

# I AM AN IMMIGRANT

*Leaving, Belonging, Becoming*

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WRITING AS

Dr. Lucas

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Interview participants appear under pseudonyms; nonessential identifying details  
have been generalized to protect privacy.

## DEDICATION

For the child who leaves before knowing what leaving means.

For the parent who calls sacrifice love because there was never time to learn another language for it.

For the person who has built a life in one place while still answering to another.

And for everyone who has ever been asked where home is and discovered that the honest answer is a story.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book follows one editorial rule above all others: the story must earn the lesson before the lesson is stated. Its narrative spine comes from recorded conversations conducted between April 2024 and April 2025, especially the early immigration interviews that first gave the project its shape. The goal is not to explain people until they become examples. It is to let scenes, choices, songs, silences, and contradictions remain on the page long enough to be felt.

This book began as a sentence and then became a question.

The sentence was: **I am an immigrant. Above all, I am a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a cousin, a human being. This is our story.**

The question was simpler: **What does home mean after you leave it?**

I started asking other immigrants that question in recorded conversations in 2024. I asked about home, choice, pivoting, family, fear, work, love, language, happiness, and what people believed they had gained or lost by moving. I did not begin with a formal research protocol. I began as a storyteller trying to understand an experience I had been living since I arrived in the United States from Haiti at twelve.

Those conversations changed the project.

I expected to hear about countries. People kept talking about people.

I expected to hear about houses. People talked about safety.

I expected to hear about success. People talked about unfinished chapters.

I expected immigration to divide neatly into origin and destination. Instead, the stories kept creating a third space: the life between worlds, where someone can love the country they left, belong to the country they entered, and still feel incomplete in both.

Over time I returned to the archive with a more academic question. I compared recurring themes with scholarship on acculturation, narrative identity, transnationalism, intergenerational mobility, social identity, and the meaning of home. That work eventually produced an exploratory framework I call the **Relational Home Model**: the idea that home is not simply a coordinate but an evolving judgment about whether a coherent life can be sustained through five interacting resources - relational safety, cultural continuity, agency, material viability, and future-generational possibility.

This book is the human version of that research.

It is narrative nonfiction, not a statistical portrait of immigrants. The interviews quoted or paraphrased here were never designed to represent every migrant experience. Interviewees are represented by pseudonyms, and nonessential identifying details are withheld or generalized where appropriate. Scenes and quotations are drawn from recorded conversations and participant accounts. Sensitive health and therapy material from the broader archive has not been used to build the narrative.

I also resist the idea that “the immigrant experience” is one experience. Legal status, race, class, gender, age at migration, reason for migration, country of origin, language, family structure, and destination all alter what migration means. A person fleeing war does not make the same journey as a graduate student. A child does not migrate like a parent. A worker with a visa does not face the same constraints as someone without legal status. A Black Haitian immigrant is racialized in the United States in ways that may be different from how another immigrant is read. A wealthy migrant and a low-wage migrant can cross the same airport and enter radically different worlds.

The common ground in these pages is therefore not sameness.

It is humanity under movement.

This is a book about what happens when geography changes faster than identity; when opportunity grows but belonging does not; when parents sacrifice for children who adapt to a new world more quickly than they do; when food and music carry a country farther than a passport can; when success creates new choices and new forms of distance; and when the word *home* stops being a location and becomes an ethical question.

I have tried to let research sharpen the story without suffocating it. The end of the book contains research notes and a bibliography for readers who want the scholarship beneath the ideas. Studies are described within the populations they actually examined; no single sample is treated as proof of a universal immigrant truth.

Most of all, I have tried to honor the first purpose of the project: letting people be more complicated than the labels applied to them.

If the book does its job, you will not finish it believing that immigrants are all resilient, all traumatized, all ambitious, all grateful, all homesick, or all anything.

You will finish it remembering that every category contains a person before it contains a theory.

Several interview participants return across multiple chapters. That choice is deliberate. Character is revealed through recurrence: the same person can speak differently about home, work, family, faith, ambition, and the future, and those differences are part of the truth rather than inconsistencies to be edited away.

## **A NOTE ON VOICES AND SCENES**

This book draws most deeply from the recorded interview archive spanning April 4, 2024 through April 2025. Several voices recur across chapters because people develop across questions: a definition of home changes when the same person is asked about work, parenthood, faith, money, music, or return. Later author reflection and scholarship are used to interpret the archive, but the narrative spine comes from those recorded conversations.

All non-public interview participants are represented by deliberately unrelated pseudonyms throughout the book. I have also generalized nonessential identifying details - including

exact institutions, locations, job titles, and sequencing - when those details are not necessary to the meaning of the story. The purpose is to preserve the human truth of the conversation without making the book a map back to the speaker.

Scenes drawn from interviews are reconstructed only from recorded material and the speaker's account. Dialogue is quoted only when it is present in the archive; elsewhere I paraphrase. I do not invent dialogue, interior thoughts, or sensory details for another person's life.

## PROLOGUE - The Word Before the Story

I was twelve years old when I became an immigrant. That sentence is accurate in the language of biography. It is inaccurate in the language of experience.

At twelve, I did not wake up and become a category.

I was already a child with memories. I had people whose voices meant safety. I had routines, jokes, fears, preferences, ideas about adults, ideas about the world, and a private sense of what was normal. I had a city before I had a destination. I had a life before anyone needed to know how to pronounce my last name in English.

Then I moved from Haiti to the United States, and the new country did what countries do: it organized me.

New student. English learner. Black. Haitian. Immigrant. The labels were not always malicious. Institutions need categories to operate. Teachers need records. Governments need status. Researchers need variables. But categories create an optical illusion. Once a label becomes visible, it begins to look like the beginning of the story. It is not.

Every immigrant arrives in the middle of a sentence.

The country of destination encounters us after the first chapters have already been written.

That may be the first thing I want this book to make impossible to forget.

In Brooklyn, I learned basketball and English close enough together that the memories overlap. I remember the gym, the noise, the feeling of trying to understand what was expected before I possessed the vocabulary to ask. One word followed me through those early years: *pivot*.

On a basketball court, a pivot is controlled change. One foot remains planted while the rest of the body turns. The move creates options without surrendering balance.

I did not know then that the word would become a theory of immigration for me.

Migration is full of turns. Language turns. Identity turns. Family roles turn. A child may become the interpreter for an adult. A professional may become a beginner again because credentials do not transfer. A parent may work beneath their previous status so a child can climb above it. Someone who never thought much about nationality may become fiercely attached to culture after leaving. Someone who dreamed of return may discover the destination is now home. Someone who spent a life trying to leave may later spend years trying to recover what leaving made invisible.

The turn is obvious. The anchor is harder to see. What stays planted while a person changes countries?

That question followed me into adulthood. For years, like many immigrants, I was busy building. School. Work. Career. Travel.

Relationships. The practical tasks of life are efficient at delaying philosophical questions. You do what must be done. You learn systems. You become competent. Competence is seductive because it can look like belonging from a distance.

Then there are moments when the distinction becomes impossible to ignore. You can be doing well and feel strangely absent from your own life.

You can have a home and miss home. You can love the opportunities a country gave you and resent the parts of yourself you had to translate to receive them.

You can outgrow the goals that once justified every sacrifice and feel guilty for wanting something else.

You can sit at a table surrounded by people and discover that loneliness is not a measure of population density.

That is when the immigrant story becomes a human story.

The United Nations estimates that roughly 304 million people were international migrants in 2024 - about 3.7 percent of the world's population. The number is enormous, but the percentage contains a useful reminder: most human beings do not live outside their country of birth or citizenship context. Migration is common enough to shape the world and unusual enough to alter the structure of a life.

Numbers tell us scale. Stories tell us texture. A number cannot tell us what happens when a smell from a kitchen causes someone to feel seven years old again.

A number cannot tell us why a successful professional leaves a prestigious networking event wanting to go home to people with whom nothing must be explained.

A number cannot tell us why a woman can leave Florida desperate for change, build a meaningful life in Chicago, and later discover that distance taught her how much a Haitian community in South Florida had been holding her all along.

A number cannot tell us why a migrant sends money home while resenting the expectation, then feels guilty for the resentment.

It cannot tell us how a child hears a parent's accent after classmates laugh at it.

It cannot tell us why the same song can make one person dance and another grieve.

It cannot tell us what a house means after the family inside it changes.

This book lives in that territory. It is not an argument that immigrants are morally better because they suffer or work hard. That mythology can be flattering and dehumanizing at the same time. It makes worth contingent on exceptional performance.

It is also not an argument that migration is inherently tragic. Movement can save lives, create love, expand imagination, and multiply opportunity. Many migrants choose movement gladly. Many return. Many do not. Many live transnationally, refusing the old assumption that one country must replace another inside the self.

The argument is narrower. Migration makes visible a set of questions every human being eventually faces:

Who am I when the environment that once confirmed my identity disappears? Which parts of the past deserve preservation, and which were merely survival strategies?

How much of success is chosen and how much inherited? What do I owe the people who sacrificed for me? What do I owe myself? What does it mean to belong without becoming smaller?

Where is home when safety, opportunity, family, memory, and purpose point in different directions?

And how do we pivot without pretending the person we were before the turn no longer matters?

The interviews that became this book did not resolve those questions. They made them better.

That may be the most important role of a story. An answer can close a door.

A good question teaches us how to enter the room.

## The First Time the Question Left My Mouth

By April 2024, I had already written versions of the ideas in this book. I had pages about home. I had pages about pivoting. I had the basketball metaphor. I had quotations from songs and notes about immigration, ambition, family, and belonging. What I did not yet have was a reliable sense of which ideas belonged only to me and which would survive contact with another person's life. So I began asking people to listen.

The early conversations had a simple structure. I would share a piece of the book on a screen, read it aloud, and then ask the person on the other side what the words brought up for them. I was not conducting a standardized research interview. I was trying to create enough room for a person to disagree with the premise, wander away from my question, return through a memory, or tell me that I had the problem framed incorrectly. The looseness mattered. It made the archive less useful for estimating how common any experience was, but more useful for discovering what I had failed to ask.

On April 10, I spoke with the woman I call Simone in these pages. I read an early chapter on home. At that point my language was still full of conclusions. Home was where the heart was. Home was love rather than a house. The grass was greener where you watered it. I had the kind of sentences writers reach for when they have identified a theme but have not yet stayed inside enough lives to understand its limits. Simone listened. Then she complicated the premise.

She had come to the United States from Haiti as a teenager. When I asked where home was now, she did not answer as if I

had asked for proof of loyalty. Haiti was origin, memory, family, and identity. The United States was also home because her adult life had accumulated there and because a place had to be livable in the present, not only beloved in retrospect. At one point I used a conditional phrase: if Haiti were better. She caught the word if. The correction was small enough to disappear in a transcript and large enough to change the book. I was still treating home as if affection could be separated cleanly from safety, infrastructure, opportunity, and the ordinary ability to exhale.

A few days later, Daniel told me he had lived versions of himself in Haiti, Norway, and the United States that did not fit neatly together. Another interviewee described paying a parent's rent while realizing that money had become a way to avoid a harder emotional conversation. Avery explained that she had needed to leave South Florida to understand what a dense Haitian community had been giving her. Grace, months later, would describe an older sister as the person who made unfamiliar places feel survivable because the sister remembered all the earlier versions of her. Again and again, a question I thought was about geography returned as a question about relationship. That was the beginning of the real book.

The archive also changed the way I understood interviewing. I learned to ask for a song. The question sounded lighter than asking someone for a theory of identity, but it often produced more specific answers. A person who struggled to explain home could explain why a song played at Christmas made a particular street appear in memory. A person who spoke abstractly about

resilience could tell me what he played when he needed to remember that people from circumstances like his had overcome long odds. Music did not make the testimony more truthful by itself. It made some memories easier to reach.

I also learned to ask people to leave a question for the next reader. That reversed the direction of the interview. The participant was no longer only answering me. For a moment, the person became the interviewer. What keeps you in the game? What is life without love? Is home real, or partly a dream? The questions were not interchangeable. Their differences were the point.

Looking back at the recordings now, I can hear my own development in them. In the earliest calls I often moved quickly to interpretation. Someone would say something difficult, and I would rush to connect it to a lesson, a quote, another story, a framework. I was trying to be useful. I was also sometimes protecting myself from uncertainty. A lesson gives a conversation an ending. Listening does not always provide one.

This book tries to correct that habit on the page. When a mother describes choosing childcare over a larger house, I want to remain with the choice before naming the economics. When a young man describes three years away from his family and the thought that a funeral might become the event that finally brought him home, I do not want to hurry toward a moral about courage. When a woman remembers being three years old, unable to speak the language around her, and waiting for the one familiar person in the household to return, the scene should not have to become a metaphor immediately.

That is the wager of the book: the people are more interesting than the lessons I can extract from them.

Research still matters. It helps distinguish a recurring pattern from a private intuition, and it places individual testimony beside larger literatures on migration decisions, acculturation, family obligation, transnational parenting, autobiographical memory, and social connectedness. But research works best here when it arrives as a light, not a replacement landscape. It can help us see the mechanism. It cannot tell us what it felt like to be that particular person in that particular room.

The book therefore begins again where the archive began: with a question asked before I knew how much it would change me.

What does home mean after you leave it? The Screen  
Between Us

The first archive conversations were not polished literary interviews. Many began with ordinary technical negotiation: Can you see my screen? Is the text large enough? Can you hear me? I would open pages that were still changing, explain that the person would be able to review how the story was used, and then read. The awkwardness became part of the method. I was not arriving as an invisible narrator who already understood the material. The participants could see the unfinished argument in front of them.

That mattered because they could correct it before the book hardened around my assumptions.

With Simone, the correction arrived almost immediately. I had been writing as if home could be solved by choosing the right definition. She kept moving the definition back toward conditions: connection, safety, family, the ability to live rather than merely claim an origin. In another conversation, a participant responded to my language about pivoting by telling me that he could not think about risk without thinking about his mother's rent. I had written about courage. He introduced dependents. Grace would later hear my writing on home and tell me that the concept had always felt elusive because she had moved too often for a building to carry it. Daniel heard adaptation and gave me a roommate he had once offended.

Those responses forced a different relationship between author and archive. I could no longer use interviewees as illustrations after the thesis was complete. The thesis had to remain vulnerable to them.

The book preserves more of that vulnerability. It allows some of my early questions to remain visible precisely because the questions were sometimes wrong. A writer's growth is not proved by removing every trace of misunderstanding from the earlier pages. Sometimes the misunderstanding is the plot.

That is also why I keep returning to the date range that formed the center of the project: April 2024 through April 2025. During that year the same themes surfaced in people who did not share identical migration histories. First-generation Haitians, second-generation children of immigrants, people who had moved among several countries, people who had migrated young, people whose adulthood unfolded in a

destination their parents had chosen, people trying to decide whether to return, and people building diaspora institutions all kept pushing the questions away from nationality alone.

They talked about mothers. They talked about siblings. They talked about rent.

They talked about songs. They talked about the way success changes the meaning of old obligations.

They talked about the strange fact that distance can make a community more visible than proximity ever did.

I had started with immigration because immigration was the category I knew. The archive kept returning me to relationship because relationship was the mechanism underneath so many of the stories.

That shift is the narrative arc of the book as much as any move from Haiti to Brooklyn. I began by asking what immigrants experience. I ended up asking how human beings preserve continuity while the systems around them change. The archive also taught me something about evidence.

A recording can preserve what memory tends to smooth. When I returned to the earliest conversations, sequences I had remembered as simple became richer and harder. One mother was not merely offering advice about home and parenting. She was revisiting what she had experienced as a daughter, what she had learned as a social worker, and what she had chosen to measure differently as a parent. The order mattered. So did the hesitations, the examples, and the contradictions that disappeared when the story was reduced to a lesson.

That distinction became a rule: no summary and no later memory is allowed to outrank the recording. A summary can tell me where to look. It cannot tell me what happened. I remember some interviews as cleaner than they were. I remember certain phrases as if they arrived fully formed. The recordings show pauses, repetitions, detours, technical problems, jokes, corrections, and the ordinary disorder through which meaning actually appeared. Preserving that disorder selectively is part of preserving truth.

The date range matters for the same reason. I returned to the archive from April 4, 2024 through April 2025 because that is where the book's questions were being tested in real time. Dates and quotations were checked against the recordings whenever possible rather than reconstructed from memory. A narrative can be coherent without pretending the archive is cleaner than it is.

That may sound like a small methodological point. It is not. Immigration stories are already vulnerable to simplification. A writer can make them too clean by accident: one country becomes home, one parent becomes sacrifice, one song becomes identity, one career choice becomes courage, one return trip becomes closure. The archive resists that. It shows people contradicting themselves because human beings contain more than one valid answer at a time.

The purpose of the book is therefore not to extract neat lessons from complicated lives. It is to let people occupy enough space for the lesson to arrive honestly: Simone as a daughter and a mother; Daniel before and after the roommate meeting in

Norway; Malcolm calculating risk while his mother's rent sits inside the calculation; Grace moving through childhood with a sister who made unfamiliar places legible; Avery hearing South Florida inside a genre of music after Chicago taught her what distance can reveal; Imani recognizing that resilience can be taught without a lecture, through the look on a mother's face and the decisions children watch adults make; Julian trying to decide whether prestige is a direction or only a signal.

The book still makes an argument. It simply waits longer before making it.

## **PART I - LEAVING**

# Chapter 1 - The First Border Is Invisible

## THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*Who were you before the world learned which category to put you in?*

I became an immigrant twice.

The first time was geographic. I was twelve, leaving Cap-Haïtien and entering a United States that had existed in my imagination before I knew how it would feel against my skin. The second time happened more quietly. It happened when other people began supplying words for me: newcomer, English learner, Haitian, Black, immigrant. None of those words was false. The shock was discovering how quickly a true word can become an incomplete story. Before America, I had already been somebody.

That fact sounds obvious until you notice how often migration narratives begin at the border, as if the person did not exist until a new country began documenting them. A passport records departure and arrival. A school form records language. A census records origin. A résumé records education and work. None of them can record the private civilization a child has already built: who makes him laugh, which adult voice means safety, what food means Sunday, what shame sounds like, which streets he can cross without thinking, who he is when nobody is translating him.

Brooklyn did not ask for that full archive. Brooklyn asked me to learn. English. School. Neighborhood. Basketball.

The gym became one of my first laboratories of American life. I was new to the sport, and one instruction kept cutting through the noise: pivot. I understood the body before I understood the metaphor. Plant one foot. Turn with the other. Protect the ball. Find an angle. Do not travel. The sound lodged in me.

Years later I would become fascinated by the elegance of the rule. A pivot is movement disciplined by an anchor. You are allowed to change direction precisely because something remains planted. That is a better description of immigration than the language of “starting over.” Immigrants almost never start over. We start again while carrying what came before. We learn a new grammar with an old memory. We enter new institutions with inherited fears. We gain options while remaining answerable to people who remember us before the options existed.

That distinction matters because “starting over” can make erasure sound noble. It can suggest that successful adaptation is measured by how little evidence remains of the person who arrived. My life did not work that way.

For roughly my first nine years in the United States, Haiti receded from the center of my attention. I was busy doing what young immigrants often do when the future feels urgent: learning the system in front of me. School became a map. Achievement became proof. Brooklyn became ordinary enough to become home. It was not that Haiti had stopped mattering. It

was that survival and ambition are greedy with attention. Then, in college, Haiti came back into focus.

I returned through a university project concerned with poverty and motivation. The trip disturbed a story I had been telling without realizing it. I had grown up around children whose intelligence I remembered vividly. I knew I had not been the smartest child in every room. Yet my life had expanded through opportunities that were not distributed according to intelligence. I had crossed into systems that gave me leverage: schools, networks, credentials, information, people who could explain what door came next.

The border I began thinking about was no longer the line between countries. It was the line between a person and the opportunities that make their potential visible.

That is the first invisible border in this book. There will be others: the border between access and belonging, between gratitude and obedience, between cultural continuity and fear of change, between earning more and feeling at home, between the family story you inherit and the life you are allowed to author.

When I began interviewing other immigrants, I expected the stories to confirm my ideas. Instead they corrected them.

A woman who came from Haiti at sixteen told me that the United States had become home not because origin no longer mattered, but because home required connection and safety in the present. A young Haitian man who had lived across Haiti, Norway, Denmark, and the United States told me he could adapt almost anywhere and still feel fiercely attached to being

Haitian. A second-generation Nigerian-American woman heard my chapter on pivoting and immediately thought not of herself but of her parents. Their choices, she said, had become an instruction they never needed to say aloud.

The interviews kept teaching the same lesson in different forms: immigration is not one event. It is a long negotiation over what is allowed to change and what must remain recognizable.

At twelve, I thought the difficult part was learning how to turn. I understand now that the harder question is deciding what deserves to stay planted.

## **What the Word Could Not Explain**

When I first read the early "pivot" pages aloud in interviews, I was still trying to prove the metaphor. I had learned the word on a basketball court; I liked its geometry: one foot stays planted while the body changes direction. I expected people to tell me that immigration worked the same way. Instead, they told me what the metaphor was missing.

Daniel had lived across Haiti, Northern Europe, and the United States. He described the experience not as one smooth expansion but as several lives that belonged to the same person without fitting neatly together. He could carry new beliefs and new ambitions while remaining fiercely attached to family, faith, and the name he wanted people to remember. Change, in his account, was not difficult because he lacked courage. It was difficult because some changes seemed to threaten the continuity of the person who had agreed to change.

Malcolm heard the word differently. His decisions were connected to people who depended on him. A career risk could show up in someone else's household as unpaid rent or a missing transfer. He also recognized that money could become a shortcut: easier to send than to stay inside a difficult emotional conversation. For him, a pivot was never only a turn toward possibility. It was a negotiation with obligation.

Those conversations changed the book before they changed any theory in it. I had been treating the planted foot as identity. Daniel and Malcolm forced me to see that the anchor could also be relationship, responsibility, memory, moral commitment, or fear - and that those are not interchangeable.

Migration researchers Mathias Czaika, Jakub Bijak, and Toby Prike describe migration decisions as choices made under uncertain outcomes, incomplete information, different planning horizons, and unequal degrees of agency. That language is useful because it removes a moral halo from movement. A person can be brave and constrained at the same time. A person can make a rational choice with bad options.

At twelve, I thought the difficult part was learning how to turn. The archive taught me to ask a harder question: what, exactly, is the foot I refuse to lift - and did I choose it?

Years later, I would come to understand the danger in celebrating only the turn. America loves the immigrant success story when it can be compressed into a clean sequence: arrival, struggle, work, achievement, gratitude. The form is comforting because it converts uncertainty into inevitability. But real lives branch. The student succeeds and still feels lonely. The

professional earns more money and misses the communal life that money cannot reproduce. The parent gives a child opportunities that were once unimaginable and worries that the child may inherit none of the language that carried the family there.

The invisible border does not disappear because the salary changes.

One of the interviewees in my archive described home through the opposite of performance. She felt at home when she did not have to put on a cover. Another described a sibling as the person who made home portable through years of moving. Others located home in music, a Haitian restaurant, a language spoken without translation, a church, a familiar rhythm of teasing, a person who knew the context behind a sentence before the sentence ended.

What they were describing was not nostalgia alone. They were describing cognitive rest. Belonging is partly the relief of not having to explain yourself from zero.

That insight changed the way I understood my own arrival. At twelve, I was not merely learning English, basketball, school routines, or a new city. I was learning how much of a self is carried by the environments that already know what to do with it. When those environments change, identity does not vanish. It becomes more visible to the person carrying it.

The first lesson of immigration, then, is not that we must become resilient. Most immigrants have heard enough praise of resilience to know that the word can become a polite way of

admiring how much people are forced to endure. The first lesson is more precise: **notice the anchor before you celebrate the turn.**

Ask what must remain true while everything else changes. For a child, it may be a language spoken at home. For an adult, it may be a moral commitment, a faith, a family role, a craft, a memory, or a way of treating people. The anchor need not be static. It must simply be conscious enough that adaptation does not become accidental self-erasure.

Migration teaches movement. A meaningful life requires knowing what is allowed to move and what should not.

## **Before the Category**

When I think back to the age of twelve, I do not remember immigration as a policy topic. I remember the practical humiliations of not knowing. A child enters a room and discovers that everyone else seems to understand the choreography. The teacher says something and the class moves. A coach shouts an instruction and bodies respond. A joke lands and people laugh before you have finished translating the words. Nothing dramatic has to happen for a person to feel outside the rhythm.

This is one reason childhood migration deserves its own language. Adults often imagine children as naturally adaptable, and in one sense they are. A child can acquire pronunciation, slang, technology, and school routines with remarkable speed. But speed should not be confused with costlessness. Adaptation can happen at the same time as confusion, embarrassment, grief, and an intense desire not to look confused.

The instinct to hide not knowing is powerful. It teaches observation. You watch who speaks first. You learn which mistakes invite laughter. You notice how adults pronounce your name and decide whether correcting them is worth the interruption. You discover that competence in one country does not automatically transfer as visible competence in another. Even childhood has credentials.

Years later, interviewing other immigrants, I recognized versions of that same process in adults. A new arrival may be an accomplished professional and still need help understanding a lease, health insurance, credit scores, school districts, workplace small talk, or how aggressively to follow up after an interview. The skill deficit is often not intellectual. It is contextual.

That distinction matters. If we mistake contextual unfamiliarity for inability, we waste human capacity. Schools lower expectations. Employers misread silence. Newcomers internalize confusion as inadequacy. The person spends energy proving basic competence instead of applying it.

I think of this as the first invisible border: the boundary between what an institution explains and what it assumes everyone already knows. Physical borders are visible because governments mark them. Tacit borders are harder. They live inside sentences such as, ‘Everybody knows that,’ or ‘That’s just how it works.’

But everybody does not know. Somebody taught the people who know, even if the lesson was delivered indirectly through family, class, neighborhood, school, or repeated exposure. The immigrant becomes a student of the implicit.

That can become a strength. I learned to ask what a system is really doing beneath the language it uses to describe itself. I learned to notice process. I learned that rules have formal and informal versions. Those habits later looked like engineering, product thinking, operations, strategy, and entrepreneurship. Their earlier form was simpler: a child trying to understand the room before the room understood him.

## **What the research illuminates - Adaptation Is Not a Single Score**

Acculturation research helps clarify why arrival cannot be reduced to a straight line from foreign to assimilated. John Berry's influential framework distinguishes among different orientations toward heritage culture and the receiving society, but the broader lesson is more important than any four-box model: adaptation occurs across domains, and people can change differently in each one.

Language can shift quickly while values change slowly. Professional integration can occur without social belonging. A person can develop strong national identification with a destination while becoming more intentional about heritage practices at home. Someone can be economically successful and culturally lonely. Another can be deeply embedded in an ethnic community while remaining institutionally marginalized.

The receiving environment also matters. Adaptation is not something an immigrant performs alone. Schools, laws, labor markets, neighborhoods, discrimination, legal status, and community networks shape the available strategies. The

language of adaptation can become unfair when it treats the destination society as a fixed exam and the immigrant as the only student being graded.

A better question is relational: what changes in the person, what changes in the environment, and what kind of fit becomes possible between them?

That question returns throughout this book because it changes the moral frame. The immigrant is not simply succeeding or failing to become like everyone else. A human being is negotiating continuity and change under particular conditions.

At twelve, I would not have said any of this. I would have said I was learning English, learning basketball, learning school, learning America.

Only later did I understand that I was also learning which parts of myself the new environment could recognize without translation - and which parts I would have to carry until I found language for them.

The interviews would eventually teach me that every migration contains two timelines: the date the body moved and the slower period in which identity learns what the move meant. My border crossing happened once. My understanding of it is still happening. That is why the rest of this book returns repeatedly to the same people. Character is not revealed by one answer; it is revealed by what a person carries from one question into the next.

Before asking an immigrant how well they have adapted, ask what they have had to translate. Before praising a successful

pivot, ask what it cost. And before reducing arrival to the moment someone entered a country, remember that the deeper crossing may have happened at a lunch table, in a classroom, or in the instant a child realized that the world understood them differently than home once did.

The border on the map matters. The border inside the self can last longer.

## Before the Category

When I began the recorded conversations, I often introduced the project by explaining what had bothered me since childhood: how quickly a country can meet a person through a category. I could describe my life before migration, but institutions in the United States first needed different information. What language did I speak? What grade belonged on the form? What services did I need? Where was I born? Which boxes applied?

None of those questions was unreasonable. Together, however, they created a strange compression. A child can arrive with a complete social world and still appear administratively as a set of needs.

In one of the April conversations, I tried to explain this problem to another Haitian immigrant. I told him that people often wanted the story after the label: the hardworking immigrant, the poor kid who made it, the Black professional who proved himself. He laughed at the stereotype because he recognized the speed with which a neighborhood, school, or workplace can decide what kind of person it expects. We had both crossed borders young enough to learn the American categories as if they were new vocabulary words.

The part I understand more clearly now is that categorization does not merely describe a newcomer. It can reorganize what the newcomer notices about himself. In Haiti, I did not wake every morning thinking about being Haitian. Haitian was the background condition of life. In the United States, origin became foreground. Race became foreground.

Accent became foreground. Things that had once required no explanation became the first explanation.

That reversal is easy to underestimate because identity is often discussed as if it exists entirely inside the person. It does not. Identity is partly autobiographical and partly relational. We learn who we are through what other people repeatedly notice, reward, question, mispronounce, fear, admire, and misunderstand. Migration changes the audience while the person is still speaking.

This is one reason the sentence every immigrant arrives in the middle of a sentence matters to me. The phrase is not an argument that childhood before migration was whole or idyllic. My Haiti contained beauty and constraint, affection and inequality, ordinary joy and realities I did not have the language to analyze as a child. The point is continuity. Whatever the first chapters contained, they existed.

The interviews forced me to become more precise about that continuity. Imani, the second-generation Nigerian-American woman who appears later in the book, never crossed the same border her parents crossed. Yet when she listened to an early version of the pivot chapter, she immediately thought of their lives. She had spent years wondering why striving felt so natural to her. Her parents, she realized, had not needed to deliver a speech about resilience. Their behavior had become instruction. They had demonstrated adaptation before she had a word for it.

That insight widened the book. Immigration does not end with the migrant. It can continue as household atmosphere: what is considered risky, what counts as a respectable career,

how adults react to wasted food, how quickly a child is expected to become self-sufficient, which opportunities feel too fragile to refuse, which mistakes seem affordable, how love is shown when the adults do not narrate love in the language the child expects.

The archive also made me notice the reverse process. Children translate the destination country back into the household. Sometimes literally, through language brokering. Sometimes socially, by bringing home school norms, slang, expectations about privacy, ideas about gender or friendship, and assumptions that did not exist in the parents' childhood. The family is not simply transmitting culture downward. Culture is moving in both directions at different speeds.

This is where the first border becomes invisible. The border is not only the airport, checkpoint, visa, or passport stamp. It is the moment a child learns that a behavior considered ordinary in one setting carries a different meaning in another. It is the realization that the jokes that make sense at home require footnotes at school. It is the first time a parent needs help navigating an institution the child can already read. It is the first time success in the new world creates distance from the people whose sacrifice helped make that success possible.

Those moments do not always hurt. Some are funny. Some expand the self. Some give a young person the exhilarating realization that there are many ways to live. But even positive expansion can create a private accounting problem: if I become more than the people who raised me imagined, am I becoming less of what they hoped I would remain?

Daniel gave this problem a name without intending to. He spoke of his life in Haiti, Norway, and the United States as three lives in one. They were all his, yet they did not automatically translate to each other. His parents in Haiti could love him completely without understanding the niche technical work he was learning to do abroad. The people who knew him in Europe could understand the newer version of his thinking without knowing the family history attached to his name. No single audience had the complete archive.

That is not a pathology. It is one ordinary consequence of movement. The mistake is to demand that a person resolve it into a cleaner identity than life actually produced. The destination country often asks for a simplified answer: Where are you from? The origin community may ask its own version: Are you still one of us? The immigrant can spend years performing coherence for both sides.

I am less interested now in coherence than in capacity. Can a person hold multiple chapters without treating one as evidence against another? Can a family allow a child to adapt without reading every adaptation as rejection? Can institutions meet newcomers without assuming the administrative label is the beginning of the biography?

Those are not abstract inclusion questions. They shape what people are willing to reveal. They determine whether a newcomer enters a classroom or workplace as a person with knowledge or as a person presumed to lack it. They influence whether a child learns to hide the food, language, parent, religion, or neighborhood that once felt ordinary.

The first border is invisible because it moves inside the story. Long after the flight ends, the crossing continues in small acts of interpretation. Before the Passport, a Child

The earliest version of this book, written before I had enough interviews to distrust my own framing, treated immigration as a dramatic crossing followed by an equally dramatic test of resilience. That was not false. It was incomplete. At twelve, I did cross from Haiti into a new country, a new language environment, a new school system, and a different social map. But the child who crossed did not experience those changes as categories from a sociology textbook. He experienced them as tasks.

Learn the words people use here. Learn the game. Learn what the teacher means when the instruction is not only in the sentence but in the tone. Learn which joke is safe. Learn which silence means confusion and which silence means that everyone else already understands. Learn the routes, the expectations, the rituals, the names of things that were ordinary to everyone except you.

Basketball became one of those classrooms. I have written often about the word pivot because I first knew it physically. The coach could tell me to keep one foot planted and turn the body. The rule was visible. If I moved the wrong foot, the whistle explained the error. Life outside the gym was less generous. Social rules rarely arrived with a whistle. A person could violate one without knowing a rule existed.

That is one reason the immigrant child can appear unusually observant. Observation is not always personality. Sometimes it is

survival through pattern recognition. Watch what gets rewarded. Watch which pronunciation produces a puzzled face. Watch how the other children ask for help. Watch how adults speak differently to one another than they speak to you. The work is cognitive, social, and emotional at once, but from the outside it can look like ordinary adjustment.

Years later, when I began interviewing other immigrants, I kept hearing versions of the same hidden curriculum. Daniel did not struggle to understand the English definition of tolerance. He had to discover that a belief carried from one moral world could injure a person in another. Grace's problem at three was not simply that she lacked English. It was that the people, place, and language were all unfamiliar at the same time, which made her older sister's return after school feel like orientation. Avery did not need a dictionary to understand Chicago. She needed distance from South Florida before she could see how much family, music, faith, and familiarity had been doing for her there.

The immigrant category therefore arrives after the human experience has already begun. The child is not asking how to acculturate. The child is asking whether he can understand the assignment before everyone notices that he does not understand it.

This is also where the American story can become misleading. We like beginnings that make later achievement look inevitable. A child arrives, learns, works, excels. The sequence is satisfying because the struggle appears to contain its own solution. But the archive keeps showing the contingency

that the polished story removes. A different teacher, neighborhood, friend, legal status, family income, illness, school track, or moment of violence can change the branch. Two children with similar ability can enter institutions that reveal radically different menus of possibility.

I saw that more clearly when I returned to Haiti through a university project years after leaving. For much of my first nine years in the United States, Haiti had receded from daily attention. College brought it back into focus. I traveled with a group observing philanthropic and health-related work, and the return unsettled the easy idea that talent naturally finds its path. I remember asking whether people ran for exercise there because running had become normal in my American college life. The question sounded absurd in context. The reaction reminded me that even habits I now treated as ordinary were products of environment, infrastructure, leisure, safety, and access.

The trip did not prove that America had made me better. It showed me how thoroughly environment had changed what I could imagine as normal.

That is a more useful starting point for this book than resilience alone. Resilience describes what a person does under pressure. It does not tell us who designed the pressure, who had alternatives, who could make a mistake without catastrophe, or whose talent was visible to an institution capable of converting talent into opportunity.

When I say now that every immigrant arrives in the middle of a sentence, I mean that literally at the level of development. The receiving country meets a person after family has already

taught love, danger, respect, shame, work, gender, religion, humor, food, authority, and possibility. The new environment does not write on blank paper. It writes beside earlier handwriting.

The first border is invisible because the deepest crossing happens in the rules a person begins to revise without announcing that revision to anyone, including himself.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Which label have you mistaken for a complete description of yourself?*

## Chapter 2 - Home Is Not a Coordinate

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*If every address disappeared, which people, sounds, and rituals would still make you feel at home?*

When she was three years old, the woman I was interviewing came to the United States with her father and her older sister. Her sister was six and went to school. The adults went to work. The younger child was left in unfamiliar rooms, sometimes at home, sometimes in care, without the language that would have made those rooms legible.

She does not describe that period with a theory. She remembers a person. Her sister would come back.

That return became orientation. The older girl was the one familiar element inside a world that had changed too quickly. Years later, after more movement—back to Haiti, away for school, Florida, Long Island, more houses, more classrooms, college, graduate school, study abroad—the woman still reached for the same definition. Home was not the building. Home was the person through whom she did not have to explain the whole journey.

Listening to her, I realized how easily adults confuse stability with address. She had changed addresses repeatedly. Yet a form of continuity traveled beside her. Her sister knew the before and the after. She had witnessed the moves rather than hearing them summarized. In a life cut into geographic chapters, another person carried the unabridged edition.

That is one reason the word home becomes so complicated in immigrant lives. A place can be beloved and unsafe. A new country can be safe and culturally lonely. A childhood neighborhood can survive perfectly in memory while changing beyond recognition in real life. A person can own property in one city and feel most at ease in a kitchen hundreds of miles away. Home can be the country you left, the city that received you, the person who remembers your first language, or the room in which you finally stop performing competence.

Simone was a teenager when she migrated from the Caribbean. When I asked where home was, she did not treat the answer as a patriotic test. America was home because much of her adult life had unfolded there and because connection had accumulated there. Haiti remained origin, memory, and identity; it did not automatically remain the place where she could live with the greatest sense of safety.

Her answer unsettled a sentimental version of migration I had carried.

I had wanted home to be morally simple. The homeland was the place you loved most purely; the destination was the place you used for opportunity. But people are not required to preserve geography in order to prove loyalty. Sometimes the place that

formed you cannot provide the conditions in which the present version of you can flourish. Sometimes leaving is not betrayal. Sometimes staying away is grief.

Another Haitian woman complicated the question in the opposite direction. She could feel “home” in places that were not Haiti at all: in parts of the Caribbean, in Haitian neighborhoods in American cities, among people who understood Creole, food, music, humor, and the shorthand that let her lower her guard. She described home with relational words—welcome, safe, appreciated, unjudged, valued, comfortable, able to be herself.

Notice what is absent from that list. Square footage. Ownership. Prestige. A particular flag.

The interview that brought the point into clearest focus happened when she compared two kinds of rooms. One was professionally valuable: accomplished people, prestigious institutions, the sort of networking environment that could advance a career. The other was socially ordinary: close friends, many of them Haitian or Caribbean, gathered without the need to turn every interaction into an exchange of advantage.

In the first room, she monitored herself. In the second, she could take the cover off.

That phrase changed the way I thought about belonging. Access asks whether you can enter the room. Belonging asks what you must conceal to remain there.

Immigrants become exceptionally skilled at gaining access. We learn accents, credentials, norms, forms, passwords, calendars, professional codes, transportation systems,

bureaucratic procedures. We learn which version of ourselves makes each door open. That skill can become so practiced that nobody else notices its cost.

The body notices. You know it in the shoulders that lower around certain people. In the joke you do not need to translate. In the food you do not need to explain before eating. In the name pronounced without ceremony. In the moment you stop scanning for the possibility that something ordinary about you will require a defense.

This is why I no longer think home is a coordinate. A coordinate can tell you where a body is.

Home tells you where the body is allowed to exhale.

## **The Person You Can Carry**

Grace complicated the geography of home for me. Her childhood had been divided across several addresses and more than one country, but one relationship traveled with her: her older sister. When schools, languages, and neighborhoods changed, the sister remained a person who already knew the earlier chapters. Grace did not describe that bond as a theory. She described a fact of life: when enough of the world changes, the person who remembers you can become a portable form of home.

Simone reached a similar conclusion through a different path. For her, home had to include safety, connection, and the ability to live without constantly defending the self. The country of origin mattered. So did the country in which

everyday life had become secure enough to build relationships, raise children, and imagine a future.

I began the project asking people where home was. They kept answering with who, when, and under what conditions. That correction became one of the book's central ideas. A place matters partly because of what relationships become possible there and what version of the self those relationships allow to remain alive.

A large 2025 Nature Communications meta-analysis synthesized 5,066 effects from 1,114 studies involving more than 571,000 first-generation migrants, international students, expatriates, and refugees. Across those varied populations, adaptation was most strongly undermined by stressors such as discrimination and acculturative stress, and most strongly supported by social resources such as connectedness and the absence of loneliness. That does not prove that connectedness is "home." It does make it harder to treat belonging as decoration around the serious variables.

The body may occupy an address before the life feels held there.

Migration scholarship has wrestled with this tension for decades. Geographers David Ralph and Lynn Staeheli argue that studies of transnational life must hold two truths together: home can be mobile and reconstructed across places, but it can also remain stubbornly attached to particular locations, boundaries, and memories. In other words, saying "home is wherever the heart is" is emotionally appealing and empirically

incomplete. Sometimes the heart wants a street. Sometimes it wants a person. Sometimes it wants the right to stop translating.

The mistake is thinking these desires cancel one another.

My own research notes eventually led me to a formulation I could not stop returning to: **home is a relational achievement, not merely a coordinate**. That does not mean geography is irrelevant. Geography can be the container that makes certain relationships, practices, and identities possible. A Haitian neighborhood in Brooklyn is not interchangeable with any other neighborhood simply because loving people might live there. The restaurants, accents, churches, barbershops, music, history, and informal networks reduce the friction of being understood. Place matters because relationships happen somewhere.

But home becomes more than place when the conditions that made a place meaningful can be recreated, carried, or lost.

In the interview corpus, five conditions appeared repeatedly. First was **relational safety**: the ability to be known without constant defense. Second was **cultural continuity**: access to language, food, music, ritual, humor, memory, and people who recognize their meanings. Third was **agency**: the sense that one's life is not entirely being dictated by necessity or by other people's categories. Fourth was **material viability**: enough economic and physical stability to live rather than only survive. Fifth was **future-generational possibility**: the belief that children or younger relatives can inherit something better without losing everything that came before.

Those five conditions form what I call the Relational Home Model.

The model emerged from stories, but it helps explain why apparently contradictory choices can both make sense. A person may leave a beloved country because material viability has collapsed. A person may remain in a difficult city because relational safety exists there. A person may return to a homeland despite lower earnings because cultural continuity and agency matter more at that stage of life. A parent may stay abroad because future-generational possibility has become the dominant value even while loneliness increases.

Home, then, is not the maximization of one variable. It is the unstable balance of several.

That is why immigrant nostalgia should not be mocked as romanticism, nor accepted uncritically as proof that the past was better. Memory edits. So does ambition. The person looking backward and the person looking forward are both capable of selective attention.

One interviewee remembered Haiti as difficult in material ways and still described childhood happiness that present-day convenience did not automatically reproduce. The point was not that hardship is beautiful. Poverty is not a spiritual advantage. Infrastructure matters. Safety matters. Medical care matters. Opportunity matters. The point is that human well-being has inputs that income alone does not price correctly.

A family can gain convenience and lose time together. It can gain income and lose extended kin. It can gain professional status and lose the ease of cultural familiarity. It can escape one

kind of insecurity and encounter another. Migration is often a portfolio of gains and losses, not a single upward line.

This is what I call the mobility paradox: **a person can become more mobile and less settled at the same time.**

We see it in successful professionals who can afford to travel anywhere but are unsure where they want to stay. We see it in children who become fluent in the dominant language and less able to speak to grandparents in the language of intimacy. We see it in parents who achieve the house they once imagined only to realize that home was never the mortgage.

The philosopher in me wants to make this universal. The engineer in me wants variables. The immigrant in me knows the variables change weight by season.

At twelve, home may be the place where you can understand the jokes. At twenty-two, it may be the city where possibility appears unlimited. At thirty, it may be the person waiting when you return. After becoming a parent, home may become the environment in which a child can grow without learning to shrink.

The question “Where is home?” is therefore often less useful than another question: What makes home possible for you now? The word now matters.

Recent longitudinal research reinforces how dynamic cultural identity can be. A 2026 study following 6,846 first-generation adult immigrants in Germany over two decades found substantial change in identification over time, especially during the first decade, alongside large differences between individuals. That study concerns a particular population and

country; it should not be universalized. But its larger implication fits the stories I have heard: cultural identity is not a switch flipped at arrival. It is a long negotiation between continuity, context, opportunity, and choice.

We should expect definitions of home to move because people move internally even when they remain at the same address.

I have lived in multiple cities, crossed continents, sat in rooms where my résumé opened doors, and sat in other rooms where the more important credential was whether someone could pronounce my name without turning it into a puzzle. I have learned that a place can impress you and still not hold you. A place can frustrate you and still be home. The deepest form of belonging is not admiration. It is recognition.

Recognition says: I know what this is. I know who I am here. I do not need to rehearse my existence before entering the room.

## **The Room Where the Cover Comes Off**

One of the clearest definitions of home in the interview archive came from a woman who refused to reduce it to Haiti. She loved Haiti and identified strongly with Haitian and Caribbean culture, but when I asked her to describe the feeling of home rather than its address, her vocabulary changed.

Welcome. Safe. Not judged. Appreciated. Valued.  
Comfortable. Happy. True to herself.

The list interested me because it sounded less like real estate than a relationship climate. She could experience it in Haiti, but

also in parts of Boston, Brooklyn, Miami, or the Caribbean where language, food, music, and cultural familiarity lowered the amount of explanation required. She described people around whom she did not need to put on a cover. That phrase stayed with me: a cover.

Most adults learn some version of code-switching. We adjust vocabulary for a workplace, behavior for a ceremony, humor for an elder, volume for a library. Social flexibility is not inherently false. The problem begins when adaptation becomes chronic self-concealment - when participation requires suppressing the parts of identity most connected to ease, humor, memory, affection, or dignity.

Her comparison between two rooms made the point. In one memory she was in Miami with close friends, many of them Haitian, celebrating a birthday. The value of the group did not depend on professional utility. They could talk about work, but work was not the reason the relationship existed. In another memory she attended a prestigious gathering of women in finance. The room was objectively valuable. There were accomplished people and potential connections. Yet after a long day she felt the urge to leave rather than collect business cards. She could not imagine the same degree of disclosure or ease.

The difference was not that one group was morally good and the other bad. It was that one environment carried more relational safety.

This matters because modern mobility often gives people access without intimacy. We can enter institutions our parents could not enter, travel to cities they never saw, earn credentials

they never held, and still struggle to find rooms where vigilance falls.

Access answers: Can I be here? Belonging answers: What does being here require me to hide?

The two are related but not identical.

## **What the research illuminates - Home as a Relationship Between Person and Place**

Migration scholars David Ralph and Lynn Staeheli argue that home should be understood through the tension between mobility and fixity. Migrants can make homes across borders, but this does not mean place becomes meaningless. Particular streets, houses, landscapes, and national histories can retain extraordinary power.

The interview archive supports that tension. People did not say location was irrelevant. They said location became home when it hosted the relationships, routines, cultural cues, and possibilities they needed. One person could feel at home in several cities because each reproduced meaningful elements of cultural recognition. Another could live in a comfortable apartment and describe the city as temporary because the relational network never thickened.

The Relational Home Model grew out of trying to name these ingredients without pretending they operate independently. Relational safety can compensate for an unfamiliar location. Cultural continuity can make a destination less alien. Material viability can determine whether family life

has enough time and stability to deepen. Agency changes whether staying feels chosen. Future-generational possibility can make a place emotionally important even before it feels culturally familiar.

The model also explains why nostalgia is complicated. A person may long for a homeland that offered cultural continuity and relational safety while remembering clearly that it lacked material viability or security. The longing is not irrational. It is a weighted comparison across dimensions.

This is why telling an immigrant, ‘But you have more opportunity here,’ can miss the point. Opportunity answers only one part of the home equation.

A human being can be grateful for opportunity and still miss the world in which they did not have to introduce themselves.

The woman whose sister had become a portable home ended our conversation with a question rather than a definition: is home real, or partly a dream? Simone answered from another angle by locating home in present connection. Together, the two answers keep this chapter honest. Home is constructed, but constructed things can be life-sustaining. The test is not whether home is objectively fixed. The test is what kinds of safety, recognition, responsibility, and possibility the construction makes real.

Do not ask only where you are from. Ask what conditions allow you to exhale. List the people, languages, rituals, neighborhoods, responsibilities, and forms of work that make you more recognizable to yourself. Then notice which are portable and which require a place.

Home is not less real because it is partly constructed. Most meaningful human institutions are constructed: families, nations, professions, traditions, promises. The work is not to discover a perfect home waiting untouched somewhere on the map. The work is to understand the ingredients well enough to build with intention.

The Person Who Comes Back Grace was three the first time she came to the United States. Her older sister was six. The adults had work. Her sister went to school. Grace was sometimes left at home and sometimes in care, surrounded by people she did not know and a language she did not speak.

When she told me the story years later, she did not begin with an address. She began with the person who returned. Her sister came back.

That return was enough to make the unfamiliar environment legible again. Grace did not claim that a three-year-old had formed a theory of belonging. She remembered the practical fact of familiarity: one person knew the same before that she knew. Her sister had crossed the same threshold, carried the same family context, and understood without explanation why the new rooms felt new.

The two girls kept moving. They returned to Haiti. At one point they were sent away for school without their parents, Grace around seven and her sister around ten. They changed schools in Haiti, moved again to Florida for a short period, then to Long Island when Grace was about thirteen. Houses changed too. Later came college, graduate school, study abroad, more cities, more communities, more versions of adulthood.

For someone with that biography, the phrase go home cannot remain simple for long.

Grace told me that when she thinks of physical home, she can still picture a hometown in Haiti set between mountains and water, near the northern coast. Place matters to her. She is not arguing that geography is meaningless. But geography has

not been stable enough to carry the whole definition. People have.

Her older sister became what I began thinking of as a living archive. Not because the sister remembered every detail, but because she had been present across so many transitions. Childhood friends can sometimes do that. So can siblings, cousins, parents, neighbors, partners. They hold versions of us that later communities never met.

This is an underappreciated form of security. When your life has been segmented by migration, a person who knew multiple segments reduces the amount of self-explanation required. You do not have to summarize the earlier country to make the later self intelligible. The witness already knows there was an earlier country.

Research on migrant adaptation repeatedly returns to social connection for a reason. A 2025 meta-analysis drawing on more than a thousand studies found that perceived discrimination and acculturative stress were among the strongest negative correlates of adaptation, while social resources and feelings of connectedness were among the strongest positive ones. The result does not prove that one sister, friend, or community can undo structural barriers. It does underline something Grace's story makes concrete: connection is not a decorative feature of settlement. It is part of the infrastructure.

But Grace's story contains a second layer that I had not expected. The people she remembers most vividly are not only family. She remembers classmates in Haiti who were, in her account, every bit as gifted and competitive as she was. She can

still name children who fought for the same top spots in school. The divergence came later. Intelligence did not vanish. Opportunity changed.

Some of those classmates went on to higher education. Some did not. Some remained in a country where even advanced education could not guarantee a stable professional path. Grace's own route carried her through American education, graduate study, and work centered on schools and communities. When she talks about that work, she circles back to the little girl she was and the children who sat in classrooms beside her.

She is not trying to rescue a sentimental childhood. She is trying to keep it morally present.

That distinction matters. Nostalgia asks us to preserve an image. Responsibility asks what the image obligates us to notice.

For Grace, work in education became one way to answer the inequality she had witnessed retrospectively. As a child she knew which classmates were smart. As an adult she had language for the unequal distribution of pathways, networks, safety, institutional quality, and mobility. The new vocabulary did not make the memory less personal. It made the unfairness more visible.

This is why home cannot be only comfort in this book. The place where we feel most recognized can also be the place that reminds us of people who did not receive the same exits. Belonging can produce obligation as easily as ease. The Conditional Home

Simone complicated the same question from another direction. She had migrated as a teenager and built most of her

adult life in the United States. When I asked whether Haiti was home, I was still carrying a romantic hierarchy in my head. Origin was supposed to be the truest home; the destination was where opportunity lived.

Her answer refused the hierarchy. Home, for her, required present-tense connection and enough safety to live a life. She could love Haiti and still acknowledge that the United States had become home. She could carry Haitian identity without making residence in Haiti the test of authenticity.

The distinction sounds straightforward until you notice how often migrants are asked to perform loyalty through discomfort. If you criticize the country you left, perhaps you are ungrateful to your origins. If you criticize the country you entered, perhaps you are ungrateful for opportunity. If you say the destination feels like home, someone may hear assimilation. If you say the homeland still feels like home, someone may question whether you ever integrated.

The honest answer is often less elegant: home can be plural, uneven, seasonal, person-specific, and dependent on what dimension of life is being measured.

A place can be home for memory and not for safety. Another can be home for work and not for culture. A household can be home while a city is not. A city can be home while the nation feels conditional. A language can be home even when the country associated with it is far away.

This is why I now resist asking people to choose too quickly. Forced ranking produces clean interviews and inaccurate lives.

Grace's sister and Simone's conditional answer point toward the same deeper proposition: home is not the place with the strongest claim on our nostalgia. It is the set of conditions under which a life becomes recognizable, supportable, and shareable. Those conditions can travel. Some cannot.

A sister can board the plane with you. A legal system cannot. A recipe can cross a border. A neighborhood network may not. A song can preserve the feeling of a holiday. It cannot reproduce the people who were there. Money can buy a house in a new country. It cannot guarantee that anyone inside it feels known. Home is portable only in pieces.

The Ever-Shrinking Circle Grace described home as an increasingly small group of people with whom she could be fully herself. The phrase did not sound sentimental when she said it. It sounded like the result of repeated movement.

Every move gives a person more relationships and more endings. Childhood friends know one version. College friends know another. Coworkers know the professional self. Family may know the origin story but not the details of the adult world. The older the person becomes, the more difficult it can be to find someone who can hold several versions without requiring a summary.

Grace had moved too often to assume permanence. She remembered friends from different schools in Haiti and from schools in the United States. She remembered people because of how they made her feel, not because the relationship survived every relocation. Some names remained vivid even when contact did not.

This gave her definition of home an unusual feature: home did not require permanence either.

A person could matter enormously and still belong to a previous chapter.

That insight is important because migration narratives sometimes treat lost relationships as failures of assimilation or failures of loyalty. Movement naturally creates relational turnover. People change schools, jobs, cities, languages, status, and schedules. Some ties survive. Others remain meaningful without remaining active. The question is what continuity replaces them.

For Grace, her older sister had unusual power because the sister crossed so many of the same transitions. Her mother and younger sister could also produce the feeling of home, she said, but the older sister carried a special chronology. They were only three years apart. They had been the two children sent through moves together before the younger sister entered the picture. They shared the school-away-from-parents period in Haiti. They shared the geography of disruption.

This is one reason sibling relationships can become central in migrant families. Parents may be dealing with work, legal processes, housing, and the adult burden of relocation while siblings experience the new environment side by side at child height. They translate different things for one another. They may disagree intensely, but they share a timing nobody else can reproduce later.

Grace's story also complicated one of my favorite phrases: home is where you can be your full self. There may be no single

relationship in which every part of the self is equally available. The child self appears with a sibling. The professional self appears with colleagues. The cultural self may become louder among diaspora friends. The religious self may feel at home in one community and questioned in another.

Perhaps the more realistic goal is not one perfect room. It is a network of rooms in which no essential part of the person has to remain permanently homeless.

That is what Grace seemed to build over time. Her career in education and strategy was not separate from the childhood movement. She told me that people often opened up to her quickly, sometimes within half an hour. She believed she had learned to create a sense of safety because she knew what it meant to move between spaces and search for it.

The child who once waited for a familiar person had become an adult trying to make unfamiliar institutions feel more inhabitable for others.

That is not a neat redemption story. Childhood instability does not automatically produce empathy or professional purpose. Grace was making meaning from what happened, not proving that what happened had been necessary.

The distinction is ethical. We can admire the capacity a person developed without blessing every condition that required the capacity.

Home as a Distributed System Listening to Grace and Simone together made me stop searching for a single location where all functions of home must reside.

Modern migrant life often distributes those functions. Safety may be in one country. Family history in another. Economic opportunity in a third city. Friendship across a group chat. Religious community in a neighborhood. Cultural memory in music and food. Professional identity in institutions that relatives back home have never seen. The person becomes the network administrator of a life spread across systems.

This distribution creates resilience because no single place carries everything. It also creates fatigue because belonging has to be maintained.

Calls must be made. Flights must be booked. Languages must be kept alive through use.

Relationships must survive different time zones and unequal incomes. Children must be introduced to people they may see only occasionally.

A place does not remain home by memory alone. Home requires maintenance.

The phrase the grass is greener where you water has appeared repeatedly in these interviews and in the music participants chose. I used to hear it mainly as advice about gratitude. I hear another meaning now. Watering is labor.

A relationship becomes home partly because somebody keeps showing up.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*When you say you want to go home, what are you actually asking to recover?*

## Chapter 3 - The Language of Arrival

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What changes when the person who knows the most in one language becomes the beginner in another?*

Daniel had lived enough different versions of his life to make a single biography feel misleading.

Haiti. Norway. Denmark. The United States. By the time we spoke, he could count roughly eleven countries touched by the previous few years. Travel had widened him, but it had not produced the cosmopolitan fantasy in which every culture becomes interchangeable. He told me something more interesting: he liked discovering the world, but he did not want discovery to require becoming culturally blank.

“I want to be Haitian,” was the core of it. He wanted the way Haitians speak, the food, the family name, the texture of belonging that had existed before the travel. Then he told me about Norway.

On his first day in a room full of students from different countries, he spoke from the moral vocabulary he had inherited through a conservative Catholic upbringing in Haiti. He said, with the confidence of someone who did not yet know the local meaning of what he was saying, that he did not want gay friends.

Weeks later, his Norwegian roommate told him that he was gay and did not want to continue sharing a room with someone who had already announced dislike for people like him. This was not a vocabulary problem.

Daniel's English could have been perfect and he still would have faced the same translation. The difficult work was learning that a value system can feel complete inside one environment and become visible as a set of assumptions inside another. Adaptation, in that moment, was not memorizing the host culture. It was discovering that the self he had carried across the border was editable.

He did not tell the story as a triumph in which Haiti represented ignorance and Europe represented enlightenment. That would have been too simple and, in its own way, another stereotype. He described the change as a negotiation: how could he preserve faith, family attachment, and Haitian identity while letting go of a way of treating another human being that he no longer wanted to defend? That is what immigrant language often hides.

We speak of "learning English" as though arrival were a classroom problem. But every immigrant is learning several languages at once. There is spoken language. There is institutional language: how schools, hospitals, banks, employers, and government offices communicate. There is class language: what confidence sounds like in rooms where people have inherited access. There is racial language: what a body means before it says anything. There is emotional language: which feelings can be named safely. There is family language:

how much of the new world can be brought home without being interpreted as rejection of the old one.

Children often learn these languages faster than adults because they are immersed earlier and corrected more ruthlessly.

That can turn a child into infrastructure.

A son reads a letter his parents cannot read. A daughter explains a school form. A teenager calls an office and speaks with adult authority because the adult beside her does not have the dominant language. The child becomes translator, advocate, cultural interpreter, sometimes protector. Researchers call part of this work language brokering. Families often call it helping.

Both descriptions are true, and the emotional meaning depends on context. Translation can be pride: I can make this country understandable to my family. It can be burden: why am I carrying information that adults are supposed to carry? It can create competence, intimacy, irritation, status reversal, and responsibility years before a child has language for any of those experiences.

My own arrival did not turn me into a professional interpreter overnight. But it made me attentive to the hidden interface between worlds. I learned that comprehension is not the same as fluency. You can understand every word in a meeting and still misunderstand the rules by which the meeting operates. You can speak without an accent and still miss the network that determines who gets invited into the next room.

That insight followed me into adulthood and into product work, organizations, and entrepreneurship. Systems are easiest

for the people whose assumptions they already match. Everyone else must reverse-engineer the interface.

Immigrants do this continuously. The danger is that competence can become camouflage. If you become very good at translating yourself, people may stop noticing that translation is occurring. They see the polished answer, not the internal calculation that selected it.

Daniel's story gives me another way to understand the work. A translated life should not be a reduced life.

The goal is not to become so legible to a new country that you become illegible to yourself. The goal is to acquire more languages—literal, cultural, emotional, institutional—without confusing expansion with erasure.

## **The Work Between Worlds**

There is a quiet kind of work that happens between worlds. It is not the work of building, nor the work of imagining, but something far more delicate. It is the work of translation.

I did not always understand this. For a long time, I believed that value came from creation alone. From writing the code, building the system, delivering the output. But over time, I began to notice something else. There were spaces where things broke down - not because people lacked skill, but because they lacked understanding of each other.

I found myself drawn into those spaces. Requests came in incomplete. Problems arrived without clear origins. A page broke and no one knew whether the fault belonged to the

design, the data, or the system that connected them. It wasn't a technical problem. Not entirely. It was a human one.

I began to understand that the real challenge was not the absence of tools, but the absence of shared language. Business spoke in intention. Developers spoke in implementation. And somewhere in between, meaning was lost. That space - the fragile distance between what we want and what we build - became the most important place in the entire system. And it was also the least understood.

"When meaning is misaligned, everything suffers. When meaning is clear, everything flows."

What fascinated me was not the complexity of the systems, but the simplicity of what was missing. Clarity. A willingness to pause before acting. The most valuable person in that environment was not the smartest developer or the most creative designer, but the one who could stand in the middle and truly listen. The one who could take something abstract and make it tangible.

That kind of work requires something deeper than skill. It requires awareness. To speak to business, you must understand urgency without being consumed by it. To speak to developers, you must respect precision without becoming rigid. And to move between both, you must hold a quiet authority - not over people, but over meaning itself.

There is also a deeper layer that extends beyond systems and teams. The work between worlds mirrors something within us. We all live between different versions of ourselves. Who we are

and who we are becoming. What we feel and what we express. What we know and what we choose to act on.

And just like in systems, the breakdown often happens in the translation.

To be that person - the translator, the bridge - you must be willing to ask the questions others avoid. You must be comfortable saying "I don't understand yet," and patient enough to stay until you do. You must care not just about outcomes, but about alignment. Because without alignment, outcomes are accidental. And with it, they are intentional.

To live between worlds is not to be lost. It is to be essential.

Psychologists often use the language of acculturation to describe changes that occur when people and cultures come into sustained contact. Berry's classic framework distinguished strategies such as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization depending on the degree to which a person maintains a heritage culture and participates in a larger society. No framework can summarize every life, but one distinction is especially useful: adaptation and erasure are not synonyms.

I learned that distinction slowly. There is an adaptation that expands you. You gain a language without losing the first one. You learn another professional code. You discover new music, foods, friendships, and ways of solving problems. You become capable of moving through more worlds. This is additive adaptation.

There is another kind that feels like subtraction. You learn which parts of yourself create friction and stop presenting them. You shorten a name. You avoid an accent. You stop bringing

certain food. You let other people set the boundaries of what counts as professional, intelligent, modern, or safe. Eventually the performance becomes efficient enough that nobody - including you - can easily identify what was removed. The difference is agency.

A bilingual person choosing the language best suited to a situation is exercising range. A person who feels one language is forbidden from serious rooms is experiencing hierarchy. A professional who learns the conventions of an industry is gaining fluency. A professional who must repeatedly overprove competence because others attach doubt to race, nationality, or accent is paying an extra tax for entry.

Immigrant life contains both. One of the women I interviewed described home as the place where she did not have to wear a cover. Her phrase stayed with me because it identifies the opposite of belonging with unusual precision. The opposite of belonging is not always exclusion. Sometimes you are invited, employed, celebrated, even promoted - and still covered. You edit yourself before anyone explicitly asks.

Social psychologists have shown that group identities can provide purpose, continuity, and psychological protection during migration, while exclusion and disruption of identity can increase strain. A 2024 qualitative study of first- and second-generation migrants emphasized the importance of continuity and the gaining of supportive social identities. The details belong to the participants in that research, but the concept illuminates a larger truth: people need not only access to institutions; they need ways to enter without losing all previous

forms of belonging. This is where language becomes more than speech.

Consider the child who interprets a bill for a parent. The task appears linguistic. But translation also reverses authority. The child enters an adult system first and becomes the guide. Consider the immigrant professional who understands a technical problem and must also calculate how to present disagreement in a room where being perceived as “difficult” carries unequal risk. The work is technical and social. Consider the grandparent who can communicate with a grandchild in simple phrases but cannot transfer humor, proverbs, stories, reprimands, or tenderness with the same precision. The issue is not vocabulary. It is bandwidth.

Families can become emotionally narrower when their shared language narrows.

This is one reason cultural transmission matters. Language carries an archive. Haitian Creole carries ways of teasing, warning, praying, exaggerating, persuading, and remembering that English can translate semantically without reproducing socially. Every language has such layers. To preserve a heritage language is not to reject the dominant society. It is to preserve access to rooms inside the family that may otherwise close.

The same principle applies beyond immigrants. Every person belongs to multiple interpretive communities: profession, generation, neighborhood, religion, hobby, family. We all translate. Migration makes the translation visible because the distance between codes is larger. There is power in becoming good at it.

The ability to translate across worlds can become a leadership skill. It can make someone unusually effective at product management, diplomacy, community building, teaching, entrepreneurship, design, or care. The person who has spent a life asking, *What does this mean here?* often becomes skilled at identifying hidden assumptions. Immigrants are frequently praised for hard work; their interpretive labor deserves equal attention.

But we should not romanticize it. Translation is tiring when it is compulsory.

## **Color in a Black-and-White World**

I have learned that safety and freedom shape the way we see the world. When you grow up in a place where security is fragile, where power shifts quickly and trust feels expensive, you don't just learn survival. You learn caution. You learn how to scan rooms. Even after you leave, that instinct stays in your body like a second heartbeat.

I was born outside the United States, and the idea of security has never been abstract for me. It has always been lived. Freedom does not mean chaos. It means room to breathe. But freedom is not only political. It is emotional. It is relational. It shows up in how we treat each other, how we listen, how we choose to grow beyond our own blind spots.

I once reflected on how differently people often see the world. Some of us move in straight lines. Efficient. Logical. Black and white. We want answers quickly. We want clarity even when clarity oversimplifies reality. Others see in layers. They

notice texture, nuance, emotional shading. They sense what cannot be easily measured. That difference is not a competition. It is a gift.

I realized this in a simple moment while watching someone design something visually. My instinct was minimal. Clean. Structured. But the moment color entered the conversation, the design came alive. The shape didn't just function. It spoke. It invited. It felt human. It reminded me that life is not meant to be lived in grayscale.

Relationships work the same way. If we only move through logic, we miss beauty. If we only protect ourselves, we stop learning how to open. Love requires color. Listening requires patience. Growth requires vulnerability.

"Every person adds a new shade to your understanding." When we reduce the world to rigid categories, we lose its richness. When we invite color into our thinking, we begin to understand complexity without fear. That is how bridges form between people who appear different on the surface but share the same longings underneath.

I have learned that safety gives us roots, but curiosity gives us wings. When we allow color into our thinking, relationships, and identity, we begin to experience life as art instead of merely survival.

The goal is not to stop reading rooms. Awareness is valuable. The goal is to become capable of choosing when adaptation serves connection and when it serves fear.

That choice takes practice because the body may learn caution before the mind has words for it. A person can enter a

new meeting already preparing to be misunderstood. A child can decide not to speak before anyone laughs at the accent. A worker can become so committed to being beyond reproach that excellence turns into a form of hiding.

This is one of the quiet burdens of migration: you may spend years becoming legible to others and neglect the work of remaining legible to yourself. Narrative helps.

Dan McAdams's work on life stories argues that people construct evolving internal narratives that give life unity and purpose. The story is not merely a record of identity; it is one of the ways identity is organized. This helps explain why telling immigrant stories matters beyond representation. To narrate is to decide what events belong together. It is to place meaning around a rupture. It is to say: that child, that arrival, that language, that humiliation, that success, that return - those were not unrelated episodes. They are part of one life.

When immigrants control none of the narrative, other institutions organize the story for them. Government records organize by status. Schools organize by performance. Employers organize by skill. Media organize by conflict, novelty, tragedy, or exceptional success. Those records may be useful. None is a self.

The work of arrival is therefore partly grammatical: learning how to say *I* in a new sentence without letting the sentence erase what the pronoun carried in.

## The Child Who Knows the Interface

In one interview, a woman described moving repeatedly from early childhood: between Haiti and the United States, between schools, between houses, sometimes without parents physically present in the same way at every stage. When I asked what home meant after so much movement, she did not name a building. She named her sister.

Her older sister had moved through many of the same transitions. When adults, languages, and places changed, the sister remained a witness to the earlier version of life. That continuity mattered. A person who remembers you before the new environment can protect you from the strange feeling that the past happened to somebody else.

This is another form of translation: not translating words, but translating selves across time.

Immigrant children often become linguistic brokers for families. They explain letters, websites, school rules, and conversations. The arrangement can look simple from outside - the child knows English better, so the child helps. But role reversal carries emotional complexity. The parent remains the authority in the family while depending on the child for access to parts of the surrounding society. The child can feel useful, proud, embarrassed, burdened, powerful, or all of those in one afternoon.

Translation also changes what can be said. Anyone who speaks more than one language knows that meaning does not travel cleanly. Some expressions arrive carrying history. Some jokes die at customs. Some forms of affection sound too formal

in one language and too exposed in another. Some emotions become easier to say in the language in which they were first experienced.

This means language loss is not only a communications problem. It can become a relationship problem. A grandparent and grandchild may love each other deeply while sharing only a narrow vocabulary. A parent can possess an entire moral and emotional universe that the child encounters mostly through translated summaries.

The practical response is not guilt. Guilt is a poor language teacher. The response is use. Languages survive when they give access to something meaningful: a person, a joke, a prayer, a story, a song, a trip, a game, a feeling of competence, a domain of family intimacy.

This is why I think about heritage language less like a museum object and more like a bridge. Bridges that nobody needs eventually stop being maintained.

## **What the research illuminates - Narrative Identity and the Need for Continuity**

Dan McAdams argues that people build identity partly by constructing an internalized life story connecting reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future. The theory is useful for migration because geographic movement can fracture the ordinary cues that make continuity feel automatic.

A person does not literally become someone else after crossing a border, but the audience changes. New people did not

see the childhood. They may not understand the references that once confirmed personality. The destination can reward different traits. A quiet person becomes assertive because institutions require self-advocacy. Someone considered middle class at home becomes economically precarious abroad. A parent who held professional authority becomes dependent on a teenager to interpret a form.

The self-story has to explain these discontinuities without losing coherence. That is why the question ‘Who were you before you came here?’ can be unexpectedly powerful. It returns biography to people who are often introduced only through arrival. It reminds the listener that migration is a plot turn, not a birth.

It also changes how we think about integration. A healthy integrated identity does not require deleting the pre-migration self. It requires enough narrative room for old and new selves to belong to the same protagonist.

The sister in that interview functioned as a living archive. She remembered the earlier chapters.

Not everyone has that person. Sometimes the archive is a photograph, a recipe, a church, a voice note, a childhood friend, a language, or a story repeated so often that it becomes portable architecture.

We carry witnesses because continuity is one of the ways a changing life remains ours.

Daniel called his experience “three lives in one”: the Caribbean, Northern Europe, and the United States. The phrase matters because integration did not mean forcing the three into

a smooth story. Some pieces remained difficult to translate even to his parents. The developmental task was not to pretend the lives were identical. It was to build enough bridges that none of them had to be disowned.

Pay attention to the places where you translate yourself. Which translations make you larger? Which leave you smaller? Which are voluntary? Which are performed under threat of exclusion?

Fluency is a gift. Covering is a cost. The difference can be subtle from the outside and unmistakable from within.

Ten O'Clock in Norway Daniel arrived at school in Norway late, around ten at night. In the room were students from several countries, the kind of introduction circle in which everyone is trying to explain quickly where they come from and what kind of person they are.

He came with a Catholic education from Haiti and a moral vocabulary that, until then, had largely been reinforced by the world around him. During that first conversation he said openly that he did not want gay friends.

He told me the story years later without trying to make the earlier version of himself sound better than he had been. That is important. Retrospective growth stories are easy to polish. We remove the arrogance, add foreshadowing, and make the changed self look inevitable. Daniel left the discomfort in the record.

A few weeks later, his Norwegian roommate called a room meeting. The roommate told Daniel that he was gay and did not want to continue living with someone who had already announced dislike for people like him.

No vocabulary list could solve that problem. Daniel already had enough language to understand the words. What had failed was a social translation. A belief that had felt normal inside one environment had entered another environment and become visible as a choice with consequences for another person.

He began reading, talking to people, and reconsidering what he had inherited. In our conversation he was careful not to tell the story as a morality play in which Haiti stood for backwardness and Norway stood for enlightenment. That would

have reproduced the same flattening the book is arguing against. He remained attached to Haiti, to his family, to faith, to the way Haitians speak and eat and move through the world. The change was more specific: he no longer wanted inherited conviction to require contempt for another human being.

That distinction gave me a more useful definition of adaptation. Adaptation is not simply becoming more like the destination. Sometimes it is discovering which parts of the self were chosen and which had never been tested outside their original environment. Migration supplies comparison. Comparison can produce humility.

The experience also reveals why language of arrival is broader than English. Newcomers learn institutional grammar: how offices work, which questions are safe to ask, what a deadline means in practice, how to speak to a teacher or supervisor. They learn racial grammar: what their body signifies in the destination before they speak. They learn class grammar: the difference between knowing material and knowing how to display confidence around material. They learn emotional grammar: which feelings can be named in public and which are expected to remain private. They learn moral grammar: behaviors or identities that were discussed one way at home may be treated differently in the new social world.

The hardest translations are often the ones no one identifies as translation. *Three Lives in One*

Later in the same conversation Daniel gave me the phrase that best described the cost of all this movement. He said he felt

as if he continued to live three lives: Haiti, Norway, the United States.

They did not cancel one another. They made him. But they did not naturally add up.

His parents had not gone to college and did not speak English. He was learning technical work in fields so specialized that even explaining the subject could become difficult across distance. When he traveled, he tried to send pictures home. On a trip to Mexico, for example, he sent images from a historical site and tried to explain some of the science and history behind what he was seeing. The gesture was small and revealing. He was not merely sending proof that he was doing well. He was trying to build a bridge between lives that had developed different vocabularies.

Technology makes that bridge easier than it was for earlier generations. A family can see a face instantly across oceans. Photos arrive before the traveler has returned to the hotel. Voice notes preserve accent and mood in ways a letter cannot. But speed does not eliminate translation. A parent can watch a child's world expanding in real time and still lack the context that makes the expansion intelligible.

Daniel worried about this gap because his attachment to family was not symbolic. He told me that he sometimes used his family name deliberately because many of his achievements were unprecedented within the family. He wanted what he did to reflect back on them. Success was not only personal mobility; it was an extension of family memory.

That can make change harder. When a belief, career, partner, or place becomes part of a new self, changing direction can feel like altering a family inheritance one did not create alone.

This is one reason first-generation adaptation cannot be reduced to an individual preference for origin culture or destination culture. Meta-analytic research finds, on average, strong identification with origin culture and moderate identification with receiving-country culture among first-generation adults, with wide variation depending on context, migration type, cultural distance, gender, measurement, and other factors. Other meta-analytic work cautions against treating one acculturation pattern as a universal recipe for well-being. The evidence is messier than the popular story of balancing two cultures perfectly.

Daniel's three lives are a better image than a scale. A scale asks which side weighs more. Three lives ask whether the person can build passages among rooms that were never designed to connect.

The passage can be a phone call home. It can be a meal. It can be introducing a partner to parents who do not share the same first language. It can be explaining why a belief changed without implying that everything the family taught was wrong. It can be allowing a younger self to remain recognizable without giving that younger self veto power over every future decision.

This is what I mean when I say fluency is more than speech. The immigrant may become fluent in the destination and still

spend years learning how to translate the destination back to the people who made departure possible.

Sometimes the translation works. Sometimes the family nods without fully understanding. Sometimes love carries what vocabulary cannot.

The Name He Carries Daniel's attachment to Haiti was not abstract patriotism. It lived partly in a surname.

He spoke about using his family name because his achievements felt connected to people who had not had the same educational or geographic opportunities. He had entered technical environments his parents could not easily picture. He had traveled farther than many relatives. He was doing things that, in his telling, had not been done before in the family.

The name became a way to prevent mobility from looking like self-creation.

This matters because success narratives in the United States often reward the fiction of the solitary individual. The person leaves, works, rises, and becomes evidence that determination is enough. Immigrant families know the story is rarely so clean. A child may carry parental sacrifice, sibling care, remittances, community information, inherited discipline, and even the fear generated by earlier scarcity. The individual's résumé does not list most of the inputs.

Daniel's use of his name was one way of keeping the inputs visible to himself.

It also raised a difficult question. What happens when honoring the family name seems to conflict with changing a family belief?

His roommate story in Norway is powerful because that was exactly the collision. Daniel did not want to disrespect the Catholic and Haitian world that had formed him. He also no longer wanted to defend a position that required disrespecting a person in front of him. The change was not only intellectual. It implicated loyalty.

This is the emotional problem hidden inside many acculturation debates. A belief can become fused with the people who taught it. Revising the belief then feels like revising the relationship.

The work is easier when a family can distinguish love from sameness. Harder when continuity is measured by behavioral replication.

Daniel eventually learned to make another distinction: preserving the family name did not require preserving every inherited assumption. He could carry the name forward precisely by deciding what kind of person he wanted the name attached to.

That is a form of agency I did not understand at twelve. As a child, culture can feel like the environment itself. You do not choose an environment. You breathe it. Adulthood, migration, education, friendship, and conflict reveal that some of what felt like nature was instruction.

Then choice begins. When Parents Cannot Picture the Work Daniel's technical career created another kind of distance. His parents had not attended college and did not speak the language in which much of his work was conducted. The

problem was not lack of pride. It was lack of shared reference points.

He could tell them he was doing well. Explaining the actual work required a longer bridge.

This form of distance is common in upwardly mobile immigrant families and is rarely captured by income statistics. The child's education succeeds so thoroughly that parts of the child's daily life become less available to the people whose sacrifice supported the education.

A promotion sounds good, but the parent may not know what changed.

A technical field sounds prestigious, but the parent may not know what the person actually makes or solves.

A business trip produces photographs, but not the institutional context that made the trip matter.

Daniel tried to bridge the gap by sharing travel and explanation. A photograph from Mexico became an opportunity to tell family what he was seeing. The gesture could not make three lives one life. It could keep the doors between them from closing completely.

That is why communication across immigrant generations cannot be evaluated only by frequency. Two people can talk every day and still inhabit worlds that are becoming difficult to translate. Another family may speak less often but share enough context that change remains understandable.

The deeper question is whether curiosity travels in both directions. Do parents ask who the adult child has become, not only whether the child is safe and successful?

Does the child remain curious about the parents as people rather than reducing them to origin, sacrifice, or old-fashioned rules?

Translation becomes humane when neither side is treated as a museum.

#### THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Which part of your voice have you been translating for so long that you nearly forgot its original sound?*

## Chapter 4 - The Price of the American Dream

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What if the dream succeeds on paper and still costs more than you meant to pay?*

Simone had seen the American Dream from both sides of the front door.

As an immigrant, she understood the power of a house. Property could mean safety after instability, proof after doubt, inheritance after scarcity. In many immigrant families the house becomes more than shelter. It is evidence. It says the work counted. It says the move produced something visible. It says the next generation will begin with a floor beneath it.

Then her work put her close to families whose pursuit of that evidence had become expensive in a different currency.

She had worked in preventive social services. She had seen West Indian families labor toward ownership while children absorbed the cost of adult absence. Parents were not neglecting their children because they did not care. Often they were doing exactly what love had been translated into: work more, save more, endure more, buy something permanent.

But permanence could create its own paradox. What is the value of securing a house if the children inside it are not being parented in the way the sacrifice was supposed to make possible?

Simone made a choice that would look, on a spreadsheet, less impressive than the culturally approved version of success. At one stage she chose a smaller two-bedroom home and paid for help with childcare rather than stretching immediately toward the largest house she could obtain. The point was not to reject property. She would later own a home. The point was to rank the variables differently.

Her children came before the symbol. That distinction is one of the deepest tensions in the immigrant American Dream. Public mythology tends to photograph outcomes: the graduation, the home, the business, the professional title, the citizenship ceremony. Family life is lived in the verbs that produce those nouns: wake, commute, work, save, send, cook, supervise, worry, call, translate, wait.

The nouns are visible. The verbs consume the years.

Economists can measure an important part of the story. Across more than a century of American data, children of immigrants have often shown substantial upward mobility, and research by Ran Abramitzky and colleagues demonstrates that this pattern is not merely a modern anecdote. That finding matters. Opportunity is not imaginary. Migration can change the trajectory of a family dramatically.

But a mobility statistic cannot decide what the family should have sacrificed to produce the mobility.

Simone's story forces the moral question back into the frame.

If a child earns more than a parent but feels no relationship to the people who made the earnings possible, did the dream succeed? If the family owns a larger house but speaks to each other mostly through resentment, what exactly was purchased? If the next generation gains freedom but learns to experience its freedom as a debt, how much of the old scarcity has really disappeared?

There is no universal answer. Some parents work punishing hours because there is no alternative. Some children later understand sacrifices they resented while living through them. Some households do manage to build wealth and intimacy together. The purpose of the question is not to judge families from the safety of hindsight. It is to widen the accounting.

Simone had done that accounting inside her own life. She spoke about a difficult relationship with her own mother not as a simple story of blame, but as an intergenerational problem she wanted to interrupt. She could look backward and see the limitations of a very young mother. She could look forward and decide that her own children would receive something different.

Her phrase for the future was striking in its simplicity: she wanted them to become better versions, not replicas.

That is a more demanding dream than assimilation. Assimilation asks whether the children can enter the mainstream successfully. Intergenerational growth asks whether the family can transmit love, culture, memory, and opportunity

while refusing to transmit every wound in the form it was received.

Later, when I asked Simone what home might mean in the future, the answer had moved again. She spoke about health, grandchildren, being available to support her children as they became parents. The dream was no longer concentrated in a property deed.

It had become time. That is the price the American Dream rarely puts on the brochure.

Money can purchase space. Only a life can make time.

## **On Paper and In Bone**

Simone's choices made the accounting problem concrete. A larger home could signal progress; a smaller home paired with childcare, family support, and time could produce a life that was more workable. Both options could be called success. They simply optimized for different things.

That is the weakness in the phrase "it makes sense on paper." Paper can compare square footage, salary, commute, price, and projected return. It cannot assign an objective value to a grandparent nearby, a parent who is not chronically exhausted, a child who is known by neighbors, or the cultural ease of hearing your language without planning for it.

Behavioral economics is useful here not because it can tell a family what to choose, but because it reminds us that decisions are made relative to reference points. A gain in one domain can feel like loss when it moves a person away from the life they

thought the sacrifice was supposed to buy. The reference point itself can be inherited.

The mature question is therefore not whether a decision is impressive. It is whether the objective function has been named. What are we actually trying to increase - income, safety, time, mobility, proximity, cultural continuity, future options - and which costs are we willing to carry?

A dream becomes more honest when its trade-offs are visible. My interviews repeatedly returned to a tension I came to call the mobility paradox. The same move that improves one domain can destabilize another. The paradox is not evidence that migration was a mistake. It is evidence that human welfare is multidimensional.

When I was younger, I understood ambition largely as forward motion. Better school. Better role. Better opportunity. More influence. More capacity. This is a useful mindset for a person who must create options. It is less useful if every option is automatically treated as progress.

There was a period in my own career when California represented one version of the future and New York another. Opportunities with some of the most admired companies in technology were possible. Then the pandemic rearranged the meaning of distance, health, family, and risk. A decision that might have looked obvious on a compensation spreadsheet no longer felt obvious as a life decision.

Migration prepares you for these moments because it has already taught you that leaving is never only leaving and staying is never only staying.

What matters is the objective function. Engineers know that optimization is impossible until you define what you are optimizing for. Maximize income? Minimize risk? Increase time with family? Preserve cultural connection? Improve educational opportunity? Build long-term wealth? Protect health? Expand freedom? Different objectives produce different answers from the same inputs.

Immigrant families often inherit an objective function without naming it: *make the sacrifice worth it*.

That phrase can become both fuel and burden.

It fuels education, entrepreneurship, discipline, remittances, and extraordinary persistence. But if “worth it” is never defined, the goalpost can move forever. The first stable job becomes the next promotion. The apartment becomes the house. The house becomes the better district. The degree becomes the advanced degree. Security becomes status. A family can spend decades proving that migration was justified without asking whether the life being built is one they actually want to inhabit.

This is not a criticism of striving. Striving saved and transformed many families. It is an invitation to specify the destination.

Psychological research on intergenerational cultural conflict offers another warning about hidden costs. Priscilla Lui's 2015 meta-analytic review, focused on Asian and Latino/a American samples, found links among acculturation mismatch, intergenerational conflict, and aspects of offspring mental health and educational outcomes. The findings should not be casually generalized to every immigrant population. But they

underline something families across backgrounds recognize: generations can adapt at different speeds, and those differences can become relational conflict when nobody has language for them.

The child may interpret freedom as evidence that the sacrifice worked. The parent may interpret the same behavior as abandonment of the values that made the sacrifice possible.

Both may believe they are protecting the family. This is why the American Dream cannot be passed down as a fixed picture. It has to be renegotiated between generations.

For one generation, homeownership may symbolize safety after instability. For the next, flexibility may symbolize freedom. One generation may value prestigious credentials because institutions once closed doors. The next may value meaningful work because access is less novel. One generation may fear risk because failure had no cushion. The next may embrace risk because the cushion is precisely what the previous generation built.

Conflict sometimes appears where success changed the available choices. A mature immigrant narrative must make room for that irony. Parents can succeed so well that their children become free to question the very strategy that produced the freedom.

## **The Quiet Architecture of Care**

The archive kept returning the American Dream to care. People spoke about money, but underneath money were school choices, medical security, aging parents, children, remittances,

housing, and the hope of being available when someone needed them. Economic life was already relational; the language of success had simply made the relationships less visible.

That is why the dream cannot be evaluated only by what a family accumulates. It must also be evaluated by what the accumulation makes possible - and what it consumes along the way.

Care, then, is not sentimental decoration around economic life. It is part of the balance sheet.

Time is an asset. Trust is an asset. Shared language is an asset. Health is an asset. The presence of adults who know a child well is an asset. A neighborhood where people notice if someone is missing is an asset. These forms of capital are difficult to price and easy to spend.

The strongest immigrant families I have observed do not avoid sacrifice. They make sacrifice discussable. They tell children not only what was given up but why. They allow the why to evolve. They do not make gratitude a permanent debt that prevents the next generation from choosing differently.

A dream that must never be revised is not a dream. It is an instruction.

## **When the Dream Becomes a Ledger**

One of the most persistent immigrant stories in the United States is the story of sacrifice converted into assets: work hard, buy a home, educate the children, create a more secure generation. The story contains real economic logic. It also contains a hidden ledger.

Who works the extra shift? Who watches the children? Who sends money abroad? Who delays school? Who takes the job with benefits rather than the job with meaning? Who absorbs the stress of a business that cannot close because relatives depend on the income?

The American Dream is often narrated through outcomes because outcomes are visible. A house can be photographed. A diploma can be framed. A title can sit under a name. Presence is harder to display. Emotional availability does not appear on a résumé. Cultural continuity is not listed on a mortgage statement.

In an early interview, a mother forced the question into the open. She was not dismissing material success. She was asking what it was for. If parents work so relentlessly to secure a house that they lose meaningful connection with the children the house was supposed to protect, the objective function has become confused.

Engineering language helps me here. A system can optimize the wrong metric extremely well.

Families do this too.

A parent who experienced poverty may optimize income because income once solved the most urgent problem. A parent who experienced instability may optimize control. A parent who experienced educational exclusion may optimize credentials. These strategies can be rational responses to earlier conditions. Trouble begins when the strategy survives after the environment changes and starts crowding out other needs.

The question is not whether money matters. Material insecurity is not spiritually ennobling. Housing, healthcare, transportation, education, legal stability, and savings materially expand agency. The question is whether the family knows when enough of one resource has been achieved to let another resource receive attention.

A ledger that tracks only money cannot tell you whether a life is solvent.

## **What the research illuminates - Mobility Is Real, but It Is Not the Whole Dream**

Economic research by Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan, Elisa Jácome, and Santiago Pérez provides an important corrective to the idea that immigrant upward mobility is purely mythology. Using large historical and contemporary U.S. datasets, they find strong upward mobility among sons of immigrants from many sending countries relative to sons of U.S.-born fathers with similar starting positions. Geography - where families settle - helps explain part of the pattern.

That finding matters because it demonstrates that the intergenerational promise attached to migration can be empirically real. But it should not be made to carry more than it measures. Income rank is not belonging. Economic mobility does not tell us how identity changes, how family conflict is experienced, or whether a child feels connected to grandparents.

The mistake is not believing in mobility. The mistake is treating one measurable dimension as the definition of flourishing.

Research on acculturation gaps adds another layer. In a meta-analytic review focused on Asian and Latino/a American samples, Priscilla Lui found links among parent-child acculturation mismatch, intergenerational cultural conflict, and some mental-health and educational outcomes. The effect sizes and populations require careful interpretation; the point is not that immigrant families are destined for conflict. The point is that generations can experience the same migration at different speeds.

That difference in speed creates a management problem for the family. Parents may evaluate the destination through sacrifice: We gave up X so you could have Y. Children may evaluate it through lived normality: This is simply my world. The parent sees opportunity compared with origin. The child compares their life with peers in the destination. Both comparisons can be valid and still produce incompatible conclusions.

A more complete dream would therefore ask two kinds of mobility questions. What did the family gain materially?

And what capacities did it preserve or build relationally? The best inheritance is not a choice between the two. It is the ability to convert material progress into more time, safety, learning, connection, and agency - not merely into a larger symbol that progress occurred.

Simone's sequence keeps returning: child, immigrant, mother, social worker, future grandmother. The American Dream looked different from each position. A dream that cannot survive the aging of the dreamer is probably a slogan. A

durable dream should become more humane as a person's field of responsibility grows.

Write down the dream in verbs, not nouns. What do you want your days to contain? Who should have access to you? Which sacrifices are temporary and which have quietly become a lifestyle? What would "enough" look like?

Then ask the harder question: if your children inherit your opportunities, do you also require them to inherit your fears?

The American Dream is most humane when each generation is allowed to renegotiate its meaning without forgetting the people who paid the first installment.

The First Mortgage Simone was twenty-three when professional life gave her a view of the American Dream from inside other families.

She was working in preventive social services. The families she encountered were not abstractions in a debate about immigrant aspiration. They were parents trying to hold together work, housing, children, schools, bills, discipline, and the pressure to prove that migration had produced progress.

She noticed a pattern among some West Indian families, including Haitian and Jamaican households. Homeownership had enormous symbolic power. A house could mean permanence after instability, proof that sacrifice had accumulated into something visible, an asset for the next generation, and a rebuttal to anyone who had doubted the move. But buying the house did not end the work required to sustain it. Mortgage, taxes, repairs, transportation, food, school costs, and the ordinary expenses of raising children remained. Some parents responded by working longer.

In the families Simone encountered professionally, the trade-off sometimes appeared in the children: school truancy, pregnancies, dropouts, arrests, and other problems that were never caused by one variable alone but that made her ask a question she carried into her own parenting. What was the point of achieving the symbol if the family the symbol was meant to protect was becoming harder to reach?

The question changed the order of her own goals.

When she and her family bought their first place, they chose a two-bedroom condominium rather than stretching

immediately toward the largest house they might obtain. They also paid for a nanny to help with the children. In the interview, Simone described the children themselves as the first mortgage. The phrase reverses the standard financial picture. Housing was not unimportant; the order of obligation was.

Years later she would own a house in New Jersey. The earlier decision was not anti-property. It was anti-confusion. She did not want the visible object called success to consume the time required to produce the family outcome success was supposed to serve.

The distinction is sharper in immigrant life because material achievements often carry more than their market value. A degree can be family redemption. A professional title can become proof that a parent's sacrifice was rational. A house can become a public receipt for private years. These meanings are not foolish. They are part of why people endure difficult transitions.

But symbols become dangerous when they stop being instruments and become judges. The American Dream is often narrated through nouns: house, diploma, citizenship, business, retirement account. Family life is experienced through verbs: wake, commute, translate, cook, supervise, send, call, worry, save, forgive, return. The nouns photograph well. The verbs consume the years.

Simone had seen enough families to know that a good noun could not rescue neglected verbs.

Motherhood as Revision

Her view of parenting was also personal. Simone described wounds in her own relationship with her mother, including periods when she experienced her mother's choices as abandonment. At one particularly vulnerable point in adulthood, she expected her mother's presence and found herself facing another departure. The details belong to Simone's family, not to a morality tale, and I do not need to turn one person's history into a diagnosis.

What matters for the book is what Simone did with the memory.

Her training in social work gave her a language for stepping outside the child's view long enough to ask what capacities the adult might have lacked. She came to think of her mother as someone who had not fully developed beyond the age and conditions under which she had first become responsible for a child. That interpretation did not erase harm. It allowed Simone to separate explanation from permission and to imagine a different inheritance.

She told herself she would become a better version of what she had received. Later she told her own children something similar: the goal was not to reproduce her. They were supposed to become better versions, to outgrow what she knew.

That is a profoundly different model of intergenerational success from the one in which children exist to prove that parents made the correct sacrifices.

Immigrant children are often praised through a language that contains an invoice. We came here for you. We worked for

you. You have opportunities we never had. Each statement may be true. Together they can quietly turn freedom into repayment.

Simone's parenting philosophy complicates the invoice. If the purpose of sacrifice is possibility, then the child must eventually be allowed to choose possibilities the parent did not predict. Otherwise the sacrifice has purchased compliance, not freedom.

Research on immigrant families makes clear that these dynamics cannot be generalized from one ethnic group or one household. Intergenerational cultural conflict has been studied most extensively in particular Asian and Latino populations, where a meta-analytic review found meaningful associations between conflict and well-being while also emphasizing heterogeneity. Transnational-family research adds another layer: migration can redistribute caregiving, authority, communication, and gendered expectations across borders. The form varies; the recurring problem is that family roles do not remain untouched by movement.

Simone's story gives the problem an everyday scale. The American Dream enters the house through schedules. Who is home when the child arrives? Who works the extra shift? Who takes the call from school? Who can afford to say no to overtime? Who interprets a teenager's behavior through the parent's childhood culture, and who recognizes that the child is growing in a different social world?

These are not arguments against work or aspiration. They are questions about the objective function.

What, exactly, are we optimizing?

If the answer is family flourishing, then the largest house may not always be the best house. The highest-paying job may not always be the best job. The neighborhood with the strongest status signal may not be the place where anyone feels most held. A family can maximize one variable and discover too late that the variable was a proxy.

Simone had learned that lesson before she had language from behavioral economics for it. She had watched families pursue an understandable target and then noticed the hidden costs outside the target.

Her response was not to reject the Dream. It was to rewrite its accounting rules.

The future version of that rewrite was unexpectedly concrete. Near the end of our conversation, she told me that she was eating differently and trying to stay healthy because she imagined the next ten or fifteen years not only as her own aging but as time she might give to grandchildren. She wanted to be available to her children so that care could move forward another generation.

A bigger house was one inheritance. Time was another. The Child's View of the Mother

Simone's account of her own mother is one of the places where the interview archive became hardest for me to summarize cleanly.

From the child's perspective, absence is experienced before it is explained. A parent leaves, fails to arrive, or chooses something the child cannot understand, and the child receives the behavior as evidence. Years later the adult child may acquire

new information: the parent's age at the time, economic constraints, trauma, immaturity, lack of support, cultural expectations, or simply the fact that the parent was more limited than childhood allowed the child to imagine.

Explanation can arrive after the nervous system has already learned the earlier lesson.

Simone described using her social-work training to revisit her mother's choices. She could see the possibility that a very young mother had remained developmentally stuck in certain ways, carrying adolescent limitations into adult parenting. That framework helped Simone make sense of behavior that had felt like abandonment.

But making sense is not the same as declaring the harm unreal.

This difference matters in immigrant families because sacrifice stories can pressure children into premature forgiveness. The parent crossed a border, worked hard, endured racism, sent money, or survived political instability; therefore the child may feel that ordinary pain inside the family is too small or ungrateful to name.

Two truths can exist together. A parent can have survived extraordinary difficulty and still have failed a child in ordinary ways.

A child can understand the conditions that constrained a parent and still decide to parent differently.

Simone's adulthood was not organized around punishing her mother. It was organized around revision. She kept asking what a child needed that she herself had not reliably received.

This is where her two-bedroom-condo decision becomes more than a budgeting example. Childcare was not merely a service purchase. It belonged to a theory of presence. She had seen what happened when every adult hour was consumed by the visible achievement of providing.

Her question was not, How do I avoid sacrifice? It was, What kind of sacrifice produces the life I actually mean to protect?

That question should sit at the center of any serious conversation about the American Dream.

The Dream After It Comes True The American Dream is easiest to believe in before achievement tests it.

Before the house, the house can stand for safety. After the house, it also means maintenance, taxes, commute, school district, neighbors, and the amount of work required to keep the payments comfortable. Before the title, the title can stand for dignity. After the title, it means responsibility, politics, and the possibility that prestige has increased while time has decreased.

Migration intensifies this because the dream may have been inherited from parents who knew the destination mainly as possibility. The child who grows up inside the destination eventually learns its trade-offs in more detail.

Simone's story allows the dream to mature without turning cynical. She eventually owned the house. She valued property. She valued professional achievement. She also refused to let those outcomes become self-justifying.

The question became what they were for. A house is for a life.

A job is for a life. Education is for a life.

Migration itself is for a life. When the instrument begins consuming the thing it was designed to serve, the objective function needs revision.

That principle connects motherhood to every later chapter. It is the reason the book cannot measure success only by whether the immigrant moved upward. We have to ask what the upward movement made possible inside the person's actual relationships. A Mortgage Is Not a Mother

Simone gave me one of the sharpest corrections to the American Dream in the entire archive. Her first professional work was in preventive social services. She entered families after problems had already become visible: school truancy, adolescent pregnancy, conflict, children beginning to fall away from the futures their parents believed they had migrated to create. She saw immigrant parents working long hours to buy and maintain a home while the children inside that home received less time than the parents intended to give them.

The lesson she drew was not that homeownership was foolish. It was that a house could become a false proxy for family success.

When she and her household were making their own choices, the first home was a two-bedroom condominium. The decision mattered because it ran against a familiar visual grammar of arrival. A larger house is easy to photograph. A mortgage closing produces a key, a document, a date. Childcare is harder to display. Time with children leaves no deed. The same money can disappear into a nanny, after-school care,

medical appointments, transportation, food, and the thousand ordinary supports that make a child's life more stable without producing an asset someone can admire from the street. Simone called the children the first mortgage.

I keep returning to that phrase because it changes the accounting unit. The traditional immigrant success story can turn sacrifice into a staircase: endure now so the next generation can stand higher. Simone asked a more uncomfortable question. What if the sacrifice used to build the staircase also removes some of the attention the child needs to climb it?

There is no universal answer. Families do not choose between work and love in a vacuum. Wages, schedules, housing costs, childcare availability, legal status, extended-family support, discrimination, and the number of adults able to earn all shape the menu. The point is not to romanticize time over money. Poverty consumes time too. The point is to stop pretending that visible assets capture the whole objective function of a family.

Research on transnational families makes this tension impossible to reduce to a morality play. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila's classic work on Latina transnational motherhood showed how migrant women reworked the meaning of good mothering when employment and borders made physical co-presence impossible. Joanna Dreby's ethnographic research with Mexican transnational families similarly documented that children are not passive beneficiaries of parental migration; they interpret absence, gifts, remittances, authority, and sacrifice from their own position

inside the family. The same parental act can be experienced as provision by the adult and separation by the child.

That is why Simone's story matters beyond her particular household. She is not offering a formula that says buy a smaller house. She is insisting that children experience the process, not only the outcome.

Her own childhood made that insistence personal. In the recording, she described a mother who had given birth very young and who, in Simone's adult interpretation, had not developed in some of the ways a child later needed her to develop. Simone used her social-work training to understand the woman behind the role of mother. That understanding helped her move toward forgiveness. It did not require her to reproduce the same pattern.

She told her children that the goal was for them to become better versions of her.

I hear two kinds of humility in that sentence. The first is parental: the child's success should not threaten the parent's identity. The second is historical: survival is not the same thing as completion. A parent can honor what an earlier generation survived and still decide that the next generation deserves a different baseline.

That is one of the most difficult forms of inheritance. Material inheritance is easy to name. A house, savings, education, citizenship, a family business, a professional network. Emotional inheritance is less visible. A child can receive a parent's vigilance, fear, silence, ambition, generosity, conflict

style, way of handling uncertainty, and definition of what counts as enough.

Simone was trying to alter that second inheritance while still building the first.

Her future horizon extended beyond her own children. Near the end of the interview she described trying to remain healthy because, ten or fifteen years later, she wanted to be present for grandchildren and support her children as they became parents. The time scale moved again. The American Dream was no longer the house. It was not even the child's diploma. It was continuity of care across generations.

That long horizon changes how success is measured. A household can maximize income in the short term and weaken relationships in the long term. It can also overprotect children in the name of care and leave them underprepared for independence. Simone's philosophy was demanding because it refused both extremes. Parents must show up. Children must still become capable of living without them.

A mortgage is an obligation with a payment schedule. Motherhood is an obligation whose terms change as the child changes. Confusing the first for proof of the second is one of the quiet errors inside the immigrant dream.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Which measure of success would you keep if nobody else could see it?*

## Chapter 5 - Pivot

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What are you allowed to change when other people depend on the version of you that already exists?*

The man on my screen did not need a motivational speech about courage. He understood risk too well. I will call him Malcolm. By the time we spoke, he had learned to perform competence in the American way: work hard, make yourself useful, keep moving. But the arithmetic underneath his career was not individual arithmetic. He helped support his mother. A professional decision that looked like one person's career move could arrive in another household as a missed payment.

I asked him what pivot meant. His answer did not sound like the language of entrepreneurship. It sounded like the language of obligation. He could imagine leaving a job, but he could also imagine the consequences. That second image was heavier.

Then he said something that changed the geometry of the chapter. Sometimes, he told me, money was easier than emotion. If someone he loved was hurting, paying a bill could become a way to help without having to remain inside the pain. The money was care. It could also be distance. Both could be true at once.

That is where the clean American language of risk begins to fail. We often praise the person who bets on himself as if he is wagering only his own future. But many immigrant decisions are distributed decisions disguised as individual ones. The downside is shared. The upside may be shared too. The person choosing is not standing alone at the table.

## The Behavioral Economics of a Family Decision

Behavioral economics is useful here because it begins from an uncomfortable premise: human beings do not make decisions like frictionless calculators. We evaluate gains and losses from reference points. We react differently to uncertainty depending on what we believe we stand to lose. We discount some futures and overweight others. We use mental shortcuts because life does not give us enough information or enough time to compute everything.

Migration makes those conditions more intense. Czaika, Bijak, and Prike describe migration decisions as choices made under incomplete information, uncertain outcomes, shifting aspirations, and unequal degrees of agency. That is a more realistic frame than the mythology of the fearless migrant. A migrant can be brave and still be uncertain. A person can choose and still be constrained. Agency is not the absence of limits; it is the capacity to move meaningfully inside them.

For Malcolm, the reference point was not simply his own salary. It included the stability of people he loved. A conventional career coach might see an opportunity with a higher expected return. Malcolm's nervous system saw the

possibility of a family loss. In the language of prospect theory, losses often weigh more heavily than equivalent gains. In the language of family, the explanation is simpler: a raise for you does not erase the rent someone else still needs next month.

Research on remittances makes the same point from another angle. Money sent across borders is not merely a financial transfer. It can express kinship, obligation, reciprocity, guilt, status, belonging, and conflict. Mahmud's work with Bangladeshi migrants in Los Angeles describes the 'friction' that can exist inside transnational belonging: cooperation and strain can occupy the same relationship. That word - friction - matters. It rescues us from the sentimental story in which every sacrifice feels noble to the person making it.

Some sacrifices feel loving. Some feel compulsory. Some begin as love and harden into expectation. Some begin as obligation and become a source of pride. A mature account of immigrant family economics has to leave room for all four.

## The Planted Foot

I learned the word pivot on a basketball court before I understood it as a life instruction. Plant one foot. Turn with the other. Protect the ball. Find the angle. The move works because everything does not move at once.

For years I loved that metaphor because it made adaptation sound athletic: quick, intelligent, controlled. Adulthood complicated it. The hard part is not turning. The hard part is deciding what stays planted.

I knew my own version of that problem. During the early pandemic period, I was weighing career opportunities that could have kept pulling me west while the emotional gravity of family was pulling me back toward New York. On paper, the decision could be framed as compensation, brand name, trajectory, optionality. In the body, the variables were different. People I loved were living through a frightening period. The future was difficult to price. I moved back.

I do not present that decision as a formula. That would betray the point. Another person with the same facts could have chosen differently and remained loving, rational, responsible. The lesson is not that family must always win or ambition must always yield. The lesson is that the decision was not actually about one variable, and pretending otherwise would have made me less honest about what I was choosing.

The economist asks: compared with what? The psychologist asks: according to which fear, identity, or attachment? The immigrant child asks: what will this choice mean to the people who made choices for me before I was old enough to understand them?

## **Daniel and the Cost of Keeping Everything**

A second conversation pushed the idea further. I will call him Daniel. His life crossed the Caribbean, Northern Europe, and the United States. He described those chapters as if three versions of himself had learned to occupy one body. Some values traveled easily. Others collided with new people and new norms.

One of his strongest attachments was family identity. He wanted achievement to reflect backward as well as forward - to honor the people and history attached to him. Yet living abroad also forced him to confront beliefs he had inherited without previously needing to examine them. He did not describe growth as replacing one culture with another. He described it as discovering that loyalty to origin did not require loyalty to every assumption acquired there.

That is a more difficult pivot because it threatens identity, not merely routine. Behavioral economics has a phrase for the tendency to prefer the existing state: status quo bias. Cultural life gives that bias emotional depth. The existing state may contain your parents, your faith, your language, your childhood, and the people whose approval once meant safety. To change a belief can therefore feel less like updating an opinion and more like risking membership.

Daniel asked the question better than I could: what force would be strong enough to make you let go of a piece of identity?

The answer is not 'new information.' Human beings routinely ignore information that threatens belonging. Sometimes change requires a relationship safe enough to survive disagreement. Sometimes it requires distance. Sometimes failure. Sometimes love. Sometimes the simple shock of discovering that a person you were taught to reduce to a category can be kind to you in a room where your old certainty has nowhere to hide.

## The Courage Myth

We like stories of decisive people because they allow uncertainty to disappear in retrospect. The founder took the leap. The immigrant boarded the plane. The student left home. The employee quit. Once the outcome is known, the earlier ambiguity gets edited out of the story.

But the archive kept teaching me that courage often looks less cinematic. It looks like carrying uncertainty without letting it make every choice for you. It looks like changing one variable instead of detonating your life. It looks like building a runway before jumping. It looks like admitting that dependence changes risk tolerance. It looks like telling the truth about what you can afford to lose.

There is no shame in that. Scarcity narrows the set of reversible mistakes. Wealth can buy retries. Family support can buy time. Citizenship can buy mobility. Health can buy endurance. Networks can buy information. When advice ignores those differences, it turns privilege into personality.

This is why 'bet on yourself' can be inspiring and still incomplete. Some people are betting with rent money. Some are betting with a visa. Some are betting with a parent's medication. Some are betting with nothing more than ego. The bets are not equivalent merely because the sentence is the same.

## A Better Definition of Pivot

A pivot is not reckless change. It is a disciplined reallocation of commitment under new information.

That definition sounds less romantic because it is. It asks four questions. What has changed? What still matters? What can move? What must remain planted for now?

The word for 'for now' matters. A constraint can be real without becoming eternal. Malcolm could support his mother and still build boundaries. Daniel could preserve heritage without freezing his moral development. I could choose family proximity during one season without treating geography as destiny.

The most dangerous decisions are often the ones we mistake for identities. I am the responsible son. I am the successful immigrant. I am the one who never quits. I am the person my family can always call. Those sentences can guide a life. They can also imprison it if they stop being examined.

A good pivot therefore requires more than bravery. It requires periodic renegotiation with the self.

## The Question in the Conversation

Near the end of these interviews, I began asking a version of the same question: if this were your chapter, what would you leave the reader with? The answer mattered because it returned authority to the person whose life I had been interpreting.

Malcolm kept circling responsibility. Daniel kept circling identity. Another participant spoke about a 'True North' - an orientation strong enough to guide choices even when the route remained unclear. The answers differed, but each one rejected the fantasy that a good decision is a decision without trade-offs.

The archive changed me here. I began the project thinking the interesting story was the turn. I now think the interesting story is the foot that stays planted - and whether we chose it consciously.

The Rent Behind the Risk Malcolm did not need a theory of loss aversion to explain why a career pivot frightened him. He had a rent payment that was not his own.

When I asked what made change difficult, he described himself as carrying responsibility for other people. He did not have children, but he felt like the man expected to remain financially steady for his family. If he left a job and the experiment failed, he might still manage his own rent. The question in his head was whether he could also cover his mother's.

That is a different risk calculation from the one embedded in most career advice.

The standard language of reinvention assumes an individual decision-maker: How much runway do you have? What is your tolerance for uncertainty? What do you want? For Malcolm, the unit of analysis was larger. A decision made by one person could alter the stability of several.

He understood intellectually that his relatives would find ways to survive if he were unavailable. Someone had even told him that if he died tomorrow, life would continue. The thought did not dissolve the obligation. Love is not a spreadsheet error we correct once we notice it.

Then Malcolm said something more revealing. Sometimes, when his mother was hurting, he preferred to pay for the

problem rather than stay in the emotional conversation. Tell me how much you need. Let me handle the rent. Money could become efficient care, and efficiency could become avoidance.

I recognized the temptation. Money has clean interfaces. A bill has an amount and a due date. Grief does not. Fear does not. A parent's loneliness does not. When someone you love is struggling, a transfer can produce the relief of action even when the underlying problem has not moved.

Research on remittances is useful here because it resists the idea that money sent across families is simply an economic transaction. Hasan Mahmud's work with Bangladeshi migrants in Los Angeles, for example, describes remitting as entangled with family responsibility, belonging, moral obligation, and relationships across origin and destination. The population is not Malcolm's and the context is not identical. The mechanism is recognizable: money can carry affection, duty, status, guilt, and friction at the same time.

This is why I think of some immigrant decisions as distributed decisions disguised as individual ones.

A job offer arrives in one inbox, but the decision may include a mother's rent, a sibling's tuition, a child's school, an immigration deadline, a spouse's career, an elder's care, or a promise made before the person had enough money to understand how expensive the promise would become. The person signing the contract is not always the only person living with the outcome. *The Offer I Did Not Take*

Malcolm's story pulled me back to a choice from my own life. I was living in California as the world moved toward the

first shock of COVID. I had been pursuing the kind of opportunities ambitious professionals are trained to recognize immediately: bigger companies, bigger brands, clearer status, more money. I was interviewing in the orbit of companies whose names require little explanation on a résumé. Then the pandemic changed the decision environment.

The variables that had looked secondary became primary. Family health, geographic distance, uncertainty, and the possibility that normal travel could disappear were no longer background concerns. I chose to move back toward New York rather than continue optimizing the West Coast path. At the time, the financial comparison made the choice look less obvious than it felt emotionally.

I do not tell that story to claim the decision was objectively correct. Counterfactual lives are generous because they never have to submit receipts. Perhaps the other path would have produced extraordinary professional opportunity. Perhaps it would have created costs I cannot see. The point is that the weights changed.

Migration decision research describes movement through aspirations, information search, time horizons, and agency under uncertainty. The framework is useful beyond the initial international move. Immigrant lives can contain repeated migrations—city to city, class to class, institution to institution—each with incomplete information. We do not choose with full knowledge of the future. We choose with a model of the future built from what the present allows us to imagine.

That is why a pivot is not merely courage. It is an allocation of uncertainty.

Who absorbs the downside if I am wrong? Who benefits if I am right? Which losses feel recoverable? Which obligations are negotiable? Which are part of my identity? Which fears belong to the present, and which are memories of a scarcity that no longer governs the same way?

Malcolm had another answer to that last question. Going away to school in New Hampshire and playing rugby had placed him among peers whose assumptions about possibility differed from the assumptions he had known. He noticed that they often seemed to begin not with I can't but with how. How do I get there? How do I make this happen?

He described the difference as scarcity versus abundance. I would phrase it more carefully now because scarcity is not a character flaw. People who have lived close to material limits often possess extremely accurate risk perception. A missed paycheck can matter more when there is no cushion. Optimism cannot replace cash, legal security, health insurance, safe housing, or social capital.

What Malcolm gained was not proof that constraints were imaginary. He gained exposure to people whose constraint set was different. That changed the menu of strategies he could imagine.

Behavioral science often focuses on choice architecture: the way environments make some options easier to see or select. Social environments do this too. Peers teach us what kind of question to ask. A group that repeatedly asks how may make

experimentation feel normal. A group that has repeatedly experienced punishment for experimentation may reasonably ask whether first.

Migration changes the comparison group, and comparison changes perceived possibility.

Malcolm eventually described himself as solution-focused. When a person spends all his attention rehearsing the problem, he said, the solution can become difficult to recognize even when it appears. I would not turn that statement into a universal rule. Some problems require structural change, not reframing. But as a description of what one new environment had given him, it was powerful.

He had learned a new sentence form. Not I cannot. How might I? The challenge was carrying that sentence forward without forgetting that other people's rent was still attached to the answer.

The Question Malcolm Left Behind Near the end of the conversation, after we had talked through family responsibility, career risk, school, rugby, scarcity, and the way money can substitute for emotional presence, I asked Malcolm the question I had begun asking everyone: What question would you leave for the reader?

His answer was shorter than the conversation. What keeps you in the game?

He meant the game of life—the goals that continue to matter when plans fail or obligations become heavy.

The question works because it refuses the motivational language I had sometimes brought into earlier versions of the

book. It does not ask whether you are resilient. It asks what the resilience is attached to.

For Malcolm, one answer was family even when family complicated freedom. Another was a solution-focused orientation he believed had been strengthened by leaving his familiar environment. Music belonged to the answer too. When I asked what he listened to when he needed to think about pivoting, he reached not for a single perfectly symbolic song but for artists whose careers represented overcoming long odds. He named figures such as Jay-Z, Nas, and Kendrick Lamar. The point was less the exact track than the psychological use: hearing evidence that difficult trajectories could be survived and transformed.

I have become wary of the phrase motivation because it sounds internal and inexhaustible. What Malcolm described was closer to cueing. People build environments that remind them who they are trying to be. A song, a friend, a photograph, a coach, a calendar entry, a religious practice, a family name, a question—each can retrieve a goal when fatigue has pushed it out of immediate view.

The cue does not remove the constraint. It changes which part of the person enters the constraint.

That matters for pivoting. A decision is rarely made by the whole self at once. Sometimes fear is loudest. Sometimes obligation. Sometimes ego. Sometimes exhaustion. A good cue can bring a neglected value back into the room.

Malcolm's question therefore belongs beside Julian's True North. One asks what direction should guide the choice. The

other asks what keeps the chooser moving when direction alone is not enough.

I would add one more question now. What keeps you in the game—and who is paying for you to remain in it?

That second clause is the immigrant complication.

Persistence can be admirable and still distribute costs to spouses, parents, children, or the self. Staying in a prestigious career can support a family and consume every evening. Leaving can protect a person's health and destabilize the household. There is no moral answer embedded in the verb stay or leave.

The work is to make the ledger visible before the decision pretends to be individual.

Risk Has Dependents

Malcolm heard the word pivot and immediately changed the unit of analysis. I had been talking about fear of failure as if risk belonged to the person choosing. He told me that he could cover his own rent and still fail to cover his mother's. He had no children, but he understood himself as a provider inside a family system. A career move could therefore be exciting on his résumé and destabilizing somewhere else.

That is the problem with much of the language of reinvention. It assumes the chooser owns the downside.

For some people, the downside is distributed. A missed paycheck can become a parent's late rent, a sibling's delayed tuition, a relative's medical debt, or the loss of the informal safety net that made another household possible. The rationality of staying in a job cannot be judged only against the potential salary of leaving it. The decision contains obligations that are

invisible to an employer and often invisible to friends whose families do not depend on their income.

Malcolm was candid about another part of the arrangement. Money could become easier than emotion. When his mother was hurting, he sometimes preferred to ask what needed to be paid rather than stay inside the emotional detail. Financial provision solved a concrete problem and allowed him to return attention to the rest of his life. He recognized that this could also be avoidance.

That admission is important because immigrant-family sacrifice is often idealized from the outside. Remittances, bills, tuition, and housing support are real forms of love. They can also become the only language of care a family knows how to exchange comfortably. The provider becomes efficient at solving what can be priced and increasingly unsure what to do with what cannot.

Research on migrant remittances has long shown that money crossing borders is not merely an economic transfer. It is embedded in kinship, duty, belonging, status, and expectations. Malcolm's story brings the same logic inside a domestic U.S. context. Distance does not have to be international for money to carry relational meaning.

The most interesting part of his interview came when he described a period of education away from New York. In New Hampshire, rugby placed him among peers whose assumptions about possibility were different from the scarcity scripts he had known. What struck him was not that they were inherently more capable. It was the ordinary confidence with which they

treated certain problems as solvable. The question shifted from whether something could happen to how it might happen.

Exposure changed the menu before it changed the outcome.

This is where popular conversations about abundance mindset become too shallow. A mindset is not downloaded by repeating affirmations. Malcolm's sense of possibility changed because he entered a social environment in which other people behaved as if different futures were normal. He saw a wider set of examples. He learned new reference points. He watched people approach resources, institutions, travel, education, and professional ambition without treating every opportunity as a scarce piece taken from somebody else's plate.

The shift did not erase family obligation. It made the contradiction sharper. Once you can see more options, staying put becomes a choice rather than the only imaginable path. But a person with dependents cannot simply copy the risk behavior of peers whose downside stops at their own bank account.

That is why I no longer write about pivoting as courage plus motion. A good pivot requires a map of who moves when you move.

Behavioral economics helps here because it takes reference points, loss aversion, uncertainty, and constrained choice seriously. But even those concepts can become too individual if the household is treated as background. In many immigrant and working-class families, decisions are interdependent. The person choosing the job is not the only person whose utility changes.

Malcolm ended the conversation with a question: What keeps you in the game when things get hard?

At first I heard it as motivation. Now I hear it as a systems question. Which commitments are strong enough to survive uncertainty? Which obligations are chosen and which are inherited? Which relationships make risk possible because they provide support, and which make risk harder because they depend on the chooser remaining stable?

The planted foot in a pivot is not always identity. Sometimes it is another person's rent.

#### THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What is your planted foot - the value you refuse to abandon while the rest of your life turns?*

## **PART II - BETWEEN WORLDS**

## Chapter 6 - The Work Between Worlds

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*How much invisible labor does it take to make two worlds intelligible to each other?*

When the second-generation Nigerian-American woman heard my early writing about immigrants and pivoting, she did something that changed the architecture of the book.

She thought about her parents. Not their speeches. Their movements.

They had left Nigeria, built a life without the support system they might have had at home, encountered new responsibilities, and adapted to family circumstances that had not been part of the original plan. She told me that the drive she once considered “innate” began to look different when she examined it closely. Perhaps her parents had taught it without ever delivering the lesson.

Their lives were the lesson. That is how much immigrant knowledge is transmitted. Not as doctrine, but as atmosphere.

A child learns what an emergency is by watching adults react. She learns whether education is sacred by seeing what the household will sacrifice for it. She learns whether authority can be questioned by watching what happens when an elder is wrong. She learns whether money is security, status, generosity,

danger, or shame long before anyone offers a financial philosophy.

The woman described another kind of language inside her family: the look. Her mother did not always need to speak. A change in expression could carry a complete sentence. The child learned the grammar because she had spent years inside the relationship. Outsiders might see silence. She received meaning.

This is the work between worlds that receives almost no formal credential. Immigrant families become translation systems.

Some translations are obvious. A child interprets English for a parent. A parent explains a heritage-language phrase that has no clean equivalent. A family member helps someone navigate a school, a hospital, a lease, a tax form, a job interview.

Other translations are harder because nobody recognizes them as translation.

Explain to a teacher why a parent who rarely attends school events may still care intensely about education. Explain to a parent why a child who asks for privacy is not necessarily rejecting family. Explain to a spouse why sending money abroad is not optional in the emotional economy of the household. Explain to an American-born child why an elder experiences direct disagreement as disrespect. Explain to an elder why the child experiences enforced silence as the opposite of respect.

Then translate yourself. At work, confidence may require directness. At home, directness may read as arrogance. In one culture, independence signals maturity. In another, maturity includes remaining available to the family. The immigrant or

child of immigrants becomes a switchboard, routing meaning between systems that rarely acknowledge the cost of the routing.

The danger is that the translator can disappear behind the function. A person becomes useful before becoming known.

This appeared repeatedly in the interviews. People were proud of what they could do for their families and exhausted by being the one who knew how. They wanted to make life easier for parents without becoming the permanent customer-service department of migration. They wanted to honor sacrifice without allowing sacrifice to settle every future argument.

The distinction requires language many families never had reason to develop before migration.

A boundary, for example, can sound like rejection if the inherited model of love is unlimited availability. Rest can sound like laziness if survival required constant work. Therapy can sound like accusation if pain was historically handled through faith, family, silence, or endurance. Career experimentation can sound reckless if a stable paycheck once represented the difference between security and crisis.

No side is stupid. They are often optimizing for different historical conditions. That sentence has saved me from many shallow judgments.

The parent who fears risk may be carrying a world in which one error had devastating consequences. The child who demands room to experiment may be living in the opportunity structure that the parent's sacrifice helped create. The conflict is not always between old and new, or collectivism and individualism.

Sometimes it is between two definitions of safety. The work between worlds is learning to translate those definitions without allowing translation to become permanent self-erasure.

## **The Work Nobody Sees**

Imani grew up in the United States with Nigerian parents and told me something that changed how I understood transmission. Her parents did not need to deliver formal speeches about resilience for her to absorb it. She watched what they did. She watched how they handled disruption, obligation, faith, and work. What felt "innate" in her was partly an inheritance communicated through repetition.

She laughed about another language of the household: her mother's look. A glance could carry instruction, warning, affection, history, and expectation at once. Nothing about that communication appears on a vocabulary test, yet it is part of cultural fluency.

Until then, I had been thinking of translation too literally. I was focused on words moving between languages and newcomers learning institutions. Imani widened the frame. Families also translate values through gesture, routine, tone, permission, silence, and the behaviors children see repeated long before they can name them.

That is invisible work because it rarely appears in an integration metric. The child who learns to move between a family code and a school code may become skilled at interpreting context without ever calling the skill translation. Later, workplaces may rename the same capacity stakeholder

management, cultural intelligence, facilitation, or systems thinking.

The skill can be valuable. The burden can also be heavy. No child should have to become the permanent interpreter of every adult system around them. The point is not to romanticize bridge work. It is to notice who is doing it, what it costs, and when institutions have quietly outsourced their own accessibility to the people with the least power.

We tend to measure integration through outcomes that institutions can count: employment, education, income, language proficiency, citizenship, homeownership. These are important. But beneath them sits an enormous layer of relational labor that makes the outcomes possible.

Someone tells you which form matters. Someone warns you that a letter that looks routine is not routine.

Someone introduces you to the person who will actually answer the question. Someone says, “This is how it works here.”

The phrase can be generous or controlling depending on who says it and why. At its best, it is a handrail.

When I look back at my own education and career, I can see moments when formal skill mattered and moments when navigation mattered more. Engineering trained me to break problems into systems. Public school and life in Brooklyn taught a different systems literacy: how to read environments, how to move among people, how to recover when the structure is not explicit. Later, in corporate environments, product work, private capital, and entrepreneurship, both kinds of intelligence became useful. The technical answer is rarely enough if nobody

understands, trusts, adopts, funds, or implements it. Immigrant life can train that instinct early.

The child who moves between home culture and school culture becomes accustomed to asking, “What does this mean to them?” The adult who enters a new country learns that the same act can be interpreted differently by context. Over time, this can become bicultural or multicultural competence: not perfect mastery of several worlds, but a practiced ability to notice that worlds have different defaults.

There is strategic value in this. Organizations pay consultants large sums to discover what immigrants learn by necessity: systems fail at the interfaces.

A hospital may provide excellent clinical care and still fail a patient who cannot navigate scheduling. A school may employ good teachers and still lose families whose work schedules make conventional engagement difficult. A company may build a technically strong product and fail because its users interpret the interface differently than designers assumed. A government can create a benefit and make the process of accessing it so opaque that eligibility and access become two different realities. The bridge worker sees the interface.

That is why I have come to think of immigrant adaptation not only as a personal burden but as a form of systems training. The danger is that the person doing the bridging becomes permanent infrastructure for everyone else. The child translator grows into the adult who is always called. The culturally fluent employee becomes the unofficial representative of an entire group. The competent eldest sibling becomes the family

problem solver. The community organizer becomes indispensable and therefore unable to rest. Bridges carry weight.

## **The Discipline of Translation**

Imani's story also changed my sense of clarity. Communication across cultures is not a contest to say more. Sometimes the work is to identify which layer is failing: vocabulary, context, trust, expectation, or timing. Repetition cannot solve the wrong layer.

Communication across worlds also requires a discipline that is easy to underestimate: the willingness to say something clearly without demanding immediate evidence that it was understood exactly as intended.

Immigrants often know the frustration of being misunderstood. That history can produce two opposite habits. Some people become quiet; they anticipate the gap and decide speaking is not worth the cost. Others over-explain; they have learned that misunderstanding carries consequences, so they keep adding context until the message becomes buried under its own defense.

I know the second tendency well. The work between worlds requires learning when more explanation creates clarity and when it simply reveals anxiety. A translator does not reproduce every possible meaning. A good translator identifies the meaning needed for this moment.

That is a leadership lesson as much as an immigrant lesson.

One of the reasons storytelling became central to this book is that stories bridge differently than arguments. An argument

asks someone to accept a proposition. A story places them inside a sequence. Instead of saying “immigrants experience complex belonging,” I can tell you about a woman who felt more at home among Haitian friends in Miami than at a prestigious finance networking event, even though the event might have offered more professional value. The scene does not prove a universal rule. It does something else: it makes a psychological distinction visible.

At the networking event, she was included but guarded. With friends, she was unguarded. Both rooms contained people. Only one produced home.

That is bridge work too - the movement from abstraction to human recognition. The most useful bridges do not erase the shores. They make exchange possible while preserving distinction.

This matters in multicultural societies because integration is sometimes imagined as convergence toward sameness. Yet the most generative environments I have seen are not those in which everyone becomes identical. They are those in which difference becomes navigable without becoming dangerous.

A person can be Haitian, American, Black, Caribbean, an engineer, a parent, a musician, a believer, a skeptic, a founder, a neighbor. These identities do not sit neatly in separate boxes. They interact. Context brings different ones forward. Belonging is not achieved by selecting a single final label. It is achieved when the person can move among legitimate parts of the self without feeling fraudulent in each.

That freedom is rare enough that we notice immediately when we have it.

## **The Job Beneath the Job**

There is work listed in a job description, and there is work required to make the job description possible. Immigrants often become unusually familiar with the second category.

Consider a professional entering an American workplace for the first time. The technical role may be clear. The invisible role is not. How directly can you disagree with a senior leader? Is silence in a meeting interpreted as thoughtfulness or lack of engagement? When someone says ‘we should grab coffee,’ is that a real invitation, polite speech, or networking protocol? How much self-promotion is expected? When does asking for help show maturity and when is it read as weakness?

These questions sound small until a career depends on them. The same invisible work appears outside the office. A newcomer learns which neighborhoods connect to which schools, how credit histories affect housing, why a medical bill has several prices, what an insurance deductible means, how college applications work, and which government offices require appointments that cannot be made in person.

Nobody experiences all of this identically, but the pattern is familiar: formal access to a system does not guarantee usable access.

This gap creates an informal occupation I call the translator of systems. Every immigrant community contains people who do this work. The aunt who knows the form. The friend who

has already applied for financial aid. The coworker who explains the unwritten promotion process. The church volunteer who knows which clinic will take the insurance. The older student who tells a younger one which internship matters.

These people are infrastructure. They are also often unpaid. When institutions fail to explain themselves, communities create human APIs. Knowledge travels person to person because the official interface assumes a user who already understands the architecture.

I became interested in systems partly because I kept seeing how much of life depends on interfaces. In engineering, product management, and operations, we ask what the user is trying to accomplish and where the process fails. Applied to immigration, that question is powerful: where does a capable person fail not because the goal is impossible, but because the pathway is opaque? The answer is frequently somewhere between departments.

## **What the research illuminates - Integration Has an Interface**

Integration is often measured through outcomes such as employment, education, language proficiency, income, residential patterns, or citizenship. These indicators matter, but they can hide friction. Two people can reach the same outcome while one spends vastly more time, stress, and social capital navigating the process.

This is the difference between access and transaction cost. Economics uses transaction costs to describe resources consumed

in making an exchange possible. A similar idea applies to institutions. The cost of enrolling a child in school includes not only money but information, documentation, transportation, language, time off work, and confidence that asking a question will not create risk.

For immigrants, some costs are amplified by unfamiliarity or legal vulnerability. Others are reduced by strong ethnic networks. Community knowledge can make a complicated institution dramatically easier to use. That benefit is one reason social networks matter in settlement.

But network dependence can also create segmentation. If all useful information travels within one community, people without access to the right nodes remain excluded, and institutions receive less pressure to improve their own interfaces.

A mature integration strategy therefore does not merely tell newcomers to find mentors. It redesigns systems so critical information is legible without privileged access.

Schools can make family processes understandable. Employers can explain tacit advancement norms. Cities can centralize newcomer services. Professional organizations can teach how the profession actually works rather than assuming credentialed entrants already know.

The principle is simple: if success depends on knowledge that is not written anywhere, the system is selecting partly for proximity to insiders.

Immigrants reveal that design flaw because they arrive without inherited shortcuts. Fixing it helps everyone who was not born near the manual.

The second-generation daughter did not cross the same border her parents crossed, yet the crossing lived in her behavior. That is the invisible work of transmission. Children inherit not just culture but strategies. The question for every generation is which strategies are still adaptive under the conditions the previous generation worked to create.

Notice the invisible translators around you. Who explains systems? Who makes introductions? Who turns one group's assumptions into language another group can use? Who is carrying cultural labor without title, pay, or relief?

Then ask a second question: where are you yourself a bridge, and does the bridge have somewhere to rest?

The goal is not to stop translating. It is to build institutions that do not require the same few people to translate everything forever.

What Children Learn Without Being Told When Imani listened to the early chapter on pivoting, she did not begin with her own career. She began with her parents.

That response surprised me because I had framed the question around individual adaptation. Imani heard inheritance.

For years she had thought of her own drive as something close to temperament. She knew she was persistent. She knew she tended to keep moving when a plan failed. She knew she could enter situations without a detailed map and find a way through them. She had sometimes wondered where that came from because her parents had not sat her down and delivered a formal philosophy of resilience.

During our conversation, the answer arrived through their behavior. They had migrated. They had adapted to systems they did not design. They had made decisions without knowing every rule in advance. They had raised children in a country whose institutions were more familiar to the children than to them. The lesson had been taught in motion.

That kind of inheritance is easy to miss because families often think of culture as explicit content: food, language, religion, holidays, stories about where people came from. Children also inherit procedures. They learn how adults react when money is uncertain, whether problems are discussed or hidden, who is expected to sacrifice first, what kinds of careers count as safe, how much emotion belongs in public, what respect looks like, and how to respond when an institution does not recognize the family immediately.

Imani described forms of communication that were almost invisible to outsiders. A look from a mother could carry a paragraph. Body language could communicate instruction, warning, affection, or disbelief without a sentence. The child who grows up inside that system becomes fluent long before realizing it is a language.

Then the child leaves home and discovers the fluency is local.

A facial expression that means one thing in a Nigerian-American household may mean nothing to a classmate. A form of correction understood as care inside one family may be experienced differently by a child absorbing norms from school, peers, media, and another generation. A parent may believe the message was obvious because it would have been obvious in the parent's childhood. The child may understand the rule but not the history that produced it.

This is the work between worlds at its most ordinary. It happens at dinner tables, in cars, on phone calls, at school conferences, at weddings, and in the pause before a young adult tells a parent about a decision the parent may not understand.

*The Bridge Has a Body*

We often praise people who can move comfortably across worlds. The bilingual child. The professional who understands both the neighborhood and the boardroom. The daughter who can translate a doctor's explanation for her parents. The colleague who knows why an institutional message that sounds neutral to one group will land badly with another. These people are called connectors, cultural brokers, bridges.

The metaphor sounds noble. A bridge, however, is infrastructure. It carries weight.

Language-brokering research illustrates the ambiguity. Young people who translate for immigrant families can gain competence, pride, and closer relationships in some contexts; in others the responsibility can produce stress or role strain. The effects depend on age, context, family dynamics, the difficulty of the material, and how the child interprets the role. There is no single emotional meaning attached to helping adults navigate a new system.

The same is true later in life. Cultural fluency can become invisible labor. A worker explains a joke, softens a message, prepares a colleague for a difficult meeting, notices exclusion before the people who designed the room can see it, and then returns to her official job. The work is valuable precisely because it prevents friction. That can make it difficult to measure.

Imani's reflection helped me see that adaptation produces assets that institutions often consume without naming. The person who learned to read multiple environments may become unusually good at anticipating misunderstanding. But the skill began somewhere. Often it began because misunderstanding had consequences.

This is why I no longer want to romanticize the bridge. The ability to translate is a strength. A life in which the same person must translate everything is not necessarily a success.

Institutions have responsibilities too. Schools can make processes legible to parents without relying on children as permanent interpreters. Employers can explain unwritten rules

rather than treating inherited familiarity as merit. Health systems can provide language access. Professional organizations can teach how advancement actually works instead of assuming everyone arrived near someone who already knew.

If a system requires insider knowledge that is never written down, it is selecting partly for proximity to insiders.

Immigrants expose that design flaw because they often arrive without inherited shortcuts. The work between worlds should therefore lead to a second question. Where is the bridge allowed to rest?

For Imani, one answer was love. Near the end of our conversation, after moving through parents, culture, body language, unpredictability, and faith, she left the reader with a question: What is life without love?

She did not mean romance alone. She meant the relational force that makes adaptation worth doing. Without love, achievement becomes technically impressive and emotionally thin. Without someone to receive the translated self, fluency becomes performance.

That question belongs in a chapter about work because some of the hardest immigrant labor is not employment at all. It is the work required to remain connected while every environment is teaching a slightly different language for being a person. The Passport in the Room

The June 24 group recording does not belong to the core one-on-one interview series, but it belongs to the world of the book. The conversation moved quickly among ancestry, Germany, Ghana, Britain, the United States, bureaucracy, race,

travel, and the uneven meanings attached to different passports. Because it was a group discussion, the claims should be read as testimony and interpretation, not as a controlled account of European migration systems. What matters for the narrative is how participants recognized status in real time.

One speaker described the bureaucratic vulnerability facing African men who arrive in Europe without the kind of passport that makes mobility legible to institutions. Another described moving through a German process with the advantage of a British passport and the social ease produced by speaking the language and finding a common topic with an official. The contrast was not subtle to the people in the room. The same border can feel administrative to one person and existential to another.

I contributed a story from Barcelona. In a nightlife setting, I noticed Black men who appeared to be from West Africa being treated differently from me. My Americanness was readable in ways that changed the interaction. English, accent, dress, and the assumptions people attached to an American traveler altered how Blackness was interpreted.

The experience complicated the identity hierarchy I had learned in the United States. In America, being Haitian, immigrant, and Black can place a person inside categories with long histories he did not choose. Abroad, American nationality can become a form of privilege even while Blackness remains visible. The order of the labels changes with the room.

Mary C. Waters's work on West Indian immigrants and their children is useful here because it shows why racial

incorporation cannot be understood as a simple replacement of ethnic identity by American identity. Caribbean immigrants arrive with their own national and ethnic frameworks, then encounter a U.S. racial system that may classify them in ways that alter both opportunity and self-understanding. Later generations can experience that classification differently again.

This is one reason I resist the phrase immigrant identity as if it were a stable psychological trait. Identity is partly relational. A person discovers what a category means when another person, institution, border officer, employer, neighbor, teacher, or stranger acts on it.

In Haiti, Blackness did not operate for me as it would later operate in the United States because it was not the same differentiating category in daily life. In Brooklyn, race entered the social field differently. In Europe, Americanness could sometimes reorganize the interaction again. None of these contexts erased the others. They accumulated.

The accumulation produces skill. People learn when to explain, when to let a label sit, when to emphasize nationality, when to use professional credentials, when to speak Creole, when to speak polished corporate English, and when to stop performing legibility for somebody else's comfort. That skill can look like confidence. It can also be tiring.

Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut's broad work on immigrant incorporation is helpful because it refuses the idea that arrival produces one uniform pathway. Education, labor markets, language, religion, neighborhood, legal structures, race, and the second generation all shape incorporation. The

June conversation made the same point in messier human language: the passport in the room changes what the room is allowed to demand from you.

This is the job beneath the job for many immigrants. They are not only doing the work. They are continuously estimating which part of themselves the institution can recognize without penalty.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Where in your life are you doing translation work that nobody has named as work?*

## Chapter 7 - The Mobility Paradox

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What if moving upward increases the distance between you and the people who taught you why upward mattered?*

Avery left the Sunshine State because she was tired of it. The heat. The racism. The familiarity. The feeling that something else had to exist.

South Florida was the landscape of her childhood and the center of a living Haitian world: stores, restaurants, music, events, family, the ordinary visibility of people who did not need to announce the culture because the culture was already in the air. She had grown up inside that abundance of recognition without fully understanding it as a resource. Chicago made the resource visible by removing it.

The first year was transition. The second year, she told me, Chicago began to feel like home. She built friendships. She owned a condo. She grew in ways that mattered to her, especially in faith and independence. Distance from family forced her to discover how much of her old life had been carrying her without asking for credit.

By the third year, the equation changed again. She missed Florida intensely. She began flying back often. The city that had

once represented escape began to feel like a lesson with an ending.

This is the mobility paradox in human form. Movement gives us comparison. Comparison changes value.

Avery could not return to the coastal city where she grew up as the same person who had left it because a Midwestern city had taught her what the place she first called home in the United States had been giving her. Family was no longer background. Community was no longer an assumed feature of adulthood. Cultural familiarity was no longer something she noticed only when outsiders misunderstood it.

She was preparing to leave Chicago for Philadelphia, but not because Philadelphia had replaced Florida as the dream. She had made a promise to her brother. He and his wife wanted another child; she had agreed to spend a year in the same city if they did. The pregnancy made the promise concrete.

So the next move was not a career optimization. It was an act of kinship.

After Philadelphia, she imagined Florida again. When I asked her to name the story, she did not choose “return.” She called it “the girl who left the sun to find her own light.”

That line understands something most migration models miss. Leaving can deepen attachment instead of weakening it.

A person may need distance from a culture to distinguish love from habit. She may need another city to learn which parts of home were constraining and which were nourishing. She may discover that the thing she wanted to escape was not the whole

place. Or she may discover that nostalgia is selective and return would not solve what she imagines it will solve.

Mobility is valuable partly because it generates information about the self. But information has a cost.

You cannot unknow that you could live elsewhere. You cannot return to innocence about the tradeoffs of home. Every place becomes comparable to another place, and comparison can make gratitude more intelligent but peace more difficult.

The finance professional I interviewed described a different version of the same paradox. She could enter elite rooms that represented mobility her family might once have considered extraordinary. Yet professional access did not always produce belonging. At a prestigious networking event, surrounded by accomplished people and potential opportunity, she found herself wanting the ease of a room in which relationships did not have to justify themselves economically.

Success had increased her access to rooms. It had not eliminated the need for a room where she could take the cover off.

This is why a life can look increasingly free and feel increasingly fragmented. Each new option creates another possible self, another city, another career, another network, another version of home.

The challenge becomes less about gaining options. It becomes learning which options deserve to become commitments.

## The Cost of Keeping Every Door Open

Mobility creates options, and options feel like freedom. They also create comparison. Once you know you can live in several cities, work in several industries, or return to more than one cultural world, every commitment begins to close another door. That closure can feel like loss even when the chosen life is good.

Behavioral economics gives us language for part of the discomfort. People evaluate changes against reference points; losses can weigh more heavily than equivalent gains; defaults acquire power simply because they are already in place. Migration adds another layer because the reference point can be split across countries, generations, and imagined futures.

This is why "Where should I live?" is rarely only a preference question. It is a bundle of income, housing, family, schools, safety, legal security, culture, transportation, career density, weather, friendship, and future options. Czaika and colleagues' review of migration decision-making emphasizes that people act with incomplete information and unequal control over outcomes. The fantasy of a perfectly informed move is just that - a fantasy.

Avery's sequence made the problem visible. South Florida had once felt constraining enough to leave. Chicago gave her distance and discovery. The distance then revealed how much Haitian community, family proximity, food, music, and cultural familiarity had been doing for her in the background. Her next move was shaped not by a ranking of cities but by a promise to family.

The finance professional in my archive described another version. Access to elite rooms had expanded, but access was not the same as ease. Success increased the number of places she could enter; it did not eliminate the need for a place where performance could stop.

The best current evidence on migrant adaptation pushes in the same direction. The 2025 Nature Communications meta-analysis found social connectedness among the strongest positive correlates of adaptation across a very large and heterogeneous evidence base. Exposure to the new culture mattered, but the social resources surrounding a person mattered more consistently.

The lesson is not to stop moving. It is to stop pretending movement is costless. A mature choice is not the place with no trade-offs. It is the set of trade-offs you understand well enough to consent to.

## **The Place You Miss After Leaving It**

A woman I interviewed grew up in South Florida and once wanted badly to leave. She disliked parts of the climate and politics and wanted something new. Chicago gave her exactly that: distance, independence, a different city, and a period of personal and spiritual development she came to value deeply. Then the meaning of Florida changed. From Chicago, she began to understand how much the Haitian and Caribbean environment of South Florida had been doing for her without announcing itself. Stores, restaurants, music, family, social familiarity, the probability of hearing Creole - these had once

been background. Distance converted background into infrastructure.

She described flying back frequently. Eventually she planned another move, this time first to Philadelphia to honor a family commitment and then, she hoped, back to Florida. Her story was not a simple return to where she started. The person returning had learned why the place mattered.

This is a classic migration paradox: leaving can increase attachment.

Proximity hides value because humans adapt to what is available. We often recognize a resource only after its removal. A parent's cooking becomes culturally significant in another city. A loud extended family becomes a support network when childcare is scarce. A neighborhood that once felt limiting becomes the only place where identity was never an introduction.

The reverse can also happen. Distance can expose harms that familiarity normalized. Someone may realize after leaving that constant family access had prevented autonomy, that a neighborhood was unsafe, or that a cultural rule treated fear as virtue.

Mobility produces comparison data. The danger is believing comparison automatically produces clarity. Every place has a honeymoon and a fatigue phase. The new city can be evaluated against the worst features of the old one; later, the old city is remembered through its best features while the new one is experienced through ordinary inconvenience. That is why the mobility paradox needs time.

## **What the research illuminates - The Option Value of Movement**

Economists sometimes think about options as valuable even before they are exercised. The ability to leave a job, move to another city, return to a country, or pursue a different career can matter psychologically because it changes whether staying feels coerced. Agency is therefore partly about credible alternatives.

Immigrants may begin with very few. Legal status can tie a person to an employer. Limited savings can make relocation impossible. Family obligations can narrow the set of acceptable choices. Over time, citizenship, income, education, networks, and knowledge may expand the option set. Ironically, belonging can deepen precisely when leaving becomes easier, because remaining becomes more clearly chosen.

This helps explain why the question ‘Where should I live?’ is rarely only about preference. People are evaluating bundles: income, housing, weather, family, schools, culture, transportation, legal security, social networks, healthcare, opportunity, and identity recognition. No city dominates on every dimension.

A decision is therefore not a discovery of the objectively best place. It is a weighting exercise that changes with life stage.

At twenty-five, career density may dominate. At thirty-five, childcare and family proximity may become heavier. Later, healthcare or aging parents may reorganize the map again.

The important skill is not finding a permanent answer too early. It is knowing which variables currently deserve weight and which costs are being romanticized or ignored.

Home can move because the person evaluating it moves internally. That does not make belonging superficial. It makes it alive.

Avery's arc is deliberately unfinished in these pages. an East Coast city closer to family is not a neat ending, and the place she first called home in the United States is not a guaranteed final home. That incompleteness is the point. People do not owe a memoirist a resolved geography. Sometimes growth is simply becoming more precise about what each place gives and what it costs.

List the futures you keep postponing into "someday." Which are genuine plans? Which are emotional insurance policies - versions of life you preserve so you never have to fully choose the current one?

Mobility is valuable because it creates options. Rootedness is valuable because it allows depth. A life needs enough movement to remain alive and enough commitment for something to grow.

The Condo Sold in Twelve Hours Avery's move out of Chicago became real quickly. The condo sold in roughly twelve hours.

There is something useful about that detail because migration stories can become too symbolic on the page. Movement is also logistics. Listings, boxes, flights, deposits, neighborhoods, keys, people asking where you are going next. The emotional meaning of a move has to coexist with the practical machinery that makes it happen.

Avery had arrived in Chicago after becoming tired of South Florida. She wanted difference. Florida had been heat, familiarity, racism, family, Haitian restaurants, music, events, friends, and the ordinary saturation of a culture she could take for granted precisely because it was everywhere around her. Chicago removed the saturation.

At first the loss was not entirely a loss. Distance created room. Avery became more independent. She developed friendships that belonged to the new city rather than to childhood. She bought property. She deepened her faith. She learned what it felt like to live far enough from family that every problem could not be answered by somebody nearby.

Then the meaning changed again. By the time we spoke, South Florida had become more valuable in memory because Chicago had taught her what the earlier environment had been supplying without invoice. Siblings were not simply people who existed in the background. Haitian community was not simply the setting of childhood. Proximity was a resource.

That discovery did not mean she had been wrong to leave. This is the part of mobility I find most interesting: a move can succeed and still make return attractive. Growth does not always convert departure into permanent preference. Sometimes departure is how a person learns what should be carried back.

Avery was preparing for Philadelphia, not because Philadelphia had become a grand new dream, but because family obligation had entered the map. She had made a commitment connected to her brother and the arrival of a child. She wanted to spend a period in the same city and be present.

The next move therefore looked different from the first. Florida to Chicago had contained escape, experimentation, and self-definition. Chicago to Philadelphia contained kinship.

If migration is narrated only through economic opportunity, that distinction disappears. Cities become bundles of wages, housing prices, and amenities. Real people assign values to being near a sibling during pregnancy, to having grandparents close enough for ordinary help, to knowing which grocery store carries familiar ingredients, to being able to attend a birthday without buying a plane ticket.

Behavioral economics gives us language for some of these trade-offs, but ordinary life already knows them. The value of an option depends on the reference point. Before leaving Florida, Avery compared it with an imagined elsewhere. After building a life in Chicago, she could compare both places with experience. The information set had changed.

So had she. The Song That Sounds Like a Place When I asked Avery about music, the answer became more specific than a genre. She reached for the sound of South Florida: local dance music associated with the region, the kind of music that did not need to announce where it belonged because people around her already knew.

Then she gave me a childhood scene. She was around nine. Her older siblings sometimes threw parties at the house against their mother's wishes. Music filled the house. Avery remembered opening her bedroom door and seeing people dancing. She remembered the same musical world around her brothers' basketball practices and at the park.

The memory matters because it shows how culture is stored. We often talk about music as a soundtrack, something added to an event. In autobiographical memory, the relationship can run the other direction. Years later, the music can become a retrieval cue for the event.

Research on music-evoked autobiographical memory documents how familiar music can elicit vivid personal memories, sometimes involuntarily, and how those memories are often emotional and socially themed. Diaspora research adds another layer: music can become a medium through which people recognize themselves, remember collective histories, and negotiate identity in environments where the surrounding culture no longer supplies the same cues.

Avery did not need those papers to know what the song did. She said it sounded like home.

The phrase is deceptively simple. A song has no address. Yet the sound can contain one: a room, a sibling, a basketball court, the social confidence of hearing something no one around you needs translated.

That is what she missed in Chicago. Not only people, not only weather, not only food. She missed the ease of cultural recognition. The distance had taught her to name it.

This is one reason I resist describing immigrant communities only as enclaves. The word can imply separation from a mainstream. For people living inside them, such communities can also function as recovery spaces from constant translation. A Haitian bakery, church, music night, or family party may be economically ordinary and psychologically important. The person is not required to begin with explanation.

That ease can coexist with constraint. Communities can police difference, reproduce hierarchy, spread gossip, or make departure feel like betrayal. Avery's story does not idealize South Florida. She left for reasons. What she learned was that critique and attachment are compatible.

When she described her trajectory, she eventually gave it a title: the girl who left the sun to find her own light.

The phrase works because the light she found did not prove the sun had been worthless. Chicago gave her something Florida could not have given in the same way: comparison.

Mobility created knowledge. Knowledge complicated home.  
A Thousand Miles from Rescue

Avery told me that Chicago changed her relationship with faith partly because family was far away.

In South Florida, help had been embedded in the geography. Family could arrive. A familiar network existed around problems. In Chicago, she was roughly a thousand miles from the people who had been her default infrastructure. The distance made dependence visible by removing its convenience.

She did not describe the experience only as loneliness. It also became development. Without the immediate possibility that family would step in, she learned forms of self-reliance and spiritual dependence that had not been necessary in the same way before.

This is another reason movement cannot be evaluated by comfort alone. Some environments hold us; others force capacities to emerge. The challenge is distinguishing growth from deprivation after the fact.

We often romanticize difficult seasons because survival gives them meaning. Avery was careful about that. Chicago had served a purpose. She had made friends, built property ownership, deepened faith, and learned independence. None of that meant every hard moment had been good for her.

When she later felt the pull back toward family, she did not interpret it as regression.

That matters.

Western narratives of adulthood often equate maturity with increasing independence. Many immigrant and diasporic lives are organized around interdependence. The adult can become more capable and still choose greater proximity to family.

Moving closer is not necessarily failure to launch. Moving away is not necessarily liberation.

The more useful measure is agency: can the person understand what the relationship gives, what it costs, and choose rather than merely reenact?

Avery had gained information through distance. She now knew which parts of South Florida she had been taking for granted and which parts had genuinely constrained her. That made a future return more intentional than simple nostalgia.

The Promise to a Brother Philadelphia entered the map because of a promise.

Avery's brother and his family were entering another stage of family life, and she had agreed to spend a year in the same city under certain circumstances. When those circumstances became real, the promise became a relocation plan.

From a labor-market perspective, that may look inefficient. From a family-systems perspective, it is legible.

People move for care all the time. They move toward aging parents, new babies, siblings, illness, marriage, divorce, religious community, and the possibility of children knowing cousins. These moves disappear in economic narratives that treat wage maximization as the default reason for mobility.

The archive taught me to count promises as infrastructure too. A promise can organize geography.

It can also reveal priorities a résumé would never show. Avery's next city was not supposed to become a permanent answer. It was a chapter with a purpose. That temporariness is

important because migrants are often asked to justify movement as if every move must discover the final home.

Some places are bridges. A bridge does not fail because you cross it.

### A City Can Be a Teacher

Avery's story works because no city remains only geography. South Florida, Chicago, and the next East Coast move each taught her something different about what she valued.

She grew up with Florida close enough to family that proximity could disappear into the background. Siblings, familiar music, community, and the Caribbean texture of the region were simply there. Chicago removed the automatic access. Distance made the ordinary visible.

In the interview, Avery described arriving in Chicago with far less of the network she had known. The move deepened her religious life because she could not assume family would be physically available whenever she needed help. It also changed how she valued siblings and community. What had once been easy to take for granted became something she could name.

This is one of migration's recurring paradoxes: leaving can increase attachment.

The mechanism is not mysterious. Distance creates contrast. Behavioral decision research has long shown that reference points shape evaluation. A person rarely experiences a city in absolute terms; she experiences it against the city before it, the people missing from it, the opportunities gained, the costs newly introduced, and the self that became possible there.

Chicago was therefore not simply better or worse than Florida for Avery. It was diagnostic. It showed her the value of faith, family, and community by placing them under different conditions. When she later prepared to move toward family again, the move was not a retreat to an old self. She was carrying the person Chicago had helped create.

The music made that visible. When I asked what she listened to when she wanted to disappear into sound, she chose music connected to South Florida. The choice was immediate because the genre contained childhood scenes: siblings throwing house parties against their mother's wishes, music blasting through the house, basketball practices, parks, the ordinary soundtrack of being the younger child carried through older siblings' lives.

That is what nostalgia often is at its most precise. Not a desire to reverse time, but a sudden restoration of context.

A song can return the layout of a house, who was old enough to host the party, who was still young enough to open a bedroom door and watch, which family members were active in sports, what the park sounded like, and what kind of person you were before you had language for identity. The memory is relational before it is geographic.

Avery titled her own story with an image: the girl who left the sun to find her own light.

The title could have become too neat if the interview had ended there. But her actual story resisted the heroic arc. She did not leave Florida because Florida had nothing for her. She loved it. She did not stay in Chicago because growth requires permanent exile. Chicago had completed a particular kind of

work in her life. She did not know exactly what Philadelphia or the next move would become. She was going partly because family mattered differently now.

That uncertainty is important. We often judge mobility by asking whether a move was the right decision. Avery's story suggests a different frame: what did the move teach you to value, and what will you do with the knowledge?

A city can be a teacher without being a forever home.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What would progress look like if belonging counted as an outcome rather than a sentimental extra?*

## Chapter 8 - Scarcity, Ambition, and the Psychology of Possibility

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*Which of your ambitions are desires, and which are insurance policies against returning to what you feared?*

When I returned to Haiti through the University of Rochester, one of the most destabilizing things I encountered was not poverty.

It was familiarity. The faces, the schools, the intelligence of children reminded me of something achievement had made easy to forget: I was not the only child who had been capable.

In America, success is often narrated retrospectively as evidence of personal quality. The degree proves you were disciplined. The job proves you were talented. The promotion proves you made good decisions. The story feels coherent because winners are given enough microphone time to explain themselves.

Haiti complicated that story for me. I remembered classmates who were exceptionally bright. I knew children whose minds had not been the limiting variable. My own life had changed because ability intersected with migration,

schools, mentors, information, institutional access, and the chance to make mistakes inside systems with more ladders.

Opportunity had been doing work inside my biography. That does not erase effort. It tells the truth about where effort gets multiplied.

One woman in the interview archive carried a similar memory more painfully. She had moved repeatedly as a child and still remembered classmates in Haiti from around eleven, twelve, thirteen—the students she competed with, children she considered every bit as talented as she was. As an adult working in education, she could look at her own path and the paths available to some of them and see the divergence.

She described her work as a way of serving the little girl she had been and the children who had shared classrooms with her.

That is not survivor's guilt in the simplistic sense that success should be apologized for. It is a form of moral memory: refusing to let the outcome rewrite the starting field.

Scarcity matters because it changes the cost of experimentation.

A person with savings can fail and try again. A person without savings may experience the same failure as eviction, debt, lost immigration status, inability to support a parent, or a delayed education. A child whose family understands the American school system can make a mistake and be rerouted. A child whose family does not know the system may discover the missed opportunity years later.

This is why “mindset” is both powerful and insufficient.

One of the men I interviewed described how going away to school in New Hampshire and playing rugby exposed him to peers who seemed to approach possibility differently. He had grown up around forms of scarcity thinking—reasonable adaptations to environments where there was not enough. His new peers seemed more likely to ask how something could be done than to begin with whether it was available to people like them.

That shift mattered to him. It helped him become more solution-focused. But we should be careful with the moral lesson. Abundance thinking does not create abundance by itself. Confidence cannot replace capital, legal status, safe housing, health care, a functioning school, or a network. Telling structurally constrained people to “think bigger” can become a way of excusing the structure.

The useful lesson is subtler. Possibility is partly material and partly perceptual. Systems expand or narrow the options a person can actually take. Experience expands or narrows the options a person can imagine.

Migration changes both at once. For me, crossing into the United States increased access to institutions and also changed the size of the future I could picture. College changed it again. Travel changed it again. Returning to Haiti changed the moral meaning of that expansion because it reminded me how contingent it had been.

The question stopped being “Why did I make it?” A more honest question emerged.

What made it possible for effort to compound in my life—and how do we build more of those conditions for people whose potential is already there?

## **A True North Is Not a Destination**

Julian had completed an elite graduate business program, and the expected map after graduation was familiar: remain near the most prestigious networks, or move toward another city dense with capital and opportunity. He chose South Florida instead. People asked why he would step away from the obvious centers of advantage.

His answer reached backward. After Haiti's earthquake, he had written himself a letter. The reason for leaving, as he remembered it, was not to escape responsibility to home but to acquire tools he could eventually use. Years later he still did not claim to know the final form of that promise. He used a phrase he returned to throughout our conversation: True North.

What interested me was that his True North was not a five-year plan. It was a direction for evaluating plans. He wanted proximity to Haitian community. He wanted to build rather than simply attach his name to institutions other people had already made prestigious. And he did not want contribution to become something postponed until he was wealthy enough to feel heroic. His question was more immediate: what can I do now with what I know and what I have?

When I asked for a song, he chose "Skeleton Move." He associated it with remembering the road home. I did not need the lyric to understand the behavioral function of the song: it

was a cue that turned an abstract value into something retrievable. Music was doing what a written mission statement often fails to do - returning a decision-maker to the reference point that mattered.

The conversation corrected another simplification in my own thinking. Ambition is not one variable. Status, income, autonomy, contribution, family proximity, cultural continuity, and the pleasure of building can all enter the same decision with different weights. Two people can choose opposite jobs and both be acting ambitiously.

Migration decision research supports the caution. Aspirations, information search, planning horizons, and agency all shape movement under uncertainty. The behavioral mistake is not choosing the unconventional path. It is treating the conventional path as if it arrived without assumptions.

My own life has repeatedly been changed by entering rooms I did not fully understand and then discovering the machinery was less mystical than it appeared. Engineering, consulting, product management, private markets, entrepreneurship, academic work, fashion, youth development - each domain initially has its own mythology. From far away, expertise looks like identity. Up close, it becomes a sequence of learnable practices plus judgment accumulated through experience.

That realization is liberating for immigrants because migration itself can create a sense that everyone else received a handbook you missed. Often there is no handbook. There are conventions, networks, vocabulary, and confidence - unevenly distributed, but learnable.

The challenge is distinguishing legitimate knowledge gaps from manufactured intimidation. Institutions benefit when their processes appear more complex than they are. Jargon can protect expertise; it can also protect status. People who did not grow up around elite institutions may assume confusion means they do not belong. People raised near those institutions are more likely to interpret confusion as temporary.

One of the quiet advantages of privilege is the assumption that not knowing something yet is normal.

One of the quiet burdens of marginality is interpreting the same gap as evidence.

This is why I care about teaching young people systems, not only motivation. Telling a child to dream big without explaining admissions, financial aid, networking, interviewing, negotiation, internships, credit, investing, entrepreneurship, and professional norms leaves aspiration floating above infrastructure.

Agency requires information. At the same time, information without imagination can reproduce the existing world too faithfully. Once you learn the rules, another question appears: which rules deserve to remain?

Immigration makes this question unavoidable because every migrant compares systems, whether consciously or not. You notice what one country does better and what it does worse. You see which behaviors are called normal only because they are familiar. Travel widened this instinct in me. China, Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean - each place complicated

the idea that there is one inevitable way to organize life, work, transportation, community, family, or public space.

The goal is not to romanticize elsewhere. Comparison can become shallow if it ignores history and institutions. The goal is cognitive flexibility: the ability to see a system as designed rather than natural.

Once a system is seen as designed, it can be redesigned. Ambition also needs redesign.

Immigrant families sometimes use achievement as evidence of security. The degree is not only education; it is protection. The profession is not only work; it is legitimacy. The house is not only shelter; it is proof that the gamble succeeded. These meanings can be powerful. They can also make it difficult to admit when an achievement no longer serves the person who earned it.

A title can become a border of its own.

I have had to learn that pivoting away from an identity is not disrespecting the effort required to acquire it. Engineering still lives in how I think even when the problem in front of me is human. Product management still shapes how I decompose ambiguity. Corporate experience informs entrepreneurship even when I no longer want the same organizational life. The immigrant self is cumulative even when the résumé looks discontinuous.

Nothing meaningful has to be wasted merely because it is no longer central.

## Learning That the Door Has a Handle

Scarcity changes the way a person interprets a closed door. If opportunities have been rare, a rejection can feel like evidence that the category itself is unavailable: people like me do not get this. If opportunities have been abundant, the same rejection is easier to classify as one data point: try another door.

The external event is identical. The learned probability model is different. I began noticing this in professional environments where some people treated elite institutions as normal. They asked for introductions without apology. They negotiated offers. They applied before meeting every qualification. They assumed a senior person might answer. It was not necessarily arrogance. Often they had accumulated enough evidence that systems were penetrable.

For someone raised farther from those systems, opacity can look like prohibition. This is why representation matters in a more precise way than slogans sometimes capture. Seeing someone with a similar background succeed does not magically transfer their resources to you. What it can transfer is probability. It updates the internal model from impossible to demonstrated.

Mentorship goes further by transferring procedure. ‘You can do it’ is encouragement. ‘Here is how the interview actually works, here is who makes the decision, here is when to follow up, here is what this salary range means’ is infrastructure.

Immigrant ambition is often praised as if motivation were the scarce resource. In many cases motivation is abundant. The

bottleneck is information, network access, time, or permission to imagine a nonstandard path.

That is why I became increasingly interested in teaching systems to young people. Aspiration without process can become another way to blame the individual. We tell students to dream, then hide the mechanics of financial aid, internships, relationship-building, negotiation, credit, professional norms, and organizational politics inside families that already know them. A fairer system makes the hidden curriculum visible.

## **What the research illuminates - Scarcity Is Cognitive and Structural**

Scarcity is sometimes discussed as a mindset, and mindset does matter. People can learn avoidance, pessimism, or overprotection from environments in which mistakes were expensive. But reducing scarcity to attitude is dangerous because it turns material constraints into personal defects.

A person with one month of savings should evaluate risk differently from a person with two years of runway. A student supporting family members has a different opportunity cost for an unpaid internship. A worker whose immigration status depends on employment has less freedom to 'just quit' a harmful workplace.

The psychological and structural levels interact. Long exposure to fragile conditions can produce habits that persist after circumstances improve. Someone who finally has savings may still experience every expense as danger. A professional with strong credentials may still assume a missed opportunity will

never return. These are examples of old constraints surviving as internal forecasts.

The practical task is therefore dual. Change the conditions when possible. And update the forecast when the conditions have changed.

That is where an abundance orientation is useful if defined carefully. Abundance does not mean believing resources are infinite. It means recognizing that opportunity can be generated, relationships can be built, skills can transfer, and one rejection does not exhaust the future.

For immigrants and their children, the shift can be intergenerational. One generation optimizes survival; the next inherits enough stability to optimize exploration. Conflict arises when the first interprets exploration as irresponsibility and the second interprets survival logic as fear.

Both may be accurately reading different environments. The bridge is not choosing which generation was right. It is naming when the environment changed.

The children I remembered in Haiti and the classmates another interviewee remembered should remain in the book even when they never become characters in the conventional sense. Their absence is part of the plot. Opportunity creates biographies not only through what happens, but through what becomes possible enough to happen at all.

Ask which of your current decisions are being made under constraints that no longer exist. Which fears are inherited forecasts? Which rules did you learn because they are useful, and which because nobody around you imagined an alternative?

Scarcity teaches discipline. Possibility teaches experimentation. A mature life needs both: enough memory to respect consequences and enough imagination to stop rehearsing emergencies after the emergency has passed.

## WHEN SCARCITY CHANGES THE CHOICE SET

Scarcity is not only having less. It can change what becomes cognitively available. When money, time, safety, or status feels fragile, attention narrows toward the urgent. That narrowing can be adaptive: the overdue bill really does matter. But it can also make long-horizon investments - rest, experimentation, relationship repair, education, creative risk - feel irresponsible even when they might expand future options.

Migration intensifies this because the comparison set is unstable. A person may compare the present simultaneously with the country they left, the peers they now live among, the sacrifices their parents made, and an imagined future they promised themselves migration would produce. Four reference points can generate four different definitions of 'enough.'

This is why ambition can behave like both aspiration and insurance. The goal is not merely to achieve. It is to become impossible to send backward. For some immigrants, professional prestige, savings, property, degrees, or relentless work are partly defenses against the remembered vulnerability of having fewer choices. That does not make the ambition false. It makes its emotional economics more complex.

The practical question is therefore not whether ambition is good. It is whether the goal is still serving the person or merely protecting them from an old fear whose probability has changed.

What Scarcity Teaches the Body Malcolm's time in New Hampshire changed the grammar of possibility for him. He had grown up around people for whom resources were finite in

visible ways. Then rugby placed him among peers, many of them white and more economically secure, whose assumptions about problems sounded different.

He noticed the questions. Not, Can people like us do this? More often, How do we do it?

The distinction can be over-romanticized if we are careless. People with more resources can afford to experience risk as adventure because failure is less likely to threaten housing, immigration status, family remittances, or basic stability. What looks like confidence may partly be insurance that nobody names as insurance.

Still, exposure changed Malcolm. It gave him evidence that some barriers he had treated as fixed were at least partly negotiable. He started describing himself as solution-focused. He became suspicious of narratives that spent all their energy rehearsing why something could not happen.

The useful lesson is not that scarcity is a mindset. Scarcity is often material. The useful lesson is that material conditions and mental models interact. An environment can constrain what is possible and also constrain what a person learns to imagine as possible.

Migration changes both. A newcomer may gain access to institutions unavailable in the origin country while simultaneously losing social capital, professional status, language fluency, or family support. Opportunity expands along one axis and contracts along another. This is why immigrant success stories that move in a straight line are usually edited versions of more complicated graphs.

The same is true of ambition. The Letter After the Earthquake Julian's choices looked unconventional from the outside because people were comparing them to a familiar prestige map.

He had completed an elite graduate business program. The expected next steps were easy to name: remain near the densest networks, follow the companies with the strongest signals, convert credential into proximity to capital. Instead, he chose South Florida and entrepreneurial work that kept him closer to Haitian community and to projects he could shape directly.

When I asked why, his answer did not begin at business school. It began in childhood.

Julian remembered noticing broken or under-resourced spaces around him in Haiti. At church he could look at damaged benches or lights that needed fixing and imagine what he would do if he had enough money. The fantasy was not luxury for himself. It was the power to sign a check and repair what everyone else had learned to walk around.

After the earthquake, when he left Haiti, he wrote himself a letter. In his memory, the promise was that he was leaving because of the earthquake and because he needed tools. The exact form of the future was unclear. The direction was not.

Years later he called that direction his True North. I like the phrase because it does not pretend to be a destination. A destination can be completed. A direction has to be consulted repeatedly as circumstances change.

Julian did not claim that every choice he made was sacrificial or altruistic. He liked entrepreneurship. He liked building. He

took pride in creating something from scratch rather than attaching himself to whatever institution was currently most prestigious. What made the choices coherent was the reference point he returned to: use what you have now, from where you are now, rather than postponing contribution until you feel powerful enough to make a grand gesture.

Migration decision-making research is useful here because it rejects the idea that movement is one clean utility calculation. Aspirations form over time. People search for information imperfectly. Planning horizons differ. Agency varies. Decisions occur under uncertainty, and the options people perceive are shaped by resources and prior experience.

In behavioral terms, Julian and a classmate choosing a conventional prestige path may not be maximizing the same thing. One may weight status and income heavily. Another may weight autonomy, proximity to community, contribution, family, and the pleasure of building. Calling one ambitious and the other not ambitious simply hides the objective function.

This changed my own thinking. I had often treated ambition as a vertical quantity: bigger role, bigger salary, bigger institution, more recognition. The archive kept showing me ambition with direction but not necessarily hierarchy.

A mother chooses a smaller home to preserve time with children. A professional moves closer to a sibling instead of closer to a headquarters.

A graduate turns away from the most obvious prestige market because another geography aligns better with an old promise.

A provider remains in a stable job longer than he wants because the downside is distributed across family.

The choices can look irrational only when we refuse to count what the chooser is counting.

Music as a Decision Cue When I asked Julian for a song, he chose "Skeleton Move." He associated it with the road home and with remembering direction.

I do not need the lyrics to make the point. The song functioned as a cue. Values such as contribution, loyalty, or home are too abstract to be present in working memory every time a decision appears. A song can retrieve the emotional state in which the value became meaningful.

This is one reason music appears throughout this book. It is not decoration between serious ideas. It is one of the technologies people use to keep a reference point available.

A mission statement can sit untouched in a file. A song can arrive while driving.

The difference is not trivial. The Choice Menu One of the most important differences between people is not how boldly they choose from a menu. It is which options appear on the menu at all.

Malcolm's move to New Hampshire expanded his menu because he watched peers treat certain ambitions as ordinary. Grace's move into American education expanded hers because institutions existed that could convert academic performance into further opportunity. Julian's graduate education expanded his professional menu while his True North changed how he ranked the items on it.

This is where the language of mindset can become both useful and dangerous.

Useful, because exposure genuinely changes perceived possibility. Dangerous, because people can only choose among options that are materially reachable enough to enter consideration.

A person cannot positive-think a visa into existence. Confidence does not create affordable childcare. A network cannot fully compensate for an unsafe neighborhood or a collapsed labor market. At the same time, two people with similar resources can perceive different options because their prior environments taught them different expectations.

Migration is powerful because it can change the material menu and the perceived menu simultaneously.

That is what happened to me. The United States expanded access to institutions I could not have imagined in the same way as a child. College expanded the menu again. Travel expanded it again. Professional life introduced rooms that had once looked mysterious from outside and ordinary once I understood how they worked.

But expansion creates its own burden. Once you know more options exist, every choice excludes more visible alternatives.

This is the psychological side of mobility nobody advertises. Opportunity can increase regret because the road not taken becomes easier to picture.

The person who had one plausible path can commit without comparing ten. The upwardly mobile professional may carry a constant sense that another city, company, country, or business

could have been better. Choice becomes abundance and noise at once.

That is why Julian's True North matters. More options require stronger criteria, not more motion.

A direction is what keeps opportunity from becoming permanent indecision.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*If scarcity stopped making the decision for you, what would you choose next?*

## Chapter 9 - The Stories We Inherit

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*Which family story has been guiding your choices without ever announcing itself as a rule?*

Children inherit migrations they did not personally choose. Sometimes they inherit them as stories: the airport, the first apartment, the job nobody wanted, the winter coat, the relative who lent money, the person left behind.

Sometimes they inherit them as rules. Work twice as hard. Do not embarrass the family.

Become a doctor, lawyer, engineer—something nobody can easily take away from you. Do not waste food.

Do not trust institutions completely. Send money home. Remember where you come from. Be grateful.

Sometimes they inherit migration as silence. The second-generation Nigerian-American woman I interviewed said her parents did not need to lecture her into ambition. Their lives had already communicated it. They had broken a pattern by leaving Nigeria. They had built without the support structure they might have had at home. They had absorbed challenges their daughter only understood later.

The message was not spoken. It was embodied. That is why intergenerational identity is not simply a question of which

culture a child “chooses.” Children are raised inside unfinished projects.

A parent's fear may be the residue of a real danger the child never experienced. A child's impatience may be the product of security the parent worked to create. The parent sees risk and remembers what falling cost. The child sees the same risk and sees possibility. Both can believe the other has misunderstood life.

Simone's family story gave this dynamic another form. She could look backward at her own mother and see the limitations of youth, circumstance, and emotional development. She did not excuse every hurt. She also refused to make hurt the only inheritance. When she became a mother, she consciously overcorrected in some ways, determined that her children would receive what she had missed.

That is how family history changes. Not through perfect healing, but through edited transmission.

Every generation receives a draft. Some sentences deserve to be preserved exactly. Some require revision. Some beliefs were survival tools under conditions that no longer exist. Some customs carry beauty the new environment cannot replace. Some silences once protected people and later prevent intimacy. Some ambitions once represented freedom and later become cages.

The difficult task is deciding which is which. This is one reason immigrant families can become intense sites of moral argument. A tradition is rarely experienced as merely a preference. It can carry ancestors, sacrifice, faith, memory, and

proof that displacement did not erase the group. When a child questions the tradition, the parent may hear a threat to continuity.

The child may simply be trying to become an adult. Both interpretations can exist in the same room.

Research on cultural identity helps explain why there is no single endpoint. First-generation immigrants and their children can hold ethnic and national identities in many combinations, and those combinations change with age, relationships, discrimination, opportunity, and context. Identity is not a percentage that settles after enough years in one country.

It is a negotiation over meaning. The most dangerous family stories are not necessarily the painful ones.

They are the ones nobody is allowed to revise.

A story can honor sacrifice without making the next generation reenact it. A child can love a country of origin without performing cultural purity. A parent can want continuity without owning the child's future. A family can say, "This is where we came from," without turning the sentence into "This is the only place you are allowed to become."

That is the inheritance I am after in this book. Not a museum. A living archive.

## **The Quiet Art of Listening**

There are moments in conversation when the real lesson isn't about the task at hand, but about how we show up for one

another inside the task. I've learned this most clearly in the small, imperfect exchanges where patience gets tested, assumptions slip out, and intention has to be re-centered. Planning something meaningful - something layered with memory and culture and responsibility - exposes how easily we talk past each other instead of truly listening.

What began as a practical discussion about contributions, timing, and logistics slowly revealed something deeper. Gratitude surfaced first. I found myself appreciating the rare consistency of someone who shows up, contributes, and carries weight even while busy. That kind of reliability matters more than we often admit. It builds trust. It creates momentum. It reminds us that collaboration is not just about ideas, but about commitment.

Then the conversation moved toward something personal. Food became memory. My mother's cooking was not just taste, but identity, care, and lineage. The frustration wasn't about preference - it was about context. Subjectivity matters. When something holds emotional weight, it deserves careful listening, not casual equivalence. Learning when to honor another person's meaning instead of defending your own becomes a quiet form of maturity.

From there, the discussion expanded into culture and storytelling. Folklore, rhythm, memory, language, and ritual hold generations of meaning. When culture is presented thoughtfully, it becomes invitation instead of performance. The goal was not spectacle, but resonance. Five minutes of truth can carry more power than an hour of noise.

At the same time, leadership revealed itself through boundaries. Staying on topic. Avoiding assumptions. Understanding that information is often shared in layers for a reason. In professional spaces and in life, not every detail belongs to every moment. Trust grows when people learn to work within the scope they're given without undermining the unseen structure around it.

"Listening is how respect learns to speak." Generational dynamics surfaced too. Speed, multitasking, and confidence can easily become shortcuts to assumptions. But wisdom still requires patience, sequencing, and humility. Being capable is not the same as being grounded.

What stood out most was how collaboration thrives when creativity is invited but guided. Storytelling requires both freedom and discipline. Even art needs structure to land with clarity and care.

There was also tenderness underneath the planning. The desire for something melancholic yet beautiful. The understanding that memory can live inside music, movement, language, and shared attention. When we create space for grief to coexist with celebration, we allow humanity to remain intact rather than hidden behind perfection.

In moments like these, I'm reminded that growth doesn't come from flawless execution. It comes from friction, correction, humility, and learning how to stay present when communication gets uncomfortable. Listening becomes a form of love. Precision becomes a form of respect. And patience becomes the bridge between intention and impact.

I continue to learn that leadership begins with listening, that culture deserves reverence, and that clarity protects relationships as much as kindness does. When we move with awareness instead of assumption, we create spaces where meaning can breathe.

One purpose of my interview project was to create the pause required for examination. I did not begin with a survey instrument or a hypothesis I wanted people to confirm. I would read a passage about home, choice, or pivoting and ask what it brought up. The conversation could move toward a song, a parent, work, faith, childhood, marriage, fear, or a city. The looseness was intentional. I wanted to know where people's minds traveled when the categories were not imposed too tightly.

What emerged was often less tidy than a formal interview and more revealing about how identity is actually organized.

A song was not only a song. It was Christmas in Haiti, a bus stop, a parent, a neighborhood, an artist someone had met. Food was not only taste. It was a transportation system to childhood. A sister was not only a sibling. She was continuity across houses and countries. A church was not only religion. It was a social network, a moral vocabulary, a place where someone did not have to explain why a ritual mattered.

Stories link objects to meaning. This is one reason narratives are powerful in migration research and dangerous in politics. The same facts can be organized around radically different plots: invasion, opportunity, rescue, exploitation, renewal, loss. Once a

plot becomes dominant, new events are interpreted to fit it. Individuals do the same thing.

If the family story is “we survive,” vulnerability can feel like betrayal. If the story is “we sacrifice for our children,” a child’s independence may be interpreted as ingratitude. If the story is “we are not like those immigrants,” belonging may require distancing from people whose struggles look too familiar. If the story is “home was perfect,” return can produce disillusionment. If the story is “home was nothing but suffering,” cultural pride can feel irrational. Mature identity makes room for counterevidence.

It says Haiti can be beautiful and wounded. America can create opportunity and alienation. Parents can make extraordinary sacrifices and mistakes. Children can benefit from sacrifice and still choose differently. A person can love a country and criticize its institutions. A person can leave and remain loyal. A person can return and remain changed by departure. Complexity is not indecision. It is accuracy.

## **Love That Knows Its Limits**

### **What We Call Personal**

There is a moment when silence stops being peaceful and starts becoming heavy. I’ve learned that moment well. It’s the pause after a conversation where everything important was said too late, or not at all. It’s the space where love still exists, but trust is fractured. That is where this story begins. Not with anger, but with exhaustion. Not with blame, but with a question

I kept asking long after my voice cracked from asking it out loud. What is the path forward?

I grew up believing family was an unbreakable thing. Not because we were perfect, but because we were anchored. There was always a center. Someone who absorbed the weight, translated the chaos, and reminded us who we were when we forgot. When that anchor disappeared, we didn't just lose a person. We lost a language. Suddenly, words like loyalty, respect, and love meant different things to different people. And the most dangerous word of all entered the room. Personal.

I was told something was personal after I was already involved. After decisions had been made with my time, my energy, my trust. Personal became a shield, not a boundary. It was used to end conversations instead of protecting them. And I realized something painful. When people say something is personal only after it causes damage, what they often mean is: I don't want to be accountable.

I've never needed perfection from the people I love. I've needed honesty. Mistakes don't fracture families. Lies do. Silence does. And grief, when left unspoken, becomes a quiet poison that seeps into everything. I wasn't angry about decisions. I was hurt by the absence of truth around them.

There is a special kind of loneliness that comes from being the one who always steps in. The fixer. The communicator. The one who sees the problem coming and tries to stop the crash. You don't realize how much weight you're carrying until you finally set it down and notice your hands shaking.

"Love does not require proximity. Sometimes love requires distance - not as punishment, but as protection."

Loss changes your tolerance for dishonesty. After watching someone you love live their life with forgiveness as a daily practice, you become less patient with manipulation. I watched someone forgive again and again, believing love meant endurance. But endurance without truth is not love. It's self-erasure. And I refuse to inherit that pattern unquestioned.

At some point, I had to admit something difficult. Sometimes love requires distance. Not as punishment, but as protection. I still love deeply. That hasn't changed. But love does not mean unlimited access. It does not mean absorbing chaos to keep the peace.

We talk so much about unity without talking about the work it requires. Togetherness is not a feeling. It's choosing honesty over comfort. It's naming harm even when it's inconvenient. It's understanding that faith, if it means anything, must show up in behavior, not just words.

I've learned that some people confuse forgiveness with forgetting. I don't. Forgiveness is memory with wisdom. It's remembering clearly and choosing not to weaponize the past. But that choice depends on one thing. Change.

I am no longer asking others to define the path forward for me. I'm walking it with intention now. With boundaries. With clarity. With love that knows its limits and honors them.

The stories we inherit also shape boundaries. Many immigrant cultures place extraordinary value on family

obligation. That can create resilience through networks of care. It can also make limits feel like rejection.

I have learned that belonging without boundaries becomes possession. Love asks something of us. It does not ask everything. A family can be central without receiving unlimited authority over an adult's marriage, work, geography, finances, or emotional life. Culture can deserve preservation without every inherited practice deserving obedience.

This is a painful distinction because critique can feel disloyal when culture has been under external attack. Members of marginalized groups often defend the group from outsiders and then struggle to discuss harm inside the group. The instinct is understandable. But a culture protected from all internal examination becomes brittle.

Preservation and reform are not enemies. In fact, cultures survive partly because they adapt.

The foods we call traditional have histories of exchange. Languages borrow. Music travels. Religious practices meet local customs. Families change with economies. Diaspora communities preserve some practices more intensely than people in the homeland and discard others more quickly. What feels timeless is often a successful adaptation whose history we have forgotten.

This should make us more confident, not less, about choosing deliberately. We are not the first generation to change culture. We are simply responsible for the quality of the changes we make.

Dan McAdams's narrative identity framework helps explain why these choices matter. People create coherence by building life stories that connect past, present, and imagined future. If the inherited story cannot accommodate the life a person is actually living, distress can emerge as fragmentation: I am one person with my family, another at work, another with friends, another in private.

The solution is not always to become identical in every context. Human beings naturally have roles. The goal is deeper: the roles should feel like legitimate expressions of one self rather than mutually hostile characters.

A coherent immigrant identity does not require choosing one country inside the body. It requires a story capacious enough to explain why several places, languages, and loyalties belong there.

## **The Sentences Families Repeat**

Every family has a small set of sentences that function like policy. Get a stable job.

Family comes first. Don't tell people your business. Education is something nobody can take from you.

Never depend on anyone. We did not come all this way for you to...

The wording changes, but the mechanism is similar. A family compresses experience into advice. The sentence survives because it solved a problem once.

The difficulty is that descendants receive the advice more easily than the original conditions.

‘Get a stable job’ may have emerged from economic volatility or discrimination that made entrepreneurship extraordinarily risky. ‘Don’t tell people your business’ may have been protection in a context where vulnerability could be exploited. ‘Family comes first’ may have been the survival technology of a community excluded from formal institutions. Without context, wisdom can harden into commandment.

One reason I designed the interviews as open conversations was to get beneath these sentences. When people were not pushed through a rigid questionnaire, they moved associatively. Home led to a sister. A sister led to childhood. Childhood led to a school. A school led to opportunity. Opportunity led to guilt. The structure of memory revealed the network beneath the answer.

I learned to listen for repeated phrases because repetition often marks inherited moral language.

Sometimes the phrase belongs to a parent. Sometimes to a church. Sometimes to a country. Sometimes to corporate culture. Sometimes it is a label the person has heard so often that it begins speaking from inside.

The goal is not to discard inherited sentences. It is to restore their footnotes.

Who taught this? What were they protecting? What did it cost them to learn it? Does the same risk exist now? What new risk appears if I obey it literally? Those questions convert inheritance back into knowledge.

## **What the research illuminates - Stories as Intergenerational Technology**

Narrative identity theory focuses on the individual, but family narratives operate at another level. Families transmit stories about who ‘we’ are: hardworking, educated, religious, independent, unlucky, resilient, private, entrepreneurial, respectable, betrayed, chosen, responsible. These stories create expectations before a child has enough experience to evaluate them.

Migration can intensify the narrative because the family needs an explanation for sacrifice. The journey becomes a founding story. Founding stories are powerful because they organize meaning, but they can become brittle if later generations are allowed only one interpretation.

For example, a parent may understand migration as rescue: we came so you would have opportunities. A child may experience the destination as home and the origin as heritage. If the child questions a career path, the parent may hear rejection of the founding story rather than an ordinary adult decision. The conflict is partly narrative. A more flexible family story might say: We moved to expand the range of lives available to the next generation. That story can accommodate a child choosing differently while still honoring sacrifice.

This is what I mean by narrative agency at the family level. The past does not change, but its meaning can become more spacious.

The strongest family stories are not propaganda. They include mistakes, contradictions, ordinary humor, and the people who disagreed. They allow ancestors to be human rather than monuments.

That complexity is not disrespect. It is intimacy across time.

The second generation often becomes the place where a family's contradictions surface. That is not evidence that migration failed. It may be evidence that the family succeeded well enough for new questions to become possible. Security creates the room to challenge survival rules. The challenge is learning to hear that questioning as development rather than ingratitude.

Write three sentences your family taught you about success, love, money, home, or duty. Then ask: Who taught this? What problem was the sentence trying to solve? Does that problem still exist in the same form?

Inheritance is not the same as instruction. We honor our ancestors not by freezing their strategies but by understanding the conditions that made those strategies wise.

## THE STORY IS ALSO A SOCIAL INHERITANCE

Narrative identity research helps explain why family stories have so much power. We do not construct a life story from private memory alone. We inherit templates about sacrifice, success, respectability, danger, gender, faith, race, nation, and what a 'good child' owes. Adult children of immigrants often build continuity by locating themselves inside larger family and group narratives, not only individual ones.

That can be stabilizing. It can also create conflict when the inherited script no longer fits the life being lived. A child may be taught that security is the highest good and later discover that a secure life can still feel psychologically absent. A parent may teach obedience as protection while a child encounters a culture that interprets autonomy as maturity. Neither side is necessarily irrational. They may be optimizing for different historical environments.

Cultural psychology asks us to resist turning those differences into a hierarchy. Independence and interdependence are not simply modern versus traditional, strong versus weak, enlightened versus backward. They are different ways selves can be organized in relation to others. Migration often forces a person to become bilingual not only in language but in models of personhood.

The work of adulthood is not to choose one script forever. It is to become conscious enough to know which script is speaking when we make a choice.

**Inheritance Is Not a Script** The phrase immigrant family can create an illusion of cultural consistency. Two generations share

a surname and an origin story, so we imagine the culture moving intact from parent to child. It rarely works that way.

Imani's parents transmitted resilience without giving it that name. Grace carried memories of Haitian classmates into an American professional life. Daniel held tightly to his family name while changing beliefs he had once associated with that same inheritance. Simone wanted her children to become better versions rather than obedient copies. Each story contains continuity and revision at the same time. That tension is where intergenerational culture actually lives.

Parents transmit what they believe will protect children. Sometimes the strategy was adaptive in the environment that produced it: caution around institutions, intense emphasis on education, respect for elders, saving behavior, suspicion of debt, privacy about family conflict, strong expectations around marriage or religion. The child receives the strategy in another environment where the costs and benefits may be different.

Conflict can begin when both generations interpret the same behavior through different histories. A parent's restriction may mean protection to the parent and mistrust to the child. A child's request for autonomy may mean development to the child and rejection to the parent. A career choice may look adventurous from one generation and irresponsible from another because the two generations have different memories of what failure costs.

Research on intergenerational cultural conflict among particular Asian and Latino populations has documented links between cultural dissonance, family conflict, and well-being.

Those findings cannot simply be pasted onto Haitian, Nigerian, or every other immigrant family. They are useful because they identify a mechanism: when cultural expectations change at different rates within one household, ordinary developmental disagreements can acquire the weight of cultural survival.

The archive gave me a less clinical phrase for it. The stories we inherit can become instructions long after the environment that wrote them has changed.

The Classmates Who Stayed Grace's childhood memories in Haiti make the problem larger than family. She remembers classmates who were as bright, competitive, and ambitious as she was. She remembers competing for top positions. Years later, the divergence in their lives could not be explained by talent.

She had moved through systems that multiplied her opportunities. Others remained in a country where advanced education did not guarantee the same access to stable institutions, global employers, or professional networks. Some continued education. Some did not. Some encountered a labor market too weak to convert credentials into the future those credentials were supposed to represent.

Grace's response was not survivor's guilt in a simple sense. It was vocational memory. Her work in education became one way of staying answerable to the children she remembered and to the little girl she had been.

That is a form of inheritance too. Immigrants do not inherit only the values of parents. They inherit comparison between lives. They know, sometimes with painful specificity,

that the same person in another institutional environment could have produced a different outcome.

This knowledge can fuel gratitude. It can also produce obligation, anger, pressure, and a tendency to treat every opportunity as too precious to waste.

The American story often individualizes that result. The immigrant worked hard. The immigrant rose. The immigrant proved what effort can do. Effort matters. So do the systems that allow effort to compound.

I learned that in my own return to Haiti after years in the United States. I could remember children who had been every bit as capable as I was. The distance between our adult opportunities was not a moral verdict on childhood potential.

That realization changes the meaning of success. Success is no longer only evidence of what I did correctly. It is also evidence that at several points the environment opened instead of closed.

A scholarship opened. A teacher noticed. A school admitted. A passport allowed movement. An institution converted work into another opportunity.

A network answered. If we mistake those openings for pure individual virtue, we turn biography into ideology.

The stories we inherit should make us more specific than that. What We Are Allowed to Change

There is another temptation in immigrant narratives: to describe every inherited practice either as sacred tradition or oppressive baggage. Most practices are harder to classify.

Food can be memory and gendered labor. Faith can be belonging and constraint. Family closeness can be care and surveillance. High expectations can produce achievement and fear. Collective obligation can protect people from isolation and make boundaries difficult.

Maturity requires enough loyalty to understand why a practice existed and enough agency to decide whether its original function still serves the people living under it.

Daniel's story of his roommate in Norway is one example. He did not need to reject being Haitian in order to reject contempt. Imani could recognize the power of her parents' modeled resilience without assuming every parental strategy should survive unchanged. Simone could understand her mother's limitations without repeating them.

That is the inheritance I want to defend: not preservation through repetition, but continuity through conscious relationship.

A culture that can only survive if nobody changes is already fragile.

### The Look

Imani's interview gave me a different model of inheritance. She is a second-generation Nigerian American, so the migration story begins before her own memory. When I asked where her drive and resilience came from, she first described them as almost innate. Then, while talking, she revised the answer. Her parents had not needed to give a speech about resilience because their lives had already demonstrated it.

They had moved countries, built without the support systems they might have preferred, and responded to family challenges that changed the life they had imagined. Their children watched those adaptations before they had language for the concept. The lesson was behavioral.

When I asked how values could be transmitted without explicit instruction, Imani described her mother's face. A look could tell her she had crossed a line. The meaning was readable because it lived inside years of relationship. The same facial expression from a stranger would not contain the same information. Communication depended on shared history.

That detail matters because immigrant-family research often focuses on language loss or intergenerational conflict through words: which language is spoken at home, whether children translate for parents, whether parents and children can discuss emotional topics with equal fluency. Those are crucial questions. But families also transmit culture below the sentence level.

A look can contain hierarchy, warning, affection, disbelief, humor, disappointment, or protection. A child can learn which adult must be greeted first, how long eye contact is respectful, when silence is obedience and when silence is defiance, what tone means a request is actually an instruction, and how a room changes when an elder enters. None of this requires a written rulebook.

Migration complicates the code because children become fluent in another social grammar at the same time. At school, assertiveness may be rewarded. At home, the same behavior may

be read as disrespect. In one context, direct verbal communication is praised as healthy. In another, insisting that every feeling be stated explicitly can itself feel culturally strange. The child becomes a translator between communication systems even when everyone in the family speaks English.

Imani did not describe that translation as oppression. She described closeness. Being able to understand her mother's expression without speech felt like connection. That is an important corrective to any account that treats indirect communication as inherently deficient. The question is whether the code allows mutual understanding or whether it becomes a way to suppress information that needs to be spoken.

Her answer about resilience works the same way. Children do not inherit only what parents tell them. They inherit what parents normalize through repeated action. If adults respond to disruption by improvising, the child learns something about what disruption means. If adults treat every setback as catastrophe, the child learns that too. If parents seek help, apologize, pray, save, hide, work, migrate, endure, or start again, those behaviors become part of the child's practical theory of the world.

This does not mean children simply copy parents. Imani's story is precisely about the next generation interpreting what it saw. She can admire the courage required for migration without reproducing every expectation attached to the culture. She can understand a look and still decide which conversations need words.

Intergenerational transmission is not a package passed intact from one hand to another. It is more like a language heard in childhood and spoken later with an accent of one's own.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What inheritance deserves your gratitude but not your obedience?*

## Chapter 10 - Small Things Carry Countries

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What song, smell, meal, or phrase can move you across an ocean without moving your body?*

Before Avery could explain the place she grew up as culture, she could hear it.

A song would begin and the room around her would thin. The present would remain, but another geography would arrive inside it: family voices, crowded houses, neighborhood routines, the particular ease of being around people who did not require a glossary. She had moved away because she needed distance. Distance eventually taught her what she had been receiving for free.

That was one of the revelations of the archive. People often recognized culture most clearly after losing effortless access to it.

You can miss a country. You can also miss the version of yourself that did not have to explain why a sound made sense.

### Music as Portable Home

I had been asking people about songs almost from the beginning, before I had a scholarly explanation for why the

question kept working. The pattern was simple. We would talk about home, choice, identity, or pivoting. Then I would ask: what song belongs to this part of your life? The conversation would change.

People slowed down. They stopped speaking only in conclusions. A title led to a person. A beat led to a room. A chorus led to a season. Somebody would remember a parent. Somebody else would remember church. Another person would remember driving, loneliness, a school dance, a breakup, a country, or the sound of adults talking in the kitchen while the child version of them was supposed to be asleep.

Music did not simply illustrate the memory. It opened it.

Psychologists call these music-evoked autobiographical memories. In everyday-life research, Kelly Jakubowski and Anita Ghosh found that such memories were often vivid, involuntary, emotionally charged, and social. A systematic review by Alexander Kaiser and Dorte Berntsen likewise found that familiar music can provide unusually efficient access to autobiographical memory, including in clinical populations. The mechanism is still being studied, but the lived experience is immediately recognizable: sometimes you do not decide to remember. The song decides for you.

That matters in a migration story because migration is partly a problem of continuity. The body moves quickly. Identity does not. Music can collapse the distance between those timelines.

## Ethnic Identity Has a Sound

Sociologist Rolf Lidskog's review of music and ethnic identity in diaspora identifies four recurring functions in the literature: diasporic context, recognition and resistance, time and memory, and politics. One phrase in that review stayed with me: music can create a 'space for recognition and resistance.' That is larger than nostalgia.

A song can say: this way of speaking still exists. This rhythm still belongs to us. This history has not disappeared because our address changed. In a society where immigrant identities can be flattened, mocked, marketed, or selectively celebrated, music can preserve a form of cultural authorship.

But preservation is not the same as freezing. Diasporic music changes. It borrows. It samples. It translates. It becomes bilingual, sometimes within a single bar. That is not evidence that identity failed to remain pure. Purity is the wrong goal. The more interesting question is whether people remain able to recognize themselves inside the transformation.

Research with African, Caribbean, and Black emerging adults in Canada makes this concrete. Myrie, Breen, and Ashbourne found that participants used music to negotiate what it meant to become Black in a new national context, to resist reductive narratives, and to create continuity across histories, generations, spirituality, land, and ancestry. Music was not background entertainment. It was part of identity work.

That phrase - identity work - explains why a childhood song can become more important after migration than it was before.

At home, the song may have been ordinary. Abroad, it becomes evidence.

## The Culture Inside the Cue

Music is often called a universal language. The research suggests something more interesting. In a PNAS study, Elizabeth Margulis and colleagues found that people from the same culture imagined more similar narratives while listening to the same instrumental music than people across cultures. Their conclusion was that music is 'neither an abstract stimulus nor a universal language.' Its meanings are shaped partly by shared culture.

That helps explain why the same song can make one person homesick and another person merely curious. Sound is not detached from history. Rhythm carries prior encounters. A melody is heard through a body that has already lived somewhere.

Large cross-cultural work published in *Nature Human Behaviour* adds another layer. Across participant groups in fifteen countries, researchers found both common features in how people mentally represent rhythm and meaningful variation associated with local musical practices. Human beings may share cognitive capacities for music while cultures teach us which patterns feel expected, pleasurable, ceremonial, intimate, sacred, or ours.

The universal and the particular do not cancel each other. They are the point.

## When Music Regulates What Words Cannot

The interviews also made me careful with the word therapy. Listening to a beloved song can be therapeutic without being music therapy. Music therapy is a clinical practice delivered by trained professionals; ordinary music listening is not the same intervention. The distinction matters because emotional resonance should not be mistaken for medical evidence.

Still, the clinical literature is striking. A 2022 systematic review of music interventions for refugees found evidence across a small and heterogeneous set of studies for improvements in behavioral and psychological functioning. A randomized clinical trial with traumatized refugees in Denmark found trauma-focused music and imagery to be noninferior to standard verbal treatment on the primary trauma outcome, with substantially lower dropout in the music-therapy condition. The study does not mean music replaces therapy. It means culturally adaptable, nonverbal approaches deserve serious attention, especially when language itself may be part of what displacement has made difficult.

A 2024 scoping review of music and emotion regulation is equally useful for restraint. The field supports the idea that music can participate in emotional regulation, but definitions and mechanisms remain inconsistent. That caution belongs in this book. Music can calm, intensify, organize, release, accompany, distract, or make emotion more legible. It does not perform the same function for every person every time.

In the archive, Simone described turning to a gospel song when frustration made faith difficult to hear. Daniel returned to

Haitian music when uncertainty threatened to become the whole story. Julian used a song as a directional cue - movement without amnesia. Avery described how music could restore South Florida before any plane ticket did. The commonality was not genre. It was function. The commonality was not genre. It was function.

## **The Question That Changed the Room**

The song question became one of the most reliable turns in the interviews. I would begin with an abstract word - home, choice, pivot, belonging - and people would answer in concepts. Then I would ask for one song. The pace changed.

A song forced specificity without forcing disclosure. It could carry a church service, a sibling, a bus ride, a first apartment, a country, a season of grief, or a private ritual for getting through the morning. The participant chose the door; I did not have to decide which memory should matter.

Then I began ending with another question: If this were your story, what question would you leave with the reader? That changed my role too. I was no longer only extracting meaning from someone else's life. I was giving the person authority over the question their story released into the world.

The form of this book now follows that practice. A chapter opens with a question, moves through lives and evidence, and closes with a question that has been altered by what came between. The reader is not asked to accept a lesson. The reader is asked to continue the inquiry.

## Food, Language, and the Other Small Carriers

Music is not the only small thing that carries a country. Food does similar work through taste and smell. Language does it through cadence. Clothing can do it through texture, color, and ceremony. Faith can do it through repeated words whose meaning lives partly in the memory of who first taught them.

These are micro-infrastructures of continuity. They are easy to underestimate because they do not look like institutions. But institutions are made durable by repetition, and so are identities.

Sometimes a country is too large to carry. So we carry dinner.

We make a dish the way somebody made it before us, even if the ingredients came from a grocery store thousands of miles from the first kitchen. We correct a child's pronunciation and then laugh because our own accent has changed. We put on a song while cleaning the house and discover that the body remembers a rhythm the conscious mind had not visited in years.

The ordinary is not trivial. The ordinary is where culture survives long enough to become inheritance.

## Avery Hears Home Differently

When I returned to Avery's story, I noticed that her definition of home had changed without becoming contradictory. She had once needed to leave the place she grew up. The move gave her room to become someone else. Later, the distance made her newly attentive to the community she had once treated as background.

That is character development in real life: not the replacement of one belief with its opposite, but the enlargement of the frame. The place had not become perfect. She had become capable of holding its injuries and its gifts at the same time.

Music helped make that complexity available without requiring a verdict. A song from childhood could carry affection without cancelling criticism. Nostalgia did not force her to move back. It simply revealed that departure had not severed meaning.

I began to see why I had instinctively asked for songs in so many interviews. A song lets people answer two questions at once: Who were you then? And who are you now when you hear it?

## The Playlist Is an Archive

A playlist is a strange kind of autobiography. It rarely follows chronology. It mixes inheritance with discovery. It includes songs we chose and songs that chose us because someone else played them often enough. It preserves bad years next to joyful ones. It may contain a parent's faith, a teenager's rebellion, a wedding, a funeral, a bus ride, a first apartment, a country we left, and a future we had not yet reached when the song first entered our life.

For immigrants and diaspora communities, the playlist can become a portable archive of belonging. That does not make every track sacred. It means the sequence can hold cultural evidence the passport does not record.

This is also why music can become political. To play a language publicly, to dance a rhythm others stereotype, to sample an ancestral sound inside a new genre, or to teach a child a song from a place they have never lived is to make a claim about continuity. Not purity. Continuity.

The claim is: we changed, and we are still here. Listening Room: South Florida

The first thing music changed in the interviews was pace. Ask someone what home means and the answer often begins in concepts. Ask for a song and the person starts searching memory differently. The title may come first. Then a car ride. A kitchen. A funeral. A church. A sibling. A December street. The conversation moves from definition to scene.

With Avery, music led back to South Florida and a house full of older siblings. She was around nine when they sometimes threw parties against their mother's wishes. The music was loud enough to become part of the architecture of the memory. Avery remembered opening the bedroom door and seeing people dancing. She also remembered the sound around her brothers' basketball practices and at neighborhood parks.

The same music later became portable geography. It did not reproduce South Florida. It made a particular South Florida retrievable: siblings before everyone scattered, a neighborhood before she understood it as culture, music before she had to explain what kind of music it was.

That is the difference between a song as entertainment and a song as cue. The first occupies time. The second can reorganize time.

Studies of music-evoked autobiographical memory help explain why. Familiar music can trigger vivid personal memories and emotional detail with relatively little deliberate search. The effect is not mystical and not uniform. Familiarity, age, personal relevance, and context matter. But the mechanism is strong enough that researchers study it in both everyday life and clinical populations.

Diaspora adds another layer. Music does not carry only individual memory. It can carry a social world. Rolf Lidskog's review of music and ethnic identity in diaspora describes music as a site where recognition, memory, politics, and resistance can become organized. Research with African, Caribbean, and Black emerging adults has likewise shown how musical practices can participate in identity development and continuity.

The language matters: participate in. Music does not create identity by itself. It gives identity somewhere to happen.

Listening Room: Christmas in Haiti Another Haitian woman in the archive chose a song connected to the late musician Mikaben. The automated transcript did not capture the title reliably enough for me to print it as fact, so I will not manufacture certainty. What the recording preserves clearly is what the song did for her.

It was associated with Christmas in Haiti. She remembered it being played enough that hearing it later could bring back a seasonal landscape. The song named or evoked places she knew: streets, neighborhood references, familiar geography. She described the way the song placed poverty and generosity near

each other, the visibility of people in need during a season organized publicly around celebration.

Her relationship to the musician made the memory more personal. She recalled having met members of his family and having been in spaces connected to them. Again, the point is not celebrity. The point is density. A song that another listener might hear as a recording existed for her inside a network of people, places, and prior encounters.

That is why cultural music can become more valuable after migration. At home, the reference may be ambient. Abroad, it becomes concentrated.

At home, everyone may know the street being named. Abroad, the name of the street can feel like a door.

The finance professional who told me this story also described an elite networking event where she was surrounded by accomplished people and useful professional contact but did not experience the same safety she felt with close friends. The contrast is instructive. A person can gain access without gaining ease.

Music can temporarily collapse that difference. It can restore a context in which no explanation is required.

Listening Room: Daniel's Cultural Ease Daniel's musical memory worked differently. He reached for Haitian music that represented cultural familiarity, humor, energy, and a form of ease that was difficult to translate into the technical language of identity.

That word—ease—may be more important than pride. Pride is public. Ease is embodied. Pride says this culture matters

to me. Ease is what happens when the body stops preparing to explain it.

For migrants who spend much of the day moving through institutions built around another cultural center, music can create a short interval of ease. The listener knows the rhythm, the references, the social context. The experience is not necessarily nostalgic. It can be immediate and alive.

Cross-cultural research on musical meaning makes another useful correction. People often call music a universal language. There are certainly shared human responses to rhythm, tempo, repetition, and affective cues. Yet research also finds culturally patterned differences in what listeners hear, imagine, and expect. In one PNAS study, people who shared cultural backgrounds imagined more similar narratives from the same instrumental music. A large cross-cultural study of rhythm cognition found both commonalities and variation associated with local musical practice.

Music can therefore be both shared and local at once. That makes it unusually suited to diaspora. It can connect across difference without erasing the difference.

The Question That Changed the Interviews Eventually I stopped treating the song question as an ending ritual and started treating it as part of the method.

The sequence became revealing. First, I would ask about home, pivoting, choice, love, or belonging. The person would answer in the language available for public explanation. Then I would ask for a song. Sometimes the song confirmed the explanation. Sometimes it contradicted it. Sometimes a person

who had described herself as fully settled chose music saturated with a place she claimed not to miss. Sometimes someone who spoke about independence chose a song tied to family. The gap was often more interesting than consistency.

Songs are not lie detectors. People choose music for many reasons, and playlists are not psychological tests. What they can do is open another channel of autobiographical retrieval.

That was true for me as well. Michael Bublé's "Home" entered the project because there were periods of travel and professional motion when the song's emotional premise felt uncomfortably accurate: apparent progress could coexist with the sensation of living at a distance from one's own life. I no longer need to reproduce the lyric to understand why it mattered. The song gave form to a contradiction I had not yet learned to state cleanly.

Other songs in the archive worked as faith, memory, aspiration, grief, humor, or a cue to keep moving. One interviewee reached for artists associated with overcoming long odds when he needed to remember what was possible. Julian used "Skeleton Move" as a return to direction. Imani chose a song whose emotional center she connected to love, dissatisfaction, and the human tendency to recognize value after distance changes the reference point.

The songbook at the back of this book preserves some of those choices. But the deeper argument belongs here: music is one of the ways people make identity portable without pretending portability is complete.

A song can carry a street. It cannot carry the street's current condition. A song can return a parent to the sound of childhood.

It cannot make the child living in another country inherit the same memory automatically.

A song can create a temporary room in which a person recognizes herself. It cannot substitute for rights, relationships, safety, or material stability.

This distinction is especially important when discussing music as therapeutic. Everyday listening can soothe, regulate, cue memory, and provide social connection. Clinical music therapy is a professional therapeutic practice with trained clinicians, defined methods, and an evidence base that should not be collapsed into the claim that any meaningful playlist is therapy. Research with refugees and trauma-exposed populations is promising but heterogeneous; the strongest responsible conclusion is not that music heals everyone. It is that music can become part of how people remember, regulate, relate, and make meaning.

That is already enough. Sometimes a country is too large to carry. So we carry a song.

Listening Room: Ire Imani chose a song whose title the transcript captured imperfectly but whose identity became clear on review: Adekunle Gold's "Ire," a song whose title translates as goodness or blessing.

The choice is almost too precise for this book. The song is structured around the fantasy of greener pastures and the later realization that the life being searched for may have been closer

than the traveler understood. Scholarship has even read the song explicitly through migration and return, situating it within Nigerian narratives about leaving for the Global North and discovering that movement does not automatically produce the imagined goodness.

Imani did not present the song as academic evidence. She chose it because it carried a feeling.

When we played part of it during the interview, I heard the theme through my own archive. How often had people described leaving in order to discover what they had left? Avery needed Chicago to understand South Florida. Grace needed years of movement to understand why a person, not a building, anchored home. Julian left Haiti with a promise to acquire tools and later evaluated opportunity through the direction of that promise. I had spent years in the United States before returning to Haiti through a university project and realizing how much of my origin I had allowed to become background.

The greener-grass metaphor can become shallow advice if it is used to tell people not to leave. Sometimes the other side is materially safer. Sometimes it contains schools, rights, jobs, or health systems unavailable at home. Sometimes migration is not dissatisfaction but survival.

The deeper point in "Ire" is not stay where you were born.

It is that movement cannot answer a question the traveler has not learned to name.

A person can migrate toward salary while actually longing for dignity. Toward prestige while longing for recognition. Toward a new city while longing for distance from family

conflict. Toward home while longing for childhood rather than current geography.

When the object of longing is misidentified, arrival cannot solve it.

That is why songs became so useful in the interviews. They sometimes revealed the object beneath the declared object.

The Songs We Misremember Correctly Otter transcripts are imperfect witnesses to music. Titles are misheard. Yoruba or Haitian Creole can be transcribed into nonsense. Artists' names become phonetic guesses. That technical limitation forced an editorial rule I wish more memoirists applied to memory generally: uncertainty should remain visible.

If I cannot verify a title, I describe the song rather than invent it.

That restraint has thematic value. Migrant memory also contains imperfect transcription. We remember a street name slightly wrong. We merge two childhood years. A relative's phrase becomes cleaner with repetition. The emotional truth of a memory can remain powerful even when factual detail requires verification.

This book therefore treats songs in two layers. The first layer is verifiable: title, artist, recording, documented cultural context when reliable sources exist.

The second is autobiographical: what the participant says the song means to them.

The second layer does not require the song to mean the same thing to everyone.

Michael Bublé's "Home" became important to me because it named a form of successful displacement—the experience of making objectively good progress while feeling subjectively absent. "Coming Home" entered the project because the question of whether a house remains home after relationships change was already bothering me. Avery's South Florida music carried siblings and neighborhood. The Haitian Christmas song carried streets and seasonal memory. Daniel's choices carried cultural ease. Julian's song carried directional recall. Imani's "Ire" carried the question of whether the desired life was always elsewhere.

Taken together, the songs do not form a universal immigrant playlist.

They form evidence of method. When language becomes overly conceptual, ask what the person plays.

Then ask what appears. Music, Therapy, and the Temptation to Overclaim

Because music produces powerful emotional responses, it is tempting to make grand claims about healing. The research deserves more discipline.

Music-evoked autobiographical-memory studies show that familiar music can cue personal memories, including in clinical populations. Research on emotion regulation shows that people intentionally use music to influence mood and arousal. Studies with refugees and trauma-exposed groups suggest promising roles for structured music interventions. None of this means a song automatically heals trauma, and ordinary listening is not

the same thing as music therapy delivered by trained professionals.

For the purposes of this book, the more defensible claim is also the more interesting one: music changes access.

It can make a memory easier to retrieve. It can make an identity easier to inhabit for a few minutes.

It can create synchrony among people who know the same cultural codes.

It can provide a ritual for grief or motivation. It can let a person revisit an earlier self without purchasing a ticket.

That is enough to make it a serious technology of belonging.

#### A Song Can Keep Street Names

One of the Haitian interviewees chose a Christmas-season song by the late Michael Benjamin, Mikaben, because the song did not merely sound Haitian to her. It contained locations she knew.

As she explained the choice, memory became spatial. A place mentioned in the song was not an abstract name; it was connected to routes she had traveled and places she had waited. References to people suffering in the street were connected to images she had actually seen growing up. The song's call toward generosity during a celebratory season mattered because the moral argument was embedded in a geography she recognized.

That is a different kind of musical nostalgia from Avery's South Florida memory. Avery's song restored family scenes. This Haitian song restored public space.

Diaspora music can do both. It can carry the kitchen and the avenue, the family joke and the political crisis, the church cadence and the street vendor, the party and the person sleeping outside the party's field of vision. A song becomes a compressed social map.

Rolf Lidskog's review of music and ethnic identity in diaspora emphasizes that music can become a space for recognition and resistance. The formulation is useful because recognition is not simply hearing something familiar. It is being able to locate oneself inside a cultural field. The listener knows the reference without an explanation. The sound does not have to translate itself before it can move the body.

This helps explain why songs often produced more specific interview answers than direct questions about culture. Ask a person what Haiti means and the answer can become national, moral, even performative. Ask which song returns them to Haiti and the answer may include a bus stop, a holiday, a parent, a school route, an artist's family, a neighborhood, a dance, or a joke.

The song reduces the scale of the country to something memory can actually hold.

That matters because countries are too large to love in a uniform way. People love fragments. A coastline. A grandmother's cooking. A school courtyard. A phrase that loses force in translation. A church service. The first minutes of a song before the chorus arrives. A particular kind of drum. A soccer game watched with relatives. Plantain chips bought hot from the street. Haitian pizza remembered not because it would

win a culinary comparison but because it belongs to a life that cannot be reproduced by ordering the same ingredients elsewhere.

The April 2025 Haitian-community conversation returned to this through food. A participant who had spent early childhood in Haiti described how taste could move her backward instantly. Fresh plantain chips and remembered outings reopened a country that adult political reality had made difficult to reconcile with childhood beauty. The food did not settle the argument about Haiti. It kept memory from allowing the argument to become total.

This is why I resist using culture only as evidence of continuity. Culture can preserve contradiction too.

A person can love the music and fear the security situation. A person can celebrate Haitian art while criticizing Haitian institutions. A diaspora organization can teach pride and still argue about leadership, execution, money, class, gender, religion, and who gets to represent the community. Cultural continuity is not the absence of conflict. It is the shared material through which conflict can still recognize itself as belonging to the same story.

The song remains useful because it does not require the listener to solve the country before feeling connected to it.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Which small ritual are you willing to repeat long enough for the next generation to inherit it?*

## **PART III - BECOMING**

## Chapter II - Love Across Borders

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*What happens when love asks two histories to share one future?*

Love does not abolish borders. It brings them into the kitchen. Two people can choose each other deeply and still discover that they have inherited different definitions of respect, privacy, money, family obligation, celebration, gender, religion, hospitality, conflict, and time. The national flags are the easy part. The difficult borders are hidden inside sentences such as, “Of course we would...”

Of course we would call family first. Of course parents can stay with us.

Of course that money should be sent. Of course the wedding should include this.

Of course an elder should never be answered that way. Of course a married couple should decide this privately. Every “of course” is a border checkpoint.

My own Haitian and Nigerian family worlds made that visible. The cultures could meet beautifully, and often did. But beauty was not automatic. It had to be designed. A tradition that looked decorative from outside might carry generations of meaning for one family. A practice that felt compulsory to one person might feel like love to another.

Marriage taught me to ask a question I now use far beyond marriage:

Is this a value, a tradition, a preference, or a fear? The categories change the conversation.

A value might be honoring elders. A tradition might be the ceremony through which that honor has historically been shown. A preference might be how the event looks. A fear might be the belief that changing the ceremony means the value is dying.

Immigrant families often collapse the four into one. That is understandable. Migration makes continuity feel fragile. When language weakens, relatives are far away, children grow up in a different culture, and the destination country exerts enormous pressure to normalize, even small practices can become emotionally overburdened. A holiday becomes proof. A wedding becomes proof. A child's name becomes proof. Food becomes proof.

Love can help carry culture. Love can also be crushed by being asked to prove it constantly.

The same tension appeared outside romance in the interviews. The man supporting his mother had to decide where care ended and self-erasure began. Simone had to decide which parts of her own upbringing deserved to continue into her parenting. Avery moved to an East Coast city closer to family partly because a promise to her brother mattered more than geographic preference for that season of life.

Each was negotiating the same deeper problem. How do you remain available to the people who are home without surrendering the agency required to build a home of your own?

There is no formula. There is, however, a principle that emerged again and again: relationships become more durable when obligations can be named without being treated as betrayals.

Unspoken expectations are dangerous because they arrive as surprise invoices. The parent believes the child should know.

The child believes the parent should understand. The spouse assumes the meaning is obvious.

The sibling assumes the promise has no expiration. Then resentment becomes the language used to discuss a contract nobody remembers signing.

Immigration intensifies this because sacrifice is real. Someone often did give something up. Someone did work the night shift, cross a border, lose status, live far from parents, postpone pleasure, or remain in a job for the family.

Gratitude matters. But gratitude and permanent obedience are not synonyms. The purpose of sacrifice should be to enlarge the next generation's capacity to live, not to own the enlarged life.

Love across borders becomes mature when it can hold both truths: I know what you carried for me. And I am still responsible for authoring the life that carrying made possible.

## **Thread Count**

### **The Thread Count of a Life**

There was a moment when I realized I could tell the difference without being taught how. I ran my fingers across

two fabrics laid side by side, both beautiful, both functional, both technically correct. But one of them held something quieter, something deeper. You couldn't always see it at first glance. You felt it. The weight. The softness. The intention woven into it. That was the moment I understood that life, like fabric, isn't just about appearance. It's about thread count. About what's hidden beneath the surface.

I didn't grow up with language for that kind of awareness. I grew up learning by touching, by listening, by sitting in rooms where conversations overlapped and stories spilled out half-formed. I lived alone for years, long enough to develop my own rhythm, my own mess, my own rules. Long enough to believe that independence was the same thing as freedom. When you live by yourself, you answer only to time, not to another person's expectations.

Then love enters the room. Love doesn't ask permission. It rearranges the furniture. It notices the details you learned to ignore. Suddenly, the way you fold towels matters. Suddenly, timing becomes negotiation. Suddenly, you're not just living life - you're sharing it. That's when friction begins, not because something is wrong, but because something is real.

People think conflict is failure. I've learned it's evidence of investment. I used to believe the absence of arguments meant I had found perfection. Now I know better. Silence can mean distance just as easily as peace. When you care, you notice. When you notice, you respond. And sometimes that response sounds like disagreement, or frustration, or the same conversation

repeated for the tenth time. That repetition is not a flaw. It's a signal. It means something matters.

What I've come to understand is that adulthood is less about avoiding tension and more about learning how to stay present inside it. Marriage, partnership, commitment - they are daily negotiations of identity. They ask you to loosen your grip on the version of yourself that only existed because no one else was around to challenge it.

"The value of a life is not in how flawless it appears, but in how honestly it is constructed."

I've been building something of my own alongside all of this. A way of telling stories through fabric, through memory, through moments that don't repeat themselves. A suit worn at a wedding isn't just clothing. It becomes a witness. It remembers who hugged who. Who cried. Who stood quietly in the corner thinking about everything that led to that day.

Travel taught me this too. Being a child of the globe means knowing that no single place holds the full truth. The world is wider than the narratives we inherit. And yet we often shrink ourselves to fit what's expected. We hide joy so it doesn't provoke jealousy. We learn to perform versions of success that look good but feel hollow.

But I don't want virality. I want resonance. I want to build things that feel like that fabric - the one you don't need explained, the one you recognize because your body knows quality before your mind can articulate it.

Life doesn't become meaningful when it becomes smooth. It becomes meaningful when you can feel the stitching. When you

can trace the seams back to choices made with intention. Some things are premium not because they shine, but because they endure.

My own marriage forced me to examine what I had treated as self-evident. Haitian and Nigerian traditions can sit beautifully beside each other, but beauty is not automatic. It is produced by choices. We decide what to preserve, what to combine, what to alternate, what to explain, and what to let go.

That process taught me a principle that extends far beyond marriage: plural identity becomes sustainable when difference is designed for rather than merely tolerated.

Tolerance is thin. It says, I will allow this thing to exist near me.

Design asks a better question: what arrangement lets both of us remain legible here?

That is the question immigrant families ask constantly, even when they never use those words. How can a child belong to a country of residence without learning to be embarrassed by the country of origin? How can grandparents remain central when distance makes everyday participation difficult? How can a spouse join a family without becoming an apprentice to customs nobody has explained? How can a person honor parents without allowing inherited expectations to govern an adult household by default?

The answers cannot be found in slogans about tradition or independence. They require relationship-specific work.

Psychologists who study close relationships often distinguish between connection and autonomy as if they are competing

needs. Migration reveals how frequently they are intertwined. The ability to become an independent adult may depend on a family's sacrifices. The ability to remain connected may require boundaries that preserve affection from resentment. A person can owe gratitude without owing unlimited control.

This is one of the most difficult sentences for many immigrant children to believe.

Gratitude and obedience are not synonyms. The distinction matters because sacrifice can become a moral currency. A parent may say, explicitly or implicitly: We left everything for you. We worked for you. We endured humiliation for you. We crossed for you.

All of that may be true. But love becomes dangerous when sacrifice is converted into permanent ownership of another person's choices.

Children do not repay migration by surrendering the adulthood migration was supposed to make possible.

Neither does adulthood require contempt for the people whose strategies were formed under different conditions. The mature task is translation in both directions. The child learns to see the fear beneath control. The parent learns to see that autonomy is not abandonment. The spouse learns that a family custom may carry deep emotional meaning even when it looks inefficient. The family learns that a new household is not betrayal; it is the next unit of culture.

This is where boundaries become a form of love rather than its opposite. A boundary says: I want a relationship that can survive the truth.

It is easy to confuse closeness with unrestricted access. But a home with no doors is not necessarily more loving. Privacy can protect intimacy. Distance can prevent hostility. Saying no can keep a yes from becoming poisonous.

Migration can intensify the fear of separation because the family has already survived so much of it. People who have lost places, relatives, routines, or status may grip the remaining bonds more tightly. The instinct is understandable. But fear cannot be the sole architect of family life.

The healthiest inheritance is not a command to stay the same. It is a secure enough foundation to change without believing change will cost you love.

That is what I want love across borders to mean. Not fusion. Not erasure. Not the romantic fantasy that differences disappear when two people care enough.

I mean the disciplined practice of building a shared world in which both people can still recognize themselves.

## **Marriage as a Translation Lab**

Cross-cultural marriage makes invisible assumptions visible because two families arrive with different defaults. The disagreements are not always dramatic. Often they begin with details so small that each person is surprised the other considers them meaningful.

A wedding makes this obvious. Clothing, sequence, family roles, music, food, money, who speaks, who enters when, how elders are honored - every choice can carry more history than

the couple initially realizes. What looks to one side like logistics may look to the other like respect.

My own Haitian and Nigerian family context taught me to ask a question I now use far beyond marriage: is this requirement a value, a tradition, a preference, or a fear?

The categories are different. A value might be honoring elders. A tradition may be the specific ceremony through which that respect is shown. A preference may be the color or order of an event. A fear may be the belief that changing any part will signal rejection of the family.

Conflict grows when all four are treated as equally sacred. The work of building a shared household is partly classification. Which elements are nonnegotiable because they protect dignity? Which can alternate? Which can combine? Which should end?

Immigrant marriages also sit inside transnational family systems. A decision made by two people may affect relatives across countries. Money transfers, travel, caregiving, expectations of hosting, and assumptions about obligations can enter the household budget and calendar. The couple needs a shared operating model strong enough to absorb external claims without becoming hostile to family itself.

That is why boundaries should be designed together. If one partner is always positioned as the barrier between the other and their family, resentment is almost guaranteed. A boundary becomes more legitimate when the household can explain the principle behind it.

We are not rejecting family. We are protecting the capacity to remain generous without becoming unstable.

That sentence is easier to live than ‘my spouse won’t let me.’

## **What the research illuminates - Biculturalism Is a Practice, Not a Personality Trait**

Research on bicultural and transnational identity often asks how people integrate or alternate cultural frameworks. In daily life, integration is less like selecting a box and more like repeated negotiation. Context activates different norms. Family gatherings, workplaces, religious settings, and friendships can call forth different parts of the self.

The key psychological question is whether those shifts feel compatible or conflicting. A person who experiences cultural identities as mutually exclusive may feel that loyalty to one requires betrayal of the other. A person who develops a more integrated frame can treat context-sensitive behavior as part of one coherent self.

Relationships can help or hinder this integration. A spouse who mocks heritage practices increases conflict. A family that treats an outsider spouse as permanently provisional does the same. By contrast, curiosity creates room for both people to learn without demanding identical attachment.

This is why cross-cultural love is not proved by saying culture does not matter.

It is proved by taking culture seriously enough to ask what it means to the person you love.

The resulting household is not a diluted version of two origins. At its best, it becomes a third culture with an explicit constitution: our practices, our boundaries, our traditions, our way of telling the children who they are.

That new culture is itself an immigrant creation - not because it lacks roots, but because it has learned how to grow more than one set at once.

The deepest form of cross-cultural love is not agreement. It is interpretive generosity: the discipline of asking what an action means inside the other person's history before deciding what it means about the relationship. That practice does not eliminate boundaries. It makes boundaries intelligible enough to negotiate.

Ask the people you love which customs feel essential to them and why. Do not begin by negotiating the practice. Begin by discovering the meaning underneath it.

Then ask a harder question: which expectations in your closest relationships have never actually been spoken?

Unspoken expectations do not disappear. They become surprise invoices. Love grows stronger when the bill is discussed before it comes due.

## Love Is Also a Translation Problem

Imani's final question—what is life without love?—belongs here because immigrant love stories are often told as if culture enters only when conflict begins. In practice, culture is present before the first disagreement. It shapes what counts as care, how families are introduced, what marriage means, how often relatives call, who is expected to help, what privacy looks like, which holidays matter, and how much of a relationship is considered to belong to the couple versus the wider family.

I learned this long before marriage gave me formal language for it. Loving across cultural lines did not mean one of us had no culture and the other supplied difference. It meant two people were carrying different assumptions that felt ordinary because each had learned them early.

The archive taught me to stop treating these differences as trivia. A partner can love the same person deeply and still read the same family event differently. One person sees obligation; another sees intrusion. One sees hospitality; another sees performance. One hears advice; another hears control. The argument begins in the present, but the meaning often comes from histories neither person created.

That is why curiosity is more useful than cultural scorekeeping. The question is not which family knows how relationships should work. The question is what each practice is trying to protect.

Sometimes the answer is belonging. Sometimes status. Sometimes safety. Sometimes fear of shame. Sometimes a memory of what happened when no one showed up. Sometimes

a parent's belief that love is demonstrated through practical sacrifice rather than verbal reassurance.

Once the underlying function is visible, the couple has something real to negotiate.

This is especially important when migration has already made family ties feel fragile. A request that would seem minor in a geographically concentrated family can carry more weight when relatives are scattered across countries. A visit is not only a visit if people have not seen one another for years. A missed wedding is not only a scheduling problem when travel and legal status have made attendance uncertain. A partner entering an immigrant family is not only meeting individuals; the partner is entering a story about who stayed, who left, who sacrificed, who sends money, and who is still expected to remember.

Love across borders therefore requires more than tolerance for food, language, or holidays. It requires a willingness to learn the emotional accounting system behind them.

What Love Cannot Be Asked to Solve There is a romantic version of multicultural love that says difference disappears when people care enough. The interviews made me distrust that sentence.

Love matters. It does not abolish structural problems. It does not make immigration paperwork irrelevant, create childcare, erase racism, fix money, or automatically resolve conflicts between a spouse and an extended family. It cannot substitute for boundaries or for the difficult work of deciding which expectations a new household will carry forward.

Imani's question is powerful precisely because it does not say love is sufficient. She asks what life becomes without it.

That leaves room for discipline. A loving relationship may still require saying no to family. A loving parent may need to let an adult child make a choice the parent dislikes. A loving child may have to stop solving every crisis with money. A loving partner may have to ask for translation instead of assuming intent.

The archive repeatedly returned to this difference between connection and disappearance. People wanted to belong, but not at the cost of becoming illegible to themselves.

That is the standard I now use for home as well.

A home that requires disappearance is not enough.

Love should make more of the person speakable, not less.

### The Wedding as a Small Country

In 2024, while I was also collecting these interviews, I was planning a wedding that needed to hold more than two individuals. Haitian and Nigerian histories, American life, family expectations, music, ceremony, food, elders, and the ordinary logistics of a large event all had to occupy the same day.

Wedding planning made culture extremely concrete. It is easy to say two people are blending cultures. Then somebody has to decide which music enters the room, which rituals require explanation, which relatives expect a role, what food belongs on the menu, what story is told publicly, and how long any of it takes before the venue needs the room turned over.

The archive from that period includes conversations about incorporating Haitian stories and Nigerian elements into performance, including a desire to represent motherly love rather than reduce culture to spectacle. Those discussions taught me that representation can become another form of flattening when it selects only the most photogenic symbol.

A flag is easy. A family system is harder. Food is visible.

The rules about who cooks, serves, pays, welcomes, and takes leftovers home are culture too.

Music is audible. The question of which song makes an elder stand up before the first chorus is culture too.

Cross-cultural love becomes durable when the partners learn to see these invisible layers.

The wedding was a temporary country we had to govern together. That may be true of marriage itself.

Two people create a new household constitution. They inherit laws from earlier households, discard some, amend others, and discover a few rules only after somebody violates them accidentally.

The work is not to eliminate origin. It is to build enough shared governance that difference does not become permanent surprise.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Can you love someone without requiring them to become fluent in every part of your past?*

## Chapter 12 - When the Future Has a Face

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*How does migration change when the person receiving your choices has not yet learned to name them?*

Simone's definition of the American Dream changed when the future acquired names. Before children, success can remain theoretical. Better job. Better house. Better neighborhood. More security. The logic is clean because the person making the plan is also the primary person living inside it.

Parenthood makes the consequences visible in another face. Simone had already lived the child side of that equation. She knew what it was to interpret an adult's limitations from below, before age provided context. Becoming a mother gave her the chance to transmit something different.

She did not describe that work as perfection. She described it as intentionality. Her children would not merely inherit the results of migration; they would inherit a relationship to it. They would learn, through thousands of ordinary interactions, what sacrifice meant, what love required, what success was for, and whether a parent's unfinished dreams became a child's assignment.

One of the quietest dangers in immigrant families is turning children into evidence. Evidence that the move was worth it.

Evidence that suffering had meaning. Evidence that the family belongs. Evidence that the parent made the right choices.

That burden can hide inside praise. The child is told she has opportunity, and she does. She is told the parent crossed for her, and perhaps that is true. But if every choice must justify the crossing, freedom begins to resemble a performance review.

Simone's story points toward a different inheritance. She wanted her children to become better versions—not because she believed herself inadequate, but because the purpose of a generation is not duplication.

The future should have room to surprise the past.

That principle changed for me again when I became a father.

Ideas I had treated as intellectual suddenly became domestic. Heritage language was no longer an abstract commitment to culture; it became a question of what sounds a child would associate with love. Education was no longer just an institution I could critique; it became part of the environment that would tell a child what kinds of intelligence counted. Home was no longer merely where I felt settled; it was the system of relationships, routines, safety, and possibility another human being would absorb before he could evaluate any of it. Parenthood turns theory into architecture. You are building a world inside a world.

The outer world will categorize the child soon enough. Race, nationality, language, class, ability, achievement—the labels arrive early. The family cannot prevent categorization. It can give the child a thicker story to meet it with.

You are Haitian and more than Haitian. You are Nigerian and more than Nigerian.

You are American without needing America to be your only inheritance. You come from people whose sacrifices matter and whose limitations do not have to become yours.

You are not responsible for redeeming every unfinished dream that existed before you. You do owe the future your attention.

That last distinction matters. Intergenerational continuity is not achieved by controlling children tightly enough that culture survives unchanged. Control can preserve behavior while emptying it of love. Continuity is stronger when children know what a practice means well enough to choose a relationship with it.

The goal is not cultural obedience. It is cultural literacy joined to agency. If the future has a face, then legacy becomes less about what I leave behind and more about what I help another person become capable of carrying freely.

## **What We Mean When We Say Better**

Immigrant parents use the word better often. Better schools. Better opportunities. Better safety. Better jobs. A better future.

The word is powerful because it converts sacrifice into direction. But better is not self-defining. Every generation has to decide which variables count.

As a child, I experienced migration from the receiving end of adult decisions. As a father, I now understand more viscerally how impossible some parental choices are. Parents act with incomplete information while knowing that another person will live inside the consequences.

That knowledge can produce control if fear becomes the dominant parenting strategy. If I can optimize every variable, perhaps I can protect the child from the uncertainty I experienced. But a childhood engineered to remove all uncertainty can also remove agency.

The goal cannot be to make a child's life risk-free. No parent has that power. The more realistic goal is to build a base secure enough that the child can encounter risk without interpreting every mistake as catastrophic.

This reframes what inheritance means. Money matters. Education matters. Citizenship and legal security matter. Property can matter. But the child also inherits a model of conflict, rest, love, ambition, help-seeking, culture, and self-worth. Those assets and liabilities are less visible and often more durable.

A child watching adults learns whether work is a tool or an identity. They learn whether disappointment can be discussed. They learn whether apology threatens authority. They learn whether culture is joyful or mostly a list of prohibitions. They

learn whether the family celebrates curiosity or only correct answers.

Parents transmit the emotional rules of home long before children can name them.

## **What the research illuminates - Intergenerational Transmission Is Multilevel**

Research on immigrant and migrant families increasingly treats intergenerational outcomes as products of multiple levels: individual coping, parent-child relationships, family stress, community support, discrimination, legal conditions, and access to services. This is a more useful frame than either romanticizing resilience or pathologizing immigrant families. Risk can be transmitted. So can resilience.

A parent's fear may shape a child's worldview, but so can a parent's meaning-making, social support, faith, humor, routines, and capacity to repair relationships. Cultural continuity can be protective when it provides community and identity, but it can become stressful if maintained through coercion. Assimilation can expand opportunity while creating loss if it severs important relationships.

The practical lesson is that no single parenting rule can optimize the system. Families need feedback.

Do the children experience heritage as connection? Do they know family history beyond sacrifice?

Can they disagree without being threatened with exile from belonging? Do parents have enough support that children are not required to absorb adult stress as their responsibility?

These are not uniquely immigrant questions, but migration makes them visible because generations may inhabit different cultural reference points under one roof.

The phrase 'better future' becomes meaningful when it includes not only more options but a stronger capacity to choose among them without losing love.

That is a future I can recognize as progress. A child should not have to spend adulthood proving that a parent's migration was worthwhile. The more hopeful inheritance is capacity: enough story to know where one comes from, enough security to ask questions, enough culture to choose connection, and enough agency to build a future that the previous generation could not have predicted.

If you are raising, mentoring, teaching, coaching, or caring for a young person, write two lists.

On the first, write what you want them to achieve. On the second, write what you want them to feel in your presence.

Then look at which list governs more of your behavior.

The future does not inherit our intentions. It inherits our repeated practices.

When the Child Becomes the Measure Simone's story changes again when the future is no longer abstract.

Before children, the American Dream can be optimized as a personal project. Better salary. Better neighborhood. Better

school district someday. Better house when the numbers work. Parenthood introduces another person whose needs do not arrive in the same units.

Simone had already watched families make this mistake professionally. Parents pursued property because property represented security, then discovered that sustaining the property could consume the time in which parenting happened. When she had children, the lesson became domestic. Her family's first home was intentionally modest relative to what the dream could have demanded, and childcare entered the budget as a primary investment rather than a secondary expense.

Her language was blunt: the children were the first mortgage. The phrase deserves to remain strange. A mortgage is normally a claim on the future. Simone was saying that children were already a claim on time, attention, and resources before the house could become the organizing symbol.

This matters in immigrant families because children are easily turned into evidence. Evidence that leaving was worth it.

Evidence that hardship produced something. Evidence that the family belongs in the destination country.

Evidence that the parent did not suffer for nothing. The burden can be delivered as praise. You are our hope. You have every opportunity. We came here so you could do more. A child can hear gratitude and pressure in the same sentence.

The most generous version of sacrifice creates possibility without demanding that the child spend a lifetime proving the sacrifice rational.

Simone's formulation was developmental rather than transactional. She wanted her children to become better versions—not clones, not receipts. That means accepting that success might take a form she did not choose. *Parenting Across Time Zones, Languages, and Generations*

Migration can reorganize parenting long before a family reunites in one household. Some parents migrate before children and build a family later. Some leave children with relatives. Some children migrate first or with one caregiver. Some families move repeatedly. Digital communication now allows a parent to participate across distance in ways previous generations could not, but access does not erase the emotional and practical consequences of separation.

A 2024 meta-synthesis of research on parents who migrate without their children identifies recurring themes around family roles, emotion, gender, communication, family cohesion, expectations, and reunification. The literature is a reminder not to reduce transnational parenting to absence. Care can continue across borders. It is also a reminder not to romanticize distance. The same arrangement can contain devotion, guilt, relief, conflict, opportunity, and grief.

That complexity appears in smaller forms even when parent and child live under the same roof. The parent may inhabit the origin country's memory while the child is socialized daily by the destination. The parent is not only raising a child. The parent is negotiating with an environment that is also raising the child. This is where heritage becomes practice.

Language lessons matter, but so does which language carries comfort. Food matters, but so does whether cooking is experienced as connection or compulsory performance. Stories about grandparents matter, but so does whether the child is allowed to ask hard questions about family history. Religion matters, but so does whether faith is offered as a relationship or enforced as evidence of loyalty.

Parenthood turns theory into architecture because children live inside repeated practices before they can evaluate them.

A Future Grandmother Near the end of the April 2024 conversation, Simone shifted the time horizon again. She told me she was paying attention to her health because she could imagine herself ten or fifteen years later helping with grandchildren.

This was not a grand philosophy. It was a practical image: remain healthy enough to provide time, so her children could have support she considered important.

The image stayed with me because it reframed intergenerational mobility. We usually measure what one generation gives the next through education, income, housing, or occupational status. Those measures matter. Families also transmit availability.

Who can pick up the child? Who can teach a recipe? Who can tell the story of someone who died before the child was born?

Who can speak the heritage language often enough that it becomes associated with affection rather than homework?

Who can give a new parent one uninterrupted afternoon? These are small units of social infrastructure.

When I became a father, questions I had kept at the level of theory became harder to evade. I could no longer discuss cultural continuity only as identity. It was becoming a schedule. Which languages would be spoken? Which relatives would be present? Which traditions would be repeated often enough to become memory? What would I do when the child's American environment supplied assumptions different from mine? Which of my own habits were culture, which were fear, and which were simply personal preference disguised as heritage?

Parenthood also changed my relationship to the phrase better life. Better for whom? Better by which measure? If the next generation receives more money and less time, is that automatically progress? If the child receives cultural pride but also the burden of redeeming ancestral sacrifice, what exactly has been transmitted?

There is no perfect answer because parenting is not an optimization problem with stable inputs. Children change the variables as they grow. The parent who succeeds is not the parent who predicts every outcome. It may be the parent who can revise without interpreting revision as failure.

Simone's hope that her children become better versions carries that humility. A child should inherit enough foundation to exceed the parent's map.

The future should have room to surprise the past.

The Parent Is Also Becoming One reason immigrant-family stories become moralistic is that we freeze adults in the role of

parent. Simone's story reminded me that parents are still developing people.

Her mother had once been a young woman making decisions with limited capacity and support. Simone herself became a mother with professional knowledge her mother had not possessed. Her children will eventually evaluate Simone from a future she cannot fully imagine. Each generation receives a parent at a different stage of that parent's unfinished development.

Migration can intensify this mismatch. Parents may be learning the destination country while children are learning childhood. An adult who felt competent in the origin becomes dependent on unfamiliar institutions at the same time the child needs the adult to feel omniscient. The parent may be managing language, work, legal status, housing, remittances, and grief while also being expected to understand a school culture that did not exist in the parent's own childhood.

Children rarely see the entire load. They see whether the parent attended the game.

Whether the permission slip was signed. Whether the parent understood the homework.

Whether the parent allowed the party. Whether the parent listened. This does not mean children owe parents silence about harm. It means family stories become more accurate when we allow the adults to be historically situated people rather than symbols of sacrifice or failure.

Simone's approach to her mother modeled that distinction. She could revise the story without erasing the child who experienced it.

As a new parent, this gives me a different kind of humility. My child will not experience my intentions directly. He will experience repeated behavior.

That makes the ordinary day more important than the identity statement.

I can say culture matters. What will matter more is whether there is time in the week for the language, food, stories, music, relationships, and visits that make the culture lived.

I can say family matters. What will matter more is whether family life feels safe enough for disagreement.

I can say education matters. What will matter more is whether curiosity is rewarded only when it produces achievement.

The future is always taking notes on what we repeat.

Parenthood Changes the Unit of Time

Before parenthood, a person can evaluate many decisions on a personal horizon: this year, this salary, this city, this degree, this relationship, this next move. Parenthood expands the time scale and multiplies the stakeholders.

Simone made that visible by talking not only about what her children needed now but about the grandmother she hoped to become later. The future entered the present through health choices. She wanted enough longevity and strength to support

her children when they eventually had children of their own. Care became intergenerational planning.

That is a useful correction to the way immigrant sacrifice is often narrated. We imagine one heroic transfer from parents to children: the first generation suffers so the second can thrive. Real families are recursive. Adult children support parents. Grandparents provide childcare. Siblings pay bills. Cousins transmit information. A person who was once the beneficiary of sacrifice later becomes part of the infrastructure supporting somebody else's opportunity.

The January 2025 parenting conversation in the archive made the same point at the scale of a night. The discussion was about breastfeeding, sleep, and how two parents divide responsibility so that maternal care does not become maternal depletion. The practical recommendation was not romantic. Build a routine. Share the parts of nighttime care that can be shared. Protect the mother's health because the family system depends on it.

I include that conversation because it shows how quickly abstract values become logistics. Equality sounds noble. At two in the morning it becomes who wakes up, who prepares what, who tracks the schedule, who notices exhaustion, who is expected to know what the baby needs without being asked, and whether one adult's paid work is treated as more deserving of rest than the other's care work.

Parenthood turns theory into architecture because love has to occupy time.

This is also why motherhood deserves more than symbolic praise inside immigrant narratives. The language of sacrifice can make overextension look virtuous. A mother who never rests is admired for endurance rather than asked whether the distribution of care is sustainable. A father can understand himself as provider while remaining less fluent in the daily system that provision is supposed to support. Families can inherit those arrangements without deciding they still fit the lives they are building.

The point is not to impose one household model across cultures. It is to make the allocation visible enough to become a choice.

That is the larger pattern of this book. Migration, language, money, identity, and parenting all contain arrangements that become natural through repetition. The work of the next generation is not to reject everything inherited. It is to notice what has become automatic and ask whether the automatic still serves the people involved.

A child changes the future from an idea into a person who will eventually ask what kind of world was built around them.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What do you want the next generation to inherit besides opportunity?*

## Chapter 13 - The Country You Return To Does Not Exist

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*Are you returning to a country, or to the version of it that  
memory kept for you?*

The first country an immigrant returns to is memory.

Memory has perfect authority and terrible recordkeeping.

It remembers a street as if the street agreed to remain still. It remembers adults at the age they were when we left them. It remembers a smell without inflation, a school without renovations, a family before marriages, deaths, illnesses, migrations, disappointments, and new children reorganized the map.

Then the plane lands. The country has continued without your permission. So have you.

That is why return can feel like a second migration. The first move teaches you that a new place does not know the person you were. Return teaches you that the old place does not fully know the person you became.

## The Country in the Mind

For years, my relationship with Haiti was partly an archive: childhood, family, language, school, food, stories, photographs, news, responsibility, grief, pride. Distance did not make the country less real. It made memory more powerful because memory had fewer daily facts competing with it.

When I returned through university work focused on motivation and poverty, I encountered a problem I had not fully understood as a child. I remembered Haiti from inside one life. I was returning with the education, assumptions, vocabulary, and comparative frames of another.

It is tempting in that position to confuse emotional ownership with current expertise. Diaspora love can produce urgency. Urgency can become certainty. Certainty can become a plan for people whose daily constraints you no longer inhabit.

Love does not guarantee current knowledge. Distance does not eliminate responsibility either. Both truths are necessary.

## Return as Encounter

The mature form of return is not recovery. It is encounter. You meet the place as it is. You let it meet the person you became. Neither side gets to demand restoration.

That sounds obvious until nostalgia enters. Nostalgia is not a lie. It is a selective archive. It preserves intensity better than context. The street you miss may have been dangerous. The family gathering you idealize may have contained conflict. The school you remember may have excluded people. The country

you defend from outsiders may deserve criticism from the people who never left it.

At the same time, statistics are selective too. A development index can describe deprivation without describing humor. A news story can document violence without documenting tenderness. An economic report can measure remittances without measuring what it feels like to receive a voice note from a cousin you have not seen in years.

A country is larger than nostalgia and larger than its worst indicators.

## **Grace and the Little Girl Who Stayed**

One of the conversations that most altered my thinking came from a woman I will call Grace. She had moved repeatedly as a child. When I asked about home, she did not begin with real estate. She began with her sister.

Her older sister had functioned as a portable form of home because the two of them crossed change together. When places, languages, schools, and adults shifted, the relationship remained a bridge between versions of the self.

Grace also carried another image: children she remembered from the country she left who were bright enough to have lived very different futures if opportunity had been distributed differently. Her later work in education became partly a conversation with the child she had been and the children whose paths had narrowed.

That is one of the paradoxes of diaspora service. We return to help real people, but we are often also answering an earlier version of ourselves.

The ethical question is whether the old image helps us see the present or prevents us from seeing it.

## Behavioral Economics of Return

Return also has an economic psychology. Migrants compare places using reference points that move over time. The salary that once looked unimaginable becomes normal. The cost of inconvenience changes. Safety expectations change. Time becomes more expensive. Family obligations expand. Children alter the objective function.

This is one reason return decisions can feel irrational from the outside. The relevant utility function is not only income. It may include proximity, status, cultural ease, language, healthcare, schooling, political stability, family care, spiritual life, and the psychological cost of being permanently translated.

Migration scholarship increasingly treats movement as a decision process under uncertainty rather than a one-time economic calculation. That same framework should apply to return. People do not simply ask, Where can I earn more? They ask, often without stating it so cleanly: Which combination of money, meaning, safety, family, identity, and future can I live with? The answer can change by decade.

## The Ethics of Diaspora Building

Return does not have to mean relocation. It can be a practice.

You can return by teaching a child a language. You can return by funding a scholarship. You can return by correcting a false story about your country. You can return by investing responsibly rather than performing rescue. You can return by connecting expertise across borders. You can return by buying from local creators, mentoring students, supporting institutions, or simply refusing to treat the people who remained as supporting characters in your own migration story.

But every form of return deserves questions. Who defined the problem? Who holds decision rights? Who receives the benefit? What capacity remains when the outsider leaves? Are local professionals treated as partners or implementers? Does money strengthen an institution or merely create dependence on the donor?

Those questions matter because good intentions are not governance. Diaspora communities can possess capital, technical knowledge, networks, and global access. Local communities possess current context, relationships, lived constraints, historical memory, and knowledge that cannot be downloaded during a visit. Durable work requires both forms of expertise to meet without one pretending to be the whole.

## What Returning Changed in Me

When I was younger, I thought return might resolve identity. Go back, reconnect, remember, and the fragments would line up. I now think return does something more useful: it reveals that the fragments were never supposed to collapse into a single uncomplicated self.

The child from Cap-Haitien is real. The teenager learning Brooklyn is real. The engineer is real. The person who studied poverty and motivation is real. The adult who builds, fails, loves, travels, grieves, asks questions, and tries again is real. Continuity does not require sameness. Psychology research on autobiographical meaning-making supports that intuition: people often protect a sense of self-continuity by building connections between distant chapters rather than pretending the chapters are identical.

That is what storytelling can do when it is honest. It does not erase rupture. It makes rupture narratable.

A 2021 study of refugees found that autobiographical meaning-making was associated with stronger self-continuity under some conditions, while also cautioning that ongoing post-displacement stress can complicate that process. The caution matters. Narrative is not magic. We cannot story our way out of material insecurity, discrimination, legal precarity, or trauma. But we can sometimes use narrative to understand which self crossed which border and why both selves still belong to us.

## The Country You Can Meet

The country you return to does not exist. The country you can build a new relationship with does.

That relationship asks for less romance and more attention. It asks you to learn what changed after you left. It asks you to notice what changed in you. It asks you to stop using childhood memory as a policy brief. It asks you to love people enough not to reduce them to suffering and respect suffering enough not to turn it into poetry.

Most of all, it asks you to surrender the fantasy that belonging means being unchanged by distance.

Return becomes honest when memory is allowed to meet time. *Returning Before the Funeral*

Daniel had gone years without seeing his family. Movement had become normal enough that he could describe life across countries almost casually, but family remained concentrated in Haiti. At some point the distance began to acquire a darker possibility. He did not want a death to become the event that finally forced him home.

So he returned. That reason matters to me because return is often narrated at the wrong scale. We imagine the dramatic homecoming: the airport, the recognition, the reconciliation between migrant and homeland. Daniel's decision was simpler and more urgent. He wanted ordinary time before extraordinary loss made ordinary time impossible.

The idea changed the way I thought about postponement. Migrants become skilled at delay. I will visit when work calms

down. When the ticket is cheaper. When the security situation improves. When the project ends. When the paperwork is complete. When the children are older. When the children are younger. When there is more money. When there is more certainty.

Many reasons are legitimate. The danger is that time continues to pass while the condition for return remains imaginary.

No airline sells a ticket to the country as it existed when you left.

When Daniel returned, he was not returning as the young person who had departed. His beliefs had changed. His technical life had expanded. His relationships to faith, identity, and difference had been tested elsewhere. His family had also continued without him.

Return therefore creates a second translation problem. The migrant has spent years explaining the origin to the destination. Now the migrant may have to explain the destination-shaped self to the origin.

The Little Girl Grace Was Grace's relationship to return is distributed across multiple moves rather than one dramatic homecoming. Her childhood contained Haiti, the United States, schools away from parents, Florida, Long Island, and later education elsewhere. Yet when she spoke about work, the northern Haitian landscape and the children she had known there remained morally present.

She remembers a hometown near mountains and coast. She remembers classmates who matched her academically. As an

adult, she understands more clearly that opportunity did not follow talent evenly.

That changes return even when the return is partly imaginative. A person can revisit a childhood place and confront two countries at once: the physical country in front of her and the remembered country that has been waiting untouched in the mind. Memory edits. It preserves certain faces and streets, compresses time, and can make a place feel more coherent than it ever was.

The first country an immigrant returns to is memory.

Memory has perfect authority and terrible recordkeeping.

That is why return can disappoint people who expected recognition. The place has changed. The person has changed. Friends moved. Buildings disappeared. Family structures shifted. A neighborhood that felt enormous to a child may look small. A problem the child normalized may become unbearable to the adult. A beauty the adult overlooked may become newly precious.

The goal of return cannot be to prove which memory was correct. It can be to establish a new relationship with the place as it exists now.

From Nostalgia to Participation By April 2025, my conversations about Haiti sounded different from the conversations that had started the book a year earlier. The question was less often simply what Haiti meant to me and more often what kind of participation made sense from the life I was actually living.

In a Haitian community strategy conversation in Chicago, the discussion moved between family history, schools, neighborhoods, restaurants, organizations, scholarships, events, customer service, economic habits, and the practical difficulty of sustaining community institutions. The range itself was revealing. Diaspora is not only identity. It is infrastructure.

One woman described a family history in which earlier generations had been sent to the United States amid political uncertainty. The men built lives, joined institutions, worked, educated children, and still maintained a relationship to Haiti through family visits and memory. Her own work later included supporting Haitian women through education and scholarships. The story crossed generations without producing one clean version of what loyalty should look like.

That conversation pushed me away from a romantic binary: return versus abandonment.

Some people will return permanently. Some will never return. Some will invest, teach, mentor, send money, build businesses, fund scholarships, organize cultural events, or raise children who know enough of the history to make their own relationship with it. Some forms of participation will succeed. Others will be ineffective or self-congratulatory. Good intention is not the same as impact.

The question is not whether every migrant must go back. The better question is whether memory can mature into responsibility without becoming control.

Diaspora communities sometimes reproduce the very problems they criticize in the homeland: weak institutions,

personality-driven leadership, poor succession, mistrust, fragmented organizations. They can also create extraordinary networks of care and opportunity. Both facts can be true.

A mature relationship to origin should be able to hold both. Love does not require pretending a country is functioning well. Criticism does not require contempt. Distance does not cancel belonging. Return does not automatically prove commitment.

The country you return to does not exist because no country remains frozen for one person's memory.

The country you can build a new relationship with does. The Return That Reintroduced Haiti to Me

For roughly the first nine years after I arrived in the United States, Haiti did not occupy my mind with the intensity people might expect from an immigrant memoir.

I was busy becoming legible in America. School, language, basketball, adolescence, college ambition—the new environment supplied enough immediate work that origin could become background. That is another experience migration narratives sometimes understate. Homesickness is not constant. Some children adapt by investing attention in the present because the present demands it. College changed that relationship.

A university project gave me a reason to return to Haiti with new eyes. I was no longer only the child who had left. I had acquired educational vocabulary, professional aspirations, and a comparative frame. Things I had once accepted as normal became questions. Things I had once overlooked became sources

of pride. I could see institutional gaps more clearly and human ingenuity more clearly at the same time.

The return did not restore an earlier identity. It created a new one.

That is the difference between nostalgia and re-encounter. Nostalgia wants the past to confirm memory. Re-encounter allows the present to correct it.

I began thinking more deliberately about education in Haiti, about access to technology, about the fact that talent does not become opportunity automatically. Later work donating laptops and supporting educational programs grew out of that longer relationship, but I do not want to turn philanthropy into proof of belonging. Sending resources is easier than understanding what local institutions actually need. Diaspora efforts can become performative when the person with access assumes access is the same as expertise.

The harder version of return asks for partnership. What do people already know?

What are they already building? Where is an outside resource useful, and where does it distort priorities?

Who maintains the program after the visitor leaves? Return matures when the migrant stops needing to be the hero of it.

The Ethics of Looking Back Grace's classmates sharpened this for me. It is tempting for the migrant who gained opportunity to look back and see a version of himself waiting to be rescued. That gaze can reproduce hierarchy.

The people who remained are not frozen examples of the life the migrant escaped. They have made choices, built families, developed expertise, survived conditions the migrant may no longer understand firsthand, and changed alongside the country.

The ethical task is not to deny unequal opportunity. It is to name inequality without stripping agency from the people who encountered it.

That principle should govern this book too. No interviewee appears here merely to validate my framework. No country should appear merely as background for my becoming. Haiti is not the wound that makes America impressive. America is not the solution that makes Haiti tragic.

Both countries contain institutions, contradictions, love, violence, opportunity, history, and people whose lives exceed the argument I am making.

The return chapter therefore resists the clean emotional payoff of coming home.

Return is not a conclusion. It is another beginning with more information.

### Returning Before Loss Makes the Decision

Daniel told me that after years away from Haiti, one thought began to bother him: he did not want a death in the family to become the event that finally forced him home.

The logic was stark. Haiti felt dangerous enough that postponing the trip could always be justified. School, work, distance, money, and uncertainty could each support another

delay. But Daniel knew that if a close relative died, those same reasons would suddenly lose their power. He would find a way to return because grief would outrank caution.

He did not want death to have that authority over the relationship.

So he went back while the people he loved were alive.

That choice reveals something important about return migration that cost-benefit language can miss. The value of a trip is partly the future regret it prevents. A person is choosing not only between travel and safety, or money and time, but between possible versions of memory.

My own first return after leaving Haiti had a different structure. I had spent much of my first nine years in the United States not thinking about Haiti very often. That fact can sound like rejection when written too quickly. It was closer to immersion. School, adolescence, sports, education, work, and the immediate demands of becoming competent in a new environment filled the foreground. Haiti remained in the biography without always remaining in daily consciousness.

College changed the foreground. Through a university project, I returned in a setting organized around observation and service. The country was both familiar and newly strange because I had changed the reference points against which I was seeing it. A hospital visit made inequality difficult to keep abstract. My own questions revealed how much American life had become my baseline. Even the idea of recreational running, ordinary in my college environment, sounded different inside the conditions I was observing.

That return did not restore an original identity waiting intact for me. It introduced a gap between the Haiti I remembered, the Haiti in front of me, and the person doing the looking.

This is why I write that the first country an immigrant returns to is memory. Memory arrives before the plane lands. It tells the traveler what the street should feel like, who should still be there, which foods should taste the same, which relationships should resume without explanation, and how much of the old self ought to be recoverable. The actual country has had the audacity to continue existing without consulting the memory. So has the traveler.

Daniel's return amid crisis and my return through a university project are not equivalent experiences. They share one structural feature: return is not a reversal of migration. It is a new migration into a place whose familiarity can make difference more disorienting. The person expects recognition and encounters change.

Family members may see the returnee as privileged, distant, Americanized, lucky, responsible, absent, generous, or naive. The returnee may see relatives through a mixture of love, guilt, frustration, admiration, and the dangerous confidence of someone who has learned to solve problems in a different institutional system. Both sides can mistake partial knowledge for full understanding.

This is where diaspora work can become paternalistic. The person abroad has access to resources and starts believing access equals insight. Good intentions then produce projects designed

around what the diaspora wants to give rather than what people on the ground say they need.

The lesson of return is therefore not simply remember where you came from. It is return curious enough to discover where people actually are.

Daniel returned before grief made the decision for him. I returned and discovered that opportunity had changed my own expectations more than I knew. Grace looked back at childhood classmates and refused the comforting idea that her path proved superior effort. Julian carried a promise made after the earthquake without pretending he already knew the perfect form of repayment.

Each story turns return away from closure and toward relationship.

No airline sells a ticket to the country you remember. The only honest destination is an encounter with what remains, what changed, and who you have become in the meantime.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*Can you meet the place you left without demanding that it remain loyal to your memory?*

## Chapter 14 - More Than an Immigrant

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*Who are you when the category that once explained you becomes too small?*

I began the interviews because I thought immigrants needed to tell their stories. After enough conversations, I realized the sentence contained a hidden arrogance.

People already had stories. What many lacked was not narrative. It was an environment in which the full narrative was wanted.

Institutions often ask immigrants for compressed versions of themselves. The immigration form wants legal facts. The employer wants qualifications. The university wants an essay with an arc. The media may want resilience, trauma, exceptionalism, crime, contribution, gratitude, or controversy—recognizable categories with enough emotional clarity to travel quickly. Real lives are badly behaved in comparison.

Simone could be grateful for America and critical of the costs embedded in the American Dream. Avery could leave the place she first called home in the United States because she needed distance and later understand the same place as home.

Daniel could remain fiercely Haitian while changing beliefs formed in Haiti. The finance professional could benefit from elite institutions and still experience intimacy elsewhere. A second-generation daughter could inherit immigrant resilience without personally crossing the border.

A label that fits all of them tells us almost nothing about any of them.

That was the reason the original title kept returning to family roles. I am an immigrant. Above all, I am a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a cousin, a human being.

The sentence was not an attempt to pretend immigration does not matter. It matters enormously. Legal status changes lives. Race changes how migration is experienced. Class changes the risks of movement. Gender, sexuality, age at arrival, language, education, health, and geopolitics all reshape the path.

The point was order. Immigrant is an important fact about a person. It is not the fact from which every other fact must descend.

When I listened back to the archive, another pattern emerged. People often became most alive not when describing migration directly but when the conversation reached the thing migration had made newly visible.

A sister. A song. A mother's look. A promise to a brother. A child.

A classroom remembered from Haiti. A question about happiness. A family name. A room in which the cover could come off.

These are not side details. They are where personhood lives. Narrative psychologists use the idea of an evolving life story to describe how people create continuity across time. Migration makes that work visible because the external world can change abruptly while the person must still experience some sense of being the same “I.” Story is one tool for repairing the breach.

But story can also become another prison if we force every life into a redemptive arc.

Not every hardship made somebody stronger. Not every immigrant is heroic. Not every family sacrifice was wise.

Not every homeland should be romanticized. Not every adaptation is loss. Not every tradition deserves preservation.

Not every opportunity produces belonging. The highest respect we can offer an immigrant story is complexity.

That is what character development means outside fiction. It is not inventing a transformation because a book needs one. It is noticing the transformations the person has already lived: what she believed before a move, what experience contradicted, what she carries forward, what remains unresolved.

In the earliest interviews, I was often too eager to find the lesson. The archive taught me to stay longer with the contradiction.

Contradiction is where the person appears. A human being can miss a country and refuse to live there.

Love a parent and establish a boundary. Want wealth and reject the career that offers it fastest.

Assimilate in one dimension and deepen ethnic identity in another. Feel at home in a country that still treats him as foreign.

Build a successful life and remain uncertain whether it is his. These are not failures of coherence.

They are the material from which a truthful coherence must be built.

## **The Self That Travels**

My own life contains enough roles to look inconsistent from the outside: immigrant child, student, engineer, corporate operator, product builder, entrepreneur, teacher, storyteller, musician, designer, community organizer, husband, father. For years I treated coherence as a problem to solve. The interviews taught me to treat it as a story to understand.

The useful question was not "Which version is the real one?" It was "What keeps recurring across the versions?" I kept returning to systems, translation, people, possibility, and the urge to build. Migration had trained some of that method before any job gave it a title.

Narrative identity research gives academic language to the intuition. Continuity does not require sameness. A life can change substantially while remaining intelligible if the person can connect what changed, what endured, and why the next chapter belongs to the same protagonist.

That is different from reinvention as performance. A coherent life is not a personal brand with every contradiction edited out. It is a story capacious enough to admit that several true selves existed at different times - and that some of them disagreed.

The pressure to become a “good immigrant” can be its own performance. Gratitude must be visible. Achievement must justify admission. Success becomes evidence offered to an imagined jury: See? The country was right to let me in. My family was right to sacrifice. I have made the journey worth it.

This bargain is exhausting because it makes belonging conditional on usefulness. Citizenship, legal residence, or social membership should not require a person to become inspirational.

The right to be complicated is part of the right to belong.

## **Identity Without a Verdict**

The research becomes especially useful here because popular discussions of acculturation are often too confident. A 2024 meta-analysis by Debora Maehler and Jessica Daikeler, drawing on forty-four samples of first-generation adult immigrants, found strong identification with cultures of origin and moderate identification with residence countries on average, with meaningful variation by factors such as cultural distance, migration type, gender, region of origin, and even questionnaire language. The average pattern is informative; the variation is the more important warning.

Another meta-analytic paper in Psychological Science by Kinga Bierwiazzonek and Jonas Kunst challenged the common assumption that one acculturation strategy reliably produces better adaptation. Across a large correlational literature and a smaller longitudinal literature, the relationship was weaker than prevailing theory often suggests, and longitudinal evidence was especially limited.

That matters for a book about becoming. I do not need the research to award a winner between assimilation, separation, biculturalism, or any other tidy category. I need it to protect the characters from being forced into an endpoint the data itself cannot justify.

A person can deepen attachment to an origin culture after leaving it. Another can release parts of that culture without rejecting the people who gave it to them. Someone can become fluent in the destination culture and still feel lonely there. Another can maintain several identities without experiencing them as conflict. The honest unit of analysis is the life, not the slogan.

This is why identity should be understood as layered rather than singular.

The person who arrived at twelve did not vanish when I became a student. The student did not vanish when I became an engineer. The engineer did not vanish in product management. The corporate worker does not vanish inside entrepreneurship. The Haitian child does not vanish in American adulthood. Marriage does not erase the son. Fatherhood does not erase the builder.

A coherent life is not one in which every chapter has the same title.

It is one in which the reader can eventually recognize the same protagonist.

Narrative identity research gives academic language to this intuition. We develop a sense of continuity partly by constructing stories that connect change across time. The goal is not factual neatness; real lives are messy. The goal is intelligibility. Why did this matter? How did that loss shape this choice? What remained constant when the setting changed?

Storytelling becomes especially powerful for immigrants because other institutions tell stories about us first.

A border regime tells one story. A labor market tells another. A school records another.

A census creates categories. A newspaper selects frames. A family remembers selectively. An accent activates assumptions before content arrives.

Narrative agency is the capacity to answer: Here is how I understand what happened to me.

It is not absolute freedom. No one authors life without constraints. We inherit history, bodies, laws, class, race, family, geography, chance, and other people's decisions. Agency lives in interpretation and action inside those constraints.

We can reject a label without denying the condition it names. We can say: immigrant is true, but it is not sufficient.

That may be the central sentence of this book.

## The Résumé Cannot Hold the Person

Professional biographies reward compression. We reduce years to titles, dates, employers, degrees, and measurable outcomes. The format is useful because strangers need a fast way to assess experience. It is also an identity machine. Repeated often enough, the résumé begins to sound like the person.

Immigrants can be especially vulnerable to this because achievement often becomes a defense against stereotype. Credentials say: I belong in this room. Compensation says: the sacrifice worked. Titles create legibility in a society that may know little else about the person.

I understand the attraction. My own path moves through engineering, corporate work, product management, private markets, technology, entrepreneurship, education, football, fashion, research, and community building. Depending on the audience, one of those identities becomes the headline.

But no headline explains why the pattern makes sense from inside. The deeper throughline is curiosity about systems and people. I like taking something complex, understanding how it works, finding where value is blocked, and building a path through it. The domain changes; the method persists.

That method predates the résumé. Migration cultivated it. A child entering a new country asks the same product question without knowing the jargon: how does this place work, and what am I supposed to do next?

The danger of achievement identity is that the credential can outlive its usefulness. A person may stay in a career because

leaving feels like invalidating the family sacrifice that made the degree possible. Someone may keep a prestigious role because the title has become proof of belonging, even after the work no longer fits.

The alternative is not to stop caring about excellence. It is to detach worth from a single expression of excellence.

## **What the research illuminates - Category Error**

Social science requires categories, and public policy cannot function without them. The problem arises when a category created for one purpose is used to answer a different question.

‘Foreign-born’ may be useful for demographic analysis. It cannot tell us whether a person feels foreign. Citizenship can tell us legal membership. It cannot by itself tell us social belonging. Income can tell us economic position. It cannot tell us whether achievement feels self-authored.

This is a category error: using a variable outside the domain it was built to measure.

The same error appears in everyday social perception. Accent becomes a proxy for intelligence. National origin becomes a proxy for culture, even though class, region, religion, generation, and personality may matter enormously. ‘Immigrant’ becomes a proxy for political preference, work ethic, gratitude, trauma, or aspiration.

The antidote is not pretending categories disappear. It is disciplined specificity. What exactly do we know from this label?

What are we inferring? What evidence would change the inference? This discipline is especially important for stories. Narrative nonfiction can easily replace statistical stereotyping with aesthetic stereotyping - selecting only the dramatic immigrant, the heroic immigrant, the suffering immigrant. A book may be compassionate and still flatten.

The ambition here is different: keep the category visible while restoring the excess that does not fit inside it.

A person is always more data than the label can store.

This is why the book keeps the interview questions visible. The answers matter, but the project itself is part of the story: an immigrant began asking other people what home meant because his own answer no longer fit inside one country. The archive became a collective mirror. Each voice corrected the temptation to turn one life into the model for everyone else.

List the five labels strangers are most likely to apply to you. Then list the five identities that feel most important from the inside.

Where do the lists overlap? Where do they fail to recognize each other? Finally, write one sentence beginning: "What you cannot know by looking at me is..."

A society becomes more humane when its categories remain useful without becoming cages. A person becomes freer when they can name themselves without pretending the labels imposed by the world have no power.

The Passport Does Not Enter Alone One of the adjacent conversations in the archive took place in Europe around questions of race, bureaucracy, and belonging. The discussion was messy, social, and unscripted—people from different backgrounds trading stories about Germany, the United Kingdom, Africa, the Caribbean, passports, immigration systems, and the uneven treatment of Black travelers.

What stayed with me was how quickly the same body could be read differently once nationality became legible.

A Black person carrying an American or British passport could move through an interaction with a degree of institutional recognition unavailable to another Black person presumed to be an African asylum seeker or an undocumented migrant. The people in the conversation did not claim nationality erased racism. They were noticing that race, class, citizenship, language, and legal status combine.

That intersection matters because the category immigrant is too blunt to predict experience. A highly educated professional with a powerful passport, a refugee awaiting status, a child who migrated with parents, a temporary worker, an international student, and an undocumented adult can all be called immigrants. The label tells us something and not nearly enough.

This is another reason I resist the demand for a single immigrant identity. The same person may occupy different positions across borders. Daniel could be culturally disoriented in Norway and still possess educational opportunities others did not. Grace could feel like a child without language in one

setting and later become the professional building belonging for others. I could be Haitian in America, American in another country, Black in a room that saw race first, an engineer in one institution, an outsider in another.

Identity travels with documents, and documents alter the journey. The Self That Travels The phrase more than an immigrant does not mean immigration is unimportant. It means immigration cannot be allowed to swallow every other identity.

This was the problem underneath the original title from the beginning. I am an immigrant. Above all, I am human.

Human does not mean cultureless. It does not mean that the destination should ignore race, origin, language, or legal status in the name of treating everyone the same. Those categories can shape material reality dramatically. Human means that no category exhausts the person.

Daniel is Haitian and a son and a technical builder and a traveler and someone whose beliefs changed. Grace is an immigrant and a sister and an education professional and a witness to classmates whose opportunities diverged from hers. Simone is Haitian and American and a mother and a social worker and a future grandmother. Malcolm is a provider who can feel both love and resentment inside the same financial obligation. Avery can miss Florida and be grateful she left it.

The identities do not line up into a perfect hierarchy. Research on acculturation has sometimes encouraged the public to imagine culture as two sliders: origin and destination. The empirical literature is more complicated. First-generation

immigrants often maintain strong origin identification while developing meaningful identification with the receiving country, but patterns vary substantially. Longitudinal and meta-analytic research also cautions against assuming one combination guarantees adaptation.

That uncertainty is liberating for the book. The goal is not to discover the correct percentage of Haitian, American, Nigerian, Caribbean, Black, professional, religious, secular, or global. Identity is not a recipe whose ingredients become authentic only at fixed ratios.

The better question is whether the person can inhabit the identities without one becoming a prison for the others.

A person should be allowed to change a belief without being accused of abandoning a people. A person should be allowed to love an origin country and refuse to live there. A child should be allowed to inherit a culture without inheriting every fear that culture carried through a different historical moment. To be human is not to become generic. It is to be irreducible.

Identity Without a Verdict The archive changed me here too. In early interviews I sometimes asked questions as if the participant's job were to resolve a tension. Is America home or Haiti? Did leaving improve life or complicate it? Was a family obligation loving or burdensome? Did adaptation require loss?

The best answers refused the verdict. Home could be both countries and neither in the same way. Leaving could be necessary and painful. Money could be care and avoidance. A tradition could be meaningful and in need of revision. A song could produce joy and grief within the same three minutes.

The refusal to resolve is not indecision. It is fidelity to complex experience. I now think one of the most respectful things narrative nonfiction can do is leave some contradictions intact. Black, Haitian, American - and the Order Changes

One of the hardest things to explain about immigrant identity is that categories do not have the same weight everywhere. The person can remain physically identical while the social meaning of the body changes with location.

In Haiti, I was Haitian before Blackness needed to become a daily explanatory category. In the United States, Blackness entered differently because American institutions and social life carry a specific racial history. Haitian identity did not disappear, but it was no longer the only frame through which other people could read me. In professional settings, educational credentials could add another frame. Abroad, an American passport or American accent could reorder the interaction again.

The June group conversation made this fluidity visible because the speakers were comparing how race, nationality, language, and passport status changed treatment in Europe. The conversation was not a research study, and I do not use it to generalize about entire countries. I use it because the participants were doing what immigrants do constantly: building a comparative map from lived encounters.

Mary Waters's research on West Indian immigrants provides a more systematic backdrop. Her work shows how Caribbean immigrants and their children negotiate ethnic and racial identities inside a U.S. system where becoming American can also mean being placed more firmly inside American racial

categories. The process is neither immediate nor uniform, and generation matters.

That complexity protects this book from a sentimental mistake. Cultural identity is not simply a treasure the immigrant either preserves or loses. Identity is also a set of classifications imposed, negotiated, resisted, used strategically, and revised through contact with institutions.

A Haitian professional in Chicago may emphasize Haitian heritage at a community event, Black identity in a conversation about discrimination, American nationality while traveling abroad, engineering or product expertise at work, church membership on Sunday, and family role at home. None of these identities is necessarily fake because it is context-dependent. Human beings are relationally legible.

The problem appears when a context demands that one category become the whole person.

This is what the title of the book has been resisting from the beginning. I am an immigrant. Above all, I am human. The second sentence is not asking anyone to become generic. It is rejecting the idea that the first sentence explains enough.

Humanity is not what remains after culture is stripped away. Humanity is the capacity to carry culture, revise it, contradict it, love it, argue with it, and still exceed every label used to summarize the carrying.

The order of the labels can change without the person becoming dishonest.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What would remain of your identity if the word immigrant disappeared tomorrow?*

## Chapter 15 - Building Home Forward

### THE QUESTION AT THE DOOR

*If home can be built, what are you constructing for people who will arrive after you?*

Near the beginning of this book, a twelve-year-old boy in Brooklyn hears a basketball instruction he does not yet understand.

Pivot. Plant one foot. Turn with the other. For years I thought the beauty of the move was adaptability.

Now I think the beauty is relationship. The moving foot can only create a new angle because the planted foot has enough connection to the floor to bear the turn. Too much rigidity and the player cannot respond. No anchor and the movement becomes traveling.

An immigrant life keeps renegotiating those two needs. Movement and anchor.

Avery's anchor changed meaning after a Midwestern city taught her the value of the coastal city where she grew up's Haitian community. Daniel carried a family name across countries while allowing travel to change some of the beliefs attached to it. Simone redefined the American Dream around the quality of the life happening inside the house, not only the ownership of the house. The woman whose sister became home

learned to build belonging for other people through education and community work. A second-generation daughter inherited the pivot without inheriting the border crossing.

None of them arrived at a final answer. That is important. Home is not a prize awarded after sufficient integration. Belonging is maintained.

A marriage maintains it through negotiation. A diaspora maintains it through institutions and rituals. A family maintains it through attention. A neighborhood maintains it through businesses, schools, parks, faith communities, music, language, and the ordinary repetition of seeing people who recognize you. A person maintains it internally by revising identity without treating every revision as betrayal.

The research model I developed from these conversations names five conditions that repeatedly shaped whether people described themselves as at home: relational safety, cultural continuity, agency, material viability, and future-generational possibility.

The list is useful. The lives are more useful. Relational safety is the sister coming back into the room.

Cultural continuity is music in a South Florida house before a child has words for why the sound matters.

Agency is Daniel deciding that preserving Haitian identity does not require preserving every inherited belief.

Material viability is the reason people leave places they love. Future-generational possibility is Simone deciding that a child's success matters more than the photograph of a larger house.

A model becomes human when you can see the face inside each variable. That is what building home forward requires.

Not choosing once and for all between origin and destination. Not winning an argument about assimilation.

Not performing cultural purity. It requires designing conditions in which people can become more fully themselves without making connection the price of growth.

For families, that may mean telling children the migration story without turning the story into a debt.

For communities, it means treating cultural spaces as infrastructure rather than decoration. For institutions, it means recognizing that access is not the same thing as belonging.

For immigrants, it may mean allowing success to be redefined after the survival stage has ended.

For people who never crossed a national border, the same work appears in another form. Every adult eventually leaves some version of home. Every family hands down unfinished material. Every life demands pivots. Every person has to decide which inheritances are anchors and which are weights.

That is why this remains an immigrant book and also a human book. Immigration intensifies the questions.

It does not monopolize them. If I could speak to the boy in the Brooklyn gym now, I would not tell him that everything will work out. That sentence is too easy, and life is too contingent.

I would tell him something harder and more useful. You will change.

Some of the change will save you. Some will confuse you. Some will make people who knew the old version of you uncomfortable. You will mistake achievement for belonging more than once. You will leave places, return to places, and discover that memory is not a map. You will meet people whose stories challenge what you think you know about your own.

Keep an anchor. But choose it consciously. Let love be an anchor without letting fear impersonate love.

Let culture be an anchor without making it a cage. Let ambition move you without making movement your only proof of life.

Let the future expand without humiliating the past that carried you to it. Then turn.

Build the next angle. And when somebody asks where home is, do not worry if the answer takes a while.

The honest answer may be a story. There is one more reason storytelling belongs inside this model.

A person can have safety, culture, money, agency, and opportunity and still struggle to integrate the versions of self created along the way. Narrative is the thread that helps plural attachments become coherent.

The story does not have to conclude that every sacrifice was worth it. That is another myth immigrants are pressured to perform.

Some losses remain losses. Some choices were made with terrible options. Some people would not make the same migration again.

Some are grateful and grieving at once. A mature narrative can hold that. This is why I resist the demand for a clean moral at the end of every immigrant story.

The journey does not prove that suffering makes people stronger. Sometimes suffering injures people. It does not prove that hard work always wins. Institutions distribute opportunity unevenly. It does not prove that leaving is brave or staying is brave. Both can be acts of courage or constraint.

The lesson is more modest and, I think, more useful. Human beings author meaning under conditions they did not fully choose.

We inherit a starting position. Then we interpret, improvise, connect, build, lose, love, adapt, and try again.

That is the pivot. Not turning away from where we came from. Turning while keeping one foot grounded long enough to choose a new direction.

The basketball metaphor returns here because it is more precise than I understood at twelve. A legal pivot requires an anchor foot. Without an anchor, the move becomes a travel.

Immigrant life asks a similar question: what remains planted while the rest of you turns?

For some, the anchor is family. For others, faith. Language. Music. A moral code.

A memory. A promise. A child. A community. The anchor can change, but life becomes unstable when we pretend we need none.

The purpose of belonging is not to prevent movement. It is to make movement survivable.

That is what I now believe home is for. Not a cage. Not a finish line.

A place, relationship, practice, or inner coherence strong enough to let us leave and still know how to return.

The final lesson is not “find home.” It is build the conditions under which home can keep being made. Geography will change. Bodies will age. Children will reinterpret us. Countries will disappoint us. Careers will move. The work is to create enough safety, continuity, agency, viability, and future possibility that change does not require disappearance.

When I think about the years ahead, I return to five questions. Where am I safe enough to tell the truth? That is relational safety.

**What practices help me remember who I am without requiring me to remain who I was?** That is cultural continuity.

**Where can I make meaningful choices and accept responsibility for them?** That is agency.

**What material conditions make care, rest, health, learning, and participation realistically possible?** That is viability.

**What am I building that enlarges possibility for someone beyond me?** That is the future.

No place will answer all five perfectly. No family will either. Home is not perfection. It is sufficient coherence to live with dignity and enough connection to keep becoming.

And perhaps that is why the question has followed me across countries, careers, rooms, and relationships.

Where is home? The answer keeps changing because I do. But the deeper answer has become clearer.

Home is where a life can be held without being made smaller. Home is where the past can speak without ruling.

Home is where the future can arrive without requiring amnesia. Home is where love and truth can occupy the same room.

Home is where we learn that belonging is not a prize handed to us by the world.

It is something we build with one another. One word at a time. One table at a time.

One institution at a time. One child at a time. One story at a time.

And then, if we are fortunate, we build it well enough that someone after us begins their life with a little less distance to travel.

Community Is a Verb By the time I spoke with members of the Haitian community in Chicago in April 2025, the word community had begun to bother me.

It was too easy to use as a noun.

The Haitian community. The immigrant community. The Black community. Each phrase can make thousands of people sound like a coordinated institution with a shared agenda. In practice, community exists through repeated work: someone organizes the event, raises the money, cooks the food, gives the scholarship, mentors the student, keeps the contact list, drives the elder, teaches the child, rents the room, mediates the disagreement, follows up when the first plan fails.

The April conversation moved through exactly that practical terrain. We talked about Haitian organizations, education, restaurants, cultural events, business habits, the South Side and suburbs, schools, family history, and ways to support younger people. The conversation was not elegant because community is not elegant. It is logistics with meaning attached.

One participant described involvement in an organization supporting Haitian women through education and scholarships. She also spoke critically about Haitian businesses that she believed failed to pair cultural pride with disciplined customer service or operational standards. The two positions belonged together. Loving a community did not require lowering expectations for it.

That was a useful correction for me. Diaspora pride can become fragile when every critique is heard as betrayal. But institutions do not improve because their members protect

them from honest feedback. Belonging should create enough security for standards.

This is true at the household level too. A family that cannot discuss what hurts is not stronger because everyone stayed polite. A community that cannot evaluate which programs work is not more united because every event is celebrated.

Building home forward requires affection and measurement. The Infrastructure of Belonging The Relational Home Model at the back of this book names five resources that kept recurring in the archive: relational safety, cultural continuity, agency, material viability, and future-generational possibility. I developed the framework after the interviews, not before them. That order matters.

Grace gave me relational safety through the sister who returned. Avery gave me cultural continuity through community and music she did not know to value until distance removed it.

Daniel gave me agency through the difficult work of changing a belief without discarding an entire identity.

Simone gave me material viability through the practical decision to prioritize childcare and family function over a larger symbol of success.

Parenthood gave the framework a future tense. None of the five resources is sufficient alone.

A person can have family love and no legal stability. A person can have a high salary and no community. A person can have cultural continuity inside a neighborhood and limited access to institutions outside it. A child can have extraordinary

opportunity and feel crushed by the expectation to justify every sacrifice that created it.

This is why home should not be evaluated only by address. The strongest homes I encountered in the archive were systems: relationships, routines, institutions, memories, practices, resources, and believable futures reinforcing one another enough that the person could expand without becoming unrecognizable.

That definition changes what building home forward means. For a city, it may mean newcomer services that do not require insider knowledge.

For a school, it may mean language access and family processes that are legible to parents.

For a workplace, it may mean making tacit advancement rules visible rather than pretending everybody arrived with the same map.

For a diaspora organization, it may mean scholarships, archives, events, business networks, mental-health resources, cultural education, and governance strong enough to survive individual personalities.

For a family, it may mean calling more often, making expectations explicit, telling children why a tradition matters, and accepting that continuation will not look identical to the past.

For me, it increasingly means refusing to treat the life I built in America and the life that began in Haiti as competitors.

The Future Should Not Be a Museum Cultural preservation is often imagined as preventing change. That is not how living cultures survive.

A museum protects an object by controlling the environment around it. A family cannot do that to a child. A diaspora cannot do it to a second generation. A language, faith, food tradition, or national identity survives differently when it remains useful enough to be chosen.

Choice does not mean the older generation has no responsibility. Children cannot choose what they never encounter. Exposure matters. Repetition matters. Stories matter. Travel matters when possible. Relationships with elders matter. Language needs time in the mouth, not only symbolic praise.

But inheritance becomes stronger when meaning accompanies practice. Do not only tell a child to eat the food. Tell the child who used to make it and what the kitchen sounded like.

Do not only insist on the language. Use the language for affection, humor, storytelling, and ordinary life so it does not become associated only with correction.

Do not only display the flag. Explain the history, including the parts that complicate pride.

Do not only say that family is everything. Build a family culture in which closeness is compatible with boundaries and honest disagreement.

The future does not inherit our intentions. It inherits our repeated practices.

That is the final meaning of pivot for me. A pivot is not abandoning the planted foot. It is using the anchor to create another direction.

I came to the United States at twelve believing the hard part would be learning to turn.

The harder work has been deciding what deserves to remain planted. Home, I now think, is not the place where nothing changes.

It is the place—sometimes a household, sometimes a network, sometimes a language, sometimes several countries held in relationship—where change does not require disappearance. The Institution After the Event

Diaspora life produces many events: galas, heritage celebrations, church gatherings, fundraisers, conferences, cultural festivals, watch parties, scholarship dinners. Events matter because they create temporary density. People who are scattered across a city can see one another in the same room. Children hear music they may not hear at school. Business owners meet customers. Elders encounter younger professionals. A community becomes visible to itself.

The April 2025 conversation also reminded me of the question after the event.

What remains on Monday?

An organization is stronger than an event when it can convert attention into durable infrastructure. A scholarship process. A mentorship relationship. A database. A recurring program. A documented history. A set of operating procedures.

A succession plan. A relationship with schools. A fund that can be audited. A network newcomers know how to enter.

This is where my engineering and product instincts enter the immigration story. I am interested in systems because systems preserve intention after energy changes.

Immigrant communities often rely on extraordinary individuals who carry too much institutional memory in their heads. When those people burn out, move, age, or die, the organization loses not only labor but knowledge. The pattern is familiar in families too. One aunt knows every relative's number. One parent remembers every document. One elder carries the oral history. One volunteer knows how the annual event actually gets produced.

Building home forward means externalizing enough memory that continuity does not depend on one exhausted person.

The archive itself became a small example. Recorded conversations preserve voices that memory alone would have simplified. A transcript can show me where I interrupted too quickly, which word a participant repeated, where my later summary flattened a contradiction. Documentation does not replace relationship, but it can protect relationship from the distortions of memory.

Diaspora institutions need the same humility. If something matters, build a way for the next person to inherit more than a story that the previous leader was amazing.

Belonging Needs Maintenance. Writing this book has made me less interested in the sentence find your home.

Finding implies the home is waiting, complete, somewhere on the map.

The people in this archive keep describing construction. Simone constructs home through parenting choices.

Grace constructs it through people who make full selfhood possible. Avery constructs it by learning which community elements must travel with her.

Daniel constructs it through bridges among lives that do not naturally translate.

Malcolm constructs it through financial care while learning where money cannot do emotional work.

Imani constructs it through inherited resilience and the question of love.

Julian constructs it by using direction to choose among opportunities. None of them is finished.

Neither am I. The phrase building home forward is intentionally awkward because the work points in two directions. We carry materials from the past and build for people who did not live it.

A child cannot inherit my Haiti exactly. He can inherit stories, language, food, music, relationships, travel when possible, and enough honest history to create his own relationship to it.

That is more demanding than nostalgia and more hopeful than preservation.

It allows the future to answer back.

Institutions That Remember for Us

By April 2025, the book's question had moved from private belonging toward public infrastructure. A Haitian-community conversation in Chicago gave me the clearest version of the shift.

The woman I was speaking with had been born in the United States, spent early childhood with grandparents in Haiti, and returned to the United States for school without English. Haiti remained part of her life through repeated summer visits until grandparents died. Her adult identity was unapologetically Haitian American, but the form of her commitment was institutional. She had founded Daughters of Haiti, a community organization centered on women of Haitian descent, education, cultural pride, and service.

That matters because memory alone is fragile. A family can preserve a story for one generation and lose it in the next. An institution can create repeated occasions for the story to be practiced.

The conversation moved through museums, film festivals, scholarships, Mother's Day programming, Haitian food, dance, music, school choices, and the politics of who gets to represent a community. None of it was frictionless. She was frank about a problem familiar to anyone who has tried to organize diaspora work: too many people want to be chef. Leadership can become competition. Meetings can become talk. Pride can become territorial. And yet the work still gets done.

The most concrete example was a resource event for newly arrived migrants. The organization did not want donated clothing to feel like a pile of charity. Volunteers sorted the

clothes, organized sizes, hung items, and arranged the space to resemble a boutique. They paired the clothing with food and access to practical services: passport help, health resources, and legal support. The design choice was small and morally significant. Need did not cancel dignity.

That scene belongs near the end of this book because it answers a question the earlier chapters could only ask. What does it mean to build home forward?

It means creating conditions in which another person's arrival is less lonely, less illegible, and less humiliating than it might otherwise be.

The institution cannot become a substitute family for everyone. It can reduce the number of problems each family must solve alone.

That is what community infrastructure does. A museum preserves stories so every parent does not have to invent the curriculum. A scholarship converts collective money into an individual educational chance. A legal clinic converts professional expertise into navigability. A cultural event gives music, language, dance, and food a public room where children can see them treated as assets rather than private leftovers. A mentoring network converts one person's knowledge of an institution into a path somebody else can follow.

The participant described Daughters of Haiti as her baby, then immediately resisted making the organization a monument to herself. She wanted it to belong to women of Haitian descent collectively: women who could stand with pride,

carry culture with grace and dignity, love family and people, and celebrate life through art, music, and dance.

That ambition is bigger than nostalgia. Nostalgia preserves a feeling. Institution-building preserves capacity.

The distinction helps me understand my own projects in Haiti differently too. Laptop donations, education programs, research trips, and community initiatives can feel meaningful to the person delivering them. The harder standard is whether the work reduces dependency, expands local agency, and survives the excitement of the founder. A project that proves the diaspora cares is not automatically a project that helps.

The archive repeatedly pushes toward this standard. Grace's education work returns to classmates whose talent was not matched by opportunity. Julian asks what he can do now with the tools he has rather than waiting to become powerful enough to act. Daniel shares pieces of his world with family so mobility does not become total separation. Simone treats parenting as an investment in people before assets. The Haitian-community organizers build rooms where cultural pride and practical help can coexist.

This is the Relational Home Model at the institutional level. A community becomes more home-like when it can offer relational safety, cultural continuity, agency, material viability, and future-generational possibility in forms that do not depend on one heroic individual.

That final condition matters. Heroic individuals are fragile infrastructure. They get tired, move, lose money, change

priorities, become ill, or die. Communities need systems capable of remembering the work after the founder leaves the room.

The book began with the fear that immigration erases what came before. It ends with a different possibility. Movement can also create new institutions through which the past becomes usable rather than merely mourned.

Home, then, is not only something we find or remember. It is something we design so another person has more room to become.

### The Computer Is Not the Program

A February 2025 conversation about technical boot camps in Haiti forced me to confront another version of the same mistake: confusing the visible object with the system that makes the object useful.

The visible object was a laptop.

The program under discussion was more complicated. The team wanted to run parallel tracks in data science, software engineering, and cybersecurity. They were trying to build local lab capacity in several Haitian cities, including Cap-Haïtien, where a partner site was not yet secured. That opened a chain of practical questions. Do we find a room? Rent one? Install reliable internet? Use Starlink? How do machines get there? Commercial flight in checked luggage, freight, or another route? Do the donated laptops need new SSD drives or chargers? Who installs the operating system? Who documents the setup so the next person can repeat it without waiting for the donor to return?

Those details are easy to treat as logistics below the level of mission. They are the mission.

A laptop sitting in a closet is not educational opportunity. A curriculum a student cannot afford is not access. A six-month training program that graduates people into no plausible work pathway is not economic mobility simply because the content is technically strong. The farther I have moved from the early years of Education Haiti, the more suspicious I have become of interventions that photograph well before they operate well.

The conversation included a useful negative case. A previous program in Jamaica had attracted students who were already working or enrolled in university because the participation fee filtered out many of the unemployed, high-potential learners the organizers most wanted to reach. Half of the eight enrolled participants completed the four-month program. The lesson was not that technical training failed. The design had selected a different population than the mission intended to serve.

So the Haiti plan was being redesigned around the bottleneck rather than the brochure. Could diaspora relatives sponsor tuition? Could people abroad log into a portal and sponsor a student they did not already know? Could the program pair six months of training with internship placement so the credential connected to a next step? Could donated hardware lower the cost of participation? Could generative AI eventually become a Creole-speaking tutoring layer that made individualized help less expensive? Could students be taught not only to code or analyze data manually but also to use new AI

tools as leverage, so they entered the labor market learning the current interface rather than the interface of five years earlier?

I recognized the problem because I had seen an earlier version of it. During years of education work connected to Haiti, it was easier to reach students from stronger schools and families already close to opportunity. The people easiest to recruit were often the people who had enough information, connectivity, confidence, and social support to find the program in the first place. The deeper target population—the talented student outside the obvious pipeline—required more than an announcement.

This is the distribution problem hidden inside opportunity language. We can build a good thing and still distribute it badly.

Grace's childhood classmates belong in this section. She remembered students in Haiti who were as smart and competitive as she was, people whose later lives diverged not because talent was evenly transformed into opportunity but because opportunity itself was uneven. The boot-camp conversation was an attempt, imperfect and still in design, to intervene in that conversion function.

One line from the planning discussion has stayed with me in spirit: how do we reach the twenty-year-old who could become an excellent engineer if somebody first put a capable computer and a viable path in front of them?

That question is better than how many laptops can we donate.

The difference is the difference between charity and infrastructure.

Charity asks what we can give. Infrastructure asks what has to keep working after the gift arrives.

For a technical program, that includes electricity, connectivity, hardware maintenance, language, curriculum, instructors, tutoring, selection criteria, financing, accountability, projects, employer relationships, and the social permission to imagine oneself in the field. Remove enough of those pieces and the laptop returns to being an object.

The same principle applies to diaspora work more broadly. People abroad often possess resources that are genuinely useful: money, devices, professional knowledge, institutional access, passports, networks, and the ability to make introductions across borders. The temptation is to let possession of resources become evidence that we understand the problem. We do not.

The community has information the diaspora does not. Local students know the friction of transportation, internet reliability, family expectations, safety, school quality, and what a fee actually means in a household budget. Local educators know which prerequisites can be assumed and which cannot. Employers know which skills they will pay for. A credible program has to make those knowledges meet.

That is why the phrase building home forward has become more demanding for me. It is not enough to keep a cultural connection or to feel responsible. Responsibility needs architecture.

A well-designed program allows the recipient to become less dependent on the person who designed it. It documents the process. It localizes expertise. It creates feedback. It changes

when the first pilot reaches the wrong population. It treats failure as information rather than embarrassment. It does not require the founder to remain the smartest person in every room.

The laptop can still matter enormously. I know what a machine can open for a student who did not have one. But the machine matters most when it becomes one component in a system that enlarges agency.

The question at the end of this book is therefore not only what will we carry forward. It is what will still work when we are no longer the ones carrying it.

## THE QUESTION TO CARRY

*What practice - not intention - will prove what you decided home should mean?*

## EPILOGUE - The Question at the Door

There is a question immigrants learn to answer before we learn to understand it.

Where are you from? At first it sounds geographical. Later it becomes biographical. After enough years, it can become philosophical.

I am from Cap-Haitien. I am from Brooklyn. I am from classrooms where I was learning English while learning what

other people thought my accent meant. I am from basketball gyms where the word pivot entered my life as an instruction before it became a theory. I am from family stories I did not understand when they were happening. I am from countries I have visited, work I have done, people I have loved, people I have lost, and questions that followed me long after the conversations ended.

The longer I worked on this book, the less interested I became in producing a perfect answer to the question of home. A perfect answer would have betrayed the evidence.

Simone taught me that a dream can change when a child becomes a parent and success begins to mean presence rather than display. Avery taught me that leaving a place can be the experience that reveals what the place had quietly given you. Daniel taught me that loyalty to culture does not require freezing the self at the age of departure. Malcolm taught me that risk is social: the person who leaps may be carrying other people's rent, expectations, and emotional security in the backpack. Grace taught me that sometimes home is a relationship portable enough to survive several addresses.

None of them gave me a universal immigrant answer. That was their gift. The project began with a phrase: I am an immigrant. Above all, I am a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a cousin, a human being. I believed the sentence when I began. I understand it differently now.

At first, 'above all, I am human' sounded like a plea against stereotyping. See the person before the category. That remains true, but it is incomplete. Humanity is not what remains after

culture is removed. Humanity is also expressed through culture - through the foods we repeat, the languages we protect, the music that finds memories before we do, the obligations we resent and honor, the faith we keep or revise, the names we inherit, the stories we challenge, and the futures we build for people who may never know what the first border cost us. To be human is not to become generic. It is to be irreducible.

That may be the central claim of this book.

Migration exposes how much of identity depends on context. Remove the neighborhood and a habit becomes heritage. Remove the language and an accent becomes visible. Remove the extended family and obligation becomes long-distance logistics. Remove the country and a song becomes a vehicle. The migrant learns that ordinary things were holding the self together all along.

Psychology calls part of this self-continuity. Cultural research calls part of it identity negotiation. Migration scholarship studies aspirations, transnational ties, integration, return, remittances, and belonging. Behavioral economics helps explain why choices under uncertainty rarely resemble the rational diagrams we draw after outcomes are known. Music research shows how a familiar sound can cue autobiographical memory, regulate emotion, and carry culturally shared meaning. Each field illuminates a piece.

But a life is what happens when the pieces speak to each other. That is why the conversations mattered more than any single theory. I would ask a question, listen, follow the unexpected turn, ask for a song, and then ask the person to leave

a question behind. Again and again, the most meaningful moment was not the answer. It was the point where someone revised the question.

What is home? became Who is home? What is success? became What did success cost?

What does it mean to pivot? became What am I unwilling to abandon while I change?

What do I owe my family? became How do I love them without disappearing?

Where are you from? became Which version of the answer do you have time to hear?

The questions got better because the people became more complicated. So did I.

I started these interviews believing I was collecting stories. I eventually realized the stories were collecting versions of me. The twelve-year-old arriving in Brooklyn listened differently from the adult interviewing parents. The engineer heard systems. The immigrant heard longing. The son heard sacrifice. The future parent heard inheritance. The person who had traveled widely heard how often human beings mistake familiarity for universality. The writer heard how easily a beautiful sentence can become a cage if it is repeated after the story has already moved on.

That last lesson changed the way I wrote the book. I no longer want to explain every feeling until it becomes safe. I want to leave room for the reader to recognize something before I name it.

Maybe that is another form of belonging: being trusted to complete part of the meaning yourself.

The research throughout these pages suggests that belonging is rarely one thing. It can involve social identity, safety, cultural continuity, agency, material stability, recognition, memory, and a believable future. My own Relational Home Model organizes those dimensions into five recurring needs: relational safety, cultural continuity, agency, material viability, and future-generational possibility. The model is useful only if we remember that models are maps, not countries.

The people remain larger than the framework. And perhaps home does too.

Home may be the place where your nervous system stops auditioning. It may be the people who remember the version of your name that existed before the resume. It may be the kitchen where nobody asks why the food smells that way. It may be the friend who can hold two contradictory versions of your story without demanding that one be false. It may be a language you speak badly but love deeply. It may be the song that returns your childhood to you for three minutes and forty seconds. It may be the future you construct so your children inherit more options than you did.

Home can also be something we build incorrectly. Families can be unsafe. Nations can exclude. Communities can demand conformity as the price of acceptance. Tradition can preserve wisdom and preserve harm. Nostalgia can become denial. The word home deserves affection, but not immunity from examination.

That is why belonging must include agency. A home that requires disappearance is not enough.

A future worth building must have room for revision. If there is a final lesson here, it is not that immigrants are unusually resilient. I am suspicious of any compliment that turns suffering into a requirement for dignity. People should not have to overcome extraordinary difficulty to qualify as worthy of attention.

The lesson is simpler and harder. Every person arrives in the middle of a sentence.

The ethical task is to resist pretending we heard the beginning. Ask the next question.

Listen long enough for the category to fail. Pay attention to what the person carries: a mother's warning, a father's silence, a sister's protection, a child's future, a remittance receipt, a recipe, a faith, a joke, an accent, a scar, a song.

Then notice what changes in you because you listened. When people ask where I am from now, I can still answer Haiti. I can still answer Brooklyn. I can answer Chicago. I can answer with a family tree, an airport itinerary, a basketball court, a kitchen, a church, a classroom, a saxophone, a research paper, a suit, a child, a grief, a dream.

All of those answers are true. None of them is complete. That incompleteness no longer feels like a failure to belong.

It feels like evidence that a life can contain more than one home without betraying any of them.

I am from migration and return, from opportunity and unfinished chapters, from work and music and food and faith and questions.

I am from every version of myself I once thought I had to abandon in order to become the next one.

And if you have made it this far, I want to leave you where the interviews so often left me - not with an answer, but with a question strong enough to travel.

What the Archive Did to the Question When I listen back to the recordings from April 2024, I hear a writer trying to get answers.

By April 2025, I hear something different. The questions have become more specific because the people made them harder.

What is home? became Who makes you recognizable to yourself when geography changes? What is success? became Which variable are you optimizing, and what is disappearing outside the metric?

What is a pivot? became Who absorbs the downside if you are wrong? What is culture? became Which practices still carry meaning after the environment that produced them has changed?

What do we owe family? became How do we love people without converting love into disappearance?

What does return mean? became Can you meet the country that exists now without demanding that it reproduce the country memory preserved?

The archive did not answer immigration. It made the category fail in productive ways.

Simone could be an immigrant mother and an American homeowner and a critic of the American Dream and someone deeply committed to the opportunities her children had received. Daniel could be fiercely Haitian and changed by Norway. Malcolm could be generous and tired of the obligation generosity created. Avery could miss Florida because Chicago had helped her grow. Grace could define home through people and still feel morally tied to a specific Haitian landscape. Imani could inherit migration without crossing the same border.

Every person arrived in the interview in the middle of a sentence too. The ethical task is to resist pretending we heard the beginning.

That principle matters beyond migration. Categories are useful because human complexity is expensive to process. We need words such as immigrant, citizen, refugee, parent, worker, Black, Haitian, Nigerian, American. The mistake is not using categories. The mistake is forgetting the amount of life that remains outside them.

This book began because I wanted immigrants to be seen as human beings before they were treated as abstractions. I understand the goal differently now. Humanity is not what remains after culture is removed. It is not the lowest common denominator beneath difference.

Humanity is the capacity to contain difference without becoming reducible to it. A person can love several places differently.

A person can carry gratitude and anger toward the same country. A person can honor parents and revise what they taught.

A person can send money home and resent sending it. A person can be proud of an origin and relieved to live elsewhere.

A person can return and feel foreign. A person can become more herself by changing.

The final question, then, is not whether we can make all these stories agree.

It is whether we can listen long enough to stop needing them to.

The Question Is the Inheritance The interview project began with the belief that a good story could correct a stereotype.

I still believe that. I now think the more durable inheritance may be the questions the stories leave behind.

A story can make one person's life visible. A question can travel into another person's life and become useful there.

What keeps you in the game? What is life without love?

Is home real, or partly a dream? Which success would feel empty if nobody you loved recognized you inside it?

Which part of your identity is an anchor, and which part is fear?

What do you want the next generation to inherit besides opportunity?

The people who asked those questions did not know one another as a group. Their questions still speak to one another.

That may be the closest this book comes to a collective theory.

Belonging is not the elimination of contradiction. It is the capacity to remain in relationship while contradiction is present. Home is one name we give that capacity.

## **The Last Question Is a Practice**

The question method changed me because it imposed a small discipline on certainty. At the beginning of the project, I often entered conversations with an interpretation already forming. I had written the page. I knew what I thought home meant, what pivoting meant, what sacrifice meant. The interview could easily have become a search for confirmation.

The better moments occurred when a participant refused the frame without announcing that they were refusing it. Simone moved from a house to a child. Malcolm moved from courage to dependents. Daniel moved from adaptation to the part of identity that change can threaten. Grace moved from place to a sister. Avery moved from geographic preference to the way distance taught her to value community. Imani moved from individual drive to parents whose example had been absorbed before it was verbalized. Julian moved from prestigious options to direction.

A question is useful when the answer can still change the questioner.

That may be the book's most portable lesson. Not immigration. Not even home. The discipline is to enter another

person's story with enough structure to listen and enough humility to let the structure fail.

This matters because categories are efficient. Institutions need them. Forms need them. Governments need them. Research often needs them. A person may be immigrant, citizen, mother, engineer, Haitian, Nigerian American, student, provider, refugee, professional, child, spouse, Black, religious, secular, wealthy, poor, or several of these at once. Categories are not inherently dehumanizing. The danger is mistaking the category for the completed explanation.

The archive taught me to look for the sentence that does not fit the summary.

That sentence is often where the human being becomes visible.

So when I end with a question, I am not trying to make the reader perform reflection as a literary exercise. I am asking the reader to continue the method. Ask what someone means by home. Ask what their family paid for opportunity. Ask which song they return to when language becomes too narrow. Ask what they are carrying because they chose it and what they are carrying because nobody ever told them they could put it down.

Then stay long enough for the first answer to become insufficient.

That is where this book finally arrived. The immigrant story is not a special category of human story. It is one of the clearest places to see a problem every person eventually faces: how to change without becoming unrecognizable to yourself, how to

belong without disappearing, and how to build a future that can honor the past without being governed by it.

The final question is therefore not a conclusion. It is an operating principle for the life after the last page.

One more consequence of listening this long is that I no longer hear the phrase I am an immigrant as a complete sentence. It names a history of movement, but it does not tell me what was moved, what remained, or what had to be rebuilt. A border can change a legal category in an afternoon. Belonging usually changes more slowly. It is negotiated in kitchens, classrooms, workplaces, phone calls, remittances, arguments, marriages, songs, and the small decisions through which a person discovers which parts of an earlier life still fit. That is why the stories in this book keep returning to ordinary things. Ordinary things are where continuity becomes visible.

The interviews also complicated the language of success. Opportunity matters. Safety matters. Money matters. Education matters. A person should not have to romanticize scarcity in order to honor where they came from. But the archive kept showing that gains in one dimension can create pressure in another. A promotion can increase the distance from people who cannot follow the new vocabulary. A larger income can turn family love into an unspoken financial contract. A move can produce freedom and loneliness at the same time. A child can inherit opportunities a parent prayed for and still experience the parent's sacrifice as a form of pressure. None of those outcomes cancels the value of migration. They simply make the accounting more honest.

What I want to carry forward is therefore not a verdict about whether leaving is good or returning is good, whether assimilation is good or cultural preservation is good, whether ambition is noble or dangerous. Lives do not stay inside those binaries. The more useful question is whether the life being built allows a person to remain recognizable to themselves while becoming capable of change. That requires relationships that can survive revision, traditions strong enough to be examined, institutions that widen rather than ration possibility, and enough agency to decide which inheritance becomes an anchor and which becomes weight. Home, in that sense, is not the place where nothing changes. It is the place, or the set of relationships, in which change does not require disappearance.

## THE FINAL QUESTION

*What are you carrying forward - and what are you finally ready to set down?*

# **THE SONGBOOK - MUSIC AS PORTABLE HOME**

Music entered the interviews as a method before it became an argument. I would ask a participant for a song connected to home, choice, faith, fear, or pivoting, then listen for what the title unlocked. The list below records the identifiable songs and musical references preserved in the archive used for this book. Lyrics are intentionally not reproduced. Where a transcript did not capture a title reliably, I preserve the description rather than invent one.

## **Home - Michael Buble**

What it carried: distance, loneliness, and the strange experience of succeeding while feeling that part of life is happening elsewhere. Question: Which success would feel empty if nobody you loved could recognize you inside it?

## **Goodness of God - Bethel Music / Jenn Johnson**

What it carried: faith as a practiced route back to trust when frustration made trust difficult. Question: Which ritual helps you recover a value when you cannot reason your way back to it?

## **A Haitian Creole faith song - title not reliably captured in the transcript**

What it carried: spirituality in the language closest to memory. The participant emphasized message over rhythm. Question: Which part of belief changes when it is spoken or sung in the language of childhood?

## **Skeleton Move - Master KG featuring Zanda Zakuza**

What it carried: Julian's True North - movement without amnesia, ambition that remembers the road home. Question: What cue returns you to your direction when opportunity becomes noisy?

## **A Haitian carnival song from Boukman Eksperyans - title not reliably captured in the transcript**

What it carried: Daniel's cultural ease, humor, and reassurance under uncertainty. Question: Which song lets you inhabit a culture instead of explaining it?

## **Redemption Song - Bob Marley and the Wailers**

What it carried: freedom as external condition and internal work. In a conversation about pivoting, it moved the discussion from career change toward self-authorship. Question: Which freedom do you possess legally but not yet psychologically?

## **Changes - Black Sabbath**

What it carried: growth without the false promise that becoming is comfortable. Question: Which change are you resisting because the old identity is still socially rewarded?

## **Glock in My Lap - 21 Savage**

What it carried: a participant's unfiltered musical taste before the conversation turned toward a more explicit song about change. Its presence matters because identity is not curated only from morally tidy artifacts. Question: What belongs in your story even if it does not fit the version of you that looks easiest to explain?

## **We Are One - The Lion King II: Simba's Pride soundtrack**

What it carried: an early association between family, difference, and belonging. Question: Which childhood song taught you a social lesson before you had adult language for it?

## **High Hopes - Pink Floyd**

What it carried: longing, imagination, and the distance between the inner world and the world one can build. Question: Which imagined future still organizes your decisions even if you rarely say it aloud?

## **I Just Wanna Shine - Fitz and the Tantrums**

What it carried: daily orientation - part ringtone, part mantra, a way to begin with agency rather than reactivity.

Question: What do you repeatedly place in your environment because you want it to shape your attention?

## **Pride Is the Devil - J. Cole featuring Lil Baby**

What it carried for me: a recurring reminder that achievement can harden into ego and that pride can distort choices that began with a more generous purpose. Question: When has protecting an image cost you access to the truth?

## **Coming Home - Diddy - Dirty Money featuring Skylar Grey**

What it carries here: the paradox of a house, a return, and the people who make either one meaningful. Question: If you could return to the address but not the relationships, would you call it home?

## **Why music belongs in this book**

Rolf Lidskog's research review describes music in diaspora as a "space for recognition and resistance," as well as a medium of time, memory, and political positioning. Research on music-evoked autobiographical memory finds that familiar music can cue vivid, involuntary, socially meaningful memories. Cross-cultural studies in PNAS and Nature Human Behaviour show both shared human capacities for music and culture-shaped

differences in how sound is represented and interpreted. Research on African, Caribbean, and Black immigrant emerging adults shows music being used to negotiate identity, resist reductive narratives, and connect histories and generations.

The clinical literature adds an important boundary. Music can participate in emotion regulation, and formal music therapy has shown promising results in refugee and trauma settings, including a randomized trial in which trauma-focused music and imagery was noninferior to usual verbal treatment on the primary trauma measure. But ordinary listening is not clinical music therapy, and the broader evidence base remains heterogeneous. The point of this book is not that a playlist cures displacement. It is that sound can become cultural technology: a cue, a container, a bridge, and sometimes a temporary room in which the self is easier to recognize.

## QUESTIONS FROM THE ARCHIVE

The conversations often began with one question and ended with another. The answers below synthesize recurring themes across multiple interviews; they are not quotations from a single participant. The point is not to close the question. It is to show how the question changed after a life entered it.

## **What is home?**

A few answers: the people who make the body feel safe; the place where translation can stop; a sister who remembers the earlier chapters; a language, meal, neighborhood, faith community, or song; sometimes the place distance finally taught you to see.

## **What is a pivot?**

A few answers: changing direction without surrendering the core; revising an inherited belief when experience makes the old one morally untenable; taking risk while carrying other people's needs; moving because new information changed the objective, not because the previous self was a failure.

## **What is enough to make you let go of part of an identity?**

A few answers: evidence, love, safety, moral conflict, a relationship, exposure to a different way of living, or the realization that preserving a value does not require preserving every rule historically attached to it.

## **What drives you? What is your True North?**

A few answers: family, faith, contribution, freedom, craft, service, a promise made to a younger self, and the desire to leave more possibility behind than one inherited.

## **What keeps you in the game?**

A few answers: responsibility, curiosity, people who depend on you, the memory of what earlier generations survived, the belief that one more attempt may create an option that did not exist before, and sometimes the discipline of simply showing up before confidence returns.

## **When are you most happy?**

A few answers: around people who require no performance; while creating; in unplanned connection; while serving something larger than status; when freedom and belonging stop feeling like competing goods.

## **Is home real, or partly a dream?**

A few answers: both. Home is real enough to shape the body and imagined enough to change whenever memory edits the past. We return not to a fixed object but to a relationship among place, people, and self.

## **When does care become obligation?**

A few answers: when love is assumed rather than discussed; when one person's stability depends on another person having no room to change; when money replaces emotional presence; when gratitude is treated as a permanent contract. Care becomes more durable when the terms can be named.

## **Which part of identity is an anchor, and which part is fear?**

A few answers: the distinction cannot be made by age or tradition alone. An anchor remains meaningful under honest examination. Fear usually requires the question to stop.

## **What did success cost?**

A few answers: time, proximity, ease, language, sleep, relationships, familiarity, and sometimes the ability to explain the work to the people whose sacrifice helped make it possible. The answer is not an indictment of success; it is part of accounting for it.

## **What do you want the next generation to inherit besides opportunity?**

A few answers: language without shame, culture without coercion, financial literacy, emotional vocabulary, family stories with footnotes, permission to revise, and enough security to use freedom differently from the generation that created it.

## **What song returns you to yourself?**

A few answers: the song that restores a person, a language, a church, a country, a road, a promise, or a version of you that the present has temporarily made difficult to hear.

## **What would you ask the reader?**

Across the archive, the strongest questions became human rather than demographic: What are you afraid to lose? What does love require? Which choice is actually yours? Who are you becoming? What are you carrying because it is sacred, and what are you carrying because you have not yet given yourself permission to set it down?

## RESEARCH NOTES

### **Music, Memory, Culture, and Diaspora**

Music and ethnic identity in diaspora. Rolf Lidskog's research review synthesizes two decades of scholarship on how music participates in diasporic identity. The review organizes the literature around diasporic context, recognition and resistance, time and memory, and politics. This book uses that work to treat music as identity practice rather than ornament. It does not assume that musical identification works identically across ethnic groups or generations.

Music-evoked autobiographical memory. Kelly Jakubowski and Anita Ghosh's naturalistic diary study found that music-evoked autobiographical memories occurred in ordinary life and were often vivid, involuntary, emotional, and socially themed. Alexander Kaiser and Dorte Berntsen's systematic review of clinical investigations likewise found that familiar music can cue relatively specific autobiographical memories with comparatively low retrieval effort in several clinical populations. These findings support the book's use of music as a memory cue without implying that every musical memory is therapeutic.

Music and emotion regulation. Hyun Ju Chong, Hyeon Joo Kim, and Bohyun Kim's 2024 scoping review included 47 studies and found a substantial literature on music and emotion regulation alongside important definitional and mechanistic ambiguity. The book therefore uses cautious language: music can participate in regulation; it does not automatically regulate every listener in the same way.

Music and Black diasporic identity. Rachele Myrie, Andrea Breen, and Lynda Ashbourne studied African-, Caribbean-, and Black-identified immigrant emerging adults in Canada. Participants described music as part of negotiating Black identity, resisting reductive narratives, and creating continuity across history, spirituality, land, and generations. The sample was qualitative and small, so the book treats it as an illuminating mechanism, not a prevalence estimate.

Culture and musical meaning. Elizabeth Margulis and colleagues reported in PNAS that listeners who shared cultural background produced more similar imagined narratives in response to the same instrumental excerpts. A 2024 Nature Human Behaviour study across 39 participant groups in 15 countries found common structure in rhythm cognition alongside variation associated with local musical practice. Together these studies support a central distinction in the book: music can recruit shared human capacities while carrying culture-specific meanings.

Music therapy and refugee trauma. Gabriella Bernard and Abbey Dvorak's 2022 systematic review identified 11 eligible studies using music to address trauma among refugees, with

generally positive behavioral and psychological outcomes but heterogeneous methods and a limited evidence base. Beck and colleagues' randomized noninferiority trial with 74 adults diagnosed with PTSD found trauma-focused music and imagery noninferior to treatment as usual on the primary trauma measure, with much lower dropout in the music condition. These findings justify taking clinical music therapy seriously while keeping it distinct from ordinary listening.

## **Behavioral Economics, Choice, and Cultural Adaptation**

Migration decision-making. Mathias Czaika, Jakub Bijak, and Toby Prike review migration decisions through four dimensions: aspirations, cognitive rules for searching and evaluating information, planning horizons, and degree of agency. Their central premise is that migrants decide under uncertainty and incomplete information. The book uses this migration-specific work as the bridge to behavioral concepts such as reference points, defaults, option value, and loss sensitivity rather than treating migration as a textbook application of laboratory findings.

Family obligation and remittances. Research on transnational remittances shows that money can function simultaneously as economic transfer, kinship practice, moral obligation, status signal, and source of conflict. The book uses this literature to resist a simple split between generosity and burden: the same transfer can carry both care and friction.

Social resources and adaptation. A 2025 *Nature Communications* meta-analysis synthesized 5,066 effects from 1,114 studies involving 571,260 first-generation migrants, international students, expatriates, and refugees. Across this broad evidence base, stressors - especially acculturative stress and perceived discrimination - were among the strongest negative correlates of adaptation, while social connectedness and low loneliness were among the strongest positive correlates. The finding supports the book's attention to relational safety while remaining correlational rather than causal.

Cultural identity and acculturation. Maehler and Daikeler's 2024 meta-analysis of 44 samples found strong identification with culture of origin and moderate identification with residence country on average among first-generation adult immigrants, with substantial moderation across demographic, migration, and methodological factors. Bierwiazzonek and Kunst's 2021 meta-analyses further caution that the often-assumed superiority of one acculturation pattern has much weaker longitudinal support than theory sometimes implies. The book therefore avoids treating biculturalism, assimilation, separation, or any other category as a universal psychological endpoint.

Narrative and self-continuity. Christin Camia and R. Zafar found that autobiographical meaning-making among refugees can support self-continuity under some conditions while ongoing post-displacement stress can complicate that benefit. Moin Syed and colleagues' analysis of Somali American digital stories likewise showed different ways younger and older

narrators sought continuity and meaning. Storytelling in this book is therefore treated as a meaning-making resource, not a substitute for material, legal, social, or clinical support.

### Family, Parenting, and Intergenerational Life

Transnational parenting. Nerea Larrinaga-Bidegain, Marco Gemignani, and Yolanda Hernández-Albújar's 2024 meta-synthesis of parents who migrate without their children organizes the literature around changes in family roles, affect, gender and family expectations, family cohesion, communication across distance, and reunification. This book uses that work to frame migration as a reorganization of care rather than a simple binary of parental presence versus absence. The research does not imply that every transnational family experiences the same costs or that distance necessarily produces dysfunction.

Intergenerational cultural conflict. P. Priscilla Lui's meta-analytic review synthesized 68 independent samples from research on Asian and Latino/a Americans and found meaningful links among intergenerational cultural conflict, family processes, and psychological or educational outcomes. The populations do not match every family in this book. The evidence is used to identify a general mechanism—generations adapting to different cultural contexts at different rates—while keeping claims population-specific.

### Social Connection and the Receiving Environment

Large-scale evidence on migrant adaptation. Bierwiazzonek and colleagues' 2025 *Nature Communications* meta-analysis combined 5,066 effects from 1,114 studies and more than 571,000

first-generation migrants, international students, expatriates, and refugees. Perceived discrimination and acculturative stress were among the strongest negative correlates of adaptation, while social connectedness and other social resources were among the strongest positive correlates. These are associations across heterogeneous populations, not proof that connection alone causes adaptation or can substitute for material and legal security.

### Music as Cultural Text

Adekunle Gold's "Ire." The song selected in Imani's April 2024 interview was identified on review as Adekunle Gold's 2018 track "Ire" ("goodness" or "blessing"). Nigerian cultural criticism has read the song through greener-pastures migration narratives and return. In this book, that scholarship is used only to establish a public interpretive context around the song. Imani's personal meaning remains her own and is not treated as proof of the song's universal meaning.

## How to Read the Research in This Book

The scholarship serves three functions: it names mechanisms that appeared repeatedly in the interview archive; it tests whether those mechanisms have parallels in established research; and it marks the boundaries of what the conversations alone cannot prove. The interview corpus is exploratory and suited to theory building, not prevalence estimates. Recurrence tells us a concept deserves examination. It does not tell us what percentage of immigrants experience it.

## Chapter 1 - The First Border Is Invisible

John W. Berry's classic acculturation framework remains a useful starting point for understanding migration as more than geographic movement. Berry treats acculturation and adaptation as processes shaped by both individual and social conditions rather than a single inevitable path. This book uses that insight while resisting the idea that successful adaptation requires erasing origin identity.

The global scale figure in the prologue comes from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' *International Migrant Stock 2024*, which estimates approximately 304 million international migrants worldwide in 2024, about 3.7 percent of the global population.

## Chapter 2 - Home Is Not a Coordinate

David Ralph and Lynn Staeheli's review of migration and home argues that scholarship must hold together two truths: home can be mobile and transnational, and it can also retain strong attachments to bounded places. That tension is central to this book. The interviews did not reveal that geography is irrelevant. They revealed that geography alone is insufficient.

Shuang Liu and Cindy Gallois, writing about older Chinese immigrants in Australia, similarly conceptualize home through physical, familial, social, and cultural relationships. Their population differs from the people in this narrative archive, but the work strengthens the broader proposition that home is relationally constructed.

A 2026 longitudinal study of first-generation immigrants in Germany followed cultural identity trajectories across two decades and found substantial change over time, especially in the first decade, with meaningful individual variation. The finding supports a dynamic rather than fixed model of cultural identity while remaining specific to its German sample and measures.

### **Chapter 3 - The Language of Arrival**

A 2022 scoping review by Vittoria Romoli, Paola Cardinali, Joseph R. Ferrari, and Laura Migliorini synthesized 28 studies of migrants' psychological perceptions of home. Across the literature, home extended beyond dwelling or territory to include belonging, intimacy, security, identity, relationships, and the symbolic meaning of spaces and objects. That scholarship helps name what the interview archive repeatedly makes visible: a person can be geographically settled while still doing the psychological work of becoming at home.

Paolo Boccagni and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo describe migrant homemaking as material, emotional, and relational work. Their framing is useful because it moves integration away from a binary choice between assimilation and transnationalism. People make places through routines, relationships, rights, institutions, and everyday negotiations; a receiving society is therefore part of the adaptation process, not merely the stage on which migrants perform it.

Dan McAdams's narrative identity theory describes identity as an internalized and evolving life story through which people

create continuity and meaning across time. Migration provides a particularly visible test of this process because the social world can change faster than the self-story.

Kristine Brance, Vasileios Chatzimpyros, and Richard Bentall's 2024 qualitative work examines social identity and psychological well-being in first- and second-generation migration contexts. Their findings emphasize identity continuity, group memberships, exclusion, and belonging. The book draws on these mechanisms while avoiding clinical claims about individual interviewees.

#### **Chapter 4 - The Price of the American Dream**

Language brokering offers one concrete example of how migration reorganizes family roles. In a 2022 meta-analysis of 65 studies including 17,791 people, Yishan Shen and colleagues found that the effects of young people translating for immigrant families were context-dependent. Frequency alone had small associations with stress and adjustment; how young people experienced the role - with pride, burden, competence, conflict, or connection - was often more consequential. The lesson is not that brokering is inherently harmful or empowering. It is that responsibility acquires meaning inside a relationship and an institution.

Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan, Elisa Jácome, and Santiago Pérez use linked historical and contemporary U.S. data to study father-son economic mobility over more than a century. Their work finds high rates of upward mobility among sons of immigrants from many sending countries and identifies

settlement geography as one contributing mechanism. The result is important, but its outcome measure is economic mobility and its historical design focuses on father-son pairs; it should not be stretched into a general claim about every dimension of immigrant flourishing.

Priscilla Lui's 2015 meta-analytic review of Asian and Latino/a American samples examines acculturation mismatch, intergenerational cultural conflict, and mental-health and educational outcomes. The associations are not universal laws, but they provide empirical support for taking within-family cultural change seriously.

## **Chapter 5 - Pivot**

The pivot chapters are primarily theory building from the narrative archive. They connect adaptation to agency: people do not simply absorb a new environment; they make decisions under uncertainty, constrained by family responsibility, resources, legal status, information, and perceived risk.

The book deliberately distinguishes resilience from romanticized suffering. Hardship can produce learning, but it can also injure. No research cited here supports the claim that suffering is necessary for growth.

## **Chapters 6-9 - Translation, Mobility, Scarcity, and Inheritance**

The research also draws on the 2025 Nature Communications meta-analysis of social and contextual correlates of migrant adaptation and the 2024 meta-analysis of first-generation adult cultural identity. Together they reinforce

two cautions: social conditions matter substantially, and cultural identification is heterogeneous rather than a single linear march from origin to destination.

These chapters extend the framework from cultural adaptation into institutional navigation. The concept of “invisible translation” includes tacit norms: how schools work, how professional networks operate, what forms matter, which questions can be asked, and how unfamiliar institutions signal belonging or exclusion.

McAdams's narrative work is especially relevant to Chapter 9: inherited family stories become materials from which later selves build coherence. The claim in this book is interpretive rather than causal - the stories families tell can shape the moral meaning attached to migration, sacrifice, work, and success.

## **Chapter 10 - Small Things Carry Countries**

Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła's work on embodied transnational belonging is a key scholarly bridge for this chapter. Based on interviews with people who migrated from Poland to Norway, the research emphasizes the bodily and sensory dimensions through which transnational attachments become materially felt. Food, sound, objects, routines, and place are not merely symbols; they participate in the experience of belonging.

Research on multilingual immigrant families also suggests that everyday literacy and language practices can mediate transnational identity and belonging. The book translates that insight into a practical proposition: heritage practices persist when they have meaningful relational jobs to perform.

## **Chapters 11-12 - Love, Family, and the Future**

The family chapters draw on the acculturation-gap literature while treating families as heterogeneous. Cultural conflict is not inevitable, and “collectivist versus individualist” contrasts are too blunt to explain many households. The useful mechanism is mismatch in expectations combined with unequal rates of adaptation and unclear communication.

Recent reviews of intergenerational trauma and resilience among immigrant and migrant families also emphasize that risk and protection operate across individual, family, cultural, and structural levels. This book does not diagnose trauma. It uses the broader insight that what parents experience before and after migration can influence the environment children inherit - and that resilience is likewise relational and contextual.

## **Chapter 13 - Return Without Romance**

Transnational migration research challenges the assumption that movement ends when a person settles. Migrants may remain socially, economically, culturally, and emotionally embedded across borders. Return can therefore be periodic, imagined, relational, financial, or physical.

The chapter's central caution is methodological as much as moral: distance changes what a person knows. Diaspora expertise is real, but so is local knowledge. Effective transnational work requires both.

## Chapters 14-15 - Narrative Agency and the Relational Home Model

Research on narrative continuity helps explain why storytelling matters beyond representation. Work by Kristín Guðbjörg Haraldsson and Kate McLean with adult children of immigrants shows how people can locate the self inside larger family, origin, and national narratives. The stories inherited from parents are not merely background information; they can become materials through which a person links past, present, and future.

A 2026 longitudinal study by Ronja Runge and Débora B. Maehler followed 6,846 first-generation adult immigrants in Germany across as many as 20 years. Cultural identification changed most strongly during the first decade after immigration, but trajectories varied substantially across people and contexts. That variability is important for this book's final claim: there is no single psychological endpoint called integration. Belonging develops through time, relationships, opportunity, constraint, and the meanings people assign to change.

The final chapters synthesize narrative identity, home scholarship, acculturation, transnational belonging, and the interview corpus. The proposed Relational Home Model treats belonging as an emergent judgment produced through five resources:

1. **Relational safety** - whether close relationships provide recognition, reciprocity, and enough security for honest self-expression.

2. **Cultural continuity** - whether language, ritual, memory, food, music, faith, and other practices make origin identity livable across change.
3. **Agency** - whether a person can make meaningful choices and author a life without requiring total approval from inherited or destination systems.
4. **Material viability** - whether housing, income, legal stability, health, education, and everyday infrastructure make a dignified life realistically sustainable.
5. **Future-generational possibility** - whether a place and social network make the future feel expandable for children, family, or communities beyond the individual.

The model is exploratory. It should be tested prospectively across origin groups, legal statuses, ages at migration, and socioeconomic positions. A strong future design would combine repeated surveys with narrative interviews and social-network measures, allowing researchers to examine whether within-person changes in relational safety, cultural continuity, or agency precede changes in reported sense of home.

The model's practical proposition is simpler: integration should not be evaluated only through residence, employment, education, or legal status. A coherent life also requires relationship, continuity, voice, and believable futures.

## Interview Archive and Source Integrity

The primary narrative evidence comes from recorded conversations conducted between April 2024 and April 2025. Dates, quotations, and substantive narrative claims were checked against the underlying recordings whenever those recordings were available. The archive is used as documentary evidence, while later reflection and scholarship provide interpretation rather than replacing the speakers' accounts.

The motherhood sections draw on the interview archive alongside scholarship on transnational parenting and family separation. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila's work is used to show that migration can require parents to renegotiate what responsible motherhood means under distance and labor constraints; Dreby's ethnographic work is used to preserve the child's interpretive position within transnational family decisions. These sources are not treated as direct analogues for every participant in this book. They provide comparative concepts around family, provision, absence, and obligation.

The sections on Black Caribbean identity and incorporation use Mary C. Waters and the updated fifth edition of Portes and Rumbaut's *Immigrant America* as structural context. Again, the book does not infer a participant's psychology from population-level literature. Research is used after the scene to name mechanisms the scene has already made visible.

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## BOOKS IN CONVERSATION

This book is in conversation with migration memoirs and narrative nonfiction that earn intellectual scope through intimate scenes. These works are craft benchmarks, not templates: the aim is to learn from their attention to childhood, family, language, place, and moral complexity without imitating any author's voice.

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To the people who challenged the premise, corrected assumptions, and refused easy answers: you made the project better.

To the family, teachers, coaches, friends, colleagues, communities, and cities that became different kinds of home across the years: the book carries you even where it does not name you.

And to every reader who has lived between worlds - geographically or otherwise - this remains an invitation, not a conclusion.

What does home mean to you?