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I was recently looking through a diner menu and saw a section called "South of the Border." I was not that surprised to see that South of the Border food meant tacos, burritos, and guacamole. How did we get to a time when "the border" *always* means the southern US-Mexico border? How did we get to a time when we believe that Mexicans crossed the US border to bring food, rather than recognizing that we used to be part of Mexico and that the line we call the border has changed many times with war, politics and American imperialism? What do you think of when I say, "the border?" Do you imagine a place of violence, desperation, a "national emergency?" Or a place of resilience and hope? What about other borders, both seen and unseen, that divide us? Today I want to share my own recent experience at the border and draw some parallels between immigration policy in the past and today in order to expand our own beliefs about borders.

Last February I went to Tucson, Arizona with a group of nine other Unitarian Universalist ministers on a border justice immersion trip through the UU College for Social Justice. This trip was described as a reverse mission trip—instead of traveling somewhere to share our message, we were traveling somewhere so that we could witness injustice firsthand and be changed ourselves. Before I went, some people asked me what I expected to learn? I already believed many of our immigration policies to be unjust and in need of reform, including family separations, denying asylum seekers, and ICE raids. I grew up in the border city of San Diego and I'm the descendant of immigrants myself. However, I went because I believe that immigration justice is something that requires serious study and direct witness- something that requires being in close proximity to those whose lives are the most affected.

In Tucson, an organization called BorderLinks created an itinerary for our group. This itinerary included witnessing Operation Streamline at the courthouse, hiking into the desert for a water drop, listening to non-profits working with immigrants and locals, and reflecting on issues of power, privilege, charity, and solidarity. It was a *transformative experience*. I'm deeply grateful for the leaders, activists, and educators who took time to teach us, and for the colleagues that brought reflection, challenge and our UU faith to that experience.

We did an activity that replicated the complex and impossible legal immigration system in which many people, especially those without money, did not make it. On a hike through the desert, we passed discarded backpacks and caches of water bottles in a harsh and unforgiving landscape. We witnessed the vulnerability of LGBTQ immigrants, many of whom suffer violence and oppression in their own countries compounded by oppression here in American detention centers. We heard from activists from the indigenous tribe of the Tohono O'odham, whose ancestral lands were cut up by the drawing of the US-Mexico border, who see this desert landscape as sacred, not a place to be covered with walls, barbed wire, drones and motion detectors.



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We spent one of the heaviest and most impactful days witnessing Operation Streamline. Operation Streamline started in 2005 and operates in a few border cities, including Tucson. People apprehended by Border Patrol while crossing the border without documentation are charged with felonies in federal court. These offenses used to be civil charges processed in immigration court. Now, federal criminal court proceedings often convict up to 70 people in just two hours by sentencing in groups of ten or so. Groups of migrants, all in handcuffs and shackles at the ankles, are charged with “illegal re-entry” and are encouraged to sign a plea bargain to plead “guilty” earning them a prison term and leaving them with a permanent criminal record. Operation Streamline does not make the border safer or deter people from crossing and fails to address the root causes that make people migrate in the first place. It was [watching Operation Streamline](#) in action that made me feel the weight of the American state's oppression, and the sheer power and privilege of the judge, lawyers, and law enforcement who pretended that it was a lawful and free choice for people in shackles to plead guilty and be sent to prison for crossing the border.

In the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez, a group of immigrants from throughout Mexico and Central and South America live in the same apartment complex. One character states, “We're the unknown Americans, the ones no one even wants to know, because they've been told they're supposed to be scared of us and because maybe if they did take the time to get to know us, they might realize that we're not that bad, maybe even that we're a lot like them. And who would they hate then?”

Being in Tucson and hearing the stories of immigrants, their families, and the activists who work with them made me question the divide- the border- between what I used to think of as citizen vs non-citizen, immigrant vs citizen, the “unknown Americans” and the privileged. How the rights of citizenship have been denied, retracted, granted sparingly, and fought for by generations of determined resisters. How the privilege of documented migration is often arbitrarily denied to the most vulnerable. How it is the unknown Americans who provide the underclass of cheap labor that America depends on today and have depended on for centuries in agriculture, domestic care, construction, etc. Now I see the effects of borders everywhere. Before I left for Tucson, I did some background reading, including a book about the history of Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America. I wrote down in my journal my own family's history—my mother born here in 1952 in Los Angeles after her parents fled China's political pressures; my father born in the same year in Japan to Chinese parents who then moved to Brazil hoping for easier access to American visas, and then hoping to migrate to America. Both sets of grandparents were motivated by war and political upheaval, as well as seeking out education and safety for their families. Even more interesting was the story of my maternal grandmother, who was born in Stockton, California. Her parents were early Chinese immigrants: my great-grandfather, who later opened an herbalist shop in Oakland, was part of the California gold rush and my great-grandmother crossed the border from Canada to America in the early 1900's.



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Now my family doesn't know very much about her crossing of the border, but why is that particularly interesting? Who has heard of the Chinese Exclusion Act? Passed in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was America's first law to ban immigration based on a country of origin. Passed in a wave of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment that was particularly strong here on the West Coast, Chinese were seen as dirty, drug-dealers (opium) and a threat to the economy and the jobs of more deserving Whites. Of special threat was the idea that Chinese would settle in America and build their families here, so Chinese women in particular were under strict scrutiny and definitely not allowed to immigrate. I believe this would have made my great-grandmother's crossing of the border illegal at the time—both because the only way to come in officially was through ports of entry such as San Francisco and because of the ban on Chinese women.

Seeing my own family's history in connection with immigration law during the last century, I now more deeply recognize how racist those laws were and how it is only because of both the defiance of those laws and changes in the law that my ancestors built their lives here. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 when it was replaced by a quota system. Exclusion of people based on racist fears, criminalizing and deporting people who are seeking work, safety, and livelihoods, discriminatory laws preventing immigrants from achieving citizenship—these are nothing new.

In my reading, I discovered that in San Francisco in the 1870s a series of laws were passed that effectively banned “carrying something while Chinese!” Laws banned the use of carrying poles for peddling vegetables or carrying laundry, thus discriminating against Chinese who had been pushed into the laundry business because of inability to open other types of businesses or to buy land. These types of cruel and inhumane laws seem eerily familiar to the racial profiling happening in Arizona and all over the United States, as we see speaking Spanish, having darker skin, or working in certain industries as a reason to interrogate people over their right to be in this country.

Today's tent detention camps also had their precedents more than one hundred years ago. Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay was an immigration station that started in 1910 to process cases of Chinese laborers. Unlike Ellis Island, Chinese would-be-immigrants arriving were not met with welcome but would be questioned for weeks, sometimes months, detained in prison-like circumstances. Like today's version of “extreme vetting,” people were interrogated over biographical details of life in their home country and possible connections to family in America. Many of those without formal connections created fictional family ties, becoming known as “paper sons.”

More than two hundred poems have been found carved in Chinese on the walls of the buildings of Angel Island, mostly written by women and men with only an elementary education. Even through translation, the depth of despair, loneliness, and anger at their mistreatment can be felt in these poems. One reads, [“With a hundred kinds of oppressive laws, they mistreat us Chinese. / It is still not enough after being interrogated and investigated several times;/ We also have to have our chests examined while naked.”](#)



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The modern poet Teow Lim Goh, a Chinese immigrant and American citizen, wrote a book of poetry called *Islanders* based on poetry found at Angel Island. Goh was especially inspired to imagine poetry written by the women detainees, writing poems about situations such as a woman learning that she was about to be deported even after marrying an American citizen (illegal) or a poem set during an anti-Chinese riot in San Francisco's Chinatown. Goh was fascinated by this part of American history and sought to wrestle with what this legacy means for her, as a newer Chinese immigrant. She writes that even though the "target groups are different" the questions of "Who do we include? Who do we exclude? And why?" are still relevant today.

This is the poem that opens her collection, *Islanders*

To the miners who sailed the Pacific  
with dreams of golden rivers.  
To the workers who built the railroads  
over mountains and prairie skies.  
To the farmers who made the desert bloom.

To the Chinese who were attacked  
for the color of their skins.  
To the aliens who posed as citizens,  
their papers lost, a quake and fire.  
To the paper sons who forged a history.

To the detainees on an island  
between the sea and the sky.  
To the poets who penned on barrack walls  
songs of hope and hazy dreams,  
sobs of home and nights alone.

To the paper sons who began new lives  
under assumed names  
anxious their ruse would be unmasked,  
afraid to tell their children  
of their past.

This is not my history.  
I am not the daughter of a miner.  
I am not the daughter of a laborer.  
I am not the daughter of a farmer.  
I am not the daughter of a  
paper son  
false citizen  
prisoner.

This is not my legacy.



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This is my history.  
I crossed the sea.  
I sat on a plane.  
I came with the dream  
    of freedom  
        to speak  
        to believe.  
It is here I begin to write.  
This is my legacy.

We are all recipients of and active participants in a great long line of legacy, stretching behind us and in front of us. For me, the legacy of Chinese immigrants to California is deeply personal. But for all of us, the legacy of immigrants to this country is something that must be known and reckoned with.

Maybe you are not the child of immigrants or maybe your family's immigration story is different from the one I've told today. Maybe your family crossed a border by car, by plane, in secret or in the open, generations upon generations ago, maybe by force and enslavement, or maybe the border crossed them. Today we lift up these many histories, these many stories of human migration, recognizing the journeys of our ancestors and how they are linked to the stories of people still migrating today. Again we ask, who are we including and who are we excluding? What do we see in the border? Who does the border serve?

To quote another great American writer on the value of immigrants,

*"Legacy, what is legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me."*

Can anyone guess where that quote was from? That was from Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* continues,

*"America, you great unfinished symphony, you sent for me// You let me make a difference, a place where even orphan immigrants// Can leave their fingerprints and rise up."*

We celebrate the tremendous contributions of immigrants who have left their fingerprints and footprints in American history. This country's great unfinished symphony continues and calls to each of us. Do we choose to sow seeds of peace and justice or war and hatred? What is the contribution to legacy that you hope to make? Our legacy?

Our Unitarian Universalist principles call us to respect the worth and dignity of every human person, to recognize the interdependence of all life, and to seek justice, compassion, and equality in all our relations. And



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in recent times we have sought to be right at the border, breaking down walls and barriers, and providing aid, advocacy and witness to immigrants. Look at the many UUs who are participants in [No Mas Muertes, or No More Deaths](#), one of the organizations leaving water in the desert for migrants, sometimes being arrested and prosecuted for it. Or the witness of many of our UU clergy and lay people in Tijuana, meeting people from the caravans. Or our own congregation's support of Rosa and her family this past year.

There are many ways that you can be involved in immigrant justice. You can support organizations who assist migrants, like this church, No Mas Muertes, or a great organization I met in Tucson called [Mariposas sin Fronteras](#), which assists LGBTQ migrants. You can help dismantle false information about current immigration and about American history—myths like the belief that immigrants take our jobs or spread violence or “should have gone the legal route,” and you can educate yourself about the real story. I can recommend a few books! You can promote the voices and stories of the people most affected by our current crisis—families torn apart, folks in detention centers, people fleeing violence and poverty. And lastly, I encourage us to examine our own histories and family narratives. What was going on in American immigration history during your ancestors' time? How might your own story be deeply connected to or influenced by immigration?

I want to close with another poem by Teow Lim Goh, [“Passages.”](#)

Ten miles of concrete can bring you  
to different places. Your feet carry you  
across the ground, let you

into worlds unlike your own. You go places  
you have never been. But what matters  
is not where you have been

but what you see. What you choose  
to see. Whether you let yourself  
see the distance

between what is and what you want to be.

What do we choose to see in the border? The border between our country and another? The border between citizen and non-citizen, documented or undocumented? Do we see the differences, or do we recognize ourselves in one another? May we examine the borders in our lives and our society and seek to see across them. And let us recommit ourselves to contributing notes of justice, equity and compassion to our communal symphony, to our legacy.

Amen and blessed be.

**Neighborhood Unitarian  
Universalist Church**



**The Border: Then and Now**

Rev. Christina Shu

May 5, 2019

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