

What We Bring: New Immigrant Gifts

by Amanda Dargan



This is the last picture we took in Afghanistan. I wouldn't see it until years later. We are with my grandad's cousin, Haji Akbar, who took us as far as the easternmost city, Jalalabad. He said he wanted to mark this historic moment, so he had someone take our photograph. My mother is not in the picture. I don't know why. There was a lot I didn't know. I didn't know we would go from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, and from Sri Lanka come to the U.S. I didn't know that a year would pass before I would see my father again and that I would run away from him because I didn't even recognize him.

Sahar Muradi (2nd from left) with her siblings and a cousin on her last day in Afghanistan (1982).

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

--Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

To counter narratives built from fear, “fake news,” and anti-immigrant sentiment fostered in the current political climate, educators, folklorists, and artists are asking with a renewed sense of urgency: What have immigrants contributed to this country? What gifts do they bring that enrich their lives and their communities, as well as our country at large? How have their cultural expressions—their languages, arts, cuisines, and poetry—contributed to America’s vibrant cultural mix?

The Hart-Celler Act was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson on October 3, 1965, and fully implemented in 1968. This act fundamentally changed the demographics of our nation. Still the foundation of today’s immigration law, it phased out a national origins quota system instituted in 1921 and inaugurated a new era of immigration from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Today, tens of millions of Americans can trace their lives in the United States directly to the impact of the Hart-Celler Act and its successor legislation.

In New York City, three nonprofit cultural groups—CATCH (Center for Art, Tradition, and Cultural Heritage), City Lore, and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance—are engaged in a three-year program titled *What We Bring: New Immigrant Gifts*. The program marks the 50th anniversary of the Hart-Celler Act, also known as the Immigration Reform Act. *What We Bring* includes an exhibition in City Lore’s gallery and a major traveling exhibition, along with three years of accompanying public programs, to commemorate, interpret, and discuss the experiences and cultural contributions of this new immigrant wave. It also will include arts education programs in New York City public schools highlighting the stories and traditional arts of immigrants who arrived after the Hart-Celler Act. The title *What We Bring* is used in a dual sense. Each image of an immigrant artist will be accompanied by a touchstone object that they

brought with them from their home countries. The exhibit object may include ankle bells from dancer Malini Srinivasan, a *cajón* drum from musician Hector Morales, and a costume from the Chinese Opera retelling of “The Monkey King Wreaks Havoc in Heaven” from theater artist Lu Yu. At the same time, *What We Bring* will highlight what these artists bring to American culture through their teaching and their cultural activism.

About the Program

While the program is new, *What We Bring* builds on the arts education program model that City Lore has developed with our partner schools over the past 31 years. It offers in-depth, skills-based arts instruction through long-term artist residencies; opportunities for students to do original research using primary sources such as interviews with community artists and experts; professional development for teachers; activities that engage families in their child’s arts experiences at home and in school; teaching artists’ performances, exhibits, or PowerPoints of their artwork; and a culminating event where students share with an audience what they learned and created. The content and art focus vary from residency to residency, but *What We Bring* draws on the strategies, practices, and community contacts we have developed over many years.

What We Bring will include the stories and experiences of City Lore’s teaching artists in the body of stories that students can draw upon to understand immigrant experiences and contributions. Listening to a wide range of stories that describe the reasons emigrants leave their homes and their challenges adjusting to life in the U.S. can counter the effort to define immigrants with a single story. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” makes a

compelling case for the power of stories and the importance of knowing multiple narratives about people and places rather than one defining story:

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. (Adichie 2009)

Student Experiences

Working directly with teaching artists and community guests in the classroom, students listen to stories that recount the experiences of immigrants who live in their city. Listening to multiple stories—stories of family members, neighbors, guests, fellow students, and teachers—can give students a deeper understanding of the variety and complexity of immigrants’ experiences and the challenges they often encounter. This serves as an important step toward developing empathy. Students learn different reasons people leave their homes to come to this country, but also what they bring with them that continues to enrich their lives and their communities here.

Students quickly realize that through interviews they can learn more about people they see every day but whose stories they do not know, including their own families. Once they get the interview bug, they want to interview everyone. Students interview each other in pairs to develop listening and interview skills. As they learn about one another’s stories, they begin to see connections. They explore the experience of leaving their homes or places they know and love, whether that place was a different country or different city neighborhood. Some discover for the first time that their parents or grandparents were immigrants. One student said, “It was kind of surprising because I didn’t think my mom had to emigrate from a country. I felt like that was a really, really, really, really long time ago, but it doesn’t seem so long ago.” Students also hear from immigrants who were forced to leave their homes and from those who chose to leave. The term “illegals” used by some students at the beginning of the residencies, disappears from conversations about immigrants.



Take a deeper look into City Lore residencies and learn how these programs contribute to students’ rich educational experiences.

The questions that guide our interviews provide a framework for exploring both commonalities and differences between our shared experiences and the people we interview (see Classroom Application worksheet below). We practice asking good follow-up questions to encourage our interview subjects to share more details and compelling stories about their experiences. Students learn to ask questions that elicit more sensory details—colors, smells, sounds, and the landscapes and memories of places and people left behind. Then we analyze and interpret the interview for ideas and images to use in art projects in theater, dance, song, poetry, and visual art. Artist residencies are designed to foster an understanding that one story does not define an individual's or a group's experience nor does one person's experience represent the experiences of a group or country. In some residencies, students interview two immigrants from the same country to encourage discussion about the differences in their experiences. In others, two classes interview the same person separately so that we can compare how each group interpreted one person's stories. This method encourages conversations about ways interviewers' interests, preconceptions, and deeply held beliefs shape the questions they ask and their interpretations of what they heard. Drawing on the work of Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2012), we ask students to consider three questions as they reflect on what they bring to the interview:

Find examples of songs written by students interpreting interviews with immigrants [here](#).

What surprised you? ~ What disturbed or challenged you? ~ What intrigued you?

These questions increase students' awareness of how their interests and the preconceptions they held about immigrants shaped the interview and what they heard.

Working with Teaching Artists

What We Bring will include a play that features the stories of six City Lore teaching artists who are immigrants or whose parents emigrated to the U.S.: Sahar Muradi, who, at age three, emigrated with her family from Afghanistan in the early 1980s, just following the Soviet invasion; Hector Morales, who came from Peru in 1999 to study at William Paterson University's jazz program; Malini Srinivasan, a Bharatanatyam dancer whose parents emigrated from India in the 1960s; Lu Yu, who emigrated from Taiwan to the U.S. by way of the South Pacific; Yahaya Kamate, a dancer from Cote d'Ivoire, who traveled here with a professional dance troupe; and James Lovell, a Garifuna musician who emigrated from Belize. We interviewed each artist and enlisted George Zavala to direct the play. His parents migrated from Puerto Rico to New York City, where he was born. As a long-time City Lore teaching artist, George brings many years of experience working with immigrant artists and themes related to immigration and migration to *What We Bring*. Our goal is for students to gain a deeper understanding of both the differences and the commonalities among the stories of immigrants from different parts of the world.

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Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED, 18:49 June 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story#t-35087.
- Sunstein, Bonnie and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater. 2012. *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, 4th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Classroom Application: Student Interview Worksheet

These questions can be adapted for interviews with community guests, family members, or artists visiting your classroom.

Note to students: Don't forget to use follow-up questions to encourage interview participants to share more details and compelling stories about their experiences. Can you elicit more about the colors, smells, sounds, and the landscapes and memories of places and people left behind?

Why did you leave?

What were your feelings about leaving?

What did you bring with you?

What did you leave behind?

How did you travel to get here?

What obstacles and helpers did you encounter on your journey?

What were your first impressions of this country when you arrived?

How was it different from what you expected?

What challenges and opportunities have you experienced here?

What do you miss most about the home you left?

What do you like most about your new home?

Selections from the Play

What We Bring

FAREWELLS

SAHAR MURADI: On the bus sucking sugar cane. You give us sugar stalks to keep busy with, to keep our mouths shut with. If we speak, the soldiers who stop the bus will know we aren't border people. So you silence us with these sweet, sticky plants and keep us dirty. Two weeks, no baths, and wrapped in three layers. It's how we can pass. Border people carry little, so we take nothing. The hurt in Jawad's hands, from the absence of his slingshot; he wonders if there'll be blackbirds where we're going. Shabnam tries to keep her feet still; there is a little itch, a tiny tickle in them, where the pedals of her tricycle fit. How long would it take to reach Pakistan on a tricycle? I think of my little bag, my *khalta-gac*, the pillowcase that I keep all my treasures in, apple seeds and nail clippings and little webs of lint, everything I drag after me all over the place. Your mother says she will keep it safe, for when we come back from the trip, with new treasures. But you, *madar jan*, you have so many more things than we do, so your missing is so much bigger. It takes up all the room on our seat. It splits the vinyl, fogs the windows, and spreads to either end of the bus. It's already hard to be comfortable, with the rocks under the tires and dust in our eyes and our lips sealed tight around the cane, but now your missing is coming off your face like steam and none of us can breathe.

That was 1982, and I was three years old traveling by bus from Kabul to Jalalabad and then onto Peshawar, Pakistan, with my mother and two siblings. We were fleeing Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the political dissolution following. A year earlier, my father had escaped after repeated visits to our home by secret police asking for his whereabouts. Members of the traditional elite, the religious establishment, and the intelligentsia began fleeing or risk being jailed or disappeared. My dad spoke out against the invasion, and he also ran his father's textile factory. My mother was a schoolteacher. They were both from the Qizilbash tribe, a minority Shi'ite group who largely worked in government and trade. We were now passing as Pashtuns who lived on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, who crossed daily. We were not to make a sound until we reached the border.

Once we were stopped at a checkpoint. My mother was the only woman on the bus and we were the only family. She was asked to lift her veil to check against her photograph, at which point the female guard, who was a classmate of my aunt's, mistook her for her sister, Fauzia. Not only was she not Fauzia, she was also not the person indicated on her passport. My mother begged not to be turned in. She agreed and would later pass a message to her family that we crossed the border safely.

This play will be performed in the City Lore gallery in December 2017 as a public program to accompany the *What We Bring* exhibit. It also will be offered to schools as a performance in our artist residency programs that explore immigrant experiences. Teaching artist George Zavala worked with six immigrant artists to combine their stories in a script organized by the stages of their departure, arrival, and lives in the U.S.

ARRIVALS



Hector Morales playing the cajón at a school assembly program. Photo by Amanda Dargan.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Can I get your custom declaration form please? Could you please open this bag, Sir? [*Hector takes cajón out of the bag.*] What is this?

HECTOR: It's a *cajón*, a box. [*Officer looks at Hector expecting more information.*] A wooden box. [*Officer remains silent, waiting.*] Oh, yes, well, in my country this box is used as a drum. We use it to play Creole and Afro-Peruvian music. I am coming to America to study jazz. [*Officer looks inside the hole in the cajón and takes out a T-shirt and a sock.*] Well, when I travel I use it to carry some other things too.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Is this all you are bringing? Aren't you forgetting to write something on this list? [*Officer disappears and Hector sits on cajón.*]

HECTOR: I had the feeling that I was forgetting something, I just wasn't sure what that was . . . and suddenly I wasn't sure if it was me who brought the *cajón* to the U.S or if it was the *cajón* who brought me. My *cajón* was filled with very valuable things, not just my socks, but my memories, my sounds, my view of the world, my culture, my language, my accent, my identity . . . my identity . . . the *cajón* helped me find my identity. [*Hector walks a few feet away from the cajón, and the cajón speaks.*]

Cajón: Oh, yes, of course . . . my *cajón* . . . how I love my *cajón* . . . blah blah blah . . . yes, it is me talking, Hector, down here, your *cajón* . . . let me tell you the true reason you came to America the *la verdad* why you came is because you want to play jazz . . . you want to play the drum set . . . you know your beloved cymbals, drums, snare drum, bass drums . . . I don't know why you want to do that . . . !

HECTOR: Because I thought it was really cool . . . you know . . . try something different . . . how about thinking a little bit outside of the box for a change? *Ay caramba* I am sorry . . . I didn't mean to offend you. But jazz is part of me too, aren't you curious about other styles of music, other instruments, other cultures? We live in this culturally diverse city and I feel like I could be a mediator, a bridge, between cultures, between sounds . . . I love the sound of jazz, and you're right, that's why I came here (*sound of jazz music*). The sound of the piano, the harmonies and the cymbals, the rhythm, so elegant . . . so free . . . [*Hector plays along for a little bit.*] So many possibilities . . . (*sound fades out*) . . . You don't have to be jealous, I also love your sound . . . you are the . . . sound of my homeland . . . of my childhood . . . the sound of my father . . . [*Hector looks at his hands, the right one holds a stick, the left is free. He plays both instruments.*] From the *cajón* to the drum set . . . from the *cajón* to the drum set . . . (*repeats, looking at his hands*). It's perfect . . . This is what I brought to America (*hits cajón*) . . . and this is what America brought to me (*hits snare*), what I mean is that I do not consider myself a *cajón* player or a drummer either, maybe here in America I can be both. I bring my cultural duality, I am a mediator, a bridge between cultures, between sounds, from the *cajón* to the drum set.

WHAT WE BRING

MALINI SRINIVASAN: What my parents brought to America was dance, a family of three children, and a strong will to bring India with them to America. My mother studied Bharatanatyam dance in India from a young age; she learned from her mother. Ironically, though this art was passed on from mother to daughter, neither woman called herself a “dancer.” They were “dance teachers” because women of their community were forbidden from dancing after puberty; it was considered obscene for a woman to show herself on stage. My mother and grandmother gave all the children in our family the gift of Bharatanatyam dance: the stories, the music, the colorful costumes, and, of course, the ankle bells that keep the rhythm. But more than anything, this gift of dance gave us a vibrant experience of being in our bodies. My mother and grandmother were subversively conscious we should feel proud of this gift, and unafraid to dance. I am the first woman of my family to become a professional dancer who experienced none of the approbation formerly attached to the act of dancing . . . Sometimes the most beautiful gift also comes with the heavy weight of the past; and sometimes it brings with it the possibility of liberation. And sometimes, the gift carries both.



Malini Srinivasan teaching Indian classical dance to students at Public School 11. Photo by Tal Bar-Zemer.

JAMES LOVELL: I left Belize in 1990. I came with my Garifuna music inside of me. I found it among my people who were living in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The Garifuna drums, maracas, conch shell, and turtle shell drums were all here in New York City waiting for me! Life in the city was exciting! I was constantly exposed to music from other cultures, and I saw drums of different makes, sounds, and sizes. I was exposed to musical instruments that I never knew existed. The beautiful costumes, the different types of dancing—it expanded my cultural and musical horizons! I began to see myself among these amazing musicians, bringing my story, the Garifuna story, through our unique voice and musical sound onto the world stage! Living in New York opened my mind and soul and forced me to reach deeper into my culture and learn its history. I felt pride for and became an advocate of my rich Garifuna heritage. My homeland of Dangriga prepared me. I have all the elements of my Garifuna music in me. All I have to do is play my drums, my maracas, my turtle drum, and sing! During this journey of cultural awareness, I realized that the Garifuna language was in danger of becoming extinct. I made a resolution to keep my music, culture, and language alive! I started using Garifuna songs to teach children and adults how to speak the language.

HERE AND NOW

YAHAYA KAMATE: I came here in 1994 with a group of 60 performers representing The National Dance Company of my country, the Ivory Coast. One day someone saw me perform and asked if I would be willing to work in schools with children . . . When I started teaching I found my place. Teaching, teaching, teaching was all I did and have been doing since. It changed my life. It's been incredible seeing the difference drumming and dancing can make in a kid's life. I've taught in schools, in community centers, in universities, in hospital psychiatric wards, and even in jails. I have seen kids who were depressed and contemplating suicide light up and smile when they were drumming and young men in jails who spend all day arguing sitting side-by-side playing the drums. I am blessed to do this work!



Yahaya Kamate with students at Public School 274 in Brooklyn, New York.



Lu Yu teaching dance to his students at Public School 69 in Queens, New York.

Photos by Amanda Dargan.

LU YU: Many people ask me, what am I doing? Why don't I retire? . . . I don't think of the things I do as work, because so much of what I do is really gratifying, watching children grow. When a child comes up to you after a workshop and says, "I want to be an actor" or "I want to be an artist," that really moves me. Watching them transform and seeing their joy as they shine on stage, I think to myself, this is right. In this political climate with so much division and discrimination, what we do is not only right, it is necessary. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be doing this work for so long.