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Sheltering as a destabilising and perpetuating practice in the migration management architecture in Mexico

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses shelters in relation to the migration industry that shapes irregular migration from Central America to Mexico. Whereas the migration industry literature often separates migration facilitation from migration control, we instead position shelters at the intersection of the two domains. We use an assemblage approach to better understand how different institutions, policies, responsibilities, actors and discourses meet, clash and intertwine at shelters. Based on our ethnographic material, we distinguish three significant processes that characterise sheltering practices (attraction, multiple performativities, (dis) location) and analyse how these processes display different, sometimes contradictory, discourses and power relations. With these insights, we conclude that sheltering practices reinforce as well as destabilise migration management architecture in Mexico. They undermine the presupposed ‘rigidity’ of migration management, but they simultaneously attract violence and control, and incorporate state-like practices of administration and discipline. In particular, the notions of ‘humanitarian aid’ and ‘mobility control’ are floating signifiers in these practices in the sense that they are constantly open to different ascriptions of meaning. Following this observation, we consider the migration management architecture as a form of plasticity. Its shape and function might appear to be rigid, but it is able to bend, bow and change in forms rather easily.

Introduction

Auto-ethnographic vignette 1.

After half an hour from my very first arrival at the shelter, an Austrian volunteer asked me if I knew how to clean blisters and if I had ever dealt with injured feet, to which I responded, ‘Well, I have cured my own blisters in the past’. She took me to a small room; at its door, I saw around 15 people without shoes, mostly young women and men. They stood in line, waiting. We entered the room, then the Austrian volunteer handed me a box with disposable gloves, a
bottle with merthiolate (antiseptic), some cotton and a box with surgical needles. She briefly explained how she pinched blisters and cleaned people’s injured feet, then left me on my own. I spent almost three hours taking care of that group of people who had arrived at the shelter almost at the same time as I did. It was hard to see how badly injured their feet were. Twitching gestures and postures of exhaustion expressed the pain from their injured bodies (also by guns and barbed wire) and from severe dehydration. As we went on, each person said something about the high temperatures on the road, the reasons behind their journey, their escape from migration agents and the encounters with armed thieves. There was a high level of violence in each story. (Diary notes, 1 January 2018)

Caring for migrant peoples’ safety and well-being seems to be the main motivation for the staff working at this shelter for migrant people in southern Mexico. Many international (mostly European) co-workers were there to help vulnerable people going through such harsh and violent experiences. As the days passed and the experiences accumulated, Cesar (the first author) noticed that the practices employed at the shelter were part of a wider structure, an institutional landscape that consisted of migrants, state institutions enforcing migratory policy and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in humanitarian aid. Cesar became aware that the shelter and its workers, as part of the ‘rescue’ branch of the so-called migration industry (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sorensen 2013), were thus part of a wider structure of migration governance. With this awareness, new questions arose: How can such organisations be positioned in the institutional landscape of migration management? What is their role in the facilitation and control of migration? How much safety do the sheltering practices provide to the migrants they work for? And how does the work done at shelters impact the migration management architecture?

Starting from these questions, this article aims to understand the daily sheltering practices in relation to a wider institutional web of actors that facilitate and control migration. The analysis is primarily based on auto-ethnographic material collected by Cesar at the Casa para Todes shelter for migrant people, complemented by data from Tine’s (the second author’s) fieldwork. Tine has done fieldwork at two shelters here referred to as Casa Sol and Casa Luna; these data sustain the analysis and in particular aspects complement it. Both Tine and Joris (the third author) have contributed substantially to this paper with face-to-face meetings and active writing. We use auto-ethnographic vignettes taken from fieldwork notes to illustrate how sheltering practices unfold and produce power imbalances between the actors engaging in such practices. More specifically, we aim to rethink the differentiated understanding of the migration industry that approaches migration control and migration facilitation as separated domains (see for instance Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sorensen 2013). In so doing, and in line with others (Andersson 2014; Schapendonk 2018), we approach the migration industry as a highly dynamic landscape that involves not only different institutions, but also overlapping responsibilities, shifting roles and ‘strange alliances’. Following the editors’ argumentation in the introduction to this special issue, we consider migration management a form of governance that can be situated at national, transnational and global levels. The architecture of this governance structure is composed by a series of agreements between states and with transnational governance institutions (eg the United Nations, International Organization for Migration and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to regulate migration. At the same time, we recognise that within the Mexican migration management architecture, state institutions are not the only regulatory
actors, as ‘in the absence of a unified governance architecture, various private and voluntary actors have carved out a space of influence in migration governance’ (Riemsdijk, Marchand, and Heins 2020). Therefore, NGOs take care of certain tasks that are linked to migration management processes, like the migratory status regularisation for undocumented migrants. To contrast the seemingly prevalent immateriality of such architecture, this article describes the shelters for migrant people as spaces in which the migration management architecture materialises. These are spaces of care and sanctuary, but at the same time they reflect elements of control, blockage and violence.

Hence, we position shelters and their human rights advocacy practices at the crossroads of migration facilitation and migration control. From this standpoint, and in relation to this special issue, we delve into specific ways through which sheltering practices destabilise, reproduce and incorporate the migration management architecture that controls mobility. A key element of our argumentation lies in the assemblage approach we use (Ong and Collier 2005; Teunissen 2020). By considering shelters as places where different elements of migration facilitation and control are assembled, we are more sensitive to the ways different actors converge at this space, and how different – if not contrasting – elements of the migration management architecture enmesh. We thereby focus on the articulation of discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) by staff members and migrants, and the ways these discourses are performed and negotiated in the everyday practices. Based on our in-depth insights, we conclude that humanitarian aid and mobility control appear as floating signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) in the sheltering practices as they are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning. We relate this observation to a wider argument that points at the instability – or plasticity (DeBono 2019) – of Mexico’s migration management architecture.

Positioning shelters at the crossroads of migration facilitation and control

Trajectories of irregular migrants are dynamic, fragmented and often risky undertakings (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). To understand the evolution of journeys and routes, migration scholars have increasingly paid attention to the formal and informal institutions that facilitate and hamper these processes. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on migration apparatuses (Feldman 2011), outsourced borders (van Houtum 2010), transit control regimes (Campos-Delgado 2017; Marchand 2017) and wider regimes of mobility across the globe (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). As well, researchers analyse how these architectures of control and surveillance alter or block people’s migratory processes (Schapendonk et al. 2018). On the other hand, new insights have been gained regarding the actors and processes that facilitate movement and support migrants during their journeys. In this regard, scholars have focussed on migration infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) and migration industries (Basok et al. 2015; Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013) that include brokers and smugglers. Some scholars thereby stress migrants’ degree of freedom in the smuggling process and the intimacy developed within it (Sanchez 2016; Van Liempt 2007), without closing their eyes to the constitutive structural violence at the transit routes (Vogt 2013, 2018). The emergence of hospitality networks, migrants’ rights movements, and the ‘rescue industry’ is mainly subsumed as a force that facilitates cross-border mobility (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014; Millner 2011).
Shelters can be understood as places where different elements discussed above come together. In a conceptual sense, assemblages are dynamic configurations that include politics, actors and technology (Ong and Collier 2005; Teunissen 2020). Shelters thus simultaneously appear as the places where assembling takes place, and as actants in these assemblages that go beyond the physical location of the shelter itself. Thus, approaching the shelter as part and parcel of assemblages makes us sensitive to the variety of situational factors, different actors (from local civil society to global governance institutions), rules and policies and – importantly – the discourses articulated by the actors involved. Moreover, sheltering as performativity (Butler 1990) displays different, sometimes contradicting, discourses and power relations. It is therefore important to understand how these discourses articulate both facilitating and controlling elements of the migration architecture (Riemsdijk, Marchand, and Heins 2020), and how these corresponding power relations of care and discipline cement the humanitarian aid that shelters provide. Ambivalent and contradictory characteristics of sheltering practices and work related to NGOs have been identified in the scholarship (e.g. Agustín 2007; Hernández-León 2012; Shih 2018). Moreover, and evidently so, the contradictory nature of care and hospitality is not exclusive to migration, as widely elaborated by Michel Foucault (1979, 2003, 2006), who discussed how different institutions discipline and control particular populations. In our analysis, we start from the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), visualising shelters as places where different actors perform and negotiate the social landscape of these articulating discourses and power relations. This is important not only for a better understanding of the migration architecture itself, as an ever-changing landscape, but also for those who wish to challenge the regimes of surveillance and control (DeBono 2019).

In mostly reflecting on the auto-ethnographic experiences of the first author, we acknowledge the methodological challenges of performing the role of volunteer and researcher simultaneously. This endeavour brought a constant emotional struggle to him that emerged from the shifting roles of carer, discipliner and observer. His distress intensified due to the violent context the shelter was submerged in, the inefficiency of the state institutions to counter such violence and their inability (or unwillingness) to guarantee migrants’ safety and access to justice.

Our collective reflections on the collected data brought us to identify three processes that indicate what is assembled through sheltering practices and which discourses are articulated. These processes are attraction, multiple performativities and (dis)location. The focus on these three processes is not meant to be an exhaustive overview; rather, it serves as an illustration of how elements of facilitation and control intersect. The first process (attraction) outlines how different actors were attracted to and as such assembled through the shelter. By focussing on attraction, we regard the shelter as an ‘actant’ that is placed in a borderland where different agendas are constantly in dispute. The second process (multiple performativities) describes how sheltering is performed by volunteers and migrants. We look at how performativities multiply and shift, articulating apparently opposing discourses such as safety, care, discipline and exclusion. The third process ((dis)location) shows how the shelter is a space of both mobility and immobility. It holds people together, while at the same time serving people’s outward mobility. Before we unpack these processes, we first depict some of the shelter’s routines and practices.
Sheltering practices at Casa para Todes

Auto-ethnographic vignette 2.

Patricio, a Honduran man in his early forties, arrived at Casa para Todes in very bad condition: barefoot, dehydrated, with several injuries and profound rage and despair. The night before, while walking with eight other migrants, a group of men assaulted them somewhere on the road that goes from the border crossing between Guatemala and Mexico to the town where the shelter is located. Around 10 p.m., about five men ambushed them, threatening to shoot their guns or use their machetes if they did not cooperate. One of the attackers took Patricio’s shoes, wallet and cell phone while beating him up. Patricio fought with this man and managed to escape, running away through the fields. While hiding, he heard some gunshots and then silence for the rest of the night. (Diary notes, March 2018)

This vignette underlines the extreme violence and death threats that many migrants encounter along their trajectories, and thereby speaks for their need of safety and protection. Migrants’ shelters in Mexico, usually called casa del migrante (migrant’s house), provide people with daily basic aid, like food, shelter, medicines and clothing. Until 2018, Casa para Todes had counted more than 7000 people hosted in less than 10 years. These people were primarily moving to improve their well-being or to escape death threats and persecution in their countries of origin. In 2014, Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration implemented the Plan Frontera Sur (South Border Plan), a migration policy scheme that included the militarisation of the region’s borders, roads and communities, for the containment, detention and (forced) return of irregular migrants to their countries of origin (Campos-Delgado 2017; Marchand 2017). In 2016 there were 188,595 migrants detained and 147,370 deported as a result of its enforcement. Although the government blames organised crime for the violence against migrants in transit, it has been documented that state institutions have been connected to criminal activities like kidnapping and extortion. Discursively, the administrations of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–present) consider the protection of human rights a priority, yet violence remains a defining element in this border region. Criminal groups in combination with Mexican authorities keep profiting from the commodification of migrant bodies (Vogt 2013), applying a set of violent practices or ‘necro-practices’ (Mbembe 2011; Estévez 2013; Castro Neira 2014) legitimised by the criminalisation of irregular migration.

Several organisations with a religious background, like the ones at stake in this article, work to counter this violent context (Olayo-Méndez, Haymes, and Vidal de Haymes 2014). Casa para Todes is a shelter created by the Catholic religious congregation in the town of San Pedro, at the southeast of Mexico and close to the border with Guatemala; Casa Sol and Casa Luna, located in central Mexico, were founded by Catholic priests. As part of broader networks of shelters, these organisations serve a diversity of needs related to the intersection of gender, age and ethnicity of the population transiting through such regions of the country. Casa para Todes has specific characteristics that are not necessarily shared by other shelters, like the unlimited length of time that migrants can stay, its legal support services and its activities to raise awareness of the migratory context within Mexican society. In Casa Sol and Casa Luna migrants cannot stay for an unlimited time; as a rule they can stay one day to recuperate before continuing their journey, unless they have health problems that need more attention.
The staff of Casa para Todes is divided into two main groups: a base team and a team of voluntary workers. The base team consists of a religious leader and co-founder of the shelter, who takes care of administrative duties; the director, who coordinates the teams and performs other administrative duties; a case worker in charge of the regularisations for humanitarian reasons; a lawyer in charge of the regularisations through the asylum process; and a person in charge of the agroecological farm. The voluntary staff is formed by foreign and Mexican people in charge of the functioning of the humanitarian assistance areas and some advocacy activities. Upon arrival, most migrants are welcomed by a volunteer through a protocol that exudes hospitality, while at the same time disclosing disciplinary guidelines (house rules). The rules of conviviality, the schedule for entering or leaving the facilities and the services offered by the shelter are all explained. At the moment of arrival, newcomers are re-hydrated and receive medical care (if urgent), then are registered at the shelter’s database through a short interview conducted by a volunteer. Name, sex, age, nationality and other demographics are solicited, as well as information about the reasons for leaving their countries, and any cases of crimes or abuse from the authorities committed against them. Similar routines are found in other shelters along different transit routes in Mexico.

Once registered, people have access to the shelter's facilities. The main areas of the shelter are the kitchen, toilets, showers, infirmary, internet and telephone room, and dormitories separated by the following groups: those who identify as LGBTIQ+, unaccompanied minors, women, and men. This can sometimes result in problematic situations when families arrive together. Residents have very little privacy, or none at all, and due to the scarcity of financial resources, many things have to be shared. It is common to see people queuing for each service provided. Some spaces in Casa para Todes have multiple functions: a basketball court is used for sports, recreational and artistic activities, but also to accommodate people when the dormitories are overcrowded. The same basketball court is used for daily speeches from the shelter staff (usually its religious leader) highlighting conviviality issues and news related to the region’s context, or expressing a mix of political and religious messages. All these features can be understood as a material projection of the migration management architecture and the apparent contradictory nature of such space. The shelter, as a place constituted with the prerogative of granting safety and care, enforces a normativity based on administration and monitoring. This kind of monitoring has a regulating and eventually disciplining effect. While the shelter denounces migrants' oppression by the migration management architecture, it constrains and holds migrants' bodies in transit on behalf of their protection. This reflection, of course, does not counter the fact that such organisations are sometimes the only actors granting safety, physical and psychological care, and the possibility to access other rights related to free transit, work, education and health.

According to the shelter's director, Casa para Todes stands out for its role as a ‘Human Rights Centre’ (diary notes, 2018). The organisation gives advice and helps migrant people regarding two processes for the regularisation of their legal status in the country: the refugee status application and the visitor due to humanitarian reasons application, commonly known as the 'humanitarian visa'. At the shelter, irregular migrants in transit receive free legal advice from lawyers and accompaniment by human rights advocates during their regularisation processes. If an irregular migrant in Mexico is the victim of or witness to a robbery, kidnapping, extortion, rape or murder, classified by the Public Prosecutor's Office Specialized in Attention to Migrants as violent crimes, she/he/they can apply for a humanitarian visa at the National Migration Institute (INM). The people working at the shelter's Human Rights
Office (comprising members of the base team and volunteers) focus on denouncing such abuses and guiding the victims through the bureaucratic process. This is a two-step procedure. First, one makes a report at the Public Prosecutor’s office and wait for an investigation file to be created. Second, based on the investigation file that recognises the migrant as a victim of the crime or as a witness, an online application has to be made together with completing some administrative requirements, like an identity document and a letter from the migrant addressing the reason for applying for a regular legal status.13

The humanitarian visa allows anyone who entered the country without a valid migratory document to move through Mexican territory and prevents their detention by INM’s agents. There is not a time period stipulated in the Migration Law for the authorities to decide whether a migrant who has been victim of a violent crime could be entitled to regularisation. Rather, the timeline depends on the length of time that the Public Prosecutor and the INM take to go through the legal process. Cesar observed that the oversaturation of applications and lack of resources (material and human) were the main reasons behind these prolonged waiting periods, in addition to the apathy and indifference among the personnel at the Public Prosecutor’s office and the INM. Cesar’s role at Casa para Todes was to listen to and document the stories of migrants who had been victims of a crime on Mexican soil, then provide them with the information regarding the legal procedure to apply for the humanitarian visa. If they agreed, he accompanied them to make the report at the Public Prosecutor’s office and followed up on their regularisation process with the INM.

It follows that through the everyday practice of sheltering, different elements (administration, registration, legal assessments) of so-called mobility regimes which differentiate mobilities across the globe (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Schapendonk et al. 2018) are assembled. To unpack this further, and to understand how different discourses are articulated, we focus on the three characterising processes that we identified earlier: attraction, multiple performativities and (dis)location.

**Attraction**

For Central American migrants, an important element defining their trajectories is the distance between their point of departure and one of the official border-crossing points along the Mexican southern border. Even though most migrants do not actually pass through the formal border-crossing points, they use the infrastructure (roads and transportation) attached to these. Despite the aforementioned 2014s securitisation enhancement, thousands of migrants were attracted to the specific route where Casa para Todes is located. This attraction process can be partly explained by the presence of La Bestia (The Beast) – which is the name that migrants, locals and (inter)national media gave to a series of railways and freight trains interconnecting the southern border and the northern one. Many shelters in the region are located next to or near the railroads, which is convenient for people jumping on and off the train. By using La Bestia, migrants avoid migration checkpoints and reduce travel costs, but they also experience long and dangerous journeys before they reach the border with the United States. For this reason, other means of transportation and smuggling services are frequently used by migrants travelling through this region.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the proliferation of transit routes in the Mexican southeast and the increasing numbers of people moving through them attracted two other important actors: criminal organisations and the state’s migration control apparatus. The Mexican
criminal organisation (also called a *cartel*) *Los Zetas* became an important stakeholder in this part of the country. It is likely that the men who assaulted Patricio formed part of such an organisation in a direct or indirect way, via local gangs and/or other individual criminals linked to the cartel (also known as *zetitas*). Originally created as the armed branch of the *Cartel del Golfo* in the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, *Los Zetas* eventually took over drug and gun trafficking. As they became the most powerful criminal organisation in the region, they expanded and diversified their business to the southern border states, controlling the smuggling, extortion and human trafficking of (mostly) Central American migrants on their way to the United States (Basok et al. 2015; Martínez 2010; Vogt 2013). In parallel to this criminal group, state security and migration management institutions were also attracted to the region. The military and federal police, along with the INM, increased their presence at the (nearest) formal border-crossing point and the communities between it and San Pedro; also, necessary infrastructure and human resources were reinforced at the border and at different points throughout the region, all for the fulfilment of the South Border Plan. As some scholars indicate (Castro Neira 2014; Campos-Delgado 2017), these security measures had adverse consequences for migration management, such as the diversification of smuggling strategies.

The mobility of irregular migrants attracted the actors for its control. Almost simultaneously, actors concerned with humanitarian assistance and advocacy for migrants’ human rights were attracted. This is how Casa para Todes’ presence and role are closely related to this emerging institutional landscape: after the initiative came to fruition through efforts by the Catholic Church in San Pedro, the shelter’s founders transcended the parochial space in the town to establish an NGO in a house located close to the railway where La Bestia passes by. By the time this organisation started working with the migrant population, some of the local residents from San Pedro and its surroundings were also attracted to collaborate within it. With increased activity by the shelter came support from several national humanitarian organisations. One by one, transnational organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Medico International, UNHCR, Mexican Red Cross and UNICEF also joined. The collaboration with these actors certainly contributed to the facilitation of migrants’ mobility.

In contrast, the control regime, too, intensified around the shelter. There emerged a constant collaboration between the military, police and INM agents, attracted to the railroad area and the surroundings of the shelter in order to identify and detain migrants. Although the agents are not allowed to conduct ‘immigration verification visits’ at places where irregular migrants remain sheltered by civilians or NGOs, migrants still had to avoid ‘being chased’ throughout the town. The mobility control elements around Casa para Todes seemed to be composed mostly of people from state institutions and organised crime, but in other cities of Mexico, material structures were built around shelters to discourage migrants’ mobility. For instance, because Casa Luna is based at the side of the railroad where La Bestia passes, first, big concrete blocks were placed next to the tracks and, later, fences were built alongside the railroad to prevent migrants from jumping off or onto the train. This is an example of forensic architecture (Jusionyte 2018), similar to the fences surrounding the Spanish exclave of Ceuta and Melilla that were designed not only to block people from entering, but to purposely injure people when trying to cross over them.

By outlining how a wide spectrum of actors was attracted to this place in southern Mexico, we gain a first insight into the assembled forces that perpetuate and destabilise the migration management architecture. It helps us to understand the constitution of an uncertain
landscape that migrants have to navigate (Vigh 2009). This uncertain landscape, however, does not consist only of the encounters of diverse actors; it also appears in the performativities within the interactions happening inside the shelter. We delve deeper into this issue in the next section. Since they are closest to Cesar’s auto-ethnographic experience, we therefore focus particularly on the performativities regarding the ‘rescue’ role of the shelter and its impact on the facilitation of and control over migrants’ mobility.

Multiple performativities

Auto-ethnographic vignette 3.

On the second week of my stay at the shelter, I was chosen to coordinate the activities of the voluntary staff, only for one week. Among all my duties, I had to monitor compliance with the conviviality rules inside the house. I actively participated in the decisions to ‘throw out’ people who violated such rules – mostly men who were drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana inside the shelter. One day, a woman who was traveling with her three children got into a fight and punched someone else. Since she was acquainted with one of the guards, I felt that I had to give her a second chance to stay in the shelter, even though she broke one of the main conviviality rules by reacting violently towards another person. (Diary notes, February 2018)

Volunteers at the shelter were responsible not only for their own safety but also for the migrants’ safety and well-being. Even though the administration of scarce resources and the attention to migrants’ needs were many times subjected to the volunteers’ own criteria, there were specific guidelines they had to follow. Cesar documented the enactment of multiple performativities when following the rules and protocols in the daily activities at the shelter. For instance, as previously mentioned, after providing care to newly arrived migrants, volunteers explain the shelter’s conviviality rules – no violence inside the house, no use of drugs or alcohol inside the house and no business (commodities or services of any kind) among migrants inside the house – emphasising that the violation of any of these rules would lead to the resident’s expulsion from the shelter. However, these rules and punishment were not always strictly imposed: they were continuously negotiated between the shelter’s staff and the residents, for example by the gravity of a fault if a rule was broken, and according to the criteria used by the individual dealing with the situation.16 Such negotiations involved the resolution of disputes over – among many other things – food, space and other resources; drug and alcohol consumption; and racial and sexual violence inside the facilities.

Cesar incorporated the shelter’s disciplinary discourse and tried to follow the protocols to the letter. Despite his awareness about the unsafe context of San Pedro and the vulnerable condition of many residents, he participated in a few decisions leading to the expulsion of residents. When a conviviality rule was violated, volunteers had to juggle different aspects of the shelter’s hospitality discourse. Their volunteer work was about care and safeguarding migrants, but also about disciplining their behaviour inside the shelter. On the one hand, the hospitality discourse was reflected in the obligation to consider all residents equally entitled to care and safety; on the other hand, such hospitality could only be ‘earned’ by a migrant who behaved and followed the shelter’s order. In a slightly different context, Daniela DeBono (2019) frames the tensions and inconsistencies in state-led hospitality practices as a form of plasticity. She uses this metaphor to not only indicate the malleable and flexible meanings attached to hospitality, but also to argue that hospitality is full of cultural norms
and unequal power relations. As she outlines (2019, 6): ‘In Gramscian terms, the impoverishment of language through the insertion of plastic words results in the disempowerment of groups whose worldview is an imposition by a dominant group to meet their own interest.’ DeBono makes this point in the context of state-led practices of first reception in Europe. In hospitality initiatives of NGOs there are significant power struggles as well, especially when differences are articulated between migrants and the organisation’s staff, and when different levels of ‘deservingness’ are at play (Casati 2018). In his daily activities, Cesar often felt compelled to perform the ‘good Samaritan’, while realising that his role as a volunteer had a disciplining dimension of othering ‘good’ and deserving migrants from the ‘bad’ and undeserving ones.

Migrants also performed different roles simultaneously, sometimes looking to obtain a direct benefit for themselves, their relatives or their acquaintances. Residents who decided to stay at the shelter for a long period, mostly to wait for their regularisation, were at times incorporated by the shelter as voluntary workers. They became part of ‘the guards’ or worked in the kitchen. Working in these areas created a hierarchy, placing some migrants in a higher position from which they could condition other residents’ access to certain services. The guards controlled the entrance schedule and the male residents’ accommodation; since there were not enough beds they decided who would spend the night inside or outside the dormitories. In the case of the kitchen staff, cooks were able to obtain extra food or eat something different than the other residents. Some of the migrants working in these positions experienced the shelter as a pivotal space where they could negotiate and perform discourses in two different ways: being subjected or subjecting others. This creates moments of severe ambiguities, as in the situation of vignette 3, whereby the guards have to balance out the security discourse of the shelter on the one hand, and existing social relations and levels of deservingness on the other.

During the process of obtaining the humanitarian visa, victims of a violent crime (migrants) and people working at the shelter (a combination of base team and volunteers) had to negotiate and perform different discourses as well. For instance, Patricio performed towards Cesar his discomfort with the regularisation process by openly complaining about the role of the police and public prosecutors who were, according to him, doing nothing to solve his case. His distrust in the authorities made him feel that his attackers would never come to justice, making him hopeless and angry because this situation would continue to happen to others. In addition, he knew that other residents had already been waiting for six months to get a resolution from the INM. Patricio became frustrated as he realised that his goal of reaching the northern city of Z remained uncertain. With all these considerations, he would constantly show such discomfort to Cesar and remark upon the urgency to continue his journey as fast as he could in the safest way possible. As a result, Cesar felt compelled to constantly check with the authorities about Patricio’s case and insist on their fast action to solve his situation. In this regard, Cesar’s attitude was indeed part of the Human Rights Office’s discourse, pushing the authorities towards a recognition of the violent context and their responsibility for the protection of migrants in transit. This would – so he hoped – translate into Patricio’s access to justice and migrants’ secure and legitimized transit through Mexico.

Although Cesar became aware of the inefficiency of the state institutions involved in the humanitarian visa application process, it remained his responsibility to follow their procedures. He also remained responsible for following the shelter’s protocol by offering
information to newly arrived migrants about the humanitarian visa as a possible way to continue travelling without risking detention. Cesar felt divided since he knew that many others would probably be denied the humanitarian visa after a long and frustrating period of waiting. Consequently, they would also continue their journeys in the same conditions of unsafety. On the other hand, he was committed to the shelter’s procedures to provide the information about such process and push the state institutions for better results. Patricio (and Cesar) knew well that in the case of the visa being denied to him, he would once again face a dangerous journey. However, although these risks worried Patricio, his main concern was the survival of his family back home; as he stated: ‘In the meantime, my family, my wife and children [must] eat every day. So I must be quick, I must send them some money so they can stay alive. If I stay here, I won’t be of any help for them. That, I can’t do’ (Diary notes, March 2018).

These insights show how hospitality, discipline, care, punishment, safety and exclusion are discourses often articulated and performed by the same actors in different situations. In this case, voluntary workers have to align with the discourses coming from the shelter’s narratives and negotiate these with the migrants. At the same time, the shelter’s narrative is also negotiated between migrants themselves. Migrants use their own narratives to negotiate such discourses with other residents and the shelter’s staff, to help themselves and their mobility goals. Thus, some practices at the shelter are direct reactions to a repressive migration management architecture; they reproduce notions of justice, safety and dignified lives. While these struggles unfold, such discourses are also contested by the performativities of migrants and volunteers that are related to notions of differentiation, deservingness, control and discipline.

(Dis)location
Auto-ethnographic vignette 4.

I kept following Patricio’s case. The report was placed at the prosecutor’s office; all the medical examinations were done by the forensic physician who certified the injuries to Patricio’s body as part of the evidence for the judicial process; and, finally, the paperwork for the regularisation process at the INM was submitted. Patricio already had a copy of the official letter issued by the INM, which stated that he had begun with this process. As a result, he could not be detained (and deported) by migration agents. At the same time, he was not allowed to leave the state where San Pedro is located. For a few days I saw how he became more active in the shelter’s daily activities and his good humor increased. At different times he told me how strong his faith was about getting the humanitarian visa, and how grateful he was to the shelter and its staff for helping him and so many others. Then, after waiting in the shelter for almost a month, he left. I asked other volunteers, guards and other residents that seemed to be close to him if they knew anything about his departure. But no one did. I remember how afraid he was of being robbed again or being detained while traveling undocumented. I felt concerned, but also frustrated after all the effort he and I had invested in his case. (Diary notes, March 2018)

The purpose of many migrants’ shelters in Mexico seems to be straightforward: to provide humanitarian assistance to the people in transit through Mexico, and in some cases, to promote and protect migrants’ human rights. As mentioned before, along the different routes close to La Bestia’s railroads from the southern border with Guatemala to the northern border with the United States, there are networks of shelters that allocate different tasks to different
locations. Networks like *Red del Altiplano* (Altiplano Network) or *Red de Acompañamiento Integral de Migrantes* (Integral Accompaniment Network for Migrants) (among others) were formed by the coordinators of mostly Catholic-based shelters to agree upon the roles these shelters should have along the transit routes. Tine documented that Casa Sol and other shelters based in the central region of the country suggested that Casa para Todes, and other shelters at the southern border, should have the role of orientating migrants upon their recent arrival in Mexico. The concern of Casa Sol’s leader, based on his experience, was that migrants run the risk of normalising the aid they receive to the extent that they could develop a more passive attitude and dependence on the aid shelters’ offer. In his perception, the shelters from the central region of Mexico should prevent this from happening by stimulating the autonomy of migrants. This coordination of tasks shows that shelters themselves seek a form of management, shaping an architecture that affects migrants’ decisions regarding where to stay, and when to move.

As we have shown, the shelter attracts agents of control, enforces disciplinary techniques and exercises power over migrants. This not only reshapes migration management architectures; the changing configurations of care/discipline and facilitation/control also influence migrants’ trajectories. These trajectories are characterised by movement and stillness, loss and hope, and emplacement and displacement (Schapendonk 2020). With regard to the latter, Lems (2018) stresses the importance of placemaking along paths of movement. A sense of place is of crucial importance for understanding these trajectories – not only for existential questions of belonging, but also for the practical concerns of migrants: How to make ends meet? How to navigate my pathway? Patricio’s situation, depicted above, is telling in this respect. In a wider process of displacement, he was still *located* in the sense that he interacted with the community around and inside the shelter. Eventually he found two jobs in San Pedro, one at a bakery owned by people from Guatemala and another provided by an agroecological farm that the Catholic congregation created to provide work for some of the residents at Casa para Todes. He stayed in place to explore his chances for a safer route (through regularisation), but in the meantime he mapped out his travel plans. Sheltering – as a practice – thus locates and dislocates people at the same time. It holds people together, but in such a way that everybody is still on their way to somewhere else. In these impermanent settings, people bond in place and create connections to move onwards (Winters and Reifen 2019). In this constant dis(location), people try to find updates about co-migrants and ask around about the safety of friends. They share stories of where they came from and listen carefully to rumours and news related to their future pathways. In the shelter, migrants indeed stay put in order to be mobile (Dahinden 2010).

Migrants’ (dis)location is not only shaped by their personal interaction with the surrounding community, as illustrated above in Patricio’s case, but also by the way the shelter is situated in San Pedro. This is illustrated by the case of Casa Luna, a shelter located in central Mexico that was founded on the request of local citizens, particularly those living in the neighbourhood near the railway where La Bestia passes by. These neighbours requested a shelter because migrants wandered the streets in search of food and housing. The Catholic parish took it upon themselves to create a shelter. The success of the shelter, however, also attracted local people (some homeless) in need of assistance. As these were refused by the shelter, some of them found a place to spend the night by breaking into houses and cars. The result was that the neighbours – who had initially asked for the shelter – started to turn against its very existence. Later, a fence was built along the railroad side next to the concrete
blocks that were already put in place by the local government to hamper migrants’ access to the shelter. While the policy of the shelter dictates migrants can only stay for one night, this became more complicated due to the reaction of the neighbourhood. As the environment turned more hostile, the need for shelters grew. This holds particularly true for migrants who were wounded or travelled with children. Processes of (dis)location are thus influenced by local dynamics, and by the way the shelter is characterised by the intermingling of location, policy and city life, as well as migrants and their trajectories.

Interestingly, this process of (dis)location does not relate only to the migrant trajectories from Central America. Although Casa para Todes is to a large extent based on local infrastructures (both social and physical), most of the volunteers came from faraway places (mostly Europe), and many of them found themselves in existential transit situations (not knowing which destination was next). From this position, the shelter as a space of (dis)location has a broader connotation than the shelter space for migrants pictured above. It is a kind of hub that is produced by permanent processes of inward and outward mobility of various people. This place is defined by a constant entangling and disentangling of trajectories, social connections, dreams, fears and aspirations. This latter characteristic, in combination with the multiple performativities at stake discussed in the previous section, fundamentally diffuses the question of who is hosting whom (see also Aparna and Schapendonk 2018) as the volunteer community and the migrant community are both characterised by (dis)location.

Conclusion: sheltering, plasticity and articulation

This article positioned the practice of sheltering at the crossroads of migration facilitation and migration control. Through the three instances of assemblage that we placed centrally – attraction, multiple performativities and (dis)location – we further substantiate the analytical argument that the migration industry can be best regarded as an uncertain landscape that requires careful and continuous navigation of the migrants in question (Vigh 2009; Schapendonk 2018). We have seen how different institutions meet each other at the shelter, and how the sheltering practices overlap with the state’s migration management agenda. Furthermore, we showed that people at the shelter have different roles, and that these roles are likely to shift over time. This all happens in a condition of (dis)location in which everybody seems to be on their way to somewhere else. In so doing, the unpacking of these three processes discloses how the practice of sheltering reinforces as well as destabilises migration management architecture in southern Mexico, and beyond. On the one hand, the shelter undermines the presupposed ‘rigidity’ of the migration management regime: management architecture based on securitisation, border protection and walls along railway tracks are bypassed and undone (for example, by literally healing wounds) by everyday sheltering practices. On the other hand, however, the shelter simultaneously attracts violence and control, and incorporates state-like practices of administration, assessment and discipline. We therefore perceive the migration management architecture as a form of plasticity (see, for a different yet related argument, DeBono 2019). Its form and function might appear to be rigid, but it is able to bend, bow and change in form rather easily. This notion of plasticity does not simply lead to an argument that stresses the permeability of borders and underlines the limits of migration regimes. Quite to the contrary, it also articulates the fact that migration management architectures enter spaces that are presumably out of reach. Moreover, the
plasticity of migration management architectures produces uncertainty for people on the move. Basic decisions of where to go and who to trust are subjected to constant change from the instability of institutional settings.

In this regard, it is important to announce that, while writing this paper, different aspects of the policy and time frame for the humanitarian visa process changed, and so too were migrants’ strategies and pathways altered. Such alterations became publicly visible with the phenomenon of the Caravanas Migrantes (migrant caravans) that appeared in response to the securitised and violent context controlling irregular migration in Mexico (Martínez Hernández-Mejía 2018). These caravans crossed the country via different routes between April 2018 and June 2019 with the aim of reaching the United States (see also Marchand in this special issue). In June 2019, after Trump threatened increasing tariffs for all Mexican imports by 5%, a new Mexican militarised police corporation called Guardia Nacional was sent, by the left-wing government newly in power, to the southern border to contain the caravans.20 It is also worth mentioning that towards the end of 2019, Casa Luna was attacked by unknown subjects that looted and set it on fire, and that in the first half of 2020 Casa para Todes’ sheltering practices and staff structure drastically changed, mostly due to the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic. These developments underline the constant re-shaping of the migration management architecture, with an important influence on the trajectories of migrants.

By unpacking the combined processes of attraction, multiple performativities and (dis)location, we noticed that they attribute both controlling and caring elements to the practice of sheltering. Because these contrasting elements meet at the shelter, there is a constant struggle over discourses. In this context, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 113) use the concept of ‘floating signifiers’ to point to elements that are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning when discourses are articulated (see also Davids and van Eerdewijk 2016). ‘Humanitarian aid’ and ‘mobility control’ can be seen as important floating signifiers in the context of these shelters. Humanitarian aid can be performed both as care and control. Through people’s performativities (plural), the specific meanings of care and control are constantly negotiated and articulated. Performativity, in this sense, is a form of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) since it reflects the constant struggle between different discourses and the fixation of their meanings. By further investigating this process of articulation in sheltering processes, we enrich our understanding of how migration trajectories evolve in troubled and violent times. The struggles and negotiations should not, therefore, be positioned in an architecture where shelters and migration regimes are positioned as separate domains. Without disregarding their crucial role in the protection of people on the move, we should also look at the mobility regimes inside shelters and the way different people – like Patricio – coproduce, negotiate, bypass and escape these regimes.

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Notes

1. All ethnographic vignettes in this article were translated from Spanish to English by the first author, and taken from his fieldwork experiences.
2. The names of migrant people, the shelters and the places mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.
3. Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sorensen (2013) in fact distinguish a third domain that they call the ‘rescue industry’. We subsume this aspect under the notion of migration facilitation.
5. Mainly security corporations like the federal, state and municipal police, as well as the military, public prosecutors and National Migration Institute (INM) agents.
7. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, also known as AMLO, from the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) party, promised before the 2018 elections to solve the ‘migratory crisis’, focusing on the protection of migrants’ human rights: https://lopezobrador.org.mx/temas/migrantes/; see also https://regeneracion.mx/la-prioridad-para-la-politica-de-amlo-sera-que-a-los-migrantes-se-les-respete-olga-sanchez-cordero/ Marcelo Ebrard, Secretary of External Relations, signed on December of the same year the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) on behalf of AMLO’s administration.
8. Casa para Todes is continuously engaging in activities with the local community to raise awareness about the violent context that migrants experience. There is also a project created by the shelter to provide a number of migrants with dignifying employment in farming activities.
9. It is worth mentioning that the first author did not obtain data regarding the amount and forms of payment for the base team workers. The minimum amount of time that a volunteer
works at the shelter is one month. The first author met volunteers who had worked there for five months already. It is known that after a certain period of time a voluntary worker can become part of the base team, but the precise conditions and/or the time period for doing so are not known.

10. This shelter and other shelters collect data on migrants for statistical purposes; to denounce the violence experienced by the migrants on their journeys; to counter the state's narrative of protection of migrants by the state institutions; and to document the violence and criminal practices that migrants are exposed to.

11. These are two different regularisation processes. In this article we focus on the humanitarian visa process. The migrants who do not apply for refugee status may obtain a regularisation of their legal status through the humanitarian visa process if they have been victims of a violent crime in the Mexican territory (article 52 of the Mexican Migration Law). See https://docs.google.com/viewer?u=r=https://legalzone.com.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/PDF-Ley-de-Migraci%C3%B3n-M%C3%A9xico.pdf&hl=es

12. The Fiscalía Especializada en Atención a Migrantes is the public prosecutor’s office, where irregular migrants can submit a report and obtain access to the Mexican judicial system.

13. This article refers to ethnographic experiences that occurred between January and April of 2018. The procedure for requesting the regularisation for humanitarian reasons and all the requirements can be found at http://www.inm.gob.mx/static/Tramites/regularizacion/Por_razones_humanitarias.pdf; see also https://www.gob.mx/tramites/ficha/regularizacion-migratoria-por-razones-humanitarias/INM791

14. Journalist Oscar Martínez explains how the Zetas Cartel have control over local ‘minor criminals’ by authorising their operation and punishing whoever acts outside their authorisation. These criminals are known as zetitas.

15. Article 76 of the Mexican Migration Law.

16. Decisions of expelling someone were taken by the shelter’s director, nevertheless, volunteers would have an active role on evaluating each situation.

17. The ‘guards’ are a group of migrants working voluntarily to uphold the conviviality rules, and to keep the flow of people in and out under control.

18. These were also gendered areas: only men could become guards, while women and men could become kitchen staff.

19. There is a 99% impunity regarding the crime reports made by irregular migrants at Mexican Public Prosecutor’s Offices between 2014 and 2016 (see report from WOLA 2017).


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