INTRODUCTION
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It takes a great deal of courage to cross borders and emigrate, to venture beyond the comfortable and the known. Familiar ways of thinking may no longer protect or guide, and the unmapped territory is often physically and psychologically perilous. The students enrolled in LaGuardia’s Center for Immigrant Education and Training (CIET), part of the Division of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE), are courageous individuals who, here in New York City, are continuously challenged by the unfamiliar. They enter our classrooms seeking to educate themselves, find better work, and create opportunities for their families. As Director of CIET, I am privileged to know many of these brave people and to shape an educational program that responds to their needs.

As I write this introduction to the “Crossing Borders” issue of In Transit: The LaGuardia Journal on Teaching and Learning, I think of the ways CIET students encourage us to widen our understanding and definition of “college” to include, rather than exclude, surrounding communities. I am mindful, too, that CIET students and their international peers across campus call upon those of us with multi-national identities to ask ourselves hard questions and to introduce our lives more fully to the college community. Thus, the opportunity to present this issue of In Transit allows me to introduce – or reintroduce – myself to LaGuardia colleagues, and for this I am grateful.

When we started the Center for Immigrant Education and Training in September 2001, we understood that our students require more than instruction in English to negotiate life in New York City. CIET students – many in midlife and with families to support – desperately need to make sense of the rules and patterns that govern their new world, and they must understand how to use that knowledge in their daily lives. In a description of her encounters with her son’s teacher, a student in CIET’s Immigrant Family Literacy Program recently summarized what she learned during her time with us. “Before, I was afraid,” she recalled. “I said ‘Yes, yes,’ and I went away. But now I ask questions. I ask about how my son is doing at school.” Clearly, she has started to learn the rules structuring the New York City public school, that most powerful and complex of systems, and to speak up on her son’s behalf. Asking questions in English, she has moved beyond a limiting definition of herself as a marginalized immigrant mother to become an unhesitating advocate for her child’s education.

The presence at LaGuardia of this individual – and so many like her – changes our relationships with surrounding communities and asks us to rethink our conceptions of the college’s role. Part of the more than thirty thousand students who attend classes in the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, CIET students have made the long-standing boundary between college and community less rigid, more porous, allowing our college and community to gain vitality and meaning from each other.

This redefined relation between our campus and its environment necessarily requires examining, questioning, and, finally, changing the ways we teach. In CIET, our approaches to teaching and learning are not always associated with traditional classroom work. Our mission is to meet students where they are – in academic experience, age, language, and work needs – and to help them recreate their multiple roles of parents, workers, students, and citizens in their new land. We ask where they would like to go, how they wish to advance, and what they will need to achieve their goals. As they realize that successful progress in these roles requires specific skills and knowledge, students begin to raise important concerns: What are the rules that govern the public school system? Should I just listen to my son’s teacher or
should I ask questions? What are the unspoken laws of the workplace? Shall I ask for clarification if I don’t understand directions or should I figure out things on my own? What is my role as a worker? These questions provide a foundation for positive negotiation with teachers, employers, and the wide range of individuals encountered in everyday interactions.

Famous for its diverse student population, LaGuardia Community College is certainly an appropriate place for CIET. “Come to LaGuardia and meet the world,” we say. The diversity in students and staff prompts the “difficult dialogues” that bring in the world outside our doors, enlarging our community. Sharing ideas and experiences not always familiar to or welcome in the ivory tower, we expand our conversations. Often exhilarated by our work, we move forward. But it is equally important to slow down, stopping long enough to pose this question: As an academic community engaged in broadening the definition of academia, will we embrace the changes that accompany shifts in definition?

At CIET, we welcome questions about our ability to accept change. When faced with the unfamiliar, how do we respond? Do we insist on seeing the world through old lenses? Can we acknowledge difference without the need to defend the familiar? In response to the unknown are we able to change, or do we try to hold on to a pristine image of ourselves? Those who experience the complexities of multi-national identity on a daily level understand that the tensions framed by these questions connect us to communities and institutions throughout the world. In this regard, I am reminded of the mother who stopped saying “Yes, yes,” and dared to question her son’s teacher. Indeed, the students represented in these pages challenge us to see the realities of their lives, to invite “foreign” matter into our thinking about teaching and learning, and to create possibilities for professional research and conversation that can alter and revitalize our practice.

Last spring, the Difficult Dialogues project invited members of various faiths from within the college and surrounding communities to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday. We began the morning in small groups, introducing ourselves and our own belief traditions. In our group, Dr. Innocent Datondji, La Guardia’s 2006–7 Fulbright Scholar, introduced himself first as “Innocent,” his “proper” Christian name, a legacy of the colonial powers that once ruled Benin. He then identified himself as “Koovi,” using the African name given in his culture to all male children born on a Tuesday.

Innocent/Koovi: with his Christian and African names, Dr. Datondji provided two approaches to identity, one marking individuality, and the other affirming collective belonging. Explaining his syncretic roots, Dr. Datondji held up his identification badge. There on the front for the public to see was “Innocent,” but always right behind it, he said, was Koovi, his African name.

Dr. Datondji’s introduction to his layered names, and all that I learned about my colleagues at Dr. King’s celebration breakfast, affirmed my belief that our many identities should not just sit front to back. Rather, we must engage and speak to one another, confront and learn from one another.

My different worlds and identities must live together, too, and now I present them to you. For me, like Dr. Datondji and many others at
LaGuardia, introduction requires elaboration and explanation. I am Indian, female, raised in Africa, educated and living in the United States, married to an Italian. Up front and for the world to see, I am also a professor and the director of a program for low-income immigrants within the Division of Adult and Continuing Education at LaGuardia. Less publicly, I am Suma Sosamma. Suma is a modern Indian name in a modern country born after colonialism ended. Sosamma is an ancient Syrian Christian name, the name of my long-dead paternal grandmother – fiery and difficult, I am told, and inclined to take things into her own hands – a name from the proud, insular community of Kerala in Southwestern India of which I am a part. Kurien, another marker of my Kerala Syrian Christian identity, is my father’s first name, adopted as my last name in deference to the customs of the West. I am also known, sometimes, as Signora Norelli, in acknowledgement of the customs of Italy, my spouse’s country.

None of these names and identities exists in isolation; through proximity to the others, each is transformed and new identities are born. I need to be an educator and administrator. I need to be Indian, Syrian Christian, and American. I need to learn how to make my way in Italy; my husband’s home, as well as here in the United States where we live and work, and also in India where I visit my large and extended family.

As I express these realities of myself, new possibilities and transformations abound. For example, my female cousins tell me that their young daughters now say that no longer must they give up their professional dreams to marry the man their parents have chosen. “Look at Suma-kochamma (in English, ‘little mother’ or ‘aunt’)!” the girls say. Like the mother in our Immigrant Family Literacy Program, the daughters no longer just say “Yes, yes.” They, too, ask questions.

The current issue of In Transit contains voices from many parts of our college, and is significant for its conscious effort to include multiple perspectives. Introductions to difference in all its forms, and the sometimes difficult dialogues that result, help us all to reflect on our practice and to respond with integrity to the transformations central to our work as teachers and learners.