

## AMERICA HAS ITS OWN GHOSTS

Guest: Kao Kalia Yang  
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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JD: I'm Joshua Doležal and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. We're back with our second season, and our theme for this year is Immigration. Over the next few months, we'll speak with eight guests - writers, educators, artists, and more - who left their native countries to make a home in the Greater Midwest. We ask our guests what pulled them from their homelands, what challenges they faced while making a home in the Heartland, and how they contribute now to a changing Midwest.

Our first story in this series comes from Kao Kalia Yang. As a young refugee, Kalia watched her parents struggle to speak English. One day that pain was so great, she simply stopped talking.

KKY: My mom, I looked at her, and her head was bowed. I could tell she was ashamed, in front of me. I decided I was no longer going to speak this language. This language that did not need my mother or my father. That didn't need me either. That if the world we lived in no longer needed to hear what my mom and dad had to say, then it no longer would hear anything I had to say. The next day, I stopped talking. At first, it was a great revolution. Somewhere along the way, I realized the revolution was against me. I caved underneath all that pressure. I became a selective mute in my files all the way through until I became a professional writer. In college, I started whispering. In graduate school, it was a little over a whisper every time I had to speak. But it wasn't until April 10, 2008 when *The Latehomecomer* came out when I actually spoke to be heard for the very first time in a great long time.

JD: Kalia was born in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. She and her family settled in St. Paul when Kalia was six years old, and she came of age in the Minnesota Public Schools. After graduating from college, she moved to New York for graduate school - an immigrant in a city of immigrants. And coming home to Minnesota - to launch her writing career - was like emigrating all over again.

That's how Kalia thinks of the Midwest. Simply, as "home." And it's stories like hers that embody our notion of the Midwest as a dynamic place. A changing place. A place, she says, where miracles might be born.

This episode describes trauma, suicide, and death and might not be appropriate for all ages. Listener discretion is advised.

JD: I'm sure you've had to tell your immigration story to many people. What are some of the different versions that you tell, and where in time did those different versions begin?

KKY: When I was a child, and I was asked, "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" I used to say, "I'm Hmong." And then I perceived the confusion in the faces of the people asking. I'd

say “Hmong. We’re an ethnic minority. We don’t have a home country. But I was born in Thailand.” And then of course I had to explain the difference – the fact that I was born in Thailand and yet, not Thai, and that my mom and dad were born in Laos, but they were not Lao. And that my ancestors came from the lowlands of China, but we were not the Chinese. It got very confusing for a time. In the space of my life where I didn’t talk much, it became enough to say when people said, “What is Hmong?” I’d just say, “It’s a people. My cousin’s name is Bruce Lee and his son’s name is Brandon Lee.” It was enough for the people on the other side. They would laugh, or they would nod, and the question would be done. Now that I’m an adult and now that I’ve written books about Hmong and where we come from and what we’re doing here, my answers have taken on different nuances and different complexities, depending on the audience that I’m with. For a high school audience, I think it’s always so important when I talk about where the Hmong are from to talk about the Vietnam War. But of course, for most American students, the Vietnam War ended in 1975. It’s incredibly important for me to point out that for my family, that war did not end until 1979. Until we crossed the raging Mekong River. It’s incredibly important to remind them that even today, there are some 800 Hmong families in the jungles of Laos, fleeing from a war that the world has long declared over. There are so many different ways to tell the story, and each time I do it, it’s because there’s a particular kind of work that needs to be done. Whether I’m interrogating the history as it is written, or whether I’m doing a more literary, creative take on an explanation that people expect to be simple and direct and uncomplicated.

JD: Do you think of yourself as a Midwesterner?

KKY: I do. It is in the way I talk. Actually, I met a professor years ago, a linguist, and she knew a lot of Hmong folk, so I said, “Do I have a Hmong accent?” And she says to me, “No, but you do have an accent.” And I waited for her, thinking she was going to say something very, very cool, and then she looked and she thought about it for a long time, and she says, “It’s Minnesotan.”

JD: I wonder how you define the Midwest.

KKY: The Midwest – how do I define the Midwest? For me, before it is anything else, it is home. As a writer from the Midwest, I know that many of the big issues of the land are hardly ever centered in the Midwest. We hear about the fashion of the coast, the food, the writing, the movies. Whenever I go places and I’m introduced as a Midwestern author, everybody does a double take. I think they do so because I am not what they think about when they think about writers from here. My very own life and my presence is a contradiction to people’s understanding of what is essentially my home. I grew up with Garrison Keillor being one of the best things to come forth from the Midwest, and here I’m talking specifically about Minnesota. But here in the Midwest I think we’re beginning to see different nuances and layerings of flavors that have never been here before. All of the newspapers will say that Hmong farmers have introduced fruits and vegetables to the Midwest that nobody knew about twenty, thirty years ago. Varieties of eggplants, varieties of mustard, so not only are we changing the way the place looks – we are changing the way the place is fed. At Carleton College, my alma mater, most of

the greens actually come from a cooperative of Hmong farmers. They're serving bok choy, they're serving Japanese eggplants, they're serving Thai basil leaves. It's incredible.

JD: I'm curious – for you and your family, what are some of the biggest misconceptions that people in the Midwest have had of the Hmong community?

KKY: Growing up, I saw this documentary, and I still teach it whenever I teach anything related to the Hmong story. It's a documentary called *Becoming America*. At the end of this documentary, there is an anthropologist. And the anthropologist poses a question: Where will the Hmong be in 40 years? Something to this effect – when a small traditional, backwards group such as the Hmong meet up with the majority that is so much more technologically advanced and culturally, they will be wiped out. I teach that documentary some 40 years after its making. I teach it as a Hmong scholar, as a Hmong professor, as a Hmong writer. It is incredibly moving to me, because even 40 years after the fact, when we've proven our survival once again to the world, we are still so often cast in the light of the traditional. Traditional as backwards, without the positive connotations of that word. We are an ethnic minority that have had to survive against a much more powerful mainstream in every single part of the world we have existed. We are now a population dispersed around the globe and yet, somehow without a country we remain intact as a people. I think people can see the power of the Hmong, the power of the Hmong identity, the power of an undocumented history. I love the deep, deep love we have for each other. For our tattered history. For our poverty.

JD: After reading your memoir and feeling the healing power of that language, realizing that I'd missed this story – I've lived in Pella, Iowa, for a little over fifteen years now. I know there's a Hmong population here. I know them mostly through the farmer's market. That history was a silence for me, and your book helped fill it. I'm just wondering why it took me so long to hear that story, why you think American schools omit the Hmong story from the history of the Vietnam War, and maybe how you would teach that particular history differently.

KKY: History, as many have observed, and as it has been written, is oftentimes documented by the winners. The Hmong are not winners by any light. The American school system cannot teach something that the American government has yet to make public. We were America's secret war. We were expected to be a secret war because the expectation was that we would all die in that hot, humid jungle. And that when the war was over, America would come back and life here would resume as if the Hmong had never lived. And yet against all odds, we are here. We are reading things that were never intended for us to read. We're living lives that were never intended for us. We are the unimagined in the land of the imagination here, the American imagination. In order to teach Hmong history, it's incredibly important to ask what other kinds of histories are not being taught in our schools. We don't learn very much about the history about the mentally and physically disabled in our school system. We don't learn very much about the Native American experience beyond the fact that this land was taken from them. If the history books were being honest, the horrific and tragic ways, we don't learn much about many other populations in America. We've had a hard run across history and across time. Whenever I teach the Hmong, I have to situate the fact that it is a tradition in this country to omit and silence the

history of many other people. Once that is established, I can go into the particulars of where I'm positioned in this particular history as a Hmong writer. Why has it taken so long? Because when you're beginning from so very little, it takes that long. I think about my own history. I was born at the tail end of '80 in a refugee camp. In a place where suicide was the number one cause of death. My family somehow made it out from that place with my life intact. It took me how many years to garner an education to learn how to speak English, to learn how to write in it? To garner the kind of academic pedigree where people might look at it once or twice? And then when that book came out, to be a writer from a community with so few writers? And then I had to somehow make my way through. I've been at this since I was 22, professionally pursuing the arts. The fact that you, Josh, are just beginning to learn about my work tells you how much further I have to get. The road is so very far. There are so few walking it, and in many ways we have to walk in different directions. Senator Mee Moua, the first elected Hmong senator in the U.S., it took her that long to become who she was, who she is. I think about Sophia Vuelo, who is the first female Hmong judge in the country, how long did it take her? And then of course, I'm doing the work in the writing landscape. The road is so very far, and it takes so very much to roll a boulder up a hill. A task before all of us.

JD: I asked Kalia how suicide could be the leading cause of death in a refugee camp. Why, after escaping certain death, would so many people take their own lives in the very place they had come seeking shelter?

KKY: Because the camp was never designed for so many. Early on, when the first refugees started flooding into the camp – this is all very recent. I just read a testimony from an American woman who had visited the camp for three months in 1980, just a few months before I was born. By the time my family came into the camp, the camp was overcrowded. The river of my youth was nothing more than a sewage canal. The camp was on more than 400 acres. There were 40,000 of us in that place. The schools were overcrowded. There was no medication to treat all the illnesses. The mental health, PTSD from the war. In a camp, you can't just leave. You can't walk freely. There are men with guns. Soldiers in fatigues watching you. When women and girls left the camp to forage for food because Hmong people got food only three days out of the week. So often, they came back with blood seeping in between their legs, hair in their faces, crawling on the ground. Men and boys, some of them left and never returned. In that place beneath the hot sun, there were atrocities against my people. Not even I, a child, could close my eyes and forget. To unsee what I'd seen. To unknow what I knew to be true. In that place where there were still memories of our time before, our freedom, of wide open spaces and tall mountains, those people who remembered, who yearned for return, could not find a place out. Many chose death. Hard question. My mother had six miscarriages after me in the refugee camp because every time I looked at her, she gave me the food in her hands, the food in her mouth. She didn't have enough strength in her to nurture all those little babies to life. Some point in between all those miscarriages, my mom attempted suicide. I wrote a book recently, I co-edited a collection called *What God is Honored Here?* Writings on miscarriage and infant loss of native women and women of color. In there, I write my mother's story and my own. When I ask my mother for her story of miscarriage, I didn't expect to hear a story about how she tried

to visit the children on the other side. My mom has seven living and seven dead now. Equal numbers in each world. I did not expect to hear the story about how she tried to kill herself. How she almost succeeded. That is a reality of a refugee camp. That is a reality of a place like that.

JD: So you went to another camp, which was the transition camp before you came to America. And the kind of safety that your father had helped you feel in the first camp, the sort of cocoon he kept around you seemed to be a little more shaken there. You saw a woman die and that seemed to really give you a fear of death yourself. Can you tell me how that happened?

KKY: I'd seen death before in the refugee camp. As a child, one of my good friends was a younger child and she died. She was a neighboring child. We lived in a longhouse, so we shared the same kitchen, just slept in different rooms. I saw her body after she died. The drums of the dead were being beat. Death was nothing new to me. But in Phanat Nikhom, transition camp to America, we had just left parts of my family behind. I knew that we were leaving each other after that place. But one of my uncles got sick in that place, so we went to the hospital to visit him. Beside him, there was an old woman, and she was stretched out on the bed. I remember her because every time we went, there was the sound of flies. All her intestines were out, it was in some sort of plastic covering. And the flies would buzz around her day and night. When my uncle got better and came home, we heard that she had died. I wanted to see her dead body. She hadn't looked alive to me, even in the hospital, so I wanted to see her dead body. I remember the funeral hut was this open hut with doorways, no doors, doorways in between. My older cousins and my older sister – I was the youngest in the group – we decided we would go and peek. In the Hmong culture, we believe that if you die before the body of a dead person, that the dead person can have your soul and spirit forever. We were all kind of afraid. I think I was the most afraid. But it was my turn. I was the last one to go up to the hut to take a good look at her. I was looking when they called my name. I was down by the side of this body, the shadow of a body on the table. She seemed so big, and I was still absorbing it all in. I heard my name being called so I ran. I didn't see the rock in my way, so I came tumbling down. That night, with this big secret inside me, when everybody in my family was asleep, we had these longhouses where each family had a sleeping part. They were separated by billowing sheets. I saw her standing beside the doorway, by the sheet, staring at me, nearly as tall as the ceiling. That became my big fear, and my big fear of the dark. My big fear of everything else. For most of those six months, I could not sleep. I lost all ability to sleep during the night. I'd stay up all night, watching out for her, watching out for me. There were nights that my dad, in his infinite love, he would take me outside so we could sleep beneath the stars because I was afraid of the dark. In the openness, there were these big searchlights the camp had installed. We'd sleep underneath them and it was too hot to have a blanket or a sheet, so we'd stare up at the stars together. Countless nights. I could feel the imprint of the rocks in my back. But of course the softness of my father's arm. Lots of horror and lots of beauty mixed together in that place.

JD: Those memories sound so vivid. Do those fears haunt you now? Or have you moved beyond them?

KKY: I've moved with them, Josh. I don't know that you move beyond things. I think I've moved with them, much more gracefully because I've had practice. I wish I could tell you I lived a life that wasn't haunted, but that would not be honest to the Hmong story or to my own. America has its own ghosts. Now she is one of many ghosts. And if it's possible, I think the ghosts check each other as much as they check me. In some ways, the fear is more tracked than it's been in the past. But my grandma, she was a shaman, and she always said to me, "You are gonna make your life because of your faith, not your fears." I've tried to live in the power of those words. Now as a mother, I say to my daughter all the time when she's afraid, "There's so much to be afraid of, but I want you to know something." And she looks up at me and she goes, "What?" And I say, "Everything that you're afraid of is nothing compared to my love for you."

JD: After a series of flights from Bangkok, Kalia and her family arrived in Minnesota on a steamy night. July 7, 1987. As she recalls in *The Latehomecomer*, she could not imagine what her new life would bring. All she did that night was *feel*.

KKY: Everybody said Minnesota would be cold, Josh. I was prepared for a cold Minnesota. But I remember walking out of the airport and feeling the blast of humidity and heat hitting me. My cousin and his wife who came to pick us up, they didn't have air conditioning in their car. They had all the windows open, and I remember all the lights along the highway. And because I came to America with a fear of the dark inside of me, I thought, "Oh my god, this is it. Follow the lights and I'll never get lost in America." And I thought, "Oh, this is so delicious." Here I am, having my first feast of American wind, and nobody knows it. I'm swallowing wind like crazy, like nobody knows, and nobody cares, but I'm going to remember this forever.

JD: That feast of wind gave way to harsher truths once Kalia went to school. In Thailand, everyone she knew was poor. But in America, she noticed that all the refugee kids lined up for free lunch and wore clothes from church basements that didn't fit right. She told me about one day when those realities came crashing in on her.

KKY: Everything I think in America comes down to one single moment. I'm in the lunchroom. We're having french toast sticks, and we're dipping sausage patties into syrup. It is incredible, okay? Since you are a kid from the refugee camps, it's an incredibly sweet lunch. And I'm eating and eating and relishing it. And then I notice the whole table quieting around me. And I notice all the other kids looking at me. And I notice that some of the other kids start mimicking me, the way I'm eating. And halfway through, because I'm not a dumb kid, I see they're making fun of me because I'm eating with my mouth open. All of my life, I've only always been taught to eat. And all of a sudden I knew that the thing I had been taught was not enough for America. I start crying. All these tears start falling, and I can't control them. I'm super stubborn, and I'm not gonna stop. I'm not gonna stop eating and do what they want me to do. Because they think it's good for me. Because whether they mean to or not, they're saying that the way I have been taught to eat is not good enough for this country. I'm crying, I'm stuffing myself, and I start choking. And the adults intervene, and I'm in the principal's office with the interpreter, and they're asking me what's wrong. And I tell the interpreter, this small man who was like my dad's age, and he was as scared to be in there as I was, and I tell him what's wrong. He looks at me,

and he tells me, “You’re going to have to learn how to do things like other people here in order to survive.” Oh, and I remember in my heart, the birth of defiance. I’m never gonna do everything the way that other people want me to do them, simply to survive. I would do something more than survive here in America. And not always on their terms.

JD: One story from your first book is how in those early days of the McDonough housing project, your family would sometimes gather at your uncle’s house to watch professional wrestling. I’m curious how that came about and maybe what you learned about American culture from watching Hulk Hogan and Rick Flair.

KKY: Yes. The WWF matches. When we came to America, our cousins before us – that was what they were excited about. This was the late ‘80s. Hulk Hogan was supreme and Rick Flair was the villain. The good and the bad battling it out before a cheering audience. The bad guys would cheat and cheat and cheat, and sometimes the refs would pretend that they hadn’t seen it. Or they would look at it and openly support it. Oh, we felt those injustices so keenly. I think my family was so into wrestling because for us, it mirrored so much of what was going on in our lives and the very real worlds that we were living in. Where life was hardly ever fair, and sometimes justice looked at it, and justice looked away. Somehow we still had to win. Somehow we still had to believe, believe in the goodness. For years and years my family would gather and cheer on the good guys, and we’d be so sad and despondent when things didn’t go well, when there was the hurting and the cheating and the lying going on. But we cheered them on anyway because we felt it was the least we could do. Cheer on the good guys. For years, that was our main entertainment. The basis of so many family gatherings.

JD: Okay. Backing up to primary school there for a bit – you really struggled to speak English, not that you didn’t understand it – you read perfectly well. You were, even at a young age, gifted as a writer. Why was speaking English so hard for you in your early years, and what was different about reading and writing versus the spoken word for you at that age?

KKY: In the beginning, it was just fine. I was a kid, and learning. I was in school for the first time so I was already hungry to learn, and I understood the importance of the things that I was learning. I was doing well. But one day, my mom and I, it was a year after we came to America, we went to K-Mart to look for light bulbs because one day the light bulbs in the bathroom started flickering. My mother, who was then only 25, 26, went up to the desk because we didn’t know where the light bulbs were. She asked the clerk, “Where are the things that make the world shiny?” She kept on pointing up to the ceiling. My mother, of course, spoke with a thick accent, and the clerk started tapping on the counter. The faster the tapping, the harder it became for my mother to speak. My mother is brave and my mother is courageous, so she pushes through. My father had said when the bombs are falling in Laos, because Laos is the most heavily bombed nation in the world, only the world didn’t know it. For 8 years, American bombs rained on Laos every seven minutes, twenty-four hours a day. My mom and dad both grew up in the most heavily bombed province of all. My dad would say the bombs would fall, and my mom would walk her chin parallel to the ground when old men and women were scrambling to find safety. My incredibly brave mother asked where the things were that made the world shiny. The clerk

walks away. We think the clerk is going to come back, so we're waiting. I knew the word for light bulb, but I was so young. I didn't have the courage to say. So I waited with my mother, thinking she had done a good enough job. Fifteen minutes ticked away on the clock, and she didn't come back. The clerk didn't come back. My mom, I looked at her, and her head was bowed. I could tell she was ashamed, in front of me. I decided I was no longer going to speak this language. This language that did not need my mother or my father. That didn't need me either. That if the world we lived in no longer needed to hear what my mom and dad had to say, then it no longer would hear anything I had to say. The next day, I stopped talking. At first, it was a great revolution. Somewhere along the way, I realized the revolution was against me. I caved underneath all that pressure. I became a selective mute in my files all the way through until I became a professional writer. In college, I started whispering. In graduate school, it was a little over a whisper every time I had to speak. But it wasn't until April 10, 2008 when *The Latehomecomer* came out when I actually spoke to be heard for the very first time in a great long time.

JD: One teacher in high school seemed to see your promise as a writer. I wonder if you might tell us about Mrs. Gallentin and your essay on *Romeo and Juliet*?

KKY: Mrs. Gallentin had a really red face. Mrs. Gallentin either laughed or she yelled. My older sister had Mrs. Gallentin and she says, "Mrs. Gallentin doesn't like high school girls with a lot of eyeliners. I had on too much eyeliner. You shouldn't wear any." And so that's how I went into Mrs. Gallentin's class. Mrs. Gallentin one day had us read *Romeo and Juliet*, and she had us answer a question: "Is *Romeo and Juliet* the story of love or lust?" I was a freshman in high school. I had no experience with love. I couldn't think of anything to write, so I pondered for hours. In the early morning hours, I wrote an essay about my mom and my dad. I wrote and I'll read from the book. I said, "It took me all night long to think about the essay. I had no personal experience with love or lust. Some of my friends said they were in love, but I was not convinced. The phone conversations they had with their boyfriends were mostly just listening to each other's breathing. After many false beginnings, I wrote about what mattered to me. I wrote about the love I felt I knew. Love was the reason my mother and father stick together in a hard life when they might each have had an easier one apart. Love is the reason you choose a life with someone, that you don't turn back although your heart cries and sometimes your children see you cry and you wish out loud that things were easier. Love is getting up each day and fighting the same fight only to sleep at night in the same bed, beside the same person. Because long ago, when you were younger and did not see so clearly, you had chosen them. I wrote that I would never know if Romeo and Juliet really loved, because they never had the chance. I asserted that love only happened in life, not in literature, because life is more complex. As soon as I wrote the essay, I started worrying about it. What if she didn't like it? What if she didn't agree? What if I had it all wrong? That was my first understanding of how writing worked. How I mattered to the writer, personally. That day, I turned in the essay, and later Mrs. Gallentin caught me in the hall, and she said I had a talent for literature. And of course, I didn't know what she meant, but it made me happy to hear her say this. Mrs. Gallentin said I would do well in



college because college is all about good reading and good writing. And I think that gave me a kind of confidence for the next chapters of my life.”

JD: When Kalia was fifteen, her family bought their first home in America. The house reminded her of Laura and Mary Ingalls, of the Little House in the Big Woods. And it would be her home until she left for college. But just as Kalia’s feast of wind during her first night in America gave way to bullying at school, her romance with the new house didn’t last long. No matter how much they scrubbed, they couldn’t rid the walls of mold. At the same time, Kalia was struggling to reconcile two parts of herself. The Hmong heart that grieved for her people and the American heart that was “lonely for the outside world.” The moldy walls closed in. She felt like she was pushing against her own skin. And she fell gravely ill. Here, Kalia reads a portion of this scene from *The Latehomecomer*.

KKY: My body was surely whole. The doctor said so. What was broken in me was something doctors couldn’t see. I worried. The more I thought about it, the sicker I became. How does one change what one is becoming? One day I lay on the sofa, another day absent from school. My grades were slowly dropping. Looking up at the wall, grandma had gone shopping. My mother was in the kitchen preparing rice porridge for me. I heard the key in the lock. I heard them come in. I turned and I saw that my grandma had a gift for me. There was something glittery in her hands. Her uneven gait came closer. She presented a thin silver bracelet made of elephants. Bigger mother ones and smaller baby ones. It was the most beautiful gift anyone had ever got me. She told me that the man at the store had taken off a few of the elephants to fit my small wrist. Grandma put the bracelet on me and said, “Elephants protect their babies by forming a circle around them. You are sick and I cannot protect you. I bought this for you so that the power of the elephants will protect you and make you well again.” I wore the bracelet every day. I started to eat a little bit of food and took the medicines the doctors gave me. I wore the bracelet and grew stronger in its hold.”

JD: Another figure like that in your life, a protector, was your older sister Dawb?

KKY: Yes.

JD: And when you followed her to college, not to the same college, but she went to college and you always had those aspirations, she warned you about that experience by reading a book to you. What was she trying to warn you about?

KKY: The night before I left for college, my sister read me Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*. She read me this excerpt about how education was the distance that grew between his mom and dad, even as he was searching for a place where they might all be together in this new world with the demands of an American system. Oh, I cried when she read that piece. I went to college afraid that I would forget. In the beginning, everything I learned, I would try to find the words in Hmong. I remember trying to talk about hegemony and paradigms of power with my dad, trying to translate these words into Hmong and knowing that I was failing in the process. I never wanted school to be this thing that came in between me and the people that loved me most. But I knew that I was human, and I knew that I was away from home more often

than not. It was very fraught for me. I went to Carleton College, a school where all of a sudden I became one of three Hmong girls. In my high school, 51% of us were Hmong. All of a sudden, nobody knew what Hmong was in a very different way.

JD: I'm just wondering how fair it is to describe your journey through college and graduate school and then back to Minnesota as another kind of immigration. Is that how you experienced it?

KKY: Yes. An immigration. This time in the true sense of the word, I was an immigrant. I was going to college and graduate school in the hopes of finding more possibilities. I wasn't a refugee, which I had been as a child in the camps of Thailand. So yes, I think that is very fair. I went to Carleton and Columbia, New York as an immigrant to these places. First, a small white town along a beautiful river. The second, one of America's biggest cities. I'd only seen New York on TV. *Law and Order* and other crime shows. Yet there I was, trying to become a writer in this place where my mom and dad couldn't afford to drop me off. My older sister, my cousin, and one of my sister's friends dropped me off at Columbia. I remember taking this Toshiba laptop that my mom and dad had purchased for me when I had first gone into college. I still have such a clear memory of mom and dad giving me that laptop right before they left with the kids all in that old Honda. They handed me this cardboard box, and when I opened it, there was a receipt inside. The laptop cost them \$2,100. In their whole bank account, and I know because I had access to it, only had \$2,300. They cleared out the entirety of their account to buy me this computer, this laptop, so I could go to college. That was the same laptop I wrote my first book on, *The Latehomecomer*. And then they bought me this printer, and by the time I took it to graduate school, that printer had stopped running in black ink entirely. So, for two years at Columbia University for a workshop, every time I printed out something, it was in blue or red. I was an immigrant, and I went with everything I had to give.

JD: In a city of immigrants.

KKY: Yes. Where I became the only Hmong person I knew looking into the mirror every morning and every night.

JD: What were some of the challenges you faced in trying to come home to your family in Minnesota after those years at Columbia and in New York City?

KKY: I remember very clearly one time I was coming home from New York, and I had gotten myself a new jacket. A fancy jacket. I had some fellowship money left over, so I bought myself a nice white jacket. My dad came to pick me up at the airport, and he was so proud of me. He missed me so much. Then he took me immediately to the butchering house so we could get a hog to celebrate my homecoming. It had been a while since I had been to the butchering house. In this white jacket, I'm standing there with my father and the hogs are crying like crazy because it's a butchering house. I thought, both of these things are my world.

JD: Kalia launched her writing career with *The Latehomecomer*, winner of the 2009 Minnesota Book Award in Nonfiction. She never imagined that her book would introduce her to the man she'd marry one day. A white guy from Milwaukee.

KKY: I published my first book, and I was invited to give a talk at a conference on Critical Pedagogy: Theater of the Oppressed conference. My husband was in the audience that day. There's a video of our first meeting. He came to that conference because his teachers, two of his professors wanted him to come to hear this young, up-and-rising Hmong American writer. He himself hadn't had that much experience with Hmong American folk. He was doing a PhD in curriculum and instruction, culture and teaching. He came to that talk. I didn't meet him that day, but he met me that day. Later on, he emailed me, and I'm a nice person, so I said, "If I can be of help in your work, let me know." He goes, "Would you like to meet for coffee?" I don't drink coffee, so I said, "How about lunch?" And we met for lunch. I had put myself back in that seat on that day, a very very hot June day, when he biked all the way from Minneapolis to St. Paul to meet me for lunch at this Hmong restaurant. I had no idea that I would marry him. I had no idea that my first serious boyfriend would be this guy in a pink shirt soaked through with sweat. He was vegetarian. Not a lot of Hmong folk are vegetarians. There's a growing population, but not then. He was a vegetarian, and I thought, "Oh, he's so odd." He told me he graduated from Penn, but he didn't like UPenn, and I thought, "All that privilege, and yet he wants to tell me he didn't like it." Yet here I am, three kids later, a mortgage, and two cars. Life is unpredictable. The impossible happens every single day.

JD: That's the simple answer to the question of how you met him, but you have a more powerful answer to that question in your forthcoming book, *Somewhere in the Unknown World*. I wonder if we might hear that. This is the version you tell your children?

KKY: Yes. This is the very end of the book, *Somewhere in the Unknown World*, which is a collective memoir of 14 different refugee stories, not just the Hmong story. It is the most ambitious of all of my projects, but this is where the book comes to. "Your father and I met because in the late 1950s, long before either of us were born, America entered a war in southeast Asia, in Laos. A country you know as the birthplace of your Tais Tais and Yawm Txiv. During the war, the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States recruited Hmong people to fight and to die on America's behalf. The Hmong were farmers in the high mountains, trained to tend to the earth. We could not win the fight against communist soldiers. When Laos fell to communist rule, the Americans left the war with the highest ranking Hmong military families. They abandoned hundreds of thousands surviving Hmong to an incoming government that saw them as enemies. My family was one of the families left behind to face genocide. To escape death, your Tais Tais and Yawm Txiv fled across the Mekong River into the refugee camps of Thailand. I was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. I was born with no memories of the war but stories of how we came to this place we couldn't leave, waiting for food to come to us in huge trucks. Your father and I met because when the Americans left behind what would be called the Indo-China Wars, they left millions of refugees in its aftermath. In south Vietnam alone, there were six million refugees all fleeing persecution. Most Americans did not know who the Hmong were or that Americans had been involved in a war in Laos at all. President Gerald Ford signed

into law the Indo-China Migration and Refugee Act of 1975. This act allowed for the resettlement of refugees from south Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1987, my family was able to register as refugees of America's secret war in Laos through the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees and apply for resettlement in America. I was six years old. Your father was eight at the time, living a life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his mother and father, friends and neighbors. Neither of us could have imagined that our futures would be shared. Your father and I met because against tremendous odds, some Hmong people will survive that war. Against incredible odds, some of us resettled to America. I, a refugee child, became a Hmong American girl who became a writer to tell the right story of a wondrous old woman. That writer was invited to give a talk at a conference. Your father, a young scholar, had been in that room, and he heard me and wanted to hear more from me. Because your father and I met, you three are possible. Shengyeng first, with her eyes the color of seaglass. I held her little feet tight in my hand and felt the beat of her heart, and my understanding, strength, and fragility shifted forever. Thayeng and Yuepheng came together next. One possibility dividing into two. Two little boys with matching eyes and noses and mouths. Two little ones who came into the world with big voices, although their bodies were small. Their cries were like sirens across the quiet landscape of my being, and I ran from one to the other, pushed beyond the limits of what I believed my body could deliver. Before your father and I met, all three of you were unimaginable."

JD: Kalia told me that early in her career she was still learning how to stand strong beneath the pressures of her own story and the Hmong story. I asked what pushed her to share other refugee stories in her new book. She explained that *Somewhere in the Unknown World* began with a promise. A promise she made to one of her uncles near the end of his life.

KKY: He told me this incredible story about the night of the crossing of the Mekong River. He and his wife were approached by a little girl who was carrying another little girl on her back, her sister who was about three or four but too weak to walk. The older girl presented a pot with a little bit of rice in it, and said, "I'll give you everything I own. Our parents died in the jungles of Laos three weeks ago, but just carry my sister across with you. You don't have to take me." My uncle looked at the raft and there was no room for two. He couldn't just take one. He told the girl, "I'm going to take my family across and then I'm going to come back for you and your sister." The girl went to her knees with the bit of rice in her pot, held up toward the light of the moon. My uncle got on this tiny little raft and pushed him and his children off, with every intention they would return. He said they were in the middle of the river when he could hear the gunfire. When he looked toward the shore he saw them still kneeling there, but he knew he wouldn't return. He said he prayed to the ancestors and to the spirit of the land and the river that a better man would come along. But he didn't know if that happened. In Thailand, his wife gave birth to a little girl, so he was raising a pair of sisters. But all he saw, all he continued to see in his sleep were the two waiting by the side of the river. He says the older he gets, the closer they are. He's gonna meet them soon. He wanted me to write this book, this one story. I did. I sent it to my editor and asked what we can do with this. She said, "Are there more?" And of course I knew there were more. I sat out to collect them with the hope that the book itself would first and

foremost be a service to the individuals and to their communities. There are people from my everyday life I talked to that I knew I would write their stories regardless. I've heard too many refugee folks share their stories and never have anything come forth from it. I wrote about the secretary at the pediatrician clinic where my children go. Another parent of kids at my children's school, and a Lyft driver in these cities. College students, these are the people in my life. People who I respect. People who make my heart stronger every time it grows afraid in the world we live in. Knowing that these people share these cities make me so much braver for everything that will come. I'm hoping that the book can do the same for others. That beyond that, it will always be of service to the men and women in the book itself.

JD: Kalia's third children's book, *The Most Beautiful Thing*, was just released by Carolrhoda Books. I asked her to read from the opening pages.

KKY: "The Most Beautiful Thing. Dedication: For the everlasting beauty of a grandmother's smile. [Grandma's name], the grandma in this book, and [name], the grandma I never got to meet but whose love shines through my mother. My grandmother is so old, no one knows how old she is. Not me. Not my big sister. Not our older cousin. My father waits patiently while we try to guess her age. He is my grandma's ninth and youngest child. Even he doesn't know how old she is. We know grandma was born on the other side of the world, across a wide ocean. My grandma came from a time and a place where creatures lurked in the jungles, waiting to chase children. She told us she once looked into the gleaming eyes of a tiger and felt its hot breath on her face. By the time I was born, my grandmother already had an old woman's face. Her skin was soft but dry like paper, and her mouth was a single tooth. Grandma said, "It is the only thing standing strong in my mouth. This final tooth my mother and father gave me." I asked to see a picture of her parents. She said, "They lived in a time long before the Hmong learned of things such as photographs." She pointed to her heart. "The only picture I have of them is here."

JD: Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana. And my heartfelt thanks to Kalia for sharing her story. To order Kalia's latest books, go to [kaokaliayang.com](http://kaokaliayang.com). That's K-A-O K-A-L-I-A Y-A-N-G DOT COM. *The Most Beautiful Thing* is available now wherever books are sold. *Somewhere in the Unknown World* is available for preorder and will be released in early November of this year. Next time, Brian talks with Pavel Polanco Safadit, a Latin jazz artist based in Indiana. Hear how his teenage passion for classical piano turned into a ticket to leave his native Dominican Republic for the U.S., and how he's rediscovered his roots in Richmond, Indiana, a rural Midwestern town with a surprising place in the history of boundary crossing jazz. You can find transcripts and show notes on our website, [midamericana.com](http://midamericana.com), which includes original illustrations for each episode by Mathew Kelly. If you like our show, please recommend us to your friends and rate and review us wherever you listen. Kao Kalia Yang's story was produced by me and Brian Campbell, and edited by Brad Linder. Music for this episode was written and produced by Adam Bruce. Mid-Americana is supported by Central College, Humanities Iowa, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thoughts aired on our show do not necessarily represent the views of Central College, Humanities Iowa, or the National Endowment for the Humanities.