

Sanctuary in a Small Southern City

An Interview with Anton Flores-Maisonet

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A day with Anton Flores-Maisonet is a day filled with interruptions. His phone constantly buzzes and beeps with calls and texts from folks seeking aid or solace. Immigrants in the small southern city of LaGrange, Georgia, know that Flores is someone to contact when they're in trouble, whether they need a driver to a meeting with a child's teacher, a counselor for a nephew in despair about his legal status, or an advocate for a mother picked up by ICE.

Flores did not set out to provide sanctuary. Invoking the privilege of sanctuary, we might assume, would require some measure of religious authority that could oppose the authority of the state. Flores's vocation has taken a different path. A former professor of social work at a church-related college, Flores got his start in radical politics protesting the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq. He quickly realized that while the bureaucratic integration model of social work may allow for some critique of status quo politics, his calls for more fundamental changes placed him in a precarious relation to his institution. Though he made his protests using religious language and commitments that he thought were shared by his institution's denomination, Flores learned that such prophetic politics was beyond the pale.

Now, fifteen years later, Flores's full-time, largely unpaid work is with Casa Alterna, a hospitality house he helped to found that offers sanctuary and accompaniment to Georgia's immigrants. Casa Alterna offers accompaniment in a host of neighboring practices, some small and some large. In its early days, Alterna

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Figure 1. A child who identified Flores as “Santa Claus” combed his beard in Santa Teresa Llano Grande, Chiapas, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Bryan Babcock.

developed a cooperative housing model where immigrants could be free of unscrupulous slumlords, build equity, and find a stable and welcoming community at a time when such welcome was hard to find. After reading about a hunger strike of Salvadorans who were facing deportation, Flores learned that the second largest private detention center in the United States was in his backyard in Lumpkin, Georgia. In 2007 he held the first of many vigils demanding the closure of Stewart Detention Center and other detention facilities, including the successful campaign to close the North Georgia Detention Center. In 2010 Flores helped launch El Refugio, a house of hospitality and ministry of visitation, located one mile from Stewart. And by partnering with the School of the Americas Watch, an international network of advocates and activists began to widen the circle of those repelled by the cruel yet profitable incarceration of immigrants along with its connection to a wider structure of US-Latin American militarism.

Flores’s political commitment to sanctuary has meant not merely public protest and organizing, but also providing sanctuary in his home by offering transitional housing to immigrants and even fostering a newborn child whose mother was incarcerated and, over a year later, deported. In 2017 Flores and his wife Charlotte moved into a cul-de-sac comprising mostly Guatemalan immigrants and

continue to build relationships with the communities in Guatemala from which many of these neighbors originate. Casa Alternativa offers some programs for and with their new neighbors, including academic tutoring, language exchange, accompaniment and interpretation, and a food cooperative; but the primary aim is to cultivate an interdependent neighborhood built upon community, trust, and political power.

Kyle Lambelet: *For folks unfamiliar with Casa Alternativa, can you narrate for us what the day-to-day looks like?*

Anton Flores-Maisonet: Casa Alternativa is a place where acts of mercy and justice are undergirded by the principal value of hospitality. In particular, the solidarity we seek is with immigrants from Latin America. Historically this has played itself out in different ways: by having a multinational, intentional community; by making home ownership a viable option for first-wave immigrant families, regardless of their status; by founding El Refugio in Lumpkin, Georgia; and by leading a campaign to close a for-profit deportation prison, Stewart Detention Center. Now, what it looks like since 2017 is that this house of hospitality exists in the midst of a first-wave immigrant neighborhood, almost entirely Guatemalan. We are a ministry of presence here. We want to make this little cul-de-sac a sanctuary, we want it to be a refuge, we want it to be a safe place, and that commitment has led us to do some direct things.

In response to a multiday ICE operation targeting our neighbors, we hosted the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights for a defend-your-rights session.¹ And now neighbors are equipped with knowledge and resources like window postings that help protect our constitutional and human rights when immigration officials or law enforcement come knocking on our doors. That training was a result of some early-morning raids that we experienced in the fall of 2017. As folks left home for their first-shift jobs and as children were awaiting their school bus, right beside the children's bus stop, ICE waited in the dark in unmarked vehicles at the entrance of the cul-de-sac. As parents and their hired drivers left the street, the ICE agents would engage in racial profiling and would stop the drivers for bogus reasons. It just so happened that the drivers that were stopped were all Latinx but were also all legal permanent residents or US citizens. Each driver informed us that these plain-clothes officers would not identify themselves but would ask the drivers and passengers to provide documentation. Some of the passengers were subsequently taken into ICE custody.

I was called on one particular morning and I was able to monitor and confront the ICE agents on their final apprehension. I was threatened with arrest for monitoring and photographing this incident from a public sidewalk. By the time I arrived, a neighbor with diabetes who was the passenger in a vehicle driven by a US citizen

was in ICE custody. My neighbor was taken to an immigration detention center, but the driver and I decided we would file a complaint. I was deeply disturbed by ICE's new tactic. As a brown-skinned, US-born citizen, I needed to know that I can drive on my own street and on public roads without fear of being racially profiled by federal agents. A DHS official visited us from DC, and since then ICE has not returned to our neighborhood. I don't want to take credit for this; it was the courageous drivers who spoke out who deserve the credit. Together, we made our neighborhood a safer place for parents to leave for work and for children to catch the school bus. So, if we can think about sanctuary in this wide sense, then we aspire for our cul-de-sac to be a place of sanctuary.

KL: *Sanctuary is kind of a buzzword right now. There are several different entities that have taken on the term: sanctuary campuses, sanctuary cities. I'm interested to hear what sanctuary means in your context in LaGrange, Georgia.*

AFM: It seems to me that sanctuary means first and foremost housing someone who has an order of removal and publicly shielding them from that in a place of worship. When I hear the term sanctuary being used I think of it as an actual place where there is an act of moral or faithful resistance through offering lodging to a family that our government is seeking to remove from the United States. We have never done that publicly, we've never participated in that in the narrowest sense. I would do it if I really thought that it could somehow be a protection. But I suspect that ICE would treat our house of hospitality differently than, say, a church down the block. While this work is deeply rooted in our faith and our faith tradition, we're not an institutional church. I wouldn't expect that ICE would honor the sacred work we are engaged in.

That's why we've hesitated to use that word *sanctuary* when referring to us. Sanctuary is about a place where a person can live free from the fear of government intrusion and forced removal. I don't think we can completely offer that.

But, sanctuary is also a place where we honor God and affirm the inherent dignity of every person. Alterna has always been a place where the best thing we knew to do was to counteract fear with loving acts, and counteract dehumanization through personalizing who our neighbors are, and to give them names and faces. I don't think you can have sanctuary unless you no longer have fear and can encounter each other as fellow human beings created in the image of God. That's what we try to replicate wherever we are, in our former neighborhood, and now here in Historic Goose Holler.

When Charlotte and I decided to move into this neighborhood, others, including some of our immigrant friends, said we would regret living here. Folks used very dehumanizing language to talk about the people on this street. But, just as I suspected, the naysayers have been proven wrong by our new neighbors. What I

have found are neighbors and friends with names and faces and stories. It is the immigrant neighbor who has welcomed us as the stranger. For in many ways, Charlotte and I are the stranger—for example the culture of our neighbors as first-generation immigrants and thus of our street is very different from our own as people coming from families with generational histories of citizenship. Living on this street is like living at a crossroads of cultures, American and Guatemalan. In a true sense, we are both welcoming the stranger and being welcomed as the stranger. I have the opportunity to welcome the other and serve as an ambassador or bridge between their home culture and that of the southeastern United States, and my neighbors have the opportunity to invite me into this micro-culture of a Guatemalan oasis of sorts.

KL: *It strikes me that in spite of your hesitancy to use the language of sanctuary in the narrow sense that many of the practices that you engage in are aimed at granting a kind of sanctuary. Maybe the terms that would be more familiar are practices of hospitality and resistance.*

AFM: In this sense I would say that everything we're doing is a form of sanctuary. When we started El Refugio, our house of hospitality near Stewart Detention Center, the idea was to not just engage in a political form of resistance but, as the name suggests, to provide a real space of refuge for the families of immigrants in detention.

Sanctuary is the idea that a person can find rest and safety. From what? Thinking about all the multiple layers by which an immigrant is persecuted, laws and policies continue to be some of the harshest tools used against immigrants. You can think about it in a federal sense in terms of immigration policy, but it trickles down. Local governments also have the power to enact anti-immigrant policies, even ones that are distinct from federal immigration law. For example, in our town where utilities are publicly owned, sometime after 9/11 the city implemented a policy that requires the provision of a social security number to obtain utilities services. Since its inception, the rationale for this policy has been refined to a financial one; having consumers' social security numbers on file is a means of ensuring that there is a mechanism by which to garnish someone's wages should they move out of town with an outstanding debt to the city of LaGrange. But, regardless of how often the reasoning gets modified, the spirit of the Privacy Act and of the Fair Housing Act is violated and those disproportionately impacted are Latinx immigrants, many of whom do not have a social security number.

For over fifteen years, immigrants have been summarily denied access to water, heat, and electricity. The result is that it reduced access to affordable housing, relegating immigrants to substandard housing and opening them up to other forms of exploitation by unscrupulous landlords. After years of trying to negotiate with the

city—writing letters to the editor, organizing vigils, and even running for city council—we were finally able to partner with the National Immigration Law Center and the Southern Center for Human Rights to bring a lawsuit against the city of LaGrange. We were able to leverage our friendships to get plaintiffs who would be willing to say that they had been adversely affected by this policy.

The lawsuit is currently being appealed by our attorneys after a lower court dismissal, but there has already been a small victory; just the litigation itself has caused the city to unofficially change its practice. While the policy remains intact, if you refuse or decline to provide a social security number, they won't deny you services. Instead, they'll charge you the maximum deposit of \$500. We are still not pleased with this as it is still not written policy. We remain committed to ensuring access to fair housing for all. After all, what better sanctuary is there than to live in the security and dignity of one's home.

KL: *Historically, the provision of sanctuary has relied on ecclesial authority, be that a religious institution or clergy person, to create a space where fugitives can find protection often from unjust arrest. You're not a clergy person. I guess the question is: Are there practices of sanctuary that you employ that aren't reliant on religious authority or the provision of institutional space? Does Casa Alterna practice aspects of sanctuary without sanction?*

AFM: I once heard the term “civil disobedience” restated as “divine obedience.” Therefore, if one defines religious authority as obedience to a divine authority, we're being very faithful. But does the state recognize our authority as legitimate? Who knows? Perhaps this is a question of religious freedom in an era of harsh anti-immigrant policies and laws.

We have done sanctuary in ways that may be countercultural. Aside from being arrested for acts of civil disobedience outside an immigration detention center, we've expressed our commitment to divine obedience in a myriad of ways. We've cared for a newborn child whose parents were incarcerated and facing deportation. We've been given power of attorney for several children as preparation in case parents find themselves ensnared in our deportation pipeline. We've been a safe place where women with the additional vulnerability of unlawful presence in the United States can find safety as they muster the courage to leave an abusive relationship. As our name, Casa Alterna, hints at, sanctuary is an alternative to a world that is unsafe for the damned of this world.

Sometimes this is behind-the-scenes work, sometimes it's more public. In 2011, the legislature of Georgia passed House Bill 86. Deemed one of the harshest laws confronting immigrants in the US, HB86 amongst other things created harsh punishments for anyone who “harbored” unauthorized immigrants. This section of the law could have been so broadly interpreted that someone could potentially have



Figure 2. Anton Flores-Maisonet walking from El Sauce to La Libertad in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo courtesy of Bryan Babcock.

been prosecuted for knowingly renting to or housing someone who was undocumented, like many of the folks we have worked with through Casa Alternativa. Motivated by the tenets of our faith, we publicly joined the lawsuit stating it would be a direct prohibition of our vocational call to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger.

One of our inspirations is the Catholic Worker movement and its vision of every congregation having a house of hospitality and every family a Christ room in which to welcome Jesus in the disguise of the stranger. The question for us then is, Who are we willing to host in our Christ room? And if Christ is in need of sanctuary, will we offer it? I think we would; I pray we would.

KL: *It strikes me—getting back to this idea of sanctuary drawing on religious authority—that rather than relying on religious authority, what you’ve relied on in the construction of sanctuary is a more democratic practice of empowering neighbors, acknowledging a common humanity, and offering protection from unwanted and oppressive, racist policies. You’ve resisted immigration control through empowerment of voice and agency on the block.*

AFM: Yes, while it remains deeply rooted in spiritual values, at Casa Alterna sanctuary is both creative and subversive. In the early days of Alterna one of the more creative and subversive initiatives we launched was a program called “Maneja en Paz” (Drive in Peace). This was a cooperative where anyone, licensed or unlicensable, could pay a \$100-a-year membership. If any member were ever charged with driving without a license and without any disqualifying additional offenses, like DUI or excessive speeding, the cooperative would pay the first \$700 of their fine. Maneja en Paz was creative and brilliant; it provided a tangible way for immigrants and allies to stand in solidarity and stand against exploitive, dehumanizing laws that criminalized folks driving to work, worship, or Walmart. Through a series of events, local authorities caught wind and said that this might be misconstrued as insurance fraud. I was angry at the system for arresting working poor immigrants for simply driving, but I was also afraid of possible sanctions that could be imposed against me for organizing Maneja en Paz. I consulted with a human rights attorney and she fueled my fear, but I also spoke with a human rights organizer and she encouraged me to go public with our cooperative. She believed it was the only way to make it a true act of civil disobedience, especially one that sought to provoke the conscience of the majority of uninformed Georgians. In the end, state laws became more repressive and we discontinued the cooperative, but not our unwavering commitment to immigrant justice. The practice of sanctuary as welcome and refuge can animate many forms of cooperative ventures.

KL: *It’s the same tension that was at work between the Tucson branch and the Chicago branch of the sanctuary movement of the 1980s. How public should they go? Was the purpose one of accompaniment in which we are tailoring our political acts to the needs of migrants? Or is this a political movement where the larger policy shifts are the goal with an understanding that some local migrants may be exposed to a greater risk of deportation? I think your intuitions tend toward the primacy of relationships, more in the Tucson mode.²*

AFM: Yeah, and that internal debate or discussion still goes on today. There are churches that are doing sanctuary publicly. And then there are underground safe houses. We are always seeking to find ways to be faithful to the Gospel even if it means subverting the state. I’m pragmatic enough not just to do anything in the name of defiance. But we’re always trying to creatively imagine alternatives to the state’s exclusion of immigrants. Who else has thought of forming a little cooperative to pay for unjust tickets? If there’s another model, I’d like to learn from it. Driving while Brown and being arrested or ticketed for driving unlicensable is not unique to LaGrange. Immigration detention confines approximately forty thousand per day across the United States. But in remote Lumpkin, Georgia, a small group of us

dreamt of offering refuge, hospitality, and resistance. We were informed and inspired by other models, but subversion necessitates creativity. We're always trying to figure out creative ways to just remain faithful to the Gospel regardless of what the current policies are.

That's where the name *Alterna* comes from: an alterna-tive. A sanctuary is always an alternative reality to what the dominant systems are doing. You provide safety that does not exist outside your walls.

KL: *It takes us back again to this idea of sanctuary as a practice of reciprocity rather than a unidirectional, paternalistic provision of aid. Rather than, I create a sanctuary for you, it's a reciprocal giving and receiving of gifts that involves mutual recognition of common humanity.*

AFM: Yes, and at the same time I have to figure out, is there sanctuary for my own heart? One of the things I would admit and confess to is that decades of justice work comes at a cost. I carry my own wounds from struggling against systems of oppression. If I allow the toxicity of those wounds to fester in my heart it breeds an unhealthy form of anger. Not just anger at the system, but just a generalized anger where the recipients of that poison at times are the people closest to me, including myself. Therefore, sanctuary also means creating a space where one's own heart can also be healed. Is there a place for one's heart to find refuge in a world that is driven by fear and violence? That's probably the hardest battle: to find the sanctuary within that leads to creating spaces of sanctuary in the world. Some of the least peaceful people I know are peacemakers. And, at times, I am one of those people. How can one keep a radical edge and an engaged vision of what Charles Eisenstein calls "that more beautiful world our hearts know is possible," and yet keep a heart that has space for present moments of beauty, love, and joy?

KL: *What does that mean in your practice? How do you create sanctuary within?*

AFM: When I'm at my best, it's knowing how to keep a balance with technology; it's carving out time for solitude and silence. Those are my best practices. Prayer, meditation, mindfulness, solitude, and unplugging from the rat race. Presently, I regularly visit a spiritual director and practice contemplative prayer. In this moment of silent attention to God, because of some personal grief and loss, sometimes the best I can offer is my body but not my inner stillness. But I have to be okay and be gracious with myself. I remember asking a Benedictine monk once about his prayer practices. He lives in a community where they pray four times a day, including every day at four in the morning. I asked the monk if he ever had difficulty meditating and if he ever actually fell asleep during some prayers. His response back was very simple. "Yes, I fall asleep sometimes, but there's no better place to fall asleep than the lap of Jesus." What a lesson that was for me; a lesson in grace. So that's been

me lately; even this morning during prayer, my mind was wandering on half a million things. And while that tells me something about my inner condition, it's ultimately a reminder to be gentle with myself because this world can be cruel enough on its own.

Kyle B. T. Lambelet teaches and researches at the intersection of political theology, religious ethics, and social change at Emory University. His current research explores the moral and political dimensions of nonviolent struggle. His forthcoming book *¡Presente! Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead* develops an extended case study of the movement to close the School of the Americas.

Anton Flores-Maisonet is cofounder of Casa Alterna, a hospitality house located in a West Georgia neighborhood of first-wave immigrants, primarily from Guatemala. Casa Alterna is committed to faithful acts of justice, mercy, and solidarity. Flores-Maisonet is also cofounder of El Refugio Ministry and Georgia Detention Watch. Casa Alterna has been named Organization of the Year by *Mundo Hispánico*, Atlanta's largest Spanish newspaper. You can follow Anton on Instagram and Twitter at @antonofalterna and Casa Alterna on Facebook at facebook.com/alternacommunity.

Notes

This interview was conducted on April 26, 2018.

1. The Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) is an advocacy and base-building organization focused on empowering Latinx immigrants in Georgia. In their defend-your-rights sessions they educate immigrants on the legal rights they have when encountering law enforcement officials. For more information, visit www.glahr.org/.
2. For a brief introduction to the differences between the Tucson and Chicago approaches to sanctuary see Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 61–70.

References

- Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.