“Where Do We Belong?”: A Brief Collection of Immigrant Daughter Musings

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“Where Do We Belong?”

A Brief Collection of Immigrant Daughter Musings

Introduction

My friend groups have always been ethnically and racially diverse. Once, while pouring over pictures from my quinceañera celebration, my mom laughed and pointed out that my friend group could be on the cover of a magazine that celebrates diversity. I think that children of immigrants understand each other on an instinctive level, so we flock to each other. Regardless of mom’s and dad’s countries, we feel this shared sense of displacement. We’re too different from “typical American” kids, and we’re “too American” when we go back to our parents’ countries. For most of my life, this feeling went unsaid.

After realizing that the majority of my close friends are daughters of immigrants, I wanted to know—no, I needed to know—if they felt the same pressures and longing I did. I interviewed these five daughters of immigrants separately (some of them don’t know each other), and I was simultaneously surprised and unsurprised at how similar our feelings are, despite our differ-
ent ethnicities, religions, races, sexualities, and socioeconomic classes. From feeling like we’re missing a part of our identity to wanting to succeed to justify our immigrant parents’ sacrifices, there’s mutual experiences among us. As I searched for the place where I belonged, I came to realize that our friendships have created a space of belonging, and now I’ve found that there are things that I can fully claim. I illustrated all six of us in our parents’ traditional cultural clothing, and it was an extremely validating experience. I hope this project showcases our true feelings: our hopes, dreams, fears, and sisterhood.

...I’ve always found it funny when white people explain their cultural heritage in terms of several small percentages. It’s so casual and detached.

What am I supposed to do with the information that you’re 16 percent Irish?

Do you speak 16 percent of the Irish language? Do you eat Irish food 16 percent of the time?

And why are you so surprised I am 50 percent Honduran and 50 percent Guatemalan? That I’m 100 percent Central American?

If I had more percentages, would that make me more of a proper ingredient in the US melting pot?

“Melting pot” is such an interesting choice of words. It’s such a simplified and vague phrase.

In order to assimilate, I have to lose my personal flavor. I have to give up parts of myself, no? Boil out all individuality till it’s bland and limp.

It doesn’t sound appetizing.

**Assimilation**

*María:* My parents told me that being a part of the U.S. culture is following the things that white people do, basically following their example. I had to break a lot of those habits and learn to stay true to myself.

*Ariana:* I feel like since my parents have been in the U.S. for such a long time that they’ve even adopted several components of the US culture. I love my Latina roots and continue to speak Spanish with my parents and grandma along with listening to Spanish music, but I also have parts of me that fits more within the U.S. culture. I feel like my mission really solidified my love and connection with my Latina roots and I don’t want to lose those aspects.

*Ysabelle:* My parents brought me up with the intention of helping me assimilate to U.S. culture, so I feel very disconnected from Filipino culture. I don’t wanna say that my Filipino culture has no impact on my decision-making pro-
cess at all, but I’m really unable to differentiate between what is inherently Filipino culture vs what is inherently U.S. culture. A lot of Filipino culture and media aspires to be like that of the U.S. Like, I recently found out Filipino teleseryes (soap operas) now have English subtitles, which didn’t used to be there before. A lot of the “rich” characters in Filipino movies/soap operas speak English rather than Tagalog. Most people in the Philippines consider getting to the U.S. their main goal.

I distinctly remember my parents telling me about how they thought the Philippine government was stupid for choosing their independence over becoming a U.S. territory. Many people in the Philippines—like my parents—are taught to be successful in school so they can come to the U.S. and make a better life for themselves and their families back home. Because of this, my parents generally hold the U.S. in a very positive light. As a result, for the majority of my childhood, I thought of the U.S. and U.S. culture as the standard. As a child, I really aspired to whiteness. I wanted things like lighter skin, lighter hair, lighter eyes to look more like a traditional “American” woman. However, as I’ve gotten older and have been able to learn more things about my home country and about this country, I’ve found value in reclaiming the culture that I feel very disconnected from.

**Cas:** We were naive when we moved here. We had no idea there was anything negative about the U.S. I didn’t know that it mattered that I was from a different country. It made me want to be American more, being the only brown girl at school. I felt this overwhelming need to be just like them. I was so small compared to how big this country is.

**Trang:** I kind of felt this expectation to be a perfect blend of Vietnamese and American.

There were many times growing up where I wanted to fully assimilate. I wanted to change my name and eat meals like my peers. My parents’ own rejection of Vietnam because of the trauma caused by living through a war kind of turned me off of my own culture, and yet here I’m still seen as a foreigner, regardless of the fact that I was born here in the U.S.

...  
Being mediocre is not a luxury I can afford.
Every time I have an exam in front of me, I knit my hands together and beg God to help me score well.
It’s about proving I’ve learned the material, sure, but it’s also so much more than that.
It’s a plea that it will help me qualify for financial aid and scholarships.
It’s evidence that my parents’ sacrifice hasn’t gone to waste.
It’s a reminder that every single decision my ancestors have taken has led to this very moment.

The multiple choice options swimming before my eyes remind me that, in reality, I have two options: failure or success. The good grades and the dean’s list and the praise from professors are fleeting comforts. They’re little nudges to keep me on track, but I try not to wallow in the little victories. I can’t afford to lose focus and fail. And I don’t have the luxury of being mediocre.

The paradox of being the daughter of immigrants is finding the better life your parents fought for yet sacrificing your individual life looking for it. When I watch the Saturday Night Live sketch1 about immigrant parents’ exasperation over their artistic son choosing writing over medicine, it’s all too familiar. The laughs that escape me are half sincere and half sardonic.

We don’t have the luxury of being mediocre, but we don’t really have the luxury of being ourselves, either.

Our parents sacrifice their dreams to provide for us, and we sacrifice a lot of our dreams to repay them. I pray that the American Dream will all make it worth it.

The American Dream

_María:_ My parents instilled a lot of fear in me about the U.S. while at the same time encouraging me to love the U.S. and take advantage of all its opportunities. I was constantly filled with fear about cops because of “la migra”

1. “Proud Parents,” Season 46 Episode 16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVudRberrSc&list=PLJa52NxTTEWNde5sHmK0uITlzNx7apaS&index=4
so it was hard for me to want to take advantage of these opportunities when I was taught to also be scared. I was a legal citizen, but my family wasn’t, so I was constantly on edge.

I don’t want to have to always sacrifice my dreams out of fear or out of obligation; I don’t want to feel pressured to take every single opportunity that comes along. I know my mom sometimes regrets not taking advantage of the opportunities she had in Peru, though. That’s probably why I feel the need to take advantage of every opportunity I get. It’s a weird dilemma I find myself in sometimes.

The American dream molds my path because it serves as a constant reminder to make something of myself. My parents came to the United States to help me have a better life than they did. It’s honestly something that motivates me to keep going especially when I want to give up.

_Ysabelle_: I believe the American Dream really molded my parents’ path more than anything. I think the American Dream does apply to me because I am the living product of all my parents’ hard work. I feel as though my family’s “American Dream” story isn’t as profound as others because my parents were only really able to come to America because they were already successful in their home countries. Everything that I have today was made possible because of my parents and their success in achieving the American Dream.

_Cas_: There’s nothing about the American Dream that has propelled me into the future. These people don’t like me. If anything, it’s holding me back. And yet I’ve been given opportunities here that I wouldn’t have in other places.

_Trang_: The United States allows me the chance to challenge things that still might not be considered acceptable for me to do. It’s the American Dream for me in the sense that the American Dream gives all foreigners and people who are different to have opportunities they wouldn’t have anywhere else.

_Ariana_: My grandma didn’t go to school after she was twelve. My parents didn’t have much when they came to the US. I am blessed with their support along with financial opportunities that can make my goals more realistic. The American Dream gives me the ability to obtain opportunities that my parents and grandparents never had.

... My mother is what I like to call “accidentally progressive.” She used to scrunch her nose in disgust at the mere mention of the word “feminist,” but then she’d give me in-depth talks about how my individual worth is not and cannot be tied to a man’s perception of me. She taught me that education

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2. She’s come around, but the way she gingerly calls herself a feminist makes me laugh a little bit. Ma, stop hesitating! This isn’t 1980s Honduras!
is power. She taught me how to be financially independent, how to verbally stand my ground, how to know the scope of my divine worth as a heavenly queen and priestess in progress, and how to do a plethora of other things I could fit into a Tolkien sized book. She’s worked for most of my life, often more than one job at a time, and sometimes up to three. Dad has never expected my mom to solely take care of the house or me. He’s always been present in my life and has never shied from being emotional with us. The respect my mother and father have for each other—I think it’s celestial, or at least close to it. My parents have such an incredible balance that, frankly, I don’t see in a lot of North or Latin American homes. No couple is perfect and I know my parents are flawed, but they’ve set such a high standard for me both as an individual woman and as a future partner in a marriage. It’s a standard that defies Latino machismo and toxic American masculinity.3

Womanhood

María: My parents’ Peruvian culture teaches me that a woman is important only because she takes care of her kids and husband. I find it super frustrating. It’s been something my mom has had to outgrow because she’s finally realized her own individual worth. Peruvian culture is super machista. It’s always “What does Dad need? Has the food been cooked? What do the kids all need?” Which, don’t get me wrong, family is so important, but I also think a woman should focus on herself.

The career and dream that I hope to live one day, in Peru, is only for men. I’m not about that. I want to be given the same opportunities as a woman. While obviously there’s still a gap here in the United States, there’s a bigger one in Peru.

Now, living in the U.S., I also want a chance to have a career and work to provide for my family while at the same time being able to raise my children. I don’t think you should have to choose between having one or the other.

Cas: In traditional Indian culture, women are held responsible for the stability of the family. Women take care of the household. There is an emphasis on motherhood and providing as good of a life as you can for your family. Men can do whatever they want, so women have to pick up the slack and be the backbone of the family.

Trang: I think, like most women, I grew up being taught how a woman “should” be: lady-like, quiet, etc. While my parents never outwardly tried to

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3. I’m aware that toxic masculinity is not strictly a U.S. problem, but it’s certainly something that has been encouraged by U.S. consumerism and media, no?
silence my boldness, I think there were some misogynistic underlying tones about the conversations that we should be having.

_Ariana_: Women are the heart of the home and are a big influence within their family. The U.S. teaches me that womanhood is about reaching your dreams and breaking past barriers that were once there. I feel like there is a larger push towards the feminist movement within my current country.

...  

This country doesn’t have a name. It has a description. The people who named this land were silenced, and their names for their land were discarded as thoughtlessly as one would discard a stray post-it note. So if this country doesn’t have a name, what are her people called?

Americans?
Aren’t Canadians Americans? And Argentines? And Haitians?

When I went to South America, the people would ask the missionaries where they were from.

“We’re American,” they’d say. “Somos Americanos.”

“So are we,” the Paraguayans would quip, unfazed. “Vivimos en América del Sur. Somos Americanos. We’re asking you what part of America you’re from.”

And the missionaries’ ears would turn red and they’d mutter they were from Utah.
I never knew what to say. At first I said I was Latina, but sometimes I would be informed by the South Americans that I was a gringa because I was born in the US. “We don’t care who your parents are or what color your skin is,” they’d say. “If you were born there, those are your people. You’re not like us.”

Here in Provo, though, when I say I’m from California, I’m hit with, “but where are you really from? Before you lived in California? Because your English is soooo good!” This implies, of course, my otherness. You’re not like us.

Now I just tell the truth. I’m North American and I have Central American roots. I lived in South America.

I’m American.

... When I was a child, I began school barely knowing any English.

My parents made the deliberate decision to speak as much Spanish to me as possible, only teaching me a few basics in English. I’m deeply grateful for this decision. Kids have the cleverest minds. So much elasticity in those little brains. I picked English up quickly.

I remember that I wasn’t the only new girl in class who didn’t speak English. Shivani didn’t speak any English either. We would babble at each other in our respective languages, Shivani in Punjabi and me in Spanish, but we managed to understand each other. We learned English together.

Spoken language is powerful. My family is a family of storytellers on both my maternal and paternal sides. When I get together with them, I love hearing them tell stories about their childhoods back home and their transitions from home to a new country. They talk about their late parents with fondness. I love hearing about how my abuelita babysat her best friend’s kids so her friend could march with Cesar Chavez, or how excited everyone was when they got their first teeny weeny but boxy TV. Most of the stories are laden with laughter. Some bring tears. They’re all spoken in Spanish.

None of my grandparents speak English. Only my paternal grandmother permanently moved to the States, but as a widow with seven mouths to feed, she worked multiple jobs to take care of her family, leaving no time to study a difficult new language.

Dad’s mom had fifteen children. Those fifteen children had fifty-two grandchildren. Abuelita loved talking to all of us. I always felt bad for the primos who couldn’t speak back to her, the ones whose parents didn’t teach them Spanish. My tios wanted to help their kids fit in with the white kids in school because they remembered how hard it was to fit in when they moved to the States. I will forever feel relieved and indebted to my parents for raising me.
with a deep love and respect for my cultural heritage. I often think about how I am going to apply my parents’ mentality to my own children so they too can feel a sense of identity and belonging. Nothing lifted my spirits more than hearing “you don’t sound like a gringa!” when I was in Latin America. I may not be a native Spanish speaker, but the term “heritage speaker” is one that I apply to myself with pride. I can’t fully explain how exactly language makes us feel held—makes us feel like we belong—but it does. Spoken language is powerful.

**Language and culture**

**Ysabelle:** Language is a big insecurity for me and my cultural identity. I feel like the fact that I cannot speak my native language fluently creates a fundamental disconnect between me and my culture. The biggest thing that I hate about not being fluent in my own languages (Tagalog and Ilonggo/Hiligaynon) is that I can’t pass that part of my culture to my future children.

**Trang:** Being unable to speak Vietnamese as fluently as I’d like definitely makes me feel less confident in my Vietnamese heritage. I feel discouraged knowing that I probably don’t know enough to pass it on to my future kids especially if I marry someone who doesn’t speak Vietnamese either. It feels like a missing part of my identity in a way.

**Maria:** I was so self-conscious when I was younger because everyone knew my Spanish was bad and I’d feel so dumb. It wasn’t until my mission where I actually developed comfort and fluency. I definitely gained more confidence in myself and my cultural identity by becoming fluent in Spanish. I think about my friends who are Latinas and don’t speak Spanish and how it’s way hard for them.

**Ariana:** Before I was fluent in Spanish, I felt more of a disconnect within my culture. The inability to speak well with my grandparents was hard. After I was able to go to Paraguay and become fluent, I felt a stronger connection to my Latinidad! Being in South America was incredible. It was so neat to not feel like I was sticking out. Feeling that I’m part of a community is a magical thing.

...  

“We don’t always remember that the people described in the Book of Mormon are still around,” I once heard in a class. Who is “we”? I like looking at the painting *Jesus Christ Visits the Americas.* I like to think that the people depicted around His outstretched hands are my tatarabuelos.
Teaching about the Book of Mormon was one of my favorite lessons on my mission in Paraguay. “Jesus was here,” I would tell the listeners. “He walked through this land, on our red dirt, through our palm trees. Our grandparents felt the marks in His palms and kissed His feet, and He blessed them.” I loved seeing the listeners lean forward to study the grubby image in the pamphlet, smeared with bug spray and warped by the humidity, of the Savior with our pyramid temple in the background.


In Paraguay, I learned Guaraní. (I’m still learning it. It’s a bit tricky. *Hendy.*) Guaraní is the language of the largest indigenous group in Paraguay. When I would testify of the restored gospel in Guaraní, I wondered if I was speaking a modern version of what Christ spoke when He was in America. Would the missionaries of those days have testified in archaic Guaraní too? I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch.


To you, the Book of Mormon might be a book of scripture. It might be a book of lies. It might just be a book. But as for me and my house, it is family history. It is genealogy. It is a source of knowing—knowing who we were and knowing who we can be. It is an immigrant story of Nephi’s family. Even Christ, during His mortal life, was an immigrant. I am the daughter of Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father, immigrating from my Celestial home to my earthly one. I am the earthly daughter of immigrants who came from one
America to another. I am also the daughter of Mother Sariah and Father Lehi, who immigrated from Jerusalem to the Americas. The Book of Mormon is my story. It’s where I belong, and I claim it. I’m still telling it.

**Final Thoughts**

This project was born out of a place of vulnerability. As I wrote about these specific emotions and discussed them with others, I felt overwhelmed and exposed, but it was eventually cathartic.

Most of my friends emailed their replies to my questions, but I was able to FaceTime Cas to interview her. Our conversation strayed from the questions, and honestly it was refreshing to vent to each other about how bizarre this liminal space is.

“Don’t you hate when they say this to you?”

“In high school, did they—”

“Oh gosh, me too!”

“Do your aunties—”

“Yes, always!”

At one point I laughed too loud and then teased her for trying to get me into trouble.

“Cas, I know I’m twenty-three, but if my mom hears me laughing at this hour [it was midnight], I’ll get in trouble and she’ll ask every single detail about you down to your Social Security number.”

Cas shook her head and laughed. “No, I get it. Immigrant parents are so nosy!” I realized that although it was important for me to hear that my friends and I had similar feelings, I’ve actually known all along that we were there for each other. My heart was full as I got to see Ysa cry tears of joy because there’s a South East Asian princess that looks like her, and my heart was full as I sobbed because I finally felt represented by *In the Heights* and *Encanto*. I remember watching *Coco* in theaters with Sam and sniffling together because Mama Coco looked like our abuelas. I remember Asil showing me pictures of her trip to Palestine and us taking turns discovering which words in Arabic and Spanish sound alike (azucar, camisa!). I remember folding wontons with Vivian as her mom explained the Chinese zodiac to us. I remember cheering “opa!” as Alexandria and Yanni and Erasmia danced in circles during their Greek festival. There have always been little pockets of belonging, and no one can take that from us. I’d love for us to amplify them. Amado, my first last name, means “beloved” in Spanish. Everyone deserves to feel beloved and feel like they belong.
About the Author/About the Interviewees

My mother is from Honduras and my father is from Guatemala. Both immigrated from their countries to the Bay Area, where we live to this day. I recently came back from Honduras, but I’ve yet to visit Guate. My parents have always told me, though, that I’m a catracha (Honduran) and a chapina (Guatemalan). Serving a mission in Paraguay gave me more confidence in my Hispanic identity.

María’s parents are from Peru. As her parents crossed the border into the United States, her pregnant mother promised the Virgen María that if they could successfully cross, she would name her daughter after the Virgin. María served a mission in Paraguay where she was able to strengthen her Spanish. She enjoys performing traditional Hispanic dances, which she and her twin sister have been doing since they were young.

Ariana’s father is from El Salvador and her mother is from the Dominican Republic. Her parents met in the States after immigrating from their respective countries. Her family lives in Independence, Missouri, or Zion, as Ariana fondly refers to it. Ariana served a mission in Paraguay where she was able to learn Spanish. She plans on visiting the Dominican Republic to connect with her heritage.

Ysabelle’s parents are from the Philippines. They studied vigorously there, which led to their economic success and ability to move to the States. Ysabelle spent her early years in Michigan until her family moved to California, where they currently reside. She is teaching herself Tagalog to connect to her roots.

Cassandra’s parents are from India. Her family has lived in four different continents: Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. They emphasized the importance of speaking English and Tamil. Upon moving to the States, they lived in the Midwest, where “my mom felt it was too hard for us to feel like we belonged,” Cassandra noted. The family has since moved to California, where they presently reside. As a model and social media influencer, Cas enjoys blending western culture with her Indian roots.

Trang’s parents are from Vietnam and currently reside in Virginia, where Trang grew up. She has always had a firm sense of deliberation that has inspired her social justice work. Trang is pursuing the entertainment industry as a plus-size American Asian woman and promotes and provides representation as a social media influencer.
Thank you to my beloved friends for lending their time and thoughts to this project. I’m grateful we don’t have to navigate this liminal space alone. Thank you to our beloved parents for seeking a better life for us. May we create a better life for all as we learn from one another.