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Review

Miguel De La Torre,

Trails of Hope and Terror: Testimonies on Immigration

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Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, which many critics say legally allows racial profiling, is perhaps the latest and most blatant legislative expression of anti-Hispanic sentiment in the US. Given this current climate of xenophobia and misunderstanding of migrants and Latino/as in the US, *Trails of Hope and Terror: Testimonies on Immigration* is a timely, relevant resource. The

book contains a preface, introduction, seven chapters, and two resourceful appendices. In addition to superb analysis, each chapter offers testimonies (*testimonios*) from migrants and others involved with migrants. All chapters also have a “Voice of the People” section full of poems and pictures. In short, *Trails of Hope and Terror* is elegantly written and accessible to a wide readership.

In the preface, the book’s author, Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre, poses a simple (and yet complex) question to guide his project: “Why would people in their right mind pack up their family and their meager belongings to cross hazardous borders in order to enter a country with different customs, traditions, and language?” (ix). Indeed, the answer to this question—contrary to what politicians might say—is infinitely complex. It does not boil down to simply economic reasons, or because migrants are in search of the so-called “American Dream.” As the book shows us, financial hardships, historical circumstances, foreign interventions in the form of unjust international policies (like the North American Free Trade Agreement), and political and social conflicts *force* migrants to cross several borders. And, should migrants successfully trek the harsh Sonoran Desert, cruel work-related and law enforcement abuse await them in the “land of opportunity.” Compounding matters for all Latino/as—but especially for migrants—is the recent surge in anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic sentiment across the US (3).

Chapter 1 traces the effects of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on the US and its southern neighbors. Following the Mexican-American War—a war waged, wrote Ulysses S. Grant in his memoir, for the sole purpose of land acquisition—the triumphant US took half of Mexico’s territory. Unfortunately for Mexico but lucky for the US, this territory was rich in gold, silver, and oil.

146 years later, the US implemented NAFTA, forcing “many Mexican farmers ... to abandon their lands because they were unable to compete with U.S.-subsidized imported agricultural goods” (13). With once successful Mexican farmers no longer able to provide for

their families, they had no recourse but to attempt the dangerous journey north. In 1994, however, the US government launched Operation Gatekeeper, which inhumanely pushed migrants away from the heavily militarized borders of San Diego and other cities and into the harshest portions of the desert (14).

Chapter 1 also discusses the various threats confronting the border crosser, such as sexual abuse, dehydration, starvation, and drowning. The desert, as the book points out, is a place of ambiguity; one can be thirsty one minute and drowning from flash floods the next. This danger awaiting many border crossers prompts De La Torre to exclaim: “The ethical or moral question we should be asking about the undocumented is not *why* they come, but what responsibilities and obligations exist for the United States in causing this present immigration dilemma” (16). US policies have impelled migrants to relocate to a strange land, where many of them are treated, as one border crosser stated, “as if we were either invisible or dogs” (21). Many have died—and will continue to die—attempting to cross borders. The US government, instead of offering humanitarian assistance to border crossers, penalizes organizations and individuals who provide migrants with food, water, and medical assistance. Clearly, the government prefers that migrants perish in the desert so that their deaths can serve as deterrents to others considering the move. “Not since the days of Jane and Jim Crow,” De La Torre rightly argues, “have the deaths of people of a particular race or ethnicity been normalized by the overall U.S. culture” (16).

Chapter 2 introduces readers to the “Economic Realities” that pressure people to leave their countries. This chapter is particularly crucial because, as De La Torre writes, “as long as we continue to ignore the basic economic causes of migration, no progress will occur” (44). He states that “since the passage of NAFTA, at least 1.7 million Mexican farmers, unable to compete with cheaper imported subsidized corn from the United States, have lost their small plots of land” (39). The Mexican Agricultural Ministry claimed that within a year after NAFTA’s initiation, over a million Mexican farmers left their farms (40). Many of these farmers then had

no choice but to cross the border to work on US agricultural fields for meager wages. And since there was a high demand for “unskilled” workers in the US, these migrants, with no legal rights, filled that demand perfectly for greedy, unjust corporations.

It is a paradox how migrants do the work that many in the US consider too unbearable and yet encounter a hostile populace. US farmer Andy Grant reminds us that migrants “are feeding Americans, yet Americans lack gratitude for the people responsible for putting food on their table” (48). Of course, migrants come not just from Mexico, but from Central and South America and the Caribbean as well. Alberto from El Salvador tells the author in an interview, “Many think that we just have to cross one border. But for those of us in Central America, we have to cross many borders” (54).

In an increasingly misinformed society, where citizens look to talk shows and their evening news for accurate information, chapter 3—which debunks the most prominent myths in the immigration debate—is essential for any well-informed reader. The author employs statistics and other sources to demonstrate that migrants contribute in several ways to the economy. He also presents evidence that migrants are not taking away US jobs, and that they do not increase the crime rate, destroy the environment, and introduce and spread diseases (61-70). Migrants do not seek to become terrorists, and many of them want to learn English.

Chapter 4, titled “Family Values,” decries the hypocrisy of organizations (like Focus on the Family) that view abortion and homosexuality as the principal threats to the family. Yet, these same organizations remain silent on the profound harm that current immigration policies exert on Hispanic families. De La Torre writes, “Of the nearly 2.2 million undocumented deported from 1997 to 2007, 100,000 were parents of children born in the United States” (86). A recent report issued by the Urban Institute titled *Facing our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement* thoroughly examines the effects of family separation on children due to the arrest, detention, and deportation of their parents. In the report’s Executive Summary, the writers state

that “today there are an estimated 5.5 million children with unauthorized immigrant parents, about three-quarters of whom are U.S.-born citizens.”

Apart from the havoc wreaked on families by current immigration policies, chapter 4 also details the terrors detained migrants experience. They are often not given due process, coerced into signing documents without understanding their content, abused by guards, denied medical care and mental health treatment, and forced to deal with unbearable living conditions. In addition, according to various sources, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) “has injected over 250 undocumented migrants, against their will, with dangerous psychotropic drugs to sedate them during their expatriation” (90). Clearly, US authorities have violated (and continue to violate) international human rights. But numbers and statistics do not do justice to the abusive horrors as do the victims’ testimonies, and *Trails of Hope and Terror* contains many *testimonios* that are spiritually and emotionally taxing.

“Undocumented” migrants are not the only ones suffering social exclusion, law enforcement abuse, and implicit and explicit racism. De La Torre argues that all Latino/as in the US are victims of a surging politics of fear (111). Indeed, the mainstream Anglo culture often paints Latino/as as an uneducated, promiscuous, and violent homogenous group. Spanish is considered an inferior language, and *salsa*, *merengue*, and *bachata* are all “vulgar” musical genres that can never equal the sophistication of classical music. With several reports confirming “that Hispanics are the fastest-growing group within the United States,” perhaps many Euroamericans fear that their way of life will vanish and be replaced with a “brown” lifestyle. Thus, political and law enforcement mechanisms are attempting to repress Latino/as and their cultures. Chapter 5 excels at presenting evidence of this repression—e.g. LAPD’s brutality on 2007 May 1, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s hotline for suspected “illegal” migrants, and other events as told by abuse victims (117-119).

With these crimes against humanity occurring daily, how should Christians and all people of goodwill respond? In chapters 6 and 7, De La Torre uses Biblical precepts and ethical insights to conclude that the Christian tradition explicitly demands that all citizens welcome and embrace sojourners. After all, the author reminds us, God’s chosen people were migrants who, throughout their history, were oppressed by several imperial forces. God’s son, Jesus, was born in an occupied territory and was then crucified for struggling against oppressive religious and political powers. Today’s crucified peoples, the least among us, are migrants. Yet, the churches—with the exception of the US Catholic church—have remained relatively silent on the abuse of migrants and on the cultural normalization of anti-Hispanic sentiment. De La Torre attributes this lack of social justice commitment in many churches to their obsession with correct doctrine over ethical action (161). It does not suffice simply to believe in Jesus as God; Christians must also be Jesus-like, fighting for justice and equality.

One way to work toward justice, De La Torre cites, is through the See-Judge-Act method of Catholic social teaching (161). By first recognizing the injustice, then reflecting on it with Biblical and ethical sources, and finally acting to halt it, Christians and others can begin to forge a just society.

Appearing after the final chapter are a “Timeline for Legislation on Hispanic Immigration” and “Resources on Immigration.” The former offers a crash course on several fundamental legislative decisions on immigration, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924, and other essential legislation in the latter half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. The “Resources on Immigration” section, written by Ph.D. candidate David Carlson, provides links and brief descriptions of faith-based and non-faith-based US advocacy groups, immigration/migration centers, and of film and print (both scholarly and lay) resources.

However one decides to struggle with migrants and all of society's marginalized, I have no doubt that *Trails of Hope and Terror*—with its thorough analysis, ethical and Biblical reflection, first-person narratives, and call to action with its practical resources—embodies the See-Judge-Act method. In the last chapter, the author laments that “if you, the reader, finish this book, are saddened and shaking your head in empathy for the undocumented, and do nothing, then I have failed” (162). For the sake of the repeatedly crucified Latino/a migrants and all the marginalized, I hope that the author is successful in invigorating Christians and non-Christians to free our oppressed brothers and sisters from the evil chains of hatred, xenophobia, and bad immigration policies.