



To be or not be... In times of coronavirus

By Maria Valentina Aduen Ramirez

I am from a Barranquilla, a small town on the north coast of Colombia, and at the core of my life, I have always found fulfillment in building community and being an active, intense, and inquisitive citizen. From high school elections; through the arts, performing with a theater group in college; to militating in political campaigns in my professional life; I have always had a sense of responsibility to help better the worlds around me. So you would imagine the shock when I arrived in the United States and was told that I was not a citizen. Even in academia, my heroes have been Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Chantal Mouffe, they were the first people I read in college who I felt a deep intellectual connection with and found my calling in wanting to work and talk about publics and communication for social change, in which engaged citizenship was at the center!

But here I was, labeled an “Alien”, a non-citizen, it contradicted everything that I have tried to embody my entire life, imagine my identity crisis. It’s not like I passed through immigration at the airport and bam! I was in shock. I still had my rose-colored glasses on when I arrived in NY and it took time to feel displaced. It wasn’t until little things started to happen. One night I was out with my friends (who were a group of

Colombian friends that had also migrated for different reasons and life brought us together in NY) and a group of guys was hitting on us, we weren't interested and wanted to be left alone, but they were being very aggressive in their approach, to the point we felt very uncomfortable. I was planning the whole escape in my head, but then fear crept in, I had been warned by the program that I migrated with, that I couldn't get in any kind of trouble or I would immediately get deported and that's when it got real. These guys could press charges if I hit them (let's be real, I didn't have a chance to win that fight, but blame it on all the Jackie Chan movies from my childhood, I had hope!). These men were American and I was not, if they accused me of anything I would have a record and I would be kicked out of this country. From that moment on this is a fear that always creeps in, from getting a traffic ticket to deleting nasty posts about Trump in social media, I live with the fear that creeps up at times and limits my performance of Valentina. It's a fear that silences some parts of my identity that for better or for worse, I don't have the option to explore.

This anecdote and the things that I don't get to do as an immigrant because of the many fears that invade me might seem insignificant. But this is a fear that in times of emergency like today, with COVID-19 creeping into our lives, takes a whole other level! Being labeled a "Legal Alien", an "Illegal Alien" or a "Citizen" becomes more significant during a health pandemic. Knowing that there is a hierarchy of worthiness as a human being is scary, but being in the lower tier of that hierarchy is terrifying! I was speaking with my best friend who lives in a city in this country. I will call her "Daniela"

and avoid any identifiers for safety purposes, which made me realize how severe this situation is for immigrants. “Daniela” is an undocumented citizen, or what the government would label as an “illegal alien”, she is married to another undocumented citizen and they have a 5-month-old baby that is the center of their world right now. “Daniela” called me so I could help her choose the right words and communicate with her boss that she didn’t feel safe coming to work because there was too much traffic in the workplace. You see, “Daniela’s” boss has kept the workplace at the same capacity pre-pandemic and said that they were safe, because the virus only attacked old people and if they get sick, they have access to doctors that can come set up all the necessary resources in an extra room of her house to quarantine whoever gets affected, certain that it would be a quick recovery and life can go normal as usual. What Daniela’s boss didn’t consider and what “Daniela” wanted to word properly is the following:

Dear Boss, (Setting up the conversation, being thankful for having a job and making sure white American boss knows how much “Daniela” appreciates her generosity in allowing her to work for her)... “given the circumstances around this virus I am afraid for my family and I feel so scared for us, given our immigration status and healthcare coverage we cannot afford to get sick. It is unknown whether we would be significantly ill or not, but this is something that I am not willing to gamble with. I wanted to stay home and not come over because of any given day (here she describes the insane amount of people coming in and out of the work environment, I am omitting it because it has too

many identifiers that could put my friend at risk)... I know you are taking the necessary measures to stay safe (not true! But you can't tell the boss they are ignorant and irresponsible), but I can't know for sure what measure the other people coming in and out are taking when they leave the space and who they are interacting with or if they are taking any social distancing precautions at all..."

At the core of Daniela's fear as she expressed to me through the phone was that if anyone in her family got sick and they went to the hospital and there was only one respirator left and it was between giving it to them or an American citizen, Daniela, and her family would be left to die. During COVID-19 it is a matter of life and death, this is not an exaggeration, and deportation is the least of immigrants' fears right now, in fact, we would rather be deported than die!

To begin unpacking my feelings and my response after I heard all this would be impossible in a couple of pages, but I immediately went to my research (I had been procrastinating writing final papers for school, they seemed insignificant when I was dealing with life and death conversations with family and friends and I honestly did not have the headspace for them), but I had to do something cathartic and I had to release some of my anger and impotence. I kept questioning this idea of citizenship and how some of us are considered second class citizens or non-citizens at all. I found refuge in my Latinx literature about identity, border rhetoric, mobility studies, and representation. I couldn't (or don't know how) use the personal narratives surrounding my life, but I

found in the videos of the protests of the men and women imprisoned in ICE detention centers, the voices that expressed the latent fears of immigrants during COVID-19. Because of their limited space, every fear that we all felt, was heightened and more emergent than we could ever experience. Their experiences within the detention centers made that disparity between belonging or not in the United States more latent, and the abandonment of the state when you are on the wrong side of that distinction more evident. One of the biggest fears of being an immigrant is being deported, being stripped of the life that you have built in this country, but today our biggest fear is dying. The oppression is real and I could feel it with the stories of my friends, at a time of crises our disenfranchisement has taken a whole other level. These are desperate times in need of desperate means and raising our voices is more necessary than ever, because our lives might depend on it.

