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 refer 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 visa, the dream. While I continually prove my deservingness of the visa, the reality that such meritocracy is a myth 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? When I proved my deservingness of the visa, the rule of the game changed arbitrarily; nobody is safe.

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 matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of worth or deservingness? Anybody born on this land is automatically an American, so citizenship is a matter of...
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 an idea 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 requirements 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” (Saïd, 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’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.

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