

## **Episode 2: Sanctuary: a Dream Reimagined Sanctuary in the Borderlands and the South**

**OLP:** Hello everybody. Welcome to our podcast, Sanctuary: A Dream Reimagined. I'm Obed Labra-Pelaez. I'm a sophomore at Amherst College, and I'm from New Jersey.

**PZ:** And my name is Petra Zuñiga. I'm a junior at Amherst College, and I'm from Seattle, Washington.

Today we are interviewing Dr. Barbara Sostaita, who holds a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She has completed fieldwork in Tucson, Arizona and New Haven, Connecticut and is interested in the role of faith and church institution in the lives of migrants in times of transition, dislocation, and relocation.

**OLP:** So without further ado, let's get into it.

Hello, Dr. Sostaita. I just wanted to take this chance to welcome you and thank you for speaking to our class last week. And I'm excited to talk about sanctuary along with everyone else today.

**BS:** Hey. Thank you all for the invitation. I'm excited about our conversation too.

**OLP:** Great. So just to start off, could you tell us a little bit more about yourself, maybe your upbringing and how you got into the scholarship that you currently do?

**BS:** Yeah of course. I came to the United States from Argentina in 1998 with my parents and my sister, Daniela. And we came to North Carolina because my dad had family here that had fled Argentina during the military dictatorship in the 1980s. So we grew up as immigrants in a new immigrant destination, where people from Central America and South America were coming and larger and larger numbers.

And my dad became a minister in the United States and opened a church for those people who were arriving to North Carolina, seeking a community, and trying to congregate at a church that would meet their material and social needs. And so, growing up I was really active in my Dad's church in events and programs like Know Your Rights trainings and legal clinics and free medical checkups and immigration policy lobbying. And all of these radical and progressive movements were happening within the space of the church.

And so how I became involved in this research and this scholarship is really tied to growing up as the daughter of an immigrant pastor in the rural South and seeing how immigrants were drawing on religion to build community and to remake their lives and to claim space in the United States.

**PZ:** Awesome, thank you so much. That is just a helpful basis for the rest of the conversation. And we were also hoping you could describe your dissertation a little bit to us and your particular interests in the Sanctuary Movement, specifically in Tucson, which is far from North Carolina.

**BS:** Yeah. I first went to Tucson in 2015, the summer after my first year in graduate school. I had taken a class on border politics and learned about the Tucson Samaritans and their work that is at both times religious and political. I learned about sanctuary because when I went to Arizona there was a woman living in sanctuary, Rosa, at Southside Presbyterian Church. And that was the first time I heard the word sanctuary.

The next year after the 2016 election, I started hearing sanctuary discussed beyond churches. So I started hearing about sanctuary schools, sanctuary cities, sanctuary hospitals, Sanctuary Restaurants. And so I started wondering and theorizing: what happens when sanctuary is not specifically a place, but a mobile practice, and what happens when we stop thinking about sanctuary as a set apart space of protection offered to migrants and instead think about how migrants carry this tradition and this practice with them on this journey north?

So my dissertation is an ethnographic project. It's based on research in Tucson but also in Nogales. And I'm currently adding a fifth chapter on the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants that makes its way all the way through Mexico. So what happens when we track sanctuary as a journey, as a map, as an itinerary.

So my dissertation is about artists making crosses for dead migrants in the borderlands, nurses healing wounds in Nogales and caring for asylum seekers. It's about women in immigrant detention centers who touch and practice a healing hapticality that's prohibited in prisons. It's forbidden to touch. But what happens when sanctuary emerges through touch in prisons? And it's about how Indigenous people, especially the Tohono O'odham, defend the land and offer the land sanctuary in the desert. So it's about these instances or scenes of sanctuary through migrants' journeys.

**PZ:** Yeah, in class you spoke about and connected the Sanctuary Movement to the history of maroons and Indigenous sanctuary practices, and we're hoping you could explain these connections a little more for our listeners and also talk a little bit how, about how you made those connections in the first place?

**BS:** Yeah, I live in the U.S. South, in the Southeast, and I've heard of the Great Dismal Swamp often. And as I started reading more about the Great Dismal Swamp and learning about maroons, I also read Cedric Robinson "Black Marxism," and Robinson's text traces the history of maroons

in the Americas. So as I started reading about maroons, and these are communities of enslaved Africans who flee the plantation and form autonomous communities in the marshes, in the swamp, in the hills, in the mountains, and they are kind of creating these sanctuaries away from enslavement. I started to connect sanctuary and say, 'there is no destination that is safe. In a world where slave catchers are chasing you, where ICE agents are pursuing you, where they defy sensitive locations protocols and enter a church, where you're always facing the threat of being found and captured and caged: there is no place that is inherently safe.' And so the history of maroons teaches us that sanctuary emerges on the road. Sanctuary emerges in flight. Sanctuary is what happens when you're fleeing, when you're becoming something else.

So I think I came to maroons because I live in North Carolina and because there's this long legacy of flight in the South. And Indigenous people often harbored fugitive enslaved Africans. The Lumbee Tribe here in North Carolina has a long history of enslaved Africans finding sanctuary with Indigenous peoples. So yes, so I think I came to that through my situatedness in North Carolina and in a place where fugitive enslaved Africans created sanctuary for themselves.

**PZ:** In our readings, not a lot of other scholars talked about sanctuary as fugitivity, and so we were really curious about how this idea and these connections that you have made, whether or not that challenge other scholars or how they received that?

**BS:** Yeah, I had to read a lot about sanctuary for my PhD program. When I decided that this was gonna be the topic of my dissertation, I started researching. And there are a lot of scholars who talk about new sanctuary, the New Sanctuary Movement that emerged after Elvira Arellano took sanctuary in a Chicago church. They talk about the Sanctuary Movement, capital letters, the New Sanctuary Movement, after the, during the Bush administration. They talk about sanctuary in the Trump era. And all of these are capital letter movements, New Sanctuary Movement, Sanctuary Movement, and it focuses a lot on spaces and places of sanctuary. So it really thinks about sanctuary as a place-based tradition. It traces sanctuary to the Hebrew Bible; to Greece and Diana's temple; to medieval England; the tutor kings kind of started chipping away at sanctuary; it's a state versus church struggle, who has the power. And it never really talked about informal practices of care. And it never really talked about connections in the Americas.

If we're thinking about sanctuary in the United States, do we tie this tradition not to England or the Hebrew Bible or Greek, Greco-Roman civilizations, but maroons and Indigenous peoples and colonization and displacement and extraction and struggles to get free in a world marked by enslavement, the transatlantic slave trade, and ongoing settler colonialism? And I just never really read that in all of the literature reviews I was doing. And so I think that in a world where we're talking about abolition, and we're talking about decolonization, and we're talking about the struggles of colonized and racialized people to get free, we have to rethink sanctuary as

something that's happening in the undercommons, in fugitive spaces, and being practiced by people who are escaping these forms of subjection.

I'm really in conversation with Black Studies and Indigenous Studies because I think sanctuary needs to be thought of as something that happens on the run, on the move, in flight, not simply a place that offers you temporary, limited protection.

**OLP:** Yeah that's really fascinating and it kind of helped me, and I'm sure many others, look at sanctuary in a new light. I guess right now I wanted to transition into your relationship with Juana Luz Tobar Ortega became that's how we first became introduced to your work through your article, "Escape Bound." So I guess we just wanted, if you could, to discuss about her experience in sanctuary and how you became involved in her sanctuary case and how your relationship with her grew and changed over time?

**BS:** Yeah. I hosted a panel at UNC, which is where I'm at, or where I'm up for another four days until I technically graduate. And I hosted a panel that brought Juana's daughter and a filmmaker who made a short documentary about Juana. And I asked, someone in the audience asked, "well, what can we do to help your mom," to Juana's daughter. And she said, "please visit her. She's so lonely. She's by herself. She's trapped in this church. She can't leave. The best thing you could do is just sit with her and spend time with her."

So the next week, my partner and I started visiting her every Friday, and we would bring her lunch cuz she would say that whenever white people, I'm white, but she would say whenever the white people would bring her food, it would not be food she enjoys. And so we would bring her like Peruvian chicken or *tacos* or *arroz con frijoles*, like we would bring her food that she likes to eat, and we would just hang out with her.

The first few meetings felt like she had to get all of her trauma out of the way so that we could build a relationship. So it was a lot of explaining 'I'm separated from my family,' a lot of crying, a lot of backstory. So it took a while to be able to just have more informal conversations and more like *chisma* time of gossip and 'oh my gosh, you won't believe what this person did who came to visit me or,' until it became a little less formal. But yeah, I just started visiting her and just talking to her and getting to know her apart from what was happening in sanctuary.

I will say there were a lot of awkward silences, a lot of times when the conversation felt forced, a lot of pauses, and I don't know like moments of not really understanding each other or living very different lives. We're, we both have experiences being immigrants, but mine is the daughter of people who came from Argentina and were able to make a commitment to sacrificing everything for their daughter to get an education, which is not what I would want for my parents, but the path they chose. Versus Juana, who's in deportation proceedings, right? So we're in very

different places in our lives, and so there were many awkward moments in our relationship. And I want to stress that building sanctuary together is an awkward, uncomfortable, difficult process.

Over time, we started spending more time together. There were moments when I was in Arizona and I didn't see her for months. It's a relationship that has, is born of struggle and has always involved food. There are times she called me to ask me to write a letter on her behalf, to ask my dad to write a letter on her behalf because he's a minister and he's more credible, when she was like 'my son wants to apply the college. Can you help?' So it's a give-and-take relationship. But, yeah, I think my relationship with Juana has been sometimes a struggle.

**PZ:** Yeah. I guess I was curious about, and we talked a little bit in class, how this has impacted your writing and your understanding of sanctuary. Whether or not that came from challenge and misunderstanding or from connection, and yeah I guess how that has changed you in that process.

**BS:** Yeah, definitely. Juana describes sanctuary as, when it's a church or when it's a place, sanctuary chokes her. Sanctuary confines her. Sanctuary restricts her. Sanctuary limits her mobility. So when I started meeting with her is when I started thinking about places of sanctuary as prisons. And there are many people who have written about sanctuary as prisons who don't acknowledge how the people living in sanctuary had been articulating that for years and years and years.

In 2002 Elvira Arellano, when she took sanctuary in a church in Chicago, she fled sanctuary and that's when she was deported because she had to escape it, because she was miserable and in prison-like conditions. So for years and years and years and years, people have been saying that. If only we listened to their complaints and criticisms and longings for freedom.

So when I started meeting with Juana, very early on she says, 'sanctuary's a prison.' But when I started paying attention to how she was living her life in sanctuary is when I started also connecting fugitivity and maroons and Indigenous peoples and saying, 'wait she's confined but she's finding ways to flee, whether it's through her *pupusas*, through *Colectivo Santuario* and the organizing they've been doing; whether it's through her sewing projects, her garden, the cultivating of life that flees the prison.'

I think that's when I started making the connections to fugitivity in a more concrete way. And I started thinking, Neil Roberts has a book called *Freedom as Marronage*, and he says freedom is not a destination, but freedom is rather a practice of becoming free. Like we're always becoming free. And I started thinking about how Juana, for her, freedom was not just about getting out but about how she could cultivate opportunities for escape while confined in sanctuary.

**OLP:** We've discussed and kind of echoed in what we've both said in this podcast, risk and resistance of the law is an inherent part of sanctuary and sanctuary activism. And you had mentioned previously in class and in your scholarship that when you first joined the Sanctuary Movement or started studying it, you still held undocumented status in the US. And I guess that makes me wonder, how did you reckon with your own precarity in relation to your activism? And where did this strong sense of conviction come from? Essentially, what made engaging in this particular activism make the potential risk of state surveillance and persecution ultimately worthwhile?

**BS:** Yeah. You know, my lawyer told me not to do it. He was very insistent. He was like 'just wait a few months. Wait until you have citizenship before you go to the desert.' Like very insistent I shouldn't go.

On the one hand, my advisor also told me there's a long history of anthropologists who see themselves as heroes. And it's really caught up in this fucked up colonial trope of the ethnographer as adventurer, who takes risks and goes out and does whatever it takes for the material. Like will risk anything. And I didn't want to fall into the trope of anthropologist as hero or anthropologist as adventurer. So I wanted to be very careful to not see myself as a martyr for the cause, to not see myself as a hero because people are saving themselves.

I do want to say I went against what my lawyer said, but I also practiced care for myself while I was conducting field work. There's a long, long history of anthropologists who can lay their bodies on the line and who will put themselves in these very risky situations for the book, for the research. And reading Black Feminist anthropologists, there's a great article called "Towards a Fugitive Anthropology," taught me that yes I think this work is necessary and important, and I'm willing to go to the desert even though I'm not a US citizen and something like offering water to a migrant or giving shelter to someone could land me with a felony charge, could land me with deportation charges. I knew that that was a possibility, but at the same time, there were moments when I was conducting field work and I knew something was very risky, and I would stay out of it.

There's one instance, one specific instance. I had to go to the only restaurant in Arivaca, which is a very, very tiny town. I don't even know if it counts as a town because there's so few people living there. But I went and waited for my group at the restaurant while they were engaging in sanctuary. There were risks I was willing to make, but I was also very cautious of the anthropologist as hero trope, and I was very cautious of the trope of anthropologists laying our bodies on the line because it's a really messed up history that I didn't want to participate in. So I wanted to risk while also caring for myself and practicing a care for the self.

**OLP:** If the people who are listening want to get involved and support the movement, what are some resources or organizations that you would recommend as a starting point? What can your average person do to meaningfully support and bolster the movement?

**BS:** Yeah, I would say look to local groups that are connecting policing and surveillance and immigration. In North Carolina, there's an organization called Durham Beyond Policing where I live and Southerners on New Ground. And those folks are really thinking about building coalitions between Black people targeted by state violence and immigrants. For instance, Black immigrants are the ones deported at the highest rates. Why? Because there's more police presence in Black neighborhoods, right? So thinking about how the police and ICE and surveillance and all of these forms of carceral governance are affecting different communities and how we can start to build sanctuary by creating communities free from policing.

So that is what I'm most invested in right now given the conversations about abolition that we've been having. There's organizations led by migrants, led by people targeted by state violence in your communities. You can get involved. If you don't have the time to get involved, you can give money. One time someone asked this to John Fife when he was on my campus. Someone asked 'how do we get involved in the border issues?' And John Fife said, 'we've got that covered. We have a very long history in the border. We're good. Focus on your community.'

And also not accepting this narrative that just because Biden is now an office, things are better for immigrants, right? Because I grew up with very similar demonstrations of anti-immigrant violence before Trump was even on the political radar. So thinking like 'okay, well a lot of people in sanctuary or going home.' And that's a good thing, but that doesn't mean that sanctuary is over, right? Because people are still being targeted by deportation and incarceration and other forms of state violence against immigrants. So remembering that our community still needs us.

**OLP:** The election of Biden supposedly was supposed to be a big change for immigration, and so far, it hasn't been anything special. All it has been has been the reversal of policies by Trump that should have never been instituted. We've seen him moving away from the comprehensive immigration reform to a kind of a piecemeal approach which will, by nature, by design, leave people out in the dust. If anything, delineating who gets to have status will kind of solidify the helplessness and will destroy all hope that the other, the rest of the group will have permanently. It kind of illuminates a sad truth that until there's a pathway to citizenship, until there's actually comprehensive and inclusive immigration reform, that activism is going to be hindered and every other part of an immigrant's life is going to be hindered. So, yeah, that's what I had to say about.

**BS:** The only thing I'll say in response to is, and I think this is why my argument that freedom, or the argument I'm borrowing from Neil Roberts cuz it's not my argument, that freedom isn't a destination because think, like, we're always thinking 'when Biden is elected,' 'when this

happens,' 'when they stop border wall construction,' 'when...' like, then we'll be free, right? And then thinking about how what you're describing that being undocumented or having a status that is not citizenship, there are ways that people find are escape-bound. To think about Juana, right? Even in confinement, even under surveillance, even in the most precarious of circumstances. I think that's why I want to think about sanctuary is because people find ways to defend and protect and shelter and care for each other, right? Like even in these impossible circumstances, growing up and seeing how my community cared for each other, and how we defended each other and how we gave each other sanctuary. Even under the Bush administration, even in Obama's deportation machine, right? The man who's deported more people than anyone with Biden failing to live up to his promises.

Every time politicians fail us and every time policy fails us, we care for each other. And I think that's why I'm interested in sanctuary is because even in the conditions you're describing and even in the conditions we've both lived, we show up for each other. And I think that's what sanctuary, that's why I care so much about sanctuary is because in these impossible circumstances, there is still care and there is still shelter that we give each other.