

Jen Chien ([00:00](#)):

You're listening to Above the Fog, a podcast from Grace Cathedral and me, Jen Chien. This season is all about bridge builders, people in our communities who build connections and span divides. Today, I'm bringing you sociologist, Valerie Francisco-Menchavez.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([00:21](#)):

My name is Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, and I'm an associate professor of sociology at San Francisco State University. I am an organizer with Filipino, progressive communities in the SF Bay area and the mama of two children. And I am the daughter of immigrants and I am an immigrant myself.

Jen Chien ([00:40](#)):

Valerie's academic focus and her political interests are intimately connected. She studies the lives of migrant workers in the U S and the Philippines, especially how the globalization of care work affects families. Her book, The Labor of Care, is about Filipina domestic workers in New York and how they maintain familial connections across distances of time and space. It's a subject she knows well from her own life.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([01:16](#)):

I was born in Parañaque, Philippines, and grew up in a pretty middle class community in the sort of Metro Manila area. My father there was a, he worked for a mining company and my mother was practicing as a dentist. And that when we had a home that had, you know, three rooms and marble floors, and I say the marble floor is not to be like bougie, but more like in the Philippines to have marble floors means, you know, it's nice and cool. So you have, your family had enough money to invest in your home in that way,

Jen Chien ([02:02](#)):

When Valerie was nine, her family moved to the U.S. Her father stayed behind. It'd be a decade until he joined them, but she, her mom, her older brother and younger sister all came over together.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([02:16](#)):

We came to live in Concord, California, and we stayed with my grandmother Romeos and my grandfather Porfirio. They were caregivers at a care home. And they had one room as living caregivers have like next to the kitchen and this was totally illegal. But anyway, we all lived in that room together. We lived there and helped with the care homework for three years, helping to take care of the elderly patients and doing the cleaning of the care home facility and, tidying up the garden and the yard. It was very different from our middle-class community. It was a shock. S many of the Filipino immigrants that we, made community with that became our fictive kin were working very hard jobs and they were working around the clock. And the children like us, you know, who immigrated, were just trying to do their best to learn English and, you know, like adjust to American life.

Jen Chien ([03:35](#)):

Valerie had come to the U.S. As a third grader. Then, right when she was starting middle school, her grandmother passed away suddenly. Valerie, her mom and siblings moved out of the care home.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([03:48](#)):

We moved into low-income community of color neighborhoods, and those communities were sometimes not the most safe, but we kept us safe. Our neighbors kept us safe, you know, meaning my, my mom would be working 12 hours a day and there would be African-American grownups who were living next door to us that would make sure that we got into the door from school. And, you know, there was a Filipina auntie that lived just down the street, made sure that we had dinner that night, you know, before she came in. And it was actually this very complex and kind of really dope network of folks who were just like, piecing it together, you know, like, Oh, I'm not going to be home till seven. You know, they didn't have text message, you know, they have to rely on each other really. Like, can you make sure the kids, you know, have dinner at seven and then I'll get you back on Saturday when you're working, I'll make sure that they all have lunch or whatever, you know, and yes, there was police sirens and gang activity and, you know, drugs in that same street being pushed. All of that. Like, I remember that too. And I also remember all the ways in which those neighbors came together.

Jen Chien ([05:27](#)):

When she looks back now, Valerie applies her grownup sociologist lens to what she saw and lived as a child. She sees the patterns in what could sometimes feel like a jumble.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([05:40](#)):

I think about the ingenuity of, you know, working class, working poor folks, people of color immigrants, and that ingenuity, that innovativeness or what Antonio Gramsci calls that "organic intellectualism," right. Where it's like, they are gonna figure it out. And, you know, sometimes it looks like a mess. It looks like just mix and matching and, you know, putting things together. But there is an intricacy, a boldness about how to offer care to your neighbor, to your family member that isn't just patching it together. But that there's this like underlying underbelly of like caring for one another. And not just for the moments where we need care, but the moments that are joyful that you want to share with people, right. When your family, like our family was across an ocean and it was my brother's promotion, eighth grade promotion, and you know, who was there, it was like the little biological family members we had here and hella neighborhood families, right? Like on our birthday parties. Sometimes I didn't even know that that wasn't my real auntie and that kind of ethic of care is to me one radical and also something that has been like fermented and, you know, simmered and manifested in these communities for so long.

Jen Chien ([07:25](#)):

Valerie was in high school when she first discovered that her own community could be a subject of scholarship. She went to a Filipino American youth leadership program that took place at Stanford for a whole immersive week.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([07:40](#)):

And we slept in the dorms and ate at the mess hall and these like doctoral students who would become professors, they taught us Filipino American history. And one of those professors is the late dr. Don [inaudible], who eventually becomes a history professor at SF State in the future. Dr. Alison [inaudible], who is an Asian American and Asian American studies professor at SF State right now, they were like our workshop teachers — how lucky, how grateful I am to meet these Filipinas from the Bay area. And Don was from Stockton and who had these ambitions too, we're going to be studying to be professors. And we dabble. And this is what we study. We study our people's history. We study our community's journey through education. And so I was like, I want to do that. I could do that. You know, like I want to, I want to talk to people. I want to study how, like, you know, my mother came here, I want to learn a little bit

more of why. And I want to tell my grandmother's story, you know, tell the story that like sharp shift between like my grandmother in the forties got her master's degree in math. She was a bad bitch. You know what I mean? Like she has, she had seven children, you know what I mean? Like, and then she came here and she was a caregiver. That's crazy to me. Right. And that's not an isolated story. So many Filipino migrants that I've met have had master's degrees full on careers in the Philippines, PhDs in the Philippines, professors in the Philippines, and come here, swallow their pride, eat humble pie and clean houses and take care of children and take care of elderly and make sense of that and value it and create a new identity around that because they know that they are the bridge to how their families in the Philippines are going to survive. I was like, I have so many Titos like that. I have so many, you know, um, Lolos like that. And in, in that little youth leadership camp, I was like, I want to study that if that's what a professor means, I want to do that.

Jen Chien ([10:10](#)):

Fresh out of high school, Valerie, headed to San Francisco State. And as she took classes in the history of immigration, Asian American studies, ethnic studies, she deepened her understanding of her own family's trajectory.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([10:26](#)):

The history of the United States in the Philippines, and like the Philippines post, the Marcos dictatorship was and continues to be in political and economic ruin, you know, and in college, I was learning that, you know, in, in my classroom and in organizing spaces that thousands of people left the Philippines every day. And the thing that felt like such an individual decision for my mom in the early nineties was situated in that. And I started to understand that like, Oh, she didn't, it was a constrained decision, right. A choice on her part, but it was constrained by all these, you know, systemic problems in the Philippines and in the United States.

Jen Chien ([11:17](#)):

Along with that new understanding came a twist, as Valerie puts it. Her mom had originally arrived on a work visa with the three kids, all on dependent visas. And those were only valid up until they turned 21.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([11:32](#)):

So all of my mother's children, like Cinderella's carriage turns into a pumpkin at midnight, our carriage, our visas turned into pumpkins at 21. So all of us became undocumented in college. And sort of all throughout, like my teenage years was a sort of specter hanging over us, you know. At SF State, when I got into SF State, I had documents and then they expired while I was there. And, um, it was also learning about, you know, what about the United States brings Filipinos here, the history of labor migration to the United States. And then what about us? American immigration system kind of breaks down and produces all of these undocumented people with no path to legalization and, and by no path, I mean, when I became undocumented, really, there was only two options for me. Was to become an international student with my Philippine passport, which would skyrocket my tuition by 250% or 300%, or I could get married and get documents through that. How can you expect this, this 21 year old, you know, to choose between that? Right. And I'm asking lawyers and non-profits, what can I do? And instead of opportunities, what was really being shown to me was walls, right? Like, nah, you can't do that. You can't go get your PhD. You cannot go, you know, work somewhere with your BA degrees, right? If you don't have a social security number or a permanent resident card, you're not going to be able to work. Right. Was there any other paths for me to get legalized now? No. No.

Jen Chien ([13:49](#)):

So like her mother before her, she made a constrained choice.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([13:53](#)):

I got married for papers to a high school boyfriend of mine. I really, you know, love that person. And I think under the circumstances that we got married under it really skewed the power dynamics in our relationship and quickly our relationship turned sour. Number one, getting married at 21 years old. I mean, I know it works for some people, shout out to them, you know, way to go congratulations. But for me, I wasn't ready and I don't think my partner was ready either.

Jen Chien ([14:33](#)):

This part of her life can still be hard for her to talk about.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([14:37](#)):

That marriage really turned, turn, you know, abusive. What I ended up applying for is the Violence Against Women Act and the Violence Against Women Act, or VAWA, allows for undocumented women to petition for themselves, under proof of abuse. And so I was able to do that, you know, was able to successfully apply for that. And it was hard because the person who agreed to help me with my papers was a good man. And under the circumstances that we were in it wasn't good for either of us.

Jen Chien ([15:28](#)):

Hard as the end of that marriage was for her, Valerie talks about that time as a sort of crucible, the beginning of a new direction.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([15:37](#)):

The people who helped me apply for VAWA, who helped me procure, you know, pro bono lawyers to help me through it were all grassroots organizers, right? They weren't governmental agencies, they weren't these sort of normative traditional institutions that was going to help a young undocumented person. No, it was still that ethic of care, right? These folks who believed politically in the same values as I did, who nurtured a different kind of radical care outside of our kin, right? That created sort of these chosen political communities of care. Those are the folks who helped me to get the resources so that I could become legalized were also the same people who were teaching me about the world, sort of systemically and structurally.

Jen Chien ([16:36](#)):

Those mentors helped set her on the path to become a scholar activist.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([16:41](#)):

Most academics want to find a research question that's novel, that contributes to the literature that, you know, sort of builds on a body of scholarship. The way that scholar activists and Kusamas or comrades in my community taught me was what are the questions that are pressing in our community? How can you find the answers to that so that we can build political power in our organizing work?

Jen Chien ([17:12](#)):

Through this lens, she learned to use participatory research methods.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([17:18](#)):

Participatory means that instead of me being like I have the PhD, I have the degrees, I'm the smart one. I know the questions that I'm going to ask you. It's really saying like a little bit of humility saying, Hey, what are the folks in this community? And particularly for me, Filipinos, Filipino migrants, Filipino, migrant workers, what is important to y'all and what are your experiences like first and foremost? Let, let, let's have you tell that story. And it's my role as an academic, as a researcher, as a scholar to say, okay, there are some ways in which there are like repeating themes throughout these stories. And can we ask a couple of questions about that? Because many migrant workers, many caregivers, like my Nani, my grandmother or my mother didn't get like all the wages that they were supposed to be given at the end of the month, that's recurring, right? So many of them get sick or have body aches. I feel like many working class folks, queer folks, communities of color, immigrant folks never get asked to like, stop and reflect about what it is that you do. They just are like working non-stop right. But when you ask them to stop and reflect and participate in really thinking through their own stories and how they line up, you know, when they hear other people's stories, they start to really see a collective story that emerges.

Jen Chien ([18:57](#)):

Valerie thinks the story of care workers that's emerging right now in this pandemic has huge implications for all of us.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([19:05](#)):

I think it's really an urgent time for us to reconsider the ways in which care work and care workers have become invisibilized and how we have done that. How in this country, in the United States, we have relegated care workers to people that we don't even, you know, think twice about until they are all gone, until we can not bring our children to daycare, until our elder care facilities have to minimize workers until schools shut down. You know, people ask me like, how do you think, you know, we can reevaluate care work. And my snarky response to that is we stay in this pandemic and we stay in it. You know, we prolong as much as possible, the contradiction of folks not having care so that they understand, you know, this is like the mother in me, you have to understand the consequences and the impact of these care workers when it's gone, right. When it is taken away from you. Because I think this country has a history of gendered and racialized domestic work, the history of enslaved Africans being the first domestic workers in this country that, I'm not even gonna call them domestic workers, enslaved Africans that, or relegated to be domestic servants for white slave owning families that then could profit and build wealth in this country has a direct and through line to the mostly immigrant women of color who are working as domestic workers now in this country, who are taking care of children and elderly, chronically ill, differently abled peoples. Right now under the pandemic, we have to reconsider that that through line is a part of this sort of American system that really marginalizes particularly immigrant and communities of color. That part of the pandemic is laying bare that contradiction.

Jen Chien ([21:34](#)):

In the middle of all the pain and struggle of this year, Valerie received some very good news. She got tenure, it's a kind of job security that's increasingly rare for academics in the U.S. And she says she does not take that for granted.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([21:50](#)):

I can say that in sociology, I may be one of two handfuls of sociologists that are Philippina, Filipino, Philippine, ex American who have tenure in the discipline. For me, I think about a younger Val who had

no idea what it meant to be a professor, but wanted to do that. I think about my sister who owns her own beauty salon and went to beauty school and my brother who's a mechanic. And I think about them being like, I don't know what that is, like what? So, so something good happened? Like, yeah, something really good happened.

Jen Chien ([22:38](#)):

Getting tenure also means she can deepen into work that she's impassioned about.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez ([22:43](#)):

Really trying to think about what it means to create spaces where I take that ethic of care that, you know, I write about, that was taught to me as a child and bring it to like graduate students, undergraduate students, so that they, that we all can contribute to what I, when I learned when I was 16, such an eyeopening experience to read about my own people's history here in the U.S. and what it meant for me to read the poetry, the literature, the sociology of Filipino Americans, and building out that kind of community across the United States and even Canada. It means to me so much to have tenure because I want to be able to write a new book about caregivers in the Bay area and write about Remedios who my grandmother and, you know, every member of my family has been a caregiver. And as I was, you know, getting my college education, I want to write about their stories and, you know, their ingenuity and their, their creativity as migrant workers. You know, and, and, and I want to tell that story from someone who grew up in a care home and who helped with all of the things in the care home as well. And tenure gives me that opportunity, to write a book that I I've been wanting to write for all of my life.

Jen Chien ([24:25](#)):

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez is a professor of sociology at San Francisco State University. You've been listening to Above the Fog from Grace Cathedral. I'm Jen Chien. This episode was put together with help from Gabe Graban, Christine Murray, and Rebecca Nestle. Music by Blue Dot Sessions. Thanks so much for listening.