

Introduction

Voices of the Minority Undergraduate Fellows Program (MUFP) Fellows

*I am my own story.
The right to say I am from where I am
and have the last word
Because I'm the only one who can answer that question.
—Julie J. Park*

The concept of “voice” is much discussed in higher education. In academic circles—in every discipline and every program—how to exercise and express one’s voice is an issue. This book is about voice, especially underrepresented students’ voices rarely heard in colleges and universities or in student affairs literature and research. It is not that these voices are not present; rather, they are more likely ignored or misinterpreted. When present, some on college and university campuses dismiss their relevance. Some find their cadence or

tone difficult to understand. But not having a voice at the table or not having it represented in “official” places such as literature or policy does not mean that someone does not have a voice. This book is a medium for voices. It is a testament to the idea that students—especially students of color (given the history of higher education)—have the right to define themselves.

The book presents the voices of students in NASPA’s Minority Undergraduate Fellows Program (MUFP). The program was established in 1987 to encourage the number of minority students in higher education and student affairs. Since its early founding, the population of students served was expanded to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and students with disabilities. In 2005, the program’s name was changed to the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) to reflect the wider audience served. In this book, the authors refer to the program as the Minority Undergraduate Fellows Program or MUFP, which was the name in effect when the narratives were written. All narratives were written by students of color although some fellows were students with disabilities and others were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. In no way, however, are the narratives or the interpretations offered meant to represent *all* students of color.

The fellows included in this book participated in the Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) and took part in an exercise called “Where I Am From.” Through the exercise, Susan Borrego attempted to bring the idea of scholarship into the SLI but, more importantly, encouraged the students to give voice to their experiences. Borrego and the SLI faculty understood that students had a right to define themselves; a right often denied

to students of color. “Where I Am From” was an opportunity to ground the SLI participants in their pasts and their own experiences as they attended college. The exercise helped them understand that their experiences matter and are important to creating a more complete learning environment. This was an important message to convey to the fellows because their experiences are often rendered invisible on college campuses.

I am an uncertain, beat up, exhausted black girl hiding behind the mask of a strong, powerful, educated, self-empowered, and self-motivated black women.

—Lesley-Ann Brown

As first proposed by Borrego, the “Where I Am From” exercise was a risk because it asked students of color to expose parts of themselves often kept hidden. Borrego had been introduced to the exercise herself in a writing workshop facilitated by a poet. Because the starting point is the students’ experience, Borrego connected it to David Kolb’s experiential learning theories (1984). She explained Kolb’s model to the MUFP fellows in the following terms. First, you have an experience. Then you reflect on that experience by asking, for example, “What makes it different or the same as...?” Next, you test what you learned from the experience in a new situation and reflect on how it worked in that situation. Then you consider how you will apply what you’ve learned to your environment. Borrego used Kolb as a way to teach students to experience, reflect, and question. She assured the MUFP fellows that each of them had meaningful

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experiences, and encouraged them to reflect on those experiences and see what questions arose, even if they felt lost and doubtful about saying anything of value. Finally, she brought them to the action-based question: “So, what do you do...?”

In this way, they see that their experiences have meaning and are a source of knowledge and understanding. Borrego wanted the fellows to recognize that they brought important experiences to higher education. The exercise provided them with a way to connect their personal experiences with the experiences that they would have in college—to ground them in their own experiences. It encouraged them to express and understand what it means to be who you are in a place often inhospitable to that concept, and to realize that they could use the knowledge gained from their experiences to sustain them in college.

Students of color, adult students, and working-class or poor students often feel excluded in higher education settings. The theories, methods of conducting business, and spoken and unspoken rules of college and university life differ from the places from which many of these students come. The “Where I Am From” narratives in this book are a window into the experiences of students not well represented in the theories and practices that guide work in higher education and student affairs. The purpose of this book is to broaden perspectives, encourage learning, and expand the reader’s response repertoire. We hope to convey the need to listen to and talk about what students of color say about themselves—not what the theory says or neglects to say about them. A guiding principle of the exercise is that if we, the educators, can get out of the way, then students will fill their rightful space and express their feelings. We must get out of

the way and avoid the inclination to privilege our forms, experiences, or assumptions over those of students. Education is about respecting and honoring the voices of students and their means of expression.

“Where I Am From” created an opportunity for the expression of voice in ways that open the academy to a diversity of perspectives. When you read these narratives, you’ll be amazed at how poetic they are, although the fellows were not asked to write poetry. They were simply read two samples of previous “Where I Am From” narratives and asked to write their own. They were encouraged to believe that they had something important to say; that their experiences were important, worth writing about, and central to the practice of higher education.

*I’m from the bond we discovered between us
and the struggle we took to get there.*

—Joseph Piko Ewoodzie

We, Susan Borrego and Kathleen Manning, are two White women from working class families. Like many people who work in higher education, we straddle class-consciousness. What we have in common with the fellows who wrote the narratives in this book is the feeling that we are in a place not designed for us. Somewhere, somehow, we were given the opportunity for education; we live and work in places where family members, former schoolmates, and others from our past seldom went. While we may not share a common experience of race with many of the “Where I Am From” authors, we do share the common experience of being outsiders in the academy.

We take our role as stewards of and witnesses to the book very seriously. The narratives express private thoughts, experiences, and dreams. We worried about our ability to convey the legacy of these voices. At the same time, we understand that it is not our role to paternalistically protect the fellows, who are quite capable of protecting themselves. In fact, all the students gave permission to have their narratives published in this book. We agonized that our privilege (e.g., race, education, class, professional status) gave us the opportunity to publish a book including their voices—a chance that they, most likely, would not be offered. We worried that our degrees in student affairs and higher education had created a distance from our immediate experience—that we had been “trained away” from it. There is something about education that can break you or strip you down to become something you are not. Even now, we worry that our summaries of the narrative themes do not do justice to the sentiments and passion expressed in these narratives. Most of all, we worry that both student and racial identity development theory do not recognize the assets that students of color, like the MUFPP fellows, possess.

*Persistence to prove I could do
more than others believed.
Fear and overcoming it from
hope and pride and endurance.
—Briza Juarez*

The original purpose of the “Where I Am From” exercise was to give the fellows an opportunity to express their voices as

well as connect them to the process of scholarship and education. We did not plan to write a book or develop a theory from the narratives. Yet after several years of conducting the exercise, Borrego realized that the narratives warranted a wider audience. They show that students are so much more than we know and that their experiences are so much deeper and richer than theory suggests. The voices expressed in the narratives reveal the ways and places where “messiness” is the order of the day and where interesting substance happens at the borders and boundaries of experience.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first half of the book contains the MUFPP fellows’ narratives. They are loosely arranged by theme, but you will probably read into and interpret your own themes from the narratives. There are multiple themes that overlap, double back, and repeat in an iterative, not logical, fashion. In the second half of the book, we, Borrego and Manning, summarize and discuss the themes that we interpreted from the narratives. We relate the themes to student affairs practice and theory but, more importantly, we discuss the theory grounded in the narratives. Our goal is to let the narratives speak for themselves—as authentic expressions of their experiences. We believe that the narratives speak to a whole that is often missing from the professional literature.

WHERE I AM FROM

REFERENCES

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

PART I

*Narratives of Students
in the Minority
Undergraduate
Fellows Program*

CHAPTER 1

Family, Neighborhoods, Love, Disappointment, and History

Where I Am From

J. V. Hollenbeck

*I am from the land of the Midnight Sun
Of coffee beans and sourdough pancakes
Of fresh off the boat and yellow produce
Of Nordstroms and Wal-Mart
Of "Before It was a State"
and "I Got Stationed Here"*

WHERE I AM FROM

*Where a Broadway show has equal precedence
with attending the State Fair
A place of alcohol and misspent youth
Where rural meets urban in a sandpaper
kind of way—she flew back to the village
Carharts with Doc Martens and prom dresses from
Seattle*

*Culture and independence shake hands while
the world's harsh reality kicks you in the tail
Beauty and peace are the shore that
meet the sea of unrest and the mountains
asking to be moved with faith and a little time
border every day and when there is no night
Nature fosters learning but slightly warps time*

*But time is such a lower 48 thing as are
our MTV dreams and credit card desires*

All in all, Alaska is and always will be home.

Where I Am From

Todd Wilcox

I am from a place that makes me the person I am today. I'm from a place of simplicity and humble beginnings.

I am Salt Clan, born for San Juan Pueblo, my maternal grandparents

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are Towering House Clan, and my paternal grandparents are Edgewater Clan.

Ashiihi nishli. Kinlichiiinii Dine'e bashishchiin. Kiya'aanii da' shicheii. Tabaaha' da' shinali.

This is my identity as a Navajo man from the communities of Leupp and Winslow, Arizona.

I am from my experiences as a little rez boy growing up in the boonies with my parents, one brother, and four sisters.

I am from my mother's love, my father's strength, and my Grandmother's wisdom and happiness.

I am from a place where playing basketball and volleyball were my escape and where past trips to town on the weekends were spent visiting family, grocery shopping, and a hopeful trip to McDonalds.

I am from a place where fried potatoes and tortillas is a delicacy, and the aroma of frybread grease and mutton stew from a local vendor can be welcoming.

I am from a history of the Long Walk, government policy, cultural assimilation, relocation, boarding school education, and broken promises.

I am from love and family, struggle and sacrifice, culture and tradition, education and achievement.

This is me, this is my way of life. This is where I am from.

Where I Am From

Aeza Mae Bolo

I am from here and there, and every where; but mainly I am from a land filled with sun, tourist, coconut trees, exotic flowers and crashing waves on the south shore. Even bikinis and surf shorts all around.

I am from military boots, fatigues, PX's commissaries and military life. I am from structure that has made me into the person that I am today. I am from obedience and military time, moving here and there. From new friends made and old ones that may seem lost, but are just at a distance. I am from love and laughter all around me, never ending as the world revolves around. Strong family ties that bond me to my blood.

I am from busy-hustling days on campus that students flock to. The busy days and nights, so that I can keep myself occupied. Busy days of meetings, classes, work, and more work—just so that I can keep myself occupied. Days when I sleep at midnight and wake up at 4:00 a.m. The craziness that everyday life brings upon each person. I can handle!!! But sometimes I think I can be super woman.

I am from the quietness and peacefulness that the world cares for. The silence that you hear on street corners at one in the morning. I am from romance and love that floats in the air when he is nearby. I am from the softness of the feathered-down pillow that I lay on at night, the softness that soothes your soul when times are rough. I am from the light feather or the soft petal that falls as the wind breezes through. I am me...I am Aeza.

Where I Am From

Darrell A. Rodriguez

I am from the country—where kids play outside all day and eat fresh peaches from the trees. I am from the ghetto—where crack heads walk the streets and gunshots are normal. I am from a culture rich in tradition, with large festivals, music, and tortillas. I am from a culture centered around family and hard work, with cornbread, apple pie, and country music. I'm from a family of cotton pickers who came from the hills of Tennessee. I am from faith, work, and dreams. I am from no money. I am from scratch. I am from nothing. I am from setbacks, slow progress, and low pay. I am the underdog that was kicked and then asked why don't you have anything? I am from hope for a better tomorrow and the promise of a brand new day. I am the dream.

Where I Am From

Kimberly Herrera

Where I am from family is very important. As you would say in Hawaii, Ohana is all around you.

Where I am from there is all kinds of noise from the taxi drivers honking, babies crying to the little hoodlums in the corner by the bodega whistling at the pretty girls passing by.

Where I am from the most important seasonings used in food are Adobo and Sazon. My friends laugh at me because I put those two specific seasonings in everything I make from rice & beans to spaghetti.

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No matter what social event is going on you always see the same people in the neighborhood. The little girls playing jump rope, the guys playing dominoes, the women gossiping about what's going on in the neighborhood and, last but not least, the abuelitas in the kitchen cooking and preparing food.

I didn't grow up in New York City all my life but it is always home for me. When I take a ride into the city I end up doing the same routine. I take the train to my grandfather's restaurant, get food for my grandmother and I such as arroz y gondules, white rice with caldito, pollo guisado, pernil, and of course pan con mantequilla.

As I am walking home, I buy some batteries from a guy selling them off the street.

Oh wait, where is the guy with the coco???? As I pass the bodega, I see the little boys in the neighborhood and how they are growing up to be men but still doing the same things with their lives, hanging out on the block.

But of course, they know me as the college girl. As I walk into my grandmother's building I see the neighborhood gossip Jackie shrinking from drugs and I see my cousin with a face full of makeup wishing she were 25.

But I laugh to myself because this is what I see and expect every time I go home.

I walk into my grandmother's apartment and ask her for her blessing and she tells me "Que dios te bendiga."

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We eat and I speak to her in Spanglish, both English and Spanish. I feel right at home. This is where I'm from.

You probably are all saying "Well why is she telling us her routine of when she goes to the city."

This routine is where I come from: My culture, my life, and the things that I love.

Who I Am, Where I Am From

Peter Chu

I am from a place where there were locked doors and closed minds.

But a father and mother who always said "in time." Hey—father and mother, can you feel that separation? I did, in an instant, there was no preparation. "But you will make it someday, you will get there," were the echoes that raced through my mind from my brother and sister's care. I am from a place, where some of you call home, except I didn't call it that, I called it alone. Everything happens for a reason, that's what I always say. Put your life in God's hands, just drop to your knees and pray. "As I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake....Thank you."

Why? Why would someone say this, you ask? Well from a life of pain and sorrow, poems and songs trying to figure out why everything was going wrong. Walking around with my head hung

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low, even got to the point where I didn't want to go. And that was it, I was done. Once you hit rock bottom, there's no where left to go...but up. "Smack"—the sound of my sisters hand across my face. Hypothetically of course, but it still left a trace. "What are you doing?" she said, "we'll get through this together. We've been through bad times, but the sun will shine through the weather." One hundred and eighty degrees, I call it my 2nd turn around. Helping others find themselves, and helping me learn. So now whenever I question myself and feel ever so lost, I turn to my favorite line by Robert Frost. Yet still the way it was written was not enough, I took his line, revamped it and made my own verse. "Two roads diverged in the woods, I took the one less traveled, made my own path, so I can find my way back to help others. So I'll tell you who I am and where I am from—the road less traveled is where it all began."

Where I Am From

Marie Smallwood

I am a person that's looked up to, not only by my little sister, but by my whole family. I'm a person that's put on a tall pedestal, but always trying to get down. I'm southern and country to the people that don't live in the south, but sound like "a white girl" to the people that lives around me. I live in someone else's dream. I'm the one that's going to make it, but what is it? Then it might not be my it. I don't even know my own dreams because I live the life that everyone wants me to live so I convinced myself that's what I want. I get depressed because I don't really know who I am. I am so wrapped up in what I'm supposed to do that I don't think about

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self. They tell me that I'm a "strong black woman," but what does that really mean?

Where I Am From

Natalie M. Byrdsong

*I am from Red and Blue flashing lights
And sirens blaring through the night
From the days it was safe and ok
To play hide and go seek outside
But be in by the time the streetlights came on.*

*From a place where love is a fantasy but also
A safety net
Where the biggest smile might shield away
The times of sadness, disappointment and despair.*

*Friends who are far and in between
And the ones you trust—you never try to let go
Music of Marvin Gaye; Donny Hathaway and
Stevie Wonder that brings you to deep thought,
But eases your soul.*

*I lived in the world of Street Dreams
Where things can go beyond the limit of the sky
But quick \$\$\$, too many babies, and a quick high
Make the boundaries harder and the people forget
About the ride.*

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*A place of solitude, a hope of joy, and
A peace of mind are the elements
That pushed me forward and a way to escape
Towards my own destiny.*

Where I Am From

David S. Smith

*West side of Chicago
Rough looking on the outside
Much love and respect on the inside
Neighbors looking out for me as I walk to and from
school*

*I am from a Preacher and Missionary's home
Monday night prayer, Tuesday night bible class, Friday
night Weekly service
Saturday rehearsal and Sunday morning services
This describes my weeks as a young one.*

*I saw my parents attend church and laugh and smile
with people
Once home, that love and sincerity didn't change.
They showed love and respect to everyone.
It was nothing unusual for someone to call late in the
Midnight hour asking for prayer.
Or to have someone come and stay with us in our
one bedroom*

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*Apartment until they were able to get back on their
feet.*

*I am from a home of respect and obedience
Not only did I have to mind at home, but also in
church,
school, grocery store etc...
There were no harsh words or yelling to keep me in
line
Simply a stern look and the fear of momma's purse
strap being
Transformed into her "Special Helper" and hearing
her say "do
I need to get my help?"*

*I am from a home that firmly believed and relied on
"The Lord shall supply all of my needs..."
I never heard or saw complaint,
Just praise to God and the result of that praise.*

*I come from "Do unto others as you would want
them to do to you,"
"Be your own person"
"Always Think!"
"Education is the key to go places."
"Never limit yourself or allow anyone else to limit
you."*

*I am from a southern belle of a mom
Frozen dinners? Canned foods?*

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*Those were unknown in our home.
Collard greens, baked macaroni and cheese,
smothered pork
chops or chicken, homemade cornbread (not jiffy),
southern
style biscuits (not pillsbury), candied yams (with or
without
marshmallows), potato salad, mustard and turnip
greens
(ham hock included), pound cakes, 3 layered caramel
and
Chocolate cakes (homemade icings), lemon meringue
pie,
Sweet potato pie and kool aid.
That's where I'm from*

Where I Am From

Joseph "Piko" Ewoodzie

I'm from a land far, far away stored in my heart of memories. I'm from uncertainties because when I'm asked where I'm from, I usually ask...what do you mean?

I'm from Monrovia, Liberia, where my family fled at time of war. I'm from Gomoa Jukwa, Gomoa Ankamm, Agona Sweden where I was introduced to life as I know it.

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I'm from the tears that I shed when I said goodbye to my mother to come to this new land. I'm from the joy that filled me when coming here gave me a chance to get to know an absent dad. I'm from the bond we discovered between us and the struggle it took to get there. I'm from the depth of misunderstood and misguided love that lives in my home. I'm from the strict rules that broke my spirit only to be rebuilt. I'm from the love of education that lived in my home. I'm from essays, books, and articles that my dad left on my desk to read, just for conversations while we make pancakes on Saturday morning.

To tell you the truth, I often do not know where I'm from. But every word, every action, every experience have molded who I am, and it stays in my heart.

I'm from love.

I'm from helping and being helped.