

Laura Tanenbaum

Creative Non-Fiction

Abstract for In-Class Work: Reflection and Context in the Personal Essay

This assignment was used in ENG 274, Creative Non-Fiction. This class is taken by both majors and non-majors; for Creative Writing majors, it is an option to fulfill their advanced creative writing seminar and also a requirement for journalism majors. The majority are either one of these two majors, Writing and Literature or Liberal Arts majors. This course is located in the capstone section of these programs. This assignment fulfills the course objectives in that it uses the essay “The Ungrateful Refugee” as a model for understanding the personal essay, one of the core genres covered in the class. It asks them to identify *reflection*, a core technique used in Creative nonfiction and to apply this technique to their own writing. It also fulfills course objectives by asking students to locate the wider historical, political and social contexts that create meaning in this genre. This assignment fulfills the integrative learning competency by asking students to identify techniques in a piece of writing and apply that to the creative work they themselves are creating. It also fulfills this objective by asking students to bring together their knowledge of world events and their belief systems about war and peace, displacement and exile. Finally, it fulfills this objective by breaking down the stages of critical reading and writing process into the identification of key features, brainstorming, narrative, reflection and consideration of context. This was an in-class assignment that drew on students having completed the reading of Nayeri’s essay and other personal essays so that they brought to class and understanding of the genre. It was worth 10% of their final grade. The assignment came directly out of the “Meanings of War” seminar. I had proposed a reading of *The Dispalced*, and edited collection in which Nayeri’s essay appeared. The seminar discussion of that volume heightened some of my sense of the possibilities and contradictions of Nayeri’s essay, such as her assessment of teaching narratives of exile to privilege students and how LaGuardia students might both react differently and respond to those reactions. I workshopped a version of the assignment, during which time other participants encouraged me to offer more specific context about the causes and politics of exile as a basis and model for the discussion and suggested a rubric to evaluate their completion of the various stages of the assignment.

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In-class exercise: *reflection* and *context* in the personal essay

**LESSON OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Help students understand more about the genre and form of the personal essay.
- 2) Help students engage with a personal essay beyond the facts of the writer's experience through discussion of **reflection** (writer's consideration of their experience and its meanings) and **context** (larger historical, political, or ideological framework that shapes the author's experiences and with which the author is engaged).
- 3) Prepare students to respond to personal essay in reading journals with discussion of ethical or political questions of essay, use of reflection and context rather than just summary of author's experience or emotions.
- 4) Prepare students to incorporate reflection and context into their own personal essays.

**STRUCTURE OF IN-CLASS WORK:**

**1) Work with partners** In pairs, discuss Dina Nayeri's essay "The Ungrateful Refugee" and discuss these questions.

- A) What wider QUESTIONS (historical, political, ethical) is essay asking?
- B) Identify two places in the essay where the narrator *reflects* on her experiences. How do these reflections change our understanding of these experience?
- C) Identify two places in the essay where we get a sense of a wider *context* - historical, political, cultural? What wider forces are shaping the narrator's experiences and her ideas about them? How does the narrator address war, exile, and the conflicts between nations through an interpersonal lens?

**2) Report back** Bring back to the larger group and discuss. In discussion, try to pull out illustrate the ways a personal essay is not just about the writer:

- How do we see the writer *thinking*?
- How has the writer's thinking and understanding of their experience changed?
- How is the writer entering into a larger discussion?
- What ideas (and whose) are they responding to?
- What arguments is the writer making, implicitly or explicitly?

**3) Brainstorm for student pieces:** How have wars and conflicts between nations shaped your own stories?

**A) Narrative** Describe a scene you would like to describe in your essay

**B) Reflection** Below the scene, reflect on its meanings. Some prompts to get you start:

- I was thinking. . .
- What I remember/what I don't remember . .
- What I didn't understand then/what I understand now . . .
- What someone reading this needs to understand . . .

**C) Context** Below your reflection, brainstorm thoughts about the context for your essay.

- What ideas are you thinking about?
- What forces in the wider world shaped your experiences?
- What belief systems shaped how you understood your experiences?
- What is at stake in the stories you are telling?
- How would your experience have been different in a different place or time?