

Privilege, Risk, and Solidarity:  
How Christian Feminist Ethics Speaks to the Issue of Undocumented Immigration

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## ABSTRACT

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Privilege, Risk, and Solidarity: How Christian Feminist Ethics Speaks to the Issue of Undocumented Immigration

(Under the direction of Margaret E. Mohrmann)

For U.S. citizen Christians who take seriously the claims in scripture to love the stranger and practice hospitality, the reality of over 11 million undocumented persons living within our borders on the farthest margins of society, with no access to social resources and without a voice to defend themselves, creates a very real theological and ethical problem to overcome. This complex and often divisive political issue has been considered from a wide array of Christian ethical philosophies. This thesis provides a specifically Christian feminist ethical point of view on the issue and outlines various ways to understand the issue of marginalization and to combat it.

While feminist theology is not the only effective approach this issue, it does offer specific perspectives that help Christians where other theologies may fall short. This literature provides valuable insight for Christians trying to understand how to approach the issue of undocumented immigration. It reveals the worth of the marginalized and listens to them, and it indicates to the privileged their shortcomings and aids them in finding new ways to interact with the marginalized that improve everyone's lots (and souls). Feminist theology and ethics supports the cause of immigration reform through its emphases on giving voice to the marginalized, recognizing the autonomy of the marginalized, and teaching the privileged how to stand in solidarity with the marginalized.

Undocumented immigration is a lived reality, one which requires both theory and practice to end suffering, draw out the marginalized, and take risks to make major changes in an oppressive system of injustice. While feminism began and continues to deal specifically with the plight of women in various contexts, the whole of the feminist scholarly endeavor need not be applied only to one subset of marginalized people. As set forth in this work, the work of feminist scholarship in religious theology and ethics (along with some secular work) speaks volumes to issues of great importance for our daily lives, whether we are privileged White U.S. citizens or the most oppressed and marginalized undocumented immigrant. Building bridges through information, story, liberty, giving voice, flourishing, solidarity, and risk in their many forms will create a more just society in which all persons, of any color or immigration status, are given space to live with equal regard.

*This thesis is dedicated to the millions of undocumented immigrants who live among us and yet have no voice, and to Christian and secular feminists before me who have opened our eyes to oppression, given voice to the voiceless, and taken enormous risks to stand in solidarity with the marginalized. May we all find inspiration and challenge as we explore how best to live among our neighbors as God intended.*

For U.S. citizen Christians who take seriously the claims in scripture to love the stranger and practice hospitality,<sup>1</sup> the reality of over 11 million undocumented persons living within our borders on the farthest margins of society, with no access to social resources and without a voice to defend themselves, creates a very real theological and ethical problem to overcome. The length of this work does not provide space for the many reasons immigrants flee their own lands, nor does it allow for much reflection on how immigration law has evolved (and why) since that time when America began as a nation of immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the problem of undocumented immigration forces U.S. citizen (especially White) Christians, to face an ever-present human issue, requiring deep introspection about their own privilege<sup>3</sup> as citizens as well as spiritual conviction about, and thoughtful analysis of, the social problem from a place of solidarity, responsibility, and mutual love.

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<sup>1</sup> A concise description of the scriptural claims can be found at Sojourners Magazine's online Immigration page: "In Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites: You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:19). Having experienced life as immigrants in a foreign land, God's people were now called to offer love and welcome to the immigrants among them. Jesus reiterates this call to radical hospitality in the New Testament (Matthew 25:35)." <http://sojo.net/get-involved/campaigns/immigration> (accessed 7 March 2015). For a more in-depth theological analysis of the issue of immigration and migration and why Christians should take seriously the problem of those living in the shadows due to migrant status, one can turn to Catholic Social Teaching, which offers one of the most (if not the most) comprehensive discussions of the theological implications of Christian responses to immigrants and immigration. For example, see US Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement Of Peoples," online: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm> (accessed 7 March 2015)

<sup>2</sup> See Immigration Policy Center, online: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/basics-immigration-resource-page> (accessed 7 March 2015), or my exploration of the topic in chapter two of an earlier work, online: <http://libbygrammer.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/The-Baptist-Response-to-Undocumented-Immigration-Libby-Grammer.pdf> (accessed 7 March 2015), for more in-depth information on these topics.

<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed later in this work, privilege must be recognized by those who hold it. To do this will entail first-world (or in this case, U.S. citizen – especially Caucasian) persons recognizing their own responsibility, complicity, and privilege in relation to those on the margins of their society, including and especially those without proper legal immigration status. See Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 38ff.

To explore how Christians can respond faithfully to this issue to the ends mentioned above, the field of Christian feminist ethics provides a plethora of tools to better approach this social problem, requiring many of the skills feminist ethicists (both Christian and secular) have been developing for decades in scholarship. For purposes of this thesis, a limited scope will be maintained, exploring a subset of the scholarship of Christian (and some secular) feminist ethicists because certain topics within these works pertain to important aspects of undocumented U.S. immigration as a political and social problem.

Feminist theology is not the only effective theology to employ to approach this issue,<sup>4</sup> but it does offer specific perspectives that help Christians in ways other theologies may fall short. This literature provides valuable insight for Christians trying to understand how to approach the issue of undocumented immigration. It reveals the worth of the marginalized and listens to them, and it indicates to the privileged their shortcomings and aids them in finding new ways to interact with the marginalized that improve everyone's lots (and souls). Feminist theology and ethics supports the cause of immigration reform through its emphases on giving voice to the marginalized, recognizing the autonomy of the marginalized, and teaching the privileged how to stand in solidarity with the marginalized.

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<sup>4</sup> Virtue ethics, deontological consequentialism, liberation theology, and even biblical literalism, have all been used to support arguments for immigration reform (and some have been used against reform as well). I argue that where these fall short in their arguments for reforming immigration laws to aid those most marginalized – the undocumented – is their lack of attention to the voices of the marginalized and/or their lack of attention to how the privileged can help in ways that do not overpower the autonomy of marginalized people. Feminist theology and ethics deals with these specific issues in helpful ways, as we will explore here.

### **Knowing the Undocumented through Statistics**

Before exploring feminist scholarship on this issue, it is helpful to know a little about those persons the U.S. immigration system labels “undocumented” or “unauthorized” immigrants.”<sup>5</sup> Undocumented (or unauthorized) immigrants are those persons present in the United States without proper immigrant or nonimmigrant<sup>6</sup> status, as authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security. According to the Pew Research Center, there were approximately 11.2 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. as of the year 2012, a number that had not changed since 2009. Before that time, U.S. undocumented immigration had been rising rapidly, peaking at 12.2 million in 2007, the beginning of the Great Recession.<sup>7</sup> Undocumented immigrants are overwhelmingly Latino/a, with over 8.8 million of the 11.2 million undocumented coming from Latin America. Of these, 7 million are of Mexican heritage.<sup>8</sup> To contrast with these numbers, the overwhelming majority of foreign-born persons in the U.S. have legal immigration status (temporary/nonimmigrant status or permanent residence). There are approximately 40.4 million foreign-born

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<sup>5</sup> Note that while U.S. immigration law does use the term “alien” as a technical term for foreign nationals, this term has fallen out of use in academic circles due to its use by anti-immigrant groups as a kind of slur that dehumanizes a large swath of the U.S. population. For purposes of this work, I will interchangeably use “undocumented immigrants” and “unauthorized immigrants” as descriptive only of the immigrant’s lack legal immigration status, not as a descriptor of their personhood or worth.

<sup>6</sup> Immigrants are those persons seeking to live long-term or permanently in the United States. Nonimmigrants are those who enter the U.S. for short term purposes (visiting, studying, or working). Those without nonimmigrant status may have entered legally and then overstayed their allotted time in the U.S. and now no longer have legal status.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D’vera Cohn, “A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States,” Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/immigration/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D’vera Cohn, “Origins of Unauthorized Immigrants: A Focus on Mexico,” Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/v-origins-of-unauthorized-immigrants-a-focus-on-mexico/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

persons present in the U.S., fewer than 30% of whom currently have no legal immigration status.<sup>9</sup>

In 2008, there were 6.3 million men, 4.1 million women, and 1.5 million children under age 18 living as undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Three quarters of households headed by unauthorized immigrants are married or cohabitating couples with or without children. Notwithstanding the abundance of young men (35% of unauthorized immigrants are men age 18-29, compared with only 14% among U.S.-born population), the majority of unauthorized immigrants live in the U.S. with their family. Nearly half of all unauthorized family heads are living with both a spouse and children under age 18 (48%). Many families are “mixed-status,” or families with unauthorized immigrants and their U.S. citizen children or legal resident family members. In this group, 3.8 million are unauthorized immigrant adults and half a million are unauthorized immigrant children. The U.S. citizens (mostly children) and the legal immigrant family members make up the rest. The information from the Pew Center states that “Since 2003, the number of children (both U.S. born and unauthorized) in these mixed-status families has increased to 4.5 million from 3.3 million. This increase is attributable almost entirely to the increasing number of U.S. citizen children living with undocumented parents.”<sup>10</sup>

The 2007 median income for undocumented immigrants was \$36,000 per year, which is well below the mean of \$50,000 per year for U.S.-born persons. The income of

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<sup>9</sup> “Data Trend – Society and Demographics, Immigrants,” Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/data-trend/society-and-demographics/immigrants/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D’vera Cohn, “Demographic and Family Characteristics,” Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/iii-demographic-and-family-characteristics/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

undocumented immigrants, as compared with that of other legal-status immigrants and American citizens on the whole, does not increase significantly the longer they live in the United States. According to the Pew Center's research, "a third of the children of unauthorized immigrants and a fifth of adult unauthorized immigrants lives in poverty. This is nearly double the poverty rate for children of U.S.-born parents (18%) or for U.S.-born adults (10%)."<sup>11</sup> Thus, unauthorized immigrants are not only unrepresented in the country where they live, a large number of them are living at or below the poverty line with their families and receive little to no government support.

U.S. undocumented immigration is a particularly human issue for many reasons because it involves vulnerable humans seeking to improve their lot in life, but the issue is particularly relevant and appropriate to Christian feminist ethics because of its focus on the plight of the marginalized and oppressed. Oppression of the undocumented comes in the form of lack of access to representation in government, low wage earnings at often back-breaking jobs with no recourse to government assistance or worker's rights, lack of access to health insurance,<sup>12</sup> lack of access to basic identification documents due to some state laws barring all undocumented immigrants from obtaining legal state ID or driver's licenses,<sup>13</sup> and an ongoing fear of deportation and family separation.<sup>14</sup> Undocumented

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D'vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/04/14/a-portrait-of-unauthorized-immigrants-in-the-united-states/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Only about ten states will issue driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants, including most recently, California. Mark Berman, "California Begins Issuing Driver's Licenses Regardless of Immigration Status," *Washington Post*, online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/01/02/california-begins-issuing-drivers-licenses-regardless-of-immigration-status/> (accessed 7 March 2015).



immigrants are some of the most socially and politically marginalized persons in the United States, and their plight warrants the attention of Christians who care about social justice and making social and political changes to improve the life circumstances of others, their neighbors created in the image of God.

Additionally, feminist ethics focuses strongly on recognizing the structures and systems behind such oppression. Whether it is Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, emphasizing autonomy and equal regard, Traci West's liberationist feminist thought, stressing the conditions that ensnare the socially marginalized, Emilie Townes' womanist approach to the ways how culture can produce evil, or Ana Maria Isasi-Díaz' *mujerista* stories and emotive moves toward change, feminist ethics (especially Christian feminist ethics) has much to say to human issues involving systems of oppression and the struggles of the marginalized, along with something to say to those who do the oppressing and benefit from such structures. I will explore these perspectives in this work, along with some ways in which they can speak directly to the specific issue of undocumented immigration.

### **Knowing the Undocumented through Story**

Stories are the "face" of facts, the human background of information that creates space for those who are marginalized and oppressed to speak and potentially to actually be heard by their oppressors, the privileged living among them. Feminism works to create

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. deportation of undocumented immigrants reached an all-time high in 2013, the fifth year of the Obama administration, which had campaigned on promises of immigration reform and has only in the last year begun the process of reining in deportations of non-criminals and young people brought illegally into the country as young children: "Unauthorized Immigrants: Who they are and what the public thinks," Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/immigration/> (accessed 7 March 2015).

space for everyone's voice. Liberationist and *Mujerista* traditions provide theological insights while simultaneously examining the daily lives of the oppressed, their hopes and dreams, and their own ideas for changing the broken system that ensnares them.

### **Stories Matter**

Traci West's book *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* provides a black liberation/feminist viewpoint that combines both theory and practice: "Theory needs practice in order to be authentic, relevant, and truthful. Practice needs theory so that practices might be fully comprehended."<sup>15</sup> West insists that the marginalized be given space to tell their own stories in order to communicate well about topics of major importance. Thus, a dialogue between those considered "great individual thinkers" (like Reinhold Niebuhr, who had much to say about Harlem activists, but in an unfortunately paternalistic way<sup>16</sup>) and the oppressed people themselves is necessary in order to fully grasp social situations for the most marginalized in society. Black feminist liberationist theology like West's continues the feminist tradition of adjusting the emphasis on individual autonomy, drawing into conversation not only the fact that persons are individuals with freedom to make their own choices, but also that their relationships with others are of utmost importance both to understanding their successes and plights as well as to addressing issues. Problems are to be solved on a community level, not just an individual level:

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<sup>15</sup> Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), xvii. Black Feminist Liberationist thought, while specific to the black community, applies widely to women of color and the struggles they face. Feminist thought is never meant to be narrowly construed as applicable to only one subset of people, but as a rallying cry for all to listen to the marginalized, let them speak for themselves, know their stories, and move into a place of solidarity with them.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Autonomy and relationality are both inseparable and necessary for nurturing and confirming personhood (moral worth). When supposedly making our own choices, our dependent relationships to other persons and to the natural environment are at the center of how we learn, know, and experience what is moral and immoral. It is through these relationships that we even recognize the need for the freedom to make moral choices and come to learn what those choices might entail. Choices about exercising our freedom should infuse, enhance, or maintain respect in our relationships with one another.<sup>17</sup>

Feminist thinkers like West look deeper into the lives of marginalized women to deflect the erroneous and debasing caricatures played out in Congress and the media.

Challenging the way the poor and marginalized have been treated is no easy task. This is a re-writing of cultural history and demands strong and persistent voices speaking against ignoring the actual narratives of the oppressed. When U.S. Christians consider whether to democratically support policy initiatives restricting immigration status or making it harder to obtain, the perspective of those receiving (or not receiving) the benefits should matter a great deal. That kind of openness to the eyewitness testimony of the poor and marginalized “generates an uneasiness that lingers” for those “focused upon defending the moral fiber of [the] poor...even defenders seem to be caught identifying people who are poor as having [a] problem that needs to be addressed”<sup>18</sup> rather than simply allowing the stories of the oppressed to guide the conversation. It takes courage and humility to step away from society’s presumptions and really listen.

West makes important theological moves to re-characterize how best to hear and understand the poor, based in her reading of the scripture passage that is commonly referred to as “Mary’s Magnificat” in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. West claims

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<sup>17</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

that Christian scripture concerns itself with stories of faith as people grappled with challenging social and political realities. In the case of Mary of Nazareth's "song" prior to the birth of Jesus Christ, her son, West claims that Mary's words, as recorded in Luke 1:46a-55 are actually theological pronouncements about power that challenge us regarding our treatment of the poor by teaching a moral lesson about wealth and poverty and offering a "radical theological understanding of political realities that create these inequalities."<sup>19</sup>

Considering the words of the unwed, pregnant Mary in the first century over against the problems of the current state welfare functions in the twenty first century, West attempts to show that moral lessons gleaned from this passage can assist with a better understanding of poor women now. While her focus may be on the problems of a lack of welfare offered to those women most vulnerable, with children to care for and little to no family support, her words are helpful for understanding why all of the marginalized must be heard and how black feminist theology can bolster the argument that women and minorities deserve space to speak for themselves. Luke's gospel, like most ancient texts, is fraught with social depictions of poor women that offend our sensibilities in modern times, but despite this, West insists that Mary's words in the Magnificat "carry a message about God's concern for the particular lives and needs of the lowly and poor...[that] stresses God's powerful actions on their behalf."<sup>20</sup>

First, there must be a *blessing of the particular*. Mary's Magnificat speaks of particular circumstances and lowly status, especially that of poor, unwed mothers (a

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<sup>19</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

group of especially marginalized persons both in the first century and now). The plight of particular circumstances like poverty matters to God, who provides salvation for the poor and oppressed. Second, there must be *no more humiliation*. Mary has “triumphed over her enemies.” Victory in God’s mercy should lead contemporary marginalized people to salvation and justice, just as it did for Mary. This means no more privileged tolerance of marginalized people’s suffering and indifference to their situations. Third, *reversal* must occur. By this, West means that Mary’s Magnificat and her particular situation are linked “with God’s delivery of justice in the broader society.”<sup>21</sup> This delivery of justice comes about as part of a reversal of situations: instead of regulating the poorest and most destitute, the wealthy and powerful become the more regulated (such as by having their morality analyzed and probed with the same close scrutiny given to that of the poor and marginalized).<sup>22</sup> Lastly, she emphasizes the concept of *churches breaking their primary allegiance to the state’s agenda*. Churches asked to provide government services must be able to separate ethically from the state-sanctioned illegitimacy attributed to their parishioners, including not only the poor or persons of color, but also those denied by law the right to even be present. Churches instead should call for changes in how the problems are solved. White U.S. citizen Christians must resist the comfort they can find in supporting values that point to the superiority of their own racial group. When undocumented, poor families who need benefit of better immigration laws are depicted as having a cracked foundation and innate tendencies toward criminality, whites receive the

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<sup>21</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 106-107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

unearned reward of being excluded from this depiction.<sup>23</sup> If Christians can adjust their theology to one that blesses persons in the particular and sees injustice and God's power of salvation over it through their eyes, contemporary stories that mirror Mary's Song will help bring the outcasts back into community and the privileged to a place of solidarity.

### **Mujeristas Luchando Por Voz/Mujeristas Fighting for a Voice**

*Ya las gentes murmuran que yo soy tu enemiga  
porque dicen que en verso doy al mundo mi yo.*

*Mienten, Julia de Burgos. Mienten, Julia de Burgos.  
La que se alza en mis versos no es tu voz: es mi voz  
porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo; y el más  
profundo abismo se tiende entre las dos.*

*Already the people murmur that I am your enemy  
because they say that in verse I give your I to the world.*

*They lie, Julia de Burgos. They lie, Julia de Burgos  
who rises in my verses is not your voice. It is my voice  
because you are the dressing and the essence is I;  
and the most profound abyss is spread between us.<sup>24</sup>*

One's story, her own truth, must come from her own voice. No one else can tell it the way she tells it. No one can create others' narratives and produce truth, for the honesty of one's own story cannot be duplicated by someone else's interpretation of a life: "What rises in my verses is not your voice. It is my voice because you are the dressing and the essence is I; and the most profound abyss is spread between us." Truth, for this poet, is in her voice as woman without boundaries, while the lie is the mask of a person put forth by her conventional roles of mother, wife, and object. The voice is

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<sup>23</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 110.

<sup>24</sup> "A Julia de Burgos," quoted and translated by Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 195-96.

buried beneath how others view her. The voice is her truth, her *I*, her story. To hear her truth, not only must she see beyond her own artificial limitations as a woman in a specific kind of culture, but so must her listeners.

*Mujerista* theology is a theology of story and real life based in Latina/Hispana culture that focuses on grassroots understandings of actual lived stories, rather than beginning theology with theory. *Mujerista* theology is a subset of liberation theology, with a more specific focus on giving voice to the most marginalized. *Mujeristas* focus on the participation of those who suffer, especially poor women of Latin/Hispanic heritage. By incorporating stories and feelings, these theologians seek to build bridges between the Hispana/Latina communities to link to those who differ from them by sharing their liberative stories. Ana María Isasi-Díaz's book *La Lucha Continues* begins with this focus on story – the author's own narrative of the daily life of a Latina/Hispana woman. The rest of the book is dedicated to explicating the function of the different aspects of *mujerista* theology, such as *lo cotidiano* (the everyday), social location, difference, liberating culture, *burlando al opresor* (tricking the oppressor, creating a new future shaped by Hispana/Latina women), justice and love, and reconciliation.

Through her own transformation into feminist scholar, then shaper of *mujerista* theology, Isasi-Díaz has become one of many voices contributing to the important work of bringing about changes that give voice to Latina/Hispana women in the United States. Isasi-Díaz writes her own story of when she recognized the lack of voice given to women in the Roman Catholic Church, and from within began to ask questions of the leadership from a grassroots group of Women of Color (WOC). One of the main goals for Isasi-Díaz

was bringing light to the power being used to dominate and cover up the voices of Latina/Hispana women in the Church, and in doing so, she realized not only that poverty was an issue, but that sexism instead of being separate from it, compounded it, resulting in even less of a voice for the marginalized women for and with whom she advocated. Appeals to justice simply are not enough, she writes; *narratives* must be told to create a bridge “between the mute experience of being wrong and political arguments about justice.” For Hispanas/Latinas, Isasi-Díaz write that the ongoing revelation of God manifests itself in *lo cotidiano* (the everyday), as well as the bodily actions of both thinking and being in the world. The goal of liberation leads to reflective praxis that involves action, decision, and interaction with the world. And no decision occurs without emotion.<sup>25</sup>

Oftentimes, emotion is not seen as a positive element of morality,<sup>26</sup> but Isasi-Díaz posits that “To know reality...one has to be, first of all, enmeshed in a situation, one has to be impacted and affected by it.”<sup>27</sup> The emotion of people’s stories is what *mujerista* theology leans on. One can only really become involved materially in a situation by

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<sup>25</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Nussbaum in her book *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1999), 72-73, discusses reason and emotion in her section on the feminist critique of liberalism. She deduces that some liberal thinkers have concluded erroneously that emotions hold an inferior status to reason (or are “confused reasoning”) because emotions have long been understood as “female” and thus inherently of lesser importance to a male-dominated discipline. But, as Nussbaum points out, emotions can be a function of reason; emotive responses like grief and fear are both ways of seeing and understanding. Liberal thinkers have not all dismissed the value of emotion, and though the strand of liberal ethics lacks coherency, feminist critique can offer ways to improve upon the liberal tradition by experiencing the value of emotional attachments by recognizing that emotions are part of cognition and thus should be evaluated positively. Additionally, though some stronger feminist critiques would assert that emotion cannot contain the kind of reason liberalism espouses, even the most self-giving of persons is involved in evaluative thinking in their emotion-giving, and if she is not involved in that, she is being taken advantage of by giving of herself to her own detriment and without care for the self. This lack of distinguishing of her own well-being from that of others is where the problem lies.

<sup>27</sup> Isasi-Díaz, 110.



feeling those things which the marginalized feel: “The anguish, pain, fright, and loss we [feel] can very well be placed at the service of making us go beyond our regular pattern of analyzing and dealing with situations in which we place ourselves always at the center.”<sup>28</sup> When we hear the stories of the oppressed and marginalized from their own mouths, when we start to feel their pains as our own by listening to their personal stories, fraught with emotion, only then can we begin to change our views about those persons we would normally keep at arms-length, including Latinas/Hispanas and all those oppressed and seeking justice. No longer are we simply dealing in our rational/cost-benefit analysis, but we are going beyond ourselves into the lives of those without our privilege. Emotions can guide us away from the “objectivity” of the supposed impartiality of non-emotive thinking and reasoning. “Pure reason” so often overpowers the pain of those under power, domination, and control. Supposed objectivity, according to *mujeristas*, is simply “the subjectivity of those who have the power to impose their own point of view on others.”<sup>29</sup>

Instead of being a roadblock to reason, emotions are a way of understanding reality that is inherent to the human condition. To be sure, emotions must be in concert with reason to some extent, but reason without emotion is not only disingenuous but harmful. Humans experience the world through both intellect and feeling. The gut-wrenching sensations in the face of injustice are part of the drive to then use intellect and emotions together to solve problems. Isasi-Díaz insists that without emotions, “our knowledge is incomplete, our understanding is severely hampered, our reasoning is

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<sup>28</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

faulty.”<sup>30</sup> Internalizing stories allows the emotions of the marginalized to spur us to hear them in ways some supposed “pure intellect” cannot. Additionally, trusting emotions becomes important for the privileged. No longer is an injustice a matter of supposedly emotionless analysis, but it becomes a human situation requiring a fully human response, empathizing with the marginalized’s feelings while simultaneously using their own emotions as a driving force for change on their parts.

Instead of providing a “one size fits all” function for all Latinas/Hispanas, Isasi-Díaz instead calls for recognizing the differences in the daily lives of the oppressed while also seeing the “empathetic fusion” of their shared experiences. The stories from those most affected by social structures in the United States are required to thoroughly explore any political/social issue that affects Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas in a way that culminates in justice. Doing this requires ongoing reflection on, anger toward, and changing of norms that keep whole groups marginalized.<sup>31</sup>

### **How U.S. culture creates problems for marginalized people**

The United States carries with it the weight of its own past, from its founding at the expense of the native peoples in the Americas, to its enslavement of Africans, to its current systematic exploitation and marginalization of undocumented immigrants. The White citizen majority and its ongoing sins of racism, classism, xenophobia, and long-term mistreatment of people of color have created an entire nation upon the backs of those struggling in a supposedly “post-racial” America to survive, thrive, and have the

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<sup>30</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

same rights and privileges of White U.S. citizens. White U.S. citizens have created and perpetuated evil in our society that needs urgent attention.

### **Culturally-Produced Evil and How to Religiously Overcome It**

Emilie Townes, a foremost womanist<sup>32</sup> scholar, argues that in order to define, engage, and eliminate the problem of what she describes as culturally-produced evil, one must enter into the interior parts of the lives of marginalized and oppressed people as well as the structures that put them in that position in order “to discover what truths may be found there” which is the “proper realm of womanist discourse based on interstructured analysis that includes class, gender, and race.”<sup>33</sup> Her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* provides a helpful discourse to “expose the ways in which a society can produce misery and suffering in relentlessly systematic and sublimely structural ways.”<sup>34</sup> She begins her discussion of the cultural production of evil with the idea of the “womanist dancing mind,” which provides the framework from which her womanist critique will flow – from the “particular community of communities yearning for a common fire banked by the billows of justice and hope.”<sup>35</sup> Within this framework, she begins the work of understanding where these culturally-produced evil structures do and do not originate and how to combat them. She does this through

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<sup>32</sup> While womanist scholarship is birthed from the African American tradition and thus focuses on the issues in that particular community as its prime objective, the scholarship is relevant to women of color (and truly, any person of color) when applied in different circumstances. For this project, womanist scholarship will speak to the reality and hardships of being a marginalized group of people in the United States. The marginalized referred to in this work are the undocumented immigrants among us, who have a similar set of circumstances leading to their marginalization.

<sup>33</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2006), 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

particularities. Townes uses “sites of memory” as her context in which to grasp the stories behind the institutional problems in order to get “into the interior worlds of those who endure structural evil as well as the worlds of structural evil itself to discover what truths may be found there.”<sup>36</sup> Her critical and analytical work insists that one cannot fully articulate or understand the structures of evil without examining issues of class, race, and gender – this is where the misery and suffering of structural evil is experienced in particular ways, with particular voices. Townes says that “history usually becomes the terrain of Whites. It is objective, rational, and true. Memory is the terrain of Blacks...” (and I would suggest, many persons of color from a myriad of backgrounds other than privileged White persons in the United States)... “Memory is subjective, emotional, and suspect.”<sup>37</sup> Both history and memory are subjective if recounted from differing points of view; thus, both must be recognized for what they are and expanded to consider the diversities of others in order to create richer and deeper analysis of and, eventually, change to structural evil.<sup>38</sup>

Townes explores how structural evil can start with human life and cultures becoming “commodities that are marketed and consumed in the global marketplace”<sup>39</sup> through an in-depth look at how race and gender have been both ignored and used in cultural commodification. She begins with a description of the Aunt Jemima phenomenon, playing on White fairy tales about the black mammy,

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<sup>36</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

unsexed/plump/modest/older dark-skinned black woman, who supposedly thrived under slavery. She points out the many ways this image has permeated black lives and stories with a patent untruth about both age (most black women who worked in the home were young women), gender (most black women were not giving up their own children to raise their master's children in happy communion with the white family, but were coerced into sexual acts with white overseers), and race (most black women in the home were mulattas, or mix-raced, lighter-skinned women). Fortunes were made on the relatively rare "mammy" ideal to commodify racist assumptions and belittling of marginalized African American women. The African American woman is by far not the only persona caricatured by oppressive White people, and Townes' work, while particular to African Americans (who of course, immigrated by force as slaves into the United States), is relevant to the stories of *Mujeristas* and other women of color, which we have already examined.

Townes describes not only particular instances of commodification, but a force of dominion led by the United States and its "city on a hill" mentality. This leads to "an increase of political polarizations along the lines of nation, race, gender ...class, denomination, and faith traditions...culture is sanitized and then commodified."<sup>40</sup> She insists that in the case of race, White Americans too often create identity around what they are not – "not Black, not Asian, not Latino/a, not-Native American." Townes says that we must instead "be able to construct our identity, our selves, in such a way that we

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<sup>40</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 57.

integrate the lives and histories of different peoples and cultures.”<sup>41</sup> This is the only way to fully confront structural evil that arises out of cultural processes and understandings. Only when we stand in solidarity, integrating others’ voices with our own, can we create any kind of just society that takes risks to better lives.

Instead of simply erasing the pleasing parts of the “city on a hill” myth for America, Townes suggests that we instead pay attention to “who and what may be at the foot of that hill (or clinging to its side) or to the cost we pay to keep our house on top of the mountain.”<sup>42</sup> Only when we give space to those not benefiting from the myth can we begin to fully see injustice and work with those affected to create a more ethically sound society.

Christianity has become a tool of commodification through its power in the political arena among those with higher standing, namely, the U.S. citizen White majority. Not only has it worked against the marginalized in very obvious ways (for instance, scripture being used to condone slavery), but it continues to do so even as overt racism is less acceptable. Christian triumphalism leads to the condemnation of those “foes” against the grain of Christian “winners.” This kind of drive leaves the national politics of the country (including its immigration policies) at the mercy of the imperial mindset, which Townes argues is antithetical to democracy. It is the work of the wealthy and powerful (read: White citizens) to create hegemony in society (controlling reality and shaping it to please themselves), that ultimately ignores the reality of real lives.

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<sup>41</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Poverty, race, and immigration status thus remain off the radar of many in power, being chalked up to poor morality on the part of the marginalized. Townes aptly notes that talk of reparations for Blacks is “about White power and privilege sashaying around with Christian triumphalism, empire, and imperialism...the elite White imagination creates a world complete with images built on stereotypes of utter otherness.”<sup>43</sup> We are still in a time where undocumented immigrants are “othered” in profound ways, considered “criminals” for their very presence in the country, even as the outdated immigration laws do not offer enough recourse for short-term workers or family reunification. Until Christians can see fully the culturally-produced evil structures supporting the marginalizing of undocumented immigrants, they cannot begin to break them down through political and social advocacy. Townes’ explanation of the structures of evil and their origination points can help socially-minded Christians in position of privilege to see and then act.

To begin to combat such ingrained imperialism and othering, Townes posits that objective generalizations and observations are simply not enough to contend with the full reality of oppression and marginalization. Being a detached observer is not merely difficult, it is impossible. If one does not attempt to experience being the “other” through others’ stories, one will only experience from one’s own social location, with all its biases and potential misunderstandings of what it means to be marginalized. Instead, there should be an emphasis on the context and experience of the marginalized to fully explore and confront the issues. She admits there are challenges this experience creates

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<sup>43</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 109.

for analyzing, but she continues to insist that it helps us to “develop empathy and respect for others and, more importantly...creat[e] public policy, to share in the experience of others.”<sup>44</sup> To fully examine knowledge claims, we must use the interconnected components of ethics, emotions, and reason. “As contextual, these components are often marked by class, gender, and race formations. When joined with religious values, these are powerful actors in public policy formation.”<sup>45</sup>

We continue to perpetuate the supposed “Black woman’s space” in society, just as we do the undocumented person’s place. Townes says, “The damaging effect of such epistemological musings is that they take bits of Black reality and transform them into moral depravity as the norm for Black existence. This is structural evil working at its best (or worst).”<sup>46</sup> The reality for undocumented immigrants is similar – their existence in a country where they do not have legal status shapes how many of the privileged class (particularly White citizens) view them. According to a large majority of more conservative politicians, undocumented immigrants are unworthy human beings, morally bankrupt rule-breakers, and obviously “out to get” White U.S. citizens and their jobs, healthcare, and social welfare.<sup>47</sup> The undocumented are thus hidden in shadow, for the

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<sup>44</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 114.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>47</sup> See the Pew Center’s data for polling related to recent deportation relief laws, noting that “non-Hispanic whites disapprove of it by nearly two-to-one (62% vs. 34%), with nearly half (49%) disapproving very strongly,” online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/immigration/> Additionally, Daniel J. Tichenor, PhD, of Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy has published a paper titled “The Congressional Dynamics of Immigration Reform,” Baker Institute, online: <http://bakerinstitute.org/media/files/event/00794bd6/LAI-pub-TichenorCongressionalDynamicsImmigration-040813.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2015) which states, “border hawks today see the illegal immigration problem as nothing short of an unprecedented breakdown of American sovereignty that compromises national security, the rule of law, job opportunities for citizens,



White majority still needs their clothes laundered, their children cared for, and their vegetables harvested. They are simply ignored, until political necessity calls for a scapegoat to blame for whatever campaign promise is not being fulfilled.

This radicalization of an entire group's worth has led to the truncation of those lives at the bottom of the hill the city supposedly sits on. Townes rightly asserts that "public policies reflect the working out of our national value judgments. The moralization of poverty in the age of empire is a gruesome and death-dealing pageant for low-income and poor women, men, and children,"<sup>48</sup> and undocumented immigrants are no small part of this country's poorest and most marginalized. Townes calls for "a more democratic epistemology...that stresses an interstructured autonomy, dependency, and interdependency [that dynamically] calls for a more truth-filled and more open process of making public policy decisions...a more inclusive epistemological stance in public policymaking [that] appreciates the diversity of our experiences rather than see them as nuisances or representative of special interest groups."<sup>49</sup> She says that this different kind of approach would not necessarily start with simple individualism, but would instead begin with change to social structures that would enable all strata of society to work together to improve the systems we have. Townes would not begin this change from a purely "objective" standpoint (even if there were such a thing). Instead, she would use

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public education, and social services. Mobilized by conservative talk radio, columnists, and television commentators, many Main Street Republicans are outraged that the nation's fundamental interest in border control and law enforcement has been trumped by the power of immigrant labor, rights, and votes. Amnesty of legalization proposals inspire hostile resistance from this camp, which views them as unethical rewards to those who break the rules."

<sup>48</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 125.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

religious notions of love and justice to claim rights as part of the assertion of our dignity and well-being. It is relational, not autonomous, and leads to a sense of caring that could be actualized for undocumented immigrants in accessible legal status and improved social standing.

Townes suggests that this change of structure must also occur on a religious level, or the church becomes (even more) complicit with the dominant political powers. If this change does not occur, religion really does only become an opiate, and not a source of just change. She asserts that the notion of community itself must change. We must become more interdependent, focusing not on domination and competition, but on how we can better embrace the individualism of all persons in diversity: “it is not for us to garner absolute truth, but to be in a process of radical engagement with each other as we participate, together, in constructing the common good. This requires epistemological courage and theoethical fortitude.”<sup>50</sup> She goes further to say that not doing this, that settling “for a weak democratic system that runs roughshod over people is to reconcile with structural evil.”<sup>51</sup>

Engaging this as a group, we use both intellect and emotion, what Townes describes as a “counternarrative.” This kind of narrative lives in what Townes describes as the “true-true,” not the “almost-true” or “sometimes-true.”<sup>52</sup> Keeping justice and peace at the forefront and listening to a diversity of particular lives and memories and histories is ongoing work requiring a mediating ethic. She insists we should live “our lives not

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<sup>50</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 136-137.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

always comforted by the holy, but haunted by God’s call to us to live a prophetic and spirit-filled life, and not just talk about it or wish for it or think about it – actions that mean that we remain in the tension.”<sup>53</sup> We are to demand the uncovering of injustice and the working through of how we dismantle evil in order to meet the needs of those “least of these,” including the stranger and the outcast.

Before we assert that the cultural production of evil and its hegemony sits outside of us, we must realize we are actually in a world that we helped to make, with those in a place of privilege having a great deal more work to do to overcome the poor imaginations we have had up to this point. All of us have better imagination deep within us. She says that, as black mystic and theologian Howard Thurman suggests in his autobiography *With Head and Heart*, we must blend head and heart to confront and change this social hegemony.<sup>54</sup> And, she insists, this must be a group project. There is no way to dismantle a cultural production without the work of community. “Individual acts, while helpful, will not provide enough moral oomph to unhinge and dismantle the tremendously entrenched force of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.”<sup>55</sup>

As the empire nation in a global world, those of us in the United States have enormous influence on a global scale. We can do great good with our wealth and power (and have), but we must not fall prey to our own work ethic, only focusing on our insular needs as a bordered nation or our needs as the wealthy and White. Part of womanist theology and ethics is a deep focus on truth-telling. No longer do we simply believe the

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<sup>53</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 161.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

White myths about Blacks, Latinos and Latinas, or Africans. No more do we amass power and wealth without digging up the bodies upon which the wealth is buried: “If we can hold on to digging up the truth when it gets buried in geopolitical, sociocultural, and theoethical cat fights and mud-wrestling contests, then we will be able to bring together justice-making and peacekeeping to dismantle evil.”<sup>56</sup>

The real lives of people of color who must prove and justify their very being in places like immigration courts and ICE detention centers face challenges that White U.S. citizens cannot fathom. But Townes contends that this stuff of nightmares does not have to have the last word for Black women and men, or for any people of color. Instead, she says, dreams can be more powerful than these nightmares and overcome through the intersection of challenge and hope. This challenge and hope come from those such as her Black foremothers and fathers who “refused to acquiesce to demonic stereotypes.”<sup>57</sup> She says the hope given by them is also the hope passed on to future generations that bit by bit the culturally-produced evil will come crashing down. This combination of challenge and hope is what keeps the oppressed going when strength is weak and the present is discouraging: “This has the relentless and timeless force of water on the rock of the entrenched evils of the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Ultimately, the water wears the rock away through an unwillingness to alter its course.”<sup>58</sup>

Living in this intersection of challenge and hope is not easy, for anyone. It requires living in the present and for the future simultaneously. It requires loving and

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<sup>56</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

cares for other people as ourselves and “interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us and calls us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living.”<sup>59</sup> This covenant commitment seems for Townes to mirror a marriage covenant – in sickness and health, in predictable and unpredictable, in safe and insecure. This requires a prophetic fury in order to protest “the sins of a fantastic hegemonic imagination.”<sup>60</sup> This way of living requires what Townes calls “everydayness” – an everyday way of living faith deeply, recognizing accountability and responsibility for the justice and love that needs to happen in every facet of life, from personal to national to global. Townes tells us that: “The challenges of forging a tough solidarity demand all of our creativity and intellect as we step toward a more just and whole society.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Marginalized People’s Responsibility and Autonomy**

Simply recognizing the structures and culturally-produced evil White U.S. citizens have created is not enough, though. White U.S. citizens must also recognize the personhood, rights, and autonomy of undocumented immigrants. Feminist scholar Martha Nussbaum provides a deeply thoughtful and philosophical reflection on what autonomy might mean for the most marginalized, especially poor women. Her work speaks well to the issue of the poorest and most marginalized undocumented immigrants, many of whom seek to be seen and heard as full persons in a society that has largely hidden them, ignored them, and given them no voice to speak for themselves.

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<sup>59</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 163.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

### **Feminist Liberal Autonomy**

A common critique of feminist thought is that it strays from liberal notions of rights and equality in favor of a general relativism. While certainly in some cases this is true, other strands of feminism have reinvented these concepts in unique ways that take into account the autonomy of the most oppressed women, as well as their resourcefulness and need for better social support. Martha Nussbaum in her book *Sex and Social Justice* does just that. She reclaims traditional liberal ideas of rights and autonomy for feminist thought. Instead of discarding extremely useful ways of approaching ethical reflection (such as individual autonomy and the function of universal goods), she reinvents them in feminist reflection on gender inequalities. She does not simply embrace the problem-ridden utilitarian views that often ignore much of the particularities of gender issues, but recreates Rawls' "primary goods" and "good functions" into "Central Human Functional Capabilities." Her capabilities approach moves from the focus on specific goods needed for human functioning to specific opportunities/capabilities needed for human flourishing. Flourishing, according to Nussbaum, moves beyond "bare humanness"<sup>62</sup> toward a life in which humans can fully function with dignity and choice. Nussbaum asserts that just because feminism so often looks at particular circumstances and relational collective flourishing, the work of liberalism is not absent, nor should it be, even if shaped into something somewhat different and more attentive to feminist principles. Nussbaum finds it intrinsically important for individual flourishing to happen first, before collective flourishing can. Women too often have been seen as means to an

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<sup>62</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 40.

end and not ends in themselves, she reasons, and thus the individual approach of liberalism begins to move women (and I argue, any deeply oppressed group) from the shadows and into a place of importance.<sup>63</sup>

The scope of Nussbaum's work in *Sex and Social Justice* is broad and calls all societies and governments to task on the issue of marginalized women's struggles. While surely all governments and societies must work toward a more just system of moral and legal codes that address these issues, for purposes of this thesis, her work is useful in its focus on human dignity generally; that is, when discussing the millions of undocumented immigrants already in the United States, to conserve space, we are necessarily precluding conversation about their home countries and their shortcomings on human rights. Her concept of human dignity is rooted in an approach that allows all people to flourish by creating and enforcing both laws and mores that guarantee persons agency to live their lives on their own terms. This approach provides space to discuss issues in various contexts, not just in the broad context in which she focuses. Undocumented immigrants lack much of what Nussbaum (and others) consider basic human rights that uphold their dignity as free agents and fully human persons. Nussbaum wants all societies to provide "social support for basic life functions, including prominently basic liberties"<sup>64</sup> for all human beings. For purposes of this thesis, while foregoing the questions of whether and how home countries are failing or need to deal with these issues, those same desires are being applied to a specific situation in which there are concrete ways for Christians living in a democratic society to enhance the life situations for millions of people by creating

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<sup>63</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 62-63.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

and enforcing laws and moral codes that create space for these persons to flourish. In other words, this thesis cannot and will not answer all of the global justice questions forcing or encouraging migration to other countries, but it will use Nussbaum's capabilities approach to outline some of the ways the United States is falling short on treating undocumented immigrants with dignity, and it will provide some suggestions on how best to encourage privileged U.S. citizen Christians to both understand and act on this issue.

Nussbaum's list of capabilities covers many of the needed abilities that must be addressed for any marginalized group, including marginalized undocumented immigrants in the United States. Some of the capabilities covered that are particularly important to the discussion of undocumented immigration include:

- 1) *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.<sup>65</sup>

For undocumented immigrants seeking new life in the United States, living a life of "normal length" is a constant struggle. Oftentimes immigrants die entering the U.S. through dangerous desert routes,<sup>66</sup> work back-breaking labor jobs for little pay for twelve hours a day when work is available, sending a great many immigrant men to their deaths.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 41.

<sup>66</sup> Fernanda Santos, "Arizona Desert Swallows Migrants on Riskier Paths," *New York Times*, online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/us/immigrant-death-rate-rises-on-illegal-crossings.html> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>67</sup> Pia M. Orrenius and Madeline Zavodny, "Do Immigrants Work in Riskier Jobs?" PubMed Central (PMC), online: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831347/> (accessed 8 March 2015).



- 2) *Bodily Health and integrity*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished; being able to have adequate shelter.<sup>68</sup>

Even if undocumented immigrants have made it into the U.S., their families are not eligible for affordable healthcare, and oftentimes avoid using healthcare facilities due to fear of providing damning documentation (or lack thereof) about their immigration status.<sup>69</sup>

- 3) *Bodily integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; being able to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault, marital rape, and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.<sup>70</sup>

Moving freely is not something undocumented immigrants do in the United States. Laws in states have become restrictive,<sup>71</sup> calling on local law enforcement to become immigration police, even as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on the federal level has in recent years increased the number of raids resulting in mass deportations.<sup>72</sup>

Without new laws to support their right to be present in the U.S., undocumented immigrants will suffer from daily fear of being ripped from their families, jobs, and communities. Additionally, many undocumented Latinas use charities to receive healthcare, including many religiously-based charities that do not offer comprehensive

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<sup>68</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> Ruth Tam, "What's Holding Undocumented Immigrants Back from Seeking Healthcare?" PBS, online: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/whats-holding-undocumented-immigrants-back/> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Nussbaum, 41.

<sup>71</sup> "Analysis of HB 56, 'Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act,'" ACLU, online: <https://www.aclu.org/immigrants-rights/analysis-hb-56-alabama-taxpayer-and-citizen-protection-act> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>72</sup> Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "U.S. deportations of immigrants reach record high in 2013," Pew Hispanic Research Center, online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/02/u-s-deportations-of-immigrants-reach-record-high-in-2013/> (accessed 8 March 2015).

reproductive healthcare, leading to a severe lack of choice on the part of poor women of color.<sup>73</sup>

- 4) *Affiliation*. (a) Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this capability means, once again, protecting institutions that constitute such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedoms of assembly and political speech.) (b) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. (This entails provisions of nondiscrimination.)<sup>74</sup>

Undocumented immigrants often lack any political or social voice, as they fear removal from the country as retribution for speaking out. Oftentimes in news reports and political rhetoric, undocumented immigrants are described in callous and nonhuman terms, degrading their very sense of self as they watch television news and read political reports from the state and national capitals. This rhetoric can also move those who espouse the terms to violence and bullying of the undocumented population.<sup>75</sup>

- 5) *Control over one's environment*. (a) *Political*: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the rights of political participation, free speech, and freedom of association. (b) *Material*: being able to hold property (both land and moveable goods); having the right

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<sup>73</sup> Recent pushback from various religious groups, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has demanded exemption from dispensing emergency contraception or referral for abortion services. Reproductive healthcare is limited for some of the most vulnerable women, migrant women, some of them only children, many of whom are sexually assaulted and raped simply trying to enter the country. See Esther Yu-Hsi Lee, "Faith Groups Are Trying To Block Emergency Contraception For Raped Migrant Children," ThinkProgress, online: <http://thinkprogress.org/immigration/2015/03/05/3627571/faith-refugee-contraception/> (accessed 8 March 2015). For the full written letter from the faith groups, see: "Comments on Interim Final Rule on Unaccompanied Children," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, online: <http://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/rulemaking/upload/02-20-15-comments-UM.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 41.

<sup>75</sup> "Anti-Immigrant Hate Crimes," Southern Poverty Law Center, online: <http://www.splcenter.org/intelligence-report/-year-hate/anti-immigrant-hate-crimes> (accessed 8 March 2015).

to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from the obvious ramifications of being undocumented (being unable to obtain authorized employment, being able to vote in elections that affect their lives in the U.S.), undocumented immigrants often cannot obtain employment protections because they must work “off the grid” or use a fake social security number and identification to work, gaining all of the taxation without representation or benefit.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, working on or off the grid, these workers cannot make claims against unjust employment practices that U.S. citizens can because of their fears of deportation. Undocumented immigrants face setbacks to home ownership and banking practices (though this is beginning to change in recent years).<sup>78</sup> Also, undocumented immigrants who have grown up in the United States, brought here as young children, and having very few ties to their birth country, often graduate high school with few job prospects or struggle to get an education that will allow them to enter the job field. Even with a U.S. degree, this generation has struggled to find meaningful work due to a status chosen for them as children. The recent executive action on immigration called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)<sup>79</sup> has

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<sup>76</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Francine J. Lipman, “The Taxation of Undocumented Immigrants: Separate, Unequal, and Without Representation,” University of Nevada, Las Vegas – William S. Boyd School of Law Scholarly Commons, online: <http://scholars.law.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1827&context=facpub> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>78</sup> “Serving the Underserved,” Immigration Policy Center, online: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/perspectives/serving-under-served-banking-undocumented-immigrants> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>79</sup> “The Obama Administration’s DAPA and Expanded DACA Programs: FAQ,” National Immigration Law Center, online: <http://www.nilc.org/dapa&daca.html> (accessed 8 March 2015).

served to assist these DREAMers,<sup>80</sup> but with ongoing litigation against it and other executive immigration orders, they could again be in a precarious state of inability to work – and, even with a work card and job, these younger immigrants do not gain long-term status through their deferred deportation application. They are still at the mercy of restrictive, out-of-date immigration laws.<sup>81</sup>

Every group experiences these needs for assistance reaching their optimal capability in different ways, in specific contexts. This is where Nussbaum moves into a very concrete, feminist understanding of rights and autonomy. Each capability she endorses (and the list above is not the complete list – there are many others, and even more she admits are not written in her book), need to be dealt with in different ways for different groups. For instance, in the case of undocumented immigration, simply providing blanket amnesty would not be a comprehensive enough solution, as other ongoing problems of racism and hate would still continue (as the United States learned with civil rights for black men and women), though of course better laws would be one, very large, required step forward for the undocumented. Certainly, with the capabilities approach, autonomy is protected, as each person still has his or her own choices he or she can make in life (which may or may not include everything on the list of potential actions

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<sup>80</sup> “Who and Where the DREAMers Are,” Immigration Policy Center, online: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/who-and-where-dreamers-are> (accessed 8 March 2015).

<sup>81</sup> “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a prosecutorial discretion program administered by USCIS that provides temporary relief from deportation (deferred action) and work authorization to certain young people brought to the United States as children—often called “DREAMers.” While DACA does not offer a pathway to legalization, it has helped over half a million eligible young adults move into mainstream life, thereby improving their social and economic well-being,” Immigration Policy Center, “A Guide to the Immigration Accountability Executive Action,” online: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/guide-immigration-accountability-executive-action#deferredaction> (accessed 31 March 2015)

one can take). But then they are no longer constrained by their inability to make those choices, which provides the space within which one can flourish in ways of his or her own making.

### **Solidarity and Risk for the Privileged**

Once the voices of the marginalized are heard, their stories told, the socially-constructed evil unmasked, the importance of their autonomy recognized, and their lack of capabilities accepted, White U.S. citizens then must find ways to move into solidarity with their undocumented friends and neighbors to begin the process of changing structures of evil perpetuated against them. Knowing the meaning of solidarity and the risk it entails is yet another way Christian feminist ethics can transform the way in which undocumented immigration is approached by White U.S. citizens. Solidarity is a word used in many contexts, but explored here is one distinctly liberative and feminist viewpoint from Rebecca Todd Peters, along with a discussion about whether White U.S. citizens truly do flourish because of their privilege by Lisa Tessman, and a description of the risks involved in moving into solidarity with the marginalized from Sharon D. Welch.

### **The Search for Solidarity's Meaning**

Solidarity is not a term with a single definition. Rebecca Todd Peters in her book *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*, explores what solidarity might look like for the privileged through a lens of Christian social ethics, a public theology that “engages in critical social analysis...[to develop] normative moral criteria to help shape human behavior and social policy.”<sup>82</sup> She layers on the work of critical feminist and

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<sup>82</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 2.

liberationist theologies to examine “interstructured oppression, privileging standpoint theory and the importance of social location, and the emphasis on developing relationships across lines of difference.”<sup>83</sup> She insists that too much focus on individual self-worth and dignity has clouded our view of the common good. While we should retain these affirmations of individual autonomy (as Nussbaum rightly rationalized), Peters says a theology of solidarity would go a step further, being “rooted in the values of mutuality, justice, and sustainability.”<sup>84</sup> To create an ethic of solidarity, Peters proposes three foundations:

- 1) *Understanding social location and personal privilege.*<sup>85</sup>

Social location would include any identity-forming circumstances, including “race, gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and class...that affect one’s experience of the world.”<sup>86</sup>

- 2) *Building relationships with people across lines of difference.*<sup>87</sup>

Doing this will promote long-term change through raising consciousness on a higher level than simply reading about others. It will eventually change the way the privileged understand their world by giving them faces, names, and stories – rather than being statistics on a page.

- 3) *Engaging in structural change.*<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 3-4.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

More than compassion as the sole religious response to suffering, the poor and marginalized need justice through structural changes to the social problems that ensnare them in cycles of ongoing oppression. Conflict transformation can be addressed in many ways, but by far, religious persons have one of the strongest and most meaningful ethical foundations upon which to analyze, critique, and ultimately change the damaging social structures harming marginalized people.

Peters says that because solidarity in the first world (such as White U.S. citizens in relation to undocumented immigrants) begins from a position of privilege, the discussion must also begin there – at the point of understanding privilege.<sup>89</sup> To do this, those in positions of privilege must work through what Peters calls “categories of moral intuition.”<sup>90</sup> Moral intuition is cultivated as persons “negotiate complex moral situations that are new or unfamiliar.”<sup>91</sup> This moral compass functions out of a worldview a person has, and it begins in a stage of sympathy, or feelings of pity toward an “other,” which ultimately leaves a sharp divide between self and “other.” The second stage is responsibility, when people of privilege realize their own complicity in the systems of oppression, but at this stage, they cannot imagine how they might make a difference in such a system. Plaguing this stage is a sense of paternalism, or perceived moral superiority toward the other. While responsibility does move persons toward an understanding of privilege, it does not solve the underlying problem: that the “other” is still separate, different, and somehow less than the privileged person. The final stage

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<sup>89</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 30.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Peters describes is mutuality. This category equalizes the marginalized and the privileged through the “understanding that the well-being of all creation is interdependent.” In mutual relationships, persons of privilege no longer seek to solve problems for the marginalized, and they see that social location and not inherent worth, determines the place in which persons find themselves. Solidarity is built on mutuality and moral equality.<sup>92</sup> Solidarity is not simply a category of intuition, though. It goes a step further, in a commitment to moral action alongside those who are marginalized:

While some people may simply act out of their moral intuitions, a more morally responsible course of action is for people to employ their moral agency to engage in ethical reflection that can help people discern how God is calling them to respond in word and deed to the injustice in the world.<sup>93</sup>

Peters then proposes how faith can assist in the work of the responsible action of solidarity by describing how Christian solidarity will “negotiate the territory between pragmatism and prophetic vision.”<sup>94</sup> For Peters, the work of the Social Gospelers functions as a prophetic vision, but their idealism need not be the practical end goal, even as it is a dream about the human spirit and heart. Instead, she layers on a form of pragmatism that makes solidarity into what she deems “both a theory and an action” that is both a way of understanding the world and a way of living in it. This theory-turned-action describes a way of being for both the marginalized and the privileged that connect the two groups based on their shared interests, values, and goals.<sup>95</sup> Peters then outlines

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<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 37-41.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*



her theological anthropology – that human beings are created to be in relationship; there is something ontologically important about living in community with other people.<sup>96</sup>

With that as background, two ways she suggests ordering the world are through sustainability and social justice. These two work together, for sustainability requires people of privilege who would normally be consuming and destroying to live more simply, thus bringing them into better community with those who already do live more simply. Social justice follows suit – just as we care for creation in ways that equalize others with our privilege, we must also care for those different from us to ensure everyone’s needs are met, just as Old Testament legal codes required of the ancient Hebrews. God’s covenant with God’s people after liberation from slavery leads to a more just society.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, in the New Testament, Peters points out that the concept of *metanoia* (or a radical transformation of heart, mind, and soul) describes what can happen with the privileged when they move into solidarity with the poor and marginalized in their everyday lives in different ways. In other words, the inbreaking of Jesus’ way of living, in solidarity with others, changes people’s innermost being, redirecting them toward others in love.<sup>98</sup> What differentiates solidarity from Christian “brotherhood” is that instead of meshing differences into one group, solidarity recognizes the differences as meaningful. The problem with the rush to “brotherhood” (its patriarchal implications aside) is that it often tries to quickly *overcome* strife due to differences instead of slowing down and *listening* to those marginalized by their differences. In solidarity, we can still

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<sup>96</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 54.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

have a common cause, but we also are allowed to see and appreciate differences, listen to the marginalized and different, and grow and learn alongside each other. These new and differing voices that are suddenly heard offer new ways for those in privileged positions to be accountable to their equal neighbors. There is then a sense of compassion among the group that moves toward material realities being enhanced and improved by the small steps of individual action to the larger steps of creating change on a global scale.<sup>99</sup>

Learning of one's privilege is not an easy process. Peters insists that though some amount of guilt will inevitably accompany the process of solidarity, guilt is not a healthy ongoing feeling, as it can lead to paralyzing fear and disable those seeking to undo their burden of guilt: "Shame and regret do nothing to establish God's vision of right relation and justice in the world."<sup>100</sup> She says that while we cannot necessarily be held accountable for historical injustices, we are nonetheless accountable for how we respond to history and must work to change the structures and processes by which the injustices have occurred or are occurring. Peters says that when difference ceases to be a divider and instead becomes an "avenue for epistemological insights about the nature of humanity,"<sup>101</sup> the privileged will have the opportunity to see their advantages and those that others do not have and begin to cease talking and start listening, creating a more just and egalitarian community.

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<sup>99</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 63-66.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

### Whether Oppressors Really Flourish

Seeing privilege in the White community leads to the question of whether those with oppressive privilege are actually flourishing, even as their privilege affords them luxuries the marginalized do not possess. Is privilege really “the good life” or is avoiding solidarity with the poor and marginalized actually causing the privileged to miss out on what it means to “flourish”? Lisa Tessman, in her book *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, uses feminist theory and Aristotelian virtue ethics to rethink the “good life” as it is considered for both the oppressed and the oppressor. She has gathered research based in virtue ethics but focuses on the plight of the oppressive meta-structures in which we find ourselves (a feminist change of focus from Aristotle’s original work). She discusses the brokenness and morally damaged nature of the oppressed, but she also lays groundwork for examining the moral brokenness of oppressors who *seem* to be living “the good life” or “flourishing.”

Of particular importance for this work is her chapter “The Ordinary Vices of Domination”<sup>102</sup> wherein she explores how those who benefit from power structures are considered to be flourishing in ways the oppressed are not and yet are still damaged by their inherent oppressive (uncriticized) way of being. She explains that the vices of domination range from overt social oppression to simple, passive acceptance of unjust privileges built upon those who are positioned unjustly below them. She suggests that while violent, domineering men who batter women are not widely believed to be

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<sup>102</sup> Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53-80.

flourishing, persons who have unjust economic or status privileges are believed to be living the good life, or the “American Dream”:

This group could include anyone from the wealthy capitalist who exploits the labor of working people while remaining unsympathetic to the hardships of their strenuous, unsafe, or deadening working conditions, to the hard-working but fulfilled and well-rewarded member of the middle or upper class who resists redistributive measures that would equalize wealth.<sup>103</sup>

Tessman says that those who benefit from unjust systems may begin to flourish as they “become critical of their own social privilege [and]...try to change not only structural sources of oppression but also their own characters.”<sup>104</sup> The struggle is real for character change, though, as Tessman points out that while one may learn habits, such as no longer leaving the sidewalk upon meeting someone different for fear of being seen as racist or classist, he or she may yet continue in their fearfulness of the “other” on a more visceral level. Much more work has to be done to effect character change than simple changes in habits. The kinds of vices that continue in oppressively structured societies are so common Tessman calls them “ordinary.”<sup>105</sup>

Tessman argues that under virtue ethics theory, moral virtue is necessary for flourishing, and those exhibiting the ordinary vices of domination without critique are very far from the “good life.”<sup>106</sup> While the oppressors should not wallow in their brokenness, which can lead to inaction, she does consider that “ordinary vices of domination are all failings of other-regarding virtues”<sup>107</sup> and that in Aristotelian ethics

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<sup>103</sup> Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 54-55.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

there is room for the concept of flourishing “implicit in the liberatory goals of communities that are struggling against oppression,” maintaining “Aristotle’s assumption that the health of a social collectivity is key for any individual member’s well-being.”<sup>108</sup> Oppression equally but in different ways affect both the oppressor’s and oppressed’s hope for attaining the good life. Moral virtue must be understood not simply from an individual perspective, but from a collective perspective. The *polis* as a whole flourishes only as much as its members are virtuous.<sup>109</sup> While the obvious damaging effects of oppression to the oppressed need not be outlined here, the strong word from Tessman’s book is that we all will suffer if unchecked oppression continues under the guise of “ordinariness.” Thus, we must step out of the bounds of acceptance into a place of solidarity and change. And this will require risk-based action on the part of the privileged.

### **Risks Moving Forward in Solidarity**

Sharon D. Welch in her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, calls for an “ethic of risk” within the concept of solidarity, which she defines as “responsible action” that engages critically with (and not for) members of other communities.<sup>110</sup> She says that what those with privilege view as “responsible action” may have very little to do with what the marginalized and oppressed need or desire. Welch describes a different kind of moral reasoning, based in communicative ethics, that involves “accountability to others, an

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<sup>108</sup> Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 75.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>110</sup> Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 16.

openness to critique and insight from other perspectives.”<sup>111</sup> The risk undertaken in these kinds of encounters involves both the maturity to live among others as equals and not above them as overseers (community), as well as the risk to make mistakes and fail to solve all societal problems in a single generation (partial resolution):

Responsible action means changing what can be altered in the present even though a problem is not completely resolved. Responsible action provides partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions by others. It is sustained and enabled by participation in a community of resistance.<sup>112</sup>

This moral action becomes appropriate to the needs of others not only because of its immediate results, but also because of the possibilities it creates. One person cannot resolve other people’s problems, but participation in communal work with others can provide the necessary changes in systems that allow all parties more possibilities, even if it does not immediately resolve all problems in the interim.

This feminist ethic of risk is a multilayered approach to both ethics (a frame of morality) and a way of being (an action-based lifestyle). For Welch, these two are inextricable from one another. We must first see the problems with our current approaches and understandings, then really see the people affected by those approaches, and finally in solidarity, risk a great deal to move forward with others into a new shared reality framed by justice. This ethic has strong words for the privileged and provides a whole new framework from which feminists can work alongside others in oppressed situations (especially women of color), that ultimately can effect incremental change in structures and systems that oppress.

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<sup>111</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 18.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Welch begins her argument by pointing out the ways in which what she deems “the ethic of control” has dominated our discourse and our political imagination as a Western society. This ethic of control is so deeply entrenched in our cultural and political lives that we as Euro-American middle-class persons cannot imagine another way to be. For instance, the “burnout” of white middle class persons working in social justice is based in this ethic of control. Doing something in response to injustice becomes a question of what “responsible action” should produce. By assuming we can “do something” to effect change, we continue the cycle of desiring to control “events and receiv[e] a quick and predictable response...we are shaped by an ethic of control – the assumption that effective action is unambiguous, unilateral, and decisive.”<sup>113</sup> She insists the only way to begin to inch out of this ethic of control is to move into solidarity with the oppressed and *act on it*.

Welch provides specific descriptions of actions that White U.S. citizens in solidarity with undocumented immigrants might consider. Her description of how a feminist ethic of risk might happen theologically for those in solidarity is framed in the “beloved community,” which “names the matrix within which life is celebrated, love is worshiped, and partial victories over injustice lay the groundwork for further acts of criticism and courageous defiance.”<sup>114</sup> She describes a communicative ethic grounded in “dangerous memories” that drive the moral outrage and function to help create justice from remembering. Welch says this communicative life is not seeking consensus, but a “mutual critique leading to more adequate understanding of what is just and how

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<sup>113</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 25.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

particular forms of justice may be achieved.”<sup>115</sup> This solidarity with others is based on love, not a love of self-sacrifice, which is damaging to self-love (a deep problem among the oppressed), but a love that helps us to “accept accountability (in contrast to feeling guilt) and motivates our search for ways to end our complicity with structures of oppression.”<sup>116</sup>

To achieve beloved community, Christians of privilege must *really see* and live with the oppressed in a real way. We must not cringe at their anger or dismiss them. We must not give up on causes that support and change their lives. We must not succumb to what Welch calls the “middle-class numbness [that] is a luxury of being able to avoid direct interaction with victims.”<sup>117</sup> Love is not just sacrificing oneself for another, but giving love in community out of abundance. The immanence of the divine in all things good and right, as well as the creative outflow of fighting injustice, is for Welch what becomes grace in community. She says, “grace is not the opposite of works; it is the gift of being loved and loving that enables work for justice.”<sup>118</sup>

Her argument in support of an action-based ethic of risk does not initially lean on philosophy. Instead, she provides a litany of narratives, highlighting the struggles of those oppressed by racism. Her work *with* women of color (note: not *for* women of color) strengthens her argument in support of an ethic that is broadly inclusive and constantly critical of itself. She paints a picture of white middle class despair as inimical to

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<sup>115</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 129.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.



successful work in social justice. The privileged cannot seek social justice very well inside an ethic of control without succumbing to the problem of cultured despair – because one whose life is not controlled by oppression (but indeed is bettered by someone else’s oppression) will begin to despair over the ills of the world and lose sight of the work that needs doing, returning to her relatively easy life. She will not have what Welch calls the “rage” to continue the work. To have this kind of strength, we must be a part of the lives of the oppressed, providing voices of defiance and indicting our own complicity in the imbalances of power.

Welch’s ethic has three main parts in order “to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds: a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic risk-taking.”<sup>119</sup> Her kind of responsible action begins in communal memory, formed from the defiant voices of the oppressed. As she notes, “Justice cannot be created for the poor by the rich, for it requires the transfer of power from the oppressors to the oppressed, the elimination of charity, and the enactment of justice.”<sup>120</sup> Risk-based action recognizes the limits of any given group to effect change. To be sure, voices must be strong and defiant, filled with a “holy boldness,” but they also must be realistic and ready to take even small steps to make change a reality for future generations.

Welch then spends time indicting liberal and postliberal theologies for their shortcomings – whether too essentialist-driven or lacking the critique of power structures or misogyny. She instead evokes the deconstruction of the typical “eschatological reservation,” noting that all our works may be partial, but they are nonetheless works

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<sup>119</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 46.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

with and in divine purpose. She notes that grounding this reservation in an ethic of control will only lead to cultured despair, whereas if grounded in liberative theology, it can create an imaginative questioning of what the genuine limits in society are for change. There is no longer a “naturalized” limit based in a theology of control, but rather, there is a *pressing of limits* in loving community to combat perceived social constraints to justice. She says, “The genuineness of the limits facing a people can best be assessed from the point of view of love for people and from the perspective of those involved in concrete struggles to live with joy and integrity.”<sup>121</sup> Only in sophisticated questioning of these limits can self-critique emerge, checking “against the idolatrous reification of any particular human project.”<sup>122</sup>

Welch digs deep into African-American narrative, which contains these “dangerous memories” that provide a background for combating serious woes that continue for the oppressed. By incorporating a deeper understanding of black women’s suffering, Welch begins to have authority to speak with them about their struggles under oppressive systems. Reading Welch both indicts Whites and offers a risk-based ethic to stand in solidarity with women (and really, all persons) of color. With this new ethic of risk, Whites can begin to see how women and persons of color actually feel in their oppressed situation.

Welch’s version of eschatological reservation provides an “out” for those who have lost hope in fighting systems of oppression: “Sole attention to the failures in history can blind us to the partial successes; the realization that more is yet to be done masks the

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<sup>121</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 110.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

fact that some good has been attained.”<sup>123</sup> This notion “cannot provide such resiliency if grounded in a contrast between human actions and divine power. If political programs are faulted for not bringing about the kingdom of God, and if failure is seen as evidence of the folly of all human actions, the will for political action is destroyed.”<sup>124</sup> By embracing this notion of eschatological reservation not based in an ethic of control, those of us in positions of privilege can move past our burnout, recognizing both the boundaries of human hope and continually pressing on those boundaries to affect many smaller changes over time.

The maintenance of a liberative theology is not easy, however. Welch says, “one of the challenges facing liberation movements is the maintenance of love and solidarity in a form that enhances differences.”<sup>125</sup> We must not write off or assimilate the “other” into our own programs (as Welch points out in her discussion of oral cultures and other tribal differences). Welch insists that it matters greatly who is speaking when it comes to matters of great moral significance. By thoroughly experiencing others’ stories, the privileged can begin to appreciate our interdependence and begin to live fuller, more whole, lives as we struggle together to overcome racism, sexism, and classism. What grounds this beloved community and helps the whole group effect change is a spirit of love – not one of self-sacrifice, but one of continual giving from abundance by all members. Welch describes this love as providing “the resiliency of commitment, vision, and hope when efforts for change either are defeated repeatedly or are shown to be

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<sup>123</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 106.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

insufficient.”<sup>126</sup> This ethic of “love for self and for others can provide self-critique and social critique without the enervating cynicism of the eschatological reservation.”<sup>127</sup>

To get to this kind of theology of love, Welch employs a redefinition of god – as a deity that is no longer an absolute power that corrupts, but *the* relational power. She says “the power of compassion is divine”<sup>128</sup> and “we participate in divinity as we delight in the beauty of humankind, as we rage against all that destroys the dignity and complexity of life. The ability to love and to work for justice is profoundly spiritual.”<sup>129</sup> We need to “learn innocence” to avoid continuing the cycle of harms to others, and this is part of divinity. We as a privileged society have too long oppressed persons both politically and socially. In the case of immigration, they have been doubly oppressed – by both legal status and race. Persons of privilege must work alongside these marginalized people in their social struggles, in beloved community, with the help of the relational god, to assist with the ongoing need for change in these lives. Feminists like Welch help us reimagine deity as a supporter and lover of the oppressed, rather than a cornerstone of power for the ruling class. Certainly the need for a theology that raises the oppressed to beloved status is ever-present, and Welch’s strong assertion of a relational god is not unheard of, having much support in Trinitarian theology.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, Welch provides ways in which the

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<sup>126</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 165.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>130</sup> “To confess that God is triune is to affirm that the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship”... “It points to experiences of friendship, caring family relationships, and the inclusive community of free and equal persons as hints or intimations of the eternal life of God.” Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2004), 76-79.

privileged can not only understand theology and community, but ways we can act – fighting alongside our friends of color when racism bares itself, from ballgame to work to marketplace to church to immigration court.

This ethic is a powerful feminist ethic, asking much of those in privilege. Welch makes the case that action in solidarity by those in power is the only way to create space for the oppressed, to hear and see them, and ultimately to work alongside them. This feminist desire to situate persons, listen to them, and understand them from their own point of view is complemented by a radical call for defiance, rage, and powerful love and solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

Overcoming decades, even centuries, of oppression is no easy task. It demands a great deal of work on all sides to bring to fruition lasting, positive change. It continues to require ongoing care and reevaluation. The work of Christian feminist ethicists opens a myriad of very lucrative pathways for better understanding the problems facing the marginalized and the realities of privilege those with it must overcome in order to assist in the hard work of change. As Traci West showed us, communication between interested parties is a must. Both the privileged and the oppressed must be active in overcoming debasing characteristics put upon the marginalized by society. The privileged U.S. citizen Christians must stop talking and start listening to the stories of those affected, for as Ada María Isasi-Díaz pointed out, God is revealed in the everyday (*lo cotidiano*) and the emotions drawn up from the narratives told by the real people involved.

By seeing the undocumented immigrants as persons, hearing their stories, and recognizing privilege, our society can begin to unpack how our own systems of economy, faith, and mores have created the monster that is culturally-produced evil. Just as Whites have only begun to deal with the stain on their past and present that is racism, as Emilie Townes points out, so too U.S. citizen Christians can begin to “face our demons” and start to unravel the work of God from the unhealthy habits of our nation and first-world society by supporting laws and cultural changes that re-humanize and give voice to our undocumented neighbors.

Public policy and church teachings are value judgements and must be held to the high standards of the hard work of solidarity. This solidarity begins with recognizing the individual dignity of all human beings, whether undocumented or here legally, their liberties being part of their dignity. Rebecca Todd Peters confirms that this recognition of dignity can then move forward toward relationship building between the privileged and the oppressed so that the risks of solidarity moving toward justice might be undertaken together in community. Until something like Sharon Welch’s ethic of risk replaces our ethic of control, the privileged cannot flourish and live the good life any more than the oppressed can. We are all harmed by oppressive structures, as Lisa Tessman showed us, and unraveling them is one of the many helpful tools we have through the work of Christian feminist ethics.

Undocumented immigration is a complex and unwieldy topic that cannot be fully explored in any one written work. It is instead a lived reality, one which requires both theory and practice to support it as a means to end suffering, draw out the marginalized,

and take risks to make major changes in an oppressive system of injustice. While feminism began and continues to deal specifically with the plight of women in various contexts, the whole of the feminist scholarly endeavor need not be applied only to one subset of marginalized people. As Martha Nussbaum points out, “one’s feminism is not mere identity politics, putting the interests of women as such above the interest of other marginalized groups. It is part of a systematic and justifiable program that addresses hierarchy across the board in the name of human dignity.”<sup>131</sup> As set forth in this work, the work of feminist scholarship in religious theology and ethics (along with some secular work) speaks volumes to issues of great importance for our daily lives, whether we are privileged White U.S. citizens or the most oppressed and marginalized undocumented immigrant. Building bridges through information, story, liberty, giving voice, flourishing, solidarity, and risk in their many forms will create a more just society in which all persons, of any color or immigration status, is given space to live with equal regard.

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<sup>131</sup> Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 71.

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