

We Build Together the Spaces We End Up Calling Home

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I clench the handles of my suitcases as my mother's fingers tuck the hair behind my ear. Tears start to well up in my eyes.

"Te amo Dianita."

Before I knew it, I hugged goodbye [to] all our nights dancing in the living room, the chocolate she made lukewarm 'cause she knows I do not like it piping hot, and our loud laughter after a really good joke.

I have been living in Indianapolis for over a year now, pursuing the education I had always dreamed of and worked so hard for.

I am a "legal" alien on an F1 visa.

I am a "guest."

And I have never felt as lonely, as desperate, and as pained as I have here.

When you think of Indianapolis and the people that are in it, odds are you probably think WHITE. I know I did.

My PWI [predominantly white institution] school did not help.

I felt vulnerable.

I am brown. I have an accent. I am queer. I am not from around here.

I have been more-often-than-not the only person of color in my classes, let alone the only person coming from another country.

At times I have not understood the words going on around me, or the tone of them, or the phrasing, even though I had always considered myself bilingual. Sometimes, I have stumbled on my words because the right word I am looking for in English only exists in Spanish or Quechua. I have missed hugging people just for the sake of hugging people and talking to the person in line next to me just for the sake of talking to people.

Immigrating to another country is renouncing a part of who you were and constantly battling to discover and rediscover the place you occupy in this new environment.

There are conflicting voices.

Those of your loved ones repeating that you belong and those of the systems in place that treat you like a threat and an unwanted presence in this country.

I have been questioned on my intentions by every officer I have encountered.

Unfortunately, officers at entrance ports are not the only ones questioning my intentions. Uber drivers are a close second.

“If you are a student here, then why do you speak like that?”

This country was occupied by immigrants in its foundations, but this country was not built for immigrants that are not white.

In the words of Victory Sampson, a first-generation Nigerian American and a freshman at Butler University, the atrocity is that it never occurs in their thought process that people were going to come to the U.S. with different colors. This was not intended to be a land for all, and the systems put in place reflect it.

Immigration enforcement has gotten 333 billion dollars since the early 2000s. ICE is set to receive more funding this year — even when they have committed crimes such as racial profiling and apprehending people without probable cause. Allowing you into my own nightmare, I have been stopped in an airport and put in a room with people that have my skin color and speak my language simply because I was brown. I have been stopped even when I had all the paperwork to [show] proof [of] my “lawful” intentions in this country. Seconds became hours and all I could do was pray that somehow someone would take pity on me and let me leave.

From all the horrible things I witnessed, I want to share with you one of them.

The officer called a man to review his case. He questioned him in Spanish “Qué es lo que realmente estas haciendo aquí?”

What are you really doing here?

The man answered by saying he had been hired for a job.

“No tiene sentido. Por qué te darian el trabajo a ti, cuando hay miles de Americanos ciudadanos de Estados Unidos que podrían hacerlo?”

That does not make any sense, why would anyone hire you when there are thousands of Americans, citizens of the United States, that could do the same?

The man did not answer.

“Y si trabajarás aquí, por que no hablas Ingles?”

And if you are supposed to work here, why can you not speak English?

Before the man could reply, the officer called three of his colleagues who were on their break.

“Look at this guy. He is trying to fool me! He doesn’t know that I send people like him back all the time.” The officers laughed. The man they were questioning did not speak English. He had a contract in his hand, his boss’s [telephone] number as a reference, and had been respectful. Yet, they were there making fun of him in a language he did not speak. They had deemed him incapable of performing a job, deemed him worthless, with no information other than his name and demographics. And they were doing so while eating snacks. As if somehow the man was their form of entertainment.

I held my tears for five long hours and fell down to the floor, incapable of moving, after I got out. But, I got out of that room. Not everyone does.

Immigrants and their children are treated as non-human in the United States.

I talked to two of my friends, both children of immigrants, about their experiences.

Jazlyn Khan is Deisi and white. Although Jazlyn holds an American passport and was born here, she has also been treated as the other. “The biggest issue that affects my family is the ability to be here and visit family members,” she said.

Aside from policy limitations that exist to prevent immigrants from going back home and coming back, there are constantly people trying to target them. “When the Trump ban was occurring, it was a big concern if we could visit Pakistan,” Jazlyn said and then proceeded to explain that when she tried to get her visa for Pakistan, her family was asked to go physically to an office for “special review.” Jazlyn was only travelling with her father but had all the permissions from her mother in order. Her family had to travel to Chicago, because there was no office in Indianapolis, and wait hours only so that the officers could see her white mother and confirm she consented to Jazlyn’s travelling plans. “The only reason mine took longer is because I am mixed, and not only was that discriminatory against my dad, it was inefficient because you could have gotten the same thing from a phone call.”

And even when Jazlyn gets to travel, she has always been stopped to check her luggage in airports, once triggering an alarm because of colored pencils. You read that right, a box of colored pencils.

Random checks are not always random.

The sentiment of othering runs deep in the United States. When I talked to Victory, he said that “if [his] mom had decided to emigrate to London, still a very white place, instead of the United States, [him] being Nigerian would not have been seen as shocking to others.”

And while it may make some uncomfortable, WE ARE STILL HERE.

I will eternally be grateful for Hanako Gavia and Ms. Bobbie Gibson. They heard me when the world was falling apart and lent me their shoulder to rely on.

Hanako, thank you for showing me Indianapolis is more than just a white population in the middle of cornfields. Thank you for taking me to events and places that celebrated diversity, that celebrated people from all over the world, and that immediately treated me like one of their own. Meeting you changed my life here.

I want to use this space that has been given to me to talk about the power of community and I want to explicitly tell you reading this that Indianapolis is a place of immigrants of all colors. I feel it every time I go to [the] Global Village and see the artifacts from all over the world people have lent for others to see. I feel it in the Immigrant Welcome Center and the stories that all the attendees share. I feel it when I go to delight in cuisines, other than mine, around Indianapolis.

And while I advocate for the dismantling of oppressive systems and institutions such as ICE, I stand with my community and ask you to stand with us. There are so many resources and places in the city that will love us unconditionally. Visibilize them!

We are your neighbors and we make your city brighter. Vote for people that stand with us. Talk to us.

We build together the spaces we end up calling home.