

LIVING WALLS

chinese

生活墙

korean

살아있는 벽

malay

dinding hidup

khmer

ជញ្ជាំងរស់នៅ

hindi

रहने की दीवारें

vietnamese

Tường sống

spanish

PAREDES VIVAS

japanese

リビング・ウォールズ

somali

DERBIYADA NOOL

russian

ЖИВЫЕ СТЕНЫ

lao

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amharic

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BUFORD
HIGHWAY
LIVING WALLS
WE LOVE BUHI
CONFERENCE

THE BUHI WALK

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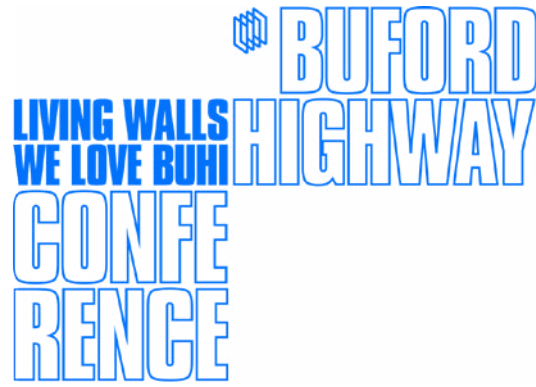
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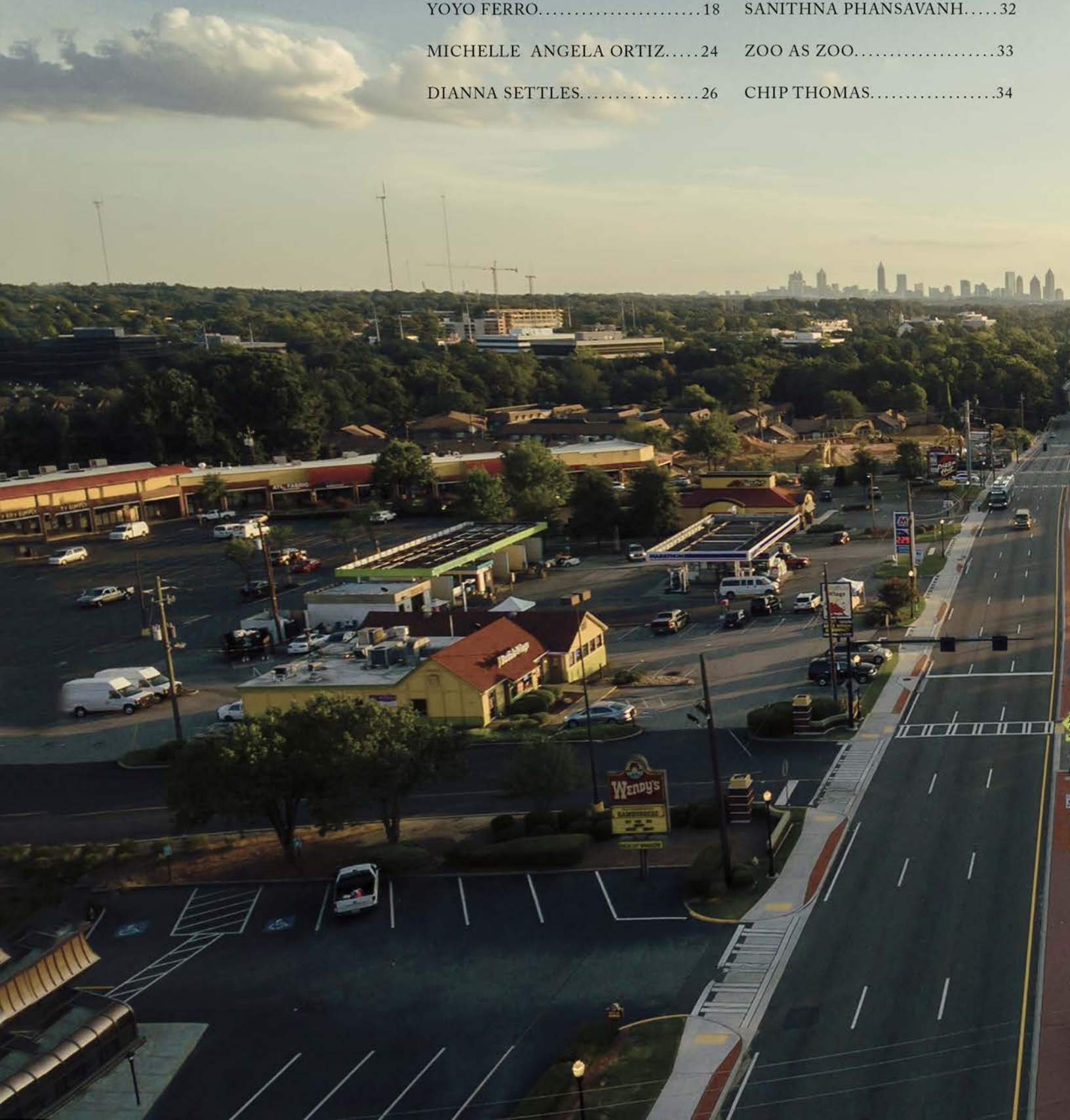
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HOW TO DESIGN AN OBSTACLE COURSE

Looking at Buford Highway from the side of the road





When my firstborn, biracial, son was four years old, we started eating much more frequently on Buford Highway, because I'd just gotten divorced, moved to the area, and hated cooking. One day, on our way to lunch at a local Chinese restaurant on Buford Highway, he asked why we were going to eat Chinese food once again, and I responded, because we're Chinese. What he said next broke me.

“No, I’m not. You’re Chinese, mommy, but we’re not.”

Too often, we are invisible to ourselves. What is complicated, what is painful, what is shameful, and misunderstood remains hidden and overlooked until we realize one day that those are our gifts. They make us who we are. They are our messy truths and complicated beauty.

In the same way my son's identity was invisible to himself, in the same way we are too often alienated from the sources of our strength, in the same way Buford Highway's buildings and shops have been invisible to everyone who's driven, ridden the bus, walked by, or even flown over, them a million times over, Buford Highway's beauty and strength and truths have been ignored by and hidden from most. We have only seen the challenges, problems, and other-ness, both from without and within.

But the food, you say. Loving other people's food without loving the people epitomizes marginalization and appropriation and “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” But, when we begin to see who we are, we want to know and understand more. When we see who are, we want to be part of who we are. When we

see Jess Snow's tender, transcendent, powerful representation of some of the women she's encountered in her time on Buford Highway, particularly with the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, our understanding, appreciation, affirmation of, and love for, all of us, and all of our stories, grow. And grow. grow.

To love Buford Highway, then, is to open our eyes, and to love ourselves, messy and complicated as we are. It is to look beyond the street and the food to see the intrinsic worth of places and people. It is to connect with one of Atlanta's most fascinating and special places, so that who and what makes Atlanta soulful and real will never again be overlooked. It is to love the people who are an essential part of who we are, who have made a rather ordinary place extraordinary.

Come to Buford Highway to these formerly invisible walls, to this once unseen community, and see for yourself. See yourself. See who we are. See what could be.

To riff on Walt Whitman,

We are larger and better than we thought.

Truly, we did not know we contained so much goodness.

Marian Liou
Founder, We Love BuHi



My love for street art began when I learned that I could paint walls anonymously, putting work into the world and on walls without people having to know who was behind it. I think that this is because when I moved to this country from Peru at the age of fifteen, I assimilated as a survival tactic. I lived in constant fear of being made fun of for having a different accent. When I began to make street art, I was all of the sudden connecting with people without having to be asked where I was from or why my accent sounded funny.

For years now, I have been promoting and helping other artists to create public art. It is only through past Living Walls conferences that I ever found a sense of ownership in Atlanta.

Seeing the beautiful murals being painted throughout the city made me feel like the work I was doing had a positive impact.

It came as a shock to me when I began to consider the role this work had on “the beautification process” and that I may have unintentionally used this medium to encourage assimilation and gentrification in the parts of town where the murals existed.

Having this epiphany created a lot of pain for me, as I felt a sense of guilt for not doing enough to encourage diverse representation and empower communities of color through past conferences. I may have helped to create a safe space for artists, but what was our message and impact on the entire diverse population of this city? In a way, coming to this realization has been just as liberating as it has been painful. At my 34 years of age, I feel free and ready to embrace everything that I am: a brown Latinx woman from Peru, with a kick-ass accent and who possesses the hustle, work ethic and determination that my fellow immigrants carry.

My focus has changed. Without any apology, I’m starting to create spaces for people like me to embrace their history, culture, accents and otherness fully. I have begun to see what I didn’t want to see before: museums’ lack of representation for artists of color, the street art community’s role in perpetuating gender and racial stereotypes that aid systems of inequality. Even today as I bring these things up with my counterparts in the street art world, my own community tells me to stay quiet.

I want nothing more in life than to celebrate what makes this world so incredibly beautiful and diverse, to emphasize migration as a necessity for evolution, to use art as a way to honor every parent that has made the decision to move their family to another country, looking for a better life. I want to tell stories of immigration and to represent immigrants in public space, not as the other but as an integral part of our world.

Mónica Campana
Founder, Living Walls

**GA
400**

ROSWELL ROAD

PEACHTREE ROAD

Yoyo Ferro
Cross Keys High School
1626 N Druid Hills Rd

Jess x Snow
Precision Auto Care
4196 Buford Highway NE

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh
Northeast Plaza
3375 Buford Highway

Sanithna Phansavanh
Crown Car Wash
3751 Buford Highway

Yehimi Cambrón
Havana Sandwich Shop
2905 Buford Highway

Roberto Hernandez
Atlanta Package
3268 Buford Highway

Chip Thomas
El Progreso #6
3061 Buford Highway

CLAIRMONT ROAD

Zoo as Zoo
Chamblee MARTA Station
5200 New Peachtree Rd

THIS IS BUFORD HIGHWAY

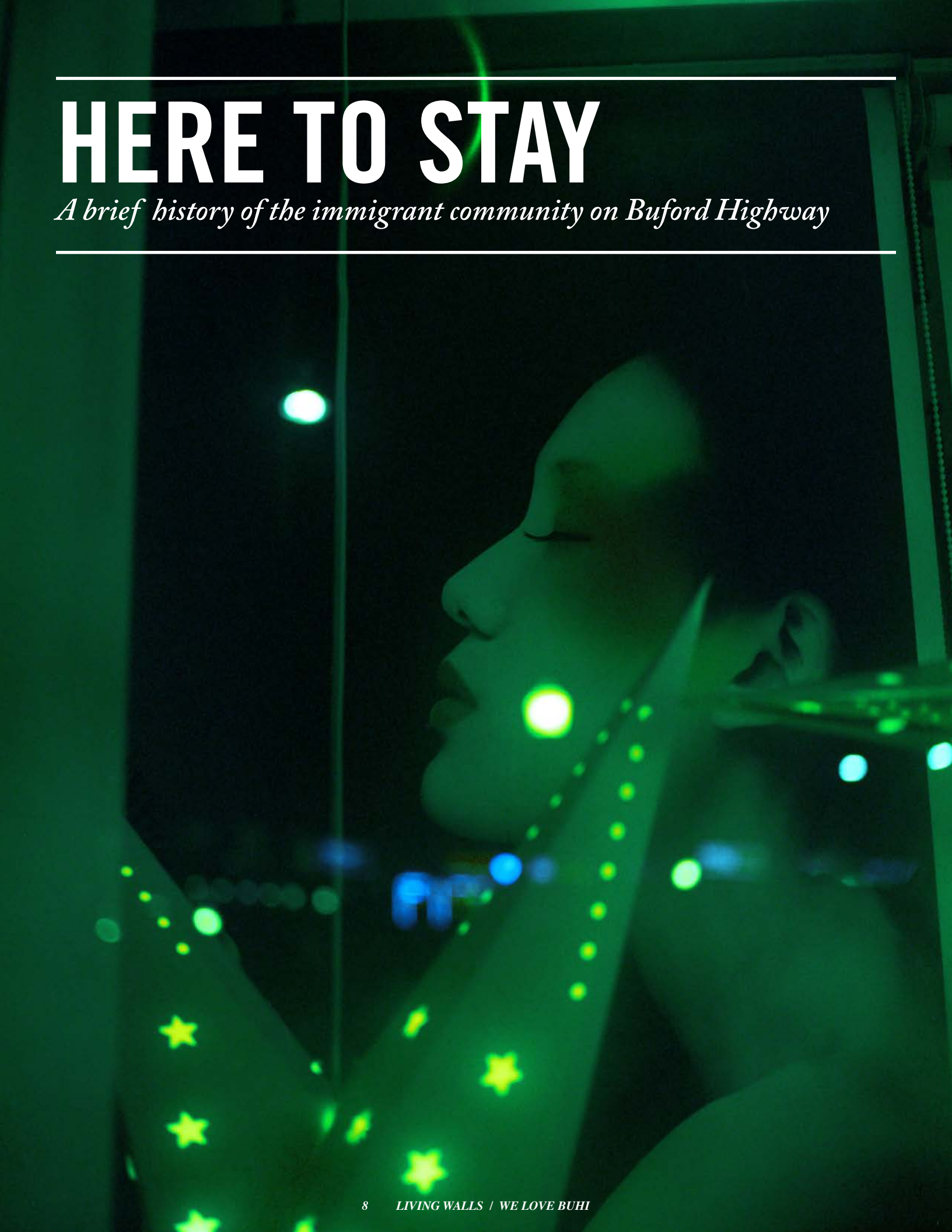
I-85

I-285

Michelle Angela Ortiz
Northeast Plaza
3369 Buford Highway

HERE TO STAY

A brief history of the immigrant community on Buford Highway





In the commonly accepted version of American history there's a tendency to ignore the value of immigration after the early twentieth century. Not coincidentally, this coincides with the period of time when non-European refugees started to uproot their families and move to the United States. This version of history casts early European colonizers in bronze and puts their names on practically every important city, state, street and monument, because they had the wherewithal to stand up to oppressive mother countries and make for themselves what was not allowed in their birth-given homes. In the very idea of a self-made democracy lies the American Dream.

Where European-American stories of overcoming oppression have been indoctrinated into folklore and legend—their belief systems protected by the constitution, and their very image perpetuated as the physical ideal of greatness—the populations of non-European immigrants fleeing equally and often more oppressive countries cannot claim to have the same representation or ability to make well for themselves in the United States. Where European immigrants were able to forcibly take a country from its native population and

make it a safe haven for their own, non-European immigrants come into the land of the free through a rigorous and exclusionary process, only to be put to work doing the jobs that the American-Europeans do not want to continue doing themselves. Still, people from all over the world have continued to flow into America, despite showing up late to the American experiment and despite federal and local governments' shared tendency to favor the needs of earlier European colonizers. America, since its inception, has historically been one of the best countries to seek refuge in, if only for its citizens' freedom to live without certain fear of death, rape or mutilation.

Fast forward through many years of American history, past several world wars, conflicts and genocides, after perpetual and colossal refugee migrations of non-European immigrants into the United States, and look specifically at the city of Atlanta and what you will find northeast of the city is the multi-ethnic, safe haven community of Buford Highway. This area of town was popularized post World War Two as an up-and-coming commuter community. Strip malls were built; troves of apartments for singles or newly married couples were constructed; a six lane state highway was paved to connect the epicenter of



TACO MARKET

ARTISTES



Atlanta to the clustering suburbs that were forming by the dozen.

In the early seventies the interstate system overtook state highways as the primary means by which people would begin to travel further distances to work. In effect this created a migration from suburbs in close proximity to city centers to further out, newer suburban communities with more land. The section of Buford Highway within Chamblee and Doraville was one of the closer in Suburban areas that was abandoned in mass. Apartments sat without tenants and the massive amount of newly built strip-malls slowly became vacant as store fronts began to list available rentals at lower prices by the day.

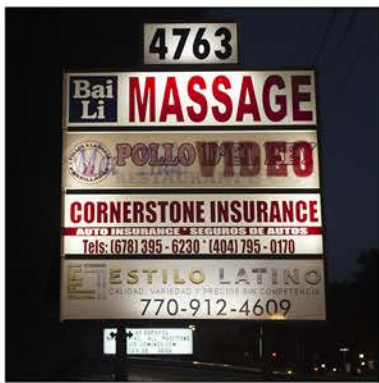
The amount of vacant commercial real estate and affordable housing along Buford Highway unintentionally provided a blank slate and open space for the growing influx of immigrants who were moving to Atlanta instead of and from population-dense cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, whose immigrant communities were becoming overly saturated as jobs became harder to come by.

As early as the late seventies, a sizeable, multi-ethnic immigrant community was beginning to form on Buford Highway. Immigrant families began to open businesses that catered to the tastes and traditions of their home countries. Commonly known as one of the first migrant owned shops on Buford Highway, The Havana Sandwich Shop opened their doors in 1976. In the years that followed many more immigrants would move to the area and continue to find success as business owners. When Atlanta won the bid for the 1996 Olympics, a massive amount of construction work was required to build the infrastructure that would host the games. This attracted even more job

seeking immigrants to choose Atlanta as the American city to relocate their families.

As of 2017 Buford Highway sits as the ethnic enclave of Atlanta, home to more than a dozen different ethnic groups, where former strip malls now house taquerias and lavanderias, pho, szechuan and Korean barbecue restaurants, tea houses, supermercados and massage parlors. Buford Highway has effectively become a safe space for any and all migrant communities, where people from all over the world can rest assured that they will find other people that look like them, speak their language and serve food similar to what they were used to in their home countries.

While the comforts afforded by Buford Highway surely buffer the immigration process, there also exist the imposing threats of onset gentrification driving up rent and forcing residents out of their homes, ICE raids targeting to displace and deport undocumented residents and the difficulty of navigating by foot a stretch of road that was specifically designed to make car travel easier but without pedestrian traffic in mind. The complex, beautiful and diverse history of Buford Highway, coupled with the lack of diverse representation in the conversation about Atlanta's future are what prompted Living Walls to host this year's conference on Buford Highway. While past conferences were held within the city of Atlanta, this year we stand alongside the immigrant communities on Buford Highway against displacement, for diversity and simply stating through the creation of ten pieces of art that "We're here to Stay." •





Jess X Snow is a queer asian North American artist, filmmaker, poet and educator. Her work discusses survival, joy, and the human relationship with the earth by amplifying the voices of those who refuse to be defined by borders, heteronormativity, gender, color, legislation and time. Through her work, she hopes to create a home that holds narratives of queerness, migration, disability and displacement that we grow up without language for. She is interested in what happens when intimacy is brought into public

space. How depictions of queer love letters, an embrace between migrant mother and child, or the feminist erotic in public space can threaten the power of some, but make it possible for others to live another morning—in how intimacy can be a tool for resistance. She believes that art acts as a portal to the futures that we have been denied, and is working toward imagining what joy could look like for queer, migrant communities of color, making it possible to live it in 2017.

JESS x SNOW

Living Walls: Who did you meet on Buford Highway during your engagement process?

Jess x Snow: I was working with an organization called CPACS, which stands for Center for Pan Asian Community Services. I met with some of the lead organizers and showed them some of my previous artwork that I have done in immigrant communities. I asked them what they thought would really resonate with their community and would uplift people if they were to randomly encounter the artwork.

LW: What were some of their ideas?

JxS: A lot of their ideas centered around the homemaking and community building that happens after immigration—the nurture and love that goes into building a new home overseas after having travelled a great distance. That is the work that CPACS does but it's also the individual work that immigrant families do for their children and what the children do for their families in return. I really identify with that given my own immigration experience.

LW: How did the community engagement process inform the way that you approached this mural?

JxS: I guess the first thing that I thought about, having been offered the space of a wall to create a piece of art, was the reminder of how much had to be sacrificed and overcome for me to even be able to have a voice. I hold a great amount of personal responsibility to my ancestors and chosen family but also a responsibility to the community that

the mural is going to exist in, to make something that displays a positive message for them. I thought about immigrants going through so many challenges assimilating into a new culture and creating new homes overseas, and how the forces that have pushed them out of their homeland and caused them to immigrate are now pushing them out of their new home in the form of gentrification.

LW: Can you describe what your mural is about?

JxS: I'm painting two walls that are on opposite sides of the same building. On one of them there's a mother holding a child but the mother also becomes the Pacific Ocean and you can see refugee ships and immigrant boats that are all crossing the ocean to get to America. The child that the mother is holding onto becomes an island where an Asian plaza is built, which represents the mother nurturing the child but also building a neighborhood that will have the closest resemblance of the child's homeland that they'll ever have.



LW: Any closing thoughts?

JxS: To be migrant is to cross oceans & deserts yet still wield the power of your ancestors to alchemize home from ash. To nurture Chinatown, little Tokyo, little India, little Saigon, Koreatown, Buddhist temples, mosques, pho restaurants, nail salons, Korean spas, and more as if it were your own motherland. Because if we cannot have our mothers—we recreate her from memory. To acknowledge that grief only exists because we lost something beautiful enough to be worth mourning. To celebrate longing as a powerful force that drives us into acts of reincarnation. Yes, we migrants can lose a country, a homeland, an extended family, a culture, a language, but we carry the shambles in our bodies. The Atlanta immigrant community proves these shambles are enough to build an entire community & nurture a new generation. Communities like this are why I am still here.

Behind the Scenes

Sketches for Jess x Snow's mural on Buford Highway



Tatyana Fazlalizadeh is a native of Oklahoma City, OK, currently living and working in Brooklyn, NY. She is a 2015 Forbes 30 Under 30 recipient. Tatyana is the creator of Stop Telling Women to Smile, an international street art series that tackles gender-based street harassment. The public art series can be found on walls across the globe, amassing international attention for tackling violence against women in public spaces.

TATYANA FAZLALIZADEH

*“I’m here,
I’ve been here,
I’m not going anywhere.”*

Living Walls: What inspiration did you garner from your community engagement process?

Tatyana Fazlalidadeh: I was really inspired by how a lot of the residents of Buford Hwy have this strong sense of home. I remember ‘home’ being a word I was hearing a lot from people: the idea of home, the concept of home, but what is home? So this became a question I started to ask myself and wanted to hear more from individuals that I was speaking to, whether that means making Buford Hwy your home if you immigrated from somewhere else, home being another place or person, home being a community or home being a body as opposed to an environment. It seemed like a lot of people I was talking to had to construct their own idea of what home is, and I find that very interesting.



LW: What are you painting for this project?

TF: When I first got to Atlanta I wasn’t really sure what I was going to do. I had never been to Buford Highway before so I wasn’t sure who I was going to meet or what the conversations were going to be like. I had an idea of the direction I wanted to go and that was to specifically address the larger problems that resonate with women in the community, and to find out how specifically they’re affected by these issues. So that was in the back of my mind the entire time, and it all kind of culminated with me meeting a woman named Estrella, a trans woman and activist who is very bright and a beautiful spirit. I ended up meeting her on my last night in Atlanta. We had some really great conversations, and I left there knowing that I

wanted to paint her portrait.

Estrella had some difficult times when she first came to Atlanta, but she is very strong, very resilient, beautiful and amazing so I’m excited to paint her portrait. I feel like she is someone that embodies the idea of what home is and she is able to construct her own home, against all odds.

When we think about communities of women and girls, we forget about trans women and homeless folks, or we forget about sex workers. We ignore the people whose stories don’t really align with ours exactly or whose stories aren’t as pretty as those that we think should be told or amplified. So her story is one that I definitely want to amplify, to help her reinforce that she represents Buford Highway.

LW: What do you think is the importance of this project taking place in the midst of our current political climate?

TF: It’s hugely important for communities to use the arts in order to assert themselves and in order to assert their culture and ultimately their existence. I think it’s a powerful thing to be able to say “I’m here, I’ve been here, I’m not going anywhere.” Art and culture are hugely important in being expressive in a way that is political, social and in taking a stand. I think that art is a means for social change, and that’s why we do what we do. So to have a festival like this and to have it during a time like this is wildly important – I’m really glad to be a part of it.



YOYO FERRO

You might already recognize the work of Brazilian-turned-ATLien artist Yoyo Ferro by his vivid colors, bold lines, and playful imagery. Lately, he's painted quite a few lively murals around our beloved ATL, entertained a handful of you drawing blind contour portraits, and captured your heart through his illustrations of the Atlanta skyline. Yoyo's love for our people, culture, and diversity makes him proud to represent the city too busy to hate.

YOYO FERRO

“I want to paint a mural that helps the people from here to feel more proud of where they’re from.”



Behind the Scenes

*Blind Contour drawings
by the students at Cross
Keys High School*

Living Walls: Who did you meet during your engagement process?

Yoyo Ferro: My community partner was Cross Keys High School, specifically the art department. My wife, Kristin Ferro, is one of the Art teachers there. We put on a workshop with the other art teachers for the students where the theme was focused on lines, storytelling and being imperfect in making art. Imperfection is fine. Throughout the presentation I showed them where I started and how I used my imperfections to my advantage. I don't know how to draw realistically so I have created a different technique that allows me to use my flaws in my favor. I wanted to release a little bit of the pressure to draw anything perfect or have anything figured out.

On the second day we started working with lines and contours in portraits. The principal of the school came to the classroom and I did a blind contour drawing of him, using a single line. When I showed the kids what the drawing ended up looking like, they thought it was funny but I think they liked that it actually kind of looked like him in some weird way. I assigned them to pair into groups of three and then to make blind contour portraits of each other while the person being drawn told a story.

LW: How did the workshop inspire the mural you're making for this conference?

YF: I asked the kids what they're proud of on Buford Highway and it was hard for a lot of the kids to say what specifically, because they've grown up here and it's maybe hard for them to know anything else than what they're used to. Sometimes it takes growing up and moving out to miss or truly appreciate what it was that you have growing up.

Hearing the kids talk about Buford Highway reminded me of when I was their age, growing up in Brazil, and how I felt the same things about where I lived. I want to paint a mural that helps the people from here to feel more proud of where they're from. If I can do that then I'll be happy.

LW: What is your mural going to look like?

YF: I collected all of the students' blind contour drawings and from many of them I extracted lines, and small sections of their portraits, and combined them into a design where all of the lines are all connected with each other. I've never done anything like that, putting other people's lines together like a puzzle. I think it will represent the kids on a wall without specifically drawing their portraits. I designed the mural in a way to where it's bottom heavy in color so that the kids could help me paint in the different colors without having to get on ladders or lifts. Hopefully, they'll feel proud of being a part of making this mural and I hope that this is something that they'll remember one day.

CROSS KEYS HIGH

Dekalb County School District's best kept secret

It's Monday morning at Cross Keys High where school has been back in session for an entire week. The campus sits on a hill at a short distance from the southern strip of Buford Highway, where students are starting to file into the main entrance from the winding roads that lead to the school from all sides.

The morning commute for most Cross Keys students takes just under an hour, and mostly this is because the majority of students walk or take a bus to get to school and the district is zoned to be unusually long but narrow. On a map the district's borders precisely trace the entire eight plus mile strip of Buford Highway up to and just past I-285, and while it cannot be proven, it is widely acknowledged by the community that the district is zoned this way as a means to keep the minority populations that live close to Buford Highway at one school. In fact, almost ninety percent of the student body is latino,

As students settle into their seats for the first period of the day, Dj Khalid's "All I Do Is Win" slowly ascends to a deafening screech over every loudspeaker throughout the school, getting so loud that the higher frequencies start to clip. Students are beginning to cover their ears and wince. Afterwards the voice of a faculty member enthusiastically cuts in, announcing that "It's W.I.N. time," which stands for What I Need—a time in the day dedicated to whatever each student needs to get in the zone. Last year these moments of reflection were called D.E.A.R. time – Drop Everything And Read.

Judging by the offhand sarcasm displayed by several faculty members when asked about W.I.N. time, it seems like D.E.A.R. wasn't all that popular with the students at Cross Keys and the hope for playing DJ Khalid so loudly is to better motivate students to learn. For the most part, students seem to laugh off the song and continue on with whatever they were doing before it interrupted them. The day keeps moving.

While it's hard to say that such poised moments actually do much for the students at Cross Keys, the fact they they exist point to something, and that is the idea of needing to stay focused and work harder. Practically everyone that Living Walls has talked to about Cross Keys, whether it be a student, alumni, faculty member, or parent, has mentioned that when you're at Cross Keys there is an overwhelming energy of endurance and resilience that cannot be ignored. Resilience is shown by the faculty, who despite having less resources than most schools, continue to send students to college, by any and every means possible. Endurance is shown by the students who continue to make good grades on top of working part time jobs, translating for their parents and watching after their younger siblings, commuting everywhere by bus or on foot.

In 2014 WSB-TV did a report on Cross Keys and the neighboring elementary school that focused on an evidently dangerous pathway in between the two schools, in effect portraying the school system as disheveled and broken.

The report caught traction within the community but was mostly shrugged off by people who have either gone or go to Cross Keys because they know that the school is often sensationalized as being dangerous by the general public.

Several alumni remember going to other schools for sporting events or competitions and making it a point to avoid announcing that they went to Cross Keys, if it ever came up in conversation with kids from other schools. This was and is still a tactic of Cross Keys students, not because they're embarrassed but because they don't want to deal with constantly reassuring people that everything is safe at Cross Keys and that people actually get a good education there.

High school undoubtedly is a tough time for anyone. It's awkward, full of many firsts and marks the beginning of adulthood. While the teenage struggle is alive and real at Cross Keys it is dwarfed alongside the threat of ICE raids in the community, forced migration as housing units are torn down and replaced by higher-end, luxury apartments, and all the other unfortunate realities that come with being a minority in America today. Despite these threats to the collective wellbeing of the student body, there has emerged a clear and distinct familial atmosphere at Cross Keys High, and like a family, despite its dysfunctions, it remains strong and thriving through its support networks. •



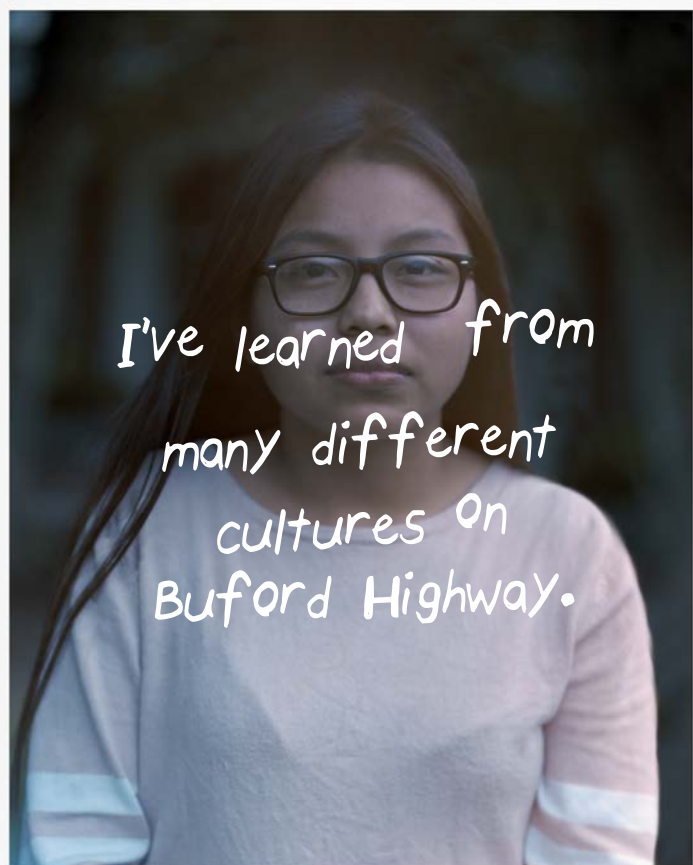
“High school is undoubtedly a tough time for anyone. It’s awkward, full of many firsts and marks the beginning of adulthood.”



Tithi Das, Class of 2018



Veronica Garcia, Class of 2018

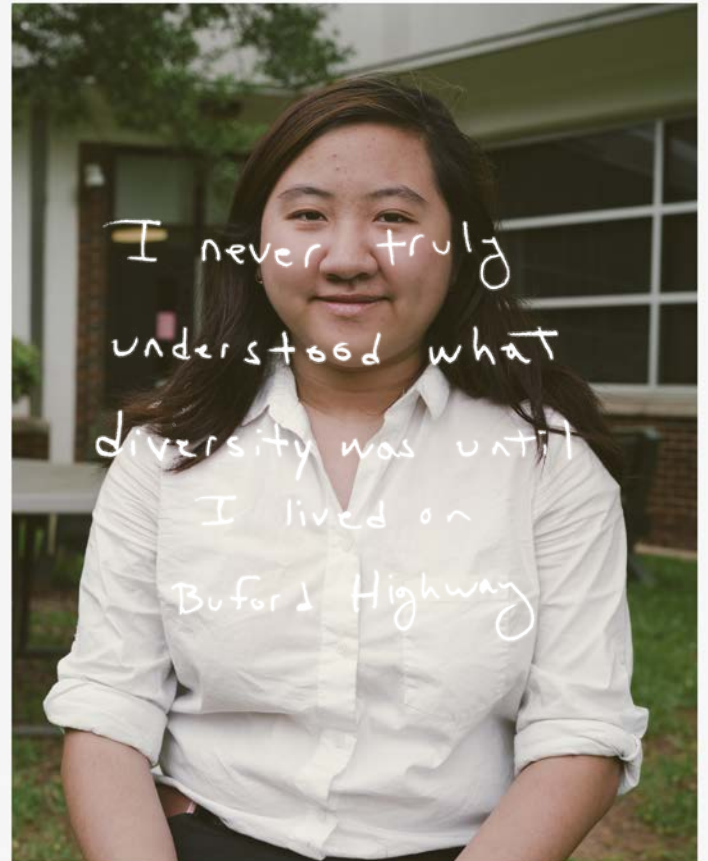


Any Perez, Class of 2020



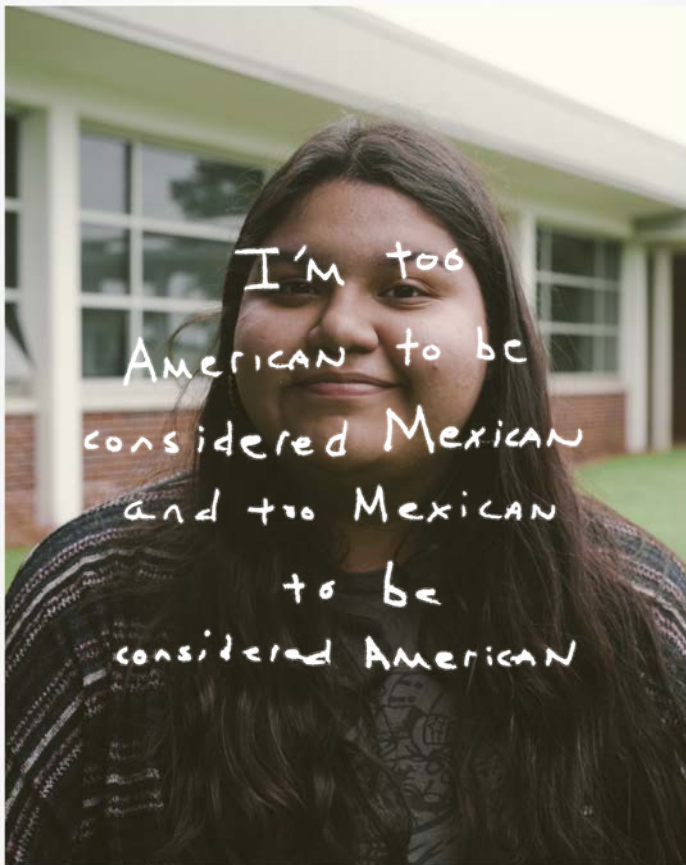
Everything that we accomplish is because of our abilities. we don't have the same resources as wealthier schools.

Yuyan Ke, Class of 2018



I never truly understood what diversity was until I lived on Buford Highway

Diana Le, Class of 2018



I'm too American to be considered Mexican and too Mexican to be considered American

Alejandra Zambrano, Class of 2018



I'm an undocumented immigrant and I've had to register through DACA just to have access to things that people are born having in this country

America Flores, Class of 2018



Michelle Angela Ortiz is a visual artist/skilled muralist/ community arts educator who uses her art as a vehicle to represent people and communities whose histories are often lost or co-opted. Through painting, printmaking, and community arts practices, she creates a safe space for dialogue around some of the most profound issues communities and individuals may face. Her work tells stories using richly crafted and emotive imagery to claim and transform spaces into a visual affirmation that reveals the strength and spirit of the community.

MICHELLE ANGELA ORTIZ

Living Walls: Who did you meet during the engagement?

Michelle Angela Ortiz: I met with a group of women through the Latin American Association who call themselves Las Chicas de Clan. Most of them are mothers, and some of them are undocumented.

LW: How did these meetings inspire your idea for your mural?

MAO: Fear was one of the main things we talked about – the fear of deportation, the fear of being pushed out of their community, the fear of maintaining an affordable rent, the fear of ICE agents coming to their door, their workplace, or their child’s school. In one of the sketches for my mural I wrote, “Living a life with dignity and no fear.” I was thinking about the idea of freedom and how it essentially is being able to not live in fear.

Another thing that I have thought about is how to talk about this neighborhood? There are a lot of people who only talk about it as a restaurant haven, but how do I talk about it in a way that also shows the family life of people who have grown up here and have made this place their home? I think it’s important to convey these ideas because there is a lack of visual representation in the community right now, and what if this



“Street art for the sake of street art is just pretty, but street art that genuinely represents people... is extremely crucial.”

were to change? How would it affect people who do not see themselves represented in the public spaces that they’re constantly moving through? Personally, I think that there is an incredible power in representation, in claiming a space and honoring yourself in that space.

LW: What impact do you hope to see your mural have on the communities that live on Buford Highway?

MAO: One the reasons I said yes when Monica asked me to be part of this year’s conference is that not often do you hear the director of an organization say, “We need to change the way we think about this art form. We should figure out a better and more responsible way to make this work.” I’ve seen a lot of different mural arts conferences that produce beautiful work, where lots of artists are coming in from many different places and the images that are reflected are purely based on the artist’s own aesthetics. It isn’t necessarily right or wrong, but the cultural currency can and has been used as means to support gentrification. Street art for the sake of street art is just pretty, but street art that genuinely represents people whose stories are not often seen, specifically through messages of love, strength, unity and power, is extremely crucial at this moment and so we shouldn’t be wasting our time doing anything else. I think as artists we have be using our work as tools to magnify these narratives and put them on display.



DIANNA SETTLES

Dianna Settles is a Vietnamese American artist living and working in Atlanta, Georgia. Her work springs from the anxieties of both loss and reclamation of identity politics. This is compounded by an interest in the overlooked and the mundane, giving passing moments and the commonly ignored a place to transcend from unremarkable to enduring.

DIANNA SETTLES

“I think that representing non-white bodies in public spaces is a radical act in itself.”

Living Walls: Who did you meet with on Buford Highway?

Dianna Settles: I met with Athena’s Warehouse, an after-school project founded by Bee Nguyen that operates out of Cross Keys High School in order to foster sisterhood and empower young girls in the community. We worked together over the course of a week to discuss immigration and womanhood and created a zine together with drawings, letters, collages, and poems that the girls made in response to our conversation. We then briefly spoke about the radical history of letterpress and self-publishing as a way of communicating new ideas. The girls set type and letterpressed the covers of the zines on a mini press with the title they came up with, “Diversity through Adversity”.

LW: How has did the meetings inspire the mural that you’re making as part of this conference?

DS: Our conversations largely revolved around our experiences as young women of color, as immigrants or the daughters of immigrants and first generation Americans. We discussed media’s representation versus the true experiences of migrants as well as larger ideas of visibility and of invisibility as a form of violence. The girls described the challenges that their parents and other families faced in order to get here for the promise of offering us, their children, better lives than the ones they knew. We discussed the deep sense of responsibility to our families and ancestors to prove that their sacrifices weren’t in vain and, beyond familial responsibilities, a social responsibility to uphold other migrant voices. The mural is based on notions of strength, support, and responsibility – to the family we know and to those we will never know, bound by bloodline or only bound to us by struggle.

Behind the Scenes
Sketches for Dianna’s upcoming mural on Buford Highway

LW: What is your mural going to look like?

DS: The mural is a glimpse of an interior, with women of color occupying space together. I think that representing non-white bodies in public spaces is a radical act in itself, as it demands attention is given to beauty and strength of our skin.

When I met with the girls, they spoke candidly about the ways in which women’s labor goes unseen when it takes place outside of the home. This invisibility diminishes the weight and value of domestic work and ignores the myriad responsibilities and roles women fill outside of it. Along with the women in the mural there is an ancestral altar that contains, amongst traditional offerings to past relatives, offerings to migrants everywhere enduring traumas and hardships in promise of better lives free from oppressive regimes and violence. There is bottled water to pray for those traveling through the desert from Mexico into America. There are photos of people before us who said goodbye to the only land they had ever known for the safety of their families, to start over and forge a new home from the dust of the one they left behind; a group of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States after being vetted by sponsors, a Syrian woman cradles her child in with the uncertainty she faces as to how to escape the civil war.

Our social responsibility, our compassion, and our empathy are some of the greatest tools we have for change. We use them to look into the eyes of discrimination/white supremacy/racism and pull up those we know the struggles of, rather than vie for the ranks of ‘model minority’. Adorning the altar is the inscription ‘here to stay’, referencing the beautiful murals that Jess X Snow did for Living Walls as well as solidarity in defending DACA. The scene is surrounded by plants which I’ve been using as a means of coded language. There is yarrow and tansy representing both wounds and healing, hyssop to show sacrifice, daffodils for memory, and kudzu leaves – something very Georgia-centric, which speaks to the sheer number of our experiences and to our phoenix-like ability to return stronger when we are cut back.



Roberto Hernandez was born in Acapulco, Mexico. He migrated to the United States at the age of 12 after the unfortunate kidnapping of his mother. Such a tragic event forced his family to relocate to Atlanta, Georgia, where he continued to develop his passion for art. Roberto is a graphic illustrator and digital artist, and instructs theatrical and special effects makeup, produces murals, constructs and designs costumes, and has been an art director on multiple art projects.

ROBERTO HERNANDEZ

“I think that every community needs empowerment.”

Living Walls: How long have you lived on Buford Highway?

Roberto Hernandez: I came to Atlanta when I was twelve years old after my mother was kidnapped in Mexico and we had to flee our home there. My mother moved here first and I stayed behind by myself for two years. I had to learn how to do a lot of things for myself while she was gone. This time period was a huge dose of reality.

When my mother came back for me, we headed to Atlanta, and for Buford Highway. It was a brand new start with a whole new set of challenges. We were undocumented, didn't speak the language and we didn't really know anybody. Once again we were in a situation where we didn't have a home anymore, but since we had already been through that before, we knew everything would be okay.

LW: What do you hope the impact of this conference will be on the community?

RH: I think that every community needs empowerment. When I think about painting the mural specifically for this conference, I'm asking myself, who are the people in this community, what are their ideas and how do they feel? These are the conversations that we need to be having in this country. A lot of people don't realize that people are literally dying to get into the United States. It seems obvious, right? Who wants to leave their country to be a thought of as a lesser person in another country? If we could afford to stay in our home countries, we would.

Our story, as immigrants, is a story of survival. Part of what we as artists can do to help this problem is to start these conversations. We have the power to create our own stories. Like the story of the mother who cooks to pay for her struggling kid to go to college. That's my story; my mother would sell tamales at a gas station on Buford Highway to pay for my school tuition. Every day in immigrant communities, people are making sacrifices.

LW: Can you describe the mural you're painting for this conference?

RH: So the mural that I'm painting is essentially a series of traditional Mexican masks of different animals. It's very traditional in Mexican folklore, these types of masks. The mural is representative of the diversity amongst people, and how important it is to be different.

Somebody once told me this very cliché story that I like: every finger on your hand is a different shape and size. Separately they are only so strong, but when they are all brought together into a fist there is enormous strength in their unity. I think that this is the story of Buford Highway and the story I want to tell in my mural.



Yehimi Cambrón is an artist specializing in printmaking and digital media pieces that celebrate the humanity and dignity of immigrants. Yehimi moved from Mexico with her parents to Atlanta, Georgia, in 2001, when she was eight years old. She did not know she was undocumented until she was denied a prize for an art contest at age 15.

YEHIMI CABRÓN

“Growing up here, I never lost the sense of home...”

Living Walls: What was growing up on Buford Highway like?

Yehimi Cambron: When I first came here I was very young and I had this idea that everything would be only be written in English and I wouldn't be able to understand anything or communicate with anyone. When we drove down Buford Highway for the first time, looking for my Aunt's apartment, I was so surprised to see that a lot of things were written in Spanish and there were panaderias and supermercados, all these things that reminded me of home. It was a really big deal to me. So right away it became home. Growing up here, I never lost the sense of home because I was surrounded by so many comforting people and in a familiar place to my home country.

LW: How were you approached to be part of the conference this year?

YC: Being part of this community, and having grown up here, I was asked to take place in one of the conversations that another artist, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh was having with some alumni of Cross Keys High School. When Monica learned that I was an artist and saw some of my artwork, she asked me to then be one of the participating artists. For me, this is a really big opportunity to continue the work that I've been making, just in a bigger, more public and accessible way. I see this as an opportunity to let the people that live here know how powerful they are. I also want the mural to send a message to anyone that comes in and attempts to disrupt or tear apart the community that we're still here, we're not going anywhere and we're stronger than ever.

LW: What made you want to become an art teacher?

YC: When I was in high school at Cross Keys my art teachers started to pay attention to me and the work I was making, so I started to take it more seriously. I took as many art classes as I could. Now that I'm back at Cross Keys as a teacher, my role is not just as an artist but as an educator as well. I want to help empower kids to know that they matter, the art that they make matters, and that there is a place for them in this country.

I came back to Cross Keys specifically because I wanted to take everything that I had learned and funnel my efforts back into the community where I grew up. It might be hypocritical for me to come back and tell my students that just because I got out and went to college that they can too, since they're up against so much, but I think that at the very least it is an affirmation for them to see someone in this position who looks like them, speaks their language, eats the same food as them and is also undocumented.

LW: What message are you trying to send through your mural?

YC: Putting a mural on Buford Highway is like having a piece of me put on public display and it is hopefully my way of showing my support and love for this place, especially as the community is changing and affordable housing is disappearing slowly. This community matters and I want people who are here to know that they matter.



Sanithna Phansavanh is an artist working and living in Atlanta, Georgia, with a focus on examining the human condition, particularly the dynamic between creation, existence, and permanence. His work, ranging from small, intimate drawings to largescale, public murals, has been exhibited nationally and internationally, with notable showings at the High Museum of Art, on the Atlanta Beltline, and through the City of Atlanta’s Public Art programs.”



5 more minutes.

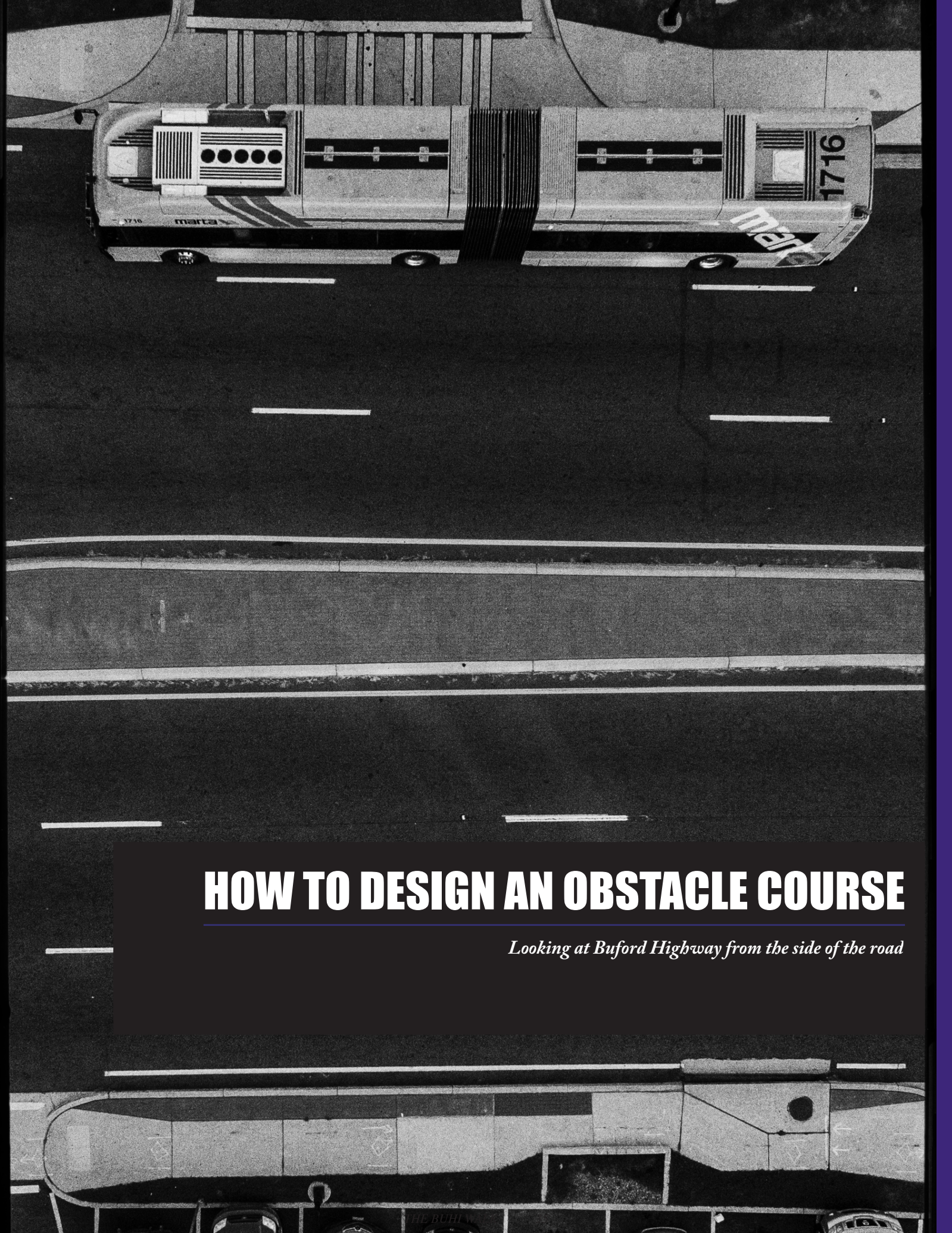


Zoo

ZOO AS ZOO is a chaotic place where different cultures mash together to evolve a new culture.



Chip Thomas started working in a small community between the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley called Inscription House in 1987. He'd always been drawn to photography and built a darkroom shortly after arriving at the Navajo Nation. His passion photographically is shooting black and white in a documentary style, inspired by people like Eugene Smith, Eugene Richards, Joseph Koudelka and others. By going out and spending time with people in their homes and family camps, he has come to know them as friends.



HOW TO DESIGN AN OBSTACLE COURSE

Looking at Buford Highway from the side of the road



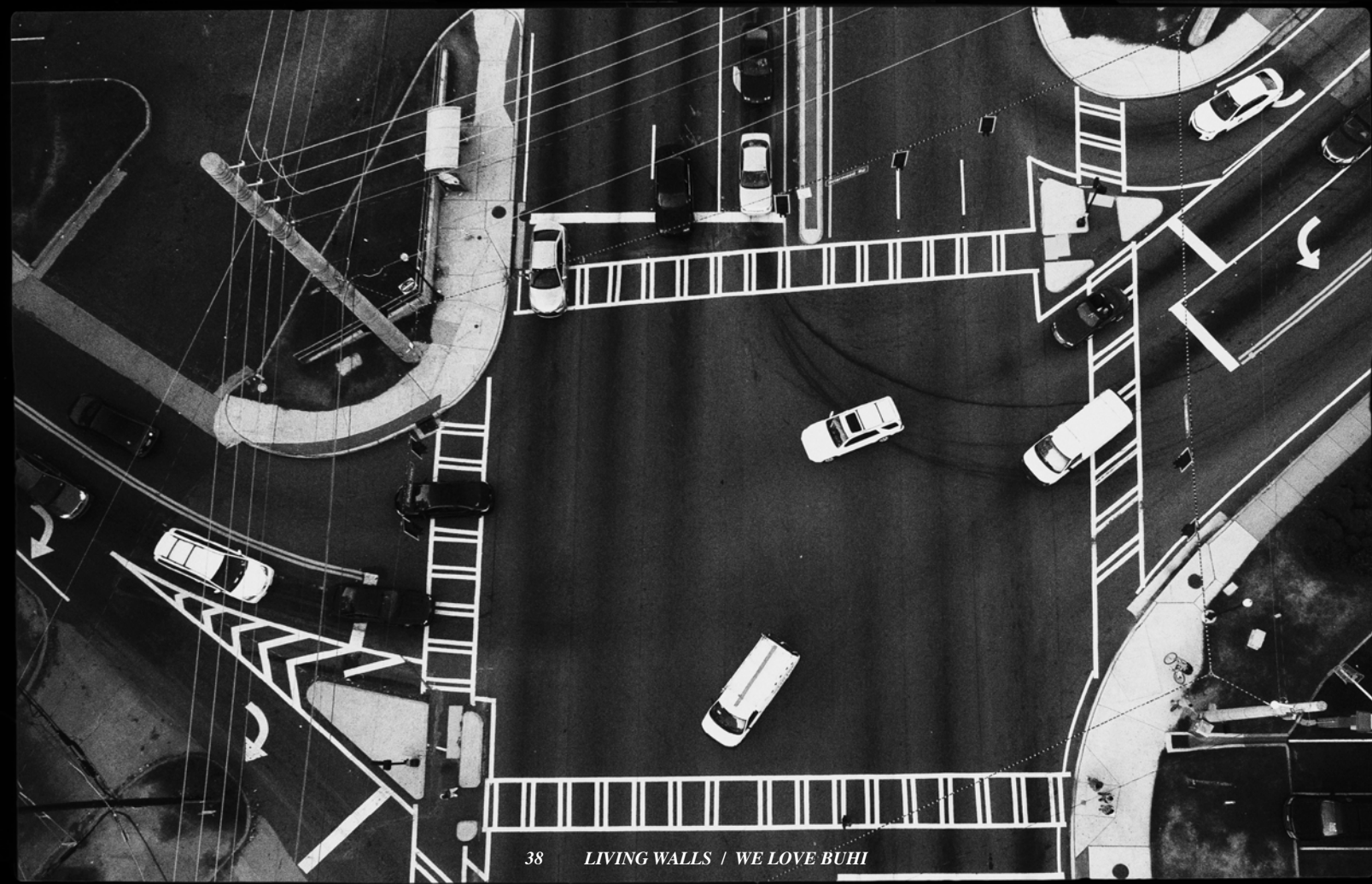


The seven lane wide stretch of Buford highway constitutes one of the busiest corridors in the greater Atlanta area but, unlike the most of Atlanta, travel on foot, bus, and train are more popular modes of transportation than by car. MARTA bus route 39 is the busiest route in the city, with an average daily ridership just shy of 7,000 people. Riding a bus is in fact so commonplace that secondary bus services operate alongside the city buses, using the same stops as pick up and drop off points but at a cheaper cost.

Georgia State Route 13 was built in 1953 as a means of connecting Atlanta's northeastern railroad towns to its downtown. This worked well until the construction of I-85 overtook Buford Highway as the primary roadway for traffic north of the city, effectively serving the same purpose only better. While it might have made sense to downsize the highway at this point, stripping it from six lanes to four, such a road diet has

never occurred and as a result has left one of the most uncrossable roadways to serve as the primary footpath for one of the largest pedestrian populations in the state of Georgia.

After ranking as Georgia's deadliest road for pedestrians there have been recent efforts in the past decade to expand sidewalk coverage and build crosswalks. While the introduction of crosswalks have surely created a safer walking space, the fact remains that Buford Highway was not designed to be walkable. With strip malls at extreme distances from the road, cars speed past in excess of 50 miles per hour. Large sections of the highway are bordered by dirt footpaths, which precisely mark where sidewalks are direly needed. For the residents living alongside the Buford Highway corridor, simply commuting to work, school or elsewhere requires adapting to the dangers of the road, in effect becoming a survival tactic. ●



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