

BEYOND WELCOME

Centering Immigrants in Our
Christian Response to Immigration

KAREN GONZÁLEZ

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Introduction

The ideas in this book were born en conjunto—that is, in community with many other people in my life, mostly my Latina friends, my comadres. Together we discussed what to call ourselves in English because English is a language in which nouns and adjectives do not have a gender. We discussed Latino/a, Latine, and Latinx as possibilities. I struggled with how to name our community because I know there is power in being able to name ourselves.

I am aware that there is disagreement about what exact term to use to reference our community, and I have heard and understand the objections to all of the terms. In the end, words are imperfect, but they are all we have, and I had to choose.

Ultimately, I chose the word “Latinx” (pronounced lah-teen-equis) for a few different reasons. First, I appreciate the way that *x* references an unknown factor, as it does in algebra. Our community is difficult to define because we come in all races: white, indigenous, Asian, Black, and mixed. We also come from so many countries that though we may speak Spanish, our cultures

are distinct. In addition, we are still defining ourselves within the North American context; we are changing the culture, but it is also changing us. Finally, I appreciated the way the word “Latinx” is genderless and, thus, inclusive of my siblings in the LGBTQ+ community.

Throughout this book, I also use different terms to discuss human flow. It is important to define them for the reader:

Migrant: Any person who relocates within their own country from one state or province or region to another, permanently or temporarily.

Immigrant: A person who leaves their home country and moves to another country permanently.

The only difference between a refugee claimant and an asylum seeker is *where* they apply for their status. The following definitions come from the United Nations as well as US law:

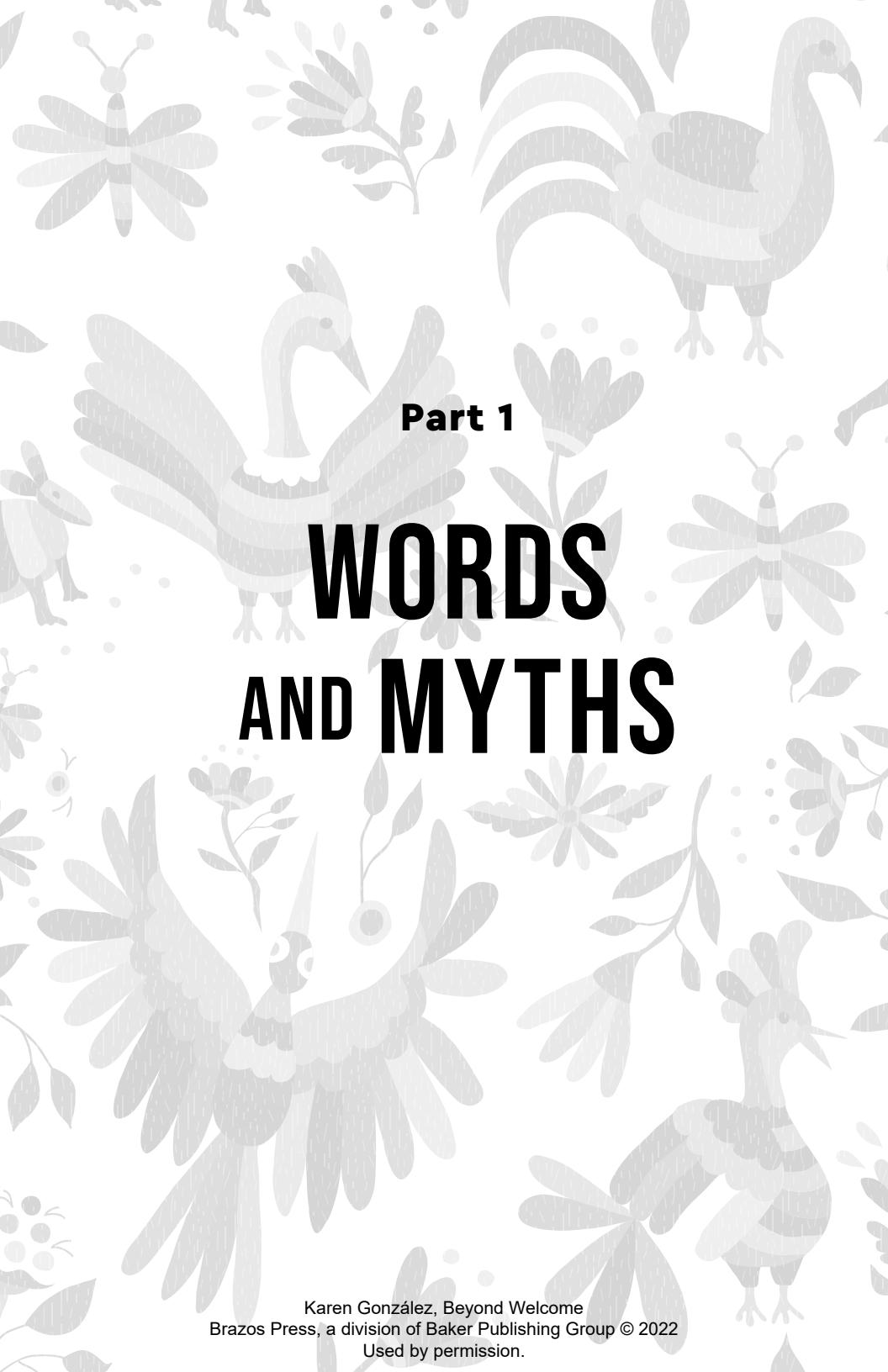
Refugee: Someone who is unable to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Refugee claimants apply for and receive the status *before* they arrive in their country of resettlement.

Asylee: Someone who is unable to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Refugee claimants apply for and receive the status

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before they arrive in their country of resettlement. Asylum seekers apply for their status *at* a US port of entry or *after* they are already admitted to the US.¹

It is my hope that defining these terms will bring clarity to you as the reader. I hope this book will be helpful to you as you seek to love your neighbors as yourself.



Part 1

WORDS AND MYTHS

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Strangers in a Strange Land

The Myth of Assimilation

Donde fueres, haz lo que vieres. (Wherever you go, do whatever you see.)

—Latin American proverb

Nunca te olvidaremos”—we will never forget you—was emblazoned on the T-shirts of nearly all the middle school Mexican girls. The words were written in perfect script and were positioned above a picture of a smiling Selena Quintanilla, who was looking out with her signature dark, wavy locks. It was 1996, and I was a first-year teacher at a middle school just east of Tampa, Florida. Most of the students who looked like me were children of migrant farmworkers; their parents

came to town for the winter harvest and moved on at the end of the season. The Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla, known simply as Selena, had died the year before, and the community still listened to her music and mourned her loss, proclaiming on their T-shirts that she would never be forgotten.

I am now ashamed to admit it, but I cringed whenever I saw one of the T-shirts. I was one of two brown Latinx teachers in the entire school, and there was open hostility toward the mostly Mexican farmworkers in the city and, by extension, toward their children. They were poor and lived in trailer parks, were not permanent residents, and didn't seem to want to assimilate into the wider American culture by speaking only English. Didn't these kids understand that our language and culture could be private, reserved for the comfort of our families and homes? By day we could be part of the mythical melting pot, blending into the white American culture of the school; by night we could be fully ourselves: sing our Selena songs, eat our spicy food, and speak our mother tongue. Nevertheless, the kids never failed to greet me in Spanish in the hallways even though I always responded in English. As much as I wanted to distance myself from them in an effort to belong, my brownness made me one of them, and they never let me forget it with their playful familiarity.

Nobody taught me to assimilate to the white-dominant culture of the US, but I unconsciously adapted as a survival skill; life became easier when I erased parts of myself and revealed only the parts that fit in with the culture's comfort level and expectations. When I spoke Spanish to my cousin at a high school football game, angry fellow students yelled, "This is America! Speak English!" So I did—I was angry, but I became much more cautious about speaking my heart language pub-

licly. When white classmates returned from Christmas vacation, boasting of trips to California or the mountains of North Carolina, I did not share about our family Christmas in Guatemala with marimbas and fireworks. And when a white friend laughed hysterically at Howard Stern playing Selena's music alongside a track of gunshots while Stern mocked her death, her music, and her fans, I pretended I found it amusing too.

My white colleagues asked me about what they called "the woman" T-shirts. I explained quickly who Selena was and then changed the subject, but they were interested and perplexed by the prolonged public mourning. I knew I could not make them understand what the loss of a brown Tejana singer with a curvier body meant to brown immigrant girls who are used to seeing fair-haired waifs with light eyes starring on American television shows as well as on their favorite telenovelas. On Spanish network television, women who look like Selena are often relegated to minor roles as maids and only appear in the background; they look down, take orders, and reply submissively, "Si, señora." That is a fact even today, more than twenty-five years after Selena's death. Selena represented something beyond herself; seeing her was dignifying in a way I could not articulate at the time. It meant that we—the Spanglish-speaking, curvy brown girls—could be the leading ladies, could be centered and recognized just as we are.

Those tender feelings and that ethnic pride were private. Publicly, I was embarrassed because I wanted the other teachers to see me as one of them: a fellow American teacher who shared their language, culture, and professional skills. I constantly heard grumblings and complaints about the Mexican students. One school leader, a self-professed Christian, called the Mexican boys "RDBs" in code over the walkie-talkies that

the school administrators used. I later learned that RDB was shorthand for “regular dirt bag.” Many adults working at the school whispered about the “inappropriate” clothing the Mexican girls wore: “Where are their parents? Who lets them dress like prostitutes?” Never mind that the white boys and girls behaved and dressed similarly.

Given this hostile environment, I wanted nothing to do with being different, with being seen as the brown Guatemalan immigrant I am. I did not want to be connected to the scantily clad or the dirt bags. All I wanted to do was blend in and disappear, something the kids and apparently my colleagues did not understand.

Hunger of Memory

The first time I read anything by a Latinx writer was in college. In my nonfiction creative writing class, we read *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* by the Chicano writer Richard Rodriguez. The book is a memoir of Rodriguez’s educational journey in Northern California as a child of Mexican immigrants. I was twenty-one at the time and inspired—in all the wrong ways.

As I understood it, Rodriguez talked about the immigrant experience as one that necessitated assimilation, and that assimilation was costly because it required alienation from your past, your family, and your culture of origin. That’s just the steep cover charge we immigrants have to pay to enter the club of higher education, middle-class America, and upward social mobility.

The book is beautifully written and contains very poetic prose. But whether Rodriguez intended it or not, the central

idea I absorbed was that immigrants could choose to assimilate or live in failure outside of mainstream culture. This false dichotomy stayed with me and influenced my own identity formation as well as my teaching philosophy with Black and brown students.

My job, I told myself, is to help my students assimilate into the mainstream in order to be successful. I recognized, as Rodriguez did, that there would be losses for them in this venture and that was not fair, but it is what success required. We just play the cards we are dealt, and these are our cards. End of story.

In my fifth year of teaching English, we received new textbooks, and I was annoyed at the exclusion of the classics in favor of “diverse authors.” All “diversity” meant to me was having to rewrite lesson plans that I had spent years painstakingly perfecting and giving up treasured stories and novels in favor of more contemporary ones in order to appease some politically correct school board members. The fact that my Black and brown students and I were not represented in the old curriculum never bothered me. There is no room or value for representation when assimilation is the goal, because assimilation means that we are all absorbed into a whole where no one is supposed to be different.

One day I was in my classroom after school preparing a lesson on a narrative poem by the Puerto Rican writer and educator Martín Espada. The poem, “Tony Went to the Bodega but He Didn’t Buy Anything,” is about a disadvantaged Puerto Rican boy who lives in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood in New York City and eventually leaves the neighborhood for law school in Boston. There, he curses the cold spring and misses the smells and people of his old neighborhood. The poem describes

the loneliness and alienation he experiences in this new environment where nobody looks like him.

He walks the neighborhoods in search of any semblance of home and arrives at a bodega, a small Latinx grocery store, where he goes in but does not buy anything. He just hangs out, content to be around people who are brown like him and who speak Spanish. When he finishes law school, he decides to open his law practice above the bodega, among his own people whom he will serve with his professional skills, and he is happy at last.

I remember sitting in my classroom by myself, and I just started crying—I found that poem so poignant and hopeful. I often told students that literature could move us, but I had not experienced it myself in this way. I had never considered the possibility of another way—of being an American without losing my cultural and ethnic identity.

Strangely, this idea had never even presented itself as a possibility in the church. We talked so much about our identity in Christ, and yet all our leaders, authors, and theologians were white men. Never was I even given a framework for considering my own experience as different and in need of processing. In all our conversations about racial reconciliation, not once did I hear a Christian leader suggest that I would experience God differently through my gender, culture, and language—that God would meet me as an immigrant woman of color. In fact, looking back I see that though these leaders meant well, our conversations never amounted to much except to make white Christians feel better without having to give up power or be uncomfortable.

While I still believe that Rodriguez’s book has value because it is his story, the way that I internalized his views was harmful as I was striving to form my identity as an immigrant woman of

color. It also deeply affected me as a teacher of color. I inflicted this same perspective on my Black and brown students, and I now regret the way I harmed them by telling them in direct and indirect ways that success meant giving up their ethnic and cultural identities too.

The Story of Zaphenath-Paneah

Assimilation is a key component of colonizing both lands and people. Moreover, it has been historically required for survival for many immigrant people, not just those we know personally but even those we meet in the pages of the Bible. Joseph in the book of Genesis is the most prominent example that comes to mind.

I have loved this story since encountering Joseph's words in Genesis 50:20: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." This verse encapsulates how Joseph makes sense of his own suffering. He endures the worst treatment at the hands of his brothers—they intend to murder him but instead separate him from his father and sell him to slave traders headed for Egypt. There he experiences not only enslavement but also incarceration for a crime he did not commit. He suffers cruelly for thirteen years. He leaves Canaan as a naively arrogant seventeen-year-old and is reunited with his family when he is well into his late thirties. It is noteworthy that he does not return to Canaan when he is set free; his lost family comes to Egypt in search of food during a famine, and they inadvertently find each other.

However, his story seems to end well—so well that most of us only see Joseph's resilience and leadership gifts. After

interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams correctly, Joseph helps him and all of Egypt to prepare for the coming famine that will follow seven years of plenty. Pharaoh rewards him: Joseph is dressed in the finest clothes, given power that makes him second only to Pharaoh, and provided an Egyptian wife. Scripture says, “Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt” (Gen. 41:45). Joseph is even renamed—no longer Joseph but Zaphenath-paneah, an Egyptian name that reveals his fully assimilated identity as an Egyptian.

Nonetheless, we readers are aware that Joseph is not *really* an Egyptian. He is a son of the great patriarch, Jacob, whose father was Isaac and whose grandfather was Abraham; he belongs to the people of Israel, the Hebrews who are God’s chosen people.

But it is worth considering: Is he *really* still strictly a Hebrew?

He has been in Egypt longer than he had ever been in Canaan; Egypt is where he spent his young adulthood and matured into middle age. He speaks the language and understands the culture, even speaking to his own brothers incognito through an interpreter (Gen. 42:23); he marries a local woman; and he communicates freely with Pharaoh as his second in command, instructing his own brothers as to what to say and do to get to the land of Goshen (46:28–34). No mention is made of the need for a translator or a cultural attaché to help him navigate life in Egypt. Even when he gains freedom and power, he makes no effort to return to Canaan. He uses his wisdom and leadership not to bless the people of God, his own people in Canaan, or even the world at large, but strictly to prosper in his adopted country.

Some of us might make sense of Joseph’s actions by blaming God. We may conclude that God kept Joseph in Egypt to save and bless all the nations. This is all part of God’s cosmic plan that Joseph knows nothing about yet. But this interpretation, however much it might make sense of and simplify a complex story, also robs Joseph of agency. God is not the great puppeteer in the sky—Joseph has options, and God is certainly powerful enough to accomplish plans with and in spite of Joseph’s choices. We also know from Joseph’s later actions that he deeply loves his father and his younger brother, Benjamin. Why does he not return for a visit? Does he not wonder how his biological family is faring in Canaan? Would it not be prudent and kind to at the very least notify them that a famine is coming and that they should prepare? Why does he not send for the family he lost, even just his father?

The text does not answer these questions, but it is fair to assume that for his own survival, Joseph fully assimilated to life in Egypt. Essentially, he was now an Egyptian. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann posits that Joseph aligns himself with Pharaoh and helps his adopted country to establish a “food monopoly.”¹ Then, as now, tyrants weaponized food and used it to control hungry people; Joseph assists Pharaoh in these endeavors. Brueggemann goes on to exegete the incidents in Genesis 47:13–26:

The [Egyptian] peasants, having no food of their own, come to Joseph, now a high-ranking Egyptian, and pay their money in exchange for food, so that the centralized government of Pharaoh achieves even greater wealth [v. 14]. After the money is all taken, the peasants come again and ask for food. This time Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh, takes their cattle [vv. 15–17]. . . .

In the next year, the third year, the peasants still need food. But they have no money and they have no livestock. In the third year they gladly surrender their freedom in exchange for food.²

Even Brueggemann refers to Joseph as an Egyptian, not as a Hebrew, perhaps because only a fellow elite Egyptian leader would create the economic conditions in which the Egyptian peasants give up their freedom and their land. They cry out to Joseph,

“Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? *Buy us and our land in exchange for food.* We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.”

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh’s. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. (Gen. 47:19–21)

We do not often note this part of Joseph’s story; most of us are infinitely more comfortable discussing God’s providence in his narrative, his rise from slavery and imprisonment to leadership and glory. According to Brueggemann, the enslavement of Egyptians and later the Hebrews occurs “by the manipulation of the economy in the interest of a concentration of wealth and power for the few at the expense of the community.”³ And all of it was Joseph’s doing; he was the right hand of Pharaoh that unwittingly ended up becoming the instrument by which not only the Egyptians but also he and his family’s descendants are enslaved. The supreme irony often lost on all of us is that Joseph created a system of exploitation so brutal that God raised up

another young Hebrew named Moses a few generations later to free the people from bondage.

It is fascinating to read Joseph's story from this perspective—one that recognizes that Joseph probably did not see himself as a Hebrew or even a global citizen but as a fully assimilated Egyptian. It makes me wonder whether he felt pressured to prove his Egyptian-ness the way so many of us immigrants feel pressured to prove our American-ness or Canadian-ness. Perhaps he still spoke Hebrew, and his Egyptian had a strong accent. Perhaps he worried that his neighbors might question his allegiance to Egypt and overcompensated by assimilating to systems of oppression to avoid the whispers and suspicions. How might this story have turned out differently if Joseph had held on to his Hebrew identity and culture but integrated into Egyptian culture? Would he have sought the common good instead of only what was good for Pharaoh?

Moses In-Between

It is not appropriate to judge Joseph by twenty-first-century standards, but it is notable that there are characters in the Bible who made different choices when caught between two cultures. Moses, for example, had a similar experience to Joseph in that he was a Hebrew person who grew up among Egyptian people, though in more favorable circumstances.

Those who have watched Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* will be familiar with Moses's origin story: to a people oppressed and subjugated is born a baby boy. However, Pharaoh has ordered that all baby boys be murdered (Exod. 1:22), so his mother, Jochebed, puts him in a basket in the river, hoping to save him. He is saved! Not only is he saved, but he

grows up in the palace as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses’s life is one of privilege—he lives among the elite of Egypt, but he cannot ignore what he sees happening to people who are just like him: “One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (2:11, 12).

Moses flees to Midian to escape the consequences of this murder. He leaves behind his life of privilege and wealth and starts a new life as a fugitive, even marrying and starting a family. In this new land, Moses calls himself the Hebrew word for “stranger” or “foreigner.” Writer and theologian Daniel José Camacho wonders if perhaps Moses felt like a stranger his whole life, knowing that his community of origin was simultaneously seen as inferior and as a threat.⁴ It must have been disorienting to know he was born to an oppressed community but was raised and educated in the heart of the oppressive empire. Moses could have enjoyed the comforts of Egypt, aligning himself with power and prestige, and forgotten his own people. He could have assimilated into this environment, but something in him does not let him do so—his destiny remains inextricably linked to his people, the Hebrews.

Camacho notes the similarities between the Hebrews and Latinx immigrants: “The Pharaoh in Moses’ story approached the Hebrew people as dangerous invaders in spite of the fact that they had been there for generations. It didn’t matter that they had originally arrived in Egypt as refugees during a famine or had helped build up the kingdom. Similarly, although cheap Latinx labor has been used to build and maintain the United States, Latinx immigrants have become scapegoats for

everything that's wrong in society. How or why we ended up here remains an afterthought.”⁵

Having the option, Moses chooses the side of the oppressed. Though reluctant at first, he becomes God's chosen leader for delivering the Hebrew people. I have often wondered whether God chose Moses because he was someone who understood both cultures. As a Hebrew who understood the ins and outs of Egypt, he had integrated but not assimilated into Egyptian culture. The difference between Moses's approach and Joseph's is nuanced but distinct. Those who assimilate identify wholly with their host country's culture and deny or suppress their own, but those who integrate learn to navigate the basic values and principles of the society they live in while maintaining their distinctive cultural identities and practices. Essentially, those who integrate live in two worlds. For Moses, this means living in the worlds of the oppressed and the oppressor simultaneously.

Moses can use his intimate knowledge of Egypt to undermine the empire in subversive ways for the common good. He becomes the anti-Joseph who aligns himself with the oppressed for the sake of their and his liberation. Moses's clarity about the evils of his adopted Egyptian culture might be the difference between assimilation and integration. Integration is necessary for immigrants but is *not* destructive to us. In fact, it can serve the common good because often we can see things more objectively in our host cultures when we are not absorbed into them like water to a sponge.

Such is the case of Bennet Omalu, the doctor who exposed the prolonged effect of concussions on NFL players. As a Nigerian immigrant, Dr. Omalu was disinterested in and confused by the North American fascination with football.⁶ Although he lived and worked in the US and in a city where football reigns

supreme, Dr. Omalu remained outside this American fascination as well as other aspects of American culture. Morbid as it may seem to many North Americans, he saw himself as an “advocate for the dead,” a calling he embraced wholeheartedly, as he sought to defend and speak for those who died from traumatic brain injuries.⁷ His calling led him to do research and learn from NFL players whose lives had ended tragically and had been forgotten, their football glory days far behind them.

Indeed, he became their champion and defender, standing up to the league and its doctors, who communicated to him, between the lines, “We own this field. We are not going to bow to some no-name Nigerian.”⁸ But it was the outsider, a foreigner, who exposed the harm inflicted on players who were discarded by society once they were past their prime and no longer productive. He became not only their defender but also the face of their cause. And it was in part he who forced the NFL to admit and reckon with the consequences of a sport where men sustain traumatic head injuries over and over again. Dr. Omalu’s integration but not assimilation enabled him to speak truth to power, just as Moses did thousands of years ago.

Good Advocacy

I am no longer a teacher, but I often speak and write about biblical justice and immigration. In this context I often hear people say that immigrants do not assimilate. As a good advocate, I am supposed to say, “Yes, they do!” and prove to them that this is a myth. I am supposed to help mostly white Christians forget that most first-generation immigrants struggle with American culture and the English language and do not assimilate. I am supposed to reassure them instead that immi-

grants do assimilate, learn English, and lose their own culture and language within a couple of generations. In essence, I am supposed to convince them that immigrants will become white and will not change the North American cultural and religious landscape.⁹

Naturally, most immigrants to North America today will not literally become white; they originate in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. But many North Americans, including those in the church, want reassurance that the mythical melting pot is alive and well—that immigrants will quickly assimilate to the dominant culture, even if they are brown or Black or Asian. What many of those people want is reassurance that the white-dominant culture will remain undisturbed and will continue to be the norm. They want the comfort of knowing that white supremacy will not be toppled, though they would never use those words explicitly.

The message of assimilation makes me uncomfortable because it requires me to celebrate the loss of other people's culture, traditions, and languages in order to alleviate the fears that white people, including Christians, might have about a diverse society where their position as power brokers of society may be threatened. It is akin to saying, "White Christians, please do not fear immigrants because they, too, will submit to white supremacy and blend into it as best as they can, even with their non-white skin and features." I refuse to communicate that message because it is not my job to appease privileged white Christians at the expense of the dignity of immigrants. Nor is it my job to absolve anyone of their Christian responsibility to welcome and love immigrants because they are nostalgic for a bygone era of *Leave It to Beaver*, before the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism.

And I do not want to communicate this message because I know what it is like to live with the self-hatred brought on by internalized racism and beliefs about the cultural superiority of white America, and I recognize the damage that did to my sense of self and the people around me. Assimilation is rooted in white supremacy because it assumes that our white host culture is superior and that we must shake off our inferior cultures to belong. But it does not have to be this way. Centering immigrants in our Christian response to immigration means that we make room for their integration but do not pressure them to assimilate. We recognize that people are allowed to bring their full selves into every space even as they are adapting to a new country. The act of speaking another language, eating the food of one's homeland, and listening to music from our cultures is not a threat to the host country's way of life, because immigrants value integration just as much as the native citizens do.

In truth, I am still recovering from the harm inflicted on me by the pressure to assimilate. I often remember those middle-school students at my first teaching job and wish I had followed their example—they were truly integrating into American culture and life while being true to their whole selves. I wish I could go back and seek their forgiveness for not standing up for them and instead distancing myself from them. My journey toward a healthier sense of self started with them and, sadly, not in the church.

I was told that the church valued diversity—later I discovered that this actually meant that they valued seeing Black and brown faces in the congregation but that they did not welcome Black and brown people as teachers, leaders, and decision-makers. In essence, the church also wanted my assimilation into their way of being. It was acceptable to be brown as long

as I talked and behaved like the majority-white congregation and knew my place.

Among Christians of color who actively resist white supremacy and embrace the Jesus who loves and accepts people as they are, I have begun to love my true self. It is those friends and that Jesus who are continually teaching me to affirm that I am not just a child of God but also a Latina immigrant child of God, a Guatemalan-American child of God. Jesus does not ask me or anyone to assimilate but asks us to be fully ourselves.



God of Joseph and Moses,

You gave us a vision of the world that is just, generous, and life-giving for all. You created each of us in your image, whether we were born Egyptians, Hebrews, or North Americans. You are the God of all peoples and cultures, revealing yourself locally and globally so that we may know you. As God in the flesh, you were a fully integrated Jewish man who held on to your heavenly identity. We confess that we are people who tend toward fear of those who look, speak, and act differently than we do. Enable us by your Spirit not to fear differences but to celebrate them. Show us how to live together and give each other space to be who you created us to be. We need your wisdom to reimagine our understanding of what it means to adapt to another country and culture. Help us to see a way forward that does not harm our immigrant neighbors but respects their cultures and languages. Amen.