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Practical Theology as Knowledge of Origin and Migration: An Essay

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Abstract

In an exploration of immigration and faith, this essay argues for a practical theology that privileges narrative and storytelling. The essay responds to the political landscape in the United States in 2017. During this time, the executive branch spoke violently against immigrant groups from a variety of locations across the globe, hurricanes devastated the Caribbean, earthquakes struck Mexico, and political and social unrest in Central America caused many to migrate north. Violent rhetoric against migrants is historically grounded in western hegemonic practical theologies and narratives. Drawing on work with latinx farmworkers and young adults of color, the essay argues knowing one's authentic story, learning the narratives of one's neighbor's children, and exploring how these narratives inform the shared sacred narrative of the community create the conditions for the next generation to thrive.

Know your story. Learn the sacred narratives of your neighbor's children. Explore how these stories interact with a shared sacred narrative. These are practical theological acts that create the conditions for the next generation to thrive. "I don't just need you to know the story of Latinx people in this country! I need you to know your story and what it means to be you." This was my response to the emails and phone calls from non-Latinx Christian leaders that came into my office asking for a response to the statement made by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions that the Executive Branch of the government would be reversing the executive order under the Obama Administration known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). With a smug smile, Sessions defended changing the order that protected those who came to the United States as children and met standards such as receiving a high school diploma, earning higher education credits, or serving in our armed forces. He claimed, "societies where the rule of law

Practical Matters Journal, Spring 2018, Issue 11, pp. X-XXX. © Patrick B. Reyes 2018.
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is subject to political whims and personal biases tend to become societies afflicted by corruption, poverty, and human suffering."[1] What Attorney General Sessions and I agree on is that we are a society afflicted by corruption, poverty, and human suffering. The cause I argue though is the personal bias of not creating the capacity for deep compassion for the sacred migration narratives of our ancestors, each other, and the sacred. Christian leaders rightly wanted to know the church's role in responding to DACA. How could they help? What responsibility did the church have in protecting these young people? All practical theological questions. I responded as I did above, again and again. The reversal of DACA was not only a tragedy of prejudice but also the expression of a majority people not knowing their own sacred migration stories. I proposed and propose to you now a narrative framework, borrowing from Marshal Ganz's work:

- Know your story.
- Learn the sacred narratives of your neighbor's children.
- Explore how these stories interact with our shared sacred narrative.[2]

These are not innovative claims in practical theology. In a time when stories of marginalized communities of color are under threat and whose narratives and bodies are being exploited, violated, and disregarded, the very act of telling one's story is a bold act of claiming our lives to be sacred.[3]

How we got here

There is a false idol, namely the history of the land and its people, in the United States. The dominant culture's – white, male, Protestant and Evangelical Christian – practical theological imagination includes a divine narrative that this land belongs to them without any reference to the larger narratives they carry in their bodies, in their ancestral stories, and in their sacred narratives. It's more than just a settler colonialism, savior complex, racism, classism, and (or?) xenophobia.

This myth–call it manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, or the pious colonial reworking named the American Dream—places a primacy of white, European descended, east coast migrants and their claim to this land with little to no regard to the people and bodies that existed here long before the United States came to be.

My body, somewhere between the sacred jaguar, turtle, conch shell
    Breathing life into the old world
Tonantzin meets the Guadalupe
    Festivals move from the circles of our calendar
        Art and ages
        To the square pegs and numbers
            Of a Roman calendar.
    Each day, farther from a day in our time.
        In our space.

In my culture, the Chicano anthem, "the border crossed us," is a helpful reminder for those who occupy our homelands in Alta California and the southwest that this land has multiple histories. God, the land, the ecology, and the people that inhabit la frontera do not recognize present-day political borders. Ongoing and historic political, religious, and economic marginalization document us as immigrants in our own land.[4]

Essentially, the public square and the church do not interrogate its origins of power. People who occupy the public square colonize, purchase land, create treaties, or formalize arrangements to occupy territories with little regard to the traditions, land, and people that cohabitate a particular ecosystem, such as in the case of the continental United States, Puerto Rico, Guam and the many foreign U.S. military bases around the world.

The church abets in perpetuating these colonial narratives. For those on the underside of history, for those dispossessed of their lands and culture, our communities create rituals of survival to ensure that our stories, traditions, cultures, and languages survive the forces that render us and our histories mute. Our stories of survival, through migration, are preserved by the elders and our traditions to mark the sanctity of our lives.

In my research with Latinx farmworking communities in the Southwest, a good portion of whom are without documentation, my question is always what sacred practices are keeping them alive. It is not a rhetorical question. Farm laborers–those that pick your fruits and vegetables–mostly work less than 150 days a year. On the days one can find work, imagine waking up at 4:30 a.m., arriving at a cold and wet field, your cotton clothing saturated by a foggy mist, sloshing in the moist dirt until the late afternoon when the sun is high in the sky and burns your skin. All of this work for less than a living wage.

Not surprisingly, the answers I received included themes such as familia, gathering together socially at soccer fields, community centers, and churches, or teaching their children about the lives and traditions of their ancestors.

I was surprised, though, when I pushed the question further in a healing circle designed for latinx women reflecting on la lucha. I asked, "what is getting in the way of the next generation thriving?"

Expecting to see a breakdown in the list above, the first woman to respond said, "Mijo, our children do not care (or know) about where we come from and we do not love each other's children." Knowing our story. Loving someone else's children. The breakdown to the next generation thriving was this loss of self and a disconnection to the lives of our neighbors.

If we focus on the next generation, we have to teach/learn the stories of our elders, and we have to love our neighbor's children. It is that simple.

The latter can be seen in my home community in California, when the mothers and neighbors take turns picking the children up from school, and bringing them all to one small, cramped apartment or house until the children's parents get off work, an expression of a deep love and commitment to knowing our community. Even without documentation, one may find these children laughing and rejoicing in these homes as they do homework and share meals.

For many of the mothers, the fear of deportation and the feeling of shame because of their own lack of access to education prevents many from attending school meetings, school board hearings, and city coun-

cil meetings to advocate for their children. Invisible borders keep the community both rich in resources like love and fellowship, and impoverished in access to wealth and power that would benefit los inocentes. They are afraid that the administrators of the public education system–a system and institution that represents hope for the next generation–will not love them enough to help them fully participate in the life of their children.

Leave home behind
Journey to the land of my sacred ancestors
    To a more hopeful future
        Not for me, but for niño/as
Only to find they don't want me
    Anywhere.
Maybe they will lock us up.
    ICE, cage us, like animals
    Animals, the class Trump gave us
    And like animals in a zoo
    They separate us from our loved ones.[5]

Dispossession and disconnection are not reserved for the marginalized. The stories of the colonizers, oppressors, and dominant culture violate the histories of the marginalized and also their sacred narratives. A truthful recovery of sacred stories and family narratives can lead to deeper compassion for those surviving in la frontera. It reveals that their ancestors, through similar strife and sacrifice, risked migration to the United States.

It will also reveal to majority people the genocide, again accompanied by the church, that occurred as European descendants from the western United States ventured north, and as those from the eastern United States occupied the west.

The questions raised to me in light of the DACA announcement were practical theological questions: what practices, traditions, and resources do communities of faith have to respond to current immigration debates and policies?

I claim that if we are to focus on the thriving of the next generation, the practical theological task is knowing and telling our own ancestral story, learning the story of others, and exploring how our communal stories fit in with God's larger narrative.

Knowing your ancestors

As a father of younger children, I love to watch movies with my children. In Disney's most recent venture and under the musical genius and guidance of Lin Manuel Miranda, Moana (2016) tells the story of the young daughter of a Polynesian chief who together reclaim their ancestral story as explorers. In one of my favorite songs by Opetaia Foa'i, "We Know the Way," the ancestors sing into Moana's life how they mi-

grated from island to island to find new life. Opening in the Tokelauan language, the song's lyrics include, "We know where we are / We know who we are" and "We tell the stories of our elders / In a never-ending chain." This song also recovers a lost tradition. Moana, frustrated with her father's insistence on staying place in a land that is dying, is determined to tap into her ancestral power and narrative of migration and lead her people – in the spirit of her ancestors – to a place where they may thrive. A celebration of exploring islands, a place of life, knowing where one's home is, who one's elders are, and where there may be life and place for the community to thrive, all contribute to the life-giving narrative of reclaiming an ancestral history of migration.

As my son sings this song in the car, we reflect on our ancestral migration patterns. Through my father, my son is four generations removed from his ancestors in Mexico (and still has family there) and has origins in the Southwest and California when it was still Mexico. Through my mother, my son is also three generations removed from present-day Macedonia. On his mother's side, he inherits an Apache and Mexican lineage traced to New Mexico and Northern Mexico and an east coast American narrative traced to the Mayflower. Religiously, he inherits a strong Chicano Catholic tradition(s) through me, and a Jewish narrative through his mother.

As we raise him, there is a cultural traditioning that can only happen through stories of his people – and he has a lot of "people" and a complex narrative. Orlando Espín defines traditioning as "the process whereby Christianity transmits itself across generations and across cultural boundaries."[6] As practical theologian Frank Rogers reminds us, there is power in storytelling that provides young people an experience of belonging to God's larger story. He says, "contemplative engagement of sacred stories can connect persons to the pools of presence from which faith emerges [...] Telling one's life story strengthens personal power, and interpreting it through a community's myths deepens life's meaning."[7] Knowing one's own story is essential in knowing how to relate to others and God.

So how do we do this? One way is to recognize this process is already occurring. In every act, we are telling a particular history, privileging a particular narrative, building the myths and legends that our descendants will come to know or forget. Learning the sacred narratives of our lives by choosing the books to read, the shows to watch, the houses of worship to attend, the cultural practices we continue in the home, and the languages we speak, all tell a tradition.

In my home, I have a small altar. Like many Chicanx and Mexican-American homes, the ofrendas alongside the Guadalupe are all placed in honor of the many ancestors that watch over my family. Honoring their sacrifice, I tell and retell our story of our family to my children.

The recovery practice of my son's story and stitching all of these narratives together is not as straightforward as simply telling one's own story. Because of slavery and colonialism, the disenfranchised and communities of color inherit traumatic histories and in many cases, broken links to our ancestral past. Assimilation and dominant culture's never-ending conquest for supremacy destroy many of our histories and practices.

As Éduoard Glissant reminds us, el Caribe is a reminder that histories and bodies rest submarine, lost to the transatlantic slave trade. Only now, through a process of research and exploration are we resurfacing previously lost family histories.[8] This work of exploring one's personal history takes the skilled discipline

and a pursuit of practical knowledge of knowing one's self and one's history. In many communities, the practice of recovery takes critical investigation, prayerful research, and the humility to know we will never know the whole story.

Like an ancient fresco
the paint chips and fades over time
the mural of our ancestral tree
awaits artists
to repair
recover
fading beauty.

Knowing another's story

A 15-year-old Guatemalan boy, Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juarez, wanted to earn money to pay for the medication for his mother's epilepsy. His mother placed a white rosary around his neck, before saying good-bye, as he started the journey to the United States.

He was found dead near the border in Texas in June of 2014. Without a shirt, he was only identifiable by a phone number written on his belt. He died wandering the desert alone after border patrol agents detained his uncle.

Pause to reflect on Gilberto's life. I want you to take a moment to truly care for Gilberto – your neighbor's child.

Every time I write, speak or engage the topic of immigration I think of this story. And weep.[9]

I do not know Gilberto, or his younger brother, or mother, or father. But the image of a young man, leaving his family at 15, to save his mother, to provide for his family, and to end up in the desert alone, destroys my soul. His death was my and our collective failure of not knowing the plight and story of Gilberto and his family.

As practical theologian Elizabeth Conde Frazier reminds us in *Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families*, the choice to immigrate is never an easy one. Social, political, economic, and a host of other stresses cause families to migrate.[10] For many of the poor who make the journey from Mexico and Central America, the expedition is a violent one. Families navigate and negotiate with official and unofficial (often armed militia) border agencies, coyotes (those who transport humans across political boundaries for high fees), and drug, human-sex, and arsenal traffickers.

Our bodies encounter
Militia, warriors, guardians
Of a purity that does not exist
Except only in their imagination
By accident of birth

Nightmares
Surround us
And we are treated
Like monsters in the dark
Our love for
Great-great grandchildren
Drives us to survive.

Families crossing the border to escape poverty, violence, and political strife face having enough provisions to eat and drink to survive the journey. Upon arrival, they meet less than hospitable welcome with no access to public services or goods and communities of support. In my community, they negotiate new borders defined by politicians and public servants (zoning laws for denser housing, voting districts, municipalities) and borders defined by the barrio, both good and bad. Community centers, libraries, and churches defining the communities of support. Gangs define violent boundaries. Our failure to connect with the stories of the children buries young people like Gilberto.

As practical theologians, knowing the stories and practices of others is a core theological practice. For all of the limitations of practical theological methodology, most noticeably the insistence on a western hegemonic discourse and bibliography, there is a commitment to the lives and flourishing of people across the discipline.[11]

Knowing our Sacred Story

Latinx theology tends to focus on liberation and the Latinx community's connection to the Christian narrative and migration. From Virgilio Elizondo's foundational text *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, Latinx theologians have been tracing and capturing the impact of migration.[12] Whether from el Caribe, Mexico, Central or South America, Latinx theologians have been tracing the origins of our people and la lucha – the struggle – to survive. Our sacred stories are at the heart narratives about places of origin and migration.

Whether the narrative begins with Exodus and the Hebrews entering into an inhabited promised land or Jesus leaving his hometown walking with his followers across his sacred valley, our holy texts are filled with stories of bodies and families leaving one place and traveling to another. For practical theologians, one of the discipline's shortcomings has been tracing how these migration and immigration stories impact local people.

We often equate the story in Exodus, or Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt, or Jesus's migration with the immigration narratives of today. As Orlando Espín reminds us,

> Religions survive and prolong their existence in time because they have managed to create the means of transmitting their beliefs, holy stories, and rituals, from one generation to the next and from one culture to another, selecting what to remember, prioritizing among that

> which is remembered, and interpretively adapting the meaning of these vital elements of religious life to new historical and cultural contexts. These are "processes of traditioning." they are always and inescapably historical and cultural, with all that histories and cultures contain and imply.[13]

We must name that this process of selection of the sacred stories has come at the expense of native and indigenous cultures here in the Americas.[14] Christian history tells a story of a violent evangelism, [15] even after Christendom.[16] Practical theological histories since Constantine through the crusades and the conquest of the Americas after 1492[17] and modernist missionary practices are stories of how the faith migrated (and immigrated) to new cultures and lands. It is part of the sacred, and often violent, narrative Christians share.

Practical theological historiography in the United States, in particular, tends its bias towards an east coast, Protestant U.S. story. Dana Wright, for example, traces practical theology history in the United States with no mention of Latinx contributions or to a history of the southwest.[18] We often forget (or do not teach) that the first churches planted in present day United States were in Puerto Rico and Santa Fe, respectively. Today, both of these sites represent colonial abandonment, showcased devastated Puerto Rico most recently after Hurricane Irma and Maria,[19] and exemplified in how first nations and indigenous people in the Southwest are left in poverty. This negligence of a history and contemporary struggle of the Latinx church and people are the violent and oppressive foundations of a practical theology of migration in this country.

Part of knowing our sacred story is knowing how and where it came to us. Where did our ancestors first learn the sacred narratives of our elders? Where did we learn our practices of healing and redemption? Where did we first hear our creation myth? Where did we first learn about the stories of God accompanying God's people into the lands they now inhabit? What sources are we reading when we look at our sacred narratives? What traditions are we tracing? Are we following when Europeans built churches? Shared the bible? Or the origin of the posada? Or pre-Christian stories of the Guadalupe/Tonantzín?

Practical theologians have the power to hear, capture, and tell sacred stories.

Stories not worth retelling

I was not interested in this piece in retelling the histories and practices of practical theology as a discipline or a Latinx perspective from within that discourse.[20] I was not interested in recalling the ways that the white, European descended canon of practical theology has come to inform the discussion of displaced, marginalized, and oppressed people. My community's starting place is different. Our sacred knowledge within the scope of practical theology is necessary for the vitality and thriving of all people.

Dominant culture perpetuates a myth in our discipline that our black, brown, and other lives, histories, practical theologies, and traditions are not sacred, simply by privileging its colonial narrative. It is in responding to the call to life that practical theologians Pamela Lightsey says "our lives matter"[21] and Carmen Nanko-Fernandez declares, "we are not your diversity, we are the church."[22]

I have also argued that dominant culture needs to pay closer attention to the histories it does tell – this includes the majority discourse in practical theology. If I am to believe my colleagues that practical theology is indeed the study of survival and flourishing of God's creation, then I must call dominant culture's attention to learn its own history, learn the history of others, and learn how these stories inform our connection to the divine.

We – the disinherited – have a story to tell. We have a story that needs to be learned. Our theological reflection pieces together the rhythms of the teponatzli – a sacred drum – that beats the lifeblood and spirit of our community through the generations. This is not an either/or proposition, asking either our sacred life or your holy narrative. God's sacred narrative calls those from marginalized communities to speak their stories of life. God's sacred narrative for the powerful is a story of repentance and reflection.

Practical theology is the practice and art of telling and knowing sacred stories:

- Knowing the stories of our lives.
- Learning the stories of our neighbor's children.
- Exploring our shared sacred narratives.

We tell our stories because our words and lives matter. We pass them on so that the next generation can thrive.

Endnotes

1 Ryan Teague Beckwith, "'We Cannot Admit Everyone.' Read a Transcript of Jeff Sessions' Remarks on Ending the DACA Program," *Time*, September 5, 2017. http://time.com/4927426/daca-dreamers-jeff-sessions-transcript/

2 Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). You can read more about his framework, which is focused on the present and is politically charged: story of self, story of us, story of now. He also provides helpful exercises at http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/sites/default/files/documents/resources/Public%20Story%20Worksheet07Ganz.pdf. Ganz grew up in Bakersfield, California. The hometown of the author's family. To the Reyes and Contreras families and that town, I am grateful for the lessons of struggling to survive in California's central valley.

3 See Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016).

4 See Jimmy Santiago Baca, *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems* (New York: New Directions Books, 1990).

5 See the film by David Barnhart, *Locked in a Box: Immigration Detention*, https://vimeo.com/146727430.

6 Orlando Espín and Gary Macy, *Futuring our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition* (New York: Orbis, 2006), 3.

7 Frank Rogers, *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 2011).

8 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University Michigan Press, 2010).

9 Associated Press, "Guatemalan boy sought care for family in US and died crossing border desert," *The Guardian*, July 2, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/02/boy-died-border-crossing-guatemala-ramos-texas.

10 Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011).

11 Dana Wright, "The Contemporary Renaissance in Practical Theology: Past, Present, and Future of a Discipline in Creative Ferment," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6, 2 (2002), 288-319.

12 Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (New York: Orbis, 2010).

13 Orlando Espín, *Idol and Grace* (New York: Orbis, 2014), xix.

14 See works by Howard Zinn, Eric Wolff, David Carrasco, Vine Deloria, Eduardo Galeano, Walter Mignolo, and theological historians, Luis Rivera and Daisy Machado.

15 Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

16 Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

17 For a full discussion of this history see thinkers such as, Enrique Dussel, *The History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981); Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

18 Wright, 2002.

19 Hurricane Irma and Maria devastated Puerto Rico in late summer 2017. The entire island was without power and aid to the island from public and private agencies were bottlenecked at the port for days. In the final days of September 2017, ICE raided the homes of more than 500 people lacking documentation, most of whom were living in sanctuary cities.

20 For a full discussion of a Latinx practical theology and its implications for the field, the most recent work by Hosffman Ospino outlines not only the scope of literature to date, but also creative areas of interest for the field. See Hosffman Ospino, "U.S. Latino/a Practical Theology," *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds.

Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Plymouth: Rowman And Littlefield, 2014), 233-249.

21 Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

22 Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Theologizing in Espanglish: Context, Community, and Ministry* (New York: Orbis, 2010).