

INTRODUCTION

Dragging my tired feet across the immaculate floor of the JFK airport immigration area, eyes swollen from endless hours crying my goodbyes to family and friends, I stand face to face with the immigration officer.

It is July of 2002, less than a year since the horrific events of 9/11. A skinny middle-aged man scrutinizes me from behind his black-rimmed glasses as I stand next to my husband, who is as exhausted as I am.

“Headed to the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth?” he asks, looking down at the paperwork he holds in his hands, which are covered by blue surgical gloves. He then looks back at us, his expression difficult to read.

“Yes,” we reply in unison with wide, prideful smiles. After hard work and sacrifices beyond the imaginable, our dream finally came true.

His gaze dissipates my smile in a second, as I feel my adrenaline pumping and my heart rate accelerating.

“Hmm,” he pauses, just to look back at us and ask, “Mom and Dad paying for school, huh?”

We gasp and remain silent. If he only knew the roads we had traveled, but we know better: silence is our safe space, and we will not react no matter how nasty this gets.

With a defiant look, he pushes the paperwork and our passports back to us, and barks, “You can go now.”

Welcome to America.

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Fourteen years later I am lying in bed at home in an affluent neighborhood in New Jersey, recovering from a burnout, a concussion, and a broken foot. I realize, as I stare into the darkness, that life was offering me an opportunity to reflect on my journey. I am an immigrant Latina of humble beginnings whose story began in the dust-filled streets of a small town in rural Argentina, and who had paved her way through college, advanced degrees, and a corporate career spanning two decades in seven countries.

With images of a simple and happy childhood still vivid in my mind (endless summer days with my two brothers, five cousins, family all around), I shiver in loneliness in my bedroom as I ask myself, “How did I end up like this? Where did I lose my way?”

I had been raised by loving parents who dreamed beyond our reality as a hard-working middle-class family. As they held

my school report card, they would proudly proclaim “You can achieve anything you dream of. You got this!”

And off I went. I became the first one in my family to move to Buenos Aires to obtain two college degrees with honors and in record time. I started my professional career at eighteen to pay for my college education, a feat unknown to a family of hard-working parents and grandparents who in some cases were blessed to finish elementary school. In other cases, they had no option other than to start working at the young age of nine, like my grandmother who would wash dishes standing on a stool to reach the sink.

I just kept walking, working, wondering the never-ending “What’s next?” Being the first one to access those new spaces was physically and emotionally exhausting. Big corporate names, large conference rooms crowded with smart multilingual peers from all continents, and even larger business class plane seats all felt too big for my humble beginnings.

Mine had been a frantic, adrenaline-filled life of achieving and conquering, and then achieving and conquering some more. I was always proving myself, pushing beyond exhaustion. As an obedient Latina, I worked hard while keeping my head down, plagued with self-doubt and a sense of unworthiness that only drove me to work harder.

Time sped up, with other vivid images swirling faster around me: my wedding, a one-way ticket to the US, our arrival at Dartmouth, our graduation, corporate jobs, two children, job promotions, and then...darkness. I burned out. I did not

want to continue that life anymore. I hated my success as it had brought me down to this darkness.

I quit my job and decided to burn the extra energy in the gym in an attempt to not think too much. It was then a careless woman hit me on the side of my head with a fifteen-pound weight, causing a concussion. Two weeks later, I broke my foot in a domestic accident. Life clearly wanted to make sure I stopped.

The same darkness that surrounded me in my beautiful bedroom was nothing else than a perfect mirror of the deep, hollow darkness inside. I felt purposeless, with no clear direction in life, and exhausted from constantly trying so hard.

My fourteen years in the US had offered great opportunities, but also intensified that feeling I first tasted while standing across from that immigration officer back in 2002: powerlessness. An immigrant. A woman, and an immigrant woman with an accent, for goodness' sake! I felt unappreciated and stuck in a system that seemed to demand the best of me, only to leave me empty inside.

I was not the only one feeling this way. Our stories are woven together in inexplicable ways.

Monica was born in Newark, New Jersey, to immigrant parents. She became the first to graduate from college and pursue a corporate job, accessing spaces that had definitely been out of reach to anybody else around her.

Monica worked harder than anybody as she felt the constant need to prove herself to others, particularly to white men. On a typical day at work as a very successful senior manager back in 2015, Monica was on the phone with a client when a male coworker approached her and stood nearby, signaling for her to interrupt her phone call as if the building was on fire.

“Is there anything you need? I am on a call,” she remembers saying.

“The kitchen is disgusting. You should go and clean it,” the man replied.

A deep-seated feeling of frustration and powerlessness took hold of her as images from her childhood came rushing in.

Monica had been an adorable four-year-old girl with a shy smile when she stepped into pre-school without speaking one word of English. This is when she realized she was different. For US-born children of Latino immigrants, school is generally the first space where they experience that they come from a different culture than other children do.

“Starting school was a traumatic experience,” she shared. “I did not understand what was going on around me. I felt different.” At that young age and despite being a US-born citizen, the thought of “*Something is wrong with me, and I do not belong here*” invaded her mind. The system back then was not ready to provide her any support, and there was not much her loving parents could do since they were going through their share of hurdles in their daily strive for survival.

This was her firsthand experience of what being a second-class citizen meant. Monica followed the cultural mandate of remaining invisible and quiet by enduring these events without speaking up.

“We were raised in a culture of silent parents and grandparents. My parents were always trying to remain invisible and quiet, out of fear of being *found* and punished. They passed that fear onto us. I grew up feeling the best way to be safe was to remain invisible and not stand out,” she shared with me. This desire to remain invisible would intensify as her neighbors constantly called the police on them for no reason other than they looked *strange and different*.

At elementary school, Monica experienced the segregation many Hispanic and African American children had to endure. While the segregation of African American children is not unheard of, that of Hispanic kids has been kept sealed inside the locks of our cultural silence and fear of speaking up.

“In 1985, when I was a ten-year-old student, our teacher used to sit the smartest kids in the front of the room. Latinos and African Americans were usually sitting in the back, *by default*,” Monica said, as she took a deep breath, perhaps reviving once again those painful memories that had caused her enormous embarrassment and guilt. “I immediately felt I had been labeled as *not smart enough*, just because of the way I looked or how my parents spoke. And you know what?” she looked at me with sadness, “I believed it. I believed I was not as capable and as deserving as the white kids sitting in the front rows.”

Time flew by as more experiences reinforced those early limiting beliefs she had constructed about herself. Here she was in 2015 sitting at her desk, shocked as her co-worker walked away. She was feeling powerless and broken. A few weeks later, she quit her job and took time off in an attempt to bring herself back from illness and from the dark hole she had fallen into.

Through her experiences Monica had built a mental image about her value, diminishing her self-worth and self-confidence. Yet, something inside of her pushed her to succeed and do well, but the price she ended up paying was high. Monica handled her internal battles the best she could until she got ill with an almost crippling disease.

When you reach rock bottom, you have no choice but to find your way up and rise. In your darkest nights, when you wonder why you are on this planet and what it is you are here to do, your spirit screams for freedom and meaning in a desperate attempt to turn away from powerlessness.

In my darkest nights I held on to God, the God I had forgotten during my most successful years, and I desperately asked for clarity on the next steps.

And soon after, the answers came flooding in.

On a beautiful summer morning my phone rings. It was Aixa Lopez, a Puerto Rican powerhouse that works at the State-wide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, whose story will enlighten you later in this book. She offered me the opportunity to lead the relaunch of their entrepreneurship

training platform, and my heart said “yes” before my brain could think too much. I jumped in.

And then it happened: a powerful immersion into the dreams, trauma, struggles, and power of the Hispanic community in the US that reflected my own journey, hopes, and wounds.

As I supported Hispanics from all ways of life to succeed as business owners, I celebrated their victories, cried their tears, and most importantly listened to them. I was shaken to the core by their inner plea for true belonging, meaning, and fulfillment; the same plea my heart was making. Hundreds of voices felt silenced, limited, and diminished.

While helping them pivot their lives into spaces of possibility and opportunity, I continued pivoting mine, challenging my beliefs and the limiting cultural narratives, such as inferiority, powerlessness, and lack, that I had accepted as the truth. As I became true to myself, more outspoken, and confident, they did as well. When you grow, it also impacts those around you.

“Do you know what the Hispanic Paradox is?” I asked hundreds of entrepreneurs as they stared at me from their classroom seats in what I knew would definitely not be another business workshop. Most of them were immigrant Latinas and daughters of immigrants, and Monica was sitting in the audience, probably wondering what I would say next.

“This is what I call the Hispanic Paradox,” I continued, “Numbers show our huge power. According to the Census Bureau, there were 62.1 million Hispanics in the US in 2020, and we

will be 111 million in 2060. By then, roughly 1 in 4 Americans will be Hispanic.”

“Research shows we are increasingly educated and different media outlets recently mentioned we open businesses at the highest rate across all population groups. We are the engine of the American economy, contributing a massive \$2.6 trillion to the US GDP, as stated in a 2020 Forbes report,” I shared excitedly.

I continued, “This figure is so significant that if we were our own country, we would be the eighth largest economy in the world.”

I paused to look at them and could tell most were grasping the meaning of those impactful numbers for the first time. Indeed, according to a Sentiment Study by We Are All Human, almost 80 percent of Hispanics are unaware of our collective power and accomplishments.

“Yet,” I went on, “We are far behind in absolutely all relevant metrics that measure inclusion, equity, and access to wealth creation: business size, access to capital, salary levels, career promotions, and representation in corporate leadership positions and boards, to name a few.”

“We are extremely *and* increasingly powerful, and yet, we have not awakened to our power and influence, and we remain unseen and unappreciated. And that...is a Paradox.” I proclaimed.

I paused and took a deep breath. I could tell I had created the perfect momentum to throw the most important question at them.

“So...how do we change this? Where do we begin?” I asked.

“Change the government!” some yelled, with excitement. “Change the rules so white supremacy has less power!” a few added. “Make the system an equitable one,” others ventured.

I looked at their flushed faces and offered in a very calm tone of voice: “How about we start by changing ourselves?”

The room became silent.

“How about we look into our cultural and personal scripts, our limiting beliefs we inherited from our ancestors and that tell us we are not good enough or that what we bring to the table does not matter?”

“How about we stop fighting who we are, and we use that energy to achieve what we want in life?”

We have been functioning under a *colonial mindset*, and most of the time, we have not been aware of it. A colonial mindset is a set of cultural beliefs that influence our decisions and behaviors. It is a way of thinking so deeply ingrained in our psyche that we may not notice how much it drives us. I found this mindset is quite prevalent in those of us who are immigrants or daughters of immigrants. We brought it from our Latin American lands as we immersed ourselves in the US system, and we have not taken the necessary time to unlearn it, yet.

So, when bigger and better opportunities show up, we can feel uncomfortable, fearful, and anxious. Many of us show up to our lives feeling we don't fully belong or fit in, and some of

us even feel we need to be thankful to be *allowed* to live in this country, even when we are lawful citizens.

Today can be different, as we are called to unlearn that which no longer serves us.

Monica stared at me from her seat with light shining in her eyes. I could tell she had done the work of unlearning and healing. She had brought herself back from a dark place, as I had, and had embraced the truth of who she is.

Later on, she would share with me what closely resembles my journey: “At some point I had to choose to release all the conditioning, all the fear, and the need to be invisible. I had to see and embrace those parts of me that felt less, not good enough, and afraid. I had to forgive others and understand they were also programmed that way.”

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Through real-life stories, research, and insights, this book lays out a roadmap to unlearn and heal what we do not need to carry any longer. It invites us to own our individual and collective power and to break the chain of inferiority, powerlessness, colorism, and competition among ourselves. As Latinos, we are a diverse and complex culture with varied levels of acculturation and different racial profiles. Therefore, the insights and lessons covered in this book may apply to each of us differently. I invite you to check them out and to embrace those your heart indicates can best support your unique journey.

I will be referring to Latinas and Hispanics interchangeably through these chapters, although both terms have different meanings. “Latinos” refers to those with ancestry in Latin America and excludes countries such as Spain, while “Hispanics” refers to those of Spanish language ancestry and includes Spain but excludes non-Spanish speaking countries like Brazil.

If you are a Latina going through these pages, my hope is you will embrace your unique journey, and you will learn from the powerful stories of other Latina sisters who paved the way before us. My intention is for you to gain a renewed awareness on the limiting cultural narratives that may be running your life, particularly when you navigate new spaces, and to feel encouraged to act from a place of self-love and self-esteem.

If you are an ally seeking to support our Latinas, I appreciate you being here. We count on your allyship to thrive as a new collective. My intention is to provide you with powerful insights on how to support Latinas in their journey, particularly those who are the first in their families to access academic and professional spaces.

As we become *Uncolonized Latinas* and break the chain of ancestral thinking and the last remnants of patriarchy, systemic bias, and machismo, we will not only reclaim our voice and power, but we will also step fully into our role of driving the future of this country that *is* our home. And as we do so, we will become beacons of hope to our daughters, sisters, and mothers.

Latina sisters: we are the best-kept secret in the history of the United States. Welcome home.

