PERSONAL NARRATIVES FOR BORDERS TO BRIDGES

The stories of struggle and perseverance told in our own words gave way for a seismic shift in the public's understanding of 'the undocumented.' We empowered allies and policymakers to make arguments for reform rooted in reality and backed by human connection. Together we taught the lion to write!

- Tolu Olubunmi

After Tolu Olubunmi graduated with a degree in Chemistry-Engineering, she discovered that although she was raised in the United States, she had undocumented status that prevented her from working in her field because she was born in Nigeria. This crisis led her to become an unpaid volunteer advocating for undocumented immigrants and refugees helping to build what has become the largest immigrant youth movement in the history of the U.S. Her inspiring life experiences, which she shares as a motivational speaker, include leading NGOs with projects on climate change, youth engagement, education and immigrant rights; working as a political strategist in the White House and the United Nations; being honored as one of 15 Women Changing the World and an Outstanding Woman Entrepreneur; and founding Lion's Write, an organization that helps others "live beyond the limits of their current circumstances." She believes in the power of story, giving voice to the voiceless, impacting social change for justice.

Olubunmi's story and the seventeen immigration /migration stories in the *Personal Narratives* section are important parts of *Borders to Bridges* so that students hear real life experiences in words and metaphor; immigrant students relate these stories to their own lives; all students find inspiring role-models stimulating them to write their own stories, poetry and prose; and finally, as resources enhancing the lessons in the curriculum.

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Tiff Chan

(Hong Kong to England to Canada)

Author's note: Content includes details about how meat eating influenced an increase in the development of vocal articulation for the pronunciation of different accents and languages. Reader's discretion is advised.

Location: Hong Kong, a developed city characterized by a principal island, with land connected to south-eastern China, and a series of outlying islands. Owned by the British for 100 years pre-1997, returned to China under 'one country two systems' for 50 years.

I have not lost my childhood joy in getting to know people from different parts of the world since I started going to an international school age 4. I realized how satisfying it was to connect with people by learning words or phrases in their home languages, or their most comfortable language, which really stimulated my love for life, marveling at the different sounds we can create with just our mouth (including our teeth, tongue and throat)– nothing *extra* to bring, or anything we might forget at home. I hadn't noticed at the time, but my sensitivity to sound was largely heightened by the fact that I was born with hearing only in one ear, allowing me to take sounds apart in minute detail, and have perfect pitch. This naturally led me to explore languages! Whenever moments become dry, dead, or depressing, I sometimes remember that I can change my accent. Speaking different accents and languages would change my perspective on life instantly without my body even having to move! Then, to add to this, being born into a Cantonese Chinese family, we ate lots of foods that involved us getting very 'pernickety' with our teeth and tongue, such as chicken wings and chicken feet, as well as other meats, like steamed fish which had fine sharp bones, so we had to master using our mouth very sensitively in order not to get hurt while sorting flesh from bones and to make sure we don't swallow the bones by accident, which was extremely scary and painful. It was normal to be expected to eat every last sliver of meat off the bones until they were spotlessly clean, because it would reflect a weakness of character otherwise, such as an inability to do things well or thoroughly. At Chinese New Year we ate dried melon seeds as a snack, which involved precisely using just the right amount of pressure to only crack the outer shell between our teeth, without affecting the seed in the middle. These foods can be a scare or considered strange for many people from other countries and cultures.

My family enjoy recalling that I used to call chicken feet "shake hands", because they would be offered to me from chopsticks, rising from the dish like a hand stretching out to shake mine. Foods are examples of things that can be perceived by other cultures as alien, grotesque and sickening – the differences that we can't come to understand or accept. In our sameness and fear of intolerance of the other, we lose our uniqueness and the space to be our full selves, to share all the intricacies that are hidden in every individual, which makes life fascinating.

There were many advantages to have been educated in international schools. In addition to being in a co-learning environment that was shared with peers that had special intellectual needs and differences in capacities, we saw the humanity in everyone regardless of where they came from – it would be ridiculous to think otherwise. At present, I still notice some mild discomfort and suspicion in myself when I am not in a group of people that is culturally diverse.

At school I learned phrases like "noh teggeh teggeh moosingasoh", and "noh iparli nomu noreh" in Korean, which meant 'you're very ugly' and 'your teeth are very yellow', which was very funny when we were 7 years old! I still remember the friend who taught me, "apka naam kya heh?" ('What is your name' in Hindi). Fast forwarding to when I moved to London UK, our group of friends frequented a Turkish restaurant almost every other day. "Iyiyak shamlar, -Nasilsin? –Iyiyim Sin!" (Good evening, how are you? I'm fine thanks). The first friend I met when I was interviewing at the Ruskin to study a BFA in Fine Arts was Polish, named Kostek. He showed me a drawing and I said – "what's that mean?" There was this letter, 'l' with a stroke across it – he said "that letter is 'ł' " (pronounced "eh-w"), "Pan Masło means Mr. Butter"! It was a little yellow cartoon character with big googly eyes. Over the years, we developed a strong friendship and I often went to Poland with him and he taught me more and more Polish. One day, we were outside a club in Warsaw taking a break, and I initiated him to translate the song for me, 'One More Time' by Daft Punk, because I could tell I knew half the words in Polish already but needed the missing words. So, it goes, "jeszcze raz, będziemy sie bawic, oh tak, oh tak, idziemy tanczyć"! ('One more time, we're gonna celebrate, oh yes oh yes we're going to dance...') - believe me, this was very satisfying!

In 2015, by sheer serendipity, I was in Berkeley California teaching a friend my mother tongue Cantonese (a Southern Chinese language with thousands of years of history, far older than the Chinese national language Putonghua, which was developed later and uses simplified Chinese characters). The attempt to condense teaching basic Cantonese tones and pronunciation within half an hour, triggered a chain of 'eureka moments' that connected components of knowledge from different disciplines and different times of my life, forming an innovative new way to approach language speaking and learning. What started as a method for accessing and learning Cantonese, became a method of transcription that could be applied to an unlimited number of languages, the extent of which is still unknown because it is unchartered territory, waiting to be discovered, only at the mercy of how curious we can be, with the time and resources to match up to the task. So far, I have managed to transcribe some Cantonese, Putonghua, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Hungarian, Hmong, Cree (Indigenous Canadian), and Sri Lankan Sinhalese, all with the intention of being in conversation with people face to face, or as a speaker addressing an audience in their native language.

Recently there have been more public speakers and celebrities adding words of Putonghua to their speeches, and we may have seen actors do so in movies, some speaking more accurately than others! Of course, polyglots exist, those who can speak multiple foreign languages immaculately. What I want to share, is that the apex of joy was in finding resonance with people on the level that is usually only associated with home, family and friends. This was the equivalent of the meaning of life for me - spontaneously responding to my desire to connect with people with adventure into completely new territory, just from trying to make new shapes and sounds with our mouths. It's an experience more precious than a plane ticket to go to a new

city, because essentially, you're visiting a part of their heart and their home, through language. Essentially, what also happens, is that we then begin to see our fellow human counterparts eye-to-eye, not just talking down to them with expectations that they 'get their English right' if they want to be understood - there's an opportunity for us to reciprocate an interest in learning from the languages and wisdom that they know, which actively acknowledges and respects who they are and where they've come from, all the while, biochemically building our versatility and reinforcing our universal connection.

Tiff Chan, also known as 'ArtyCatalyste', is a compulsive creative, international community builder, educator and empathic artistic collaborator through applied Expressive Arts Therapy. Currently she is a Masters student at the European Graduate School, advocating for arts engagement as a source of freedom, expression, understanding and fulfilment in life. Born in Hong Kong with hearing in one ear only, Tiff is hypersensitive to sound as a result, captivated by sounds, music, accents and languages, as well as poetry, drama, visual arts and dance. Awarded BFA at Oxford University (The Ruskin), Masters in Movement (RCSSD). Active member of IEATA, founder of Chantoneasy® method of language learning.

Mahima Tiwari

(Nepal to US)

"Welcome to America" said the immigration official as he handed me back my passport. As soon as I got outside the airport, I saw my father smiling and waving at me. We were seeing each other for the first time in seven years. I noticed he had aged a lot, but his hug still had the same warmth as when he used to cuddle me when I was little.

Adjusting to a new country is not easy, let alone when you come at age 25. I had to teach myself how to use a post box, a credit card, a subway, how to navigate a GPS or something as simple as how to order a coffee at Dunkin Donuts. I also needed to adjust to a new culture which was entirely different to what I had ever seen or experienced. I had to make new friends while wondering if I would ever get to see the ones I grew up together with again. I had to learn to celebrate new holidays, meet new neighbors while being mindful of being sensitive towards a new country and its people. Most importantly, I had to look for ways to get back to working as a physical therapist - a profession that I truly love.

I grew up in Nepal during the time of Civil War. It was a war that was fought between the Communist Party and the Government of Nepal. It lasted from 1996-2006. During the war many people lost their lives, many were injured, many tortured or "disappeared." Young people in their teenage years left their villages to avoid mandatory deployment as a Communist Comrade. Tourism–the main source of government revenue– was completely affected. Industries and factories were either closed or bombed. Many schools were shut down. A lot of families lost their loved ones in gun battles or ambushes and a large number of people are still living with the mental trauma of the war. My elementary school was bombed two times during the war. We were required to take part in school assemblies organized by the Communist Party to encourage us to join Maoism. All schools were closed for almost half a year due to many political strikes.

School curriculums were forced to be changed to include subjects that would teach students more about communism, and English Language schools and teachers were attacked claiming that learning English was against the "national interest." Innocent students caught between the dirty politics of power conducted many rallies to urge the government and the opposition to declare schools a "peaceful zone apart from politics." Nobody listened. We tried to resist by going to school during the "unlimited national strike," only to have our school bus windows hit with stones and tires burnt. A large majority of young students opted to leave the country for lives as migrant workers.

My father being one of the few educated people in our village was looked upon highly by villagers. The Maoist Party expected him to join their party to help appease the people. This was not acceptable to him. We knew what could happen if he disagreed. A few months prior to this, his uncle who had voiced his opinion of favoring the government had his leg chopped by an axe in the forest at midnight. Fearing for his life, he had to flee the country. I can still recall my mother telling us not to talk to anybody about when and why my father left the country.

While the memories of growing up during any war are tough, I also have a lot of wonderful childhood memories: climbing orange and guava trees in the neighborhood early mornings, celebrating festivals together as a community, learning to make a rug from my grandmother, fighting with my cousins over which grandchild my grandfather loves the most, greeting the milkman good morning each day, vegetable gardening with my mother, getting excited about Dashain (the national festival) because we would get to wear new clothes, playing hide and seek with friends after school. These are a few things that are dear to my heart. All these memories are a part of me, my roots and my heritage.

I have been living in America for two years now. While Nepal taught me humility, gratitude, simplicity and persistence, America continues to teach me independence, acceptance, kindness and possibility. From a narrow view, I am Asian, a brown person, a female and an immigrant; but, I realize the world is larger and so much more beautiful than the labels of nationality, religion or race that we are given. I am reminded each day about how kind most people are, be it a doctor who reached out of his way to help me connect to a PT who selflessly guided me on my process to become a PT, my colleague who invited my family over for dinner knowing we knew no American families here, a friend who took me and my boyfriend on a sailing trip because he wanted us to experience his part of the world, or my patient who is now like my family and goes out of her way on every little occasion to invite me for a concert, a local women's group meeting or a movie.

I am always grateful for the opportunities of growth and learning my life has provided me. I have received so much more than I will ever be able to give back. But I hope to contribute to the world in little ways that I can, especially through my work as a PT. I also hope to go back to Nepal one day, wander the streets of Kathmandu and tell the stories of love, kindness and opportunity that exist in all corners of the world.

Mahima Tiwari was born and grew up in Nepal. She spent some of her life in India where she completed her education. She migrated to America in 2016. Mahima is a currently a physical therapist at Novacare Rehabilitation, Maryland. She loves hiking and exploring different food.

Madlyna Bouchotte
(Haiti to US)

The "Mother," the Director of our boarding school, called me. *Was I in trouble? Did I do anything wrong in the last couple days? Did I do all my chores last night and this morning? I don't think I was rude or unkind to anyone at least not since last night,* I thought. "I'm coming, Mother," I said walking slowly into the family room. My best friend, Marise, saw me and asked if I were in trouble and I told her that I wasn't sure, but I was a little nervous. She said, "You never get in trouble so even if you did something wrong, I'm sure she will give you a chance." *I hope so*, I thought. I took a deep breath and walked while Marise stayed by the door. We knew the rules, if Mother called one of us by name, she expected that person to come to her alone. Mother was standing next to the large table. There was a big package on it. Mother nodded.

My heart started pounding. "Another package from America?" I sadly moaned under my breath. *Maybe it wasn't from America. Maybe it wasn't from my parents*, I hoped. *Maybe it wasn't even for me. Maybe Mother made a mistake and it was for one of the other girls*. I moved close enough to read the label that had my name on it. I sighed in disappointment. Another care package from my parents in America. This was not good, not good at all. I tried to put a smile on my face, but I just really wanted to leave the package on table unopened and run to my bed and cry and cry. Marise and the other girls standing by the door peeking in, looked at Mother for permission to enter the room. She nodded, and they came in with big smiles on their faces.

Even though I tried to smile, I guess I didn't hide that I was sad. The Mother couldn't understand my reaction. Marise just stared at me. I tried to fake excitement. Any of the girls in the boarding school would have been thrilled to get a package from anyone, from anywhere, never mind that it came from America. Every other time I had been more than excited to receive a care package as well. This day was a different. The overwhelming feeling of sadness was what I felt.

The Mother looked at me confused. With her eyes bright and a smile on her face, she told me to open it. By now many of the girls had gathered with excitement to see what was going on. They especially liked when I got a package because my mom always put in something for each of the them as well. Sometimes, it was special pink pencils, pretty hair barrettes or hair ribbons, sometimes it was cool socks, and last time all the girls got a cute bracelet.

I took a deep breath trying hard to hold back the tears. I couldn't let them see how disappointed I was. They would not understand. They would think something was wrong with me. I bit my lips and started pulling off the tape. I opened the box and all the girls gathered around, some standing on chairs to get a better look.

I pulled out the black bag and put it on the table. The special treats for the girls were always in a black bag and everything else in the box was for me. Marise had been my best friend since the time I came to live in the boarding school and the one whose "job" it was to pass the treats out. The girls were so happy that I was happy for them. I loved it when everyone was happy.

But for myself, I now felt not only sad but hopeless. To me this meant that I wasn't going to leave Haiti to go to America anytime soon. My mom would not be sending me a package right now if she were coming to pick me up. Last time she visited me here, she promised that very soon I would be coming to America. She wouldn't have to send me packages anymore because I would be with her all the time. Every day I woke up wondering if that would be the day. The week before, I had realized *oh my gosh! she didn't send me a package*. That was great news! It meant that she was coming to get me. Each time I saw an airplane flying I wondered. But now, I knew she wasn't coming, and I was going to stay in Haiti, in this boarding school for the rest of my life. No one understood. I couldn't talk about it because everyone was so happy to get a treat. But this box told me that I would be in Haiti maybe even forever.

That was a life changing event for me. When I finally spoke to my mom, I told her how sad I was that I was never going to America to be with her and my dad. I don't remember exactly what she said but I know it made me feel better. Every night, I told my friends goodbye and that if they didn't see me the next day it meant I would be on the airplane heading to America. I told them I would miss them, but I'd write to them all the time. I was excited to see a plane flying because I knew that plane might be the one. It seemed like a very long time, but I kept remembering that my mom always kept her promises.

Finally, the day arrived, and I had no idea it was the day that I had been waiting so long for. As usual, the Mother prayed with us before we went to bed; but for some reason, I didn't tell my friends goodbye and that if they didn't see me in the morning it meant that I had gone to America. This is something I still think about now, over 30 years later. I wonder why, of all the nights, that night I didn't say goodbye. Maybe it was meant to be this way? I remember that night well, because I went to bed thinking *oh no, I forgot to say goodbye to my friends in case my mom comes to pick me up for America*. But then I laughed to myself and thought, *I'll just make sure I tell them tomorrow night*.

It was very early in the morning when the Mother came quietly into the room. She tapped me until I opened my eyes to look at her. She told me to get up but be very quiet, so as not to wake up anyone. I followed her out of the room and got dressed very quickly. She gave me a small suitcase to put some of my things in. We walked out and there was the Pastor, who I had never seen before. The Mother told me he was taking me to America to be with my parents. I could not believe it! The day finally came! The nice Pastor asked me what I wanted before we went on the plane. I really wanted a sugar cane which he bought for me. I remember this sugar cane tasted so much better than all the others I had ever had. When we got to America, I was so happy to be with my mom and dad. I got to meet all my cousins and aunts and uncles. Everyone was so happy to meet me too. It was the best day of my life! I do remember one concern. I had a homework assignment due the next day and I worried that I would get in trouble because I didn't

leave my homework in Haiti for my teacher. My mom promised me that I wouldn't get in trouble; and now, it was truly a good day.

Madlyna Bouchotte is a family support worker at a nonprofit agency. Most of her work through the years has been helping families by finding resources for special needs students to help them succeed; searching for jobs; giving information about accessing ESL classes and other community resources. She works with families from all different cultures and walks of life. She loves learning about the life experience of others. What she enjoys most about her work is helping others 1in a way that can make a positive impact in their life. When she is not working, she enjoys reading and baking with her family.

Gaudence K. Ndikumana
Burundi, East Africa

COMING TO AMERICA/BECOMING AN AMERICAN CITIZEN

My hair dresser was creative with a brand-new style and everybody was saying 'Chic', 'Beautiful', 'Wow'!! I was applauded as I was rounding up my preparations for traveling again to United States. It was not the first time. I had traveled there a few years before on a work mission. This time, I was telling everybody, including my father, that I would be back in three years after graduating from social work school at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

At the airport in Bujumbura, many people came to see me taking off with my two children, who were four and five years old at the time. My father told me that he had never seen so many people coming to say goodbye. He had a feeling that he would not see me again and he wanted to bless me more. I reminded him that I would be back in three years because with my scholarship I had to return when school was done. He couldn't believe me. He hugged me many times. The emotions were overwhelming from everyone. I had never felt as emotional myself.

I was tired yet unable to fall asleep during my flights. My kids kept me occupied. I was watching them constantly and responding to their multiple, endless questions. Their father was studying at Washington University as well. We were traveling to join him. I was studying social work while he was finishing his doctorate in economics.

We landed in New York. I did not speak English well at the time. I lost my luggage while we were trying to catch our connecting flight to Missouri where my husband was. We missed that flight because I couldn't communicate my needs to anyone.

It took about two hours more to find flight attendants that spoke French. Apparently, the flight had waited over an hour but couldn't find me. I missed the call over the loud speaker. They arranged for another flight on the following day. Meanwhile, my husband spent the night calling all airlines asking about his wife and his kids. I eventually connected with him shortly after 2 am.

My husband was exhausted, but he was there to greet us with his host parents in the United States, who gave us the dishes, beds and other items we used in our first home. The kids were asking many questions and, at the same time, they didn't trust their father yet. They would seek my approval before they spoke to him or before touching him. He wanted to pick them up but they would not let him. He had been away from them for three years.

In the following days, I learned to take the trash out, take the bus, get to a store and to a church. I saw my husband cooking for the first time. We had helpers back in Burundi. We had a nanny for the children, and a cook. I missed them during my first two years in the United States. I called them many times forgetting that the system works differently here. My husband was very patient and lectured us about trying and about the risks of major depression. He also selected the food I should look for and the food I should not eat. Pizza, hot dog, hamburgers were never served or bought from the store, only freshly cooked food. During my third month here, I took a road test but didn't pass because the officer told me to go left and I went right. He thought I wasn't listening, but it was a problem with my English. I passed one month later. I was quite frustrated because I was driving long before I came to the United States.

Going to school was fun. I did one year in the ESL program before I started my Master's in Social Work. I made friends, life was becoming more interesting. I experienced my first winter which was very cold. I complained the whole time. It was a big deal to wear pants. I never knew that pants were for women as well. I had only seen women who do sports wearing pants. I had no other options. My clothing became useless despite them being labeled as fancy and colorful. They are for the warm weather. I had to learn how to separate clothes for the winter and the clothes for the summer time.

There were growing pains for us. Three months after I arrived in United States, a war started in Burundi following the killing of the first elected president. We lost many family members, we lost our house, we lost all our belongings. My family there had to live a different life. They had to leave their home and were relocated in the valley, fleeing factional groups fighting with government troops. We were told that everybody seen as being in the way was killed, people of all ages and genders. It took a while for those who survived to get back to their homes. It became a lifestyle of living some days of the week at home and other days in the valley. Many people fled to neighboring countries. Those who were already outside the country like us were advised not to return. We had no plans to stay. We needed an attorney to present our case. At the asylum interview, I told them that almost all of my immediate family members and extended family had died, not of illness but rather from being killed. The interviewer stopped asking me questions and asked me how I was able to cope with such events. There was a long moment of

silence. My husband and I had mixed feelings about staying here. We never thought that we would be staying longer, probably never to return to live in Burundi. We waited and waited for the war to finish, but it was not being declared as over.

Communication was a problem and extremely expensive. There were no cell phones yet. I tried to reach anybody who could tell me something about my parents, and the family. My father tried to reach me the night I decided not to take calls that came in at 2 or 3 am because of the seven-hour time difference. This was his last call to me. I never had a chance to reach him again. He died when everybody else ran away from the fighting and he had remained at home but was found dead when others came back.

The war situation continued in Burundi. We were told again that there was nowhere to go. Our house in Burundi was destroyed, and all belongings taken. We continued the process of becoming residents without problems. But, we had to give up our Burundian citizenship in order to become American citizens, which was not easy to do. We continued to carry our Burundian values while balancing with American values. The kids wrote their essays for college about spending their days with America (school, sports, etc.) but spending the nights in a Burundi home. My husband and I continue to preserve that balance between cultures, but it looks like that the children are not able to keep it any longer.

Gaudence Ndikumana has been a Department of Children and Families social worker since 2016. She has worked with teen parents, was the supervisor of Healthy Families Program, was a family assessment and outreach clinician at Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Family Counseling Center. She holds a Master of Social Work from Washington University and a Master of Health Economics from the University of Cape Town. She earned her bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Burundi. She is currently living with her husband and three grown children and works actively in her community where she has adopted some refugee families.

Nadia Chaney

(first generation *parents from* India *to* Canada)

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'.
There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."
— Arundhati Roy

I used to hate to introduce myself, because I wasn't sure how to pronounce my name. Everyone around me said it differently, including my parents and grandparents. I always felt tongue tied at that moment of introduction. Nadia. Nah-dia. Nawd-ya. Nah-Dee-Ah. Nau-dia. Nae-dia. Na-ja. It felt heavy and slippery in my mouth. Now, in my late thirties, that feeling has disappeared, and I have a job that keeps me travelling and teaching, introducing myself with confidence and ease. Tonight, I find myself retracing my steps, wondering when and how that change happened.

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My mother made matching clothes for me, my brother and our dollies, and invited us all to the backyard for lunch. She made a gingerbread carnival complete with a roller coaster with little dough mice in walnut half shells to ride it, and facilitated cupcake decorating contests, and hosted dress-up Christmas parties where each family had to come as a fairy tale, or showed us how to make little animals out of the plaster drippings from my father's dental practice. It never stopped, a cascade of creativity and play. I looked way, waaaay up to her. She loved all our little friends on Frobisher Court, in Saskatoon, too. They were often invited with their Teddy Bears for tea. She arranged yearly block parties with big barrels of Macdonald's juice and marshmallow roasts and tricycle races.

When I look back it is as if she was treating us like two tiny dignitaries from another planet. She always listened with interest and accepted our opinions as equal and valid. I understand that she was raised this way by her own parents in India, Edwin and Victoria D'Souza, to have opinions and to be celebrated for her gifts, though I think maybe mom took this a few steps further. Even the imaginary friend we shared was treated with respect (they were two, actually, Good Alec and Bad Alec). They were real to us, so mom treated them as if they were real, as well. When we would blame Bad Alec for some mischief she would consider the evidence and discuss our punishments (usually sitting in a corner, for a bad offence you faced the wall, not so bad you could sit and draw or read) with the Alecs in the picture. This ability to bring the world to life with play and wonder would eventually become a part of my life's direction, training teachers, social workers and activists to invite creativity and the arts into their work.

We grew up in a world of imagination. We sat on our knees at symphonies and craned our necks in museums, we traveled and marveled and there were always books and music in our house. But we were not taught any Indian languages. When I ask mom now, why didn't you teach us Hindi she says, "there was no real need." I get that, I guess. I mean, it's not a dying language. It's spoken by nearly five percent of people on the planet. My parents were neophiles, moving forward instead of looking back.

Grandma Vicky and Grandpa Edwin never came to visit us, though we went to Goa to see them. My father's mother, Rhubab Chaney, Ruby Maji, would come from Pune every few years and stay for a few months. She was often taken aback by the freedom we had, especially in terms of being allowed to argue with our parents, to state our points of view, and to ask challenging questions. She usually calls me *rani,* a not unusual nickname which means *queen*, whereas my parents call me Nanji, a diminutive plus an honorific. To me, these nicknames point to a valuing of my personal power, a way that my elders respected my personhood.

A few years ago, I was working in Bangalore and a friend used the word *cow-like* to describe a woman in a positive way. When I was surprised, he explained that the traditional Indian woman's role was to be like the sacred cow, obedient, docile, nurturing and generous. Perhaps this is why Ruby Maji and I used to struggle with our relationship. Not only did we not share a fluent language (she spoke very little English, and I spoke no Hindi or Marathi) we didn't share a common destination. When it came to the woman, I was becoming it wasn't easy for her to approve.

Thing is, she started it. When my parents fell in love and wanted to get married all their parents blessed their union, although my father's side is Muslim, and my mother's is Catholic. They only asked that they leave India to marry, since it would be much harder to raise mixed-identity kids in India.

We grew up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan of the 80's, a small prairie city with a university and a healthy river. This was an era of assimilation, and Saskatoon in particular was not yet very diverse. Many of the early settlers were Ukrainian or otherwise Eastern European, and though it was the traditional territory of seven Indigenous nations, as well as an incentivized area for immigrants of all colours, you just didn't see that many black or brown families. In school, I was one of only two children of colour. In school, I was not the little *rani* I was at home. In school, the other kids knew something about me that I had not yet realized.
"Your skin is dirty," they said, "you need to wash it. You smell." In the first grade, I would try to stay inside at recess, but I'd usually get booted out in the snow, waddling in my pink snowsuit and swaddled in wool scarf, hat, and mitts. I would skulk around near the big garbage bins or hide under the three old pine trees that watched over the playground. Wherever I could be alone. I would build little snow caves and crawl inside to inhale the freshness of clean snow, or crouch between the garbage bin and the wall, using my warm breath to draw circles and stick people in the thin ice. I had a couple of friends who my mom might invite over to play, or whose home I would visit and poke at their strange bland-but-salty food, but I mostly avoided those kids if they were in a group. I wasn't happier alone, I just didn't really understand the rules of the world I was in.
***
One sunny, freezing afternoon at school recess-time there was a group of girls pulling each other on a 'magic carpet', a square of hard blue plastic with holes cut for handles. They'd tied a skipping rope through the holes and were running on the ice, squealing and sliding. All my hiding spots were overrun, so I was pressed against a cold brick wall, trying to kick over a raised lump of ice, waiting for the bell to ring. A volunteer mother saw me watching. "You want a turn, dear," she asked me. Her breath was steaming, and her cheeks were bright red with splotches of waxy white. The parent volunteer's job was to walk around the playground at recess, so the teachers could rest. Each parent volunteer had a couple kids who were always with them. This woman's two were standing on either side of her, looking at me from over their brightly coloured scarves.
"No," I whispered.
"What? No? Of course, you do." She pulled me by the arm and I slid along the ice, leaning back, trying to escape. Her two minions grabbed my arms to help her. She yelled at the girls to stop playing. When they finally gathered around her they were panting and laughing. "What's your name," she asked me.
"Nadia," I whispered feeling a little shaky like I might throw up.
"You need to let her play with you," she told the girls. "Give her a ride." They immediately started shouting "not it!" almost as one voice, and one girl was last. She looked as if she had lost something precious. Her mouth hung open for a second as if she couldn't believe it. Her friends mocked her until the volunteer mom said, "Hurry it up." I was incredibly embarrassed. At that age embarrassment used to freeze me, my whole body, so I couldn't move at all. One of the minions pushed me a little. "Go ahead," said the mother. "It's fun." My mind was racing with ways to get out of this, but I was utterly stuck. The mother pushed me by the shoulders towards the carpet, and then pushed me down onto the carpet, onto my knees.
"Hold this," said the girl who had to pull me as she threw me one end of the skipping rope. I think I saw the puller nod to the oldest girl, who had been held back the year before. She started to run. I fell back but managed to hold on. The rest of them were running behind and beside me, so I was in a little bubble of boots and snow pants making a stomping, rushing sound. We were

bumping over the icy playground. Actually, I was having fun! Then they turned a corner, and pushed the carpet into a doorway, where the gym's double doors were. I could hear the basketball practice inside, as if it were underwater.
"You're a teacher's pet," one of them said.
"No, she's not," said another. "They all hate you. Mademoiselle LeBlanc hates you because you're dirty and you smell."
"You should go back where you came from." That's the last thing I heard. They began to kick me with their winter boots. They kicked my legs open, kicked my vagina, over and over and over. The bell rang. They pulled the magic carpet out from under me and ran to the foyer door, lined up two by two. I tried to move, but my body wouldn't listen. I curled up on my side. My heart was pounding, my insides throbbing. When I finally got to my knees my hips and groin screamed in pain. As I made my way to the foyer door, I slipped and fell. This time I almost started to cry but I picked myself up and pulled open the heavy door.
"What is the matter with you," Mademoiselle snapped when I walked into the classroom. "Why are you late? Why don't you know how to behave?" I didn't answer but hung up my clothes and slunk into my chair. My body ached. I needed to pee, but I could not move my arm to ask for permission. I felt the pee burning harshly and wetting my underwear. Then, Mademoiselle called on me. To write on the board. I did not move. "What is the matter with you today," she said. She walked over to my desk and tried to pull me, her long nails digging into my forearm. I could not move, but to my horror I began to cry. I watched myself crying as if I was standing beside the desk on the other side of the teacher. A little girl with her head down, trying to will herself to disappear. When I remember the event, I see it like that even now.
She softened and asked me what was wrong, and I managed to say, "I want to go home."
"Why?" she asked me. The other kids were watching. I heard the clock ticking. I could see Mademoiselle chewing her red lips. She was still holding my arm. I said nothing, and finally she kind of pushed my arm back onto the desk and went back to the front. "*Bien*, Michelle," she said. "You can take Nadia's turn."
***
I never told anyone about that day, or the torture that continued in various forms for many years. Instead, I developed a practice that happens with some second-generation children. I learned to shape-shift. I learned to shift my view of the world quickly and completely between my home and school environments. It wasn't just a lie of omission. The world and all its rules changed dramatically. In school I was a watcher. I was wily. As I grew, I became competitive, but quietly so. I hated people. I would try to kill them with my eyes. I worked to become better versions of the people around me, imitating their accents, their gestures. I was jealous of everyone. I was subservient, always hoping to gain favour from teachers, my classmates, older kids, always feeling it slip away. I hid my emotions. I pretended it was all fine with me. At home I was a little queen; stubborn and argumentative, or bright and all-knowing. I wept easily. I was creative and confident. I was one of the eldest of the children of my parents' friends, and I bossed everyone around.
In Saskatchewan, so far North, it was often dark when I rode the school bus, both to and fro. This was my transition time. I was always quiet on these rides. Sometimes they were a time for games of keep-away or what-does-she-smell-like, but for the most part they were my time to release one world for another. I never answered honestly when my mother asked me, "How was school today, Petunia?" I felt my parents would not understand and I was very embarrassed by

what was happening to me. I didn't want them to know how hard the real world was. In my seven-year old mind they needed to be protected.

This kind of shape-shifting is a practice of forgetting and erasure of the self. It's brilliant as a coping mechanism: instead of a self (who can get hurt) one becomes a kind of mirror, an object. Instead of having a sense of my own needs and desires, I submitted everything to the environments I moved in. I distanced my emotions from my experience of the world and existed only in response to stimulation. This allowed me to experience two completely different environments without having to explain one to the other. I became the wall between my worlds.

By the time I was in my late teens the freezing and speechlessness were buried but still alive and creating a seething knot inside my guts. I became excellent at understanding what was being asked of me and providing it; at school I was very successful. At home, I was boiling with a resentment that I could not name. I started to take it out on my parents, especially my mother. I didn't know why, but I hated being at home. At school I had a few friends, but I was still mostly alone. Now, when I look back, I see the root of that resentment. I did not have the skills to direct my anger to its source, in fact, the source was long gone. In our teens we didn't have the same play time at home, of course, but we were still very much encouraged to be creative. For example, we were never to buy our parents gifts. We had to write them poems. While our home existence was not quite idyllic, it was still very safe, predictable and disciplined. I felt none of the intense vulnerability and fear I felt at school. So, home became the place to release the anger.

I believed for a long time that a mother-tongue would have given me a sense of what was meant when I was told to "go back to where I came from." I blamed my parents for not teaching me who I was. When I look back now I see that I am certainly a product of the little home they built for us; they taught us values and culture and language in a million ways. But I wonder about the aspect of a traditional culture, and in particular a language. I longed for it, and I still do. A mother-tongue. Something that would help me understand myself and connect me to my ancestors. That would connect me to the skin and body that was costing so much and giving back so little. I wanted something my white friends didn't have, instead of always feeling like they were the arbiters of belonging.

While we didn't have an Indian language, and we didn't have Indian roles, there were still potent aspects of Indian culture. This is the confusing but beautiful thing, the reason I'm writing this essay in the first place. Although I speak no Indian language, don't know how to wear a sari, don't know how to make a round chappati, etcetera, I have deep values and a being that is somehow still Indian. My body is made of two parts that aren't familiar to each other: my ancestors' bodies and the elemental earth where I have lived and breathed. What are the implications of this kind of dislocation?

My body didn't fully belong to the place I lived, and those little girls and boys in elementary school knew it, even though I didn't. And yet I do belong. My body grew here, in Canada, knowing its earth, breathing its air, struggling with its complex history and my place in it. In India or in Canada, at school or at home, I felt like an alien. The shape-shifter was operating from outside my body. I was a good girl, with good grades, and a sharp tongue. But inside I was a bleating, self-castigating mass. I wept at night, wishing to be different, to be someone else.

In the second grade, when they asked me what I wanted to be, I said, "author." My escape was novels, where the rules of the world stayed still. Narnia, Nancy Drew, Sweet Valley High, Lucy Maude Montgomery, Madelaine L'Engle. Stolen novels from my parent's high-up shelves, too, where I read things I didn't understand. Because of my shape-shifting I would make sense of

them, and be moved and horrified and gripped, but in rereading them now I realize I understood very little. I wonder also if this was happening as I moved across cultural boundaries in my small world. I made the sense I could, but it was neither mature nor consistent.

I wrote my first story when I was five or six. It was called "The Princess Who Wanted To Be A Librarian." The princess was the shifter. She had to please everyone. The stakes were high. If you (disobey, don't study, chew your nails, leave your towel on the floor, don't practice the piano, etcetera) no one will ever marry you, my father would say. In a way, this wound was as deep as the winter boots to the private parts. Perhaps they were oddly twinned. I had no context for what my father was saying, no way to understand his version of a cow-like, obedient femininity. My mother was not like that. I had no context for his threat, which he meant quite mildly: if you don't conform to your role as a woman you will not be able to access the institution of marriage. But, in the absence of an understanding of that role or those expectations, I took it personally. I did these things, so, shadowy demons whispered in my mind: You will always be alone. Hideous. You are rotting inside. I was adrift without a world in which I clearly belonged, where I could know myself. I did not yet know that I was also free.

At eighteen I moved far away from my parents' home, to the other side of this wide country, to Vancouver. I wanted to study English, I really wanted it, though I couldn't fully explain why. My father wanted me to study science and warned me that I would be wasting my life if I didn't. Instead of freezing, something shifted inside me and I fled.

In Vancouver I wrote spoken word poems and my knees knocked as I staked out my identity on little café stages, patiently stalking it like a deer hunter. I was "letting myself go," as my father put it on a trip home to see them. But really, it was more like letting myself out. I was unravelling. I was awkward and unruly and got myself into dangerous situations like being kidnapped by a biker I met at a party, and inappropriate situations, like spending a summer selling cookies at a nude beach, and I reveled in it all. Bit by bit I was finding my own feelings, my sense of what I wanted, regaining my instincts. Learning to be oneself is the journey I believe all humans have to take, but in those first few years on my own I was making up for some lost time; time I had spent erasing myself. I began to tell myself the story of myself, piling up journals and collages and paintings. I was filling in the blanks.

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…I got an opportunity to begin working in Bangalore. Every year for five years I went back and worked with peers and colleagues I related to, for a month or more at a time. I saw Ruby Maji on each trip. We built a relationship that went deeper than words, and a language of mixed up English, Hindi and sign language that was more than sufficient for us to talk about womanhood, religion, soul and art. While this did not resolve my mother-tongue issue, it allowed enough space for me to account for the gains of unleashing the body from its traditional language. As the intense shame began to recede I had to acknowledge a sense of freedom.

Maji said, "I never school, *beta*. You smart one."

My grandmothers all bore children, bore husbands. The roles they had open to them were staked out in the earth they were from, and indelibly marked on the tongues of everyone around them. My mother left that earth at twenty-one to expand her perspective and she bore me into that expansion, without tether, without expectation. It meant I had to find my own way to say my name. But it meant I was also free to choose it for myself.

I rewrote the poems. Draft after draft, like a miner I was looking for flashes of myself. I started to send them out into the world, little emissaries looking for bits of land where I could stake my skin tent. As they found their homes, I felt my self begin to settle; those vast inches between

body and spirit slowly shrinking. My heart clicking back into my chest. My tongue reaching all the way down, at last, into the deepest gut. Navigation and language, inspiration and instinct finally beginning to work as one.

NB: This is an abbreviated version of the article first published for a special edition of the Chicago Quarterly Review edited by Moazzam Sheikh

Chicago Quarterly Review, Ed. Moazzam Sheikh, "There's No Such Thing As the Voiceless" Spring 2017 (print journal)

Nadia Chaney is a freelance facilitator, trainer and interaction design consultant in arts empowerment and arts-based processes. She is currently serving as Director of Training at Partners for Youth Empowerment, an organization dedicated to providing transformative experiences for youth by providing capacity-building creative facilitation workshops for frontline social workers and community artists. Since 2002 Nadia has facilitated well over two thousand events, workshops and trainings in many countries around the world. As an artist she is a published poet and essayist, as well as a seasoned performer and a dedicated extreme manicurist. She specializes in creative-risk taking, anti-oppression, and emotional intelligence. For more please visit nadiachaney.com

"refraction" by Nadia Chaney (2017)

Catherine Leder

(from US to London ex-pat point of view)

Roots

Detroit, 1964. I was seventeen, in high school. Most of the other kids were Polish. Their parents worked in the automobile factories. Helen was Greek. Her family had a red checked tablecloth and a piano in the kitchen. So European! On holidays they circle-danced through the house. She had a hopeless crush on a football hero. Her mother disapproved violently, forbade phone

calls – he was Armenian. Another friend was Russian. He took me to his church and I heard the choir sing amazingly in his language. At school, there were a few Irish kids too. Only one other Jewish family. My brother and I were half Jewish; they were really Jewish. They didn't celebrate Christmas, but every year the parents gave the most fabulous Christmas night party – we few committed adolescent Bohemians (1) and friends of the daughters, escaping the aftertaste of our own family Christmases.

In America, nearly everyone was from somewhere else, but I only realised this later.

My mother grew up in Detroit. Her ancestors had arrived on "The Mayflower", which meant a long time ago, escaping religious persecution in England. We were proud that some of them had travelled in a covered wagon from Vermont to Michigan. My mother travelled backwards to New England, to get her MA in social work at Smith College. Then she moved to New York and married my father. They had lived a sophisticated and fascinating life, I thought. Now we were living a boring life in a new ranch style house in a new suburb, with tiny new Norway maples planted in the new lawn.

My parents had left, perhaps fled, New York in 1947, the year of my birth. My father could not get work there: he had been a Communist, on the front line editing a trade union newspaper while my mother worked more quietly for justice as a social worker.

He was born and grew up in Lower Manhattan. His father, my grandfather, worked as a clothes presser. The family spoke Yiddish. His mother, my grandmother, spoke very little English. When my father was old enough, she took him to a public library. "Here are books." He began his lifelong vocation – reading. When my father was twelve years old, he got his first job, delivering cigars to local speakeasyies (2). One evening his delivery took him farther north, to a street near Penn Station. There, for the first time, he saw men in business suits. They were boarding trains, going home to the genteel commuter towns. My father had an insight. From then on, he began learning American culture.

Thus, my parents, living a new life in Detroit. My mother's parents were nearby, they took my father to heart. My mother was an only child; we were a small, close-knit family. My father's mother had died before I was born. He and his father were estranged. My father seemed to have very little past. I knew I had cousins in New York and eventually I met them - my father's brother came to visit with his family. Perhaps because my Uncle Joe was twelve years younger than my father, they disagreed about most of the details.

Joe: Pop was from Poland.
Herman: No, from Austria.
Joe: From Warsaw. Miriam (my grandmother) from Romania.
Herman (insisting on something better for them): They both knew Vienna very well.

Joe knew "for a fact" that Pop had walked on foot from Warsaw to Glasgow, where he took ship for America. At the time I imagined my grandfather tramping along from village to friendly village, camping on the wayside in green forest glades.

I did not understand about pogroms and prejudice. Displacement, privation, demonization did not occur to me. I was one of the protected children.

Soon though, I found that oppression was close to home. As a teenager, news of the Freedom Riders taught me how black people were mistreated. At my Midwestern college I met other young radicals of the 1960's and woke up to American imperialism, the impact of the Viet Nam war; napalm, and friends lost to the draft, lost in the war. Later I lived in New Mexico among Chicano (3) communities surviving along the margins of well-heeled white culture. As I read the history of the genocide of Native Americans upon which my country was built, I began to feel an internal displacement for which I found no authentic outward expression.

I moved to Europe for my own personal reasons. In Berlin I was lucky. I joined a group of puppeteers and a wellspring of creativity opened in me. When my parents' gift, the need to be useful, resurfaced, London became the place for me to study and eventually become a psychotherapist. In 1970's London, like so very many other people from all over the world, I found refuge.

A pattern can only be seen after it is made. I could say, grandiosely but with some small truth, that I tried to commit an act of karmic expiation for the virtual genocide of the people of the entire North American continent. My small payment for those dreadful acts is to feel forever homesick for a settled Midwestern way of life that I know has dodgy roots. I will always miss the land, the beautiful woods, the lakes.

Or I could say I went *back* to Europe, which felt instantly more familiar than strange.

Notes:

1. Bohemians: an artist or writer, or anyone who sets social conventions aside
2. Speakeasy: during Prohibition (1930's, USA) an illicit bar selling alcohol
3. Chicano: an American of Mexican descent

Catherine Leder was born and raised in Michigan, USA. She earned a BA in Cultural Anthropology from Grinnell College, including a year of fieldwork in Costa Rica. In 1971 she went to Berlin where she built puppets, performed with Berliner Bilderteater and taught expressive movement. In 1976 she settled in London to study Humanistic psychotherapy, Reichian character analysis, bodywork, massage, and psychodynamic psychotherapy. Catherine is a UKCP registered psychotherapist in private practice since 1980. She works with individuals and groups and has taught courses on Therapeutic Massage, Embodying Female Archetypes, Bioenergetics and Character Structures, and Body-based Countertransference. Catherine has been a student of Taiji quan since 1975.

Irisz Lihua Zhuang

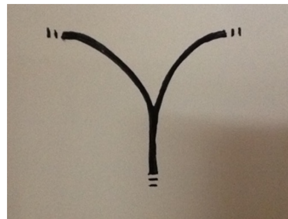
(China to the Netherlands to Hong Kong to Canada)

Geographical, psychological and cultural Distance

To have an intimate relationship was a mysterious and strange idea during my early life in mainland China. To stay safe was to keep a distance physically and psychologically! Is this a curse for Chinese people and their families in the last century?

Geographical distance from my father

My father is originally from Shenzhen, China. He said he had escaped to Hong Kong during the 1960's, when the Cultural Revolution started in China. Shenzhen is just next to Hong Kong. He only had to cross the border, as many other people also escaped there at that time. But soon, he went back to Shenzhen to marry my mother because he wanted someone to take care of his mother in a small village in Shenzhen. After they married, he went to the Netherlands for work, as many Chinese did at that time. My mother was then left in mainland China alone with my grandmother. Everything seemed so normal at that time. People looked for primitive safety, but they took risks at the same time.



A few years later, my father went back to Shenzhen. My parents decided to adopt a girl to accompany my mom (that is my sister). She was five years older than me. I was the first natural born child. I met my father for the first time when I was three. I have a little brother who is 3 year younger than me. My father said his responsibility for our family was sending us money for daily expenses. I still remember when I was about nine years old, my mom cursed my father often, saying that he dumped us in China and had another woman in the Netherlands. On the other hand, she forced me to write letters to him to keep a good relationship because we needed money for our living expenses. I had many quarrels with my mom about her hypocrisy.

Psychological distance to my mother

My mother seldom talked to me about her life when we were in China, but after we had moved to the Netherlands, she shared her story. When she was young, she was very proud that her father was an accountant. The family owned a small rice-field at that time. But during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, her father was oppressed terribly. Eventually, he committed suicide by hanging himself. Then she and her brothers and sister escaped the family crisis by going to the south. They begged along the way until a friend introduced my mother to my father in Shenzhen. Her resentment towards the Communist Party was very deep. There was also a kind of collective trauma in China. She complained to me frequently that many people bullied her because my father was not home, and if you had a family member abroad, it became another excuse to be ostracized in the community. She was lonely and cried overwhelmingly every time she talked about this. But I was not able to comfort her with sympathy when she cried because I saw that almost everybody had a similar story during that dark period. I was not able to connect to her stories from that period. I had to shut down my emotions, it was too overwhelming for me as well. Far later I realized, the unsafe environment and irritating family relationships caused my mother's vulnerable personality.

When there is no healthy connection to people, I seek a connection to nature, and protect myself by keeping a safe distance from harm. I'm grateful because I had lots of freedom to explore nature when I was young. This is a very important memory of my childhood and becomes a rich resource for me now.

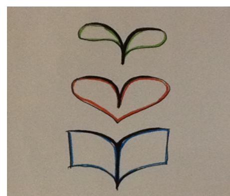
I used to dream of my childhood in my home town frequently – the natural environment, the houses, the roof and the small garden. But after my mother passed away in April 2018, it seems I haven't had that kind of dream anymore.

C*ultural distance connects by the thread of the arts between mainland China, the Netherlands, and Hong King*

I was born in 70's, in a small poor farming village in Shenzhen in South China - Huang Gang. I had a childhood which was filled with soil, plants, trees, flowers, a rice-field, a river, insects, a cow, a cat, a dog, mud, sand, fire, wind, hills, scenic surroundings, the texture, taste, smells and the weather of the seasons. Actually, everything from nature was my playmate. Nature nurtured me and protected me from a fragile and chaotic relationship with my family and a confined untrusted society.

By the end of the 1970's, the Cultural Revolution was over. From the 1980's on, Shenzhen began a huge change. Continuing urbanization and construction broke the village image. The rice field was gone, farming became factory and labor work, more and more roads and houses were built, and nature was disappearing gradually.

In the early 90's, after I had finished secondary school, I moved to the Netherlands with the whole family. I was happy to leave China, even though I didn't know what difficulties were to come. I still remember the first time I heard Dutch at Customs – it was very unfamiliar, even scary. My inner anxiety, uncertainty, and vulnerability were suppressed, just like when I was facing my family's overwhelming emotion.



As a common immigrant, my parents expected me to learn some Dutch and then work in a Chinese restaurant liked most of the Chinese did. Confronting language and communication difficulties, I struggled with culture shock and self identity. At that time, I met a Dutch couple, a musician and a dancer. When I told them I liked the arts, they decided to help me in speaking Dutch. They led me to encounter Dutch culture and open my view of the arts. They encouraged me to pursue my life's dream through the arts. Against my father's will, I started to study in the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. It was a new start to know myself.

I have niece who was born in Netherland during my second year of study in the Art Academy in the mid 90's. The family faced many painful experiences because she was born with a physical disability. I saw my sister crying many times, but we have never talked about feelings– sadness,

fear, pain, guilt– to each other. There was a kind of shame and taboo to talk about feelings in Chinese culture, even though we were far away from China. I pretended to be strong and helped handle the clinical issues and language translation. However, meanwhile I was experiencing a lonely, hard and dark period mentally. In my last year in the Arts Academy, my final project focused on "communication with children." I attempted to see the world through the eyes of a child, my niece, and looked for the possibilities of the future. The arts supported me through that hard time. I believe I got closer to human beings - suffering, without fear from the past.

The distance to the world is getting closer, when I confront my fear more bravely.

I loved the clear seasons and the freedom of arts in the Netherlands –the trees, the grass, the seasonal color, the temperature, a different kind of nature than in my childhood. It helped sustain my body and my spirits in more extreme situations, making me more capable of being with people and the world. It also became a hidden thread to my later life, study, career and experience with people with different challenges in Hong Kong, a new but also familiar culture to me.

Irisz Lihua Zhuang was born in mainland China where she finished secondary school, then immigrated to the Netherlands where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. She received a Master of Art and Design Culture from the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, and a Certificate of Advanced Studies (C.A.G.S.) from the European Graduate School Division of Arts, Health and Society where she is a doctoral candidate. She lived and worked in Hong Kong as a freelance arts facilitator for ADAHK (Arts for Disabled Association of Hong Kong), special schools, rehabilitation centers, facilitator for teacher trainer workshops for schools and organizations, and in her private studio applying Expressive Arts Therapy. She currently resides in Toronto where she pursues her life as an artist studying Expressive Arts as a helping tool for mental health and well-being.

Gazing (2021)

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio
Ecuador (about DACA)

The following article was originally published in the NY Times Opinion page Sept. 8, 2017 under the title "The Psychic Toll of Trump's DACA Decision" reprinted here with permission from the author

"I did not raise you to cry," my father would say when I fell off my bike, as he poured rubbing alcohol on my bloody 6-year-old knees. Not hydrogen peroxide — alcohol. Whenever I cried, which was usually when I did not get an A on a math test or saw a lost-dog poster or read about Anne Frank, my parents, immigrants from Ecuador, handed me a mirror to observe myself. They wanted to desensitize me to my own tears, to line my small heart with bulletproof glass, even if doing so meant making me hate my own weakness.

Undocumented life in America is hard on the mind and body. Poverty, precarious employment, poor access to health care, discrimination and trauma from the migration itself often lead to disorders like depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Access to mental health treatment is scant, the demands of simply surviving are overwhelming, the fear of being discovered discourages people from seeking care, and the stigma of mental illness has perpetuated a culture of silence that only worsens the suffering.

Enter the Trump administration. With its aggressive hunt for undocumented people like my family — capped off by the announcement on Tuesday that the president plans to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program for the so-called Dreamers — the administration has placed new emotional and mental burdens on an already deeply stressed community. Thanks to DACA, I was able to get a state ID, land my first paid office job and fly without fear for the first time in my life. My best friend from college is in DACA, as are the children of nearly everyone I have interviewed for the dissertation I am working on. We know all too well people like the two young brothers from Maryland without criminal records who were deported after one of them, a soccer star, told immigration officials he had won a scholarship to college. Or the children on their way to schoolwho filmed the detention of their parents on their phones while sobbing and screaming. Or the DACA recipient who hid in her closet as her father was arrested by armed ICE agents.

Some studies have found that the first wave of immigrants has a better mental health outlook than subsequent generations, which researchers say results from traditional family networks and values, as well as "lower expectations for success." But such conclusions betray a misunderstanding. As a graduate student, I have interviewed dozens of undocumented people, including first-wave adults. Most of them speak of symptoms that we might call anxiety, depression and PTSD, even if the subjects themselves do not use this language, and have less familiarity with diagnostics and less access to treatment than their American-citizen children. These studies are from a more innocent time.

All of the immigrants I have interviewed and known throughout my life seem to accept chronic exhaustion, low self-esteem, fear and panic, low moods and fits of crying as normal for the

melancholic migrant struggling to subsist without being arrested. Older immigrants are at the highest risk for mental health struggles, having aged out of manual labor, with grown children and dead parents, and being unable to receive health care.

My parents have lived in this country for 30 years, and they have seen their share of ghosts. I recently learned that my father hid his father's death from me for three years because he did not want it to affect my mental health. Unable to travel, he could not bury him. I made my way through Harvard and Yale as an undocumented student. But even safe in my Ivy League college town, I have nightmares — of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, of swastikas. When I travel the country meeting undocumented immigrants for my dissertation, I see my father's face in theirs and I know this astigmatism will always be with me. Anytime my parents take too long to text me back or when they call me at an unusual time, I panic. When I hear them say, "Just reminding you to wear sunscreen today!" I want to laugh in relief.

And then I worry that nothing but death will liberate me from the constant anxiety. We all live with the thought: *My life as I know it might end now. Or now. Or now.* The uncertainty is torture.

Here are some of the people I have met while researching my dissertation. Alejandro is a 49-year-old day laborer from Mexico who rents a room in Staten Island, to which he returns only at night to eat a dinner of oatmeal with milk and sugar, and then sleep. He has crossed the border four times to see his children but is too old for that now. Some of the trips were traumatizing. On one, a middle-aged man got so dehydrated that he could no longer swallow. "I can't stop thinking of his face, the look in his eyes," he says. Alejandro himself got so tired on that trip that he felt like giving up and surrendering to death, perhaps to be eaten by bobcats. But two young men lifted him up and pushed him by his shoulders up the slopes of a mountain. "They didn't want me to die, and I didn't want to let them down, so I lived," he recalled. "I can't stop thinking about them. When the news comes on, I worry I will see their faces."

A woman named Sandy described a stampede in Queens after a fake post about an ICE raid circulated on social media. Panicked crowds knocked her down and dozens of people trampled over her, stepping on her head and neck. Pressed against a wall, she could not breathe and had a panic attack. A Mexican neighbor came back to pull her to safety.

William is a 16-year-old Dominican martial arts star who loves math and science but also struggles with anxiety and depression. "After the election, I thought I was lower than everyone in society, that I had no voice or role or place here — an alien, like people say," he told me. He began to fear ICE was following him at all times and he had a nervous breakdown. "But then I got to a point where I didn't care because I knew I was going to commit suicide and nothing would bother me after death," he says. He was put on Zoloft and hospitalized for a week.

Claudia is a 60-year-old Colombian woman who is afraid to go to the doctor. She goes anyway because she's being treated for cancer, but winds up running out of the doctors' offices when the treatment is over, fearful that someone will turn her in. She tells me she doesn't watch the news and has installed surveillance cameras outside her apartment in case agents come to her door. "They don't want us in this country," she says. "We have to be careful."

Experts on immigrant mental health say they have already seen a spike in symptoms since President Trump's inauguration. Roberto Gonzalez, an assistant professor of education at Harvard who studies undocumented youth, says he has seen parents pull their children from school out of fear. "This kind of elevated fear and anxiety can have detrimental physical and mental health effects in the long term," he told me. "Many of the young people I've been studying have shown physical and emotional manifestations of stress: chronic headaches, toothaches, ulcers, sleep problems, trouble getting out of bed in the morning, eating issues." It will get only worse, he said, with Mr. Trump's DACA announcement.

Rosa Maria Bramble, a social worker who works with undocumented families, including former ground zero cleanup workers with PTSD, told me that news of stepped-up enforcement triggers symptoms in her clients. "I work with a number of people who fled their countries because of political violence or gender violence, and after they reached these shores their symptoms of PTSD began to mitigate," she says. "Now they feel just as vulnerable and persecuted and terrorized as they did prior to being here."

Spreading fear and anxiety, of course, is part of the administration's plan. Thomas Homan, the acting director of ICE, recently said: "If you're in this country illegally and you committed a crime by entering this country, you should be uncomfortable. You should look over your shoulder, and you need to be worried."

A common Spanish refrain is that dirty laundry is washed at home. But silence equals death. In lieu of comprehensive immigration reform, what can we do? Churches, community health centers and nonprofit organizations can provide referrals to bilingual therapists and conduct workshops on self-care, explaining depression and anxiety from a culturally sensitive perspective. Licensed therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists can offer care for reduced fees to low-income clients, and clinics can hire more bilingual practitioners. Teachers can check in with students from mixed-status families. All of this would be smart from a public health perspective. But it is also a moral imperative.

Every morning at 6:40, as he is going to work in construction, I text my father extravagant statements about my love for him. I do it again in the evening, urging him to rest, reminding him my dog has green eyes just like my grandfather, asking if he has ever been so adored, hoping that I can inoculate him and my mother against the evils of the current administration. We are a generation apart and have different ideas about what tactics can preserve the heart. Here is the child whom he taught not to cry, begging her father to accept her love as a substitute for everything else that is good and fair.

But love alone cannot cure what ails us, and neither can resilience or quiet strength.

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is one of the first undocumented students to graduate from Harvard University and is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Yale. She is the author of the memoir *The Undocumented Americans* published in 2020.

Yara Al Mazouni
Syria (refugee) to US

'Then one day a bomb exploded during my geometry class'
Fleeing Syria to pursue safety, education and a socially just world
Courtesy of The Hechinger Report 8/7/18 https://hechingerreport.org/student-voice-then-one-day-a-bomb-exploded-during-my-geometry-class/

MAFRAQ, Jordan — Syrian refugee children at a settlement near the Jordan-Syria border on April 26, 2018. Photo: © Mohammad Abu Ghosh/Xinhua via ZUMA Wire.

There are many things people don't know about life in my home country of Syria.

First, it was an incredibly beautiful, and incredibly normal, place in which to grow up. My friends and I were typical teenagers who looked forward to going out on Friday nights and the arrival of summer break.

It is also a country that, culturally, places a high value on education. We were all expected to perform well in school and attend and graduate from college. The need for and importance of education was so well understood, it seemed as much a basic right as good health or personal safety.

But one day, very quickly, all of those rights were shattered.

That Tuesday morning in 2011, our neighborhood was viciously bombed. My days as a typical teenager were over, as was the normalcy of the lives of my 20 million fellow Syrians.

It speaks to Syrians' prioritizing of education that my school continued to operate despite the growing safety challenges. Frequent power outages meant studying by candlelight, without internet access, often without heat or running water. I have vivid memories of riding the bus to school, looking out the windows and seeing only empty streets.

Then one day a bomb exploded during my geometry class, this time within a block of my school. The windows shattered, gunfire rang out, and we were hurried into an underground shelter. In Syria, students are not allowed to have cellphones in school, so it was many hours before we were able to notify our parents that we were safe. After that, my parents refused to send me back to school.

It was then that we had to make the hard decisions. Our right to safety was compromised, and along with it my right to, and hopes for, a formal education. With my mother temporarily in the

United States for a fellowship at Tulane University, we made an ambitious plan to join her in New Orleans, knowing it was a plan unlikely to come to fruition.

"This is the best, most reliable way to build a socially just world: through education, regardless of income level, immigration status or geographic origin."

Because the U.S. embassy in Syria had closed due to the unrest and out of concern for the staff's safety, we traveled to Jordan to apply for visas. We drove for hours and hours through war zones, crossing borders and checkpoints. The journey itself was perilous. At the embassy, we waited many more hours for our interviews and watched as most of the other applicants were rejected. It was a demoralizing wait.

Fortunately, our visa applications were approved. We were the lucky ones.

Once in New Orleans, I got back to the work of finishing my education. I was now among the 2.8 million first-generation immigrant children in the United States, and I was determined to be among the subset of them who graduate from college.

I was more than a little disappointed when my new school enrolled me as a junior, and in remedial classes, because of my limited English. Early on, my teachers called my parents in for a meeting and told them I had very high levels of capability in math and science and should be enrolled in Advanced Placement classes instead. The only thing holding me back was not knowing the language. I embraced this new challenge, taught myself English and made many new friends.

That same year, I had the good fortune to be accepted into College Track, an organization that works with first-generation students from low-income communities throughout their high school and college careers, to ensure they earn four-year degrees. A big focus is not just to prepare students academically and financially for college, but help them feel deserving of college and career success, of achieving the American Dream. College Track shares my belief, and my culture's belief, that education is a fundamental human right. After joining the program, I was able — for the first time since our move — to see my future differently, and to set my sights high.

It was also through College Track that I was introduced to the Dream Summer Fellowship, which teaches immigrant youth how to participate effectively in social justice work, including addressing immigrant rights, issues and responsibilities. Through this 10-week program, I had the opportunity to train at the AFL-CIO and work closely with undocumented construction workers. I began to recognize and understand the strong intersectionality between the U.S. labor movement and immigrant issues.

Like College Track, Dream Summer was an unforgettable experience that significantly affected my life. I know now that it is precisely *because* immigrants are newcomers to this country that we are the best advocates for marginalized populations. Our unique experiences give us a lens into what is possible when you truly connect with people whose first languages and cultural customs differ from your own. But becoming powerful advocates starts with completing our

educations. The Institute of International Education estimates that today there are nearly 100,000 university-qualified Syrians who are, unfortunately, unable to access higher education.

All of this is coming full circle now that my college diploma is almost in hand. I will apply to medical schools to fulfill my dream of becoming a physician, but I remain passionate about social justice work given all that I have seen in immigrant and refugee communities. I plan to combine these passions and specialize in health equity for marginalized populations, perhaps through Doctors Without Borders or Save the Children. However, with my current visa status, attending medical school in the United States may not be an option. As always, I remain optimistic and continue to pursue my dreams, despite the obstacles.

When I receive my bachelor's degree next spring, it will signify not the end of my education, but in many ways the beginning. It will mark the beginning of my knowledge being turned loose on the world to bring better health, more opportunities and improved livelihoods to people around the world. The investments others have made in me will, in turn, advance equity for many others. And this is the best, most reliable way to build a socially just world: through education, regardless of income level, immigration status or geographic origin.

This story about refugees, immigration and higher education was produced by The Hechinger Report***, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about higher education.***

Yara Al Mazouni was born in Damascus, Syria. In May 2014, she graduated high school as one of the top ten scholars with several awards and a full scholarship. She enrolled in Broward College where she became a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society while serving as a New Students Orientation Leader. In 2019, Yara graduated from Florida Atlantic University with a B.S. in Biology *summa cum laude*. With her goal of becoming a physician, Yara is a clinical volunteer working with underserved communities. She believes that with hard work, commitment, and passion she is equipped for her journey.

Yara writes: "I strongly believe that education is the strongest weapon in my journey in finding my ability to share my story and influencing others, which is a privilege to have. I certainly wouldn't have been as empowered if I didn't have a strong support system around me including the many students I relate to and connect with. I believe being vulnerable and open to share life difficulties, experiences, and weaknesses helped in molding the person I am today; making me realize how strong I am."

Lina Marquez

Colombia to US working as therapist with immigrant children from Venezuela, EL Salvador, Puerto Rico, Cuba

Mass migration has been a phenomenon through every generation and in every continent.

My migration process to the US in 2001 was a fun one. I came to get my MS in mental health and to get away from an abusive relationship. Here in South Florida, I felt right at home. It is very Latino culturally with so many Hispanics populating the three county regions: Maimi-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach. It is common to encounter Spanish speakers everywhere and even supermarkets have most of our typical food. South Florida is just "a step" to South America; the City of Miami is considered "The capital of South America." The US of America received me with stars and hearts: I was able to find safety, peace and love while I worked on advancing my career as a psychotherapist. Settling here opened my vision of the world and my experience as a human being. Since I came I have become an advocate for youth to travel, to see the world and be exposed to different geographical parts of this great planet, to learn languages, listen to different music and eat other types of foods. Traveling is education, growth.

Unfortunately, I find many Americans have a simplistic view of the world believing the US alone is the greatest place to be. In my practice, I encounter very few young people who have left Florida. Fear is the main obstacle for voluntary migration.

In my clinical practice, I do see numerous families with immigration struggles. One that is common is the fear of deportation, especially in children. When a child enters puberty and discovers the reality of their undocumented parents, that child develops many overwhelming fears of losing parents to deportation. Fears paralyze humans and in young children who are starting puberty and the identification process, their fears impede them from thriving socially and academically. Fears interfere with finding who they are in this world. Some kids feel powerless and angry, ultimately getting depressed and completely unmotivated.

In 2016, I remember an 11-year-old girl born in America. Both her mother and father were undocumented from Venezuela. She had a younger American brother too. She was reportedly performing very poorly academically; she had stopped all outings with her friends and was displaying aggressive verbalizations towards her parents. The child was seen as sad, unmotivated and very quiet. During the assessment process, she drew her family playing soccer on a field between two buildings on each side of the paper (fig. 1). She stated later on during treatment that she felt her "family was trapped." During the sessions, I worked with her using play, drawing, painting and sculpting. In every medium this child expressed her fears of losing her parents. The fact that the family was trapped but still together was the cognitive tool that helped this little girl accept and understand her situation. However, her parents are still undocumented immigrants; the risk of deportation is always on her mind.

Another 3-year-old client whose father was deported to El Salvador and taken from his home in the child's presence is another "casualty" of today's immigration system in the U.S. This particular child developed severe agoraphobia and the overwhelming fear of losing his mother. The child was displaying intense two-hour tantrums; he was unable to calm down and "never"

enjoyed playing. He reported having nightmares of “hombres malos que se llevan a mami” (bad men taking mom away). I am currently working with him with play and music and the tantrums have decreased; however, the child seems constantly aware that he may lose his mother to deportation at any time. At this young age, and without the ability to understand abstract concepts, this little boy feels mom’s fears and acts them out. For a therapist there is only so much that can be done.

In September of 2017, right after hurricane Maria and its devastation throughout Puerto Rico, I serviced at least four families struggling to adjust to South Florida while staying with relatives and friends, trying to settle and fit in the community. The arrival of children from Puerto Rico in school is buffered socially by the fact that the child most likely will find Spanish speaker peers. The children have help. All public schools in both counties have ESOL (English as a second language) classes and services for them. However, the sense of belonging, the language barrier and the family they leave behind brings much pain. In one family, the 10-year-old son became angry after he arrived. The boy expressed thanks for his parents, for his house with “beds and air-conditioning,” but he also stated frequently that he was “no Americano sino Boricua” not American but from Puerto Rico. The boy was confused about his identity. He wanted to fit in as American but could not let go of his Puerto Rican origin. Using dance and music with his family, especially Bad Bunny, who is an upcoming Puerto Rican rapper, the family helped this child to ease off the stress while working on keeping their roots alive. I always advised immigrant parents to maintain their cultural roots/identity and language for the sake of their children.

Another 7-year-old who arrived from Puerto Rico to Hollywood, FL struggled with his learning skills. He had learned how to read and write in Spanish and he had to relearn the reading and the writing again in English. The vowels and letters sound totally different, making the task frustrating. It also made the child regress in his emotional behavior. His parents negatively spoke about education in their homeland stating that Puerto Rican schools should teach English, voicing their own frustration with the language barrier. Again, using music and dance, I worked with this family adjusting to the US without letting go of their Island roots. Puerto Ricans are a great addition to the United States and the fact that they still keep their cultural traditions and language is key in their identity as an American social group. My 10 and 7-year-old friends are still learning to function in South Florida without letting go of their Caribbean roots and language. One of them expressed that now, “voy bailando mi Isla” (I go dancing my Island) when describing his adjustment process.

Moving around and changing places of residence is stressful always, regardless of the cause. It is more likely so for younger children, who need routines and structure to securely thrive. A long time ago, one 7-year-old who came from Cuba to live described to me his experience of coming to the US saying, “it’s like living in a different planet.” He drew himself as an alien (fig. 2).

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Lina M. Marquez is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in Florida since March 2007. She has over twenty years of experience working in non-profits, providing psychotherapy and assessing families, teenagers and children. She started her private practice at The Center for Psychological Counseling Services in 2010 and is currently certified as a Comprehensive Behavioral Health Assessor (CBHA) for the Dependency Court System. She is skilled using a variety of clinical interventions in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Solution Focused and Family Functional Therapy with an Experiential/Dynamic approach, in three languages: English, Spanish and French/Creole. Lina is a Colombian born immigrant who came to the U.S.A. to further her education and practice as a psychotherapist using a combination of movement, arts and crafts, to process therapeutic change. www.galerinastudio.com

Sokeo Ros

(Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand to California, Iowa, Rhode Island in US)

3 names

I was born in a Thailand refugee camp in the back of a truck. There was no hospital. They converted the trailer of an 18-wheeler into a medical center. I was a really sick child. The lack of medication didn't help either. In the refugee camp, I was given three names. Sokeo for a place filled with suffering, anguish and confusion. The place of birth called Sra Keo. Since I was a very sick child, they took me to a monk so I could get blessed. Vouthy was a name given to me by a monk, who cured sickness and named me for luck. Another monk named me Chouk for the presence of a flower face. The color of my skin resembled the color of a lotus flower. As I got better, a lonely stranger tried to buy me for a child of his own, but my mother wouldn't let me go. She lost 6 children. She was not going to lose another. Finally, they escaped to America, to California and then to Iowa.

Welcome to Hanover Street 1986

I came to the US as a refugee. In 1986, we moved to Rhode Island.
Welcome to Hanover Street.
There are boarded up houses—on one end of the street there was a plastic factory---you can smell melted plastic on the whole street.
Around the corner, chickens feed in a vacant lot.
At the other end--- A prostitute walks out of the local whore house.
Across the street, there was a liquor store. There were always People outside.
And this… this is My house, near the plastic factory. Gang members lived on the first floor.
They didn't bother us, they worked at a dye factory with my father and he drove them every day.
During the Summer days they hung out on the porch, it was difficult going in and out of the house.
They would just move over slightly and I would have to inch my way in to go upstairs.
When I came back down, I didn't want to be rude: "What are you king around here?'
There was a nice green lemonade truck. Going up and down my street. Ringing its bell. They sold lemonade, pretzels, hot dogs, chips, soda.... and drugs.

There were bullet holes in our house. Every now and then there would be a drive-by. My house is a target because we live in a gang household. They would shoot here, and they would shoot there, and they would shoot there.
We never got hit with a bullet.
There was this car and it drove right-into-the-porch and they set it on fire, and it blew up.
This one kid was walking down the street wearing a red shirt. I saw him get beat up.
I never wore red till I moved out of the neighborhood.
Welcome to Hanover Street.

Sokeo Ros was born in a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand, arriving in the United States at the age of three. He began performing in high school with the Carriage House Performers, a Providence-based hip-hop group. In 1998, Sokeo joined Everett Dance Theatre as a creator and

performer. He has taught master classes in universities while touring pieces including Everett's latest, called *Freedom Project*. He is also the director of the hip-hop based company, *Case Closed!*, which he founded in 2004 performing at venues across New England, including Brown University, Providence Performing Arts Center and the Yard. Sokeo received a RISCA grant for his latest piece, *From Refugee Camp to Project*, about being born in a Thailand refugee camp and coming to the United States to live in an impoverished neighborhood. In 2016, he was awarded Rhode Island Monthly's Best Documentary Theater for this solo show and was asked to perform/speak at TedxTalk Providence.

Luiza Mouzinho
(Brazil to US)

I was six years old when my father told me he was leaving Brazil to go to the United States. I understood little about where that was, why he was leaving, and how that would influence my life. The only thing I knew was that he would be absent from my life. This would not be a major adjustment, as he left for work before I woke up and would not return until late evening.

I spent most of the day in the care of my grandmother. She would wake me in the morning before school. She would make me chocolate milk, which I would dump down the drain when she wasn't looking. I didn't like how the chocolate powder and the milk never fully blended together. She would walk me to school, even when the streets became rivers during Rio's downpours. She would always have a meal ready for us at lunch time, our traditional mix of rice, beans, and meat. She would watch me ride my bike or play in the blow-up pool as she rocked back and forth on her hammock. In the evenings I'd keep her company as she unpinned laundry from the clothesline under the moonlight.

My parents woke at dawn to beat the crowds cramming onto the city buses. No matter when they left, they could never fully avoid the risk of assault, harassment, or mugging on their way into downtown Rio de Janeiro. Both of them carried that constant fear, especially my mother. Fear led my family and our neighbors to build concrete walls with spikes around our homes. The walls were meant to protect us from the dangers of the city, but the walls also sheltered me from a richer life.

I imagine that hopelessness also played a role in my father's decision to leave. I imagine he felt hopeless that our country could provide him a path out of the poverty he was born into. I imagine he felt hopeless about the prospect of our politicians suddenly caring about their citizens. I imagine shame also drove him out. As a man, he was expected to provide for his family. No matter how hard he worked, he could never make more than enough to get by. He was dependent on the support of my mother's parents. It was on their land that they had built our

small home, and they helped the family financially. They looked down on him for being poor and mulatto. For these reasons he left his country, his family, his mother tongue, and his home. He left because he refused to accept reality and dared to envision a different life for his family.

One year later, he asked us to join him in the new life he had cultivated for us on Martha's Vineyard. I was seven years old. Again, I had no idea where I would be going, why I was going there, and how much the course of my life would shift. We were traveling very light. My mother told us we were vacationing in Disney World. My brother and I were told we could select one object each to carry with us on the plane. I chose the teddy bear my grandmother had just given me for my seventh birthday. I waved goodbye out of the car window as she stood alone unpinning the laundry from the clothes line. She refused to go to the airport with us. I don't remember if she looked and waved back.

It was my mother's first time traveling by plane. She was in charge of getting herself, two small children, and our luggage on board a flight to a country where she could not speak the language. After rushing through lines and checkpoints, she stopped and told us we would have to leave our chosen objects. I would have to throw my bear away. My brother would have to throw away his balloon. I don't remember why, but I knew that despite our protests, the decision was final. We boarded the plane, and the bear and balloon remained in Rio.

The next thing I remember is my father. I barely recognized him but felt obligated to hug him. My brother refused and threw a tantrum in the middle of the airport. It was incredibly cold that day. There was snow on the ground, and we were not prepared for the weather. The following day I was enrolled in school and taught to say the word "bathroom" in English. My classmates circled around me speaking gibberish. I spent a long time trying to escape them. It wasn't until second grade that I learned English.

I am now twenty-nine years old and have begun to understand the sacrifice my parents made by leaving their home. I am so grateful that they took a risk to improve our lives and respect the courage with which they endured their journey.

Luiza Mouzinho was born in Brazil and now lives on Martha's Vineyard. Upon studying philosophy and peace and conflicts studies at the College of the Holy Cross, she volunteered in a school through City Year Boston. Eventually, working as a therapeutic mentor for children and families led her to pursue her degree in mental health counseling and theology and ministry. Presently, Luiza works as a therapist in community mental health and primarily serves Portuguese speakers.

Itoro Udofia
(Nigeria to US)

A Visitor in My Homelands: Too African for the U.S. and Too American for Nigeria

People often assume I was not born and raised in the United States. As a child of Nigerian immigrants bearing an indigenous name, and with features etched from another land, I have never felt like I fully belong here.

But I've also had difficulty fitting in with my Nigerian origins.

The cultural gatherings my family hosted when I was growing up made me anxious, although I looked forward to them. Would I fail the "authentic Nigerian" inspection of my elders? My voice lacks the musical timbre of most Ibibio-speaking peoples. It's clear when I pronounce my name. Would that one aunt with the smirk across her lips slyly ask me to repeat my name? And when I did, would she tell me I had mispronounced it, correct me, and then dismiss me like I had no right to my own life?

I was 2 years old the first time I visited Nigeria. Will my family and others living there judge me for my cultural limitations when I return?

After 29 years, I fly into the Abuja international airport as a guest author to speak to students about coming of age as a first-generation Nigerian woman in the U.S.

At the airport, a friendly agent looks at my passport, "Eh! Your name's Itoro. You're from the Akwa Ibom State. Are you going to Uyo for the festival?"

I feel a rush of gratitude for my name, because it has become an entry into learning more about my ancestry. "This is your home," she says, encouraging me to get my Nigerian passport. "Feel free to come back anytime."

My relatives are also tender and eagerly check in with me. I feel the rare joy of belonging with my wide nose, dark skin, and box braids respected as the norm.

There is much to celebrate.

Through the students, however, I learn there is also much to reconcile.

I'm asked questions like, "Why didn't your parents send you home more often?" "You didn't have money growing up, aren't Americans rich?" "Why don't you know your mother tongue?" "Racism is a real problem over there, huh?" "Will you start visiting home more often now?" "Do you even know your tribe?"

It's not just the students but the encounters with others that make me feel, ultimately, *You're like us but not really. You're more American than Nigerian.*

In some respect, they may be right. I'm the daughter of Nigerian immigrants, born in the American South and raised in the rural hills of New England. I do not fluently speak any of the local languages and can understand only a handful of Ibibo words. When I open my mouth to speak, I feel my own contradiction of sounding American while looking and sometimes feeling Nigerian.

Africa, for me, is not the experience of many Western tourists—safaris, wildlife, and a devastating savior complex. But also it is not a place where I am magically unscathed by the pillage and plundering that has taken place here for centuries. My relationship to my ancestral home is complicated yet precious.

I saw this trip as a sacred opportunity to do something different.

I connect some encounters abroad to similar experiences as a Black woman in the U.S. In one incident, while staying in a hostel catered to expatriates, I'm approached by a man. "I'd like a glass of water," he says as I stand at the front desk joking around with the receptionist. I let the gentleman know that I didn't work there, as I was not wearing the uniform that clearly identifies who can get you a cup of water. He walks away. "Looks like you're one of us now," the receptionist whispers.

What Black person has not survived the tired notion that dark skin means naturally suited to serve? But for the most part, if I keep quiet, I can "pass" for being a part of the dominant culture. If I play my cards right, I could feign understanding of social and cultural experiences that are not my own. But I wasn't there to lie to myself; traveling is a luxury many people don't have. I saw this trip as a sacred opportunity to do something different.

I use these moments to listen and observe, and to talk and relate when appropriate. Being the stereotypical Westerner who gets to ask questions, take pictures, and then present their ideas on what they've "discovered" as fact is unflattering. The magic for me is the unique opportunity to listen and fill in the gaps with what I learn.

Traveling back home gives me a sacred opportunity to glean from others respective diasporic experiences and hear their ideas on how we can remain connected.

Itoro Udofia wrote this article for YES! Magazine. Itoro is a writer, cultural worker, composer, and avid meditator living a creative life. She is working on her first novel entitled, *The Soil Below*, a story following four generations of Nigerian women grappling with generational trauma, migration, and change as they weave themselves into the American fabric. For more on Itoro, visit www.itoroudofia.com.
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Itoro Udofia with her students at the American International School of Abuja in Nigeria. Photo from Itoro Udofia.

Author's note written 8/22/19: My parents migrated to the U.S in the 1970s. They were part of a generation of African immigrants studying abroad to pursue higher education in Western universities. From that generation, some folks decided to stay in America while others went back. This contributed to a massive amount of brain drain which—to my knowledge—still impacts many African nations today. My parents had hoped to return home, however the economic climate in Nigeria was uncertain, and with a growing family they needed certainty, so they stayed in America. But their longing to return home was always there.

There is an assumption often made about immigrants of color. The assumption is that we leave our countries because of war, or some unfathomable brutality, which many times is true but not always the case. There is an even more dangerous assumption that labels every immigrant as being "star struck" with America; that insidious idea that assumes we are happy and eager to leave our countries at all costs because there's something fundamentally inferior about who we are and where we come from.

Our relationship to America is as complicated as the legacies that cause many of us to move in the first place. It's important for the diversity of our experiences to be known in the hopes of making our full and often chaotic humanity more complete. Discussions of immigration must push beyond binary conversations that says America is good, whereas everywhere else (primarily developing nations) is bad.

When my parents arrived here, there was no "free ride" or getting a chance to "cheat the system." They were introduced quite harshly to the reality of black working-class life in America. In many ways, once they landed on this soil, their journey had just begun.
More research and statistics are needed on this subject because of its importance to the complexity of immigration. This is an opportune time for us to learn from each other in our full breadth and depth.

Michael Ditchfield
(from England to U.S.)

There Were Four of Us

America didn't seem like the great hope, or freedom, or any other superlative, it was just the place we were going, the place my father's job had sent him. The year was 1965, and it was just before Christmas. I was 16, my sister 15. We traveled with our mother and our cat from London to Virginia. None of us had ever been on a plane before. My father had gone on ahead. He'd found us a temporary place to live on Lee Highway in Arlington. I had no idea about General Lee or the Civil War, but I did notice that one side of Lee Highway was all white people with modern brick buildings and concrete sidewalks, while the other side was poor and black. Shacks really. No sidewalks. I wanted to explore that other side, but that wouldn't happen right away. The other thing I noticed: even though it was 1965, the white kids in Virginia all looked more like it was 1956. Elvis was still King.

After Christmas, we moved to DC and I started at Woodrow Wilson High School. Those three weeks between arriving and school were excruciating. My sister and I tried to do "normal" teenage things like going to a club with live music. Only we got turned away. "Carded" they called it. In England we'd listened to lots of music, in pubs mostly, and never once got turned away.

It was a first lesson that America had a lot of rules. The Puritans arrived here early. Their influence lingers. Freedom means different things to different people.

After starting high school, we soon made friends. But, again, there were those rules. I'd never heard of a tardy slip. Didn't even know what the word meant. Everyone frantically going to lockers and hurrying down corridors before the bell rang. Programmed anxiety. But I couldn't figure out the combination lock, never did, and it wasn't as though they'd assigned a helper to guide me through the madness. Nope. It felt infantilizing. So, I didn't bother hurrying. Thus, the tardy slips. I soon learned I had a bad attitude. I lasted three months before one of those alternative schools beckoned. They were a link between the beat era and the hippies, who hadn't quite arrived yet, but were soon to be on the horizon. A savior to my sanity.

Then 55 years passed. The Vietnam War. The Gulf War. The Second Gulf War. Afghanistan. Not to mention the little wars, like Grenada. Remember that one? Probably not. A war undertaken by President Reagan to make the world safe for yachting. Grenada had an army of about 10 men. They lost.

Civil rights advanced, retreated, and advanced again. General Lee finally had his statue taken down in many places, but Lee Highway is still Lee Highway. Maybe it could be renamed Emancipation Highway. Wouldn't that be something? Gay rights happened. Stonewall was a big deal. So was Resurrection City if you lived in DC. Not that the poor have ever been resurrected. They remain underfoot. As objects of scorn. Until politicians need their vote.

On the family side, there was marriage — two for my sister, one for me — children, grandchildren, and moving to Martha's Vineyard. All four of us moved, just like moving across the Atlantic. Some say you're an islander if you have a grandparent buried in the graveyard. My children do. My sister's children too. My grandchildren even have great grandparents buried here. Four of us came, and I'm the only one left. It's the other end of the immigrant experience.

We all got our citizenship papers, but the story is more complicated than renouncing a former allegiance. My mother never quite bought the whole America thing. After my father died, she remarried another Englishman and disappeared for a decade, until he too died, and I brought her back. She lived out her final years not knowing which country she resided in. Which I think is informative.

When my time comes, I'm happy to just be here. We're always a part of where we came from, and it doesn't much matter if it's another country, another state, another religion, or another culture. It's an imprint and that imprint gives life its vibrancy, it's color. These days, when I hear the anti-immigrant rhetoric, it reminds me of getting off the plane at Dulles Airport in Virginia and feeling like I was caught in a time warp because the baggage handlers were still trying to look like Elvis. As though that were America. It never was. It never will be. It was just a small part of experience with an overinflated sense of itself.

America at its best embraces the whole. That's what I love. Should I dare call it a melting pot? Because it is. Time goes in one direction and the tide will always be for change. The new era will offer whole new generations of immigrants the possibility of dying here of old age and disease, just like the native born. And history will look back on our gravestones and wonder.

Michael Ditchfield is an accomplished writer of fiction, non-fiction, plays, haikus, essays, and short stories. He is a graduate of Goddard College, where he began writing fiction, and Simmons School of Social Work. A quarter-century of practicing social work taught him that life is fragile, life is dangerous, everyone is wounded. Yet, people do heroic and selfless things. He won the 2018 William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Contest for *Zen and the Art of Dementia,* an essay about caring for a loved one suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. His published work and cartoons have appeared in *Sun Magazine, In These Times, World Haiku Review, Voices: Journal of the American Association of Psychotherapists*, and *The Double Dealer*.

Pissamai Silarak

(Thailand to the U.S.)

The year was 1964. Americans were listening to the number one hit song, "I Want To Hold Your Hand," by the Beatles. The Vietnam War was in its ninth year, and the military dictator in Thailand, Thanom Kittikachorn, allowed the United States to bomb Vietcong sanctuaries and supply routes in Laos using Thai airbases. And in a remote village in Thailand, far removed from

world events, a young Thai woman at the age of 22, returned home, exhausted from working in the rice field all day. She wasn't feeling well, yet she knew how much the family depended on her. Not working was not an option. She laid down on the wooden floorboards, and her mother wiped the sweat from her forehead with an old rag. She fell asleep that night without eating.

The next morning the mother was suddenly awoken by screams from her daughter. Although they never counted days or months of pregnancy back then, the mother knew to seek help. She ran from the house and shortly after returned with the medicine women who knew the young girl was in labor and quickly prepared everything. The mother knelt beside her daughter while the medicine women repeated her chants until the baby girl entered this world. The medicine women held the baby in her hands while the young women's mother separated her daughter from her grandchild by cutting the umbilical cord with an oyster shell that she had found along the Mun River. The child was so small, and the grandmother knew the chances of survival were very slim. As the medicine woman was placing the baby on the young mother's stomach, immediately she noticed that the young mother was hemorrhaging. She hurriedly prepared an open platform to lay the mother on and built a fire underneath her to keep her warm so she wouldn't go into shock. She started chanting while messaging the young women's uterus. Off to the side, the grandmother held her grandchild, gently cleaning the soft, untouched skin, with her tears, as they rolled off her weather-beaten face, knowing that on this day, she might lose both of them.

And so, I was born March 7th, 1964, in that one-room hut built on stilts, in a small village in northeast Thailand, and this is my story. As I reflect on my life, there are so many memories that flash in and out. Within those memories there are some very good ones, and of course, there are some not so good ones; and unfortunately, some are painfully nightmarish.

I, like so many other immigrants, entered the United States wide-eyed and excited, full of the dreams that all of us carry as we cross her borders to the land of hope and opportunity. Then we encounter the reality of a daunting maze of bureaucracy as we hurriedly jump through the rabbit holes of the immigration system. Our opportunities dwindle as the rabbit holes disappear, and our dreams start fading as we lose hope. I have many stories to share that I am in the process of writing as a book. I do this in the hopes that many young men and women, not only in Thailand but also around the world, always have hope.

In 2014, my son, Nantawat, delivered an appreciation speech at commencement ceremonies for the Martha's Vineyard Public Charter School. He recalled his first day at the school: "It was the first time that I could go to school in jeans, and a T-shirt. I barely spoke to anyone my first year. I was not shy or anything, but I only knew about ten words in English. Coming from a different culture, I felt like my life had started over. Everything was brand new, including experiences. Coming from a poor part of Thailand, I now had cereal for breakfast every morning, and lasagna had become my favorite food.

Changing is not an easy thing to do, but we do it all the time. What we do every morning: changing clothes, changing paths. The future is unpredictable. I didn't know that I was coming here 10 years ago. Anything could happen so just be prepared… Confucius once said, 'A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.' I already took my first step, and that step is graduating from the charter school and I thank all of you who were involved with that."

In his speech, giving thanks to me and to my partner, Daniel, he quoted an excerpt from one of my immigration letters which follows:

"I cannot believe my son is here with me now. It's been six very hard and long years not seeing him grow up. My son is in school now and he loves being here. I can make a living here in United States and that makes me feel good. I do love this country very much. But sometimes when I look at my son sleeping, I wonder if it was worth it. Yes, he is here with me now, but what price did he pay. The long time he waited to be with his mom at an age when he needed me the most. Yes, I am happy to be here, and there are no words to describe how I feel to have my son here with me. I can only hope that someday he will forgive me for leaving him and understand that it was the most painful thing I could have ever done in the hope of giving him the opportunities that only this country can give to him."

Nantawat concluded: "Mom, I have no words to tell you how much I love you. And yes, I forgive you."

Pissamai Silarak (Mai) has worked in the US as a chef, an entrepreneur running a Thai restaurant, a teacher of Thai cooking classes at Adult and Community Education of Martha's Vineyard, a caregiver and caterer. On International Women's Day, Thailand honored her for sharing Thai culture in another country. As a guest speaker, she explained the importance of women's rights and having strong boundaries. Many young Thai women were in tears, asking where to go for help. Pissamai realized she had opened a door of hope with nobody behind it. Since then, along with Daniel, she has been committed to developing community education centers. Her son Nantawat Loathong's full speech can be found at https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2014/06/02/note-graduate-his-mom-thanks-sacrifice

Emil Draitser

(from Russia to US)

Why I Left Russia

It was not cool to be Jewish in the Soviet Union over my lifetime there. I've been trying to understand what being a Jew means for a long time, starting with my first day in school. Upon hearing my surname, my classmates attacked me, calling me a "kike." It puzzled me. Was it enough to have a surname which, to the Russian ear, sounded Jewish, to be a Jew? There has to be something more substantial than that!

Yes, in our family, my father, mother, and my grandmother sometimes exchanged phrases in Yiddish. Yes, a few times a year, our family celebrated holidays with strange names. They called one of them Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It didn't take place on the first day of January, but in September and, to make it more confusing, on a different date each year.

There was a Jewish holiday for children; its name also strange—Hanukkah. My cousins and I received gifts—candies, nuts, and money. Though they amounted to a few rubles only, back then, at the time of overwhelming poverty, they made us, children, feel filthy rich.
On one of the spring days, my mother would bake triangular cookies with jam filling. She explained that the holiday is called Purim. It was easy to see she was not just baking the cookies because it was to be done on that Jewish holiday, but she did it with a special joy, which I, an adolescent, couldn't fathom. "But of course!" Her face flushed from the heat of the stove, she answered my unuttered question. "It's Purim, after all!"

On the Jewish Passover, you were supposed to eat some flavorless baked product with a name that was also strange to the Russian ear—"matzo. " There was, finally, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the adults fasted the whole day and then made up for it at a table laden with delicacies.

However, these special holidays aside, we lived just like the rest, not better and not worse than our Russian neighbors. Did merely celebrating the Jewish holidays make you a Jew? That's all? The synagogue of my childhood (the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s) was at the outskirts of the city. My parents visited the temple seldom, mostly on Yom Kippur. They took me there only twice, on the occasion of the death, first, of my grandmother and then of my Uncle Abrasha on my mother's side. As I understood much later, they took me to the synagogue rarely, to not "soil my reputation" of a young pioneer.

I knew no Hebrew and only a smattering of Yiddish, just a few phrases and expressions I heard at home. Judaism as a religion was unknown to me, and millennia-long Jewish history, except for the story of the Exodus, which, when I was a kid, my mother told me to explain why, at the Passover time, I have to consume the tasteless matzos. Of the Jewish writers, I knew only Sholem Aleichem, published in Russian translation. That's about all my connections to things Jewish.

As I was growing up, I saw that my father took to heart the fact that, by the circumstances of our life, I was alienated from things dear to him. He secretly sighed on that account, but he hardly could do anything about it. I grew up in the post-war years, at the time of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaigns, which rolled over us, one after another, like tsunami waves, threatening to destroy everything in their way. It was not the best time to affirm one's Jewishness.
I just turned ten when, not in the official press but through the grapevine, the horrible news reached my hometown Odessa about the murder, on Stalin's orders, of Solomon Mikhoels, the great Jewish actor and the famous director of the Moscow State Jewish theater. A wave of anti-Semitic campaigns, under the guise of fighting cosmopolitans, was launched. The country's leading cultural figures of Jewish origin were pressed to reveal their Jewish names, not to "hide under the pseudonyms," as the papers jeered. In 1952, thirteen Yiddish writers were accused of espionage and shot one August night. It all culminated in the infamous "Doctors' Plot." A group of Kremlin doctors, mostly Jewish, were arrested and accused of plotting to murder the leaders of the country.

When you grow up and see your parents' and other relatives' faces turn pale with fright, whispering to each other even in the comfort of their homes, you want to belong to any of over a hundred ethnicities populating the Soviet Union (even as obscure as Chukchi), as long as you were not identified as Jewish.

Then came the Six-Day War of 1967, in the course of which Israel crushed Arab forces, a new antisemitic campaign was launched in the country. It was branded as "anti-Zionist," but everyone knew it was just a fig leaf. It was, in fact, an antisemitic campaign. Besides reissuing Trofim Kichko's slanderous booklet, *Judaism without Embellishments* (1963), they published Yuri Ivanov's defamatory *Beware: Zionism!* (1969). These books were hardly more than retelling in modern terms the infamous *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, about an alleged Jewish conspiracy to conquer the world.

In the early 1970s, pressured by human rights campaigns on a global scale, especially in America, to allow Jewish emigration, and dependent on trade with the West and Western technology to sustain their stagnant economy, the Soviet powers-that-be raised the Iron Curtain a crack. I seized the opportunity to leave the country.

Emil Draitser was born in Odessa, Ukraine where he began his writing career as a contributor to leading Soviet periodicals, such as *Literary Gazette* and *Crocodile*, on Central Radio and TV. He immigrated to the US in 1975 and earned a PhD. In Russian literature from UCLA. Since 1986, he has been a Professor of Russian at Hunter College in NYC. An award-winning author, he has published essays, short stories, artistic and scholarly prose in leading American and Canadian periodicals, and in Russian, Polish, Belorussian, and Israeli journals including *Forbidden Laughter*, *Shush! Growing up Jewish under Stalin: A Memoir*, and an autobiographical novel, *Farewell, Mama Odessa*.

Artist Jessica Herrera