Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

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The students come from around the city, often taking several buses with their baby carriages and backpacks before arriving at Hilltop, a public high school for pregnant teenagers nestled in the Mission District of San Francisco. Inside the school, strollers line up in front of lockers and pregnant teenagers, discussing mothering and boyfriends, pass in the halls. Outside of the walls of the school, life is harder. The majority of the young women immigrated to the United States from Latin America, some seeking asylum. The young women are raising children, many in the midst of gang culture, immigration and housing problems, foster care, poverty, and violence.

Almost every young mother says that her baby saved her life, forcing her out of dangerous and abusive situations into new decisions with fresh purpose. The experience of inclusion in Hilltop was a turning point and provided a crucial space of belonging, at an urgent time in these young women’s and their children’s lives.

Hilltop opened in 1968 as a one-room school in San Francisco’s General Hospital and moved to the Sunshine building in the Mission District a few years later. In the 1990s there were approximately 160 students, by 2000 80 to 90 students, and by 2017 65 students. The numbers of students and their demographics are changing as the Bay Area becomes unaffordable.
Hilltop has a standard high-school curriculum, with the addition of parenting and nutrition classes, grief group, baby massage workshops, and creative writing. There is a social worker, counselor, and nurse on staff, as well as a nursery, and continued care for the children after graduation. Sanctuary is at the core of the experience, with a focus on empathy, and moving each student out of reactive trauma and survival modes into a space where she can make choices, understand pathways, identify needs and self-actualize.

Several of the 2017 graduates who walked across the stage with their babies this year also walked across the US/Mexico border with no family and no food. Two of those students graduated with honors and have scholarships to City College in San Francisco.

I started spending time at Hilltop in 2004, until 2007. I returned to the former students in 2016 for a ten-year update. I have been reconnecting with and interviewing these women (see Figs. 10.1-10.8). This process includes looking back at videos made during those earlier years where they discuss immigration, the first time they had sex, giving birth, and relationships with partners and family. In the recent interviews they open up about life since graduation, including having more kids, parenting, and dealing with housing and economic realities, and the conversations were a moment for them to reflect on what they thought life would be like ten years after graduation and what they have experienced and learned.

Charlotte enrolled at Hilltop in 2005. She describes the experience as finally arriving in a place where they saw her as she saw herself:

I met Renaldo [Re] at sixteen, and was pregnant at seventeen with Lualhapi & Ligaya, who are now twelve years old. I was scared and wanted an abortion. I was thinking, can I really raise them on my own? Renaldo is a good person, but he was young. I’m thinking, if he leaves me, what will my life be like? My family situation wasn’t fit.

When I told Re I was pregnant, he was happy. He wanted to be a dad. I said, ‘so you’re not going to leave me?’ He said, ‘of course not.’ My parents kicked me out and Re’s parents took us in. All the time I am thinking, when is he going to leave me. I wasn’t planning on a commitment. The way my life has been, there had been so much disappointment in my relationships with people.

We’ve been together fourteen years. We’re inseparable. We grew up together and into adults together. We had set ideas about the father and mother roles, but now we share roles. It took a while for us to do that.
He changed his views of a Latino family, and who was supposed to be the provider and who was supposed to stay home. We’ve had setbacks. My nephew passing away made things rocky. I was depressed. I’m still going through it but it’s better. I was depressed after our son was born too, and didn’t take care of myself then, and that was hard.

My son is Herinaldo. He was an accident. I switched birth control and got pregnant. Before Heri, we thought we are in a good place, the girls are getting older, I can finish school, and then: surprise!

I was born in the Philippines. Emigrated at five years old. Came on a green card with my adopted mom [an aunt]. I always thought she was my real mom, but then I found out I was adopted. I felt loved as a kid, but there was always something missing. In middle school, I overheard one of the aunts say, you know she’s not their real daughter. I didn’t tell anybody I had heard that. When I was older, I went to the Philippines and found my real mother. She thinks I shouldn’t tell my story, that there could be legal issues. I think why should I be afraid to tell my story? I have my papers. It's good for other people to know there are other people out there—for hope.

Re is from the Philippines. We had the same circle of friends and met messaging each other. I have friends, but my children have always come first. My goal is to be the best mother because I didn’t feel like I had a solid person in my life. My children are my world, and I’m going to give them the best of me, and then what’s left can go to friends.

I was always searching for a place to feel like I can be myself. I knew I was a good person but felt like every step I made was wrong. Hilltop became about choice. I had a say in what I needed, and my needs were met. They guided me to meet my own needs. I had the freedom to make choices and being a part of the Young Family Resource Center, we were the first people to help young parents plan, to see what they needed and organize resources. I was given responsibility. I felt a belonging to a place. I had connections with teachers who care and really sit down and listen to me. Who help me plan if I have a career idea or want to go to college and take me seriously.

I was sleep-deprived in high school, after the twins were born, and they would say, school would always be here. Go sleep and come back to class when you are ready. So I would go sleep on the couch in Naomi’s office, and then go back to class when I woke up. I was learning how to take care of myself. To figure out what do you need and how do you make it work, and breastfeeding as a way of connection with my girls. I felt at home. They didn’t highlight the bad. Only the good came out of their mouths, which I wasn’t used to. It made me want to go to school every day.

We live in Daly City now, all five of us in one room of a house. The girls are in seventh grade. I have a job at a preschool and I drive for
Lyft. I always dream of where I want to be. I’m about to turn thirty and assessing myself. Have I succeeded? Is this where I saw myself being ten years ago? Over the years I grew spiritually, intellectually, and mentally, and I reassessed. Money is great. It gets you places and gets you what you need. But it’s not everything. I’m successful. My daughters are good people. I’m still in school. I’m always striving to learn something new in school or from another person. My relationships with people, I assess them, thinking how can I grow. I’m thankful for a house over my head and that I can provide for my kids.

It’s a continuous process. I know myself now more than I did ten years ago. All I have learned has taught me to be a good person and someone who can contribute to others’ well-being. I’m able to let go of things. I define success that way. I may not have the nice stuff — the nice shoes, the house, those things which means you’re making it, but it’s all situational. With three kids, I have to always ask, is this reasonable, is this realistic? What will benefit my family? I’m secure in myself, I know who I am and what I want. It’s a journey and you have to just keep going.

Fig. 10.1 Jessica Ingram, ‘Charlotte’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.
Dear Zion-Kreon,

The thought that you are inside of me is overwhelming to my soul. I feel your strong kicks and I know that you are happy. Even though through out this pregnancy I have had many mixed feelings about you, I am happy to be your mother. I wish the best for you and I hope that you will be a strong individual, a strong man and maybe some day become a strong father and a good role model for your offspring. I want you to be a successful person and I hope I succeed as a mother. I admit I contemplated having an abortion, but I knew in my heart you were here to stay. Your father is a little scared about your unexpected arrival but it will all fade away once you get here. I want you to have all the finer things I life, that’s why I’m trying so hard to make sure that I finish school, and not only that go to college and get my bachelors degree. All too often young African American men get persuaded by the wrong people to do things that only bring negative results. Such as, selling drugs, stealing and much more, these actions only bring you to prison or to an early death. Most of the time these young men lack parental guidance in their households. Based on this fact alone I promise you I will do everything in my power to make sure that you don’t end up like this. Your father never really knew his dad and I would hate for you to grow up like that. I know in my heart that you are going to be someone special to society, I can feel it in my bones and in my soul. Everyone around me told me to be wise, think about my future and make the right decision about having a baby at such a young age. I honestly feel that I did make the right decision about deciding to keep you and not getting an abortion. I know in the end I will not regret it one bit. Zion I love you and I can’t wait to meet you face to face.

Love, your mommy

Fig. 10.2 Jessica Ingram, ‘Letter to My First Born Son’, 2006. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.
Fig. 10.3 Jessica Ingram, ‘Isabelle at Prom’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.

Fig. 10.4 Jessica Ingram, ‘Rosaura’s Wedding’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.
Fig. 10.5 Jessica Ingram, ‘SF’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.

Fig. 10.6 Jessica Ingram, ‘Alanna’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.
Fig. 10.7 Jessica Ingram, ‘Juicy’, 2006. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.

Fig. 10.8 Jessica Ingram, ‘Picnic’, 2005. Courtesy of Jessica Ingram, CC BY-NC-ND.