

Article

# Seeing Sanctuary: Separation and Accompaniment

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Received: 29 August 2020; Accepted: 12 October 2020; Published: 19 October 2020



**Abstract:** “Seeing Sanctuary” explores the practice and labeling of immigrant sanctuaries in the Trump era of migration enforcement and family separation. The essay utilizes the case of a class visit to a migrant sanctuary in Amherst, Massachusetts, and explores the challenges, rewards, and sense of futility from this flawed but necessary form of accompaniment. In March of 2018, my “History of Deportation” class visited Lucio Pérez, a Guatemalan migrant and nineteen-year resident of Massachusetts, who resides in sanctuary at the First Congregational Church. At this writing, in August 2020, thirty-five months since he entered the church, Pérez is still in sanctuary. Facing deportation in October 2017, Pérez sought refuge, five months prior to our class visit. The essay, drawing from the public narrative of Pérez, distinguishes the open defiance of Pérez’s sanctuary from the broader “sanctuary city” efforts at non-compliance with federal enforcement schemes.

**Keywords:** immigration; Central American; sanctuary; visitation

## 1. Ending Prosecutorial Discretion

This essay explores the spatial, discursive, and experiential topic of migrant sanctuaries in the Trump era of migration enforcement and family separation. The essay utilizes the case of a class visit to a migrant sanctuary in Amherst, Massachusetts, and explores the challenges, rewards, and sense of futility from this flawed, but necessary form of accompaniment. In March of 2018, my “History of Deportation” class visited Lucio Pérez, a Guatemalan migrant and then-nineteen-year resident of Massachusetts, who resides in sanctuary at the First Congregational Church. At this writing, in August 2020, thirty-five months since he entered the church, Pérez is still in sanctuary, separated from his spouse and four children. Facing imminent deportation in October of 2017, and five months prior to our class visit, Pérez sought refuge in the Amherst church. The essay draws from the public narrative of Pérez, explores the policy turns from the Obama to the Trump administrations, and distinguishes the open defiance of Pérez’s church sanctuary from the broader “sanctuary city” efforts at non-compliance with federal enforcement schemes.<sup>1</sup>

Candidate and President Donald Trump has infamously and consistently maligned immigrants, in particular Latina/o/x immigrants, with intense, misleading, and hateful rhetoric that pleases supporters, pressures his administrative staff to adopt harsh policies, and sets the context for the Trump brand of migration enforcement. Of all the immigration policies of the Trump administration—from the Muslim ban, “zero tolerance” and family separation, the threat to place a tariff on all Mexican goods, and the U.S.–Mexico border wall, to name a few—one of its very first enforcement actions

<sup>1</sup> The essay owes a deep gratitude to my Spring 2018 “History of Deportation” course. The students were: Avery Allen, Violeta Alvarez, Louisa Benarbane, Genesis DiCarlo, Sarah Fite, Vanesa Guevara, Kimberly Mota, Jody Phelps, Mahima Poreddy, Natalie Russianoff, Shebati Sengupta, Leah Shipulski, Madeline Skrak, and Milo Ward. Some of them are featured in the text, but all of them contributed to the effort to visit Lucio Pérez, to raise funds, and variously to translation. Other mentions of Pérez are drawn from the public record.

was to “take the shackles off” of immigration and border officers by ending Obama-era prosecutorial discretion which prioritized particular enforcement cases over others (Kulish et al. 2017). Of the two executive orders issued on 25 January 2017, the order “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States” created a sea change in Obama-era policies, removing all discretionary protections and casting the widest net possible over deportable migrants. The order stated, “We cannot faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States if we exempt classes or categories of removable aliens from potential enforcement” (Trump 2017).

Prosecutorial discretion under Obama—most notably exemplified by the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the never-implemented 2014 Deferred Action for Parents of American and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA)—created a priority system for deportation, targeting migrants with criminal records and final removal orders, as well as recent undocumented migrants or those entering after being deported.<sup>2</sup> If a deportable migrant was vetted and deemed to be outside of these priorities, deportation was deferred as long as the migrant maintained scheduled contact with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Massachusetts resident Lucio Pérez was one of these cases, experiencing discretion under Obama and prosecution under the Trump administration.

## 2. Sanctuary Jurisdictions and Church Sanctuaries

Sanctuaries can be legal and extralegal, political and religious, and symbolic as well as spatial. Church sanctuary, like the one that Lucio Pérez resides in, should be distinguished from what are commonly called “sanctuary cities” or sanctuary jurisdictions. Sanctuary jurisdictions are non-federal legal spaces, including cities, counties, and states, which adhere to various levels of non-compliance with federal immigration authorities. They might reject, with or without exceptions, immigration detainers—federal requests to local authorities to voluntarily hold migrants in custody for 48 h before immigration authorities arrive. Sanctuary jurisdictions might bar cooperation with ICE enforcement operations or limit or prohibit information-sharing with federal authorities. Sanctuary jurisdictions can work quietly and subtly, or openly and defiantly. Sanctuary jurisdictions dovetail with federal enforcement policies that purport to avoid “sensitive locations” such as churches, hospitals, and courthouses so as not to disrupt important social practices as well as to avoid the poor optics of raiding such spaces. During the period of Pérez’s stay in sanctuary, “sensitive locations”, in particular courthouses, were haphazardly raided in several states, rattling both immigrants and local authorities.

Overall, sanctuary jurisdictions are varied and heterogeneous, according to Serin Houston, who approaches sanctuary “as a process rather than a place designation” (Houston 2019, p. 3). A city, or state, or even a college campus, is not a sanctuary or not-a-sanctuary, although the media and the jurisdictions themselves often assert such a binary. As such, there is not a single template or aspiration for establishing a sanctuary jurisdiction or providing sanctuary.

Sanctuary states and cities, in particular, are hard to define and exist in contrast to anti-sanctuary jurisdictions. One study lists the anti-sanctuary states as one out of every five states, where statewide laws either require cooperation with ICE and/or ban non-compliance, in effect outlawing the practices of sanctuary. These states are: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Pro-sanctuary states are more difficult to define because there is a wide range of state processes—statewide declarations against compliance, more limited versions of non-compliance with exceptions, and states where court orders pave the way for local jurisdictions not to comply. Among these three tiers are: (1) California, Oregon, and Vermont with statewide non-compliance with ICE; (2) Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the Obama administration is also responsible for expanding Operation Streamline along the U.S.–Mexico border, allowing authorities to criminally prosecute migrants for unlawful entry and then deport them as “criminal aliens”. In this sense, Obama, like Bush and Trump, manufactured criminal records for migrants and undermined the relief system that he instituted.

with partial non-compliance; and (3) Colorado, Massachusetts, and New Mexico which permit counties and cities to comply or not comply (Herrera 2019).

Importantly, the executive order which ended prosecutorial discretion also anticipated dissent and targeted “sanctuary jurisdictions”, threatening to deny them federal funding. The order states, “Sanctuary jurisdictions across the United States willfully violate Federal law in an attempt to shield aliens from removal from the United States” (Trump 2017). Such a violation and the potential loss of federal funding has been contested by cities, counties, and states (Associated Press 2018). For example, California’s statewide non-compliance sanctuary law was upheld in April 2019 by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which concluded that it does not interfere with federal authorities. The Circuit Court suggested, it “no doubt makes the jobs of federal immigration authorities more difficult” but “California has the right to refrain from assisting with federal efforts”. ICE responded by saying that it “expect[ed] our partners to participate in public safety”—a public goal that is claimed by all sides whereby public safety is frequently invoked to oppose local compliance with federal authorities (Gonzales 2019).

It is important to note that sanctuary jurisdictions that assert their right to non-compliance have been critiqued by anti- and pro-immigrant constituencies for their various levels of limited or continued cooperation with the federal government. For immigrant advocates, non-compliance with detainers, but continued compliance with judicial warrants, for example, reduces the moniker “sanctuary” to its symbolism. More so, critics argue that sanctuary policies often privilege public safety and “law and order” in a way that discerns the “good” migrants from the “bad”, underscoring a dangerous dichotomy in immigration enforcement and advocacy. Police departments value cooperation, and thus “good” unafraid migrants, the argument goes, can be witnesses and “force multipliers”. Similar debates roiled the 1980s Sanctuary Movement as well, where asylum seekers’ merits as deserving or undeserving were also measured or doubted due to a number of factors that could include past criminal records, ideological beliefs and relations to the oppressive regimes they were fleeing, as well as migrants’ relative need for safety after living for some time in Mexico. Within the 1980s movement itself, ongoing strategic conflicts arose around practices that privileged secrecy and the safety of refugees as opposed to outspoken defiance, where media savvy and publicity could on one hand serve as a critique of U.S. foreign policy, but on the other hand might expose migrants to government retribution (García 2006, pp. 101–2).

Strategic conflicts notwithstanding, as much as jurisdictions argue that sanctuary policies can help the police do its job, sanctuary jurisdictions also bring significant relief to migrants in routine civic life as well as enunciate a declarative public stance towards existing and future migrant residents. States and municipalities can decriminalize actions that trigger deportation or provide other forms of relief. They might work to create—or work in concert with—other policies like local identification cards, driver’s licenses, and school registration to establish a welcome mat that is less easy to yank away by a subsequent administration. Remaining within the law, city non-compliance policies, as we will see below, can help with other forms of extralegal sanctuary, in particular church sanctuaries, making it easier for such sites to protect migrants.

Whereas sanctuary jurisdictions provide more local and lawful protections up to the limits of federal law, church sanctuaries, on the other hand, more closely approximate direct defiance of federal law. According to the ACLU, the declaration of a church as a migrant sanctuary is not recognized by federal law, is policed differently throughout the country—such as the aforementioned breach of “sensitive locations” enforcement restrictions—and is situated in a legal gray area between criminal harboring and offering aid and comfort to a migrant with an ongoing legal process. “The federal criminal harboring law”, according to the ACLU, “prohibits concealing, harboring, or shielding from detection (or attempting to conceal, harbor, or shield) an undocumented immigrant, when done with knowledge or reckless regard of the immigrant’s unlawful status” (ACLU 2017, p. 1). To protect themselves legally, churches consult attorneys, often offer protections, aid, and comfort to broad categories of people—not just deportable migrants—assert privacy rights over their space, and provide

sanctuary in public and in contact with local media. Like other sanctuary jurisdictions, churches provide strategic and symbolic protection, leveraging the poor optics (for immigration authorities) for raiding a place of worship.

Even though churches are defiant and disobedient with respect to federal law, church and community sanctuaries also have their limitations. Critics have stated that the sanctuary movement overall addresses too few migrants or that moral and religious philosophies may be a barrier to some secular activists or limit the kinds of migrants deserving of church support. Often, the promotion of religious values and morals leads to the construction and framing of migrants in sanctuary as innocents or meritorious because of their family or religious values. Houston and Morse refer to this as the “ordinary and extraordinary”—a double-edged framing among sanctuary activists (Houston and Morse 2017). In this frame, migrants in sanctuary are everyday people—“just like you and me”—or sometimes they are framed as perfect victims—a requisite factor for achieving asylum. Sanctuary activists can underscore this framing in their defense of certain migrants, privileging carefully selected migrants for sanctuary over others who do not possess the ideal merits for potential legal relief (Houston and Morse 2017).

### 3. Teaching Sanctuary

During the Spring semester of 2018, my “History of Deportation” class visited a migrant church sanctuary in Western Massachusetts in order to witness and learn about one of the racialized spaces of immigration enforcement. As a class, we would have to request and gain acceptance from church leaders and the congregation's guest, Lucio Pérez, as well as prepare ourselves intellectually and emotionally. We would have to assess our own migration statuses for safety and arrange for group transportation. And importantly, we would have to address the limitations inherent in sanctuary protection and our potential contribution to those tensions—that is, we would have to balance our goals toward experiential learning with a clear sense of reciprocity in the practice of migrant accompaniment. The course about detention, deportation, and prisons is taught through the Latina/o/x Studies program at Mount Holyoke College, as the study of immigration remains central to Latina/o/x politics, experiences, and identities. While many Latinas/os/xes have been in the United States for generations, even centuries, large-scale migration from Latin America also remains an enduring trend, replenishing and/or shifting the culture, language, and politics of U.S. Latina/o/x communities.

One of the results of long-term migration through the continuous historical entry points into U.S. society is that Latinas/os/xes are broadly conflated racially with each other across citizenship and countries of origin. In short, to many, all Latinas/os/xes are, or at least signify, immigrants. In addition, for many Latinas/os/xes, large-scale migration, family reunification, and intermarriage create the demographic reality of mixed status families, linking citizens and noncitizens to the migration experience. The Pew Research Center estimates that at least nine million people reside in mixed status families (Taylor et al. 2011), defined as one undocumented adult and one U.S.-born child. These numbers can be viewed as guarded. A broader frame, defining a mixed status family as any familial unit with at least one citizen and one noncitizen, captures numerous immigration statuses and family relationships that are all impacted by immigration policy, increasing the scale of migration politics within Latina/o/x communities. While mixed statuses might cause families and communities to coalesce around migration issues, they can also form cleavages within families, where the unlawful status of one family member requires protection and the lawful status of another member requires continued participation in society, such as maintaining employment or continuing educational opportunities.

Policing the borderlands between citizenship and noncitizenship—a shared space for families and communities composed of both statuses—is the highly racialized, bureaucratic, and punitive system of immigration enforcement. It is designed historically to punish racial others, defined legally and/or socially as nonwhite. Today, immigration enforcement is a system of punishment created almost wholly for Latinas/os/xes. Far over 90% of apprehensions, detentions, and deportations ensnare

persons originally from Latin America—a racial concentration far higher than in the criminal justice system (Baker 2017). Migrant sanctuaries are among the racialized spaces of immigration enforcement, at once sites of refuge and simultaneously a measure of migrants' fragile belonging. Sanctuary is thus a communal strategy—one of society's defensive capacities (Hernández et al. 2018)—providing refuge in opposition to immigration enforcement policies, but also one where isolation from community is a central characteristic. As such, for families not seeking sanctuary together or not sharing a collective condition of deportability, sanctuary is also a form of family separation.

As part of our course, and with the goal of experiential learning, students and I carefully planned the visit to the First Congregational Church in Amherst, where Lucio Pérez had resided in migrant sanctuary since October of 2017. The visit took place in March of 2018 and at the time Pérez had been living at the church for five months, shielded from immigration authorities. At this writing, he is still there, thirty-five months and counting.<sup>3</sup> I learned of Pérez, prior to entering the sanctuary, in the previous semester. My class, "Latina/o/x Immigration", discussed the local story of Pérez and his pending deportation, initiated by the Trump administration. A local parent and laborer from nearby Springfield, Massachusetts, Pérez has been in the United States without documents since 1999. His deportation had been deferred by the Obama administration through the vehicle of prosecutorial discretion, which Trump ended upon entering office. In this course, during the semester prior to our visit, a student, Vanesa Guevara, asked what could be done now that Pérez was ordered deported and told to purchase a ticket and leave the country. In my own melancholy, I recall just shaking my head, saying to her and the class that not much could be done at this point. It seemed like he had exhausted his options.

My response, however, was incorrect. Little could be done within the law, but if one were willing to defy current enforcement policy, there were options. Local community activists, including various local churches and a local advocacy agency, the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, never stopped mobilizing for Pérez, and by the next class period, the answer to Guevara's question was in the local paper, which I brought to class (Merzbach 2017)—sanctuary. Guevara recalls:

I was saddened about his situation and the ambiguity of his future in the United States and how hard it must have been for his children. I wanted to know what could be done, if anything. I asked the question in class to see if anyone had any ideas. At the time, no solutions were produced.

To my relief, next class, Professor Hernández brought in another article about Lucio. Sanctuary! Not too far away! Although this was not a permanent solution to his deportation, it would give him more time.

The Fall 2017 course would discuss the 1980s Sanctuary Movement and the contemporary New Sanctuary Movement that emerged during the Bush and Obama administrations and their relationship to faith-based activism and asylum seekers from Central America. We stayed abreast of Pérez's situation, but did not seek the opportunity to visit him. However, for the following semester, I wanted to consider visiting—if students, church officials, and Mr. Pérez were willing—because my course focused explicitly on deportation.

#### 4. Preparing for Sanctuary

In the "History of Deportation" course, we were all aware of the asymmetry of the visit, where we as a class could gain something educational and experiential and Pérez had nothing tangible to gain.

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<sup>3</sup> In previous semesters, I brought students, staff, and administrators to the Franklin County Jail in Greenfield, MA, with the director of the national visitation organization, Freedom for Immigrants (then called CIVIC). The goal at that time was to create a permanent visitation program for migrant detainees, an effort that is ongoing but bureaucratically challenging. When that goal faltered, we looked locally to explore other racialized enforcement spaces and to confront the tensions therein.



A visit could sink into awkwardness or exploitation, where the focus might be on our own feelings and reactions and less on the turmoil experienced by Pérez. I worked with the church liaison to ask if Pérez would be interested in visitors, especially a sizable group of students. The church too was balancing care, accompaniment, and protection of Pérez with the public narrative of his plight and larger narrative of the New Sanctuary Movement. We were reassured that we were welcome, that Pérez regularly took visitors, and that he appreciated our efforts. Humbled by Pérez's efforts, we sought to be well-informed about the context under which Pérez sought sanctuary, as well as his individual circumstances.

Prior to the visit, we shared amongst the class what we knew about Pérez, gleaned from the local papers and the church liaisons. Pérez had been in the United States since 1999, pushed out of Guatemala by gangs, according to Pérez's testimony during our visit. One student, Milo Ward, contacted the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, a nearby advocacy organization which had been working to defend Pérez with his initial deportation proceedings and current legal plight.<sup>4</sup> Ward researched the 2009 event that triggered deportation proceedings, recalling, "Lucio's crime was contact". Pérez and his wife had briefly left their three children, ages five to ten, in the car while they entered a donut shop. Pérez was charged with child abandonment, and even though the charges were dropped, the contact was enough to place Pérez in the sights of immigration authorities.

We learned more about Pérez's family—that he is married, has four children, and is deeply religious—from church liaisons. They shared information about his children, their names, and what they like to do on their visits with their father. The class planned something reciprocal, not only as a gesture of our appreciation, but to indicate our understanding of the impact sanctuary has had on his entire family as a form of separation. Students devised a fundraiser selling buttons with self-designed pro-immigrant themes and images in concert with the campus group the Undocumented Immigrant Alliance. The fundraiser supplemented our educational goals and allowed us to spread the message about Pérez and his family, the local sanctuary movement, and the harsh reality faced by the undocumented community in our current political climate. Raising nearly USD 500, we bought gifts for Pérez's children that included books and games, as well as gift certificates to local restaurants offering "take-out" for family visits at the church.

Pérez requested that we study the history of U.S. intervention in his native Guatemala and Central America to help us understand contemporary migration from that region. Throughout the twentieth century and peaking during the Reagan administration, the United States caused both economic and political instability in the region through regime change, the support of military violence, and economic "development" which ended up harming rather than helping the region. The political and military warfare against communist/socialist regimes or rebels in Central America, backed by covert intelligence agents and U.S.-supported "liberation" groups, caused massive migration north and in the region.

The U.S. role as a "reluctant host" to refugees and asylees, according to María Cristina García, illustrated the ideological impossibility of asylum in the United States. In García's *Seeking Refuge*, one Salvadoran migrant of the 1980s noted, "The Reagan Administration doesn't want to accept us as refugees because it would be admitting that the military aid it sends to El Salvador does not help, rather destroys and creates refugees" (García 2006, p. 84). The willful ignorance of the causes of migrant displacement in Central America is a time-honored tradition, underscoring the U.S.'s cold war logic, the protection of capitalist interests, as well as the discursive and bureaucratic barriers to asylum. The Sanctuary Movement was a direct consequence of the near blanket denial of asylum to Central Americans in the 1980s just as the New Sanctuary Movement follows the ramping up of immigration enforcement through multiple administrations.

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<sup>4</sup> Pérez continues to resist deportation and is pursuing two legal avenues for relief—his legal appeal to remain in the U.S. is pending at the Bureau of Immigration Appeals and his request for a Stay of Removal is pending at Immigration and Customs and Enforcement. Pérez is not currently seeking asylum but is focused legally on halting removal.

Knowing this violent history helped us see connections to Pérez's case and why refugees and asylum seekers left then and today—with some family members reuniting after years of separation and/or fleeing because of the catastrophic introduction since the 1980s of widespread gang violence and police repression. Today, the United States is still denying safety and stability to migrants who flee climates of violence created by U.S. policies, including deportation policies that disrupt family stability in the United States and facilitate the spread of criminal organizations across borders. At the time we visited Pérez, the Trump administration was devising a merger of criminal and immigration policies—a one-size-fits-all “zero tolerance” approach toward unlawful entry to create a “deterrent” to asylum seekers from Central America (Department of Justice 2018). The criminal prosecution of parents with children would lead to the traumatic separation of over 3000 children from parents, some of whom were deported without their kids (Dickerson 2018).

The fusion of contemporary enforcement with decades-long trends of migrant displacement ensnared Pérez and mobilized local communities in the sanctuary effort. Today's sanctuary strategies are reflective of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, which was also a product of Central American refugee migrations—from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua—and the punitive policy of detaining asylum seekers who were apprehended in the United States. Like today, the movement's epicenter was also at the U.S.–Mexico border, in Tucson, Arizona, and while the effort was national, it was dependent on a small group of largely faith-based activists appealing to religious doctrine, but also international laws protecting migrants from *refoulement*, or the return to danger in their home countries (García 2006, p. 102). What began as a bail bond effort to get migrants out of detention during asylum proceedings turned toward providing refuge when activists learned of the high rates of rejection of asylum claims—as high as 97% for Salvadorans and Guatemalans (García 2006, p. 113)—and consequent deportations and documented violence subsequent to removal. Immigrant advocates, as a result, “took their humanitarianism efforts a step further” (Campbell 2017, p. 476). They provided legal assistance, accompaniment to hearings, and then shelter, placing sanctuary workers, according to Campbell, “squarely in the line of fire of the federal government” (p. 477).

Today's sanctuary activity is part of what is loosely called the New Sanctuary Movement, including churches like the First Congregational Church in Amherst, but also cities and college campuses. Dozens of city mayors and officials nationwide, as well as college and university presidents, vowed to protect migrants.<sup>5</sup> But as pressure from constituents, college trustees, and the federal government gained traction under Trump—including retaliatory raids in or near sanctuary cities (Tanfani 2017)—many sanctuary jurisdictions clarified the limits of their various versions of sanctuary—stopping short of defying federal law—due to their concerns about federal prosecution, as it occurred in the 1980s. For church congregations, however, civil disobedience has bested caution and fear of federal enforcement. Echoing the defiance of the 1980s movement and the pledge to “publicly violate” federal laws against harboring and human smuggling (Campbell 2017, p. 478), Pastor Vicky Kemper of the First Congregational Church stated in support of Pérez, “It's a matter of faith for us. There are our nation's laws and then there are the laws of God” (Aresco 2018).<sup>6</sup> In addition to religious and moral beliefs, church congregations, as they did in the 1980s, deploy the symbolism of sanctuary, the havoc wreaked on migrant families, humanitarian protections from violence—in particular the country conditions of Pérez's native Guatemala—found in international law, and critically, the potential optics of a federal raid on a house of worship.

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, Mayor Marty Walsh of Boston made his defense explicitly spatial. “If necessary, we will use City Hall itself to shelter and protect anyone who's targeted unjustly”, Walsh said. He added, “They can use my office. They can use any office in this building as a safe space” (Robbins 2017).

<sup>6</sup> María Cristina García documents an almost exact statement by Texas religious leader, Father Thomas Davis. “I felt we had a special obligation to these people. You have to do something as a Christian. We were caught between the laws of man and the laws of God. I chose the laws of God” (García 2006, p. 104).

## 5. Seeing Sanctuary

The day of our visit, after much anticipation, we were greeted by church staff and welcomed inside the sanctuary. Pérez was finishing up a Spanish conversation class that he was teaching—one of his activities to pass the time and support his family. Things happened very quickly, including decisions about where we would meet, and who would translate between Spanish and English, and introductions. After presenting Mr. Pérez with our gifts, he took a deep breath and launched into a detailed account of his deportation proceedings, a painful history that spanned nearly a decade. His voice was calm and quiet, “at times barely audible”, stated one student. Pérez’s testimony imparted “fear and uncertainty”, reflected student Sarah Fite. Upon reflection, the class would recount feelings of optimism, helplessness, heartache, and anger over Pérez’s complicated legal process of seeking relief and ending separation from his family. While the ongoing efforts of the church and the community-at-large offered a humbling narrative of courage, commitment, and compassion, we had mixed feelings—a strange brew of hope and despondency after the visit.

The language barrier was one of the biggest challenges throughout the visit with Pérez. A handful of students were fluent in Spanish, a few others knew some, and the rest relied on translation by students. One student in particular, Violeta Alvarez, did the lion’s share of the translating, without much advance notice. Alvarez recalls:

Translating is a difficult process because there are certain things that get lost in translation, particularly when Lucio expressed his feelings towards specific events. His experience reinforced the injustices undocumented people face in this country that criminalizes their existence. Lucio is in fact resilient; however, we should remember that he should not be in such a position in the first place.

Alvarez’s translation demonstrated how this skilled practice is a critical technology and a potential pitfall or lifesaver at all stages of the migration process, especially in enforcement processes. Sanctuary is no exception. In 2008, for example, during the infamous Postville immigration raid at an Iowa meatpacking plant, it was Spanish language interpreter Erik Camayd-Freixas who blew the whistle on the government’s secretive, rushed, and legally dubious criminal and deportation proceedings against the migrant workers. Camayd-Freixas’s critique, published in the *New York Times*, prompted a congressional investigation and informed a unanimous ruling at the Supreme Court of the United States (Camayd-Freixas 2013, p. 1). Similarly, novelist Valeria Luiselli structured two books—one fiction and one non-fiction—around her translation work for unaccompanied migrant children seeking asylum during the Obama administration. The latter text, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, was structured around the bureaucratic intake form for the children, and served as a critical form of migrant advocacy and accompaniment, and anticipated the Trump administration’s cruel and inhumane turn toward a policy of family separation (Luiselli 2017).

The intensity of translation and visitation as a form of accompaniment was a central aspect of the class’s experiential learning. Students reflected on the language barrier and how it impacted their time with Pérez. Shebati Sengupta commented, “There was also something powerful about hearing his emotional journey, and then listening to my classmate’s translation”. Sengupta noted that there was a “level of collaboration” present in this mode of communication, and that this invoked deeper emotions for her. In general, we all heard some portion of Pérez’s story mediated through translation, and witnessed our translators’ eyes well with tears as they turned Pérez’s Spanish into English. Highly emotional, there were long pauses, body language, and facial expressions amongst everyone that denoted pain, confusion, and uncertainty. It was uncomfortable, but essential.

Through the mediation, we learned more about his family—the source of Pérez’s greatest heartache. Emerging from various backgrounds, some with direct family experiences with undocumented status, students were impacted distinctively by Pérez’s testimony. Sarah Fite stated:

The children spoke to me loudest, because I am a parent and I know I would submit myself to any circumstances necessary if there was a threat I would be taken from my boys.



My resounding thought or emotion is one of absolute helplessness—on Lucio’s behalf, sure, but also on my own. I can show up and I can listen and I can write a letter and attend a protest, but I cannot pick Lucio up in my truck and drive him home where he belongs. In that sense, visiting Lucio in sanctuary did more for me than it will ever do for him.

Family separation—made both traumatic and sensationalized by the Trump administration—is a core and routine fact of displacement, migration, detention, deportation, and as we learned, sanctuary. We had studied family separation all semester and our visit left us to process the strain placed upon the Pérez family amidst the general injustice that immigrants, specifically Central American immigrants, face in the United States. We had to balance our academic study with the human reality five miles from our campus.

## 6. Arbitrary Isolation

Pérez’s need for sanctuary flowed directly from the Trump administration’s enforcement reforms that eliminated all exempted categories—categories that refer to human beings—from deportation. Persons who were permitted to check-in with immigration authorities under the Obama administration and otherwise remain free—usually persons with the strongest ties to local communities, like Pérez—were and continue to be targeted for removal. The one-size-fits-all approach, devoid of nuance, ignores the complexity of migrants’ lives and those around them. Notably, the U.S.’s role in creating the conditions that compel migration remains illegible and uninterrogated. Trump’s iteration of these policies netted Pérez and were a prelude to the “zero-tolerance” and family separation policies unveiled in the spring of 2018. While under the guise of combatting unlawful migration, the policies were an indirect, yet no less deliberate, attack on forms of lawful migration, namely the process of seeking asylum. Unlike the local and relatively quiet resistance of sanctuary, the national outrage over “separation” points to a broader dissatisfaction with the Trump administration’s enforcement policies. While “separation” has always been at the tragic core of immigration enforcement, it enjoys a public reverence today, and is a surprising counter to the vitriol emanating from the White House.

Pérez’s need for refuge, and his isolation from family—potentially permanent and already thirty-five months old—arises in this hostile context. As Sengupta relates, sanctuary activists “lend safety to those who do not receive it from the law”. As a class, we recognized that the First Congregational Church’s decisive action placed them and their team of volunteers at legal risk, especially in the absence of a national fervor comparable to child separation. Even more so, we marveled at Pérez’s heartbreaking decision and conscious isolation. Leah Shipulski notes,

His decision to live in sanctuary is a politically resistant one. He is showing his community and, because of publicity of his situation, the national community of undocumented populations that there is another option.

All told, it was a very emotional and visceral experience, a rollercoaster of hope and hopelessness and dread mixed with courage. After the visit, most of us were without words, without language to explain this human tragedy. Here was a story of alienation right before us, kindly speaking to us from that isolation. Pérez’s sanctuary is a site of busy activity—punctuated by limited family visits—and followed by silence and isolation. While Pérez has a church staff member, an “accompaniment volunteer”, with him at all times, his family can only visit a few times a week and their travel from their home in Springfield to the Amherst church is a regular struggle. As Pérez told the local paper after a day of church activity, “They go home, they’re playing with their kids and I stay here. But at least I’m here” (Christensen 2018b).

## 7. Sanctuary: Not Just a Place, But a Practice

Since our visit, two other women and their children have sought sanctuary in our area. One is in Northampton (Cain 2018) and another in Springfield. In Northampton, a Russian woman with a stay of removal under the Obama administration, like Pérez, had it stripped away by the Trump

administration, resulting in her decision to seek sanctuary. Much like Pérez, she and her children have received broad community support. But in Springfield, the Democratic mayor Domenic Sarno has spoken out harshly against the Peruvian immigrant, Giselle Collazo, and her two U.S. citizen children in sanctuary (Goonan 2018). Demonstrating how municipal policies can impede sanctuary, Sarno directed city officials to inspect the church for possible building violations and to look into revoking the church's tax-exempt status. These punitive efforts are very much like Operation Sojourner in the 1980s, when the federal government covertly infiltrated and criminally prosecuted sanctuary workers for their public rebuke of immigration laws (Campbell 2017).

In January of 2018, 36 people resided in migrant sanctuary nationwide (Hing 2018) and 450 religious congregations were ready to provide it (Campbell 2017, p. 503). As a strategy, sanctuary often relies on media to generate broad community support, which can help individual migrants buy time to seek legal remedies. In 2017, for example, nine of the several dozen people in sanctuary received reprieves and six in 2018 received legal relief (Otterman 2018). Of course, some sanctuary residents do not go public and simply hide, choosing secrecy over an outspoken public process. As a strategy of last resort, sanctuary squeezes hope from isolation and separation. As a practice, it provides both material protection, testing the limits of legality, but it can also conjure a sense of unity among community members. One student, Sengupta suggests, "I hope the church and the community continue to show how significant the strength and impact of a united community can be. It really reflects the possibilities present in community activism". At a broader level, the Trump administration's extremist enforcement goals and strategies, including its anti-sanctuary policy, have created a public education project about the rights of immigrants. In this way, Pérez's situation exposes the obvious human aspects of living in sanctuary—hope, longing, and isolation—as well as the legal and policy contradictions and cruelties of blanket anti-immigrant policies.

Since our visit, Pérez left sanctuary briefly, accompanied by two-dozen supporters, for emergency surgery to remove his appendix. He was released the following day and returned to the church. "These past few days have been very sad for me," Pérez reflected. "But in this moment I feel so happy to have so many people around me" (Christensen 2018a). Sanctuary, in all likelihood, saved Pérez's life. Had he been in migrant detention while legally fighting his removal, his medical needs could easily have been ignored. Detention centers, both public and private, are notorious for substandard medical care, callous delays in medical requests, and bungled emergency responses. Human Rights Watch reports, for example, that more people died in detention in 2017 under the Trump administration's watch than in any year since 2009 (Human Rights Watch 2018). The Trump administration has maintained this lethal trend, with nine persons dying in custody in 2018 and again in 2019, and fourteen dying in 2020 (Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020). As well, there has been a spate of children dying during the Trump administration, in the custody of the Border Patrol, prior to potential transfer to immigrant detention.

In a climate where rhetoric, no matter how racist or unfounded, can drive migration policy, the collaborative work of providing sanctuary and allowing visitation permits opportunities for engagement in multiple layers of advocacy. As Alvarez reflected, "I hope that Lucio sharing his experience with different groups like our class will lead to changes in the system and will bring justice and liberation to the undocumented community". For our class, the collaboration informed other migration projects in the days and months that followed. One student, Avery Allen, noted, "I didn't want to leave the visit as only a visit—I felt it was a call to action that deserved a response". Rhetorical attacks on migrants by the Trump administration—as criminals, terrorists, or various vulgar expressions of being non-human—can be challenged by student engagement, by local activism, and by experiential learning. On a small campus, a dozen or so informed scholar activists can have an impact locally.

During the fundraiser for Pérez, the shared information and discussion that students conducted with other students and faculty while tabling was a key achievement in addition to the funds raised. Although we entered with varying connections to migration issues—from personal to intellectual—we

developed common bonds with Pérez, the First Congregational Church, and the larger effort in our area at promoting immigrants' rights. One student began volunteering at the church shortly after our visit and helped a local agency gather 1000 letters on behalf of Pérez that were delivered to ICE. Another joined the local law firm that does immigration work and whose staff attorney recently played a lead role in freeing fourteen transgender migrants from detention in New Mexico (Dunau 2018). The student suggested that our visit and the preparation for it, "gave me more context for the work I am doing right now" and informed the work they did the following summer interning on behalf of detainees in New Mexico (Hernández 2018b).

Another student interned at the New Sanctuary Coalition in New York City and worked on public demonstrations informing the public about the final moments before deportation, asking, "What would you pack?" in a single suitcase after a lifetime in the United States (New Sanctuary Coalition 2018). At least three of the students entering their senior years developed senior theses and special majors focused on migration and forms of marginalized citizenship. These projects, including this essay, reverberate in the lives and political consciousness of our group, and perhaps even with Pérez, his family, and the Amherst church members. One of the church liaisons commented on our class visit, expressing his "appreciation of the depth of their caring and study" and characterized the visit as "healing" for Pérez (Hernández 2018a). And when speaking to the media, Lucio Pérez critically reminds us, "Together we are strong" (Glaun 2017).

Seeing sanctuary as a group in March of 2018 taught us, above all, that "sanctuary is not just a place, but a practice", as Allen noted. It is based on various levels of community action—people stepping forward to do their parts, volunteer, check-in, drive family members to visits, and to keep the story in the media and push back against unfair policies. "The church created its own legal space to protect Lucio", commented student Maddy Skrak. Sanctuary thus exposes and defies the injustice of immigration policy, replacing isolation with accompaniment. Sanctuary is not without its flaws, concessions to power, nor mishaps, even when advocates, including us, provide support. Sanctuary is flawed, but necessary. Visitation and accompaniment opened our eyes and hopefully provided some relief, however small, to the Pérez family. As Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz write, "Accompaniment is a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior. It is both a commitment and a capacity that can be cultivated" (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2013, p. 8). We hope that, as a class and as a community, we can translate this inspiration, humility, and accompaniment into further action.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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