



## A Better Life? Something I Can't Unsee

At the start of the Biden administration and just two weeks after the siege at the U.S. Capitol, how are immigrants responding to this moment? Three senior journalists in the Feet in 2 Worlds network discuss the opportunities and risks and the trauma they continue to grapple with from the past four years. Carolina González moderates this conversation with Zahir Janmohamed, Maritza L. Félix and Macollvie Neel.

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**Carolina González:** 2020 is over. The pain and struggle we all shared in the past year, in the past few years, hasn't magically disappeared, but the Biden administration promises that they will do better. In his first day on the job, President Biden got right down to work. He signed an executive order strengthening DACA, the program for undocumented young people brought to the U.S. by their parents. Another executive order reversed efforts by the previous administration to exclude non-citizens from the census count, and there were several other measures that protect immigrants and refugees.

But the siege of the U.S. Capitol by right wing extremists and white nationalists, sent a very different message. The principles of democracy and freedom that have drawn immigrants to America for generations are under attack.

To sort through the events and emotions of the past few weeks, we've gathered some of Feet in 2 Worlds senior journalists. We're going to process this moment together, and maybe we can help you, our listeners, process the collective PTSD many immigrants like us may still be feeling right now, even in a moment of hope.

Joining us today are Maritza L. Félix, Zahir Janmohamed, and Macollvie J. Neel.

Maritza is in Phoenix, Arizona. She's a reporter and an editing fellow for Feet in 2 Worlds. This year, with the help of Feet in 2 Worlds, Maritza created Conecta Arizona, a new service that brings information about COVID-19 to Spanish speaking audiences in Arizona and in Sonora, México.

Zahir is in Portland, Maine. He's the host of the podcast series "A Better Life?", he's a Zell writing fellow at the University of Michigan, and he was one of the creators of the Racist Sandwich podcast.

Macollvie is in Brooklyn. She's a freelance journalist and communications consultant, and was a Feet in 2 Worlds fellow in 2005.

We're recording this the day after Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were sworn in as the new President and Vice President.

I want to ask each of you, what went through your head as you watched and listened to the Inauguration? What struck you the most on that day? Maritza, let's start with you.

**Maritza Félix:** That we could actually breathe. I feel that we were holding our breaths for the past four years. And yesterday, after four years, we were able to stop, breathe, and feel a little bit of peace, finally.

**Macollvie Neel:** I think it just seemed so stately and elegant, and just really well thought out. I just, the optics of it was just so, so very different from what we've been seeing and experiencing, like a lot of the fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants approach of the Trump administration.

So, that reinforced, you know, like, the America that my parents brought us to and loved. The higher ideals that so many people, not just immigrants, kind of look towards and see, you know, this is how America does it. So, I felt comforted in being able to see that again, that return to normalcy, if you will.

But, at the same time, I was still guarded, Carolina. Because in driving into my house, I passed by a bunch of Trump flags still, and some of them were pretty profane. So it was a weird, like, 'Okay, we're still doing this.' There are still a lot of people, a lot of holdouts. We can't, like, ignore or dismiss or pretend they're not there. They're much more in your face than they were four years ago, or even two years ago for that matter.

But then coming in, getting into the house, and being able to see the stateliness of it all. And then, like, watching Amanda Gorman just deliver that powerful poem or sermon, as some people called it, it gave me chills. I got goosebumps. So, that's where I am, like, mentally, emotionally.

I'm guarded because I know there's 70 million people out there who still feel like this is a sham, or whatever the stories are that they're telling themselves. And I'm optimistic that we will get to where we need to be somewhere and bring some of them along.

**Zahir Janmohamed:** Yeah. I mean, I would say like, so the day before the Inauguration, Mike Pompeo, the former Secretary of State, uh, tweeted about how multiculturalism is not who we are. And there's an alarming number of Americans for whom they think that, um, they, they are racist, they are white supremacists, but God forbid you call them white supremacists, 'cause they don't want to be called that. But they are, and we have a white supremacist party, that's the opposition party. And it wasn't always like that. I used to work in politics, so the Republican Party wasn't like that. But they're literally booing when Cori Bush talks about white supremacy.

So, seeing yesterday was quite striking. I got choked up as well when Amanda Gorman read her poem and said, like, "A skinny Black girl like me could come down these stairs and read for a president." A Vice President who was half-Black. That was incredible. So for me, I'm also feeling, uh, cautiously optimistic, but I'm also really alarmed.

When I saw George W. Bush fly away at the inauguration in 2008, when I was at Obama's inauguration, sorry, 2009, you know, it was like, "Oh my God, he's leaving." And yes, Trump did fly away yesterday too, but there's something that's staying with us. There's something that I can't unsee, even though I was born and raised in this country. And there's something I know that my parents can't unsee. You know, these last four years, it's the first time my parents have ever really said the word "white people," and now they can't not say the word "white people." That wasn't always the case.

So, I've changed as a person, I know my parents have changed as people, and I know we have changed as a country. I hope we get back to where we were, but I don't...I'm not hopeful about that.

**Carolina:** So, a lot of you have talked about the optics. What do you think it means for your communities to see Kamala Harris? To see this diverse Cabinet? Does it help to soften, you know, the shock and anger that many of us felt during the attack on the Capitol, by this mob of mostly white right-wing extremists? Macollvie, do you wanna take that first?

**Macollvie:** Sure. So, in our reporting with, um, the *Haitian Times* in particular, we saw a lot of people who were just watching virtually and attending these events, however they could, via Zoom and everything, right? And so a lot of them had talked about how they prayed for a peaceful transition. After what we saw on January 6th, there was some fear that, um, something else might happen that might be more devastating than the insurrection from the 6th, even. And, so, I think there was relief, not just in being able to breathe again as immigrants, you know, being assaulted like constantly. Doing away with the Family Reunification Act of the Obama era, not extending TPS, or taking it to the Supreme Court, right. The Muslim ban, all of that. It was just constant. And so that had us on high alert to begin with, right?

Um, with TPS in particular, there's this Haitian comedian who said it doesn't stand for Temporary Protected Status with Haitians, it stands for "Trump Pap Siyen," which is Creole for "Trump won't sign the extension," right? That's what it came to mean under Trump. And that was a reality that we were living here, or our families, extended family members who were TPS recipients, were living here on borrowed time and at any moment, right, they could just be summarily deported for whatever reason. So, there was that huge, like, sense of relief that, okay, maybe now we'll be able to, like, go to bed and not wake up to some new law.

For a lot of people, they said, you know, the January 6th storming of the Capitol was, like, a warning, like, a wakeup sign for America. To, like, show how vulnerable even the highest super power in this world, in our world, could be subject to that type of desperation and anger from a group of people that, they would deal with that, right? So, they were saying, you know, they hope that that means something and we can go past it.

**Carolina:** Great. Maritza, do you want to say something quick about this?

**Maritza:** Yes. Yesterday during my kid's class, they were watching the Inauguration. And I saw the look on my girl's face and she was looking at Kamala Harris and she was thinking that this is possible. For her it's going to be normal that women can be like going up in this, in the stairs of power, because that's something that she saw yesterday.

And she also told me that she wants to be the first President who's a chef, because she wants to be a chef when she grows up, and I don't cook. So, I don't know how she gets all these ideas. But I saw her look saying this is possible.

But then I think about the other many, many families that are still struggling because, well, the Trump administration is almost done. I'm saying almost because we are still, still have this impeachment going on, but there were so many families that were separated and they still are not hopeful. They're relieved that Trump is no longer in power, they are hopeful that something is going to get done, but they're resilient because they don't know if that's going to be enough. If those families are going to be able to be back together. And because they remember Biden from the Obama administration,

because they know that there were so many families separated as well, because they were — the deportation numbers were extremely high.

So, that doesn't go away, not even with the executive order that he signed the first day that he was in office. But at least they have a room to dream, a room to, to think, in their future, without that fear that they had during the Trump administration. But they're not blind.

So, I think that's something that we need to think of, because the hundred, the first hundred days are going to be important, but we still have more — four more years to go.

**Carolina:** Yeah, I, you know, our communities were looking at the U.S. very differently in the last four years, and certainly in the last year. We supposedly have turned a page now. What is different? What is the same?

**Maritza:** I think it will be the opportunity, Carolina, because trying to come to the U.S. the right way is extremely hard. And I'm talking about personal experience. I first came to the U.S. with a work visa, with a spouse visa because I got married, then I moved to LA. I got my work visa and it was extremely, extremely difficult to get that work visa. And then I was changing to one work visa to another work visa, and I always needed a sponsor to sponsor me to be able to stay in this country. And, uh, I'm a green card holder now, and I'm so grateful for that, but I did pay the price. It was a very long experience, it was a very expensive process, and not everybody gets the opportunity to do so. So, we need to think about that.

With Trump, the door was closed. With Biden there is a window that is open, it's not the door yet. We're trying to find a way to do the things the right way, to come to this country, to do the things the right way. But there is no way 'til now, but there is this hope that Biden is going to change that.

**Carolina:** Zahir, what's different? What's the same?

**Zahir:** So, I was in Michigan at the Arab American Museum as an Artist-in-Residence in November, and I remember interviewing people on the day that, uh, Trump lost, and, um, you know, some people were, you know, saying, "What's really going to change?" I mean, certainly Biden is much better than Trump, but we have to remember that many of the things that, what we saw at the Capitol were things that the United States has, has been doing around the world for quite some time. Um, I'm old enough to remember Abu Ghraib. I'm old enough to remember the torture in Iraq. I'm old enough to remember when Guantánamo was started and it's still, still open.

And what I think has changed now is I think there's much more space in which to talk about some of these issues. I also think that, and I see this with a lot of young, um, children of immigrants running for office. We tried respectability politics for a long time, but guess what? Respectability politics didn't get us anywhere. We tried appealing to the white voters, but guess what? White voters haven't supported the Democrats since, I don't know, 30 years, or something like that. So, we're going to launch our own effort and we're going to mobilize within our own particular immigrant communities, communities of color.

Keep in mind, like, the Arab community in Michigan didn't really identify as people of color, you know, 20 years ago. But now they do, and they've found alliances with the Black community in Detroit. And that's amazing.

There has to be a new strategy to tackle this America, because what we're facing is serious and what we're facing isn't going away. I'm cautiously excited right now, after watching the beautiful Inauguration yesterday, but I'm also, I'm ready to get back to work. And by getting back to work, what I mean is to have uncomfortable conversations because experiencing racism is uncomfortable. So the conversation about racism, the conversation about America, has to be uncomfortable. And if people don't like it, I guess I don't care anymore. Not that I ever did, but I care even less now.

### Ad Break

**Carolina:** You're listening to a special edition of A Better Life? a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds. We're talking about the state of the American Dream in our current political moment. I'm Carolina González. Maritza L. Félix joins us from Phoenix, Arizona, Zahir Janmohamed is in Portland, Maine, and Macollvie J. Neel is in Brooklyn, New York.

We've all been having a lot of uncomfortable conversations in the past few years. How do y'all think that we're going to be talking to each other differently in the coming days, with strangers or with people we know in real life or online?

**Zahir:** I want to be more specific. To me, it's like, how do we speak to white people differently? So I used to work in the U.S. Congress. I was there from 2009 to 2011. I worked for a black member of Congress, and when I would walk with the congressmen, his name was Keith Ellison, late at night, over by the Senate side there's kind of this area where it's kind of dark, in between the Senate buildings. He would have to walk with his pin up in the air, so that the officers would know that he's a member of Congress, so that they wouldn't do anything. And that was just something that Black members of Congress had to do to walk with their pins up in the air. And you had white people just go in and just think it's their right to storm the Capitol.

So when I think, when I talk about things being differently, I guess I can only speak about myself. I'm going to be much more forceful when I'm gaslit by white people, and I talk about the kind of America that I'm seeing. I'm going to vow to myself not to take the crap that I did for so long from white people saying, "Oh, it's not so bad. This isn't who we are." No, this is who we are. I'm going to talk to white people differently, and I'm going to be much more forceful, and say, now, wait a minute. I warned Democratic leadership about this new batch of Republicans, but they didn't believe us. They didn't believe us people of color. A lot of journalists of color, we reported about who Trump was. He started by calling Mexicans rapists, and Saturday Night Live still put him on the air. We have to, we have to, like, have a tough conversation about the failure of white liberalism in this country. And if there's not a conversation with the failure of white liberalism, about the failure of the Democratic party, then I don't want to be a part of it.

**Maritza:** I love that you said that, Zahir, here because I'm realizing that I'm not the only one thinking that we are not the quota that they have to meet. It's like, we're here to stay. It's like, we're not going anywhere. There's a lady that I always interview and says — and she always says, "I don't cross the border. The border crossed me." And I think that's a very powerful message. And I think that we're here to stay, and the good thing is, like, we're learning as well of the new generations. That they have their own voices, and they don't want to be an echo anymore of somebody else's words. They want to be their own voice, and they're taking advantage of it.

And I need to process and understand, is how we, as media, as Latino media, as Spanish-speaking media, we learned a lot from Trump because we doubted everything

because he was always under attack and we needed to find another way to inform the communities that we were serving. And I think that's something good that came out of the Trump administration.

But with Trump, we crossed as society, we crossed so many lines that I think our conversation is like, how do we find the way to go back and not normalize all those things that we, that are normalized after Trump. That are not good for us, that are not good for anybody regardless of the color of their skin, but especially not good for us who are still a minority, who we have a different accent, who our English is not perfect, but we live here! And we're staying.

Carolina: Who come from "shithole countries."

Maritza: Exactly! [Laughs.]

Zahir: [Laughs.]

Macollvie: [Laughs.]

Maritza: But they're actually really nice that you can enjoy, like, a very nice vacation in Mexico, I can assure you. Well, as soon as the pandemic allows it, let me make this a commercial. But yeah, it's like, we need to embrace diversity and not just because we need that slogan, like, we are a diverse country, we are the land of immigrants, because we are the land of immigrants. Start believing it and start embracing it.

Macollvie: Yeah, I completely, I'm just nodding. I feel like my head's gonna fall off because, you know, what Zahir and Maritza are saying are so true. I think for Haitian Americans, we saw a lot, especially over the summer, just how ingrained being Black is, like, the Movement for Black Lives, right? Black lives matter when we say that for a while or for generations as Haitian Americans, we did kind of try to keep ourselves apart and think of the issues of African Americans as you know, their issues. That's for Black communities to deal with, right? But over time, to your point about generations and like what happens as you assimilate, and also when you just get to the point where you were tired of it, like, you were tired of seeing your parents and yourself, you felt less than, right? And so now we're at the point where, you know, we're saying yes, Black lives matter. We're part of this too, um, this movement.

Like, we, as immigrants, Black immigrants, can't stand on the sideline and think that we can address systemic racism, like, by ourselves in our, you know, little smaller, tighter-knit communities, because the same issues, the systemic racism that has plagued this country for so many years, for a hundred plus years, right? That impacts us in the way we've had relief or not had relief from the financial burdens of COVID, the health inequities, the disparities that we've seen from COVID, you know. We live in these communities where the foods we eat, the things we consume, they're impacting our lives as well, and making us more susceptible to these comorbidities that the health, um, public health professionals talk about, right? Education, like work, the type of work that people in the service sector are able to get versus not get, or being able to work in a nursing home for 30 years and never being promoted or getting a raise because you are a Black immigrant. All of that is part of the systemic racism we face in this country. And so talking about this, and seeing all of these come to the fore last summer for sure, just kind of felt like an aha moment for a lot of people who weren't there yet to say, yes, we do all have to come together.

And so now when I look at the Biden administration coming in and, you know, touting that they have the most diverse people in the administration, that says something. And to Zahir's point earlier about not being afraid or being shy about demanding some sort of change, I think having that level of access now in that administration is one place that our experts and, you know, leaders have said, "We really need to tap into like those opportunities there." If we have all these people, this inclusive America that we saw on display yesterday at the Inauguration, we can't let that opportunity pass us by to make our demands known, to tell a different story and move this American narrative forward in a way that benefits our future generations as people of color.

**Carolina:** Let's circle back up for a minute a little bit to COVID-19 again. We are entering year two, officially, of the COVID-19 pandemic. What do you think that your respective communities, and communities that you are in contact with, what do they want to see from the Biden administration concretely in terms of a response? A response that's going to tell them that they matter?

**Maritza:** This is a very good time for the Biden administration, because everybody is so receptive after Trump left the White House. It's like, they have the opportunity to get to know the communities they're serving, but get to know them well, not just because they want to have a diverse Cabinet, um, in Congress or the White House. Um, we have been in the shadows for so long that sometimes I think they forget about us, but no, we are here. We're not leaving. We are not the pobrecitos anymore of the United States. We're powerful, we're chingones. We can make things happen, but we need help.

We need to have healthcare access for everyone. What happened with these mixed-status families when they didn't get the stimulus check, for example, um, because they weren't here, like, documented, but they still pay taxes with the ITIN number? What happened with all these Latino families that they need to, like, make a chicken soup and drink hot water with lemon just to try to get rid of COVID because they don't have access to the, to the pharmacy, to the doctor? Because they're the last ones on the list when the vaccine is going to get distributed in Arizona, for example. So, we need to make that accessible. We are all in the pandemic, not just white people. We are probably these essential workers that we're sacrificing are part of these minorities. And they need to have the opportunity to have access to the same services, to the same help, to the same medical care as everybody else. And we need to have it now because if not, it's going to be too late. So many people have died already, and that's on Trump's conscience. Let's see how Biden deals with it.

**Zahir:** Two things. Number one is I think our political system has to be reformed. I know that's a tall task because I think our political system is designed for things not to happen. Um, the Senate filibuster, for example. And the second thing is there, I think there has to be, um, more regulation, particularly of companies. I want to speak about Detroit. So Martina Guzmán, who's terrific, terrific journalist in Detroit, wrote a fabulous piece about, um, access to water that particularly black communities, Latinx communities have in Metro Detroit. Very little regulation on these companies. So, water is shut off and, you know, obviously COVID, you need to wash your hands, um, just the...you need, you need water for life. Um, but there's very little regulation.

And then when there tries to be attempts at accountability for these companies, the political system just sort of stalls because you've got these split houses at the state level. And so I do think that the killing of George Floyd, and the pandemic, and the January 6th attacks have shown, is that we have to change culturally as a country, but also our institutions have to change because our institutions are, they're not failing, they're doing

what they're designed to do, which is to protect the powerful and protect white communities. And I never, I never saw it that way, but now I do.

**Carolina:** So are you saying that we need to, okay. Now White House — check, moving on to states, is that what you're saying?

**Zahir:** Yeah, but I also think that, you know, obviously the Biden administration is not going to go down and change policies at the state level, but to, to frame the conversation differently that at, at all levels of the government, there has to be a reform of these institutions, whether it's down to the city police. I mean, like, I'm from Sacramento, California, there are all these reports about collusion between the Sacramento PD and white supremacy groups. I saw that in Portland, Oregon. There has to be reform at all different levels.

And I do hope from the highest level from the White House, there's a talk about changing the systemic racism that, really, has gotten out of hand. And when we see the systemic racism wreak havoc on particularly Black communities this last year, um, that has to be changed. So, as much as we can change the attitude, great, but we also need to change these institutions and hold companies accountable.

**Carolina:** So, you know, a lot of us had, you know, when, uh, when we saw January 6th, it looked familiar for a lot of us because we come from places where we've lived through these deep societal and political turmoil. My family went through civil war, you know, if you're from Mexico, you've gone through the drug wars, the corruption, you've seen what we saw on January 6th looks familiar, you know, not in the U.S., but from our own countries. Haiti, you know, 200 years of, um, being under siege.

**Macollvie:** Mm-hm.

**Carolina:** So, do you think that those experiences, that either we have had personally, or that our parents have had, or our grandparents have had, of political violence, of political turmoil, did they help us, any of us, deal with the last few weeks?

**Maritza:** Well, in Mexico, it's been a while since the last time something like that happened. So, and I remember that we were making fun of the big TV networks, because they were saying, "This is like Colombia, this is Mexico." And we're saying, "Oh, it's been a while." We do have our own issues. We do have the drug dealers, and everything. But the thing is, like, compared to the white population in the U.S., we are used to it, and we are resilient, and we have normalized some of this violence that shouldn't be normalized.

**Zahir:** I also think there's been a slow, like, you know, I remember that Trump voters would drive in Sacramento, where my parents live, and get very aggressively close to my brother, who's a cardiologist, and my mom, who now wears the headscarf, and, you know, they both were nervous. My brother, nervous for being a doctor wearing scrubs, 'cause, like, God forbid, like, do you know what I mean? Like wearing a mask, um, and my mom for wearing a hijab. So I think this has been going for some time.

I remember my dad said he really thought, he always loved the idea of a peaceful transition of power. And he said that was probably one of the greatest things about America. But it wasn't peaceful on January 6th, and that's a hard thing. That there were all these troops in Washington, DC. DC is a city that I love, my father-in-law lives there, and to know that my wife and I had to constantly check in on him to make sure he was safe, that's weird. And I hope that changes. Um, and that's something that, um, yeah, you know, I never thought that I would see that in America. And I know my dad has been

saying that too, um, and that's a tough thing. So, you know, it's going to take some time to recover from January 6th.

**Carolina:** One concrete thing that this new administration can do, one specific thing that this new administration can do, that would make you feel that yes, there is going to be a change?

**Maritza:** For me, it will be the family reunification of the migrant children that we have forgotten, and I think that is really hopeful. And an immigration reform, an immigration reform that is comprehensive, that is not an amnesty, but there is a — creates a path for legalization of hundreds and thousands of undocumented people that are still living in the shadows.

**Carolina:** 11 million, yeah.

**Zahir:** Mine is simple. One word: punish. Punish, punish, punish, punish, punish. The people who stormed the Capitol, they should be punished. That swimmer who stormed the Capitol, who got off with a warning, what the hell? That real estate agent? She should be punished. The men who abused women, punished. Honestly, the police officers who killed George Floyd? Punished. That is how you send a signal.

Four years of a lack of accountability, and I want to see accountability. That's how you change a society. When I worked in Washington, D.C., what I saw was a lack of punishment. People get off the hook and so there's no incentive. These companies that cut off water to people in Detroit, they get away with it because they're not punished. We should punish people who violate the law, even if they're white, even if they're powerful.

**Carolina:** All right, Macollvie?

**Macollvie:** There's TPS for Haitians, cause it's somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 who would be impacted by this. It's encouraging to see, like, the evictions moratorium that was listed among the 15 executive actions yesterday. I think that will go a long way towards helping people who are living and working here to just feel like they have a way to live day to day, and continue having the kind of life that they imagined in the US, because it gets really, really tough, really, really depressing, when you have to choose between dealing with a landlord who was trying to, like, kick you out or a bank who wants to repossess your house or something and like feeding your kids, right? Like those basic needs should be met, that's part of the draw of coming to America and having a better life here. So, when we get to the point where we have to make those trade-offs, it gets really, really tough. And then you start thinking about what next, where do I go from here? That I think could be super helpful.

**Carolina:** Thanks, Macollvie. So much more to talk about as the year goes on: managing COVID-19, rethinking the economy, and rethinking our relations to each other. In addition to Macollvie Neel, we also heard from Maritza Félix and Zahir Janmohamed. Thank you so much to all of you.

To listen to the earlier episodes of A Better Life?, where we explore the impact of COVID-19 on immigrant communities in the U.S., visit [abetterlifepodcast.com](http://abetterlifepodcast.com).

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This episode was produced by John Rudolph and Mia Warren, who also mixed it. Our senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Katelynn Laws is our intern. Fareed Sajan composed our theme. I'm Carolina González. Thank you for listening.

**John Rudolph:** Call Your Elders and A Better Life? is produced by Feet in 2 Worlds. For fifteen years, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and advancing the careers of immigrant journalists.

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