HOW DID WE GET HERE?
A regional history of the Bay Area

A PUBLICATION OF URBAN HABITAT
Written by Miriam Walden
Illustrated by Christine Wong

Edited by: Cheryl Brown
Juliette Ellis
Francisco Herrera
Philip Hutchins
Banae Martinez
Colin Rajah
Viviana Kennella
Erica Swinney
History class seems to be all about other people's ancestors. I wish I knew more about *my* ancestors.

Yeah - like "her-story"!

Or "ourstory".

There is so much about mom and dad's life that I don't understand...

It's like a lost language...

LOST OR FORGOTTEN?

Lost or forgotten? -
I can't grasp or comprehend my father's language
Cause he never taught me

It's mine like DNA and Fingerprints
But words clumsily trip off my tongue as I mimic the phone conversation in the next room
We are not written down and will be erased from history
And the effects of imperialism are like asbestos in old ceilings
It's never leaving and
It's just so much more than language -

Lost or forgotten? -
White like
Missing heritage like
Blank space
Like writing history with cultureless feet.
Being the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of immigrants
Gives her nothing more than dark hair and washed out family legends.
She wants to walk this frayed tightrope history
Backwards to her great-grandmother, plead
Teach me. Teach me
Everything -
Lost or Forgotten?

I never had my mother’s language
Have no poem explaining each and every reason I have
More than her
More than her mother
More than you but
No language
I lack sounds of conquistador Indio gardener alien laborer washed over illegal forgotten and proud
Lying under floor hiding strewn in the middle
Brown —

Lost or Forgotten?

Stomachs Full of the sweet hollow America not reminding us of anything
But what we saw on TV
Saving is a tricky business when you forget the Way to the beginning knowing dictionary definitions doesn’t prove Anything
But we want to know ours Peace hardly held together Not lost. We write ourselves into a new piece. —

The first people in the Bay Area were Pomo and Ohlone. A lot of their stories have been lost, but I don’t want to forget. I want to know the story that explains the way we live today.
I know my folks struggled to make life better for me, but what happened? There is still so much inequality.

Yeah. Like, our life here in the City is so different from what goes on in some suburbs...

Long drives take time away from family.

Most people of color in the Bay Area live in big cities like this one. Wages are low. Most people rent. We go to the suburbs to shop. Our schools and our bus systems don’t have enough money.

Older suburbs like this were built about 60 years ago! We have mostly housing, few businesses or jobs, so we have very little money to repair roads and schools. Our community is diverse. Lots of people own their homes, but they commute to work.

OLDER SUBURB (San Leandro)*

People of Color  Home Ownership  Median Income

BIG CITY (Oakland)*

People of Color  Home Ownership  Median Income
Most people living in new suburbs like this are white. Wages are pretty high, and most people own their home. Lots of businesses are moving in, bringing lots of jobs. We are building new schools and parks. Housing and shopping centers are taking all the open land. Traffic is a real problem.

NEW SUBURB (Livermore)*

- People of Color
- Home Ownership
- Median Income

Where you live really defines your chances for a good education and job. It's so unfair!

I bet our great grandparents would have something to say about that! It starts with what happened to them, no?

Every Bay Area community is different. What is it like in your
Well, I know my great grandparents came from Mississippi to the Bay Area in the 40's looking for work.

When I got back from the War, I went to work making appliances. African Americans were not allowed in the union then so our wages were low and we got no benefits. I was eligible for a government loan to buy a house but we found that in some neighborhoods in the City, the homeowners' deeds had these things called "restrictive covenants" that kept them from selling to Black people.

I got a job in a factory in Richmond helping to build ships for World War 2. The job came with housing and childcare. But, when the War ended, we women all lost our jobs. I cleaned houses to make ends meet.

They would let me clean those houses, but not live in them!

My business building ships and tanks boomed during the war. Afterwards, I needed to find a new line of business fast! I switched to building cars and appliances. And, I made sure our government understood the need to create demand for this stuff (and jobs) by encouraging new home construction in the suburbs.

Finally, we found a house for sale near the factory where Pa worked. There was a lot of noise and smoke, but it was also a wonderful community!
My great-grandfather also fought in World War II...

My Family has lived in the Bay Area since my folks left their farm in Oklahoma. While my husband was fighting in Europe, I worked in the shipyards.

After the men came back, I became a homemaker.

I got a management-trainee position at a factory in Oakland. Lots of my buddies from the war worked there, but I noticed that all the folks chosen to become managers were White. The salary was good, and with a loan from the government we were able to buy a house.

The government loan people were really pushing houses in the suburbs. They encouraged us to buy in San Leandro. They wouldn't make any loans for “integrated” neighborhoods.*

There was a trolley line that took me from home to work, so we didn't really need a car. But we bought one to drive to church on Sundays. We were so proud!

Low interest government loans helped 33 million families buy or improve homes!
That's about the time my great grandfather came up from Mexico to work in the peach orchards...

The Bracero program, allowed us to work in the US only as long as our bosses wanted us, so we had to work for whatever wages they offered. We lived in temporary shelters near the fields. Finally, my wife was able to join me.

The Bracero program began in 1942 and ended 1965 bringing 4.5 million Mexicans to the US.

Little by little, the fields around us disappeared. Construction companies came in and built houses.

We moved into Oakland to work in a factory canning fruit. As Braceros, we couldn't get a loan to buy a house. In the neighborhood where we rented an apartment, there were so many Latinos they called it a Colonia!

We didn't just come here. They brought us! My father worked building roads in Mexico, and a recruiter came saying "Do you want to earn pesos or dollars?" My father and a few others dropped their shovels and followed the American. The Bracero program wouldn't allow my mother to come into the US, so my sister, mother, and I lived just across the border.
My people came here all the way from China...

I grew up in the Bay Area. My grandfather came here to build the railroads. In his day, Chinese-Americans worked in factories and farms but they were forced out. By 1940, most of us were working in the restaurants or the laundries in “Chinatown” in San Francisco. My wife and I opened a restaurant.

No one would sell property to us. We asked for a loan to buy this building. But the bankers, they said it’s not good business to make loans here. So, we rented the restaurant and the apartment above it. It was so crowded!

When World War 2 started, our Japanese-American neighbors got taken away to concentration camps. They lost their businesses and homes forever. Anti-Japanese feeling made all of us targets of hate crimes.
Zoning laws are created by local governments. They define what can be built in each “zone” of land. The first zoning laws in the Bay Area were written to keep Chinese businesses in Chinatown. In the 1940s there were three major kinds of “zones.”

By the time any of us realized how dangerous these chemicals coming from the factories were, our houses were already next to them.

When we retired, we got no pension. Because our house is so close to the factory, we couldn’t even sell it.

After years of working in the fields and then the cannery, my health wasn’t good. We never had health insurance. All our money went to doctors and hospitals.

Renting all our life, we didn’t have property to pass on to the next generation.
Of course, the new houses in the suburbs were in areas zoned for housing only. But people of color couldn't move out there.

Our children grew up playing in these yards. Now we know the dirt is full of dangerous chemicals.

Communities living near industrial sites have higher risks of death from asthma, cancer, and heart disease. They also experience higher rates of lead poisoning. African American children are 5 times more likely, and Mexican American children are 2 times more likely to have elevated blood lead levels, compared to white children.

My son got a good job through my friends at the Bank.

By 1960 almost half (40%) of Americans lived in the suburbs. Government loans basically allowed us to build a nest egg for the future.

Housing discrimination really limited folks' options.

And the kind of jobs that folks could get really shaped what would happen to them later in life.

But it's not just the housing or the jobs! Access to loans! Access to clean air! These things made a big difference!

So, the result was that our parents and grandparents had really different opportunities in life.

What kind of job, housing, and education did your grandparents have? How did that affect you?
Government investment in the suburbs made a big impact. What if the government made a big investment in the city? Could that help?

Yeah, we wanted to invest in the city. In San Francisco, Richmond, and Oakland we needed land for office buildings and warehouses. The housing that stood in the way was shoddy and run down.

Federal government money for "Urban Renewal" was supposed to rebuild "blighted" areas. We felt our houses and businesses represented our hard work but the people in power thought they were slums.

Over 400,000 families in the US were displaced by the Urban Renewal program, 2/3 of them people of color.

The housing in downtown San Francisco was built for workers from places like China and the Philippines. It was old, and most of us were old too!

This land is too valuable to permit poor people to park on it.*
Another priority was to use government money to support my automobile company.

To keep the suburbs expanding, we needed to get people to use cars instead of trolleys.

In the 1960s, it was easy to use the ferries and trolleys. 170 ferries landed every day in San Francisco, connecting to trolley lines leaving every 20 seconds! The trolleys were faster than the cars because they went down the middle of the road.*

It was a group of auto companies bought the trolley system—and burned it down! The buses that were supposed to replace the trolleys were terrible! Anyone who could afford to bought a car instead.

The Federal Government began to spend billions of dollars to build a network of big interstate highways. This meant I could drive to work and it was fast! People moved out to the suburbs following the new highways.

They built the Freeway right through our neighborhood! They forced us out of our house. The "compensation" we got was not enough to buy a new place. We had to rent. We had to cross the Freeway to get to church or see our friends. We could smell the fumes from all the trucks on the highway.

Public transit was better in my mother's time than it is today!

330,000 Families in the US were displaced by highway construction.

Exposure to auto exhaust can cause asthma. 1 out of 5 children in the Bay Area suffers from asthma, and those near highways have the highest rate of death.
After years of construction our neighborhood looked like a ghost town! Many African Americans in San Francisco left the Western Addition for Hunters Point. It wasn't "Urban Renewal" it was Negro Removal!

The message we all got was: "Go home to Mexico or Mississippi or wherever you came from." But the Bay Area was home, and we were not about to leave! Many Latino Families Forced out of West Oakland ended up in the Fruitvale.

The Freeways destroyed many people of color communities! Government was putting the needs of corporations over the needs of people.

Yeah. It was just racism as usual. But people did fight back!

When I was growing up my family had to move twice because of Urban Renewal construction. So, when I became an active leader, I was not surprised that BART planned to build right through the core of Berkeley's African American community. We fought to make BART go underground and WON. We were protecting the social capital of our community - our Black owned businesses. Our movement later put Ron Dellums in the US House of Representatives.

Emil DeGuzman, S.F. Human Rights Commission

My family had to move from the Fillmore when the City destroyed our housing. Later, I got involved in the struggle to save the International Hotel because it was the heart of the Filipino community downtown. Corporations wanted a luxury hotel, not housing for low-income people. Other groups fighting redevelopment joined us, and we were able to hold off the demolition for 8 years. It was a victory because we showed that the developers could be stopped.

Joe Brooks, Director, PolicyLink
Many struggles came together in the 1960's, including the Fight For Civil Rights, the Fight to stop the Vietnam war, the Fight For women's equality, and the Rights of Asians, Native Americans, Blacks, and Chicanos.

Brown vs. Board of Education outlaws separate schools based on race. (1954)

Voting Rights Act outlaws rules used to prevent people of color from voting. (1965)

Civil Rights Act forbids discrimination, creates affirmative action. (1964)

Fair Housing Act outlaws housing discrimination. (1968)

I fought to integrate the union at my shop. Now all workers earn decent salaries and benefits regardless of our race. Then I became a leader in the union.

I fought against housing discrimination. We were able to buy a house and move our business to Daly City. There are better schools, but my children aren't learning Chinese culture.
Protests raised up the issue of poverty, a concern that united many different groups. Our government started the "War on Poverty". It created a lot of services and jobs. Because of affirmative action, many new jobs finally went to people of color.

Not every program was successful, but the War on Poverty and the economic boom of the 60's together cut poverty by almost half!

I got a Federal student loan and studied nursing. I went to work at the new government clinic. I could afford a house while serving my community! I was elected President of our neighborhood council.
The level of protest around the country was truly frightening to the business community. Something had to be done to cool things off, without going too far, of course!

The Anti-Poverty Program in Berkeley had 35 full time staff. We were in charge of legal services, childcare, a food program, and more. We organized a tenants union to represent renters’ interests. People saw that they didn’t have to have policy done to them, that they could organize themselves to have power to influence decisions.

Joe Brooks, Director, PolicyLink

Wow! So that’s where all these programs came from! Now they seem so broken down and overloaded. I wonder what happened?
Everyone on this page seems so tense! What caused all this?

One thing was, gas prices went up! Businesses that used gasoline laid off workers. By 1975 one out of every ten people was out of work.*

Rising prices were bad for banks—it cut the value of their money. So they fought back by making loans more expensive. Without cheap loans, businesses could not grow. That led to even more unemployment.

Military bases closed, and factory jobs left the country. As more people moved to our older suburb and the schools became integrated, less government money was spent fixing things up. We moved to the new suburb of Livermore to avoid all these kinds of problems.

Frustration led to riots in some cities. Any family who could afford it, white or brown, moved out to the suburbs. Our church lost many active members.

I grew up in Richmond. Downtown Richmond used to feel like a real neighborhood. Then there were the riots. Businesses got scared, and started moving out to the edge of the City. City money was redirected away from downtown. Downtown became a wasteland.

I came to Richmond from Laos in '75 when the US lost the Vietnam War. I had to leave...or be killed. I pulled my wife, a teacher, out of her class in the middle of the lesson. I only told her the truth—that we couldn't go back—when we were on the plane. Here in Richmond, I did not feel safe driving down the main street, because I'm Asian. The Latino, African American, and the Asian communities were all in isolation—we just had no way to communicate.


Maria Alegria, Councilwoman, City of Pinole

Torm Nonprasert, Director, Laotian Organizing Project
People were not sure who to blame for their problems. When Ronald Reagan ran for President he told us all our problems were because of too much money being spent on poor people and people of color. I guess some folks believed that - because they voted for him and he won.

Right away, the government began cutting services. The community clinic where I worked was closed. I managed to get a new job, but without health benefits for myself and my children. Hundreds of people in my community lost access to services or jobs - or both!

Well where did all the money from the cuts go?

I guess they spent it on the military. My mother came here from El Salvador around that time. The death squads she was running from got their guns from the US government!

Also, US Banks told my country to balance their budget by cutting social services. So, there were no schools, no clinics. I couldn't raise my son there.

And some wealthy families and corporations got big tax cuts. Families with incomes of half a million a year got $135,694 off each year's taxes - but we got just $147!?
It's not just government programs that are missing in the City—we need places to shop. Why are all the stores out in the suburbs?

As the suburbs continued to grow, businesses changed our strategy.

Banks closed down branches in the city and replaced them with ATMs.

Grocers built big stores out in the suburbs and closed down their stores in the city.

Hospital companies moved their best equipment out to the suburbs where more people have insurance. Profits were the priority.

Instead of banks and grocers, we have check cashing places and liquor stores. Back home I ate lots of fresh vegetables, but not here! The quality of the food at the corner store is terrible and the prices are high! It costs $10 just to cash my paycheck!

In 15 low-income neighborhoods in Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara county, 2/3 of residents cannot get to a hospital within 30 minutes by public transit.

Half don't have a supermarket in walking distance. 89% of the people in these neighborhoods are people of color.

So their wages were low—and ours went down too.

Our union lost a lot of members as businesses moved out to the suburbs. Out there, the jobs were so spread out—it was hard to organize.
Cities lost 2/3 of the money we used to get from the US government. Now, most of the money that City governments have comes from sales taxes, property taxes, and fees – like for parking or business licenses.

That money comes from me! When I buy clothes, I pay sales taxes. Part of my rent is property tax.

In 1978, California passed a law called Proposition 13. It keeps the government from raising my property taxes much – unless I sell the building. So my tax bill is pretty much what it was twenty years ago!

But I just bought this house last year, so I pay taxes based on the current – and higher – value of this property. I'm paying much higher property taxes than he does – even though my property is right next to his!

Business property doesn't change hands as often as homes do – so most of the benefits of Proposition 13 go to business owners.
Our city has lots of older buildings protected by Proposition 13—and the homes aren't worth so much because they are near factories or freeways. We don't get much property taxes. We don't have any space to build a new mall, so our sales tax income is low. We charge a lot for parking—but it doesn't help much!

We don't have any space for a mall either! Just all these older homes. If our schools were good, people would want to buy here—raising the prices and bringing in more property taxes. But we don't have the money to spend on the schools—or even to fix our roads and parks!

Older housing means lots of mold, rats, and lead paint, which makes people sick. People in our neighborhood have health problems—but the City has no money to deal with it.
What we have is lots of open space! We need money for new schools and parks, so we made zoning laws that require new homes to be big and expensive! Brings in lots of property tax revenue! Plus, low-income people can't afford to move here - which keeps down our costs for services. To bring in sales tax, we are building big malls with expensive shops.

The water and power companies spend lots of money to get services out to the new suburbs, but the rates go up for everybody, including people in the cities.*

This is so depressing! We've got do something!

What? People here in the city are actually paying for the construction of suburbs!

THAT'S OUR MONEY!
1990s

Maybe if we could get some jobs into our city things would be better.

Well, the government is still investing in the military, and my high tech company is getting lots of contracts. We need a new headquarters. Where should we build it?

We have no money to spare in our budget, but we'll go all out to get these jobs anyway.

We have plenty of money, so we can offer lots of tax breaks - but they won't even care about that when they see what else we have to offer.

We didn't even have enough money to make a brochure.

COME TO THE BIG CITY! We have:

- Lots of little pieces of land!
- Free clean up of polluted land!
- Tax breaks for new business!
- Shipping and cultural hub!

COME TO THE BIG CITY! We have:

- Free land in our giant new office park!
- Huge tax breaks for new business!
- Great new schools, big new houses, lots of parking!
- New roads and fast new telephone lines!

More business in the suburbs means more trucks coming thru my neighborhood to get to the airport and shipyards. I get the exhaust, but not the jobs.

2/3 of all new jobs from 1980 to 2000 were located in suburbs!

Well, the choice is clear! I'll take the land and tax breaks out in the new suburb.

I can still use the City's airport.

Tech jobs aren't what they seem. Making computer chips doesn't pay well - and the chemicals are ruining my health.

I'd love to have one of those jobs - but it takes two hours by bus to get out there. And I can't afford one of those big houses.

Look, there's my dad!
High tech businesses in Silicon Valley were generating 3 jobs for every available house down there* - that sent a wave of folks up to the Bay Area looking for housing.

We'll convert this old building into luxury condo apartments for wealthy computer programmers. That will generate lots of profits for me, and property taxes for the City.

*Source: 1998 figure from Joint Venture Silicon Valley Network

The traffic and the commute to the suburbs was killing me. I wanted an apartment in the City, close to all the great ethnic restaurants and music clubs.

The condos displaced families with children. With fewer children in the community, schools were closed. My friend's business was replaced by an expensive coffee shop.

We Finally brought in a big retail store. We got some sales tax money - but it wasn't enough to build affordable housing for all the low wage workers at the store.*

The jobs at the new store paid so little I couldn't afford my own apartment. So I rent a converted garage. It's not safe, but it's something.
Wow! So that's how we got here. The history is complicated - but it explains so much about today! Right now, things are getting worse in a hurry.

I guess this is where WE step in to help.

Their struggle does give me some ideas. We need to bring jobs that pay well into the City. And, if we could get a good grocery store and farmers market here, we'd have fresh vegetables.

As long as schools in some suburbs are better than schools in the City there will be pressure for families to leave. And that will drive up housing prices where the schools are good. We've got to get better funding for our schools.

If we had a better public transportation system more folks could get to the jobs without adding to the clouds of exhaust over our neighborhoods.

We need a way to make sure that each community has enough housing at a price that people can afford. I want to be able to stay in the community where I grew up.

A coalition of 30 youth organizations came together to fight for schools not jails. We organized walkouts, demonstrations, school takeovers. Thousands of people were involved. We stopped the powerful forces who were determined to build a super-jail for young offenders way out in the suburbs.

Our government spends so much money on police and wars overseas. It's only that money was invested in our schools!

A war on poverty is still a good idea.

We got them to put dollars into programs for youth in Oakland instead of jail cells far away from families. Now, we're fighting for good jobs. Because a McJobs-style economy, makes it too easy for youth to say "I'll just sell drugs." We are looking at how development decisions get made, and how youth can change that.
I think Richmond has come a long way. Our organization was formed to give a voice to Asian Pacific Islanders. We studied the toxic pollution from Chevron, and we realized it isn't happening because we were Asian - it is because we are poor. We work together with African Americans and Latinos because people understand that this is our community and toxics affect all of us.

First, I was a volunteer for the City for several years. I felt they didn't value our work. It was disrespectful, and typical of the racism in predominantly Anglo communities. So I ran for city council. I feel my role, now, is to promote open government. Everyone who lives in the community should have access to the people making the decisions.

Yeah. Our Families all got here in different ways - but we are in the same boat now!

No kidding! The leaders of each City are competing with each other - but it seems to me that the competition is bringing us all down.

We've got to look at the Bay Area as one big community and plan for it to get better for everyone.

I'm excited about picking up the struggle that our parents and grandparents started. We can stop fighting each other for opportunities and start organizing for real equality.
Urban Habitat partners with low income and people of color communities to make the Bay Area livable for everyone.

Urban Habitat
436 14th Street, Ste. 1205
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 839-9510
www.urbanhabitat.org

Dedicated with love to all those who brought the struggle to the present day.