

Contextualizing Sentiments

Part I: Where and Why We Started

Since Press Press's founding in 2014, our practice has always been deeply informed by our concerns with immigration, and especially with experiences of what we call "cultural passage," a term that is central for understanding *Sentiments*.¹ Cultural passage has a broad meaning: It refers to experiences of transitioning and negotiating one's way through multiple cultures. It is something that exists at every level of our lives as immigrants or immigrant-adjacent persons. It affects our familial and communal relationships, our conception of "home," our access to various institutional benefits and opportunities, our self-understanding, and our emotional wellbeing. It leaves nothing untouched. Using the notion of cultural passage has helped center our conversations as a collective around the experiences of individuals, families, and communities, rather than relying on mainstream terminology that emphasizes legal status and bureaucratic categorizations ("refugee," "alien," etc.).² Our team's ongoing practice of openly talking about our personal experiences with cultural passage has helped us navigate the various projects we have undertaken. It has also enabled us to form the general principles that guide our practice: Embrace difference, not just similarity; commit to ongoing and open-ended dialogue; support the emergence of collaborative projects; and emphasize the importance of personal life experience.

Over the past few years, as xenophobia gained more prominence in national media, my collaborators³ and I began to discuss the ways in which our (usually) private conversations about our own experiences of cultural passage might be helpful in combating aspects of anti-immigrant violence. We became especially con-

cerned with sharpening and revising the simplistic interpretations of concepts that inform—and often misinform—the public discourse around immigration. Specifically, we wanted to unpack overly simplistic concepts of "immigrant," "citizen," "sanctuary," and "freedom." For this purpose, we needed to grow our community. We needed to connect with people we could learn from and share experiences with, and who could collaborate with us to develop a more nuanced, sensitive, and substantive vocabulary for answering our questions: What does it mean to be an *immigrant*? What does it mean to be a *citizen*? What does it mean to build *sanctuary*? What does it mean to be *free*? We needed to cultivate space for subtler conversations around cultural passage that could do justice to the richness and complexity it involves, and thus, this collection of conversations, workshops, artist projects, and writings—*Sentiments*—was born.

Building on Press Press's approach, *Sentiments* is a coordinated effort of multiple agents taking on various roles as co-organizers and contributors. The project involved extending invitations to individuals, groups, and families to participate in social gatherings and workshops, one-on-one conversations, and the production of artistic works. In this sense, community-building has been a central component of *Sentiments*. The multiplicity of roles played by participating individuals in *Sentiments* is what enabled us to create a compilation where the editorial voice reflects a vision that has been developed by the collective itself. Each voice in this compilation presents a different take on cultural passage. Although we all share the experience of cultural passage in some way, our perspectives and experiences are not reducible to a common denominator. Our multiple identities, our various circumstances and contexts, have all combined to produce the

¹ The term "cultural passage" was introduced to our team by curator, Sharmyn Cruz Rivera, at a workshop we hosted this past winter in Chicago.

² We recognize that legal statuses and bureaucratic categorizations deeply affect our experiences as immigrants. However, the legalist jargon is often used in such ways that promote not seeing immigrants as people, drawing attention away from the types of personal experiences that cultural passage seeks to explicitly place in the foreground. Our use of the term cultural passage allows for a discussion of one's experience in both a personal and legal dimension.

³ In 2015 Bomin Jeon and Valentina Cabezas formally became part of the Press Press team, in 2016 Rahul S. Shinde joined as our website engineer, and more recently Bilphena Yahwon, Ayaka Takao, Samiha Alam, and Eleni Agapis became part of our efforts in various ways through this project.

distinctive voices you will find in the pages ahead. Although this collection is not exhaustive of all of the possible experiences that immigrants and immigrant-adjacent individuals may have, our hope is that it can nevertheless bring us closer to understanding the complexity of immigrant experiences.

Part II: A Brief History of Citizenship in the United States

Who is labeled an “immigrant” in the United States today? Mainstream media and politicians often imply that the identity of the “immigrant” is something simple and straightforward: An immigrant is a foreigner, a stranger, an outsider, the “Other.” Relative to other geographic regions, the United States is new; many American citizens are at most only three or four generations removed from being “immigrants.” Yet the social category as it is used today seems to imply that there is a deep difference between the immigrant of today and the immigrant of past generations. Someone is an immigrant not in virtue of where they’ve come from but in virtue of *who* they are. For many Americans today, “immigrant” seems to simply mean foreignness, where the quality of one’s foreignness is (often) implicitly measured by one’s proximity to whiteness—the less white someone is observed to be, the more of an “immigrant” they are. This contemporary conception, however, is a great oversimplification of a rich and complicated identity that intersects with a vast range of social categorizations such as race, nationality, culture, ethnicity, and so on. It is also a great oversimplification of *American* identity itself, as it implies that being American means being white. This is the same perspective that fuels practices of assimilation and that pressures immigrants to lean into whiteness in order to be accepted. This paradigm of “immigrant versus citizen” fuels one of the primary problems that the United States faces today and has faced throughout its history: an already-narrow, and narrowing, concept of what it means to be an American.

This characteristic of American citizenship was created by design, in order to strategically affirm a white supremacist hierarchy. Starting with the first Immigration Act of 1790, the privilege

of citizenship was limited to “free white aliens.”⁴ This jargon was not taken out of immigration law until 1952, when race was no longer formally named as a qualifier for obtaining citizenship. Although it was written into law, the use of the term “free white alien” had come into legal use before the Supreme Court had fully, legally defined the category of “whiteness.” As new waves of non-Western immigrants came into the United States, various individuals across different time periods over the last 200 years who sought citizenship rights were strategically rejected, but in some accounts accepted.⁵ Through this process, the legal category of whiteness was refined and shifted in order to create the material conditions and rhetoric of today’s United States. For example, in a famous Supreme Court case, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923, Thind, an Indian immigrant, argued that he and American whites were both of Caucasian descent, and he was thus qualified to attain citizenship. In order to reject Thind’s argument, the court decided to disregard its “scientific” understanding of citizenship—i.e. previously, the word “Caucasian” had been used to determine white status based on an individual’s ancestry⁶—and use a new definition of whiteness “to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man.”⁷ This shift not only explicitly shows that the production of laws in the United States is based on an ideological notion of race, but also exemplifies the ways the legal system has fluctuated in order to maintain the ideology of whiteness. Instead of building up a deep cultural meaning around the idea of citizenship—as in trying to clarify what it means to be an accountable member of the public sphere, a neighbor, a resident, or a community member—the

⁴ Between 1790 and 1802, people applying for naturalization were required to have resided in the country for five years, have “good moral character,” and be “free white persons.” This language was meant to exclude Black residents and “Indians not taxed” from citizenship rights. Generally, these laws aimed to transform northern and western European immigrants into American citizens and exclude anyone else. However, the Fourteenth Amendment declared that all free persons born in the United States should be considered citizens. In 1870, Congress amended naturalization requirements and extended eligibility to “aliens being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” This revision led to further confusion over racial eligibility for citizenship. In 1882, Congress banned the naturalization of Chinese immigrants with The Chinese Exclusion Act, however it did not explain whether “Chinese” indicated race or nationality.

⁵ “United States v. Cartozian, 6 F.2d 919 (1925).” law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/F2/6/919/1551454/.

⁶ “Ozawa v. United States, 260 U.S. 178 (1922).” supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/260/178/case.html.

⁷ “United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).” supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/case.html.

value of American citizenship was created through lines of exclusion.⁸

By holding space for a more nuanced conversation of our various experiences as immigrants, *Sentiments* aims to expand the notion of what it means to be an American and to complicate the overly simplistic notion of what it means to be an immigrant. As we explore the ways that citizenship affects our lives, I invite you to consider how immigration has—or, better yet, how immigration *should*—figure into your personal, historical, and political existence.

Part III: Declaring our Sentiments

During the process of putting together this compilation, violent anti-immigrant actions and rhetoric have continued to flood the public sphere. This has made the task of sharing our stories and personal experiences in *Sentiments*, which make our vulnerabilities transparent to the outsider's gaze, much more difficult. Sharing these intimate stories is an act of resistance. *Sentiments* takes steps toward developing language that reveals the complexities of our different migrant experiences and calls for our collective liberation, which starts with fighting alongside and for the sake of the most vulnerable members of our communities. We believe in solidarity—as long as it doesn't necessarily mean assimilation or erasure—as a form of resistance that relies heavily on our ability to be empathetic, to celebrate difference, and to approach structural injustice through an intersectional lens.

In the following pages you will find different types of artistic works and conversations, including a series of conversations on individuals' various artistic, social, and cultural practices; a series of conversations and collaborations between families, often with a focus on grandmothers, mothers, and daughters; and a collaborative manifesto addressing what sanctuary is, how it can be created, and how it can be protected. By documenting the ways in which we have *sustained*—a word that simultaneously means to *strengthen, support, or encourage*, and to *undergo, endure, or*

suffer—we ask how we have both overcome constraints that affect our livelihood, as individuals and within our families, and how we may be complicit in them. Inspired by Audre Lorde's assertion that the core of our power lies in our poetry,⁹ or our empathetic and emotional sensibilities, we hope to affirm the necessity for empathy and emotion as the basis for a just collective existence.

Although we may not be able to fully actualize the visions expressed in this book, through our collaborative process, we can and have managed to form a space of empathy, learning, and support that has enabled us to better navigate the spaces we inhabit in our daily lives. I hope this collection of voices gives you an idea of the process we've undertaken over the past year and that it will shed some light on the otherwise reductive ideas that hover around the orbit of immigrant identity.

I encourage you to join our efforts: **How does cultural passage fit into your personal, political, and historical existence?**

Kimi Hanauer,
Founding Editor, Press Press

⁸ "Race, Nationality, and Reality." by Marian L. Smith. National Archives and Records Administration, 2002, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/summer/immigration-law-1.html.

⁹ "Poetry Is Not A Luxury." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, by Audre Lorde.