

August 2016

## Stephanie Smile

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Stephanie Monique (2016) "Stephanie Smile," *First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv/vol6/iss1/12>

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In pursuing anything great and necessary, one has to make sacrifices. I believed that a private high school would nurture my abilities and gifts as a student and help me cultivate a stronger character. Although some of my immediate family was not onboard in the beginning, they all made sacrifices to support me. I did not fully comprehend that I too would make personal sacrifices; I would spend four years fighting to survive in a foreign land.

I yearned for a connection with richly “melanated” people.<sup>1</sup> I hardly felt their presence walking through the halls or sitting in class with me. For four years I could not break free from the responsibility of representing all black or African American people. I was an ambassador, a spokesperson; it was a position I could not decline. Eyes would cluelessly fixate on me. They burned holes into my skin, just hoping to see tears and anger pour out over the countless deaths of blacks in the news and the never-ending ramifications of slavery we are still fighting to overcome. Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison must have been my parents because I was expected to know about and relate to every black experience they publicized so brilliantly. Most days I was overwhelmed by nauseating smells of blatant ignorance and entitlement, and I often felt obligated to educate the sincerely unconscious. A breath of fresh air, the moment where my body finally exhaled and smiled, came at graduation.

My high school diploma and commitment to LMU, formally known as Loyola Marymount University, was my prize for surviving Sacred Heart. You do not understand how happy I was and how happy my family was that I graduated. We all believed that I was absolutely capable of holding my own academically—that was not the problem. We didn’t know if I would socially survive because almost every day I came home feeling beaten up, miserable, lost, and disconnected from anything that made me who I was. The moment they called my name and my family screamed the loudest of everyone and my dad shouted “you’re the one!” I was on my way. All I could do was hope that in the next land I journeyed to, my battles would be a little different. Without my family to go home to this time around, I hoped that I would not have to fight alone.

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LMU was vastly uncharted territory, but small and beautiful. It was almost another Sacred Heart Preparatory, its own little paradise; still, LMU had enough of what I was missing, at least for the moment.

When I heard about TLC, short for The Learning Community, I knew that I could not pass up the opportunity. A scholars’ program to help African American students transition from high school and build professional networks was just what I needed to feel more comfortable and confident in my abilities as a student, specifically a student of color. Everyone told me that college would be

the place to find students who looked like me and had similar educational aspirations. College would be...the start of something new; I guess Disney's High School Musical said it best.

Thinking about starting my freshman year and deciding on opportunities I had been presented with, like TLC, I found out a little more about myself. **I am a first-generation college student.** I knew that my parents and siblings had not gone to four year universities, and that not all of them had completed community college, but I didn't know that afforded me another identity. My family couldn't tell me a lot about college life, they couldn't really prepare me for the academics, and they knew little about creating strong resumes and networking. They are some of the most intelligent and hardworking people I know, but they didn't possess the resources that could have helped me transition into college with a little more ease and confidence. I knew the opportunity to get acclimated to LMU's campus and all of the available resources before school even began would be beneficial to my success. The fact that I would be with other African American students was a bonus.

Moving in three weeks early was crazy and exciting. LMU was nearly deserted, but old-school R&B and hip-hop music blared through the freshman dorm area. I walked up slow, stunned a little at the many brown faces. All of them were so different, yet they looked like me. The TLC director, office staff, and RAs were all smiling and laughing with each other; then they welcomed me to check in. My heart was pounding and I was smiling inside. I really didn't know what to do other than rush to move in. Fourth floor in Del Rey South, one of the more updated freshman dorms, was my home for the next three weeks. After moving in, I was too nervous to interact with the other students, so I clung to my mom and brother and did what I enjoy—I ate. It kept me calm for a while until it was time for an introduction. I kept playing scenarios over and over in my head, thinking about how my life would be those next three weeks and four years, and I couldn't stop staring at everyone. I was in shock...

Finally separated from my family, I grew stiff. My heart was pounding again, but not because I was excited. Honestly, I was actually a little hesitant about joining TLC because, although I wanted go to school with other driven students of color, I was intimidated by my own people. It's weird, I know, but for four years I had minimal contact with people who look like me. That wasn't exactly a choice, but how my life was playing out. And as alien as it sounds, that was the truth. I had been stuck in limbo for a while, but sitting next to my mom and brother, listening to Dr. Stone speak about Black heritage, culture, and traditions, I knew that I could not turn back. This was what I wanted, right?

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Day One...it was new, moments were fun, but things were settling in quickly. People found those they clicked with or those they wanted to get to know. Me being the quiet and more reserved one in a group full of extroverts and strong personalities, I was nervous because it wasn't happening like that for me. I kept telling myself that it would take time because all things do take time, and something worth having is not to be rushed. But that didn't mean that I could sit back and expect things to just happen; I had to make an effort too. My roommate and I got along and we were getting to know each other, but there were other people I needed to connect with. It was hard and uncomfortable, minutes seemed to go on forever, especially in those 'elementary' moments where people would pass my seat on the bus or sit far from me on the couch. It probably wasn't a big deal to anybody else, but when I was in that moment, all I wanted to do was crawl back into my shell. I realized that I was afraid of being rejected and disliked by my own people, people I longed to have a connection with. As time went by, and we took classes and had discussions, I also began to think that I wasn't up to par with others academically, and that I didn't have a lot to offer the strong community of black students. I was black and they were black, but I didn't always feel like I was one of them.

Life in the program was a real rollercoaster; our group and our energy was definitely unique, but not always enjoyable. I remember calling home late one night because I didn't know what to do with myself.

"I don't feel like anyone likes me or wants to get to know me, even my roommate is a little distant now. People come off kind of passive aggressive and a little insensitive. I've been trying, but I don't feel like I fit in or fit the type of person they all hang with. I'm just frustrated with myself..."

My family would talk me through it all, my brother often making me think about what was most important.

"Listen, it's all about the experience. As time goes on you'll learn how to deal with the good and bad. You're doing things we haven't done..."

The good days would roll in sporadically and my phone calls would change.

"Everything is good. We're all hanging out in the hall talking. I'm kind of becoming friends with a few people. A.C. actually invited me over to her house for Thanksgiving if I can't fly home..."

I look back on some of the hard conversations I had with my family and the moments that summer I wouldn't want to happen again; I pushed through it all because there were moments that were great, and being in TLC was an important resource in itself. In the end, TLC ushered me into my freshman year with some experience, and I was grateful for that, especially as a first-generation college student. Walking around LMU the first few days, even weeks of school, I actually felt like I had some family, and I was finally comfortable being immersed in a

community of people who looked like me. However, throughout the year I did have to adjust to the larger black community. Ultimately, I learned that I had to find the communities at LMU, black or not, where I felt like I could absolutely be myself.

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Mid-first semester, a friend and I sat in Sacred Heart Chapel, the main chapel on campus, to listen to LMU's gospel choir practice. Taking a break from school work to hear them sing was refreshing. Surprisingly, the power and strength of their voices made me feel tranquil. I actually couldn't stop smiling...

A few minutes into being there, Dr. Dee, the choir's amazing and talented director, stopped practice and turned to us. After a brief introduction, my friend and I were standing with the choir learning their songs. I was nervous, so nervous, but I felt the warmest energy. Gospel choir became the place for me to let go of any stress, any worries, and any feelings of not belonging or inadequacy. That community, comprised of students who look like me and students who don't, made me feel comfortable and surer of myself. By the end of the year, I had learned about music, the rich roots of gospel, African American traditions, and I had learned to be confident in my voice and who I am all around.

My first year at LMU has come and gone so fast. On Friday, May 6th, I packed up my belongings and turned the lights off in Whelan 376.<sup>ii</sup> The room was so bare, stripped of my presence like I was never there, making it official that I had made it through and was moving on. But even with all of the triumphs and struggles that lie ahead, I never stop thinking about the journey this past year.

Some of the dreams I carried from the Bay Area had a chance to blossom in sunny Los Angeles, and I owe a lot of that to the many strong forces behind me. But my drive and insatiable hunger for success and resources I lack also made me my own force. I pushed my limits. I wanted to find comfort in the black community, dispel any intimidation, and create a network of support. With all the success and failure that came, I realized that no matter what community of people I found myself in, my growth as a more confident individual would be what I needed to face anything. There will always be challenges in the pursuit of higher education, challenges that drain my energy, bruise my spirit, and ignite inextinguishable fires. But as much as going to college was an option, it was also a necessity. As a first-gen student, my brother tells me all the time, "You're gonna be the one to break the cycle. You're gonna do big things." I know I can't let anything hold me back from making this happen for my family. Education is such a powerful thing. "Education is freedom,"<sup>iii</sup> our freedom.

Sometimes I walk around with a dark cloud over my head and I don't give myself enough credit for how far I have come. It's all about the story I choose to tell, and when I think about it...I have so much to SMILE for.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> As a junior in high school I was co-leader of the PUMA club (People United for Multicultural Awareness). In the midst of planning our retreat, I started talking to our staff overseer about being a black girl at my high school. For some reason, in talking about people of color and our skin, I blurted out how we are very "melanated," pertaining to the amounts of melanin in our skin. I am not really sure how the word came to my mind because it is not an actual word, but it stuck with me.

<sup>ii</sup> My freshman dorm room.

<sup>iii</sup> One of the most powerful statements I have ever heard. I had heard it said a few times before, but it was charged with new meaning on the First To Go Dominican Republic trip this past May.