

Raul Vaquero

From Ahuehuetitla to Brooklyn: Life under the COVID-19 pandemic and the Trump

Administration

It's March 18th, a Wednesday afternoon in Union Square. It's my last day of work, and soon enough it'll be my last day of in-class sessions. It's a strange scene, usually, this part of NYC is packed with office workers, students, and pedestrians bumping into each other rushing to their daily commute. Today the streets are nearly empty; it seems like many people decided to stay home, at least those that have that type of luxury. There are people out here still working: charging, lifting, breaking, building, or driving, but no one really pays attention to those people. Not while the rich treat NYC like their playground. Little do they realize some of those people are often immigrants. In fact, about one in four workers in New York is an immigrant ("Immigrants in New York"). Yet they generally lack access to federal aid programs such as Medicaid, food stamps, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (*Undocumented Population*). I would know as the son of immigrant parents. The stories of my parents and relatives recount the injustices they face on an everyday basis. From subtle discrimination to being unjustly treated in the workplace. "Si, no molesta, pero estamos aquí por el bien de ustedes," they would often say. How selfless of them. How unfair it is to them. To my neighbor next door and down the hall and across the street and around the block. They all ought to be home, but that's not how things work in the United States of America.

In the US, congress in 1882 established the public charge concept for the sake of allowing the US government to deny a U.S visa to anyone who, "is likely at any time to become a public

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charge” — but without defining what “public charge” means (*Public Charge | USCIS*). Under the Trump administration, the “Public Charge rule” is being interpreted broadly to reduce the number of people who are eligible for green cards and other visas, by penalizing those on any form of government assistance. Therefore the Trump administration defines a public charge as an alien who receives one or more public benefits. This rule unabashedly targets poorer immigrants using a merit-based system that is grounded in racist ideologies. Over the years the rule has been subjectively enforced. For example, in the early twentieth century, immigration officials on Ellis Island used the law to bar immigrants who were “likely to become public charges as an effective means of denying entry to Jewish immigrants” (Lee 49). Today the Trump administration has taken this rule to incite hatred, fear, and long-lasting trauma. My family and community face the brunt of this rule.

It's March 19th, every Thursday I visit my parents. The neighborhood I moved to gives off the same calm vibe it does every day. Unlike Flatbush, the block is always loud and vibrant. Today things were quiet. Not a soul on the stoops or police sirens declaring ownership of the neighborhood. I knew today would be the last day I came to visit them, at least for a while. My mom wasn't looking too good. I hope it's just a fever. News about my dad's only brother being in the hospital filled me with doubt. Virgencita please watch over her.

It's Tuesday evening, March 24th, I get the news that “papa y mama se lo pasan tirados en la cama” says my little sister. This is news I thought I'd never hear. They wouldn't allow it, my dad can't go a day without working and my mom can't go a minute without doing something. She

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often tells us that she'll get all the rest she needs when it's time for her to go. I'm not ready for that. I turn on the tv for the sake of distracting myself, but the headlines about the virus only stress me even more. "20-somethings now realizing that they can get coronavirus, too"(Freytas-Tamura), "Gobernador de Nueva York pide 30,000 ventiladores para los afectados por coronavirus;" ("Gobernador de Nueva York"), "Density is New York City's Big 'Enemy' in the Coronavirus Fight" ("*Density Is New York*"). Did my dad catch it from his workplace or did my mom catch it while running errands? Who else might be sick? I call my aunt who lives upstairs from my parents. She picks up and before she even says a word she's coughing her lungs out. My parents were like that just a few days ago. She mentions to me that uncle wasn't feeling too well either and thinks he might have passed it on to her. What does this mean for my younger cousins? With school out, what are they going to eat or learn? Before another thought even crosses my mind my cousin calls me. His dad, my father's only brother, is on the ventilator. He's tested positive and they think he might not make it. I think back to what el Vicegobernador de Tejas said that "los abuelos están dispuestos a morir por coronavirus para no dañar la economía" ("Vicegobernador de Tejas"), who in their right mind would say such a thing. He might be undocumented and old, but who died and appointed you the spokesperson for someone else's life?

It's March 25th, I got word from my siblings that our parents aren't okay and that my tio from upstairs is too sick to get out of bed. How are my cousins, Christian and Danny going to survive? They're only ten and seven years old. It's a 40-minute walk from my place to theirs. I have to do it, because how else are they going to eat if my aunt and uncle are coughing their lungs out like

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my parents? I get a blocked caller ID number calling me “Raúl I'm scared, are my parents going to be okay?” I realized shortly after it's Christian. I didn't know what to say. All I could do was share the little positivity I had left. “They'll be okay, I'll be dropping off some food soon, I made all your favorites,” I say in an effort to cheer them up. I hear Danny crying in the background. Can she hear through my lies or is she just as scared as I am? Christian explains to me that, “Danny is scared that someone is going to come while our mom and dad are sick.” I know exactly who that someone is, she's imagining again that ICE will take advantage of her parents while they're bedridden. “Danny, it's going to be okay, no one is going to come. Everyone has been ordered to stay home and that means even those bad people.” Is this one of those times when it's okay to lie? This sucks. Things are only going to get worse and I don't want to lose anybody.

It's April 3rd, I log onto my laptop in hopes of finding out that the situation is getting better, but there are now over a million cases globally of COVID-19; 50,000 people have died. The United States has over 270,000 cases and over 6500 people have died (*COVID-19 Maps, Graphs, & Figures* |NCSD). If my parents heard about this they'd find it weird because here in NYC we have strict sheltering and stay at home orders that are being enforced and also, in many other states. Yet what I'm seeing is that in other states, there are no orders at all. For instance, the state of Georgia just issued a statewide shelter in place. The governor Brian Kempt claims that he had just learned that asymptomatic people can spread the virus too. A cousin of mine from Atlanta was convinced that it was all a conspiracy. Up until he heard about how most of our family members were on the brink of dying because of the virus. This misinformation is happening

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because of the Trump administration's response to all this. Instead of prioritizing the safety of every walk of life, they are strategizing new ways to sustain their own self-interests. By shifting the discourse to stopping the dique “growing threat of cartels, criminals, terrorists, and other malign actors [that] will try to exploit the situation for their own gain” (“Remarks by President Trump”). What he is doing is morally despicable. It’s even more infuriating to realize that this is him running a reelection campaign during a pandemic. While my parents, tias, tios, cousins, and neighbors suffer in isolation. This man is going above and beyond to maintain his power while others cling to their life. According to my siblings, my parents couldn’t move an inch. It was too hard for them and even harder to speak without feeling like a fish out the fishbowl. I called later that day to find out how they were doing, but it was pointless nothing had changed, and even if something did my younger siblings wouldn’t tell me. I’m sure my parents had something to do with that.

It’s April 23rd, the Trump administration is yet again targeting immigrants. Like it wasn’t enough to bring back the public charge rule during this pandemic. On Wednesday, Trump signed off on an executive order limiting certain immigrants from coming into the country for 60 days (“Proclamation Suspending Entry”). He, of course, cited the pandemic and uses the same language he has been using since he announced that he was going to be running for president. It’s racist, anti-immigrant, and it’s all based on the premise that he is protecting American jobs. I don’t where in that shallow mind of his that he thinks he is protecting anything. This country wouldn’t be able to survive if it weren’t for undocumented farmworkers who are putting food on

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the tables of every household in America. Despite that, the Trump administration continues to throw refugees and immigrants under the bus.

Today is May 19th and it's also mental health awareness month. The most distressing part about all this so far is that every waking morning I read about the number of deaths that are piling up. The data and statistics don't capture the severity of having family members infected with the virus. It's been over 60 days since I last got to see my family. I miss seeing them. These days I even sometimes have trouble processing my emotions as I hear about relatives or friends losing the fight against COVID-19. May they all rest in power.

It's July 31st, the last day I'll cease to receive the extra \$600 unemployment benefits. A week from today I'll be forced to return back to work. With my parents almost fully recovered from the virus, I wrestle with the anxiety of having to step outside of my house for the first since March. I can't believe the government is allowing businesses to reopen.

It's August 6th, not a soul on the streets but your occasional driver speeding by. This intersect is normally bustling with honks, sirens, or screeches. On my way to the train, it takes about nine minutes and in those nine minutes, I see less than five people. Inside the train cart, there are less than that allowing the chemicals MTA employees used to sanitize the train to smack you behind your mask. During this 45 minute commute from avenue M to union square, less than six people board the train. Walking out of the station your usual crowd of cheese players, yogis, tourists, and people who are homeless are nowhere in sight. Just their belongings that no one ever stole:

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milk crates, foldable tables, chairs. Rags, new papers, and books. It's all there, but they aren't.

The only noise at Union Square now is the rustling of garbage in the form of tumbleweed making its way down across the steps. At work, I'm greeted at the front door followed by a temperature check, new gloves, a new mask, and bottles of hand sanitizer. There's a plastic divider separating half of the coffee shop leaving no room for direct contact with any customer.

Every thirty minutes we must wipe the entire store down with bleached rags. Even if there isn't a customer, this is the new routine. This is the new normal.

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