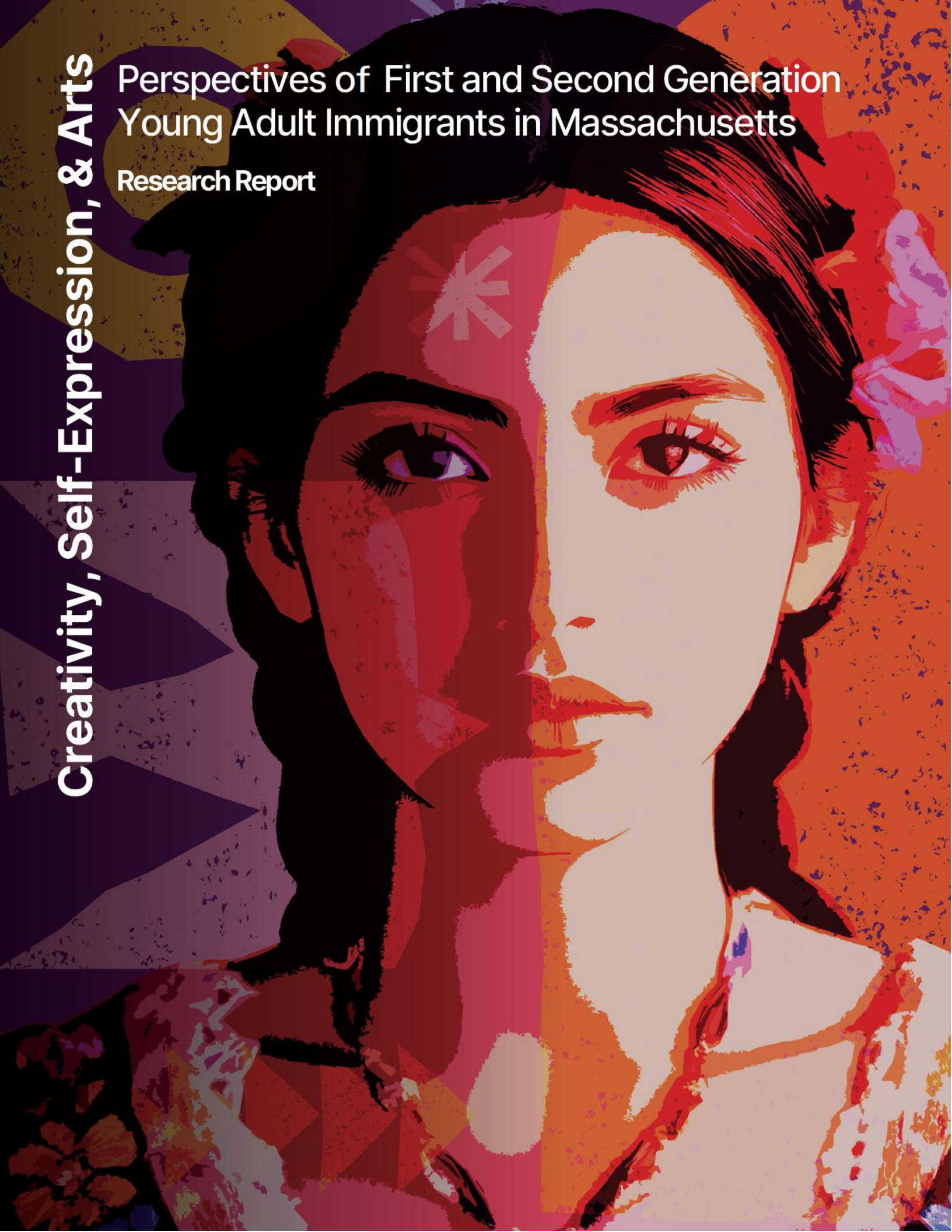
Creativity, Self-Expression, & Arts

Perspectives of First and Second Generation Young Adult Immigrants in Massachusetts

Research Report



RESEARCH REPORT

Creativity, Self-Expression, and the Arts: Perspectives of First- and Second-Generation Young Adult Immigrants in Massachusetts

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FOREWORD

Bao-Long Chu
Program Director, Arts & Parks, Houston Endowment

I left Vietnam with my family on April 27, 1975—just days before the fall of Saigon. After a few years in Miami and Galveston, we arrived in Houston in 1979, one of only a few hundred Vietnamese families in the city at that time. We were part of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees entering the country under Operation New Arrivals—professionals, educators, civil servants—who fled South Vietnam after the collapse of a government we had served. There was no formal cultural infrastructure to welcome us. No temples. No nonprofits. No Vietnamese community centers. Organizations like the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association (VCSA) wouldn't emerge until 1990, and Boat People SOS came later.

Before there was infrastructure, there was family.

My earliest exposure to Vietnamese arts and culture came through music nights my parents hosted with other refugees. Friends formed makeshift bands; neighbors gathered to sing songs of longing and loss—ballads about Hanoi, about separation, about leaving home. It was karaoke before karaoke. And many of those in the room, including my parents, had lost their homes twice—once in 1954 when the Geneva Accords split the country and again in 1975, when the last helicopters left and the boats began to sail. After dinner, my mother would tell us Vietnamese folktales—animal stories, cautionary fables—but sometimes she would slip into personal memory: tales of betrayal and exile, her own harrowing departure from the North. Those stories, along with the music, became my first teachers of culture. They rooted me in something older than the present, and more fluid than history books could ever explain.

This early exposure shaped me into a poet and eventually led me to co-create the opera *Bound* with composer Huang Ruo. *Bound* tells the story of a Vietnamese American teenager caught in a legal and cultural limbo—not unlike many of the young people represented in this study. Both Huang and I are what filmmaker Elizabeth Ai calls "escape artists"—creatives whose work is born from exile, transformation, and the stubborn act of remembering.

Reading this study the same week as the country marks the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon was deeply personal. Our diasporic reflection on the war's final days and its survivors remains the same after the intervening: we are still reckoning with what was lost and what had to be rebuilt in its place.

This report is a vital, timely, and moving portrait of young immigrant and refugee adults navigating complex identities through creativity. It is not a study about what they lack—it is about what they create. Its strength lies in its embrace of the full range of expressive life:

from poetry to cooking, from clothing choices to caregiving, from formal dance to social media videos.

The participatory, peer-led research design offers both rigor and trust, allowing for honesty often absent in institutional studies. Its emphasis on storytelling, positionality, and co-authorship models a more humane and equitable approach to arts research.

Themes that stand out to me include the following:

1. **Creativity as Emotional Release and Identity Formation**

   Many participants describe creative practices not as hobbies, but as vital acts of emotional regulation, survival, and self-integration (pp. 48-50). Whether through journaling, photography, or cooking, these expressions help metabolize the pressure of growing up bifurcated—feeling at once American and inherently "other." These are not just cathartic moments—they are acts of reconstruction.

   In this way, arts and culture serve as a safety valve for many immigrant youth, particularly those navigating conflicting expectations around language, family, gender, and visibility. As someone who also grew up split across those fault lines, I recognize this creative function as essential—not decorative. These youth are, in many ways, escape artists too: not fleeing their identities, but reshaping them through creative means.

2. **Cultural Participation Happens Outside the Frame**

   The study shows that for immigrant youth, cultural participation often exists outside institutional walls. Whether it's cooking for religious gatherings, organizing Instagram poetry accounts, or attending prayer ceremonies with grandparents, creativity lives in relational and often informal spaces (pp. 50-52). In these moments, cultural creativity is often intertwined with moments of safety.

   As with my own upbringing—where music nights preceded any formal organization—these expressions are deeply meaningful yet frequently overlooked by traditional arts institutions that privilege gallery-based or performance-based work.

3. **Systemic and Institutional Barriers Remain High**

   Participants report a lack of familiarity with how to access arts opportunities, a fear of bureaucracy, and persistent impostor syndrome—particularly among undocumented youth or those without formal training (pp. 58-63). Some don't know how to invoice or submit a W-9. Others fear that engaging with institutions might expose their status. This is not a deficit of ambition—it's a structural failure of access. Arts institutions often speak of inclusion but continue to build systems that are hard to navigate without cultural fluency or professional networks.

This study affirms what many of us have known instinctively but lacked the language to express: that creativity in immigrant communities is neither accessory nor aspiration—it is survival, inheritance, and joy. It is the thread between exile and belonging.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, I think of all the stories that have been passed down in kitchens and car rides, at altars and open mics. Those of us who are escape artists—by history or inheritance—know that art is how we remember without breaking. This report doesn't just document those memories; it dignifies them.

May we listen. And may we build accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

Art has a unique power to bring people together. Created through the lenses of diverse artists, it can be a bridge - connecting histories, cultures, and communities. Our nation and society are enriched by the many people who have found root here, each contributing something special to the ever-changing story of who we are. Yet, the existing research literature about the arts and culture sector often misses this part of the narrative.

Slover Linett at NORC and the Barr Foundation undertook this important research project to better understand the ways immigrant communities engage with arts and creativity by exploring their creative and artistic identities, as well as their relationships to cultural institutions. This report *Perspectives on Creativity, Self-Expression, and the Arts: Highlighting First- and Second-Generation Young Adult Immigrants in Massachusetts* is presented in the spirit of inspiring more dialogue within the field about how to deepen existing relationships, build new ones, and authentically represent the work of immigrant youth artists. The report, while not intended to be comprehensive, highlights key findings and implications gained from 35 qualitative in-depth 90-minute conversations with young adult immigrants across Massachusetts. The research aimed to answer: what is necessary for arts organizations to better highlight this population with integrity alongside other populations that are already visible? What does an ecosystem of resources for this population look like and what role can larger well-connected arts organizations play to highlight already existing resources?

A great deal has changed in the short time since the initial pandemic-era research collaborations that lead to this 'deeper dive' analysis of the contributions and impact of immigrant youth artists on the arts field. At the publication of this report, we acknowledge that this report also highlights what our State and our communities are poised to lose as immigrant populations are unfairly vilified in this country.

We recommend prudence with applications of this rich resource, but we also hope it sparks meaningful dialogue among all of us – funders, administrators, and practitioners about how we can all more fully support our immigrant neighbors – not just as artists and audiences, but as leaders, storytellers, and catalysts in our creative ecosystem. At a time when these communities face increasing scrutiny and further marginalization, let this report be a call to action and a call for celebration. The future of Massachusetts requires us all to embrace the full spectrum of creative voices who want to shape it.

Giles Li, Director of Arts + Creativity, Barr Foundation

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Overview

This study explores how immigrant young adults in Massachusetts understand creativity, culture, and belonging—and what those perspectives mean for the state's arts and culture ecosystem. Conducted by Slover Linett at NORC in partnership with the Barr Foundation, the research centers the voices of young adult immigrants whose experiences are often overlooked in arts and culture research, despite their significant presence and influence in Massachusetts communities.

Through in-depth qualitative conversations with young adult immigrants across the state, and in collaboration with co-researchers, advisors, and peer reviewers, this study surfaces key themes and implications for how arts and culture organizations can more meaningfully connect with, support, and learn from immigrant young adults.

Key Findings

Four thematic areas emerged across our conversations with young adult immigrants. Please see pp. 17-20 of the report for more in-depth key findings.

CREATIVITY

Being an immigrant is an act of **creativity on a daily basis**—one that is both a source of pride and a challenge. Young adult immigrants engage with creativity at multiple levels, particularly for wellness, self-grounding, and envisioning their futures. Because of this, they are **a naturally aligned audience** for arts organizations.

COMMUNITY

Community is essential for both first- and second-generation young adult immigrants and often takes shape through cultural or creative sharing. These practices help foster belonging, connection, and mutual support.

ARTISTS

For many participants, creativity is seen as a practical, everyday tool which anyone can engage in, while **being an "artist" is contingent** on skill level, available time, and access to financial resources. We heard less emphasis on preserving traditional art forms; instead, those who pursued artistic practices described **blending past and present influences** in new and personal ways.

ECOSYSTEM

Many participants felt that the U.S. has a strong arts and culture landscape—but one that is **not highly accessible or welcoming** to immigrant artists. Arts and culture organizations were seen as most valuable when they offered opportunities for **consistent, ongoing connection**. These organizations were also viewed as important spaces for **representation**, creating space for dialogue and highlighting the value that immigrants bring to American society.

Reflections

In collaboration with co-researchers, advisors, and peer reviewers, we examined what this research suggests for how the arts ecosystem can align with and deepen connections with young adult immigrant artists and communities. Please see pp. 21-25 of the report for more in-depth reflections.

AMPLIFY

- **Support similar studies** on excluded or ignored communities' relationship to the arts.
- **Magnify arts programming** that prioritizes mental health, joy, and community healing—not just visibility or representation.
- **Support intergenerational and informal community spaces** that already exist within immigrant-serving organizations.
- **Create space in your organization to reflect** on this report and collectively process the experiences it highlights.

DISRUPT

- **Dismantle the hierarchy** that places "arts" above "culture" and that clings to strict artistic genre categories.
- **Disrupt the binary** of "artist" versus "non-artist" and help normalize how people can bring an artist's mentality to life through any career.
- **Link arts to wellness and restoration** more explicitly and in more varied ways.

ENGAGE

- **See young adult immigrants as natural allies** and partners for creating spaces of dialogue.
- **Help young adult immigrants break through stigmas** and cultural/social pressures that being an artist is not a legitimate career.
- **Nurture on-going and long-term community relationships** by extending connection outside of cultural showcases.

SUPPORT

- **Provide young adult artists with opportunities for group-based self-reflection** that support self-knowledge building among early-career immigrant artists.
- **Strategize and implement appropriate pay** for young adult immigrant artists.
- **Invite opportunities to hear from young adult immigrants** about what would be useful to them to help navigate a difficult arts ecosystem.
- **Build relationships with social service agencies** and non-arts resources to connect and strengthen multiple support systems that contribute to community vitality.

Background

BACKGROUND

Study Overview

Massachusetts has a significant immigrant population, with immigrants making up almost a fifth of the state's population as of 2024, and a similar proportion of its labor force (based on the 2024 American Community Survey). Slover Linett at NORC and the Barr Foundation undertook this important research project to better understand the specific perspectives of immigrant young adults in Massachusetts– their creative and artistic identities, their relationships to cultural institutions, and how they see their place in the workforce. This study is vital not only because the lived experiences of these young people matter intrinsically, but also because immigrant youth remain significantly underrepresented in existing literature on arts and culture.

The goals of this research emerged as an extension of our pandemic-era national Culture + Community research collaboration with the Culture Track team at LaPlaca Cohen and the equity-and-transformation experts at Yancey Consulting. The Barr Foundation helped to support this work, sponsoring "deeper dive" analyses and reports for Massachusetts-based arts organizations and foundations. In 2023, we participated in additional conversations with the Barr Foundation and numerous Massachusetts-based arts community foundations about ways to continue to draw lessons from a new phase of focus. Those conversations have directly led to this new qualitative research project. The arts community foundations we spoke with felt that young adult immigrants were a population that their local arts ecosystems were not fully connecting with and that arts organizations could benefit from better understanding their values and needs.

To ground this focus, we also reviewed relevant scholarship using keywords such as informal arts, immigrants and arts, traditional arts, cultural transmission, culture bearers, and youth creative expression. Our review revealed a notable gap in research focused specifically on immigrant youth and their cultural lives–highlighting the urgency and necessity of amplifying their stories.

To help bridge that gap, we conducted 35 in-depth 90-minute conversations with young adult immigrants living in Massachusetts, with conversations held over Zoom web-conference software. We talked to people ages 18 to 39 with a range of relationships to arts and culture, and who were from a variety of different immigrant backgrounds and had diverse geographic rootedness within Massachusetts. Our research team, which included four co-researchers who also identify as immigrant young adults or arts practitioners based in Massachusetts, worked to collaboratively highlight participant perspectives on the role that arts, creative activities, and self-expression play for themselves, within their families, and for the communities they are a part of. Additional areas of focus include perceptions

of arts organizations within communities, how arts organizations could better support immigrant communities, perceptions of traditional and contemporary arts, the identity and roles of artists within communities, and deepening connection to home cultures versus exploring other cultures.

We hope that this report will contribute to a growing body of cultural research that must continue to evolve with and for these communities. A selection of key reports and studies that we reviewed are listed in the Appendix (pp. 79-80).

Research Team & Partners

As in any qualitative study, the researchers themselves are part of the research, especially in the kind of exploratory, semi-structured interviews we used in this project. It is important to note that one member of the primary Slover Linett at NORC research team, Camila Guerrero, is herself a second-generation immigrant, while the other three interviewers and co-authors on this report, Barbara-Shae Jackson, Emily Bray, and Tanya Treptow, are not themselves first or second-generation immigrants. Additionally, none of the primary research team has lived in Massachusetts. Therefore, our four co-researchers have been instrumental in multiple phases of the research, helping to refine the research design, engaging in conversations with participants, debriefing, and collaboratively making meaning from what we learned. These co-researchers are themselves first and second-generation immigrant young adults living in Massachusetts who have professional and personal connections to the arts. We are immensely grateful for the opportunity to work with each co-researcher throughout the many steps of this project. These individuals are:

Emma Burke, *Artist / Junior Art Director, Elevated Thought*

Hendrick Hernandez Resto, *Artist / Creative Director, Sleepless In New England*

Andreza Moon, *Artist*

Shuming Ni, *Designer, Chao Tian Inc.*

We have also been honored to work closely throughout this research process with a very thorough and thoughtful team at Barr Foundation, including Giles Li, Jamilah Bradshaw, Yvonne Belanger, and San San Wong.

This study has been strengthened and deepened through numerous conversations with community-connected arts leaders in Massachusetts, who served as an advisory committee during the design and analysis stages of this project. We're appreciative of their generosity in helping us think through priorities and implications of this study, and in the energy they spent helping us invite people from their communities to participate in this research. These individuals include:

David Andrews, *Director of Fundraising and Development, 3rd EyE Unlimited*

Issa Coulibaly, *Artistic Director, Co-Founder, and Master Djembe Drummer, Crocodile River Music*

Slandie Dieujuste, PhD, *Vice President for Campus Life and Community Engagement, Springfield College*

Michelle Garcia Fresco, *Program Director, Elevated Thought; Dominican poet and organizer*

Xiaohong (Ada) He, *Community Outreach Coordinator, Chinese Culture Connection*

Melissa Martinez, *Executive Director, Berkshire Immigrant Center*

Margareth Shepard, *Former Framingham City Councilor; Board Member, Brazilian American Center (BRACE)*

Chummeng Soun, *Program Director and Senior Instructor, Angkor Dance Troupe*

We also are grateful for feedback from three peer reviewers of this study, who helped us situate the findings and relevance of this study at a national level:

Rocio Arondo Alvarado, *Senior Program Officer, Creativity and Free Expression, Ford Foundation*

Bao Long Chu, *Program Director Arts & Parks Houston Endowment*

Dr. Nada Shabout, *Regents Professor of Art History, University of North Texas; Coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI)*

Participants & Recruitment

The 35 individuals we interviewed represented residents of regions across the state of Massachusetts, including the Berkshires, Greater Boston and Cambridge, Greater Worcester, Metro West, Northeast MA, North Shore, the South Coast and South Shore, and Western MA.

Our participants identified with a rich diversity of races, ethnicities, and countries. They were Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, and Middle Eastern. They represented many world regions, including Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and South Asia. Specifically, they represented 23 countries of origin: Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Haiti, India, Iran, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Taiwan, Uganda, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

We intentionally chose not to interview immigrants whose culture of origin stemmed from European countries, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (though we had several who had immigrated to one of these countries and then again to the U.S.) Also, we didn't speak with people identifying as only White from any country of origin. As a research team, we felt

= country of origin for one or more participants

Additionally, the choice to only interview people ages 18-39 highlights the desire to fill the gap in arts and culture in understanding the experiences of young adults early in their life journeys, especially immigrants who are at the stage of "figuring things out" regarding their creativity and creative practice. We chose to capture those stories, and we want to reiterate that this research is not intended to cover the entire landscape of immigrant experiences. Instead, it is meant to cover a small piece of ground well. If we had expanded the age group more broadly, it would have been more challenging to make meaningful inferences regarding the experiences of a group that has been largely ignored in research, despite them being a focus of a fair amount of programming in the sector. We want to make a strong statement about why the young adult immigrant experience is unique and should matter, independently of any others' experiences, to the arts and culture field.

We also want to emphasize that this study is not meant to speak for "the" immigrant young adult community in the U.S., as immigrants are far from monolithic. Our interviewees span many parts of the world, languages spoken, and reasons for immigrating alongside being multifaceted individuals with diverse identities and unique life-experiences. The findings and implications offered in this report are reflective only of the experiences of the 35 people we interviewed—and possibly other immigrant young adults with similar identities and experiences. We hope readers will join us in resisting the urge to generalize or compare these findings to other groups and instead take them on their own terms, as insights to help the arts and culture world reflect on the role of creativity, community, welcome, self-care, wellbeing, and other dynamics in their work. We are delighted to be able to have the space to highlight immigrant young adult perspectives on their own, without requiring the justification of comparison to other groups.

We connected with 26 of our participants through a third-party professional recruiter. The research team worked with the recruiter to strive for diversity of country of origin, region of residence in Massachusetts, connection to arts and culture, and a range of other demographics (e.g., gender, LGBTQ identity, disability identity, and income). Based on randomized sampling we expected that this group of recruited participants would be less connected to the arts professionally. We did not recruit individuals who worked directly for an arts organization.

We connected with the other nine participants through our advisory committee, through their work and personal circles. This group was expected to be more deeply connected to the arts, and even potentially working in the arts (although not directly for an arts organization). We affirmed that they identified as first or second-generation immigrant young adults and did not screen them for any other personal characteristics.

Definitions

First Generation Immigrant: A person who is born outside of the county where they have immigrated to.

Second Generation Immigrant: Children born to first-generation immigrants; they are born in the country their parent(s) immigrated to.

Conversation Scope

This study used in-depth conversations to explore the varied insights and unique experiences of 35 immigrant young adults living in Massachusetts. Each conversation included some combination of these eight team members, with usually one leading the conversation and one taking notes. We were aware that different combinations of researchers, particularly in terms of racial and immigrant background, may have brought up different dynamics in each interview, as noted in other studies.

During the interviews, we consulted the guide rather than using it as a script, so that we could be responsive to each participant's unique interests and contributions. We intentionally took a broad approach to this inquiry, exploring general dynamics of creativity, community, welcome, culture, self-care, and organizational influences rather than focusing narrowly on only arts and culture organizations and attendance. This allowed us to hear and explore how culture and community experiences and organizations naturally fit into peoples' lives. The research design was reviewed and approved by the NORC institutional review board (IRB). For more information about the study consent and interview protocols, please see the Appendix.

Throughout this report, we display and discuss quotations from the interviews without attribution. This was to ensure participants' anonymity and privacy as well as to encourage

candor and intimacy in the conversations. In the quotes included in the report, we typically share several sentences to fully convey the intent and emotions of the speaker. We have condensed some of them for clarity.

All interviewees were offered a chance to conduct the interview in a language other than English. One interviewee chose to do the interview in Mandarin instead of English. We had the guide translated and a Mandarin speaking co-researcher conducted the interview.

Intended Audiences

As we've drafted this report, we've kept three primary audiences in mind as readers, so that we can tailor findings and implications in directions most applicable to these readers:

1. Arts organization that center immigrants in their work, supporting either specific cultural or ethnic communities or a general immigrant diaspora, who may want additional connection to arts and culture sector supports or collaboration with other immigrant-serving organizations

2. Arts organizations who serve multiple communities and who may want to specifically deepen relationships with immigrant communities or undertake new, more intentional programming to engage immigrants

3. Arts funders such as community foundations, state-level funders, national level funders who may want to consider intentional strategies for supporting immigrant artists and immigrant communities

We have also kept in mind a number of secondary audiences, including arts organizations that have not yet started relationships with immigrant communities, general immigrant-serving organizations that want to bring in an arts lens to their work, immigrant service funders, cultural heritage arts funders, community leaders hoping to strengthen community, and study participants.

Report Graphic Design

We are grateful to have collaborated with Eileen Riestra on the design of this report. Eileen is an award-winning bilingual designer and artist based in Boston with over 18 years of experience working at the intersection of art, culture, and community. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, her work was shaped by the vibrant colors and cultural richness of the Caribbean. Through design and visual storytelling, she centers humanity and resilience—highlighting individuals rather than masses, and honoring each person's unique story and cultural identity. Her approach combines strategic vision with hands-on execution in print, digital, photography, and social media. From leading creative direction at Depict Brands to collaborating with brands such as Wayfair and HomeGoods, Eileen creates expressive, purpose-driven work that uplifts communities and supports immigrant- and minority-owned businesses. Learn more at https://eileenriestra.design/.

Key Findings

KEY FINDINGS

CREATIVITY

Being an immigrant is an act of creativity on a daily basis—one that is both a source of pride and a challenge.

Adapting to a new place requires coping, survival, and learning from anew. Immigrants may be in situations that are uncomfortable, that constantly require fresh problem-solving. We heard from many who felt that immigrants inherently need to have a creative mindset—and they often expressed pride in how they'd worked to adapt in Massachusetts.

Young adult immigrants are a naturally aligned audience for arts organizations, because they engage with creativity at multiple levels—particularly as a means for wellness, self-grounding, and visioning.

In addition to the creativity required in an immigration experience, creativity is also important in the journey of becoming an adult. Young adults often rely on creative expression to process major life decisions, take stock of values, and reflect their priorities. Arts organizations that are not fully engaging young adult immigrants are missing out.

COMMUNITY

Community is essential for both first- and second-generation young adult immigrants—and often takes shape through cultural or creative sharing.

Everyone we spoke with was seeking community. And they were often exploring ways to build community outside of typical family structures, or in addition to family structures. While most regularly interacted with at least some people in Massachusetts from their cultural background, they also talked about building relationships with immigrants from different backgrounds, many times expressing delight at opportunities to share cultural and creative traditions—through potlucks, holidays, and regular gathering to share support and ideas. This was the case for those who explicitly chose to come to the U.S. as well as those who were forced by circumstances to emigrate. Many expressed finding commonalities in a shared sense of displacement, a shared adaptability through challenges, and a shared appreciation of caring for others who do not have strong safety nets. Some of this community building may be a function of the young adult experience also captured in this group.

ARTISTS

For many participants, creativity is seen as a practical, everyday tool which anyone can engage in, while being an "artist" is contingent on skill level, available time, and access to financial resources.

Immigration is often about economic stability—and artistic careers weren't often seen as an easy means towards that. Many first-generation immigrants shared an ideal that coming to the U.S. is about an aspiration to be successful or stable—creating the greatest financial opportunities for their families. Many were aspiring to a practical or stable career. Some noted how being an artisan used to offer this kind of stability in the past in their home countries, but that times have changed. Many saw creative and artistic practices as more of a recreational pursuit in the U.S. Those who still chose to be artists in the U.S. typically did so because they felt creatively driven, not because this offered a clear pathway to a stable career.

We hear less emphasis from young adults about preserving traditional artforms. For those who participated in an artistic pursuit, it was more about blending past and present in new and personal ways.

We did hear a few people reflect on how important cultural preservation - especially when the reason for emigrating is related to active forces trying to erase identity, such as genocide, cultural suppression, or cultural devaluing. For these individuals, going back home either was not an option or didn't mean access to these practices. Instead, they hoped to find a new home for traditional practice, or elements of the practice within the U.S. Additionally, there are ongoing parallel cultural and artistic evolutions happening both in people's countries of origin and in the U.S. Many valued and reflected on the impact of past generations and ancestors more generally, but that did not necessarily mean that their work itself was a traditional artform.

THE ARTS ECOSYSTEM

Many participants felt the U.S. has a strong arts and culture landscape—but one that is not highly accessible or welcoming to immigrant artists.

Many shared that they saw the U.S. as a place where there is more freedom for artistic practice and more assistance for artists generally. However, despite this perceived openness, many felt immigrants were excluded from fully taking advantage of this landscape. Some artists noted how difficult it could be to succeed in an expressive career if they didn't have full fluency of English.

Arts and culture organizations provide the most value to young adult immigrants when they offer opportunities for consistent and ongoing connection.

Most of the young adult immigrants who we spoke with had engaged with both community-centered and European-origin/encyclopedic arts and culture organizations in Massachusetts. But we heard most about organizations where people felt holistically cared for—rather than organizations that were cultural repositories. A number noted that they didn't need organizations to literally feel like a home country to engage them—but that organizations can feel *more like home* by providing comfortable spaces with low key interactions.

Arts organizations were also viewed as important spaces for representation, creating space for dialogue and highlighting the value that immigrants bring to American society.

Some individuals we spoke with already see European-origin and encyclopedic cultural organizations in Massachusetts as intercultural spaces and intersectional spaces—or at least shifting in that direction. Others primarily saw community-centered organizations as the primary advocates for immigrants. Those we spoke with were highly attuned to signals that organizations emit on whether they see real, authentic value in immigrants.

REFLECTIONS: *AMPLIFY*

Co-curated with co-researchers, project advisors, and peer reviewers

1. **Support similar studies on excluded or ignored communities' relationship to the arts to continue to illuminate these important experiences.** Visibility of multiple communities in this way highlights their contributions alongside majority populations who are already visible in research. Reports like these can highlight and center them, nationally and globally.

2. **Magnify arts programming that prioritizes mental health, joy, and community healing—not just visibility or representation.** Arts funders need to consider the importance of these specific needs. Plus, wellness outcomes and private process-based work should be included as a key part of grant and program evaluation metrics. Centering these components of arts work makes space for everyone to participate in the arts, as opposed to only including culture bearing artists, established artists, or people who have the spare time and money to prioritize arts. Additionally, there are also larger community-wide benefits of creative practices to keep in mind.

3. **Support intergenerational and informal community spaces that already exist within immigrant-serving organizations.** Bigger well-connected organizations who have a range of networks could be having these conversations (or more of them) and helping strengthen conversations that are already in motion at smaller organizations. Funders in the arts sector have an opportunity to uplift people who might be resources to others. Consider funding non-traditional sites (homes, parks, churches) and intergenerational arts events.

4. **Create space in your organization to reflect on this report collectively.** We hope individual readers will enjoy and take heart from this report and also consider how collective discussion is useful step towards actionable change. When it comes to busy arts organizations, there can be a lack of time available to reflect and focus on learning opportunities. However, reflecting on this report can be an opportunity for organizations to think more deeply about intersecting factors in immigrant experiences and what is needed to do better or achieve more. Explore our *Resource Guide* for suggestions on potential topics for reflective conversations on page 26.

REFLECTIONS: *DISRUPT*

Co-curated with co-researchers, project advisors, and peer reviewers

1. **Dismantle the hierarchy that places "arts" above "culture" and that clings to strict artistic genre categories**. Arts funders need to consider these biases and how they benefit formal Eurocentric and institutional practices in favor of informal, community-based, and intergenerational art forms. Additionally, Western genre categorizations (e.g., dance, music, visual art) do not honor hybrid or diasporic practices and are particularly restricting for immigrant and refugee communities, where artistic expression is connected to daily life and genre agnostic.

2. **Disrupt the binary of "artist" versus "non-artist" and help normalize how people can bring an artist's mentality to life through any career.** The term artist is often reserved for those with formal training or access to Western traditions and institutions. However, many study interviewees held strong creative practices and still did not self-identify as "artistic." Arts organizations can help validate how people can be artists and feel creative whether or not they make money through art as a professional artist. It is important to show that there are many different ways of being creative, and that careers in science, medicine, construction, teaching, business development, etc. can all involve artistry. Moreover, career paths are not always linear. Everyone could potentially become an artist. It is not always necessary to choose between those identities.

3. **Link arts to wellness and restoration more explicitly.** This connection has power, and arts organizations should use it to foster individual and communal wellness. Self-care and wellness are critical needs for adult immigrants who navigate stresses of migration, and just as important for young adult navigating the stresses of foundational life choices. Arts organizations have the opportunity of not just providing individual creative outlets, but for communal normalization of the pursuit of wellness through the arts.

REFLECTIONS: *ENGAGE*

Co-curated with co-researchers, project advisors, and peer reviewers

1. **See young adult immigrants as natural allies and partners for creating spaces of dialogue**. Because creativity is such a big part of immigrant lives, and there is an opportunity to create a new power dynamic where arts organizations have immigrant artists as a core audience. Young adult immigrants can make arts spaces and the conversations in them more powerful by bringing perspectives that highlight a wide range of human contributions in U.S. society, a more accurate picture of American identity, and an awareness of inter-cultural connections.

2. **Help young adult immigrants break through stigmas and cultural/social pressures that being an artist is not a legitimate career.** Arts organizations have a unique opportunity to show how artistic careers are a valid life path – how it's possible to both dream big and reach personal and financial stability. This may involve messaging for young adults looking into job options and for their parents and families that show arts-based work as legitimate business practices. It may also be necessary to explicitly acknowledge the different ways that people make money through the arts.

3. **Nurture on-going and long-term community relationships by extending outside of cultural showcases.** Although some saw value in holiday and/or cultural month celebrations, many participants criticized the nature of this inclusion as transactional, tokenizing, and requiring little effort or thought from the organization. Co-designing nuanced year-round programming with immigrant communities would go a long way to fostering sustained relationships as opposed to tokenized, performative visibility.

REFLECTIONS: *SUPPORT*

Co-curated with co-researchers, project advisors, and peer reviewers

1. **Provide young adult artists with opportunities for group-based self-reflection**. Arts organizations can help feed a collective cycle of self-reflection and self-knowledge for early-career immigrant artists. First-generation artists are more than just their immigration story, and the negatives and hardships of their experiences. Second-generation artists are building around intersecting cultures, while also sustaining their own culture. There's so much that can be shared when people are given opportunities to reflect and speak broadly on who they are.

2. **Strategize and implement appropriate pay for young adult immigrant artists**. Immigrant artists often bring their culture with them to European-origin or encyclopedic organizations alongside their art, assisting an organization in diversifying their programming. Artists need to be compensated accordingly for this full breadth of activity. It's important not to forget that many immigrant artists have been doing their work for their entire lives and have a lot of expertise to share, even without credentials through Western institutions.

3. **Invite opportunities to hear from young adult immigrants about what would be useful to them to help navigate a difficult arts system, especially for those who are undocumented.** Legal status, paperwork, and language remain significant access barriers. Even those deeply involved in the arts may feel excluded by unfamiliar systems. European-origin and encyclopedic arts organizations and arts funders can do more to better understand the realities of people from immigrant backgrounds and be prepared to meet those needs, including providing administrative assistance, translation, and navigation services alongside program grants. Immigrants shouldn't have the burden of educating organizations, who can instead be prepared with resources to share around funding and networking, and for what is available for free (i.e., trainings, events, videos). For artists, a list of existing supports is available on page 27.

4. **Build relationships with social service agencies and non-arts resources to connect and strengthen multiple support systems that contribute to community vitality**. While it is useful to connect people with other artists and arts opportunities, also invest in resources to connect people to non-arts domains (e.g., tutoring, language education, filing legal paperwork, business planning). Arts organizations can be spaces for the exchange of ideas, filtered through a unique lens of art and creativity.

Resource Guide:
Reflecting as an Organization

Every organization is different. This report doesn't have specific answers that apply across all organizations aiming to engage immigrant audiences more deeply through arts and creativity. But it does provide food for thought, and for organizations to look more deeply into themselves and approach their work differently. If you are organizing conversations at your organization to reflect on this report, consider the following topics and questions:

Looking Inward

- Are you holding time for conversations that will challenge you?
- What power dynamics in your organization already exist related to immigrants?
- How do you hold space for immigrants already on your staff?
- How do you hold space for immigrants you partner with?
- How are you taking care of the immigrants you already serve?
- Are there any trickle-down effects that might negatively affect immigrants that you interact with (e.g., pay discrepancies, language barriers, cultural barriers)?
- If you are already immigrant-centered, are there other ways in which you might not be making space for other groups?

Building Feedback Loops

- How have you pushed to include more voices in your processes?
- What kind of feedback have you gotten recently from immigrants?
- Have you asked questions to see how you are doing?
- Are you making space for feedback that will challenge you? (e.g., are you asking open-ended questions, are you explicitly requesting both negative and positive feedback?)
- What measures have you put in place to be accountable to feedback from immigrants?

Working Around Barriers

- Are you hearing about barriers that seem beyond the control of your organization (e.g., transportation, language)?
- Are there creative ways that you could go the extra mile to get beyond those barriers (e.g., put some dollars to get some buses to pick up kids)
- Are you making time to reflect with other organizations to share lessons learned?

Resource Guide: Supports for Immigrant Artists

If you are an artist living in Massachusetts, here are some potential sources for support, funding, and networking. This is not a comprehensive list, but rather a number of starting points for further exploration:

Mass Cultural Council
Grants for Creative Individuals
https://massculturalcouncil.org/artists-art/grants-for-creative-individuals/

Mass Cultural Council
Local Council Program
https://massculturalcouncil.org/communities/local-cultural-council-program/

New England Foundation for the Arts
Public Art and Performing Arts
https://www.nefa.org/grants-programs

Connecticut Museum of Culture and History
Southern New England Apprenticeship Program
https://www.connecticutmuseum.org/cchap/apprenticeship-program/

Artmorpheus
Events, Artist Help Desk, and Creative Resources Database
https://www.artmorpheus.org/professional-development/

City of Boston
Open calls for various public art opportunities
https://www.boston.gov/departments/arts-and-culture

ArtsHub Western Mass
Various artist funding opportunities
https://www.artshubwma.org/opportunities/funding

Mosaic Lowell
Mini-Grants for Creative Projects
https://mosaiclowell.org/mini-grants-for-creative-projects/

Community Foundation of Western Mass
Valley Creates Grants
https://communityfoundation.org/nonprofits/valleycreates/

Greater Worcester Community Foundation
Access Grant Program
https://greaterworcester.org/for-non-profits/competitive-grant-opportunities/jmac-access-grants

Fine Arts Work Center
Artist Residencies
https://fawc.org/additional-residencies/

Boston Center for the Arts
Artist Residencies
https://bostonarts.org/artists/residencies/

The Yard
Artist Residencies
https://www.dancetheyard.org/yard-residencies

Detailed Findings

Detailed Findings Summary

01

Finding and Building Community

Navigating new community contexts
Ways of building community

02

Creativity and Practice

Recognizing and appreciating creativity
Facets of creativity
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Community-centered organizations
European-origin and encyclopedic organizations
Centering immigrant artists and creatives

01

Finding and Building Community

01 FINDING AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

What this section covers:

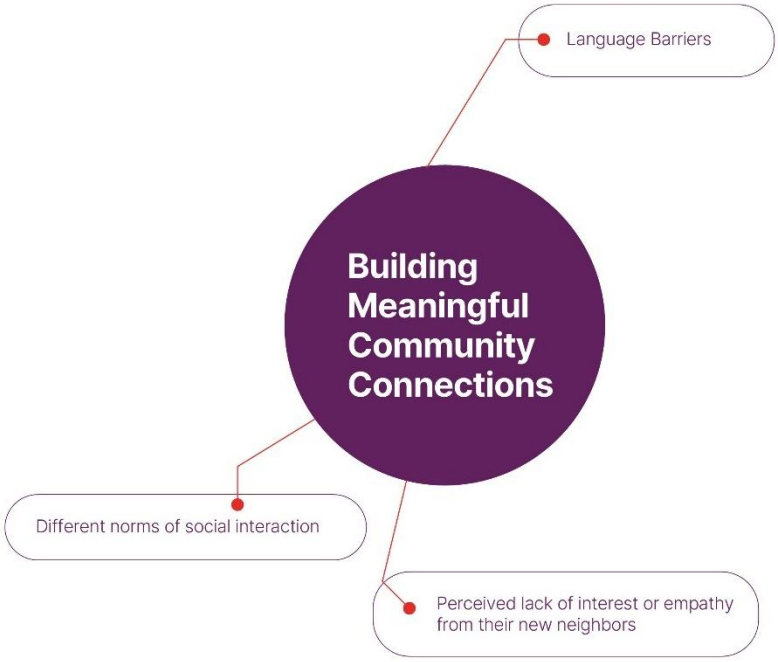
This section highlights how immigrants find connection within self-defined communities. Key contextual factors include reasons for immigrating and diversity within a new community.

All of the people we spoke to emphasized the importance of some kind of community, all of them making the effort to connect to their new neighbors while trying to navigate culture shock. The environment that people were moving into significantly impacted their perceived difficulty of forming these new connections, many noting that diversity and presence of other immigrants in their communities played a large role in their ability to connect and build friendships. Those friendships that were developed were often referred to as an "extended family," further acknowledging the value of these relationships particularly given the new and at times lonely terrain experience of immigrating to a new country.

NAVIGATING NEW COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

What we learned:

All who we spoke with shared a sense of value in community, but navigating how to discover or build meaningful connections proved more challenging for some. *People recognized that their experiences were dictated significantly based on location. Those in smaller, less diverse rural towns often struggled to connect with non-immigrant communities. In contrast, immigrants in larger cities found comfort in established cultural enclaves and formed bonds with other immigrants through their shared experiences, regardless of cultural differences. Key challenges included different norms of social interaction, language barriers, and perceived lack of interest or empathy from their new neighbors.*



Details:

Throughout our conversations with participants, we heard the many reasons why people may have immigrated to the United States, from those who didn't really have a choice coming as children, to those who were motivated to immigrate to the United States by pursuing a career, a higher education, or for economic security for themselves and/or their families. Although we didn't often hear about much detail other extenuating circumstances, including state violence and repression, gang violence, political violence, human rights violations, fear and poverty, we are aware that this is also the context behind many migration stories.

No matter their motivations for arriving in Massachusetts, and regardless of generation, everyone we spoke with shared about ways that they valued community and were actively developing connections with some kind of community. First- and second-generation immigrants described varied sense of connection to their Massachusetts communities. Many second-generation immigrants had lived in Massachusetts their whole lives and often felt deep-rooted ties in the state. While long-term first-generation residents shared they had solid ties they developed over decades, residents in more transient situations due to work or school were actively building relationships.

Some of the first-generation immigrants we spoke to compared how social interactions in the United States versus in their home countries differed, they noted that making connections in the US could be more difficult than the more casual and friendly socialization they had experienced back home. The home countries of many participants fostered a more amiable environment, some participants noted that this casual friendliness within a community is something rooted in their culture. First-generation immigrants often brought up how they have struggled to connect to people in the US who do not have immigrant backgrounds because of this lack of casual and friendly conversation and interaction with strangers and neighbors.

Several people mentioned additional factors that could aid or impede connection with others, such as language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and racial identity. First-generation immigrants who did not have English fluency when they arrived in the states acknowledged the large language barrier that existed, further complicating their ability to converse and interact with their new English-speaking community. Interestingly, a few participants said they felt more comfortable speaking English with other non-English-speaking immigrants who didn't speak their native language, one person claimed that it helped them learn English and they felt less nervous about having an accent. This also highlights an intersectional challenge: those who are racial minorities and have strong accents may experience compounded biases in their interactions with non-immigrant Americans. Additionally, a few participants shared some frustration with the struggle to make plans with their non-immigrant American friends and acquaintances, further deepening the sense of complexity in generating friendships in their new communities compared to effortlessness that came with relationships with a range of closeness, from strangers to friends, with people from immigrant backgrounds in the states and in their home countries. As one person shared:

> *Usually when I talk with Americans it's really hard to make a connection because of the accent. Sometimes when I talk to Americans, they stop the conversation. I feel like they are too tired to try and listen. Once I asked my English teacher, [and she said]: 'It's because we are lazy. It's not the accent that we normally listen to and we're too lazy to try and listen.' The most friends I have are Brazilians. I also have friends from other countries…Ukraine, Vietnam, Thailand. When it's an immigrant person I make a friendship very easily. I have just one American friend. I almost never see him. We're like, oh, let's hang out tomorrow, and he's like, oh, I can't hang out, let's hang out Saturday, and then he's like, oh, I can't hang out. (First-generation Immigrant)*

Because of these dynamics, many gravitated to neighborhoods in a variety of towns and cities in Massachusetts with a density of immigrants who could identify with similar experiences and challenges. First- and second-generation immigrants spoke about varied levels of difficulty in seeking community depending on the diversity of their neighborhoods. Larger cities, predominantly Boston and Lynn, were often praised by participants for their diversity, home to several immigrant communities making it an ideal place for people of immigrant backgrounds to find people with shared experiences. Even within these communities, people mentioned experienced shaped by additional layers of

identity, such as class and race, which impact access to resources and levels of social acceptance.

> *I'm from Lynn, Massachusetts. It's not a big city. It's smaller than Boston, but a little bigger than a small town in Massachusetts. It's very diverse, lots of Dominicans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, people from the Caribbean, Haitians… very rich in culture. There's been a stigma around my city, Lynn, the city of sin. There are ups and downs. There are crimes, like anywhere. There are lots of immigrants, lots of working class, low income [people]. I love my city. It's cool. It's got a lot of artsy things. (Second-generation)*

A number of people cited that they moved to their neighborhood because it was a hub for people of a shared cultural communities or shared country origins, due to decades of neighborhoods evolving to cater to their cultural needs with the launch of small businesses—providing access to essential pieces of home, encouraging immigrants from specific countries or regions to settle in. For these individuals, connections were found simply by looking to their neighbor. Aside from stimulating a sense of belonging through shared culture, one participant highlighted how being in their community became a resource for finetuning their language skills from their home country. Resources were critical for most of the first-generation immigrants we spoke to, and many mentioned how they benefited from them as well as their enthusiasm for sharing these resources with other immigrants who were settling into their new lives in Massachusetts.

> *When I lived in Canada, we had a Vietnamese community. Families knew each other, met in temple or places of leisure, but there wasn't a square or rec center where all the Vietnamese people hang out. So to see it in Dorchester was very eye-opening, the sense of unity and community. My parents decided that this was a good place for me to live and for what it's worth it was cool. My Vietnamese got a lot better. I got to work on my speaking and my written skills. (First-generation)*

> *We have a specific Chinese non-profit organization. Our mayor invited them to join our community because they knew that our community would benefit a lot. There is an office in city hall dedicated to helping Asian people. They host a once-a-month Monday community café, sometimes in our library, sometimes in our senior center. I sent some friends there to join the café, to exchange ideas, to make connections, to get referrals. Any new immigrants looking for help, I send them over there. (First-generation)*

In contrast, participants who resided in smaller towns or cities with significantly less diversity struggled to find people with similar experiences. Participants residing in smaller towns and cities described the lack of diversity as an obstacle in building community. A few participants mentioned that neighborhoods that were more affluent and/or whiter in smaller towns or cities made them feel less welcome or more out of place. They often expressed feeling more comfortable when they were in spaces with people of similar backgrounds, be it financially, culturally, or experientially as immigrants. Some even mentioned that in their small towns they were aware that some of their neighbors held views that openly rejected immigrants and the discomfort in having to navigate these spaces.

> *And moving to the US was a bit of a culture shock, moving to a small rural area. When you move to a small town, you lose your chance to be anonymous. In this region there's fewer immigrants. I'm often the only person that's an immigrant or has an accent or doesn't understand small cultural things. And I speak English very well. I don't have trouble with the language, but I do think it makes a difference. I think [there are] fewer people with sensibilities around people that are moving here and changing their lives. (First-generation)*

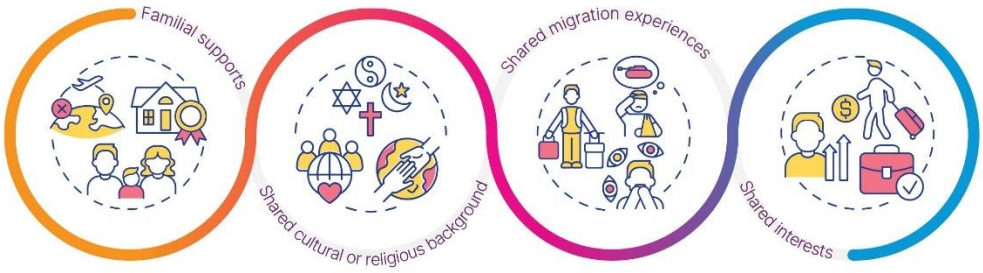
> *[In Greensfield] What I find difficult in [this] area in general is diversity. I don't find this area very diverse. It's such a huge difference when I go to Connecticut [or] Boston. I see people of color, people of different backgrounds. Here there is a wealth disparity. (First-generation)*

Participants noted that residents of less diverse areas were less knowledgeable and therefore less considerate of immigrants residing in their cities and towns. The culture shock and loss of leaving what was familiar to them in their home countries was intensified by a perceived lack of interest or empathy from their new neighbors. For some this gap was still prominent despite being well-versed in American culture or speaking fluent English. This speaks to the ways in which immigrant status may intersect with other marginalized identities. Even when linguistic or cultural barriers are removed, racial and economic biases can still pose obstacles to full inclusion. In contrast, people pointed out the almost instinctive nature of being around others of a shared immigrant background, with the desire to support and connect with each other demonstrating how the intersection of identity and environment can play a key role in immigrant experiences.

WAYS OF BUILDING COMMUNITY

What we learned:

The new immigrants we spoke to built community primarily through schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, with extended family serving as important connectors when available. *Those without existing networks relied on cultural centers, shared interests, and "chosen families" for support. While many sought connections within their cultural communities, there was also significant value placed on building relationships across different immigrant groups. Key means of building community included familial supports, shared cultural or religious background, shared migration experiences, and shared interests.*



Details:

Immigrants who were newer to the United States discussed the many ways they sought out communities, many focusing on the ecosystems they were settling into, such as their schools, their jobs, or their neighborhoods. Students and families in particular found easy connections with other peers in classes and school groups. Many had put in work to build their community from the ground up, or to intentionally seek out community.

When possible, people also connected with their relatives with stronger roots in Massachusetts. Those that had familial connections close by were eager to maintain their proximity to their families and made efforts to seem them often, some visiting almost daily. For several, the intersection of cultural expectations and family proximity shaped their decisions to stay in close-knit communities, reinforcing intergenerational support systems. For those with family nearby, their families comprised a large part of their community and played the role of a springboard for connections for those that were new to Massachusetts.

> *I've been living in New Bedford for 25 years. So, I came to the United States at age four. Never left the city. I have lived here all my life and recently purchased a house. I haven't left because my family is so big and we're a close-knit family. My sister and parents are really close, five minutes away from each other. It would make it difficult for one of us to leave. We've come to that agreement where we want to stay close. (First-generation)*

> *It's really mostly my family. I do have a lot of friends in Lynn, and the surrounding cities. Our families were just so close. My mom lived two minutes up the street from her sister. They got married around the same time, started to have kids around the same time. They just wanted to keep us really close, they always said your cousins are your friends. (Second-generation)*

Participants that did not live in a neighborhood with a density of people of similar cultural or religious backgrounds sometimes explored other cities and towns where they knew they could find people with shared backgrounds, or they attended groups that centered their communities, such as going to a temple where most attendees shared a similar country-of-origin or language. These spaces provided immense support for those that arrived to Massachusetts with few or no connections. Participants named organizations and groups that they benefited from when they immigrated, and some continued to participate in these well into their new lives in Massachusetts, because of the network of support and resources these places have provided them.

For newer immigrants in this situation, having any kind of starting point was vital to their community building, such as by finding people with similar interests and feeling a sense of welcome and openness amongst them. Newer immigrants found others through a wide variety of informal activities and shared interests such as playing video games, joining book clubs, taking yoga classes, sharing a religion, and planning work parties. Gender and socioeconomic status also influenced how people engaged in these activities, as access to leisure spaces and free time varied based on work schedules, financial stability and role in the home. Although most of these relationships were built in person, some participants discovered their communities online, noting they had difficulties forming relationships with the people they had access to in person.

> *One of the ladies in my yoga class, I got connected with her. She was a really nice person. She's a Japanese lady. She came to Massachusetts a long time ago, maybe 40 years ago, and she always had some advice. For example, tips on how I can live here in a better way. Because of that I got kind of connected. We exchanged our phone numbers, and once in a while we meet for a tea or something. (First-generation)*

And for those with no familial ties to Massachusetts or the United States, their 'chosen family' of friends with similar backgrounds, values, and experiences were essential to creating a sense of home in Massachusetts. The relationships they developed with their 'chosen family' were a lifeline during what many described as a very turbulent and lonely transition. Many identified these connections as an extension of their family:

> *I feel like we share the same commonalities, which is why we gravitate to each other. With Khmer people we want to uplift each other. Whoever is Khmer, immediately you are brother and sister. We always take care of each other. (Second-generation)*

Even for those that already had some existing connections in Massachusetts their bonds with 'chosen family' brought much needed support and validation. These families were particularly important for first-generation immigrants who needed assistance navigating the new culture, language and community they were embarking on, while also maintaining their relationships from home through online means.

> *Yes, so we have our family in Argentina that we talk to throughout the week on WhatsApp, and we were able to find a community of people from Argentina here. When I was in middle school, we found some people from Argentina who'd been here for 20 years and some who'd just moved. It was nice being able to find people to connect to, like a second family. (Second-generation)*

While finding people of the same cultural background was valued by participants, many also highlighted their appreciation for building connections with others from immigrant communities in general. A number expressed their comfort in finding immigrant communities regardless of their connection to a shared country of origin. This demonstrates how intersectionality shapes belonging, not just within ethnic groups but across shared experiences of migration, discrimination and resilience. Some stated they would even actively invite immigrants from other cultures to their gatherings so they could experience things such as other holidays, food, and films. For second-generation immigrants specifically, this kind of cultural exchange was a part of their upbringing.

> *Lynn is very diverse. I'm not Dominican but I really love Dominican music, seeing a lot of the culture, eating the food. I love listening to bachata, my mom too. She'll just play it when she's cleaning. It's beautiful being immersed in something that other people identify with, embracing the fact that there are different cultures. It's what makes Lynn a community. (Second-generation)*

Several first-generation immigrants we spoke with communicated a sense of camaraderie with other first-generation immigrants in their area, due to their aligned values and ways of socializing. This led to some engaging in cross-cultural exchange, sharing practices, food, and holidays together, often times connecting over the similarities of their cultures. Aside

from finding support in immigrant communities, culturally alike or not, many people cited their home as a place of comfort, of belonging, and where this cultural exchange happens. When asked to describe a place allows them to feel authentically themselves amongst others, home was prominent – although a few people were able to identify public places, home came up most often. When discussing places that allow them to feel authentically themselves while gathering with others, a number of people centered their community gathering in their homes.

> *I am friends with my neighbors upstairs and next door. If I compare it to India, it's much harder to make friends and build community. I am able to connect more easily with others who are also immigrants. For example, my neighbor is from Colombia, and she is married to a white man from Massachusetts. I invite them over for dinner all the time. I find a cultural connection and similarities especially with the Latin community. (First-generation)*

Additionally, people spoke to the frequency of their gatherings, some meeting consistently with the people they considered a part of their community. People discussed the importance of being able to engage with each other consistently – it was described as vital to stifling the feelings of loneliness or homesickness. These groups were often times comprised mainly of other immigrants, at times culturally alike and sometimes not – notably this could be due to the struggle to schedule outings with their non-immigrant American friends as previously mentioned when describing the differences in social interactions based on culture between immigrants and non-immigrants in the United States.

> *I'm really, really homesick here. In [Europe], I would go back once a year. That was a better thing. The good thing is that there are lots of Iranians here, especially in Boston. They have a book club, once a month. I also joined another club, Iranian women in Boston. There are also some other gatherings for networking, but I haven't done those yet. There is another one which is about literature and poems and art, which is also once a month. That I also really like. They invite some Iranian artists, for example, writers, and they come here and talk. (First-generation)*

02

Creativity and Practice

02 CREATIVITY AND PRACTICE

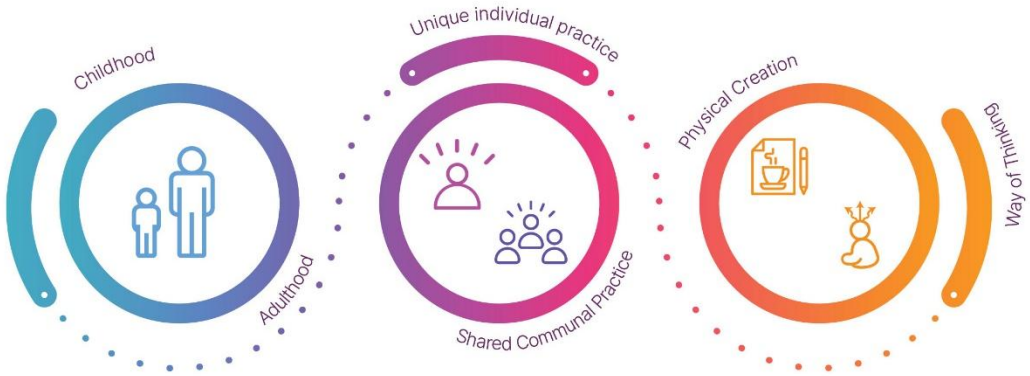
What this section covers:

This section explores the finding that everyone we spoke with pursued some kind of creative and expressive practice in their daily lives. *Even if some didn't feel that their activities were good enough to be called an artistic practice, all said that they felt that creativity was an important function of everyday life. When thinking about their relationship to creativity, several noted that navigating life as an immigrant required creativity on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, a number viewed creative practices as a caring act for oneself—something generally important for reflecting on one's trajectory in the world as an adult and also helpful in processing stress, isolation, or trauma of reorienting as an immigrant. And many felt that cultural practices were a creative strength in their lives as well, helping them to honor their culture and providing opportunities to bond with others through sharing and exchange.*

RECOGNIZING AND APPRECIATING CREATIVITY

What we learned:

It was not always easy for people to see their own creativity if they don't participate in traditional art forms. *Yet, when given permission to think a bit more broadly about the concept, many acknowledged the creative and artistic nature of a lot of activities and thought processes and how beneficial creativity can be for both individuals and society more generally. We saw three different dynamics where people tipped in one or the other direction in recognizing creativity: whether they saw it as for childhood vs. adulthood, for individual practice vs. communal practice, and as physical creation vs. a way of thinking.*



Details:

There is a common understanding of creativity as falling within certain classic artistic lines—with people not always recognizing or freely admitting the creativity inherent in their chosen activities. Some appeared not to see this creativity because their practice is not a traditional artform, therefore it seems hard for them to own that word as a personal descriptor. For some, this hesitancy can be understood through an intersectional lens, where class, gender, and cultural identity influence who is allowed or encouraged to claim being an "artist" or "creative." For example, working-class contexts or communities who prioritize practical labor over artistic pursuits may not reinforce creative or artistic skills as valuable. The boundaries around what is considered art and who can be considered an artist often reflect dominant cultural norms that often exclude or devalue the practices of marginalized groups.

> *I'm not very creative. But I do practice yoga. I like to do that in my free time. I used to journal every day, but now it's weekly. I suck at drawing. I draw outside the lines. (First-generation)*

However, once our conversations left space for a broader sense of creativity and interviewees realized that we as the interviewers were not beholden to traditional thinking, many came out with interesting examples of creativity in their lives.

> *A lot of my coworkers' husbands are in construction. A lot of them do masonry work, concrete work. I don't think they think of it as creativity, but it is. They are creating someone's dream yard. One does stamped concrete, so he's building this design. They lay the concrete on the patio, and there are massive stencils, so it looks like actual stone, versus doing the actual bricks or pavers. (First-generation)*

Similarly, many discussed how creativity is not necessarily the product of a skill, job, or hobby (as in a poem or painting), but rather the thought process behind. One interviewee stated that they don't know "how to dance and sing, but next time you need to solve a problem. I'll be there." For these individuals, creative thinking was relevant for them as far as creating and navigating solutions across different contexts and areas of interest. Creative problem solving is particularly essential for those with intersecting identities who are also navigating systems of oppression. For example, people of color, immigrants, or queer folks may need to be especially adaptive and innovative in how they navigate institutions not built for them. This everyday resilience is itself a form of creativity - though rarely acknowledged as such in mainstream definitions. In fact, more often than not these identities can be seen as counter normative as opposed to creative.

> *I think creativity in science is important. You have to think outside the box, or if science is not working as you want it to, you really have to be creative. It's not just one protocol that we follow. At least for now it's not just going to be one medicine for all the cancers, even with therapies you need to think about how to solve a specific cancer or problem. (First-generation)*

Moreover, for some the artistry in common or culturally specific practices was initially overlooked because these are so ubiquitous. If everyone in your home or community can cook or make clothes, for example, the creativity in those activities may settle in the background. Also, the intersection of race, gender and cultural identity may also play a role here as culturally specific creative practices may not be recognized or celebrated as creative or artistic. For example, cooking, sewing, hair braiding, or community organizing – often practiced by women and especially women of color – can be deeply creative acts. Yet these practices are frequently undervalued in dominant cultural narratives because of who typically performs them.

Although some people we spoke with were able to see the creativity (whether conventional or unconventional) in their lives or the lives of others, they seemed to feel the need to explain or justify these activities as a valid aspect of adulthood. When they discussed creativity and art, people often referenced examples from their childhood, or from children currently in their lives, as if day-to-day creativity is not necessarily a part of being an adult. For many there was hesitancy to discuss and legitimize their creative practices as adults. However, there was an exception for those whose creative practice was a large part of their lives or for those who were good enough to have it as a career (or otherwise garner praise for it). Validating casual creative participation appeared

uncomfortable for some of the people that we talked with, especially if they did not think of themselves as "good enough" at that activity. The idea of pursuing creative careers or bringing those hobbies into adulthood was a foreign idea for many. This hesitancy, for some at least, may be shaped by more than just age or adulthood. These attitudes may be informed by structural pressures (economic needs, cultural expectations etc.) that intersect with identity and support the notion that creativity, for the marginalized, is a luxury rather than a right especially if it doesn't lead to tangible success or visibility.

> *I was a very creative kid. I would just write stories, pretend. Drawing was my favorite thing. My mom would have shot glasses and I would copy the drawings on the shot glasses. I never felt like I could pursue it. I didn't think anything of it. (Second-generation)*

Regardless of people's personal relationship to creativity, we heard an appreciation for it and what it offers communities. It seems that everyone agreed that creativity is an inherent part of life that is woven throughout a lot of our activities, and that creativity makes the world an interesting, dynamic, and enjoyable place. There was acknowledgement that we are all consumers of creative content such as music, movies, TV's, fashion, and literature, alongside how we all benefit from less traditional creativity as far as problem solving capacity.

> *Creativity, of course. If there is no creativity, everything becomes monotonous and boring. Creativity is the center of every community, or everything becomes routine. We need to try to modify, and we need some creativity to see it and find a solution and to improve it. (First-generation)*

FACETS OF CREATIVITY

What we learned:

Many of the young adults we interviewed were very descriptive and imaginative when discussing the meaning behind their creative practices. *They often elaborated on how these practices help them to connect both with a version of themselves that they want to embrace and also with the world around them. Plus, they are engaged in an interesting mix of creative practices ranging from music to interior design to meditation. People's descriptions of the creative acts in their lives included a wide variety of positive and highly emotive terms.*

Details:

We heard a host of terms people used to describe making, creation, and why they do it. Many interviewees thought through additional terms that they would use to describe their creative practices and what they offer, they used words and phrases like: *magical, spiritual, self-expression, innovation, paying homage, authenticity, curiosity, learning, being alive, exploratory, inspiration, unique, reframing, and a spark*. These varied terms speak to how lived experience and identity inform creative purpose. For example, some found that their spirituality was closely tied to their cultural heritage, while others drew from diasporic traditions, familial connection, or highly personal meanings to frame what creativity means to them. Such descriptions helped us to show that creativity can be internalized and interpreted in many ways, and these discussions helps to show the meaning that is behind these practices for many of the young adults we spoke with.

For some the words that they used and meanings they found were more mystical or religious in nature:

> *For myself, I've always described [art and creativity] as magical and spiritual because of the influence that creativity and art has given us. Once you're in that space, you're able to create and just be in it. I would say that other people in the community would describe it as that as well. (Second-generation)*

While for others their description was more personal and reflected their need to communicate with and live in community with others:

> *I connect a lot with innovation as self-expression. When things feel mundane in your life, when you are endlessly scrolling through reels, and you get sucked into the phone and you can't get out of it. You're seeing all of these different experiences, but you're not experiencing them as well. I enjoy going back to traditional practices, put our phones away and share stories. In India I was with ten or so friends and we put phones away and shared stories about our paranormal experiences. That's something I miss, and I really enjoy storytelling. I think it's difficult now. It's important for the community to be creative and find ways to express themselves, and to find ways to develop new practices and techniques, to involve more people and build a sense of community. (First-generation)*

Additionally, some saw their creative practices as a tool for them living genuinely and having the kind of life that they value:

> *I've been having a lot of conversations with friends about what it means to be authentic and the pursuit of that, and what is considered authentic. What's the point of reference. That's a big, big word that we are trying to have conversations about. We have been calling it inspired or paying homage to something. Along with creativity you can innovate, consider what is authentic. To bring your own flare causes you to be creative or think outside of the box. (First-generation)*

> *Creativity is a synonym of curiosity, and curiosity is what is needed to have a happy life. If you are not learning or constantly asking questions and trying new things then I feel like you get stuck and getting stuck in life is really tough. I would rather be on the move. (First-generation)*

These ideas of authenticity and curiosity are shaped by positionality. For queer youth, for example, creativity might be a way to explore identity and community beyond dominant social scripts. For those from immigrant families, it can serve as a tool for negotiating cultural hybridity. Understanding creative expression through an intersectional lens allows us to see how creativity often becomes a space of survival, joy, and reclamation.

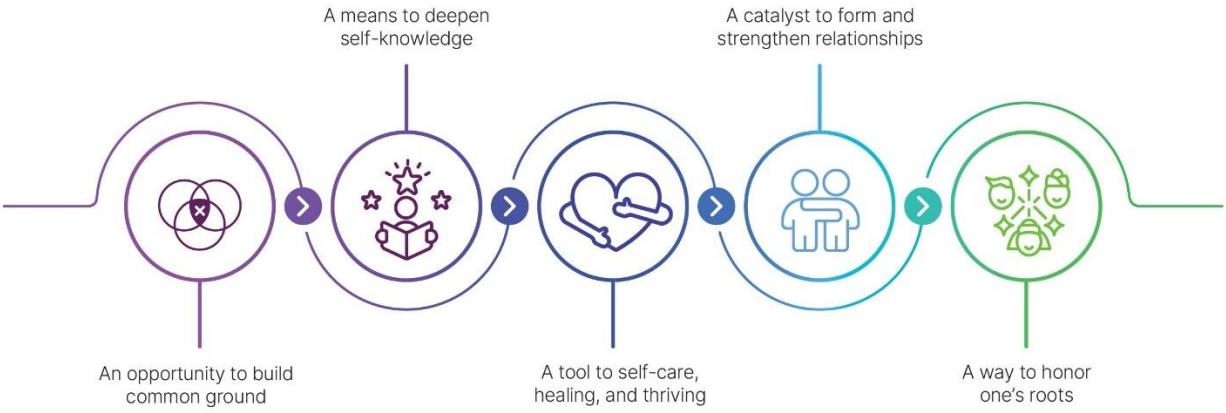
And people shared a range of the types of things they do that they consider a personal practice or something they make. This included activities like, singing, musical instruments, rap, poetry, writing, dance, cooking, baking, mixology, interior decorating/design, crafting, flower arranging, fashion design, yoga, meditation, prayer, roller skating, painting, drawing, being in nature, hiking, sailing, journaling, origami, and photography**.** Many traditional arts were referenced including singing, dance, and painting. Yet so were art adjacent activities that may not always be recognized as art like crafting and interior design, along with practices where the creativity in the practice may be less obvious, such as athletics (roller-skating, hiking) and sending time in nature. The creative relationship to food via cooking and baking stood out in many conversations as a powerful source for invention, self-expression, connection to 'home' and family, and an avenue for learning about others.

THE VALUE AND FUNCTION OF CREATIVITY

What we learned:

When speaking to the significance and the purpose underlying people's creative pursuits, we heard that it hinges on understanding, connecting to, and caring for oneself, others, and one's culture(s). *Below we explore five different ways that people articulated the function of creativity in their lives: as a means to deepen self-knowledge; as a*

tool for self-care, healing and thriving; as a catalyst to form and strengthen relationships; as a way to honor one's roots; and as an opportunity to build common ground.



Details: A Means to Deepen Self-Knowledge

The connection to self is an important value of creative practice, and for some it is a way to craft who they want to be and create a particular version of themselves. Some of the people we spoke with, especially those who were more focused on art as a career or a central part of their lives (and often started that practice as a young person) see it as a tool for coming into themselves. The artistic practice helped them to develop into who they are or who they were destined to be.

> *Typically, [Cambodian] parents will put you in organizations to preserve culture. After 23 years, I realized I did this to myself, my parents never forced me in [a dance troupe]. I realized that it was my fate. It was meant for me to be this person, in this troupe. The magic of dance and the spirit of dance brought me in. (Second-generation)*

We also so that for some who found their practice later in life or who's practice was less obviously traditionally artistic in nature, it could still nurture changes in their identiy and how they function in the world. Often that was through physical or religious pursuits.

> *The four F's – family, fitness, finance, faith. In China I didn't understand faith, but when I came to America, I understood. I found my faith last year, and I went to temple where I can connect to God or Budha. We should be kind to others. What goes around comes around. (First-generation)*

Creative practices also allowed people to be new versions of themselves as they represent opportunites to do new things and learn new skills. Creativity and art were seen by some as an outlet for personal growth.

> *I think my creativity gets explored in my home, when, for the first time really, being able to decorate in the way that I want. Putting together pink furniture. That's where creativity comes from. Just learning new skills and being inspired to make strawberry shortcake, things like that. (First-generation)*

Creative practices also functioned as an avenue for people to explore self-expression and gain self-knowledge. Artistic pursuits also offered chances for these young adults to explore and better understand their own identities. Their art is about who they are and communicating that over anything else. Furthermore, via communicating their truth they are often able to reach other people through their art who may share their experiences or benefit from experiencing their journey via art.

> *My art explores my social identities, race, ethnicity, sexuality, all these good things, just the fact I have these social identities. How I identify as a Puerto Rican woman, lower middle class. That's my lineage. (Second-generation)*

> *To be honest, my art is very selfish, I use it to internalize. I'm learning about my history. When people see my art and we talk, time and time again, I've had people come up to and say: 'Thank you, thank you for telling this story. I've had a similar story, and I never thought of seeing it this way, or put words to it, and your art piece did that for me.' Whether it be healing, food for thought, or seeing themselves reflected, that's cool. (Second-generation)*

Creativity can also act as way to hold space for living how the interviewees want to live and being themselves even if that is not the actual content of the art. The act of creating in and of itself is what allows them to feel as if they are living authentically and being true to who they are.

> *Something I really like a lot is to take photos in black and white, especially when it's too light or too dark, because there's something in those photos that truly represents society or life. I also very rarely, [make] jewelry. And I'm not an expert but I like to organize flowers. Those spaces are spaces where I can be just me. (First-generation)*

Details: A Tool for Self-care, Healing, and Thriving

Moreover, for many their creative practices served as a way to care for themselves. More explicitly, it helped them to heal and thrive, via de-stressing and finding joy, processing trauma, and adapting to new environments. The act of de-stressing through creative outlets was a common one. Unsurprisingly, like with many hobbies and activities, people appreciated the stress relieving qualities of their creative practices. It appears to even have a meditative impact on the body and induce relaxation for some.

> *The thing that I really enjoy is using my iPad to draw and paint. It is abstract painting. It doesn't have any meaning. When you see it, it is just lines and some colors. Actually it is so relieving. Whenever I am stressed, I do that. I can just unwind and be relaxed and organize my thoughts. Maybe once a week. But the good thing about painting is that it is available all the time. It's just like a meditation for me. (First-generation)*

For some their creative practice offers them an opportunity to disconnect from the world and is key to them reducing the stress in their lives. These activities provide a chance to forget about other demands or problems present in the world. Creating and listening to music was a common activity for people to immerse themselves in and tune out other demands or distractions.

> *I can box out all the other voices around me and focus on my voice. Even on Skype, I close my eyes and try to sing the note and elongate it. You're so focused on one activity you forget about what's going on around you. To be pitch perfect it takes a lot of work and concentration. I can forget about all the woes and worries in my life and just focus in and concentrate on the music. (First-generation)*

> *I learned how to make music on the computer when I was 12 on YouTube. So, I've been trying to make hip hop, electronic music. Music is something that comes and goes, like my creative energy, I guess. It's something I can kind of lose myself in, I can spend an hour making an idea that I had and just lose track of time. I really really like that I can get into that flow state. (First-generation)*

And while we heard that creative activites can be important for helping people avoid negativity, they can also more directly function as an avenue for cultivating happiness and joy. At their most basic level, people participate in these creative pursuits because they are enjoyable and bring positivitiy to their lives.

> *Every time I'm just doing my work I feel happy. First, I can be an artist, I can be using this part of my brain that works in this specific way, with the conversations that come out, and hearing peoples' stories and how people navigated difficulties, and how they find joy. The shows I put on are all about their joys, their hobbies. Of course there's a lot of hardship, but it's about their joy and how they're building their lives around it. (First-generation)*

> *One thing I enjoy is rollerskating and I will rollerskate listening to music. I have a playlist with artists who inspire me. I love to feel the freedom of skating. I am not the greatest skater but that feeling of freedom the wind hitting me it feels so good. It fills my cup. (Second-generation)*

Creative practices also helped people to process and work to heal from events of the past, specifically to process (often historical) trauma. For many, their creative practices serve as a tool to work through challenges they have had in their own lives and some even refer to it as their "therapy." And for some these challenges stem from a feeling of familial disfunction, which may be a result of the transmission of historical trauma across generations. We heard these young adults discussing their own work to dissect and understand this damage that they see as having been passed down to them, with the aim of hopefully not continuing on that trajectory.

> *I felt seen and validated. I also reflect on my feelings, emotional experiences, how I react, my personality, as a result of the generations before me. For example, my first solo exhibition was exploring the ways in which grief hasn't been processed in my family, why do I have these re-occurring negative thoughts. (Second-generation)*

Additionally, even if not specifically related to one's own family, artistic practices are a mode for processing cultural and national tragedies, social unrest, natural disasters, and wars. For some, not having to live through a terrible event by being in the US, or by being of a younger generation, or both, can be a struggle, as they are dealing with their current privilege combined with survivor's guilt. Artist practices can give space to these feelings.

> *All of my poems stemmed from being Haitian. One was about the Haitian earthquake that happened. It was tragic, horrible, so many people died. It felt like me being Haitian, it was important to speak on that. The damage was so substantial. A lot of my poetry is about the tragic things, the political, the poverty in Haiti. I know I'm privileged to perform them, to write about it in my house, some people in Haiti don't even have a pencil. (Second-generation)*

It can be a challenge to adapt to and succeed in difficult environments, and for some their creative practices were part of their success either in their country of origin or here in the U.S. For many, living specifically in new environments and being an immigrant in general necessitates daily creativity, as they are forced to adjust to a new way of life often with few resources. Several described creativity as not simply a casual pastime but rather a necessity for survival.

> *I think it's in the blood. It's in our system. Where I come from you have to be a creative person. There's not food for everybody. For you to survive you have to be able to do something meaningful with your life. You have to be able to think of what to do. The government doesn't really support the people. You survive by you. To survive, you have to be creative. How to make it out, live comfortably. I think the creative part of me is from my background. You can't afford to not be creative. (Second-generation)*

> *I've overcome a lot of my fears, which to other people may be nothing. In Asia I never had to have a car. Out here we would buy the cheapest car and fix it, but with cars breaking down at the side of the road, that stress and anxiety got to me. I said I was going to buy a new car, and I spent a lot of time researching and talking to people. I did all of the work financing it. It may seem like a small thing, but having to stand on my own, I feel like there is creativity in crafting the life that you want, and a lot of energy you can put into overcoming things. Someday I'll learn how to do this thing. Someday I'll figure it out. (First-generation)*

Details: A Catalyst to Form and Strengthen Relationships

Interviewees also reflected on how creative endeavors helped them to form and strengthen relationships. For those who are fortunate enough to have family with them in the U.S., creative practices can help them to maintain and solidify those bonds, often via exploring and appreciating their culture. For many this involved learning and co-practicing some creative activity across generations, as a parent or grandparent may teach or create with their children or grandchildren.

> *I play ukulele. My son, he plays the guitar and for me is one of the best. He sings in both languages and my daughter does both too. At home we do that and we have presentations in the community. I love bringing the traditional music from Mexico. I feel proud of my son and daughter. They are both doing what I was*

> *doing before. They are taking my culture and doing traditional music. (First-generation)*

It is important to note that these bonds can still be reinforced even among families that are currently separated across countries. Many of the young adults we talked to immigrated to the U.S. without any family, and they still found creative practices to be a source of connection across borders. Connecting to one's culture through creation can be an emotional bridge when physical proximity is not possible.

> *All of these things tie back to communities. Food is a love language. It's an act of service. To share that, is sharing your history, your culture, your story. There is so much power in a plate of food. Taking what I've learned as a Vietnamese [person], it is definitely something cool. When I am talking to other immigrant friends, we talk to each other about recipes that have been passed down from other generations. The other day I was at my friend's place. He wanted to make a braised pork dish. We helped each other out. I sent pics to my mom. She said when you come home I will show you how to cook it the proper way. Doing that with my friend…we are second generation and getting to share this with our parents. It is reconnecting us! (Second-generation)*

Others find that creative practices assist them in building new relationships in the U.S. Artistic activities can be a way to find common ground with and connect to new people, which is often a need for newcomers to the U.S. It can help via connecting on a shared interest or doing something new to join someone else in their area of interest.

> *Some of my friends are really into art and do it more often than we do as a group. Originally it was a task to do. I'm not really a creative person, an artistic person, but it's nice to dip into their interests. I have some paintings hanging on my wall right now. Each painting has a story attached to it. It's also a nice conversation starter. Everyone is unique. (First-generation)*

A creative gift is also a way to form those relationships, show appreciation and/or love. The products of creativity can also be a gift or token to offer others, even strangers. One interviewee described how giving paintings to neighbors was a way to work through a language barrier and connect. A few interviewees described how making things for others was the key to the success of that creation. Delighting others with the fruits of their efforts made those creative activities feel worthwhile. These individuals were not creating purely for the process or for themselves, but instead for the outcome. Food was often (though not always) central in this creative act of giving.

> *I love to cook for other people. If I'm by myself, I whip up something quickly, and don't put as much effort. I love cooking at Thanksgiving. I use my cooking, my spices, to do my magic for the turkey. I think food is a really great way to connect with people. (First-generation)*

> *I think, another thing we love to do is dinner parties. In our church group, whenever we have our initial first event together, I always bring something homemade. People are always drawn to that. They'll comment on how good it is. I'm just known as the cook, whether it's a good dessert or dish. I will stay up till midnight and make sure the house is dressed a certain way before we have a gathering. Honestly, it just brings me so much joy, after the fact I'm exhausted. Connecting with people is so important to me. (Second-generation)*

Though for some, it was particularly the close people in their lives that offered these interviewees the creative inspiration they needed. Creation was used by some as a way to show appreciation for one's important friendships or even as a demonstration of love. Creativity was a caring act and an act of love.

> *We'll go out to eat or have parties. I'll make a beautiful video with music effects. I do it on my phone. I think they help me a lot, my friends. They help me mentally and emotionally. I feel it's hard. I feel that I want to give back. If they give me 100%, I want to give them 200%. I never had that kind of connection when I came here. They are very happy and appreciative. That's called friendship. I think I feel like a creative person when I have passion. I put my creativity and passion and love to that project. (First-generation)*

> *I feel you are more creative when you're in love with someone. You want to give the best of you, make some gifts, searching the internet for special gifts. Create a date, create the planning. Creativity is love-based. That doesn't come from a specific space, it's from the people. (First-generation)*

Details: A Way to Honor One's Roots

Also, importantly, creative pursuits had value in helping some to connect to and explore their culture of origin and bridge gaps between cultures while in the U.S. Creative practices, sometimes, but not always, traditional ones can serve to honor one's roots. Specifically for some, those roots reference previous generations of their families that were connected to this same practice (either family who were skilled in the practice or who do to different circumstances were never able to really fulfill their creative potential). So, while they do not necessarily directly connect with

family using these creative practices, as many (though not all) of the family practitioners are deceased, it is clear that for many of the young adults we spoke with that family, ancestors, and culture are inextricably intertwined. From an intersectional perspective, this bridging of ancestral practices across time and space speaks to the layered identities many carry—where class, race, and immigration status intersect with generational narratives of creativity, silence, and survival.

> *I didn't know my grandmother was a singer until my friend 's boyfriend's dad was like, I remember your family in Haiti. Even now I can see your grandmother and your aunts singing with her. She had such a beautiful voice. She was one of the leaders in singing in church. During camp, one of our friend's moms used to sing this song to get the kids to wake up. So when we were with my parents, we were singing it in the car, and my parents were like: 'Where did you hear that? You know that your grandmother was the first person to sing that song.' I wish I had a recording of her singing. This is why I do some of the things that I do. It's literally in my blood. It brings me joy. (Second-generation)*

> *I also feel like I'm carrying or bringing to fruition some of my mom's talents. A lot of what she did was maintained in the family. My dad would always encourage her: 'You should sell the hats. You should have a catering business.' People from church were always stunned at anything she put her hands on. She was always inhibited because she was a really shy person. My dream was to be a paralegal, go to law school, I did a little bit of that and didn't like it, and now [her creativity] is just bursting out of me. (Second-generation)*

Though for others, connecting to one's roots involved seeking an avenue for a relationship to their culture of origin as a whole. For them it served to pay homage, and to identify with this culture, yet was not explicitly tied to family members. This yearning to connect was most prominent in second generation immigrants who sometimes discussed a feeling of searching for a better sense of their identity.

> *I feel extremely grateful, because the art form has been passed down to me. This was an artform that was almost lost in the war. They wiped away 90% of artists. I learned it from a master, who learned it from one of the most renowned masters, and that is extremely special for me. I am doing something that was almost lost. I could barely speak Khmer before, because of learning Khmer dance I was able to learn my heritage and my culture. I was able to be confident in who I was and to know and understand my identity. (Second-generation)*

Details: An Opportunity to Build Common Ground

Additionally, creative practices also worked to fill cultural gaps and create positive and productive cross-cultural experiences for many interviewees. They often viewed creativity as a way for people to find common ground even with very different social and cultural backgrounds and intersecting identities. This was the most common perspective we heard on how creativity and culture intersect. For some the literal goal of their artistic pursuits was to bring people together from different cultures.

> *One of my biggest goals in life is to showcase the world. Not everybody gets the opportunity to travel. Most people don't spend more than a hundred days outside their town. I love to use photography as a platform to be able to showcase images, thoughts, and emotions. You give people the opportunity to learn when you bring them to understand we're very alike and can learn from one another. That's the type of making that I hope can build community, especially in a time when things feel divided and anti-immigrant. (First-generation)*

And for others the act of creating was what brought people from different backgrounds together to share and bond. This connection appears to stem from opportunities to learn from one another.

> *All of the friends that I work with or have been in groups with, we all like to cook. We talk about different approaches to cooking. Being able to talk and share with each other is super cool. All of them are first- or second-generation immigrants. When I go to BBQs I have conversations with people about meat tenderizing across cultures. I've also been interested in spices and spice blends. Every culture has their own spice blends. Taking in all those experiences, when I go to a restaurant, I can see oh, this is how they do it. Everyone has different approaches to the same dish. The communities are different from each other, but food is a good way to close these gaps. (First-generation)*

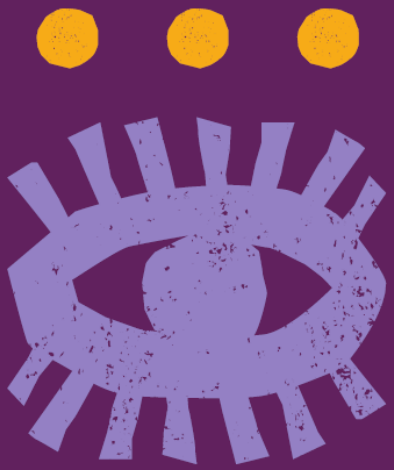
Interestingly, we also heard a blurring of lines between being a creator and a consumer of arts and creativity. The way that some people engage with creativity and feel inspired is by spending time in arts and culture spaces (e.g. museums, music venues, theaters) or diving into the details and histories of these practices without directly participating. When asked about creativity and their relationship to the arts, a few jumped unprompted to how much they love museums and appreciate art as their strongest connection to creativity. Similarly, the benefits that

people get from engaging with arts align with the rationale given for creating in the first place. For example, attending a museum has the potential to fulfill the same set of goals described throughout this section.

> *I feel like more of an observer of art than a creator. Growing up I struggled with music classes. I appreciate the people that create art. I took a couple of classes around the pandemic, and I enjoyed those classes because it was art history. I think the drawing and the painting I didn't enjoy as much because it doesn't come naturally to me. (First-generation)*

03

Artistic Identities Across Time and Space



03 ARTISTIC IDENTITIES ACROSS TIME AND PLACE

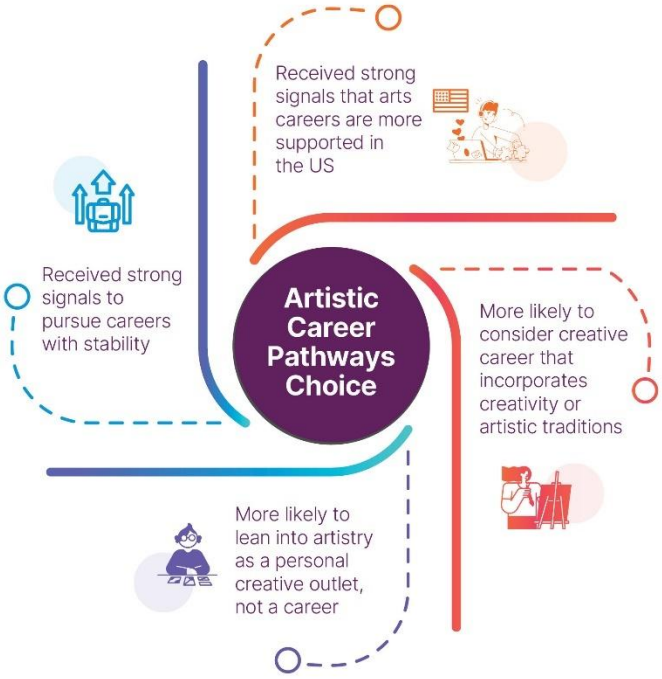
What this section covers

This section delves into how immigrant youth in Massachusetts articulate the factors that have influenced their artistic identities. It examines how these identities have evolved within a U.S. context, across generations, and in relation to their perceived access to the U.S. arts ecosystem. *The focus is on how immigrant youth and young adults—especially first-generation immigrants—define and engage with creativity, particularly as they transition from their home countries to the U.S. Meanwhile, second-generation immigrants navigate the tension between their elders' expectations and their own aspirations. The experiences shared underscore how the notion of being an artist is shaped not only by formal training and skill but also by access to resources, the ability to navigate complex artistic networks, and cultural perceptions about who should pursue a career in the arts.*

ARTS AND IMMIGRANT IDEALS

What we learned:

Across our conversations we found common threads in how immigrant youth from diverse cultural backgrounds collectively defined 'creativity' and 'artistry', and how those definitions shaped priorities around what to put their energy towards once coming to the U.S. *However, a notable generational divide emerged in how immigrants viewed their relationship to artistry. Second-generation immigrants were more likely to identify as an artist than those who were first-generation. This difference seemed to stem from contrasting cultural perceptions of who 'could be' an artist in their home countries vs who can be an artist in the U.S., as well as shifting priorities and evolving identities as they navigated life in the United States.*



Details:

While their self-perceptions of being an artist varied, there was a shared understanding that being an artist was a title reserved for those with skill, formal training, and a professional level of dedication in pursuing their interests. Those that we spoke to did not use the term "artist" casually or lightly; for them it carried a sense of reverence and meaning that limited its accessibility. As one participant modelled in their response:

> *I am not an artist so I cannot talk about this a lot, because I'm not involved in [it]. There are some restrictions, it is hard for them [immigrant artists] to represent their ideas. There are also some other difficulties. It is hard for them to present themselves in a very different culture. (First-generation)*

People who did not consider themselves artists were sure to note that they could not speak from the experience of an artist, while also acknowledging some of the challenges that they were aware of as shared by people in their networks who do consider themselves artists. These challenges—like navigating unfamiliar cultural landscapes or facing language barriers—sometimes also intersected with race, norms around family roles, and legal status, further shaping who gets to be seen or affirmed as an "artist" in the first place.

While many that we spoke to had some level of creative or artistic interest, very few were pursing those interests full time in the U.S. In addition to the interest and skill that many identified was required to be an artist, immigrant young adults also emphasized that being an artist necessitates both time and financial resources as one person noted "art is time consuming, it requires resources, but I don't see people who can't provide for their family or put food on the table [thinking] that is important."

In contrast to being an 'artist', the term 'creative' resonated with many more people. While being an artist was reserved for those who had the skills and resources, being creative was seen as an identifiable—and often necessary—trait to have for the immigrants we spoke with. Many self-identified as creative. When we asked them to give details about their creativity, the things they named varied from the traditional– like drawing, photography, singing and writing; to the non-traditional – like hiking, yoga, and cooking; to the cognitive – like thinking, strategizing and planning (see page 44 for full list). Most all mentioned that they regularly engage in decision-making and problem-solving processes, noting that these processes are common in their everyday lives as immigrants. They described this type of creativity as being useful in planning their move to the U.S., helping them secure a place to live, and integral to them learning a new city and adapting to new ways to build community and a solid foundation for their lives.

One participant shared of using creativity in making career connections and navigating systems:

> *I knew that I had to keep active and keep connected with the world. I joined a platform that teaches you how to do business, public speaking, motivates you to be hardworking and fight for your family. Money is not everything, knowledge is. I learned another language. I learned how to speak Spanish. We also have people from other cultures, I learn from them. In my free time I focus on personal development. When it comes to activities and systems you have to be creative. (First-generation)*

Throughout some of our conversations, particularly with those who had some level of creative interest, the terms "artist" and "creative" were used interchangeably. However, when talking with those who did not identify as an artist in any way, there were clear distinctions made between being creative and being an artist. To those in the latter group, being creative is employing a practical, everyday tool which anyone can do, while being an artist is considered contingent on a person's level of skill and access to time and financial resources.

For first-generation immigrants, the notion of being an artist was often more rigid, tied to formal recognition or specific artistic traditions, something separate from community-based craftsmanship. As one person shared: "*I think about how women in my family have*

been doing manual work that is very artistic that they didn't recognize as it like embroidery." This reality underscores how gendered labor and cultural invisibility often obscure the artistry embedded in everyday life. They often held a more conservative view of art as a profession or title and a narrower view of who could be an artist. This often shaped their perspectives and priorities that they passed down as expectations to their children. As one participant shared of their parents:

> *Maybe it's the immigrant [way] or [just] my parents but there is more of a focus on science stuff. There is such an emphasis on math and science. There are Indian artists and musicians, but I don't think the value and emphasis is shown or appreciated unless they are the best. There is so much focus on having stability in your life and having a good job and enough money to raise a family. Arts get pushed aside. (Second-generation)*

In contrast, most second-generation immigrants, having grown up in the U.S., identified a definition of artistry that signified their exposure to a broader, more inclusive perspective of who can be an artist and as a result, they have an expanded view compared to most in the first-generation cohort that allows them to see creativity and artistry as more fluid and accessible concepts and as worthwhile pursuits. This more expansive perspective is likely shaped by their intersectional identities: growing up at the crossroads of cultures, navigating multiple languages, racialized experiences, and often being socialized in educational or cultural spaces that promote individual expression and diverse forms of art. Their understandings of creativity and artistry reflect a hybridized identity, one that blends the structural realities of their families' migration histories with the cultural capital and social messaging encountered in U.S. schools, media, and peer networks. One Haitian immigrant living in Lynn shared of his experience:

> *I have a line in one of my poems, I'm a Lynn guy, but could've been a Haiti kid. I don't know if I would have access to art, to making beats or poetry. I think it would've been very different, I would've had different things to focus on. Being here I have the privilege of having an education that allows me to pursue the arts. (Second-generation)*

The culmination of these varying perspectives sometimes led to tensions between first- and second-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants tend to be beholden to the ideals that coming to the U.S. is about being successful and creating the greatest financial opportunities for their families and that these pathways are not secured through the arts. For second-generation immigrants, they are usually inheritors of these perspectives which may be in opposition to their own personal beliefs about the arts as a lucrative or desirable pathway.

Some of the second-generation immigrants that we spoke to mentioned feeling somewhat torn between their own arts-based desires and the pursuit of the academic or professional paths —paths that led many to the U.S. in the first place and ones that are seen as more stable and desirable by their elder generation family members or family members who more recently immigrated. As one participant aptly noted of this conflict:

> *I feel like an artist [doing clothing design]. I feel like I have a thing going on. Then I remember I have to study and work. It's like the American dream, you have things you*

> *want to do, but you are committed to some things. When you finish the things, you are committed to, maybe just then you are going to be free to do whatever you like. (First-generation)*

Both first- and second-generation immigrants noted that what we might call "being an artist" might differ across generations. They noted that for some, these creative acts are just engaging in cultural practice or simply way of life and that this motivation was separate from the desire to be an artist and was more closely tied to a trade or artisanship as a means of financial stability. As one participant noted:

> *My grandmother would say she used to be a weaver of baskets and necklaces. I think during her time that was her job. It was what she sold and got money for. But now there are so many other jobs available. Even now, I visit Kenya and it's not such a job anymore. It's more like art or a hobby. (First-generation)*

This distinction is important because it reflects a shift in the role of being an artist, from a means of livelihood in their home countries to a more recreational pursuit in the U.S.

In the U.S., becoming an artist is not typically seen as a path to financial stability. In fact, the term "starving artist" is often used as a cautionary label to describe those pursuing a career in the arts. As one participant pointed out, "In America, you can be a starving artist; in the Philippines, you have to have a job that supports you." This statement highlights a key difference: in the U.S., artists may be able to survive despite financial struggles, thanks to access to social services that help meet their basic needs. Additionally, pursuing the arts is less stigmatized in the U.S. than in many other countries, where artistic careers are often viewed as socially undesirable or impractical. As one participant shared about the financial strain that being an artist creates for some:

> *I had a high school friend he used to draw. He's a really good artist but it's really hard to break into that field and people have bills to pay. Work that pays the bills becomes a priority. It's really hard to make money as a creative artist, before you 'make it.' The starving artist is very true. People are working two jobs just to make ends meet. There's barely any time for their creative side. (First-generation)*

In contrast, many of our participants pointed out that in countries across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, artisanship was once a viable way to earn a living. However, economic shifts in these regions have altered the demand for artisan-made goods, leading to a cultural shift away from viewing artisanship as a sustainable profession. As a result, many immigrants we spoke with expressed that their primary goal before coming to the U.S. was to pursue education and secure a financially stable career—an aspiration they are reluctant to abandon, despite any interest they may have had in the arts. Consequently, for many immigrants, art has become a secondary pursuit, often relegated to hobbies, self-care, or cultural expression, rather than a primary career path once they arrive in the U.S.

OPPORTUNITIES & BARRIERS IN ARTS CAREERS

What we learned:

Many immigrants shared that they saw the U.S. as a place where being an artist is generally accessible to all, regardless of skill level or the intention to pursue art professionally. *However, despite this perceived openness, many felt excluded from fully benefiting from this inclusive culture of artistic expression. Some of the barriers that people shared most often included lack of knowledge about U.S. based procedures and rules, worries about how public visibility could affect documentation status, lack of awareness of artist supports, and difficulty networking with U.S. based mentors.*

Details:

Many noted that the U.S. provided a space for them to be themselves that was often counter to political and social environments in their home countries. The freedom to express oneself that the U.S. provides boded well with their artistic pursuits. One participant shared:

> *For me to practice here, it means that I can be my true self. I don't care if anyone is judging me. That thought doesn't come into my mind. I'm at that age where I don't care what people think about me. Growing up at home, I grew up in a conservative, middle of the road type of family, and I don't think they would understand. They have seen one side of me, not the full side of me. (First-generation)*

While the U.S. may offer more opportunities and an expanded view of who can be welcomed in artistic spaces compared to their home countries, many felt that their immigrant status was a barrier that often complicated their ability to navigate the local arts ecosystem. This challenge, coupled with the general complexities of adapting to new systems, left many feeling that access to the arts was still out of reach for them.

For the first-generation immigrants that we talked with, it was especially difficult to navigate the arts ecosystem. Like any system there are key players, dynamics, and rules that are not intuitively known. On top of that immigrants who may be "undocumented" are particularly vulnerable and face an additional layer of challenge when trying to participate in formal art processes to be paid for their work that could bring attention to their status through requiring documents like W-9s. Other concerns lie around having other skills like developing an invoice to charge for their work. When it comes down to the bottom line, many don't see pursuing arts and culture professionally as worth the risk, time and effort that would be required above their already normative stressors of acclimating to life in the U.S. One interviewee described how their documented status impacted their decision to perform in the following way:

> *I was undocumented in the past. Now I have my documents. When I had my documents that's when I started to do performing. [Before that] I was scared to share my information. People would ask for my w9. I didn't know how to do an invoice. There are more things that we think everybody knows, that not everybody knows. (First-generation)*

The various barriers that immigrants face –social, professional, and legal–make it difficult for immigrant artists, especially those who are first-generation–and unfamiliar with the U.S. arts ecosystem– to navigate and thrive in the U.S. art world. This results in a strained ability to pursue a full-time artistic career for those who might desire to do so. For most of the immigrants we talked to artistic practice has become a peripheral activity rather than a primary source of income or recognition. The combination of limited resources, legal fears, and the pressures of economic survival forces many to prioritize careers that they feel are "stable" and "lucrative" over their artistic ambitions.

ENGAGING WITH TRADITIONAL ARTFORMS

What we learned:

Immigrants from a variety of backgrounds (especially those who are second-generation) who decided to pursue arts full time in the U.S. cited that one benefit of the U.S. arts ecosystem is being able to practice traditional artforms in a new context. This gives them the ability to keep the traditions of their home culture close to them, foster connections with other immigrants from their native culture, and to evolve their artform through exposure to contemporary influences. We heard three different levels of focus on "sustaining" creative practice versus "evolving" creative practice.

Details:

Some mentioned through knowledge passed down from culture keepers, and their own family's lived experience, that in their home countries, political, religious, or social structures can impose significant restrictions on creative practices. They shared how artists in those environments often face censorship or backlash for expressing controversial ideas, which art is often used as a vehicle for. Others mentioned that because traditional artforms are so rooted in the ideals, practices and histories of a particular culture, they are thought of as practices that are immutable.

However, many young adult immigrant artists who decided to continue their artistic practice in the U.S. – particularly those rooted in traditions native to their home countries - saw an opportunity for these artforms to evolve into something new. They mentioned that the U.S. gives them the freedom to experiment with new forms of expression that allow them to evolve their own native artistic practices. One participant said of practicing their native traditional dance in a U.S. context that:

> *I would say that within traditional Khmer dance, because of the histories of war and genocide, there has been a huge emphasis on revival and keeping the traditions alive. There hasn't been much room for us to think outside of the box or create new things. In America it's easier for me to be able to think outside of the box and explore. Can I do this movement without being reprimanded by the masters? Can I think of this new idea without ruining traditions? That's one of the challenges we face as traditional dancers. The challenge of reviving the old and keeping things new and interesting. (Second-generation)*

This blending of tradition and modernity reflects the dynamic nature of immigrant identity in the U.S., where cultural heritage is both preserved and reimagined in new, innovative ways. Immigrant artists who merge traditional techniques with modern sensibilities help shape a unique and diverse artistic culture that reflects the hybrid identities of their creators.

Most saw first-generation immigrants as holders of cultural continuity, even if they were prioritizing other career avenues outside of art. As one participant noted:

> *The first generation has a deeper bond with the culture of the native nation, so they promote and communicate. The second generation knows less and is less interested. They need the help of the first-generation to popularize and understand. This situation is common in any race, such as zodiac or Chinese mythology. (First-generation)*

While many immigrants in this group chose not to pursue the arts professionally, they often maintained strong connections to their cultural heritage through family traditions, community practices, and informal artistic expressions. This sense of cultural preservation was deeply valued, as it allowed them to pass down traditions and maintain a link to their home countries. For many, art became a secondary pursuit or a form of self-expression, but their role in preserving cultural practices and values remained central, even as they navigated the challenges of adapting to life in the U.S.

The immigrant creative and artistic experience in the U.S. reveals a complex interplay between cultural preservation, evolving identities, and the practical realities of adapting to a new environment. For many immigrants, the title of "artist" remains reserved for those with formal training and resources, while creativity is seen as a more accessible and everyday trait essential for navigating the challenges of immigrant life. Generational differences highlight the shift from viewing art as a livelihood to seeing it as a secondary pursuit or hobby, particularly for first-generation immigrants who prioritize financial stability. Despite these challenges, many second-generation immigrants find freedom in the U.S. to explore and adapt traditional artforms, blending them with contemporary influences. This dynamic blending of tradition and modernity not only fosters a richer, more diverse artistic culture but also allows immigrant artists to preserve their cultural heritage while creating new, innovative expressions of identity.

04

Engaging with Arts and Culture Organizations

04 ENGAGING WITH ARTS AND CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

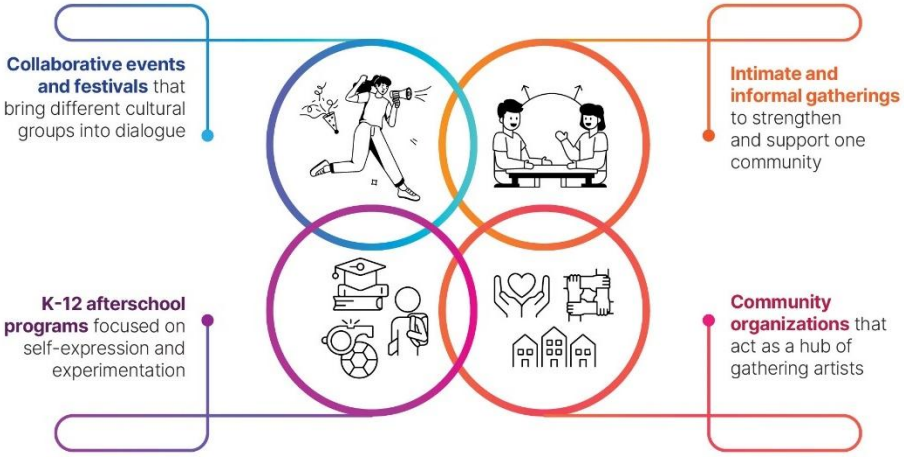
What this section covers

This section highlights how most of the young adult immigrants who we spoke with had engaged with both community-centered and European-origin/encyclopedic arts and culture organizations in Massachusetts. *Many framed both kinds of organizations as having the potential to provide safe spaces, create dialogue, and celebrate the value and unique perspectives of immigrant artists and creatives. However, they saw these kinds of organizations as playing different roles in community-building. Many appreciated how community-centered arts and culture organizations offered consistent opportunities to gather with others who shared values and identity. Most tended to see European-origin and encyclopedic organizations as positive experiences also, but in a narrower way, contributing to their personal wellness and relaxation, but not necessarily to communal connection.*

COMMUNITY-CENTERED ORGANIZATIONS

What we learned:

People shared stories of community-centered arts and culture organizations having the greatest impact for themselves—often through regular events that that celebrated cultural pride or cultural exchange. *Events ranged in formality and size, from city-wide multi-cultural festivals to intimate gatherings with a creative focus to support a specific community group. Many appreciated how these organizations offered consistent, ongoing, and intentional opportunities to celebrate cultural identity. The most commonly mentioned contexts included collaborative events and festivals, intimate and informal gatherings, community organizations, and K-12 afterschool programs.*



Details:

When we asked people about 'arts and culture' organizations they were familiar with, top of mind for many were organized events and festivals that brought different cultural groups into dialogue—often sponsored by cities or intended for a multi-cultural audience. Several shared about gatherings they appreciated that were held specifically to highlight intercultural dialogue. Others mentioned gatherings that weren't explicitly about celebrating cultural diversity, but that still allowed people from diverse backgrounds to express themselves. Both those from the Boston area and people in smaller cities mentioned organized gatherings that created cultural exchange.

> *There is a block party event [in Cambridge] and they bring people from different dance groups and different studios so you get a chance to see dances from all over the world. From Brazil, Mexico, India, other countries—flamenco from Spain. I have seen many concerts of jazz. I've seen a mariachi singer as well. (First-generation)*

> *Our downtown [in New Bedford] isn't really big, so they can close off the street and create these really big events. It's a really good way for people to express themselves. [Llike a craft fair], to put oneself out there. (First-generation)*

A number felt that immigrants have a natural appreciation for human diversity because of their own cross-cultural experiences. As one person put it, *"when you're an immigrant, you can also appreciate other cultures."* Some noted that they were more likely to try new experiences than their non-immigrant friends or colleagues were. Several were also appreciated of opportunities to get to better understand the range of cultures and diversity within a shared region, such as in different sub-cultures of Asia or in Latin America. Their interest was often related to regions that included their own family' home culture. But many of the immigrants we spoke with also shared about attending events that highlighted different cultural groups than their own.

> *There was a fest [in Lynn] for Cambodians. I stopped and checked it out, and it was beautiful to see that. It's important to listen to the music they have, food they have, because they're a part of the community. Within their culture they have their own ways of expressing themselves creatively. (First-generation)*

While some of the people we spoke with enjoyed attending these kinds of events, others had actively participated in organizing them. We heard from several artists who had participated in this way, but also from an individual who had joined a cultural council that helped sponsor events in the city where they lived.

> *I started events for the community. I was able to get together different people, different immigrant people, where they feel welcomed. We made those events free for everybody. It was about music. People love music and art and food, especially our community. My mission was bringing local artists. I was bringing painters who could do their own exhibition. We offered food. We created a performance. (First-generation)*

> *We have an arts and culture committee in the city. I know because I had to volunteer for it. My job mandates that you do so many hours of volunteer time. These events, having someone relate to that culture, or experience a different culture. It lets them know they are validated or seen. (First-generation)*

When we asked them about 'arts and culture' organizations they knew about, many reflected on smaller, more intimate and informal gatherings in addition to the larger cross-cultural gatherings mentioned above. They often shared stories about how smaller gatherings helped strengthen and support their specific community—often by providing consistent, ongoing opportunities to gather for a small group to be creative together. These gatherings were sponsored by a variety of organizations (universities, schools, companies, cities, parks), and not always by arts-specific organizations.

A number of individuals who had immigrated to the US in order to pursue an education specifically mentioned groups within their university that had formed to creatively support students with shared cultural experiences. Work environments were another environment where people mentioned that they felt supported by organized gathering centered around creative sharing. Some of these gatherings were highly informal and self-driven. As one person shared, "*in the company where I work, we had a little group of the immigrants and international people, and we shared our cultural things.*" Examples ranged from informal book clubs to climbing groups, and professional networking. A number of even the most informal gatherings still had some support from more structured organizations, which provided spaces for meeting and activities.

And even when these informal creative gatherings were geared towards meeting the needs of one cultural group, we heard examples of invitations to and interactions with individuals from outside the cultural group. This was often by intent, as a way to share hospitality and build a larger network.

Definitions

Community-Centered Organization: serving a particular community, usually founded and led by that community, often neighborhood-embedded

European-Origin or Encyclopedic Organization: initially founded with colonial mindsets or centering Western artistic values, often centrally located

> *I was president of the Iranian association in my university, so I was preparing some events, gathering people together. I invited non-Iranians. They really liked it. I talked to the chef of the dining hall and they cooked Iranian food for the first time. That was challenging. It was not perfect. There are lots of Iranian restaurants, but it was a small city. So we had a meeting with the chef, with some options. And they cooked for the first time for us. And we played Iranian music. We were really involved in that event. It was a good activity. I really felt involved in that University. It gives us a good feeling, really being seen. (First-generation)*

> *We have students of different cultural backgrounds, Cape Verdian, Black, white. We have different show cases [student performances]. We have so many people coming in, their grandparents, their siblings. With themselves being from different cultural backgrounds is nice to see how beautifully they work together, and the people who are supporting them from different walks of life. (Second-generation)*

Several shared their appreciation also for arts-specific community organizations that also acted as a hub of gathering for artists—often immigrant artists. Artists who we spoke with were particularly likely to have worked with at least some arts organizations that supported community building across a variety of programs.

And a couple also emphasized the importance of arts-focused after-school programs for children within K-12 schools. These examples were less tied to cultural expression within particular groups and more about the importance of self-expression and experimentation in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Others also echoed the important connection between art and community for high schoolers in particular.

> *We need more centers where kids can go after school to connect to other people. [In my high school], we had the spoken word team. People could come and talk about art, and we'd continue to talk to each other, get vulnerable with each other. I don't think without those spaces I could be as vulnerable. I wouldn't be able to do a lot of things without those spaces that have brought me to where I am now. (Second-generation)*

> *It's very easy after school for kids to get into mischief. But if it's something they have to do every day after school, having responsibility, or something they can look forward to, or spark interest or find community as well—especially high school students as they're trying to figure out what to do, and especially children of minorities, who might not know that these things are available. Having these programs that will help you find out whatever you're interested in, or help you apply to college. (First-generation)*

EUROPEAN-ORIGIN & ENCYCLOPEDIC ORGS

What we learned:

All participants had also engaged with at least some kinds of European-origin or encyclopedic organizations, but frequency of engagement varied greatly. *Many saw their experiences with these organizations as positive—most often contributing to wellness and relaxation. Their experiences with these organizations were mostly personal and less about connecting with cultural heritage or community, although we did hear examples of both.*

Details:

At some point in their lives, all participants had been to at least one European-origin or encyclopedic organization in their area. For most interviewees we shared a list of a variety of organizations to help prompt discussion. The list of organizations included the following: art or design museum, art gallery or art walk, children's museum, history or science museum, botanic garden, planetarium, zoo or aquarium, outdoor or indoor festival or fair, dance performance, music performance or concert, theater or comedy performance, historic site tour, public park, immersive experience.

Participants varied greatly in how often they engaged with these kinds of organizations. However, most knew of at least some of the most popular arts and culture attractions in their area. As part of getting to know the place where they lived, they had been to at least a few.

> *I know about the Whitney Center for the Arts, the Berkshire Art Center, and the Berkshire Botanical Garden. I went to the Whitney Center for the Arts with my friends on a Saturday and we just walked around and spent some time there. (Second-generation)*

Most people we spoke with had strong tastes about which organizations on the list they would consider—quite a few people enjoyed some of the organizations in our list, but did not connect with others. Personal preference came to the fore here. One person shared, for example, that "*usually the ones that I do the most are the art museum and history museum"* while another person stated, "*I'm not a big play fan—I'd rather see a live comedy show*." And some noted how their tastes were also evolving over time. Several first-generation immigrants also spoke of exploring arts and culture organizations from the list first in their home countries but then chose other aspects to explore in America.

> *I am not a person of museums and art. I never visit. A historic site gives you the timeline of what was happening in the beginning and what is happening now. I feel the museum is more like you visit and you see the art and that's it, so I don't really have a connection to the museum. (First-generation)*

> *I like concerts, I like musicals too. That's something I started to like in the U.S. We have American influence in Brazil, like guns and roses. The zoo, not in the U.S., in Brazil yes. There is a famous aquarium in Boston. We always say let's go, and we never go, just procrastinating. (First-generation)*

A smaller number of the young adult immigrants we spoke with were frequently engaging with a variety of historically white-led arts and culture organizations (e.g., at least several times a year). Those who regularly engaged were more likely to identify as someone into the 'arts scene' or as a 'museum lover.' As one person put *it, "I'm a person that definitely loves the arts and museums and stuff like that."* Quite a few individuals were highly aware of the arts ecosystem where they lived, even if they weren't artists themselves. Some of these individuals were also more likely to see these ecosystems of historically white-led cultural organizations as intercultural spaces and intersectional spaces—or at least shifting in that direction.

> *Greenfield is a great place for arts and culture. We have a fairground. They have the traditional American fair in September, but every weekend they have different things. There's a little bit of an art scene here, also for queer artists, queer communities. It's a place that has had hard times, but there is so much potential here. (First-generation)*

> *I love arts and culture. I see myself as a patron of the arts, because I enjoy so many different aspects of it. I went to a theater and saw a South African play, and then I went to the Brooklyn Museum to see Hiroshige, and then I went to go see a musical with a British [focus]. Arts and culture is where I'd spend all my time and money if I had more. (First-generation)*

> *I am really impressed by the arts and culture community in Boston. Even if this is a space that does cost money, they're always having free events that are family friendly. I know there's been an expansion of public art and making it more pedestrian friendly, shifting away from colonial times, to art that is representative of people from a variety of cultures. (First-generation)*

Across all frequencies of attendance, almost everyone thought of their experiences with these organizations in positive ways. A number of people specifically noted that they could be important wellness spaces or places of safety.

> *I especially didn't have a lot of friends. [This museum] has live music on the first day of the month, and a painting class. And going there was free. A lot of people come there and it was a busy place. I really enjoyed being there. It has is very relaxing. Actually, I think the best word is safe place. You can just be there. It's quiet. You can just enjoy being there with art pieces. (First-generation)*

Others focused on how these organizations can help you get out of your routine and the stresses of daily life—and some mentioned that these stresses were increased for people living in a new place without a strong community. And at least one person shared how these spaces were especially important in less diverse and smaller cities and towns.

> *I think it's important, here we work a lot, we have our routine. If you don't make it a point to do something fun, you get caught up, you don't have time for self-care stuff. There was a point in time where I would go home and go to work and just go home, and then there was a point in time where I realized that wasn't healthy. When I go to a park, I'm feeling relaxed, that's for yourself. After I'm done, I feel good too. (First-generation)*

> *I think arts and culture organizations play a big role [in my city]. For a long time, it's been a conservative city. It's provided an inclusive place for everybody. It's not just meant for older people or younger people. Everyone can feel safe wherever they are. (First-generation)*

Those who were employed or who were students noted that their business or school had sometimes provided opportunities to visit these kinds of arts and culture organizations. We heard about sponsored trips or free ticket offerings to museums, the ballet, and live theatre. They weren't always able to go, but it did put these organizations on their radar.

Despite largely positive experiences at an individual level, we didn't hear as much consistent passion about historically white-led organizations as we did for community-centered organizations, and this is likely because passion came out at a communal level. Most of the people we spoke with did not see these organizations as connected to community—although there was some variety here again. For example, as one person noted, *"theater doesn't have a big footprint in the Latin, Hispanic, or my [Brazilian] community."* Although this statement may not be universally true, it may be the case within this participant's neighborhood or geographic area.

CENTERING IMMIGRANT ARTISTS & CREATIVES

What we learned:

Many noted that they would like to see more historically white-led arts organizations directly support artists from immigrant communities. *A number appreciated when white-led organizations highlighted immigrant artists, experiences, and creative value—because they understand historically white-led arts organizations as arbiters of value in collective American society. They often felt that there were unique opportunities when historically white-led organizations that did this work, they but also expressed concerns about token partnerships rather than authentic valuing of immigrants as contributors. We heard six common ways to better center immigrant artists: showing appreciation for the unique perspectives that immigrants bring, creating spaces for multicultural comparisons, fostering multiple language access, showcasing a holistic range of immigrant creativity, supporting ongoing collaborations, and highlighting immigrant works in central spaces.*

Details:

A number of people shared stories where they appreciated seeing historically white-led organizations highlight and directly support individual artists from immigrant communities—and a number also wished for more of this. Participants often shared examples where they appreciated when a historically white-led organization highlighted an artist or artistic tradition from the participant's own cultural background specifically. Some mentioned specific yearly celebrations of a culture or group, such as AAPI month. Other experiences were less connected to official celebratory periods, and more about expressions of cultural connection at any time. As one person of Iranian origin shared, they had recently attended two theatre performances, one of which featured *"the translation of a book from Farsi to English."*

For some, the core benefit in seeing their culture represented resulted in them also feeling more of a direct connection with the organization. Content highlighting immigrant contributions could also create feelings of validation and pride, especially for people who aren't sure how they'll be accepted in new, foreign country.

> *If the museum talked about my background and culture, I'd be interested in visiting. I don't want to go to museums for which I have zero background. (First-generation)*

> *I have really noticed there are some museum spaces and exhibits where you can see that this exhibit is around this local artist or local community, or native space, I've seen them do that more. I think that's really cool. In east Boston, I've had the opportunity to see people in my community. Who ever imagines that you can be in a museum of such regard? I think that's so cool and can draw people in. (First-generation)*

But how organizations highlighted artists and creative traditions mattered a lot. Many participants were eager to see organizations when they centered immigrant artists and creatives explicitly as equal contributors to an artistic canon—rather than being a sideline highlight. Centering could happen either through space (e.g., highlighting in a central space or through equal-space multi-cultural comparisons) or through time (e.g., ongoing relationships and collaboration). And a couple noted how it was important to consider a wholistic picture of immigrant stories rather than just a focus on trauma.

> *I went to [an encyclopedic museum] maybe like a month ago. It was a Dominican artist. It was kind of cool in sense that she was mixing history and fiction and demonstrating that with her art. I feel like when it comes to art that comes from people of color it tends to be traumatic, or really colorful and energetic. She blends the history that is painful with something aspirational. (First-generation)*

The desire to see immigrants centered in historically white-led organizations was not only about one's own culture of origin. Many noted that they would like to see arts and culture organizations of all types foster more inter-cultural dialogue and involve a wider range of human diversity—and that Massachusetts was a particularly apt place to lead in this work because of the rich network of immigrant communities across its Gateway Cities. Others emphasized how artistic traditions from multiple cultural groups can incite dialogue.

> *I think Massachusetts has one of the larger immigrant populations, so all these different arts and culture orgs have their own place to exist, and everyone has their own community. I think it helps people be exposed to different cultures, to get more familiar with people they might not be. (First-generation)*

> *These cultural arts can make people question, why is that, or make them question themselves. They can definitely incite dialogue. I personally believe that's a really good thing, the more dialogue or civil talk we have, the more we learn from each other. (First-generation)*

However, some noted that collaborations between historically white-led organizations and immigrant artist could be performative at times—especially if events felt obligatory or where payment didn't feel commensurate to other artists. Others—including non-artists—noted the infrequency at times of arts events focused on their community. For some, infrequency meant a once-a-year event, and they felt that collaborating even just twice a year was an important signal of a more authentic desire to partner.

> *[My city] has transformed this into an intracultural space, where there are a bunch of live events where artists get to perform or share their art. It's coming from within rather than from the large organizations. People within the community are already doing this and supporting each other. On a larger scale we haven't really been supported, unless its AAPI month. We are only hired for those reasons. I don't really feel anything about it, it's expected. Sometimes within these communities, they don't even pay enough. I have to negotiate prices. Immediately they are not respecting the artform, or the years or expertise that we have accomplished. (Second-generation)*

Those we spoke with were highly attuned to signals that organizations emitted on whether they saw real, authentic value in immigrants—often through the lens of what audience showed up.

> *Having these places offer a taste of home helps. It says as an organization we are thinking about you. To have an 'authentic' experience that's not there for fetishization of these groups. The worst thing would be a clickbait situation to get crowds in for money—I would not support that at all. The best way to figure that out is when I see a crowd with people who identity with it, a lot of families and older people. (First-generation)*

For organizations that have not yet developed relationships with immigrant audiences, participants suggested many different solutions to reduce barriers, often noting the importance of addressing these in tandem. Reducing cost also came up frequently, to be cognizant of how people from different immigrant backgrounds also have financial backgrounds and constraints on their time.

Several felt that providing access in languages other than English was especially key to providing a real sense of invitation to multiple immigrant groups. Some noted that Massachusetts especially was an important place to foster multi-language access because there were so many places with multi-ethnic immigrant communities, and because language is essential. As one person shared, "language is so basic, so addressing it is important." A number felt that this was particularly important for older generations who

had more limited English capacity, but some also noted how this would be valuable to themselves.

> *There's a lot more that needs to be made in terms of making those places where the immigrant community can go, not just for special activities, but as a part of their lives. It's having diverse staff. Staff that speaks different languages, providing transportation. If you start providing that to different groups, they can pass it on to others. It's a matter of breaking the ice. (First-generation)*

> *There's a language barrier. I think that is huge. A lot of Latin communities don't come out to these events. It's advertised everywhere, but just in English. So, there are massive crowds, but you don't see them at these really big events. (First-generation)*

> *It was important that there was a caseworker there, someone that could speak Farsi, or Arabic, that had trust in the community, and they would open the door to me or other people. I think that people underestimate how important that is to be truly welcoming. (First-generation)*

And while addressing these barriers was considered key, some noted that these were the means, but not the central driver of relationship-building. One person suggested that the key to relationship-building is through appreciation for what immigrants can bring—both to the arts and to a healthy and thriving society.

> *Can we improve access so that people from this community can actually be there? That is a big thing that's still in the works. It's not perfect and not going to be perfect for a long time. I think it fundamentally comes down to, can people even think about doing art, or opening a restaurant, or being in charge of how the city is going to be run? Can we truly get representation in these spaces, not to fill a quota or a hidden agenda, but because we appreciate these people? (First-generation)*

Appendix

APPENDIX

Conversation Topics

The qualitative approach we took for this study allows a deeper exploration of people's viewpoints, actions, and conceptual framing. We created a conversation protocol to ensure that we kept the overall goals of the project in mind when conducting interviews with participants. Prior to developing the goals of the study, we had conversations with the advisors, our Barr project partners, and the co-researchers to think with them about the intentions and desired outcomes of the study. These conversations guided us in writing a semi-structured "discussion guide" for these interviews. In every 90-minute conversation, we covered the following themes:

- Introductions and consent
- Icebreaker (origin of name, shared by both interviewee and facilitators and note-takers)
- People's Neighborhoods, Family Background and Communities
- Making, Creating, Practicing, & Self expression
- Perceptions of Arts and Connection to Culture
- Aspirations, needs, and experiences in relation to arts organization
- Conclusion and questions

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Report Graphic Design

Eileen Riestra is an award-winning bilingual designer and artist based in Boston with over 18 years of experience working at the intersection of art, culture, and community. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, her work was shaped by the vibrant colors and cultural richness of the Caribbean. Through design and visual storytelling, she centers humanity and resilience—highlighting individuals rather than masses, and honoring each person's unique story and cultural identity. Her approach combines strategic vision with hands-on execution in print, digital, photography, and social media. From leading creative direction at Depict Brands to collaborating with brands such as Wayfair and HomeGoods, Eileen creates expressive, purpose-driven work that uplifts communities and supports immigrant- and minority-owned businesses. Learn more at https://eileenriestra.design/.