Border Cuentos

Sources for Reflections on Migration

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Theological reflections on and pastoral responses to migration need to respect the human dignity and daily experience of immigrants, making room for their own naming and claiming of the experiences that shape their participation in building the reign of God.

In the middle of a large factory in the heart of downtown El Paso, Texas, U.S.A., Celia Ortiz, mi abuelita (my grandmother) made thread from cotton that was used in sewing uniforms for men serving in the United States military during World War II. One of these soldados (soldiers) was her own brother, my tio (uncle), Manuel Ortiz. Mi abuelita, a citizen of the U.S.A., commuted from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, every morning to work at this factory in the U.S.A.

Celia Ortiz was born in Phoenix, Arizona, the daughter of a citizen of the United States of Mexico and a citizen of the United States of America. My great grandfather was a citizen of the United States of America who went to work in the mines in Santa Eulalia, Mexico. His children were born in the U.S.A. and raised in Mexico.

Mi abuelita, though a citizen of the U.S.A. by birth, speaks mostly Spanish. She gave birth to my father, Antonio DeAnda, in Juarez, Mexico. My father is a naturalized citizen of the United States of America because of his mother’s birthright.

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I was born at Providence Hospital in El Paso, Texas, the daughter of two citizens of the U.S.A.

I recount these familial stories and histories because they concretely illustrate the complexities of life on the border. First, these cuentos (stories) portray a relationship that is both fluid and organic between these two neighboring countries. For generations, many families, including my own, have traversed back and forth across what is now the border between the United States of Mexico and the United States of America. These migrations were and still are made for a variety of reasons including but not limited to work, family, worship, shopping, and vacation on both sides of the border. Mi abuelito (paternal grandfather), for example, always bought everything in Mexico because he believed that one could always find better quality articles south of the border rather than on the northern side.

Second, these cuentos show how patterns of migration have benefited both countries. As citizens, mi abuelita and Tio Manuel served the U.S.A. in the Second World War. While working in the factory, mi abuelita lived in Juarez and contributed to the economy on both sides of the border. Tio Manuel, posted with the Third Infantry Division in Europe, was wounded and awarded a Purple Heart. Their contributions, like many Latinos, have added to the growth of both the U.S.A. and Mexico.

Third, these stories particularize lo cotidiano (daily lived experience) by naming individuals and identifying relationships, thus cultivating an appreciation for human dignity. Such specificity enhances our ability to connect on a human level with one another, sensitizing us to our shared humanity. It is this respect for the human dignity of real people that should guide immigration policies.

The Border A Place of Danger: A Few Notes on Methodology

While my U.S.A. citizenship allows me to name some members of my family and tell my story without fear of detention or deportation, the cuentos of those among us who are—as Carmen Nanko-Fernández describes—“alternately documented” do not permit such specificity without risk (Nanko-Fernández 2007). The border is a place of contradictions, and to write from border perspectives can be dangerous for some. At the border one finds “[t]he joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of [all people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 1).

To be a follower of Christ on the border means to try to understand and walk in solidarity with those afflicted. Yet, when writing from a border perspective, the lines between accompanying those who are afflicted and being one who is afflicted become very murky. Many times those actions and policies that reflect anti-immigrant...
sentiment directly affect those with U.S.A. citizenship or documentation legally recognized by the government of the U.S.A. These lives, relationships, and communities represent realities so interwoven that when one part of the body is afflicted, many are afflicted. Therefore, “failing to stand for just and comprehensive immigration reform impoverishes us all” (Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States).

The methodology of U.S. Latinao theologies privileges the daily lived experiences of individuals and communities (Espin and Díaz, 262). Specificity provides grounds for theological reflection. Migration invites such consideration. However, in this case, too much specificity—names, dates, and places—can prove detrimental to life and livelihood. In order to privilege the daily living of alternately documented immigrants, while preserving their anonymity, I draw on the practice of communicating through cuentos, stories told to me and passed on by me that convey certain truths. This use of cuentos serves to “open our souls to the possibilities, to the questions of ultimacy that our human existence and experiences reflect” (Delgado, 24). However, cuentos involve multiple levels of interpretation, and as author Sandra Cisneros reminds us:

Cuentos play a constructive role in the development of individual, family, and communal identity. They are passed across and within generations as part of a process of traditioning. There are parallels with Miguel Díaz’s observations on the Trinity as

God’s self-revelation as a paradigm for a Christian understanding of community-building processes. In this sense, God’s self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit can be described as a kind of handing over or traditioning of God’s life. This personal handing over is a signpost for the community-building process that constitutes the very reality of God. In turn, the way that God shares and hands over God’s self provides a Christian foundation for identifying authentic traditioning and community-building processes. (159)

A process of traditioning includes a personal relaying of messages where both those sharing (Díaz, 157) and those receiving (Ruiz, 103) engage in its shaping. As Jean-Pierre Ruiz claims about written text, “re-presenting it (tradition) in the vernacular of the here and now of reader and audience (even if the reader is his or her own audience) . . . is no less true when the texts that are being read are invested with special and normative authority as scripture” (Ruiz, 103). I would
like to take this statement further, as I consider oral traditions, including cuentos, to function as authoritative within certain communities, and in this case as they reflect on daily living from perspectives on the Mexico/U.S.A. border. Therefore, I use cuentos as a form of resistance to restore voice to those who need to be anonymous.

**Cuento 1: Buscando a Javier**

Buscas a Javier? (Are you looking for Javier?)” the woman at the door asked me as I searched for a friend at his apartment. “¡Se lo llevó la migra! (He was taken away by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a division of the Office as Homeland Security)” she informed me. I must have looked puzzled as she told me the story of how Javier, whom I had known since we were both children, had been sent to a detention center for six months. Then without any trial or legal counsel, he was deported to Mexico because he did not have legal documentation to be in the U.S.A.

Javier had already risked and lost much in crossing the Mexico/U.S.A. border. He had lost both his legs trying to catch a train to come to the U.S.A. After saving money for prosthetic legs, Javier worked as a gardener, landscaper, and home repair person for various families, some for more than ten years. In spite of major set backs, Javier worked to earn an honest living for himself and his family. He never used government aid programs and rode a bicycle to his various places of employment so as not to use public transportation.

Javier’s employers had no way to contact him or his family because he never gave them his family’s contact information in Mexico. He also never carried his employers’ contact information for fear of being caught. Javier never wrote or learned phone numbers or street addresses of his various employers out of concern that they could lose their jobs for employing someone without the work documents recognized in this country. During Javier’s time in the detention center, his family had no way to contact him. His wife and two children who live south of the border were forced to find other means of income because they were now deprived of Javier’s earnings.

Javier’s cuento connects us to the lived reality of another with aspirations that are familiar and foundationally human. His story dispels myths and stereotypes yet sheds light on the ugly reality of detention and deportation. For most first-generation immigrants, unemployment rates are low (Fernández-Kelley, 17), and few alternately documented migrants use social services or public assistance for fear of deportation (Fernández-Kelley, 18).

Like Javier, many migrant individuals and families are being kept in detention centers around the U.S.A. However, as the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services have discovered,
some of these facilities, for example in Texas and Pennsylvania, are best described as inhumane. In one facility, a pregnant woman does not receive proper nutrition and her unborn child is already underweight according to her doctors (WCRWC, 5). Another facility, the T. Don Hutto Residential Center north of Austin, used to be a jail. Describing conditions in family unfriendly detention, the *El Paso Times* reports, “Cell door systems prevent parents from attending to children after ‘lights out,’ separation and threats of separation were used as disciplinary tools on adults and children and the detention centers are operated without official regulations. Immigration and Customs Enforcement relies on custody rules designed for inmates.”

Some specific recommendations have been made for families in detention facilities. These include but are not limited to discontinuing:

- the detention of families in prison-like institutions, parole asylum seekers in accordance with international standards and DHS’s [Department of Homeland Security’s] own policy guidelines, expand parole and release options for apprehended families, implement alternatives to detention for families not eligible for parole or release, house families not eligible for parole or release in appropriate, nonpenal, homelike facilities, and expand public-private partnerships to provide legal information and *pro bono* legal access for all detained families, and to implement alternative programs. (WCRWC, 3)

As the U.S.A. debates the parameters of just immigration reform, Javier’s story highlights what is increasingly and painfully obvious:

Mounting evidence, the result of painstaking research, clearly shows that, in the age of globalization and with growing points of contact between Mexico and the U.S. illegal immigration will continue unabated. The question is not whether people will keep flowing to points of opportunity but whether more will have to die or sink to the bottom of the social ladder in the process. (Fernández-Kelley, 19)

### Cuento 2: Guilty Until Proven Legal

In my own experience, I have been told by a black homeless woman to return to my own country (DeAnda). I have also joked with my German, blonde-haired and blue-eyed fiancé about the day he will pass through immigration, and I will be detained because of my brown hair, eyes, and skin. While I have not yet been officially detained, I did receive more scrutiny from the airline employee checking passports, green cards, and visas for a return flight to Chicago from Munich, Germany. She approved my fiancé’s documentation without question. Then she looked at my passport twice. She quickly asked me questions as to who packed
my bags, where I was going, where I had been, and whether I had any flashlights or batteries. At times these two words are confused on the U.S.A./Mexico border where people call batteries _baterías_ while in other Spanish-speaking contexts _baterías_ are “flashlights” and _pilas_ are “batteries.” The airline employee may have been testing either my English abilities or, assuming Spanish to be my primary language, she was testing my translation abilities when asking for these specific items. When my fiancé tried to help, the airline employee quickly informed him that I needed to answer the questions myself. While I cannot conclusively tell why she asked me these questions, I believe she was trying to confuse me. I suspect that if I had floundered in my responses, I would have been taken for further questioning. Once I answered all of the questions in English and with an accent from the U.S.A., she allowed me to proceed with the check-in process.

From a perspective on the Mexico/U.S.A. border, identifying as Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican-American, and/or Latino/a is to participate as part of the majority yet our privilege can never be taken for granted. On the border, Latino/a hold the positions of superintendent for the El Paso, Ysleta, and Brownsville Independent School Districts. All these districts have schools within a few miles of the border. The president of the University of Texas at Brownsville, Dr. Juliet Garcia, “was recognized as the first Mexican-American woman in the nation to become president of a college or of a university” during her earlier tenure as president of Texas Southmost College (UTB/TSC 2007). James Tamayo is the bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Laredo. Latino/a hold places on all rungs of society on the Mexico/U.S.A. border. However, while some individuals work as supervisors in maquilas (U.S.A. company factories) in Juárez, others lost jobs in El Paso when the factories moved to Juárez.

A very strange tension exists between Latino/a as consumers and Latino/a as residents of the U.S.A. Marketing strategies target Latino/a’s dollars and loyalty. The U.S. Army, for example, runs ads in both English and Spanish and their website, www.Goarmy.com, provides a specific Spanish chat site for individuals to ask questions and receive answers in Spanish. The iTunes store has a link on its home page specifically for Latino interest. _People en Español_ debuted in 1996, and by 2006 it was the Spanish-language magazine with the largest readership in the U.S.A. Each issue reaches over 4.2 million readers (Echo Media).

To see marketing directed at Latino/a and Mexicans on both sides of the border is normal and expected as part of lo cotidiano. The message on the mountain in
Juarez, “La Biblia es Vida. Leela. (The Bible is life. Read it.)” is visible from both El Paso and Juarez, radio stations from both sides transmit to all sides, and companies and goods travel back and forth freely and openly. However, the process of human border-crossing has become increasingly difficult as vigilance mounts and security is tightened ("Holding the Line," 27). The treatment of Latinaos in this country reflects the misconception that all Latinaos are immigrants in the U.S.A. and that many are here without legal documentation. Documents like birth certificates, passports, or green cards establish who lives in this country legally and who has inalienable rights under the Constitution, yet increasingly certain workplaces and neighborhoods are subject indiscriminately to government raids that sweep up U.S.A. citizens and residents with the alternately documented based on appearance and language. Such confusion challenges the notion of community and tests relationships of solidarity, especially within Latinoa communities. Guilt by association raises the stakes for those who accompany their alternately documented neighbors.

**Cuento 3: Pesos and Cents**

After waiting forty-five minutes to cross the U.S.A./Mexico border, Sofia parks her classic 1966 Mustang convertible with Chihuahua license plates in a spot close to the engineering building at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). She grabs her Coach satchel and walks to class. Now a graduate student at UTEP, Sofia has followed a similar daily routine for more than eighteen years of education in the U.S.A.

One myth prevalent in U.S.A. culture is that migrants from Mexico and Latin America only come to the U.S.A. to earn money and send it to their families south of the border. From a border perspective, this myth is absurd. Mexican citizens with visitor or tourist visas come across the border daily to engage in business, vacation, shopping, and visiting family. Economically wealthier Mexican citizens send their children to private schools in the U.S.A. These children are educated from preschool through high school and some even attend university here. The full tuitions they pay at private schools can surpass $7,000 annually, a lofty amount for most families living on the Mexico/U.S.A. border. Students from out of state attending UTEP pay more than double the tuition than their counterparts who have documented and established Texas residency. Ten percent of the student population at UTEP commutes from Cuidad Juarez, Chihuahua (UTEP).

In shopping centers and malls, license plates from Texas equal the number of license plates from Chihuahua. At Cielo Vista Mall located on Interstate Ten in El Paso, Texas, “Mexican Nationals account for 17 percent of Cielo Vista Mall’s shopper base and exhibit a higher expenditure level than domestic shoppers” (Cielo Vista Information). A prevalent misconception in the U.S.A. is that of Mexican
citizens who come to this country to work and then take the money from the U.S.A. back to Mexico. Minimized are the financial contributions to the U.S.A. economy, not only of immigrants, but of countless border-crossing consumers who return home after spending in the U.S.A. their money earned in Mexico. The intricacies of globalization cannot be easily reduced to simple models of dependency.

**Cuento 4: From Familia to Kin-dom**

The last night with my grandfather would have been very different without Norma,” said Lola, of the home healthcare worker from south of the Mexico/U.S.A. border who cared for a man dying of cancer on the northern side of the U.S.A./Mexico border. “Because of her training and experience working with other cancer patients, she knew the signs leading to the final hours. Nos dio chanca de despedirnos y decirle adios a nuestro abuelo (She gave us the opportunity to properly say goodbye to our grandfather).”

Norma replied, “Porque Dios me ha mandado a hacer este trabajo, estoy aqui con su familia y hasta le digo a mis hijos que ellos pueden sin mi porque ahorita esta familia me necesita (I know that God has sent me to do this work. For this reason I am here with this family. I even tell my own teenage children [living south of the U.S.A./Mexico border] that they can manage without me because this family needs me now).”

Gary Riebe-Estrella sees most Latinaos as sociocentric and organic (174). In other words, many Latinoas find their identity within collective entities, and a primary group of belonging is la familia (family). Riebe-Estrella explains the notion of compadrazgo (co-fathering) (174–75), and I would like to add comadrazgo (co-mothering) as ways for persons who may not be blood relatives to join a family. Typically these relationships arise in the context of sacraments such as baptism or marriage, a common experience for Roman Catholics along the U.S.A./Mexico border. Sometimes these relationships are ritualized and other times they form the fabric of daily life without ceremony. Comadrazgo and compadrazgo not only unite people who may not be kin by blood, but these relationships carry lifelong expectations of mutual responsibility, caring, nurturing, and representation within and across families.

In this cuento, Norma and nameless others who care for our most vulnerable, especially the elderly, the sick, and the young on the northern side of the U.S.A./Mexico border understand their work as contributions to the good of others and the greater good of society. As in Norma’s case, both she and Lola, one of the family members who employed her, saw her labor as fulfilling a ministry, a response to her baptismal call from God. In this way Norma participates in building the kin-dom of God here on earth.
In another case, Sarita, a pregnant Mexican-American woman with two master’s degrees, spoke of Luz, the Mexican woman who was to care for Sarita’s daughter upon her return to her career. Sarita reflected, “Luz cared for all of my sisters’ children, and now she will care for mine as well. She has been in our family for many years. We really trust her. I know she will love and care for our daughter as if she were her own. I am extremely happy she is still willing to move in with our family and care for the baby.”

In both of these cuentos, Norma and Luz care for what in effect are adopted family members. Individuals from the southern part of the U.S.A./Mexico border live with families on the northern side for either part or all of a week. These individuals care for others’ family members as if they were members of their own family. In many ways they embody, through their labor, the notion of comadrazgo and compadrazgo. Yet, I do not want to use these cuentos to glorify or spiritualize an entire group of people. Following what Carmen Nanko-Fernández says, “To impose spiritual interpretations on las vidas cotidianas [the daily lives] of those who comprise our communities of accountability is exploitative, manipulative and to a degree voyeuristic” (2006, 58).

While many individuals do share lives, gifts, and talents with other families, they also are paid for their work. Too often, financial need dictates that they leave their own vulnerable kin behind in order to care for the sick, the young, and the elders of others. The powers of privilege that these cuentos unmask underscore the reality that mutuality cannot be assumed. A spiritualization of these relationships fails to account for the imbalance in power that is driven by economics and documentation.

As Ada María Isasi-Díaz articulates, “The word ‘kin-dom’ makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other; we will indeed be the family of God” (103). Although Norma understood her own work as ministry, actions contributing to building the kin-dom of God, co-mothering implies a mutuality that is often not present in relationships that are grounded in employment. In many ways Norma and Luz, within Lola’s and Sarita’s families respectively, participate as kin in the sense of comadrazgo or co-mothering. However, what responsibilities do Sarita and Lola bear in relation to the kin of las comadres? What about Norma’s children or Luz’s aging parents, who is caring for them? Some of these jobs on the northern side of the border provide more financial stability for families than many of the employment opportunities on the southern side of
the border. Is it possible to create ways in which families do not need to choose financial stability over caring for their own kin at home? The complexity of life along the Mexico/U.S.A. border defies simplistic spiritualization but invites sustained reflection on mutual accountability.

**Daily Life on the Border**

The cuentos I recount and pass on con cuidado (with both care and caution) bear the authority of daily lived experience and hopefully allow us to stumble on the truth (Cisneros). Theological reflections on and pastoral responses to migration need to respect the human dignity of immigrant storytellers, making room for their own naming and claiming of the experiences that shape their participation in building the kin-dom of God. Those among us who hold documentation recognized by the government of the U.S.A. are challenged to comprehend the privilege these documents bring and the obstacle they can pose to achieving mutuality in our relationships with those among us who are alternately documented. As daily life along the Mexico/U.S.A. border becomes increasingly complicated, and as artificial boundaries exacerbate levels of anxiety and fear, the work of justice and immigration reform necessitates a co-mothering and co-fathering where our “work is not a doing for others but, as far as possible, a being with others” (Isasi-Díaz, 86).

**Notes**

1 Except when they appear in a cited quotation or are used as specific terms, words and phrases in Spanish are not italicized to reflect the common, dynamic interaction between Spanish and English in the daily experience of the border.—Ed.

2 The author uses the terms *Latinoa* and *Latinao* interchangeably for specific reasons. First, because the Spanish language defaults to a masculine ending when including men and women together, using both letters ensures that the presence of women and of women’s voices is not negated, forgotten, or silenced. Second, by using the terms interchangeably, no priority is given to a masculine or feminine ending in order to maintain a more egalitarian understanding. Third, unlike *Latino/a*, which seems to signify an either/or context, use of *Latinoa* and *Latinao* represents better the fluidity that is present in gender contexts.—Ed.

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