

An immigrant's eye

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue



OUTSIDER: Will Smith plays Dr. Bennet Omalu, the Nigerian-born doctor who took on the NFL over the long-term neurological effects of football on players. Photo by Melinda Sue Gordon. © 2015 Columbia Pictures. All rights reserved.

My friend Bethel Lee was born in Korea and immigrated to California. In seminary, she studied Wendell Berry's theological form of localism but grew tired of his celebration of the local and the rooted. Doesn't the Bible also tell an immigrant's story, she wondered, a story not of staying put but of going to a new land that God will unveil in due time?

Israel maintains its identity when it's violently removed from its land. It settles down in exile, building dwellings, and marrying and giving in marriage. Lee's father is an evangelical pastor in California, and she is doing work in the United Church of Canada in ways nobody could have predicted. Isn't this as biblical as Berry's localism?

An immigrant story is at the heart of the movie *Concussion*. Dr. Bennet Omalu (Will Smith) is a Nigerian immigrant to America who takes on the National Football League, showing that the violence of America's favorite game is causing long-term neurological disease in many of its athletes. Omalu doesn't care about football, so he's not tempted to join in the conspiracy of silence about the adverse effects of the game. If the game goes the way of bear baiting, so what?

Omalu's status as an outsider is complicated by competing ideas of what America is. When the FBI shows up at his office with trumped-up charges, Omalu objects: "Not

even in Nigeria could we come up with such a thing.” He laments to a friend that he’s criticized something “as American” as football, and the friend reassures him that in challenging the system, he’s doing the most American thing he could do.

In an immigrant story, outsiders bring truth to a society that can no longer see its flaws. When Omalu presents his research to a fellow MD, he’s met with the not-entirely-scientific objection, “But football is freaking fantastic!” Sure—and formerly magnificent athletes are reduced to becoming homeless, hearing voices, harming their families, mutilating themselves, and committing suicide. Omalu’s outsider status is crucial to his prophetic stand.

In taking on American football, Omalu is supported by faith as well as science. *Concussion* is a surprisingly religious (not just spiritual) movie. Omalu’s faithfulness is central to his character. He meets his future wife in church. He has a Bible bedside, visible as a reassuring token when trolls park outside his apartment in efforts to intimidate him. “God did not intend us to play football,” Omalu insists to another physician. “Let’s leave God out of this,” the man objects, but the movie does not. God can’t be left out of it. A former NFL team doctor tells Omalu that in his home state of Louisiana, “God is number one,” said as he holds up two fingers, “. . . and football number two,” said with only one finger. Omalu’s boss warns him, “You’re taking on a corporation that owns a day of the week, the one the church used to own.”

At the morgue where he works, Omalu orders extra tests at his own expense, laboring expertly and self-sacrificially to determine how otherwise perfectly healthy men are losing their minds and dying in their forties. The NFL and other doctors repeatedly seek to undercut his credentials. Where did he go to medical school? In *Nigeria*?

Omalu treats his dead patients with dignity, talking to them—incurring the disdain of other pathologists, whom he asks to help determine how patients died. He uses sterilized instruments on corpses as though they were living and says he’s glad to have “met” them, even though he never knew them while they were alive. His speaking to the dead feels like a kind of prayer, one not likely taught in any medical school.

*Concussion* might remind the church that it needs immigrant voices to ground our biblically rooted immigrant stories. Yes, the church and theology should root us in the neighborhood, the soil, and an ecologically attentive way of life. But whereas

reading Wendell Berry may leave us longing to live in the same town as our great-grandparents, farming with the same tools, the immigrant's story opens up our eyes to the fact that God sometimes calls us to tell a new story and an old story at the same time.