

MEDST225: Ethnicity in American Media/LALS205: Latinx in the Media

Undergraduate course | Meet once a week for three hours | Max 35 students

PROJECT: Creating an Ofrenda

DESCRIPTION: You do not need to be Mexican to celebrate Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). What you need however is a deep and thoughtful cultural understanding of the practice. This lesson plan teaches students what Dia de los Muertos is, the influence of colonialism (past and present), how mainstream media understands the celebration in the U.S., and how local communities honor the celebration. This approach is from a media studies perspective and a particular focus on art, specifically altar making or making an ofrenda. Writer, philosopher, tejana Gloria E. Anzaldúa details that altars are “‘the sanctuary of the soul,’ a ‘hope-filled activity,’ a ‘sources of inspiration and visualization,’ a ‘symbology system,’ and a method for ‘facilitating change.’” Additionally, she reminds us that altars assist us in building community-with ourselves, our ancestors, our spirit guides, local spirits, and each other.” Therefore, creating an ofrenda, is a literal offering by community and for community. The outlined lesson plan is for three class sessions. Day 1; is a traditional plan with a lecture (suggested readings and film to view are listed) with a homework assignment. Day 2; is an “interactive gallery walk” with four stations of Dia de los Muertos materials, questions students should consider as they interact with diverse material, and a homework assignment. Day 3; introduces students to the space where they will build their ofrenda and brainstorming the Queens (or Queen’s College related) theme for the altar. This approach to Dia de los Muertos focuses more on the symbolic visual aesthetics and does not focus on a religious practice. Students will learn how colonialism (from the Spanish Empire and contemporarily by *Disney*) have associated Dia de los Muertos with religion and capitalism, in an attempt to remove the indigenous origins of celebrating life.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

1. Describe mainstream and community representations of Dia de los Muertos.
2. Identify semiotic meanings of altar making.
3. Create alternative representations of Dia de los Muertos related to students’ communities.

PLACE: This class project engages place by taking students across campus to visit memorials and to the on-campus library. Students’ only guidelines when creating a theme of their ofrenda is that it must be related to Queens or to Queens College specifically.

DAY 1

- I. Have students read this book chapter before coming to class:

Marchi, Regina. "El Dia de los Muertos in the USA: Cultural Ritual as Political Communication." In *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, edited by Jack Santino, 261-83. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

- II. Opening Activity | Free Writing | Discussion

Ask students to write down what they know about Dia de los Muertos and where did they receive this information from?

- III. Lecture

Create lecture from the following readings:

Brandes, Stanley. "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning." *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 2 (1998): 181-218.

Brandes, Stanley. "The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity." *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 442 (1998): 359-80.

Jones, Sofia. "Remember that time Disney tried to trademark 'Dia de los Muertos'?" *Nuestro Stories*. October 28, 2024. <https://nuestrostories.com/2024/10/remember-that-time-disney-tried-to-trademark-dia-de-los-muertos/>

Marchi, Regina. "El Dia de los Muertos in the USA: Cultural Ritual as Political Communication." In *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, edited by Jack Santino, 261-83. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Morales, Orquidea. "Horror and Death: Rethinking Coco's Border Politics." *Film Quarterly* 73, no.4 (2020): 41-49.

Pérez, Laura E. "Altar, Alter." In *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetics Altarities*, 91-145. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

- IV. Screen

Zaccaria, Paola and Daniele Basilio (dir.) *Altar: Cruzando Fronteras, Building Bridges*. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pep1vMqtHYs>

- V. Homework

For the next class meeting, have students bring information (social media links, old flyers) from local organizations, city, other colleges, or museums in the area that celebrate (or have celebrated) Dia de los Muertos.

DAY 2

I. “Interactive Gallery Walk”

Create four stations of Dia de los Muertos information (stations below). Have students spend time at each station and rotate. Students can take notes answering the following questions:

1. What new information did I learn from these materials?
2. What questions do I have of these materials?
3. What did I like about these materials to potentially include in a community altar?

II. Dia de los Muertos Stations

1. Info that students brought (homework from Day 1)
2. Art Book:

Pérez, Laura E. and Maria Esther Fernández. *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Archaeology of Memory*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2023.

III. Children’s books

Our campus has a children’s collection in the library. I worked with a library faculty member to curate books for the class. Some are:

Gonzalez, Eric and Erich Haeger. *Rosita y Conchita: A Rhyming storybook in English and Spanish*. New York: Scholastic, 2018

Hernandez, Camila and Anahita Tamaddon. *Mi Familia: Celebrating the Day of the Dead*. Independently Published, 2022.

Tonatiuh, Duncan. *Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2015.

IV. View

OskeyVision. “Day of the Dead Origins and Meaning.” YouTube. October 9, 2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6VdNxPfPM>

V. Homework

Have students watch, “Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead.” *Artbound* (Season 10, Episode 3). PBS SoCal. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1c8sXFFjws>. Students should write down,

1. List quotes/phrases that are meaningful, and explain why.
2. What information was new?
3. Draft ideas for community altar.
4. What items/symbolism do you want to reproduce for the community altar?

DAY 3

- I. Class will meet in original classroom. We will walk to the campus library to view potential locations for the altar. On our walk to the library, we will stop by some intuitional memorials (COVID, September 11th, and Rantus Rock) to see how local people/events/places are honored.
- II. After students review possible spaces for the altar, we will gather in a classroom in the library and plan the theme for the Queens/Queens College altar and materials needed (professor is working on funding). Ask students how they want to vote to determine theme. Students will share their homework (from Day 2). Another class meeting might be necessary to determine how labor will be divided.