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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/utgr20

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To cite this article: Jorge Choy-Gómez (07 Mar 2024): THERE AND BACK AGAIN: NAVIGATING IMMIGRATION INSTITUTIONS AS AN INSIDER RESEARCHER, Geographical Review, DOI: [10.1080/00167428.2024.2321187](https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2024.2321187)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2024.2321187>



Published online: 07 Mar 2024.



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THERE AND BACK AGAIN: NAVIGATING IMMIGRATION INSTITUTIONS AS AN INSIDER RESEARCHER

JORGE CHOY-GÓMEZ 

ABSTRACT. The study of immigration institutions has mainly focused on the effects these entities have on migrants and refugees' lives. Much less research has been produced from the unique perspective of the people who comprise these institutions. Drawing from work experiences and ethnographic research on the operation of detention centers for migrant and refugee children in southern Mexico, this article reflects on the daily work in these centers and on the personnel who reproduce the government and execute immigration policy. The article builds on feminist postcolonial perspective by focusing on the uniqueness of the bureaucrat-ethnographer viewpoint. Keypoints of this article are how axes of race, gender, and nationality hinder and/or favor access to these institutions either for work or study, and how this contributes to global inequalities in knowledge production. *Keywords:* immigration research, detention shelters, bureaucracy, refugees, Mexico.

I arrived one hour early for my first day of work as the new director of the “Shelter for Migrant Children” of the Chiapas state government. I was very nervous. I introduced myself at the gates, but the guards were expecting me. Upon entering, I saw offices and bedrooms spread throughout the grounds, people in uniforms with papers in hand and walking in a hurry, people lined up here, lined up there. A regular government office. It was hot. Very hot. The humidity was stifling. Huge mango trees, wet ground, and beautiful murals on some of the buildings almost made me forget that it was a detention center for unaccompanied migrant children. I was constantly reminded of where I worked by the imposing wall almost four meters in height that surrounded the center.

To acquaint myself with my new workplace, I walked around alone and observed: a laundry, a small chapel, a sports court, four run-down housing units, babies in arms, adolescents, some joyfully running and others with faces of sadness and desperation. A couple of minutes later, the outgoing director approached me. “Let’s go to the office and talk.” From the administration building, you could see everything. The office had glass walls like a panopticon. We talked for about half an hour. “Don’t write down anything we’re talking about. In two or three days the job will take care of you learning everything, believe me. Just remember this: here, what matters are the documents, they are 90 percent of the work.” I imagined the other 10 percent was the care for children, but I didn’t ask.

I only lasted six months as the director of this detention shelter¹, from October 2014 to March 2015. At the detention shelter, bureaucrats decide who

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is entitled to seek international protection and who is not, and who would be deported almost immediately back to their country of origin. Despite their importance in the fabric of immigration policy in Mexico, not much is known about the 40 migration detention facilities (INAI 2023) for unaccompanied minors and their daily operations, the devastating effect these institutions have on the lives of thousands of unaccompanied children who are placed in these detention shelters, or who works there. With notable exceptions, few studies have been produced from the unique perspective of the people who make up these institutions, and how their knowledge and experience contribute to the study of migrant and refugee policies, institutions, and logics. This article focuses on the methodological dimensions of research on immigration institutions in Mexico. In particular, I reflect on the nonpublic activities of the public institution, the daily activities that escape media and researchers' attention, and the goals that shape these state bureaucracies' practices. Over the years, this immigration institution exposed me for the need to consider the imbalances in access to such institutions for academic research. A central tenet of this reflection concerns the everyday, embodied experience and knowledge of scholars from the Global South who have worked within these immigration and refugee institutions. Centering these voices and perspectives is critical for understanding, and potentially dismantling, the systems of oppression represented by restrictive immigration policies, such as those in Mexico.

In the first part of this text, I illustrate how a series of not-so-random events allowed me access to one of the most closed spaces for research on migration policy in Mexico during the so-called "unaccompanied minors crisis" in 2014–2015. Through ethnographic observation made in these years, I describe the impressions of the first days, the awe of the complexity in the operation of the institution, as well as my own slow but sustained bureaucratization and automation necessary to perform my duties as the director. This section discusses bureaucracy as a disciplinary device used in the operation of these "shelters" and its effect on the staff, and how the technical language used in these spaces gives meaning to restriction.

The second part examines the implications of returning to this space in 2021 and 2022 as a researcher, and the constraints imposed on the dissemination of research findings—a product of unequal geopolitical positions in the global academic environment. I illustrate institutionally denied access, and the continuing ambivalence of being a former staff member and a researcher. I discuss how these constraints are the result of both formal academic policies and geopolitical positions embodied and traversed by axes of nationality, race, and gender, among other researcher characteristics.

I conclude these reflections by underscoring the critical importance of analyzing institutions from the inside, told from the experience of people who

have been and continue to be part of a system as closed as the practice of immigration policy and its everyday reproduction.

THE INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE IN IMMIGRATION STUDIES

Research on immigrant detention in Mexico draws almost entirely from local human rights organization reports (Barja 2016; Gómez and others 2023), national coalitions (CCINM 2017; GIDMT 2018; Barja and others 2019) and international coalitions (Corlett and others 2012; Coria and Bonnici 2013; Coria and others 2015). The recent proliferation of such reports is the product of a growing need to document the actions of the Mexican state as they implement immigration policy in conjunction with the U.S. government interests. The contents of these reports are largely informed by supervised visits to these centers once or twice a month, with visits scheduled well in advance (CCINM 2017). Often, these visits and subsequent reports focus on infrastructure, treatment of detainees, access to services, and length of detention. As important and thorough as they are, all these reports are based on external opinions, sporadic and supervised observations, and are mostly based on statistics and institutionally provided data. Yet, almost nowhere in this documentation is there an interview, opinion, or testimony of a current or former detention center staff person.

Along with this, there is a notable dearth of scholarly work on immigration detention in Mexico. Exceptions to this trend are recent studies by Amy Thompson and others (2017), Amalia Campos-Delgado (2018, 2021), Elisa Ortega (2019a; 2019b), Alethia Fernández de la Reguera (2020), Campos-Delgado and Côté-Boucher (2022), Torres and others (2022), and Lucero-Vargas and others (2023). These works, in addition to representing almost all the scholarly work on immigration detention in Mexico, share the important characteristic of including interviews with detention center staff, further emphasizing the need to better understand the political embodiment, ethical implications, and the on-the-ground, everyday decision making in immigration detention.

Recently, feminist decolonial scholars have made important contributions to the study of migration and policy institutions in Mexico by incorporating reflections on the need for and importance of voices from within those institutions. Feminist anthropologists and geographers Valdivia and others (2021, 1) have coined the term “bureaucrat-ethnographer.” This term critically interrogates the hegemonic white-western position within which the study of immigration and refugee institutions is traditionally approached. The term reflects on the practice of those researchers who place their work within the state at the center, putting it into question and providing new evidence of the emotional and ethical entanglements by which the state is produced, reproduced, and studied. Drawing on feminist postcolonial perspectives (Noxolo et al. 2012;

Radcliffe 2017; Naylor and others 2018; Zaragocín and others 2018; Faria and others 2019; Valdivia and others 2021; Zaragocín and Caretta 2021; Glockner and others 2023) focused on the everyday execution of Mexico's asylum institution, an issue deeply intertwined with immigration detention, pointing to the often dismissed voices of native bureaucrat-ethnographers. In particular, Valdivia and others, recognize the "unique ethical, emotional, and intellectual struggles and insights" of bureaucrat-ethnographers. In doing so, they address the politics of fieldwork and the inequalities of global academic labor that diminish potential critical changes to the systems of oppression that these institutions reproduce.

Drawing on insiders' perspectives has long been integral to feminist approaches. Situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) is one way feminist researchers have interrogated knowledge at large. Donna Haraway has argued that neutrality in scholarly analysis is impossible because all knowledge is situated in time and space, and grounded in the experiences of particular bodies. Thus, there is room for political stances to productively influence scientific research. My experience as a local researcher; my brown, male, able body; and my memories and experiences as a staff person in the Mexican immigration system are at the center of this reflection—that is, they are the primary source of research. Nonetheless, I recognize that mere "field experience does not legitimize knowledge" (Frazier 2019, 142). Feminist geographers have already warned that stating positionality is not enough, as it can be done in superficial ways and become an apology for being part of a certain group in power (Sultana 2017, 3). As discouraging as this may sound, in reality these warnings push researchers to continue to interrogate their own position, continually reflecting on the relationship between power and knowledge (Rose 1997, 318), understanding that, in fact, this questioning is bound to fail but that out of these failures emerge alternatives for knowledge production and for rethinking the researcher-researched relationship (Rose 1997, 315; Frazier 2019).

This article also explores the concept of "care" within the framework of Mexican immigration policy. The geographical literature on care has focused extensively on the ethical considerations intertwined with unequal power dynamics that are spatially interconnected. This becomes especially relevant in a time of market expansion, dominant discourses of individual responsibility, and waning public support in crucial domains (Lawson 2007). Examining public space, exemplified by Mexican immigration policy, its infrastructure, and practices, offers insight into how states harness resources for care to function as a tool for border enforcement. This extends the state's jurisdiction, governing a broader spectrum of individuals even in seemingly nonpunitive and unexpected spaces (Williams 2015). The literature cited here is relevant to this article, highlighting the often contradictory nature of care, serving both as a mechanism of oppression and as an integral component of the political landscape within contexts of migratory restriction.

In this article, I argue that valuing the insider's perspective is one alternative to disrupting deeply entrenched hierarchies in the production of knowledge. If one of the main goals of research on migration management and restriction is to advance social justice and disarm the mechanisms of bodily subjection, is it not imperative to understand how the enforcers of state power think, act, feel, and the motivations behind their participation in this system? This perspective moves away from the researcher-researched binary, recognizing that indissoluble relationship, and actively engages ethical dilemmas to reformulate new understandings of research spaces. In the following article, I exemplify this by recreating the circumstances that led me to work in such a restricted space and discuss the implications for narratives about immigration detention in Mexico, the politics of fieldwork, the inequalities of knowledge production and the value of bureaucrat ethnography. I argue that these discussions are of critical value for the academy of the global north but also for the academy of the Global South. In both groups there are subjects that belong to elites far from the work contexts from which the experience and knowledge production of street-level bureaucrats emanates.

BECOMING A BUREAUCRAT

On 12 October 2014, I received an unexpected text message. It was a job offer for a “shelter for migrants” within the CPS (Children Protection Services System), or *Sistema de Protección para Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*) in South City, Chiapas.² The message was sent from a friend and colleague who had worked on immigration in Chiapas for a long time. My friend explained the long chain of recommendations in which CPS Chiapas approached the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Mexico looking for someone who could manage the detention shelter, someone with “immigration experience.”

At the time, I had just finished a consultancy on migration routes and nongovernmental organizations in Chiapas for a United Nations agency and was looking for a job.

After consideration, I responded by accepting the position and enquired regarding next steps. Two days later, I was sitting in the headquarters of CPS Chiapas in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, capital of the state, in a formal interview for a job for which I had not applied, but for which apparently I was deemed the best qualified. On October 15, only three days after the initial text message, I formally began working as administrator of the CPS Chiapas’ “Shelter for Migrant Children.” I soon realized that this is the regular recruitment process. None of the people I met in subsequent years in that institution had gone through a competitive selection process, they were all recommended. The norm is that those who work in these detention centers often perform activities for which they have not been professionally trained or, if they have the desired profile for the position, arrive with zero experience in migration and asylum. My case

aligned with this trend. Although I had experience with immigration studies in the region, this was academic experience. I had not previously worked with children and adolescents in detention. Furthermore, the recruitment practice was substantiated by the experiences of nearly all my colleagues during that time. Except for Guadalupe, one of the shelter's cooks and a chemical engineer who had previously worked as a private preschool teacher, none of them had prior experience in caring for children and adolescents. Despite many staff members having professional backgrounds—such as two psychologists, four social workers, and an educator—the majority had not previously dealt with migration issues or worked specifically with children and adolescents.

Mexican detention shelters—touted as protection facilities—serve as a sovereign claim for national security. While the government asserts compliance with international standards, advocacy NGOs argue that these shelters violate migrants' fundamental rights (Barja 2016; Gómez and others 2023). Despite the legal rhetoric that forbids labeling residents as detainees, these individuals face restricted freedom and adhere to schedules. The shelters are seen as an proving ground for disguised mobility control under the guise of humanitarian policies, aligning with the U.S.-driven narrative on the Central American unaccompanied-children crisis.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF HUMANITARIANISM AND MIGRATION

Miriam Ticktin (2011) explores the intertwining of compassionate policies and violence within France's immigration approach to HIV-positive women from African nations. She introduces the concept of "regimes of care" to elucidate how ostensibly humanitarian actions serve the neoliberal state's control over mobility. Similarly, Didier Fassin (2012) discusses the role of moral sentiments in contemporary politics, terming it "humanitarian government," where actions such as refugee reception, detention, and deportation are portrayed as morally justified through depoliticized language.

This humanitarian narrative has a double mechanism of operation and legitimization: on the one hand, detention shelters function as facades to legally support the detention and deportation of hundreds of thousands of migrant and asylum-seeking children and adolescents who have passed through these facilities. The use of euphemisms such as "shelter" instead of detention, or "assisted return" instead of deportation, politically deflect the responsibility of the state as immigration enforcer, in addition to concealing the constant human rights violations that occur in detention. On the other hand, the endless training on identification and care of migrants and refugees, as well as the reminders of the importance of "shelter" for the "safety" of children in detention shelters, generated a conviction in the staff that all the actions we performed had a humanitarian character—that confinement and deportation procedures were made in accordance with international agreements.

I soon learned that the official name of those in charge of the detention shelters was “administrator” or “manager.” The position’s title was quite in line with the everyday practice in this institution, emphasizing the legal responsibility under Mexican law that the administrators hold, and not the care and protection that these facilities are supposed to provide. I realized that the emphasis was not made in vain: I would never sign as many documents and attend as many training sessions as during my first month of work, which was 90 percent. For each activity, no matter how small or mundane, a form had to be completed. These types of actions and procedures recall Akhil Gupta’s analysis of documents and the state (Gupta 2012): the production of documents is not a part of the work of the state, but its main activity. Documents—paper evidence—were the most important activity in the shelter. The services all had to be accompanied by a paper counterpart: the children’s emotions and feelings had to be recorded in clinical documents in the psychology area, people were transformed into statistics. This is aligned with what sociologist Molly Fee calls paper integration (Fee 2019, 478). Studying the case of the resettlement program in the United States, Fee argues that when institutionally documents are privileged over services provided to beneficiaries, caseworkers use documents to maintain the myth of compliance. In other words, documents are essential to managing the shelter’s legitimization of the state’s immigration enforcement policy.

Another essential part of this bureaucratization was the training to identify potential asylum seekers or refugees. Under Mexican law, the first refers to someone in the process and the second as a person who has been recognized by the Mexican government as granted full protection (Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum 2023). Facilitators went over with us each one of the treaties, conventions, and declarations that define the concept of refugee, emphasizing how to identify the difference between a refugee and an economic migrant. This training, however, did not reflect how these labels are constantly changing and shifting (Ehrkamp 2016), or how this binary is being challenged (Abdelaaty and Hamlin 2022). The daily task of identifying potential refugee seekers has been consistently carried out since the arrival of children and adolescents, accompanied by the completion of their intake forms. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that this identification process is informal. Legally, the responsibility for processing asylum and refugee cases in Mexico rests with the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance—COMAR). Therefore, the informal identification process entails notifying COMAR of potential cases requiring assistance.

Detention shelters often serve as the initial screening point for detecting potential refugee cases. However, this practice introduces risks as the identification process is not solely reflective of neutral and objective analytical criteria (Valdivia and others 2021). Empathy toward specific nationalities—and even the development of empathetic or aversive sentiments toward the individual

personalities of certain children and adolescents—play a pivotal role in this detection and filtering process.

Persistently, training was meant to reassure the urgency and necessity of the word “refugee” and its identifiable subjects. Words were operations and substantiation in this construct, because a “migrant” is not the same as a “refugee.” This has ignited contemporary discussion on why migrants and refugees are being considered as separate entities with an entirely different approach to their situation and, therefore, with inequalities on access to rights. Alexander Betts (2013) proposes the erasure of these differences via the concept of “survival migrants,” referring to people outside of their country of origin due to an existential threat with no domestic remedy or resolution. By foregrounding the structural conditions that lead people to migrate, this approach undermines traditional legitimacy and justification for humanitarian intervention, instead elucidating the ways that such discourses allow institutions to develop exclusionary practices. In these training sessions, I witnessed the bureaucratic production of refugees as a manageable subject for the institutions (in this case, the United Nations and the Mexican state). This distinction does little for the subjects themselves (Gupta 2012).

In this role, I also witnessed the unfolding of geopolitical connections between the United Nations headquarters in Geneva and South City on Mexico’s southern border. The geographical location of our policy execution was in part the result of a long global chain of decisions often made oceans away and with deep impacts on the lives of asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, and staff in these detention shelters. As Antoine Pécoud (2017) argues in his insightful article on the practices and discourses of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the technical language has a charming effect that erases discursive borders, reaffirms sovereignty of states, and diverts efforts toward the management of humanitarian crises (migration, in this case) and away from criticism of the structural causes that produced those crises. The use of language contained clear elements of race and class. It is not a coincidence that during my work in the detention shelter, almost all of these international organizations’ members were nationals from the so called “developed countries,” trained in the use of technical language as part of the expertise gained in universities and international cooperation institutions. In addition, the vast majority were white, often trained in international relations, international development, or law, with years of experience in volunteering in some of the most precarious conflict zones of the world. Clearly, this was enough to provide and legitimize the training and, consequently, to accept the concepts and execute the categorization policy exactly as the self-denominated “best practices” in international standards suggested.

DETAIN TO PROTECT: PARTICIPATING THE (RACIST) STATE

As bureaucrats, categorizing migrants in the shelter was one of the main tasks. While asylum seekers have a set of well-defined protocols to manage their

cases; those considered “only” migrants—that is, non-asylum seekers—were very likely to stay no longer than 12 hours in the shelter, and sometimes even less. While awaiting deportation, the treatment of children and adolescents was very different. Despite the principles of nondiscrimination enshrined in the institution’s rules, and the continuous and numerous training on racism provided by various United Nations agencies, racialization was persistent. In the shelter, there was clear categorization of detainees: those from Guatemala were considered noble, humble, and even tender. They were perceived to be well-behaved, calm, and docile. This contrasts with how staff viewed migrants from El Salvador and Honduras as rude, demanding, problematic, and violent. This view was reaffirmed since most Guatemalan children and adolescents were of indigenous and rural origin, and those from El Salvador and Honduras were mostly nonindigenous and often from urban neighborhoods they fled to avoid gangs and associated violence. In their article regarding the Mexican asylum system, Valdivia and others (2021) point out that often the bureaucratic asylum process is assumed to be objective and neutral, although those who reproduce this system execute the processes subjectively. Their personal biases were likely products of overwork, but also a colonial or racialized burden.

Even though I was aware of these processes of categorization and racialization, the structure of care produced from this racialization was impossible to dismantle. Dealing with Guatemalan children was “easier:” that is, the weight and structure of the state had produced a series of attitudes and responses that reaffirmed stereotypes of indigenous docility, while dealing with Salvadorans and Hondurans was often hostile and problematic. A recurrent situation was the food served at the lodge. While the Guatemalan children and adolescents never complained about the food, the children of Salvadoran and Honduran origin often complained about the preparation and taste—going so far as to demand dishes from their countries of origin. This situation hugely offended the shelter staff, calling into question the quality of Mexican food, which is dearly held, and at the same time violating the unspoken principle of gratitude that “humanitarian” actions demand. This situation reinforced the racialized classification, where Guatemalans were shown to be deserving of empathy as a form of “soft” racism, implementing what Austin Crane and Victoria Lawson term “minor acts of care,” thus kindling the complex situation faced by staff, who are tasked with both implementing control over detained migrant and refugee youth, and providing gestures of empathy for the children, but fail to challenge the oppressive framework in which they operate (Crane and Lawson 2020, 2). On more than a few occasions, fatigue, excessive bureaucratic processes, and the terrible vigilance of both the state and the international organizations, meant the abandonment of any attempt to dismantle this destructive structure.

The quick and easy way to manage the migrant population in the shelter was to abide by the already established structure—that is, provide the service

migrants required: basic under-12 education, personal hygiene materials, and telephone calls. Enough to keep them calm and quiet. Upon my arrival at the shelter, I contacted local human rights organizations to give us antiracism workshops. I also organized activities to provide information about immigration, the asylum process, and their rights as immigrants, instead of activities solely to entertain and calm. Sadly, I quickly understood that these additional activities had an impact on staff workload, resulting in their rejection. Workload is a big part of the precarious conditions characteristic of low-level state workers in Chiapas (Carte 2017). It is especially difficult for the women with whom I worked and spoke with during 2014 and 2015, and who were still earning very low wages when I saw them again between 2020 and 2022. Guadalupe (kitchen), Gloria (kitchen), Raquel (social work), Ramona (janitorial), and Monica (psychologist) are single mothers, earning little more than minimum wage, with benefits that fall short of their needs, working overtime almost every workday. These conditions made it very difficult for them to accept additional activities beyond those established by the regulations. State oppression is enacted by bureaucrats as embodiments of the state and reproduced rather than resisted because of the crushing workload intersecting, in this case, with gender and class.

From the beginning, I quickly grasped the dilemma before me. I had to decide whether to prioritize providing the best information and resources to all detainees, even if it meant conflicting with many of the institution's protocols and practices, or to adhere to the conventional norms that involved monitoring and controlling children and adolescents. The latter approach offered the potential to gradually introduce new care practices. I opted for the former, taking various steps such as reaching out to the local human rights organization for training and engaging in discussions to enhance collaboration. I also recommended to my superiors the implementation of improvements in detention conditions, including the wry suggestion to increase the number and duration of visits for male parents detained in the adult detention center. Additionally, I participated in counter argumentation and discussions at United Nation trainings, highlighting the need to consider suggestions specific to the political and cultural context of the detention shelter. All these actions led to my termination after just six months.

A year and a half after my abrupt dismissal, I joined a local human rights organization in Tapachula. This organization is one of the few (still) in Mexico that is authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (National Institute for Migration—INM) to document human rights violations in CPS detention shelters. Ironically, my first documentation mission was to the detention shelter where I worked. On that occasion, I remember that we were given a hostile reception by the staff. After all, this is an organization that for many years has been denouncing the detention of children and adolescents in these centers. At the same time, I was able to compare the

reactions and attitudes of my former colleagues with my new colleagues, the few people who have access to these detention centers. The human rights center was made up of local people trained in radical activism and with critical opinions about the operation of these centers. The only other people who had almost free access to the shelter were the members of the United Nations agencies (namely, IOM and UNHCR staff) that had a direct relationship with the shelter, and who had provided the shelter with material resources and human rights training.

Colleagues at the human rights organization, locals of medium-to-low class, mirrored the shelter staff, while United Nations agency workers were predominantly white foreigners. The racial dynamics in both institutions weren't coincidental. The human rights organization had limited access, visiting once a week for four hours, while the United Nations had unrestricted access and could donate resources. Working within the government detention center, racial disparities became evident in staff training, child categorization, and access protocols, reflecting a state-driven racialization structure.

After months of documenting human rights violations, I pursued a PhD to gain critical insights, aiming to shed light on the opaque history and operations of Mexican detention shelters for migrant children.

FROM BUREAUCRAT TO RESEARCHER

How would I begin to study an institution in which I worked for a very short time, but that marked me so much? I began by accepting that I had a deep emotional relationship beyond the workaday one. I accepted that in doing so, ethical dilemmas would arise because of the personal relationships and friendships I had, and still have, with many of the people who still work there and who I would potentially interview (DeLyser 2010). I found a fundamental motivation in centering my gaze on the sources of the exercise of power, especially since these oppressors are at the same time oppressed by labor precarity, gender, race, and class. This came from the full acceptance that, although with the best of intentions, I had been part of an oppressive institution, and in working there I was directly responsible for the exercise of state power. One major and constant concern was the potential implications on my research results. I am a member of a doctoral program in Latin American Studies at a U.S. university. This program is comprised of Indigenous, Black, and LGBTQ individuals, all passionately dedicated to engaged and activist research. All the topics I studied there had to do with spreading and amplifying the voices of historically oppressed populations within the present social and cultural struggle. My research, on the other hand, focused entirely on state agents in a detention shelter for unaccompanied migrant children. The concern about the scholarly expectation often made me rethink the relevance and

validity of my research and even my intellectual pertinence in such an academic space.

Anthropologist Laura Nader (1972) presented the idea of “studying up,” calling for a drastic inversion of the study subjects: moving from the lower classes to the middle classes and up to the elites to gain insight into the sources and processes of power. In doing so, she advocated for studying where power originates from, rather than focusing solely on where it was executed and experienced. Political geographers Billo and Mountz (2015, 199) argue that ethnographies embedded in institutions allow us to comprehend the “associated productions of subjectivities and material inequalities,” and their varying impacts within and beyond institutional spaces. As a researcher, I adopted this theoretical orientation out of a desire to reflect on the radical idea of oppressors and oppressed. My intention was to investigate the space in between, centering the people who inhabit the spaces of execution of power, who execute it, but who are also subjects of oppression in the general structure of the state. This methodological and theoretical perspective allowed me to explore spaces of the state that shattered academic expectations based on the radical division between oppressors and oppressed, while at the same time employing self-critique to explore one of the ways in which the relationship of academics with immigration institutions is navigated.

In March 2020, a few months before I formally began my fieldwork, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of all state institutions in Mexico and I no longer had access to the detention shelter at the center of my study. Despite the barriers of COVID-19, my colleagues, along with new staff members, agreed to conduct interviews at locations outside of the shelter and through video calls. I found that the staff were eager to talk, as the pandemic had created a need for emotional release to anyone familiar with their work. This situation facilitated long hours of discussion not only of work but also of personal life and how these two spheres complemented each other. The people I interviewed were street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010), the gatekeepers of the state on the ground (Carte 2014), exercising power daily amidst internal and external pressures. During these ethnographic reencounters, I was able to see how personal and family biographies substantially impact their work, something that continues to demystify the neutral, objective, and nonpartial nature of the state and its practices. I was also able to confirm how precarious labor conditions negatively impact the exercise of power, as already been illustrated in various state institutions related to immigration in Mexico, pointing to material and resource scarcity (Carte 2017; Valdivia and others 2021; Torres and others 2022) and the precarious labor system that directly upholds individual over institutional responsibility (Campos-Delgado and Côté-Boucher 2022). The interviews I conducted, along with these previous studies, confirmed that in the border externalization process, one of the strategies is to coerce state workers through labor precariousness, which together with personal and family pressures form a perfect breeding

ground to exacerbate nationalisms, xenophobia, and the reproduction of institutional racism.

IMMIGRATION INSTITUTIONS AND THE LABOR OF RESEARCH ACCESS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

While the COVID-19 pandemic altered my research plans, it opened up methodological possibilities and revealed structural conditions of access that I would not have been able to observe before. This unexpected but fortunate change of plans confirmed that in prepandemic conditions these interviews with staff would have had to be conducted inside the shelter and under institutional surveillance, or even forbidden by the shelter director. I had already foreseen this methodological challenge. In my time working there, I rejected countless university students requesting permission to conduct research, based on the legal obligation to protect the confidentiality of children and adolescents, and to avoid revictimization and retraumatization while “honoring” the informal and tacit agreement to avoid criticism of shelter staff. As mentioned above, the only people with regular authorization to enter the shelter were staffers of United Nations agencies (International Organization for Migration—IOM, UNHCR, among others), who had special authorization through generous donations of equipment, the implementation of numerous training workshops, and the financing of important infrastructure works at the shelter. The local human rights organization, on the other hand, had a limited authorization to enter once a week for only four hours.

In an essay on conducting doctoral research in the Global South, feminist decolonial scholars Millora and others (2020, 15) argue that the insider-outsider distinction is artificial and flexible in space and time, and is constantly negotiated by ethnographic encounters in the field. In my case, my experience as a bureaucrat-ethnographer (Valdivia and others 2021) is embedded in a particular network of global relations: I am a researcher from the Global South affiliated with an institution in the global north, studying a topic that geopolitically links the desires and dreams of people hoping to transit to the global north (United States) alongside the mobility restrictions enforced in/by Mexico. My unique position along this geopolitical axis gives me access to research spaces that would have been unthinkable/unreachable otherwise.

My gender also played an important role. Before I arrived as administrator, that position belonged solely and exclusively to women. Moreover, most of the staff at the shelter were, and still are, women, something that confirms that the tasks of care—especially when enforced by the state—are highly gendered. When I arrived, I was overly congratulated for taking on such a job “despite being a man” and having no previous experience in care work. In other words, I was seen as an outsider at that time. These variations of the insider-outsider position do not end when the formal fieldwork period concludes, but rather continue to shape the research context (Millora and others 2020).

During and after fieldwork, several major dilemmas relating to knowledge production for scholars in and from the Global South present themselves. For example, there are constraints to exposing the workings of an institution. These limitations arise from disparities in academic endeavors, frequently restricting local researchers from openly addressing oppressions in their home countries due to the limited access to institutional spaces that can be closed at any time. Such openness can result in tangible and material repercussions for scholarly pursuits. The challenges associated with revealing these oppressions extend beyond the act of documenting them, which, although crucial, form part of what Millora and others (2020, 17) term “data boundaries.” They also encompass thoughtful considerations of what can be included and what must be excluded. The consequences of publication for a scholar from the Global South may involve closing doors to institutions, negatively affecting an entire line of academic research, and even potential jobs. These decisions are continuously scrutinized by scholars from the Global South, even prior to the execution of the research, often silencing research proposals and results that might otherwise serve to influence the dismantling of systems of oppression. Mexican scholars may not have the same mobility and resources to change research sites if denied access or blackballed. Mexican institutions, such as immigrant detention centers, are pressured to temper critiques, thus having a silencing effect on scholars. These issues are often ignored or neglected by academics in the global north, as they deal with political contexts that do not directly affect them when researching in the Global South, and/or where their actions have repercussions that they do not see in the short term.

CONCLUSION: ACCESS AS METHODOLOGY, METHODOLOGY AS THEORY

State institutions—particularly migration management institutions—from an insider’s perspective remain understudied. The insider’s perspective represents an avenue toward the production of knowledge beyond the outsider-insider binary since it poses a path toward a critique of the intellectual authority (Valdivia and others 2021, 3), which in the case of detention shelters belongs to international organizations due to wide access, resulting from the pressure for transparency.

Researchers hailing from the Global South bear additional work and emotional burdens beyond their academic responsibilities. To gain access to state research spaces, they engage in reciprocity work, involving activities such as conducting workshops, offering guidance, and facilitating grants. It is crucial for academics from the global north to actively collaborate with local counterparts, acknowledging the more precarious conditions they face and appreciating the extensive commitment invested in their work. Failure to do so perpetuates inequalities in knowledge production.

Simultaneously, local researchers develop stronger emotional ties to institutions due to the personal relationships formed during their research journeys (DeLyser 2010). In my own experience, while striving to depict the daily realities of detention shelters, institutional racism, and the perpetuation of discriminatory stereotypes, I have made ethical decisions regarding the disclosure of information concerning individuals with whom I collaborated. These decisions reflect a respect for their complex and often challenging work within precarious conditions.

Overall, revaluing the work of insiders and bureaucrat-ethnographers means moving toward a new, more horizontal knowledge economy that encourages and protects the intellectual production of scholars in the Global South. As Leyva and Speed (2018, 453) rightly argue, today's knowledge economy often uses insiders' experiences as footnotes, contextual data, and empirical justifications for further theoretical postulates published in books and articles that serve to advance academic careers. In the same vein, as feminist scholars have argued, only pointing out the privileged background to make methodological notes, such as location of their research, time spent, methods employed, and groups consulted, without delving into political asymmetries, makes the production of knowledge invisible because of that encounter (Rose 1997; Sultana 2017). Using positionality as a disclaimer obliterates the emotional burdens, job precarity, and ethical dilemmas that Global South scholars face and that determine the production of knowledge and the spaces that we can access. The very production of knowledge itself is conditioned on the access we can have to the fieldwork.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Shout-out to Emily Frazier and Lauren Fritzsche for their generous feedback on a preliminary draft and for bringing this article and special issue to publication. Much appreciation to the anonymous reviewers who generously volunteered their time to review this paper. I am profoundly grateful to Rebecca Torres for encouraging me to develop these ideas and make them a publishable paper. I also thank Pearl Jam and their marvelous Ten for musicalizing this writing process. This article was made possible by the generous support of the CONACyT Doctoral Fellowship, a HEGS NSF grant "Geographies of Displacement: Mexican Migrant/Refugee Children and Youth in the Mexico-United States Borderlands" (Award #: 1951772), the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California San Diego.

NOTES

¹These facilities are euphemistically referred to as "shelters" by the Mexican state, but I use the term "detention" to reflect the highly restrictive settings designed not only to "care" for apprehended or deported youth, but to serve as an immigration deterrent. Thanks to Kate Swanson for calling my attention to this comprehensive term.

²The institution and staff members' names have been anonymized.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego [Visiting Fellows Program]; Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología [Doctoral Fellowship]; National Science Foundation [1951772].

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