a century, a crucial phase in penal history sandwiched between the transportation of convicts and the emergence of the ‘modern’ prison. In attempting a history of such a sprawling set of practices and ideologies, the authors take both a chronological and a thematic approach. The book traces the origins, expansion, and eventual demise of penal

servitude as a sanction while also presenting themed chapters that focus on subjects such as life inside the prison, class, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter 1 presents the ‘early origins’ of what would become the convict prison system. As is now understood, there was a need for a ‘home-grown’ answer to the question of punishment once the transportation of convicts abroad was coming to an end. The authors convincingly show that transportation did not so much ‘end’ as gradually dwindle to nothingness. Administrators, nevertheless, could see the direction of travel and were presented with a significant, albeit forced, opportunity to re-imagine punishment. Chapter 2 continues the examination of the beginnings of the convict system, zeroing in on the practicalities of ‘building the convict prison estate’ and exploring the first 25 years of this new regime. What the book successfully does is draw out just how much was repurposed from the system of transportation, and how ideas and innovations that had once been applied to convicts going to Australia could be modified and applied to those being sent to convict prisons in Britain.

Chapters 3 and 4 review the evidence on what life in the convict prison was like, taking in the everyday but essential concerns such as regime, labour, and education, an overview of progression and resistance, and a look at the health and diet of convicts. These chapters present a sense of the parameters of convict prison life that structured an inmate’s time, tracing how these shifted according to the various reforms enacted over the decades. For example, these chapters examine the confounding system of marks and progressive stages, the various ways of classifying and categorizing prisoners, and attempts to impose meaning on the prison population through a system of semiotics that extended to all aspects of prison life, including dress and diet.