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Una Carta Para Nuestras Familias/Isang Lihim Sa Aming Mga Pamilya: Rebuilding And Healing from Intergenerational Trauma for 1.5 Generation Children And 1st Generation Parents

Jeane Robles and Maria San

We, Jeane and Maria, both identify as 1.5 generation students who felt like we did not belong where we were born or where our parents immigrated, but we found belonging through validation from our communities during college. Throughout undergrad, we distanced ourselves from our parents because of the rejection we faced, but we would like to rebuild our parental relationships by sharing our stories in the form of letters to our parents. This piece explores our experience of immigration and identity development at a predominantly White Midwestern institution. We write for 1.5 generation students and first-generation parents in hopes of rebuilding torn relationships rooted in differing intergenerational perspectives of love.

From Maria Luisa to Ma,

Our relationship has not been the same since I graduated high school and left home to attend Iowa State University. Moving from Miami to Iowa was the first step I took to find out who I am and unintentionally distance myself from you. Our standard of living in Cuba was not luxurious, but it was simple and comfortable. We had our community and our culture, and we were happy, but you wanted more for me. “Yo quiero que tu seas un alguien,” you would tell me, you wanted me to be a “somebody,” so we came to America. From the moment you decided to raise me here, you became self-sacrificial with your choices. You worked several graveyard-shift jobs with minimum pay to provide for the both of us. You tried your hardest to put yourself through school and learn English.

Jeane and Maria identify as 1.5 generation QTPOC immigrants from Cuba and the Philippines. Maria works as a TRIO Program Coordinator, and Jeane is a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont with an assistantship as an Assistant Residence Director.

You attempted to get a nursing license and after failing the bar exam four times because of the language barrier you began to doubt yourself. As your oldest child, for whom you gave up everything, you needed my success to validate the hardships you went through. You expected me to take all the necessary steps towards success so that I would have a better life than our home country could offer.

Your version of “an idol daughter” was someone who valued rigorous academic pursuit and put the family before anything else. *La escuela es tu prioridad, todo lo demas viene despues.* Adapting to the American school system was far from a smooth transition for me. I will never forget the time you were called into my third-grade teacher’s office because of my poor academic standing. You could not stop yourself from crying. You felt that I had failed you. I did not fit the image of the daughter you wanted when I was not achieving. I felt like I was not enough and I felt rejected by you. Achievement and failure came fabricated with acceptance and rejection. We began a cycle where I did not achieve in the way that you wanted me to and I faced rejection, leading me to stray further away from you. I could not feel accepted by you because your acceptance felt conditional. The weight of your expectations and the fear of failing you was overbearing.

After my brother was born, there was a new expectation put onto me. You needed me to be the third adult in the household and fill a role that I was thrown into without regards for what I wanted or whether it was something that I was prepared for. I was not a natural caregiver and being my brother’s full-time babysitter was never something I wanted to do. But I understand that it was what you needed from me because you were busy working and needed me to be his caretaker. I did not feel like I had much of a choice. I was scared to tell you how I really felt because I feared more rejection from you. As much as I tried, I could not be your ideal child.

When I was in my senior year of high school, you told me you wanted me to go to any university that was close to home. On the other hand, I wanted to go somewhere where I could explore who I was and, at the time, that meant moving away from home. I fled to the Midwest. When I got to college, I experienced being in charge of my own life for the first time. I felt free of family obligations and relished in my newfound autonomy. I surrounded myself with people with whom I effortlessly bonded. I appreciated the friendships that I made because I did not have to worry about fitting into an idealized image of myself. I found belonging through my friend and roommate Abby, who understood why toxic family dynamics and lack of acceptance pushed me away from you. I found solidarity with my classmate and friend Araceli, who is also a 1.5 gen Latinx American woman and understood the familial pressure to achieve. I found

validation through my college's multicultural liaison officer, Audrey, who helped me get connected with other students with similar identities as my own. My agency to choose whom I allowed into my circle was the opposite of our family dynamic because I could go towards what I wanted and explore my boundaries. I discovered who I was as a person outside of being your child.

On the day that I graduated, you told me that you were very proud of me and I felt so elated to hear you say that. I moved back home for a brief time and you were happy to have me back. But it did not last long, because after a few months of being home I decided to move to Vermont to be with my partner, Jeane. You had the expectation that I would help out at home when I was back and felt disappointed that I was leaving once again. Yet you still supported my decision and sent me off with good wishes, reminding me that no matter what happens, you will always have room for me at home. I am grateful that you supported me even though watching me leave twice was difficult for you. I still harbor guilt from not meeting your expectations as an ideal daughter. I still struggle to find belonging within our family. I hope that one day I will find the courage to tell you how I really feel and the reasons why I really left. And I hope that we can work together towards building the relationship that we both want with each other.

*Te Quiero,
Tu hija, María Luisa*

From Jeane to Mom and Dad,

I remember our first full day in Iowa after leaving the Philippines to start our life here. It was September and Dad and I went to QuikTrip to grab hot dogs for lunch. Then, you sent my sisters and I to Washington with our aunt so that you could both figure out how to settle into America while making sure we were taken care of. Mom, you went through working nights for 10+ years, studying countless hours to pass the TOEFL exam, and made sure that we always ate. Dad, in the Philippines you worked at a bank, but when you came to America you had to start over and take odd jobs as a caretaker for the elderly, sandwich maker at Subway, and cashier for a casino even though you had asthma. You both left your families, friends, and jobs in the Philippines so that your three kids could have opportunities that neither of you had.

I did not realize how much our lives had changed until we went to visit the Philippines when I was in middle school. We went to our old neighborhood, Caloocan, where I saw our one-bedroom apartment, the lack of electricity in Nanay Celeng's house, and how my cousins had just enough supplies to go to school. All of this compared to the house we had, all the things I owned, and the opportunities I had—I could not believe we made it in America from where we came from, but you both did it. After that trip, I knew I had to give back—I was going to make your dreams of having a kid become a doctor come true.

I still remember the day you both dropped me off at Iowa State University to start college. I reassured both of you, as always, that I would be okay, but what I did not tell you was that I had no idea what I was doing. I could not tell you that because I had to make it, for the both of you, for all of us here in America as the first one to go to college. I was doing everything according to my checklist of “success,” by getting A's and not worrying you both about any hardships I experienced. But that also meant not telling you anything I was going through. While the hardships piled up, I grew distant from the both of you because I had to hide parts of myself.

First, it was the failed tests, drinking, and feeling alone. Then, I tried to pray the gay away. I lost my friends because my partner and I isolated ourselves from the shame we felt about getting an STI. Then depression took over when my partner went to go study abroad, and loneliness became engraved in my everyday life. It took me three years to come out because I wanted to reassure you both that things would be okay if I was queer—as always, I did not want you to worry about my wellbeing.

Throughout all of this, the only people who were there for me were my mentors who worked in student affairs: Der, Brad, Nancy, and Tabatha. They would check

in on me about how I was doing and helped me understand what I was going through because they went through it too. I felt like I could tell them anything, and they would always reassure me that I was valid. I went to them not because I thought you did not care for me, but because there was an unspoken expectation of what I needed to be to give back for all you have done, and those road bumps were not “supposed” to be a part of my journey.

After coming out as queer, you both said that you wanted me to be happy. From then on, I did not want to hide anymore so I made sure to let you both know more about me. Last winter, I told you that I wanted to take testosterone, and your initial reactions were filled with fear and regret, so I chose not to transition. I knew what I wanted, but I could not go through with it without your support, so I felt lost in my own body for months until I could not take it anymore. I went and took testosterone without letting you know, and I felt at home in my body. I wanted to let the world know about my transition on my own terms, so I created my own YouTube channel called This Connected. I waited for your reaction and waited for your approval until one day mom texted me and called me her “unico hijo”.

*Your son,
Jeane*

Our Parents' Letters to Us

The purpose of our letters was to try to rebuild our relationship with our parents, which has a different meaning for each of us. Our rebuilding is a process rooted in years of trauma from our interactions with our parents, which we internalized for 23 years. We chose two different ways to heal from our letters due to our current emotional capacities: Maria chose not to share the letter with her Ma while Jeane shared their letter with their parents.

Maria's Ma Letter

I chose not to share the letter with my Ma or talk to her about its contents. Growing up, I was always aware of her side of the story. Whenever I try to bring up my thoughts and feelings and share them with her, I was shamed or deemed an ungrateful child. I thought a lot about sharing it with her, but I feel that at this point in my relationship with my Ma, I do not believe that she will be receptive to my letter in a positive way. Writing this letter was an outlet for me to express my feelings of shame for distancing myself from her. For my own emotional health and wellbeing, I will not share my letter with her to avoid the anticipated conflict between the two of us. I would like to have the kind of relationship with my mother where I can share my feelings with her, but that is not a reality at this moment. I feel that we would need to rebuild our relationship by taking small steps prior to taking a giant leap and sharing the letter.

Jeane's Parents' Letter

I am amazed that you remember our first day in Iowa, you were right we went to Quick Trip gas station since that was the closest store in our temporary shelter across the Hospital. Yes it's been a life changing journey from the Philippines to Iowa. At six years old we (Mom and Dad) know you are capable of competing in school and in sports; you had that in you even in the Philippines. Sorry for not being there for all your challenges, we wished we knew early on what is going on with you. We are too busy working trying to provide and give you the best we can. We could have helped you if you only let us in, in your experiences and transformation. I know Dad can sound harsh sometimes, okay, most of the times, but I only want to share my thoughts with you. We want to assure you that you always have our unwavering support, we love and care about you no matter what your choices are. Sorry if we made you feel awful tonight, we didn't mean to ruin our conversation. We are always going to be proud of you and your achievements, the way you handle yourself at school and how you gain the respect of your friends, our Family and Friends back home. And rest assured Mom and Dad will always be here for you. Continue making us Proud Parents.

*Love,
Mom and Dad*

Healing from our Letters

Maria and I have varying intersecting identities, but we have overlapping experiences due to our identity as 1.5 generation students. We share themes that emerged from the letters: attending college to live out our parents' dreams, building an identity outside of our family, and seeking healing within our parental relationships.

We saw higher education as a way to validate our parents sacrificing their lives in their home countries for our future in America. Growing up, we saw the disparities between where we came from and where we lived, which gave us perspectives on the differences in standards of living across two countries. Contrary to our expectations of what an "American" life would be like, it was not abundant and joyful because our parents had to work harder than they did in their home countries to gain wealth and opportunity. We felt that their struggle was an everyday reminder of our responsibility to make our futures all "worth it" and aspiring to anything outside of that would stir up guilt.

College provided opportunities for exploration around our identities through physical distance from home and affirming communities on campus. At home, we built an image that fulfilled our parents' expectations of their children. In

college, we were exposed to conversations about identity that made us question who we were. We began to understand our identities outside of our 1.5 generation immigrant status, which changed the context of how we thought about our immigrant identity. Not only were we feeling the pressure to succeed in America as immigrants, but we also felt the weight of living in America as people of color, as queer people, and as trans* people.

At the root of our healing is an understanding of the mutual struggles we, our parents and us, share to exist in America. In our countries of birth, we are seen as “Americanized” because we are more financially privileged. In contrast, we are perceived as “not American enough” in the United States because we are not white. We understand that our struggles are connected, thus our healing is connected. Our parents’ identities are tied to beginning our futures in America while our identities are tied to continuing our futures in America, which creates pressure on both sides. The pressure will manifest differently for each generation after us and may continue to disconnect us from one another. We hope our letters interrupt the cycle of intergenerational trauma by communicating our understanding of our expectations of one another.

Our letters provided context for how we understood our immigrant identity through our intersecting identities as queer and trans* people of color. In the same way, our immigrant identity shifted in relation to the context we were exposed to. We hope our stories could provide context to our parents’ understanding of their immigrant identity towards one that is intersectional. Through this paper, we hope to encourage folks who want to connect with their families to write to them about what they are going through in college. Writing these letters gave us the opportunity to empathize with our parents’ journeys and recognize that our struggles are connected. The letters opened a pathway towards mending our relationships with our parents, and we hope that we can continue this healing process through practicing love and empathy.