



Digital Commons@
Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

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

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Writers' Workshop*

Article 1

October 2015

Must be an American Citizen

Guadalupe Astorga
Loyola Marymount University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Astorga, Guadalupe (2015) "Must be an American Citizen," *First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv/vol4/iss1/1>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Academic Resource Center at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

This is my immigration story. It's not my grandparents nor my parents. *It's mine to share.* It's the story that leads and follows me like a lingering dark shadow. *This is my shadow.* I tried silencing the truth because I used to be ashamed of it. I used to think people would look down at me if I told them my truth. *I was wrong.* Those who truly care about me as an individual aim to understand my story and how it impacts me; they listen intently when I share the feelings that oftentimes haunt me. I am going to tell you my story, so that maybe one day, *maybe,* you'll be able to understand me a little better and judge me a little less; because I'm a vulnerable human with hopes and dreams just like you. I'm one of thousands of humans simply trying to reach this idea of the "American Dream." Today will be the day I find out if this dream can become a reality.

I'm sitting down in a room with people from other parts of our vast and unique planet. A girl sits with her mom two rows across from my seat and I can't help but notice that she is incredibly nervous. She's a beautiful young woman. *Could it be? Could it be that I'm just seeing my own lost reflection in her?* She seems to be in her early twenties like me. Her Asian beauty, however, is covered over with a striking worried expression. It's the worried faces that catch my attention. *Could it be? Could it be that even though some people would say we are both from completely different worlds, we share the same troubles and emotional strains?* You see, I'm waiting for my immigration appointment where it will be determined whether or not I will become a permanent U.S. resident. The wait is eternal, and all I can do is sit down in absolute silence until my name is called from behind the front doors that seem to open to Pan's Labyrinth. *I don't want to suffer anymore.* As I look to my right I see another Asian family sitting down and joking around with a white older male, their attorney. Their faces don't look as worried, but they continue to tap their fingers on the chair armrest as if to harmonize with the uneasy drum beat my feet and heart have created. Next to me is a family that seems to be from South America. *I hope they don't see how nervous I am.* There is an older woman, her daughter and grandson. The boy, probably five years old, is very impatient and cannot sit still. The women's efforts to calm him down are in vain. They start to hold him tighter and begin to raise their voices at him.

He's just a boy—you can't force him to stay calm! A sudden feeling of frustration consumes my body. I begin to think of myself as a little girl when I felt like I had to do everything everyone told me. *You can't force him to do anything!* I had to make so many choices on my own when I was younger, but a lot of them were also made for me. "*No es mi culpa,*" I've told my mom as I try to tell her that it is not my fault she decided to bring us here illegally with her. I immigrated illegally to the United States when I was twelve years old. But it wasn't my choice. *He's just a boy!* What twelve year-old truly knows what he or she is doing? This was the beginning of my life being stuck in a box. It wasn't my

choice to come here illegally; the circumstances forced me to. My mom and sister were already in the United States, and the wait to get a visa was too long. *Just hold him and let him know you love him.* A visa would only allow me to visit my family, but I wanted to live with them. *I wanted to be loved.* My mom and sister had been living in the United States since the year 2000. During that time, I was living with my grandmother, my uncle, and his family in Mexico.

I had a great lifestyle in Puebla, Mexico. I was a part of the middle-class, and I lived with a family that loved and took care of me. But a twelve year-old needs her parents with her. My dad passed away when I was seven. I had neither my mom nor my dad for five years. *I miss dad more than anything.* I was forced to grow up and be more independent when I lived with my grandma. I was even pushed into the arms of solitude. I had to learn how to use the public transportation system. I had to learn my way around the city by the age of nine to be able to get to and from home, music class, and my family's hardware store. I never really had someone help me with homework or school projects because my aunt and uncle were usually helping my cousins. It didn't bother me so much because I had become somewhat accustomed to being second. It also didn't bother me because I grew up feeling as if I had many families. All of my uncles' wives' families were also my family. *They are family.* I went to their birthday parties, weddings, dance recitals, and *posadas*. My extended family constantly tried to make me feel a part of them. *I was a part of them.* I joined my four cousins in Kung Fu classes at my grandmother's house or the art classes that my God-sister attended. I was always included in the gift exchanges within each family during Christmas. I loved it! What eight year-old doesn't love getting more presents during Christmas?

My favorite time of the year was our annual trip to the hot spring spa. My aunt and uncle started this tradition with our entire family when I was nine. Much like the cartoons, we stuffed all three cars with backpacks of all sizes in the trunk until there was barely room to breathe. We then tried to fit six people in each five-person car for the three hour ride. The cars took us through narrow and twisted roads that followed the mountain's curves, winds, and turns. I remember looking to my left through the window and seeing nothing but a deep abyss blanketed by pine trees like the ones you might see if you were driving through Seattle. *Do you see the trees? Do you see the birds and flowers?* I felt the excitement, and I knew we were close as soon as I saw that rusted arrow sign that read "*Chignahuapan en 10 km.*" The entrance to the town of Chignahuapan was like walking into a storybook. To the right I saw houses in bright and aged purples, blues and oranges. They reminded me of the pictures I had seen in my history books of the Spanish colonization. *Is this even real?* Vendors lined the sidewalks trying to sell us *papas fritas*, artisan bracelets, or, my favorite, *nieve de limón*. A long, half-concrete, half-dirt road lead to the town's Catholic Church. It was a grand yet

simple building. The bell towers and the intricate decorations along the wall edges made it seem like a Spanish palace. My favorite part of walking into that church was the grand ten foot statue of the Immaculate Conception. That motherly look on Mary's face created by the delicate, fine carvings welcomes you with open arms. *I wanted my mom.*

After visiting the church, our caravan would proceed to the hotel. We could see the four different pools from our room as well as the rest of the green mountain. *You might get lost.* My cousins and I would immediately put on our swimming suits and run to the pools. It took a few minutes to get used to the rotten egg smell that the thermal waters produced, but the warm waters made up for it. It didn't matter that the sky was covered in grey clouds as if a storm was coming our way; we still jumped into the hot waters without hesitation. *It was my favorite time of the year.* Most of our family members attended. All eight grandchildren, not including my sister, ran around the hotel, pools, and tennis courts like hummingbirds flying freely and quickly in between trees, bushes, and flowers. Everyone had breakfast, lunch, and dinner together three days in a row. I loved times like these when I felt like most parts of my family puzzle were pieced together. *We were together.* My uncles, aunts, and cousins always made me feel as if I had my immediate family through them, but I there were times when I was reminded that the reality was far from this dream.

I remember walking into a conversation my grandma was having with my three uncles as they decided who I was going to stay with during summer vacation. You see, I was always rotated between my family members on weekends and holidays. *I thought I belonged.* One weekend I'd be telling my Godparents how mad I was because my cousin, Isra, pulled a prank on me. The next weekend I'd be telling my grandma about the great bicycle race I had with my older cousins, Caro and Ale. The following week I'd be calling my mom without my uncle's permission telling her how much I hated my cousins making me get in trouble for no good reason. I continued to tell my long gone mom, "*No quiero estar aquí.*" I told her again and again that I simply didn't want to be there anymore. I missed someone taking care of me. *I missed my sister.* So in May of 2006 my mom and I decided that I would finally join her and my sister in the U.S.

I look up again to the cries of the five year-old boy who is making his grandmother very impatient. The grandma is here for her appointment but needs her daughter to translate for her. *She reminds me of mom, so vigilant.* The grandma looks to her left and then to her right. Her facial expressions keep changing from excited, to frustrated, to worried. *Do I look that worried?* I want to ask her what her story is, but words seem to be stuck in my throat as if they're hanging on for their life. Despite our different backgrounds, we all found ourselves in this empty and cold waiting room for the same reason. We want a better lifestyle.

This is my lifestyle. I can't help but continue to think of what's going to happen when I go into the office for my interview. I sometimes wish my life was the way it was the first few months I moved to the States. After arriving to the U.S., I was immediately given all the attention from my family who already lived in Los Angeles. *I was finally loved.* My aunts wanted to take me shopping everywhere since I only brought two changes of clothes with me. My mom wanted to get me the best school supplies for a brand new start in the American middle school full of *güeros*, where I would continue to excel as a student. *I'm going to make papi proud.* My stepdad and sister wanted to show me all around the city—from Hollywood's street artists to Downtown's skyscrapers to Beverly Hills' exotic shops. But all of these things were only temporary. Soon, I realized that my transition to becoming "American" would be the most difficult task and lesson I had ever encountered. *I don't belong here.* This journey would soon make me question if I had made the right decision to move to the United States. I loved being with my family, but the language barrier, the limited opportunities and other difficulties seemed to outweigh my desire to live with my family. *I don't belong here.*

The first time I truly reconsidered my move to the U.S. occurred two years ago, two years after my stepdad and mom decided to apply to get my sister and I our U.S. residency. The process was followed by mountains of paperwork, pictures and constant visits to our attorney's office. *Why does it have to be so complicated?* Everything was fine until I got kicked out of my home. The constant arguing, yelling, and silent treatments between my mom and I made it very difficult for me to be happy at home. *I'm sorry.* My personality, manners, and belief system were rooted in me by my grandmother and other parental figures I had in Mexico. I wasn't raised the way my mom wanted me to be raised. I was a good daughter; it just wasn't the "good" that she wanted. *I'm sorry.* She believes in respect to elders no matter the situation. I believe in mutual and earned respect. She believes family encompasses only those who are blood related. I believe family can be found outside the bloodline through love, compassion, and care. *I'm sorry.* I had had enough arguments with her, and I was asked to leave my house. *Why did I come here?* I decided it was for the better that I continued to find my independence the very way I had done it since I was a young girl. *This lifestyle sucks.* I lost contact with my parents, and I had no idea what I had to do to continue to make sure my conditional residency was not taken away. Soon after this, I found out that my residency had expired and that my parents didn't file the necessary paperwork to renew my residency on time. *Are you kidding me? This was the one thing I thought I could count on you for!* I didn't know what to do. I was scared. *I am scared.* Sleepless nights became the norm. Images of what could happen to me raced through my head vividly at night as if I had been swallowed into the Pensieve of Hogwarts. I wasn't sure if this meant I would be deported or

if I still had a chance of getting my permanent residence. I talked to a couple of professors at my school, Loyola Marymount University. They directed me to some organizations that would be able to help me figure out what steps I needed to take to become a permanent resident of the U.S. *I hope this works.* After a few visits to lawyers and attorneys, my application to become a permanent resident was submitted. *It might actually be over soon.*

I see two different outcomes as I wait for my interview. Oh, if only walls could talk, then they'd be able to help me stay calm by telling me all the success stories they've heard in this room. *It's all going to be fine.* I cling to escaping hope as I observe a family jubilantly experience success. They emerge from behind closed doors with bright smiles full of joy. *I want to be in their position.* Everyone in the room starts chattering and saying "they're good!" "ya pasaron..." But, I've also seen the other side. A few minutes before, a couple had come through the doors, and their attorney explained to them the reasons their immigration application was denied. *I want to hug them and tell them how sorry I am.* The woman's eyes were crystallized with tears that were waiting to travel down her cheek. *I'm sorry it had to be this way.* I can feel my throat tightening and forming a knot as I look at her. I look back down at my phone. It's been forty minutes and I'm still waiting. The longer I wait the more worried I get. *Why have I been waiting so long?* I impatiently check the time again. It feels as if an eternity has passed, but it has only been one minute. *Why are they taking so long to call me in? Is there anything wrong?* I look down at my phone and stare at the bright little screen that reminds me of how long I've been waiting. *It hasn't even been a minute.* My heart is beating so hard it feels like it's going to come out, ripping my chest in two. I've been sitting for so long, I can almost see my legs betraying me as I stand up.

I can't help but be nervous. I thought my stress level would go down after I submitted my application. *I was wrong.* My anxiety increased. I am constantly thinking about three possible outcomes. First, my application is approved and I get my permanent residence. Second, my application is denied, but am somehow allowed to stay in the United States until I can submit another type of application. Third, my application is denied and I have to go back to Mexico. *I can't do this anymore.* I've been told many times before, "Oh don't worry, it'll all turn out okay," or "It's not a life or death situation—you shouldn't stress too much." I admit, it's not a life or death situation, but it is a major part of my life, and it is something I have no control over. *I can't do anything, absolutely anything.* That's the part that stresses me out the most, the fact that I have no control over the decision, the process timing, or who will read my application. My life is placed in a box over and over again, and the only time I'm allowed to come out is when the government is done processing my paperwork. This could take anywhere from six months to nine months or even more. *My life's on hold. I can't move on.* That's six

months of waiting around, hoping to get a letter saying that my application has been approved. That's six months of me wondering what's going to happen to my life after college.

"I'm stuck..." I told one of my mentors as I broke down because I hadn't heard back from the government, and it had been over nine months that my application had been submitted. What happens if I have to go back to Mexico? *What would I do? I don't belong there anymore.* I love Los Angeles; it's my city. *I don't want to go back.* People often don't consider the massive impact deportation can have on others, especially on those who have lived in the U.S. for most of their lives. The government is sending back people who *are* American, maybe not in the legal sense, but in the cultural sense. *We belong here.* Facing deportation isn't limited to facing violence. It also introduces a wormhole of fears, and very few opportunities. Most of the innocent people who are deported are forced onto an endless and unfamiliar road. *They get lost. I will get lost.* I know of many people who have faced this and it scares me. Why can't I just stay in the city that has become my home? *LA is where I belong.* I used to think I would never fit in this large city. Now I realize that's what LA is about, standing out.

Sometimes I look over the LMU bluff and simply admire everything about my city. To my left, I see the vast blue ocean, and to the right I see the Hollywood sign next to the Downtown skyscrapers. Off into the distance, I sometimes see the mountains topped with the whitest of snows. *This is beautiful.* In between all of this, I see adventures, past, future, and present. I see opportunities, from being able to attend LMU to the future dream of working for an engineering firm somewhere in Los Angeles, or joining a post-graduate service program somewhere in the country. *It's a beautiful city.* I see relationships. Those that I've formed in the past, the ones that I'm currently nurturing, and the ones that I will hopefully hold on to as we wrinkle together. *It's a beautiful life.* Possibilities float around the skies as infinite clouds. But that's exactly what they are—moving clouds that come very close to me, but with a sudden gusty wind they float away.

There have been so many times when I've encountered an opportunity, but too often the excitement vanishes as quickly as it appears. I remember a time when I received an e-mail from one of my professors about an internship opportunity with NASA for civil engineers. "Are you kidding?" I said to my friend, "Civil engineers aren't really hired in this field of study—it's the opportunity of a lifetime!" I'd always dreamed of working with NASA but I knew that it was a longshot. But this was it; this was the bridge that could make my dream a reality. *This was my chance.* A few minutes later, this dream vanished as I read one of the last requirements at the bottom of the application page: "Must be an American citizen." Each letter in that sentence had a voice of its own. They all screamed loud and clear, and my ears simply could not take it. I fought back my

tears, not allowing my friends to see one more piece of my heart tearing apart. This happens more than I like to admit. *I'm tired of this.*

I'm almost in tears. The drumbeat continues as my heart races in this suffocating room. *I want this to be over.* I think the family sitting down next to me, also waiting for their interview, has noticed that I'm really nervous. The grandma and I occasionally exchange smiles. They're comforting smiles trying to cover up the worry. *It's been an hour.* I hope they call me in soon because I can't take it anymore. My worries are taking over my hope. I try to be enthusiastic regardless of how many no's I get. I try to keep my positive attitude and a smile on my face everywhere I go, but this is often a façade for what's really going on inside of me. *I don't want to worry anymore.* I constantly think of what will happen if I can't become a permanent U.S. resident. It really is all I think about.

What if it's denied? This is the one thought that sticks around no matter what I'm doing. Even if I'm working on homework, a task at work, or even meditating, this thought is always in the back of my head. *What if it's denied?* I have little to no control over my future and there's only so much I can do to help my case. I smile hoping to keep my mind and heart on the positive side. *What if it's denied?* As I wait for the final minutes before my interview begins, my smile is finally starting to go away. This is the truth to my story, the real reason behind my broken smile. *What if it's denied?*