

Book Review: Making Sanctuary Cities

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Humphris, Rachel. 2025. *Making Sanctuary Cities: Migration, Citizenship, and Urban Governance*. Stanford: California: Stanford University Press. 208 pages. Paperback/ebook \$25, Hardcover \$100.

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Making Sanctuary Cities (2025) is a compelling and timely work that explores the tension between migration and sanctuary cities within the context of the burgeoning crisis of migration governance. Drawing upon ethnographic work spanning three transatlantic sanctuary cities: San Francisco (U.S.A.), Sheffield (U.K.), and Toronto (Canada), the book demonstrates how sanctuary policies are dynamic, and how their definitions change and are challenged by evolving state-local relations, intensifying anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric (Baroud, Karsavuran and Atar 2024; Ng, Choi and Chan 2019; Triandafyllidou 2025), and changing urban space imaginaries within the global context of international migration (Hoekstra 2018).

The book consists of seven chapters (including introduction and conclusion). Beginning with a series of vignettes drawn from meetings with community groups across the three cities in the introduction, Humphris uncovers the tensions and nuances of how each city struggles to manage its imaginary status as a sanctuary city amid increasingly hostile attitudes toward immigrants. The first chapter introduces the three cities where Humphris conducted her fieldwork and how each incident reveals how discussions on sanctuary cities are pivoted on who deserves to remain and on what grounds. For example, during her visit in San Francisco, she witnessed how participants in the meeting agreed that a young Vietnamese's deportation was "fair" as he was undocumented. However, they were embarrassed later when they discovered that the boy had only forgotten his wallet, which contained his bus pass. The book continues in Chapter two traces how colonialism has historically connected and implicated the three sanctuary cities in the engagement of migrants. Colonialism in this book functions as both a historical context and a critical explanatory framework. By connecting their related colonial pasts, the writer explores how shifting geopolitics and different systems of government are redefining their positions

as sanctuary cities that share the same history, especially amidst divisive, chaotic, reactionary, and politically motivated increasing border securitization, anti-immigration strategies, and unwelcoming narratives toward immigrants and refugees. Chapter Three shows how hierarchies of enforcement and the legal system shape the public's perception of precaritized residents. Chapter Four outlines how the narratives of sanctuary actors define who belongs to the city, on what terms, and why. Chapter Five continues the discussion on how the terms defining who belongs to the sanctuary and the moralities defining the cities are translated into practices. The book concludes by inviting readers to explore the kinds of communities aspired to and how the belongings of individuals are determined for those communities.

Humphris's work provides crucial empirical grounding for understanding how cities attempt and struggle to create spaces of relative safety and belonging and how these efforts are challenged by narratives that redefine what is "just," "humanitarian," "healthy," "fairness," and "efficient" based on contribution and legal status. The book's critical analysis of how sanctuary definitions are contested and reconstructed suggests that cities are dynamic sites of ongoing negotiations among multiple stakeholders. This work chronicles grassroots efforts to challenge federal migration policies while simultaneously addressing the limitations of advocacy and different interpretations and understandings of sanctuary cities. The book's documentation of migrants' precarity, especially how government officials and community leaders act as "brokerage"—actors who try to "stabilize interpretation and produce policy 'success' based on the emerging moral values" (Humphris 2025, 97); migrants' vulnerabilities makes the book relevant for advocacy efforts, in addition to policy debates seeking evidence-based arguments for sanctuary approaches.

The book's groundbreaking contribution lies in its transatlantic comparative ethnography. Rather than examining sanctuary cities in isolation, Humphris's comparative ethnographic approach reveals how different political systems, histories, and urban imaginaries shape definitions and practices of sanctuary. Her attention to the shifting configurations of state-local relationships over time offers scholars a dynamic framework for understanding how sanctuary policies are constantly contested and renegotiated. The explicit foregrounding of colonialism as a connecting thread through these three cities represents a sophisticated intervention that moves beyond conventional migration scholarship, encouraging readers to situate contemporary sanctuary practices within the longer historical trajectories of imperialism and global inequality.

While the ethnographic breadth is commendable, the book's focus on three specific cities that share a colonial history raises questions about generalizability. How might the findings from these urban contexts translate to sanctuary initiatives in smaller cities or in regions with different demographic compositions and political cultures, such as in Europe? Readers may wish for a deeper exploration of the effectiveness of sanctuary policies in tangible outcomes for migrants, such as employment opportunities, housing security, and legal protection, beyond the definitional and rhetorical changes the book emphasizes. The book, which focuses on the meso- and macro-level of sanctuary city management, community leaders, and professionals like social workers and lawyers,

may benefit from the voices of the migrants themselves and their ideas and perceptions, as well as experiences of the sanctuary cities in which they are situated.

The book has a significant influence on academic research by establishing a comparative ethnographic approach for studying urban migration governance. It also offers rich case studies on migration, urban governance, and citizenship. It is designed for scholars and practitioners across multiple disciplines who study and teach international migration. Its interdisciplinary approach makes it valuable to researchers in migration studies, urban governance, political geography, sociology, anthropology, and policy studies. The ethnographic methodology and nuanced engagement with local contexts render it particularly accessible to both advanced undergraduate and graduate students seeking to understand how cities navigate immigration policy outside the formal federal frameworks. Additionally, practitioners in urban governance and immigrant advocacy organizations will find practical insights into how sanctuary policies function in practice.

Making Sanctuary Cities represents a timely and insightful work in migration scholarship that combines rigorous ethnography with a critical historical perspective. By examining how three major cities navigate the contradictions between anti-immigrant state policies and the desire to create welcoming urban spaces, Humphris contributes essential knowledge for understanding contemporary migration governance in the Global North. The book poignantly captures the contemporary precarious state of immigrants amid intensifying anti-immigrant rhetoric and stricter border controls. The book will serve multiple audiences well, from academics seeking sophisticated theoretical frameworks to practitioners seeking evidence-informed approaches to immigrant integration. While certain analytical gaps remain, the work's overall contribution to our understanding of how sanctuary cities operate across different national and colonial contexts makes it a valuable addition to the migration studies literature.

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