



American Copia

An Immigrant Epic

Javier O. Huerta

“A highly satisfying international, multilingual literary meal.”
– Rigoberto González, author of *Black Blossoms*

American Copia

An Immigrant Epic

by

Javier O. Huerta



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

American Copia is made possible through a grant from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Bryan Dechter
Photo by Jack Davidson

Huerta, Javier O.

American Copia: An Immigrant Epic / by Javier O. Huerta.

p. cm.

Text in English or Spanish.

ISBN 978-1-55885-748-3 (alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3608.U34964A8 2012

811'.6—dc23

2012003145

CIP

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Form N-652

Preface | xi

- 1 American Copia
- 11 “Me das algo, te doy dinero, los dos vamos en el camino”
- 12 “Ayer por la tarde, en el quinto día del pánico, empecé”
- 13 On ta Jorge?
- 15 Amapola: A Play
- 23 “*Publix* me hizo reír la primera vez que vi”
- 24 “Anónimo”
- 25 American Copia
- 38 “Un hombre en mi sueño me dijo”
- 39 “Solo quiero aclarar. Es en mis sueños”
- 40 Meet Memo
- 42 Sum of Our Love
- 45 “Juan Carlos: fui”
- 46 “Don Tomi”
- 47 “Mi amá va a la tienda porque necesitamos”
- 48 “¿Por qué no me quieres?!”
- 49 “Una vez a mi tía Rocío”
- 50 American Copia

- 60 “Así”
- 61 “Dos 11s de septiembre han pasado, y todavía”
- 62 “el audio caja negra de los pilotos”
- 63 “Realmente”
- 64 “La semana pasada”
- 65 Oráculo
- 68 When I Step, Females Respond
- 71 “Cuando el mono 24 se escapa”
- 72 “Por desgracia, Mr. Whipple ha fallecido”
- 73 American Copia
- 84 “¿Cuántos de ustedes confiarían en el Otro, hoy en día?”
- 85 “Soy uno de los mayores defensores de las checklists”
- 86 Wheatsville: A Dialogue
- 91 Las Aventuras de La Dos en Costcolandia
- 95 “Terminaremos”
- 96 “Tootsie va”
- 97 American Copia

“Ubi panis ibi patria, is the motto of all emigrants.”

—De Crèvecoeur, “What Is an American?” (1782)

dedicado a la memoria de mi abuelita chole

Soledad Huerta (1926-2009)

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) processes applications and determines eligibility of people who want to become naturalized United States citizens. As part of the naturalization process, an INS Officer will interview you to determine if you are eligible for naturalization. An individual who seeks naturalization must meet the following requirements: lawful admission for permanent residence, a minimum residency period, a minimum period of physical presence in the United States, demonstration of good moral character and attachment to the Constitution, an understanding of the English language and knowledge of the history and government of the United States. At the naturalization interview, the INS officer will:

Provide Professional, Efficient, and Courteous Service and explain the nature of the interview and the requirement that the interview be conducted under oath.

Allow an Attorney or Other Representative who has filed a Form G-28 with the INS to accompany you during the interview. In addition, if you are exempt from the English language requirements, you may bring an interpreter to the interview, or the INS may select an interpreter for you. If you have certain disabilities, a family member, or legal guardian may accompany you during the interview, at the discretion of the INS officer.

Test Your Understanding of English and Knowledge of the History and Government of the United States, and provide you with the test results. Your understanding of spoken English will be judged by your answers to questions normally asked during the interview. If necessary, the INS officer will repeat or reword questions until satisfied that you understand the questions or do not understand spoken English. If you do not pass the tests at the first naturalization interview, the INS will schedule a second interview for you to take the tests again. If you are exempt from any of these requirements, or if you present a certificate from an authorized testing entity stating you passed the test, the INS officer will not test you at the interview unless there is evidence of fraud.

Receive Your Oral or Documentary Evidence to support your claim to eligibility for naturalization. You must also answer all of the INS officer's questions during the interview that relate to your eligibility for naturalization.

If you have questions or comments regarding your interview, you may ask to speak with an INS supervisor. You may also mail questions or comments to the district director or officer-in-charge of the interview location, or to the INS Executive Secretariat, Attention: Customer Service Comments, 425 I Street, NW, Washington, DC 20536.

After your naturalization interview, the INS officer will fill out the information below which you may retain with your naturalization records.

A# 90-891-109

On 11-27-99, you were interviewed by INS officer STROUD. The results of the evaluation of your understanding of English and knowledge of the history and government of the United States are:

- You passed the English language test.
 You failed to demonstrate the ability to _____ speak/_____ read/_____ write English.
 You are exempt from the English language requirement, or the requirement was waived.
- You passed the history and government test.
 You failed to demonstrate a knowledge of the history and government of the United States.
 The history and government requirement was waived.

If during the interview you failed to demonstrate an understanding of the English language or a knowledge of the history and government of the United States, you _____ will/_____ will not be scheduled for another interview to take the tests again. The INS will notify you later of the final decision on your application.

Grant

Preface

Mi abuelita Chole became a U.S. citizen in her seventies, and her decision to naturalize actually influenced my own decision to apply for citizenship. She likes to recount her INS interview and has related it to me several times. She says that somehow she managed to answer the questions the INS agent posed about her family, her home back in Mexico and her health. She says that the INS agent helped her with some of the words, and that throughout the interview she clutched the rosary beads in her pocket. Then the agent asked her to write the following sentence in English: “I Love America.” She guessed “I,” and “America” is spelled the same in English as it is in Spanish. This left mi abuelita with “Love.” Clutching the rosary beads and praying to la Virgencita she looked around for an answer and noticed on one of her fingers a silver ring that my father had bought more than twenty years ago. On the ring, a serpent slithers and bends to form the letters L.O.V.E. My grandmother attributes this to the infinite wisdom and benevolence of God. I believe my grandmother may have cheated.

“Today I’m going to the grocery store”—this is the sentence that I was given. Inspector Stroup handed me a slip of paper and asked me to write it down. (I know the name of the agent not because I remember it but because I have kept a form she signed saying that I had my passed my exam. Considering that I have a passport and a Naturalization Certificate I probably don’t need to keep any of these other forms. But having lived the undocu-

mented experience I have internalized the need to document my existence.) This requirement to prove proficiency in English as part of the naturalization process conflates citizenship and language. I was being tested not on my ability to speak and write English but on my love of nation, my love for America.

Being in the very awkward situation of proving that I belong in a country in which I had lived already for twenty years, I was rather offended by the simplicity of my sentence. I felt that in a way I had prepared my whole life, at least since the first day I arrived in the United States, for this interview. I arrived in 1981 in the midst of a legal battle between undocumented school children and the state of Texas. A Texas statute denied state funding to any school district that opened their doors to undocumented children. In the late 1970s lawsuits were filed on behalf of those children, and while the issue was undecided the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston established a couple of alternative schools. My family enrolled me in one of these schools, Guadalupe Aztlan in Houston's North Side.

In 1982, the "undocumented student" case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plyler v. Doe*. In a 5-to-4 vote the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented students were not to be punished for the actions of their parents and that undocumented immigrants were to be considered as "persons" and were therefore protected under the Fourteenth Amendment, which calls for equal treatment under the law. The Texas Statute was deemed to be unconstitutional. Furthermore, the case raised the question of education as a right. Justice Powell in his concurring opinion wrote that because of the importance this society places on education the failure to educate a certain group of people would result in the creation of an underclass. Undocumented children, he commented, should not "be left on the streets uneducated." In the fall of 1982 I entered Houston Independent School District and through bumps and bruises, misunderstandings and mispronunciations I learned to read and write and speak English.

By the time of my INS interview, I was an English major at the University of Houston. So I felt ready to pass any exam on or about the English language. And “Today I’m going to the grocery store” was my sentence?! I wanted to tell the INS agent that I could do things with the English language that she could never imagine. Instead I settled for showing her that the sentence scans as iambic pentameter.

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Today I’m going to the grocery store.

“One day,” I told her, “I will write an epic starting with that line.” Poor Inspector Stroup. You were just doing your job. Accept my apologies. My mistake was to think that I or anybody else could master this or any other language. I have since learned of the abundance of language, which is both a great resource for writers and a daunting challenge. I consider this piece an epic about going to the grocery store. I am simply attempting to explore the abundance of experience found in that one sentence.