Chapter 12

El Dia de los Muertos in the USA: Cultural Ritual as Political Communication

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Introduction

Associated with a preindustrial past that is seemingly unrelated to the modern world, ethnic folk rituals practiced in the United States are often dismissed as apolitical activities that serve only to entertain. As a result, ritual as a medium for critiquing dominant systems of power has generally been neglected within the field of Cultural Studies in favor of analyses of mass media cultural production (Limón 1994: 11). However, cultural scholars such as Americo Paredes (1993), Olivia Cadavál (1985), José Limón (1994), and George Lipsitz (1990) suggest that folk rituals are *not* merely substitutes for politics, but communicate important messages about identity and social struggle that help to shape individual and collective practice. 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 culture and popular 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" (Limón 1983: 42).

Working from the premise that ethnic celebrations in the United States represent a "public sphere" where conversations about identity and politics occur, this essay focuses on the communication of political messages during Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States. Using insights from E.P. Thompson's essay, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," I will discuss how U.S. Day of the Dead rituals frequently operate along a "moral economy" of social protest, encouraging moral reflection on issues of political importance and revealing dimensions of repression normally overlooked by the dominant culture. Similar to the protests of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Chile and Argentina, politicized Day of the Dead rituals in the U.S. allow what Michael Taussig has called "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" (Taussig 1994: 280).

Having participated in Day of the Dead celebrations in San Francisco's Mission district during the 1980s, I later had the opportunity while working in Central America from 1990–1994 to see how the holiday was observed in urban and rural areas of Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Chiapas and Oaxaca regions of Mexico. Over the past eight years, I have attended U.S. Day of the Dead events, workshops and exhibits in Washington DC, Boston, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, El Paso, Texas; La Mesilla, N.M.; and Tijuana, Mexico. My reflections for this paper are based on interdisciplinary readings from the fields of communication, sociology, anthropology, folklore, history, and cultural studies; a review of newspaper and Internet articles written about Day of the Dead events across the U.S.; interviews I have conducted with Day of the Dead participants both in the U.S. and Latin America[1]; and my observations of Day of the Dead activities in the United States, Mexico, and Central America.

Background on the Ritual

In many Latin American countries, the "Days of the Dead"[2] are observed on November 1 and 2, the dates of the Roman Catholic celebration of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. A syncretic mix of Catholic beliefs and indigenous practices of honoring the ancestors, the two days are considered as one holiday throughout Latin America (Milne 1965: 162). Rituals are celebrated in diverse ways from country to country and from region to region *within* countries, but key practices of this holiday include any of the following: sprucing up family gravesites by weeding, cleaning, and repainting them and/or refurbishing crosses; bringing flowers or other mementos to gravesites; constructing home altars to honor the departed; preparing special foods and/or beverages for the ancestral spirits traditionally believed to visit the living on these dates (or simply eating specific foods prepared only at this time of year); and attending Catholic mass to pray for the departed.

Throughout Latin America, many people visit cemeteries between October 31 and November 2 to clean and decorate family graves. Processions are sometimes held after mass on November 1, in which people walk together from the local church to the cemetery, carrying flowers, candles, and other offerings for placement on graves. The processions may include singing, praying, or musical accompaniment. In urban areas, it is customary for people to bring flowers to family graves, light candles, and pay their respects to the dead, although the visits tend to be more cursory than in rural and indigenous communities, where the festivities aré often elaborate, with preparations beginning weeks or months in advance. In indigenous communities of Mexico, Central America, and South America, nocturnal vigils and serenades are held in the cemeteries to accompány the souls believed to descend to earth at this time of the year, and home altars are constructed to honor the deceased. In both Mesoamerica and South America, these altars often display a combination of candles and harvest produce (such as flowers, fruits, legumes, and gourds), specially made breads,[3] personal mementos, and favorite foods of the deceased. Photos of the departed and/or pictures of Catholic saints, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary are often in the center of family *ofrendas*, frequently surrounded by crucifixes, angels, and other Catholic iconography. Other key elements often placed on altars made by Mayan, Mixtec, Zapotec, Aymara, Quechua and other indigenous Latin American groups include incense, salt, coffee, and a glass of water (believed to quench the thirst of the traveling souls).

A major difference between the European All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day celebrations and Day of the Dead lies in the celebrants' perceived relationships between the living and the dead. In the European version, 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 ask the saints to intercede on behalf of deceased family members in order to hasten their journey from purgatory to heaven. In the popular religion of Latin American Catholics, however, the hierarchical structure between purgatory and heaven is not emphasized (Childs and Altman 1982: 16). Most people assume that their loved ones go directly to heaven and are "free" from their earthly tribulations. Instead of asking saints to intercede on behalf of family members in purgatory, as is done in official Catholic observances, Day of the Dead celebrants in Latin America often ask the dead to intercede on their behalf in worldly affairs.

The emphasis of the celebration in southern Mexico, areas of Central America and indigenous regions of South America is on family connectedness, rather than on mournful supplications to free souls from their purgatorial incarceration. As one Guatemalan explained to me, "Day of the Dead here is similar to Thanksgiving in the U.S., because people travel across the country to be reunited with family members, living and dead."[4] The family reunion aspect of Day of the Dead has been noted by Carmichael and Sayer (1991), Garciagodoy (1998), Greenleigh and Beimler (1991), Bade (1997), and others. Thus, a Catholic holy period filled with thoughts of punishment and suffering becomes, in many Latin American countries, a celebratory time not only to remember the dead, but to actively communicate with them via shared meals, candlelight vigils, musical serenades, expressive altars, and individual and group prayer. Because the dead are felt to be particularly connected to the living at this time of the year, they are often seen as heavenly allies who can offer hope and assistance with life's tribulations.

The Day of the Dead in Latin America is most elaborately celebrated in regions with large indigenous populations, such as southern Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, but is also observed in varying ways in countries with comparatively little overt indigenous presence, such as Argentina, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Mexico has become internationally famous for its Day of the Dead celebrations, particularly in the areas of Oaxaca, Michoacán, Puebla, Vera Cruz, and Yucatan, where people create aesthetically intricately altars, and engage in a variety of Day of the Dead processions, vigils, popular theater, arts, and handicrafts. Less well known are the ritual practices found in other Latin American countries on November 1 and 2.

For example, the towns of Santiago, Sacatepequez and Sumpango, Guatemala, hold Day of the Dead kite flying celebrations, in which Maya 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.[5] Hand written notes are often attached to the kite strings, ascending into heaven as a kind of telecommunication with the dead.[6] To the delight of thousands 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*. 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. In El Salvador, brightly colored, waxed paper flowers and chains adorn tombs, and *coronas* (wreaths) made of paper or fresh pine boughs are placed on graves. Families may leave small mementos by graves and sometimes tape letters to the tombs of loved ones.[7] In Nicaragua, on November 1 and 2, it is not uncommon for families to light candles in the home for each deceased relative and prepare *buñuelos* (fried dough pastries) and *nacatamales* (tamales) for the occasion. In rural homes, candles are sometimes arranged as an "altar" on the floor.[8]

Among the Andean regions of Bolivia and Peru, a variety of Day of the Dead festivities take place in the cemeteries, including grave adornment, vigils, singing, praying, and eating. Altars are prepared in homes, and relatives, friends, and neighbors visit each other to pray, chat, and share in consuming the specially prepared foods (Buechler 1980; Coluccio 1991; Milne 1965; Vergara 1997). Similar festivities have been documented in areas of Argentina and Colombia (Coluccio 1991: 113–118.) In both 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* (Day of the Dead bread baked in the shapes of children and animals, found throughout the Andes).[9] The indigenous Quechuas of Ecuador visit cemeteries to clean and restore grave markers, and make altars of flowers, *guaguas*, and fresh fruits (particularly bananas, oranges, and apples) on the tombs of loved ones. Like in Mexico and Guatemala, lively picnics are held in the cemeteries.[10] In all of these cases, ritual actions carried out on Day of the Dead are methods of communicating with and about the dead. They keep alive memories of the deceased in the hearts and minds of the living.

In view of these far-reaching traditions, it is not surprising that many Latinos in the United States are able to culturally and spiritually connect with the Chicano-initiated Day of the Dead celebrations held in United States. As the U.S. Latino population has become more diverse over the past 20 years, with substantial numbers of immigrants hailing from Central and South America, U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations increasingly include participation by diverse Latino populations, who incorporate a variety of their own national customs into existing festivities, or create their own celebrations. For example, in Cleveland, Ohio, Day of the Dead activities have been held by Honduran and Bolivian immigrants, featuring their traditional foods and dances.[11] In Minneapolis, Minnesota, Chilean immigrants erected Day of the Dead altars in November 2000 to remember those who disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile.[12] In the same year in San Rafael, California, the Guatemalan community hosted a Day of the Dead kite-flying celebration in a local cemetery.[13]

Day of the Dead in the United States

According to American folklorists, early Mexican All Saints'/All Souls' Day cemetery observances in the United States occurred in Texas and other parts

of the American Southwest where, for generations, residents of Mexican heritage faithfully visited local cemeteries on November 1 and 2 to clean and decorate family gravesites (Gosnell and Gott 1989: 220; Turner and Jasper 1994: 133; West 1989: 152). In the 1970s, when Day of the Dead in Mexico experienced heightened popularity as a tourist attraction and symbol of Mexican national identity (Turner and Jasper 1994: 133; Brandes 1988: 88), Chicano activists in California were inspired to organize Day of the Dead processions and altar exhibits in the United States as a way to celebrate Mexican–American heritage (Morrison 1992: 33; Romo 2000, and personal interviews). Yet until the early 1990s, the holiday was rarely celebrated in the United Stares outside of California and the southwest. This changed with the large-scale migration of Latin Americans both *to* and *within* the United States over the past 15–20 years, and Day of the Dead has increasingly been celebrated across the country, not only in major urban areas such as Chicago, New York, or Washington DC, but in rural and urban areas with historically little or no Latino presence, such as Omaha, Nebraska; Columbus, Ohio; Seattle, Kansas City; Milwaukee, and Atlanta.[14]

While Day of the Dead in Latin America is a time specifically to honor the deceased, the holiday takes on very different purposes and meanings in the United States.[15] From a primarily family-centered celebration focusing on the ritual preparation of homes and graves in honor of the departed, the holiday is transformed in the United States into an advertised cultural "happening" celebrated primarily in public, secular locations such as community centers, schools, libraries, museums, and parks. The period of celebration, usually lasting a few days in Latin America, often lasts one to two months in the United States.[16] Advertised in newspapers and on the Internet, U.S. Day of the Dead altar exhibits, processions and vigils are performed self-consciously for audiences no longer comprised of people from the same town, region, or country, but of Latinos and non-Latinos of diverse ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Rather than morally binding obligations to the deceased, U.S. celebrations are reinventions of traditions that become methods for honoring Latino cultural heritage. Alicia Gaspar de Alba refers to this as the conversion of ancient devotional expressions into "ceremonial art whose main function [is] the ritual celebration and preservation of cultural memory" (Gaspar de Alba 1998: 76). Jack Santino calls such transformations of tradition, "rituals of public presentation," that is, "rites of intensification of group unity and identity" that are also presented to outsiders to inform them about the culture (Santino 1988: 124).

Anthropologist Victor Turner notes that rituals in tribal or non-industrial contexts are observed because of "obligation, not optation," while those celebrated in modern, industrial contexts are the result of individual optation rather than social obligation (Turner 1977b: 39). These optional rituals, he asserts, are forms of "leisure activity" rather than "work," and allow participants to escape the "should" and "must" character of ritual performed in the original context. Participants are thus free to "play with ideas" and release their creativity in ways capable of either supporting or criticizing the dominant social structural values. Through these "play" frames, argues Turner, celebrants can fabricate a range of alternative possibilities of behaving, thinking, and feeling that extend beyond the confines of what is admissible in the obligatory ritual frame (Turner 1977b: 42; and 1982: 28). Such is the case with Day of the Dead celebrations, where activities considered obligatory by most practitioners in Latin America have become remarkably innovative forms of expression for practitioners in the United States. Freed from the obligatory ritual frame, these ceremonies can express both cultural faith and political skepticism, commenting on a wide range of social issues and identities.

Within the six modes[17] of ritual sensibility sketched by ritual studies scholar, Ronald Grimes, Day of the Dead in most of Latin America can be classified as *primarily* a form of ritualization, or habitual, routine, socially obligatory action, with *secondary* elements of celebration, or "expressive ritual play" (Grimes 1995: 40–56). In contrast, Day of the Dead in the United States is *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"(Grimes 1995: 47). Intentionally commemorative, ceremony "symbolizes respect for the offices, histories, and causes that are condensed into its gestures, objects and actions"(Grimes 1995: 48). Grimes notes that "celebrations" seem spontaneous, but are choreographed "happenings" arising from expressive culture, and are often linked to the arts (Grimes 1995: 54–55).

Based on a conceptual framework of Latin American celebrations, U.S. Day of the Dead activities include traditional components, such as altar construction (in which individuals or groups create altars to honor the departed); cemetery rituals (where participants adorn graves, hold vigils, pray, sing, or dance in honor of the dead); and candlelight processions (in which participants walk through town carrying candles and/or photos of the deceased).[18] Yet these events are integrated with nontraditional 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, *coronas*, and *papel picado*). Other nontraditional practices include Day of the Dead dance and theatre performances, multimedia art installations, spoken word events (where poems or stories about the dead are recited), public lectures on Day of the Dead or the topic of death, and screenings of documentaries on Day of the Dead.

From their inception, U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations have been a hybridization of spiritual, folk, and popular elements of the holiday, reflecting an assemblage of various religious influences impacting Chicano identity. Altar installations, processions, and cemetery rituals reflect this hybrid nature, routinely including Catholic and indigenous iconography such as crucifixes, devotional candles, pictures of saints, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary, together with statues of Aztec or Mayan deities, copal incense,[19] and offerings of food, drink, and other traditional oblations. These elements have been interwoven for the purpose of creating a feeling of Mexican American cultural unity to assist in struggles for political justice (Romo 2000).

Because these commemorations were created to be public displays, rather than family religious rituals, gallery spaces, community centers, public parks, and streets became key stages for communicating messages of Latino cultural affirmation and political consciousness within mainstream U.S. culture. Influenced by the rituals and imagery of Mexico's Day of the Dead, Chicano artists reconfigured the celebration and iconography in ways that were relevant to their lives and experiences in California. Some artists transformed traditional imagery, such as *calaveras*[20] into forms that would resonate with the Chicano community, such as sardonic skeletal depictions of local political personalities, rebellious urban youth "pachucos," or feminist versions of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Others based their work on the traditional indigenous *ofrendas* found in southern Mexico. Still others utilized the holiday's focus on death and remembrance to create altar installations that would draw attention to sociopolitical issues affecting Latinos, such as pesticide-induced sickness and death among farm workers, poverty and gang-related violence in urban neighborhoods, or US-supported coups, massacres, and wars in Latin America.

Death and Political Resistance

Before discussing politicized Day of the Dead activities in the United States, 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 Mexico, Central America, and South America, indigenous peoples forced to convert to Catholicism resolutely retained native customs of honoring their ancestors (Ricard 1982: 269–287; Stern 1987: 161; Stern 1993: 177). While Day of the Dead rituals were considered familial, rather than political activities, on a certain level, honoring the departed invited contemplation about the myriad inequities faced by indigenous peoples

living under colonialism. To remember the dead, after all, is 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. Therefore, the period set aside each year to remember the dead was simultaneously a space in which the poor might express frustration toward 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 the cemeteries during the Days of the Dead (Carmichael and Sayer 1991: 43). Scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Max Gluckman, and Peter Burke have described the place of festival in traditional societies as a time of social inversion—a privileged time when what was often thought could finally be expressed aloud with relative impunity. Day of the Dead was such a time, and historical evidence suggests that the special closeness that participants felt with departed loved ones during this holiday encouraged communal reflections about the conditions under which they lived and died.

Mexican ethnohistorian, Juan-Pedro Viqueira, argues that the observance of Day of the Dead and other popular religious festivals during colonial times represented a "resistance of the popular classes who, in order to defend their interests, entrenched themselves behind their traditions" (Viqueira 1984: 14). Writing on the resistance of Andean peasants to Spanish colonial rule, Steven J. Stern contends that a certain interplay existed between the heightened moral consciousness experienced while remembering the dead, and an increased collective consciousness of material exploitation (Stern 1987: 31). Similarly, William B. Taylor notes that by connecting communities to their past, cemeteries in colonial Latin America were frequently sites for rebellions or meeting places for the collective planning of rebellions (Taylor 1979: 118–119). So threatening to the ruling elite were the social tensions expressed during Day of the Dead in Mexico and what is now Central America, that the 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 (Viqueira 1984: 13). Comparable measures to contain public manifestations during this holiday existed in Peru and other Andean countries (Stern 1987: 31) and as recently as the early twentieth century, Bolivian officials banned the sale of alcohol and fireworks and forbade musical bands from playing in and around cemeteries during All Saints' Day (Buechler 1971: 167).

During the mid-nineteenth century in Mexico, the spirit of resistance appeared in literary form during the Days of the Dead. A carry-over from the ninetieth century Spanish lampoons or *pasquines* (Carmichael and

Sayer 1991: 58), poems called *calaveras* ("skulls") were written during this time of year (Carmichael and Sayer 1991: 58). Utilizing humor to express the political dissatisfaction, which people felt privately but could not express publicly, these satiric verses were composed anonymously for publication in local newspapers. This practice continues in Mexico today, and while *calaveras* may touch on any theme, they frequently take the form of joking "obituaries" for corrupt political leaders, the wealthy, and others associated with structural inequality. The custom of writing satirical verses during the Days of the Dead is practiced on a smaller scale by university students in Guatemala and El Salvador.[21] Known as *bombas*, these anonymous poems have provided fleeting opportunities to condemn institutionalized violence and extreme disparities in wealth within a context of severe political and military repression. A late twentieth century form of political commentary to emerge during the Days of the Dead is seen in the Mexican skeletal figurines known as *calaveritas*. Crafted by working class artisans, these miniature skeletons frequently spoof the wealthy and portray cynicism toward the government, expressing the average working person's awareness of and resistance to class exploitation.[22] Thus, while Day of the Dead in Latin America is primarily about dedication to family, there has historically existed a subtext of contestation.

In recent years, urban activists in Latin America, (whose education and cosmopolitan lifestyles afford them the freedom to creatively play with traditional rituals), have sometimes drawn attention to social injustices through the creation of public Day of the Dead altars that comment on social relations of power. For example, in Mexico City, altars have been created in memory of destroyed rainforests, murdered street children, and AIDS victims (Garciagodoy 1998: 91). During the civil war in El Salvador, altars were erected near the cathedral in San Salvador to honor slain Archbishop Oscar Romero and other social justice advocates killed by government military forces.[23] In Santiago, Chile, Day of the Dead processions have been held to remember the victims of the Pinochet regime.[24] On the whole, however, politicized altars comprise a relatively small minority of the overall Day of the Dead activities occurring in Latin America, which are still overwhelmingly family and religious rituals.

In contrast, politicized altars and activities are a much greater part of Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States, largely because of the holiday's change in form from intimate, family ritual to choreographed, public "event." Freed from the traditional, religious and social constraints prevalent in Latin America, Day of the Dead in the United States becomes a reflexive expression of Latino identity that is performative and designed to communicate messages to a living audience, rather than to the dead. Advertised in newspapers, TV, radio, and the Internet, U.S. celebrations are

generally viewed by many spectators and can be effective means of promoting "life and death" issues that go unreported or underreported in the mainstream media. Through community vigils, vibrant public altars and dramatic processions (that often include performative elements such as dance, music, masks, and puppetry), Latinos and others who are marginalized from formal channels of mainstream U.S. political participation and media representation, due to barriers related to educational and economic status, residency status, language fluency, or political views can put their issues on the table (or the altar, so to speak).

U.S. Day of the Dead as Political Ritual

An important part of expressing Latino identity involves acknowledging the discrimination and exploitation faced by Latinos in their lives as cultural minorities in the United States (Flores 2000; Paredes 1993; Sanchéz 1993). In expressions of Latino identity during the Days of the Dead, the deaths of local people are often used to invoke political discourses around national and global issues. Along the lines of E.P. Thompson's moral economy, deeply rooted cultural traditions provide the moral force and physical infrastructure for critiquing dominant society.

In his discussion of the moral economy, Thompson argued that the popular food riots 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 (Thompson 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" (Thompson 1991: 188) 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 common weal. Tracing the origins of the highly organized eighteenth-century English working class to local traditions that emphasized decency and mutual aid, he argued that the widespread participation of common folk in traditional rituals and ceremonies sustained collectivist values that, 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 political necessity in the struggle for justice (Alexander 1990: 21).

Similarly, the collective Day of the Dead traditions of Latinos living in the United States help this population to create a sense of identity and solidarity in difficult political times. Grounded in Latin American traditions of moral obligation and respect toward the dead, as well as reciprocal networks of community responsibility toward the dead and toward each other, many U.S. Day of the Dead activities, "elevate the defense of the interests of the working community above those of the profits of a few" (Thompson 1991: 339). Moral arguments are advanced through colorful and dramatic rituals that attract the attention of both the media and the general public in ways that ordinary political work does not. Whether implicitly or explicitly, U.S. Day of the Dead altar 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.

Because of the novelty of this holiday for most mainstream U.S. observers and the colorful photo opportunities available to journalists, Day of the Dead activities receive significant coverage in newspapers across the United States, both in terms of promoting events beforehand and covering them afterward. This attention is particularly noteworthy in a society where 13 percent of the population is Latino but only 1 percent of national TV news focuses on Latinos[25] and only 1 percent of all characters on entertainment TV are Latinos (down from 3 percent in the 1950s).[26] While Latinos are severely underrepresented in magazine advertising[27] and often negatively portrayed on film,[28] media coverage of Day of the Dead events is positive coverage that affirms the value of Latino culture and, in the case of politicized altars and events, draws attention to political concerns affecting the Latino community.

U.S. Day of the Dead rituals create sacred spaces that serve both as sites for cultural affirmation via the enactment of ancestral customs, and sites for political expression, in which the dead become allies of the living in the condemnation of injustice. Consider, for example, a Day of the Dead altar erected by students from the Chicano Studies program at Pomona State University. To commemorate farm workers and their struggle for better working conditions, the altar displayed photos of deceased workers and union activists, along with wooden fruit crates, plastic grapes, citrus tree cuttings, real heads of lettuce, hoes, pesticides, and a section of barbed wire fence.[29] The ancient tradition of placing harvest offerings on Day of the Dead altars became politically charged, with lettuce, grapes, and wooden produce crates sardonically substituting for the fruits usually placed on altars. This altar evoked both the ancestral culture of Latino farm workers and their contemporary exploitation in the United States. Because of its artistic allure, this installation visually emphasized the dangerous labor conditions of farm workers to hundreds of passersby who might not otherwise have considered this issue.

Another example is an altar at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco, comprised of 30,000 matches, painstakingly peeled by hand to produce "arms" and "legs," and then glued to a table to symbolize 30,000 victims of AIDS. The altar was ceremonially burned on November 2 as both a visual homage to AIDS victims, many of whom are people of color, and a political call for the need to fund more research.[30] Thompson argued that the moral economy exposes "confrontations in the market place over access (or entitlement) to necessities" (Thompson 1991: 337). 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. In 1998, 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. Organized by parishioners from St. Anne's Church, 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.[31] With calls to "create jobs, increase educational opportunities and end a pattern of social neglect that feeds a violent gang lifestyle,"[32] community residents employed traditional rituals of honoring the dead to support moral claims about their entitlement to educational and employment opportunities, as well as the obligations of government toward tax-paying, rights-bearing citizens.

Similarly, a Day of the Dead altar dedicated to teens lost to drugs and suicide was erected in November of 2000 at the Sherman Heights Community Center in San Diego.[33] Like Latin American altars that display mementos of the deceased, the altar included photos of the teens, their personal belongings (hair clips, a folded T-shirt, and a baseball cap), their favorite foods (Pepsi, Reese's Cups, and Doritos) and handwritten notes from friends and family to the deceased teens, telling them how much they were missed and loved. Next to the altar were informational flyers about resources for depressed and drug-involved youth. Similar politicized altars have appeared across the country, dedicated to victims of social problems such as domestic violence, drugs, or drive-by shootings.[34] Because of their public nature, these altars and processions not only honor the dead, but also challenge the American-style privatization of mourning by publicly expressing the pain and anger of populations which, because of socioeconomic inequalities are disproportionately affected by an unnecessary loss of life.

A recurrent theme of U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the issue of migration across

the United States/Mexican border. In San Diego, the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights (ICIR) has held vigils on the United States/Mexico border to protest the controversial border patrol program, 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[35] 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 (see figure 12.1). 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 U.S. government's role in maintaining a "favorable investment climate" that ensures poverty wages for the majority of people living in Latin America. By honoring migrants who die while attempting to cross the border in search of a better life, these activities emphasize the great contradictions between the rights of Latin Americans and North Americans to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Roughly one-third of all bodies found along the border are unidentified due to the fact that Central American and other non-Mexican migrants typically travel without identification, hoping to pass for Mexican and thereby avoid deportation to their native countries, if captured by Border Patrol agents. At present, the nameless corpses are mechanically inhumed in vacant tracts of land near the border and the families of the dead have no

Figure 12.1 *Pan de Muerto* offered in memory of a dead migrant.
Photo by: Regina Marchi.

way of knowing the destiny of their absent relatives. In response to this situation, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, together with St. Joseph and St. Anthony's parishes in Holtville, California, sponsored a Day of the Dead event in the Terrace Park Cemetery on November 1, 2001 (see figure 12.2). In a barren lot behind the main cemetery, the cadavers of more than 200 unidentified migrants found in the nearby desert lay buried beneath stark mounds of earth, generically marked "John Doe" or "Jane Doe." In an implicit condemnation of Operation Gatekeeper, this event combined a traditional, village-style Day of the Dead procession (from the outlying street into the cemetery) with a political call for binational efforts to identify the bodies via DNA testing.

At the entrance to the cemetery was a large sign that read, "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 right and wrong. They reminded readers that, while U.S. residents get peace of mind in mourning the loss of loved ones, families of many migrants are left to wonder, forever, about the fate of theirs. Organizers distributed buttons reading, "Would you walk across mountains and deserts for a job? 1,700 migrants did and died."[36] 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—concepts that are strong in Latin American

Figure 12.2 Commemorating unidentified migrants.
Photo by: Regina Marchi.

cultures, as they were among the working-class English culture described by Thompson.

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, incense, and *pan de muerto*, converting the lonely burial site into a vibrant commemoration of "those souls who have no one to remember them."[37] By commemorating the migrants buried in Holtville, local residents (most of whom were Latino) reenacted ancestral traditions of moral obligation to the dead. In so doing, they not only drew attention to the deaths, but simultaneously forced the public to consider the sociopolitical *reason* for them, while demanding that state and federal government address the problem. The drama, music, and color of the event drew media coverage through which community participants—working-class Latinos and social justice activists—gained access to public space from which they are usually marginalized. Each year, immigrant rights activists around the country observe Day of the Dead with processions and altars critical of U.S. border patrol policies.[38]

Yet another social justice theme frequently honored during U.S. Day of the Dead events is that of indigenous rights. On November 1999, Lakota–Sioux Indians from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota,[39] together with Maya immigrants from Guatemala[40] organized a Day of the Dead event in Washington DC. Held in downtown Lafayette Park, directly across from the White House, the event featured Guatemalan Day of the Dead kites, Mayan music, dancers, and a series of speeches.[41] Pan-indigenous themes addressed at the event included the genocide of native peoples across the Americas, solidarity with the people of Guatemala, calls to free Leonard Peltier,[42] and demands to shut down the U.S. Army's School of the Americas.[43] Participants brought photos and mementos of indigenous martyrs for placement on a community altar, which quietly underscored the U.S. government's obligation to make restitution for past and present abuses to the native peoples of both North and South America. I have seen similar altars honoring indigenous struggles at numerous Day of the Dead events, including a 2002 altar in San Diego's Chicano Park, a 2003 altar exhibit at The Mexican Cultural Institute in Los Angeles, a 2004 altar at the Fruitvale Day of the Dead Festival in Oakland, California, and a 2004 altar exhibit in the town plaza of La Mesilla, New Mexico.

Sometimes the focus of Day of the Dead events is not 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 community 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 LA caused by a high concentration of industrial plants in the area, and kicked off a community-based initiative to reduce environmental hazards. Utilizing 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[44] 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" (Thompson 1991: 350).

Aside from large-scale public protest events such as the above mentioned, individual Day of the Dead altars on display at museums, schools, libraries, and other community-based spaces frequently draw attention to social justice issues. For example, since 1996, the World Languages and Culture Department at California State University at Monterey Bay has erected an annual Day of the Dead altar dedicated to historical figures who have worked for social justice.[45] In November 2000, students created an altar dedicated to "Yanga," a slave from Nigeria who lived in Vera Cruz, Mexico in the 1600s. The narrative surrounding the altar explained that Yanga fought against slavery and negotiated the founding of a slave-free town in Vera Cruz. Similar altars focusing on justice leaders from Martin Luther King to Cesar Chavez[46] have been erected across the country, in cities as disparate as Fort Worth, Kansas City, Seattle, and Atlanta. Altars have also been created for the anonymous victims of global political crises such as the Holocaust, the 100 million female babies lost to infanticide around the world, and the "slow death" of homelessness.[47]

The Day of the Dead is observed in a variety of ways throughout the United States, and this paper has focused on an important subset of these celebrations—those with overtly political messages. In a country as culturally diverse as the United States, ethnic rituals are important spaces in which cultural and political minority groups may criticize and respond to hegemonic norms and values. Through personalizing public issues and infusing traditional rites with contemporary meanings, U.S. 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 urging concrete political action toward addressing the sociopolitical causes of death. In both cases, participants employ moral arguments to open public consciousness and stir it to action on behalf of those members in society who are victimized, discarded, and forgotten.

Over time, Day of the Dead traditions have reflected the historical conditions of participants. From the initial arrival of Europeans in Latin America to

the more recent experiences of Latin Americans living in the United States, the celebration has provided practitioners with an opportunity for solace and expression amidst the often-unjust realities of a globalizing world. The holiday provides a useful case study on the political character of cultural rituals that, along with grassroots community organizing and alternative media production, can be valuable resources through which marginalized populations can construct narratives of self-affirmation, solidarity, and political resistance.

Notes

1. I have interviewed people from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Ecuador concerning the various ways in which Day of the Dead is observed in these countries.
2. Throughout Latin America, November 1 and November 2 are described by a variety of names, including *Todos Santos* (All Saints') *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead); *Dia de los Difuntos* (Day of the Departed); *Dia de los Fieles Difuntos* (Day of the Faithful Departed) or *Dia de las Animas Benditas* (Day of the Blessed Souls).
3. Called "pan de muerto" in Mexico and "guaguas" in Ecuador, Bolvia, and Peru.
4. Discussion I had on November 5, 1999, with resident of Morales, Izabál, Guatemala.
5. Celso Lara, "El Origen de Todos los Santos y la Fiesta de los Difuntos," *La Hora,* October 30, 2000, 11.
6. Personal observation, Santiago, Sacatepequez, November 1, 1991.
7. Personal interviews with Salvadoran immigrants residing in San Francisco, CA, May 17, 2001.
8. Personal interview with natives of Chinandega, Nicaragua (recently relocated to San Diego, CA), June 1, 2001.
9. Personal interviews with several informants from Quito, Ecuador, April 2001.
10. Personal interviews with Ecuadorians and photos taken in November 2002, documenting these activities in a cemetery in Otavalo, Ecuador.
11. Susan Ruiz, Patton, "Day of the Dead Comes to Life," *The Plain Dealer*, November 6, 2000, 1B.
12. Maria Elena Baca, "Days of the Dead," *Star Tribune*, November 4, 2000, 5B.
13. Karen Pierce Gonzalez, [no headline] *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 27, 2000, 6.
14. According to newspapers articles I have collected about Day of the Dead activities in these and other areas.
15. Olivia Cadavál discusses this phenomenon in "The Taking of the Renwick: The Celebration of the Day of the Dead and the Latino Community in Washington DC" *Western Folklore*, May–June 1985, 179.
16. In San Diego, for example, the 2002 Day of the Dead activities began on September 28 and continued until November 30, including art, altar, and photography exhibits, altar "house tours," workshops in sugar skull-making, masks, *pan de muerto* and *papel picado*, film screenings, community altar-making events, poetry readings, dance and music performances, vigils, and masses. On the other side of the country in Boston in 2003 Day of the Dead events began at craft stores, community centers, and the Forest Hills Cemetery in mid-October, and ended with the closing of the annual Day of the Dead exhibit at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University on December 9. This elongated timeframe is common in cities across the United States.
17. Grimes distinguishes between Ritualization, Decorum, Ceremony, Magic, Liturgy, and Celebration.
18. Depending on the nature of the procession, participants may wear skeletal costumes and masks or carry props such as banners, signs, cardboard coffins, or giant skeletal puppets.
19. Incense made of pine resin, used by Mesoamerican religious ceremonies since pre-Columbian times.
20. Skeletal imagery in the form of figurines, engravings, paintings, wooden puppets, papier-mâché, sugar sweets, and other materials.
21. Personal conversations with students from the University of San Carlos, Guatemala, and the University of Central America, El Salvador, July 1994.
22. For detailed political analyses of these figurines, see Susan Masuoka's "Calavera Miniatures: Political Commentary in Three Dimensions," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, volume 9, 1990, and Juanita Garciagodoy's, *Digging the Days of the Dead.*
23. Personal interviews with Salvadoran activist now living in the United States, May 2001, San Francisco, CA.
24. "Chile Victims Remembered," *The Toronto Star*, November 2, 1998, A12.
25. See Cecilia Alvear, "No Chicanos on TV," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 1998, 52 (3): 49.
26. Center for Media and Public Affairs' *Distorted Reality Study*, cited in Marco Portales, *Crowding Out Latinos* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 56.
27. Charles R. Taylor and Hae-Kyong Bang, "Portrayals of Latinos in magazine advertising," in *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, Summer 1997, 52 (2): 285.
28. "Combatting the network 'brownout,' " *Hispanic Business*, October 1999, 21 (10): 46.
29. Alicia Gaspar De Alba, *Chicano Art*, p. 75.
30. Denise Richards, *Calaveras*, documentary video on Day of the Dead, 1996.
31. John L. Mitchell, "1000 Hold Vigil Against Violence in Santa Monica," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1998, Metro, part B, p. 1.
32. Ibid.
33. Personal observation, Sherman Heights Community Center, San Diego, October 26, 2000.
34. Allen R. Meyerson, "Caressing Life on the Day of the Dead," *New York Times*, November 4, 1995, 9.
35. According to the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, November 2003. Statistics derived from immigrant deaths recorded by the Mexican

Foreign Relations Office, the Mexican consulates in San Diego and Calexico, and the INS.

36. At the time of this event the death toll was 1,700. As of the fall of 2004, nearly 3000 bodies have been found.
37. Words of Claudia Smith, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, in speech made at cemetery, personal observation, November 2, 2001.
38. According to newspaper articles and websites I have reviewed, such activities have occurred in at least 20 cities across the country, including Phoenix, Austin, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington DC.
39. One of the poorest census tracts in the United States.
40. Members of the International Maya League, a national organization incorporated in 1990 by Guatemalans living in exile in the United States, working to raise awareness of the violent affects of U.S. foreign policy in Guatemala.
41. Retrieved November 15, 2001 from the School of the Americas Watch website <www.soaw-ne.org/daydead.html>
42. American Indian Movement (AIM) activist allegedly framed by the FBI because of his political work and imprisoned for more than 25 years on murder charges.
43. Dubbed the "School of Assassins" by international human rights activists, this U.S. facility trains Latin American military leaders in counter-insurgency tactics. Its graduates have been responsible for many of the worst human rights abuses in Latin America, including assassinations, torture, and massacres against civilian populations.
44. "Latino Event Focuses on Area's Pollution," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1994, 9.
45. California State University, Monterey Bay website <http://csumb.edu/events/dead/> Also see Professor Maria Zielina's research at <http://faculty.csumb.edu/zielinamaria/yanga/yanga.html
46. "Live Events for Day of the Dead," *The Arizona Republic*, November 2, 2000, p. 39.
47. Marcia Tanner, "Hispanic Art Risen From the Dead," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 1992, Home page 9.

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