

Eunil David Cho. *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience: Religious Stories Korean American Dreamers Tell in the Face of Uncertainty*. Leiden: Brill, 2024. 228 pages. \$60.

In *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience*, Eunil Cho offers an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of ten undocumented Korean American immigrants, all of whom are Christian recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Established in 2012, DACA is a federal policy that grants individuals who entered the United States as undocumented minors a renewable two-year deferral from deportation. While it provides recipients with a measure of stability and hope, it also introduces heightened uncertainty—particularly under the Trump administration. Korean DACA recipients comprise a numerical minority among the predominantly Latinx DACA population—over 90%—rendering their experiences largely underrepresented in scholarly and public discourse.

The thesis of Cho’s work is that “*we are the stories we tell*”—namely, that humans construct their identities by telling their stories (2). This interdisciplinary study draws upon the sociology and psychology of religion, Asian American studies, education, and critical race theory. Cho argues that undocumented Korean immigrants engage in a theologizing process—interpreting their lived realities through religious narratives, symbols, and spiritual practices—as a means of identity formation and meaning-making. In the first chapter, Cho delineates his methodology, identifying it as both pastoral-theological and qualitative. These approaches uniquely position him not as a detached observer but as a “co-creator” of narrative, journeying alongside marginalized individuals as they make meaning of their experiences. He fosters what he terms a “narrative environment”—a safe and supportive space where participants are empowered to share and reflect upon their stories (30, 33).

Chapter two outlines the theoretical framework of the study, informed by key narrative theorists and their critiques. Cho affirms the view that human beings are inherently narrative-driven, with identity shaped through processes of meaning-making. Following Thomas Long’s *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, which he references, Cho engages Paul Ricoeur, albeit from a pastoral perspective, to reveal how life narratives evolve through a process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (67-68). He argues, “the person is not merely the one who tells a story nor merely the one about whom the story is told, but both a reader and a writer of the person’s life” (69).

In the second half of his book, which is divided into three chapters, Cho dives deep into the lives of 10 South Korean DACA recipients and carefully narrates and interprets their stories. Chapter three explores their pasts—delving into the traumas associated with pre-migration, migration, and post-migration phases. The interviewees recount experiences of family separation, emotional abandonment, guilt, shame, systemic racism, and the absence of nurturing adult figures.

In the fourth chapter, Cho speaks of “the violence of uncertainty” and “narrative identity foreclosure”—a condition and state where a person is unable to develop meaning and hope and imagine a future due to systemic injustice, lack of a support system, and recurring trauma. I find this chapter to be quite triggering, as some of the stories are deeply painful and gut-wrenching. It reminded me of the isolation I sometimes feel as an international student—away from home and out of pocket. Most of Cho’s interviewees also internalized “the redemptive self-story” myth that comes from the ideal model-minority narrative that tells that Asian Americans are the most successful and resilient immigrants, forcing them to fit into the mold of their community’s expectations, leading to shame and guilt when they differ from these standards.

In the final chapter, Cho emphasizes the redemptive potential of religious narratives and spiritual practices—including caregiving, mentoring, companionship, and prayer—in helping undocumented immigrants interpret and cope with their realities. Conversely, the absence of such spiritual resources, compounded by continued uncertainty and trauma, prepares for spiritual discontent. Reading this chapter raises a question: what of spiritual care in non-religious or non-Christian settings to undocumented Asians or religious Asian immigrants who are unchurched?

As a homiletician, I find profound inspiration in Cho’s work. It resonates with Howard Thurman’s “life as a working paper” metaphor, which reminds preachers of the importance of working with narratives and being a story companion.¹ Across each chapter, Cho consistently underscores the significance of storytelling in human identity and highlights the collective labor required to sustain life-giving narratives. Moreover, Cho demonstrates that practical theology should be aimed at providing people with the tools for ongoing “self-making” processes, to examine harmful narratives critically, and to foster nurturing communal spaces. Although centered on a specific demographic, this work offers essential insights for practical theologians, justice workers, and spiritual caregivers amid the continual visibility of systemic violence against immigrant communities.

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¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), i.