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## The Path Remains Forward

### Abstract

David Rios Jr. is a first-generation, first-born son to Mexican parents who made a home in Los Angeles, CA. As a Mellon Mays Fellow, Rios has needed to reflect on how and why his research in medieval literature connects to his Latinidad. “The Path Remains Forward” explores the intersectionalities and collisions between both. In this personal narrative, Rios reveals doubts he harbors within the turbulent seas of existence and considers his search for calmer waters and comforts through love and joy.

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DAVID RIOS JR.

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## The Path Remains Forward

If you had told me a year ago that I'd be traveling Europe, I would have said, "only if I can bring my wife." If you had told me five years ago, I would have said, "with whose money?" If you had told me ten years ago, I would have said, "I don't deserve to go, I wasn't up to par when I studied in Boston." I am here now though, existing where no other member of my family has before. Reflecting on that thought reminds me of the long, arduous path that I walked with my family. For so long, access to joy meant passing through the gates of toil. Work, faith, and family cemented my feet to the ground and breaking free often meant one, two, or all three of those values were compromised. At St. Andrews, I would get in trouble for failure to adhere to the directions of Sister Dorothy, simply because I wanted to make people laugh during our fifth attempt at memorizing the Act of Contrition. Have you ever had to translate the scorn of a nun to your parents into meek and meager Spanish? For example, "David is brilliant, but he gets bored and distracts the classroom by being funny and obnoxious. He gets lazy and rushes his work," which roughly translates to, "Por favor no me peguen pero mi maestra dice que soy flojo," which then translates to a belt and getting yelled at in the car for the 10 minute ride from Pasadena to Highland Park.

My struggle with religion is well documented, but as I have continued to mature and grow, I am now in a phase of reconciliation. Sitting here on these ancient, hallowed grounds with the cool wind whipping the mist of the English sea, I somehow feel more connected to my own ancient indigenous roots than I ever have. The reverence, respect, and admiration I feel for the priory at Lindisfarne is something I did not anticipate; it is a Holy Island indeed. For so long I considered "Anglo-Saxon" people, or people with that lineage, a natural enemy. Was I naïve in failing to make the connection between the ancient medieval peoples of the Northeast and the indigenous populations of North and Mesoamerica? I look back to our local mission of San Gabriel and attempt to create parallels and connections, where perhaps there are none. When you enter the San Gabriel mission the architecture is on the complete opposite side of the spectrum; stone is replaced by adobe, cobblestone with mudbrick, and sunshine with clouds. Adorned with the mission are tributes, excerpts, plaques, and entire pieces of literature dedicated to indigenous populations of the San Gabriel valley and the violent conversion to Christianity they underwent. When I stand in the priory, or even Durham Cathedral, I see no plaques, no excerpts, and no evidence of the violence that I thought would parallel California. Maybe I am naïve, and maybe the violence is native to the land I call home. The priory is stunning, and I feel as connected as ever to what I wish to continue to study. Through all these ponderings, I still find joy when my wife can pull me out of the clouds, firmly back to the earth, insisting we find French pastries.

Some Joy from Bordeaux. We woke up at 6am, jet-lagged, yet desperate to make the most of the last couple of hours we had together. The city was still asleep. The only movement we could see was the current of the Garonne River. I still had the taste of cherry, vanilla, and creaminess in the back of my mouth from the merlot the night before. Up the street we went,

adorned with small sidewalks and treacherous cobblestones that lead to the buttery fragrance of fresh baked bread. An old man on a bicycle passed us with an unleashed cinnamon and white Australian shepherd trailing faithfully only to meet us at the threshold of a window lined with pastries, tarts, baguettes, and croissants. Inside, the warmth of the 500-year-old oven embraced us, and we felt closer together than we had in days. When we left, the old man tipped his hat and the Aussie nuzzled my hand with its cold wet nose, demanding a scratch on the head.

Aside from reconciliation with my own Catholic faith, a lifelong travel fulfillment to Europe, and undergoing the sacrament of marriage, I look forward to the challenges that await. In my class with Dr. Dyckhoff, we were asked on the first day of instruction what it means to be a first-generation student. I immediately referenced my mentor, of whom I am eternally grateful, who taught Dante's *Inferno*, and quoted the famous first line from Canto 1, "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ché la diritta via era smarrita.*" I argued that being first generation often echoes this same sentiment that has continued since the Middle Ages. How often I have felt lost in the proverbial dark wood without the path forward is a question with no quantifiable solution, and one that first-gen students may find themselves unable to answer, instead forced to simply trailblaze their own path forward. I am eternally grateful to both of my parents who always did their best to help and support my endeavors, something that I am extremely privileged to count on to this day, but there does come a time when more is needed. The "more" I have come to find includes my own ethereal trinity of marriage with my partner and her family; my own immediate family and extended friends, whom I consider in the same breath; as well as "*mio maestro, mio autore,*" who includes Dr. Dyckhoff, the professor who expanded my physical horizons and validated the complex feelings I could not identify or define being first-gen, Professor Silva who pushed me back into academia and fostered the notion that Latino men belong in Medieval studies, and of course Don Calabrese himself who rekindled and synthesized the harmony between industry and spirituality, something I had lost sight of. The path remains forward, even if at times, we do not know where forward is.