

English 101
Composition I
Professor Phyllis van Slyck
Spring 2019
For NEH Seminar: Meanings of War

Abstract

The following three assignments were part of an English Composition course based on the theme, Crossing Borders, which I developed in response to the Meanings of War Seminar. Primarily non-majors take this course, or, more precisely, they have many different majors from Liberal Arts to Business or Accounting or Computer Science and pre-Nursing. These are baseline assignments. The research essay (Assignment #2) addresses the LaGuardia Core Competency, "Inquiry and Problem Solving," which asks students to "seek and use disciplinary and cross-disciplinary content knowledge to address challenging issues, weighing evidence and drawing conclusions through a process of synthesis and evaluation." Students addressed this competency by analyzing their own experiences as immigrants, examining the experiences of others in relation to specific stages of the journey, obstacles faced and adjustments made, and by synthesizing personal examples and research investigations. Each of the assignments described below was worth 20% of the final grade.

In the Meanings of War Seminar, we examined numerous primary and secondary critical and literary texts, as well as photographs and documentaries, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways war continues to inhabit peoples' lives. For the assignments I developed during the seminar, I was particularly interested in the ways stories and photographs of "displacement" might be used to tap into and enlarge students' understanding of their own experiences and of events unfolding daily in the news since our administration introduced the "immigration crisis." Each week we discussed new developments in the news and we came to characterize the events at the border, and decisions regarding immigration status of different groups as a kind of "war at home." Students wrote about their own experiences of migration to avoid local violence and seek asylum, and about their status as Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals. We watched documentaries about families fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria. I revised these assignments on a weekly basis and each of the Meanings of War Seminars gave me new materials.

Introduction

Over a three-week period, we will read the following essays pertaining to immigration, migration, belonging and exile, often in relation to war or trauma in an individual's country of origin.

"Children of the Sea" and "1937," Edwidge Danticat (Haiti)
"This is What the Journey Does," Maaza Mengiste (Ethiopia)
"The Ungrateful Refugee," Dina Nayeri (Iran)

“I am Displaced” and *We are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan)
“Love, Honor, and Pity and Pride and Compassion,” Nam Le (Viet Nam)
“Beyond Survival: A Politics/Poetics of Puerto Rican Consciousness,” Liza Fiol-Matta
Girl in Translation, Jean Kwok (selection)

Class Activity—Presentation

You will choose one of the above essays/stories to present to the class (groups):

1. Provide class with the main claim, argument, or theme(s) of your essay/story
2. Give relevant historical context revealed in story or your mini-research
3. Discuss two to three significant quotations that illustrate the theme (explain)
4. Follow our close reading practice: underline powerful words, details, key ideas
5. How does the story surprise you, challenge ideas you have, make you think differently about the impact and implications of war, exile, migration. . . ?

Assignment #1

Writing assignment based on the one of the above readings and presentations.

How did the essay (or story) you chose introduce a new way of thinking about any of the following conditions: immigration, exile, the aftermath of war, and/or displacement.

Discuss specific moments in the essay that challenged your understanding of belonging, displacement, exile.

For example, you might say, “before reading this essay/story, I felt, thought, believed, assumed X about displacement, or I hadn’t thought about this experience at all, or deeply. Reading this essay helped me see, understand Y”).

Be sure to use 2-3 relevant quotations to support your claim.

In your conclusion, see if you can make a connection between what you have learned through this essay and the contemporary debate in the U.S. regarding immigration, the wall, and attitudes articulated in national media that we have read about and discussed.

Assignment #2: The Immigrant Journey

This essay will begin with a pre-writing interview assignment with member(s) of your family about their own journeys (questions to be developed in class). You will then develop a “story” based on family experiences as an introduction to an essay on the immigrant experience. Alternately, students may use one of the stories in our course as the starting point for an investigation of the immigrant experience.

For either topic, you will then decide on an angle: a specific moment in the immigration process—the journey, the moment of crossing the border, the adjustment to a new world. You may also consider the idea of the journey in relation to Joseph Campbell’s “Journey of the Hero,” which we will discuss in class. When we turn to current immigrant

experiences, we will review *The New York Times* each week for new stories about events at the border and we will screen documentary videos about immigrant experiences. In response to dehumanizing treatment at the border, we will also consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights developed by the United Nations in 1949. This declaration may provide you with interesting material for your essay.

Assignment #3: Responding to a Photograph

You will choose a photograph to examine closely and discuss in relation to our course theme, Crossing Borders.

We will examine photographs from Sebastiao Salgado's *Migrations*, Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, Louis Hine's documentary photographs of Ellis Island immigrants, Don McCullin's war photographs of Viet Nam and Northern Ireland, and Graciela Iturbide's images of Mexican indigenous cultures and landscapes.

How do documentary photographs shape the way we feel, see, think about a cultural phenomenon or historical moment, especially in relation to belonging and exile? When you look at a photograph:

1. What words come to mind?
2. What thoughts, emotions does the image evoke in you?
3. Where was photo taken; what is context?
4. In what ways does the photo seem composed?
5. How do the aesthetics of the photo affect/shape your understanding?*

How does a photograph that deals with migration, exile, the aftermath of war or violence expand, enrich, our understanding of the subject? What are the specific techniques, language, ways of SHOWING the subject that are powerful? What does the photograph communicate that words do not?

Outline for this essay:

- 1. Describe the photo briefly but with details that help your reader understand the thoughts and emotions the photo evokes for you.**
- 2. Provide a more detailed examination of the photo, explaining what each aspect of the photograph (angle, center of interest, light, composition, foreground, background) does to create a specific mood, theme, emotion.**
- 3. What questions does the photo raise for you? How does it expand or enrich your understanding of the experience of migration/immigration? Where was it taken—what is the social or political situation?**

*Please refer to detailed handout and class notes on reading a photograph.