The Precariousness of Life: Undocumented and Migrant Farming through the Perspectives of Ethics, Religion, and Spirituality

By David Chen,

In conversation with Gaby, Ramón Torres B., Debi Covert-Bowlds, and Roger Yockey

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Prelude

My Inspirations

I was drawn to this project because of the closeness of my connection to migrant farmworkers—both geographically and in the sense that I eat the food they produce. Despite this closeness, they are also far from me. They are far in the sense that before beginning this project, despite having worked at multiple Farmers Markets for the past few summers, I had never met one of the people who picked the fruit I ate. The workers of the fields are cordoned off from life in the city, and thus, for the most part, they never exist in the same space as those who consume the fruits of their labor. They are far in the sense that I’ve made a habit of believing that food appears from thin air, and all I need to do is to purchase and eat it. As I grew up Catholic, this is even reflected in my mealtime prayers: “Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.” We are taught to see food as an apparition, a gift from God, but not the result of peoples’ labor.

Furthermore, they are far from me because our lives could not be more different. I will never be on the impoverished end of the imbalance that is global inequality. I cannot foresee myself having to leave my home to follow a dream or to survive. Even the loftiest of the world’s dreams are right here in front of me; the pursuits of wealth and status would not be furthered—as far as I can see—by my immigration to the Third World; I have all that I need to survive right here. I will never know the feeling of being undocumented or the pain of the discrimination inflicted upon Latinos—especially those who are Indigenous to Mexico—in the U.S. The former includes being imagined as a criminal and, consequently, the persistent fear of deportation; the latter accounts for why “Oaxacans like to work bent over” is a prevalent attitude towards farmworkers in the U.S. (Holmes 2013a: 170). I will never experience these forms of suffering, let alone have them compounded by having children to love and care for, as so many migrant farmworkers and undocumented people do.

I chose spirituality and religion as two of the three lenses through which to approach immigration because through it I hope to convey that we are also close. I define spirituality as the journey to understand one’s deep connections to all else in the world and even in the universe. (Love, in turn, is the recognition of that connection—a relationship of interdependence.) However, I’m not sure that a distinction can rightfully be made between spiritual and non-spiritual. As Rosalinda Guillen¹ spoke about spirituality, “I understand it as being in everything that you are and do and everything around you. It’s everywhere for me. It’s in everybody and everything.” I essentially agree: instead of seeing spirituality as a unique aspect of life, I choose to see it as life’s very foundation. We sometimes forget how strange it is

¹ Rosalinda is the executive director of Community to Community Development (C2C), which is based in Bellingham, Washington. I volunteered with C2C as a part of this project.
that we are literally stardust—we are composed of energy that has stabilized itself into atoms, and our closeness may be captured in that our atoms are all from the same supernovae. But aside from being constitutionally or existentially the same, our interdependence takes on more mundane forms.

As the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese-Buddhist monk and scholar, so relentlessly asks us to see, all of life is connected (see Peace Is Every Step). Thich Nhat Hanh might remind us, in a very similar sense to Judith Butler, whose work I will use, that our lives are dependent on those who grow our food. The rain, the soil, the sunshine are all necessary conditions for our food—but we would be hungry if it weren’t for the labor of those whom we seldom encounter in person. In the words of Filemón Piñeda, “Nuestro trabajo, el trabajo que nosotros hacemos, es la vida (Our work, the work we do, is life)” (see McKinley 2014). Because of their work we can eat our fruits and vegetables. There is no denying the deep connection between the farmworkers and I. It is just a question of whether this connection is ethical and wholesome or unequal and violent.

For this project, religion and spirituality will be distinguished from each other. In the words of Gaby, one of the women I was fortunate enough to interview, “For me spirituality is something really personal, something you use to communicate with God. It’s more private for me, specifically. Spirituality is something that you feel, and that you express, not so much with the church in general, but rather with yourself.” In accordance with Gaby, I see spirituality as more of an experience that is available to most (if not all) people. Religion, at its best—and there is no shortage of examples of it at its worst—is an intellectual scaffolding (and source of community) which many use to connect with the spiritual. Though I will not deal with this here, there can be much overlap between religion and spirituality. This is because, as Laurence Freeman writes, in the spiritual quest, “religion is not so easily dispensed with…. We cannot be truly spiritual without encountering others on the same path and relating, with them, to those who went before us” (2006: 15).

Religion and Spirituality as Narratives

The use of narratives is a fundamental, inescapable part of our lives. This is because we each must tell a story through which our lives may be understood. I am interested in narratives as they relate to ethics. The stories we use to understand reality necessarily have an impact on how we interact with that reality, so they therefore shape that reality, even as it shapes us, too. However, reality is not to be cast into abstraction, for we coexist with many others whose existences are just as

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2 I would broaden Freeman’s statement to include non-religious people. I think that in the spiritual quest we all, no matter our specific beliefs, must find community and “relate,” with them, to those who went before us.” Those who went before us may be people like Kurt Vonnegut, Rachel Carson, or those of a particular religious tradition.
real as our own. In short, the narratives we employ have profound consequences for others.

I would like to take a moment to destigmatize religion.\textsuperscript{3} I agree that it is uniquely powerful, and that its ability to make people believe that they have found "the truth"—and that everyone who disagrees is "wrong"—is singularly dangerous. However, one must recognize that religion occupies a special place in the hearts of many. In a world plagued by suffering, it is one of the few constants that people can rely on for comfort and guidance. Furthermore, it is unique in that it is one of the very few narratives available to us that ask us to go beyond ourselves and to attempt to connect with others in a genuine way. Beyond this, I contend that the "war" between science and religion is altogether fictitious. In a compassionate and refreshing essay, the late Stephen Jay Gould states: "The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives" (1998). I think that Gould would agree that condescending individuals from the scientific community, such as Richard Dawkins, and religious fundamentalists fuel an unfortunate and unnecessary division between people.

I find much of religion's value in that it exercises our often-neglected imaginations. It asks us to allow our lives to be absorbed by a narrative. To illustrate this, let us consider the following words attributed to Jesus: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21, NIV). We can imagine the radical effect that these words might have on someone who takes them seriously. The theme is that spiritual salvation comes through voluntary poverty. Our imaginations are thus asked to perceive simplicity as beautiful, as spiritual; our realities are changed. The second sentence of Jack Kerouac's \textit{On the Road} is this: "I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with... my feeling that everything was dead" (1959: 1). I don't think it is too difficult to feel like this in a culture that prizes individualism and materialism. I contend that religious narratives push us to move past the stagnancy of U.S. culture—of the self—and to perceive through our imaginations what is real and alive. To be clear, I'm not making a statement about the factuality of the Gospel, nor am I attempting to belittle it by calling it a story. Rather, I am saying that stories and narratives are an inescapable part of our lives—it's just a matter of which ones we use.

\textsuperscript{3} When I refer to religion, I am specifically referring to Christianity and Catholicism. Though I will not dole this out here, I think there is a great deal of overlap between religious traditions, and so I think that this discussion is, to at least some extent, relevant for others too.
Introduction

Resumen

Con raíces en las entrevistas de cuatro activistas—Gaby (una mujer indocumentada), Ramón (un trabajador migrante), y Debi y Roger (aliados Católicos)—este ensayo trata de entender el activismo de los campesinos y inmigrantes a través las perspectivas de la ética, la religión, y la espiritualidad. Se enfoca en tres “momentos de inmigración”: Movimiento, Indignidades, y Acción. En Movimiento, discuto que la decisión de mover se puede entender como ética. En Indignidades, desarrollo un borrador interconectado hecho de estatus indocumentado, discriminación, y empobrecimiento, y discuto que estos le fuerzan a gente indocumentada hacia un estado de vida desnuda, un concepto de Giorgio Agamben. Entonces, usando el concepto de vida precaria de Judith Butler, exploro cómo se usan la religión y la espiritualidad para ayudar mejorar o sanar sus experiencias de opresión. Este momento está basado en dos “sitios de inmigración” conectados: Sakuma Brothers Farm (Sakuma) de Burlington, Washington, y the Northwest Detention Center (the Detention Center) de Tacoma, Washington. Estes primeros momentos conversan con Gaby y Ramón. Finalmente, en Acción, analizo como el activismo de una persona puede ser motivado por el narrativo Cristiano y como la experiencia de espiritualidad le puede inspirar a actuar. Este momento final conversa con Debi y Roger. Empiezo y termino con reflexiones personales.

Abstract

Rooted in the narratives of four activists—Gaby (an undocumented woman), Ramón (a migrant farmworker), and Debi and Roger (both Catholic allies/supporters)—this essay seeks to understand migrant farming and immigration activism through the lenses of ethics, religion, and spirituality. I focus on three “moments of immigration”: Movement, Indignities, and Action. In Movement, I argue that the decision to move can be understood as ethical. In Indignities, I develop an interlocking framework constituted of undocumented status, discrimination, and impoverishment, and argue that these push undocumented people towards a state bare life, a concept of Giorgio Agamben. Then, using Judith Butler’s concept of precarious life, I explore how religion and spirituality help to ameliorate their experiences of oppression. This moment is grounded in two connected “sites of immigration”: Sakuma Brothers Farm (Sakuma) of Burlington, Washington and the Northwest Detention Center (the Detention Center) of Tacoma, Washington. These first two moments are in conversation with Gaby and Ramón. Finally, in Action, I look at how one’s activism may be motivated through the narrative of the Gospel and how one’s experience of spirituality may inspire one to act. This final moment is in conversation with Debi and Roger. I begin and end this essay with personal reflections.
Methods

I began volunteering with Community to Community Development (C2C), a Bellingham, Washington-based organization “committed to systemic change and to creating strategic alliances that strengthen local and global movements towards social, economic and environmental justice” (www.foodjustice.org) in April 2014. At this time, I also began participating in as many protests, vigils, and educational events as I could to both support Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Familias Unidas), a union of migrant farmworkers which will be discussed below, and to protest Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Detention Center. This served the dual-purpose of giving me insight from experience as well as ensuring that I was giving something back to the people who would share their time and knowledge with me through interviews. In addition to having informal conversations, I formally interviewed five people. I first interviewed Roger and Debi, who are both Catholic, non-Latino allies of the farmworkers and immigration activists. I then interviewed Gaby, an undocumented woman who gave a testimony at a Mother’s Day vigil I attended at the detention center. My final interviewee was Ramón, the president of Familias Unidas. For the two interviews conducted in Spanish (Gaby’s and Ramon’s), I translated as much as I could and then I received help from Gabriela, a native Spanish speaker, to ensure accuracy and to translate anything I could not.

Within this essay, my 4 interlocutors are also my collaborators (c.f. Jackson, 2013). Their stories and ideas are the foundation of this project, which belongs to all of them. I alone am to be held accountable for any inaccurate representations. Furthermore, regarding the power of language to effect discourse, in this essay I will never call any person “illegal.” Bound to the unquestionable respect we give to the law in the U.S., this word posits that there is something fundamentally wrong with a person, and its widespread use is permissive of and facilitates violence—be it physical or mental.

By focusing on the lives of a few individuals in depth, we can gain insight that is unavailable at the surface level. I do not want to suggest that the story of each undocumented immigrant is the same as, or even similar to, that of Gaby’s or Ramón’s. Rather, it is my wish that we can leave room in our imaginations for the possibility that each is as complex and unique. In a similar way, rather than arguing that religion and spirituality are important for all immigrants or allies, I want us to recognize just how important they can be and have been.

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4 C2C is a sister organization to Familias Unidas por la Justicia, which is to be described.
5 Though Gaby is not a migrant farmworker herself, her story shares many commonalities with them. Throughout this essay, to avoid tediousness, I will use “migrant farmworker” and “undocumented person” almost synonymously.
6 The only time I use this word is when quoting a racist individual to show discriminatory yet prevalent attitudes towards migrant farmworkers.
Arguments and Outline

The life of a migrant farmworker is highly precarious. Amongst other forms of oppression (for example, gender violence, which I will not focus on here), almost every migrant farmworker must contend with impoverishment, racism, and a series of other issues that accompany their lack of documentation (Holmes 2013a; Jackson 2013; Stephen 2007; also see work of Jason De León). With the exception of Jackson (2013), much of the scholarship that addresses the lived experiences of undocumented Latinos doesn’t take into account—or only does so minimally—how ethics, religion, or spirituality influence these experiences. The question that this project seeks to address is: How do ethics, religion, and spirituality play into the lives and activism of migrant farmworkers, other undocumented people, and their allies? To answer this, I focus on three significant moments of immigration: movement, indignities, and activism.

Movement. In The Wherewithal of Life, Michael Jackson asserts that the negotiation of “the ethical space between external constraints and personal imperatives... defines our very humanity” (2013: 202, emphasis in original). I follow Jackson in viewing the decision—or even exigency—to move as ethical. This section is an exploration of how this is apparent in the stories of both Gaby and Ramón. The discussion, however, will break away from the rest of this essay in that it will be framed through ethics instead of religion or spirituality. The reason for this is that neither religion nor spirituality was explicitly mentioned as an impetus for movement. I end by presenting their stories of crossing.

Indignities. The lives of undocumented Latino immigrants and migrant farmworkers are often filled with multiple socially imposed forms of suffering. I present a framework for understanding the oppression of undocumented people composed of their mutually reinforcing undocumented migrant status, discrimination, and impoverishment. I argue that these pushes people towards a state describe by Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life. However, moving to the framework of Judith Butler’s concept of precarious life, Gaby and Ramón show that religious narratives and the spiritual experience can help one to embrace life’s precariousness, which in turn leads to healing and the desire to serve others.

Action. Allies who are not from migrant farming or Latino communities play an important role in migrant farming and immigration activism. Here I look at how spirituality and religion may facilitate the activism of such allies. Using interviews with Roger and Debi, I argue that (1) the Gospel can provide people with a narrative with which to imagine activism and (2) the experience of spirituality itself can be intrinsic to activism.

Though I originally had intended to interview at least one Indigenous migrant farmworker, who would have been Triqui or Mixtec, for reasons of timing and access I have been unable to. Indigenous people make up a majority of all migrant farmworkers. It is reasonable to think that they would experience each
moment—movement, indignities, and action—differently than other people. As Seth Holmes notes, his Triqui companions clarified “repeatedly that they are forced to migrate in order for themselves and their families to survive” (2013a: 17-8; see McKinley 2014). The discrimination they experience is worse, as is exemplified in their being at the bottom of the racial hierarchy of the farm (Holmes 2013a). The difficulties that they face are compounded because many do not speak Spanish, let alone English. Lastly, their experience of spirituality and religion is likely unique because of the Indigenous religions, philosophies, and traditions they bring with them.

The remainder of this essay will unfold as follows. To close this introduction, I provide a brief background of two sites of immigration: The Sakuma Brothers Farm (Sakuma) and the Northwest Detention Center (the Detention Center), and then discuss Seth Holmes’s Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies. Afterwards, I establish my theoretical framework. We then move to the main body of the project. Finally, I conclude with some brief reflections.

Background: Sakuma Brothers Farm7 and the Northwest Detention Center

Here I provide a brief background of the two “sites of immigration” I will be referencing: Sakuma Farm and the Detention Center. This background is especially important for understanding the section title Indignities. My overviews are not meant to be comprehensive; rather, they are meant to provide a basic understanding, and furthermore to suggest the political relevance of each site at the present moment.

In the summer of 2013, at the Sakuma Brothers Farm, migrant farmworkers organized themselves into Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Familias Unidas).8 The goal of Familias Unidas was—and still is—to receive a dignified contract from Sakuma.9 Familias Unidas made a list of demands on July 11, which included reinstating a fired worker, better pay, an end to wage-theft through use of paper tickets to weigh the berries, an end to intimidation and disrespect, removal of disrespectful supervisors, sick leave, overtime pay, and childcare (see image below).

Migrant Farm Workers at Sakuma Brothers Farm had gone on strike before in 2004 and won 30-minute lunch breaks and a better piece-rate, though the following year these gains were quietly taken away (Holmes 2013a). According to Tomás Madrigal, a UC Santa Barbara ethnographer based at C2C, migrant

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7 I am indebted to Tomás Madrigal for his generous feedback and edits of this section. Madrigal is a doctoral candidate of UC Santa Barbara whose ethnographic work is based at C2C.

8 For Filemón Piñeda’s (the vice-president of Familias Unidas) description of their formation, see Appendix.

9 Ramón comments on the organization’s name: “We are united families fighting for justice. Justice is not necessarily for justice, but it is fighting for the rights that exist, the laws that exist, to make them worth something.”
Farmworkers had reported stopping work in the berry fields at least once a year over piece-rates and mistreatment since 2004, each time resulting in no gains (personal communication, June 1, 2014). Likely in anticipation of more strikes, Sakuma applied for 160 guest workers from Mexico under the H-2A program. In August 2013, in the middle of the labor dispute, they received 70 (Bacon 2014).

Figure 1 From Tomás Madrigal

H-2A guest workers are often worse off than undocumented workers. They are highly regulated by both federal and state governments. The positive points of the H-2A program are that employers are required to pay an Adverse Effect Wage Rate, which in 2013 was just under $12 per hour, to provide decent housing, and to provide meals and transportation. Also, guest workers are provided temporary work visas. However, Farmworker Justice (2011) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (2013) have both published reports that document how H-2A guest workers are subject to a whole host of human rights and labor abuses. For example, they are susceptible to wage-theft, discrimination, maltreatment, and the denial of their right to organize just the same as undocumented workers. The key differences are that they are entirely unfamiliar with their new work places and their rights, and that ICE has all of their information. What laws there are to protect them are mostly unenforced, and their employers hold the power to deport them whenever they want.
In the summer of 2013, according to their website, Familias Unidas achieved the following:

[They] were able to secure a temporary wage increase to $12 per hour, new bedding and mattresses that were not infested with bed bugs, the reinstatement of Federico Lopez, the removal of a hostile supervisor, $6000 in back pay for 30 farmworker youth, a temporary change in the way piece rates were determined, a signed agreement against retaliation, and a restraining order against security guards in the labor camps (“About Familias Unidas por la Justicia,” www.boycottsakumaberries.com).

Today Familias Unidas has over 460 members and a broad coalition of support from outside of the migrant farming community. Though Sakuma applied for 438 guest workers, which would have allowed for them to disregard Familias Unidas, after losing key legal battles surrounding the decision, and with enough public outcry, Sakuma rescinded their application in early June 2014. Another key issue is that Sakuma changed its housing policy. With this new policy, non-working family members would need to, as Sakuma’s letter to the farmworkers states, “make housing arrangements ... elsewhere”; furthermore, men and women would be separated into Male and Female cabins: “We do not have separate housing for married couples.”10 This means that families cannot live in the same quarters, and that children cannot stay with their parents. As most farmworkers have children, it is a mystery as to where they would sleep.

The other site of immigration is the Detention Center, the privately run prison of The GEO Group, Inc. (GEO Group).11 The Detention Center is where people go to be “processed” for deportation or to await their release.12 The capacity of the Detention Center is 1,575 people. However, the contract between the Department of Homeland Security and GEO Group requires that ICE supply GEO Group with 1,181 prisoners per night (Kamb 2012). This “bed quota” is just a part of the nationwide quota of 34,000 prisoners per night. GEO Group charges $100.65 per day per each of the first 1,181 detainees, and $62.52 per day for anyone more (Kamb 2012). [Most other sources say that the total cost per prisoner per night is between $122 and $164 (Yáñez 2014).] As Lewis Kamb (201) writes, “GEO would make no less than $43.4 million per year – and up to $52.4 million annually” under the contract they were granted in 2009.

The list of human rights abuses at the Detention Center is long. For example, it employs its prisoners for “$1 a day or less” (Urbina 2014). As Ian Urbina explains,

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11 GEO Group is a part of the prison-industrial, or what has been called the immigration-industrial complex (Douglas & Saénz 2013).

12 In part because of a limited budget for deportation, oftentimes people will be given a fine and then, after they pay the fine, be released. This was the case with Gaby.
“The cheap labor, 13 cents an hour, saves the government and the private companies $40 million or more a year by allowing them to avoid paying outside contractors the $7.25 federal minimum wage” (2014). Another example is that it frequently fails to provide necessary medical care to its prisoners (Yáñez 2014). Among the list of demands of Maru Villalpando, one of the chief organizers around the Detention Center, are “an end to the indefinite waits for hearings, the solitary confinement regime, the medical deprivation and the callous and arbitrary separation of families” (Blumenthal 2014). Gaby, who spent 6 weeks in the Detention Center, will have much more to add.

In March 2014 over 750 people—more depending on the source—went on hunger strike in protest of the inhumane conditions (Blumenthal 2014). Because of this activism and activism that occurred from outside of the Detention Center’s walls, Rep. Adam Smith met with hunger strikers and organizers and introduced new legislation: The Accountability in Immigration Detention Act of 2014. This is truly significant because a representative met with undocumented people and recognized their needs. If passed, this would undo many of the inhumane policies now in place.

A Discussion of Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies

Since this work was both inspired by, and comes in the wake of, physician and anthropologist Seth Holmes’s Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies, I use Holmes’s ethnographic account extensively. His book has shed an academic spotlight on a poorly researched group of people, and has facilitated a surge of discussion where there was little before. Indeed, as the only major work written about Sakuma itself, it has become the common text of the labor dispute, read and interpreted by both supporters of Sakuma and Familias Unidas. Even as I depend on Holmes’s work, this project is in many ways a contestation of some of his conclusions. I disagree with Holmes’s insistence on a framework of structural and symbolic violence, as they move responsibility away from Sakuma executives and onto migrant farmworkers. I show how such thinking has been used harmfully in the ongoing labor dispute. I quote Holmes at length to avoid the potential for mis-representation.

Holmes provides an overview of his book:

[T]his book explores ethnographically the interrelated hierarchies of ethnicity, labor, and suffering in U.S. agriculture as well as the processes by which these become normalized and invisible. The exploration begins by uncovering the structure of farm labor, describing how agricultural work in the United States is segregated according to an ethnicity-citizenship

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13 See Demay (2014) for an example of someone sympathetic to Sakuma using it. As for supporters of Familias Unidas, I have discussed Holmes’s book with student supporters of Western Washington Students for Farm Worker Justice (a group of about 100 students who have been a major asset to Familias Unidas), a lawyer who has worked with Familias Unidas, and members of Familias Unidas (Ramón) and C2C.
hierarchy. The book then shows ethnographically that this pecking order produces correlated suffering and illness, particularly among undocumented, Indigenous Mexican pickers. *Yet it becomes clear that this injurious hierarchy is neither willed nor planned by the farm executives and managers; rather, it is produced by larger social structures. Of note, these structures of inequality are very rarely problematized by any group of people on the farm, even the most exploited* (Holmes 2013a: 31, emphasis added).

The emphasized text sums up the grounds for this critique, which (1) questions the assertion that the “injurious hierarchy is neither willed nor planned,” (2) disputes the claim that farmworkers do not problematize “these structures of inequality,” and (3) points out that Holmes’s commitment to understanding the issue through structural and symbolic violence paradoxically has been used in the media in such a way that is permissive of the same violence.

(1) Holmes’s assumption of the executives of Sakuma’s innocence is unsubstantiated. Before explaining why, here I present excerpts where this assumption is clearly set forth:

After the picker strike in chapter 6 in which explicit racist treatment of the pickers in the fields was brought to light, the growers were visibly surprised and upset. They promptly instructed the crop managers to pass along the message that all workers are to be treated with respect. Of course, the executives share some complicity with the unfair system, and some are more actively racist and xenophobic than others. *Overall, however, perhaps instead of blaming the growers, it is more appropriate to understand them as human beings doing the best they can in the midst of an unequal and harsh system* (2013a: 53, emphasis added).

(I will discuss the strike mentioned in chapter 6 below.) Commenting on the class-, race-, citizenship-, and gender-based segregation on the farm, Holmes writes:

As made clear by the ethnographic data above, this segregation is not conscious or willed on the part of the farm owners. Much the opposite. These inequalities are driven by larger structural forces as well as the anxieties they produce (2013a: 86).

Holmes uses Nancy Schepers-Hughes’s notion of “collective bad faith”—an adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s “bad faith”—to point out the complicity of certain individuals, thus (slightly) complicating his assertion that the farm owners act unintentionally

[C]ollective bad faith is visible in the Skagit Valley when white area residents tell me they know what it is like for Mexican migrants to pick berries because they picked one summer as a child, despite the clearly and significantly different living and working conditions of the white teenage crews and the Mexican crews. [It] is visible also when Indigenous languages are falsely
demoted to “dialects,” and impressively efficient, technical pickers are
categorized as “unskilled.” Such forms of collective bad faith are fostered by
official and unofficial policies and practices.... Collective bad faith is allowed
to continue beyond the borders of the farm by the general hiddenness of
migrant farmworkers (2013a: 87).

Finally, Holmes again comments on the strike that will be discussed below:

The strike, the temporary nature of its results, and the conversion of the
contrato [contract] into a memo highlight the complicated nature of power
and resistance on the farm. The executives demand that all workers are
treated with respect at the same time that their real anxieties over farm
survival prohibit them from effectively addressing the primary, economic
concerns of the pickers in a lasting way. The increasingly harsh market in
which the farm operates coerces these growers to remain complicit with a
system of labor segregation harmful to the pickers (2013a: 180, brackets
added).

Having thus presented Holmes’s position, let us now move to his
justifications for it and then look at how it could be harmful. Holmes offers support
for his sympathy towards the Sakuma executives. He notes:

[M]any of my friends and family who visited me ... quickly blamed the farm
management for the poor living and working conditions of berry pickers.
They automatically assumed that the growers could easily rectify the
situation. This supposition is supported by other writings on farmworkers....
The fact that the perspectives of farm management are generally overlooked
inadvertently encourages the assumption that growers may be wealthy,
selfish, or unconcerned.

The stark reality and precarious future of the farm serve as reminders that
the situation is more complex. The corporatization of U.S. agriculture and the
growth of international free markets squeeze growers such that they cannot
easily imagine increasing the pay of the pickers or improving the labor camps
without bankrupting the farm. In other words, many of the most powerful
inputs into the suffering of farmworkers are structural, not willed by
individual agents....

The [Sakuma] farm executives are ethical, good people who want the best for
themselves, their workers, and their local community (2013: 51-2).

Holmes includes extended interviews of Sakuma’s executives that speak of their
economic precariousness and also how the berry pickers were paid $7.16 per hour
rather than the federal minimum of $5.75 (note that this was more than a decade
ago) (2013a: 52).
Because Holmes continuously points to structural economics as the main source of the suffering of the farmworkers, it is strange that he never cites or even talks about asking for Sakuma’s finances. In critical media (The Stranger and The Nation) Sakuma is reported as having net sales of $6.1 million (Bacon 2014) and $6.4 million (Herz 2013b). The discrepancy between these figures is likely due to what aspects of Sakuma’s business are being included, as Sakuma’s operations extend beyond the farm to include a nursery and other services. Notably, Sakuma wrote a blog that contested several of Ansel Herz’s (2013b) points, but Herz’s point of finances was not one of them (see Herz 2013c).

Among the scarce evidence that Holmes offers to support his claim that the farm executives “want the best ... for their workers” is that, after the strike and seeing list of grievances, “The executives became visibly surprised and upset at the descriptions of explicit racist treatment and differential promotions on the farm” (2013a: 179). The executives addressed a few of their demands, but, “The following summer, the lunch breaks and higher pay were silently rescinded” (2013a: 179-80). Holmes concludes: “The executives demand that all workers are treated with respect at the same time that their real anxieties over farm survival prohibit them from effectively addressing the primary, economic concerns of the pickers in a lasting way” (2013a: 180). Again passing blame to economic structures, “The increasingly harsh market in which the farm operates coerces these growers to remain complicit with a system of labor segregation harmful to the pickers” (2013a: 180).

Holmes’s invocation of Sartre’s notion of “bad faith” may be used to describe the actions of Sakuma’s executives. First, to return to Sakuma’s finances, the claim cannot be made that they are struggling within an “increasingly harsh system” without seeing how they are doing economically. Second, “visibly surprised and upset” are unconvincing when it comes to revealing a person’s intentions. Holmes doesn’t say whether this is a recurrent issue or not. If it were, there would be good reason to see the Sakuma’s gesture of sincerity as nothing more than playacting. Furthermore, any present-day suggestion of being “visibly surprised” or “upset” would be meaningless because strikes have become a yearly event—so even if the executives’ gesture was descriptive then, a similar gesture would mean nothing now. For example, Sakuma filed its application for 160 H-2A workers last summer before the strikes happened, suggesting that Sakuma anticipated the worker discontent. Lastly, before rescinding the application for 438 H-2A workers, Sakuma’s justification for that same application was that workers missed more than 5 days of work, thereby breaking a contract (Wilkinson 2014). However, that contract never existed—a contract is exactly what Familias Unidas is fighting for.14

14 According to www.boycottsakumaberries.com, Familias Unidas’s webpage, the farmworkers “have been fighting for a legally binding contract since the end of July 2013” (see “Familias Unidas por la Justicia’s Legal Battles: A Reportback on WAFLA and Sakuma Bros Farms 2014 H-2A Applications”).
Holmes seems to attempt to portray the executives as victims of an “increasingly harsh market” in order to fit his ethnography into a framework of structural violence. However, structural violence is (paradoxically) dangerous because it ignores the agency we each have. While I do not for a moment question its general usefulness or explanatory power, it remains only one perspective. Even as it is crucial to recognize the violence facilitated by certain structures and policies, this recognition cannot be used to absolve those who participate in this violence of responsibility. Furthermore, given Sakuma’s apparent financial success—at least in the last year—the strenuous market forces seem not to apply here. Next we look at Holmes’s use of the framework of symbolic violence.

(2) Holmes’s claim that farmworkers internalize discrimination and reinforce the structures that cause their suffering is harmful. He asserts that the concept of symbolic violence “inheres a sense of internalization and subtle complicity of the dominated. One does not perceive only others, but also oneself, as belonging in ordained social locations” (2013a: 172). The evidence Holmes offers for this is the response of two individual farmworkers to an educational movie about the dangers of pesticides. The two responses were “Pesticides affect only white Americans [gabachos] because your bodies are delicate and weak” and “We Triquis are strong and aguantamos [hold out, bear, endure]” (2013a: 173). As Holmes notes, “The others nodded” (2013a: 173). Holmes concludes: “Here Triqui people internalized their class position through ethnic pride in perceived bodily differences that ironically aids in the naturalization and therefore reproduction of the very structures of their oppression” (2013a: 173-4). He soon after connects this back to his framework of structural violence:

In essence, the migrant body is made to betray itself. Specifically, because of perceptions of ethnic difference and body position in labor, the migrant body is seen as belonging in its position in the very agricultural labor hierarchy that then leads to its deterioration. These mechanisms of rendering inequality invisible are potentiated by internalization into Triqui forms of pride. The structural violence inherent to segregated labor on the farm is so effectively erased precisely because its disappearance takes place at the level of the body, and is thus understood to be natural (2013a: 175-6, emphasis added).

Though Holmes’s juxtaposition of the workers’ perception of their ethnicity and their acquiescence to contact with pesticides is persuasive, it is not definitive. It overlooks the potential that the workers do indeed view their ethnicity as strong and capable of enduring things other ethnicities cannot, all while believing in their right to dignity. In such a case this naturalization would be a coincidence where Sakuma’s reliance on pesticides is unquestioned because some farmworkers think their bodies can handle it. However, I would contest even this reading because I

\[15\] Though it is not directly related to migrant farming, Holmes also cites the following: “One of the Triqui people with whom I traveled to Oaxaca bragged to me that there were many Triqui people in the military in Mexico because ‘we endure [aguantamos]’” (2013a: 173-4).
found pesticides to be a major concern of farmworkers. For example, at an organizing meeting at Casa Latina, Ramón told the story of a worker who died from pesticide exposure. Either way, Holmes’s assertion is general and sweeping; just because of this one instance, he implies his analysis applies to other aspects of the farm. In other words, the specific instance he uses to support his framework in turn is taken to apply to the farm as a whole. To establish that Triqui people internalized their oppression, Holmes would need to provide more examples.

Holmes’s focus on the body and naturalization is, again, guided by Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence:

Symbolic violence is the naturalization, including internalization, of social asymmetries. Bourdieu explains that we experience the world through doxa (mental schemata) and habitus (historically accreted bodily comportments) that are issued forth from [the] social world and, therefore, make the social order—and its hierarchies—appear natural....

[Under Bourdieu, all] social actors in a given field must “buy into,” via some degree of illusion, the rules of the game [or the social world].... [T]he victims of symbolic violence, by definition, unknowingly consent to their own domination... (Holmes 2013a: 156-7).

Though I do not doubt the philosophical importance of Bourdieu’s theory, I find it highly problematic. It is used here in place of another, less abstract social process: racism. Holmes is suggesting that we should move away from understanding the injustices on the farm as a result of racism and more in terms of unconsciously driven symbolic violence. In effect, he says that those who suffer from racism are in part complicit in their suffering. I find this assertion unethical, let alone unfounded.

It is unethical in part because of the implications it carries into the present day. Though Holmes’s research was done in 2003 and 2004, and I cannot speak about the degree to which the farmworkers’ suffering was internalized then, I have found this notion to carry little explanatory power today. For example, on a trip I took to Olympia with some farmworkers and allies, in response to a question that inspired much laughter (“Is there anything spiritual about working with the Earth? Rosalinda told me there was.”), an employee of C2C said, “A lot of people think that working in the field is dirty, it is the worst work there is....” Ramón replied:

What she is trying to say is that working in the field is a dignified work, that we are proud, and that they should pay us a just wage, because this is the work we want to do, to work in the fields. What people see is, as Edgar says, just for the simple fact of working in the field, they want to say that we have less than everyone else. It’s what the people see. Why? Because the majority of us who work in the field are Latinos. But how we see our work is as something that we enjoy, and the only thing we want is to work in the field
but with a just wage, to earn something (*para ir con ganas*). Right now we feel like slaves working.

María, an Indigenous woman and activist, added: “We ask that they treat us well—that they treat us well (*Que nos traten bien. Que nos traten bien*).” Furthermore, at a meeting at Casa Latina, Filemón (the Indigenous vice-president of Familias Unidas) said:

The problem is that we are Indigenous people and we don’t speak that much Spanish, and a lot of people can’t speak any so they can’t defend themselves. *That’s bad because, even though we don’t speak the same language as the company, we should be respected as human beings. We are all equal* (emphasis added).

Here I have cited evidence that farmworkers—at least those of today—*do not* internalize racism. However, even within Holmes’s account there is evidence that he doesn’t seem to develop. This evidence is that the farmworkers went on a strike and made a list of 20 grievances (not unlike the list of grievances and demands from the summer of 2013) “about the working conditions, from low pay to explicit racist statements from supervisors, from lack of lunch breaks to unfair promotions of mestizo and Latino workers over Indigenous pickers” (2013a: 178-9). This is significant because, as I have found through my research, a strike is the main tool available to farmworkers to challenge “their own social position.” But instead of using this to trouble his notion of internalization, he explains this by saying that, given the “context,” the actions of Sakuma were “seen as unreasonable” and “considered entirely unjust” (2013a: 178).

The usefulness of a framework—just as a narrative—comes from its reliance on *doxa* (mental schemata), which guide our thinking. The internalization aspect of symbolic violence pushes us to see the oppressed as internalizing, and therefore complicit with, their oppression. Could Holmes’s insistence on a framework of symbolic violence thus enact a different kind of symbolic violence?

(3) Holmes’s position, aside from being controversial, has also been used against the struggle of Familias Unidas, thus—very ironically—permitting the structural violence Holmes speaks so adamantly against. Holmes was interviewed for an article titled (eerily close to what Holmes argues) “The symptom of a larger issue.” Here is how Holmes is used:

‘It isn’t a simple black-and-white situation.... It’s important for us to understand these people are made vulnerable by the economy and by racism,’ Holmes said. ‘It’s also important for us to remember farmers are

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16 Ramón made the following remarks at an organizing meeting for Familias Unidas, “A lot of people wonder why we Mexicans or we farmworkers always do boycotts. But that’s the only way that we can force such a big company give us a contract. We don’t have another way, that’s our only weapon....”
vulnerable, too.’ Holmes pointed out that many of the Triqui and Mixtec workers who come to work on the farms are farmers themselves in Mexico. ‘But their farms weren’t able to survive,’ he said. ‘So, in one sense, they have a lot in common (with the farmers here)’ (Demay, 2014).

As the suffering of farmworkers is just “the symptom of a larger issue,” the article—and Holmes—suggests that the executives do not really need to address the grievances of the workers; the executives, as Holmes suggests by describing them as “vulnerable,” are victims too. He further compares Sakuma’s purported (recall estimations that Sakuma makes over $6 million a year) financial insecurity with the farmworkers’ struggle to meet their basic needs—“they have a lot in common,” he notes. However, as relationships of dominance are clearly present, such a suggestion could be offensive to migrant farmworkers.

In all of the mainstream (non-independent) media I have reviewed on this subject, the perspective of the executives is pitted up against that of one or, at most, a few migrant farmworkers. There is an inequality of representation because the voices of hundreds of farmworkers are suggested to deserve no more attention than the voices of Sakuma’s few executives. This is to say that there is not just one voice that can accurately or fully represent the experiences of hundreds of people, and the suggestion that there is only bolsters the banal violence of ignoring the voices of those from lower socioeconomic classes and nonwhite ethnicities. In a sense, this is what Holmes’s comparison reinforces.

In an op-ed written by Holmes (2013b) on the labor dispute, he again discusses the needs of the farmworkers as well as the economic structures that drive the executives, who “desire to do the best for their workers,” to ignore those same workers. He concludes with the following:

Perhaps most importantly, both today’s farmworker strike and the strike in the mid-2000s speak to the need for fair immigration reform. Notably, the majority of farm and nursery owners (including the owners of the Skagit Valley farm), known collectively as the Agricultural Workforce Coalition, support immigration reform in order to help secure a more stable workforce that does not have to cross a dangerous border only to live in fear of deportation.

For these reasons, it is critical that Pacific Northwesterners stand strongly on the side of Indigenous Mexican farmworkers while also supporting local farmers in today’s economy.

Again, though I agree that immigration reform is absolutely necessary, by invoking its necessity in this context, Holmes excuses Sakuma’s refusal to acknowledge its farmworker employees. Furthermore, there is an important qualifier to Sakuma’s
pro-immigration stance: although making mandatory programs like E-verify\textsuperscript{17} would, as Steve Sakuma said, “shut us down” (Hotakainen, 2011), the legalization of workers would also make it much more difficult for Sakuma to consistently ignore them. Finally, the labor dispute between Familias Unidas and Sakuma is often described as a “lucha (struggle, fight).” In the midst of this fight, Holmes’s suggestion to support both Sakuma and the farmworkers is unfeasible.

In sum, I worry that Holmes’s dedication to his frameworks of structural and symbolic violence is unsubstantiated yet absolves Sakuma executives of their ethical duties. I end this discussion with a question: Surely Holmes knew that the Sakuma brothers would read his book; on the other hand, would his Triqui companions too? Were they given a chance to respond to Holmes’s claims about internalization?

An important point must be made here: this project is not an attempt to vilify the Sakuma brothers. As Hannah Arendt’s (1963) notion of the banality of evil so piercingly describes, “regular people” often do bad things. In reality, almost all of us are complicit with some sort of suffering; indeed, it is (nearly) impossible to lead a perfectly ethical life. I do not think the Sakuma brothers are necessarily “bad people.” In fact, if time and access allowed for it, I would love to interview them to find out how their ethical framework permits them to mistreat their workers. Furthermore, despite their reported financial success, I am sure that they still, as Holmes notes, worry about the future of their business. Nonetheless, this does not give them the right to oppress others.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} This program verifies the documentation status of a company’s workers electronically.

\textsuperscript{18} In the labor dispute, Sakuma’s status as a 4\textsuperscript{th} generation Japanese-American family that has gone through the internment camps of World War II is sometimes invoked to garner sympathy. While my sympathy lies with them for having been subjected to oppression, this is not relevant to how they treat farmworkers today.
Theoretical framework

As I have already established many of my baseline arguments, I will only briefly review them here. They are as follows. (1) Religion and spirituality afford us narratives which we can employ within an ethical framework. (2) The decision to move can be ethical, not arbitrary. (3) Life is inherently precarious, and this precariousness is amplified in many ways for undocumented people. (4) Understanding immigration through large-scale politics or the law is just one perspective. It can obscure the more personal dimension of immigration.

(1) Religion and spirituality allow for different ways of seeing the world. With reference to the work of Paul Ricoeur, Jackson writes: “the adequacy of any idea... consists in its ability to help us realize our capacity for speaking, acting, praying, and even narrating our story” (2013: 136). Jackson sees God as “a condensation symbol, a powerful metaphor, for life itself,” and in submitting to this “higher power,” one doesn’t so much “forfeit one’s own agency but [one] recovers it through a relationship with something beyond oneself” (2013: 136, emphasis in original). Though I do not advocate for limiting the divine to solely a metaphor, the use of the divine as a metaphor can have an unmistakable impact on an individual’s life. I view religion and spirituality as opening up possibilities within the imagination that are otherwise easily discountable. These alternate perceptions shape the subjective reality of an individual.

(2) Movement can be ethical, and ethics is a domain that transcends nationality. Again drawing from Jackson’s insights, “the good, the right, [and] the true” cannot be decided without context; rather, an action’s “worth lies in what we achieve within the limits of what is possible” (2013: 8-9). The understanding of movement as ethical undermines the commonplace attempt to make abstractions of immigrants. It demands that we acknowledge the subjectivity of each person, and appreciate that in the quest for life—whether for mere survival or the search for fulfillment—political lines and boundaries can lose much of their meaning and can become little more than obstacles/barriers. Note that this point will be explored in depth in Movement.

(3) Life is precarious. Butler writes that our social makeup is inherently fragile because “[t]here is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of” people and our relations to each other, “the environment and to non-human forms of life” (qtd. in Stanescu 2012: 575). Our lives are hopelessly intertwined with people and nature, thus James Stanescu writes: “Indeed, it is perhaps just a trick of language that we are able to talk about a precarious life, instead of the always already plural of precarious lives” (2012: 575).19 As Stenescu further notes, “under Butler, it is not our precarious lives

19 In a way that complements Butler, Jackson, with reference to Spinoza, writes: “ethics concerns the ways species life or individual lives are struggled for and sustained, especially
we have to worry about, but instead our systems of immunity against our vulnerability that are our biggest threats” (2012: 575). Like other oppressed groups, the lives of migrant farmworkers and undocumented people are made more precarious than many others.

(4) *Thinking of immigration through a structural or legal lens is perspectival, not absolute.* A structural perspective on immigration is concerned with broad movements of people and political stability. For example, this is thinking about what would happen if everyone present in the U.S. were to be granted a path to citizenship and worrying about potential political, economic, or cultural instability that, in theory, might result. Though it is tempting to privilege such a perspective over others, we must resist this urge. To assign it a greater degree of legitimacy is to cast other perspectives—like those of the migrants—in the background. Similarly, legality is just one among many factors that shape our system of ethics, and therefore our actions. The devastating power of a person’s documentation status to shape their life is an unfortunate consequence of the hegemonic position occupied by law in our society. The law is perceived as unassailable and absolute, and as a result an action’s legality is often confused with its ethicality. To be clear, I am not saying that the law is unnecessary or even unjust (though there are many cases where I find this to be true); rather, I’m saying that the law is just one competing—though dominant—perspective from which to view the life of an immigrant.

under conditions of insecurity, scarcity, danger, and loss, as well as the ways in which life itself flows through all things, connecting all forms of life in a common web” (2013: 6).

20 In this light, Sakuma’s preoccupation with financial success can be understand as an effort to become immune to precarious life. However, in doing so they only make life more precarious for others.

21 I want to be careful to not unduly suggest that anything negative would result from comprehensive immigration reform, as it could be beneficial even at the structural level (see Immigration Policy Center 2013).
Moments of Immigration: Movement, Indignities, and Action

At this point we will explore the three key moments of the immigration and farmworker activists’ lives: movement, indignities, and action.

Movement

The reasons people choose to leave their homes and come to the U.S. are many, and each person’s situation is unique. To return to Jackson’s argument, “the ethical space between external constraints and personal imperatives... defines our very humanity” (2013: 202, emphasis in original). From this perspective, one’s nationality may be a constraint to arriving to one’s goals, and thus something that must be overcome. For Diogenes and the Cynics, one may live “according to nature (kata phusis)” or according to “social law and custom (nomos)” (Jackson 2013: 98). This distinction helps us to recognize that law and nationality are arbitrarily designated facets of life that poorly capture our realities. The starting point for our current exploration must be empathy, as it is among the only tools we have that can cut through our historical conditioning. We must ask: What would we do if we were born into a different country, a different circumstance? Would we make the same choices as many, like Gaby or Ramón, who have migrated? Would we risk everything in hopes for a better life? Questions like this help us see through the nomos of nationhood, which Benedict Anderson (1991) describes so succinctly—imagined communities.

The current discussion is in conversation with the personal narratives of Gaby and Ramón. My original research question was, just as it is throughout this essay, about how religion and spirituality shape this particular moment. However, because neither religion nor spirituality was explicitly invoked by either Gaby or Ramón, this section will be more of an exploration of the ethical dimensions involved in the decision to move. We end with Gaby’s and Ramón’s accounts of crossing the border. Throughout this essay (and in this section too), rather than partitioning each person’s narrative into their own section, I will place them into conversation with one another.

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22 For Jackson, “any human life is largely shaped by moral, political, social, and religious regimes,” however, “every human life unfolds in ways that only partially realize, replicate, or reinforce these...” (2013: 8).

23 We should be reminded that for Gaby and Ramón, the movement was a decision. In contrast, Holmes (2013a) found that for many Triqui farmworkers, it was a matter of physical survival (see also Stephen 2007).
Beginnings

Let us begin from where Gaby and Ramón were born. As Gaby describes,

[M]y town is called Morelos, my municipality is called Mexquitic, and my city is called San Luis Potosí.... [W]here I come from there are places where there weren’t houses. Still there are very few people living there. There was no lighting, there was no drinkable water, there were no companies, or even telephones. Today there are those things—it is a little bit more civilized. We grew up growing our own food—corn and beans. Every vegetable that we cooked, we grew. Today I see that it was purely organically grown food—it didn’t have any sort of chemicals. ...I didn’t know that cars existed; I came to know about cars when I was 8- or 10-years-old. It was a very beautiful town—very, very beautiful.

Gaby’s recollection of her first home is nostalgic, and she even suggests that she regrets ever leaving:

I would prefer to be in Mexico. If it weren’t for the process that I’m undergoing—I have my children here, my children already grew up here, they are already studying here—I would be in Mexico.... It has been around 13 years since I’ve been [there]. It’s been 8 years since I’ve seen my father.

When I asked Ramón to say a little about where he was from, he responded: “I was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco. I have one sister and one brother. I lived there until I was 18-years-old.... So, what could I tell you about my childhood? I don’t have anything good to say. I didn’t have a difficult life in Guadalajara.”

Seeking Opportunity and Escaping Sorrow

The two factors that brought Gaby to move were the image of the U.S. as a land of opportunity and her desire to give to offer this opportunity to her children.

[W]hen I came to the U.S., my family was in the U.S.... I came because what we would hear is that in the U.S. life was really good. The truth is that they told us, if we wanted, we could buy a car here; that here, we would make earn our living in dollars rather than pesos, so it’s more money. If you make 100 dollars here, it’s like making 1000 dollars in Mexico.

Roberto, one of Jackson’s 3 interlocutors in The Wherewithal of Life, himself a Mexican immigrant, describes how the “myth of the American dream constantly haunts the imagination of young Mexican men living in rural areas, and it is fueled by all the success stories of those who return...” (2013: 108). Gaby made her decision in part because of this mythic image of the U.S.

This first factor in Gaby’s migration is grounded in the personal imperative to improve one’s life, or what Jackson describes as “[t]he ethical quest for existential
fulfillment” (2013: 6). With reference to Spinoza, Jackson notes: “every life form ‘endeavors to persist in its own being,’ seeking whatever augments and amplifies its existence, while avoiding all that imperils or diminishes it” (2013: 6). To return to empathy, we can imagine that we too would seek a better life if the opportunity were presented to us. Indeed, this is ideological foundation of our capitalist, individualistic culture: no one can be blamed for pursuing self-interest. It is ironic that, although this imperative is seen as quite literally a birthright, we are reluctant to accept that it transcends national or cultural boundaries.

The other main factor for Gaby was providing her children the opportunity to study English.

What also brought me here is that I wanted my children to study in English. Because school in Mexico is really expensive, I couldn't pay for it back then... So that was one of the reasons, so that they could study and learn the language.

What Gaby points to here is the innate desire to want what is best for one’s children. Children are rightfully awarded a privileged place in our culture as human beings who have not yet had the chance to develop or to come into themselves, and to rob them of their right to do so is regarded as an unspeakable crime. I would suggest that this is because of their innocence: to harm a child in war, for example, is impermissible because the child has not yet become the enemy. A similar logic, rooted in the developing but still-innocent child, may be at play here. Gaby speaks of her wish for her children to learn English, the "language of commerce," which occupies a position of hegemony within the structures of global capitalism. I would suggest that Gaby was unable to find a legitimate reason why her children should not have the same opportunity—afforded by knowing English and having an education—as children born in the U.S.; they had done nothing to deserve being born on the impoverished end of global inequality. From an ethical perspective, movement was not only permissible but also pressing; to stay in Mexico would have all but guaranteed socioeconomic immobility for her children’s future.

As we move to Ramón, we find that his motives were different yet similar. For Ramón, it was a grief-inspired act of rejuvenation into a place of opportunity. He recounts:

My story is that I came to this country because my father died. I was 18-years-old, I was the youngest, I got depressed, and there was nothing to do so I decided to move here.” Ramón summarizes: “I didn’t come because of necessity but rather I didn’t feel right, I wasn’t able to cope with the death of the father (no tenía la capacidad para sostener la muerte de mi papa). It wasn’t good for me to be there anymore.”

I asked, “Were you really close to him?”
Well, I never liked to spend much time with him at all, but before he died—4 or 5 months before—I began to talk with him, and those 5 months were the most important months of our relationship, we really got to know each other (en esos 5 meses hicimos todo lo que no hicimos toda la vida). I’m not sure why that was, maybe because he was going to die... I’m not sure, but 5 months before he died was when I had the opportunity to become close to him.

“How old was he?” I asked. Ramón said, “He was 44-years-old when he died.” I told Ramón that I was sorry that his father died so young.

The catalyst—but not the underlying reasons—for Ramón’s migration was the death of a loved one. In a way not unlike Christopher McCandless of Into the Wild (Krakauer 1996), who was burdened by Kerouac’s feeling that “everything was dead,” the 18-year-old Ramón found solace in escaping the grief-stricken place of his birth to find something new—he had never left Guadalajara. Although McCandless’s adventurous spirit and quest for truth captured the heart and the imagination of an entire generation, Ramón’s quest for rejuvenation is not regarded with the same admiration because of his nationality. We are reminded of two things: first, that grief and the longing for something new are not limited to a certain ethnic group or nationality; second, that a preoccupation with these relatively arbitrary labels can lead us to forget the spirit that we share.

Though grief was the catalyst for migration, we still need to see why Ramón chose the U.S. Like with Gaby, it was for socioeconomic opportunity, and in turn the prospect of being able to support family. Ramón explains:

I came because my father died and I didn’t want to be in Mexico, but I also had the hope of trying to help my family—to try to make a little bit of money and send it to them, to my mom especially because she doesn’t have a husband, and to try to help my siblings. These were the other reasons that I came here.

Struck by Ramón’s concern for family and especially for his mom, I asked him if he still called her and he confirmed that he called “every 3 or 4 days, to see how my family is, to see what they are doing, what they might need, to see how they are.” I then asked if he would see her again. He said: “Yes. I really want to see her because it’s already been more than 10 years since I’ve seen her. So, I think that one day I will see her. I want to go, but I can’t because of my legal situation.”

As with Gaby, family is huge for Ramón. Through the lens of empathy, we again need to appreciate the ethicality of this situation. In John Q (directed by John Cassavetes, 2002), the protagonist’s son has an enlarged heart that demands a transplant if he is able to survive. Because of a change in his health insurance, and not being able to raise the necessary funds to put his son on the donor list, John Q. finds that the only hope he has of saving his son is to take people hostage in a hospital and to demand the surgery that would save his son’s life. The viewer is
forced to grapple with whether he is justified in doing so or not. Eventually it is revealed that John Q planned to commit suicide in order to provide his son with a working heart. The hostages are moved by John Q's immense love for his son, and so is the viewer. John Q provides us with a way to understand that the law is not always in accord with what is most ethical. For John Q, the life of his son greatly outweighed the label of criminal, let alone his own life; for Ramón and Gaby, in wanting what was best for family, laws were ethically trivial.

At this point in my conversation with Ramón, I had the chance to reflect on the magnitude of the decision to leave one's family. I thought back to the 4-months—the longest duration yet—I went without seeing my family when I studied abroad in Peru and traveled in Chile, and I couldn't imagine what it would mean to realistically never see them again. Yet this is exactly what Ramón and Gaby risked (and still risk). For Ramón it has been more than 10 years since he has seen his mother and, as Gaby tells us, “It’s been around 13 years since I’ve been to Mexico. It’s been 8 years since I’ve seen my father.” Empathy demands that we imagine the pain of going years, and possibly the rest of our lives, without seeing family.

Ramón explains that he cannot see his mother because of his “legal situation”—his lack of documentation. To leave the U.S. would be to risk his whole life here because there are no guarantees that he could cross the border successfully a second time. As Holmes notes, “Some of the migrants in their late teens or early twenties” would return to Oaxaca “for the patron saint festival in early November and stay through Christmas” and then “risk another crossing” (2013a: 42). It is thus ironic that the very machine designed to keep immigrants out of the country is that which keeps them in (Holmes 2013a: 42).

I expressed to Ramón that many people view the decision of immigrants to migrate as somewhat trivial, and added my reflections about the sacrifice of not seeing family. In response, he explained:

It’s a sacrifice but at the same time you open up more doors so that you can have a family—so that you can maintain a family and give them a better future. In Mexico, it is really difficult because of working and studying. You have to work and study, and if you can’t do both, you must choose one. The majority of us barely studied, we got to middle school and stopped because there was no money. It is a really bad situation because there is no money for your studies, and if you don’t qualify for scholarships, there is no other option for you other than working. ...the idea comes to your mind to go to the U.S. So, at the same time, you lose everything, but you also receive a lot. You lose everything but here you begin a life that is really different. You can do things that you never imagined and you can try to give your children an education so that they can become better (se mejoren).

When Roberto (again one of Jackson’s interlocutors) is at his naturalization ceremony to become a citizen of the U.S., he crosses his fingers during the first part
Looking around to the other immigrants, he asked: “Have we no shame?” Beforehand, Roberto had “an ambivalent relationship with the U.S. because of the discrimination and violence against nonwhite immigrants that [he] had heard about and directly experienced.” He had also been reluctant to adopt English, the “language of commerce,” the language of colonization, as his own; Roberto cites a passage written by Frantz Fanon: “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.” These “anxieties returned during the pledge of allegiance.” But suddenly, as he tells us, “I remembered that it was in the U.S. that I learned that effort could potentially pay dividends, regardless of one’s class, gender, or status. In my case, at least, this was no myth, for, after all, hadn’t I, a Mexican immigrant from impecunious and obscure beginnings, ended up studying at Harvard?” He uncrossed his fingers (Jackson 2013: 88-9).

This is the kind of opportunity that Gaby thought she would find and that Ramón references, that in the U.S., “effort [can] potentially pay dividends, regardless....” For both, this opportunity seems to be more for their children than themselves. Though after the fact I realized that my language could be interpreted as condescending, I nonetheless commented about Ramón’s daughter: “She is studying and can be somebody.” “Someone better than us,” he said. Seeing that Ramón didn’t interpret what I said as disrespectful, and furthermore that his comment was in reference to opportunities, not a person’s worth, I replied: “Whomever she wants to be.” In turn, he said: “Yep... our children can be whomever they want. This is something that in Mexico can’t be done.”

Unlike Ramón, Gaby speaks in the past tense about why she wanted to move. Whereas Ramón asserts that “you lose everything, but you also receive a lot” (emphasis added), Gaby says, “I came here for a better future for my children” (emphasis added). Gaby’s knowledge of the U.S. was based on hearsay and myth, and her expectations of the U.S. and the opportunities that English would give to her children did not pan out as planned. She explains: “That was how I was thinking about it. Today, I recognize that English is really important, but we are losing our own language. We don’t even speak our language well anymore.” Gaby frequently expressed the disappointments she met in the U.S. Of her hometown, she noted nostalgically: “It was a very beautiful town—very, very beautiful. Honestly, I would prefer to be there.”

To close on our focus on the decision to move and to now consider the journey of crossing itself, I want to briefly summarize what has thus far been discussed and note a couple of things. Gaby and Ramón made the ethical decision to move from Mexico to the U.S. While both shared the desire to help their families—Gaby’s 4 children and Ramón’s mother and 2 siblings—they differed in that Gaby was given false ideas about the U.S., and Ramón desired to escape the death of his

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24 This whole paragraph is based on Jackson (2013: 88-9).
father. Though Gaby and Ramón both had a choice, we should remember that, oftentimes, immigration is the only recourse to survival (Holmes 2013a; Bacon 2004; Bacon 2008). However, Gaby and Ramón also show us the potential danger of making such generalizations, since under such criteria their own stories would be seen as less valid. Thus, although it is absolutely necessary to recognize the injustice of economically forced migration, it is perhaps equally necessary to remember that movement can be inspired by more than just the need to survive. We need to remember that “every life form ‘endeavors to persist in its own being,’ seeking whatever augments and amplifies its existence” (Jackson 2013: 6). Finally, our understanding of the decision to migrate should be based in a consideration of the ethics involved, and not in a perspective of life limited to the primacy of law or nationality.

**Crossing**

Now we shift our focus to the journey of migration itself. In a way, the remainder of this section acts as a transition to the next, Indignities. Before beginning, it is again important to highlight the absence of an Indigenous voice here. When I asked Ramón if he thought the Indigenous experience of immigration was different, he said:

> I definitely think so. I can’t tell you exactly how it is, but I think that it is really different. I can’t really say anything more, simply that many of them don’t speak Spanish. With this simple fact we can imagine everything they go through in order to come to this country—more than me, because I speak Spanish…. I think that it was more difficult for them. For me it was difficult, but for them it must have been even more difficult.”

Having thus limited our scope to the non-Indigenous experience, let us move to the stories of Ramón and Gaby. I asked the same question to both: “If you are comfortable with sharing this, how was your experience of crossing the border?” We will look at Ramón’s story first, and then at Gaby’s. I hope to highlight that the perilous journey of crossing the border is yet another price an immigrant must pay. This section will have minimal commentary.

Ramón responded to my question:

> I came with a cousin; it was really hard because we didn’t have money. I spoke with my mom who got us 5,000 pesos, and with that money we went to Mexicali, and in Mexicali we went to look for the woman who were coyotes

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25 As Jackson asserts, “all lives and lifeworlds are more complex and variable than is suggested by the paradigmatic discourses of both the academy and the popular media” (2013: 124, emphasis in original).

26 For more information on the politics of border crossing, and of U.S. policies funneling migrants through Arizona, see the work of Jason De León, Joseph Nevins (*Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*), and Luis Alberto Urrea (*The Devil’s Highway*).
and tried to come here. But when we got to Mexicali, my cousin told me that everything was arranged, that someone was already waiting for us there, and he brought me to Mexicali. But he was lying to me. But I wanted to go, so when we got to Mexicali, we talked to somebody in California and found that nobody knew that we were coming. I had never left Guadalajara before this. We left without money, without anything. It was really hard. It took about 6 or 7 days in Mexicali, until finally they were going to take us to the U.S., and we came with 12 women and men. [I]t was really difficult because you have to cross the river, and I don’t know how to swim. To cross the river, I had to do something.

I failed to seize the opportunity to ask Ramón what it was he had to do to cross the river, and he quickly continued to discuss what happened after he crossed the river successfully.

I walked 2 or 2 ½ hours; there was a van that belonged to the women, to the mentados coyotes. They picked us up and brought us to Los Angeles. When we got to Los Angeles, they spoke with my family, to my cousins, and my cousins came to pick me up and paid $1,500 for each one of us.

“IT was very risky because there are many animals at the border,” he added. “Snakes?” I asked. He responded:

Yes, snakes. Aside from that, a lot of people are looking for a way to take your money. But we didn’t have any problem with this. The only thing is that we were in Mexicali for 4 or 5 days waiting. But we didn’t have very many problems. We were really fortunate because almost everyone says they walk for many hours or even days to come here. I only walked 2 hours to come here.

“Many people have many problems while crossing,” I commented. He said: “Yeah, there are a lot of people who die. There are many people who cross through Tijuana or Arizona that spend many days walking. They become dehydrated and they die. All for the American dream.”

Gaby and her family, in contrast to Ramón, had a denigrating and nearly fatal journey across the border. Much of Gaby’s experience was shaped by her being a woman.

For me it was really hard because I didn’t know anything. When they told me that I had to cross the river by swimming I told them that I couldn’t. Those people, when they find out that they are bringing women, and they find out

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27 I interpret these final comments of Ramón’s as carrying no spite for “the American dream.” In contrast with the popular image of this dream as meaning exorbitant wealth and status, Ramón describes the dream he sought in America as follows: “[M]y goal was nothing more than to save a little bit of money, $2 or $3 thousand, and to return to Mexico.”
that they cannot swim, they are prepared. They have a tool that allows us to cross. But I was really afraid of crossing the river, because about 4 months before my cousin had drowned in the river.... The guides first crossed a few times to see how fast the current was. They tested it several times and then said it was safe for others.... The most difficult part for me was that I didn’t know that they told us to bring a change of clothes, and they told us that we had to bring a second pair of shoes, and they asked us to take off our clothes before crossing the river—all of our clothes.

It was really hard because I told them no. I’m going to tell you that if you get wet, and you get cold, then everything depends on you. So we had to take off our clothes in order to cross the river. It was really, really uncomfortable because I didn’t expect this. So we were maybe 7 women between—I’m not sure how many there were—maybe 50 men, I don’t remember. It was hard because they were people without morals (quien no tenía escrúpulos) and I had never met them before. It was really uncomfortable. Because of this there was a lot of abuse of women, because of this there were many rapes of the people who cross to this country. And because of fear, they allow for many things. It never happened to me but I could see how, for other girls, they could abuse them. It is really horrible (desagradable) because if you speak up or say something then you have to stay behind, and you don’t want to stay in the desert. It’s really hard. Today we say: If you are going to bring yourself here, then come with your husband. If you are going to try to bring a daughter, don’t do it, because nobody will take care of her.

“The experience is really different for women,” I commented. “Yes, really horrible,” Gaby replied. She continued:

[S]uppose that the person that you contact from the other side of the border is coming from Mexico, and you ask how many hours you are going to walk. They lie to you. They say you are going to walk 4 hours—4 hours, and no. It took me 8 days of walking. The first 3 days we had food, and after that they didn’t give us food or water. Thanks to God we are still alive. So they lie to you, and you don’t come prepared, and because of this many people stay in the desert. They die because they don’t come prepared—the children and the women, there have been pregnant women who have come, and they are left in the desert.

In reminding us of the deadly journey from Mexico to the U.S., Gaby is pointing out that, in addition to “losing everything,” one also risks one’s very life, or the lives of one’s family members. We need to recall that Gaby had 3 children and was pregnant with her 4th when she—they—crossed.
Indignities

Though it is difficult to locate where suffering starts for many immigrants (or if it starts before movement), it seems that the moment of crossing is something that many undocumented people share. The indignities people experience, however, continue. I explore these indignities through a framework that includes undocumented status, discrimination, and impoverishment as mutually reinforcing phenomena. Using this framework, I argue that Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life accurately describes the suffering endured by many undocumented people. Finally, using Judith Butler’s concept of precarious life, I shift to consider how religion and spirituality can help one to deal with—and even heal through—bare life. As in the preceding section, Gaby and Ramón are my interlocutors and co-thinkers.

Figure 2 A framework of bare life

Before beginning, I want to highlight that migrant farming is not inherently undignified. Rather, Rosalinda, who was a farmworker herself, explained to me that in farming one has a connection with the Earth. I asked Ramón what he thought about this; he replied: “What she is trying to say is that working in the field is a dignified work, that we are proud, and that they should pay us a just wage, because this is the work we want to do, to work in the fields....” Thus we begin with the understanding that, as far as this section relates to Ramón’s experience, migrant farming is not the problem itself, the problem is how it is practiced.

Undocumented status, discrimination, and impoverishment: a framework

Here we explore how being without documents, discrimination, and impoverishment are co-constituted phenomena and undergird the suffering that migrant farmworkers and undocumented people experience, both on the farm and at the Detention Center.

To be without documents in the U.S. is to live in a state of fear. For instance, when I asked Gaby if Washington was a better state to live in than Texas, she said:

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28 The qualifier to this point is that, according to José Jorge Mendoza, almost half of undocumented people arrive to the U.S. lawfully (Mendoza 2011a: 4).
“[Y]ou don’t have so much fear because here they give you a license…. In Texas you are no one because you don’t have identification.” Here Gaby reminds us of the power of the Cynic’s notion of nomos (social law and custom); in the absence of a piece of paper, a real person is considered to not exist. Ramón also comments:

In my case, it’s not that difficult, but it’s something I risk day after day. Everything that I’ve done, everything that I’m doing for all these people, could all fall apart overnight. Not so much because I do something bad, but rather because, as you suggest, Immigration stops me. So I am afraid that they will detain me … because I’m not from here.

Later Ramón also notes that deportation would mean separation from his family. Gaby has been in the U.S. for 14 years and Ramón for about 11, yet everything could be lost, in a flash.

This fear of, and vulnerability towards, deportation allow for Sakuma and other farms29 to treat their workers as they wish with relative impunity. I asked Ramón: “Can you say something about the connection between how farmworkers are treated and the law?” He said:

I think that people are just like me. People are always afraid, they are afraid to fight for their rights for the same reason: their immigration status. They therefore think that if a campesino goes on strike, the first thing they will do is call the police and send them back to Mexico. So I know people who have worked here for 12, for 14 years who have told me that they haven’t wanted to go on strike because they were afraid because of their immigration status.

However, fear of the law may have less to do with the law itself than with a person’s undocumented status working in tandem with other oppressive forces, including discriminatory law enforcement (but not actual law). For example, police forces of certain cities of northern Washington routinely reroute 911 calls to Customs and Border Protection (Border Patrol) (Turnbull 2013). Despite such discriminatory practices that create a disincentive to report crimes, living undocumented in the U.S. is classified as a civil offense, not a criminal one (though it is still punishable by deportation). Furthermore, undocumented workers have the same constitutional workplace rights as U.S. citizens. They also share the same constitutional rights in terms of being a victim of a violent crime. Ramón suggests that, perhaps due to a greater awareness of actual laws,30 the fear involved with being undocumented is no longer keeping workers silent:

But now since we’ve gone on strike and all of that, and knowing that there are laws that also protect them even though they are undocumented, they

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29 “Not all of the companies are the same, but the majority practice [the same things],” Ramón clarified at the beginning of our interview.

30 Indeed, the law has proven to be an important asset for Familias Unidas (see Herz, 2014).
feel better. Because of [the huge number of people who have gone on strike], I want to say that people no longer are afraid.

The Detention Center—a potential consequence of being “caught” by ICE—is a source of the fear embedded into one’s undocumented status. This is because, through deportation, it separates family members from each other; and, as Gaby explains in great detail, it is guilty of numerous atrocities:

They took me to Immigration because my car lights were out. Since I arrived at nighttime, they didn’t give me bail—I arrived at 11 pm. The following day I saw a judge who told me that I have no reason to be there and I could go home. When I was getting ready to supposedly go home, there were immigration officials waiting. When I went to Immigration, it was a long process, because my fine was $15,000. I didn’t have that money. Many of us have to work to survive day by day, so I wasn’t going to take get $15,000 to pay my fine. I asked the judge to lower my fine, he looked at my case, and he decreased it by $5,000, so it ended up being $10,000. Because I didn’t have the money, I remained there for 6 weeks until my sister gave me a loan through her credit card because she is a resident. She loaned me the money to pay so that I could leave. That’s how I was able to leave. That’s why I spent so much time there, because I didn’t have the money.

I asked Gaby, “How was it in the detention center?” She answered:

In the detention center it was really hard because, already knowing a little bit about it, I knew what was happening in the detention center was unjust—it was a prison. It is not a detention center, it is a prison. How things are set up there is really uncomfortable because you have 3 bathrooms to shower for 100 people, and 2 toilets for 100 people. It is really uncomfortable because you don’t have privacy. Just imagine this little space [we were in a small car] with a roof above and the beds really close to one another like in cars—one here, and the other above. So you don’t have privacy. They never turn off the lights, the food that they give you is nauseating (asquerosa), and the treatment they give you is really inhumane. What happened to me was that, when I was began to see these injustices, I thought that we shouldn’t permit them. We are human beings; you shouldn’t allow them to hit you...

“They hit you?”

People fight amongst themselves because of a lack of food. So if you go and many people are hungry and aren’t able to eat, then sometime the same security wouldn’t allow... For example, people would arrive after dinnertime, which is at 4 pm, and then go to their cells. The new arrivals, after completing a process that can take 8 hours in total—to do your paperwork to be able to send you to what they call “bookies,” in the halls where they send you to sleep, they call them “bookies.” If you are in administration working on the
process of paperwork, finding out names, where people are from, it is a really long process. It can be that they take 100 people and they only have 4 people making the files—they get tired. It makes sense (es lógico), I understand. And because they are tired, they don’t hurry through the process. So if people arrive after dinnertime, which is usually what happens, then people are hungry. If you have food, you are not allowed to give it to the newcomers. Why? I don’t know—they say it’s because of rules that they have. So sometimes there are no towels, there are no clothes, there’s no toilet paper.

As women, we suffer a lot because sometimes there isn’t that which is necessary for a woman. So you ask them for things you need and they don’t give them to you. So if we as woman are at that time of the month, and we have nothing to use, we have to tear up towels, and they bother you for it. They give you a warning because they think you are robbing them of something that is theirs. What can you do if there is nothing to use? So, there were times when you needed to rob the people that were taking the towels from you in order to use them as sanitary towels. That is why people fight. And that was the reason—that would make people fight because, if this is my towel, they are not going to give me another. So, what are you going to use the next day if you don’t have a towel? And they give you towels of about this size [her hands were a foot and a half apart], dirty, unhygienic, many women would get sick because of infections because the uniforms don’t get washed. So, it is unhygienic in that place. It’s very depressing.

When I began to see this injustice, I told them, we have to speak out against this situation: I can’t allow this to happen, we need to do something. We need to let people know that this is happening. They figured out that I was organizing people. What happened to me is that they punished me. They punished me for 3 days with no food, with no telephone, with no bath, nothing but my bed. But anyways, all of the women would sit down on the stairway and talk to me. But it was really bad, because I was using crutches. They didn’t allow people to bring me food to where I was. They wanted me to get the food myself, but I couldn’t carry the tray while using my crutches. Either I walked with crutches, or didn’t have food. I would prefer sometimes to not eat.

Discrimination works in tandem with undocumented migrant status (see Provine & Doty 2011). Amy Reed-Sandoval, in conversation with José Jorge Mendoza, argues that we need to understand undocumented migrants as an “oppressed social group” which she calls “the socially undocumented”—those who are forced into this group “endure a common set of unjust constraints on the basis of being perceived to be undocumented” (Forthcoming: 2-3, emphasis removed). This is to say that discrimination and undocumented migrant status are mutually reinforcing. Discrimination reifies the documented/undocumented dichotomy (where most undocumented people are commonly considered to be Latino) and being present “unlawfully” begets more discrimination. Gaby recounts:
...I’ve felt a lot of sadness, a lot of resentment, a lot of hate towards what
good growing conditions. We asked: “If they are in such good
conditions, why don’t you live in them?”

Holmes, complementing Ramón’s account, describes his “cabina” or “shack”:

[T]he plywood walls are semicovered by peeling and chipping brown-pink
paint. There is no insulation, and the wind blows easily through holes and
cracks, especially at night. Each unit is elevated a foot off the ground and has
small two small windows on one side, some of which are broken and most of
which are covered by pieces of old cardboard boxes. The ground around the
camps is often deep mud or a dust storm waiting to be triggered by a passing
car. During summer days, the rusty tin roofs of the units conduct the sun’s
heat like an oven, regularly bringing the inside to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. At night, the air is damp and cold, reaching below 32 degrees Fahrenheit during the blueberry season in the fall” (2013a: 47).

This impoverishment is justified—or perhaps even naturalized (Holmes 2013a)—through the farmworkers’ undocumented migrant status and the discrimination perpetrated against them. For example, here is a response to media coverage of the labor dispute: “I live in Skagit County and the farms are a large industry around here. Unfortunately, we have a high population of illegals. I am sick and tired of these people thinking they are entitled to anything” (“seattleempt,” qtd. from comments section of Associated Press, 2013). This sentiment, which is commonly expressed on the web, equates one’s undocumented migrant status with not being deserving of “anything.” Furthermore, one can imagine that poverty, in our culture that regards material success so highly, would reinforce discrimination and thus also the sharp divide between undocumented and documented.

Note that I use “impoverishment” and not “poverty” because the latter is passive, whereas the former acknowledges that poverty is created through structural and personal forces. As an example of the deep structural roots of the poverty of migrant farmworkers, it is well-documented that the North American Free Trade Agreement is largely responsible for impoverishing people in rural Mexico, thus creating a diaspora north (Bacon 2004; Holmes 2013; Stephen 2007). More locally, this poverty is perpetuated by the denial of the farmworkers’ right to receive a legally binding, enforceable contract.

In contrast (but also in addition) to impoverishment being justified by discrimination and one’s undocumented status on the farm, Gaby experiences poverty as a direct result of her undocumented migrant status.

You go looking and looking for work, and they tell you that you don’t have social security, you can’t work. You get desperate because you have children who need to eat, and they are going to kick you out of your apartment, because you don’t have any other resources. If you ask for help, they tell you that there is none. We can’t take care of our children because we need work, but they don’t want to give you work. How are you going to find work with 4 children? When you don’t have anything to eat, you become desperate.

Gaby’s impoverishment is legally prescribed. This is to say that it is against the law for her to be employed and earn a living, so her poverty is literally written into the legal structures that cast her as undocumented.

Farmworkers experience poverty differently from non-farmworkers like Gaby. This is because much of the U.S. agriculture industry is reliant on migrant farmworkers, whereas Gaby struggles to find employment. Therefore, migrant farmworkers struggle with the conditions of their employment rather than with employment itself.
In place of Holmes’s (2013a) dual theoretical framework of structural and symbolic violence, I have presented a system of oppression founded on the mutually constitutive phenomena of undocumented migrant status, discrimination, and impoverishment. This framework does not deny the validity of structural or symbolic violence, but instead encapsulates them: structural violence finds expression through documentation status and impoverishment, and symbolic violence and its naturalization are present in discrimination. While this framework does not negate the influence of structural forces, nor does it absolve the agency of those complicit in the overarching systems of violence.

Life without ethical or legal protection

The framework we have established shows the complex and interrelated factors that go into producing the suffering of undocumented people and migrant farmworkers. Here I argue that this suffering is adequately described by Agamben’s notion of bare life. For Agamben, *bios* is “qualified life” or a life that is politically respected and *zoe* is life that all living things share (2012: 572). Bare life describes “when someone who is considered to have *bios* is seen as having only *zoe* …a life stripped of all its legal and ethical protections” (2012: 572, emphasis added). The bare life of a migrant farmworker is treated as disposable and breakable, a means to a capitalist end. After a discussion of the visceral suffering implied by bare life, I address the extent to which farmworkers are without ethical and legal protection. Here I only consider migrant farming.

Migrant farming breaks one’s body. During a meeting at Casa Latina in Seattle, Ramón told us: “If any of you have picked strawberries, you know how hard it is. If you don’t, you have to get us at 5 in the morning. You must get your hoe and 4 buckets, then get on your knees in the rain.” Holmes describes the multiple pains he felt during a typical workday, which, for the farmworkers, was “seven days a week from approximately 5:00 in the morning until the early evening” (2013a: 71):

I picked berries once or twice a week and experienced several forms of pain for days afterward. I often felt sick to my stomach the night before picking, due to stress about picking the minimum weight. As I picked, my knees continually hurt; I tried different positions, sometimes squatting, sometimes kneeling, sometimes propped up on just one knee. Each time I stood up to take my berries to be weighed, it felt as if a warm liquid like my own blood was running down my pants and into my shoes. All day, I leaned forward to see the strawberries below the leaves, and my neck and back began to hurt by late morning (2013a: 88).

Holmes, asking “two young female pickers how their knees and backs felt,” was answered: “*Mi cuerpo ya no puede sentir nada* [My body can no longer feel anything]” (translation mine) and “the other said that her knees, back, and hips are always hurting (*Siempre me duelen*)” (2013a: 89). As the book’s title—*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*—so adequately expresses, migrant farming is deadly labor. Holmes
discusses a long list of health problems the workers—including children—suffer from as a result of intense physical labor, poor working conditions, pesticide exposure, stress, poverty, and susceptibility to disease (see 2013a: 99-103). As a former berry picker tells us: “We have a saying as we go out to the fields: a matarse. We’re killing ourselves now” (Herz 2013a).

The framework I have established helps us to see how farmworkers are, to a certain degree, without ethical protection. Namely, undocumented status, discrimination, and impoverishment work together to create, justify, and enforce the bare life of migrant farmworkers. However, the other aspect of bare life is legal protection. Can we say that migrant farmworkers do not have legal protection?

In short, yes and no. There are many aspects of the law that protect migrant farmworkers. As discussed above (see pg. 32), migrant farmworkers and undocumented people are protected by the same constitutional rights when they are victims of a crime, and these rights have played an important role in the struggle of Familias Unidas (see Herz 2014). Indeed, according to Mendoza—in conversation with Agamben and Hobbes—“the law can at times be the only thing that protects the most vulnerable from the full wrath of the sovereign’s power” (2011b: 192). However, as we have also discussed in the preceding subsection, it is the designation of “undocumented”—among a constellation of other forces—that creates vulnerability in the first place, thus leading to bare life. Mendoza again explains: “Because of the plenary power doctrine, non-citizens currently do not have any standing in court proceedings related to immigration, and hence any non-citizen, including legal permanent residents, can be deported at any time”(2011b: 196). Furthermore, as Gaby has demonstrated, the Detention Center—so intimately connected to Mendoza’s last point—is clearly a site of bare life.

Religion, spirituality, and precarious life

Stanescu puts Butler’s notion of precarious life in conversation with Agamben’s bare life. Stanescu, striving for a “frame of life” that is expansive enough to describe animals in addition to humans, argues that precarious life is just that:

Bare life, because it refers to the zone of indetermination between bios and zoe, is a condition that excludes the animal, and excludes us from thinking of the animal as having a bios, a qualified and particular life. Butler provides us a path out of this impasse; she provides us with a way of thinking of other animals as having a fullness of being and existence (2012: 574).

This is significant because in this project I am attempting to present the lived experiences of people like Ramón and Gaby, and therefore I am also trying to go beyond how their lives are dictated by social constructs. The dominance of the

32 Mendoza explains plenary power: “Plenary power allows the federal government to regulate immigration free of judicial review and thereby, with regard to immigration cases, minimize the Constitutional protections afforded to non-citizens” (2011b: 187).
human is one such social construct, and by limiting our framework to one that is solely of the human, we risk failing to appreciate that which is close to life itself—all of life.\(^{33}\) As Stanescu notes, the framework of bare life fails to acknowledge the potential for things other than suffering even within situations of suffering. On the other hand, precarious life—grounded in interconnectedness—“is not a condition to be overcome or critiqued, in the way that bare life would be for Agamben. Rather, precariousness becomes a place from which to think and organize” (2012: 574). Thus it is about hope. Agamben’s notion of bare life has given us a tool for understanding the indignities of the farm; now, through the frame of precarious life, we can explore the place of religion and spirituality in the lives and activism of Ramón and Gaby.

Though the next section is titled *Action*, I also include a discussion here of how religion and spirituality shape the activism of Ramón and Gaby. I do this because (1) it is difficult to separate their employment of religion and spirituality from how they are inspired to action, and (2) for ease of organization. I argue that Ramón and Gaby use religion and spirituality to embrace precarious life, though in unique ways.

For Ramón, religion revolves around God having a plan. “From my point of view,” he says, “God does everything for each one of us, so we each already have a destiny. So whatever happens to me, I attribute to God.” To appreciate how powerful Ramón’s philosophy regarding religion is, it is helpful to reflect on the precariousness of his life. His philosophy that everything is somehow, someway planned by God, that nothing happens outside of God’s will, grants him immunity from fear and worrying about the future.

I am afraid but nothing becomes of this fear. I know that this isn’t my home, but if I’m able to change something, I’m going to change it. And I’m going to fight. I’m not saying that they aren’t going to take me, but if they take me, it will be for something more. If something happens to me, it’s for something else, because God has everything prepared.

In U.S. culture, the notion of destiny is cliché and hollow. Thus we may need to use a degree of imagination to understand the sincerity behind Ramón’s words; only then can we recognize its significance in his life and activism.

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\(^{33}\) Rosalinda, the executive director of C2C, might agree with me. Here is an excerpt from a sermon she gave: “[Do] we want to talk about economics and economic sustainability from the perspective of profit, or the terms of living well? And not just living well for ourselves, but also in terms of the Earth living well. Can we talk about an economic equation that includes Mother Earth, and the cost of our economic equation to her, and how we bring it all together so that we can survive, be happy, and be well?”
When I asked him if religion fit into Ramón’s leadership of Familias Unidas, he responded:

Well, I believe in God and I think that everything that he does is for something good. So I think that I’m in the position I’m right now, as a leader of so many families, because God wanted me to be. It’s because God has something for me. It’s not just because of coincidence. I have always thought that everything that happens in life, all that you do, everything is for something. So yes, I think that God is doing this—that he set me up to do this for something good, to help so many people. I don’t know why, but I think that he chose me.

Note that Ramón is unlikely to be self-glorifying or self-righteous in saying he is “chosen.” In fact, Ramón recognizes that boycotts are stereotyped (and thus not glamorous), saying, for example, “We don’t have another way, that’s our only tool.” Furthermore, following the above excerpt, he said: “I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t know all of the problems or anything, and I didn’t want to involve myself in them. But it’s moving to see that you can help so many families, and if you can do it, why not?” Ramón’s last remarks further suggest that religion not only protects him from fear, but also affirms his activism.

Ramón’s religious philosophy acknowledges precarious life through the lens of destiny. Because there is a reason for everything, anything that happens is embraced as meaningful—even deportation. Thus his religious philosophy constitutes a narrative that allows Ramón to embrace life’s precariousness.

In our conversation, the opportunity presented itself (via the American dream being brought up) to ask Ramón, “What is your dream?” His dream changed twice: when he got married and then again last summer. He describes what it has been since then:

My dream is to try—well, not to try, to do everything that is possible to help workers of the field, from here forward. What I’m trying to do is to make my dreams happen, which means having a union. Now I have that. But, to make it grow, make it bigger so that everyone recognizes that it is a union and that it is for campesinos, something that many don’t want to recognize. But it’s my goal right now, to get a contract, and to be sure that the workers are making a good living so that they can have a good future for their families. That’s my goal, my dream, to keep helping people.

Stanescu discusses how our rejection of our precarious lives is the foundation of our destruction (2012); however, is this not just as true for the oppressed? Ramón’s insistence that everything happens for a reason, which I have argued is his way of acknowledging precarious life, allows him to act without fear. As with the DREAMers, many who have came out publicly with their undocumented status, thus being made vulnerable yet strong, Ramón’s dream of helping people can
be understood as being rooted in his faith, which is in part defined by its embrace of precariousness.

Religion also finds its way into Ramón’s life through joy and protection. When I asked if any particular stories, values, or saints were important to him, he responded:

Well, yes. I have a lot of respect for la Virgen de Guadalupe and la Virgen de Zapopan. They are the virgins that I know from my home. We would do a march or a walk—they call it a manda—towards la Virgen de Zapopan. We would have to walk to the church, and for 3 or 4 years in Guadalajara we dedicated ourselves to walk to the church, which took some 8 hours, in order to see the Virgin. In one of the months, I forget which, there is the most important holiday, that of la Virgen de Zapopan. It is a big celebration. They are the ones that I know the best and they give me a lot of joy.

A little later, he continued:

I always have a rosary. Whenever I can, I pray. You wouldn’t think I do because of how I am, how I’m seen, but always, since I was 14-years-old, I’ve had a rosary with me always. For me it means something of God.

“What do the Virgin and the Rosary mean to you?” I asked.

La Virgen is la Virgen, she is the mother of Jesus, and this is what I know. So in reality I use the rosary as a symbol of good luck, protection. That’s the only reason I use it—and to remind me of God, because sometimes, with so many problems, I forget.

Before turning to Gaby, we should consider how, from Ramón’s experience, religion is misused. Towards the beginning of our conversation, I asked: “How do you imagine religion? What does it mean for you in a perfect world?” He explained:

Religion is really good, because it helps you to read the Bible, it helps you a lot. But it also has problems. I think it’s that—well, everything that we read in the news, everything that’s happening with churches, that they don’t want the gays, the lesbians, that they disagree with abortion, with all of that. These things discourage the people for them to continue with those beliefs…. So that’s how I see the church. While they do good, at the same time they also do bad because they are discriminating.

I asked if religion inspired his activism (which his religious philosophy certainly does, as discussed above), to which he responded:

To tell you the truth, last year in 2013 when we had the strike, I had a different idea about the Catholic religion. I thought that it was always a good thing, that it helped you. Last year—I still can’t believe it—but I was
disillusioned with the church because we were on strike, more than 200 or 300 workers, and the church in Burlington, instead of helping us, what it did was ask for grants, for money. They say they did this in order to help us, but they didn’t at all. So it doesn’t seem just to me that the church—I don’t mean all churches—this church took advantage of the workers in order to make money. That isn’t just to me. I think that the churches should be helping the workers, not becoming so political. A church, I think, its position should be to help the workers in whatever situation. It’s something that during last year, it didn’t happen like this, the church didn’t help. They looked for a way to benefit themselves. It doesn’t seem right to me—and not just for me, but also the majority of those who work. The church uses its authority to take advantage of the workers, and that’s not okay.

On a trip to Olympia with Ramón and other people who work with Familias Unidas and C2C, Ramón’s experience was echoed. An employee of C2C who grew up near Sakuma explained that many religious groups talk about immigrant rights and how the farmworkers are mistreated, but never engage in solidarity with the farmworkers. Though they call for dialogue between Sakuma and the farmworkers, they don’t actively support the farmworkers.³⁴

Gaby’s experience of religion and spirituality is similar to yet different from Ramón’s. Whereas my conversation with Ramón was purely couched in the language of religion, Gaby made a strong distinction between religion and spirituality. For Gaby, spirituality is the experience of forgiveness and peace; on the other hand, religion provides Gaby a narrative to help her arrive to the spiritual experience. I argue that, for Gaby, religion is used to remind her of life’s precariousness, whereas spirituality is the direct experience of precarious life. From narrative and experience come healing and the desire to serve others.

Gaby’s definition of religion includes rules, tradition, and community;³⁵ however, in this essay I focus only on the narrative aspect of religion. At one point in our conversation, I asked: “[D]o you think about Jesus or Our Lady of Guadalupe sometimes?” She said:

Yes, I think about Jesus every day and every minute, and the Virgin Mary too. At this point, I’ve learned from where I am going to church, that she is the

³⁴ See “We make the road by walking: Part III – Undoing Privilege,” www.karani.wordpress.com for more about this dynamic. This blog is written by Tomás Madrigal, a doctoral candidate of UC Santa Barbara.

³⁵ When asked how she understands religion, Gaby responded: “For me, it depends on the concepts that each of us have about religion, because each person takes religion in their own way. For me religion is something which people can be based on—a set of rules from the church where they meet. It can be in how you dress, or traditions you learn, or your way of learning in general. For me its that, you identify with the place where you congregate.” Though this communal aspect of religion is significant, I will not focus on it here.
mother of Jesus. She was a part of Jesus, and for me, every day I think about Jesus.

“How does thinking about Jesus help you?”

For me he is everything, everything because from the moment my life changed, I’ve had a lot of faith. I know that my life—that I came to this country with a purpose, and I’m here with a purpose, and I continue forward. Part of my life is to help others. But at the same time, I am taking care of myself in order to take care of those that follow.

“In his life, Jesus did the same,” I commented. She replied, “Yes, that’s right. I didn’t understand it but now I do.”

Religion is narrative for Gaby by virtue of her thinking about it; conversely, it shapes her thoughts. Gaby’s statement “[p]art of my life is to help others” ran through our conversation like a refrain. I made my last comment, “...Jesus did the same,” to see if Gaby’s service could be directly linked to her religion, and indeed it seems to be.

Gaby’s use of religion should not be surprising. The narrative of the Gospel is one of the only narratives in our culture that asks us to see redemption in the lives of the oppressed and a sickness of the spirit in oppression. In a sense, it asks us to recognize our shared precariousness. For example, consider the following Gospel verse: “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40, KJV). Jesus is effectively identifying himself with society’s most vulnerable members. As narratives are an inevitable part of understanding our world, it makes sense that Gaby should have in mind one that is kind to her.

Turning to spirituality, Gaby distinguishes spirituality from religion:

For me spirituality is something really personal, something you use to communicate with God. It’s more private for me, specifically. Spirituality is something that you feel, and that you express, not so much with the church in general, but rather with yourself.

Note that the verbs Gaby uses—“communicate,” “feel,” “express”—denote that spirituality is an experience for her. Perhaps because of issues with translation, or because Gaby did not have the time necessary to fully explain, she linked her spirituality back to her church, though above she said they were different. To answer “Do you use spirituality in your daily life?” she responded:

Yes... The congregation that I’m with today is really important for me to understand things I haven’t lived. Today that part has helped me—it’s
education, it’s education, because I didn’t understand many things, but now I do. It’s like peace, how to be more peaceful (tranquila).

Though that she focuses on her church may seem somewhat contradictory to Gaby’s first definition of spirituality, we can perhaps understand it through what came a little later: “...I became a volunteer for an organization, and it takes place in a church. I did a lot of community service while being around the people of the church.” There are two ways to understand this: (1) The church is a platform for service, and service is spiritual or (2) Gaby’s story is more complicated, and we would need to ask follow-up questions in order to clarify.

Either way, a significant part of the spiritual experience for Gaby is peace and forgiveness. Her answer to the question of what the spiritual experience is like demonstrates this:

The experience for me today is really different because besides that I am improving myself, it is part of my life. Becoming a part of a church, to see people gathered in a place where I feel good, for me spirituality is part of my life today. This has brought me to be able to be more comfortable with myself because I’ve felt a lot of sadness, a lot of resentment, a lot of hate towards what people say about us. It’s that you are not from this country, you don’t have any business being here, and you have to leave this country. So you ask why. So I started feeling hatred towards those people. I’ve been discriminated against so many times. Today it’s not like that. Today I feel healthy and peaceful because today I’ve learned that I can help other people. By giving to others I have been able to heal myself (el dar me ha podido sanar) and I know that I am helping other people, I know that I’m going to continue being with groups of women, and with myself too. From that situation I’ve learned a lot. I take my peace into that situation and share it and it’s thanks to my spirituality that I am feeling good.

Gaby makes it clear that spirituality is about feeling good and at peace in the midst of oppression and discrimination. Note that Gaby is essentially experiencing forgiveness of her oppressors. This may be through establishing herself on higher moral grounds, and thus no longer feeling the need to respond to such ignorance and racism. Also, I would argue that service is contingent upon the recognition of independence, as Butler would suggest. Next I focus on Gaby’s notion of healing through service.

For Gaby, religion and spirituality play a fundamental role in her experience of immigration. To bring this back to precarious life, it seems that religion reminds Gaby of life’s precariousness at the intellectual level, which in turn guides her to the spiritual experience of feeling that all of life is precarious, which in turn moves her to serve others. As Jackson writes, “...in being robbed of one’s dignity... a person sometimes comes into possession of the very humanity [her] persecutors lack”
(2013: 100). Amidst bare life, and through religion and spirituality, Gaby finds peace, well-being, and is reminded to serve others.
Action

When I asked Ramón if he used religion in his activism, he responded:

No, because I can’t involve religion, because this is a fight, and I can’t decide who should help me and who shouldn’t. We are talking about there being thousands of religions, and I can’t just say: “I’m Catholic, and nobody else is going to help beyond the Catholic Church.” …This is a fight, and you have to open the doors to those who want to help you.

Though the use of religion has the potential to turn non-religious people away from activism, it nonetheless is an important part of organizing and demonstrations.

Here I list some examples. In a sermon Rosalinda gave to the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship (BUF), she recited a prayer that is also—according to Rosalinda—recited during each meeting with farmworkers. It begins “Cuando el pobre nada tiene y aún reparte… va Dios mismo en nuestro caminar (When the poor who have nothing and still share... there goes God on our same path, walking)” (translation is mine). This suggests that religion helps to ground the activism of the farmworkers themselves. But this sermon is also an example of how relationships with religious groups, and the support they can provide, can be an important part of activism. BUF has formed a partnership with Community to Community Development (C2C), of which Rosalinda is the executive director. Members of BUF are involved in many aspects of migrant farming activism, including volunteering at and participating in demonstrations and having fundraisers for C2C and Familias Unidas. In fact, my volunteer work at C2C was as the liaison between C2C and BUF. In practice, this meant skypeing in on meetings, recording notes, and writing blog posts. Rosalinda also has relationships with other religious groups around Bellingham. For example, in addition to the sermon given at BUF, she has also given one at a local Methodist church. Furthermore, First Nations spirituality (and religion) has been performed through ceremony at 3 actions I have attended: first at a demonstration of Indigenous solidarity at ICE’s offices in Tukwila, second at the May Day march, and third at a march hosted by C2C in Bellingham the Sunday following May Day. These performances include music, dance, prayers, and rituals like the burning of plants.

One event that struck me as particularly powerful was a Mother’s Day vigil held at the Detention Center. A group of perhaps 150 people gathered to mourn the mothers and fathers being taken from their children, and the devastation that such a practice brings. The event was complete with music and delicious food made by Gaby (this is where I met her). Two religious leaders who spoke were Alfredo Feregrino, an Episcopalian priest, and Rev. Marian Stewart, a Unitarian. Here is an example of what each said:

Father Feregrino: We are here to demand justice, to be visible, to be against unjust and inhumane laws. We as people of faith, for years, we have been
marching, speaking, and visiting our political representatives. We as people of faith are here to demand, as the prophet Isaiah said... Woe to those who made unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights, and we call justice on the oppressed, for all my people.

Rev. Stewart: Each of these persons had a life outside of these walls. Each of these persons came here without permission, under duress, and lost their freedom. We have come here today to bear witness, to offer our love, and to offer hope, that this will stop.... We recognize that these people come from many countries, but they are loved ones, they are family, they are us.

Rev. Stewart: Spirit of life and love, be with us as we stand here today to bear witness by being here, to bear witness with our hearts, and to bear witness with our actions. May we work together in the days to come, so that everyone, everyone, everyone, everywhere, may have freedom. Blessed be. Amen.

Rev. Stewart made these remarks during a ceremony where we were asked to imagine each life broken by ICE and the Detention Center. We were asked to pick up a stone that represented “a person, a family member, a loved one” and to hold that stone and pray with it, and then we were gradually asked to place the stones into a smaller circle also made of stones. During this time, the names of dozens of people who had died in ICE custody in the last year (since the last Mother’s Day), and their places of birth, were slowly read off. Religious performances like these are important in part because, through religious narratives, claims like Rev. Stewart’s “they are us” may be made; in other words, they are able to draw out emotional responses of participants in a way that a secular demonstration may not be able to.

What are the theological/philosophical underpinnings of such activism? We will explore this question through the stories of two Catholic allies of migrant farmworkers and undocumented people: Roger and Debi. In line with the discussion led by Gaby in the last section, here I also frame spirituality as an experience and religion as involving narratives that guides us to that experience. Roger and Debi understand the Gospel as inherently political, as a revolutionary text that asks us to supplant the kingdom of the powers that be with a kingdom based in spirituality. In the cases of migrant farming and immigration, this means privileging the needs of people—farmworkers and undocumented people—over structural, political, or economic concerns. Finally, Roger and Debi show that the crossing boundaries of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and gender inherent to activism is a spiritual experience itself.

*The Gospel and activism*

Roger and Debi each have a long history of activism. Roger began as journalist who focused on labor issues, first getting involved with migrant farmworker activism in the 1960’s. Debi first participated in Latino activism during
her time in college. Both Roger and Debi have travelled to Latin America on service-learning focused trips, and recognize the deep roots of global inequality. Roger and Debi stay involved today through C2C. They are both frequently present at demonstrations for migrant farmworkers and immigration in general. For both Roger and Debi, faith is a central part of their activism.

Roger and Debi understand Jesus as spiritual and political. As Roger explains it,

I believe that the Catholic social teaching is ignored by a lot of Catholics. I really love and read a lot about liberation theology. I think it’s really important to read the Gospel, then reflect on what you’ve read, then look at you’re current situation and see what you need to do in light of that.

Roger speaks in reference to the notion, found in liberation theology, of praxis, which describes the need to act in concert with reflection. The same idea is communicated in Leonardo and Clodavis Boff’s notion of liber-a(c)tion (1986/2005: 4). In this sense, the Gospel is seen as metaphor; Jesus’s refusal to see the law as ethically binding and his insistence on identifying with marginalized social groups are thus rich with meaning today. For example, Roger suggests parallels between the religious powers of then and today: “The Western church has been so involved in dogma, in rules and regulations, versus practice—how we live our lives. I think Jesus was saying it’s how we practice, how we act towards others—that is the most important.” In a follow-up e-mail, Roger wrote to me: “If Jesus told his followers to ‘proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed,’ am I not to do what he has said to do? Of course I am!”

Debi focuses on the Gospel as a mystery in order to “not lock God into a box,” and in this mystery are the contradictions of oppression and spirituality, death and life. She says: “But just the story of Jesus, dying on the cross, standing up against the powers that be, the oppressors; and the story that Jesus descended into hell then resurrecting, and breaking death, there’s just this sense of hope, that suffering is not the last word.” For Debi, this mystery is about the transcendence of that which seems hopeless and final.

For both Roger and Debi, Christianity is unequivocally about social change. As Virgilio Elizondo, a Mexican-American liberation theologian, argues, the “ultimate struggle” is that of “spirit versus establishment” (1983: 70). For him, Jesus’s journey was one of a reject—the son of a simple carpenter from a backwater town—who challenged “Jerusalem,” the “symbol of established power” or “the center of the powers that excluded and oppressed the masses” (1983: 68, 70). For Roger, we

36 Gustavo Gutiérrez, considered to be the father of liberation theology, comments on praxis: “From the perspective of the theology of liberation, it is argued that the first step is to contemplate God and put God’s will into practice; and only in a second moment can we think about God” (1999: 28).
must reflect on this, look at our current situation, and then act. In this light, his activism is a consequence of his faith and the realities of oppression towards undocumented people and migrant farmworkers. For Debi, the journey Christ undertook is hopeful—the mystery is that the “powers that be” are not immutable, and neither is suffering.

A foundational aspect of liberation theology is that Jesus identified with the poor and oppressed. An anecdote illustrates this. As described by the Boff brothers, a community group drew an image on a board of a seven-headed dragon before a wounded lamb:

They invited those present to give names to the dragon’s seven heads. Men and women came forward and wrote, as best they could: “multinationals,” “Law of National Security,” “foreign debt,” “military dictatorship,” and names of various government officials held to be against the people. And below the lamb someone wrote: “Jesus Christ, Liberator.” And a woman came forward and added: “The people of the poor” (1986/2005: 17).

Roger is in accordance: “I see—and it’s a matter of faith—the person in Oaxaca, Peru, the Skagit Valley, or Lynnwood Washington, or wherever it is, for me, that is Jesus, that is a reflection of Jesus Christ, that person.” Debi says something similar: “I think, personally, we all have that spirit of Christ within us.” From the perspective of narratives, it is difficult to overstate the significance of a story, a belief that challenges one to see the divine as nowhere more present than in the oppressed.

Debi grew up in poverty, with abuse, and with alcoholism in her family. We discussed at length how her own suffering has allowed her to understand that of others. For example, she recounts:

...there was this indignity. It was very difficult being poor and ... looked down upon. Like some friends could never come to our house, and I always felt like it was because they were afraid to let their kids come stay with us. I felt different and like an outsider in that regard, and that was challenging. And when I had to go on my own welfare grant, that was probably the beginning of my social justice awareness. When I turned 18 in high school and had to go get my own welfare grant, I was told that I had to keep my food separate

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37 However, it is also important to not glorify oppression or expect the oppressed, solely by virtue of their oppression, to be saint-like. As I understand it, Jesus identified with the oppressed, so we are to give a preferential option for the poor (this is a motto of liberation theology), but we are not to glorify them or oppression itself.

38 During that discussion, Debi made the following remarks: “So how do we have those conversations ... where we can learn what each other’s stories are? Then we can flesh out our own stories of suffering, and then we can understand other groups that are suffering. Then we can have a heightened awareness of how we can work together to alleviate some of these structural problems that are creating this suffering.”
from my family, and I just laughed at that woman. And I was shy back then, but it was so ludicrous, I was just a kid and had to keep my food separate from my family—that’s stupid.

Debi repeatedly pointed out the value of embodied knowledge, saying that the farmworkers are the ones who “understand what needs to happen on the farm.” Thus, regarding the farmworkers, she commented: “it’s exciting to [see] … people who are suffering and standing up….”

In *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo writes about what he calls “the Jerusalem principle: God chooses an oppressed people, not to bring them comfort in their oppression, but to enable them to confront, transcend, and transform whatever in the oppressor society diminishes and destroys the fundamental dignity of human nature” (1983: 103). For Debi, it seems that this is so because the oppressed have a privileged perspective on oppression. By suffering its wrath, they know better than we can about what needs to be done to live in a world that is affirming of life and dignity.

For theologian Walter Brueggemann, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (1978: 13, emphasis removed). He adds: “The alternative consciousness to be nurtured … serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness” (1978: 13). What is particularly relevant to our discussion is Brueggemann’s notion of the dominant—or royal—consciousness.

“The royal consciousness,” Brueggemann tells us, “leads people to numbness, especially to numbness about death” (1978: 46, emphasis removed). To help us understand this dominant or royal consciousness, Brueggemann describes three aspects of the “Solomonic achievement”: (1) it was characterized by “incredible [material] well-being and affluence,” though “not democratically shared”; (2) it was “in part made possible by oppressive social policy”; and (3) it involved “the establishment of a controlled, static religion” (1978: 32-4, emphasis in original). Brueggemann’s framework describes our present-day situation very well, only now a materialistic culture and media has supplanted the dominance of religion, so we should replace “static religion” with “materialistic culture.” Understanding the royal consciousness to be neoliberal capitalism (see discussion of Daniel Bell and *homo economicus* below), we turn again to Debi.

Debi discusses her understanding of the dominant capitalist consciousness:

The capitalist structure, for example, that I worked hard for this, and this is mine. I don’t know what it is, but I just don’t have that attitude about possessions. I’m grateful for what I have, and I try to use it the best I can to share, especially with groups that work in solidarity. I would rather do that than charity, with people that are trying to change the structure. We’re lucky
to have a good income, so what can we do to change the structure? I’m not anti-capitalist, to be sure, I mean small business is capitalism; it’s just the greed that’s in capitalism, and the unbridled capitalism that demeans people and destroys the planet... I don’t even want to use the word capitalism. We need another word.

But Debi’s vision also connects to the divine. Here she suggests that her conception of heaven involves transforming oppressive social structures in the present.

I guess when I say mystery—in the Christian theology where there will be a new planet and earth, for example—who’s to say that this whole idea of heaven, that this is not all we have to work with, right here on the earth. So social and political and historical reality is what we have to work with, and we have to learn how it is that we’re going to survive as a planet together.

To better understand Debi’s desire to transform capitalism, let us turn to the work of theologian Daniel Bell, who argues that Christianity is incompatible with capitalism (2012).

Bell, using Gilles Deleuze, asserts that reality, rather than being “static,” is “constituted ... by dynamic flows of desire in an infinite multiplicity of becomings” (2012: 42). In other words, our desires and their flows and fluxes create our realities, not the other way around. Setting capitalism within a historical lens, Bell (again using Deleuze) shows that modernity is in part defined in that “the modern state-form now serves economy” (2012: 65). What accounts, then, for the rise of the dominance of economy? Bell writes: “Capitalism is born as flows of desire overwhelm the diverse state’s ability to regulate desire and connect it to specific, concrete people, land, or things” (2013: 63). Though abstract, I want us to appreciate that desire is the source of the injustices perpetrated in the name of capitalism, such as those that take place at Sakuma and the Detention Center.

Bell shows that capitalism and Christianity (or spirituality, I would argue) are competing for our limited desire, and that capitalism “effects a horizontal displacement of desire by constantly misdirecting desire from its true ... home in God” (2012: 140). It does so through a corruption of our values, as is described in the notion of *homo economicus* (2012: 94-110), the human with capitalist values, the sum effect of which is that “under the capitalist order, there is no such thing as social justice” (2012: 110). To put Bell in conversation with Brueggemann, *homo economicus* defines the royal consciousness, which the prophets sought to replace with the alternative consciousness. What Debi, Roger, Brueggemann, and Bell are calling for is for the system to be shaped around the human, not for the human to

39 Bell reflects extensively on Deleuze’s notion that “politics precedes being” (2012:36-46), which means that our ways of conceiving the world necessarily affect our reality. Thus even “philosophy,” whose task it is to explain reality, is “intrinsically political” (2012:37).
conform to the system. In the same sermon given by Rosalinda that is referenced above, she reflected at length on redefining power.

In this light, the Gospel is a narrative that supports social justice and challenges dominant social structures. Bell writes: “[E]conomy matters because if we love God, we will love our neighbors (1 John 4:20-21)” (2012: 28). In our current context, this means supporting the migrant farmworkers of Familias Unidas and resisting oppressive immigration policies and practices like those that occur at the Tacoma Detention Center. The activism in which Roger and Debi partake is at its core about love of people and wanting them to be well, and this love supplants their allegiance to the law and nation. Having established a framework for understanding their activism at the intellectual level, we now turn to its experiential dimension.

The spiritual experience of activism

Finally, it is crucial to highlight the experiential aspect of spirituality, without which the activism of Debi and Roger would be misunderstood. As suggested in the last section, Indignities, I understand the spiritual experience as recognizing the precarious life we share, our interconnectedness, and in that very recognition we transcend our limited selves. Debi, in answering how spirituality motivates her activism, seems to agree:

I do this work for my love of God and people. I just have this joy in my heart that I can only express [as coming] from God—there’s no other explanation for me. And the joy of people, as I say, when I was a student chaplain, every time I listened to the stories, I felt I was hearing a gospel story. Their good news in their suffering, I called it their gospel. As we listen to one another’s stories, there’s just listening beyond it to the spiritual connection—there’s some connection that I call spiritual, anyway. What is it that’s beyond our selves that connects us? That’s what drives me, this connection.

Debi points out that her activism cannot be understood without first recognizing the joy that it gives her. While Debi was working at a Vietnamese refugee camp in Thailand during college, “a friend said, ‘Are you drunk?’ I said, ‘I guess I’m drunk with the Holy Spirit.’ [I] was just having this overwhelming sense of love.” It is ironic that activism, which society regards as something that angry and unhappy people do, can actually be among one’s greatest sources of joy. How about Roger? When asked to describe a spiritual experience he had referenced, Roger emphasized that spirituality may be found in the simple:

It was in Oaxaca, the countryside, I went into a very small church made of cement blocks and went inside and there were very simple wooden benches. Strung across were red and white plastic stars. On the altar, I think there was a simple cross or crucifix, I don’t remember. A campesino came in, knelt down, and prayed. I felt that God was present in that situation more than in any majestic cathedral I have been in.
One thing I noticed about Roger was his commitment to inclusion of groups that experience discrimination. Consider, for example, his favorite saint:

Our Lady of Guadalupe is my favorite saint. I think it’s significant that a woman of color—obviously a campesina, a pregnant woman—appeared not to a wealthy person, but appeared to a shepherd. We’ve had this throughout history: Our Lady of Fatima appeared to three poor children who were taking care of animals. I think it’s significant.

In a follow-up e-mail, Roger spoke of receiving the Eucharist from “ordained women priests,” and then continued a little later:

[I]n recent years, I have been reading a lot of Latin American Women (Latinas) doing Liberation Theology. They have much to teach us all and what they have said and written needs to be heard and read. I am not a theologian, but theology, the way I understand God, is important to me. "If a theology does not emerge from and relate to our human experience, and assist us in moving towards freedom, then it should be abandoned," said Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian ecofeminist liberation theologian.

For me there is much to admire in both Debi’s and Roger’s commitment to oppressed groups of people, and it is indeed inspiring that this commitment is a fundamental part of their religion and spirituality. Whether it is that the spiritual experience is the grounds for their inclusive theology, or that their inclusive theology leads them to the spiritual experience, or both, remains to be seen. I’d like to end this section with a short reflection on the Gospel and Gebara’s assertion cited by Roger. Though I am a cradle Catholic, I do not strongly identify with any religion today. Nonetheless, I am impressed with liberation theology’s ability to “emerge from and relate to our experience.” As someone who is interested in activism, I think the narrative of liberation theology is powerful: not only are we to abolish oppression, we are also to supplant it with love—a positive, creative force.
Conclusion

First as People, Later as Immigrants

After a talk on immigration activism, I saw a mentor of mine, Miriam, a Mexican-American doctoral candidate, and we talked about what we had heard. I asked Miriam a question that had been on my mind: If U.S. immigration policy allows for large-scale naturalization, wouldn’t that create a slippery slope of immigration that would eventually lead to political and economic instability in the U.S.? She told me that that was a really big question, and she didn’t know the answer. A similar worry is expressed by Slavoj Žižek, in response to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s proposition (in Empire) to grant global citizenship to all. This would, he says, “trigger an invasion of cheap labor from India, China and Africa into the United States and Western Europe, which would result in a populist revolt against immigrants” (2001: 192).

This type of thinking is at the level of structures. It asks, how will changing a policy influence history? If groups like #Not1More, one of the leading immigration advocacy organization, were to achieve the goal written into their name, would the U.S. become unstable? A surface level consideration of this issue would not lead one to support bold and comprehensive immigration reform. Although there is much evidence that immigration reform would in practice be overall beneficial for the U.S. economy (Immigration Policy Center 2013), it is nonetheless easy to write off immigration reform because of structural level thinking.

In contrast, when one sees the devastation wrought by immigration policies, the issue becomes about people. Rather than thinking about some abstract fear of political instability, one becomes concerned with the mother who risks being separated from her children, and how her children will fare without her. Furthermore, one sees that excessive perseveration over broader political concerns instills a sort of violence into the immigration debate, in that it is easy to support the (violent) status quo in the name of political “complexity.”

Going into this project, I struggled with how to fuse the personal and the structural. Though I now think it is possible, and requires a lot of work very specific to economics and politics, after I began to spend time at demonstrations and meet the people these policies were affecting, I stopped thinking about the structural issues—they no longer mattered to me. What mattered was that people were being harmed.

An underlying thesis of this project is that immigration must be framed as an issue that affects people, since becoming “lost in the complexities” of politics leads to complacency and inaction. In other words, we must see people before we see them through their structural lenses, or as immigrants. We cannot privilege structural thinking over people.
The reason I chose to study migrant farming and immigration activism was because both situations struck me as profoundly unjust and necessary of remediation. However, I also had to continuously examine my own positionality. Was I taking part in extractive industry by studying a group of people without a commitment to them? Would I thank my interviewees for allowing me to write about their issues and then be on my way? Were the relationships I was forming authentic, or were they nothing more than a byproduct of the unequal system in place? This is a reflection on commitment—the politics of accountability—and where it comes from.

After leaving my interview with Gaby, I felt physically ill. I had just learned about another person’s life in vivid detail. The suffering that she endured and continues to endure is not something that I could (or can) imagine. I wondered about how much more dedicated I would be if what was real to her could become real to me.

My conversation with Debi prompted me to think about these issues in greater depth. For Debi, it was her experience of poverty, abuse, and growing up with alcoholic parents that allowed for her to appreciate the struggle of a group with an altogether distinct set of issues. Her own history allowed her a window into the world, a base of action.

I was reminded of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutical horizons, which Linda Martín Alcoff defines as “a substantive, perspectival location from which the individual looks out at the world” (2013: 135), or our historically constructed perspective. Gadamer’s notion describes the “subjective aspects of our identities” and “captures the way that identities are often correlated to certain framing assumptions, determining what is foregrounded, what remains in the background, and the range of concepts and categories that we have at our disposal to make sense of the world” (Alcoff 2010: 136). Hermeneutical horizons help to explain why C2C (Community to Community Development), Familias Unidas (Familias Unidas por la Justicia), and most immigrant rights groups are led by Latina and Latino people: they have lived the injustices against which they are fighting. Aside from their in-depth, embodied knowledge of the issues, the issues are more real to them than they can ever be to me. I will never know the urgency with which the Northwest Detention Center must be shut down. However, far from meaning that I should disengage, I need to regard these things as obstacles to my effective engagement. In a sense, they are my “hermeneutical gaps,” the undeniable space between my experience in life and the experience of another.

The tool to bridge this gap is friendship. As Butler would remind us, relationships are deeper to life than socioeconomic group, ethnicity, religion, or documentation status. As I move on from this project, I will navigate my own politics of accountability through the commitment demanded by friendship. Like the fox and
the Little Prince (Saint-Exupéry 1943), through commitment and time I can bridge both the arbitrary labels and the very real hermeneutical gaps that make the lives of migrant farmworkers and undocumented people speciously far from my own.
Appendix

Filemón Piñeda, the vice-president of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, recounts the union’s formation:

The strawberry season lasts 3 weeks, then after that is the blueberries. The problem came up when we moved to the blueberries. When the strawberry ended, they told us that maybe in a week the picking of the blueberries would start. Three days passed, then they told us that Tuesday we would pick blueberries. We just wanted to work. We came to the field where the blueberries were and were ready to pick. When we got there, the supervisors told us we would get paid 30 cents a pound. We were over 300 people, and there was a migrant farmworker who had come up from California, and he said: “No, it’s too low for us. We’re not going to make enough because the fruit is still green, and in California we get 70 cents a pound. If you can, raise the wage 5 or 10 cents.” They said, “No. If we pay you more, we start losing money. But go ahead and try it out.”

The first day we went in and started picking. We worked 8 hours and we didn’t reach the minimum by hours. We left the next day and they wanted to pay us the same price. That’s when we said no because yesterday we didn’t make enough. To work we wanted 5 or 10 cents. What the company always says is that they can’t raise it more. What that does is it divides the people. They said, here’s the work, so anyone who wants to, go. But nobody went because we knew we wouldn’t make enough money. So we all went home. The young man who asked for a raise the day before, he was getting there late as we were leaving. I thought it was good that we would go home, wait 3 days, and then come back, because the fruit would ripen more, so there would be more to pick.

We heard that they were trying to fire the young man who had asked for a raise the day before. He felt really bad because he was going to get fired just for asking for a raise. He asked all the campesinos for help. That’s how all the families got together. We all walked down to the management and asked why they wanted to fire him. They said that it was because he was a bad man, that he was violent. They said that he scared off the people who wanted to work. The reality is that he wasn’t even there on the second day when we walked out. We achieved something in that he wasn’t fired. We also got one of the supervisors moved to a different plant—he was the guy who treated us really bad. That was when we formed Familias Unidas.
**Bibliography**


