International Student Solidarity Statement

We, a collective of international students, are writing this statement in support of those of us impacted by ICE’s recent xenophobic policy change, and in solidarity with undocumented students who have always been impacted by ICE’s violence.

We are writing to outline the concerns of international students, and adumbrate how our struggles are connected to the struggles for undocumented people’s rights and racial justice. We are also writing to challenge the rhetoric of respectability that is pervading the advocacy for international students in academic spaces. Unfortunately, many advocates of international students are perpetuating white respectability politics arguing for our worth on the basis of revenue and productivity, hence sidecasting the thousands of international students on financial aid and work-study. We urge supporters of international students to move away from the neoliberal logic of productivity, and to uplift the voices of those who do not fit the stereotype of the productive elite international student, such as working-class international students and international students with disabilities.

We also ask faculty, staff, and domestic students to advocate for international students through an intersectional lens— by keeping in mind how the xenophobia we are facing intersects with other oppressions like racism, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, ableism and classism. This will help us prioritize the most socially marginalized international students as we advocate for the right of international students to be physically and emotionally safe. During this struggle for international students, let us also keep in mind the continuing importance of being in solidarity with the struggles of Black people in the U.S. As Angela Davis has taught us, anti-immigrant detention centers and anti-Black prison systems are part of the same prison industrial complex. That is, policing and deportation are violent products of the same surveillance state. Like the police, ICE shows no regard for human life, as they actively keep immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in crowded cages, even in times of COVID-19. We honor and remain grateful to the Movement for Black Lives, and the movement to abolish prisons and police, which gave rise to the movement to abolish ICE.

Solidarity with Undocumented Students

Many of the petitions and statements circulating in support of international students are implicitly arguing that we deserve to be safe because we are in the country “legally.” We stand against the false binary created between international and undocumented students based on issues of “legality.” We must remember that we are all studying and working on stolen Piscataway Conoy land. On Indigenous people’s colonized land, the question of a person’s legality has always been the means for the state government to enforce and reinforce their rule however and whenever they see fit. While we abide by the rules and regulations of our visas, we also maintain a constant critique of the ways in which U.S. immigrations systems uphold myriad forms of oppressions, often pitting one community of peoples against the other.

We are grateful to the work undertaken by undocumented student activists at UMD, and we follow their path in asking the university to divest from and work towards abolishing ICE. Students at UMD have been asking the university to divest from contracts with ICE for years, but their demands have not been heard by the administration, except in the form of empty gestures. We urge you to protect DACA recipients, and pressure the university to turn UMD into a sanctuary campus, where
undocumented and international students’ legal status will not be shared with ICE. We ask UMD cancel contracts with ICE (such as giving “counterterrorism” training to ICE officials at UMD), protect the status of international students, and eventually work towards abolishing ICE.

We recognize the contradiction between advocating for legal protections for international students while also reiterating the violence of legality that undocumented people and Indigenous peoples undergo. As you advocate for our protections, we ask you to simultaneously critique the history of unjust legal systems that have long defined BIPOC communities’ worth in a settler colonial nation. We ask everyone to especially take accountability for using any rhetoric that others undocumented students, and we urge you to build solidarity networks with undocumented rights activists in the university and nationwide.

**Current International Student Concerns**

In addition to being impacted by ICE’s new policy, international students have faced constant institutional obstacles. Since we constantly fear deportation, many international graduate students have endured toxic advisors to retain their legal status at UMD. Unlike their fellow domestic students, international students—enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs alike—must maintain high GPAs and take large course loads to sustain F-1 status. We mention these obstacles not because we believe getting good grades makes us more worthy than others; but rather to note the unjust nature of U.S. academic systems that constantly tax international students, whose status is once again being discussed in ways that uphold the harmful myth of the model minority.

In addition to the imposed moral high standard, international students are also financially pressed by the U.S. academic and immigration systems. International students pay out-of-state tuition, cannot work off-campus, and are not eligible for financial aid at UMD, which puts brutal economic pressures on many. Those who are on OPT are advised to take up non-paid positions by the International Students and Scholar Services office, just to meet the USCIS requirement of 20 hour/week employment. The financial burden manifests especially when coupled with our limited access to health care and the academic workload which is based on the rhetoric of meritocracy that is incognizant of our living conditions. Many prestigious fellowships and scholarships are not open to international students, and we cannot enroll in medicare to access affordable health care. Needless to say, our challenges have recently been further exacerbated by COVID-19; many international students were not eligible for the COVID-19 stimulus check, and are still not eligible for most emergency funds and financial assistance provided by the university or the state.

Lastly, the right to exist in this country for non-citizens has been contingent upon our market values. International students have always been deemed as a source of revenue for universities and that alone. We urge you to assert that international students are not valuable because they pay extra tuition; international students are valuable because they are human. International students are not valuable because they bring diversity to classrooms; it is not our burden to educate (white) Americans on imperialism and globalization. To constantly have to prove our worth through the dehumanizing logic of neoliberal racial-capitalism is emotionally taxing, to say the least.

**Race and Colonialism:**

Since most international students are people of color, we understand the xenophobia of ICE’s policy change is also an act of racism. ICE’s new policy is a thread in the larger tapestry of U.S. xenophobic racist laws, that range from the Chinese exclusion act of 1882 to Trump’s recent Muslim ban in 2017. While the institutional obstacles impact everyone on an F-1 visa, let us keep in mind that the
experiences of white international students are very different from those of international students of color. We have witnessed international students of color face discrimination by peers and professors for their racialized national identities. Even though all international students are surveilled by the state (USCIS and DHS started screening our social media feed as a part of visa processing a few years ago), state policing harms Black and brown students the most, due to which many feel that it is too risky to voice opinions on public platforms like Twitter concerning the new guidelines published by ICE. International students of color, particularly Black Muslim international students, not only face the many limitations that come with the F-1 visa, but also face heightened state surveillance, and more racist discrimination in the classroom and workplace, hence robbing their right to privacy and safety, and making their visa status even more precarious.

We must remember that international students of color are here not because of the benevolence of the U.S. education system, but because U.S. and European colonialisms ravaged the economies of our countries, creating a desire and need in our communities to seek “better” education from the West. From the United State’s global war on terror to its many “development” programs to the World Bank’s structural adjustment policies, neocolonialism continues to exploit vulnerable people in the Global South. At the same time, we recognize power differences among international students of color, since many of us also come from countries that hold proximity to whiteness and have been complicit in many imperialisms. We are grateful to our professors of color (many of whom were once international students) who have taught us to analyze how histories of colonialism, racialization, imperialism and globalization intersect with our personal experiences as international students of color living in the United States. Even though we harbor a constant fear of deportation in case we are arrested for protesting the state or university, we must now claim unapologetically that U.S. imperialism created oppressive conditions that confine our personal and professional success to be defined by a U.S. education.

Going forward, we ask you to:

1) Contact UMD’s leadership and demand that UMD joins Harvard and MIT in filing lawsuits against ICE and seeking a restraining order from ICE.
2) Demand UMD to divest from ICE, turn UMD into a sanctuary university, and protect international students’ health and visa status.
3) Contact your local representatives and express your concerns for international students’ health and safety during this pandemic.
4) Read and sign this letter drafted by the Latin American Studies Center in support of international students.
5) Make some noise on your social media and other public-facing platforms.
6) Create more concrete financial, employment, and support resources for international students, particularly for international students of color (such as scholarships directed toward international students of color, jobs specifically designed for students on OPT, career support for international students who need H1B visas).
7) Examine how international students are rendered pawns in a larger system created to oppress immigrants of color.
8) Educate yourself and your colleagues on the history of U.S. imperialism in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Signed,
→ Aqdas Aftab, PhD Candidate
→ Setsuko Yokoyama, PhD
[other signatures hidden for privacy reasons]