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# First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First- Generation College Experience

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## An Education

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My grandmother often tells me that she thinks I was switched at birth. My brown skin, brown eyes, dark hair and short stature are consistent with that of the rest of my family, but everything about my personality is not. I blame her though. Every Sunday, when I was a young girl, my mother and I would visit my grandmother at her house. She lives in East Los Angeles, next to an alley with lots of graffiti and potholes, and trash in the street. Yet, there is something almost magical about her home. Amidst the seemingly poor conditions of her neighborhood, stands a house, brown, tall, wide, and welcoming. The rod iron-gate leading to her lawn has metal flowers on it that twirl ever so slightly. Her garden is filled with little treasures, strawberry plants, sunflowers, roses. To an impressionable girl who understood very little about the world, my grandmother's house was paradise. It continues to be my favorite place in the entire world because it is where my grandmother sparked a curiosity for knowledge within me that has driven me to where I am today, college.

Every Sunday, my grandmother would pull a few articles from the Los Angeles Times for me to read. The topics would range from sports to restaurant reviews, but I could always count on a current event article being included. I often struggled to understand the complex language of the current events page, yet I trudged on and asked questions when I saw fit. We would then discuss what I had read and she would ask for my opinion about what I understood from the article. I felt important. I felt as if what I believed mattered. This continued on until well into my teens, and when I joined the newspaper at my high school, I always saved a copy of the latest issue for her. She has kept many of my writings that I am most proud of. She even has a poem I once wrote about my cousin buying Hot Cheetos from the *raspado* man down the street hanging above her Singer sewing machine in her room.

The support of my grandmother and my parents prompted a strong sense of confidence in me leading up to college. In fact, I was always cognizant of my Mexican heritage, and the fact that I would be a first generation college student, but I did not fully understand what that meant until I was actually in college. Throughout high school, I did not allow those two facts to ever limit me, and it appeared as if the world I lived in failed to recognize that those were aspects of who I am, which I was fine with. When I entered college, people suddenly referred to me as a first generation college student and I found myself a part of programs geared toward promoting the success of minority students in a university setting. People consistently asked me what it was like being a first generation student, and I would sarcastically reply, "it is the same as being any type of college student, you go to class and take tests." As I started to look around, as I returned home with stories of my aspirations to attend law school and participate in undergraduate research, as I filled my summers with trips, work, classes and internships, my family, including my grandmother, would ask me why

I was pushing myself so hard. I tried to explain that I was simply attempting to seize as many opportunities and experiences as possible during my time as an undergrad. Consistently I would receive comments from my extended family suggesting that I “get through college first” before I think so far into the future. My grandmother continuously told me she was proud of me, but she wanted me to relax from time to time and take a summer off occasionally. Conversely, many of my friends who were doing work that paralleled the amount of work I was doing, claimed that their parents told them they should be doing more to advance their careers. As I changed my major from health and human science to political science without any opposition from my family, I realized that this was an oddity. My friends, who changed their majors from science to social science, claimed that their parents, who had gone to college, droned on about how their decision would prove to be a costly mistake. The contrasts between my friends who were not first generation and myself were suddenly becoming explicit in my world view.

Throughout my life I have been fortunate in that I have always yearned for an education. The subtle influence of my grandmother instilled this want within me. As I have grown and come to understand the injustices of the world and the complexities of everyday life, it has become my dream to use such an education to better the world in whatever capacity I have the ability to. Looking around, analyzing my experience along this journey that is called college, I cannot help but notice that my experience is not the traditional one. In fact, none of my aunts, none of my cousins, not my grandmother, my grandfather or my parents can relate to what I am going through at this moment in time entirely. Family gatherings are interesting in that I have gotten to a point where I can physically feel the significance of what I am doing. Growing up, coming to the understanding of what it means to be a first generation student, leads to the realization that my education, my success, my accomplishments are not only my own, they are my family’s as well. When I take an exam, sometimes I can picture my grandmother crying tears of pride at the freshmen welcome mass. Sometimes while studying, I think about my cousins who defected from college. I would be lying if I said that it is not strenuous to have these thoughts running through my mind, treading on my heart, but I believe it is what gives me the substance behind what I put forth. The added stress, the weighing significance of my education is an oddity. When academics coupled with family life become too much to handle, when I feel as if my love of learning is slipping from my grasp, I pause. I look down at the metal necklace I wear every day, and I see the small, Singer sowing machine charm on my necklace. I think back to lazy Sunday afternoons at my grandmother’s house. I remember reading the newspaper and debating with her and I realize, my education has always been a concerted effort. I am the product of generations and generations of moments like those, simple care, simple attention, and gentle encouragement. Moments like these, acting in a domino effect, for years between

the women of my family, have culminated, and I am currently the embodiment of them. What I choose to do with these moments is what is mine, and I have chosen an education.