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Assignment #1: Democracy DNA

It is difficult for my mother to smile in photos. And when we told her to smile, she would just smirk. It is a joke that she never smiled while she was married with my father and after. Even though my mother has been divorced from my father for more than 20 years, she still doesn't smile in pictures. It is unsettling for me to look my mother without a smile staring at me. Like she has no joy.

All my life, I knew that my mother came to America to have a better life for me and my sister. And that's why my mother worked, as she told me constantly, "like a dog in the streets." Throughout my childhood, my single mother would come home just in time for the telenovelas to start. She wouldn't want me to bother her with trivial things, so I spoke to her about the grades I've received. If I showed her an A-, she asked, "Why didn't you get a A+?"



Picture of my mom in her Brooklyn Apartment

My mother expected that I would work harder to get the best grades, to be the best in class. But I never knew why I had to work hard. My mother said so and I did it. When I grew up, I started to learn about my mother's life before she left the DR. Because she is not an open person, I only learned pieces. The family was poor that she never had shoes as a child. That's why she loves buying shoes now.



Picture of my mom taken somewhere in the DR before she left. She might have met my father already.

But reading “Drown” and “The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” and talking with other Dominicans my age finally made me understand the Dominican Diaspora and the immigrant experiences that I thought we alone suffered. I felt comforted that we weren’t alone, but I had a greater understanding of the injustices and suffering that my mother and my family had to go through to find stability in this country.

Then she learned I was gay. As an traditional, Christian Dominican mother, she did not take it well. She was angry that I would “choose” to be gay

She, the oldest, had to take care of all the to take care of all the brothers and sisters. Her father used to beat her for reasons she will not explain. I carried those stories with me and felt burdened by them. Her stories were not something I saw reflected in TV or movies. The (white) families had a mother, a father, and two or three children who worked in stable jobs. I had no way to understand what I was going through and find something relatable in the outside world. Because of that, it was our burden and would remain like that.



Picture of my mom taken in NY, posing for some reason

In her mind, she sacrificed and toiled so much to turn out her only son is gay. My sexuality was an insult to her hard work, her legacy. She then proceeded with tears in her eyes to tell me of all the things she went through once she came to America. She told me that she wanted to be a lawyer, that she had to work in a factory and struggle through the pain, that she only had money to go to work and come back home. Of course, she said this to make me feel guilty. But She held onto those traumas that she was going to crack eventually. I then thought later about the deeper meaning of her experiences and how it related to my upbringing.



Picture of my mom with, from left to right, my aunt, my older sister, and my cousin. It was my older sister's birthday. I was not born yet.

Being in America did not mean she enjoyed the privileges that she wanted. She had to work instead. And she projected her fear of poverty and her drive of a better life onto her children, so we would not suffer like she did. The American Dream was her unspoken mantra and later our mantra too. Everything she did, she would say, was for her children.