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with Alejandra Arias, Bridget Belfiore, Kelly Caione, Allison Devaney, Marina Lindland, Carlye Mazzucco, and Samantha Moore

Field Notes for a Vulnerable & Immersed Narrator

My advanced creative nonfiction students came to class one day recently with their eyes big and wild. They dropped their backpacks and threw up their hands in a fit of pre-writing I knew well. “The immersion assignment,” they howled. “It’s too big. It’s out of control! It didn’t go like I planned!”

“Perfect,” I told them. “This is exactly what is supposed to happen.”

For a brief minute standing up at the whiteboard, I stepped out of craft and grading mode. I drew a heart on the board and wrote “vulnerability to subject.” That wasn’t on the lesson plan, but I decided to go with it, because I was realizing something in the moment. And this was exactly their challenge as writers. My extended immersion project aims toward the goal of producing a longer essay in which the narrator intentionally steps into the story as it’s happening. The essay is the mode of inquiry, from subject-selection to research and writing, and the essay is the genre of the finished piece. We think of journalism as looking “out” at the world, and memoir as looking “in,” and this assignment requires one eye trained inward and one eye looking out at the world.

Think of Thoreau, I told them, going to live in the woods to see what he could see and write about it, or John McPhee, setting out with himself and his curiosity. The most perfect expression of the form I’ve read might be Adriana Páramo’s *Looking for Esperanza*, which begins with the author reading a newspaper article about a woman crossing the border from Mexico with her children and having to leave a dead infant somewhere in the crossing. Páramo—with no guarantee of success—simply set out to find her. Other great examples include James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—a classic about immersion with sharecroppers, Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*—a research journey about the intersection of science,

race, and society that becomes personal, and Steve Almond's *Candy Freak*—a love affair with candy turned into a road-trip to find mom-and-pop candy factories. I usually use Robin Hemley's book, *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing: Memoir, Journalism, and Travel*. Instructors who've taught composition for a while will also connect this to the [I-Search Paper](#), a fantastic composition assignment and framework by Ken Macrorie, and my own *Backwards Research Guide*, which is also centered around the same basic approach for use in composition classes but with more quotes from Buddhists.

The scaffolding for it takes all semester. First I assign the project and orient them to the form, and then they have staggered due dates for each step of the essay, which is due about ten weeks into a fifteen-week class. I launch the experimental essay project at the same time (it's a bit of juggling) so that we get that done with while their immersions are brewing or rising or fermenting. It ends up that they're workshopping experimental essays while they're writing their immersions.

What's something you're curious about or connected to but have never done?

To start, I ask everyone to bring in three or more ideas to class, and we put them all up on the board. Students can claim one that they want but the rest are up for grabs. What we do for that whole class period is to think about activities that they might not otherwise do that allow them to experience something new and thought-provoking. Students propose questions, ideas, and stunts: live a week as a good Catholic, talk with seniors at a senior center, shadow a friend who works at a charter school, do a ride-along with a local police officer, or to eat a meal plan prescribed for an anorexic friend in recovery as a way to understand the friend's experience. I tell them about my current immersion project (four years and counting) of walking the border between Bridgeport and Fairfield in Connecticut to observe and meditate on socio-economic disparity as a way to stress that a simple visit to a place, once or repeated, builds a structure for an immersion. Many of them focus on interviews, too.

“Three out of my four best friends are anorexic. I’ve never understood their aversion to eating because I love food. All three of my friends have a connection with each other that I’m not a part of because I don’t understand anorexia. I don’t understand why eating is so difficult, I don’t understand body dysmorphia, and I don’t understand my closest friends. This disconnect especially damaged my friendship with one of my friends who was my roommate the first year and a half of college. I witnessed her lose more and more weight until she was forced to leave school in the first semester of sophomore year because of her unhealthy weight. I never recovered from this separation. When my friends were recovering, their doctors assigned them a special meal plan to help them gain a healthy and wholesome appetite. Perhaps if I tried this meal plan and interviewed them, I could understand their struggles with eating and what led them to anorexia. I need to understand them to bridge the gap between us.” —Carlye Mazzucco

What’s your question?

Almost immediately when the ideas come out, I share my honest reactions: many of the initial ideas sound kind of dull because I can’t see or understand where the student’s true curiosity lies about the topic. Students don’t need to have only one question, but they need at least one. They might not get their question answered, but if they don’t have one burning complex question, it’s not usually a good topic. But a bad topic can usually be reframed. Sometimes I’ll just tell them to come back with more ideas. Everyone has the ideas that connect to topics from their own lives, and those ideas—the ones that have a personal stake—are the strongest.

“My immediate question about my immersion topic is ‘why do college students often have negative feelings towards English literature or writing courses?’ In order to answer this question, though, I have to prove that students do actually feel this way. This is where my immersion comes in; I want to observe the most basic English course that Fairfield has to offer, a core requirement everyone must take or take the equivalent of in high school, in order to assess students’ interest levels in an English class. Through observations, I will learn how the course is taught by different professors and what kind of impact this has on the students as well as the overall atmosphere of the class.” -Allison Devaney

What's at stake for you?

I don't ask this question in the assignment sheet itself. Instead, I separate out their curiosity, allowing it to express itself. Then once they've committed to a project, we focus on their personal connection. I bring this topic up in class and have them do a free write, telling them afterward that there is potentially *always* something at stake. This is often a surprising and open-ended act of discovery that keeps developing throughout the project, the question of how the topic connects to one's own life. Sometimes students won't be able to identify a deep connection at first, and then later it comes as a kind of a-ha moment.

"My immersion topic focused in on my religious beliefs, and practicing Catholicism to a nearly extreme degree. I think that my 'stake' in the project changed as I continued to prepare and follow through with my plan. Initially, I wanted to examine my religious views, and how my beliefs aligned with those of the Catholic tradition, which is a little unnerving in itself. Throughout the project, though, it became even more personal. I started to examine myself as a person, my flaws and my weaknesses, and how those may be exposed by following these rules. The immersion itself went from being unnerving to slightly terrifying, but then it grew and expanded to more than just myself. Suddenly I was writing about family traditions, the struggle between the Catholic lifestyle and modern society, and how different spheres of my life interacted with the Churches. This project ended up touching every aspect of my life in a way that I never expected it to." —Marina Lindland

"In my immersion topic I planned to pay attention to the connections made between people within the coffee shop. The reason I wanted to pay attention to this is because I wanted to show how the local coffee shop Harbor View is more for people than just a local place to get their food and coffee. Harbor View refers to themselves as "the original social network" and that is what I wanted to find during my experience. I wanted to show examples of people living through this social network of a coffee shop. As much as I paid attention to this during my immersion, I found myself less focused on the people's connections to each other and more the connections that they were making with me. In immersing myself as a regular I found I was no longer an outsider and that I had become apart of the social network, which shifted my topic into being just as much internal as it was external. I planned to take the idea of the original social network and the things I learned about different customers and setting my immersion up as a series of different interviews or sections of my experiences talking to each specific person that I wanted to include. I wanted my immersion to have the same structure that Páramo is able to achieve in *Looking For Esperanza*. However I found that since I had become a regular my story had to be the backbone of all my different encounters with regular customers. I ended up telling the story of the original social network by at the same time showing my own connection to the place, who I became in Harbor View, and how the coffee shop was able to provide a home for everyone else it was now also able to do for me." —Kelly Caione

How do you feel right now about your topic, before you've started?

While the immersion has an element of long-form first-person journalism to it, I stress to them that the mode of inquiry is only half journalistic. Unlike most journalism, the narrator is a character. Unlike most essaying, the action is happening in the present and is chosen consciously by the narrator—but the narrator is free to also associate, make connections, and bring up the past. For that reason, the narrator isn't a blank slate. Instead, the snapshot of the first moment a write has committed to a topic—before writing or doing any research—is key. I ask them to write also about their expectations, which will often be foiled or confounded. But I don't tell them that. Instead, after the freewrite, I tell them they've already been writing their essays, that the free-writes we've done can go into their drafts.

Although none of my students claimed this subtopic for their responses, I've seen how anchoring this moment can be for writing projects. Instead of avoiding their own preconceptions, this pre-write gives them permission to examine how much their views can change in a short period of time.

Let's check in. What do you plan to pay attention to during your experience, and what will you actually do during your immersion?

Students need a lot of time to talk about these projects, because each becomes its own story pretty quickly, including the difficulty of arranging their immersion in their busy lives. One student realizes that to observe in a school, she needs a background check. Another sends five emails to potential locations and gets no replies, and both students have to quickly come up with a plan B. Students struggle with how to put ideas into practice, so we do a check-in every few classes so students can give each other feedback. Sometimes planning the immersion convinces a student that they want to switch or reframe a topic. Once they have their immersion experiences planned, I usually have to reorient them to also pay attention to the writerly details that might fall by the wayside: sense, scene, dialogue, color, smell, and the narrator's own feelings. I tell them

to jot in a notebook if they're able, to record interviews, and take many pictures, and then to journal afterward.

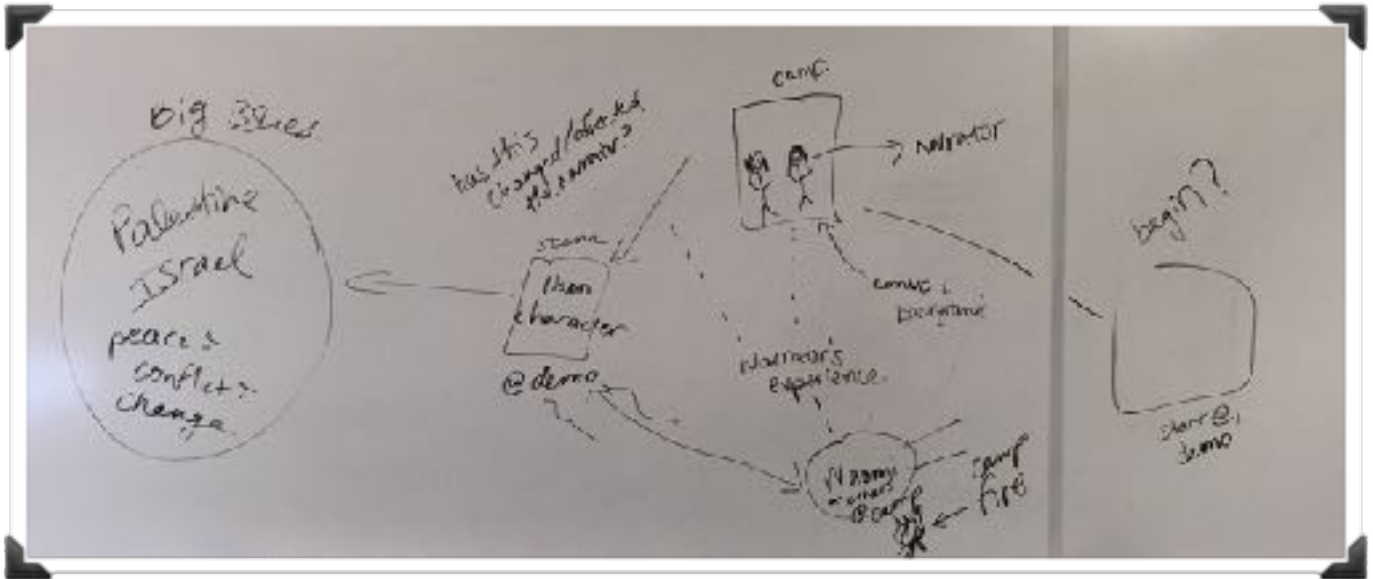
What are your options for structuring your essay?

Writing these beasts takes time and care. To think about structure, we use John McPhee's "Travels in Georgia" as a model along with McPhee's essay, "[Structure](#)" from *The New Yorker*, which provides diagrams he draws for his essays. I tell them to remember John McPhee lying on his picnic table overwhelmed, and that this is what life is like: not the pre-planned thesis and argument, but the beautiful process of letting life help you write and then expanding what you thought the story was. We also draw diagrams for Páramo's book, which has a very visible structure composed of juxtapositions between immersion reporting and experimental pieces, and a submerged thematic structure that moves a reader from beginning to end of the book.

As often happens with these, especially in longer form, the research journey is the narrative spine of the piece, like a mystery story. Each writer is essaying as they experience the construction of the immersion, and the experiencing itself raises questions that change the experience and the reflections, which then get recorded. If writing is recursive, this is recursive pre-writing.

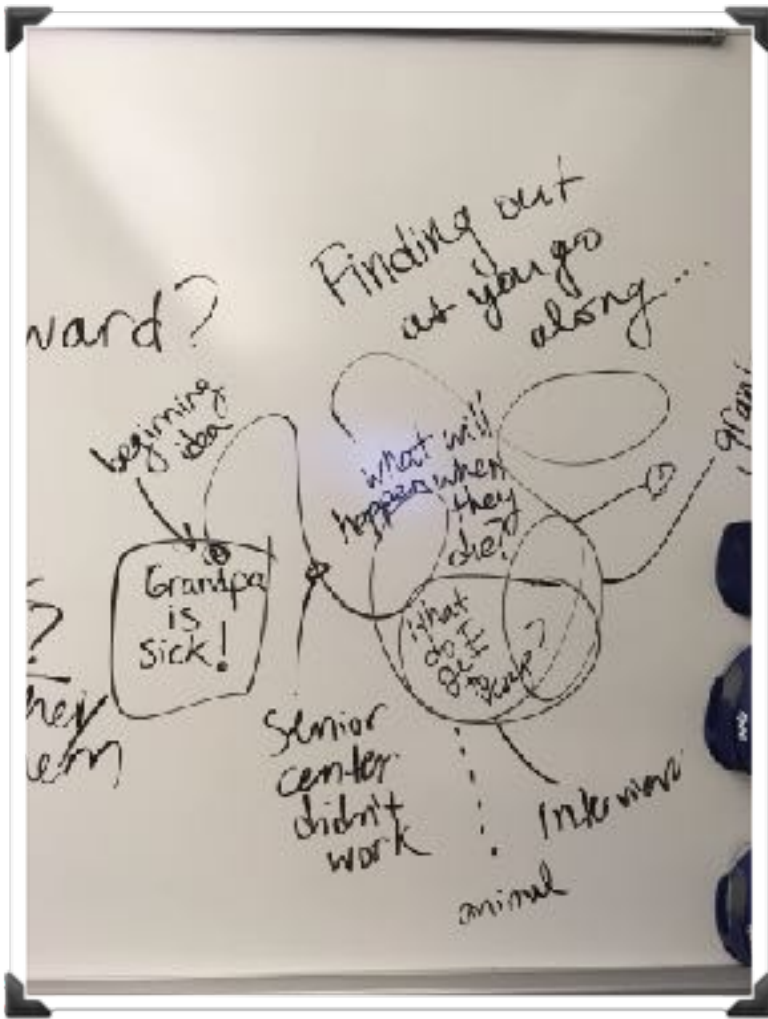
Throughout the semester, I diagram structures of our reading assignments on the whiteboard. As a visual person, I started doing this as a reflex when I first began teaching, hoping to crack the code of how something hangs together, and trying to make sense of my own options as a writer. The system of diagramming doesn't have to make sense or be consistent; in my drawings, arrows go everywhere and are interspersed with terrible little un-lifelike drawings (which we then all enjoy laughing at). I also will occasionally step away from the essay a student is writing and diagram their material, asking them questions to complete a kind of timeline of a section of their life on the board, which my students at one point called "getting white-boarded." Students are eager to take these diagrams home, and they snap pictures on their

phones and get involved in the collaborative question-asking, honing in on dramatic elements the writer can't see because they are too close to the living itself.



Caption: A picture of a structure diagram of a student essay, exploring how the narrative might track the narrator's change in point of view along the winding axis of experience

When I ask them to diagram narrative structure at the beginning of the class, they are cautions, often drawing a single line on an axis like a calculus problem that tries to capture the mood of a piece. I steer them toward more wildness in their diagrams, trying to push them away from a plot diagram and more towards moveable structures. Toward the end of the immersions this semester, I also gave them five or six index cards each, and had them write a few words on each representing different “chunks” or “movements” (McPhee calls them “set pieces”) in their essays-in-progress. Using “Travels in Georgia” as a model, we talk about the reasons why McPhee decided to launch with a scene of rescuing a turtle from a roadway, and how that opening ripples outward in the piece, using the spiral diagram he provides in “Structures” as a map. I tell them that the opening tells a reader how to read a piece, and the ending is the lens through which the reader looks back to interpret the whole reading experience. They then moved the cards around, experimenting with how their essays would feel if they started with different cards, and how, if



a certain card came first, what the next card might be. They reported that they found this exercise very helpful as they began writing. My goal with the exercise was to disconnect them from the assumption that what goes on the page is fated to appear where it first emerged.

Ultimately, I tell them, the art of these pieces is in the submerged structure: building a container that can be deceptively simple to help structure a reader's encounter with complex material. McPhee explains that you can have a chronological structure, or a thematic structure, or a combination of both. But the job in immersion writing is the art of the transition, how to go from one

moment to the next. Sometimes that transition is smooth, from one idea to a similar one, and sometimes it crackles with a gap, and the juxtaposition gives the essay energy.

Talking about this part of advanced structure, I stood up at the white board and started sketching something I hadn't even articulated to myself: how you end a scene on a thematic moment or image so that you have that link to move to something that matches, like dominoes. And the dominoes are ordered based on a larger sense of how a reader should move through a piece. For me this is a pretty advanced topic to teach to undergraduates or even to articulate for myself, but they're getting it—even as they are moaning that

this is the hardest writing they've ever done. And every time I get to do this class, the finished pieces my students produce are breathtaking.

"I definitely struggled to structure my Immersion project. With an immersion essay, you do not have the luxury of a clear structure, like that of a journalistic piece. An immersion piece has characters, a narrator, and not always a linear timeline. So, in order to structure my story on grief--mine and my friend, Eric's--I broke down our stories into sub-stories. Then, I wrote the themes of each story on index cards and scattered all 14 cards on the floor. On my hands and knees, I paired the stories by theme or specific stages of grief. Once I was content with the pairings, I pulled up my Word document of my stories and organized them to match the index card chain, then I added transitions. In this way, I was able to combine different stories and characters to form a relationship of grief." —Kaitlyn Tatulli

"I think for me, I was walking into my immersion wanting to know two things. 1. I wanted to rediscover Park Ave and see the businesses that are there and the people who run them. 2. I wanted to connect with my Costa Rican self since that street is heavily populated by Ticos (Costa Ricans). Now that I'm finished, I realized that it wasn't about trying to make connections or to find who my 'Tica self' is. It was to remind me that we are all trying to achieve one thing: the American Dream. Some were doing it by working their butts off to provide for their families while others were doing it by having flourishing businesses. That street has memories and generations of people doing the same thing and trying their best to make it happen for them. It's truly inspiring." —Alex Arias

How was your experience different than you thought it would be?

This is the fun part: not getting what they expected, or having the experience raise new questions they hadn't even considered. Usually this is where the research comes in, so I ask them to find outside sources from news articles to put their experience in its larger context. The surprise of the experience, while often very intuitive and unformed, is the heart of the piece. Here, in this pre-writing moment, I tell them to be bold, and not to settle for reporting their experiences as a feature. The goal is instead to dive in to those inchoate feelings that are nudging at them as a result of the experience itself.

What is breaking your heart about your immersions? or What questions is your immersion raising for you?

As students research and accumulate facts and their own thoughts about their experiences, they often approach that wild-eyed sense of encountering an “issue” in the wild. It’s not packaged in a textbook or a secondary source. It is *huge*. Oh my gosh, it connects to *everything!* It made me *cry!* Ultimately, the best immersion writing is about heartbreak, and about being steady enough to plow into heartbreak and see it for what it is, to witness it in one’s self and in others, and to describe the experience. Whether it’s realizing the implications of one’s relationship with Catholicism, or really looking at the friendship with a friend who struggles with anorexia, or even confronting what it means to be an only child, these projects generate knowledge of itself and of the world, and reaching that heartbreak place is, to me, the sign of successful creative nonfiction.

What is equally challenging is that these projects, in their glorious melding of fact and heart and detail, emerge first like a horrible hairball with so much urgency and without any structure. It’s just a maelstrom. That’s usually where another check-in is needed to tell students they are right where they need to be, and that the heart and mind vulnerable to all elements of this research will continue to show them which structures make sense. Also at this time I tell students that I am pushing them, and that this is the hardest thing I know how to assign for any level of nonfiction student.

“I remember sitting in class the day this prompt topic was posed. I had previously been wrestling with what I had experienced during my immersion of tutoring underprivileged children. I realized during this class period that my heartbreak was exactly what my piece was missing. Although I had immersed myself in that I noted what I had observed and what I thought, I realized that I hadn’t yet fully immersed myself emotionally in the piece. This freewrite ultimately spurred my more vulnerable, guilt-filled analysis that my original draft lacked. While this portion of my immersion was the most challenging to write, I discovered that pushing myself to dig into these emotions, analyze them, and reflect on the experience as a whole helped clarify what was at stake in the piece. Overall, this prompt shaped my final essay by opening a new avenue for my immersive experience, for now I could couple my observations with emotional analysis.” —Sam Moore

“When one is extremely attached to a topic, the emotional connection normally never ends - even if the paper is finished or if the revision process has ended. Though I wrote about life as an only child and the everyday stereotypes and misunderstandings that surround this lifestyle, I did not expect to become as invested as I did. Oftentimes, we never realize how close we are to a topic until we delve into it and scoop out its core. I anticipated writing about how frustrating it is to be cast as someone who is more prone to be “spoiled” or “lonely” just because I am siblingless. I even suspected I would be drawn into the stories of the several only children whom I interviewed. However, when I finally sat down and began to type, I never could have imagined the emotional fluctuations and pit-in-stomach feelings I would experience. I never realized how much of my identity revolved around my childhood and growing up without a sibling. I also was both relieved and distraught to understand that so many other only children have experienced the same judgment and prejudice that I have. As I continue to ponder my immersion, innumerable questions arise: What now? How do I make a difference through this topic? I know I am not finished yet, so what can I do to continue? The most wonderful and terrifying thing about an immersion project is that it never ends - it is ceaseless, ever expanding, and infinite.” —Bridget Belfiore

Creative nonfiction offers the writer and the reader an opportunity to pursue maximum vulnerability.

We spend so much of our lives armoring ourselves, and I have come to feel that I am teaching students partly how to scaffold and support themselves so that they can stop and come in contact with wild, unplanned reality, meeting it with preparation and focus, an inquisitive mind, and a heart willing to let go of the world they thought they'd find. Vulnerability to our emotions is one goal, and another is vulnerability to facts, the nitty-gritty of issues beyond our little isolated day-to-day worlds. I want to teach students to throw themselves into a new subject, to feel like they're up to their ears in the complicated world. And I want to teach them that they can navigate this intensity, using their research skills, intuition, empathy, and their capacity for surprise and connection.

Immersion Nonfiction Project

Part 1: Choose a topic, event, location, etc. that you are unfamiliar with but interested in. After participating in initial in-class writing work on the topic, schedule a time in which you interact with this topic as an observer. Immerse yourself in an experience in order to record impressions, sensations, scenes, and insights. Write an essay in which you record and reflect on your initial understanding of the experience and on your observations. Capture the detail and immediacy of your experience with the tools of narrative nonfiction, including description, characterization, pacing, and structural elements of suspense and narration.

Some ideas... You might consider participating in a volunteer activity, an event as part of the diversity calendar, a social event that is outside of your normal circle of experience, or visit a location in or around Fairfield that you would normally not consider attending. *Please do not put yourself in any kind of stress or danger in order to choose an extreme topic; requirements of this assignment can be met without putting yourself in any kind of awkward or difficult situation.*

Key elements and questions...Is there a personal connection for you? How are you connected to the topic? What are the stakes for you? How is it relevant to your life and what questions does it raise for you? What larger questions does it connect to for society or for others?

Part 2: Do research to add to your understanding of the topic. Choose a person to interview related to this topic in some way, read a book about the topic, or several articles, or obtain information in another way that gives you context on this activity. Weave the research into the essay in a way that enhances reader understanding.

Format:

- Your essay should be at least 6 double-spaced pages. In other words, text should cover page 6 fully and can be longer.
- Pages must be numbered.
- Please bring enough copies for everyone in the class.
- Please include your name and a title on each copy.