

# TEACHING WRITING THROUGH THE IMMIGRANT STORY

EDITED BY  
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The editors dedicate *Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story* to their parents:

*To my parents, Grace Wood and Randolph Ostman, whose family stories span multiple nations but always lead to the same place, where love knows no boundaries.*

—HEATHER OSTMAN

*To my parents, who came to this country from the ashes of Europe to start life anew, following the Biblical commandment, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”*

—HOWARD TINBERG

*To my mom, Maria Leude Patricio Ortega-Olson, who immigrated to the US from Brazil on wit, determination, and sass: “Para bom entendedor, meia palavra basta.”*

—DANIZETE MARTÍNEZ

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## INTRODUCTION

Heather Ostman, Howard Tinberg, and Danizete Martínez

This project seems right for this moment. During an era marked by immigration conversations and arguments dominating nearly every public forum, the college classroom is, of course, not exempt. As our students struggle to make sense of a nation that alternates between hospitality and hostility toward multitudes of immigrants to its shores, we—their teachers—often find ourselves trying to navigate the same uneven waters at the very same time. As a result, as teachers we are learning with them and from them because, frankly, the topic of immigration is as political as it is personal. So many of us understand our lives and our families—our past, present, and future—within the contexts of our own immigrant journeys. Composition classes have always been a site for meaning making and deciphering meaning, as students work their ideas and knowledge into academic discourse, in addition to discovering themselves as thinkers and writers. Central to that discovery is the breadth of knowledge all students bring to the classroom, drawn from their previous educational experiences certainly, but, equally important, drawn from their life experiences prior to entering the composition classroom, which for nearly every student is shaped by a personal narrative about how they have come to *be* in that classroom. Certainly immigration, as a broad topic, offers students a way into understanding the world around them and a way for articulating their ideas and place within that world insofar as it is a common topic for discussion. Beyond its general accessibility, the lens of immigration also provides a viable frame for situating and articulating knowledge as well as building knowledge within and outside of the classroom.

But even beyond all of that, the topic of immigration as a pedagogical site of inquiry is not just current, it is urgent. Daily national and global forums engage the question of immigrants' rights and legitimacy—a nativist question that has emerged in waves over the centuries and one that is never quite put to rest as the United States attempts to make sense of its national identity amid a shift in global demographics. How any nation treats its new arrivals reflects everything about its regard for

humanity: its public policies, its level of tolerance, its expectations of assimilation, its generosity, and at the very least, its level of fear of a perceived Other. As a topic that opens the discussion of the legitimization as well as the marginalization of the “Other,” we have found that the immigrant story enables the opportunity to explore and evaluate the othering of learning spaces, particularly of nonacademic ways of knowing.

The chapters in this volume speak to the immigrant story as a viable frame for teaching writing—an opportunity for building and articulating knowledge through academic discourse—but the chapter authors access this occasion through the very real, very vivid, lives lived within and outside of the classroom. Each of the chapters in *Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story* recognizes the prevalence of immigrant students present in writing classrooms across the United States (and we include foreign-born, first- and second-generation Americans, and more in this definition of immigrant) and the myriad opportunities and challenges those students present to their instructors, but each contributor here has also seen the absolute validity in the stories and experiences the students bring to the classroom—evidence of their lifetimes of complex learning in both academic and nonacademic settings. Further, the contributors themselves—like thousands of college-level instructors in the United States—have immigrant stories of their own. Therefore, the immigrant narrative—in its multiplicity of forms—offers a unique framework for knowledge production in which students and teachers may learn from each other, in which the ordinary power dynamic of teacher to students begins to shift, to allow empathy to emerge, and to provide space for an authentic kind of pedagogy, which, as Tara Fenwick has said, “like learning, is about struggle and invention, not certainty and control” (16). In these chapters, readers will find instructors who are willing to learn with their students, who demonstrate an openness to not knowing all of the answers but a solid commitment to creating a safe, constructive space to find them together.

The contributors to this volume, *Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story*, offer a collection of essays that explores the intersection between immigration and pedagogy via the narrative form. Our collective work emerges within the contexts of student work, drawn from writing about or responding to immigrant stories, as well as from our own perspectives as immigrant, or as first- and second-generation immigrant, teachers. For each of the editors in particular, the topic of immigration is packed with significance on multiple levels beyond our professional concerns. For all of us, the topic is personal, as well as pedagogical, political, and urgent. For Heather, a first-generation American, family traditions

shaped the road to college and beyond, but it was her work at the State University of New York, Westchester Community College, that codified her interest. In the college's surrounding community, where one in four county residents is foreign-born, she took for granted the multiplicities of identity and culture that appeared in her classrooms, and after teaching in a Eurocentric curriculum for years, she came to see the necessity of broadening the curricular approach to teaching by intentionally and explicitly including the immigrant experience. The immigrant experience offers a framework for the consideration of myriad knowledges and literacies that students present in the writing classroom, particularly as it serves as a reminder of all that is at stake in the classroom: the urgent social, cultural, economic, and political ramifications that stem from the ability to articulate knowledge into academic discourse.

For Howard, the immigrant's story and the call for social justice have deep resonance. A child of Holocaust survivors who were allowed into this country as refugees only after having lost virtually all of their family members during the war and having spent considerable time in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, Howard has always felt an affinity for those seeking aid and comfort from beyond US borders. Moreover, having been reared in a traditional Jewish household in which the Bible held considerable sway, Howard had heard often (during services and during Passover seders) these deeply felt teachings: "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*King James Bible*, Exodus 23.9) and "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19.34). Perhaps not surprisingly, Howard has spent more than three decades teaching full time at a public, open-access community college where the doors remain open to all.

For Danizete, also a first-generation American whose mother came to the United States from Brazil as a Fulbright Scholar, education has been central to her ethos in terms of citizenship and responsibility to her community. Having grown up in a Latino household in New Mexico with parents involved in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and being deeply invested in education, Danizete has also dedicated her career to teaching at two-year open access institutions with historically Hispanic populations while researching Xicanx cultural production and the positionality of marginalized identities within the dominant culture.

While the editors teach at community colleges, the other contributors to this volume teach in various kinds of institutions ranging from community colleges in urban, suburban, and rural areas to four-year colleges

and institutions, both public and private. Yet all of them—all of us—are confronted by the current political context of our age. Therefore, we have elected to focus on composition and credit-bearing courses as a unified platform for the variety of institutions represented among the essays, because composition courses very often function as gateway courses to a college education. We are aware that developmental writing courses prevail particularly among community colleges and offer a rich space for considering the immigrant story as a site of inquiry; however, given the multiplicity of competing issues that present in such courses, we have elected to address the intersections between “immigration” as a lens and developmental writing pedagogy elsewhere. For now, as college-level composition instructors, we are compelled by the narrative opportunities that have emerged in this context; as citizens in a democratic republic, we are equally compelled to help students negotiate those narrative opportunities and their own, supporting their active participation in a world that directly affects them—whether they are aware of those effects or not. Mostly, we know they are well aware. Thousands of our students are foreign-born or are the children or grandchildren of immigrants, so the effects land quite directly and personally. They know firsthand the struggles of establishing themselves or their family in a new land, one that is alternately welcoming and unfriendly. But, collectively, they challenge us to continue to try new pedagogical strategies and to learn more along with them. They inspire us with their willingness and trust in our classrooms, even as many of us struggle to make sense of the political climate we find ourselves in. Regardless of how any of us enter the classroom, we recognize our common responsibility: to teach our students with the best resources and intelligence we can muster. We know that everything depends on how well we execute our charge, because for so many of our students, *everything* depends on how well they do in college.

Organized into two parts, *Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story* presents the interdependent issues of identity and pedagogy within the framework of the immigrant story. *Part 1: Situating the Discussion* opens the collection with writing instructors telling their own immigrant stories as a way of scaffolding the conversation: The topic of immigration in the classroom is as personal as it is political, a rich resource for the teaching of writing and critical thinking. For many, immigrant stories are the narrative threads that link prior knowledge to the present classroom experience; therefore, the contributors to this first part—as well as throughout this project—are not shy and do not apologize for drawing on their own prior learning experiences from their own lives, which have

helped them understand who they are today as learners and educators. Because, as we all know, our stories as teachers inform everything we do in the classroom; our family histories and our personal journeys shape us as teachers, enabling us to see and hear our students, empowering us to respond and create. We tell our own stories so that, as contributor Elizabeth Stone says, ideally our students, our colleagues, and our readers might “recognize that there is more that connects us than separates us,” in spite of how different we all seem from one another.

In chapter 1, “I am an Immigrant: Cultural Multiplicities in US Educational Systems,” Sybille Gruber, a writing instructor originally from Austria, situates the immigrant story in terms of her own journey navigating cultures and literacies from one nation to another, as she “became part of the immigrant narrative,” teaching in her adopted land of the United States of America. In this essay, Gruber reflects on the writing classroom with a specific focus on contradictory cultural positions and the rhetorical significance of identity, particularly through the dual lenses of teacher and immigrant, as she reveals herself as an instructor who, because of her own life’s trajectory, is sensitized to the nuances of the immigrant student experience and who uses the classroom as an active space to use the immigrant story to mitigate the challenges of teaching writing and acclimating to a new culture. Through “asymmetrical reciprocity,” which creates a space for difference as well as safe inquiry and learning within the classroom, Gruber discusses how she leverages this space as a place for building knowledge and strengthening her students’ engagement with academic discourse.

The second chapter in our collection situates the discussion of the immigrant narrative in terms of teaching from the perspective of the perceived “Other,” as Elizabeth Stone reveals her own family immigration story and the ways it emerges in the classroom and enhances her teaching. In “My Italian Grandmother, the Enemy Alien: Bringing Her Story and Others into My Classroom in an Age of Nativism,” Stone traces the history of her family’s immigration as it opens up the critical possibilities for exploring the discourses of power and privilege, as her students negotiate that power firsthand in the academy. Through the lens of her own immigrant story, Stone shows how she and her students examine rhetorical strategies that marginalize the immigrant narrative as well as engage rhetorical strategies that claim/reclaim its legitimacy.

The third and final chapter in the first part of the collection, “Immigrant Stories from the Deep South: Stories of Bias, Discrimination, and Hope,” by Liliana W. Mina with her students, Brittany Armstrong, Venijah Bellamy, and Paul Frick, provides a bridge from the teacher-centered

narratives in Part 1 to the student-centered pedagogies that follow in Part 2. Mina's essay draws out the paradigm shift that is at the heart of this volume and that is explored and broadened in the essays that follow. In this chapter, Mina draws from both her students' as well as her own immigrant story in the classroom, employing a multiplicity of voices as she moves from self-narrative to research-based student writing. She narrates her experiences as an Egyptian immigrant instructor teaching in Alabama, as she studies and draws examples from her students' research and linguistic explorations across national, geographical, and emotional borders. In this essay, Mina and her students are all too aware of the immigrant student experience in which "immigrants find themselves obliged to discard, rather than build on, their existing resources," but as she notes, the authors collectively attempt to reverse this trend, and these efforts lead Mina to draw conclusions about and identify directions for American educational policies.

The chapters that follow in the second part of the volume, "Teaching through the Stories," build upon the earlier chapters' focus on the personal stories of instructors and expand outward more intentionally toward pedagogical practice that enables students and faculty to learn from each other. The essays in "Part 2: Teaching through the Stories" continue to build upon the intersections between identity and pedagogy and draw from literary sources and student writing to facilitate further student writing and critical thinking. The contributors to this section at times articulate strong political opinions about US immigration policy, and we, the editors, stand behind their right to articulate those opinions, particularly as they are attempting to strengthen their own students' critical thinking and ability to draw their own conclusions about society and their relationships to it, independent of their teachers' own ideas.

Therefore, chapter 4, "Reorienting via Triad: From Animals, Rapists, and Gang Members to Living, Breathing, Human Beings," by Katie Daily, draws from Danticat's fictional work as well as current journalistic texts to engage questions and issues emergent from detention centers, detainee medical treatments, and human rights and the ways students might approach these topics through writing. Using Danticat's work, Daily demonstrates strategies for enabling students' close readings and creating bridges for articulating their conclusions about the treatment—both political and health-related—of immigrants to the United States.

Chapter 5, "Initiating a Globally Inclusive Undergraduate Curriculum through Luis Valdez's Chicano/a Protest Theater," by Danizete Martínez, explores immigration on macro- and micro-levels. At first outlining the

focus in her First-Year Composition course, the author delineates the rhetorical strategies found within selected Chicana literature, which foreground social injustice and inequality. Using student examples, Martínez then narrows her focus on pedagogical approaches to teaching Chicana drama through writing and reflective practice as they point to Chicana drama's contribution to efforts toward rethinking the American undergraduate curriculum.

In chapter 6, Tuli Chatterji posits Arjun Appadurai's essay "Disjuncture and Difference" as the foundation for a postcolonial composition pedagogical framework to explore how multilocal experiences initiate immigrant students to construct critical, complex discourses of hybridity. In the seventh chapter, Libby Garland and Emily Schnee address the political implications and contexts for writing in "Classrooms Filled with Stories: Writing Immigrant Narratives in the Age of Trump." In this chapter, the authors confront the high stakes of immigrant stories within the academic realm and the particular reflective effects and political challenges for teachers engaged in enabling students to write their stories.

In chapter 8, John C. Havard, Silvia Giagnoni, Timothy J. Henderson, Brennan Herring, and Rachel Pate develop an honors-level writing-intensive course around the immigrant experience with an explicit emphasis on the human element through synthesizing myriad forms of the immigrant story through the news, interviews with live subjects, and reflective writing. Designed as a requirement for the Auburn University Honors program, the course objectives include research and writing to deepen students' understanding of global citizenship, respect for cultural diversity, and engagement of social responsibility.

Finally, chapter 9, "Reflective Practice, Immigrant Narratives, and the Humanities Institute," by Heather Ostman, takes a broader look at enriching a humanities curriculum through student writing and reflective practice that draws from immigrant stories and creates the scaffolding for further knowledge production. The chapter emphasizes multiple pedagogical principles inherent in prior learning assessment, such as the centrality of situated or subordinated knowledge to legitimizing the immigrant story as a site of knowledge production and a viable means for accessing academic discourse through reflective practice.

Collectively, the chapters of *Teaching Writing through the Immigrant Story* extend and deepen a conversation that has already begun among colleagues at universities and colleges, as well as national and regional conferences, and that engages multiple facets of the immigrant experience in the United States and beyond. The contributors to this volume

address teaching writing through the frame of the immigrant story, both as teachers of immigrant and native-born students and at times as immigrants themselves. The volume is timely, as immigration policies are under scrutiny by the federal government and lawmakers across the nation. Every university and college in the United States has students who are or will be affected by current or pending immigration legislation, such as the many DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students enrolled in these institutions, who seek citizenship but already claim the United States of America as their home. The time is now to engage the topic of immigration as a framework for writing and critical thinking, particularly as it enables the prior learning experiences of students—and their teachers—to become central to knowledge production in the classroom.

Perhaps equally important, the lens of immigrant stories within the classroom also facilitates a necessary shift from the conventional, traditional learning paradigm in the composition classroom. By foregrounding the immigrant story, elevating it as a tool for learning, writing instructors and students create classroom space for knowledge production and academic discourse while learning from each other. Moreover, through this collection, we invite composition colleagues to leave a space in the classroom for students to tell their stories—especially personal stories of immigration—and by so doing sending students the message that they are more than consumers of texts and may produce and compose powerful texts of their own.

Scholars in composition, rhetoric, and in allied fields such as gender and critical race studies have for decades propounded the view that positionality matters—in how we construct the world and how we are constructed by others. The stories captured in this collection are framed through the experience of the storyteller—whether the students or the faculty. That fact matters and gives power and meaning to those stories. Vantage point matters. “How you construe is how you construct,” the composition scholar Ann E. Berthoff observed many years ago (10). That maxim is no less true today and furthermore has application beyond the teaching of writing, capable of informing instruction not only in the humanities but in the social and technical sciences.

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