

UNDERGROUND AMERICA

NARRATIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED LIVES

COMPILED AND EDITED BY PETER ORNER

FOREWORD BY LUIS ALBERTO URREA



Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives

Lights Up

Table at center; four chairs behind (two on either side). Three chairs at the table. Each character will be at the table with the narrator to tell their story.

Narrator will address the audience directly, characters will address the narrator.

Programs will list actors along with the characters they play and each character's country of origin.

NARRATOR:

In the fall of 2005, I represented an asylum-seeker in a case before the Immigration Court in San Francisco. My client, Eduardo, was from Guatemala. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan army carried out a campaign of systematic murder against indigenous people like Eduardo. His father was killed, but Eduardo, his mother, and sister were spared death though they were held captive for nearly a decade in the home of a paramilitary officer. Eduardo and his sister grew up in a house where they were beaten and abused by the officer who also continually threatened to torture their mother.

At fourteen, Eduardo managed to escape to Guatemala City, and his mother and sister followed some time later. But after their captor launched a search for the threesome Eduardo fled Guatemala in fear of his life. He swam across the Rio Grande, was arrested on the north bank in Texas, requested asylum, and eventually made his way to California.

Given the details of his story and the fact that being granted asylum rests primarily on a few basic principals – which Eduardo fulfilled in my mind – I went into the hearing with confidence. Call me naïve. That day in October 2005, the judge rushed through the case, comporting herself with an air of *I've heard all this before*. Asylum denied.

Afterward, as we sat there dumfounded and staring at the judge's empty chair, the opposing government counsel came over and said, not without sympathy, that Eduardo had been credible and that our case had been a strong one. She suggested that the judge might have just simply seen one too many Guatemalans that day.

“One too many Guatemalans.”

(Pause)

Eduardo had survived a horrific experience only to be considered one of too many. Maybe Eduardo's essential problem was his very existence. I began to think about all those other people out there implied in the phrase “one too many Guatemalans,” which seemed to me another way of saying “one too many stories.” I couldn't help thinking ‘how many stories – legally tenable or not – go untold’?

(The rest of the cast enters and go to their seats)

So with the help of a dedicated team of graduate students in the Creative Writing Program at San Francisco State University, as well as a group of volunteer lawyers, writers, and independent filmmakers, I began searching for stories. Our interviewers collected the stories of more than sixty people. We went to New York City and Washington, D.C. and Chicago and Houston. We traveled to Dodge City, Kansas; New Bedford, Massachusetts; Biloxi, Mississippi; and Mount Vernon, Washington. We talked to people in living rooms, on the street, in public libraries, in nursing homes, and once in the parking lot of a putt-putt golf course. There were also times when we did not have to go looking very hard to find stories.

A number of our connections were made through friends and family. Consider your own life:

(Narrator sits)

What is the degree of separation between you and someone who lacks documents that allow them to stay in this country legally?

ACTOR 3

I can't live here. I can't live with these guns and wars and bombs. There was not peace there yet. (Abel)

ACTOR 1

It was very hard to leave my family, especially my children, Cristina and Augusto (Dixie)

ACTOR 3

If you love me you'll go. (Jose Garcia)

ACTOR 4

We didn't have enough money to make ends meet. I thought moving to America was an answer to my problems. (Dixie)

ACTOR 1

I left with my newborn baby and my husband. We walked for two nights in the mountains. (Adela)

ACTOR 4

I'd work about twelve or thirteen hours a day, six days a week. You're on your feet the whole time and have to work really fast, otherwise the boss yells at you. (Mr. Lai)

ACTOR 2

The job belongs to the person who is willing to work. (Nsombo)

ACTOR 3

At the plant, there was a machine for grinding the meat of the dogfish. This machine was very dangerous, and no one ever explained to us how it functioned. (Abel)

ACTOR 1

I can't marry the person I love (Desiree)

ACTOR 2

I tried to explain to them what had happened with my lawyer not telling me the date, they wouldn't listen to me. They treated me like I was a criminal. (Elizabeth)

ACTOR 3

Everything we do is a crime. You don't have papers, it's a crime. You buy fake papers, it's a crime. You live a crime. (El Mojado)

ACTOR 4

I don't have a right to anything, I can't fight anything. I know I'm nobody important. (El Mojado)

ACTOR 1

You're not good enough to talk to me because you don't know English. (Lorena)

ACTOR 2

Who am I? I'm nobody. I don't resemble anyone. (Roberto)

ACTOR 4

I was crying, nobody saw me. I talked, nobody heard me. (Julio)

ACTOR 2

It often feels like nobody wants to listen.

ACTOR 3

Sometimes I talk to myself. Sometimes I cry by myself. Sometimes I scream by myself. (Roberto)

ACTOR 4

I wanted to scream but there was no place to scream. If you put your head under water you can scream as much as you want, but you drown. (Farid)

ACTOR 2

Sometimes my eyes swell up from crying. (Rose)

ACTOR 1

Sometimes I don't want to talk to anyone but something inside of me pushes me to speak out. (Olga)

(Actors sit in chairs)

NARRATOR:

We cannot begin to understand the situation facing undocumented people in this country unless we start listening to them directly. This is a collection of voices. These people are neither saints

nor sinners. These people are struggling the best way they can to get through the day, to keep their families safe, to make a little money, maybe even save some. Is there anything more American than this? It's only that they must keep silent. And there's nothing very American about not being able to speak up.

(Actor 4 approaches the table)

MR.LAI

They came to the house one day and warned me about having more than one child.

(Actor 4 sits)

NARRATOR:

Born in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian, forty-year-old Mr. Lai ran into problems when his family violated the one-child policy.

MR.LAI

Luckily, my wife wasn't at home, as she was heavily pregnant with our second son at the time. We'd heard a lot of stories about bribery, forced abortions, forced sterilizations. This seemed to happen more in rural places – we decided we had to run. We were in hiding for a little over two months. Later I found out that officials knew about our second pregnancy and had come looking for us. When they couldn't find us, they went to our house and destroyed it, just tore the place down.

I was really angry about this, but I couldn't do anything, couldn't say anything. The whole family would have been in trouble. You had to be careful. You couldn't offend the party. You just can't criticize the government there. If you refuse to do what they say, they'll throw you in jail, or demote you at work. Or if they can't find you they'll destroy your house. That's what they do. That's what they did to us.

It was during this time that I first started having ideas about going to America. I'd been hearing people talk about how democratic America was, that there was freedom of speech. The feeling that I had to find a way out for myself and my family grew stronger and stronger over the next few years. We just couldn't go on like this. This was no way to live. I just had no faith in China. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew I had to go to America. I thought I could go over, then send for my wife and sons, and then we could have two or three more children! But after I left, the government forced her to have a hysterectomy.

NARRATOR:

After a harrowing journey during which he spent three months hiding in Thailand, three months in a small room in Cuba, four months in Mexico, sixteen hours standing in a truck, and five hours walking, Mr. Lai landed in Los Angeles where he spent another two months before he traveled to New York. From there he would be sent to various jobs all over the country as a cook.