

Review: *Rhetoric and storytelling within the U.S. asylum process: Shelter rhetorics.*

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Reyes, M. (2025). *Rhetoric and storytelling within the U.S. asylum process: Shelter rhetorics*. Routledge.

Keywords: [U.S. asylum process](#), [forced migration](#), [storytelling](#), [participatory research](#), [advocacy](#), [border](#), [third space](#), [spatial rhetorics](#), [cultural rhetorics](#), [transnational rhetoric](#), [feminist methodologies](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2026.28.3.05](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2026.28.3.05)

In *Rhetoric and Storytelling within the U.S. Asylum Process: Shelter Rhetorics* (2025), Mónica Reyes' project emerges through the voices of La Posada Providencia (LPP), an emergency shelter for displaced people located in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas, where it is a part of the broader border community that Reyes calls home. As Reyes points out in Chapter 1, which introduces the premises of this book, the U.S. asylum process demands asylum-seekers to convince the U.S. government that they have been displaced by a "credible" fear of persecution. Functioning as "the welcoming of the foreigner other as a friend, but on condition that the host...remain the proprietor, the master of the house" (Derrida, 2023, pp. 4–5), this legal asylum process demonstrates the hostility inherent to the "universal" hospitality purported by the right to asylum, which Jacques Derrida famously articulated as "hostipitality". Instead, by turning to the everyday, mundane, practices which nonetheless shape peoples' lives in shelters like LPP, Reyes calls attention to the stories that displaced people tell on their own terms, highlighting the variety of narratives that exist beyond state-required "credible" fear-based accounts." In doing so, she demonstrates how feminist rhetorical and forced migration scholars, in particular, are especially well-positioned to revise and expand support for displaced people by engaging beyond the *legal* structures of asylum and offering interventions that make the process more *livable*.

Chapter 2 dives into Reyes' methodologies and research methods, which are guided by three (often overlapping) tenets. Firstly, drawing on the work of Chicana feminist scholars, Reyes engages with LPP as a "Third Space" situated in the RGV that makes resistance possible. Secondly, using rhetorical ecology as her primary framework, Reyes traces agency, knowledge building, and the asylum system itself as distributed and emergent across the relations and intra-actions of human and nonhuman agents. Lastly, Reyes aligns herself closely with the participatory research models and priorities of cultural rhetorics scholarship, emphasizing the ethical and scholarly necessities of "[researching] with communities in which we already have established an accountable relationship" (p. 20). This last tenet is perhaps the most central to this project, as Reyes makes clear that she is positioning both herself and this project—first and foremost—as active contributors to these community knowledges. Reyes then proposes "located-listening" as her own approach to helping tell the story of knowledge-building at LPP, grounded in four key axioms: materiality, equitability, permeability, and diversity. These axioms of located-listening function as the primary concepts that guide the remaining chapters of the book, which draw on critical discourse analysis of interviews conducted with LPP staff, interns, volunteers, and clients/residents in the asylum process.

Chapter 3 parses out the spatial logics of shelter rhetorics and LPP as a Third Space. Reyes identifies how

displaced people are criminalized through the use and enforcement of labels like “migrant,” “refugee,” and even “asylum-seeker,” which are fundamentally space-bound to specific geopolitical contexts, and rhetorically fix people within a hierarchy of rights overdetermined by specific nation-states, like the United States. However, drawing on the work of scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa, Nedra Reynolds, and Jenny Edbauer, Reyes emphasizes how engaging with the RGV as a “felt site” re-orient attention to the way communities’ cultures of daily practices complicate and subvert the spatial conventions of RGV as a border space. Reyes demonstrates this through stories of local advocacy in the RGV, ranging from advocacy groups like “Angry Tías and Abuelas” to the work of individual “dragtavists” like Beatrix Lestrangle. In doing so, she highlights the way advocacy efforts around displaced people in the RGV cultivate a culture that welcomes ambiguity as resistance against space-based labels.

In Chapter 4, Reyes points out how “credibility” in the U.S. asylum process is primarily measured in terms of persuasiveness, based on Western narrative norms that expect certain forms and content that rarely fit neatly with the lived experiences of displaced people. Contrary to the standards of persuasion and domination set by the U.S. asylum system, Reyes points, instead, to the importance of silence in asylum narratives, as exemplified by the “echoes of displacement” in LPP clients’ stories. Understood as part of a displaced person’s “narrative reactions,” she argues that silences are “fresh resonances— echoes—of...lived experiences” that can only be understood within the specific, transnational contexts that it emerges from (Reyes, p. 59). Borrowing from feminist rhetorical scholar Krista Ratliffe’s concept of rhetorical listening, Reyes argues for the need to deeply listen and “stand under” narratives composed by people in the asylum process, guided by their individual needs and lived experiences rather than the systemic demands for persuasion and domination.

Chapter 5 further disrupts the fixity of asylum narratives in the U.S. asylum system by turning to routines within LPP as alternative rhetorics of displacement. To do so, Reyes borrows from Kelly Medina-López’s concept of “rasquache rhetorics,” which she grounds in three key narratives that emerge from LPP stories of routine. The first narrative, “I am useful,” centers the story of LPP client, Esther, whose routinized practice emerging from a crocheting group demonstrates the nuances of economic utility and culture formation around crafting, thereby complicating mainstream, disempowering victim narratives. Re-introducing a spatial dimension to this engagement with routine in LPP, Reyes then articulates the second key narrative of “I Have a (Temporary) Family,” through stories of routinized, communal housework in LPP. These practices enact a feminist architecture (Anzaldúa) of home that composes a sense of ownership to this temporary space through “the material assemblage of routine” (Reyes, p. 94). The third and final key narrative of this chapter is “I Am Patriotic without Citizenship,” which deviates quite noticeably from the previous two in that it most directly engages with the nationalist ideologies that underpin the U.S. asylum system’s narrative frameworks discussed in Chapters 1 and 4. Reyes traces this narrative of patriotism without citizenship through the routinized practices of singing in the daily language and U.S. culture classes that take place at LPP. This section highlights the way Esther’s and other LPP clients’ daily practice of singing is co-constituted by other normalized practices of translating/transforming lyrics to the patriotic and religious songs that are typically used in these classes. These layered practices invite clients to “contextualize themselves materially” in the imaginaries

of songs such as “God Bless America” or “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” (Reyes, p. 96), therefore resisting the exclusion and marginalization of dominant U.S. citizenship narratives.

Chapter 6 closes this book by returning to Reyes’ methods and methodologies and provides two examples of how she has pursued advocacy initiatives beyond the scholarly work of this project. The first is a writing consultation program that she initiated, which partners faculty and students from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) with LPP clients and staff. Named *Rhetorica del Refugio*, Reyes emphasizes how this program is very much a collaboration between LPP staff and UTRGV faculty and students, tapping into invitational rhetoric practices that are *already at work* in LPP. In this manner, the program intervenes in the rhetorical ecology of the U.S. asylum system while resisting structures of persuasion and domination. Reyes’ second initiative is a first-year writing course, in which she fostered routinized exchanges between her students and LPP contacts, through both student-visits to LPP and LPP contacts’ visits to her classroom. In addition to further demonstrating the re-centering, collaborative, and networked approach to engaging with the rhetorical ecology of the U.S. asylum system, this second example is also especially important because it highlights how intervention in this ecology also involves actively challenging dominant narrative structures in the U.S. writing classroom.

In my own process of researching transnational activist networks, a recurring question for me is what the role of my work is/can be beyond academic study, especially when based in a U.S. university. It is an uncomfortable question to ask, made even more difficult by the way answering it requires one to engage with the enduring inhospitability of formal academia, its institutions, and scholarly traditions. However, this book is a timely reminder that, while critically reflecting on one’s positionality within such formal academic systems is necessary, one should also seriously contemplate how to “exit the [scholarly] project when that time [comes]” (Reyes 106). In her conclusion, Reyes reflects on how her “long path out” of this project does not simply mark the end of her research but reflects her continued “path *into* the community” (106). By making clear how she is personally embedded in the material situation of this project, not only as a scholar but as a shelter volunteer, teacher, and advocate, Reyes positions herself as always-already situated in the broader ecologies of LPP, RGV, and the U.S. asylum system, beyond the university. Hence, this book is relevant not only to scholars working on forced migration but also in the broader field of feminist rhetorical studies, as it invites its readers to (re)position the function of research as but one part of a broader, communal effort to enact bridges that make our shared ecologies more hospitable and livable for all.

Biography

Jade Yeen Onn (she/her) is a PhD candidate in composition and rhetoric at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is also pursuing a graduate certificate in decolonial global studies. Alongside her graduate studies and research, she also teaches college writing and introductory literature courses at UMass Amherst and serves as a writing associate at the Amherst College Writing Center. Her research is centered on the archipelagic imaginaries and decolonial rhetorics of transnational Southeast Asian activist networks and their anglophone literatures, which she explores through the lenses of transnational feminist rhetoric, decolonial studies, and Southeast Asian studies.



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