

“Can I Trust You?”

Observing Human Intervention at the Border

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023



For my brother, Josh, for being my best friend and the world's greatest human.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the founders of Team Brownsville and the family of volunteers that were so gracious to show me around and answer my one million questions about their work and passions.

I want to thank my parents, Melissa and Andrew, for believing in me endlessly and loving me well.

Thank you to Jamie, my big sister. You teach me what it means to be strong.

Thank you to my brave roommates for listening to me sort out ideas and allowing me to cover the floor of our home with the many pages of this project. Thank you to Gaby, Sam, Kylie, and Dania for knowing my heart and helping me find the right words to share it.

I want to thank my sweet grandmother who was so filled with excitement about this project that she sent me home from Thanksgiving with a copy of her own senior thesis, in case I needed any ideas or sources. Thank you for showing me how to love unconditionally and care so deeply for the world we live in.

Most of all, I must express my deepest admiration and gratitude to Nicole. Thank you for knowing my thoughts before I even speak them, and for making this entire project possible. You once referred to yourself as my “Fairy Godmother,” and I can’t express how true this is. I can say with absolute certainty that you are the reason I am completing this project... also this degree. Gracias mil por todo <3

## **A Note on Intentionality**

I have chosen to incorporate images taken from a public Facebook page that are particularly useful in support of my research. To maintain the anonymity of individuals posted in some of these images on social media, several have been cropped or edited to blur faces of individuals who may not have consented to be photographed.

Additionally, this project was constructed without the goal of emerging with any set “findings.” My only goal for this research was to observe and try to piece together how the current situation on the border between Texas and Mexico appears in daily life, hoping it may give me some insight into how current structures came to be. I have hoped, through the intentional use of a layer of removed analysis of everyday experiences, certain points of stark importance can become visible, so that we may find ways to meet a broken system with an understanding of its segments.



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## Introduction



Fig. 1: Two angles of the border fencing between the United States and Mexico; taken by the author.

On a hot July day I woke uneasily in the early morning. Carefully, I packed two water bottles into the bottom of a paper bag from the pantry of my mother's house; adding a few onions, a bag of rice, and several cans of black beans from the shelves to last me the first few days of my research.

When I arrived in the border town of Brownsville, Texas, I spent the first several hours driving around the city, trying to orient myself among the palm lined city streets. Heading towards the historic district, I followed the main road to an intersection by a massive department store. I turned to my left and was met with about two miles of fencing, made of high steel bars and barbed wire, lining the city's boundary along the Rio Grande river. Pulling into a small

parking lot located along the fencing, I found a roundabout and historical marker that read, “Alice Wilson Hope Park.” I turned into a spot in the empty lot and got out of my car slowly, stepping onto a paved platform looking out at the eighteen foot fencing structure. I cautiously walked along the fence, peering through the bars and layer of barbed wire to catch a glimpse of the Rio Grande and the red bridge that crosses into Matamoros, Mexico. I tried to capture images of this site from any angle I could, a task that proved to be quite simple as I found I could slip my arm through the bars and take a picture of the terrain. I saw the landscape fenceless, without borders.

A dirt road carved the lush river banks and tall, iron bars encasing the city. At several points along the border structure, tanks drove along the narrow roads, dust billowing in clouds from the other side of the boundary. I saw no border patrol or law enforcement presence on the American side of the fence; the park was empty spare a few people crossing the street to the department store. Gateway International Bridge, painted a bright red, connected the United States and Mexico over the river. The vegetation that existed on the Mexican side of the border surrounding the river met the boundary to the United States with abrupt shades of brown and gray, infrastructure built out from the line of fencing.

The landscape of Brownsville follows the natural features of its terrain, main roads built along resacas, small channels of water cut off from the Rio Grande, lined with palm trees bigger than I had ever seen. Bridges made of limestone native to the area serve as hotspots to witness the vast biodiversity of the landscape. Main roads passing through downtown Brownsville follow the natural patterning of the several resacas in the area, allowing Brownsville a reputation for the unique natural features in its metropolitan zone. The largest resaca, located at the heart of the

University of Texas of the Rio Grande Valley campus, just two blocks from Brownsville's point of entry, was home to a large percentage of parrot species in the area; I noticed they were almost all green.



Fig. 2: Resaca located at the university campus; captured by the author.

The physical division between the two countries, between “American” and Mexican bodies, displays larger dynamics at play in perceptions of border operations. American interest in “securing” the border overlooks the individual value of each person crossing the border, forced to exist within a system designed against them. The position of the United States as a self-identified figure of refuge and security is undermined by the reality of its policy and the values it expresses through the consistent tightening and militarization of this boundary. The urge to increase military presence in this terrain pushes the value of security and the notion of the “illegal” crossing the United States with ill intentions. The landscape of the US border as a point of violence and heightened vigilance reinforces the prejudice of illegality associated with people crossing the border, regardless of their personal security or the existence of their humanity.

Current border policy strips humanity from individuals seeking security in the United States, many of whom are striving to reunite with family members working in the country to afford their reunification. Through brutal border policing and security practices in cases of rampant disregard of people's bodily autonomy and protections of dignity, the institutionalization of how the border patrol receives asylum seekers has come to value control above all else. A harsh focus on efficiency and swift processing of individuals neglects their personhood and individual needs, bearing a structure of systematized disregard for humanity and the creation of additional hurdles to meet basic needs. The realities of the lives of many operating within this system bent on brutality indicates an immediate need for the United States to improve its response in receiving the large numbers of people that need asylum and are coming to the Southern border regardless of policy changes.

The system of admitting individuals seeking asylum into the United States has been generationally established on the promise of success and the notion of freedom within the country's borders. Modern governing practices focus largely on means to prevent migrants from arriving at the physical border, disregarding the prevalence of a social understanding of opportunity that is inextricably linked to the United States even after decades of anti-immigration legislation. Federal and local negligence to address the circumstances occurring daily at the border are perpetuated largely by the notion of "prevention through deterrence," an idea that focuses the responsibilities of border policing on keeping migrants from being able to physically cross the border. Robin Reineke, professor of Anthropology at University of Arizona notes, "The basic idea behind prevention through deterrence is that once people would see how difficult and dangerous it was to cross, that they wouldn't try," she says. 'They did try, and they

died in the thousands” (NPR 2022). Attempts to deter asylum seekers from being allowed to cross into the United States will not prevent people from making the journey to flee life threatening situations in their home countries. The legacy of negligence on behalf of the government in response to increasing mortality rates and the realities of migration for thousands hoping to settle in the United States’s borders has required nonprofit and religious organizations to pick up the slack of resource provision. The complexities within the experience of arriving at the border of the US must be met with compassion and an understanding of not only the responsibility to care for these individuals, but to honor the reputation the United States has harnessed for its own political gain.

The facade of the ability to provide care allows the United States to shrink behind a constructed sense of security, only employing additional resources to the Southern border in forms of increased military presence. The United States offers a limited provision of aid to those arriving, promoting an appearance of security rooted in both an image of benevolent understanding and providing menial care like eight ounce water bottles to those in their custody, also supporting the idea of migrants posing a threat to national security. Border policy has focused almost exclusively on the idea of “securing the border” through increased oversight of the movement of migrants and advocating for physical barriers like fortified walls and fencing, centering a sense of physical safety and mediating a threat posed by the individuals attempting to cross the southern border. The employment of patrol as means of securing the border places the individuals in transit along the border into a role of illegality and threat to the security of the United States.

Although the everyday functioning of state policy in processing and connecting asylum seekers that are legally within the US contains many forms of resource connection and logistical aid, the use of heightened patrol reinforces the assumption of migrants as a population to be monitored. With thousands of migrants arriving to the US on a daily basis, particularly through the complications of an ever changing landscape of the Covid-19 pandemic, the development of resources to meet them, after significant travel and traumatic experiences, requires greater care than the government has offered. The role of nonprofits and church groups serve to smooth over the rough and efficiency minded processes enacted by US border patrol.

This intense focus on “securing” the Southern border communicates to the public that those who are crossing into the United States are inherently dangerous, whether or not it is explicitly stated by governing bodies themselves. The actions taken by both federal and local initiatives to reinforce these narratives emphasize the negative assumptions of who some of these individuals *could be*, rather than acknowledging and embracing the fact that individuals *are being* forced into a system with little access to basic human needs. The practices of border patrol, ranging from actions like attaching a wristband with a barcode to identify an individual to severely harsh practices of detainment and family separation, depend on some form of removal of the autonomy of migrants in border patrol custody.

The general attitude of migration policy bends towards assumed illegality, resulting in the scope of migrant reception practices to be strongly associated with militant control. Further, the employment of tactics of protection permeates into social ideologies of migrants as a threat to the security of American citizens, whether through the stereotyped migrant or through the popularly cited “threat to American jobs.” Author and activist Paola Zaccaria refers to this idea in her

piece, “The Art and Poetics of Translation as Hospitality,” stating, “The semantics of lawfulness and punishment in the name of resident citizen’s security is instrumental in cashing in on the consensus of conservative, racist tempers, and to keep the more vulnerable portions of the population quiet” (169). The emphasis on maintaining silence presents an opportunity for border protection agencies to justify their actions of increasing brutality under the guise of protection for US citizens. Fortification of the assigned identity of illegality and risk attached to migrants within this structure positions the border patrol in an increasingly militant mindset, resulting in the rise of brutal and dehumanizing tactics of control.

Acts as overt as shackling migrants being released from detention emphasize a label of criminality and containment associated with the act of claiming asylum in the United States. When migrants arrive at a processing center along the border, those claiming asylum are guided through the process of legally claiming asylum and connected to sponsors across the country, being assigned a court date and help coordinating bus tickets to reach their sponsor. In many cases, asylum seekers arriving at these processing centers or being transferred from detention have crossed the border in the last 24 hours, many with no money or access to food or water. Under CBP, there are no regulations that ensure individuals in transit to their final destinations are given food or water. Further, CBP confiscates items from asylum seekers like shoelaces, belts, and often other personal items, foregoing the significance of an individual to retain their ability to tie their shoes after days of traveling to the United States. *Anchorage Daily News* reported on the practice of removal of shoelaces from the shoes of asylum seekers in 2020, noting, “While there may be a theoretical risk that the folks in custody can use a shoelace to harm themselves or others, there is real danger when the shoelaces are not returned or replaced

when the asylum seekers are released back across the border in Mexico” (Smith 2020). Dr. Hal Smith unpacks the significance of the forced removal of individual’s shoelaces that are often never returned, meaning that many people are sent across the border to Mexico to await a court date under current policy for up to several months with nothing holding their shoes together.

These policies seemingly arise in order to maintain an efficient and fast paced system to process as many migrants as possible, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a federally implemented buffer to remove the possibility for those in custody to attempt suicide or harm to patrol officers. As federal regulations do not require border security to provide many types of resources that serve to aid the harsh realities of the experience of surviving migration into the United States, or that of custody under border patrol, this work has been picked up by humanitarian organizations stationed across the border.

My research provides an ethnographic account of the realities of the landscape of humanitarian work being done in the border town of Brownsville, Texas to supplement the needs of asylum seekers. The work presents a descriptive account of the experience of working as a volunteer within a prominent local nonprofit, commenting on the moments of tension between the work being completed and the backdrop of border policies at play. Ethnographic data depicted throughout the piece serves as a foundation to zoom out and analyze larger impacts and meanings of simple, everyday actions taking place at the border. The work is separated into three chapters of analysis, entitled: (In)visible Spaces, Dignity and Choice, and Sanctuaries of Constraint. Each chapter highlights a specified point of tension observed within my research, with the aim of taking steps back to notice how each interaction may fit into the larger landscape of the American immigration institution. The piece presents a survey of the realities of



immigration policies as they appear in the case study of an individual organization within a prominent border town, identifying aspects of these policies that are often overlooked.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The structure of this project utilizes ethnographic data as a case of the larger institutions and patterns evident in migrant aid and policy on the United States-Mexico border in Texas. My research and analysis furthers previous research on the role of humanitarian work in spaces of neglect of care, the role of trauma and emotion in the operations established to receive large influxes of people, and forms of aid serving as social resistance. Previous humanitarian work subscribes to two bodies of published work; significant emphasis is placed on questions of humanitarian work and its efficacy, as well as its ethical concerns. These central modes of focus steer the discussion of nonprofit work towards a measurement of their aid versus harm analysis, neglecting the physical reality under which many of these organizations operate.

My research aims to texture these discussions through evidence of nuanced dynamics and relationships evident in the case organization, engaging in both questions of their own impact and role in the larger institution of immigration politics in the United States. This follows the style of Sharon Abramowitz's piece, "Bringing Life into Relief: Comparative Ethnographies of Humanitarian Practice," constructing the use of ethnographic study of humanitarian work and what is left out of traditional analysis. Abramowitz pushes the binary of discourse regarding the humanitarian through a rejection of the simplified critique of the practicality and morality of nonprofit work. She states, "Ethnographic accounts have the ability to make visible the interdependence of an expatriate or national doctor holding a stethoscope to the chest of an elderly refugee woman and the global cultural, financial, and political flows that make that

intimate interaction possible” (4). The attitude of expanding the description of a landscape like the border, rather than searching to offer claims on the legitimacy of nonprofit work, allows a more nuanced understanding of the generalized structure of the figure of the humanitarian in a closed, institutional system. My research offers a descriptive account of how these operations unfold in real time, opening several perspectives and making connections unable to be simplified through the constraints of a reduced claim to the legitimacy of the work being done. Actions evident in the examples of my field site require further thought and open up larger, more generalized discourse on the status of modern border operations and their human costs.

Interruptions in some of the neglect reinforced by border patrol by humanitarian and religious organizations serve as a landscape of advocacy and social disruption from within the structures they operate under. The idea of social tactics can be used as a framework for these actions by modern humanitarian groups. In a climate of suppression and a sense of disconnection between the desires of nonprofits and border patrol, tactics represent means in which humanitarian groups can reintroduce the protection of honoring individual humanity and advocate further for those they serve past the limited and restrictive guidelines of legislation. The notion of “tactics” emerges from Michel De Certeau identified a distinction between *strategy* of the structure of power to maintain control, and *tactics* deployed by those operating inside the institution as means of disruption. De Certeau proposes that a tactic, “Operates in isolated actions, blow by blow, it takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them... What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (Gibbons 2017). The strategies of immigration policies and those who

enact them, namely Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) units, perpetuate the necessity for humanitarian intervention to provide the support to maintain human dignity through resources and connection. When the expectation remains that migrants will undergo hours and even days of processing from CBP, the provision of resources like sufficient food and water must be valued and enacted; further, the constraints posed for humanitarian groups that attempt to supplement this lack- through restrictions in abilities to provide services in certain locations and administer specific goods like soap-constructs a system that strips autonomy and respect for each person entering the United States.

Strategy and tactic employ a background of analysis that rely on small changes within larger structures of strategic oppression. The case of border militarization over time, evident in the focus of identifying a physical border to claim difference and separation between American citizens and those arriving in the US to reside there, is an evident strategy of establishing difference and management of a growing population in need of assistance. In an article that posits humanitarian work and militarization as two inseparable elements of state control, Geographer Jill Williams explains,

The entry of state agencies and agents into the policies and practices of migrant care make this continuity strikingly evident as care functions as a technology of enforcement and the sick and injured are cared for in order to facilitate their timely deportation. In this context, mini-malist humanitarian interventions complement and uphold the enforcement regime. (18)

Concern for state security blends into the efforts of authorities to provide basic necessities to those under their watch. Similarly, this emphasis inhibits state policy to provide meaningful care to migrants. Such intense focus on the efficiency of this process, namely through the larger goal

of expedited deportation efforts as introduced by Williams, highlights a strategy of liminal aid that does not attempt to serve the root cause of many of the issues faced by those seeking asylum. Eight ounces of water may help an individual for an afternoon, but not for the strenuous week of travel that lies ahead in many cases.

Local organizations attempt to serve as a remedy for the absences and pitfalls of federal aid, imperative in the support of migrants crossing the southern. Many organizations utilize connections to larger communities through social networks like congregations and access to prominent community members. These networks offer an example of Mark Granovetter's analysis of the role of strength in social ties. He states, "The strength of a tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (1361). Most social ties that maintain extremely close connections create an insular structure of social network that limits the ability for information to travel as great distances as larger institutions of weaker connections. The most prominent groups that have long standing histories of practicing care on the border are connected to religious work and the notion of sanctuary, made up of large social networks of weakly tied connections, allowing them greater influence.

The aim of nonprofit service often relies on donations from vast networks of support of like-minded individuals and institutions across the country. This pattern of work is displayed through two contemporary organizations offering services to migrants that span the perimeter of El Paso to McAllen, Texas. These groups serve as case examples of the prominent mode of humanitarian provision that lay the foundation to modern migrant aid.

A well known group, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, presents a clear example of the implications of a social network and its ties. Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) serves their local community of McAllen, Texas through respite centers open to migrants since 2013. The organization was founded as a subgroup of the national nonprofit, Catholic Charities, which has agencies in almost every state in the US. The national organization was founded in 1986, slowly expanding to open new agencies of their mission (Catholic Charities USA). Located in the Rio Grande Valley, the agency has served as a critical member of the humanitarian field in recent years. Providing services common for humanitarian groups like hygiene supplies, meals, and clothing, Catholic Charities RGV operates a respite center in the heart of McAllen. Their “Humanitarian Respite Center,” opened in August of 2015, partnered with the city of McAllen and a few other nonprofits to provide a space of rest for migrants just two blocks from the port of entry. The respite center is operated by volunteers that facilitate the provision of short term housing, medical services, as well as facilities for migrants to rest and bathe before continuing their travels to a sanctuary city or sponsor.

The extent of Catholic Charities RGV’s presence in South Texas has reached national attention, the branch’s founder, Sister Norma Pimentel, frequently being interviewed by national news outlets for her work in the respite center as the population of migrants arriving continues to grow. Her presence on the border garnered significant social influence among humanitarian work in recent years as Catholic Charities RGV continues to expand the possibilities for providing care to asylum seekers. Pimentel orchestrates the process of migrants coming from custody to the bus station; in an article in *The Washington Post*, this process is detailed, stating, “When a text

arrives from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Sister Norma Pimentel knows it is time to dispatch her volunteers to the bus station two blocks away” (Tumulty 2018).

The close connection between Pimentel and ICE indicates a process by which this nonprofit is able to work in collaboration with city officials and border patrol in an unprecedented manner. The direct link, evident in the use of text messaging to pass information to the organization from ICE directly, indicates an extremely closely operating social tie between Catholic Charities RGV and border officials in McAllen. The organization harnesses the social connection to the city to provide more extensive services and forms of care such as accessible bathing facilities.

The insular relationship to the city is countered, however, through the weaker ties of the larger networks Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley have established over their time in operation in McAllen. When interviewed regarding the increase in migrants since 2014 and how the group is able to provide so many services on a daily basis, Sister Norma responded, “We have companies and individuals pay for 80 pizzas on days when we run out of soup. The last three months have been unpredictable yet the generosity of the Valley people seems unending” (Reyes 2016). Though they maintain close contact and aid through the support of the city and border patrol, Catholic Charities RGV is also able to employ their external support of donations and funding granted by their local and national image. Their position in the landscape of humanitarian aid in South Texas suggests an advantage of utilizing the larger organizational ties and history of Catholic Charities to expand the network of the agency in McAllen.

The role of volunteers at Catholic Charities RGV also highlights complex social ties and relationships between institutions. The organization has little public information regarding hired

positions in the organization, exclusively mentioning the role of Sister Pimentel and the volunteers working with her in published works. Catholic Charities RGV frequently posts to larger social media and other Catholic organizations to garner more volunteer support at their location on the border (KRGV). This sense of advocating for more connection through the strands of a larger social network reflects an active process of widening their weaker ties by inviting them into the ground level of the organization. The level to which the organization is available and searches for volunteers to keep up with the vast numbers of migrants they receive on a daily basis suggests a desire to create stronger ties with individuals through the vehicle of their national network under Catholic Charities. The nature of a larger organization accessible to this specific operation in McAllen offers a unique opportunity for this group to expand their network and invite more members into the social structure of border operations in McAllen.

Another organization providing relief to asylees, Annunciation House, was established in 1978 as a Catholic institution providing resources like housing for people coming through the border and their undocumented community in El Paso. The initiative cites their origins in a small group of Catholics with a goal of aiding the growing community of migrants coming through El Paso, and is run entirely on volunteer work; their work centralizes a religious belief in being, “In solidarity with the poor,” in their community (Annunciation House). Annunciation House utilizes their location a mere few blocks from the border with Ciudad Juárez to provide services like meals, hygiene materials, and even emergency housing in their shelter. The location of Annunciation House in El Paso offers a different perspective of ties constructed between border patrol and nonprofit work. The longstanding history of Annunciation House and their services in El Paso have established them as a key player in the process of receiving migrants, similar to that

of Catholic Charities RGV. In an interview for the *LA Times*, executive director Ruben Garcia explains Annunciation House's role working in close collaboration with Customs and Border Protection, though this relationship has developed alongside increasing need for migrant care. *LA Times* reported that Annunciation House had been raided several times over the course of their operations, including an incident in 2008 where an individual residing in Annunciation House's shelter was killed by CBP just outside the building (Montes, *LA Times*). The event complicated the relationship between the nonprofit and local border protection agents, straining the capacity for the two groups to work in compliance in the same manner. However, with the surge of asylum seekers arriving in early 2014, the relationship of collaboration between Annunciation House and CBP solidified into a process of close contact with CBP frequently relying on services from the nonprofit for individuals released from custody.

Annunciation House displays a carefully constructed organizational structure, rooted in strong connection of volunteer work and moral beliefs that rely on both strong and weak ties of fiscal support from the community around them. The values exhibited of community and service based in volunteer work have established an insular community dedicated to the same causes; the close commitments they subscribe to also, however, limit their ties to larger networks of donors. Their website states, "In order to better understand the insecurity and instability with which the poor live, it would never be possible to seek or accept permanent funding sources...Nothing would be accepted that had strings attached" (Annunciation House). These "strings," though they offer promises of more funding, also indicate some association with other members and larger structures that this nonprofit does not want to strengthen. This serves as an example of a group with strong ties to their volunteers and direct community, though they steer from the external,



weaker connections that organizations like Catholic Charities rely on. The group's attitude prioritizes stronger ties with local volunteers to operate the organization according to their morals and intentions exclusively.



Fig. 4: Border fencing at Alice Hope Wilson park, view of Gateway International Bridge; taken by the author.

## Methods

The data collected for my ethnography were taken this summer, in the month of July. I traveled to Brownsville, Texas for 10 days to study and volunteer in an organization working in the city center, providing humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers. I used participant observation methods, and supplemented my findings with interviews. My interview participants consisted of other volunteers in the organization; I used snowball sampling to identify potential interviewees, as well as convenience sampling through asking volunteers I worked with each day. Some volunteers would steer me to others they believed would be helpful for my project, as well as recommending individuals outside the organization that may be informative. The nature of the volunteer schedule allowed me to work with and request interviews with most volunteers on schedule, with the exception of a few who were out of town. The study was constructed to interview the personal relationships individuals held with the work they engaged in within the organization. I focused my interviews on the personal narratives people held regarding their own work, the work of the organization, and the system of receiving migrants at large. This multilayered approach allowed me to identify how an individual positioned themselves in both the social and political landscape of aid in Brownsville, as well as helping construct a clearer understanding of the system's intricacies and development over time.

I organized my research through a grounded theory approach<sup>1</sup>, emphasizing the adjustments necessary in the commanding nature of the work to inform my interview questions and analysis. The findings and narratives of my ethnography align with a grounded theory

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<sup>1</sup> Grounded Theory, introduced by Sociologists Glaser and Strauss, “Sets out to discover or construct theory from data, systematically obtained and analyzed using comparative analysis” (Chun Tie, Birks, Frances 2019). This theory allows for the evidence found on the ground level of research to inform the theoretical framework and analysis employed after the data have been collected, rather than collecting data to fit under a specific theory.

practice of using the data to make claims and connections to larger and more conceptual analysis of social structure. I use specific stories and interview anecdotes to break open a larger conversation and imagery of the institution of migrant processing in Brownsville. The grounded approach highlights the role of the individual and collective humanitarian, the role of public policy and political ideology, as well as the impact of religious beliefs on humanitarian work. The study was designed to display a case and analyze the experience of working within a humanitarian initiative along the border, incorporating interviews as means to display the sociopolitical environment of this initiative and how volunteers and members make sense of the realities of border policies.

The goal of this research centers around observing this community as it operates, trying to comprehend the moving parts that keep the flow of migrant aid in operation. Sharon Abramowitz analyzes the possibilities of ethnographic accounts in spaces of humanitarian intervention and its ethical and practical implications. In her piece, *Bringing Life into Relief: Comparative Ethnographies of Humanitarian Practice*, Abramowitz expands the notion of goals inherent in an ethnographic study to incorporate more than just a collection of “findings.” She questions, “How ethnography can engage with humanitarianism work without becoming mired in struggles over practical relevance and moral legitimacy” (Abramowitz 4). The somewhat fraught effort of analyzing practicality and ethics in the circumstances of border relations, though sometimes informative, offer little opportunity to consider the individuality of each actor involved in keeping the institution running, or those trying to create more space within its boundaries for care.

My research aligns with elements of patchwork ethnographic work, a developing mode of ethnographic study that incorporates the constraints of daily life in the production of social analysis and research. I follow this pattern of work through the use of my short-term duration on the fieldsite as an aspect of larger research and a more careful, nuanced lens of engaging with the work. I continued to research through my field site after I left, though I was not physically present, keeping contact with volunteers and developments occurring within the organization. The exclusivity of my ability to travel and conduct my research is reflected in the duration of my study. The study was designed as a much longer stay at the fieldsite, initially incorporating multiple cities along the border for a comparative lens. As the planning of this research progressed, it became evident that the length of my study would need to be condensed, due to family obligations and financial restraints. Through the patchwork method, I have supplemented my condensed time at the fieldsite by conducting research on significant bodies of work produced around the fieldsite itself, as well as continuing to interview participants available to meet online or over the phone.

The study may have been limited in the capacity to conduct interviews with the most diverse population available, largely due to the demands of the work being done and the demographics of volunteers present. For instance, I was unable to interview both co-founders together, as one had been out of town. Additionally, I conducted interviews on site of each volunteer shift, meaning there were moments where the flow of the interview was disrupted or the interview was cut short completely due to an influx of people arriving on a bus. These external factors may inform my data in the inability to make larger claims regarding the intentions of each volunteer associated with this organization, though I attempted to gather some

of this information through observation of practices and behaviors on site. My inability to secure interviews with certain individuals, or sudden pauses or breaks in an interview due to work constraints, molds into my research as they represent the inconsistencies of time and access available at the border in a nonprofit setting.

The small pool of participants available to me signifies a possible limitation of claims able to be made as a result of my research, however the centrality of Team Brownsville in the operations of migrant aid and processing in the city of Brownsville presents the most diverse and consistent form of aid operating in the city. The group had established a sense of permanency in the town, evident in their use of the building across the street from the bus station shared with a local homeless shelter mission that works in the building on weekdays. The relevance of the organization as the main humanitarian assistance located out of Brownsville indicates the data collected with this organization could be largely representative of the humanitarian presence in Brownsville as a border town.

Additional research used in the analysis of the ethnography and its implications have been collected through the search for resources like other ethnographies published on global humanitarian efforts, works centralizing around the ideas of dignity and humanity in federal and local policy, and the role of the border as a larger, abstracted entity. Similarly, resources like news articles and reports on Brownsville regarding migration were collected to grasp a larger understanding of the context of the organization's formation and social significance. I compiled articles and previous research through the process of searching databases and publications for pieces to analyze containing content related to Brownsville, migrant policy, humanitarian aid, religious presence along the border, and the entity of the border itself. Through this process,

works of varying fields allow supplemental research to pair with my ethnographic observations that will broaden the scope of generality applicable to the analysis.

### **Ethnography**

Team Brownsville was established in 2018, in response to the growing number of migrants passing through Brownsville and Matamoros, the bordering town across the Rio Grande river<sup>2</sup>. A small group of volunteers began carrying food and other supplies across the Gateway International Bridge, the point of entry situated between Brownsville and Matamoros (Leaños 2019). The organization expanded their work after the Trump administration initiated the Zero Tolerance Policy in April of 2018, declaring each migrant crossing the border would be detained and prosecuted (US Department of Justice 2016). Following the implementation of this policy, the organization saw a sharp increase in migrants being held on the Matamoros side of the border, residing in camps awaiting their court date up to six months in the future. This process is still in place today, though under the enforcement of a new policy, Title 42, implemented in March of 2020 to mitigate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. An interview with Theresa Cardinal Brown of the Bipartisan Policy Center explains, “The Trump administration used Title 42 to ‘essentially to override immigration law that allowed people to ask for asylum after entering illegally and said we could send them back across the border, arguing that taking migrants into custody in federal facilities would create more of a public health risk,” (PBS 2023). The adoption of a policy of immediate detainment or refusal of entry established a bottleneck effect, with thousands of asylum seekers prohibited from arriving in the United States to begin

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<sup>2</sup>As of December of 2022, the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas has received an average of 1,200 migrants along border crossings in the area each week. This compares to the 2019 average of 1,000 asylum seekers coming through points of entry each day in the area. (Flores 2022).

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/18/us/texas-border-migrants-rio-grande-valley/index.html>

their court proceedings, as each person had been detained and questioned under an assumed label of illegality. Neither the American or Mexican government established significant policies to manage these thousands of individuals waiting to cross the border, forcing them to sleep on the streets of Matamoros with little access to facilities or food. Team Brownsville was founded as organized groups delivering food and other necessities across the bridge into Matamoros as the numbers of migrants held in Mexico continued to grow. Following the termination of Zero Tolerance Policy and the ushering in of Title 42 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Team Brownsville adjusted their process of providing food and other resources to the historic district of the city.

The trajectory of this care provision evolved into the permanent presence of Team Brownsville in the daily undertakings of the processing of migrants. When a bus of asylum seekers arrives at the Brownsville processing center, located just across the street from both the bus station and Team Brownsville's building, the Portillo Building, the asylum seekers are led into the processing center for intake and then walked over to Team Brownsville for them to acquire resources like belts, shoelaces, sanitary products, and food. This process was organized by the city's branch of federal emergency services. This group, "The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) supports citizens and emergency personnel to build, sustain, and improve the nation's capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards" (USA.gov). FEMA workers, under the city's direction, work to escort migrants on and off buses, across the city streets to the Portillo building and bus station, and aid CBP in their operations within the processing center itself. This careful coordination between authorizing structures situates Team Brownsville in collaboration with the city's immigration

processing operations, as they remain an integral part of securing safety and dignity for many people in the city's system.

The legacy of humanitarian work alongside border patrol established a protocol of coexistence between nonprofits and local immigration enforcement that typically relies on the cooperation of nonprofit work within the city's limitations. The example of Catholic Charities RGV differs from Team Brownsville in its capacity to work in complete collaboration with the city. In Team Brownsville's work, there became a looming sense of threat and distrust from the city of their intentions to hand out food. For instance, Team Brownsville became required to progressively move their table of resources further and further out of sight in the bus station, furthered by a ban for Team Brownsville to bring resources or food inside the station itself. Other volunteers, and even a supervisor, expressed that there seemed to be no real reason for these restrictions to be applied, even before the Covid-19 pandemic heightened the city's policies to tighten. Each restriction was communicated by a FEMA official contacting the cofounders of Team Brownsville with little explanation as to why each decision came to fruition. As it currently stands, Team Brownsville is permitted to set up a folding table at the very end of the bus terminal and must walk into the station to inform migrants of the services available to them outside.



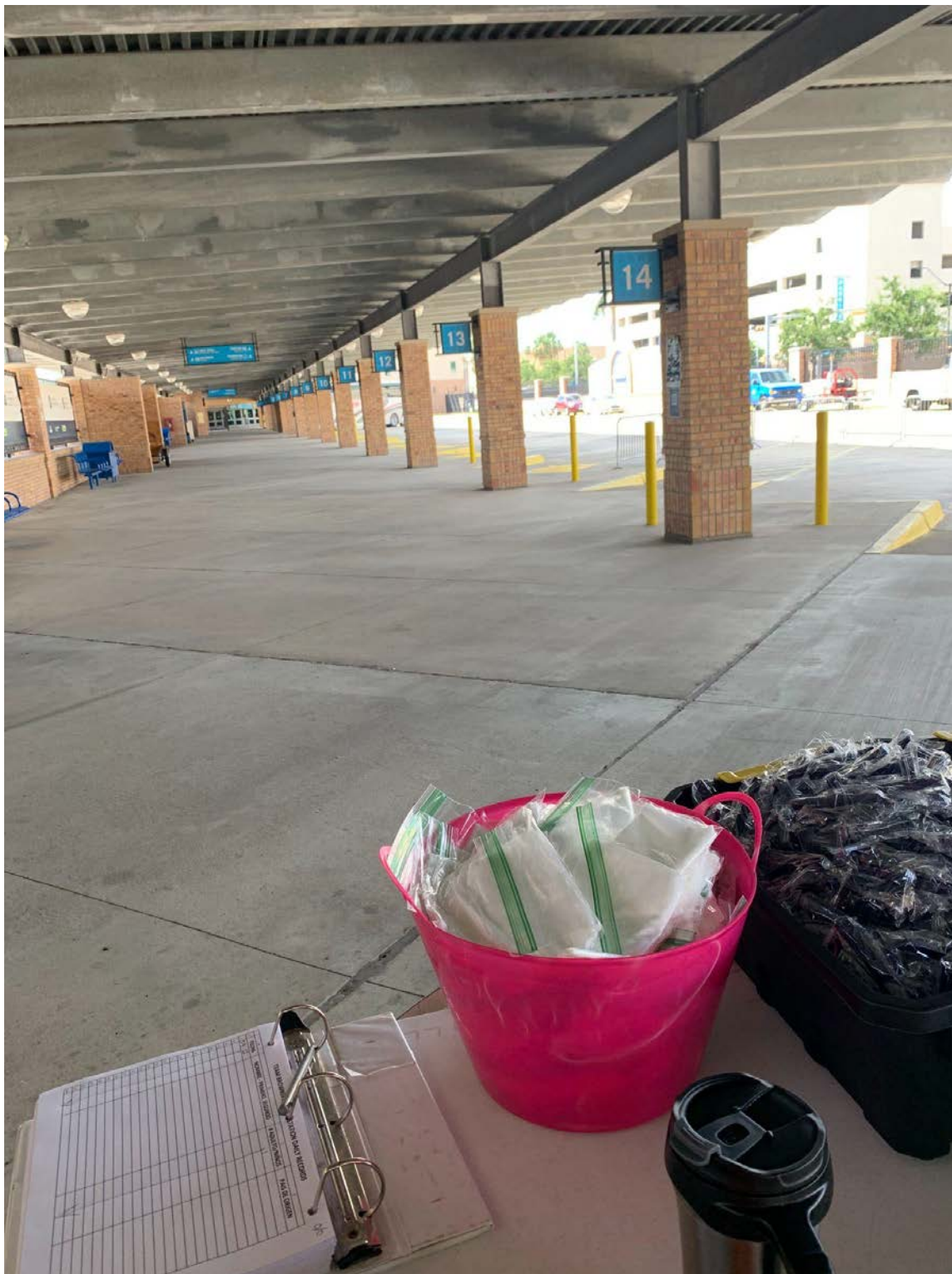


Fig. 5: View from the resource table set up outside the bus station and terminals; captured by the author.

The relationship between the city policies and the nonprofit represents a tie of cooperation rather than collaboration, identifying a deviation in meaning for each member in this landscape. Team Brownsville utilizes its space as a physical actor of humanitarianism that disrupts the institutional pattern of the city's process in many ways, largely due to their continued visibility in spaces of processing. This public image presented a tie between the city and nonprofit to appear as collaborative work, though it is not a strong connection in practicality. The lack of communication regarding how many buses will arrive on any given day and how many people to expect are not indicative of the traits of a strong tie of time continuity and internal connection. When compared to a connection like that of Catholic Charities RGV receiving direct contact from ICE with the numbers of people arriving and calling for aid, the strength of the tie between the city of Brownsville's border patrol and Team Brownsville subscribes to a weaker form of connection. The lack of deep collaboration between the city and the organization hinders the capacity for them to work together to create the most efficient and compassionate process for receiving asylum seekers into their town reflects the structural landscape in which Team Brownsville is able to provide care.

Throughout Team Brownsville's time of operations, their services have greatly adapted to the developing public policies impacting the community of asylum seekers they serve. In my research with Team Brownsville, it became clear that as they provided more organized services, local policy began to change to limit their impact. For example, the nonprofit continued to carry food across the bridge to people waiting to cross the bridge daily, until the COVID-19 pandemic heightened restrictions to a point that CBP began confiscating items they were allowed to bring into Matamoros. Patty, a regular volunteer, told me that in early 2020 she would pack her wagon

with clothing items, one of the few items remaining in the favor of border agents clearing volunteers to cross. Patty also stated that she became the group's secret weapon as she would frequently hide diapers and formula inside the clothing items in her wagon to pass through the checkpoint.

The act of smuggling items like diapers inside sanctioned resources indicates acts of social resistance against the tight laws and changing structural restrictions placed on those in charge of providing care to migrant populations on both sides of the border. Team Brownsville, even as they shifted operational abilities following shutdowns in the entire immigration system due to the pandemic, continued to provide care to migrants in their community through whatever means possible. This came to evolve into its current organizational structure, providing three meals a day out of their building located on the same square as the bus station and processing center in downtown Brownsville, as well as providing resources at the bus station itself for asylum seekers on their route to other cities in the United States.

The ability for this nonprofit to adapt to changing and tenuous circumstances signifies a strength in their motivation to serve the community of asylum seekers in their town through whatever means necessary. Through acts like folding diapers inside shirts and rolling baby formula inside of pant legs to carry across the bridge, Team Brownsville has established a legacy of survival as a small nonprofit through tactics of social agency against the structure of the city and CBP constantly shifting their restrictions. Uses of organized and consistent processes of aid position Team Brownsville to be able to manage the constant state of confusion that remains at the border. Their determination to provide individuals with the things they need requires the

group to operate within a larger system, utilizing loopholes and back doors to certain policies that stand in their way.

Sociologist of Migration, Maurizio Ambrosini posits in their analysis of humanitarian work and those that volunteer in migrant aid, “Many activities in favor of migrants and asylum seekers acquire a political meaning, even if not openly declared or even conceived: they imply an objection against borders, either external or internal” (3). Imperative skills of adaptation and adjustment to consistently changing policies, particularly those that prohibit necessities like diapers and clothing to be provided to asylum seekers, an inherently political meaning due to the context in which it is enacted. The attitude of many volunteers generates a goal to provide care by whatever means necessary, often going against regulations put in place by those in control of immigration institutions. The use of each strategy employed by FEMA or other governing bodies provided new opportunities for Team Brownsville to meet such obstacles with means of resistance to the larger system they upheld. Each time city officials forced the organization further outside the bus station, tucked out of sight, the leaders of Team Brownsville would find some solution to maintain their capacity to meet the needs of the migrants arriving daily.

The value placed on volunteers in Team Brownsville provides a clear example of their deeply rooted connection and ties with volunteers, both local and national. Local volunteers run the operations of the nonprofit in a very similar manner to Annunciation House and Catholic Charities RGV, with their consistent involvement in the work keeping these organizations afloat. A cofounder of Team Brownsville told me in an interview that at the beginning of their organization's formation,

One of the people that volunteered started a GoFundMe, and people started to donate some money to buy snacks and food and water and things like that...And then we got a

little bit of publicity in that fall, that The New York Times showed up. And they did a story on Team Brownsville and we became kind of visible because we were cooking the food in Brownsville and taking it across the bridge in wagons.

This sentiment of the volunteers as central to the expansion of their efforts is evident in the attitude of the cofounder's ideas on how this example of national attention was able to build. The focus is placed on the close ties with the volunteers that are able to utilize their personal networks of weaker ties to garner support for the organization; the structure relies on the individual's connection to Team Brownsville and the bridges between those connections and the other members of their networks. For instance, when asking what I could do to help the work being done by this organization, the founder told me, "Go home and tell your friends about us here. Tell them what you have seen and what we need. Tell them to donate and tell their own friends and families to donate too. We need their help." This direct call for me to use my own network of bridges, and to rely on members in my social network to use their own bridges as well, indicates the significance of these weaker ties in the funding and aid of Team Brownsville enacting this work with asylum seekers.

The culmination of decades of older humanitarian work like Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley and Annunciation House have provided a framework for humanitarian intervention in localized processing of migrants on the Southern border. Examples of a variety of social ties between organizations and their structural authorities enacting strategy to maintain power has created a space for younger organizations like Team Brownsville to utilize this location as a point of tactical resistance against the structures they are required to operate under. Cooperating with city officials in order to have a claim to aid and be included in the city's process of receiving migrants opens a moment for Team Brownsville to push the boundaries of

their restricted aid opportunities through small actions of change and empowerment of those they serve.

The orientation of humanitarian aid on the border occupies several opportunities for relation to larger networks of support, as well as interaction with border patrol agents and policies. The differences in these ties and social fields indicate differing levels to which organizations are able to, or choose to, exercise their motivations through action. Differing values among specific nonprofits indicate what they find most important and how they are able to find meaning in the work of supplying asylum seekers and migrants with resources to maintain dignity and support. The differing representations of how nonprofits choose to provide aid, as well as understanding the limitations placed on them, serve as examples of the continuous narrative of the US-Mexico border aid as a site of varied vulnerability and compassion, bringing multiple approaches and backgrounds to the same goal of empowering and honoring populations seeking asylum in the United States.



Fig. 6: Main road leading to the historic district of Brownsville; captured by the author.

## Chapter 1: (In)visible Spaces

When I arrived in Brownsville, some of my biggest concerns were about navigation. Where was I going to park my car? How many blocks between the parking garage and the bus station were there? Which building did they operate out of?

The entirety of my work, and generally most work done in Brownsville to aid the thousands of asylum-seekers who are bussed to the city daily, was constrained to about two city blocks: an intersection, really. The newly renovated bus station looms at the center of this landscape with a parking garage directly across the street. Team Brownsville and two church groups operated out of the building next to the garage: the Portillo building. The street between the station and the garage was under construction, plastered with signs for rideshares and next to a bright yellow sign that read, “MIGRANT PICKUP.”

It was one of the few signs printed exclusively in English.



Fig. 7: Parking spaces in front of La Plaza bus station, designated for cabs to pick up migrants; taken by the author.



Each day working at the bus station and in the Portillo building, a new piece of the landscape of the border came into my vision. At the bus station, I saw people loading and unloading buses, the crosswalk directly across the street, and the black iron gate enclosing the terminal. I learned I could use this gate if another volunteer was positioned at the table for the shift, so I did not have to walk the entire perimeter of the bus station to enter the terminal. Some days I would go in through the station intentionally, noting if people were waiting inside to load a bus who may not have come out to see our table.



Fig. 8: Resource table of snacks, toiletries, etc.; image taken by the author.

When I entered in the early morning, the harsh stench of bleach stinging my nose, I would begin to scan the interior of the station. I searched for the small, red drawstring backpacks that were given to asylum-seekers as they were escorted through the Portillo building. The asylum-seekers usually sat in groups along the center rows, the only seats with outlets underneath, as they waited for their bus to begin boarding. Individuals waited in the station for an average of five hours, refusing to leave for fear of missing the announcement that their bus was delayed or canceled, or wary that the only announcements in Spanish were played inside the station itself.

The protocol for informing people of our resources was rooted in patterns of colors; we wore bright orange aprons with the organization logo embroidered on the front. When I saw a group of people with the red bags, I would approach and point to my apron, to say, “Me llamo Julia. Estoy con Team Brownsville, una organización y tenemos agua, comida, ropa.” Sometimes people would walk with me outside to the terminal where we operated as the city prohibited the organization from handing out resources inside the station itself. About ten minutes after they returned inside to wait in the air conditioning, a stream of people would appear through the terminal doors.

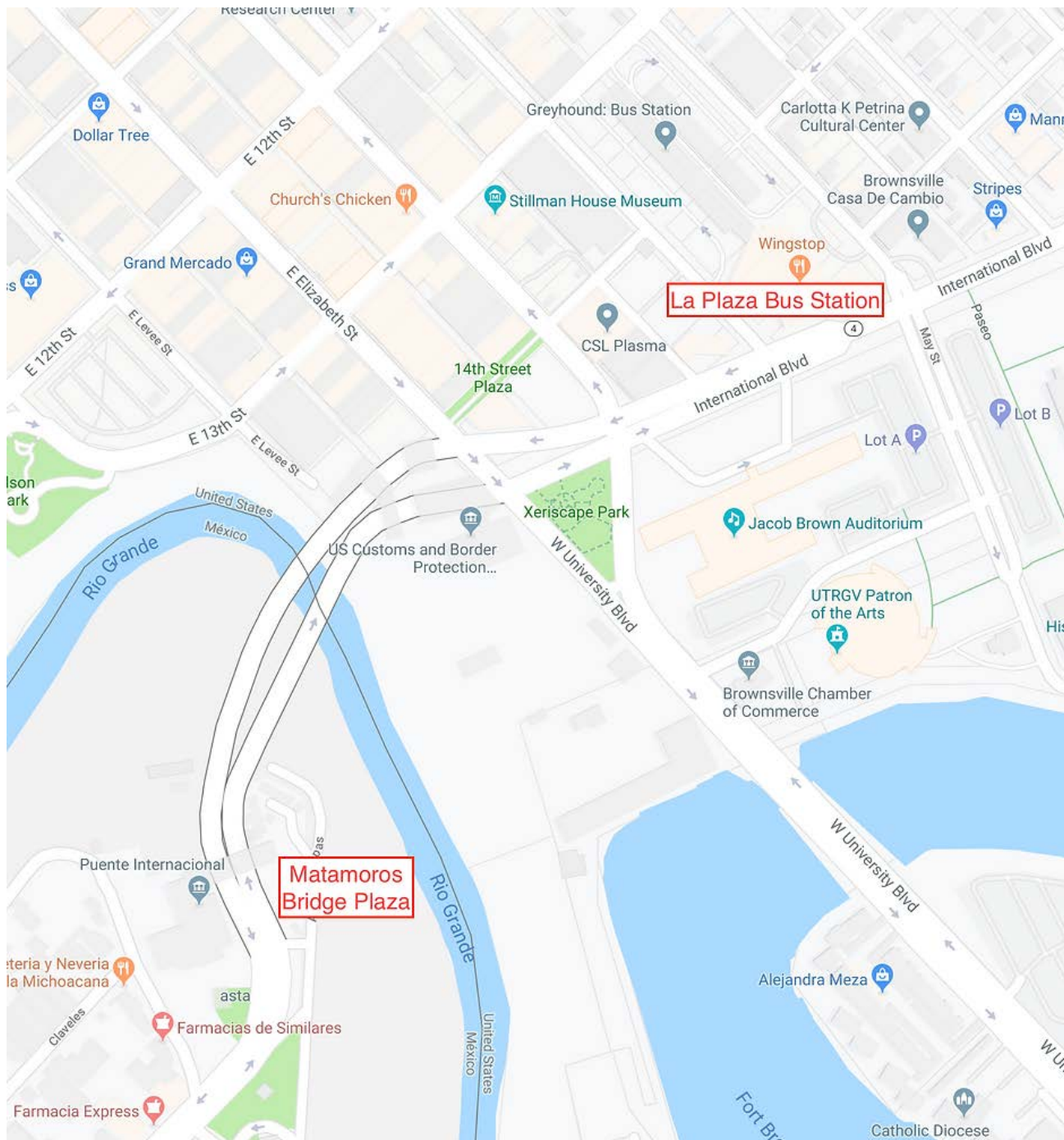


Fig. 9: Map of Brownsville where Team Brownsville operates (Team Brownsville).

On weekends, the organization ran its operations out of a building directly adjacent to the bus station and across 14th street, facing the entrance to the parking garage. The building had two sections, a bay window towards the front with a large glass door pointed directly at La Plaza garage. A large wall aligned with the window's edge, spanning through to the back side of the building. The second half of the building mirrored the entry with another glass door and bay window. From the far window, you could see the garage parking entrance and a row of storefronts to the right. The view from the front door opened to the majority of the city block. The entire bus station and terminal was visible with a slight turn to the left, or by climbing onto the window seat. The morning I arrived into this building for the first time I was tasked with setting out breakfast for the initial bus of asylum seekers expected between nine and ten o'clock.

"Separate those bananas out," José, the weekend shift leader told me, "Everyone gets one banana and two pastries." I set out paper plates, covering two folding tables, and began to assemble platters of a banana and two mini pastries from the local supermarket.

"Bus is here, come look," José mumbled, motioning for me to join him as he propped open the front door. I watched as the bus pulled in, accompanied by two border patrol pickup trucks, one at each end of the vehicle. A man in a bright red vest emerged from a door at the bottom of La Plaza garage. I asked, "Is that building where they are processed?" Realizing the entire first floor of the garage had its sidewalks blocked off by tall fences lined with black fabric and signs that read, "No cruzar," with an icon of a hand held out in a "stop" motion, almost like a crosslight. The man in the red vest waited as the border patrol agents emerged from their trucks and individually filed people off the bus and into an unmarked door.



Fig. 10: View of the intersection between Portillo building and bus station, taken from the third level of the parking garage across the street by the author.

“We should see them in about half an hour,” he told me. He returned to his work and I set out more plates. E Adams St., the street that separated the Portillo building and La Plaza garage, served as a stage for the processing of people bussed to Brownsville. After border patrol handed off responsibility of the groups to FEMA city officials, people received an eight ounce water bottle, an array of vaccinations, and a stack of papers. Our organization provided each person in line with manilla envelopes: a container for their bus tickets, court date, and list of addresses of where they were going and set to appear. They were then walked across the street, trailed by city workers in a single file line into the building. Some days the city workers crossed patiently, holding the door for people and answering questions. Other days they would wait along the windowsill for people to finish gathering their things, eager to return the group to the processing facility across the street. Once inside, they were offered resources like blankets, hair ties, baby wipes, hair brushes, razors, and any clothes that were in supply.

I could never get a clear answer on why people were given vaccinations, or even what kind. I assumed it to be a precaution for Covid-19, noting that some migrants came through the Portillo building wearing a green wristband denoting they had tested negative for the virus. Had these individuals given consent to receiving a vaccination? Could it have been presented as a condition of their paperwork being handed over? Most individuals coming through wore short sleeves, fit for the heavy heat that encompassed South Texas in the heart of summertime. I could clearly see fresh bandaids on each person that entered, typically accompanied by a green bracelet.

One volunteer was committed to a practice of standing at the front door and cutting off people’s wristbands from border patrol that were printed with their name, age, country of origin,

and a barcode. Removing the wristbands as soon as they entered our building served as a small gesture to shift the dynamic in the Portillo building as best we could. She would take a pair of scissors and remove every piece of border patrol identification attached to each person in line, giving them the option of keeping the band or she would toss them all in the trash. I saw no one decide to keep their band.

The simplicity within the tactic expresses some of the seemingly menial actions used by Team Brownsville to cultivate a sense of community and represent the value they placed on the autonomy of each person seeking asylum. The act of cutting off a barcoded wristband announces to the wearer a semblance of freedom or distance from the custody of border patrol. A sense of physical detachment from a number and scannable identification offers an opportunity for migrants to begin to rest into their liberated status, complete with a label of legality attached to their court document handed out across the street.



Fig. 11: A parent and child waiting at the Portillo building; Cardenas/Reuters (2021).

Though they were legally certified to be in the United States, the nature of the city's process, in their efforts to manage each person enforced an environment of control and

containment, prohibited people from fully actualizing forms of autonomy. Many would not fully comprehend their status due to the firm assertions of the city workers, yelling instructions for the asylum-seekers to “Hurry up!” or “Stay in line!” Our organization made significant efforts to meet this expectation of efficiency and containment through leaving room for moments of agency or any support we could provide in the process.

After they wrapped up inside the building, city officials walked people back into the processing center across the street, arms full of bags of items, plates of pizza, folders of documents. It was never clear to the organization why the asylum-seekers were taken back into the processing center once they had been brought through our building. The city workers hurried people out of the building to stand on the street sidewalk and wait for the light to turn, heralding groups of fifty to one hundred back into a tinted, inconspicuous door.



Fig. 12: Migrants entering the side door of the processing center beneath the parking garage (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2022).



I noticed after the first group was guided back to the processing building that the main door was shattered, as if a rock had been cast right into the center. About an hour later, people were walked to the bus station, some entering the building and others escorted into taxis. At this point, the city workers were absolved of their responsibility and returned back to their building, only reemerging when the next bus of asylum-seekers arrived.

The system of guiding asylum-seekers from one building to another was a well oiled machine. In the name of “order,” the local government of Brownsville carefully constructed a system of managing migrants through unmarked doors and no external accountability. Generally, the residents of Brownsville do not spend much time on this block, largely due to the decay of the old town strip a few streets away<sup>3</sup>. Large shopping centers built just north of the heart of Brownsville moved significant populations further north. The younger volunteers I worked with who were from Brownsville said that they normally only spend time in downtown Brownsville when their extended family would come to visit; they also informed me that though they have lived in Brownsville their entire lives, none of them knew the extent of the operations happening between La plaza garage and the bus station. The weekend shift leader told me, “I didn’t even know this was happening down here. I mean, we knew there were migrants at the bus station but I never knew about all this.” The invisibility of this process of moving people between buildings, even to the residents of Brownsville, exemplifies a larger social understanding of the goals of Brownsville city officials to transport people from one place to another with as little public interaction as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> A participant told me his family only comes to the historic district for shopping when his extended family comes into town. He shared that as a child, when his grandparents would come from Matamoros to visit, his family would drag him and his siblings into the department stores and shops along Levee St. so he never really wanted to go there of his own accord. I noticed as I drove along this strip the increase in recently developed delis and restaurants opening there, complete with outdoor seating and large fans on the sidewalks for diners’ comfort.

The disorientation of this experience, particularly from an external perspective of a volunteer trying to track the movements of border patrol buses, generates an environment of quiet confusion. The strategy of disorientation through the dance of leading migrants from building to building with little to no explanation for what is happening or why, reflects the city's involvement as means of stripping individuals of their sense of direction and individual autonomy. The psychological impact of forcing people into lines, walking them back and forth between buildings with no information even as to where they are along the border works to generate uncertainty, removing agency and the provision of information from asylum-seekers legally certified to travel within the United States. The lack of communication surrounding the city's regulations and operations established a vivid lack of concern for those under their eye.



Fig 13: Two people sitting outside the bus station; two police officers stationed at the entrance to the station; taken by the author.

The issue of communication between the city and our organization became another clear way in which the city perpetuated this system of regulated movement. One weekend I worked from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon, the full day that the organization's doors were open to those in various steps of being processed through Brownsville. We saw several men that day who needed to stay overnight, as their bus was not scheduled until the following morning. At around three in the afternoon, one of the cofounders of our organization and I began to set up for dinner; the nonprofit offers three full meal times a day for those who may have a later bus. We had heard earlier in the afternoon that another bus was coming to the processing center between three and four. I watched as one of the cofounders spoke with a city official who claimed the bus would have carried between thirty and forty people. As we prepared for this final bus of the day, we called in an order for ten pizzas, sending out another volunteer to go pick them up so we would be ready when the bus pulled up across the street.

Once returned, we separated out paper plates, two slices each, covering the two folding tables for the incoming bus. As we busied ourselves with this task, we noticed it was well past three, assuming that meant the bus would arrive any minute; the bus never came. One of the cofounders walked across the street to the processing center to inquire where the bus was. She returned, fists clenched, eyes glued to the pavement. She then entered the front door and exclaimed,

“Well. There's no one coming. I cannot believe they did this again.”

The strategy of miscommunication was used frequently to undermine the organization's ability to provide services, even if just in the distribution of meals. The other volunteers informed me that there were likely still people inside the processing facility from earlier in the

day who may not have been able to contact their sponsor to secure their bus ticket or flight, and that sometimes they keep people inside for seemingly no reason at all. To manage the ten pizzas we had acquired to feed those coming, the volunteers dispersed and found people to offer the food to. I headed to the bus station to see if there were any asylum-seekers there waiting in the lobby, directing them to the Portillo building for however much food they needed, as the city regulations prohibited us from bringing any resources inside the actual station to distribute. I walked back with three or four people, for whom we secured a plate and ziploc bags full of slices for their bus ride. We closed the building with three boxes left that went home with the three volunteers.

The dance of miscommunication and performative action on the streets of downtown Brownsville created a sense of constant confusion for those involved in, or witness to, the movement of asylum-seekers through the border and into the town. The entire process appears to be designed for efficiency, exporting an idea of a “successful” structure of guiding people across city streets to their next location. Beneath this facade, it can be seen that the city government established such a well-choreographed image of their system of quickly moving lines that they manage to remove the presence of the inherent inhumanity and removal of dignity within their actions. Simple acts of allowing the asylum-seekers to be walked from the processing center to the humanitarian organization offering food and necessities present an image of the city as caring for the wellbeing of this population. The permittance of the community to be fed and given items like shoelaces and belts, items taken from them across the street at the processing center, present a profound paradox in the actions and intentions of the city.

The complicated nature of the work done by the city to meet the influx of people entering the United States through Brownsville reinforces and reflects larger systems of immigration policy on a federal level. From one perspective, evident in many examples from my own time at the border, the role of local government and their methods of intervention perpetuate structures of oppression, rooted in a sentiment of moving people through the process and out of Brownsville as quickly as possible. While the desire for an efficient and organized process to help people from one location to another may not be considered an overt action of oppression, the implications and consequences of a machine-like process should be closely examined. The pressure of federal and local officials to accommodate the increasing numbers of people entering the United States through its Southern border establish the work of meeting asylum-seekers in an institutional frame that separates the emotional labor to deliver a sense of humanity and dignity to the strenuous process of moving people through Brownsville and its comparable border towns.

The depiction of a system so focused on efficiency leaves room to question the role of humanity in such a process, namely how the maintenance of dignity can be maintained for the population it serves as well as the unintended consequences of institutional actions. To establish a system prepared to receive thousands of people each day, the institution must maintain a well managed process to aid people with the legalities of their arrival, however the strength of focus placed on the legal aspects of migration, evident in the act of escorting asylum seekers from one building to another without the basic provision of information or amenities available, hint to a possible deeper aim held by local governments in their operations to receive migrants from border patrol.

Attempting to decipher the true intentions and values of the higher officials in local governing bodies proved complicated in the interaction with their actions on a ground level. The coherence of city policies and emphasis placed on expedited and organized movement tended to bleed into an intense focus on the image presented by their policies in action. One morning I arrived at the Portillo building early for my shift at around eight in the morning. I remember it was raining hard that day; I wondered as I crossed E Adams St. what the system looked like when it rained: would the city official hand out umbrellas to people in line? What about the people who would arrive without shoes or with ICE sandals; I assumed they might fall apart as they made contact with a puddle.



Fig. 14: Sandals left by an asylum seeker who was given a pair of sneakers; taken by the author.

As I entered the building I met a younger couple, only a few years my senior, hauling large storage boxes from the back room. I set down my bag and followed them, bringing box after box full of hygiene kits into the center of the room. The previous day I had packed around a hundred kits full of mini deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, wet wipes, shoe laces, bars of soap and other necessities that were handed out as people came through the door. We had also received boxes from a partnered church group that shared the building with us on weekdays. I asked what we needed to do with the kits and they responded, “The city decided yesterday that we have to take out every bar of soap. We can’t give it out anymore.” The city’s defense for this new rule declared that the administration of soap encouraged asylum-seekers to bathe in public restrooms, mainly the restrooms located inside the bus station.

That morning we spent around two hours taking out every bar of soap from each hygiene kit, resealing them and putting them back in the boxes to be handed out later in the day. In the evenings, one of my self-assigned duties was to go check the bus station for people waiting to board before we closed the Portillo building. Some days I would find five or so migrants waiting and could direct them back to our building for dinner. That evening I headed over a bit early as we were not expecting another bus. I found no one with a red bag inside the station and went to fill up my water bottle near the restrooms. I approached the fountain and found it completely covered over with a plastic sheet and signs reading, “Cerrado: NO USARSE.” Inside the restroom itself, signs had been plastered on the mirrors above each sink declaring, “NO BAÑARSE!!!”

Each day people would ask me one of three questions: where can I get food, may I plug my phone into this outlet to charge, and where can I bathe? I would respond, “We have nowhere for you to shower but there are wet wipes in your bag of toiletries. I’m sorry.”

The simple act of the removal of a bar of soap from a bag came to represent larger structures of the elite officials in the city in their portrayal of their authority through the cleanliness of the bus station which they deemed threatened by its own customers. The communication of this messaging in such direct language, “NO BAÑARSE!!!” denotes the perspective of the city and their value of how their buildings and physical spaces appear to the public. By placing bathing and the use of soap as a luxury not allowed to the population of migrants, a confiscation of agency and the dignity of being physically clean moves into the forefront of the work of the city. Though they may have a dire need to restrict bathing in public spaces in terms of strains on the city’s resources, the results of this restriction have severe impacts. The nuance of their behavior through their role in purchasing bus tickets and connecting migrants to their families and sponsors becomes overshadowed by a lack of recognition for their moral implications, namely through restricting the ability for people to become clean after their journey across the border. Regardless of the governing reasons for these regulations on bathing or the miscommunication between the city and Team Brownsville on how many people they expect in a day, the actions taken by the city reproduced the condition of the stripping of individual dignity and autonomy.

The regulation of soap and restriction of public restrooms identify patterns in border politics that complicate the narrative of border patrol and city regulations in the process of seeking asylum. If a governing body declares soap to be confiscated, fastens a barcoded



wristband onto an individual, or puts someone into a car beside a sign identifying them to the public as “MIGRANT,” the city expresses the value they place in the process of receiving asylum seekers. Should the appearance of public restrooms be valued over the appearance and comfortability of a human being, the sentiments shared by the city become strikingly clear. The prioritization of efficiency and success over the individual person becomes evident at the center of federal and local operations.

This operation illustrates the significance of action and autonomy in crafting the visuals of migration operations, aid, and perspectives. The impact of identification and the act of being identified displays how asylum-seekers move through the border town of Brownsville, much of this identification attached to the use of color. Bright, primary colors allow for the public eye to naturally identify an actor in the social sphere. The use of color identification on behalf of the city signified an expressive authority, their desire to be easily identified mirrored in their carefully constructed movements and mirage of cohesiveness. Imagery that underscores the simple act of deboarding a bus of migrants into the processing center with such a sense of guarded invisibility indicates a separation between the public and private actions taken by the city in their work. Official workers presented an image of a humanitarian effort on behalf of the local government, and by extension the federal government, using their public action and movement on the street as means to convey messaging of both the role of the asylum-seeker as “guided” and the city as benevolent. A single file line, guarded on both ends, creates an illusion of a clear *need* for protection, though the group had received their documents, and more importantly, their bus tickets.

Additionally, the use of coded communication between the city workers and organizations like ours allowed the city process of moving migrants through Brownsville to be hidden in a sense of controlled agency. Through allowing only glimpses into its structure and efforts through tracking where someone in a red vest physically stands within this city block, a majority of the evidence of the thousands of people traveling through Brownsville each day could be seen. The idea of visibility altered inside buildings like the Portillo building or the bus station. Without external visibility within these enclosed spaces, the actor, the recipient of the identifying color, was the asylum-seeker holding a red bag or wearing recognizable detention sandals, white and paper thin. The actor may have also been the organization's volunteer, wearing bright orange aprons to remain as identifiable as possible. The use of the ability to be identified inside these spaces changed the focus of social attention onto the asylum-seekers as actors in the space. The shift in attention, evident in the change in the subject of the color red, identified the agency present in the background of the carefully constructed production of the city's management of people passing through Brownsville. With the goal of the image of an identifiable authority figure, the city choreographed a social presence of invisibility of asylum-seekers in the city, apart from their presence under the protection of a red-vested city official. The attitude of institutionalized caution transcends the ground level of Brownsville to the larger scope of immigration policy and visibility.



Fig. 15: Gateway International Bridge; Point of entry between Brownsville and Matamoros, Mexico. Photo captured by the author.

The use of the institution as a figure in Brownsville transcended the operations at the processing facility and in the bus station. One evening, after closing the Portillo for the night, I decided to drive around town and make use of the last few hours of sunlight. I crossed the intersection of the Gateway International Bridge, the bridge that crossed the Rio Grande and into Matamoros, and drove parallel to the border through the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley. I wandered aimlessly through the side roads and neighborhoods in the area and, looking for a place to turn around and head back across town, found a driveway with a large metal sign that read, “Lincoln Park.” As I pulled in I noticed a baseball field to my left, accompanied by a small playground. I followed the curve of the street to park in the parking lot of the playground, spotting a patch of wildflowers I hoped to collect. To my right, a monstrous reddish orange fence

came into view; bars as wide as my torso extended about thirty feet into the air, barbed wire carefully positioned along the brim. From the parking lot, I could walk ten feet and reach the playground, or walk about twenty and reach the border fence itself.

A family waved to me from the swingset as I scooped up a pink buttercup from the grass, my favorites since I was a child.



Fig. 16: Border fence visible from Lincoln Park; captured by the author.

I decided to continue my exploration of the surrounding area through a side road connected to the park, leading to what was labeled a golf course on the map. I followed the road behind the university, parallel to the border structure the entire way. I drove to a dead end that led to a bus stop and a building which appeared to house university vehicles. At this point I became determined to find this golf course; as I turned back and rejoined the main road, I saw signs for the course and pulled into its driveway. I was only able to enter around fifty feet before noticing the road ahead was blocked off by two border patrol agents sitting beneath a camo tent, guns and

cell phones in hand. They peered at my car as I made a painful three point turn to avoid interacting with them, realizing this course was definitely no longer open to the public.

The careful watch of the agents followed me back to the main road, past the bus station and through downtown Brownsville as I made my trek back to the East side of the city. It was common in Brownsville to see border patrol trucks monitoring the streets, though I had never seen an agent outside their vehicle unless at the processing center. The reality of border security measures in Brownsville mirrored the city workers; they were often never seen outside of extremely specific circumstances. Susan, a cofounder of Team Brownsville, told me a story one afternoon about her being woken up at three in the morning by border patrol agents knocking on her windows and shining flashlights inside. Another volunteer agreed, sharing several experiences of border patrol searching her house for someone that they believed to be undocumented.

This sense of visibility and the weighted image of the border patrol agent, even to an unassuming witness, contributes to the frame of public and private narratives. In the performance that encapsulated border functions in Brownsville, the signal of a border patrol agent positioned in an area like a public golf course, the visual representation of their presence in town reduces to secluded stationing along the fence itself, and the evasive, amorphous figure of “security” reinforces a structure of absent yet militant caution.



Fig 17: Signs put up in the bus station bathroom indicating new washing rules, as captured by the author.

## Chapter 2: Dignity and Choice

The lack of access to bathing facilities was the greatest shortcoming of humanitarian services at the bus station and its surrounding city streets. As the city continued to tighten what they deemed acceptable in offering resources to migrants, the need for basic access to sanitation and personal hygiene continued to weigh heavily over the work of Brownsville's nonprofits. The monumental hurdle of providing access to cleanliness and basic care such as running water to serve as a makeshift shower became another disconnect between the city and the public. I began to notice more than just signs on bathroom mirrors dictating, "NO BAÑARSE!" On several occasions it seemed cleaning and hygiene products were absent from public spaces in the bus station; one day I discovered that all paper towels had been removed from the bathroom, as well as the water fountains being covered over with plastic sheets and taped down, signs reading on the wall, "No funciona." While it is impossible to claim these changes in the facilities of the bus station correlate with the presence of the asylees traveling through the station daily, the bare implications of these actions proved significant in themselves. By removing access to running water, for what was stated only to be out of "interest for the public image," hundreds of people arriving in Brownsville would be denied the dignity of entering comfortably into the United States after their efforts in claiming asylum.

The interpretation of this notion of the "public image" highlights the underlying possibilities embedded in this desire for a clean bus station. Does the city determine cleanliness by the physical state of the bus station's restrooms? May "cleanliness" also denote an emphasis on efficiency and a flow of moving people in and out of this public space? The removal of access of public water usage to a population of darker bodied people in this liminal space cannot be

separated from the legacy of removal of resources and separation evident in these actions. The same position appears evident within the trend of migrants being transported by Texas governor, Greg Abbott, to sanctuary cities in the northeast. This pattern signifies a larger urge for migrants in a state of liminality to be removed from public visibility in border towns, whether this is clearly identified as the motivation or not. The notion of public presences of darker bodies in spaces like a bus station, or on a plane or bus to land outside locations like the Vice President's home, indicate an intentional association with people's physical presence and existence and some form of trouble or issue. *The New York Post* quotes Philadelphia mayor Jim Kenney, claiming Abbot's recent activities bussing migrants to the Northeast as, "Downright irresponsible and callous to do this unannounced and without coordination, showing blatant disregard for the sanctity of human lives" (Algar 2022). The focus on repairing the "public image" in Texas legislation overlooks the inherent humanity and cost of dignity embedded in the ripple effects of these actions.

What does the forced removal of a group of people, either from the facilities inside a public space, or from that public space entirely, indicate about policy values? Further, what aspects of these kinds of forced removal or hiding of migrants continue the pattern of the agency of asylum seekers being restrained?

An argument can be made that many migrants taken to sanctuary cities did not protest to this transportation, as it enabled many to arrive closer to their final destination than if they were to be left in towns like Brownsville. Though this may be true in many cases, the optics of forcing an entire group of people, like the fifty Venezuelan migrants that were flown to Martha's Vineyard in September of 2022, expands federal and state policy of removing migrants from the



public eye, yet heavily represented in media coverage, pawns of an institution. In an article released by *National Public Radio* a mere few days after the migrants had been transferred, this process did not unfold as clearly as Abbott claimed. Three migrants interviewed shared that,

A woman they identified as ‘Perla’ approached them outside the shelter and lured them into boarding the plane, saying they would be flown to Boston where they could get expedited work papers. She provided them with food. The migrants said Perla was still trying to recruit more passengers just hours before their flight. (Zuckoff 2022)

The facade of well meaning exhibited by border enforcement in these circumstances, claiming the transportation of asylum seekers to northern cities as beneficial to them, ignores the larger context of what this action implies; even within its disconnection with the physical actions being committed at the border itself, the frame of what is occurring in migrant policy on every scale becomes obsolete. The attitude of quick action as a remedy for a larger problem, through policies like bussing and removing water access, neglects to treat what lies at the root of both issues: a lack of governmental claim to responsibility for the welfare of migrants arriving to the United States. Concern for cleanliness or orderliness in the bus station can be compared to the harnessing of the optics of fifty migrants in need of resources waiting in a largely white area like Martha’s Vineyard, with the state of need and mere existence of people being exploited for a larger political goal. As the concern leans so heavily on the image an action could maintain, governing bodies have utilized a practice of guiding the public eye toward their specific interests.

The enclosing access to public water sources highlighted an intricate dynamic at play in Brownsville policy values. With the direct ordinance against water use in public spaces for bathing, provided solely through the implementation of a dozen signs displayed in the bathroom though no direct policy announcements, furthered by the demand that Team Brownsville withdraw any soap provided to migrants, the city communicated a lack of value placed on the

significance of an act like washing one's face and body. These large scale actions retain implications for individuals on the ground in Brownsville and across the country; the removal of access to water or the relocation to a city unprepared to receive people in need of resources and efficient systems that exist only in border towns reinforces a lack of understanding or concern for the complexities and requirements within migrant reception and aid, practiced meticulously by organizations like Catholic Charities RGV and Team Brownsville.

One afternoon, after checking out the bus station and directing a few people to our table for a belt from the shipment we had just unpacked, I stopped in the restroom before heading back outside. Wiping heavy beads of sweat from my forehead from the hundred degree heat that once again awaited me outside, I turned the latch on the bathroom stall. It clicked open as I heard someone in the stall across from me fall to the ground and throw up into the toilet. I peered through the crack between the door and the stall, trying to locate the sound's origin. A bright red bag sat on the floor next to a woman hunched over the toilet, her friend waiting outside the stall asking,

“¿Estás bien? Necesitas algo?”

The second woman disappeared for a moment and returned with a paper towel she had dampened in the sink, gently offering it beneath the door.

I stood silently behind the stall, securing the latch and trying to remain out of view of the small space between the door and its frame.

If I emerged and went out to get this woman a wet wipe or some antacid from the medication locker, what would that mean? Would she recognize me from when I helped her pack up her bag of granola bars and ligas? I had recognized the woman that waited outside her stall;

would I recognize the person in the stall too? I decided to wait until she and her friend exited the bathroom to take my leave, presuming it was not my responsibility to force a moment of mutual recognition. I assumed the intimacy of this moment should not be disrupted by the complexities of my existence in this environment of significant trauma. I felt an aversion to participating in a moment of recognition that this woman had not consented to; I presumed I would be in violation of her privacy to acknowledge that I had heard or seen anything.

This moment highlighted a complexity that lies at the core of humanitarian work and other forms of care. From both my perspective and the experience of this woman in the restroom, our understanding of one another was oriented in terms of the disturbing reality we both existed in. My position as an external actor entering a space of aid in a border town, and more specifically, the bus station that serves as a space of liminality, offers a unique position. My role as a white, middle class volunteer there for a college research project, required careful consideration in the impact even the presence of my physical being would carry. In cases of clear aid and the insignificance of *who* would be completing tasks like handing out food, so long as someone was, this reality was more palatable for me to accept and move through. I had clear instructions: one banana and two pastries per plate, keeping the table full. When the job was less simple and maintained a certain level of fragility, with a moment as intimate as the internal debate on whether or not I should be seen by someone in a public restroom, the question of dignity and privacy remained. Anthropologist Ruth Behar pushes the nuances within research of trauma and entering an environment to which one does not originate, reflecting,

The tendency is to depersonalize one's connection to the field, to treat ethnographic work as that which is "other" to the "self," and to accumulate masses of data that can be compared, contrasted, charted, and serve as a basis for policy recommendations, or at least as a critique of existing practices...Still, others, as I once did, have retreated to

history, to the quiet of the archives and the study of the past, where presumably an observer can do less damage, not have to be quite so disturbingly present. (25)

My presence as a researcher and “other” in this instance presented an opening to harness some of this ethnographic perspective, attempting to balance the realities of my identity and the urge to shy away from moments of intensity where the “right” thing to do was not overtly obvious to me. Being “disturbingly present” allowed the circumstance to highlight aspects within my own desires and motivations that play into histories of humanitarian work that have layered effects I was so eager to avoid or mediate.

Due to the levels of trauma inherent in the process of migration and claiming asylum, the right to privacy serves as a position of increased awareness in providing care. The nature of the journey asylees take to arrive at the border make room for the desire to establish additional levels of privacy to offer relief to individuals once they arrive in the United States. The forced visibility of this woman in this moment, following days or weeks of insecurity and publicity in existence spur a desire to respect the moments when an individual has access to a private space. If I had chosen to leave the stall and asked if they needed help, this woman may have seen that I was wearing an apron of the organization that just gave her lunch, or maybe she would even notice that I was the one plating the food. I *assumed* that the discomfort of realizing someone else had heard you in a moment of vulnerability was far greater than the possible support of the rationed singular antacid medicine I could bring her. However, my assumption of what would be a greater or worse act of care still removed a level of agency from this woman to accept the help I could offer. I determined that *I* should be removed from the scene, so she could carry on with the aid of her friend, when in reality she may have wanted another person to help soothe her, bring a cup of water, or grab that antacid from the medicine cabinet.

In my position as a student doing research and entering this environment with an analytical lens to the dynamics and circumstances around me, I considered my own role in each scenario with extreme critical attention. This tendency to overthink urges the question of how much of an impact a white, middle class volunteer can have in environments of aid. As I consider this dynamic from a distance, my understanding shifts to recognize that individuals are likely not analyzing the volunteer's intentions or meaning for helping and resenting the offer of some form of relief. Though it is not an exception, the progressive humanitarian push to analyze the amount of space one takes up in each circumstance, while critical in understanding and breaking cyclical dynamics of oppression, often overshadows certain aims and efficacy of care. There is a difference between engaging and reproducing hierarchies of inequality and operating within a system that cannot be separated from the participant. My role in this organization could not be completely stripped from the privileges I hold and the larger image of the humanitarian "savior," though this analysis serves to push these notions and oversimplifications of aid as a flawed act in itself. In the example with the woman in the restroom, both scenarios required me to make a decision of how to "help" based on what I deemed the most valuable form of care, though I had no way to know what this person would actually want or need. Both choices, to stay hidden or to ask if she was okay, required me to decide what would hold her dignity best, reinforcing the larger structures of power and privilege at play of our existence in this moment.

Between the delicate nature of the work being done on the border to aid migrants and the legacy of humanitarian intervention as a monolith of preserving American superiority under the facade of benevolence, the daily interactions of people working to offer resources to those crossing into the United States are tasked with a balance of connection and removed intimacy. In

an interview with the bus station coordinator, the sole full time worker in Team Brownsville, she stated, “I know what’s happening and I don’t want to see it...And I don’t want them to see me seeing them and then have them have to see me later.” Jane’s instinct, after a year of working in this environment, adopted a posture of removedness from the realities of the migrants she worked with daily. I noticed this in her from my first shift at the bus station; she is an incredibly organized and efficient worker who knew exactly what needed to be done at any moment. I found myself afraid to ask questions on her motives and personal experience being involved with the organization, though throughout my week working with her we became increasingly friendly, often discussing the tensions involved in this work.

Jane was one of the only people I encountered that took this level of care to such an extreme; she was well attuned to the element of visibility at the bus station. While she wanted to make sure everyone had access to what they needed, she also wanted to ensure a level of separation so as to not disrupt people’s privacy. The initial desire to swoop in and provide care to the extreme of capacity may not always be the “right answer” in receiving and aiding asylees coming through towns like Brownsville. The significance of a level of removedness is crucial in the daily work of extending resources to fill the gaps of federal and local government. The skills employed by those that work and volunteer in nonprofits along the border dig much deeper than the task of putting food onto a plate and maintaining order in a hectic work environment. A sense of intense focus came to the forefront of my mind every shift at the bus station, trying to keep track of everything occurring around the actual distribution of care to ensure our presence served enough to outweigh the existence of the legacy of a nonprofit at a bus station full of asylum seekers.

### Chapter 3: Sanctuaries of Constraint

A minivan full of older women came pouring in the front door at around eleven in the morning one Saturday, just after we had helped the first busload of people for the weekend. They unloaded box after box of shoes, clothing, food, hygiene kits, and objects like small bibles and books. The ministry sprung into action immediately; several women set up six new folding tables in the span of a single minute and had put out a snack station, as well as shirts by size and style for easier access through the line. I looked over to José on the other side of the room, he shrugged and continued helping set up tables and opening boxes. Once the last of the supplies had been brought in from the van, another large truck appeared out front of the Portillo building. An older man emerged wearing a polo, shiny reflective sunglasses, and a baseball cap with the ministry's name embroidered on it. José whispered to me, "That's Pastor John, he's the head of the church that comes every weekend. He's...extra." As soon as he entered the front door, I began to understand what José meant.

Pastor John came around to each person in the room, shaking their hand and offering a "Dios lo bendiga," as he made his way to his table stationed at the very end of the line. The table had been set up for him, full of hygiene kits donated by the Salvation Army, donned with the organization's red logo on a white, plastic drawstring bag. I noticed there was a case full of extra bags beneath the folding chair stationed there. As I observed this fluster of activity unfold, I continued my task of sorting the newly soapless bags of toiletries that Team Brownsville handed out at the beginning of the line. I wondered about the 87 people we saw that morning that would only receive one bag of toiletries since their bus happened to arrive earlier in the day; did these Salvation Army bags have bars of soap inside? Was anyone going to check? I returned my

attention to my wagon full of bright red toiletry bags, tightly rolled and carefully stacked on top of one another. I busied myself by filling another layer of bags at the top so people could easily grab them as they signed in.



Fig. 18: Pastor John stationed at his table in the Portillo building. (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023)

Our next bus came about half an hour after Pastor John and his team arrived. A flood of about a hundred people streamed inside, harshly ushered by city officials trying to move the group in and out as quickly as possible so they could return to the processing center. It was unclear what the goal of this quick return was, especially as we had already removed their identification bracelets as they entered the building. As the group came pouring through the front door, Pastor John's entire team cheered, directing people into three main lines to fit everyone inside. The pastor turned on a large flatscreen television mounted to the wall behind the line of migrants as Jose and I explained to the group what the process through the Portillo building would look like: sign in here, grab resources here, there is pizza at the back and coffee set up by the window. Occupied by the chaos of welcoming almost one hundred people inside this very



small building, I glanced up to check how many more were arriving and noticed Pastor John had put on a video of a very energetic eighties singer from Venezuela, singing loudly through the room as people started taking in their surroundings. Pastor John assumed his position at the very end of the line, introducing himself to everyone coming through, asking, “¿De dónde eres?” He seemed to know a song from every country people claimed, belting out a few lyrics from popular hits. Pastor John operated out of an extremely high register, loudly alternating from one person to the next, ensuring each person had a moment to connect with him. Incorporation of emotional connection and a sense of understanding and empathy appeared beneficial at the surface of Pastor John’s work, offering a form of humanity and compassion absent in many institutional forms of migrant reception.



Fig. 19: Pastor John sitting with two asylum seekers waiting in the Portillo building (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023).

The attitude of connection displayed by Pastor John and his team felt admirable in many ways; I found myself wishing that José and I had enough time to talk to each person in line and ask what they needed, being able to connect with those we came across on a more overtly

meaningful level. I could only do so much from behind the table, guiding them through the steps of gathering resources so they could reach the bus station and rest until their departure. Pastor John and his team, Grace Ministries, used their weekend hours of service, typically Saturdays and Sundays from noon to three, to connect further with people coming through the town than most humanitarian organizations are capable of under the limitations of working in environments of high demand and risk. The assumption of the migrants' basic needs being fulfilled daily through the existence of Team Brownsville removed Pastor John and his team from the responsibility of providing a consistent presence. The assumed responsibility and maintenance of care assigned to nonprofits in the area often allows church groups to deliver extensive resources like additional donations or spiritual connection on a singular day or season, particularly in seasons of high publicity.

Higher volunteer presence coincides with both increased media representation during moments of intense policy changes, as well as calendar seasons associated with increased volunteerism in religious communities. For instance, following the heightened media coverage of family separations occurring at the border in early 2017, the border saw an influx of external volunteers arriving to support humanitarian initiatives. One participant told me, "After the media stopped covering what was happening here we really took a hit on volunteers. It's hard to do some of this when numbers are so inconsistent." When more documentation is published on the atrocities unfolding in the treatment of people arriving to the Southern border, individuals naturally become aware and more motivated to flood the border with aid not always evident in seasons of less public dehumanizing policies. Social perceptions of the idea of an "immediate need" often gets lost in news cycles of the interest of the public eye in that moment, establishing

a fleeting and often shallow precedent for outsiders to plug into humanitarian practices. Grace Ministries harnesses this reality of national attention, publicly displaying their efforts through their Facebook page, spreading awareness of their ministry to gather more support. Further, the cyclical nature of religious “seasons of giving,” namely the Christmas and Easter seasons, offer a dedicated time frame for members of congregations to become involved in community efforts. The heightened levels of public knowledge put out by Grace Ministries allows members of their congregations and others to interact with their content, possibly with these seasons in mind, to bolster their volunteer schedules. The pattern of media circulation of images and information regarding migrants by Grace Ministries reinforces this cyclical nature of media-driven empathy, feeding viewers with images of suffering to garner support. Pastor John’s constructed image serves to both advocate for consistent donations and support from his congregation and reproduce a role of the compassionate community member that is involved in a local and national infrastructure of care.

Grace Ministries operates from a unique position of entering the system established by Team Brownsville, though using it more as a staging ground for their own resources and operations than other volunteers seemed to. The weekend lunch shifts were primarily run by Pastor John and his team, unlike the other instances of pastors of smaller congregations and a few volunteers joining the regular members as I had done. Pastor John provided an intensive form of aid and emotional care that was largely unavailable to Team Brownsville’s process, almost entirely due to the limitations of time and resources we were able to provide. Additionally, the consistency in their volunteering schedule allows Pastor John’s team to immediately begin working and organizing materials, as they require little instruction or

intervention from Team Brownsville itself. Their familiarity with the process and needs of people coming through the Portillo building positions the group to offer a systematized form of care not accessible to first time volunteers.

This familiarity extended into the interactions between Grace Ministries and Team Brownsville itself. A volunteer from Pastor John's team, a gentle older woman, hugged me as she entered the building and whispered, "Gracias por venir, amor." José told me she comes every weekend with Pastor John and often brings big batches of cookies for the migrants and volunteers. While we set up for the bus to arrive, the woman told me, "I told the others not to put too much of your stuff out. We have plenty." It seemed this group had some awareness of the limits to Team Brownsville's donations, hoping to help support the organization in their additional offerings so at least a few buckets of red hygiene bags could be saved for the coming week at the bus station. Through connections and general access to larger communities to pool donations and support from, Pastor John and other religious groups are able to operate under a mindset not always available to organizations like Team Brownsville that run on a schedule of selectively distributing its supplies to serve the greatest number of people. Shoes and clothes were kept in the large cabinets along the wall at the bus station, only to be given out if people really needed them. If someone came in wearing thin white sandals supplied by detention facilities or no shoes at all, we handed out pairs of sneakers donated by members of the community. I remember one afternoon a senior volunteer came to the bus station with a giant bag of shoes donated by a church group in the neighboring town; she carefully sorted each pair by size and set them in rows along the back of the cabinet, letting out a sigh of relief.

In the Portillo building that morning, Pastor John's team brought three large boxes of donated shirts purchased from Walmart, tied together by thick string by size and sleeve length. Two older ladies got to work cutting open each pile of shirts and rolling them out onto the tables, another volunteer to their left cutting the plastic connecting each pair of sneakers she unloaded from a black garbage bag between her feet.



Fig. 20: Grace Ministries and Team Brownsville handing out resources in the Portillo building (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023).

The intention of this explicit aid on weekends did not end with the provision of resources and food to those arriving in Brownsville. When I returned home from my shift at the Portillo building the first day I worked with Pastor John and his team, I found their Facebook page and noticed he had already made a post on the day's events. Alongside a blurb on how 27 people

gave their hearts to Christ that morning, I found images of Pastor John with many of the migrants walking from the processing center over to meet us at the Portillo building. I was struck by the editing done to these images, a harsh filter applied that made the street look much starker than usual. Pastor John stood in front of a group of mostly male migrants, following behind him with their release papers and bus tickets in hand. I could not help but view this through the religious context Pastor John operated within. The spectacle of this figure leading a group of people from detention, or being held by border patrol, to the Portillo building conveyed a sense of shepherding this population to their futures. The exposition of the picture harshly displayed the bright yellow and green wristbands on each person's arm and the freshly painted crosswalk. Pastor John's posture reflects a prevalent American performance of offering a level of sanctuary and protection to vulnerable populations. This narrative of a welcoming and benevolent savior reinforces the notion that American policy claims to fulfill the responsibility to receive and support the population of migrants arriving to its borders daily, further than just an increase in militarization and security as their top priority.

Ties between Christian narratives and notions of American independence and governing practices inform the unfolding of border policing. Modern evangelical ideals of protection and security, largely rooted in fear of "the other" and structures of power built to uphold these beliefs, have established systems of control in the name of individual freedom and safety. The prevalence of conservative political impetus to police these areas of land that, in turn, neglect to consider the gravity of those actions in terms of the individuals on the other side of each action, serves as a possible point of entry for figures like Sister Norma and Pastor John to cultivate different images of religious intervention with border patrol. Pastor John's conservative beliefs,

evident in his congregation's social media presence depicting images of political nature and public support for conservative lawmakers in the area, is not evident in the work of Grace Ministries within the process of Team Brownsville's umbrella of aid. Aside from overt religious practices like prayer and the distribution of bibles on a regular basis, Pastor John and the other volunteers operate within Team Brownsville's designated process, displaying a different kind of intervention rooted in compassion rather than policing. The potential to embody Christian ideology alongside a secular, progressive group like Team Brownsville offers the opportunity for Grace Ministries to present an alternative image of Christian humanitarianism, likely appealing to larger audiences. The distinct association with religious groups and local government bolsters a narrative of government sanctioned volunteer work within the specific mindset of conservative Christian values.

The choreographed act of escorting a group of individuals just released from border patrol presents a performance familiar to the American ideals of protection and humanity under an expectation of control and supervision. Author Naomi Paik unpacks this idea of sanctuary and its long term implications in spaces of aid. She notes, "Physical sanctuary in a religious space allows one undocumented person at a time to remain in the community, but these immigrants 'choose' to live in a (benevolent) space of confinement as a last resort" (123). Though Pastor John was not able to offer direct physical sanctuary in his operations out of the Portillo building, the connection between physical security and a sense of confinement may not be removed from this landscape. The pastor leads groups of migrants out of custody on a governing level into the care and oversight of himself and his own group of volunteers; the act seemed more like a

transference of power and responsibility over the migrants than their true freedom from a watchful eye.



Fig. 21: Pastor John leading a group of migrants from the processing center to the Portillo building (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023).



Paik furthers this concept of sanctuary rooted in religious narratives of advocacy though still in a confined or limited capacity. The use of Pastor John as a physical escort between the processing center and Portillo building carries weighted connotations, separate from the daily practice employed by city officials walking groups between buildings. Grand gestures and the use of photography to cultivate a certain image of care and public action to help the group of migrants behind Pastor John serve as intentional actions that feed into a larger context of sanctuary without action as described by Paik. The use of physical space as a stage to display the care being provided to each group of migrants holds a different meaning when it is provided under a covert desire to be converted to the faith of the figure handing out meals. The subtle messaging embedded in a significant portion of the work done by Pastor John and many religious organizations involved in humanitarian causes seeks to promote values and faith-based ideology alongside physical forms of refuge. In my experience in the Portillo building and at the bus station, this position often provided many migrants a sense of relief and hope as they connected with the messages Pastor John promoted. This contact felt distinctly separate from the several women that carefully asked to take a small rosary from the pile on the bus station resource table. The prevalence of faith in daily interactions was often a point of strength for Pastor John and those on his team, furthering the emotional and spiritual connections he was able to foster through the nature of the aid he provided.



Fig. 22: Pastor John leading a group of asylum seekers in prayer (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2022).

However, the promotion of doctrine with the provision of a meal that would have otherwise been absent questions larger implications of these actions coexisting. Even in details as subtle as the bright red logos printed on each hygiene kit handed out by Pastor John's volunteer team, signifying they had been donated by the Salvation Army, reinforces a history of religious sanctuary built around structured containment of those receiving care. The history of the Salvation Army holds a firm example of this form of containment, in their founding years holding a practice of requiring each person listen to a sermon presented by a speaker before they were able to receive a meal. Though not as direct, Pastor John's acts of shepherding and requests to pray over each person's plate of pizza before they sat on the cool tiles of the Portillo building

uphold a pattern established by organizations like Salvation Army. Though Pastor John's acts did not contain the same level of conditionality as evident in the practice of sitting through a sermon to get a meal, the physical constraints and routine of group prayer and individual connection certainly displayed a preference on behalf of Pastor John's desired form of care. The merit system inherent in Pastor John's publicization of the spiritual aspects of his volunteer work in the Portillo building, through the daily posts with images of migrants that agreed to follow Pastor John's theology, produces an assumed superiority or an image of privilege associated with the act of accepting this rhetoric.

Although there were no consequences to rejecting the offer to pray over their meal or give their lives to Christ, the promotion of this act by the figure in a position of power provides an opportunity for the pressures of this difference in status to influence action. Being asked by the person providing a secure meal of the day to declare submission to a particular faith reinforces a context of submitting individual agency to earn the trust or aid of authority figures in migration practice. Although the meal would not have been withdrawn in this circumstance as a result of someone rejecting to follow the faith being solicited to them, the situation mirrors types of requirements and practices of stripping autonomy employed by positions of power like Salvation Army practices and even border patrol strategies. With the context of the dynamics at play of those serving the group and those being served by each individual, this pattern solidifies a group of outsiders who could be deemed less favorable by Pastor John and the group providing resources.



Fig. 23: Member of Grace Ministries placing a copy of the New Testament into the bag of an asylum seeker (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2022).

The sense of extravagance in the aid brought by Pastor John, even just through the optics of his actions, carries the idea of the United States as a point of sanctuary for migrants. I started noticing that he seemed to know a bit more information about how many buses were coming, and maybe even the times they would be arriving. At one point between mealtimes I noticed José ask Pastor John if there was another bus coming in before he was scheduled to leave for the day; Pastor John replied, “No, no they said it wouldn’t be until around 3 or 4 in the afternoon.” It became clear to me that Pastor John maintained connections to some line of information that even the leaders of Team Brownsville did not. I wondered if perhaps his role as a community

member, or even his conservative political affiliations would grant him greater access to the border patrol agents or city officials running the processing center. I asked one of the cofounders the following day about this inconsistency in information, she remarked, “Oh well he’s been here a long time. He has really deep ties with the city and they really let him do whatever he wants as long as it’s *within bounds*.” The social ties upheld between the pastor and the city push a clear ideal of trust embedded in his work at the border. The strength of this relationship offers certain privileges of information and access that are not granted to members of other nonprofits with greater volumes of ties of smaller levels.

I wondered what these bounds could be; how far could this religious leader push the possibilities of aid to become advocacy even? Was he actively pushing any of these boundaries placed by the city on humanitarian aid? How did he come to this position of authority and confidence within the institution of state governing? Was Pastor John pushing for better treatment of those coming through the processing center? His proximity to law enforcement, both the city and border patrol officials, represents a pattern of an allied government and religious groups that is not as easily accessed for secular organizations. Though an overt generalization, the history of the use of sanctuary and religious intervention in spaces of aid indicates an element evident in this case of access to certain pieces of information and actions specific to some groups over others.

Close ties of historical ideologies between governing bodies and religious institutions in the United States, particularly conservative groups, allow religious communities certain levels of trust in their motivations and abilities to provide aid; the political and advocacy goals of secular

organizations may be less appealing to law enforcement and city officials than a Baptist group hoping to serve meals and make spiritual change for those being served.



Fig. 24: Bus of migrants being led into the processing center (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023).

The impact of Pastor John's work produced ripple effects that accompanied the resources distributed to each migrant coming through Brownsville. The distinct use of efficient and very public processes to distribute resources and food, like the extraneous documentation captured each weekend of Pastor John and the migrants at the Portillo building, reinforce the notion of the provision of aid as an extension of religious and social belief. In both the city and Pastor's systems of guiding migrants between spaces, the desired impact appears twofold: to efficiently provide aid to the increasing number of people arriving and to present an appearance of benevolence and control. The nuanced reality of the landscape of Brownsville's processing of asylum seekers requires every system to be well organized and prepared for the groups arriving on any given day, however other motivations of religious conversion or a projected image of

state humility continue the enforcement of individual bodies being exploited for a larger public cause. The initiatives are not exclusively built to provide relief to a population emerging from strenuous circumstances, indicating that their involvement has underlying motives and impacts further than the surface level actions completed in the processing center or Portillo building. The relationship between city officials and Pastor John reinforced many aspects of the institution's systems of silence and lack of information. Pastor John's additional knowledge seemed to indicate a system of value or hierarchy assigned with which individuals providing care could have access to certain services and pieces of information. Does the prevalence of Team Brownsville in the bus station and so deeply connected to the daily operations of receiving migrants put them in a higher position of conflict with the city? Does their makeup appear as a form of threat to the city's efficient system? Would the outcome be the same if Pastor John had been in charge of the daily provisions of resources at the bus station as well?



Fig. 25: Grace Ministries van parked between two CBP vehicles under a sign that reads: "Gov't Vehicles Only" (Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville 2023).

Even amongst some of the oldest migration services offered along the border, occupied by a majority of religiously affiliated groups, the level of cooperation and even collaboration with authorities indicate cycles of preference and privilege. Perhaps the most clear example of this distinction can be seen in the relationship between the McAllen organization, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, and the McAllen border patrol authorities. Sister Norma Pimentel, the founder of Catholic Charities in McAllen, maintains very close ties with border authorities of McAllen, to the extent that she receives a text when a bus of migrants is expected to arrive so her organization can meet them at the bus station and provide services. There are several plausible pathways for this mode of direct communication to be so embedded in McAllen's practices of receiving migrants, namely the seniority of Catholic Charities as a national institution and history of activity in McAllen. The existence of this organization as a branch of the larger, nationally recognized group could potentially indicate a level of trust or establishment in the infrastructure of border patrol's operations in the town. It is also significant to note the exclusivity of this kind of relationship between governing bodies and religious groups and the kinds of communication and compliance that is granted to them over secular groups. The youth of many secular groups, particularly those that are specifically oriented towards aid for asylum seekers in border towns, have a shorter history of operations due to the extreme influx in need for resources and establishment of processes of accepting migrants into the United States in recent years. Both the elements of the organizations being made up of largely younger people, as well as their relatively recent solidification as nonprofits could influence levels of trust awarded to certain groups in their interactions with policing forces. The impact of increasing push factors of individuals from their native countries due to economic instability and security concerns



heightened the population of people seeking asylum in the US; this increase has been met with largely restrictive, conservative legislation like Title 42 that requires asylees to remain on the Mexican side of the border until their legal status of asylum is approved. The emergence of young groups like Team Brownsville that respond to these adjusting and consistently developing paradigms are not afforded the same levels of established relationships with the policing structures in their respective communities, forcing them to operate at a disadvantage until they earn the trust of authorities.

This notion of hierarchy and “deserved” information access leads to the constructed role filled by religion in cases of humanitarian aid, produced by a historical construction of selected relief and varying levels of support. The spectrum of responsibility for different religious groups to be involved in supporting marginalized communities has removed an expectation for organized faith to interrupt systems of dehumanization in many ways, allowing organizations of more secular backgrounds to adopt this role of care provision. The history of religious groups picking up the slack of state policy that neglect the dignity and needs of individuals at risk, has been transferred in many ways to secular organizations like Team Brownsville whose main motivator remains in the provision of care and resources. Assumption of a layered impetus for care removes figures like Pastor John from the responsibility of providing consistent resources, as they are able to distribute aid in a manner that suits the needs of both the migrants being served, and the desire to spread doctrine.

However, the goals of many of the values that push Pastor John and similarly formed groups to provide care to their communities often originate from similar values of service and empathy as other secular humanitarian groups. A significant distinction of religious care work

lies in a sense of restricted aid evident in cases like the Salvation Army requiring people to follow certain protocols to receive aid. Pastor John's use of prayer and personal connection with each migrant in the Portillo building follows this process of limited and constrained relief offered to individuals. Larger effects of these constraints have compounded over time to establish the strict and institutionalized modern perceptions of care and the notion of which populations are deserving of certain levels of care. A distinction between religiously affiliated groups and state policy indicates a gap between the type and degree of resources provided to migrants arriving to the United States, reinforcing standards of the humanitarian impetus to supplement state provisions displays a certain level of neglect agreed upon by both religious and secular groups to remedy through donations and visible aid. For instance, one participant expressed that the policies of Catholic Charities RGV are highly politicized, with only certain communities being offered services based on their legal status. The participant described Sister Norma as, "Very close to God," insinuating that the forms of care she would provide were exclusive and aligned with her own religious and political beliefs. The same can be said for Team Brownsville and other secular groups, offering care from a motivation of social and political desires to intervene in a system they find fault in. However, the difference between a nationally oriented and funded organization and a grassroots group of community members produces different levels of direct impact and furthering of entrenched practices with residual implications.

The nature of Pastor John's team and their absorption into the functioning patterns of Team Brownsville offers a clear case of some of the complexities inherent in faith based and secular humanitarian intervention. The complications in impact and layered effects of singular actions like group prayer or Pastor John leading groups to sanctuary at the Portillo building

provide a glimpse of some of the power dynamics and institutionalized couplings of care with compliance evident in both the authority figures of the Pastor and border patrol. However, alongside these legacies of control and containment exists a community of concerned members of a congregation that aim to feed, clothe, and connect with a large population coming through their town. The nuanced impacts of the work of this group lies beneath a compassionate and motivated exterior; each volunteer operated from extreme dedication to help people in any way they could, particularly through any spiritual comfort they could provide. The use of the spiritual self in this instance allowed this group to align with individuals in a deeply intimate manner inaccessible for secular organizations in many cases. The gateway of a shared belief and doctrine to connect with and find comfort in provides an immediate connection between individuals that enriches the physical forms of aid they are offered. Pastor John's team uses group prayer to both foster community and comfortability for those who are predisposed to participate, as well as a way to persuade and expose others to their means of connection and beliefs. This double sided action offers an extremely unique pattern of connection that still manages to further the colonial legacies of humanitarian work and hierarchies embedded in the power structures of care administration. These patterns also, however, offer significant spiritual and emotional relief to many people entering a process of recovering from traumatic circumstances.

My limited time working with Pastor John requires the context of these circumstances to be taken into account when analyzing his work in its entirety. Pastor John's spectacularly cultivated image, as presented to the public, may not be representative of his complete personality and role in relation to border patrol officials and the city of Brownsville. The possibility of Pastor John cashing in some of his credibility and trust from the city to lobby for

betterment of Brownsville's immigration processes behind closed doors should remain a possibility; my analysis consists of the public image represented to volunteers and migrants interacting with Pastor John on his designated volunteer days.

Working with the Pastor made clear the permanence of some form of social power that religious communities still operate under in humanitarian aid provision for those neglected by state and federal authorities. Even if the underpinnings of privilege were less clearly communicated through his actions, the differences between Pastor John and the nonprofit remains palpable in the everyday functioning inside the Portillo building.

## Conclusion

The human cost of contemporary border policies ignores needs and creates systems of additional encroachment on people's autonomy. This landscape reframes nonprofit work into tactics of disrupting and providing relief within oppressive structures. Should border policies be constructed to prioritize the value of each person crossing borders to arrive in the United States, such a level of immediate need would not exist in the same ways, as established systems of care would be offered within policy itself. The adjustment of immigration practices to include viable pathways to asylum and citizenship, diverting the legacy of harsh emphasis on legality and assessment of the moral validity of each migrant, holds potential to greatly diminish the circumstances evident in the border's current state of dehumanization. An emphasis on a moral need, even simply in the assessment of need-based care administered to some migrants over others based on their country of origin or status when they arrive at border facilities, ignores the foundation of American identity and democracy as it was founded. In another sense, it exactly follows the American strategy of accepting and offering liberty to some, but not all individuals. The history of the United States and its flawed structural foundation of merit based value placed on humanity, though it claims to value each human life, establishes itself as a stronghold of a blurred sense of refuge.

When a country has potential to be a place for individuals to find better living conditions and economic prosperity, but requires a level of traumatizing experiences to justify your worthiness to be admitted, when does this ideal of equal freedoms materialize? At what point are asylum seekers granted this status of validity: when they receive legal documents? When they become employed and can pay taxes? Is that not also a point of contention for members of the

American public that push the narrative of migrants being given opportunities that keep American citizens in cycles of unemployment? This ethnography serves as an exploration of how some of these larger questions materialize in the daily interactions between migrants and those who detain, process, and seek to serve them. Dynamics at play between asylees and nonprofits, border patrol, and local religious figures highlight aspects of the modern American immigration system that is built to fail, only admitting enough individuals to bolster the notion of the United States as a stronghold of safety.

Through analysis of institutional and individual members involved in the immigration processes in the city of Brownsville, this project dissects the roles and residual impacts of the presence of each member of these processes and how they support or hinder the population they claim to support. If governing practices truly considered the good of individuals in their custody, they would provide the essential services that must accompany their policies. If migrants are being forced to sit in a processing center for hours at a time, they should be provided more than just one eight ounce water bottle and a granola bar. Personal items like cell phones, wallets, belts, and shoelaces should not be withdrawn or left unreturned when they are released from border patrol custody. If not providing services comparable to those of humanitarian organizations in the area as a result of the structures border patrol policies establish, governing bodies and law enforcement must work in collaboration with these groups without such restrictive levels of interference. Active restriction of the ability for individuals to access resources communicates the desires and interests of government offices lies with their own levels of efficiency rather than the true support for people in such states of need. The focus on efficiency over effectiveness of governing policies to support asylum seekers lies at the core of patterns of neglect and

dehumanizing policy. Simply providing care as means of pushing people through a system efficiently does not equate to care for individuals *because they are* individuals.

The allocation of responsibility to private citizens to support the absent second steps of governing practices, like holding facilities without access to showers or sufficient food, is a telling feature of national interest and priorities. Subtexts of illegality and lack of security promoted as one of the largest controversies around migration, both in national and local arenas. National focus to push narratives that reinforce a label of illegality to asylum seekers that is physically enacted in practices occurring in Brownsville. This narrative, paired with increased financial support given to policing and security and a military presence along the border, pushes the sense of insecurity rather than recognizing the humanity put at risk in these actions.

Poet Claudia Rankine critiques these notions of American security measures and the reality of how assumptions of security influence larger narratives attached to individuals. In her video series entitled, “Situations,” Rankine explores the question of a performance of safety and danger; her piece, “Situation 8,” depicts two black men entering a retail store, backed by her own voice reading out a poem on surveillance and the significance of visibility. She questions, “When I walk towards you it is one of the reasons I am interested in... Each second inside our unspoken questions; can I trust you?” (Rankine 2016). The use of space in this piece mirrors the landscape of Brownsville. The removal of spaces of public use or forced creation of surveillance diminishes the visibility of the individual. The assumption of efficiency in border policing blurs the individual seeking asylum into a larger group that needs to be pushed through a system as quickly as possible to accommodate those coming next. This is furthered by a sweeping assumption of this compressed group as a threat to the safety of the public that must be closely

monitored, developing a level of suspicion or association with something that should be hidden from public view. The competing goals of containment, exploitation, and a well organized process of moving migrants through the city displays the competing goals inherent in border policies. Contrasts between the exploitation of migrant bodies as pawns for media coverage of larger social issues and the neglect of the individuality and needs of each person under, and released from, border patrol custody furthers the attitude of mistrust and the displacement of responsibility. If the eye is redirected from the needs of an individual to a persona of illegality or a sense of distrust, the visibility of each person changes meaning.

Possibilities for reconciliation for this institutional neglect of dignity could entail several approaches to an improved state of immigration policies and practices. Firstly, the criminalization of asylum seekers places an immediate consequence on individuals trying to gain access to resources and success in the United States, requiring people to operate from an additional level of instability and stigma. The hurdle of proving one's validity to be claiming asylum before being provided essential services like food and hygiene access places basic needs in a position of merited luxury only accessible for those determined "worthy." The social influence of the United States has been designed to position itself as a point of refuge for suffering individuals; this reputation and legacy, though it may not operate from a dedication to providing said refuge, transcends governing efforts to deter individuals from coming to the US. Policies that restrict people from entering or remaining within the country's borders will not deter individuals from arriving.

The larger structures of government neglect in providing these forms of care are unlikely to be remedied in a scale necessary to relieve the pressure placed on nonprofits and religious



organizations in many cases, but the possibility of a more dedicated and cooperative attitude on behalf of governing bodies in their understanding of the realities of migrating would greatly relieve some of the additional trauma inflicted upon individuals as they make this journey. The current policy of Title 42 holds migrants on the Mexican side of the border until they are approved to complete asylum claim processing. Current operations rely on a mobile app where migrants can request access into the United States, automatically rejecting individuals that cross illegally. A participant explained to me that, “Each day, thousands of individuals log onto the app at the same moment to be able to make it through the morning round, inevitably overwhelming the software’s ability to function.” The inability for this system to adequately meet the numbers of individuals seeking asylum forces thousands to wait in Mexican border towns with extremely limited infrastructure built to support them. *Wall Street Journal* Immigration Reporter Michelle Hackman states, “The government is saying use this app, book an appointment, you can come to a legal port of entry and ask for asylum. And we’ll take you. The only issue is there are just way fewer appointments than there are people who want them” (PBS 2023). The stagnancy and constraints of time incorporated into this policy have served as the backdrop of Team Brownsville’s main operations for the past few years, consistently bracing for the policy’s expiration promised in December of 2021.

The Biden Administration has consistently promised to lift this restrictive policy, though rolling back the date of its removal until May of 2023. As of the completion of this project, the possibility for this policy’s extinction indicates a significantly greater number of migrants that could be met by Team Brownsville and other groups as they are finally able to pass the hurdle of United States points of entry. The liminality present in Team Brownsville’s ability to operate

through consistently shifting legislation and a posture of continual analysis of the needs of their community contextualizes this case study as representing their position being able to adapt to rising conflicts from every angle. My ethnographic account of a singular moment in the operations of Team Brownsville, and the climate at the border in general, offers an analysis of how the individual interactions that occur in border policing, aid, and social landscapes reflect larger conceptions and cycles that decenter humanity in American border policies, aiming to reconnect with the value of each human by breaking down these cycles.

This project serves as an analysis of what operations look like under current systems, from a first hand perspective into the optics and public understanding of migrant processing. The foundation of ethnographic research allows a glimpse into how these ground-level interactions further the larger scope of immigration politics in the United States. Through the use of interview and ethnographic data collected by a ten day trip to the border, I was able to analyze information within a context of reflective policy and the distance of time. Configuring my research into the historical and theoretical background of similar claims made through academic analysis, moments of dehumanization are amplified by taking steps back to notice what is actually occurring in Brownsville on any given day. The role of scope in the performance of immigration aid offers an opportunity to texture the simplicities of many occurrences and practices in an attempt to understand how these small impacts culminate into the current American migration system. In taking a singular action or image, detailed messaging can be seen through a closer lens often overlooked.

The aim of this piece highlights the role of individuals within a community harnessing their resources to offer relief to a population they care about. The capacity for members of a

community to come together to meet the needs of those in their city, particularly those of grassroots status that have limited access to funding and resources, exemplifies the significance of the realities along the border to more than just those policing them. The efforts of the individuals that develop processes to try to fill the holes of federal policy and border patrol resources often gets lost in the vast numbers of individuals coming across borders daily, establishing a routine of removedness within those that show up to run the bus station on a daily basis. Something poetic here about the larger scope of my work and what I hoped to contribute to. I have hope for Team Brownsville and its allies to face the upcoming challenge of adapting to the expiration of Title 42, and the new restrictions that may actualize. The routine of migrant care in Brownsville will not be able to hold the same patterns, with numbers of individuals being able to enter the United States in significantly higher numbers. Practices in place by city and federal agencies may not function in the same mechanisms they have seemingly perfected in accordance with current legislation: how will this choreography change in the face of new policy? Team Brownsville consistently exhibits their capacity to develop alongside increasingly restrictive government regulations, positioning them to be able to meet the needs of those crossings at Gateway International bridge with humanity and compassion.



### Parrot Studio

“You need a fan out here, it’s not good for your bodies”  
 Jars of peanut butter placed on the table  
 Gently from weathered hands holding a straw hat.  
 It looked just like the one my mother wore to the river.

Permanence in shelves lining the interior walls,  
 Carefully stacked bags and boxes.  
 “You can park at St. Joseph’s, they let us use the lot on  
 weekdays;  
 Just don’t park on Jefferson”  
 I ended up in the garage across the street,  
 A routined search for validation from an absent city.

I’m nervous to ask her for an interview.  
 Parrots come to my bedroom window, ones I have never  
 seen before;  
 Green and red ones, paired along the power lines.  
 Shouts from the skate park beneath me,  
 I wondered if they could be the birds.

## Two of a Kind

Who could be living down the street,  
how they can get it but I may not.

People realize there is a burgeoning group beneath the earth,  
their blood soaking through palm leaves.  
Like the whole town knows some secret,  
they only hear it through the vibrations of neighborhood chatter:  
women gathered on street corners with yipping dogs,  
Dishing gossip about Ana and her son who moved in next door...  
it is obvious they came "from nowhere"                      There is talk about documents.

I don't know what the documents are for,  
I can't remember the last time I have seen a single piece of paper                      not hung on the  
refrigerator of an adoring abuelita,  
carefully constructed in Sunday school,  
in the basement of the Baptist church that molded me.

A giant boat as it crashed onto land,  
my tiny hands spewing animals of every kind onto the page in various hues;  
poised to signify the arrival of newcomers to a foreign land that was meant to welcome them.

Only that time, it actually did.  
"Two of a kind," we were told.  
Just enough to keep us forward,  
Keep us awake.  
Two hands identifying who they are, vulnerably displaying, recognizing,  
accounting for them like ducks formed into a row.

Write your name, get a banana.  
Write a last name or two, get a muffin.  
An act of exchange.

"¿Los puedo cambiar por negro? Combina mejor con mis zapatos."

Thousands of shoelaces piled beneath their noses.  
In a building unmarked,  
a burst window that did not appear until a week ago.  
Maybe someone could see what it means, who it serves.  
Does my parking ticket pay for those metal folding chairs?  
Poles of meshed lining                      to stand and wait my turn?  
Where will they take each lace?  
I suppose I can use this wrapper,  
tie through two holes to tide me over until then.

**27 al cristo**

St. Francis laid bare on the table for a few days,  
 Last of the box next to three small buckets:  
 Ligas, compresas, y tampones.

La Virgen de Guadalupe no duró,  
 Gingerly placed in plastic HEB bags,  
 The ones with red cowboy boots;  
 The kind collected in my father's cupboard.

Socks tucked away,  
 La casa de cambio cerrado,  
 She notes the last of the offerings: tan hermoso  
 ¿Puedo tenerlo? ¿En serio?

Carried in crunchy plastic packages.  
 Cargado el autobús a Des Moines  
 o St. Louis  
 o Los Angeles.

They say people will be there at the station,  
 ¿Cómo saben?  
 Maybe they will not, me dijo,  
 But it's good to say it aloud just to be safe.

Armies of bougainvillea between cars,  
 Trepas por las paredes del mecánico del lado;  
 Stray cats liked to weave between the trees and the fence,  
 En el capó de mi coche cuando llegaron los vientos.

St. Francis boards the 3:17 tornado;  
 I would give anything to know if he arrived.

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