RESEARCH ARTICLES

Shelter Vision

Compassion, Fear, and Learning to (Not) See Trauma along the Migrant Trail through Mexico

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Abstract

Within a context of shifting affective economies of racialised fear and reluctant humanitarianism that surround Central American migration through Mexico, this article draws on ethnographic fieldwork as a volunteer at a humanitarian migrant shelter in Central Mexico to describe how aid workers negotiated concerns expressed by visiting volunteers about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation. Building on the work of scholars who examine intersubjective and relational dynamics of looking and being looked at beyond a lens of either surveillance or performance, I describe how shelter workers learned to (not) see trauma by negotiating the affective expectations of visitors. I argue that what visitors took to be indifference and insensitivity reflects what I refer to as 'shelter vision', a tacit and embodied form of competent looking developed through apprenticeship and enskilment. Such vision refuses racialised discourses that position undocumented migrants as either passive victims deserving of compassion or as a toxic threat to the body politic, both in the United States and Mexico.

Keywords

Introduction

In the autumn of 2015, shortly after I had begun conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork at La Casita,[1] one of several dozen non-governmental shelters across Mexico that provide direct aid to people fleeing violence and poverty across Central America's Northern Triangle region (Guevara 2015; Candiz and Bélanger 2018; Casillas 2011), a colleague from back home in Michigan came to visit. Over the course of the day, she shadowed me and my fellow shelter workers as we made our way through the daily routine of conducting intake interviews, serving meals, and distributing donated items left behind by other visitors. Aiding the sixty migrants who would pass through the shelter that day, nearly all of whom recounted a recent encounter with some form of violence—typically robbery, assault, or extortion—had come to feel mundane. Most of these newly arrived guests would already be gone by the next morning, and their departure would be followed by the arrival of several dozen more people seeking short-term sanctuary. In the late afternoon, we walked to the centre of town where my colleague was to catch a bus back to the city. On the way she stopped, turned to me with a clear look of concern, and asked, 'Are you ok? You're being exposed to a lot of trauma. Do you think you might be experiencing compassion fatigue?'

Her concern about compassion fatigue and exposure to trauma took me by surprise. It didn't align with how I had come to think about my work at La Casita, which revolved primarily around research into the place of migrant shelters in the context of Mexico's Southern Border Program (SBP). The program was announced in 2014 in response to the growing number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the US–Mexico border and focused on preventing migrants from using Mexico's infamous network of freight railways to reach it (Leutert et al. 2019). This effort was framed in humanitarian terms as a way of protecting migrants from organised criminal networks along railway routes and was emblematic of a broader politics of 'compassionate repression' surrounding irregular migration through Mexico (Galemba et al. 2019). Didier Fassin coined this oxymoronic term to describe the tendency for governments to combine the appearance of humanitarian concern for migrants with the enactment of restrictive immigration policies (2005; 2012). I began my fieldwork focused on the growing role that migrant shelters like La Casita had come to play in helping people to access a special humanitarian visa (Galemba et al. 2019). This visa is granted to undocumented immigrants who meet certain conditions, typically being the victim of a crime, and permits one year of legal stay in Mexico. I wanted to understand how the humanitarian visa—which has analogues in the U-Visa in the United States, for immigrant victims of serious crimes (Kohl 2019), and the French 'illness

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1   All organisations and individuals described in the article have been pseudonymised.

clause', which permits immigrants who are seriously unwell to remain in France for treatment (Ticktin 2011)—might be functioning differently in Mexico as a kind of 'humanitarian border' (Walters 2010) where, at the behest of the US government, the granting of humanitarian recognition serves to contain undocumented migrants within Mexico (Basok and Candiz 2020).

My colleague's question made me wonder if, in focusing on compassion discourse primarily through a lens of governance, I had lost sight of how the fast-paced work of bearing witness to routinised violence—which, after all, constituted the bulk of the shelter's daily routine—had impacted my mental health and that of my fellow shelter workers, intake by intake, meal by meal, day by day. My colleague's concern was far from unique. Visiting church groups, journalists, academics, student volunteers, and other (generally more privileged) outsiders, on whom the shelter depended on for volunteer labour, donated items, and protective accompaniment, often expressed a similar sense of concern about how shelter workers responded to migrants' trauma with such composure, and perhaps even a sense of indifference.

I also began to develop a sense of why her question had nonetheless taken me by surprise. Visitors tended to interpret the apparent indifference of shelter workers as evidence of vicarious trauma (the idea that exposure to people who have experienced trauma is itself traumatising) or compassion fatigue (the exhaustion and apathy felt by caregivers as a result of prolonged exposure to clients' trauma). However, such ideas were rarely topics of conversation among my fellow shelter workers. As my fieldwork progressed, I began asking members of La Casita's team more explicitly what they thought of the concerns expressed by these visitors. While shelter workers acknowledged that ideas like vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue resonated with the experience of shelter work, they also felt that visitors were misinterpreting what was really going on. As a shelter worker named Paula put it, 'Yes, I've often felt myself becoming numb to what people are going through. I don't think it's good to be like that. You lose that bravery that it takes to really help someone. But it's also necessary to be a little insensitive.'

In this article, I examine this discordance between visitors' affective expectations about shelter work and what Paula described as 'the need to be a little insensitive'. While shelter workers at La Casita certainly struggled with feelings of numbness and apathy, they also cultivated a more affirmative ethic of emotional restraint, which visitors like my colleague understandably mistook for indifference, or even insensitivity. I refer to this practice as 'shelter vision': a relational approach to (not) seeing trauma in a context where compassion discourse has been weaponised to justify and expand repressive and militarised policing. I conceptualise shelter vision as a form of 'skilled vision', what Christina Grasseni (2007) defines as embodied

and often tacit forms of competent looking that result from enskilment through apprenticeship. My analysis builds on the work of scholars who examine the embodied strategies on which migrants rely in order to communicate and conceal information in a context in which Central Americans have come to be associated with racialised notions of 'criminality, delinquency, and sexual predation' (Vogt 2016, 161) by virtue of their proximity to intersecting economies of human smuggling and drug trafficking (Brigden 2018; Galemba 2018). I argue that learning to see (through) migrants' performances was central to how shelter workers cultivated a relational ethic of collaboration with them, while negotiating the contradictions of compassion and repression that simultaneously legitimise shelter work and exacerbate the violence to which such sanctuary spaces respond.

In what follows, I begin by outlining the emergence and formalisation of Mexico's shelter network amid an affective economy of racialised fear and reluctant compassion that associates Central American migrants with toxicity, either as traumatised victims or traumatising criminals. I then return to my colleague's invocation of compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation to situate my analysis conceptually and methodologically. Finally, I examine how shelter workers at La Casita positioned themselves relative to the affective expectations of visitors, whose contributions of time, money, and other goods have been increasingly central to the maintenance of migrant shelters like theirs. Ultimately, my analysis contributes to prior understandings of skilled vision by revealing the centrality of intersubjective engagement—the affective expectations that structured the work of looking *and* being looked at—amid a shifting affective economy of humanitarian aid along the migrant trail through Mexico.

Compassionate repression, reluctant humanitarianism, and racialised fear in Mexico

The politics of compassionate repression that surrounded the 2014 Southern Border Program echoed a politics of reluctant humanitarianism and racialised suspicion that has long characterised the Mexican government's response to Central Americans fleeing violence in the region. In the 1980s, for example, the Mexican government was hesitant to assist predominantly indigenous Guatemalans who were escaping civil conflict amid concerns that leftist guerrilla soldiers, posing as indigenous refugees, would incite political unrest over the border in Mexico (Hernández Castillo 2010). These anxieties were structured by earlier instances of anti-Guatemalan rhetoric being used to legitimise the forced assimilation of certain indigenous groups in southern Mexico (Galemba 2017, 39), part of broader efforts to establish a national *mestizo* [mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent] racial identity that celebrated indigenous heritage while actively eradicating contemporary indigenous lifeways (Ybarra 2019). Amid

mounting pressure from international human rights groups and US authorities seeking to stem the flow of refugees arriving at the US–Mexico border, the Mexican government agreed to grant ID cards to Guatemalan refugees but placed restrictions on their movement outside the camps in which they were accommodated (Montejo 1999). These events led the Mexican government to establish the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* [INM, National Migration Institute] in 1993—the country's first dedicated immigration agency—and to begin installing immigration checkpoints along highways. Framed by racialised anxieties about how the 'cultural backwardness and antinationalism' of indigenous groups threatened Mexico's national project of *mestizaje*—the ideology surrounding the production of a national *mestizo* racial identity (Hernández Castillo 2010, 24), these checkpoints laid the groundwork for the emergence of what Wendy Vogt has described as an 'arterial border' throughout Mexico, where 'layers of enforcement […] permeate highways, roads, and railways, spreading like arteries throughout Mexico's interior' (Vogt 2018, 54).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, as railways and bus routes across Mexico became well-established corridors for irregular migration and drug smuggling, racialised concerns about indigenous subversives gradually evolved into anxieties about members of Central American street gangs working in partnership with Mexican drug cartels (Zilberg 2007; 2011). Young people caught between zero-tolerance policing in the US and a similar tough-on-crime policing regime known as *Mano Dura* [Iron Fist] across Central America turned to the business of undocumented migration as a way of life after becoming trapped in a cycle of deportation and displacement (Brigden 2018; Wolf 2017; Zilberg 2011). As the presence of gangs along the route surged in the early 2000s, these 'criminalized urban youth', whose tattoos and clothing styles signalled both gang belonging and transnational displacement, provoked fear and unwanted attention from police authorities as 'popular discourses about *cholos*[2] mobilize[d] latent, historically constructed racial and social meanings of the contamination of a disorganized, unwieldy, and increasingly global *mestizaje*' (Rosas 2012, 80).

The intertwining of drug and people smuggling and trafficking economies during this period radically transformed the journey through Mexico. Following the re-routing of the drug trade away from the Caribbean and toward the same land routes on which migrants rely, the smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion of migrants became an increasingly central dimension of 'narco-corruption' in Mexico (Andreas and Duran Martinez 2012). Previously, Mexico's immigration enforcement apparatus largely stopped at or near international borders and migrants could transit relatively freely through the interior. In 2001, President Vicente Fox

2   *Cholos* is a term often used to describe young men associated with urban street gang culture.

announced *Plan Sur* [the Southern Plan], which expanded the network of highway inspection checkpoints further into Mexico's interior and doubled the number of immigration detention facilities, resulting in a dramatic increase in Central Americans being deported from Mexico. Not only did Central Americans come to be increasingly associated with criminality and delinquency, they also came to be viewed as an 'expendable, replaceable resource' for cartels and gangs vying for control of the system of informal fees, or *cuotas,* that migrants paid to navigate Mexico's thickening arterial border (Brigden 2018, 72; Vogt 2012). Between 2006 and 2012—as President Felipe Calderón's war on drugs further destabilised what were already precarious territorial agreements between criminal groups—cartels and gangs began sending messages to competing cartels by kidnapping and murdering migrants. Among these messages was the massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas in 2010 (Martínez 2016). Together, these events have contributed to a general sense across Mexico that proximity to Central American migrants equals the risk of exposure to violence and trauma (Galemba 2017), extending and transforming similarly racialised anxieties that positioned Central Americans as subversives in the 1980s and criminals in the 1990s.

My concern in this article is with how racialised anxieties that associate Central Americans with the risk of exposure to violence intersect with a politics of compassionate repression that has facilitated the formalisation and professionalisation of Mexico's grassroots shelter network. Like many of Mexico's migrant shelters, which continue deep traditions of religious civil disobedience and sanctuary (Uribe-Uran 2007; Coutin 1993; Lipper and Rehaag 2012; Frank-Vitale 2016), the neighborhood parish in which La Casita is located had for years been providing shelter to passing migrants on a relatively informal basis, before the shelter became a registered civil society organisation in 2011. This formalisation came in the wake of reforms to Mexico's migration system between 2008 and 2011 that reflected US interests in stemming undocumented migration, while also signaling compassionate concern for undocumented migrants amid mounting public outcry from civil society organisations about abuses committed against migrants, both in the US and in Mexico (Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017a). In particular, the reforms decriminalised unauthorised entry into Mexico (rendering it an administrative offence instead) and granted legal protections to civil society organisations providing aid to undocumented immigrants, which otherwise risked prosecution for harbouring criminals.

These reforms facilitated the expansion of a humanitarian infrastructure along transit corridors across Mexico. However, they also exacerbated the very violence against migrants to which these organisations were responding (ibid.). First, the reforms granted significant discretionary power to state authorities in determining which forms of migrant victimhood were considered legitimate, amid widespread

collusion between those very state authorities and criminal networks (González-Murphy 2013). Second, while making unlawful entry an administrative rather than a criminal offence provided a sense of moral authority to Mexican officials at a time of surging deportations of Mexican citizens from the US, it also made it easier for INM agents to deport Central Americans quickly (ibid.). These reforms have been central to the growing number of Central Americans who seek to regularise their immigration status in Mexico (Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017b). However, migrants who are unable to show proof of legitimate victimhood, those who are unwilling to expose themselves to state authorities they assume to be corrupt, and those who are unable to renew their humanitarian visas have increasingly come to experience a revolving door of displacement, detention, and deportation.

Through these successive journeys, people at times become ambiguously entangled with and indebted to criminalised smuggling networks as their desperation to reach the US–Mexico border mounts (Frank-Vitale 2020; Heidbrink 2019). A rich body of ethnographic scholarship has examined the ways in which migrants' interactions with smuggling networks do not match the neat division between victims and victimisers assumed by immigration law both in the United States and in Mexico (Vogt 2018; Brigden 2018; Frank-Vitale 2020). Noelle Brigden, for example, describes how over the course of making multiple attempts (or in talking with others who have done so) migrants learn to enact what she has referred to as 'survival plays'. These are improvised reenactments of gendered and racialised social scripts like 'indigenous farmer' or 'impoverished beggar', in order to successfully 'pass' through security checkpoints and immigration controls (2018, 102). Importantly, as Wendy Vogt points out (2016), these gendered and racialised performances often take place in the context of fluid and ambiguous relationships between migrants and smugglers, where it is difficult to draw a clear line between collaboration and coercion, victim and victimiser, migrant and smuggler—such as when a migrant feels compelled to help recruit new clients, effectively taking on the work of smuggling in order to pass through a particular stretch of the journey. In sum, Mexico's politics of compassionate repression, which emerged against a historical backdrop of reluctant humanitarianism and racialised fear of Central Americans, has propelled the expansion of a loose network of humanitarian shelters while also exacerbating the violence to which these shelters, and the migrants who pass through them, respond.

Learning to (not) see trauma amid Mexico's shifting affective economy of migrant aid

One of my core interests in this article stems from the way that my visiting colleague's collapsing of compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation echoes a similar terminological ambiguity across diverse health-related disciplines, where

a discourse of 'trauma as emotional contagion' is persistent (Baillot, Cowan, and Munro 2013). Psychic trauma, once a stigmatised and 'suspect condition', as Fassin and Rechtman write in their analysis of the cultural politics of trauma (2009, 3), has come to be seen over the past thirty years as a widely accepted and legitimised consequence of events ranging from car accidents and pandemics to natural disasters and immigration raids (Lopez et al. 2018; Kindermann et al. 2017; Schock, Rosner, and Knaevelsrud 2015). At the same time, disentangling adjacent ideas like compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatisation, and secondary stress syndrome has become the subject of a rich interdisciplinary conversation across health-related fields like nursing (Coetzee and Laschinger 2018; Sabo 2011), emergency medicine (Hamilton, Tran, and Jamieson 2016), and social work (Bride and Figley 2007). As Kathleen Ledoux writes, however, while this research has served to normalise the idea that aiding people who have been traumatised can itself be traumatising, efforts to empirically clarify the aetiology of these concepts and the causal relationships between them remain largely 'equivocal' (2015, 2043). Given how 'a new vocabulary for explaining causes and prejudices' has emerged around the idea of psychic trauma (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 10), it is important to consider how discourses of emotional contagion that underlie concerns about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation intersect with the historical construction of Central Americans as a racialised threat to the body politic in Mexico.

These intersecting discourses—racialised suspicion, reluctant compassion, and the idea that trauma is contagious—served as an important backdrop for my ethnographic research as a volunteer shelter worker at La Casita between 2014 and 2017, which occurred during a transition period in which the shelter sought to navigate a shifting affective economy by strengthening relationships with professionalised aid networks. I conducted interviews with shelter workers and migrants passing through the shelter, but the majority of my fieldwork consisted of carrying out the daily work of the shelter: preparing meals, conducting intake interviews, administering first aid, and distributing donated goods. As someone whose training and research interests sit at the intersection of social work practice and critical anthropological traditions, this dedication to the shelter's daily grind reflects my commitment to approaching ethnography with an 'embodied ethic of accompaniment' (Frank-Vitale, Vogt, and Balaguera 2019), of striving to contribute to the broader political logics of organisations like La Casita through everyday practice. For me, the experience of working to harmonise my different disciplinary, professional, and political positionalities—all of which are mediated through racialised and gendered hierarchies—has provided an illuminating, if also tense and difficult, window onto my own socialisation and that of my interlocutors. For example, the anxiety that I felt about whether my involvement in the daily duties—which sometimes involved being left to run the shelter alone so that other team

members could rest or attend training—was compromising my 'data collection' goals is itself an important piece of data that illuminates both shared commitments and lines of difference between myself and my fellow shelter workers. In a very practical sense, my involvement in daily aid work also reflected the shelter's basic need for more hands on deck, particularly in the early days of my fieldwork. When I began, the shelter was staffed by a small group of dedicated local volunteers who were divided fairly evenly between men and women and ranged in age. These volunteers came from various professional backgrounds and included a retired electrician, an accountant, and a primary school teacher. Some, who became involved through the shelter's relationship with the local church, were drawn to shelter work through a religious ethic of charitable social service. Others, who came to the shelter through their involvement with allied social advocacy organisations, embraced an ethic of social justice and were more attuned to professionalised human rights work. All were familiar with, if not deeply committed to, a politics of liberation theology that melds religious social service traditions and a commitment to working in solidarity with poor and oppressed populations (Brown 2013; Hagan 2012).

In those early days of fieldwork, the core team of shelter workers, who generally referred to themselves as *colaboradores* [collaborators] and to their work as a form of *cooperación* [cooperation]—ideas to which I return later on—often expressed a shared feeling of being overwhelmed and under-resourced. Growing international attention in the wake of the much-publicised 'unaccompanied minors crisis' of 2014 and 2015 allowed the shelter to gradually shift from a primarily volunteer-driven and locally supported initiative to an increasingly professionalised organisation with the ability to provide a small but reliable stipend to the shelter's core team members through formalised relationships with supra-governmental bodies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, private foundations in Europe and the United States, and international religious service programs. This attention and support, which was accompanied by increasingly regular visits from more privileged people like me, brought a greater sense of financial stability to the shelter. These visits, in which shelter workers educated visitors about their work providing aid to migrants, were also moments of enskilment where shelter workers learned to anticipate and negotiate visitors' affective expectations. What visitors anticipated did not always align with shelter workers' strategies for navigating migrants' fluid and ambiguous relationships with criminalised smuggling economies, however. As I discuss in what follows, the ethic of collaboration with which shelter workers approached their work (both among themselves and also with the migrants who passed through the shelter), together with their consciousness of how compassion discourse had been weaponised to intensify policing along transit corridors, shaped a way of interpreting migrants' proximity to trauma that differed in important ways from the typical image of humanitarian aid.

My analysis of the affective tensions that accompanied this shift towards a more professionalised approach to humanitarian aid builds on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that seeks to nuance what Lisa Malkki has described as the all-too-common assumption 'that the aid worker is an always already worldly, generically cosmopolitan, globally mobile figure operating from a position of relative strength and anonymous power vis-à-vis ('local', 'helpless') aid recipients' (2015, 24). Scholarship in the field of critical humanitarian studies has extensively documented the central role that frontline aid workers involved with transnational humanitarian agencies play in operationalising broader moral and affective economies of rescue, sympathy, and compassion (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2007). More recent scholarship, meanwhile, focuses on the role of 'compassion economies' (Caldwell 2016) and what Vincanne Adams (2013), building on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), refers to as 'affect economies', where non-governmental projects that are empowered by the charitable motivations of volunteers subsidise the failures of neoliberal state policies. These critiques tend to position humanitarian projects like La Casita as normative, surface-level interventions that lubricate the circuits of displacement and deportation that are the products of an affective economy of compassion and repression.

Yet, as Britt Halvorson writes, it is important to recognise that moral and affective economies 'are complexly shaped and reinforced through ongoing linguistic and social interactions, rather than preceding people's involvement in aid work or existing only within individuals' (2020, 155). Just as Brigden (2018) draws attention to the ways in which migrants subvert tropes of passive victimhood by strategically embodying culturally and historically constructed social scripts, shelter vision speaks to the ways that aid workers learned to tacitly refuse an affective economy that imagines Central Americans as potentially toxic, whether as traumatised victims or traumatising victimisers. Extending the work of medical anthropologists who have similarly drawn attention to how patient–provider relations can unsettle established social hierarchies (Cooper 2015; Roberts 2012; Yates-Doerr 2012), my aim is to describe how shelter workers learned to subtly subvert an affective economy of fear and compassion—of which compassion fatigue discourse is one dimension—by enacting a collaborative form of skilled vision; one that did not necessarily align with the more normative expectations of compassion and contagion that underpin transnational humanitarianism (Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010; Murphy 2015). Importantly, the ethical and political work of (not) seeing trauma tended to emerge most clearly prior to and following moments of explicit enskilment and apprenticeship, such as when shelter workers shifted their practice slightly to meet the affective expectations of visitors.

I conceptualise shelter vision as one form of what Cristina Grasseni terms 'skilled vision': 'the training of vision in professional, scientific, and everyday settings'

(2007, 1), which she describes as a response to critiques of anthropology's ocular-centric bias (Fabian 1983). Building on the way Grasseni (2007) unsettles the tendency for vision to be equated with an evaluative and surveilling gaze, anthropologists have taken up the idea of skilled vision as an intersubjective form of social navigation (Archambault 2013). Chris Tan, for example, argues that developing skilled vision involves both 'knowing how to look and being looked at' (2016, 843). Approaching skilled vision from an intersubjective perspective of embodied accompaniment intersects in important ways with recent anthropological discussions of empathy as a dynamic of feeling *with* that is distinct from that of compassion as an experience of feeling *for* (Singer and Klimecki 2014). Douglas Hollan, for instance, argues that empathic understanding is 'always embedded in an intersubjective encounter that requires ongoing dialogue for its accuracy' (2008, 476). Empathy, understood as 'the imaginative work of not only the empathizer but also the empathizee who participates in the process of being understood by another' (Throop 2012, 410), diverges from a more mechanical understanding of compassion fatigue, whereby a practitioner's 'empathic ability' (Sabo 2011) is both the foundation of a successful therapeutic relationship and the cause of distress for practitioners. This model assumes that it is the practitioner's job to foster an environment in which the traumatised person feels comfortable enough to share their traumas based on the idea that talking about trauma is a crucial step in assimilating painful memories into a pattern of meaning (McKinney 2007). As a consequence, however, the practitioner is in turn traumatised by the 'emotional contagion' of trauma.

Grounded in my own experience of contributing to the daily work of shelter, my analysis contributes to Grasseni's (2008) approach to theorising vision as an intersubjective encounter that goes beyond a surveilling or disciplining 'gaze'. In particular, I emphasise the affective dimensions of looking and being looked at that structured how shelter workers at La Casita balanced migrants' strategic dissimulations and visitors' affective expectations. I argue that rather than approaching migrants with compassion—understood as a feeling *for* that reinscribes a sense of distance between the person who bears the mark of trauma and the person recognising it—shelter workers' interactions are better described as feeling *with*. Here, learning to look away, or to pretend not to see at appropriate moments, subverts discourses of trauma as contagion without risking the shelter's place within an evolving affective economy of professionalised humanitarianism.

Looking

Mexico's migrant shelters, forming a loose and yet deeply interconnected web of grassroots spaces that very publicly defies the global deportation regime, are an inspiring testament to collective, grassroots action. For those who are immersed

in the daily, often hurried work of providing aid, however, shelter work can also come to feel fairly mundane. Across most of Mexico's shelters, migrants tend to stay just enough time to eat, shower, and maybe take a nap. Most stay only a few hours and those who spend the night tend to leave early the following day. Amid the continual passage of migrants and visitors through the shelter's doors, aid workers develop a sense of shelter vision, a learned familiarity with what to look for as well as a respect for the fallibility of these interpretations.

Most mornings, migrants who had arrived in the night were already waiting outside the door of La Casita when I arrived. Those waiting out the chilly nights of Mexico's central plateau often made a fire made from sticks, pieces of rubbish, and the ashes left behind by those who had been in the same position the previous night. On one of these mornings, I sat and made small talk with a group of men standing around the fire as I waited for Paula, a shelter worker in her mid-twenties who had first come to the shelter as a college intern, to arrive and open the shelter. I usually waited until arriving migrants had had a chance to eat, shower, and get a good night's rest before bringing up the idea of an interview. However, those who were familiar with people like me from shelters farther south regularly prompted interviews themselves.

'I assume you want to make a recording', remarked a man with luminescent green eyes who later introduced himself as *El Gato* [the cat]. 'Reporter, student, or academic?' he asked, pointing for me to put my recorder on. Seeing the recorder, two of the men standing nearby walked away. Others sidled up to hear what kind of stories Gato might tell. As he recounted his journey up through Mexico, he turned to a man who he referred to as *Dientes* ['teeth', due to his mouthful of gold-capped teeth, I presumed] as if he was double checking his story:

Gato: 'You guys got on with us in Medias Aguas, right? At night, no?'

Dientes: '*Sí'ombé* [yeah man], at night.'

Gato: 'Heading towards Tierra Blanca, right? And up ahead there were guards inspecting the train with flashlights, so we stopped the train and ran ahead.'

Dientes: 'It was you guys that disconnected the brake lines. That's when I joined up with these guys. And from there the train took us to Orizaba.'

Gato: 'It's not like it used to be, *berdá'mano* [right, brother]?'

Dientes: 'It's almost all on foot these days.'

As with many of these impromptu interviews, our conversation was interrupted when Paula arrived. Those who had been waiting began to form a queue as Paula

opened the shelter's main door, apologised for the delay, and let everyone know what was going to happen. Four people would be let in at a time. All belongings would be searched. Backpacks would be stored in a locked room. Phones would be labelled and locked in a filing cabinet. No smoking was permitted in the dormitory. People could come and go as they pleased before 19:00, at which point the shelter's doors would be closed for the night. Paula concluded, as always, by letting those gathered know that the shelter limits its hospitality to two nights. 'Our resources are minimal', she explained. 'We have to respect that more people are coming up behind you. This is your house. Please respect the space and each other.'

As in other hospitality contexts, where discourses of unqualified openness coexist with strategies to discern a guest's positionality (Shryock 2008), Paula's welcome speech was accompanied by backpack inspections that, at least superficially, signalled the shelter's alignment with a politics of security and suspicion. In most instances, however, and especially if the shelter was busy, shelter workers enacted shelter vision by strategically passing over seemingly significant evidence.

For the next half hour, as Paula prepared breakfast in the kitchen, I welcomed groups of four and quietly looked through their belongings. Some people carried as much as possible. A man with long flowing hair who appeared to be in his mid-twenties carried a bright red duffel bag with a shoulder strap fashioned from bailing twine. It contained a pair of flip-flops, two pairs of jeans turned inside out and carefully rolled up, a fleece blanket, and a flattened roll of toilet paper. Others, like Gato, who carried a piece of heavy black plastic rolled neatly into a bundle and tied with a piece of string, had next to nothing. Some people tucked important documents like death certificates, photographs, and newspaper clippings into worn ziplock bags that they hoped would be useful to support asylum claims once they reached the US–Mexico border. As the drawer in the shelter's office filled with abandoned mobile phones, pocketknives, and pocket-sized bibles attests, people just as often left seemingly significant belongings behind.

Overlooking potentially significant signs of smuggling or trauma—or the absence of expected signs—was as much about the impending arrival of more migrants as it was about a sense of indifference or apathy. Shelter vision, in this sense, involved an awareness of how taking the time to conduct intake protocols with more discernment had the potential to disrupt the shelter team's ability to keep up with the seemingly continuous arrival of new guests. Indeed, in anticipation of more people arriving we often rushed to begin the next task before finishing the one at hand. By the time I neared the end of the backpack inspections, Paula had often already begun serving breakfast. Just as quickly, we transitioned to conducting intake interviews with those who had finished eating; each task blended into the

next. Amid this flurry of activity, aid workers asked explicitly about migrants' traumatic experiences and looked for subtle signs of trafficking or coercion. However, they balanced this work of visual discernment with a logistical overview of what might lay ahead over the course of the day.

The small office where we conducted interviews was just big enough for two folding chairs and a small desk. An enlarged map of Mexico, recently donated by Médecins Sans Frontières, showed the locations of Mexico's shelters, linked like a game of connect the dots. Dientes, the man with the gold teeth, plopped down on the chair opposite Paula as she opened a spreadsheet on the shelter computer. I stood behind her, chopping up bars of soap into small pieces to be handed out, along with some toilet paper, to each new guest. Because similar registration procedures are commonplace across most migrant shelters, Paula tended to begin the intake interview without explanation. Dientes, who disclosed that his name was Selvin, responded calmly to questions about his age, highest level of education, and how he earned a living back home. Paula asked whether he had experienced any violence while en route. 'Honestly, it's been bad with all the new migration and raids and assaults', he began, adding:

> This trip I've already been traveling two months and I'm barely here. Two months since I left my home in Honduras. I'm not even halfway. I'm just going little by little. I haven't been able to send anything to my family. Nothing at all. Sometimes I can't even talk with them because, I don't know, what do I tell them? Other times I've found good jobs in Mexico, working a week here, a week there. Now it seems like nobody wants to lend a hand to us migrants. I imagine they've run out of money back home.

His response opened the door for any number of potential follow-up questions but, after quickly inputting 'assaults by Migration [INM] and others' into the spreadsheet, without missing a beat Paula continued:

Paula: 'When is the last time you spoke with your family?'

Selvin: 'A month ago.'

Paula: 'O.K. I'm just going to take a quick photo… [shutter clicking]. And here is some soap and toilet paper.'

Selvin: 'Do you have any razors?'

Paula: 'Sorry, we just ran out. Who's next?'

Shelter workers like Paula went through this same intake interview with everyone that passed through, fitting all the pain and exhilaration of what it takes just to make

it to the halfway point of their journey into a few cells on a spreadsheet. By the time we completed these interviews, it was not uncommon for another group of migrants to have arrived, and the whole process to begin again.

The amount of information collected within migrant shelters is substantial. However, simply documenting people passing through the shelter provides little opportunity for follow-up with someone like Selvin. Generally, there simply wasn't enough time to help everyone to reconnect with family. For Paula, the value of intake procedures lay, as she put it, 'in the aggregate'. On a daily basis, however, she and other shelter workers experienced the shelter as a rapidly revolving door that required a sheltered way of seeing, of learning to strategically overlook signs of someone needing additional attention, whether as someone traumatised, someone traumatising others, or both. While the number of migrants who stayed at shelters like La Casita for weeks and months as they pursued efforts to obtain state humanitarian recognition increased over the course of my fieldwork, the vast majority of people were gone almost as soon as they had arrived. This rapidity of transit left shelter workers with an appreciation of the risks associated with the level of compassion that was expected by visitors, to which I turn in the next section.

Being looked at

Throughout my fieldwork, I learned to appreciate how shelter workers balanced speed with care amid the expectations of visitors, who were less attuned to both the prevalence of violence experienced by migrants and the ambiguous dynamics of migrant and smuggler dissimulation. Compared with shelter workers, whose affective displays were more akin to the 'emotional restraint' prized by the aid workers on whom Halvorson has focused (2020, 154), these visitors often seemed earnest to outwardly demonstrate a sense of humanitarian compassion. This reflected a desire, as one leader of a group of high school students put it, to '[understand] people's experiences as humans, not just as migrants'. Anticipating that visitors might mistake their emotional restraint for indifference or insensitivity, rather than a strategic form of skilled vision attuned to (not) seeing trauma, shelter workers often felt a sense of relief when migrants seemed eager to talk with visitors. Ironically, those most willing to talk with said visitors, who also tended to be the most familiar with the journey, were the very people shelter workers were most likely to suspect of being more than 'just migrants'.

The same day Selvin passed through, for example, a group of US college students made a visit to the shelter. After passing through the shelter's intake protocol, Selvin had asked to borrow a pair of clippers which had been donated to the shelter by a visiting journalist in order to help set up an impromptu barbershop. As a queue of migrants looking for haircuts formed, Selvin called the students over with an air

of benevolence and furrowed his brow in my direction while nodding at my phone, directing me to begin recording. 'The most important thing about migrating through Mexico is that you never know who you can trust, man', he began. He went on:

> You know, sometimes you're like, 'I've already done this, I know what's up', and you start talking to people about what's next. But being there in places like La Cementera, you can be talking about these kinds of things and not want to tell another person that's there with you about what's happening up ahead because you never know if someone you're talking to or someone who is listening is one of them. Because they're just like us. They're Salvadorans and Hondurans, the folks that work in those organisations. Sometimes you see a person and you hold back instead of telling them what's up ahead and where to walk to get around a checkpoint. They might start wondering how you know about what's up ahead. They might say, 'Hey, is this guy a guide or something?' So, you know, you stand the chance of losing if you start giving people advice. If I tell someone not to go a certain way, I don't have any idea who I'm talking to.

For the next hour, the students and I listened with rapt attention as Selvin worked his way through four haircuts. His testimony appeared to be exactly what the students had been hoping for. Some even pulled out notebooks and began jotting down their own ethnographic field notes. He told of nearly being kidnapped at La Cementera, an abandoned cement factory outside of Palenque, Chiapas, that is known as a place where migrants riding the train are often assaulted. He also lamented that the clippers he was using paled in comparison to the ones he used to make his living in a barbershop in Atlanta before being deported three years ago. Since then, he explained, he had made the journey four times. Every once in a while, Paula popped her head out of the kitchen where she was cleaning up from the morning meal and gave me a knowing smile as Selvin continued to hold court. Later, she told me that while she didn't recognise Selvin, she found his familiarity and sense of ease suspicious and that she would keep her eyes out for him in the future.

Similar to what Wendy Vogt describes as 'skeptical compassion': learning to '[read] between the lines' in order to decipher ambiguous dynamics of collaboration and coercion between migrants and smugglers (2016, 375), shelter workers like Paula enacted shelter vision by filing away the ambiguous hints that someone like Selvin may be more than just a migrant, like the fact that he was comfortable speaking publicly about what he had experienced along the route. This was not just a matter of knowing who someone 'really was' and deciding not to acknowledge the person; it also reflected how shelter workers developed an awareness of the fallibility of their interpretations. Given the number of people who pass through shelters like

La Casita, shelter workers and migrants alike often misrecognised each other, confusing one suspected smuggler for someone else, or, as in the case of Selvin, one shelter volunteer for another. After the students left, for example, Selvin pulled me aside and told me that he recognised me from the first time he took the trip three years earlier. I met Selvin in 2015. The first time I visited the shelter had been a little over a year earlier, in 2014. I became accustomed to being confused for someone else. Voluntourists, priests-in-training, student researchers, and others who travelled to Mexico from abroad to help out at shelters were all commonplace. After another skinny white guy in his mid-twenties from the United States started volunteering at La Casita, our fellow shelter workers started jokingly referring to us as *Güero Uno* and *Güero Dos*—White Boy 1 and White Boy 2—, given how often migrants and others confused us.

In this context, Paula's hesitancy to pin down who Selvin *really* was revealed a learned ethic of *not* getting to the bottom of what people had experienced while en route. While shelter workers appreciated the visitors' desires to see people accessing the shelter as more than 'just migrants', they also resisted the idea that there are moments when people are 'just migrants' and the suggestion that those implicated in smuggling networks are somehow less deserving of humane treatment. As I have discussed in this section, withholding judgment was not only about coping with the pace with which successive groups of migrants pass through the shelter. As the number of visitors to the shelter increased throughout my fieldwork, shelter workers also learned to fit their work, at least in an outwardly visible way, into the affective expectations of visitors.

Collaborating

In what follows, I situate the dynamics of looking *and* being looked at discussed above in the context of the shelter's place within a shifting affective economy of humanitarian governance in Mexico. The country's politics of compassionate repression revolved discursively around the relationship between migrants and organised crime; throughout my fieldwork, however, the affective expectations that underlie shelter vision increasingly came to be mediated through the shelter's deepening integration with intersecting economies of transnational humanitarianism. Strengthening relationships with international visitors offered stability; however, these relationships typically came with the expectation that helping migrants to access formalised humanitarian status—whether as refugees or through a humanitarian visa—was preferable to a less professionalised ethic of 'collaboration'. As this collaborative ethic reflected the shelters' efforts to sustain the work of shelter on a shoestring budget, it also reflected a shelter vision ethic characterised by an appreciation for the fact that migrants passing through shelters are much more than passive, destitute victims.

Migrant shelters offer free temporary lodging to migrants, but not all migrants who pass through shelters are penniless. Many migrants on the move are in the process of coordinating with family members and friends to receive thousands of dollars in order to pay for a crossing; others arrive at migrant shelters after being separated from guides who, in most cases, have already received a down payment of several thousand dollars. And while these separations, which are often portrayed as acts of abandonment, play into the vilification of smugglers, intensified policing also plays an important role. The point is that while many do cross Mexico with next to nothing, it is also common for these periods of destitution to coincide with significant spending.

Without downplaying the significance of the debts that families take on (Heidbrink 2019), often after costly efforts to contest deportation in the U.S. (Boyce and Launius 2020), shelter workers were acutely aware that characterising migrants as a financial burden to the body politic is a problematic misrepresentation. Throughout my fieldwork, migrants regularly asked aid workers to retrieve wire transfers from friends and family members on their behalf. In Mexico, receiving a wire transfer through a service like MoneyGram or Western Union requires government-issued ID, meaning migrants must rely on Mexican citizens to receive money. Many people who live near migrant shelters also make a living from receiving these wire transfers by charging a fee to do so. Of course, sharing personal information with strangers is risky. On top of the real danger of being kidnapped, stories of family members having received threatening calls from people falsely claiming to have kidnapped their loved ones, and demanding thousands of dollars, are also commonplace.

To minimise these risks, some shelters like La Casita offer to retrieve funds sent by wire transfer. However, fitting in time to do so is complicated, both logistically and ethically. Wire transfers require coordinating phone calls, keeping track of lengthy access codes and, most importantly, leaving the shelter. At La Casita, it also involved taking a return trip by bus and queueing, a process that sometimes needed to be repeated because of a misspelled name or because a number had been mistakenly transposed. For shelters like La Casita that operate on a shoestring budget, wire transfers were also a financial burden. The cost of taking multiple daily trips to receive wire transfers added up. In an effort to strike a balance between helping migrants while also reducing the financial and logistical burden of receiving wire transfers, shelter workers at La Casita asked those receiving them to 'collaborate' by donating a portion of the money to the shelter. While shelter workers were careful to clarify that doing so was voluntary, in a context of widespread suspicions of corruption, this practice opened up the shelter to rumours of exploitation and wrongdoing. Shelter workers' responses to these suspicions of corruption help illuminate the fact that shelter vision not only involved

tacitly acknowledging the ambiguities of collaboration and coercion between migrants and smugglers, but also how they themselves were implicated in similar dynamics that ran counter to the expectations of altruistic charity that surround humanitarian aid.

Several months into my fieldwork, for example, a shelter worker named Diego, a former electrician who began volunteering after his retirement, was asked to take a two-week break after migrants began arriving at the shelter explaining that they had been warned that the *viejo enojón* [angry old man] skims off wire transfers. As these rumours began to build, La Casita's advisory board informed shelter workers that they should stop retrieving money transfers entirely. A shelter worker named Sandra was particularly troubled by this change. Like Paula, Sandra had begun volunteering at the shelter three years ago after having a number of clerical jobs with different human rights organisations. 'People need money to travel just like you and I do', she told me. 'Besides, the *compas* [colleagues] often give a piece of what they receive back to the shelter. I mean, you should never ask for payment, but you say, "Would you be willing to support the shelter with a small *cooperación?*" – after they receive the money, of course. We all have to help each other out to keep this place running.'

Like Sandra, shelter workers often framed their efforts in terms of 'collaboration'. For example, they often referred to themselves and those who contributed to the shelter as *colaboradores* [collaborators]. At the same time, shelter workers also sought to distance themselves from being understood as merely workers. For example, they also referred to the small amount of money they received in exchange for their efforts as their *cooperación* [literally 'cooperation', but also meaning 'stipend']. The language of cooperation and collaboration speaks to a tension between connecting with people and maintaining the professional distance that is required to accommodate people who depend on illicit economies without stigmatising them or being stigmatised.

Shortly after Diego was asked to leave the shelter, I met up with Pablo, a former shelter worker who had recently begun work as a secondary school citizenship teacher. When I asked him about Diego and the issue of money transfers, he explained that he could empathise with Diego, although would not say so directly. He understood how, amid the perpetual stress of shelter work, it is easy for someone who is struggling to pay bills with the shelter's relatively meagre *cooperación* to forget the role that they play not only in maintaining the legitimacy of La Casita, but that of the broader networks of shelters across Mexico. He told me:

> A lot of people arrive in desperate situations, people who are willing to try and 'do business' with you. They'll put money on the table or offer you something.

They say, 'You know what, I'll give you this much and you work for me.' You don't represent the shelter. You represent an institution. You represent all the labour that came before this. You might be the face of the shelter right now, but you can't lose sight of all the other people; from the activists in Mexico City dialoguing with state senators to the guy down the street who donates a kilo of rice every couple of months. If we lose sight of that, we lose it all, all the confidence of the people that maintain this space because what we do is not only what is happening now. It's all the other people surrounding us who are looking at what we are doing. That's what matters.

Pablo described a conundrum. Practicing shelter vision involved welcoming whoever arrived with a radical openness and humanising empathy. This openness, however, was double-sided. 'It is a big contradiction', as he puts it. Shelter work, according to Pablo, is a constant struggle to 'not lose sight of all the other people'. This is demonstrated by the way even mundane acts associated with shelter work are wrapped up in a social milieu that requires, as Pablo explains, 'the confidence of the people who maintain this space'. Of course, not losing sight of the bigger pictures is a challenge when you are trying to feed dozens of people three meals each day. 'It's interminable', he explained, going on to say:

You daily confront faces that are utterly exhausted and traumatised. You can see the violence on their faces, right? That includes the violence of nature because they have to pass through extreme climate changes. Aggressions. It's a big contradiction because every day you have to be very open. You have to have a spirit of help and even the ability to encourage. You have to know how to communicate, how to connect; joke a little and respect it when somebody doesn't want to say anything at all. The person is there because migrating is a human act. And because it is a human act, it requires a degree of professionalism.

Rather than seeing their work as a form of humanitarian exceptionalism that consisted of providing aid to people defined by trauma and the malignancy of corruption, shelter workers like Diego positioned themselves as part of a broader affective economy that also remained attuned to a different sense of humanity, one that is rooted as much in the agency of people migrating as it is in their victimhood.

Conclusion

In this article, I have taken concerns about compassion fatigue that I encountered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in and around a non-governmental migrant shelter in Mexico as a window onto how shelter workers developed a logic of (not) drawing attention to the suffering of individuals in the name of rescuing their individualised humanity, which I have referred to as 'shelter vision'. I have

conceptualised shelter vision as a form of skilled vision that was central to how the aid workers I spent time with at La Casita negotiated the ambiguities of care and coercion that Central Americans encounter as they made their way through Mexico. While I have developed my argument in response to visitors' concerns about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation, my aim is not to minimise or downplay the psychological and emotional toll of witnessing and engaging with the violent consequences of militarised immigration enforcement on a daily basis. Rather, I have tried to highlight how concerns about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation risk reinforcing discourses of racialised suspicion that underlie the politics of compassion and repression surrounding Mexico's immigration regime.

My conceptualisation of shelter vision is also an attempt to capture how shelter workers learned to negotiate overlapping and often contradictory affective economies. First, shelter workers enacted shelter vision in response to a border regime that vilifies smugglers and guides, people who are 'more than just migrants', while enacting enforcement policies that push migrants to collaborate with those very networks in order to survive the crossing. Second, they enacted shelter vision in response to the affective expectations of visiting volunteers, many of whom were also interested in seeing the people who passed through the shelter as 'more than migrants', but for very different reasons. Finally, my understanding of shelter vision speaks to how aid workers negotiated these overlapping stances in the context of the growing professionalisation of Mexico's migrant shelter infrastructure, which required shelter workers to balance legitimacy in the eyes of migrants with legitimacy in the eyes of potential funders. Ultimately, my understanding of shelter vision as a form of skilled vision reveals how aid workers learned to navigate broad and often contradictory affective economies that revolve around the faultlines of victimhood and villainy, as well as purity and toxicity.

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