Background Reading on the Virtual *Cajita* Project

What are *cajitas* and where did they come from?

…*[C]ajitas* are literally boxes of various shapes, forms, and sizes made out of wood or cardboard. The assignment is introduced at the beginning of the fall semester and continually discussed throughout the months of September and October to recognize and honor *El Día de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) celebrations commemorated and observed the first and second of November throughout Mexico and the United States. Traditionally, November first is known as *El Día de los Angelitos* to celebrate children whereas November second honors those who died as adults. The students' *cajitas* become the centerpiece of a one-day campus-wide celebration held yearly in commemoration of the Day of the Dead.

On these days, it is believed that the spirits of deceased return to their gravesites to commune in spirit with their loved ones living on earth. These observances and practices have their roots and origins in pre-Columbian Mexico where as early as the preclassic period the dead are said to have partaken on a four-year northern journey to *Mictlán* ("the place of the dead") ruled by *Mictlantecuhtil* and *Mictecacíhuatl*. With the soul of the deceased in transit to *Mictlán*, it was considered common practice to make offerings to the dead at various moments: at death, eighty days later, and on the anniversary of the death for the next four years. Offerings of pottery, vessels, personal ornaments, food and drink, and even toys were commonly buried with the deceased. Annual celebrations and observances were said to replenish the deceased on their journey. Numerous examples of monthly indigenous celebrations have been documented by Franciscan Friars that demonstrate a history of celebrating and honoring powerful deities in conjunction with those who died in a manner that was associated with what the deity symbolized. For example, between late October and November communities engaged in fiestas honoring the war God *Mixcoatl* and all those who had died as a result of war. It was common for celebrants to sit by the deceased's gravesites all day and night, and on the last day of the month, everything, except certain food items such as tamales, was ignited thereby symbolizing that by burning them they would be in the afterlife waiting for them upon their death.

As a result of indigenous traditions, one of the most popular practices for Day of the Dead celebrations today, in particular in rural communities in Mexico, is for families to return to community cemeteries and clean the gravestones and markers of their loved one. They then remain at their gravesite into the evening, and they offer the dearly departed favorite foods and libations. Traditionally, cemeteries are brightly lit with candles and colorfully decorated with marigolds which act as signposts for the spirits of the deceased and assist them in finding their way to the cemetery and back. When the deceased consist of children, sugar skulls and breads along with toys will also be present. Similar practices are observed in rural parts of the American Southwest within the United States in historic and traditional Mexican/Chicano

communities. However, the majority of U.S. celebrations occur as festivals to commemorate the day of the dead in urban communities outside the confines of the cemetery.

Similar to observances and practices in urban metropolitan centers of Mexico, cities like Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Phoenix commemorate the departed through the transformation of public space into public altars that acknowledge the passing of the deceased and marks their contributions to one's life. The creators of these altars may not have personally known the deceased. In fact, it is common that these public tributes are created in order to recognize and acknowledge the contributions of well-known celebrities who have touched the lives of many. These public altars are transformed into public testimonies and narratives for all to admire and to learn something about their lives. Some good examples would be altars dedicated to the lives of Selena, César Chávez, or Tito Puente. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for these public altars to become political statements on behalf of oppressed communities and their struggles for social change and social justice. In the most recent Day of the Dead celebration that I organized, my students honored the less-affluent victims of the Twin Towers tragedy through the creation and construction of a collective *cajita* or public altar that recognized the lives and contributions of restaurant workers and custodians (many of who were immigrants and people of color). About three years ago, we paid tribute to the countless children, women, and men, who over the years have lost their lives as they attempted to successfully traverse the U.S.-Mexico border, through a large *cajita* and display to recognize their passing and to bring recognition to their plight. (Pulido, 2002, pp. 71-72)

What do *cajitas* have to do with becoming a learner and teacher with technology?

…[W]hen students enter the classroom, they bring their lives and experiences on a painter's palette where an artist lays and mixes the range of living colors symbolic of a person's life journeys and experiences. In turn, as a teacher I offer my students a painter's canvas in the form of lectures, discussions, readings, and assignments representative of a canvas of knowledge where students, utilizing this space, are inspired and motivated to explore the range of living colors on their palettes that speak to their lives in deep and profound ways.

This philosophy is best illustrated through the insights offered by the poet T.S. Eliot that I hold near to my heart as teacher and educator. The fourth movement of The Four Quartets entitled *Little Gidding* informs us that throughout our entire lives:

We shall not cease from exploration
And in the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

The words of Eliot guide and support my convictions as an educator that the foundation of our knowledge base is located within us. The answers are already in us, and it is the role of the educator to gently guide and direct us so that we can search within ourselves for answers. All

past and present knowledge that is before us represents the familiar. It is the role of the educator to organize and shape this familiar knowledge in a new way that has not been thought of before, and, as a result, brings forth a new understanding of the familiar. (Pulido, 2002, pp. 69-70)

…[W]e have employed a revised version of the *cajita* project with significant success with our graduate students majoring in higher education leadership and student affairs. In our classes, we have asked students to construct their own *cajitas* reflecting their life journeys and containing images of past, present, and future. The life paths of our master's and doctoral students will place them in professions such as student affairs administrators, community organizers, social activists, educational policy analysts, college presidents, and college professors. In essence, students are going to meet the world as it is and seek to transform it. (Kanagala & Rendón, 2013, p. 43)

We tell students that they will be expected to construct their own *cajitas*. A *cajita* is a personal reflective box that represents who each student is as a person, and the special talents she or he brings to the student affairs profession. Students may select artifacts that represent individuals (in and out of college) who have influenced and validated them, the kind of student affairs administrator they hope to be, and how they hope to make a difference in the lives of students and in the world of college. (Kanagala & Rendón, 2013, p. 45)

What is an example of a written reflection on creating a *cajita*?

What a serendipitous day it has been! Not sure why *Amma* [mother] wanted to clear the garage in this super cold weather but she did. And boy, am I glad she did! After a few minutes of trying to organize stuff, I decided that it was probably easier to just declutter by discarding or donating things that we did not need anymore. That old tattered suitcase lying in the corner for the longest time had to go! I took and tossed it into the dumpster outside our apartment. *Amma* sure wasn't happy. I always teased her that she was a secret hoarder! She wanted it back. She really wanted the ripped suitcase with a broken wheel back, and would not stop yelling at me until I dived into the dumpster to get it back for her.

That's when *Amma* explained. She wanted the suitcase back not because it has any utility value left but because of the emotional value *Amma* attached to the suitcase. *Amma* reminded me that this was the first suitcase that our family had bought, and used as we immigrated to the United States back in the early 90s. I was in tenth grade. I remembered vaguely but not really. That's when it hit me, today. We, as a family, have never processed our family's immigration journey from India to the United States. We have neither talked about the financial challenges that *Nana* [father] and *Amma* faced nor have we discussed the emotional scars we had to endure for leaving our extended family behind. All of us lacked social and academic capital when we immigrated but still somehow we believed that this was the land of opportunity. I guess our unwavering belief that we will eventually find success in this distant land helped us make it.

Suddenly, it is all coming back. Here I am a son of immigrants, an immigrant myself, the first in my family to enroll in a doctoral program realizing our dream—my parents' dream. That through education, we would find success and happiness. I was living our American dream.

Who would have imagined that a spring-cleaning project that included a dumpster dive would provide an answer for my class project? Voilà! I just found my perfect box for my *cajita*. That suitcase is my *cajita*. I did not have to fill it with artifacts. Even empty, it is full of meaning. It connects me to my past in a unique way and grounds me for who I am. I did not know I had yearned for that connection all these years, but I did. My suitcase *cajita* is my identity. (Kanagala & Rendón, 2013, pp. 46-47)

What have educators learned from engaging their students in creating *cajitas*?

Over the years, the *cajita* project has taught me that so many of the answers that we seek in becoming complete and "educated people" are located within ourselves and from those foundational sources we have been shaped into who we have become. As an educator who was raised by parents with little formal education, I have come to realize that the veins of personal transformative knowledge are contained in our stories of family, ancestry, and community as articulated in my father's philosophy of *reparar*. There exists great knowledge and instruction in this fact, and I feel obligated to share this with every student who enters my classroom. With this in mind, I believe that there is *esperanza* (hope) for those who have suffered at the hands of both structured and individualistic oppressive forces in their lives. Our educational systems must embrace and validate the palette of living colors that make up the lives of all women and men regardless of race, gender, class, religion, or sexual orientation.

In reflecting on the *cajita* project in relation to Eliot, he reminds us that we are not alone in our thoughts and actions—that what we knew in innocence is already grounded in experience. The *cajita* project for students embodies the theme of Eliot's Four Quartets cited above, because it is a process of leading us back to the beginning – a sort of homecoming back to the source that orients our world from where we strive to obtain wholeness. Borrowing from Eliot and his interpreters, the *cajita* becomes a visual and material story that is enshrined in space and time. Of the multiple experiences of an individual, the *cajita* serves to capture the culmination of these experiences – the end of a journey up to this point in the lives of students where they are able to reflect back and capture the summation of all parts that brings forward the resolution to their self. It represents closure to a cycle of life and history – and closure to a journey that has an end and a beginning. (Pulido, 2002, pp. 75-76)

References

Kanagala, V. & Rendón, L. I. (2013). Birthing Internal Images: Employing the *Cajita* Project as a Contemplative Activity in a College Classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 134*, pp. 41-51.

Pulido, A. L. (2002). The Living Color of Students' Lives: Bringing *Cajitas* into the Classroom. *Religion & Education*, *29*(2), pp. 69-77.