# “Make Holy the Bare Life”

## *Theological Reflections on Migration Grounded in Collaborative Praxis with Youth Made Illegal by the United States*

*Steve Pavey and Marco Saavedra**

> And if you cannot justify our present reality with your faith, then you will become illegal, too, and also irreconcilable with the present.
>
> MARCO SAAVEDRA (2014: 19)

## 1 Introduction: Methods, Marco and Avoiding False Problems

The co-author of the paper[1] Steve Pavey is a scholar, an artist, an activist and friend to many undocumented youth. All these identities and relationships are theologically and anthropologically informed and further, not easily bounded or disentangled. Knowledge and love, both discovered and applied, require pushing beyond borders and boundaries. Steve's work as an activist anthropologist is methodologically grounded in relationships with marginalized communities

* Marco and Steve found each other on the margins of empire as brothers, as artists, and as contemplative activists without an institution. Our writing and work together is deeply shaped by *acompañamiento*, walking with one another in deep solidarity towards the dignity of our shared humanity. Marco, an undocumented poet, dilettante, and peripatetic, works as an occasional dishwasher at his family's restaurant, La Morada (www.harvestwonderful.com). Steve (Ph.D., M.Div.), a documentary photographer and applied anthropologist, bears witness to the struggles and joys of humanity at Hope In Focus (www.stevepavey.com). Together, they have worked for four years with the National Immigrant Youth Alliance struggling for migrant justice. They are co-authors of the visual ethnography *Shadows then Light* and under contract for the co-authored book, *Eclipse of Dreams: Accompanying the Undocumented Youth-led Struggle for Freedom in the United States* (Praeger, forthcoming 2016).

1 The paper is written using a third person point of view purposely to conflate the common distinction between the subject and object of research. This third person point of view is our attempt to write collaboratively as a “we” and decolonize traditional research and writing methodologies.

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with a commitment to seeking justice together. Steve got involved with the undocumented youth movement for immigrant justice back in 2010 when he boarded a bus with undocumented youth from Kentucky and Tennessee, headed to Washington, D.C. to join over five hundred undocumented youth and allies gathered for the annual DREAM Act graduation[2] where twenty-one youth were also arrested for civil disobedience. Steve continues to work with undocumented youth in the movement across their own organizational divisions. He works with Dream Activist and the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA), by assisting with documenting and organizing civil disobedience across the USA, including the infiltration of the Broward Immigrant Detention Center in Florida (Pavey 2012). Steve utilizes multiple participatory and collaborative research methods alongside photography to document and inform the work of undocumented youth-led activists.

This chapter grows out of a dialogical journey of research and activism between an activist anthropologist and undocumented youth activists committed to a participatory and collaborative research model. The research methods are deeply shaped by Paulo Freire and his core value: "The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world" (Freire 1982: 30). And further, this ethnographic research "is only justified to the extent that it represents, not an attempt to learn about the people, but to come to know with them the reality which challenges them" (Freire 1970: 110). The methodology employed here, then, uses an approach that "rather than analyze communities, can actually learn from the analysis that comes from communities" (Smith 2004: 77). This collaborative approach extends beyond data collection and analysis to include co-authorship of this chapter among other writing and art projects.

Based on over three years of ethnographic research and activism across the USA, this work identifies within the diverse experiences of undocumented youth the dominant themes of fear and shame (out of the shadows) right alongside the growing power of a movement of youth finding agency and building community (into the light). The lived experiences of the

2 "Every June for the past twelve years, undocumented students from around the country have traveled to Washington D.C. to urge Congress to pass the DREAM Act, holding a 'mock graduation ceremony' followed by lobby visits to their respective Congress persons" (Lal 2012). The DREAM Act is an acronym for the "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors" Act.

undocumented community are shaped by what De Genova (2010) calls the threat of "deportability" and Susan Coutin (2003) calls the "erasure of personhood" through the production and experience of "illegality." The experience of these challenges, particularly as young people move through the high school ages, is aptly described as "awakening to a nightmare" (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). We recognize with them that "illegality" and "deportability" are at the same time produced by political-economic structures as well as experienced by undocumented youth and their communities. We are committed to putting this knowledge into action to challenge a status and identity conferred by a nation-state on the bodies of human beings through policies of exclusion, detainment and deportation.

This solidarity with undocumented youth activists begins with participatory and collaborative methods of research and activism. As Freire says, "[t]he oppressor is in solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plentitude of this act of love" (1970: 50). Research guided with this solidarity is grounded in relationships that risk acts of love.

Steve met Marco Saveedra, an illegal[3] artist and activist, in the spring of 2011 as a part of his research and missiological engagement with undocumented youth activists. Marco's life and friendship bears witness to the light of the gospel. The insights of this paper emerge wholly out of this relationship of solidarity with Marco that has produced both a rich dialogue, and more importantly, a deep friendship. Since July 2010, Steve has worked across the USA alongside undocumented youth like Marco; listening to their stories, following their lead in efforts to fight for immigrant rights, receiving and offering hospitality, crying and laughing together, and building friendships. The movement between action and reflection in relationship with undocumented youth grounds this theological reflection on undocumented migration.

The co-author of the paper Marco, age twenty-three, was born in the small village of San Miguel Ahuehuetitlan, in the southern state of Oaxaca in Mexico.

3 Regarding the use of the word illegal, refer to Saavedra's essay "Illegal, More Indictment than Identity" in *Shadows then Light* (Pavey and Saavedra 2012: 27). "If I was never illegal, then, perhaps, the economy, the international politics, multinational corporations and their unmatched revenues were never legal. Doesn't the fulfillment of the gospel point to a new creation? Have we become so alienated, so deaf to the yearnings of all creation?" (27).

His ancestors, as far back as they can remember, have always been farmers. But at the age of two, his father and mother left him, along with his older three-year old sister, in the care of his grandparents, in order to migrate to the United States in search of a job to feed their family. A year later, his parents returned to unite the family. At the age of three, Marco made the journey to the USA. along with his family entering without authorization through the desert. He grew up in New York City, earning a scholarship to a prestigious private high school in Massachusetts. Marco graduated with a degree in sociology in 2011. Unable to legally work without a social security number, let alone find employment in his field, he has volunteered and worked for small stipends as an organizer for immigrant justice with various non-profits, but largely without funding working on his own with the National Immigrant Youth Alliance.

Marco's final court hearing for his removal from the United States is scheduled for the summer of 2017 (Calloway-Hanauer 2015). The last time he appeared before Judge Bain, he told her that he had done nothing wrong when he crossed the border "illegally" at the age of three. What's wrong, he continued, is that a nation-state created laws that criminalize the movement of people across borders that further dehumanize migrants through a growing detention and deportation industrial complex. Marco is one of the "perfect" DREAMers who moved away from fighting for his own benefit through isolated legislation, to risking his own future in efforts to end deportations. He was one of the first undocumented youth to intentionally infiltrate a detention center in order to organize from the inside with other migrants facing deportation (Pavey and Saavedra 2012). Claudio, one of the immigrants whose deportation was stopped, described the sacrifice of Marco as someone who was willing to become another orange (jumpsuit) among us (willing to risk deportation). We have much to learn from the undocumented migrant about faith, hope and love.

> Last month, I told Judge Bain that I did nothing wrong when I crossed the border at age three, and I was right. Yet this single truth took years to develop. If not for my friends, family and faith, I could not have gone before the law with the uncompromising position that the burden of proof was not on me and with the confidence that I could (we could) take on whatever decision came from the court—even a removal order—and fight it and win (Saavedra 2013: 26).

We briefly introduce Marco's story because his story, and the stories of all the undocumented youth at the margins of society, are at the center for this theological reflection. And it is not just the ethnographic details of their lives which

are important, "but more fundamentally," as Phan says, it is the "very existential condition of the immigrants themselves" that is central for theology (2003: 148). "The existential ontology of the immigrant entails a distinct epistemology and hermeneutics, a particular way of perceiving and interpreting reality" (Phan 2003: 148). Marco says this in another way, quoting from Du Bois. "My life had its significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a problem; but that problem was, as I continue to think, the central problem of the greatest of the world's democracies and so the problem of the future world" (1940: vii–viii). Marco believes this fundamental problem is updated and further contextualized through the context of his life as an illegal migrant.

We will at the end of the paper return to analysis and theological reflections that are born from this methodological commitment to relationship with the marginalized migrant who offers his/her life as the challenge and path toward justice and God's kingdom. For now, we must recognize that far too often we engage in research and action addressing false problems, as Jacques Ellul warns, "at the cost of Christians truly becoming 'present' to this world" (Ellul 1989: 20).

> If we want to avoid being completely abstract, we are then obliged to understand the depth, and the spiritual reality of the mortal tendency of this world; it is to this that we ought to direct all our efforts, and not to the false problems which the world raises, or to an unfortunate application of an "order of God" which has become abstract. Thus it is always by placing (one's) self at this point of contact that the Christian can be truly "present" in the world, and can carry on effective social or political work, by the grace of God. Thus it is not for us to construct the City of God, to build up an "order of God" within this world, without taking any notice of its suicidal tendencies. Our concern should be to place ourselves at the very point where this suicidal desire is most active, in the actual form it adopts, and to see how God's will of preservation can act in this given situation (Ellul 1989: 19).

As the church largely partners with organizers to fight for immigration reform in the United States, we wonder if this is at the greater cost to freedom and justice (Pavey 2013). The thread of hope within this chapter toward addressing immigrant injustice rests with submitting ourselves to our true sovereign and seeking first in divine obedience the presence of the kingdom of God.

## 2 Locating the Context of the Undocumented Youth-led Struggle for Freedom in the USA

The context for the theological and methodological approach to migration in the present chapter admittedly represents a limited part of a much more complex and diverse phenomenon of global migrations. But, it does humbly contribute to a growing and important theological discussion of migrants on their journey (Campese 2007; Gutierrez 2008; Bevans 2008; Pineda 1996). Over 195 million people lived outside their country of birth in 2005 (UN 2009). Of that number, the United Nations estimates that 20–30 million are unauthorized migrants. The vast percentage of that number, eleven million, resides in the United States. Undocumented youth who entered the USA under the age of sixteen, on the other hand, are only a small portion of this population. According to the Migration Policy Institute study, there are nearly 2.1 million undocumented immigrants in the USA who came into this country under the age of sixteen (Batalova and McHugh 2010). To put that into perspective, nearly 65,000 undocumented youth graduate from American high schools each year. Unfortunately, only an estimated five to ten percent pursue higher education (Gonzales 2007). Many never graduate from high school and the majority choose to work a low-wage job because of the social, institutional, legal, and financial barriers they face (Gonzales 2011; Glidersleeve 2010). While much of the national research and media attention focuses on the small percentage of highly successful undocumented youth (who still face tremendous obstacles), it is important to recognize the vast majority remain in the shadows. They face the very real possibility of joining a permanent underclass (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011).

These undocumented youth are often identified, both by themselves and others, as DREAMers. The term DREAMers refers to the undocumented immigrant youth who would qualify for a conditional pathway to citizenship under the yet-to-be-passed DREAM Act legislation. The DREAM Act legislation, first introduced in 2001, would provide a path to citizenship for those also referred to as "generation 1.5", who were brought to the United States as children by first generation immigrant parents (Rumbaut 2004; Seif 2009). They are caught in a legal paradox. Although guaranteed free public primary and secondary education by the Supreme Court decision Plyler v. Doe in 1982, these students today face the contradictions of limited opportunities for college education and social mobility in a country that for all intents and purposes is the only home

they know (Olivas 2012). After high school, for those who do finish, DREAMers must contend with limited access to financial aid, out of state tuition rates (except in fourteen states), the inability to work legally, and a host of restrictions of their movement and rights in the country that most refer to as "home."

Following the narrow defeat of the DREAM Act in December 2010, more and more undocumented youth began to "come out of the shadows" to join the undocumented youth-led movement. Some come out by sharing their story with a friend; others publically announce their status during rallies, and still others come out of the shadows through acts of civil disobedience. Dulce Guerrero, an eighteen year old undocumented youth from Georgia and member of NIYA, spoke these words prior to her arrest for civil disobedience against Georgia's anti-immigrant laws:

> I'm here today to claim my status as undocumented because I'm sick and tired of people telling me to relax. I'm sick and tired of people telling me that things are going to be okay, because things are not okay. It is not okay for any student to wake up each morning and feel worthless because of their immigration status, it is not okay for students to stay home with all this talent and not be able to go to college. It is not okay and I'm not okay with it. I'm not going to relax and I'm not going to sleep and I'm not going to be okay with this knowing that there are 74,000 students just in the state of Georgia, 74,000 of us! So to all you undocumented students watching this today, I want you to know that you are not alone, that if you have ever felt depressed or felt that you were alone, you are not. Today we are claiming our status. We are taking back our dignity. My name is Dulce Guerrero. I'm undocumented and unafraid.[4]

Up until December 2010, United We Dream (UWD) was the primary organization of undocumented youth activists, focused on education and organizing towards winning legislation like the DREAM Act, and currently for comprehensive immigration reform. UWD has now successfully garnered major funding and backing from national mainstream immigrant rights organizations that have, in turn, co-opted this supposedly youth-led organization. The result is a monolithic platform that is uncritical of America and its hegemony.

4 Quotes are used extensively throughout the chapter that we do not reference because they come from field notes and transcriptions of conversations, interviews and participant observation.

Mainstream organizations benefit from the credibility that UWD bestows upon them, and in exchange UWD receives more money to finance their supposedly undocumented youth-led campaigns and recruit members to a supposedly independent organization. UWD claims to be the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the USA. It certainly is true that they are the largest, but the question remains whether they are truly led by undocumented and immigrant youth.

Failure of the DREAM Act to pass in 2010 led to the organization of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) by undocumented youth who were formally part of UWD. The NIYA immigrant youth recognize that both political parties and their legislative efforts are themselves part of the broken system that dehumanizes their parents and communities. With that perspective, NIYA focuses on grassroots organizing, using education, empowerment and escalation, in particular civil disobedience, as strategies to build a movement rather than to win a campaign. NIYA is wary of being co-opted by any political group that promises a limited piece of legislation based too often on the merit of the "perfect" DREAMer, as the cost of continued oppression of their families and communities. According to one of NIYA's leaders, "Maybe our goal isn't to pass the DREAM Act; maybe our goal is for undocumented youth to reach a point of acceptance where the passing of the DREAM Act may or may not matter." NIYA leadership continued, "We have reached a point where lobbying alone is not adequate to accomplish our mission. We strongly believe that our movement needs to escalate and we will use mindful and intentional strategic acts of civil disobedience to be effective."

Marco has been arrested three times for civil disobedience, including most recently in 2012, when he chose to infiltrate an immigrant detention center after two years of fighting deportations on a case-by-case basis. The National Immigrant Youth Alliance has focused on fighting deportations since its inception and has the most inclusive predisposition of any advocacy group in this field. Specifically, NIYA has rallied and pushed for the just application of prosecutorial discretion for migrants deemed "low-priority" for deportation. Due to lack of accountability in Immigration and Customs Enforcement this policy pathetically falls short of its goal as the majority of deported individuals qualify for this relief. Infiltration of detention centers has further built on past acts of publicly coming out and declaring undocumented status, civil disobedience, and information gained through deportation cases. It is an escalation tactic because instead of waiting to receive individual cases, the infiltration campaign aggressively seeks cases in a detention center where the potential for organizing is greater due to the emergency need of relief.

## 3 Into the Light, Losing Fear and Shame—"We are Undocumented and Unafraid!"

Early in our research, undocumented youth were asked to explain the fears they faced, the meaning behind those public declarations, "I am no longer unafraid." More often, this led to a discussion of shame and frustration, rather than just fear. Yes, there existed the fear of separation from one's family. But this fear was entangled with frustration with the lack of nine digits (social security number), the lack of a driver's license, the inability to work a legal job, the difficulty of going to college, and the big picture of not being able to live the American Dream, which their parents, and themselves have sacrificed and worked so hard to get. There is great suffering embodied in a life of "legal non-existence" (Coutin 2000). Probing even deeper, conversations unfolded a deep level of internalized shame. One youth told me, with deep sorrow and tears, she remembers in grade school sneaking into the bathroom to rub baby powder on her skin so she could be white like her friends. "What would my friends think of me", if they knew my status, another youth told me.

In January 2012, NIYA launched its *Undocuhealth* website in an effort to address the mental health pathologies among the undocumented youth population. The goal through education and organizing was to reach out to youth, largely as they transitioned into the high school years, to assist with dealing with the pain, the challenges, the fear and frustration of being undocumented, of living with restrictions and the constant threat of deportation. This "nightmare" is described well by Gonzales and Chavez (2012) as awakening to the experience of abjectivity and illegality. Their description of abjectivity "underscores the link between the mechanics of biopower and the lived experiences of those most vulnerable to the exercise of power" (2012: 256). For many, Paulo Freire describes well their orientation to the future as "hope pulverized in the immobility of the crushing present, some sort of final stop beyond which nothing is possible" (Freire 1997: 101).

The experiences of "illegality," "deportability" and the "erasure of personhood" all give shape to the fears and shame we hear in nearly every narrative. But at the same time, a growing movement of undocumented youth is now facing these experiences by telling their personal story that leads to empowered lives and the building of safe supportive communities. At a prayer vigil in Washington DC, before the vote in the house in December 2010, an undocumented youth leader in the movement described the DREAMer movement as walking out of the dark shadows and into the light. Many tears began spreading around the circle when she realized and identified this light as the light of their own lives. Recently, commenting on a local state struggle, she said,

"They can never take who we are from us! They can try and try, but we know who we are! And it is the people and bonds we create that give a sense of hope and realization that we are all humans. We belong to each other. We are not alone!"

Many times I was told something similar to this; "I don't remember who I was last year. Something changed inside of me after coming out. I'm a much happier and stronger person now. I feel free. I feel like myself." Another DREAMer shared, "I think losing the shame overshadows the fear" when coming out. By finding their story, accepting their story, telling their story even to one other person, they shared they were overcoming their feelings of shame, of feeling less than those around them. One undocumented youth told me, "Coming out has liberated me. It has put a human face to the immigration issue. It shows that we are human beings, that we are students, sisters, brothers, friends, with dreams and rights."

At a civil disobedience action in Phoenix, one undocumented youth participant shared:

> I am afraid of being out here and doing this, you know, being arrested. I am willing to face that fear because that is the fear that is in our community every day. It is in our hands. Everything that this fear takes away from us, we are letting it go to gain our dignity. The same thing that they use to keep us down, it is the same thing we will use to get back up.

On September 6, 2011, in Charlotte, North Carolina, Marco Saavedra was arrested (for the first time) with six others for an action of civil disobedience protesting the implementation of harsh anti-immigrant state legislation. It was this action and the following fifty hours in jail that he now describes as a kind of "baptism and resurrection." It is for him both personal renewal and also social renewal to question the hegemonic structures that make people "illegal" and less than human. He writes, "To be called by name in an age of distortion is achievement enough; to be known, truly, without fear, without shame, without apologies." Quoting from James Baldwin's essay "The Fire Next Time", he says of that experience, "The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off" (Baldwin 1998).

Speaking of this moment of liberation that is giving birth to a community, he compares the experience to "the Genesis creation poem, of how the cosmos [order] is birthed from chaos [shadows]." We are children of the light and live in the light of a new creation under God's reign. This hope, says Marco, is not rooted in a piece of legislation, or a political system. It is hope, as Ellul writes, which seizes God's future; where allegiances are transferred to God's kingdom

(Ellul and Vanderburg 2010). Paraphrasing the apostle John, Marco says, "there is no fear where there is love" (1 John 4:18). Remember, he tells me, "Whosoever shall lose their life, will find it" (John 12:25). Civil disobedience in the movement as interpreted by Marco, becomes divine obedience. This is a radically different lens with which to view loyalty, power, and identity towards a theological understanding of migration.

## 4 Into the Light, Building a Community—"I am No Longer Alone"

The movement of undocumented youth coming out of the shadows and into the light is growing very quickly. The "Coming Out of the Shadows" stories have become almost a rite of passage into the movement that leads to building a local community of support. One undocumented youth explains:

> Slowly but surely, I was beginning to find others like me. I read articles and saw their videos online. Tam Tram was the first undocumented student I ever saw speaking out openly—undocumented and unafraid. She gave me the courage to stop feeling bad for myself, to make the best of the situation and carry on. I wasn't alone anymore. I began finding more and more undocumented students as I shared my struggles online through blogs. I discovered group after group that was organizing for our rights and the DREAM Act. I finally had a place to belong, and friends that understand what it's like to grow up as an undocumented American.

Marco writes of finding a sense of hope through friendship with others facing similar fears and shame,

> I can confess my fears to David knowing him as a fellow undocumented poet—we've only met on a handful of occasions when civil disobediences or celebrations have brought us together—but we know each other deeply having been forced into America from Mexico before the age of four and growing up with the terror of deportation and finding ourselves irreconcilable with our reality and having wrestled with loneliness and insecurity and disillusioned ourselves with policy as relief and felt liberated and then overwhelmed by organizing within our communities.

The agency and identity of undocumented youth are rooted in and grow out of finding a community. One youth said, "Coming out isn't about them. It's about us. It's about taking back our power, simply by stating something they

want to keep hidden.” Another youth told me, “as a DREAMer, you see another DREAMer putting their life on the line, and you feel a sense of service to them. You are doing it. I should do it too.” Over and over I was told of how important it was to discover and feel that they no longer felt alone. One undocumented youth remarked, “I don’t know how our DREAM elders did it before us. I could not do this alone.” One undocumented youth shared, “We fear being separated from our families. We fear not seeing our parents, our brothers, and our sisters. We fear not seeing them again. And so we hide. We ignore our reality, that every day is a risk. We are confronting that fear. As a community we can stand strong!” Another undocumented youth spoke at a rally, “We don’t sit down at intersections and refuse to get up because of the DREAM Act. We do this for our families, for our communities.”

I sat in the senate gallery in December 2010, holding hands alongside undocumented youth and allies where dreams were crushed once again with the failed DREAM Act vote. Testimonies shared afterward included the experience of frustration and sadness, but almost always was followed up with the stronger experience of hope. They felt hope because they were together. Later we learned that this was a very different experience than to watch the vote alone. One youth shared, “Being in the senate gallery was more important than my graduation.” She continued, “We didn’t lose today because we came together.” Another said, “The loss this time is different, because this time, I have become part of a bigger family.”

Mohammed, a leader with NIYA, says:

> Over the course of the last year (2011), I have watched dozens and dozens of undocumented youth take the risk, step up, face arrest, and face deportation willingly because we are tired of waiting. As undocumented youth we recognize that our parents made a sacrifice when they came here. And as undocumented youth those of us who speak this language perfectly, those of us who understand this country, need to step up, need to recognize our privilege, need to make a sacrifice for our families, and make the right thing happen.

## 5 Into the Light, Affirming the Dignity and Holiness of a Bare Life

Before turning to the theological reflections on undocumented migration, I will argue that this ethnographic reality of suffering on the margins by undocumented youth can be better understood through the lens of what Agamben identifies as a “bare life” (1998). Giorgio Agamben, drawing on Hannah Arendt

(1994), theorizes on the relationship between the "citizen" and "bare life" through the figure of the refugee as the figure "who has become the decisive factor of the modern nation-state by breaking the nexus between human being and citizen" (Agamben 1998: 134; Agamben 2000). The refugee, for Agamben, embodies a bare life without rights, as she stands outside the rights given by sovereign states to citizens, and therefore calls into question the legitimacy of the nation-state. I posit that, in a similar comparison, the 1.5 generation of undocumented immigrant also represents this "bare life" that confronts and challenges the power of the nation-state and the juridical order of citizenship. It opens up the important theological questions: what is a bare life worth and who gets to decide? Further, where should sovereign power lie theologically? Where does the allegiance of a Christian belong? This 1.5 generation of undocumented youth confounds the meaning and practice of citizenship while problematizing the sovereignty of nation states and their conferral of rights. Undocumented youth, like the refugee, embody this challenge:

> The refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link, and that thereby makes it possible to clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights (Agamben 1998: 134).

Marco has discovered this liberation that Agamben points to, saying, "We, the undocumented, do not need legalization if no human is illegal." One youth declared, "My very existence is an act of freedom." This is not about politics, of securing legislation for human rights. "Our faith is not guaranteed in any current [or future] institution." Their faith is in the reign of God through an identity, Marco says, "like Christ, as children of God." But further, Marco argues, his own liberation is tied intimately to the liberation of all, especially the oppressor. He says,

> If I never was illegal, then that reveals that you, also, don't know who you are. If a people who have been subjugated and demeaned for so long; yet manage to carve out of that, a humanity. Therein exists some gospel from which we shall all learn; to which we should all return. If I was never illegal, then that cornerstone on which lay the foundations for systems of oppression is folly. If I was never illegal, then, perhaps, the economy, the international politics, multinational corporations and their unmatched

revenues were never legal. Doesn't the fulfillment of the gospel point to a new creation? Have we become so alienated, so deaf to the yearnings of all creation?

## 6 Theological Reflections: Human Dignity and the Challenge of the Migrant

Reflecting on his experience out of the shadows and into the light of the movement, Marco says:

> What I was trying to argue, and maybe still am, is that maybe it takes a lot of audacity to say, and more humility to bear, that perhaps undocumented DREAMers say more about Christianity and the faith than we are willing to believe. That maybe, and here I'm loosely quoting scripture: "stones are speaking;" perhaps stifled by moans too deep for words, perhaps unheard by unwilling ears, and incredulous eyes. It is rushed and unfinished but a foundation to build further on a theology of immigration.

Here we turn to a few theological reflections from the margins on migration acknowledging that this is just a beginning and draws from a limited source and context of migration. The reality of migration and the migrant is much more complex, as should be the theological picture. But it is my belief that this is where it must begin, at the margins, in solidarity and theological praxis with the most marginalized. Other theological work has begun the journey in this same direction (Myers and Colwell 2011; Bevans 2008; Groody and Campese 2008; Campese 2003; Campese 2007; Schreiter 2003; Phan 2003; Goizueta 2001; Gonzalez 1996; Fernandez and Segovia 2006; Segovia 1996; Cavanaugh 2011).

First, we must recognize that these theological reflections ought to be rooted in solidarity with the most marginalized. This is a solidarity that walks with migrants and "shares the dangers of the journey" (Golden and McConnell 1984: 487). One undocumented youth says that theological talk on migration means nothing apart from a theological walk with migrants. Theology must "not only 'think' about God, but commit to God's way and act on God's word" (Burke 2005: 42). Further, the way forward includes a theological vision of hope that sees and embodies God's future, but does so by facing history. There must be a willingness to remember the past from the perspective of the marginalized, to face what Metz calls "dangerous memories" (Metz 1998: 40). This will lead to hope that sees that "history is not closed and God is not finished yet" (Fernandez 2007: 271). Finally, in terms of process, it will be important to use

interdisciplinary approaches, including a dialogue with the social sciences "in order to 'de-ideologize' the customary interpretation of the Christian faith and its language that hide and legitimate oppression or social injustice" (Segundo 1993: 161).

Second, the key theological concept that emerges out of this study of the lives of undocumented youth is the God given dignity of all human beings. Their very existence as children of God as *imago Dei*, challenges any political, economic or social system that excludes them or treats them otherwise. In 1968, James Baldwin was asked to address the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the black experience. I asked Marco and several other undocumented youth what they would say today to the WCC on the migrant experience. Marco affirmed Baldwin's opening statement, and updates it with his own. Baldwin began by acknowledging he was not a theologian, but rather, his credentials for speaking was the reality that he was one of "God's creatures."

> I address you as one of God's creatures, whom the Christian Church has most betrayed. And I want to make it clear to you that though I may have to say some rather difficult things here this afternoon, I want to make it understood that in the heart of the absolutely necessary accusation there is contained a plea. The plea was articulated by Jesus Christ himself, who said, "Insofar as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it all unto me" (Baldwin 1985: 749).

Marco continued, "The tragedy of the gospel is not that God became human only to be murdered by his creation, but that we continue to do so. As long as we fail to see Christ in each other, to neglect the spark of divinity in our neighbor, we ignore Christ's passion and sacrifice."

This leads to an important corollary and a final challenge from the migrant, that our loyalty ought to side with the reign of God, not the sovereignty of a nation-state. The US church fails when its theological imagination remains bounded by the boundaries of a nation-state. Her imagination of God's future becomes co-opted by political and economic power. "God's mission is not primarily about the church, but about the reign of God" (Bevans 2008: 92).

The most challenging theological reflection for the researcher is the challenge of the lived experience of the migrant (Flusser 2003). "We, the countless millions of migrants recognize ourselves not as outsiders, but as vanguards of the future" (Flusser 2003: 3). This unsettledness is what "opens us up to a different sort of mystery: the mystery of living together with others" (Flusser 2003: 15). Living in this "new creation" tent "means the Christian's security and settledness will never be spelled out in a clear-cut system and their security and

peace will be in their relationships with God and each other" (Baker 2005: 155). The focus of any theological approach to migration then ought to be to seek first the kingdom of God, a radical realignment of power that has its boundary when it comes to love and the embrace of all people as God's people. Christians ought to make holy the bare life.

This challenge comes out of the gospel of Christ shining out from Marco's life:

> Returning to my first point, this sense of confinement and surveillance is not new to someone who grows up undocumented and criminalized. One develops a separate consciousness that is always monitoring what you do and who you're with and what's to lose. And the more urgent call to me is that when we let the market dictate our morality and determine our lives then there will be segments of people left out who find this form of living in complete disagreement with theirs. I am not unimaginative enough to believe that millions of people abroad selected to be poor and found migration unavoidable and found their existence unjustifiable in the land of the free. I think here is where we must confront the gospel. And if you cannot justify our present reality with your faith, then you will become illegal, too, and also irreconcilable with the present. That's the lesson from Broward Detention, that the current system of operation is unsustainable and yearns for a new creation.

Marco continues, "If in the fulfillment of the gospel the first are last and the last are first, then that means the most marginalized among us should be foremost considered in living and teaching the gospel." The undocumented migrant challenges us to become "illegal" too, irreconcilable to the law apart from faith (Saavedra 2013). It is only apart the law that the migrant's bare life and the citizen's bare life becomes holy. Returning to Agamben, he warns of the church losing its Messianic vocation in part because it lost its relationship to this bare life and further, its own identity as the stranger (Agamben 2012).

Now I, the researcher, the activist, and the friend of undocumented migrants, illuminated by the light of their lives, am confronted with the complicity of my own participation in a hegemonic political-economic system that begets darkness generating a shadowed oppression. The question, now, for me, for all Christians who live in the United States, having seen the light, where does your allegiance lie? To which sovereign power do you belong?

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