

University of Colorado Law Review

Volume 93
Issue 2 29th Annual Ira C. Rothgerber
Conference: Pursuing Citizenship

Article 2

Spring 2022

UndocuAmerica Monologues

Motus Theater

Alejandro Fuentes Mena

Armando Peniche

Christian Solano-Córdova

Kirsten Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/lawreview>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Migration Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Motus Theater, Alejandro F. Mena, Armando Peniche, Christian Solano-Córdova & Kirsten Wilson, *UndocuAmerica Monologues*, 93 U. COLO. L. REV. 291 (2022).

Available at: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/lawreview/vol93/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Journals at Colorado Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Colorado Law Review by an authorized editor of Colorado Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact lauren.seney@colorado.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
COLORADO LAW REVIEW

Vol. 93, Issue 2

2022

UNDOCUAMERICA MONOLOGUES

MOTUS THEATER IN BOULDER, COLORADO*

The following work contains three monologues from Motus Theater’s UndocuAmerica Project, which aims to interrupt dehumanizing portrayals of immigrants by encouraging thoughtful engagement on the challenges faced by undocumented communities and the assets immigrants bring to our country. The monologues were created in a collaboration between leaders with DACA status and Motus Theater Artistic Director Kirsten Wilson during a seventeen-week autobiographical-monologue workshop. All three pieces were presented in a virtual performance on April 8, 2021, as an introduction to the 29th Annual Rothgerber Conference.

I.	“DEPORT ME” BY ALEJANDRO FUENTES MENA.....	292
II.	“THIS BEAUTIFUL DARK BROWN SKIN” BY ARMANDO PENICHE.....	294
III.	“THE MEANING OF COURAGE” BY CRISTIAN SOLANO- CÓRDOVA.....	298

* The mission of Motus Theater is to create original theater to facilitate dialogue on critical issues of our time. We aim to use the power of art to build alliances across diverse segments of our community and country. Motus Theater’s UndocuAmerica Project began in 2013 with the aim to interrupt dehumanizing portrayals of immigrants by encouraging thoughtful engagement on the challenges facing the undocumented community and the assets immigrants bring to our country. Motus works with undocumented leaders to help them write powerful stories about their lives, then uses performances, podcasts, and media to reach a wider audience.

I. "DEPORT ME" BY ALEJANDRO FUENTES MENA¹

I was just a kid when I realized what being undocumented meant. At age eight, I started going to work with my dad, so I could help him rebuild the entire outside of other people's homes—all the while not having a real home of our own. I would help my dad research what to charge and work out all the math. For example, I would discover that for one given job, contractors would charge \$20,000. But my dad had been screwed over so many times that he would only charge \$15,000. Clients would see his strength in Spanish, his lack of English and documentation and give him about \$10,000. And that is who my father believed he was: half the man I thought he was, half the value of any other.

I witnessed as my mother would leave for an entire weekend—seventy-two hours—to take care of someone else's family. She was lured with the promise of being paid over \$300 for the weekend, but she would come back with only \$100 in her pocket. One-hundred dollars that she saw as a blessing. One-hundred dollars that I saw as an attack on our family.

All those rich families saw little value in everything my mom did. They would take her away, only to use her and spit her out. The money they paid was barely enough to put food on the table. It didn't cover the worry my mom had, because she couldn't be home to take care of us when we were sick, help us with homework, comfort us when we returned to an empty house. One-hundred dollars for a whole weekend away from her family—like she was worthless. But don't you understand? She was priceless to me!

Well, spending my weekends without my mom as she cared for other people's children, and spending those weekends working for my dad for free so he wouldn't lose money for the privilege of building a home for someone else's family, and witnessing this over and over and over again, I began to think that I wasn't worth much either. Despite the fact that I had been recognized

¹ Alejandro Fuentes Mena is a Motus Theater UndocuAmerica Monologist. He was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and grew up in San Diego, California, after age four. Through Teach for America, he was one of the first two DACamented teachers in the entire nation. With seven years of classroom teaching experience, a bachelor's in psychology, and a master's in educational leadership, Alejandro is opening an arts-based K-12 school named Radical Arts Academy of Denver in Fall 2023. This autobiographical story was written by Alejandro Fuentes Mena in collaboration with Kirsten Wilson as part of Motus Theater's UndocuAmerica Project.

at school as *Gifted and Talented*. Despite the fact that I was a math wiz; that I learned English, a completely unknown language, in less than a year; and that I was an engaged student. Despite the fact I was the precocious worship leader at my church. I let those weekends of feeling worthless affect me.

I began making jokes rather than making plans for my future. Playing games rather than paying attention. Chasing girls rather than chasing my dreams. And, like all self-fulfilling prophecies, I got to the point where my grades reflected what society said my parents and I were worth: half-priced human beings.

But luckily, I had a teacher named Ms. Kovacic who worked hard to remind me of my value and helped convince me that what this society was telling me and my family was wrong. With her support, and that of many others, I got myself out of that pit of self-deprecation—past the insecurities, past the hate, past the negativity, past that half version of me—into a good college and into a position where I am now an educator who teaches math. And like my mentors, I teach young children their value, because all children are valuable, just as you and I are valuable.

As a teacher, I can't help myself. Let me take you to school for a few moments. Hope you're good with that? Let's start off with a little math lesson. My father is one man, one of the hardest workers I know. My mother is one woman, one of the strongest and most compassionate individuals in my life. My sister is one daughter, a brat but a lovable one, and an American citizen. I'm one son, half of this country and half of Chile. And we are four whole, beautiful gifts, *indivisible with liberty and justice for all*. Not the half-priced individuals that society has attempted to make us.

Moving to applied math and economics: If this country continues to deport the undocumented community, it is missing out on courageous, strong, intelligent, family-loving, hard-working people of great value. And that is not only our loss; it is your loss to miss out on us—not to mention the billions in taxes we bring in every year, which is billions more than large corporations are paying.

Lastly, moving beyond math to ethics: Paying an undocumented person half the value for their life's work; extracting all you can get to build *your* homes and take care of *your* families; and then deporting them, as if they had not brought value, is not just mathematically flawed—it is also an American math story

problem gone wrong. It is criminal to treat us as subservient and less desirable.

I am living in this country undocumented, teaching your children, supporting them, engaging their minds in math and in their dreams. I'm 100 percent here and 100 percent committed to this country in which I was raised, this country that constantly seeks to spit me out. Lose me, and you lose my value—not just the money I pay in taxes and the money I pay into social security that I will never benefit from—but you lose my ability to inspire, connect, and engage. You lose my ability to bring an impact, and you lose the knowledge I bring to my students, who are your children. This country would be foolish to lose me.

Deport me. But in the end, it's your loss.

II. "THIS BEAUTIFUL DARK BROWN SKIN" BY ARMANDO PENICHE²

Like many Latinos, I have a huge family. Unfortunately, I never get to see most of them, because they are on the other side of the United States border with Mexico. My family in the United States, I can count on my fingers: a few uncles, my dad, my brother and sisters.

Thankfully, I've always been fortunate to have wonderful friends who I see as my family. That's why in the seventh grade, when my dad decided to move us to a different neighborhood, I chose to remain in the same middle school to stay with my old friends.

Hanging out with my friends during lunch and sitting next to my secret crush in math class seemed like a no-brainer, but it made for my trip to school to be a long one. I had my routine down though: wake up at 5:30 a.m., catch the first bus at 6:15, arrive at the second bus stop at 6:45, and hope I didn't have to

2. Armando Peniche is a Motus Theater UndocuAmerica Monologist. Before DACA became a reality, Armando shared his story on camera for the short documentary film "No One Shall Be Called Illegal" which premiered at the 2011 Denver Film Festival. He is a Library Program Associate with Denver Public Libraries, is creating his own picture books, and also runs "Leámos Juntos" which provides local businesses with books for children to read while at their establishments, nurturing a reading habit for families. This autobiographical story was written by Armando Peniche in collaboration with Kirsten Wilson as part of Motus Theater's UndocuAmerica Project.

chase after the bus. If I made it to the corner of Kentucky and Federal by 7:15 a.m., I was good. I could take a deep breath.

This meant I had time to stop at the convenience store and grab a cup of hot cocoa, maybe play a couple of arcade games before school. Talk about a warm-up—I'm winning against hordes of zombies before even starting my school day? Yep, no pop-quiz was ever bigger than that.

After school, on nice days, I would skip the second bus and just walk. My dad would still be at work when I came home and my sister at her after-school activities, so I was in no hurry to get to an empty house. On my way home, I would use the concrete dividers on the sidewalk as measures and take the time to practice my music lessons for cello. Each step I made on the sidewalk was a note. I would walk and count: 1–2–3–4. For longer sections I would count 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 For shorter sections, 1, 2, 3, 4. I had my music teacher in my head telling me, "Come on, Armando. Stay on the beat, stay on the beat."

So, one day, I'm happily counting along, looking down at my concrete measures when I see blue-and-red lights flashing across the sidewalk, and I hear an angry voice yelling at me, "Stop. Freeze."

I was totally confused. I might fight video-game zombies, but I was just a kid—barely old enough to sit in the front seat of a car, and here are two police officers coming at me, hands on their guns, yelling. I was freaking out, like, "What did I do wrong?" My mind was going through a mess of different emotions. Because, as an undocumented person, the last thing you want to do—the very, very, very last thing—is to get in trouble. Even a simple traffic violation can lead to deportation.

So I'm thinking, "What did I do? What could it have been? Did I forget to pay the bus driver?" But no way. I remembered paying David. He gave me a transfer. And he would never call the cops, even if I did forget.

The officers were yelling at me to turn around and put my hands up. I was struggling to understand what was going on when the second officer physically spun me around, stuck his hands into my pockets, and started pulling everything out: my gum, the coins left from the arcade, my bus transfer, my student I.D. He yanked my arms tight behind my back and handcuffed me.

I was in shock, totally confused, and terrified. And then, with some kind of kid logic, I thought, "Is it my hair?" My family

didn't have money for regular haircuts, so I cut my own hair—which, as you can imagine with a twelve-year-old, didn't work out so well. I would always end up using the number-four clipper to get rid of the patches. At least it was even! "No," I thought, "it can't be my hair."

Then, they searched every pocket in my backpack, dumping out my schoolbooks. They were looking for something they couldn't find, and that's when it hit me: "They stopped me because of the color of my skin. They think I'm some criminal. I can't believe they're doing this. What if they take me to jail and my dad has to come and get me? Will he need an I.D.? Could they deport my dad?"

The officers pushed me down, grabbed my student I.D., and went back to their car, leaving me on the street handcuffed. It took about twenty minutes to run my I.D. through some database. And while I sat on that curb, all these cars were going by with people looking at me, pointing at me—like I stole something or robbed somebody. They assumed the officers were making the city safer for them—stopping a thief. I'm a kid in handcuffs sitting on the curb, and I wanted to get up and yell, "Stop! I'm the victim here! I didn't do anything! Let me go! I'm innocent! I didn't do anything! I didn't *do* anything!"

And I can't explain to you, even now, how humiliated and ashamed I felt, sitting there with everyone going by pointing at me, looking at me, thinking I was some criminal.

Finally, the officers came out of their car, threw my stuff into my backpack, and uncuffed me. One handed me my I.D. and said the most ironic thing I've ever heard, "Stay out of trouble." No apology. Nothing. When all along, I wasn't the "trouble," *they were*.

I remember it taking me a long time to pull myself together—to even figure out which way was home. But I did make it home, and like many other days, there was no one there. No one I could talk to. Instinctively, I grabbed my soccer ball and went to an elementary school a few blocks away where I often played. There was no field, but there was a baseball cage where I would sometimes practice my shots. I stayed there until evening, kicking the soccer ball over and over and over against the metal cage, taking out my anger and shame on that ball until my foot couldn't take the pain anymore.

I often wonder, how many other brown and black kids go through this stuff? Pulled over, harassed by the police with no

way to channel the fear, anger, and humiliation? How many undocumented kids go through this stuff and have no one at home to talk to? No shoulder to cry on. No soccer ball. Because we start to serve a life sentence away from our families as soon as we cross that border.

I'm a man now, watching another man, our former president, tell the citizens of this country that if you're an undocumented Mexican, you must be in a dangerous gang—a rapist, a murderer. Can I be safe walking home from my job at the library when more and more Americans view people who look like me as a threat? Even more importantly, is my nine-year-old son going to look like a bad guy to a couple of cops? Will my neighbors see me for who I am? A young father hurrying to pick up his son from school so that *he* doesn't have to walk into an empty house. Or am I their worst nightmare? Like some zombie that must be stopped?

And this beautiful dark skin you see, that people are being taught is a threat to this country, is the rich, brown tone I inherited from my grandfather. And let me tell you, my grandfather is the best person I've ever known. No matter how poor he was, he would always house and feed people. Before he turned to religion, he was so patriotic that even when the national anthem was played on the radio, he would stand up. And he loved his grandkids so much, he would wake up extra early and walk miles to a place in Mexico that gave out free milk at five in the morning. So despite our poverty, we had what we needed to grow strong.

Across that invisible border, my grandfather is the person I've missed the most. And because I'm undocumented, I never got a chance to go back and say goodbye to him.

So when you see someone with this beautiful, dark, brown skin walking down the street, I hope you think of my strong, kind-hearted Mexican grandfather. And I hope you will think of me. And I hope you think of my beautiful son, and help me to keep him safe.

III. "THE MEANING OF COURAGE" BY CRISTIAN SOLANO-CÓRDOVA³

When I was my sister's age, ten years old this year, I didn't have many worries. It's funny because my baby sister, D'naayi, is an American citizen, so it should be easier for her. But it's not. It's not right now, because the people she loves most—my mom, our other sister, Beba, and I—are all undocumented. When we are threatened, she is threatened. My baby sister was forced to bear the burden of attacks on immigrants under the Trump Administration.

I remember election night 2016. My mom and I were in complete shock, trying to absorb what had just happened to the country, trying to strategize about how to handle certain possibilities. I remember frantically Googling, "What happens to a U.S. citizen child if an undocumented parent is deported?"

My dad died young, so I needed to assure myself that if my mom was deported, I could get custody of D'naayi, who at that time was only eight. But then, of course, what would happen if Beba and I were both deported?

My mom and I totally lost track of time during our election night panic, so when hours later I came downstairs, I was surprised to find my baby sister, D'naayi, wide awake, sitting in a corner by herself, crying. Red faced, with puffy eyes.

With my dad gone, I've always had to be the big brother—or rather father figure—since my mom was always working. I help D'naayi with her homework, we read each other bedtime stories, play games. I answer those unanswerable kind of kid questions and comfort her when she is scared. But I'm not used to trying to comfort her when, in reality, I needed so much comforting myself.

I remember tilting her chin, glistening with streams of tears, toward me, looking into those deep brown eyes, trying my best to give her soothing answers to her questions, and just saying:

3. Cristian Solano-Córdova is a Motus Theater UndocuAmerica Monologist. He is a Denver native, born in Chihuahua, Mexico. He began working for the immigrant community in 2015 when he ran and won an election to become a Student Body President at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Cristian is a proud DACA recipient, is currently the Communications Director at the National Partnership for New Americans, and hopes to one day work in health policy advocacy. This autobiographical story was written by Cristian Solano-Córdova in collaboration with Kirsten Wilson as part of Motus Theater's UndocuAmerica Project.

Don't cry, baby. Don't cry. It's going to be okay, I promise. It's going to be okay. Listen, why would you be deported? Do you even know what that word means? You shouldn't have to.

Listen to me. You are an American citizen. You will never be deported. You're right. I'm not a citizen, but I've got DACA. They can't deport me. I know mom doesn't, but mom is going to be okay. She has lived here for decades. She is not going anywhere.

Baby don't cry. Please.

I promise, whatever happens, we'll be together. Always. I'll be there to put Band-Aids on your scraped knees. I'll be there to help you with your school projects. Yes, we're going to finish reading Harry Potter together. And I'll be by your side when you need help applying for college. I'll be there for you when you fall in love for your first time. When your heart is broken. I'll walk you down the aisle one day. It really doesn't matter where we'll be as long as we're together. And yes, of course, the puppy is coming with us if we go—Lulu is part of this family too, I'll have you know.

Yeah, that's the dimply smile I like to see. It's going to be okay.

At least that's what I told her. I did my best to offer her what I wanted to hear—what I wanted to believe for both her and our entire family. Because how do you talk to a child about being taken away from their parent or siblings without terrorizing them and stripping them of their innocence?

With each day of the Trump Administration—the increased deportations of parents like my mom, the attempts to end the DACA program that protects me and my sister Beba, the willingness to end rules that limit how long children can be detained, even threats to strip children like D'naayi of their citizenship, and all the [other] mounting threats—it felt increasingly cruel to offer my little sister a fairytale when she might need great strength to overcome great threats.

So tonight, I offer her and you another story. This story won't kiss it and make it all better, but I'm hoping it will help us stay strong, regardless of the challenges we might face.

I was three years old, and my sister Beba was just one, when we crossed the border with my mom. We walked together with a group of people, maybe ten or fifteen, across the desert. We walked for hours and hours at night. I remember we were out in the middle of nowhere following a dim silver light in the distance. I imagined we followed it because it meant we were going the right way, some shining city in the distance.

We finally got to a raised road, lined with streetlamps. To avoid walking over the road that night and potentially being seen, we crossed through a drainage tunnel under the road. Mom had me walk through the tunnel in front of her, and she crawled behind with my sister in her shawl.

Beba and I were wearing those little-kid light-up shoes that everyone was going crazy over that year. Mom had saved up a lot of money to buy them because we were going to be seeing our dad after a year of him being in the United States on his own, and she wanted us to look our best. The shoes were actually super helpful in the drainage tunnel to light the way for mom and all the people crawling through on their hands and knees. But of course, in the dead of night, they were a dead giveaway.

When we were finally able to see the moonlight at the end of the tunnel and catch a whiff of fresh air, the coyotes urgently requested that my mom take off my shoes. "There's a Border Patrol car parked outside," he whispered.

The drainage tunnel emptied out right next to a gas station, where the Border Patrol car was parked. The officers were inside, we assumed, so we waited for awhile, hoping they would return to their car and drive away. But no one was coming out. For some reason, the coyotes grew impatient and abruptly told everyone to move.

In the chaos, everybody immediately scrambled, crawling behind tall grass on their hands and knees as the coyotes gave us voiceless commands with their fingers on their lips and pointing to the ground. But the ground was covered in cactus thorns and prickles and I didn't have any shoes. While everyone crawled, my mom stood up, carrying both Beba and me in her arms, and she just started walking.

At first, I thought she was giving up because we would surely be seen. Everyone else was still crawling on the ground, but she stood up tall and walked with a defiant pep in her step as if she belonged right there where she stood. That's when I realized she hadn't given up. She just had faith that walking

quickly and quietly was her best strategy to protect us. She was resolved that somehow, somewhere, we would be okay and that we would find a home where our family could thrive.

I have never forgotten the look on my mom's face as she walked down the street and out into the dark of an unknown country. That is when I first learned that the real meaning of courage is not to pretend to be immune from fear, but rather to calmly and steadily take action in spite of it.

Our former President might caricature my little three-year-old self as a diseased-toddler-criminal-murderer-rapist-gang-member in the making. He might try to scare people who don't know undocumented immigrants into thinking that a mother carrying her children to safety is nothing less than an invasion. But Beba and I grew up beloved by our friends and neighbors and are strong members of our communities. We both went to college. I even became the student body president of my university. I'm not part of some invading army fighting against America, but, like many of you, I'm fighting for the American ideals I think we can live up to.

He may want to take away my baby sister's right to citizenship, but I remain hopeful that maybe D'naayi or some other young girl might be our future President and help lead us to a future where we live up to our ideals to truly have liberty and justice for *all*.

But that is going to take a lot of hard work and not just on my part, or just on the part of the immigrant community, but hard work on your part too. As Anne Frank once wrote in her famous diary: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO LAW REVIEW