


BOOK REVIEW

***Shelter on the Journey.* By Priscilla Solano. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2024. ISBN 1439921520**

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In *Shelter on the Journey*, Priscilla Solano presents an account of humanitarian practice and human rights defense work within nongovernmental shelters that assist people migrating through Mexico, primarily from Central America. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in 2012, Solano examines how humanitarian actors navigated a formative period for what Solano refers to as Mexico’s “double-edged” immigration policies. A year before Solano’s fieldwork, the Mexican Government finalized a federal immigration law reform that decriminalized irregular migration and promoted a discourse of defending migrant’s human rights. Simultaneously, US-backed border securitization programs like the Mérida Initiative intensified policing along transit corridors and increased migrant’s dependence on criminalized smuggling networks, as well as their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of corrupt officials and organized crime. In recent years, shelters have been key sites where irregular migration has been made visible during periods of acute public attention, such as the so-called “unaccompanied minors crisis” in 2015 and the migrant caravans of 2018. Rather than approaching shelters primarily as a site for observing migration, however, *Shelter on the Journey* focuses attention on the roles that a range of humanitarian and human rights actors play in addressing contradictions of compassion and repression that characterize Mexico’s “double-edged” immigration policies.

A central contribution of the book is Solano’s examination of the politics of “dignifying transit” within Mexico’s shelter movement. Early in the book, Solano outlines the ambivalent relationship between Western, more institutionalized forms of humanitarianism and the more grassroots and generally faith-based tradition out of which most shelters across Mexico have emerged. Solano shows how an apolitical and ahistorical “emergency imaginary” that characterizes much Western-dominated humanitarianism sits in tension with a decidedly political approach within shelters. “Dignifying transit,” Solano argues, approaches irregular mobility as the consequence of structural socioeconomic hierarchies and seeks to hold state actors accountable for abuses against migrants. In this way, “dignifying transit” subverts the tendency for Western humanitarianism to view irregular mobility as a relatively isolated crisis and as a security threat, framings that align paradoxically with state projects of border securitization. A highlight of Solano’s analysis in this vein is her examination in

Chapter 3 of tensions between “warm” forms of humanitarianism that are driven by a moral imperative to care for the stranger – particularly the impoverished stranger – and “dry” forms of humanitarianism that revolve around state logics of safety and threat.

In later chapters, Solano focuses on challenges associated with providing humanitarian aid to people who both depend on and suffer at the hands of criminal actors while migrating through Mexico, including smugglers and corrupt state officials. In Chapter 4, Solano shows how border securitization – and the vilification of smugglers in particular – renders shelters vulnerable to attacks from a variety of state and non-state actors. Shelters, Solano argues, tread a precarious line as they seek to help migrants who are perceived as criminals by virtue of their proximity to illicit actors without drawing retribution from criminal actors by disrupting their business interests. Paradoxically, as Solano shows in Chapter 5, legal tools such as Mexico’s humanitarian visa, which provide temporary status regularization to migrant crime victims in exchange for cooperating in police investigations, also short circuit justice to the extent that they revolve primarily around prosecuting crimes rather than offering meaningful protections, let alone dignity, to survivors of various abuses.

Solano’s focus on humanitarian actors is an important contribution to a body of scholarship that has often relied on shelters as a point of access while overlooking the work of shelter itself. That said, Solano offers limited insight into migrants’ viewpoints and does not elaborate on why this decision was made. This feels like a significant omission given that many people who arrive in shelters as migrants later become key members of shelter teams. Solano mentions conducting interviews with more than 100 migrants as part of her fieldwork and acknowledges not including direct quotes of people migrating. There are likely meaningful and nuanced ethical and practical decisions behind this choice, but Solano does not explain why she decided to exclude this substantial body of data. Solano also provides only limited insight into her positionality and the ethnographic decisions she made in navigating fieldwork with vulnerable interlocutors, migrants and humanitarian actors alike. This leaves me wondering about the book’s quite heavy reliance on interviews with leading humanitarian actors, particularly Father Alberto, a key protagonist who Solano describes as enjoying a national and international audience. How, for example, did the choice to focus on Father Alberto’s perspective shape Solano’s ability to gain insight into others’ experiences, including migrants and shelter actors with contrasting and perhaps competing points of view? While interviews with such key actors allow for insight into the complicated moral and political landscape that surrounds shelters at a high level, I found myself wanting to see more grounded and everyday ethnographic insight into how such ideas were put into practice at the time of Solano’s fieldwork.

Ultimately, *Shelter on the Journey* expands our understanding of the critical role that humanitarian actors play in shaping irregular migration through Mexico. The book contributes a rich examination of how efforts to “dignify transit” work within but also subvert Western humanitarianism and state border securitization efforts.