eCOMMONS

Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

Volume 3
Issue 3 *Resilience, Resistance, & Reclamation: Changing the Narrative of Higher Education*

Article 3

October 2018

You Get What You Deserve: The Struggle for Worthiness of International Students and Workers

Hoa Bui
Miami University - Oxford

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Bui, H. (2018). You get what you deserve: The struggle for worthiness of international students and workers. Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs, 3(3), 20-23.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

You Get What You Deserve:

The Struggle for Worthiness of International Students and Workers

Hoa Bui
Miami University

Late January 2017, never once having talked about anything other than mundane daily activities and the weather, my mother sheepishly asked about American xenophobia and racism. My mother heard a news segment about Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency; she wants to know how much he actually does not like immigrants and whether he actually "makes racism happen." I resent her for asking, eight years too late, after investing most of my family's income to make sure that I have a spot in the United States to follow the American dream. Who faults a mother for investing in her child's future early? She created my deservingness of the American society. On the rise of anti-immigration policies, the Alt-Right, and the embrace of American-first rhetoric in the United States, who holds a mother responsible for the reality of a society across the ocean where she has never been? In this reflection, I wrestle with the concepts of worthiness and deservingness in my life as a "nonresident alien" student affairs professional and interrogate the responsibilities that those like me might owe to others.

My journey to come to and stay in the United States is a perpetual personal struggle. While I continually manipulate my assets and resources in a supposed meritocracy to get to the American dream, I painfully live and learn the reality that such meritocracy is a myth (Carter, 2008; Ebert, 2004), that many in this country increasingly do not want me to dream at all, and that I deserve such treatment. Conceptually, in a supposedly color-blind meritocracy "You can be anything you set your mind to be," and to understand "rights" (as in individual rights) requires grappling with worthiness, deservingness, and responsibility.

Colloquially synonymous, "worthy of" and "deserving of" both denote somebody's entitlement to certain things, treatments, or services. However, although worthiness is internal and sacred to the person, deservingness results from external behavior. For example, I do not have to do anything to be worthy of human dignity or my parents' love—that worth is inherent in my being. On the other hand, to deserve a promotion, I need to work hard and show that I possess the necessary skills and accomplishments. When it comes to the right to be in this country, is it a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a worthy birthright that rarely gets stripped away. Yet for all noncitizens, the right to be here requires proof of deservingness. In his State of the Union Address on January 2018, President Donald Trump announced his "immigration reform package." The goal was to end "the visa lottery" and to "begin moving toward a merit-based immigration system—one that admits people who are skilled, who want to work, who will contribute to our society, and who will love and respect our country" (State of the Union, 2018, para. 87). Implied is the assumption that the visa lottery has brought in undeserving—unskilled, lazy, noncontributing, and unpatriotic—immigrants. To the President, because America should be a meritocracy, having such a system is un-American: the merit-based system is clearly a solution to the American immigration problem.

> **While I continually manipulate my assets and resources in a supposed meritocracy to get to the American dream, I painfully live and learn the reality that such meritocracy is a myth.**

A frame "imposes a structure on the current situation, defines a set of 'problems' with that situation, and circumscribes the possibility for 'solutions'" (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006, p. 1). "Lottery," a loaded word, as a frame, conveys a random, skill-less, and risk-taking process. A luck-based fortune, such as the visa lottery, is neither deserving nor worthy. Tellingly, the visa lottery Trump attacked in his speech is "The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program." Diversity is a threat to the President. For me and many other international students and workers on this land, the process that landed me here is a merit-based process, proving every step of the way that we can speak English well, are financially self-sustainable, and are either academically well-prepared for school or especially skilled for "specialty" jobs.

The most accurate frame to describe my American positionality is that I am a "temporary worker," formally known as a "guest worker," who "come to America for a short time, work for low wages, do not vote, have few rights and services, and then go home so that a new wave of workers without rights, or the possibility of citizenship and voting, can come in" (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006, pp. 8–9). Paying tax and without suffrage, international students and workers by definition do not have representation, yet debates about our lives happen daily, always in reference to something or somebody else. Will temporary workers take American jobs? Are the foreign students studying bioengineering secretly creating biological weapons? Even when I proved my deservingness of the visa, the rule of the game changed arbitrarily; nobody is safe.

Image by Justin S. Campbell

Systemic disempowerment could continue to hit until people have nothing left to fight with. In March 2017, one month before the opening date of the H-1B visa petition and four months before the end of my legal status, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that starting April 3, it would suspend premium processing for all H-1B petitions, creating a backlog in processing time and potentially pushing me into illegal status. Without my department's financial and legal support, I could not have been here. In April 2017, Donald

Trump signed an executive order titled "Buy American and Hire American" that instructed federal agencies to closely regulate policies that granted work authorization such as the H-1B visa, which is the visa I am on. Multiple different American institutions—the university international offices, the U.S. consulate providing the visa, the Department of Homeland Security at the airport, and USCIS approving my legal status—exist to check for my deservingness to come and be here. The underlying assumption is that my legality is intimately dependent on my deservingness of and productivity within the American economy. As a student affairs professional, I still feel like a liar when affirming many international students of the beauty of diversity and their inherent worthiness of belonging and success.

One reason that many college officials use to convince international students and domestic students of the value of international students on campus is cultural diversity. That is, these international students will bring their cultures and contribute to the larger campus. I cringe at questions about "my culture" because the story is complicated. My Vietnamese story is not of an ideologically distant exotic land with a strange culture stuck in the past. My mother wholeheartedly believed in the "land of the superior" (in her words) so strongly that she started my ideological preparation as far back as I could remember. For most of the 1980s, my mother lived in a German rural town as an immigrant worker. Although she almost met the requirement for German citizenship, she went home, got married, and had me. The story of my conception is also a testament of her sacrifice: her chance of transformation in exchange for mine. For 18 years, my mother raised me with tales of Germany's abundance and prosperity and the Germans' generosity. She raised me with tales of cultural and materialistic shock after she moved back to Vietnam—when she did not have sanitary pads, flushable toilet paper, or sunscreen. Displaced from her childhood home due to bombing and having multiple family members die in the Vietnam War, she blames the Vietnamese government for not normalizing its relationship with the United States sooner so she could access Western goods and live its "advanced" values. "The bitterness and humiliations of the [imperialized] experience […] nevertheless delivered benefits—liberal ideas, national self-consciousness, and technological goods—that over time seem to have made imperialism much less unpleasant" (Said, 1994, p. 18). Along with bribing my teachers to excuse me from "unnecessary classes" so I could focus on the SAT and driving for hours a day to get me from school to my volunteer site to my test-prep class all at different corners of the city, we paid US$2,000 (40% of my family's annual income) upfront to a Vietnamese study abroad agency to get professional help with my college application. I would not have been here, and my deservingness will not be recognized without my mother's unyielding faith and investment in White imperial supremacy.

Ruminating over worthiness and deservingness does not change my reality, and I have the ability to act on this reality. Part of my reality includes facing questions of responsibility. Specifically, responsibility to whom? Upon which social and political conditions am I responsible to act? Spivak (1993) wrote about people whose background and reality are similar to mine. To benefit themselves, Third World academics and professionals living in the West essentialize and commodify their marginal culture to fulfill a Western fantasy of an authentic "Otherness" and reproduce imperial hegemony (Spivak as cited in Andreotti, 2011). Spivak's (1993) warning is not destiny because of my ambivalent position in relation to Western imperialism. Speaking English without a strong accent, fluent in popular cultural references, praised as the embodiment of exemplary working ethics, confident in my capabilities, and committed to democracy, my existence is a mimicry of the colonizer's production: "translated' copies of the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions, and values" (Andreotti, 2011, p. 26). Bhabha's (1984) conceptualization of the "mimic men" and Frantz Fanon's (1968) "native intellectual" both have a potential path to transformative colonial resistance (McLeod, 2000). Fanon's (1968) three-phase process—unqualified assimilation, just-before-the-battle, and fighting—for the native intellectuals is helpful; yet, just as any theory is an imperfect reflection of reality, I am not sure it is applicable to me. My responsibility is to define this path for myself. I am not yet at the fighting phase where I am with my people reimagining, reinterpreting, and transforming the Vietnamese culture. That is where I would like to go.

The underlying assumption is that my legality is intimately dependent on my deservingness of and productivity within the American economy.

***References:**

Can be found at the end of this special issue.

Image by Natalie Battaglia

Suggested Citation:
Bui, H. (2018). You get what you deserve: The struggle for worthiness of international students and workers. *The Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs, 3*(3), 18-21.