

U.S. Day of the Dead: Fusing Spanish, Indigenous and U.S. Cultures to Communicate New Messages

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ABSTRACT

The largest Hispanic celebration in the U.S., El Día de los Muertos has both Spanish and Indigenous American roots. Largely unknown in the US prior to the 1970s, it was adopted by Mexican American artists as an emblematic symbol of the Chicano Movement. It is now part of the educational curricula of many U.S. schools and universities and is one of the most popular annual exhibits in art galleries and museums. Receiving prominent media coverage because of its colorful rituals, the celebration in its new socio-political context honors the growing demographic of Latinos in the U.S. and encourages moral reflection on issues of political importance. Many Day of the Dead activities honor popular Latino icons (i.e. artist Frida Kahlo, labor union organizer César Chávez, salsa star Celia Cruz) and a significant number draw attention to socio-political causes of death affecting the Latino community (i.e. gang violence, war, labor exploitation). Through public altars, art installations, street processions and vigils commemorating the dead, participants contest the privatization of sadness and frustration experienced by sectors of U.S. society disproportionately affected by an unnecessary loss of life. At the same time, the celebration is a unique medium for teaching about Latino identities and histories. Based on ethnographic observation of more than 100 Day of the Dead events in the United States over a 10 year period, as

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well as interviews with 78 Chicano artists and other participants, this paper will discuss the emergence of the celebration in the US and the changes in meaning that have occurred as the festivities have migrated to new geographical and socio-political contexts.

Keywords: Day of the Dead, Chicano Movement, Chicano art, Arte Chicano, Latinos in the United States, culture and politics, altar-making, ofrendas, invented traditions, imagined communities, cultural reappropriation.

RESUMEN

La fiesta hispánica más grande de los Estados Unidos, El Día de los Muertos tiene raíces indígenas y españolas. Básicamente desconocida en los EEUU hasta la década de los años setenta, la fiesta fue adoptada por artistas México-Americanos como un símbolo emblemático del movimiento chicano. Ahora forma parte del currículum educacional de muchas escuelas y universidades norteamericanas y es una de las exposiciones más populares en museos y galerías de arte. La celebración recibe amplia cobertura de los medios de comunicación dado a sus rituales coloridos y exóticos. La celebración en su nuevo contexto político y social hace honor a la creciente presencia latina en los EEUU y alienta la reflexión moral sobre cuestiones de importancia política. Muchas actividades del Día de los Muertos están dedicadas a iconos populares latinos (como por ejemplo Frida Kahlo, el sindicalista César Chávez, la cantante de salsa Celia Cruz) como también a recalcar causas de muerte y sufrimiento que afectan a la comunidad Latina (violencia de las pandillas, la guerra, explotación laboral). A través de la construcción de altares públicos, instalaciones artísticas, marchas, y vigiliass honrando a los difuntos, los participantes enfrentan la privatización de la tristeza y la frustración experimentada por los sectores de la sociedad americana afectada desproporcionalmente por la muerte innecesaria. Al mismo tiempo, la celebración es un medio único para enseñar sobre la historia e identidad latina. Basado en la observación etnográfica de más de 100 eventos de Día de los Muertos en los EEUU a través de una década, como también entrevistas a 78 artistas chicanos y otros participantes, esta monografía discute la llegada de la celebración a los EEUU y los cambios de significado que han ocurrido al cambiar las festividades su geografía y contexto socio político.

Palabras clave: El Día de los Muertos, El Movimiento Chicano, arte chicano, Latinos en los EEUU, cultura y política, creación del altar, ofrendas, tradiciones inventadas, comunidades imaginarias, reapropiación cultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the oldest and newest immigrants to the United States, people of Hispanic heritage have greatly influenced U.S. culture since before the territory officially became a country. It is well known that Spaniards were among the earliest Europeans to arrive in the Americas, from Christopher Columbus's crew to Hernando De Soto, Juan Bautista De Anza¹ and many others who explored and charted what is now U.S. territory. Since then, Spanish speaking peoples from Spain, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and elsewhere have had a major influence on U.S. society, whether in politics,² architecture,³ art⁴, music⁵, or foodways. The term "Hispanic" is a catchall phrase first utilized by the US census bureau in 1970 to refer to Spanish-speaking peoples with ancestries in Spain or Latin America living in the United States (and their U.S. descendants). The original Latin word "Hispanicus" was an adjective referring to "Hispania", the Roman name for the Iberian Peninsula, today known as Spain. In the United States, the term "Hispanic" refers to Spanish speaking regions, peoples and their cultures, and is often used interchangeably with the term "Latino", a noun and adjective used to describe a person of Latin American ancestry living in the U.S. Latino refers to people of Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Central American, or South American heritage, regardless of race, and applies to native-born U.S. citizens as well as Latin American immigrants. The descriptor has gained popularity over the past 20 years and is the preferred term among those seeking to interrupt the historical privileging of Spanish over American Indigenous⁶ cultures that has been an enduring legacy of Spanish colonialism in the Americas. Reflecting the rising ubiquity of the term "Latino" in colloquial speech and in popular cultural industries such as music, print media and film, the U.S. census bureau replaced the "Hispanic" category with "Spanish / Hispanic / Latino" in 2010.⁷ This paper will henceforth utilize the term "Latino."

Latinos have occupied a tenuous position in the U.S. - beloved in small numbers as entertainers and athletes, eagerly recruited in large numbers as cheap labor, but simultaneously reviled by the mainstream society and media as representing a "dangerous" threat (Ramirez-Berg 2002; Santa Ana 2002; Carveth & Alverio 1997). For most of the first two hundred years of United States' history, Mexican-Americans in California and the American Southwest, including those who were native to these regions, experienced segregated housing, employment and schooling, much as African-Americans in the U.S. South. Anglo discrimination and violence towards Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos was commonplace. Racist attitudes were reflected in decades of U.S. news coverage that depicted Latinos as lazier, less intelligent, less moral, and more prone

to crime than Anglo Americans (Santa Ana 2002; Carveth & Alverio 1997; Friedman et al 1991; Rodriguez et al. 1997; Wilson & Gutierrez 1985), and the same pattern of negative representation existed in magazine and television advertising (*Hispanic Business* 1999; Taylor & Bang: 1997; Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao 2003). In Hollywood films, Latinos were stereotyped for generations in tropes such as the *bandido*, the gangbanger, the over sexualized Latin Lover, the dangerous temptress, or the dim-witted buffoon (Fregoso 1993; Noriega & López et al. 1996; Ramírez-Berg 2002).

Blossoming in the 1970s (with roots going back to the 1930s), the Chicano⁸ Movement began in California and the American Southwest as a political and cultural movement that worked on a broad cross section of issues affecting Mexican-American and other Latinos. These included farm workers' rights; Native American land rights; efforts to improve housing and educational opportunities; voting and political rights; and the proud public celebration of cultural traditions. Among other goals, the Movement sought to combat historically negative stereotypes of Mexican-Americans in the U.S. media. Since few Latinos occupied powerful positions in the world of mass media production at the time, Chicanos created their own alternative media in the form of public art. In response to decades of political, economic, and social oppression, they created *arte contestatario* – art designed to challenge mainstream racist tropes (Gómez-Peña 1986: 86). Political transformation through collective efforts and spiritually influenced artistic expression became major themes of the Chicano Movement.

Chicanos engaged in political and cultural media work that included literature, theater, music, and visual art meant to tell the collective histories of their people. Neglected and abandoned buildings in Mexican-American neighborhoods became canvasses for giant public murals that educated onlookers about Aztec legends, Mexican revolutionary heroes / heroines, and Mexican-American political struggles such as the grape boycott of the United Farm Workers' Union. Chicano performance artists and theater troupes traveled to urban barrios and rural farming towns producing *teatro popular* – a street theater tradition common in Latin America – to educate immigrant laborers about their legal rights in the US. Chicano poets, novelists, musicians and painters expressed both the beauty and pain of the Mexican-American experience. These art forms represented the first time that Mexican-American culture was so visibly celebrated in the U.S. public sphere.⁹

Emerging at a time of widespread social justice activism by disenfranchised populations,¹⁰ the Chicano Movement was influenced by Black civil rights activism, the American Indian Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement (Lipsitz; 1990, 2001; Romo 2001). 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. The Chicano Movement integrated culture, art, and politics for the goal of building community and creating progressive political change (Gaspar De Alba 1998; Del Castillo et al. 1991; Ybarra-Frausto 1996).

Since there were no Latino Studies programs in U.S. universities at that time, many Chicanos (most of whom were born and / or raised in the U.S.) undertook independent historical research and visited Mexico to gain a better understanding of Mexico's cultural traditions. Some dedicated themselves to learning Indigenous languages, Mayan weaving, Aztec *danza* 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 (Carrasco 1990; González 1972; Romo 2000). With its stunning aesthetics and vibrant rituals, the celebration of *El Día de los Muertos* would become one of the most widely observed annual traditions of the Mexican-American community.¹¹

2. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DAY OF THE DEAD

In the Indigenous communities of Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and other regions of Latin America, the celebration of Day of the Dead (officially observed on November 1 and 2) is a fusion of Spanish Catholic All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day activities with pre-Columbian Indigenous rituals for honoring and paying tribute to the ancestors. Like many Latin Americans and Spaniards, Mexicans routinely visit cemeteries between October 30 and November 2, to clean and decorate family graves. They may also attend mass, pray the rosary, participate in religious processions or prepare a family meal – All Saints' Day rituals common throughout the Catholic world. However in Mexico and other Latin American countries with large Indigenous populations, the celebration is fused with ancestor remembrance traditions and beliefs that predate the arrival of Spanish missionaries. Nocturnal cemetery vigils are held by candlelight 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 or *ofrendas* for the deceased. The southern regions of Oaxaca, Michoacán, Puebla, Chiapas, Vera Cruz, and Yucatán (home to Mexico's highest concentration of Indigenous peoples), have become internationally known for

their painstakingly ornate *ofrendas*. The altars are often laden with *pan de muerto* (bread for the dead), salt, grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, coffee, soda pop, alcoholic beverages, special dishes (such as *tamales* or *mole*), mementos and photos of the departed, candles, and Catholic iconography (such as crucifixes and images of saints). Tables, shelves, or crates are used to create multi-leveled altars, often crowned with large arches or frames (said to be gateways to symbolically welcome the traveling spirits home) overlaid with marigolds and hanging fruits.

The most prominent symbol of Mexico's Day of the Dead is the *calavera* or "skull" – often made of papier-mâché, clay, wood, plastic, metal, or cut-out tissue paper. In particular, edible white sugar skulls decorated with colored icing have become internationally recognized emblems of Mexico (Brandes 1998). Piled on trays by the dozens in shops and open-air markets, these fanciful treats adorn altars and are exchanged between family and friends as tokens of affection. While skull imagery was also popular in Spain and other areas of Europe from the 1400s -1800s (Boase 1972; Ariés 1981; Kastenbaum 1989; Carmichael & Sayer 1991; Brandes 1998), Mexicans took skull imagery to new heights, greatly influenced by the satirical skeleton images of Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913). Posada created what has since become the most universally depicted of all skeletons in Mexico – *La Catrina* – a female skeleton foppishly attired in a plumed, wide-brimmed hat, satirizing the pretensions of the Mexican upper classes and their imitators who preferred the culture of Europe over the Indigenous foods, dress, and customs of Mexico. Jacques LaFaye notes that the renowned Spanish painter, Francisco de Goya, had earlier created satirical *catrines* ("dandies" or "fops") in eighteenth-century Spain. Whether Posada was familiar with Goya's *catrines* is unclear, although reproductions of the work of Goya and other European artists were imported in great numbers into Mexico from the eighteenth-century onward (LaFaye 131).¹² Today, Mexico is renowned for its production of skeleton-themed marionettes, gigantic puppets, toys, masks, paintings, statues, posters, mobiles, clothing and more. With humorous expressions that mimic the living and mock everyday behaviors, these skeletal images are said to remind the living of the brevity of life and inevitability of death.

3. A CHICANO TRADITION IS BORN

Prior to the 1970s, public approbation of Latino cultures was rare in the realm of U.S. arts, education, or the mass media. When Hispanic heritage was acknowledged at all, it was Spanish rather than Indigenous ancestry that was lauded. In both Latin America and the United States, Eurocentric racism categorized "Indian" heritage as a

shameful impurity that consigned mixed blooded *Mestizos*¹³ and full-blooded Indigenous peoples – the majority of the Latino population – to inferior socioeconomic status vis-à-vis more “pure blooded” descendents of Europeans. As a rejection of this mentality (which over decades had colonized the minds of many Mexican-Americans and Anglo-American society), *Día de los Muertos* celebrations and other actions emerging from the Chicano Movement emphatically embraced the customs and beliefs of working-class *Mestizos* and Indigenous peoples.

Before the 1970s, most Mexican-Americans observed November 1 and 2 similarly to other Catholics around the world. These dates were referred to by their Catholic names: “All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day,” and sugar skulls, *pan de muerto*, and the elaborate Indigenous altar-making traditions of southern Mexico were virtually unknown in the U.S. (Gosnell & Gott 1989; Griffith 1985, 1995; 1997; Marchi 2009). However, as Chicanos visited southern Mexico and learned about these traditions, they brought them to the *barrios* of Los Angeles and San Francisco, where Day of the Dead altar installations were showcased in art galleries, community centers, schools and, later, in major museums. In the U.S. context, these altar-making rituals were hybridizations of Indigenous and Catholic spiritual practices mixed with elements of U.S. popular culture and politics – three major elements of Mexican-American identity. Day of the Dead sugar skulls quickly became a ubiquitous expression of Chicano iconography because of their perceived connection to ancient Aztec skull imagery, as well as their “shock” value. Chicano artist and educator, Yolanda Garfias Woo, one of the first to teach about Day of the Dead in U.S. schools, noted that compared with most U.S. 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*.”¹⁴

An innovative component of Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations was the inclusion of Aztec *danza*, a term that refers to a pre-Columbian style of “dancing in prayer” used as a form of communication with the spirit world. *Danza* performers frequently inaugurate U.S. Day of the Dead processions, altar exhibitions, and community celebrations with modern re-creations of ancient ceremonies, although this form of dance was previously not done on Day of the Dead in Mexico (Marchi 2009: 46). By combining Aztec ceremonial dancing with the *ofrenda* tradition in new ways, Chicanos exercised creative syncretism. They also exercised syncretism by mixing the personal with the political. Besides honoring deceased family and friends, Chicanos converted the holiday into a commemoration of the collective “ancestors” of all U.S. Latinos, creating public 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 United States and the world. Chicanos also utilized the holiday's focus on remembrance to criticize dominant power structures by creating altar installations intended to raise public awareness of the socio-political causes of death affecting Latinos and other minorities. 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 commemorated Mexican-American farm workers poisoned by pesticides; Latin American migrants who died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border; urban youth victimized by gangs and drugs; factory workers killed in industrial accidents; victims of U.S. funded wars in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan; the "death" of the environment; and other political issues (Marchi 2006; 2009).

The first documented U.S. Day of the Dead activities to occur in 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 Graphics, a community-based Latino 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. Professor of Latino Studies, 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 Boccadero). 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" (Venegas 47). Through the influence of Ibañez and Bueno, the Self Help Graphics artists were introduced to Mexican *calavera* (skull) imagery and Indigenous-style altar making. Within in couple of years, the celebration had attracted the participation of the larger Chicano artist community, and a plethora of silkscreen prints, posters, paintings, T-shirts, multi-media compositions, performances, and other Day of the Dead-inspired expressions soon emanated from artists throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

Comprised of artists and local residents, the Day of the Dead procession at Self Help became an annual event. It concluded in Self Help's gallery, which housed a Day of the Dead art show and held workshops in sugar skull making and related holiday crafts. Over time, the Los Angeles Day of the Dead procession grew to include music,

Aztec *danza*, giant skeleton puppets, sculptures, banners, stylized Chicano “low rider” cars, decorated floats, and more. Workshops teaching the public how to make *papel picado*, sugar skulls, plaster skeleton masks, and altars became an important part of the organization’s Day of the Dead festivals. Inspired by Self Help, community centers, schools, libraries, art galleries, museums, folk art stores, city parks and commercial districts throughout southern California and the rest of the U.S. later developed annual Day of the Dead programming.

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. Organized by artists René Yáñez and Ralph Maradiaga, together with other artists including Carmen Lomas Garza and Yolanda Garfias Woo, the exhibition and related educational activities also evolved into an annual tradition. In 1981, *La Galería* organized a small Day of the Dead street procession with about twenty-five 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 *danza* groups, colorful banners, curbside altars, sidewalk chalk art, giant *calavera* puppets, stilt walkers, portable sculptures, and Cuban *Santería* practitioners. Individuals walking in honor of deceased family members and friends were joined by contingents walking to draw public attention to various socio-political causes of death, such as U.S. military interventions abroad, gun violence, and AIDS. The procession today attracts an estimated 20,000 participants, spanning diverse ages, races, and ethnicities – making it the largest Day of the Dead street procession in the U.S.

La Galería’s annual Day of the Dead exhibits have ranged from traditional *ofrendas* to high-tech video displays to cross-cultural installations done by students and artists from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. From the beginning, the themes and people being commemorated reflected a broad spectrum between the traditional and the contemporary, including installations honoring regional Mexican altar-making traditions, feminist *ofrendas*, and tributes to Latino artists.¹⁵ This small gallery had a profound influence on the shape of Day of the Dead celebrations in the U.S., both in encouraging hybrid experimentation with and “mainstreaming” the altar format. Chicana curator, Tere Romo, notes that the *Galería’s* most significant contribution to *El Día de los Muertos* and to Chicano art history was the new direction in which it took *ofrendas*. By blending traditional rituals with modern materials and designs, artist Rene Yáñez, in particular, transformed the altar format into an “environmental space” and pushed altar making into the realm of contemporary art, while still remaining respectful of the

traditional *ofrenda* as the source of inspiration (Romo 2000: 38). “Altar installations” (the term used by Chicano artists to describe the *ofrendas* they create in public spaces) always contemplate some aspect of death and often utilize mixed media such as sculpture, oil paints, silkscreen, mobiles, collage, computers, televisions, sound systems, video footage, or interactive websites. *La Galería’s* exhibitions ultimately generated citywide recognition and inspired parallel celebrations elsewhere. As a result of the activities of these two Latino art galleries, museums and schools throughout the U.S. now organize Day of the Dead programming each fall.

From Alaska to Iowa to Maine, New Jersey, Florida, and beyond, Day of the Dead is now one of the most popular multicultural educational activities in U.S. school grades K-12, providing a creative platform for teaching social studies, history, art, and language skills. University departments of Anthropology, Latino Studies, Spanish, Religion, and Art hold Day of the Dead celebrations, including altar exhibits, craft workshops; performances; and poetry slams (where participants read poems or tell stories about the departed). Many contemporary U.S. celebrations also include public lectures about Day of the Dead traditions or metaphysical topics related to death and the spirit world. They feature film screenings ranging from documentaries such as *La Ofrenda: Days of the Dead* (Portillo & Muñoz 1988) and *La Muerte Viva, The Day of the Dead: A Living Tradition* (Llamas 1989), to classic Mexican movies with Day of the Dead scenes, such as *Macario* (Roberto Gavaldon 1960) and *Ánimas Trujano* (Ismael Rodríguez 1962), to films on Mexican folk art such as *Pedro Linares: Folk Artist* (Bronowski & Grant 1975). In all of these ways, the celebration has been transformed in the US into a multi-faceted artistic, educational, and social phenomenon. It is now an annual autumn ritual that US-Americans of many races and ethnicities enjoy, as both Latinos and non-Latinos create public altars and participate in Day of the Dead installations at art galleries, schools, and museums.

3. ART IN THE SERVICE OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

U.S. Day of the Dead installations reflect the hybrid nature of Chicano spirituality (Romo 2000), incorporating Catholic crucifixes, bibles, religious candles, rosary beads, and pictures of saints, with pre-Columbian foods and Mayan or Aztec symbols. Their principal goal is to publicly celebrate Chicano / Mexican / Latino identities rather than to fulfill religious obligations to the dead. In the U.S., art gallery and museum exhibits have become key “media” for communicating messages of Latino cultural affirmation and political struggle – another way in which Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations differ from those of Spain or Latin America.

Unlike in many Latin American villages where Day of the Dead customs have been passed down through generations, most of the U.S. public (both Latino and non-Latino) were unfamiliar with *El Día de los Muertos* prior to the 1970s, and needed to be taught the meanings behind the skull imagery and harvest-themed altar rituals. Some onlookers feared these “pagan” activities were affiliated with “necrophilia,” and some even accused organizers of being associated with the “death cult” of Charles Manson (Marchi 2009: 93). So, each year from late September until early November, Chicano artists have organized educational workshops about the history and meanings of Day of the Dead traditions, and taught participants how to make Mexican-style paper flowers, sugar skulls, papier-mâché masks, and altars. Today, such educational programming continues to be the medium through which most people in the U.S. learn about Day of the Dead. These are important community-building experiences that draw economically, ethnically, politically and generationally diverse groups of Mexican-Americans together, connecting them to each other and to other Latinos, as well as helping to build bridges between Latinos and non-Latinos.

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000’s, as the U.S. Latino population became more ethnically diverse, immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia and other countries with Spanish and Indigenous Day of the Dead traditions, began to participate in Chicano celebrations, in many cases, developing pan-Latino observances. For example, Honduran and Bolivian immigrants have held Day of the Dead activities featuring their native foods and dances in Cleveland, Ohio;¹⁶ Chilean immigrants have erected Day of the Dead altars in Minneapolis, Minnesota to remember those who were disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet;¹⁷ and the Guatemalan community of San Rafael, California, hosted a Day of the Dead kite flying celebration in a local cemetery.¹⁸ Pan-Latino celebrations are not limited to major cities, which used to be the only spaces where diverse Latino groups lived in close proximity. Today, globalizing towns in the U.S. “heartland” also hold Day of the Dead celebrations in places such as Lincoln, Nebraska,¹⁹ Cicero, Illinois,²⁰ Logan, Utah,²¹ Kokomo, Indiana²² and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.²³ Annual Day of the Dead celebrations in the city where I work, New Brunswick, New Jersey, include *ofrendas* and performances by Mixtecs and other Indigenous peoples from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, together with Maya Mam immigrants from Guatemala; Puerto Ricans; Cubans, Peruvians, Chileans; and others who live in New Brunswick and the surrounding towns of New Jersey.

4. ART ATTRACTS THE MASS MEDIA

In the weeks preceding November 1 and 2, mainstream U.S. newspapers and magazines now announce Day of the Dead events in their “arts and culture” listings. Promotional posters are hung in windows of stores, restaurants, social service agencies and schools, while large banners and billboards are placed in malls, parks, and university campuses. Each fall, community centers, art galleries, public libraries and museums mail thousands of postcards to their constituents, announcing the dates of their Day of the Dead events, while art galleries, universities, folk art stores, and community centers post schedules of their Day of the Dead activities in their web pages, email lists and newsletters.

As the largest Latino festivity in the U.S., Day of the Dead brings positive media attention to Latino culture in a variety of forms. There have been *El Día de los Muertos* episodes on primetime US television shows such as PBS’ *American Family* (2002 season); the popular HBO series, *Six Feet Under* (2002 season) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (2004 season). The John Sayles movie, *Silver City* (2004), included a Day of the Dead scene, and the Tim Burton film *Corpse Bride* (2005) was filled with Day of the Dead imagery. Nationally distributed travel publications promote Day of the Dead excursions to New Mexico, Texas, and California, while popular lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Travel and Leisure* and *Martha Stewart Living* have featured articles on the holiday. As of October 18, 2011, the celebration was the subject of more than 1,400,000,000 non-profit, personal, and commercial Internet web sites and other search results geared towards an English-speaking audience. Major news organizations such as the Associated Press, National Public Radio, *U.S. News and World Reports*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, along with documentary films and local TV stations, now provide annual coverage of the holiday. For U.S. Latinos, this coverage has facilitated the development of an “imagined community” or “a community of sentiment”—a group that begins to imagine and feel things together, coming to see themselves as people with historical, religious and social commonalities (Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996).

Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger coined the phrase “invented tradition” to refer to newly created practices of a ritual or symbolic nature “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms” and which “imply continuity with the past.” In “using old models for new purposes,” they observe, an implied (but fictitious) continuity with the past is key to establishing group cohesion and identity (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1-5). Although the term “invented tradition” often conveys a pejorative tone, connoting a falsification of history or manipulation from “above,” U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations

exemplify agency from “below.” Here, traditions are reenacted, not to provide a dominant group with “the sanction of precedent, social continuity or natural law” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2), but to offer a historically marginalized population cultural resources with which to counter generations of disparagement from the mainstream society. U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations help counteract a long history of Latinos being marginalized and excluded from the mass media, museum exhibitions, and academic curricula. They also help counteract the psychological harm done by decades of racially segregated public education, where Latino children – largely relegated to substandard schools and non college-track curricula – were taught misleading histories that portrayed their cultures as devoid of value.

5. POPULARITY WITH NON-LATINOS

Studies of “Latinidad” should not be confined to analyses of how Latinos create and fortify cultural ties in response to the dominant Anglo-American society. They must also examine how phenomena considered Latino enter different cultural spaces and change the dominant culture (Valdivia 2003). Today, the celebration of Day of the Dead in the U.S. is not limited to Latinos, but is also enthusiastically embraced by non-Latinos, who comprise as many as half of the participants at exhibitions and street processions. People of Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino), Native American, African-American, Italian, Polish, Irish, Jewish, East Indian and other ethnic and racial backgrounds now make Day of the Dead *ofrendas* at public art exhibitions or in their homes; walk in Day of the Dead street processions; and attend other Day of the Dead events. The growing popularity of this celebration is an example of the *Latinization* of U.S. culture that has occurred over the past 40 years, in the context of the biggest migration flow from South to North in the history of the continent (Suarez-Orozco 40). The largest minority population in the U.S. today, Latinos are influencing mainstream America’s vocabulary, culinary tastes, music, dance styles and other cultural aspects more than ever. The mass media have played important educational and promotional roles by covering Day of the Dead as an annual autumn activity, but media coverage alone does not explain the appeal of the celebration for so many non-Latinos.

In a society famed for its rugged individualism, contemporary Americans find themselves longing for emotionally satisfying community-building experiences to offset the feelings of isolation that increasingly accompany modern life. Day of the Dead celebrations help fulfill this longing by providing a public medium through which to express repressed emotions regarding death. Feelings of gratitude for the opportunity to process feelings about deceased loved ones are frequently expressed by non-Latino

attendees of Day of the Dead events. Staff from a half dozen museum shops and folk art stores visited for this research confirmed the popularity of Day of the Dead among non-Latinos. Shopkeepers stated that Day of the Dead season is their most profitable time of year, and that at least half of the clientele buying Day of the Dead items are non-Latinos. For example, the owners of a San Diego folk art shop that distributes Day of the Dead merchandise wholesale to retailers across the U.S., noted: "Day of the Dead is our busiest time of the year [...] probably sixty-five percent of our clients are non-Latinos."²⁴ Similarly, the owner of a fair trade craft store in San Francisco noted: "October is our big season. You would be *amazed* at how many sugar skulls we sell here. I sell over a thousand. For a small store, that's *a lot*. I think that everyone I know, at this point, is making altars at home now. It's sort of like decorating the Christmas tree – an annual ritual."²⁵

The popularity of Day of the Dead among non-Latinos is not limited to California or the Southwest. At celebrations I observed from November 2006 through fall of 2011 in New York City at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian, and *El Museo del Barrio*, as well as events observed in Massachusetts, Maine and New Jersey, many attendees appeared to be non-Latinos. All of the non-Latino Day of the Dead participants interviewed for this research discussed what they felt was a dearth of opportunity for honoring the dead in mainstream U.S. society. A Korean-American from Los Angeles said, "Americans tend to be morbid and depressed about death, while the Latino culture honors their ancestors and celebrates their life through their death."²⁶ An Irish-American from Boston who had recently lost her father said, "I think it's a much healthier version of dealing with death and dying. Making the altar is very healing. It makes a connection with the people who have gone before us and affirms what they did in life."²⁷ All of the respondents described a dichotomy between mainstream U.S. society's way of relating to death, which they considered "unfulfilling" or "depressing," and the personalized, communal rituals of Day of the Dead, which they called "celebratory," "supportive," and "healing."

The theme of healing was also discussed by Barbara Henry, Chief Curator of Education at the Oakland Museum of California, where Day of the Dead exhibits have been held annually since 1994. More than 20,000 people attend the six-week exhibit annually, making it the best-attended show in the museum's annual calendar. In fact, the exhibit is so popular that the museum extends its hours of operation to accommodate all the families, school groups and others who want to attend. The event receives enthusiastic feedback in the form of letters, emails, and guest book comments from visitors, and Henry believes that an important part of the exposition's popularity is the

opportunity it provides for people to publicly reflect upon death: “We’ve had a number of grief counselors and people from the health profession who have come here and used this exhibit with their clients to help them process death. There was one group of terminally ill patients. We’ve gotten written comments from many people telling us about how coming to this exhibit has become an annual tradition for their family.”²⁸

In addition to broadening society’s options for processing death, Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations have affected U.S. society, particularly the art world, in yet another way. They have transformed private, family traditions of altar-making (found throughout Spain and Latin America) that were previously considered the realm of “superstitious” and “uneducated” people, into a respected contemporary art form. According to museum curators and artists interviewed for this study, altar-making first began to appear widely in museums in the context of Day of the Dead exhibits. Today, altars are considered works of art worthy of year round exhibition, and are created by U.S. artists of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.²⁹

6. CHICANO INFLUENCE ON MEXICO AND BEYOND

While today, diverse groups of Latinos participate in Day of the Dead celebrations, Chicanos were the cultural “midwives” who brought it to life in the U.S. and continue to be at the forefront of the organizing and educational efforts for the holiday. Chicanos were initially inspired by Mexican Day of the Dead rituals and Mexico’s Day of the Dead expressions were later influenced by Chicano renderings of the holiday. This happened as Mexican artists and tourists visited the U.S. from the 1970s onward and observed Chicano Day of the Dead installations. It also happened as Chicano artists traveled to Mexico City to give workshops and promote books they had written about the Day of the Dead. Ironically, while Chicanos were discovering and popularizing *El Día de los Muertos* in the U.S., many middle-class Mexicans dismissed the tradition as something that only rural, uneducated “Indians” would do. Urban elites who wanted to forge a “modern” (i.e. westernized) Mexico considered Day of the Dead a mortifying anachronism best left behind. In fact, until the latter twentieth century, Mexico’s Indigenous peoples were often ridiculed by non-Indigenous Mexicans for creating Day of the Dead altars (Carmichael & Sayer 119; Beezley 1987), and *ofrenda* traditions were waning (Brandes 1988; Nutini 1988). Therefore, the esteem that Chicano and other U.S. teachers, professors and artists had for the holiday helped elevate it in the eyes of urban Mexicans and, in particular, among Mexican artists. Amalia Mesa-Bains, a visual arts professor at the California State University at Monterrey Bay, explains: “A number of Chicanos began to go back to Mexico and assist in reclaiming

the tradition there [...] In Mexico City and other large cities where there was much more dominance from the U.S., [...] most contemporary Mexican artists were not interested in those traditions because to them they seemed rather old-fashioned. And, so we Chicano artists actually valued something that contemporary Mexican artists did not.³⁰

Mexican artists have noted the influence of Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations on Mexico. Sculptor Guillermo Pulido, who was born in Guadalajara, Mexico and moved as an adult to California in the late 1980s, observed the “regeneration” and “transformation” taking place with Day of the Dead in the U.S. and felt there was a “recycling of influences back and forth” between the countries (Morrison 362). Curator Tere Romo states that Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations offered new models and inspiration for future generations of artists and “forever changed the tradition not only in the U.S., but in Mexico, as well” (Romo 2000: 31).

7.CONCLUSIONS

The history of this ritual in Latin America for more than 500 years makes it a point of cultural continuity for many Latinos living as cultural minorities in the U.S., connecting them to both their Indigenous and Spanish roots. While increasingly popular, Day of the Dead is not universally embraced by all U.S. Latinos. There are differing levels of knowledge about and acceptance of the celebration within communities, and even within members of the same family. (It is not unusual, for example, to see Chicanos in their 20s or 30s passionately celebrating Day of the Dead, while their older and more traditionally Catholic relatives - who do not consider it empowering to embrace Indigenous customs - observe All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day via exclusively Catholic rather than Indigenous rituals.) Meanwhile, many non-Latinos in the U.S. have become enthusiastic about the holiday, illustrating how expressions of *Latinidad* are impacting not only the Latino community, but the larger society, as well.

Day of the Dead in the United States illustrates that U.S. culture is not monolithic but is, instead, an evolving hybrid composite of the traditions and experiences of the country’s diverse inhabitants. It also illustrates that political communication can take place in venues not considered “political.” In their interactions for nearly 40 years with mainstream educational, cultural, and media organizations, the creators of Chicano Day of the Dead celebrations have shown that when mainstream audiences are exposed to alternative cultural aesthetics and values, the result can be subversion rather than a reinforcement of dominant Anglo-European practices and beliefs. Day of the Dead has helped change mainstream U.S. culture by increasing interest in alternative art formats

and broadening the spectrum of metaphysical reflections and material practices related to remembering the dead. It has also helped increase the general population's knowledge of Latino culture, histories, and political struggles while providing U.S. Latinos with a source of public validation.

As a result of Chicano Day of the Dead exhibitions, the U.S. now has two popular autumn celebrations related to "spirits," and many families, schools, and community centers celebrate both Halloween and Day of the Dead. Meanwhile, as Mexican immigrants and Chicano artists move to new parts of North America, Europe and other areas that previously had little or no Latino presence, Day of the Dead exhibitions and celebrations are spreading. A review of newspaper databases and Internet web sites done for this study reveals that in the past decade, Chicano-style Day of the Dead celebrations have been held in Canada, New Zealand, England, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Japan, Australia and the Czech Republic. U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations illustrate the powerful dynamics of global cultural flows and, as it migrates to further places, this celebration will continue to influence and be influenced by the socio-political landscapes in which it is observed.

8. METHODOLOGY

This paper emerged from a research project conducted from October 2000 through November 2010 regarding Day of the Dead celebrations in the USA. Research methodologies included an extensive review of scholarly literature on both European and Latin American Day of the Dead celebrations and the Chicano Movement in the United States; archival research of U.S. Day of the Dead exhibit materials at Chicano art galleries; ethnographic observation of more than 100 U.S. Day of the Dead events; 78 formal, tape recorded interviews with artists and staff at Chicano art galleries and community centers, and interviews with dozens of non-Latino participants. I attended Day of the Dead street processions, vigils, exhibits, craft workshops, film screenings, altar-making ceremonies, poetry readings, and related activities in California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Maine and Massachusetts. I conducted broad Internet searches and used Lexis-Nexis, Proquest, Los Angeles Times and other news databases to retrieve articles and radio and TV transcripts about Day of the Dead activities occurring in the U.S. and other countries. All interviewees whose names are cited gave written permission to be quoted by name. For more detailed information about U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations, please see Marchi 2009.

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NOTES

¹ De Soto (1496-1592) led many expeditions throughout the U.S. and was the first European to have crossed the Mississippi River. De Anza (1736-1788) explored and mapped out much of what is now California.

² Since the first Hispanic, Joseph Marion Hernandez, was elected to U.S. Congress in 1822 as a member of the Whig party, people of Hispanic heritage have been active in national politics.

³ From the 1500s through the present, Spanish styled architecture has had a major influence on U.S. building styles, from stucco *pueblo* style buildings in the southwest to Spanish colonial and renaissance style buildings in Chicago, New York, Boston, and other major East Coast cities.

⁴ Iconic public buildings and parks in the U.S. showcase the creations of Hispanic muralists, sculptors, and other artists, from federal buildings such as the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. to private corporations such as Rockefeller Center in New York City.

⁵ One of the most popular music styles in the world, salsa was born in New York in the 1970s, as Cuban *son* - a fusion of Spanish and African rhythms - was combined with Latin jazz by predominantly Puerto Rican musicians. Tex-Mex, *música norteaña*, mariachi music, tango, *reggaeton* and other Latin music styles have become quotidian aspects of U.S. culture.

⁶ In this article, “Indigenous” is used as a noun and adjective referring to the autochthonous peoples of Latin America, whose ancestors had the earliest human presence there.

⁷ For many in the U.S., the decision as to whether to utilize the term “Latino” or “Hispanic” is a political choice, meant either to create distance or emphasize cultural ties with Spain.

⁸ “Chicano/a” is a self-identifying term for Mexican-Americans dedicated to progressive political organizing work.

⁹ During this time, similar multi-media work was carried out on the East Coast by Puerto Rican artists responding to the racism and discrimination Puerto Ricans faced as minorities living within mainstream U.S. society. Although the Chicano Movement and Boricua Movement were distinct movements that sprung organically from each community, both were examples of public Latino art serving as a medium for political education and organizing.

¹⁰ The 1970s was a period in which many racial minority groups in the U.S. were attempting to learn about and reclaim their cultural roots – including languages, clothing, art, music, rituals and other ancestral traditions that had been lost in processes of slavery, colonization, reservation systems, and forced assimilation.

¹¹ Comprehensive information on the genesis of the celebration in San Francisco, California, can be found in the doctoral dissertation of theologian Suzanne Morrison (1992), listed in the References. Further historical documentation and curatorial perspective on the Chicano celebration is available in *Chicanos en Mictlán*, a museum catalog written by Tere Romo, et al. (2000).

¹² LaFaye notes that while Goya’s characteristic expressions appear in the work of Posada, this does not necessarily imply imitation (131).

¹³ A term used to describe peoples and / or cultures that are the product of racial mixing – usually referring to Latin Americans or U.S. Latinos of mixed European, Indigenous and / or African ancestries.

¹⁴ Personal interview with Yolanda Garfias Woo, San Francisco, California, June 6, 2003.

- ¹⁵According to Romo and Lomas Garza, *La Galería's* early Day of the Dead exhibits were instrumental in popularizing Frida Kahlo, who was virtually unknown in the U.S. in the 1970s (Romo 2000:38; 2001:101; personal interview with Carmen Lomas Garza, San Francisco, California, May, 25, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Susan Ruiz Patton, "Day of the Dead Comes to Life," *The Plain Dealer*, Nov. 6, 2000: 1B.
- ¹⁷ Maria Elena Baca, "Days of the Dead," *Star Tribune*, November 4, 2000, p. 5B.
- ¹⁸ Karen Pierce Gonzalez, "*Días de Muertos* ceremony keeps Latinos linked to past," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 27, 2000: 6.
- ¹⁹ "*El Día de Los Muertos* Celebrated October 26 at Sheldon Gallery," US Fed News wire service October 15, 2007.
- ²⁰ "Town President Dominick, Cicero Celebrate *Día de los Muertos*," US States News wire November 2, 2007.
- ²¹ "Learn about, Celebrate *Día de los Muertos*," U.S. Fed News wire, October 8, 2007.
- ²² See *Día de los Muertos* display at Indiana University, Kokomo, U.S. States News wire, November 2, 2007.
- ²³ "'Days of the Dead' Celebration Focus of Museum Family Day, Exhibit," U.S. Fed News, October 2, 2007.
- ²⁴ Personal interview with Claudio and Maribel DeLucca, San Diego, California, April 24, 2003.
- ²⁵ Personal interview with Nancy Chárraga, San Francisco, California, June 5, 2005.
- ²⁶ Personal communication, Los Angeles, California, May 2, 2001.
- ²⁷ Personal communication, Boston MA, July 12, 2001.
- ²⁸ Personal interview with Barbara Henry, Oakland Museum of California, June 3, 2003.
- ²⁹ Examples: San Diego Public Library's exhibit, "The Altars Project," shown from December 12, 2004 – January 30, 2005; The San Francisco SomArts Cultural Center's "Native Tears" altar exhibit shown from March 4 – 24, 2004; and the "Sacred Wild" altar exhibit at the Apexart gallery in New York, running from May 25-June 25, 2005.
- ³⁰ Personal interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains, July 24, 2007.