

More Migrants with Nowhere to Go?

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Mary Theis

"More Migrants with Nowhere to Go?"
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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.5 (2018)**
Thematic Issue **Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives.**
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Abstract: In her article "More Migrants with Nowhere to Go?", Mary Theis reframes the stories of the Tai Dam and discusses this group of people, who migrated from Vietnam and Laos to Thailand and then to Iowa in 1975 after the wars in Southeast Asia when they virtually had nowhere to go. It is based on interviews with some of the 1,200 Tai Dam who were invited by Governor Robert Ray to resettle in Des Moines, Iowa, and nearby cities. The stories are contextualized by research on U.S. policies on immigration and the current precarious fates of other migrants in the United States to reflect not only upon just how many in the United States appear to be retreating from its *raison d'être* but also upon potential reactions to the inevitable, not-so-distant demographic consequences of climate change.

Mary THEIS

More Migrants with Nowhere to Go?

Would-be migrants to the United States today can no longer count on the welcome once promised in Emma Lazarus's famous sonnet in the Statue of Liberty to the tired, poor, "huddled masses" teeming on other shores. Many doors to other countries have been shut for Syrian and other migrants within the past few years all around the globe, but for the first time, the President of the United States, according to an August 5, 2017 report by Jonathan Blitzer on National Public Radio seems very receptive to a "merit-based immigration system" that would lock them out except for highly skilled immigrants preferably fluent in English. Along with the still euphemistically called evolving plan for his infamous wall along the Mexican border, this proposed restricted immigration policy responds to the concerns of some U.S. Americans about competition for their jobs, funding their public assistance programs and supposed threats to national security posed by immigration from the South.

This type of win-lose thinking reflects a desire to control the direction of U.S. demographics in their favor, which to them seems even more essential now that the blatant rigging of the maps of electoral districts to favor one political party is being challenged in the courts, as, for instance, in Pennsylvania, where its Supreme Court intervened by drawing its own map so that voters could choose their representatives rather than the other way around. The White House has exploited job insecurity and prejudice to distract attention from the injustice of its own economic policies. These do not alleviate income inequality that, as *THE WEEK* reported in its May 18, 2018 issue (16), reached a level in which the world's richest 1 percent received over 80 percent of the wealth created worldwide last year—a related subject that is beyond the scope of this study.

The steps taken to deter immigration to date include: intimidating Latino and other immigrants and inciting violence among xenophobic individuals, immigration bans primarily restricting entry to Muslims on the basis of country of origin, plans to cut legal immigration in half in part by stopping chain immigration of families, eliminating the lottery system that granted green cards randomly to a select few from underrepresented regions of the world, denying public assistance to immigrants seeking permanent residence, and deporting those deemed likely to be a burden on the public.

When not refusing entry to asylum seekers, as noted in the same issue of *THE WEEK* (7), current White House measures for deterrence also involve separating children from their detained parents although concern already exists about the potential trafficking of immigrant children. As Ron Nixon reported in his April 26, 2018 article in the *New York Times*, federal agencies have already lost track of nearly 1,500 children who, having fled drug cartels, gang violence and domestic abuse primarily in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, approached the border alone and then were insufficiently monitored after being placed with sponsors who released them to people they thought to be relatives.

Other arbitrary conduct and unnecessary rough treatment on the part of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have resulted in tearing innocent immigrant parents with no criminal record from their American children (Pilkington), such as the deportation of Amer Othman Adi, who was sent back February 8, 2018 to Jordan after 39 years in the United States. According to Jomana Karadsheh and Kareem Khadder's February 8, 2018 CNN report, Adi spent nearly two generations raising a family with his second American wife and building from scratch several successful businesses that have created numerous jobs and made him a pillar of the community in his beloved Youngstown, Ohio. His first marriage to an American woman was invalidated when she was pressured to declare it fraudulent. She later rescinded that version of their marital history. Adi had permission to remain under a private bill that Trump rescinded to instill fear and dissuade other immigrants. No matter how law-abiding most of the undocumented immigrants are, nor how deeply rooted in the lives of fellow Americans, no humane pathway to citizenship appears yet certain for noncitizens except perhaps for those serving in the military.

Even those trying to enter legally have been refused permission to enter: a Latina university student with a green card was stopped at JFK international airport because she did not seem fluent enough in English (Theis, 12 April 2017). That sojourner arrived from a country not subject to Trump's executive order on selective exclusion of immigration the day it first went into effect in New York, where she experienced the chaos of arriving passengers crying and trying to get answers from less than polite TSA agents. Speaking Caribbean Spanish and some English, Maria Ramirez (not her real name) had a mini-interview with a customs agent, who had no translator with him to assist her. Their failure to communicate naturally first made her nervous and then quickly a person of interest, so she had to go through a second interview that made her situation even worse. They questioned why she

did not speak English very well despite having had a green card for two years. She waited twenty-four hours at the airport for a return flight back home. Ramirez had been extremely vetted and had no problem entering when she arrived the first time to start her studies in the United States because her father is a naturalized U.S. citizen. She did not have to win the lottery. Moreover, one can have a green card for ten years before becoming naturalized. Initially she was considering dual intent, which means obtaining citizenship in the United States as well as in her home country. When U.S. federal courts later blocked the executive order banning immigration from certain countries, her family had to chip in to pay for a second flight to the States. Not having been allowed to enter due to the unwarranted overreaction of the ICE agents, she is reconsidering whether she even wants American citizenship (Theis, 12 April 2017).

She is not the only Latina, of course, to be stressed out by the efforts to dissuade immigration from the South of the border as Mikaela Shwer's 2015 documentary, *Don't tell anyone! (No Le Digas a Nadie)* shows. In this film, Angy Rivera, a Colombian immigrant's oldest daughter who came to the United States at the age of 4, recounts her own and others' courageous efforts to become naturalized U.S. citizens. While trying to complete her education, she was one of two principal caregivers for all of her U.S. American siblings. Angy's pursuit of citizenship was finally rewarded because of a loophole: visas are given to the victims of crimes committed against them here, and she was sexually abused as a child in the United States. Not long afterward, her mother also sought and was granted U.S. citizenship.

Yet those who are no longer even temporarily safe in the United States now include other groups of people who have demonstrated that they are law-abiding, productive, and contributing members of society. Their situations have become increasingly precarious. A total of 300,000 migrants from around the world have temporary protected status (TPS) in this nation. Some of them have never lived outside the country and only speak English. Even the Haitians and Salvadorans who were granted TPS after earthquakes are at risk. The Haitians must be gone on or before September 2019. Kamal Essaheb, the policy and advocacy director at the National Immigration Law Center has reported that even some of the Dreamers—those refugees who were brought as children to the United States and were granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) by President Obama—have been illegally deported according to Katherine Mangan's June 16, 2017 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Trump Will Continue DACA for Now, Though Immigrant Students Still Wonder About Its Future." The fate of the rest of them, despite their academic achievements and service in teaching in U.S. schools, now depends on congressional negotiation before March 2018, the deadline set by the President last year. This issue now has become a bargaining chip in the context of comprehensive immigration reform and the President's own derogatory broad-brush descriptions of Latinos and the confusing divisive conditions that he now demands to permit immigrants to stay. Noteworthy is the fact that undocumented immigrant parents of U.S. citizens and of permanent-resident children, never benefited from the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), an Obama-era program that was blocked in the courts before it could be carried out. Exceptions to the terminated DAPA, however, were granted in the past.

Due to the animosity of the White House and given a much shorter rope in 2017, many Haitians have already sought sanctuary in Canada. In January 2018, the President made his bias quite explicit with racial slurs, that on January 18 Donald Trump Jr. attempted to explain away, by his father's singular obsession with another color, green—the color of money. The same day that Trump Jr. admitted in this way the limits of his father's thinking and empathy, Tal Kopan reported that the Federal Register removed Haiti from the list of countries that are eligible for H-2A agricultural and H-2B nonagricultural temporary permits, effectively eliminating for Haitians all means of legal entry. Other than the fact that 39% of Haitians are said to overstay their visas as do some of the highly skilled employed by tech-related industries, no other statistics have been given to support this decision. Kopan, however, cites research by Michael Clemens, a senior fellow studying the economics of migration at the Center for Global Development on the profit for businesses that Haitian temporary workers earn in terms of produce and services: each temporary Haitian worker contributes \$4,000 each month to the U.S. economy while sending back home another \$3,000 (Kopan).

Nevertheless, last year instead of the usual 18-month extension, the Department of Homeland Security, noting Haiti's progress in recovering from the 2010 earthquake, cut the extension of TPS to Haitian refugees from that devastation to 6 months to allow for "an orderly transition," in other words, deportation. This response ignored Haitian President Jovenel Moïse's statement that his country was not yet in a position to receive the fifty thousand Haitian refugees with TPS living in the United States due to the subsequent \$2.7 billion damage caused by Hurricane Matthew, which is equivalent to 32

percent of Haitian GDP. Having destroyed Haiti's southern peninsula's infrastructure, homes, crops and livestock, that hurricane has meant "a dearth of housing and increased food insecurity" in Haiti, according to Edwidge Danticat.

As of January 2018, nearly 200,000 Salvadorans have been put on notice that their TPS is also being revoked. These individuals have been living in the United States for a generation. Eighty-eight percent of them now have jobs and about a quarter own their homes. Two of the President's immediate predecessors extended their TPS because of gang violence and severe poverty in their country of origin. This notice should come as no surprise, however, in view of the fact that even American citizens in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories who have survived Hurricane Maria did not get the same prompt recovery assistance by this administration.

According to Priscilla Alvarez, previous administrations' proposals for immigration reform were much more humane: George W. Bush's plan provided legal status for millions of undocumented immigrants in the United States, set up a new guest worker program, and included a merit-based system; Barack Obama's proposal was bipartisan and offered a pathway to citizenship for many immigrants already in this country while it strengthened enforcement. Left out of his proposal was any mention of an effort to reduce legal immigration.

The current White House prefers instead to continue the mistaken practice of adding to the misfortunes of migrants in what Daniel A. Gross termed "the tradition of persecuting the refugees." He references a very clear instance of that from 1939, when one quarter of the 937 primarily Jewish passengers on the *St. Louis*, a German ocean liner, were not permitted to land in Miami. They died in the Holocaust after it was sent back to Europe from the United States. Thousands more of desperate Jewish refugees on the *SS Drottningholm* from Sweden were turned away from the United States in 1942 because the State Department and Franklin Delano Roosevelt feared there might be more than one Nazi spy among them. Deporting the afore-mentioned Salvadorans with their 192,700 U.S.-born children makes even less sense since they have demonstrated for almost two decades that they do not pose any threat to other U.S. citizens. This administration's arbitrary, arrogant, win-lose, me-first attitude disgusts and horrifies many fellow Americans and others who applaud global efforts to protect those seeking shelter from human cruelty and natural disasters that will only become more frequent due to climate change.

In this upside-down context, therefore, it is both wise and necessary to restore the balance found in recognizing our common humanity, as the future will undoubtedly bring ever increasing pleas for humane responses to wars, more devastating natural disasters, and the additional economic and political turmoil they entail. To that end, it helps to recall the benefits of seeing migrants from all latitudes and longitudes as individuals in need. These are evident in the following pages from the family histories of the Tai Dam, long-term refugees from northwestern Vietnam who sought refuge in the United States over forty-three years ago—another "interesting" time in American history.

One thousand two hundred micro-cultural people without a homeland were permitted after the wars in Southeast Asia to come as a group to Iowa. Like double knots, these immigrants have held together their families and many of their traditions while strengthening the frayed patchwork quilt of their new homeland. Having overcome poverty, linguistic difficulties, radical changes in climate and diet, and significant differences in cultures, their journeys were truly heroic and an uplifting experience for freedom-loving people everywhere. Their cohesiveness as a group, self-sacrifice for their families, hard work and adaptability have made it possible for many to both survive and thrive while helping their neighbor Iowans heal after U.S. meddling in Vietnam and subsequently helping them cope with other traumatic events, including the arrival of the boat people and the cleanup after 9-11.

The story of this "minority among minorities" (*Nowhere To Stay*), called the Black Tai because of their embroidered black traditional clothing, began centuries ago in southern China when the Mongol-driven Chinese moved south and the ancestors of the Tai Dam left the Valley of the Himalaya Mountains in southern China, according to historical accounts of this period from the Joshua Project and Handmade Southeast Asia. Those who stayed in China were known as the Dai. The Tai Dam who uprooted for the first of four times dispersed to Thailand, to Laos, and to four provinces in northwestern Vietnam, Son La, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai, which were called the Twelve Tai Principalities (Sip-Song-Chau-Tai) ("Tai Studies Center").

When the French colonized Southeast Asia at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, they granted semi-autonomous status to these principalities, which became known as the Tai Federation. Many served in the French administration and in its military, which in 1954 was definitively defeated at Dien Bien Phu by the communists, aided by yet

other local people. Because the cultural practices of the very conservative Tai Dam clashed with those of the Communist Vietnamese, their ethnic rival burned their books and legislated against their performing their traditional funeral rites honoring their ancestors. So the Tai Dam emigrated a second time, going first to Hanoi in 1952, and then south in 1954, as their homeland was absorbed into North Vietnam. Some Tai Dam stayed in Vietnam. Others crossed the border into Laos, stayed in a village near there for a short time, and then moved to the capitol, Vientiane, partly in search of more appropriate jobs and partly for its location near the border with Thailand—just in case history would repeat itself. There they enjoyed rebuilding their lives and two decades of peace.

Then the foresight of the Tai Dam elders paid off. Just before the fall of Laos to the communists, many Tai Dam emigrated a third time, quickly crossing the Mekong into Thailand, where they were given shelter on the grounds of a Buddhist temple. Historically along with schools, mosques and courts, temples in Southeast Asia were "topographically anomalous" and thus traditional "zones of freedom" (Anderson 169-70). This particular temple made room for them. Unprepared for their arrival in Nong Khai, the Thai, who have cultural and linguistic links to the Tai Dam, did what they could for their uninvited guests. After their first few nights outdoors, the Tai Dam were permitted to sleep under the huts of the young Buddhist monks, who, one source said, shared at night with them part of the food gotten as alms in the morning that they had hidden from the elder monks because the young monks were not supposed to eat anything in the evening. They also shared their comic books with some of the Tai Dam. One of the respondents interviewed for this study said that this early graphic entertainment was how at the age of 12 she learned the language spoken in Thailand (Theis, 9 July 2017).

Soon, however, it became crowded, and conditions worsened as the Pathet Laos across the border took complete control. Much later the camps in Thailand were said to look more like prisons, and the Tai Dam then became "illegal aliens" and were barely given enough to keep them alive (Baccam II:1, I:2). One Tai Dam woman described herself as skinny as a "fishbone" when she rejoined her relatives abroad (Baccam II:7). On behalf of their people, Wing Cam and other Tai Dam elders, however, got to work right away seeking asylum abroad in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and France, but mainly in the United States because they wanted to be free once and for all from the communists and because the Tai Dam women were exhausted due to having to hustle for food in a nearby town. The second largest group of eight hundred went to France. Some of the hundreds who spoke French and "had connections to the French war effort," went there because "an automobile company sponsored some to work" (Walsh 59). The system set up to receive the first wave of Tai Dam refugees in the United States paved the way for their relatives and many of the traumatized boat people who subsequently joined them in Iowa (Walsh 109).

The very first U.S. resettlement effort took place thanks to the intervention of Arthur Crisfield, an educator and a former USAID worker, who having learned from his sister in France that the Tai Dam had become refugees in Thailand wrote to thirty different U.S. governors (Walsh 40-41). Their fourth and final emigration in the winter of 1975 came about because Iowa's Governor, Robert Ray, persuaded President Ford and Kissinger at the State Department to make an exception that would allow the Tai Dam to settle as a group in his state. Governor Ray's resettlement agency helped many find jobs. Their local sponsors, of course, played no small part in this effort. Many Iowans, having first found room for them in their hearts, found places for them to live. In taking this positive step, they may have felt a little lighter in spirit after what was then called America's longest war.

Governor Ray was virtually the only U.S. governor who responded to the incentives offered by the federal government, whose goal was to take in 150,000 Southeast Asian refugees. The compensation for resettlement included Medicaid, cash assistance, social services and \$500 per resettled refugee (Walsh 43). Ray's resettlement program, known for its work-first component, became a model for foreign leaders as well as other governors. Through his Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees End Starvation (SHARES), Iowans also made direct donations to desperate Cambodians and others starving in camps in Thailand. By 1982, 8,700 Southeast Asians had resettled in Iowa. "Since then, the Tai Dam population alone in the United States has grown to 10,000. Eighty percent of them have remained united in the state of Iowa," according to the Tai Studies Center's film, *Nowhere to Stay*.

Precious few of these multilingual people spoke English although some who first came would be considered skilled workers. Their spouses and many others were not, a fact that would prevent them from settling in the United States if the U.S. Congress were to pass the Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment Act (RAISE Act). Space here does not permit the inclusion of the history of U.S. immigration nor of the vicissitudes of this re-emerging initiative, that has pitted against each other industries favoring the entry of low-skilled workers with industries needing highly skilled

foreign-born ones. Suffice it to note that this thorough overhaul of the system of immigration has once again become more salient in the mainstream under Trump, who in the words of Alvarez represents "the best opportunity" for restricting not only illegal but also legal immigration in twenty years. Ironically, the unintended consequences of this type of social engineering could very well be a weakened economy due to the loss of many who still believe in the American Dream and are willing to do almost any kind of work to achieve it. At the very least, for those who think in such terms, the United States is turning away customers: the tourists who no longer want to spend their money here as well as the immigrants who cannot.

Proposed on February 13, 2017 by Republican senators Tom Cotton and David Perdue during President Obama's second term, this amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 floundered, but it was brought back to life by President Trump, who was inspired by Canada's point system for immigration according to an August 4, 2017 article in *Forbes* by Andy J. Semotiuk, a U.S. and Canadian immigration lawyer. The RAISE Act eliminates the diversity visa lottery that has allotted a certain number of visas to countries with historically low levels of immigration to the United States; "limits the President's discretion in setting the number of refugees annually admitted to the United States"; reduces the number of family-sponsored immigrants otherwise known as chain immigration; and creates a new nonimmigrant classification for adult United States citizens' parents, who would not be allowed to work or have access to public assistance; nor would they be eligible for permanent visas, so they would have to renew their special status every five years. These changes "would transform the current employment-based system to a merit-based system," potentially reducing legal immigration by fifty percent in ten years (Gross). Eliminating the diversity green card lottery that has granted 50,000 green cards to foreigners who might otherwise never qualify in any way to immigrate to the United States, the RAISE Act according to Semotiuk apportions instead those 50,000 visas to refugees.

That figure for all migrants including those fleeing natural disasters restricts the influx in any given year. It seems quite modest for those without U.S. passports, given that twice that number alone left Puerto Rico for the mainland after Hurricane Maria according to Ana Campoy. On February 8, 2018, Reuters reporter Yeganeh Torbati noted another potential disincentive to immigrants: the Department of Homeland Security may scrutinize the eligibility of immigrants for permanent residence according to their use of food stamps and public assistance for utility bills and preschool, a practice that currently is barred for noncitizens. Semotiuk has pointed out that the administration is also considering investment-based permanent residence permits along with those of skilled worker immigration (formerly separate categories in Canada and up to now in the U.S.) and that this might be an indication of how the White House may change the EB-5 visa. No mention in the RAISE Act was made of allowances for climate refugees who might easily exceed the cap at 50,000 green cards. A few years ago, there was broad support for *higher* legal immigration, but in evident contrast to that, according to the February 16, 2018 issue of *THE WEEK*, a new Harvard-Harris poll has found that now "some 70 percent of U.S. Americans want to end the visa lottery, 80 percent reject family-based migration, and nearly 80 percent want secure borders." Inhumane conditions following unwise political decisions made in the name of national security, however, can cause an equally amazing change of heart, as was the case after Vietnam.

In the past the United States held unfavorable policies toward all Asian immigrants, who were dubbed the Yellow Peril. Despite their considerable ethnic diversity they were often lumped together and treated "as one monolithic group" (Lee 36). Since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, however, immigration from Asia "has grown exponentially" (Lee 38) as has the number of applications to prestigious U.S. universities (Gersen). In this comparison of that earlier tumultuous period and now, it is impressive that among Asian immigrants in the United States today, sixty percent have college degrees. This is twice the number for other immigrants to its shores (Neuliep 98). In 1965, Asian immigrants accounted for 1% of the total U.S. population. Today they make up nearly 6% (just over 18 million) and are the fastest growing microcultural group in the U.S. (Neuliep 98). Anna Brown and Renee Stepler of the Pew Research Center reported that in 2013, over 41 million immigrants were living in the United States. This was 13% of the total population, four times the number for 1960, when about 10 million immigrants made up about 5% of its population (Neuliep 9).

In 1975, the Tai Dam refugees were allowed to enter because of another legal loophole: technically they were from Vietnam, a place that unlike Laos had fallen to the communists when they were still living there. Had the recently proposed skill requirements been in place then, the heartland of the United States would not have benefited from the many contributions of this multilingual, talented, generous, brave, and law-abiding people. Consider for instance, the courage and community spirit of

Lo Van Vong, a former soldier who arrived on December 4, 1984. While in Vietnam, he had translated for the leader of the Legionnaire group, Battalion 22-Griss that he joined after being "the last person" fighting during the non-stop 55-day battle that marked the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. On the road to Hanoi, he slipped away from his group of POWs and went to Laos, where he joined the Laotian army, and then after its defeat went to Thailand, where he sought to establish a foothold while planning to return to the fight. There, however, this brave man discovered that former "high officers" had all given up the cause. While in the army, he worked as a "physician." The French called him "a medical assistant" (Baccam II:15). When he got to Iowa, however, being "too old to study" and not speaking English or having any knowledge of computers, he could not do that line of work and took intensive lessons in English for 6 months so that he could take a position at Container Recovery, Inc., a beer bottle company. His wife started out cutting fabric for Bob Ellen Companies (Baccam II: 14-5) before being trained to take on other modest employment. Many others agreed to take whatever work was available to avoid asking for public assistance, a major component of Governor Ray's initiative that at the time had its critics. So when one Iowan called the governor to object that "native" Iowans would not be able to find jobs because of the influx of refugees, having anticipated that type of pushback, he pointed out to her the 400 available jobs listed in *the Des Moines Register (A Promise Called Iowa)*.

Some Tai Dam with more training and education, however, eventually got jobs that suited their professional background. For instance, before seeking asylum in the United States Khao Baccam, a francophone who had earned a scholarship to study electronics in Canada, worked in Laos in the magnification of hydroelectric energy. Although conditions for him during his seven to eight months in Thailand were "not that difficult," his status as a refugee had frequently interrupted his education (Baccam I:2). Nevertheless, his entire family got to come over, except for one sister, who went to France. At first he took an hourly wage because he did not speak English, but English as a Second Language classes were made available through Iowa State University and the University of Iowa, and he soon landed a job with IBM fixing computers. He bought a house in 1979, after four years in the United States and has three U.S. American children (Baccam I:6-8).

Computers have also been the passion of one of the very first Tai Dam women immigrants to Iowa. She arrived when she was 12 and had difficulty her first year or so with English in school, but she graduated in the top 15 of her high school class. Now a business systems analyst with a degree in Economics and a minor in Computer Science, she followed her passion in information technology eleven years ago when she was offered a position during the Y2K scare instead of accepting a promotion with higher pay. She flies sometimes to Austin, Texas on business, but usually she works out of her home on line with contacts in India, South America, Brazil, Hungary, and Romania (Theis, 9 July 2017).

Proud of her family and heritage, this Tai Dam woman is related to Tai Dam elders, who, like her, devote many hours to the care of others in their community. Her communal spirit extends now to her American community. Empathetically, she takes time to hear the perspectives of people unfamiliar with her culture in order to make a human connection before she explains her culture to them just as she did as an adolescent before caller ID. Then she would listen to crank phone calls and help the callers understand the Tai Dam. Her younger son, who joined her for this interview, had just graduated from college with a degree in psychology; his older brother, also a recent graduate, is planning to go to graduate school in radiology (Theis, 9 July 2017).

Their family, community and service-oriented sentiments are shared by two other Tai Dam couples interviewed in the summer of 2017. One leader of the Tai Dam community is a Laotian-American and the husband of an ethnic Tai Dam woman. He knew French and English grammar before his arrival in the states. About to retire in a few years, he is employed by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Because of the asbestos in the atmosphere following the destruction of the twin towers in New York, he was asked by OSHA to go to Ground Zero to monitor air quality for seven to eight hours a day and to check the workers' masks. "It was so sad," he said, that he had to go home, but when he was asked by OSHA to do it again, he returned without hesitation a second and third time (Theis, 10 July 2017:1).

The wife of another multilingual leader of this community had studied English in high school before coming to Iowa. A native speaker of Laos and Tai Dam, she could read English much more fluently than she spoke it. After she immigrated to Iowa, she pursued her education, getting her GED in 1982 and later a degree in bookkeeping and accounting from Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC). Her first full-time job naturally was at an accounting firm, Greyhound Accounting Center. Currently she works for the post office in Des Moines (Theis, 10 July 2017:2).

Also born in Laos, her husband spoke Tai Dam and Laos, but used his French to learn English in the United States. Very few of his Tai Dam age mates in that first generation earned tertiary degrees after they arrived in the United States. He is one of the few exceptions. Having had the opportunity in Laos to attend private schools, he studied at DMACC and Grandview University in Des Moines, and continued his education at LaSalle University, where he obtained a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree. Today he often does the legal paperwork for many Tai Dam, directs the Asian Home Care facility, and helps to manage other affairs of the Tai Dam community in Iowa (Theis, 10 July 2017:2).

In September 2017 these and other members of the Tai Dam in Iowa celebrated the Tenth Anniversary of the founding of their Tai Village in Des Moines. Bought with pooled resources and donations from outside, it is situated like the villages of their homeland in a forested area along a curve of a river, in this case, the Des Moines River. Naturally for this ancestor-worshipping people, it boasts a museum and a welcome center dedicated to Governor Robert Ray, whom they revere as one of their elders. Their cohesiveness, empathy for others, and hard work made possible this testimonial to their past and contribution to intercultural understanding, and it allowed them to thrive in a very different culture and climate: only 2.5 percent of the Tai Dam have ever received public assistance, a figure well below the average for native Iowans (Bachti).

In conclusion, although many migrants and refugees tend to resettle in their own geographic region or continent, especially African and Asian migrants, as did the Tai Dam before settling in Iowa, according to UN Department of Economics and Social Affairs, for the first time the period between 2010 and 2015 saw more migrants "added to the population of Northern America coming from Asia than from Latin America and the Caribbean" (LAC): immigration from the LAC corridor had declined steadily on average from 0.8 million in the period 1990-2000 to 0.3 million between 2000 and 2015 (*International Migration Report 2015*). The same UN agency stated in 2017 that the "largest number of international migrants (50 million) resided in the United States of America" (*International Migration Report 2017*). Recently entry from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean has become increasingly difficult. However, in our evermore interconnected and demographically shifting world, the uplifting stories of the Tai Dam undermine the justification in the United States both for restricting immigration to skilled Anglophones and for vilifying as rapists and drug lords those that are not, whether they are from halfway around the world or from the southern half of our vertically, that is, economically compressed planet.

For if under the climatic conditions today, a country only looks inward, takes care of itself and denies shelter to those in need, where will it find the needed empathy when everyone faces not only class-related vertical compression but also horizontal compression due to rising sea levels, fires, drought, and other natural disasters? According to Aryn Baker, Cape Town, South Africa was about to earn the dubious honor of becoming the first major city to run out of water before the end of April 2018. Drought conditions will undoubtedly heighten political conflicts not just there but in Syria and several Middle Eastern countries. It would be tragic if one of the wealthiest countries in the world would become one of the first to run out of empathy to help cope with migration due to such foreseeable and other traumatic events. The year previous to the current one was once again the hottest year ever recorded. Sooner than expected, the humaneness of humanity will be tested as to whether, regardless of economic wellbeing and country of origin, it can ensure that there will never be more migrants with nowhere to go.

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