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Cultures and Politics of the Global Drug War [Urban Studies/English]

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ENN 195: Violence in American Art and Culture

The Digital Essay and the Global War on Drugs

LINK: <https://lagcc-cuny.digication.com/ENN1952018/home-1/published>

All Urban Studies courses at LaGuardia are writing intensive, and all are designated for Global Learning and Written Communication. Urban Studies courses exist on different points of many programmatic curriculum maps for Liberal Arts majors, but students usually take it as a midpoint course. Dozens of different majors completed this assignment and take Urban Studies courses more generally, including Criminal Justice, Psychology, and Computer Science.

This assignment comes from a course called ENN 195: Violence in American Art and Culture. This course surveys the depictions of various types of violence and the use of violence as a theme or metaphor in North American literature, art, and popular culture. Emphasis is placed on New York City as a laboratory and resource for researching considerations of violence in poetry, drama, fiction, film, and other visual art forms as well as popular culture (e.g., lyrics, comic strips, advertising, horror and suspense stories).

My assignment asks students to compose an argumentative, thesis-driven essay that fulfills the similar criteria of both writing intensive courses and Written Communication. I decided to use this assignment to address Digital Communication as well, in part because I believed the multimodal elements of the digital ability would enhance the overall composition. The writing intensive skills we practiced in relation to Written Communication included the key modes of academic writing and professional communication: summary, comparison and contrast, analysis, close-reading, unified paragraphs, introductions, conclusions, bibliographies, arguments, supporting claims, key words and concepts, authentic audience, and research skills, including in-text citation. The assignment addressed the criteria of Digital Communication by asking students to compose multimedia “digital essays,” with sourced images and videos supplementing their argumentative claims.

I adapted the themes of ENN 195 to inquire more deeply into what the assignment entitles the “Global War on Drugs.” For this multi-stage assignment, we examined how art and literature represents the complex causes and effects of drug war cultures and politics in the present and historically in the United States, Mexico, and Colombia, whereby each nation anchored a different part of the essay. We began with the problem of racial policing and mass incarceration, pivoted to the migration crisis on the U.S.-Mexican border, and concluded with an investigation into Colombian visual arts and how they depicted themes of narco-violence, civil war, and indigenous land expropriation. We assessed how different kinds of media, including rap, fiction, and visual art, narrated the complex global sites of drug war violence. All students had to combine at least two parts of the three part essay.

Our specific, writing-intensive course objectives included:

- * understanding the historical context of drug war violence and mass incarceration;
- * defining the relation between drug cultures, economic inequality, and racial identities;
- * identifying the political economy of migration, immigration, and border violence;
- * analyzing how different media and literature represent drug war cultures and violence.

Due to the multi-staged nature of the digital essay assignment, it took most anywhere from half to the entire course to complete it. We spent approximately 20% of the course addressing hip-hop and the New Jim Crow as an argumentative essay, 20% of the course addressing migration, the border crisis, and narco-violence as an argumentative essay, and 20% of the course addressing Colombian history, art, and culture in relation to narco-violence as an argumentative essay. We then spent approximately 10% of the course adapting these essays into one composite “digital essay,” using lab hours to peer review both the writing and the digital presentation. Each essay alone was worth 20% of the final course grade, while the digital aspect of the assignment was worth 10% of their course grade.

I developed this assignment in conjunction with two Center for Teaching and Learning Seminars: “The Pedagogy of the Digital Ability” and “The Next Generation ePortfolio.”

ENN 195 Urban Studies: Violence in American Art and Culture

Assignment: Cultures and Politics of the Global Drug War

Total length: 6-10 double-spaced paper pages. The length of the assignment after the 2 or 3 white papers have been transformed into the digital essay will be unique to each student creation.

Assignment Goal: Your goal for this semester-long, multi-staged assignment is to create a working “digital essay” that makes argumentative claims about one to three dimensions of global narco-violence. You will support your claims with visual and textual evidence.

Assignment Description: This digital essay will create two or three intertwined essays as one semester-long project. It will examine the complicated global relationships between drugs, politics, and different regional and national cultures. By “digital essay,” I mean an essay that uses scholarship, literature, visual media, and video evidence to support your claims. These claims will speak to three sections connecting different aspects of drugs, politics, and culture. We will write each section on each area one at a time. You will use LaGuardia’s new “Next Generation” ePortfolio to build your digital essay over the semester. We will use our lab time in a computer lab to accomplish this. Each section, or individual three-page essay, will be due in two week intervals; see the syllabus for details.

Our course will inquire into three parts of the global narco-violence, which we’ll build one section on at a time, and layer together over time, while looking at both different cultural media and historical essays and book chapters. You will add an additional (third or fourth) part to your digital essay: a reflective conclusion, which you can create as an oral segment for extra credit.

PART 1: racial policing and mass incarceration (rap music)

PART 2: immigration and the novel *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (fiction)

PART 3: the Colombian civil war (video and visual arts)

PART 4: A 2-page reflection

For Part 4, you will write a reflective conclusion for your digital essay. For extra credit, you will speak your reflective conclusion in an audio recording that we can add as a file to the digital essay. *Your* voice will be a powerful way to conclude our work.

Part 1: The Sound of the New Jim Crow (Racial Policing and Mass Incarceration)

Assignment Goal: For this section of the digital essay, you will focus on a rap, hip-hop, or other music video that focuses on racial policing and mass incarceration. Your goal is to describe the ways that the artist or artists who created the music (and/or) video speaks to two of the texts from Weeks 1 and 2, which is to say what the artist is able to tell us about the drug war from his or her perspective in the song.

Assignment Description: In your thesis statement, you will craft a claim that explains how the music video connects to specific ideas from course texts, such as *The New Jim Crow*, including the ways the video communicates across difference. You will state the relationship between the music video and texts, and make specific links to lyrics and moments in the video and specific *quotations* from the texts. You will use this part of the essay to discuss the ethical consequences of global issues or events.

Let's think about what this assignment requires first as an argumentative essay. In your thesis statement, you will craft a claim that explains what argument the music video connects to specific ideas from course texts, such as *The New Jim Crow* and *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. You will explain how the song addresses racial policing or mass incarceration, and then also highlight the main ideas between the song and the course texts, and make specific links to lyrics and moments in the video and specific *quotations* from the texts. You will use this part of the essay to discuss the ethical consequences of global issues or events.

Part 2: Violence and Borders (Drugs, Immigration, and Migration)

For our second essay, you will write a thesis-driven argumentative essay about Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*.

Assignment Goal: Your goal is to argue about how the novel addresses events threats, and sensations of "violence" surrounding the main character Makina. You will argue about the meaning of *actual, literal* violence that occurs in the novel, but also argue about the ways the US-Mexican border, and Makina's status as a migrant searching for her lost brother, manages to accomplish what *literal* violence cannot: the breakup of her family, her lonely search, and the loss of multiple places and persons in her life.

Assignment Description: This essay looks at the experience of migration to the United States from Mexico as a kind of literal and figurative journey for Makina. In the context of our class, we see the way the novel begins with two parallel plots: Makina is supposed to deliver a secret parcel between two narco traffickers, and at the same time find her brother who stopped communicating after he migrated running a similar errand.

Rather than focus on the violence of the drug war, narco-trafficking, and cartel wars near the border, we're reading Herrera's novel for a larger story about the cultures on both sides of the border that feed, police, supply, and live in two of the most powerful and violence narco-states on the planet, Mexico and the United States.

One benefit of focusing on this kind of story is that it allows us to see new sides, and new genders, of the American drug economy. Instead of listening to the frequently male hustler of rap music, this novel allows us to contemplate another part of this same world through the eyes of a young woman.

In your thesis statement and supporting paragraphs, you will craft claims that discuss the ethical consequences of American migration, and analyze the dynamics of what's sometimes called the "immigration crisis." Part of your task here is to analyze violence both as an event, such as the chapter where Makina is shot, but also as a culture, situation, atmosphere, and system. In other words, not every chapter in the book is about *physical* violence. But if we think of violence as *something that causes pain, loss, and bodily risk*, then nearly every chapter is about violence.

It's therefore essential that in this paper you think carefully about violence and define what it means, how it works, how we know it, what causes it, and what its effects are. This definition should occur in your introduction, likely as your thesis statement, and/or throughout your paper, likely as your topic-sentence claims.

In your conclusion, if not in your body paragraphs, I want you to think carefully about *what* causes Makina *harm* in the novel – both in little ways and in big. Give a name to that system, and connect that system to what we studied in our first section on mass incarceration and racial policing. Ask yourself: what's different about the character rapping in the song you wrote about? What's similar? What might Makina say to that character?

Part 3: The Colombian Civil War (Visualizing and Remembering Violence)

Assignment Goal: Using two of the three videos we studied on or about the unique experience of the drug war in Colombia, your goal for our third argumentative essay is to explain how those videos/art reveal to us important ideas about the violence or experience of Colombia drug culture.

Assignment Description: For our final area of study we will look closely at readings about the history of the Colombian civil war and its relation to narco-trafficking and production, and cocaine in particular. On the one hand, this gives us the opportunity to examine a country where, historically, drugs like cocaine were produced for global markets and especially the United States. This trafficking drove both sides of the Colombian civil war and remains a critical part of the war's legacy today. On the other hand, this assignment will also give us a new set of visual texts from which we can understand the violence of the drug wars from another global location, and which asks us to make different kinds of connections between drug war violence, the global war on drugs, and the consequences for everyday people.

For this essay, you will choose two of the following art videos to analyze in light of our themes:

1. "Bolívar's Tray." A video in which an artist destroys a white porcelain tray, turning it into a powder that looks like cocaine. It's on the nose, but good: the tray is a replica of a national treasure.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRg2wNmAqx4>

2. "Mouths of Ash." A classic and heartbreaking work. An 18 minute video of massacre survivors singing songs that they have composed themselves about the massacres. Good for talking about the victims of war in Colombia.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG1X8Bey3fl>

3. Édinson Quiñones' art

<http://vkgaleria.com/es/artista/edinson-quinones>

Thesis: Your thesis should make claims about the art as artifacts of the Colombia drug war culture. What do they tell us? What themes and ideas do they express? What are they trying to say?

Evidence: You should be able to identify and specify the specific parts of each object, or the parts that contain meaning for your claims. Note where these parts occur in the video, and relate them so that a viewer would know what you're talking about.

Critical Thinking: In your introduction, if not in your thesis, you should be able to refer to the links between the art and other readings and films we've consumed about the drug war and economy. In your body paragraphs, you will make connections between the art/videos and these readings. You should include at least two other sources in this paper.

Conclusion: For your conclusion, please reflect on the following questions and answer them. Address your answers to readers who are *not* from our class. This means you should not take for granted they know what you're discussing or referring to. If you mention a name, song, idea, or text, re-introduce them to it. Please refer to texts and ideas as you answer the questions, although whether you choose to employ direct citations is up to you.

1. How do the themes you address in this essay about Colombian art connect to speak to themes or ideas you discussed in your first two essays about the *New Jim Crow* and *Signs Preceding the End of the World*?
2. How would you describe the problems of the *New Jim Crow* as a part of a *global* issue that also involves the themes and ideas you found in the Colombian art, as well as the themes of violence we see in *Signs*? Can you give examples?
3. What are the implications of understanding the *New Jim Crow*, the violence associated with migration, and the ideas from the Colombia art as a *global* issue or event? How does our understanding of one influence our understanding of another? In other words, what is the significance of realizing that rap songs about the drug war are related to the violence described in *Signs*, which are also related to ideas we find in the Colombian art?

Part 4: Conclusion: What is to be done?

In your 2-page conclusion, you will draw connections between all three parts of the digital essay. You will also address covert operations in the drug trade or money laundering in the United States.

You will be strongly encouraged to revise each part of the essay as the semester unfolds, however, to make the links you find between these parts explicit and clear. Here, you will also analyze the ethical consequences of global issues or events and propose solutions.

Students are strongly encouraged to read and revise their conclusion into a spoken "oral conclusion" that will add an audio dimension to the digital essay. Students that choose to do this will receive extra credit on the assignment.

Digital Essay Checklist and Grading Guide

Your transformation of your first essay into a “digital essay” using ePortfolio is 10% of your final course grade.

To achieve the minimal design for full points (100% of the 10%), your digital essay should contain the following:

1. **Home Page.** This page should welcome readers to the site, introduce you as the author, and introduce the class and assignment. This page should also contain a reflection on what it was like to write this assignment, and should convey what is most important about what you learned completing this assignment. This page should have at least one image and contain links to relevant content. This relevant content includes outside sites but also the key pages of the digital essay. You may call this page whatever you like. **(20%)**
2. **Thesis page.** This page is your primary introduction to the arguments you’re making, the sources you’re using, your body paragraph pages, and your conclusion. This page should have at least one image and contain links to relevant content. This relevant content includes outside sites but also the key pages of the digital essay. You may call this page whatever you like. **(20%)**
3. **Body paragraph pages.** There should be at least two body paragraph pages. In addition to following the college model paragraph structure we’ve practiced, these pages should have at least one image and contain links to relevant content. This relevant content includes outside sites but also the key pages of the digital essay. You may call these pages whatever you like. **(20%)**
4. **Conclusion page.** This page should have at least one image and contain links to relevant content. This relevant content includes outside sites but also the key pages of the digital essay. You may call this page whatever you like. **(10%)**
5. **Bibliography page/ Image and video sourcing.** This page should contain a correct works cited list in MLA 8th edition, with links on the titles of your sources to relevant web sources/content for the source. Every image and video that appears on your ePortfolio site should be linked to its source from the web where you found it, copied, and saved it. Furthermore, every image and video that appears on your site should be in the Bibliography/Works Cited page (#5 above). **(20%)**
7. **Design.** The overall multimodal design of your ePortfolio includes the use of colors, the text boxes and slides, the use of fonts, and overall originality in your tab titles, decoration, illustration, and user experience. **(10%)**