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Communing with the Dead: Spiritual and Cultural Healing in Chicano/a Communities

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Remembering and honoring the dead during the Chicano tradition of *Días de los Muertos*, or Days of the Dead, is a spiritual and cultural practice responding to a complex historical process of colonization, including displacement from land, language, religion, and identity. These elaborate public rituals rooted in indigenous Mesoamerican and Mexican Catholic beliefs in communing with the dead have proliferated in the last three decades due to the efforts of Chicana/o artists, teachers, students, and cultural workers. As ancient Mesoamerican indigenous populations cyclically asked the hearts of their dead ones to return from the sacred mountains so that new life and new harvest might continue, so too Chicanas/os are replenished with new life and new hope when they invite their dead to return.¹ The reinvention of traditional ways to express contemporary concerns renews and recenters a people hungry for spiritual nourishment in their ongoing struggle for justice and healing. In Spanish, the verb *curar* (to heal) refers to a holistic sense of healing. The physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person must be attended to if he or she is to be fully healed. The popular saying "la cultura cura," or culture heals, is often used to refer to the significance of Days of the Dead for Chicanos, a tradition that holds the healing power and memories of the ancestors.

This chapter explores *Días de los Muertos* as celebrated in the heart of East Los Angeles during 1998 at the internationally recog-

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nized Chicano/a community art center, Self Help Graphics (SHG). As a case study of how one Chicano community annually celebrates, it offers insight into the process that numerous Chicano communities engage in as they honor their dead. The healing aspects of the tradition receive emphasis, as does its political significance for a population committed to the task of self-determination. In ritual and artistic expressions of Chicano/a spirituality, the political cannot be separated from the spiritual. In light of the history of colonization and the ongoing marginalization of Chicano and Latino communities, the public expression of honoring the dead contests Western dichotomies between the living and the dead, between the spiritual and the physical. For a historically subordinated population, publicly remembering their ancestors takes on political meaning as the genealogy being honored is indigenous and of mixed blood, a genealogy not intended to survive in the Western world. Claiming public space, including streets and parks, to honor these "others" is "an ultimate act of resistance against cultural domination" (Mesa-Bains 1988: 9). And "others" themselves parading en masse refute daily efforts to dismiss their very presence in an increasingly segregated society. I argue that for Chicanos/as, a key to healing from the trauma of spiritual and physical colonization is the claiming of ancestral indigenous epistemology that values interdependency between the living and the dead, between living communities and ancient ones.

Días de los Muertos at SHG

Self Help Graphics, the first and primary Chicano/a community arts center and gallery in Los Angeles, has played an instrumental role in reintroducing Days of the Dead to "Angelesños" and the larger U.S. population. Begun in the early 1970s with the instrumental support of Karen Bocallero, O.S.F., SHG has enabled Chicana/o artists to exhibit and further develop their work. Since then it has emerged as the leading visual arts organization producing and exhibiting Chicana/o art and culture in the country. SHG began celebrating *Días de los Muertos* as a communal public ritual in 1972. While many Chicano families have honored their dead for generations, ritual practices were of a more private nature, with home altars and family visits to cemeteries. According to art historian Sybil Venegas, "Sister Karen credits Mexican artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez with suggesting that *El Día de los Muertos* be celebrated as a collective, public art project aimed at cultural reclamation, self-determination and definition" (1995: 18). Community trauma experienced at the Chicano Moratorium in 1970 in East Los Angeles when police killed three Chicanos in a peaceful anti-Vietnam War protest could also be addressed in the ritual. The first celebration was on a small scale, involving primarily artists and including a procession from the local cemetery, the building of an *ofrenda* (an altar for the dead), and the sharing of food among the participants. By

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1976, community members expanded the number of participants to several thousand. "Several years later, SHG was host to the largest and most widely attended annual day of the dead celebration in California, if not the U.S. The festivities included a cemetery mass, a street parade, altar and art exhibits" (Venegas 1990: 1). Catholic clergymen, Gary Riebe-Estrella and Juan Romero presided at several of the liturgical celebrations until the archdiocese notified Sister Karen that Catholic liturgies in a secular cemetery could not be approved. The archdiocesan action and a growing integration of indigenous beliefs and practices in the lives of the artists created a separation between the Catholic Church and the art-centered ritual celebration. SHG continued to sponsor Los Angeles's largest *Días de los Muertos* celebration independent of church involvement.

Honoring the Dead in East Los Angeles

The several hundred people gathering on a sunny November 1, 1998, morning at the intersection of "Five Corners" attest to a journalist's claim that "Los Angeles must be the United States' Day of the Dead capital" (Anon. 1998). Many are in full *calavera*, or skeleton attire, the predominant icon for *Días de los Muertos*. Adults and children enthusiastically line up to have their faces painted to represent the skeleton within. Others mingle with anticipation as they wait for the mile-long procession to begin. Many carry bouquets of bright orange *compoaxóchitl*, or marigolds, the traditional flowers for the *ofrendas*; the bright color and pungent smell will attract the spirits of the dead. Others attentively watch a *teatro* performance on the north side of the small plaza, portraying a son speaking with the spirit of his dead mother. Words of forgiveness help reconcile a lifetime plagued by drugs and violence. The beat of the Aztec drums notifies the crowd that the procession is about to begin. *Danzantes*, or Aztec dancers, wearing feathered headdresses and beaded ceremonial clothing offer prayers of thanksgiving to the four cardinal directions with the scent of *copal* (holy incense) floating to the heavens. Their prayers also invoke the presence of the ancestors from all directions of the universe. Individuals, couples, and families quickly maneuver into line to begin the short trek down Cesar Chavez Avenue. Banners publicize the political sentiments: "Cuántas más masacres?" refers to the recent killing of forty Zapatistas in Acteal, Mexico, and "Vivan los muertos" stresses the enduring presence of the dead. An oversized papier-mâché *calavera* on a flatbed truck brings up the end of the parade. The living proceed to honor their dead. Death does not have the last word, here in East Los Angeles.

Preparations actually began four months earlier. Between September and October a total of fourteen art workshops were offered free to the public, with Chicano/a artists teaching mask making, altar making, *calavera* crafts, and

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Impersonating Mictecacihuatl, goddess of Mictlan, place of the dead. Olvera Street, Los Angeles, 1998. Used with permission from Lara Medina.

mural painting, all in honor of the dead. The creations would be used in the public ritual.

By noon on the day of the celebration, the facilities at SHG are clearly marked as sacred space. Led by Mexica *danzantes*, the procession of living *calaveras* finds its way to the parking lot decorated with oversized papier-mâché masks, large, richly painted canvas murals, and a centrally located pyramid-shaped structure. The all-female *danzante* troupe blesses the event with *copal* and drumbeats as they circle the pyramid. The procession of 400 begins to disperse and join the others waiting in anticipation. A float depicting Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity, maneuvers to the middle of the lot as the six-foot *calavera* on the flatbed truck parks close to the fence. Children's masks, *papel picado*, or intricately cut tissue paper, and two long *tlatzotzompantli*, or

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skull racks, decorate the chain-link fence enclosing the parking lot. The *tlatzotzompantli* resembles the one found in the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. But these skulls, with sunglasses and teeth bared in smiles, reveal their Southern Californian roots as they purview the festivities under way. The opening prayer offered by En Lak Ech (You Are My Other I), a group of Chicana poets, emphasizes the spiritual significance of the day ahead:

We would like to offer you all, in a good way, in a humble way,
 a prayer song,
 We would like to honor all those who have passed on, all our
 ancestors, our grandmothers, and our grandfathers.
 We want to pray for those who are yet to come and those that
 are here present with us today.
 We, En Lak Ech *mujeres*, pray to the women and *mujeres* who
 have died through violence or through life and struggle. We
 offer this prayer for you.

The day's schedule includes twenty-seven performances offering more prayer, music, *teatro*, poetry, comedy, and dance. The music reflects the diversity of the crowd: mariachi, Chicano rap, blues, Mexican, rock, salsa, and reggae. Groups with names like Quetzal, Aztlán Underground, and Quinto Sol reflect the Los Angeles music scene incorporating an indigenous consciousness. The program for the day announces what can be expected:

Culture is not static. And in the hands of artists, it is volatile and exciting. The traditions of Mexico are honored and respected, and then added to, modified to accommodate the North American experience of La Raza. As is Day of the Dead, a custom both secular and religious, sacred and sacrosanct, Christian and pre-Columbian, the modern celebrations are old and new, maintaining the most popular customs and prompting the next edge of invention. Day of the Dead has become a paradigm for how local artists contribute to the quality of life in their community, and it has become the ideal vehicle for sharing culture with the larger realm of society.

As the performances get under way, it is evident that political concerns will be heard throughout the day as community members gather to remember and renew themselves for ongoing social struggles. Social criticism informs many of the musical compositions. The lead singer of Aztlán Underground responds to the power of the system toward Chicanos/as:

So they can see a strong brown man, a strong brown women
 And feel proud of who they are.
 So we can finally stand up
 and take the foot of the oppressor out of this land.

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Themes of the *actos* reflect an indigenous consciousness: Acto 1, *Nezahualcoyotl*; Acto 2, *La Carpa Tezcaltipoca*; Acto 3, *Luchando con la Vida*; Acto 4, twenty-five years of Chicana(huat) fashion; and Acto 5, poem to Miquitztl. One performance group, Indians Teaching Spaniards (ITS), speaks to "taking back the streets of Los Angeles" not just one day a year in a procession for the dead but for all the living in Los Angeles. Throughout the day, people sit, stand, dance, and mingle with family and friends as they soak in the richness of these cultural and political expressions.

The gallery space on the first floor of SHG is packed with people viewing the "room altars." These sacred spaces reflect intimate, lifelike scenes from the homes of those remembered. One of the altar makers dedicates a sewing room to her mother. A black Singer sewing machine, a full-length mirror, and a dress form create the center of this *ofrenda*. An ironing board draped with clothes provides a sense of the activity that once filled the sewing room. Flowers, crochet needles, sewing boxes, crocheted dolls, and bolts of fabric fill this woman's room: a creative sanctuary away from the problems of everyday life or perhaps the workplace of an efficient seamstress. Another room altar displays a 1940s kitchen, one familiar to many Chicanos who grew up with a grandmother who healed others through her cooking. A "dining room altar" adjoining the kitchen displays a buffet table filled with photographs, flowers, and food offerings. This "altar within an altar" emphasizes how the *ofrenda* tradition held a central place in this family space. A "backyard porch altar" includes potted plants and a swinging chair where the artist's *abuelos*, or grandparents, used to sit. Their shrine to Guadalupe calls to mind the home religious practices embedded in Chicano Catholic culture.

Near the entrance to the second floor, another altar is dedicated to migrant farmworkers. Its five levels are filled with a dozen small black-and-red United Farm Worker (UFW) flags and plenty of orange marigolds. Black-and-white photos of farmworkers fill three of the levels. At the top of the altar is a photograph of Cesar Chavez and Senator Robert F. Kennedy after Chavez's 1968 fast. A Guadalupe image is placed in the center of the altar with a crucifix nailed to the wall above. Red and black *papel picado* outline the altar. Another altar sponsored by the Wall, an organization for gay Latinos, honors those who have died of AIDS. Photographs, a statue of Guadalupe, teddy bears, and burning sage bless their presence. Space is reserved for people to add names or prayers for others remembered. By the end of the evening, many names on green and white sheets of paper decorate the wall. Pamphlets on AIDS prevention and services for gay Latinos in Los Angeles are freely distributed as part of this *ofrenda*.

From noon until ten in the evening, several thousand people participate in the day's activities. No alcohol is served at the event, but an espresso stand provides coffee. The aroma of Mexican food fills the air. Vending booths sell

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An *ofrenda* created by a third-generation *altarista*, or altarmaker, Ofelia Esparza. Los Angeles, 1998. Used with permission from Lara Medina.

Días de los Muertos iconography. Participants line up to get their faces painted *calavera* style. Guitarists roam the area singing “*La Llorona*” (The Weeping Woman), and others serenade the dead. In the far corner of the parking lot stands a fifteen-foot mosaic statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Neighborhood women clean and maintain the shrine on a regular basis. Many folks who come to SHG identify her as *Tonantzin*, the Nahuatl mother goddess. This permanent shrine at SHG blesses the crowd and the celebration.

Approximately one half of the forty participants interviewed identified as Catholic, and the other half no longer associate with organized religion, or, as one woman shared, “I follow *Indígena* ways, that makes me balanced.” All recognized the importance of the day as they offered their respect for the dead. As one informant explained, “*Días de los Muertos* has become a significant spiritual celebration for Chicanos. Without that sense of who we are, and who our ancestors are, we become a lost culture. Many segments of our society are lost because they don’t know their ancestry and they don’t understand death.” Despite diverse religious affiliations, the sense of a communal identity per-

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vades the celebration. With a shared purpose of remembering and renewing, many participants acknowledge the value of passing on traditions, and affirming cultural, spiritual, and political values. As one stated, "I love how families with their children are here, teaching them the traditions, and how to honor their elders. Unless we teach them, they won't know." Knowing that the tradition aids their resistance to marginalization adds to the importance of the celebration. Another participant emphasized, "All we get from the media is that we [Chicanos] are worthless; our children need to know their traditions so that they will know right from wrong when they hear stereotypes."

The rituals of making and exhibiting art, constructing *ofrendas*, parading in *cajavera*, and performing from the heart, sanctify what is important here in East Los Angeles. As one participant remarked, "Remembering and honoring is praying." Through *Días de los Muertos*, Chicanos and Chicanas find healing, strength, and renewal in their struggle to survive and prosper as a people.

Discussion

Días de los Muertos does not replicate Western patterns of exclusion. The rite, with its color, humor, and friendly spirit, invites all people to approach death and the "other" without fear. The silence of death and the pain of exclusion are healed in the festivity of this public mourning ritual. As Father Grey Baumann of Mission Dolores reflects, "In Anglo culture an altar for the dead seems bizarre because we divorce ourselves from the fact that we die. . . . We try to put it off in the corner and only face it when we have to. The Latino culture is not afraid of death. . . . When you age, you don't have to be ashamed."⁹

Although the majority of Chicanas/os have been Christianized, there is a concerted effort by many to reinstate and identify with indigenous ancestral knowledge. Estrangement from Roman Catholicism is due in large part to a historical attempt to assimilate Chicanos into a "universal" Euro-american Catholicism, compounded by the absence of native-born Chicano clergy, and the limitations placed on the authority of women in the ecclesiastical structure. Many Chicanos, however, who have left the institutional church continue to identify with symbols that represent the faith, courage, and survival of their Catholic parents and grandparents. *Días de los Muertos* reflects these allegiances as participants consciously construct a symbol and ritual system that contains significant elements of indigenous spirituality alongside the elements found meaningful in Mexican Catholicism. Icons of saints, Madonnas, Guadalupe, and the sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary, among many others, continue to assert a strong presence in visual expressions of Chicana/o consciousness and spirituality. Catholic icons share physical space with indigenous elements

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such as earth, water, fire, herbs, symbols of duality, and images of non-Christian deities, such as Coatlicue, the Nahuatl Mother Earth Goddess, on many of the *ofrendas*.

This coexistence of Catholic and Mesoamerican symbols reflects an aspect of *nepantla* spirituality, a spirituality at the biological and cultural crossroads where diverse elements converge, at times in great tension and at other times in cohesion. *Nepantla* is not syncretism in its limited meaning but an example of transculturation, or a continuous encounter of two or more divergent worldviews. The use of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl term meaning "in the middle," was recorded by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century. Dominican friar Diego Durán had reprimanded an indigenous elder for his behavior, which appeared to the friar to be in discord with Christian and Nahuatl customs and morals. The elder responded, "Father, don't be afraid, for we are still '*nepantla*'—in other words, 'in the middle,' or as he later added, 'we are neutral'" (León-Portilla 1990: 10). The elder's presumed indecisiveness, interpreted as the "trauma of *nepantlism*," resulted from forced cultural change, producing a psychological and spiritual condition filled with ambiguity, confusion, and conflict. The indigenous or non-Western self is forced to deny its essential being and become like the conqueror.

The state of *nepantla*, however, can become a site of transformative struggle and creativity, a state of inherent being and meaning making (Anzaldúa 1987; Pérez 1998). Once the tensions of *nepantla* are understood and transformed, and the indigenous self is reclaimed and continuously healed, *nepantla* becomes a psychological, spiritual, and political space that Chicanas/os can appropriate or recast as a site of power. Rather than being limited by confusion or ambiguity, Chicanas/os act as subjects or agents in deciding how diverse religious, cultural, and political systems can or cannot work together. Just as the indigenous elder could have very well been maneuvering the fissures, boundaries, and borders of his new world, Chicanas/os can consciously make choices about what aspects of diverse worldviews nurture the complexity of their spiritual and biological *mestizaje* (cultural/racial mixture), and what for them enables communication with transcendent powers. As a professor of religious studies and Chicana/o studies, I have witnessed Days of the Dead as one of the central expressions of *nepantla* spirituality in the pathway to healing.

Días de los Muertos provides opportunities for healing, for renewing and enlarging a group identity. In a society that ignores Chicanas/os as historical actors, the mere act of remembering one's ancestors carries subversive elements. For Chicanos/as, who are consistently portrayed as "aliens" to the dominant Euro-American culture, continuity with ancestral ways heals the wounds incurred by ongoing attempts to silence indigenous and mestizo peoples. Remembering the dead who struggled to ensure life would continue for their descendants strengthens communal identity. In the process, a community of

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individuals heals itself. As Chicanas/os revisit and consciously select an indigenous heritage that supposedly was obliterated through colonial pursuits, they make a political decision as well as a spiritual decision. As government and corporate actions show, it is still not advantageous to be indigenous or Mexican. Legislation opposing Latino immigration, affirmative action, and bilingual education reflects mainstream sentiments toward these populations. And amid the deeper political meaning lies a rich spirituality "respecting those who have gone before and celebrating our ability to communicate with them." The poem "Miquitzli" by Olga Garcia concludes as follows:

Us Mexicans,
 We love our dead,
 Love 'em like we do chile,
 Like we do guitar wailing
Corridos on drunken nights,
 Like we do loud *abuelas*
 Smoking on blue porches . . .
 We love our dead
 like fire
 like memory
 like the bouncing reflection of all of us here,
 now,
con caras pintadas,
*bocas sonriendo,*⁴
 dancing in front of this smoking mirror,
 waiting for it
 to break.

NOTES

1. See Alfredo López Austin, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997).
2. Father Gregory Baumann of Mission Dolores Parish, interview with author, November 1998.
3. Pastor Mike Kennedy, Dolores Mission Parish, interview with author, January 1999.
4. Translated as "with painted faces, smiling mouths." Poem read at SHG, November 1, 1998.

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