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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Altar Images: US Day of the Dead as Political Communication

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Regina M. Marchi

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Michael Schudson, Chair  
Professor Chandra Mukerji, Co-Chair  
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2005

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2005

## **Dedication**

For my grandparents,  
Frances and Thomas Cave and Mary Marchi.  
My favorite “muertos.”

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Marchi, R. Spanish to English translation of book, *The Festival Day of Saint John of Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico*. Nahual Institute. Forthcoming (Winter 2006).

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Cultural Studies and Media Studies

Specialization: Culture and communication, social movements and the media; social change, grassroots uses of communication technologies, race and ethnicity in popular culture; Globalization; social theory; communication theory; qualitative methods

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Altar Images: US Day of the Dead as Political Communication

by

Regina M. Marchi

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California, San Diego, 2005

Professor Michael Schudson, Chair

Professor Chandra Mukerji, Co-Chair

This dissertation encourages a rethinking of what social scientists typically classify as “media” to include public ritual celebrations as an influential form of community-based media that enlarge the public sphere and provide important opportunities for political communication, particularly for populations with limited input and access to conventional media production. Using a mixture of ethnography, historical research, and critical textual analysis, I examine Day of the Dead events in the USA as vernacular media that communicate about identity, politics, and modernity. Within a dominant Anglo culture that has historically treated Latinos with violence and discrimination, Chicano-initiated Day of the Dead celebrations are more about communicating a Latino

cultural and political presence in the US than about fulfilling moral obligations to the deceased. While many altars and events commemorate deceased friends and relatives, a large number honor popular Latino icons (e.g., artist Frida Kahlo; actor Pedro Infante) or draw attention to sociopolitical causes of death affecting the Latino community (e.g., labor abuses, immigration policies). I examine how ritual and visual culture, in combination with news and popular media coverage of the celebration, transmit messages of identity and political solidarity among Latinos of diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds. This research also examines commercialization as a form of communication that has affected the growth of Day of the Dead in The US, and looks at how this celebration has affected mainstream US culture. Day of the Dead is both a “residual” and “emergent” practice, as Latinos revitalize ancestral forms of social solidarity and communication while at the same time transforming them for relevancy in twenty-first century America. One of the most important implications of this dissertation is that meaningful political communication happens during activities and in places not usually recognized as “political.” The examples and analyses offered demonstrate how cultural rituals can serve to inform the public and, in commemorating culture and political struggles for justice, inspire community activism.

## **Chapter One: Ritual Communication and the Public Sphere**

### **1.1 Introduction: Project Overview**

This dissertation argues that Day of the Dead exhibits and events in the United States are vernacular media<sup>1</sup> that communicate about identity, politics, and modernity. Amidst discussions in the field of communication concerning the production, distribution and consumption of cultural and intellectual information, it encourages a rethinking of traditional assumptions regarding both the formulation of the public sphere and the constitution of political communication. Day of the Dead events in the United States illustrate how a public ritual celebration, a form of communication generally ignored by academic programs preoccupied with journalism, television, film, video, and computer-mediated communication, has created distinctive public spaces for the expression of oppositional ideas. This traditional ritual survives and grows in the US, developing new audiences and new meanings in our age of mass media, in part, by using the mass media. Besides being a form of alternative media themselves, Day of the Dead celebrations have helped open up space for the coverage of Latinos within mainstream US news and popular media. This has served, among other things, as a bridge for non-Latinos to better understand aspects of Latino culture and experience. In contrast to the marginalization and stereotyping of Latinos in the US mainstream media for most of the twentieth century, Day of the Dead season creates an annual source of positive news coverage, portraying Latinos in alter-images, or “altar” images that break with the problematic news frames and tokenism comprising most coverage of Latinos

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<sup>1</sup> A term suggested to me by Professor of Religion Thomas Tweed in conversations we had in March 2004 at a seminar sponsored by the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

As Day of the Dead has grown more popular in the United States over the past thirty years, its celebration has grown more commercial - a phenomenon that occasions both concern and excitement among members of the Latino community. While some see commercialization as useful in promoting Latin culture, others feel that it exploits and corrupts the tradition. This study traces the complex historical relationship between the ritual folk festivities of Day of the Dead in Mexico, their commodification, and contemporary celebrations in the United States. After describing ongoing discussions regarding the authenticity of Day of the Dead traditions in the US versus Mexico, I will demonstrate that traditional Latin American Day of the Dead celebrations have not been free of commercial elements and that, in the case of Mexico, commercial forces have played a crucial role in the twentieth century revitalization and nationalization of a regional "Indian" tradition that was previously disregarded by most non-indigenous Mexicans. In both the US and Mexico, the commercialization of Day of the Dead has been a powerful communication force in popularizing the celebration among both Latinos and non-Latinos. Despite an increasing reliance on corporate sponsorship, US Day of the Dead events maintain a vernacular quality that uses commercial publicity and funding to carry out creative and critical work while resisting the emptying of meaning feared by critics of commercialism. This is an instance where commercial imperatives, usually associated with the destruction of traditional cultures and oppositional expression, have helped sustain folk customs and dissenting political expression.

Along with studying the meanings and uses of Day of the Dead rituals for the US Latino community, I look at how the celebration is affecting mainstream America.

In the biggest migration flow in the history of the continent (Suarez-Orozco 2001:40), Latinos now represent the largest minority population in the United States and are significantly influencing US culture. Spanish vocabulary words are increasingly integrated into American English speech; salsa dancing is as popular as (if not more popular than) ballroom and swing; and tacos are now standard fare in restaurants, school lunch programs, and sports concession stands. As growing numbers of non-Latinos attend Day of the Dead activities and adopt the ritual of making home altars in honor of the deceased, I explore the mainstream appeal of this Latin American tradition within late modern US society, and how this appeal has contributed to the growth of Day of the Dead celebrations in Latino communities.

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

### **What does this have to do with communication research?**

When people initially learn that I study Day of the Dead, they inevitably ask, “What does this have to do with Communication?” They automatically assume that scholars of communication should spend their days dissecting television audiences and scrutinizing the nightly news. Yet, on an elemental level, communication is the social use of symbols for the transmission of ideas, information, and attitudes, and Day of the Dead is a rich site for the study of this process. The startled reactions I receive illustrate that within the field of communication, including the sub-field of cultural studies, ritual has generally been neglected in favor of analyses of mass media cultural production (Limón 1983; Carey 1989; Rothenbuhler 1998). This emphasis on the mass media overlooks alternative forms of communication that emerge from and express the

viewpoints of populations that may not have ready access to the traditional public sphere.

The notion of the “public sphere,” as theorized by Jurgen Habermas (1989; 1991), is particularly important to communication researchers because of its focus on the roles of public discourse and media in democratic societies. Yet, as Keith Negus observes, concepts of the public sphere derived from Habermas “neglect significant non-linguistic areas of contemporary communication while privileging a logocentric view of knowledge and political communicative action” (1996: 180). This logocentrism has led to an overemphasis on print media and broadcast news (Curran 1991; Dahlgren 1991; Garnham 1990; 1992; Negus 1996) at the expense of oral, visual, theatrical and auditory forms of communication that also reach mass audiences. For populations traditionally under-represented and misrepresented in the mainstream media and other domains of liberal, bourgeois politics (due to barriers and discrimination based on class, race, immigration status, etc.), alternative public spheres that do not depend on the mastery of written language, fluency in English, or the attainment of formal education, are crucial arenas for the creation and transmission of discourses that counter dominant “rational” worldviews.

Over roughly the past decade, critical scholars studying music have pointed out that the Habermasian emphasis on speech and language as the means of sharing ideas and generating dialogue has resulted in an overly narrow conception of communication (Tagg: 1990; Garnham 1992; Negus 1996). This critique stimulated a growing body of work in cultural studies and communication research on musical expression as an alternative site of political communication (Garafalo 1992; Gilroy 1993; Rose 1994;

Negus 1996; Eyerman & Jamison 1998). Similarly, analyses of subcultural sartorial style, emerging from the school of British cultural studies (Hall & Jefferson 1976; Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979) has had an important influence on communication studies by drawing attention to non-literary “texts” that defied conventional “rational” discourse to subvert and critique forms of oppression normalized by the dominant society. Inspired by this work, my research contributes to a critique of logocentric concepts of the public sphere, encouraging an expansion of the traditional parameters of communication research to include public ritual celebrations as alternative media that can enhance public discourse and political activism.

Over the past twenty years, most critical communication scholarship has concentrated on political economic analyses of communication that foreground the economics of communication processes to the exclusion of ethnic, racial and gender dynamics (e.g., Herman & McChesney 1997; Mosco & Schiller 2001; H. Schiller 1969; 1976; 1989; D. Schiller 1999). While importantly drawing attention to the exacerbation of structural inequities in an age of increasing privatization, deregulation, and commercialization, such research does not capture the ongoing struggles of subordinated populations to resist oppression and transform socio-political landscapes. In exclusively emphasizing the ramifications of corporately produced communication on “the cultural activity and the visions that sustain a people” (H. Schiller 1989: 3), bottom-up forms of public expression that also impact social and political landscapes are inadvertently neglected. Moreover, in focusing on the spread of US culture to other countries, most of this research does not examine the influence of non-Western practices on US culture.



Using a cultural studies perspective, contemporary critical scholars have challenged the linear and unidirectional models of cultural transmission assumed in earlier modernization and political economic theories of communication, providing new analyses of globalization and culture that elucidate grassroots forms of power and resistance. They point out that while globalization has intensified existing economic inequities and created new forms of exploitation, it has also generated new flows of people and cultures across borders, creating new practices, solidarities and forms of resistance to ethnic, racial, gender, and economic discrimination (Appadurai 1996 & 1997; Chakravartty & Casteñeda-Paredes 2002; Chen 1998; García-Canclini 1997; 2001; Hall 1998; Negus 1996; Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996).

As a form of communication that directly contributes to public knowledge, Day of the Dead in the United States is an example of a new cultural practice forged within the border encounters of Latin American and US cultures, as experienced in the lived realities of Latinos, their interactions with diverse cultural groups in the US, and the ongoing influence of successive waves of Latin American immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The growing popularity of this tradition across the United States challenges assumptions that automatically equate “modernity” with US-flavored cultural homogenization and the forsaking of pre-modern, “non-rational” communicative practices.

While communication scholars have concentrated mainly on the mass media, researchers in fields such as folklore (Limón 1983; 1994; Davis 1986; Paredes 1993; Santino 2004), political science (Scott 1990), History (Lipsitz 1990; Gutierrez 1995)

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the term “Latin American” refers to historical and contemporary peoples and cultures located in Latin America, while the term “Latino” refers to people of Latin American ancestry living in the United States (whether born in the US or in Latin America) and their collective experiences, beliefs, and cultural practices in the US.

and religion (Carrasco 1990) have analyzed public rituals as conveyors of messages about identity and social relations that help shape individual and collective practice. Much contemporary thinking about the political importance of public ritual celebrations is influenced by earlier scholars from a variety of fields who drew attention to the potential of folk rituals to contest dominant systems of power. For example, literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival discussed the temporary suspension of social hierarchies and prohibitions in the festival context, during which time oppressed commoners could symbolically critique their social superiors (1984). Political philosopher Antonio Gramsci argued that folk rituals had the capability to "bring about the birth of a new culture," and "must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously" (1999: 362). Influenced by Gramsci, social historian E.P. Thompson suggested that folk practices were contexts and locations "in which men and women, confronting the necessities of their existence, derive their own values and create their own mode of life" that could be antagonistic to the overarching system of domination and control (Limón: 1983: 42). Anthropologist Victor Turner discussed the power of ritual to temporarily break down hierarchies of power, reclassify the individual's relationship to society, and "incite participants to action and well as thought" (1977:129).

Against the backdrop of the dominant Anglo-American society's history of discriminating against and exploiting most Latinos, Day of the Dead celebrations in the US are more about communicating a pro-Latino cultural and political presence than about fulfilling moral obligations to the deceased. Unlike Latin American Day of the

Dead traditions, passed down from generation to generation, these public celebrations in the US were forged in the 1970s as a conscious political act by the Chicano community. Reworking salient rituals from the Latin American holiday, Chicano Day of the Dead events - featuring altar and art exhibits in galleries, museums, libraries, community centers, municipal buildings, parks and other public spaces, as well as public processions, vigils, spoken word events and cemetery rituals - represented a new forum through which to educate the public about Latino history, culture, and political struggles. Many exhibits and events honor deceased Latino writers, musicians, artists, scholars, filmmakers, actors, political activists and other cultural icons, publicly promoting and validating unofficial histories or “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) regarding Latino contributions to US society that were long ignored by mainstream educational curricula, cultural institutions and mass media. Many others evoke a “moral economy” model of social protest (Thompson 1991), encouraging ethical reflection on issues of political importance ranging from police brutality and handgun violence to workers’ rights and immigration policies.

During Day of the Dead season in the United States, art and ritual frequently serve to reveal dimensions of human repression so commonplace within the dominant society that they are nearly invisible to the average person. Similar to the public protests of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, US Day of the Dead events allow what Michael Taussig calls “the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead to flow into the public sphere, empower individuals and challenge the would-be guardians of the nation state” (1994: 280). Much more than simple “escapism” or a “safety valve,” this public ritual celebration provides significant spaces

for “the work of the imagination” that, as Appadurai, Scott, Lipsitz, and others have argued, raises political consciousness and fuels activism. Appadurai asserts: “It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only escape” (1996: 7).

Because it involves cultural rituals *and* occurs ritually each year, US Day of the Dead is a form of “ritual communication” – a term that refers both to viewing communication processes as rituals and to seeing rituals as an important form of communication (Carey: 1989; Rothenbuhler: 1998). Influenced by the work of John Dewey, the concept of ritual communication emphasizes the roots of the word “communication” in terms such as “common,” “communion,” and “community.” It focuses on the projection of community ideals via creative public expressions and examines the role of ceremonial presentation and participation in the structuring of people’s lives. Dewey contended that artistic presentations (e.g., poetry, drama, novels) were often more accessible and effective than news media in stimulating the social inquiry and public debate crucial to the process of turning the Great Society into a Great Community (1927: 183-184).

Following Dewey’s lead, James Carey observes that the knowledge and consciousness people need in order to act politically often develop “only by divesting life of its mundane trappings and exposing our common sense or scientific assumptions to an ironic light that makes the phenomenon strange” (1989: 25). Critiquing the predominant transmission model of communication that narrowly views society as either a political order (a network of power, administration, and control) or an economic

order (a network of property, production, and trade), Carey asserts that social life is much more than the dynamics of power and trade. Through ritual communication, he argues, social identities are symbolically constructed and reinforced while engaging the intellectual, spiritual and/or physical participation of the public. While noting that “a ritual view of communication does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change” (1989: 21), Carey provides the following general distinction between the transmission model and the ritual model of communication:

The archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view of communication is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality (1989:18).

Embedded in the transmission model is the assumption that communication must convey new information to the public. In the ritual model, however, the act of communication is often effective (and affective) without necessarily relaying new information. It is more likely to be repetitive than unprecedented, recycling deeply felt ideas, values, and experiences to retell rather than report a story. This form of communication has powerful consequences in terms of consciousness-raising and solidarity building.

Carey’s concept of ritual communication was also influenced by the writings of Raymond Williams. Williams argued that in addition to information officially articulated in the mass media, communication included the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values, and intellectual notions via art and

performance (1961; 1976). He posited that such forms of communication created “structures of feeling,” that is, expressions that conveyed knowledge via humanization, rather than theory or argument, to reveal “the deepest feelings in the real experiences of the time” (Williams 1961: 68; Simpson: 1992:17). Williams suggested that structures of feeling were achieved during a “process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived” (1979: 168), or the contrast between dominant ideology and personal experience. As I will discuss, many Day of the Dead altars and events pointedly reveal the incongruities between dominant US ideologies of liberal individualism and the lived realities of the Latino community.

### **1.3 How I came to study Day of the Dead**

As children, growing up in Boston, Massachusetts, my brother and I would sometimes make charcoal rubbings of the seventeenth and eighteenth century tombstones found in local cemeteries. Surrounded by floral designs and sprouting angel wings from their sides, the wide-eyed, sometimes smiling skulls etched on the weathered slate gravemarkers made the cemeteries seem peaceful rather than petrifying places to explore on hot summer days. The winged skulls adorning the headstones were designed to publicly convey that the deceased were in a better place - free from earthly tribulations - a place where all reside eventually. Years later, I was reminded of these irenic skulls when I became familiar with Day of the Dead, and perhaps it was my childhood exposure to the poignant mortuary etchings and epitaphs of early New England that made me feel at home with this ritual and its imagery.

My interest in Latin American culture and, specifically, in Day of the Dead, arose from a combination of life and work experiences. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, I worked as a teacher, community organizer, and volunteer with Latino communities in Massachusetts and California, as well as in rural and indigenous communities in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama. I first attended Day of the Dead celebrations while living in San Francisco's Mission District<sup>3</sup> in the 1980s, and later had the opportunity, while living and working in Central America for four years, to see how the holiday was observed in urban and rural areas of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. On returning to the United States in the mid 1990s, I encountered Day of the Dead events in Washington DC, New York, and my native city of Boston, where such activities had not been celebrated when I was growing up there.

The noticeable diaspora of Day of the Dead celebrations across the United States raised a number of questions for me, among them: How and why did the tradition emerge in California in the early 1970s, and how did it extend across the United States? What was the relationship between cultural practice, socioeconomic conditions, and politics? Given the historical under-representation of Latinos in the US media, why was Day of the Dead so widely covered by the mainstream press and what was the significance of this coverage for the Latino community? What was the relationship between this celebration and commercial forces? And finally, why did a ritual that was initially so particular to Mexican-Americans appeal so deeply to diverse people around

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<sup>3</sup> The largest Latino community in San Francisco, comprised mainly of Mexican and Central American immigrant families together with Chicano/Latino artists and activists. It is also home to non-Latino artists and activists attracted to Latino culture, the neighborhood's historically affordable rents, and the creative synergy produced by a high concentration of artists, politically progressive organizations, and community centers located in the Mission.

the country? Interested in issues of globalization, cultural transmission, and political communication (particularly the ways in which grassroots social movements communicate about political struggle, given their limited access to the mainstream media), I decided to make this celebration the subject of an orals qualifying paper that later evolved into my dissertation.

This topic provides an opportunity to explore several issues relevant to communication studies. First, while the majority of research in the field focuses on mass mediated forms of communication, US Day of the Dead is an example of how cultural celebrations can become alternative media for the diffusion of counter-hegemonic ideas to the broader society. Second, within discussions of globalization that focus heavily on the global omnipotence of corporately-produced US culture, Day of the Dead is an example of a “third world” folk ritual that is influencing mainstream US culture. The growth of Day of the Dead from a marginal practice of a cultural minority to a tradition observed in cities throughout the US counters the one-way “center to periphery” transmission model inherent in earlier theories of communication and modernization. Third, the celebration provides a contemporary case study on the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities, illustrating that invented traditions - often associated with the manipulation of tradition from above for the benefit of ruling elites - can also be used for empowerment by disenfranchised populations. However, as this case illustrates, the construction of ethnic identity through invented traditions, even when intended for the empowerment of oppressed groups, is not without its tensions and contradictions. Fourth, the study offers an opportunity to interrogate the widely



upheld dichotomies of “local” versus “global,” “authentic”<sup>4</sup> versus “commercial” and “traditional” versus “modern,” so common in the critical literature on consumer culture.

#### **1.4 Scope and Significance of the Study**

Because California was the first place in the United States where Day of the Dead was intentionally celebrated as a choreographed “event” and is home to one of the largest and most diverse Latino populations in the country, my research focuses primarily on California celebrations. In order to illustrate certain trends, however, I also refer to Day of the Dead events in other parts of the country, using information gathered from news coverage, Internet websites, personal interviews, and observations. This dissertation is a study of public, Chicano-style celebrations of Day of the Dead in the United States and does not attempt to look at private, family observances. Nor does it attempt to rearticulate a detailed history of pre- and post- Columbian Day of the Dead rituals in Mexico, amply discussed elsewhere (Childs & Altman 1982; Nutini 1988; Portillo 1990; Carmichael & Sayer 1991; Greenleigh & Beimler 1991; Lok 1991; Garcíagodoy 1998). Instead, it seeks to examine from a communication perspective the history and growth of the celebration in the United States, noting continuities and changes from the Latin American to the US context, and to explore the significance of these developments for Latinos and the larger US society.

Compared with the vast literature written on Mexico’s Day of the Dead, academic research on Day of the Dead in the United States is relatively limited. The

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<sup>4</sup> “Authentic” refers to what is considered to be authoritative and genuine, conforming to an “original,” and free from commercial or other forms of imitation, manipulation or adulteration.

most comprehensive information on the genesis of the celebration in San Francisco, California, can be found in the unpublished doctoral dissertation of theologian Suzanne Shumate Morrison (1992). Further historical documentation and curatorial perspective on the California tradition exists in a museum catalog written by Tere Romo, et al. (2000), published by the Mexican Museum of San Francisco. Of the handful of scholarly journal articles written on US Day of the Dead, most have a different scope and object of study than this dissertation. In the mid 1980s, folklorists Kay Turner and Pat Jasper researched traditional Mexican-American All Saints' Day/All Souls' Day observances in Texas (1994), and James Griffith studied similar Mexican Catholic folk practices in the twin cities of Nogales, Arizona, and Sonora, Mexico (1995). Bonnie Bade has discussed the role of Day of the Dead rituals in the maintenance of transnational community ties among Mixtec immigrants living in California and their families in Oaxaca, Mexico (1997). Closer to my focus, Lara Medina has written an article about a Day of the Dead event at Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles, describing the ritual's ability to renew community via the articulation of popular religion, indigenous spirituality, and social critique (2002).

The above mentioned authors concentrate exclusively on the ritual's meaning for US Chicano/Mexicano communities, with the exception of Morrison, who also notes the participation of Central Americans in San Francisco's festivities. I have found only one article devoted to Day of the Dead in relation to non-Mexican US Latino groups: folklorist Olivia Cadavál discusses the celebration as a vehicle for the construction and assertion of pan-Latino identity by Ecuadorian, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran immigrants in Washington, DC (1985). At the time of Cadavál's research,

Central and South Americans were beginning to constitute a significant demographic presence in DC and, with the vast national increase in immigration from various regions of Latin America since then, her observations are even more relevant today. My work continues the examination of how diverse groups of Latinos connect with and are united by Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States.

This dissertation comprises the most current and comprehensive analysis of US Day of the Dead activities produced to date. It examines the meaning of the tradition for Latinos of diverse ethnic, economic, political, and generational backgrounds, as well as for non-Latinos, who now comprise a large proportion of US Day of the Dead participants. Through detailed ethnographic accounts, it provides a wider lens through which to consider the ritual's capacity for community building and political expression, while also detailing the differing meanings that the same ritual can have simultaneously for diverse groups of participants. The interdisciplinary nature of this research makes it relevant to several academic disciplines beyond the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies, including anthropology, folklore, ethnic studies, Chicano/Latino studies, ritual studies, performance studies and religion. In analyzing the hybrid mixture of US Day of the Dead practices that have evolved through the intersections of Latin American and US cultures, this study also contributes to Border Studies research. It exemplifies the assertion of folklorist Américo Paredes, considered by many to be the father of Border Studies, that a "folklore of resistance" emerges in response to the marginalization and exploitation of Latinos by mainstream US society (1993: xiii).

## **1.5 Chapter-by-Chapter Compendium**

### **Chapter Two: Historical Background on Day of the Dead**

This chapter provides information on Day of the Dead rituals in various parts of Latin America and discusses the genesis of Chicano-initiated Day of the Dead celebrations in California. It also reviews the modern history of Day of the Dead in Mexico, exploring some of the social and historical reasons why the holiday has become synonymous with Mexican national identity. I argue that the observance of this ritual in various areas of Latin America for more than 500 years makes it a point of cultural continuity for many people of Latin American ancestry living as cultural minorities in the United States.

Most of the existing research on Day of the Dead portrays the tradition as a uniquely and essentially “Mexican” phenomenon. While some authors parenthetically note that the holiday is observed in other parts of Latin America, there has heretofore been no comprehensive scholarly discussion of the varieties of Day of the Dead rituals practiced throughout the Americas. In bringing together information on practices throughout the region (extracted from existing empirical research, newspaper articles, and personal observations and interviews), this chapter makes a unique contribution to the literature on Day of the Dead by providing more extensive socio-historical contextualization. Essentialist assertions, intended to extol Mexican identity and counter generations of demeaning attitudes towards Mexican-Americans, have been powerful at uniting diverse groups of people sharing Mexican ancestry. However, they

can also be restrictive and potentially disempowering portrayals of culture.<sup>5</sup> Alleging temporal continuity and a primeval dominion of the “tradition” creates an illusion that the way things are today is the way they always *have* been and always *will* be. I portray the socially constructed nature of contemporary Day of the Dead celebrations, both in Mexico and in the US, not with the goal of debunking them as “fake,” but in order to highlight the liberating communicative opportunities afforded when symbolically constructed realities are acknowledged, freeing people to choose progressive aspects of their culture and ignore oppressive ones.

Describing regional Day of the Dead practices throughout Latin America is important for understanding the significance of the celebration for US Latinos of diverse ethnic backgrounds. I have met people from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and Brazil attending and/or helping to organize US Day of the Dead events. Yet, because the holiday is widely viewed as an exclusively Mexican custom, the participation of other groups has been relatively neglected in the academic literature. Through interviews with non-Mexican Latinos, I illustrate that Day of the Dead is an event to which *many* Latin American populations can relate, increasingly becoming a celebration of Latino (not simply “Mexican”) identity and solidarity in the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of the art world, in particular, the stock association of Mexican-Americans as intrinsic carriers of the Day of the Dead tradition has had the effect of sometimes pigeonholing Chicano artists or marginalizing them from participation in other types of creative work during the fall exhibit season.

### **Chapter Three: Cultural and Political Solidarity**

Chapter Three discusses the influence of Catholicism and indigenous spiritual beliefs on contemporary Latinos and how religious symbols have been used in US Day of the Dead celebrations to create feelings of cultural and political solidarity among ethnically, economically, racially, politically, and generationally diverse groups of Latinos. Incorporating Durkheim's perspectives on religion (1965), Turner's theory of "communitas" (1977), Anderson's work on "imagined communities" (1991), Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of "invented traditions" (1992), and Thompson's discussion of "the moral economy" (1991), I consider ways in which these celebrations use ritual, myth, aesthetics, and ethics to encourage a sense of identity and solidarity among diverse groups of Latinos. I note that Chicano-style Day of the Dead celebrations are re-inventions of traditions from which celebrants have been physically separated, sometimes for generations, and discuss the changes in meaning that occur when pre-industrial, religious rituals are practiced in industrialized, secular contexts. From a family-oriented celebration focusing on the preparation of homes and graves in honor of departed relatives, the holiday has been transformed in the United States into an advertised, public "event," organized primarily by non-profit and for-profit organizations, rather than individual families.

In addition to exploring how this holiday celebrates Latino cultural heritage, this chapter considers its potential as a social force through which to convey political messages important to the Latino community. I provide detailed ethnographic accounts of US Day of the Dead activities (public altars, art exhibits, community vigils, and processions) that use the deaths of local people to personalize abstract political

discourses around national and global issues, encouraging moral reflection and political action. Theoretical works regarding the interrelation of culture and politics, from Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, George Lipsitz, and others, are incorporated into the discussion.

#### **Chapter Four: Mass Mediations**

After providing a brief survey of research on the historical under-representation and misrepresentation of Latinos in the US mainstream media, Chapter Four discusses how coverage of Day of the Dead events represents a ritualized, annual media space for the public affirmation of Latinos and Latino culture. While originally created to communicate to the public via ritual and artistic expression, Day of the Dead events soon attracted mass media attention that transmitted information about the celebration to much wider audiences. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze media coverage, I argue that the mass media have served an important purpose in educating mainstream society about the Latin American tradition and its Chicano-initiated public revival in the United States. Because Day of the Dead season in the US lasts for two to three months, newspapers typically publish multiple articles and listings on the subject each year (as opposed to a single article that may be published regarding a one-day event such as Cinco de Mayo or St. Patrick's Day). Because no other Latino celebration receives such detailed and extended media attention annually, this coverage represents the largest public forum in the United States for the admiration and validation of a Latino cultural practice.

I contend that Day of the Dead news stories, considered rather shocking three decades ago, have now become examples of “sphere of consensus” coverage, or “social objects not regarded by journalists and by most of the society as controversial” (Hallin 1994:53). The celebration’s exotic and colorful nature, its non-denominational spirituality, and its association with school children, families, and “community togetherness” make it an irresistible story for reporters. I argue that sphere of consensus status allows these stories to be featured as routine human interest pieces, creating space for related Day of the Dead stories about serious political issues that would normally fall within “sphere of controversy” or “sphere of deviance” news frames. This situation allows journalists to cover Day of the Dead events dealing with issues such as war, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), immigration policies, etc., from the vantage point of the non-elite community people sponsoring the commemorations, without the prioritizing of government and other official news sources that characterizes most reporting of political issues.

### **Chapter Five: Adoption, Adaptation and Appropriation**

Chapter Five describes how Day of the Dead has been adopted and adapted in the United States for a complex variety of objectives. I describe how non-Latinos from various racial and ethnic backgrounds are constructing ancestor altars, attending cemetery vigils, and participating in community processions for Day of the Dead, and examine various reasons for this phenomenon. Comparing contemporary US society’s discomfort around death with Latin American society’s more common acceptance of death as a natural part of the life cycle, I argue that many people in the United States see



Day of the Dead as a way to access emotions and experiences that seem otherwise culturally unavailable. The professionalization of death in the US by the medical and mortuary industries in the twentieth century brought a loss of collective time and space in which to tell stories about departed loved ones, communally mourn and heal. Day of the Dead rituals offer mainstream US society an important element of pre-modernity – public remembering of the dead as a way to maintain connections to the past.

While Day of the Dead enthusiasm among non-Latinos is gratifying to many in the Latino community who see their culture finally being valued by the mainstream, it is a cause of concern for some who feel that the influx of “others” is endangering the original purpose and authenticity of the celebration. However, as the ethnographic work of this chapter reveals, debates over authenticity are not limited to “Latino versus non-Latino” concerns, but also occur within the Latino community itself. Some Chicano artists who choose to interpret the holiday in unconventional ways have received criticism from their peers in the Chicano community. Meanwhile, many young Latinos are embracing radical interpretations of Day of the Dead or are attracted to “New Age” manifestations of the holiday that connect it to Celtic and Druid rituals repudiated by many of their parents’ generation.

In addition to exploring these complex dynamics, this chapter discusses the commodification of Day of the Dead rituals, crafts, and products by museums, folk art stores, galleries, the Internet, tourism, and urban redevelopment organizations. Based on examples from my fieldwork, I suggest that this commodification is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, as various positive benefits result for the Latino community. Encouraging readers to re-think commonplace dualisms such as “commercial” and

“authentic” or “local” and “global,” I note that religious and cultural festivals in Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere have long been connected to commercial forces, and that it was a commercial interest in Mexican crafts and rituals on the part of museums, collectors, and tourists from the 1920s through the 1970s (and into the present) that has been largely responsible for reviving Day of the Dead traditions that were waning. I refute romanticized notions that posit Mexico’s Day of the Dead as “non-commercial” and argue that Day of the Dead events and exhibits in the US are not less authentic than celebrations in Latin America but are, instead, new creations with their own authenticity.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions**

This chapter recapitulates the major arguments of the preceding chapters and explains the larger implications of these conclusions for Communication and Cultural Studies scholarship.

### **1.6 Methodology**

The methodology for this project entailed a combination of library research, multi-sited ethnography over a period of six years, and critical textual analysis of events/exhibits and mass media coverage of them. Each year since the autumn of 2000, I attended dozens of Day of the Dead processions, vigils, altar exhibits and art shows, craft workshops, film screenings, community altar-making ceremonies, festivals, poetry readings, and other related holiday activities in Tijuana, San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, as well as events in New Mexico and Texas. I shot more than 40 rolls of

film during these events and, with UCSD Human Subjects approval, conducted 73 formal interviews with event organizers and participants. Over the past 15 years, I have traveled widely throughout Latin America and have had the opportunity to informally observe and discuss death rituals (wakes, funerals, and remembrance days) and Day of the Dead traditions with friends and extended family in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, and Ecuador. These experiences have provided me with additional reflections, insights and background information for this study.

### Library Research

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of Communication Studies, my library research included readings from a wide variety of sources and fields. I first conducted a review of the scholarly writing available on pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary Latin American rituals for remembering the dead, particularly in Mesoamerica and the Andean region. This literature ranged from sixteenth-century historical documents about pre-Conquest rituals to the observations and research of nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologists, folklorists, and travelers. To gather additional information on Latin American Day of the Dead customs (aside from what I encountered in scholarly and travel books), I also reviewed articles and editorials published over the past ten years in prominent Latin American newspapers (in Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Ecuador, Bolivia, Panama, Argentina, and elsewhere) that discussed activities occurring on November 1 and 2. I also surveyed the few scholarly publications available on Day of the Dead in the United States, produced primarily by anthropologists, folklorists, and scholars of religion. My investigation of US

celebrations included a review of museum catalogues from Day of the Dead exhibits, promotional posters, postcards, flyers, and newspaper advertisements about Day of the Dead events, newspaper and magazine articles, websites, documentary videos and educational curricula used to teach about Day of the Dead, recorded radio programs from National Public Radio, and videotaped footage of TV news coverage of Day of the Dead events.

Writings from the fields of cultural studies, communication, ethnic studies, and Chicano/Latino studies enhanced my theoretical understanding of the social and political importance of cultural traditions for minority groups in the United States. I also immersed myself in Ritual Studies literature from the fields of anthropology, folklore and religion, through which I learned valuable theoretical and practical approaches to analyzing ritual, celebration and festival. Readings from the fields of religion and theology, including liberation theology, provided me with additional theoretical and historical data on indigenous and mestizo Latin American spirituality, popular religiosity, and death-related beliefs and customs. A selective review of literature on the subject of death and dying in the United States, mainly from the fields of sociology and anthropology, provided me with an understanding of changing attitudes, beliefs, and customs around death in the US, from the seventeenth-century up to the present. A review of the literature on consumer culture/commercialization of culture, from fields such as sociology, anthropology, history, and cultural studies, informed my reflections on the commodification of Day of the Dead.

### Critical Textual Analysis

I conducted an analysis of altar exhibits, Day of the Dead websites, magazine articles, and newspaper coverage published in the US over the past thirty years, with a particular emphasis on California. This involved photographing altar exhibits, artwork, processions, and ceremonies and taking notes on the placement of objects, words spoken at performances or lectures, “spoken word” performed at poetry events, and visual, olfactory and auditory details about ceremonies (regarding the types of instruments used, songs and dances presented, flowers used, costumes worn, incense burned, etc.). At exhibits, I took notes on the names of the artists or community groups making the altars and reproduced (by hand or via photograph) the written descriptions that accompanied altar installations. When handouts were available at particular altars (as they commonly are), I gathered copies of whatever materials were available. These usually consisted of detailed descriptions of an altar’s significance, information about the artist(s), and/or information about the person or political cause being honored (such as a life history of Mexican actress Maria Felix, or victims of torture detailed in Amnesty International statistics). When possible, I spoke with the artists and performers about the meaning of their work, if they were present at exhibits or events (which is common during exhibit openings and one-day special events).

In order to conduct both qualitative and quantitative analyses of news coverage, I acquired newspaper articles and radio and TV transcripts of shows about Day of the Dead by using Lexis-Nexis, the *Los Angeles Times* online archives, and other news

databases.<sup>6</sup> US popular magazine articles were acquired both by doing searches on Lexis-Nexis and by purchasing the fall issues of standard supermarket checkout line fare such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Family Circle*, *Essence*, *Holiday Celebrations*, *Latina*, and *Parent*.

### Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnography comprised the bulk of my research. Although I officially initiated my scholarly interest in Day of the Dead in the fall of 2000, I had attended Day of the Dead exhibits in San Diego and Tijuana in the fall of 1999, before I knew the celebration would be the topic of my dissertation. My fieldwork expanded geographically over the next five years. In the fall of 2000, having learned of additional activities throughout the San Diego County area, I attended events in the towns of San Ysidro, Chula Vista, Escondido, Solana Beach, and Oceanside, California, as well as in San Diego and Tijuana. In the fall of 2001, along with attending annual events in the previously named communities, I also attended several Day of the Dead exhibits, workshops and altar-making ceremonies in Los Angeles. In the fall of both 2002 and 2003, after attending exhibits and events in San Diego and Los Angeles, I flew to San Francisco to attend the annual November 2 Day of the Dead procession in the Mission District and spent the next two weeks visiting and photographing numerous Day of the Dead exhibits in Bay Area community centers, public schools, universities, museums,

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<sup>6</sup> The precise methodology I used to analyze news coverage of Day of the Dead in the US is detailed in Chapter Four.

galleries, restaurants, and stores, as well as interviewing artists, curators, staff, students, retailers, teachers, and local residents involved in these exhibits/activities.

In the fall of 2003, I also participated from October 26 to November 1 in a week-long, binational Day of the Dead “Border Pilgrimage,” spanning the Border regions of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Traveling by car caravan from San Diego to El Paso, Texas, and stopping along the way at border locations in both Mexico and the US (San Diego/Tijuana; Yuma/Nogales; Mesilla, NM; and El Paso/Ciudad Juarez), the event was organized by clergy, labor activists, immigrant rights workers and human rights advocates to draw attention to the thousands of deaths along the US-Mexican Border related to US immigration and economic policies. Participation in this event allowed me to augment my previous research in California with events and exhibits from southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. It also gave me an opportunity to interview participants from the California caravan contingency, as well as participants from the hosting organizations (churches, universities, social service agencies, community centers, and arts organizations) in the various states along the way regarding their views about Day of the Dead.

In the fall of 2004 and 2005, I attended many Day of the Dead exhibits, processions, vigils and other activities in San Diego County (including in downtown San Diego, Oceanside, Vista, Escondido, La Jolla and Chula Vista) and Los Angeles. From 1999 to 2005, whether in San Diego, Los Angeles or San Francisco, I went to a variety of Day of the Dead workshops on sugar skull making, altar making, *corona* (wreath) and paper flower making, *calavera* (skeleton) arts and crafts, mask making,

and Day of the Dead bread baking. In most cases, I was a participant observer, enjoying the activities while taking written or mental notes on the material being taught, the reactions and comments of participants, the gender, age and ethnic composition of the group, and other observations to be typed up later. As further documentation, I took photos at workshops, asking individuals for permission at smaller events or simply taking panoramic shots at larger events.

Considering that the holiday in Latin America is officially observed on two dates, November 1 and 2, it may seem surprising that I have attended so many Day of the Dead events each year. Yet, one of the interesting changes that has occurred in the observance of this holiday in the United States is that it has gone from being a ritual of a few days' duration (as it is in Latin America) to a *season* of two or three months' length (discussed in more depth later). While many US community centers and museums hold their major Day of the Dead celebrations on the official dates of November 1 or 2, many others hold their celebrations the week before (or, less commonly, the week after)<sup>7</sup> because of scheduling difficulties, attempts not to conflict with other well-known Day of the Dead events or, in some cases, a desire to keep November 1 and 2 free so that people can celebrate it with family members (which for many Oaxacan immigrants entails traveling to Mexico for the holiday). Most US Day of the Dead altar exhibits and craft workshops tend to begin in late September or early October and end in late November or early December. Thus, each year from mid-September through early December, with assistance from Google.com and Mapquest, it

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2003 the Instituto Familiar de la Raza, in San Francisco, held their annual Day of the Dead community procession and ceremony on November 7. When November 1 and 2 fall on weekdays, as in the year 2005, most organizations hold their main celebrations on the preceding weekend in order to attract larger crowds than would attend on a weekday.



was possible for me to attend two or three exhibits or workshops each Saturday and Sunday at community centers, galleries, and stores throughout southern California, attending additional events, exhibits, film screenings, poetry nights, or lectures during the week. The wide temporal spacing of events throughout the fall allowed me to attend nearly 100 exhibits and events in multiple cities and states over the past five years.

Because I was a transplant from Boston, I was initially unfamiliar with the arts and social service organizations of Southern California.<sup>8</sup> During my first year, I learned of Day of the Dead events by reading the calendar sections of local newspapers. On meeting more people and getting to know the area better, I subsequently learned of additional events via word of mouth; by perusing websites hosted by community centers, galleries, museums, universities, Latino organizations, immigrant rights groups, tourist bureaus, and folk art stores; and by signing up for their mailing lists. At each Day of the Dead event I attended, I took photographs<sup>9</sup> and field notes that were elaborated and typed up when I returned to my office. I initially conducted a series of informational interviews with key staff at prominent Latino community centers and art galleries. These were pioneering Latino community organizations, including Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles and the Mission Cultural Center and La Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, that had initiated the earliest Day of the Dead exhibits in the United States. After contacting the directors and/or program coordinators at each site via a

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<sup>8</sup> I was familiar with community centers and arts organizations in the Bay Area from having lived there in the 1980s.

<sup>9</sup> Day of the Dead celebrations in the US are publicly advertised “events” where participants and spectators routinely videotape and photograph altars, dance performances, processions, ceremonies, and workshops. Taking photographs is expected and is usually not considered intrusive. I encountered only two galleries that prohibited photography. When in doubt, I asked staff, ceremony participants, or shopkeepers before taking photos.

letter written on official university stationery, explaining the scope of my project and requesting an interview, I later scheduled face-to-face interviews via follow-up phone calls or emails.

In total, I conducted interviews (averaging one to two hours each) with 73 Day of the Dead participants in San Diego County, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. My respondents included neighborhood residents active in their local community centers or churches, high school and college students, public school teachers and university professors, artists, political activists, librarians, clergy, community development specialists, and vendors of Day of the Dead products. I also had many informal conversations with Day of the Dead celebrants whom I met at altar exhibits, sugar skull and altar-making workshops, community processions, and ceremonies (some of whom I later interviewed formally).

All of the organization directors and exhibit curators I contacted for my first round of interviews had been involved in their respective organization's earliest Day of the Dead celebrations, and each possessed an average of 30 years of experience working in the Latino arts community. Thus, they were able to provide detailed oral histories about Day of the Dead at their institutions and offer views on the ritual's social and political significance. These key respondents had visited Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico and/or Central America and were therefore able to make comparative observations. All identified themselves as being long-term activists in the Chicano Movement.<sup>10</sup> After initial interviews with these respondents, I began interviewing staff

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<sup>10</sup> While all of the people who initiated the earliest Day of the Dead exhibits in California identify as Chicano/a, not all people of Mexican heritage who later became active in organizing Day of the Dead events identify as Chicano/a. The term Chicano will be discussed in Chapter Three.

and participants from other organizations that had more recently begun to celebrate Day of the Dead. At the end of every interview with staff from these organizations, I asked for suggestions of local residents, artists, and others who might be willing to be interviewed in the future. This yielded recommendations of colleagues, board members, and constituents whom I later contacted, allowing me to use “snowball” or network sampling to acquire the bulk of my interviewees. With the exception of a couple of agency heads that never responded to my letters and phone calls, nearly everyone I contacted was willing to be interviewed. The few who were unable to meet because of time constraints emailed me their comments or gave me the names of others whom I could interview in their place.

Because Day of the Dead is one of the busiest periods of the year for those who organize these celebrations and exhibits, I avoided scheduling interviews during this time. Most of my interviews were conducted in the period from January to September, after the rush of the winter holiday season and before the major Day of the Dead activities began.<sup>11</sup> Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, according to the preference of respondents, who were comprised of a variety of Mexican-Americans, other US-born Latinos; Mexican immigrants (Mestizos and indigenous Mixtecs who hailed from urban and rural areas of Mexico and reside in urban and suburban areas of California); Central Americans from Guatemala (including indigenous Maya K'iché and Mam), El Salvador and Nicaragua, now living and working in California; several immigrants from South America; and non-Latinos.

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<sup>11</sup> Exceptions were my trips to San Francisco, where I interviewed some people in November (after Nov. 2, when activities were not as hectic), and interviews I held with people during the 2003 Border Pilgrimage car caravan.

Most of the non-Latinos I interviewed were middle-class, college-educated individuals such as teachers, professors, artists, administrators, political activists, or small-scale entrepreneurs. Some were people who described themselves as living alternative lifestyles (i.e. gays and lesbians, neo-pagans, or “Goths”) and actively sought out, explored and adopted alternative worldviews. Others were people not affiliated with academia, politics, or the art world, including elderly retirees, military families, and middle and working class people who are often classified as “Middle America.” Many interviewees from the latter group learned about Day of the Dead through local newspapers, radio and television, or their children’s involvement with the celebration in school. Another group of non-Latinos celebrating Day of the Dead were those whose congregations held Day of the Dead services, processions, or altar-making events.

In contacting non-Latinos, I began by interviewing people I knew personally who had adopted Day of the Dead as an annual holiday, asking them to recommend others whom I might contact. Another way I acquired interviewees was by striking up conversations with people at Day of the Dead events largely or primarily attended by non-Latinos, such as the Campo Santo cemetery event in San Diego’s Old Town State Park, the Mission District’s Day of the Dead Procession in San Francisco, the Participatory Offering at the California Center for the Arts in Escondido, and the Universalist Unitarian Day of the Dead Celebration in Solana Beach, California. While the majority of these people were White, this non-Latino group also included some Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, and persons of Middle

Eastern and East Indian descent. Ranging in age from the early 20s to the late 70s, the majority of the people I spoke with were between 25 and 60 years old.

Throughout my research, I was deeply impressed by the enthusiasm and candor with which respondents were willing to talk with me, particularly given that most people were extremely busy. Interviews scheduled to be sixty minutes in length often lasted much longer. Repeatedly I received emails, postcards or phone calls from people I had interviewed, inviting me to attend upcoming Day of the Dead (and other) events/exhibits in the following months or year(s). The owner of one San Diego gallery-store specializing in Day of the Dead crafts invited me to sit in on the sugar skull workshops she held during the 2003 season so that I could observe, photograph, and casually talk with participants about their perspectives on Day of the Dead. More than once I was invited to attend planning meetings of community organizations as they discussed their upcoming Day of the Dead celebrations. Twice at the end of interviews with community residents, the person being interviewed literally walked me to a neighbor's home to introduce me so that I could interview the neighbor as well.

Most sponsoring organizations generously shared their press kits, archival photos, flyers, educational curricula, guest books of public comments about their Day of the Dead celebrations, and statistical information on the events. Two organizations gave me computer CDs of photos, sponsorship information, and promotional materials from their celebrations. Several agency directors and artists spent additional hours, aside from the formal interview, showing me photo albums or computer files of previous years' events and, in one case, a curator spent nearly three hours showing me slides of Day of the Dead exhibits he had organized over 30 years. Without my asking,

a couple of agency directors offered me office space to use as a base for interviewing artists and community people. Some interviewees gave me photocopies of articles they thought would be useful for my project, recommended books, or offered to make their personal photos available for my research. Others working at non-profit organizations bestowed upon me Day of the Dead T-shirts, posters, and other souvenirs from their events. An artist I had never met before concluded our interview by giving me a small Day of the Dead clay sculpture she had made, while the owner of a folk art store made a gift to me of a book on Mexican altars, hoping it would be useful to my work.

After every interview, I followed up with a hand-written note thanking people for their time – always feeling that I owed them so much more. In an unexpected and touching reversal of roles, one Mixtec respondent sent me a large Hallmark “thank you” card in return, thanking *me* for my visit and interview. Throughout this project, I have been moved by the generosity of my research respondents, in terms of both their time and their spirit of collaboration. I am far more grateful to them than words can convey.

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## **Chapter Two: Historical Overview of Day of the Dead**

### **2.1 General background on the custom**

The majority of the books and articles written about Day of the Dead refer to the holiday as “Mexican.” What is less often mentioned in the research is that the celebration is observed in much of Latin America, with rituals and practices varying from country to country. There are several reasons for the heavy academic focus on Mexican Day of the Dead. First, Mexico is the largest and closest Latin American neighbor to the US and, thus, the most visible and accessible research site for US-based scholars (responsible for the majority of English-language scholarship on the holiday). A second factor that has encouraged researchers and the international public to associate Day of the Dead exclusively with Mexico has been the Mexican tourism industry. As the most populous and industrialized of all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, Mexico has an extensive tourism industry, highly adept at promoting the country’s natural and folkloric assets to national and international markets. Since the 1970s, the Mexican government has sponsored major campaigns aimed at both Mexican and international tourists, in which Day of the Dead has been heavily promoted as representing “authentic” Mexico (Brandes 1988; 1998; Garcia-Canclini 1997). Brandes notes: “Recognizing that traditional fiestas can further its financial and ideological goals, the Mexican government since the early 1970s has systematically promoted the tourist development of particular religious occasions, including most importantly the well-known Day of the Dead” (1988: 88). Prior to the 1970s, as will be discussed, elaborate activities for Day of the Dead were carried out in certain areas of southern Mexico, but these rituals were not the national phenomena they are today.

Meanwhile, communities in smaller Latin American countries with less developed tourism infrastructure, such as Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, have long carried out their Day of the Dead traditions in relative obscurity. A third factor adding to the holiday's heavy association with Mexico is that people of Mexican descent comprise the largest Latino group in the United States, representing 60% of the US Latino population. Mexican-Americans were the first to celebrate Day of the Dead in the US and, until the recent influx of Central and South American immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, were often unaware themselves that the holiday was observed in other parts of Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

So, while most scholarly and popular publications refer to Day of the Dead as a Mexican holiday, Latin Americans from other countries consider the holiday their own. Bolivians with whom I have spoken refer to the holiday as "Boliviano." My friends in Ecuador call the Day "muy nuestro" (very much ours), and Guatemalan anthropologist Celso Lara, who has spent more than forty years documenting the native traditions of Guatemala, calls the holiday "one of the most Guatemalan of all holidays."<sup>13</sup> In reviewing articles and letters to the editor from newspapers from Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Honduras, Argentina, Guatemala, and Panama, it is clear that intellectuals, members of the clergy and residents-at-large of these countries consider Day of the Dead to be a particularly authentic part of their national culture, which they often

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<sup>12</sup> Based on conversations I have had with dozens of Mexican American residents, including college professors, librarians and directors of social service agencies. Morrison (1992) also notes this in her research.

<sup>13</sup> Discussion with Professor Celso Lara, Director of the Center for Folkloric Studies, University of San Carlos, Guatemala City, July 19, 2001; and in Lara (2002).

contrast with the “invasive” and “foreign” character of Halloween.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while Mexico has become internationally renowned for Day of the Dead over the twentieth century, the celebration is not unique to this country. This point is important to keep in mind when discussing festivities in the United States, as some observers conclude that Central and South American immigrants have “adopted” the “Mexican” holiday. As I illustrate, they are instead reencountering and re-creating in the US practices with which they are already familiar.

#### Catholic and indigenous observances

Throughout Latin America (as well as in other countries with large Roman Catholic populations, such as Spain, Italy, Poland, the Philippines and Haiti), the “Days of the Dead” (referring to the period of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day) are observed, respectively, on November 1 and 2. While All Saints’ Day is technically referred to in Spanish as “El Dia de Todos los Santos,” and All Souls’ Day is called “El Dia de las Animas,” the two days are considered as one holiday throughout Latin America and are widely known as “El Dia de los Difuntos” (“The Day of the Deceased”). In Mexico, for specific historical reasons that will be discussed later, the more playful and somewhat less reverent term, “El Dia de los Muertos,” (Day of the “Dead”) is in popular usage.<sup>15</sup> This is the sole expression (in both English and

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<sup>14</sup> Based on my review of some 30 articles and editorials published in Latin American newspapers over the past 10 years.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout Latin America, the holiday is described by a variety of names, including *Todos Santos* or *Fiesta de Todos los Santos* (All Saints’ Day); *El Dia de los Difuntos* (Day of the Departed); *El Dia de los Fieles Difuntos*, (Day of the Faithful Departed), *Fiesta de los Finados* (Feast/Holiday for the Deceased), and *El Dia de las Animas Benditas* (Day of the Blessed Souls). This is also the case within Mexico, where the expression “El Dia de los Muertos” is common in urban areas, and “Todos Santos” or “El Dia

Spanish) used to refer to US observances of the holiday born out of the Chicano Movement in the 1970s, based on popular Mexican traditions. In this dissertation, I will use the term “Day(s) of the Dead” to refer to celebrations revolving around All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day in both Latin America and the United States.

Key practices of the holiday include sprucing up family gravesites by weeding, cleaning and repainting them, and/or refurbishing headstones and crosses; constructing altars to honor departed relatives; preparing special foods and/or drink for the ancestral spirits traditionally believed to visit the living on these dates; and attending Catholic church services. These customs are celebrated in diverse ways from country to country and from region to region *within* countries. In some areas, the holiday is celebrated in ways that reflect standard Roman Catholic observances of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day. In other areas, official Catholic rituals are mixed with folk Catholic practices. And in areas with large indigenous populations, such as the southern states of Mexico and the countries of Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and regions of Columbia, the holiday is celebrated through a combination of official Roman Catholic All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day practices, unofficial Catholic folk customs, and pre-Christian indigenous rituals of honoring the dead.

Syncretic religious beliefs and practices are found among indigenous communities throughout the Americas, where people commonly pray to Jesus, Mary, and the saints as well as seek help from native *curanderos/as* (shamans) who engage in centuries-old rituals of communicating with the world beyond. In the worldview of the

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de los Difuntos” are the preferred terms among rural and indigenous people in Oaxaca and elsewhere. In Central and South America, the more blunt expression, “El Dia de los Muertos,” is considered disrespectful and is not commonly used.



Aztecs, Maya, Mixtecs, and other aboriginal populations of Latin America, maintaining harmony between the worlds of the living and the dead was a crucial belief before the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, and various festivals in honor of the dead were conducted throughout the calendar year.<sup>16</sup> Because indigenous beliefs were so deeply rooted in the native populations, early Catholic missionaries found it impossible to eliminate the “pagan” activities, which shared certain similarities to folk Catholic practices carried out by rural people in Europe.<sup>17</sup> To facilitate conversion to Christianity, indigenous rituals of communicating with the dead (such as the preparation of elaborate offerings of food, flowers, incense and ornaments (*ofrendas*), ceremonial drinking, ritual dancing and the use of native incense), were consolidated and moved to the Roman Catholic liturgical dates of November 1 and 2.

An important distinction between European All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day and indigenous Latin American celebrations lies in the celebrants’ perceived relationships between the living and the dead. In the European version of the holiday, the tenets of official Catholicism are more strictly observed. The souls of children and other sexual innocents are believed to ascend directly to heaven, while those of adults are thought to suffer in purgatory, occupying a lower hierarchical position than the spirits in heaven. The role of the living, in this scenario, is to pray to the saints for

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<sup>16</sup> In contrast to highly individualistic contemporary US attitudes of identity, the worldview among Latin American indigenous communities is extremely communally oriented, where the maintenance of extensive networks of social relations is considered crucial for physical and psychological survival. It is believed that the spirits of the dead and the deities/saints are always present among the living and must be properly tended to on a daily basis, *especially* during the Days of the Dead, in order to ensure the well-being of oneself and one’s family.

<sup>17</sup> Across the global Catholic diaspora, Catholic folk practices include shrine and altar making; leaving offerings of food, candles, and various mementos for the deceased; the adornment of gravesites; vigils for the dead; and other rituals not officially promoted by the Church. Catholic folk activities (such as costuming, processions, ceremonial dance, and mumming) have always been more playful and joyous than the somber rituals of official Catholicism.

intercession on behalf of deceased family members in order to hasten their journey from purgatory to heaven. Among indigenous peoples of Latin America, however, the hierarchical structure between purgatory and heaven is not emphasized (Childs & Altman 1982:16; and personal observation). Most people assume that their loved ones are already in heaven and free from the tribulations of life. Instead of asking saints to intercede on behalf of their relatives in purgatory, Day of the Dead celebrants in Latin America often ask dead relatives to help them with their worldly affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Another distinction revolves around the meanings associated with the dates. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, November 1 is the date when Catholics should pray to the saints, while November 2 is dedicated to praying for the souls in purgatory. However, indigenous peoples have infused these dates with additional significance, based on the pre-Columbian belief that the souls of children and adults visit the earth on separate dates. Throughout Mesoamerica and elsewhere, the period of the evening of October 31 to November 1 is popularly designated as the time when the souls of children are believed to visit the earth, and the evening of November 1 through late on November 2, the time when the souls of adults arrive (Rogers 2002:144; Carmichael & Sayer 1991: 20; Bade 1997:13).<sup>19</sup>

A final important distinction between standard Roman Catholic All Saints' and All Souls' Day observances and indigenous Day of the Dead celebrations concerns the formulation of death. In contrast to finite and frighteningly apocalyptic European formulations of death (reflecting medieval anguish about the end of the world and

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<sup>18</sup> As depicted in the 1990 documentary film, *La Ofrenda: Days of the Dead*, by Lourdes Portillo and Susana Muñoz

<sup>19</sup> The precise dates vary slightly from place to place, but the belief that the souls of children and adults arrive on separate dates exists throughout Mexico, Central America, and the Andean region.

portrayed by such images as worm-eaten corpses, the eerie figure of Death clutching a sickle and poised to truncate human life, and notions of hell as a place of excruciating torment), pre-Hispanic cultures viewed death as simply another phase in the journey of life and saw the afterworld as a desirable province offering peace from the suffering endured on earth (Reuter 1979:73-74). It is this distinct attitude towards death that has endured and continues to characterize indigenous Day of the Dead celebrations. Unlike official Catholic observances filled with thoughts of punishment, suffering and mournful supplications to free souls from their purgatorial incarceration, the celebration in Mesoamerica and indigenous regions of South America reflects feelings of joyous reunion between heavenly and terrestrial relatives. As one Guatemalan explained to me, “Day of the Dead here is similar to Thanksgiving in the US, because people travel across the country to be reunited with family members, living and dead.”<sup>20</sup> The family reunion aspect of Day of the Dead has been noted by Carmichael & Sayer (1991), Garcíagodoy (1998), Greenleigh & Beimler (1991), Bade (1997), Rogers (2002) and others.

There is scholarly and popular debate about whether Day of the Dead rituals are predominantly indigenous or European in origin. As scholar of Religion Colleen McDannell notes, “Shrine building has a long tradition in Catholic culture and scholars have discovered domestic shrines throughout the world” (1995:35). Throughout Catholic and non-Catholic cultures, placing special foods (particularly sweets and breads) on tombs and erecting altars for dead ancestors have been practiced for centuries in places as disparate as Spain (Carmichael & Sayer 1991), Japan (Ivy 1995),

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<sup>20</sup> Discussion I had on November 5, 1999, with resident of Morales, Izabál, Guatemala.

Russia (Propp 1987:236), Ireland (Santino 1994; 1998), Egypt (Richards 2005) and North America (Brandes 1997:285-286).

In Mexico and the rest of Latin America, pre-Columbian peoples honored their dead through elaborate *ofrendas* often accompanied by dance and/or prayers). Yet, certain similar practices existed in Europe, complicating attempts to prove the precise origins of today's Day of the Dead customs. Cross pollination between cultural practices of Europe, Africa, Asia, North America and South America has occurred for centuries, affecting both European and Latin American rituals. One relevant example of this phenomenon is seen in the tradition of the edible sugar skulls made in Mexico for Day of the Dead (now synonymous with Mexican national identity). While the pre-Columbian peoples of Mexico had traditions of making flatbreads and sweets with amaranth seeds as special offerings for the deceased, the custom of making sugar-based sweets for Day of the Dead was introduced to Mexico by the Spanish (Brandes 1997: 293). According to Carmichael and Sayer, the practice actually dates back to twelfth century Italy, where sugar skeletal treats were "affectionate presents for the Day of the Dead which were offered to family and friends" (1991:46). These sweets are still made today in Italy on November 1 and 2.<sup>21</sup>

Altars seen today in such diverse cultural settings as Asian restaurants, African-American Kwanzaa celebrations, Japanese Obone, Jewish Succoth, and Catholic churches contain flowers, incense, bread, beverages, produce or other symbols of life and regeneration indicating earthly communication with gods and spirits. Common

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<sup>21</sup> In Italy, sugar treats known as "ossi di morti" ("bones of the dead") and special cookies called "fava dei morti" ("beans for the dead") are still made in Trieste, Naples, Palermo, and Sicily during November 1 and 2. In November 2002, friends from Trieste sent me bags of them in the mail.

elements placed on altars in Mexico, Central and South America include salt, incense, a glass of water (said to quench the thirst of the traveling souls), fruits, grains, legumes, gourds, and tuber vegetables. Photos of departed loved ones and/or pictures of Catholic saints, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary are often placed in the center of Day of the Dead altars heaped with offerings and frequently surrounded by crucifixes, angels, rosary beads, devotional candles and other Catholic iconography.

Customs similar to Latin American Day of the Dead rituals existed in pre-Christian Europe, most notably during the Celtic harvest celebration of Samhain (celebrated on November 1), when household doors were left unlocked, fires kept burning in the hearth all night and gifts of food and drink arranged for the spirits of the dead believed to visit the living at this time of year (Santino 1994: vv-xvi). Because this was the first day of the Celtic new year and the first day of winter, it was thought to be a transitional time when the gates that separated the worlds of the living and the dead were open. Santino notes that many of the beliefs and customs associated with Samhain continued after Ireland was converted to Christianity. As recently as the mid twentieth century in rural Ireland, for example, arrangements of bread and produce were prepared in homes, “a bowl of water placed on the table,” and the doors left unlatched “to let in the souls” on the evening of November 1 (1998: 90).

In the folk cultures of both Europe and Latin America, there exists an association between death and life/love/sexuality. Santino discusses the connection between life-reinforcing events such as courtship and marriage with the seasonal activities of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, such as harvesting crops in preparation for the dead of winter (1994: xiii). In Scotland, Ireland, and Wales from the eighteenth

century until the early twentieth century, All Souls' Day was the time of the year for making marital matches or engaging in games of chance and divination rituals meant to reveal the name of one's future spouse (Santino 1994:xii; 1998:117; Rogers 2002:44-48). In Italy, All Souls' Day is the traditional time of year when marriage proposals are made and engagement rings proffered. In Bolivia and Peru, fertility rituals are performed by young people in indigenous villages during the Days of the Dead (Buechler & Buechler 1971: 84; Coluccio 1991: 115). In Arequipa and Cuzco, Peru, courtship rituals are performed in which young men bring cake, made in the shape of babies, to their girlfriends, while in Tomaiquiche, Peru, young men go out at dawn on November 2 to serenade their girlfriends (Milne 1965:163; Coluccio 1991:117). In Guatemala, teenagers typically meet members of the opposite sex in the cemeteries during the nocturnal festivities of Day of the Dead.<sup>22</sup> Throughout regions of Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, Day of the Dead bread is made in the shape of babies. The cyclical association of mating (new life) and death is also seen in Mexico, where one of the most common *calavera* motifs is a skeletal bride and groom complete with white wedding dress and tuxedo, respectively. In addition to the exchange of sugar skulls among friends and family members during Day of the Dead season, sweethearts offer each other personalized sugar skulls as signs of their affection.

Efforts by Mexican and Chicano scholars, poets, filmmakers, activists and others to forge a singularly Mexican identity - distinct from that of Mexico's European

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<sup>22</sup> For young women in traditional Mayan villages, this occasion is one of the few times of the year when they are allowed to walk around at night while parents are busy talking with neighbors and tending family graves. There are jokes, based on reality, about young people losing their virginity in the cemeteries during the Days of the Dead. According to Santino (1994:120), similar courtship behaviors occurred during US Memorial Day/Decoration Day celebrations in the mid-twentieth century.

colonizers or the imposing cultural behemoth of the United States - by emphasizing a univalent link between the contemporary celebration and pre-Columbian rituals, have ignored the many similarities between Day of the Dead practices and early modern European celebrations of All Souls' Day (Childs & Altman 1982; Brandes 1998; Lara 2002). For example, while skeletal motifs, food offerings and the use of yellow and orange marigolds to adorn graves and altars in Mexico are often described as customs inherited from pre-Columbian times (Portillo & Muñoz 1990; Greenleigh & Beimler 1991; Lok 1991; Bonfil Batalla 1996; Romo 2001:107), Nicholas Rogers notes that similar symbols and practices were carried out in Spain and other parts of Europe:

Yellow flowers of mourning were common to both sixteenth-century Spain and Mexico. Ossuaries of skulls were part of the medieval rites of the dead, as were the animated skeletons of the *danses macabres* that graphically represented the ubiquity and inevitability of death. In the old Castilian province of Zamora, moreover, *ofrendas* and banquets were a customary aspect of funeral rites. In Barcelona, food stands routinely sold seasonal sweets called *panellets dels morts* on All Saints' Day. A variety of other cakes and sweets also formed part of the festive fare in Catalonia, Sardinia, Portugal, the Azores and...France, just as soul cakes were widely distributed in pre-Reformation Britain (2002: 144).

Carmichael and Sayer also point out similarities between pre-Columbian and European practices:

When the Spaniards conquered the New World, they brought with them not only the official Catholic religion, but also some of the more popular or folk-religious practices of sixteenth-century Spain. The European customs of making food-offerings and feasting with the dead found fertile ground in Mexico, where superficially similar ceremonies were an important aspect of pre-Hispanic religious ritual (1992:15).

Brandes observes that while the indigenous people of Mexico possess complex ideas about death and have always celebrated the dead through the performance of specific rituals, “The possession of elaborate ideas about death as well as the ritualized commemoration of the deceased are human facts, characteristic of all known societies past and present (see Metcalf & Huntington 1991). The celebration of death itself cannot be presented reasonably as evidence for an indigenous origin of Day of the Dead. Nonetheless, Day of the Dead ceremonies are presented throughout Mexico as if they were unambiguously Indian” (1998: 366).

While debates continue about the precise origins of Mexico’s Day of the Dead celebrations, with arguments of “cultural continuity” between ancient and modern iconography and rituals promoted by some and questioned by others, it is apparent that from the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica to their descendent in the United States, a cultural continuity exists in the human need to build and renew community and collectively heal through rituals of honoring the dead.

## **2.2 Day of the Dead as Mexican Popular Culture**

In Mexico, as in much of Latin America, many people visit the cemeteries between October 30 and November 2 to clean, refurbish and decorate family gravesites. In rural villages, nocturnal cemetery vigils are sometimes held to await/accompany the souls of family and friends traditionally believed to descend to earth at this time of the year, and home altars are constructed in honor of the departed. The most elaborate Day of the Dead altars are built in the heavily indigenous regions of Oaxaca, Michoacán,



Puebla, Vera Cruz, and Yucatan, where *ofrendas* may include marigolds,<sup>23</sup> bananas, oranges, apples, *pan de muerto* (bread for the dead), salt, grains, coffee, soft drinks, alcoholic drinks, favorite foods of the deceased, personal mementos, and candles. For many families in these areas, honoring the dead is the most important moral obligation of the living. Reaffirming connections with the ancestors not only ritually maintains social relationships between family and community members but also ensures the support of the dead in the economic, political, and social lives of the living. For indigenous people, Day of the Dead preparations can represent the largest financial expenditure of the year, and celebrants save for many months and even go into debt, if necessary, to meet their obligations to the dead.<sup>24</sup>

While in most of Latin America, including many parts of Mexico, Day of the Dead activities would be classified as “folk” rituals (earnestly observed as a taken-for-granted part of the religious worldview of participants), Mexico stands out from the rest of the region for its vigorous popular culture manifestations of the holiday. Garcíagodoy refers to this phenomenon as the difference between “earnest” and “carnavalesque” celebrations, noting that the latter does not necessarily preclude a level of earnestness or gravity. She writes:

[W]here folk culture dominates, *Días de Muertos* consists virtually entirely of the earnest and oldest elements of the *fiesta*; preparation of elaborate *ofrendas* containing key elements, visits with the dead, and sharing of the *ofrendas*. Where popular culture dominates, some people keep one of more of the earnest aspects of the commemoration, and

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<sup>23</sup> Known in Mexico by the Nahuatl name “*cempasuchil*,” and in Central America as “*flor de muerto*” or “*flor de sempa*,” this flower has been used in Mesoamerica since pre-Columbian times to honor the dead.

<sup>24</sup> For detailed discussions of the ritual renewal of family and community ties during Day of the Dead, see Buechler 1980; Nutini 1988; Bade 1997.

others do not. In the second circle, a number ignore the fiesta altogether, especially if their parents or grandparents did not celebrate it; some prefer a Mexicanized version of US Halloween; some enjoy one of more kinds of the myriad *calaveras* – literary or sculptural, edible and enjoyable as art, folk art, popular art, and humorous artifacts (1998: 79-81).

### Calaveras

The country's popular manifestation of the holiday is recognized internationally by colorful and humorous skeleton and skull imagery made of sugar, chocolate, wood, papier-mâché, clay, plastic, metal, and other materials. These *calaveras* ("skulls") can take the form of miniature skeleton-shaped figurines, marionettes, gigantic puppets, edible treats, toys, masks, paintings, statues, posters, mobiles, candle holders and more. Their humorous expressions and positions often mimic the living and mock everyday behaviors. They are said to be a reminder of the brevity of life, the inevitability of death, and the indiscriminate arrival of death to all.

Another type of *calavera* popular in Mexico is a style of humorous poetry. Emerging in urban Mexico in the mid nineteenth century as a carry-over from nineteenth-century Spanish lampoons or *pasquines* (Tinker 1961:20; Carmichael & Sayer 1991: 58), these satirical stanzas are written and published, often anonymously, during the Days of the Dead. The poems may touch on any theme, and often take the form of joking "obituaries" for corrupt political leaders and other public figures associated with injustice. The custom of writing satirical verses during the Days of the Dead is also practiced in Guatemala and El Salvador. Known as *bombas*,<sup>25</sup> these anonymous poems have provided fleeting opportunities to condemn institutionalized

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<sup>25</sup> Personal observation and discussion with university students in Guatemala City and San Salvador.

violence and extreme disparities in wealth within contexts of severe political and military repression. However, the practice is much more widely institutionalized in Mexico where, since at least the 1970s, it has become part of official school curricula from the earliest grades, with local and national competitions held for the pithiest epigrams. A literary form of social satire, *calavera* poetry originated as a practice of the well-educated in Mexico City and, to this day, is most commonly practiced in urban areas where literacy rates are highest. Similarly, it is mainly limited to university students in Guatemala and El Salvador.

A latter twentieth-century rendition of *calaveras* to emerge in Mexico is seen in the miniature skeletal figurines known as *calaveritas*. About two inches in height, these mini-skeletons humorously reenact scenes from daily life, including weddings, funerals, sporting events, workplace scenarios, and drunken barroom brawls. Sometimes accompanied by written captions, a significant number of *calaveritas* express political commentary on issues of socio-political concern. In tourist shops in Mexico City, Mérida, Cuernavaca, Acapulco, and Tijuana, I have seen these figurines dressed as police officers, extorting “*mordidas*” (bribes) from skeletal motorists, and as skeletal women fending off skeletal sexual harassers. Masuoka (1990) and Garcíagodoy (1998) document how these miniature figures, crafted by working class artisans, frequently spoof the wealthy and portray cynicism towards the government, expressing the average working person’s awareness of and resistance to class exploitation. Popular among Mexican students, urbanites, and international tourists,<sup>26</sup> *calaveritas* are a three-

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<sup>26</sup> They are now commonly sold in US shops specializing in Latin American folk art and have become trendy collectors items (discussed in Chapter 5). For a detailed discussion of the history and meaning of *calaveritas*, see Masuoka (1990) and Garcíagodoy (1998).

dimensional manifestation of the playful and satirical tradition of written and spoken *calavera* poetry.

The prominence in Mexican popular culture of humorous Day of the Dead skeletal imagery, found nowhere else in Latin America, is regarded by many Mexican intellectuals and artists as representing a uniquely Mexican perspective on death, usually alleged to be inherited from the Aztecs. However, anthropologist Stanley Brandes notes that such claims fail to provide substantiated evidence of connections between ancient and modern Mexican skull iconography (1998: 185-187). Acknowledging that “Mexicans, in their popular arts, display an undeniable fascination with skulls, skeletons and other representations of death,” Brandes offers evidence that this fascination is more a colonial and post colonial construct than an inheritance from ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. Human skulls and bones are nearly universal iconographic representations of death, he notes, and their mere existence in certain ancient Mesoamerican cultures does not constitute proof of a connection to contemporary Day of the Dead imagery.

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica was not a single, undifferentiated entity, but a diverse region of distinct and complex cultures with representations of death that varied markedly from one culture to another; skull iconography only one of the *many* representations utilized (Brandes 1998). For example, while Mayan cultures used images of human skulls and bones to represent death, they also employed the unique iconography of coils of long black hair tied into the shapes of bows, images of decomposing corpses, and dead people shown with open mouths and closed eyes – none of which are present in popular Mexican art associated with Day of the Dead (Brandes

1998:190). For the people who flourished in the Central Mexico area of Teotihuacán, skulls and skeletons as a design motif were relatively rare (Berrin 1998; Winning 1987, cited in Brandes 1998). Instead, Teotihuacán artists represented death with perforated disks or rings above the eyes or the forehead (Winning: 1987: 58, cited in Brandes 1998). The ancient cultures that existed in the present states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit showed similarly rare skeletal representations (Fuente 1974, cited in Brandes 1998). The Toltec culture at Tula exhibited prominent skull imagery, but the artistic design and function of the imagery was vastly different from Day of the Dead imagery. Aztec iconography included representations of skulls but did not depict full-length skeletons. Throughout ancient Mesoamerica, the skull imagery had a stylized rigidity and seriousness that differs greatly from the art associated with the Day of the Dead. Brandes concludes: “These archaeological remains display nothing of the playfulness and humor so essential to contemporary Mexican skull and skeletal representations...Contextually, the use of skulls among the Aztecs could not be further removed from that among Mexicans in today’s Day of the Dead celebrations” (1997: 193-194).

While it is impossible to discount the impact of pre-Columbian iconography on colonial or post-colonial Mexican art, historical evidence strongly supports an ancestral connection between contemporary *calavera* imagery and the political caricatures of nineteenth-century Europe. Popular in Spain, France, Germany, Holland and England, these caricatures, in turn, harked back to traditions of medieval European art rife with skeletal imagery (Childs & Altman 1982; Carmichael & Sayer 1991; Brandes 1998; Garciagodoy 1998). It makes sense that, of all Latin American countries, Mexico alone

would have developed the humorous *calavera* tradition, given that for hundreds of years it was the political and cultural capital of New Spain and, therefore, more heavily influenced by European culture than the rest of Latin America. Skulls and skeletons were important features of European iconography during Colonial times, as illustrated in the Dance of Death motifs. Popular across Europe from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Dance of Death images were highly animated skeletal figures exemplifying a range of human emotions such as gaiety, antagonism, lust, impudence, and sneakiness. Like today's Mexican *calavera* figurines, these macabre depictions were a humorous form of social critique, with skeletons depicted among the living and usually engaged in human activities. They conveyed a message to the public about death's inevitability and equality before all people – the very messages invoked today as uniquely “Mexican.”

Boase (1972), Ariés (1981) and Kastenbaum (1989) have documented the popularity of the Dance of Death motif across Europe from the early 1400s through the late 1700s, where it appeared in manuscripts, paintings, and gravestones. Reuter suggests that it was probably in the eighteenth century that pictures and models of Death as a comic skeleton were first made in Mexico: “Puppets and masks, figures made of clay, paper, and cardboard, toys and candies (from little sugar skulls to the bread for the dead) began to fill Mexico's popular markets with the image of the skull and the shape of the skeleton (1979: 75). Garcíagodoy observes: “It seems very likely that the spirit of social criticism and the comedy that infused European depictions and dramatizations of the dance of death were taken up and fitted to their new milieu in Mexico” (1998: 134).

A major vehicle for popularizing social and political satire in Mexico was the penny press of the mid nineteenth century (Beezley 1987:98; Brandes 1998:198). One of the earliest examples of skeletal depictions in Mexico's penny press was the short-lived literary magazine *El Calavera*, published in 1847. Providing burlesque and critical commentary on political events, the magazine included drawings of fully clothed, life-like people wearing white skeletal masks. Earlier European publications, such as the French *Voyage pour l' éternité* (published by Jean Grandville in 1830) also showed satirical skeletal figures representing death, and French and other European caricatures were popular in Mexico at this time (Bailey 1979). The earliest documented example of skeletal imagery in Mexico's literary culture is thought to be the etchings accompanying the tragicomic protonovel, *La Portentosa Vida de la Muerte*, published in 1792 by Fray Joaquín Bolaños and illustrated by Francisco Aguera (Bailey: 1980; Garcíagodoy 1998: 134). Both the narrative structure and skeleton imagery of this play were very similar to the types of writing produced in Spain and other areas of Europe at that time.

While several examples of skeletal imagery in Mexican publications preceded them, two engravers, in particular, Manuel Manilla (working from 1882-1890) and José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), hired in the late nineteenth century by publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo to create graphic images for popular texts, took the *calavera* tradition to new heights (Carmichael & Sayer 1991: 58). Posada, whose creative style was influenced by Manilla, is credited with originating the representation of death as a skeleton without the usual scythe; creating skeletal animals (LaFaye 1979:139); and producing cavorting skeletons adorned with human apparel. He created what has

become the most universally depicted of all calaveras - *La Catrina*. A female skeleton foppishly attired in the plumed, wide-brimmed hat fashionable with upper class Mexican women during the regimes of President Porfirio Diaz (1876-1880 and 1884-1911), *La Catrina* satirized the pretensions of the Mexican elite and their imitators who, like Porfirio Diaz, extolled and preferred the culture of Europe over the indigenous foods, dress, and customs of Mexico.<sup>27</sup> Jacques LaFaye notes that the great Spanish painter, Francisco de Goya, had earlier made *catrines* (“dandies” or “fops”) the target of satire in eighteenth century Spain. Whether Posada was familiar with Goya’s work is unclear, although reproductions of Goya’s and other European artists’ work were imported in great numbers into Mexico from the eighteenth century onward (La Faye 1979: 131).<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on Posada’s work, Childs and Altman observe that “Anyone and everything was likely to be the subject of [Posada’s] illustrations,” including political and revolutionary leaders, businessmen, members of the aristocracy, barmaids and others” (1982: 56). In the context of an international artistic movement, Posada and other Mexican engravers were part of “a whole repertoire of nineteenth century urban popular art – catchpenny prints, peep-shows, panoramas, Punch and Judy, melodrama and fairground attractions” that addressed, in various ways, the historical circumstances of their times (Wollen 1989:19, quoted in Brandes: 1998: 204). The proliferation of calaveras produced by Posada “breathed new life into Death” (Reuter 1979:75), and re-

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<sup>27</sup> Today, the original social commentary of *La Catrina* is largely lost on the general public, and her image, endlessly reproduced on promotional posters, flyers, and T-shirts in both Mexico and the United States, has acquired new meaning as the modern personification of Day of the Dead.

<sup>28</sup> LaFaye notes that while Goya’s characteristic expressions appear in the work of Posada, this does not necessarily imply imitation (1979: 131).



popularized the traditional allegory of medieval Spain (LaFaye 1979: 138). His work fused diverse types of skeletal imagery, ranging from Christian allegorical skeletal depictions to the traditional pirate's skull and crossed bones, to skull images reminiscent of Aztec temples. Certain calavera scenes by Posada contain piles of skulls evocative of the *tzompantli*, or wall made of human skulls sacrificed at the ancient temple of Tenochtitlan. LaFaye notes that if Posada's *calaveras* are a reflection of the Hispano-Christian tradition, they also "mark the emergence of the Aztec past into modern Mexican art" (1980:138).

Towards the end of his life and after his death, the popularity of Posada's *calaveras* waned, but a rediscovery and reclaiming of his work occurred in the post-Revolution 1920s (Brandes 1998: 202-203; Carmichael & Sayer 1991: 126), when Mexican intellectuals and artists sought to create an image of national distinctiveness separate from the historically dominant cultures of Spain and the United States. This period was the time of the "Mexican Renaissance," when a greatly increased interest in Mexico's popular arts emerged among the country's elite. Seeing both populist and artistic appeal in Posada's work, modernist painters and muralists working in Mexico, including Dr. Atl, French muralist Jean Charlot, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfro Sisqueros "took up Posada's cause, often in hyperbolic terms," notes Wollen, "and acknowledged their debt, direct or indirect, to the humble popular print-maker. The legend was born" (1989:14). Wollen continues:

This particular role assigned to Posada was important both in relation to Mexicanism and in relation to Modernism. It gave credibility to claims to be part of an authentically Mexican artistic tradition...and, at the same time guaranteed the modernity of the tradition by aligning it with the

revival of popular imagery among the European avant-garde. It was a way of solving the classic dilemma of evolutionary nationalism – how to be popular, authentic, traditional *and* modernizing all at the same time (1989:16).

Together with this newfound veneration for Mexico's popular arts came a new interest in the country's indigenous life and customs. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and other artists were invited by the Mexican Education Minister, José Vasconcellos (credited as the "father" of the muralist movement in Mexico) to tour the newly discovered ruins of ancient Mesoamerica for inspiration. Carmichael and Sayer note: "the artistic, literary and scholarly communities all turned to the exploration of Mexico's ancient history and the indigenous populations of the country. For the first time since the early Colonial period, the culture and lifestyle of the Indian peoples took center stage" (1991: 60). Brandes argues that Posada's distinctive imagery satisfied Mexico's need for "a 'cultural nationalism' that started with the Mexican Revolution and persists to this day" (1998: 205). From the 1930s onward, national and international scholars, particularly in the fields of anthropology and archaeology, began to provide ethnographic accounts and interpretations of Day of the Dead, usually reinforcing, overtly or subtly, the claims of Mexican artists, intellectuals and, later, government campaigns, that the celebration was a unique Mexican phenomenon emanating from the Aztecs. This both created and reinforced the stereotype of the "death obsessed" Mexican.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> According to the widely read Mexican writer and Nobel laureate, Octavio Paz, whose essay on Day of the Dead in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is quoted habitually in writings and films on the tradition, Mexicans have had an essential, obsessive relationship with death since time immemorial. Paz claims that the Mexican "caresses" death. It is "his most steadfast love." "Death enters into everything we

Of contemporary Day of the Dead iconography, Brandes concludes: “No special Mexican view of death, no uniquely morbid Mexican national character, has yielded this mortuary art. Rather, specific demographic and political circumstances originally gave rise to it, and commercial interests have allowed it to flourish in the twentieth century” (1997:214). Certain ideological work is accomplished by making claims of direct lineage from pre-Columbian iconography and rituals to contemporary Day of the Dead practices in the US and Mexico. On one hand, identifying with Mexico’s ancient indigenous cultures has helped create a sense of national unity and pride (to be discussed in Chapter Three). On the other, such claims romanticize history, decontextualizing the tradition from a chronology of colonization, imposed loss, and alienation from indigenous languages and practices experienced by generations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Although the indigenous origins are most heavily stressed, contemporary Day of the Dead traditions are hybrid fusions comprised of varying mixtures of indigenous, European, Chicano and Mexican popular cultural practices.

#### Mexican tourism/national identity

Despite the recognition that Day of the Dead rituals received from artists and intellectuals, folk observances of the holiday waned during the early and middle twentieth century, as Mexico continued to modernize and rural people moved to metropolitan areas. By mid century, rural people who stayed in their villages and continued to observe Day of the Dead with elaborate altars and cemetery rituals were

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[Mexicans] undertake.” “Our relations with death are intimate – more intimate, perhaps, than those of any other people,” and so forth (Paz 1985: pp. 47-64).

mocked by more “educated” Mexicans for their “superstitious” beliefs. Hugo Nutini’s study of Day of the Dead in rural Tlaxclaca, Mexico, done in the mid 1980s, laments what he considered to be the atrophy and impending demise of Day of the Dead traditions (1988). Brandes similarly noted that these traditions in Tzintzuntzan and other areas of Mexico were on the wane (1988). In the late 1990s, Garcíagodoy notes the loss of “earnest” aspects of the celebration among rural people who migrated to cities: “typically, within two generations of immigration to the city, rural immigrants lose the tradition” (1998: 87). Describing the shame that those who made altars in their homes were made to feel by mainstream Mexican society, a nursery school teacher from Puebla, interviewed by Carmichael and Sayer in 1989, explains:

Today the Festival of the Dead has official support. Forty years ago it was strongly discouraged. In the 1950s, when I was a child in school, we were ridiculed for believing in *ofrendas*. If we admitted having one at home, we were laughed at for our incredulity. Those who honored Day of the Dead, it was said, were the victims of superstition and hallucination. My teacher asked me to explain this to my parents: “Tell them this is nonsense; tell them they are making a foolish mistake,” she said...By 1972, when I started teaching, the position had changed...the authorities revised their views and decided to support our traditions...Now the Government wants to shore up our sense of pride and national identity. Mexico’s future lies with its children: when official policy was reversed, La Secretaría de Educación Pública [The Ministry of Education] asked schools and nursery schools to promote Mexican culture; teachers, who had mocked our traditions, were told to endorse them. (Carmichael & Sayer 1991: 118).

This passage depicts both the lack of public appreciation for Day of the Dead in Mexico in the 1950s and the increased national interest in the holiday twenty years later, when the Mexican government began to officially promote it. Nestor Garcia

Canclini has argued that the Mexican government's latter twentieth century embrace of indigenous practices and products was aimed at fostering a united identity among an ethnically, racially, and economically heterogeneous national population, in order to achieve elite political goals (1995). In a similar vein, Brandes argues that governmental intervention created the present-day national zeal for Day of the Dead in Mexico, beginning in the 1970s when the Ministry of Tourism began to advertise the celebration as part of a concerted push to promote tourism and economic development in the country (1988). As will be discussed, the previously denigrated traditions of Mexico's indigenous peoples were suddenly seen in a new light, as the living embodiment of a distinctive and authentic "Mexican" identity and culture.

Based on his extensive fieldwork in the village of Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, now a famous tourist destinations in Mexico for Day of the Dead celebrations, Brandes notes that prior to 1971, the town "celebrated the Day of the Dead exactly as did countless other rural communities throughout Michoacán and Mexico as a whole, that is, in a relatively muted fashion" (1998: 367). He writes:

Before the 1970s, this fiesta was unimportant in Tzintzuntzan's annual fiesta cycle. Villagers would decorate home altars in simple motifs. Some bereaved community members would spend several hours at gravesites, especially on the first anniversary of the death of a relative. Otherwise, people paid little attention to the occasion; it certainly attracted few if any outside visitors. In 1971, governmental agencies...intervened to stimulate tourism. As a result, not only do more local people participate than before, but also the variety of activities associated with this fiesta has expanded enormously...Tourism has virtually created Tzintzuntzan's Day of the Dead, or at least, embellished the traditional observance beyond recognition (1988: 89).

While only a small proportion of Tzintzuntzan's population participated in the simple observance prior to 1970, notes Brandes, *thousands* of tourists were attending the fiesta by 1980, in which local townspeople participated but government outsiders ran the show. Heavy traffic became endemic, television cameras flooded the cemetery with glaring lights and the town became a "stage" for a "gala performance" of national identity. Brandes observed similar changes in Day of the Dead celebrations in other rural areas of Mexico throughout the 1970s, and Mexican author Carlos Monsiváis commented that in Mixquic and Pátzcuaro, towns that have also become internationally famous for their Day of the Dead celebrations, "Kodak takes possession...Mexico has sold its cult of death and the tourists smile, anthropologically satiated" (1970). Folklorists Kay Turner and Pat Jasper also note that in the 1970s, "the Mexican celebration of Day of the Dead achieved a new status as a tourist attraction, especially in south and central Mexico" (1994: 133).

In Mexico City and other large Mexican cities and towns, Day of the Dead is now an exuberant commercial fiesta, complete with televised parades, concerts, theater productions, dance performances; competitions for the best altar; "discos for the dead" and a variety of other secular activities. Official government buildings, schools, and universities are expected to build altars, and Day of the Dead is a mandatory part of the Mexican educational curriculum. Since the 1970s, Day of the Dead travel tours have been marketed to tourists from North America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and elsewhere, and many of the most "authentic" celebrations in rural Mexico sport more foreigners and television cameras than local people. Brandes documents ways in which local traditions have been drastically altered by the intervention of government tourism

officials, who frequently override the wishes of local residents. In a poignant example of government management, Tzintzuntzan villagers' desire for electricity (rather than fire torches) in the cemetery was overridden by government officials bent on satisfying the romantic and "authentic" expectations of outside visitors (1988).

For a combination of reasons related to Mexican-American cultural pride, Mexican nationalism, and tourism on both sides of the border, Day of the Dead has been increasingly celebrated as a public festival in Mexican and US border towns (organized by schools, community centers, art galleries, local governments, stores, and hotels). Conversations I have had with people on both sides of the border confirm that this development is recent. Middle-aged natives of Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, for example, have told me that they grew up celebrating Halloween and that Day of the Dead began to be publicly observed only in recent years.<sup>30</sup> More than one informant expressed sentiments similar to this 52-year old Tijuana college professor:

Lots of hotels, restaurants and stores noticed that Americans who came here expecting to find Day of the Dead were disappointed when they realized there wasn't anything. So they started organizing activities, making ofrendas and selling calaveras and sugar skulls. You never saw these things in Tijuana when I was growing up. Day of the Dead was not something we did at home or learned about in school. Now children learn about it in school and are encouraged to make altars and write calaveras.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Brandes also notes that Halloween "has long enjoyed a visible presence in the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila and Sonora," and mentions a middle-aged Mexican friend of his from Coahuila who "remembers celebrating Halloween and Halloween alone" as a child (1998:374).

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview, Tijuana, Mexico, October 31, 2001.

An article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* describes the impact of US Day of the Dead art collectors and enthusiasts on Tijuana, noting that vendors in Baja California have begun doing a brisk business with Anglo customers. Where twenty years ago, local stores in Rosarito, Ensenada, and Tijuana did not carry Day of the Dead mementos and art, these commodities are now available year-round. The article quotes an employee from a downtown Tijuana shop who says that “almost everyone who buys Day of the Dead art there is American.”<sup>32</sup>

Aside from commercial motivations for promoting Day of the Dead, it appears that many natives of Tijuana have embraced the holiday in response to concerns of US cultural imperialism. Brandes suggests a correlation between the rising popularity of Day of the Dead in northern Mexico and growing feelings of Mexican nationalism among Mexican intellectuals and others “who resent the growing US influence over the Mexican economy and cultural scene,” including the prevalence of Halloween and increased flows of US products and citizens to Mexico via NAFTA (1998: 378). The following article from *The Los Angeles Times* also relates the rise in Day of the Dead in northern Mexico to concerns of cultural imperialism. Describing an “aggressive” Day of the Dead campaign promoted by Tijuana’s Instituto de la Cultura and city municipal leaders since 1992, the article states:

Tijuana has embraced Halloween for decades, something that might seem inevitable in a region where Mexican children grow up closer to US shopping malls than the wellsprings of Mexican culture. But now, schools and culture officials are fighting back with an aggressive campaign to popularize Mexico’s venerated Day of the Dead...The

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<sup>32</sup> David Gaddis-Smith, “Skeletons out of the closet,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 31, 1999, p. H-13.



campaign is encouraging parents to take the family for a traditional Mexican cemetery picnic in which food is set out to invite deceased spirits to join the living. School children are learning to write the traditional calavera poems...Before long, sugar skulls and special Day of the Dead breads began appearing in Tijuana markets, officials say. People – and strolling troubadours – began to flock to beautiful candlelit graveyards. A funeral home kicked off the first altar contest...now there's a boom. The Day of the Dead movement is part of the emerging identity of a generation of border adults who grew up alongside the United States.<sup>33</sup>

The article notes that “To help remember everything, Tijuana officials have an itemized altar checklist,” and that “No one can recall a time when Day of the Dead was this widely celebrated in Tijuana.” The leader of the campaign, Margarita Barba, is quoted saying that twenty years earlier, “there was no Day of the Dead here. Halloween was universal.”

Illustrating the dialectical relationship between culture and political economy, actions by government and business helped bring greater public consciousness and validation of the tradition to regions throughout Mexico. This dynamic is vividly demonstrated in the case of Tijuana and other border areas that have historically been more connected to US culture and less connected to indigenous traditions than any other part of Mexico. In the context of increasing Mexican resentment of US cultural imperialism, Day of the Dead is embraced, in part, as a cultural response to US hegemony.

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<sup>33</sup> Anne-Marie O'Connor, “Traditions collide at Halloween,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1997, p. A1, Metro.

### **2.3 Day of the Dead in Other Areas of Latin America**

A description of the variety of Day of the Dead practices in Latin America is useful for understanding these celebrations in the United States, yet comparatively little scholarly work exists specifically on Day of the Dead practices outside of Mexico. By reading books written on the general religious and cultural practices of South America, reviewing articles published in Latin American newspapers during the annual period of Day of the Dead, and interviewing people from various Latin American countries, I have compiled accounts of Day of the Dead practices in Central and South America that reveal strong similarities to the pre-1970s observances of Mexico. In order to illuminate reasons why US Latinos of diverse national heritages are able to identify with Day of the Dead celebrations held in the United States, I provide the following discussion of Day of the Dead practices from various Latin American countries.

#### Day of the Dead in Central America

Guatemala provides a good example of how Day of the Dead observances can vary widely within the same relatively small country. The towns of Santiago Sacatepequez and Sumpango, for example, are known nationally (and increasingly internationally) for their Day of the Dead kite flying celebrations, in which Mayan villagers fly ornately-designed kites (many larger in size than a house) in the cemeteries to help traveling spirits find their way back to earth (Lara 2000 and personal observation). Notes are often attached to the kite strings, ascending into heaven as a

kind of telecommunication with the dead.<sup>34</sup> To the delight of hundreds of participants and onlookers, a festival atmosphere prevails in and around the cemeteries, with vendors selling food, flowers, candles, and the hot corn drink, *atol de maiz*. Whether they are elaborate tombs or simple mounds of dirt, graves are lovingly adorned with flowers, candles, and food for the dead.<sup>35</sup> In the village of Todos Santos, a town literally called “All Saints” (indicating the great importance of the holiday for the town’s inhabitants), November 1 and 2 are special festival days, complete with parades, competitive games, and carnival rides. Todos Santos is known for its wild November 1 horse races accompanied by much drinking of an alcoholic fermented corn drink called *chicha* (Milne 1965: 163; Cameron 1999: 705). Villagers prepare special foods for the ancestors and place them by family graves as offerings for the departed. Later the food is shared with family and friends (Milne 1965; and personal conversation with natives of Todos Santos).

In the tropical Atlantic Coast region of Izabál, residents repaint cemetery tombs bright colors, re-carve wooden crosses and grave markers, lay wreaths of flowers (*coronas*) on graves and hold family picnics in the cemeteries.<sup>36</sup> In the town of Salcajá, Day of the Dead is celebrated with nocturnal candlelight vigils. Food and flowers are brought to the cemetery and most of the town turns out to await the visiting souls. Children run from door to door “begging” for candles and singing, “Candelitas para las

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<sup>34</sup> Personal observation, Santiago, Sacatepequez, November 1, 1990-1994.

<sup>35</sup> Personal observation, November 1, 1990 - 1993.

<sup>36</sup> Personal observation.

animas benditas!” (“little candles for the blessed souls!”).<sup>37</sup> Illuminating the cemetery with thousands of candles, neighbors keep watch by family tombs and reminisce with friends about the departed. The atmosphere is happy, as children run about, marimba music is played, and the sweet smells of candles, flowers, and *copal*<sup>38</sup> incense fill the air. A similar nocturnal celebration occurs in the town of Huehuetenango, where people walk from tomb to tomb serenading the dead with their erstwhile favorite tunes.<sup>39</sup> In Guatemala City, small altars are set up in homes, stores, restaurants, bus terminals, and market places. Trips to the cemetery tend to be more cursory than in rural areas, and greater emphasis is placed on the preparation of a special family dinner in which Guatemala’s most famous Day of the Dead food, *El Fiambre* (a cold dish made of varieties of finely chopped sausages, meats, fish, poultry and vegetables) is consumed.<sup>40</sup> Guatemalan anthropologist Celso Lara notes that Garifunas (Central Americans of Afro-Caribe descent) observe the holiday by pouring liquor around graves and sending small rafts carrying fire, water, and flowers to sea (Lara 1996).

In the country of El Salvador, large, colorful waxed paper flowers and paper chains adorn tombs, and *coronas* made of paper or fresh pine needles are placed on gravesites. *Ojuelas*, or sweet, fried tortillas drizzled with honey, are made specifically for this holiday and sold at busy food stands around cemeteries. Family members often leave small mementos by graves and sometimes tape letters to the tombs of loved ones.

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<sup>37</sup> The custom of ritual begging on this day also occurs in Mexico and South American countries and is reminiscent of the All Souls’ Day “souling” practices of England and Ireland that later migrated to the US to become “trick or treating.”

<sup>38</sup> Ceremonial incense made of pine resin, used by indigenous Mesoamericans since pre-Columbian times as an aerial medium for communicating with deities and spirits.

<sup>39</sup> April 7, 2001 discussion I had with lifelong residents of Huehuetenango. This custom also occurs in El Salvador and Mexico.

<sup>40</sup> Personal observation. According to Celso Lara, the original reason that the dish was pickled and served cold was so that it would not spoil when taken to the cemetery.

At a family's request, bands play songs at the tombs of the dead.<sup>41</sup> In Nicaragua, families light candles in the home for each deceased member and prepare *buñuelos* (fried dough pastries) and *nacatamales* (tamales). In rural homes, candles are arranged as an "altar" on the floor.<sup>42</sup>

### Day of the Dead in South America

The work of Hans Buechler, who has conducted extensive research on indigenous customs of the Andean region, reveals many similarities between Mesoamerican and Andean festivals. His description of Bolivian Day of the Dead rituals practiced by the Aymara people is worth citing here because of the remarkable likeness of these rituals to Day of the Dead practices of southern Mexico:

The first of November is a day of food preparation. Any family who "has a warm dead" (i.e. who grieves the recent death of a sibling, parent or child) prepares an 'altar' for the soul (or souls) of the deceased relative (or relatives) in the house where he or she lived. First, they shape an arch out of two sugar canes...over a table...and place two candles on either side; then they heap the table with bananas, oranges, bread, agricultural produce and quinoa or *k'espina* dough figures and sometimes milk, alcohol and coca. The bread and *k'espina* are prepared specially for the occasion (1980:80).

Buechler explains that special bread is baked in the shapes of wreaths, ladders, people, babies and animals. In both its form and use, this bread resembles types of pan de muerto made in Mexico. In the evening, relatives, *comadres* and *compadres* (symbolic

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<sup>41</sup> Personal interviews with Salvadoran immigrants residing in San Francisco, CA, May, 2001, and October 2003; Articles and photos of the practice retrieved from [www.ElSalvador.com](http://www.ElSalvador.com) on November 2, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Personal interview with two natives of Chinandega, Nicaragua, recently relocated to San Diego, CA. June 1, 2001.

relatives connected via godparent relationships), friends, and neighbors drop in to pray in front of the altars and share in eating the specially prepared foods. “If the deceased liked coca during his lifetime or was inclined to drink beer or white rum,” notes Buechler, “the host may offer these items as well” (1980:85).

The praying and eating continue all night, while boys go from house to house singing and collecting bananas and oranges for their songs. On November 2, Buechler observes, “the entire community gathers in the graveyard. Each family rebuilds the ‘altar’ with the food not yet distributed the day before on top of the flat-roofed, hutlike structures that mark the graves. Renewing their prayers for the souls, relatives move from one grave to another...the groups of singing boys perform at every grave” (1980: 85). Praying, singing, and food distribution in the cemetery are followed by ritual fertility dances in the town plaza later in the afternoon (Buechler & Buechler 1971: 84; Coluccio 1991: 115). Felix Coluccio provides a similar account of Day of the Dead practices in Bolivia, observing that on the evening of November 1 families go to the tombs to leave offerings of breads, fruits, and foods enjoyed by the dead. On November 2, having prayed in the cemetery for most of the preceding night, he notes, the relatives of the dead partake in “abundant food and frequent libations, ending the day with merriment and dancing” (1991:115). Likewise, Jean Milne observes that “In the Andean countries it is customary to bring food [to cemeteries] and people feast, dance and make merry in the cemeteries until dawn of the third [November 3]. In some places, food and drinks are sold at special stands set up on the grounds. Andean Indians often pray to their dead for good crops and set up altars of their favorite foods, of which the dead may partake in spirit” (1965:162).

Both Milne and Coluccio offer descriptions of Day of the Dead activities they observed in indigenous communities in Peru, where tombs are adorned with multi-colored paper decorations, flower wreaths, and freshly painted crosses. They note that pots are carried to the cemetery, filled with roasted pig, tamales, breads, and other *almamicuy* (favorite foods of the deceased), presented as offerings for the dead. After a Catholic priest blesses the offerings, the food is later shared among family and friends (Coluccio 1991: 117; Milne 1965: 162-163). On November 2, in the region of Huancavélica, Peru, there are horse races and various types of competitive games, together with more eating, drinking, and partying (Coluccio 1991: 117). Providing a more recent discussion of Day of the Dead practices in Peru, César Abilio Vergara explains that on November 1, in the mountains of southern Peru, *ofrendas* are made for the dead “for whom dishes and drinks that they most liked in life are prepared and for whom vigils are held during the night” (1997: 57). On November 2, families visit the cemetery offering flowers, candles and prayers. Headstones are replaced or repaired, and “there is a festive atmosphere on the walkway leading to the cemetery where food and beverage booths are set up, and the population participates enthusiastically and massively” (1997: 57).

Similar festivities have been documented in areas of Argentina where, according to Coluccio, from the evening of October 31 through November 2 in the Cochino, Rinconada, Santa Catalina and Yavi regions, kitchen tables are converted into altars for *ofrendas* comprised of meals, special breads, fruits, jams, cocoa, and *chicha*. Vigils and prayers for the souls are held during the night and ceremonies are performed between *compadres*. Later, the offerings are taken to the cemetery, where part are buried and the

rest shared among friends and family. In other areas of Argentina, such as Palermo and Cachi, he notes, a game of chance involving the throwing of “ankle bones” (*taba*) is played while vigils are kept alongside the *ofrendas* (Coluccio 1991:113). In the Argentine regions of Tafi and Tafi Viejo, Tecumán, families make *ofrendas* of doll-shaped bread known as *guaguas*, and prepare “the dishes most fancied by the deceased” (Coluccio 1991: 114). They carry large pots of food to family tombs and arrange a portion of victuals for the souls of the deceased: “It is the belief that the souls partake only of the essence of the food, leaving the meal for their kinsmen, who have spent the night praying, chatting and drinking fig brandy, ingesting coca and drinking chicha” (Coluccio 1991:114). In other areas of Argentina, such as Caldimonte, he reports, special foods for the dead are left in a room with a closed door, “so that the souls can enter without being bothered” (Coluccio 1991:114). The author also observes that in areas of Colombia, cloth is draped over tombs during November 1 and 2, converting them into altars for *ofrendas* of candles, flowers and foods “most appreciated by the deceased.” A priest is invited to bless the offerings and after much praying, the foods are consumed by the participants (Coluccio 1991: 118).

In urban and rural Ecuador, a blood-like, blackberry drink called *colada morada* is prepared specifically during the Days of the Dead, along with loaves of *guaguas*, found throughout the Andes.<sup>43</sup> The widespread consumption in the Andean region of anthropomorphic breads made in the shapes of humans or animals during the Days of the Dead (as is the custom in Oaxaca, Mexico) is noted by Brandes (1997: 285) and Rogers (2002: 144). Indigenous Quechuas of Ecuador visit cemeteries to clean and

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<sup>43</sup> Personal interviews with several people from Quito, Ecuador, April 2001.



restore grave markers. Creating altars made of flowers, *guaguas*, and fresh fruits (particularly bananas, oranges, and apples) on top of the graves of loved ones, they pray and hold lively picnics in the cemetery.<sup>44</sup> In Quito and other urban areas of Ecuador, it is common for both Indigenous and mestizo people to visit cemeteries on November 1 and November 2 to clean, refurbish, and decorate family graves with flowers, candles, *guaguas*, and mementos. As one interviewee told me, “The cemeteries are packed on these dates!”<sup>45</sup>

Throughout Latin America, the Day of the Dead practices considered to be most authentic by the inhabitants of each country are those carried out by indigenous communities. Yet, even among non-indigenous peoples of Latin America, folk Catholic rituals of remembering the dead via prayer, lighting candles, cleaning and decorating graves, or preparing/consuming specific foods, are common on November 1 and 2. My intention here has been to illustrate both the presence of this celebration throughout various areas of the continent, and the similarities of key practices across ethnic and geographical locations. In view of these widespread traditions, it is not surprising that Latinos of various ethnicities are able culturally and spiritually to connect with the Chicano-initiated Day of the Dead celebrations held in United States.

US Day of the Dead celebrations have increasingly included participation by these Latino populations, who incorporate a variety of their own national customs into the existing festivities, or create their own celebrations. For example, folklorist Olivia Cadavál documented a Day of the Dead celebration organized by Ecuadorian,

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<sup>44</sup> According to discussions I have had with Ecuadorians and photos sent to me in November 2002, documenting these activities in a cemetery in Otavalo, Ecuador.

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with Sandra Sanchez, lifelong resident of Quito, Ecuador, October 2002.

Nicaraguan, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran immigrants at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC (1985). In Cleveland, Ohio, Day of the Dead activities have been held by Honduran and Bolivian immigrants who feature their traditional foods and dances.<sup>46</sup> In Minneapolis, Minnesota, Chilean immigrants erected Day of the Dead altars in November 2000 to remember those who were disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile.<sup>47</sup> In the same year in San Rafael, California, the Guatemalan community hosted a Day of the Dead kite flying celebration in a local cemetery.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.4 Day of the Dead in the United States

### Mexican-American All Souls' and All Saints' Day Rituals

In the United States since at least the 1890s, Mexican-American families in certain areas of South Texas and the Southwest have faithfully visited local cemeteries on November 1 and 2 to clean and decorate gravesites (West 1989; Gosnell & Gott 1989; Turner & Jasper: 1994).<sup>49</sup> These customs were more muted than Mexican observances of Day of the Dead, with an absence of distinctively indigenous practices (such as elaborate harvest-laden altars, *copal* incense, all-night vigils with boisterous drinking, or the popular skull imagery and *pan de muerto*).<sup>50</sup> As is common in

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Ruiz, Patton, "Day of the Dead Comes to Life," *The Plain Dealer*, November 6, 2000, p. 1B.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Elena Baca, "Days of the Dead," *Star Tribune*, November 4, 2000, p. 5B.

<sup>48</sup> Karen Pierce Gonzalez, [no headline] *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 27, 2000, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> While West and Turner & Jasper refer to these as "Day of the Dead" observances, this term, popularized since the 1970s by Mexican and California celebrations, was not traditionally used by Mexican-Americans, who instead referred to the holiday as All Saints' and All Souls Day (or used the Spanish *Todos Santos* and *Dia de los Difuntos* rather than *Dia de los Muertos*).

<sup>50</sup> When large numbers of indigenous Oaxacans immigrated to California in the 1980s and 1990s, numbering over 60,000 today, they began to construct elaborate Day of the Dead altars in their homes.

Catholic communities around the world, southwestern Day of the Dead customs were private, family-centered rituals, with certain communal activities practiced at the cemetery.<sup>51</sup> They were carried out because of the religious beliefs of participants and emphasized attending Mass and visiting the cemetery to clean and adorn family graves. Although these All Souls'/All Saints' Day rituals sometimes included processions from the local Catholic church to the cemetery, they lacked the carnivalesque revelry of urban Mexican and Chicano Day of the Dead processions and were not performed or displayed for a public audience. The majority of Mexican-Americans did not self-identify with (or know much about) Mexico's indigenous cultures and engaged in popular Catholic, rather than indigenous, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day customs.

Mexican-American activities shared with indigenous rituals a sense of moral obligation to remember the dead, "rooted in a legacy of obligations and practices that retain a continuity of remembrance from generation to generation" (Turner & Jasper 1994:135). Despite certain similarities between Mexican-American and Mexican indigenous practices, folklorists studying these rituals in the American southwest caution against making simple comparisons between the two. For example, Gosnell and Gott note: "[T]he cultural distance of these Mexican Indian celebrations from contemporary Mexican-American life within San Antonio leads us to be cautious when

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This is a relatively recent phenomenon and does not negate the fact that, prior to the 1970s, indigenous style Day of the Dead altars and rituals were not part of the average Mexican-American experience. For more on the construction of indigenous altars in private family settings among Oaxacan immigrants in California, see Bade (1997).

<sup>51</sup> Decorating graves with flowers, candles and mementos on All Souls'/All Saints' Day has been and continues to be done by Catholics in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, France, Haiti, the Philippines, and other parts of the world.

drawing parallels between *Dias de los Muertos* traditions and decorating practices in San Fernando Cemetery” (1989:220).

Attending Mass, having a family meal, or lighting candles for the departed at small home shrines on All Saints’ Day/All Souls’ Day were practices familiar to rural and urban Mexican-American Catholics, and resembled those of other Catholic ethnic groups living in the US. Mexican-American families might bring a picnic lunch to eat at the cemetery when they spent the day cleaning and decorating graves, but Turner and Jasper contend that food and eating were not a central symbol of the holiday, as they are in indigenous celebrations (1994:145). They argue that picnicking in US cemeteries was related to transportation difficulties rather than to indigenous rituals of offering food to the dead. In the days when private transportation was rare, they observe, a trip to the cemetery was an all-day family outing that often required walking for miles or taking several lengthy bus rides, making it necessary to pack food for the day. As cars became increasingly common after the 1960s, the authors observe, the level of picnicking at the graves decreased noticeably. Gosnell and Gott make similar observations, noting that “up until the post war period,” it was common for families to “take food and a little chair and stay [in the cemetery] the whole day” (1989:220). By the late 1980s, many of their elderly respondents from San Antonio lamented the fact that people no longer did these things (1989:220).

Moreover, grave decorating customs were not practiced by all Mexican-Americans but rather, by relatively isolated, lower-income communities. San Antonio’s San Fernando cemetery (where both Gosnell & Gott and Turner & Jasper conducted research in the late 1980s and early 1990s) was located in the low-income Westside

district, “sliced away from the city’s heart” by a freeway. This physical separation from the city’s Anglo neighborhoods, the authors argue, contributed to a distinctly “Mexicano” cultural milieu, while “groups in more flexible economic positions – the professional, technical, and managerial Mexican workers – tended to form enclaves away from the poorest sections or move to other parts of the city. The cultural as well as physical separation of the Westside discouraged or slowed acculturation for those who could not afford to leave the barrios” (Gosnell & Gott 1989: 218-219). Over time, many younger generation Mexican-Americans, like children of other ethnic immigrant groups, chose to assimilate US customs as a way of being “modern” and illustrating their improved economic status, abandoning the grave decorating traditions of their parents and grandparents which they knew were considered rather strange within mainstream US culture.

Texan John Gonzalez, whose father was the superintendent of cemeteries for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio from the 1940s through the 1970s, notes that his father’s job had an unusual perk: “Our home was on the grounds of perhaps the best known Catholic cemetery here, San Fernando Archdiocesan Cemetery No. 2, in the West Side barrio.” From this unique proximity, Gonzalez describes the Mexican-American traditions he grew up observing:

Day of the Dead was an annual observance in my back yard. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and lived in the cemetery until the early 1970s. We never called it Day of the Dead. It was always All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day. What I observed was nothing like nowadays. Today, throughout Texas, not just in cemeteries, there are more Day of the Dead arts and crafts and other influences from Southern and “interior” Mexico. The stylized skulls and skeletons are relatively new icons. At our San Antonio cemeteries, in the timeframe mentioned above, there were no

such artifacts or influences. The observances were simple. They involved bringing flowers (marigolds and mums) to the grave, tidying up around the grave and maybe having a “picnic” where people sat around for hours as other relatives came by...The high point was an All Souls’ Day Mass on the cemetery grounds, usually led by the Archbishop...[M]any Texan families incorporated Halloween traditions in the 50s, 60s and 70s, they continued with grave visits, but the picnics and other long vigils faded, in my opinion, because that was viewed as a Mexican peasant practice.<sup>52</sup>

Researchers at the Southwest Folklore Center at the University of Arizona, working in the early 1980s in the border region of Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico, also noted that Day of the Dead observances along the Arizona/Mexico border region had not traditionally included popular Mexican practices such as *calavera* poetry, elaborate *ofrendas*, or *pan de muerto*. They observed that these things had “recently been introduced to Nogales either by immigrants from further south or by members of Nogales’ intellectual community” (Griffith, et. al. 1985: 12-17). They recount a story of a baker who moved to Nogales, Mexico, from Mexico City and began baking *pan de muerto*: “The first year he displayed his pan de muerto, everyone who came into his bakery wanted to know what it was. This custom was unknown in Nogales. Now, due perhaps to a combination of his efforts and to continuing immigration from further south, he makes and sells pan de muerto in a considerable quantity” (Griffith, et al. 1985: 17).

In contrast to some Mexican-American communities in Texas and the Southwest, most Mexican-Americans living in large urban areas did not spend the day in cemeteries on November 1 and 2. This was due to factors such as the greater

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<sup>52</sup> Personal communication with John Gonzalez, San Antonio Bureau Chief, *The Houston Chronicle*, June 13, 2005.

pressure faced by those living in large cities to assimilate Anglo cultural norms and that many city dwellers were migrants who did not have relatives buried nearby. While many families went to Mass and shared a family dinner to commemorate All Souls/All Saints, Mexico's indigenous-style Day of the Dead observances were virtually unknown to urban Mexican-Americans in the mid twentieth century (Venegas 2000 and personal interviews). For similar reasons, Mexicans living in northern Mexico were equally unacquainted with Mexico's indigenous Day of the Dead traditions. Many of those who settled in Mexico's industrializing border regions did not come from areas where indigenous customs were practiced, and those who did experienced a breakdown in traditional cultural patterns when they migrated north. Early border settlers were typically single males who found themselves surrounded by other migrants from diverse regions of Mexico, making it difficult for them to maintain cultural practices tied to village life. Childs and Altman observe that northern prejudice against "backwards" rural customs, combined with the fact that the migrants' relatives were usually buried in distant home villages, made Day of the Dead celebrations relatively unknown in Mexico's border regions for most of the twentieth century (1982: 60).<sup>53</sup>

### A Chicano Tradition is Born

So while private, family-centered All Souls' and All Saints' Day cemetery practices with some similarities to Latin American Day of the Dead activities occurred

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<sup>53</sup> Eventually, as women joined their male relatives and larger migrant communities from Oaxaca began to form in areas such as Tijuana, home-centered *ofrendas* began to appear. In Colonia Lomas Taurinas, a largely Mixtec colony of 200,000 living in Tijuana, families from Oaxaca have quietly celebrated Day of the Dead in their homes since the 1980s (personal interviews). Aside from indigenous migrants, however, the general population of Tijuana was unfamiliar with indigenous Day of the Dead practices until the 1990s, for reasons that will be explained.

in insular Mexican-American communities of the southwestern United States throughout the twentieth century, ornate grave decoration practices and picnicking in the cemeteries were not widespread among the majority of Mexican-Americans, most of whom had never heard the term “Day of the Dead.” In the early 1970s, however, the celebration in the US became an urban, artistic, and political phenomenon that would eventually be embraced as an imperative tradition of the Mexican-American community.

At a time when the holiday in Mexico was experiencing rejuvenated popularity as a tourist attraction and symbol of national identity (Turner & Jasper 1994: 133; Brandes 1988: 88), Chicano activists in California began to organize public Day of the Dead processions and altar exhibits as a way to celebrate Mexican-American heritage (Morrison 1992; Romo 2000; personal interviews I conducted with Chicano activists and artists in California from 2001-2004). These celebrations had vastly different purposes than Day of the Dead observances in the Southwest or in most of Latin America. They were intentionally performed for a heterogeneous public audience rather than exclusively among family and friends from the same town or neighborhood.

Tere Romo, a Chicana curator who has been deeply involved in Day of the Dead exhibits in California, Chicago, and other parts of the US for more than 30 years, has published an historical account of the genesis of the holiday in California (2000). This publication and Suzanne Shumate Morrison’s ethnographic research on Day of the Dead in San Francisco (1992) comprise the most comprehensive documents available on the early history of Day of the Dead in California. Romo explains that within the political context of the emerging Chicano Movement of the 1970s, Day of the Dead



celebrations in California were “a momentous statement of cultural affirmation” (2000:20), given that Mexican-Americans and other Latinos had long been disdained and degraded by mainstream America.

The Chicano Movement “grew out of the combined efforts to establish farm labor unions by Mexican farm workers in California and Texas; to recognize the plight of dispossessed land grant owners in New Mexico; to acknowledge problems facing the urban working class in Mexican American barrios across the Southwest and Midwest; and to integrate the concerns of the growing youth and student movement” (Romo 2000:43). At the forefront of the Movement were Chicano artists who were responding to decades of political, economic, and social oppression of Mexican-Americans through the medium of *arte contestatario* - art designed to challenge mainstream racist tropes regarding Latinos (Gomez-Peña 1986: 86). Reflecting the demographic composition of California and the Southwest, most Movement activists were of Mexican heritage, although there were also some Latinos of other ethnicities actively involved.

Emerging at a time of widespread social justice activism by marginalized groups both in the United States and throughout the world, the Chicano Movement was influenced by African American civil rights activism, the American Indian Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement. Romo notes: “The Black Power Movement with its emphasis on political autonomy, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural affirmation influenced the Chicano Movement greatly,” while the value Chicanos placed on their indigenous history in the Southwest provided an important link to the American Indian Movement (2001:93). At the same time, Chicano activists identified strongly with anti-colonial nationalist struggles

happening around the world (e.g. Puerto Rico, Cuba, Vietnam and Africa) and proclaimed solidarity with these movements for self-determination. As George Lipsitz notes, the Chicano Movement was “both nationalist *and* internationalist, class conscious *and* culturalist, reformist *and* revolutionary” (2001:72. Italics original), and included a global perspective, supporting such efforts as elderly Filipinos in San Francisco trying to avoid eviction from their affordable housing; striking coal miners in Kentucky; and the boycott of Nestlé’s because of that company’s aggressive promotion of infant formula to nursing mothers in Africa (2001:80).

*Chicanismo* was a radical alternative to the assimilationist paradigm traditionally touted in US ideology (Gutierrez 1995) and “provided a way of rejecting the deracination and self-hatred embedded in the assimilationist model, a way of forging alliances with other aggrieved communities of color, a way of ending antagonisms between old and new immigrant cohorts by describing Chicanos as a people united across borders, and a way of giving a working-class egalitarian accent to collective community politics” (Lipsitz 2001:84-85). Foremost in the model of Chicanismo was the integration of culture, art and politics, not simply for “community-based art making,” but for “art-based community making” (Lipsitz 2001: 84). One of the earliest goals of the Chicano Movement was to create a cohesive and culturally distinct community identity that would express a collective history, creativity and idealism. As Chicanos searched for methods and symbolism, they looked to Mexico’s past for inspiration, just as the muralists and artists of the post-Revolution Mexican Renaissance had done in the 1920s. Romo explains:

Though Chicano art had begun by visually articulating the Chicano Movement's political stance, it also had as a central goal, the formation and unification of a Chicano cultural identity. In visualizing this new identity, artists became part of a cultural reclamation process to reintroduce Mexican art and history, revitalize popular artistic expressions, and support community cultural activities (2000:7).

Since a respect for Mexican culture had not been part of US public school or university curricula when Chicano artists and activists had grown up, many began doing historical research and/or visiting Mexico to gain a better understanding of Mexico's cultural traditions (Morrison 1992:222; Romo: 2000). Referred to today as Neo-Indigenism, (a movement by Chicano activists to reaffirm and celebrate the contributions and achievements of Mesoamerican civilization), the collective return to Mexico's indigenous past became a dominant aspect of Chicano artistic expression from the 1970s onward. A major influence on the development of Chicano iconography was the pageantry and spectacle of Mesoamerican sacred rituals, together with indigenous religious symbols and spiritual beliefs. "Among the more profound expressions of this new iconography was the appearance of Day of the Dead celebrations," notes Latin American Studies Professor Sybil Venegas (2000: 42). Similarly, Romo asserts:

The definition of art was expanded by Chicano and Chicana artists to include all artistic activities that affirmed and celebrated Mexican cultural heritage. The *Dia de los Muertos* observance, including its indigenous philosophy, *ofrendas*, popular art and foods, became a focal point in this reclamation process and helped establish direct ties back to Mexican ancestors, both familial and historical. Artists were - and continue to be - at the core of this transformation (2000: 7).

From their inception, Chicano celebrations were comprised of a hybridization of spiritual, folk, and popular elements of the holiday. Because most Chicano artists had grown up in US environments where Day of the Dead was not observed, their artistic portrayals of the commemoration were largely based on celebrations that they had read about or seen as visitors to Mexico. Influenced by the rituals and images of Mexico's Day of the Dead, these artists reconfigured the celebration to make it relevant to their lives and experiences in California. Some adopted humorous and carnivalesque Day of the Dead imagery prevalent in urban Mexico, transforming José Guadalupe Posada's *calaveras* into local political personalities, urban *pachuco* youth, or skeletal chihuahuas. Others based their work on the indigenous *ofrendas* found in southern Mexico, creating altar installations that overflowed with *papel picado*, religious iconography, and (since organic materials are not permitted in most galleries) synthetic fruits, flowers and foods.

Chicano Day of the Dead rituals became what folklorist Jack Santino calls, "rites of presentation of group unity and identity" (1988: 124). From a family-oriented observance focusing on the ritual preparation of homes and graves in honor of departed relatives, the holiday was transformed into an advertised cultural "event" celebrated in art galleries, community centers, schools, libraries, museums, and parks. The festival period - usually lasting a few days in Latin America – eventually extended to more than two months in the United States, with activities and exhibits typically beginning in late September or early October and continuing until late November or even early December.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Based on personal observation of US events. For example, the annual Day of the Dead exhibit at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego starts in late September and lasts until mid November. Activities at the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego start in mid October and continue through the

Based on a conceptual framework of Latin American Day of the Dead celebrations, Chicano Day of the Dead activities include indigenous Mesoamerican components such as the creation of altars on which visual tributes and offerings to the departed are arranged; the performance of cemetery rituals (where participants decorate graves, hold vigils, pray, sing, or dance in honor of the dead); and participation in candlelight processions (pedestrian cavalcades in which participants carry candles and/or photos of the deceased).<sup>55</sup> Yet these Latin American traditions are integrated with many contemporary US components, such as educational workshops where participants learn to make Day of the Dead sugar skulls, masks, bread for the dead, or paper decorations (such as flowers, wreaths, and *papel picado*), Day of the Dead performance art, multi-media art installations, and poetry events (where participants publicly read poems or tell stories about the departed). “Altar installations” are frequently comprised of mixed media such as sculpture, oil paints, silkscreen, mobiles, collage, computers, televisions, sound systems, video footage, and interactive websites. US celebrations often include public lectures educating people on the tradition of Day of the Dead, or lectures that use the seasonal theme to discuss existential topics related to death or the spirit world. They feature movie screenings ranging from documentaries about Day of the Dead, such as *La Ofrenda: Days of the Dead* (Portillo & Muñoz 1988)

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first week of November. Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles and the Peabody Museum of Harvard University typically begin holding Day of the Dead workshops in mid October and continue their exhibits through the first week of December. This extended time frame is the consequence of museum and gallery exhibit logistics and linkages with school calendars in preparation for their Day of the Dead curricular activities.

<sup>55</sup> These events usually happen on the evening of November 1 or 2, and are often accompanied by music, e.g., the processions occurring in East Los Angeles, San Francisco’s Mission District and the City of Oceanside, California. Depending on the nature of the event (which is often jovial but sometimes somber), participants may wear skeletal costumes and masks or carry props such as banners, signs, cardboard coffins, or giant skeletal puppets.

and *La Muerte Viva, The Day of the Dead: A Living Tradition* (Llamas 1989), to classic Mexican films with themes revolving around Day of the Dead, such as *Macario* (Roberto Gavaldon: 1960) and *Animas Trujano* (Ismael Rodriguez: 1962), to films on Mexican folk art such as *Pedro Linares: Folk Artist* (Bronowski & Grant 1975). In a particularly southern California rendition of Day of the Dead, local artists in San Diego have organized a publicly advertised November 2 car caravan procession to visit altars and “muertos art” exhibited in public spaces and private homes (personal observation 2002-2004).

An innovative component of Chicano celebrations has been the inclusion of Aztec spiritual ceremonies and *danza*, a form of dancing in prayer used for centuries to communicate with the spirit world. Expert *danzante* Macuilxochil Cruz-Chavez, who founded the San Francisco Bay Area group, Danza Xitlalli in 1982, learned *danza* as a teenager in her native Hidalgo, Mexico. She discusses the evolution of *danza* in Northern California Day of the Dead celebrations:

Danza has been around for thousands of years. But not in the form of doing performances for the public. It was done in the homes...When I lived in Mexico, people didn't dance on Day of the Dead. When I came here, people weren't doing it. I connected danza with the way I celebrated Dia de los Muertos in my house, involving food on the altars, like I did in my home. I started to connect the two customs - danza and Dia de los Muertos. Now the groups here think that all danza groups dance for Day of the Dead, and have *always* danced on Day of the Dead. But that's not the case. Others have copied us and now many danza groups dance on Day of the Dead.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Macuilxochil Cruz-Chavez, October 18, 2004.

While not all Chicano Day of the Dead festivities include Aztec ceremonies and *danza*, many do. Since 1988, I have observed numerous examples in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, which have tended to be similar to one another. Dressed in shimmering synthetic re-creations of Aztec attire and elaborately adorned with feathers and shells, ceremonial performers frequently open Day of the Dead celebrations by blowing on a large conch shell, used by the Aztecs as a form of communication. The four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) and the four directions (north, south, east, west) are saluted. This introduction is followed by dancing and/or prayerful singing in twentieth century interpretations of ancient Mesoamerican rituals. Such ceremonies often precede US Day of the Dead processions or initiate the opening of an altar exhibit or Day of the Dead community festival.

Since US commemorations were created to be public performances rather than religious rituals, altars and gallery spaces became key media for communicating messages of Latino cultural affirmation and political consciousness. As Chicano artists reconfigured the celebration, many utilized the holiday's focus on death and remembrance to create installations that would draw public attention to the socio-political causes of death affecting the US Latino community. In the transgressive spirit of Mexico's Day of the Dead poetry and skeletal figurines, these politicized altar installations took advantage of the liminal space of "festival" time (Turner: 1977; Bakhtin: 1984; Falassi: 1987; Beezley: 1987; 1994) to criticize the dominant power structure that benefited from the oppression and exploitation of Latinos and other minorities. As will be discussed in chapter 3, Day of the Dead in the US continues to be

a thriving medium for the public communication of political critiques by both Latinos and non-Latinos.

#### Early US Day of the Dead exhibits

According to both Romo and Morrison, and confirmed by the Chicano artists I interviewed, the first recorded Day of the Dead celebrations in California occurred in 1972, organized separately by artists at Self Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, and La Galería de la Raza, in San Francisco. Artists at Self-Help Graphics, a community-based visual arts center in East Los Angeles, organized a lively Day of the Dead procession in which people dressed as skeletons and walked to a nearby cemetery. Venegas notes that none of the Chicano artists who helped put together this first ceremony were personally familiar with Day of the Dead, and took their cue from the three founders of Self Help Graphics (Mexican artists Antonio Ibañez and Carlos Bueno, and Italian-American nun Sr. Karen Boccasero), who were familiar with the celebration. She writes, “While these artists were initially unfamiliar with *El Dia de los Muertos*, they were undoubtedly attracted to its potential to generate cultural awareness, ethnic pride, and collective self-fulfillment for the East Los Angeles community” (2000:47). Through the influence of Ibañez and Bueno, the Self-Help Graphics artists were introduced to the Mexican folk art aspects of the festival, such as *calavera* imagery and altar making. By 1974, the celebration had attracted the collaboration of a cross section of the larger Chicano art community, and a plethora of silkscreen prints, posters, paintings, multi-media compositions, performances, and other Day of the Dead-inspired art soon emanated from Chicano artists throughout the Los Angeles area.



Comprised of artists, local residents, students and grassroots activists, the Day of the Dead procession at Self Help Graphics became an annual event that sometimes included participation in a Catholic mass. Each year, the procession concluded in the Self Help Graphics gallery, where there would be a Day of the Dead art show and community workshops. During the celebration, the gallery sold Day of the Dead art, mementos, and traditional foods such as *atol de maiz* and *pan de muerto*. In subsequent years, performances by the Chicano political theater troupe, El Teatro Campesino, were presented. Over time, the Day of the Dead procession grew to include music, Aztec *danza*, larger-than-life *calavera* puppets, sculptures, banners, decorated trucks, “low rider” floats, and more. Because Self-Help Graphics worked with local elementary schools to educate students and teachers about Day of the Dead and held on-site craft workshops at the gallery during the month of October, many children attended the annual processions, wearing or holding Day of the Dead art projects that they had made (Venegas 2000: 48). Workshops teaching the public how to make *papel picado*, sugar skulls, plaster skeleton masks, and *ofrendas* would be an important part of Self Help Graphic’s Day of the Dead festivals for the next thirty-five years. Inspired by Self Help Graphics, community centers, schools, libraries, art galleries, museums, stores, and commercial districts throughout the Los Angeles area eventually developed Day of the Dead programming during the months of October and November.

In the same year, the Chicano art gallery La Galería de la Raza, located in the heart of San Francisco’s predominantly Latino Mission District, held the city’s first Day of the Dead altar exhibit. Organized by artists René Yáñez and Ralph Maradiaga, with other artists such as Amalia Mesa-Bains, Carmen Lomas Garza and Yolanda Garfia

Woo, the exhibit and related educational outreach activities (a major objective of the gallery) evolved into a much-awaited annual tradition. In 1981, La Galería organized a small Day of the Dead nocturnal procession with about twenty-five people who walked around the block holding candles. As one woman born in Ecuador and raised in the Mission described the earliest processions: “They were very quiet and spiritual. People prayed and held photos of deceased family members.”<sup>57</sup>

Since then, Mexican *danza* groups, indigenous blessings, candlelight ceremonies, colorful banners and standards, sidewalk *ofrendas*, chalk sidewalk art, giant *calavera* puppets, portable sculptures, Cuban Santería practitioners, and even a Jamaican steel drum band on wheels have become part of the Mission’s now exuberant annual manifestation. Over the years, individuals walking in honor of deceased family members and friends have been joined by contingents walking to draw public attention to various socio-political causes of death, such as US military interventions abroad, gun violence, and AIDS. Today, the Mission procession attracts between 20,000 and 30,000 participants, spanning all ages, races, and ethnicities.

La Galería’s Day of the Dead exhibits have ranged from traditional altars to high-tech video monitors, computer screens and websites, to cross-cultural installations done by students and artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The themes and people honored have always reflected a broad spectrum between the traditional and the contemporary, including installations honoring regional Mexican altar-making traditions, feminist *ofrendas*, commemorations for victims of US-sponsored wars, or

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<sup>57</sup> Conversation with Elisabet Sanchez, San Francisco, California. November 5, 2002.

tributes to Latin American and Latino artists.<sup>58</sup> According to Romo, “the Galería’s greatest and most significant contribution to Dia de los Muertos and Chicano art history” was the new direction in which it took *ofrendas*. Blending traditional ritual aspects with modern materials and design, Rene Yáñez, in particular, is credited with transforming the altar format into an “environmental space.” While committed to supporting the traditional altar as an inspirational source, notes Romo, Yáñez’s aesthetic experimentation pushed altar-making into the realm of contemporary art installation (2000:38). Summarizing the profound impact of La Galería on US Day of the Dead, Romo notes:

Galería’s Day of the Dead exhibitions and wide-ranging activities ultimately generated city-wide recognition and inspired other parallel celebrations, to the point that many non-Latino museums currently dedicate part of their October programming to “Day of the Dead” events in an attempt to outreach to Latino communities. This has led to the mainstreaming of ‘multi-culti’ reinterpretations of Day of the Dead celebrations that have pushed its hybrid nature a step further (2000:21).

While Chicano artists have received great inspiration from Mexican Day of the Dead rituals, many of the foundational artists who gave birth to the California celebrations believe that Chicano renderings of the holiday have influenced artists in Mexican celebrations as well. Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains, who created an altar at the first Day of the Dead exhibit at La Galería (and many subsequent Day of the Dead exhibits in various museums and galleries since), has emphasized the “new genre of *ofrendas*” created in the United States, incorporating elements such as neon, video,

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<sup>58</sup> According to Romo, La Galería’s Day of the Dead exhibits were instrumental in popularizing Frida Kahlo, who was virtually unknown to the US public in the 1970s (2000: 38; 2001: 101).

and performance, and repositioning images and icons in ways not done before in Mexico (Morrison 1992:359). Mexican sculptor Guillermo Pulido, who was born in Guadalajara and moved as an adult to San Francisco's Mission district in the late 1980s, was initially impressed by the "regeneration" and "transformation" taking place with Day of the Dead in the US. He felt that the San Francisco celebration would impact Mexico's, and that there would be a "recycling of influences back and forth" (Morrison 1992:362).

Salvador Acevedo, Director of Communications at the Mexican Museum of San Francisco, moved to San Francisco from Mexico in 1997. He also spoke of his initial surprise on seeing how Day of the Dead was celebrated in California: "Here, because of the Chicano Movement, it's much more political. Everything that is related to Chicanos is political. They use the Day of the Dead celebration as a way of doing politics, and as a way of denouncing what they are against." He noted that politicized and artistic altars have increasingly become popular in Mexico: "Even in Mexico, there are new interpretations of altars, and you see artists doing more experimental things around Day of the Dead. I've seen altars in Mexico City, one that was a minimalist altar with the same motif repeated endlessly. The idea was to touch the infinite, the endlessness of death. I thought that was really interesting."<sup>59</sup> Tere Romo expresses the feelings of many of her peers when she notes that the Galería artists' impact on Day of the Dead provided new models and inspiration for future generations of artists and

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<sup>59</sup> Personal interview with Salvador Acevedo, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2003.

“forever changed the tradition not only in the United States, but in Mexico, as well” (2000:31).<sup>60</sup>

### Beyond California

Because of its “exotic” appeal to most North Americans, early California Day of the Dead events soon attracted media attention from local newspapers and television stations. Yolanda Garfias Woo, who was invited to create a Day of the Dead exhibit at the prestigious De Young Museum in San Francisco in 1975, remembers that all three major TV networks of the day covered the opening of the exhibit. She notes, “It was the first time a major museum was interested in Dia de los Muertos, something so ethnically *outlandish*...we got invited to do a lot of TV programs.”<sup>61</sup> Garfias Woo continues:

I think that La Galería, for example, and everybody at that time, really took to Dia de los Muertos, because that was a time of really looking for cultural identity. Chicanos and Mexicans have always been in this country. People forget and think of us as an immigrant group. When the cultural awareness of the 1960s was really going strong, everyone wanted something that was uniquely theirs. Blacks were trying to learn Swahili and other African languages. For Chicanos, it wasn't enough to have a holiday like *las posadas*, because it was just a variation of a European Christmas holiday. But with Muertos, it was *so far out*. It was a shocking kind of thing to be doing. It literally *shocked* the non-Latino community. And that's exactly the emphasis that Chicanos were looking for. They wanted to make a statement and make it big. And that's what Muertos did for them.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> This “change” refers to the new role of Day of the Dead altars as media for political expression by artist/activists.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

Nancy Chárrega, a Chicana activist in San Francisco explains:

Day of the Dead was definitely a political way of showing Latino pride in the US, in California and in San Francisco, when it wasn't so hip to be Latino. Now, it's sort of like the 'Latino Explosion' and J Lo, but fifteen years ago, when I was in high school here in the Bay Area, it wasn't cool to be Latino. It was very hard actually. So Day of the Dead began as a way to show Latino pride and recover the traditions that we lost as immigrants. Because when we migrate, unfortunately, people try to assimilate to the dominant culture, or the dominant culture doesn't really give you a lot of room to continue practicing your traditions.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Day of the Dead celebrations continued to spread to Sacramento, San Diego, and other areas of California, with similar artistic exhibits and festivities becoming popular among Mexican-American communities in Texas and the Southwest. By the mid-1990s, Chicano-style altars and ceremonies began to appear in schools, galleries and cultural institutes in Texas and the Southwest, as well as in the northern Mexican border regions. A 1995 *New York Times* article observed the adoption of Mexico's indigenous practices and symbols in San Antonio, Texas, noting:

Rituals that were once shunned are now embraced, becoming a local alternative to Halloween. On November 2, teachers build classroom altars, ethnic, not religious, they say, and bring in pan de muertos. This year, for the first time, a community center arranged for 60 children wearing skeleton masks and makeup to march from an altar at the center to [a] cemetery, where they danced in circles."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Personal interview with Nancy Chárrega, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Allen Myerson, "Caressing Life on the Day of the Dead," *NYT*, November 4, 1995, section 1, p. 9 National Desk.

Organized tourist excursions to San Antonio began to be advertised in national magazines such as the AAA (American Auto Association's) *Horizons* and the *Elderhostel Annual Program Guide*:

In San Antonio, with its historic and current Hispanic influence, you'll become acquainted with El Dia de los Muertos – and extraordinary celebration which honors the past and celebrates the future. Explore the evolution of indigenous and Hispanic traditions into a friendly family festival. You'll construct a traditional altar...gain insights from a curandera (Hispanic shaman), take a field trip to San Fernando Cemetery to take part in the day-long celebration, and taste foods prepared only for this special day...Oct. 30-Nov. 3, 2004 – \$444.00 double, \$564.00 single.<sup>65</sup>

Today in San Diego, middle aged Mexican-Americans who grew up on either side of the San Diego-Tijuana border region at a time when Day of the Dead was unknown, ignored, or disrespected, are learning about the celebration through events sponsored by community centers and schools. A San Diego librarian who lived in Tijuana until she was nine (before moving to San Diego, where she has lived for forty years), told me that not only did her family not celebrate Day of the Dead while living in either Tijuana *or* San Diego, but that she had never heard of the holiday until she saw altar exhibits at the campus where she works. In another example, a 40 year-old San Diego hairstylist who spent her childhood in Coahuila, Mexico, before moving as a teenager to San Antonio, Texas, learned about Day of the Dead through her children:

I'm a dedicated Catholic, very active in the Church. Growing up, we never celebrated Day of the Dead. We never even heard about it. I don't even really know what it is. It's kind of funny how we people from

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<sup>65</sup> *Elderhostel: The World is our Classroom*, "United States and International Programs 2004-2005," p. 14.

Mexico don't know about Day of the Dead, but people say it's a Mexican thing. No one in my family ever celebrated it, not even my grandparents. No one I *knew* celebrated it, and I lived in a very Mexican neighborhood. My kids celebrate it now in school though. They go to the Spreckels School, which is bilingual. They make masks and do other things. At first, when they came home talking about Day of the Dead, I didn't respond too positively. I didn't know why the school was teaching my kids about this cult and I didn't like the idea. I thought it was something weird. But they told me it was our Mexican heritage. Well, *I* never heard of it. I still don't know what it is, exactly.<sup>66</sup>

A 42 year-old woman, who grew up in Tijuana and moved to the US in her late teens to attend college in San Diego, learned about Day of the Dead in the year 2000, when she bought a home in the San Diego neighborhood of Sherman Heights. As an enthusiastic new homeowner, she became active in the Sherman Heights Community Center, where she first saw Day of the Dead altars. She liked the concept so much that she began to participate annually in the Sherman Heights Neighborhood Association's Day of the Dead celebrations:

My father's family was from Oaxaca and they celebrate it a lot there. But in my neighborhood in Tijuana, we didn't celebrate it. I used to live in Chula Vista [a city with a large Mexican population in south San Diego County] and they don't do it in Chula Vista. I'm surprised. I lived there for 10 years, but it's not done. But when I came here and saw the celebration, I really wanted to be a part of it. It was an incredible experience, gathering mementos about my Dad...Before I didn't celebrate Day of the Dead. Now that I'm in this community, it's very important to me. It'll be a part of my annual holiday celebrations. I feel so much closer to that part of my culture. And I have been able to teach my family about it. My mother is *really* into it now! And my niece. She's 10 years old and she's half Caucasian and half Mexican. She really enjoyed learning about it and making the altar with me. She hadn't seen this before and if we hadn't done this, she would never have learned about it.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Personal conversation with Berta Gomez, San Diego, California, April 12, 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Personal interview with Pita Ruiz, San Diego, April 29, 2003.



Similarly, a Mexican-American employee working at the Folk Tree Gallery in Pasadena explained to me: “I’m a third generation Mexican-American, but we never celebrated Day of the Dead. I mean, we went to church and had a meal, but it was very solemn. I learned about it working here, and was inspired by all the artists who participate.”<sup>68</sup>

Tomás Benitez, Chicano artist, activist, and former executive director of Self Help Graphics, the flagship Latino arts space in Los Angeles, was born and raised in the predominantly Mexican American neighborhood of East Los Angeles. He recounts:

Like so many other people, Day of the Dead was really introduced to me by Self Help Graphics. Back in the early 1980s, there were shows and processions happening here for Day of the Dead. It was really here that I was introduced to it, before I even started working here. I had also read a little about it in Chicano Studies, but never in a first hand way of being involved in a community event or procession. This was ground zero for Day of the Dead.<sup>69</sup>

### Negotiations over “ownership”

While Day of the Dead in Mexico has been romanticized and immortalized in the nationalist murals of Diego Rivera and the habitually quoted writings of Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, it is clear on closer examination that the ritual has, for various political and historic reasons, been promoted in ways that make Mexico *seem* unique among Latin American countries. The preceding sections illustrate that making altars for the dead, socializing and eating with *compadres*, gathering and picnicking in graveyards, holding vigils, and serenading the dead are customs also found in various areas of Central and South America, and that “partying with the dead” is not exclusive

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<sup>68</sup> Personal interview, Pasadena, California, June 4, 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Personal interview with Tomás Benitez, Los Angeles, California, June 5, 2004.

to Mexico. Because there are countless books, newspaper articles, documentaries and websites produced about Mexican Day of the Dead (and scant information on the customs in other countries), people familiar with the celebration, including most Mexicans and Mexican-Americans I have interviewed, assume (and sometimes insist) that the ritual is strictly a Mexican phenomenon. As one Chicana artist emphatically replied when I asked if she saw similarities between Mexican and other Latin American Day of the Dead customs: “Dia de los Muertos is *Mexican. Period.*”<sup>70</sup>

The perception in the US and elsewhere that the tradition is unique to Mexico reflects a social construct of the holiday created and perpetuated in Mexico. It also reflects the fact that people of Mexican heritage, who comprise sixty percent of the US Latino population, have more political and cultural power than smaller demographic groups of Latinos living in the United States, including the power to organize cultural practices found throughout Latin America, such as Day of the Dead, Christmas *posadas*, *pastorelas*, Easter re-enactments of the crucifixion of Christ, or exhibits of *milagros* and *exvotos*, for example, from a Mexican-centric vantage point.<sup>71</sup>

In California, the dominance of the Mexican and Chicano perspective is seen in many cultural aspects, such as the celebration of Mexican festivals (e.g., Cinco de Mayo, the “Fiestas Patrias” and “El Grito” of September 16, and Guelaguetzas<sup>72</sup>). It is evident in

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<sup>70</sup> Personal interview, June 6, 2003, San Francisco, California.

<sup>71</sup> Originating in Italy and Spain, the custom of holding Christmas *posadas*, or musical re-enactments of Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter in Bethlehem (usually ending in a big party) is common throughout Central and South America. Similarly, the European customs of *pastorelas* (the performance of morality tales (passion plays), collecting *milagros* (talismans, often in the shape of human body parts, representing a miracle received or desired) and making *exvotos* (decorative plaques created to show appreciation to God or specific saints for the granting of miracles requested) are practiced in many parts of Latin America, but are usually referred to in the US as “Mexican” rather than “Latin American” traditions.

<sup>72</sup> September 16<sup>th</sup> is Mexican Independence Day. This celebration in California can be traced back to at least the 1930s, reflecting the large immigration of Mexicans to the US during and after the Mexican

the designing of bilingual (Spanish/English) and multicultural educational curricula in which Mexican culture is the predominant Latino culture emphasized, the strong Mexican emphasis of most university Latino Studies programs,<sup>73</sup> the Chicano/Mexican-American management of most Latino community centers and art galleries, and the predominantly Mexican-American leadership of the Latino business community.

Central Americans and other non-Mexican Latinos in California and the Southwest are surrounded by the prevalent influence of Mexican culture in aspects ranging from the types of groceries in stock at Latino markets, to the programming available on Spanish-language TV, to the Mexican heritage of most Latino government officials, politicians, and police. I have spoken with Central Americans living in California who have expressed feeling ignored or excluded from the Latino public sphere.<sup>74</sup> Others have told me that in order to fit in and get better access to jobs or social services, they have had to learn to speak and act “Mexican.” This prominence is understandable, given that people of Mexican descent have lived in California longer than any other population except Native Americans. I mention it not as a criticism but in an attempt to explain why Day of the Dead and other traditions practiced in much of Latin America are frequently classified as “Mexican” in the US. The common categorization of Day of the Dead as a Mexican (rather than Latin American) tradition

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Revolution. Guelaguetzas are performances celebrating the dances of each region of Oaxaca, held every July. These celebrations were originally sponsored by the Mexican government to stimulate national appreciation for indigenous culture, and are now reproduced by Mexican communities in the US.

<sup>73</sup> Some Latino Studies programs, such as those at the California State University at Northridge and San Diego State University, have implemented Central American tracks due to requests from growing student populations of Central American heritage.

<sup>74</sup> Such as a Guatemalan-American woman planning to start a non-profit agency in San Diego to serve Guatemalan immigrants because she feels that the existing Latino social service agencies, run by Mexican-Americans, are not meeting the needs of the thousands of Maya-speaking Guatemalans now living and working in San Diego County.

reflects the ancestry and lived experiences of California's (and the United States') majority Latino population, rather than an active attempt by Mexican-Americans to exclude other Latino populations. As alluded to earlier, most Mexican-Americans are not aware of the hemispheric observances of Day of the Dead, an ethnocentrism that is also seen in other Latino groups. For example, when I invited a friend from Ecuador, who was studying in San Diego, to a Chicano Day of the Dead event, she commented in surprise, "I didn't know Mexicans celebrated it too."

In the early 1980s, existing populations of Mexican-Americans were joined by substantial numbers of new Latin American immigrants. Over the past two decades, economic restructuring in Latin American countries has intensified unemployment and poverty, which, in turn, has escalated migratory pressures. So many immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean have migrated to the US (often attempting to escape the repercussions of US foreign policy abroad), that there are now more Latinos than African Americans attending US schools (Suarez-Orozco 2001:40). The traditional segregated settlement of US Latino populations – Chicanos/Mexican Americans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in the East, and Cubans in Florida – no longer accurately describes the diversity of Latin American cultures living in the US. As new waves of immigrants travel both *to* and *within* the United States, following job opportunities that draw them far beyond the traditional geographic locations of earlier Latino communities, arts, educational, and social service agencies arise to serve them. Providing institutional support, financial resources, and public space in which to celebrate Latino culture, these institutions have helped make Day of

the Dead celebrations the norm rather than the exception in cities and towns across the country.

As the Latino population in California has become more diverse, non-Mexican Latino artists and activists both appreciate the Chicano Movement's achievements and goals and, at the same time, strive to expand political, cultural, and artistic work towards a greater recognition of other Latino populations. Day of the Dead – now the largest Latino celebration in the US - is one space in which negotiations over representation have occurred. For example, at the November 2002 Day of the Dead exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California, Guatemalan and Salvadoran altars were featured along with Mexican ones. Instead of calling it a “Mexican” tradition, as the museum had in previous years, the exhibit guides and publicity materials illustrated a shift in terminology, referring to the holiday as a “Mesoamerican” custom. Entitled, “Espíritu Sin Fronteras:<sup>75</sup> Ofrendas for Day of the Dead,” the exhibit featured *ofrendas* “that explore the Days of the Dead as a Mesoamerican tradition of shared spirituality among the people of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and their descendents here in California.”<sup>76</sup> This expanded definition of Day of the Dead occurred as a result of discussions between people of Central American and Mexican heritage living together in US Latino communities. Born in Guatemala and raised in Los Angeles, a young artist involved in organizing Day of the Dead exhibits in the Bay Area describes the types of mediations taking place:

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<sup>75</sup> Meaning in English, “Spirit Without Boundaries.”

<sup>76</sup> Text from *Espíritu Sin Fronteras* exhibit brochure, published by the Oakland Museum of California and distributed to exhibit patrons from October 12 to December 1, 2002.

Living in California, of course, there's the Chicano experience. But not very often is the Central American, Mayan experience recognized. You always get the "Mexica," "Aztlán," "Chicano" experience. For me, it was a real priority to have that voice heard within this institution, too. So last year was the first year, with the help of Tere Romo, we expanded that part of our identity and incorporated more of the Mayan experience and the interpretations of El Salvador and Guatemala. It's hard though. It's definitely a push to get that voice heard. Even just changing the language, because now, instead of saying it's a "Mexican" tradition, we're saying "Meso-American" tradition, so even internally within the [planning] committee, it was a push to try to get them to do this. There's always resistance when you try to change anything...I guess if you lived in New York, everyone would assume you're Puerto Rican. Here, in California, if you're not Mexican, you're sort of invisible. People don't really recognize the culture that you represent. It's an important thing to have a voice.<sup>77</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

From a Latin American family-oriented event focused on the ritual preparation of homes and graves in honor of departed family, the holiday in the US context has been transformed into a public, choreographed "happening." The role of Chicano intellectuals, artists, and cultural activists in California and elsewhere is responsible for the creation and popularization of Day of the Dead in the United States, resembling an earlier, similar phenomenon among intellectual, artistic and political nationalists of nineteenth-century Mexico. Each year, more schools, libraries and universities include Day of the Dead in their educational curricula, while art galleries, museums, community centers, recreational parks, and commercial establishments host altars, processions and other activities.

Originally a Chicano creation, US Day of the Dead celebrations in the twenty-first century increasingly include the participation of other groups of Latinos who are

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<sup>77</sup> Personal interview, June 3, 2003.

able to relate, in various ways, to the Catholic and indigenous symbolism. For example, altars at the 2003 Day of the Dead Festival in Fruitvale, California, were created by Guatemalans, Mexicans, Chicanos, Cubans, Hondurans, Native Americans, and others. Altars created at the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego during the years 2001 to 2004 were made by Mexican immigrants, Chicanos, Nicaraguans, Panamanians, and others. The 2002 and 2003 altar installations at the SoMarts Gallery in San Francisco, California, were created by Puerto Rican, Columbian, Chilean, Mexican, Salvadoran, Chicano and other artists. As diverse groups interweave the Chicano celebration with their regional traditions, these events are a form of media that publicly celebrate and honor an increasingly diverse US Latino population. With extensive presence of Latino immigrants in new areas of the United States, Day of the Dead is now publicly observed not only in major US cities such as Chicago, New York, and Washington DC, but in places with historically little or no Latino presence such as Omaha, Nebraska; Columbus, Ohio; Boulder, Colorado; Kansas City, Kansas; Seattle, Washington; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Atlanta Georgia.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> According to newspapers articles I have collected about Day of the Dead activities in these and other areas.

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## Chapter Three: Cultural and Political Solidarity

### 3.1 Latinos and the Religious Imagination

One of the most meaningful yearly celebrations in Mexico, in fact, throughout Latin America, is the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). - David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmopolitanism and Ceremonial Centers*, p. 142.

Historian of religion David Carrasco observes that religion is a pervasive but often elusive presence in modern life, where things considered to be secular often have deep religious roots. He notes: “Vivid aspects of Latin American and Latino cultural expressions such as art and architecture, literature and dance, ideology and theology, family and desire, gender and political action have religious roots, influences and meanings.”<sup>79</sup> These religious roots are both indigenous and Catholic in origin.

The historical influence of Catholicism in Latin America over the past 500 years has been so extensive that, even today, a majority of Latin Americans and US Latinos are still at least nominally Catholic.<sup>80</sup> George Sanchez has observed that the Mexican-American ethnic identity is intertwined with religious reference points that exist outside of the official framework of the Catholic Church (1993:152). Whether Catholic or not, most Latinos easily recognize and, on some level, identify with Catholic rituals and iconography, making it possible for Chicano activists to reuse this familiar imagery in novel and politically liberating ways (Carrasco 1980; Gutierrez 1995; Perez 1999; Romo 2000). For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe was used as a unifying symbol for Chicano, Mexican, and Filipino agricultural workers in California and the Southwest

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<sup>79</sup> David Carrasco, in lecture for the course, “Religion and Latin American Imaginations,” which I attended at Harvard University Divinity School, September 16, 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Among Latino adults in Evangelical, Mormon and other Protestant denominations, many were raised Catholic and converted to Protestantism later in life. Thus they are quite familiar with Catholic beliefs, practices and iconography and are able to “read” these cultural texts.

during the United Farm Workers' Union organizing efforts of the 1970s and 1980s. The power and pervasiveness of her image offered a symbol to which many people – laborers, growers and the general public - could relate, lending moral authority to the struggle for workers' rights. In another example, the Virgin Mary has been reconstituted as a symbol of Latina feminist power by Chicana artists such as Ester Hernández and Yolanda López, who privileged the inner strength, endurance, and authority associated with Mary over the conventional images of self-sacrifice, passivity and suffering.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to Catholic symbolism, key concepts of Latin American indigenous spirituality (such as a veneration of ancestors, a respect for and relationship with nature, a belief in spirits, and ongoing communication between the living and the dead) remain alive in Latino culture,<sup>82</sup> comprising an important part of what Carrasco calls “the religious imagination.” Through the religious imagination, he contends, US Latinos have recovered indigenous symbols of the past for strength and regeneration in the present, reflecting “a reaching back for power and inspiration from distant ancestors” (1998:156). Observing that “Mesoamerica’s pre-Columbian traditions have continued to play a vital role in the colonial and postcolonial communities of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize” Carrasco notes that meaningful traces of these traditions can be found in Latino communities in the United States, where Latinos celebrate their pre-Hispanic past in aesthetic expressions for

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<sup>81</sup> For example, the 1975 etching *The Virgin of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of the Xicanos*, by Ester Hernández, and the 1978 oil painting *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgen de Guadalupe*, by Yolanda López.

<sup>82</sup> This is reflected in the magical realism of Latin American and Latino literature and film, such as in the writings of Sandra Cisneros, Gioconda Belli, Eduardo Galeano, and Gabriel García Márquez, and the films of Luis Valdéz, Gregory Nava, and Salma Hayek.



political liberation (1998: 125). Through music, performance, murals, and other art forms, Chicano Movement<sup>83</sup> activists have employed Aztec, Maya, Olmec, Toltec, Mixtec, Zapotec and Teotihuacan symbolism as spiritual resources to communicate messages of resistance against Anglo-created stereotypes, political oppression, poverty and unequal opportunity. For Carrasco, “It is a special gift of the religious imagination that allows a people, after five hundred years of colonialism, dependency, oppression and resistance, to turn to the ancient Mesoamerican past for symbols of a cosmovision that help make a world meaningful, give it a standing center, and provide for social and spiritual renewal” (1998:156).

Because of both its Catholic and indigenous roots, the observance of Day of the Dead in Latin America for more than 500 years makes it a point of cultural continuity for many Latinos now living in the United States, regardless of whether they have personally participated in the custom, seen others doing so, heard stories about it, or merely read about it. Ritual activities associated with indigenous, European Catholic, and mestizo folk traditions - such as arranging household shrines with pictures and/or statues of religious icons, lighting candles with spiritual intent, holding vigils, or praying to the dead – are widespread practices of daily life throughout Latin America,<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The term “Chicano” began to be widely used in the 1970s to describe Americans of Mexican descent who were politically engaged in the struggle for liberation from Anglo racism and exploitation. While comprised mainly of people of Mexican heritage, the Movement also appealed to and included Latinos of non-Mexican ancestry, such as the Peruvian-born Chicano artist Mario Torero. Today, many US activists of Central or South American descent self-identify as Chicano, as in the case of the Chicano performance artists “Culture Clash,” where two of the widely acclaimed trio are of Salvadoran heritage, or the “Taco Shop Poets,” whose Latino members have roots in other Latin American countries besides Mexico.

<sup>84</sup> See for example, the work of Angelina Pollak-Eltz (1989) on elaborate altars and spirit devotion in Venezuela; Tweed (1997) and Brown (2003) on Cuban altars and rituals, or Celso Lara (2005) on altars in Guatemala.

making it possible for many people of Latin heritage to understand and embrace Day of the Dead rituals, regardless of their specific national ethnicity.

As one teacher living in San Diego explained to me, “In Puerto Rico, we don’t celebrate Day of the Dead in the way that the Mexicans do, but we do go to the cemetery and bring flowers. Like a lot of people, my mother and grandmother always had a little altar in the house, year-round, so I can relate to the sense of devotion that is felt for certain saints or people we’ve lost.”<sup>85</sup> A San Diego businessman and Day of the Dead enthusiast commented: “I grew up in the back country of Brazil, in a very traditional type of atmosphere, folkloric, you might call it. So for us, dealing with this [Day of the Dead] is an extension of our own backgrounds. Even though we celebrate it differently than Mexicans, it was something we knew something about, and our cultural and aesthetic tastes were drawn to it.”<sup>86</sup>

### **3.2 Religious Rituals in a Secular Context**

Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff have argued that secular rituals in modern societies have limited references and are “connected with specialized parts of a social/cultural background, rather than with the all-embracing ultimate universals to which religious rituals are attached” (1977: 11). US Day of the Dead rituals exemplify this because they are performed as isolated cultural events by an ethnic minority living within an extremely heterogeneous society, rather than as integral units of a common cosmology. This situation contrasts greatly with Latin America, where Day of the Dead

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<sup>85</sup> Personal conversation with Vilma Colón, San Diego, October 17, 2002.

<sup>86</sup> Personal interview with Claudio DeLucca, San Diego, April 24, 2003.

is a common custom that reflects and reinforces socially dominant beliefs about the primacy of family relationships, moral obligations, and religious faith. I do not wish to suggest that Latin American society is homogeneous, or that everyone there observes Day of the Dead. Clearly, there are religious, ethnic, racial, and class differences among and within Latin American countries. Instead, I wish to emphasize that the holiday is well known and observed in various forms throughout the region. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Peru, Day of the Dead is a national holiday on which banks, government offices, businesses and schools are closed.<sup>87</sup> In Mexico, Costa Rica, and Argentina it is popularly observed but, for reasons of separation of church and state, not officially designated as a national holiday.

Gerd Baumann argues that a multiplicity of constituencies, interests and values are always in operation during ritual celebrations (1992). *Any* ritual, he says, even in seemingly homogenous communities, involves different levels of participation, including that of bystanders, spectators, and invited guests. Accordingly, while not all Latin Americans observe Day of the Dead, most recognize November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> as a period of the year when the dead are remembered via certain rituals. Whether one is an active participant or not, various ritual practices associated with Day of the Dead, such as adorning graves, preparing special foods on these dates, arranging home altars, praying to or for the deceased, and holding vigils, do not strike most Latin Americans as “out of the ordinary.” A respondent who was born and raised in El Salvador and has

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<sup>87</sup> According to *Mexico and Central America Handbook* (1998) and Lonely Planet’s *South America Guide* (1999) these countries list Nov. 1 and/or Nov. 2 as national and/or legal holidays.

lived in the US for many years notes the easy familiarity with which many Latin American immigrants view Day of the Dead: “I think that the reaction of other Latinos is, ‘Ok, what’s the fuss?’ Because they’re used to it. They wonder why the Chicanos are making such a big deal of it. Yes, you remember your dead, but it’s a typical part of their culture, so they don’t think about it in a political sense.” This comment illustrates both the “taken for granted” nature of the tradition in Latin countries, as well as the very different social, cultural and political perspectives of Latino immigrants and US-born Chicanos vis-à-vis life in the United States (which I will discuss in depth later).

In most of Latin America, celebrations of Day of the Dead would be classified as “folk” culture, which John Fiske defines as “the product of a *comparatively* stable, traditional social order” (1989:169). By folk culture, I refer to beliefs and practices that arise from the organic life of a community and are not intended to be promoted, packaged or sold to a larger audience. A folk belief related to Day of the Dead, for example, is the still widespread conviction among indigenous and other devout celebrants, whether they live in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, or elsewhere, that one’s earthly success depends, in part, on treating the dead with respect. If the dead are not remembered in the proper manner, it is maintained, one’s own financial security, family stability, and health could be jeopardized.

Prayer is an important part of folk Day of the Dead observances, whereby the living often ask the spirits of family, friends or saints to protect their relatives, crops, health, and property. As mentioned earlier, many people in Latin America attend Catholic mass on November 1 (All Saints’ Day – a holy day of obligation in the Catholic faith) to pray for the dead, and Catholic priests are often asked to bless family

altars and tombs that have been decorated for the occasion. Even in moderate observances where people do not engage in elaborate vigils, altar construction, processions, or prayer to the dead, but merely clean and decorate family graves, this ritual act is done out of an organic, “common sense” connection to and respect for departed family and friends that is prevalent in Latin American countries. Whether observances are elaborate or moderate in tenor, they emanate from a religious tradition in which feelings of moral obligation, or at least social obligation to the deceased, are central tenets of the holiday.

Meanwhile, within the more secular and commercial context of US society (and the museums, galleries, community centers, and commercial establishments where US Day of the Dead activities predominantly occur), these rituals have migrated into non-religious spheres, becoming a form of popular culture. I use the term “popular” here to refer to cultural practices that have been appropriated from folk culture, commodified for consumption by mass audiences, and utilized in novel ways as signifiers of new meanings. This does not mean that US Day of the Dead rituals are devoid of any spiritual significance, but that they routinely occur in secular contexts as “art,” “ethnic culture,” or “political expression” and are not primarily undertaken as acts of religious devotion. Their principal function is to express Latino identity and convey political messages, rather than to fulfill moral obligations to the dead. However, while these celebrations emerged as an artistic means of celebrating Latino identity, rather than as a morally-imposed, religious obligation, there was, in fact, a sense of obligation to the dead involved. Chicano artists and activists felt a moral obligation to improve the lives

of their children and community, building on the sacrifices that their parents and grandparents had made to improve *their* children's lives.

Within the six modes of ritual sensibility sketched by ritual studies scholar, Ronald Grimes,<sup>88</sup> Day of the Dead in most of Latin America is *primarily* a form of "ritualization," or habitual, routine, socially obligatory action, with *secondary* elements of celebration, or "expressive ritual play" (1995:40-56). These customs are so much a part of "normal" behavior that they are likely not to be consciously considered as "rituals" by participants. In contrast, Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations are *primarily* a form of ceremony and celebration. As opposed to ritualization, ceremonies are "rites that are more differentiated, more intentional, and therefore more likely to be considered ritual by participants" (1995:47). Intentionally commemorative, ceremony "symbolizes respect for the offices, histories, and causes that are condensed into its gestures, objects and actions" (1995:48). It often extols implicit we/they distinctions, with participants "sometimes so certain, yet defensive of their ideological territory, that they dramatize their own victorious heroism" (1995:48). Grimes notes that celebrations seem spontaneous but are choreographed "happenings" arising from expressive culture, hence their link to the arts.

Despite the secular location of US Day of the Dead rituals, however, a residual aura of the sacred remains. In his discussion of "residual" meanings and practices, certain religious values among them, Raymond Williams explains that they are the results of earlier social formations in which certain real meanings and values were generated. Within a given dominant culture, there is:

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<sup>88</sup> Grimes distinguishes between ritualization, decorum, ceremony, magic, liturgy and celebration.

a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in real societies in the past, and which still seem to have some significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture under-values or opposes, or even cannot recognize (1991:417).

As Chicanos reached back to an imagined past for symbols and strength with which to respond to an oppressive dominant culture, it was the deep spirituality of Day of the Dead that made it desirable for adoption by the Movement. Spirituality was considered a vital unifying component of Chicano identity and iconography, offering US Latinos new perspectives on the metaphysical, apart from what many considered to be the restrictive rules and scriptures of an historically oppressive Catholic Church (Romo 2000). As evident in the *Plan Espiritual de Atzlán* (Spiritual Plan of Atzlán), a Chicano Movement manifesto drafted at the 1969 Chicano National Liberation Youth Conference in Denver, Colorado, and subsequently promoted by Chicano artists throughout the US, a culturally unifying spirituality that incorporated ancient indigenous beliefs and practices was considered integral to the struggle for cultural resistance against a homogenizing and often hostile US mainstream (Gonzalez 1972:405; Romo 2000:40). Romo refers to this feeling as a “spiritual nationalism” which became a unifying force for Chicano farm workers, artists, and community activists (2000: 32). This Chicano spirituality was what political theorist Antonio Gramsci would call “religion taken not in the confessional sense, but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct.” In a Gramscian sense, this conception of religion emphasizes elements of

struggle, process, and politics, with the goal of creating a unity of consciousness appropriate for new stages of social development and action (Gramsci 1999: 326-328).

Chicano spirituality was a hybrid assemblage of diverse religious influences that influenced Chicano identity, woven together for the purpose of creating a feeling of cultural unity that would assist in struggles for political justice. Noting the comfortable coexistence in Mexican American communities of Catholic *quinceañera*<sup>89</sup> masses with indigenous *curandera* healing rituals, Romo explains, “Chicano spirituality evolved from multiple sources by way of Spanish Catholicism, Moorish mysticism, African beliefs and a Mesoamerican indigenous worldview – all filtered through an American-lived experience” (2000:30-31).

US Day of the Dead altar and art installations reflect this hybrid nature of Chicano spirituality. They routinely include Catholic iconography such as crucifixes, Catholic devotional candles, rosary beads, pictures of saints, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary, together with indigenous elements, such as statues of Aztec or Mayan deities, copal incense and various offerings. Catholic priests, indigenous shamans, and Mayan and Aztec-inspired ceremonial dancers are often invited to participate in Day of the Dead festivities.<sup>90</sup> Such invitations are extended in accordance with the political orientation of the planning committees designing the events. For some, the participation of both

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<sup>89</sup> A “coming out” party held for girls on their fifteenth birthday, commonly celebrated by families in Mexico and other Latin American countries as well as by Latino families in the United States.

<sup>90</sup> For example, each year Catholic priests bless the altars and lead the annual Day of the Dead processions held at Olvera Street, in Los Angeles. In 2001, a weekend-long Day of the Dead festival in Oceanside, California, began with a Catholic mass. Both of these celebrations are funded by the local business community and promoted to both local residents and tourists as secular, cultural activities. Aztec and Mayan ceremonial dancers perform each year at the Day of the Dead celebrations and exhibit openings held at the Oakland Museum of California, the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego, Chicano Park in San Diego, Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles, the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, and elsewhere.



indigenous and Catholic officiates is a way to acknowledge the *mestizo* history of Day of the Dead and to attract as broad a range of participants as possible. For others, having the involvement of *either* Catholic clergy *or* indigenous elders is a way to privilege one history over the other. And many US Day of the Dead events have neither indigenous nor Catholic functionaries present.

Romo, who helped organize the first Day of the Dead celebration in Sacramento in 1975, discusses the decision of the Royal Chicano Air Force, a collective of Chicano artists and activists, to include both indigenous and Catholic ceremonies as part of the annual celebration:

[W]e had an indigenous ceremony with dance offerings, along with a Catholic mass, because there were a lot of older, traditional people there, and it's a holy day of obligation for Catholics...We invited the Guadalupe nuns because we wanted to get that generation of people involved, like our parents and grandparents. And how do you get them involved if we were doing indigenous stuff and they might see it as too artistic or not Catholic enough, or respectful enough? Because we were a Chicano reclamation project, we wanted to incorporate all the things that we knew made up the culture. We wanted people to start recognizing the indigenous connections and foundations of a lot of what we took for granted as our culture...We chose Dia de los Muertos because of its specific connection to indigenous thought...And we also wanted to recognize that there was a segment of the older population that was very Catholic and needed to be part of this, and we wanted to be respectful, in terms of their belief system, but not let one take over the other. And it worked.<sup>91</sup>

The participation of religious representatives in California's Day of the Dead ceremonies does not mean that the participants necessarily consider these events within a religious context, although many may. Because participants are diverse in terms of

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<sup>91</sup> Personal interview with Tere Romo, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.

age, ethnicity, politics, and religious orientation, the imagery at these rituals is open to a variety of interpretations. A symbol such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, has different meanings for “an atheistic politician than for a proclerical one, for an Indian than for a worker, for a shantytown dweller than a university professor” (Lomnitz-Adler 1992: 312). Both Catholic and indigenous religious symbols are physically present in US Day of the Dead celebrations and, depending on the perspective of the viewer, can hold meanings that are similar to, or vastly different from, the same symbols in a Latin American context. Their presence provides a symbolic orientation point in the religious imagination, towards which a wide spectrum of Latinos gravitate.

Lacking the historical continuity of Day of the Dead customs in Latin America that are observed and passed down from generation to generation, Chicano celebrations are reinventions of traditions from which most celebrants have been physically separated, often for generations. Thus, public altars and events created by US Latinos are methods for teaching and remembering cultural heritage rather than morally-binding obligations to the deceased. Alicia Gaspar de Alba has referred to this change as the transformation of Day of the Dead “from folk culture to popular culture,” where ancient devotional expressions are converted into “ceremonial art whose main function [is] the ritual celebration and preservation of cultural memory” (1998: 76).

Because California’s Day of the Dead activities lack the kind of societally-reinforced moral weight that characterizes most Latin American observances, celebrants are able to pick and choose the meanings attached to them. Whereas most Latin American celebrants observe Day of the Dead because of “obligation, not optation” (to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Victor Turner), people in the US participate as

optation rather than obligation (Turner 1977b: 39). To continue with the metaphor, the observance of these rituals is a form of obligatory “work” for indigenous and other devout celebrants in Latin America, but a “leisure” activity for Chicanos and most other Latinos in the US. Turner defines leisure as “freedom from an array of institutional obligations” and “freedom to *play*” with ideas and fantasies. He writes:

Play frames allow participants to escape from the ‘should’ and ‘ought’ character of ritual...and see themselves as free to fabricate a range of alternative possibilities of behaving, thinking, and feeling that is wider than that current or admissible in...the [obligatory] ritual frame (1982: 28).

Because they are optional rather than obligatory, leisure rituals “are potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual and communal, either to criticize or prop up dominant social structural values” (Turner 1977b: 42). Free from the constraints of the traditional ritual frame, creative play allows US Day of the Dead events to express both spiritual faith and political skepticism, and to comment on a range of social issues and identities.

### **3.3 Day of the Dead and Community Building**

While it has not been the subject of much attention by communication scholars, ritual as a form of communication has long been analyzed by anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists who offer various functionalist and ideological interpretations. Marxists have noted ways in which religion and ritual legitimate dominant authorities, while Weber and Douglas have described the role of ritual in delineating and reinforcing social boundaries (Weber 1978; Douglas 1966). Durkheim

noted how rituals can strengthen social solidarity (1965), while Turner observed that the social transgressions often involved in ritual may set the stage for future structural change (1977). More recent scholars have argued that rituals can communicate in multiple ways simultaneously. They contend that while rituals may create solidarity, reinforce values and beliefs, and help maintain or erode the existing social order, no one function is the necessary or exclusive role of ritual (Lukes 1977; Grimes 1990; Bird 1995; Rothenbuhler: 1998). I hope to illustrate that, since the 1970s, the public celebration of Day of the Dead in the United States has helped create a sense of community among Latinos while challenging dominant social structures on a number of levels.

Emile Durkheim observed that religion constructs a web of interpersonal relations and social solidarity by means of its rituals and collectively shared feelings. He argued that social bonds were created as much by the profane division of labor involved in ritual celebrations as by the shared sacred beliefs. Through ritual, “Men who feel themselves united, partially by bonds of blood but still more by a community of interest and tradition, assemble and become conscious of their moral unity” (1965:432). While Durkheim referred to a collective consciousness developed via the enactment of religious rituals in tribal societies, similar unifying dynamics pertain to the celebration of rituals among members of minority groups living in modern, industrial societies (Moore & Myerhoff: 1977; Turner: 1977; Hobsbawm: 1983, Orsi: 1985; Anderson: 1991; Bade 1997).

### Imagined community / Invented tradition

Benedict Anderson has emphasized the ability of signs and rituals to create “imagined communities” of horizontal comradeship among people who have never met, regardless of the inequality of their social positions (1991). The concept of a socially constructed, “imagined Latino community” has been discussed by a variety of scholars (Flores 1997; 2000; Rodriguez 1999; Lopez & Espiritu 1990; Sanchez 1993) with a mixture of wariness and pragmatism. On one hand, all-embracing terms such as “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used to facilitate data collection, marketing plans, and political strategies by mass media, commercial, government, and other interests that typically ignore the ethnic, racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and political diversity of the US Latino population. On the other hand, as Juan Flores points out, isolationist and essentialist stands on the part of Latino ethnic groups in the US can fragment and diminish the potential for solidarity in political struggle (2000).

Flores distinguishes between “Latino” as a convenient demographic unit of analysis created and used by outside institutions, and a “Latino imaginary” fashioned by Latinos themselves “on the basis of shared memory and desire, congruent histories of misery and struggle, and intertwining dreams of utopia” for the purpose of socio-political solidarity (2000: 198). Despite cultural and historical differences, including differing experiences of arrival and settlement in the US, different political relationships between countries of origin and the US, and differences between recent immigrants and those, such as Mexican-Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans, with longer histories here, Flores contends, it is possible “to find a common thread in the intricate ‘Latino’ weave, or at least a framework in which to interpret the huge and diverse

Latino presence in some more encompassing way” (2000:145). In listing commonalities of the Latino imaginary, Flores observes:

The Latino historical imaginary refers, first of all, to home countries in Latin America, the landscapes, life-ways, and social struggles familiar, if not personally, at least to one’s people, and in any case, indispensable to Latinos in situating themselves in U.S. society...Colonial relations of hemispheric inequality underlie not only the historical logic of Latino migration but also the position and conditions of Latinos here in this society...The Latino imaginary...rests on the recognition of ongoing oppression and discrimination, racism and exploitation, closed doors and patrolled borders. Whether sanguine or enraged, this recognition structures the negotiated relations among Latinos, between Latinos and the dominant culture, and with other groups such as African Americans or Native Americans (2000: 198-199).

Similar to Carrasco’s “religious imagination,” Flores’ concept of the “Latino imaginary” emphasizes historical commonalities that provide resources for building Latino unity in the US. He notes that Latino communities are drawn together across ethnic, generational, and other lines by invented traditions that display elements of an “alternative ethos,” an ensemble of “cultural values and practices” that are self-referential and affirming (2000:200). Day of the Dead represents an example of a “landscape” or “life-way” in the Latino imaginary which, when re-created in the US, helps foster a sense of community among diverse groups of Latinos. In “using old models for new purposes,” as discussed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (1983:5), this celebration is an invented tradition born out of the political objective of Chicanos to affirm Mesoamerican cultural values and practices and provide both Latinos and the larger US society with an alternative ethos.

Hobsbawm and Ranger coined the phrase “invented tradition” to refer to newly created practices of a ritual or symbolic nature “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms” and which “imply continuity with the past” (1983: 1). They observed that an implied continuity with the past, while factitious, was key to establishing or symbolizing group cohesion and identity. Although the term “invented tradition” often conveys a pejorative tone, connoting a falsification of history or manipulation from “above,” US Day of the Dead is an example of creativity from “below.” Here, traditions are reenacted, not to provide a dominant group with “the sanction of precedent, social continuity or natural law” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 2), but to offer an historically marginalized population cultural resources with which to counter the disparagement they have traditionally received from the larger society.

In California, the Southwest, and increasingly throughout the rest of the US, Day of the Dead activities are a means through which to counteract decades of Latino exclusion from the mass media, museum circuits, and academia. Likewise, they are a means to counteract the psychological harm done by decades of racially segregated public education, where Latino children, routinely relegated to substandard school facilities and vocational, rather than college-track curricula, were taught misleading histories that implied that they were the descendants of a vanquished and inferior culture. By re-creating cultural rituals from which constituents have been temporally and geographically separated and connecting them with narratives of a proud and powerful cultural ancestry, organizers of Day of the Dead celebrations have actively engaged in community building among the US Latino community.

### Communitas

While the primary intent of US Day of the Dead events (celebrating Latino culture) differs from the primary intent of most Latin American Day of the Dead rituals (fulfilling a moral obligation to the dead), both types of celebrations create opportunities for the ritual cultivation and maintenance of social relationships. Day of the Dead in Latin America, particularly in indigenous communities, is not simply a ritual remembrance of the dead, but also a celebration and reaffirmation of living communities. Among the Mixtec people of Oaxaca, for example, Day of the Dead is a time for “formally celebrating the support network ties of family, kin and community and maintaining access to the economic, political, social and psychological capital they represent” (Bade 1997: 8). Ritual acts such as refurbishing gravesites, constructing altars, and preparing decorations and special foods for the holiday require the collaboration of extended networks of family and neighbors, who also come together to pray for the deceased, visit the altars of neighbors to pay respects to their dead, and share the festive food and drink prepared for the occasion. All of these actions serve to reaffirm individual and collective identity and promote a sense of solidarity.

As Latinos of various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds come together to organize and carry out Day of the Dead celebrations in the US (a process that often requires several months of regular planning meetings and preparatory workshops), and as they create and view altars or participate in processions, vigils, craft workshops, and other activities related to the celebration, they also develop and ritually reinforce a sense of community. This can have the temporary effect of leveling social hierarchies, exemplifying Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas” - a period during ritual



celebrations in which the norms governing institutionalized relationships are transgressed. According to Turner, this transgression results in “a reclassification of reality and man’s relationship to society” which lowers the strong, elevates the weak and can “incite people to action as well as thought” (1977a: 128). He writes:

There are those who, in the exercise of their daily authority...have little opportunity to deal with their fellow men as concrete individuals or equals. Perhaps in the liminality [of *communitas*]...they find an opportunity to strip themselves of all outward tokens and inwards sentiments of status distinction and merge with the masses (1977a: 202).

Although Turner originally discussed *communitas* in the context of tribal societies, he later argued that people in modern, industrial societies who share an important characteristic (such as ethnicity, race, or religion) and feel alienated from the larger social system in which they live, may “seek the glow of *communitas* among those with whom they share some cultural or biological feature they take to be their most signal mark of identity” (1977b: 48). Moore and Myerhoff also discussed the power of ritual to create social solidarity among strangers in industrialized, heterogeneous societies, contending that “Ceremonies that make visible a collective connection with some common symbol or activity can minimize for a ceremonial moment their disconnections and conflicts in a crowd” (1977: 6). Because Day of the Dead is an event with which people of various Latin American backgrounds can identify, its celebration in the US brings together ethnically and racially diverse Latinos who, whether recent immigrants or native-born US citizens, often face forms of political, social, and economic marginalization by the larger society. *Communitas* occurs as Latinos from diverse walks of life - well-educated and illiterate, wealthy and working

class, US citizens and “illegal aliens” - participate in creating Day of the Dead altars or simply viewing them in the same community centers, museums, schools, and other social spaces. A sense of collectivity is fostered which can temporarily mute ethnic differences and social hierarchies.

Cadavál has noted this process at work during Latino festivals in Washington, DC, where solidarity is reinforced among different classes so that “individuals whose heritage may be Latin American but whose regular behavior and cultural patterns are not identifiably ethnic may become Latinos for the day” (1991: 212). Other scholars have made similar observations about the *communitas* created during US Day of the Dead celebrations. Describing the event at Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles, Lara Medina observes: “Despite diverse religious affiliations, the sense of a communal identity pervades the celebration” (2002:85). Tere Romo notes of California’s Day of the Dead celebrations: “It’s brought different aspects of the community together, age, gender, geography, politics, etc. Because if some people didn’t agree with the UFW [United Farm Workers’ Union] or whatever, they would still come to this event. Chicanos can go there with Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, right-wing and left-wing people. It’s been a great equalizer. That’s been one of its greatest strengths.”<sup>92</sup>

The phenomenon of *communitas* during Day of the Dead is particularly interesting with respect to relations between newcomer and US-born Latinos. As has occurred among many other ethnic groups in the United States, certain conflicts exist between long-term and newcomer Latino populations. Depicted in films such as *El*

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<sup>92</sup> Personal interview with Tere Romo, San Francisco, June 2, 2003.

*Norte* and *Bread and Roses*, primetime TV shows such as *American Family*, and *The George Lopez Show*, and illustrated by political actions such as the approval by a significant percentage of California's Latino voters of the anti-immigrant Proposition 187,<sup>93</sup> some long-term Latino residents of the US feel that incoming Latin immigrants represent tax burdens or job competition. That newcomer Mexican and Central American immigrants have worked as replacement workers, or "scabs," during labor strikes by the United Farm Workers' Union, for example, has historically created resentment among Mexican-American farm workers. Describing the conflict felt by longer-term US Latinos towards newcomers, Stanley Ross has noted,

They have strong kinship and cultural bonds...yet in their own self interest, they find themselves opposing the influx of immigrants, legal and illegal, because of the competition for jobs. They may even find themselves siding with immigration officials whom they would traditionally distrust (1978:14).

David Gutierrez has also noted that Mexican Americans and other US-born Latinos have been deeply divided over the issue of immigration and that "the recent recession has helped to raise interethnic and interracial tensions to new, dangerous levels" (1995:207).

Connected to issues of immigration are issues of class. Not infrequently, middle- and upper-income Latinos (most of whom are US citizens) may look down on lower-income Latino immigrants (Durand-Ponte 2000:106). Conversely, many newcomer Latinos feel discriminated against by "nuestra propia gente" ("our own people"). In interviews I conducted in 1996 and 2000 with Central American

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<sup>93</sup> "Election Exit Poll Results," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1994.

immigrants in Boston and Los Angeles, a common theme mentioned was the poor treatment newcomers felt they received from “legal” Latinos who allegedly refused to share information about jobs, English classes, social services, or apartments.<sup>94</sup> In another example of class hierarchies among Latinos in the US, América Rodríguez points out that Spanish and English language usage have become markers of economic status. Among Hispanic media marketers (themselves educated, middle- and upper-class Latinos), monolingual Spanish language US audiences are classified as “lower class,” while bilingual and monolingual English-speaking Latino audiences are considered higher class (Rodríguez 1999:50).

During Day of the Dead celebrations, however, the social tensions existing between newcomer and long-term Latinos in the US temporarily diminish, as both groups reflect on a perceived common cultural ancestry. The celebration is a time in which low-income Latino immigrants can gain admiration, based on the grounds of tradition, from Americanized, middle-class Latinos for whom the celebration is often an intriguing novelty rather than a lived reality. Observing community-based Day of the Dead celebrations in San Francisco, California, in the 1980s and 1990s, Morrison observed that class hierarchies were temporarily reversed because newcomers often held first-hand knowledge of how to create *ofrendas*, vigils, *papel picado*, or *pan de muerto*, something most US-born, urban and middle-class Latinos lacked (1992: 301). My own observations are in concord with Morrison’s. In a Day of the Dead workshop I attended in San Diego in October 2000, two Salvadoran immigrants explained the

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<sup>94</sup> Class hostilities between Central American immigrants and middle-class Mexican-Americans is also noted by Omi & Winant 1993: 106.

customs and meaning of the holiday to some twenty bilingual schoolteachers. Most of the workshop participants were US-born Latinas who appeared to have little first-hand knowledge of the holiday, judging from the intensity of their note taking. Similarly, altar exhibits I have seen at San Diego's Sherman Heights Community Center have been organized by a mixed group of US-born and newcomer Latinos. During the six years that I attended the celebration [1999-2005], participants have included immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama, as well as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and other US-born Latinos. Noting that Day of the Dead brings neighborhood residents of diverse ages, ethnicities and regions together, Estela Rubalcava Klink, Director of the Sherman Heights Community Center explains:

In the beginning, we had altars from Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Michoacán, but then we started having altars from other parts of Mexico and even Central America and the Philippines...It's a real community-building thing, because people who may not even know each other will say, "You're from Michoacán? I am too! Let's do an altar together next year." And they do it. They become almost like comadres and they build an altar together. This event brings people together and gives them an opportunity to talk and act in ways, as if they've known each other for a while, when they haven't. It's a way for different generations to interact. I remember one woman who was from Puebla came last year. She was really moved by the altars and needed some time alone to collect herself. She went home and came back later with her daughter, who was 20 years old. She not only showed her daughter the altar, but explained the whole tradition to her, and now she and her daughter want to do an altar from the Puebla region next year. We've never had one from Puebla before.<sup>95</sup>

During Day of the Dead workshops I attended at Sherman Heights, monolingual Spanish-speaking immigrants often took the lead in discussing the significance of the altars and demonstrating how to make *pan de muerto*, or *papel picado*, while bilingual

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<sup>95</sup> Personal interview with Estela Rubalcava Klink, San Diego, California, June 12, 2003.

and monolingual English-speaking Latinos watched intently, often from behind the viewfinders of their home video cameras. Each year, the general public at the Sherman Heights celebration is comprised of an ethnically and racially mixed audience of lower- and middle-income Latinos as well as non-Latinos, and the atmosphere is one of mutual acceptance and respect.

While not all Latinos in the US participate in Day of the Dead activities, a cross-section of Latinos from different ethnic, racial, class, political, and generational backgrounds is usually present at these celebrations. Folklorist Olivia Cadavál asserts that the re-creation of Day of the Dead activities in the US by Latinos from various countries produces a “potpourri of national traditions” which she refers to as a “pan-Latino American Day of the Dead model” (1985:181). While people of diverse Latin American ethnicities proudly maintain their distinct national and ethnic allegiances, Day of the Dead in the US is increasingly a time to celebrate a constructed collective identity as US Latinos. Whether honoring political figures such as Cesar Chavez (Chicano), Arch Bishop Oscar Romero (Salvadoran), Che Guevara (Argentinean), or artists and entertainers such as Frida Kahlo (Mexican), Celia Cruz (Cuban), Tito Puente (Puerto Rican), this is a celebration in which the contributions, struggles, and achievements of people of Latin American heritage are remembered collectively. In honoring those who have gone before, Day of the Dead is a public forum for expressing a community’s collective experiences – its knowledge and memory of itself. The collective identity formation of *Latinos* is an important catalyst in the process of political consciousness-raising, providing the foundation necessary for effective political organizing work.

Communitas operates not only internally among the Latino community, but also externally between Latinos and non-Latinos. Day of the Dead rituals often engage non-Latino audiences in physical, psychological, or spiritual ways that they may not anticipate, creating feelings of “oneness” between the audience and host community. Studying the interactions between mainly white, middle-class audiences and the immigrant organizers of Cambodian New Years, Day of the Dead, and other ethnic celebrations held at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art, Jack Santino observes that spectators were transformed into participants in an atmosphere of festival “liminality.” He suggests that although temporary, this liminal experience can encourage audiences towards greater “appreciation, acceptance and understanding” of diverse communities (1988: 125). John MacAloon discusses a similar dynamic in his writings on Olympic Game ceremonies, contending that the power of public rituals can transport “entire societies outside of their ordinary boundaries of space and time...providing society wide communitas experiences” that transcend barriers of language, nationality, class, and ideology (1984: 269). He continues:

Those who come simply to watch and be watched, to enjoy the spectacle or to profit from it, may find themselves suddenly caught up in actions of a different sort at levels of intensity and involvement they could not have foreseen and from which they would have retreated had such participation been directly required or requested of them (1984:268).

While most of the organizers of US Day of the Dead festivals, events, and exhibits are Latinos, these celebrations attract substantial numbers of people (artists, organizers, participants, and spectators) who are not of Latino heritage and create a

highly visible “public sphere” in which messages regarding Latino culture and politics are transmitted both within and beyond the Latino community.

### **3.4 Claims For Public Recognition**

While the ritual components of Day of the Dead (such as processions, the creation of altars, preparation of specific foods and adornments, flying of kites, or public discussion of the deceased) can invoke *communitas* among diverse Latino populations and between Latinos and non-Latinos, the holiday’s spectacle nature performs another important type of communication. Access to public space is a crucial element of contemporary cultural politics, and public rituals are as much symbolic statements to outsiders or “others” about a group’s social and political presence as they are consolidations of internal values and meanings. As Baumann argues, “Public ritual in plural societies...can very often be viewed as a claim to public attention, public space, and public recognition” (1992: 100). Inherent in the color, drama, music and spatial location of public events organized by minority ethnic groups, he notes, are claims both to credit and access on behalf of these particular groups in relation to the larger society.

Similarly in “The Taking of the Renwick,” Cadavál describes how a Day of the Dead celebration at the Smithsonian Institute allowed Latino immigrants in Washington, DC, to “take over” social space habitually occupied by the white middle and upper class. She notes the pride felt by Nicaraguan, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Ecuadorian immigrants who created Day of the Dead altars at the prestigious Renwick Gallery. Although the holiday was not widely observed in Washington, DC, at the time,



its celebration provided an opportunity for ethnically diverse Latinos to collaborate amongst themselves and receive the attention of mainstream America. “More than a way to honor the dead,” she writes, “it becomes the context for reflexivity and assertion of identity” (1985:186).<sup>96</sup> For Cadavál, Latino festivals in the US are “a means for asserting and negotiating one’s culture and one’s right to place and space,” creating a temporary center of power in which new social identities are forged (1991:205).

Before the 1970s, the work of Mexican-American and other US Latino artists was widely shunned by prestigious museums and mainstream galleries. Reflecting manifold aspects of what today is referred to as “magic realism” and “neo-indigenist” style, their artistic expressions were considered jarring to the traditional “legitimate” standards of Western classical art. That Day of the Dead altars and art are now featured in the most distinguished museums, galleries, and universities in the country, in addition to public libraries, schools, stores, and upscale cafes, is a source of pride for many Latinos for whom the holiday is a way both to assert their presence in the United States and to see their cultural heritage valued by the larger society. As Ofelia Esparza, one of the most acclaimed Day of the Dead “altarists” in the United States commented, “This celebration is a validation of Latino/Chicano/Mexican culture. We’ve always been here, but the renaissance of Day of the Dead over the past twenty-five years has put us on the map.”<sup>97</sup> I have heard similar sentiments expressed by many Chicano and Latino scholars, activists, and community members. While the national attention this event has garnered is gratifying for many US-born Chicanos and Latinos who grew up in a time

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<sup>96</sup> Historian of religion Robert Orsi describes a similar phenomenon in the celebrations of the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street in New York’s Italian Harlem (Orsi: 2002).

<sup>97</sup> Personal observation at public discussion with Ofelia Esparza at an altar-making event held at Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles, California, October 26, 2002.

when Latino culture was devalued within mainstream America, Day of the Dead also provides an opportunity for public recognition and elevated social status for recent Latino immigrants, who have traditionally been even more ignored and marginalized by mainstream US society than US-born Latinos.

In November 2001, I observed an example of immigrants from Oaxaca, Mexico, gaining attention through public ritual, as Mixtec Indians living in Oceanside, California, “took over” the downtown area while leading the city’s first public Day of the Dead procession to inaugurate a weekend-long Day of the Dead festival. The relevance of the public recognition Mixtecs received during this event was underscored by the fact that, of all agricultural workers in California, Mixtecs hold the least desirable and lowest paying jobs (earning as little as \$5,000 per year for full-time farm work), suffer the greatest labor abuses, and live in the worst housing conditions (Runsten & Kearney: 1994). To a great extent, Mixtecs have been socially and politically “invisible” in California for the past couple of decades.<sup>98</sup>

Unlike Day of the Dead events in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Francisco organized by Chicano activists, the public celebration in Oceanside was initiated by Anglo members of the Oceanside Chamber of Commerce through its Mainstreets Initiative.<sup>99</sup> After contacting the pastor of St. Mary’s Star of the Sea Church (Oceanside’s largest Mixtec congregation) to seek his support (and his connections with the Mixtec community), the Oceanside Chamber of Commerce invited members of the

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<sup>98</sup> One of the prominent indigenous populations of Oaxaca, Mexico, Mixtecs began migrating to California in the 1970s in search of agricultural jobs. Today there are some 300,000 Mixtecs living in the state and about 25,000 living in Oceanside, making them one of the city’s larger minority populations.

<sup>99</sup> A national economic development program designed to breathe new cultural and commercial life into economically distressed downtown districts. This program will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

Binational Oaxacan Indigenous Front (*Frente Indigena Oaxaqueño Binacional*) to build seven large altars throughout downtown Oceanside. Initially surprised by the request, the Mixtec community accepted the invitation to participate in a citywide celebration of their native culture. The altars, which soon became the talk of the town, were constructed inside storefront windows of local businesses and made in the exact styles of *ofrendas* found in Oaxaca, with no attempt to be intentionally artistic or politically “contestatorio.” While the Chicano initiators of Day of the Dead generally avoided making exact replicas of family altars because they felt that “a transplanted Mexican version [would] be unrealistic and too removed” from the Chicano experience (Romo 2000: 40), Mixtec immigrants felt comfortable creating a transplanted Mexican version of the holiday. Unlike Chicanos, they had grown up making these altars and, even while living in Oceanside, had continued to make them in their homes. Because of their very different cultural location and historical experience in the United States, Mixtecs saw the celebration more as a continuation of customary activities (albeit altered) than as an artistic simulation of primeval rituals. A Mixtec from Oaxaca, who has lived in Oceanside for thirty years and helped organize the first citywide celebration, explains how he felt about building an *ofrenda* in his restaurant, one of the most popular eateries in downtown Oceanside:

I made it just like we always do in my village. I had a lot of food, *mole*, fruits. We had it up for four days and everybody came to see it. We decorated it with a lot of things, jicama and flowers and everything just like over there. Here [in the restaurant] we have about 95% American people as customers, so they were very interested to see it. They never saw something like that before. They were asking me what it represented and I explained to them that it’s something we do over there in Mexico. They really liked it. A lot of them came in and later came back and

brought more people. They brought their camera and started taking videos and pictures. Some even added things to the altar. Some of them told me they wanted to do it in their homes. A lot of people came in just to see it. They didn't want to buy anything, they just came in to see it, just to learn about it. I'm glad about that because since I left Oaxaca, I've never seen anything like that until now. It was really nice.<sup>100</sup>

Besides the altars, the festival included two other very important aspects of the celebration for Mixtecs: a Catholic mass and a public procession that started at the church and made its way through the downtown streets.<sup>101</sup> On the evening of November 1, 2001, nearly 1,000 people attended a bilingual Day of the Dead mass held at St. Mary's and participated in a candlelight procession through the streets of this "all-American" city, as Oceanside is called on the city's official website.<sup>102</sup> Nearly half of the procession participants were Anglo residents of Oceanside, for whom this appeared to be their first exposure to Day of the Dead; those who were part of St. Mary's parish attended the mass, while others waited outside for the procession to begin. The rest of the public consisted of recent Mexican immigrants (mainly from Oaxaca) residing in Oceanside and other Latinos (Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Central Americans) from Oceanside and surrounding towns, many of whom had read about the event in the weekly *San Diego Reader*, *North County Times* or *Union Tribune*. Most of the non-Mixtec people I spoke with called the event "interesting," "beautiful," and "different."

The following additional comments by the Mixtec restaurant owner illustrate how Oceanside's public Day of the Dead rituals have provided recognition and validation for Mixtecs and more broadly, Mexicans and other Latinos:

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<sup>100</sup> Personal interview, August 5, 2003, Oceanside, California.

<sup>101</sup> While this event was Oceanside's first Day of the Dead procession, the All Saints' Day/Day of the Dead mass was a preexisting, annual parish event, around which the procession was planned.

<sup>102</sup> Personal observation, November 1, 2001, St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church, Oceanside, California.

When I first moved to the US, some Mixtec people would celebrate a very little bit in their home. Just a little bit, just making dinner for Todos Santos. But a couple of years ago, somewhere out there, it started really getting big. I guess everybody knows what it is now. For Latinos and Mexican people, it was hard for them to celebrate their own fiesta before. We thought probably a lot of people wouldn't understand what we were doing, because they never lived it or experienced it...I think before, there wasn't enough people. We didn't have a voice. You couldn't hear our voice then. It was like being in a jungle and screaming and nobody could hear you. The voices just got lost. But now, there's enough people to make it happen.<sup>103</sup>

While hundreds of people waited outside St. Mary's Church (which was packed to capacity) for the start of the Day of the Dead procession, an upper class Mexican-American from the affluent town of Del Mar expressed her delight and gratitude towards the Mixtec community as she told me excitedly, "This is wonderful. This is *absolutely* wonderful! I'm so glad they are doing this!" As a light-skinned, US-born Latina who spoke English better than Spanish and did not grow up celebrating Day of the Dead, she appreciated the Oaxacan immigrants for bringing her closer to the customs of her ancestral land. "They" were agents, in a way that she could not be, for publicly revealing the beauty and profundity of her ethnic culture to the larger US society. Coming from a very different racial, linguistic, and socio-economic background than the Latina from Del Mar, a Mixtec resident of Oceanside expressed similar feelings of pride:

I know for sure that a lot of Latino people wanted to be there for the church and the procession because that's probably the most important part. I think they felt like part of them came true. All the way from there, it came true, and they just couldn't pass it up. They had to be a part of it. For people who were not Latino, I guess they were just interested and

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<sup>103</sup> Personal Interview, Oceanside, California, August 5, 2003.

wanted to know what was going on. Just curious, I guess. It made me feel good, because at least they were interested. Like I said, when I heard about it, I just couldn't pass it by, because that's what I did when I was young. I just had to be involved. When I saw all those people, it made me feel like I was back twenty years in my life, as if I was home. It made me feel very nice. There was a lot of newspapers covering it. I was interviewed by a TV station too. It was interesting that they wanted to cover it. If we keep going like that, the younger people can learn things. Like my daughter, she's ten and she says, 'Dad, I really like this.' In school they are learning about these things now.<sup>104</sup>

As the candlelight procession proceeded through the center of town led by a traditional Oaxacan band, Mixtecs were clearly honored and proud to be the center of attention, from TV cameras to speeches by the mayor and other city leaders. Although many members of Oceanside's Oaxacan community had privately constructed Day of the Dead altars in their homes for years, this was the first public celebration of what, for Mixtecs, is the most important holiday of the year. In the quiet darkness after the mass and before the procession, hundreds of people from different generations, classes, ethnicities, races, and legal statuses stood together, each holding a candle and remembering someone dear who was no longer living. The flickering candlelight seemed to connect everyone as a single entity, moving slowly en masse down the cordoned off streets of Oceanside's commercial district, while pedestrians and motorists looked on in bewilderment. Day of the Dead celebrations were also held in Oceanside during the years 2002 to 2005. They have grown exponentially each year, becoming one of the city's most popular annual events.

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<sup>104</sup> Personal interview, Oceanside, California, August 5, 2003.

Mary Ann Thiem, a *Mainstreets* volunteer who coordinated Oceanside's Day of the Dead festival during the years 2002-2005, describes the inter-cultural community-building she observed during the event:

Day of the Dead brings a lot of people together who might not normally work together. The planning takes almost a year. There are lots of meetings. So we have business people, artists, Mixtec people, designers, teachers all working together. I'm originally from Nebraska...so there's people like me who are new to the community, working with people who've lived here a long time. There's people who speak Spanish and people who speak English and people who speak Mixtec or Zapotec. As I said, there are a lot of Oaxacan families involved. We had the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts involved...On the day of the event, everyone is working together...People who know about Day of the Dead and those who didn't know about it before all work together.<sup>105</sup>

But what is the result of temporary *communitas* experienced at such events? Are there lasting benefits for the communities involved, or are immigrants simply exploited for their knowledge of traditions and ignored during the rest of the year? Do cultural programs supported by dominant institutions (such as the Chamber of Commerce in the Oceanside example) ritualize the dominance of those agencies? The answer is multi-pronged because, as mentioned above, various phenomena occur simultaneously during public ritual celebrations. As Santino and MacAloon point out, *communitas* takes place both within a particular group and between different groups. As Baumann notes, the reinforcement of values and traditions for "insiders" can occur simultaneously with the conveyance of separate messages to "outsiders." An ethnic group's "exotic" customs may be supported by the business community, politicians or

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<sup>105</sup> Personal interview with Mary Ann Thiem, Oceanside, California, July 8, 2003.

museum curators to attract visitors, improve economic development, or cultivate a “cosmopolitan” image for a depressed city.

Yet, these other agendas do not necessarily diminish the powerful experience such ceremonies represent for participants, nor do the interests of financial sponsors or the mainstream audience automatically dominate the ethnic group(s) involved. Santino argues that when the planning of folk celebrations is shared between a sponsoring institution and a participating ethnic group (as with the Oceanside event), it is the funders and audience members who adapt to unfamiliar customs and take their cues from cultural subgroups, rather than vice versa. Therefore, the impact of ethnic rituals on mainstream audiences is often “a kind of subversion of dominant values, rather than a reification of them, because...audiences [are] effectively provided with access to an alternative system of cultural esthetics and values” (1988:129).

In response to concerns over the exploitation of immigrant culture, Santino further argues that ethnic celebrations presented within formal institutions or sponsored at the national, state, or local level can actually encourage immigrants and ethnic groups to resist the overwhelming social pressure they experience to deny these traditions and assimilate. This support is important as a form of validation, “in that it indicates to the people that this agency, which represents the dominant culture of the United States, recognizes and values the unique cultural contributions and the intrinsic worth and beauty of their traditions” (1988:122). From my observations of the Oceanside Day of the Dead festivals (most recently in October 2005), the Mixtec community, rather than the Chamber of Commerce, set the tone of the event, educating others about Oaxacan traditions and receiving public praise and recognition from the city’s established



institutions (schools, public library, local university, city government, the media, local businesses and arts organizations). Although the impetus for Oceanside's Day of the Dead festival was the Chamber of Commerce's economically-motivated desire to draw visitors to downtown Oceanside and change the city's illiberal public image,<sup>106</sup> the celebration nonetheless has provided Mixtecs with a formal opportunity to receive public recognition. Social networking is of the utmost importance in Mixtec culture and the Mixtecs of Oceanside, far from being unwitting pawns, recognize and embrace the opportunity to create connections between themselves and the larger north San Diego County community. They see the Oceanside festival, like festivals in their native pueblos, as a communication system that allows them to improve the conditions of their lives through social interaction.

Thirty years after the first Day of the Dead celebrations began in California, the Oceanside event illustrates an interesting reversal in dynamics. Chicanos in the 1970s initiated altar exhibits and ceremonies to promote knowledge of and respect for Mexican culture as a form of resistance against racism and the self-loathing instilled by it. In 2001, Anglo Californians in Oceanside were so familiar with the tradition, portrayed in countless museums, galleries, schools, and mass media outlets, that they approached Mixtec immigrants to organize a celebration. While Chicanos, as US citizens, felt empowered and entitled to celebrate their ethnic heritage, Oceanside's Mixtec immigrants, despite residing in Oceanside for nearly thirty years, did not feel empowered to publicly celebrate their fiesta until encouraged to do so by mainstream institutions.

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Mary Ann Thiem of Oceanside Mainstreets, July 8, 2003, Oceanside, California.

Mixtec immigrants, most of whom speak limited English and some of whom speak limited Spanish,<sup>107</sup> are much farther removed (socially, culturally, linguistically, economically) than Chicanos from mainstream US culture and the rights and privileges afforded US citizens. They live tenuously in a predominantly Anglo “military town” that is known throughout San Diego County for its politically conservative (often described by outsiders as “redneck”) character and fervent patriotism. Because many Mixtecs are undocumented workers, they have historically preferred to maintain a low profile for reasons of survival. In contrast, the Chicano activists who began Day of the Dead celebrations in Los Angeles and San Francisco lived in major cosmopolitan cities known internationally for cultural and political diversity. Whether they had grown up in low-income or middle class communities, most of these activists were college-educated, highly articulate artists and intellectuals. The cultural and political work they accomplished from the 1970s onward made it possible for incoming groups of Latino immigrants, such as the Oceanside Mixtecs, to publicly celebrate Day of the Dead in the twenty-first century.

Traditionally, the more economically and socially comfortable ethnic immigrants and their offspring have become in the United States, the more comfortable they have grown with publicly celebrating their cultural heritage. While in the past it usually took a generation or two for this comfort level to accrue, today’s more open climate of multiculturalism (brought about by the advocacy work of Chicanos and other minority groups over the past four decades) makes it easier than in the past for people, particularly first generation immigrants, to celebrate their ethnic traditions publicly.

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<sup>107</sup> Mixtec is the first language of most Mixtec immigrants, some of whom are not fluent in Spanish.

The public celebration of Latino cultural traditions in contemporary US society has also been facilitated insofar as the typical pressure faced by all ethnic minorities to assimilate (coming from public education, the media, and ongoing contact with the larger mainstream culture) has been offset in this case by the steady influx of legal and undocumented Latino immigrants entering the US since the 1980s (Meyer 1989: 219).

As immigrants participate in public cultural celebrations, they build community not only with others from their ethnic or linguistic group, but also with people from different backgrounds, official organizations, and institutions. This participation is one way, and often a non-threatening way, of beginning to “belong” to the larger US society. To a great extent, US culture is immigrant culture, and the expression of ethnic identity is part of “belonging.” As the most prominent ritual manifestation of contemporary Chicano/Latino culture, Day of the Dead creates a sense of pride among many Latinos, as they see their culture and, often, the physical spaces of their neighborhoods acknowledged and admired by the larger US society.

### **3.5 From Cultural to Political Solidarity**

In response to sustained contact with mainstream US culture, assimilated or “Americanized” ethnics tend to experience an intensification, rather than a decrease, in ethnic identification (Stern & Cicala et al. 1991; Gutierrez 1995). This increased cultural identification can lead to greater political solidarity with newcomer immigrants. David Gutierrez observes that when Mexican-Americans started to celebrate their ethnic heritage publicly, they began to identify more with Mexican immigrant struggles:

Having attempted to redefine the Chicano community by rejecting the assimilationist model and emphasizing the central importance of Mexican culture, history and language to contemporary Chicano society, Chicano activists raised some complex questions as to the bounds of their community...[T]heir appropriation of Mexican cultural symbols as integral parts of Chicano culture seemed to open the door to establishing a new level of solidarity with immigrants from Mexico (1995:190).

Gutierrez argues that while Mexican-American activists and political leaders generally favored anti-immigrant legislation during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the cultural pride stimulated by the Chicano movement in the 1970s and 1980s helped encourage a new, empathetic stance regarding Latin American immigrants. Relating proudly to Mexican culture (via cultural emblems such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec and Mayan imagery, or Day of the Dead celebrations) was one way that many Mexican-Americans began to assess and define their own sense of social and cultural identity vis-à-vis the recent arrivals. Eventually, Gutierrez observes, even conservative Mexican-American organizations recognized relationships between their cultural heritage, immigration issues, and the status of Mexican Americans in the United States.

I witnessed a similar attitudinal change among established Guatemalans in Boston during the planning of a Christmas *posada* in 1998. Although the “legal” Guatemalans (some of whom had lived in Boston for thirty years) initially looked down on and avoided associating with their undocumented compatriots, they began to collaborate with them because of common concerns that their US-born children knew little about Guatemalan customs. As they collaboratively planned the Guatemalan *posada* celebration, assimilated Guatemalans depended on recent immigrants to play the

marimba and teach Mayan dances, while recent immigrants looked to assimilated Guatemalans for administrative details such as publicity and funding. The posada, which included a street procession, singing, dancing, and traditional foods, was hailed by all participants as a tremendous success, and connections formed during the preparation and performance of the event motivated some of the established Guatemalans to set up a volunteer-run English as a Second Language class for new immigrants.

While such cultural experiences do not immediately or even permanently alter intra-ethnic tensions, the *communitas* felt at these events allows participants to experience, even for a brief time, a different way of relating to each other. In the view of Victor Turner, status reversal during ritual celebrations does not bring drastic change in the status quo but, nonetheless, offers a new perspective from which to observe social structure. “What is left,” he says, “is a kind of social average, or something like the neutral position in a gear box, from which it is possible to proceed in different directions and at different speeds in a new bout of movement” (1977a: 202).

#### US Day of the Dead as Political Communication

Noting the importance of aesthetic dimensions to political movements, philosopher Herbert Marcuse suggested that it was mainly through art and music that traditions of resistance and critique were “re-membered” (1969). Similarly, Raymond Williams posited that artistic and dramatic forms served as indices of change and creators of public consciousness (1979). I argue that as Day of the Dead commemorations in the United States employ aesthetics, performance, and ritual to

promote a shared sense of history and experience among Latinos, the collective identity created during this annual rite serves as a catalyst for the promotion of values and ideas aimed at consciousness-raising and political change. I will now examine ways in which the spirituality associated with this ritual helps imbue secular ideas with a religious importance.

Initiated as one of the most prominent manifestations of the highly political Chicano Movement, Day of the Dead celebrations in California were, from their inception, media for contesting and critiquing the dominant system of power. As these celebrations spread from Chicano-run galleries into mainstream museums, schools, business districts, and other places not necessarily affiliated with Latinos (or with politically-active Latinos), many took on an apolitical, “multi-culti” tenor. However, a significant number of these events have continued to project overtly political messages, in the critical spirit of Mexican *calavera* poetry and figurines, Central American *bombas*, and their Spanish predecessors, *pasquines*. Advertised in newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet, these events are viewed by many spectators and can be effective ways to publicize “life and death” issues that are unreported or underreported in the mainstream media.

An important element of expressing Latino cultural identity, in general, has been the acknowledgement of the discrimination and exploitation faced by Latinos in their lives as cultural minorities in the United States (Sánchez 1993; Paredes 1993; Flores 2000). Receiving significant media coverage, Day of the Dead events not only honor and validate the growing demographic presence of Latinos in the US and celebrate popular Latino icons, but also often evoke a “moral economy” model of social protest,

encouraging moral reflection on issues of political importance. The holiday's focus on death makes it a useful occasion in which to criticize public policies and social practices that cause death on a local, national, or global level. Illustrating the tragic senselessness of avoidable deaths, aesthetic and ritual traditions are frequently used to urge viewers towards what Marcuse called "a new sensibility which expresses the ascent of life instincts over aggressiveness" in order to "foster on a social scale, the vital need for the abolition of injustice and misery" (1969:23).

In California, it is rare to attend a Day of the Dead exhibit (whether in a museum, gallery, school, park, library or outdoor festival) without encountering at least one (and usually more than one) altar dedicated to victims of a socio-political cause of death. Often, entire gallery exhibits and events are dedicated to political issues. Given the institutional racism, inferior educational opportunities, and poverty that make it difficult for both US-born Latinos and Latin American immigrants to tell their stories in the mainstream news media or achieve proportional representation in electoral politics, the ritual communication that occurs during annual Day of the Dead events becomes an important annual generator of knowledge and action.

In his discussion of the "moral economy," E.P. Thompson argues that the working class uprisings of eighteenth century England were not merely compulsive responses to economic stimuli but "self-conscious behavior modified by custom, culture and reason," in which people used moral indignation to defend community rights and challenge official descriptions of reality (1991: 187). The grievances expressed by the common people, he explained, were grounded in traditional views of norms and obligations that "operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and

what were illegitimate practices” among various sectors of society (such as workers, consumers, business, and government). For Thompson, the moral economy was a “group, community or class response to crisis” that expressed resistance to exploitation and challenged the authorities, on moral grounds, to attend to the commonweal (1991:188). Tracing the origins of the highly organized English working class to local cultural traditions that emphasized decency and mutual aid, he argued that the widespread participation of common folk in traditional rituals and ceremonies sustained collectivist values which, in turn, allowed the working class to maintain solidarity under difficult political conditions. Culture, in Thompson’s view, was not simply an extraneous variable, but a necessary element in the struggle for justice.

Similarly, the collective Day of the Dead traditions of Latinos living in the United States help this population to maintain a sense of identity and solidarity in difficult political times. Moral arguments are aided by “exotic” rituals that attract the attention of both the mainstream media and the general public in ways that ordinary political work does not. These rituals create semi-sacred spaces that serve as sites for both cultural affirmation, via the enactment of ancestral customs, *and* political expression, whereby the dead become allies of the living in the condemnation of injustice. Given the mass media’s relative neglect of the malignant consequences of neoliberalism – rising unemployment, dwindling affordable housing, the privatization of public resources, the defunding of health services, public arts, education, and youth programming (policies that create the economic and social desperation necessary for people to undertake life-threatening forms of subsistence) – Day of the Dead events are grassroots media that encourage reflection on the contradictions between the lived



experiences of most Latinos and official US ideologies of rugged individualism, equal opportunity, and color-blind justice for all. Whether implicitly or explicitly, these events frequently draw attention to the classism and racism in American society that make low wage earners and people of color the routine recipients of violence, drugs, environmental injustice and the least desirable jobs.

### **3.6 Examples from the Field**

#### Events on US Immigration Policy/Human Rights

Thompson argued that the moral economy exposed “confrontations in the market place over access (or entitlement) to necessities” (1991:337). Many Day of the Dead public processions and rituals accomplish this confrontational aspect. Since 1994, when the US Government instituted its controversial “Operation Gatekeeper” Border Patrol program,<sup>108</sup> annual Day of the Dead altars and events in California (and subsequently throughout the US) have publicized and protested the US government’s treatment of Latino immigrants both working in the US and attempting to cross the US/Mexican border in search of employment. In the face of an increasingly militarized border and intensifying legislation in California and other states to deny undocumented workers basic necessities such as health care, housing, access to public educational institutions, or the right to obtain a driver’s license, numerous Day of the Dead events and exhibits expose the ironic contradictions between corporate America’s desire for

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<sup>108</sup> This program has greatly intensified Border Patrol surveillance along heavily-trafficked, urban areas of the US-Mexico border, forcing undocumented migrants to attempt border crossings in the less patrolled but more dangerous desert and mountain areas where, to date, over 3000 migrants have died since 1994. The major causes of death are dehydration and hypothermia, as daytime temperatures in the desert can exceed 120 degrees and night temperatures can fall below freezing. Gun violence by bandits, human smugglers, vigilante groups, and US Border Patrol agents is also a cause of death for migrants attempting to cross the border.

cheap labor (on which the US economy depends), and an institutional unwillingness to provide immigrant laborers, among the most vulnerable members of society, with basic human rights. They express the human cost of government policies, a toll that is ignored or treated with such “objective” distancing by most news media and politicians that the devastating consequences are not usually seen or felt by the general population.

In November 2002, the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts (MCCLA), the largest Latino cultural center in San Francisco, dedicated an entire gallery room to Operation Gatekeeper as part of its annual three-week Day of the Dead exhibit. Entitled, “Life and Death on the Line,” the multi-media exhibit simulated the fear and danger faced by Latino migrants attempting to cross the border. The entrance to the gallery was partitioned off by a chain-link fence, representing the wall between Mexico and the US. Along the fence were blinking red and blue police lights and life-sized photos of armed Border Patrol agents, mounted on wooden stands so that they appeared ready to apprehend all gallery-goers who entered the exhibit. On the wall inside the exhibit was a written explanation of Operation Gatekeeper, noting that the number of Border Patrol agents had recently grown from 4,200 to over 10,000, and illustrating with a graph the sharp rise in immigrant deaths since the implementation of the policy. The walls of the room were lined with large photos depicting actual immigrant lives and deaths. Juxtaposed with photos showing migrants with their families in their native villages before they attempted to migrate to the US, were photos of their dead bodies found in the desert. In the center of the room was a huge altar arranged with imagery from the desert. The floor around the altar was covered with rocks and sand imprinted

with footprints, creating a sense of desolation. In the sand lay plastic snakes, mice, and scorpions, symbolizing some of the difficulties of a migrant's journey.

The multi-tiered altar consisted of many traditional *ofrenda* elements (flowers, candles, fruit, gourds, copal incense, photos of saints, crucifixes, indigenous weavings), mixed with symbols of the desert (scorched branches and cactus), books about Operation Gatekeeper, enlarged photocopies of green cards, and symbols of Mexican and Mexican-American revolutionary struggle (Zapatista dolls, the United Farm Workers Union logo, photos of Cesar Chavez). In an updated and highly relevant twist on the tradition of placing a glass of water on the altar to quench the thirst of returning souls, small plastic bottles of water – the element most desperately needed by people dying in the desert – lay scattered in the sand and on the altar. On the wall behind the altar, in red paint made to signify dripping blood, were the questions, “Cuántos Más?” (“How many more?”), on one side of the altar, and “El Sueño Americano?” (“The American Dream?”) on the other.

This was only one of twelve Day of the Dead installations exhibited at MCCLA during November 2002. Many of the other exhibits had equally political themes. One *ofrenda* called “Papel Picado para Digna Ochoa,” honored Mexican human rights lawyer, Digna Ochoa, who was brutally murdered in October, 2001, in what is widely believed to be retribution for her investigations into the political corruption of top Mexican government officials.<sup>109</sup> Another exhibit, called “Rueda de la Muerte,” (“Wheel of Death”), was a Wheel-of-Fortune style mechanism that the public could

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<sup>109</sup> Day of the Dead altars for Digna Ochoa appeared throughout California and the Southwest after her murder.

spin to see where the arrow would fall. Each of the possible categories represented a form of death or destruction caused by US foreign or domestic policies, such as “Bombing in Afghanistan,” “War in Colombia,” and “Destruction of the Rainforests for Hamburger Consumption.” According to Patricia Rodriguez, exhibit curator at the MCCLA, the Day of the Dead exhibit is the gallery’s best-attended event each year. In addition to many hundreds of visitors from the general public, she notes, thousands of elementary, middle, high school, and university students visit the exhibit annually. The magnitude of this audience, many of whom carefully read and study the exhibits and discuss their meaning, makes the gallery a potent consciousness-raising space. Over the past twenty-five years, MCCLA has become one of the most prominent art galleries in the Bay Area and, in fact, in the United States, attracting large and diverse audiences and regular media coverage.

Over the past five years, faith-based and other organizations involved in immigrant rights work have begun to link the religious meaning and cultural customs of Day of the Dead with political organizing work. In San Diego, California, the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIR), whose members include people of Anglo-American, Chicano, Mexican, Guatemalan, Cuban-American, Italian, and Filipino heritage, holds annual vigils on the US/Mexico border to protest Operation Gatekeeper. Each November 1, a religious service is held and wooden crosses are placed along the border wall listing the names, ages, and places of origin of many of the nearly 3,000 migrants who have died while attempting to cross “the line” since

Gatekeeper's inception.<sup>110</sup> Also erected along the border are traditional Day of the Dead altars heaped with fruits, candles, flowers, and *pan de muerto* in memory of the dead migrants. Because these events occur in areas of high visibility, within eyeshot of the official Tijuana-San Diego border crossing for car and pedestrian traffic, they are seen by thousands of daily commuters, tourists, Border Patrol agents, and local residents. Mixing the religious, the cultural, and the political, these rituals force the public to remember the desperate living conditions of millions of people South of the border, and to reflect on the US government's role in maintaining a "favorable business climate" that ensures poverty wages for most Latin Americans. By honoring migrants who die attempting to cross the border in search of a better life, Day of the Dead participants emphasize the double standard between the rights of Latin Americans and North Americans to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Roughly one third of all corpses found along the US/Mexican Border are unidentified. This situation is due in large part to the fact that Central American and other non-Mexican migrants typically travel without identification documents, hoping to pass for Mexican and avoid deportation to their native countries if captured by the Border Patrol. At present, the nameless cadavers are mechanically inhumed in vacant tracts of land near the border, and family members back home have no way of knowing the fate of their missing kin. In response to this situation, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, together with St. Joseph's and St. Anthony's parishes in Holtville, California, sponsored a Day of the Dead event in the Terrace Park Cemetery

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<sup>110</sup> According to the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, November 2004. Statistics derived from immigrant deaths recorded by the Mexican Foreign Relations Office, the Mexican consulates in San Diego and Calexico, and the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

on November 1, 2001.<sup>111</sup> In a barren potter's field behind the main cemetery, the cadavers of more than 200 unidentified migrants found in the nearby desert are buried beneath stark mounds of earth, generically marked with small cement blocks labeled "John Doe" or "Jane Doe." In an implicit condemnation of Operation Gatekeeper, this event combined a traditional, village-style Day of the Dead procession (in which people sang, prayed, held flowers and carried candles as they walked from the main street to the cemetery), with a political call for bi-national efforts to identify the bodies via DNA testing.<sup>112</sup>

At the cemetery entrance was a large sign reading, "This Day of the Dead, 600 families don't even know whether or not they have a migrant to cry for." The words "*don't even*" encouraged empathy with the migrants' families, appealing to a collective sense of justice. They reminded readers that, while US residents can have peace of mind in mourning the loss of loved ones, families of migrants are left to wonder, forever, about the fate of theirs. Organizers also distributed buttons reading, "Would you walk across mountains and deserts for a job? 1,700<sup>113</sup> migrants did and died." Once again, the message urged readers to identify with migrants and compare their differing life circumstances. The underlying discourse of the event appealed to unspoken but deeply felt concepts of basic human rights, dignity, and dedication to family.

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<sup>111</sup> Located in Imperial County, California, Holtville is a farming community on the US side of the Border. I attended this event as a participant observer. Similar Day of the Dead events at the Holtville cemetery were held on Nov. 1, 2002 and October 27, 2003, and I also attended the October 2003 commemoration.

<sup>112</sup> Expressed in the event's press release and public speeches given in the cemetery.

<sup>113</sup> The death toll as of November 2001.

Following Latin American Day of the Dead traditions of grave adornment, nearly 100 participants proceeded to decorate the anonymous graves with flowers, candles, colored paper, copal incense, and *pan de muerto*, converting the lonely burial site into a vibrant commemoration of “those souls who have no one to remember them.”<sup>114</sup> By publicly honoring the migrants buried in Holtville, local residents made demands on state and federal government regarding an international problem. The drama, music, and color of the procession drew media coverage through which community participants – working class Latinos and social justice activists – gained access to public space from which they are relatively marginalized. Edward Dunn, the director of ICIR, explained: “This type of ceremony not only educates the public about what’s happening on the Border, but it recommits people of conscience and our coalition members, some of whom have traveled from Los Angeles, Santa Cruz and San Francisco to be here today, to the statewide work we do on behalf of immigrants and refugees.”<sup>115</sup> Each year, immigrant rights activists across the United States observe Day of the Dead with processions and altars critical of US border patrol policies.<sup>116</sup> While the weekly and monthly migrant death toll along the border region rarely makes the local evening news – and is generally relegated to the back pages of mainstream newspapers when covered – Day of the Dead events often get front page coverage in the Metro, Region, and Culture sections of major newspapers (as will be discussed in Chapter Four).

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<sup>114</sup> Words of Claudia Smith, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, in a speech made at the cemetery. Personal observation, November 2, 1999.

<sup>115</sup> Personal conversation with Edward Dunn, November 2, 2001.

<sup>116</sup> According to news articles and websites I have reviewed, such activities have occurred in more than forty cities across the US, including Phoenix, Austin, Chicago, Seattle, New York, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC.

From October 26 to November 2, 2003, the migrant death toll along the US/Mexican Border was the topic of a bi-national, week-long Day of the Dead Border Pilgrimage I attended, organized by immigrant rights and labor activists from California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas,<sup>117</sup> to draw national attention to deaths attributed to NAFTA, Operation Gatekeeper, and its sister program in Texas, “Operation Hold The Line.” As stated in the Border Pilgrimage’s promotional materials, news coverage, and website, the purpose of the event was “to raise awareness about the deaths on our southern border and the economic policies that contribute to them.” The front page of the website and promotional brochure read:

Since Operation Gatekeeper in California and Operation Hold the Line in El Paso/Juarez and similar operations in other parts of the border more than doubled the number of Border Patrol agents in 1994, there have been over 2,200 deaths of undocumented migrants along the US-Mexico border. Economic realities and aggressive employment recruitment tactics act as a strong push for the treacherous journey north for migrants from Mexico, Central America and points south. Since 9/11, an attitude that all immigrants are terrorists seems to have permeated the US. This increases the peril for undocumented migrants and their families in search of a better life. Vigilante activities, hate crimes, unscrupulous coyotes (smugglers), bandits, rapists and unyielding terrain often allow for no survivors on the journey.<sup>118</sup>

Consisting of people from across California,<sup>119</sup> a car caravan set out from San Diego, California, on October 26, headed for El Paso, Texas, with daily stops at various points along the border to learn about US economic and immigration policies and

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<sup>117</sup> Organizers included the Maryknoll Border Team; Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; The Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico; The American Friends Service Committee; the Interfaith Coalition on Immigrant and Refugee Rights; the Asylum Program of Southern Arizona; La Resistencia; Borderlinks; Casa Del Migrante; Columban Fathers’ Justice and Peace Office; Alianza Indigena; Medical Mission Sisters; and the participation of the New York State Labor-Religious Coalition.

<sup>118</sup> From promotional flyer, “The Border Pilgrimage,” distributed from August to November 2003.

<sup>119</sup> While most participants were from southern California, several people traveled from Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, and other parts of Northern California to participate in the Pilgrimage.



publicly honor the dead migrants who fall victim to them. A send-off event was held for the caravan in Larsen Field, a public park in San Diego near the US-Mexican Border. About 100 people participated in a ceremony honoring the dead, each participant holding a white cross with the name of a migrant who had died since Operation Gatekeeper's inception. Amidst singing, prayer, and speeches on the legal and moral implications of US government policies, an altar was made on the grass, consisting of candles, flowers, crosses, old shoes, clothing, stuffed animals, and other mementos meant to represent migrants who had perished in the desert.

On October 27, the delegation stopped at the All-American Canal, running between Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Mexico. Although the canal looks placid on the surface, enticing attempts to swim to the US side, its deadly undercurrent is responsible for 10% of all migrant border deaths each year. After reflecting on this site of migrant death, the delegation crossed over to the Mexicali side of the border to view sewer tunnels where migrants crawl through human excrement in order to try to reach the US. On October 28, the group spent time in Douglas, Arizona, talking to a cattle rancher and his wife whose property runs along the border. The couple discussed the problems they had encountered with migrants, Border Patrol agents and vigilante groups waging war on their property since the commencement of Operation Gatekeeper. Afterwards, the delegation met with an advocacy group called the Border Action Network<sup>120</sup> to learn more about vigilantism and civil rights issues along the border.

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<sup>120</sup> Founded in 1999, with offices in Tucson, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico, the Border Action Network provides education and advocacy regarding environmental and human rights issues affecting people on both sides of the US-Mexican Border.

On October 29, after meeting with human rights activists in Tucson, Arizona, the group crossed the border into Agua Prieta, Mexico, to hear from Alianza Indígena<sup>121</sup> about the impact of US border policies on indigenous communities on both sides of the border. This meeting was followed by a visit to the Casa del Migrante in Agua Prieta, a “safe house” run by the Catholic Scalabrini order. Here, food, water, and temporary shelter is offered to migrants who successfully traverse the Sonora desert, before they attempt the final leg of the journey across the border to Tucson. Unexpectedly, while the delegation spoke with the priest and staff at Casa del Migrante, a group of migrants arrived, visibly exhausted from their desert trek. As staff provided them with food, water, bathroom facilities, and lodging, several of the migrants shared their stories with the delegation members – many of whom later said that this encounter was the most moving experience of the pilgrimage.

On October 31, the caravan stopped in Mesilla, New Mexico, to participate in a Day of the Dead tribute and vigil in the town plaza, while townspeople began to prepare outdoor *ofrendas* for the town’s annual celebration. That evening, the group arrived at El Paso, Texas, where it was joined for a weekend Day of the Dead Convocation by a similar caravan that had driven from Brownsville, Texas, together with hundreds of participants from Texas and other parts of the country who had flown to El Paso for the weekend event. A combination of cultural and educational activities, the Convocation was attended by a diverse group of community residents, immigrant and labor activists,

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<sup>121</sup> Founded in 1997, Alianza Indígena is a Tucson-based, advocacy group and binational alliance of O’odham, Yaqui, Apache, and other indigenous communities living on both sides of the US-Mexican border between California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Northern Mexico. Working to advance indigenous rights on both sides of the border, Alianza members oppose anti-immigrant legislation and the militarization of the Border.

religious workers, elderly people active in their churches, local university students, and children. Participants were about 50% Latino (Mexican-American, Chicano, Mexican, and Central American immigrants) and 50% non-Latino (mainly Anglo-American and a few African Americans). Planned nearly a year in advance, the event had been widely promoted among both secular and faith-based organizations working with immigrants, as well as among labor groups, university faculty and students, and the general public (via newspaper and newsletter articles, community meetings, church announcements and the Internet).

On November 1, the Convocation began with a series of workshops entitled, “Migrations, NAFTA and Economic Policy”; “Life on the Border”; “Mexico Reality”; “Current Border Enforcement Policies”; and “Border Theology and Spirituality,” facilitated by human rights activists, labor policy advocates, and professors from university border studies programs. Throughout the weekend, there were also Day of the Dead cultural activities, including satirical *calavera* poetry readings about Mexican workers being abused and poisoned in US-owned maquiladoras, and Latin American migrants vainly searching for the American Dream. Between performances by folkloric dancers and political-folk musicians, giant *calavera* puppets danced and sang humorous and sad songs of love, life, and death along the border.

On Sunday, November 2, to conclude the Convocation, a binational Day of the Dead interfaith service was held along the hot and dusty border. A few hundred people standing on Mexican and US soil sang and prayed in honor of the dead, facing each other through the metallic eyelets of barbed wire fence dividing North from South. A traditional Day of the Dead altar with colorful table coverings, fruits, flowers, candles,

and photos of the dead – literally split down the middle by the barbed wire fence – was constructed by participants on both sides of the border. Children, unable to see amidst the crowd, scaled nearby sections of the fence, clinging to its top for a better view of the festivities on the other side. The week-long Day of the Dead Pilgrimage was covered each day by the US Spanish TV network *Univisión*, as well as by local newspapers in San Diego, El Centro, Calexico, and Tucson. The weekend Convocation received coverage in the *El Paso Times*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Maryknoll*.

### Labor Issues

Another theme common to Day of the Dead altars in California and the Southwest is the commemoration of struggles for fair labor conditions among America's farm workers, most of whom are Latinos. Whether in grassroots community centers, art galleries, or museums, these altars typically display photos of deceased farm laborers and activists, with pictures of UFW founder Cesar Chavez frequently at an altar's center. Elaborating on the custom of flowers, fruits and other harvest-related mementos traditionally placed on Day of the Dead *ofrendas*, these altars often include a combination of wooden produce crates, plastic grapes and other fruits/vegetables, pesticide cans, and farming implements such as hoes, shovels, and work gloves. Like altars I saw in November 2002 at the San Ysidro Civic and Recreational Center in South San Diego, and in 2003 at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Los Angeles, and in 2004 at the Day of the Dead Celebration at the California State University of San Marcos, to name just a few, these agricultural altars usually include newspaper

clippings (either placed on the altar itself or mounted on nearby walls) about farm worker strikes and struggles.

Over the past couple of years, a related theme has emerged in US Day of the Dead exhibits – altars commemorating “los braceros,” the 4.5 million Mexican “arms” or hired hands recruited by the US government from 1942 to 1965 to fill manual labor shortages during and after WWII. Admitted as temporary laborers but denied the possibility of permanently staying in the United States, these workers were used and underpaid by US agro-business and government authorities, who withheld ten percent of their wages for a social security-type program which was to be administered by the Mexican government. Some sixty years later, the vast majority of braceros have never received the benefits of these \$36 million in wage deductions, and the funds have “disappeared” from the Banco Nacional de Mexico. Since 2001, hundreds of surviving braceros have held public demonstrations and filed lawsuits, both in Mexico and the US, in attempts to receive compensation for braceros, their widows and children, most of whom live today in poverty.<sup>122</sup>

A “braceros” altar I saw on November 1, 2003, at the Day of the Dead celebration of the Mayapán Women’s Collective in El Paso, Texas, included posters explaining the history of the Bracero Program and informational pamphlets discussing the illegal wage deductions and how braceros or their families could join the current political and legal struggle to win financial remuneration. This event was attended by hundreds, including families, school groups, undocumented workers, political activists,

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<sup>122</sup> Kiley Russell, "Former migrant workers suing US, Mexico for back wages," Associated Press; March 5, 2001; Jerry Bier, "\$505b suit filed for Mexican workers," *The Fresno Bee*, February 24, 2001.

journalists, and senior citizens, several of whom were former braceros. In fact, when a few elderly Mexican men lingered in front of the bracero altar, visibly surprised and impressed to see public recognition of their experience, a spontaneous and lengthy discussion took place between these men and some of the onlooking public. People began to ask them questions, and the retired braceros appeared moved by the opportunity to discuss their experiences publicly.

Numerous agricultural-related altars are created throughout California and the Southwest each year, often constructed in schools (elementary, middle, and high school), universities, public libraries, museums, and other “high traffic” public areas of learning. These altars simultaneously promote Latino cultural traditions and teach a “bottom up” version of history that is under-emphasized in the mainstream collective consciousness. By keeping alive the historical memory of past political struggles and achievements, agricultural altars simultaneously honor the memory and sacrifice of the dead while keeping alive concerns about farm worker exploitation in the present that require the awareness and support of the larger community.

### Indigenous Rights

Another theme to emerge in US Day of the Dead celebrations is that of indigenous rights, and it is not uncommon for Native Americans, Chicanos, and Latin American immigrants of indigenous heritage to come together in solidarity to publicly remember their histories of disenfranchisement and exploitation.<sup>123</sup> In November 1999, Lakota-Sioux Indians from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, together with

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<sup>123</sup> From its inception, the Chicano Movement has received inspiration from and felt solidarity with the cultures and struggles of indigenous Mexican and US Native American peoples (among others).

Mayan Indians from Guatemala living in the US,<sup>124</sup> organized a Day of the Dead event in Washington, DC. Held directly across from the White House in downtown Lafayette Park, the event featured Guatemalan Day of the Dead kites, Mayan music, dancers, and a series of speeches.<sup>125</sup> Themes addressed included the genocide of native peoples across the Americas, solidarity with the people of Guatemala, calls to free Leonard Peltier,<sup>126</sup> and demands to shut down the US Army's School of the Americas.<sup>127</sup> Participants brought photos and mementos of indigenous martyrs for placement on a community altar, which visually underscored the US government's obligation to make restitution for past and present abuses to the native peoples of both North and South America.

In an unrelated event the previous year, over 2,000 Native Americans gathered in Mesa, Arizona, on Day of the Dead to pray and dance in honor of their ancestors.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, on November 2, 2002, Pomo Indians from Northern California traveled more than 500 miles to Chicano Park, the symbolic center of San Diego's Latino community, to drum, sing, build a sweat lodge, and communally create a giant altar honoring Chicano and Native American ancestors.<sup>129</sup> I have seen altars honoring indigenous struggles at numerous Day of the Dead events, including exhibits in 2003 at The

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<sup>124</sup> Members of the International Maya League, a non-profit organization incorporated in 1990 by Guatemalans living in exile in the US, working to raise awareness of the violent affects of US foreign policy in Guatemala.

<sup>125</sup> Retrieved on November 15, 2001 from the School of the Americas Watch website: [www.soaw-ne.org/daydead.html](http://www.soaw-ne.org/daydead.html)

<sup>126</sup> American Indian Movement (AIM) activist allegedly framed by the FBI because of his political work and imprisoned for more than twenty-five years on murder charges.

<sup>127</sup> Dubbed the "School of Assassins" by international human rights activists, this facility trains Latin American military leaders in counter insurgency tactics. Its graduates have been responsible for committing some of the worst human rights abuses in Latin America, including assassinations, torture, and massacres of civilian populations.

<sup>128</sup> Carlos Miller, "Native Americans honor their ancestors," *Arizona Republic*, October 26, 2001.

<sup>129</sup> Personal observation, November 2, 2002.

Mexican Cultural Institute in Los Angeles, the Fruitvale Day of the Dead Festival in Oakland, California, and the Day of the Dead Festival in Mesilla, New Mexico; and in 2004 at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles, the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, and the Day of the Dead Festival in Oceanside, California, to name only a few.

### Death of the Environment

Sometimes the focus of Day of the Dead events is not on dead people, per se, but deadly situations. In 1994, LA CAUSA (Los Angeles Communities United for a Sustainable Environment) held a Day of the Dead forum and art exhibit to draw attention to environmentally caused illnesses. “Revisiting the Dead: Latinos and the Environment” focused on the influx of toxins in Southeast L.A. caused by a high concentration of industrial plants in the area, and kicked off a community-based initiative to reduce environmental hazards. Using the allure of festival and art, the event (advertised in the *LA Times* and other local newspapers) attracted a variety of residents, scholars, environmental activists, elected officials, and others<sup>130</sup> who may not otherwise have attended a meeting about toxins in this distressed community. In a local manifestation of a global problem, residents used moral discourses about the “correct” and “incorrect” economic role of business in their community, defending working class interests above the profits of corporations. The language used at the event embodied what Thompson calls “certain essential premises...[about] what humans owe to each other in time of need” (1991: 350). Altars solemnizing the death of the environment

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<sup>130</sup> “Latino Event Focuses on Area’s Pollution,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1994, p. 9.



have become commonplace in Day of the Dead exhibits in schools and community centers across the US.

### Death Caused by War

Most recently, Day of the Dead altars and events have focused on the death and destruction caused by the Iraq War. On October 30, 2004, Mujeres Against Militarism and the Raza Unida Coalition sponsored a Day of the Dead Vigil Against Militarism in the Latino community of Sylmar, Los Angeles. Beginning with a 4:00 p.m. procession through residential and commercial sections of town in which participants held traditional candles, photos of the dead, and flowers, together with non-traditional banners of *calavera* skulls clad in army helmets, processants chanted, “No blood for oil!” and other anti-war slogans in Spanish and English, while onlookers in homes and stores stopped what they were doing to watch.<sup>131</sup>

The procession culminated in a five-hour Day of the Dead vigil outside of Tia Chucha’s Café Cultural, in which community members spoke publicly about the disproportionately high percentage of Latino youth dying in Iraq, as compared with other US populations. They condemned the presence of the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) and other military recruitment programs in Latino communities, noting that such programs are rarely found in the high schools of upper income communities. Located in a busy shopping mall, the vigil area included an altar wall lined with traditional marigolds and candles, on which hung photos of thirty-eight Latino youth recently killed in Iraq. Below each photo was the military

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<sup>131</sup> Personal observation, Sylmar, Los Angeles, California, October 30, 2004.

servicemember's name and birth/death dates, along with a description of the deceased youth's personality, accomplishments, goals and dreams, such as the following: "Amy Lopez was a straight A student who had planned to attend college. She joined the army as a way to help fund her education and see the world. She loved animals and wanted to become a veterinarian. She was killed in a mortar attack in Fallujah. She was 19 years old." Hundreds of passersby and shoppers at the mall stopped to look at the photos of the candlelit altar wall and were visibly sobered by this Day of the Dead memorial.

Over the past two years, in California, New Mexico, and Texas, I have seen dozens of altar exhibits and vigils commemorating both Iraqi and US casualties of the war. They have appeared in Latino galleries and community centers, as well as in mainstream museums and commercially-sponsored Day of the Dead festivals. An interesting example was an anti-war altar on display at the 2004 Day of the Dead Festival in Oceanside, California – a city known for its heavy pro-military stance. This annual event attracts over 10,000 people and, in 2004, included twenty outdoor altars exhibited in the center of town, where one of the main streets had been cordoned off from auto traffic for the festival. In the midst of the downtown area (where storefronts routinely display American flags, advertise "military discounts," and brandish signs declaring "We support our troops"), stood a large altar decorated with crosses and adornments done in El Salvadoran *pirografia* style.<sup>132</sup> A life-sized *calavera* dressed in a military camouflage uniform and helmet sat at the front of the altar, near an oil drum

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<sup>132</sup> A craft done in El Salvador, in which designs are burned in wood and colorfully painted and varnished.

and a container of Mobil car oil. The Salvadoran-American woman standing by the altar explained the significance of the altar to all passersby, switching languages as necessary to talk with the English and Spanish speakers in the public. She was a member of the North County Coalition for Peace and Justice, whose members had created this altar, dedicating it principally to Jesus Suarez del Solar Navarro, one of the first American Marines to die in Iraq. On a table beside the altar was information on the Coalition for Peace and Justice as well as information on national anti-war work being done by Suarez del Solar Navarro's father, Fernando Suarez; YANO, a project on youth and non-military opportunities; and other anti-militarization organizations.

As the preceding examples illustrate, US Day of the Dead altars reflect the political periods in which they are created. During the 1980s, hundreds of altars throughout the country were dedicated to the victims of AIDS and the US-funded wars in Central America. In the 1990s, many Day of the Dead events and exhibits reflected opposition to anti-immigrant policies, environmental destruction and domestic violence. In 2001, a multitude of Day of the Dead altars across the country honored those killed in the September 11 World Trade Center explosions. From 2002 through 2005, I observed altars throughout California and the Southwest, particularly in the southern border towns, that drew attention to the rape and murder of hundreds of female maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, an issue that has slowly come to the public's attention over the past few years. From 2003 through 2005, numerous Day of the Dead exhibits included altars commemorating the deaths of both US military servicemembers and local civilians, as a result of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

US Day of the Dead celebrations function in a number of interesting ways, engendering feelings of cross-class and intra-ethnic solidarity among Latinos and encouraging cross-cultural solidarity between peoples of diverse races, ages, ethnicities and religions. Whether such feelings of solidarity are temporary or have long lasting effects, Day of the Dead illustrates how ritual and visual communication are effective in making the “private” public and in stimulating the types of communion necessary to achieve greater understanding and “community” within an extremely heterogeneous society. Because of their public nature, Day of the Dead events not only celebrate Latino culture and honor the dead but also challenge the American-style privatization of mourning by publicly expressing the pain and anger of populations disproportionately affected by an unnecessary loss of life. Through personalizing public issues and infusing traditional rites with modern meanings, politicized Day of the Dead events function at both the micro- and macro-political level – at times quietly inviting the public to reflect on the reality of oppressed populations, while at other times actively urging concrete public action towards addressing sociopolitical causes of death. In both cases, event organizers strive to open the consciousness of the public and stir it to action on behalf of those members in society who are victimized, discarded, and forgotten.

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## Chapter Four: Day of the Dead in the News

### 4.1 Mass mediations of a death ritual

“Interest increases in Day of the Dead,” Robert Crowe, *The Houston Chronicle*, Nov. 7, 2002, This Week, pg. 1.

“Homage to the dead in Dia de los Muertos draws thousands to Seattle Center,” Maria Gonzalez, *The Seattle Times*, November 2, 2003, Local News, p. B1.

“Dia de los Muertos is bustin’ out all over the place,” Eduardo Cuan, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, October 28, 2004, Entertainment, p. 21.

“For a growing number of Atlantans: navigating life requires honoring the dead...” Yolanda Rodriguez, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 6, 2002, p. 1E.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, open a newspaper in just about any major US city (and myriad small cities and towns) in late October or early November, and you’ll encounter articles about Day of the Dead. Typically, a given newspaper will publish several Day of the Dead articles and listings during the “Muertos” season, which in the US ranges from late September to mid November. Stories range from coverage of children’s Day of the Dead activities to avant-garde art exhibits, community celebrations, political manifestations, holiday recipes, craft instructions, and theological reflections. Given that thirty years ago the holiday was virtually non-existent in the US media, this chapter examines English-language media coverage of the celebration as a site for the representation of Latinos in mainstream US society. In particular, I explore what the exponential increase in media coverage of Day of the Dead means for the Latino community, a population that has been underrepresented and misrepresented in the mainstream media for most of the twentieth century.

As critical media scholars have noted, commercial media (print, television, film, music, video and the Internet) are not simply a source of knowledge and entertainment, but a site of cultural politics. Herman Gray suggests that the media are both resources

and sites in which race, as a cultural sign, “is produced, circulated and enacted” (1995:2). Ana Lopez argues that the media do not simply represent ethnic and minority populations, but create them and provide audiences with an experience of them (Lopez 1991:405).

I argue that as it grew to eventually become the largest public Latino celebration in the United States, Day of the Dead attracted widescale media coverage that, in addition to the events themselves, became ritualized and institutionalized opportunities for Latinos to communicate their own perspectives and interpretations of their culture to the larger US audience. Contesting the assimilationist theory prominent for most of the twentieth century, which posited that ethnic minorities could only hope to be “real Americans” through cultural assimilation and political accommodation to existing Anglo norms, Chicano Movement activists reclaimed Day of the Dead as a way to reinvent themselves and challenge conventional ideas of what it meant to be American. Television, radio and newspaper coverage of the ritual celebration literally put Latinos in the headlines each October and November, eventually impacting mainstream US culture to the point where Day of the Dead has become a new American holiday and the art of altar-making a respected form of visual communication.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Folklorists such as Jean McMann and Sylvia Grider suggest that the custom of public altar making by Latinos has popularized the practice among the mainstream US population. See, for example, the research of McMann (1998) and Grider (2001) on the growth of altar making among mainstream Americans. Altar making as “art” first appeared in US museums in the context of Day of the Dead exhibits, yet today institutions across the country consider altars a form of art worthy of exhibitions year-round. A few examples include the San Diego Public Library’s “The Altars Project” exhibit, shown from December 12, 2004 - January 30, 2005; The San Francisco SomArts Gallery’s “Native Tears” Native American altar exhibit shown from March 4 - 24, 2004; Santa Clara University’s “Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-inspired Art,” exhibit, which ran from April 25 - August 4, 2000; and the “Sacred Wild” altar exhibit at the Apexart gallery in New York, May 25-June 25, 2005.

## Methodology

My review is based on a content and textual analysis of Day of the Dead coverage from 1972, the year of the celebration's public advent in California, through November 2004. To track the growth of this celebration in the media, I studied a variety of sources, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, documentary videos, billboards, poster advertisements and websites. Because my research focuses mainly on California celebrations, I chose the two largest California newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, to illustrate the growth of Day of the Dead coverage quantitatively over the past thirty-three years. These two publications were selected because they are the papers of record for each of the two cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where California's public Day of the Dead celebrations first came into existence. Each paper is read not only by citizens in the cities of publication but also by people throughout each respective geographical region. *The San Francisco Chronicle* is the most prominent newspaper in northern California, read in Sacramento, San Jose, and other regional cities. Similarly, *The Los Angeles Times* is read in San Diego, Riverside, Irvine, and elsewhere throughout southern California. As the largest news organization in California and one of the best-known newspapers in the United States, *The Times* is considered a bellwether for California and the West, in terms of news and cultural coverage.

My qualitative analysis includes examples of media representations from both California and non-California sources to illustrate the extensive presence of the celebration in newspaper coverage across the country. All articles were collected via the search engines Lexis-Nexis and Proquest, using the search terms "Day of the Dead"

and “Dia de los Muertos.” I accessed articles published from 1972-1984 by scanning microfilm copies of newspapers from the dates Oct. 30 through November 3 for each year.<sup>134</sup> In addition, I surveyed journalists who have written articles about US Day of the Dead celebrations in newspapers across the country.<sup>135</sup> Predominantly but not exclusively Latino, these journalists, whose professional experience ranged from a few years to over thirty years in the news business, offered insights regarding the rise in the past couple of decades of Day of the Dead and other Latino issues in the news.

## **4.2 Latinos in the US Media**

In order to contextualize the discussion, a review of the research on portrayals of Latinos in mainstream US media is useful. Numerous studies done in recent years conclude that, while Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, representing 13% of the total national population, they receive the least media coverage of any group in the country. According to a recent study by UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center that analyzed the content of prime time news and reality programming, drama, situation comedies, sports, variety shows, animation, and other television genres, Latinos are “the most dramatically under-represented racial/ethnic group on prime-time” (Hoffman & Noriega: 2004:6). The report notes that 85% of all prime-time shows do not include Latinos as regular characters. The findings of this report are consistent with similar studies conducted over the past four decades. A study published

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<sup>134</sup> From personal interviews with organizers, I know that Day of the Dead activities during these early years were concentrated in late October and the first couple of days of November, unlike today, where Day of the Dead season lasts for a couple of months.

<sup>135</sup> Using names from the bylines of Day of the Dead articles written over the past 15 years, I initially wrote to 54 journalists. About half of these individuals no longer worked for the paper in question and could not be reached. I received responses from 19 people, 64% of whom were Latinos.

in 1993 by the Nieman Center for Journalism at Harvard University found that only 1% of national TV news focused on Latinos (Alvear 1998:49), while research done at the Annenberg School of Communication revealed that on major network news, “Latinos make up 1.5% of all newsmakers, only 0.3% of all news deliverers, and were not cited at all as sources, spokespersons or authorities – by far the lowest proportion of any other group” (Gerbner 1993). Other studies concluded that, of the one percent of network news stories about Latinos, 85% fell into one of four negative or controversial categories: crime, immigration, affirmative action, or welfare (Carveth & Alverio 1997).

Similarly, a 1994 study of entertainment TV done by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that only one percent of all characters on entertainment TV were Latinos, down from three percent in the 1950s (cited in Portales 2000: 56). Other research notes that Latinos have been severely under-represented in magazine and television advertising (Taylor & Bang: 1997:285; *Hispanic Business*: 1999:46) and have been underrepresented and misrepresented in Hollywood films for most of the twentieth century. Several researchers have documented how Latinos in film have overwhelmingly been portrayed as deviant and dependent in such tireless tropes as the bandido, the greaser/gang banger, the Latin Lover, the dangerous temptress, the dim-witted buffoon, or the welfare recipient (Friedman 1991; Fregoso 1993; Rodriguez 1997). Rodriguez asserts that the absence of diverse and realistic film portrayals of Latinos reinforces and increases discriminatory behavior, undermining public support for policy interventions aimed at addressing discrimination (1997).



Coverage of Latinos in mainstream US newspapers has been found to reflect the stereotypes found in generations of Hollywood films. Various analyses of major papers across the United States conclude that Latinos have been portrayed primarily within “problem” and “social disadvantage” news frames, as people who live in crime-infested neighborhoods, lack basic educational and job skills, and are probably not legitimate US citizens (Rodriguez 1997; Carveth & Alverio 1997). Studies conducted from the 1960s through the 1990s note that news stories about Latinos and other minorities focus disproportionately on gangs, illegal immigration, and violence, portraying minorities as “problem people” who represent a danger and resource drain for the rest of society (Fishman & Casiano:1969; Wilson & Gutierrez: 1985; Turk et al. 1989; Smith 1992). Rodriguez notes that “These negative portrayals are exacerbated by the fact that they are rarely counterbalanced by Hispanics who appear in more positive settings in the news...[R]ather than helping to overcome the negative image of Latinos fostered by entertainment programming, the news media appear to reinforce this image through often stereotypical news coverage” (1997:31).

The conclusions of a more recent analysis of news content in *The Dallas Morning News* (TDMN) found that only 5% of all stories covered Latinos in an area where Latinos represented 13% of the population. Noting that editors at *TDMN*, *USA Today*, and other news outlets have attempted to increase news coverage of Latinos in response to criticisms of the industry, this study found that while coverage of Latinos in *TDMN* was not overtly negative, it was still problematic because of “the limited range of what little coverage did appear.” One third of all *TDMN* stories about Latinos focused on sports, while many of the other stories appeared to suffer from tokenism, in

which athletes or entertainers were the subject of stories, rather than more serious Latino newsmakers or everyday people (Kraeplin & Subervi-Velez: 2003:119).

Similarly to Rodriguez and others, the authors conclude:

It may limit what young Latinos envision for their future by restricting the roles in which they see themselves. Where are the physicians, the architects, the teachers? Others may argue that such a limited portrayal may perpetuate myopic stereotypes of Latinos among other ethnic groups simply by offering few alternative visions of Latino life. Both effects are pernicious and further steps must be taken to ensure that the general market media offer a broader picture of Hispanics and the Hispanic community (Kraeplin & Subervi-Velez 2003:120-121).

Media scholars seeking to remedy the situation have suggested several solutions to the problems of negative and stereotypical news coverage of Latinos. These suggestions include the need to recruit more Latinos as reporters, editors, and managers of news organizations and the need to present more diverse and complex coverage of the Latino community, in which Latinos from many walks of life are represented and sought out as news sources.

As the largest Latino celebration in the United States, Day of the Dead has increasingly become the subject of media coverage over the past thirty-three years. This coverage is a form of wide-scale and positive visibility for the Latino community, breaking with the historical norms of Latino media coverage in a number of important ways. First and most obvious is that a Latino cultural practice, once considered an obscure and even embarrassing “minority” ritual relegated to the elderly and the superstitious, is now regularly front-page news in the Metro, Region, Culture, Arts and Calendar sections (and sometimes the main front page) of newspapers across the

country. From the 1970s to the present, news coverage of Day of the Dead has gone from being virtually non-existent, to achieving a couple of lines in the Calendar listings (in the late 1970s and early 1980s), to warranting small articles in the back pages (mid 1980s), to receiving routine lead story status with colorful photos in some of the most heavily read sections of the newspaper (early 1990s to the present), presenting Latinos and Latino culture as a vibrant and legitimate part of US culture.

The second break with past journalistic norms is that the news sources interviewed for Day of the Dead stories represent a diverse range of “every day” Latinos, rather than sports and entertainment icons. These people include educators, librarians and students, Latinos involved in the arts and social services (e.g., artists, curators, poets, folk dancers, staff of community-based organizations), activists (working on immigrant rights, environmental justice, anti-war and anti-military recruiting efforts, women’s rights, youth work, labor issues, etc.), and others (e.g., homemakers, the elderly, religious leaders, parents, children, recent immigrants, shopkeepers). In contrast to the historically low percentage of diverse and positive representations of Latinos in the mainstream news, Day of the Dead season has become an institutionalized period each year when these images are seen in the news.

The third break with the past is that a significant amount of Day of the Dead coverage discusses issues of political importance to the Latino community, as defined by Latinos themselves. Here, Latinos are the subjects rather than the objects of communication, and media coverage of altars and processions for victims of gang violence, unsafe work conditions, or war, for example, catapult Latino perspectives on these issues to the front pages. The public interest generated by this cultural practice

has created annual media space for Latino-produced representations that present opportunities for political communication.

### **4.3 Day of the Dead as news event**

Day of the Dead celebrations in California were initiated as an important part of a multi-pronged approach by Chicano activists (involving political consciousness-raising through urban murals, danza, visual art, theater, music, poetry, etc.) to proudly reclaim their ethnic heritage and, most particularly, their indigenous heritage. From the beginning, these celebrations were formulated as performances of identity whose creators anticipated public viewing and media coverage. Unlike ritualized “media events” discussed by Dayan & Katz (1992), however, Day of the Dead events were not crafted by establishment figures, but by artists and activists from the margins of mainstream culture. The novel events eventually attracted the attention of establishment institutions such as the mass media, schools, museums, commercial organizations, and local governments.

Prior to the 1970s, public approbation of Mexican-American and other US Latino cultures was rare in the realm of arts, culture, and education. If heritage was acknowledged at all, it was exclusively the Spanish ancestry that was considered noteworthy, as in Flamenco dancing, Spanish cuisine, architecture, and classic literature. For centuries, both in Latin America and the United States, Eurocentric racism had constructed the indigenous heritage of Mestizos as a shameful impurity that consigned them to inferior socioeconomic status vis-à-vis whites. As Yolanda Garfias Woo, now in her 60s, notes:

I grew up [in California] in a time when Latinos were still changing their last names in order to get better jobs and promotions. If you were light skinned and could pass for something else, you did, because it was easier and you had more opportunity. It wasn't really shame of culture, but a matter of trying to survive. It still happens in Mexico with the class system, where the middle classes are still afraid to associate too much with the indigenous groups, which they consider to be below them.<sup>136</sup>

Chicana activist Nancy Chárrega, who organizes Day of the Dead workshops at her fair trade store, Casa Bonampak, in San Francisco's Mission district, discusses similar experiences:

Mexicans are a fusion of Indian culture and Spanish culture, and as a product of colonialization, we have sort of this unconscious psychology ingrained in us that we should hate the Indian aspect of ourselves, and that the European aspect is better. So we really struggle with that and really undervalue our culture.<sup>137</sup>

So, while both Latinos and non-Latinos attending early Day of the Dead events experienced a mixture of surprise, admiration, and awe at the rituals they observed, many Latinos, in particular, experienced deep feelings of cultural validation and pride. For many, California's Day of the Dead events represented the first time in their lives that they saw familiar aspects of their culture, previously denigrated as "superstitious" and "ignorant" (e.g., altar-making, gravesite adornment, folk religious devotional practices), acclaimed in the mainstream public sphere as artistically valuable and philosophically profound. And while attending Day of the Dead events in person was a moving experience, media coverage of these events had an even farther-reaching effect

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<sup>136</sup> Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

<sup>137</sup> Personal interview with Nancy Chárrega, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2003.

of publicizing Latino culture and pride to millions among the general public who were not personally connected to the Chicano Movement, the art world, or multi-cultural educational programs. Thus, these celebrations communicate to the public in two ways: on a personal level, as individuals observe exhibits and rituals, and on a collective level through media coverage of events. Arjun Appadurai has noted that the conditions of collective reading and imagining which the mass media make possible facilitate “a community of sentiment” – a group that begins to imagine and feel things together (Appadurai 1990). Media coverage of Day of the Dead is one way that US Latinos come to see themselves as a group of people with historical, religious and social commonalities.

Moreover, media coverage of Day of the Dead portrays Latinos as having something valuable to offer mainstream US society. In a country where the commercial celebration of Halloween begins to occupy people’s minds (or at least the windows and shelves of stores, restaurants, schools, libraries, popular magazine covers, and other public spaces) from mid August through October 31, annual media coverage of Day of the Dead activities has helped validate and promote an alternative autumn ritual, interrupting the exclusive reign of Halloween in America’s early fall holiday calendar. This coverage counters earlier stereotypes of Latinos by recasting them from dependent and deficient frames to trend-setting frames. Coverage routinely depicts Day of the Dead as beautiful, valuable, and, according to many descriptions, more meaningful than Halloween. Consider, for example, the opening sentences of the following articles:

For most people who grow up in the United States, Halloween is little more than an excuse to wear tacky costumes, gorge on the plastic waxiness of candy corn and maybe get a few pleasant thrills at the local haunted house. But for many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, the days at the end of October and the beginning of November are both more solemn and more festive – involving the entire family rather than only the children.<sup>138</sup>

For many Americans, the colors of death squeeze into a narrow spectrum. Funeral attire is black, while the pallor of the dead is described as ashen or ghostly. Red, green, blue, fiery orange, deep lavender, the vibrancy of the rainbow – this is not death's palette. That might change for those who take in a new exhibit at Harvard's Peabody Museum on *Dias de los Muertos* (Days of the Dead), a Latin American festival that celebrates the links between the living and the deceased.<sup>139</sup>

Halloween gets most of the hype, but of this weekend's two spooky holidays, *Dia de los Muertos* has the most heart and soul.<sup>140</sup>

#### The mass media as promotional vehicle

Unlike Day of the Dead practitioners in much of Latin America, where ritual activities such as altar-making, visiting the cemetery, or preparing special foods for the holiday are part of the quotidian fabric of community life, most people in the US, whether Latino or non-Latino, rely on some form of mass media to learn about Day of the Dead activities or acquire concrete details about anticipated annual events.<sup>141</sup> During the weeks preceding November 1 and 2, daily and weekly papers announce Day of the Dead events, explaining the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” of the

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<sup>138</sup> Devorah Knaff, “A lively attitude on death: Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations go beyond the ghoulish activities of Halloween,” *The Press-Enterprise*, Riverside, CA, October 16, 1994, p. AA16.

<sup>139</sup> Rich Barlow, “Spiritual Life,” in *The Boston Globe*, November 16, 2002, Metro/Region, p. B2.

<sup>140</sup> No byline. “The other spooky holiday,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 26, 2003, Sunday Datebook, p. 17.

<sup>141</sup> While word of mouth may be the main way that people already connected with a sponsoring organization learn about its Day of the Dead events, particularly in smaller organizations, thousands more learn about these events via newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet.

celebratory activities. Posters announcing the festivities are hung in windows of commercial establishments, community organizations, and schools, while banners and billboards are placed in commercial centers, parks, and university campuses. Early each fall, community centers, art galleries, and museums mail thousands of postcards to their constituents announcing the dates of Day of the Dead exhibits, workshops, and related events. Entertainment magazines and the “Calendar” or “Arts” sections of newspapers include Day of the Dead listings each week from late September through November. Many sponsoring galleries, museums, universities, folk art stores, cafes, and community centers post a schedule of their Day of the Dead activities on their web pages.<sup>142</sup>

Scholars of media, popular culture, and religion note that the media are significant for their ability to bring marginal voices into contexts where they have traditionally not been accessible (Hoover et al. 2002). Over the past thirty-three years, Day of the Dead has been made accessible to average Americans through a substantial amount of mainstream media coverage ranging from the Associated Press and National Public Radio, to local TV stations, newspapers, and independent documentary film. In the past five years, there have been Day of the Dead episodes on primetime television shows such as PBS’ *American Family* (2002 season) and two of HBO’s highly popular TV series, *Six Feet Under* (2002 season) and *Carnivale* (2003 season). A recent John Sayles movie, *Silver City* (2004), included a Day of the Dead scene and the Tim Burton film *Corpse Bride* (2005) was filled with Day of the Dead imagery. National travel

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<sup>142</sup> Through web pages, I discovered several new Day of the Dead activities at organizations with which I was not previously familiar and accessed schedules for Day of the Dead activities I attend annually.



magazines such as AAA's *Horizons* and *Westways*, and the *Elderhostel Annual Program* publication promote Day of the Dead excursions in New Mexico, Texas, and California. Mainstream lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Travel and Leisure*, and *Holiday Celebrations* feature articles on how to decorate and cook for Day of the Dead. National news publications such as *US News and World Reports*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* include stories on Day of the Dead celebrations occurring in both the United States and Mexico. In addition, the celebration is the subject of thousands of English-language commercial, non-profit, and personal websites geared towards a US audience.

A native of San Diego described the increase in news coverage of Day of the Dead in the following way:

Ten years ago, I saw just one article, one *tiny* little mention in the paper saying, "Come see this." Now, there's much more than one celebration in locations around the county and it's celebrated on more than one day. There are four or five or six celebrations lasting several days or weeks. Now you see feature articles in the newspapers, which ten, fifteen or twenty years ago, you *never* saw. Nothing was ever done to honor the Latino culture anywhere here in San Diego County, which is staggering, if you think about it, because we have lots of Latinos here and we're kissing the Border.<sup>143</sup>

Numerous first-time attendees I have spoken with at Day of the Dead events reported that they learned about the event through their local newspaper or through receiving a newsletter or postcard from the hosting organization.<sup>144</sup> Others mentioned

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<sup>143</sup> Personal interview with Judy Bishop, La Jolla, California, April 29, 2003.

<sup>144</sup> For example, at the 2003 Day of the Dead celebration of the California Center for the Arts in Escondido, I met people of Jewish, Italian-American, and other non-Latino backgrounds who learned of the event from the *San Diego Reader*. I also met Latinos, including a Guatemalan family and a married couple from Oaxaca, who said they came because they read about it in the *North County Times*. Even

hearing about events on radio or TV, such as a San Francisco woman who told me she was driving her car when she heard live coverage on National Public Radio of the 2004 opening of the SoMarts Gallery Day of the Dead exhibit, so she “stepped on the gas and headed over.” While the Internet is used most often by regulars already familiar with a specific Day of the Dead event who simply want to download schedules or directions, I also met people who used the Net to discover events on line, such as an Anglo college student new to the San Diego area, who attended the 2001 Holtville cemetery event after searching “Day of the Dead” and “San Diego” on “Google.com.”

The Internet has become an important tool not only for organizing and advertising Day of the Dead festivities but also for sharing historical and educational materials. Enter the term, “Day of the Dead” in the Google.com search engine and nearly 200,000 entrees appear.<sup>145</sup> The majority of Internet sites provide a history of the holiday, replete with colorful photographs and information on upcoming events. Many sites are created and maintained by educators who share their Day of the Dead teaching curricula with the public for free. Other sites are maintained by galleries, community centers, or university faculty (usually from Spanish Language or Latin American Studies departments) to advertise their events or display photos of their Day of the Dead exhibits. Still other sites are sponsored by online catalogs, stores, and museums that sell Day of the Dead products ranging from educational curricula and books to Day of the Dead sugar skulls, toys, decorations, “muertos art,” T-shirts, tequila shot glasses and more.

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“repeat customers,” who attend the event each year, told me they relied on mass mailings or newspapers to learn the time, date, and other program details.

<sup>145</sup> As of November 1, 2005.

Many of these sites offer detailed information on how to make Day of the Dead altars and decorations (such as *papel picado*, masks and sugar skulls) or traditional Mexican Day of the Dead culinary fare such as *pan de muerto* or *mole*. While much fewer in number, other sites discuss Day of the Dead traditions of countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Bolivia, explaining how to make Guatemalan Day of the Dead kites, cut-out gourds, and the traditional dish *el fiambre*; discussing the waxed paper flowers and fried tortilla *ojuelas* popular in El Salvador; or providing recipes and photos of Andean Day of the Dead breads known as *guaguas*.

People who are not employees or constituents of a particular arts organization or community center are most likely to rely on media coverage to learn about Day of the Dead traditions and annual activities. As examples of the kinds of events typically listed in newspapers, the following appeared in the weekly arts and culture magazine, *The San Diego Reader*, during the two weeks prior to November 1, 2002. Similar event listings can be found in newspapers across California and the United States:<sup>146</sup>

*Art for the Dead:* This celebration is at the Chicano Park Gazebo on Friday November 1. Expect to find altar building, spoken word, music and a marketplace to celebrate Days of the Dead. A special offering will be built to commemorate the second cycle of mourning for the twin towers victims. Free.

*Dia de los Muertos* is being celebrated all over town this week. Bazaar del Mundo has activities planned from Saturday, October 26, through Sunday, November 2, with traditional decorations, activities and artists' demonstrations. Hours 10:00 am to 9:00 pm...Admission is free.

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<sup>146</sup> Taken from the *San Diego Reader* during weeks of October 24, 2002 (in which there were six different Day of the Dead events advertised), and October 31, 2002 (in which there were eight different Day of the Dead events advertised). There were additional announcements of these and other events in the *San Diego Union Tribune*, the *North County Times*, the bilingual *La Prensa San Diego*, and many smaller community newspapers throughout San Diego County.

*Bring Mementos, Photographs and Objects* that remind you of deceased loved Diego State University. The event begins with a slide-illustrated lecture...and ends with a community altar-making ceremony. The altar will be on view in Love Library through Friday November 22. Free.

*The Day of the Dead Festivities* at Casa Familiar Civic and Recreational Center take place on Friday, November 1. There's altar making all day, with the observance getting underway at 6:00 pm and a *velacion* [communal time to remember the dead]...from 8:00 pm to midnight.

*Noche de Muertos*, head to Voz Alta Cultural Center to celebrate life and death with a poetry reading honoring those who have passed away...The event starts at 8:00 pm on Friday, November 1.

This small sampling of media listings illustrates how, from a primarily “internal” religious observance in Latin America, focused on the ritual preparation of homes and graves in honor of departed relatives, Day of the Dead is transformed in the US into an “external” advertised “cultural happening,” primarily celebrated in galleries, community centers, schools, libraries, museums, and parks. In contrast to Latin America, the media in the US play a much greater role in educating and informing the public about the holiday’s activities and meaning. Museum catalogs, promotional posters (themselves spectacular works of art by Latino artists), and T-shirts advertising Day of the Dead events are other media artifacts that educate the public about this ritual celebration.<sup>147</sup> Promoted by these multiple forms of mass media and the implementation of multicultural K-12 curricula over the past three decades, Day of the Dead has gone from being viewed by the mainstream as a “strange” practice of an ethnic minority, to a well-known seasonal event, embraced by growing numbers of average Americans.

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<sup>147</sup> The vast majority of museums, galleries, community centers, and civic organizations that sponsor Day of the Dead events create new T-shirt designs each year, which are sold to raise money for the organizations and events.

While many people learn of activities in their communities via word of mouth, media coverage of Day of the Dead events reaches people who might not otherwise hear of the celebrations. Various event organizers I spoke with mentioned ways that the media have helped promote their Day of the Dead activities to people beyond the immediate vicinity. Mary Ann Thiem, chief organizer of the Day of the Dead Festival in Oceanside, California, explained:

Day of the Dead is a baby event for us. We're just starting... We're guessing that Day of the Dead brings in about 10,000 to 15,000 people... We still need to do more education about it, but it's growing by word of mouth and in the media. We advertise it in *The North County Times*, *The San Diego Reader* and *The Union Tribune*. We have a newsletter that goes out to all our Mainstreet members. *Telemundo* promoted it... this year we may be working with *Uniradio*. We're planning to do more advertising on Spanish-speaking stations. It gets written up in *Oceanside Magazine*. Last year *The North County Times* did a huge spread on it. There were something like 33 different articles on Day of the Dead, in a huge spread. Not just writing about ours, but other events happening in the county.<sup>148</sup>

Estela Rubalcava Klink, director of the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego where Day of the Dead celebrations have taken place since 1994, explains that while the majority of people who attend the annual celebration are local residents, media coverage has attracted people from throughout San Diego County:

It's really grown and we have press releases in local magazines and newspapers... We get people from San Ysidro, North County, Oceanside... People come from Los Angeles. There are bus tours that come, organized by another organization. There are tourists, a mixture of Caucasians, African-Americans, and Latinos, and professors and students from universities. Last year we were written about in *Smithsonian*

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<sup>148</sup> Personal interview with Mary Ann Thiem, July 8, 2003, Oceanside, California.

*Magazine* and we were announced in *Night and Day* and *The San Diego Reader*.<sup>149</sup>

The owners of Back From Tomboctou, a San Diego gallery and folk art store known for Day of the Dead products and workshops, felt that news coverage helped attract people to their shop: “There have been articles in the *Union Tribune* that mention us on Dia de Muertos. People come in here looking for information. We see a lot of college students coming in here with their notebooks...local TV stations call us.”<sup>150</sup> Similarly, the owner of the Folktree Gallery in Pasadena, offering annual Day of the Dead altar exhibits, merchandise, and Dia de los Muertos travel tours to Mexico, noted that media coverage has helped promote Day of the Dead and her gallery: “There’s usually at least one article in one of the local papers about us. *The Star News* and *The Pasadena Weekly*. Once I was on the cover of *The L.A. Reader*. One year we got a blurb in an opera handbook...Oh, and we were in *The New York Times* once. We were also in *Travel and Leisure Magazine* and AAA’s *Westways*.”<sup>151</sup>

#### 4.4 The Growth of Media Coverage

Early California Day of the Dead events were publicized mainly via hand-typed flyers and word of mouth. According to my interviews with artists who organized the Day of the Dead celebrations in San Francisco’s Mission district in the 1970s, media coverage was not foremost in people’s minds at the time: “We were too busy just trying to organize the exhibit. We weren’t thinking about publicity. People came because of

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<sup>149</sup> Personal interview with Estela Rubalcava Klink, San Diego, California, June 12, 2003.

<sup>150</sup> Personal interview with Claudio DeLuca and Maribel Simán-DeLuca, San Diego, California, April 24, 2003.

<sup>151</sup> Personal interview with Rocky Behr, Pasadena, California, June 4, 2004.

word of mouth.”<sup>152</sup> In her research on San Francisco’s Day of the Dead celebrations, Suzanne Morrison notes that event organizers, while committed and hardworking, were overextended and disorganized. Noting the paucity of publicity in the early days, she states that while she lived in San Francisco and worked in the Mission neighborhood from 1974-1978, she heard nothing about Day of the Dead at La Galería de la Raza or elsewhere (Morrison 1992:343).

My review of coverage in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Los Angeles Times* during the 1970s found no full-length articles about these events in any sections of either paper. Paying particular attention to the “Calendar,” “Art Walk,” and “Family Guide to the Weekend” sections in *The Times*, and the “Events,” “Art,” and “Datebook,” sections in *The Chronicle*, I found that none of the autumn cultural happenings announced in any of these sections took place in the Latino neighborhoods of East Los Angeles or the Mission District of San Francisco. Associated with crime, poverty, and violence, these neighborhoods were apparently not yet considered suitable locations for family and arts activities. Despite the lack of initial media coverage, however, word of mouth about the early Day of the Dead exhibits and processions spread quickly, particularly in arts circles, and growing numbers of people attended the events each year. The Latin American aesthetic and indigenous metaphysical philosophy soon attracted the interest of major museums that, in turn, attracted media attention from local newspapers and television stations. Chicana artist and educator, Yolanda Garfias Woo, affectionately known in San Francisco circles as “La Madrina de ‘Los Muertos’” (the godmother of Day of the Dead) for her pioneering work conducting

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<sup>152</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2003.

Day of the Dead workshops in California schools in the 1960s, was invited to create an altar exhibit at the prestigious De Young Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco in 1975.

To her surprise, all three major TV networks covered the opening of the exhibit:

It was the first time a major museum was interested in Dia de los Muertos, something so ethnically *outlandish*... Channels 4, 5, and 7 were all there with camera crews, filming and asking all kinds of questions that no one on the museum staff could answer. They were doing community interest stories. But channel 7 had an ABC program called *Perspectives* that was an hour long, and they returned and we filmed one hour about the exhibit and the whole history of Dia de los Muertos. It was great because since Galería was doing a Muertos exhibit at the same time, we got invited to a lot of TV programs to do a combined effort about the exhibits and about what this *was*. This was a real turning point for the community, as well as for me, in terms of being public.<sup>153</sup>

Soon the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Mexican Museum of San Francisco, and other distinguished institutions began to hold Day of the Dead exhibits featuring installations by Chicano artists. Exhibits at major museums were the first to attract the attention of the newspapers, although early coverage was limited to brief listings in the “Arts” sections. For example, in November of 1975 the De Young Museum exhibit received this curt mention in *The San Francisco Chronicle*: “M.H. De Young Memorial Museum ‘Day of the Dead’ Festival through December 14.”<sup>154</sup> A Day of the Dead exhibit at the San Francisco MOMA in 1980 received only a slightly longer mention:

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<sup>153</sup> Personal Interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

<sup>154</sup> “On the Town” section in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, “This World” supplement, November 2, 1975, p. 8.



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Day of the Dead Exhibition, based on the traditional Mexican celebration, includes an altar for dead souls with food and trinkets, by Amalia Mesa-Bains, and woodcuts from the 1920s by Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. Through November.<sup>155</sup>

In tiny print under the subheading “Galleries,” the above listing had no accompanying or follow-up article explaining the meaning of “the traditional Mexican celebration,” the relevance of “food and trinkets” to the altar, the connection of José Guadalupe Posada’s work to Day of the Dead, or any background information on the Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. Day of the Dead events at galleries in Latino neighborhoods began to be listed briefly in mainstream papers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However these were fairly nondescript, such as a listing in the “Calendar” section of *The Los Angeles Times* in 1980 that referred to Self Help Graphics’ November 2 Day of the Dead celebration as an “Autumn Celebration,” noting only that there would be “a costume parade, arts and crafts and live entertainment.”<sup>156</sup> This changed by the mid-1980s, when full-length articles and photos about Day of the Dead events began to emerge in both *The Chronicle* and *The Times*, providing lengthier explanations of the celebration’s history and meaning.

There are several combined reasons for the increase in media coverage in the 1980s. By this time, the original two celebrations had developed large public followings, numbering more than 3,000 participants in Self Help’s annual procession and even more visitors to their exhibit and workshop events, and around 10,000 participants in San Francisco’s procession and exhibits (Morrison 1992; Romo 2000).

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<sup>155</sup> “Art” section, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 2, 1980, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> “Calendar” in “Today” section of *The Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1980, p. 5.

As these events grew larger and better organized, coordinators began to send press packets to media outlets, hold press conferences, and spend time conducting interviews with journalists to educate them about the celebration. Broadcast and newspaper journalists arrived in greater numbers and were allowed to film and photograph Day of the Dead processions, exhibits, and activities, as were members of the general public. Unlike Day of the Dead activities in most of Latin America, where cameras would be considered intrusive, California's activities were created to be publicly showcased, and the media are an expected part of the proceedings.

The 1980s and 1990s saw an exponential growth in Day of the Dead activities at schools, galleries and community-based organizations across California, helping to make the celebration more widely known. The increased amount of news coverage coincides with an increased number of galleries and organizations, inspired by La Galería and Self Help Graphics, sponsoring their own Day of the Dead events. Below is a partial list charting the growth of Day of the Dead events in San Francisco and Los Angeles, compiled from information I received through newspaper articles, websites and personal communication with organization staff. The total number of museums, galleries, community centers, universities, civic organizations, and commercial establishments that initiated Day of the Dead events in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1980s and 1990s is much larger, and similar growth occurred at the same time in other parts of the country. The following is a chronological list of organizations, illustrating when they began holding their annual Day of the Dead celebrations:

Galería de la Raza, San Francisco (1972)  
 Self Help Graphics, Los Angeles (1972)  
 Mexican Museum of San Francisco (1975)  
 De Young Museum, San Francisco (1975)  
 Mexican Cultural Center, Olvera Street, Los Angeles (approx. 1975)  
 The Mission Cultural Center, San Francisco (1976)  
 El Centro de Acción Social, Los Angeles (1978)  
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1980)  
 The Los Angeles Children's Museum (1984)  
 The UCLA Museum of Cultural History (1986)  
 Folktree Gallery, Pasadena (1986)  
 The Los Angeles Photography Center (1987)  
 Instituto Familiar de la Raza, San Francisco (1988)  
 Long Beach Museum of Art (1989)  
 Pasadena Central Park annual celebration (1989)  
 Social and Public Art Resource Center, Los Angeles (1990)  
 Pasadena Art Center (1990)  
 Fullerton Museum Center, Los Angeles (1991)  
 Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, and Kidseum, Santa Ana (1993)  
 Plaza de la Raza, Los Angeles (early 1990s)  
 San Fernando Valley Latino Arts Council (1994)  
 The Oakland Museum of California (1994)  
 Fruitvale Mainstreets Day of Dead Festival, Oakland (1996)  
 SomArts Gallery, San Francisco (1998)  
 Precita Eyes Gallery, San Francisco (1998)  
 Pico Rivera Center for the Arts, Los Angeles (1998)  
 Los Angeles City Council District 14 (1999)  
 Hollywood Forever Cemetery (2000)

As the above list demonstrates, while there were only five California organizations holding Day of the Dead celebrations in the 1970s, the number doubled in the 1980s and tripled in the 1990s. This growth in numbers of organizations holding events was accompanied by a growth in the number of annual news stories. While the 1970s through 1980 yielded no full-length Day of the Dead articles in California's two largest newspapers, these papers averaged two and three articles per season by 1985, four articles per season by 1990, and six articles per season in 1995. By 1990, the Mission's Day of the Dead celebration made the front page of the *San Francisco*

*Examiner* (the evening edition of *The San Francisco Chronicle*), with a photo of the procession and a description of the celebration activities and their history.<sup>157</sup> Similar photos and articles appeared on main and sectional front pages of major papers around the country. From 2000 to 2004, Day of the Dead coverage had grown to an average of between six and eight articles per paper each year (see Table 1). While a few of these were about Day of the Dead in Mexico, the vast majority discussed Day of the Dead events in California, almost always accompanied by large photos and detailed listings of related events occurring throughout the city.

**Table 1. Annual number of articles about California Day of the Dead Events**

	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>SFChronicle</b>	0	2	4	6	8	6
<b>L.A. Times</b>	0	3	4	5	6	7

The rise in organizations holding Day of the Dead events in the 1980s and 1990s corresponds with the steady growth in the popularity of multiculturalism as schools, galleries, museums, and community-based organizations received generous funding from public and private sources to reach out to and reflect diverse constituents. Day of the Dead became a flagship event of multicultural curricula aimed at elementary, middle, and high school students in California and the Southwest, as well as an autumn highlight of multicultural teacher training workshops and manuals across the country. It is an event particularly well suited for educational curricula, engendering numerous

<sup>157</sup> Lon Daniels, "The Day of the Dead: Mission District Celebrates Ancient Aztec Festival," *The San Francisco Examiner*, pg. 1, November 3, 1990.

academic components such as language arts (*calavera* poetry writing), history, social studies, art, anthropology, and religion. Several journalists I contacted, such as the following three, cited multiculturalism as a reason for the growth in Day of the Dead news coverage:

The dominant, middle-class white liberal affection for “multiculturalism” is one reason, as many newsrooms are run by editors who came of age journalistically and politically between the 60s and 80s. It’s genuine, and I think worthy, however, because their view in many ways reflects the view of their readership, particularly in large urban centers.<sup>158</sup>

I think it’s the growing interest in multiculturalism. This is an interesting cultural event that many readers don’t know about but might want to see. We also write about the African-American Juneteenth celebration and other ethnic celebrations.<sup>159</sup>

The editors of a lot of newspapers realize the importance of diversity and that celebrating diverse cultures will attract readers to their paper.<sup>160</sup>

At the same time, editors at media organizations were responding throughout the 1980s and 1990s to Affirmative Action requirements to hire more women and people of color, historically marginalized from the traditionally White, male profession of journalism. These hiring policies, combined with similar Affirmative Action policies at universities nationwide, resulted in higher numbers of Latinos graduating from college, attending journalism schools, and being hired at newspapers. The responses I received from Latino journalists indicated that their ethnic background played a role in their choice to write about Day of the Dead, suggesting that the increase in Latino journalists at newspapers across the country is at least partially responsible for the increased

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<sup>158</sup> Personal communication with Daniel Hernandez, reporter at *The Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2005.

<sup>159</sup> Personal communication with reporter who preferred anonymity, *The Boston Globe*, June 11, 2005.

<sup>160</sup> Personal communication with Adriana Chávez, reporter at *The El Paso Times*, June 8, 2005.

coverage of Latino issues and events in US newspapers. Nearly all of the Latino journalists I surveyed (except one) reported that they had initiated stories on Day of the Dead, pitching the subject to their editors in editorial meetings or, (in the cases of editors and columnists), simply deciding to cover the subject. The following are a few of the journalists' comments:

As somebody who covers the entire city, I can't and shouldn't cover every Latino event, but I do take care to make sure that I'm not shortchanging Latino events and prominent individuals.<sup>161</sup>

I brought the idea up, as I do all my stories, to my editor, who is also Latina, and she said Ok. I cover an area that is predominantly Latino, near the San Diego-Tijuana border, and so many of my stories, at least the feature-type stories, are about Latinos.<sup>162</sup>

I brought the topic up to my editor at the time. There is a fear among some Latino journalists of ghettoizing themselves if they pitch too many articles on Latino culture and life, preventing them from climbing the newsroom ranks...I resist this idea because A.) if we don't do it, who will? And more importantly, B.) Latinos in the US happen to be the most interesting national story around, if you ask me.<sup>163</sup>

I was working the night shift and had the choice of covering two evening events. I picked Day of the Dead because it was something I was familiar with.<sup>164</sup>

Non-Latino journalists also indicated that they had initiated Day of the Dead stories, either because they thought it was "colorful," "cool," "multicultural," or because they were interested in Latin American culture. For example, Lola Sherman of *The San Diego Union Tribune*, said, "I brought up the subject because I cover

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<sup>161</sup> Personal communication with Ed Tijerina, journalist at the *San Antonio Express-News*, June 12, 2005.

<sup>162</sup> Personal communication with Janine Zuniga, journalist at the *San Diego Union Tribune*, June 22, 2005.

<sup>163</sup> Personal communication with Daniel Hernandez, journalist at the *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2005.

<sup>164</sup> Personal communication with Adriana M. Chávez, journalist at the *El Paso Times*, June 8, 2005.

everything that happens in the city of Oceanside. Although I am not Latina, I am bilingual, did postgraduate work at the University of Mexico, and have been an officer in the San Diego chapter of the California Chicano News Media Association. My editor, also not Latino, was immediately interested.”<sup>165</sup>

John Gonzalez, a reporter for thirty-three years and San Antonio Bureau Chief at *The Houston Chronicle*, affirmed that while he initiated writing Day of the Dead stories at his paper, he now observes both Latino and non-Latino journalists initiating stories:

I’ve initiated any stories I’ve done on Day of the Dead, but I see my colleagues (both Latinos and not) in other parts of my newspaper doing so as well, like feature writers and arts writers. Hopefully, we’ve moved beyond the day when only Latino writers were asked to cover Latino topics.<sup>166</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous reason for the growth of Day of the Dead media coverage has been the tremendous growth of the Latino population in the United States from the 1980s onward. The sizeable numbers of Latin American immigrants settling in the US over the past two decades has rendered the Latino population more noticeable and attractive as a market for media and other commercial enterprises. Similarly, with more Latinos than African-Americans now attending US public schools, many schools and community centers hold Day of the Dead festivities as a way to connect with their Latino constituents. Journalists expressed the following thoughts on the relationship between the growing Latino population and increased news coverage of Day of the Dead:

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<sup>165</sup> Personal communication with Lola Sherman, June 13, 2005.

<sup>166</sup> Personal communication with John W. Gonzalez, June 13, 2005.

I think the media in general is beginning to wake up to the powerful Latino market. There is an interest in doing more on various ethnic groups, certainly, for the marketing value, but the Latino population is really growing and you will be dead in the water in those growing markets if you don't begin doing more to cover Latino issues.<sup>167</sup>

[Increased coverage of Day of the Dead] is probably about trying to appeal to Latino readers and advertisers...More and more cities throughout the country are growing in their Latino population means that media outlets need to hurry and find ways to appeal to those readers. Areas that are experiencing fairly new waves of Mexican immigration are just starting to see more Day of the Dead celebrations...that's definitely news.<sup>168</sup>

With the Latino population on the rise, more and more people are taking an interest in Day of the Dead as an alternative to the traditional American Halloween. Newspapers reflect this trend.<sup>169</sup>

More Latinos are moving to California, graduating from college, and entering newsrooms. More are running community organizations that alert editors of their community celebrations. It's a natural demographic shift. Papers are even starting to cover Virgin de Guadalupe festivals and parades. It's also a copycat phenomenon. As more papers watch other papers give it play, they fall in line.<sup>170</sup>

#### **4.5 Media coverage as resource for financial support**

In a symbiotic relationship, the growth of Day of the Dead celebrations attracted media coverage, while media coverage helped the growth of the celebration. Through the media of gallery exhibits, educational curricula, newspapers, popular magazines, radio, television, video production and, more recently, the Internet, Chicanos and other Latinos promoted Day of the Dead as an annual ritual for constructing and

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<sup>167</sup> Personal communication with a *San Diego Union Tribune* journalist who preferred anonymity, June 24, 2005.

<sup>168</sup> Personal communication with Ed Tijerina, journalist at *The San Antonio Express-News*, June 12, 2005.

<sup>169</sup> Personal communication with journalist from *The Kansas City Star* who preferred anonymity, June 27, 2005.

<sup>170</sup> Personal communication with Meredith May, journalist at *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 20, 2005.



communicating about Latino identity. Day of the Dead media coverage also provided another tangible benefit for Latinos: It helped attract foundation funding and commercial sponsors through which exhibits, workshops, outdoor festivals, and other costly forms of the celebration expanded to new sites and larger audiences than would otherwise be possible.

Although some event organizers asserted that, regardless of funding, their constituents would still engage in Day of the Dead activities, even if it meant paying expenses out of pocket, other gallery curators and community agency directors I spoke with, including René Yañez of the SomArts Gallery in San Francisco, Tomás Benitez of Self Help Graphics in Los Angeles, and the coordinators of the Oceanside and Fruitvale Day of the Dead festivals, expressed concern that without continued outside funding, the exhibits, workshops, and other public activities (which are usually offered free or at minimal cost) might not continue. Many spoke of the financial strain that funding cuts to the California Arts Council, the National Foundation for the Arts, and other traditional funding sources have placed on their organization's arts and cultural programming. Almost all of the gallery curators and community center staff I interviewed showed me binders and, in some cases, compact discs of collected press coverage of their annual Day of the Dead events. These collections included photocopies of newspaper and magazine clips written about their events and lists or transcripts of radio and TV coverage they had received over the years. Such press coverage is routinely used as supporting material for grant applications and press packets, indicating the importance of news coverage for the continued public visibility and financial support of US Day of the Dead activities.

#### 4.6 Media coverage as educational tool

Recognizing the power of the media to educate the general public about Mexican and Chicano culture, event organizers have welcomed press coverage of the celebration, both as a way to promote the tradition and to prevent misunderstandings of it. Given the general unfamiliarity of mainstream American audiences in the 1970s with non-Western cultural and religious belief systems, a celebration of “the dead,” replete with “offerings,” smoldering incense, and other “pagan” symbols, was initially misinterpreted by some onlookers as the handiwork of satanic cultists. In addition to non-Latinos disturbed by what they perceived to be sacrilegious communication with the dead, there were also Latinos unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the indigenous manifestations of the holiday. Yolanda Garfias Woo was sharply criticized by Anglo co-workers as well as a Mexican-American superintendent of schools for teaching students about Day of the Dead:

I taught in an area that was predominantly black. It was a very difficult area. There were a lot of deaths, a lot of murders, suicides, violence. And because I realized that the students had no outlet, I began doing “Muertos” in the classroom and found that it was extremely successful in opening things up and being able to talk about death. I was criticized by the staff for teaching “witchcraft,” even though the teacher next door to me one year during Halloween was standing in her doorway, wearing a long black gown with a pointed witch’s hat, and she said to me, “You know you can’t do that in your classroom because it’s witchcraft.”<sup>171</sup>

Later, when Garfias Woo conducted a teacher’s workshop about Day of the Dead in the San Jose area, she learned from the teachers that the school superintendent, who was Mexican-American, had not wanted to pay for the workshop:

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<sup>171</sup> Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

He had told the teachers that it was barbaric and that only the poorest areas of Mexico, only the uneducated people did it, and that it wasn't part of mainstream Mexican culture and had no place in the school curriculum. The teachers fought and fought to get him to approve the workshop.

As more people have learned about and embraced Day of the Dead, such attitudes among Mexican Americans have become less common today than they were in the 1970s, although they still exist. One second-generation Mexican-American who did not identify with the Chicano Movement, commented: "I don't celebrate such holidays. Truthfully, it scares the living daylights out of me. Just the weirdness of it. Can you *imagine* people actually celebrating the *dead*?!"<sup>172</sup>

Some onlookers initially criticized Day of the Dead as being too "pagan," too "Indian," too "poor," or "barbaric" while others criticized organizers for celebrating a "Catholic" tradition in publicly-funded schools and community centers. Patricia Rodriguez, Gallery Curator of the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, recounted an experience similar to that of Garfias Woo: "I was teaching at the University of New Mexico – doing an altar and talking about the tradition – and the local newspaper wrote me up as being 'pagan.' Others said it was too Catholic. Too religious and that religion didn't belong in the university."<sup>173</sup>

Artist and curator Tere Romo recalls that, in response to the earliest Day of the Dead exhibits at La Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, the word "necrophiliacs" was found scrawled on the front windows of the gallery.<sup>174</sup> People who did not understand the intent of the tradition accused Galería staff of being members of a death cult. René

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<sup>172</sup> Personal communication with San Francisco resident who preferred anonymity, June 13, 2005.

<sup>173</sup> Personal interview with Patricia Rodriguez, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.

<sup>174</sup> Personal interview with Tere Romo, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.

Yañez, who organized the first Day of the Dead exhibit at La Galería in 1972, notes: “The Irish captain of the Mission Police Station refused to give me a permit to hold the Day of the Dead procession. He called me a ‘devil’ ...[and] said, ‘Over my dead body!’ People thought we were a death cult. They made references to Charles Manson.”<sup>175</sup>

Given the misunderstandings surrounding the celebration, communicating the proper meaning of Day of the Dead was important, not only as a way to promote Latino identity but also as a way to correct misperceptions that could negatively affect levels of future community and institutional support. While Day of the Dead organizers regularly clarified the meaning of the celebration when meeting with school groups and other audiences, and published explanations in exhibit brochures, catalogs and gallery wall texts, the mass media helped elucidate the intention of the ritual to much wider audiences. Explaining the meaning of the holiday - something that would be unnecessary in Latin America - has been a consistent theme in US media coverage of Day of the Dead. From the 1980s to the present, articles, television news, and radio segments have clarified that the custom is a “joyous” rather than “morbid” time, and centers around “life” and “loved ones” rather than “death.” Keenly aware of the gruesome images that the appellation “Day of the Dead” might conjure in the minds of a general public unfamiliar with the tradition, journalists have regularly acknowledged the “strangeness” of the name and preemptively dismissed morbid associations, as in the following examples:

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<sup>175</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2002.

Despite its somber-sounding name, el Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, is a day of music, food, and decoration in the Latino community.<sup>176</sup>

Although it sounds macabre, celebrating the Day of the Dead is actually about life, affirming the belief that death is the final arc of life's circle, bringing it to its inevitable close. And it is about love, about honoring the people you once knew so intimately that death could not fully take them from you.<sup>177</sup>

Dia de los Muertos is not a worship of death, but a recognition that life and death are one in the same, part of the same cycle.<sup>178</sup>

This is not a grim, morbid affair. With touches of humor and a festive air, it is a form of honoring the dead and acknowledging death as a part of life. Sweet and somber. Mischief mixed with mysticism...<sup>179</sup>

Joy, not sorrow, is the mood at the annual Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, in Canoga Park.<sup>180</sup>

Frequently noting that the celebration falls around the same time as Halloween, news coverage typically clarifies another common misconception, pointing out that Day of the Dead is *not* simply “Mexican Halloween.”

Days of the Dead are not, as some mistakenly call it, the “Mexican Halloween.” True, in some regions of Mexico, Dias de los Muertos begins on Halloween, October 31 but...the two celebrations didn't coincide until Spanish priests trying to Christianize the holiday moved it so it conveniently dovetailed with their holiday of All Hallow's Eve.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Angelica Martinez, “Day of the Dead ‘a happy day,’” *The San Bernardino Sun*, November 2, 2001, Local, p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> Sandra Guerra-Cline, “Altared states: Annual festival for the dead is whimsical, bittersweet,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, October 13, 2001, Home p. 1.

<sup>178</sup> Marita Hernandez, “Day of the Dead: Time to Celebrate,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1985, Metro, p. 1.

<sup>179</sup> Rico Mendez, “A Grave Celebration,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 30, 1997, Daily Datebook, p. E1.

<sup>180</sup> Melissa Lalum, “Family fun for every season,” *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, February 26, 2004, News, p. N12.

<sup>181</sup> L. Gutierrez, “Days of the Dead commemorate the departed,” *The Kansas City Star*, Oct. 28, 2000, Religion, p. 1.

There's nothing Halloweenish about Dia de los Muertos: No haunted houses, no costumes, no candy, and no knocking on doors. Instead, the Day of the Dead is about communing with lost loved ones. It's an ancient, spiritual ritual...<sup>182</sup>

"I try to keep it as separate from Halloween as possible. They're two completely different things," Duran said. "Halloween is a night of witches and scary evil kinds of things in which death is something to fear. The Day of the Dead is a joyous day."<sup>183</sup>

### Day of the Dead as Latino history in the news

In addition to disabusing the public of misconceptions, news coverage usually provides historical information about the tradition, connecting Day of the Dead rituals and, more importantly, Latinos and Latin American culture, to centuries-old civilizations that chronologically dwarf US holiday traditions and are the object of intensive anthropological, archeological, and theological scholarship. Scholarly interest is often noted by journalists in statements such as "Anthropologists have written volumes on Day of the Dead."<sup>184</sup> Articles also note the growing international popularity of Day of the Dead in countries such as Canada, Japan and Scotland. Through such coverage, Latinos are no longer portrayed as inferior half-breeds whose culture pales in comparison with Europe, but as living links to eminent civilizations with traditions worthy of international attention. Historical explanations of Day of the Dead in news coverage portray the practice as "ancient" and thus worthy of respect:

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<sup>182</sup> Megan Scott, "A tradition that gives dead their due," *The St. Petersburg Times*, November 1, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>183</sup> Anne Marie O'Connor, "Day of the Dead Crosses Borders," *The Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 31, 1998, Metro, p. 1.

<sup>184</sup> Dave Moranzt, "Celebration of the Day of the Dead has grown in Omaha as more Mexican-Americans seek their identity," *The Omaha World-Herald*, October 29, 1999, Living, p. 45.

The celebration dates back to ancient Aztec and Meso-American civilizations, where it was observed for an entire month.<sup>185</sup>

One of the oldest continuously celebrated religious rituals on the planet, Dia de los Muertos is celebrated at the end of October and beginning of November...<sup>186</sup>

The Days of the Dead, or los Dias de los Muertos, is a holiday that predates the Spanish conquest of Latin America. Mesoamericans regarded death as a part of the endless cycle of life. When Europeans brought Christianity to Mesoamerica, the observance was changed from summer to fall and was fused with the Christian All Souls' and All Saints' days.<sup>187</sup>

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Aztecs had long believed death was a permanent human state and should not be feared. A person's life was merely a temporary dream. They observed the holiday around the same time the Catholic Church observed All Souls' Day – so when Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortes arrived in 1519, the holidays merged.<sup>188</sup>

Day of the Dead, which was celebrated on November 2, is a centuries-old tradition with origins in the indigenous peoples of Latin America.<sup>189</sup>

Aside from associating Latinos with the esteemed civilizations of the Aztec, Maya, Mixtec, and others, media coverage helped heighten mainstream awareness and respect for Latino culture by publicizing the spiritual beliefs of indigenous Latin American cultures. In doing so, it presented US readers with an alternative cosmology that contrasted with contemporary Western views about death.<sup>190</sup> While death is considered a permanent loss of connection with the living for many within mainstream

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<sup>185</sup> Megan Scott, "A tradition that gives dead their due," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 1, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>186</sup> Raphael Lewis, "Locals Fete Ancestors with Day of the Dead," *Boston Globe*, November 5, 2000, Metro, p. B5.

<sup>187</sup> Maria Elena Baca, "Days of the Dead," *The Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), November 4, 2000, News, p. 5B.

<sup>188</sup> Jose Cardenas, "Altar Ego," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1997, Metro, p. 1.

<sup>189</sup> Robert Crowe, "Interest increases in Day of the Dead," *Houston Chronicle*, November 7, 2002, This Week, p. 1.

<sup>190</sup> This alternative cosmology coincided with a rise in "New Age" spirituality in the 1980s and 1990s in the US, where increasing numbers of people, disenchanted with traditional Western organized religion, sought alternative spiritual models from other cultures.

US society, Latin American indigenous cultures held a more fluid concept of death that affording ongoing connection between the living and the dead. Considered strange and even “sacrilegious” in the 1970s, such philosophies now enjoy wider circulation among the general population, due in part to media coverage depicting Day of the Dead as a spiritually profound and healthy practice. The following are some typical examples:

In Latin America, death is seen as an inevitable, natural part of life. This healthy attitude towards our potentially disturbing fates finds expression in annual Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration, when many nations pay their respects to their late loved ones.<sup>191</sup>

[For the Aztecs] the underworld was no place to fear. For them, recognizing the dead was part of the general holistic sense of the universe.<sup>192</sup>

Some people associate death with an irreparable loss, with something that they’ll never get back. However, with this kind of celebration, people remember the passion, the beauty or whatever made this person unique.<sup>193</sup>

The fact of the matter is, whatever lives will die and pass on. We spend way too much time, especially in this country, worrying about death. We don’t want to talk about it anymore because it pains us... This is about an attitude change and looking at life a little differently. Life is short and death is long. Let’s enjoy it while we’re here.<sup>194</sup>

### From Mexican to Mesoamerican to Latino

As noted in Chapter Two, because the earliest Day of the Dead events in the US were organized by Chicanos and modeled after Mexico’s Day of the Dead, the

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<sup>191</sup> Dirk Sutro, “Music to go with Raza’s Day of the Dead,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1991, Calendar, p. 1.

<sup>192</sup> Debbie Pfeiffer Trunnell, “Remembering the dead,” *The Whittier Daily News*, CA, October 31, 2004, News, p. 1.

<sup>193</sup> Kelly Terry, “Public’s participation will help enliven Day of the Dead exhibit,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, October 31, 1999, Local p. B3.

<sup>194</sup> G. Pabst, “Accepting death while celebrating life,” *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Nov. 4, 2001, News, p. 2A.



celebration was typically referred to as “Mexican.” Early media coverage usually mirrored this language, portraying the ritual as unique to Mexican. However, as the US Latino population became more diverse from the 1980s through the present, (with 40% of Latinos now reporting ancestry from Latin American countries other than Mexico), Day of the Dead traditions of countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, and elsewhere began to be included in US exhibits and events. News coverage has reflected the greater diversity of Latino populations participating in Day of the Dead and has helped inform the general public that the holiday is not an exclusively Mexican tradition.

Today, media coverage frequently describes Day of the Dead as a “Latino” celebration, reflecting that it has grown from a Chicano/Mexican-American to a pan-Latino event. This change in terminology is evident in headlines such as: “Day of the Dead altars honor Latin heritage;”<sup>195</sup> “Latinos gather for Dia de los Muertos;”<sup>196</sup> “Latin holiday honors the dead;”<sup>197</sup> and “Dias de los Muertos Ceremony keeps Latinos linked to past.”<sup>198</sup> By discussing the participation of diverse Latino communities in the celebrations, news coverage both reflects and helps shape definitions and perceptions of Day of the Dead in the United States. The following are a few examples of the more inclusive ways in which the holiday is now being discussed in newspapers across the country:

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<sup>195</sup> Cecily Burt, “Day of the Dead altars honor Latin heritage,” *The Oakland Tribune*, Oct. 22, 2004, Local News, p. 1

<sup>196</sup> Kathryn Scott Osler, *The Denver Post*, October 31, 2003, p. FF2.

<sup>197</sup> Madeline McKenzie, *The Seattle Times*, October 30, 2003, p. G11.

<sup>198</sup> Karen Pierce Gonzalez, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 27, 2000, p. 6.

The spirits awakened for Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, on Saturday, as Hispanics around Houston gathered at cemeteries to reunite with their loved ones. Derived from ancient Aztec, Mayan and other indigenous traditions, the celebration is a festive remembrance of the dead.<sup>199</sup>

The Mexican and Central American tradition of Dia de los Muertos dictates that the souls of the dead return every year to visit relatives.<sup>200</sup>

Dia de los Muertos isn't celebrated only in Mexico, but in several other Latin American countries as well, including Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia.<sup>201</sup>

"Day of the Dead is a Guatemalan tradition going back centuries," said Villalobos [a Mayan healer], as he lit a censer of copal incense. "We build an altar in the house to honor our ancestors," he said.<sup>202</sup>

Observance of Dia de los Muertos, the traditional Latin American holiday celebrating loved ones who have died, has outgrown smaller venues and is being held at the Seattle Center for the first time this year. All are invited to join the local Latino community in the celebration.<sup>203</sup>

In addition, news coverage frequently describes US Day of the Dead celebrations as cultural reclamation projects, publicly recognizing that these rituals owe their widespread popularity in the US to the Chicano political movement. Thus media help pass down the genesis of these events to newer generations:

In the United States, assimilation had nearly erased the holiday from Mexican-American culture until the Chicano movement of the 1960s...The renewed interest was chiefly among artists who popularized it with displays and processions at galleries and public places.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Robert Lopez, "Family reunions mark Day of the Dead ritual," *Houston Chronicle*, November 2, 2003, p. A 35.

<sup>200</sup> No byline. "Mr. And Mrs. Bones request the pleasure of your company," *LA Weekly*, Calendar, p. 61.

<sup>201</sup> Javier Erik Olvera, "A celebration of life on Day of the Dead," *Rocky Mountain News*, November 3, 2003, p. 5A.

<sup>202</sup> Tyche Hendricks, "Families bring life to Day of the Dead," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 2, 2002, p. A 17.

<sup>203</sup> Madeline McKenzie, "Latin holiday honors the dead," *The Seattle Times*, October 30, 2003, p. G11.

<sup>204</sup> Jose Cardenas, "Altar Ego," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1997, Metro, p. 1.

In the United States, Dia de los Muertos was revitalized through the Chicano Movement of the 1970s, she said. “Chicanos were rejecting the idea of assimilation, and there was a renaissance of their culture that meant revitalizing cultural holidays. It was a way of reaffirming identity.”<sup>205</sup>

Many Mexicans who immigrated to the United States quickly lost touch with the holiday...Now, people are regaining the spirit and the meaning of the day...The Chicano artist is creating a renaissance of Dia de los Muertos in the Southwest.<sup>206</sup>

“It’s a custom that has really been revived by a lot of younger Chicanos,” said Lorenzo Flores, a CSUN [California State University at Northridge] Chicano Studies professor who has seen the event take hold in the San Fernando Valley in recent years. “It’s really an effort to recapture that culture that people have ignored and in an essence almost taken away from us,” he said.<sup>207</sup>

#### 4.7 Publicity for Latino communities

Day of the Dead celebrations have presented journalists with opportunities for out-of-the-ordinary, “attention-grabbing” human-interest stories that resonate within the multicultural sensibilities of the late twentieth century. The celebration’s “outlandish” nature and aesthetic allure provide spectacular photographs and lively text that have helped to put Latino neighborhoods “on the map” of newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts that used to be devoted exclusively to cultural activities in fashionable Anglo areas of town. For decades, an association of Latinos with crime, drugs, and poverty in the media had rendered Latino neighborhoods devoid of the cultural cachet necessary for inclusion in the “Arts and Culture” sections of citywide publications and broadcasts.

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<sup>205</sup> Debbie Pfeiffer Trunnell, “Remembering the dead,” *Whittier Daily News*, (CA) October 31, 2004, News, p. 1.

<sup>206</sup> Chris Driscoll, “Resurrection of a Mexican Holiday: Spirited Day of the Dead gains Arizona celebrators,” *The Arizona Republic*, October 30, 1994, Valley and State section, p. B1.

<sup>207</sup> Yvette Cabrera, “Day of the Dead: Latinos Prepare to Celebrate Their Roots,” *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, October 31, 1997, News, p. 1.

However, as Day of the Dead exhibits brought the barrio to the Academy, representing the first time, for many prestigious museums, that works of Chicano artists were exhibited in their galleries,<sup>208</sup> they also brought the Academy and non-Latino mainstream population to the barrio. Exhibits at neighborhood-based Latino art galleries such as Self Help Graphics, La Galería de la Raza, the Mission Cultural Center, and elsewhere physically drew art lovers and art critics into communities that had long been ignored by the cultural cognoscenti.

Coverage of Day of the Dead exhibits in citywide publications and broadcasts encouraged middle class suburbanites and wealthy city dwellers to venture into the allegedly “dangerous” sections of Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and other cities to attend Day of the Dead exhibits, purchase “muertos” art, or find authentic *pan de muerto*. Thus, not only the events themselves but also media coverage of them helped make Latin neighborhoods “safe” for people who had never before visited them. Today, field trips to barrio art galleries, bakeries, and shops during Day of the Dead season are commonplace for schools in California and elsewhere, as students and tourists arrive by the busload to communities such as The Mission in San Francisco, East Los Angeles, and Sherman Heights in San Diego.

Noting the increased visibility that media coverage of the Sherman Heights Day of the Dead exhibit (promoted in *The San Diego Reader*, *The Union Tribune*, *La Prensa San Diego* and *Fahrenheit Magazine*) brought to this Latino neighborhood, local resident Louise Torio explains:

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<sup>208</sup> Based on my conversations with René Yañez, Tere Romo, Yolanda Garfias Woo, David Avalos and other Chicano artists.

The excitement that people felt when they came to Sherman Heights was immense...People from all over the place coming to this inner city neighborhood – people who don't know about the neighborhood, or from what they've heard, they think of it as a *bad* neighborhood. Or they haven't been here for thirty years. So with this event, the impression of the neighborhood changes.<sup>209</sup>

Similarly, Terry Alderete, chief coordinator of the annual Fruitvale Day of the Dead festival in Oakland, California feels that media coverage of the event (in *The Oakland Tribune*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Bay Guardian*, television networks, Telemundo and Univisión, AAA's travel magazine, Southwest Airline's in-flight magazine, English language jazz station KBLX, Spanish radio stations, online news sources, and other local media) has helped change the image of the neighborhood. Initiated in 1996, Fruitvale's Day of the Dead Festival is the most prominent event in an annual line-up of cultural events sponsored by the neighborhood's *Mainstreets* economic development initiative,<sup>210</sup> and now attracts some 100,000 visitors annually from throughout the Bay Area. Alderete explains:

In the late 1980s, Fruitvale was all boarded up, urban blight, crime. People wouldn't drive here for fear they might get shot at. From the 1970s and into the 1980s, it was like a war zone...[Now] we're getting a lot of publicity and this brings a lot of pride. Our Day of the Dead festival is even listed in the "local legacy" section of the Smithsonian Institution's website.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Personal interview with Louise Torio, San Diego, California, November 15, 2003.

<sup>210</sup> *Mainstreets* is a national economic development project that provides funding to economically distressed communities throughout the United States in order to upgrade commercial infrastructure and public image as a way to reduce crime, build community, and improve a neighborhood's economy.

<sup>211</sup> Personal interview with Terry Alderete, Oakland, California, November 4, 2003.

By the 1990s, Day of the Dead feature articles were much more likely to be found in the “Metro,” “Region,” or “Local” news sections of papers than the “Arts” sections, indicating the celebration’s progression from a “quaint” minority custom to a popular cultural practice increasingly integrated into the mainstream. Media scholars have discussed the power of the media to portray the world beyond direct experience and determine “what exists, what happens and what matters” (Gitlin 1980). Particularly for oppositional and marginalized groups who do not normally occupy powerful positions as “newsmakers,” media coverage becomes a kind of public validation of their existence to the larger world (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991; Cook & Bevin 2001). Given the history of limited and predominantly negative media coverage of Latinos in the US media for most of the twentieth century, the magnitude of culture-affirming articles about Day of the Dead has provided an annual counterbalance to the usual stories of poverty and crime. While Day of the Dead articles are not the *only* positive stories written about Latinos, they represent a sizeable number of stories, published regularly each fall, in which Latino culture receives center stage in a positive context.

#### **4.8 Day of the Dead as political news**

Having discussed several ways in which Day of the Dead media coverage has promoted Latino culture to a wide US audience and increased pride within the Latino community, I turn to ways in which coverage of this event, by institutionalizing an annual media space for attention to Latino culture, has created a ritualized opening for the public presentation of political issues important to the Latino community. Often

located on the front pages of the “Metro,” “Region,” “Culture” and “Arts” sections,<sup>212</sup> Day of the Dead coverage illustrates how serious political issues are often interwoven into human interest stories. In order to quantify the frequency of political Day of the Dead stories in the news, I conducted a content and textual analysis of all Day of the Dead coverage over the past ten years in California’s three largest newspapers, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The San Diego Union Tribune*.

After counting the number of Day of the Dead stories with political themes published in each paper during the 10-year period and dividing these figures by the overall number of Day of the Dead articles published in each paper during the same period, I arrived at the following numerical percentages: Of the total number of Day of the Dead articles published from 1994 to 2004, nearly 30% of *The Chronicle’s* articles (20 articles out of 71), 40% of *The Times* articles (30 out of 74), and 32% of *The Union Tribune’s* articles (26 out of 82) discussed political themes. These themes were connected to Day of the Dead exhibits, vigils, cemetery events, and processions, drawing attention to a variety of issues including US immigration policy, violence, labor issues, war, “the death of free speech,” “the death of arts funding,” the presence of JROTC in Latino high schools, death/destruction caused by racism, “the death of the environment,” AIDS, homelessness and human rights violations. (See Tables 2 and 3).

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<sup>212</sup> These stories are sometimes located on a newspaper’s main front page in cities with large Latino populations. For example, Day of the Dead made the front page in *The San Francisco Examiner* (Nov. 3, 1990), *The El Paso Times* (Nov. 2, 2003), *The San Bernardino Sun* (Nov. 2, 2004), *The Daily News of Los Angeles* (Nov. 1, 2004), and the “Weekend Calendar” supplement of *The Los Angeles Times* (October 27, 2005).

**Table 2. Number of political issues discussed in Day of the Dead stories 1994-2004**

	<b>Operation Gatekeeper (Immigration)</b>	<b>Violence (gang, handgun partner abuse)</b>	<b>Labor Struggles</b>	<b>Women of Juarez</b>	<b>War</b>	<b>Other<sup>213</sup></b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Chronicle</b>	3	3	2	2	3	7	<b>20</b>
<b>LA Times</b>	8	6	4	3	2	7	<b>30</b>
<b>UnionTribune</b>	6	4	1	3	3	9	<b>26</b>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of Day of the Dead altar exhibits I have attended in California include altars dedicated to victims of socio-political causes of death. This is the case whether the events are sponsored by mainstream organizations such as chambers of commerce and museums or by grassroots centers and student groups. Moreover, it is not uncommon for exhibits, vigils, or processions to be dedicated entirely to political themes, such as the 2000-2004 annual Holtville cemetery events in honor of dead migrants, or the 2004 Sylmar Day of the Dead procession in protest of the Iraq War.

News coverage of Day of the Dead reflects these political events and helps stimulate larger political discussions among mainstream audiences. While TV news coverage of Day of the Dead usually consists of quick and colorful sound bites, and stories in lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Family Circle* adhere mostly to decorations and recipes associated with the holiday, newspaper

<sup>213</sup> For figures 2 and 3, the category “other” includes death/destruction caused by racism, homelessness, gay bashing and other human rights violations, NAFTA, the anti-immigrant California ballot propositions 187 and 209 (anti-immigration and anti-affirmative action measures, respectively).



coverage transports the political views of altar creators and event organizers far beyond the environs of the event or exhibit. These articles provide visibility for Latinos in two ways, explicating the meaning and practice of a Latino tradition while simultaneously publicizing issues of political importance to Latinos. The perspectives portrayed in news articles frequently underscore the contradictions and inequalities of US society, revealing how lived experiences often belie dominant discourses of freedom, opportunity and justice.

**Table 3. Percentage of political issues in Day of the Dead stories 1994-2004**

	<b>Operation Gatekeeper (Immigration)</b>	<b>Violence (gang, handgun partner abuse)</b>	<b>Labor Struggles</b>	<b>Women of Juarez</b>	<b>War</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Chronicle</b>	15%	15%	10%	10%	15%	35%
<b>L.A. Times</b>	27%	20%	13%	10%	7%	23%
<b>Union Tribune</b>	23%	15%	4%	12%	12%	35%

Scholars of news have long contended that “events” get more prominent coverage than “issues” (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980). Because of their standing as unique, cultural phenomena in the US, Day of the Dead events receive prominent placement in newspapers, offering higher-than-normal visibility to the political perspectives expressed during many of these events. By far the largest single category of political news discussed in Day of the Dead stories over the past ten years has been the issue of immigration, particularly Operation Gatekeeper. Immigrant rights activists blame this policy for the deaths of over 3,000 Mexican and Central American

migrants who, they argue, have been forced to attempt deadly border crossings in desolate areas of the Imperial Desert as a result of Gatekeeper's drastically militarized infrastructure in the traditional urban crossing routes of the San Diego/Tijuana region. Many US government leaders and other official news sources (such as the business community, security forces, and conservative think tanks) claim that the remedy for illegal immigration is an increasingly militarized border (at the cost of some \$3 billion tax dollars annually) but decline to discuss root causes of migration. Although statistics by the INS and Mexican Consulate document the daily death toll of migrants attempting to cross the border, these figures are not normally prominent in the media. Coverage of Day of the Dead events, however, often transports these statistics to the front pages.

For example, a 1998 *Los Angeles Times* Day of the Dead article discussed the root causes of migration, pointing to neoliberal economic policies promoted by both the US and Mexican governments that lower wages and living standards for Mexico's majority and trigger illegal immigration to the North. After explaining that Day of the Dead is "a holiday when Mexican families traditionally honor their deceased ones through graveside visits and altars," the article noted that Latino immigrant rights advocates saw the day as "an opportunity to publicly commemorate many who died in obscurity" attempting to cross the border. Depicting the Day of the Dead altars "heaped with sweet bread and candles, flowers and fruit in honor of the deceased," the article quoted a Catholic bishop and others critical of US-Mexican economic policies: "In these kinds of deaths, we can't put the blame on natural factors," said Antonio Garcia Sanchez, official human rights ombudsman for Baja California. "The ones who deserve blame...are the ones who have designed an economic policy in our country, who have

not succeeded in providing satisfactory resources in health and housing and food and clothing.”<sup>214</sup>

A *Los Angeles Times* Day of the Dead story on the same topic two years later noted that the death toll had climbed to nearly 600.<sup>215</sup> It began with a description of a religious observance in which “a priest blessed nearly 600 crosses that were erected to honor those who have died while trying to come to the United States.” Describing the ramifications of Operation Gatekeeper, the article observed that the toll of migrant deaths had greatly increased in a year’s time:

Advocates say 131 illegal immigrants have died so far this year along California’s border with Mexico, compared with a total of 85 deaths in 1997...Critics blame Operation Gatekeeper for driving immigrants into dangerous routes to the east. The program increased enforcement on the once-porous border in San Diego, through more fences, lighting and doubling the number of patrol agents in San Diego...The largest number [of migrants] succumbed to harsh desert conditions, and nearly half drowned in the irrigation canals that crisscross the fields.

Stating that the crosses were intended “as an indictment of US Immigration and Naturalization Service policies that have made the border an increasingly deadly place,” the story pointed out that increased militarization of the border had proven ineffective in reducing illegal immigration, suggesting that improved economic conditions would be a more effective solution:

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<sup>214</sup> Ken Ellingwood, “Activists in Tijuana mourn dead migrants: Protest, white crosses, makeshift altars remember those who died looking for a better life in the US,” in *The Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1998, Metro p. A3.

<sup>215</sup> Erin Texeira, “The Hidden Toll: Activists erect 591 crosses in remembrance of people who lost their lives crossing the border from Mexico,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2000, Metro, p. B1.

More migrants than ever are dying: between fiscal years 1999 and 2000, deaths increased 57% to 369, INS data show. Rather than reduce illegal immigration, Operation Gatekeeper has instead pushed the border crossers into rural areas in Arizona and Texas, the data indicate. Angelica Salas, director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, is quoted saying, “If we had improved labor conditions and wages on both sides of the border, my God, you would not see this kind of situation. We’re just not dealing with this as a nation.”

The article closed by indicating the need to “do something about the employer magnet,” referring to corporate America’s preference for cheap immigrant labor over well-paid jobs for US citizens. This story was picked up by the *Associated Press (AP)* and published in newspapers around the United States, with added INS statistics indicating that “an average of at least one person every day died last fiscal year on the American side of the Mexican border while crossing.” The *AP* version also noted that Day of the Dead events were being held around the country to draw attention to the growing number of migrant deaths along the border.<sup>216</sup>

Similar stories are published annually across the US, such as a *Chicago Sun-Times* article about a Day of the Dead exhibit at Chicago’s Mexican Fine Art Center, in which the altars “pa[id] tribute to loved ones and the hundreds of people who have died while crossing the Mexican border in search of a better life,”<sup>217</sup> a *Seattle Times* article describing a Day of the Dead exhibit of “hundreds of crosses bearing the names of people who died trying to cross the border,”<sup>218</sup> and a *Newsday* article about Day of the Dead altars in New York commemorating sixty-six undocumented workers who died in

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<sup>216</sup> No byline. “Nearly 600 crosses remember those who died coming to US,” *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, November 2, 2000.

<sup>217</sup> Della De La Fuente, “Museum’s art pays tribute to Mexico’s ‘Day of the Dead,’” in *The Chicago Sun-Times*, September 27, 1999, News, p. 21.

<sup>218</sup> No byline. “Remembering the Migrants,” *The Seattle Times*, November 3, 2000, News, p. A8.

the September 11 WTC explosions. The article indicated that these workers had no legal rights, “lived alone and in fear,” and “have died and probably will never be officially reported.” The director of the Tepeyác Association, sponsoring the Day of the Dead celebration, connected the anonymous deaths of undocumented workers killed in New York with migrants dying on the border, stating plans to memorialize “those who have been lost at the World Trade Center and those who have been lost at the border.”<sup>219</sup>

The second most prominent political issue discussed in Day of the Dead coverage over the past ten years has been violence, including the categories of gang violence, domestic violence, child abuse, gay bashing, and gun violence. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* article explained how an “ancient ceremony took a decidedly modern and mournful turn,” when the Long Beach Community Hispanic Association focused their Day of the Dead event on “youngsters who lost their lives to violence.” One of the three people quoted was a Salvadoran woman whose 19 year-old daughter was killed by a bullet to the head. Another person quoted was a Latino activist and the founder of “Teens on Target,” a group that warns students about firearms. He spoke about the trauma experienced because of gun violence in Los Angeles neighborhoods.<sup>220</sup>

A *San Francisco Chronicle* article discussed a Day of the Dead exhibit meant to “raise awareness about the rising violence in Oakland.” The principal person quoted was a native of Oakland, where the homicide rate has risen despite a decrease in the

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<sup>219</sup> Rachel Dornhelm, “A Matter of Life and Death: Mexicans celebrate memorial holiday with a unique focus this year,” *Newsday*, October 29, 2001, News, p. A 29.

<sup>220</sup> John Cox, “Ancient Mexican Ceremony for Dead Takes Modern, Mournful Turn,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1995, Metro, p. 4.

national rate. Noting that eighty-eight people were murdered in Oakland that year, the artist/altar-maker discussed how her city, largely comprised of low-income and minority people, “has a long history of neglect...What we’re getting now is the result of people being thrown away for generations. If someone said there was a terrorist bomb in Oakland that had killed 88 people all at once, everyone would look. The way it is now, there are a few people getting picked off every day.” The article described Latin American Day of the Dead traditions and explained their metamorphosis in the US as an expressive art form that touches people’s emotions and challenges them to think.<sup>221</sup>

Similar themes have been reflected in Day of the Dead articles across the country, such as a front-page article in *The Christian Science Monitor* about a Day of the Dead altar exhibit honoring 16 Latino youths killed in gang feuds in Chicago during the previous eight months. The article noted that “across America, street rivalries are growing more lethal as gangs spread at an alarming rate. The number of cities with street gangs skyrocketed from 172 in 1980 to more than 1,000 today.” Observing that police repression against gangs “has failed to curb the violent brotherhoods and in some cases has backfired,” the article discussed the classism and racism in US society that breeds gang violence, stating, “most gang members are the products of an urban underclass with few good options. The vast majority are black and Hispanic youths ages 12-25 [who] live in poor, racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods where substandard schools, crime and unemployment are high.”<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Joshunda Sanders, “Art pays tribute to Oakland’s dead,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 18, 2002, Datebook, p. 1.

<sup>222</sup> Ann Scott Tyson, “Combating the Allure of Gangs,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1995, p. 1.

A Day of the Dead article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* discussed domestic violence, noting: “this year the event will be marked by a special tribute...Putting An End to Abuse Through Community Efforts, or the PEACE Initiative, has created an altar to honor some local victims of domestic violence during Day of the Dead activities.” Listing the names of several women killed in domestic violence, the article described the altars created in their honor at the Institute for Texan Cultures. A Latino education specialist from the museum noted that the event was “a chance to educate visitors about both the Day of the Dead and domestic violence...The more people that see this altar, the more people will be educated about these things.”<sup>223</sup>

So many Day of the Dead articles have discussed the theme of violence against women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, that I decided to classify them in a separate category. Covered each Day of the Dead season in California newspapers such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Oakland Tribune*, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, *The Tri-Valley Herald (Pleasanton)*, and papers across the country such as *The Daily News* (New York), *The Tampa Tribune*, *The San Antonio Express News*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Boston Globe*, the proliferation of these Day of the Dead articles represents some of the most concentrated attention this mysterious bout of murders receives annually. Articles typically discuss altars “in memory of the hundreds of young women slain in Juarez, Mexico,”<sup>224</sup> who are, in the vast majority, workers at US and other foreign-owned factories operating just across the

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<sup>223</sup> Edmundo Conchas, “Altar to Honor Victims of Domestic Violence,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 15, 2003, Metro, p. 1.

<sup>224</sup> Vanessa Hua, “Annual festival with Mexican roots honors lives of the deceased,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 29, 2004, p. B 1.

border from El Paso, Texas. As of 2005, more than 400 women have been murdered and mutilated, nearly half of them after being sexually assaulted.

A *Los Angeles Times* article discussed a Day of the Dead forum held at UCLA, co-sponsored by Amnesty International, called “The Maquiladora Murders, or Who is Killing the Women of Juarez?”<sup>225</sup> An *Oakland Tribune* article discussed the work of an artist in the Fruitvale Day of the Dead Festival whose altar honored “the more than 300 women mysteriously raped and murdered during the past decade in Juarez, Mexico.” Through “a display of empty white dresses, dirty and suspended in the air,” the artist “honored them by bringing their cause before the Oakland [Day of the Dead Festival] crowd who heard about the murders for the first time.”<sup>226</sup> An article in *The San Antonio Express News* discussed the violence in Juarez and urged readers to write letters to President Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox to urge investigation. It also urged the public to donate funds to human rights organizations assisting the families of the victims.<sup>227</sup> A *Houston Chronicle* article discussed a Day of the Dead exhibit at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, where “a portion of this day is being set aside to honor hundreds of women cruelly murdered along the border near the cities of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.” The article described a central altar of the exhibit that included hundreds of pairs of slightly worn women’s clothing and shoes such as those found near naked bodies dumped around the Juarez maquiladora plants. Drawing attention to the exploitation of gender, race, and class on which the maquiladora

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<sup>225</sup> Anne-Marie O’Connor, “Vanished,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2003, Style and Culture, p. 1.

<sup>226</sup> Laura Casey, “Celebration’s altars honor the dead, educate the living,” *The Oakland Tribune*, November 3, 2003, Local and Regional News, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> Sonja Garza, “Altar for the Slain: Students remember 258 murdered Juarez women for Dia de los Muertos,” *The San Antonio Express News*, November 1, 2003, Metro, p. 1B.



industry relies for profitability, the article stated that most of the girls and women killed over the past ten years were “brown-skinned” and “were poor workers in Mexico’s numerous border town assembly plants, known as maquiladoras.” Noting that neither the US nor Mexican government has taken steps to address the gendered violence that is a daily reality of the maquiladora industry lauded by NAFTA enthusiasts, the article concluded that “Demonstrations in solidarity with the victims and their families have been scheduled this weekend throughout Mexico, Texas and other US cities and in Europe and Asia.”<sup>228</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, Day of the Dead stories can go beyond simple cultural coverage, delving into serious social, economic, and political issues acutely affecting Latinos and other communities of color, as well as the nation as a whole. Like the exhibits and events themselves, Day of the Dead coverage helps generate larger discussions among diverse audiences, as partially illustrated by letters to the editor written in response to Day of the Dead articles. Whether the authors agree or disagree with the content of these cultural stories, their letters illustrate public engagement with the political ideas transmitted in these “cultural” stories. For example, an October 31, 2003, Day of the Dead article published in *The Los Angeles Times* about the women of Juarez received a letter to the editor accusing the journalist of treating the topic callously.<sup>229</sup> A November 3, 1992, Day of the Dead article elicited a letter to the editor urging greater cultural sensitivity in the discussion of alternative cultural traditions:

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<sup>228</sup> No byline. “Murdered Mexicanas remembered this Day of the Dead,” *The Houston Chronicle*, November 2, 2003, Outlook, p. 2.

<sup>229</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Samantha Ott, November 8, 2003, Calendar, p. 4.

I was shocked...to see the headline ‘Macabre Meal’ over the picture of native people celebrating All Souls’ Day. It is the tradition of many peoples, including Central Americans, Filipinos and others to celebrate Day of the Dead at cemeteries where their loved ones are buried and to bring special foods to eat at the cemetery. It is a day of rejoicing that their loved ones are with God, and an attempt to be with them and remember them...I feel your headline ridicules these people and, worse than that, puts, by the use of the word macabre, a negative connotation on what is a beautiful family custom.<sup>230</sup>

A November 3, 1998 article about a Day of the Dead tribute to dead migrants inspired a letter to the editor critical of Operation Gatekeeper and the lax enforcement of US labor laws:

There is no chance of sealing off the border with Mexico. And there is no nice way of controlling the flow. But we should not do it by funneling migrants into such punishing corridors. Meanwhile, we are in no hurry to crack down on employers who want cheap, throw-away workers. In San Diego and Imperial counties, it has been years since we prosecuted a single employer who uses undocumented labor.<sup>231</sup>

Conversely, a Day of the Dead article in the same paper a year later elicited a response from someone who disagreed with critics of Operation Gatekeeper, writing:

Such critics conveniently forget to mention that thousands of Mexicans cross the border to the US without incident, and that the US accepts more legal Mexican immigrants than any other country does. They also forget to mention that Mexican migratory law is stricter than American law, and that thousands of Central American illegal immigrants are tossed out of Mexico each year without fanfare...On the traditional Day of the Dead, a memorial service was held in memory of those who died crossing the border. But the event...used the dead to stage a political rally in which big guns were fired at US migratory policy. It’s not popular...to point this out, but the people who crossed the border in dangerous places did so voluntarily and should have been aware of the risks. The US government

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<sup>230</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Renate Hayum, November 25, 1992, Metro, p. 6.

<sup>231</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Claudia Smith, November 9, 1998, Metro, p. 9.

did not force them to cross...in fact, many Mexican lives have been saved by Border Patrol Agents...I doubt that any country, including Mexico, would not have moved to control the unrestricted flow of illegal immigrants.<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.9 Conclusion

Mainstream news coverage of Day of the Dead events has served an important purpose over the years in educating people about the Latin American tradition and its Chicano-initiated public revival in the United States. This coverage represents the most widespread annual media forum in the US for the admiration and validation of Latino cultural practices, both as aesthetic art forms and alternative spiritual worldviews. Media coverage has helped to elevate Latino culture and people in the eyes of the non-Latino majority, while encouraging cultural pride among Latinos who, as a group, have long been devalued in the mainstream US media. Given that most year-round media coverage of Latinos is still under-represented or “token,” the existence of a period each year where positive, diverse, and compelling articles about Latinos proliferate in the news is significant. Many Latinos with whom I have spoken have expressed pride in seeing Day of the Dead become so popular in mainstream US culture. A 24-year old San Diego university student, who was born in El Salvador and moved to Fresno, California, when she was four, explains:

When I was growing up, I wanted to fit in, like most kids. And fitting in meant I wasn't supposed to be different, like letting people know I was Latina, or speaking Spanish. At least where I was living. Having more media exposure to the culture gives young Latinos a chance to feel really good about themselves and feel like they *do* fit in.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, Allan Wall, February 20, 1999, Metro. P. 7.

<sup>233</sup> Personal interview with Carolina Mendez, May 27, 2003, San Diego, California.

By appearing annually in the headlines, Day of the Dead coverage has helped to “normalize” this celebration to the point where it is becoming a new American holiday. In fact, mainstream enthusiasm for Day of the Dead has, itself, become news and is noted in coverage, such as the following excerpts:

From San Francisco to Austin to New Orleans, Mexico’s Nov. 2 Day of the Dead is becoming a crossover holiday bleeding through cultural borders...The holiday’s growing popularity in the United States is ‘a cultural crisscross, like the American taco,’ says Tomas Benitez, the director of Self-Help Graphics in East Los Angeles. ‘The Day of the Dead is becoming more and more widespread. It’s not just something for Latinos anymore.’<sup>234</sup>

Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, has become an event whose meaning crosses ethnic and social boundaries. From mountain villages in northern New Mexico to...San Antonio, the first day of November marks a transborder happening whose regional popularity rivals that of St. Patrick’s Day.<sup>235</sup>

The holiday was once a rare sight in New England, but will probably become routine for many here...<sup>236</sup>

Finally, a significant amount of Day of the Dead coverage draws attention to issues of political concern for the Latino community, providing a “ritualized” public forum in newspapers across the country. Public Day of the Dead celebrations and media coverage of them annually reflect the issues of the day, offering social critique and stimulating public reflection on the realities of those most negatively affected by

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<sup>234</sup> Anne-Marie O’Connor, “Day of the Dead Crosses Borders, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1998, Metro p. 1

<sup>235</sup> John Carlos Villani, “There’s lots of life in Day of the Dead,” *The Arizona Republic*, Oct. 29, 2000, A&E, p.1.

<sup>236</sup> Raphael Lewis, “Locals fete ancestors with Day of the Dead,” *The Boston Globe*, Nov. 5, 2000, Metro, p. B5.

US foreign and domestic policies. Media scholar Robert Hackett has observed that, “The news value of human interest creates openings for ‘folksy’ pieces on activists that can help humanize and legitimize their political commitments” (1991:279). Additionally, the news value placed on sensational images in a commercial media market motivates journalists to seek novel ways to cover “old” news. This situation favors an increase in innovative “takes” on what has become a routine holiday story. As *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist Meredith May notes: “My story was about Day of the Dead sculptures commemorating those who had just died in the 9/11 attacks of 2001...I heard about the artwork from artists and I thought it would be a fresh and topical way to cover what’s become a routine festival story.”<sup>237</sup>

Contemporary Day of the Dead news is an example of “sphere of consensus” coverage, which Dan Hallin defines as “The region of motherhood and apple pie: in its bounds lie those social objects not regarded by journalists and by most of the society as controversial” (1994:53). The celebration’s colorful nature (and spectacular photo opportunities), its non-denominational spirituality, and its association with school children, families and “community togetherness” make it an irresistible story for the media. News organizations are attracted to community-creating events because such stories are popular with the public and can help make diverse audiences feel more coherent (Kaniss 1991). This sphere of consensus status allows Day of the Dead stories to receive routine, prominent coverage, creating space for related stories about serious political issues that would normally fall within “sphere of controversy” (e.g. discussions of Operation Gatekeeper or NAFTA) or “sphere of deviance” (e.g. anti-war protests)

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<sup>237</sup> Personal communication with journalist Meredith May, June 20, 2005.

news frames. Journalists can discuss political Day of the Dead events from the vantage point of the “non-elite” community people sponsoring the events, without the reliance on government and other official news sources that marks most political reporting. While it is usually assumed that sphere of consensus reporting does not contribute to public discussions of political issues, the above examples illustrate that this is not always the case.

As an increasingly complex and multifaceted entity, the mass media exert significant influence on the ongoing construction of human cultures. Yet the media are not monolithic, functioning as an anonymous leviathan imposing a particular cultural hegemony upon society. They are reflexive mechanisms that help shape cultural consciousness while themselves being shaped by a range of cultural influences. The dramatic increase in Day of the Dead events and news coverage of them over the past thirty-three years, and the growing embrace of this custom by non-Latino and Latino Americans alike, illustrate that media can serve not only to convey minority social practices and visions to a much larger audience, but also to affect internal and external perceptions of minority populations and, in so doing, help these groups to influence mainstream culture itself.

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## **Chapter Five: Adoption, Adaptation, and Appropriation in the US**

This chapter discusses the adoption (or voluntarily taking up) of Day of the Dead traditions by non-Latinos; the adaptation (or modifying to fit new environments) of these traditions by both Latinos and non-Latinos; and the commercialization (or intended utilization for remunerative objectives) of the celebration. These processes are interrelated, often operating simultaneously on a spiritual, artistic, and commercial level that defies stand-alone distinctions between terms such as “devotional” and “artistic,” “local” and “global,” or “authentic” and “commercial.” The commonality of these modes is the transformation of the ritual to serve populations and purposes other than or in addition to those usually associated with the holiday in Latin America.

Having discussed historical and contemporary manifestations of Day of the Dead traditions in various Latin American and US Latino communities, I now turn to the adoption of this holiday by non-Latinos. During the past six years of my research in California, I have met people of Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Filipino), African (Somali, Ethiopian, South African), African-American, Italian-American, Polish-American, Irish-American, Jewish, Palestinian, Iranian, and other heritages participating in Day of the Dead altar exhibits and processions, or simply coming to view them. Overall, participants may be devout or lapsed Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, neo-pagans, followers of indigenous spirituality, or atheists. Their economic status may be upper class, middle class, or working class. They may identify as Black, Asian, White, Middle Eastern, Native American, or a combination of different races and ethnicities. They may be politically conservative, liberal, radical, or apathetic. But, like the diverse Latinos who are drawn to Day of

the Dead celebrations, a common “faith” that unites these adopters is a belief that the act of remembering the dead in public ways, whether through poignant visual tributes, solemn candlelight vigils, or colorful processions, is powerful and healing. To better understand the appeal of this celebration to non-Latinos, a discussion of contemporary US attitudes regarding death is useful.

### **5.1 Death in the USA**

In mainstream US culture, death is a topic to be feared and avoided – a kind of obscenity not to be uttered in public. We say someone “passed on” or “slipped away.” We put sick pets “to sleep.” We outlaw the practice of euthanasia, so that accepting death as a release from life’s physical pain and suffering becomes a crime worthy of imprisonment. Unlike in Latin America, where poverty causes a large majority of the population to face death on a frequent basis, the relative affluence and technological advancements of the United States create a sense of invulnerability among the general population. It is not unusual for individuals in the US to live for twenty or more years without experiencing the death of a family member (Jackson 1977), and this sense of invulnerability fosters a reluctance to confront mortality. Even when terminal illness strikes, the “fiction of probable recovery” is often maintained until the moment of death (Metcalf and Huntington 1991), rather than accepting death as a natural part of the life cycle.

Americans avoid the topic of death, evidenced by the fact that the majority of senior citizens in the US do not prepare wills or discuss with family their wishes regarding final medical or funeral arrangements (*60 Minutes II*, June 23, 2004, 8:00 pm

ABC). Metcalf and Huntington contend that in societies with harsh living conditions and little social mobility, people hold more accepting attitudes towards death (often seeing it as a peaceful, sometimes even joyous release from the hardships of life) and play active roles in death proceedings such as preparing bodies for burial, planning funerals, or engaging in mourning and remembrance rituals. However, in the United States, with its strong cultural emphasis on individualism (where people are socially and geographically less connected to their families and “home towns” than in Latin America) and goals of pleasure and upward mobility, people generally view death in negative terms and play only passive roles in death rituals. In fact, most Americans rarely witness death: the majority now die in hospitals where family members are frequently absent in the final moments. Revealing a collective cultural discomfort with death, US families seldom ask to see the body of a relative before its removal from hospital to funeral home (Metcalf & Huntington 1991).

In a consumer culture that emphasizes the new and improved version of *everything*, physical degeneration and fatality are contrary to dominant ideologies of competition and rugged individualism. Some critical cultural scholars have argued that the prosperity of modern US consumer society has depended on the continuous promotion of youthful values. In an economic system dependent on ever-expanding production, they note, corporate marketers and media producers enhance their selling power by promoting “youth values” such as impulsiveness, immediate gratification, and contempt for authority over “adult values” such as respect for tradition and authority or a willingness to save and sacrifice (Leach 1993; Frank 1997). Americans are obsessed with looking and acting young, and being youthful has become almost synonymous

with being *alive*. We are socialized to believe that with the right diet, exercise, grooming products, and cosmetic surgery, we can be young forever. Within this mindset, thoughts of death are rigorously resisted. In contrast to many traditional societies where elders are revered, the elderly and infirm in the United States are often discarded like outdated appliances, left to die alone and in poverty. Whereas most Latin Americans are socialized to consider *la muerte* as another stage of life, many people in contemporary US society feel so removed from death that they lack positive ways to relate to the deceased. For many people (especially young Americans) their earliest notions of death come from the ghoulish images of commercial haunted houses and Hollywood slasher films.

With the rise of the funeral industry in the twentieth century, Americans became physically separated from their dead. Bodies were no longer cleaned and dressed by family members. Wakes were no longer held at home. Professional morticians transported corpses to funeral parlors for institutionalized viewing and, for the majority of Americans, active community rituals of leave-taking, mourning, and remembering were lost. Today, most burials are not conducted in front of the public, who are generally led out of the cemetery by funeral professionals before the coffin is lowered into the ground. An underlying reason for this practice is economic expediency, since more funerals can be processed per day when families vacate the cemetery as quickly as possible.<sup>238</sup> As death has become a lucrative and efficient corporate business in the

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<sup>238</sup> At a funeral I attended recently, the family of the deceased was prevented not only from watching the burial, but also from viewing the grave. On arrival to the cemetery, mourners were led to a generic “chapel” for several minutes of hurried prayer led by an unknown chaplain, and then dismissed. Those who wanted to go to the tomb to lay flowers were told by funeral staff that there was no time to visit the

United States, families today find themselves with fewer opportunities than ever to adequately process the loss of loved ones.

This state of affairs was not always the case. Until the early twentieth century, death was widely contemplated in the US and occupied an important place in the mass culture, where mourners readily found sources of community support. In the mid-nineteenth century, American religious movements “sought to promote a homely, even domestic view of the world to come” (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 208). Cemeteries were considered “schools of moral philosophy and catalysts of civic virtue” where the living regularly engaged in meditative promenades to contemplate the shortness of life and learn from the exemplary lives of the interred. Walking, reading and picnicking in cemeteries were actively promoted by moral leaders as being “healthful, agreeable and refreshing” activities that would inspire visitors to work hard and do good in life (Meyer 1989: 295).

So widespread was the desire to stimulate retrospection, and reverence regarding life and death, that magazines, newspapers and advice books of the 1800s encouraged American families to take Sunday walks in cemeteries to cultivate “a cheerful association with death.” Visiting the United States in 1847, English writer Harriet Martineau observed that thoughts of death “filled a large space in peoples’ minds” (Meyer 1989: 298). As recently as the early twentieth century, the American public still viewed death as an expected part of life. Senior citizens born in the early 1900s recall how, in Catholic schools, students were taught to begin each day by “praying for a

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grave because another funeral caravan was scheduled to arrive in ten minutes, and mourners’ cars needed to exit in order to make way for the incoming group.

happy death.”<sup>239</sup> Parents routinely purchased life insurance policies for their infants, cognizant of the reality that many children, stricken by commonplace childhood illness, would not reach adulthood. Over time, however, these commonplace reflections on death became all *but* common.

North America’s commercialized version of All Souls’ Day – Halloween – is bereft of any serious commemoration of the departed, while Memorial Day, the official US holiday for visiting cemeteries, began as a day to honor Civil War dead and continues to focus primarily on the honoring of military dead. As with Flag Day and Independence Day, the American flag is a major symbol of Memorial Day, along with military parades and veterans’ ceremonies. Rather than highlight the *lives* of the deceased, the day focuses on their *deaths* as a way to commemorate patriotism and, implicitly, US capitalism and the foreign policy that supports it. The somber tone of contemporary Memorial Day observances, where buildings and graves are often draped in black, stands in stark contrast to the vivid ambiance of Day of the Dead, where altars typically brim with flowers, fruits, corn stalks, gourds and other symbols of vitality, reflecting the coexistence of harvest and winter, life and death, as balanced parts of the life cycle. With its primary focus on war dead (as opposed to “the dead” in general), Memorial Day has become irrelevant for the majority of Americans who do not have deceased veterans in the immediate family and for whom the holiday is just another long weekend of cookouts and shopping sales.

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<sup>239</sup> Personal interviews with senior citizens at the Anna DeFronzo Senior Center, Boston Massachusetts, July, 1999.

### A Desire for Public Remembrance

However, growing numbers of Americans feel dissatisfied with the mainstream culture's mode of handling death. A collective desire for public ways to remember the dead is visible in phenomena such as the enormous public response to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC; the spontaneous creation of a public shrine at the site of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing; and the ubiquitous appearance of outdoor altars in New York City following the World Trade Center explosions of September 11, 2001. Filled with mementos of the dead, these public spaces represent opportunities for the public to remember and mourn communally. As with Day of the Dead altars, families of Vietnam veterans place objects (such as uniforms, hats, boots, photos, candles) along the memorial wall, converting it into a public shrine for those killed. After the Oklahoma City bombing, residents and visitors attached items (such as stuffed animals, baby shoes, hair ribbons, and poems) to a hurricane fence surrounding the bombed area, transforming a bleak, wire barrier into a public shrine.<sup>240</sup> More recently in New York, hundreds of make-shift altars consisting of photos, flowers, letters, candles, and other mementos appeared along sidewalks, parks, schools, government buildings, storefronts, subways, and fire stations as a tribute to those killed in the explosions. Such public acts are efforts not only to honor the dead but also to communally grieve and heal.

The growing popularity of public shrine making in the United States over the past twenty years indicates a noticeable shift in cultural practice from the somber, private, Protestant forms of remembrance considered "proper" by mainstream America

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<sup>240</sup> So enormous was the outpouring of offerings to this unplanned commemoration, that the Oklahoma City Memorial Museum was opened in April, 2000, to house them all.



during most of the twentieth century. This rising practice coincides with the recent demographic growth in the US of Latinos and other non-European populations (e.g., Filipinos, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Africans) with strong shrine-making traditions and their contact with and influence on native-born US citizens. In particular, the marked rise in roadside shrines, identifying sites where lives have been lost in car accidents, has paralleled the burgeoning growth in the US of immigrants from Latin American countries, where roadside shrines are commonplace. Several of my respondents made explicit connections between the rise of public shrines in the US (particularly in cases of disappeared children and car accident victims) and the demographic growth of Latinos. A Latina who has lived in the US for nearly thirty years, noted that “A few years ago, American people did not have the tradition of putting flowers on the side of the road where someone dies in a crash. That’s a Latino tradition, but now I’m always amazed at how much everyone in this country now is doing this tradition. That wasn’t done twenty years ago, at *all*.”<sup>241</sup>

A greater public emphasis on the value of multi-cultural diversity since the 1970s, together with an increasing interest in alternative forms of spirituality by many Americans who feel disenchanted with traditional western Christianity, have also contributed to a greater openness, acceptance, and adoption of non-western ritual practices that would have been considered garish or superstitious by mainstream observers fifty years ago. Given the dearth of opportunities in modern US society to publicly honor departed friends and family in a positive way, Day of the Dead offers an

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<sup>241</sup> Personal interview with Maribel Simán DeLuca, April 24, 2003, San Diego, California.

opportunity to reconnect with recessed memories, symbolically keeping deceased loved ones alive.

## **5.2 Mainstream Appeal (or the Rise of “Day of the Dead” Heads)**

The most famous Day of the Dead procession in the United States is the annual procession in San Francisco, first organized in 1981 by René Yañez (then working at the community-based art gallery La Galería de la Raza), in which a few dozen residents of the Mission neighborhood walked around the block holding candles and photos of their dead. As an indicator of the holiday’s mainstream appeal, the procession now attracts upwards of 20,000 participants each year, at least half of whom appear to be non-Latinos. During her ethnographic field work in San Francisco in the 1980s and 1990s, Suzanne Morrison noted that non-Latinos of various racial backgrounds enthusiastically participated in both the creation and viewing of altars at the Mission Cultural Center and comprised the majority of annual procession participants. She wrote: “Non-Latinos initially approached the November 2 procession through the barrio as ‘semi-tourists’ but are now full-fledged and enthusiastic participants. In fact, every year that I have been present [1984-87; 1990-91], Anglos have constituted the majority of the processants” (Morrison 1992:2). This situation was still the case when I attended the Mission procession during the years 2001-2003. When I asked about Day of the Dead’s appeal to non-Latinos, a volunteer involved in organizing the Mission procession replied:

During Day of the Dead, there’s no negative energy, but an incredible solidarity. A completeness of people coming together to celebrate their loved ones and their own emotions, which rarely happens here. It’s a

time to acknowledge that we're all human and are dealing with some pretty heavy emotions that we're all here to support. Just by being in the park or in the procession, you're supporting somebody's process of healing. What makes Day of the Dead unusual is that you're literally walking in the street with hundreds of people, thousands of people who you don't know, but there's a feeling of community... You see strangers hugging each other...crying together. It meets a human need for affiliation, on a really elemental level.<sup>242</sup>

In Sacramento, California, Day of the Dead events have become so popular with non-Latinos that a round-table discussion was held in November 2000 at Sacramento State University to discuss the reasons why. One participant in the discussion explained:

Each year, more non-Latinos have participated...I think everyone's consensus is that there is no venue in American tradition which lets us honor and celebrate our dead. Once people have died, their memory becomes a private matter for the family...there is no public remembrance past the funeral. It's as if they were swept under the carpet and we move on to the next thing. With Dia de los Muertos, the entire community is involved...there is that public acknowledgment of the dead.<sup>243</sup>

The popularity of Day of the Dead among non-Latinos in California was confirmed in my interviews with staff from more than a half dozen museum shops and folk art stores where Day of the Dead merchandise is sold. In every conversation, respondents informed me that Day of the Dead season is their most lucrative time of year, and that at least half (and frequently more than half) of the clientele who buy Day of the Dead products are non-Latinos. I was told that the best-selling products were sugar skulls, skeleton figurines, *papel picado*, and other items used to decorate altars,

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<sup>242</sup> Personal interview with Lila Mays, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2003.

<sup>243</sup> Personal communication with Sacramento resident Marie Putnam, April 21, 2001.

potentially indicating that many people are adopting the practice of altar making. The owners of a Back From Tomboctou, a San Diego folk art store and gallery that distributes Day of the Dead merchandise wholesale to retailers across the United States, noted that “Day of the Dead is our busiest time of the year...probably sixty-five percent of our clients are non-Latinos.” Similarly, the owner of Casa Bonampak, a fair-trade folk craft store in San Francisco, said:

October is our big season...You would be *amazed* at how many sugar skulls we sell here. I sell over a thousand. For a small store, that’s a *lot*. ...I think that everyone I know, at this point, is making altars at home now. It’s sort of like decorating the Christmas tree. An annual ritual. Schools have altars. Museums have altars. Companies have altars. I get invited to all kinds of city events. Supervisor Ammiano lost his partner to AIDS, a while back, so he does an altar every year in his office in City Hall. I would say my clients are about 50% Latino and 50% non-Latino.<sup>244</sup>

Staff at bakeries I visited in Latino communities in San Francisco and Los Angeles also reported that Day of the Dead was their busiest time of the year. Some reported that their *pan de muerto* sales in October and early November annually exceed the amount of money earned during all other months of the year combined. Bakers noted that many clients purchasing *pan de muerto* were non-Latinos, particularly teachers who bought it for their students’ Day of the Dead celebrations. Florists in Latino neighborhoods are also experiencing a rising business in the sale of marigolds, popularly used in Mexico and Central America to decorate altars and graves during Day of the Dead.

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<sup>244</sup> Personal interview with Nancy Chárraga, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2003.

Non-Latinos are not only attending Latino-organized Day of the Dead activities in growing numbers but are also adopting the custom and creating their own rituals. For example, the Solana Beach, California, congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship holds a Day of the Dead community altar ceremony each year. Worshipers and the general public are invited (via word of mouth, church bulletins, and listings in local newspapers) to bring photos, stories, and favorite mementos of departed loved ones to share at a communal altar. When I attended this event in November 2001, the congregation consisted of approximately 150 white, upper middle-class people. One by one, individuals placed items (such as candles, photos, books, jewelry, or alcoholic beverages) on the Latin American-styled altar (adorned with fruits, tamales, Mexican chocolate, marigolds, *pan de muerto*, *papel picado*, and other Latin American mementos such as Guatemalan tapestries and Salvadoran *pirografía* crosses), then took the microphone to speak about the person they had lost. The atmosphere was both happy and emotional, as people related jokes and stories about their loved ones. Numerous participants mentioned that it was the first time they had talked publicly about the deceased since his or her death, which, in many cases, had occurred years earlier.

In my interviews with non-Latino Day of the Dead participants, all discussed what they felt was a dearth of opportunity for honoring the dead in mainstream US culture. A Korean-American from Los Angeles said, “Americans tend to be morbid and depressed about death, while the Latino culture honors their ancestors and celebrates their life through their death.” An Irish-American from Boston who recently lost her father said, “I think it’s a much healthier version of dealing with death and dying.

Making the altar is very healing. It makes a connection with the people who have gone before us and affirms what they did in life.” Many other respondents stated that participating in Day of the Dead helped them to mourn the loss of family members. For example, a native of Kentucky who participated for four consecutive years in San Francisco’s Day of the Dead celebrations, said:

I loved the diversity of it. Aztec dancers, crowds of skeletons, yuppie couples, Latino moms with kids in strollers. I loved the somber yet celebratory tone of the marchers. I took the time to reflect on the loss of a favorite aunt who died unexpectedly that year. I hadn’t been able to go to her funeral. My experience that night gave me some much needed closure on her death. It was wonderful to reminisce about her in such a supportive atmosphere. My traditional Catholic upbringing has left me extremely unfulfilled when it comes to dealing with death. In the past few years, I’ve found myself actively pursuing other culture’s rituals and practices around death in an effort to unravel my own feelings.<sup>245</sup>

The cathartic aspect of Day of the Dead rituals is similarly noted by a Polish-American respondent who participated in a Day of the Dead procession in Chicago:

One thing I thought was neat at a procession at the local cemetery was almost a roll call, where people could call out the name of a dead family member or friend and the entire group would answer ‘*Presente*,’ acknowledging their presence among us. It was amazingly soothing for me, as I had just lost my mom and found that many people were just too uncomfortable with death to even talk about it.<sup>246</sup>

All of the respondents described a dichotomy between US ways of relating to death, which they considered “unfulfilling” or “depressing,” and the personalized, communal rituals of remembrance common in Latin America, which they called

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<sup>245</sup> Personal communication with Catherine Guthrie, April 21, 2001.

<sup>246</sup> Personal email communication with respondent who chose to remain anonymous, April 19, 2001.

“celebratory,” “supportive,” and “healing.” An Italian-American native of Jersey City explained:

I’ve got people who have passed away in my life that mean so much to me, and in thinking about their memory or seeing their picture, it seems so shallow to remember somebody in such a quiet way when they were so important in your life...In the modern world, we have gotten away from our ability to form strong relationships and bonds lasting beyond our physical life. Day of the Dead is a reminder of that. The bonds don’t end when our time above ground ends.<sup>247</sup>

An Anglo artist who lost a baby to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and now makes an annual Day of the Dead altar for her child, classified the American attitude towards death in the following way:

In our culture, we deny death. We think we can avoid it. We have books on the stages of grief and think we can control things and intellectualize and fix everything...To me, Day of the Dead is a way of coping with death in a country where nobody wants to talk about it. People also like the fact that it’s beautiful, colorful and fun. It’s finally a dialogue about remembering people we love. For people like me, who didn’t know what to do with death, it’s really helpful. Death hurts and sucks and it’s hard. This gave me a place to put my energy and make something positive and share with other people.<sup>248</sup>

As these statements illustrate, the Latin American tradition of Day of the Dead provides a channel through which non-Latinos feel empowered to access their emotions regarding death.

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<sup>247</sup> Personal interview with Louise Torio, San Diego, California, November 15, 2003.

<sup>248</sup> Personal interview with Johanna Hansen, Lakeside, California, July 22, 2003.

## 5.2 Spirituality versus Religion

While Day of the Dead is a ritual rooted in Catholic and indigenous religious practices, the basic premise of the celebration – remembering the dead - is universal enough to appeal to many who describe themselves as “non-religious.” A theme that consistently arose among both Latino and non-Latino artists and intellectuals I interviewed was the opportunity that Day of the Dead provides to engage in spirituality outside of organized religion. Patricia Rodriguez, a Chicana artist who has organized Day of the Dead exhibits and educational activities for more than twenty years, expressed the sentiments of many Latino artists I spoke with when she said:

We’re so far removed from the Church that none of us go to Mass anymore like when we were growing up. Now that we’re adults, we don’t go, at least the intellectual crowd doesn’t. So, this is a unifying of those spiritual connections. You can see it in their faces. You can see their pain. You can see their remembrances. They’re very grateful to have that space to come together and remember.<sup>249</sup>

An appreciation for the opportunity to engage, both on an individual and community level, in a spiritual ritual independent of the doctrine of a religious institution was also stated by many non-Latino respondents, such as the following young artist:

I think that there’s been a large-scale reaction against organized religion for many in this country, so that people are left in a void. People ask themselves, ‘Without organized religion, where is the spirit?’ Day of the Dead gives people something tangible that they can connect to. Everyone has people close to them who pass away. To have a time to remember them is very healthy and it’s a lot easier to access those feelings when a

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<sup>249</sup> Personal interview with Patricia Rodriguez, Mission Cultural Center, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.



lot of people are visualizing a connection with the spirit world simultaneously.<sup>250</sup>

Unique within US society, this celebration provides a ritual opportunity for profound human connection with departed individuals and the living who collectively remember them. Because of the universality of death, Day of the Dead has achieved a much wider cross-cultural appeal than other ethnic celebrations, such as Cinco de Mayo, Kwanzaa, or Chinese New Year, for example, all of which revolve around historically and culturally specific events. Tere Romo discusses the diversity of Day of the Dead participants: “It’s one of the few exhibits that you can walk into a gallery and see a crowd that is totally diverse...African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Whites, all ages, moms with their kids, school children, old people and every age in between. It has an attraction across generations and ethnic groups.”<sup>251</sup>

According to Barbara Henry, the educational curator at the Oakland Museum of California, some 20,000 people attend the museum’s Day of the Dead exhibit during a six week period each year, making it the best-attended exhibit in the institution’s annual calendar. The exhibit, now in its twelfth year, regularly receives enthusiastic feedback from visitors in the form of letters, emails, and guest book comments. Henry believes that an important part of the event’s popularity is the opportunity it provides to publicly acknowledge, reflect upon, and discuss death:

A number of people have said that they don’t have anything from their culture that helps them deal with death. One woman sent me a letter about three months after the exhibit closed, telling me how it helped her

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<sup>250</sup> Personal interview with Jonathan Youtt, Cell Space Gallery, San Francisco, California, June 4, 2003.

<sup>251</sup> Personal interview with Tere Romo, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.

deal with the death of her mother. We've had a number of grief counselors and people from the health profession who have come here and used this exhibit with their clients to help them process death. There was one group of terminally ill patients. We've gotten written comments from many people telling us about how coming to this exhibit has become an annual tradition for their family.<sup>252</sup>

Another employee at the Oakland Museum notes that the museum's annual Day of the Dead exhibit is a "healing tool" for many visitors:

We've received lots of letters from people thanking us and saying that it's helped them reflect, or telling us how they've adopted the tradition. Not just Latino people. One of the great things we have here is a wall of reflection, where you can write messages to people who have passed on. I've seen families crying, hugging each other. So there's something we can offer people who are in pain, to help them heal.<sup>253</sup>

In Oceanside, California, some 30,000 people attend the annual Day of the Dead celebration that has been organized since 2001 by the local business establishment in conjunction with the city's Mixtec immigrant community. I attended the celebrations in 2001, 2003 and 2004, where nearly half of the participants appeared to be non-Latinos. Artist David Avalos, a professor at the California State University at San Marcos who created an altar dedicated to his father at the 2002 Oceanside festival, describes the variety of participants at the celebration: "It was a mixed crowd. There were Oaxacan Indians mixed with the kind of folks you'd expect to see at the Del Mar Fair."<sup>254</sup> Avalos observes that Day of the Dead provides a rare opportunity (in US society) not

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<sup>252</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Henry, Oakland Museum of California, June 3, 2003.

<sup>253</sup> Personal interview with employee who chose to remain anonymous, June 3, 2003, Oakland, California.

<sup>254</sup> The Del Mar Fair is a typical "All American" county fair held annually in San Diego County.

only to connect with dead ancestors but, at the same time, to learn about and publicly share personal histories:

I teach a class called Chicano Art in the Border Region. And what I find is that people respond to Day of the Dead because it gives them an opportunity they don't have otherwise...For students who aren't of Mexican ancestry, and even those who are of Mexican ancestry and don't practice the tradition, it gives them an opportunity to connect with their own personal history and that's a spiritual resource that we're often denied...It's a spiritual resource to be able to look back on your family history. When you find out more about dead relatives, you find out more about yourself.<sup>255</sup>

#### Organized Religion and Day of the Dead

Interestingly, while the indigenous spirituality and ritual of this celebration attract many people who are not associated with any organized religion, these rituals have begun to be incorporated into the official All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day activities of some US Catholic churches that, until about ten years ago, did not embrace them. Historically, even in Mexican-American neighborhoods, observance of this holy period within church walls was traditionally limited to holding designated masses and novenas for the dead. Elaborate indigenous-style altars, almost unheard of in Mexican-American homes thirty years ago, and confined to the private realm of the home rather than inside churches even in Latin America, were not traditionally seen inside of American Catholic churches. In recent years, however, the popularity of Chicano-style altar-making events, along with the demographic growth of indigenous and other rural Latin American immigrants within US Catholic congregations, have created a climate in

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<sup>255</sup> Personal interview with David Avalos, California State University at San Marcos, July 29, 2003.

which Day of the Dead altars are now constructed inside some churches. Thus, the secular popularity of a ritual associated with folk or “unofficial” Catholicism has influenced the way some US congregations officially observe All Saints’ and All Souls’ Day.

Professor of religion Lara Medina notes that certain predominantly Mexican and Latino parishes in the Los Angeles Catholic archdiocese “are increasingly incorporating Dia de los Muertos traditions into their liturgical calendar...[and] construct ofrendas in their worship space” (Medina 2002:91). Father Jorge Hernandez of the Mission San Luis Rey Parish, one of the largest parishes in the San Diego diocese, observes that both Latino and non-Latino Catholics participate in the parish’s Day of the Dead altar-making activities:

Our parish is majority Anglo-Americans. The second-largest group is Hispanic, mostly Mexican. Most of them are first generation...We have some people from Puerto Rico, Brazil, Central America...a couple of people from Spain. The two other major groups are from the Pacific Rim, the Samoan community and the Filipino community, and a small minority from Hawaii. We make altars and light candles. Candles are a symbol of the light that helps the souls come back to their families, like a lighthouse. People also bring photos of their loved ones, so that there is also a material presence, not just the thought. That also helps people to overcome the separation...By offering altars, they are not only remembering their loved ones, but also giving thanks to God for all of the blessings that we have received.<sup>256</sup>

Aside from Catholic churches, some congregations from other denominations, such as Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Universalist Unitarian, also now include Day of the Dead altars as part of their All Souls’/All Saints’ observances (personal observation and

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<sup>256</sup> Personal interview with Fr. Jorge Hernandez, Mission San Luis Rey Parish, August 5, 2003.

interviews). Nicholas Rogers writes: “Taking their cue from Latino communities, other religious congregations have also adopted the practice of cleaning up and adorning their gravesites on All Saints’ or All Souls’ Day. In Texas and South Carolina, even some mainstream Protestant denominations have adopted this liturgical calendar to commemorate and pray for the dead” (2002: 154-155).

#### **5.4 Adaptation and Change**

How do Chicanos and other Latinos feel about so many non-Latinos getting involved in Day of the Dead celebrations? Nearly everyone I interviewed expressed pride that the celebration has become popular across the country, and most welcomed the participation of non-Latinos. However, several Latino intellectuals I spoke with expressed mixed feelings about the impact of non-Latinos on the celebration. Reservations centered around issues of “tradition” versus “change,” with some people concerned that non-Latinos were misinterpreting and altering the rituals in ways they thought strayed too far from the original tradition.

In California, the Day of the Dead procession in San Francisco’s Mission neighborhood is a site where heated debates about tradition and change have emerged within the Latino community. René Yañez notes that what started off as a procession of a few dozen people swelled exponentially within a few years: “By the third year, it became massive, with thousands of people.<sup>257</sup> Feeling that the procession had gotten out of hand, staff at the La Galería de la Raza stopped organizing the event after Yañez took a job elsewhere. It was then organized for a few years by the Mission Cultural

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<sup>257</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, June 3, 2002.

Center, whose staff also decided it was too much to handle and eventually discontinued sponsorship. Yet, even when the procession was left without official promotion by a community organization, thousands of people showed up the following year.<sup>258</sup>

Illustrating the resentment that some Latinos feel towards the large non-Latino presence in the Mission procession, a 53 year old native of Ecuador who grew up in the Mission told me that she no longer attends because she feels the event has lost its original meaning and become too “gringo.” A 42-year old Salvadoran-American who has lived in San Francisco since she was 17 expressed similar feelings: “I stopped going for a number of years. But then we started again because my daughter’s school participates. The kids dress up like skeletons and make a giant skeleton puppet and her friends and teachers are there, so we go.” The massive influx of non-Latinos and non-traditional activities in the procession (e.g., fire throwers, steel drums, New Age rituals) elicited frustration from some Chicana artists I spoke with who had participated in the original processions organized by Yañez. The following comment reflects the types of concerns felt by those who worry that the authenticity of the procession has been compromised and co-opted:

When René started the processions at Galería de la Raza, they were real. It was somber, sad and beautiful, like the processions that happen in Mexico...But in San Francisco, everyone who wasn’t part of the tradition jumped in with their drums, jumped in with their caricatures, cartoons, skates, and puppets that have no meaning to the procession. So it turned

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<sup>258</sup> By the mid 1990s, responsibility for organizing the Mission procession was assumed by Bay Area artist Rosa de Anda and other artists from the Rescate (Rescue) Culture Collective. Since 2002, the Collective has organized the event jointly with the Marigold Project, a group of young artists who organize the outdoor altar exhibits in Garfield Park, where the procession ends. Marigold Project members come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds including, Japanese, Lebanese, Anglo, and Mexican-American. Personal interviews with four members of the Marigold Project, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2003.

into a kind of carnival. It has no meaning. Not in a real sense...It's just cool and popular to be there.<sup>259</sup>

Another Chicana artist explained: "People come [to the Procession] from all over the Bay Area, which is a good thing, but...perhaps unintentionally when people like something, they begin to change the very essence of what it is. Something becomes very popular and very hip, but there is a way we can appreciate the essence without changing it."<sup>260</sup> Similar concerns are sometimes expressed about altar exhibits. In response to the participation of many non-Latino artists in Day of the Dead altar exhibits, Yolanda Garfias Woo stated, "The only thing that worries me is when I think that the person doing the installation actually misunderstands what [Dia de los] Muertos is. It concerns me only because I don't want the tradition to get lost. It was so hard to find it, to get it in the first place."<sup>261</sup> The comments of Garfias Woo and others who remember a time before Day of the Dead was popular in the US, a time when Mexicans and other Latinos were automatically consigned to the rank of second class citizens by the dominant society, reflect their personal knowledge of how difficult it was to initiate the tradition, given the racism and exclusion they encountered. As cultural midwives of an emergent ritual practice in the United States intended to reflect a respect for and connection to Chicano/Mexican/Latino ancestral heritage, these artists feel a strong sense of ownership regarding the appropriate and inappropriate observation of the tradition.

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<sup>259</sup> Personal interview, June 2, 2003, San Francisco, California.

<sup>260</sup> Personal interview, June 5, 2003, San Francisco, California.

<sup>261</sup> Personal interview, Yolanda Garfias Woo, June 6, 2003, San Francisco, California.

While the “misinterpretations” and “changes” mentioned by the above respondents were associated with non-Latinos, radical reformulations of altars, processions, and other Day of the Dead rituals are not the exclusive realm of non-Latinos. René Yañez, for example, has welcomed non-traditional interpretations from the celebration’s onset, curating numerous acclaimed and provocative Day of the Dead exhibits, such as his famous “Rooms for the Dead,” at the Mission Cultural Center and Yerba Buena Cultural Center, and “City of Miracles” at the SomArts Gallery.<sup>262</sup> Receiving both intense admiration and criticism for his work, he notes: “Some people think it’s too far out...They want to see paper cuts and traditional altars.” He recalls the reaction he received from some of his Chicano peers when he began inviting people from different cultures to participate in Day of the Dead exhibits:

I got a deluge of objections from people in the community who wanted to keep it Latino. First it was Chicano and Mexican only, and I started opening it up to other Latinos and there was an objection to that. Then the objection went. Then I opened it up to other people and there were more objections and debates. I started feeling pressure from people, mostly academics, who were saying, “You should keep it strictly Latino, Chicano, Mexican-American.” I wasn’t comfortable with that, because part of the process and evolution that happened was that children from all over the city would come see the Day of the Dead, in their schools and with their families. And when those kids were growing up and coming to me and saying, “I want to participate,” I didn’t feel comfortable telling them, “No you can’t participate. You’re Black.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> “Rooms For the Dead” (1990-93) transformed the concept of altars into themed rooms for the dead. Yañez invited Latinos, Anglos, Africans, Asians and others to create room installations. In “City of Miracles” (2001) he pushed the room concept a step further, developing the idea of a dreamlike labyrinth of rooms and passages, complex theatrical lighting grids and brilliant sheaths of cloth wafting in a gentle breeze. Yañez has consistently recruited non-artists as well as artists to create altar exhibits, an innovative approach not taken by most curators. He notes: “I’ll ask housewives and go to hospitals and recruit nurses and different people to make altars, who wouldn’t normally participate.” Personal interview, René Yañez, San Francisco, June 3, 2003.

<sup>263</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2003.



Thus, in a complex milieu of debates within the Latino community, there have been discussions not only about the impact of non-Latinos and non-Mexican Latinos on Day of the Dead but also about the non-traditional expressions of Chicano artists such as Yañez and others who have taken Day of the Dead in unconventional directions. Affirming that tensions over the preservation of tradition are not limited to Latino versus non-Latino dichotomies, David Avalos notes: “Even young people of Mexican ancestry here in the United States bristle at the constraints they feel are imposed on them by an older generation. They want to make art that reflects and informs their Chicano identity in ways that are different than some recipe handed down from 1970.”<sup>264</sup>

New generations of Chicano artists, who have grown up seeing Day of the Dead widely celebrated in their schools and communities, approach the event from a vastly different perspective than many people of their parents’ generation. While maintaining a respect for the groundbreaking work of earlier generations of Chicano artists, many (but not all) of the younger generation seem less concerned with the gatekeeping of “authenticity.” Illustrative of this idea is the fact that some young Latino artists I interviewed enthusiastically described the very procession scorned by some older generation Chicano artists. For example, a Mexican-American artist in her early 20s who helps organize The Mission District’s Day of the Dead procession expressed excitement at its non-traditional aspects. In contrast to the middle-aged Chicana who stated: “Everyone who wasn’t part of the tradition jumped in with their drums, jumped in with their caricatures, cartoons, skates and puppets that have no meaning to the

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<sup>264</sup> Personal discussion with David Avalos, February 11, 2005.

procession,” this young artist and a group of her friends expressed admiration and enjoyment of the non-traditional elements of the procession:

Last year, we had people dancing all night! We had fire dancers and people sharing food with one another. A lot of musicians came out, bagpipe players and drummers. It’s so cool because it’s so diverse. People of all ages and cultures...People really get into it. Wearing all kinds of costumes, using all kinds of creative props, music, anything you can think of!<sup>265</sup>

The same young artist also discussed feeling a “pull” from older Chicano artists to adhere to “the tradition,” while at the same time wanting to embrace the different cultures that constitute her world:

People have views of how it *should* be...You have your elders, whom you need to respect, who have their rituals and their understanding of the way it should be...For me, being Latina, it’s been a bit of a struggle. I’m of Mexican descent, but I don’t speak very good Spanish. So sometimes I’m accepted by the community, sometimes I’m not...But, I’m born and raised here. This is my turf. In the United States, you have your different types of cultures, often within the same person. You have one side and another side in you and a constant pulling. In doing Dia de los Muertos, I want to experience a minimal amount of pulling...There’s a lot of political bullshit that’s deeply rooted in artists that have been here for like 35 or 40 years – since we’ve been alive! – that I can’t even begin to understand. But I understand that in order to do a community event, you need to work together with lots of different people.

Ironically, while Chicano “traditionalists” strive to maintain the Mexican integrity of US renditions of the celebration, Mexicans who view Chicano altars often comment on how un-Mexican they are. As a native of Mexico City, who first saw Chicano altar exhibits in San Francisco in the mid 1990s, told me: “Most of these aren’t

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<sup>265</sup> Personal interview, June 5, 2003, San Francisco, California.

the traditional altars with ‘the three levels and the five elements that every altar must have,’ [smiling] but that’s just different interpretations. What happens in California with Mexican-American, Chicano and Latino artists is really different. It’s not Mexican. It’s not Latin American. It’s a whole different thing.”<sup>266</sup> Carlos Von Son, also from Mexico City and professor of Spanish at California State University, San Marcos, felt similarly when he first observed Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations. He shared the following reflections on authenticity:

Sometimes, if I use terms that are Spanglish, my family in Mexico laughs and says, “Look how *pocho*<sup>267</sup> you are,” because they think I’m not speaking real Spanish. The same thing happens here with Day of the Dead. Mexicans sometimes laugh when they see the cultural celebrations we do over here...because they feel they’re not authentic...Being honest, I felt the same way when I first came to the US. My instinct was to correct [Mexican-American] people for the way they spoke Spanish, or tell them they were making quesadillas the wrong way. When I would see Day of the Dead celebrations here, I would say, “Don’t use those elements that are foreign to the way it is in Mexico.” But it didn’t take me long to realize that these things are not wrong. It’s not a degeneration of the original...I started looking more closely at the changes and loving the way that culture gets adapted to new surroundings.<sup>268</sup>

Sharing his reflections on the tradition versus change debate, Tomás Benitez, Director of Self-Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, observed that the cultural diversity of Chicanos, themselves, naturally leads to diverse interpretations of Day of the Dead. Benitez is part Irish (and still keeps in touch with relatives in County Cork, Ireland), while his son is half Jewish. They celebrate Day of the Dead as well as Hanukah and

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<sup>266</sup> Personal interview with Salvador Acevedo, June 3, 2003, San Francisco, California.

<sup>267</sup> A sometimes humorous, sometimes derogatory term used by Mexicans to describe Mexican-Americans, referring to their “Americanized” ways.

<sup>268</sup> Personal interview with Carlos Von Son, San Marcos, California, July 29, 2003.

Seder. “That doesn’t take away from my Chicanismo, it adds to it,” he states. “Day of the Dead is the same way,” he asserts, noting that racial and cultural diversity have been integral parts of US Day of the Dead celebrations from their beginning:

Let’s not forget that our experience, which is only thirty years old, is predated by an experience in Mexico that was several hundred years old. So we’re already knocking off. What we’re talking about is the authenticity of how Chicanos celebrate it. Which means there’s a flexibility to it to begin with...From the get go [at Self-Help Graphics] we were a mixed group of Chicanos and Mexicanos with a Franciscan nun who was an Italian girl with a Jewish stepfather and a couple of other nuns from other places. Right away we had exchanges with Black organizations and Asians and an Australian group...That’s hybridization of culture.<sup>269</sup>

Along similar lines, Yañez feels that opening Day of the Dead to a variety of people and forms of expression keeps it germane to the lived experiences and socio-political reality of Chicanos and all who participate:

Death doesn’t discriminate. As a Chicano-Latino curator, we started Day of the Dead to create alliances of Chicano culture and work together with other people. I’ve worked with people from Chinatown. I’ve worked with Black groups in Oakland. I’ve worked with mainstream groups. This allowed me to learn about how other cultures think and feel and where we fit in the scheme of things. Because if you’re going to be a Chicano curator and not learn from other cultures, then you’re very isolated, and not being relevant to your own culture...Irish, Korean, Japanese, African people all bring something to the table. Other Latinos bring something to the table. It’s a chain reaction.<sup>270</sup>

This chain reaction involves non-Latino artists being inspired by Latinos and Latino artists being inspired by non-Latinos. For example, David Avalos notes that in creating one of his art installations, *Lotería Chicana* (1983), he was influenced by a Day

<sup>269</sup> Personal interview with Tomás Benitez, June 5, 2004, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>270</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2003.

of the Dead exhibit done by Lisa Kokin, a Jewish-American artist.<sup>271</sup> The comments of Benitez, Yañez, Avalos, Von Son and others I spoke with revealed a similar underlying perspective: cultural practices are continually evolving and, if they stagnate, they perish. As the work of contemporary scholars of culture increasingly demonstrates, no cultural practice is pure (Gilroy: 1994:54; García-Canclini 1995; Chen 1998:24), and with Day of the Dead in the United States, diverse groups of people are deepening the hybridity of an already hybrid subject.

Even before the encounter between Spain and the indigenous cultures of the Americas, rituals such as Day of the Dead were in flux, as various indigenous cultures came into contact with one another. Over the past 500 years, at least, these rituals have been influenced by African, European, Asian, and other peoples who settled in Latin America over time. The celebrations of southern Mexico, which today are widely considered to be the most “authentic” Day of the Dead traditions, are themselves the hybridized results of diasporas and cultural clashes of Zapotecs, Aztecs, Mayans, Mixtecs, and others, later influenced by Catholicism and, in the twentieth century, by Western commercial markets. Summarizing his feelings about tradition and change, Von Son concluded, “I have learned to see the beauty of cultural changes happening here and now, and it makes me think of how things must have changed one thousand or two thousand years ago, and I’m part of those changes.”<sup>272</sup>

Regina Bendix notes that “The crucial questions to be answered are not ‘what is authenticity?’ but ‘who needs authenticity?’ and ‘how has authenticity been

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<sup>271</sup> Personal conversation with David Avalos, August 3, 2005, San Diego, California.

<sup>272</sup> Personal interview with Carlos Von Son, San Marcos, California, July 29, 2003.

used?””(1997: 21). For people who feel their culture under threat, creating and maintaining cultural practices that reflect a perceived faithfulness to the past becomes critical. For others who inhabit different generational, national or philosophical locations (such as many young US Latinos who have grown up with opportunities to learn about Chicano and Latino culture and see these validated, or Mexican immigrants who lack the need to prove their “Mexican-ness” or “Chicano-ness”), there is often less concern over adhering to ideas of “what’s always been done” and more openness towards innovation.<sup>273</sup>

A process of conflict and dialogue is essential to community building and maintenance. Over time, debates and negotiations around the authenticity of Day of the Dead in the US have been a valuable learning experience for many people within and outside of the Latino community. These discussions have challenged people of various ages and ethnic backgrounds to consider the meaning and purpose of the event in the US context. Rather than fracture the sense of Latino solidarity discussed in Chapter Three, negotiations around Day of the Dead, (“growing pains,” as one respondent called them), ultimately serve to strengthen intra-ethnic and inter-generational understanding within the Latino community. Most Chicano and other Latino artists I spoke with agreed that the intention with which people engage in Day of the Dead activities – a spirit of remembrance and respect for the dead – is more important than the actual format of the activities or racial/ethnic background of participants. Many viewed

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<sup>273</sup> In fact, some young Chicano and Mexican artists purposely avoid participating in Day of the Dead because they do not want to be associated with or “locked into” the expected norms of Mexican-ness.

innovation and inclusion as integral to keeping Day of the Dead relevant in the twenty-first century.

### **5.5 Culture and Commercialization**

Regional Latin American variations of Day of the Dead have migrated to the US, initially through Chicano artists and later through the contributions of incoming groups of Mexican and other Latin American immigrants. Contemporary US articulations of the holiday incorporate indigenous traditions from southern Mexico, urban expressions from Mexico City, practices and symbols from Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and a variety of other cultures existing in the United States, and attract diverse audiences for distinct reasons. On one hand, the US celebration is a manifestation of Latino symbolic power, creative energy, and political expression in a racially stratified society where historically Latinos have been relegated to the bottom. For Mexican-Americans and other Latinos, this ritual period is a time to celebrate collectively their cultural identity as Latinos in the US. On the other hand, the celebration offers the larger society an alternative metaphysical approach to death, extending the salience of the ritual far beyond the Latino community.

Profoundly inspired by the life-affirming energy and aesthetic dynamism of these rituals, both Latinos and non-Latinos honor the deceased through an assemblage of Mexican and other Latin American material objects (e.g., religious votive candles, sugar skulls, skeleton figurines, pottery vessels, packaged foodstuffs, statues of Catholic saints, statues of indigenous deities, crosses, rosary beads, marigolds, etc.). These items are simultaneously cultural artifacts and mass-produced commodities, the “exoticism”

of which has made them particularly attractive for commercialization. How did this commodification start and in what ways has it affected US Day of the Dead celebrations? The vibrant material culture associated with Day of the Dead is commercialized in the US in three major ways discussed below:

1. The selling of Day of the Dead art and products

Across the US, ethnic folk art stores, museum gift shops, and boutiques specializing in eclectic “kitsch,” along with Southwestern-themed tourist areas in California, Texas, New Mexico, and elsewhere, sell a variety of “muertos” merchandise, ranging from sugar skulls and the plastic molds to make them, to Day of the Dead coloring books, coffee table books, kite-making kits, skeleton figurines, T-shirts, posters, paintings, *papel picado*, papier-mâché masks, educational videos, and do-it-yourself altar kits in a box.<sup>274</sup> Every museum gift shop and folk art store I visited in California reported that Day of the Dead is one of their busiest, if not *the* busiest selling season of the year, equaling or outpacing Christmas sales. Art galleries sell Day of the Dead-themed paintings, sculpture, mobiles, papier-mâché masks and skeletons, skull-themed jewelry, and *nichos*.<sup>275</sup> Increasingly in October, smiling skeletons (distinguishable from Halloween skeletons by their festive apparel, human-like expressions and activities, and floral motifs) decorate US store windows, newspaper

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<sup>274</sup> While these products are most common in California and the Southwest, they are increasingly sold in museum gift shops in Northwestern, Midwestern, and Eastern cities; in ethnic art stores and curio shops in university towns and gentrifying, urban neighborhoods across the country; and in New England and other vacation towns where upper class professionals summer. Museums such as San Diego’s Museum of Man, the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, El Museo del Barrio in New York, and the Chicago Museum of Mexican Art are just a few of the museums across the country that sell Day of the Dead products. Many of these items, such as the do-it-yourself- altar kit, can also be purchased on Amazon.com.

<sup>275</sup> Miniature altars made inside of small boxes that can be hung on walls (often displayed in exhibits).



advertisements, restaurant interiors, dance clubs and bars that cater to both Latino and non-Latino clientele.<sup>276</sup> According to Rocky Behr, owner of The Folk Tree Gallery and Store, in Pasadena, California, sales of Day of the Dead greeting cards are on the rise: “People are sending out a lot of cards now. We’re seeing more and more cards published specifically for the holiday...We even had people from Hallmark go on our Day of the Dead tour. I don’t know if they’re making cards, but [the publisher] Chronicle makes cards.”<sup>277</sup>

In recent years, Day of the Dead products and motifs have become prominent in businesses that have no overt connection to Latin American culture, illustrating the holiday’s symbolic value as an emblem of “hip” style. These items are often available for purchase year-round, illustrating the cachet of Day of the Dead iconography, independent of the holiday’s specific season. For example, an exclusive antique shop in Carmel, California, one of the wealthiest communities in the United States, had Day of the Dead *calavera* mannequins on display in July of 2004. They were part of the shop’s trendy decor, which included art and fashionable relics from around the world, helping to create an ambiance of cutting edge “chic” for a savvy clientele well versed in international art and culture.

In another example, “Dia de los Muertos” embroidery packets (including florid designs of skulls, dancing bride and groom skeletons, candles, flowers, and the Virgin of Guadalupe) can be purchased year-round on the self-described “Hip Embroidery” website, [www.sublimestitching.com](http://www.sublimestitching.com). Advertised with slogans such as, “Embroidery

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<sup>276</sup> Although many of these establishments are Mexican restaurants, non-Mexican eateries and bars are also getting into the act, just as many non-Irish bars decorate with shamrocks and offer green beer on St. Patrick’s Day.

<sup>277</sup> Personal interview with Rocky Behr, Pasadena California, June 4, 2004.

Rocks!” and “This Ain’t Your Grandma’s Embroidery,” the site prides itself on making the oldfangled craft of embroidery “cool” by offering design patterns reflective of pop culture themes. The Dia de los Muertos kit is one of the four kits (out of more than twenty kits available by clicking the links) featured on the top of the home page, amidst other funky patterns such as electric guitars, flaming racecars, “Goth” designs, and yoga symbols.<sup>278</sup>

Day of the Dead inspired the artistic style, characters, and story of the highly popular computer game, “Grim Fandango,” marketed by George [Star Wars] Lucas’ company, Lucas Arts. The game’s designer, Tim Schafer, who came up with the idea for the game on Day of the Dead 1997, explains: “I wanted to do a game that would feature those little papier-mâché folk-art skeletons from Mexico. I was looking at their simple shapes and how the bones were just painted on the outside and I thought...it’ll be cool!”<sup>279</sup> Winner of the 1998 “Game of the Year” award from the gaming website *Game Spot*, Grim Fandango is described on the Lucas Arts website as “a homage to Mexican folklore with a film noir twist,” and centers around the adventures of “Manny Calavera” in “an epic tale of crime and corruption in the land of the dead.”<sup>280</sup>

Mainstream restaurants, bars, and dance clubs are adopting the Day of the Dead theme as a hip alternative to Halloween parties. For the past decade, like many bars and restaurants throughout California and the Southwest, commercial establishments in San Diego’s downtown Gaslamp Quarter have placed advertisements in local newspapers promoting Day of the Dead festivities (usually consisting of live music and/or discounts

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<sup>278</sup> Information retrieved from [www.sublimestitching.com](http://www.sublimestitching.com) on February 14, 2005.

<sup>279</sup> Text retrieved on October 27, 2005, from Game Spot *Designer Diaries*, [http://www.gamespot.com/features/fandango\\_dd/11-05-97\\_2.html](http://www.gamespot.com/features/fandango_dd/11-05-97_2.html).

<sup>280</sup> Text retrieved on October 27, 2005, from [www.lucasarts.com](http://www.lucasarts.com).

on food and drinks). For example, “On Broadway,” the “most exclusive nightclub in San Diego”<sup>281</sup> hosted a “Dia de los Muertos Party” on October 28, 2004, complete with “muertos” decorations, salsa, merengue, and Spanish rock. “Offering San Diego the most cultural and stylish events,” the club markets itself as an ultra modish night spot and is described on a website of “Best Bars and Clubs in San Diego” as:

A lavish entertainment center...Like many city hot spots it's not enough just to have a room with a bar and a DJ...these days – you have to go all the way. So enter On Broadway and take your pick: there's a large dance floor...a luxury VIP lounge; a bar called Ruby Red; a funky Gallery Lounge; a retro-futuristic chill out room known as the Ultra Lounge and, to cap it all, the Zen Lounge and Sushi Bar.<sup>282</sup>

Amidst the art gallery, Zen Lounge, and retro-futuristic themes, Day of the Dead helped the club exude a voguish countenance for its stylish clientele.

In the autumn of 2004, the mega-conglomerate Starbucks joined the action, placing Day of the Dead displays consisting of packaged Mexican coffee and cocoa, *calavera* cookies, plastic skull-shaped *calavera* pails, and information on the holiday (printed on colorful posters and take-away cards) on shelves in their California and Southwestern cafes.<sup>283</sup> According to Starbuck’s marketing manager in the Southwest:

Starbucks is executing a national program celebrating Day of the Dead. We recognize that it is a key holiday for Hispanics and we also recognize that the Hispanic population is growing at a rapid rate. In the Southwest

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<sup>281</sup> According to the AOL City Guide to San Diego. Information retrieved on March 9, 2005 from: [www.digitalcity.com/sandiego/bars/venue.adp?sbid=99509](http://www.digitalcity.com/sandiego/bars/venue.adp?sbid=99509)

<sup>282</sup> Retrieved on March 9, 2004 from [www.worldsbestbars.com/city/san-diego/on-broadway-san-diego.htm](http://www.worldsbestbars.com/city/san-diego/on-broadway-san-diego.htm).

<sup>283</sup> Personal observation in several San Diego Starbucks and personal communication with a representative from Starbucks corporate headquarters, who informed me that such displays were put up in their California and Southwestern stores. The displays I saw in San Diego were up from late September until mid December.

zone, specifically, this is an important customer and we have been identifying better ways to embrace this group.<sup>284</sup>

Despite (or in addition to) the company's stated intention of reaching out to the Hispanic population, the celebration remains a hip strategy for marketing products to Starbuck's clients, the majority of whom are white urban professionals for whom, one may assume, the printed information explaining the meaning of the holiday is primarily aimed.

In a telling example of this holiday's arrival in the US mainstream, the Fall 2002 editions of *Better Homes and Gardens* and the company's popular off-shoot publication, *Holiday Celebrations*, featured Day of the Dead articles discussing home decorating ideas, crafts, and recipes. Headlined on the cover of *Holiday Celebrations* (alongside Christmas, New Year's Eve, and Hanukkah headlines), Day of the Dead received an eight-page photo spread depicting altars, *papel picado*, Day of the Dead cookies, marigold wreaths, and folk art. The accompanying article briefly explained the tradition and offered recipes for Aztec chocolate custard, mole, flan, salsa, and other Mexican specialties hailed as "festive enough to make anyone feel alive."<sup>285</sup> The magazine's readers (who are mainly middle class, white women) were encouraged to replace humdrum Halloween parties with Day of the Dead "soirees" where guests would "party till the ghosts come home."<sup>286</sup> Presented as exotic, cultured and *chic* – Day of the Dead was portrayed as the latest in avant-garde entertaining for the middle class hostess.

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<sup>284</sup> Personal communication via email with Lisa Bass, October 14, 2004.

<sup>285</sup> Kathryn Trim, "Día de los Muertos," in *Holiday Celebrations*, Fall 2002, p. 63.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The presence of this holiday on the pages of mainstream lifestyle magazines reflects the growth in popularity of Day of the Dead parties as an alternative to Halloween parties. Several respondents active in education and the arts told me about annual Day of the Dead parties they hosted or attended. On November 2, 2003, after attending the Day of the Dead Procession in San Francisco, I was invited to one such party at the home of a Bay Area artist. In the entrance of her apartment was an elaborate, candlelit altar, and every room of the flat was decorated with papel picado cutouts and cardboard *calaveras* hanging from the ceilings. With copious amounts of food and salsa music, the party attracted about 100 people, many of whom were prominent artists, writers, and political activists in the Bay Area. In talking with other guests, I learned that this party was considered one of the “places to be” after the annual Day of the Dead procession in the Mission.

The owner of a San Diego folk art store specializing in Day of the Dead merchandise also noted a surge in Day of the Dead house parties in recent years:

There’s an amazing number of people who have Day of the Dead parties now, in this country. I’m seeing that more and more. I don’t mean Chicanos. I mean Anglo people. There are people who have a party every year, and there are Day of the Dead party groupies [laughs] who attend the party, and people later come and bring us photos of their altars. People spend a whole month planning for what they’re gonna do with their altar.<sup>287</sup>

## 2. Day of the Dead workshops, exhibits, and performances

From late September until early November in cities across the country, art galleries, museums, and folk art stores specializing in Latin American art and

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<sup>287</sup> Personal interview, Maribel Simán DeLucca, April 24, 2003, San Diego, California

merchandise offer workshops on how to make Day of the Dead-related crafts such as paper flowers, *papel picado*, sugar skulls, papier-mâché masks, and mini-altars (or *nichos*). Most workshops offered in museums, privately owned galleries, and ethnic art stores cater to middle class families and professionals (especially teachers) who are often non-Latino. The cost of these events is generally out of the reach of working class and immigrant families. For example, museums typically charge admission to view Day of the Dead altar exhibits, with entrance fees ranging from \$5.00-\$10.00 per person. The average cost for making sugar skulls in private stores ranges from \$10.00 to \$15.00 per person, while the cost of making a mini-altar ranges from \$25.00 to \$50.00 per person. In San Diego, an annual car caravan tour to visit Day of the Dead altars costs \$10.00 per person, paper flower and wreath making workshops cost up to \$15.00 per person, and “Dead Bread Workshops” cost as much as \$20.00 per person.<sup>288</sup>

### 3. Day of the Dead as urban redevelopment/tourism strategy.

Since the 1980s, Day of the Dead has become an important tourist draw for US towns and state parks that highlight Mexican heritage. For example, Bazar del Mundo, the major commercial center in San Diego’s Old Town State Park, promotes annual Day of the Dead activities spanning nearly two weeks. These activities include music and dance performances (from Mexico, Guatemala, Spain, and the Andes), craft sales, sugar skull workshops, and altar exhibits. Each November 2, the historic *Campo Santo* cemetery in Old Town holds its annual “Day of the Dead” tour, in which mostly non-Latino visitors are guided from grave to grave by non-Latino tour guides who explain

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<sup>288</sup> Prices based on personal observation and advertisements from newspapers and promotional flyers found throughout California during the years 2000 to 2005.

the history of San Diego's deceased early settlers. With the cemetery aglow with candles, enlivened with music by a Mexican folk trio, and adorned with marigolds, *papel picado* and altars, the holiday is used to provide historical education and attract consumers to Old Town's commercial area, where local shops sell Day of the Dead T-shirts, magnets, cups, books, stationery, post cards and sugar skulls. Similar activities occur in the historic plazas of cities such as Mesilla and Santa Fe, New Mexico; San Antonio, Texas; and on Olvera Street in Los Angeles.

In a new twist on Day of the Dead tourism to emerge in the US in the late 1990s, the holiday has become an urban redevelopment strategy for economically depressed communities that otherwise would be unlikely to attract tourism. The first example of this strategy occurred in 1996 in the predominantly Latino "Fruitvale" District of Oakland, California, when the Fruitvale Unity Council's Main Street Program<sup>289</sup> sponsored a weekend-long Day of the Dead Festival. The event was designed as the highlight of an annual calendar of public events created to draw people to Fruitvale from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area (many of whom would not normally visit this predominantly low-income community, known more for crime and abandoned properties than for cultural vitality). Terry Alderete, the event chairperson for the festival, explains: "This is the biggest event we do all year...The business people and community people wanted to plan street festivals and events to draw people to Fruitvale. They figured this was unique and would highlight Fruitvale's Latin culture.

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<sup>289</sup> Established in 1968, the Unity Council is a non-profit redevelopment organization dedicated to the economic, social and physical revitalization of the Fruitvale District. It promotes low-income homebuyer programs, tree plantings, building renovations, façade enhancements, transit improvements and financial investment.

It started off with about 5,000 people coming, then it grew to 10,000, then 25,000. Now we get over 85,000 people coming!”<sup>290</sup>

Sponsored by some 40 corporations<sup>291</sup> and many smaller local businesses, the Fruitvale festival has become the largest Day of the Dead event in the United States. Ten blocks of the neighborhood’s central boulevard are blocked off to vehicle traffic and transformed into a festive jubilee offering four major performance stages, an international food court, and five entertainment and craft pavilions. Activities included twenty altar installations, free Latino cinema; arts and crafts; face painting; clowns, children’s amusement rides; theater, dance, music and puppetry performances; a participatory drumming circle, and an art exhibit. Because of its success in attracting large crowds, this model is being reproduced by *Mainstreets* communities in other parts of the country.<sup>292</sup>

An example of Day of the Dead literally reviving a defunct district is the case of the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, in Los Angeles. The final resting place of Rudolph Valentino, Jane Mansfield, Cecile B. DeMille, Douglas Fairbanks, and other silver screen legends, the 109 year old cemetery, formerly called Hollywood Memorial Park, was a decaying landmark so overtaken with weeds and trash that the family of make-up mogul Max Factor had his remains exhumed and moved elsewhere. In 1998, a 28-year old enterprising English literature major bought the decaying landmark for \$375,000,

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<sup>290</sup> Personal interview with Terry Alderete, Fruitvale, California, November 4, 2003.

<sup>291</sup> A partial list includes Citibank, Southwest Airlines, Albertson’s and Safeway supermarkets, AT&T, Clorox, State Farm Insurance, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, Money Gram, Wells Fargo Bank, Washington Mutual Bank, Union Bank, Starbucks, AAA, The Oakland Tribune, NBC, Univision, Telemundo and numerous radio stations.

<sup>292</sup> When a member of *Main Street* Oceanside, (California) observed Fruitvale’s success, the idea was adopted in Oceanside, which began hosting Day of the Dead festivals in November 2001. The Oceanside event now attracts between 30,000 and 40,000 visitors annually, and has helped bolster the city’s image and economy. Other *Mainstreets* cities are being inspired to organize similar festivals.



renamed it, gave it a makeover, and turned it into one of the grooviest graveyards in the country. On Day of the Dead, the most popular event in an annual calendar of social and cultural events at Hollywood Forever, the cemetery is filled with thousands of candles, strolling musicians, dancers, theater, food booths, “muertos” art exhibits inside mausoleums, projections of dancing *calaveras* on the walls of crypts, dozens of altars honoring erstwhile movie and musical greats, and even outdoor concerts by stars such as Ella Fitzgerald and Lila Downs. I attended the celebration in 2004, when some 8,000 people turned out for the fiesta, and again in 2005, when attendance exceeded 10,000. Strolling the grounds to see the altars and entertainment was free.<sup>293</sup>

#### The McMuertos Critique: Longing for the Good Old Days (of the Dead)

The “McMuertos” altar installation, created by young Chicano artists and displayed in San Francisco galleries during the Day of the Dead seasons of 1998 – 2000, represents perhaps the most blatant public critique of the commercialization of Day of the Dead in the US.<sup>294</sup> Built to resemble a McDonald’s fast food counter, the exhibit includes a “McMuertos McMenu” offering “McMuertos Meals,” “Super-size

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<sup>293</sup> During the rest of the year, Hollywood Forever screens nightly outdoor movies and arranges birthday parties, political fundraisers, weddings, and other social events on the premises. Burials and cremations are now booming, as well as the cemetery’s business of producing memorial videos to honor deceased individuals.

<sup>294</sup> Artists, including Raul Aguilar, Olivia Armas, Yesenia Cardona, Robert Garcia, Robert Karimi, John Leños, Noelia Mendoza and Seline Szupinski-Quiroga were from the Regeneration Project, an initiative started by La Galería de la Raza to train and mentor young Chicano artists. The exhibit was displayed at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (1998); the Oakland Museum (1999); and the Mexican Museum of Art (2000).

Death Combos,” special edition “Beaner Babies,” and images of “Ronnie Calaca.”<sup>295</sup>

An excerpt of the exhibit text reads:

Here at McMuertos we care about you and making your preparations for the festive celebration of Dia de los Muertos (dee-ah day lohms mwert-toes) as quick and hassle-free as possible. We have perfected the process of providing you with the rapid delivery of a uniform mix of prepared products necessary for your altar in an environment of obvious cleanliness, order, and service with a smile. For starters, we've decorated McMuerto outlets with care to reflect the charming folk traditions of papel picado (pah-pail pee-kah-doh) and luminarias (loo-mee-nah-ree-ahs). The cheerful brown workers have been hand picked and brought all the way from romantic Mexico (may-hee-ko) just to serve you...Our products improve on the cryptic ritual items of primitive Mexico -- now you can buy your sugar skulls and candles in pre-packaged variety packs that save you time and money; we assure you they are prepared under hygienic conditions, are top-quality, and packaged fresh! Our Dead Meal Combos bring together the most essential altar items by type of death for your convenience, plus they give you a cute little McTreat to take away...be sure to check out the complete line of McMuerto products.<sup>296</sup>

The critique is aimed not only at the commodification of the holiday's ritual and material culture, but also at the consumption of Day of the Dead by non-Latinos (blatantly referenced in the text by the phonetic spellings of Spanish words and descriptions of “cheerful brown workers” serving an implied White public). The sardonic wit and clever creativity of the exhibit made it popular with Latinos and non-Latinos alike concerned with the expanding impact of commercialization and, in particular, the influence of corporate America, on our cultural lives. Yet, by mocking the “mix of prepared products” marketed in the US, the installation implies, via the Golden Arches imagery, that the buying and selling of Day of the Dead merchandise is

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<sup>295</sup> “Calaca” is a Mexican word for skeleton, popularized by Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada.

<sup>296</sup> Text retrieved from [http://home.pacbell.net/raul\\_art/mcad.htm](http://home.pacbell.net/raul_art/mcad.htm) on February 26, 2005. For more information, see Romo (2000:122-123) and [www.leanos.net/projects/mcMuertos/](http://www.leanos.net/projects/mcMuertos/).

automatically tantamount to the corporate exploitation of culture. This ideological position ignores the historic connections between commerce and Day of the Dead in Latin America and the role of commodification as a form of communication in promoting Day of the Dead in both Mexico and the United States. The sale of Day of the Dead products for consumers' personal use (most of which is transacted by small, independently-owned businesses rather than corporations); the commodification of the tradition for tourist and other economic development purposes; and the appropriation of Day of the Dead imagery to sell unrelated products are distinct processes with distinct outcomes that do not necessarily correlate with corporate greed and neo-colonialism.

This installation's underlying message reflects the attitudes of many people I interviewed who felt that US Day of the Dead celebrations are more commercial (in terms of the marketing and selling of products) and therefore less spiritual or authentic than Latin American celebrations. With its presumption that the tradition in Mexico is somehow pure of commercial influences, the exhibit inspired me to take a closer look at the relationship between Day of the Dead and phenomena of commodification, commercialization, and corporate sponsorship.<sup>297</sup> The following discussion is intended to complicate rigid dualities between "authentic" and "commercial" in an effort to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between cultural traditions and commercial forces. Tourism, museum patronage, government sponsorship, and the international commercial market have played a crucial role in the revival, survival and,

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<sup>297</sup> By "commodification," I mean the process by which an everyday object or resource that was traditionally not considered a "commodity" is transformed into an object exchangeable in the market for monetary or other advantage. "Commoditization" is another term for this process. While commodification does not always involve monetary exchange, "commercialization" (the act of involving something in commerce) is commodification for the express purpose of financial gain.

in some cases, invention of many Mexican crafts and traditions that, according to anthropological accounts (Brandes 1988; Nutini: 1988; Carmichael & Sayer: 1991; Chibnik: 2003) were noticeably fading away by the 1960s and would perhaps otherwise be little known today.

Despite commonplace, romanticized notions of “authentic” indigenous rituals being practiced apart from commercial forces, Day of the Dead celebrations in Latin America involve considerable marketing of and expenditure on “prepared and pre-packaged products,” with celebrations in Mexico, in particular, experiencing extensive levels of commercialization.<sup>298</sup> As has been discussed by many anthropologists, there is an economic aspect to people’s reaffirmation of their social relationships, and rural families in southern Mexico, the Andes, and other areas of Latin America invest enormous amounts of time, energy and money to purchase or produce the commodities necessary to adorn family graves and altars. Illustrating the importance of new products in honoring the dead in rural Mexico, Garcíagodoy notes: “Many traditional ofrendas include new items of clothing, new work implements, or new miniature clay images of tools laid out on a new petate [straw mat], along with candles, food, and incense on a bed of coal in a new incense burner” (1998:118). Carmichael and Sayer describe the “headbreaking” nature of the necessary purchases: “expenditure for *Todos Santos* can be a heavy burden for a family, perhaps especially so in rural Mestizo communities

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<sup>298</sup> On a smaller scale, aspects of Day of the Dead are also commercialized in other Latin American countries. Since at least the late 1980s in Guatemala, companies such as Coca Cola, Kodak, and Nescafé have sponsored enormous kites emblazoned with corporate logos for the Day of the Dead kite festivals held in San Lucas Sacatapéquez and Sumpango. Guatemalan supermarkets hold promotional sales of flowers, candles and meats used to prepare the traditional Day of the Dead meal, *el Fiambre*. In Ecuador, *guaguas* (Day of the Dead bread) and *colada morada* (a hot blackberry drink made specifically for Day of the Dead) are advertised in shops. The transnational company Nestlé now sells “instant” *colada morada* powdered drink mix for the Ecuadorian market.

where the *ofrendas* for those who have died within the last year can be especially costly and elaborate. The building of an expensive *ofrenda* confers prestige within a community, as does the ability to offer bread and chocolate to all comers when they visit a house to pay homage” (1991:56).

It is through the commodities of elaborate meals that are costly to prepare, special holiday breads (usually bought in bakeries), the purchase of beverages, candles, flowers, new clothing, new pottery, new table cloths, incense, statues of the saints, etc., that the dead are honored, and many families often go into significant debt to meet their ritual obligations. While most of my respondents made comparisons between “commercial” US Halloween and “non-commercial” Mexican Day of the Dead, ironically, the average annual expenditures of US families buying candy or costumes for Halloween (in relation to annual income) pales in comparison with the average expenditures of Oaxacan families preparing for Day of the Dead.<sup>299</sup>

In addition to the above-mentioned commerce carried out by the holiday’s earnest participants, is the commodification of Day of the Dead products for tourists. This twentieth century phenomenon was preceded by a general commodification of Mexican folk art by the new government after the Mexican Revolution. For the socialist-minded government and its supporters, Mexico’s indigenous crafts symbolized a homegrown national identity, distinct from the Euro-centered identification of earlier

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<sup>299</sup> For Oaxacan families, the preparation of the home altar can cost more than US \$400.00, for which they must save all year. Major expenses include new table cloths, incense, chocolate, enormous loads of marigolds and fresh fruits (such as apples, oranges, bananas, pomegranates and other fruits that are often not grown locally and are quite expensive by local standards), alcohol, soft drinks, turkey and other ingredients necessary to make substantial amounts of the tamales and/or *mole* traditionally placed on the altar and shared with guests during the Days of the Dead. Personal conversations on November 1, 2003, with families living in Colonia Turcio Limas in Tijuana, Mexico, where thousands of Oaxacan families have settled over the past twenty-five years.

governing regimes. Starting in 1921, the government organized national and international campaigns to promote an appreciation for Mexican folk art, opening state stores that sold indigenous crafts and kept traditional craftspeople employed, and sponsoring art exhibits that highlighted the “art of the people.”<sup>300</sup> These efforts were enthusiastically supported by the Mexican art world, including Diego Rivera, Frida Khalo, Alfonso Caso, Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias, and others who “awakened public functionaries, educated persons and the popular classes to the taste for Mexican products” and helped “display the richness of Mexico’s folk art before the eyes of the world (Espejel 1986:9).

Mexico’s folk objects were considered intriguing and “campy” by national and foreign artists and intellectuals, who increasingly traveled to southern Mexico as tourists following the construction of the Pan-American Highway in the 1940s. Moved by a romanticized nostalgia for “the primitive” that continues to accompany the secularization, standardization, and industrialization of modern life, urbane city dwellers purchased as souvenirs the weavings, pottery, masks and other crafts produced for daily use by Mexico’s indigenous peoples. Yet, while the “art of the people” was extolled by the Mexican government, artists, and intellectuals, the lived practices and beliefs of indigenous and rural Mexicans were still disdained for most of the twentieth century by most of Mexico’s middle class, who considered the “ignorance” and “superstitions” of country folk hindrances to the country’s ability to modernize.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> By the early 1970s, Mexico had “fifty governmental agencies that bought, promoted, exhibited, or were otherwise related to folk art” (Espejel 1986: 9-10).

<sup>301</sup> The disdain that “educated” Mexicans held for “Indians” and their “pagan” Day of the Dead celebrations had existed in Mexico since the time of the Conquest (and is not completely gone today). In the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, in particular, Day of the Dead was considered a

Tourism, educational campaigns, and museum patronage helped change these attitudes, and significantly affected many rural Mexican traditions. For example, folk crafts that were previously made in relatively small quantities for personal consumption, such as children's wooden toys or ceremonial masks, began to be produced in mass quantities in the latter half of the twentieth century, in new colors and styles that appealed to tourists (Graburn 1976; Brody Esser 1988; Barbash & Ragan 1993; Chibnik 2003). Not infrequently, as Michael Chibnik and Shepard Barbash illustrate in their respective research on the making and marketing of Oaxacan woodcarvings, entirely new crafts were invented to please tourist desires for colorful "Indian" artifacts. Both authors describe how Mexican woodcarvers have modified traditional designs and motifs to please non-local buyers, mass reproducing the products, including Day of the Dead skeleton carvings, that sell best with tourists (Chibnik 2003b:5; Barbash & Ragan 1993). Both document how purchases by tourists and folk art retailers/wholesalers in the US and Canada far outweigh local sales of these crafts and have been the driving force for their production.

Along with tourism, the commodification of Mexican folk art by international art collectors and museum curators revived the production of certain crafts that were no longer produced after the Mexican Revolution. Carlos Espejel notes that, in the 1930s, the Austrian art collector René d' Harnoncourt "was instrumental in the revival of certain dying folks arts," as he sought out pieces for tourists, private art collectors and museums (1986: 2). The multi-millionaire, art patron, and former US Assistant

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mortifying anachronism by those interested in forging a "modern" (i.e., Westernized) Mexico. For more on Mexican middle class attitudes during the Porfirian period towards Judas burnings, Day of the Dead rituals, and other folk practices, see Beezley (1987).

Secretary of State, Nelson A. Rockefeller, developed one of the largest single collections of Mexican folk art in the world between 1933 and 1978. Books written about his collection suggest that Rockefeller's goal in amassing and exhibiting these crafts was to educate the public in order to help prevent traditional Mexican crafts from disappearing (Fox 1969: introduction; Espejel 1986: 2). Rockefeller's enthusiastic patronage, which included the purchase of Day of the Dead crafts and breads among many other objects, had a far-reaching impact on the popularity of Mexican folk art among US and international collectors, helping to stimulate future production.<sup>302</sup>

Susan Masuoka observes that from 1919 onward, American, Australian, and other foreign art connoisseurs, as well as Mexican art collectors, approached Mexican artisans asking them to resume the production of certain defunct folk crafts as well as to create new forms (1994:125-126). She notes that the Linares family, internationally renowned today for their 3-D papier-mâché depictions of nineteenth century engraver José Guadalupe Posada's *calavera* drawings (and credited with re-popularizing them in the latter twentieth century), began the large-scale production of these figures only after gaining steady patronage from museums and art collectors (from 1968 to the present). Before this time, the family specialized in making piñatas, masks, and other holiday related cardboard crafts for the local population.<sup>303</sup> In their 1975 documentary film on the Linares family, Bronowski and Grant note that the traditional art of papier-mâché

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<sup>302</sup> Rockefeller was one of the most prominent US collectors to criticize divisions between "high" and "low" art and to advocate actively for the placement of Mexican folk art in prestigious US museums such as the New York Museum of Modern Art (in 1940). According to Carlos Espejel, this exhibit "helped open the North American market" for Mexican folk art (1986: 9).

<sup>303</sup> For years, the Linares family's economic mainstay had been the production of papier-mâché "Judas" effigies, popularly burned in Mexico City during Holy Week. When the burning of Judases was outlawed by the Mexican government in 1957, following a devastating fire, the family turned more of their attention to fulfilling art collectors' requests for both traditional and original papier-mâché pieces.



was “only being carried out by a few folk artists” in Mexico at the time. In the same film, the patriarch of the Linares family, Don Pedro, laments the increasing loss of traditions in Mexico (Brownowski & Grant 1975). With the economic security the Linares Family received from national and international commercial patronage, their collective creativity reached new heights, during which time Pedro Linares invented his famed whimsical animal *alebrije* figures and his son, Felipe, created three-dimensional papier-mâché skulls overlaid with bright floral designs and vines that have since become one of the most ubiquitous contemporary trademarks of Day of the Dead.<sup>304</sup> Subsequently, a renaissance of papier-mâché art in Mexico has occurred.

While, as previously noted, the Linares family is known internationally for their life-sized embodiments of José Guadalupe Posada’s drawings, they had not known of Posada’s work until 1968, when they first received a request from Diego Rivera’s friend (and caretaker of his art collection), Dolores Olmedo, to create 3-D renditions of Posada’s *calavera* sketches (Masuoka 1994:86). At that point in time, the long dead Posada’s *calaveras* were not part of the popular memory of the Linares family or most other everyday Mexicans. Yet, with the successful public reception of their first group of 3-D *calaveras*, the Linareses subsequently received numerous additional orders from commercial establishments, museums, and private collectors from around the world, including a request from Disney World’s EPCOT Center. Like José Guadalupe Posada, the Linares family were commercial artists, responding to consumer demands for their

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<sup>304</sup> For a thorough documentation of the Linares family’s papier-mâché work, see S. Masuoka (1994), the source of the above information.

products. Their Day of the Dead *calaveras* are embedded in market realities that generated a national and international renaissance in the popularity of Posada's work.

The contemporary prominence of Day of the Dead in Mexico as a *national*, rather than a regional, tradition (as it was considered in the early and mid twentieth century) is due, in large part, to the promotion of the holiday by the Mexican government and private tourist-related businesses. Prior to the 1970s, Day of the Dead in Mexico was a sub-cultural practice, observed by a dwindling number of "backwards" rural communities in the south. This reality began to change when tourism in Mexico became a booming industry and the Mexican government realized that Day of the Dead was a cultural resource that could attract visitors and development to the country's impoverished rural regions. Brandes describes how in the 1970s, the waning holiday of Day of the Dead was actively promoted by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism in order to boost the meager economy of southern Mexico (1988). In picturesque indigenous towns, "authentic" cemetery processions were choreographed to please tourist sensibilities. Ticketed folk dance festivals and performances of the urban play *Don Juan Tenorio*, previously unknown in rural areas, were introduced to indigenous villages as part of the government's plan to promote Day of the Dead tourism (Brandes 988:98-100). On seeing the financial success of these commercialized Day of the Dead events, Brandes observes, other towns where the holiday was "all but forgotten" followed suit.

Today, indigenous-style Day of the Dead celebrations are ubiquitous throughout Mexico, including in areas of the country where the rituals were little known prior to the

1980s and 1990s, such as Tijuana and other northern border regions.<sup>305</sup> In San Diego, for example, there are now organized tours to Tijuana on November 1 and 2, such as one advertised in the *San Diego Union Tribune* that charged US \$59.00 per person “to preview Tijuana’s preparations for Day of the Dead.”<sup>306</sup> During Day of the Dead season, sugar skulls, skeleton figurines, and *pan de muerto* do a brisk business in Mexico’s small shops, while upscale national department stores such as Sanborn’s display elegant chocolate *calaveras* alongside the Godiva assortments.<sup>307</sup> Noting the successful commodification of Day of the Dead products by independently owned shops, transnational chain stores in Mexico, such as Wal-Mart and The Price Club, began selling *pan de muerto* and other Day of the Dead products in the 1990s. Realizing the holiday’s potential to attract tourists and increase sales, stores, restaurants, hotels, and other businesses throughout the country now erect altars and advertise Day of the Dead products and events.

An example of this is Tijuana’s Bread for the Dead Festival. Since 1997, Tijuana’s *Camara de Industria Panificadora* (Industrial Baker’s Association) has sponsored an annual “Pan de Muerto Festival,” where “bread for the dead” and other baked goods are promoted. When I attended in the event on October 28, 2001, over thirty local bakeries participated, setting up tables in Morelos Park, Tijuana, and distributing free bread samples to several hundred festival attendees against a backdrop of altar exhibits, music and dance performances. A representative of the Camara

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<sup>305</sup> The relatively recent advent of Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico’s northern border region is also discussed by Brandes (1998b:374) and Childs & Altman (1982: 53-60).

<sup>306</sup> Caroline Dipping, “Tijuana day trip will preview Day of the Dead holiday,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, September 21, 1996, p. B1, Local.

<sup>307</sup> Personal observation, October 2001-2005 in Tijuana’s Zona Rio district.

Industria Panificadora told me that the event was started to familiarize people in Tijuana with Day of the Dead and, specifically, with *pan de muerto*: “Day of the Dead is not native to this area of Mexico, so a lot of people here do not know about it. They are not familiar with pan de muerto, so we would like to show them.”<sup>308</sup> Increased bread sales was the primary motive for organizing this event.<sup>309</sup>

Two of the most commercialized Day of the Dead sites in Mexico are the towns of Mixquic, a suburb of Mexico City, and Janitzio, in Michoacán, which have been relentlessly highlighted in glossy photo books and travel articles over the past twenty-five years. Referred to by Mexicans and foreigners alike as “the places to go” to experience an authentic Day of the Dead, these communities have become veritable pilgrimage destinations for tourists in search of “tradition.” By the late 1980s, over a million foreign and Mexican tourists were visiting Mixquic on November 2,<sup>310</sup> and the numbers are even higher today. The island of Janitzio, with a population of about 1,500 inhabitants, receives some 100,000 Day of the Dead tourists each year, making the holiday the biggest annual source of income for many of the town’s poor families, who convert their homes into restaurants and craft booths for the occasion. Tourists have transformed Day of the Dead in these areas into an unrestrained party scene that one journalist described as a “chaos of drunken groups of city dwellers and hawkers of such

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<sup>308</sup> Personal conversation with a member of the Camara Industria Panificadora, Tijuana, October, 28, 2001.

<sup>309</sup> Both the Bread for the Dead Festival and altar exhibits in Tijuana area hotels, such as the Rosarito Beach Hotel a half hour south of Tijuana, are advertised in San Diego newspapers to attract US tourists.

<sup>310</sup> No byline. “Day of the Dead expected to draw million visitors,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1987, p. 20.

trinkets as small wooden boats and mixed tequila drinks.”<sup>311</sup> On a visit to Janitzio in 2005, San Diegan Maribel Simán DeLucca was deeply disturbed by the disheveled condition in which she found the town’s cemetery three months after Day of the Dead: “It was filled with broken bottles and beer cans. It made me so upset that I went to the town hall to complain.”<sup>312</sup>

In addition to the commercialization of Day of the Dead in numerous communities throughout Mexico, the country now has a Day of the Dead theme park, located in the Xcaret Amusement Complex,<sup>313</sup> about a 40 minute drive from the tourist haven of Cancún. In the winter of 2005, Xcaret inaugurated its newest attraction, a fabricated cemetery called, “El Puente al Paraíso” (The Bridge to Paradise) that allows tourists to experience Day of the Dead year-round. In a pre-packaged fusion of ancient and contemporary elements of the custom, the cemetery is built in the shape of a *caracol* (spiraling conch shell sounded by the Aztecs and Maya as a form of audio communication), and has an entrance designed with symbols of the four elements of life – water, air, earth and fire – according to ancient Mayan cosmology. It has seven levels “representing the seven days of the week,” fifty-two stairs “symbolizing the 52 weeks of the year,” and 365 tombs “one for every day of the year,” that reflect various tomb styles, decorative practices, legends, humorous epitaphs, and Day of the Dead

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<sup>311</sup> No byline. “Masses Celebrate: Culture of Mexican holiday drowned out by sea of tourists,” *Ventura County Star*, October 31, 2000, p. E1, Life.

<sup>312</sup> Personal communication with Maribel Simán DeLucca, San Diego, California, March 8, 2005.

<sup>313</sup> A Mexican-style Epcot Center that opened in 1990, Xcaret’s attractions include replicas of a Mayan village, a Spanish mission; a traditional Mexican plaza with strolling musicians and craft vendors; a Mayan archeological site (with restored and replica pyramids); a museum; bird aviary; butterfly pavilion; botanical garden; aquarium; charrería (traditional horsemanship show); re-enacted village festivals; jungle eco-tours; spelunking; snorkeling, scuba, and “swim with the dolphins” tours; folkloric entertainment, five restaurants and “Get married in Xcaret” packages. Admission is US \$49.00 per person. Information retrieved from [www.xcaret.com](http://www.xcaret.com), March, 25, 2005.

customs from regions throughout Mexico. There is also “a series of crypts ready to house the incinerated remains of those who visited, enjoyed and loved the park and decided to choose Xcaret as their final resting place.”<sup>314</sup>

In short, while family traditions are still carried out by indigenous and other celebrants, commodification and commercialization are no strangers to Mexico’s Day of the Dead. Along with government promotion via public schools, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Culture, and other state institutions, commercial forces have played a crucial role in reviving and popularizing the tradition. Through tourism during the twentieth century, a subcultural ritual practiced mainly by Mexico’s economically depressed and socially marginalized indigenous populations generated a distinct subculture of urbane Day of the Dead enthusiasts and collectors among artist and intellectual communities. This subculture eventually impacted Chicano artists, some of whom visited Oaxaca as tourists, and others of whom were inspired by earlier interest shown in Day of the Dead by artists such as José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera, and the Linares family, or writers such as Octavio Paz and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (whose mass-produced images and descriptions of Day of the Dead have portrayed the celebration as a Mexican national birthright). While indigenous subcultural celebrations of Day of the Dead in Mexico were being transformed from the 1970s through the 1990s into national traditions, they were also being taken up as a subcultural practice by Chicanos in the US where, as in Mexico, they grew to become more mainstream in the larger society.

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<sup>314</sup> All quotations are from “El Puente al Paraíso: Un vistazo al más allá desde Xcaret,” in *Paquetes Gran Plan*, the official flight magazine of Aero Mexico, Winter, 2005, vol. 10, pp. 24-25. [Translation mine]

### Day of the Dead commodities and Chicano subculture

Subcultures often communicate through commodities (Hebdige:1979; Rose:1994; Frank 1997) which can signify oppositional or conventional meanings, depending on the social context. Looking back on the early days of the Chicano movement, Tere Romo observes that it was the material culture or “visuals” of Day of the Dead that caught the attention of Chicano artists and inspired them to learn more about the metaphysical aspects of the ritual: “Day of the Dead affected Chicano artists because it gave them a whole bunch of new iconography, new images of death and life and the whole idea of duality and the life cycle.”<sup>315</sup> As the Chicano celebration of Day of the Dead expanded in scope and popularity in the US, it was the commodities of the celebration (e.g., *papel picado*, sugar skulls, *pan de muerto*, copal incense, marigold wreaths) that caught the attention of the general public, both Latino and non-Latino, and inspired people to draw closer, learn about the tradition, and get involved, whether as active participants or spectators.

For Chicanos and other Latinos, Day of the Dead iconography functions within complex networks of cultural beliefs, values, and social structures. When Latinos place devotional candles, statues of the Virgin Mary, rosary beads, and photos of the saints on altars, for example, their use is usually embedded, at least to a certain degree, in the system of meaning that produced these objects. Even Latinos whose relationship to Catholic and/or indigenous beliefs may be distant or problematic, still often see themselves as part of a larger community for whom these symbols have historical meaning. The ways in which Chicano artists arrange Day of the Dead artifacts –

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<sup>315</sup> Personal interview with Tere Romo, San Francisco, California, June 2, 2003.

mixing Aztec, Mayan and Catholic iconography with American pop cultural commodities and political symbols – connects with and respects the cultural history of these items while creating unique meanings for them, distinct from the meaning that *pan de muerto* or saints' statues have on altars in rural Mexico. In the Chicano context, these ritual items may be transformed from objects of devotion to objects of cultural expression and art – but can be both devotional objects *and* art simultaneously.

Writing about Mod, Punk, Rastafarian and other subcultural movements in Britain, Dick Hebdige contends that subcultures respond to the oppressive ways in which social life is experienced by minorities within the dominant culture. They “express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms,” that transgress codes of acceptable thought and behavior (1979: 91). For Chicano activists, the overt skull imagery of Day of the Dead and the act of publicly communicating about death in a society accustomed to avoiding the topic were ways to express visually their “consciousness of difference” both to foster pride within the internal community and to demand respect from the external society. The altar rituals and skeletal imagery initially struck (and still strike) some onlookers as morbid, shocking, or even ghastly, making them powerfully distinctive. As an administrative assistant working at an art gallery that exhibits Day of the Dead altars expressed to me with a shudder:

I can't get used to it. I just *can't*. The blatant skeletal symbols bother me. They really do. They're too garish. Too gory. The bones really turn me off. The sugar skulls are too much! [rolling her eyes] It's too



reminiscent of a decomposed body. *That's not the memory I want... The whole wasting away of the body thing is too macabre!*<sup>316</sup>

Similar to the unconventional fashions and commodities embraced by the subcultures of punk, (Hebdige 1979), rap (Rose: 1994), and hippies (Frank 1997), it was the shock value of Day of the Dead iconography that made the ritual an attention-catching proclamation of identity for the Chicano community.<sup>317</sup> The graphic yet vibrant skull imagery forced the larger society to acknowledge the presence of a population whose existence in the US had been simultaneously exploited and rendered invisible for decades. It challenged US hegemonic social norms on multiple levels, embodying resistance to an individualistic society that glorifies the present and forgets the past, and more importantly, resistance to a socioeconomic system that routinely denigrates and ignores people of color.

#### From Chicano subculture to hip consumerism

Thomas Frank has charted the rise of “hip consumerism,” a term he uses to describe the phenomenon whereby Americans, resentful of the bureaucratic monotony of their productive lives, rebel in their consuming lives by purchasing products that symbolically represent a break from the numbing homogeneity of Middle America (1997: 232). From the 1960s onward, he notes, business executives have capitalized on

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<sup>316</sup> Personal interview with an employee of a San Diego art gallery who chose to remain anonymous. May 29, 2003.

<sup>317</sup> The Day of the Dead *calavera* has become a common year-round logo and symbol for many Chicano organizations. For example, it is the logo of the Chicano-run “Calaca Press” in San Diego as well as the logo for the Chicano newspaper *Voz Fronteriza*. It is found on the official website, letterhead, flyers, and other publications of *Voz Alta*, a Chicano/Latino performance space in San Diego. It is the logo on the website, printed ads, and promotional materials of the San Diego café, “Chicano Perk,” and is displayed on the website of the Latino-based art gallery Self-Help Graphics.

both the social and political rebelliousness of youth, aligning commercial products with emergent counter-cultural expressions through advertising. For Frank, “hip is the cultural lifeblood of consumer society,” – the spark that entices ceaseless consumption, making the marketplace “a 24-hour carnival, a showplace of transgression and inversion of values, of humiliated patriarchs and shocked puritans, of screaming guitars and concupiscent youth, of fashions that are uniformly defiant” (1997: 4-5). Given that commodities are a conspicuous aspect of Day of the Dead celebrations, and that the celebration and its iconography were adopted as subcultural symbols by Chicano activists struggling for political justice, it is not surprising that US retailers and marketers (including those of Latino heritage) soon appropriated these commodities in the service of hip consumerism.

The commercialization of Day of the Dead artifacts in the US occurred in the context of two other related phenomena. The first was the secular commercialization of Catholic material culture that emerged after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) when, in an effort to simplify public worship, institutional Catholicism no longer promoted certain symbols (e.g., lace head coverings, rosary beads, religious prints). This greatly de-emphasis decreased the presence of Catholic material culture in churches and homes, opening the door to nostalgic and humorous postmodern re-appropriations of erstwhile devotional symbols. As Colleen McDannell, a specialist in religion and popular culture in the US, notes:

[T]he secular marketplace has found that Catholic images have an exotic and erotic quality. Antique stores, boutiques, mail order houses, as well as traditional religious goods stores are finding that people will buy Catholic

objects for their “camp” and fashion value. Detached from any devotional overtones, Catholic material culture can communicate “style” (1995:61).

The second phenomenon was the commercialization of “Southwestern” style that emerged in the US in the 1980s and remains popular today. Southwestern style exploited the vibrant colors and designs of Mexican and Native American cultures in everything from architecture and furniture to art and cuisine. With the commercialization of both Catholic and Southwestern concepts, folk symbols and imagery were detached from their social or devotional functions and marketed to the mainstream public as symbols of hip lifestyle. Like glow-in-the-dark rosary beads and flaming pictures of Joan of Arc used for décor in discotheques and clothing stores, Latin American religious iconography (e.g., the Virgin of Guadalupe or Cuban Orishas) and Latin American folk art (e.g., wooden masks, painted pottery, and weavings) are part of a fashion trend in which product owners convey a cosmopolitan knowledge of “exotic” others, while simultaneously demonstrating a social and intellectual detachment from the “quaint” traditions being appropriated.

Pierre Bourdieu calls this “aesthetic distancing,” in which items popular with “lower class” groups are appropriated by “higher class” members who distinguish their class position by displacing interest from the content to the form of the assumed objects, treating them with “disinvestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously” (1984:34). Appadurai refers to the phenomenon as “commoditization by diversion,” where the value of objects is accelerated or enhanced by diverting them from their native contexts to atypical contexts: “It is the aesthetics of decontextualization (itself driven by a quest for

novelty) that is at the heart of the display, in highbrow Western homes, of the tools and artifacts of another” (1986:28). These “diverted” objects are meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray, Appadurai notes. They gain new meaning in the unconventional settings in which they are placed, as the group identities of the native users/producers become tokens for the status politics of non-native consumers. As fashion accoutrements, skeleton figures, sugar skulls, *papel picado*, and other Day of the Dead objects represent cultural capital that communicates the taste and social status of the educated, well-traveled connoisseur of other cultures.

#### A Closer Look at Commercialization

On first sight, the commercialization of Day of the Dead products and events offered by private galleries and stores might appear to be the mere exploitation of culture for private profit. However, commercial shops have served an important role in educating the general public via the sale of products such as altar-making workshops, sugar skull kits, or books about Day of the Dead.<sup>318</sup> Unlike non-profit organizations, these establishments do not receive public funding and must charge prices that will cover the costs of materials and instructors as well as earn profits. Shops like Casa Bonampak, in San Francisco, the Folk Tree Gallery in Los Angeles, and Artes de Mexico, in San Diego, for example, typically pay prominent local and Mexican artisans to teach workshops. Each year, the Folk Tree Gallery invites a member of the Linares family to come to Pasadena from Mexico to teach a workshop on making papier-mâché *calaveras*, while Casa Bonampak offers *papel picado* workshops by Herminia Albarrán

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<sup>318</sup> Commercially available popular books such as Carmen Lomas Garza’s *Making Magic Windows: Creating Cut Paper Projects*, Carmichael & Sayer’s *The Skeleton at the Feast*, and Mary Andrade’s *Through the Eyes of the Soul* series have helped thousands of people learn about Day of the Dead.

Romero, one of the most talented *papel picado* artists in the United States. In addition to fee-based workshops, all of the small gallery-stores I visited also offered certain free events to the public, such as altar exhibits and Day of the Dead receptions (with free hot cocoa and *pan de muerto* for the public), lectures about Day of the Dead traditions and art, or screenings of films related to Day of the Dead. The products sold in gallery stores and museum shops usually support the educational work and exhibits of these organizations.

While Day of the Dead is a profitable season for privately owned galleries and stores, it was clear from my interviews with owners of these businesses that a love of Day of the Dead, rather than a desire for money, was the primary motivation for offering workshops and products to the public. Operating an independent shop and staying economically viable is always a struggle, and there are easier ways to earn a living. Most of the owners of such businesses are either Latinos or specialists in Latin American folk art who have a strong desire to educate the public about Latin American culture. Shop owners see their job as helping to educate people who might not otherwise have exposure to Latin American culture. As the owner of Back From Tomboctou notes:

We do a lot of community outreach...We give lectures to Chicano community organizations and hold talks here. In the store, people come in and we tell them what the holiday is...We have hand-outs we give, explaining the ceremonies...So that's our function, to give instruction to people about Day of the Dead. Most of all, to dispel beliefs that are wrong.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Personal interview with Maribel Simán DeLuca, April 24, 2003, San Diego, California.

The commodification of Day of the Dead in fee-based exhibits in museums is also not a simple case of cultural exploitation for profit. While museums benefit economically and socially from the large crowds attracted to Day of the Dead exhibits, they also perform an important educational and legitimizing function. As discussed in Chapter Four, the presence of Day of the Dead exhibits in museums has been important in popularizing the celebration to a wider US audience, and in providing greater visibility for Chicano and Latino artists within the “establishment” art world. Nearly all museums offer free tours of their Day of the Dead exhibits to school and community groups, and many offer free admission one day per week and/or free Day of the Dead community events, such as musical performances, Aztec danza, lectures, and craft workshops. Barbara Henry, Educational Curator for the Oakland Museum of California, observes that of the 20,000 visitors the museum receives during its annual six-week Day of the Dead exhibit: “We have about 7,000 school kids come through here each season. Last year we had about ten groups on the waiting list. There’s a tremendous response from schools in nine Bay Area counties...from all different grade levels... We get about 3,000 to 4,000 people at the [free] community celebration, just on that one *day*.”<sup>320</sup>

Many Latino respondents noted that having their culture represented in mainstream museums is beneficial to the community in that it provides opportunities for Latinos, especially youth, to see their culture esteemed by the larger society and creates or strengthens contact between Latinos and museums. As a Guatemalan-American young woman explained:

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<sup>320</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Henry, June 3, 2003, Oakland, California.

I live two blocks away from here [the museum], but I never stepped foot in this institution until I came to the Day of the Dead celebration they have here...If you come from somewhere where they don't take you to museums, you don't always think of going to museums...So I went, and I was amazed...What was amazing to me was how a public institution took something that was so personal and practiced in the home and turned it into a public interpretation...So I started to be a volunteer here. Then a job opened up and I got a job here.<sup>321</sup>

Henry notes: "We know that the Day of the Dead event brings in Latinos, and then once they know about the museum, they come back for other exhibits. We have done surveys that ask if people have come to any previous museum events, and most of the time, they check off Day of the Dead. Four of our staff members have started as volunteer guides at our Day of the Dead exhibit."<sup>322</sup> Sam Tager, Exhibit Designer and Coordinator at the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, shared a similar story with me. When he recruited local Latino youth to help create an altar exhibit at the museum, it initiated an ongoing relationship between the museum and the teens, launching the artistic career of one young man who did not previously consider himself an artist.<sup>323</sup>

Despite the fact that certain commercial activities are economically out of reach for low-income people, the vast majority of Day of the Dead events in the US are offered free or at very low cost by community-based organizations, schools, universities, public libraries, parks, and non-profit galleries that receive funding from government initiatives, private foundations, or businesses. For example, Self Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, offers free workshops every weekend from late September

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<sup>321</sup> Personal interview with informant who chose to remain anonymous, June 3, 2003, Oakland California.

<sup>322</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Henry, June 3, 2003, Oakland, California.

<sup>323</sup> Personal discussion with Sam Tager, December 16, 2003, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

until November 2 in sugar skull making, mask making, flower making, papel picado and other crafts, while the Sherman Heights Community Center and Old Town State Park, both in San Diego, offer similar workshops for \$1.00 per person. Galleries such as the Cannon Gallery in Carlsbad, California; Centro Cultural de La Raza, in San Diego; Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles; Precita Eyes, La Galería de la Raza, and SoMarts, in San Francisco; and countless others offer free admission to beautiful and professionally curated Day of the Dead exhibits. Scanning the newspapers or the Internet during the month of October, the number of free Day of the Dead exhibits, dance performances, theater productions, storytelling events and poetry workshops offered by community-based organizations far outnumbers the quantity of fee-based activities and exhibits.

### The Effects of Commercialization

How do commercial settings and corporate sponsorship affect the content of Day of the Dead altars and events? To explore this question, I attended various commercially-oriented Day of the Dead events organized by local chambers of commerce and tourist bureaus that received major funding from corporate sponsors. One example organized by a business association is the annual celebration at Olvera Street, a Los Angeles re-creation of a Mexican-style marketplace, offering altar exhibits, workshops, films, a procession, live music, dance performances, and numerous craft vendors. Despite the celebration's location in a tourist venue, the altar exhibits I attended there in October of 2003 and 2004 included several political altars, including one dedicated to Cesar Chavez, altars dedicated to US military servicemembers killed in



Afghanistan and Iraq, an altar in memory of the genocide of Native Americans, and one in memory of people killed by gay bashing. This last altar displayed photos of recent gay bashing victims along with photos of famous gay and lesbian people, including Frances Bacon, Anthony Perkins, Leonardo da Vinci, Lawrence of Arabia, Harvey Milk, Oscar Wilde, Andy Warhol, Gertrude Stein, Michelangelo, James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, Barbara Stanwyck, Billie Holiday, Gianni Versace, Rudolph Valentino and Rock Hudson. The caption by the artist stated: "I celebrate their lives and thank them for their example...far too many gay teens are still contemplating suicide. Too many gay people are still being bashed on the street. It is my hope that this altar will give strength and courage to all people who have been marginalized by society."

In November 2003, I attended another tourist-oriented Day of the Dead celebration sponsored by the local chamber of commerce in the town of Mesilla, New Mexico, where the central plaza was filled with altars and craft vendors. Among the diverse individuals and themes honored were people who had died of homelessness, victims of domestic violence, abused children, Iraqi victims of war, and an altar commemorating victims of torture, done by the local high school chapter of Amnesty International. While the event served the purpose of attracting tourists to this historic Spanish colonial town, it was simultaneously a way to raise public consciousness about political issues, as well as a way for local townspeople to strengthen community bonds by publicly honoring deceased friends, family, and community leaders.

Day of the Dead festivals in Fruitvale and Oceanside, California, both funded through the *Mainstreets* economic development initiative as ways to improve business

in these cities,<sup>324</sup> also included prominent political altars. The 2004 Oceanside festival, which featured numerous traditional Oaxacan-style altars made by members of the city's Mixtec immigrant community as well as altars and tables sponsored by businesses, also included altars about the war in Iraq. For example, just a few yards away from the Citibank table (which was made to resemble an altar surrounded with orange marigolds and papel picado) was the previously mentioned altar created by members of the San Diego Coalition for Peace and Justice and YANO (Youth and Non-Military Opportunities). Featuring a life-sized skeleton dressed in camouflage fatigues and a combat helmet sitting next to containers of Exxon oil, the altar was clearly critical of corporate power and its influence on US foreign policy, connecting the loss of human life to US oil interests in Iraq. Next to the altar was a table with pamphlets on local peace and justice initiatives, anti-war protest activities, and efforts to end military recruitment in Latino high schools, so within the space of a few feet, one could either sign up for a credit card with Citibank or join efforts to protest corporate and governmental power abuses. In another area of the festival was a participatory Iraq War Memorial, listing the names of hundreds of dead soldiers and offering the public an opportunity to write down or draw their feelings about the war in chalk on the sidewalk next to the exhibit.

At the 2004 festival in Fruitvale, commercial and political elements also coexisted. While four stages transmitted continuous mariachi, Andean, salsa, reggae, jazz and rock music, social service providers staffed tables offering information on

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<sup>324</sup> Both events, organized primarily by the local business communities together with interested residents, artists, and scholars, received sizeable monetary and in-kind donations from multinational corporations such as media outlets, soft drink companies, credit card companies, airlines, and grocery stores.

health care plans, legal and immigration services, domestic violence shelters, drug rehabilitation centers, organ transplant donor programs, health tips, Latino civic organizations, environmental organizations, Catholic Charities' Prison Ministry, the California Highway Patrol, the Girls Scouts, and solidarity groups working on behalf of Chiapas, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Lining the main street, where walking was laborious because of the enormous crowds, were 120 vendor booths selling everything from private mortgage insurance to chiropractic services to cell phones.<sup>325</sup> Election volunteers stood at tables registering people to vote and distributing promotional materials for political candidates. The Oakland Raiders' Cheerleaders had a booth selling Raiders' merchandise. Bilingual Citibank employees signed people up for credit cards, and the Safeway supermarket chain created a replica "supermercado," where patrons could purchase Goya and other Latin American food products. Hundreds of plastic skeletons and Guatemalan-style Day of the Dead kites adorned the street, blowing in the wind as people danced, ate at the food pavilions, participated in craft activities, and visited vendors.

In the center of the festival, spanning both sides of the street, was an exhibit of twenty elaborate altars made by local artists and community residents. This was the largest street fair I had ever seen and, given the commercial orientation of the event, I half expected the altars to be corporately sponsored cookie cutter creations. (In fact, a number of Day of the Dead aficionados in the Bay Area rolled their eyes when I mentioned that I was planning to attend the Fruitvale celebration, dismissing it as a

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<sup>325</sup> Booths sold clothing (from India, Africa, Latin America, and the US), toys, jewelry (including Irish and African jewelry and Italian good luck charms), newspaper subscriptions, phone cards, massages, and more.

commercialized and inauthentic gimmick. For them, the Mission procession was the only authentic Day of the Dead event.) Nonetheless, I found that the altars at Fruitvale's festival were thoroughly grassroots projects, reflecting an impressive level of artistic innovation, ethnic diversity and political expression, – certainly as interesting and moving as altars exhibited at the Mission procession or in that neighborhood's well-traveled art galleries.

Amidst altars honoring individual family and friends of the people who made them, an altar created by local school children for their deceased loved ones, and altars that honored pop stars such as salsa singer Celia Cruz, African musician Malonga Casquelourd, and Chinese pop culture artist Mon Gway Wong, were various altars commemorating politically-related deaths. There was an altar in memory of people who have died of hunger, comprised of flags from many countries (including the US), listing each country's annual death toll from malnutrition. The altar included written text on the political causes of hunger and informational flyers from a non-profit organization called The Hunger Project. Another altar, in memory of the murdered Women of Juarez, Mexico, included statistics on the abductions and flyers listing the addresses and websites of the multinationals Sony, Zenith, and Lear (operating Juarez factories where many of the murdered women were employed). These handouts encouraged the public to contact the corporations and demand that they increase safety precautions for their workers and cease union busting activities. There was an altar done by the family of a Native American woman soldier killed in Iraq on April 4, 2002, and an altar honoring Rosie Jimenez, a low income mother who died of a botched, back alley abortion. Believed to be the first woman in the US to die from an illegal abortion

after the passage of the 1977 Hyde Amendment banning the use of Medicaid funds for abortions, Jimenez is a symbol, for pro-choice activists, of the ongoing threat to women's reproductive rights under the Bush Administration.

Perhaps most striking of all was a large Guatemalan altar installation done by Grupo Maya, a support group of Guatemalan refugees living in the Bay Area. Recreating the feel of a rural Guatemalan cemetery, the exhibit consisted of life-sized mounds of earth replicating graves and decorated with marigolds and wooden crosses. Pungent with the smell of candles, copal incense, flowers and plates of tamales, each grave displayed large photos of real-life skulls and skeletal remains of some of the estimated 100,000 Mayan people murdered by the US-supported Guatemalan military during the 1980s. One photo depicted a skull lodged with a sharp pole that had been stabbed through the victim's cranium, exiting out of one of his/her eyes. Other skeletons were still dressed in decomposing shreds of intricately woven Mayan clothing. In efforts to document the extent of the government-sponsored massacres, the photos were taken by forensic experts and journalists during recent exhumations of mass graves in Guatemala, conducted by the Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology, with support from the United Nations and Amnesty International. Next to the altar installation was information on the Guatemalan civil war, the military's "scorched earth" campaign of the 1980s, and the ongoing death threats and attacks being made on Guatemalan forensic investigators as they attempt to conduct these exhumations. Members of Grupo Maya were present to discuss and answer questions about the altars, as were the creators of all of the other altars, converting the celebration into a learning experience for passersby.

Because of the beauty and arrestingly gruesome nature of this exhibit, it attracted some of the largest crowds of spectators, who stood quietly in front of the altar, staring at the photos and reading the text. When I asked one of the altar's creators, José Villalobos, a native of the Maya Mam Indian town of Todos Santos in Guatemala, what he thought of locating such a serious political statement in this carnivalesque setting (salsa music blaring in the background, and smells of tacos and fried dough in the air), he responded, "Es lo maximo!" ("It's the best!") He explained that he "loved" this venue because:

Thousands of people from all over pass by the altar and learn something of the traditions and history of Guatemala. Many Guatemalans come and stare and some start to cry and look away. Others, when they see me dressed in my Mam clothing, start to speak to me in Mam. Others who aren't from Guatemala say that they didn't know Guatemala had Day of the Dead too.<sup>326</sup>

For Villalobos, the commercial, the spiritual, and the political were not mutually exclusive, reminding me that traditional religious fiestas in Latin America are accompanied by *tianguis*, temporary markets that sell festival and everyday items. It struck me, in that moment, that a commercial Day of the Dead festival such as this, or commodification of the material culture associated with the ritual, does not necessarily negate the spirituality and power of the celebration for its participants.

Holidays or "holy days" in both Western and non-Western societies have been intricately connected to commerce for centuries (Mauss 1967; Waits 1993; Schmidt 1995), with spiritual and commercial phenomena operating simultaneously as

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<sup>326</sup> Personal conversation with Jose Villalobos, November 2, 2003, Fruitvale, California.

individuals choose the level at which they wish to participate. The existence of commercial galleries and stores selling Day of the Dead merchandise helps to promote the celebration publicly, whether or not visitors purchase the products and workshops offered. For some, the act of window-shopping itself is a ritual that helps mark the season. As one vendor commented: “I see people coming into the store regularly every year. They may not buy anything. Maybe they buy a little thing. But they always *have to* come to the store because it’s Day of the Dead season. Like Christmas season. So it’s part of the ritual, going to the store and looking at things.” The extensive advertising that tourist-oriented and corporately-sponsored Day of the Dead festivals receive and the crowds they attract guarantee a much larger audience for exhibits than is typically drawn to non-profit galleries (including many people who might not visit museums and art galleries).

It would be overly simplistic to classify the commercialization of Day of the Dead as the exploitation of Latin culture for profit, because both economic and non-economic benefits occur for the Latino community. Besides being good for business, Day of the Dead altars and adornments in commercial establishments exert a Latino presence in the public sphere, conveying to the mainstream public that a large number of Americans are of Latin heritage. As the Oceanside and Fruitvale festivals illustrate, such events allow US-born Latinos to connect with and feel pride in their cultural heritage, and provide recent immigrant groups, such as Mayans from Guatemala and Mixtecs from Oaxaca, with an opportunity to interact publicly with mainstream populations, organizations, and institutions. Collaboration with various government, business, arts, and social service agencies helps Day of the Dead altar makers, vendors

and volunteers establish social and political connections that can be beneficial to them in the future. In the case of Fruitvale, where nearly all of the event organizers and many of the commercial sponsors were Latino, the annual Day of the Dead Festival has helped transform the image of the neighborhood in the eyes of both outsiders and local residents.

For all its flippant funkiness and commercial publicity, the Hollywood Forever Day of the Dead celebration in Los Angeles succeeds in recreating the festive atmosphere of Latin American cemeteries on November 1, and attracts thousands of Latinos.<sup>327</sup> Amidst the famous cadavers, are also interred Latin American immigrants from nearby East L.A. The sight of countless lighted candles in the night, the aromas of marigolds, tacos, and tamales, and the sounds of music, laughter and children playing, made the Latino immigrants I spoke with there feel at home. For example, I met a family of six from El Salvador, sitting and talking by the grave of their 17 year-old son. Bunches of flowers and votive candles were arranged around his grave, and his photograph rested against the headstone. The deceased's mother explained to me that, although they always visited the tombs of relatives on November 1 and 2 when they lived in San Salvador, they did not do it in Los Angeles before Hollywood Forever began its Day of the Dead celebrations, because this cemetery was a dangerous place to be at night. Her adult daughter added that in El Salvador, the cemeteries are not sad places on Day of the Dead, but that the Hollywood cemetery used to be abandoned and sad. "Ahora es alegre estar aqui" (Now it's cheerful to be here), she said, noting that

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<sup>327</sup> When I attended in 2004 and 2005, I heard more Spanish than English being spoken around me, and estimated that the crowd was at least 60% or more Latinos. The rest were a mixture of Whites, Blacks, Asians, and others.



they have held a family vigil at her brother's grave every year since Hollywood Forever began celebrating Day of the Dead. Thus, an event intended to help convert a bankrupt property into a profitable business has also made it possible for Latino immigrants to resume Day of the Dead traditions that they had relinquished and, like other commercial events mentioned above, provides an opportunity for US-born Latinos and non-Latinos to learn about and celebrate the tradition.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

An ongoing fear regarding the commodification of cultural practices, in general, is that it destroys the soul of traditions and serves to narrow the range of creative expression, particularly political expression. Sometimes, however, the parallel and distinct intentions of commercial forces and cultural practices can be mutually beneficial. US Day of the Dead celebrations are deeply personal yet public forms of communication that transmit the Latino community's knowledge and memory of itself. Commercialization is a form of communication and the commodification of Day of the Dead objects has helped popularize the celebration, without preventing earnest spiritual and political expressions from taking place. The altars I observed at commercialized festivals and tourist venues were not less meaningful or less authentic than those I saw in community-based centers and art galleries. They maintained a vernacular quality and critical spirit, using commercial publicity and funds to promote messages of cultural affirmation and political struggle while resisting the emptying of meaning assumed by critics of commercialism. Whether funded by government grants, private foundations, or corporations, "arte contestatario" is an intrinsic aspect of US Day of the Dead

celebrations. As Tomás Benitez put it: “Chiapas, prop 187, AIDS, immigrants, the women of Juarez...people are reflecting what’s on their minds...This is not just a bunch of happy Mexicans dressed as skeletons. It’s about life and death and who we are as people.”<sup>328</sup>

The drastic curtailment of public funds for the arts in recent years (particularly in California, where California Arts Council funding has been eliminated) means that many community-based organizations (traditionally non-commercial, oppositional political spaces) are struggling to continue providing free and low-cost Day of the Dead programming. Both the Sherman Heights Community Center, in San Diego, and Self-Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, have received significant Day of the Dead funding from the California department store chain Mervyn’s in order to continue their extensive programming. Benitez, of Self-Help Graphics notes:

I took flack last year because I accepted funding from Mervyn’s for Day of the Dead. A very prominent leader of another community center said, “Don’t sell Day of the Dead to the white man.” And I said, “What the hell are you talking about? Don’t you know how expensive ‘free’ is becoming?” I think Mervyn’s *should* be sponsoring community activities. Sixty-five percent of the people who spend money in their store are from this community.<sup>329</sup>

While they have grown more dependent on business sponsorship, Latino curators and event organizers exercise agency in shaping the ways that corporate sponsors are involved in Day of the Dead. They make concerted efforts to avoid the commercial excesses that characterize Cinco de Mayo celebrations (heavily sponsored

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<sup>328</sup> Personal interview with Tomás Benitez, Los Angeles, California, June 5, 2004.

<sup>329</sup> Personal interview with Tomás Benitez, Los Angeles, California, June 5, 2004.

by beer companies) and engage in a careful balancing act between accepting corporate funding and maintaining the spiritual and political integrity of the celebration. One director of a free Day of the Dead festival, who noted that she “has to hustle” for sponsorship, stated: “We are a non-profit and this type of event costs close to \$100,000 to put on. Still, we draw the line with the type of sponsorship we accept. No beer companies. No cigarette companies.” René Yañez explains: “I was approached by beer companies who said, ‘How about some beer booths?’ And it’s hard to turn down money when you’re not making a lot of money. But I thought that would betray the original intent.”<sup>330</sup> Another Day of the Dead organizer related how he insisted that a corporate sponsor’s logo not dominate promotional materials for the celebration, even though it meant significantly less money for his organization: “They offered us \$20,000.00 to have the posters say on the top in large letters, ‘Day of the Dead presented by ----’ but I told them *no way*, so we settled on their name in smaller print at the bottom for \$10,000.00.”

Most people I spoke with at community-based organizations expressed that Day of the Dead activities would continue, in one form or another, whether they received funding or not, because this is a celebration that deeply moves people to participation.

Yañez notes:

I have artists and community people who make altars for free because it’s for their daughter or son or parents. Normally for an exhibit, artists ask you what your budget is and if you don’t have money, they won’t do it. But Day of the Dead is different. People will often do it for free. It goes back to the spirituality and the ritual. People want to address these.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Personal interview, June 3, 2003, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>331</sup> Personal interview with René Yañez, San Francisco, California, June 3, 2003.

Similarly, Louise Torio, who organizes a popular walking tour of home altars sponsored by the Sherman Heights Neighborhood Association (SHNA), explains:

The first year we did this, we got a small grant from the San Diego Commission for the Arts and Culture, so we were able to pay the artists about \$175.00 for supplies. This year, things have been real tight. There was no money for this. But we found that that was okay. People wanted to do it anyway and were willing to pay out of pocket to do it. It's not about the money. It's about the experience of sharing.<sup>332</sup>

Many twenty-first century Americans long to recapture the mutual support and sharing of a way of life and death abandoned in the early twentieth century. What was lost with the professionalization of death by the medical and mortuary industries was the collective time and space to tell stories about departed loved ones. Inspired by Mesoamerican traditions, adopted and transformed by Chicanos and other Latinos in the United States, and promoted via local and mass media, as well as via commercialization, US Day of the Dead rituals offer American society an important custom from the pre-modern past: public storytelling. In the dozens of testimonies I have collected, Day of the Dead participants overwhelmingly assert that assembling an altar, walking in a community procession, reciting a poem, or participating in cemetery rituals allows them opportunities to symbolically and verbally discuss the deceased, sharing buried memories that facilitate healing, while keeping departed loved ones alive in spirit.

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<sup>332</sup> Personal interview with Louise Torio, San Diego, California, November 15, 2003. A lack of grant funding did not diminish the event, as altar makers wanted to honor deceased loved ones and were willing to use their own resources to create the altars. SHNA was able to raise modest funds by selling T-shirts and requesting a small donation from tour participants, which helped defray the cost of flyers and other organizational materials.

In an extremely commodity-oriented society such as the United States, it is not surprising that Day of the Dead products have become popular, both for Latinos and non-Latinos. For some, they represent hip style. For others, they signal sincere participation in and adoption of the tradition. Displaying the material culture of Day of the Dead via objects such as *pan de muerto*, sugar skulls, *papel picado*, devotional candles, religious statues, and other commercially-produced items allows people to publicly identify with/celebrate the Chicano/Latino community and the metaphysical philosophies of Latin America while literally demarcating a public space (in museums, schools, offices, parks, community centers, and galleries) for honoring personal and collective memories of the dead.

Day of the Dead commodities have helped provide the Mexican-American community with a distinctive identity while at the same time providing a means for them to connect with other Latinos and the larger mainstream society. The growing popularity of the tradition among both Latinos and non-Latinos parallels an increasing disenchantment with late capitalist values of eternal youth and hyper-individualism that respectively eschew the topic of death and privatize mourning. As a new US holiday, Day of the Dead offers mainstream America an opportunity not only to process the loss of loved ones, but also to respond to the loss of community that has become the hallmark of contemporary American society.

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## Chapter Six: Conclusions

*Community media underscore the enormous challenge confronting democratic societies struggling to reconcile the high-minded ideals of civil rights and equal opportunity with the harsh realities of structural inequalities, institutionalized racism, gender inequity, and ethnocentrism. (Kevin Hawley 2005: 38)*

How do populations that lack ready access to official channels of power make themselves heard in the public sphere? How do they create a sense of shared knowledge and the solidarity necessary to address issues of injustice? These are questions that anyone interested in democratic participation must ask, given the disproportionate influence of affluent and politically powerful stakeholders on the production and circulation of ideas in the public square. I have tried to illustrate that much of this work is carried out in the cultural realm through the creation of alternative public spheres that embody a ritual model of communication. As the writings of John Dewey (1916), Raymond Williams (1973), James Carey (1989), and others suggest, the solution to undemocratic mass media structures is not merely a matter of transmitting alternative information, but of creating a sense of fellowship and interaction among individuals inhabiting an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

This dissertation encourages a rethinking of what social scientists typically classify as “media” to include public ritual celebrations as an influential form of community-based media that enlarge the public sphere and provide important opportunities for political communication, particularly for populations with limited input and access to conventional media production. Examining the popular cultural practice of Day of the Dead as a way to critically analyze issues of power, the previous

five chapters tell a complex sociological story of the communicative capacity of cultural ritual in identity construction, education, and social protest. It is a story about the agency of an historically stereotyped population with relatively little economic capital and abundant cultural capital to use their cultural resources to challenge mainstream, mass-produced images of themselves – images that have helped legitimate and reproduce relations of economic, social and political domination.

In the process of interacting for more than thirty years with the institutionalized practices and beliefs of the dominant society, Day of the Dead rituals and participants have affected mainstream US culture. They have been instrumental not only in helping to redefine Latino identity in the United States but also in helping to broaden the spectrum of US attitudes and practices related to death and the deceased. The celebration in the US context is both a “residual” and “emergent” practice in Raymond Williams’ conceptualization (1991: 415-416), as Chicanos and other Latinos draw upon and revitalize ancestral forms of social solidarity and communication while at the same time transforming them.

It is this ritual’s ability to communicate via creating a sense of *community* – an entity simultaneously eroded and longed for with the steady advance of modernity – that has made it so attractive to both Latinos and non-Latinos inhabiting what can be, for many, a socially alienating twenty-first century America. Addressing the public as fellow community members, Day of the Dead rituals concurrently acknowledge cultural difference while expressing feelings and thoughts about the profound connections between all people. That is to say, in contrast to mainstream media transmissions portraying the perspectives of a relatively narrow segment of society, public ritual

communication can represent a diversity of populations, perspectives, and experiences within a locality, while at the same time acknowledging the commonality and interconnectedness of these people and experiences. This collective experience generates a sense of belonging to and responsibility towards the larger community.

Chapters Two and Three describe historical and contemporary celebrations of Day of the Dead in Latin America and the United States, presenting evidence that challenges essentialist notions of ethnic identity by revealing the constructed and contested character of “traditional” ritual practices and social formations. The growth of Day of the Dead in the US, as well as in many areas of Mexico, has been a conscious, proactive choice on the part of participants. These chapters illuminate the central role that ritual communication plays in delineating specific communities while simultaneously helping to forge a shared collective identity amongst diverse peoples. The reclamation of cultural practices can be a powerful tool for uniting populations, whether it is used by governments to create a sense of national identity (as in the case of the Mexican government’s promotion of Day of the Dead) or by minority ethnic groups that experience discrimination at the hands of mainstream society (as in the case of Chicanos in the United States).

Yet a danger always exists that such reclamation projects can lead to a naturalization or decentralization of ethnic identity that can harm both “insiders” and “outsiders” of a group by pressuring insiders to uphold limiting natives expressions, values, and behaviors, or by creating dynamics of “reverse racism” against those who are not part of the “in” group. In the case of US Day of the Dead events, however, this scenario has been minimal because most early organizers, recognizing the hybridity of

their own Chicano (and all) cultural practices, were open to including diverse participants in Day of the Dead activities, and because the celebration spoke to widely-felt needs among the general US population, many of whom enthusiastically sought to become part of the tradition. Since their inception in the United States in 1972, then, public Day of the Dead celebrations have helped unite diverse Latino populations while at the same time lending themselves to the larger society as a bridge of understanding between Latinos and non-Latinos.

As a form of communication that is multiple in its origins and seeks to achieve active reception and response, the celebration of Day of the Dead illustrates the power of ritual to expand people's opportunities to learn and exchange ideas, a quality of communication that has been overshadowed in the United States by "an obsessive commitment to a transmission view of communication" (Carey 1989:34). Yet, these events also transmit information, illustrating Carey's assertion that "a ritual view does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change" (1989: 21). Whether educating the public about Latino culture, history, and identity, or humanizing abstract political concepts and problems regarding contemporary issues such as handgun legislation, neoliberal policies, or immigration laws, the creators of Day of the Dead altars, processions, art, poetry, prose, and other activities communicate affectively and effectively to educate while reinforcing a sense of interconnectedness on a local, regional, national, and even international level.

One of the most important implications of this dissertation is that meaningful political communication happens during activities and in places not usually recognized as "political." The examples and analyses offered here have demonstrated how cultural

rituals can serve to inform the public and, in raising consciousness about Latino cultural heritage and political struggles, inspire community activism. Although Day of the Dead celebrations may appear, at first glance, to be just another “multi-culti” form of entertainment, many of the messages communicated in the exhibits, processions and other public rituals elucidate the severe realities of those members of society for whom the American Dream does not apply, thereby undermining and challenging the assumptions of equality and peaceful coexistence inherent in most multi-cultural projects. Revealing new subjects of power and resistance from the “margins” (Appadurai 1996; Chen 1998; Hall 1998), these exhibits and processions help cultivate understandings and alliances between diverse people, creating the groundwork necessary for civic engagement, whether in the form of becoming more active at the local community center or getting involved in political struggles.

This study does not provide quantitative data on the relationship between people’s participation in cultural activities such as Day of the Dead and other subsequent forms of community activism. However, based on anecdotal evidence from my conversations and interviews with participants, I know that many of the people I spoke with felt imbued with a sense of cultural pride and became involved in their local youth centers, museums, art councils or chambers of commerce after being profoundly moved by attending Day of the Dead exhibits. Likewise, many were unexpectedly awakened to disturbing socio-political issues while attending these events. For example, an Anglo technical writer told me that he had never heard of the “Women of Juarez” situation before attending the Day of the Dead exhibit at Cal State San Marcos in the fall of 2004. Three elderly Mexican American women who, unable to hold back

tears as they helped decorate the unmarked graves of dead migrants at the Holtville cemetery ritual of October 2003, told me that the event made them determined to get more active in immigrant rights and social pastoral work along the border. A Guatemalan-American told me that he had never heard of YANO (Youth and Non-Military Opportunities) and had not considered the connections between race, class, and military recruitment in US high schools before seeing the anti-war altar in honor of Jesus Suarez de Solar at the 2004 Oceanside Day of the Dead festival. All of these people were initially drawn to these Day of the Dead events because of the cultural aspect of the celebration but left with new knowledge and political commitment.

Given the pessimism regarding national decreases in traditional forms of civic engagement in the United States (Postman 1985; Putnam 2000; Mindich 2005), more research is needed on non-traditional forms of civic participation that often occur “under the radar” of social science observers. As political scientist James C. Scott has argued, political engagement does not exist merely in concrete physical actions (such as voter turn-out, volunteerism, organized protests) but is necessarily preceded by mental processes of consciousness-raising. According to Scott, the intellectual and emotional stages through which political consciousness germinates is a form of “infrapolitics” that is “the building block for more elaborate institutionalized political action” (Scott 1990: 201). He notes that “material and symbolic resistance are part of the same set of mutually sustaining practices,” with the latter not only supporting practical resistance, but serving as a condition for it (1990: 184-191). Similarly, media scholar Kees Brants asserts that bridging gaps and enhancing social solidarity are necessary conditions for political involvement (1998: 174).

In addition to the impact Day of the Dead rituals can have on individuals who personally participate in them, mainstream media coverage of the celebrations has helped open up space within the American public sphere for portrayals of alternative cultural practices and oppositional political viewpoints. As shown in Chapter Four, the celebration's now routine inclusion in newspapers across the country has helped promote this tradition nationally. This coverage counters a history of predominantly negative representation and underrepresentation of Latinos in the US news and popular media, injecting previously submerged knowledge and traditions into the dominant discursive arena. The colorful, family-oriented character of the celebration makes it a "sphere of consensus" story that has become part of the US mass media's lineup of annual holiday coverage, alongside other "feel good" sphere of consensus celebrations such as Independence Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, or Valentine's Day. Yet, the non-threatening, almost mundane nature of Day of the Dead celebrations (for twenty-first century American audiences) has afforded news space for a significant number of stories with political ramifications.

In contrast to neo-Durkheimian analyses (Shils & Young 1953; Warner 1962; Bellah 1982) that presume a socially integrative function of public ritual based on the presumption that similar values and likeminded interpretations of these values exist within a given society, Steven Lukes argues that within class-structured, pluralistic societies, public rituals can be important spaces for the expression of a *lack* of consensus. Rather than necessarily serving to unify, he suggests, rituals are modes of expression that bring about intensified public mindfulness, during which time they can serve as "a source of creativity and improvisation, a counter-cultural and anti-structural

force, engendering new social, cultural and political forms” (Lukes 1977: 69). Day of the Dead is a contemporary example of a public ritual serving as a medium for communicating counter-cultural messages, yet it is not a unique case.

Saint Patrick’s Day celebrations in the United States, which began as family-oriented religious observances, have become, over time, public celebrations of Irish identity in which anyone can be “Irish for the day.”<sup>333</sup> In the 1990s, the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade in South Boston, by then one of the largest annual parades in the city, served as a riveting site for gays and lesbians of Irish descent to struggle for public recognition and acceptance within the traditionally Catholic and socially conservative Irish community. Similarly, Columbus Day began as a day to commemorate the “discovery” of America, but later became a celebration of Italian-American pride in reaction to years of discrimination and hostility Italian communities had faced from Americans of English and Irish descent. More recently, Columbus Day has become a day of mourning and protest by Native Americans and Latinos drawing attention to the genocide and suffering that the Italian explorer’s arrival portended for the original inhabitants of the Americas. Valentine’s Day, promoted by card and flower companies in the early twentieth century, began as a holiday for sweethearts to express their sentiments through cards, flowers, and chocolates but has since also become a day of national consciousness-raising around gender oppression through annual Valentine’s Day events such as “The Clothesline Project” or performances of the *Vagina*

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<sup>333</sup> Given the severe economic exploitation and social discrimination faced by Irish in the United States from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, St. Patrick’s Day parades were initially a public statement that unified people hailing from various parts of Ireland and challenged the hegemony of the dominant Anglo Saxon society.



*Monologues*.<sup>334</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. Day was initiated to honor the Civil Rights Movement and its most prominent protagonist, but also became a day for African-Americans to engage in a variety of “Black Pride” activities, as well as a day in which anti-war activists, connecting with Dr. King’s advocacy of non-violence and condemnation of war, have nationally protested US military invasions (both during the Vietnam War era and in the context of the present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq). In each case, new expressions and collective meanings of public celebrations are constantly made and remade by creatively working with cultural materials, in what Eyerman and Jamison have called the “mobilization of tradition” (1998:163).

News coverage of Day of the Dead celebrations exemplifies the increasingly porous line between “hard news” and “soft news” (Brants 1998; Hallin 2000; Sparks & Tulloch 2000). Because politics, war, economics, and crime have traditionally been considered the distinct realm of “hard” news, while arts, entertainment and lifestyle stories (that place greater emphasis on personal anecdotes than thematic analysis) the realm of “soft” news, the latter has been derided as mindless fluff by some media critics who argue that the growth of this genre denotes the impending demise of a news-literate public. This study diverges from such opinions, supporting the positions of those who contend that because lifestyle and arts sections are among the most widely and carefully read sections of newspapers nationwide, and large sectors of the general public learn about political issues from soft news (especially those people least likely to encounter political news elsewhere), such coverage should be taken seriously for its ability to raise

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<sup>334</sup> The Clothesline Project is a traveling exhibit of T-shirts representing the lives of women lost to domestic violence. The *Vagina Monologues* is a play performed around the nation intended to affirm non-patriarchal expressions of female sexuality.

important civic concerns outside of the formal political domain (Hallin 2000; Baum 2003; Prior 2003; Schudson 2003).

The findings of this dissertation, particularly the discussion and examples presented in Chapter Five, also support an unhinging of the binary categories “local” and “global”; “traditional” and “modern”; “authentic” and “commercial.” Offering historical examples of the impact of global and commercial forces on local contexts, this research counters nostalgic portrayals of ethnic communities as insular entities that, until recently, were untouched by non-local influences. While preserving and transmitting popular memories, affirming ancestral rituals, and portraying the experiences, pleasures, and sorrows of diverse groups of Latinos and non-Latinos who comprise “local” communities, US Day of the Dead celebrations vividly demonstrate the influence that non-local forces have on the formation of local identities and cultures as well as the influence that local identities and cultures have on the formation of regional identities. Without romanticizing culture, citizens, and consumers or disregarding the ways in which dominant configurations of power create inequitable social conditions, this study illustrates that cultural production and political agendas are not determined exclusively by dominant stakeholders. In contrast to the admonitions of cultural imperialist theorists who predicted the imminent onslaught of a homogeneous global culture (Mattelart 1979; Schiller 1976), it provides a more complicated picture of the dialectical relationship between the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, the authentic and the commercial.

Encouraging the examination of both macro and micro level processes of communication and cultural production, media theorist Jesús Martín-Barbero has

suggested that scholars of communication redirect their focus away from typical industry critiques and textual interpretations towards cultural, social, and political mediations that occur within grassroots communicative practices (Martín-Barbero 1993). With this suggestion in mind, US Day of the Dead events can be seen as a kind of strategic retort to the corporate commodification of news and culture, whereby local artists, activists and citizens-at-large (including undocumented residents, children, the elderly and others generally excluded from mainstream media production) exercise cultural autonomy despite an increasingly privatized media environment. As vernacular media, Day of the Dead celebrations challenge and simultaneously revitalize mainstream US culture, making an important difference in the lives of participants by affirming their individual and collective agency as cultural producers and communicative subjects.

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