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

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## Border Living

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Every four years, that was the drill. Every four years during the summer we went to Colombia to visit our family. Every time we returned it was as though we had never left. We would always pick up right where we left off; spending time watching television with my grandmothers, running down the block with my cousins, playing soccer in the street until the sun went down, and buying empanadas from Doña Olga as the day was coming to a close. Then little by little it became more difficult and more expensive to travel. So ten years passed filled with graduations, birthday parties, college entries and the business of life. Finally it was time to go back. I was excited yet overwhelmed with nervousness. From the beginning, I knew this trip would be different than the ones from my childhood. The cousins that were once my best friends, I now only knew through pictures. Before my family had known the child everyone referred to as *Michelle*; now they were going to meet a different person, an adult.

I remember being in an airplane for the first time in ten years. As the plane shook, I felt like it was going to collapse, but I couldn't help staring out the window in awe. When we got there, I remember getting out of my uncle's taxi and seeing the faces of six eager children all excited to see us. Faces that were unknown to me. I look up and see my grandmother's white three-story home, so different yet the same. A little home you can see from miles away.

Everyone was very welcoming and received us with warm hugs. Although many things had changed, it was still my home. My father has fifteen brothers and sisters, so it was always a huge family reunion when we got there. We would take turns spending the night at different uncles and aunts homes as they all wanted to spend time with us. Every Sunday after church we all gathered in my grandmother's tiny home to drink *cafecito con pan*, coffee with bread.

As time passed and we got to reconnect with most of our family members, there was one uncle that was very distant. We tried to talk here and there, but he put no effort into trying to get to know my siblings or me. I felt like I was interacting with a stone. All the conversations never went past, "Hi how are you?" and "I'm good, and you?" It was as if he didn't know us, but that was just it—he didn't know us at all. All we were to him were people from the other side, "los gringos." I felt his ice-cold personality whenever he was around. This put a wall between us, and I struggled to find my role in the family. I realized I had missed a whole decade of family outings, weddings, and birthdays, and all my cousins had kids so there was a whole generation I had never even met. It was challenging to interact with some family members because so much time had passed. To them we were strangers.

No matter how hard I tried I couldn't prove to them that I was Colombian enough. I was from the other side where money grew trees, so I was American. But in the United States I am not American enough. I am brown. I speak Spanish. I don't have blonde hair or colored eyes. I'm the daughter of immigrants. I struggle every day thinking about how I will be able to pay for school and how to balance working three jobs while getting straight A's. Oh, and don't forget to come home every weekend!

But whenever I feel like giving up I remembered my father's hard-working hands filled with cuts and bruises, each one with the story of struggle and pain. And his hands look that way so that mine never have to. I remind myself that this isn't just for me. I see how my mother calls my grandma every day at 3 PM to pray. I think about how much my parents gave up to come pursue the American dream. They left their families, their comfortable world, to enter one full of sacrifices. They left everything behind.

When I graduate, my parents should each receive a degree because without them I could have never done it. They live through me, and I am a representation of the life they were never able to achieve themselves. These are just as much their dreams and goals as they are mine. I need to make every drop of their sweat and tears count. My American birth certificate came with a glimpse of hope and a tiny seed of faith.

So I may not be Colombian enough or American enough, but that's OK because I'm not just one. I'm Colombian-American. I do not need to pick one, and each has made me the person I am today.