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The Customer at the Brothel: Student Enlightenment through “Degenerate” Art

Cheryl Hogue Smith and Maya Jiménez

Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York has received much attention for its Learning Community (LC) Programs, in large part because the professional research organization MDRC published research findings that LCs have a direct and significant impact on the success of Kingsborough students. This year the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program named Kingsborough one of the top ten community colleges in the nation, in part because of Kingsborough’s strong LC programs. One reason for the success of the programs is their strong push towards integrative teaching, assignments, and/or curriculum of all classes in a link.

For five semesters, we have taught in the largest of Kingsborough’s LC programs—the Opening Doors Learning Communities—where entering freshmen enroll with a cohort of students in an LC consisting of an English course, a general education course, and a freshman seminar class (study skills and orientation to learning in college). For our link, we have two cohorts of students who take composition with Smith, a survey course in art history with Jiménez, and the freshman seminar with Stephanie Akunvabey, who is also their freshman advisor.

From the beginning of our LC, we combined our curriculum and shared many assignments, all focusing on art theft, destruction, and forgery during the period of World War II. We wanted a topic that would hold our students’ attention, since, by our account, many enter college believing they’ll never need to write in their careers, supposing art history is either looking at pretty (or not) pictures or creating art, and assuming they already fully understand what it means to be a new freshman in college. Many of our students think our classes cannot help them with their future careers. One of the hardest parts of our job is to teach students that understanding art, reading and writing will contribute to critical thinking they will do in any future class or field.

In our LC, students are thrown quickly into the world of modern art and the debilitating impact Hitler had on avant-garde artists in Germany. Their first paper requires them to analyze a written text about “degenerate art” and then explain in detail why a certain painting would have been considered for the “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937. Owing to the interdisciplinary aspect of this assignment, the paper counts in both English and Art History. We tell students that they must use as their audience someone who knows nothing about degenerate art, so it is their responsibility to define “degenerate art” before they describe and analyze what we call *The Painting*, which is Gino Severini’s (1883-1966) *Armored Train in Action* (1915). We only give students the image of the painting, sans the artist, title, or date, because we want them to analyze the painting based on what they see, not on what they can look up on Google. In other words, they have to use not only what they learn in art history class, namely the skills of how to look at, describe, and analyze art, but also what they learn from written text in English, and then they must apply that knowledge to a visual text.

To begin this paper, students first read Stephanie Barron’s “1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany,” where she explains that

Hitler chose to apply the term “degenerate” to modern art after the architect and racial theorist Paul Schultze-Naumburg demonstrated that the faces in modern artworks resembled those of the mentally ill. The text is difficult, not in any way written for freshman students at any school; in fact, Barron bandies around such terms as “Cubism,” “Expressionism,” “Futurism,” and “Dada” as though readers automatically understand how they fit into the topic of Modernism. Not surprisingly, rarely do our students understand these terms or understand their differences or their impact on the art world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

To help students understand the four modern art movements, we created a short handout drawn largely from Gloria Fiero, whose text *The Humanistic Tradition* succinctly defines these four movements. We require students to read this handout prior to reading Barron, which helps them somewhat, but it still does not give them entrance into the world of modern art. So our students are simultaneously grappling with a difficult text (Barron) and difficult ideas (understanding modern art and why it would have been considered “degenerate”), which in some ways makes them feel much like outsiders in both fields.

They don’t feel like outsiders for very long. Since one of the requirements of art history is that students visit a museum and since we live in New York and have the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in our backyard, we require our students to go to MoMA after they have read Barron but before they are given the image of *The Painting*. Smith and Jiménez (who also holds a Lecturer position at MoMA), as well as Akunvabey, take the students to the museum, reinforcing the idea of a LC as a “community” of both students and faculty.

Students are surprised to learn that Hitler would have probably considered every single piece of art in MoMA as “degenerate.” Here they stand, in one of the best museums in the country, confronted with the idea that it all might have been destroyed. The goal of taking students to MoMA is, of course, to help students better understand modern art, discussing in the museum how and why such criteria as subject matter, the illusion of depth or three dimensionality, colors, realism, visual clarity, and the visibility of foreground, middle-ground, and background all figured into Hitler’s classification. Seeing the artwork while Jiménez and the students discuss it on site, rather than seeing an image projected on a screen in a darkened lecture hall, helps students understand how modern art challenged traditional painting.

As students are surrounded by both the art and patrons viewing that art in the galleries, they come to realize that appreciating and understanding art is part of a much larger phenomenon than they could have previously fathomed. They undergo a transformation from passive learners in our classes to active participants in the fields of Art History and English; the transformation usually occurs the moment students encounter Picasso’s (1881-1973) painting *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907), which is always the first stop. This showcases five naked women in various poses, some standing, some sitting, all depicted

in a fragmented and distorted manner, within a squared canvas measuring 8 x 7.8 feet.

When Jiménez shows this painting, the first thing she notices is the students' amazement at the impressive size of the canvas, the mask-like faces of the figures, and the visibility of the brushwork. She begins by explaining various features of the work, all the while asking students questions about what they see in relation to visual clarity, the illusion of depth and three dimensionality, colors, realism, and so on. Then Jiménez takes the discussion in a direction something like this:

"Where are the women? Are they inside or outside?"

"Inside," a student answers.

"How do we know they are inside?" Jiménez asks, always prompting students to back up their observations with evidence.

"Because of the curtains. The women are pushing them out of the way, so they're inside."

"Great!" replies Jiménez. "Let me tell you a little more about this painting. Does anyone understand the name? . . . No? Well, it means 'The Women of Avignon.' What kind of women do you see here?"

"Distorted ones?" A student timidly asks.

"Yes," Jiménez answers with a smile, "but what else?"

"Naked ones," a student offers.

"Okay, good. Do you think there's a reason Picasso painted them naked?" This usually throws students because they've never considered why artists—or authors—made any of their choices. The question both baffles and intrigues them and most often renders them speechless. "Let me tell you the subject matter of this painting. It's actually five women in a brothel. Does anyone know what a 'brothel' is?"

At least one student usually exclaims—a little too loud for a museum—"A whorehouse!"

"That's right," Jiménez responds. "And what, exactly, is a 'whorehouse'?"

"Where people go for prostitutes."

"Exactly! Okay, now let's really think about this. We have here a painting that depicts five naked women in a brothel, two of whom are pulling back a curtain. How would you describe the women?"

"Scary," replies a student. Jiménez presses them for explanations and students begin to mention their glaring eyes and fragmented bodies.

Jimenez continues, "Based on what we know about these women, what they do, and how they look, how would you describe our interaction with this painting? Wouldn't you agree that the painting feels confrontational?"

In unison, students nod their head. "Okay, so what does all this tell you as a viewer of this painting? What is Picasso doing here?"

"He's showing us the women in the brothel who are looking out at us, perhaps waiting for someone?" a student asks, not yet grasping the implications of his reply.

"Okay, and who are they waiting for?" leads Jiménez?

"Customers?" asks another student.

"Precisely. Now where are they looking?"

"They are looking at us."

"So who are the customers?" Jiménez invites.

"We are!" they shout. And in that split second, they get it.

Part of the brilliance of Picasso's work is that this painting makes the viewer a necessary element of the work of art, and in that process, the painting becomes a dynamic performance in which the observer is a participant. Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser describe a similar concept when they argue that a literary text is an inert object until a reader brings his or her experience to make meaning with it. A work of literary art does not have vital existence until the reader makes it come alive. With no viewer, *Les Femmes d'Alger* is like an inert text or a dramatic play without an audience: It is incomplete and has no meaning. Additionally, as in any theatrical performance, the viewer of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is the last—and, arguably, the most vital—"character" of the artwork. So the viewers' active participation is what creates the dynamic interaction between artwork and audience. And the second students understand the implications of being a participant in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the air in the room changes because the idea of being needed as an active part of the experience challenges their notion of what it means to *see* art, or better yet, *experience* it. In that second, students begin their transformation from outsider to insider in the fields of Art History and English, through the practical application of the knowledge acquired in both classes.

Even though we intuitively knew that *experiencing* art at MoMA would help our students better understand our fields, never could we have predicted that becoming customers of an Avignon brothel would help them become enlightened members of the academic community.

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