

Good boys, gang members, asylum gained and lost: The devastating reflections of a bureaucrat-ethnographer ☆

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Abstract

State institutions and their acts of indifference, valorization, and violence operate through relationships, emotions, legal framings, and people. Engaging feminist geographic interventions, in this article we center state employees and their quotidian, affective relationships to asylum-seekers and the asylum process. We show how these actors embody state migration control through their daily practices. And we highlight the insights of former employees undertaking reflexive feminist research into their past working life. Drawing on the memories of one such “bureaucrat-ethnographer” (Valdivia), and our shared feminist engagement together, we outline three key insights for research on state migration practice. First, that the training state employees undergo aims to develop objective, neutral, and emotion-free decision-making, yet it relies on highly affective and biased state assumptions about asylum-seekers and their motivations. Second, while this training fosters simplified understandings of the causes and impacts of violence, a feminist geographic lens makes visible its complexly power-laden machinations. Last, we assert that state employees face distinct emotional pressures as they deal with devastation: the state's, their own, and that of asylum claimants. Valuing the insights of bureaucrats who become, or are at once, undertaking critical research disrupts intellectual divisions and hierarchies and complicates our understanding of the migration control practices of the state.

Section snippets

Introduction: ethnography at the desk

Ayúdame a ayudarte...

Help me to help you...

This phrase is often voiced across a desk by officials working in a Mexican office devoted to refugee assistance. Officials like me [Valdivia]. Most commonly the call comes after the formal interview between the solicitant and the official has ended. It's a telling one, for those in the know. It's a phrase officials use when they have sympathy for asylum seekers, but when they recognize that sadly, and in truth, the case is weak. This is often so for those...

Interrogating the state from within: institutional ethnographies of migration and asylum

“the state is not an apparatus but a set of processes ... its materiality resides much less in institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power” (Trouillot 2001, 127)....

Institutional ethnographies investigate structural and bureaucratic processes and relations. They do so, in part, via the experiences of informants who work or otherwise engage with them (Smith 2005). With attention to the routine, day-to-day practices,...

Setting the institutional stage: claiming asylum in Mexico

A complex set of factors work in concert to drive people from the Central American region to Mexico. Civil war and weak post-war governments, U.S. economic and political intervention, the war on drugs fueled by the United States' voracious demand, failed *Mano Dura* government gang crackdowns, soaring homicides, gendered and sexual persecution with impunity, widening economic inequality rooted in neoliberal restructuring, lost employment opportunities, erosion of labor organizing, and land...

Conclusions: critical feminist bureaucratic embodiments and emotional geographies

Feminist geographers, feminist migration scholars, and wider feminist thinkers insist that our work challenges the epistemic violence of accounts that ignore or flatten marginalized people. We do this by being witness to and narrators of spaces outside the dominant, formal accounts, creating alternative narratives of people externally defined through violence. Bureaucrats in the asylum system do this witnessing-work. It is through the bureaucrat that an entire legal framework for asylum is...

Declaration of competing interest

None....

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OLIMPIA M. VALDIVIA RAMIREZ is a feminist anthropologist. She studies the Mexican asylum process with a focus on its institutional practices, and the strategies adolescents deploy to navigate them. She is concerned with the construction of “agency,” both individual and collective, in the face of structural conflict and marginalization...

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