

Art, Culture and Public Humanities Writing Prompt Responses

Prompt 1:

Culture is defined as shared values, behaviors, beliefs and attitudes that distinguish a group of people from other groups of people. Describe a particular culture in which you are apart (family, school, race, ethnicity, sports group, etc.) by sharing some of the shared values, beliefs and attitudes among its members. Make sure to also discuss some ways that your culture is distinctive in terms of behavior, such as its language, creative styles of dress, traditional foods, or celebrations of certain holidays and rituals.

Prompt 2:

A “cultural stereotype” is an oversimplified idea about a group of people that leaves little room for exception or complexity. Discuss why you think it is important to challenge cultural stereotypes that promote oversimplified ideas about a particular cultural group. How might art be used as a way to resist cultural stereotypes and provide more accurate depictions and images of a cultural group?

Prompt 3:

Among all of the art pieces we have seen today, which one spoke to you the most? Did it challenge any previous assumptions you held or did it resonate with your beliefs or experience? How so, and/or why not? Discuss some of the ways in which the piece expressed certain ideas about culture and cultural heritage. If applicable, also discuss some of the ways that that the piece might promote the resistance of cultural stereotypes. If none of the artwork you saw today inspired you (positively or negatively!), name your favorite piece of creative art (whether a visual art piece, song, novel, etc.). Make sure to also name who the piece was created or performed by. Discuss a way in which your favorite piece of creative art expresses certain ideas about culture and cultural heritage.

ALIEF ELSIK HIGH SCHOOL

Lily Nguyen, Alief Elsik High School (Prompt 1)

Vietnamese Culture

Vietnam, my mother country, is small in size, but rich in its culture and tradition. After being influenced by the domination of the Chinese, French, and most recent one, the Russians and Americans; Vietnam has created its own unique cultures and traditions.

The first thing I want to talk about is the value of status in Vietnam. We're very concerned with the politeness and respectfulness as it's the first thing we learn on the first day of school. We also have a separate class to teach about ethnics and morals.

Vietnamese spoken and written language is also unique and distinct. We use Latin alphabet, which was introduced by the French colonizers. There are six basic vowel tones that could change the meaning of a word completely. (Example: Ma-ghost, mà-but, má-mom, mã-tomb, mã-horse, mạ-rice seed) Not only that, we also have different

accents/dialects for different regions, though all are generally understood by most Vietnamese speakers, it'd still be really hard for anyone that wants to learn Vietnamese!

Our biggest and most important holiday that we celebrate is "Tết" (Vietnamese New Year). It's that time of the year when everyone is excited and enflamed. We prepare for Tết by cleaning the house, shopping for new clothes, and cooking special holiday foods such as bánh chưng, bánh dày (sticky rice). Many customs are practiced during Tết are visiting family relatives and friends as well as our ancestors in the cemetery. Not only that, there's also a tradition where adults give children red envelopes to happy new age. The celebration of New Year often last for 3 to 5 days. The streets during the holiday is always thrilled and boisterous and filled with many people. There were also parade of Lion Dancing during this time period as well.

Vietnamese cuisine is extremely varied as we have different major foods in different regions-North, Central, and South. Our main food is rice as we can eat rice three meals a day and every day of the week with different side dishes. However, Vietnamese most popular food is Pho (noodle) and is greatly enjoyed by many. It can be found widely in Houston, too!

Vietnamese's traditional clothing and also national costume is called "áo dài" (long dress). It emphasizes the women's beauty and elegance. It also honors the Vietnamese etiquette from the past up to the present. Ao dai is mostly worn during holiday and wedding. High school students are also required to wear ao dai to school as a school uniform in many cities.

As you can see, Vietnam has a rich and wide culture with many etiquettes and customs through behaviors, language, holidays, traditional food and clothing. I hope that this can help you gain some knowledge about my mother country - Vietnam.

Ashley Chukwu, Alief Elsik High School (Prompt 1)

When people think of Nigeria they probably conjure up images of an African country with an abundance of oil wells; not quite developed, but getting there. No one ever sees the dynamic of this beautiful country, the culture within a culture that is so broad it encompasses all of thirty-six states.

Of course, it would be hard to imagine the streets of Lagos overflowing with men in masks, dressed for the annual Eyo festival, if no one talks about it. Nigeria has over five hundred ethnic groups, each packed with customs that make them unique. The Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba people form the bulk of the nation's society, but there are hundreds of tiny branches connected to these huge trunks of ethnicity. With so many different groups of people milling around, there has to be a central means of communication, or else it would be like the tower of Babel all over again! In order to avoid this problem, English is Nigeria's lingua franca. We speak our own languages within our groups, and then the English comes in handy when anyone on the outside wants to communicate.

Diversity can also be seen in the religious aspect of Nigerian culture. Nigerians are deeply religious, and take matters of spirituality very seriously. The three main branches of faith are Christianity, Islam, and traditional worship. Some people even mix the traditional worship with the elements of western and eastern faith. People even intermarry regardless of religion, and they manage to form a bond regardless of their

differences. The food eaten in this country is a result of cultures mixing together or even remaining independent of others. From the rich egusi soup (which is made from watermelon seeds) to the plantain and palm oil, the food is just as rich as the culture. When people intermarry and mix, these beautiful dishes are modified to fit the situation, thus keeping traditions alive.

Nigeria is not called the "Giant of Africa" for nothing. It is a nation that rises above standards, and this is only possible because people from different backgrounds are willing to band together to achieve greatness. There are still tussles between ignorant people who refuse to accept change and diversity, but everyday society is made richer by those who embrace the differences in our culture.

Nafisa Chowdhury, Alief Elsie High School (Prompt 1)

I'm from Bangladesh, which is a small country located in South Asia. It is a Muslim country and, therefore, my culture is very much based on my religion, which is Islam. Bangladeshis also share common cultural values with Indians and Pakistanis. Starting from the food we eat: our staple food is rice and fish. Bangladesh is famous for cultivation of Hilsha fish which is a rare breed. All Bangladeshis love to eat Hilsha and so do I. Rice is always the main course for dinner and lunch in my culture. We have various other curries and vegetables. We don't eat pork and our favorite is chicken. We love spice. Most of our food contains spice. Central and South Americans also like spice, but the way we use it is a lot different than theirs, which makes our food taste different as well. Moving on to clothing: our traditional dress is called saree and another one is called salwar kameez. These clothes provide full coverage, following the Islamic dress code. We also wear hijab, which is the head coverage for Muslim women. Different styles of salwar kameezes are gaining huge popularity in other countries these days, because of their uniqueness. Bangladeshis are all about family values. For us, family always comes first. When kids grow up, the sons are required to take care of their parents, which is why, most of our families are joint. Unlike the western culture, kids don't move out of their parents' places when they become adults. We have strict rules within the family which also follows the Islamic code. Bangladeshi parents are usually over protective of their children and afraid of letting them face the wider and more diverse world. Next, we have our own Bengali calendar. We celebrate our new year on the 14th of April, annually. We wear our traditional dresses on that day and attend fairs and events that take place for celebration. We also enjoy doing "alpona" on this particular day. Alpona is a unique form of painting on the roads and streets. It looks beautiful. There are many other different things we do in our culture, which are left not mentioned.

There are both positive and negative sides of my culture. However, I am very proud and glad to be born in this culture. My culture is one of the many forms of my identity. I practice 100% of my culture even here in Houston, because I'm afraid I might lose it in the midst of the diverse environment of the United States. I hope to pass it on to the future generations of our family as well, so that our origin always remains within us.

Vivianh Huynh, Alief Elsie High School (Prompt 2)

"Art imitates life" is what first comes to mind when reading this prompt. While in English class I had to read the short story "Black Men and Public Spaces" by Brent Staples, the main character of this selection faces quick judgement when other people see him and react to his presence during the night. People would cross to the other side of the street, lock their doors suddenly, or even in one case, a person would run for their life in danger. Due to all these racist and sexist judgments, the author decided to make a change in his life to see the reaction of others if he walked in a calmer and gentler manner, or he spoke softer when addressing others. The main character learned to keep his frustration with this racism inside so that he no longer appeared threatening. I had a realization that we are all guilty of being prejudice at one point or another particularly when we have seen an African American male during the dark hours of the night. Reading this selection expressed to me what society has labeled the African American male. I came to the realization that we have to break the habit of being prejudice, for it is continually affecting the African American community. Upon concluding my reading, I also gained a deeper understanding as to how men feel about the prejudice and racism that takes place all around them.

Joy Ihedilionye, Alief Elsik High School (Prompt 2)

When I hear the word "stereotype," I cannot help but find humor in the sentiments of the origin, granted that is just a part of my inherent personality, but I find it sad to the point of being funny that people are capable of reaching such an echelon of ignorance. How could one possibly believe that an entire race of people identify with an exact behavior or quality, and to most of which, are completely degrading and unwarranted? The human spirit is magnanimous, elusive, and almost divine. Words only have as much power as we are willing to give them, so when people believe in stereotypes and allow them to proliferate to influence their own perceptions, the human spirit that exists within all races essentially becomes trapped behind the constraints of what society dictates it should be and do.

Stereotypes, I feel, epitomize the true meaning of Maya Angelou's poem, "Caged Bird"; they are the physical manifestation of words trying to break through to the surface. *But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams ...can seldom see through his bars of rage.* Just as the cage prevents the bird from embarking on his own pursuits, stereotypes capture and restrain an individual's dreams, passions, and identity. Because society has already preconceived an individual's sense of self-worth, this prejudice permeates through the individual's thoughts until they are coerced into believing what society has already deemed as true. Their dreams wither and die because they were too brazen for society's low expectations. It then becomes a question of, what is the purpose in trying to establish your identity in the world when the world has already decided what your identity is. Stereotypes are cages. They are dangerous oppressors that belittle the beauty of diversity in human beings. People are not defined nor limited by the color of their skin. We must break these superficial molds that society has constructed in order to show how human beings are capable of amazing things, no matter what race, religion, sex, or background they come from. Only then can the world begin to so see what it means to be human.

It's obvious that ignorance is prevalent when people are not willing to see others for what they truly are, other than what stereotypes say they are. Art, however, just might be the creative outlet that is able to defy these gratuitous biases. Art carries with it an alluring compulsion that sometimes even the most obstinate of persons can't resist. Unlike simply speaking to someone who is firm in their beliefs and opinions, art is able to penetrate this fortitude by exposing the vulnerability of one's mind and moral truths. It can be used to resist the transgressions of stereotypes by illuminating their corrupt nature in the presence of serenity and comradery. It's almost as if some reciprocating force takes over; the human spirit is compelled to obtain knowledge and the art itself facilitates the beauty in which ignorance fades away at the sight of enlightenment. Art is fluid, it is free, and when people are subjected to its fragility, they are predisposed to its genuine purpose. No matter what medium art is portrayed through, it can literally be molded to portray any intellect the artist wishes to expose to the world. Stereotypes are stripped of their collective acknowledgment in the face of art because the power they were given is transferred towards understanding how they arose in the first place and why their existence is wrong. When an individual who believes in stereotypes comes to *see* the pain that they cause, they also come to *know* and recognize the error of their ways. Through art, the human imagination can exist indefinitely, free for examination and interpretation. It's message will never die, so that stereotypes can.