

**Navigating the In Betweenness: A First-Generation Mexican American Soul,
Unfolding the Tale**

By Itzel Arias

I am a proud first Mexican American daughter,
Embodying the fusion of my rich Mexican heritage,
A heritage with a burgeoning American identity,
I am also a first-generation, full of untold challenges of navigating a system.
A system that is so unfamiliar and daunting to me.

A first-generation Mexican American tale unfolds

El comienzo de una gran historia.

Una historia que no solo me incluye a mí, sino también a mis padres, quienes
sacrificaron todo para que yo pudiera perseguir mis sueños.

Una narrativa que se despliega con el peso de las expectativas, la lucha implacable por
alcanzar los sueños, la búsqueda de identidad,
y una resiliencia marcada por el orgullo de la herencia mexicana.

In the journal of my life, se desarrolla una historia,
a narrative of my discovery and voice as a first-generation soul,
a soul that navigates the complexities of forging an identity infused by multiple
intersections.

Reflecting on my academic journey, the weight of first-generation guilt and obligation, of
carrying my parents' dreams and aspirations, is ever-present. While being a
first-generation student is an honor, beneath the surface is fear and exhaustion. With
each step forward, I must be mindful of the sacrifices made by those who came before
me, their hopes intertwined with mine, shaping the narrative of my existence.

I am constantly reminded of my parents' migration from Michoacán to the "land of the
free" about 28 years ago. They arrived with nothing but a suitcase full of memories,
aware of the life they left behind, focusing on their present, and clinging to dreams of a
better tomorrow.



Family photo of the author's mother (back) and her siblings.
Image courtesy of the author

My mother came with dreams of pursuing education, working in an office, and exploring the beauties of her new country. However, at just 16, she was forced to leave behind her childhood desires to take up the mantle of responsibility, tending to her younger siblings and helping care for her family. I can still feel the weight of my mother's tears, her childhood dreams fading into the harsh reality of life's limitations. "Sueños de niña," she softly sighs in the shadow of her weary eyes.



Family photo of the author's father. Image courtesy of the author.

My father made his way to the United States at the age of 18, all by himself, leaving his family behind, never to see his parents again. Beginning at the age of 14, el trabajo de campo was his reality; it was all he knew. His dream, like my mother's, was modest. He wanted a job that didn't entail hours under the unforgiving sun, one that would provide some financial stability. Years later, he continues laboring as a strawberry picker en el campo; the absence of opportunities for immigrant workers like him weighs heavily on his shoulders. My father wears his exhaustion like work clothes, and every day continues to toil under an indifferent sun. "Deseo haber tenido," me dice mi papi, con su carita triste y quemada por el sol.

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Sueños ignorados que se desvanecen como la luz al final del día. Pero en cada amanecer, surge un nuevo mañana, una nueva luz. Mis hermanos y yo somos la esperanza en el horizonte.

In the midst of their struggle, my parents instilled in me the value of education.

For me, higher education was not just an option—it was a necessity, a pathway to opportunities my parents never had, and that they want me to have. This responsibility serves as a constant reminder of the multigenerational journey I am part of, fueling my determination to forge a path that honors their legacy while carving out my own historia.

Their trauma and suffering, etched into the fabric of our family history,
Those are the threads that weave together the tapestry of my existence.
I am the beginning of a great story, and the culmination of their sacrifices and struggles.

Amidst the weight of their unfulfilled dreams, I find myself a stranger to my own identity,
And to the vast expanse of my existence. Navigating realms where tradition and culture
intertwine, atrapada entre los ecos de los sueños paternos y los susurros silenciosos de
mis propias aspiraciones.

I tread the delicate path of a first-generation student.

How do I confront the realities of being a struggling student in a system that does not
always cater to my needs? How do I explain my experiences to those who have never
walked in my shoes?

For me, the “other” refers to those who have not faced the same hardships and who
come from backgrounds where higher education is given and support systems are
robust. Their lives are often marked by privilege and familiarity with academic
environments, making it difficult for them to comprehend the weight of my journey. Their
different experiences create a chasm of understanding and a lack of empathy for the
unique challenges I face. While I navigate through the world that supports and uplifts
them, I grapple with a sense of isolation and the pressure of expectations that are
foreign to others.

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My reality is different, shaped by the pursuit of aspirations that were once only distant hopes of my parents. While I strive to honor their sacrifices and achieve the goals they envisioned, I coexist with the realities of others who have never known such burdens. Their lives are marked by privilege and ease, free from the weight of unmet expectations and cultural dissonance. My daily existence is a stark contrast to theirs, making my journey one of constant negotiation and adaptation. In this duality, I navigate a path that bridges the dreams of my parents with the realities of a world that often feels like a dream apart.

In the dance of identities, I unfold, embracing the complexities boldly. I am surrounded by possibilities, fueled by multiple aspirations that strive to turn into reality. For every dream my mother never fulfilled, por cada sueño que nunca se hizo realidad para ella, I carry a dozen of my own.



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Image of the author's mother as a young woman. Photo courtesy of the author.

My mother, a woman from Michoacán, faced barriers that kept her dreams at bay. Growing up in a patriarchal society, her role was often confined to traditional expectations, limiting her access to education and opportunities. The harsh realities of hardship left her with little room for personal aspirations. Even upon migrating to the United States, the promise of a better life came with its own set of challenges. As an immigrant woman, she encountered language barriers, racial discrimination, and a restless struggle to adapt to a new culture. The complexities of her dual identity, straddling two worlds, left her dreams deferred but not forgotten.

These layers of adversity that my mother faced are woven into the fabric of my identity. I am acutely aware of the privileges I now hold, the opportunities to pursue higher education, and the freedom to dream beyond mere survival. For every barrier that held my parents back, I feel a profound responsibility to push forward, navigating my own path with a blend of reverence and resolve. I am determined to turn aspirations into reality amidst the complexities of my inherited and chosen identities. *For I am from a different time, yo persigo mis sueños, los hago realidad, a testament to the resilience of a new generation.*



Photo of the author in her college graduation gown. Photo courtesy of the author.

In this journey of self-discovery, I was not raised to be a soft woman. Strength courses through my veins. In the face of adversity, I stand firm, unwavering, unbroken. I am the possibility, a light of hope and strength, a possibility who moves and moves others. Llevo el legado de los sueños silenciosos de mi madre y el trabajo inquebrante de mi padre. I tread boldly where they could not, impulsado por sus sacrificios y mi propio espíritu inquebrantable.

I am a proud first-generation Mexican American daughter, a fusion of my heritage and my burgeoning American identity.

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I embrace the intersections of my being – first-generation child of immigrants *and queer*.

In my queerness, I find another layer of complexity. It is a facet of my identity that challenges my cultural norms and defies expectations, a thread woven into the fabric of my life. Being queer in a traditional Mexican family presents unique challenges. It means facing the fear of disappointment, rejection, or misunderstanding from those closest to me. Yet, it also means finding strength in my authenticity, learning to stand firm in my truth, despite societal pressures.

My queerness is a testament to the diversity within me, a celebration of love and authenticity. Far from being a hindrance, it has shown me that it is possible to honor all parts of myself. It propels me forward, encouraging me to create spaces where all aspects of my identity can thrive.

To use my voice, wide and strong like the sea, to advocate, to challenge, to dream. I embody the strength of heritage and defiance against norms. As I navigate these realms, I am more than my struggles, more than the first generation, the queer, the immigrant's child. My existence is a bridge between worlds, a testament to the power of resilience and the beauty of embracing one's full self.

Al honrar mi pasado, construyo un futuro en el que los sueños no sólo se persiguen, sino que se hacen realidad.

As I navigate these realms, I move with purpose and pride, carving out a path not just for myself, but for others who will follow.

En cada paso, honro a las y los guerreros que me precedieron y su legado se mantiene en mi determinación inquebrantable.

My journey as a first-generation Mexican American daughter navigating the complexities of identity has been one of resilience, strength, and self-discovery. Through the intersections of my experiences—as a first-generation student, a child of immigrant parents, a queer individual- I have learned to embrace the richness of my heritage and the power of my own identity and voice. As I continue on this path, I carry with me

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lessons of the past and the hopes for a future where all aspects of my identity are celebrated and embraced. My story is not just my own; it is a mosaic of the struggles, a reflection of the collective journey of resilience that defines the immigrant experience.

It is a testament to the enduring strength of embracing one's true self. Through it all, I remain steadfast in my commitment to honor the past, navigate the present, and pave the way ahead for the future where every individual can thrive regardless of the intersections of their identity.