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### OFRENDAS: celebrations and toolkits within Latinx Poughkeepsie

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OFRENDAS  
celebrations and toolkits within Latinx Poughkeepsie

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Media Studies Senior Project

May 10, 2020

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## acknowledgements / dando las gracias

First, a very big thank you to my parents and brother for unconditional support. You've inspired me to aim high y ponerme las pilas. Although the decision to study at Vassar initially came as a shock, I am thankful to have received your support throughout these past years. Gracias por todo el apoyo, y estoy emocionado a regresar muy pronto a Las Vegas. También quiero dar las gracias a mi familia extendida — forman parte de este proyecto, y agradezco la involucración de ustedes en mi vida.

I am especially grateful to all my friends I have made during my time in Poughkeepsie. Huge shoutout to the Transitions community and my fellow first-gen/low-income lifelong learners. I don't think first-year Eugene was expecting to grow with a chosen family here, but that's exactly what happened. I hope to continue learning and celebrating con todxs, and for now I'm sending everyone digital hugs. I'll be spreading the kindness and ambition I've experienced with yall, wherever I am. Nothing but love for each of you.

Gracias a mis profesores. The faculty at Vassar have pushed me to rethink and reimagine the spaces I inhabit. These people went above and beyond to support me academically, emotionally, intellectually... Big shoutout to my awesome advisers.

To my Media Studies Program: it was a pleasure to have worked as an Academic Intern, alongside Kennedy! Thanks to the classmates and professors who were always excited to explore Media Studies, which, for the record, is about everything and nothing.

The Vassar community at large gets a shoutout. Thank you to the administrators, dining staff, custodial staff -- everyone who has put a smile on my face. En mi primer año, una trabajadora de Raymond House me regaló un refri para usar en mi dormitorio. Gracias Alma por darme el bienvenido a Vassar.

Thank you to all the folx in Poughkeepsie who I met by chance, through a friend of a friend, a quick conversation at a restaurant, or even an uber/lyft ride.

To members of TA 10, TH 92, the Latinx Student Union, and the Transitions familia: thank you for the homes you built with me.

eugenio/eugene

## Abstract

This senior project consists of three components: a virtual space envisioning a set of physical installations, a bilingual toolkit publicly available via Google Slides, and a written reflection. Using multimedia production as a vehicle to explore community building and advocacy, I seek to raise questions of how to include and affirm the needs of marginalized people in a digital age. Such speculation is increasingly urgent as this project is released in the midst of a global pandemic, in which entire populations of working class households are subject to extreme levels of socioeconomic disparity. How might we harness community knowledge during stay-at-home orders? What role can public and private realms play in the facilitation of equitable understandings of communities, as businesses begin to jolt local economies out of dormancy? These questions, combined with my reconfigured creative project, ask audiences how our surroundings may evolve to better suit our needs and hopes.

## Toolkit / Caja de Herramientas

Enter the Neighborhood / Entra La Comunidad:

[https://connect.unity.com/mg/other/elh\\_seniorproject](https://connect.unity.com/mg/other/elh_seniorproject)

Toolkit:

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kRAw0Y2bPfb8ftjQLS8U49soBLjpb5x-nx76lwtF5\\_0/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kRAw0Y2bPfb8ftjQLS8U49soBLjpb5x-nx76lwtF5_0/edit?usp=sharing)

Caja de Herramientas:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1CU-ZTOTdYSLUAOT8bzEfZn-TArpzTQulre5twu8nPKQ/edit?usp=sharing>

## Reflections

I want to open by confessing I hope life after COVID-19 does not exactly return to the way it once was. I hope that we may renew our appreciation for our communities and the physical presence of loved ones. But we must also realize that our surrounding structures are consistently protecting specific people at the expense of others. As states and countries around the world gradually recover and reopen, I think of all the essential workers who consistently sustain our communities. Ultimately, thanking these people will not suffice. My wish is that everyone may better understand how they are situated in structures of power in reference to privilege and marginalization. Just as important is a sense of agency to dismantle these structures and create change, from our homes, to our neighborhoods, to communities both near and far.

These ideas intersect with the original direction of this senior project. I aimed to design small installations in separate off-campus spaces, with particular interest in businesses that are popular with families of color. As observed in my virtual space titled *La Comunidad*, each installation would only occupy a small portion of the venue; most of its contents should fit on no more than two tables. I envisioned the contents of each table as an ofrenda, or offering, similar to those seen during Día de los Muertos celebrations on November 2. Mesoamerican cultures directly inform this annual tradition to honor loved ones who have passed away and acknowledge a cyclical nature between the living and the dead.<sup>1</sup> My inspiration from this Day of the Dead

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<sup>1</sup> Gwyneira Isaac, April Bojorquez, and Catherine Nichols, "Dying to Be Represented: Museums and Día de los Muertos Collaborations," *Collaborative Anthropologies* 5 (2012): 35, doi:10.1353/cla.2012.0001.

practice specifically draws on the concept of the offering as a gift to passerbys. This table is embellished like an altar, but it serves to provide resources and ideas to visitors of the installation. The ideal venues to house this project include restaurants, hair salons, and cafes -- destinations where people expect and enjoy social interaction. Consequently, these are businesses that many look forward to visiting after stay-at-home orders are lifted.



fig. 1 The virtual ofrenda in the hair salon of *La Comunidad*.

I sought to engage with Latina-o-x and Spanish-speaking households who would potentially benefit from the resources I share through the ofrenda. The location and accessibility of this project were all designed to reach folks who might not commonly involve themselves with local policy and community advocacy. I actively decided against placing the installation in art gallery or museum venues, in part from conversations with Poughkeepsie community members who mentioned that Latina-o-x



residents have not experienced a history of frequenting these spaces. The cultural elitism typically associated with these art spaces, combined with Euro-American hegemony and top-down approaches to community involvement, may deter families of color from attending them.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the resources and wealth generated by these art spaces does not necessarily circulate through the communities they occupy. Cities like Beacon, New York might introduce galleries and museums as key components of economic revitalization plans, but residents may doubt how their homes will directly benefit from this urban “reinvestment.”<sup>3</sup>

To create *La Comunidad* with accessibility in mind, I designed the virtual space using Unity, a free game development software. I gradually pieced together a world by refreshing my computer software skills and inserting 3D models from an online SketchUp catalogue. The resulting product is a first-person “video game” in which players move around a hair salon as an unidentified character. *La Comunidad* is shared and hosted by Unity Connect, meaning it is publicly available online. By visiting the provided URL, anyone with a computer and internet connection can play the game.

The player begins by falling from the sky and into the hair salon. If the player remains still while they fall, their character ends up on one of the salon chairs. From there, players are invited to explore the business, using the directional keys or WASD to move and their mouse to look around. By the business’ entrance is an ofrenda I would have presented as a physical installation. It is adorned with papel picado, thanks

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<sup>2</sup> Isaac, Bojorquez, and Nichols, 31.

<sup>3</sup> “Preservation as a Tool for Social Inclusion in Poughkeepsie, NY,” *Columbia GSAPP*, <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/student-work/3358-preservation-as-a-tool-for-social-inclusion-in-poughkeepsie-ny>, 117.

to Luz Claudia's 3D model that features a design of the feathered serpent deity Quetzalcoatl recognized in various Mesoamerican cultures. By accessing the URLs or QR Codes in either the game or this PDF, audiences may view the public Google Slides "toolbox," which is available in both English and Spanish and includes resources for people of color and Spanish-speaking households. This document has since been updated to include information related to COVID-19 guidelines and sources for financial assistance.

I drew inspiration at Vero's Unisex Salón, which rests at the intersection of Church and Main Street Poughkeepsie. Earlier this semester, I went to Vero's for a haircut and had a really pleasant experience. Although it was my first time there, I had a great conversation with the hairdresser, and even my parents complimented my haircut via video chat. I wondered if my project could ever be hosted by a business like that, and I wish things could have turned out differently in that respect.

Community advocacy, Latinx cultural expression, and multimedia production are all concepts I have engaged with during my four years at Vassar. But compressing these academic interests and guiding them through a yearlong project was a creative process I had not previously encountered as an undergraduate. By continuously asking myself what I wanted to convey with this work, I learned to be vulnerable about my hopes and doubts. The cultural and political implications behind this series of installations sometimes overwhelmed me, especially during the ongoing world pandemic. I was often met with difficult truths and uncertainty, but those moments were also when I learned the most. My yearlong effort was an attempt to reimagine

conversations of power and belonging within a community, and each of these components served as opportunities to engage in such a forum by specifically offering a platform to marginalized communities of color. This is my offering, mi ofrenda.

From a postmodern perspective, community symbolizes everything and consequently stands for very little. As Tony Blackshaw writes in *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, “The paradox of ‘negative’ postmodern community is its belief that the language game of community can offer us that most valuable gift: the pragmatics of a singularity of one vision.”<sup>4</sup> In this case, “community” is importantly defined as the key to a gift that individuals and groups wish for. It is not only the objective at the end of an agenda -- community represents an unwavering hope for belonging and solidarity.

This is a promise used by politicians, corporations, and organizations: creating a single voice that whole neighborhoods can support unanimously. However, the use of “community” is ultimately self-defeating because it is constructed in a strict binary. Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s “play of difference,” one sees that “community” is constructed to easily categorize people in everyday life.<sup>5</sup> In order to describe “us,” the word must therefore designate “them.” Ultimately, “them” is ignored (and Othered) so that “us” only consists of that ideal promise.

In this sense, the hollow symbolism of community may be activated to create an exclusive and hostile environment. A neighborhood may spend hours, days, and even years defining who they are and who they aren’t. Unanimous agreement will never be

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Blackshaw, 45.

reached, but popular notions of belonging may enforce the borders of their newfound community. Individuals who do not identify within those parameters are Othered, marginalized, and stripped of “membership” to their community. This is especially true for people of color and immigrants across the U.S. who are represented by white government officials and make their home among historically white communities. Black and Brown communities in Poughkeepsie have also witnessed this in the form of “white flight” and increased neighborhood segregation.<sup>6</sup> Such hostility is intensified for undocumented individuals who face the consistent threat of deportation.

Through the lens of the U.S. immigration system, community membership manifests as a citizen/non-citizen binary. As complex and lengthy as the path to citizenship may become, mainstream culture often simplifies citizenship status into a yes or no question: are you a citizen, or not? This approach ignores people who might respond with a more complicated answer like “not yet.” However, it is precisely this extreme simplification that constructs a basis for the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. Those who are included are therefore worthy of exercising special rights and determining how the excluded can “earn” citizenship. American democracy, as understood by contemporary political contexts, “must have the power to grant or refuse membership to newcomers, as well as the power to say that members can do some things that nonmembers cannot.”<sup>7</sup> U.S. citizenship not only grants certain rights to individuals, but it also provides a sense of nation-wide unity. Certain values begin to apply specifically to fellow citizens, while non-citizens are casted out and portrayed as

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<sup>6</sup> “Preservation as a Tool for Social Inclusion,” 18.

<sup>7</sup> Hiroshi Motomura, *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

malevolent invaders of communities. For instance, former Dutchess County Legislator Joe Inconato criticized the City of Poughkeepsie in 2018 for passing Safe City guidelines to protect undocumented immigrants from federal immigration officials. “Instead of creating a safe haven for law-abiding legal residents,” he asserts, the policy “may hamper and circumvent the lawful apprehension and deportation of dangerous aliens.”<sup>8</sup> Inconato’s perspective directly criminalizes non-citizens and ignores the guidelines’ potential to increased public safety if undocumented individuals feel safe enough to interact with police officers. Despite the contributions of immigrant communities to local economies and cultures, their indispensability is never forgotten by neighbors and politicians with xenophobic sentiments. These are necessary considerations that aided me in designing the installation. As I seek to interact with immigrant residents through the components of this project, I have a responsibility to allow audiences to remain as anonymous as possible.

With particular attention to race, citizenship, and class, a sense of community may serve to actively deny individuals a sense of agency and belonging. By sharing their language and culture with their community, immigrant populations unfortunately risk presenting themselves as outsiders. Moreover, a lack of legal rights only exacerbates vulnerabilities for undocumented people. As Blackshaw describes, “‘outsiders’ must be dealt with because they offend order; they disrupt ‘our’ system of

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<sup>8</sup> Joe Inconato, “Giving sanctuary to illegal immigrants undermines public safety,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/opinion/letters/2018/03/27/giving-sanctuary-illegal-immigrants-undermines-public-safety-letter/454141002/>.

classification through their very Otherness.”<sup>9</sup> It is my hope to leverage my privileges and resources to further disrupt this flawed and bigoted understanding of community.

Hiroshi Motomura suggests the U.S. must return to a perspective that views immigration as a process and not a fixed identity. Shifting away from a citizen/non-citizen binary will reveal “the understanding that many of *them* will become part of *us*.”<sup>10</sup> As individuals acknowledge the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of naturalization, groups of people may better accommodate the needs of their marginalized neighbors. However, this approach may apply to concepts beyond national citizenship. Understandings of culture and identity could be reconstructed to imagine who *should* and *will* belong. Instead of concentrating discussion on who fits within the parameters of a community, members should look past these boundaries and consider who remains excluded. To this extent, the virtual space I designed allows for this speculation because the identity of the character they control is never revealed. Players hear footsteps as they walk through the game, but who is walking? Their first-person perspective prevents them from ever determining a correct answer. They may choose to self-identify as the character, or they can speculate as to who they are guiding through the hair salon. Maybe audiences play as a regular customer of the salon, or as someone new to the area who is looking for a good haircut.

One of the issues I encountered with the execution of this project is the impossibility of how to connect to vulnerable communities. On one hand, the Latina/o/x community in Poughkeepsie feels familiar and comfortable. On the other, I

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<sup>9</sup> Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Motomura, *Americans in Waiting*, 14 (emphasis added).

possess privilege and mobility within this city, particularly through my U.S. citizenship and enrollment at Vassar College. These privileges cannot be transferred among individuals, nor are they tangible resources. However, it is my wish that this senior project, in its original and current forms, may balance the safety of and advocacy for vulnerable people of color. This virtual version of my project particularly addresses this concern in that audiences may remain relatively anonymous as they play the game through an online server and view digital documents.

As a first-generation/low-income college student, I sought opportunities to support marginalized people within and beyond Vassar's campus. In respect to the Poughkeepsie community, I feared overstepping boundaries as someone who had few years in this city. Just as important was the fact I am situated at a college that identifies more with the wealthier and more white Town of Arlington. But this discomfort stems from very polarizing criteria for a community that, as previously discussed, often prioritizes exclusion over solidarity. Both versions of my installation blur the distinction between "insider" and "outsider"; audiences are simultaneously participants and visitors when they interact with the ofrenda. In the case of *La Comunidad*, viewers must peer into their screens to observe an intangible space, yet they actively control a first-person character to navigate this confined world. Audiences may be largely unaware of this contradiction because it does not affect their experience of the virtual space. Only when the connection between the individual and the space is interrupted, say, during a sudden loss of internet connection, does the inside-outside distinction immediately matter. In short, this dichotomy is very

ambiguous, often unrealistic, and only useful in certain situations. By concentrating too much on who belongs where, one loses sight of the experiences and gifts right in front of them. This also applies to groups of people because “to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and of power.”<sup>11</sup> *La Comunidad* seeks to celebrate the spaces, people, and interactions that “community” often dismisses.

Questioning the insider/outsider binary creates opportunities to subvert the discriminatory behaviors it preserves. Hacktivists Carmin Karasic and Micha Cárdenas explain that rejecting dichotomies, like the Black-White binary, allows communities to acknowledge complex structures of oppression. By rejecting labels, and remaining skeptical of the ones they accept, groups of people may focus on real issues that affect their livelihoods. “I would rather see no labels,” Cárdenas admits, “and [that] we are recognised for the work that we do, rather than clustering people into different groups.”<sup>12</sup> By inspecting, disassembling, and even repurposing binaries, marginalized people are also resisting the original motives behind such classifications: white supremacy, criminalization, and exploitation, to name a few. We are rejecting the ideologies that seek to exploit us. This practice applies to a broader process of understanding the solidarity that forms between neighbors. Cities across the U.S. have experienced the lasting effects of “communities” that redraw borders to amass wealth and resources at the expense of marginalized neighbors. Poughkeepsie is no exception; the City’s School District faces clear underperformance in comparison to

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<sup>11</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxiii.

<sup>12</sup> Micha Cárdenas and Carmin Karasic, “Hacking the Label: Hacktivism, Race, and Gender,” interview by Leonie Tanczer, *Ada New Media: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 6 (January 2015), doi: 10.7264/N37S7M22.



the surrounding Arlington and Spackenkill School Districts.<sup>13</sup> Binaries and symbols of unity are common tools of the privileged. Therefore, we must reconfigure these concepts to suit our needs and produce increasingly equitable results. After all, the principle of community is central to how socioeconomically and racially marginalized people share ideas and resources. As explored by David Harvey, “it has also its authentic working-class counterpart as a defensive and even offensive weapon in class struggle.”<sup>14</sup>

Using the video game in conjunction with the digital toolkits, audiences may “hack” through their understanding of resilience and advocacy. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that a widespread hack-a-thon must proceed in order to dismantle oppressive systems. During this global event of significant spatial restriction and economic instability, marginalized households will especially reach out to their networks to remain afloat. Essential workers continue to risk their lives as “everyday heroes” to feed families, while the upper classes may take shelter with work from home. Perceptions of inclusion and solidarity must urgently expand in order to prevent a surging disparity from reigning over entire communities. Digital and physical tools will help along the way, but most important is imagination and the belief that our livelihoods can exist in more equitable conditions. It is my hope that children, parents, laborers, neighbors, students, and loved ones will accept my offering and join the conversation.

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<sup>13</sup> “Preservation as a Tool for Social Inclusion,” 76.

<sup>14</sup> David Harvey, “The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2, no. 1 (1978): 123, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.1978.tb00738.x.

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