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Of all the criteria by which people habitually distinguish civilization from barbarism, one should at least be retained: that certain people write and others do not. —Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Writing Lesson," Tristes Tropiques

November 24th, 2011: Only two days left until the opening of the XXV Guadalajara International Book Festival. Many of the participants were already in their hotel rooms preparing for interviews, rewriting lectures, or cutting and pasting quotations into their acceptance speech documents; others were still home packing their suitcases or boarding planes to one of the most important publishing events in the Spanish-speaking world. This year the fair would honor two Nobel laureates in literature, Mario Vargas Llosa and Herta Müller, and would recognize a great number of internationally renowned writers such as James Ellroy, Juan Gelman, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Elena Poniatowska, and Fernando Vallejo, recipient of the fair’s Literature Award in Romance Languages. Tents had been pitched the night before, tables were all set up; everything seemed ready to welcome over 600,000 visitors, including academics, literary agents, journalists, book professionals, and the general reading public. But, unfortunately, an unexpected guest would also make a disturbing appearance at this literary gathering: Los Zetas.

As day broke on that chilly Thursday morning, 26 dead bodies were discovered just about a mile from the Expo Guadalajara events center where the fair would be held. All of the victims were men aged 25 to 35; most were asphyxiated, some were shot in the head, one was decapitated. Their bodies were then crammed into three vehicles and left on the side of an expressway near the Millennium Arches, one of the city’s most recognizable landmarks. The victim’s chests were marked with the words “Milenio Zetas” or “Millennium,” suggesting the local drug gang Milenio had joined forces with the sanguinary Zetas. Inside one of the automobiles was a written message surrounded by blood that explained the rationale behind these gruesome killings. The dreadful scene, said the text, was not meant to scare the civilian population but was a warning to drug lords Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and Mayo Zambrada (leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel) whom the authors accused of working as informants for the Mexican and U.S. government.

Like other notes, banners (narcomantas as they are commonly called in Mexico) or wall graffiti found in the previous months in different cities in Oaxaca, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Veracruz, this message referred directly to the tortured bodies as “muertitos,” alluding to them as irrefutable evidence of the group’s increasing power within enemy lines. Both the lifeless bodies and the body of the text intertwined as part of a Zeta rhetorical strategy in which extreme acts of violence were the chosen form of expression. The dialectical tension between these two elements (corpses and words) served to create a shocking narrative about the precariousness and fragility of contemporary life. Furthermore, the hit men constructed and framed the scene in such a manner that victim and text conversed with the very site where they would be found. The location in which the bodies were placed was thus a fundamental part of the way the gruesome find was perceived. As such, words and space could not be separated from the murders but rather were part of the formal procedure of its performance.
Law enforcement officers described the paper trail left behind by the Zetas as, “the killers’ calling card,” with which they claimed authorship of their practices. This procedure has become a common modus operandi among Mexican drug cartels, who often place menacing texts next to their victim’s bodies in order to assert their control over the contested territory. The physical presence of the written word bestows a lurid legitimacy upon the killers and confers political meaning to what otherwise could be read as simple acts of sadism or as morbid ritualistic killings. The new generation of narcotics clearly understand that the letter is an instrument of power and thus cement their authority through recourse to writing. Not only do they encode their claims and values in narrative mode, but also seek ways of asserting their domination over the written word. In the past year alone, several local newspapers have been bombed, dozens of journalists have been murdered, hundreds of bloggers have been threatened, and a few social media users have been brutally tortured and assassinated for sharing information that was presumably related to crimes of the drug cartels.

As a result of the awful escalation of narco violence, the days that followed the Guadalajara killings were surrounded by continuous talk and speculation about the 26 deaths. At the book fair, novelist Fernando Vallejo made a direct attack against presidential cabinet member Felipe Calderón stating that the war on drugs had been a complete and utter failure. Mario Vargas Llosa was more cautious and defended the Mexican government, while warning that Latin America could easily become a “narco continent” ruled by drug lords. Many others pointed to the murders of Millennium Arches as “bestial acts” and referred to their authors as “savages” and “monsters.” But despite this so called “inhumanity,” few would have been able to contest the fact that the Zetas had displayed a powerful and complex symbolic repertoire that fulfilled their communicative objective. Yes, they had committed unthinkable crimes, but they had also provided a detailed explanation as to the reason behind these acts of bloodshed and mass murder.

The uncomfortable paradox between their terrible actions and their ability to produce meaning made me wonder if some of the fear and indignation expressed in response to these deaths was not only due to the brutality of the methods used but to the very fact that the Zetas had left a written commentary that created knowledge about themselves and gave logic to their heinous crimes. That is to say, perhaps some of the negative emotions that surfaced in the murders’ wake were a sort of frustration of “our” (meaning Western liberal tradition) hidden cultural presumptions, of the deep conviction that writing separates civilized peoples from barbarians.

The bloody executions were not only a blow to Mexico’s international image, but could also be considered an assault on the Lettered City. Their physical proximity to the fair is anything but irrelevant. Their timing made them a pre-text to most critical discussions produced at the Expo Center. More importantly, in a theoretical level it could be argued that the bodies and their textual accomplishment questioned the belief that violence and words are actually exclusive. Through their perpetrators, the Zetas showed, as Mary Louise Pratt has recently pointed out, that “violence actually is almost always accompanied by language […] it is usually embedded in it” (“Violence and Language,” SocialText: Periscope). In addition to this, I would argue that the discursive violence found both in the handwritten text and in the victims marked with letters was felt by some as a threat to the written word.

If the Mexican war on drugs is in some way a “modern war on affect” as Hermann Herlinghaus asserts, we might read the murderers as a blow to our social emotions and collective moral sensibilities. The adverse response to these crimes may be no more than an anxiety of cultural pollution that derives from seeing the dividing line between central/civilized/citizen and peripheral/barbarous/criminal spheres crumble. It could also be caused by the fact that the Zetas shattered the complacency that comes from understanding cultural and artistic spaces (in this case, book fairs) as physically and discursively immune to the growing criminal related violence that is rapidly expanding throughout the globe. Perhaps it’s due to a feeling of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty referred to as “cognitive insecurity with regard to the grounding of human truths” (Dillon 1997: 277), or just to an instinctual realization that there is no longer an “outside” where drug gangs engage in terrible vendettas and an “inside” where artists and scholars can dine and wine while talking about making and unmaking the world.

It strikes me as somewhat ironic that the most important celebration for book commerce (traffic) in Latin America are not so closely connected to one of most tragic events derived from the traffic (commerce) of drugs. Nonetheless, I believe that it is precisely this proximity between the Guadalajara killings and the International Book Fair that offers us a broader framework for understanding the roles intellectuals (be they cultural critics, journalists, fiction writers, essayists, or political leaders) must play in these turbulent times.

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Notes
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Works Cited


ESL writing lessons are an important part of any English course, as writing is probably the trickiest of the skills. Apart from the normal language difficulties, the students also have to consider: spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, style, capitalization, linkers, text organization and sentence construction. General Guidelines. As with other skills, it's important to teach the students what they need to know, before they have to produce anything themselves: show the students an Education.com's writing lesson plans are so thought provoking that your students will love developing stories and practicing writing techniques. Have the students in your classroom learn and draw on their own creativity together by using our interactive, engaging activities for early writing, writing process, and different genre writing. Using these lesson plans will guarantee an organized curriculum with successful learning! Students will love honing their writing skills in different "opposite" areas throughout the classroom. Preschool.