COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 80

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RACHEL ZUCKER: Can you hear?

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Mmmhmm. Are you recording?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Hi Moses.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Hi. So this is crazy. I can already feel it changing my personality.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know. It's really weird and I I don't know if this is the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do. I'm trying to write the introduction to the Taiwan episode. You've been trying so generously to help me, and what I feel is that I just can't do it.

[Music]

Hello, listener. This is Rachel Zucker, founder and host of Commonplace. Welcome to this two part episode, most of which was recorded in Taiwan in March of 2019. I'm going to start off, however, with sharing an excerpt of a conversation I recorded a few days ago in New York City with the oldest of my three sons, Moses Zucker Goren.

Moses traveled with me to Taiwan last March, and in this conversation, he and I talk about why we went to Taiwan, what the trip was like, and why I was not able to write the kind of Commonplace introduction I usually write. Moses and I talk about my mother, Diane Wokstein, her life, her death, whether she cursed me, how storytelling and story-making are essential to our humanity, and highly problematic, and how both Moses and I sort of hate writing.

After my conversation with Moses, you'll hear from Doreen Wang, Commonplace producer. She'll talk about growing up in the United States and in Taiwan, and her strong identification as the child of immigrants. Doreen talks about becoming a writer, her work as a labor and community organizer, falling in love, and her relationship with someone who lived for many years in the United States as an undocumented resident.

She will also talk about some of the reasons she moved from Queens, New York, to Asia in 2017.

Doreen Wang has been the voice, mind, and heart behind Commonplace's social media since September 2018. Doreen is a writer, poetry and creative nonfiction, and longtime NGO worker who now does freelance work for a youth leadership program for the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, and she leads food tours in Chengdu.

Doreen received a Poetry Fellowship from Kundiman, as well as a Pushcart Prize nomination for her work. You can find her work in On She Goes. Taiwan's Centered Magazine, and Racist Sandwich Podcast. An inaugural participant of Spotify's Boot Camp for Women of Color podcasters, Doreen is now working on a writing and audio documentary where she and her grandmother talk story about how the borders of China, Taiwan, and U.S. Mexico have shaped their lives.

I recorded Doreen at the Corner House Hotel in Taipei on March 11th, 2019. In part two of this episode, which will air in a few days, Doreen will introduce two conversations that she and I recorded in Taipei. One is with Mr. Chang Chen, Co founder of Brilliant Time Bookstore, an incredible resource and meeting place for Southeast Asian literature, languages, and culture. The second conversation is with Li Xiu Mei, or Sophie, store manager of FemBooks, one of Taiwan's oldest and most respected independent bookstores, and Professor Kang Min Jay of National Taiwan University's Graduate Institute of Building and Planning.

In these conversations, Doreen and I speak with Mr. Chang, Sophie, and Professor Kang about the history and importance of independent bookstores in Taiwan. This two part episode is the most ambitious and difficult, logistically and emotionally, that we've made at Commonplace. It is also one of the most exciting and expensive.

It's about Doreen Wang. It's about my mother. It's about the beautiful island of Taiwan. It's about Moses and my trip to Taipei and Kaohsiung, who we met, what we saw, what we ate, what we wondered and wondered at. It's about travel and migration and immigration, accidents, coincidences, storytelling, ghosts, grief, loss, and what Commonplace is always about: living life with and through language.

[5:10]

But it's also about resisting aboutness, and trying to experience, exist, and be with others in the world in anti-imperialist and even anti-narrative ways.

We have so many great extras for this episode. All Commonplace patrons will receive a sneak peek at an unpublished lyric essay I wrote about my trip to Taiwan, with accompanying photographs, an amazing list of resources for visiting Taipei, compiled by Doreen Wang, an hour long video of storyteller Diane Wokestein and musician Jeff Green performing *Monkey King, Journey to the West*, a full track of an original composition by the Taiwanese musician Ng Lang Cheng with lyrics by Chen Chen Xi and Jin Lin on guitar, which you'll hear in Part 2 of this episode, and a 20 minute edited audio recording of our visit to Taiwan to the Baytu Museum,

where we saw an exhibit called “Stories Told Through Mother's Hands: Children's Textile and Embroidery Arts.” We were guided by the show's curator, Brenda Lin, who also serves as Director of Corporate Social Responsibility at Les Enfants and is the author of *Wealth Ribbon.* The exhibit showcased items from Brenda's mother, Christi Lan Lins collection of traditional Asian textiles made by mothers for their children.

Some members of the Commonplace Book Club will receive copies of my 2014 book, *Mothers*, courtesy of Counterpath Press, signed copies of Brenda Lin's fabulous intergenerational memoir, *Wealth Ribbon, America Bound, Taiwan Bound,* courtesy of Brenda Lin herself, and copies of *Salsa* by Taiwanese poet Xia Yu, translated by Stephen Bradbury, courtesy of Zephyr Press and Christopher Madison.

To find out how to become a Commonplace patron, to sign up for our Newsletter, which comes out once per episode, and for links to the people and texts and places we mention in these conversations, please visit Commonpodcast.com. And we do hope that if you are able, you will support the show financially. Commonplace has no ads and no corporate or institutional support and is made possible only by the support of our patrons.

If you cannot afford to support Commonplace financially at this time, we'd love it if you would recommend the podcast to friends and students. Write us a glowing review on iTunes or social media, and we always love getting your messages of support and encouragement. Our next episode of Commonplace will feature Maggie Nelson. But for now, let's get back to my conversation with Moses, and then on to Doreen.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: And in 2019, in March, you and I went to Taiwan. And why did we go to Taiwan? Do you want to answer that? [Laughs].

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Sure. Yeah. Um, we went to Taiwan because, however many years before, your mother died there. And this was shocking. It

was, any death is, is surprising, but there was a lot about this death in particular, which I, I mean, I was 13 at the time, and even I could tell that it was, that there was, this was a, this was a strange way to die. This was a strange way to have your relationships cut off with other people, and I couldn't see the whole thing, obviously. So, last year, I think probably in part because you have a, a literary way of approaching things, you thought that it would be a good way to approach the sort of frayed end of that relationship to go to the place that she died and to try to learn something about what she saw before she died, what she cared about before she died, the people she was with before she died, the kind of life she was living, and that maybe you could, you could do… something [laughs].

[10:11]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, right, right. And I think that's part, that's part of this. Yeah. Which is that to be able to tell the story I kind of I have to know, I, I went to Taiwan without really knowing the end of that sentence and I still don't really know the end of that sentence. I mean, what I, what I do know is that this wasn't an isolated thing.

It was part of a series of things that, that started right after her death, um, of ways of trying to survive, conceptualize, and recover from her death, um, in ways that were, you know, healthy and true. And so, you know, she died, uh, January 31st, 2013. And on January 30th, um, uh, 2019, uh, I had reached out to a bunch of different people to ask for help creating an untying ritual, um, because I felt that my mother, who had cursed me, um, before she died, that this curse was still in effect and that it was still impacting my life, even though I'd had a lot of therapy, and I'd written, you know, a whole book basically, you know, trying to justify myself to my mother and talked about it and thought about it, but I still felt tied up in this curse or in this difficult part of the relationship.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: So I, so, and, and I'm not sure if people listening will understand how literally true everything you just said is. Um, I, I don't believe in almost anything that I can't see, unless it has to do with your mom [laughs]. Yeah, like I think she probably, yeah, she probably really did curse you. She probably did have magic.

And I mean, I remember in the, in the weeks after she died, her showing up in my dreams, I can, I, I know how much more she haunted you, but hh, she, she was a person who so sincerely believed in magic that we, it would, it just seems obvious that she, she still is an important active person with agency in your life.

Yeah. I just wanted to say that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. No. And I mean, I think maybe to like back up and, and, and tell like this part of the story. I had written this book called *Mothers* and I had decided, um, I, I thought it would never get published, and then I found a publisher, Julie Carr at Counterpath, and, um, I sent the manuscript to my mother in the, uh, summer of 2012, I And the book was about my mother, but it was also really about like looking for a mother or a mother figure in and becoming a mother myself and my thoughts about motherhood and mentorship and why I had been looking for a mother even though I had a mother.

Um, it was about the death of Peggy Sradnick, who was the daycare director of the daycare that you and your brothers went to. It was about the death of Alana, uh, Stein, who was my doula mentor. It was about all these things. So, and clearly it was about my mother, but it wasn't only about my mother. And so she read it.

I was terrified, terrified, terrified of her reading it. Um, And at first she said, “I'm really glad you wrote this,” um, and then she said, “Don't publish this. You can't publish this.”

So some of it was like, really, what I felt was my own story to tell, Um, which she also didn't want me to tell, but most of her complaints were about my talking about her, uh, about her or my relationship with her.

So November 11th, 2012, 70th birthday, um, December, Um, we're still arguing about the book, um, my book, about whether I should publish it, and she's coming up with all of these reasons why I shouldn't, and she finally says to me, sitting at my kitchen table, “If you publish this book, terrible things will happen to you, to me, and to your children.”

[15:03]

That's what I mean by a curse. Um, in any case, um, like part of why I have so much trouble telling this story is just like even the phrase, in any case, I, I just feel like I can't use that phrase with this story.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Because there's so much that you don't want to move past.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and also it makes it sound like a thing that you can just do in language.

As opposed to like, my mother fucking died. You know, like, the story of it, now, I didn't think so then, now seems untellable. Then, I felt like I was telling a story that I needed to tell, that I, that I had to tell, that was interesting to other people. And my mother was like, no, you can't tell that story. And I was like, I have to tell that story.

Now, telling the story, I feel like It's like, just even the act of making it into a story feels so offensive. And then she went to Taiwan. Um, she was supposed to be there for, um, uh, January, February, and March. She was supposed to be there for three months. She had been working for several years on translating and retelling and performing the Chinese epic Journey to the West, uh, Monkey King. Um, she felt that this story had never been properly translated for a Western audience and that it was one of the most important stories.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: And your mother's life work was stories. She was a storyteller. And she, she believed in stories as the, as the way that people learned about death, and the way that people learned about suffering.

And so much, so much of this is just… That it doesn't make any sense, right? And because in, in reality, our lives are, are pretty senseless. And, and don't, don't fit into stories, however valuable those stories are, however much we like them.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think that, you know…

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: OR they do, and there are curses, and there are, there's magic, and if she was able to persuade a lot of people that that was how the world worked.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. I mean, so, and, and I do think that one of the Purposes, if not the main purpose of storytelling and story making is to impose meaning on experience. So you can say that stories are the way that we learn how to live, how to love, how to die, how to Suffer how to, you know, make war, how to make peace.

But you can also say that like no, stories are just the sense we make of those experiences, which are basically meaningless. And the idea of, of a meaningless existence, I think is more frightening to most people than death.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Do you think that everyone believes that, or do you think that you believe that because you're your mother's daughter and you're a poet, you're sort of literarily minded?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't know. I don't know the answer to that.

Anyway. [Laughs].

The word anyway, I am now saying.

In any case. In any case.

Um, she told me this: “Terrible things will happen to you, to me, to your children if you publish this book.” She went to Taiwan, and I sent her an email, um, on, uh, January, uh, 29th, um, saying, “I have decided to publish the book. I know you don't want me to do that. Um, I do not think anything terrible is going to happen. In fact, I think this is an opportunity for us, and if I don't publish this book, I feel that I can never publish another book again and never write anything again. And I think this is my story to tell. I'm happy to add corrections, you know, that you've given me, and I hope you understand.”

Um, and then I didn't hear from her for, for about half a day, 12 hours maybe. And then the next thing I knew I had come home early in the morning from the gym. Um, it was about 6 30 AM. And the phone was ringing, and it was my mother's therapist. And she was calling to tell me that my mother had been rushed to the hospital with chest pain, had been told that she had an aortic dissection and needed an emergency heart valve replacement.

[20:05]

Um, she was being transferred to another hospital, um, and that she had, based on her age and her condition, a 50 percent chance of surviving the, the surgery, and that my mother had called her therapist on the way from the first hospital to the second hospital and told her, call my brother Gary and tell him what's happening and call Rachel and tell her not to publish the book.

So, right before my mother went into surgery, her aorta, um, exploded, that's probably not the right medical word, but it went from being an aortic dissection to an aortic rupture, ruptured, and they replaced her heart valve, um, and she did not regain consciousness. Her heart and lungs were not able to work on their own.

Um, and, you know, my mother was living there alone. They needed to know what her, if she had a health directive. They needed to know if she had a will. They needed to know all of these things. Um, I, her only next of kin. Um, you know, I, I, um, booked a ticket to Taiwan. They kept asking me, when are you getting here? When are you getting here?

Um, and you know, it takes at least 36 hours to get to where my mother was. She was in Kaohsiung. Um, so you have to fly to Taipei and then go from Taipei to Kaohsiung. Um, and you know, that she they called me when they finished the surgery and, and, you know, said it was not looking good.

I, you know, meanwhile was calling all these cardiologists and asking, you know, what is this, what does this mean? I finally asked them, like, do you want me to be there when she wakes up, or do you want me to be there to tell you to turn off the machine? And finally, I, I mean, I think that they were so, the doctors that I spoke

to and everyone I spoke to in Taiwan was so distressed and beside themselves that she didn't have any family there that it was just, they couldn't, they just couldn't comprehend this situation of this 70 year old woman, alone in Taiwan, you know, on the verge of death and, you know, neither could I, uh, and, but finally I, the doctor said, "I, I need you to tell me to turn off the machine." Um, and I said, okay, well, you know, I'm, I'm, my flight leaves in a few hours.

Um, I went to sleep a few hours later, um, he called and said, we have to turn off the machine. It's not. It's, her blood is too thick, um, was what they said.

I mean, every part of this, you know, all the details, the language, the description, the adjectives are just, you know, the very things that make it a good story and make it vivid are horrific. It's like doing an autopsy.

Anyway, um, I listened over the phone while, um, Jasper and other friends of hers were in the room. Um, and they had a rabbi or some Jewish guy who was also on speakerphone from Australia who was, uh, like saying Jewish prayers. Um, and, and her friends there were chanting things, uh, Buddhist prayers and, you know, they put the phone up to her ear and I spoke to her even though there was no sign of brain activity and then they turned off the machine.

Um, of course this was not the end of the story of my relationship with my mother, um, and I don't even know exactly when you want to measure the exact end of her life, whether it was when she collapsed during the surgery, when they turned off the machine, um, but I didn't ever end up going to Taiwan, um, and I felt that I was not going to be able to recover or make sense of this, this horrific trauma of having my mother die when she was so angry with me and not being there with her, um, and possibly at the time I believed I'd caused her death.

[25:13]

Um, I felt I couldn't make sense of that unless I went to Taiwan.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: And there are all of these ways in which I, I, I understand that most people expect to be able to process the deaths of their loved

ones that we didn't have. I mean, I was, I didn't have anything close to the kind of view of this that you did, but I have no, I have no strong feelings about burial versus cremation versus anything. But, uh, this was a horrible, confusing polemic of its own.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, she was I mean, this is like horrific, but she was in the morgue in like cold storage until the end of Chinese New Year, so it was like five or six days that nobody was going to help me get her out get her body out of there and you're really supposed to bury within 24 hours or 48 hours, I think in in Jewish under Jewish law and you're not supposed to use formaldehyde or embalming chemicals. But you can't ship a body that's been dead for that long back, you know, overseas. And so yeah, I had all of these people telling me that I, you know that her soul was in jeopardy, as was mine…

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Is the moment when we did receive her ashes and we were going to bury them in her garden a meaningful moment?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh my god I mean for sure But I mean, well…

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: we'll get bogged down in all the details if we if we try to say every single…

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean you say you say the moment of when you finally got her ashes as if that just wasn't a saga in and of itself. I had to go and pick them up from JFK shipping from China Air.

I had to have all of this paperwork. For a while it seemed like maybe I would actually have to fly to Taiwan and just take the ashes home because it was so legally complicated to have the ashes shipped.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: And, and for me, the, the moment that I will remember for the rest of my life is when we had that little box and we were standing in her garden, which was a very important place to her and to you, uh, and to, and to us, her grandkids.

And we were going to bury it in the garden. Um, and we opened up the box.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, this is not what happened. No. I remember this very clearly. So. Already there's a whole story about how we got the box of ashes because I separated the ashes into three parts, and your father thought that it would traumatize me to open and view or touch the ashes.

And so your dad brought the ashes to a Jewish burial home and they separated the ashes for me so that no one would have to see them or touch them into three packages. So I had one of the three packages of ashes. We went down to Patchen Place. We were sitting in her backyard around her table right near the tree that my father and mother had planted when I was born and Judah, who was five at the time, he had just turned six was sitting in my lap, and Judah was very very close to my mom and he was crying and I mean, I don't think he was crying right then, but he was, you know, he was very emotionally attached to her.

And the three of you, you, your dad, and, and Abram were all facing me, um, Judah in my lap. And I was giving a speech about my mom and talking about like her garden and burying it. And all three of you looked horrified, just completely and totally stricken. And I was like, why are they looking at me like this?

And I couldn't figure it out, and then I looked down and Judah had opened the box. I had not told him not to, but we were not planning to open the box. And dad was horrified, just completely freaked out.

[30:00]

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: So I absolutely was, was horrified in the moment. I had been expecting a sort of fine powder. Yeah. Um, and that's not what it was.

No. There were some, there were fragments of bone. Yeah. And they were very smooth. Like something you would see washed up on the beach. They were kind of kind of pretty yeah, and Judah had picked up a piece of bone and was holding it in his hand and and looking at it and I felt that that sort of extreme non traditional,

very brave, honest interaction with death was the best thing that we possibly could have done in that moment.

And that only five year old Judah could have done it. And that for me, my relationship with her death changed from there, because he had, he, it's not that he had taken the power out of it, but he, he had sort of faced it in a way that it could never be. There was, there was, there was nothing that we were gonna see that we, that we hadn't just seen.

Mm hmm. I don't know if that makes any sense.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Absolutely. And, and as soon as I realized that he'd opened the box and had, and was holding a bone fragment, I immediately said, "Oh, it's beautiful. Oh, this is okay. This is a …I'm glad you did that." Because I knew I didn't want to scare him. I didn't want to shame him, and I think I immediately felt that this was what was supposed to happen, even though it was absolutely not my intention and in fact uh, that your dad had gone so far out of his way to make sure that that didn't happen.

But once it happened, I, I was like, "Oh yeah, this, this really needs to happen." And I think that that is part of, it's, it's what actually happened, but it's also in some ways a metaphor for why I felt even after all those years that I needed to go to Taiwan.

We went to Taiwan. I was super scared to go. I didn't want to go alone. A few months earlier, I had hired Doreen Wang, um, to work on Commonplace. I'd never met her in person, um, and I knew that, um, she was moving, she was in the process of moving from New York to China, and she was living, I believe, with her grandmother in Taiwan. Um, and I was like, well, that's a weird coincidence, because I think I'm going to go to Taiwan.

And, um, by that time she had moved from, um, Taiwan to mainland China. And I said to her, is there any chance that I could hire you to help me plan this trip? Um, and she said, yes, not only that, but I'll meet you there. And I felt so protected by that, and I also felt protected by the idea of having part of the trip not be only about

this, like, death pilgrimage, um, and so then the, you know the trip also became, and this was what I was trying to write about, you know, I went to meet my mother's friends to go stay in the hotel that she lived in for weeks and weeks and weeks, I I managed to get a… she had a favorite room, 226, at the Seas Bay Hotel that she always liked to stay in and I managed to get that room reserved.

So I literally I slept in the bed, I wrote at the desk that she wrote at, I looked out the window that she looked out of…

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Do you think that that the trip to Taiwan confirmed for you that there… that there is still a deep mystery to these events that needs to be unraveled if you are going to have peace with your mother's… with your with your mother's death? Or do you think that the trip to Taiwan showed that there was no such deep mystery or or some other some other thing?

[35:00]

Like, is the moral of this story that it is a story or that it's not a story? That might be a separate thing. [Laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, let me answer that in two different ways. Um, there were things I learned from going to Taiwan and experiences that we had that are clarifying. So one in particular is, you know, we sort of said like that we thought, Oh, she's just in Taiwan. She's not dead. And then actually we saw her in Taiwan. over and over and over and over again, in the weirdest way, which is to say I realized only after going to Taiwan that my mother had been dressing…

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Like a 70 year old Taiwanese woman.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, she looked more, I didn't get it. You know, until I was there.

But like the clothes that she wore, the way she moved, the way she did Tai Chi, you know, everywhere she went, the way, the way she squatted, the way, I mean,

and, and, and you and I talked about this, like, did she feel drawn to Taiwan? Um, because she saw something of herself when she got there? Or did she become that?

I think she was like that before she ever went to Taiwan. Did I learn something from going there? Primarily, I learned not to expect to learn anything by going there. You know, I, I felt that I had not gotten what I came for. I, I had all of these experiences and I thought, okay, I'll, I'll sort of figure out what all of this means later.

And I, I knew it was a lot. Um, and it certainly had been very emotional, but I still felt that I had like done it wrong. And I felt I'm never going to come back to this place again, maybe my whole life. And you know, I just, I just thought like I, you know, I kept thinking like that there was something I should bring with me and leave there or get there and take home like I was trying to make a ritual and I ended up, um, calling my friend Arielle Greenberg and, um, and just weeping and weeping and saying, you know, I, I just, I'm just not sure what to do.

And I, you know, it's really hard for me to leave this place, um, because I feel like I didn't do it right. And she said, get in the water. You have to get in the water and, and there had been, there was, you know, the, the right outside of the, her hotel room was the beach and the ocean. And, um, my mother loved to swim and I have come to love swimming, but I didn't used to.

It's one of many things that I am becoming much more like her in, in these ways. And there was a sign that said no swimming, but I couldn't figure out why. And I, I never saw, I saw some people swimming early in the morning further down the beach. So I had a lot of fear. But I just was like, I have to do this, you know, like, as if, oh, well, this is obviously the final scene in the movie that is this experience, or this is the final chapter.

And I was both, like, disgusted with myself for seeing it that way, but also, like, yeah, of course, you have to get in the water. And I remember you were writing a paper about Freud [laughs]. And you were so freaked out about having to write this paper. And I, uh, texted you and said, you know, will you go down to the beach with me?

And you either said no or you didn't respond. I can't really remember.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: I'm sorry.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's okay. And, uh, and so I just was like, I have to do this. And I went down and it was, again, it was like right out of a fairy tale there. There, there was no one around. And I was really scared. And then all of a sudden there was a fisherman who just like materialized Out of nowhere.

I started to walk into the water. I was really scared. I didn't know what I was scared of. I had this idea, this like very sort of cinematic Christian picture in my mind that I needed to submerge as like a baptism. Um, which, you know, I was like, Oh my God, like, what am I doing?

[39:51]

And, but I was afraid and I stood there like waist high in the water and then Out of nowhere,a bird dove down into the water and came up with a fish right in front of me. And I was like, okay, well that's clearly a sign. And I bent my knees and I submerged, you know, into the water. And then I, I took all of these like very sentimental photos of my shadow at the edge of the water.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Maybe it was actually helpful to you that I was on my phone the entire time and I was texting my new girlfriend [laughs] and I was working on a paper that I hated writing for a class that was not that great.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I think it was. I mean, first of all, I think had you not been with me at all, that would have been really difficult.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: I don't think that I was ever fully submerged in it the way that you were.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I think that was really helpful because you, you were sort of my link to a reality, to actual experience rather than the story of experience.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Literally one hour ago in therapy, I was like, it's so funny, my mom also hates writing.

Dr. Cohen was like, yeah, that might have something to do with it. [laughs]. Well, I was just, I have been. Not writing for about a month now.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and I was in therapy also an hour ago. We actually didn't talk about writing. She and I both basically agreed that my therapy goal is the same as my non therapy goal, which is that I would like the next part of my life to be different from the how it's been before, and she said *and you want a we* and that is a fundamental shift, and I thought to myself, instead of constantly thinking that I'm I've failed at writing the intro and I failed, what if what if I actually honored this part of myself that is moving towards a we, and maybe writing can be a we, and sometimes it is, but in this case, it definitely felt like it wasn't.

I was like, I can have a conversation about this. I can talk about this. And I thought it was the difference between talking and writing. But I think it's the difference between I and we. And that and I think that being on that trip with you, again, like if you're, if you're having the same experience, you're like a plural I.

That's not what a we Is. A we is not just two eyes. A we is two different people. You're smiling at me. Like that's so dorky.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: That, that seems, that seems very true to me. Mm hmm. And underrated.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, one of the reasons why it was so hard for me to figure out how to write this intro was I just kept… I mean part of it was my resistance against the linearity of writing and the feeling that I had to start somewhere just like I had, you know, and I had to end somewhere and anywhere I started anywhere I ended was going to really determine kind of the nature of the piece, the tone of the piece, the sort of takeaway, you know, and you know, the tone of the piece, the sort of takeaway, you know, the sort you know, what was it about?

Is, is this story? Is it about me? Is it about my mother? Is it about us? Is it about Doreen? Is it about Taiwan? Is it about, um, Jasper? Is it about death? Is it about storytelling? Is it about loss and grief? Is it about the medical stuff? Is it about my book? Is it about writing? You know, and any one of those that I put at the center or at the beginning feels like a, like an imperial force that's subjugating all of the other things, and I want them to all exist simultaneously and equally and conflictingly, and….

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Because that's how they existed in those days that we were in Taiwan.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Absolutely. And, and, and, and, and, and, you know, in the 10 months since then, I've had this amazing experience of, like, one experience, or one memory, or one piece of, of that trip will sort of float up to the surface, and I'll sort of look at it, and turn it around, and think about it, and for a moment, that's the most important part.

And, and then I get to see the whole sort of mosaic of it, or the whole sort of shape of it differently with that, you know in my clearest focus, and then something else comes up and then something else comes up and it keeps it's very organic and it keeps changing and and soon I'm gonna start really misremembering all of it.You know that already have yeah, and that's that's gonna be part of this too, but I don't know how to communicate that in writing. I mean, I just don't.

That's what I want to communicate in writing.

[45:21]

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: I really hope for you… Grandma D's memory is a blessing for me. Mm hmm. And I hope that, I hope that it can be for you as well. I understand that you are for sure cursed [laughs]. I think, I think you may have more to do with that than she does. Yeah. Not trying to victim blame.

That's that's the essence of life.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you think I'm gonna get past it? Do you think I already have? Do you think there's something I still need to do or do you think? Do you think I I mean do you think going to Taiwan was?

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Maybe parat of the curse is that you always are looking for something to do to break the curse, man. Yeah, yeah,

RACHEL ZUCKER: I could be. Right.

And maybe Maybe both of us can let go of some of the ways in which we make it harder for ourselves and move towards more joy and more pleasure and less feeling bad about that.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: I just heard a beeping in my headphones.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh. Um. I don't know what that means.

MOSES ZUCKER GORENI think, I think the recording equipment said, either agrees or disagrees with you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, it's saying that the batteries are almost done. All right. Well, that's all I've got. Yeah. Thanks Moses.

MOSES ZUCKER GOREN: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. Bye. Bye

[ocean sounds]

DOREEN WANG: So about me. I was, my parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan in the early 1980s and I was born in a New York City Hospital in July 1983. And they were living in Sunnyside, Queens at the time. So, I think of myself as a Queens girl. And then, before I was six months old, my parents decided that they really couldn't take care of me because they were running a jewelry store.

And they had, they had two babies, basically, and they had to choose one. That was what they felt. So my, my grandparents came to the United States and they brought me back to Taiwan sometime before I was six months old. And so I realize that I have very few memories of my parents from my early years, but even, even like later in childhood, I don't think I have too many memories of them.

So my parents were always really busy working at the jewelry store. They traveled a lot. There were a lot of jewelry conventions where they would like take like boxes and boxes of, you know, their I don't know, their jewelry, like strands and strands of stones and beads to Tucson, Arizona and all these places.

And, so at different points, my grandparents came to take care of me in the U.S., and so I was pretty close with my paternal grandparents. And in Chinese, we call them [Chinese]. And at another point in time, my maternal grandparents came. And I call them [Chinese] but I was less close to them. And so, you know, in all these, in every family there are these strange dynamics that develop.

And my, I have a younger sister. She's a year and a half younger than me. My sister and I were kind of shuttled back and forth a bit. Not between the U.S. and Taiwan, but between two sides of the family. So, my mom's side of the family, there was like this, like, both sides had all these extended relatives, and on my mom's side, it was like the aunties that were my main caretakers. And on my dad's side, it was my paternal grandparents. And so I was kind of back and forth between them until around age four.

[50:00]

And then I went back to the U S. and started preschool in the U.S., and that's how I learned English. So I remember, you know, going to preschool and not knowing, not understanding anything and then I came home and I remember asking my mom, “What's alligator?”

And she said, I don't know, you know, and she couldn't really help me. So I have a lot of, actually a lot of early memories of being an English language learner actually. And we only went to Taiwan very intermittently as kids, so I remember

one time going back because my grandfather, did he have a stroke or some kind of big deal illness?

We all went back and I remember being around nine and that was, that was pretty scary for me as a nine year old. And then I went back one time when I was 11 because my, my parents were again really busy and it was a summer and so my, my mom's cousins took care of me that summer in Taiwan, my sister and me, and there, I have a whole like cohort of kind of young feisty aunts and I feel like I was partly raised by these aunts who they were the ones who told me bedtime stories and gave me baths and you know, I basically drew while they worked and you know, they had like a home office also sellering selling jewelry.

And, you know, then like we went to my mom's island, Penghu, which is a small fishing island off of the west coast. Is it called the west? Yeah, it's the west coast of Taiwan. And so those are like my early Taiwan memories growing up. I later discovered that when I was a baby in Taiwan, my grandfather also put me on the household registration system for our family.

And then when I moved here as an adult, that allowed me to have Taiwanese citizenship. So I'm a dual citizen now of both the U.S. and the Republic of China. There's a lot more I could say about like my family, like their backgrounds, like what part of Taiwan they came from. But I don't know how deep I should go into that.

Um, but we spoke Mandarin and then they would speak Taiwanese as a secret language. So that my sister and I couldn't understand more sensitive matters. So by the time I came back to the US and started preschool, they had moved to Jersey. And I also have memories of my grandparents being there. And I was the only kid in school who got taken to school on a bicycle.

My grandfather biked me to school and picked me up from school every day. If I had to say what the most salient part of my identity is, uh, I would say that I'm the eldest daughter of an immigrant family. And so growing up, you know, I was my parents' interpreter. I, by the time I was nine, I was doing like business writing and communications for them.

You know, like if they had to like file a complaint because of something related to their jewelry store. I was writing that and, and then I also saw my parents, you know, face all kinds of discrimination as small business owners in New York, um, and so I felt like I was I was like a third adult of the family and my mom, you know would come home crying a lot because of different things that had happened to her and and, you know, in school, if there was like a parent teacher conference, I had to be around for my parents too, um, and so I also kind of felt like a parent to my little sister as well.

Um, and so that was kind of my, um, childhood. And also then, like, discrimination that I personally experienced at school, you know, from teachers, from other students. Um, so I was pretty clear as a young person that society was kind of messed up. Um, and it wasn't until I got to college… well, you know, in high school there, there was like Asian culture clubs. I was like, Oh, I should join Asian culture club, but we didn't do anything about societal, you know, like deeply rooted societal issues. And it wasn't until I got to college, there was a student of color orientation, I went to Brown University and, and that was like huge, transformatively eyeopening. Um, I have many of my friends are still from that time period.

And I was like, Oh, I can do something about this and I'm not alone in it.

[55:00]

And so then I became a college, like I was like a campus activist. Um, and so I, I was like a. You know, I was like a hard working, achieving student for, um, most of my young life, and then when I became a campus activist, I was still a decent student, but other things took precedent by the time I was in college.

And so then I became a, didn't do a lot of my reading classes, but, you know, I had some really great professors who supported us in being whole people. I started writing probably by the time I was in elementary school. It was part of me learning English as a language. And I felt that the white page was less scary than trying to orally use words to describe the reality I was living in, and so I was like writing little stories and poems and I remember like in high school, like I won a couple of

prizes that encouraged me to continue and then in college I was a Race and Ethnic Studies Major and I remember I just somehow Brown has no core curriculum, so I just made everything fit into race and ethnic studies.

I made Chinese language classes fit into race and ethnic studies, and I said, my focus was the Chinese diaspora in Latin America, but somehow they let me fit Chinese language classes in. And, um, I also always took writing classes, and I studied with some really great people. You know, Brown has some really great people, and they teach both the grad program and the undergrad program.

And, um, I, my I did a, what did they call it at Brown? Oh, it was a creative writing capstone. It was a little bit like a minor, you need to create a final project. And my final project was a collaboration with my mom. And it was a combination of my Race and Ethnic Studies studies values plus creative writing.

Because in Race and Ethnic Studies, we always talked about how to bridge academia and the community. And I thought to myself, well how do I do that if I can't even communicate with my parents? So My mom doesn't identify as an artist or a writer in any way. She's very much like a very practical, like business woman wouldn't know… actually, she has some, like, she has some artsy, she's a very charismatic lady. Actually, she has some artsy sides to her too, but I think she would never call herself those things. And she, so she, you know, I proposed it to her and I think she felt both very nervous, but also kind of excited. So we structured, we structured this whole thing together.

I guess it was mostly me presenting a proposal to her. Uh, what we did was we created, uh, we, we drew comics about what is an eldest daughter's responsibility and we, created a timeline of each other's lives. So I created a timeline of her life, and she created a timeline of my life, and then we compared what the gaps were in our knowledge and had conversations about that.

And then we, I also created a short documentary about us cooking together, and, and then the final product was an exhibition at, um, Brown had like a, I can't remember the exact name, it was like Sarah G. Doyle Women's Center? So, it was

a really, really meaningful time in my life, actually. And I, and then I wrote a series of essays and poems related to that, and I kind of put it all together.

Um, I don't know, you know.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Did she go to the exhibition?

DOREEN WANG: She did, they helped, my parents helped install it. You know, because I, we had all these, we had like, these comics on just like eight, eight and a half by eleven paper, and like this timeline. And I'm, Actually really bad with measuring physical space and my dad did all that, you know, he pulled out a tape measure and Helped me hang everything up.

Yeah, so it's really, and then also it helped… Oh, the other thing that happened at this time was I came out to my mom. I came out to my mom my aunt because I was also in love with my college best friend who was a girl and that was not good. And so we felt like there was a lot of healing that needed to happen in the relationship.

But beyond that, because my parents didn't really raise me, they were just always busy and working. So I was the third adult in the house. I watched my sister. Sometimes we also had, um, uh, like a Chinese nanny who would be at home with us, who would like live with us and be at home with us. But at a certain age, you know, we were old enough to watch ourselves.

[59:57]

I did my final, no, so my final semester was at the University of Hawaii and I took one of my favorite professors at, professors at Brown, Daniel Kim, he taught Asian American Lit and we read a lot of literature from, from Hawaii. R. Zamora Linmark, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and I was like, oh my god. So I realized that everything I did in Race and Ethnic Studies was really about finding where Chinese people could be at home and comfortable IN where they were. That's why I was interested in Chinese diaspora issues.

So I took time off from Brown. I went to Peru. I finally learned Spanish after, you know, middle school and high school classes that weren't very helpful at all. I went to Hawaii also for the same reason. I was like, Asian people seem like they do really well here [laughs].

And when I got to Hawaii, I realized, oh, that's actually very complicated. Um, and I had a great professor who said to us on the first day of class, most of you all are settlers here. And I was really inspired by the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. I started trying to write poetry in Chinese language and I showed it to my mom and she said, good effort, it seems like a five year old wrote it [laughs].

Um, and so that, yeah, so I spent some time in Hawaii. I, um, did a little bit of traveling after that. So I was kind of, so I went to Taiwan, because I was already out in the Pacific, so I just went like further east. And, went back to New York, started applying for jobs. And I got a job at the Museum of Chinese in, Chinese in America in Chinatown, New York City. And I started off working in education. I taught ESOL at a local Chinatown public school. And also led gallery tours and walking tours of Chinatown. And, you know, there was other kind of education, educational activities that we had.

But then I also came on to work on the exhibitions at the museum. We were planning a huge long, like the permanent exhibit of the new museum once it would move into a new building. And so it was this historical survey starting from the early 1700s until like modern day. Um, and a lot of it was about US China relations. And that is I think part of the history of Chinese Americans as well.

When I was in college, I somehow got an internship at a worker's center on the Lower East Side. And it was all very random because basically my friend couldn't do it and the worker's center had, they had gotten some funding and they needed an extra, like they needed an intern, so they didn't even know who I was and I didn't even know who they were, but it worked out.

And it turned out to be hugely impactful on my life. And instead of thinking of myself as a aspiring professional, I began to think of myself as a working person and as a worker. They were, they were a pretty radical, um, Maoist worker center

on the Lower East Side. And so, not only did we do organizing around housing issues, um, as well as like kind of more bread and butter labor issues, we also would read like theory. So I read Lenin. I didn't read a lot of theory. I read Lenin and Mao and Marx. And, you know, we talked about the myth of the middle class. And how, you know, really all of us are workers. And without us, almost nothing in society could happen. And so I learned a lot about power and my own agency through that.

And as a student activist at Brown, it was more about how we were oppressed, but our, our, how we were powerful, and how we could be powerful together, and how we, how, how, what were our commonalities besides that we were all just people of color was not as clear to me. So, the Worker's Center was so influential that, and then also, the Worker's Center, asked all of us to think about our lives, and not just, you know, have pity on people working, um, blue collar jobs.

[1:04:55]

So, there was white collar worker organizing, too. So, by the time I graduated from Brown and started working at this museum, I was also involved again in the Worker's Center. I was on the board of directors at one point. Um, it wasn't hard, you know, you just had to be very active, and you got voted in, basically.

And, so, around the time of the 2008 financial crisis, we were, I'm gonna go into a little bit of the story of how I got fired from the museum [laughs]. 2008 financial crisis, there was, we had staff meetings weekly at the museum, and you know, we talked about how, hey, you know, it's a bad time right now, and the museum has, you know, every year the, the way the balance is, the way the balance of the budget fell, we would sometimes, oftentimes be a little bit in the red, but it was okay because, like, we figured, I wasn't in charge of finances at all. So I didn't know the details.

But this year, the board felt really concerned because of the general environment. So they were proposing cuts on all of our salaries, and we were not making a lot of money as like a grassroots nonprofit museum. And because I was organizing

people in the Lower East Side in Chinatown, I knew that Chinatown restaurant workers made more than me.

Which is a great thing, you know, but not so great in some ways and not great in other ways. They made more than me because there had been so much labor organizing in Chinatown and all over all those years. Um, I was like, yeah, so there should be organizing the museum too. So but I wasn't thinking that much.

Um, and then after that staff meeting somebody on, somebody on staff saw on her alum, like her school's alumni listserv that there was a post for a new executive director. They were searching for a new executive director. and offering a salary that was double what the current executive director was making.

So then we were all like, oh, well, that sounds like they're cutting our salaries to finance a salary of a new, new ED. And that's not okay. Before, before we found this posting on, it was like a Yale alumni listserv [laughs]. Um, before that we had spent hours trying to rebalance the budget. Many, many, many meetings, figuring out ways to do cuts that didn't affect our salaries. So much time. We even met with the board, like we had gone to like some board member's fancy office down on Wall Street. And then to discover that posting felt like such a betrayal. So then I was like, this is not okay. Oftentimes, as working people, we feel like there are two choices. We either put up with it or we quit when we quit and we go somewhere else, oftentimes the options are not that much better. So what about a third option? You stay and you fight.

So I wanted to do that. I wanted to try to start a union so we had better protections, um, as staff and also stay and work at the museum. And I then brought it to my coworkers and they were really, really nervous about it.

Um, and I was definitely the person trying to spearhead this effort. So then all of our following staff meetings was basically grilling… people grilling me about why I wanted to do this. Then there's another staff meeting where the current ED told us that that before was a 5 percent cut in our salaries and now it was a 10 percent cut or we would have to let somebody go.

And he wanted us to vote on it because he wanted us to be a democratic institution. And I said, that's bullshit. We shouldn't be voting to like kick somebody off the island or, or all take a hit on our salaries. And then the day came when we were called in for the vote and I refused to vote and then the next day, and then, you know, I remember the ED said, oh, you know, I'm so I'm so sorry Doreen that you're forcing us to come to this decision. And the next day he told me I was fired. And so then I then I started doing more stuff.

Then I started a picket line outside the museum. And I also filed a complaint at the National Labor Relations Board. And it was a, it was a big to do. Um, and I was like in Chinese, I was in different local New York City newspapers at the time. And my parents joined me on the picket line. Really, my parents, a lot of kudos to them for being non traditional Chinese parents.

[1:09:48]

Like, they really, literally, they were willing to be on the line for me, literally, and metaphorically, and, um, but it was a really tumultuous time in my life, because I was just like a high achieving, good student type, and I'd never been fired before, um, and so it was like, I think there was like, my ego was dented in all these ways, but I was also trying to figure out like how to be a, I think in other words, I was trying to be like a high achieving labor activist.

So it was just a really tumultuous time in my life. And also at the time, because the museum was affiliated with other Asian American institutions. So I, I remember a friend of mine had gone to an event at the Asian American Writers Workshop and she asked the head of the Asian American Writers Workshop, Hey, what do you think about what's happening at MOCA, the labor dispute, blah, blah. And he called me a liar. And that was hurtful, too.

I mean, I bet he doesn't remember me or remember this time or anything now. Because, I don't know, I guess I feel like I've tried really hard to, um, live my life ethically, it felt really hard to be called a liar so publicly. Um, yeah. So I ended up having a lot of feelings about Asian America from that experience. That I, I was

sure that I identified as Asian American, but I didn't necessarily feel like Asian Americans were my people.

I feel solidly that immigrants, other children of immigrants are my people. People of color are my people. You know, with all this stuff and tensions and things between us. But like I don't know, I had all these feelings about Asian America. Also 2008 I was I was involved in a worker center and I was, I started a romantic relationship with, um, this man from Mexico and he was, um, undocumented and he worked in restaurants all over the Upper West Side. I don't know if you know of Saigon Grill. Do you remember the picket line at Saigon Grill?

I was on the picket line along with him, um, you know, however long it went on. And then, you know, Flor de Mayo? He was at Flor de Mayo. So, Flor de Mayo is quite interesting. I began, when I began working at MOCA, we, when I was an intern, my focus as an intern was, like, Chino-Latino like restaurants and like businesses, so I had known about Flor de Mayo because it's like a Chinese Peruvian owner and Adolfo worked there and was just so random and then there so him and his co workers… his brother was inspired by the picket line of Saigon grill. He was a delivery worker. He came back with a flyer brought it back to Flore de Mayo and then Fernando, Adolfo's brother and Adolfo basically started a pretty highly publicized lawsuit against Flore de Mayo. So Adolfo and I started dating, and I remember when everything was going down at the museum, I would hide in the bathroom and call Adolfo. Like, I'm so scared. They're threatening me, you know? And um, so that was all happening. I got fired. But I think because I had like the worker center and Adolfo, and he had been through so much stuff too, so I had a lot of support. And I, so then I was like, okay, I got fired. And I was also able to get unemployment.

So I gave myself some time off. And I I'm looking back and realizing I had all those moments where I took time off in my life from, you know, my college semester in Lima, Peru to, you know, this firing. So I was on unemployment. It was nice. Dustin had moved to New York. We like kind of were doing that thing.

I went to Taiwan for a while. I also, you know, by the spring, my unemployment was running out and I got a job at the census. The 2010 census that year. And I had

lots of interesting experiences knocking on doors in my neighborhood in Queens. I moved to Queens. I, I had also done this like queer women of color writing workshop at the Audre Lorde project.

My friend Naomi Jackson said there was an opening at her foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. So they were looking for somebody to work in the grant making program, um, on New York City grant making as well as China grant making. And I was like, wow. I would love to do that. Uh, and I didn't realize how different the programs were in New York City.

The New York City grant making program supported arts and culture organizations and immigrant, immigrant, like, immigrant organize, immigrant issues organizing. And then also, like, kind of sustainable development in New York City. And I was like, okay, that sounds all familiar to me and good. And the China part was, uh, where I really didn't know how deep, like, how deep the waters I was getting into.

[1:15:07]

I really knew very little about China or about China's environmental movement. So it was really, it was like about climate change and environmental pollution and public health at the time. And I, I think my supervisor kind of knew I knew nothing about China, but because I had Chinese language skills, I think I got the job partly because of that.

And I was saying to a friend the other day, like, about, this is a bit of a tangent, about how, for me, there… there is no light without dark and she was like give me an example, and I was like, well the fact that I can speak Chinese is my example. Because I was bullied for it as a kid, you know I would get off the payphone at school and have ching chong ching chong be… like people said that literally to m. So but the fact that I can speak Chinese now is such a gift and, um, definitely part of the reason why I got that job.

So I worked at Rockefeller Brothers for six years. Three years I did part time, like New York City program and China program. The final three years I was full time with a China program. And that also changed my life because it got me thinking

that I wanted to move to Asia, and that I I met just really really brave creative people working on progressive change issues in China, and they had to work in in situations that were more challenging that I had ever imagined, being jailed, being worse than being jailed, their passports taken. I don't know if it's worse, but their passports could be taken away. Things could happen to their family members. Like I met activists whose family members were contacted all the time. It wasn't rare at all. And, but they also had to be so creative and innovative because of the risks that they were under.

So it was, if you wanted to survive, you had to get creative or you just stopped doing it. And I, um, felt like meeting these people also changed my life. So, um, I also wanted to learn more and be based on the ground in Asia and in China, really. And, and I think another part of me wanted to learn about this place I had heard about all my life.

And I said to you the other day that I feel like I'm the child of two empires, the U.S. and China. And through my job with Rockefeller Brothers, I was also learning about Chinese investment and Chinese kind of investment and kind of building projects all over the world. And the U.S. China relationship was, you know, just even during the Obama years, like tense, you know, like a lot, like another, one of our partners called it, um, cooperative competitors, you know, and how much emphasis on the cooperation, how much emphasis on the competition is something that is in flux all the time, but these are, whether I like it or not, these are the defining powers of our world going forward.

And so, I felt like, as somebody of Chinese descent, no matter where I went, no matter how much I talked about being an American, I had this Chinese face, and that's how people read me. And wherever I went in the world, if something bad was happening with China, they looked at me.

And if something bad was happening with the U.S., if they knew enough, they also looked at me, too. And so, I bore some responsibility somehow and I wanted to have more knowledge so I could speak to that.

Okay, so I'll back up a little bit and say too that, so I've been in this long relationship with somebody who's undocumented and he had three kids in Mexico. Um, and Adolfo, so Adolfo had first come to the U. S. in 1997 when he was 17 and he comes from a small little town in Guerrero called [indecipherable] much longer name that I can't remember now. And then his family had moved to a city called Tlapa de Comonfort. And this was, this is also kind of known to be like one of the most dangerous States in Mexico.

The U S state department has advisory warnings for us citizens to travel there in 2014, 43, um, teach, um, teaching, what are they calle,d students training to be teachers were traveling from uh, a small city in Guerrero State, they were traveling to Mexico City and you know, these like normalistas, these like teachers in training, they also have a tradition of being activists and en route to Mexico City, they all disappeared.

[1:20:12]

And so they came from, so this is like the state that Adolfo comes from. It's like also one of the states where there are like the highest rates of remittances. So um, anyway, so Adolfo, it was always a question of like, is he going to need, is he going to go back? Will he need to? Does he want to? And then they had won their lawsuit against Flore de Mayo, but the way the lawsuit was settled, I hope it's okay, we can figure out whether or not this is okay to say on tape, but the payout was over six years. So he had to be in the U. S. for six years after… What year did they win the lawsuit? Maybe like 2011? So he had to be in the U. S. for six years to receive payments even. So it's part, like, partly why. He had also, he had also, um, become a staff member at the Worker's Center.

So he had, he was just super involved. He was like the first staff member that was, I don't know, like everything about him was like kind of unique in this way, you know, he was the first, no, maybe not the first, but he was just very involved, he had a community, we had a community, um, he, you know, was on TV, in the newspapers, and he like wasn't like shouting out that, about his undocumented status from the top of the Empire State Building, but he was never like hiding it either, um, and then in 2014, I started traveling to Mexico to meet his family,

almost for him, because he couldn't go or otherwise it would be hard for him to come back.

And, um, so this was always kind of in the backdrop of our lives. And, but by the time it was 2015, his grandfather died. And his grandfather was the rock of the family. And he was always, like, if somebody in my family is sick or something happens that's big, I need to go back. And so I just lived, we lived with a lot of uncertainty about when that would ever happen.

But I knew his grandfather's death would be a big deal. And I, by the time I had gone to visit his kids and his family in Mexico, my first time was with my sister, actually. So we went together because it was such a big, momentous trip. And my sister said, you know, um, somebody has to advocate for these kids. Um. And that means getting Adolfo to go back.

So, um, it took me, it took me more time than my sister to get around to that, but I did. Um, so I started convincing Adolfo that he needed to go back, too. And, um, yeah, so by the time his grandfather died, it was time. So by late 2015, we started plotting out an exit strategy.

Like, we took, we gave ourselves like one year to implement an exit strategy from the U.S. So, we coordinated, like, the quitting of our jobs, um, and like, like saving up money and, um, all of that, yeah, yeah, yeah [pause].

Wo, um, and then, I guess the last piece of this is we bought our ticket for, so I, I said I would help him move to Mexico halfway. Because if I went all the way to Tlapa de Comonfort, it would be, it would be a little strange. His family would be like, well, why aren't you going to stay with us here? And I just, I was still trying to debate whether or not I could move to Mexico more permanently, but it felt like I couldn't do it at the time.

And, um, so I was like, okay, I'll help you move to Mexico City. And we bought our tickets for November 8th, 2016. Thinking that Hillary Clinton was gonna win [laughs]. We just really didn't believe, because we were in that New York City bubble, you know, so, you know, I remember I wrote something about this. So, but

I remember like leaving the house that day before dawn. We had this like huge dinner with like everybody in his life like the night before. We left our home before dawn. And um, we like arrived in Mexico City and like by nightfall, it was becoming clear that, like, Donald Trump was, like, was somehow going to win, you know, like, we didn't believe it.

So, like, we went to bed, and [01:25:00] the next day we woke up. I remember, like, the biggest newspaper in Mexico had in bright capital yellow letters F U U U U U C K [laughs]. That was the headline.

[1:25:11]

And then people told us, well, you know, Adolfo got out in the nick of time. And we heard lots of stories like even when all of my time during all my like during all those years with Adolfo I learned so much I learned so much like my parents were always like my parents were never like, like my mom was like first you came out to me and then you start dating a documented Mexican man with three kids, yyou know, like what the fuck [laughs]. And so I just but it was really interesting because I felt so safe with him. I felt like I was with somebody… first, my friends and I used to play this game. It was like the apocalypse game. If the apocalypse came, which ones, which one of us would die first? And I would be like earlier in the order of dying first, but Adolfo would always make it to the end.

He had survived everything already, you know, but he had also survived everything and he was like the most he was like the gentlest, most generous person I had ever met. And I was just like, sometimes I would be like, if I, I would say to him, like, you know, if I got tortured, I'm not sure I could be strong enough to like resist like spilling all the secrets.

And he'd be like, yes, you can. Yes, you can. And I would always like really believe him because I felt like some of the things that he had been through in his life were... I would just be on my imagination, you know, um, and even just like my 10 years with him and like our eight years in New York, you know, his, I went to the hospital because his nephew got stabbed and his brother had gotten brutally beaten up.

And that was how his brother got citizen, like got a green card because there's a special status for victims of crime, if you report to the police, his brother was like, Oh, it was awful. And, um, after he, after Adolfo self deported to Mexico, one of our other good Mexican friends from the worker center, like he was beat up by a couple of guys in the Bronx who specifically talked about Trump, you know?

And so like many friends were like trying to comfort us, trying to comfort us saying, okay, it was a good thing, but, um, yeah, so it's just been a, it's been a very intense time since I've left the U.S. The U.S. I mean, just, an underbelly that was always there was brought to the light more and uh, I gave myself like, I just gave myself another like time off period in 2017 that was, um, and I went to go visit Adolfo Mexico over the summer. I spent a month over there with him and I, I don't know. The question is like, when did I know that things were at the end? You could say I knew from like year one, you could say I knew that summer in Mexico because it was such a hard summer.

I wasn't very happy there that summer and he knew it and I knew it but like we didn't know what to do about it. So, um, he, he, I went to visit him, then he came to visit me in Taiwan. Um, that was a, that was a huge trip because travel was so hard. He had never traveled. Like, he had never filled out a customs form in his life.

And he told me, because he filled it out wrong, that he missed a flight. So his route was, eight hour bus ride from Tlapa to Mexico City, spend the whole day in Mexico City waiting for a midnight flight, fly to, fly to Toronto, then Vancouver, then Taiwan. That was like three full days of travel. By the time he got to Toronto, he filled out the customs form wrong, so he missed his transfer to Vancouver.

They lost his luggage. He filled out the customs form wrong because they ask you questions like, are you bringing any weapons? And he didn't understand. And he wrote, yes. And it was like, are you bringing like agricultural meat products? Yes. So he like, then we like laughed about it, even though it was like tragic and funny at the same time.

Um, just 2017 was like figuring out my relationships, and then I like slowly started to build a life in Taiwan. I just did a lot of random stuff that I can say more. I did

maybe, I did more writing, although not as much as I hoped. And I started thinking about this audio project that I want to do too.

[1:29:47]

I started like recording oral histories with my, with my family members. Um, I also did a engaged Buddhism social justice training for NGO workers in Thailand. That was also very transformative for me. But these are all long stories. So anyway, we're in 2018 now, 2018. I'm like, okay, my savings are running low. I should start to work again. And so then I started to, I was like, okay, what do I do? And that, that's just, um, it's also been a time of like, confronting inner demons, you know, like anxiety around like making money and like, what does security mean to me? So I, some friends introduced me to like a foundation that needed translation work done. I started doing a little bit of that.

And my, my friend Brenda, who you met, told me about a non profit in Taipei that needed somebody to teach creative writing. So I did that over the spring and that led to some editing jobs. Um, and so it was just kind of piecing it all together. And then I, this is like 2018 still, then I had an epic summer in the States.

I applied for this, like, podcasting boot camp for women of color that Spotify was running. I got into that and they paid for me to go to the U. S. So I got to spend the summer in the U. S. learning more about podcasting and I finally graduated from Kundiman after like 10 years. And I… what else happened? I did a road trip across the U.S. Anyway, I, I did a female sexuality workshop with Betty Dodson, so it was just a very random epic summer. It was, it was really good.

Then I started working for Commonplace after my summer ended. Basically, I was back in Taipei by September working for Commonplace, and I was also thinking, okay, I've been in Asia for a while now and I've said I'm going to move to China and I haven't. So what, what will that take?

And I thought, well, I went from having a very rooted life in New York to this other kind of life, which feels very untethered and sometimes it's scary, but it also

gives me a lot of freedom. So I packed up one suitcase and I tied up some loose ends in Taipei and I moved to , China.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: You've been listening to Episode 80 of Commonplace, the first in a two part episode on Taiwan. I'm your host, Rachel Zuker. This episode was edited by Katie Fornelius and me. And produced by Katie, Doreen Wang, Christine Larusso, and me. For this episode, Commonplace's partner organization will donate $150 to a Taiwanese non profit organization chosen by Doreen Wang, and $50 to the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition, which demands that Yale University divest from fossil fuels and Puerto Rican debt.

Among other actions, this group, of which Moses is a member, Delayed the Harvard Yale football game by occupying the field and getting arrested. Money collected by the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition goes to legal support necessary for the group to keep doing this important work. It will take a bit longer than usual to get a transcript of this episode to you, but we will make one available as soon as possible.

So much gratitude to Aumaine Gruich and Justin Todd Smith for their incredibly generous time and effort in making transcripts for this and so many other Commonplace episodes. Thank you to our Commonplace Book Club members, thank you to our patrons, and to all our listeners. Thank you for listening.