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Border Abolition:
Responsibility to Migrants and an End to Border Violence

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We are illegal
because we don't obey their laws
their laws of misery, exploitation
hate and separatism
their laws that make sure
we are always poor
their laws that kill us slowly
We jump their borders
and defy death because
we didn't make borders in our lives
we fight, we resist, we dare

--"With or without papers, we will always be illegal." – Irina Crisis¹

¹ Irina Crisis, "With or Without Papers, We will Always be Illegal," Screen Print, 2012, Grinnell College.
<https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/fulconer-art%3A6543>.

Introduction

I open with these words from Irina Crisis because they offer a poignant reflection on the condition of being an illegalized migrant. Many people find themselves forced to migrate when the living conditions in their homeland are no longer bearable. Whether it is poverty or violence, these are conditions that were created by larger social structures and historical contexts. Crisis points to the legal frameworks and militarized borders that illegalize people by making the act of migrating illegal. Although not by choice, illegalized people are resisting colonial borders each time they defy the apparatus and assert their right to free movement. As Crisis declares, illegalizing a migrant goes beyond a legal immigration status, it is criminalizing the act of moving, seeking safety, and securing a truly human life. In what follows, I challenge the function and necessity of borders in an effort to advocate for *less* violent and *more* life-affirming migrations.

Migrant deaths at borders around the world have become commonplace, especially at borders dividing the Global North from the Global South. The US-Mexico border is a particularly poignant site of death given the large numbers of people fleeing from various countries around the world seeking entry into the United States and Canada. The US-Mexico border, as it currently exists, encourages death, and obscures the historical relationships that exist between migrating people and the United States. I argue that migrants are fleeing their countries of origin due to colonial policies that have caused poverty and instability and now prevent people from thriving in their homelands. The border distracts from this reality and instead criminalizes migrants and encourages dangerous crossings through uninhabitable terrain. In reality, given these interventions from Global North nations in Global South nations, Global North nations like the United States have particular responsibilities to accept migrants seeking safety in the United

States. New, open border policies are needed to ensure the right to migrate, and the life and safety of migrants.

In this thesis, I will utilize an ethic of responsibility proposed by Tisha M. Rajendra to reconsider what solidarity and justice can look like at the US-Mexico border and to advocate for open border policies that center border abolition as the end goal. I will begin by examining the current conditions at the border and the policies that have normalized death. Then, I will consider traditional Christian migration theologies to argue for a transition that considers our responsibilities to migrants. I then link the ethic of responsibility proposed by Rajendra to Harsha Walia's analysis of border imperialism to reconsider what solidarity and justice mean in this violent border reality. I will use prison abolition theory to inform an open border strategy that centers border abolition as the end goal in order to address the perilous journeys that migrants currently face. In the final section, I consider how community organizing can reshape narratives regarding our relationships with migrants and the efficacy of borders to demonstrate how some community organizing efforts are already imaging and building a world without borders.

US-Mexico Border: Divisions and Violence that Obscure Justice

The US-Mexico border is emblematic of policies and trends that are leading to deaths at borders around the world. It is a sight of crossing for migrants from many different nations including Mexico and Central American countries such as El Salvador and Honduras and more recently, South American countries such as Brazil and Venezuela.² The border has also recently seen more migrants from Haiti and African nations such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic

² John Gramlich and Alissa Scheller, "What's Happening at the US-Mexico Border in 7 Charts," *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2021.

of Congo, Ghana, and Somalia.³ Because it is a site of so many crossings, often from countries where the US has had political or economic involvement, it serves as a helpful case study for examining critiques of border violence. The US-Mexico border encapsulates a large security apparatus that has led to countless deaths and the criminalization of migration.

A glimpse at the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) budget for 2022 reveals the investment and adherence to creating and maintaining a large border security apparatus. In 2022, CBP received \$15.3 billion, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement received \$8.1 billion; this includes \$309 million for border security technology, \$19 million for border fencing, and funding to hire 300 more Border Patrol agents.⁴ In response to critiques from immigrant rights groups, the Biden administration has cut funding for detention but replaced it with surveillance technology like ankle monitors for released migrants.⁵ This investment in border technologies supports the larger security system that extends far beyond the geographical location of the border. The border is not a fixed location but extends beyond the limits through migrant tracking technology and ICE presence in cities across the United States. It is important to note these numbers because it reveals a deep faith in the border security apparatus despite its failure to halt migration, and more importantly, the human lives at stake in securing the border.

The presence of the border has not prevented migrants from attempting to cross, but it has increased the scale of death at the border. Because of the level of security along the US-Mexico border, more people cross through dangerous areas, particularly remote desert regions. This is a part of a set of policies known as Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), which have deliberately

³ Caitlyn Yates and Jessica Bolter, "African Migration Through the Americas: Drivers, Routes, and Policy Responses," *Migration Policy Institute*, October 2021, 7.

⁴ Jonathan Weisman, "With Center-Leaning Budget, Biden Bows to Political Reality," *New York Times*, March 28, 2022.

⁵ Eileen Sullivan, "Biden to Ask Congress for 9,000 Fewer Immigration Detention Beds," *New York Times*, March 25, 2022.

sent migrants into dangerous crossing areas by securing urban ports of entry. Jason De Leon, the founder of the Undocumented Migration Project, argues that this strategy has allowed Border Patrol to use the desert to their advantage to deter crossing while absolving themselves of culpability by shifting blame onto the desert.⁶ De Leon further argues that the number of deaths serves to measure the success of PTD. He highlights a 1997 report from the Government Accountability Office that lists “deaths of aliens attempting entry” as an indicator for measuring the “effectiveness of the strategy to deter illegal entry along the Southwest border.”⁷ The language of the report dehumanizes migrants in its language referring to “aliens” but also by seeing them and their deaths as numbers to measure the success of their policies. Recent numbers demonstrate that their policies are having the intended consequences; in the fiscal year 2022, nearly 750 migrants died at the border.⁸ Deaths are accepted as the consequence of securing the US-Mexico border, and those who aid migrants find that they must be careful of the kind of aid they provide, or they risk breaking the law.

Not only does the border apparatus directly target migrants, but it also targets those who seek to provide aid, effectively criminalizing the act of aiding migrants. Those who provide aid to migrants crossing the border risk being accused of aiding and abetting migrants in illegal crossings if their help goes beyond providing water and first-aid care. Scholar and former EMT, Ieva Jusionyte describes this fine line between providing aid and assisting a border crossing: “But how does this ambiguity fit with the law? When is the act of transporting an injured border crosser to the hospital a crime...because it is ‘in furtherance of’ their ‘unlawful presence in the

⁶ Jason De Leon, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 29-30.

⁷ De Leon, *Land of Open Graves*, 34.

⁸ Priscilla Alvarez, “A Record Number of Migrants Have Died Crossing the US-Mexico Border,” *CNN*, September 7, 2022.

United States,' and when is it a life-saving humanitarian intervention? The answer depends on legal minutiae."⁹ These questions impact the aid that border activists are able to provide. One case that highlights these tensions is the case of Scott Warren in Arizona. Warren volunteered with the humanitarian group No More Deaths providing water and medical aid to migrants crossing the border. He was arrested in January 2018 after Border Patrol found him with two migrants and he was charged with "two counts of harboring undocumented immigrants and one count of conspiracy to harbor and transport," facing 20 years in prison.¹⁰ Warren's team argued that the government had not proven criminal intent, and Warren testified that he was simply providing humanitarian aid. Ultimately, the jury agreed with Warren and his team, and Warren was acquitted. Still, this case highlights the extent to which migration and aid to migrants have been criminalized, disincentivizing aid efforts and thus further barring access to safe and humane migration.

These border policies have turned migration into a crime or a death sentence. They normalize the scale of suffering we now see at the US-Mexico border and demonstrate that migrants are people not worthy of safety and obscure our obligations to migrants. We currently have a border system that was created because of false narratives that claim that the border is keeping out dangerous people. However, studies have shown that the border is ineffective at deterring people from migrating.¹¹ I would argue that the border is only effective in obscuring the reality of why people migrate while obscuring the relationships and responsibilities we have to migrants by creating a false enemy. If we were to focus on the historical relationships we have

⁹ Ieva Jusonyte, "Wildland" in *Threshold: Emergency Responders on the US-Mexico Border* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 188.

¹⁰ Kristin E. Heyer and Daniel Kanstroom, "Empathy, Legitimacy, Faith, and the Dangerously Uncertain Future of Migration," in *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, ed. Silas W. Allard, Kristin E. Heyer, and Raj Nadella (London: Routledge, 2021), 336.

¹¹ De Leon, *Land of the Open Graves*, 101-2.

with migrants at the border, it would provide us with a new lens through which to understand the root causes of migration and our responsibilities to migrants, given this reality. More importantly, it would urge us to consider what solidarity looks like in this context and the necessity of the border in the first place.

There is a long history and tradition of Christian ethics responding to the needs of migrants. Traditional approaches focus on migrants as people in vulnerable situations who need support and charity from those in receiving communities. While this approach is powerful and has aided and saved the lives of many migrants, it does not account for the deeper relationships and historical context that exist between receiving and sending communities and that lead to migrations in the first place. For example, in the case of the US-Mexico border where there is currently an increase of Central American migrants, it is disingenuous to think of US-American aid at the border as charity when American policies have led to their migration in the first place. In this next section, I will outline the traditional theology that has informed solidarity with migrant communities in order to make the case that this theology needs to move beyond charity and consider the responsibilities that receiving communities have to migrants.

Christian Ethics and Migration

The Bible is rich in its migrant tradition and there is a strong legacy of migrant solidarity in Christian ethics. As Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo write in their introduction of *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration*, "...biblical scholars with Christian commitments have often responded by showing how the Bible was not only produced by migrants but also affirms that settled communities are obligated to welcome, love and affirm the humanity of migrants."¹²

¹² Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13.

Because of these commitments, much has been written on how the Bible calls for Christians to stand in solidarity with migrants. Theologian M. Daniel Carroll R. has published two book-length projects: *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (2008) and *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (2020). There are several examples of migrant solidarity in the Bible ranging from divine personhood or *Imago Dei*, Christ as a migrant, and hospitality to foreigners. I will name a few examples to ground this thesis in the long-standing tradition of solidarity with the migrant and ultimately argue for a shift in theology that moves away from charity and instead focuses on responsibility, solidarity, and justice.

Divine Personhood

Essential to Christian ethics of migration is the idea of divine personhood or *Imago Dei*. At its core, *Imago Dei* means that all people were created by God as outlined in the book of Genesis. Catholic theologian Daniel Groody has articulated the role of *Imago Dei* in migration ethics in much of his work. Groody argues that *Imago Dei* is essential in humanizing migrants. Speaking of migrants in terms of political labels such as undocumented, migrant, alien, and refugee, can obscure the human nature at the core of any person who is in a state of migration.¹³ *Imago Dei* allows for an understanding of the "...personal and relational nature of human existence."¹⁴ He adds that "Without adequate consideration of the humanity of the migrant, it is impossible to construct just policies ordered to the common good and to the benefit of society's weakest members."¹⁵ It is common to approach migration as a political problem without regard to human impact, but *Imago Dei* centers the humanity of migrants and the obligations that other people have to them as fellow human beings. Similarly, M. Daniel Carroll R. argues that

¹³ Daniel G. Groody, "Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 642-643.

¹⁴ Groody, "Crossing the Divide," 644.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 645.

“Immigration should not be argued in the abstract because it is fundamentally about immigrants. Immigrants are humans, and as such, they are made in God’s image. All those who have come to the US are God’s creation and are worthy of respect.”¹⁶ For Groody, respecting the human requires ensuring access to the resources to live a life “truly human.”¹⁷ Quoting Pope John XXIII, Groody makes the case that a truly human life means having access to resources such as food, clothing, and shelter, and while these needs will be ideally met in their homeland, people have the right to emigrate when they cannot meet these needs in their homelands.¹⁸ The *Imago Dei* framework shapes many Christian responses to migrants.

Yvette Santana considers what *Imago Dei* asks of Christians in her article for *The Church and Migration: A Theological Vision for the People of God*. Santana quotes Desmond Tutu: “[*Imago Dei*] imbues each one of us with profound dignity and worth...to treat such persons as if they were less than this, to oppress them, to trample their dignity underfoot, is not just evil...It is positively blasphemous for it is tantamount to spitting in the face of God.”¹⁹ Santana argues that this acknowledgment of the divine in each person requires a sense of compassion and an understanding of why people migrate.²⁰ It also renders immigration status irrelevant because it is an earthly attribute that cannot override a migrant’s humanity and oneness with God. Additionally, while some Christians feel a special obligation to Christian migrants as siblings in Christ, this concept of *Imago Dei* is especially powerful precisely because it applies to all people and all migrants regardless of religious affiliation.

¹⁶ M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 48.

¹⁷ Groody, “Crossing the Divide,” 646.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Yvette Santana, “Imago Dei: The Image of God and the Immigrant,” in *The Church and Migration: A Theological Vision for the People of God*, ed. Daniel Montañez and Wilmer Estrada Carrasquillo (Cleveland, TN: Centro para Estudios Latinos Press, 2022), 28.

²⁰ Santana, “Imago Dei,” 29-30.

Throughout this thesis I return to the fact that immigration is a human issue with consequences for people's lives and thus requires a human-centered approach; the foundations of this are rooted in *Imago Dei*.

Christ as Migrant

One of the most often cited examples when discussing the importance of solidarity with migrants is the fact that Jesus himself was a migrant. We see many migrations present in the life of Jesus, starting with Mary and Joseph's migration from Galilee to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth in the book of Luke.²¹ Soon after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee to Egypt in order to save Jesus from Herod's violence.²² We see the importance of movement for the well-being of the Holy Family in this story of the flight into Egypt. Migrant rights activists have often cited this story of Jesus as a migrant and as I will highlight later, this story is central to a protest event hosted at the US-Mexico border called Posada sin Fronteras.

As Jesus grows older and begins to preach the Gospel, he continues to move throughout the region to share his message. Throughout Jesus' life, we see the importance of migration in his story. As Miguel Díaz argues, "Similar to migrants' experience, the Gospels portray Jesus on the move with 'nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20)."²³ Díaz goes on to allude to the migrant experience of longing for a fatherland, or a place to belong. He aligns this with Jesus' desire for his "fatherland" arguing, "Indeed, doing the will of and returning to the "Father" (Mark 14:36; John 16:17) constitute the core of Jesus' proclamation."²⁴ Aside from the many

²¹ Miguel Díaz, "Life-Giving Migrations: Re-visioning the Mystery of God Through U.S. Hispanic Eyes," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 11, no. 1, (April 2006): 25.

²² Díaz, "Life-Giving Migrations," 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

examples related to the life of Jesus, we see that the Bible is filled with other examples that encourage hospitality to the migrant.

Hospitality

The Bible highlights many stories that demonstrate the good that comes from showing hospitality to a stranger. One story often cited by migrant rights advocates is the story of the three visiting strangers to Sarah and Abraham. Sarah and Abraham are quick to show hospitality when these strangers arrive and prepare them a meal. In the course of their interaction, it becomes evident that these strangers are actually angels.²⁵ This story embodies the principle of Hebrews 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Linking this further to the idea of divine personhood, Miguel Díaz explains, “In Christian trinitarian traditions, the story has been used iconically and theologically as a signpost to affirm the relational nature of human and divine personhood.”²⁶ This relationship between humanity and divine personhood is central to advocating for the rights of migrants.

Moving Christian Migration Ethics Toward Responsibility

Daniel Groody argues that the mission of the Church is to “proclaim a God of life and make our world more human by building up, in Pope Paul VI’s words, the ‘civilization of love.’”²⁷ This calls us to practice a fellowship with those shunned by society and that goes beyond the barriers that separate us from one another. When we think of migrants as people created in the image of God and consider the ways God has called us to treat the stranger with kindness, we must reconsider the systems that continue to oppress migrants. This tradition of

²⁵ Genesis 18.

²⁶ Díaz, “Life-Giving Migrations,” 25.

²⁷ Daniel Groody, “Dying to Live: Theology, Migration, and the Human Journey,” *Yale Divinity School Reflections*, Fall 2008.

standing with the foreigner and ensuring their well-being asks us to think more deeply about the system of migration that criminalizes and punishes migrants. We can show hospitality to migrants and welcome them into their new homes, but what does this do to address the reasons behind their migration and the traumatic journeys that many encounter? What responsibilities do we have to migrants in a context where the act of migrating is criminalized?

To consider these questions, I want to examine this larger notion of responsibility using Tisha M. Rajendra's concept of *justice as responsibility to relationships* in order to rethink traditional Christian approaches to migration and link migrant solidarity to Harsha Walia's concepts of border imperialism and border abolition.

Responsibility and Solidarity

Responsibility to Relationships

In *Migrants and Citizens: Justice and Responsibility in the Ethics of Immigration*, Tisha M. Rajendra aims to address the question: "What responsibilities do citizens have toward migrants and potential migrants?"²⁸ She answers this question by examining the driving forces behind migration and arguing that migration is impacted by "specific kinds of preexisting relationships between countries of emigration and countries of immigration..."²⁹ Migrants' movement is often shaped directly by these relationships situated in particular historical and economic realities. Rajendra argues for *justice as responsibility to relationships*, which accounts for specific relationships in order to understand the responsibility we have to migrants. Through examining the larger structures that drive migration, such as labor markets, it becomes evident

²⁸ Tisha M. Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens: Justice and Responsibility in the Ethics of Immigration*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 6.

²⁹ Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens*, 6.

that receiving countries are not “passive bystanders” and are instead often participating in systems and structures that develop relationships that cause migrants to move to a particular country.³⁰

Rajendra uses migration-systems theory to examine the larger structures causing migration and to unpack where certain relationships emerge. She looks at three forms of foreign intervention that have initiated migration systems: government-sponsored labor recruitment, colonialism, and foreign investment. While Rajendra focuses her examples on different countries and not just in a US-Mexico context, these forms of intervention are still applicable to the relationship between the United States and many of the countries of origin of people currently migrating to the US. One example is the Bracero Program (1942-1964) which recruited Mexican labor and supported a system of circular migration, and another is the US intervention in countries like El Salvador in the 1980s.³¹ Ultimately, Rajendra argues that relationships of the past can have an impact on relationships in the present and shape the way we must now respond. She writes, “...ethics of responsibility understands these political, social, and historical systems as a starting point. They are part of the moral context in which we must make decisions about how to act.”³²

Rajendra is not the only scholar to highlight these particular obligations. Indeed, David Hollenbach makes a similar case pointing out that historical relationships between sending and receiving nations play a role in defining “special duties” to certain migrants.³³ He includes the dominant role of the United States in Central America and the Caribbean as an example. These

³⁰ Ibid., 32.

³¹ Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 67 and 165-166.

³² Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens*, 117.

³³ David Hollenbach, “A Future Beyond Borders: Reimagining the Nation-State and the Church,” in *Living With(out) Borders*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and María Teresa Dávila (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 232.

special duties also include situations in which a country has had a military presence in another nation. Hollenbach argues that these countries with a military presence abroad have a particular duty to those who have been displaced by their military intervention. The United States has particular obligations to Vietnam and Iraq, for example. These approaches that highlight the historical relationships between nations in the Global North and nations in the Global South that are often rooted in exploitation and violence, deviate from traditional approaches in that they challenge the notion of migrants as people in need of charity. This approach highlights the ways that migration is often caused by the actions of more powerful nations and there is a need to respond in the context of those circumstances.

For Rajendra and Hollenbach, these relationships mean considering immigration policies that take these histories and obligations into account, but neither Rajendra nor Hollenbach call for open borders. Rajendra, for example, offers full citizenship as a solution for undocumented migrants and guestworkers as a recognition of the long-standing relationship between workers and the United States.³⁴ While this would be immensely beneficial, this ethic of responsibility asks us to think beyond the structures of this exclusionary system. I do not mean to discredit the need for full citizenship for migrants, but my hesitancy is that the structure that excludes will continue to exist, leaving the next generation of migrants to suffer the consequences of this exclusionary system. I argue that justice as responsibility to relationships requires more of us given the violent reality of the border. Understanding our past and existing relationships helps us to see how unjust it is to enforce deadly borders when the United States is often the driving force behind this migration. To develop a deeper understanding of this history and the deadly nature of

³⁴ Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens*, 135.

borders, I would like to turn now to a few ideas proposed by border abolitionist Harsha Walia in order to link border abolitionist thought to these ethical perspectives.

Border Imperialism

In *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, Harsha Walia argues that borders are an extension of a long history of colonialism and imperialism perpetuated by the Global North against the Global South. The scope of her work is wide as she seeks to address how systemic racism, capitalism, imperialism, and policing are all interconnected. All of these factors seek to capture the fact that people are not migrating voluntarily but are rather fleeing conditions caused by more powerful nations both historically and in the present day. Her approach makes clear that migrants do not simply show up at borders; migrants are often the product of neoliberal labor and production policies that create global poverty.

Central to Walia's argument is the concept of border imperialism, which aims to highlight these long-standing relationships that can reshape our understanding of migration. Walia explains her central claim: "Analyzing the border as part of historic and contemporary imperial relations, hence the term 'border imperialism,' forces a shift from notions of charity and humanitarianism to restitution, reparations, and responsibility."³⁵ Much like Rajendra's argument, Walia believes that realizing the reasons behind forced migration urges us to reimagine our obligation to migrant communities. Walia makes clear that we are not offering charity to people in need, but rather taking responsibility for the conditions created by powerful nations. It reframes migrants from a problem to solve, to people who are experiencing the effects of imperialism and neoliberal policies. Walia explains further how the language of a "migrant

³⁵ Walia, *Border and Rule*, 24.

crisis” “...depict[s] migrants and refugees as the cause of an imagined crisis at the border, when, in fact, mass migration is the outcome of the actual crises of capitalism, conquest, and climate change.”³⁶ Because they are seen to be the cause of an imagined crisis, the response is to increase border security measures that only cause further violence without addressing the root causes of migration. Given this reality, Walia ultimately advocates for border abolition.

Walia best sums up the case for border abolition writing, “To end anti-migrant xenophobia, criminalization of migrants through detention and deportation, and migrant worker exploitation, we must dismantle the wider structure of racial social violence upholding exclusionary citizenship.”³⁷ When we see Black and Brown people dying in an attempt to cross into Western countries and then see that Western, majority white countries have the flexibility for leisure travel around the world, we have to ask why this is the case. Many US-Americans already experience a world of open borders, and we must ask why it is that some people are able to move freely when the people experiencing the most danger are forced to risk their lives to find safety. When we consider the United States’ role in perpetuating some of these migrations, it is unjust to continue to enforce violent borders.

Solidarity

Christian communities and Christian ethics, with their emphasis on a shared humanity in the image of God, can offer a counter approach to the current border system—an approach that centers on the preservation of human life. The language of responsibility and border abolition challenges us to think about what this system *can* be and what it *should* be to truly stand in solidarity with migrants. Similar to Walia’s work urging us to move beyond charity, Marianne Heimbach-Steins argues that solidarity requires more than charity; it requires “legal and political

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 206.

rules” that will allow migrants to seek safety and live in a new country without paternalistic sentiments from the receiving nation.³⁸ Additionally, in writing about mutuality, Susanna Snyder, argues for the importance of practicing solidarity in a way that values and respects migrants as moral equals. Quoting Rebecca Todd Peters, Snyder presents a model of solidarity that is “...shaped by and accountable to survival migrants themselves.”³⁹ Both Heimbach-Steins and Snyder advocate for solidarity that is not shaped by charity, but rather recognizes migrants as active agents in their migration.

Further, Kristin Heyer argues, “the Christian tradition’s social commitments shape a different story, a counternarrative of shared humanity with implications for a justice-oriented immigration ethic...it demands shared responsibility for the effects of structural injustice.”⁴⁰ Heyer is not arguing for open borders like Walia, but rather for a radical solidarity that considers wider structures. However, I believe that addressing the structural injustice that Heyer points to means tackling the border. The Medellin and Puebla documents from the Second Vatican Council point to the social structures that create passivity by projecting an image of legitimacy.⁴¹ Since it is the only system of border regulation that we know, we might feel more comfortable with it, but the reality is that it will only lead to more death and will exclude people who are in search of safety and greater economic opportunities. Thinking of a world beyond borders asks us to center the humanity of others, as Christian ethics often do, and consider how we can create a world where the humanity of the vulnerable is honored.

³⁸ Marianne Heimbach-Steins, “Migration in a Post-Colonial World,” in *Religious and Ethical Perspectives on Global Migration*, ed. Elizabeth W. Collier and Charles R. Strain (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 99 and 101.

³⁹ Susanna Snyder, “Walking, Wounds and Washing Feet: Pedetic Textures of a Theo-Ethical Response to Migration,” in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 1 (October 2018): 17-18.

⁴⁰ Kristin Heyer, “Migrants Feared and Forsaken: A Catholic Ethic of Social Responsibility,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020): 163.

⁴¹ Kristin Heyer, “Radical Solidarity: Migration as a Challenge for Contemporary Christian Ethics,” in *U.S. Moral Theology from the Margins*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020), 78.

Heyer's radical solidarity addresses the shared international responsibility to migrant people. She cites Reinhold Niebuhr who argues that "the universal human experience entails the sin of 'seeking safety at the expense of another life.'"⁴² Heyer discusses how people tend put national interests first for self-preservation even though allowing migrants in will not necessarily harm us.⁴³ She argues that we should consider the ideas of liberation theology in conjunction with the idea of social sin which would call people to confront their complacency in larger social structures that cause harm.⁴⁴ This approach addresses not just the structural issues but also the ideological barriers that lead people to complacency. It entails addressing the role that we have played in migration as a nation and our individual behaviors that drive inequality, such as materialism and putting money and the economy first. It is an approach that moves us toward an analysis of the root causes and away from blaming migrants. This is what Heyer means by radical solidarity, it is shared accountability. She writes, "...this can help reframe migration as a shared international responsibility and cultivate conversion from pervasive idolatries."⁴⁵ We can begin to see how we play a role in the global system of migration and understand our obligation to migrant communities. This is similar to what Walia is arguing in recognizing how borders cause harm and how some nations are responsible for the causes that lead people to flee their homelands. We must rethink how we approach migration and develop a different approach to our theology so that it responds to these structural challenges and moves beyond hospitality to address the root causes and the inherent violence of the border.

When we view open border policies as a way of taking responsibility for past actions, solidarity takes on a new meaning. Solidarity in this context requires concrete actions to improve

⁴² Heyer, *Radical Solidarity*, 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Heyer, *Migrants Feared and Forsaken*, 165.

⁴⁵ Heyer, *Radical Solidarity*, 81.

the conditions and lives of migrants. With this larger context and ethical concepts in mind, our responsibility to migrants and what it means to stand in solidarity requires a move toward policies that create more open borders with the goal to reach abolition in the future. Some of the concepts that inform prison abolition theory can inform our approach to constructing a new, nonviolent, and life-affirming immigration system.

Abolition and the Border

The Case for Abolition

We have accepted death as the cost of keeping people out, but this US-Mexico border regime has not always existed as it does today, and there is no reason it must continue to exist. Prison abolitionist thought offers important interventions that can inform our understanding of the border and why we should consider abolition. While prison abolition tackles the criminal justice system, the abolitionist outlook can also inform our approaches to immigration politics. As César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández argues in *Migrating to Prison*, the criminal justice and immigration systems are deeply tied together, especially as the immigration system in the United States took on a more criminalizing role in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁶ As they exist today, both the prison and immigration systems speak to who belongs in society and who does not. Both make determinations about who will be detained, who will be deported, and who has contributed enough to the nation. Both systems attempt to determine good moral standing, and any criminal past makes a migrant ineligible for most immigration relief. Just as we can view the prison

⁴⁶ César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison: America's Obsession with Locking Up Immigrants* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 69-70 and 73.

system as intentionally fabricated, we can see that the border regime is also fabricated and functioning exactly as intended.⁴⁷

A common refrain in the prison abolition movement is that another world is possible. Just as there was a time when prisons were not ubiquitous, there was also a time when the United States had permeable borders. Attorney Anna Hales explains that “Throughout the nation’s first century, the approach was generally one of open borders, favoring admission.”⁴⁸ The United States immigration system was once a system that focused on admission and not exclusion at a time when white Europeans were the main people migrating. Those who were excluded were often excluded because of questions of race, ability, and gender, further pointing to the discriminatory nature of borders.⁴⁹ It was not until later in the nation’s history that exclusion became the focus, leading to a need to secure the border through militarization and exclusionary laws. For example, people were illegalized with the passage of certain laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and even more recently with laws like the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. This 1996 law made it more difficult for people to gain legal status or permission to remain in the United States while limiting judicial review of the deportation process.⁵⁰ This led to the increase of undocumented people living in the United States, which was then perceived as a problem, leading to the creation of ICE.⁵¹ While people claim that this border regime is “fixing” the issue of undocumented migration, it is important to take note of the prison abolition movement and question what this border regime is actually doing in criminalizing migration.

⁴⁷ García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison*, 13.

⁴⁸ Anna Hales, “Beyond Borders: How Principles of Prison Abolition Can Shape the Future of Immigration Reform,” in *UC Irvine Law Review* 11, no. 5 (2021): 1424.

⁴⁹ García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison*, 28.

⁵⁰ Hales, “Beyond Borders,” 1425.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Counterarguments

Some argue that open borders or porous borders would be sufficient to address many of the issues affecting migrant communities, but this is not enough, and it is important to center border abolition as the end goal. The biggest drawback of open borders is that it does not ultimately address the larger concerns about global power imbalances. One of the core arguments for border abolition is that borders uphold the global wealth gap and reinforce existing exploitative relationships between nations.⁵² Since I have focused on the US-Mexico border in this essay, I will pull from an example in this context and focus on the maquiladora industry along the US-Mexico border.

While the maquiladora industry first started in the 1960s, it expanded rapidly following the passage of NAFTA in 1994. By 2000, maquiladoras generated 48 percent of Mexico's exports.⁵³ As Nina Ebner and Mateo Crossa argue, "NAFTA was an investment project for the United States rather than a 'free trade' deal" and was rooted in low-cost labor in Mexico.⁵⁴ NAFTA was accompanied by restrictive immigration laws so that while cheaply made goods could flow into the United States, people could not migrate. This exploitative relationship is made possible by the border, and any laws that improve wages and working conditions would not address the power asymmetries between the United States and Mexico that allowed the maquiladora industry to develop in the first place. The border is necessary to create conditions where capitalism can thrive. Additionally, Mexicans who did migrate without documents during this period in the 1990s, become an easily exploited, low-wage worker class in the United

⁵² Anita Yandle, "Open Borders, Then Abolish Them," *Abolition Democracy* (Columbia Law School blog), March 31, 2021.

⁵³ Nina Ebner and Mateo Crossa, "Maquiladoras and the Exploitation of Migrants on the Border," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, October 11, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/10/03/maquiladores-exploitation-migrants-border>

⁵⁴ Ebner and Crossa, "Maquiladoras."

States.⁵⁵ Indeed, Walia argues that we must place border crises in the context of global asymmetries of power and how borders function to uphold these imbalances.⁵⁶ As I previously stated, pulling from García Hernández, the border is functioning exactly as it is intended to: it keeps people out and upholds a system of inequality that benefits Global North capitalist interests.

Additionally, open borders entail that borders can still be closed depending on national interests. While this may be helpful in some contexts, Global North countries like the United States do not always close borders in response to national threats. Take, for example, Title 42. This public health law states that if there is a communicable disease in a foreign country and there is a risk that the disease could enter the United States, then the government has the power to prohibit, "...in whole or in part, the introduction of persons and property from such countries."⁵⁷ Migrants, even asylum seekers, were expelled under the pretext of stopping the spread of COVID-19. However, as the doctors writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine* point out, "there was—and remains —no public health evidence that singling out asylum seekers or other migrants for exclusion is effective in stemming the spread of Covid-19."⁵⁸ Despite the claims that enacting Title 42 was due to COVID-19 concerns, it is clear that the United States was able to close its borders (and violate international law in the process) as an excuse to keep migrants out. This is the trouble with porous borders that can still be enforced. As Walia argues, borders actually have very little to do with movement. Armies and corporations, for example,

⁵⁵ I say easily exploited because employers are often able to leverage undocumented status against migrants to dissuade them from speaking out or finding other employment. This system of exclusion provides employers with a low-wage labor force.

⁵⁶ Walia, *Border and Rule*, 25.

⁵⁷ Anne G. Beckett, Loune Viaud, Michele Heisler, and Joia Mukherjee, "Misusing Public Health as a Pretext to End Asylum — Title 42," in *New England Journal of Medicine* 386, no. 16 (2021): e41 (1).

⁵⁸ Anne G. Beckett et al., "Misusing Public Health," e41 (1).

can move easily across borders, and borders do not stop powerful nations from invading weaker nations. Walia makes the case that, "... they [bordering practices] are intended to be carceral regimes—systems of punishment and exploitation."⁵⁹ Borders, and the larger system of citizenship and immigration controls, are a key part of reinforcing global inequality and porous borders do not address this concern.

Border Abolition Proposals

This brings me back to the case for border abolition. As I have discussed, the United States immigration system has changed over time; societies change their institutions and ideals and if change can happen in one direction, it can happen in another. The abolition of borders will not come overnight but there are reforms that can be implemented in the short term and that would work towards a future where more migrants are permitted to enter the United States and, eventually, a borderless world. In *Migrating to Prison*, García Hernández cautions against reforms because they can often reinforce and solidify the system of incarceration.⁶⁰ For example, when advocates called for reform to end family separation, it resulted in family detention.⁶¹ Like García Hernández, I would prefer abolition to come immediately, but recognizing that this is unlikely, we must consider reforms that can offer relief in the present moment. If we center abolition as the end goal, we can achieve helpful reforms that do not strengthen the border regime and that ease migrant suffering.

One key reform to end the number of border deaths would be the end of Prevention Through Deterrence. This would entail the removal of border technologies that encourage migrants to take dangerous crossing paths and actively promote death. PTD does not work; even

⁵⁹ Harsha Walia, "There's No Liberation in Isolation," Interview by Amelia Williams, *The Tyee*, June 9, 2021, <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2021/06/09/No-Liberation-In-Isolation/>.

⁶⁰ García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison*, 143.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

after it was implemented, people continued to cross.⁶² There is no need for people to die especially for an ineffective strategy. Another abolitionist reform would be the repeal of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Repealing this act would end three- and ten-year bars that prevent many undocumented people from obtaining legal status and ease the punitive measures that have disqualified others from petitioning for legal status.⁶³ One final reform would require a more fundamental shift in our approach to asylum law.

In recent years, some have started to advocate for a shift in the burden of proof in asylum law. Migrants are currently forced to prove that they are in danger in order to ask for asylum when the vast majority do not pose a threat. Because of this, some border abolitionists argue that one abolitionist reform would be for the burden of proof to lie with the United States government to demonstrate that a migrant poses a threat to the nation.⁶⁴ This reform is meant to counter the current “guilty until proven innocent” approach that harms asylum seekers. For example, asylum case decisions vary widely between states. In 2019, one court in New York had a 26% denial rate while Houston had a 91% denial rate.⁶⁵ This disparity indicates that the asylum system is highly subjective. Shifting the burden of proof would be a fundamental change in asylum law, but reform is currently needed to ensure that vulnerable people are not expelled without a valid reason.

These reforms are all meant to support safety for migrants while borders continue to exist, but they ultimately seek to break down the existing border apparatus. These reforms urge us to think about how “... the space currently occupied by the massive immigration enforcement

⁶² De Leon, *Land of the Open Graves*, 101-2.

⁶³ Alianza Americas, “It’s Time to Repeal IIRIRA!” Alianza Americas. Presente.org, Accessed December 7, 2022. I am pulling from a recent 2021 campaign.

⁶⁴ Hales, “Beyond Borders,” 1435.

⁶⁵ TRAC Immigration, “Asylum Decisions Vary Widely Across Judges and Courts – Latest Results,” Syracuse University, January 13, 2020, <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/590>.

system could be occupied instead by systems that address the causes of migration, based on an approach to immigration that promotes free movement and presumes admissibility.”⁶⁶ These proposals would be fundamental shifts in the immigration system that would allow more people to migrate freely and safely.

Community Organizing as a Tool to Envision New Paths Forward

While these proposals seem difficult to envision, it is important that we consider the possibility of a new system that affirms the right to life of migrant communities. I believe some organizations along the US-Mexico border have already started to integrate a borderless vision into their work. In the second half of this work, I would like to turn my attention to the efforts of community organizations that are engaged in work supporting migrant communities and challenging the perception of the border. I am choosing to focus on community organizing because it is a powerful vehicle for bridging communities—in this case migrant and US-citizen allies—and challenging the narratives that encourage fear and distrust. I will first discuss the theory behind community organizing as a tool to bring people together and push back on harmful narratives. Then, I will highlight two cases, Posada sin Fronteras and the Dream 9, that I argue capture a border abolition ethic and encourage us to conceive of a new way of thinking about migration that affirms the right to migrate.

Pushing Back on Narratives

One of the central arguments that Rajendra presents in her work is the idea that we need to examine the hidden and false narratives that lead to inadequate ethics and prove harmful to migrants. For example, to return to the Bracero Program, Rajendra points out that the United

⁶⁶ Hales, “Beyond Borders,” 1435.

States has not contended with the fact that this program created a system of labor exploitation that left workers with no form of legal status even after decades of working in the United States. Because workers had grown accustomed to entering and leaving the United States seasonally, they were reliant on US-American income for their livelihoods and continued to return to the country without legal status when the program ended. The United States only wanted the labor, not the people, and as a result, did not account for the long-lasting effects of creating this program that would produce a system of circular migration, with or without legal status.⁶⁷

Many people do not have a full understanding of this history, so they do not account for the role that the United States played in encouraging Mexican migration for labor exploitation. Rajendra argues that is essential to reshape these understandings and narratives in order to bring our relationships with one another to the surface. As she states, “false narratives about relationships abound...they condition how we understand the world and can limit what we are able to see...”⁶⁸ When we believe false narratives, we are not able to see the relationships and responsibilities we have to one another. As a result, people hold anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia, and it is crucial that we reshape these narratives and build relationships that alter the perception that citizens have of migrants. This is where I think community organizing can be an effective tool.

At its core, community organizing is about bringing people together and building relationships so that a group of people can work around a common cause. Community organizing helps to strengthen ties between people by providing a space where people can learn about one another and see the commonalities that exist between them. Additionally, community organizing is about working toward change and toward a future that does not yet exist but a future that a

⁶⁷ Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens*, 60-61.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

community believes will be better and more just for everyone. Rajendra believes that working toward new relationships and reconceptualizing our obligations to one another is a part of our future and it requires intentional choices.⁶⁹ Community organizing can help us build these new relationships and work toward a new world that does not yet exist. The cases I will highlight, Posada sin Fronteras and the Dream 9, are examples of community organizing that have brought both migrants and citizens together toward a common cause and in the process challenged the perception of borders and helped to envision new ways of being. These cases bring to life the absurdity of borders and embody the idea that the border is not inevitable and is simply a human-constructed line.

Posada sin Fronteras

Every Christmas season, organizations serving the San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico border region gather at the US-Mexico border for a binational, multifaith posada. A posada is a traditional Mexican, Catholic procession that reenacts the story of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter in Bethlehem as Mary is about to give birth to Jesus. Traditions vary by region, but typically, during the Advent season in Mexico, groups will walk through various neighborhoods with two people dressed as Mary and Joseph carrying a doll symbolizing the baby Jesus, asking for shelter at various pre-selected homes. The group is rejected many times before they are finally met with hospitality.⁷⁰ The posadas are a time of celebration when attendees sing, pray, share meals, and remember the Nativity story. For nearly three decades, people have gathered at the border to celebrate the Posada sin Fronteras, remembering that the Holy Family

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., "‘There’s a Spirit that Transcends the Border’: Faith, Ritual, and Postnational Protest at the U.S. Mexico Border," *Sociological Perspectives* 47, no. 2 (2004): 134.

knew the migrant experience, challenging restrictive immigration policies, and dreaming of a world where hospitality is extended to migrants.

In 1993, Roberto Martinez, the director of the US-Mexico Border Program at the American Friends Service Committee, started hosting a posada at the border to advocate for migrant rights amidst the militarization that was just starting to emerge at the border.⁷¹ To Roberto Martinez and countless others who have participated since its founding, the migrant struggle of today mirrors the Biblical Nativity tale. Posada sin Fronteras has grown to be more significant than ever as anti-immigrant policies continue to be enforced and the border grows ever more militarized leading to a record number of deaths. The Posada sin Fronteras reaffirms the life of migrants and challenges the fixed nature of borders.

In a world where migrant deaths are commonplace, an event like Posada sin Fronteras reminds participants and viewers that migrant lives are not disposable. Pedro Rios, one of the organizers of the 2022 Posada sin Fronteras explains:

La Posada Sin Fronteras is the retelling of the nativity of Jesus Christ through a migrant lens...at a time when governments are closing their doors to migrants seeking refuge, this event takes on greater importance because it takes this Christian story of the survival of the divine child and suggests that for a migrant person is divine and should be treated with respect and dignity.⁷²

⁷¹ Ched Myers, "La Posada: Hospitality to Those Displaced by the Push and Pull of Empire," *Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries E-News*, December 2006. <https://inquiries2015.files.wordpress.com/2006/12/06-0-pa-las-posadas-empire.pdf>.

⁷² CE Noticias Financieras, "'Posada Sin Fronteras' Celebrated in Tijuana and San Diego." *CE Noticias Financieras*, Dec 10, 2022, English ed. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/wire-feeds/posada-sin-fronteras-celebrated-tijuana-san-diego/docview/2753373536/se-2>.

This event allows people to reflect on the migrant nature of Christ, echoing back to the long tradition of viewing Christ as a migrant that has mobilized many faith-based organizations to advocate for migrant rights. In a time when migrants can be painted as a threat to citizen populations, this event offers a way to counter the narrative and present migrants as people who seek safety and challenge citizens to open their doors. It is almost asking participants and viewers, “would you turn away Mary and Joseph?” Additionally, participants are not only advocating for migrating people because they believe it is the morally correct action to take, but they are also recognizing the innate divinity of migrants. These beliefs are directly tied to the legacy of Christian migration ethics. Posada in Fronteras affirms the innate human right to life that migrants are entitled to and challenge the policies that prevent migrants from accessing the safety they seek.

The event not only pushes participants to consider the divinity of migrants but also brings them face-to-face with the border and leads them to reflect on the meaning and impact of the border wall. As I previously mentioned, one of the foundational faith-based arguments aligning with migrant rights is the idea that all people are God’s children. This idea comes into play for many participants and challenges them to consider what this means in a world divided by borders. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, a migration sociologist who has written extensively about Posada sin Fronteras, argues that various participants that she interviewed suggested that, “nation-state borders violate the notion of a common humanity and a higher law of nature and spirituality.”⁷³ Although the participants did not use the exact terms such as “nation-state,” they knew that the border created divides that were not in line with the idea of people as children of God. Furthermore, the event allowed participants to experience what unity without borders can

⁷³ Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., “There’s a Spirit,” 147.

look like. Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, “The collective gathering and the reenactment not only allowed them to imagine and call for the end of border divisions, but the event allowed them to actually experience a world without border divisions.”⁷⁴ Seeing people on the other side of the border, engaging in the same singing, praying, and sharing a meal put into perspective the absurd nature of the border that tends to highlight differences rather than commonalities. For many participants, the event left them with questions about the efficacy of the border.

Perhaps most powerful, several participants that Hondagneu-Sotelo interviewed describe a feeling of transcendence where they felt united under God despite the physical barrier dividing them from people across the border on the Mexican side. Hondagneu-Sotelo describes this event as an anti-border event, although the event organizers and many of the people present would not use “border abolition” to describe the goal of Posada sin Fronteras. For example, a nun present at the event reflected, “To see people on the other side who were deeply hurt by what was happening...strengthened our resolve...one day, this wall will disappear.”⁷⁵ Another participant reflected on the border extending into the ocean and said, “It goes out into the ocean; it’s just like a sin against the planet, and against God’s earth...Surely there is room for everyone on God’s earth...it belongs to all his children.”⁷⁶ Still, other older participants reflected on a time when the border was more permeable and they could cross back and forth freely. In these examples, we see the ways that Posada sin Fronteras stirs many reflections and criticisms among participants. For some, the idea of being one under God challenges the very notion of borders, and others are reminded of how the border has changed over time from a border that was once more open, to one that is heavily militarized and closed. There is a sense of shared oneness among participants

⁷⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁵ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *God’s Heart has no Borders: How Religious Activists are Working for Immigrant Rights* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 187.

⁷⁶ Hondagneu-Sotelo, *God’s Heart has no Borders*, 157.

that makes borders seem inauthentic and a violation of humanity because God unites all people. More importantly, Posada sin Fronteras allows people to consider another possibility for what the border could look like in the future.

The location of this migrant rights event is important because, as I have described, the US-Mexico border is a site of death. As it exists, the border is the site where rejection, death, and border enforcement occur daily. However, Posada sin Fronteras transforms the border into a site where people can imagine a new world. Hondagneu-Sotelo describes how Posada sin Fronteras turns the border into a site of redemption writing, "...it is a site where...a postborder world of hospitality, and the sharing of shelter can be imagined and even experienced for a few moments."⁷⁷ Not only does the event challenge the notion of borders, but it allows participants to experience the border space differently if only for a few moments. In a Sojourners interview, one of the participants of the 2018 Posada, Dr. Jamie Gates, reflects on the fact that the border is more militarized than it has ever been. He argues that because of this, it is more important than ever that they host this event and bring "meekness and joy" into the space to challenging the border space as it currently exists.⁷⁸ Dr. Gates goes on to say that Posada sin Fronteras is, "...fundamentally about nurturing the prophetic imagination, about seeing the world... through the lens of a God who cares most deeply about the widow, the orphan, and the stranger."⁷⁹ This event allows participants to consider what the space can be if it is modeled after the teachings of a Christ who cares about migrants. Posada sin Fronteras is an event that transgresses the border because it allows participants to question the validity of borders and consider possibilities outside of the current system.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁸ "The Inn Without Borders/La Posada sin Fronteras," *Sojourner*, News Video, December 19, 2018, 3:15-3:25. <https://sojo.net/media/inn-without-borders-la-posada-sin-fronteras>

⁷⁹ "The Inn Without Borders," 3:39-3:50.

The Posada Sin Fronteras is also a way to interpret the gospel in public and make real the struggle of the Holy Family and push participants to reflect on what the Bible has to say about the plight of migrants today. At the 2018 Posada Sin Fronteras, Archbishop Francisco Moreno Barrón said to the crowds on both sides of the border, "...on this day, on the day of the Posada of migrants, to say at this wall of shame, I think it has to be a prophetic word that will one day allow for these divisions that divide the men and women of today to be destroyed."⁸⁰ The participants then attempted to sing across both sides of the border, but it was difficult to hear each other across the wall. Dr. Gates reflected on this event and described the Posada as "incomplete" because hospitality in Christ is not supposed to be divided.⁸¹ These challenging moments where the Posada cannot be completed because of the wall, demonstrate to participants the ways the wall prevents unified hospitality. Participants then envision what it would take to be able to worship together and imagine a future where existing border policies that promote divisions and death no longer exist. The moments of imagining a different border start to move away from notions of charity and instead consider what it would mean to remove the boundaries that divide us to create a world that honors life and humanity.

Just as Posada sin Fronteras challenges the notion of a closed border, the Dream 9 participants transgressed exclusionary immigration laws and border militarization by demanding entry into the United States after being forced to return to Mexico. In what follows, I will consider how the Dream 9 challenged border logics through their direct action.

Dream 9

On July 22, 2013, nine immigrant youth presented themselves at the US-Mexico border and demanded entry into the United States. The nine had lived most of their lives in the United

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1:25-1:49.

⁸¹ Ibid., 2:21-2:27.

States without legal documentation and had recently been living in Mexico. Some had been deported or returned to Mexico with deported family members. Others had self-deported, meaning that they decided to return to Mexico after facing various challenges in the United States and feeling stuck due to the limitations of their status. The nine marched to the Nogales, Arizona United States Port of Entry, arms linked, wearing their graduation gowns, and demanded to be allowed to return home and seek political asylum. This action was controversial at the time but was ultimately successful at securing legal status for the participants. The Dream 9 action is emblematic of a shift from charity to an acknowledgment of the existing obligations and relationships between migrants and the United States. To better understand this case, I will first provide context to what led to the action and describe the subsequent outcomes before transitioning to an analysis of this action. My analysis will focus on how the Dream 9 not only advocated for their own legal status but also how they challenged border logics and the policies that govern US immigration law to bring awareness to the moral and human rights issues at stake.

Background

The Dream 9 derives its name from the DREAM Act, legislation first introduced in 2001 that would have provided a pathway to citizenship to undocumented individuals who had entered the country as children and met certain requirements. Immigrant youth who would have qualified for the DREAM Act came to be known as Dreamers. The DREAM Act failed in the United States Senate in 2010, leaving many undocumented youth disillusioned with the movement, including Mohammad Abdollahi, Lizbeth Mateo, and Marco Saavedra. The three would go on to establish the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) in 2011 with the hope of pushing for immigration relief for undocumented youth and their families. The DREAM Act's failure

inspired them to change tactics. As Abdollahi explains, "...we sort of came to this joint conclusion that things don't change because people hear stories, things change because people feel like they have no other choice but to make something happen."⁸² NIYA took more direct actions than previous organizations because they believed that they could not take politicians at their word after their betrayal in voting against the DREAM Act in the Senate. With the help of other immigrant rights organizations, NIYA organized sit-ins and hunger strikes at various representatives' and senators' offices to push for immigration relief. Their efforts would eventually pressure the Obama administration to enact Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 through executive order. While this was a huge victory that provided deportation relief and work authorization for many undocumented young people, NIYA's leaders knew this was not enough.

Following DACA's enactment, the organization started to receive calls, Tweets, and Facebook messages from youth who had been deported or had decided to return to Mexico before DACA passed, thus making them ineligible for the program. They also received daily calls from immigrants facing detention and deportation, further highlighting the gaps that remained even with initiatives like DACA. NIYA leaders recognized that policies like DACA provided relief for a small group of people while many continued to struggle, and they realized it was not enough and that there were larger issues at stake. As Maria Hinojosa describes in a *Latino USA* piece covering the Dream 9 action, leaders like Abdollahi, Mateo, and Saavedra wanted more: "NIYA...wanted to stop all deportations, shut down all the detention centers, and challenge the very notion that a border could keep them out."⁸³ With this inspiration in mind,

⁸² Maria Hinojosa, "Episode #1542 The Dream 9," *Latino USA*, Podcast Audio, October 16, 2015. 22:48-23:00. <https://www.latinousa.org/2015/10/16/1542-the-dream-9/>

⁸³ Hinojosa, "Episode #1542," 23:58-24:08.

NIYA developed a plan that would be called the “Bring them Home Campaign.” The plan was that Lizbeth Mateo, Marco Saavedra, and Chicago-based organizer Lulu Martinez – all undocumented – would leave the United States and come back with other people who had been deported.

By the time the three flew down to Mexico, they were already in contact with five other youth who were living in Mexico and agreed to participate in the action. The original Dream 8 participated in many trainings leading up to the action including how to speak to the press and how to interact with immigration officials. They had a team of lawyers ready, and they launched a media campaign that gained international attention. The day that they gathered in Nogales, Mexico, they were joined at the last minute by a final participant named Mario Felix. In all, this who participated: **Claudia Amaro** (29) who grew up in Kansas, **Adriana Diaz** (24) who grew up in Phoenix and had returned to Mexico a year before the action, **Luis Leon** (22) who grew up in North Carolina, and was living in Veracruz at the time of the action, **Ceferino Santiago** (23) who grew up in Kentucky and was living in Oaxaca at the time of the action, **María Inés Peniche** (24) who grew up in Boston and was living in Mexico City at the time of the action, **Lizbeth Mateo** (31) who grew up in California and was one of the three that flew down to Mexico for the action, **Lulu Martinez** (25) who grew up in Chicago and flew to Mexico for the action, **Marco Saavedra** (23) grew up in New York City and flew down to Mexico for the action, and **Mario Felix** (23), who joined last minute.⁸⁴

On the day of the action, surrounded by press and supporters, the Dream 9 marched to the border and demanded entry. Since they did not have immigration documents that would allow them entry, they handed over asylum applications. The nine were detained by immigration

⁸⁴ “Meet the Dream 9,” *Latino USA*, October 16, 2015. <https://www.latinousa.org/2015/10/16/meet-the-dream-9/>

officers, as they had expected, and were taken to Eloy Detention Center in Arizona. Once at the detention center, the men and women were separated and quickly thrust into prison life: they were given green uniforms, shackled, shown to their cells, and received daily yard time. On the outside, the immigrant rights community in Tucson showed up outside Eloy and protested for their release, putting pressure on politicians like Representative Luis Gutierrez (IL) who was the leading figure advocating for undocumented youth.⁸⁵ NIYA founder, Mohammad Abdollahi, ensured that their story stayed in the news and put pressure on politicians to release the Dream 9.⁸⁶

On the inside, Dream 9 did their best to survive life in detention. The women were able to speak to the other detainees, which reminded them of why they were taking this action in the first place. Maria Ines describes, “it made me see the bigger picture, it made me realize that this was bigger than myself.”⁸⁷ After hearing their stories, Maria Ines and Lulu felt compelled to help other detained women and started passing out a number to connect the women to attorneys. One day in the cafeteria, Maria Ines gave a speech to the women telling them that there were people on the outside who wanted to help and that they should not be scared. In response, the women started to chant, leading to a protest inside the detention center. Lulu and Maria Ines were accused of starting a riot and were separated from the rest of the detainees and given new, orange jumpsuits to mark them as dangerous. They were placed in “disciplinary segregation,” an experience Lulu and Maria Ines describe as solitary confinement. This quickly took a toll on Maria Ines’ mental health leading to self-harm and suicidal thoughts.⁸⁸ This, combined with

⁸⁵ Hinojosa, “Episode #1542,” 27:28-28:40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29:03-29:10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30:00-30:06.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30:23-33:30.

continued media attention, eventually led to the nine being released seventeen days after their detention at the border.

The case was unprecedented for many reasons, but I will highlight two. First, most detained immigrants remain in detention for several months and even years. Some speculate that the Dream 9 were released quickly because the Obama administration was attempting to prevent the story from getting bigger than it already was given the immigration debate raging in congress at the time. Secondly, each of the Dream 9 participants successfully gained asylum. They each had to fight their asylum cases individually in their home states, but they were all able to win their cases. The process took several years, with Marco being the last to receive asylum in 2021.⁸⁹ The usual rate of acceptance for Mexicans is just 2%, giving the Dream 9 a much higher success rate. Despite this, the action was largely unpopular with people within the immigrant rights movement.

The Dream 9 action was highly contentious with many immigrant rights advocates criticizing the group for their actions. Their critics argued that their tactics were too radical and would hurt the larger efforts to win immigration reform. For many, the Dream 9's tactics of demanding entry came-off as entitlement due to the fact they were demanding entry, rather than applying and waiting for the process to unfold. This prompted other undocumented people to say that the Dream 9 painted the community in a negative light. Luis Gutierrez eventually released a statement against NIYA and their tactics, and other allies ceased to support them as a result.⁹⁰

NIYA, however, did want to wait to see what congress would do in regard to immigration

⁸⁹ "At Long Last, Prominent Immigrant Rights Activist Marco Saavedra Has Won Political Asylum," *Center for the Humanities*, February 25, 2021. <https://centerforthehumanities.org/news/at-long-last-prominent-immigrant-rights-activist-marco-saavedra-has-won-political-asylum>.

⁹⁰ Gene, Demby, "The Dream 9 Pushes the Envelope (And Their Allies' Buttons)," *NPR*, August 20, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/20/213790881/the-dream-9-pushes-the-envelope-and-their-allies-buttons>

reform. NIYA members argued that politicians wanted immigrants “only when they were quiet and humble, not when they have voices.”⁹¹ They felt that this was an urgent matter and they wanted to get people back into the United States, and they had proven that they could do it. The Dream 9 went on to inspire the Dream 30 just a few weeks later. Of the 30, only 5 did not get asylum. While it was controversial, NIYA did bring many people back to the United States. When we consider this in light of the fact that nearly a decade after the action, there has been no permanent immigration relief, it complicates the question of the efficacy of their tactics.

Analysis

The Dream 9 was a key moment for the immigrant rights movement of the last decade. The action took the conversation about immigration reform in a different direction by highlighting the flaws in legal immigration avenues, the inhumanity of detention and deportation, and demonstrating the bonds that exist across borders. Dream 9 organizers recognized that relief was slow to come and when it did, it was never enough because it would inevitably provide safety to some at the expense of others. While other immigration organizations accepted the trade-off, the Dream 9 asked why this had to be the case. Why should the immigrant rights movement settle for something less?

While they were critiqued for being entitled, their tactics demonstrate an understanding of the human right to migrate. For example, in an interview, Marco Saavedra describes being particularly struck by the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American thinker. Saavedra cites Du Bois’ belief that it was beneath African Americans to beg for rights that belonged inherently to mankind. Saavedra argues similarly, “We [undocumented immigrants] have contributed so much to this country... We’re human beings. We have a claim to rights because, yes, they

⁹¹ Hinojosa, “Episode #1542,” 42:30-42:40.

rightfully belong to us.”⁹² In this argument, Saavedra highlights the fact that many people living in the United States live and contribute to their communities with none of the benefits of citizenship, all while facing exploitation and no avenue to gain status. In addition, the Dream 9 action expanded its scope beyond the needs of undocumented people in the United States and considered migrants who have been forced to return or pushed out of the United States due to a lack of legal immigration status. This started to build solidarity between migrant people in the United States and Mexico and brought to light the bonds that exist beyond borders.

The Dream 9 shifted the conversation to challenge the idea that only certain immigrants are worthy of status and presented the human ties that persist across borders. As Saavedra explains, “I also think that the action emerged because sometimes we only think about our community here, the community of 11 million undocumented persons in the U.S. But we know that not only do we suffer on this side, but also our families on the other side who are waiting for us.”⁹³ This demonstrates an understanding of the larger human impact of closed-border policies on a global scale. It is not just undocumented people who face the brunt of inhumane immigration policies, but also extended family and friends who know a loved one is suffering and who are also limited themselves by these policies. Additionally, when the Dream 9 arrived in Arizona, the local community quickly mobilized, further demonstrating the connections that exist despite the borders that attempt to sever these ties. Actions like the Dream 9 make the human impact more real and concrete by raising awareness about the moral crisis at hand. As journalist Eileen Truax explains, “[The Dream 9] have the moral authority and they’re trying to cause a shift that will force the political game to stop being a political game. They’re trying to

⁹² Michael Mays, “Los Infiltradores,” *The American Prospect*, June 21, 2013. <https://prospect.org/civil-rights/los-infiltradores>.

⁹³ Marco Saavedra, Interview by Ecologies of Migrant Care, *New York University*, 5 September 2014. <https://ecologiesofmigrantcare.org/marco-saavedra>.

make it a human rights issue.”⁹⁴ The Dream 9 action presented a sense of urgency for the human impact as people were, and continue to be, deported and detained every day.

Lastly, the Dream 9 action challenged the border and highlighted its absurdity through the very act of crossing without participating in the long and senseless immigration process—a process they were not able to partake in at all because they had no existing, legal avenue to gain status while remaining in the United States. Furthermore, rhetoric scholar Ana Milena Ribero argues that the Dream 9 challenged not only immigration policies but also the very concept of borders through their act of walking across the border. Using the concept of drifting, Milena Ribero argues that the Dream 9 “challenge[d] the fantasy of the border as a limited, identifiable physical space reinforced by capital, and...instead suggest[ed] how borders might wander, shift and change places via the bodies of those who cross them.”⁹⁵ Pulling from Guy Debord, Milena Ribero defines drifting as a “...mindful migration that places attention on how space and place influence a person’s emotions and behaviors.”⁹⁶ Drifting recognizes people’s social agency over a space and the process of movement people go from “...consumers to producers of meaning.”⁹⁷ For Debord, drifting emerges as a response to suppressive and militarized urbanism and Milena Ribero links this to the militarization of the US-American immigration control apparatus. Using this concept, Milena Ribero highlights the ways that the Dream 9 were able to subvert border logics.

⁹⁴ New America Media, “Criticism, Support for Decision by Dream 9 to Bring Their Case Directly to Immigration Officials,” *The World*, August 3, 2013. <https://theworld.org/stories/2013-08-03/criticism-support-decision-dream-9-bring-their-case-directly-immigration>.

⁹⁵ Ana Milena Ribero, “Drifting Across the Border: On the Radical Potential of Undocumented Im/migrant Activism in the US,” *Performance Research* 23, no. 7 (2018): 96.

⁹⁶ Milena Ribero, “Drifting Across the Border,” 96.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

As Milena Ribero describes, “In drifting across the border, the Dream 9 challenge their exclusion from the nation via border technologies and discourses and reassert their agency in world-making. Their drift disrupts the foundational borders of the nation and of the global economic system of ‘border imperialism’ that creates and exploits displaced peoples.”⁹⁸ By looking at this action through the lens of drifting, we can begin to understand how the very act of walking across the border participated in a process of world-making; they created a world in which the border is more porous and redefined what this space can look like and mean. Additionally, while many undocumented people live in anonymity for survival and safety, the Dream 9 chose to make themselves hyper-visible in order to show the ways that the immigration system and the militarized border contribute to creating precarity for immigrant communities. They told their stories to bring awareness to the limited options migrants have to “legal” avenues of migration and they demonstrated that there could be an avenue outside of existing structures. Their drift made a statement about the ways that laws can be arbitrary and change depending on context. More broadly, their action helps us to see that as people move across the border, they are challenging border logics, and the relationships that form across this divide challenge the idea that the border exists at all.

Concluding Community Organizing

Community organizing can redefine narratives and relationships and help us to imagine a different world. The actions I highlight embody the theoretical frameworks of border abolition. People like the participants of Posadas sin Fronteras and the Dream 9 and their supporters bring to life the absurdity of borders and embody the fact that this is a socially constructed line. They help us envision another way and challenge the current border logics in place. These are

⁹⁸ Ibid.

sustained efforts that required tireless efforts from the organizers behind the scenes, but this is the work necessary to bring to life new ways of understanding borders and migration.

Conclusion

When we consider an ethic of responsibility and the historic relationship of the United States with many sending communities, it becomes evident that solidarity and justice with migrant communities entail seriously considering border abolition as the way forward. Traditional approaches to migration encourage solidarity and hospitality, but it is vital that we reconsider what aid to migrant communities entails when we know the historic, often exploitative, relationships that have existed between countries like the United States and sending communities. The current US-Mexico border apparatus and, by extension, the current immigration system puts migrant lives in danger and maintains global inequalities that lead to migration in the first place. Understanding our relationship and history with migrant communities helps to highlight our responsibilities to address the violence at the border and to reimagine what our advocacy efforts can look like. Advocating for open border policy reforms that center on abolition can help us break down the existing border apparatus and envision a new world where we can free ourselves of the inequalities and unfreedoms that borders lead to. As our world continues to see the growth of displacement as a result of climate change, creating uninhabitable conditions for many people, the unsustainability of borders grows ever more evident. While a world without borders is difficult to imagine, communities directly affected by violent border policies have already begun the work of reimagining the existing border regime and others will soon come to realize that it is imperative that we heed their example.

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