

## The Decentered Vision of Diaspora Space: Theological Ethnography, Migration, and the Pilgrim Church

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the decentered vision of diaspora space that emerges from the encounters with difference present in theological ethnography, the migrant experience, and the pilgrim Church. I first argue for how crossing borders, both cultural and disciplinary, places a researcher in the intersectional power matrix of diaspora space. Second, I explore how this displacement contributes to a distinct pluralistic epistemology that invites a researcher to gain a methodological glimpse of what migrants experience existentially. Finally, I explore how the vulnerability of this decentered epistemology reveals that the Christian church is also a diaspora space, especially through a rediscovery of its own identity as a pilgrim people of “The Way.” By learning from the methodological insights of theological ethnography and the existential condition of migrants, the church too can become conscious of its own decentered position in the “already, but not yet.”

*“...you can be an immigrant without risking your lives  
Or crossing these borders with thrifty supplies  
All you got to do is see the world with new eyes...”<sup>1</sup>*

Featuring rappers K’naan (Somali-Canadian), Snow Tha Product (Mexican-American), Riz MC (British-Pakistani), and Residente (Puerto Rican), these lyrics from *The Hamilton Mixtape* are inspired by the Broadway musical’s show-stopping line, “Immigrants, we get the job done!” Released in December 2016 amid contentious national debates on border walls and travel bans, this song speaks for

those who are often misrepresented or excluded by socio-political discourse in the US. The lyrics intentionally weave together the histories and experiences of different immigrant communities to reveal their plight in their own words. Describing the consequences of Western imperialism and military interventionism, this song explores how histories of the West were already entangled with those of various peoples long before the contemporary migration crisis.

By drawing on a multiplicity of overlapping immigrant histories, the necessity of this song for the current socio-political context reflects what sociologist Avtar Brah theorizes as *diaspora space*. She argues that

*diaspora space*, as distinct from diaspora, foregrounds what I have called the ‘*entanglement of the genealogies of dispersal*’ with those of ‘*staying put*’. Here, politics of location, of being situated and positioned, derive from a simultaneity of diasporisation and rootedness. The concept of diaspora space decentres the subject position of ‘native’, ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, the in/outsider, in such a way that diasporian is as much a native and the native now becomes a diasporian through this entanglement.<sup>2</sup>

Brah’s theoretical conception of *diaspora space* resonates with the song’s opening lyrics, which claim that this decentered worldview is not reserved only for those who risk their lives to cross national borders. “Natives” of the dominant culture are also called to “see the world with new eyes” by recognizing, as Brah argues, that they are already entangled with immigrant narratives through a shared geographic and imaginative space. Consciousness of entanglement decenters assumptions of the givenness of national narratives and opens a space for negotiation and dialogue. This article, therefore, examines the possibilities of the decentered vision of *diaspora space* through the encounters with difference present in theological ethnography, the migrant experience, and the pilgrim Church.

I first argue for how crossing borders, both cultural and disciplinary, places a researcher in a *diaspora space*. I analyze this claim by examining my experience of fieldwork with the Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants of the Ge’ez Catholic community in Boston. This encounter with difference challenged my subjectivity as a researcher as I negotiated how and where to locate myself within a matrix of intersectional power. Second, I explore how the experience of displacement contributes to a distinct pluralistic epistemology that is reflected both in the experience of migration and theological ethnography. Engaging in fieldwork has the capacity to decenter a researcher’s vision by inviting her to experience methodologically what migrants experience existentially. While an inherent power differential regarding agency and choice prevents any simplistic equation of the two, both reflect an epistemology dependent on discovery, not verification. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen go further by claiming that theological ethnography is not just a methodological tool, but an expression of Christian ethics and theology itself. In the process of fieldwork, “there can be something redemptive – and healing – about being displaced through ethnographic study.”<sup>3</sup> This possibility of redemptive healing is linked to a more profound awareness of what it means to live within

the vulnerable uncertainty between centers of power, without rushing to closure. Finally, I explore how the vulnerability of this decentered epistemology provides insights for the Christian church as a *diaspora space*, especially through a rediscovery of its own identity as a pilgrim people of “The Way.” By learning from the existential condition of migrants and the methodological insights of theological ethnography, the church too can become conscious of its own decentered position in the “already, but not yet.”

### ***THE ENTANGLEMENT OF DIFFERENCE: CROSSING BORDERS IN DIASPORA SPACE***

Built right after the Civil War, the towering neo-Gothic facade of Holy Cross Cathedral gleamed against the Boston sky. I entered from one of the many side doors near the main altar and walked down the long nave. Passing pews that could easily seat up to two thousand people, I recalled images of the interfaith service held after the Boston marathon bombing a few years earlier. Honoring the victims of the attack, President Barack Obama stood at the altar and reminded the nation that Boston is

one of the world’s great cities. And one of the reasons the world knows Boston so well is that Boston opens its heart to the world. Over successive generations, you’ve welcomed again and again new arrivals to our shores -- immigrants who constantly reinvigorated this city and this commonwealth and our nation.<sup>4</sup>

Despite faint echoes of this historic moment, the nave now remained largely empty. A few well-dressed parishioners lingered in conversation by the front doors after morning Mass. Under the vibrant colors streaming through the stained-glass rose window, I turned right and walked down the staircase to the lower church. These stairs marked the implicit boundary between the Roman Catholic congregants who populated the services above and the Eastern Catholic migrants who found a spiritual home in the space below. For over a decade, Cardinal Sean O’Malley welcomed immigrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea to celebrate their ancient Ge’ez liturgy and to enjoy the communal space afterwards. Walking down a winding corridor and through a reception hall, I opened a set of heavy wooden doors to the lower church. I was taken aback by the elegant simplicity of the woodwork that surrounded the worship space.



Image 1: Ge’ez Catholic women preparing themselves for the liturgy.

Photo Credit: Jaisy A. Joseph

Arriving early for the afternoon liturgy, I quietly took my seat near a few elderly women. Covering their

heads in white cotton shawls that draped over their shoulders and past their waists, I observed these women in deep prayer. Kneeling with eyes closed, they bowed their foreheads against hands clasped around rosary beads. As a few more women walked in, they affectionately greeted each other with a kiss on each cheek three times. Some men were also setting up for the liturgy. While two men prepared the altar, another was busy tuning his electric guitar. He must have noticed me fumbling with the translated liturgical text before approaching me with a welcoming smile. “Ah, you are Indian,” he began with a distinct Ethiopian accent, “I respect the Indian women. They not show everything.” I laughed, not sure how to respond to the comment. “All are welcomed here. Especially Indians. India and Ethiopia had trade long ago – almost same food. You stay after and eat with us.”

Though I was not sure what to expect the moment I crossed the boundary between the upper and lower churches, one decision had already been made for me. This man’s generous welcome made it clear that our entangled history of past trade connections as ancient civilizations and contemporary status as minorities in the US made it possible for current engagement. For Brah, this encounter between difference outside of the Eurocentric gaze reflects the capacity of *diaspora space* to envelop “historically variable forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations.”<sup>5</sup> This space not only encompasses the individual entanglements of minority communities with the dominant culture, but also the entanglements between diverse communities on the peripheries. Furthermore, *diaspora space* is also a site of immanence for “multi-axial performative conceptions of power,” which reveal that if an individual is constituted as a ‘majority’ along one dimension of differentiation, she may also be constructed as a ‘minority’ along another.<sup>6</sup> For example, if I had arrived thinking that I would stand out primarily as an academic scholar furiously scribbling fieldnotes in a corner of the worship space, I was wrong. My embodiment expressed through my gender and dark-skinned complexion immediately marked me as other, but in a surprisingly non-threatening way. Regarding gender, the comment on modesty signaled that I may be entering certain patriarchal structures that would have to be navigated on a case-by-case basis. In terms of ethnicity, my dark-skinned otherness paralleled his otherness within a shared US culture that hardly recognized either. I immediately understood that I would have to negotiate this new cultural encounter differently from the “white privilege” written about by many ethnographers.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of how I identified myself, the world interacted with me as a woman of Indian descent. This *diaspora space* shaped by *difference* decentered my scholarly assumptions of how I would engage this community and what insights might emerge in the process.

For Brah, boundaries of difference crisscross throughout a *diaspora space*, not only by providing “insight into and understanding of relations of power,” but also transforming one’s subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> With the publication of *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah was an early pioneer in the analysis of intersectionality between race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, generation, and nationalism in various political contexts. Having lived in Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe, the experiences of dispersal and displacement shaped her sociological perspective on difference and identity. In contrast to the eurocentric Enlightenment concept of the “universal ‘Man’ as the embodiment of an ahistorical essence,”<sup>9</sup> Brah argues that the subjective “I” is not a pre-given unitary self, but constantly decentered by concrete encounters with difference. This fragmented

self must navigate and produce meaning from what political theorist Antonio Gramsci calls the “infinity of traces” that historical processes have deposited into the self without leaving an inventory.<sup>10</sup> These traces are both inherited from collective histories such as slavery, colonialism and imperialism and attributed to the self by others, creating a “multiplicity of subject positions” within a complicated matrix of power.<sup>11</sup> This matrix is formed by overlapping borders of “arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic.”<sup>12</sup>

Brah also argues how Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* presents a powerful example of the fragmented subjectivity that is illumined by border crossing in *diaspora space*. Anzaldúa primarily reflects on how the US-Mexico border symbolizes the moment where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”<sup>13</sup> This grating not only harms the physical body, but also the psyche of the soul. She argues that she who crosses borders or has them cross her must constantly wrestle with the socio-cultural implications for her identity. To struggle at the border is to “continually walk out of one culture and into another,”<sup>14</sup> existing “in a state of perpetual transition.” Caught between multiple worldviews and often contrasting value systems, she undergoes numerous “cultural collision[s]” that necessitate ongoing translation and interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

From my first ethnographic encounter with the Ge'ez Catholic community onwards, I recognized that engaging these parishioners with theological categories of *catholicity* and *communion* would not be productive. Rather, the easiest entry point for my research questions within this particular *diaspora space* would be to foreground my own identity as a child of Eastern Catholic immigrants from India. The creation of this common platform opened a space of dialogue as I engaged in weekly participant-observation of the Ge'ez Catholic community for almost two years. The establishment of familiarity and gradual trust also encouraged ten adult parishioners to share their experiences of migration and diaspora with me during in-depth interviews. In the process, I recognized common concerns between our two migrant communities, especially regarding the second generation and a desire to pass on the faith and culture in a new country. By establishing this common ground, I was able to ask further questions about diasporic negotiations between homeland, transition, and settlement to gain a deeper understanding of the social and religious scripts that ordered the relationships within this community.

### ***A DECENTERED EPISTEMOLOGY: VULNERABILITY IN DIASPORA SPACE***

While many of the regular parishioners often welcomed me and asked how I was doing, Mekdelina made a special effort to get to know me and sit with me during the coffee time after liturgy. Perhaps because we were similar in age or because I adored her children, there was an ease of interaction between us. She was often accompanied by her mother, who did not speak English, but who would affectionately hold my hand with both of hers. This gesture communicated a sense of warm hospitality that defied language barriers. After a few Sundays, Mekdalina shared with me that when her son saw me enter the church, he would excitedly

whisper, “Mommy, your friend is here.” Her kindness allowed for a natural openness to develop between us. Over the course of an in-depth interview and numerous conversations, I caught a glimpse of her migrant journey.

Mekdelina had worked hard her entire life in Nazret, Ethiopia to fulfill her dreams. She dreamed of immigrating to the US and changing her life and the life of her family. She dreamed of living in a place with socio-political and economic stability. After decades of war, famine, and corruption, the Ethiopian people were exhausted. Traditionally, their language of Amharic had no word for “immigrant.” The very idea of leaving one’s country was shameful. *Sädät* (migration) originally meant one who was displaced, exiled, or banished due to criminal activity.<sup>16</sup> The connotation of this word, however, slowly began to change after the traumatic events of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. Whereas the word was hardly known before, *sädät* gradually took on valences of tragic dehumanization as millions adjusted to their new lives as refugees.<sup>17</sup> The official collapse of the Marxist Derg in 1991 was followed by Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia, leaving the latter landlocked. There was relative peace until the Ethiopian-Eritrean border disputes turned into full scale war in 1999. By this time, *sädät* transformed from a “feared and despised status into part of the Ethiopian psyche and culture.”<sup>18</sup> Waves of immigration further changed the value of this word. While initial waves were constituted by refugees fleeing the *Red Terror* of the Derg, later waves were initiated by economic concerns. In one popular Amharic song, artist Settegn Atenaw captures this transformation when he sings

As it is said and we heard, in days past  
 Leaving one’s country meant a death of all deaths,  
 Moving away from country, from relatives, to emigrate  
 was sorrow, it was anxiety heavy on one’s mind.  
 Today all this is forgotten, new norms have come  
 People party when they get passport and visa  
 To be *sädätännä*, people dance  
 People toast and drink, they are full of laughter  
 They dance, they party regardless  
 These days, *sädätännännät* is like a wedding!<sup>19</sup>

Belonging to one of the later economic waves of migration, Mekdalina expressed similar joy as she told me about what it was like to be chosen for the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery. Since the Immigration Act of 1990, the US established a lottery program that made 55,000 permanent visas available annually, with the aim of diversifying the US immigrant population. Each year, they selected applicants from countries with low rates during the previous five years.<sup>20</sup> As she shared her story, Mekdalina’s tone revealed a mixture of pride and gratitude when she told me about how

they picked my name...so they send me mail to say I won the lottery... I

was very lucky because back home it's a very big deal...very big deal... and then I was dreaming about that because I wanted to come to US to get better life, a better job, especially job. We have everything, but we do not have enough job... so it's very hard to get a job... you cannot get easy unless you know somebody...and they can cheat you. Here you can get *any kind* of job unless you are tired and lazy. But you have to be strong, that's all...<sup>21</sup>

She came to the US not knowing a single soul. She won the visa lottery but knew of no one who could sponsor her entry into the United States. After numerous attempts at finding a sponsor, her uncle's female classmate in Boston was willing to help because they were from the same hometown in Ethiopia. Mekdalina stepped onto the plane leaving Addis Ababa Bole International Airport without knowing who or what awaited her. All she had was a picture of this classmate and trust in her uncle's word. The two women had never met before, but as soon as they found each other in Boston, the elder one took care of Mekdalina as her own sister. Their first task was to find Mekdalina a job. Through contacts from various networks, Mekdalina found her first job in the US as a parking garage attendant. She continues,

... so this change my life and then I want to change my family's life, so I work very hard to bring them...mother, sister, brother... this is what I dreamed about. I used to pray a lot. I used to pray *a lot*. I think God helped me. Back home it is very hard. Here you can work hard and get money and you can help somebody else back home. And you can help yourself...<sup>22</sup>

Mekdalina's story reveals the tenacity of the human spirit, which is not afraid to become vulnerable in the pursuit of a better life. Anything could have happened the moment she stepped off the plane in Boston. Yet, she opened herself up to all possibilities and trusted the process – and in God. Each step of the way, she found the help she needed to change her life and the life of her family for the better. Nothing was guaranteed, but she continued to move forward by being attentive to her surroundings. She took calculated risks by testing and expanding what she already knew from her Ethiopian upbringing with what was presented to her in the United States. According to Anzaldúa, this attentiveness reflects how survival between multiple worlds depends on developing a new consciousness that shifts out of

habitual formation; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes... She operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing is rejected, nothing abandoned.<sup>23</sup>

This pluralistic mode of knowing is not a choice, but an epistemic means of survival. With all the newness of a different land, her attention is expanded because of the inability to map previous “set patterns and goals” onto the socio-cultural scripts of a new environment. She must exist in the tension between multiple centers of power through a mode of discovery.

Christian ethicist Aana Marie Vigen also draws on Anzaludua’s epistemology of border crossing when she claims that as scholars pursuing fieldwork in theology, there is a shared sense that one’s home (culturally, academically, religiously, etc.) is not found on one side of the border or the other. Rather it is found at “the creative, albeit uncomfortable, place of the intersection itself – where differing disciplines, ways of knowing, and being come together. By going into a place where one does not immediately belong and by not knowing “exactly what to do, what to ask, or even how to ‘be’ in the space,” researchers gain a methodological glimpse into the existential condition of migrants.

Through the lens of this limited comparison, it becomes evident that ethnographic methods are not about applying pre-conceived truths to reality or dismissing data that initially appears irrelevant. To do ethnographic work is to also exist in a vulnerable, pluralistic uncertainty that thrusts nothing out – “the good the bad and the ugly.” The researcher must be attentive to all that emerges from the encounter with difference in *diaspora space*. Ethnographic methods belong to an inductive, “dynamic process of meaning making” that “provide a path *by which* truth emerges.”<sup>24</sup> The researcher must constantly transition between her training as a scholar and the concrete realities of those she encounters. She must negotiate her own sense of identity with what is perceived of her in a new context. She must continually walk between her own grasp of reality and those of her informants, testing what insights emerge from the dialogue between them. This process disciplines her attention to remain vigilant to the context and to others by learning from them and with them. Through this pluralistic epistemic mode, the aim is to “understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective – to take them seriously as a source of wisdom and to de-center [her] assumptions and evaluations.”<sup>25</sup> Only in this sense can the entangled histories of *diaspora space* emerge and decenter the given assumptions of dominant narratives.

Precisely because researchers choose to place themselves in a new environment with a freedom often unavailable to migrants, Scharen and Vigen insist that epistemic humility and self-reflexivity are necessary safeguards against epistemic violence. These virtues prevent the researcher from invading people’s lives and manipulating what is heard to fit predetermined arguments. A responsible ethnographer practices epistemic humility by relinquishing the presumed certainty of an expert so that she may be taught by others who often possess a very different way of interpreting reality. A proper sense of humility does not negate who the researcher is as a scholar, but rather asks her to be transparent about the hypotheses that she brings into the field. She must also be willing to be disproven. Theologically, this orientation affirms the central belief that each human person is the *imago Dei*, the image of God. Just as she can never claim full knowledge of God, she cannot assume complete understanding of the other. Each person, divine or human, remains knowable, but never fully graspable.

This humility also contributes to a self-reflexivity that resists the need to attach herself to structures of power present in the field to mitigate the pains of vulnerability. Such attachment only obscures the multi-axial intersections of power prevalent within a *diaspora space*. For example, if I had aligned myself only with the parish priest of the Ge'ez community for a narrative of the community's formation, I would have neglected how women such as Mekdalina built up this community through their often-hidden dedication and sacrifice. This self-reflexivity also prevents the researcher from indulging in "sensationalistic pseudo-journalism" that propagates dangerous stereotypes for "callous commodification."<sup>26</sup> The researcher must be willing to wade through the messy nuances and imperfect gaps that resist a confirmation of her own assumptions. In this sense, ethnographic fieldwork is about discovery, not verification.

According to Scharen, the vulnerability of this decentered epistemology becomes "redemptive - and healing" because it belongs to a larger practice of dispossession modelled after the kenotic self-giving of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> Paul's advice to the church in Philippi also applies to theological ethnographers, who must "do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves..." Paul further adds, "have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant..." (Philippians 2:3-7). Through the great migration from divinity into humanity, Jesus emptied Himself and shared in the life of a migrant, existing in the vulnerable space between centers of power. Not only was he born far from home (Luke 2:1-7), but his family had to flee to Egypt as refugees (Matt 2:13-14). He ministered as an itinerant preacher with nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58) and he graciously accepted the hospitality shown to him. Whether as a guest of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) or of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), he engaged in table fellowship with anyone and everyone. For researchers, to approach fieldwork in theology is to likewise allow themselves to become vulnerable and to be stripped of any false pretense of superiority. It is to enter the pluralistic mode of discovery through a decentered epistemology that remains open to the unknown.

### ***SEEING WITH NEW EYES: HOMING DESIRE AND THE MIGRANT CHURCH***

Immediately after securing a job, Mekdalina asked her new friend about how she could keep practicing her faith. Her friend was Ethiopian Orthodox, but she wanted to worship in a Ge'ez Catholic community, just like when she was in Ethiopia. She did not insist on many things, but finding a church was important to her.

My family is very strong Christians... since I was little, we always go to Sunday church. We always. We never miss the church. So, I *cannot* miss the church. We have to pray, we have to sing, we have to connect with God. I believe that... I used to work two jobs, but that doesn't make me to stop to come to church <sup>28</sup>

She felt that God remembered her in profound moments of uncertainty, so she could not forget God in this

new country. Her friend gave her a few phone numbers. After meeting with these contacts, one of them provided her a ride to the cathedral within a few months of her arrival to Boston. On her first day, she was surprised because she had not expected the community to be so small. Back home, Mekdalina grew up in a huge Ge'ez Catholic church that alternated between different choirs to accommodate all the talent. While people greeted each other after the liturgy back home, they did not know every single person in the church. Rather, they only interacted with those in their own age group. Despite the initial surprise, she allowed herself to be embraced by these people. Although they were initially strangers, they provided the familiarity of home and family.

First day when I came, I see a small community. It's very different for me, as I said earlier. The priest introduced me and said that I was from back home, from Nazaret. I said I can sing. They were very happy, very sweet. And I joined the choir here... Here it's different. The people who ever come, from Ethiopia or Eritrea, they want the relationship more, that's what I think...I love that. Especially right after the liturgy, the coffee time. It's very important to know each other.<sup>29</sup>

By attempting to reconstruct the spiritual and cultural familiarity of the Ge'ez liturgy and community, Mekdalina expresses what Brah theorizes as the *homing desire* of *diaspora space*, which is distinct from “a desire for a ‘homeland.’”<sup>30</sup> The idea of home is critically embedded within a diasporic imagination, revealing at once “a mythic place of desire” and a “place of no return,” even if visits are possible.<sup>31</sup> The experience of diaspora invokes both the pain of dislocation and the potential for new beginnings. Thus, the *homing desire* of *diaspora space* cannot be likened to either casual travel or individual exile because it emerges from a collective consciousness. These spaces become “contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure” a distant homeland within a new country.<sup>32</sup> This desire is also a response to the practices of inclusion and exclusion within the wider dominant culture, raising the question of *belonging*. While this *homing desire* is a prevalent *ethos* within Christian immigrant communities, it is hardly present among Christians of the dominant culture.



Image 2: Celebrating the Ge'ez Catholic liturgy in the lower church of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross (Boston)

Photo Credit: Jaisy A. Joseph

Reflecting on the relationship of migrants with the wider church, Gioacchino Campese argues that mainstream theology “has been rather deaf and mute about the human mobility that characterizes our

age... basically silent.”<sup>33</sup> In search for a reason, Susanna Snyder argues that theologians of the dominant culture participate in ecclesial practices of inclusion and exclusion by forgetting that migrants are “part of the church...the Christian ‘we.’”<sup>34</sup> What would it mean to explore the concrete lives and existential condition of migrants in relation to the scriptural understanding that all Christians are migrants in diaspora? What would it mean for Christian identity to rediscover its own *homing desire* as people of “The Way”? As defined in the introduction, *diaspora space* is not only about the empirical overlap of immigrant communities, but also the “*entanglement of the genealogies of dispersal*” with those who stay “*put*.” In this way, a shared *homing desire* for the Kingdom of God within the Christian tradition reveals that the “diasporian is as much a native and the native now becomes a diasporian through this entanglement.”<sup>35</sup> Sharing this perspective, Orlando Espín argues that journeying towards the Reign of God is an “indispensable, non-negotiable, and foundational reality” of what it means to be Christian. Churches, therefore, “must be formed by the realities of immigration – and not because of political correctness or momentary inconvenience, but – because this is the very essence of Christianity.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet, many often do not let the presence of immigrants challenge their sense of Christian identity. One tragedy of our globalized era is the existence of faith communities who share the same worship space, but hardly recognize each other’s existence. This situation is symbolized by the staircase that divides the upper church of Roman Catholics from the lower church of Gèez Catholics. In the time that I had been with the Gèez Catholics, I witnessed a great level of hospitality on the part of Cardinal Sean O’Malley and other clergy who attended liturgical feast days and encouraged these immigrants to consider the cathedral their spiritual home. On a day-to-day basis, however, Catholics from different backgrounds hardly encountered one another as they lived parallel realities under the same roof.

Kristin Heyer argues that this indifference may be due to two factors. First, because conscience (“knowing together with”) etymologically highlights the “social dimension of moral knowledge,”<sup>37</sup> it is possible to uncritically appropriate prevailing cultural biases that contribute towards ideological blindness. For example, the present socio-political climate that endorses border walls and travel bans distorts consciences against immigrants by idolizing “national security.” These social ideologies foster internalized fears and tribalism that spill over into religious faith communities. Second, migrants often experience ecclesial marginalization when they are viewed only as “passive beneficiaries of...charitable services.”<sup>38</sup> This limited understanding negates the full agency of the other to also give and contribute to the flourishing of the church. By always perceiving immigrants as those in need, Christians of the dominant culture maintain a spiritual pride that resists mutual vulnerability. This approach allows a colonialist framework to resurface as people are pitied, but never fully included within the church as equals. Unilateral assistance prevents true encounter by maintaining a perpetual gap between giver and receiver, negating their already-entangled histories.

Christian churches could learn from the practices of theological ethnographers who must discipline themselves with epistemic humility and self-reflectivity to exist within the “creative – albeit uncomfortable – place of the intersection itself.”<sup>39</sup> People must learn to leave their centers of privileged comfort and meet

others half-way in a space that transforms oppressive power dynamics into mutual vulnerability. This practice fosters the emergence of a decentered consciousness that shifts out of a “habitual formation” of “set patterns and goals” into a more “pluralistic mode” of engagement.<sup>40</sup> For example, Mekdalina displayed attentive hospitality towards me by stepping beyond her comfort zone and welcoming me into the life of the community. Having received this embrace when she first arrived, she was attuned to viewing me as a fellow Christian, not a stranger. Recognizing that people often come to church because “they want the relationship more” and because “it’s very important to know each other,” Mekdalina empathically included me within her sense of church without reducing me into a charity case. .

Through her actions, Mekdalina intuitively displayed the heart of Pope Francis’ insistence on transforming a self-centered ecclesial culture into a more decentered culture of encounter.<sup>41</sup> Christian love and commitment is not *to* the church, but experienced *in* the church and *as* the church, reflecting the profound relationality of kinship between the children of God. If ecclesial culture is a self-enclosed reality that is satisfied with maintaining social divisions within the life of the church, then an ecclesial culture of encounter is one that encourages all the baptized to decenter themselves by going to the peripheries and discovering brothers and sisters living the same pilgrim journey. Though aware of the boundaries of intersectional power, this culture does not let these boundaries prevent peoples from crossing them into mutual vulnerability. While providing a space for an immigrant community to have a spiritual home at the cathedral respects their rights to worship freely, only interpersonal relationships can humanize this home in accordance with the Gospel. By crossing the boundary between the upper and lower church, I went to the peripheries of the cathedral to participate in and observe the Gèez community. While I could have remained an outsider for nearly two years, Mekdalina went to the peripheries of her community to embrace me in a *diaspora space* of interpersonal encounter.

Crossing boundaries into mutual vulnerability is never easy, but only by doing so can just relationships across difference emerge. Without such relationships, it remains impossible to recognize God’s presence and discern God’s work in our midst. By adopting a decentered practice of dispossession, the church can gain a renewed vision that places “God, the ‘Wholly Other’ at the center.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, all Christians decenter themselves so that they stand shoulder-to-shoulder with a shared *homing desire* oriented towards the same destination. Just as epistemic humility and self-reflexivity disrupt unconscious biases for theological ethnographers, so too should these virtues be exercised by Christians. The church is an institutional migrant that exists in the “already, but not yet.” Caught between this world and the next, it too must navigate and negotiate how best to dwell within a *diaspora space* as fellow migrants. As Rafael Luciani argues, the

future of the Christian believer is not the church, but the God of the Kingdom who is revealed in Jesus; and when he is all in all the church as institution and *Mater Convocans* will cease. Only the *fraternitas convocata* will remain, the true kinship between the daughters and sons of God.<sup>43</sup>

The Christian church must allow itself to be formed by the realities of migration. These realities spiritually form Christians by giving them a glimpse into their own existential orientation towards God. Theological ethnographers can contribute to this effort by foregrounding the voices of migrants in their work so that the latter can share their existential condition in their own words. In this way, both the church and the academy can learn to see the “other” as “we.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Whether experienced as an ethnographer who dwells at the boundary between the theoretical and the concrete, an immigrant who leaves her country for the first time, or the church who rediscovers its identity as a pilgrim people of “The Way,” the de-centered vision of *diaspora space* allows one to let go of a false sense of certainty and superiority. All three experiences discover the discipline of dwelling in the instability of the unknown without rushing to premature closure, either about oneself, the situation, or the other. Truth emerges as part of a process of discovery and not as confirmation of preconceived frameworks. To reiterate, “there can be something redemptive – and healing – about being displaced” from the center.<sup>44</sup> While we must not romanticize the hardships of immigration, both natives and diasporians can learn valuable lessons from their entangled histories. To live suspended between centers of power is painful, but it is also a reminder of our common humanity, our limitations, and our desire for home. Relationships within and across difference require the capacity to see with new eyes – not from the centers of power, but from the decentered spaces of historic entanglement and contemporary encounter.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” on Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *The Hamilton Mixtape* (Los Angeles: Atlantic Records, 2016).
- 2 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 242.
- 3 Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), xviii.
- 4 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Interfaith Service in Boston, MA,” National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, 18 Apr. 2013, [obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-interfaith-service-boston-ma](http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/18/remarks-president-interfaith-service-boston-ma).
- 5 Brah, 183.
- 6 Ibid, 189.
- 7 Scharen and Vigen, 8-17.
- 8 Brah, 207.
- 9 Ibid, 119.
- 10 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1995), 324.
- 11 Brah, 125.
- 12 Ibid, 198.
- 13 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 3.
- 14 Ibid, 77.
- 15 Ibid, 78.
- 16 Solomon Addis Getahun, “Sədät , Migration, and Refugeeism as Portrayed in Ethiopian Song Lyrics,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, (2006): 343.
- 17 Ibid, 350.
- 18 Ibid, 353.
- 19 The song is from the album *Zäfän Dəro Qärä* (“Gone are the days of music”) produced in 2001, translated and quoted by Getahun, “Sədät, Migration, and Refugeeism,” 353.
- 20 “Enter the Official DV-2019 USA Green Card Lottery.” English Version, US Government, [www.usadiversitylottery.com/](http://www.usadiversitylottery.com/).
- 21 Mekdalina (not real name), Personal Interview, 6 Mar 2016.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Anzaldúa, 79.
- 24 Scharen and Vigen, 16-17.
- 25 Ibid, 16.
- 26 Ibid, 20.
- 27 Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology*, 9.
- 28 Mekdalina, Personal Interview, 6 Mar 2016.

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- 30 Brah, 180.
- 31 Ibid, 192.
- 32 Ibid, 193.
- 33 Gioacchino Campese, “But I See That Somebody Is Missing’: Ecclesiology and Exclusion in the Context of Immigration.” *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, ed. Dennis Doyle, et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 79.
- 34 Susanna Snyder, “Introduction,” *Church in an Age of Global Migration: a Moving Body*, edited by Susanna Snyder, et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.
- 35 Brah, 242.
- 36 Orlando Espín, “Immigration and Some of Its Implications for Christian Identity and Doctrine.” *Religion and Politics in America’s Borderlands*, edited by Sarah Azaransky (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 22.
- 37 Kristin Heyer, “The Promise of a Pilgrim Church,” *Church in an Age of Global Migration: a Moving Body*, edited by Susanna Snyder, et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 85.
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- 44 Scharen and Vigen, xviii.