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# Changing Communities. Changing Traditions.

**As with religion, family, or cultural heritage, many of our traditions have been shaped and passed down from our communities. As neighborhoods and communities evolve over time, so do the traditions and rituals that define them. Many of the nine essays featured below deal with gentrification. Too many of us have seen our neighborhoods displaced and local landmarks like a cherished family-owned restaurant or corner grocery store closed down. But gentrification is not the only story of neighborhood transformation. New traditions, like neighborhood activism and cultural revitalization emerge when individuals organize in their communities to create change. The following personal essays and narratives are from writers, activists, and everyday people who have witnessed the ebb and flow of tradition in their own communities — and a few who are creating new traditions of their own.**

edited by **Keidra Chaney**
illustration **Spike**

### Waiting for the Landlord's Call

When I moved to the edge of the Ukrainian Village three years ago, I shopped for groceries at Edmar and Carniceria Jalisco. For a hot dog, I stopped at Odge's; for a beer, I stopped at Cleos. For a greasy diner breakfast, I could go to Lorraine's. There were more trees and fewer buildings, so my street felt both green and sunny.

These days, Carniceria Jalisco, with its butcher counter and produce aisle, has remodeled into the Rio Balsas convenience store; Edmar will be a Dominick's in a year. I can still go to Odge's and Cleos, but now we have a Subway. A new breakfast diner catering to less greasy tastes has opened. Several new condos have gone up, and their ground floors house insurance offices, realtors and dry cleaners. On my street, trees have been cut down for no reason we neighbors can think of. And when the city broke my old sidewalk to lay down a new one, they let big chunks crush my small garden. Now, my neighborhood feels both brighter and colder.

Sometimes I wonder when my landlord will call us to ask if we can meet him to talk about the rent. I'm waiting for him to raise it so it's competitive with the rest of the Village. I'm waiting to see if any of my predominantly Latino neighbors will move out, which would spell an end to our annual Fourth of July family block party. I'm waiting to see who my new neighbors will be in the condo windows across the street from me. I'm waiting to see if the city will chop down any more trees. Someday I won't be waiting any more; then where will I say I live?

**-Amber Smock, Chicago**

## God's Unchosen Cornerstore

As a child, Sundays were a ritual for my family. The three of us, Mother, sister and I, would go to church, which was then followed by a visit to our local green grocer. Being a 10-year-old who was more interested in Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation* video clip, the idea of going to church didn't excite me the way my mother would have liked. And it seemed that the only reason I would be dressed and ready for ten-thirty morning mass each week had less to do with genuflecting and lighting of candles to save our souls and more to do with the pilgrimage to Joe & Nancy's Fruit & Vegetable Shop.

Each week, Joe, Nancy, and their flock of hard working fruit sellers put on a mouth-watering array which put the lesson of temptation to shame. There were always plump strawberries, in gleaming enviro-plastic punnets ready for picking up and eating. Sometimes Joe would have washed and de-stemmed the berries so that eager shoppers could sample what was heaven on earth within deep red berry flesh.

Soon enough puberty hit both my sister and me, which brought the weekly pilgrimage to the house of JC, as well as to Joe's, to a screeching halt. Puberty may have hit the fruit shop too, as with the least ideal timing, the small business went under. It happened on what would have been any other regular Sunday, which saw the habitual act of shoulders disappearing beneath the blankets, each time my Mother would yell, "Wake up! You are going to be late for mass — again!" It was the Sunday which saw the three of us walk up to Joe & Nancy's where we were met with striking red paint across white cardboard.

The sign read, 'Because the bank refuses to help us, we can no longer help you. Thank you for your support over the years.'

This put a stop to any redemption I was supposed to be involved in at the age of twelve, and soon enough video clips on Sunday were the only form of soul saving for a pre-pubescent teenager angry at the system which took away the Joe and Nancy's of the world. It was so sudden than no amount of praying would have brought back the joy our ritual or the simple pleasures, which the fruit sellers brought a young girl of the Rhythm Nation.

**-Saffron Lux, Belmore, Australia**

## Don't Move. Organize!

I used to go to street fairs and poetry readings with my Aunt Dawn Alvarado, who lived in the Mission District for two decades. Now, I have to drive three hours to go visit her. I¹m pretty sure that there are a lot of people here who would trade all the new cool cultural amenities for a simple dinner with their displaced friends. And yet, as a lower-middle class single guy, the damage gentrification has done to me, personally, is relatively minor.

Is the glass half-empty or half-full? If the glass is full of rancid milk it doesn¹t matter. The only good that has ever come from the displacement game is the good that organized communities have fought tooth and nail to make happen. Last November, I took a walk through New York¹s Lower East Side with neighborhood activist Chino Garcia. Through the haze of a neighborhood turned into a playground there were tangible results of social struggle: many hundreds of units of permanently affordable housing, neighborhood centers, bike repair co-ops. Almost every single site where Chino¹s community still lived or worked, he started off the story with "They were trying to kick the tenants out of there, but we organized and..."

**-James Tracy, San Francisco**

## Bittersweet Brooklyn

Some changes are subtle. And those are the ones that seem to get to me the most when I walk around my beloved Fort Greene, Brooklyn. The patisserie that's a block from my apartment. BAM Rose Cinemas showing independent films. And of course, there's the new Starbucks. But the giveaway is the much greater number of well-groomed vanilla figures waiting for the C train at the Lafayette Avenue stop. I enjoy the fruits of the yuppie invasion, but deep down I can't help resenting what brought them here.

Extreme overpricing of real estate in Manhattan has resulted in Brooklyn becoming the latest conquest for affluent but price-minded homebuyers and renters. Brownstones that could have been purchased in the 1970's for the cost of a Honda Civic are now topping out for prices as much as $1.5 million. Rents have doubled, even tripled since when I first moved to New York ten years ago. At that time, Fort Greene was being "revitalized" from a drug and crime-torn afterthought to a mecca for African American intellectuals, artists, and professionals. Spike Lee, Chris Rock, and Erykah Badu all lived a stone's throw from my studio apartment on Carlton Avenue. Fort Greene was the hip-yet-frugal place to live for young, free-thinking folks of all races. But what really made Fort Greene a home for me was not just the celebrities and the beautiful architecture and the open-mic poetry night at Brooklyn Moon Café. In Fort Greene, lawyers and bankers shared the same block with teachers and bus drivers. Single people and families. Young adults and the elderly. Different races, ethnicities, and economic stratas made Fort Greene what it was, a true melting pot.

The rising cost of living in Fort Greene has forced many of those deprived of six-figure incomes and rent-controlled leases out of the area. After losing my lease on my affordable studio, I also left the neighborhood for two years. I'm now back in Fort Greene, only because I'm sharing an apartment with two roommates. And I get my hot chocolate from Starbucks**.**

**-Faith Pennick, NYC**

## Keepin' the City "Clean"

As a previously houseless, currently at-risk resident of the Bay Area who has been gentrified, evicted, and displaced out of almost every home, neighborhood, and community I have lived in, I speak as a homeless scholar.

I am the daughter of a poor, mixed-race orphan and the granddaughter of a poor Irish woman who worked her entire life as a servant of the rich, only to die landless, squatting on someone else's gravesite, because even in death you gotta have land.

Homeless people were not born that way; they used to be housed. So how do people lose housing, how does a community become landless, how do entire neighborhoods become displaced, and finally, how does a thriving community of color become a place in need of a hygienic metaphor i.e., "that area needs to be cleaned up?"

Most often the root of evictions, displacements, and destabilized communities is redevelopment and gentrification. Almost all Bay Area communities now considered "blighted" and in the process of redevelopment were once thriving and strong. Consider the case of West Oakland; once a thriving African Descendent community with Black-owned businesses and the arts, it is now one of the targets for redevelopment and high-speed gentrification. Sometime in the late '60's the zoning laws were changed, allowing liquor stores to be placed on every corner. Within what seemed like seconds, but really took about ten years, West Oakland was a "crime-ridden" community, blighted and in need of "clean-up."

Of course, the subversive capitalist "clean-up" process often begins with the moving in of the unwitting, yet most often, privileged art school student/graduate. Unwittingly, the artist turns the blighted area, like West Oakland, into an "accessible" area, readying it for eventual redevelopment. Meanwhile, the remaining residents of color are slowly but surely "cleaned-up" and eventually mostly cleaned out.

**-Tiny, a.k.a. Lisa Garcia-Gray, San Francisco**

### Somethin' Just Don't Taste Right

When I was little, my father would often bring home a slab of ribs as a treat for the family on the nights that he had choir rehearsal. The South and West sides of Chicago were famous for the variety and abundance of barbeque joints. The smell of barbeque cooking is as familiar to black Chicagoans as the sounds of gospel, blues and jazz. It was the scent that brought my brother and me to meet Daddy at the door.

The ribs would be wrapped in a paper container; fries on the bottom, slab of ribs in the middle and two slices of Wonder bread on top. Sauce soaked everything so the bread stuck. Friendly fights began between parent and child about who would have the pleasure of eating the slice of bread with the most sauce. In the corner of the container was a paper cup of cole slaw so wet and soggy it left a trail of white rivers in the brown sauce.

Today, while driving to my job in one of the North side communities where Starbucks and Gap stores are markers of gentrification, I saw a sign for *Leon's*, one of the city's oldest ‘”que” joints, painted on the side of a building. A branch of South side tradition living on the North side. Excitedly (and hungrily) I pulled over.

No smells wafted from inside of the building as I got out of the car. The people serving me were very nice but they were not the shades of brown that we call black. The food was good and was arranged as I expected (especially the bread). But the cole slaw was encased in a plastic container, no seepage possible.

Somehow it just wasn't the same.

**-Terri Johnson, Chicago**

### Stand and Fight!

Bronzeville is where the rich and wealthy and the famous live, and so do I. My neighborhood is changing right before my eyes. The Stateway Gardens' and Robert Taylor housing projects were torn down in 2004, making room for condos, townhouses, and single-family homes.

Harold Washington Cultural Center is in the heart of the neighborhood, and the Spoken Word Café is across the street where they have poetry readings. In the summer, The African and Caribbean Fest is in Washington Park.

Why should I ever want to give this up? Brick by brick, building up the community and beautifying the neighborhood, I see improvements being done everyday, and I am glad to be a part of this change. It is only going to get better and become a safer place to live.

Black and white people live here, and people of different nationalities are moving in every day. More business will start to open up, and that will create more jobs for the community as the neighborhood developments.

It will be harder for the middle and lower income people to stay here, because of the rising cost of rent and the increase of taxes on mortgages. Right now, there is Section Eight for low-income families to help pay for their rent, but what if Section Eight is no longer in existence? What if you don't qualify for Section Eight, because you make a penny more over the guidelines to get help on your rent? What would we do then?

I want to buy in this area, but how can I afford it? Everything is extremely expensive. But I won't be pushed out or be put out of my neighborhood, because of the status of my wallet. I am going to climb that social ladder and fight for the right to live here.

**-Jean M. Swanagan, Chicago**

### Cracks in the Sidewalk

Politically speaking, Brevard County, Florida, is probably best characterized by its choice in representatives — Dave Weldon. Weldon is closely tied to the radical right and is largely anti-gay, anti-choice, and anti-church and state separation.

In the ‘90s, Melbourne pro-life activists, implementing tactics such as videotaping employees and clients, pressured the county's only abortion clinic to close down. In 1994, Palm Bay city officials and residents worked vehemently to close down the area's only Wiccan Church, the Church of Iron Oak.

Even today, Brevard still seems like the *Choose Life* license plate capital of the state, and I‘m always astonished how many people bravely boast their hatred via *One Woman One Man* bumper stickers.

But if you can see past the ugly history, and the fact our county reelected both Weldon *and* Bush in 2004, you'll find that progressive ideals are nonetheless beginning to germinate, and Brevard's legacy of intolerance is finally being dismantled. One of the pivotal periods in the evolution of our community was the buildup to the war in Iraq. A small group of us started meeting to talk about taking action to prevent the war. The result: two demonstrations with over 500 people in attendance — Arlo Guthrie even dropped in to play a few songs at one. Progressives were fed up and tired of being quiet.

Three years since the public erupted with outcry against the war, Brevard is ablaze with loud liberals, who are organizing, preparing to run for office, and participating in our democracy like never before.

Two days after the counter-inauguration demo, dozens of pro-choice activists commemorated the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. And, in the run-up to the election, an almost equal number of pro-gay marriage supporters turned out to oppose an anti-gay marriage protest in Palm Bay.

Just as many Americans joked about moving to Canada after the election, my wife Desiree and I often talk about wanting to move to a liberal community. But if we really want to take back our country, we need to be pioneers, boldly bringing our moral ideals to the very communities most festering with hatred and prejudice. It's not enough to simply join some haven for progressive thinkers. The only way to save our Constitution and our nation's legacy of freedom for *all* is from the inside out.

**-Jeff Nall, Florida**

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## Viva Chucky!

It felt good going to a place where everyone knew me and my family, “Tú gente” (your people), as Chucky would say. Chucky owned the local *bodega* across the street from my house on Ashland and Le Moyne. He had emigrated from Cuba during the Mariel exit in ’59 and ended up “Chasin’ a skirt,” as he put it, all the way to Chicago in ’71.

Chucky’s spot was *live.* He’d play nice Caribbean music from open to close and always had something funny to say. His staff consisted of a butcher we all called Shank and Judy, the lady who worked the lottery machine.

Shank loved cutting meat. Sometimes he’d take my brother and me to the back and show us random animal organs, explain their function, and tell us how they should be cooked and eaten. Judy was consumed by makeup. Every time I came into the store she was putting some on, taking some off, or touching up some part of her face. She was the first and only person I’d ever seen do her face up using only a lipstick. She used it straight up on her lips and blended it with some cocoa butter for her cheeks and eyes. It was wild!

Sometimes I’d go to Chucky’s even if my mom didn’t need any rice or beans. I’d go for the show. We all knew that on Saturday mornings he brewed his special Cuban coffee, which brought out all the locals. They’d sit on benches and chairs outside the store and talk politics, music, and local happenings. Chucky’s was the core of the neighborhood. That’s where we’d buy our food, play our numbers, and pass the time. But, things change.

Change came upon the neighborhood in the late’ 80’s. Chucky sold his shop to a Korean couple with a child. They were polite. He said he wanted to spend the “winter of his life” somewhere warm and sunny, away from all the noise. That’s ironic because he was the one who initially brought the noise … the music, the conversation, the interaction that had been missing in our neighborhood for so long. He brought us together and gave us a place to hang out, a stage.

I’m thankful to have been a part of an engaged and conscious collective of individuals, who really talked to one other, shared their lives and ideas, and helped elect the first Black mayor in Chicago. I’ve not experienced a true sense of community since the *bodega* closed, but I’ve not given up on ever finding it again.

**-Evelyn Delgado, Chicago** ☆

### Matthew Nafranowicz strikes a balance as

# Upholsterer for the People

Illinois native Matthew Nafranowicz is a craftsperson with old-school skills. 16th- and 17th-century skills, as it were.

Nafranowicz, whose upholstery business The Straight Thread is located in the Madison Enterprise Center, studied the art/craft as an apprentice in France. The furniture-making techniques he learned have been passed from person to person for centuries. “The [upholstery] trade is so much more alive there. It’s well received in the community and country as a whole,” he commented. “[The French government] provides funding to keep the skills alive. Without trying, it’s something that could be easily lost.”

Originally a biology major in college, he first got into upholstering when he responded to a help wanted ad. “I found it intriguing,” he said. “I was into visual things like shape and form. I was good at using my hands.”

The transition from would-be ornithologist to upholsterer occurred when he started questioning his desire to become a scientist. He decided to move to a big city and found work with a French interior designer in New York.

Nafranowicz became an apprentice in a foreign country with essentially no language skills when he went to France with his wife, a student of French history.

“That was the experience that made me realize this is what I want to do,” he said. “I really physically enjoy doing it.”

Most of the work Nafranowicz does today isn’t the very fine traditional work he learned in France, but rather work on regular furniture people need to have done.

Among the tools and supplies in The Straight Thread’s tidy workroom are cushion stuffings like horsehair and seagrass. These materials were abandoned, at least in the United States, before World War II in favor of cheaper ones.

“With furniture’s mass production at a large scale, they came up with different things to cut corners. One thing that takes the space of something that costs more. They’re shortcuts. Now it’s like [the focus of production] is quantity and less cost. These objects don’t have the beauty they would if done the traditional way or last as long.”

Though eschewing the mass-produced is very punk rock, there’s an unfortunate inherent conundrum in any well-made item. Ikea, the example Nafranowicz mentions by name, is familiar to and extraordinarily popular with many people for the precise reason that it makes attractive, stylish furniture available to the same people who can’t spend $8000 on a bureau as a unique piece of functioning art.

by **Courtney Becks**

“[It] allows you to buy inexpensive furniture. It’s made to be mass-produced so it can be affordable for almost anyone. Things that are hand-made are, on a certain level, only for the elite,” he said.

Yikes. Not so punk rock.

But, as Nafranowicz points out, the key might be in balance, a virtue we in the United States constantly extol, yet aren’t necessarily any good at maintaining: “People in this country instead of building a more modest house and [having] fewer really good items build a bigger house not as well-made, full of cheaper furniture. It’s a balance of how much you really need.”

Well-made furniture, he points out, is good for the second-hand market because it will last decades longer than anything made by everyone’s favorite purveyor of Swedish cheap and chic.

Even if everyone can’t or doesn’t want to buy a Louis XV settee, it’s still possible to support artisans and craftspeople. Of course, an obvious benefit of buying a hand- or well-made item is knowing its maker and his or her working conditions. More than that, and most optimistically, it places people in a — hopefully — happy web of relationships, knowing that we can fulfill each others’ needs. ☆

# Reflections on a Hippie Childhood

I am a native of an invisible culture. You probably won't recognize my cultural background if you meet me. In fact, I didn't even realize that my culture was a culture until I was an adult.

My parents were homesteaders. We ground our own flour and raised goats. We spent time in "intentional communities." When I went to school for the first time at age ten, I realized that my world was an aberration. I learned to speak the language of the mainstream. I learned to like Cyndi Lauper and Madonna. I learned not to mention certain things to certain people, not to use certain words in certain places. ("Don't mention solstice rituals to your normal friends. Don't tell your teachers you're 'pissed off.'") I learned to pass for "American".

In high school, far from the community where I grew up, I liked to regale my friends with stories of my "hippie childhood" — no indoor plumbing, lots of naked people, a huge rubber dildo as a Thanksgiving centerpiece. Fun to be shocking, but that was about it.

Until my freshman year in college, I hadn't really come in contact with anyone outside the communities I grew up in who shared my traditions. My background was defined by its outsider status. We were the counter-culture. Sometimes I told people where I came from, but it was always to point out my difference.

by **Rebecca Hartman**
illustration **jt yost**

But in college, living in student-run cooperatives, we started to find each other. We found each other because we were not like the other coop denizens. We weren't trying to make a statement by living cooperatively. We weren't rebelling against our suburban parents. We already knew about organic food. We already knew how to cook. We were living in the coops because they were the closest thing around to the way we were used to living. We were bewildered by our housemates' ferocious enthusiasm about things that were normal for us.

We began to realize that we were different. But not in the individual "shock everyone with the details of my hippie childhood" way that we were used to. We were collectively different. One of us joked that he was in a cross-cultural relationship because his girlfriend had grown up in the mainstream. We laughed. And then we realized it was true.

Our culture is, in our generation, no longer a counter-culture. We are not counter-anything. We are natives of this terrain. Our culture has its own traditions, its own values and social codes, its own foods and foodways.

Our culture is alive and evolving as a culture, no longer defining itself in opposition to anything.

Our food traditions are possibly the best known, the most emblematic of our culture. Nutritional yeast (and sometimes tamari) on popcorn. Tamari on just about anything. Brown rice. Whole wheat bread. Big pots of soup. Big pots of everything. Always room for one (or six) more at the table. Food is central. And social. And abundant. Tastier than the food we grew up with, too. Our parents often cooked more for the sake of theory than food. (Many of our parents, especially the vegetarians, cooked under the "complete protein" theory: bean + grain = complete protein, therefore lentils + rice = dinner, never mind if they don't taste very good.)

Our culture is traditionally suspicious of doctors. We are more likely to reach for garlic than antibiotics, more likely to drink teas than take pills. We are fairly sure that our minds affect our bodies, but we are also suspicious of our parents' new-age "it's all in your mind" philosophy. Many of us have spiritual practices, but we don't tend to advertise them. Most of us cringe at over-public declarations of "spirituality."

Group interactions in our culture can sometimes confuse people from the mainstream. We tend to treat each other as family, whether or not we are related. We are at home in each other's houses. We do not have categories like "host" and "guest." If you come into one of our houses and ask if you can have a drink of water, we might look at you blankly and motion toward the sink. If we are familiar with host-guest relations in mainstream culture, we might explain the situation to you—that "make yourself at home" should be taken literally in this situation.

We are "at home" with each other in ways that mainstream culture might find surprising or rude. If at one of our gatherings someone wants to sit in the corner and ignore everyone, no one will blink. If someone suddenly announces that they're leaving early and doesn't offer an explanation, none is required. In the same way, it's perfectly acceptable in our culture to drop in on someone unannounced, even if you haven't seen him or her in years. It's also perfectly acceptable for someone so dropped in on to go on with whatever they've been doing without acting as "host" for the "guest."

We are also at home with each other physically. We tend to be close. We hug for no reason. Pile eight people on the couch. Sleep three or four to a bed, if necessary, or if we feel like it. Nudity is common. None of this is necessarily sexual, though we don't ignore sexual energy.

Sex is not taboo. We have sex, but probably not more than anybody else. We tend to be pretty accepting of different kinds of relationship arrangements. We are often close friends with our exes.

Not everyone with "hippie parents" is a part of our culture. There are definitely cases of reactive reassimilation: "Oh my God I was so traumatized by my hippie childhood, now all I want is a minivan and a picket fence." But I find that most of these people were neglected by their parents in some way. I can think of one family that ended up in Mexico, the parents too perpetually stoned to feed their kids. The oldest daughter was seven at the time, and she learned to scavenge and cook and keep things together. As adults, she and her siblings have had strong negative reactions to things counterculture, and I can understand why. But most of the "second generation" adults that are a part of my culture had parents who, though they may not have had it together on a lot of levels, at least fed and clothed us adequately.

Not all of our parents were hippies. Some were homesteaders, some were intellectuals or artists or just vaguely bohemian. All raised us with what has become our central cultural value: do what's important to you and don't worry about what people think.

Funny thing is, our parents (our culture's first generation) were really quite worried about what people thought. They worried about creating themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture. They wanted people to notice that they were different, that they were rejecting one thing and embracing an alternative. Our housemates in the co-ops were the same way.

But our culture's second generation tends to find the "difference on purpose" forced. Most of us are not interested in joining the mainstream, but neither are we interested in standing out for the sake of standing out. We stand out when it is natural for us to stand out and blend in when it happens that way.

In fact, our generation tends to be allergic to anything that feels forced, anything that smacks of trying too hard. Most of us cringe when our parents or friends want to "process" something. My old roommate says of us "If we need to talk about something, we talk about it, we don't need to make a big announcement about it."

I'm not sure exactly what to make of this. In a certain way, our entire culture exists because our parents forced things. They developed a theory about how to do things, and forced themselves to follow it. With their declarations and oppositions, they created a space that we, the second generation, now inhabit. And in that space between counterculture and mainstream, we grew into a new culture.

It's a culture that values experience over theory, shades of gray over black and white. It's a culture of translators, interpreters, enamored of subtlety, suspicious of hard conclusions.

As I am suspicious of hard conclusions, I won't make any here. If the first generation forced it and the second generation is going with the flow, I am curious about the third generation of our culture. My niece turns eight next month. She is a smart, self-possessed girl. She eats popcorn with nutritional yeast and plays with Barbies. She takes echinacea for colds and learns about the pilgrims in school. We shall see. ☆

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