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**The Holy Disobedience of an UndocuJesus:
Re-Reading Luke 2:41-52 alongside Immigrant Youth**

Armando Guerrero
Boston College

Introduction

“I knew ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] was all around us and that a raid was just on the horizon. But I couldn’t tell anyone what I was always watching for, what I was always anticipating.”¹ These are the words of Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, a formerly undocumented poet; his fear of deportation is shared by millions of undocumented immigrants throughout the United States and exacerbated, today, by the xenophobic rhetoric and policies of Donald J. Trump² and his uncritically obedient administration.³

According to Roberto Gonzales, Kristina Brant, and Benjamin Roth, “Of the country’s estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants, more than 2.5 million have lived in the country since childhood.”⁴ Over one million undocumented youth under the age of eighteen reside in this country; many of them are currently enrolled in the nation’s educational system. Gonzales and his colleagues write that nearly 800,000 of these young adults and children

1. Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 2.

2. To be sure, the Obama administration too conducted an unprecedented number of deportations; however, immigration-related policies became more inhumane under the Trump administration. I wrote this essay in the final months of that administration.

3. Throughout this essay, the terms “uncritical obedience,” “uncritically obedient,” and “uncritical acquiescence” will appear in lieu of “blind acquiescence” or “blind obedience” in order to move away from the ableist tendencies of these commonly used phrases.

4. Roberto G. Gonzales, Kristina Brant, and Benjamin Roth, “DACAdmented in the Age of Deportation: Navigating Spaces of Belonging and Vulnerability in Social and Personal Lives,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43 no.1 (2020): 60, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1667506.

currently benefit from Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Initiated by the Obama administration⁵—only to be immediately challenged by the administration of his successor—the program offers eligible participants legal work authorization and a reprieve from deportation, essentially placing DACA recipients in a two-year cycle of physical, emotional, and psychological *nepantla*,⁶ a liminal, in-between state—in this case, one of being “not fully undocumented and not fully citizens.”⁷ It is out of this undocumented/DACAmented “nepantilism” that I take my point of departure; I have called the United States my home for almost twenty-nine years and have benefitted from DACA since its initiation. Like Hernandez Castillo, I hold that being undocumented does not define who I am;⁸ nevertheless, living *indocumentado* has instructed much of my worldview, and it continues to shape the ways in which I theologize. It undoubtedly informs my reading and interpretation of Scripture.

Countless biblical narratives provide the opportunity to reflect upon experiences of migration and numerous biblical figures have served as rich sources for reflecting theologically

5. Though it was President Barack Obama who issued the executive order, it is important to highlight the fact that this would not have been possible without the constant pressure from immigrants and immigrant rights advocates. As this essay is being written, millions of undocumented immigrants and hundreds of thousands of DACA recipients anxiously anticipate a ruling from the Supreme Court regarding the validity of the termination of the program.

6. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999), 100.

7. Norma Ramirez, “Awaiting a DACA Decision Amid Covid-19: Fighting for Human Connection,” *Sojourners*, April 16, 2020, <https://sojo.net/articles/awaiting-daca-decision-amid-covid-19-fighting-human-connection>.

8. Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land*, 109.

with and alongside migrants. In this “era of migration,” as Pope Francis calls it,⁹ theologians, religious scholars, and church leaders, among others, have begun to mine these biblical stories more concretely and with greater frequency.¹⁰ However, biblical scholar Eric D. Barreto reminds us that one should continuously ask oneself the following question: “What complexities in Latina/o ethnic identity have not been brought to bear on the interpretation of Scripture?”¹¹ My response: Though the scholarship on undocumented immigrant youth and unaccompanied minors has increased, there remains a need for a biblical ethics of migration focused on children, adolescents, and young adults.¹² Better yet, a biblical interpretation *from the perspective of an undocumented young immigrant*.

A re-reading of Luke 2:41-52 can offer a unique opportunity for a biblical ethics of migration that takes the lived experiences of undocumented youth and young adults as its starting point. On their way home from the temple in Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph realize that their child

9. Francis, *Message for 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, September 29, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_world-migrants-day-2019.html.

10. For a compelling edited collection from the Latinx perspective, see Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, eds., *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

11. Eric D. Barreto, “Reexamining Ethnicity: Latina/os, Race, and the Bible,” in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada, Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 88. Though migration experiences are not unique to Latinxs, this essay will focus on their experiences. This essay will also reflect my own experience as an undocumented immigrant, whose unseen roots are planted in Mexico but who has lived in the United States since the age of three. This is but a sliver of the diversity found in Latinx migrations. My hope is that this reflection can be expanded upon by others, highlighting their own particularities; after all, each migrant’s story is uniquely their own.

12. See Gregory Lee Cuéllar, “Channeling the Biblical Exile as an Art Task for Central American Refugee Children on the Texas-Mexico Border” in Agosto and Hidalgo, *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration*, 67-88 and Rodolfo Estrada, III, “What Does the Paraclete Have to do with Dreamers? A Pneumatological Paradigm for Latino/a Social-Political Advocacy,” *Perspectivas* 16 (2019): 66-80.

is missing and they find the twelve year-old boy, Jesus, sitting in the midst of the teachers of the temple. The teachers are listening attentively and asking the young adolescent questions. St. Luke writes that Jesus returns to Nazareth with his parents and is then “obedient to them.” Does this emphasis on obedience suggest some sort of *disobedience* on the part of the child Jesus? A holy disobedience or a “rebellious hope,” perhaps?¹³

I begin this essay by reading the signs of the times, providing preliminary background information on undocumented youth in the United States and focusing on undocumented Latinx youth and young adults. I then offer a critical analysis of Luke 2:41-52 through the lens of an undocu-biblical criticism from an undocumented and Catholic perspective, thereby laying the groundwork for a biblical ethics of migration. Finally, this essay imagines the pastoral implications of and recommendations for such a re-reading of the Lukan text with and alongside migrant youth and young adults. Despite the precariousness of their situation, undocumented youth have helped to move forward education reform and immigration law and policy. The church must engage and support undocumented youth in their prophetic witness, in their rebellious hope.

Reading the Signs of the Times: Facts, Figures, and Faces

For Fernando F. Segovia, understanding one’s socio-cultural and socio-political context is crucial for reading and interpreting Scripture, for it is through this understanding that one comes to acknowledge and, ultimately confront, the “unequal relations and formations of power” not only within biblical narratives but also in one’s own socio-cultural context. Additionally, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states, “In other words, rather than just learning how to interpret

13. The term “rebellious hope” is borrowed from Orlando Espín, who uses this concept as a way of advocating for popular Catholicism. See Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 102.

texts, study history, or reflect on the Bible theologically, future biblical scholars need also to learn how to read ‘the signs of the times’ (Matt 16:3).”¹⁴ Heeding their advice, this section will serve as a brief introduction to the current landscape of immigrant youth and young adults from the U.S. Latinx perspective.

Facts and figures are like a young child’s jacket on a crisp fall morning: necessary but easily dismissed. “Migration is fundamentally about people. And these people have stories. And these stories often have to do with what is most important to human beings, namely relationships,” writes Daniel G. Groody.¹⁵ For this reason, along with facts and figures, the essay introduces faces: *rostros* of flesh and blood migrants.

It is imperative that theologians and religious educators take seriously the fact that “twenty-six percent of the current U.S. population—over 85 million people—are either immigrants or the children of immigrants.”¹⁶ This number is roughly equivalent to the population of California, Texas, and Florida combined. For both public and private systems of education, this number presents both challenges and promises. The number of undocumented immigrants is, of course, drastically smaller yet still astoundingly significant—around 10.5 million, according to Gonzales et al.’s latest estimate.¹⁷ Undocumented immigrant children under the age of eighteen are estimated to total slightly over one million.

14. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 5.

15. Daniel G. Groody, “Migration: A Theological Vision,” in *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at the Global Crossroads*, ed. Jennifer B. Saunders, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Susanna Snyder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 225.

16. Stephen Macedo, “The Moral Dilemma of U.S. Immigration Policy Revisited: Open Borders vs. Social Justice,” in *Debating Immigration*, 2nd ed., ed. Carol M. Swain (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 288.

17. Gonzales, Brant, and Roth, “DACAmended in the Age of Deportation,” 60.

For many immigrant families with young children, migration is sustained by aspirations of a better life; for many others, it is simply the search for “all that makes life worth living. Indeed, in search of life itself.”¹⁸ Though such aspirations must surely be taken into account, Saskia Sassen suggests that “there typically is something in addition to the will of the individual migrants that contributes to form and sustains migratory flows. Very often it is the existence of one or another kind of geopolitically specified system” or, in many cases, systems.¹⁹ In other words, migrations—or what Sassen calls expulsions—are as much about the human will as they are about systems of inequality. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is a DACA beneficiary who has written copiously about the intersections between politics, gender, economics, education and migration. In her book *The Undocumented Americans*, she recalls how these multiple, intersecting systems were present in her migration experience: “My parents knew Ecuador was not the place for a gifted girl—the gender politics were too fucked up—and they wanted me to have all the educational opportunities they hadn’t had.”²⁰

Though education is not the sole motivator of migration, the promise of an education remains central to immigrant families, particularly undocumented immigrant families. It is important, of course, to keep in mind that education is by no means a panacea; not all undocumented immigrant youth have the opportunity to complete even a high school education,

18. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison: America’s Obsession with Locking Up Immigrants* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 157.

19. Saskia Sassen, “The Making of Migrations,” in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migration of Peoples*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and María Teresa Dávila, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2016), 21. For a more detailed account of the many factors of at play in migratory flows, see Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

20. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans* (New York: One World, 2020), 5.

let alone pursue a college or university degree.²¹ “Early-exiters,” to borrow a phrase from Gonzales, are those who are pushed out of the education system much too early. They should not be seen as less deserving or inherently inferior to degree-achieving immigrant youth; unfortunately, this dualistic framework is what underpins many of today’s legislative documents—the “good ones” versus the “bad ones.”

That said, the schooling of immigrant children and refugees is frequently “seen as an effective path on which the family as a whole can achieve mobility in the future, a view that encourages the household economy to invest resources in education.”²² Self-proclaimed DACademic Carlos Aguilar mirrors this sentiment: “Growing up as an undocumented adolescent in Texas, *mi mamá* often reminded me of the importance of higher education. In Mexico, it was perceived as our way out of poverty; on this side of the Rio Bravo, education became a haven, my own personal raft to escaping illegality.”²³ These statements reveal the essence of *familismo*, “the strong value placed on family relationships and obligations, the value of children and community, and the importance of intergenerational kinship networks.”²⁴ In pursuing an education, immigrant children, like Aguilar, are making a better life not only for themselves, but for their families as well.

21. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 47.

22. Nazli Kibria, “Household Structure and Family Ideologies: The Dynamics of Immigrant Economic Adaptation among Vietnamese Refugees,” *Social Problems* 41, no. 1 (February 1994): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1994.41.1.03x0426j>.

23. Carlos Aguilar, “Undocumented Critical Theory,” in *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies* 19, no. 3 (2019): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708618817911>.

24. Kristin Heyer, *Kinship across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 81.

Immigrant parents' commitment to education, though sometimes an uncritical one, reflects their hopes and aspirations for a better future for themselves and for their children, even if this means making personal sacrifices for the time being.²⁵ Regarding his undocumented mother's many sacrifices, Hernandez Castillo writes: "After a total of thirty-five years on and off in the country, she [Amá] didn't have any money to her name, she didn't own any property, she didn't know the language, but she had all of her grown children, who had finished at least high school and had decent jobs, as testament, as fruits of her labor."²⁶ The education system, however, provides much more than simply an opportunity for upward mobility for children and their parents. Gonzales explains that for undocumented immigrant children, "school is usually the primary institutional introduction to their new lives as Americans."²⁷ The education system serves as the primary place of conscientization for many immigrant children; after all, Gonzales states, it is where they learn what it means to belong. Unfortunately, it is in this same place that children also painfully learn about the power of exclusion.

Conscientization of the Child Jesus

Like a traditional *Bildungsroman*, Luke 2:41-52 is fundamentally a story about coming to know, coming to understand; at its core, it is a story about conscientization. Therefore, this biblical passage can serve as a rich text for reflecting with and alongside undocumented

25. See Amy G. Langenkamp's article, "Latino/a Immigrant Parents' Educational Aspirations for Their Children," in *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 22, no. 2 (2019): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1365054>. Langenkamp reports in this article that few parents expressed direct criticism of their children's schools when asked.

26. Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land*, 207.

27. Roberto G. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo*, 13.

immigrant children and young adults as they begin the process of “learning to be illegal” and begin learning how to maneuver throughout the world in a state of illegality.²⁸

In the preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire writes, “The term *conscientização* refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”²⁹ No doubt Jesus’ time in the temple is spent learning about contradictions, as we shall see below. The social, political, and economic contexts of Jesus are of course distinct from the current contexts of the twenty-first century migrant children. My hope is not to provide an anachronistic re-reading of this biblical passage that passes over or makes light of the significant details of historical Jewish temple and other traditions.³⁰ Rather, my goal is to set the groundwork for a biblical ethics of migration, one that takes seriously the conscientization and agency of immigrant youth in light of Jesus’ coming to full self-understanding as the son of God.

The apogee of the child Jesus’s self-understanding is demonstrated in the following sentence: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house” (Lk 2:49)? William Barclay writes that at Jesus’s first Passover, “with manhood dawning, there came in a sudden blaze of realization the consciousness that he was in a unique sense the Son of God.”³¹ Some years later,

28. Roberto G. Gonzales, “Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 608.

29. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniv. ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 35.

30. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine has pointed out that liberation and other contextual theologians and biblical scholars, while celebrating their own identities and cultures, have often tended to devalue or undervalue the unique practices of Judaism. See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 180-181.

31. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 30.

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that “insofar as the story contains the Gospel’s first word of Jesus about his self-understanding and his ministry, it opens up the public ministry section of the Gospel.”³² As their conscientization also take place at the cusp of a transition, it is therefore fitting to read this passage with immigrant adolescents and young adults.

Critical developments have occurred in childhood studies and sociology since the time of Barclay’s and Schüssler Fiorenza’s writings in the 1970s and 1980s. Of particular relevance here is Gonzales’s identification of “prolonged childhood,” where instead of coming into adulthood, undocumented immigrant youth enter into a state or transition to illegality that prohibits them from achieving certain milestones.³³ Immigrant youth, as Dan-el Padilla Peralta recalls, often discover their undocumented status—or at least its immediate repercussions—in such activities as applying for summer jobs during their teenage years. He confesses, “Well into orientation, I was still so consumed with happiness at being offered a job as an adviser [at a college preparatory] that I didn’t see the major obstacle standing in the way of my legal employment. . . . All I wanted was to be a mentor, but I needed *papeles* even for that.”³⁴ In many states throughout this country, the luxuries and responsibilities that come with transitioning into adulthood, such as applying for jobs, acquiring driving permits, and registering for dual-credit or college classes, remain inaccessible to many undocumented immigrant youth, who lack the proper documentation. As Padilla Peralta explains, even flying within this country can present difficulty

32. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Luke 2:41-52,” in *Union Seminary Review* 36, no. 4 (October 1982): 399, doi:10.1177/002096438203600409.

33. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo*, 10-11.

34. Dan-el Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy’s Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 142.

for school-aged children, as flying now requires some kind of government-issued identification.³⁵

“In Two Worlds and No World at the Same Time”³⁶

As Barclay points out, there in the temple at Jerusalem, Jesus comes to the realization that he is the son of God. It is in this realization that the boy Jesus discovers that he is both part of this world and an inhabitant of another. Immigrant youth experience an analogous self-realization within the education system. The institutional systems of education promote a certain level of inclusion and belonging, which of course is crucial for any child, but particularly all the more for undocumented immigrant children.

Echoing Gonzales, Tania A. Unzueta Carrasco, an undocumented independent researcher and activist, writes: “When young people speak English at school and learn about U.S. citizenship and civil rights history alongside citizen classmates, we are recognized members of our schools and communities.”³⁷ This level of inclusivity, of course, is not possible without the loving and supportive teachers and mentors in the school system. Says Padilla Peralta: “I owe a special and unrepayable debt to the many teachers and mentors who prodded me to push beyond my initial efforts.”³⁸

35. Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented*, 127.

36. The section title is taken from the following quotation: “The exile ends up living in two worlds and no world at the same time, with a twofold voice from no-where.” Fernando F. Segovia, “In the World but Not of It: Exile as Locus for a Theology of the Diaspora,” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 203.

37. Tania A. Unzueta Carrasco and Hinda Seif, “Disrupting the Dream: Undocumented Youth Reframe Citizenship and Deportability through Anti-deportation Activism.” *Latino Studies* 12, no. 2 (2014): 287.

38. Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented*, 127.

Do we not find this sort of mentoring and “prodding” in the biblical text? Mary and Joseph find the boy Jesus in the temple after three days, “sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Lk 2:46). Had the teachers not provided a welcoming environment, would Jesus have had the courage to stay with them, let alone sit among them, ask questions, and engage them in conversation? If this scene were set in our present context, would the teachers in the temple provide a hospitable environment in which the undocumented child Jesus would feel comfortable to open up about his state of illegality?

Though Jesus is welcomed by the temple teachers, one might also argue that he feels as if he were part of that world but also knows that he does not quite belong: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house” (Lk 2:49)? This is a feeling shared by most immigrants: *No soy ni de aquí ni de allá*: “I am from neither here nor there.” In the words of Hernandez Castillo, “I felt neither the U.S. nor Mexico wanted me and that I was between two opposing magnets and one pushing harder than the other—my chest heavy beneath their weight.”³⁹ Or as Segovia writes, I am “in two worlds and in no world at the same time.”⁴⁰

While the education system has often served as an introduction to the norms and cultures of the United States, schooling has also functioned as a gatekeeper. Gonzales reminds us that “historically, public schools have wielded the power to either replicate societal inequalities or equalize the playing field.”⁴¹ So, while young immigrants become aware of and participate in U.S. norms and customs—albeit in limited ways—they also become aware of the fact that their legal status, and sometimes the color of their skin, prohibits them from fitting in entirely. It is for

39. Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land*, 22.

40. Segovia, “In the World but Not of It,” 203.

41. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo*, 13.

this reason that theologians, educators, and others interested in migration must take care to safeguard against perpetuating the myth of education as the antidote to all things; education is a constantly sharpened double-edged sword.

Domesticated Family Structures

What happens when the myth of education intersects with the myth of the idealized Latinx family structure? The result is the “creation of an underclass” of marginalized immigrant youth that “threatens the common good” of society.⁴² Hernandez Castillo, Padilla Peralta, and Cornejo Villavicencio are just three of the many individuals trapped in this underclass whose transnational families have been ruptured due to migration, deportation, and/or opportunities for a better education. Hernandez Castillo opens his memoir by recalling his fears of family separation, fears resulting from multiple previous family ruptures: “Amá had lost us once before to the immigration system, and she held us tight because she thought she was going to lose us again. We were separated as children . . . I feared deportation more than I feared ending my life.”⁴³ The reason for the particular immigration raid Hernandez Castillo is recounting here is that ICE agents are searching for his father, who had actually been deported three years prior by this deportation machine.

Padilla Peralta’s memoir also begins by revealing multiple family disruptions. First, his family is separated when his parents depart from their home in the Dominican Republic to New York, leaving the young Dan-el Padilla Peralta behind. Eventually, the family is reunited and expanded in New York; however, after just a few years, the father falls ill and returns to Santo Domingo, which results in a second disruption. What follows is the creation of a transnational

42. Heyer, *Kinship across Borders*, 68.

43. Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land*, 6.

web of liminal family existence. Padilla Peralta recalls the memory of hearing the news of his father's departure:

Was [Dad] just making a short trip to Santo Domingo? Was Mom joking when she said that he could go down there and stay but that she would remain in New York with us? When would we see him? My mind was swirling with questions. But I couldn't bring myself to ask any of them. I was too scared.⁴⁴

Like the Padilla Peralta family, Cornejo Villavicencio's parents also make the difficult decision of beginning their life in the United States without their child. Following a failed business venture and after suffering from an automobile accident, Cornejo Villavicencio's father is left with no other option than to borrow money from his (greedy) family and travel to the United States—but with one stipulation. Cornejo Villavicencio explains, "The idea of coming to America to work for a year to make just enough money to pay off the debt came up and it seemed like a good idea. My father's family asked to keep me, eighteen months old at the time, as collateral. And that's what my parents did."⁴⁵ It is almost two and a half years before the young Cornejo Villavicencio is reunited with her parents in her new home.

These vignettes, first and foremost, reiterate the fact that "no one factor ever explains why people leave their land," as Maryanne Loughry notes in her essay "Sailing the Waves on Our Own."⁴⁶ Rather, migration is always the result of a culmination of events and decisions,

44. Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented*, 18-19.

45. Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans*, 4.

46. Maryanne Loughry, "Sailing the Waves on Our Own," in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migration of Peoples*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and María Teresa Dávila (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2016), 36.

often created by what Sassen calls “predatory formations” of inequality⁴⁷ and what Segovia refers to as “web[s] of repression.”⁴⁸

Second, these stories demonstrate how migratory paths, in the words of García Hernández, “are triggered by peculiar relationships between individuals and nations.”⁴⁹ Oftentimes, these peculiar migratory relationships run deeply within several generations of the same family. Hernandez Castillo, for example, remembers, “My family, all we did for generations was leave each other. To depart was in my blood, to live longing in the absence of another was ingrained into me.”⁵⁰

More importantly, these brief narratives challenge us to reimagine the romanticized understanding of the Latinx immigrant family structure. Transnational migrant families cannot and should not be made to fit within the limited Western notions of family structures or the Christian framework of the family as the domestic church; doing so is analogous to a toddler’s first attempt at a sorting cube, but with much greater consequences. As Kristin Heyer rightly puts it, “Idealized family norms not only miss significant realities and voices, but they serve to reinforce oppression.”⁵¹ The domestic church, by its very name, presupposes a *domus*: a house, a home. Migrants have *a* home, *two* homes, and *no* home at the same time. By attempting to corral migrant families into this singular (sedentary) Christian framework, one might as well speak of a *domesticated* church—a framework that perpetuates a limited anthropological vision of

47. Sassen, *Expulsions*, 13.

48. Fernando F. Segovia, “Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 9.

49. García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison*, 40.

50. Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land*, 291.

51. Heyer, *Kinship across Borders*, 85.

migrants' human agency and an incomplete theological vision of human dignity. This framework also fails to fully encapsulate the "realities and voices" of those most affected by transnational migration: women and children.

One possible translation of Luke 2:49 offers an alternative to the domestic—or domesticated—family structure of the boy Jesus. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, "A third possible translation is, 'Did you not know that I had to be among the household or relatives of my father?'" Whereas the parents of Jesus had searched among their relatives and acquaintances, Jesus is among those belonging to the household of God."⁵² "Such a translation," Schüssler Fiorenza continues, "brings out the contrast between Jesus' biological family and his 'true' family."⁵³ This interpretation should encourage readers to take seriously the multiplicity of "true" family structures presented within Latinx immigrant communities; at the same time, it behooves the Christian imagination to reimagine the experiences and the meaning of the (holy) family. "What does it mean to be a family?" is a profoundly theological question. Mixed-status families, families living in single-parent households due to deportation, transnational families who spend decades fighting for reunification: these are but a few of the many disruptions of family structures with which immigrant youth are confronted.

Education as Disruption

Such situations of disruption are sometimes indirectly, but more often than not, directly linked to parents wanting a better future for their children, i.e., a better education. As this essay has already stated, most parents see the U.S. "education system [as] markedly better than [that

52. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Luke 2:41-52," 401.

53. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Luke 2:41-52," 401.

of] their” own country of origin.⁵⁴ Education, however, is not without its challenges. Regina Wentzel Wolfe reveals how education itself can also serve as a form of disruption in the lives of migrant families.

In her study of Chinese internal migration and family patterns, Wentzel Wolfe acknowledges that students’ admittance into competitive “super schools” results in having to “leave family behind and head to provincial capitals where the schools are located, thus creating another disruption to family life.”⁵⁵ With aspirations to a better education, migrant families endure many sacrifices, many of which have life-lasting and negative consequences such as leaving immediate family behind. One cannot argue that children affected by family separations do not experience long-term psychological and emotional trauma.

Another type of disruption occurs when education and *educación* clash, and this form of disruption should not only be of import to school educators but to all those interested in theologies of migration. Amy G. Langenkamp explains that “in Spanish, the word education (not to be confused with *estudios* or studies) means both formal education as well as [sic] moral comportment.”⁵⁶ (Though “formal” education and “knowledge” production should not be relegated to the classroom, Langenkamp’s explanation remains valid.) In Spanish, one can very well be well educated (*bien educado/a*) and still be poorly educated (*mal educado/a*). In immigrant communities, the locus of teaching as *educación* is not found within the U.S. education system, but rather within the family. Tensions arise when a family’s approach to *educación*—the “teaching [of] values and morality, setting a good example, and creating an

54. Langenkamp, “Latino/a Immigrant Parents’ Educational Aspirations,” 238.

55. Regina Wentzel Wolfe, “Limiting Hope? China’s *Hukou* System and Its Impact on Internal Migration and Family Patterns,” in Brazal and Dávila, *Living With(out) Borders*, 91.

56. Langenkamp, “Latino/a Immigrant Parents’ Educational Aspirations,” 241.

environment of stability and security”⁵⁷—differs from that of “formal” or “traditional” education. Kristin Heyer provides one example, writing, “The value *familismo* places on unity and collective goals over individual well-being both challenges and is challenged by the autonomous ethos more predominant in the United States.”⁵⁸ There is no doubt that undocumented immigrant youth, particularly those from non-Western, collectivist cultures, face this tension in the U.S. education system, which focuses significantly on individualism and competition. Church leaders must ask themselves, how is this same or similar tension presently found within the church or in religious education programs? How does the church address such tensions?

One last disruption is all too familiar to immigrant communities and is alluded to in the Gospel story. Again, the height of the pericope is Jesus’s conscientization in Luke 2:49; however, this peak is only climatic because it is set in direct contrast to the following verse, in which the author writes that Mary and Joseph “did *not* understand what [Jesus] said to them” (Lk 2:50).⁵⁹ How many immigrant children—and even first generation U.S.-born children—have asked their parents for help on their homework, only to discover that their parents do not understand? How many undocumented children have tried to explain a situation occurring at school to their parents, only to receive blank stares and puzzled expressions? How many children have attempted to translate a letter from a teacher to their perplexed and sometimes frustrated parents?

57. Langenkamp, “Latino/a Immigrant Parents’ Educational Aspirations,” 241. The argument, here, is not that *educación* is better than education or vice versa; rather, it is to point out that the two are not always “in sync” and that this may cause disruption.

58. Heyer, *Kinship across Borders*, 82.

59. Italics added for emphasis.

Lizet is a first-generation daughter of Cuban immigrants and the protagonist of Jeanine Capó Crucet's timely, serious, and at the same time, hilarious, novel, *Make Your Home among Strangers*. After registering for an English rhetoric and composition course during her first semester of college (to which she had applied without her parent's knowledge or permission), Lizet calls home to update her mother. What ensues will undoubtedly sound familiar to many immigrant children and college-aged students: "You're taking English?" my mom said. "Why? You already *speak* English. *Great* English. If anything you should be taking Spanish."⁶⁰ Regardless of the amount of explanation by the child, education repeatedly presents many situations—disruptions—in which many undocumented parents are left like Lizet's mother or like Mary and Joseph: they just do not quite understand.

Holy Disobedience and Rebellious Hope

There are, however, some forms of disruption that provide opportunities for growth and improvement. Simply put, disruptions are not always negative. Following the previous episode in Luke 2:50, the gospel writer affirms that "[Jesus] went down with [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51). Could not Luke have simply stated that Jesus rejoins his parents? Why the sudden emphasis on obedience?

Is Jesus disobedient in staying behind in the temple without his parent's permission? To answer this question in the affirmative and to say, outright, that Jesus is disobedient to Mary and Joseph, would suggest that the child Jesus does not uphold the fourth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex 20:12). To argue that the only-begotten Son of God does not follow one of the Ten Commandments (and is therefore a sinner) would be contrary to Christian

60. Jennine Capó Crucet, *Make Your Home among Strangers: A Novel* (New York: Picador, 2015), 55.

teaching. In fact, Barclay stresses the faithfulness and piety of the child by saying that the fact that Jesus “was God’s Son made him the perfect son of his human parents.”⁶¹ The emphasis on perfect obedience is also expressed by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) §532: “Jesus’ obedience to his mother and legal father fulfills the fourth commandment perfectly and was the temporal image of his filial obedience to his Father in heaven.”⁶² By failing to engage the inconsistency of obedience in the Gospel passage, Barclay and the CCC quickly diminish the opportunities for discerning between the laws of the earth and divine laws. The church presupposes that the two are always in agreement, and this is clearly not always the case.

Is it not possible to say that Jesus is disobedient to Mary and Joseph but that his disobedience is rectified by his holy obedience to God, the Divine parent? In choosing to disobey his earthly parents by remaining in the temple, Jesus is holy-obedient to the will of the heavenly Father. Schüssler Fiorenza explains that “whereas theologians have often used the father-title of God in order to legitimate the father-power of men in society, the Gospel traditions refer to the ‘fatherhood’ of God not to legitimate earthly powers but to serve as a critical instance over against them.”⁶³ Jesus’s disobedience, then, is marked by a rebellious hope, “a prophetic sign of rebellion,”⁶⁴ which foreshadows the public ministry of Jesus as the advocate of those most oppressed by the patriarchal, legalistic canons of certain systems and institutions. Therefore, Jesus’s holy disobedience should be seen as the precursor to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, which Christians should emulate.

61. Barclay, *Gospel of Luke*, 30.

62. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000), 134.

63. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Luke 2:41-52,” 403.

64. Espín, *The Faith of the People*, 104.

Pastoral Implications: Supporting Undocumented Immigrant Youth

In an analogous fashion, one might argue that the efforts of undocumented immigrant youth in the immigrant rights movement and their work in education reform are manifestations of a similar form of civil and holy disobedience—“good trouble,” to borrow a term from the late civil rights activist and Congressman John Lewis.

During his junior year of high school, Padilla Peralta begins to discover the underlying xenophobia within this country’s anti-immigration laws. He asks, “What if the laws don’t make sense? What if they don’t take into account the kinds of experiences my family had gone through? What if the rules are simply wrong?”⁶⁵ Though the young Padilla Peralta does not use theological language, he understands that the existing immigration laws are outdated and based on unethical frameworks. With time and guidance, Padilla Peralta is better able to discern between the ethical and the unethical, and he ultimately decides to share his story with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. The reporter, he says, “was convinced that my story could make a difference in the public debate over immigration.”⁶⁶

In a particular way, over the past decade an increased number of undocumented youth (DREAMers and non-DREAMers alike) have engaged in the immigration debate and immigration advocacy. They have done so through storytelling, by sharing their narratives, thereby “making a powerful demand for residency status” and “demanding that they be recognized as human beings who belonged in the country.”⁶⁷ Instead of entering a temple, as Jesus does, the undocumented youth enter congressional offices, teaching congressional

65. Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented*, 146.

66. Padilla Peralta, *Undocumented*, 237.

67. Walter J. Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1.

representatives and senators that immigrant lives and immigrant bodies matter. Like Jesus, the youth of today exemplify a more democratic and egalitarian form of teaching, one where the student and the teacher (in this case, the government personnel) learn from one another. Does the church make room for such a model of education to occur? What can immigrants teach the Catholic Church about what it means to be better Catholics? When has the church paused from lecturing didactically and taken the time to listen authentically?

Recalling her work in advocacy and activism, Unzueta Carrasco writes, “By telling our own stories and supporting immigrants in deportation proceedings to tell theirs, we contest hegemonic citizenship definitions and perform strategies to claim citizenship rights to remain in the United States.”⁶⁸ Padilla Peralta and Unzueta Carrasco clearly demonstrate a holy obedience to Christian understandings of hospitality and human agency. According to Alfred Kah Meng Pang, an “anthropology of relational belonging . . . locates children’s agency in the context of community.”⁶⁹ Have churches provided a sense of community for undocumented immigrant youth where they can share their stories, practice human agency, and feel a sense of relational belonging? Have churches fostered an environment in which undocumented youth are comfortable enough to expose their status of illegality? Churches must ask themselves, what have we done and what have we failed to do to assist the undocumented immigrant child?

68. Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, “Disrupting the Dream,” 295.

69. Alfred Kah Meng Pang, “Whose Child Is This? Uncovering a Lasallian Anthropology of Relational Belonging and Its Implications for Educating toward the Human Flourishing of Children in Faith,” in *Journal of Religious Education* 69 (January 2021): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-021-00134-w>.

Conscientious Disobedience

Another important question is this: Have churches engaged sufficiently in advocacy work? Regarding the efforts of women religious and their advocacy in the health care reform debates, Heyer praises women religious in their ability to demonstrate “an understanding of conscientious obedience that departs from blind acquiescence.”⁷⁰ It is also women religious who have also been at the forefront of the immigration rights debates, showing time and again their commitment to divine justice over against (hu)man-made laws. The Church needs more people to follow these women’s prophetic leadership.

In their work in the immigration reform debates, undocumented immigrant youth model this sort of conscientious obedience to divine justice. Like the child Jesus, they also are able to discern between the moral and the immoral laws of a society. They are capable of envisioning an eschatological way of being and engaging in the world.

A challenge in today’s society—that persists within the church as well—is that an uncritical acquiescence stifles the creative imagination. In her review of the U.S. Catholic religious education curriculum for children, Emily Reimer-Barry finds that uncritical obedience is the word of the day. She argues that

if we are building the foundation for a life of contribution to the church, then training kids to obey people in positions of authority simply because they are in positions of authority empowers the people in authority more than instructs the children on what authority rests. It also sets up a situation in which “disobedience” is framed as “sin.” . . .

This creeping legalism in the moral imagination does not focus on discernment and

70. Kristin Heyer, “Reservoirs of Hope: Catholic Women’s Witness, in *Women, Wisdom, and Witness: Engaging Contexts in Conversation*,” ed. Rosemary P. Carbine and Kathleen J. Dolphin (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 227.

forming good judgment for children, but rather on forming kids to be rule followers and to do what they are told by people in authority.⁷¹

Reimer-Barry's argument is perfectly exemplified in the Catholic Church's emphasis on Jesus's faithful and pious obedience to civil and religious law. Rather than perpetuating harmful attitudes in the name of obedience, the church must reimagine a new way of being and becoming church. The failure of the imagination, in my opinion, is a result of fear; in this case, it is the fear of sustaining even the slightest of possibilities that the child Jesus is disobedient.

In what ways does the church continue to be fearful? For example, why is the Catholic Church afraid of fostering and promoting undocumented vocations to the priesthood and religious life? Have religious education directors imagined the possibilities of training undocumented individuals for leadership positions? If so, does this training require government background checks, which may deter undocumented immigrants from participating? The U.S. Catholic Church's fear of migrants keeps the church from being authentically *catholic*.

Uncritical obedience to the law (whether civil law or the law of the church) can, and often does, perpetuate oppressive and even deadly situations, particularly for vulnerable immigrant communities. Therefore, religious leaders cannot continue to align themselves with political leaders who reinscribe what Segovia calls "differentiations of power." Instead, religious leaders and pastoral agents should align themselves with immigrants and immigration advocates. These individuals are the ones who truly demonstrate prophetic obedience—in the words of Sandra Schneiders, "the prayerful listening for the will of God and all relevant 'voices' and the search for that will in the 'signs of the times,' followed by careful discernment and responsible

71. Emily Reimer-Barry, "Does Catechism Class Groom Young People for Sexual Abuse?" *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC)*, March 31, 2019, <https://catholicethics.com/forum/does-catechism-class-groom-young-people-for-sexual-abuse/>.

speaking and acting out of that discernment for the good of real people in concrete situations.”⁷² Unfortunately, while immigration reform has moved forward, the majority of bishops and priests in the United States Catholic Church have kept themselves busy by reading—sometimes, simply staring at—the signs. However, as Schüssler Fiorenza and Schneiders assert, *reading* the signs of the times is only the first step. *Speaking and acting out in discernment* must follow.

Final Remarks

It is only by listening to and fostering relationships with migrants that the church can discern the way forward. Freire writes, “Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture.”⁷³ Before it is too late, the church must speak and act in the manner of the temple teachers, who provided a radically welcoming environment and listened to Jesus and who “prodded” the inquisitive child. In so doing the church will advance in “wisdom and age and favor before God” (Lk 2:52).

Agosto and Hidalgo remind their readers that “the Christian Bible is a collection of texts of and about migration.”⁷⁴ As such the Bible can serve as a vital resource for understanding and for engaging with the lives of immigrant populations. The Bible has been utilized as both a weapon and a tool of resistance in the immigration debate. Luke 2:41-52, in particular, is a useful resource as it can shed light on the experiences of young undocumented immigrants. This essay provides but one experience and one re-reading through the lens of an undocu-biblical criticism. As undocumented youth continue on their journey in disobedience—or holy obedience to divine

72. Sandra Schneiders, “Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 7, 2010, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global-sisters-report/tasks-those-who-choose-prophetic-life-style>.

73. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 49.

74. Agosto and Hidalgo, *Latinx, the Bible, and Migration*, 11.

justice—multiple re-readings of this biblical passage can be helpful, not only for the youth, but for the entire church as well.