

Hegemonic America

The American Council on Education wrote to the Secretary of State and the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security in mid-march, asking questions like ‘if schools close how will international students maintain their visa status?’ and my personal favourite, ‘how will States process visas if US consular offices are closed for an extended period?’ An article on the letter, published on 20th March, for Inside Higher Ed ends like this: “the Department of State referred a request for comment to the Department of Homeland Security. Which did not respond to several enquiries.”

After reading this and similar pieces over the months that followed, I want to go home. I also want not to talk about what’s for dinner or think about the fact that my car back in England has a tax fine and the number I need to rescind that is in a box in a flat in London, somewhere. I feel uncomfortable all the time. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes that the only reason you’d say race was not the issue is because you wish it wasn’t. To be affluent, liberal and Non-American Black is to assume a role of casual indifference to the colour of your skin, to grow up in a white world and hold your difference at the table as everyone else holds their dinner party anecdotes. Then, to admit that you are not stronger than the everyday racism is to confess; to say you are no longer in a state of indifference about your state of difference but rather in a state of fear.

It’s not in my nature to want to go home. My family is between the UK, Kenya, and South Africa, so, like many international students and third culture kids like me—along with many others in this situation—I’m having to drastically reframe what home means. But I miss my community, and to me that isn’t any one place; it’s just not here. Seeking Americ[h]ana. In a 1979 essay entitled ‘Here’s Ronnie: On the road with Reagan,’ Martin Amis writes “[he] doesn’t care whether people like us. He just wants people to respect us!” It’s this mantra that’s been parlayed into the fabric of the US immigration system, so completely is it designed to put out your fire, to make you feel less than, to demand subservience, and to lead you down the dark road of thinking about all those for whom it won’t work out. It probably will work out for me.

When you finally get to the official websites the font is so small it’s hard to get past the first paragraph. Even before that, you are inundated by the corollary of the American free market, the top searches that come up when you’re trying to figure out an unnavigable mess. The suggested search results are all heavy on the detail you need and reassuringly written; providing just enough information for you to be sure the person who wrote it really knows what’s going on, until you reach the bottom of the page and realise you’re on an immigration law firm’s website. ‘For more, please call us today to find out exactly when and how we can take your money’—immediately and lots of it.

A year ago, my white American boyfriend decided to return to Madison, Wisconsin after two years at the University of Oxford. He's a New Yorker who grew up in DC and has since melted into the academic faculty world of Madison: a melding of pseudo-intellectual farm-to-table culture and a community spirit people talk about that doesn't exist. He is a tenured professor here, so it feels like any sentence to begin a conversation around being somewhere else starts with a full stop. I knew that if we were going to stay together, at some point, we would face immigration issues: the RAISE Act of 2017, a proposed law gaining traction among Republicans and supported by Trump, seeks to reduce the levels of legal immigration to the United States by 50% by halving the number of green cards issued.

I planned to be here for two weeks; that was two months ago. And now, with two cancelled flights under my belt, I'm really trying to get home. Home to a place that I have never had any true patriotic feelings for, despite feeling very British here. Home to a place where I rather unwillingly pay my national insurance contribution, because home is a place I have never really thought of as offering me any real protection. And why should I - the UK does bigotry like America does racism—I thought. If you're someone who has been fortunate enough to grow up without fear, then you did not grow up black in America. I didn't grow up black in America, but I am fear now.

In September this year I am supposed to join the African Cultural Studies department of UW-Madison. Along with other international students, I don't know if I will be here to start my degree. As of 27th May, I have received only two emails from my prospective schools International Student Services department. The first starts with an apology and the second ends with one; there is no information in between that I didn't already know. Our student visas, as it stands, are conditional upon classes being held in person; if the course goes online we won't be granted our I-20s and I will be six hours ahead of my partner, the dog we just adopted, and the last two months' worth of herbs I've planted. A part of me hopes I have no choice but to stay away.

The reality of being a foreign national in America is slowly revealing itself to me; that I should feel like a second-class citizen whilst I fight for the pleasure to stay in a country that would have me remain a second-class citizen. Madison is a liberal enclave in the heart of the Midwest, the blue reason Wisconsin runs purple, a college town of extortionately priced organic produce and self-serve grains (people spend hours spooning them into little glass jars they've brought from home, and smile while they pay \$206 for 12 items; I do wonder how they think all this stuff got to be in their local co-operative: in plastic). This is a bubble of white do-gooders who have signs in their kooky front gardens (read: yards) that say 'black lives matter here' and 'this is your home'; and through all my time here when I see those signs I still think, if this is my home too, why is the door—why are all the doors—so firmly closed.

So, it goes like this; maybe I spend five years here getting my PhD, and sometime within that period I become inured to my fear, or it becomes part of my existing relationship with cortisol that's killing me faster than it should. So much is now written on how nothing but a black person's experience of racism is eroding them on a cellular level. Many BLM marches and 'I Can't Breathe' protests later and maybe we get married. So, now I have a green card (maybe) and I'm still scared, scared to be on my own, scared to forget that I need to remember—always—I'm Black here. That the way people look at me is probably about that, that the fear I feel when we cross the city limits and drive through Beloit toward Chicago is the fear that if I see someone get stopped and he's black, I'm his witness. This place [Madison] isn't big enough to protect my psyche from the daily rub of America's scarcity narrative: 'there's not enough for everyone so I must eat first' and 'I would rather she didn't eat if I can't eat'—instead of letting the state feed you both—I mean, in theory. This seems to be the crux of it, that American racism is the technology designed to keep the scarcity narrative running smoothly, a swelling mania that's fuelled everything from the buying of people to the buying of a wall. And as a light skinned mixed-race woman with a British Passport, an Oxford education and a direct line to the [white] liberal elite, how do I talk about George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, when we are not them, but they are us.

And now we are in Olbrich Park, there's an obese black woman playing socially distanced basketball with her white friend. And a white family whose sons keep looking at my interracial relationship and my dog who's staring at a kite, a huge kite that a couple are flying and it's the first time she's ever seen one. She's scared. And I'm saying 'I don't know if I can live without both, if classes go online and I don't have an opportunity to create a community of my own here and yet the freedom I thought I would have to come and go between my existing communities feels distant and precarious, or impossible, I don't know if I could live like that, I don't know if I want to.' And he's saying 'but the ugliness of this country that has built and built over the last three decades is raw and wriggling on the surface right now and that *is* Trump, but this visa situation won't last forever and neither will the administration, but I can understand how that must feel so hostile and exhausting right now.' I scream across the gulf of every interracial relationship: 'no you can't, you can't understand, you will never understand because you're not black, and you don't know what it is for your whole life to feel hostile and exhausting.'

According to polling data from the Pew Research Centre, only 9% of Americans say that the rise in interracial marriages is a bad thing. But the findings also indicate that most in the US harbour implicit and explicit biases against interracial couples. The most horrifying thing is that these biases are robust in the way that they show up among those who had close personal contact with interracial couples and even some who have once been involved in interracial romantic relationships themselves.

He looks intentionally at the white family looking at us and I know it's because he wants to look at the black and white women shooting hoops, the unity. I feel uncomfortable still. The dog is barking and she's sitting in my lap, I'm holding her tightly and saying 'was it scary? Was it a very scary experience' — she assimilates this new activity into her schema and her world is different, the kite goes up again, she doesn't bark.

On the walk home we see a woman my neighbour introduced me to; we are one block from our house, she has a dog like us and as we walk over I make introductions, they already know each other; I don't think too much about that as we all talk—about dogs. As we walk away it takes him a while to quietly tell me he hadn't realised who I'd been talking about—this woman I'd met here through someone that wasn't him—they'd dated. Of course, there are no borders here.

Here I am with the person I love in this small, small place in this broken country, this place I'm trying to move to. Trump's or Obama's, I just wish it wasn't America.