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Beyond Borders: The True Meaning of Being American in the Face of the Migrant Crisis

Every morning, as New York City comes to life, Dennis Rico sets out to sell his homemade *arepas*, a beloved Venezuelan dish made from cornmeal dough and filled with a variety of savory ingredients. For him, it's not just about selling food; it's about survival, opportunity, and safety.

Rico, who is from Venezuela, is faced with the challenge of being an undocumented migrant in a city that is both a haven of opportunity and a labyrinth of obstacles for others in similar situations. "It's practical because I don't have legal documents," he explains, referring to how the cart's mobility allows him to make a living while still staying under the radar.

He begins his day at 7:00 a.m. and works nonstop until sundown, making and selling freshly made arepas to the crowds of people that swarm the streets of New York City. Rico ensures that every arepa in his cart finds a home. Many of his customers are fellow migrants, seeking a sense of comfort in a city that is far from home. "Per day it's like $100 or $200, but it's better than nothing," he says.

Despite his hard work, Rico worries about the expensive cost of living in New York and the challenge of maintaining a stable life for his family on such a modest income. He knows that his emergency housing won't last for long, and in a city where prices seem to climb every year, he understands that the steady hustle of selling arepas won't cut it for long.

Rico made the trek to the U.S. with his wife and toddler in hopes of getting away from the political turmoil and violence that has come as a response of the Maduro administration. Nícolas Maduro, the current president of Venezuela, has been in power since 2013, after the death of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez. The Maduro administration has been the cause of various political and economic crises, which have led to vast rates of emigration, hyperinflation, poverty, and the exploitation of the nation's natural resources. The nation's economy is fundamentally rooted in the country's oil industry, which had previously made them one of the richest in Latin America, but has been devastated by the mismanagement of the industry by the Maduro administration. In a ruthless attempt to hold on to power, many of the corrupt president's enforcers are accused of murdering individuals, torturing others, imprisoning political opponents, all in a brutal effort to maintain control.

The corruption and violence that have intensified under the Maduro regime have vastly diminished the quality of life in Venezuela and have left many citizens, like Rico, feeling

as though they have no other choice but to leave. With basic necessities like food, water, and medicine becoming scarce, the nation has left its citizens with no other choice but to search for another place to call home. These individuals weren't born wanting to leave their country but rather they were dealt a card that forced them to have to make that choice. Yet, we too face a choice: the opportunity to stand with them, or to turn away.

The reality is that there are hundreds of thousands of individuals like Dennis Rico, each striving for a better life than the one dealt to them. He explains that "a migrant's life is hard, but I hold on to hope that things will get better." While their motivations are the same, their stories are as diverse as the city they call home.

The migrant crisis currently unfolding in New York City has become a defining issue of our time. The city, which has been regarded as a cosmopolitan melting pot, is currently dealing with an unprecedented flood of immigrants, particularly from nations experiencing political instability, economic turmoil, and environmental disasters. Although this wave of migration is not new for New York City, it has quickly intensified to the point that the city's infrastructure and dedication to its cultural values are being put to the test.

New York City's unique ability to bring together people of diverse cultures and origins , allowing them to strive for a better life, has long been a source of pride for the city. New York City became a sanctuary city in the 1980s when city officials responded to the growing number of undocumented immigrants by integrating policies that limit cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities in order to uphold the safety of immigrant communities. The creation of sanctuary cities stems from the need to prevent undocumented immigrants from being detained or reported to federal authorities based on their immigration status. The city has long praised itself on its commitment to welcoming newcomers to their start of a brighter future. However, discussions concerning the practicality of the city's sanctuary policies and the necessity of a more comprehensive national immigration reform are being sparked by the strain that the growing number of migrants is placing on the city's already overburdened public services, housing, and healthcare systems.

The complex conflict between the city's humanitarian dedication and the practical requirements of preserving a sustainable and high-functioning city is the issue that finds itself at the core of the migration crisis. New Yorkers are having to face the intricate question of what it truly entails to be "American" in the 21st century. It seems as though the growing number of migrants has challenged the very foundation of what it means to belong to this nation.

This question is not new. The topic of immigration has long been interlinked with the American experience. From the immense waves of European immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the present-day migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Once the entry point for millions of people seeking to start over in America, Ellis Island was a symbol of hope and opportunity. The belief that

anyone could be an American, regardless of their background, social status, or economic standing, is what has fundamentally shaped the nation and contributed to its identity.

However, the scale of migration today has presented new challenges. The arrival of approximately 210,000 migrants in New York City since August 2024 has placed an immense strain on the city's resources, particularly in the search for adequate housing. At the heart of the city's housing policy is the right to shelter, a unique requirement in New York that mandates the city to give shelter to anybody who asks for it. The policy was created in the 1980s through a court ruling (*Callahan v. Carey*), with the intention of preventing vulnerable citizens—especially the homeless—from being left on the streets. However, the Right to Shelter law was never envisioned to address the scale of displacement that is evident today, particularly with the influx of asylum-seeking migrants.

When the right to shelter was originally put into effect, it was a revolutionary, progressive measure that reflected New York's commitment to social justice. At a time when homelessness was at a concerning high, the law ensured that anyone who sought shelter would receive it, regardless of their status or financial situation. The objective of the law was evident, in that New York wanted to protect the city's homeless society by getting them off the streets of New York, and provide them a safe space, especially during the city's harsh, cold winters.

New York's decision to implement the right to shelter was groundbreaking in many ways, especially in that at the time no other U.S. city had a comparable legal duty to house anyone in need, no matter the circumstances. In many ways, the right to shelter was regarded as more of a moral issue rather than a physical one. While there was an exceptionally large homeless population lining the streets of New York, the law also reflected the moral duty the city had to maintain the wellbeing of the homeless population by passing this law. The right to shelter meant that no one was left behind, and in a city as big and diverse as New York, that was profoundly meaningful.

The argument over New York City's right to shelter policy has sparked a debate ever since its passing; however, the controversy over the law has become heightened due to the city's growing migrant crisis. This divide can be seen as a reflection of the city's clash between progressivism and practicality. Supporters of the policy make the argument that providing shelter to anyone is a fundamental right that all people are indebted to have. The supporters of this law, many of whom are progressive New Yorkers, argue that it reflects the city's moral obligation to protect its most vulnerable residents, particularly those fleeing persecution and violence. Last December, on the 42nd anniversary of the right to shelter, hundreds of residents gathered in lower Manhattan in support of the policy. The rally was a direct response to Mayor Adams's attempt to abandon the right to shelter, a move driven by the overwhelming influx of migrants that has stretched the city's resources to their limits. One of the the rally's attendees, Christine Quinn, the director of Win, a homeless shelter for families, and a former Speaker of the New York City Council, remarked, "For over four decades we have have had a right to shelter in New York City, and it's one of things that makes us different than every other city in this country. It's one of

the things that makes this city great." Her words highlight not just a legal right, but a fundamental value that makes New York unique: the worth of being the voice of those who don't have one. It is clear that, no matter how vast and busy the city may be, New Yorkers have an undeniable sense of care for each other.

On the opposing end of this argument lay critics of the right to shelter policy, who claim that the policy is both outdated and unrealistic given the challenges of today's world, particularly in the light of the ongoing migrant crisis. Roger Valdez, the Director of the Center for Housing Economics and a Research fellow at the Foundation for Equal Opportunity (FREOPP), expresses his beliefs against the right to shelter as he expresses that "housing is not a right. The Fair Housing Act banned discrimination when providing housing or making housing policy but, housing has remained, to the chagrin of many, a commodity." In his view, treating housing as a right creates an unsustainable burden on city resources, especially when demand greatly exceeds supply, as seen with the current influx of migrants in New York City. Valdez's perspective suggests that policies like the right to shelter may become difficult to maintain over time and might become misguided in addressing the complex realities of housing scarcity. Instead, viewing housing as a commodity might encourage more market-based solutions, like increased supply and private sector involvement, rather than relying on government services that may be challenging to sustain in the long-run.

Essentially, the debate around the migrant crisis has become a matter of whether New York can continue to uphold its progressive values while managing the practicality of its infrastructure and resources. Is it possible for the city to honor its tradition of welcoming newcomers, or has the time come to put that chapter to rest?

In response to the growing crisis, Mayor Eric Adams's administration and the Legal Aid Society (a nonprofit organization offering free legal representation to low-income New Yorkers), New York City introduced the 30- and 60-day shelter limits in order to provide housing for asylum-seeking migrants. Single individuals without families will be given housing for thirty days, while those with families will be housed for a maximum of sixty days, until they need to find permanent housing. This strategy aims to strike a balance between the needs of long-term NYC residents and incoming migrants; it has revealed evident cracks in the Right to Shelter framework. The law, which was created to ensure that no one was left without shelter, is now facing the unprecedented demand from a population that includes tens of thousands of migrants, each with their own unique complex needs.

Adriene Holder, chief attorney of the Civil Practice at The Legal Aid Society stated, "This settlement protects the right to shelter in the consent decree, ensuring single adults'—both long time New Yorkers and new arrivals—access to shelter, basic necessities and case management to transition from shelter to housing in the community." As Holder expresses, the 30- and 60-day shelter limits were created with the intention of making sure that all vulnerable groups—both New York City's homeless and the incoming migrants—have access to housing. However, while the limits do provide

temporary housing for the incoming migrants, it doesn't seem to be enough for certain newcomers who are struggling to adjust to their new home.

Catherine Gonzalez, Supervising Attorney and Policy Counsel in the Padilla Unit of the Criminal Defense practice, testified to the New York City Council Committee on Immigration and General Welfare this past November. Gonzalez works with the BDS, the Brooklyn Defenders Services, a public defense service located in NYC that focuses on representing underrepresented and underprivileged individuals in the court of law. BDS specializes in working with immigrants, particularly in protecting them from deportation and ICE detention. Through her specialized work with BDS, Gonzalez has gone on to gain valuable first-hand experiences with many of the migrants that are living in shelters. During her testimony to the NYC Council on Immigration and General Welfare she expressed her deep concern over the implementation of the 30- and 60day limits placed by the Adams administration in order to combat the growing housing crisis.

Gonzalez recounts a particular experience with a BDS client named Lucy, a migrant from West Africa. Lucy lives in a shelter with her niece and five children, and even while being a part of a family unit, Lucy has received both 30- and 60-day limit notices. In her testimony Gonzalez explains how "Lucy has shared details of the chaotic environment at the different shelters she's been transferred to. Lucy reports experiencing segregation between Latin American and African immigrants at the shelters. Lucy has also shared issues regarding food insecurity. More than once, she has gone without meals to ensure there is enough food for her children and niece."

The sacrifices Lucy has made—not only to feed her family, but ultimately to ensure their survival—paint a larger picture of how the struggle for basic resources has become all too common for migrants. It is evident that shelters are ill-equipped to support the needs of these individuals. While the integration of these limits seem practical from a governmental perspective, it places migrants, like Lucy, in incredibly difficult situations that further complicate their efforts to establish themselves in a new city. While the city has stated that these measures were designed to better help migrants integrate themselves into society, policies like the 30- and 60-day shelter limits have created significant challenges for those affected, often undermining their sense of dignity and stability. Vulnerable people are unintentionally put in a situation where they find it difficult to meet their fundamental requirements because of these policies, which are meant to manage resources and maintain order. Many migrants, like those in shelters, are simply seeking a better life—a chance to rebuild and create a life better than the one dealt to them. Despite the policies' stated goal to control the flow of resources and combat the growing housing crisis, in reality they often fail to acknowledge the complex human realities that migrants encounter, making it more difficult for them to find opportunity and stability in their new surroundings.

As the number of incoming migrants continues to rise, New York City has been forced to explore alternative solutions in order to keep in accordance with their housing regulations. In response to the growing need for shelter, the city has turned to emergency hotels as a temporary measure. The city approximates that the total spending on housing for migrants over the past two years, including the current fiscal year, will surpass the $2.3

billion mark. A substantial portion of this cost can be attributed to the city's cost of renting hotels throughout the city, which have been used as emergency housing for the influx of migrants.

NYC residents have come out and criticized the city's use of hotels as emergency shelters, expressing their concerns about rising taxes and the negative impact on the tourism industry, which they argue could lead to lost revenue for local businesses. "Taxpayers can't sustain this indefinitely," says Nicole Gelinas, a NYC resident and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute Think Tank, a nonprofit NYC think tank that focuses on urban issues and domestic policies. Yet, while her concerns about cost are valid, a deeper question emerges in not just whether taxpayers can sustain this cost, but how much are they willing to pay for a solution to this growing crisis?

It seems that New Yorkers have found themselves at a crossroads with the migration crisis. While many acknowledge the hardships migrants have faced, the burdens this crisis has placed on the city as a whole, and on the diverse communities that make up the vast metropolis, have become ever so increasingly apparent.

Local communities, especially those already struggling with concerns of affordability, overcrowding, and limited resources, have been severely impacted by the migrant crisis. Particularly, the poorest areas in New York City are being overburdened by the crisis, with particular zip codes falling victim and bearing an excessive amount of the strain. A confidential list of shelter locations obtained by the *New York Post* reveals that areas like Long Island City in Queens are being hit the hardest, with 23 government-run migrant shelters primarily located in and near low-income housing buildings. This represents 12% of all migrant shelters in the city, despite Long Island City's close proximity to some of the area's most expensive real estate, housing the area's wealthiest individuals. Danny Beauford, a local resident of Queensbridge Houses—a neighborhood in Queens—has expressed his frustration, noting that his neighborhood, which already suffers from high rates of poverty and limited resources, is now grappling with the influx of migrants, which has created competition for essential services. Beauford explains how "people from the projects don't even get food, [the migrants] come early and tie their little carts up to a gate to hold their spot; then people from the projects show up and are like 'whose carts are these?'"

Richer neighborhoods are mostly unaffected by the shelters, due to their tendency to be clustered in lower-income neighborhoods. The city's distribution of migrant shelters has sparked tension, with many low-income residents questioning why their neighborhoods are bearing the burden while wealthier areas are left largely unaffected. Residents of neighborhoods with median incomes below $37,300, such as Jamaica, Queens and Brownsville, Brooklyn, are dealing with overburdened food pantries, schools, and social services. The Adams administration has been confronted by local leaders, including Queens Councilwoman Julie Won, who has criticized Mayor Eric Adams for not properly distributing the shelters equally across the city. Won has also called out the inhumane conditions of the quality of food that is being provided at some of the city's migrant shelters, which she argues has contributed greatly to the growing frustration among

residents. According to Won, the long lines at food pantries in her district—already common due to the high density of poverty and public housing—have only worsened as a result of the "rotten" and "inedible" food being supplied by contracted city vendors to these shelters.

Given that locals and shelter residents are fighting for the few available decent meals, this has put an even greater strain on the already overburdened community resources. While the Adams administration has expressed gratitude for communities that have "stepped up" to accommodate the migrant shelters, many feel as though the city's approach has made pre-existing issues worse and has left the city's most vulnerable groups without much assistance.

This presents a challenging moral and practical dilemma: Should we prioritize helping those who are already here, or those who have newly arrived? While it is essential to provide support to the asylum seekers—many of whom are in dire need of help and have fled dire situations—local residents make the argument that their own struggles should not be pushed to the side in response to the influx of migrants. There is an intricate balance between providing resources to both groups, especially in a city where living expenses are high, affordable housing is scarce, and public services are often overstrained. Critics of the current shelter policy argue that the government should focus on finding a more balanced and fair distribution of resources that takes into account the needs of all New Yorkers. The goal should be to build a solution that addresses both pressing humanitarian needs and the long-term sustainability of neighborhoods that have been struggling for years.

Ultimately, the question isn't necessarily about prioritization but about making sure that resources are sufficient for everyone and widespread throughout the city. The goal of the Adams administration should be a system where no group is left behind, where the demands of newcomers do not force long-term residents into even greater suffering, and where everyone, whether new or old to the city, has access to the support they require to thrive.

New Yorkers' attitudes towards migrants have proven to be quite varied. Some have shown sympathy and support towards the newcomers while others have taken a more critical perspective of the migrants. There seems to be a notion among critical New Yorkers that there is an unwillingness among migrants to integrate themselves into American society.

"The problem is they don't assimilate," explained Laila Lalami's, the Moroccan-American essayist and novelist, seatmate as they sat 30,000 feet in the sky. After some small talk, Lalami learned that her seatmate was the owner of a small butcher shop in Gardena, located about 15 miles south of Los Angeles. While she didn't intend for such a conversation on her plane ride, her seatmate expressed his concerns over the growing Korean population in his neighborhood and his concern over their motivation to conform to American society. "We have all these Koreans now. They have their own schools, and they send their kids there on Sundays so they can learn Korean."

Instead of adopting what they perceive to be the “core values” and behaviors associated with American culture, some individuals, like Lalami’s seatmate, raise a concern over migrants clinging to their native cultures. This apprehension is often rooted in fears over cultural differences and the belief that migrants must accept common societal norms, ranging from dress and language to the adoption of American values, and perspectives. Critics worry that if migrants don’t assimilate, it could pose a threat to the integrity of American culture.

The fear surrounding immigration has found itself at the heart of many of the controversies and debates that follow the issue. When immigration is seen through the eyes of fear, much of what is fact turns into fiction. Fear tends to overshadow the complexities of immigration and can lead to things such as false narratives, stigmas, and stereotypes.

American culture is often referred to as a “melting pot” or “mosaic”, but those terminologies fail to fully capture how cultures actually blend into the American identity. Instead of incorporating all cultures into American identity, American culture tends to pick and choose which traditions it adopts. A large part of what is considered “traditional” American culture is rooted in white European customs, such as Thanksgiving, 4th of July, St. Patrick's Day, and many of the country’s religious and holiday observances. The foundation of American culture is made up of these customs, which were influenced by European nations. However, the process of adopting other cultural practices has been far from inclusive. While certain aspects of Asian, Latin American, and African cultures are often incorporated—often in ways that are superficial or commercialized—other customs are left ignored, overlooked, or misunderstood. Considering that only specific elements of other cultures are allowed to be a part of American culture makes American culture less of a melting pot or mosaic, and more of a carefully curated collection of traditions, heavily influenced by white European values and practices, with only certain aspects of other cultures allowed to be adopted when convenient or practical. As a result, other communities' contributions are frequently ignored or misrepresented in a culture where European heritage has gone on to dominate the narrative.

This is where the work of Dr. Maggie Gray, an associate professor of Political Science and International Relations at Adelphi University, becomes particularly relevant. Gray specializes in the rights of low-wage, non-citizen workers, where her research is able to take her to the heart of the labor systems that exploit and take advantage of the disadvantages of vulnerable migrant workers. Her work proves to be just as scholarly as it is personal. Gray’s dedication to understanding the power dynamics that plague the migrant labor industry allow her to be both a thoughtful academic and a passionate advocate for those whose struggles often go unseen.

When interviewing Gray, it was evident that the study of these workers was much more than an intellectual pursuit. She frequently highlights the immense struggles of these individuals and refutes many of the critical notions that have gone on to surround the migrant crisis in New York City.

In our interview, Gray brings up the Dual Labor Market Theory, which separates the labor market into two distinct sectors–one that offers opportunities for development and mobility, and another that consists of low-wage service-based occupations that offer few opportunities for growth. She explains, “On one hand, you have yourself, someone who is getting an education and expects to get a job and rise up through the ranks.” And in contrast, she pointed out the lower end of the labor market: “There’s the low end of the market, mostly service jobs, where people do not have the opportunity for advancement. These are lower-paying jobs like house cleaning, babysitting, and many low-wage positions in the food industry.” These roles, though essential to a functioning society, are filled by immigrants and individuals with little education, who have limited options in the job market. “Mostly you’re relying on immigrants or people with very little education who can only survive in that part of the labor market,” she noted, highlighting the immense reliance on low-wage immigrant labor.

This imbalance is further intensified by the power dynamics between employers and workers in low-wage sectors: “There is a real imbalance between the management and the people who do the work,” she observed. Those in leadership and managerial positions typically have higher pay and job security, while lower ranked workers, particularly undocumented immigrants, are vulnerable to exploitation. Gray explained that many undocumented workers are reluctant to speak up about unsafe conditions or unfair treatment due to fear of deportation: “The undocumented tend to want to stay in the shadows and not speak up, and that can be exploited in the workplace by not having the proper safety protocols and equipment.” This fear of exposure leaves them particularly susceptible to poor working conditions and lack of legal protection.

Gray also highlighted a major gap in education regarding workers’ rights. While there are legal policies in place to uphold labor rights, many undocumented workers are unaware that they have the same protections as U.S. citizens. “The problem is that most of the undocumented don’t know that they have most of the same labor rights as a citizen,” she pointed out. Although government programs exist to educate workers about these rights, she noted that the resources available are insufficient. “Those grants are just a drop in the bucket,” she said, emphasizing the overwhelming need for more efficient outreach and support for undocumented workers.

A lack of education and common political rhetoric have contributed to a growing sense of hostility toward immigrants. Last fall, Gray argued that loaded statements from political leaders, especially under President Trump, have fueled this anger. “What you have is a president elect whose campaign was an angry one…when he first announced he was running for president, he said, ‘I want to get rid of these thugs and rapists,’” she recalled. This kind of language, she suggested, has shaped public perception of immigrants as a threat, leading to further cultural anxiety. “I think this overlaps to some degree with the idea that immigrants are taking over their country,” she added, pointing out how these fears have become deep-rooted in the national conversation about immigration.

Despite the growing political hostility, Gray emphasized that immigrants remain a core and undeniably vital part of the U.S. economy. “When a 20-year-old arrives here and goes straight to work on a farm or a meat-processing factory, that itself is subsidizing your food budget,” she explained. Immigrant labor, particularly in agriculture and food production sustains industries that would otherwise face severe labor shortages. “We are getting workers without having to invest any money,” she added, highlighting the paradox of how the country benefits from immigrant labor without fully acknowledging its value of offering the workers proper support.

Professor Gray was able to paint a stark picture of the complex challenges faced by immigrant workers throughout our interview. While immigrant labor is essential to the economy, they are often subjected to exploitation, poor working conditions, and a lack of legal and social recognition. As Gray emphasizes, by advocating more effective and widespread education about labor rights, alongside fostering greater empathy towards migrants, meaningful progress can be made in addressing the issues surrounding immigration. Ultimately, recognizing the invaluable contribution of immigrant workers and treating them with dignity could revolutionize not only labor policies but also the foundation of American society.

As the migrant crisis continues to challenge New York City, it forces us to reflect on what it truly means to live in a just society. The tension between humanitarian efforts and practical concerns of resources connects to a deeper philosophical dilemma that is displayed in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that rightful political authority comes not from power, but from a mutual agreement based on shared common good. According to Rousseau, a just society is one in which individuals are bound together by a sense of solidarity and a dedication to one another's well-being. His idea of “the general will” suggests that decisions should not serve the interests of the privileged minority but should aim to support the common good of all, especially those most vulnerable.

In the context of the migrant crisis, Rousseau’s philosophy challenges us to rethink how we define both the ideals of citizenship and belonging. If we view our society holistically, rather than as a system that protects only the rights of its most privileged members, then we must consider how we care for those who are most vulnerable, like migrants. Rousseau’s vision of a just society calls for us to act in the means of equality and empathy, recognizing that those seeking a better life should be treated with the same dignity and respect as any other member in the community. Thinking and acting in this way allows us to begin to address the migration crisis not just as a logistical problem, but a moral problem that affects humanity as a whole.

As we confront the current migrant crisis in New York City, the question of what it truly means to be American has become more urgent than ever. The answer lies not in our policies, but in our shared sense of compassion that this country has shown in diversity. At its best, American culture represents a true melting pot, where traditions and customs from all immigrants are embraced and celebrated, reflecting ideals of equality and opportunity for all. Yet, there is another side to the coin—one deeply influenced by the legacy of white

European settlers and immigrants, who established many of the traditions and values considered to be quintessentially American. This side of American culture tends to pick and choose which customs to incorporate, often embracing those that fit into mainstream norms while overlooking or sidelining others. As hundreds and thousands of migrants walk along the streets of New York, we are reminded that being American is not about where you come from, but about the willingness to embrace one another, to stand together, and to contribute to building a society that reflects the true American ideals of equality and opportunity for all. In that sense, the migrant crisis is not just a crisis, but an opportunity to reaffirm what it means to be truly American.

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