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Games are Cool! Here's Why: A Follow-up Conversation to Playing at the American Academy of Religion

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This blogpost is a conversation between Kimberly Diaz, *University of California Riverside*, Michael DeAnda, *DePaul University*, and Neomi DeAnda, *University of Dayton*.

KIM: Neomi, how did the Loteria session at the AAR come to be?

NEOMI: This year marked the twentieth anniversary of the first time I attended the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Having a background in education and strongly believing that humans learn differently, I always questioned the ninety-minute and two-and-a-half-hour session format of presented papers for all sessions. Five days of these sessions bookended with breakfast meetings and receptions has always felt exhausting to me. Over the years, the suggestion of doing something different has arisen. While I have participated in other types of sessions like roundtable discussions and generative sessions, I wondered how I could entertain comments about doing something radically different at multiple sections' business meetings.

Last December, I found the game Millennial Loteria: Gen Z Edition at a big box merchant in Chicago, Illinois and Dayton, Ohio. I initially bought the game to incorporate into my Latina/Latino Religious Experience undergraduate course at the University of Dayton. This game provided an in-class common experience from which to build the semester. The course participants enjoyed, appreciated, and questioned the game. That same day, I posted a picture of the game on social media, igniting a quick discussion about the game itself. I was overjoyed to see such a response about something both so close and so new to my *Tejana* experience. The topic of immigration often takes center stage when the AAR and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meet in San Antonio. I am often frustrated about the lack of thought given to the plurality of possible topics which could thrive while meeting at this particular geographical

location. Horacio Vela, session panelist, astutely remarked, “Loteria helps us appreciate the historical and evolving nature of Mexican-American cultures, identities, and religions. It also opens our eyes to the ways that Latina/o/x communities have handed down and scripturalized stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and gender.” The conversation on social media presented one such opportunity. From there, the idea was born to play the game at a session of the AAR.

MICHAEL: How did you envision the format of playing Loteria in a conference session and what did you do to prepare?

NEOMI: Carmen Nanko-Fernandez connected me with the co-chairs of the Religion, Sport and Play Unit, Kimberly Diaz and Jeffery Scholes. They were very amenable to helping me work through a proposal to submit to their call. The Experiential Session Playing Millennial Gen Z Loteria which was held Sunday, 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM in the San Antonio Convention Center-Room 225C (Meeting Room Level) came from that accepted proposal. The proposal recommended the following format for the session:

1. play the game
2. panelists respond
3. group discussion.

The day for the session arrived. I had conjured prizes from various tables in the AAR/SBL book exhibit and from a Wabash Center luncheon the day before. Keri Liechty from the Louisville Institute brought swag from their office.

MICHAEL: Very cool. That’s a nod to *kermeses*, a site where Loteria is often played and the prizes are often donated tchotchkes and trinkets fished out of storage. Your approach is totally emulating the found-and-sourced prizes spirit. Tell me how the session went?

NEOMI: The tone in the room was different from the beginning as game boards and emoji tokens (instead of *frijoles*) were handed out to session participants. I set the rules. Structured play. The play during the session would end when the last of the prizes was collected. After two rounds, it seemed the third round could be the last.

The participants changed the rules when play was going to end sooner than they wished.

During the session, the energy in the room dampened between playing the game and the initial responses. So the session followed a modified format:

1. play the game
2. initial responses from three panelists
3. play the game
4. group discussion.

The emoji tokens were later labeled *chingaderitas* by panelist Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez.

Session participants remarked about the relaxation they felt from play during an AAR session.

I noticed the session attendants, most of whom did not know each other upon entering the space, quickly formed a community to continue play.

NEOMI: Any reflections on theory, Michael?

MICHAEL: It's interesting to see how incorporating the game into this session really invited the play spirit for the entirety of the session and appropriated the space. It's like you went total *kermes* at the AAR! This is what I love about games: They can be tools to restructure and rethink what's possible. In your case, Loteria provided enough of a ludic structure to bring energy into the room, invite people to socialize, and allow people to unmask.

I want to note that it was smart to pivot at the request of players, granting them agency in this. Furthermore, for critical game play, multiple rounds of playing a game are important. The first playthrough we are often consumed by the game, so this was a great way to familiarize people with the game. The initial responses then primed participants to approach gameplay with the criticality to then contribute to the group discussion.

Games are ludic structures with potential to reimagine how we make meaning. It's the meaning that we create in and through games that make them so potent. Think about a game like Ticket To Ride, for example. The literal actions sound quite lackluster (drawing cards, placing blocks on a board). However, the hermeneutics give meaning to these mundane tasks: laying blocks emulates building railroad tracks.

Games of chance are good for providing just enough of a ludic structure while still allowing for socializing, but not too much that it's all people focus on. So, folks can chat, and if they reach a lull in the conversation, they can lean on playing the game during the shift in their conversation.

It's also worth mentioning that play extended beyond the game Loteria in the session. This included participants playing with the format of the session, players influencing the restructuring of the session, and playing with language deployed at a conference (yes, the swearing). As we play, we perform and we also confront truths about ourselves. Horacio commented, "Playing and talking about *loteria* in the AAR session brought back memories of growing up in south Texas. It was also a welcome and refreshing alternative to the typical AAR/SBL panel, with just as much, if not more, scholarly discourse and analysis." Horacio continued, "Newer versions of loteria challenge us to discuss, critique, and reshape our communities and cultures, which have always been characterized by diverse experiences and interpretations."

NEOMI: Kim, please tell us about your experience immediately following the session as well as your thoughts since.

KIM: The experiential session of playing Millennial Gen Z Loteria was immediately followed by

the business meeting for the Religion, Sport, and Play Unit. In between the sessions, I rushed to my unit co-chair, Jeffrey Scholes, eager to exchange thoughts about having just played Loteria at the AAR. Instantaneously, we agreed that this experiential session encouraged us to take a more practical approach to the third integral aspect of the unit: play. As far as we both knew, the Religion, Sport, and Play Unit had always approached play in terms of discourse, especially in the context of organized athletics, but never with the actual practice of play during a session. At the beginning of the business meeting, our first order of business was to confirm the ongoing use of experiential sessions of play at future AAR annual meetings.

The way in which the experiential session of Loteria radically transformed the trajectory of the Religion, Sport, and Play unit demonstrates how actual play within the conference setting can help ground the decolonization of academia. As Neomi observed, Loteria participants quickly transformed from serious individual conference attendees into a group of light-hearted players who cared more about playing together than claiming the prizes and ending the game. Recalling my own experience, I vividly remember being hunched over, placing tokens on my Loteria card as Neomi called out Millennial Gen Z phrases from a stack of shuffled cards. My body positioned itself as it needed to, helping optimize my gameplay rather than unconsciously following Western constructs of professional bodily posture (such as sitting up straight with my legs crossed). Overall, this experiential session of play fostered a communal space where participants transcended the optics of Western professionalism and became immersed in the carefree spirit of play.

Playing Loteria at the AAR was not merely a form of escapism, but, like every decolonial praxis, existed in the liminal plane between colonial hegemony and resistance. Throughout history many decolonial efforts have been led by women of color and Neomi leading the experiential session contributes to this history. But decolonial efforts should not be the sole responsibility of those on the margins, such as women of color in a heavily white/male dominated field.

NEOMI: Great point connecting back to this year's AAR theme of "La Labor de Nuestras Manos"!

KIM: Yes. Why should we, as women of color, be the ones to bear this responsibility, especially in a way that caters to the comfortability of those beyond ourselves? What about exploring other generative effects, like discomfort and unfamiliarity, initiated by the more privileged rather than the labor of the oppressed? To continuously move toward resistance, particularly in the context of experiential sessions, religious studies scholars must actively challenge the pretense that their scholarly work inherently makes the world a better place, and become intentional about practically contributing to decolonization, especially as it transcends the comfortability of their own individualism. In the words of black lesbian poet Audre Lorde, "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression."

NEOMI: Fascinating! I did not see it as a decolonial praxis but as living in my own Tejana space. I honestly saw the session as something that comes from being Mexican-American,

Chicana, Tejana. I loved being able to bring cookies as prizes to share, cookies which our parents had made during Michael and my father's occupational therapy, as he learns to live life after stroke. The convention center was no wiser that I did not ask permission or order the cookies from their vendor. As Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez, session panelist, noted, "I was happy to be a part of this Loteria session. Although I did not recognize the Loteria images (I missed my Chalupa) it was still a trip down memory lane and the importance of play in family life and spirituality. It also helped me make the connection to the importance of cultural connections for Mexican Americans living in a sometimes hostile and racist U.S.A. environment."

There is something about play which allows for simultaneous space (re)creation, mockery, and truth-telling.

MICHAEL: Play is like alchemy: it has deep transformative potential. Kim's reflection on decolonizing underscores this, especially when she draws attention to exploring generative effects, as does Neomi's approach to developing the session to reflect and live in Tejana space. Games afford ludic structures for play to happen.

<https://wabash.center/2024/04/games-are-cool-heres-why-a-follow-up-conversation-to-playing-at-the-american-academy-of-religion/>