

A painting of a young Black woman with her hair styled in two buns. She is looking slightly to the right with a calm expression. The background is a vibrant teal color, and several white, stylized flowers are scattered around her face and hair. The overall style is soft and artistic.

Testimony

our stories

the teens of
RaceProjectKC

2021

Testimony
our stories

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AFFIRMATIONS

Established by Johnson County Library in 2015, Race Project KC is an annual immersive social justice initiative. It is designed for students in grades 9-12 in the Kansas City metro area. Coordinated by a sub-team of Race Project KC and funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the scope of the Cultivating Writers project was to bring students together from each of the four student cohorts involved in Race Project KC during the 2020-2021 school year to learn, examine, discuss and produce pieces of writing that call for equitable quality education as it relates to race, equity and inclusion. In addition to producing written editorials, students shared writing at Race Project KC's annual student symposium on April 27, 2021.

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FOREWORD

by John Eligon

The New York Times

One of the first articles I wrote for The New York Times took me to a prison in Eastern Pennsylvania.

I went to interview Smokey Wilson, a 52-year-old former prison boxing champion who had been behind bars for murder since he was 17. Smokey had gained a measure of acclaim when Bernard Hopkins, a middleweight world boxing champion, said during a pre-fight press conference that when he had served time for robbery, Smokey took him under his wing and was his first boxing trainer.

While Hopkins had gotten out and risen to fame and fortune in the sport, Smokey languished behind bars, with seemingly little prospect for a productive or worthwhile life. A convicted murderer on a life sentence – it seemed an easy narrative to discard.

But in an interview that lasted some seven hours over the course of two days, Smokey laid out a life story that left me floored. He fell into the foster care system at a young age and bounced from house to house. Without a family to rely on, he turned to a gang for support. That led him down a bad path that ended with him killing another teenage boy in retaliation for the murder of one of his own friends. He was a child with little guidance, succumbing to a system and society that often discarded Black boys like him.

Yet what was truly incredible about Smokey's story is what he made of himself in prison. Many people in his position likely would have sulked in self pity at having to spend practically their entire life as a prisoner. But Smokey did everything he could in prison to turn his life around and make something of himself. He converted to Islam, took up boxing, went to school and mentored other inmates. He wrote books for youth, trying to impart lessons that would prevent them from falling into the same problems he did.

I had gone to the prison hoping to get a story about Bernard Hopkins, but I came away with a more remarkable tale of a man who had transformed his life, even though he had little hope of ever living in the outside world again.

When I think about the power of words and writing, Smokey's story comes to mind.

We often hold assumptions about people and their circumstances and think we know what their stories are without ever really exploring them. People from rough circumstances, especially Black people, rarely get the benefit of the doubt. They are caricatured in the popular imagination.

But this is what storytelling and writing can do. It breaks down the invisible walls in our hearts and minds, allowing us to see past the lazy assumptions we often hold. It makes the world smaller and more accessible. And ideally, it brings us all closer together and gets us past our political, racial and socioeconomic divides.

Smokey's story was one that many fail to see – a young man who was not afforded the luxury of resources and guidance that so many of us grow up with. He grew up with the daunting proposition of trying to figure out life on his own, a practically impossible task for a teenager.

"I didn't know how to get out," he told me of how he felt when he wanted to give up gang life.

In writing Smokey's story, my hope is that readers think twice before dismissing people who are in prison, and that perhaps people in

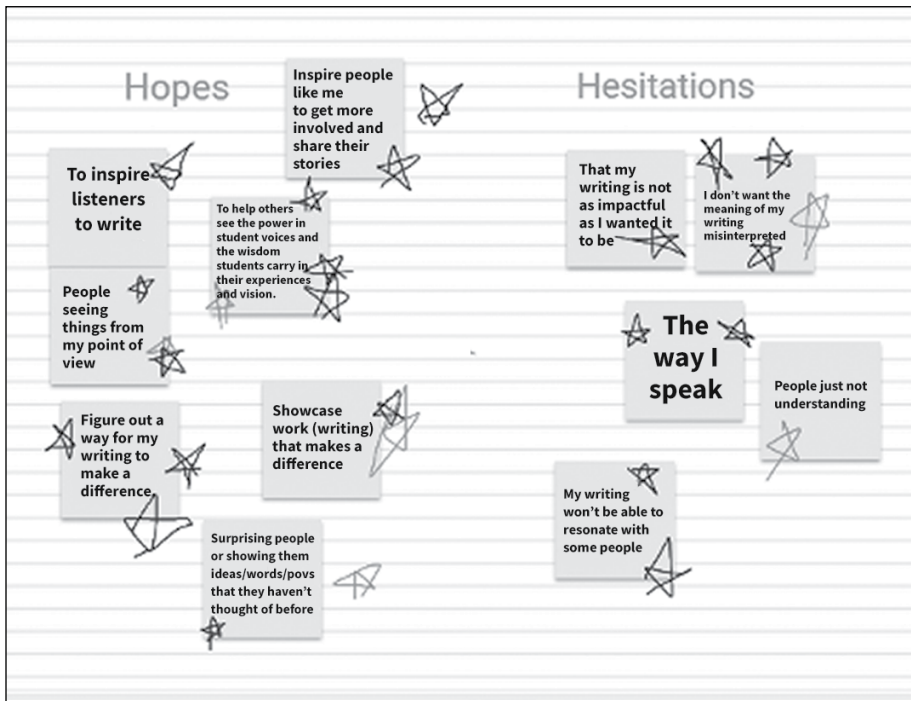
power can think of ways to correct the circumstances that lead people from marginalized communities down this path.

Ultimately, Smokey found his salvation in a series of United States Supreme Court decisions that allowed him to be released from prison. Since 2017 – after nearly five decades behind bars – he has been a free man. He is now working to mentor young people and training the next generation of boxers, attempting to find the next Bernard Hopkins.

While my story may not have gotten Smokey freed, I would like to think that it played some role in helping society to accept someone like him. I would love to be able to snap my fingers and make things happen how I want them, when I want them. That, obviously, is not an option. But I can continue to listen, to understand, to empathize and, of course, to write.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Cultivating Writers asked teens to share their hopes and hesitations regarding the opportunity to perform their pieces for a live audience at the Kansas City Race Project Symposium. This image captures their reflections, with stars representing resounding agreement from peers.



Writing is an act of vulnerability – an artform steeped in bravery, dedication, action and advocacy.

To write is to lay bare one's identity on the page, to say – with fortitude – I am here. My story matters.

Cultivating Writers offers teens the space to explore and experiment with language, and to pore their lived experiences and earned perspectives into words that move, ignite and inspire. These pages contain the words of changemakers, caretakers, truth-seekers; thinkers, writers and visionaries who are not afraid to show readers their world and hold us accountable in their telling.

What does it mean to create equitable educational spaces? How is bilingualism treated in schools across America? What does it mean to reckon with biraciality while coming of age in today's world?

In a time of transition – when politics, health and identity hang in the balance – the voices of GenZ writers hold hope. May the poems, personal narratives and opinion editorials that follow energize and enlighten you, and empower your commitment to advocating for a world founded in equity, access and change.

With love,

Brittany Collins & Marlee Bunch
Co-Facilitators and Editors, Cultivating Writers

Mi Bandera

It was a trip to a better place, but first I didn't even realize I was in a whole different universe, with a weird language and people who hated me and others like me for no reason, just for being different, for not being "American" as they call themselves. If you are one of those people, you need to learn about geography, hermano, because I'm more American than you.

I found myself in a school that, compared to my old school . . . it's like, compare a little bug and a human, feeling safe only in the classes where there were people like me, people who understand me, not only the ones that spoke the same language as me, but everyone who understood what I was feeling, and I'm not talking about those who call themselves Latinos only when they need it, but when you ask them for help, they seem like those who hate us for not being "Americans."

One day, I was walking as usual in the lunch tables where it seemed like I was invisible, and then I saw those beautiful white and light blue in a wall. The white representing purity, integrity, faith, obedience, firmness, vigilance, peace and nation and the blue representing justice, loyalty, sweetness, strength, the Guatemalan sky, and the two seas that surround the coasts of the country, as well as those of Centro America.

In front of my flag, I repeated the same words my teacher used to tell me every Monday, "Levanten su mano a la altura de el hombro y repitan conmigo."

Bandera nuestra,
a ti juramos
devoción perdurable,
lealtad perenne,
honor, sacrificio y esperanza
hasta la hora de nuestra muerte.

En nombre de la sangre y de la tierra,
juramos mantener tu excelsitud
sobre todas las cosas;
en los prósperos días,
y en los días adversos,
velar y aun morir,
porque ondees perpetuamente
sobre una patria digna.

OMAR ANAVISCA

Realidad

Recuerdo que estaba en la escuela y cada Lunes cantábamos el himno
a nuestra patria y la jura a la bandera

Jugaba con mis amigos en el patio en el recreo

Memorias de cuando caminaba entre los callejones de camino a mi
casa

llegaba a mi hogar pero once chapines mas no podían hacerlo.

I remember going down from where I lived to the town to buy
groceries

I saw a kid selling candles

He was as old as me, but he was in the streets by himself

I got home with the candles I bought from that kid, and I asked
myself:

Is he part of today's eleven?

Walking in big towns scares me

Because in towns like that is where my grandfather joined those
eleven

And now pandilleros want me and my family to be four of them

I just don't want a bullet in my head

Cierra los ojos es lo que mi mamá me decía si veía algo "feo" como
ella lo llamaba

Luego entendí que lo feo eran cadáveres dejados por la violencia.

Un dia como como cualquiera estaba en la escuela

Pase el dia con mis amigos como usualmente lo hacía

I was getting out of school, and I saw five police cars in the next street.

They said one of the teachers there got killed in front of the school,

The kids watching didn't stop them from making her part of those eleven.

But what can I expect from a country like mine?

A country with people who decide to have a clown as President,

A country where death is as usual as eating breakfast in the morning?

But in the middle of all that shit I can still have hope.

I still have hope in those who believe that a change can be made,

I still have hope in those young minds that can see what is correct,

I still have hope in those who choose to sell candles in the streets instead of help make those eleven be twelve.

Todavía tengo esperanza en la tierra cafetalera que me vio nacer

Y aún más importante todavía tengo esperanza en mi pueblo.

Author's Note: This was written from the perspective of a child who was born and raised in a beautiful country led by corruption and violence, where 11, if not more, people were killed daily in 2019 and 2020. I am lucky to not be one of them.

OMAR ANAVISCA

The Doors

How can you close those doors?

As kids, we dream about being astronauts and police officers
But as we grow up, there is a man putting wooden boards in the doors of our dreams.

What did I do wrong? I didn't commit a crime.
But maybe for that man it is a crime to not be white,
Is that right? Is it a crime to be different?

That is not fair for anybody,
But as Tupac said,
"The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody."

KAYLA ANDREWS

Who Am I?

Who am I?
Am I white?
I have curly red hair and pale skin that never tans, covered with freckles
Yet my brother is tan?
Black Hair, Olive skin, with only a hint of freckles
I am not like my brother.
I will never be like my brother
I will not be judged like my brother because of my skin
I will not know the struggle of having a darker skin color like my brother
But am I black?
I assume my grandfather was a black man
Helped my Irish immigrant grandma birth 2 beautiful black women
My father is white, but my mother gave birth to me with her black skin and her curly brown hair
So why did I turn out so different?

I mean, I never felt black.
I never knew the struggle
I live in a white neighborhood
I go to a predominantly white school
I lived with my white dad for most of my childhood.
I grew up white.
So I am white... Right?

My mom once told me a story
She was picking me up from daycare and the lady handing me over was new
She thought my mom was a nanny, because how could an extremely fair-skinned little girl come from a beautifully dark olive-skinned woman?

I joined Race Project KC, and I joined the Diversity club, but how could I speak? How could I speak about hardship or comment on others' hardship when, in my mind, I cannot relate to the black or brown kids that tell their story? I will always feel separate from their world. People are always surprised when I say I am black. And still, I need people to know. I want to celebrate the black side of me. I don't want to be known as just white, because that's not all of me. I am not just one race or one color, but I question, if others can't see my biraciality, how am I supposed to see it?

I have been in this cycle of questioning what I am for a few years now.
What do I identify as?
Am I white?
Am I black?
What seems more realistic?
What should I say to make others happy?
My life is not black or white
So why does it feel like I have to choose?
I look white so I must identify as white.
But I am black
Why can't I identify as such?

When will the world we live in see more than black or white? A person has to be one or another because we have to make it easier on the people around us. To categorize our skin color to one, making sure others do not get confused because we have to fit the expectations of others.

I can not be categorized.

Still,
It is hard admitting and accepting that I don't check one box. Biologically, I am mixed, but I haven't accepted it yet. I have the privilege of a white person, but I won't be able to experience the hardship of the black people and their history that I can only relate to by blood.
I am not white
I am not black

You can not categorize me
You can not force me into one box
You may not see it now
I may not accept it just yet either
But for my own identity
For my own sanity
I am a beautiful combination of black and white
Equal parts of each color
So I say with pride:

I am mixed.

MAQDAS BHATTI

Untitled

The American Dream: a perfect combination of success, freedom, and opportunities . . . or is it?

The American Dream, an impossible hope for many. The idea of the American Dream has crawled into the minds of millions for over thousands of years. What is the American Dream? The Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Declaration of Independence set forth the idea that any man in the United States is granted life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but the reality is that the American Dream is just that, a dream. People from all over the world believe that if they come to America, they will be able to find freedom and success. But when they do get here, all they find is hardship, discrimination and poverty.

Since 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed, we have seen that citizens and immigrants are not being granted the same ideas such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. People of a different color, race, ethnicity, religion, gender and citizenship are all being deprived of the inalienable rights that were "granted" to them.

Let's start with the citizens within the United States. The Declaration of Independence wants citizens to believe that "we are equal" and we have these "unalienable rights." Life, the ability to control how we live, and what we do when we are alive. Liberty, the right to freedom, the right to make choices, the right to feel. Lastly, the Pursuit of Happiness, the ability to reach for our own success, and the right to obtain the same opportunities as everyone else. These ideals were supposed to be the epitome of the American Dream. Everyone who believed in the American Dream thought, "I will have the same opportunities as everyone else," "I will be able to go to college,"

“I will be able to get a job,” “I will not be oppressed or discriminated against,” “I will finally have freedom.”

Wrong.

The American Dream is a fog hindering the people’s vision of freedom and happiness to hide the terrible reality. The reality that, in 2020, the Refugee resettlement ceiling was 18,000 while the U.S. only admitted 11,000, and it takes almost two years to process these refugees, and, for them to apply for citizenship, they must have proof of residency for five years (Migration Policy Institute). Or how, as of now, there are 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, and it will take them eight years to be processed and have the ability to become a citizen (Blizzard & Batalova “Refugees and Asylees”). The reality we need to see is that many immigrants of many races and genders within the U.S. are not given the same freedom, rights or opportunities that were supposedly bestowed to them by the facade that is the American Dream.

If one comes to the “States,” they can picture a land of opportunities, a land where they will reach their own version of success, where anyone from anywhere can obtain this success, and a chance at freedom without an oppressive eye looking over them. Many are wrong to think of America that way. In many ways, America is oppressive, but it all comes down to our government. Our government IS racist. Our government IS sexist. America, our country, is beautiful on her own, yet the power we give the politicians to run her manually generates the fog that blinds the citizens and immigrants of the United States to follow the “American Dream”.

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ALYSCEA JACKSON

Education

My education starts when I walk into the classroom
For me, that’s roll call
And I still remember the first time a teacher called my name
It was sometime in elementary
And Instead of announcing the forefront of who I am – a young black lady – she addressed me by the
name of my whitewashed history, “Ms. Jackson”

I couldn’t help but be confused that last name respect only applied if you were White
Like school teachers are still pressed that the roll call is ruined by ethnic names
So instead they resort to the last name that was stamped onto blacks like cattle
Like the small trademark on a garment that certifies that the cotton is real
And that maybe I still live in their fantasy where they can roll from Emily, to Tanner, and Katie to Ms. Jackson

Is the way they spit out my last name modern-day blackface?
Because its looks the same as when it was beat out of my grandparents

I know that I have never been allowed to call Ms. Barker-Fisher, “Susan,” or Mrs. Genocio, “Emily”
But I do know that I have never met a black person named “Jack”
So I am confused as to how I became Jack’s Son and why only half of my story is being told

Maybe that’s why my least favorite subject has always been History
Because all my teachers have claimed to be colorblind
But I know that I’ve had more Mr. Greens than Browns and that King Tut on page 238 isn’t supposed to be White

Maybe we need a reform in history books because almost all of the
White men that write them claim that they don't see color
And I'm starting to take that literally

Now I fear what will my kids learn in the classroom
As if all that protesting earned us a backseat in a room full of rights
Will my kids read that ". . . on January 6th American citizens pleaded
with congress to overturn the results of a fraudulent election"?
Or do both sides shift uncomfortably when the teacher announces
that White supremacist protested
oppression
And harassed the Blue Lives we thought mattered to them as they
made it six times further than their Black counterparts?
Will they see it as backwards when in a Christian nation we praise
bibles being held upside down?

Maybe subconsciously that is why I scoffed when my mom asked me
what did I learn at school that day
And maybe when I said nothing it's because I meant it
It's because the lectures teachers lectured and the notebook my hands
cramped on were still white
And my eyes didn't remember the textbook pictures because the ink
was so diluted
Mr. Green regularly skipped ten pages when going over slavery
And my teachers couldn't pronounce Alyscea so I was never present

ERANDI RAMIREZ

1st Generation Latino Immigrant, 1st Generation Student

My parents won't fully understand.
What it's like to be a student, what it's like to be a U.S. high school
and college student.
My friends won't comprehend.
What it's like to be Latino, immigrant, and a first-generation student.
The stress for success.
The pain of missed opportunities.
All because I'm a first-generation Latino immigrant high school and
college student.
The amount of research to be done.
The questions to get answered.
The probabilities to become.
The tuition to be covered.
The scholarships to be won.
The pathways to be discovered.
The college visits and flights to embark on.
The applications to be filed.
All because I'm a first-generation Latino immigrant high school and
college student.
And society's structural system wasn't built for us.

Where is Home?

Where is home you ask?
Where is the place where I can freely be me and there's no one
to judge?
The country that accepts you.
The community that supports you.
The neighborhood that respects you.
The place that encourages creativity and discipline.
The walls that shelter us from the scary world.

The place that doesn't turn its back on you
The walls that comfort us when we're in pain
The room that will ever embrace you
The ceiling that contains me but doesn't limit me
The place you can customize to your liking
The place that is you can proudly call yours
Where is home?
My mind.
That's my home.

ERANDI RAMIREZ

Immigration and the American Dream

Do you believe in the American Dream? What's your side on immigration? Who are these immigrants? What even is the reason that people want to immigrate to America? Is there a possibility for these to overlap?

We can see the American Dream being drilled into us in many different ways: advertisements, products, social media, etc., but what exactly is the American Dream? An article written by Lindsey VanSomeren, personal finance writer, on July 7th, 2020, defines it as, "The idea of the American Dream is as old as the country itself, even if it wasn't expressly named. You can find it at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence." She then quotes, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The dream of America was founded in the freedom to follow your dreams which equals your happiness. To reach your goal by working hard and catch the right opportunities no matter your looks or heritage. What this means is that you can get an education, dream career/job, homeownership, affordable healthcare, healthy food, a healthy lifestyle and independence. The American Dream is centered around the idea of pursuing your dreams and living the life you want.

Let's talk immigration in America . . . Abby Budiman, a research analyst at Pew Research Center, wrote, "The United States has more immigrants than any other country in the world. Today, more than 40 million people living in the U.S. were born in another country . . . The population of immigrants is also very diverse . . . every country in the world represented." 77% of those are legal and 45% of legal immigrants were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2017. 27% were permanent residents, 5% temporary residents, and another 23% were unauthorized. In 2017, 3.2% of the nation's population were unauthorized immigrants. While many think that Mexicans are the

only immigrants, this is actually false. Mexico is the country with the most unauthorized immigrants in the United States. In 2018, Asia combined accounted for 28%, Mexico 25%, Europe, Canada, and other areas of North America 13%, Middle East and North Africa 4%, and sub-Saharan Africa 5%. In that same year, we can see that the top country for immigration was China with 149,000 people, India #2, and Mexico #3. Out of the 45% of the nation's immigrants, 24% live in California, 11% in Texas, and 10% in Florida. Now that we have some basic statistics, we can begin to piece together why people are immigrating to the U.S., and the type of people they are.

Taking a look at the article *Top 10 Reasons Why People Move to the US* published by Visa Place on January 6, 2021, we can see the top 10 reasons people want to come to America: education, medical innovation, economy, career opportunities, science and technology, and travel amongst the top. This means that the people who come to the U.S. are students, people who like to travel, people from a country with a weaker economy, and people who want to enter a STEM-related industry in the U.S. The American Dream mostly consists of, and is defined as, the top 10 factors of America. So, in case you haven't noticed the trend, immigrants are mostly people who hitched a ride on the American Dream, and are hoping to achieve their dreams.

The American Dream can be applied to anyone and everyone regardless of their race, identity, nationality, home country, age, gender, abilities, etc. Or can it? Are there certain requirements, impediments or factors that may disqualify you from obtaining your American Dream, whatever your version is? Yes, there is, and it comes down to one major factor: your immigration status. Are you a citizen, permanent/temporary resident, VISA holder/DACA recipient/refugee, or undocumented? The U.S. has a caste system, which you can further explore in the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, and while there are eight head pillars, your immigration status is part of the U.S. caste system and can also explain your immigration status. These two topics overlap in many ways. The size and type of your American Dream come down to the opportunities available for your status, because of how it is seen. There are many different immigration statuses that are defined by the opportunity they give to drive, pursue higher education, obtain a job and good career, and travel and other opportunities.

The first thing an immigrant has to worry about when coming here is shelter and transportation. So let's begin with shelter: you're going to need to rent or buy either a house or an apartment. While many immigrants might come to live with family or friends who offer them a place to stay, you're going to want to move out on your own at some point. Generally, to rent a house or apartment in the U.S., you do not need any specific proof of residency documents. Since you will undergo a criminal and credit background check, you will have to prove your source of income and provide a Social Security number or income tax number. If you haven't lived in the U.S. long enough to establish a credit score, then you might have to pay an enhanced security deposit. However, certain neighborhoods or rental complexes might require you to prove your legal residence in the U.S., or only accept SSN, not an IT number. This automatically eliminates illegal immigrants from renting a house or apartment in certain areas or complexes where an SSN and proof of residency are required.

Anyone in the U.S. can buy property regardless of their status. The easiest way to do so is paying full price in cash, meaning you have to save money. This is a problem for someone who immigrated to the U.S. because of a bad economy in their country. To qualify for a mortgage loan as a foreigner, you need a green card, an SSN or IT number, proof of employment authorization in the U.S., to have lived and worked for two years, a credit score of 720 minimum, and make a 20% down payment. If you entered as a refugee or you were granted asylum, and if you are a temporary non-resident alien, you do qualify for a home loan. There are three options as an immigrant when it comes to housing: 1, live with family/friends until you can save up to pay in cash or until you are eligible for a loan; 2, if you have the resources to pay the full price upon arrival then buy a house as soon as you get here; 3, if you can't live with family/friends then you might want to start out renting and saving until you can buy a house or until you can get a loan. If you are eligible for these things, that is.

Transportation is the second thing immigrants must worry about. Public transportation is available to everyone regardless of their immigration status, but not available in all places. Therefore, you're going to need to buy yourself a car and drive yourself to where you need to go. Depending on your situation and the city you live in, you can also walk, bike or ask for rides. In order to drive in the U.S., you need a driver's license. These are issued by states so rules may vary,

but you will need to pass a vision examination, written examination and driving examination. Some states, like Kansas, require you to have proof of residency, and not be suspended, revoked or canceled in any state if you have previously had one. Missouri, just next door, requires you to have proof of identity, date of lawful status, proof of SSN, and proof of MO residential address. Out of the 50 states 14, along with the District of Columbia, permit driver's licenses without providing proof of legal residency as long as people can prove residency for a period of time in that state or DC. States like California, New York, Illinois and Colorado, to name a few, but will be an invalid form of identification, voting or health benefits. If you reside in the U.S. legally, then getting a driver's license will not be a problem as long as you pass the examinations and you have the age requirement.

You have to get authorization to work in the U.S. This means holding a work visa, work permit or green card, and an SSN. To get a work permit or visa you need to have a supporter from the U.S. who is an employer and will employ you. If you have DACA, or you're a temporary worker in sciences, arts, exchange or cultural programs, a work authorization also comes in that package. Any other status that allows you to have a green card and therefore an SSN allows you to work. Certain jobs also have an age requirement and a degree requirement.

If you are looking to get a degree at a U.S. college or university, there are several obstacles to overcome. If you are planning to immigrate to the U.S. as an international student, you will need a student visa that allows you to work on-campus for your second year or more. If you are an immigrant and reside in the U.S. who wants to attend a college or university, the factor that will mostly get affected by your status is the cost of tuition and other expenses. To apply for FAFSA (federal student aid) and you are a dependent student, meaning you are still dependent on your parents, you will need some of your parents' information. Documents such as your SSN, your parents' SSNs, driver's license number, alien registration number if you are not a U.S. citizen, your federal tax information, and your parents' information on savings, checking accounts, stocks, assets and investments. If you are not a dependent student, you will exclude parent information. The second part of your tuition being affected is due to the type of student you will be, out-of-state, in-

state or international. Depending on the college or university, tuition might vary depending on the place you reside in. Admission to the school might also be affected by the place you reside in and your immigration status. If you are undocumented/DACA, some schools might give you out-of-state tuition, which is significantly higher, and others might not see your status as a factor for your tuition price. You cannot apply for FAFSA either, so the cost of attending college or university as an immigrant will be harder to pay off.

There are many things that are part of life that also get affected by your immigration status. Things like having a bank account become more difficult without an SSN. These then prevent you or enable you for other opportunities. For the most part, the opportunities depend on whether you are legal or illegal. So, people may argue that they should come in here illegally in the first place. Anyone living in the U.S. and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

To conclude, the American Dream, pursuing your dreams and living the life you want, is not available to everyone. It highly depends on your immigration status, more specifically whether you're legal or illegal. The biggest differences take place in obtaining shelter, transportation, education and work permission. While many disagree with illegal immigration, we do live in a country of opportunities, which means your status should not limit them.

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NEHA SRIDHAR

Immigration and the American Dream

In Linguistics,
receptive bilingualism is defined as having
native fluency in one language and
having enough exposure to a second language
to comprehend it on a native level,
but with virtually no ability to speak the second language,
it's not uncommon among second generation immigrants
like myself. In fact, most of my friend group has the
same affliction, an odd sort of in-between fluency.

But what it really means is being
a native speaker of a language you cannot speak,
a tongue you cannot move,
a sound you cannot taste yourself but that
echoes in your mind like a heartbeat
– taken for granted but never silent.

So every time someone asks me
how many languages I speak,
it always comes down to the technicalities:
"Oh, I speak English and French,
and I know Konkani, understand it completely,
but I can't exactly speak it."

You see,
English is as natural as breathing, but
French is like a practical joke,
"Parce que ouais, je peux parler français couramment"
Mais –
I only have that ability after years of devoted study,
devotion I've never given my cultural heritage,
my mother tongue from India,
a country I barely know.

The fragments that fall
from my mother's tongue
and flood my ears
infect my thoughts,
all while never changing
the pattern of my lips
as I speak and speak and speak

And isn't that what colonization is?
Establishing control over a culture
only to bring in new influences from a different culture,
My lips the colonizer here
as they form the open-mouthed sounds of English
and the puckered-up sounds of Français
but claim amnesia
when it comes to the musicality of Konkani

When I was seven, I first experienced
the side effects of my own self-inflicted colonization

My classmates and I were speaking, but
I couldn't say the word "three"
(as in the number)
my tongue betraying me
and insisting on the word "tree"
(like you'd find in a forest)

The problem was that the "th" sound doesn't exist in Konkani
And despite my efforts to perfect my English and French,
My native-to-Konkani mouth persistently defied
my attempts to curve it into submission.
So before anyone else could tell me
I didn't know my culture well enough
because I couldn't speak the language,
I told them myself.

"White-washed" I'd call myself so no one else could,
"Coconut" I'd brand to my skin:
brown on the outside, white on the inside
"Francophile" I'd claim so I could defend falling in love
with a Romance language while cheating on my roots

I'd come home to a household that communicated in Konkani
but I would respond in English.
I remember feeling proud of ignoring my culture,
the same way you feel proud for having the right answer
on a worksheet after getting it wrong your first two tries.

No one else had ever told me I wasn't "Indian" enough,
but I'd repeated it to myself,
a whisper in the back of my head
each time I spoke to someone
and didn't know the details of my culture,
didn't know how to stop comparing myself
to other Indians, with their bold accents and bright attitudes
that I could never quite maintain.

But now?
I understand that to be "Indian" enough is to be me
I understand that hiding behind humor only hurts me further
I understand that it is my choice to accept myself,
accept my culture, accept my language
and learn from what I know of it,
learn that understanding a language
can be the gateway to growing with it

Somewhere –
there is a girl with long black hair and light brown skin
She knows how to weave music with her words
One day, I hope to meet her.

*after Boarded Up by Bansky,
an ekphrasis poem*

One house
Schoolhouse
Three and four
How many will you pillage before you're done?
Little girls
Little boys
No access to their school books
You say you want them to learn,
still close their doors for supermarkets
You want them to be educated
Without the education
Holding on to the quote unquote "principles of our nation"
Go on
With your one house
Schoolhouse
Three and Four
But do not be mad when people become angry because you closed
their doors.

Narrative Poetry

Waking up 7 am on the dot
Rolling over and tossing and turning in my bed
For a split second I feel invincible
Like those times where I am not fully awake are the memories I want
to hold on to
Because at least in between my dreams there is no pain
There are no bruises
There are not days where it feels my legs will give out on me
There is no more blood being drawn
I can be Superman or the Flash and anything in between
Because I control things here
I know that when I wake up
It'll no longer be my mind controlling the world around me
It'll be deadlines
And homework and rehearsals
It'll be me trying to keep my head afloat while I still feel that I am
damaged goods
However even in the midst of all the lunacy
I wake up
I start
I go
I achieve
I will be everything I want to be
And you will see
That freedom is not a concept
It is my religion
It is my hope
That the world in the middle of dreaming and being awake
Can become my reality
That those times where I felt like dying weren't real
That I can escape
From the horrors of everyday
Because today is a new day
And this time it'll be different.

Silence Prompt

Tell me about silence

Is it loud or is it soft?

Does it feel like the world is collapsing or do you feel free?

Silence comes in all shapes and forms

Could be the actual quiet that you get when you are alone?

Or it could be the time that you should have used your voice but you

were

Silent

It can also be the cat that got your throat?

Silent

Silence can also be an action not describing but doing

Silence is . . . whatever you want it to be

AFFIRMATIONS

I am enough.

I am my purpose.

I am the representation I have been looking for.

I am more than my generational curses.

I am in love with my self and my body.

I am allowed to say no to others and yes to myself.

Every day I am becoming a better version of myself.

I release what no longer serves me.

I forgive myself for the mistakes I have made.


Forgiveness allows to me to recognize humanity.

I am chosen.

I am loved.

I am grateful for life.

I trust myself.



As we struggle through our currently pandemic-stricken existence and attempt to process the collective trauma of living in a post-George Floyd America, it is imperative that we engage our youth in a way that will allow their voices to be heard and amplified. The Cultivating Writers initiative is achieving that goal.

Witnessing the student performances at the Race Project KC Symposium, I encountered a wide range of voices, addressing a myriad of issues from immigration to the importance of self-care and the healthy development of individual identity. The writing may have been in the form of a poem or a personal essay, but what I heard were reports from the front lines that underscored the urgency of radically re-imagining the so-called American Dream. With all that we are confronted with on a daily basis, it is easy to fall prey to pessimism. Undoubtedly, there is a darkness all around us. However, these powerful words, penned by our youth, offer a stunning beam of light to help us find our way.

~ Glenn North, award-winning poet and activist

