

Prashan Ranasinghe (2017)

Helter Shelter: Security, Legality and an Ethic of Care in an Emergency Shelter

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.288, \$25.46

Prashan Ranasinghe, in this book based upon his fieldwork in a Canadian homeless shelter, offers the reader fair warning early on when he asserts that:

Although a key subject of this book concerns visible poverty and although it is most plausible that many (even most) of the clients of the shelter are homeless – an ambiguous term in its own right – in the broadest sense, this is not a book about homelessness or the homeless per se and is not intended to be read in such a light (or, at least, not only in this light) (p.13).

A book called *Helter Shelter* that is not about homelessness? In the passage quoted above, he makes for enough wiggle room so that there may be some clever paradox here that awaits resolution, or perhaps a promise of deeper, more universal insights emanating from the time he spent at a homeless shelter. After all, a book about a shelter should be, at least to some extent, about homelessness. Given this, the ability of Ranasinghe to wriggle out of his statement will become the measure of the book's relevance for readers of a journal on homelessness.

The first chapters, if not about homelessness, are about the homeless shelter, featuring the place, facility and staff as primary dimensions of a setting where "chaos is the norm" (p.122). The shelter appears as a miserable place, with descriptions of common areas where accommodating garbage bags took precedence over making room for people, restrooms devoid of hygiene and privacy, food that fattened and malnourished, and sleeping areas in which communal noises and smells discouraged actual sleep. Ranasinghe describes the shelter staff as committed to what he calls an "ethic of care," even as they were beset by low morale amidst precarious personal security, intra-staff factionalism, and "deployment of care [described as] the routine, the boring, and the ridiculous" (p.97).

The cleavage here between homelessness and homeless shelter comes from Ranasinghe's avoidance of the resident perspective. What mentions there are of those who are sheltered are either offhand or taken from staff accounts. The reader gets introduced to those staying in the shelter in the second chapter as a crowd at the front entrance:

Men of all ages, disheveled, raggedly attired – the bare chest is a commonality – usually drunk, sometimes on crack cocaine, loudly conversing with, even berating, each other with incessant profanities and other vulgarities. The air is often filled with a thick layer of smoke from the voluminous cigarette consumption that makes even standing around a sickening experience (p.23).

This will be as close as Ranasinghe ever brings the reader to anyone who is homeless. Instead, Ranasinghe largely depends on staff accounts of shelter residents, where the dominant perspective holds them as entitled, overfed and ungrateful. Ranasinghe internalizes this perspective, charging that the shelter has unwittingly enabled a “coddling-entitlement nexus” and a “culture of dependency” (p.31). Such pronouncements are extraordinary in their naiveté, as (despite an Oscar Lewis cite) he seems oblivious to the contentious nature of his summary judgments. More telling, however, is how this underscores Ranasinghe's keeping shelter residents at arm's length, as though homelessness is a topic he would prefer to avoid despite the awkwardness of pursuing such a tack in a homeless shelter.

This apparent discomfort with directly engaging homeless perspectives grows stronger when, in subsequent chapters, Ranasinghe eschews delving deeper into the previously described chaos and dysfunction in favour of the more ethereal route of mapping the scene in academic abstractions. Here the good intentions that he assures the reader are present in the staff become an elusive “ethic of care.” Despite this being the primary concept holding together the order of Ranasinghe's shelter, he never gets more specific about the nature of this ethic beyond a polysemic (his term) intent “to serve and help those in need” (p.225). This ethic is beset by a countervailing set of legalized, securitized and gendered mechanisms that subvert and contort this ethic of care and ultimately render it unrecognizable.

The extent to which this study of shelter dynamics contributes to bodies of literature on securitization, legalization, and gender is for another reviewer to assess. Looking at the converse, couching this narrative in largely academic topics offers an unwarranted degree of complexity in explaining basic components of shelters such as the preponderance of rules (legalization), conflicting currents of engagement and safety (securitization), and relationship between staff diversity and interaction with shelter residents (gender). This means the reader who is interested in homelessness must slog through text such as this, where he describes his intent, in chapter 6 to:

explore and explicate the reciprocal relationship between gender and security: gender shapes and produces security, which concomitantly reshapes and reproduces gender. This reciprocity is paramount to understanding the order in the shelter. The order in the shelter is a product of the gendered nature of security, which, by extension, leads to and sustains an ethic of care, itself gendered (p.156).

Even the intellectual argument falls apart in the book's conclusion, where (spoiler alert) on the second to last page Ranasinghe departs from his efforts to explain the chaos of the shelter and takes an abrupt, functionalist turn in asserting that "the system works" in that "the care delivered in the shelter is uncomfortable and can only be so" (both p.231). Ranasinghe ends with the unsupported platitude that this "is the best that this site, in these conditions, can offer" (p.232). Were this a book about homelessness, he might have contrasted his shelter as chaos narrative with current best practices in homeless services that seek to do better. This includes less restrictive, low-demand versions of shelter that are supplanting the overly structured model portrayed here, as well as housing first approaches that scuttle shelters altogether. Instead, this final disconnect confirms his initial assertion that this is not, in fact, a book about homelessness.

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