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

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## Compton

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Compton isn't the safest place to grow up in. There is a clear distinction between Compton and its surrounding cities, expressed by dirt, poverty, gangs, and graffiti. As I walk through the streets, I find nature that has given up on life, cracks and holes in concrete, as if Hulk just made a superhero landing. I walk past smoke shops, shut down cleaners, and liquor stores on every corner. The smell of weed caresses my nose, kissing it, teasing me, knowing I'll smell it again. I see cop cars hovering around neighborhoods like flies on poop. The more cops you see, the more dangerous a hood is. People usually feel safe with the presence of cops, but I feel more threatened by cops than the actual cholos in this city.

As I pass a graffiti stop sign, and a graffiti trash can, and a graffiti billboard, I avoid a group of plain white shirts, three times their usual size. They're constantly looking left and right, observing any changes and spotting their next target, always on the lookout for danger. "Safe." I tell myself. I am able to hear the repetitive use of "foo," "dog," and "ese" as I walk away. A majority of the people in Compton are super observant. It's impossible to have a conversation with someone without that person constantly looking around at the environment, and I don't mean that in a good way. People focus more on the things happening around them, trying to expect the unexpected. I don't blame them; the only goal here is to survive.

There is a virus destroying Compton, impossible to see from the outside, but growing every day, caused by a lack of resources, lack of positive role models, lack of drive, and a lack of hope. I see what could've been. The hopes and dreams of a dysfunctional community have been forgotten and left in the past. Broken spirits are omnipresent, like the presence of fear and danger. I start reflecting about my life in Compton, and I've been through some crazy shit. I've been in the middle of a cross fire. I've lost a few close friends. I've seen someone get stabbed in an alley. I've seen police brutality and racial discrimination. I've seen the results of drunk driving, hit and runs, and drive-bys.

It's rare for someone to make it out of the hood. I've never heard of anyone going to a 4-year from Compton. I've never heard those words put together in a sentence like that, and apparently neither has anyone else. I would get confused and shocked reactions when I told someone I was attending college. They would see me as a traitor. They would see me as someone who was too good for Compton. They would see me as someone who was running away from reality. "Oh so you have money?" "Oh so you're a good kid now?"

\* \* \*

LMU is a breath of fresh air. Instead of the atmosphere being surrounded by fear, it is surrounded by positivity and curiosity. The Palm Walk is a portal, connecting two beautiful parts of the campus together. The Bluff is peaceful

enough for you to find nirvana. The library is quiet enough for you to study in for years, forgetting about the concept of time. The Chapel can turn sinners into saints. The breeze from the beach feels like being trapped in a vortex of cooling kisses. There is nature everywhere. The grass is green enough to camouflage Hulk. Palm trees are tall enough to be mistaken for skyscrapers. Flowers are colorful enough to be an Instagram picture.

It's the complete opposite from Compton here at LMU. Everyone walks around with a smile on their faces. Everyone is proud to be here, and excited to add value to the campus. Everyone communicates with one another with respect. Everyone is eager to lend a helping hand and aid me with any situation. The professors are even willing to assist me outside of class with any personal issues. I could not imagine being at any other place besides LMU. I never thought it would be possible to be surrounded by so many friendly people, so many people that are genuinely concerned about how I am doing.

Yet I somehow feel guilty for being here. I feel guilty for leaving everyone in Compton behind while I better my life. I feel guilty that I am not able to help everyone. I feel guilty that I am able to call LMU my home. I don't deserve to be here. I should be in Compton, looking out for my little brothers instead of living in a false reality, ignoring the real problems my family faces every day.

It's tough. Despite the fact that I've made lifelong friends, there's still a part of me that feels like I don't belong here. There's a part of me that feels like I am not good enough for this campus, not good enough for the people who are in it, and not good enough for society to see me differently. I'm so used to different norms. Compton's definition of success is money, and fame. LMU's definition is leaving behind a long-lasting legacy. I react differently to certain situations. I'm more careful with my choice of words and my behavior. I always observe the environment and analyze every situation, even if I'm in a place with zero danger.

I am aware of the obstacles I have overcome, and I am not ashamed to tell someone that I'm from Compton, even if I do get a puzzled reaction. I'm proud to say that I come from a place where ghetto birds make up 70% of the daily sounds. I'm proud to say that I'm from a place where danger and fear lurk around every corner. I'm proud to be from Compton, the city of hope and broken dreams, the city of fear and adventure.

“If I told you that a flower bloomed in a dark room, would you trust it?”  
—Kendrick Lamar