An antidote to fear

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A lady selling candy with her child on her back gets on the train. “Chicles, golosinas,” (chewing gum, sweets) she announces in Spanish. I have bumped into her in almost every morning ride I’ve taken since I arrived in New York. From the way she carries her child, using a large thick colorful cloth tied in the middle of her chest, I know she must be from the southamerican Andean region. No matter what, she’s always smiling and trying to sell her products, keeping at ease while her child either sleeps or plays with a toy in her hand.

But I haven’t seen them since last week. The fear is real and I’m beginning to feel it too. I am an Afro Indigenous communications professional from Peru, participating in a Human Rights program at Columbia University. Like the lady in the subway, I have a child too, a toddler, but I avoid taking her with me in the train, or anywhere far from our temporary home in Harlem.

I must confess I wasn’t always this fearful of circumstances. My advocacy work consisted, for many years, in traveling to far flung places, sometimes spending three to four days navigating turbulent waters in the Amazon. My job was to document some of the most outrageous crimes against nature and people: from oil spills covering and

disappearing entire lakes, to Indigenous children ill due to heavy metal exposure. Yet, the mere thought of being forcefully separated from my child paralyzes me.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, at least 8,768 people had been arrested within the first two weeks of Donald Trump's administration for not having a regularized migratory status. The Trump administration has catalogued all undocumented immigrants as criminals, but according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), failing to comply with administrative migratory procedures constitutes a civil offence, not a criminal one.

Churches, schools and other public places are emptying out from fear of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids. Cases of families being ripped apart have been shared on social media, and hundreds of asylum seekers, including complete families, were deported and spent weeks stranded in Panama, fearing to be returned to the dangers they were fleeing from. What's worse, dozens of people were sent to Guantanamo, an "emblematic" prison facility for torture and human rights violations, without access to legal defense or communication with their families, according to a suit by the ACLU. A report by *The Washington Post* gathered testimonies of released Guantanamo prisoners who said the treatment was so inhumane "some detainees tried to kill themselves."

Hope is the antidote to fear. So this time I'm riding the subway to the Bronx, where a family of undocumented immigrants have turned their restaurant, La Morada, into a community kitchen to serve those in need. As soon as I arrive and introduce myself,

Natalia Mendez, a cheerful lady, fixes a table for me. She then brings corn tortillas and a dish of steak, “en salsa verde con nopal,” as courtesy.

I take my time to eat and observe how busy they are. People come in and out, others wait by the door to be given food. Mendez, who is tending tables, and also cooking, and also cleaning, is the heart, body and soul of the place. She manages La Morada with the help of her son, Marco, and her husband, Antonio. I see three other people working, two in the kitchen and one organizing lunch boxes for take away.

“We started La Morada 15 years ago, but the community kitchen developed during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Mendez explains to me, during a break from work that I have sort of forced her to take. “We made 200 plates of soup that were finished within an hour, so the next day we decided to make more.” She details that after a few days, they received a small donation from a friend, started a crowdfunding campaign and continued receiving food supplies from farm workers. “The farm work force is us, Indigenous peoples, and we’re all connected,” she says, explaining how solidarity simply flowed.

Being of Indigenous Mixteca origin, from Mexico, Méndez takes pride not only on her culinary knowledge, but on these higher values. “We work in ‘Tequio’,” Méndez says, which is a Nahuatl word that explains the logic of reciprocity. I tell her that in Peru, we use the Quechua word “mink’a.”

Natalia Mendez behind the counter of La Morada. Photo: Kathia Carrillo

When I ask how people who frequent La Morada are dealing with Donald Trump's migration policies, Méndez mentions she has seen people afraid, sad, almost in despair, but says they provide them with comfort, because it is not the first time they go through tough times.

According to an article from the Migration Policy Institute, the foundations of many of the migration policies we see today were established during President Bill Clinton's period, and started being fully deployed after 9/11, by George Bush's administration. A report by the ACLU published in 2020 found that the private immigration detention system

expanded by 50% during president Trump's first term, which was also the time when the Zero Tolerance policy was implemented. This policy resulted in at least 5,569 children to be separated from their parents, according to a report published in The Atlantic. Undoubtedly, the cruel measures have escalated, with the re-implementation of the 1798 Alien Act, used to send innocent people to concentration camps in El Salvador.

Regardless, La Morada keeps lifting spirits. "El escudo es la comunidad (Community is the shield)," Mendez says emphatically, highlighting that it is mutual aid that tackles the furious attacks the immigrant community is facing.

I learned about La Morada via a Peruvian friend living in Brooklyn. She had gone to a "Know your rights" workshop at The New School, organized by immigrant activists, professors and the university itself, where they served La Morada's delicious fajitas as snacks. There, the participants were informed about their rights, the legal strategies to confront ICE, and the big network of organizations, collectives and places in New York everyone can rely on.

"La Morada is like a refuge and a sanctuary; we bring harmony. Have you seen how many people have come here so far?" asks Mendez. I nod at the truth. She has interrupted the interview briefly, a couple of times, to hand out lunch boxes at the entrance and set some tables for visitors.

"They wouldn't have to come here if the authorities were doing their job," Mendez says, after she hands out a food package to someone who, according to her, is homeless. It is

the people without a home, the refugees and the immigrant workers in need who mostly come to La Morada. “I’d like ICE to tell me where all these people would go if we are not here,” she says in visible frustration. “Have they thought of that? What will happen to the fields? How are they going to feed people if we’re not here?”

Solidarity and knowledge have proved to be useful at making ICE agents’ current work more difficult. La Morada and other organizations use their facilities and social media platforms to share important information on immigrant rights, as well as uplifting stories showing how mutual aid and legal information are helping people prevent detentions.

After my lunch and interview are over, I thank and say goodbye to Natalia Mendez and her son. They kindly offer me soup to take home and tell me I’m welcome back anytime I need. On my way to the subway station, I notice a huge mural on a wall on 146th street. It was painted by “Gran Om”, a mexican art collective almost every latin american activist is familiar with. The wall belongs to the “Red de Pueblos Transnacionales” (Transnational Villages Network), another collective space for organized resistance.

The mural depicts the profiles of racialized people, symmetrically painted on both sides, with an earth globe in the middle, under which the word “Immigrants” is written. On top, a text in Spanish reads “To fight separately is to lose together”. Indeed, the struggle is a joint struggle, and it is community, unity and solidarity that makes us thrive under

oppressing systems that use fear to paralyze us.

Mural by “Gran Om” on E146th street, between Willis Avenue and Third Avenue.