

# Reflections and Recommendations from 2022 Women Immigrant Faculty Praxis Retreat: A White Paper

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## Introduction

We stand on the shoulders of “immigrant” women faculty before and along us who have entered U.S. academia and journeyed the communication discipline, including many who left or were denied opportunities to stay. Many “immigrant” women started their journeys as international graduate students holding non-immigrant visas (e.g., F-1 student visas and J exchange visitor visas). Their journeys, experiences, and voices have paved the intellectual pathway for this project to become possible in 2022. For instance, one of our thesis advisers left U.S. academia in 2006 without pursuing tenure and promotion. Another “immigrant” woman we know *voluntarily* left U.S. academia when she was one year away from tenure to prioritize family and preserve her sense of self. This white paper results from ongoing conversations and reflections starting at an externally-funded retreat with a small group of “immigrant” women in communication across rank, race/ethnicity, birth country, age, religion, life experiences, and immigration status. The retreat was designed to be a space for community and solidarity. We place the term “immigrant” within quotation marks to highlight the impacts of immigration policies on academic work and also to be inclusive of varying immigration statuses in the U.S. context (e.g., non-immigrants, permanent residents, and naturalized citizens). By no means are we coming together as a singular and homogenous group. We lead in this project with ourselves as “immigrant” women faculty with attention to intersectional struggles and intention to elevate issues shared with minoritized faculty groups and solo status faculty members.

As communication scholars, we believe in the power of (de)constructing the stories that communicate, constitute, and (re)shape our lives. Speaking from the crossroads of multiple intersections (e.g., race, gender, and nationality, etc.), there is pain and trauma involved in getting to the places we have arrived, but we are not just our traumas. We are equally sources of joy, pleasure, and meaning that comes from our embodied experiences, relationships, countries, and cultures. We reclaim the power to highlight this goodness, joy, and our hopes for the present and future. As an intersectional and ambiguous group who are largely invisible and unheard on many U.S. college campuses, our intersectional invisibility often opens up a space, or creates a vacuum, for others (e.g., colleagues, administrators, and institutions) to speak about and for us especially when doing so benefits and meets their goals. When stories are told about us, we rarely get to be at the center of narrating our own stories—on our terms. Stories matter, and they are constantly changing and can be retold. The themes below represent only some of our collective stories.

## Background

We provide key findings and trends in the literature regarding “immigrant” women faculty (a.k.a., international women, foreign-born women, women in the diasporas, women expatriates, and transnational women). Numerically speaking, data compiled by the American Association of University Professors indicated that 1.3% (n = 8,659) of the faculty in the United States were female non-resident aliens in 2018 (Colby & Fowler, 2020). However, this number is incomplete

in considering “immigrant” women faculty because it might not include U.S. permanent residents or naturalized U.S. citizens. Also, when folks do not disclose their non-U.S. national origin, they may get counted under different racial/ethnic groups such as: White, Hispanic or Latinx, Black, Asian, etc.

- **Limited research on international women faculty:** Despite the long-standing presence of international faculty in U.S. colleges and universities, research on how “immigrant” academics (including graduate students) experience U.S. academia remains sporadic, specifically in the communication discipline (e.g., Daniels, 2022a; Kim et al., 2011). For instance, Paris (2019) concluded that foreign-born faculty reported lower levels of work satisfaction than their U.S. counterparts, and the “key factors that may influence workplace satisfaction for foreign-born faculty are *not known*” (p. 1).
- **Lack of support for international graduate students:** International graduate students report similar feelings of isolation, stress, depression, intellectual tension, and lack of community (e.g., Anandavalli, Borders, & Kniffin, 2021; Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011; Kim, 2011; Nikoi, 2019).
- **Navigating both tenure and immigration status:** Similar to earning tenure to stay in U.S. academia, many “immigrant” faculty also have to navigate the complex, layered, and opaque system of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to legally work and reside in the United States (Lawless & Chen, 2017). Both systems are steeped in white supremacy, (hetero-)patriarchy, neoliberal capitalism, ableism, and more (Chen & Lawless, 2018; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021; Ramasubramanian & Miles, 2018; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019).
- **A largely invisible group:** As a collective, “immigrant” women are probably one of the least visible, heard, or recognized groups of faculty members in U.S. academia (Daniels, 2022a; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020; Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020). Mirroring minoritized and solo status faculty, “immigrant” women “face the double jeopardy of both their ‘foreign status’ and their gender” interlocking with race if they are women of color (Robbins et al., 2011, p. xii). Discussions on how individuals are affected by gendered processes and relations at the organizational level, followed by identity struggles for those who do not fit the norm, appear in the literature too (e.g., Alvesson & Billing, 2009).
- **Otherness also as strength:** As dynamic agents, “immigrant” women faculty experience their complex foreignness as sources of *both* otherness *and* strength (e.g., Chen & Lawless, 2018; Daniels, 2022a; Lemish, 2022; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020; Skachkova, 2007).

### **Three Emergent Themes from the Retreat**

This retreat, informed by ongoing research with “immigrant” women faculty across disciplines since 2015, was envisioned to bring together a small group of “immigrant” women and

communication scholars to reflect on hidden fractures of U.S. academia and reimagine new possibilities. One primary goal of the retreat was to create a reflexive and co-mentoring space—the first space of its kind that we know of—that leads with the voices and lived experiences of “immigrant” women faculty in communication. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a call for retreat participation went out on January 31, 2022 via COMMNotes titled, “Call for Immigrant Women Scholars in Communication to Participate in a Praxis Retreat.” A total of 64 applications were submitted for 12 available spots (=18.75% selection rate). The retreat co-leaders met several times to make difficult decisions and to ensure that the retreat participants represent “immigrant” women across rank, country of origin, immigration status, race/ethnicity, and communication area of expertise. In response to the overwhelming interests received, the retreat co-leaders invited all unselected applicants to a Zoom gathering, titled “Immigrant Women in Academia Virtual Roundtable,” which took place on June 8, 2022.

Thanks to the financial support of The Waterhouse Family Institute at Villanova University and NCA’s Advancing the Discipline Grant, 12 women gathered for the inaugural “immigrant” women faculty retreat on August 8-10, 2022, in Menlo Park, California.



Theoretically, the three-day praxis retreat is informed by both intercultural communication praxis (Sorrells, 2016; Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008) and cultural wealth (Yep, 2014; Yosso, 2005). We approach cultural wealth as a critical orientation of affirming difference, marginality, and otherness to challenge deficit views under oppressive systems. Aligned with this orientation of cultural wealth, the facilitators developed the retreat around the six entry points across three days: (a) *framing* that engaged us in grounding and orienting the group with introductions and community agreements; (b) *positioning* that invited us to consider and share our individual and collective positionalities relating to “immigrant” women; (c) *reflection* on our entangled experiences in U.S. academia; (d) *inquiry* that led us to ask

questions to further investigate academic work and immigration politics; (e) *dialogue* about challenges, triumphs, lessons, opportunities, and self-care as “immigrant” women navigating U.S. academia; and (f) *action* that ended with outlining the white paper. The image here captures the retreat participants after completing stage c, reflecting on how they experience their identity in the academy, through artistic expression. Below are three emergent themes that we would like to share with fellow communication colleagues: (a) precarity, insecurity, and (de)legitimacy; (b) need for self-care and building “home” in U.S. academia; and (c) becoming “immigrant” Other in U.S. academia and society.

### **Precarity, Insecurity, and (De)Legitimacy**

*“Did I struggle enough to call myself an immigrant?”* We share our stories to push back against assimilation, meritocracy, and (U.S.) exceptionalist ideologies that expect us to work harder, assimilate, and stay quiet from precarious, insecure, and (de)legitimized positions. During this retreat, participants shared concerns about institutional practices that leave “immigrant” women in precarious positions. For example, many job ads for tenure-track positions do not explicitly state whether an institution will or will not sponsor a green card and the associated fees. “Immigrant” women spend hours applying to jobs that ultimately might not meet their needs, when they could have been told so ahead of time. For other women, the precarity persists when they arrive on their campuses without support for how to navigate the dual processes of securing a green card and moving through the tenure process, especially when immigration status is directly tied to their ability to continue living and working in the United States. As one woman said, “we are positioned to be afraid.” Women shared grievances about having to work twice as hard as their peers because the guidelines and expectations for their productivity are concealed. Many women experience(d) imposter syndrome or microaggressions from peers/colleagues and students. This leads to a dialectic of invisibility and hypervisibility. At once, “immigrant” women are made to feel belittled or shut down and at the same time, are tokenized for the type of “diversity” they bring to campus. The women at the retreat agreed that it would be hard to talk about this dialectic without drawing more negative attention to themselves. For example, one woman mentioned the struggle of balancing their precarity with the expectation of being grateful. She said, “For some of the faculty (and this was my case), getting hired literally meant the ability to stay in the US. There were times in the process of securing the H1B when I felt like the school was going the extra mile to get me there and that asking for anything would frame me as ungrateful or a “challenging” new international hire. I clearly remember feeling this when I learned how much the school is paying for the attorney and application fee (even though legally this is what they have to do).” As far as female international graduate students are concerned, the issues of precarity, insecurity, and legitimacy can become exacerbated partly because of their non-immigrant visas (e.g., F student visas and J exchange visitor visas). As one participant explained, “We are left unsupported through the system. There are always fears associated with our visa situation(s), the stress and fear about every detail that not every other student has to go

through because their U.S. citizenship affords them more stability.” International graduate students with non-immigrant visas experience strictest visa regulations that impose restrictions on financial aids, work hours, and funding opportunities, leaving many feel financially unsupported. Despite feeling unsupported, many international graduate women experience being expected to be grateful, survive, and succeed through the competitive environment of the Ph.D. programs.

### **Need for Self-Care and Building “Home” in U.S. Academia**

*“It becomes very hard to feel like you fit anywhere.”* While we speak as a heterogenous collective, we also speak as individuals. As the retreat was developed as a space by and for “immigrant” women, we gave ourselves permission to show up as our whole selves however tired, excited, jaded, etc. Our conversations challenge an implicit assumption that “immigrant” women faculty must have *chosen* U.S.-based academic work when they have come into U.S. academia under varying circumstances. Some of our conversations touch on how hard and challenging it can be to make home and develop a sense of belonging either in U.S. academia or society, especially when one feels unwelcomed with constant reminders that they don’t belong here. When we ourselves are not always conscious of the sacrifices and struggles to stay in U.S. academia, we wonder how much what “immigrant” scholars go through is understood and/or acknowledged in research, teaching, and service. Being in community with “immigrant” women allowed us to notice, see, and acknowledge some unseen labors that we routinely engage in: being far away from family and loved ones with very few opportunities to travel back and see them; living and studying in a language that might not be native to us; trying to just fit in with our different identities, cultures, and backgrounds and striving for a sense of acceptance. For international graduate students, it can feel like making one-sided efforts to fit into U.S. academia while the system does not reciprocate in putting in efforts and providing support. The multitude of ways in which U.S. academia encourages and pressures us to be individualistic and super/hyperproductive serve as reminders about the critical importance of self-care. How to care for or take better care of international and “immigrant” women? Some of us are living by ourselves, and some of us are worried about our aging parents overseas. An email reminder about self-care might be insufficient as self-care is not as easy as it sounds amongst the daily challenges that some of us have to go through. Also, how do we reclaim joy? Our conversations highlight a need for spaces where we can accomplish but also experience loss and grief on our terms, including intergenerational traumas.

### **Becoming “Immigrant” Other in U.S. Academia and Society**

*“Are people supposed to live on top of the mountain?”* The retreat conversations depict U.S. academic work as climbing a mountain from the bottom as undergraduate and graduate students to the top as full professors. As racialized/gendered/othered “immigrant” women, our journeys are full of expected and unexpected bumps, storms, barriers, and detours. There is no playbook

specifically for “immigrant” women. Depending on one’s non-immigrant or immigrant visas, there are clear and sometimes hidden barriers designed to “weed out” some of us. On our journeys sometimes we are intentionally and/or unintentionally misled for various structural, interpersonal, and cultural conditions and reasons. For those of us who identify as Latina in U.S. academia, we feel an added layer of struggle. Statistically speaking, of all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, only 3 percent were Hispanic females, whether born in the United States or immigrated from Latin America, in the fall of 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), which is in contrast with data coming from the United States Census Bureau that indicate that the Latinx community represents close to 19% of the total population of the United States (2022). Considering how disposable “immigrant” faculty can be treated, many folks might not make it to the top of the mountain. For those who have made it, we wonder if and how people are supposed to live on top of the mountain.

### **Limitations**

As a collective, we wish to give more attention to the experiences of international graduate students, contingent faculty members, and undocumented folks. While we had some voices from these margins, we do not wish to tokenize these experiences and acknowledge that there needs to be many more voices in this conversation. Many of us were once international graduate students and instructors holding and navigating non-immigrant visas such as F-1 student visas, J exchange visitor visas, or undocumented. However, many of us did not have to navigate immigration politics as non-immigrants during the Trump administration and through the COVID-19 pandemic combined with anti-racism protests. We also acknowledge that our voices represent relatively few of the many women from various countries across the world. While the three themes emerged in this retreat, they cannot be considered a universal experience for all “immigrant” women in the U.S. academy.





# RECOMMENDATIONS



## FROM THE 2022 WOMEN IMMIGRANT FACULTY PRACTICE RETREAT

### MENTORSHIP & COMMUNICATION

- Institutionalize and encourage mentorship with other faculty such as (co-)mentors and sponsors with similar experiences
- Facilitate discussions about being "immigrant" faculty and international graduate students within the department
- Build communities of practice to connect people across campus who are immigrant women and faculty members
- Create writing retreats for "immigrant" faculty to provide time needed to work and build community


### TOOLS & POLICIES

- Develop orientations and consolidate resources for faculty who are new to the United States
- Ensure adequately staffing at international office(s)
- Educate institutional leaders responsible for sponsorship on pertinent laws, rules, and regulations
- Provide clear deadlines and direction on immigration processes, tax responsibilities, and OPT requirements
- Clarify in job ads whether or not visas will be sponsored and supported so applicants know before applying

### ALLYSHIP & SELF-CARE

- Don't speak on behalf of immigrant women without their permission. Leading and supporting are different roles
- Call out microaggressions when witnessing them
- Ask "immigrant" faculty members what they might need
- If you identify as a woman "immigrant" faculty:
  - Recognize the cultural wealth you bring to spaces
  - Locate communities who share your experiences
  - Identify and learn strategies of coping with impostor syndrome and sentiments of U.S. exceptionalism
  - Care for your own mental and physical health

Generous funding for the 2022 retreat provided by the Waterhouse Family Institute at the Villanova University and the National Communication Association's Advancing the Discipline Grant. Access the full white paper, [Reflections and Recommendations from 2022 Women Immigrant Faculty Praxis Retreat](#)





## **Our Recommendations**

### **For Departments and Institutions**

#### ***Mentorship***

- Facilitate meetings for faculty and students at the start of a partnership describing what it means to be an international faculty and graduate students.
- Rather than traditional top-down mentor relationships, consider having a committee of mentors that include folks in one's field and with a similar cultural background.
- Institutionalize mentorship. Make it something that is encouraged or required for new faculty. For example, one faculty's institution provided a stipend for lunch twice during the new faculty's first year.

#### ***Self-Care Tools/Spaces***

- Create writing retreats for international faculty, to provide time needed to work and build community.

#### ***Networking***

- Build communities of practice to connect people across campus who are immigrant faculty members.

#### ***Develop Better Institutional Tools and Policies***

- Develop orientations for new faculty that are geared for those coming to the U.S. for the first time or those who need to navigate these waters for the first time.
- Define clear processes and deadlines around immigration, taxes, etc. (e.g., "Am I allowed to go to a protest? What are my rights?")
- Consolidate resources for international faculty on campus.
- Educate institutional leaders responsible for sponsorship, etc. on laws, rules, and regulations.
- Decolonize the tenure process to be more inclusive of field work, activism, and community service. Recognize that the work that faculty of color often produce, is not traditionally "publishable" but rather has a direct impact on the community it serves (see Daniels, 2022b).
- Adequately staff the ISSS office--Provide clear direction on OPT requirements.
- Change mindsets that position institutions as doing an international student/faculty member a "favor." Where is cultural wealth coming from? Who benefits from whom? (Daniels & Rittenour, 2018).
- Train staff on neoliberal multiculturalism (e.g., Darder, 2012).
- Conduct a needs assessment for international students and faculty.
  - If you're hiring international faculty, think of their international needs (e.g., teaching, research, service).
- Be clear in job ads that visas will be sponsored or not (transparency).
  - NCA could require this information for COMMNotes.
  - Saying "must be able to work legally in the U.S." does not give enough specificity.

### For Allies

- Recognize, read, and cite the intellectual products of and by “immigrant” women, including but not limited to our publications. As a starting place, see the references below.
- Ask your international faculty members what they need.
- Be transparent about your own tenure processes to make work expectations known for comparative purposes.
- Call out microaggressions when you see them.
- Don’t speak on behalf of immigrant women without their permission. Leading and supporting are different roles. The latter is your place.

### For Ourselves

- Rest for resistance because sometimes rest is resistance.
- Celebrate your accomplishments.
- Locate communities (at the institutions, within the discipline, or in local communities) with people who share experiences.
- Engage in meditation, invest in healthy food, and unapologetically make time to address your mental and emotional health.
- Learn ways to cope with your feelings of impostor syndrome and sentiments of ‘exceptionalism’ within your department.
- Recognize the power of your native language and cultural practices within academic spaces.
- Create safe spaces for everyone to share and celebrate their cultural abundance.
- Practice the power of “No.” as a complete sentence.

### Resources

The [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) (NCFDD), founded in 2010, offers a variety of professional development services, seminars, and groups to support faculty members, postdocs, and graduate students. NCFDD’s mission “is to change the face of power in the Academy.”

Recognizing the gender wage gap, many private and public institutions offer information sources to support women in salary negotiations. For instance, UC San Diego provides information on “[The gender wage gap could affect your income potential—here’s how to negotiate better pay.](#)”

The [Critical Refugee Studies Collective \(CRS\)](#), an interdisciplinary group of scholars advocating for refugee rights, offers a wide range of resources: story maps, refugee archives, bibliography, critical vocabularies, syllabi, and more.

[Presumed Incompetent](#) is a book that shares stories of women of color across identities in academia.

[Essays to My Daughter](#) may be an interesting book for “immigrant” women.

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### Authors' Bios

**Marwa I. Abdalla** is a Ph.D. student and Jacobs Fellow in the Department of Communication at UC San Diego and identifies as a Muslim, North African, and Arab-American woman. Her research focuses on Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, and Orientalism in news and popular media and has been recognized with numerous awards including the Young Scholar Award for Outstanding Research on American Muslims and the National Communication Association's John T. Warren Award. She works as a Certified Educator for the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a national, non-profit research organization focused on American Muslims.

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**Yea-Wen Chen** (born and raised in Taiwan) is a Professor in the School of Communication and Director of the Institute for Dialogue & Social Justice at San Diego State University. Her research and pedagogy center around communicating cultural identities from the margins to challenge White supremacy, sexism, xenophobia, and more. Currently, her three research trajectories are: immigrant women faculty in U.S. academia, critical intercultural communication pedagogy, and pan-Asian organizing.

**Rita Daniels** is a Ghanaian woman working as an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. As an organizational communication and intergroup communication teacher-scholar, she focuses on Afrocentricism, women, career progression, workplace experiences, identity, and intersectionality.

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**Reeham R. Mohammed** (born and raised in Egypt) is a Muslim doctoral student at The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. She is developing a research interest in critical intercultural communication with focus on identity, DEI work, and social justice.

**Nthemba Mutua-Mambo** (born and raised in Kenya) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Studies Department at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. She self-identifies as an African feminist scholar, with research interests covering both local and global contexts. She is interested in and has covered topics such as African women refugees and immigrants' identity negotiation, international scholars' experiences in the US, African feminist and LGBT alliances, and restorative justice in indigenous African communities.

**Jelena Petrovic** (born and raised in Serbia) is an Associate Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Stetson University in Deland, Florida. Her academic work focuses on criminalization of immigration, national identification, and types of engagement host country develops with immigrants. She is also a co-founder and Interim Director of Community Education Project, a higher education in prison program in Daytona, Florida.

**Srividya (Srivi) Ramasubramanian** is an Indian-American, an immigrant woman faculty of color, and a scholar-mom. She is trained as a musician, and a mediator. She is Newhouse Professor and Endowed Chair at the Newhouse School in Syracuse University. Her scholarship is on media literacy and social justice. It focuses on community-engaged research, scholar activism, racial/ethnic minoritized groups, refugees, and immigrants. She is the first person of color to serve as the editor of *Communication Monographs* and the recipient of the NCA IDEA Scholarship Award for her research on inclusion, diversity, equity and access.

**Tania Romero** is a Nicaraguan filmmaker, digital media instructor, and published bilingual poet. She currently works as an assistant professor in the Communication Department (Media Specialization) at Villanova University. Her documentary interests are migrant and refugee communities, border policies and recognizing the work of women in society.