Enough for All: A Review of *Seeking Asylum: Building a Shareable World*

By Robert Edison Sandiford

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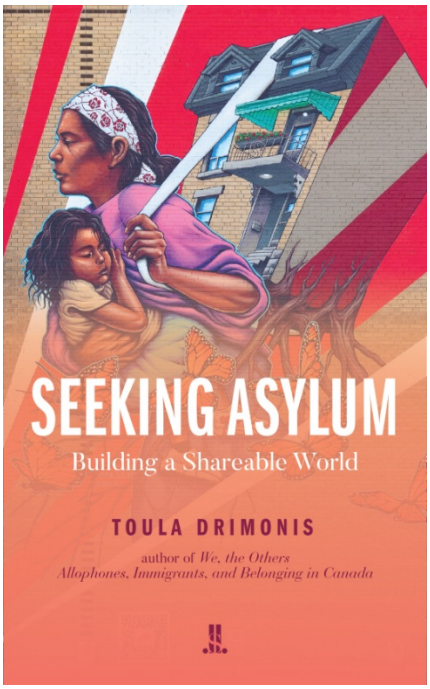
In her acknowledgements to *Seeking Asylum: Building a Shareable World*, Montreal-based journalist Toula Drimonis echoes a sentiment I first heard simply articulated years ago by my eldest brother. A barrister by training, Cal is at heart ever the student of political science, human nature and history. He said, apropos poverty alleviation, “There is enough for all of us.” Drimonis reminds us throughout her own timely reflections on migration that “there is room for us all.” The phrasing varies, but the message is the same and the concern expressed for our world is the same. Ours are lands of plenty. The better care we take of them and each other, the better off we all will be.

The need to do so is more urgent than ever. Indicators occupy every aspect of our lives, such as intense changes in our climate. These have been among the drivers of the kind of irregular migration Drimonis, the author of *We, the Others: Allophones, Immigrants, and Belonging in Canada*, discusses in her new book. One of her goals in writing *Seeking Asylum* is to simplify complex issues with clear, engaging language. Generally, she succeeds. Another is to examine how well we’re doing – as Canadians who are very much part of a shareable world – in addressing these joint, complex issues involving basic human rights. Some solutions may be easier to access but dependent on our compassion as a people and willingness to enforce such rights.

Drimonis opens her enquiry recalling Donald Trump’s attempts during his first term as President of the United States of America “to remove the Temporary Protected status designation for approximately 50,000 people who had taken refuge in the US after fleeing the deadly Haitian earthquake of 2010. The earthquake killed upwards of 250,000 people and was followed by a cholera epidemic and a hurricane.” The Temporary Protected status permitted these asylum seekers to stay and work in the US legally (with no guarantees of “gaining

permanent residency"). "But in May of 2017, the Trump administration announced this temporary status would soon be coming to an end." It did, Drimonis informs us, by July 2019.



Since being returned to office for a second term in 2024, Trump has signed executive orders to deport undocumented migrants in the US and to deny country of birth nationality to those born on US soil to these migrants. There has been pushback by judges and others amid the confusion and fear generated by his latest crackdown on those he believes do not belong in the country. For all this had been foreshadowed: by July 2017, thousands of "'irregular' asylum seekers," fearing for their temporary status in the US, i.e., that they would be deported to the country they were fleeing, would make their way into Canada – a considerable number through a modest, "unofficial port of entry" on the Quebec-New York border known as Roxham Road.

Real vs. Perceived Crisis

The 2004 Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) between Canada and the US required asylum seekers "to request refugee protection in the first safe country in which they arrive." Until the treaty was "expanded to apply across the entire land border on March 24, 2023, asylum seekers could have their appeal heard if they did not cross the border at an official port of entry and could make a refugee claim once in Canada" instead. Drimonis' primary case study is the influx of these people through Roxham Road, and how their story typifies that of so many other asylum seekers and migrants, irregular or otherwise, around the world.

"…[How] swiftly events entirely beyond our control like earthquakes, civil war, deportation, tsunamis, military regimes, hostile legislation and adoption can alter the course of our entire existence," Drimonis points out early on, though she feels she shouldn't have to. "I find it odd that people are unable or unwilling to recognize this randomness as being such a monumental part of human experience and, most certainly, of human displacement." People have been more likely to respond with fear, hate and political opportunism, all impractical solutions to the migration problems we face.

What to blame for our shortsightedness: the reactionary selfishness of our Trumpian Age or that part of human nature that can be unyielding when overwhelmed, equally wrong and strong in its assertions? Both possibilities point to a lack of enlightened self-interest and generosity of spirit. Considering the wealthy nations often involved in the discussion, the concern doesn't really seem to be about money or resources. Again, it seems to be a security (or insecurity?) issue, meaning a sense of their only being so much for so many – for so many of one's "own" group or tribe, not "those others" – and of this "so much for so many" being under threat when we do share it with others. How much more in need they may be doesn't always register as it should because of nativism or ethnonationalism, nor how helping them may help us when the circumstances are reversed (as they inevitably will in some way one day).

The number of asylum seekers to Canada "increased exponentially" to 20,000 in 2017; most entered the country through Quebec. Tensions over economic and social care rose between the provincial and federal governments, "[but] the more politicians and pundits referred to the situation on the ground as a 'crisis,' the more the public perceived it as a crisis." Even though none existed, the funds to manage the situation were there, and presumably Canada's "Diversity is our strength" helped also. Even though "common myths and fallacies surrounding the asylum process," such as queue-jumping over regular immigrants, were being "amplified," with the terms "refugee," "asylum seeker" and "migrant" often misunderstood.

As of the time of her writing, there were approximately 90 million displaced people and 27.1 million refugees globally. Half the refugees were children. Drimonis reminds us that "human migration" is part of "human existence"; it is, according to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a human right to seek refuge "in other countries." This is partly because of our rolling conflicts (Syria, Sudan, Palestine, Ukraine), and partly because of Nature's revolutions (drought, storms, wildfires, earthquakes). Ignoring the realities of migration and refusing to deal with them practically only cause more migration, suffering and loss of life. Whatever people's reasons for fleeing their environment, sound processes that protect everyone across borders should be built on empathy, kindness and the rule of law.

"Animals, Humans, and Walls"

Are some of us suffering from "compassion fatigue"? In 2018 and 2019, "Canada resettled more refugees than any other country," with a total of 30,087 in 2019. Drimonis also notes "flashes of individual compassion," such as caring Greek grandmothers and Vietnam vets, and so many others she mentions throughout who risk their own safety to save those who have migrated on unseaworthy boats or through "unscrupulous human smugglers." But, she argues, there may be a sense in certain parts of having done one's share already. We are in a genuine crisis at all levels when the politics of privilege and barricades, of dehumanization and deportation, dominate policy.

Border walls in Europe and the US "haven't worked" – except maybe as "an exclusionary symbol, a monument to fear and ego; it says who is allowed in America and who is not; who counts as American and who does not," writes anthropologist Susannah Crockford. Drimonis sees the reduction of these "racist ideas" to three words: "animals, humans, and walls…." Occasionally, her shorthand fails her. Words like "searing" and "heart-wrenching" add little to what she has already laid out for us to commiserate over. Yet, Drimonis is honest and thorough: prejudice and bigotry within groups and individuals are often stirred up to "weaponize" the topic of migration politically. And this is usually done to everyone's detriment.

"It's imperative that North American and European countries look inward and acknowledge that their own roles as colonizers, invaders, and exploiters in foreign lands has caused many of the conditions that now lead to mass migration." She means beyond "political legislation," which can "often [be] influenced by temporary mores" or values. "Slavery was once legal, but it was never moral." Humanity may be at another of its turning points: "Do we…increasingly become more insular and protectionist, shielding ourselves from the damage our own foreign policies have often caused?" Or do we own up to our mistakes and actually address their effects on us?

That will call for a brand of morality that makes being “there for one another” its “overriding” impulse. Better protection for victims of gender-based violence and of the climate crisis is needed. At present, it is limited for the former (when women and girls and those part of the LGBTQ+ community are clear targets in many conflicts or societies), non-existent for the latter, making the anticipated rising numbers of “environmental migrants” most vulnerable. Less fear-mongering by politicians, pundits and the media and more underscoring of the facts (a necessary feature these days) would certainly help us to focus on what more needs doing to resettle refugees.

Plenty is already being done, by them and by us. The majority of asylum seekers to Canada, observes Drimonis, are not increased national security risks; in need of greater financial support than nationals; unfairly welcomed over immigrants in the queue (they are processed differently); contributors to a higher crime rate; or a burden on our economy, as they pay back more in taxes and have comparatively low unemployment to nationals. Studies have shown the longer refugees stay and are settled in a country like Canada or the US, the more likely they are to “pay more in income tax on average than they receive in public benefits and services.” And 51 percent of employed refugees work in “high-skilled jobs as doctors, dentists, architects, service managers, software engineers, etc.”

Holding on for Those to Come

Refugees work very hard to give back to their host country, and improve their economic and social standing. The longer a population’s contact with them, the quicker the potential for the host group to see and accept them as “people just like you, working hard to build a life for themselves and their families.” We need to be empathetic toward those in host countries, too. Newness is almost always strange to people – at first. Closeness and communication can ease that with time.

So can the acceptance of a shared space that binds us with the trust of a common good, a *commonwealth*, in which we cannot truly survive without reliance on each other.

It’s useful to remember, as Chief Ross Montour from the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake puts it: “We don’t own this land, this land owns us…. We are only holding this land for those yet to come.” What does that mean? For Drimonis, that means “[s]tatus, country, nationality, and access to safety are often nothing more than circumstantial. A genetic lottery at best.” Flooded with all kinds of “dangerous demagoguery and political rhetoric that seeks to gain and maintain power through manufactured panic,” we need to be mindful of the kind of land we want now, and of the kind of example we will serve to all those who follow us.