



## **Don't Have to Live Like a Refugee**

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We are veteran teachers who have resisted the urge to live like refugees within our school setting. We have embraced our decades-long identity as *agent provocateurs* who champion the kind of experiential learning that transforms the world. We co-teach AP Seminar and AP Research (the two foundational courses in the College Board's AP Capstone program), and we

have made refugee welcome and resettlement a centerpiece of our classroom conversations this year. Our six core sophomores and juniors have been joined by two seniors this semester, and we have tackled together the rhetoric surrounding the evolving migration crisis from the Global South to the Global North. The courses we teach have afforded us the opportunity to be true to the mission of our institution by putting an accent on contemporary and significant issues of conscience. To be a refugee is to live through the transience, vulnerability and ephemerality of the margins.

Together, we have explored social contract theory in order to better understand the relative advantages of citizenship in the West over all competing alternatives. We have entertained the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant. We have interpreted these models through the lenses of political philosophy and sociology. The insights of Marx, Durkheim and Weber have led us to a newfound clarity on the absence of organic solidarity between the children of previous generations of immigrants and the cohort seeking sanctuary today. Today, the identity of the citizen appears more and more to be asserted over against that of the migrant as interloper. An academic understanding of the challenge of framing citizenship in less adversarial terms has nurtured in our students a desire to participate actively in the bridging of the citizen and non-citizen divide.

Our students have collaborated on a refugee outreach effort with Syrians resettled in the Baltimore/ Catonsville area over the last year. Every Wednesday, our students offer ESOL virtual classes, coordinated by two of our colleagues in the modern and classical languages department. For ninety minutes, our AP Capstone students help their peers learn the language that promises a job and a future in this adopted land. Over the course of our three months of outreach, our students have learned about some of the hurdles to assimilation: tracked classrooms that group immigrants with struggling learners, food service that refuses to offer a Halal option, inconvenient and unreliable public transportation from Section 8 housing to failing schools, and the constant threat of violence (one young woman was mugged and another worries about the gunshots that she hears in her neighborhood). These Wednesday interactions have shifted our students' appreciation for the social dislocations of forced migration from the theoretical to the practical.

In addition to our ESOL outreach, students have sought ways to contribute to the welfare of migrants who have moved to Dearborn. They have fundraised by selling coffee in the morning in order to provide winter clothing for families who are accustomed to more temperate climes. They have also contributed money to purchase holiday meals for families experiencing their first Christmas in the United States (even though they are

predominantly Muslim) . These philanthropic initiatives conform to the expectations that our students have with regard to the high school encounter with the Other. *Noblesse oblige* and paternalistic charity undermine the authentic and interdependent encounter that true cosmopolitanism demands.

In the name of cosmopolitanism, our students have ventured into the community as curious, conspicuous and competent conversation partners. During a talk at the University of Michigan Dearborn, three of the students asked the former Secretary General of the Arab League to explain the reluctance of Gulf States to offer refugee resettlement within their borders. At an author event hosted by Literati bookstore in Ann Arbor, our students joined us in asking Jonathan Safran Foer to discuss the moral implications of using a refugee crisis as a backdrop for a novel about broken families. At the Michigan Academy of Science Arts and Letters meeting on the campus of Western Michigan University, our students joined us in a talk centered on the ghosts of Platonist virtue ethics that continue to color the West's appreciation of the plight of the tempest-tossed stranger.

In each of these authentic encounters, our students have wrestled with truths about power that Baudrillard articulated convincingly in *The Agony of Power*. Baudrillard argues that the refusal to dominate must be matched measure for measure by a refusal to dominate. By exercising their collective "intelligence" (in Baudrillard's words, "the double refusal"), our young people have reimagined the social contract and negotiated less Hobbesian and less Lockean terms. Neither violence nor the property that violence wrests from the commonwealth need be interpreted as providential or inevitable. We incarnate community where and when we choose to be intentional about our shared sense of belonging.

Accordingly, our students have noticed with Baudrillard that "with the increasing globalization of the world, discrimination becomes more ferocious." (*The Agony of Power*, 52) To counter this trend, they founded at our school an unorthodox and surprisingly popular group(15% of the student body has joined!), Dignity Club. Rather than root their individual identities in the critically immature categories that domination prefers, our students have shown the courage and imagination to concede the privileges of the aggressor and the aggrieved in the name of more fulfilling relationships. They chose love. So they break bread together; they journey together; they see the world in its heartbreaking reality. Outside the edenic borders of Western civilization's flawed conceptualization of the universal, our students refuse to inhabit the privileged fringe even in the guise of academic inquiry. Baudrillard's key question posed at the heart of *The Agony of Power* resonates convincingly for our students: *What does the universal mean in the eyes of immigrants, populations left fallow, entire*

*zones of fracture and exclusion in our own “overdeveloped” societies? (The Agony of Power, 51)*

Now that the dislocations and sequelae of cancerous market rationality have wrought havoc in our Rust Belt neighborhoods, our students have cancelled their hereditary subscription to unfettered capitalism. For their two thousand word individual written arguments (IWA), they have placed a spotlight on the doublespeak at the heart of an immigration policy that shuts the doors of the academy that DACA creased open in predatory exchange for the alienation of the meat rendering plant and the agricultural field where wage theft predominates. The more our students peel away the layers of the onion, the more the raw savagery of forced migration demands their attention and its victims deserve our solidarity.

Where prevailing political rhetoric would isolate the fate of the migrant from the struggle of the unemployed and underemployed American worker, our class discussions have centered on the ties that bind global events to local realities. The widow, the orphan and the stranger understand the shared precarity of their identities on the margin. Our students have voiced their dissent with regard to the compartmentalization of the suffering of “disposable” persons. Our conversations and their papers, in particular, have restored integrity to the self-determination of the displaced. Through our reflection and our action, we have placed an accent on “consent” in the accepted social contract trope of “consent of the governed.” We do not consent to the marginalization of the displaced and the dehumanization of the non-citizen.

As pre-service teachers, you must be wondering when the opportunity to be true to your ideals will present itself. We enjoin you to invite change into your building by engaging the larger world and its intractable social conflicts. For our students, such authentic learning has resulted in an active and robust presence in local and global communities. Our students are ready to embrace the world in all of its textured nuance, vexing complexity, and its existential fissures. We have made a claim on the conscientization of our students, and they, in turn, have made claims on their communities. They have articulated in two thousand word papers and ten minute oral presentations the limits of a humanitarian model that refuses to transgress. We choose to cross the comfortable borders of empathy at a distance and convenient compassion from the couch or keyboard. We are made uncomfortable by the whimsy of geographic privilege. We are unsettled by the caprice of elective mercy. Refugees are made, not born.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Agony of Power*. London: Semiotext(e), 2010.