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Poetic Representation of Immigrant Bengali Women

from Queens, New York: A Qualitative Exploration of Narrative in Relation to Physical and Cultural Migration

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KEYWORDS: research-poetry, found poems, migration, transcript poetry, creative methods, poetic analysis, poetic inquiry

ABSTRACT:

Poetic Representation of Immigrant Bengali Women from Queens, New York: A Qualitative Exploration of Narrative in Relation to Physical and Cultural Migration is a qualitative poetic inquiry and collaborative creative writing project. Five participants were interviewed and invited to engage in a collaborative writing process with the themes of immigration, cultural negotiation, and oral family history. All participants identified as college-educated Bengali women with a connection to Queens, New York, as well as being an immigrant or relative of an immigrant in the United States. From transcriptions of one-on-one interviews and personal notes, research-poetry was created to center on the participants' lived experience and yield insight into a number of themes found in participants' narratives related to immigration, physical/cultural migration, the American Dream, model minority myth, cultural negotiation (integrating, differentiating, rejecting, assimilating, etc.), trauma, and oral family history. Participant and interviewers worked together to finalize pieces of research-poetry as a way to honor and voice the narrative of immigrant Bengali women from Queens, New York.

****RESEARCH-POEMS ARE ATTACHED TO THE BACK OF THIS RESEARCH PAPER; PAGES 21-40.**

INTRODUCTION.

Migration is intrinsically a process of negotiation between cultures during which immigrants and their children construct new identities, community organizations and structures, and cultural sensibilities. The process of integrating one's multiple cultural identities is a complex process through which migrants develop new identities and self-concept. This requires great cultural understanding and empathy for migrants and their children.

More research and data collection is needed to understand how the process of migration affects societies, families, and children. This is essential to inform policies and to mitigate adverse impacts. Families and children need to make informed decisions regarding migration. There are significant gaps in the data regarding the effects of migration on families, specifically children.¹ UNICEF states, "Marginalization and discrimination in the country of settlement, barriers to accessing social services, challenges to the rights to citizenship and identity, parents' economic insecurity, and social and cultural dislocation may affect some children ... The Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the duty of any country to ensure that all children enjoy their rights, irrespective of their migration status or that of their parents. Children are affected by migration in all regions of the globe, but the understanding of its effects is highly limited."

In the international community, there are efforts to understand the lived experience in the matters of migration. In order to train and inform workers on the ground, quantitative data is often supplemented with qualitative data. This qualitative data tends to be in the form of in-depth interviews and ethnographic reports. However, these traditional methods can be dense and challenging for those who are not familiar with traditional research methods. Readers may be overwhelmed and unmoved by this type of qualitative data despite their intentions to develop their understanding of the lived experience of migrants and their children.²

This qualitative poetic inquiry and collaborative creative writing project implements methodologies that researchers and poets (Carr, Ellingson, Faulkner, Furman, Glesne, Lahman, Leavy, Prendergast, Richardson, etc.) have used in order to condense qualitative data so that the data can be easily consumed and accessible to readers. This is done through the creation of research poems from transcriptions of one-on-one interviews and personal notes.³ Through poetic expression, the hope is to illuminate fragments of interviews and conversations which convey moments of insight that the reader may be able to connect to. The poetic pieces are meant to be enhance and resonate with each other to better emphasize the lived experience of immigrants and their families and yield insight into a number of themes found in participants' narratives related to immigration, physical/cultural migration, the American Dream, model minority myth, cultural negotiation (integrating, differentiating, rejecting, assimilating, etc.), trauma, and oral family history.

Research poems can serve as a means to create knowledge that will affect readers intellectually and emotionally through its unique presentation of data about the human experience. Furthermore, poems about individual experiences can engage all ages and lend themselves to discussions of universal immigration themes while also highlighting the human aspect of immigration often left out by political rhetoric. These poems have

¹ UNICEF-Office of Research Innocenti. Migration and Children. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/606-migration-and-children.html>

² Furman, R., Lietz, C., & Langer, C. L. (2006). The Research Poem in International Social Work: Innovations in Qualitative Methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500305>

³ Meyer, M. (2017). Concrete research poetry: A visual representation of metaphor. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2(1), 32-57. doi: 10.18432/a.r.i..v2i1.28766

the potential to give voice and representation while also inspiring others to see urban phenomena such as migration in a new and different light.⁴ It can be a democratic process to promote dialogue by including participants as collaborators.⁵ Some of the questions that poems can inspire include: What motivates a person to leave his or her home country? How welcomed do they feel when they arrive? What are their challenges and celebrations?

This creative writing project explores factors such as race, ethnicity, and migration which play in the formation of Asian-American culture, specifically Bengali-American culture.⁶ The primary question revolves around how Bengali immigrant women and their descendants in Queens, New York narrate their experiences in negotiating multiple cultures as a result of migration. Through poetic inquiry, this project seeks to explore and honor the narrative of diasporic immigrant Bengali women and their descendants. I investigate research-poetry as a collaborative process to respect and empower immigrant voices. I encourage a dialogue in which participants tell the story of growing up with their different cultural groups, and their cultural identity development within the scope of their entire life story. From interview transcripts as qualitative data, poems are created in an effort to “capture and portray the human condition in a more easily consumable, powerful, emotionally poignant, and open-ended, nonlinear form compared with prose research reports.”⁷

RESEARCH-POETRY.

“The poetic representation of lives is never just an end in itself. The goal is political, to change the way we think about people and their lives and to use the poetic-performative format to do this. The poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways ordinary social science writing does not allow. The poet is accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage.”⁸

— Norman K. Denzin, Interpretive Autoethnography, pp. 86

What is research-poetry? And how does it differ from other traditional methods of data analysis? Research-poetry aims to “illuminate aspects of the human condition” through poetic inquiry.⁹ This type of poetry can also be considered as found poetry or transcript poetry, because they transform already existing text, such as transcripts, into poems. Indeed, it seems to be that the most common approach in embarking in such poetic inquiry is the creation of research poems from qualitative data such as interview transcriptions.¹⁰

Poetic inquiry can help to give voice to the participants behind the written transcripts, highlight emotions, and express deeper meanings of data through imagery, rhythm, use of lines and space, language, repetition,

⁴ Ellis, Carolyn & Bochner, Arthur. (2000). Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

⁵ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

⁶ Asian-American Ideas (Cultural Migration). Retrieved from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/asian-american-ideas-cultural-migration>

⁷ Faulkner, S. L. 2017. Poetic inquiry: Poetry as/in/for social research. In *Handbook of arts-based research*, ed. P. Leavy, 208–230. New York, NY: The Guildford Press

⁸ Denzin, N. K. (2014). *Interpretive Autoethnography*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

⁹ Leavy, P. 2015. *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

¹⁰ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

metaphor, and voice.¹¹ Thus, poetic pieces can be created to “show truths that are not usually evident.”¹² And in doing so, this can allow for the opening of research to new understandings.¹³ According to Faulkner in *Poetic inquiry: Poetry as/in/for social research*, she notes that there is criteria unique to this type of poetic inquiry. And she goes on to highlight the capacity to use poetic language to evoke both embodied experience, narrative truth, as well as insight, discovery, surprise, and inspiration.¹⁴

In one particular research-poem inquiry, Langer and Furman explore the lived experience of a Native American woman, Donna, who grapples with identity and assimilation. In this inquiry, they find that research poems are useful when the researcher wishes to present a participant’s voice as the primary means to convey data in a compressed form. They assert that the benefit of the compressed form is that it can allow for the reader to focus on the essence of the participant’s narrative rather than be overwhelmed by the lengthy transcript data.¹⁵

There is also an objective to transform, as noted in Patricia Leavy’s *The Handbook of Arts*: “Poetic inquiry should transform by providing new insight, giving perspective, and/or advocating for social change.”¹⁶ Such inquiry can dismantle stereotypes, challenge mainstream ideologies, and include marginalized voices and perspectives, through empathy.¹⁷ And as Leavy notes, it can be useful in “jarring people into seeing and thinking differently.”¹⁸

The experimental nature of poetic inquiry encourages a “beginner’s mind.” In Jennings’ *Learning Through Teaching Poetic Analysis*, such poetic inquiry is brought forth to students. And although students were initially hesitant to indulge in this type of data analysis, the methodology was eventually embraced as a creative act and valid aspect of scientific inquiry. They were able to explore data from a new angle which invited imagination. There was also a focus on emotion, expression, and meaning in the lives of participants. Jennings observes that employing poetic analysis into methodology heightens rather than threatens validity as such analysis can express the multiple meanings, complexity, and fullness of the lived experience more effectively than participant quotes lifted from an interview transcript.¹⁹ In other words, the condensed form of a research poem leads to a more powerful presentation of data.²⁰

There have been a number of approaches to poetic inquiry outside the realm of transcript poems. For example, there have been instances of taking this approach and implementing it to literature reviews and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Faulkner, S. L. (2014). *Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work Knit Four, Frog One (Poems)*. Retrieved from <https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/2134-family-stories-poetry-and-womens-work.pdf>

¹³ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

¹⁴ Faulkner, S. L. 2017. Poetic inquiry: Poetry as/in/for social research. In *Handbook of arts-based research*, ed. P. Leavy, 208–230. New York, NY: The Guildford Press

¹⁵ Langer, C., & Furman, R. (2004). Exploring Identity and Assimilation: Research and Interpretive Poems. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-5.2.609>

¹⁶ Leavy, P. 2017. *Handbook of arts-based research*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press

¹⁷ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

¹⁸ Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.

¹⁹ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

²⁰ Langer, C., & Furman, R. (2004). Exploring Identity and Assimilation: Research and Interpretive Poems. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-5.2.609>

creating free verse poetry.²¹ Meyer also takes a unique arts-based approach to research-poetry and creates concrete poems in her efforts to understand the experiences of single mothers of children and young adults. Concrete poetry can be considered as “word-imagery”, “artifacts that are neither word nor image alone but somewhere or something between”, and an “ideogram or a constellation” of words. Her objective in using imagery and metaphor is to invite the reader to become actively engaged in interpreting the text that comes out of the poetic analysis. In other words, the reader’s interpretation is partly based on the poem’s physical shape. She argues that this interrupts the left brain’s task of cognitive processing and invites the right brain to participate in the interpretive process. In doing so, this has the potential to create a more emotionally evocative reading.²²

It should be noted that as participants become more and more involved in the process of creating these poems, participants can be considered researchers themselves, thus leading to the emergence of the researcher-participant. During this process, there may be reflection or interpretive pieces created by both the initial researcher and the blossoming research-participants. These poems can be created together, and jointly interpreted and analyzed. Langer and Furman argue that this can also be a tool which allows for the fusion of both the perspective of the participants and the insights of the researcher.²³ This method also allows for the investigation and reflection on the issues of power by drawing awareness to power relations in academia and scholarship.²⁴ Meyer, inspired by methodology employed by research-poets such as Richardson (1992), Carr (2003), Furman (2006), Faulkner (2009), and Ellingson (2011), uses poetic inquiry as the primary means to give voice to not only participants but also herself.²⁵ And so, these reflection or interpretive poems are also useful to acknowledge the experience of the researcher and serve as a way for the researcher to enter the research and present themselves in the poetic inquiry.

Given this, it can be argued poetic inquiry supports participatory research and promotes dialogue by including participants as research collaborators who construct and interpret poetic data with us and by engaging readers. Such democratic processes open up multiple meanings and by inviting participants to dive deep into these projects, poetic inquiry can end up engaging relevant communities thereby making the research more useful and transformative.²⁶ This can help to advance public scholarship, the usefulness of the data, and promote social justice.

METHODOLOGY.

I conducted outreach for approximately 2 months and invited people from my immediate network and through word of mouth to participate in a creative writing project. Individuals were initially approached and

²¹ Owton, H. (2017). Introducing Poetic Inquiry. *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, 1-14. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-64577-3_1

²² Meyer, M. (2017). Concrete Research Poetry: A Visual Representation of Metaphor. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2(1), 32. doi:10.18432/r2ks6f

²³ Furman, R., Langer, C. L., Davis, C. S., Gallardo, H. P., & Kulkarni, S. (2007). Expressive, research and reflective poetry as qualitative inquiry: A study of adolescent identity. *Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 301-315. doi:10.1177/1468794107078511

²⁴ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

²⁵ Meyer, M. (2017). Concrete Research Poetry: A Visual Representation of Metaphor. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2(1), 32. doi:10.18432/r2ks6f

²⁶ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

invited to participate via email, text, or online social media messaging. During the outreach process, I made clear the target demographic: Bengali women-identifying individuals who currently reside in or have resided in Queens, New York and that identify with any of the following: immigrant, child of immigrant parent(s), child with immigrant caregiver(s), DREAMer²⁷, immigrant parent, undocumented person, or relative of immigrants.

I communicated with a total of 16 individuals. 13 of those 16 individuals expressed interest in engaging in the project. However, due to various factors such as time constraints and scheduling challenges, it ended up being that I was able to engage a total of five individuals. It should be noted, however, four individuals (who are not involved in this particular project), expressed that they would like to participate at a later time. I expressed enthusiasm to hear of such interest and hope to keep in touch with these individuals for future projects and to build on my findings.

DEMOGRAPHICS.

To add context and depth to the individuals that were interviewed, I would like to note that, though not a requirement, all five individuals had, at minimum, completed bachelor's degrees at four-year institutions in the greater New York area. All participants identified as Bengali and as women. Throughout interviews, other identities that were mentioned include: Bengali-American, American, New Yorker, Indian-American, Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi-American, resident of Queens, South Asian-American, Asian-American, Asian, Desi, South Asian, and Brown.

Other traits shared in common would be that all five individuals spent the majority of their childhood and adult life in Queens, New York and attended publicly-funded primary and secondary schools. All of the individuals were at some point admitted and enrolled in primary and/or secondary schools which required the passing of standardized exams. These schools include The Academy for the Intellectually Gifted at P.S. 122, The Queens High School for the Sciences, Hunter College High School, and The Bronx High School of Science.

The five individuals had varying immigration statuses including but not limited to: citizenship by-birth, citizenship by naturalization, DACA recipient (DREAMer), and more. There were also many differentiations in how individuals obtained their immigration statuses and how they came to the United States. Majority of participants noted that they come from a low-income family background.

INTERVIEWS.

Throughout the project, I took a trauma-informed approach.²⁸ This was gleaned from my past experiences in the social services field in which I worked to empower survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, sexual violence, crime, etc. In taking this approach, I took care not to give unsolicited advice and encouraged participants to express themselves freely in a safe space. If past trauma came up in interviews and/or during the writing process, I neither ignored nor dwelled exclusively on the traumatic incidents. Instead, I took care to validate and normalize the experiences. If relevant, I related my own experiences to participants

²⁷ "The term "DREAMer" has been used to describe young undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children, who have lived and gone to school here, and who in many cases identify as American. The term DREAMer originally took its name from the bill in Congress, but it has a double meaning about the undocumented youth who have big hopes and dreams for a better future." - Anti-Defamation League. What is the Dream Act and Who Are the Dreamers? Retrieved from: <https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/what-is-the-dream-act-and-who-are-the-dreamers>

²⁸ Knight, C. (2014, February 19). Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice: Practice Considerations and Challenges. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10615-014-0481-6>

with the intention to help participants understand and acknowledge how past traumatic incidents may influence their present. If appropriate, I provided referrals to relevant social services agencies and community-based organizations if the participant was receptive and expressed any particular needs.

In addition to taking a trauma-informed approach, I took a participant-centered approach, and was very flexible. I was prepared to allow individuals the time and space to receive any clarification. I was fully transparent about intentions to form research-poetry based on the interview. Some individuals had further questions and preferred to meet in-person or speak on the phone prior to the actual interview. In my research notes, I considered these meetings and conversations as pre-interviews in which I helped the participant to understand my objectives.

Participants were encouraged to ask questions during the process. My intentions were to empower participants to engage in the process and acknowledge their diverse preferences and needs regarding the direction and outcome of the project. As part of this approach, participants' right to privacy was emphasized to protect identity by promising anonymity, having certain parts of their narrative off-the-record during interviews, or re-visiting the conversation and poetic pieces at any time to make amendments.

The interview was a semi-structured interview based on Storycorp's²⁹ suggested questions for Latino immigrants³⁰ as well as general questions relating to migration, identity, origin, upbringing, childhood, life in America and abroad, civil rights, etc.³¹

All five participants agreed to having their interview recorded and then transcribed by me. Length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 120 minutes. Breaks were offered and given when requested. Participants were allowed to pass any question. I guaranteed their confidentiality and invited them to use pseudonyms. If respondents chose to use pseudonyms, those names replaced real names in transcriptions and poetic pieces. Water, snacks, tea, and coffee were available.

Following the interview, participants were thanked for their time. I notified them that I would transcribe the conversation and that I would keep them updated on my progress. The audio recordings were also made available to participants upon request via Google Drive. While transcribing, I referenced Transcribing Guidelines adapted from the Historic Columbia River Highway Oral History Project.³² Upon completion, I shared the transcription with participants via Google Drive. The five interviews produced a total of 115 single-spaced pages of text.

CONSTRUCTING THE RESEARCH POEMS: POETIC ANALYSIS OF DATA TRANSCRIPTION & REFLECTION POEMS.

²⁹ Storycorp is a non-profit organization whose mission is to record, preserve, and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people from all backgrounds and beliefs and create a more just and compassionate world.

³⁰ Great Historias Questions. Story Corps. Retrieved from <https://storycorps.org/historias-questions/>

³¹ Great Questions. Story Corps. Retrieved from <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>

³² UC Irvine. Transcribing Guidelines: Tips adapted from the Historic Columbia River Highway Oral History Project. Retrieved from <http://sites.uci.edu/vaohp/files/2014/07/12a.Transcribing-Guideline.pdf>

We communicated and shared ideas via email, text, phone, and Google Drive. All five individuals were familiar with general research methodologies and voluntarily provided ideas and feedback regarding the direction of the project. To construct the poems, we read through the transcript, taking care to underline, bold, italicize, and highlight words and phrases that effectively expressed the meaning of apparent themes. Then, we arranged these phrases into lines, and used line breaks and punctuation to further relay meaning, retaining original language and repetition.³³ In accordance to the methods used in Fernandez-Gimenez's 2015 study, each poem was chronologically and linguistically faithful to the transcript and consisted entirely of both my and the participant's words. The majority of poems were intended to assume the voice of the participant and the objective of this method was to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way.³⁴ We worked collaboratively throughout the process until final poems were deemed satisfactory as an accurate reflection of the participant's narrative.

Methods in which to create research poems are meant to be democratic processes where research-participants or participants and researchers create poems together. However still, a power dynamic was still obvious as I approached individuals as a researcher with a clear objective in mind. This was acknowledged in conversation with participants. Of course, verbalizing it does not necessarily equalize the relationship. I emphasized to participants that there were no hard and fast rules and that they may be involved as little or as much as they would like throughout the process. I invited them to become an active part of the project and made it clear to them that I would not move forward with anything that they did not feel comfortable with. I also emphasized that I would be as transparent as possible. The term "ownership" came up often as I conveyed my hopes to compile the poems and submit them for publication. And so, I emphasized that I saw them as equals, as fellow writers, and that there was complete creative freedom. There were no disagreements but at times individuals requested changes or implemented changes to the poetic pieces themselves which I readily accepted in order to honor their voice and narrative. If they asked for feedback or opinions on changes, I would provide them on request but ultimately, left the final call to them.

Throughout the process of creating research-poems out of transcripts, I reflected deeply on the role of the researcher who may end up controlling the "re-presentation" of interview transcripts as poetry. Reflection poems were based on these ponderings, as well as relevant urban theories, personal experiences, and notes taken during the interviews. Such poetic inquiry helped to foster reflection on my own experience in the research process, as well as my relationship with participants and colleagues, and the issues of power in scholarly production.³⁵ These reflection poems were shared with participants.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION.

Poetic analysis yielded insights into a number of themes found in participants' narratives: the concept of the American Dream, the model minority myth, cultural negotiation (rejecting one culture for another,

³³ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

³⁴ Prendergast, M. (2009). "Poem Is What?" Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(4), 541-568. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2009.1.4.541>

³⁵ Fernández-Giménez, M. E., Jennings, L. B., & Wilmer, H. (2018). Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science. *Society & Natural Resources*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08941920.2018.1486493

integrating cultures, differentiating cultures), trauma both historical and lived, the impact of migration, the impact of immigration processes, religion as a factor for cultural assimilation, and being first-generation.

In place of the traditional results section are the research-poems laid out in the final product which has been submitted for publication to be part of PEN America's Dreaming Out Loud anthology. The arrangement of the poems and the formatting have all been agreed upon by the participants, who I consider to be my fellow writers. Akin to Rath's research-poetry work with rape crisis workers, in crafting these poems, we did something with the qualitative data, rather than say something about it. These pieces resist "the desire for analytic certainty" and "invites the reader into the text" to take part in the interpretation.³⁶

In embarking in this project and this research, I experimented with and was inspired by methodology used by other research-poets such as Meyer's approach to concrete poetry.³⁷ For example, the following piece in which the shape of the actual poem alludes to the traditional shape of a house. This poem came about in speaking about the American dream.

I
kind
of just want a
white picket fence
and a nice house
and very modest
sort of things that
I didn't have growing up

The Bangla language was also incorporated into the final product:

³⁶ Rath, Jean (2012). Poetry and Participation: Scripting a Meaningful Research Text With Rape Crisis Workers [37 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 13(1), Art. 22, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1791/3312#g6>

³⁷ Meyer, M. (2017). Concrete Research Poetry: A Visual Representation of Metaphor. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2(1), 32. doi:10.18432/r2ks6f

My parents write in Bangla

It's so beautiful

Like cursive

And excellent penmanship

And I just can't do it.

That big line on the top of everything

////////////////////////////////////

মাই পেরেন্টস রাইট ইন বাংলা

ইট'স বিউটিফুল

লাইক কার্শিভ

এন্ড এক্সসেলেন্ট পেনমানশিপ

And I just can't do it.

ডট্ বিগ শাইন ওন টপ অব এভরিথিং

Bangla is known for a distinct horizontal line running along the tops of its characters which link them together. In this case, that element of Bangla is applied to the English part of the poem to emphasize its significance. It is also an attempt to show the interplay of the two languages as it shows up in the participant's negotiation of the two languages. Below the English section, there is a transliteration written out in the Bangla language which if sounded out would be the reader saying the English version of the poem.

When Bangla came up in interviews, we collectively decided how to convey the language as well as how to translate it:

Amar oi hoyse. – 'It' happened.

I hope that the future generation
talk to their daughters
about what a period is
so they're not confused.

We don't usually give it a name.
Sometimes we say period,
but sometimes we're just like,
Amar oi hoyse.

men in the conversation.

We **need** you to be our allies
because at the end of the day,
especially in a place like New York City
where there are more men than Bengali women,
we need these Bengali men to also rise up and be like,
Hey, *ay, bhai, apne je apner bou er saathe erokom eta tik na.*
(*Hey, yo brother, the way you are with your wife, it's not okay.*)

As can be seen above, italics and bold were also implemented to convey significance to readers. In this case, the italics indicate a different language from English. In other instances, italics also may indicate the participant's thoughts during an incident. Bold and/or larger fonts were also applied for emphasis.

One limitation may be the small sample size. However, for a qualitative research project whether or not this is a limitation is arguable. And whether these poems ‘work’ as poems is a decision for the reader to make.³⁸ However, I aimed to “craft an authentic text in which all parties recognize themselves, and perceive their own stories.”³⁹ It should be noted that three out of the five participants described the experience of participating as therapeutic. Indeed, Wakeman’s findings note that poetic inquiry can serve as both research and therapy for the writer as well as the readers; it can be a form of research as well as a way of knowing.⁴⁰

Lastly, I would like to convey feedback received from participants as they looked over the final product as well as the finalized poetic pieces.

Kajol: *“Thanks so much for this! I smiled when I saw some of these excerpts ... My favorites are that “murti” one, because it was such a small but pivotal moment for me, and the one with ‘that big line on top,’ because it’s hilarious and painfully honest. But I also love them all ... It’s really come together like a quilt, I enjoyed reading it.”*

Nikita: *“I loved this, made me tear up a little ... Thanks for transcribing this and including me in your project. I feel so honored about that ... Oh my god, I don’t even know what to say. I’m so glad you thought of this ... I love it! I don’t want to change anything.”*

Nadia: *“These look amazing ... I would love to see these published.”*

Bushra: *“First and foremost, I want to thank you for listening to my story. It was great to be able to catch up with and share these experiences that once felt not so normal. I really like this ... Thank you for being so true to the content.”*

Sara: *“Haha, I like them! Some of them remind me of raps and I like the visual structuring of others (lines, spacing, etc).”*

Please note that I do not intend for participants’ feedback to serve as testimonials to research-poetry. This process required constant communication and open-mindedness. There was significant back and forth with participants before settling on the final pieces. But as they say, all’s well that ends well.

³⁸ Boyd, C. (2017, July 28). Research Poetry and the Non-Representational. Retrieved from <https://www.acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1396/0>

³⁹ Rath, Jean (2012). Poetry and Participation: Scripting a Meaningful Research Text With Rape Crisis Workers [37 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 13(1), Art. 22, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1791/3312#g6>

⁴⁰ Wakeman, B. E. (2015). Poetry as Research and as Therapy. Transformation, 32(1), 50–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378814537767>

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APPENDIX A. Interview Questions.

1. How do you relate to immigration and/or being an immigrant? How does migration play in your life? In your family's life?
2. Why did you or your family decide to move to America?
3. How did you migrate here?
4. How do you answer, "Where are you from?"
5. What roles did you play in your family life? In your school life?
6. Is there anything you want to share about relationships and dynamics in your family?
7. What was the importance of language in your life? Whether it be Bangla, English, etc.
8. What role does the Bangla language play at home?
9. How did you relate to Bengali culture? Or broadly speaking, South Asian culture?
10. How was your culture at home? Outside the home?
11. How did you identify with being Bengali and how did that play in your day to day life?
12. What is your understanding of being a citizen/resident of this country?
13. What aspects of your religion and culture migrated with your family?

14. If you meet another person, Hindu-Bengali, or Bengali from Kolkata, not necessarily Bangladeshi, do you feel a connection? Or how do you process that in terms of how you identify yourself as Bengali and how they identify themselves?
15. Do you feel that you can identify yourself, for example, as a 'global citizen,' or 'Asian,' or some other broad category that would include other cultural identities?
16. In terms of identity, how would you describe yourself?
17. How did you identify with being Muslim/Hindu/etc. and how did that play in your day to day life?
18. How did your parents respond to your assimilation into American culture?
19. Is there anything you ever wanted to tell another person or ask another person regarding your own identity?
20. Are there any cultural traditions from your home country or your family's home country that you observe?
21. How do you understand the Asian model minority myth? How does this affect your relationship with colleagues and superiors?
22. Do you see a lot of common ground between your cultural identities?
23. What are some metaphors or cultural sayings that resonate with you and your journey in the United States?
24. As a child, how did you understand your immigration status and the changes it went through?
25. Is there any metaphor either from Bangla or English that you feel like sometimes might be able to describe where you fit right now in America as however you identify?
26. Do you feel a greater preference for one culture over the other(s)?
27. Do you feel very different from one cultural context to another?
28. Do you prefer to consider each cultural identity as being very distinct and separate from each other?
29. What are some of the things that you grew up with or that you learned from your parents that you'd like to pass on to the future generation? Is there anything about being Bengali or Bengali culture that you'd want them to learn about?

30. Are there any aspects of another culture or American culture that you would want the future generation to take more from rather than Bengali culture?
 31. Is there any message that you would like to convey to young Bengalis in Queens?
 32. If you can finish any of these sentences, feel free to tell me more about it. I was the first person in my family that... or who ... / If you can finish any of these sentences, feel free to tell me more about it.
 33. As a child, growing up, how did you think things would be when you were older?
 34. Do you have any stories about how things have changed for the better as a child of an immigrant?
 35. Have you ever seen any barriers that people in your community or yourself have faced in terms of education, housing, or health, entertainment, job opportunities?
 36. Is there anything or any particular story relating to the challenges that you've seen other people face or anything else that you'd like to tell me?
 37. Is there anything or any message you want to send to those who may be undocumented or those who are currently in the immigration process?
 38. Any important lessons that you've learned in your current journey as a child of an immigrant?
 39. What are your relationships like and how do you maintain them with people from other racial and ethnic groups in America?
 40. How are your relationships with people from your home country?
 41. Are there any stories that you feel like people don't know but that they should know about your home country?
 42. What do you think your future holds?
-

APPENDIX B. Correspondence with participants.

Individuals were approached and invited to participate via email, text, or online social media accounts with some variation of the following:

Would you be willing to engage in a collaborative creative writing project with me? It will consist of a 30-40 minute interview (which I can either record and then transcribe, or take notes as you share -- your choice).

The theme centers on migration, particularly how women with Bengali roots living in Queens negotiate multiple cultures.

From the interview transcription, I will create poems that honor your narrative. I will share these poems with you to assure to get your feedback and to assure full transparency. I plan to write under a pen name/pseudonym and of course I will preserve your anonymity. You may choose to be under a pseudonym as well.

I am hoping this project will evolve and grow as time goes on so feel free to share your thoughts. You will have full creative freedom in this project, and of course, complete anonymity. Let me know if you are available for an interview.

Variations of the following language were sent along with the transcription document to participants:

Hope this finds you well. Please see attached for the transcript of our conversation. As I mentioned before, the hope is to create poetry from the transcript. I was wondering if there are any parts of the conversation that stand out to you and that you would like to incorporate into any final pieces. Feel free to highlight, make comments, and make changes if necessary.

I have also been reflecting on our conversation and have highlighted parts of the conversation that stood out to me in my personal notes. And I am happy to share that as well - just let me know! It would be great to hear back from about a week from now. Looking forward to receiving your reply.

We communicated and shared ideas via email and Google Drive. Here is an example of a message I would send along with documents with poems in progress to the participant:

I shared a document with you with some poetry created from our conversation. I am processing our conversation and am going through the transcript from time to time.

I took care not to change anything you said. Please feel free make to any changes. Always open to hearing your thoughts and ideas. And let me know if other parts of our conversation resonate with you. You have total creative freedom in this. Hope to hear from you soon!

Message I would send along with reflection poems in progress to the participant:

Would you mind if I shared some poetry that I have been working on which has been shaped by or inspired by our conversation? And let me know if any parts in particular resonate with you!

Message to participants regarding submitting poetic pieces for publication in an anthology:

I have the opportunity to submit work for an anthology which will be published this summer. The deadline to submit is May 15. Writing to inquire whether you are open to having any or all of the pieces at the bottom of the email into the anthology? The majority of my fellow writers will be sharing experiences being undocumented, negotiating life in America, and/or being part of the immigration process.

At the end of the day, I will only include these pieces if you are completely satisfied and approve of them. If I get the green light, I will keep you updated on formatting and hope you can be part of that too, esp. if you have a vision for how you would like the published piece(s) to look like. I plan to write under a pseudonym. How would you like the byline to be? I will leave this up to you if we move forward because it is your voice, your narrative. Happy to speak about this further so feel free to let me know if a phone conversation is better!

Message to participants to update them on how their pieces fit in with the rest of the pieces:

I have compiled the pieces to be submitted. Let me know if you have any thoughts/suggestions/idea re: font, spacing, design, placement of poems, etc. Feel free to let me know if you would like to add any graphics or sketches to your pieces as well. I appreciate feedback especially if anything should be brought to my attention.

I
nd
want a
fence
house

ki
of just
white picket
and a nice

When I first came to
this land
With a small sapling
Growing inside me
And a soft-spoken
Malleable heart

I gave birth to my baby
Here in the land of the
free.

Cold frigid winds
Blew against my
Raw, exhausted body
Having given birth
To the american dream.

when you're undocumented,
people are very hush hush.

But I've always been pretty
open about it since college.

I'm kind of
in your face about it.

Maybe it's annoying to people.

I think it almost normalizes—
anybody can be undocumented.

I have a master's degree.
I'm an architect.
I manage huge projects.

But hey,
I'm undocumented.

American immigration system is
fucked up.

It can happen to
anyone.

Normalize it. I'm a human
being.

x T. Jahan

Nadia Habib

I am a bird who has flown against the elements

place I want to call home.

|-----
stopping to rest in this

T.
Jahan

the buddha plays cards

do you know god the way i know god?
if you say no, then you don't know god at all

is what they seem to say to me

cuz jesus will come train-hopping through the subway carts
to give us hope in this listless city full of waves of
discontent radiating from the masses
sardine-packed six trains

moses will separate this sea of fish
we will stand with our mouths agape
a strange figure casually?
places his hand against the small of my back
but i think better me than the child
beside me who gets asked,
hon how old are you?

i reply instinctively
knowing glare
not old enough
tho he rebutts
with a sweetnlow smile

the buddha plays cards while drinking something strange
beneath the scaffolds of high-tall buildings
not begging nor asking for change
tho looking for mercy and feel-good things
the men with carry on luggages from penn station
making their way to headquarters, board meetings
holding onto the millionth copy of the witness

here in so many languages. will it teach you something
about family, and love, and the rest of the world?
us new agers, happy to consume anything anyway

lord krishna looks over you in the all-you-can-eat buffet
indian restaurant run by bangladeshi muslims
the church of blank and the masons untouchable
from their rooms on the sixteenth floor eating
seamless order foodstuffs with extra sauce

T. Jahan

realizing. I remember

there was a new *murti* in my apartment.
one of the bangladeshi girls came
and she was like,

Oh, What
is that?

and i was like,

You don't
know?!

That's when I learned about religion.

[*murti*: statue of a deity]

The thick, golden slumber of sorrow
Seeps into the delicate folds of her eyes,
Settling into a tattered heart of indigo
blue.
As the dark night's wind caresses her
freckled face,
She is tucked into old *sari* turned quilts.

Morning waits patiently for her to pray *fajr*
With inaudible counting and swaying, her
eyes quiver

~~She prays for~~

who are rising from *asr*,

the kids that i grew up with
here in jamaica,
they were all muslim kids.
and we were real close.

when we would have *nimontrons*,
we just kind of never invited
them.
they never invited us.

there was a
mutual understanding between us
that we could hang out with each
other

but we can't mingle, we can't
mix
our groups together.

i don't know. It felt weird.

it's almost like being friends
in secret.

what we did to help make ends meet
was apply for public assistance
and we subletted our apartment.

and what happened was:

we lived with different girls from
India.
and some of them would front their
caste.

and my sister and her sharp tongue,
she's like, "Well, you're in America
and
nobody cares about your caste here."

Bushra Mollick

What a bore to be born
In an age with roads
On GPS with the
One-ways and dead ends
And the fastest routes all
figured out

On a portable device meant to talk
And write little letters to people
We care little about but not enough
To see them and look them in the
eye
To say I love you, I miss you, I
care
And maybe, I'm sorry I forgot all
about you

Not how I see it.

just

a piece of paper.

number.

personally,

doesn't mean

But to others,
it gives them -
it makes them
feel the ability to

dehumanize you.

...

It's how the
outside world
sees the word,

undocumented.

It's just, it's

It's just

a

To me,

it

anything.

the border is a
tightrope

sweaty palms,
child in your arms

hard to breathe
but must breathe.

flames roar
go home slurs
below you.

just wanna move
forward,

worn out
beat up
shoes

just want it to be
over.

gotta take the jobs
they give
youse.

perforated lines
that you can
fall thru

but who's there
to catch you?

not sure of the rules,
not sure of the deals
not sure how to make my voice, to be heard
for reals
not sure how to stop others from takin the
envelope,

and puttin on

I don't think I understood the
implications
of what it meant to have or not
have

papers.

All I knew was that
it was good to have a

green card.

And that's all I knew.
And that's all I associated with
it.

Must have been a scary time

for my parents--
To not have

papers

There were not a lot of Bengalis,
there were not a lot of Bengalis.

We were living,
the four of us,
in a one-bedroom.

It was a struggle.

I feel like we all
kind of have that

backstory.

Most of us.

My parents write in Bangla
It's so beautiful
Like cursive
And excellent penmanship

And I just can't do it.

That big line on the top of everything

////////////////////////////////////

মাই পেরেন্টস রাইট ইন বাংলা
ইট'স বিউটিফুল
লাইক কার্সিভ
এন্ড এক্সসেলেন্ট পেনমানশিপ

And I just can't do it.

দেট বিগ লাইন ওন টপ অব এভরিথিং

A. Mazumdar
x T. Jahan

run out of water.

did your mom do things
when you were growing up
that you realize that she
picked up from Bangladesh?

For example,
the water would always go away
in Dhaka, in Bangladesh,

with water,
it always runs out
and you have to refill it

or whatever. And ever
since I was a little girl,

(my mom stopped doing this) but

she would literally,
every morning,
she would wake up,

(we had 10 to 15 glasses on the sink
counter)

and she filled up each one
and just leave it there.
and as soon as one was done,
she would refill it.

Thinking about it now

and I'm like, Whoa,

She did all this stuff
because she thought
we were going to
run out of water.

Jahan

Rich

x T.

The translator
for my younger siblings
when they started going to
parent teacher conferences.
And I had to go with them.

I don't, I don't know what to
do

Jahan

Nikita x T.

I've literally
never been there.

I can
barely speak the language.

But that's literally
my identity

because of a piece of paper.

Culturally—
I am American.

But by birth—
I'm Bengali.
Bangladeshi.

I was there for the first 18 months of my
life.
But the last 26 years I've been here,
So I think I'm more American than Bengali.

But then what does it mean to be American?

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

Being a hyphenated-American
is such a complex thing.

I'm a person beyond where I'm from.
Like, stop tryin' to box me.

There is a certain kind of power
in looking racially ambiguous
because people won't box you in
if they're confused about where to box
you.

But I hate when people try to box me
because there's so much more
to my identity
than the labels.

Know people without looking at
their skin tone,
their immigration status,
their education.

And I think for me
that's one thing
I'd like for people to know.

Sara x

T. Jahan

A Conversation about Being American // PT. 1

I watch the cashier trying to explain why the customer's coupon was declined in broken English. The customer then growls to speak with a manager. Out comes a tall and lean man who says, "How can I help you?" The words flow and there was no stutter.

I think to myself, I knew what the cashier was saying. Just because their English didn't flow, does that mean they can't be understood and tossed to the side? I wonder for those who immigrate to the U.S., do they feel valued here?

Sometimes how we are valued seems to be spelled out to us in how much we get paid, the opportunities available to us, and how we are treated by the world around us.

I have a colleague who I believe is brilliant. I see her thriving in whatever capacity she chooses to be in. She envisions herself going to law school in another country, traveling and consulting. Listening to her aspirations is encouraging. It encourages me to think even further on what I'd like to do after grad school. I look to her and tell her, "You're going to do great!" Then she responds, "First, I have to make sure my status is set before I make any moves." She's on a work visa. She's envisioning greatness for herself but she's limited because of her status. I was born in the U.S. therefore I hold the ever so prestige status. I think about my prestige status and I feel guilty.

Nazeefa Hossain x T. JahAN

the whole having completely different
human experiences from my siblings:

...

them being able to freely
go anywhere in the world they want
and not being questioned.

doing whatever they want:
going to school.
not having to worry
about financial aid.
getting their license.

you know, my thing is:

if I ever get arrested for something
it's an automatic deportation.

my siblings will never
have to think about that.

Eventually, you want to venture
Out into the world.

Which makes me feel I'm almost
imprisoned in the United States.

Especially
when you have
siblings that are all citizens,
parents that are citizens.

It's like, Wow, I live a

completely different
human experience

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

When I was growing up,
I was the only citizen
in my family.

I was an anchor baby.

And the story is always that
you're not allowed to have
women who are pregnant
in their third trimester
flying on planes.

But, obviously, my mom
travelled in her third semester
just so that I could be born here.

So I feel like the citizenship thing..
I always have felt like there was that
significance that made me an outlier.

At the end of the day,
I was on the cusp of things.

And I think being a citizen, the
definition,
afforded me a sense of stability or
safety:

I belong here.

that other people
who might not have had citizenship
were always questioning.

Sara x T. Jahan

jackpot baby
sweet you are, cradled over
the curves of the anchor

family desperate
to stay, and to pray
in this land of the free
that won't hold you for free

that green little book
took us eighteen years
to finally breathe

T. Jahan

Should I feel proud that I'm in a city where I can walk down the streets without worry? or should I feel guilty?

Citizen or not, permanent resident or not, I know I need to have some sort of identification with me walking down the streets. Otherwise, I'm setting myself up for trouble. I learned that the hard way.

There was a summer between semesters in undergrad, when I was outside without any ID. I normally go out with it, but for some reason, that day, I just walked out of my apartment without it. My friend called me out to smoke some bud. And you could say that we let our guard down 'cause I was in my neighborhood. Plus I didn't even see anyone on my block. But of course, some undercover cops were in a car and came at us from about a block away. They caught us, cuffed us, and we were arrested. You're probably wondering, why would you get arrested for smoking weed? Such a minor offense in New York City. Well, it wasn't always that. And I'm not gonna front and say that we weren't doing anything wrong. Anyways, according to the cops, though, it was because we were "too obvious" about it. I guess two young kids of color smoking bud in a low-income neighborhood is an "obvious" no-no. And it was worsened by the fact I didn't have ID on me. I couldn't prove to them who I was. And they would not let me go.

It's weird, but I think for the first time in my life, it ended up being a good thing to have been a survivor of violence. I convinced the cops that I could prove to them who I was because I was already in that precinct's system. Y'know, as a crime "victim." So I spent a couple of hours handcuffed to a bench while they processed the arrest, and eventually they found me in their system. They were able to match me up and let

a lot of immigrants have a very risk-averse attitude towards life.

there's a fear of authority and a fear of law enforcement even if you're not doing anything wrong

because you're susceptible, you're vulnerable.

people can find something wrong, or some sort of excuse.

that fear and that risk-aversion because you have to take up can actually be a detriment to some risks to achieve.

I think that provides for a dynamic sort of foil to the expectation that immigrant children have to succeed and achieve the american dream.

On one hand, you have to be very risk-averse and very careful.

On the other hand, you have to achieve without taking risks. So, it's just a very tight, tunneled path to success.

my dream - I feel

as a child of immigrants
with low-income
who were unskilled laborers -
they were on their feet,
manual labor type stuff
All day.

the vision of success
that I was taught
...

the vision of success
for me was always

having a desk job.

Not having to stand while
working.
A very modest goal, I think,

Looking back on it.

Sara x T.

Jahan

I tell them.

I tell people all the time:
My dad was a cab driver.

I'm not going to be embarrassed.
I'm first generation and an immigrant.

This is not something that I'm going to be
ashamed of.

I think that scares people sometimes and
I think it should not scare people.

But normalize that conversation amongst
people
who are coming to the country now.

This being alive and present is a
protest.
Because I have a voice even when there
is silence.

all the people
that left their countries,
what they're familiar with,
to a brand new place,
and just start over.
made the sacrifices.

and we don't really know that much
about their experiences.

What did they go through?

I wonder,

What kind of racism or
discrimination they faced
that they just never talk about?

Or what was it like being the
few South Asians in this area
at that time?

How different did it feel?

How aware of it?

Or did they
-not shut down their emotions-
but how did they ignore it all?

Nikita x T. Jahan

They all lived through war.

... That's something that
they don't really talk about.

My mom told me that
during the war,
they actually hid.

They went in the village and
Pakistani soldiers were going
door to door

and they hid
in a basement.

They were really lucky to have survived.

Jahan

Bushra Mollick x T.

Would you ever feel guilty about being paid minimum wage? To stand on your feet, six days a week, for over 10 hours a day, looking all prim and proper in a suit, to sell overpriced trinkets to the affluent?

For those without work permits, the reality can be harsh.

I used to work at a gift shop set in a luxurious hotel in the heart of New York City. I'm talking formal, the whole black blazer and dress pants. Y'know, gotta match the atmosphere of the hotel. The hotel patrons and guests didn't know that the gift shops inside these hotels were owned by someone else, though.

Needless to say, the owners were a bit shady, a bit sus'. But at the time, I was unemployed, job-hunting, working an unpaid internship, and looking for some cash. Off the bat, they asked me if I had papers. I showed 'em my proof. They offered me minimum wage, under the table, cash. I took it. And while working there, over time, I came to realize that most of the workers in the other hotel gift shops were immigrants who had recently come to the United States. Some were college students here on student visas, some overstayed their visitor visas, some were being sponsored by their American spouses, the list goes on. Point is, almost all of them didn't have work permits.

Without coincidence, the majority of these workers were being paid below minimum wage. But that wasn't even half of it. They weren't getting paid on time. The owners would tell 'em they should feel lucky to even have a job. That they were doing 'em a favor. I had no idea about all this until a coworker stopped by on a rainy day to help me stock the store with umbrellas. We chatted and I learned a bit about how they got to this country. And eventually, I learned about the difference in our wages. You see, there weren't many encounters with the other workers. We just manned our own stations and passed the baton on to the next person for the next shift. For the most part, we were all isolated and away from each other. How could I know that their work experience was

so vastly different from mine? Plus, not a lot of people go around outing their immigration status and that they're being paid below minimum wage.

So isn't it ridiculous that these workers basically had to project this image of affluence even though they were getting paid less than \$9 an hour? And imagine, your boss is treating you like shit. I'm talking, calling you in the middle of the night to yell at you for not counting the money right knowing you might not even be able to prove it. I'm talking, having to make you feel so small for not "staying in line."

I felt guilty for being paid minimum wage. For being paid on time. For having normal, polite encounters with the owners. And I knew this stark difference in treatment was simply because I had papers.

But even without a work permit, New York City is a sanctuary city. We have our rights here. We all deserve to be paid a fair wage. And I often told my coworkers this when I could, as I learned about their situations. But, they were fearful and didn't want to go through the "hassles" of reporting to agencies like the Department of Labor or NYC's Commission on Human Rights. No one considered reporting an option. The reasoning: They had worked so hard to get here. To risk losing their job would mean not being able to feed their children, send money back home to support their family, pay for their studies... you get my drift.

In a way, they really did believe the owners were doing them a favor. And I'm not saying I agree or disagree with that. I struggled with it, too. Here I was tryna keep my nose clean while at the same time resisting the urge to report 'em myself. But I kicked the savior complex to the curb. It's not what they wanted. And I chose to respect that.

I worked there for a little over a month. But I kept in touch with one worker. They didn't have a work permit but was in the process of applying for one with the support of their veteran spouse who was unemployed. So they didn't have enough money to pay for the

application fee. A real catch 22.

This worker eventually stood up to the owners once they realized that a lot of the other workers were being treated like shit and not getting minimum wage. It just hit 'em one day: The owners were clearly in the wrong and they were exploiting everyone. So, they told the owners in writing that they deserved to be paid minimum wage, at the very least. And part of the reason that they were able to fight for it was because they knew their rights - despite being without a work permit, despite being without papers.

Soon after, during one of their shifts, one of the owners took this worker into a tiny room, a real closed off space, and began the confrontation. It was obvious that it was retaliation for the written request for minimum wage. But this worker had it on lock; they pressed record on their phone before entering into the room. And at the end, said something along the lines of: "I recorded everything and I can report you because what you're doing is wrong." Well, needless to say, the owners were scared shitless. As they should have been. And I was really proud of the worker for standing up for not only themselves but for their fellow co-workers. The owners, not wanting any "trouble," decided to pay back all the money they technically owed. Economic justice, ftw. But it sure didn't come easy.

The worker that fought for a fair wage no longer works for 'em. And they have their work permit now. But I remember that they really hoped that others would stand up for themselves too. And this is part of the reason why I feel guilty for being a documented person in the United States. Because there are folks out there that take any job that they can get. And with that, there can be so much abuse alongside it.

We were struggling here too.

I remember the first time
I went to Bangladesh,
When I was 16,
My dad's sister had the gall to ask my mom,

"Can Bhaiya send money
for Kushul to buy a motorcycle?"

*He's not paying for my college education.
Do you think he's going to give your son money
To buy a moped?
Get out of here.*

I was so mad.
But I didn't say anything.
I just sat there fuming.

We send money home.
Which has its pros and cons.

It has its pros because
We're helping folks back home.

But it has its cons because
How are we building up our own income?

And secondly,
you know this family back home?
Are they using the money sent
in an efficient way?
To grow their income as well?

You know what I'm saying?
So it's problematic in that sense.

*Bushra Mollick
x T. Jahan*

when I was growing up, everything
financially
was determined by the uncertainty
of whether or not we would get
green cards.

we can't invest in real estate
because we don't know if
we're going to stay here

long-term.

this sense of
everything is just temporary,
which made it very hard

to build your roots.

there are so many stories of
people who spent, who invested time
in building their roots, and then

had to leave or were forced out.

Eventually, even though
they did get green cards,
the fact that they had

spent so much time

in this place of uncertainty
and that, even after
obtaining citizenship,

they had to start all over.

There wasn't any sort of
financial foundation.
All of the money was funneled

back to the country they came from.

because they just weren't
certain about whether or not
they could stay here.

And so, the assets were never

absorbed or
appreciated or
enjoyed by people living here

which I think is a shame.

Sara x T. Jahan

good-minds drained
wastelands
reclaimed

increase output
double the hands
to work the soil

decrease input
so many mouths
to feed back home

It's just really mind boggling
to me
because a lot of these
Bangladeshis
who back home were sort of
wealthy
and they come here and they're
like,

Oh shit.
I had a master's degree there
and it doesn't mean anything

why are we so concerned
about lucrative careers?

so we only end up being
doctors, lawyers, engineers?

I think it's a product of our parents
having to survive famine culture.
I think that's it.

They don't have
the space for emotions.

Famine culture, yeah, you kind of
know,
from colonialism - resulting in
lack of food and resources.

So, famines.
So, they really just had to
band together and survive.

Even though they are able to get out
of that situation and come here and,

of course, colonization
is not really a thing over there
anymore,
the effects of it still remain very
much.

And the effects followed them, our
parents,
here, in America. And they are still
not open
to really having emotions. They are
still like,

No, we need to be a pack.

security and stability. Because
I think a lot of immigrants
come here with

A. Mazumdar x

uncertainty

about their status,
about earning money, or
about making it.

It's been so deeply ingrained into us,
as children, as immigrants,
to seek that

security and stability. Because it's
something that inherently
you don't have
when you're pending

11 years for your green card.

alot of immigrants limit
themselves,
especially if they are low-
income.

Their dreams are modest
because
their field of vision is
modest.

Sara x T. Jahan

junior year of high school.
one of my friends casually
brought up how much his parents made
because we were filling out financial aid
forms.

And he was just like,
"Yeah, they make 350k together,
375 or something."

I was shocked.
And I was just like:

"What do you mean?
You're just a normal kid.
We hang out together.
We're friends.

Like,
you're not wealthy,
you're not rich,
Right?"

I realized
that my perception of
wealth and poverty
was very skewed.

Sara x T. Jahan

They wanted me to be a doctor.

But I'm like,
But you don't want to be a doctor.
My dad hated that I changed majors.

And I'm like,
I am a writer like you are.

Even though he was a cab driver
for much of his time here,
he wrote for a couple of the bigger
Bengali newspapers in New York City.

And I'm like,
Where do you think
I get my writing skills from?

I mean, it's definitely learned, but
You know, I watched you
take pictures at different events.

And now,
I'm one of the
photographers at my agency.

You know, I watched you
stay up all night writing.
And that's what I do.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

A Conversation about Being American // PT. 1V

My parents would stress how lucky I am to be born here. I don't have to worry about finding an attorney who will work with me to get status. I don't have to take on shitty jobs that give shitty pay. I can continue my education without ever having to worry about overstaying and going back home. How lucky I am to hold such a prestige status. Though, I don't feel a sense of prestige. Many times I feel guilty for holding this status. I look around the many people who have temporary status, fighting to hold status, and are undocumented, and then I ask myself: should I be proud?

It's a complicated thing to sit in front of people who don't have papers and are in the immigration process. When they find out that I'm a citizen, the dynamic changes. They think that I'm so fortunate and blessed. And in a way, I am. Because I know what I had to go through to finally get to this place. I know that I can go to almost any country in the world as an American citizen. It took a while, but now I'm at this point. I know that I can apply for fellowships, scholarships, and teaching abroad opportunities. In general, going abroad is no longer a problem for me. But it's a problem for those who are undocumented. Heck, it's even a concern for folks with permanent residency. Because it means that there is a possibility of never coming back to the place they so badly want to call home.

I listen to myself when I speak English and it flows smoothly. I can have a conversation for hours and people can listen to me without squinting their eyes or moving their head closer, emphasizing they don't understand. It's hard to put in words, what I feel inside me. Now, I wonder about what it means to be proud as an American. Like, seriously, what does that even mean? There should be a class on that, haha. But y'know, I don't want an undocumented person in front of me to feel like I'm better than them or I'm luckier than them or I'm more fortunate than them. None of those things technically feel true.

Sometimes I so badly wish that they could find an avenue to get some sort of permanent residency or citizenship too. Or at least a work permit. But in this country, in order to get papers, you often have to go through some really, really hard times. I think that the immigration process is one of the hardest things.

I'm aware that I hold a level of hierarchy over others. Should I feel proud or guilty? I wonder how others would perceive this guilty feeling? Would I be a spoiled brat or cry baby for speaking about the guilt? I wouldn't want to be celebrated either. I had no choice in where I'd be born. Since I was born in the U.S., there was the expectation that I would be the one to achieve the 'American Dream.' I never wanted this yet it was given to me. I feel guilty for not wanting it. I think about the comments I could get for speaking on this, "Do you know how lucky you are?" "How could you even feel sorry for yourself?" Thinking about these comments, I feel guilty for feeling what I feel.

There are people who put so much time, work, and struggle, to become a legally recognized individual in this country. And yet, the prize of citizenship or permanent residency seems to be out of their grasp.

civic leadership class.

I'm trying to kind of see what it's about.
But, also,
it's not something that would happen now.

It'll probably be
20 years.

because
you need to become a citizen

and then
you need to wait a couple of years

and then
you can run

and
blah, blah blah.

But it's something I think
is very important because

I feel an undocumented Bangladeshi woman
from Queens becoming
a part of Congress or Senate—

It's mind blowing.

It's representation
That we have not seen,

That I have not seen
Or felt.

And I kind of want to do it myself.
Just like fuck it.

There's nobody doing it.
I'll do it.

Y'know cuz no one's going to understand
the problems that we face in Queens
other than someone who's been raised here.

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

make structural change from the
top
to bring more people of color,
more socio-economic diversity.

not kill them with kindness
but,
defeat them with yeses. say yes
to everything even if you mean
no .

when I became a journalism major ^{and} then rise to the top.
~~and then you can institute~~
tumi to shada der subject e pora no.
~~change~~
(but you're studying a subject
meant for white people)

And I was like, America is 70% white.
It still is mostly a Caucasian country.
I'm not gonna hold myself back and be
like,
Well, I'm only going to go into a field
where it's mostly South Asians.
That's holding myself back.

I'm not afraid.

You came here,
you learned English.
You defied these odds and
you are helping the family come up.

So let me do what I need to do
and enter whatever field I want,
not on the basis of the ethnicity
of the people.

Isn't that strange? But it is what it
is.

Bushra Mollick

- - -

I walk past street vendors who work under the rain and sun, look at the cab drivers who are waiting for a fare, and study with students who have bags under their eyes. I won't assume but I can only imagine I'm surrounded by folks who do carry the burden of being worried. I can go anywhere within the city and walk as far as I want to without worrying someone will come after me.

Should I feel proud for being born in the U.S. and being automatically granted status? Or should I feel guilty because I never had to work for it?

When I was growing up, my parents and I didn't have quote unquote papers. I saw them have to work for it. Hiring an immigration lawyer, taking days off work to go to immigration court, filling out paperwork in a language that they were just starting to get familiar with, and on top of that, towing me along. I didn't really understand what it all meant or what was going on. I knew it meant not telling teachers where I was going when we had an immigration court appearance. Definitely no telling any authority figures. And I knew it meant staying out of trouble because if I got in trouble, I would be risking everything. That's a lot on a seven year old, looking back on it.

Should I feel proud that I can fill out forms checking off the citizen box without hesitation? Or guilty that I have it so simple?

I remember when I was a junior in high school. We were getting ready to take the PSATs in a week. We were required to fill out forms that asked about our demographics, parents' education background, and status. I remember when I got to the status part, I checked the first box without hesitation. After I finished filling out the form, I looked at the girl sitting next to me and saw she checked off the second box. From that moment, I started to realize not everyone had it as simple as I did.

I remember standing in front of an immigration judge, and I remember the judge questioning whether I was a boy or a girl. I remember my parents frantically trying to find a headband to put in my hair to signify my gender. To say, she's a girl. Haha, even then, I recall the judge's face - not amused.

I remember feeling very, very uncomfortable because I had to stand on my feet for a long time. And it was painful because I wore my shoes on the wrong feet, so my left shoe was on my right. And my right shoe on my left. And I remember that I knew I couldn't say anything to my

parents because it was such a hard and grave moment for them. I remember them being so, so nervous and scared. 'Cuz we didn't know what the judge would say:

Nazeefa Hossain x T. Jahan

another thing, actually.
I wanted to be white.
I thought it was easier.

And the definition of beauty:
it was a white girl with
blonde hair and blue eyes.

So I always thought, you know,
oh my God, that's what I want
to be.

...

I wish we had Bengali Barbie
dolls
or something, you know,
more dolls wearing hijab.

I think they came out with one.
But when we were growing up,
there was none of that.

Nikita x T

immigrant children
that I grew up with
are striving towards
this vision of whiteness,
trying to fit into this society.

everyone I know,
including myself,
has gone through this
period of internalized racism

where you kinda rejected
your own identity in favor of
fitting into this world

because
it was easier
to be successful
or to be accepted

if you rejected one part of yourself.

and then at a certain point,
through age, time, and maturity,
you come to embrace the other side.

And I think
that's a cycle
that everyone
goes through,
and struggles with,
and grapples with.

Jahan

Sara x T.

skin, body, and life
when they touched
my skin in a way
i had never
touched theirs

let alone my own,

that's when i
realized.

this black and brown
skin, body, and life

if my mom made
her own money

she wouldn't have
stayed with my dad
for so long in the
beginning.

I guess somehow
they learned to
live with each other
over the years.

if she were to work
that could have been
different.

I don't know how that would
have been
for us... 'cause she was always
there,
which is nice, but

she needed to
have her own money.

Nikita x T.

It's hard being
a brown girl.
It really is.

I think I saw this thing And *they'll* be like,
on Instagram where
people make fun of
brown girls

not being able to go out
and stuff.

But think about
all the girls
that were
actually

hurt or
abused or been
forced into marriage.

Nikita x T.
Jahan

ekta chele saathe chilo baire.
(outside with a boy.)

"well, who was the
guy?"

"was he your boyfriend?"

your brother?"

you know what I mean?

why is the idea
of a woman who is
by herself
and educated
and **unapologetic**

somehow threatening?

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

Amar oi hoyse. -- 'It'
happened.

I hope that the future
generation
talk to their daughters
about what a period is
so they're not confused.

We don't usually give it a
name.

Sometimes we say period,
but sometimes we're just

*you're not fair skinned,
you're not very
blah, blah, blah
you're so fat.*

...

I'm hoping that
a lot of the girls
that we grew up with,
that they don't grow up
to be moms like that.

moms that are critiquing
their kids
or critiquing other people's
kids.

you don't need to say
everything that you're
thinking.

men in the conversation.

We **need** you to be our allies
because at the end of the day,
especially in a place like New York City
where there are more men than Bengali women,
we need these Bengali men to also rise up and be
like,

Hey, ay, bhai, apne je apner bou er saathe erokom
eta tik na.

(Hey, yo brother, the way you are with your wife,
it's not okay.)

In high school
I was a nerd

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan
I was on math team.

and stuff.

Boys were not nice to me,
But I was good at math.

And so, eventually, whatever,

I became someone
who was also known
to be good at math

and it was kind of okay.

And then they all cheated
off of me on the Physics exam.

A. Mazumdar x T.
Jahan

Tumi ektu norom hou.
(Soften yourself a bit)

And I was like, what?
What does *norom* mean?
What are you trying to tell me?

And she literally told me that
I'm too much like a man.

She said,
I work out too much,
I go out too much,
I talk too much.

And I'm like,
Well, who am I learning this stuff from?

My mom is the oldest of ten kids.
Two of them passed
when they were very young.

She was the oldest.

And after my grandmother died,
(my mom's mom died)
my mom was the head of household
because my grandpa's business had
failed.

And that's when she was like, Alright.
She dropped out of school.
And she was 18.

She became a flight attendant.
And she was the one who was running
around,
she was the tallest one in her crew.
They would all look up to her
and be like, *Oire baab.* (Oh my.)

She would party in grace
with all her cool friends
and all this stuff.

And I'm like,

The apple does not fall
far from the tree.

And you want me to soften myself?

I think

Bengali moms are bad bitches
and they get mad at us
for trying to be bad bitches.

as annoying as my mom could be,
I guess she can also be
supportive.

So I would want
to be some level of supportive that she was.
Not giving up on her kids.

I guess that's also good. Hmm.

Yeah, those are probably the main ones.
Being there.

You know? Things like that.
I don't know if I'll ever have as much
patience

as her.
Yeah, those are the things.
Doing nice little things for your kids

...
Sometimes she'll cut fruit.

You know?
It's a small thing but it's nice.
Who else is going to do that for you?

Nikita
x T. Jahan

A Conversation about Being American // PT. v1

Would it be right to keep these feelings to myself?
Would keeping these feelings make me feel proud or guilty?

It's okay to feel guilty, though. I don't think it's a bad sort of guilt. It's part of being aware. For me, I could have easily been in that unfortunate circumstance where for some reason, things didn't go through, things didn't work out. It can depend on the political situation, who's the individual in office, who's the judge in court, who's the immigration attorney, and the list goes on. There's just so many factors beyond your control and all you can do is sit and wait and wait and wait.

Waiting is probably the hardest part of the journey. And that's the struggle that I see in many immigrants who are in the process. It's the uncertainty. The agonizing limbo. Today, when I help fellow immigrants whether as a case manager, or a counselor, or as a friend, I feel guilt. Because I know it's not easy. I know it's not easy to wait years and years and years. For me, it took 17 years. Looking back, I got really lucky that I didn't "age out." Y'know, being part of your family's immigration application as a dependent but aging out because you turned 21, therefore no longer a dependent. We age faster than the immigration process.

I never knew you could age out. Not until years later, when I met people out of status or relying on student visas because that's what happened to them. Basically, they're in the country without papers even though their family members are citizens or permanent residents.

I realize that some of them are in this situation because perhaps the judge didn't see their immigration case favorably or something weird happened with the paperwork. Something just got messed up and they aged out. When I meet those people, I feel guilty because they're basically around my age and they were in exactly the same place as me at some point in their lives, but it just didn't go in their favor. So that's part of the reason why I feel guilty about being a citizen. I feel guilty because I know that I can still be considered one of the lucky ones.

I ask someone who is an American, whether you're born here or were naturalized, do you feel the same?