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### Inquiry and Problem Solving in English Composition: Belonging, Exile and Migration [Composition]

Phyllis E. VanSlyck

*CUNY LaGuardia Community College*

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**Professor Phyllis van Slyck**  
**Department of English, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY**  
**ENG 101: An Introduction to Composition and Research**

**Inquiry and Problem Solving in English Composition:  
Belonging, Exile and Migration**

**Introduction**

In the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Meanings of War and its Aftermaths Seminar, offered to LaGuardia Faculty in the 2018-19 academic year, we examined numerous critical essays and literary texts, as well as photographs and documentaries, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways war continues to inhabit peoples' lives. When I began participating in this Seminar, I had already planned a first-semester English Composition course based on the theme, Belonging, Exile, and Migration. Thinking about connections between our readings for the NEH Seminar and my course, I was particularly interested in the ways stories of displacement and photographs of migration might be used to tap into and enlarge students' understanding of their own experiences and of events unfolding daily in the news since the current U.S. administration (2016) introduced the "immigration crisis."

As our English 101 course unfolded, we analyzed terms such as "refugee," "migrant," "undocumented immigrant," and "asylum seeker," and discussed turbulent developments at the border as they were presented in the news. We came to characterize the events at the border, and decisions regarding treatment of immigrants as a kind of "war at home." Some students wrote about their own experiences of migration to avoid local violence, others described their family's participation in a Visa Lottery and others spoke about their status as Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals. We watched documentaries about families fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria. In constructing the research assignment below, I was careful to offer students choices. If they preferred not to discuss personal or family experiences, they could choose from various sources in our readings.

**Course Content and Connection to LaGuardia Competencies**

The three key assignments presented here, and their two supporting class activities, are designed to address the Inquiry and Problem-Solving Core Competency and the Written Communication Ability required for English 101. The research essay (Assignment #1) is an inquiry and problem-solving assignment. It 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 analyzed their own experiences as immigrants, or used a primary source of their choosing, and they connected that example to the experiences of others facing migration, displacement and related emotional experiences.

Assignment #1 is also a written communication ability assignment as students are asked to construct knowledge by selecting, linking and evaluating research materials related to a specific aspect of the immigration experience. Each student chose a specific stage of the journey to focus on. They examined obstacles faced, trauma experienced, and adjustments made, and they compared and synthesized personal examples with research. Depending on the topic, the structure of the essay follows an argumentation pattern or a problem-solution pattern. And in the conclusion to the essay, students are invited to impart a message to their audience related to ethical questions the topic raises about the treatment of those arriving at our borders.

The photography essay, (Assignment #2), in a more subtle way, is an inquiry and problem-solving assignment because it asks students to close read the photograph, research its context, connect that context to the migration theme, and to consider ways a photograph communicates differently from a written text.

Similarly, the final reflective essay (Assignment #3) asks students to review our class readings and screenings and to assemble and synthesize evidence from diverse sources of knowledge relevant to our theme by explaining how their selected texts enlarged their understanding.

### **Learning Objectives for ENG 101**

1. Introduce process-based writing, including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, critiquing, and reflecting.
2. Enable students to read, write, and listen critically and analytically, including identifying a text's major assumptions and assertions and evaluating its supporting evidence. As part of this process of inquiry and problem solving, faculty will familiarize students with the concepts of audience, voice, context and purpose.
3. Provide students with opportunities to write clearly and coherently in varied academic genres, rhetorical modes, and forms of argumentation using standard written English (SWE).
4. Provide early assignments that allow students to practice utilizing summation, paraphrase, quotation, and citation to create well-reasoned arguments.
5. Provide later assignments that enable students to develop research skills, most importantly the evaluation and synthesis of primary and secondary sources.
6. Enable students to formulate original ideas and relate them to the ideas of others by employing the conventions of ethical attribution and citation and avoiding plagiarism.
7. Enable students to complete essays that will increase in complexity, ranging in length from 600 to 1500 words.

## THE ASSIGNMENTS

### Preparatory Class Activity A: Group Presentations on Readings

Over a three to four-week period, we will read the following essays pertaining to belonging, exile, and migration, often in relation to war or trauma in an individual's country of origin, often with an emphasis on psychological and/or physical trauma and other responses to different stages of the journey.

“Children of the Sea,” Edwidge Danticat (Haiti)

“This is What the Journey Does,” Maaaza Mengiste (Ethiopia)

“The Ungrateful Refugee,” Dina Nayeri (Iran)

*We are Displaced*, Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan)

*Girl in Translation*, Jean Kwok (selection) (China)

*Tell Me How It Ends*, Valeria Luiselli (selection) (Mexico)

*This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant's Manifesto*, Suketu Mehta (India)

In the second week of class, groups will be established, and each group will choose one of the essays or stories to present to the class. This is a ten-minute, warm-up presentation as we begin analysis of each text. Your task is to help us think about how your text tells us something interesting or important about belonging, exile, migration.

1. What is the main claim or theme(s) of your essay/story? How does it frame an immigration issue?
2. Tell us something about the historical context revealed in story or your mini-research: how does it contextualize the issue?
3. Share for class discussion two significant quotations that illustrate an aspect of the theme we are discussing.
4. Follow our close reading practice: underline powerful words, details, key ideas: invite the class to explain how these words/details help us analyze the text.

### Preparatory Activity B: Developing Close Reading Skills Through Your Journals

Journal assignment: you will write a one paragraph reflection in response to each reading, done in advance of, and in preparation for, the presentations. How did the essay (or story) surprise or challenge you? How does it 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 relevant quotations to support your claim.

## Assignment #1: Your Research Essay on the Immigrant Journey

**This essay is a staged research essay of four to five pages. Details below.**

This essay will begin with a pre-writing interview assignment with member(s) of your family about their own journeys. We will practice by developing questions in class and staging interviews in class. Think about what you want to know and how to elicit details!

To begin your essay, you will develop a “story” based on family experiences. This will be the introduction to your essay on the immigrant experience. Alternately, you may use one of the stories, essays or memoir pieces in our course as the starting point for your essay.

For the body of your essay, you will decide on a specific moment in the immigration process—the journey, the moment of crossing the border, detention, the adjustment to a new world. Create a transition at the end of your introduction that announces the theme you will be focusing on. For example, if you have a family story about detention at the border as a child (see sample essay), you can pose a question or a series of questions: how are children being treated today at the border? What kind of trauma might result from detention or separation of parents and children that we are reading about in the news?

### Supplemental Research Materials

In addition to essays in your course pack and journalistic essays we discussed the following materials. Think about how they relate to your topic, and consider using ideas from them in your research essay:

- The Greek concept of Xenia described in Homer’s *Odyssey*: care for the stranger because beggars and strangers come from Zeus. Consider this in relation to the meaning of xenophobia.
- Joseph Campbell’s “Journey of the Hero” which describes the stages of a hero’s journey in ways that are strikingly similar to the journey of an immigrant;
- *This is Home: a Syrian Refugee Story* which follows an individual Syrian family’s adjustment to life in Baltimore;
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights developed by the United Nations in 1948. This document should provide you with ways of thinking about our ethical responsibility and may fit the conclusion of your essay.

### Essay Structure (See model student essay on “Detention” in course pack.)

- I. **Your story—from our readings or from your own or your family’s experience—make the story vivid and detailed; then make transition to the specific focus on immigration you are pursuing. Example of story: Family held by ICE in detention, in the icebox.**

- II. Your research into other examples focused on your theme—give examples and discuss what they reveal. Example: Other stories in the news about treatment of immigrants at the border: how does each story give us important information about the immigrant’s experience upon arrival? how are these stories connected?**
- III. Conclusion: What are we doing versus what should we be doing? What is humane treatment of others? What does your culture teach about care for others? What are your personal beliefs on this subject? What materials that we discussed are relevant to your concluding thoughts?**

**This is a suggested structure—please feel free to modify it as you proceed with your drafting of the essay. We will be reviewing each stage of your draft in class. We will be following MLA (Modern Language Association) formatting for this essay. In class we will review and practice how to acknowledge in-text citations of sources and how to create a Works Cited page, an alphabetical listing of the sources you have used.**

**Example:**

**Silva, Daniella. “Families’ Anguished after Massive ICE Raids in Mississippi Sweep up Nearly 700.” *NBC News.com, NBC Universal News Group*, 8 August. 2019. Web.**

### **Assignment #2: Responding to a Photograph**

For this assignment, you are invited to choose a photograph to examine closely and discuss in relation to our course theme, Belonging, Exile, Migration.

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, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange’s photographs of rural Americans during the Depression, and Graciela Iturbide’s images of Mexican indigenous peoples.

Class Activity:

1. You will choose your photograph from our initial workshop where we will examine selected examples from the above list, but you are welcome to choose your own photograph as long as it fits our theme.
2. In small groups you will share your photographs and help each other determine how the photo captures or suggests a backstory of war or violence, belonging or exile, struggle or trauma.
3. Then we will work together as a group screening each photo, so you will get input from everyone in the class.

Special field trip: Walker Evans’ photographs are currently on exhibit in the B Building of LaGuardia. Scott Sternbach, the head of the photography program will give our class a

guided tour and discuss Evans' life and approach to photography. (For future classes, I would research photography exhibits in New York that students would get credit for attending.)

Here are some steps for developing your essay. Begin by doing a journal entry on your photograph responding to the questions below.

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 emotions does the image evoke in you?
3. Where was photo taken; what is the social or political context?
4. In what ways does the photo seem composed?
5. How do the aesthetics or composition of the photo affect/shape your understanding?

**The following key terms will help you think about your photograph in more detail. We will discuss these in class using your photos as models. Be sure to take notes:**

- a. angle: the vantage point from which the photograph was taken
- b. background: the part of a scene or picture that seems to be towards the back
- c. balance: the distribution of visual elements: symmetrical or asymmetrical
- d. central focus: objects that appear most prominently, most clearly focused
- e. composition: arrangement or structure of formal elements
- f. contrast: strong visual differences between light and dark
- g. setting: actual physical surroundings and implications
- h. subject: main object or person in photograph—why?
- i. theme: dominant idea or emotion that photo evokes

### **Assignment #2 Prompt:**

**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 about the composition 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? Please research the context of this photo. Where was it taken—what is the social or political situation?

4. Can you connect the context and subject matter of the photo to any specific texts or films we have discussed on displacement and immigration?
5. How did writing about this photograph expand or enrich your understanding of the experience of migration/immigration and the related emotional issues associated with this experience?

As with the research essay you have completed, we will work together to provide correct documentation for the photograph you have chosen, following MLA formatting: Last, First M. *Photograph Title*. Year Created. Photograph. *Museum/Institution*, Location. *Book Title*. City: Publisher, Year Published. Page(s). Print. You should also cite specific texts or films we have discussed (in answer to #4), as we have done for the previous essay.

### **Assignment #3: Final Reflective Essay**

Please review the various readings, videos and photographs we have discussed as a class. A good place to start would be your weekly journal entries. How did the work of our course change, possibly enlarge, your understanding of belonging, exile, and migration? What three things (texts, videos, stories of classmates, interviews you did) changed your thinking most dramatically and why? You may bring notes for this final essay which will be completed in two hours during exam week. We will discuss some of your examples in class before the final reflective essay. Your final essay should be 600-800 words; it should be typed in 12' Times New Roman font, and double-spaced. Be sure to include a Works Cited entry for the three sources you will be discussing. You will have two hours in the lab to complete the essay. Enjoy ☺.