Name: ____

Immigrant Stories
Source 1: Adela

***Background**: Adela grew up in Arroyo Seco, a small town in the Mexican state of Michoacán. In her mid-twenties, she left her low-paying job as a housekeeper to journey with her husband and six-week-old newborn daughter, Estrella, across the U.S.-Mexico border without legal immigration documentation. Adela eventually settled in Modesto, California, where she became a leader in the local immigrant rights movement in 2006. About a year later, Adela was interviewed at age forty-five. The interview was first published in 2008.*

I had heard so many things about newborns who die making the trip from Mexico to the United States because when Immigration [agents are] close the mothers cover their babies' mouths to keep silent…. [But] I decided to take Estrella and risk the journey with [my husband]…. We walked for two nights in the mountains…. At one point in the night, as we were walking in a canyon just below one of the [U.S.] Border Patrol trucks, Estrella started to cry…. I thought, Oh my God, what should I do? My husband said we should take the blanket from her head, let her breathe—and that was the trick…. After that she stayed silent the rest of the trip, even when I slipped in mud while I was holding her, and even when we crossed the freeway…. So we got here but, as they say, we arrived struggling….

When my daughters started going to school I began to get involved in the issue of immigrant rights…. I started taking classes in English so I could talk to the teachers and understand more about the girls' education…. After I'd been volunteering within the schools for a while, I was made head of the Latino Parents' Committee…. I would go to the meetings and the workshops they had for Latino families and I would come back and report to the parents in my church or in the neighborhood….

My husband was more tolerant of my involvement with the schools and with our community in the beginning…. [But eventually] he would come home from work and demand things. He would say what a woman should do for her husband and what a working man deserves and all…. But as my daughters grew, I realized I didn't want to be weak around them. I shouldn't be scared because I'm a woman or an immigrant or anything….

[The Latino Parents' Committee] organized our first march [for immigrant rights] for April 10, 2006…. When I arrived, though, there were only twenty parents there…. It seemed like too small of a group to make any difference…. People didn't want to risk it…. I said, "No. Let them arrest us. We're going to risk it. We're going to keep marching."… And all of a sudden I looked behind me as we made the turn, and there were so many parents! I don't know where they came from; I think they were hiding before because they were scared, too…. That's what gave me the most courage to keep marching and not be afraid….

More than three thousand people showed up for the second march, on May 1. They came from towns all around Modesto…. Everybody was there, even my husband. My man said to me, "You're not scared?" I said, "Well, if something happens here, they're going to have to take all of us."…

It's been over a year since the marches and so far nothing's happened. Estrella still asks me if I'm scared and I say no…. "I'm not scared," I say. "Because," I tell her, "there's a chance that the people that you talk to will be able to help you. You talk to them and maybe they can help you with your [immigration] papers, help you fix your situation. My daughter, with luck maybe they'll be able to fix things for you."… I say, "These are opportunities. Maybe talking about these things will change them…. You must, as they say, come out of the darkness. Come out and say, 'Here I am! See me.'"

Name: ____

Immigrant Stories
Source 2: Adrián Cruz

***Background**: Adrián Cruz grew up in a neighborhood in Guatemala City, Guatemala, known for gang activity. His mother was murdered in front of him at age five. At seventeen, he was severely injured by a gang member and fled gang retribution. He left Guatemala in 2012 and twice made the dangerous journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. Detained after his second attempt to cross the border, he spent months in ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] detention in California before being released on bail in 2015. Adrián was interviewed shortly after his release in 2016. As of the interview's publication in 2019, Adrián was still awaiting a decision from the immigration court on his asylum application.*

We lived in the Zona 18 barrio in Guatemala City, where my mom had a business…. The gangs there are very dangerous…. There was a gang that would sometimes come around to my mom's store and demand money. One day when I was five, I was with her at the store when a guy from the gang came in and asked for money. My mom said she didn't have it. She asked if she could pay part of what he was asking. He didn't answer her—he just shot her. And then he just left. After my mom was killed by the gang member, I stayed with my grandparents….

When I was seventeen, there were some gang members who wanted me to join their gang, and, well, I didn't want to…. I was shot twice, and…[a gang member said], "Leave him. He's dead."… [But] I was still alive and [I later heard] that [the gang] were asking around for me. So after I got out of the hospital, I hid, and then three or four months after that, I left Guatemala…. If I return, I think they'll kill me….

I took a bus to the [Guatemala-Mexico] border…. Then I went from train to train to train to train…. We call the trains *La Bestia* [The Beast]…. We'd go through tunnels and have to tuck in and stay low. I did see accidents, usually with people trying to grab onto the train as it passed, since the trains move very quickly. Some people get hurt, and some die that way…. Eventually I made it up to the [U.S.-Mexico border], but I got caught by Mexican authorities and sent back to the Guatemalan border…. My grandma came there to see me, and she told me, "I'm very old. If you go, you're not going to find me alive again. You're not going to see me again."… On my second trip…[w]e hopped a lot of trains, suffered hunger, suffered cold, and worried that gangs or cartels would catch us, would kill us…. I was *solito, solito* [alone, alone]!… I tried to cross the U.S. border in [the cross-border cities of] Calexico-Mexicali. I went to the line at [U.S.] customs…. [A]n immigration officer spotted me [and] drove me to a [migrant] detention center.

[Adrián went from an ICE detention center near Calexico to a camp in Texas run by Baptist Child and Family Services (BCFS), then to a youth home in Fairfield, California. When he turned eighteen, ICE transferred him to the West County Detention Center in Richmond, California. He met Franky, a caseworker with CIVIC (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement), who helped him get out on bail and apply for asylum.]

[While out on bail,] I work for eight hours in construction and then I go to school for three and a half hours…. Everything was going well, and then I heard that my grandma had died…. I want to stay here, working and studying, making a new life. I don't want to go back to Guatemala…. I know what will happen to me if I go back and the gang members catch me: they'll [kill me]…. I'm going to go to school so I can convince the judge to let me stay. I don't have another option. I have dreams of learning English, living here, buying a car one day….

[Courts generally do not rule in favor of asylum cases like Adrián's, but he remained hopeful that within two years he would be able to prove his right to stay in the United States.]

Name: ____

Immigrant Stories
Source 3: Siti Dyannie Rahmaputri ("Putri")

Background: *Siti Dyannie Rahmaputri—"Putri"—was born in 1993 to a middle-class family in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her father worked as a banker and her mother held a college degree. When Putri was eleven, her parents decided to travel to the United States on temporary visas in search of educational opportunities for their only child. Their application for permanent residency status was rejected, making her family "undocumented." Her parents worked under-the-table jobs in dry cleaners, gas stations, and other small businesses. Putri later received DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status, completed community college, started a degree in neurobiology at UC Berkeley, and began advocating for immigrant rights. Her story was published in 2013.*

We came to the United States [from Indonesia] on a six-month visa [when I was eleven years old] and my parents thought that they could apply for residency once they got here. That's what they thought—that after a couple of years they could become permanent residents. But that didn't happen, and my mom and dad still have never been able to work here legally….

All along, my parents had given me little hints about our immigration status. I had friends who were from Asia and Indonesia who could easily go in and out of the United States and visit their old countries whenever they wanted to—but we couldn't do that. I started to realize that I might have a problem. By the end of high school, I understood that we were undocumented and that it really put me in a limitation….

When I really started to get concerned about my immigration status, a counselor encouraged me to go to the Asian Law Caucus in [San Francisco's] Chinatown…. My lawyer said, "You're a Dreamer student, right?" I said, "I guess so." My lawyer introduced me to a group of undocumented Asian students called ASPIRE. That's when I first got involved in the immigration movement….

[D]uring my second semester of community college [ICE officials told us we may soon be deported] and I thought that I had to end my education, that I only had a few months to say goodbye to my friends and my community. Although we weren't detained during that time, they took our pictures and fingerprints and we were told we had to report to ICE every month….

I didn't cry at all, I tried to be brave. My parents were in shock, so I kept quiet while [ICE] took our photos. We were fingerprinted at the detention center and that's where we saw a lot of people in handcuffs and cuffs on their waists and ankles. The detainees just happened to be in a room we were in at the time. My parents held onto me really tight to make sure that I was right there near them. Even the immigration officer said, "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to show you this side of the offices." It was scary, but it was a good experience for me to see that side of ICE. It got me thinking about the privilege I had, how thankful I am for all the help and support from the community.

Checking in with ICE every month was not how I would have chosen to spend my time while trying to do my best in college, but I made the best of it. I studied in the waiting room and my mom and I even made jokes about it, teasing that we liked going there because our immigration officer was good looking. Truthfully, going to the ICE offices was always pretty scary….

Then DACA came up and my deportation was deferred for two years, from 2012 to 2014. At the time, it was a big relief for me. But what about my parents? They still had to leave the country by the end of 2012. They had already decided that if they were actually deported, they would leave me behind. They didn't want me to quit college. And I didn't want to waste all of the sacrifices my parents had already made for me. I knew I had to stay.

Name: ____

Immigrant Stories
Source 4: Mazin Sidahmed

***Background**: Mazin Sidahmed is a Sudanese-born, United Kingdom-raised, New York-based journalist who started his career at* The Daily Star *in Lebanon in 2014. He was eighteen months old when his family fled from Sudan. He is the co-founder of* Documented*, a nonprofit news site that covers immigration in the New York area. Mazin shared the story about his transnational family's WhatsApp group on stage in New York City as part of a project celebrating immigration and later contributed this piece to a book published in 2021.*

[M]y family has been scattered all over the world. For a time, my parents and I were in Canada while my sister was in the United Kingdom (UK). Then they were all in Canada, and I was in Sweden. When I got back to Canada, my sister was in Yemen. Now my parents live in Beirut, [Lebanon,] the most recent location of my father's work in human rights. We fled Sudan when I was eighteen months old after the…dictator Omar al-Bashir came into power. First, we lived in the Czech Republic, where my father completed his PhD, before seeking asylum in the UK…. Through this all, one thing has kept the four of us connected: our "My Family" WhatsApp group. The Family WhatsApp group is a modern African tradition. The app gobbles up most of the phone data on the continent…. WhatsApp lets my auntie in a rural part of Sudan speak with her son in Riyadh, [Saudi Arabia,] with ease…. Our immediate "My Family" WhatsApp group is no different to most I imagine, a healthy mix of updates, photographs, conspiracy theories, and memes….

The "My Family" group is the closest thing I have to the dinner table. The dynamics are much the same…. My mother is not shy about using caps lock or sending three lines' worth of emojis. Unlike my father, she's a technology savant…. She uses stickers, GIFs, bitmojis, and things that I didn't know were possible on WhatsApp. One of her favorites is a sticker of a woman threateningly holding a flip-flop. My sister regularly delivers speeches via text…. It's also a source of support.

More than just laughs, "My Family" is an anchor that helps me wade the waters through difficult times. It's a form of something that has been elusive throughout my life: a sense of home. As a family of asylum seekers, the concept of home was broken from the very beginning. My parents' political activism meant that it was [not realistic] for them to stay in Sudan when al-Bashir came into power. In a search for prosperity, we sacrificed stability. Moving from city to city, from country to country, building resilience but leaving pieces of ourselves behind. My parents sought to build a life for us while also pursuing their career goals. That's why we moved to the UK, to Canada, and why they keep moving into their sixties.

We're a close family…. WhatsApp serves as a grounding device. My parents were not able to attend my master's [degree] graduation. They weren't granted a visa due to an Obama-era rule blocking people with European passports who had visited Sudan from [traveling to the United States without a visa]. I instead provided them live commentary of the event via "My Family."…

Many immigrant children carry a feeling of indebtedness to their parents. They sacrificed so much to ensure you had a better future and you promise yourself that you'll be there for them when they need you. When you can't, it hurts even more…. Pictures and family videos get lost in one move after another. Keepsakes slowly disappear as you start fresh over and over. But we always have the "My Family" WhatsApp group.

Immigrant Stories
Source 5: Heraclio Astete

***Background**: Heraclio Astete grew up on a farm in a mountain village in Peru. He studied education at university in Lima, and later opened a school in his village before experiencing hardship during Peru's political unrest in the 1980s. In 1991, he came to the United States on a H-2A visa as a temporary guest worker, herding sheep in Idaho and California. After contracting a debilitating illness related to his work, he organized a herder's union and successfully advocated for the improvement of guest workers' conditions in California. Heraclio was interviewed in 2016 at age sixty-two. This interview was published in 2017.*

In 1991, my wife was pregnant with our third child, and there simply wasn't any money…. I decided to go to the United States…with the H-2A [temporary guest worker] program…. I arranged my paperwork with the company [I was going to work for in the United States] in Lima, and then they sent me the visa and I was able to travel…. [In] October 1991 I flew from Lima to Los Angeles to Idaho, where I first worked…. We arrived at the ranch in the afternoon and there I met other Peruvians who were also working at the ranch…. That night we cried together, and the next day we got to work. We started really early, at about 5 a.m…. [W]e were always terribly cold because we were outside for as much as twelve hours a day…. [W]e worked almost 365 days of the year. In Idaho we earned $750 a month, and it didn't matter how many hours a day we put in….

One day I was told I was being sent to California…. I was a Western Range [Association] employee, and I was in the United States legally only because they'd hired me. So I could be moved by the boss to wherever they needed me…. In July 1998, I was out setting fences with some of the other workers…. After the sun came up it was a very hot day in the desert, and I was feeling very uncomfortable…. Late that night, I began to feel a fever coming on…. My body wasn't even responding to my brain's commands.

[Heraclio was taken to a hospital and diagnosed with "valley fever," a life-threatening lung infection caused by a fungus found in desert soil in California. Western Range Association would not pay for his treatment and insisted that he return to work despite his continuing illness.]

I met with an ex-employee of Western Range, a fellow Peruvian named Victor [Flores]. I told him my story, and he said, "If you want to die, stay at the ranch. If not, you'll need to get out."… In early 1999, after six months trying to keep up with my job while sick, I left work and moved to Bakersfield…. I had no [legal immigration documentation] papers to stay in the U.S., but I was able to find a job working on a farm that grew produce…. I began to organize a sheepherders' union…. Victor and I would go out at night to meet with the sheepherders in all the different pastures and fields. We collected signatures to see if they were for or against joining a union. We also gathered their stories—we had to show that there was abuse of the sheepherders going on…. [I]n 2001, there was a hearing in Sacramento about the conditions faced by herders with guest-worker visas…. I testified about my own experience to state senators and a special commission…. That year, the California legislature passed a law protecting us. It required a graduated increase in pay over the next few years, as well as better living conditions such as electricity, toilets, and access to better food and fresh water….

Today, I still live in Bakersfield with my wife. I work for the same farm that I worked for after I left the ranch. It's a good company—they respect the laws protecting their workers…. We also have two of our kids here with us…. My oldest son and my second daughter are still in Peru…. My oldest boy is a doctor. My daughter is a nurse, and she's working on a post-graduate degree. Thank God my children have been able to understand and value the sacrifices that I've made.

Name: ____

Immigrant Stories
Source 6: Tatenda Ngwaru

***Background**: Tatenda Ngwaru was born in Zimbabwe and migrated to the United States in 2016. She is an intersex advocate and the founder of True Identity, the first organization for intersex people in Zimbabwe. A 2019 documentary,* She's Not a Boy, *follows her life as an intersex woman living in New York City. Tatenda shared her story on stage in New York City as part of a project celebrating immigration and later contributed this piece to a book published in 2021.*

My name is Tatenda. I was born intersex. For those who do not know what that is, it is a condition when a child is born with ambiguous organs, and the doctors cannot tell which sex the child is. Some intersex people have less obvious variations, and never know they are intersex. Estimates say that as high as 1.7 percent of children are born with some variation to their reproductive anatomy…. In Zimbabwe, we do not have doctors who are specialists in this field, so they did not have advice or information for my parents when I was born. Because it wasn't affecting me healthwise, my parents decided to raise me as a boy…. When I got my period, it was evident to my parents that I was a woman—even though I knew already. I never doubted it…. At the time, my parents convinced me to keep living as a boy. They did this to protect me, because they knew the community wasn't going to be kind…. But the bullying continued, even though I dressed like a boy…. During high school, I started dressing like a woman….

After going to college and obtaining my business degree, I moved to South Africa…. I went to a doctor who worked with trans people and [h]e was able to examine me and immediately tell me that I was intersex. After a few years in South Africa, I came back to Zimbabwe. I founded an organization called True Identity…to create a dialogue between [my] community and the transgender and intersex people, to create understanding and awareness and to try to normalize it…. People I didn't know would approach me and make ignorant comments saying I was an "abomination to the culture," asking me why I was "bringing Western culture to our country," and telling me "You are the reason we do not get rain. You are a taboo."… What really made me decide to leave Zimbabwe was when I realized my work was going to harm not only me, but my parents. One day, some people gathered outside our house, yelling…. They wanted to burn down my father's house while we were inside. My father gave me his last dollar and said, "I will buy you a ticket. Go somewhere where you will be accepted as a human, and a citizen who deserves human rights."… Oh, the dreams and hopes of a loving father for his queer child!…

I thought: This is my best bet. America is the land of dreams. That's what we hear in the music and in the culture…. What the television shows portray, and what I believed, is not exactly what I found here…. In America, instead of being welcomed with open arms, I felt ignorance. I discovered that many people did not know what intersex means, even within the LGBTQ community…. My heart was further broken after finding out about the intersex infants here in America whose decisions are made for them by the health facilities and their parents…. Even though my condition was met with ignorance and discrimination in Zimbabwe, [n]othing was taken away from me until I could make that decision for myself, and until I knew who I was…. The only way we can break the barriers is to familiarize people with what it means to be intersex….

Not a day goes by that I do not miss home and my parents and the love that they gave me. I want to go back. But it is not possible at the moment…. I haven't gotten my asylum yet, so I cannot invite them to visit. Getting asylum takes years. I can now work, but I cannot travel outside the country. I cannot see my parents. All these things weigh on my brain every morning when I open my eyes.

Name: ______________________________

Immigrant Stories
Source 7: Fausto Sanchez

Background*: Fausto Sanchez was born in 1969 in Oaxaca, Mexico, and came to the United States as a teenager in the 1980s to work in the fields in southern California. A Mixteco (an Indigenous group native to Mexico), Fausto speaks two Mixteco dialects as well as Spanish and English. He used his language proficiency to translate and advocate for Indigenous farmworkers in the United States. He was interviewed in 2016 at age forty-seven in Arvin, California, where he lives with his wife. This interview was published in 2017.*

The village where I grew up…had about 200 people; we all spoke Mixteco, not Spanish…. I was seven years old the first time we left for Sinaloa, [Mexico]. Sinaloa is famous for its produce such as tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, and eggplant. It's good farmland and people from Oaxaca and Guerrero go to Sinaloa to find work….

[At school in Sinaloa,] the children…made a lot of fun of me…because I didn't speak Spanish…. I think it took me a year to learn Spanish—that's all anyone spoke…. [At] thirteen or fourteen I…started to work for myself…. After the season was over in Sinaloa, I went to [the Mexican state of] Baja, California. Then I came to the United States for the first time, along with some other Mixteco farmworkers who wanted to make money working in fields…. We went straight to work in the onion and garlic fields…. I was sixteen or seventeen when the group I was with walked three days in the desert to get to Arizona…. After oranges, the group I was with went to work in pecans in the area…. The farm had a machine that would shake the trees and pick the nuts up, but a lot of the nuts would fall on the ground. So the supervisors would give us a bucket, and we'd use the bucket to fill a sack. I think they were paying $3.50 a sack. And sometimes, for nine, ten sacks, they'd give me $30, $40 a day. It was a lot of money….

I married my wife, Alberta, on March 8, 1988. She's also from Oaxaca [and] we speak the same Mixteco…. At the time, my brother-in-law was living in Arvin, [California,] and he asked us to come live with him and his sisters…. After moving to Arvin…I had an appointment at the [U.S.] Immigration office in Fresno, [California]—they asked me where I had worked, what kind of work I had done. That's how I got my green card [i.e., permanent resident documentation]….

We have three children, all born in the United States…. When my kids started going to school, I decided to go to school, too. In 1997, I learned that California Rural Legal Assistance [CRLA] was looking for people who spoke Mixteco and Spanish, so that they could become interpreters. I signed up, got the grant, and went to Salinas, [California,] for interpreter training…. I got my GED in 2001. After that I went to Bakersfield College [in California] and graduated in 2011 with a certificate in Human Resources…. I started working with CRLA on April 26, 1999. I work in the Indigenous Program. I give presentations in schools, or for community agencies, or the people at the consulate; or I talk to the clients, or go to the labor commission, or the radio, or the television….

Prejudice against Indigenous people from other Mexicans can be a problem. People from other [parts of Mexico] think that Indigenous people who can't speak Spanish are dumb, that they are not intelligent…. We are native people from Mexico who have our own language, our own culture…. My favorite part of the work is when we…get involved in a lawsuit about wages, or some other issue they have had in the fields, and win the case for them…. We are only asking to be treated with respect, right?… We are here as well, part of a country of immigrants. In fact, our ancestors lived here in the Americas for a long, long time and the only thing that makes us look like foreigners is the political division of the border, but other than that Indigenous people have always moved around—there were no borders until politics invented them.

Immigrant Stories
Source 8: Samad

Background*: Samad grew up in Iraq and came to the United States as a refugee of the Gulf War (1990-1991). In his twenties, he was offered asylum in the United States after working for the U.S. military during its operations in Iraq. Samad has experienced significant memory loss, and it is difficult to determine if this results from trauma, mental illness, or medical issues—or the realities of all three. The passage below is a narrative excerpt co-produced by scholar Nora J. Kenworthy in close collaboration with Samad (a pseudonym), who at the time was a patient of a northeastern state psychiatric facility. While Americans often talk about "immigration" or "mental hospitals," these conversations too often just talk about numbers, laws, and trends. Samad's story, published in 2016, addresses these systems at the level they are experienced by individual human beings. This source includes a brief mention of suicide.*

[Samad's] settlement process, as is true for many refugees, was difficult, and his transition was made all the more frightening by the voices he had begun hearing. "It was crazy," he remembers, "I walked around in the city, and I didn't even know who I was…I was so scared…I went to the hospital, and the hospital did nothing…[so I left the] hospital…[I was] crazy, crazy." At the time, he was living on a small stipend in an apartment he shared with five other people, and after a few conflicts with his roommates, he left the apartment to seek out accommodations in the city's only homeless shelter**….**

While [Samad] was sleeping outside one night, his wallet and all of his [identification and asylum] papers were stolen…[and he] lost all touch with his family, because he had lost their contact information as well. His memory loss makes reapplying for [identification and asylum] documents especially difficult….

Samad circulated between homeless shelters and the streets in cities throughout the southwestern United States for more than half a decade. Samad's stories from this time period are disjointed but consistently full of fear. The police hassled him relentlessly in encounters that he found threatening and overwhelming. He recalls that when he was in California he heard voices that told him to kill himself. The shelter he was staying in was particularly abysmal, and he felt perennially cold from sleeping outdoors. [Around this time, Samad] walked into traffic and was hit by a car, which broke his leg. At another point, he ran into an Iraqi refugee he knew from his army service. The man was doing well, working for a bank, but he refused to speak to Samad, slamming the door in his face. It is these stories of assaults on his dignity that seem to stick most clearly in his mind.

Eventually, Samad made his way to the East Coast. Soon after, he was admitted involuntarily into an urban psychiatric hospital and from there was transferred to the state hospital for 8 months. Now in the residence, Samad enjoys a gentler life than the one he led on the streets. It is a good place to stay, and he has friends. But he misses his family, and his many letters home either go unanswered or (he suspects) are never sent. He cannot remember any addresses in Iraq. And though he misses his home country, Samad is well aware of the conflicts that have raged through Iraq in his absence and is doubtful he could find a way to survive there, even if he did find his family.

Name: ______________________________

Immigrant Stories
Source 9: Carolina Alvarado Molk

***Background**: Carolina Alvarado Molk was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Brooklyn, New York, where her family settled in 1995. She earned a dual bachelor's in English and religion from Brooklyn College (CUNY) in 2008 and a PhD in English from Princeton University in 2017. She lives and writes in Denver, Colorado. Carolina contributed this essay, "On Paper," to a 2022 collection of stories, poems, and artwork by undocumented and formerly undocumented immigrants to the United States.*

When I got home from my [U.S. citizenship] naturalization ceremony, I looked at my certificate for a long time. They tell you not to laminate it, not to photograph or frame it, but to simply get home and put it away…. I understand the instinct to preserve that document in some way that makes you feel like it won't wither away—it's just a piece of paper. I used to wonder what it would feel like to become a U.S. citizen. I thought it would make me feel safe, free, like I could do anything…. It didn't happen quite that way…. The old anxiety is still there, in my sweating palms when I'm asked for an ID [identification], in my accelerated heartbeat when I see a police officer….

When I was younger, all a stranger had to do was ask me where I was from, and I'd relay my whole life story: my family moved back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the U.S. when I was a child. We settled in Brooklyn for good in 1995. I was open about my status as undocumented—I was bold and defiant and unafraid. Living in New York City, studying and working among immigrants, I trusted that, for the most part, others shared or understood my history. All of that changed in graduate school. Suddenly, I was an ill-fitting piece in a privileged crowd at an elite institution. "Can't you just apply for citizenship?" administrators asked and frowned in pity or confusion when I explained the unique limitations of my undocumented status…. Nobody knew what to do with a student like me, and most weren't interested in learning….

I let my peers think I wasn't up to the teaching requirement, that I was behind in my coursework instead of undocumented and unable to legally teach for the university. I let them think I didn't care to travel, instead of admitting I wasn't able to. I let them believe I was an overly private and unambitious person. I became private and unambitious. I wonder now whether my classmates and colleagues knew all along. It would have been difficult not to.

There is no easy vocabulary for us, for this. There is no vocabulary that can explain what it does to a person to be named "illegal"—before the hashtags, before the "undocumented and unafraid" T-shirts, before newspapers were chastised for calling you "illegal" or an "alien," before it was part of the liberal cause to protest detention centers and to call for the abolishment of ICE. I can tell you that it was terrifying. I can tell you that it was lonely. I can tell you that, as I got older, it got harder and harder to trust people and to connect. I tell myself that I'm safe now. I can vote. I can travel. I can participate. I can be a part of the country I grew up in in a way I couldn't before. And yet—a piece of paper isn't enough to undo the damage done. Or to soothe the fears that have, for decades, made of my body their home.

I became a citizen in May 2019…. I remember the sun shining through the windshield as my husband drove us home from the courthouse after the naturalization ceremony…. I looked out of the passenger window and waited for the difference to set in, for the weight to lift. I've gradually grown more comfortable with my citizenship, and with what it means. I voted for the first time a few months ago. [M]y husband snapped a picture as I dropped my ballot. We shared the smiling photo on social media, and I celebrated, for the first time, that voting was now something I could do. I'm sure to a passersby I looked like any other woman, posing for a picture, voting one more time—but inwardly, something glimmered, something gleamed. Beginnings, like endings, are bittersweet.

Immigrant Stories
Source 10: Saba Nafees

***Background**: Saba Nafees was born in Lahore, Pakistan, before immigrating to the United States with her family in 2004 when she was eleven years old. Saba's grandparents, already U.S. residents, sponsored her and her parents for a green card (permanent resident status). However, before the green card process was completed Saba's grandparents died, which meant Saba and her parents' immigration status changed to "undocumented." Saba later received DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status, earned a PhD at Texas Tech University, and became both a computational biologist and advocate for immigrant rights. She wrote this piece in 2015.*

Growing up in [Lahore, Pakistan,] a city of 13 million people in the midst of what seemed to be chaotic poverty, I wondered why I am fortunate enough to gain an education and thus armor against the poverty that plagued the poor of Pakistan. Why was I the one who was on the other side of their horizons?…

My grandparents moved to America in the early 1990's…. [M]y family and I immigrated to America in 2004. We came legally and knew that since my grandparents had sponsored us for our green cards, we would be able to stay. I hoped to utilize the opportunity of moving into the New World to work hard, continue to pursue my obsessive love for mathematics and science, and gain the tools to help the poverty-stricken…. This journey continues to test my inner strength and faith in this land of justice. My grandparents passed away while we were moving to America and within a few years we fell out of [legal immigration] status. My parents questioned whether we should go back and face the terroristic turmoil that is pervading their native land and risk the future of their children.

So we went on to live a life in the shadows. But we did not commit a crime. If you define crime to be seeking educational opportunity for your children, then yes, we are criminals. If you define crime to be victims of fate, then we are criminals. If you define crime to be falling in love with the country that has become another home to you, then we are criminals.

We lived on…waiting impatiently for a sound immigration system. Relief came when President Obama passed an executive order, DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which would allow young people like me to remain without fear of being deported. The momentum continued to build as I met a phenomenal leader and mentor, Jose Antonio Vargas. He urged young thinkers to join the movement. He showed us that it is possible to be unafraid and undocumented. His story of being torn apart from his family is similar to that of millions. The thought of being separated from my parents still haunts me as they continue to suffer due to [undocumented immigrant] removal proceedings.

Soon after, I found myself on the TEDx [TED talk] stage, humbled to proclaim to the world my love for this country, darkened by immigration roadblocks. Since then, my life has changed drastically. I received words of encouragement from around the world…. Despite recent momentum, the struggle continues with evermore fervor, leading to the movement generated through the Dream Riders. We are traveling from [Washington,] D.C. to Texas in an effort to engage communities in realizing the connection between racial injustice and immigrant rights. [We are sharing] our personal struggle of being in a country which we love and to which we contribute to every day, yet it is one in which we have no political rights…. The cost of freedom is a movement. Not through these small moments and stories, but through the movement that these stories make can we achieve change for our nation.

Immigrant Stories
Source 11: New Latthivongskorn

Background*: New Latthivongskorn was born in Bangkok, Thailand, to a middle-class family. When the Thai economy crashed in the mid-1990s, his family struggled. After years of trying to stay in Thailand, New's parents decided to move to the United States to better support their three children. New joined his parents in California at nine years old. Without legal immigration documentation, he and his family were "undocumented." While a college student at UC Berkeley, New became involved in the immigrant rights movement. He testified before the California state legislature and U.S. Supreme Court (2019) on behalf of undocumented young people. He received DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status and graduated as the first undocumented student from UC San Francisco's medical school. His story was published in 2015.*

It was difficult to make a new start [after coming to America from Thailand as a nine-year-old child]. My parents had been successful business people in Thailand, running their own businesses, and suddenly they were cleaning toilets, mopping floors. Managers would yell at them. And all of it was for my brother, my sister and myself. Coming here meant we could be part of America's public education system. I still can't believe how much my parents sacrificed to make sure we got a good education.

When [my siblings and I] joined my parents [in America], they didn't tell us that we were moving here permanently. We thought we were going on another trip to visit family and have fun. After a few months, they sat us down and told us we were staying. I remember thinking—but what about my toys? Back in Thailand, I had these model robot kits that I loved. I also thought about all my third-grade friends I would never see again. I still had my little phone book with their numbers in it. My parents explained that we were going to be staying here without any visas or green cards. They wanted us to understand that this was what we had to do, that—as a family—this was our only option….

As a family, we were very uninformed about immigration policies and very afraid of what it meant to be undocumented. There was always this looming risk of deportation. And we thought that we were somehow the only undocumented family around, so we didn't tell anyone outside our family….

I always thought I'd be able to go to college. I guess I was naïve…. [T]wo weeks before the deadline to register [at a California university], I got an email that said I was missing some documentation. I went in to talk to the people there and I told them that I didn't have a Social Security number or a green card…. This was the exact phrase they used: "Come back when your status changes." It was only three months before college started and it was one of the biggest roadblocks I'd come up against. I was devastated….

Through [Educators for Fair Consideration, a nonprofit organization that supports undocumented immigrant students], I met other undocumented students and we got together every week to write something about our immigration experience. It became like a therapy session.

I ended up writing two short creative writing pieces that I performed at a commemorative event on Angel Island. There were 150 people in the audience. It was my first public experience, my first time "coming out" as being undocumented. It was scary and powerful at the same time. Everybody in that class shared parts of themselves, they were all vulnerable, and I got to see other people who had gone through similar experiences, who understood what I had gone through. My parents were nervous about my public appearance. In the booklet for the event, we decided to cut off part of our last name, to try to remain slightly anonymous. But my family got to hear other peoples' stories and it was a great moment of growth for all of us….

Immigrant Stories
Source 12: Laila Lalami

***Background**: Laila Lalami was born in Rabat, Morocco, in 1968 to a working-class family. After studying in Morocco and the United Kingdom, Laila traveled to the United States in 1992 on a student visa to begin a PhD in linguistics. Now a U.S. citizen, Laila is a novelist, essayist, and professor at UC Riverside in California. Her story, published in the* New York Times *in 2020, is adapted from her nonfiction book,* Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America.

In books and newspapers, Arabs and Muslims are typically seen through the lens of current events — foreign wars, global migration and especially terrorism. The association is so pervasive that references to it crop up even in situations that have nothing to do with terrorism. At my literary events, for example, I've been asked many times about Al Qaeda and ISIS, as though my being Muslim grants me special insight into transnational terrorist groups that combine Islamist ideology with guerrilla tactics.

Muslim Americans who appear in a public forum will, sooner or later, face that question…. And when [they do], the Muslim faces an impossible choice: Ignore the comment and perpetuate the association with terrorism, or address the comment and perpetuate the association anyway. There is no right answer. There is only the hope, by speaking about oneself, to create room for individuality….

My own life has taken turns I could not have imagined when I stepped off a plane at Los Angeles International Airport on a late-summer afternoon in 1992. Back then, my intention had been to complete a Ph.D. in linguistics, then return home to Morocco, where I planned to work as a college professor. A couple of years into my degree, however, I met an American, we fell in love and eventually married. In choosing to be with him, I chose to embrace his country as well. That made of me an immigrant, the kind of person that America has long mythologized [i.e., created stories that idealize them]….

But even under the best of circumstances, immigration is a traumatic experience that cuts a person's life in two: There is the life before and the life after. For a long time after I moved to the United States, I wore two watches: one that told the time in Los Angeles, and the other the time in Rabat. In the morning, while I was getting ready for class, I would often think about my family, 6,000 miles away, sitting down to afternoon tea. In my memory, everyone back home remained exactly as I had last seen them, as if caught in a photograph. It never occurred to me that, day after day, they were getting older, making new friends, switching jobs or moving houses. They were changing, just as I was changing….

My story of immigration has been enriched by the love of my husband and family, the joy of enduring friendships, the fulfillment I find in my work. But nothing could have prepared me for what I lost. I missed my grandmother's funeral, four of my cousins' weddings and countless birthdays and celebrations with my family. If there was a crisis, I could never be sure that I would be there to help….

These experiences are not unusual; I share them with more than 40 million people in the United States. All immigrants walk around with a scar left behind by their crossing into a new country, an invisible mark of the exile that became their condition when they were uprooted. Their children grow up without grandparents, without aunts and uncles and cousins, without a reservoir of collective family memory passed down through generations.

But while immigrants nurse this immense loss, they also face intense pressure to shed their past and assimilate into the mainstream…. If they cling to a mode of dress, a language or a habit that seems a little too conspicuous to the majority, they might be told that they are not assimilating, or not assimilating enough. If they voice negative opinions about government policies, they might be told they have no standing to speak and that they should "go back home."