Book Review/ Compte rendu

Prashan Ranasinghe. *Helter-Shelter: Security, Legality, and an Ethic of Care in an Emergency Shelter.* University of Toronto Press, 2017. $29.95, 288 pp, paper (9781487522063).

Across Canada, non-profit organizations are responsible for providing emergency shelter in urban centres. University of Ottawa Criminologist Prashan Ranasinghe's monograph *Helter-Shelter* details a year in the life of one such overnight shelter. From September 2010 to December 2011, Ranasinghe conducted sixteen interviews with shelter staff, and visited the centre fifty-one times. The shelter is located in the "Centre Square" (20) of a city "close to the Province of Quebec" (85), and provides overnight accommodation for approximately 120 men. Ranasinghe examines "the life of the emergency shelter from the perspectives of the personnel who work in these sites" (5), including frontline staff, caseworkers, and managers. Despite all working under an "ethic of care," the ethic was polysemic, with each employee practicing a different version of caring for clients. Ranasinghe argues that the ethic of care purported to guide the functioning of the shelter was instead superseded by the binary logics of legality and security. The "provision of care", then, was "profoundly impossible" (8). Resultantly, a polysemic ethic of care within a binary structure of rules created "a space that is disorderly, even dysfunctional, governed by administrative chaos" (226).

This chaos made for an uncomfortable environment for staff and clients. Clients facing challenges resulting from poverty, homelessness, mental illness, addiction, and unemployment also had to navigate the shelter's bureaucracy and rules. Staff faced challenges resulting from the structure in place to manage clients' issues, and as one caseworker explained, "*hide them away from everybody else*" (21). Ranasinghe's monograph highlights how in contrast to the behaviour and practices of affluent citizens, marginalized residents' visibility in the city was mitigated through the functioning of the shelter. By not mentioning the name or location of the shelter (likely due to ethical issues), the anonymity results in allowing the reader to reflect on possible similarities (serving meals) and differences (beds instead of thin mats) the shelter's structure has for other Canadian urban centres.

Regardless of local nuances, this shelter structure is widespread across Canada. It gives municipalities the ability of keeping accountability of managing homelessness and its visibility at arms-length. Nonprofits, like the organization running the centre in *Helter-Shelter,* are tasked with the responsibility of care, but without the resources of the state. As Ranasinghe details, the amount of funding the centre gets depends on how many people are sleeping in beds. In line with neoliberal governance, the cost of funding the centre is less than municipalities running the centres themselves, since for instance, non-profit employees normally make much less money than city workers. While this means smaller expenditures for civic budgets, it takes its toll on the "working poor", charged with supporting the welfare of the city's most precarious residents.

As Ranasinghe's book shows, this had negative effects on shelter staff. Some were disgruntled because clients had consistent access to free meals at the centre they could not afford themselves. Rather than solidarity, this created a divide between frontline staff and clients (some of whom were employed). There was also created tension between employees whose hourly wages only slightly differentiated. An even more serious repercussion than animosity, unfortunately, was when staff had to act as first-responders without suitable supports, resources, or training. In one instance, an employee was stabbed by a mentally distressed client. The response to the attack was telling: instead of dealing with the root issues, the capacity and priorities of the organization instead led to the construction of an enclosed working space for employees, called "the bubble". The bubble gave the appearance of security through physical separation built into the structure of the shelter. Emulating the spatial organization of a prison, the bubble was an example of how care was managed in the shelter by security and rules, and a microcosm for how mental wellness was dealt with by the city. It gave evidence to Ranasinghe's conclusion, that in the centre, "the care provided is minimal and marginal, a result of space that is heavily legalized and securitized. This is the life in (and of) the shelter" (227).

Ranasinghe heavily draws from spatial theory and literature on poverty governance and homelessness to compliment his own research. While Ranasinghe's firsthand approach was ethnographic, his methodology could have been strengthened in two important ways. First, Ranasinghe's book could have benefited from more reflective analysis, since he does not consider how his own presence may have influenced the behaviour of those he studied. Second, he chose to deploy observation as a research method, instead of participant observation. One night, Ranasinghe watched an intoxicated man stand at the entrance to

the shelter until he fell asleep and hit the floor. Only then did staff attend to the man, who an hour later fell over again, resulting in a serious injury requiring an ambulance (although the man refused care). While Ranasinghe helped care for the man once he had a cut on his forehead, he did not interfere until the man was bleeding. Ranasinghe was not even sure if staff ignored the man or simply did not notice him. While observing was important to the research process, Ranasinghe could have been participating, questioning, and reflecting on his own role in the research. Although Ranasinghe might not have observed the staff's normal process of care in this instance, he could have immediately notified staff the man was at the entrance. Afterwards, Ranasinghe could have question staff on how they reacted to the man's presence, and reflected on the potential consequences of his inaction—which would add important nuance to the work, and could have prevented the man's head injury.

This choice stresses the one-sided nature to the data collection process, and raises a wider issue in researching within marginalized communities. While researchers benefit, what do study participants gain through publications and academic accolades? Ethnographers must take pause before parachuting into communities, whether it is for the short or long term. Perhaps ethical requirements were met by assuaging concerns over harm, but consideration should also be given to reciprocity in a project. For instance, were research findings shared with participants before the release of the book, or other publications, years later? Was Ranasinghe's method of observation his own choice, or a requirement of attaining access to the centre? *Helter-Shelter* only explicitly covers methodology in two and a half pages, and hence, would have benefited from a more rigorous and expanded methods section.

Despite its ethnographic limitations, this study of an emergency shelter offers a deeper understanding of daily life in such a centre. Specifically, *Helter-Shelter* shows the perspectives, hierarchy, and power dynamics of shelter employees. It raises questions related to city priorities, and how it manages the visibility and challenges of its most marginalized residents. These questions also extend to other Canadian urban centres. For example, Ranasinghe situates "the location of the shelter in the entertainment district" (104). This has implications for cities such as Edmonton, where a publicly-funded arena and entertainment district recently opened in the downtown core. This space was already home to the city's homeless community, daytime resource centres, and overnight shelters. As such, *Helter-Shelter* offers a template for future research in precarious communities. It offers a foundation for studying spaces in cities with residents experiencing poverty and homelessness, but with the expectations of more affluent residents and business interests given

priority. It also presents a strong case for more resource allocation to shelters, better wages, training, and support for staff, and the need for a more overt harm reduction approach to properly address homelessness and poverty in Canada.

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