Kristy A. Belton, *Statelessness in the Caribbean: The Paradox of Belonging in a Post-national World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. xii + 288 pp. (Cloth US\$75.00)

Statelessness in the Caribbean is a seminal book that will be a reference for future research in the fast emerging field of statelessness. Kristy Belton offers a new theoretical perspective and proposes compelling directions to reduce statelessness around the world. She argues that statelessness is not an issue related to migration, but rather “a form of forced displacement in situ” (p. 14). Stateless people are not migrants, they are “displaced in place,” in most cases living in the country in which they and their ancestors were born. Belton, a political scientist, supports her thesis with detailed ethnographic studies she conducted in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas.

Statelessness has been framed and contested mainly in reference to the work of Hannah Arendt, for whom our humanity is defined by the very fact of belonging to a polity that grants political and human rights to its members. Possessing a nationality and being a citizen, Arendt argues, are crucial to access such rights, whether individual or collective. Belton reminds us of two rebuttals to Arendt’s views that deny the impact of not being a citizen for access to rights and protection. The first is a postnational perspective claiming that it is not necessary to be a citizen of a country in today’s borderless world in order to be granted the same rights and protections as any other individual. The second one contends that, due to our multiple memberships in today’s polity, having formal citizenship is not a necessary condition to access any rights. Belton considers both views overly optimistic.

The 1954 U.N. Convention defined a stateless person as “a person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law.” Individuals of Haitian descent who were born and live in the Dominican Republic or in the Bahamas either find themselves stateless at birth or, in the case of the Dominican Republic, have been denationalized in virtue of the contemporary interpretation of former laws. They live what Belton calls a form of “rooted displacement” (p. 15). Both physically and legally immobilized, they can neither cross borders nor move on in their life due to a lack of legal identity. Belton’s in-depth descriptions and analysis of the Dominican and Bahamian situations are based on interviews with state officials, public servants, lawyers, and stateless individuals. The historical approach to the study of law that she develops in both cases shows how fragile national belonging is, and how embedded in racial, gender, and class power relations—even when it comes to getting a birth certificate.

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Based on a discussion of the literature on global distributive justice and “just membership,” Belton argues that statelessness falls within the scope of a global distributive justice because “it is an issue of citizenship not being distributed at all” (p. 164), though citizenship is both a human right proclaimed by international conventions and the condition to access rights, freedoms, and protections. Statelessness would not exist if international law recognized the “right to individual self-determination” (p. 168) in belonging to the state of birth or residence in the same way that it recognized the right to collective self-determination that led to the independence of formerly colonized countries.

Statelessness in the Caribbean provides a conceptual framework to describe and address comparisons for situations that are otherwise denied or made invisible by the state—such as in the case of France, which categorizes overseas stateless individuals as undocumented migrants or as residents in a situation of a “legal insecurity.” The French state is still incapable, or unwilling, to provide birth certificates to many people who were born in the overseas departments of French Guiana and Mayotte and many of whose families were the first inhabitants of these territories—Amerindians and Maroons in the case of French Guiana and former colonial subjects in the case of Mayotte. Those people are indeed immobilized in “rooted displacement,” both physically and legally.

By characterizing statelessness as a form of displacement in situ, Belton’s book contributes not only to studies of statelessness and citizenship, but also to the field of migration and mobility that has recently come to consider globalization less as the free circulation of capital, goods, and people than as the nonmovement of people. Any scholar or student interested in those questions, whether in the Caribbean or elsewhere, would benefit greatly from reading it.

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