

The name *Testimony* refers to people giving a formal account—in this case, of immigration to the United States, and specifically to the Bay Area. These formal accounts come in the form of verbal narratives, visual portraits, and a selection of objects and ephemera from each person's life.

The people in these pictures have welcomed me into their homes to record them speaking about their lives and make portraits of them. I want to say thank you to each person who contributed to this work by becoming a subject. That is a deeply generous act, and that generosity infuses the whole project. Thank you for being open, trusting, and willing to teach me.

Each testimony also offers some counterpoints to the contemporary, deeply troubled dialogue around immigration. When examined through the lens of individual experiences, so many of our policies seem not just bad, cruel, or inefficient but truly absurd. What seems clearest to me is that we need a new approach, a new angle, a new set of ideas with which to engage the issues raised by human movement among nations. We desperately need to start asking different questions. And listening to the answers.

testimony

A project by
Eliza Gregory

Activist Poster

"There has been a collective movement for adoptees to support other immigrants. There are some undocumented adoptees who have gotten deported, because their adoption paperwork was never legal. But most adoptees are documented. We do have citizenship. It makes you ask, What does citizenship mean and who is it granted by and what makes you worthy?"

—Molly, page 4

Poster designed by HyunJu Chappell/Magna Citizen Studio for adopterightscampaign.org.

STANDING WITH UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE

#DACA #DREAMACT

#CITIZENSHIPFORALLADOPTees

Adoptee Rights Campaign **ADOPTION** MUST PROTECT

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Carolyn on the Stairs

"Living here has changed my perspective. Living in Germany, I always thought, Yeah, we have figured it out pretty well. But now being an immigrant myself, I sometimes think, We can actually open up more."

—Carolyn, page 20

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In *Testimony*, photographer Eliza Gregory invites Bay Area residents to share their personal stories as immigrants in an effort to broaden the discussion on immigration.

Each account is represented through photographs, ephemera, and interviews assembled during Gregory's three-year collaboration with the Asian Art Museum's Artists Drawing Club.

During the first phase of *Testimony*, Gregory interviewed ten service providers in the Bay Area who work with newcomer communities. Participants ranged from doctors to lawyers to leaders of community organizations. These interviews, published in the book *Testimony*, volume 1, helped prepare Gregory for phase two, when she worked directly with youth to share their own explorations of the immigrant experience. In conjunction with the Mission-based arts organization Southern Exposure, Gregory collaborated with eight San Francisco high school students to investigate themes of identity and representation in visual media. Their interviews and artworks were exhibited at Southern Exposure and memorialized in the book *Testimony*, volume 2.

The portraits that you see in the gallery and in this newspaper were created by Gregory and each participant to represent the many layers that lie beneath the word "immigrant."

Eliza Gregory is a San Francisco-based artist and educator who explores community health, cultural adaptation in contemporary society, and how family relationships shape our lives.

Marc Mayer
Senior Educator of Contemporary Art
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Caren Gutierrez
Associate Director of Education and Interpretation
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Molly
San Francisco, 2017



Molly's Back Door



Family Photos

“It’s so obviously a structurally violent practice of tearing families apart.”

Molly

October 28, 2017

I grew up in Michigan in a predominantly white upper-middle-class suburb. I was adopted from Korea when I was fifteen months old. As a kid, Michigan and life seemed normal. I had a lot of friends. I played sports. I did well in school. It wasn't until after college that I started to think, *What the fuck?*

My parents were really great in that they wanted me to go to Korean school on the weekends. But I think it was alienating in some ways because the other students all had Korean parents so they were able to speak in Korean to each other. As a kid, all I wanted to do was hang out and play basketball with my white friends. I had such a close identification with whiteness.

I moved back to Korea to teach English in 2009 and lived there for two years. I found an international community of Korean adoptees living in Seoul who grew up in the United States and throughout Western Europe. We took deep dives into the political, social, and economic reasons why we were displaced from our homeland as children. As you realize the global scale of it, you think, *I don't have to hold all of the responsibility. This is larger than me.*

We are working now to reclaim our history and resist the existing narrative. We are creating space to hold the complexities of loving your adopted family while simultaneously being critical of the inequality and oppression that causes transnational adoption in the first place. If you look at transnational adoption through the lens of forcibly removing citizens from land, it's so obviously a structurally violent practice of tearing families apart.

In the '80s, during the peak of transnational adoptions from Korea, the reasons for adopting were different. Adoption started with the US military occupation of the Peninsula after Japanese colonialism and continued throughout the Korean War. It was originally focused on orphans.

Now it's mostly single moms—more than ninety percent of the adoptions in Korea are from single moms. And that's because of the stigma associated with being an unwed mother. It's still legal to fire someone if they find out that you're a single mom in Korea. Korea seems like a progressive, modern society but in some ways, it really lags behind other first world countries. Often, women find support through organizations that take them in when they're pregnant. But there's a catch: a lot of these organizations cover medical care if the woman relinquishes her child, but if she decides to keep her child then she has to pay all of the medical fees. That practice takes advantage of women when they are the most vulnerable.

In my relationships with other adoptees who have reunited with their families, there's often this idea of a birth mother. One day, when I was in Korea, someone was talking about their cousin or something and I was like, *Wait. You have a cousin.* I thought, *Oh, my God.* It's not just a birth mother—I have a father. I have siblings most likely, nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and this whole legacy and this whole history.

I'm studying the history and the politics behind adoption, but it's also been nice to allow myself the emotional space to grieve the loss of not just a homeland but a connection to generations of family.

A lot of my friends have reunited with family, and that relationship is often challenging. At the same time, not even *having* the story is difficult. Was she sixteen? Was she forty-five? Was she poor? What were the circumstances? Were they married? Sometimes you think, *What if the whole rest of the family is still together?*

Adoptees coming back to Korea often find that the birth records are corrupt. A lot of them are fabricated to legalize adoptions when nothing was legal about it in the first place. You can't be a legal orphan when you have living family. In some instances, families would think that they were dropping their child off at daycare or for an extended period of time because they didn't have money or couldn't take care of them. Then they would come back and the child had been sent overseas. In other cases, a mother-in-law or another family member would relinquish a child at an orphanage without the mother's consent.

Globally, we're seeing profound inequality toward women and family-building. Change has to be multidimensional. We have to continue to do more legwork on the policy side and also work towards a cultural shift, which can be painfully slow at times. This isn't just isolated to Korean adoptions. This is adoptions throughout Africa, adoptions throughout South America. Unfortunately, transnational adoption is a profitable business for adoption agencies and governments, often rooted in a militarized and colonial past.

“Someone needs to raise awareness and I think I could be that person.”



Alma
San Francisco, 2017

Alma

October 5, 2017

Alma: There was a drastic shift that took place in 2011 when my biological dad got arrested and then later deported. That was a really hard time for me because I was daddy's little girl, everything revolved around him. He was my hero. To know that I wasn't gonna be able to hug him anymore just meant that a new era in my life was starting.

I changed as a person. I was more of a rebel because, in my eyes, the authority had taken him. So any figure of authority, whether it was teachers, principals, police—I didn't trust them anymore. And I grew to hate them.

Looking back at it now, I understand that my dad's deportation, although it was something really sad, was necessary for me to realize and honor the person that *my mom* really is. When my dad was around, he would make me see my mom as the one to blame. He always gave me my way. And he always defended me with my mom, even though sometimes I wasn't right. He would buy me little things that would make me believe he was a nicer person. That made me think that my mom was just this mean witch that I hated.

But when my dad got deported, I saw how tough my mom was, and how she handled the situation—always being really strong in front of us. She wanted to make us feel like we could do it if she could do it. But we knew that when she went in her room, she would start crying.

My mom would never have seen that she was too good for him because she loved him. So even though he hurt her in so many ways, she would have stayed. Traditionally in Mexico, the man who you marry within the church, you have to stay with for the rest of your life.

So even after he was deported, my mom tried to get back together with him. She went to Mexico and she tried to fix things with him. But he wanted my mom to come back to the United States and just support him financially. And my mom said, *No! I love you, but I'm not going to stand for what you're trying to put me up to.* She knew that she was better than that.

That phase in my life was really necessary because it took something negative out of our daily lives. We have this saying in our family: *If God takes something away from you, it's because you wouldn't have left it by yourself.* So now I understand that when you love something or someone so much, you really don't see the damage that they do to you. And although I do love my dad, he wasn't the person that I thought he was.

Later on, my school recommended that I get therapy because I was getting into fights—they thought I had problems. And I did. I understood that I couldn't keep all that hate inside of me. This was the beginning of my therapy sessions. And I think that, at some point, we all think that therapy is something for crazy people. But when I started therapy, my therapist said, *You're not crazy. You just have to talk about your problems to really get to a point where you can understand them.* And she was right. The more I talked about my problems, the more I understood that I had to let go of that hate. And she was a really great influence for me. She helped me trust people.

July 29, 2017

Eliza: Your journey to come here from Mexico was very intense. Did the memory of it continue to have an impact on you once you got here, or did it fade away as you adapted to new things?

Pilar: I felt strong for my daughters and I kept going, although I was exhausted and dying of thirst, my daughters came first. And my daughters made me strong, because God was with us. I brought them saline and water. Thanks to God we arrived here. Because many people come and don't make it and we came through the desert alive.

Alma: For me, it was hard. I remember it was really hard because my pants were filled with foxtails. It was just so painful. At one point I said, *I can't!* So my mom was like, *Just take them off.* Then I was walking in underwear in the desert, which is really dangerous because you don't know what insects or bugs are going to crawl up on you. But that risk was better than walking and feeling the little pokes. So, yeah, that was something really impactful.

Afterwards, at times I was really embarrassed. It's hard to hear somebody say, *Oh, you're a wetback,* to other kids and you're in the room and you're thinking, *But I have people that I know that actually did that.* And not everyone is lucky enough to survive. You know? It's hard. *[Crying]*

I'm proud of my struggle. 'Cause not everyone is as blessed as I am, so I'm not ashamed anymore. A lot of people don't survive and to know that I am one of the few that did, and I am here and I'm doing good. I'm proud of who I am. And I know that I had this opportunity because my parents wanted that, wanted a better life for me—and they had to take a big risk. In life we have to take risks to do better. Right Momma? *[Laughing and crying]* She hates to cry too.

Also, We don't like to be called aliens.

Pilar: *[Laughs]* Yeah.

Alma: That's something that really makes me frustrated, I'm a DACA student, so we're the Dreamers. The government gives us permission to work and receive financial aid. And all of our paper forms are labeled "aliens." Aliens this, aliens that—it just dehumanizes people. Nobody is alien.

A lot of people love our culture, love our food, but they still don't accept us. And they don't accept our struggle. It's not easy to see someone who doesn't accept you take in your culture and then try to kick you out.

Pilar: I try to maintain my own dignity. Because sometimes here you can lose that. To begin with, the jobs make you lose your dignity. Since you are from another country and you don't actually know the routines, the norms—sometimes your coworkers or your bosses humiliate you. You have to hold onto your own pride because you say to yourself, *If I lose this job, what will I do? I have my daughters, my bills, my rent.* It starts off like that for anyone—no one can say that isn't true. But in front of my daughters, I try to be myself and show them their strong mom.

As time passes you become more mature, and you start to know what you can let go and what is not allowed even though you are who you are, the color you are, the race you are. You have certain rights. Now they don't walk all over you as easily as they did before.

Alma: When I was younger, I used to be really scared of the world and really insecure about myself. I had my family and they were the ones I trusted the most. When I was little, I was kind of overweight and was bullied at school. Bullying is something that just messes with your head and your personality. I was scared that people were not going to like me. My mom always told me, *Do they feed you? No. Do they buy you clothes? No. Then why are you worried about their opinion if they're not helping you in any way?* My mom's words are something I really hold onto now. I even help her because she went through bullying too. I try to help her with her own words.

Eliza: How can San Francisco do a better job of supporting people who are arriving here now? What

do you think we should be doing as a city, and as a culture, and as a community to help people who are arriving?

Pilar: Well, primarily it's the salaries. Salaries are a little higher than in other states. I have family in other states, and they say our salaries are better, but things also cost much more here. It's not enough to get ahead.

Alma: I would say probably the rent in places. I don't feel welcome anymore, even though it's the place where I was raised. The mayor glorifies how great of a sanctuary city this is, but they're wiping out our people. They're making more condos. They're raising the rent. That's what they did in our old apartment—they fixed the mailbox and they raised the rent \$100.00. Little things like that affect us immigrants. It affects everyone, but for us it's more difficult because our parents are at risk because their jobs aren't stable. And sometimes the bosses try to exploit them because they don't know their rights. So, San Francisco could definitely stop selling the city and just teach our people the rights they have.

Pilar: It's true. Here the bosses exploit their workers a lot. For example, my boyfriend—my partner—he gets exploited a lot. He's also an immigrant.

Alma: He works at a sushi bar. He works thirteen hours and they only give him five minute breaks and in those five minutes he just smokes to stay up. They don't let him eat or anything. And we tell him it's wrong, to tell his boss to let him get his thirty minutes and overtime. But within their workforce, they know that if they stand up, they get fired. So he's scared. He doesn't want to lose his job.

And also street food sellers—like fruits or flowers. They're really targeted right now by police. It's really sad to see a woman who is selling flowers get beat down because she's selling flowers, when there are actual criminals out there who are not being targeted. It's a situation you can't win. If you try to go independent and get your own business, they target you and they don't let you hustle. So people would rather have a job where they get exploited but are secure. When you fear something, it limits your possibilities.

I know I want to do criminal justice. Something that really influenced me to want to be a correctional officer or a probation officer is the death of my friend. He was a victim of gun violence. And to know that his killer is probably getting less than five years is really heartbreaking, and I feel like there's something lacking in the justice system. I don't know what it is, but I would like to just know that there's somebody like me in that workforce.

I also want to work with the juvenile system. Just help out teens so they can have a chance and steer them in the right direction. I know that a lot of people don't really listen when they're in trouble, but to have somebody that you know cares can be life-changing. Maybe I can make an impact on somebody's life.

When a kid is in trouble, I don't blame the kid. I blame it more on the government, for not giving enough resources to our families so they can have a decent job, own a decent place and so that low-income neighborhoods can be sanitary and healthy. In San Francisco, there's a lot of drug activity in the Tenderloin, and down the block are all the City Hall and ICE buildings. It's ironic, you know? How can some of the most important government officials and buildings be right next to some of the most dangerous or unclean places? It just doesn't make sense. Maybe they think that we like to live like that or something.

But I know that it can be fixed. It's just not brought to light. Someone needs to raise awareness and I feel like I could be that person.



Alma Getting Ready



Alma's Book
"Growing up in San Francisco schools we don't really have a chance to learn our own history, culture, and how powerful and advanced our Native American ancestors were. Which sucks. But we're not limited. If we want to go ahead and learn about that on our own, we can."
 —Alma



Card from the Women's March in Washington DC in 2017
"The first time I ever left the state of California was to show my resistance as an immigrant female of color. Going all the way to Washington, DC for the Women's March in 2017 was a powerful, forceful, yet graceful act of resilience."
 —Alma

The Homie Old School
"This Homie reminds me of my uncle, my Uncle German. He was the last uncle that was killed in Mexico before my mom decided to come to the United States."
 —Alma





Jack
San Francisco, 2017



Keys
"You definitely need the key to get into the house or you have to be homeless [laughs]. Just another thing about being proud to be at USF."



Student ID Card, University of San Francisco
"This is my USF ID. I carried it for my whole time no matter if I needed it or not, even when I'm back in China. It feels like USF is my other home. I know it's a little bit too much of a compliment, but I'm proud of my student identity."



Plush Alien from Ikea
"This doll is the same doll my ex-girlfriend has in London, though I don't know if she still has hers. Even immigrants get their hearts broken."

“Even immigrants get their hearts broken.”

Jack

July 25, 2017

My parents are typical Chinese parents in that they care about ranking very much. And USF was not the highest ranked school where I got accepted. But I felt like if I went to one of the other schools that was more remote, I would be studying business in cornfields and forests. I wanted to know what city life was like in the United States.

For the first three months, I didn't like school. I felt the dormitory looked very bad. The food...didn't taste that good. The weather was very, very cold. *Oh, come on*, I thought. *California is sunny seashores and bikinis!* Not in San Francisco.

And there's a big distance between people. For Asians, we live in a community that is very close. People will ask what you have been doing today. No one feels like this is too much of someone else's business. They feel like, *Oh, I'm caring about you*. The downside is, people want you to behave the same way they do or they will correct you.

At USF, if there's an event going on, they will just post a notice quietly and let you know there's something going on, but if you don't want to go, no one will bother you. That was a very big cultural shock for me. But then I started to realize it's because people respect you. They think that it's your own business, I shouldn't judge your stuff, and I respect your way of doing things. Until you feel like, *Oh, I need someone to help or I need some advice or I need your idea*, and then they will gladly provide what they think or what they can do. So I like it here. It feels like you can be yourself.

Being a visiting student is not that easy. The problem is when everyone's enjoying a joke or talking about something, sometimes I totally don't get it. I didn't grow up in a country that watched the same TV episodes as people here. There are many phrases I don't know. Although I can technically understand the words people are using, I still don't actually get what they're talking about. It's hard and maybe after a few tries, you give up.

I've never been in any student clubs here and I'm not in any international student clubs or communities. I feel like everyone has the same feelings as I do. They don't find it very easy to join in a group—a different culture group. So they just join the groups that reflect where they're originally from, like Chinese students with Chinese students, Taiwanese students with Taiwanese students, Japanese students with Japanese students.

Being here has helped me notice that there's more than one way for things to be done. And just like people respect who I am, I should respect what people

think and what they do. So I think this is a good way of adapting. But I do hold onto my Chinese identity.

I will go back. To be honest, I never think about whether I should get a Green Card. What I am thinking is I can try to learn some of the ways that people here think and what they like and become a bridge between China and the US. But I will always remain Chinese.

China is not great. There's a lot of problems but I can fix it. Every time I tell my friends—my friends here, or friends back in China, or even my parents—no one understands it. They feel like you're so...you're just a small piece. What can you change? The government is so big. The culture is so big. The traditions are so strong.

But I tell them, if I'm strong, I will try to change the rules. I might have corporations that respect women, respect human rights, and don't let people work overtime. And if I'm weak, I'll just try to work on myself, perform those rules on myself. It's not about changing the whole thing in one night. It's about trying to affect it and let others see there's the opportunity to change.



Khanh
San Francisco, 2017



Khanh's Sculptures



“I asked the family that lived there if they had a son that I could take, to go on my son’s ticket for the boat.”

Khanh

October 4, 2017

I am eighty years old in the Western age and in Asian age eighty-two. We count one year during the time the mom is pregnant. I was born in Da Nang. Da Nang is in the center of Vietnam. Growing up, there were nine to ten people in the house. I had three sisters. I was the only boy. It was a hard life.

I studied in Da Nang until I was sixteen, and then I moved to Saigon. I completed middle school there but I didn't complete high school, because I had to join the army. A lot of people who joined the army had people inside that could help them—family or relatives—to protect them, to keep them from going to the war, so that they wouldn't have to fight or be killed. I had nobody inside. I was just a student. I didn't want to fight. I joined a special unit, Airborne, because I thought if I'm flying airplanes, I won't get killed from fighting on the ground.

I didn't want to join the fighting, but because there was a war all the men had to support, no matter if you were from the North, the South, the Center. I had no other option. I had to go. After I completed my training as an officer, I felt really bad. My first experience in the war was being surrounded by people dying, hungry people, people trying to survive. A lot of innocent people were dying. The war did a lot of terrible things to my country. I didn't feel that anything was right. I was in the army for seventeen years.

When I was released from the re-education camp, my son was already twelve years old. I had to escape the country. I got support from the Americans. I wanted to take my son with me but my wife said, *You have been gone for twelve years and if you take my son, if something happens to you, I will have nobody.* So I stopped by a relative's house and asked, *Do you have a son that I could take?* because I already had a ticket for the boat. That person said, *Okay*, and had a son, only thirteen years old, and I took him with me to America in place of my own son.

I escaped from Vietnam in a small fishing boat to Malaysia. There was a storm, so I left Malaysia to go

to Thailand, also by boat, because it's close. When I got to Thailand, I took a picture so that I could send it back to Vietnam to show my family that I was alive. Three dollars, three pictures.

From Thailand, everything was fine, my paperwork was done, so I went by airplane from Thailand to the Philippines and from the Philippines to the United States. That was in 1998.

I have been married for forty-four years, but we only lived together for one year. That's it. After that, we lived separately. After we got married I was sent to the camp. She stayed home for twelve years to care for our son. After that, I escaped, I came here, and was here for five years before she came. So that's seventeen years without a man around, without a husband, without support. We haven't divorced, but now we are legally separated because the relationship can't continue. But I still care for my wife.

If America had continued to support the Vietnamese soldiers, we could have won, and so many people wouldn't have had to escape from Vietnam. If the Americans hadn't left, my people could have taken over the north. My people could have won. Years later, this American commander I respected very much said, *Sorry we had to withdraw. We left you guys.* That meant a lot to me.



Khanh and His Nephew in Thailand, En Route to the U.S.

"I escaped from Vietnam in a small fishing boat. When I got to Thailand, I took a picture so that I could send it back to Vietnam to show my family that I was alive. Three dollars, three pictures."



Khanh's Wife and Son

Khanh
San Francisco, 2017



Mentors, Generals and Friends



Khanh's Living Room



Khanh as a Young Pilot

Testir

This newspaper is a complement to the *Testimony* exhibition at the Asian Art Museum, running April 6–June 10, 2018. The newspaper offers longer versions of the interviews conducted with participants from July 2017 to January 2018. It is also meant to be taken apart and displayed as a small, mobile version of the exhibition. Please feel free to put it up in your home, office, school, gym, neighborhood, or any place you'd like to share it.



Nancy, Josh, Zoe, and Theo
San Francisco, 2017



Nancy, Josh, Zoe, and Theo
San Francisco, 2017

“I guess I had really great teachers because I was never embarrassed about who I was and who my family was.”
—Nancy

Nancy



Baby Nancy and Her Mother Arriving at SFO from Manila in 1972, Being Picked Up by Her Dad and a Cousin

November 30, 2017

Nancy: When we came from the Philippines I was sixteen months old. I don't remember coming here, I just remember always being surrounded by lots of family and living with my grandparents and all my uncles and aunts. Somebody was always holding me. Everybody would go off to work together in the fields and everybody would come home together. It felt like a big party to me as a kid growing up.

My parents were mostly gone because they were working and trying to get jobs. My dad was a chemical engineer and my mom was a chemist.

My family worked in the fields with whatever was in season—grapes, asparagus. They were in Stockton, California. For some reason I really remember grapes and asparagus because we always had them in the house when they were in season.

It was like you're Filipino at home but when you go to school you're American. My parents said, *You should only speak to us in English because we want you to be an American and not struggle like we have struggled*, in terms of identity. And I guess I had really great teachers because I was never embarrassed about who I was and who my family was.

America was the promised land. My dad's cousin came here first and he said, *There's lots of jobs, everyone needs to come*. My family were all farmers in the Philippines. My dad's family was really poor so anything was better than what they had.

Josh: You should describe your dad's house.

Nancy: When I was seven I went to visit the house where my dad grew up, and it was a traditional bahay kubo. It had a thatched roof and was on stilts underneath the bamboo floorboards—they weren't even boards, they were more like sticks. There were gaps between them and the pigs just ran around underneath. There was feces down there. I was creeped out thinking, *People live here? This is gross*.

My dad cried the first time he went back. He had forgotten what it was like.

My parents came here as immigrants to achieve the American dream, to be successful and comfortable in their life, and they did it. Their kids all went to college, had careers. They never worried about money in the end or their kids' livelihoods. It's pretty amazing. Especially my dad who came from nothing. Living over pigs in his little hut to his nice big comfortable house in San Jose with grandchildren running around and TVs in every room. Everything he wanted he got.

My mom gave up her family because they didn't come. It was my dad's family she came with and I wouldn't say they got along that well.

I definitely translated for my parents growing up. Not necessarily linguistically because both my parents understood English pretty well since they had studied it in school, but I just remember so many times as a kid going, *Don't do that right now. No. No. No.*

I remember going to Sizzler one time and my mom was sitting the way she sits at the dinner table. I'm like, *Mom put your knee down*. Because she sat with her knee out like this because it's culturally normal for her. I feel like I was constantly monitoring them for, *We're in public! Don't do that!*

Zoe: In school we talk a lot about culture and identity. What is racism and who can be hurt by that? And a lot of people at school think I'm full white and

when I tell them my mom is Filipino and born in the Philippines they don't believe me unless I show them pictures. So people think it's interesting sometimes that there's more to me than just Starbucks and Uggs.

I don't think about it as culture. I think of it more as self-identity. It's also family traditions. Because a lot of things we do aren't really related to my dad's culture or my mom's.

When I think about myself and my identity I don't think, *Oh I'm a daughter of an immigrant*. Immigrant is not a really a word I would associate with myself or my mom. I have to be reminded of it to actually to start thinking about my mom as an immigrant. It's also funny because I can say, *I'm first generation*, but my dad says that's not true. We've had multiple arguments about that. Lots of Googling, Wikipedia.

We make fun of my mom not being a real Filipino because she doesn't like to fry food in the house. A Filipino house always has the fried food smell, but this one doesn't because she always takes the camp stove and fries it outside on the deck.

Josh: She's outdoor Filipino.

One thing Nancy and I try to do is be very intentional with our kids about pointing out differences between people. I'm white, she's Filipino. Not because one is better than the other but just so they feel more comfortable talking about cultural identity.

Nancy: A lot of that comes from them first and then we—

Josh: —address it. Right. What is different about being African American in America versus being white or Filipino or Mexican? How are those different dynamics? How do different groups view each other?

Nancy: It's intentional that we don't shy away from it and we embrace it. When Zoe or Theo says, *Well you're not very Filipino because you're this or that*, we ask, *Is that a positive or negative thing? We take time to have long discussions.*

The underlying value that we try to teach our kids is: be kind and love others.

San Francisco sometimes puts everything in a category of race and so we to talk about how it's not always an issue of race, but an issue of class or of family culture. Even before there is a cultural identity there is a family identity. And that's really important for people to understand. It doesn't matter what culture you come from, every family changes it to meet their needs and their values.

I think the way we're going to effect change in the larger world is to get our children feeling more comfortable talking about those issues of race, sex, class, and cultural identity with the intent to try and be kind and love each other through these conversations.



Jochen & Carolin
San Francisco, 2017

Jochen & Carolin



Konrad Playing



Jochen's Coding Socks

“We feel more like Europeans than Germans. Immigration and movement, in the concept of the European Union, becomes a non-issue.”
—Jochen

October 7, 2017

Jochen: We came to San Francisco because I had the opportunity through my work. For me, the career is much more exciting here, to be in Silicon Valley and have access to all of these new technologies.

Carolin: It happened at a time when we were already thinking about where we could live, or if we could live anywhere else.

Jochen: We were going to leave Hamburg for sure. Hamburg in particular has six months of horrible weather. You are basically inside. And if you decide to go outside, you better be prepared to be slapped with cold, stormy, rainy weather. Awful. *[Laughs]*

Carolin: I remember times that I was on my bike and just stopping and thinking, *I hate this rain! This is the fourth time I am soaking wet in one day. I am done with it.*

I was working as a theater dramaturg and producer. I produced theater festivals and curated them—youth, upcoming artists, freaks, and players. More site-specific—not conservative theater, but theater that plays outside the traditional theater house. I basically quit my career. I was at a point where I thought I wanted to take a break anyway. I didn't realize it would be a ten-year break *[laughing]*.

Jochen: When we arrived, we had English classes that were paid for by the company. And Carolin went just because it was free.

Carolin: I had nothing else to do. And I thought maybe I can improve my English.

Jochen: And then we figured out that it's really fun to hang out, and we should skip the classes and just have our teacher show us his favorite bars in San Francisco.

Carolin: Field trips. We were doing field trips. And conversation.

Jochen: We got to know Zeitgeist.

We also met people through kitesurfing; doing that all the time, hanging out with the same people at the windy places.

Carolin: Lots of European people actually *[laughs]*. **Jochen:** Many Germans. Many French. And other Europeans. Probably like fifty percent of people there are immigrants. That was really a nice thing. Because when we arrived here, we had no connections. But that was what we were into. So we pursued that and automatically ended up with a group of friends.

Regarding immigration policies and norms here, at first I never really felt that I should complain about things too much. Because it was my choice to move here. I could've stayed home and been fine. I think that's different for other immigrants that don't have a

choice because they have to save their lives or find an acceptable future for their families.

At first, I didn't want to be the loud guy who calls for stuff. The world was also in a little bit more stable *[laughs]* place altogether. But now I feel like I really have to voice my opinion. And I actually feel like I have a right to do that. I can understand people who say that if immigrants come to their country they should appreciate the culture, maybe learn the language, and not remain isolated and outside of the society. And for me, that translates to speaking out. If I live here and I'm asked to participate in the social, cultural life and have an interest in this country and in this society, that means that I participate in this debate as well. So that really changed how I feel. I feel entitled to engage in the discussion, and try to change the outcomes, if possible. Though of course we can't vote.

Carolin: Living here has changed my perspective. Because living in Germany, I always thought, *Yeah, we have figured it out pretty well.* But now being an immigrant myself, I sometimes think, *We can actually open up more. There's more to learn in this world than just that narrow way of thinking that you learned growing up.*

Jochen: Growing up in Europe with the European Union, the development post–World War II is a major effort across various countries to tear down the borders. In our generation, we feel more like Europeans than Germans. And people in France and in Holland and in Denmark—they would all probably say something along those lines. Immigration, in that ideal European place, becomes a non-issue. Then of course there are the outside borders that introduce another set of issues and fears and changes in society. But in general, there's a really positive outlook on removing borders and being able to live in different places and that being a very natural thing.

At first I was very proud of how Germany dealt with the recent immigration influx when it first happened. There was an enormous willingness to help and to solve this humanitarian crisis. Or at least try to. Because you can't really solve it. All our friends were involved in organizing things, distributing food and clothes, and offering their homes to strangers. And I thought that was amazing. It was really setting an example.

And then the debate moved on, and some things happened that changed the public opinion. Now it's more difficult. But I think this openness—it's definitely still there. The current crisis is just too big for that society to keep handling in that way.

Carolin: I was much more engaged when I was living in Germany, that was just part of my life.

Engaged in things like *Nobody is Illegal* and writing, helping, protesting. Asking, *What do you need?* and then saying, *Okay. Let's go. Let's get it. It's your right. You should have it.*

Jochen: It was sometimes outright confrontational: you might have to deal with authorities shutting you down. And here, that's something we don't do.

Carolin: I think it has to do with my immigration status. It has to do with—

Jochen: —being afraid of the authorities.

Carolin: It's not about me anymore; it's also about Jochen's Green Card because we are connected. I'm not really secure. In Germany, I know my rights. Nobody can take my German passport because I'm doing this. But here—

Jochen: —we don't want to get in trouble. **Carolin:** And I don't want you to lose your job. It's not just about me *[laughs]*. And I don't have my friends of course. I don't have my community.

Jochen: But I think finally after ten years maybe we're getting a little bit out of our mousy hideout, and maybe being a bit more—what's the word?

Carolin: Confident.

Jochen: Or finding our own identity maybe. Because we're gonna be the weird Germans for a while. *[Laughs.]*



Testimony

Jochen, Carolin & Konrad



Nhung
San Francisco, 2017

“They called me a war criminal because I had worked with the Americans.”



Nhung as a Young Man in Vietnam

Nhung

October 4, 2017

I was born on August 25, 1939. I am seventy-seven years old. I was born in Vietnam, in Saigon. Saigon is Ho Chi Minh City now. I grew up and went to school, completed my education, and later I joined the army to work for the Americans during the American/Vietnamese War. After 1975, when the Viet Cong came to power, I was taken to jail for war criminals for seven years, six months, and fifteen days. I counted day by day. More than seven years in the camp.

During the time I was in the camp, it was really hard. I had no choice but to eat whatever food they gave me. It was very difficult to survive in that environment. Some of my friends died in the camp.

I married my wife before I went to the camp. We had four children. While I was in the camp, my wife escaped the country by boat. She went to America. When I got home from the camp I had to take care of four children, to love and care for the kids without my wife. Even though I had a degree, I was unable to get a job. They labelled me a war criminal because I had worked with the Americans during the war. I applied for the paperwork to leave from 1985 to 1995. I waited ten years for the paperwork to be approved.

When I came here, I had a plan. I wanted to go to school and get a degree so that I could work in a hospital because I had worked in a hospital before. So I went to school to study ESL and after that I got a health condition and wasn't able to do anything.

I wanted to come to America and get married to an American lady, but this plan also didn't work out. A mixed child, American and Vietnamese, they would be so smart! But I wasn't able to do it. [Laughter] I had a dream. But I wasn't able to pursue my dream.

In 2004 I went back to Vietnam and married my second wife, and I brought her back here, because I have health problems and I need someone to help care for me. My wife was one of my daughter's teachers while I was in the camp. My daughter helped me get in touch with her.

I try to leave the bad things in the past, not to bring them back. I try to think of the good things. Sometimes, when people ask me about the past, I can't remember. I already blocked it out.



Nhung
San Francisco, 2017



Nhung's Living Room



Nhung's HO Card, the Paperwork Which Brought Him to the United States



One of Nhung's Favorite CD's from His Collection



The Barrel Man
"Every Filipino household has a barrel man, a wooden spoon and fork, and a karaoke machine."
—Nancy, page 18

Passport Pictures of Nancy
and Her Mother
Nancy, page 18



Tell the story of your family. Take a moment to exchange stories of your family with your companions or other visitors.

What do you know about the people who have come before you in your family? What do you know about your family's migration stories? What are the different places you have a relationship to? If you could ask a question to any family member (past or present), what would you ask?

Researchers believe that the more children know about their family history, the greater their emotional health and happiness.*

At the same time, many of us have gaps in our knowledge of our own histories. Sometimes those gaps are, themselves, a key piece of the story.

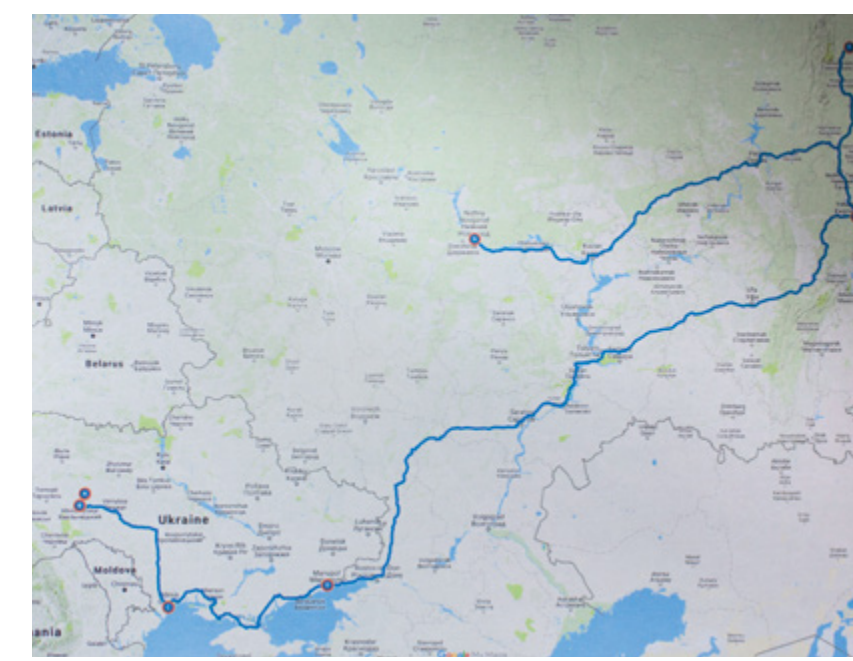
Balanced narratives are particularly effective at contributing to mental health in children. Participate in the *Testimony* project by exploring your "intergenerational self."

*Filer, Bruce, "The Stories that Bind Us," *The New York Times*, New York, March 15, 2013



Dina, Joey and Gus the Bulldog
San Francisco, 2017

Dina



Map of Her Grandfather's Flight from the Nazis
When He Was Twelve-Years-Old
"I want to keep the family stories going and make sure we don't forget where we came from. As a twelve-year-old boy, my grandfather covered about 5,000 kilometers over six years to escape the Nazis."



Dina With Her Grandmother's Ring
"There was jewelry my grandmother sent with a woman she knew ahead of time. No one felt safe bringing valuables. She gave it to Joey to become my engagement ring."



The Ticket for the Flight from Moscow to SFO
When Dina Was Seven
"I drew on the back of it [laughs]."

"We're seeing immigrant communities being hunted down. As an immigrant myself, that's very hard to see."

October 22, 2017

I was born in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia and was there until I was seven years old. I grew up with my cousin, Boris, who is almost like my brother. I'm an only child, and he's an only child. We were born six months apart.

My whole family is Jewish. We weren't very religious, but if you were a Jew in the Soviet Union, your nationality would be Jewish. It didn't matter your culture, religious identity, or connection to Zionism. It was stamped right there in your passport and other important documents that you were a Jew, and that was that.

As the Soviet Union fell apart and the Russian Federation took shape, the situation was chaotic. Russian ethno-nationalism grew stronger, and the situation deteriorated for Jews. The opportunities became more and more limited, and the threats to physical safety were real. You felt like you were always a target. My cousin Boris came home one day from our preschool to ask my aunt Tatyana and my uncle Yakov, *What's a kike?* That was it for them, and within a year they were gone. It was 1993. We followed two years later.

It was my aunt Tatyana and her family that harbored the radical idea to get out. In the United States, you buy a plane ticket with that idea. In the Soviet Union, and especially in the not too-distant past, you got locked away for that idea. So most people didn't bother to entertain the thought.

My grandfather on my dad's side, Borisach, survived the Holocaust in Eastern Europe by fleeing thousands of miles on his own at the age of twelve. Nearly a hundred members of his family were executed, and he survived. So many family lines were extinguished in a moment, but ours kept going. Fifty-five years later, he fled again.

In 1995, when we decided to immigrate to the United States, you could apply to be a refugee, or relatives could "invite" you over. We submitted visa applications to the US Embassy, but many months passed without an interview. And so my aunt Tatyana and uncle Yakov, having settled in San Francisco, wrote to Senator Barbara Boxer:

Dear Mrs. Barbara Boxer,
In July, 1993, I with my family immigrated to USA. We got the status of refugee thanks to American government. We managed to escape from Russia where the politic situation is deteriorated last time and civil war is on the point. Here in USA, we are given every support and encouragement. We are grateful for everything. But I have no peace. My elderly parents, my father and my brother with his family, including his small daughter, are in Russia. In the last half of the year, blood events happened in Russia again. Fascism parties are moving to the power with their leader, Zhirinovsky, winning on this election. Now my relatives are subjected to threats of physical violence. They receive a number of telephone calls and letters with demands to get from Russia, since Russia is only for Russians. My relatives are Jews. I am afraid for my relatives' life. And I am sure the only warranty of my relatives' safety is to be here with me.

They also attached a local article they translated which documented Jewish gravesites getting knocked down.

A couple of months later we got a call to go to the American embassy, so we attribute this to the letter to Senator Boxer.

We left after perestroika, but it was still dangerous to leave or for the wrong people to know you were leaving. My dad, who was "connected" (and you had to be to survive), had people who were instructed not to leave the airport until our plane took off. I think until we landed in the United States, my family still thought the plane could turn around and go back to Russia.

My parents didn't tell me that we were leaving for good, just that we were visiting Boris, because I had a big mouth as a kid. I just remember getting to San Francisco and it being a really gloomy day. I didn't know where we were or what we were doing, and why this place.

In Russia we have a word: *naglyi*. The best translation is probably "stubborn" or "bullheaded"—someone who will do anything to move forward and get what they want. And I think that this, along with being extremely hard-working, was one of the qualities my parents had. They only had one chance. They had no money. They had a young child and were starting over. And so I think all of them felt that they were going to do whatever they had to do to succeed here.

I've been back to Russia once, in 2009. It did not feel like home. We went to where we used to live and I remembered it so differently. I remembered it as this very homey and nice apartment, and then I looked outside and it's kind of a rundown building, very Soviet. People felt very cold. Maybe America makes you really soft [laughs]. We asked some lady for directions and we asked it in Russian, and she just said, *What do I look like to you, a map?* [Laughs]. And that's just how the culture is. It didn't feel like anything I was connected to.

I feel very much between two worlds—in no man's land. When people ask me if I feel American or I feel Russian—or Russian Jew, because Russians always want to differentiate and say, *I'm a Russian Jew; I'm not just a Russian*—it's very mixed. Because I feel like I don't identify very well with any of those labels. But at the same time, for a lot of my childhood, I wanted to be independent from my parents. I wanted to be American. Like any other immigrant child, I felt a little bit weird having my lunch box packed by my mother with traditional Russian food. And I always wanted the things that all the American kids had.

There was this pink popcorn that they used to sell at school that my mom thought was crap, and so she didn't let me buy it. I feel guilty to this day because I stole fifty cents from my grandfather's purse and bought it. And it was disgusting. But at least I felt like everyone else. [Laughs]

One thing I've been struggling with is the fundamental difference in beliefs between me and my parents. They're very conservative about some things. "Conservative" isn't even the right term. For example, they're just not as accepting or open-minded as you think immigrants and Jews would be towards other immigrant communities. They differentiate between

quote/unquote the "good" and the "bad" immigrants. If someone made it as a doctor, they're considered a good immigrant. But if someone is a gardener, a housekeeper, or undocumented, they're a bad immigrant. It really upsets me and makes me wonder how these values came to be. At the same time, I feel fortunate. They're very young, they're healthy, they're very active, they're loving. They're fun and just very outgoing. My friends really love them. I feel very fortunate to have them close by. They're living their own version of the American dream.

There is a narrative shift that needs to happen about immigration. It needs to be inclusive, not othering one community or immigrant case versus the next. I work for a local foundation. We're trying to be really careful about how we tell those stories—not victimizing but humanizing an individual's lived experience. There is a lot to be done, in terms of increasing financial, legal, and mental health resources, as well as helping these communities preserve their culture, relationships, and even physical existence as a community in a healthy way.

In this time it feels like we're seeing immigrant communities hunted down, almost wiped off the map. As an immigrant myself, that's very hard to see. It makes me so aware that I am a privileged immigrant—I am white, I can hide my heritage, I am a citizen.

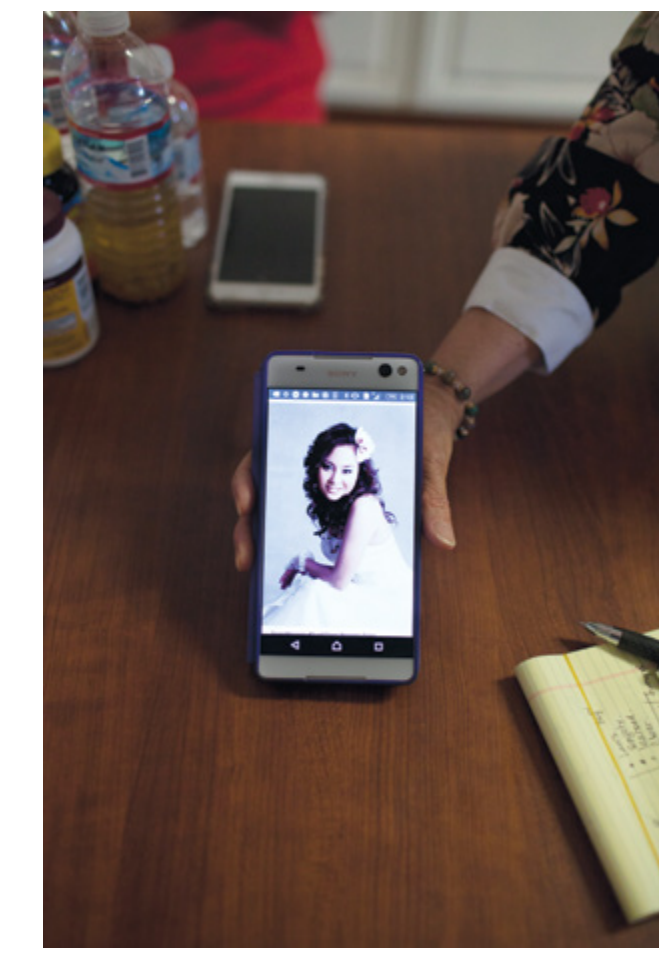
I am very sensitive to the displacement of immigrants and communities of color. San Francisco is changing rapidly, and it's sometimes hard to know what to do or what your role is. When we came here in '95, the Mission District did not look anywhere close to what it looks like now. What are we doing about preservation and the immigrant communities we say we care about?



Liên and Dũng
San Francisco, 2017



Liên and Dũng at Home, With Pictures of their Son Behind Them



Liên and Dũng's Daughter

"Our daughter has already been married for almost 10 years. Her husband is from Holland. They live in Holland. She has come over to visit us three times already. Every year she brings her daughter, who is four years old."



Liên and Dũng's Granddaughter

"I miss Vietnam,
but I'm not homesick."
–Liên

Dũng & Liên

October 7, 2017

Liên: Before 1975, my whole family got support from the government. We got housing because of my father's status as an officer. After 1975, the Viet Cong came and they took everything. My father and my older brother were sent to work camps. My family had no place to live, we had to stay in a pig farm, in the barn for the pigs. I had to help my mom and my brothers to make a living, so that we had enough food, and so that we could visit my father and brother. It was a very difficult time.

Dũng was born in 1959. When he was four years old, his father, who was a soldier, was killed by a bomb placed in a tree by the Viet Cong. So his mom, as a widow, had to take care of her two children. It was a hard childhood. After 1975 he was a contractor. The salary over there for the job that he did only paid ten dollars per day.

Dũng and I got married and have two children, one son and one girl. The son passed away two years ago because he had an illness.

Back home before I came here, I would buy things and sell them, to make a living. I'd make maybe two or three dollars a day. We both worked very hard but we couldn't make enough money for the family.

In 1991 my fourth brother escaped the country and went to Canada. He was able to help the family make a living. In 1993, my second brother came to the United States. In 1996, my parents came to this country. My father and mother at that time were old, so I could not add my name to their papers to come too.

In 2013, we came here. Three months later I got a Green Card, and I got a job caring for elderly people. Now I care for my parents.

Dũng: Four years ago I was a contractor in Vietnam. Then we came here by family sponsorship.

Liên: We were waiting and waiting for the paperwork to go through so that we could come. We waited twelve years. For a couple of days when we first came, I woke up and looked out the window and said, *Thank God that this is true. That it's not a dream.* I thought maybe I was dreaming.

I miss Vietnam, but I'm not homesick. What is better here is that when I work hard, I get something in return. People like us who are working class, back home they don't have the chance to see the doctor, because they cannot pay for the cost. Here, no matter where you come from, no matter what class you belong to, when you go to see the doctor, they treat you with respect. Even if you don't have money, they will still treat you.

Dũng: I feel American when I think about the laws. Everyone follows the laws, no matter if you are a resident, or a big guy, a boss, you have to follow the law. Laws in this country are very strict and very straightforward. I feel safe, I feel protected. This country has protections for immigrant people. Somebody won't come and steal from me or do bad things to me. I learn a lot when I talk to people and deal with American society. The way they do things is really strict, straight, and clear.

When I see my people, when I am in the Vietnamese community, I feel Vietnamese. I feel American when I ride in a car.

Liên: Back home a motorbike is expensive and we couldn't afford to buy one. But here, we are happy—we purchased a car with four wheels!

When I first arrived, I would sit waiting for the bus. In that moment, my body had two types of feelings; first, *It's raining, I worry that tomorrow I won't get something to sell.* Because I made a living collecting and selling things. But then, that feeling came and went, and the second feeling is, *Thank God. It's raining, I am waiting for the bus, but I am done for the day, and I got paid for the day.* Those worries from the past are still in my body because I've only been here for four years and I was back home for a much longer time. I am still scared, worried that the hard life will come back.

My friends call and ask me, *You live in America? Do you miss Vietnam? Do you feel sad?* and I say, *What kind of questions are those? It's nonsense. This country, America, welcomes everybody, no matter where you come from. You are given the opportunity to pursue your dreams, to pursue your goals.*

Thank God. Thank God they let me come to this country.



Yuri
Oakland, 2017

Yuri

“Only a mother can understand the pain that I felt leaving my little one behind.”



Yuri and her Brothers as Kids in Guatemala
“I was in charge of taking care of my brothers, one of whom was still a baby—he was only a year old when my mother left. My brothers are like my sons.”



Videos Yuri Made in Her Work as an Event Photographer

October 20, 2017

I am Guatemalan. We say *Guatemala*. I was born in a tiny town called Nueva Concepción, which is on the edge of a department called Escuintla. It's way out there.

My mother was nineteen when she had me. My mother told me once that even during her pregnancy, she still didn't know where babies came from. She was so ill-informed. It was incredible.

My grandmother never approved of my mother's pregnancy. She wanted something else for her daughter. She had already sent her to the United States so that she could have a better life, but when she arrived in Los Angeles, my mother felt desperately sad, she didn't like it, and she said to herself, *No. I miss my mother, I miss my home. I'm going back.*

And when my grandmother saw she had returned, she was very angry and refused to accept her in the house. The *coyote* who had brought her to the US and back again took her in. My mother quickly became pregnant and lived with him only during the pregnancy because she couldn't go home, she didn't have a job, she had no money—she was utterly poor and there were no opportunities for her in the place she lived.

My mother says that during her pregnancy she slept in the dirt in the mountains, and when the moon was full, really full, she prayed to God to have a daughter. She wanted a baby girl with a round face like the full moon.

They wouldn't tell you the sex of the fetus back then, because the technology in the hospitals was very bad, and when the parents did find out that it was a girl, they would abort the pregnancy. I was born at a time when, even in my family, women were not seen as good.

She was very surprised that her wish came true, that she had given birth to a girl that had a little round face like she had asked for. She felt like I was worth all that struggle.

When she left the hospital, she had no husband to pick her up, nothing. Her mother would let her back into the house, but only without me, and she wouldn't give me up. They gave her money to pay for a bus, public transport, two days after the birth. I didn't have clothes. She wasn't prepared with things for the baby—now you would go to the hospital with everything. But no. So they wrapped me in a diaper from the hospital and she went on a six-hour journey by bus and walking to go and live with her sister in the capital.

There she worked doing anything, for anyone. She began by working in a textile factory, where they made clothes for export to other countries. They paid her very little and it was a terrible job—a dangerous environment—but she had to do it because she had to buy milk.

After three years, we went back. I guess the anger had passed. My grandmother accepted my mother back and said we could stay. So we returned to our tiny town. Unfortunately, my grandmother continued to dislike me and refused to accept me. When my mother left me alone with her, she would yank my hair or my ear and it hurt so much. She would pinch me and scratch me. I was afraid of her. When my mother left, I would hide under the bed, and when my grandmother tried to pull me out I was terrified. We lived like that for three more years.

When I turned six, I began to go to school, and that was like winning the lottery. I was dying to learn. I was a child who, even though she hadn't been taught to read, was reading labels—anything. I had so much energy that I couldn't figure out what to do with.

Eventually my mom decided to go to the United States again. It was really difficult to always arrive

home with empty hands. We didn't have electricity, we didn't have television, we lived by candlelight and used little battery-powered flashlights. I don't know exactly how my mom felt, but I understand her decision to go, because it was so hard and no one could help her, everyone was in the same situation.

I had an uncle that brought people to the United States, so he helped her. She saved a lot of money to use on her journey, to make it safer. I didn't know what was happening, she never told me. I don't remember a mother-daughter conversation. I just remember that on the day she left, I felt really strange because she was dressed differently, and something told me that I wasn't going to see her again. Something inside me hurt, but I didn't know what it was. You could feel in the air that something was going on.

I was nine when my mamá left, and my adult life began, to a certain degree. I was in charge of taking care of my three younger brothers, one of whom was still a baby—he was only a year old when my mother left him. He's like my son. I cannot differentiate between the love I have for my daughter and the love I have for my brothers.

As I grew up, I was inquisitive, I was curious, I had a good memory. I rarely got lost, and if I did I figured it out. I did all the things that my grandmother wasn't able to do. She went out once a month to go to the bank to deposit the money that my mother sent. When we went to the bank there were so many things to do there, so many things to eat, many things that we never had in the countryside. You can't imagine how much fun we had going to the bank. We wouldn't eat the night before because we wanted to be as hungry as possible to go and eat chicken at the famous Pollo Campero. At home we would eat on the floor, sometimes with our hands. We never used nice plates or nice glasses to eat. But at Pollo Campero we got to sit down to eat at a table! It was a luxury and we loved to do it once a month.

Fifteen years later the topic of the United States came into my life again. My mamá was an undocumented immigrant in this country. She lived in the shadows of fear, fear of the police, for her whole life. But then she had the opportunity to regularize her status because a man beat her so badly that she almost died. It was really sad, but thank God, she survived and she had a lot of help from the United States immigration services. The police supported her. They offered her the opportunity to become legal and bring her four children.

It was something that we had never dreamed about—how would we have gone with her? We were all children. We had a life in Guatemala, but it was a life without a future. We lived day to day, and then they told us that there was the possibility to go to the United States. We were amazed, we couldn't believe it. A packet from Immigration arrived for us to take to the embassy. They gave us one month to leave the country. I had just given birth to a daughter, and the papers did not include her. I couldn't bring her with me.

During my pregnancy I had realized that as much as I tried to compromise and make my relationship work, I was in a bad situation. My partner didn't want to let me be free, but he didn't make me happy. He was impulsive and unpredictable. Then my daughter was born. Just seeing her, when they put her on my breast, seeing her tiny face, I didn't regret putting up with everything in the past year with my partner. She was worth it.

I didn't have anyone who I could leave her with. But I also didn't want to continue living this life that I had. I had the chance to change the future of my daughter, by building us a new life in a new place, but mother's love didn't allow me to leave her. At the same

time, it had been fifteen years since I had seen my own mother. I wanted to see her. I wanted to hug her. I wanted to tell her about my problems. I wanted her to fill a little bit of the empty space that I had in my life. It was an impossible dream that was becoming reality, to see her again. I said, *I'm going, I'm not going to miss it, I'm going. I'll see her, I'll hug her, I'll enjoy her company, and if it doesn't work, I'll come back. I'll be able to come back and see my daughter.*

In the last days I couldn't sleep, I had insomnia. I would get up and I would go outside at night. It was winter. It was raining. I would go out in the rain and I would yell, I would cry out in despair over what I was going to do. I asked God for wisdom that would help me. I cried, because no one—only a mother—can understand the pain that I felt leaving my little one behind.

I came to the United States and it was beautiful. The moment when I saw my mamá was even better than I thought it would be. I was expecting a big, tall woman, because when she left, she was bigger than I was. When I saw her again, she was tiny, a little shorter than I am. It was so nice to hug her and slowly learn to call her mamá. But every day here was hell. The country was lovely, the streets were nice, the houses were nice, the environment—everything was really modern. But I wasn't happy. I needed my daughter.

I went to Guatemala once or twice a year. I went every Christmas and for my daughter's birthday. I worked three or four jobs to be able to earn enough money to go. It didn't matter, I was happy to pay for it. I even worked a graveyard shift at McDonald's. I endured almost three years, and when I was at the point of achieving my goal of becoming a resident, I returned to Guatemala and discovered that my partner was mistreating our daughter. A long legal battle ensued.

The legal process took so long that I couldn't stay for fifteen days as I had planned. Instead, I stayed for three months. Because of the length of that trip, I lost my opportunity for United States residency. Luckily, I was assigned a female judge who was really great. I think as a mother she understood my anguish. She helped me to get my daughter back, and we filed for asylum here in the United States. We are still working on things—healing wounds, things that happened in my absence—and filling her with love every single day, with activities, with calm. I feel blessed with this life and that despite everything, everything that happened in her young life, she is okay.

I can benefit my society. I work. I have a new husband and we are making a home. We are a real family. I am instilling values in my daughter and if for some reason we had to separate, for a matter of immigration, it would be a disaster. At this point, our lives would be in danger in Guatemala. If I had to flee, I would go to another country. Not Guatemala.

The answer to my asylum case could arrive any minute. I had my last court date. Every day when the envelopes come through the mail slot, I run with excitement and fear, looking for the answer.

When I arrived in this country, it helped me. Here everyone respects different religions, everyone has their own customs even though they are also Americanized. With all the access to technology here, I feel like I have access to everything: information, resources, freedom. We are poor, but we have a life that feels rich compared to mine in Guatemala. So, we are poor and rich—rich with happiness.



Karma
El Cerrito, 2017



Chai



Karma's Brother



The Green Tara

"I've become more spiritual after coming here. It's too many things I think, too much entertainment and stuff—you know clubs, bars, shopping. Sometimes you just want to take time, a break from the Internet and computers. You just want to relax and meditate and reflect on what's inside instead of what's outside."

"I think it is important to be able to mix with the culture and be understanding, accepting, kind, and fluid."

November 18, 2017

I was born in Nepal, Kathmandu. When I was maybe eighteen months old, my parents moved to India. We're Buddhist, and we have a teacher called Karmapa. The same way there's a fourteenth Dalai Lama, we have a sixteenth Karmapa.

I don't know if you believe in a rebirth, but as Buddhists we believe in reincarnation. My brother was born with very transparent skin, you could see everything inside. Nobody was there when my mom delivered my brother, she was by herself. She gave birth, she cut the umbilical cord, the placenta came out, she cleaned the baby, she did everything on her own. And later the doctors said they had never seen anything like this transparent skin, and they were very scared.

When my brother was still really young my parents went to a Buddhist stupa in Nepal. That was 1969. The sixteenth Karmapa had come to Nepal and he was giving teaching and empowerment—we call it empowerment or Buddhist initiation. He saw my brother with my parents in a big crowd of people. He asked his attendant, *Can you go and call this couple with the child with the transparent skin back to me later after the event has finished?* My mom was planning to go back home with the kids, so when the monk came and told my parents and my mother's father that Karmapa wanted them to come see him, my grandfather said, *Okay, I will go and visit him, maybe he wants to give us a blessing.* So my grandfather sent my mom to the airport—they were heading home. But when they got there, the plane had already left. There was no way she could fly back, so she had to return to my grandparents' house. When she came back she went to see the sixteenth Karmapa. And the sixteenth Karmapa said, *The reason your plane had already flown is that you were meant to come here. The reason I called you is this son of yours is the reincarnation of one of the high teachers in Tibet. You need to bring him back to Sikkim, to the temple monastery, to grow up and be trained as a monk.*

Now my brother is a monk and a teacher. He travels a lot giving teaching. He has a center in upstate New York called Mahayana.

So that's why my parents moved to Sikkim because the monastery was in Sikkim, Rumtek. His attachment to my mother was important, so she wanted to go there and be close to him. So we grew up there, Sikkim is my home.

I was there until I came to the United States when I was twenty-four in 1997. August 14. I remember that. I came to study. I had finished my college in India, and my brother was here. He was at Harvard, in Boston, getting his PhD in comparative religious studies. So I applied to colleges in Boston and a couple other places, and then I got accepted at Bellevue University in Nebraska.

That was a culture shock. The first year there were a lot of things that were different. Growing up in India, you share. People were eating in the classroom so I thought, *Oh maybe I'll bring my stuff and share.* And Sunny, my classmate, said, *Oh my god that's so kind of you!* and I thought, *That was not kind, it was just sharing.* It was normal. Another classmate of mine, Heidi, she told me that they eat dinner and watch TV and I thought, *What?! I didn't get it—you watch and you eat?* But guess what, I was doing that almost

sixteen, seventeen years later. I thought, *Oh my god, I'm doing this.*

America has made me tough. I became more aware. When I was in college in Nebraska I had a roommate. We were friends, the trust piece was there, and I was very new. I'd been here only a couple months, and she asked me for my Social Security number. I gave it to her, she made calls and then I got a \$1,000.00 bill and a letter from a collection agency. I had no idea what that was and so I talked to another friend and she said, *Why did you give someone your Social Security number?* And I said, *What is Social Security?* I didn't know that it was a very personal thing, you don't give that out. It was a lesson for me. Sometimes you learn the hard way.

Before, if I saw someone who needed help, immediately I would just jump in and help. I wouldn't think twice. But now, before I help, I think to myself, *Will this benefit the person or not?* I have become more cautious. I've seen myself change. I still have a compassionate attitude, and I like helping people. But I've taken the good pieces from American culture, like being aware, and balanced it out.

I think it's important to mix with the culture and be understanding, accepting, kind, and fluid. You're able to mix edges with people, a culture, wherever you go. Not saying, *Okay I am this, this is right.* You stay who you are, but you kind of float. I think that's very, very important.

Karma



Shaghayegh
Walnut Creek, 2018

“All Iranians have a double life in Iran. You live in parallel. Because inside your home is totally different than outside.”

Shaghayegh



The Carpet Shaghayegh Painted That Became a Traveling Public Project
Original photograph of the carpet by Shaghayegh

January 19, 2018

I was born in 1987, and I grew up in Tehran after the Iranian Revolution. When you grow up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, you have to be Muslim. Though being Muslim in Iran is a little different than in other places—everyone does whatever and at the end they're like, *Oh we are Muslim too*.

All the parents wanted you to become a doctor or an engineer. There was no other option. My parents wanted me to become a doctor, so I studied science. And then suddenly one summer I transferred to art. My parents were freaking out. They thought art was for people who are lazy. Meanwhile I was thinking, *I only just started studying—I'm behind the other artists!* So I was really into it. I was going to all the museums and all the talks. I didn't want to miss anything.

Then in 2009 the Green Movement happened. My partner was one of the first graffiti artists. The government thought he did all the tags and stuff like that because it was a whole movement of protests. He was getting into trouble so we had to get out. We came here. Then we had to get asylum.

It was stressful. When we came here we didn't know anyone. The taxi driver from the airport dropped us off at a Motel 6 in the Tenderloin. I was like, *What!?* It was not even close to what I had seen in the movies. The urine smell was the first cultural shock. In Iran you don't have that—there are actually public restrooms everywhere. I was like, *We should go home*. I wanted to go back, but it was a mess in Iran.

I came to San Francisco for contemporary art. I wanted to go study social practice, and CCA was the only school in the Bay Area that had it. So we went there and I'm so happy I went there. I think school was really helpful because it made us connect in a better way.

A lot has changed in Iran since I left. People don't want the government anymore, and a lot of workers started to stand up. In 2009, when I was there, it was mostly artists and upper classes or middle classes standing up against the government. People thought, *Maybe we can find some solutions through the government rather than having a revolution*. But that made it worse. We don't want to become the new Iraq or Afghanistan. But people in Iran are so tired of the corruption. So it's like, *What the hell should we do?* I have no idea. But I'm so happy people are standing up in Iran. I hope that something good happens.

If we went back to Iran, I don't know what would happen honestly. Maybe I could go back and everything would be fine, but maybe they will just arrest me. I have been politically active on social media. So maybe they don't like it. I don't know.

All Iranians have a double life in Iran. You live in parallel. Because inside your home is totally different than outside. That made it hard to adjust when I came here because I didn't have that parallel, that contrast. Also I was not speaking out because I thought maybe I would put my parents in danger. The government will definitely do that. They will get your parents, and they will say, *Stop doing what you're doing outside*. Finally I asked my parents, *Can I start talking?* And they said yes.

My dad is actually one of the reasons I'm always fighting. When I grew up I would ask him why things were the way they were. And he would say, *Okay write a letter and send it to your principal*, or whatever. So I grew up with that. Questioning things. He

would say, *If you want to make a change don't just nag about it, do it*.

I haven't seen my parents for six years. We don't have a United States embassy there, and here we don't have an Iranian embassy. So if my parents want to come they have to go to a third country, which costs a lot of money. We thought about meeting in a third country, and we planned to. Then ISIS attacked the airport of Turkey and I spoke to my dad and I said, *Listen I don't want us to go to Turkey and die. I'm scared. So let's just wait a little bit*. But we have Skype.

Another reason they can't come is my brother. In Iran, military service is forced, and right now he's in the military. So they cannot leave.

A lot of the Iranian diaspora came here before the revolution, and they have no idea how we grew up in the new government. There's a lot of misunderstanding. But they are so supportive. When I came here I had no idea half of them existed because the Iranian government doesn't want to talk about them. And most of them are exiled famous singers from before the revolution or actors, actresses, directors, musicians. They're so active, especially in the Bay Area. There's an organization called the Diaspora Art Connection. They are supporting all musicians, like Iranian musicians, who cannot sing or perform. Because it's against the law to show actual musical instruments on national TV. There are a lot of stupid things like that in the government that we have. This is one of the funniest. So it's hard for musicians to work. There are a lot of musicians actually, but they're all underground and then half of them come here or go to other countries.

I still believe the best thing is grassroots communication, how we get to know each other, because I think everything comes from misunderstanding. Knowing people and their stories can connect you—*Oh they live like us. Oh they do that because of this*. Because I think very small misunderstandings create these big conflicts.

I think middle class artists are getting more ignorant—both here and in Iran. In Iran, the workers and poor people stood up to protest, and artists didn't back them because they thought, *Oh maybe the United States will come*. And I saw the same thing after Trump. People were saying, *Oh those stupid non-educated people*. I was like, *What the hell are you talking about?* That's the whole thing that I think we as artists need to get to know better; not just using people for a project—which I saw a lot of people do—but actually understanding their perspectives. That attitude is creating a wider gap between classes. It's not a good idea for open-minded people, educated people, artists, to not only ignore these workers but also think, *We think better than they do*. We are not the best because we are reading books. It doesn't mean that we know everything better. You have to feel that life too. I am starting to realize that's one of the most important things.

The whole process of the recent US election was really similar to what happened in 2009 in Iran actually. I was telling everyone, *Go vote! You don't understand*. I felt like, *No! This is happening again!*



Pictures of Growing Up in Iran



One of the Recently Seized (and Recovered) Carpets

"I am working on a project with my mom where we produce carpets and bags made from carpets with a community of traditional weavers outside of Tehran. My mom sent me a shipment of them and they were seized on October 30th. It's so insane—all of the carpets came in two days from Tehran, but I couldn't get them for four months. The government seized everything.

The Iranian government said carpets can't be exported because they're out of fashion. So we tried to repurpose them to bags. And then the United States Government was saying that only carpets are allowed to come from Iran. I guess the government likes them. They're like, The carpets are fine but these are bags not carpets. But we get the bags made from carpets.

The pattern on this one is called 'Women' by one of the weavers named Aziztala. If I translate her name it means Dear Gold. She is a nomad."

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Eliza