

Chapter 4

Querida America, Testimonios of Faith, Solidarity, and Survival Along the U.S./Mexico Border

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Abstract This chapter shares experiences and narratives from Central and South American asylum seekers subjected to the U.S.'s MPP/Remain in Mexico policy and living in makeshift camps along the US/Mexico border. As part of ongoing work in a Matamoros, Mexico border camp, the research team gathered letters asylum seekers wrote and addressed to the U.S. government. Their letters written as “Querida America” share their voices and stories with hopes that the government will recognize their humanity in contrast to the increasingly xenophobic rhetoric. Their firsthand testimonios shed light on their spirituality, desires, dreams, and futures imagined past the MPP policy they are currently retained in. Thousands of families seeking asylum in the USA have been stuck at the border for over a year. They remain indefinitely subjected to deplorable and dangerous conditions as a result of U.S. policies and given current court closures.

Keywords Querida America · Testimonies · Faith · Solidarity · Survival · U.S. · Mexico border

Introduction

Nos tiraron a la frontera, nunca esperabamos que ibamos a vivir en el suelo, en el cemento, vinimos a pedir asilo pero nos encontramos en la calle. Mis niños dormieron bajo un banco por dos semanas y algunos personas nos dieron de comer. Por el gracias de Dios estamos vivos y aqui. (asylum seeker 2019)

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They threw us at the border, we never expected to be living on the floor, on the cement, we came asking for asylum but we find ourselves in the street. My children slept underneath a bench for two weeks and a few people gave us food. Thank God we are alive and here.

The journey to the USA border for the many individuals and families who are forced to leave home and flee for safety or survival changes lives the moment they take their first steps to the unexpected. After listening to countless testimonios, meeting families released from ICE detention, and providing support for countless immigrant children and families, the degree to which their spirituality connected to their survival and well-being is remarkable. In sacred conversations and moments, these writers have shared with migrant families and individuals, they speak of their faith as the vessel that held them together in the darkness of their journey and the compass for the unknown ahead. The presence of spirituality in their lives is equal to the water they need to live. When we consider health and wellness for asylum seekers and refugees, we cannot dismiss the colossal role of spirituality.

As practitioners, advocates, researchers and allies, we must consider how we navigate spirituality as a tool for addressing crisis, for building trust as well as joining in with the community we are working with. We also must understand spirituality as a catalyst for hope in the face of inhumanity and despair as well as for their survival. This was evident in the faces and eyes of those we have journeyed with at the border. Asylum seekers have shared near death stories they experienced in their journeys, clinging on to prayer for life. They have faced floods with no protection, circling in the darkness of night to pray for a miracle. They have suffered repeated pains of hunger; they have believed that tomorrow would be a better day, praying for someone to see them for who they are. Letting go of their child's hands to cross the border, they have cried tears dripping with prayer to one day be united. Each step, each breath, we have seen miracles, we have listened to their testimonies, and through all of this, we have seen their activism, their fight for another day with the hope for humanity and justice. This chapter centers their voices and advocacy that is grounded in a spirituality that no borders can barricade. Our work positions the power of spirituality present in the lives of many migrants for survival, advocacy, and a sacred tool for building trust and relationships in our own work with them as allies.

This collective work frames the context of spirituality and advocacy in the lives and survival of Central American, South American, and Caribbean asylum seekers, informed by firsthand testimonios sent from where they live along the US/Mexico border, indefinitely subjected to the U.S. Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)/Remain in Mexico policy. As part of ongoing work supporting asylum seekers in Matamoros, Mexico, at a makeshift border camp forced by MPP, the research team spent extensive time in community with individuals living there. We shared physical (and emotional) space at the camp, prayed in fraught moments, danced in others, and walked in solidarity when the time came to advocate with them. As researchers, ourselves Mexican and Central American, we witnessed communities struggling every day to survive, and the unrelenting strength of families surviving, and fighting for their right to claim asylum in the USA.

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In our work to create moments of hope, self-advocacy was born out of a project designed as Querida America, handwritten letters that held the prayers and pleas of the asylum seekers living in the MPP camp. "Querida America" shared their voices and stories with hopes that the government will recognize their humanity in contrast to the increasingly xenophobic rhetoric used to discuss migration. Their firsthand testimonios shed light on their desires, dreams, prayers, and futures imagined past the MPP policy they are currently retained in. Their words speak to survival in the face of trauma. Thousands of families seeking asylum in the USA have been stuck at the border for over a year. They remain indefinitely subjected to deplorable and dangerous conditions as a result of U.S. policies with all courts and the border closed due to COVID-19. This chapter amplifies their testimonials, narrates the power of their faith in surviving the inhumane camp conditions, and highlights their advocacy to terminate the policy of MPP, rebuilding the right to asylum that has been dismantled in recent years.

MPP and the U.S./Mexico Border

To understand the experiences and day-to-day survival of asylum seekers at the border, it is important to understand the history and process of MPP. Further, context of history and policy frames the human rights disparities migrants at the border experience. In January 2019, the Trump administration put into place Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy. MPP furthered the previous policy of “metering”, a policy that existed prior to the Trump administration, and one that limits the number of asylum seekers that are allowed to cross into the USA (Cheng, 2019). Under MPP, those who apply for asylum at a port of entry, or along the border, are forced to return to Mexico to await their asylum hearings. Asylum seekers must put their name on a list with Mexican officials and wait until their number is called. Case updates, expected timelines, or legal assistance are often unavailable without access to a lawyer, leaving most asylum seekers in the dark about the process they are expected to navigate or how to effectively plead their claims.

In June of 2019, there were already about 150 families assembled into a camp in Matamoros, Mexico, right across the river from Brownsville, Texas’s Gateway International Bridge. At this point, most of the families living in the camp were there due to “metering”. However, by October 2019, MPP was in full swing, and the camp had begun to grow exponentially. By February 2020, there were around 4000 asylum seekers dispersed throughout Matamoros, with some 2500 living directly in the camp, and most there were due to MPP (Solis, 2020). At the time of writing this chapter, there are more than 60,000 asylum seekers waiting in impromptu camps along the US/Mexico border, near seven main ports of entry: from Tijuana/San Diego, CA through to Matamoros/Brownsville, TX, with a recent expansion to Nogales, MX/Nogales, AZ (“DHS expands MPP”, 2020). These camps receive no support from the US government and very little aid from the Mexican government and rely

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made their situations extremely precarious (Mukpo, 2020).

Testimonio

While popular U.S. understandings of migration flatten, homogenize, and decontextualize migrants’ journeys and motivations, there exist *testimonios* to return nuance and historical context via lived experiences. Though the concept of oral history is timeless and worldwide, *testimonio* is grounded in a specific history of public witness that cannot be divorced from a context of anti-imperialist resistance and human rights struggles in Latin America (Saporta Sternbach, 1991). In this context, *testimonio* was practiced verbally and/or written, with a specific aim of witnessing in spaces where justice is unlikely to be accessible, encouraging correction of historical records, and creating collective dialogues of solidarity and understanding (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Zimmerman, 2004). Though the era has changed, the utility and promise of *testimonio* have not. Many migrants are still foreclosed from justice at home, as well as upon arrival to the U.S., severed from their families, community, or a sense of safety. Worse, they are under active threat: in recent years, the Trump administration has leveraged xenophobic rhetoric about migrants to stoke fear against them, as well as to build, justify, and maintain policies that ensure their subjugation, such as the Migrant Protection Protocols centered in this chapter. Testimonio-based perspectives of migration are critical: They exist as an important challenge to this rhetoric, as well as these policies. Not only do they challenge Western investment in and notions of objectivity, instead emphasizing power and “political machinations” (Saporta Sternbach, 1991) in every step of constructing truth, knowledge and history, they also affording intimate and firsthand access to what otherwise might be obscured by dominant narratives. For example, *testimonios* illuminate what the U.S. immigration system looks like to migrants within it, as opposed to lawmakers or members of the public who will likely never enter the real-life spaces (detention centers, tent courts, and the border zone itself) that comprise it.

The Matamoros border camp is one of those spaces, infrequently visited, and often misunderstood. Though “close the camps” has become an increasingly prevalent call in migration advocacy, context—about which camps, where they are located, who is stuck in them (predominantly asylum seekers from Central America and the Caribbean; with indigenous, disabled, and LGBTQ + populations present, as well as many survivors of domestic and sexual violence)—is rare. Rarer still is a direct mention of the “Migrant Protection Protocols” and explicit acknowledgment that these policies have not only caused, but also indefinitely extended, said camps’ existence. The name “Migrant Protection Protocols” itself implies a certain framing that has been integral to the formation and maintenance of said policies (and the resulting camps): They exist to *protect* migrants, and therefore, their enforcement is ultimately, unambiguously for the good of everyone involved. As per the Department of Homeland Security’s own press release about MPP: “DHS is using all appropriate resources

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and authorities to address the crisis and execute our missions to secure the borders, enforce immigration and customs laws, facilitate legal trade and travel, counter traffickers, smugglers and transnational criminal organizations, and interdict drugs and illegal contraband” (“Migrant Protection Protocols”, 2019). The language used by DHS, as well as that of the protocols’ deceptively neutral-sounding alternate name “Remain in Mexico”, belies the fraught physical and emotional landscape asylum seekers actually occupy along the U.S./Mexico border. Instead, asylum seekers’ testimonios are more complicated and less homogenous than people would assume: their own narratives challenge conceptions of migrants as invaders/scammers, fearful subjects laden with trauma, or helpless beings in need of someone else’s saving and guidance. (Interiano, 2018; Nyers, 2006). Using cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2005) as an additional lens through which to frame migrants’ narratives and emphasize the hopes, dreams, and positive qualities they provide in their own counternarratives, these stories in this chapter serve to complicate and reorient what it means to seek asylum, as well as what asylum itself can look like.

In-/visible Narratives of Migration

Framing has always been critical in the inception, construction, and maintenance of anti-immigrant policies. Though the Trump administration’s constant barrage of xenophobic rhetoric has proved an especially visible case study of this process, policies based in exclusion have always been part of the U.S.’s nation-building, with who is viewed most capable of being or becoming a “real American” often determining who should or should not be let into the country (Hing, 2004). Narratives about migration are rendered in-/visible when convenient, as part of this discussion. Thinking about when and where the cultural and intellectual contributions of Central American migrants to the U.S. appear, if ever, Cordova (2017) reminds us of the ties between U.S. interventions abroad and influxes of Central American migrants and argues that their invisibility in broader culture is intentional. If the narratives and history of migrants from Central America are obscured, so too is the legacy of U.S. involvement in their exile, as well as the political structures that continue to destabilize and exploit the region to this day (Cordova, 2017; Fabregat et al., 2020).

Not only have positive narratives of migrants and migration history been obscured, they have been increasingly replaced with negative narratives—the arrival of the migrant caravan in Fall 2018 proved critical to Trump’s reelection strategy, and from October–November of that year, U.S. media was publishing 50–100 caravan-centric stories per day (Ahmed et al., 2018; Fabregat et al., 2020). Much coverage decontextualized migration obscured the root causes forcing people to flee their homes and emphasized notions of illegality and invasion. In doing so, the Trump administration successfully weaponized concerns about sovereignty and safety to cast migrants as criminals, rather than asylum seekers following the INA’s stated procedure by which “any alien who is physically

present in the United States, or who arrives at the United States (whether or not at a designated port of arrival ... irrespective of

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such alien's status), may apply for asylum" (Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, 1980). Menjivar and Abrego (2012) note that though the law is often cast as neutral, discourses and narratives about immigrants that render them suspect and/or lawmakers help justify their maltreatment, even casting it as necessary in pursuit of justice. This, they term, is "legal violence"—the means by which implementation of the law, in a way that criminalizes individuals pertaining to marginalized groups (such as migrants), normalizes and legitimizes physical, structural, and symbolic violence against them. Correction of negative and hypervisible narratives about migrants is critical, as it impacts their lives and especially their pursuit of asylum claims, and such begins by centering voices of migrants themselves.

Centering Faith, Cultural Wealth, and Community

When communities have been dehumanized and find space to share and analyze racist arguments constructed against them, they in turn have space to make new arguments and counternarratives, to defend themselves—as opposed to being defended by others who may lack the positioning or context to do so adequately (Yosso, 2005). Even well-intentioned humanitarian spaces may craft narratives ultimately damaging to refugees and asylum seekers: by (1) flattening them into the "barest of life" where their voices, presence, and agency are muted, leaving them instead rendered passive and in need of saving, (2) by providing humanitarian aid in a purportedly apolitical way that leaves binaries and power dynamics of giver/receiver, listener/crier, helper/victim binaries untouched, and without acknowledgment of or intervention in the root causes that continue to spur migration flows (Nyers, 2006). Turning instead to a cultural wealth-based model emphasizing the unique types of capital that migrants hold—like their ability to resist, create, and aspire in the barest of circumstances—not only paints a more holistic and realistic view of their lives, but also affords a more critical, thoughtful perspective of the support (emotional, resource-based, or otherwise) that said migrants would actually find useful, both within and beyond the liminal legal spaces they are currently located in.

Methodology

The research team, part of a larger group of Bay Area activists known as Bay Area Border Relief, spent between ten days to two weeks over the last several years, visiting asylum seeking families, either at a respite center in McAllen, Texas, or at the camp in Matamoros, Mexico. These trips were designed to support families and talk to children about their experiences during Border Patrol detention and under the policy of MPP. Trips took place every few months throughout 2018 and 2019, including the first part of 2020. The research team gathered in person narratives on a number of different trips from 2018 until the present. We also continued to engage

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with asylum seekers through WhatsApp chats, through the sending of videos and welcoming newcomer families, through continued accompaniment as some have been able to enter the USA and locating to Northern California. On the most recent trip to support migrants living in the camp in Matamoros, Mexico, in February of 2020, the research team brought letters from school aged children in the Bay Area to distribute to the people living there. The team came with art supplies to have the children in the camp write letters and pictures back to respond to the children from the Bay Area. This originally started as an exchange between children, those in the Bay and those living in Matamoros. However, one of the residents of the camp who helped us organize the logistics of these art workshops asked if he could also write a letter. This grew into a three-day activity in which increasing numbers of adults would

come to write a message, having grown curious at the sight of other letter writing, or prompted by friends and neighbors in camps writing their own letters. There was no initial prompt for the letters, and the content was open. However, over time, more and more of the messages were directed to the American public, the U.S. government, and many to the Trump administration directly. Their letters became their *testimonios*, a space where people could share their pain, their hopes, their dreams, and their experiences. Letters contained content both light-hearted and desperate and often extended into longer narratives that filled full sheets of paper, front and back. One child shared, “mi sueño es ser residente de los estados unidos y ser la mejor patinadora” (my dream is to be a resident of the United States and be the best skater) (BABR, n.d.). Another man shared, “nosotros no salimos de nuestro país porque queremos, salimos por tanta corrupcion solo te pido queremos salir de esta situación tan crítica que estamos viviendo” (we did not leave from our country because we wanted to, we left because of all the corruption. I only ask you to take us out of this situation, so critical, that we are living) (BABR, n.d.). Letter writers often articulated that they wanted their messages to be shared. At the end of the activity, we collected over 300 letters, which were then scanned, translated, and coded. The letters were then used to start the #QueridaAmerica campaign, a social media campaign in which each day a letter was highlighted with a message or an image around MPP (Bay Area Border Relief, n.d.). This chapter shares theme of their messages collected that hopes to capture their voices, their spirituality, and their fight to survive and be recognized as human. The chapter also shares reflections from the accompaniment work done walking with families suffering under MPP.

Welcoming the Stranger

After their long and arduous journey to the U.S. border, asylum seekers are processed in Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) system; their belongings are confiscated, children are separated from their parents, and individuals are stripped of their cultural wealth. Almost all sense of autonomy is lost when CBP transmits unwelcoming and intimidating messages meant to exert their authority and power on human beings imploring support. While in the camps, families have little to no control over their

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asylum case, their next court date, or the outcome that could alter their lives indefinitely as they anxiously await a final judicial ruling. It is then that families turn to one of the very few cultural aspects they can maintain in this stressful and inhospitable climate in order to feel comfort, strength, and hope—their faith.

Although many families feel at the mercy of CBP officers, the agency asylum seekers display when practicing their faith is beyond words. It is one of the few sources of power that families can control in the midst of insurmountable feelings of helplessness and uncertainty. When all else seems lost and hope is surviving on a thin line, families invest more time and energy into the propelling forces of prayer and faith knowing this as their most powerful tool to handle unpredictable situations. It is unquestionable that faith is among the most valuable cultural aspects that families preserve and cultivate in the camps and is untouchable by CBP.

The camp for many has become a sacred space, whether for good or bad. The land has held the secrets and agonies of families forcibly torn apart, both physically and emotionally. The Rio Grande River has taken the last breaths of some attempting to cross, whether through drowning or violence at the hands of others. The border has remained alert, watching families in hunger, living in makeshift tents barely holding on for dreams just out of reach of the imagined promise of the USA. Memories of family have risen out of the dust; God has created a home, resurrected by the prayers of families, the support of pastors and Sister Norma of McAllen, Texas. Even with all of the support, the reality is that anyone entering the camp from the outside is clearly an “other”, and rightfully so. For many on our team, we struggled to find hope in one of the most inhumane spaces at the feet of our border. Though prayers often

did not seem like enough, in our efforts to align with the asylum seekers, we connected to the treasure of spirituality and joined in building *capillitas* (altars) of hope. Instead of us welcoming them, they welcomed us, the American strangers who in many ways represented the policies that blocked their entry for survival.

The first altar began with one niña, only nine years old and living in a sparse tent with her father. They escaped near death in Honduras, and since arrival to Mexico had struggled to figure out how to survive the MPP process. Her eyes were exhausted, but she held her father's hand tightly as they explained how their faith kept them going: "No tenemos a nada, pero tenemos a Dios". (We do not have anything but we have God). She looked at us for answers, but the only hope we could offer was prayer. Rushing in between the lines of cars at the border to buy supplies at the tienda, (store) the thought came to buy some relics to make a small altar in the family's tent. The idea of making a capillita (altar) brought a sense of peace. While we could not give more, we were excited to give them symbols of their faith to create a space for prayer. We bought lights and several relics, handing them over with great care. Immediately a small altar was resurrected. For the next several months, this tent became sacred with asylum seekers from all over the camp coming in to pray. "Esto nos da tanto alegría, y nos ayuda, estamos aquí 24 horas" (This altar makes us so happy, and it helps us, we keep a 24 h vigil). During our time away from the camp, we received countless photos and stories of prayer for miracles. The altar was eventually moved to an open space at the foot of a nearby tree—where more could come and comfortably visit.

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At a second trip to the camp, months later, we returned with another gift for their altar and saw the *capilla* space had grown. The space had chairs and handwritten notes left at the altar. Rosaries and crosses were at the foot of the altar with flowers off to the side. We stood in silence as we were moved by the spirituality felt and presence of the community. There was a collective spirit of solidarity as they invited us to pray, to be or to witness. The bridge for our work began as our Querida America project began to form.

Querida America Narratives

Todos Somos Humanos/We Are All Human

Narratives around the criminality of asylum seekers run rampant through mainstream news sources (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). The constant use of the term "illegal" to describe those who migrate, as well as those who are seeking asylum, is not only used by the staunchest critic of open border policies, but also runs through even more liberal media sources (Guskin, 2013). The need for asylum seeking families to speak back to narratives of illegality and criminality came through in the constant cries of humanness from asylum seekers. Over and over again, the letters expressed the verbiage "todos somos humanos/we are human". Again and again, letters expressed intimate views of who the writers were as people. They would often start with a description of themselves, their families, where they were from, and how long they have been in the camp. This initial statement of humanity is important to note, because it again places asylum seekers as mothers, fathers, children, citizens of places that have not respected their human rights, as people of faith. This call for humanity is a form of their survival as well.

Often letters communicate that they are "good" people, with varying iterations of "Nosotros no somos malos, somos seres humanos/we are not bad, we are human beings" appearing in many letters. Another letter directly addressed Donald Trump to share who they are, "Hola, Donald Trump le envío este humilde saludo esperando lo reciba con mucho cariño/Hello Donald Trump, I send this humble greeting hoping you receive it with much care". The letters continued to express the basic humanity of those who have had to migrate, how they speak back to narratives of criminality. One woman shares that "soy una persona humilde, muy luchadora/I am a humble person, I am a fighter".

Those living in the camps were well aware of the narratives that had precipitated their arrival. They knew what was being said about them, not only in the U.S. media but the Mexican media as well, and used these letters as a way to reaffirm their humanity.

Another clear expression of their humanity was their faith. Letter after letter spoke to the tremendous suffering the families are enduring at the camp. As each wrote about the dangerous conditions they are fleeing from or the decaying conditions they are living through, they continued to “bless” or send blessings to President Trump.

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Even in crisis perpetuated by his policies, the letters consistently sent blessings to Trump with prayers sent to the administration. One letter begged Trump for help and ended with “Que Dios te bendiga siempre/May God bless you always”. The idea that their faith is rooted in prayer for the other, even those that persecute you was evident in the countless well wishes, prayers, and hope that exuded from their Querida America letters.

Solidarity, Community, and Collective Advocacy

Within many letters, “Yo/I” and “estoy/I am” shifted into “nuestro/our” and “somos/we are” and back, with letter writers often linking their individual narratives to shared struggles. It cannot always be assumed that “somos/we” refers to the broader community of asylum seekers, as opposed to the “we” of a letter written on behalf of one’s own family or traveling unit. However, an astounding amount of letters explicitly referenced, or pled on behalf of, *el campamento* as a whole. These pleas and/or narratives took shape in different ways. One father saw his own motives for migrating reflected in that of other asylum seekers and used his letter to emphasize the human toll of life under MPP, as opposed to the safety they many fled seeking:

The American Dream... It is sad to see so many how many families are here suffering, how many innocent children are waiting for a miracle. A president who doesn't feel the pain of others... We didn't come just to come, we came obligated to protect our families. My name is [REDACTED] and I came protecting my wife and daughter. Tell me, what would you all be capable of doing for your children? We are not delinquents, we are honorable people protecting our families.

Similarly, a pregnant mother wrote her full letter from a collective standpoint, articulating the shared struggle of “our pregnancies”, consistently using “we” to emphasize each challenge shared by expectant mothers—exposure to the elements, illnesses resulting from the cold and lack of safety—and ultimately urging readers to “lift your voice on our behalf”.

Solidarity across countries was also evident, with several letter writers noting the diverse array of nations represented in camp both generally (“...we have many families from different places suffering along the banks of the Rio Bravo, please let us all cross...”) and specifically, with one letter writer devoting a full page to list all the countries he knew were represented in camp (“Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Ecuador, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Haiti, Cuba, Peru”), with great care, as well as an expression of “Somos familia!” In recent months, residents of *el campamento* have erected a banner of flags from several of the most frequently represented nations—Venezuela, Honduras, El Salvador, Cuba—in a prominent location of the camp, a visual representation of the homelands left behind, and (re)claimed space on tenuous, if not hostile terrain. Yet though imagined community borne of shared national/cultural identity was a significant unifier, a majority of letters called for the liberation of *all* of their fellow asylum seekers, without regard to where they came from: “...I beg God to touch Donald Trump’s

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heart, that he grant us asylum, for all countries...” “I only ask for an opportunity for all who are in this place...” “...I hope that the border opens for all of my immigrant brothers and sisters...”.

The community and collective advocacy found in so many letters calls to mind a saying from the early, hopeful days of Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution and often attributed to feminist poet Gioconda Belli: "solidarity is the tenderness of the people" (Power & Charlip, 2009). There is a distinct tenderness in ceding space in one's own letter, a rare chance to share your plight with whoever will listen, to advocate for the collective. This tenderness exists in stark contrast to the brutality and forced proximity, both physical and emotional, that MPP has entailed. In terms of the latter, it is worth noting that asylum seekers are scheduled by CBP to attend court hearings in groups, leaving them to detail their most traumatic and graphic memories in front of other camp residents they may not know well, if at all. Further, said hearings take place in makeshift courtrooms—portable buildings along the U.S. side of the Rio Grande River, shrouded under giant white tents to obscure them from public view—where immigration judges themselves appear via remote video calls. Though asylum seekers are interrogated, doubted, and denied dignity or humanity in the official spaces purportedly meant to protect them, they create their own spaces to share trust and faith in each other, validate each other's stories, and uplift each other in calls for collective liberation.

Seeking a Better Life

Relocating to a foreign country is usually not the first option most families resort to despite the compelling circumstances that force migrations. Regardless, these tragic and abrupt experiences make the dangerous and precarious journey worth the sacrifice for many. A common theme addressed by several *testimonios* was the pursuit of a "better life", though families had numerous notions of what that might look like and who they were making sacrifices for. Among these were better employment and educational opportunities for themselves and their children, access to quality health care, the ability to own property, political and financial stability, and family reunification. Above all, families yearned for emotional and physical safety as well as basic human rights that would allow them to live a dignified life in the USA.

A genuine cry for help and change was deeply felt in every *testimonio*. Some families surrendered the few assets they had to criminal organizations, while others found their lives in jeopardy with no trustworthy government entity to denounce crime and threats with the hope that justice will prevail. All of these experiences compelled the refugees to seek a "better life" elsewhere for themselves and their families in search of new beginnings. One woman in the camp stated, "I ask God to give us the opportunity to be in a better place, and to be able to give my children a better future, to be able to give them security, to be able to take them for a walk without the fear that something bad will happen to them, to be able to give them the opportunity to study, that they may have a better life than mine. That they can be

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happy". These pleas for help and a better life were echoed in multiple *testimonios* from adults and children alike. Another commonality across *testimonios* was that their notions of a better life never seemed preposterous. Much of what was desired appeared to be normal and routine everyday life for most Americans—things often taken for granted. These pleas were consistently coupled with their faith and prayers for justice and asylum.

The power of their spirituality in the darkest of times to bring hope when our borders have shut them out was interwoven in their words. One mother who escaped near death in Honduras and had been in the camp for six months at the time of her letter wrote: "Le pido a Dios cada día que nos permite a mis hijos y yo entrar a este gran país" (I ask God every day to let my children and I enter this great country). Their faith in God as being able to break through the cruel barriers of MPP resonates powerfully in their letters, our conversations we had with them, and in their strength to carry forward. Day after day, they wake up to "dar gracias a Dios / give thanks to God" for being alive. Another letter pleads to God "toca el corazón de Donald Trump" (touch his heart). Asylum seekers at our U.S.

Borders are holding on to faith when the USA has turned their back on them, only asking for safety and opportunities to a life of dignity.

Conclusion

The USA government has condemned asylum seekers to live in camps in dire situations, many for over a year now as the MPP policy continues, with no end yet in sight. As researchers walking in solidarity with families, mothers, fathers, children, and human beings, we share their testimonios to speak back to the prevalent, negative narratives that reinforce the “other”. We share experiences of spirituality and faith as survival, resilience, and hope. Through politically constructed negative images of asylum seekers, the popular imagination is content to keep “them” out, keep “our” country safe. Testimonios from those who live in the camps, who have risked their lives to migrate to a place of refuge, challenge these negative narratives of criminality, invasion, and fear, to speak instead to their humanity, their family, their faith, and their dreams.

As we close, we return to an image sent to our team during Hurricane Hanna, one of many storms to flood the camp in rapid succession. As the rain came down, structures swayed, trees buckled under the force of nature, and their tents began to fill with water, threatening to destroy what little they owned. During this fraught moment, the research team received images of them gathered together in the dark. Though stressed, running on little sleep, and panicked by the escalating danger headed straight toward them, they gathered together in prayer. In the dark of night, abandoned by the world along the banks of the Rio Grande River, they kept vigil as a community: harboring and supporting one another. As the river rose at the foot of the border wall, their lives were in imminent danger. Singing, praying, and standing strong as one community, they lifted their spirits with prayer to cloak them in protection.

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Their silhouettes in the dark were illuminated by flickers of light that captured their humility and beauty in the face of trauma. Their voices, their strength, and their prayers can never be drowned out by border walls or natural disasters.

As researchers, this work of Querida America amplifies their testimonios as we stand in solidarity with them in our advocacy against the cruel policy of MPP. This chapter reflects their deep wishes to share their experiences as widely as possible as they fight and pray for hope that someone will acknowledge their humanity and take action for change.

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