

Book Review of Solano, Priscilla. 2024. *Shelter on the Journey: Humanitarianism, Human Rights, and Migration*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 188 pp.



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BOOK REVIEW

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As the intricacies of global migration continue to expand, so does the discourse surrounding migrant identity, transit, and policy. As a result, our understanding of this human phenomenon further unfurls; however, there remain various contradictions and developing actors in the process of migration that rarely emerge at the forefront of these discussions. Irregular migrants are those who fall outside of the legal frameworks of protected migration and are commonly the subject of extreme violence; as such, they are often omitted from implementations of aid and support in dignified transit. In turn, a varied network of humanitarian and human rights actors steps forward to provide both tangible and symbolic assistance with diverse social implications.

In *Shelter on the Journey: Humanitarianism, Human Rights, and Migration*, Priscilla Solano details her analysis of those within the fringe of migration who are directly affected by shifting Western migration policies, power asymmetries, and the intentions and actions of humanitarian actors and environments, through the lens of migrant shelters in Mexico. These ‘casas del migrante’ not only serve as Solano’s backdrop for her ethnographic research but also orient the exploration of the physical, social, and symbolic elements of transit and solidarity presented throughout the book. Behind the practical and emotional support of these shelters stand humanitarian actors and their concomitant agendas that directly impact the experiences of those within and surrounding the shelter. Although there is often an emphasis on violence at the border between the United States and Mexico, both in research and popular discourse, this book contributes to the field of migration with detailed accounts of humanitarian sites. In situating this book within the migrant realm of those transiting in and/or through Mexico, Solano highlights the incongruous demands from the Global North for migration reform, framed through ‘liberal notions of freedom’ (p. 40), which in turn enforce a depiction of migration (as a whole) as a precarious threat to be handled. This book consistently opposes the notion of migration as a threat or problem to be solved, and rather aims to highlight the power of social and civil solidarity, care and hospitality, and assistance of mobility to migrants through various actors.

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Shelter on the Journey unfolds in five key chapters, as Solano unpacks the policies, mobility themes, and humanitarian involvement surrounding migration as it centers around the physical and symbolic concept of the shelter: an opportunity for support and humanity along the migrant's journey. Solano outlines the emergence of humanitarianism and human rights in shelters and their varying roots in religious institutions, Western ideologies of humanitarian aid, and political agendas. She presents the invaluable role that humanitarian actors play in this context, with a specific analysis of religious institutions, which she argues currently bolster civil and social solidarity in Mexico, while historically employing an approach to 'care' that enforced oppressive ideologies harmful to certain groups and identities. As such, this book supplements similar research regarding social relations and power between migrants and those providing aid (e.g., [Stein 2022](#)). This critical approach is representative of Solano's double-edged analysis of both the help and harm circulated throughout the political, human rights, and humanitarian networks that intersect on the ground.

In Chapter 2, Solano provides the reader with a clear picture of day-to-day life in the shelter and the social dynamics among humanitarian actors (volunteers) and migrants through her depiction of La Esperanza, a prominent shelter providing hospitality for migrants in transit in Mexico. A strength of the book lies in Solano's ability to weave narrative elements from her fieldwork into larger discussions such as human rights violations, humanitarian solidarity, and the politics of intervention. A key figure in this narration is Father Alberto, the head of La Esperanza. Father Alberto is a looming presence throughout this book; his stories and experiences speckled throughout the chapters ground the more clinical, legal aspects of irregular migration back into the humanity of this experience. Father Alberto's words connect the reader to the optimistic position many actors hold, while simultaneously presenting the harsh realities migrants may face on their journey: invisibility, exposure, and violence.

Throughout the book, Solano approaches her fieldwork and discussions through a social constructivist lens, identifying and dissecting her accounts with a focus on both the practical and symbolic elements of shelters within a cycle of social intentions and interactions. This framework is applied most distinctively in Solano's analysis of how diverse humanitarian agendas often result in 'fragmented services' (p. 104) in the shelter. Solano touches upon the specific agendas, including repatriation, informing migrants of their human rights through the lens of security issues, and spiritual and healthcare support. What results is Solano's argument that the shelter stands as an 'oxymoronic site of compassion and repression, threat and human worth. It empowers and disempowers; it opens the doors to victims and heroes but also to criminals, humanitarian action, human rights, and actors linked to the INM [National Institute for Migration]' (p. 104).

To further expand upon this subject of 'criminals' and illegalities of migration, Solano explores the 'industry' of migration in Chapter 4, as it pertains to such criminalization of the migrant, illicit actors, and even those providing aid or assistance. The obstacles faced by irregular migrants are compounded by imbalances of power between the Global North and Global South. Solano points out how the criminal activity and industry of migration is, in actuality, 'globally produced and legitimized by state signatories' (p. 110). A consistent throughline of this book is a critique of state-enforced restrictions that place certain migrant groups at higher risk of danger at the hands of the industry of migration due to a lack of legal protection. Solano's discussion of the

industry of migration in this book can be connected further to research regarding the risks, legal obstacles, and safety of migrants in transit (e.g., Sørensen 2018). In turn, Solano points out the idea that the humanitarian actors are engaging in illegal acts themselves in providing aid to those who lack legal protection in transit. Such work reinforces humanitarian actors as standing in defiance of harmful, state-enforced images of migrants as threats to society.

Solano brings the book to a close with a discussion regarding migrant identity, the role of poverty in perpetuating a cycle of violence, and finally, her advocating for free transit. While each of these topics are key elements in the complex web of migration, this chapter reads in a disjointed manner. By opening a discussion of the former two elements in the final chapter, this reads as an afterthought rather than key background information that would likely have proven more effective in the introduction of this book. Migrant identity and the role of poverty in migration are both increasingly popular points of research in the field; however, Solano does not create a strong connection in these discussions to the concept of the shelter along the journey. These are both aspects of the book that have room for further unpacking, if not left for separate works from Solano.

In her final thoughts, Solano stresses once again the human right to dignified transit, and state institutions' suppression and illegalization of such mobility. However, this book rounds off on a hopeful note. Readers are reminded of the power of care and advocacy as connected to social networks, promoting solidarity and hope to those in transit. Solano brings to life abstract concepts of migration by presenting multidimensional figures who represent the challenges and experiences of migrants researched in the field. This book is well suited for those versed in key concepts of migration and humanitarianism, as well as those interested in policy, human rights, and advocacy. This book would benefit those studying and researching in these fields, specifically in relation to Solano's unique fieldwork experiences and anthropological approach. Overall, Solano's balance of narration, critique, and research provide valuable insights into the dualities within the world of migration as it pertains to shelter on the journey.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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