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Visual Essay

An Immigrant Alphabet

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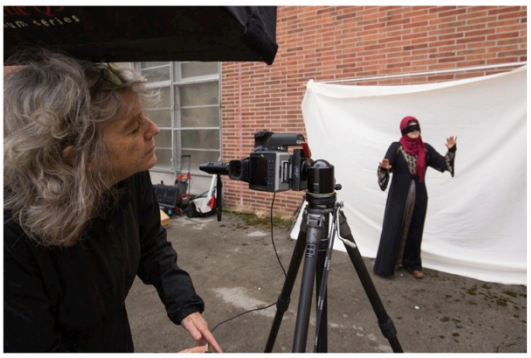
Why the alphabet? Like most everyone, I first encountered written language in children's alphabet primers. I see now that the words and visual examples used to represent letters reinforced the worldview of the middle-class white girl I happened to be. The letter C, for example, was illustrated by a picture of a shiny new car.

With this in mind, I started using alphabets with photographs to teach language to English for Speakers of Other Languages students. With their help, I made pictures with them to illustrate the alphabet so children could influence the images and meaning of a primer—in effect, make it their own. Beyond that, I realized the alphabet could be an effective tool to pick apart and document something as inexpressible as the experience of immigration. In a time of turmoil and confusion and fear, I thought it was important for young immigrants to tell their own story in a form that was **playful** and **understandable** for an American audience.



Wendy works with a student

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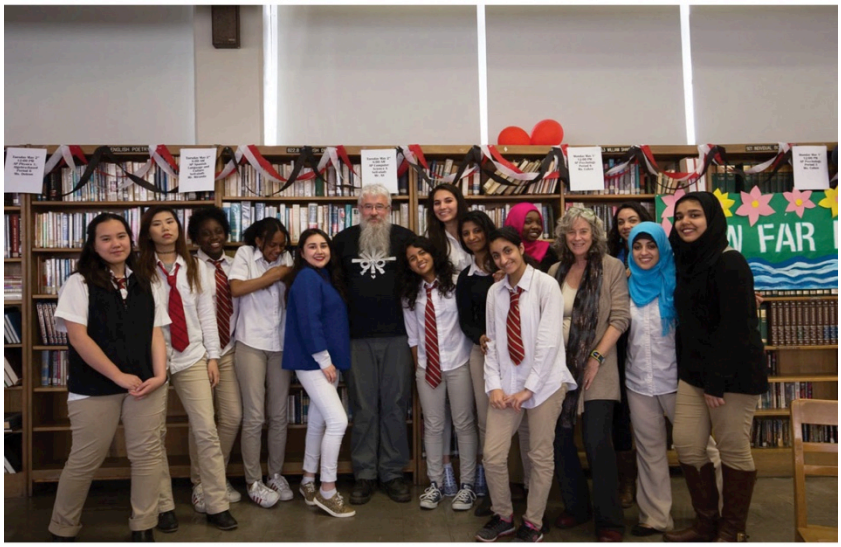
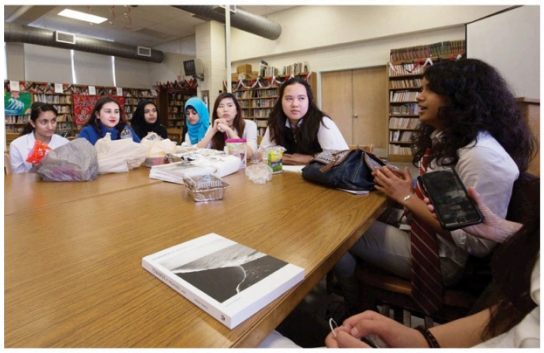
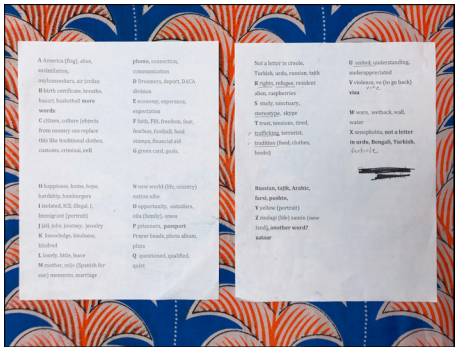


Northeast High School students who participated in the project

When Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, an arts and education organization in Philadelphia, commissioned me to work with high school teens in creating a public installation, I proposed An Immigrant Alphabet. Eighteen students from Northeast High School whose families had immigrated to the US volunteered to work with us.



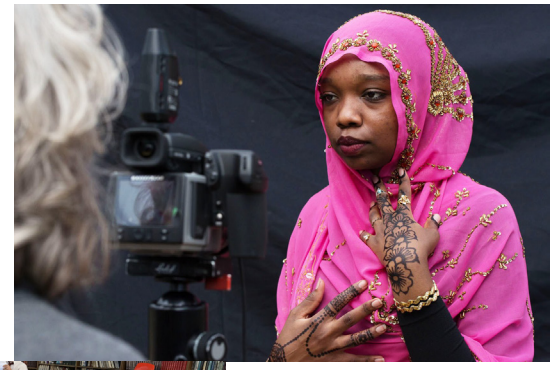
The first step was to discuss and research immigration as it was evolving each day and for the students to share their stories with each other.

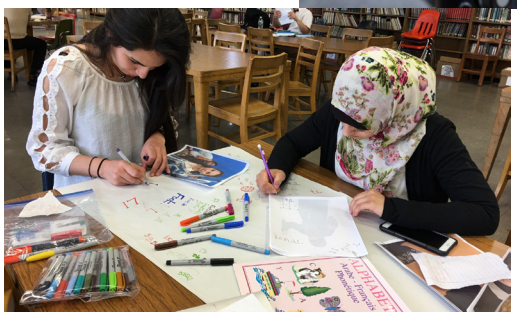


Students brainstormed words to correspond with their letters

We divided the alphabet into parts and assigned students to groups to choose words to represent their letters. Then the students drew out their photographic ideas.

The third stage was to create a studio in the courtyard of the school where we, the students and I, set up the shots, and I photographed them.



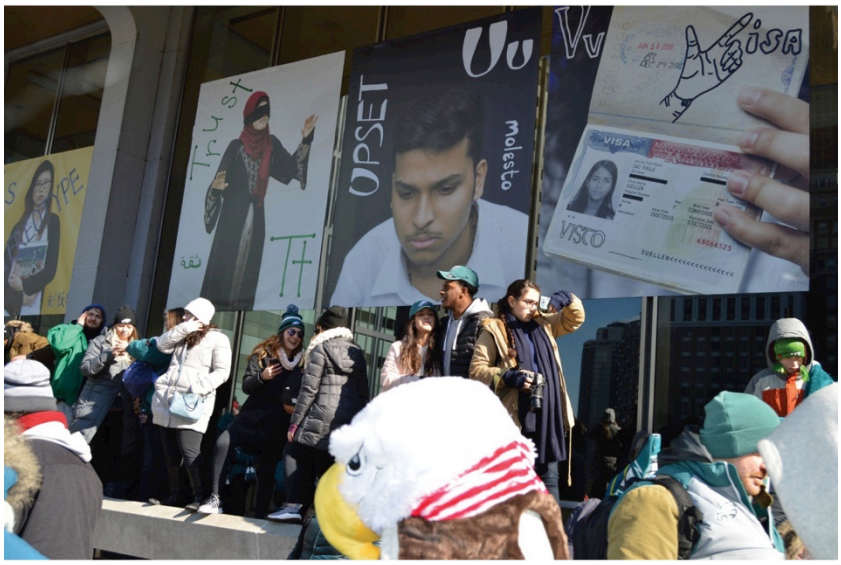


We divided the alphabet into parts and assigned students to groups to choose words to represent their letters. Then the students drew out their photographic ideas.

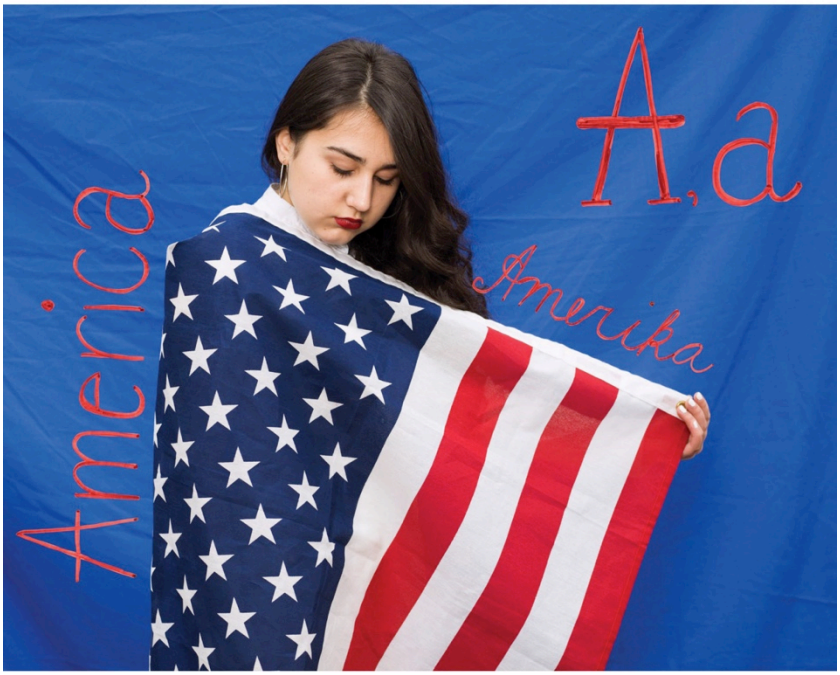
Finally, I asked the students to come up with questions they'd like to ask each other. I used the questions to interview each of them. In these interviews the teenagers discuss what it takes to leave their country and what it takes to survive in the unknown world of the US. I was amazed by their curiosity and compassion for each other.

Xuan from Vietnam told me:

> *The stories that are heard here, they came from countries where the students wouldn't be able to go to school and make friends and have the life that they're enjoying now. It's so easy to let our emotions guide us and sometimes block the difficulties away and say that it doesn't matter because that doesn't affect me. But if you keep thinking like that eventually then you're going to get hurt too. We came from countries where the people also thought that what happens in other places doesn't affect me until it was too late.*



Installation view at Municipal Services Building



America: Amerika (Uzbek) n. a country where everything starts first

I'm grateful to be in America. There is so much to see, but it's not easy to move in a foreign country where everything is new—friends, school, language, people, food, and places.

Malika, Uzbekistan

In 2011, on September 2, it was the first day of school in my country. We actually won a green card in the lottery. My aunt had persuaded us to apply. It was like a dream for us. America—what? Even though I never thought I would come to the USA, every night when I went to bed I would pray, because my best friend came to the USA and she got a green card.

We used to live together in our country. Our houses had connecting roofs and they weren't too tall. We would be playing loud all the time, so from the roof we would go to each other's house. It was really hard for me to lose my friend because we grew up together. But after she came back from America, she changed. She talked to me with English words I didn't understand.

The immigration officers came to our house, but they didn't tell us anything at first. They said we're looking for your dad, not you or your mother. We thought something violent had happened. They were talking so serious, and they didn't show their emotions.

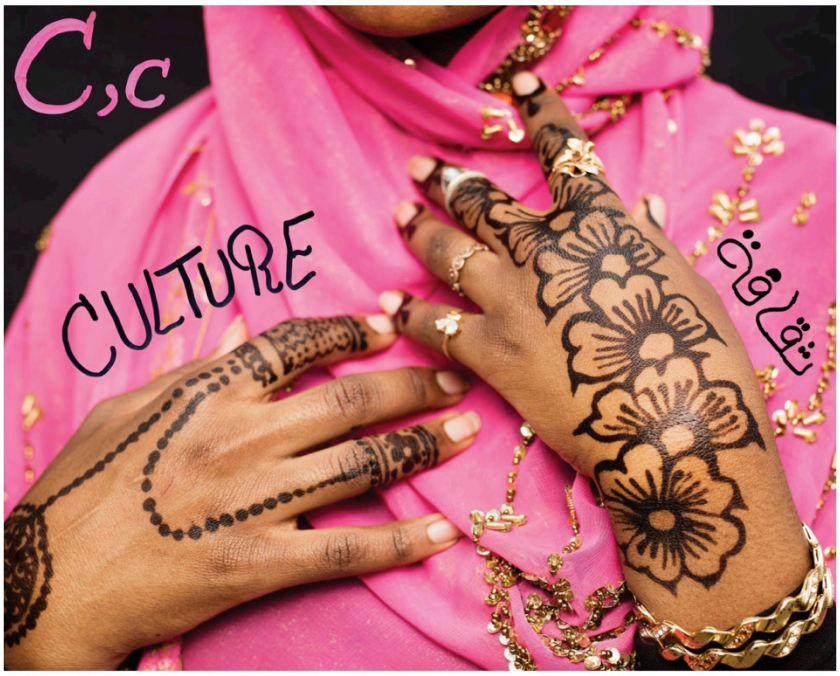
They went to where my dad worked and told him he had won a green card. In the beginning he wouldn't go along. But my mom was like, "No, this is for the kids, not for me. I want to see the kids educated and working in good places as professionals. What am I for in this life if I don't see that?" My grandmother persuaded my dad because education is really expensive in my country.

It was the last day of school—May 25, 2012. I was twelve years old. My mom, my dad, me—we all came here together by plane from Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. When I got off the plane, I was looking all around, opening my eyes, opening my mouth. I'd never seen this stuff in my life. I'd never seen African American people.

In the beginning my health wasn't good because of the weather. I slept all day, all night. I couldn't wake up; I had asthma and I had to sleep on a couch. I thought about how I used to sleep and play in my country. We didn't have a really good life there, but I was happy inside. Here, at first we lived in a town that was really quiet. I didn't have any friends. All the kids did was watch TV, TV, TV, TV. I would ask my parents to send me back to Uzbekistan because I thought the things would never change.

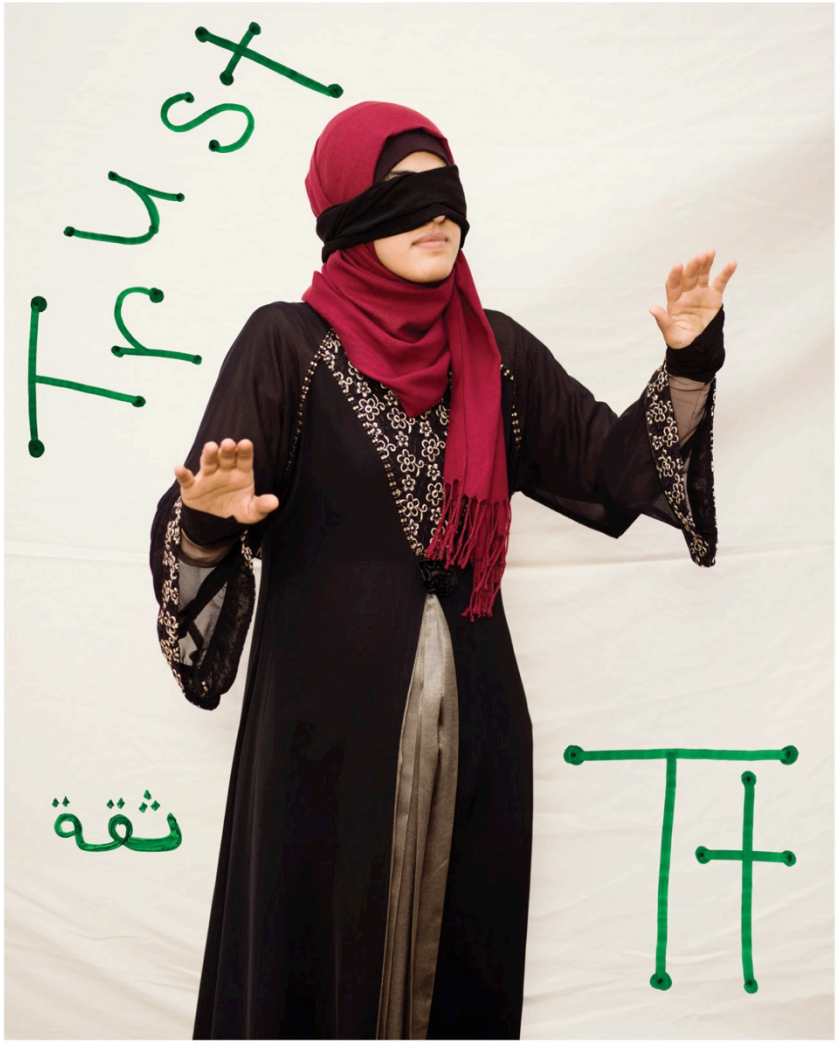
In America, education is good. If you study hard, you can become someone. I'm grateful that I came because I wouldn't be the same person I am right now; I would still be thinking in little ways. America changed me so much. It gave me a hope to a better and amazing life that I have dreamed of all the time. I want to do something that people will remember. I want to study business and help people in other countries.

In a small way, I think that we can change something in someone's life in a good way.



Culture: ثقافة (Arabic) n. the customs, art, and achievements of a particular country

Brides use henna to make themselves more beautiful for their weddings since it is part of their culture.



Trust: ثقت (Arabic) n. to find your way in the darkness with the help of others.

When I first came to the United States I had to trust others to help me through the challenges.

Mariam, Eqypt

We came here to Philadelphia in April at twelve o'clock at night. It was cold, not our weather. I was wearing my mom's jacket but it didn't help. I told her, "I'm cold, I want to go back."

When you see the buildings here, it's like you cannot hear any voices. It's so quiet, so quiet. You feel like the people in the house are dead. In our country, when you walk outside you can hear voices or noise from anywhere. You would be like, I have a headache. I don't like to walk in the street when you cannot hear like the clacks of the cars. Why is it so quiet? The buildings, the schools, the church, even the church. Why is it so quiet?

When I first got here, I was like, oh, new stuff. America is awesome. Then my aunt asked me if I wanted to see the school. OK, I thought, I'm going to see blondie girls and blondie boys and be like, ooooh. But when I came, I first saw African American people. I was like, OK, they're American so…Then I saw an Arab, I saw an Indian, I saw Chinese people and others from around the whole world! I was like, huh, where am I? I said I'm going back. I'm going to get a taxi, I'm going back. I cannot stay here. It's all Arab. I'm not in America. I'm in my country. I just traveled to another city.

I thought in America I'm going to be the only one in the street wearing a dress. But it's normal. I eat the same food. I see Arabs, I see Egyptians. The whole school, everywhere I go. Every corner there is an Egyptian. I thought I'd be the only Muslim in America, the only Arabic girl in America. I was going to be the only girl who left their country and came to America.

America was a movie to me, but we are all immigrants here. No one is better than another one. We are equal. We are all immigrants. When we came here, we were allowed to do anything. Anywhere, whenever you want to do something, you can do it. But in our country, we're not allowed to. We cannot shake hands with a boy. If you look at the Qur'an and read it, it's haram [forbidden]. But people came here and started to hug girls, and kiss them. It's OK if you hug a girl, but not in the street, or in the school.

I'm trying to stay as I am. It's Mariam, I came here. I didn't change. Here we live with one hand, me and my mom, as if we were one person. I cannot leave her because my dad is not here. She started working when we came from Egypt. I was like, no, Mom, you cannot work. I was thinking to leave the school and work for her. She told me no, so I take care of my little brother. And he was like, "Where's my mom? Why she works?" One night, I saw her crying. "What happened?" She told me we need money to pay for the rent and the food. I said, "Let's go back to our country." She said, "No, we will not give up."

Doha, Iraq

I was born in Iraq but then when I was about three years old we moved from Iraq to Syria, and then from Syria we moved to the United States.

I don't remember much about Iraq, just the house that we had where my mom's family was all gathered around, and my father's family's big farm. There was a big lake where we could swim. During the Eid holiday everyone gathered and sat there together. My uncle made a swing for us.

When Iraq was invaded the soldiers came into our house. They came out of nowhere, they broke in.

They had helmets on and guns in their hands. I still have nightmares about it. We were sitting in the living room. We didn't have sofas so we were all sitting on the floor. My mom, my grandma, and aunts were baking, working on a big dough. As soon as I saw the soldiers, my mom dropped her head and wrapped it with her scarf.

The soldiers started looking around. They went to my parents' room. They threw everything around. I don't know if the soldiers were looking for weapons. They even looked in the fridge. The worst part is that my grandfather was out of the house. My dad was out of the house. Only my aunts were there and they didn't know what to do.

I have nightmares that someone will break into our house and ask for our weapons. So when my dad told me that we're going to come to America, I didn't know how we were going to live here. I thought there were going to be soldiers all around.

After the soldiers broke in, my dad said, "I want a safer place for my family," so we moved to Syria. I remember the long car ride from Iraq. It was me, my sister, my younger brother, my mom, my dad—all in that one car, and Syrians as well.

Syrian people do not like Iraqis. They thought we were backwards. They thought we were going to ruin the country for them. They said,"The Iraqis are fleeing their country; we don't really want them here."

My father arranged everything. Our first school was in Syria. I remember my parents walking us to school for the first time. We had to wear uniforms, blue colored dresses with dark-colored pants. There was a big open field, and inside was the school. I wasn't the kind who made friends easily. And because I'm Iraqi, some people would just back away from me. That continued until I came here. Iraqis were my only friends.