

Stifling Sameness: Hardships of Immigration, Parenthood, and Being Non-White Contingent Faculty

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It was July 15, 2016, and I was at a music conference at the University of Nottingham, England, when I saw the news of the coup attempt. At around eight o'clock in the evening, British news reported that tanks had taken over the streets in Istanbul and members of the Turkish military had bombed their own parliament. Thousands of citizens ran into the streets to successfully prevent the coup, and hundreds were killed in doing so. It was shocking. To be honest, I was conflicted. On the one hand, a military coup would have been a horrific outcome, and so many Turkish citizens had lost their lives that night in defense of their government. On the other hand, the hardship that the existing government had caused me until then left me feeling resentful. What follows is a timeline of my experiences leading up to this moment.

I am a scholar whose work focuses on the analysis of both eighteenth-century Western music, especially that of Joseph Haydn, and Turkish music. After defending my dissertation on the relationship between chromaticism and form in Haydn's string quartets in January 2015, I took a position in Turkey in order to better study Turkish art music, the music of my late father's country. I was named Assistant Professor of Music at Ipek University in Ankara, and I was happy there. The university administration was pleased with my work, too, and they named me director of the conservatory after only three months on the job. Our conservatory building and concert hall were in the process of being constructed as a new, state-of-the-art facility. I hired faculty, designed curricula, and recruited students for what was planned to be a conservatory of both Western and Turkish music. I had staff who would deliver Turkish coffee to my office and a car service to take me to and from campus each day. I met my future spouse there. I was doing what I loved.

Then conditions started to deteriorate. In June 2015 the ruling party lost seats in a parliamentary election, and from that moment life became impossible. Terrorist bombings began occurring with regular frequency throughout Turkey from organizations such as ISIS and the Kurdish militant group PKK. On multiple occasions I would hear news of a bombing that went off in a place where I had been only a day earlier. One evening I was on my way to meet a colleague in the city center to work on Turkish music. As I exited the metro and approached the square, people were running in the opposite direction, screaming, "canlı bomba!" ("suicide bomber!").

A snap rerun of the June election returned power to the ruling party in November. By January 2016 the Turkish government had canceled my work visa and those of all foreign faculty members at my university. My job was officially over. Unsure of what to do next, I began working as an English instructor in Istanbul to make ends meet while continuing to look for academic work. This time coincided with the Syrian refugee crisis. Many of my English students were displaced Syrian teenagers who would tell stories of their homes being destroyed by bombs and share their dreams of one day returning to their country. It was a heartbreaking and eye-opening experience.

I was doing this work when my paper proposal was accepted to the conference at Nottingham. While I was in England for the conference, the tensions in Turkey reached such a height that a faction of the military initiated the coup attempt described at the beginning of this essay. A military coup would not have been a desirable outcome by any stretch of the imagination; however, when the government defeated the coup, things that were already difficult got even worse. In the aftermath, my former university was closed and thousands of academics who spoke out to criticize the government were either jailed as traitors, labeled as terrorists, or outright dismissed from their positions. Until that point, I had tried to remain in Turkey for the sake of both my relationship and my career, but the coup attempt was the final straw. I changed my return flight from the conference from Heathrow–Istanbul to Heathrow–New York. I came home to the United States confused, without a job, and without my future partner.

Then the 2016 US election happened. So that we wouldn't have to live apart, my partner and I decided to use the K-1 fiancée visa, whereby she would come to the United States on the condition that we get married within ninety days. However, when Donald Trump won the election, any notion that America would be much better for us was swiftly dashed, as Trump openly encouraged anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, beginning in January 2017 with Executive Order 13769, the so-called Muslim travel ban. Although we eventually received the visa and were able to get married, every stage of the process was met with increasing hostility, obstacles, and threats from the administration and its supporters.

In 2017, after my wedding and a year of unemployment, Hofstra University offered me a position teaching music theory as an adjunct assistant professor. While grateful for the opportunity to continue my academic career (especially after the events in Turkey), being an adjunct has caused me to struggle with multiple layers of inequity inherent in the American university system. I am paid an hourly rate for my time spent in the classroom only, which amounts to a small fraction of the salary of a full-time professor. I teach four courses a semester, and with lesson planning, grading, and student mentoring it is a relentless cycle of work—all necessary—for which I am mostly

unpaid. I have no job security and no benefits from the university. I have no ability to make decisions on curricula, my own course assignments, or the direction of the department. I enjoy working with my colleagues and students immensely, but the lack of financial compensation and institutional support, coupled with the demands of the position, can be debilitating.

This already difficult situation is compounded because of my wife's immigration status. She had to wait an unusually long time to get work authorization under hostile policies seeking to limit immigration (even legal immigration). In the meantime, we had a son, whom she now cares for full time. I am afraid to apply for public assistance benefits because if we do United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will view us as a public charge and my wife's green card may be denied. Some of these fears have been assuaged with the new Biden administration and its softer stance on immigration. Nevertheless, with each passing day I feel the increasing burden of my family's financial needs, the demands for time from my academic career and my growing family, and the stress and uncertainty of immigration. My wife finally received her permanent green card on May 3, 2021, nearly four years after we initiated the immigration process and at a total cost of approximately \$5,000 after application and legal fees.

It can feel demoralizing teaching for my adjunct position most days and then having to work evenings and weekends just to try to keep our heads above water. It is even more difficult finding time for research. I have no time to read and barely any time to string a couple of thoughts together in writing. On the publishing front, I have so much to say about Haydn's music, sonata form, Turkish music, and many other topics, and yet I don't have access to the time, resources, or institutional support afforded my full-time colleagues. Publishing while an adjunct often feels like a herculean effort spent on work that may never count toward promotion at my current institution or elsewhere. In spite of these hurdles, I have been fortunate to have three articles accepted in the past year (two of which are on Turkish music), to have presented at the Society for Music Theory's Committee on Race and Ethnicity panel, and to begin serving as the new secretary for the Haydn Society of North America, a role and responsibility I cherish.

My experiences on the job market have been similarly challenging, especially with respect to my work on Turkish music. I have experienced certain microaggressions that almost make me regret having studied the music of my family background at all. As a non-white scholar who is Turkish and Puerto Rican, I notice that colleagues often seem confused by my ethnicity and my decision to engage with it in my scholarship. In job applications, I inevitably feel as though my research in Turkish music is too much of an unknown area of specialization to the search committee, one that they would rather not deal with. It takes a special kind of convincing to argue that Turkish

music—or any non-Western music, for that matter—is valuable in the context of music theory. This kind of “convincing” or legitimization is simply not necessary with respect to Western music topics, which are by default central to the serious study of music. Recent job interviews in which I have participated have offered encouraging signs that this situation is starting to change, with search committees expressing more interest in incorporating non-Western music classes into the theory curriculum. I have also recently been invited by another university to teach a Turkish music module in a theory class for the upcoming fall semester. Hopefully these trends will continue.

While being an ethnic minority and featuring Turkish music in my scholarship has posed certain challenges, several music departments have given me the freedom and flexibility to develop my scholarship in my own way. During my graduate studies at Cornell University, I studied the music of Joseph Haydn and that of eighteenth-century Europe, but I also participated in a Middle Eastern ensemble, obtained funding to travel to Turkey for research, and completed a graduate minor in Near Eastern studies. My current institution allows me to develop my own methods for teaching the courses I am assigned. I have used this as an opportunity to experiment with ways of expanding the core theory and ear-training curriculum to include non-Western and popular music. This flexibility has enabled me to adapt my courses according to student feedback as well as give students a chance to benefit from all aspects of my knowledge. In the future, I hope that the field of music theory will continue to be accommodating to scholars like me, those who choose to engage with their ethnicity in ways that would contribute to a broader view of what “music theory” can be. As of now, it still feels as though engaging with non-Western music in a scholarly research agenda is either a pioneering act of bravery or a career-threatening folly.

My story is one that highlights the hardships of immigration, the inequities faced by BIPOC scholars, my experience in researching non-Western music and its reception in the field, and the ways in which contingent faculty status can exacerbate these issues. I feel that I have so much to offer my discipline, department, colleagues, and students. I thought I had found a wonderful opportunity in Turkey, but it was not meant to be. Now, back in the United States, I want to do so much more, but I simply cannot in my limited capacity as an adjunct faculty member with demands on time from my other jobs and my family. I hope the trends that are opening the field to both alternative repertoires and non-Western music will lead to increased recognition and more opportunities for BIPOC scholars. I feel that the issue really comes down to a willingness to be truly open to difference. Music theory is evolving, and, in order to do so equitably, deep-seated institutional biases need to change so that the playing field is not so slanted toward Western music only. The additional obstacles my family has had to face regarding

immigration are ongoing, even with the new administration. It has been a constant struggle to maintain a lifestyle that others with more stable faculty positions and/or citizenship status may take for granted. I am thankful for the opportunity to share my perspective with the broader academic community from this platform, and I look forward to continuing to advocate for BIPOC and immigrant scholars in the future.