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## Book Review: Unheard Voices of the Pandemic: Narratives from the First Year of COVID-19 By Dao X. Tran (Ed.)

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# Book Review

*Unheard Voices of the Pandemic:  
Narratives from the First Year of COVID-19*

By Dao X. Tran (Ed.)

Haymarket Books, 2021, 109 pages.

\$12.95 (Paperback).

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**U**nheard Voices of the Pandemic: Narratives from the First Year of COVID-19, edited by Dao X. Tran, is the latest book from the Voice of Witness (VOW) book series. VOW, a non-profit organization, uses storytelling as a powerful and transformative tool to illuminate human rights issues through narratives told by those most impacted by a given issue. VOW brings these narratives to educational contexts through curricula and resources, aimed to center marginalized voices and inspire school communities to tell their own stories. This book follows the stories of 17 narrators from marginalized communities across the United States, who speak to their experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each chapter begins with a short synopsis of the background of the narrators, from which

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point they share their experiences, struggles, hopes and fears during the onset of COVID-19. For example, we read oral histories of people currently or previously incarcerated, farmworkers, undocumented immigrants, activists, and others in a variety of professions, including a teacher, janitor, house cleaner and stripper. We read honest and important depictions of the pandemic by those whose lives are often rendered invisible.

This book seamlessly weaves together oral histories with the political climate in which they are situated. Many of the narrators have experienced abuse and trauma in their lives prior to COVID-19, and their stories shed light on how a lack of supportive social systems, alongside structural racism, and systemic oppression, has made the impact of COVID-19 particularly devastating to their communities. The narrators experienced adverse vulnerability to the virus itself, as well as high susceptibility to job loss, abrupt changes in health care, food insecurity, isolation, fear, and violations of their basic human rights. Storytelling proves to be a powerful tool through which the reader can understand and learn from the narrators' experiences. As the narrators share their stories, several themes emerge: how COVID-19 has illuminated existing inequities, the need for visibility, and the deep impact of social isolation. In addition, the stories speak to the power of community care to help people when societal structures fail to do so.

### **Inequities Illuminated by COVID-19**

Several chapters in this book show the devastating intersection between the virus and inequities people face because of immigration policies, and failures in the healthcare and criminal justice systems. Farida Fernandez,<sup>1</sup> a nurse and community organizer, explains how Black communities have been disenfranchised, controlled, criminalized, and left without access to proper health care. Fernandez asserts: "We're not going to get out of this pandemic alive and preserve the lives of Black people unless those things are addressed" (p. 21). Similarly, Yusufu Mosley, an activist-educator, who had spent 22 years in prison writes, "There's been the revelation that Blacks and

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<sup>1</sup> Farida Fernandez is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator's privacy.

Latinos and Native Americans are the primary ones assaulted by this disease” (p. 94). Mosley shares that many of his loved ones did not die directly from COVID, but rather from a lack of health care, leaving his community particularly vulnerable to the virus.

Michael “Zah” Dorrough, who has been incarcerated since 1985, reinforces this connection. When Dorrough contracted COVID-19 while in prison, he struggled to recover due to a lack of medical support or resources to protect himself. As he writes: “The starting point in discussing the pandemic is that the health care department simply does not care about our well-being. And you can actually see what not caring about us looks like” (p. 61). In addition, Raul Luna Gonzalez,<sup>2</sup> an immunocompromised asylum-seeker placed in immigration detention, paints a picture of what COVID-19 looked like behind bars. Gonzalez says that due to a lack of masks, soap, or hand sanitizer, “It was impossible for us to protect ourselves” (p. 32).

In a similar vein, several narrators speak to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Latinx and undocumented communities. Gabriel Méndez,<sup>3</sup> an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley who fled Honduras at age 15, expresses particular concern about the Latinx community. Méndez writes: “Language is a barrier. There are less resources in Spanish. Even in a pandemic, we are still a minority... We get a barrier on everything – getting food, getting supplies. It’s hard” (p. 58). These difficulties are reflected in the testimony from Roberto Valdez,<sup>4</sup> a farm worker, who says undocumented farmworkers are treated “like chess pieces that politicians move around” (p. 7). Valdez notes that even though farmworkers are considered essential workers, pay taxes, support the economy, and provide food for the country, they are denied the ability to become legal residents and receive needed benefits during the pandemic.

Similarly, Anastasia Bravo,<sup>5</sup> an undocumented single mother who works as a housecleaner, writes: “We work and we pay taxes based on the

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<sup>2</sup> Raul Luna Gonzalez is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator’s privacy.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Méndez is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator’s privacy.

<sup>4</sup> Roberto Valdez is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator’s privacy.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasia Bravo is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator’s privacy.

money that we earn... We're not able to qualify for anything. I need economic aid from the government during this time" (p. 88). These stories help the reader understand the impossible task of navigating the pandemic while undocumented and lacking access to resources.

### **Visibility**

Another theme that runs through this book is the importance of visibility in all times, but especially in times of crisis. The narrators ask to be seen, and for people to empathize with their stories. Hamina Eugene,<sup>6</sup> a student at UC Berkeley and coordinator for the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) asserts: "During my incarceration, I found that people often forget, or fail to prioritize, people or things that are not part of their daily interactions. Therefore, speaking these invisible communities and people into spaces is a way of prioritizing them" (p. 26).

This book gives the narrators visibility, and by reading their stories, we can connect to their experiences. In the words of Michael "Zah" Dorrrough: "We are people. We are part of the human family... The only meaningful difference is that many of us in here aren't getting the health care we need" (p. 64). Additionally, Anastasia Bravo states: "I want people to know that we are human beings, that we might have very little, but we contribute to the well-being of this country" (p. 85). The narrators give the reader the gift of understanding their experiences and make visible how society has failed to prioritize vulnerable communities.

### **Impact of Social Isolation**

Finally, the loss of community and connection during the first year of the pandemic was especially difficult for the narrators in this book. Shearod McFarland, who has spent more than 30 years incarcerated, notes that people in prison who became sick had to quarantine alone in an empty cell. McFarland equates this to "being placed in solitary" (p. 12). Yusufu Mosley discusses

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<sup>6</sup> Hamina Eugene is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator's privacy.

using techniques from his time in prison to get through the loneliness and isolation he faced. He expresses his determination: “I’m gonna get through it. It will pass. And be careful” (p. 93).

Soledad Castillo,<sup>7</sup> who migrated to the United States at age 14, describes her financial concerns and the pain of losing a baby during the pandemic. These experiences are compounded by being far away from home. Castillo writes: “Americans often talk about immigration, but we don’t talk about the emotional damage that occurs when people are far away from their families” (p. 46). Castillo puts forward that COVID-19 is giving all people a window into understanding what it is like to be separated from family. Anastasia Bravo also shares her poignant feelings of isolation from not being able to see family: “I really feel the need to see my mother because of all of this. It’s so terrible. I’m so afraid. I need a hug, my mother’s hug” (p. 87).

### **Conclusion**

Despite the many obstacles that the narrators face, many moments of hope and strength run throughout the stories. Roberto Valdez discusses coming home to a box of food that had been dropped on his doorstep: “It made me want to cry. It meant that someone was thinking about us, that someone was worrying about us... Nothing like that had happened before” (p. 8). The narrators call upon the reader to understand our role in supporting those outside of our immediate communities. The narrators also speak to the ways that the communities themselves have stood up for one another. Shearod McFarland writes that people in prisons have been sources of support to one another regardless of the lack of attention from the state government. This, he says, is “evidence of the rich human potential that lies behind the walls of prisons all over America” (p. 14). These testimonies offer hope and strength, inspiring readers to look deep within ourselves to see how we work to resist the structures that oppress others.

Reading the narrators’ stories was important, painful, and enlightening. Time has passed since the book was written in 2021 and while reading

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<sup>7</sup> Soledad Castillo is a pseudonym used in the book to protect the narrator’s privacy.

this book, I found myself reflecting on how the pandemic has unfolded since. For instance, Oscar Ramos, a second-grade teacher in Salinas, expressed the excitement that he shared with his students about returning to school the following school year. Sadly, we now know that students were not able to go back to school right away and that educational inequities that resulted from the pandemic continue to be vast and impactful. Additionally, we know that not enough has been done to care for marginalized communities as the pandemic continues to linger, or in the event of a future crisis.

By reading these oral histories, *Voice of Witness* helps to create a sense of connection between the reader and narrator, and offers a path for the reader to continue to explore the issues presented through the narratives. VOW offers educational curricula and resources that center the voices of the narrators' and nurture empathy and critical thinking. *Unheard Voices of the Pandemic* can be used to explore various themes with students, such as human rights, equity, and justice. These stories and themes are then used as inspiration to help students to tell their own stories and understand the importance and complexities of the issues plaguing their own communities. As such, this book, and all VOW oral histories, offer powerful insights into the narrators' life experiences, as well as serving as an important example of oral histories as an educational tool for social change.