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Building Bridges, Not Walls: Resisting Anti-Immigrant Policy

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Peter [00:00:10] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast, I'm Peter Sobota. Good to have you along everybody. You can't pick up a major newspaper, listen to a podcast or do anything for that matter without hearing about the latest twist in development in our current immigration policy implementation and crackdown. “Crimmigation” is now a word. Whether people are whisked off the street, standing in a Home Depot parking lot, showing up compliantly for a scheduled court date, or working in a doughnut shop, often despite having legal status, people are being detained and deported without due process and sometimes admittedly in error. In the social work profession and education, much is made of implementing anti-racist approaches and practicing in accordance with values of service, protecting the inherent dignity of all people, social justice, and upholding human rights. We wanted to talk with two social work scholars who are collaborating with communities, living immigration policy almost every day, and teaching and educating social workers about our current moment. Today, our guests are Dr. Laurie Cook Heffron and Esmeralda Rubalcava Hernandez. Who will tell us about immigration policy in Texas under Operation Lone Star, and beyond to the long social, historical, and political landscape that laid the ground for OLS to exist and expand nationally. They'll talk with us about the deep and long-standing emotional, family, and economic impacts on the people, who are only rarely criminals, by the way, seeking safety and security in the self-described nation of immigrants. Finally, our guests will discuss the dynamic ways social workers can be part of a variety of resistance efforts as students, practitioners, educators, and community members. Laurie Cook Heffron, PhD, LMSW, is associate professor and social work program director at St. Edward's University and Esmeralda Rubalcava Hernandez, LMSW, is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work. Hi Esmeralda and Laurie, welcome to inSocialWork.

Esmeralda [00:02:31] Hey there Peter, how are you?

Peter [00:02:33] I'm well.

Laurie [00:02:34] We're glad to be here.

Peter [00:02:36] All right, well, thanks again for agreeing to do this and let's get going. Today is, I believe, the 29th of July as we speak. And today we're eventually gonna get to community responses and resistance to anti-immigration policies. But first, let's maybe see if we could all get on the same page or at least on your pages. How's that? As we begin. There's, I mean, there's stuff every day. There's plenty going on right now. And the short list includes people being whisked off the street by officials who aren't in uniform into

unmarked cars, deportation notices for active students, deportation and imprisonment without that due process thing, rounding up people in Home Depot parking lots, a senior U.S. Justice official allegedly telling their subordinates to ignore court orders or stonewall or lie to judges, and then court battles that seem to end up in the New York Times on a daily basis. But today, if we could just spend a little bit of time talking about 2021 and the implementation of Operation Lone Star. It's been pretty much the blueprint for subsequent like-minded states, I guess would be the way to say it, and eventually the federal government for addressing so-called illegal immigration in the United States. So.. what, in a nutshell, what is Operation Lone Star? And what is it supposed do. And what does it actually do.

Laurie [00:04:34] This is Laurie. Operation Lone Star is really a constellation of policies and practices that the governor of Texas began in 2021, including a declaration of a migration disaster. And it's really a host of things that the government set in motion that use state resources to criminalize migration to criminalized migrants to apprehend folks. Detain folks and and to flood the border with National Guard, with state troopers, arresting folks for public trespassing, really just kind of a host of, you know, filling our 1,250 mile border with Mexico with razor wire, right? Really just putting up additional barriers to keep people from migrating and or to apprehend those who are migrating. Which was a new-ish and intense use of state resources and state policy on some areas of policy that have typically been federal.

Peter [00:05:46] Yeah, and I'm sorry. And I guess before we give Esmeralda a chance to weigh in, I just wanted to ask for, you know, for somebody who doesn't live in Texas, how much of this was a ramping up of what was already kind of being done or not?

Esmeralda [00:06:03] Yeah, absolutely. So I think I can jump in here. So, and again, this is all going to be very much dependent on who you ask and the framework that you're using to view this, right? Like some folks, especially in the more mainstream, are going to say that this is about national security, state border security. And because of it, like there are going to be some apprehension, some casualties, right? But that it is very, very much necessary in order to keep citizens safe. And I'm using air quotes here. And then if you're asking someone that is using a more critical consciousness or who is versed on the history of Texas, they might tell you that it is a continuation of policies that have been around for at this point centuries. That it is the continuation of a land grab of stealing land, racialized control, state violence, and this enforcement of this settler colonial border through militarization, criminalization, violating civil rights, human rights. So again, dependent on who you ask. Um, but when I say it's a continuation of policies that have already existed, um, that is absolutely the case, right? So it has become so normalized for us to just kind of think that the border patrol is a necessity. It has always been, it will always be. Um, but this is not the case. Like they are in the scope of things relatively new. And They began in 1924. There are two amazing books that I always reference. One is Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol by Kelly Lytle Hernández, and the other one is The Injustice Never Leaves You, Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas by Monica Muñoz Martinez. And both of these talk about how all of the current practices that we have around immigration enforcement, around border militarization, around policing are all based on racialization and state violence against those who are quote unquote not white. So Operation Lone Star is just a little bit more of this. And like saying, it is a whole bunch of things kind of collapsed into one.

Laurie [00:08:51] This is Laurie, and I'll add that one of the things that Operation Lone Star really showcases, while it's not new, as Esmeralda has been talking about, Operation

Lones Star really showcases the intersection and integration of our criminal justice system or our criminal legal system with immigration enforcement in the immigration system, something people sometimes called “Crimmigration.”

Peter [00:09:14] Yeah, I was just thinking of that word. Go ahead.

Laurie [00:09:17] And so that's, um, uh, “Crimmigetory” policies are the, the meshing of our criminal legal system and our immigration enforcement and immigration system is not new, but Operation Lone Star just really sort of showcases it as a really, um strong example of how those systems have come into contact with with one another.

Peter [00:09:41] So, again, I don't want to spend the whole podcast on Operation Lone Star. We said we wanted to go bigger. But I would imagine that this has been an expensive use of funds. Is that an expensive operation? How's that? Is that accurate?

Esmeralda [00:10:02] Yeah, very much so. So this is Esmeralda. So from what we know, we've spent at this point, as of the last report I could find, $11.1 billion.

Peter [00:10:19] Billion with a be?

Esmeralda [00:10:20] Billion, not million, 11.1 billion dollars.

Laurie [00:10:25] And this is Laurie. And those are state taxpayer funds from Texas. Those are not federal funds. But I think when we talk about the cost, there's the economic cost for sure, and then all the other costs, human costs, emotional, social, et cetera. And one of the pieces that falls under the Operation Lone Star that I think showcases some of that is something that was called an executive order at the government, at the state level. Governor's Executive Order 46, that happened all in and around Operation Lone Star, where the governor required public hospitals to collect immigration status of patients and the amount, the cost of their medical care and report that back up to the state. And so I think that's an example one, because the governor is clearly looking to see how much it costs to provide. Medical care to undocumented folks, but also that is an extension of this massive chilling effect on people of whether or not they feel comfortable getting the care they need, preventive care or acute care, getting the mental health care they need, right? All the pieces. And so, right, being asked what your immigration status is at the very first meeting of someone in a hospital. This happened to me recently, I was in a hotel and that was one of the very questions I was asked is what what my encryption status was. And I just think that's a good example of the sort of extended cost, right? That we obviously know that when people forego medical care, forego mental health care, right, there are these long-term economic health, mental health, social, emotional costs that carry on for generations.

Peter [00:12:11] Yeah. And to go and to go back strictly to the kind of financial cost for one second, it's incredible if you just stop and think, okay, $11 billion for this kind of militarization, essentially, of, I guess, border enforcement, if that's the way you want to talk about it. Where else could have $11 billion have gone? Housing. Programs, shelters, more judges. Anyway, so we'll leave that hanging for now. Operation Lone Star has been, as I mentioned in my kind of introductory comments, has been widely, I think, copied by a lot of states who would like to do a similar thing and has, I'm pretty sure, has kind of morphed into a kind of a federal approach and even kind of amped up, quite frankly, on that level. So. I think maybe now it's time to move past that and talk about the bigger picture. And I'm just gonna invite either or both of you to talk about this kind of long social, historical and

political landscape that kind of gave birth to Lone Star, but has enabled it not only to flourish, but to arrive at a point where we are now in the United States and how we view people who are. Have rights that we don't seem to want to pay attention to. You know, we're the land, we are the nation of immigrants. We're the Land of the Free. There's the American, you know, all that. Well, maybe not on closer examination.

Esmeralda [00:14:07] Yeah, so I think of everything, right. And I know that that is just so big.

Peter [00:14:14] I think that's fair.

Esmeralda [00:14:16] But it's really very much everything. So just starting with colonization, right? We often think of it as this thing that happened, this event that occurred hundreds of years ago and we have left behind. Instead of the structure that it actually is that dictates every single thing we do, right. You mentioned nation of immigrants and even using that phrase, which is often used in ways that are meant to be helpful, that are to be affirming and caring and inclusive. Just a phrase like that reinforces settler colonialism in so many different ways because we are not a nation of immigrant. That is a... Another framework that was used, again, to reinforce around the Kennedy administration. And so before then, the historical fact is that this is a white supremacist settler colonial project. It was before and it is now. It was land theft. It was genocide. It is land theft, it is genocide. And so small things that we think of innocuous, just again, build that foundation for what we have now, where we are hearing that Operation Lone Star and other operations and other policies have been set to protect this nation when there are many people, especially those who have decolonial lenses. We're going to tell you this is not a nation. This is, again, a settler colonial project under white supremacy. And so we look at that colonial period, and I say colonial period to mean specifically around, you know, the 1500s, 1800s. So we see this militarization already begin, not only. In the east coast but in other places as we had that westward expansion. So we see people who are indigenous and who are of African descent being used to build this nation of immigrants right quote unquote, through enslavement, through violence, we see... The building of missions, these forced conversions, we see a system being created, a system of racialization, not only within the so-called United States, but also within many parts of Latin America. And so we have that as a foundation to what we currently have now, where. Um, this system of racialization is not, um, it's not gone. It's very much enacted and it is enforced through these policies now. Um, though it's always super or it is very, very covert and it is always there. Um, and then we have things like, uh, this annexation of Texas, right? We have the creation of policing forces. We have. The creation of the Texas Rangers. Who, again, depending who you ask, are going to be heroes that we needed and still need, or again, depending on who you asked, they're going to vigilantes and terrorists. Yeah, so.

Peter [00:17:57] And the clan has a resurgence going, is, yeah.

Esmeralda [00:18:01] Absolutely, they do a resurgence, but they have always been there, right? We know that they have always laid low, but right now that they are even more emboldened by the federal government, by state governments to resurge and feel protected. That's just a tiny, tiny part of what has created this.

Peter [00:18:27] Sure, Laurie, before you jump in, I just wanted to share something with Esmeralda that while you were speaking, it reminded me of an article I read not too long ago. I think it might've been the Nation Magazine where it was a very, I hadn't heard it before, so I may be embarrassing myself that it's taken me this long, but this is the new

one. Um, and the more I thought about that, the more it is clear that this is a constellation of policies, practice, politics, that is just recreating a part of our history that we tend to, at least on the surface, regret. But here we are. Sorry, Laurie, go ahead.

Laurie [00:19:22] Oh, I want to add that what Esmeralda was talking about also reveals that citizenship, if we're thinking about citizenship, has always defined whiteness and centered whitenesses has always been racialized back through our citizenship and immigration federal policies for immigration in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. And so again, it's just a reiteration, a continuation of the same. The other thing when I think about Operation Lone Star and how we can trace some of its impacts back is I think of family separation. So we think about family separation a lot, I think in social work. We think about the modern current practices that separate families and the impacts of those on children and parents and on families and communities. And we can chase that back before Operation Lones Star to the zero tolerance policy during the first Trump administration. When it really hit the news very strongly, but we can also go back, right? We think about Japanese internment during World War II, where people were segregated, separated, deported, et cetera, right? And very much under that racialized view of who could be American, who could be here. And we go back even further, as Maralda mentioned, or like has already been talking about. The indigenous origins and peoples that live on this land. And we obviously know that families have been separated for generations and generations, right? By forced schooling and a host of mechanisms that serve to erase who people are and to sort of force or enforce a new definition of whiteness and a new of citizen and who can remain here.

Peter [00:21:11] Who are real Americans, right? Yikes. I'm having all these references that have nothing to do with academia here. I recently saw the film Sinners, and I don't know if folks have seen it, but if you haven't, I would recommend that you do. And it's interesting because it's centered on mostly black oppression. But most of the violent depression comes from an Irish vampire, a so-called white person. But of course, if you know the history of the Irish folks. They have been ostracized and not even considered white by other Europeans. So this idea of what whiteness is and who gets to say what it is and defines it was top of mind actually when I was trying to entertain myself with a film. I thought it was a very effective use of metaphors and reality.

Esmeralda [00:22:20] Absolutely. And I think it's a really great illustration of how conditional whiteness is, like these racial categories, they don't exist. They are social constructs. They merge and they flow again, depending on what the settler colonial project needs at the time. And we know, right, we see a lot of folks who would be categorized as black or Latina, even indigenous who are working within the border patrol, right, within immigration enforcement. And we see like that is not a historical that is very much part of the way that people are able to gain whiteness, right? And I say gain whitness because And many would argue that whiteness is a loss, right? Not a gain. And so, yeah, absolutely. We see that this is all very much part of the plan. In order for folks to gain whiteness, they have to practice anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity at the same time. But yeah, no, I mean Sinners, I thought was a great movie, it showcased a lot of different things, the oppression, resilience, power of the black community, but yeah, it's a good film.

Peter [00:23:47] Yeah, and immortality might not be all it's cracked up to be if you have to give up who you are, right? Yeah, anyway, this is a full service podcast. We have movie recommendations, everything goes on here. So the two of you have touched on this, but I really want to invite you very specifically to say more if you if you'd like to. Given what is happening and on a daily basis and what has been going on for a long time. But especially

now, you know, human rights are in the crosshair. So I'm curious if the two of you would like to talk a little bit more about the impact of of this this kind of policy and these programs on people's human rights, their civil rights, trauma and secondary trauma. And people who are just seeking, in most cases, safety and security under these policies.

Laurie [00:24:50] Yeah, I mean, there's a lot we could talk about.

Peter [00:24:54] And you've done a little bit of that, but I wanted to give you another shot.

Laurie [00:24:57] Yeah, I'll go back to something we talked about before, which is this extreme chilling effect. This is having the impact of people not going to work because they're afraid, not bringing their children to school, not seeking the medical care they need, going without food. And I think we often talk about the impact of deportation or detention and family separation, and those are really important things to talk about. But even when those things aren't happening, this layer of hypervigilance and this constant state of alert that people live in that keeps them from going to school, going to work, going to the hospital are intense. And I think as social workers, we have to pay very close attention to that because that also means then that people have lost trust in the systems of helping professions. Right? They're worried about... Seeking help for things that they are absolutely eligible for, for things that they need to meet their own human needs, they're worried about how their data will be kept, who will their data be shared with, how will their showing up at a women's shelter, domestic violence shelter, right, a mental health facility impact them and their families, how might it impact their immigration relief in the future, So I think we can't overstate. That the impact of the chilling effect really on all people, including mixed status families, right? Like here in Texas, something like six million Texans live within a family where at least one person is undocumented and two million or something like that of those are US citizen kids, right? So all. This impact goes way beyond people who are undocumented or people who have a precarious immigration status of some kind, right? Immigration is not, yes, I'm documented, no, I am undocumented, right, there's so many layers in that. Threats to birthright citizenship as well, right. So I think this chilling effect just goes, it extends beyond what we initially perhaps thought it did. And the research is really clear about the impact of all of this on our mental health, right? Not even just in the moment, but future, right, the long lasting impact of that generational trauma, right. Impact on our physical health when we don't have our needs met. Impact on academic outcomes for children who are scared to go to school. Economic stability of families, right it just it really hits all the pieces of what we might think of that that we're assessing as social workers, right? In a multi-dimensional assessment, all the things that help people be well, that help have people use their power, exercise their own rights, right, all of these pieces are impacted.

Esmeralda [00:27:42] Yeah, so like Lori said, we often think about immigration, just the topic as a very, very small piece, right? So big, but also very small. But like she was saying, it goes into every single system. It makes me think of schools, which Lori mentioned, right. So we think of the impacts on communities who aren't bringing their kids to school. And yes, additionally, we have folks who are also coming to school and who are experiencing things, negative mental health outcomes, right, fear in school, crying, things that seem like anger and aggression and what do teachers do in those instances? Right? As we see schools create police forces or as we see schools engage with police forces, SROs, we're also seeing the criminalization of these children who are experiencing these traumas, which capitulates them or which catapults them more into other systems, right? We see them being catapulted into family policing systems where child welfare systems, quote unquote, are now coming into the home along with perhaps another part of the child

welfare system, which is. So, one of the things that I did after my MSW was that I worked for an organization called the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. And what this was is that I got paid to go into people's homes and do checks to secure their safety. And there was that yes and. But what I saw was a lot. Criminalization of these families who were afraid to go into schools or who did go into schools and for one reason or another, they had to interact with policing systems. And I was a part of those systems. Like I was complicit in a lot of harm communities experienced. So it very much is it's overarching. It's everywhere Like Laurie said, within medical systems, within family policing systems, within court systems, within juvenile justice systems, everywhere. There is not a single point that immigration enforcement does not touch.

Peter [00:30:23] Yeah, a very compelling argument for why this matters to all of us, right? Especially social workers. When you are talking about the chilling effect and the way that that controls and trickles down through, you know, whether or not people go to an appointment or to seek the services that they and enjoyment of the cruelty of these programs. I mean, the language is quite startling and I don't want to get normed out on it. When I hear a U.S. Senator referring to immigrants as rats and as, what is it, alligator, alcatraz or something? Is that in Florida or something, there just seems to be this gleeful cruelty that I think masks something very bigger, much larger than fear is a great way to control people, isn't it?

Esmeralda [00:31:30] It is. And again, it's a part of that project. So I don't know if you all are familiar with the pyramid of hate.

Peter [00:31:37] Please, go ahead.

Esmeralda [00:31:38] So it is this another framework or it's basically a pyramid that argues that in order for a community to experience genocide that first several different things have to happen, right? So first we have to have those biased attitudes, which then builds up to acts of which then builds up to discrimination. Builds up to bias-motivated violence and then genocide. And so that's what we're seeing, right? This dehumanizing and chilling effect of calling people rats or invaders or monsters, which is going to lead to these acts of discrimination and bias. Like the things that we view as so small, right, these jokes with the punchline being incarceration of marginalized communities. Um, it eventually escalates up to the extermination of these margin. Like it is all very much part of one thing. Um, so while we, as a mainstream culture, see these things as again, innocuous, as small, like language really does shape reality.

Peter [00:32:58] And we've seen this movie, right? We've seen before and yet we find them. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Esmeralda [00:33:06] No, I was going to say like we are experiencing a genocide, several genocides in real time, right? We see it with the people in Palestine experiencing this ethnic cleansing, this genocide for many, many, many years and all of this did not happen overnight, right, like attitudes had to change, Morality had to change, language had to change in order for people to be willing to starved children right to create this man-made famine in in Palestine in Gaza and so this is very much connected to all of that there everything here is connected the local is global the global is local and so, this pyramid of hate is very much again overarching over so many different things including The topic of immigration, the topic of trans rights, the topic queer rights in general, the topic settler colonialism, like everything is so interconnected, that interconnectedness of oppression that it's just, I would be remiss not to mention all of that.

Peter [00:34:27] Yeah, thanks. I do want to save some time as promised to get to the kind of, so what can we do portion of the podcast. But before we go there, I know the two of you have studied. Community responses and resistance, and this should be right in our wheelhouse as social workers to anti-immigration policy, and that includes things like Know Your Rights campaigns. Could you talk a little bit about what that scholarship has involved and what you've been doing and what folks have been doing, and what you've worked.

Laurie [00:35:09] I think one of the things I've learned and that I have to continue to learn is that the responses, the resistance, the solidarity that people in the community, often outside of academia, often outside the social work profession, are engaged in, are powerful beyond. Measure and our places to start. Places to look for what is the community that's being directly impacted doing now, doing already. How can we sit and listen and observe and find ways that we can walk alongside or support and amplify, et cetera, before jumping in. And so I often, again, I'm still learning this. I'm always learning this, how to watch for what the community is, how the is responding first, but you mentioned Know Your Rights efforts. I find this really interesting, the whole idea of know your rights, you know, in the United States, for the most part, our educational system doesn't really talk much about, I mean, we might learn about the Bill of Rights, but we don't really learn about human rights. We don't learn about our rights in the community, our rights if we encounter a police officer. I say we don t, and I'm living with layers and layers and layer of privilege and advantage as a white person, right? So lots of people do learn about those things, but it's not embedded in our educational system as part of our sort of civic education. And so teaching people about their rights if they encounter immigration enforcement or law enforcement has been really important and on many layers, right? So part of that is people who are directly impacted who might be detained or deported or separated from their family, needing to know what their resources are, where the helpers are. What kinds of preparation they might need in place in case their family is separated, et cetera. Like it's complex for folks. But also faculty members, what happens if an ICE officer comes to the door of the classroom, right? What are my rights as a educator? What if I'm standing on the corner and I see a woman, I actually just interviewed a woman who was apprehended at the grocery store parking lot. She has five kids, she's pregnant, no criminal record. Taken by ICE, right? If I were there in the parking lot at the time, what would be my rights? Can I record? Can I intervene? You know, what can I do? What should I do, etc.? So the Know Your Rights pieces really go for everyone. And I've been, I just think it's remarkable the number of times we've done a Know Your Rights workshop, either on campus or in the classroom or in the community, that people's eyes just grow wide. They hadn't heard anyone tell them what their rights were before necessarily.

Peter [00:37:55] They didn't know.

Laurie [00:37:56] They don't know, right? And another piece connected to that, that is sort of a know your rights piece, that I've loved to see this grow sort of in Texas, is I mentioned the governmental executive order 46 that requires hospitals to ask about immigration status. And one of the things that's been sort of growing here in our state is the idea that all of us can say no, we don't have to answer that question, right. I am a US citizen. It doesn't hurt me to say to give my immigration status, necessarily, if I'm asked that question in the hospital. But if I say, I'm not going to answer that question, one, it perhaps mucks up the data that's been collected. But it also shows people around me that they don't have to answer the question. And the question is actually offensive and problematic and harmful to even ask. So that kind of idea of like. Knowing our rights and acting in

solidarity with people whose rights are being violated, I think, has been wonderful to watch. I'll pause there. I have a lot of thoughts about community responses. But Esmeralda, do you want to chime in?

Esmeralda [00:39:06] Yeah, so everything that Lori said. Another thing is the power of mutual aid. Oftentimes when, as a social worker, working in the community, a lot of the resource lists that I created were 501C3s, they were state orgs, they were federal orgs. Hotlines that are grant funded, right? All of these things. And yet one of the most powerful things for the people that I worked with and also in my own community has been the power of mutual aid. Because people are so afraid and are often barred from accessing these resources, mutual aid keeps people alive. Right, mutual aid empowers people who have systematically been disempowered. So I think that that is one of the most powerful and helpful ways that the community has continuously for decades and decades and decades survived and also resisted a lot of the things that have happened, that have been done to them. But yeah, Lori mentioned a lot of really amazing things.

Peter [00:40:38] Did you want to add something more?

Laurie [00:40:40] Yeah, I think about the sanctuary movement also. The sanctuary movement is not new. It had a heyday in the 1980s in responding to Central American folks fleeing civil wars and internal armed conflict in Central America. But it's active today as well. And it can include everything from a house of faith or a church deciding to provide shelter or sanctuary to someone who's at risk of detention or deportation. It can also include things like accompaniment services. So somebody has to go to an ICE check-in. They're fitted with an ankle monitor that surveils their very existence. And they have to periodically go have that checked in. So accompanying that person to that, accompanying people to immigration court. So accompaniment service, I think, are something that is just a powerful tool. And it's out there, but there's a lot of opportunity to grow that and to help social workers and other, and students and community members understand how they can get involved in that type of sanctuary movement activity.

Peter [00:41:51] Yeah, thanks. I think, let me even actually kind of take your lead and drill down further here, is that, I mean, we're a social work podcast, we are a bunch of social workers having this conversation. And, you know, when I think about us and our profession, you know, I think of our ethics and our values around the dignity and worth of all people and social justice. Human rights, a lot is made, much is made in social work education and practice, you know, to utilize and practice anti-racist approaches. From a social work perspective, as granular as you can make it, what is, what would you recommend that practitioners, academics, students of social work, what, why, what can we do? Within the context of the roles that we play.

Esmeralda [00:42:53] Um, so my first thing would be to divest from these systems, right? Um, instead of invest anything in them. And that includes not, um, teaching our, our students or our mentees that by going into these systems you're going to make them better for people because that's not the case, right. Um, and we have so little real peer reviewed. Evidence saying that that does happen and yet when we see things like defunding the police movements when we see things Um, like anti other anti-police and other anti system movements We keep wanting to insert social workers into them to make these things better And yet we don't have the data saying that This works, right? We don't Have that transparency from systems and from programs as well saying that we are seeing very true, very real systemic change when we put our people into these systems, right? So we see things like victim services, we see other mental health professionals not

only social workers accompanying police on calls, and yet I've done this, right? I have been on calls. I have participated in things like raids for people who have experienced trafficking. I couldn't do a single thing. The police don't, the police are going to do what they're going to, right. And so by embedding me into these operations, All that did was make the people that I... Worked with feel even more hostile against any kind of mental health care or any kind of social services. For example, there were times where I worked with DPS who then transported the survivors of trafficking to offices where they were held for hours and hours and I participated than that. I can't say that we ever saw these people again trying to access the services that we said that we would provide them because we were just another part of the system. And so this is something that in so many different programs that I have been a part or have been in. Is something that keeps getting said over and over and over again. We just need more mental health care within policing systems and immigration, within detention, and everything will be all right. It'll be better. But that's not the case. We don't have the evidence to support that. We actually have evidence to say quite the opposite, right? So divesting from these systems little by little by little, right, is one of the most important things that I think that social work can do, but it's so, so hesitant to do, right? Like the people in power are so hesitant to speak out against these practices.

Peter [00:46:17] Yeah, and that point, not exactly, but close enough for jazz, was the reason that I brought up ethics, because social workers are bound by this kind of like dual role, right? We're part of the system, yet ethically we're also charged. With kind of turning it upside down as a response to the injustices inherent with it. So yeah, you know, and I was also thinking about, you being embedded with police and the impact that that had on the people you were serving, if you will, but also, you know, the impact that that has to have on you. I mean, I'm sure you didn't walk out of that feeling very empowered and... And energized, you know, to come to work the next day.

Esmeralda [00:47:09] No, I did not, but it made me into an abolitionist.

Peter [00:47:13] Yeah. I knew it made you into something.

Esmeralda [00:47:15] Absolutely, being first-hand and being a part of it has led me to a very solid framework on abolition and decolonization, so I can proudly say that I'm an abolitionist.

Peter [00:47:27] Sure, and I think you've kind of just answered my follow-up question, because what I was going to ask you was, if we're going to divest, what are we going to do instead? And I think, you partly answered that, I think. But I would ask both of you that, what can we do if, for example, we're going to take your recommendation and divest from these structural... Based systems that compromise us on a daily basis.

Esmeralda [00:48:04] I wish I had the answer, but I go back to the words of Mary Acaba, who says that she doesn't know, she doesn't have the answers. But that together we need to dream build, right? As we divest, we often think about abolition as a framework that is about destruction, right? To get rid of things and yet it's truly about rebuilding. Based on what a particular community needs. And this might look incredibly different depending on the place where you live. Compared to, right, a completely different place. But I don't have the answers. I don't know and I think so few of us do. But I think what I and other abolitionists know is that what we have right now is so incredibly violent. Not only harmful, but violent. That as a society, as a community, it's so important for us to begin to dream about what it is going to look like in the future and know that this is not going to happen

overnight, right? When we were talking about the pyramid of hate, we talked about language, we talked, about attitudes, about morality, about bias. Those things don't change overnight. It really is. A long-term process of unlearning everything, everything that we have been socialized to believe from the woman beyond. And so, I don't know. I don't know what that's gonna look like. I know that we're having a lot of conversations on what it could look like, and I love those conversations. They are absolutely, literally wonderful and just, they keep the hope alive. And like Miriam Kaba says, hope very much is a discipline. So it's not getting lost in the muck of all of the technicalities of, if not this, then what? It really is just kind of sitting with it and unlearning.

Peter [00:50:14] Yeah, that was a very vulnerable and authentic, I think, way of responding. I often feel the same way. It's been helpful for me. I've interviewed a number of people from the Social Work Futures Lab and they have been really helpful in helping me think about, you know, what is the kind of the future that. No one's gonna create it for us. We have to be part of that. We have kind of build that ourselves. So yeah, but thank you. I agree that was a wonderful response. So Lori, would you like to comment on this as well?

Laurie [00:50:56] I'm just thinking of what Esmeralda was talking about. And I think sometimes, as someone who is interested in policy and has dabbled in policy wonkness in my career, I think all of us or any of us can get lost in federal policy, which a lot of the immigration conversation is about. And I Think when we're talking about dream building, one of the things we can do for anyone who's embedded in a mutual aid activity or in a nonprofit or in some kind of organization or agency, we can go very much to the micro level and start thinking about what is the language our organization is using? What are the languages our organization is you saying? Right? One is like, how are we talking about what we're doing? How does that reveal how we're thinking about we're we're doing? Just like beginning to ask questions. I think very much Esmeralda and I've been part of some work looking at cultural responsiveness and linguistic responsiveness of our services. So looking really at kind of internal policy and practice, beginning to unpack, what is it we're doing? How could we be doing better, right? Dream building as a team, as a unit within an organization or within a project, it does start there. And of course, like everything we know, it starts with relationships. And that's, I guess, where I would say is that it's through relationships that we. Um find healing, that we learn how to exercise our rights, that we learn, how to build solidarity, um that we learn how, to use the power we have right as individuals and as communities. Um and that's I guess one of the dangerous parts of the project that that Esmeralda's been talking about is it seeks to separate us and keep the relationship building from happening and we can resist that in our just our everyday actions, I think. And then I also think we just have to be steadfast in counteracting the narratives that have become normalized that we've been talking about this whole time. We have to steadfast in talking about migration is not a crime. It's actually a natural human, fundamental part of human existence.

Peter [00:53:00] Yeah and it helps to have allies in a network because if you're out on a limb all the time that gets to be a very lonely place and then you end up getting scared and keeping your mouth shut and none of which I think is is terribly helpful.

Laurie [00:53:16] Which is where the relationship building and the community building has to come in. You don’t have to do it alone.

Peter [00:53:19] Exactly. And in many ways, that should be social workers wheelhouse, right? I think about some of the students that I interact with who, you know, they're still

beginning their formal education in graduate social work, but many of them want to move into clinical roles, and I get that. But I try to preload them with, okay, go and do that for a little bit, and then begin to tell me how systems and communities and neighborhoods and policies and politics don't influence everything you do. So yeah, relationship can be used on many levels. So we're approaching our time here at the end, so we should begin to wrap up. So I'm going to give both of you the last word if you'd like it. Is there anything that you would that you would like to say before we say goodbye.

Laurie [00:54:23] Um, I I'll say two things. Um, one is a book recommendation again. Sure. Not what you had in mind, but

Peter [00:54:31] Sure. This is fine. This is sounding like the Ezra Klein show now, so actually I used to ask books about people about their books. Yeah, go ahead.

Laurie [00:54:39] Esmeralda, you did such a nice job talking about the abolitionist framework and whether or not reform can help us, right? And I spent a good chunk of my career thinking about the negative impacts of immigration detention, right, but if we start making detention more humane, what exactly are we doing right? Those questions. But I do, I'm showing the cover of Unbuild Walls by Silky Shah. She's the executive director of Detention Watch Network. And this is one of the first sort of popular books out there to apply an abolitionist framework to immigration enforcement and detention and deportation. And so I highly recommend it. It gets very much in the policy weeds but helps us see what we've been trying to talk about here today, like this long-standing historical grounding that has led us to where we are today, that this didn't come out of a vacuum. So I recommend that But also I think, and this is something I talk about with my students sometimes, when we talk about the ecological model and the nested systems, individual, family, et cetera, all the way up to social norms and policies and whatnot. Oftentimes I feel like students and I can get really overwhelmed, like, oh my gosh, there's so many places in these systems, so many spots where our dignity is hit, or where suffering occurs or where marginalization exclusion occurs. But I try to remind myself and my students that there are also that many places where we can reaffirm agency and reaffirm rights and solidarity and power and build relationships and communities I said before. So when I think I literally think of those nested systems I just think of like so many places, right? So many spots at every level. Where we can be doing that, right? Where we can do the things that we know are needed to seek justice and to seek wellness, right, and to see community strengths. So those opportunities are also vast.

Esmeralda [00:56:36] Absolutely. So we've talked about the interconnection, right, of these systems of oppression, and something that I think, unfortunately, we're all really good at doing is looking at all of this from a very binary stance, right? You're either for immigrants or you're anti-immigrants. You're for human rights or you’re against trans rights. And oftentimes without intending to, we dehumanize, right? In our attempt to humanize one group, we de-humanize another. So it's really important for us to know that this is not about good versus evil. Like Laurie said, it really is about these systems. And the way that we have internalized them based on our own identities. And so it's so important as we're having these conversations to be able to hold every person's humanity at the forefront. And I know that it might be controversial to say it, but even as we are talking about people in positions of power, be able to... Like recognize and acknowledge their full humanity as we are pushing against the things that they are doing that are incredibly violent and harmful because if not we fall right back into those patterns right where it's so easy to begin to dehumanize another group and as tides change we do that to someone else right and again i'm gonna mention we see this this perfect example in

Palestine, right, where we are often told that a certain group deserves an ethno state because of an oppression that they experienced over history. And it's so easy for us to take those examples and do them again and repeat them again, and again and again. Um, so it's really important for us to look at all of this, like all of these happenings when it comes to immigration from a humanizing, um, stance and also to look at it from a stance of solidarity, like our, uh, our liberation is very much intertwined, like instead of from a lens of charity, um, where we need to do it because this group is marginalized. No, like your liberation is entwined with mine and that is why we work together in solidarity.

Peter [00:59:25] Well, that sounds like a place to stop right there. Laurie, Esmeralda, thank you so much for taking the time and also your willingness to kind of climb into this arena. Thanks again to Lori and Esmeralda for joining us. The inSocialWork Podcast team is powered by the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and includes Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant and guest coordinator, say hi Ryan (Ryan: Hello) and I'm Peter Sobota. Hey academics out there, consider using podcasts as course content in your syllabus. Maybe replace a required reading or two with required listening. Live a little. See you next time everybody.