The Systemic Punches: Displacement Experience of Vulnerable Immigrants

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The Systemic Punches: Displacement Experience of Vulnerable Immigrants

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract
"The Systemic Punches: Displacement Experience of Vulnerable Immigrants" focuses on the impact of systems of state control such as immigration laws, policies, and practices that have been institutionalized and that have marginalized immigrants. In my thesis, I pay specific attention to inhuman acts of exclusion and discrimination resulting from the systemic barriers perpetuated by xenophobic and nationalist ideologies.

From this standpoint, my thesis exhibition employs interactive space, which includes visual art (drawing, sculpture ceramics), projection, video, and sound, as a means to explore the effects of the exclusive and discriminatory immigration policies and practices. Furthermore, it is designed to explore cultural, economic, social, and political forces behind the U.S. immigration system. The exhibition invites the audience to the experience of displacement and vulnerability by adopting different artistic devices. I intend to situate the audience into the experience of border crossing, assimilation, discrimination, and other forms of state control. I intend to create an environment where the audience can share their experiences with the artist as an immigrant. The emotions I intended to provoke include fear, anger, confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, depression, doubt, and loss. In order to mimic the immigration process in the United States, the audience receives the information they could not fully understand through an artistic device that is similar to the security checkpoint. Also, the exhibition offers the audience an affidavit of name changes to change their name to an unknown name. The audience's movements were restricted by a set of rules in the gallery space.

There is an urgency in addressing immigration issues. As an immigrant artist, my goal is to open up space where people are encouraged to think and have conversations around immigrant issues, even when it feels uncomfortable and sensitive. Therefore, I use different art forms and
interactive spaces to create an environment where everyone would be comfortable and willing to talk about all these unjust, unfair, inhuman, and discriminatory systems of control.
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Introduction

"Nwisie nni ahoɔden wɔ mframa kuromu" (at the mercy of the wind, the smoke has no power); The stranger has no strength in the strange land. However, the world has seen an unprecedented global migration in recent years, and research shows that the net foreign movement has increased from 30,042 in 1992–93 to 178,582 people in 2015–16. (Markus, Andrew.) This global phenomenon is driven by several factors, including climate change, fleeing war, persecution, violence, education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and many other factors. Beyond these factors are different levels of systemic forces that regulate people in their journey to escape threats.

Immigrants, mainly from Africa, journey across the Mediterranean Sea and in the desert, in the middle of nowhere due to countries closing their borders. It is a moment when people search for their fate, but they find themselves in a place where they have no choice but to accept a destiny that has been handed to them. This fear adds up different layers of complexity to the migration issues that displace thousands of people globally. That is a moment when life matters no more, which forces people to face the inescapable consequences of their systemic flaws. In our current political climate, human life has become weightless and meaningless compared to the weight and value placed on a single sheet of paper. It means, under any circumstances, the lives of immigrants are replaced with documents, leading to a loss of our humanity towards those who have been displaced. The question is, at what point do we recognize that we are all human before any other thing? It has always been upsetting to hear people point their fingers at other people, calling them names (Immigrants, aliens, criminals, undocumented, among others), thinking they have a right to be free from discrimination and oppression. I agree with Franklin D. Roosevelt,
who said we should "Remember, always remember, that all of us, and you and me especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists."

Barriers to immigration go not only in legal or political form; social and cultural barriers to immigration may also be very strong. When leaving their homes, immigrants also leave everything intimate: their family, friends, support system, and culture. They also want to break up their possessions, and they suffer the cost of running. When they come to the new country, this often has some uncertainties, including getting employment (May, Julia.) Where to go, new laws, new social norms, language or accent matters, potential discrimination, and other exclusionary behavior towards them and their home. (Nunez, Christina, Dec 2014) (Djajić, Slobodan, Sept 2013).

The politics of immigration have become increasingly linked with different issues, such as national security and terrorism, particularly in western Europe, with religion. Those with safety concerns mention these 2005 French riots and end to that Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons conflict as instances of these value struggles arising from Muslims' immigration in Western Europe. Because of all these associations, immigration has turned into an emotional, political topic in some European countries. (Nowicki, Dan 2016.). While migration and immigration have affected almost everyone to some degree that displaced them; however, the unforeseen risks are not apparent to everyone. Therefore, the research explores what kind of systems we have in the world that influence immigrants' displacement, making them vulnerable in different ways, outside and inside their new spaces. It also attempts to question the existence of those systems, how they are built and manipulated. Who does or does not benefit from all the systems of control? How do they determine who fits or does not fit into space, and how does the system punish those who maneuver their ways into space?
Background

My journey from Ghana to the United States subjected me to many displacement experiences and vulnerability (culturally, politically, socially, and economically) before, during, and after I reached my destination. This experience made me question my existence, Identity, and my place in the world. Every process was marked by series of border-crossing experiences inhibited with fear and a lack of understanding for the unknown. The visa acquisition processes in Ghana, going through series of security checkpoints, at both departure point and entry point, as well as a cultural shock through distinct phases of euphoria, discomfort, adjustment, rejection, and acceptance instilled in me a sense of self-doubt and anxiety, and certain consciousness in my new space. All these experiences were accompanied by a barrage of questions about how I navigate and negotiate space with different control systems and how the constructed systems determine what happens within the boundary set up by the system. Unfortunately, I realized they built the intentionally made structures of power and authority over time to create a false sense of security for those who do not fit into the system and perpetuate the categorization of human beings at the mercy of space politics. The term space is not only used to refer to physical spaces but also refers to the Sociocultural and psychological dimensions of space. This space politics can be understood as a constructed abstraction from a set of rules defined by the dominant culture. It has also been noted that space can be understood as a form of social structure within the boundaries of one's cultural background. Critical geopolitics shows a vivid and revolutionary criticism of the politics of space and borders, inspired and shaped by the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic conditions present. These factors have forced countries to try to remap the world in their perception. Also, it has resulted in numerous systems of oppressive control, including both visible and invisible human-made boundaries, rather than the supposed
primary function of demarcating the sovereign space of political entities and furthering the basic principles of international relations. The most significant reason for these inconsiderate migrants' policies and border brutality is the rise of nationalism (defining boundaries, "We" and the "Other") fueled by the fear of the Other as a threat to the idea of Our way of life and resources. Occasionally, Donald Trump’s rhetoric has an impressive effect on white nationalist tropes (Slate.com), and his elected success has been celebrated (theatlantic.com) By alt-right radicals. (Morris, D. Z., Aug). Donald Trump blamed immigrants as a threat to American democracy by defining them as rapists, criminals, drug dealers, and murderers. Research also finds that Americans' attitudes towards immigration affect their attitudes towards benefit expenditure welfare spending, specifically those related to health. Garand, C (2015). This ideology makes it easy for politicians to win votes by blaming immigrants for structural injustices in our societies. A persistent pattern of space inequality is perpetuated through various immigration policies, institutions, and systems that create racial boundaries. I want to raise questions about these persistent and pervasive patterns and even questions what is legal and what is not, how it is defined, and why it is defined that way.

The body of works in the Systemic Punches: Displacement Experience of Vulnerable Immigrants use abstract and perceptual driven artworks to explore the idea of displacement, vulnerability, and negotiation to challenge the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic systems that control the way people live, work and relate to one another within and beyond boundaries. Currently, I use the Ghanaian proverbs and sayings as a lens to explore the experience of displacement and vulnerability resulting from ubiquitous and complex systems of control and oppression. It offers a critique of how people's negotiation of space attracts various interpretations of systems of power and privilege that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
This critique is an essential part of my research because it highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of displacement dynamics to understand how we can better address all these systemic issues. Security checkpoints, borders, and migration signify different meanings depending on the contexts and interlocutors. Therefore, my works highlight the tension that results from the nationalist perspective realizing the complexities of the immigrant view of what it means to live while simultaneously recognizing and appreciating the interconnectedness between them. The installation seeks to use a participatory approach to situate viewers in spaces where they are emotionally, psychologically, and physically disoriented and displaced, challenging them to confront and reconsider their own complex identities and positionalities. Max Planck said, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

Furthermore, installation attempts to expand our understandings and to challenge viewers to consider the world beyond borders by questioning their own experience in the context of space, border, diaspora, (im)migration, and identity construction. It offers a critique of how people negotiate in space, attracting various interpretations of systems that control the way people interact within and beyond boundaries. The work is positioned from an ambiguous perspective that could imply immigrants' or non-immigrants’ experiences. Security checkpoints, borders, and migration signify different meanings depending on the contexts and interlocutors. We are operating now within a new and different problem space, and this requires that we ask new questions that entail new and different answers. (Iton R. 2008). Therefore, there is the need to draw attention to how these spaces shape and reinforce our understanding of race, identity, gender, class, age, ability, and other human experience dimensions. This is because immigration catastrophes are often perceived as individual action or inaction in their decision-making, bringing misfortune to them rather than being a systemic problem.
Discussion of the Artworks / Exhibition

As a multimedia and interdisciplinary artist, I am interested in engaging the audience through interactive space using video and sound, projection, drawing, and sculpture pieces to create an atmosphere that allows for an open dialogue between the works and audiences. This project aims to create a new sense of consciousness and self-awareness with the audience. Moreover, for them to question what their privileges are and their prerogatives within the constructed systems. In other words, to create a sense of spatial displacement forcing the audience to negotiate the in-between space—a state where one's identity is defined shaped by the boundaries within which they have been placed. I am interested in sharing with the participants the experience of being the "Other," an outsider who constantly finds themselves dealing with the issues of accessibility and inaccessibility. This project holds the view that past and present experiences are intertwined to empathize with the displaced.

The installation used a participatory approach to situate viewers in spaces of power and privilege by creating an environment where people can see themselves through the artist's eyes as an immigrant. Hence, the installation walked people through the process of border crossing and the experience of an unknown space to cause them to reflect, recognize and understand each other's perspectives and experiences. The exhibition space was divided into six sections. Each section was screened-off with rolling walls and barbed wires to deny the audience the opportunity to view other sections from any standpoint. This denial process excluded the scanner and the immigration route, which were partially accessible to almost any visitor. Additionally, the rolling walls were positioned in a particular order to direct the movement of people in the space or how one navigates the gallery space.
The Void

At the entrance of the gallery was a life-size body scanner titled "The void." The idea was to bring some airport experience into the gallery where all passengers go through the security checkpoint. I used the scanner to scan the audience with a specific set of instructions to respond to the audience's reactions. The scanner's negative space is an altered African map with LED lights and sensors determining and controlling who gets or is denied access into the gallery space. The negative space is designed so that the audience would not be able to stand straight but must conform to the shape of the space by leaning forward with their head down. Everyone who walks through must take off their shoes before walking through the scanner. On the scanner's base are two copper foils cut into the shape of the sole of a foot where people place their feet to complete the circuit for the LED lights to light up. The LED strip emitted white color when people stepped into the scanner, and the LED light gradually turned off from the bottom of the scanner to the top. The scanner took a few seconds to deliberate on the results after scanning and then produced either green or red light. Whoever got a greenlight had access to the exhibition space, and those who got a red light were denied access. Furthermore, those who got denied received a denial letter, granting them another chance to see the show the next two days, but was still subjected to the same process.

Even though the scanner was the only entrance into the gallery space physically, it was also the entry point into my experience conceptually. It represented what immigrants are subjected to, making them vulnerable at any similar point of entry. This experience comes with fear of being seen as a threat, anxieties, and insecurities surrounding immigrants' daily life experiences as they navigate space. It is also an entry point into the artist's experience as an immigrant and how he feels about people's perception of him. Allowing oneself to be scanned means denying oneself
and placing oneself into a space of vulnerability to allow for some unknown possibility to emerge. Bending down meant prostrate oneself—humbling oneself and being willing to have a conversation and to be able to see things differently. It is also a call to be opened to new narratives and perspectives and see the world through different eyes. Removing one's shoe is to establish a reconnection with nature. There is no need to protect our feet again; it is about time to be free from society's shackles.

**Pass of Assimilation**

The second border to cross was to replace people's identity with a foreign one by requiring them to sign an affidavit of the name change to assimilate them into the system, which was the exhibition. Pass of Assimilation was a pass handed to the audience to remove them from their culture by requiring them to memorize their new names given to them on the pass. The audiences were supposed to respond whenever their names were called, and failure to respond added up to another layer of possible denial. The names were specifically Ghanaian names representing the weekdays. These include Kwasi/Akosua - Sunday born, Kwadwo/Adwoa - Monday, Kwabena/Abena - Tuesday, Kwaku/Akua - Wednesday, Yaw/Yaa - Thursday, Kofi/Afia - Friday, and Kwame/Ama - Saturday, for both males and females, respectively.

Names are culturally and socially a crucial part of identity. They define and distinguish us from other people. However, their impact on our lives is much more complex and powerful than we can imagine. Names communicate and manifest one's identity, cultural origins, values, history, and a sense of belonging. It is not just a physical or mental representation but also an emotional expression of one's personality. Everyone has a unique story to tell, and we all enjoy hearing our names, which is part of our story. However, for immigrants to be accepted, fit, adapt, and thrive in their new environment, different circumstances force them to change their names.
Therefore, people were implicated in this process to change their identity (cultural origins, values, history, and personal story by changing their names). Thus, a transition from the known to an unknown environment. If anyone resists, even though the person made it through the scanner, they would be denied access to proceed to see the other works. The resistance from the audience to change their names was a manifestation of my struggles to reject my identity or bear dual identity to survive the systemic ordeals.

**Immigration Route**

From there, the audience encountered a black ceramics sculpture piece titled "Immigration Route." The work is one of the most prominent drums found in Ghana. On the surface is a mixture of indigenous Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols and contemporary symbols to instruct how one navigates the gallery space. It was required that the audience understand the meanings of all the symbols on the drum's surface to guide them from breaking any law that governed the exhibition. A violation of any of the rules resulted in a total dismissal from the gallery space. The drum references an indigenous way of communicating and disseminating information to the Akan people of Ghana. There are several drumming styles in the Akan Tribe, including Adaban, Aprede, Atopretia, Ekyem, and all have specific circumstances for which they are played. The rhythms always have for the Akan (a tribe in Ghana) the implication of utterance. There are three basic modes of percussion: (1) The signal mode of drumming is characterized by fast repetitive rhythms. (2) Varied rhythms characterize the speech mode of drumming played in groups separated by pauses and generally lacking in the regularity of phrasing. (3) The dance mode of drumming is characterized by the regularity of phrasing, or a recurrent pulse felt. Nketia, J. H. K. (1963).
In my experience, I always knew what to do whenever a drum was played. For instance, I could sense danger or respond to a call to duty upon hearing how a particular drum sounded. Unfortunately, my life has turned into an endless cycle of fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration in my current host country due to the lack of access to those drum sounds—a lack of access to information, leading to the inability to make informed decisions to combat the effects of discrimination, prejudice, racism, and other forms of oppression. People know stories about me as an immigrant, but they do not know my story and how people like me deal with a system that is not meant for them. Therefore, the Immigration Route was to call for the willingness and readiness of the audience to take an interest in knowing immigrants' complex steps in their decision-making process. These are complex conversations that require self-denial and self-consciousness. This conversation is very uncomfortable, especially when it reveals one's true identity and acceptance of oneself and defines how and where one is placed in any control system.

**Swerving the Punches**

Sixty Boxing Gloves people encountered as they move around the see all the works in the exhibition titled: Swerving the Punches. These gloves were hanged throughout the gallery space from the ceiling to the eye level in no order, and the gloves were painted with the colors of the Ghana flag and the United States of America flag colors. The Boxing Gloves reference my struggles just as any other immigrant faces in their new environment and how these unjust and unfair systems punch immigrants. They also represent the struggle of having a dual identity that is different and more complex. It is an everyday fight for equality, fairness, and justice throughout their journey and life experiences in their new residence space.
Erasing

After setting the tone for the dialog with the gloves, the following section had a piece titled "Erasing," a ceramics sculpture. It is a globe with two hands attached to it: one hand holding the globe and the other holding an eraser, erasing something from the surface. The "Erasing" references all countries reshaping the world in their viewpoint regarding immigration by building systems that determine the status of people and how the systems recognize them in place. People always think of walls as building something, but I see erasing or removing things as a barrier for people to be excluded within a given system. Hence, Erasing critiques the inequality and exclusion of immigrants from societal and socio-economic structures. I have been in many difficult situations in the United States of America (US) that made me question when the US health system, among other systems, recognizes immigrants as part of the system who should benefit from it. When one is removed from those systems, it defines their accessibility and inaccessibility and makes them question their legitimacy.

In Search for my Misfortune

This piece is an interactive projection where the audience can play a puzzle of immigrants' experience and how they deal with unforeseen circumstances, including death. The puzzle was two pictures of immigrants in their expedition, and the pictures were divided into grids. Each grid represents a little portion of the pictures, and they were synchronized with a Midi Keyboard; thus, each grid was connected to a key on the Midi Keyboard. Additionally, it was programmed so that one key was played at a time, and nothing displayed if two or more keys were played simultaneously. This interactivity required that the players puzzle all the grids together by repeatedly playing the Midi Keyboard to find out what was happening in the pictures. This interactivity aimed to slow the audience down and reflect and puzzle all the pieces
of stories they have gathered to that point together to understand the subsequent works that highlight the effect of being an immigrant.

**Behind the Veil. (What If)**

The story continues with this piece to enlighten the audience about the inhuman conditions of the lives of immigrants that are visibly invisible within immigration laws, policies that are enforced and implemented by the government. Behind the Veil was inspired by my encounter with a design of Xylophone, made explicitly in Africa during my visit to the Cape Coast Slave Castle. The instrument is a metaphor for one dichotomy which happened at the Castle during the colonial era. According to Joshua Heikkila, each of the castles has a church, but the church at Cape Coast Castle, sits directly above the male dungeons, where they were kept before they were transported through the trans-Atlantic) Additionally, the congregation could have a view of those captive". Joshua H. (July 2019) I could not bear with my eyes that atrocities as evidently present at the Castle because it reminded me of how immigrants are being treated, displaced, and Marginalized in the USA and across the globe.

The work comprises wood, ceramics, copper foils, bare conductive touch board, zip ties, chains, speakers, and electric cables. It is like any other xylophone from Africa with a bit of alteration. In this piece, the keys and the wooden mullet are covered with copper foils for conduction purposes and to complete the circuit to produce sounds. The gourds are replaced with ceramics and sits on the floor instead of attached to each key. The wooden frame was put together by zip-tying them, but the keys were weaved together and attached to the wooden frame using the chains. Some of the chains were wrapped around the necks of all the ceramics pots to tie them together. The "bare conductive touch board" was connected to the speakers and the keys using the cables and assigning each key with a different voice. These sounds were voices of
distress, suffering, misery, agony (baby cry, a person in the chain, sensing danger, lamenting when played). Everyone expects to hear the excellent sound being produced on any musical instrument. However, with this piece, the sound is something unexpected and discomforting to the ears. What would be the audience's attitude towards people who are not like them if the narrative is changed from what they know? The purpose of this work in the gallery space was to trigger a sense of urgency in the audience to challenge them to take the necessary action in their environment regarding addressing the issues of inequality and discrimination.

Other pieces like Immigration stumps and the suitcase were used as barriers to complicate the exhibition space. However, the following two pieces, "The failure of my mother's cloth to wrap me up" and "The waiting room," were the works that critique my current state in the United States of American.

"The failure of my mother's cloth to wrap me up" is charcoal on the paper drawing showing babysitting on a suitcase behind wall crying, and in front of the child stood a border patrol with his gun hanging by his side. The title was inspired by immigrants separated from their children and their inability to do anything. They had to leave their children in the hands of strangers who do not know what might be good for them. The drawing references what I am dealing with mentally and emotionally due to my child's possible legal status because my legal status is expiring soon. He is a citizen, and I am not, and this has left me in a state of confusion if I must leave the country.

“In the waiting room” is a metaphor for my current state as an immigrant whose immigration status is expiring. It is the last work that people encounter before they leave the gallery space. The work is titled The Waiting Room because it references a confined space where deportees are kept at the mercy of law enforcement officers until their deportation. I currently
feel like sitting in a waiting room, not knowing what awaits me because I will be illegal and erased from the system once my immigration status expires. That means my future is uncertain because I am still living in limbo even though I have applied for the Optional Practical Training (OPT), which should allow me to stay a little longer. OPT is also subjected to immigration review by the department of homeland security, which means it could be granted or denied. Being in the waiting room is a very stressful moment to deal with physical and psychological trauma, emotional stress, and unanswered questions.

Conclusion

Being an immigrant is a traumatic experience in the current political climate because of the constant fear and anxiety of being an Other - of not belonging and not fitting in. People are forced to face the reality of their vulnerability, making it hard for them to imagine how life would be without the constant fear of losing their job, family members, being deported along with others. Therefore, I want to focus on using different art genres and tools to stimulate the five sensitive organs in our body responsible for the emotions we feel when we encounter situations to communicate my ideas through different sense organs.

My education as an artist and where I grew up until my MFA program at the University of Arkansas did not create the platform for me to be more critical about the world around me. Even though I was making conceptual artworks, I considered several unnecessary things to talk about, and I did not know how they shaped my life. However, I realized that there are so many happenings I was not questioning until I started my journey to the US, where I was faced with many unanswered questions about my existence in the world.

Many writers, musicians, artist groups, and organizations have been working to address immigrants' displacement in recent years. Nonetheless, due to its complexity, it has become
increasingly difficult for people to be interested in these issues to comprehend the magnitude of this problem and address it in whichever capacity they could. Given that, I decided to use my artistic research, "The Systemic Punches: Displacement Experience of Vulnerable Immigrants," and my artwork to soften the issue of immigration and to create a convenient and comfortable ground for people who hold back their thoughts and feeling in addressing the issue with no hesitations.

I want to continue in this conversation using different art forms to reach out to people of all ages and backgrounds and encourage them to speak up about their systemic problems. Furthermore, to trigger the public to engage in dialogue about the systemic problems faced by the marginalized.
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