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

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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 rejected 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? She created my deservingness of the visa lottery Trump attacked in his speech is “The lottery, is neither deserving nor worthy. Tellingly, the visa lottery Trump attacked in his speech is “The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program.”

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. 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 possibly pushing me into illegal status. Without my department’s financial and legal support, I could not have been here. In April 2017, Donald Trump officially 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. 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 professionally prepared, and are especially skilled for “specialty” jobs. The most accurate frame to describe my American positonality 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.
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 my story includes facing questions of responsibility. Specifically, responsibility to whom? Upon which social and political conditions of reality, I am not sure it is applicable to me. My response is to define this path for myself. I am not normalizing its relationship with the United States with imperial supremacy. 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.

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