The Moral Economy: doing democracy via Day of the Dead rituals

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Introduction:

The 1960s and 1970s marked a decisive period in US history, when Latinos and other people of color were deeply engaged in struggles to gain civil rights, public recognition, and respect within mainstream Anglo society. Blossoming in the 1970s (with roots going back to the 1930s), the Chicano Movement[1] began in California and the American Southwest as a political and cultural movement that worked on a broad cross section of issues affecting the Mexican-American community. These included farm workers' rights; Native American land rights; efforts to improve educational opportunities; voting and political rights; and the public celebration of cultural traditions. Emerging at a time of widespread social justice activism by disenfranchised populations, the Chicano Movement was influenced by Black civil rights activism, the American Indian Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement[2] Chicano activists identified strongly with anti-colonial struggles around the world (e.g. in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Vietnam and Africa) and proclaimed solidarity with these movements for self-determination. They supported the struggles of elderly Filipinos in San Francisco trying to avoid eviction from 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.[3] At home in the US, Chicanos were waging multi-pronged political battles which included struggles to improve the segregated and inferior schooling provided to Latino children (who were typically tracked into vocational rather than university paths). They also worked to increase Latino voter registration and representation in the US political system, and combated the labor

abuses, substandard housing, and environmental contamination facing Latino and other minority neighborhoods.

In discussing how cultural traditions can provide the moral force and physical infrastructure needed to critique the dominant society, E.P. Thompson argued that the popular food riots of 18th century England were not merely compulsive responses to economic stimuli. Rather, they were a "moral economy" form of social protest - "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.[4] 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.[5] This 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 common weal. Tracing the origins of the highly organized 18th century English working class to local traditions of mutual aid, he argued that the widespread participation of common folk in communal rituals and ceremonies sustained collectivist values which, in turn, allowed the working class to maintain solidarity under difficult political conditions. Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations frequently operate along a moral economy model of social protest, encouraging moral reflection on issues of political importance and revealing dimensions of repression often overlooked by the dominant culture. As we shall see, they illustrate Thompson's view that cultural ritual is not merely an extraneous variable, but a political necessity in struggles for justice.

Political Art as Alternative Media

In order to combat the long-standing injustices facing Latinos in the US, Chicanos felt it was crucial to communicate with the public – both Latino and non-Latino – in order to increase consciousness and encourage political action. But how could this be accomplished when so few Latinos occupied positions in the mass media, and both the news and popular media routinely portrayed Latinos via negative stereotypes? Historically, US news coverage depicted Mexicans and other Latinos as lazier, less intelligent, less moral, and more prone to crime than Anglo-Americans.[6] The same pattern of negative representation existed in magazine and television advertising.[7] In Hollywood films, Latinos were stereotyped in tropes such as the bandido, the gang banger, the over sexualized Latin Lover, the dangerous temptress, or the dim-witted buffoon.[8] In numerous ways, mainstream US media portrayed Latinos primarily within "problem" and "social disadvantage" frames, as people who lived in crime-infested neighborhoods, lacked basic educational and job skills, and were not legitimate US citizens.

In addition to legal and advocacy efforts towards diversifying the mainstream media and improving representations of minorities, Chicanos engaged in political and cultural media work that included the creation of literature, theater, music, and visual art meant to transmit Chicano histories and political struggles. They created *arte contestatario* – protest art designed to challenge mainstream racist tropes,[9] in which they integrated culture, art, and politics for the goal of building community and creating progressive political change. For a minority community that was unaccustomed to seeing positive images of itself in the mass media, the significance of publicly honoring collective experiences and cultural traditions cannot be overstated.

Neglected and abandoned buildings in Mexican-American neighborhoods became canvases for giant public murals that educated onlookers about Aztec legends, Mexican

revolutionary heroes/heroines, and Mexican-American labor struggles such as the grape boycott of the United Farm Workers' Union.[10] Chicano performance artists and theater troupes traveled to urban neighborhoods and rural farming towns producing *teatro popular* – a street theater tradition common in Mexico – to educate immigrant laborers about their legal rights in the US. The most prominent example of this was the itinerant bilingual theater troupe, *El Teatro Campesino,* which performed free public theater (particularly aimed at Mexican-American farm workers), portraying the daily realities of Mexican-Americans, while educating people about the collective political organizing efforts taking place to combat racial injustices.[11] Chicano poets, novelists, musicians and painters expressed both the beauty and pain of the Mexican-American experience, communicating alternative and oppositional messages that represented the first time that Mexican-American culture was so visibly celebrated in the US public sphere.[12]

In the 1970s, rejecting the Eurocentrism that had been the norm in the US for generations, many racial minority groups began to embrace, study, and reclaim their cultural roots – languages, clothing, art, music, rituals and other ancestral traditions that had been lost in processes of slavery, colonization, reservation systems, and forced assimilation. Since there were no Latino Studies programs in US universities at the time, many Chicanos (most of whom were born and/or raised in the US) undertook independent historical research and traveled to Mexico to learn about the country's history and cultural traditions.[13] In particular, they went to southern Mexico to study the Indigenous[14] cultures they associated with their ancestral roots. Then as now, southern Mexico was renowned for having the country's largest concentration of Indigenous peoples. Then as now, it was the poorest, most "underdeveloped" region of Mexico, and its inhabitants were considered by those in the north to be the custodians of Mexico's most authentic traditions. Some Chicanos dedicated themselves to learning Indigenous languages,

Mayan weaving, Aztec *danza*[15] or other Indigenous arts. Referred to today as Neo-Indigenism (a movement to reaffirm and celebrate the contributions and achievements of Mesoamerican civilization), the collective espousal of Mexico's Indigenous past became a dominant theme of Chicano artistic expression. A particularly strong influence on Chicano art was the pageantry of Mesoamerican sacred rituals, religious symbols, and spiritual beliefs.[16] With its stunningly colorful rituals, the celebration of "El Día de los Muertos" or "The Day of the Dead," would become one of the most widely observed and cherished annual traditions of the Mexican-American community.

Folk Rituals and Politics

Associated with a pre-industrial past that is seemingly unrelated to the modern world, ethnic folk rituals practiced in the US are often considered to be apolitical activities that serve only to entertain. As a result, rituals as alternative media for critiquing dominant systems of power have been relatively neglected by social scientists. Yet, critical cultural scholars have argued that folk rituals are *not* merely substitutes for politics, but communicate important messages about identity and social struggle that help shape individual and collective practice.[17] Much current thinking about the political importance of folk rituals is influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci and E.P. Thompson. Gramsci discouraged the conceptual separation between "modern" and "folk" culture, believing that folk practices had the potential to challenge hegemonic beliefs and "bring about the birth of a new culture." Thompson felt that folk practices were contexts in which working-class people could define and express their own values, which could be "antagonistic to the overarching system of domination and control."[18] Similar to the protests of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Chile and Argentina, politicized Day of the Dead rituals in the US 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."[19]

Before discussing politicized Day of the Dead activities in the US, it is worth observing the historical connection between Day of the Dead and popular resistance in Latin America. Much to the chagrin of Spanish missionaries in Latin America, Indigenous peoples forced to convert to Catholicism resolutely retained "pagan" customs of honoring their ancestors.[20] Finding it impossible to eradicate them, Catholic missionaries eventually "tolerated" these rituals, as long as they were observed on the Catholic holy days of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.[21] While remembrance rituals were not overtly political activities, honoring the departed invited contemplation about the myriad inequities faced by Indigenous peoples living under colonialism. To remember the dead, after all, was also to remember how and why they died. In colonial times, death among the Indigenous majority was, more often than not, the result of preventable phenomena such as malnutrition, poverty, or abuse by colonial authorities. Thus, the period set aside each year to remember the dead, known colloquially as "The Day(s) of the Dead," was simultaneously a space in which the poor could publicly express frustration towards the injustices of the existing social order responsible for so many untimely deaths. With normal inhibitions lowered during "festival time," pent-up emotions were manifested through riotous festivities and drunkenness in Mexico's cemeteries during the Days of the Dead.[22]

Max Gluckman, Peter Burke, and Mikhail Bakhtin have all famously described the place of festival in traditional societies as a time of social inversion - a privileged time when what was often thought privately could finally be expressed publicly with relative impunity.[23] The unregulated "carnivalesque" atmosphere that historically accompanied public festivals provided a space in which the world was temporarily turned upside down, social hierarchies were

disrupted, and "truths" were contested. Day of the Dead in colonial America was such a time, when special foods and alcoholic beverages were prepared in honor of the dead, and boisterous music, ritual dancing and street processions occurred. Historical evidence suggests that the special closeness participants felt with departed loved ones during this holiday encouraged communal reflections about the conditions under which they lived and died. Writing on the resistance of Andean peasants to Spanish colonial rule, Steve J. Stern contends that a certain interplay existed between the heightened moral consciousness experienced while ritually remembering the dead, and an increased collective consciousness of material exploitation.[24] Similarly, William B. Taylor notes that by connecting communities to their past, cemeteries in colonial Latin America were frequently sites for rebellions.[25] So threatening to the ruling elites were the social tensions expressed during Day of the Dead in Mexico, that the Spanish Royal Office of Crime passed decrees in 1766 prohibiting gatherings in cemeteries and the sale of alcohol after 9:00 p.m. during the Days of the Dead.[26]

Brief description of Day of the Dead in Mexico:

The celebration of Day of the Dead (officially observed on November 1 and 2) is a fusion of Roman Catholic All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day activities and pre-Columbian Indigenous rituals for remembering the ancestors. Like many other Latin Americans,[27] Mexicans routinely visit cemeteries between October 30 and November 2, to clean and decorate family graves. In areas of the country with large Indigenous populations, picnics and vigils are held in the cemeteries to await the souls traditionally believed to visit the living at this time of the year, and elaborate home altars are constructed to honor the dead. These altars have pre-Columbian roots as harvest offerings for the deceased and are often referred to in Spanish as "ofrendas" ("offerings"). The southern regions of Oaxaca, Michoacán, Puebla, Chiapas, Vera Cruz, and

Yucatán (home to Mexico's highest concentration of Indigenous peoples), are known for their painstakingly elaborate Day of the Dead altars. Reflecting religious and cultural syncretism, they are laden with Indigenous foods such as maize, squash, grains, fruits, legumes, tortillas, and fermented corn or grain beverages offered to the dead in pre-Christian times, along with Catholic iconography such as images of saints, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, rosary beads, statuettes of angels, and devotional candles emblazoned with Catholic images. Tables, shelves, or crates are used to create multi-tiered altars, which may be crowned with large arches or square frameworks overlaid with marigolds[28] and/or hanging fruits, (said to be gateways to symbolically welcome the traveling spirits home). Photos of the deceased may also be placed on altars.

A Chicano Tradition is Born:

Prior to the 1970s, public approbation of Latino cultures was rare in US art and educational institutions as well as in the US media. If Latino heritage was acknowledged at all, it was exclusively Spanish, rather than Indigenous, ancestry that was lauded. In both Latin America and the US, Eurocentric racism had categorized "Indian" heritage as a shameful impurity that consigned mixed blooded Mestizos[29] – the majority of the Mexican population – to inferior socioeconomic status vis-à-vis those who looked European or "Anglo." As a rejection of this mentality, which had colonized the minds of many Mexican-Americans and the larger US society for decades, Day of the Dead celebrations and other actions emerging from the Chicano Movement emphatically commemorated the customs and beliefs of working-class Mestizo and Indigenous Mexicans.

Before the 1970s, most Mexican-Americans, the majority of whom did not identify as Indigenous, observed November 1 and 2 similarly to other US Catholics: by attending Mass, decorating family gravesites, and/or preparing a special family meal. Whether speaking in

Spanish or in English, they typically referred to this holiday by the Catholic terminology of "All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day," rather than the expression "El Día de los Muertos" (now commonly used in the US to refer to both days). At the time, sugar skulls, pan de muerto, and the elaborate Indigenous altar making styles of southern Mexico were largely unknown to Mexicans in the US.[30] However, as Chicanos traveled to southern Mexico and learned about these traditions, they brought them to the US, where "Día de los Muertos" altar installations and educational programming were showcased in art galleries, community centers, schools and, later, in internationally acclaimed museums such as the National Smithsonian Institute and New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These altar making rituals were "invented traditions"[31] - hybridizations of Indigenous and Catholic spiritual practices mixed with US popular culture and politics to reflect the various components of Mexican-American identity. Mexican Day of the Dead sugar skulls quickly became a ubiquitous expression of Chicano iconography because of their perceived connection to ancient Aztec culture and their attention-grabbing nature. Chicana artist and educator, Yolanda Garfias Woo, one of the first to teach about Day of the Dead in California's schools, noted that compared with most US holidays, Day of the Dead "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*."[32]

Chicanos exercised creative syncretism by mixing the personal with the political. Besides honoring deceased family and friends via public altars, they converted the holiday into a commemoration of the collective "ancestors" of all Latinos, creating altars for beloved Latino actors, singers, writers, artists, revolutionaries and other popular culture icons (i.e. Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Che Guevara) as a way to educate the public about the historic contributions of

Latinos to the world. They also utilized the holiday's focus on remembrance to criticize dominant US power structures by creating altars that raised public awareness of the socio-political causes of death affecting many people of color.[33] In so doing, they expanded a tradition originally reserved for family members into one that also remembered groups of people not personally known to the altar makers. Chicano altar installations have commemorated Mexican-American farm workers poisoned by pesticides; Latin American migrants who died trying to cross the US-Mexico border in search of better paying jobs; factory workers killed in alarming numbers in industrial accidents; victims of US-funded wars in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan; and other political issues.

Early Beginnings:

The first documented Day of the Dead activities to occur in US art gallery spaces occurred in 1972, organized separately by artists at Self Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, and La Galería de la Raza, in San Francisco. Self-Help, a community-based visual arts center in the predominantly Latino community of East Los Angeles, hosted a lively Day of the Dead street procession in which people dressed up as skeletons and walked to a nearby cemetery. Latino Studies professor, Sybil Venegas, notes that none of the Chicanos who helped organize this initial ceremony were personally familiar with Day of the Dead, but learned about it from the three founders of Self Help Graphics (Mexican-born and raised artists, Antonio Ibañez and Carlos Bueno, and Italian-American nun Sister Karen Boccalero). She notes: "While these artists were initially unfamiliar with El Día 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."[34] Through the influence of Ibañez and Bueno, the Self-Help Graphics artists were introduced to Mexican calavera (skull) imagery and Indigenous-style altar making. In subsequent years,

performances by the Chicano political theater troupe, *El Teatro Campesino,* became part of the festivities. Self Help's Day of the Dead procession grew to include music, Aztec dancing, giant skeleton puppets, banners, stylized Chicano "low rider" cars, decorated floats, and more. Because Self-Help worked with local schools to educate students and teachers about Day of the Dead, hundreds of children attended the annual processions, displaying related art projects they made in school. Workshops teaching the public how to make sugar skulls, skeleton masks, and altars became an important part of the organization's annual Day of the Dead festivities.

Simultaneously 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 exhibition which, along with related educational activities, also evolved into an annual city tradition. In 1981, La Galería organized a small Day of the Dead street procession with about 25 people who walked around the block holding candles and photos of deceased loved ones. Within a few years, the annual procession burgeoned into a manifestation of thousands, including Aztec dance groups, streetside altar installations, sidewalk chalk art, giant puppets, stilt walkers, portable sculptures, Cuban Santería practitioners, and a Jamaican steel drum band on wheels. Individuals walking in honor of deceased family members and friends were joined by contingents walking to draw public attention to socio-political causes of death, such as US military interventions abroad, gun violence, and AIDS. The procession today attracts an estimated 20,000 participants,[35] spanning diverse ages, races, and ethnicities – making it the largest Day of the Dead procession in the United States. Inspired by the activities of these two Chicano art galleries, community centers, schools, libraries, museums, folk art stores, city parks and commercial districts throughout California, and later, throughout the rest of the US, developed annual Day of the Dead programming.

Activist Art

Because Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations were a cultural reclamation project that was part of larger social justice organizing work, the altars on exhibit often expressed political themes. The celebration's change of status from a private, family ritual to a secular public event freed it from traditional Latin American religious frameworks, enabling it to become an expression of Latino identity that was performative and designed to communicate messages to the living, rather than the dead. Advertised in print media, TV, radio and the Internet, US exhibits and celebrations are today seen by thousands of spectators as they communicate about "life and death" issues that go unreported or underreported in the mainstream news media. Via public altar exhibitions, vigils, poetry slams and street processions, Latinos who are often marginalized from formal channels of US political participation (such as voting, running for public office, or personally contacting elected officials) due to barriers related to educational, economic or immigration status, can put their issues on the table (or the altar). The public spaces in which these events occur - streets, parks, schools, libraries, community centers and art galleries - are accessible to people of all walks of life.

An important part of expressing US Latino identity involves acknowledging the discrimination and exploitation faced by Latinos in their lives as racial and cultural minorities in the United States.[36] During US Day of the Dead celebrations, the deaths of local people are often used to invoke political discourses around national and global issues. Illustrating E.P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy, they "elevate the defense of the interests of the working community above those of the profits of a few."[37] Moral arguments are advanced through colorful aesthetics and ritual to attract the attention of the media and the general public in ways that ordinary political work does not. Whether implicitly or explicitly, US Day of the

Dead exhibits and events frequently draw attention to the classism and racism in American society that make low-income and minority people the main recipients of violence, drugs, environmental injustice and the least desirable occupations. Consider, for example, Day of the Dead altars erected at a local community center in San Ysidro, California, a town on the US/Mexican border, where many residents have worked in the fields. To commemorate farm workers and their struggle for fair working conditions, the altars displayed photos of deceased farm workers and union activists, along with wooden fruit crates, grapes, citrus tree cuttings, lettuce, strawberries, potatoes and other fruits and vegetables grown in the region, farming tools and empty pesticide cans. On the wall behind the altar were posters, flyers and newspaper articles regarding the United Farm Workers' Union strikes and boycotts. In the US context, the ancient tradition of placing harvest offerings on altars has become a way to make political claims about the rights of workers. Seen throughout California and the Southwest since the 1970s, such altars highlight US society's dependence on immigrant farm workers for our food supply, while at the same time revealing the exploitation and abuse these workers face at the hands of industrial farms and food processing corporations.

Thompson argued that the moral economy exposed "confrontations in the market place over access (or entitlement) to necessities."[38] Some of the most poignant Day of the Dead rituals to stir moral reflection over unfair access to necessities have been organized by the families of teens lost to violence, alcohol, drugs and other ills besetting many inner city communities. A Day of the Dead candlelight vigil attended by over 1,000 people in Santa Monica, California protested the rising number of gang-related deaths in Los Angeles. The vigil included photos and shrines honoring slain gang members. It was followed by a weekend of lengthy negotiations that resulted in the signing of a truce between warring Culver City and Santa Monica gangs.[39] With

calls to "create jobs, increase educational opportunities and end a pattern of social neglect that feeds a violent gang lifestyle,"[40] community residents employed traditional rituals of honoring the dead to support moral claims about the government's increasing disinvestment in inner city neighborhoods. For the many community members who attended, this was an opportunity to consider the problems they faced in collective rather than individual terms, gaining greater awareness of the root causes of gang violence and the need for collective rather than individual solutions. Similarly, a Day of the Dead altar dedicated to teens lost to drugs and suicide was erected in November 2009 at the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego. Like Latin American altars that display mementos of the deceased, the altar included photos of the teens, their personal belongings (clothing, jewelry, stuffed animals), their favorite foods, and handwritten notes from friends and family to the deceased, telling them how much they were missed and loved. The visceral effects of hundreds of fresh flowers on the altar, combined with the smell of melting candle wax and Indigenous "copal"[41] incense evoked sympathy, sadness, and moral indignation in passersby, reminding them of the educational, social and economic inequalities faced by too many inner city youth living in the wealthiest country on earth.[42]

On November 1, 2005, some 300 residents of Vista, California, created a giant outdoor altar in a popular community park adjacent to the town's baseball field. The altar, which spanned the length of three cars, was dedicated to several Latino young men who had been shot and killed that year by Vista police, despite the fact that the youth were unarmed. The town's Latino residents claimed that dozens of Latino youth were victims of racially-motivated police brutality each year. Photos of victims were arranged on the altar, along with the traditional flowers, candles and foods. In an unlikely juxtaposition of two very different cultural pastimes, the Latino community held an evening vigil - singing, praying and crying - directly across from a

well-attended town baseball game, while Vista sports fans cheered for their teams and a baseball announcer's voice echoed in the background. The public altar and vigil for the dead youth evoked intellectual reflection on an emotional and corporal level that went beyond the experiences of merely hearing about such shootings in the news media. The affective effects of this collective remembrance created a sense of solidarity among the Latino community and other concerned citizens who were present, communicating the vulnerabilities, experiences and needs of Vista's Latino immigrants - exploited for their labor yet excluded from mainstream media and politics because of their "outsider" status. At the same time, this public ritual attracted media attention for the families of the victims and for the entire Latino community, as local news crews that had initially come to cover the game were drawn to the adjacent altar and vigil, approaching participants to interview and photograph them.[43] In conjunction with ongoing community organizing work, this Day of the Dead event was one strategy used by Vista's Coalition for Peace, Justice and Dignity to raise public consciousness about racial profiling and police brutality in Vista.

A recurrent theme of US Day of the Dead celebrations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the issue of migration across the US/Mexican border. In San Diego, the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights has held vigils on the US/Mexico border to protest the controversial US government border patrol program, Operation Gatekeeper. Each November 1, a religious service is held and wooden crosses are placed along the border fence listing the names, ages and places of origin of many of the nearly 4,000 migrants who have died while attempting to cross "the line" since Gatekeeper's inception in 1994. 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. 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 investment climate" for transnational corporations in Latin America that translates into poverty wages for the majority of workers there. By honoring migrants who die attempting to cross the border in search of better wages, these activities emphasize the great contradictions between the rights of Latin Americans and North Americans to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Each year, from California to Chicago to New York, immigrant rights activists observe Day of the Dead with processions and altars critical of US border patrol and immigration policies.[44]

Sometimes, the focus of Day of the Dead events is not dead people, per se, but deadly situations. Throughout the country, altars have also been created for the anonymous victims of global political crises such as the Holocaust, the millions female babies lost to infanticide around the world, the "slow death" of homelessness, the "death of arts funding," the "death or organized labor," and "the death of the environment." LA CAUSA (Los Angeles Communities United for a Sustainable Environment) has held Day of the Dead community forums and exhibits to draw attention to environmentally caused illnesses. Residents in El Paso, Texas and other border towns hold annual Day of the Dead marches and public altar exhibits to draw attention to environmental contamination, labor abuses and violence associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement. Now common in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York and other major cities across the country, are annual Day of the Dead exhibits in memory of "the Women of Juarez." Altars are built to remember the approximately 400 young Mexican women, most of whom worked in transnational factories (*maquiladoras*) on the border, who have been raped, mutilated and murdered en route to and from work. In local manifestations of the global problems of female exploitation and misogyny, altar makers transmit moral discourses about the

"correct" and "incorrect" economic role of business in society, defending human interests above the profits of corporations, and urging transnational companies to provide better security for workers.[45] Such events embody what Thompson calls "certain essential premises…[about] what humans owe to each other."[46] As a legacy of the Chicano Movement, politicized Day of the Dead altars are now erected across the US each year, reminding us that there is still much work to be done to achieve a truly democratic society.

Conclusion

Day of the Dead is observed in a variety of ways in the US and this essay has focused on an important subset of these rituals – those with political messages. In a country so culturally diverse, public rituals create important spaces in which minority groups can criticize, respond to and attempt to change mainstream norms and values. By personalizing public issues and infusing traditional rites with contemporary meanings, Day of the Dead participants employ moral arguments to open public consciousness on behalf of those members of society who are most easily victimized, discarded and forgotten. This helps cultivate greater understanding and solidarity among diverse populations, creating the groundwork necessary for civic engagement, whether in the form of volunteering at a local community organization or getting involved in more overtly political work.

While this research did not aim to provide data on the relationship between people's participation in Day of the Dead and subsequent forms of community activism, anecdotal evidence from conversations with participants suggests that, after being profoundly moved by politicized Day of the Dead exhibits or events, some event participants were inspired to become involved in their local community centers, art councils, museums, or chambers of commerce. Others were unexpectedly awakened to disturbing socio-political issues while attending these

events. For example, numerous people on both the East and West coasts stated that they had not heard of "Operation Gatekeeper" or "The Women of Juarez" before attending Day of the Dead exhibits. Three elderly Mexican-American women, unable to hold back tears as they helped decorate the unmarked graves of dead migrants at the Holtville cemetery ritual, told me that the event made them want to get more active in immigrant rights and social pastoral work along the border. A Guatemalan-American told me that he had never considered the connections between race, class, and military recruitment in US high schools before seeing an anti-war altar at a Day of the Dead festival in Oceanside, CA. All of these people were initially drawn to Day of the Dead events because of the cultural aspects of the celebration, but left with increased knowledge, sympathy or political commitment. Civic engagement in concrete actions such as voting, volunteerism, political organizing and protest must be preceded by consciousness-raising processes that create a foundation for more elaborate and institutionalized political action. As political scientist James C. Scott notes, "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.[47] Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations illustrate how cultural rituals are valuable resources through which populations can construct narratives of self-affirmation, solidarity and citizen rights. For people who come from linguistically, racially, economically or politically marginalized communities, as well as for many in the mainstream who find traditional politics boring, depressing or alienating, activist art and ritual provide ways to engage with politics by feeling deeply connected to one's fellow humans in ways that are essential in order to work towards a more democratic future.

Endnotes

[1] "Chicano/a" is a self-identifying term for Mexican-Americans dedicated to progressive political organizing work.

[2] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Lipsitz, "Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano," *Not Just Another Poster: Chicano Graphic Arts in California,* Ed. C. Noriega (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 2001), 71-87; Tere Romo, "Points of Convergence: The Iconography of the Chicano Poster," *Ibid*. 91-115.

[3] A US boycott against Nestlé began in 1977 and expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. As a marketing strategy, the company offered free samples of baby formula to impoverished African women who, believing it was better for their infants, used it instead of breastfeeding. When the free samples ran out and lactation ceased as a result of not nursing, women were forced to buy the expensive formula. Babies often starved to death or became malnourished, as mothers mixed the formula with too much water, attempting to make it last longer.

[4] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991).

[5] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 188.

[6] Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Clara Rodriguez, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinos and Latinas in the US Media* (Boulder: Westview, 1997); R. Carveth and D. Alverio. *Network Brownout: The portrayal of Latinos in network television news* (Washington, DC: National Association of Hispanic Journalists/National Council of La Raza, 1997); Lester Friedman, *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[7] *Hispanic Business*. "Combating the Network 'Brownout"(Hispanic Business Inc., Santa Barbara, CA 21:46; Clint Wilson, Felix Gutiérrez & Lena Chao, *Racism, Sexism and the Media: The rise of class communication in multicultural America*. 4th edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

[8] Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); C. Noriega, 2001, *Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000,* (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 2001); Charles Ramirez-Berg, *Latino Images in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

[9] Guillermo Gomez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent," in *Made in Aztlán* (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, 1986), 86-97; Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art," G. Mosquera (Ed.), *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 196-216.

[10] For a discussion of Chicano mural art, see Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Center; Albuquerque, NM : University of New Mexico Press, 1993).

[11] Jorge Huerta, "El Teatro de la Esperanza: Keeping in Touch with the People," *The Drama Review*: 21(1), March, 1977), 37-46.; Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

[12] During this time, similar multi-media work was carried out by East Coast Puerto Rican artists responding to the racism and discrimination they faced as minorities in the US. Although the Chicano Movement and Boricua Movement were distinct movements that sprung organically from each community, both were examples of public art serving as a medium for political education and organizing.

[13] Many of them had not been to Mexico or hadn't spent much time there and quite a few did not speak Spanish.

[14] In this essay, Indigenous refers to the autochthonous peoples of Mexico, whose ancestors had the earliest human presence there. Today, there are more than 60 Indigenous linguistic groups in Mexico, comprising about 13 percent of the national population.

[15] *Danza* is a form of dancing-in-prayer based on ancient Aztec spiritual dances.

[16] Davíd Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990); Rodolfo González, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in Luís Valdez and Stan Steiner, (Eds.), *Atzlán: An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Tere Romo *Chicanos en Mictlán* (San Francisco: Mexican Museum of San Francisco, 2000).

[17] Olivia Cadavál, *Creating a Latino Identity in the Nation's Capital: The Latino Festival* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998); Americo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); José Limón, "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction," *Journal of American Folklore*, 96:379, 1983), 34-52; Mark Mattern, "Cajun Music, Cultural Revival: Theorizing Political Action in

Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society*, 22, 1998), 31-48; Mattern, "Let the Good Times Unroll: Music and Race Relations in Southwest Louisiana," *Black Music Research Journal*. 17, 1998), 159-168.

[18] Limón, *Ibid.,* 42.

[19] Michael Taussig, "Violence and Resistance in the Americas: the legacy of conquest," *Violence, Resistance, and Survival in the Americas: Native Americans and the Legacy of Conquest*. (Eds.) William. B. Taylor and F. Pease. Washington DC: The Smithsonian Institute Press, 1994), 280.

[20] Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 269-287; Steve J. Stern, *Resistance, Rebellion and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1987), 161; Stern, *Peru's Indian People's and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 117.

[21] This is considered a form of cultural resistance by Chicanos today, who feel pride in the fact that Indigenous rituals dating back thousands of years still exist. Others may consider this a form of cultural accommodation or assimilation. Yet, accommodation does not necessarily mean co-optation, and has historically been an effective strategy for survival.

[22] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton At the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 43.

[23] Max Gluckman, *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* (Frome, U.K.: Butler and Tanner, Ltd., 1962); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[24] Stern, *Resistance, Rebellion and Consciousness*, 31.

[25] William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979), 118-119.

[26] J.P. Viqueira, "Religion Popular e Identidad," *Cuicuilco: Revista de la Escuela Nacional de Antropologia e Historia*, July-December 14(15), 1984, 13.

[27] For more information about the diverse Day of the Dead traditions throughout Latin America, see Regina Marchi *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

[28] From pre-Columbian times through the present, marigolds have been used to honor the dead in Mesoamerica.

[29] A term used to describe peoples and/or cultures that are the product of racial mixing – usually referring to Latin Americans or US Latinos of mixed European, Indigenous and/or African ancestries.

[30] Lynn Gosnell, L. and Suzanne Gott, "San Fernando Cemetery: Decorations of Love and Loss in a Mexican-American Community." R. Meyer (Ed.), *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); James Griffith, *Respect and Continuity: The Arts of Death in a Border Community* (Tucson: The Southwest Folklore Center, University of Arizona, 1985); James Griffith, *A Shared Space: Folklife in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands* (Logan: University of Utah Press, 1995); James Griffith in David Gutierrez (Ed.), *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997); Regina Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA*; Sybil Venegas, "The Day of the Dead in Aztlán: Chicano Variations on the Theme of Life, Death and Self-Preservation." Tere Romo (Ed.), *Chicanos in Mictlán* (San Francisco, CA: Mexican Museum of San Francisco) 42-43.

[31] Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[32] Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

[33] Regina Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA*, 70-82.

[34] Sybil Venegas, "The Day of the Dead in Aztlán," 47.

[35] According to estimates from procession organizers and information published in newspapers.

[36] George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Juan Flores, "The Latino Imaginary: Meanings of Community and Identity," *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[37] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common,* 339.

[38] *Ibid*., 337.

[39] John L. Mitchell, "1000 Hold Vigil Against Violence in Santa Monica," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1998, Metro, part B, p. 1.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Incense made of pine resin, used throughout Mesoamerica since pre-Columbian times to communicate with the spirit world.

[42] Personal observation, Sherman Heights Community Center, Oct. 31, 2009.

[43] Personal observation, Townsite Park, Vista California, November 2, 2005.

[44] According to newspaper articles and websites I reviewed, as well as my personal observations, such activities have occurred since 1995 in at least 20 US cities, including Phoenix, Austin, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, New York, San Francisco, L.A. and DC.

[45] Such altars typically have printed pamphlets with information about the Women of Juarez and phone numbers to call for action.

[46] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 350.

[47] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 184-191.