

The American Dream and Its Nightmares



This summer, I was tasked with renewing TPS work permits for Honduran refugees, which is the focus of the rest of this article. TPS stands for Temporary Protective Status, a program granted to thirteen countries, one of which is Honduras. In 1998, a category 5 hurricane tore through Honduras and killed 7,000 people, destroying hundreds of homes and leaving 70% of the country's infrastructure in ruins. 1.5 million Hondurans became homeless in the process. The United States granted asylum to thousands of Hondurans, most of whom have been living here since 1998. In order to maintain their legal residence in the U.S., they have had to reapply for TPS and disclose arrests, criminal charges, or convictions. My clients are law-abiding and tax-paying residents who, after two decades of contributing to American society, have built a strong community in California. Contrary to what you will hear on certain myth-making networks, the overwhelming majority of them do not benefit from social welfare programs.

This year, the Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, announced the cancellation of TPS. Each national group has been given a specific deadline to return to their countries. For Honduras, it is January 5, 2020. The current administration has argued that the conditions in TPS-designated countries have returned to normal, and there is no need for their citizens to remain in the United States. However, Honduras remains politically volatile and economically unstable as evident in the violent protests that followed the presidential elections last November (not to mention American attempts at interfering in Honduran politics). Large segments of Honduran society are deeply homophobic and transphobic, and violence in general, and against women in particular, is rampant. Similar to El Salvador, their economy heavily depends on the money sent home from Hondurans working in the U.S. If viewed as a standalone act, the cancellation of TPS seems to make very little sense.

But the cancellation of TPS is no standalone act. It is part of a wave of policy changes designed to overhaul U.S. immigration laws: Asylum laws are being unravelled, namely to disqualify domestic abuse as a basis for asylum which directly targets women of color. DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a program that has allowed individuals brought to the U.S. unlawfully as children to reside and work here legally, has been cancelled. The travel ban, upheld by the Supreme Court in June, severely restricts the entry of citizens from Iran, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and North Korea (never mind the U.S. role in the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen). The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, has raided places of work, and even worship, viciously ripping communities apart. ICE has targeted individuals with no criminal record (crossing into the U.S. without inspection is a misdemeanor, not a crime). Due to increasing xenophobia, the industry of border security is thriving now more than before. Without laying a single brick at the border, this administration has significantly slowed down immigration into the U.S., namely by reducing the number of refugees admitted into the country.

There are future plans too. The Diversity Immigrant Visa program, known as the Green Card lottery, may also be dismantled.

Writing about immigration is as deeply personal for me as it is political. In 2010-11, I lived and worked in Mexico. I witnessed up-close and personally how the drug war, sponsored and armed by Mexico's northern neighbor and the world's biggest arms dealer, was tearing the country apart. Since its inception in 2006, the drug war has left in its wake grieving mothers searching for their kidnapped sons, fathers burying the unrecognizable body of their daughters, brave journalists risking (and losing) their lives to write about the truth, and a deeply demoralized and righteously angry public. My housemate, Oscar, was among thousands of victims consumed by the drug war. He was an innocent man who ended up in the wrong place and at the wrong time. His mother packed his life into a box and his room became vacant, rented days later. Life went on.

In 2013, I spent the summer studying and traveling in Palestine and witnessed the brutal realities of what now is over half a century of Israel's military occupation of Palestine. Then, those personal experiences compelled me to share my perspective in an article published in September 2013 (*Peyk* #147) in which I examined the role of the industry of border control in terrorizing indigenous communities and damaging the environment. The article began with the Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state, [and] the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." Unlike the communities it keeps under its control, the industry of border control moves across national lines in pursuit of capital gain, forming alliances that only money can explain. When Donald Trump made building a border wall the cornerstone of his presidential campaign in 2015, I was not the least surprised.

Today, it is again the power of personal experience that compels me to write about immigration. Since January 2017, I have been volunteering at the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, an organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area that has been serving asylum-seekers since 1982. The greatest privilege of my life has been sitting across from Latin American asylum seekers, listening to their stories of pain and resilience. I have bonded with them and identified with their dignified search for survival and security. The grace and patience with which they go through the overwhelming and invasive process of asylum inspires and humbles me. If anything were to happen to them, I don't know what I would do. This is the personal background that informs my views on immigration.



H-1B visas, allowing foreign workers in specialized occupations to work in the U.S., will likely be scrapped as of this August. These policy changes form a more complete narrative, one designed to attack the most vulnerable in our midst while misdirecting the righteous anger of the white working class away from financial institutions responsible for their economic hardship. The U.S. may not be as welcoming as it was a few years ago, but many are still willing to come here. Just look at my Honduran clients to see why that's the case. The U.S. came to their rescue when they were desperately in need. In return, they have worked hard with integrity and love for this country. They have become Americans, and passed their rich bicultural background to their children and grandchildren. In the waiting room, I often saw my clients play with their American grandchildren. Then, I would imagine a horrifying scenario in which they were taken away from their family. To many of them, two decades of loving labor and community building became nothing at the drop of the Attorney General's hat. They have paid social security for two decades and they will not see a penny of it when they are due to retire. The fact that over the past twenty years they were never given a path to residency shows that the U.S. immigration system is broken.

Even a conservative administration can celebrate TPS as an ideal form of immigration. It's a script for the American Dream: in the late 1990s, a group of refugees came to the U.S. with the intention of seeking asylum, a permissible act according to international laws. Instead of putting them in prison and abducting and drugging their children (which in addition to being illegal costs a lot more taxpayer money), the U.S. processed their requests case by case. Through due process, many gained legal status, which they had to renew every few years, by proving that they were law-abiding. Their legal status allowed them to be contributing members of their community, instead of shunning law enforcement out of fear of deportation. They may have lost their homes and families in a tragedy, but the U.S. gave them a platform to seek security and stability. They pulled themselves by the bootstraps and became a self-sufficient community that even contributes to Honduran economy. If this is not an immigrant success story, then what is? By deporting these precious members of our community,

the U.S. would once again write another shameful chapter in its young history.

We are all immigrants, but we are certainly not all the same. As an Iranian, I do not share the same historical connection with this land as my Latin American brothers and sisters. As immigrants, we also display very different attitudes toward immigration. Some of us come to the U.S. and want to shut the door behind us. We have the urge to align ourselves with the discourse of power, turning our backs on immigrants who are less fortunate than us. It is the easy thing to do. But there are those who consider it our obligation to fight for a more inclusionary society once we get our foot through the door. Shutting the door behind us will only reinforce all that has plagued our society, primarily self-centeredness and greed. If we embrace the latter vision, we will emerge as better individuals and a better society as a result of it.

Working with immigrant communities in the U.S. has helped me to see my family story in a different light. At the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, I interviewed farmers who were coerced to work for drug traffickers in Mexico. Refusing to participate in their violent industry, they abandoned their farm and brought their family to the U.S. I identified with their story because my father, Ebrahim, attempted and failed to seek asylum in the early 1990s. Once he crossed into Turkey and saw the real price of asylum, he returned to his family in Iran and did not divulge a word of what had witnessed in refugee camps. He began to farm but was tragically gunned down by his extortionist a few years later. I was eight years old at the time and feared that I might forget his loving memory. Forming communal solidarity with Latin American asylum seekers, survivors of a misguided drug war, has enabled me to give new meaning to his memory, twenty four years after we lost him.

My sobering article does not intend to make you hopeless, but rather to remind my community that what's happening around us is not normal, it is not conscionable. Some of these cruel policies predate the Trump administration, and sadly it will not be the last time that immigrant communities will fall victim to the misdirected rage of a fast-perishing middle class. We must come together to advocate for those without a voice. We can take inspiration from history for every time there was a brief opening for immigrants seeking a better life here, it was realized thanks to acts of civil disobedience and social advocacy. After all, the American Dream is more accurately the history of brief openings in between the door being shut again for a long while. We must not fall asleep.

Images:

Standing at the border of Mexico and the United States, a girl holds a balloon near the wall where separated families are reunited for three minutes. Credit: Getty Images.

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Aria's views do not necessarily reflect those of the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant or *Peyk*.