Critical border and migration studies are flourishing with pertinent analyses of current border regimes and so-called migration crises. Critical geographers are contributing greatly to this debate by advancing spatial analyses and geographical notions to understand the reconfigurations of migration control, such as the “re-scaling” of migration policies (Samers 2004); the shifts in “geographies of sovereignty” (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014); the “networked and multi-layered system” of migration control (Raeymaekers 2014) or the emergence of “itinerant borders” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). One of the main points coming out of these debates has been the uneasy coupling in border practices of securitization, on the one hand, and humanitarianism, on the other. Walters’ (2011) notion of “humanitarian borders” engages precisely with this paradoxical development. Focusing on the European situation, Vaughn-Williams (2015) argues that the figure of the irregular migrant is seen as both a security threat to the European Union and its borders as well as a life that is itself threatened and in need of saving by the EU and its agencies. This contradiction leads to situations where migrant lives are both object of policing and rescue such as the “humanitarian warfare” on migrants through military missions for the deterrence of movement in the Mediterranean Sea (Garelli and Tazzioli forthcoming).

To this debate on how to read and intervene in border regimes, Kelly Oliver’s concise book brings a necessary and provocative philosophical appraisal of humanitarianism, focused on the treatment of refugees and the realities of migrant detention centers in the context of the “war on terror”. Starting with geographer Martina Tazzioli’s (2015) work on “rescue politics” (a critical appraisal of practices of surveillance and aid at sea carried out by border authorities in order to ultimately contain unauthorized movement), Oliver explains how these so-called rescue operations are justified by a problematic yet increasingly used system of population...
management: “humanitarian aid and humanitarian warfare operate in tandem in an uneasy, but necessary, alliance between saving lives and killing—or letting die” (p.5).

Oliver provides an incisive critique of the intrinsic link between humanitarian aid, human rights discourse, and war. She explains how the logic of avoiding “the worst” constitutes the basis for both aid and war, leading to actions according to a risk-benefit calculus and notions of collateral damage. The author ties this critique to the question of refugees: since refugees are considered to be the “collateral damage” of the ongoing war on terror, a carceral humanitarian logic takes them to be both victims as well as potential terrorists. Host countries assess the relative hazards of taking them in versus turning them away following risk-benefit analyses based on measuring threats and advantages. The “calculus itself risks turning human life, or all life, into exchangeable units. This economy in which human life become fungible operates according to a genocidal logic in which the lives of some have become disposable … Refugees are a population that has been made fungible and disposable” (p. 74).

Although deeply immersed in the critical migration debates myself, I was nonetheless moved to tears while reading Carceral Humanitarianism. Oliver’s approach brings a nuanced novelty to the already powerful critiques of humanitarian interventions. Her portrait of refugee politics is based not only on devastating numbers and detailed descriptions of the physical spaces of contention as well as the unbearable processes of determining refugee status, but also a historical depth on the refugee figure that brings a sense of déjà vu and impotency to the reader. This is when she boldly proposes to see refugees through the historical and painful experience of “genocide”:

The UN definition of genocide goes beyond mass murder to include any group whose members are denied basic human rights on the basis of their membership in that group. I argue that refugees constitute such a group. (p. 15)
She argues that the official view of refugees as both charity cases and security threats leads to the cordoning off of a group of people who are often given substandard assistance, fenced in or detained, and implicitly condemned to what some refugees call “slow death” in the camps (p.15, 22, 23, 27). This is a rather counter-intuitive reading, since definitions of genocide—even more recent ones, as reviewed and advanced by John Cox (2017) in *To Kill a People*—imply the notion of a relatively stable and permanent group. While the 1948 UN definition stresses the national, ethnic, racial, or religious nature of targeted groups, current definitions are more open and flexible, recognizing the limits of the UN definition (which excluded social and political groups, among others):

> Genocide is the attempt to destroy any recognizable, stable and permanent group as it is defined by the perpetrator; it is a concerted effort to eliminate its individual members and to destroy the group’s ability to maintain its social and cultural cohesion and, thus, its existence as a group. (Cox 2017: 11)

Such links made my head buzz for a while, pondering questions under this lens: are irregular migrants and refugees becoming a “stable and permanent group”, even if their main trait is their mobility? Are border policies “defining” such a group as undesirable mobile bodies and “attempting” to get rid of their individual members and its existence as a group–erasing the culture of free movement, and re-affirming the culture of controlled mobility through nation-states’ border rules? Is not having proper paperwork to move justification enough to make you “fungible and disposable” to the point of being contained in dangerous, disease-ridden, and inadequate conditions? Oliver argues that humanitarian aid, human rights, and military operations are producing refugees as criminals who deserve to be interrogated and incarcerated or as moochers who don’t deserve anything but pity, concluding: “Carceral humanitarianism is today’s response to the UN Refugee Convention originally designed to protect refugees escaping [genocide] from Nazi Germany” (p.4).
This critical reading is coupled with an affirmation of political possibilities. The author points to the partisan politics of humanitarianism and how human rights discourse constitutes an alibi to sustain humanitarian war and the logics of the sovereign state, including borders. Yet Oliver also signals how the “solution” to the refugee crisis must be a political one and thus the situation is potentially reversible. She forcefully states that “[w]ithout state sovereignty and territorial borders, there wouldn’t be refugee camps or detention centers”, adding a kind of “no borders” political call: “If we embraced radical democratic values, and had open borders, the very distinction between citizens and refugees would disappear as people moved freely across borders” (pp.10-11).

Also, I appreciate Oliver’s attention to the figure of the woman refugee, portraying her not only as one of the most targeted victims of this humanitarian-border complex, but also as source of active reflection and critical politics. Hannah Arendt opens the book and her persona as a refugee herself is present throughout the text. Arendt’s position in one of her writings, “We Refugees” (1943), demands a political solution to the problem, and that is the main argument of this book. Despite the devastating scenario, there are indeed political alternatives. Using reflections on how to respond to an earthquake elaborated upon by Kant and Derrida, Oliver rejects Kant’s response based on tolerance, embracing Derrida’s critique of this apparent virtue: it is “always on the side of the reason of the strongest” (p.35). Instead, the author advocates Derrida’s notion of unconditional hospitality: beyond the conditional hospitality defended by Kant, unconditional hospitality is driven not by “invitation” but by understanding the Earth as a common ground where there are multiple and unexpected “visitations” (pp.75-84). According to the author’s reading of Derrida, these visits do not require prior knowledge nor call for categorical imperatives and duties; but, rather, they entail doses of “compassion, desire, and a certain ‘madness’”. For me, this refers to the messiness and excess of human mobility which is impossible to codify into closed categories of who visits and who is visited. It also points to the usually missing component of affect in analyses of migration/reception dynamics.
Regardless of the author’s position against essentializing tendencies, though, one concern I did have with this book is that while it challenges the juridical and philosophical figure of the refugee, and by extension that of the international migrant, it might accidentally feed into the conventional way of discussing migrants and refugees which somehow reifies those on the move. This tendency, common in many press and political discussions of migration, assumes the migrant to be poor, of certain colors, and from specific geographies, thereby invisibilizing that migration has origins and destinations in all continents. By focusing on refugees and their mobility, its regularity or irregularity and its legitimacy regardless, we forget to highlight the regular and irregular migrations of those who are not categorized as refugees.

Still, the author calls for hospitality as an “Earth Ethics” beyond identity politics and national boundaries, raising awareness of the interconnectedness of life. The book ends by synthesizing an underlying message, which might be crucial food for thought for pro-migration activism: pointing to the impossible subject position of the “refugee” as a political actor (p.84). Given the current rescue politics and carceral humanitarianism at work, the label of “refugee” undermines notions of worthiness and autonomy, both as an individual and as a group. I highly recommend this concise text for critical geographers of borders and migration as well as for all kinds of activist endeavors advocating for freedom of movement and anti-war positions. Oliver’s excellent book makes me want to read other contributions to the *Forerunners: Ideas First* series, “where intense thinking, change, and speculation take place in scholarship”.1

References


Glenda G and Tazzioli M (forthcoming) The humanitarian war on migrant smugglers at sea. *Antipode*


Maribel Casas-Cortes, PhD
Jobless scholar
https://maribelcasascortes.weebly.com
maribelcasascortes@icloud.com

October 2017