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Accepted for publication in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2023.2290449>

Title

The Shelter Multiple: How Humanitarianisms Hang Together at a Mexican Non-Governmental Migrant Shelter

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Keywords

Humanitarianism, violence, information, ontology, Mexico, Central America

Abstract

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork at a nongovernmental migrant shelter in Mexico to examine how aid workers coordinate apparently contradictory humanitarian orientations. Prior research has called attention to the institutionalization of grassroots humanitarian organizations as they take on the work of categorizing migrants as either “good” or “bad,” “worthy” or “unworthy.” Studies also call attention to initiatives that oppose such institutionalization, with a particular focus on highly mediated acts of civil disobedience. We argue that in Mexico, where the ambiguous line between state and criminal authority makes such explicit claims potentially damaging and dangerous, knowledge practices that seem to signal the institutionalization of otherwise grassroots spaces—the work of registering, classifying, and documenting migrants—are also central to how aid workers discretely subvert such deservingness distinctions without taking explicit and potentially damaging moral and political stances. Our analysis engages with science and technology studies scholarship that understands knowledge practices to be performative in that knowing migration produces the reality that it describes, rather than merely reflecting a taken-for-granted reality. We suggest that attending to how aid workers enact and coordinate information about migrants illuminates how aid workers simultaneously resist and reify distinct legal and moral regimes in violent contexts.

Introduction

Critical migration scholarship has long examined how humanitarian discourses of a singular universal humanity purport to depoliticize migration governance (Agier 2010; Fassin 2005; Feldman and Ticktin 2010). Much of this scholarship has focused on the role of non-governmental humanitarian organizations in ‘migration management,’ what can be defined as a global policy discourse that frames migration governance as an affirmative technical process ‘beyond politics,’ rather than only a matter of security and exclusion (Geiger and Pécoud 2010; Hyndman 2000). This scholarship contends that while humanitarian organizations are generally understood to be benevolent, compassionate, and politically neutral, they are often beholden to funding interests and policy goals of migration management (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014; Cuttitta 2020), what Lafazani (2018, 906) describes as the “NGO-ization of migration management.

At the same time, a growing body of research has examined various forms of grassroots activism and political mobilization that resist conditions imposed by governments under the auspices of migration management (Mezzadra 2020; Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Brković 2023). This work calls attention to solidarity initiatives such as independent sea-rescue operations in the Mediterranean (Cusumano and Bell 2021) and anti-eviction housing squats in Italy and Greece (Dadusc, Grazioli, and Martínez 2019; Karaliotas and Kapsali 2021) that seek to foster migrant autonomy and subvert institutionalized forms of humanitarianism that are seen as disciplining, depoliticizing, and commodifying migrants’ lives. Less attention, however, has been paid to how these multiple humanitarianisms coexist within migrant-serving NGOs, particularly in the global south and ‘safe third countries’ where NGOs play a pivotal role in operationalizing the “externalization” or outsourcing of migration management to traditional sending and transit countries (Crane 2020; Andersson 2014; Pallister-Wilkins 2022).

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork at a nongovernmental migrant shelter in Central Mexico, which we refer to as La Casita, to examine how aid workers coordinate multiple humanitarianisms in the context of everyday humanitarian aid work. La Casita is one of several dozen nongovernmental migrant shelters that loosely parallel major rail and highway arteries throughout Mexico. These migrant shelters have historically facilitated transit migration by providing short-term shelter, food, and first aid, as well as advocating around migrants’ rights to migrate with dignity (García 2006; Casillas 2011; Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017). As the Mexican government has intensified immigration enforcement along transit corridors, due in large part to pressure from the United States government to deter transit migration, the number of people seeking long-term aid in migrant shelters while navigating months-long process humanitarian status determination processes has increased dramatically. As prior research demonstrates, having humanitarian recognition allows migrants to move across space and travel more freely, even if the goal of some of those who apply for these documents is to ultimately arrive at the United States (Frank-Vitale 2023). Between 2012 and 2022, the number of people seeking asylum in Mexico increased dramatically from less than 2,000 annual applications in 2012 to nearly 125,000 in 2023 (UNHCR 2023).

Recent scholarship on migrant shelters in Mexico points to tensions that have emerged as shelters have increasingly transformed from volunteer-based grassroots transit spaces to professionalized asylum spaces that are increasingly oriented to pressures and incentives from transnational humanitarian institutions that fund asylum access work (Basok and Candiz 2020;

Angulo-Pasel 2022; París-Pombo 2022). These tensions, which revolve around whether migrant shelters should be subversive spaces or more institutionalized spaces, became particularly visible in the context of the 2018 migrant caravans, which relied on migrant shelters as waystations. For some, the caravans were a high-water moment that brought new attention to long-standing yet less mediated acts of civil disobedience emerging out of migrant shelters, including earlier caravans (Frank-Vitale 2023; Frank-Vitale and Núñez-Chaim 2020; Varela Huerta 2020). Others, however, expressed concerns that such public attention undermined the safety and legitimacy of migrant shelters by destabilizing shelters' growing relationships with government institutions, particularly Mexico's Refugee Commission (COMAR) (Vonk 2022). These tensions are structured by a history of violent retaliation against migrants and migrant rights activists by state institutions and criminal organizations, which at various moments have acted in concert and with impunity (Vogt 2018; Frank-Vitale 2023; P. Martínez 2013). The migrant route through Mexico is always changing. Government checkpoints move, criminal organizations take and lose new territories, and new shelters appear or are closed (Vogt 2018). Actors also take on different identities. People who started off as migrants become smugglers or start collaborating with organized crime or state agents collude with criminals to extort people on the move (Frank-Vitale 2020; Vogt 2013). The ever-changing nature of the road and of its actors generates a sense of uncertainty, mistrust, and threat among migrants (Díaz de León 2023; Vogt 2018; Brigden 2017).

We suggest that in this context of violence and uncertainty, where the line between state institutions and criminal groups is often opaque, understanding how aid workers negotiate multiple and at times contradictory humanitarian orientations requires an analytic approach that is distinct from much existing scholarship that has primarily examined tensions between institutional and vernacular humanitarianisms by focusing on relatively public-facing acts civil disobedience such as migrant caravans.¹ We call attention to knowledge practices enacted by shelter workers in the context of everyday humanitarian aid work—the work of registering, classifying, and documenting migrant who pass through shelters—as central to how shelter workers negotiate the violent uncertainties that accompany migrant rights activism in Mexico. We draw on science and technology studies scholarship that examines knowledge practices as *performative*, meaning that a given way of knowing migration “helps to produce the realities that it describes” (Law and Urry 2004, 397) rather than merely reflecting a taken-for-granted reality presumed to exist out there (Leurs 2022; Scheel 2019). Our attention to performativity differs from scholarship that has tended to approach the relationship between institutionalized and vernacular humanitarianisms as a question of explicit debate between distinct moral and political positions, what Theodossopoulos (2020) describes as “solidarity dilemmas.” Drawing on Annemarie Mol’s work on ontological multiplicity (2002), we argue that in a climate of violence, suspicion, and dissimulation, knowledge practices are central to how aid workers coordinate multiple, seemingly contradictory humanitarianisms without explicitly committing to a single and potentially damaging moral or political stance.

¹ It is worth noting that while our focus is on the intersection of humanitarianism and the politics of irregular migration, critical humanitarian studies have long examined how humanitarian initiatives that purport to offer universal and unconditional aid also negotiate the limits of finite resources, eligibility conditions, and rumors of fraud, corruption, and malfeasance that emerge in the context of negotiating those boundaries. See, for example, Peter Redfield’s work on local staff employed by *Médecins Sans Frontières* and Ilana Feldman’s (2018) work on corruption suspicions in the context of providing humanitarian aid to Palestinian Refugees.

In what follows, we first review existing literature on forms of activism and solidarity work that have developed in opposition to the NGO-ization of migration management. In doing so, we review prior studies that examine how a state-criminal nexus in Mexico makes it difficult to make ontological distinctions between state actors, organized crime, and some combination of both. We suggest that this context requires an analytical approach that differs from existing scholarship on solidarity activism, which has tended to focus on dynamics of ambivalence. We then review literature that has applied Annemarie Mol's work on ontological multiplicity to examine how knowledge practices enact migration as an indeterminate social process. Then, after outlining our methodological approach, we describe three everyday knowledge practice—assessment, classification, and documentation—that enact migrants, partnering institutions, and the shelter itself, as “multiple.” Ultimately, our analysis draws out how the performance of knowledge practices that are often associated with the subordination of humanitarian aid into state logics of migration management are in fact crucial to sustaining networks that subvert state logics of migrant deservingness and sustain autonomous forms of migrant mobility.

Humanitarian Ambiguities

Recent scholarship that calls attention to forms of activism that oppose to subordination of NGOs into state logics of deservingness and threat has tended to focus on initiatives in Europe. There are numerous parallels between solidarity initiatives in Europe and humanitarian aid organizations in Mexico. However, whereas solidarity initiatives in Europe have largely been threatened by state efforts to formally criminalize certain forms of humanitarian aid (Dadusc and Mudu 2022), a primary concern for aid workers in Mexico is what Wendy Vogt refers to as an informal “state-criminal nexus” where it is difficult to distinguish between state agents, organized criminals, or some combination of both (Vogt 2018, 63).

Particularly since the so-called “unaccompanied minors crisis” of 2014 and the introduction of the Southern Border Plan, a border securitization initiative that framed intensified policing along transit corridors as a humanitarian effort to protect vulnerable migrants from smugglers, it has become increasingly difficult for migrants to cross Mexico *without* relying on a *coyote* or *pollero* (Frank-Vitale 2023). These migration facilitators in turn pay off a variety of state actors, including police, soldiers, and immigration officers (Ó. Martínez 2013; Cedillo 2021). Moreover, migrants who have been victimized as a result of this intensified policing increasingly end up working within smuggling networks (Frank-Vitale and Núñez-Chaim 2020; Sanchez and Antonopoulos 2023). Ironically, migrant shelters are often a key resource where migrants-turned-smugglers can reunify with clients after becoming separated, or recruit new clients (Frank-Vitale 2023). In sum, immigration enforcement initiatives that mobilize humanitarian discourses to draw clear lines between deserving victims and undeserving criminals have instead contributed to the blurring of these distinctions. In the context of everyday shelter work, this means that aid workers are often negotiate ontological ambiguity about “who is who” and, given uncertainty about where the line lies between state authority and cartel authority, “what the state is.”

Studies that examine these everyday ambiguities have remained largely disconnected from scholarship that examines how aid workers and activists in Mexico conceptualize the NGO-ization of migration management in Mexico. This latter vein of scholarship has tended to focus on aid workers' moral and political ambivalence. Merlin-Escorza, Davids, and Schapendonk (2021), for example, outline how aid workers within migrant shelters negotiate “ambivalent and

contradictory characteristics” of migration facilitation and migration control (107). Activists interviewed by Basok and Candiz (2020), meanwhile, describe various forms of ambivalence that aid workers experience as they work to advance migrants’ right to safe and secure living in Mexico without simultaneously contributing to a migration management regime that relies on asylum as a mechanism of containment.

Centering ambivalence as a core analytic echoes scholarship on solidarity initiatives in the European context, where authors have highlighted activist’s “double binds” (Cabot 2016) and “solidarity dilemmas” (Theodossopoulos 2020). These studies suggest that activists contend with ambivalence as they come to realize how voluntary initiatives that developed in opposition to state institutions might also reproduce a neoliberal politics of privatization and austerity to the extent that grassroots efforts take up work that others argue should be a state responsibility (Rozakou 2016). Whereas ambivalence has tended to be framed as an explicit epistemological debate between distinct moral and ethical positions, we suggest that aid workers also negotiate ontological ambiguities: questions about the reality of an entity, who or what somebody or something *is*.

Knowing, Performing, and Enacting Migration

In *The Body Multiple*, Annemarie Mol (2002) tracks how atherosclerosis is enacted differently across distinct medical departments in a Dutch hospital to argue that the reality of an object is not merely an epistemological question that is answered by knowing subjects who reveal the ‘truth’ of bodies through technical measurement and calculation; rather, it is a matter of “ontological politics” in which reality is a moment-to-moment accomplishment that is “brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day sociomaterial practices” (6)—a process she terms “enactment” (32). If reality is a fragile and moment-to-moment accomplishment, what may appear to be a single thing—a disease, a person, or, as in our case, a migrant shelter, a humanitarian orientation, or a migrant—may also be what Mol refers to as an “object multiple” that “hangs together” through everyday enactments. At issue, for Mol, are as much epistemological concerns about which version of an object is most accurate or effective, and according to what regime of truth, as how “coherence-in-tension” (6) between multiplicity and singularity is coordinated through the bracketing and unbracketing of different everyday practicalities.

In recent years, migration scholars have applied the work of Mol and other science and technology scholars to examine knowledge practices—the gathering, processing, and sharing of data—as a field of migration governance (Glouftsiou and Scheel 2021; Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Nedelcu and Soysüren 2022; Leese, Noori, and Scheel 2022). This work calls attention to the ways that migration, rather than being a coherent reality “out there” to which policymakers have direct access, is in fact enacted through practices of registering, enumerating, counting, imputing, extrapolating, and anticipating (Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019, 579). These authors argue that while data about migrants is often framed as a non-political technical issue, they are in fact crucial to sustaining highly political knowledge regimes (Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Indeed, the “datafication” and “NGOization” of migration management increasingly intersect as digital technologies intended to empower vulnerable populations are also used to surveil (Leurs 2022; Martin et al. 2023). Biometric databases and digitized visa and asylum procedures, for example, do not merely document

mobile individuals and populations, they also allow state actors to anticipate movements and institutional trajectories. Data practices, in other words, are a matter of ontological politics. They are “generative moments [...] which help to bring into being and perform the very migration-related realities they apparently only describe” (Scheel et al. 2019, 582).

This article puts scholarship on the datafication of migration management into conversation with studies that have focused on informal knowledge practices within migrant shelters. Noelle Brigden (2018), for example, argues that migrants face an “information paradox” (43) as they encounter different “knowledge-based artifacts” within shelters (36). Brigden argues that while migrant shelters are “oases of information” that migrants depend on for survival, they also attract people looking to take advantage of migrants (38). Within shelters, migrants and aid workers alike are often engaged in a process of discerning whether, for example, a friendly stranger is simply striking up conversation to pass the time or because they are an *halcón*, or falcon, someone who hovers around shelters in search of potential targets. Crucially, shelters are also spaces where migrants actively—albeit often surreptitiously—seek to connect with smugglers. Migrants often describe situations in which family members have promised to send funds for a smuggler once they have reached a certain point in Mexico on their own. As Doering-White has examined elsewhere, aid workers are often aware that while shelters are spaces that offer protection from exploitation, illicit economies are not by definition exploitative (Doering-White 2018).

Our analysis builds on this prior work by examining how the “double-edged micropolitics of information” discussed by Brigden intersects with more formal data practices that are generally associated with the NGO-ization of migration management. We draw attention to how aid workers coordinate multiple humanitarianisms as much through explicit ethical and political claims as through more implicit knowledge practices. We show how data practices that are central to enacting migration management are also a means through which shelters enact autonomy, both for migrants and for themselves as solidarians. In other words, rather than representing a transparent technical process, knowledge practices are instead opaque sites of struggle that allows shelter workers to perform multiple moral claims simultaneously, and to do so both explicitly and implicitly.

Methods

This paper draws on two months of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork at La Casita, a small migrant shelter located a few hours outside Mexico City in Central Mexico, over the summers of 2021 and 2022. Our fieldwork consisted of participant observation of everyday shelter work, including, for example, assisting with intake procedures, helping to prepare meals, and coordinating the distribution of donated clothing. We approach fieldwork as an act of accompaniment where aiding in the everyday work of shelter should take priority over our own data collection interests (Mei-Singh 2021). We also conducted 20 semi-depth interviews with shelter staff. Interviews focused on day-to-day aid work, what challenges aid workers face and what strategies they employ to navigate them, their views on the impact of evolving migration policies, and their aspirations for the future of the shelter and their own careers.

Our methodological approach itself is multiple to the extent that it has involved coordinating our various identities, interests, and goals that in turn have an impact on how we are understood by

shelter workers and how we understand what shelters are and how they function. We come to conducting fieldwork together after several years conducting ethnographic fieldwork in migrant shelters independently. Doering-White conducted 20 months of fieldwork in and around migrant shelters between 2014 and 2017, spending most of that time at La Casita. Díaz de León, meanwhile, has conducted 15 months of fieldwork at different migrant shelters since 2015.

Our fieldwork was also “multiple” to the extent that we often conducted different kinds of fieldwork simultaneously. For example, while one of us conducted an interview, the other was usually assisting with shelter tasks. As we discuss in the findings section, the shelter was understaffed and many of the staff members felt overwhelmed and on the verge of burning out. If there had only been one researcher, finding time to do interviews might have been difficult. Since there were two of us, however, we were able to cover for each other. This meant that in addition to conducting fieldwork together, active data collection sometimes occurred separately, in parallel, and consecutively.

Our analysis consisted of triangulating multiple sources of data, including separate field note logs completed by both researchers and thematic and narrative coding of professionally transcribed interviews. This analytical process occurred iteratively. At the end of the day, after leaving the shelter, we spent time writing field notes individually while also stitching together parts of the day that we witnessed separately. We continuously contrasted what each of us was learning and thinking about. We discussed noteworthy things that happened, compared information or gossip, and talked about possible themes for analysis in the future. These conversations informed some of the themes that guided our analysis of interview data following the completion of active data collection.

This study received institutional review board approval from the University of South Carolina. Participating were informed about their right to withdraw from participating in the study before each interview. To protect confidentiality, names and other identifying details have been changed.

Findings

The Shelter Multiple

A few hours outside of Mexico City, La Casita is a gateway to central and northern Mexico. Migrants tends to arrive by hopping freight trains that climb into Mexico’s central plateau from the country’s tropical south. Often, the first people to greet those arriving on the train are asylum seekers who have learned to anticipate when certain trains will be passing through while waiting out asylum determinations from COMAR. Some trains head southwest toward Mexico’s Pacific coast. Others turn north towards Mexico’s urban centers—Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey—and beyond to the U.S.-Mexico border. If a train is likely to turn south, migrants will make their way out onto a section of the shelter’s open patio space with a clear view of the railway embankment and warn those arriving to get off the train before it enters the station just ahead. Agents from Mexico’s Migration Institute (INM), the government agency tasked with detaining and deporting migrants, often runs raids there.

This daily routine of flagging people down from the train is as much an act of caring solidarity as it is a way to break up the monotony of staying at the shelter. While shelter workers are clear that

those who access the shelter are free to continue their journeys at any time, they have also designated a two-hour period every afternoon when migrants can leave to run errands and return. La Casita, like many other shelters, has long had some version of this rule. However, it had taken on new importance when we visited in 2021. A year earlier, long-standing tensions between the shelter and its neighbors came to a head when the shelter's offsite office was vandalized and Carlos, the shelter's director, began receiving death threats. In the wake of the incident, a subset of the shelter's neighbors lobbied local officials to close the shelter. To appease these disgruntled neighbors, shelter staff began limiting how and when migrants can come and go and from the shelter. People just arriving continued to be welcomed at any time. People who had already passed through the shelters' intake protocol, which asks migrants to disclose their name, community of origin, reasons for migrating, and whether they have experienced abuses while en route, were limited to running errands during the two-hour time window. Transit migrants, who generally access the shelter for no more than a night or two, tended to see this rule as an understandable safety measure. For those staying at the shelter for weeks and months while awaiting asylum determinations from COMAR, these and other similar rules felt both infantilizing and confining.

For shelter workers, such rules were as much about safety as they were an effort to coordinate overlapping and times contradictory humanitarianisms. Founded initially to provide short-term aid to people hopping freight trains, intensified and increasingly violent immigration enforcement throughout Mexico has led a growing number of migrants who are unwilling or unable to continue north after suffering myriad abuses to pursue asylum or what is known as Mexico's humanitarian visa, which grants temporary status regularization to victims of certain crimes (Angulo-Pasel 2022).² While asylum and humanitarian visas are different and are granted by different institutions, for many migrants, applying to them is an attempt to have a safer journey or to attempt to settle in Mexico.

According to Carlos, La Casita's director, this has in turn generated a hierarchical relationship between "albergues de paso" ("pass-through shelters), which generally provide food, first aid, and a night or two of sanctuary, and "albergues de refugio" (refugee shelters). Many of these "refugee shelters" have developed separate living quarters for asylum seekers and dedicated staff lines for asylum-related case management.

² Article 52 of Mexico's Mexican Migration Law states that migrants who have been victims or witnesses of a crime in Mexico, people who are applying for asylum or refugee status, unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable people can apply for a humanitarian visa (Secretaría de Gobernación Mexico and Instituto Nacional de Migración 2011). This visa allows these individuals to live and work in Mexico for a year; afterwards they can apply for renewal or seek permanent residency (Angulo-Pasel 2022). This visa is granted by the National Migration Institute (INM) and is related to the experiences of migrants while in Mexico. In contrast, the refugee claims are reviewed by the Mexican Refugee Office (COMAR) and are granted to people who fear that their life, liberty, or security are at risk if they return to their home country. People can apply for a humanitarian visa once they have proof of their refugee application. This allows them to move freely in Mexico and to work (ACNUR México 2023). The refugee application is related to the experiences of migrants in their home countries.

While La Casita continues to pursue asylum access work, Carlos explained that La Casita's leadership has also decided to step back from an earlier goal of becoming a "refugee shelter." As Carlos explained,

The shelter has multiplied since we first opened. We have always been an "*albergue de paso*," a pass-through shelter. We have an open-door policy, and we have tried to develop programming for asylum seekers, but the shelter is also becoming more like a "*bisagra*," [a hinge]. We are the exit from the south and the entrance to the center. Over time we have learned that the state cannot integrate asylum seekers economically, and the shelter is not designed to provide a livelihood to people. Our context forces us to only identify people with problems, with needs—to select, filter, and channel them.

Here, Carlos explains that in a context of growing distinction between transit shelters and refugee shelters, La Casita has instead aimed to maintain its multiplicity. Rather than becoming singular—one or the other—Carlos instead conceptualized La Casita ontologically as a *bisagra*, a hinge space that joins together distinct geographical regions and organizational networks.

In *The Body Multiple*, Annemarie Mol (2002) argues that atherosclerosis, a single disease, is simultaneously multiple diseases; it is what she refers to as an "object multiple," something "more than one, but less than many" (55). Mol argues that to understand this apparent contradiction—the idea that an object is simultaneously singular and multiple—one must recognize that atherosclerosis, rather than being an already existing taken-for-granted reality, is in fact "enacted" through distinct sociomaterial practices in different medical settings. The reality of atherosclerosis enacted by measuring the flow of blood through vessels in the laboratory, Mol suggests, is distinct from the reality of atherosclerosis enacted when a doctor assesses a patient's symptoms in an examination room. Often, these distinct practices are "bracketed" hierarchically such that the atherosclerosis enacted in the laboratory is taken to be more authoritative than a patient's description symptoms (37). In the context of daily practice, however, it is often the clinical encounter in the examination room that is "the beginning of and condition for everything else" (40) to the extent that a description of symptoms is needed to justify lab work. As much as laboratory measurements can provide a definitive diagnosis, they must be bracketed and unbracketed according to the everyday practicalities of working with patients. It is through this work of coordination that the atherosclerosis that exists in the laboratory and the atherosclerosis that exists in the examination room to "hang together" as an object multiple (55).

In what follows, we outline everyday knowledge practices—assessment, classification, and documentation—through which aid workers coordinate multiple humanitarianisms. Much in the same way that the distinct atheroscleroses enacted in the laboratory and the examination room hang together by bracketing and unbracketing everyday practicalities, La Casita hangs together as a "shelter multiple"—a "hinge" as Carlos puts it—to the extent that the practicalities of facilitating transit migration and asylum access can be successfully coordinated. Asylum access, like the measurement of blood vessels in the laboratory, is structured by comparatively precise definitional boundaries: a person is either eligible for asylum or not based on having experienced particular forms of persecution. Caring for transit migrants, by comparison, often involves navigating porous boundaries of care and coercion between migrants and smuggling networks, where good care often involves leaving questions about "who is who" and "what the state is" ambiguous. In the context of everyday knowledge practices, including intake protocols, keeping

tracking of who comes and goes from the shelter, and routine bureaucratic procedures with state institutions, aid workers bracket and unbracket different practicalities that allow overlapping and yet at times contradictory humanitarianisms to hang together as ‘more than one, but less than many.’

Assessment

La Casita is one of several shelters across Mexico that employs a shared intake protocol. In addition to collecting a person’s name, age, and place of origin, the intake protocol also includes questions that assess a person’s eligibility for formal humanitarian recognition, such as “Why did you decide to leave your home country?” and “Have your human rights been violated since leaving your home country?” On its face, the shelter’s intake protocol—which is a requirement for entry—aligns with the kinds of knowledge practices that Nedelcu and Soysüren (2022) associate with the datafication of migration management. That is, collecting data in the name of documenting abuses and vulnerabilities empowers and yet simultaneously controls by establishing particular constraints, such as categorical boundaries in a given database. Data collected during intake protocols are in turn mobilized by shelters and associated organizational networks to seek support from funders and for policy advocacy. As Carlos explained, much of the available funding is oriented around expanding access to asylum in Mexico. While data collected during intakes provides data that can empower a variety of different advocacy efforts, aid workers at times feel pressured to prioritize the needs of migrants with viable asylum cases over others. Accordingly, intake protocols represent a data practice that is integral to the institutionalization of migrant shelters as mechanisms of humanitarian containment.

This “empowerment-control nexus” (1821), as Nedelcu and Soysüren put it, was particularly evident in 2021 as the shelter began transitioning from its long-standing use of a desktop Excel database to a web-hosted database that is shared among participating shelters. With the new database, a profile would be created for each migrant upon arriving at a participating shelter. As a migrant accessed other participating shelters along the route, additional information would be added to that person’s profile. The promise of the new database was its ability to track a single person as they accessed different shelters. This in turn promised to smooth out the registration process, facilitate case management across shelters, and minimize the risk of re-traumatizing migrants by asking a person to rehash their migration journey and associated traumas anew at each shelter. The labor of narrating and documenting what people have experienced would be distributed across shelters. Perusing the database, there were notes about food allergies, that a person disclosed being separated from a family member at a shelter farther south, or that someone expressed interest in seeking asylum.

While the new database promised singularity by making it much easier to track who someone is, its ability to keep track of people as they moved from shelter to shelter by digitally unifying shelter intake practices also led migrants and aid workers alike to enact ambiguity, or multiplicity. While piloting the new database, for example, a shelter worker named Ingrid explained the intention of the new database to a group of recent arrivals and affirmed that the data would be shared only within the network of trusted shelters. This reassured some migrants who were eager to have their journeys documented given how frequently people are disappeared while migrating. Paradoxically, however, the density of data that the new system afforded also led to greater hesitancy among migrants to share that data. During one intake, for example, Ingrid spent fifteen minutes trying to locate an existing profile for the first person in line, a

twenty-year-old farmer from Olancho, Honduras, named Juan Carlos Santos, whose name brought up over a dozen potential matches. He explained that he had passed through the same intake in other shelters, but because his ID had been stolen in a shake-down by local police farther south in Veracruz she could not look him up using the ID number. When Ingrid gave up locating an existing profile for Juan Carlos, she added yet another “Juan Carlos Santos” to the existing list of profiles under that name. As much as the database aimed to sustain a single profile for each migrant, it also enacted multiplicity when encountering, for example, a migrant with a common name and no official identification.

The interaction between Ingrid and Juan Carlos also planted the seeds for additional multiplicity. Compared with the old system, the new cloud database included a much fuller spectrum of identities and experiences within each drop-down menu. As Ingrid attempted to speed through the long list of questions, which included sensitive questions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and experiences with sexual abuse, Juan Carlos leaned in close and whispered, “Is there a reason you’re asking these questions? I’m just a farmer trying to get north.” By the time Ingrid had completed Juan Carlos’ intake, most of the other nine men had fallen asleep, laid out on the concrete floor, using backpacks and blanket rolls as pillows. Those who were still awake began grumbling that they were hungry and tired. “Can’t the intake be done later?” they asked.

By the time Ingrid made it halfway through these ten men, another group of thirty migrants had arrived and begun waiting just outside the shelter’s main gate. The fifth person, a forty-year-old man from Roatán, first name Edison, was an immediate hit in the database. His cloud-based profile indicated that he had attempted the journey at least five times in the last year alone, passing through some shelters further south multiple times. Now feeling pressured to speed through the intakes, Ingrid merely recorded his presence at La Casita, even though in most cases, someone accessing shelters so frequently would otherwise be considered a sign that someone may be an *halcón* passing through multiple shelters in search of potential targets.

In the Case of Juan Carlos, while the new database promised to maintain singularity through the creation of one profile per migrant, its data intensity instead generated multiplicity of various forms. For Juan Carlos, it resulted in yet another profile under the name Juan Carlos Santos, likely duplicating the work of aid workers at other shelters and causing further confusion at whatever participating shelters Juan Carlos would access in the future. The new database also enacted multiplicity to the extent that it motivated Juan Carlos, the other migrants whose patience was wearing thin, and Ingrid herself to choose speed of data collection over quality data collection. This left the question of what important pieces of information she might have skipped over—questions about “who is who” unanswered. Put another way, while the database promised transparency, it also enacted ambiguity. Like Glouftsiou and Scheel’s (2021) call to challenge data-realism, “the belief that data held about migrants and travelers objectively represent their identities, bureaucratic trajectories, and past and future itineraries” (7), Ingrid coordinated these distinct humanitarian orientations by approaching the data collected during intakes as an initial and highly tentative data point that she combined with observations over the course of other shelter activities, which we discuss in the next section.

Classification

Alongside intake protocols, shelter workers coordinated multiple humanitarianisms by regulating how freely and frequently migrants were able to come and go from the shelter. In the summer of 2022, shelter workers began stamping the hands of those who had already passed through the

shelter's registration process. Stamps were usually distributed just ahead of the two-hour daily period when migrants were allowed to come and go freely from the shelter to run errands. This practice aimed to minimize the risk of someone sneaking into the shelter without having passed through the shelter's intake protocol at the end of the two-hour period when migrants tended to return all at once. Stamping hands was in line with Angulo-Pasel's (2022) argument that efforts to maintain particular notions of safety often reproduce binary understandings of migrants as either passive victims or threatening criminals. Stamping hands enacted the shelter as a safe space where shelter workers were responsible for making distinctions between those who were "just migrants" and people posing as migrants in order to take advantage of them: guides, halcones, thieves. In other words, making distinctions between the deserving and undeserving enacted the shelter as a singular secure space set apart from the dangers of the route.

More implicitly, however, the process of stamping hands—or not—was also a performative mechanism for enacting the shelter as a permeable space where maintaining a certain degree of openness to smuggling economies was itself a means of maintaining safety. Shelter workers—most of whom were young women—generally granted stamps just after breakfast because most of the shelter's guests were young men who did not always cooperate willingly with completing daily chores, such as sweeping the patio, cleaning the bathrooms, and washing dishes. Celia explained that to motivate these young men to help with chores, she would often threaten to withhold stamps to those who were not cooperating. While she did so playfully and eagerly clarified that she never *actually* confined anyone to the shelter, she aimed to communicate that the shelter is meant to be a collective space where everyone is expected to contribute to the daily work of sustaining it, regardless of gender.

Celia also explained that as much performing a threat of confinement aimed to send an explicit message—"please help keep this place clean!"—these performances also allowed her to discern more implicitly whether a group was traveling with a guide and whether that guide was staying at the shelter. According to Celia, groups with guides were often the least willing to assist with chores because they felt that their guide was providing them with inferior service by relying on shelters rather than paying for hotels or using safe houses. "What I've realized," she explained, "is that sometimes the *pollero* doesn't enter the shelter, he stays in a hotel and just leaves [his clients] here with us." For these migrants, she reasoned, hesitating to help with shelter chores was a means of putting pressure on their guide to provide them with better accommodations.

As Celia explained, the lesson that she took from observing these dynamics was that it is often impossible to know what makes the most ethical or moral decision given the fact that shelter workers rely on very limited information, which leaves the question of "who is who" ambiguous. To demonstrate, Celia described a situation when, in the context of interacting with someone who was reluctant to help with chores, she felt like drawing a clear distinction between people who are "just migrants" and someone who was likely a *pollero*, or guide, generated multiple overlapping uncertainties:

One time there was a guy who didn't want to help with anything. He had an attitude and I was like, "You know what? Get out. If you don't want to help, leave." And when I told him to leave, like ten other people got up and started to pack up their things; and this was before they had eaten. So I say to them, "Why? I mean, I'm kicking *him* out, not *you*." And they tell me, "If he goes, we go." And I tell them, "Well wait and eat, then leave. You didn't do anything wrong."

So it's like, "Ay!", you know? For one person's mistake, everyone pays, but what are we supposed to do? I really don't know what exactly to do in that situation, because I've talked openly with a few polleros or guides and according to them, they tell people that they are going to stay in hotels, but then something unexpected happens and they have to stay in a shelter. And so all that money that they paid, where is it? Well, who knows? It goes to the pollero, right? Or to the police and migration agents who charge bribes.

So, ultimately, if I don't let the pollero in, or if I realized he is a pollero and I kick him out, I am kicking out all the people who are with him and I'm creating all kinds of potential problems because they are outside on the street and we get a bad name, both with the neighbors and with the polleros, because they're super organized. Something happens to a guide, they leave their migrants here, and another one comes the next day. It's impressive the kind of network they have organized. And then sometimes, they're not even a pollero. I'll ask someone, "Is he your guide?" and they're like "No, he just knows the route."

For Celia, trying to make clear distinctions between deserving migrants and undeserving smugglers ("I'm kicking *him* out, not *you*") ran the risk of several potentially harmful consequences ("I'm creating all kinds of potential problems because they are outside on the street and we get a bad name"). One risk was upsetting the neighbors, meaning that while stamping hands originated as a means of appeasing neighbors, it ultimately ran the risk of backfiring if followed strictly. A second risk, which Celia referred to somewhat obliquely here, was that being too strict might give the shelter a "bad name" within smuggling networks. Ultimately, then, rather than making singular distinctions that defined migrants as either good or bad, deserving or undeserving, Celia created room for multiple answers to the question of "who is who" by treating stamps as performative rather than definitive. Put another way, while shelter rules articulated bordering, they also *enacted* permeability to the extent that these rules were applied with discerning inconsistency. Furthermore, if we put the shelter's intake protocol in conversation with the practice of classifying migrants with stamps, we can see how aid workers bracketed and unbracketed distinct practicalities associated with maintaining a space where, in different contexts, more information can make the shelter both safer *and* more dangerous.

Documentation

A third practicality that aid workers negotiated in coordinating distinct humanitarian orientations revolved around sustaining working relationships with ostensibly antagonistic institutional actors. In 2021, this was most visible in the context of shelter workers' interactions with agents from Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM), the agency responsible for the detention and deportation of migrants, as well as granting and denying status regularizations. A year earlier, in 2020, the Mexican government passed reforms to its federal migration law that banned the detention of family units. These reforms—which critics suggested were merely a means of appearing more humane compared with the Trump administration's family separation policies—directed INM to release family units into the custody of nongovernmental migrant shelters when state-operated alternatives to detention were at capacity. With state shelters nearly always full, INM vans began arriving several days a week to release migrant families into the custody of La Casita.

This paperwork intensive process required aid workers to work closely with INM agents that, in the eyes of aid workers and migrants alike, are responsible—both directly and indirectly—for

much of the violence that migrants experience while en route. Indeed, migrant shelters have in many ways defined themselves in opposition to INM, both legally and morally. Mexico's shelter network has largely emerged out of reforms to Mexico's Migration Law in 2011 that included legal protections for aid workers and banned migration raids within 500 meters of a shelter door (Schmidtke and Gutiérrez Escobedo 2021). These reforms were motivated in part by accounts of INM agents beating, extorting, and sexually assaulting migrants, incidents that are still commonplace within shelters (Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017). In addition to physical violence, INM agents have also been known to enact legal violence. INM agents have a high degree of discretion regarding whether to approve visa petitions and on what timeline. Compared with processing times in other states, La Casita falls under the jurisdiction of an INM office that has tended to be suspiciously lethargic. In the past, shelter workers like Carlos have interpreted this as a tactic of "bureaucratic neglect" (Grace and Roth 2020). In their eyes, INM's unwillingness to process visa petitions in a timely manner has contributed at times to migrants falling into smuggling work, the very thing INM is ostensibly tasked with deterring.

INM often released families into the custody of the shelter within 24 hours of having detained them. These drop-offs were information intensive legal encounters that involved a thick stack of forms requiring multiple signatures. In the office, two INM agents sat with that shift's lead shelter worker and methodically worked through the required signatures for each family. Just outside the office door, the families waited in the enclosed entryway where newly arrived migrants typically waited to pass through the intake protocol discussed above. To Celia's point above about well-coordinated smuggling networks, most families being released by INM were almost immediately picked up by guides awaiting their release. Indeed, most families released by INM stayed within the shelter's entryway throughout the paperwork process, never fully entering to eat, bathe, or sleep. Once the INM van pulled away, the released families then left the shelter, after checking with a shelter worker to confirm directions to a hotel where they had been instructed to reunify with a guide.

In the context of these drop-offs, shelter workers coordinated the enactment of humanitarian containment and its subversion simultaneously. On the one hand, signing the thick stack of papers was a bureaucratic performance that revolved around legally documenting the release of families to La Casita. To use the language of INM, this process involved "rescuing" families and then transferring them into a less restrictive alternative to detention. In this way, aid workers enacted the shelter as a space that operates in coordination, rather than in opposition, to a politics of humanitarian containment. Indeed, families were legally expected to remain at the shelter, or at least in the state, while awaiting a court date to legally determine their immigration status.

At the same time, these legal transfers also subverted the very politics of humanitarian securitization that INM performed. As we discussed above, the shelter's legal and moral humanitarian legitimacy revolved around *not* containing or confining migrants. While families were expected to remain at the shelter, the shelter itself bore no legal responsibility if they did not. Aid workers recognized—and suspected that INM also recognized—that these 'catch-and-release' practices were primarily a bureaucratic performance that allowed the Mexican government the appearance of adhering honorably to international best interest protocols: the human rights principles that the United States was violating quite obstinately at the time. And while they recognized that polleros frequently take advantage of migrants, they also recognized 1) that the conditions that require migrants to be "rescued" are the direct consequence of violent and repressive immigration enforcement policies and 2) that informal coordination between INM

agents and smuggling networks is commonplace. Accordingly, as much as the INM drop-offs enacted a politics of humanitarian containment, aid workers simultaneously subverted it by treating the drop-offs as primarily a bureaucratic performance that further obscured the line between state and criminal violence and left the question of “what the state is” evermore ambiguous.

Conclusion

This article has examined how aid workers at a nongovernmental migrant shelter in Central Mexico rely on diverse knowledge practices of assessment, classification, and documentation to coordinate overlapping and often contradictory humanitarianisms. Drawing on Annemarie Mol’s work on ontological politics, we have shown how these knowledge practices—as sociomaterial processes that *enact* judgements as much as they reflect reality—are central to how a migrant shelter hangs together as a space that is “more than one, but less than many.” In other words, we have shown how we might think of migrant shelters and similar organization as “object multiples,” single spaces where multiple legal, political, and moral frameworks hang together, much in the way that a hinge—to use Carlos’ metaphor—unites and divides. On the one hand, practices such as intake protocols, stamping migrants’ hands, and signing legal dossiers enact a politics of humanitarian securitization and containment that facilitates the subordination of otherwise subversive sanctuary spaces into the institutionalized confines of migration management. As we have shown, however, as much as these knowledge practices enact singularity by drawing lines of distinction and deservingness between victims and victimizers, they also enact various ambiguities that render the question of “who is who” and “what the state is” even more opaque.

Our findings are in dialogue with research that calls attention to the ways that data practices facilitate the subordination of otherwise grassroots aid spaces into institutionalized and hierarchical logics of humanitarian deservingness. We have shown that as much as knowledge practices enact singular distinctions between deserving victims and undeserving criminal actors, or between spaces that either facilitate or subvert the NGO-ization of migration management, by moving between different knowledge practices we can see how shelter workers also coordinate apparently contradictory humanitarian orientations. In other words, through the “bracketing and unbracketing of different everyday practicalities,” such as whether to prioritize quality data collection over speed of data collection, aid workers stitch these distinct orientations together.

Our analysis is also conversation with scholarship that has tended to focus on moral and political dilemmas in which aid workers experience ambivalence between relatively discreet pathways of either collaboration with or opposition to institutionalized humanitarianism. Our analysis suggests that, alongside such ambivalence, aid workers also experience and at times enact ambiguity. A central dimension that structures this ambiguity is the state-criminal nexus that aid workers negotiate in Mexico, where rumors of collusion between state authorities and organized crime networks leave aid workers hesitant to draw clear distinctions between the two. Whereas most scholarship of the double binds and solidarity dilemmas that solidarians negotiate has focused whether humanitarian aid work is in alignment with or in opposition to state knowledge regimes, aid workers in Mexico *also* negotiate the more informal micropolitics of information that surround smuggling and organized crime networks, not to mention the opaque boundaries between the two. Our findings suggest that it is not so much that shelter workers feel torn

between two opposing positions as it is that shelter work is defined by coordinating mutually constitutive potentialities.

Taken together, we hope that these contributions to ongoing scholarly conversations might also inform conversations among practitioners. Along these lines, we hope that our analysis draws attention to the work of coordinating multiple humanitarianisms as a skill that deserves recognition and critical consideration. Critical attention to distinctions between institutionalized and subversive forms of activism and solidarity work is incredibly important as organizations such as La Casita are faced with either stable funding and ethical uncertainty or ethical stability but financial uncertainty. However, naming these distinctions also runs the risk of normalizing them. What the aid workers at La Casita show is that doing both, while not without its challenges, is possible.

Funding

This research was supported by an ASPIRE grant from Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of South Carolina and a grant from the Research Program on Migration and Health (PIMSA in Spanish).

Conflict of Interest Statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to report.

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