

Tina Shrestha. 2023. *Surviving the Sanctuary City: Asylum-seeking Work in Nepali New York*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

“Everyone wants to hear a good story in this country,” Mina, an asylum grantee and former teacher from Manang, Nepal, remarks to the ethnographer, Tina Shrestha, as a preface to what would become the latest iteration of her asylum-seeking story. In her interview at a Nepali Queens café, spoken between the rumblings of the above ground subway, Mina points out that when it comes to asylum in the United States, “No one wants to hear the truth. But everyone *knows* it already” (p. 119; italics in the original). Mina’s words illuminate the central paradox faced by Nepali asylum claimant-workers in

New York City. Asylum hinges less on the veracity of the story one tells, than on the struggle to tell it; a struggle that pitches claimants further into precarity and is largely suffered in silence.

Tina Shrestha's *Surviving the Sanctuary City: Asylum-seeking Work in Nepali New York* is a welcome and necessary addition to the literature about the Nepali diaspora and migration studies in part because how asylum-seeking is performed, let alone experienced, among Nepali migrants in America is something of an ethnographic black box. To date, there have been several ethnographies approaching Nepali refugee and asylum-seeking claims in the US through the gaze of expert witnesses (McGranahan 2020) or social service providers (Hindman 2013). Andrew Nelson has also recently co-written an ethnographic study of transnational migration journeys (Nelson and Curran 2022), viscerally describing the environmental and socio-political disasters overcome by Nepali migrants determined to reach North America. Sienna Craig's ethnographic monograph *The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives between Nepal and New York* (2020) traces the ends of migration—permanent resettlement—to examine how Himalayan Nepali communities from Mustang are remade in the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. From these works, readers gain critical understanding of lives recast through channels of migration and US immigration policy. Shrestha's ethnography, however, travels a different path. Her work takes us behind the stage of immigration policy to open a side door into the formalized informality of marginalized labor and professionalized storytelling supporting the practice of asylum-seeking.

The hardships of marginalized labor become the subtext of conversation at English for Empowerment classes held at Adhikaar, a Nepali community center located a short way from the popular Little India neighborhood in Jackson Heights, Queens. Adhikaar is where Shrestha has her ears opened to discourses of suffering (Nep. *duḥkha*). In her role as a volunteer English for Empowerment teacher, “Miss Tina” interacts with Nepali labor migrants, predominately women. While attending classes to improve their English language skills, the students regularly drift into conversations about the difficulties of avoiding confrontations or humiliations with their employers and their sadness from being away from family in Nepal. Through such conversations, Shrestha also begins to pick up on nuanced registers of suffering as students retrospectively describe their early years in New York, referring to it as a time of greater suffering.

The difficulties endured in the early years of students' lives in New York were not being attributed to work conditions, as Shrestha expected. Rather, students perceived this time period as challenging because they were applying for asylum while working precarious jobs as domestic workers, live-in nannies, grocery store shelf stockers, and restaurant workers. Indeed, in an irony that is not lost on Shrestha's student interlocutors, many continued to work in precarious or marginalized employment even after achieving asylum or other legalized forms of migration status. It is in these dialogic encounters at Adhikaar that Shrestha also learns to interpret silence as a sign of suffering. Narbada Didi, a leading figure at Adhikaar explains to Shrestha, "Sister, to *know* about Nepalis living in America, you have to first *understand* how Nepalis have been surviving here by selling their suffering, silently" (p. 3; italics in the original). Selling suffering, Shrestha discovers, is key to survival in the Sanctuary City.

Asylum-seeking is presented in the ethnography as one technique in a repertoire of survival strategies undertaken by Nepali migrants searching for ways to legalize status in the United States to achieve recruitment into the workforce and reunify families separated by migration. A great strength of *Surviving the Sanctuary City* is Shrestha's ability to make the convoluted US immigration policy landscape as tangible and distinctive to the reader as the Sonoran deserts of the US-Mexico borderlands (De León 2015) or the well-trod paths from a Himalayan village to the Kathmandu airport. This is a policy landscape that has undergone repeated shifts over the last thirty years. Today's familiar scene of interior immigration enforcement emerged from the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, which combined with the post-9/11 Patriot Act to create individual state and citizen incentives to surveil immigration, and immigrants. On the ground, the enforcement of these policies by employers and state authorities have made it more challenging, and also less appealing, for Nepali migrants to regularize their status. However, by the end of Shrestha's first period of fieldwork in 2012, 403 out of 750 asylum applications from Nepalis were approved. Nepalis were one of the top eight nationalities to receive asylum in the US in 2012 and the only nationality to have over 50 percent of applicants approved.

Yet, despite the positively trending numbers, there is never guarantee of success in an asylum claim. Behind every application is the mind-bending, physically exhausting labor of *making paper* (Nep. *kāgaj banāune*). Making

paper is shorthand for the protracted process of legalizing status. In the asylum-seeking context, making paper involves filing documents, but it also incorporates the preparations claimants undergo to “sell their suffering,” including repeated interviews with lawyers (and sometimes fixers) to determine credibility and to fashion a self-presentation and asylum narrative (a “testimonial construction”) to deliver to a judge deciding asylum cases. Sleepless nights are spent memorizing what lawyers instruct are vital details of claims even as asylum-seekers continue working in marginalized and informal sectors of the US economy. Appointments at lawyer offices and courts often interrupt work schedules and threaten claimants with losing hard won jobs. But they are given priority because claimants can never be sure which aspects of their case will make an impression on a judge or prosecutor. For example, the mention of an isolated area with a tea shop in sight during one claimant’s testimony completely throws his case, overturning months of diligent preparations by the claimant, Tshering. However, for others, the hard work is rewarded with asylum, although it is not necessarily interpreted as the end of suffering.

As Shrestha astutely observes, asylum is pursued by *claimant-workers*, who navigate a continuum of *duḥkha* as the protracted labor of making paper for asylum is met with anxiety in the present and the anticipation of more sleepless nights worth of paperwork in their future. For the truth, following the claimant-worker Mina’s phrasing, is that the production of a good story for asylum depends on the formation of a subjectivity aligned with the kind of precarious worker demanded by the US economy. Claimant-workers in this sense are disciplined through the asylum process, emerging as competent and compliant labor participants.

The collective suffering of the Nepali migrant community making paper in the Sanctuary City is made visible to us as a consequence of Shrestha’s unique ethnographic position as a *participant-interpreter*. As described in the introduction to the book, Shrestha’s relationships to participants were mediated through her labor as a volunteer English language teacher and as an interpreter for asylum claimants and their legal advocates. Shrestha’s position as an interpreter extends to us, her reader, who are dependent on her choices of quotations to make sense of the social worlds of Nepali migrants and asylum-claimant workers. One of the joys of reading the book are the frequent quotations from participants appearing in English and Nepali translation. However, it is not always clear if the quotes are direct speech

transcribed from recorded interviews or speech that has been reconstructed from memory by the ethnographer. Explaining editorial choices around voice and speech would have been an excellent opportunity for Shrestha to expand discussion on the participant-interpreter method.

Immersed in the act of interpreting, Shrestha's ethnographic sensibilities become acutely sensitive to incipient meanings and loud silences in her conversations with Nepali claimant-workers, migrants, and lawyers. The intersubjective production of ethnographic knowledge is fully articulated in scenes described in the backstage, such as when Shrestha reveals how the rhythmic sound of lawyers scribbling while taking their notes directed the client's narration and her interpretation, moving them back toward subjects of suffering that the lawyers could imagine and hence write down in their construction of the claimant's asylum story.

The power of scenes such as those described in this review prove that *Surviving the Sanctuary City* is necessary reading for any anthropologist or critical immigration studies scholar invested in the divergent Nepali lives unfolding in the United States. Shrestha has aimed for her ethnography, however, to be more than reading material for training students or an addition to an academic's bookshelf. This is a book that should make noise beyond scholarly circles and challenge current US immigration policy. Reflecting on her asylum process, claimant-worker Purnima tells Shrestha, "My life story has become a piece of amusement for people. I have become an amusement for everyone ... for my own relatives and lawyers ... and perhaps to you too, no? ... I am an amusement even to myself these days" (p. 135). Speaking Purnima's story out loud reveals the logics of US immigration enforcement and asylum legalization. It also assures that suffering no longer has to happen in silence.

References

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