

Play to your strengths: The unessay as inclusive, flexible assessment and learning as a process

Dr F. A. Eissa-Barroso
SALC / MLC

The Unessay: what is it?

- Assignment that requires students to make two choices:
 - What topic they will research?
 - How will they present the findings of their research?
- Experience with a Scaffolded Unessay in SPLA31151 History of the Spanish Atlantic World

The Unessay: a history

- Around since ca. 2012 – reintroduce flexibility the essay had lost
 - “an opportunity to explore intellectual passions and interests in a personal style” (O’Donnell 2012)
 - “be creative [...], consider [their] strengths, talents and skills and think about how to apply them” (Clarke 2016)
- Inclusive by design: different learning styles (Mader 2020), disability (Nair, n/d), background

The Unessay: a history

- Big boom during pandemic: reduce stress, prioritise wellbeing
- Increased scepticism
 - Interpretative dances and quilting projects?
 - Lack of intellectual rigour
 - Impossibility of assessing aesthetic and technical standards not taught in class or mastered by the tutor

The Unessay: ensuring academic rigour

- Argument and KT centric
 - ‘a creative and audience-focused assignment’ (Banks, 2023)
 - ‘how we communicate historical narratives’ (Nair, n/d)
- Assessment as process
 - Scaffolding: support process and assess throughout
- Assess content, not style

SPLA31151's Scaffolded Unessay

- Decide on a topic that is connected to the history of the SAW between the 16th and 18th centuries and which you want to research at length
- Chose a medium in which to present the findings of your research. No restriction on the form as long as it can demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of your chosen topic and convey an argument.

SPLA31151's Scaffolded Unessay

- The unessay and marking criteria (week 2)
- Task 1: Annotated choice of topic and medium (500 words; 15%; week 5)
- Task 2: Detailed plan (1250 words; 30%; week 9)
- Unessay workshop (week 12)
- Task 3: Unessay project (equivalent to 2,250 words; 55%; start of the exam period)

SPLA31151's unessay: marking criteria

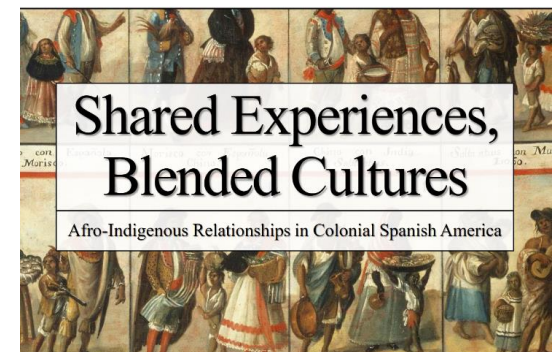
- Assessed on how compelling your unessay is; how effective it is; and how accurate it is
- Not assessed on the artistic, aesthetic or technical merit of your unessay
 - Draw on the skills you have or explore a medium you are intrigued by but have no experience of

SPLA31151's unessay: marking criteria

A First Class unessay project: constitutes a critical and active engagement with the contents of the course and chosen topic. Demonstrates thorough and highly nuanced grasp of chosen topic. Shows insight and creativity and demonstrates time and effort devoted to creating something thoughtful. Chosen medium works persuasively with the design and topic. Includes clear and insightful connections between chosen topic and broader content of the course. Puts across a convincing and nuanced argument. Excellent attention to detail. Draws effectively on a broad range of primary and secondary sources included in a consistently formatted bibliography.

Unessay projects (2024-25)

- Poetry based on primary accounts of Africans in the Caribbean + commentary
- Playscript exploring Afro-descendant sailors' agency
- Podcast on the ambivalent role of silver in the SAW
- Short story about impact and opportunities of mita service



Unessay projects (2024-25)

- Pitch for a TV drama about diverse meanings and experiences of Catholicism
- Documentary script on tobacco's role in Spanish imperialism
- Podcast about African and Indigenous pirates

Culinary Inter-cultural Dialogue



Unessay projects (2024-25): what did they achieve?

- Going beyond academic English?
- Individualised narratives / human scale
- Engagement with own history
- Content not covered in the course
- Nuanced, carefully problematised, well-researched (with few exceptions)

Challenges / dilemmas

- Can an unessay be an essay?
- Anonymity?
- Substance v. style?