



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

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Wanting Out

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As a first generation student, it is hard to know where you belong, especially when you are placed in between two distinct worlds. Do you belong in a place where your family's traditions and culture are deeply rooted or do you belong in a place where you are being constantly shunned and have to prove who you really are?

1997: The beginning to a crowded life in a world that doesn't want you

My parents met in the United States and both migrated from Mexico in the early 1990's. They conceived my brother in 1996 and I was born right after in 1997. From the moment I was born to the time I was twelve years old, we lived in a four-bedroom house with more than thirty relatives and family friends. My father was half owner of the house and since he shared the ownership with a man whom he thought highly of, he allowed this man to take in his whole family that had just migrated from Mexico. This man was my uncle, who I love, but who I also have resentment towards for making my father an alcohol and drug addict. Waking up every morning to cereal and milk because the kitchen would be too crowded was a drag. My mother, father, brother, and I shared one bedroom and bathroom while my uncle kept all the other rooms in the house. People slept in the hallways and living room while the men spent Thursday to Sunday drinking beer and overdosing on drugs. Where did that leave space for the young ones to play? On the side of the house where we would keep the trashcans or the vacant hallways during the day.

Being raised with children my age or older was a nightmare. There would be constant fights about who's using which toy or who's playing what role in *la mama y el papa* game. Most of the fights would start with my brother and I because although we called each other cousins, we were not blood related to most of the children that lived with us and they always wanted us to take the blame and pick the fights. They did not want us because we weren't a part of their family; at least that's how my brother and I saw things.

I was walking into our room, walking through the hall trying really hard not to step on someone's toy or foot. I took one big step towards the door to our room and in the midst of it all, I feel an intense pain in between my legs. Gerardo had purposely kicked me when I was trying to jump over him. "*Ten cuidado por donde pasas pendeja.*" All the boys started laughing. I was nine years old. He was only 7. I cried to my mother in pain while I watched him get away with it. We were poor, my father was an alcoholic, and there was nowhere to go in a place where I had no space or sense of belonging. I wanted out.

This was my world growing up in my early childhood years. My living circumstances made me feel trapped in a room where I knew there was only one way out that felt far out of my reach. There was this panic, this hope that someday I would live a different life, in a different home, with different people.

2004: The death of a loved one

My grandmother's death in 2004 was what brought my mother's family together. They had no choice but to go to Mexico and travel back to the United States illegally, including my parents. My brother and I were the only children to go with the adults because we were the only ones able to come back to the United States without a problem. My grandmother who I did not know well was deceased and it was my first time meeting all my family in Mexico. Even at the age of seven, I was experiencing high level of anxiety due to problems at home and meeting my family from Mexico for the first time. I was afraid of what my family would think of my brother and I because we were *pochos*, a name people from Mexico call their relatives that are born and raised in the United States. After my grandmother's funeral, emotions floating around my family had settled down and it was my second week there. It was a chance for me to explore where my family traditions had originated. But then I began to wonder about things that don't really cross your mind as child.

Walking along the unpaved pathway next to the river I could feel the heat rising from my bare feet to my face. I was walking with my cousin and I could not help but to stare at her and think of me. Her skin was darker than mine and the complexion of her face reminded me of my mother. I didn't look like my mother or my cousin and in my mind I was wondering why. I was wondering why she could not come back with us to the United States, why she was different than me if we shared the same blood. Everywhere I went with her she would greet the people in the village and they would look at me and would see me as the girl from *el otro lado*. I was known as Loreto's *hija*, a girl from a woman they had last seen ten years ago. I was the white Mexican and, to many, the *Americana*. I could not understand why I couldn't be just Mexican in their eyes. I was different. I wanted out.

Meeting my family for the first time was an experience where I learned about my culture but where I also wondered about who I truly was. Am I Mexican, American, or in between? That's what my seven-year-old brain thought of. In

Mexico, my brother and I were the intruders, the Americans who speak English and don't know what its like to live in Mexico. Our cousins resented us for living *The American Dream*. Their uttermost desire was to simply know what *the norte*, the United States looked like. What they didn't know was that back at home, we were living a similar life as theirs. Living in the United States is not a place of dream for many immigrants but rather a place where you work hard, sacrifice, and try to live a better life despite all the times you get put down by American society.

2008: The feeling of shame

When my years of elementary school were over, it was time to decide what middle school I would be attending. The schools in my neighborhood were the worst they had ever been during that time. So my mother went to one of my elementary teachers to see what other options there were. I ended up attending a middle school in a city that was safer and had a better community. The majority of the time I would take the school bus there but sometimes my mother would have to pick me up from school. My mother would drive a red 1991 Honda Accord and would always wait for me right outside the gate with a bag of snacks to eat on our way back home. I dreaded all the times she would pick me up from school because my friends' mothers wouldn't drive a 1991 Honda Accord or wait for them outside the gate with snacks. No, they would drive the newest models of Mercedes or Lexus and would park the furthest from the gate as much as possible.

My friends had nice clothes and nice shoes while I had clothes from thrift stores and the Swap Meet and pairs of shoes from the 3x20 store. Their mothers had brand handbags while my mother had the same purse she had bought from the Swap Meet a few years ago. I was envious of what my friends had that I didn't. I felt out of place not sharing common interest with the students I went to school with. I wanted my mother to have a newer car. I wanted to have a home with ceramic tiles and a beautiful kitchen; a room of my own where I could put posters and choose my own bedding. I wanted a friendly home without mold, cockroaches, or holes in the walls so that I could invite my friends that invited me into their homes.

“Why don't you invite us to your house Melissa, we really want to see it!” I could feel my heart thump faster and my cheeks getting pink. “We won't judge you, is that what you're afraid of?” “No, it's not that, there is just nothing to do over there.” My best friend had convinced me to allow her into my home. All of a sudden, she runs out screaming hysterically when she finds a cockroach on the wall. I wanted to disappear under the face of the earth. My father

worked to provide us with our basic needs and sacrificed a lot and my mother always made sure there was food on the table. Yet, something inside of me felt like it wasn't enough. It seemed as if whatever I had was unusual for many. I wanted out.

I was upset at my mother and father for putting me in a middle school where I felt different. I wanted what others had. I knew that going to a middle school away from my neighborhood was the best option for me but I never imagined how difficult it was going to be accepting my own life and trying to fit in to a middle class community coming from a poor, gang oriented community. I felt trapped between what was morally the right thing to believe and what I believed I wanted to have.

2011: Facing failure for the first time

In middle school, I had received straight A's all three years and although it's only middle school and isn't very significant to other people, it was such a huge achievement for me and for my family. I was invited to an awards ceremony my 8th grade year. That day was a special day for me and the best part was that for the first time since I was born, I had my father sober by my side. I could not wait for my father to see me walk on that stage to receive the award of *academic excellence*. It was this day that I had looked forward to being in that age at that point of my life. What had happened that day made me feel furious, sad, lost, and destroyed, feelings that looking back at them today, made me stronger.

I wore my favorite dress and put on my best-looking shoes. I asked my mother to curl my hair and put on me the lightest shade of eye shadow she could find since I still wasn't allowed to wear make up. I walked in with pride. "This student has academically achieved excellence by receiving straight A's...can Lauren Smith please come up on stage." My father went up to the Principal and with his heavy Spanish accent attempted to explain to the principal that there must have been a mistake but all my father received was a handshake and a "hello, sir." I had worked hard to receive acknowledgement just as much as Lauren and I felt like I wasn't enough. I wanted to leave that middle school right away because I felt like I had failed. I wanted out.

The only thing I received that night was a certificate from my favorite math teacher. I had later discovered that this girl's mother was heavily involved in the school's Parent Teacher Student Association and was very good friends with the Principal. For a moment, I had wished that my mother would have been more

involved in school, but not knowing how to speak English it was very difficult for her to do those things on her own. I always worked hard in middle school not having a specific goal but knowing that it would pay off. Not receiving the award made me feel like I was not good enough to be a part of this world in which we are told that in order to be successful, you must have an almost perfect education. To me, I had failed because in my own world, I had believed of excellence to be normal. I expected that from myself.

2015: When College hits you hard

After four painful and agonizing years of high school, I had finally made it to college. What I envisioned college to be was completely different than what I am experiencing now. I thought I didn't have to prove anything to anyone any more. That I didn't have to pretend to be someone in order to be accepted by others. The realities of college had hit me and I had come to realize that things don't come as easy to me as they do to other students, which made me question if I belong and deserve to be in college.

I had stayed up the previous nights working on my essay and studying for my midterm. I felt good about my grade in the class. Days passed and Tuesday came, the day we were going to get our grades back for the essay and the midterm. I was handed my essay: C-. I was handed my midterm: B-. Everyone in the class felt indifferent about their grades because they had gotten A's and B+'s. The professor had everyone clap and congratulate those that received *excellent* grades on their paper. I received mine and there was complete silence. I felt this empty hole in my stomach. I wanted out.

I struggled and continue to struggle with the concepts in the courses that I take. When I see others participate more and have more knowledge about issues going on in the world there is this feeling of incompetence that rushes through me. Being a first generation student in a private university with the majority of the students having had a quality education in high school was difficult to accept the first semester of college. Sometimes I wonder whether I was ready for college or whether I have the capability of surviving college while meeting my own expectations. I would have preferred the transition from high school to college to be easier but I was on my own. My grades and achievements depended on me the same way they did in my earlier years of education. My parents have never told me what I should or shouldn't do. All they know is that college gets you a degree and a good career.

The countless times that I wanted out I questioned who I was or where I belonged. Growing up in a low income, immigrant family while being a native to the United States had challenges that brought a mixture of confusion and misunderstanding about my identity. It was never explained to me how I could deal with being a person who speaks fluent Spanish at home and a person who speaks fluent English at school. The mixture of two distinct cultures made we want things that others had, be recognized the same as others, and feel wanted where ever I go. Truth is, being a *Latina* in the United States includes more than just trying to be a women in a male dominant world. It includes accepting the moments in life that are meant to pull you into a dark hole and start seeing them as challenge. With that challenge comes finding yourself in between your Mexican and American identity, the intertwining of two worlds. Although my living circumstances, my connection with my family in Mexico, and my experiences in schooling have improved, I look back at these points in my life and realize that they shaped me into the person I am now. I lived it, fought the feelings in my mind, and moved on and this I learned has helped me create an identity of my own.