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Hear Me Out: Maru Mora-Villalpando, the Deportation Machine, and the Universal Meaning of Liberation

When Maru Mora-Villalpando decided to come out as an undocumented immigrant, she was not thinking about herself, but of the thousands of other undocumented immigrants currently detained at the Northwest Detention Center, or NWDC in Tacoma, Washington. Facing horrific conditions, these immigrants were forced into deportation proceedings after the ICE found out about their status as illegal immigrants. Four years later, Mora-Villalpando is facing the same threat of deportation, convinced that the ICE was sending her a direct message to stop her activism, to give up. When she first received the letter, Mora-Villalpando responded “They are sending me a message. They want me to stop. And I won’t stop” (Mora-Villalpando). Maru Mora-Villalpando’s actions in the face of impending threats, violence and loss impel us not only to look critically at the implicit assumptions we carry around the meaning of courage, but also at what those assumptions mean for the ways in which freedom is constructed on a national scale.

A native of Mexico City, Maru Mora-Villalpando has lived and worked in Washington State for twenty-five years after overstaying the tourist visa that brought her originally to the United States. While not a citizen of the United States, Villalpando’s actions have made her a central part of the Washington State community. According to Joseph Denton in his article “More than Undocumented,” “Villalpando’s experience as an undocumented immigrant has defined her life’s mission” (Denton). For more than half her life, Villalpando has worked to end deportation for all immigrants in Washington State, working through various organizations including NWDC Resistance and the #Not1More movement, which works to shut down ICE deportation facilities like the Northwest Detention Center. When asked how being under threat of deportation affects her activism, Villalpando responded, “Sometimes I feel that if I say I’m an activist it sounds very

individualistic. It's more like community organizer, because I feel like I'm helping organize a community I'm a part of" (Denton). This ideology is central to activist communities around the world. Lila Watson, an international activist famously said, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" ("The Origin"). Not only do these words reflect the sentiment behind worldwide activism, but it also clearly illustrates the message Maru Mora-Villalpando is sending about immigration in the United States. Beyond its goals of improving the lives of immigrants in Washington State, the movement to end deportation is, at its heart, an effort to take down the idea that the differences between us are enough to separate the very tenants of freedom by which we live, not just in the United States, but universally. All liberation is bound up together, such that injury to one should serve as a call to all to end the denial of freedom.

Actively working against a notion of equality and liberation is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, the government agency in charge of deportation proceedings in the United States. Under the Trump administration, ICE's total number of arrests and deportations has skyrocketed, increasing by twenty-five percent in a single year (Associated Press). In her work against what she calls the "deportation machine", Maru Mora-Villalpando is working directly against ICE, using legal, social, and even physical protests against the NWDC, an ICE facility in partnership with the private prison corporation GEO (Mora-Villalpando). According to Angela Snodgrass Godoy, "Too many people are unaware that ICE is operating outside the law, it is operating outside due process, and outside the constitutional guarantees that are afforded all of us in the USA" (UWCHR). Many of the deportations that occur in Washington State are possible only because the Department of Licensing provided ICE with personal information of Washington residents without a court order. Maru Mora-Villalpando has

been personally affected by ICE's illegal actions. Speaking out in an interview for Democracy Now, Villalpando said, "We believe this is a clear targeting of people that have dared to not only question the system, but to fight the system, that we are outspoken, that we are public about it, that we're not afraid. And it's obviously clear that they're going after us right now" (Mora-Villalpando). In illegally gathering the personal information of immigrants in the United States, ICE is attempting to suppress the voices of those who dare to speak out against their regime by limiting free speech and exercising their control by forcing those people out of the country.

When describing Maru Mora-Villalpando's actions, the word 'despite' is used to convey the meaning of her actions in light of the great personal risks she is taking. An article in the South Seattle Emerald said that "[a]lways found in the front of movements she is part of, even despite her immigration status, Villalpando is a true leader" (Denton). The University of Washington Center for Human Rights claims that "despite the deportation proceedings against her, Maru Mora-Villalpando is undeterred in her activism" (UWCHR). The word 'despite' is also used by the NWDC Resistance itself, which speaks of the actions of the hunger strikers in the detention center who are refusing food in protest of the unlivable conditions to which they are subjected. The NWDC Resistance writes that their "heroic efforts to bring light to the abuses of immigration detention despite repression have led the state of Washington to take action" ("Hunger Strike Victory"). By definition, in order for an action to be courageous, it must have been associated with personal stakes. What makes the actions of Maru Mora-Villalpando so demonstrative of courage is the knowledge of what she was risking, and what she still could lose, by standing up for what she believed in.

The same day that Maru Mora-Villalpando revealed that she was an undocumented immigrant, she chained herself to other activists to prevent a bus full of immigrants from leaving

the detention center. That day, she was putting her body, her life, and ultimately her freedom on the line—risking everything she had in the name of liberation. Despite knowing that her actions would put herself in many forms of danger, she still acted to save the lives of those people in the bus. Speaking of the experience, Villalpando said, “We actually made contact with the people inside the bus. We could see their hands waving, and to me that’s when I realized this is why we did it. This why I don’t care if I get arrested right now, I don’t care if I get put into deportation proceedings. They saw us. They know what we’re willing to do to stop this” (Denton). By taking these risks, Maru Mora-Villalpando was able to stop the deportation of a bus full of immigrants with the knowledge that she too may someday be forced into a similar bus. Her actions not only work to prevent these actions from being taken against her, but, more importantly, they are working to take down the oppressive structure that allows for the destructive discrimination that is affecting an entire group that is so valuable to all aspects of our community.

While it is undeniable that Maru Mora-Villalpando’s actions demonstrate civic courage, her story asks us to look more critically about the way we view courage and the assumptions we hold about its meaning. Villalpando has spent her life advocating for immigrant rights—freedom of speech, freedom to legal representation, access to privacy, access to food, water, and shelter, access to a home, freedom from violence. Do these sound familiar? These rights are not just constitutionally guaranteed to all American citizens. These rights are not American rights, nor are they immigrant rights. They are basic, universal, human rights that no one should have to fight for, no matter who they are or where they come from. As said by Charles Payne, “There are heroes and, emphatically, heroines enough in this history. Yielding to the temptation to focus on their courage, however, may miss the point...If we are surprised by what they have accomplished, our surprise may be a commentary on the angle of vision from which we view them. That same angle

of vision may make it difficult to see that the gifts they brought to the making of the movement, courage may have been the least” (Payne 5). When we look at the actions of Maru Mora-Villalpando and all other activists working tirelessly for universal human rights, we must not look only at what they have done for a movement, but also at what they have done for a country. So much of the stigma around immigrants that has escalated in recent months is around what immigrants are taking from the United States. It is so much more important to focus on what they are bringing. Maru Mora-Villalpando has not only improved the lives of hundreds of immigrants, but has also taken huge steps toward ending deportation in Washington State. These are real changes that have affected everyone, even beyond the immigrant community, because of the innate value of immigrant lives and what they bring to society. Maru Mora-Villalpando has taught us that freedom for one cannot be called freedom. As a community, we must all fight for the belief in a reality in which rights are rights, people are people, and liberation is truly universal.

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