We are pleased to invite applications for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of $500 will be awarded to the graduate student instructor submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (second place winners, if any, will receive $150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics. These sequences probably represent work assigned during a portion of the course rather than all of the essay assignments distributed over an entire semester. Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you prepare students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community. Winning entries will be deposited in the Knight Institute’s web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute’s archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like “rhetorical situation,” “style,” “citation,” etc. Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.

Submissions are due by Tuesday, January 2, 2024. No exceptions can be made.

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**Fall 2023 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application**

Instructor’s name: Joseph Lasky

Preferred name: _______________ Preferred pronouns: he/him

Dept & Course #: GOVT 1110 Course title: Nation and State

Title of Assignment Sequence: Cartographic Essay

Instructor’s signature: Joseph Lasky Date: 12/22/23

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make it available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Amanda Munson (anm94@cornell.edu) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning sequence upon submission of the electronic text.
Abstract:
Maps reflect and geographically reify social and political imaginaries. Through them, cartographers structure space with intention. Nationalist entrepreneurs use scale, symbology, and language to solidify ties to people and territory. To understand nationalism as a process and the role of cartography in [re]producing the nation, students were asked to first draft a map (defined broadly). Once complete, the map – now a primary document – served as a lens in an exploration of nation building.

Keywords:
cartography, multi-media, creative writing, symbology, analysis

Rationale:
My intention with the cartographic essay was to offer students space to have fun and be creative with their writing. The majority of the students in my class were social and physical science majors. Many of their classes require written submissions with largely predetermined formats, minimizing space for more interpretivist and intersubjective work. With the cartographic essay, I strove to incorporate a different dimension of writing while also advancing key critical skills of synthesis and interdisciplinary analysis. The assignment also addressed essay and paragraph structure, requiring authors to develop themes and support abstract ideas with elements from their maps.

Sequence Details:
The cartographic essay sequence was a brief sequence that prioritized creative interaction with a primary document of the student’s fabrication. There were two components: mapmaking and an analytical essay. Progress on these components was completed both in and outside of class. The timeline was as follows:

- Preparatory exercises:
  o Class discussions of maps as manifestations of a cartographer’s geographic imaginary.
  o Course reading on the use of transportation and communications technology to overcome the friction of space in French nation-building; reading on Catalan separatism as an opportunity to reimagine borders and, concurrently, the defining beliefs and values of the nation; reading on transnationalism, xenophobia, and Pan-Africanism in sports.
- Part A: completion of the map.
- Classwork: small group reflections and interpretation of colleagues’ maps.
- Part B: completion of the analytical essay.
Part A of the cartographic essay was to draw a map of a nation. What the map could look like and what constituted the nation was up to interpretation, though I provided guidance for those that preferred more direction. Part A was completed before the Part B prompt was released. This was done to ensure that students engaged in the cartographic phase of the sequence in a non-teleological fashion. Instead, I encouraged them to produce their maps without considering how they would be used in the second phase of the assignment.

To prepare, we spent time in class collectively reflecting on the relationship between space, territory, and nation-building. We discussed the ways in which maps are used as political and social tools that both reflect and project geographic imaginaries. We explored how maps reveal intentions, beliefs, and political commitments. They may occlude or emphasize contestation. Where one map may paper over historical conflict, another may render it the central feature.

Readings that students completed in preparation for the cartographic essay addressed how nationalist entrepreneurs use transportation and communications technology to shrink the vastness of space that historically weakened ties between smaller social groups. Readings also examined how separatist leaders use the redrawing of borders as an opportunity to [re]envision the core beliefs, norms, and values of their nation. Finally, a reading on refugees and the Africa Cup of Nations soccer tournament explored the shifting salience of national and supranational identities, demonstrating the changing value that individuals place on state borders.

Once Part A was complete, students were asked to bring their maps to class. Then, divided into small groups, maps were exchanged. Provided with minimal context, group members were asked to interpret their colleagues’ maps. How did the mapmaker use space, proportions, the built environment, nature, language, etc. to convey a story? Were the elements linked in a coherent manner, or were they disparate and diverse? This group work provided an opportunity for each cartographer-turned-analyst to crowdsource impressions of their map in a way that facilitated a dimension of disconnect from the first phase of the sequence.

Part B then invited students to engage in a quasi-phenomenological experience in which they placed themselves in the mind of the cartographer – themselves from a time before they read the second prompt – and reflect upon the intentions of the map. This part of the sequence was an essay in which students analyzed the map as a tool of nation building. Since their maps were not created with the intention of answering specific questions of a prompt, they could be leveraged as relics of a process at least a degree disconnected from the essay phase. Their maps became objects of analysis rather than a method of information visualization.

Class Response:

This was an intentional departure from the more empirical, positivist, social science writing that other segments of the course emphasized. Some students immediately took to this assignment sequence, enjoying the minimal structure and multi-media aspects of the work. Other students relied more heavily on the optional guidance, looking for direct, explicit instructions. With this in mind, I consider the flexibility of the sequence one of its strengths. Students were able to gravitate towards a conservative interpretation of the assignment, drawing national borders that were coterminous with a state and populating it with monuments. Others embraced the ambiguous,
liminal, and contested, drawing borders that bisected state borders, brought together territories that are physically distant in the material world, used language to delineate transition zones between nations, etc.

Moving forward, I will incorporate this assignment sequence in future courses on subjects that interact with geography. I will continue with an open structure paired with optional guidance. However, there are three considerations I would like to highlight. First, I did not mandate the subject of the map (i.e., which nation). The benefit of leaving this open to the student is that they can choose a subject that they are comfortable and familiar with. However, I see an alternative benefit of a shared realm across the class, were I to require students focus on the same subject.

Second, a couple of students wrote more of a report, conveying information about important historical sites. This minimized interactions with the map as a primary document. In the next iteration, I will dissuade this approach.

Third, assigned readings captured the conceptual work of nationalist entrepreneurs while class discussions tied in the cartographic work serving the nation-building process. Next time, I will include readings that explicitly link these two facets together – with maps to illustrate – so that the sequence is more legible.
Maps play a critical role in the national imaginary. Claims to specific territory are central to nearly every nation. While the nation may be an “imagined community,” elements from the natural and built environment are often invoked to reinforce social ties, define the extent of the “Motherland” or “Fatherland,” elevate national status relative to outgroups, and explicitly solidify attachments to perceived entitlements.

For Part A of this assignment, you are tasked with drawing a map. I provide some requirements, guidelines, and suggestions below, but I am intentionally minimizing directions. This part of the assignment should not take more than 30 minutes of your time. Of course, you are welcome to spend more time on the map if you like. The map itself will serve as a reference document for Part B, to come later.

Choose a nation that interests you, that you identify with, or that you are familiar with. The more familiar you are with the history, collective memory, and narratives of the nation, the easier the assignment will be overall.

1. **First, draw the boundaries of that nation.** Some things to consider. The boundaries you envision may be coherent and align with state boundaries (the model nation-state). However, they may differ from state boundaries, such as the Kurdish nation, which stretches across several states. Conversely, the nation may be detached from a delineated territory (in this case, the globe may be the boundary for the purposes of this assignment).

2. **Second, locate five or more sites of political, cultural, social, religious, or historical significance.** Using America as an example, these can be natural sites (Plymouth Rock), monuments or sites of historic artifacts (Liberty Bell), buildings (Independence Hall), cities (Washington DC), places of worship, etc.

Do this *without* looking up the sites or their locations, as best you can. Rather, I want you to think about your life experiences, education, travel, etc. to generate maps from memory.

Maps will be turned in with the essay. The medium for the map does not matter either, as long as you can turn it in, either in person or electronically.

That is all for this first part! This is intended to be a creative writing assignment with a more interpretivist orientation before we begin the empirical research proposal sequence. Additional considerations about maps that may help along your cartographic journey (food for thought, not essential reading):

For many of us, the first thing that comes to mind when we think of a map is a road network imposed on a space carved up by administrative boundaries and dotted with buildings. The maps you may have received from Cornell when you arrived here, for instance, delineate vehicle and pedestrian throughways and buildings. However, maps can take on all types of forms. Audubon’s bird migration maps visualize avian behavior without referencing human structures (though maps
of migrations in pre-industrial North America would certainly look different). Below is a population density map of IL, devoid of other elements:

![Illinois Population Density Map](image)

While these maps are scaled in a way to reflect precise geographic realities, other maps use size to emphasize the importance of certain elements, such as historic sites. The map below locates sites that were important in the plot of the movie *Fargo*. Space is compressed in some ways, buildings are either completely omitted or oversized, and directional arrows tie locations together into a story (granted, one that is only interpretable to those that have seen the film):
Of course, maps can also treat space abstractly while emphasizing locations that are relevant for a particular purpose. Consider the classic NYC subway system map, for instance. This and other mass transit maps often compress and smooth topography and geography to visualize the order of stops along a route.

Your map does not have to recreate any of these approaches. Instead, I mention these to suggest that your map can be as abstract, detailed, minimalist, refined, basic, etc. as you like.
After having completed Part A, you now have the primary source that you will use for Part B. Maps can be used to understand how individuals relate to the space around them. For example, political scientist Elisabeth Jean Wood solicits and analyzes maps in her 2003 book *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Wood asks El Salvadorian research participants to draw maps of their localities before and after civil war (1979-1992). She then analyzes continuities and changes as indicators of individual perceptions of class, power, community, etc. Wood reminds the reader that the process of making a map does not necessarily reflect acknowledgements of collectively sanctioned spatial boundaries. Rather, the process may contribute to or contest geographic imaginaries.

For this essay, you are asked to analyze the map you have created. Reflect upon what this map conveys in terms of the nation, nationalism, national consolidation, nation-building, etc. Consider if or how sites located on the map indicate norms or values. Sites may be linked, their relationships embodying a nationalist narrative. Sites may be located strategically within territory, used to mark land that is claimed but potentially disputed, either historically or presently.

In roughly 1,000 words, the essential goal of this essay is to use the map to analyze the relationship between space, sites of national importance, and the nation. I provide directions on structuring your essay below, but how you approach the analysis itself is up to you. However, if you prefer further guidance, I list suggested ways of engaging with your map below as well.

- First, the introductory section of your essay (1-2 paragraphs) should relay the key theme or themes of your analysis along with some descriptive information, such as the nation that the cartographer illustrates in their map. The introductory paragraph is a space for you to lay out your thesis and briefly describe how you will go about supporting your argument.

- Second, the paragraphs in the body of your essay should link to either the thesis laid out in your introduction or the theme of a section (if you choose to use sections to organize your essay), which should by extension relate to your thesis. The number of paragraphs will vary, but this section will likely have more than four.

- Third, your conclusion section (1-2 paragraphs) should recapitulate your central thesis at a minimum. This is also a space to consider elements or themes of the map that you did not have time to address in the body of the essay. You could also offer brief alternative interpretations of the map that fall outside your analysis.

In contrast to most scholars, you have special insight into what the mapmaker was thinking at the time of map production. However, in writing, I ask that you interact with your map with a degree of practical disconnect. For instance, rather than claiming authorship of the map and writing “I placed X and Y monuments on the map because they emphasize Z quality of civic nationalism,” instead write “By placing X and Y monuments on the map, the cartographer centers Z quality of civic nationalism.”
Below are possible questions to wrestle with in your analysis. These are meant to get you started. It would be impossible to address each of these, but they provide ways in which you can organize your thoughts and develop themes around your map.

Consider the relationship between sites and nation-building as a process.

- Are the sites used as places of unification?
- Are they referenced by a community with regularity?
  - Are they referenced on special occasions?
  - Are they used for particular activities, such as festivals or national holidays?

Consider the relationship between the sites themselves.

- Can the sites be grouped in a way that they invoke a coherent nationalist narrative?

Consider the relationship between sites and nations as exclusive and heterogenous groups.

- Are sites contested by two or more different groups?
  - In other words, are there competing claims over the space between nations?
- Are sites contested by factions within a group?
  - In other words, are there competing claims to the importance or meaning of a site within the nation?

Consider the relationship between time and space.

- Is there a date or year of importance associated with a site?
- Is the site based in a quasi-mythical, ahistorical past?
- Is there a past that has been erased by the construction of a site?